

# Morocco: Birding & Nature | April 1-15, 2025

## Trip Report by Rick Weiman



**Host Rick Weiman and local guide Victor Porras with clients Ron, Erica, Pat, John, Richard, Celia, Anne, Michael, and Patty.**



### **Tue., April 1: Arrival in Marrakech | Cyber Park Local Birding**

Today was arrival day. Some clients decided to arrive in Morocco a few days early and explore while the rest of us all arrived at different times today. After a rest at our very modern Longue Vie Hotel in downtown Marrakech, we met in the lobby for introductions and a late afternoon walk to the local Cyber Park a few blocks away. In less than an hour we had 17 species of birds, many new to all of us. Some highlights were 3 species of swifts circling the city skies (Pallid, Alpine and Little Swifts), several migrating Booted Eagles and a pair of local Eurasian Kestrels, House Buntings and Common Bulbuls (two birds we would see every day of the tour), and a Willow and Sardinian Warbler. We had our welcome dinner in one of the hotel's two restaurants that had a talented live band performing for us. Several of our crew got up to dance with the restaurant manager and a good time was had by all on our first night in Morocco.



### **Wed., April 2: Marrakech | Koutoubia Park | Chez Mamouchthka in Ourika**

After an amazing buffet breakfast at the hotel, we checked out and visited Koutoubia Park with a local historical guide who gave us many highlights of Marrakech's old quarter. We walked through the grounds of the Kutubiyya Mosque, the largest mosque in Marrakesh, with the construction of its 253 foot tall minaret completed around 1195 AD. This minaret is considered an important landmark and symbol of Marrakesh. We strolled through the alleyways and side streets of the city, visiting the colorful and lively souk (market) and learning from our guide about the various religious and historical figures intertwined with the history of Marrakech. We learned about the five elements that were part of every local medina community: fountains for fresh water, a communal oven, a hammam (where people bathed), a mosque, and a school.

We totally enjoyed visiting the Ben Youssef Medersa, an architectural treasure nestled in the heart of the ancient Medina of Marrakech. The medersa (translated school or place of learning) transported us back to an era where art, knowledge, and culture flourished. It was completed around 1565 AD and for four centuries it remained a home for scholars and students from all over the world eager for knowledge in various disciplines, especially religious ones. Upon entering the medersa, we were immediately transfixed by the architectural splendor of it all. Zellige tiles with geometric and floral motifs adorning the walls and intricately carved cedar wood doors and ceilings showcased the accomplished art of the time.

Next, we visited an herbalist where we were able to try various lotions, sample local spices and mint teas, and of course have the option to purchase some, which most of us did. Of interest to most of us was the demonstration of argan kernels being shelled and ground into paste by a stone mortar wheel, destined for use as a food dip similar to hummus, or as the main ingredient in cosmetic lotions and creams. The Argan tree is native to Morocco and argan production is economically important as it generates almost \$2 billion in sales annually - over 20,000 tons are manufactured and sold every year. After a good lunch at a local restaurant, we visited the Dar Mejbar rug shop and learned about the intricate manufacturing process over a cup of mint tea. Several rugs were purchased by our group.

We thanked and said goodbye to our city guide and drove from Marrakech to our guesthouse Chez Mamouchthka in the city of Ourika. After checking in, we did some birding in the garden and had nice looks at a Common Cuckoo, an African Chaffinch, Eurasian Blackbirds, and some European Red-rumped Swallows. We had our formal group introductions and completed our first checklist of the tour, followed by a dinner of lamb and chicken kebobs and fresh local vegetables.



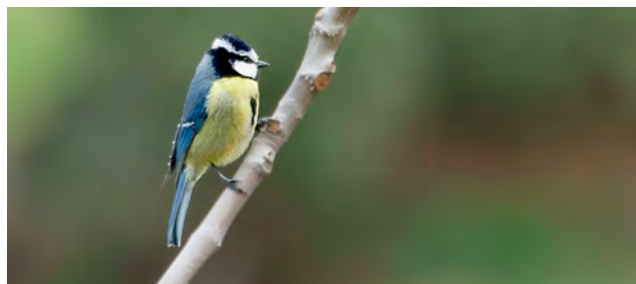
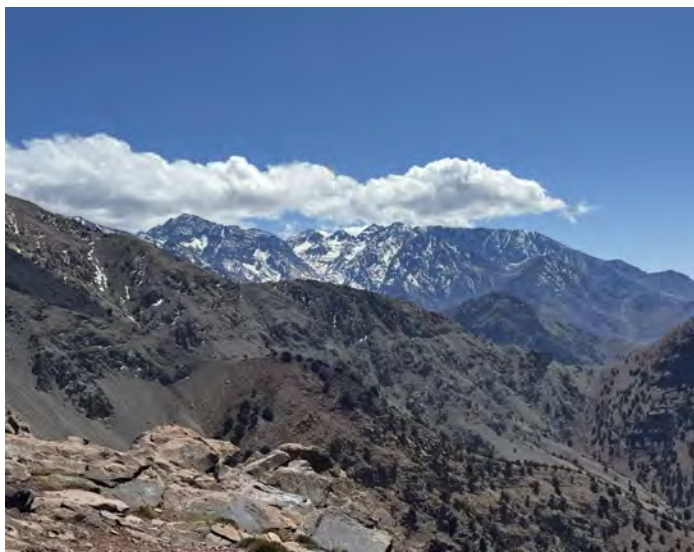
### **Thur., April 3: Birding the Atlas Mountains**

Most of the group met before breakfast for a little birding in the lodge's gardens. We saw the majority of the same birds we had added to our list the prior afternoon, but did add Common Swift as several flew overhead, and had much better looks at Common Cuckoo, European Red-rumped Swallow, and a male African Chaffinch. After breakfast, we loaded up the van, met our driver for the remainder of the tour, Ibrahim, and started our drive into the High Atlas Mountains. Our first stop was at the spacious Café Aurocher, mainly for the bathrooms, but the patio views of a beautiful valley crossed by a stream forced us to linger, and then of course, so did the birds. We had a perched Rock Bunting next to a Ciri Bunting in the top of a tall tree where a Eurasian Kestrel was also comfortably perched. We watched a Eurasian Jay fly back and forth across the valley gathering sticks for its nest, and we added African Blue Tit and a pair of European Serins as we were leaving.

As we drove on, we passed several Barbary Ground Squirrels scurrying amongst the rocks - our first official mammal of the tour. Our next stop was at a reservoir called Lac d'Oukaïmeden and we walked onto the dam searching for some key target birds. We were not disappointed when a stunning gray, black and white Atlas Wheatear flew in close to us and hopped rock-to-rock searching for insects. It was soon joined by a male and female Black Wheatear and we had quick looks at a trio of Crimson-winged Finches. We scanned the reservoir and found a pair of Eurasian Coots on the far side, and a White-throated Dipper foraging at the waters' edge. A distant Blue Rock-Thrush popped up briefly on a rock wall and we found several Rock Sparrows blending in - you guessed it - amongst the rocks. Before departing, a pair of feeding Gray Wagtails entertained us by the stream close to the dam.

We continued climbing in elevation, reaching 8,000 feet at the Oukaïmeden Ski Resort, now closed for the season. According to Victor, though now melted, the area had been covered in snow only three weeks ago, but the higher elevation mountains in the distance were still snow covered. All around us were flocks of Red-billed Choughs. These birds are all black, crow-sized birds with red bills and legs. At one point more than 75 were in the air flying in a starling-esque murmuration pattern. We scanned another flock on the ground and picked out a few slightly smaller Yellow-billed Choughs mixed in. Some other exciting finds were a male and female Black Redstart, a lone Horned Lark, and perhaps the most colorful bird of the day, a male Moussier's Redstart.

Lunch was at Chez Rachid, where we dined on a delicious chicken tagine dish. You'll hear the word tagine frequently in this report so a brief description follows - Moroccan tagine dishes are slow-cooked stews, typically made with sliced meat, poultry or fish together with vegetables and/or fruit. Spices, nuts, and dried fruits are also used. Common spices include ginger, cumin, turmeric, cinnamon, and saffron. The sweet and sour combination is common in tagine dishes such as lamb with prunes and spices. Tagines are generally served with



bread. Because the domed or cone-shaped lid of the tagine pot traps steam and returns the condensed liquid to the pot, a minimal amount of water is needed to cook the meats and vegetables.

After lunch we climbed a bit higher for a spectacular and windy scenic overlook stop, then started our descent back down. We'd stopped at Chez Rachid again for a quick bathroom break when Victor spotted a Short-toed Snake-Eagle soaring and hovering over a distant mountain ridge.

We next visited a spot along the Ourika River where many local residents were picnicking as they were still on vacation after Ramadan. That may have been why the birds were scarce, but we did have a nice African Chaffinch close enough for cell phone pictures. We returned back to Chez Mamouchthka, rested a bit, and then completed our checklist and enjoyed a nice tagine-style dinner there, a deliciously recurring theme for many of our meals.

### **Fri., April 4: Travel Day | Tizi N'Tichka Pass**

Today was largely a travel day so, after breakfast and some garden birding, we packed up and started our journey to the gorgeous town of Ouarzazate - the gateway to the Sahara Desert and famous for its movie studios (Lawrence of Arabia, Gladiator, Indiana Jones, and many others were filmed here). On the road just outside of Ourika, we passed many White Storks soaring and feeding in fields and on several nests constructed on tall mosque minarets. We added over 200 Western Cattle-Egrets at a large roost site near a local dump, several Maghreb Magpies, and a European Roller and Woodchat Shrike seen from the bus perched on wires. We made a coffee and bathroom stop back at Café Aurocher and added a Eurasian Sparrowhawk and Common Wood-Pigeon, then continued over Tizi N'Tichka Pass and out of the Atlas Mountains. We stopped for lunch and dined outdoors with half a dozen European Bee-eaters, a Western Black-eared Wheatear, and a soaring Booted Eagle. After lunch, we made a few stops at several river crossings near Amerzgane that gave us more wheatears and bee-eaters, several Crested Larks, and our first Ruddy Shelducks. Before arriving at the town of Ouarzazate, we explored a section of rocky desert and were rewarded with a view of the head of a Pharaoh Eagle-Owl peering at us from a crevice in the cliffs, a Eurasian Hoopoe, and both Black and White-crowned Wheatears.

We checked into our colorfully furnished riad-style guesthouse, Dar Amoudou, and then made our way to the back deck overlooking an expanse of green agricultural fields and orchards to see what was flying. In the distance was an active White Stork nest, with two perched adults, constructed high on an electrical tower. As



the sun set, a kettle of 17 Black Kites circled around the nest before heading off to roost for the night. We completed our checklist and had another delicious Moroccan dinner consisting of a vegetable soup and a mix of different styles of tagines.

### **Sat., April 5: Ouarzazate | Al Mansour Reservoir | Boumalne | Tagdilt Track**

After breakfast and checking out, we birded the fields and fruit tree groves outside of our hotel. It was a beautiful sunny day and the birding was quite productive. Several Ruddy Shelducks streaked by us and we had good views of both European Turtle-Doves and Laughing Doves. Large flocks of House Sparrows were in the fields with a few similar looking Spanish Sparrows mixed in. We added Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin, Tree Pipit, and a tiny Zitting Cisticola that was “zitting” on a shrub.

It was hard to leave the beauty and hospitality of our guesthouse, but we had to move on to our next destination which was the Al Mansour reservoir and the surrounding high steppe plateau. With our scopes, we were able to identify a distant Great Crested Grebe, a large gulp of Great Cormorants (interesting fact: a gulp is the name for a cormorant flock), twenty or so Little Egrets, and several large Gray Herons. We had more soaring Booted and Short-toed Snake-Eagles, and a Long-legged Buzzard as well. Other birds new to our list were Desert Lark and Desert Wheatear, a cooperative and colorful Western Subalpine Warbler, and Western Yellow and White Wagtails. On an island in the middle of the reservoir was an ancient, abandoned and crumbling kasbah - something we would observe in many villages as we wound our way along the scenic mountain roads.

Once in Boumalne, we had a buffet lunch and then checked into another riad-style guesthouse called the Kasbah La Perle du Dadès for the next two days. We took an afternoon break to rest and enjoy the expansive property, complete with an outdoor dart board, pool, and ping pong table. Rick, Victor, and Patty did some scouting around the gardens behind the guesthouse where there was a forested area and a small stream. It was a rewarding effort as we added Levaillant’s and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, European Greenfinch and Goldfinch, and a singing Common Nightingale perched on a vine in front of us. We made plans to take the whole group back to this location later in the week.

In the late afternoon, we headed to explore the rocky steppes in the famous birding area known as the Tagdilt Track. Here the land was wide open, brown, and vast and our walk out into open areas gave us Temminck’s and Thekla’s Larks, and Red-rumped, Northern, and Desert Wheatears. As we birded, a distant rainbow appeared over a local shepherd as he tended his wandering herd of sheep. We then returned to our kasbah for another delicious authentic Moroccan meal and completed our species checklist before retiring for the evening.



## Sun., April 6: Boumalne | Gorges du Dadès | Draa Valley | Falcon Nest Escarpment

We started early today to return to the Tagdilt Track to search for species not seen the day before. We stopped near a small water treatment plant where we found a few Mallards swimming in the man-made pond as a Western Marsh Harrier glided by us. We had good looks at perched Woodchat and Great Gray Shrikes, another Long-legged Buzzard, and a streaking Peregrine Falcon (Barbary). Victor spotted three heads running amongst the rocks and they were quickly identified as belonging to a family of Cream-colored Coursers, and we watched them zig and zag between the rocks and shrubs. We added sightings of three species of larks and four species of wheatears as well, all previous members of our checklist.

We then drove up into and through the Gorges du Dadès, an amazing deep-sided valley with stunning geological features. As we drove, we wound through villages with ancient and crumbling adobe-brown kasbahs next to new construction of more stable, gray cinderblock. Our drive took us along the Dadès River and it was quite a contrast to see all the greenery dotting the lush river valley compared to the drier, arid areas we passed. We stopped for scenic views, scanned for birds, and made friends and took pictures with a local boy and his affectionate pet camel. We added Eurasian Linnet, European Serin, and Rock Bunting during our visit here. A short stop was next, outside the gorge entrance, for coffee, mint tea, and bathrooms, and we marveled at some rock climbers scaling the daunting cliffsides.

Lunch was at the Riad Dadès Birds in the Dadès Valley. Fresh orange slices sprinkled with cinnamon, apparently a common Moroccan dessert, were served after our chicken kebob lunch. After a little break to freshen up or have a siesta at our hotel, a small group of us drove to a location nearby with cliffs, wadis, and rocky desert called the Falcon Nest Escarpment. Before leaving, we briefed the whole group that this would be our longest and most rigorous excursion of the tour in the heat of the afternoon, so more than half of us decided to relax at the guesthouse instead. The rest of us met up with a local shepherd guide named Lasan and walked down into the rocky wadi (an ancient river valley eroded over many millennia), but not before admiring a large green and red Bohemes Agama lizard (also known as the African Red-headed Agama) basking in the sunshine. We enjoyed a nice view of a perched Trumpeter Finch, then Lasan led us to a spot with a local male Pharaoh Eagle-Owl that was perfectly camouflaged against the rock wall above us. He found us a fledged owl chick in another nook and the larger female owl in a small cave opening further down the trail. We spotted a smaller species of lizard that was gray and black (blending in with the rocks) and we later identified it as a Moroccan Spiny-tailed Lizard. Other finds were a distant Lanner Falcon nest with an incubating adult visible through the scope and a Desert Lark, also sitting on her well-hidden nest. On the way back to our kasbah, we passed a large kettle of Black Kites



and a Little Owl perched on a roadside wall. We shared our sightings with those that had stayed back to relax and enjoy the property and then completed our checklist and had another enjoyable meal to end the day.

### **Mon., April 7: Boumalne Dadès | Todra Gorges | Sahara Desert | Erg Chebbi**

After breakfast we took the entire group to the forested stream area behind the guesthouse and were very relieved when the Levillant's Woodpecker showed up and gave us good looks. It was a target bird for Mike and a lifer for most of the rest of us, so high fives all around. Everyone also enjoyed a very visible Common Nightingale and Willow Warbler, and several of the more commonly seen birds like House Bunting, Eurasian Blackbird, and Common Bulbul. Despite playing its recorded call, we missed the Great Spotted Woodpecker, but as we walked towards the van where Ibrahim was loading our luggage, it was spotted at the top of a tree near the parking lot!

We departed back to a location near Drâa-Tafilalet as Victor had received a report of Thick-billed Larks there. We spread out and walked the rocky desert area searching for movement. In the distance, we spotted three of them around some rock formations and were able to isolate them in the scopes for positive identification. We had more Black Kites kettle by us and a Temminck's Lark and several species of wheatear.

We then enjoyed a drive up and through the Todra Gorges and river valley and were blown away by its amazing geological formations. We drove through the vibrant town of Tinghir with much new construction underway which contrasted with the old kasbahs still barely standing in the older part of town. We stopped at a scenic overlook for pictures and then we exited the Drâa Valley, which is actually a main route for migrant birds arriving from the Sahara Desert. At one of our stops, we had a surprise Little Owl perched on a wire giving a wary look to a Bonelli's Eagle flying overhead. We had an outdoor lunch in Tamerdoulte village next with more tagines of course, but this time we had a difficult a choice of beef meatballs with eggs or chicken with lemons and olives.

We continued our drive towards the desert, passing through the oasis town of Erfoud and made a stop at an area that is rich in fossils from the Ordovician period, over 400 million years ago. Craftsmen here extract the fossils (Orthoceras, Ammonites, and Trilobites being the most common types) and form and polish them into bowls, plates, keychains and other authentic souvenirs. After we left Erfoud, we could see the large pink sand dunes of the Sahara Desert in the distance and, when a herd of twenty camels walked by in a straight line, we knew we weren't in Kansas any longer.



The location of our lodgings for the next three nights, the Auberge de Charme Les Dunes D'Or Merzouga, was designed to look like an old kasbah and was located right on the edge of the desert. After check-in, we took a short walk outside the lodge and saw both shrikes, a Willow Warbler, and our first Desert Sparrow. Mike and Anne also added an Iberian Chiffchaff to our list that they spotted on their way back to the lodge. We completed our species checklist on a circle of chairs just outside the restaurant area on the sands of the Sahara Desert, with the largest sand dune complex of the Moroccan Sahara serving as our scenic background. Dinner was buffet style with many local dish options to choose from to satisfy diners of all types.

## **Tue., April 8: Full Day in the Sahara**

After a buffet breakfast, we met our three Land Rover 4x4 drivers, as the plan was to spend a day traversing the open areas and dunes of the desert in our vehicles. This area is known as Erg Chebbi, one of Morocco's several ergs (large seas of dunes formed by wind-blown sand). It is located on the far western edge of the Sahara Desert and in places these dunes rise to 500 feet above the surrounding rocky desert.

Our first stop was a water drip system (considered to be an effective way to attract birds) with sandgrouse as our target birds. However, it had been an unusually wet month for the desert, the wettest in the last 10 years, so water was more widely available and thus the birds were not so predictable. We waited behind the vehicles with fingers crossed and fortunately a small flock of Spotted Sandgrouses soon appeared, at first hard to see, as they perfectly blended into the terrain. We watched them in silence as they cautiously made their way to the drip area. After some very nice views and many pictures of them were taken, a half-dozen Crowned Sandgrouses joined them, including a boldly patterned male leading the flock. Several Brown-necked Ravens were also added to the list as we watched the sandgrouses enjoy their drink.

We continued exploring the rocky desert and made several stops, adding new desert birds along the way. One of Victor's favorite birds is the Greater-Hoopoe Lark and, after a short walk, we came across a pair feeding their nestlings hidden under a small bush on the desert sand. We also spotted a pair of African Desert Warblers, some Band-tailed Larks, and a flock of Desert Sparrows, which are much paler in color than their close relatives, the House Sparrows, which were also present. We then took an exhilarating ride across the desert in the 4x4's, with an impromptu camel photo-op stop along the way, to a spot where a local guide had found a special bird for us. Roosting under a bush right on the sand and perfectly camouflaged was an Egyptian Nightjar. Even after we had it in clear view in the scopes a few clients couldn't make it out, commenting that all they saw was a pale stick.





That stick was the perfectly camouflaged nightjar. Such an amazing find by this hard-working local guide who gets up super early to observe where these birds land to roost.

We had a late afternoon lunch back at the lodge, then drove to the Lac Dayet Srij reservoir, which apparently had not had this much water in fifteen years. Here, we added many new birds including large numbers of Black-winged Stilts, Pied Avocets, forty more Ruddy Shelducks, and over 180 Greater Flamingoes. We also found a lone Eared Grebe, a Great Egret, and a dozen Gull-billed Terns. We had some time left before dinner for a visit to the Igrane Gardens which provided a spot for us to bird while walking through the shady palm trees and orchards. Upon our arrival, we flushed a Eurasian Golden Oriole, saw several Eurasian Collared-Doves and Blackbirds, a Willow Warbler drinking and bathing in one of the irrigation culverts, a lone Barn Swallow, and three European Pied Flycatchers. We returned to the hotel for dinner and completed our checklist and then headed to our rooms for a well-deserved rest.

### **Wed., April 9: More Time in the Sahara**

After breakfast, we headed to a habitat of desert scrub near the city of Rissani known for.... you guessed it, Scrub Warblers. Our group fanned out with the local guide playing their recorded call as we walked the large desert patch. Per Victor, these birds were once very common, but due to overgrazing by goats and camels their habitat has been drastically reduced. We were fortunate, however, as a pair made an appearance and perched on top of some short scrubby bushes long enough for us to get decent looks. These warblers have long black-tipped tails that they spread and tilt upwards. We also saw the Maghreb Lark, several Tristram's Warblers, and a Desert Wheatear.

Next, we did some roadside birding along some irrigated crops closer to Rissani. Here we had great looks at a family group of Fulvous Chatterers, more Maghreb Larks, several European Turtle-Doves, a bathing Willow Warbler, and a colorful Sardinian Warbler. As we were about to leave, Victor spotted a Black-winged Kite circling gracefully above the road.

Our next stop was near a cemetery and mausoleum where King Moulay Ali Cherif was once buried, but also a known location for nesting Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters. Victor nailed it again, because before long we had about twenty of them flying and landing on trees and wires long enough for good looks and pictures of these colorful birds. Another nice find by Victor was a Eurasian Hoopoe perched in a distant tree and shortly after that a Lesser Kestrel occupied the same perch. A large raptor soared into view - a dark morph migrant Booted Eagle - and we watched a resident Eurasian Kestrel repeatedly divebomb it out of its territory.



Later in the day, we enjoyed lunch (Moroccan pizza) and did more fossil souvenir shopping at the Mezane Fossil Store, owned and operated by relatives of one of our 4x4 drivers. Patty and Pat purchased some colorful turbans, trying them on and getting a lesson on how to tie them properly. We then made our way back to the hotel for an afternoon break. A small group of us met around 6:00 for a walk outside the hotel to see if any migrating warblers had made an appearance. Rick found a lone Willow Warbler, but we did locate a spiny tree with a family of Great Gray Shrikes, including two fuzzy fledglings. As we watched them, one of the parents returned with a decent size rodent, ensuring they wouldn't go hungry today. We did not go hungry either, as after completing our checklist, we had another large Moroccan buffet dinner to dive into before retiring to our rooms for the night. Around 9:30 pm a rainy sand storm blew in and lasted a good half hour, knocking over pool chairs, before subsiding and leaving small piles of sand outside our rooms.

### **Thur., April 10: Travel Day to Ouarzazate and the Riad Aït Ben Haddou**

After breakfast at the lodge, we checked out and began a long travel day to the town of Ouarzazate. We drove through the arid rocky desert of the Sahara, passing through a long stretch of the scenic east-west running Anti-Atlas mountain range. We stopped in a desert scrub area for a little birding and had good looks at a perched male Woodchat Shrike. A new bird flew into a bush, a Melodious Warbler and, in a very un-warbler-like way, it gave us great looks as it foraged in the front of the bush near us, occasionally stopping to preen. Continuing on, we passed by an expansive, fenced-in area of rocky scrub desert with many acacia trees where the Moroccan government is releasing captive-bred, endangered Cuvier's Antelope (or Gazelle) in an experimental reintroduction program. None were in sight, but Victor told us plans were also underway to undertake a similar program with the endemic and locally extinct Red-necked Ostrich. Now, that bird would be a nice addition to our checklist! We continued through the Draa Valley, through the towns of Alnif and Tazarine. Tazarine is known for its henna production, used in the tattoo industry. Lunch was at an outdoor desert kasbah in the town of Knob, overlooking a date palm tree grove and the village below. The chicken tagines were again a big hit; this time baked with prunes and almonds with a caramelized bottom crust of sweet onions.

After lunch, we continued our drive through the Anti-Atlas range paralleling the Draa River and on through the town of Agdz. We stopped at a stunning scenic overlook of the town, ancient kasbahs, and another large date palm grove. Victor explained that the village cooperative hand-fertilized each palm tree to increase the yield of dates. We saw much evidence of buildings and roads damaged by a massive earthquake that hit Morocco and this area in 2023, with many new buildings now gray in color as they are now made of cement and cinder blocks instead of the red adobe clay and straw mixture of times past. Some of us looked at White-crowned and Black



Wheatears that flew from rock to rock as we drove past. Their similar all-black appearance with a white tail makes them challenging to tell apart from a distance unless you see and compare the tail patterns. The Black Wheatear has a black cross pattern on the white tail while the White-crowned has only a single straight black line.

We reached the town of Ouarzazate and our lodging at the Riad Aït Ben Haddou in the late afternoon. The family owned riad is situated up on a bluff and a few of the group walked down to river before dinner while Richard and Celia did a little shopping. Dinner was amazing, with five different styles of tagines served family style. After dinner, we met the mother and daughter who had cooked for us, then took a nice group picture with them and the rest of the staff.

### **Fri., April 11: Ounila Valley | Return to Marrakech**

We had another authentic Moroccan breakfast in our riad and then took a short walk to the Ounila River for a terrific view of the Ksar of Aït Ben Haddou, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which is a preserved village of earthen buildings surrounded by a defensive wall. It is located along what was once an important trade route between Marrakesh and the Sahara, with structures dating back as far as the 17th century. The community areas within the ksar include a mosque, a public square, grain threshing areas outside the ramparts, two cemeteries (Muslim and Jewish) and the Sanctuary of the Saint Sidi Ali or Amer. It is a perfect synthesis of earthen architecture of the pre-Saharan regions of Morocco, including the valleys of Draa, Todgha, Dadès and Souss, many of which we passed through during the tour. Of course, we had to take a group picture in front of the ksar, nicely photographed for us by a friendly Australian tourist. We saw some birds too, including several European Bee-eaters that perched closed by and our first Bank Swallows of the tour, also called Sand Martins by local birders. Our now-familiar, everyday birds like House Buntings, White-crowned Wheatears, and Common Bulbuls, were there as well.

After some shopping at local market stands for authentic Moroccan scarves and jewelry for our loved ones, we then departed for our long loop drive back up and over the Atlas Mountains through the Ounila Valley. We made a quick stop to admire a tall mosque minaret with a large White Stork nest on top; one of several we had seen in this area. The geology in the valley along this stretch was some of the best of the trip; with intricate colors and folds in the rock like those you'd see in the American southwest, but perhaps even more impressive. We followed the valley at the base of the mountains for its entire length, passing through small villages like Tamaloukte and Assaka, with old deteriorating kasbahs mixed with new cinder-block construction, and lush



green areas near the river. At one scenic viewpoint, we admired ancient stone homes carved out of the base of the valley walls, with newer homes with satellite dishes built near the road above them. Victor spotted some martins flying along the cliff walls and quickly identified three different species that included Rock, Eurasian Crag, and Western House-Martins. A Barbary Ground Squirrel, Black Wheatear, and a Eurasian Kestrel were also added to our day list. Another scenic stop gave us a soaring Booted Eagle and half-a-dozen Black Kites, plus a Western Black-eared Wheatear.

As we climbed higher, we started to see Aleppo pine trees appear at an elevation of around 6,000 feet and we then stopped in Telouet for coffee, bathrooms, and more European Bee-eaters chasing insects over our tables. At 7,000 feet, we met up with the main road that we had traversed earlier in the tour, and we then descended over the Tizi N'Tichka Pass, with only 90 km to go to reach Marrakech. After a delicious lunch of more tagines, kabobs, and lamb chops, our drive continued. We made one more stop at the Toufliht Forest where we added Great and African Blue Tits, a pair of amorous Eurasian Sparrowhawks, several large Common Wood-Pigeons, and a European Serin. We then arrived in Marrakech, checked back in to our modern Longue Vie hotel, completed our species checklist and had an enjoyable order-off-the-menu dinner.

## **Sat., April 12: The Coast at Agadir | Oued Souss | Shorebirds, Waders & Gulls**

After one of the most amazing breakfast buffets this author has ever enjoyed, we loaded up the vans and headed towards Agadir, a popular destination on the Atlantic coast of Morocco known for its beaches and ports. We broke up the 3-hour journey with several stops for coffee, pastries, and a little birding. By far, the most numerous bird spotted along the modern highway we traversed was the Maghreb Magpie; we counted at least a dozen. We drove past olive tree groves and low-level arid steppe habitat along the way. About an hour into the drive south through the Souss Valley, we passed many Argan trees populating the rocky slopes. We stopped for another filling lunch of tagines, more lamb chops, kabobs, and salads, and then spent the afternoon birding at the Oued (River) Souss. Here, we added a variety of shorebirds and waterbirds, including gulls and terns, to our list, while we experienced whole new habitats and vistas. The mouth of the Souss River is a Ramsar site, recognizing its international significance for conservation. Some new bird highlights for the list were Eurasian Oystercatcher, Black-bellied Plover, Eurasian Curlew, and Whimbrels. Further down the dike path, we tallied more shorebirds including Common Sandpiper and Common Greenshank. At another spot were Greater Flamingoes and Eurasian Spoonbills near a spit of land loaded with Slender-billed, Black-headed, and Yellow-legged Gulls, a single Caspian Tern, and multiple Sandwich and Gull-billed Terns. Little Egrets and Gray Herons were also present, as were four Great Cormorants.



We checked into our modern Tildi Hotel & Spa and a small group of us walked down the street to the beach with Victor to work on our gull identification skills. It was clear that Agadir had undergone a building boom as there was no sign of the massive earthquake that occurred in 1960 that killed up to 15,000 people, making it the most destructive and deadliest earthquake in Moroccan history. When we returned, we met the rest of the group and completed our growing checklist and enjoyed a hearty buffet dinner in the hotel restaurant before retiring for the evening. We noticed a large hill outside of our dining hall window with Arabic words in bright lights etched on it. We were told they meant “Allah-Country-King”. A large Kasbah fortress surrounded by a wall had occupied that space but had been destroyed in the earthquake. All that remains now are the wall, and the inscription that was once over the entrance of the kasbah is now inscribed on the mountainside.

### **Sun., April 13: Souss-Massa National Park**

A few of the group met for an early beach walk followed by a nice buffet breakfast that included an omelet station. After exploring the Oued Souss yesterday, today we were driving to the Oued Massa estuary located at the opposite end of the 130+ square mile Souss Massa National Park along Morocco’s scenic coastline. One of our target birds today is one of the rarest birds in the world, the Northern Bald Ibis. Three of Morocco’s four populations are protected here. The ibis nesting colonies and roost-sites are located on coastal cliffs within the national park, and coastal steppe habitats and fields are used as feeding areas.

As we arrived in the park, we made several stops in the estuary and added Marbled Duck, Eurasian Moorhen, and Little Ringed Plover to our list, along with many of the water birds we had seen yesterday. Another Little Owl was spotted by Ibrahim, as were Barn Swallows and a single Plain Martin. A walk down a path adjacent to the beach with fields on either side of us gave us European Stonechat, Western Black-eared Wheatear, and Moussier’s Redstart. We heard, but never got good looks at, several others, including an elusive Black-crowned Tchagra and a Zitting Cisticola. However, a perched Great Gray Shrike did give us very good looks. Along the Oued Massa we had several new ducks including Common Shelduck and Northern Shoveler, and Common Redshank and Kentish Plover were also checked off.

We completed our walk on the beach overlooking a rocky jetty and enjoyed the sunny blue skies and warm ocean breeze as we watched local fisherman casting off of the jetty. We noticed about a dozen Ruddy Turnstones on the rocks and a lone Whimbrel, and Victor spotted a distant Northern Gannet over the ocean. A large bird appeared circling in the distance and as it got closer it turned out to be one of our main target birds, a Northern Bald Ibis. A short time later, a low flying ibis streaked by us, giving us all much better looks.



At our last stop near the park visitor center that was unfortunately closed for refurbishment, we walked a dike along the river and saw many of the same birds we had added in the past two days. Several more ibises flew by as did a Bonelli's Eagle, and our first Ospreys of the tour were observed, including a successful one perched and dining on fresh fish. Celia and Rick lingered to get a look at a Sardinian Warbler they had heard and Rick was able to pish it closer for Celia to snap a few pictures. We returned to the hotel, rested up a bit, and then completed our checklist and enjoyed some wine and cold beers and another nice buffet style meal in the hotel restaurant.

## **April 14 Oued Souss | Marrakech**

Before departing for Marrakech and after breakfast and checking out, we returned to the Souss estuary to search for more birds. Established in 1991, the park is one of Morocco's top birding locations, so the more time we could spend here the better. Victor felt we'd be more successful than our first visit to the same area as this morning the tide was low, exposing mudflats that shorebirds love. We walked the same dike along the river and in just over an hour we had 36 species including new birds like Common Ringed Plovers, Bar-tailed and Black-tailed Godwits, Sanderlings, Little Stints, and Dunlins. Several Common Redshanks and Common Greenshanks were standing side-by-side, giving us a nice way to compare them. As we were almost ready to move on, a tour group riding camels that had passed us earlier disembarked from their humps, leaving a group of ten camels in the parking lot with their handlers looking for something to do. With the urging of Victor, Rick, Celia, and Pat each hopped on a camel and took a short ride in the parking lot, making for a very memorable and photogenic experience, and probably the best \$5 each of us had ever spent.

We moved the birding to a bridge over the river and added more cormorants, flamingoes, and spoonbills, and a White Wagtail, Spotless Starling, and African Blue Tit. A bushy area near the bridge had been productive in the past for Victor for Barbary Partridge, so Patty and Rick volunteered to be the bird dogs and walked up the hillside and back down to try and flush the partridges towards the group. Alas, no partridges cooperated, but the group got a good chuckle out of it watching the two of us shouting and flailing our arms at imaginary birds. We then made our journey back to Marrakech on a modern comfortable road, always looking out the van window birding along the way. Victor spotted a Lanner Falcon flying alongside the bus that soon sped by us, even though Ibrahim was doing 65 mph. And a Common Raven was added to our list as the last new bird of the tour. We said our good-byes to our driver Ibrahim once the van was unloaded and thanked him for his exceptional driving and service.



At our final checklist, we shared special memories of the tour and our favorite bird species. Erica's favorite bird was the Desert Sparrow and Patty's was the Eurasian Hoopoe, and both really enjoyed the Falcon Nest escarpment wadi hike, as did Rick. Pat and Ron selected the Ounila Valley as a favorite location and the kestrel-eagle interaction as very special to witness. Bee-eaters were also favorites of many, as was the Pharaoh Eagle-Owl. The White Storks seen so frequently during the tour also received several votes. Mike's favorite bird was the Levillant's Woodpecker and he loved his time in the Sahara Desert. Anne picked the colorful Moussier's Redstart as her favorite and enjoyed all the bright colors on the walls, carpets, and tiles inside the places we dined and stayed at, including the colorful mosques and minarets we passed every day during our travels. John picked the Egyptian Nightjar as his favorite bird because it took a while for us to prove to him it wasn't a stick.

Rick selected the Atlas Wheatear due to its narrow range as a bird of the High Atlas Mountains and because it was so cooperative and it was his first ever wheatear. We saved the best for last; for Victor, it was rediscovering Morocco even though he has visited many times, and met new people and made new friends (we were a pretty great group I must admit). He added that seeing all the different raptors from his native Spain migrating through Morocco was also very special for him. After dinner we thanked Victor for his extraordinary guiding skills and said our goodbyes as we all had different departure times the next day. The tour ended up with 158 species of birds either observed or heard by someone in our group and many unforgettable memories.

## **April 15 Departure Day**

This tour was described by many of us as a trip of a lifetime and I believe it exceeded most people's expectations. I know I felt very fortunate to have been able to host it. Patty put it best several times during the tour when describing how fascinating a place Morocco was to her by using the word juxtaposition, a word I'll have to admit I do not think I've used in a written or spoken sentence before. Juxtaposition definition: "the fact of two things being seen or placed close together with contrasting effect". Patty's examples really stuck with me so I asked her to share them again, so here they are: "Morocco is a land of remarkable contrasts where you see the juxtaposition of newly rebuilt homes nestled against an ancient crumbling kasbah, and vibrant green river bottoms painted across an arid brown landscape. Where young women walk down the street in culturally traditional headdresses wearing modern jeans and carrying cell phones. Where you encounter a breath-taking tsunami of color when entering a dusty brown adobe building: tapestries, art, clothing, and décor drenched in reds and golds and peacock blue. Those contrasts carry even to the food where simple elements like bread and olives merge with complex spices to create unique Moroccan culinary pleasures." Well said Patty!

Rick, Celia, and Richard left together very early in the morning for their flight to Paris and the rest of the group departed at different times during the day today. Hopefully we'll see each other again on future Naturalist Journeys tours.

*Photos: Group (Rick Weiman - RW), Marrakech details (RW), Western Black-eared Wheatear (Celia Gerry - CG), Red-billed Chough (CG), Scenic (RW), Taking in the view (CG), African Blue Tit (CG), Western Yellow Wagtail (CG), Al Mansour Reservoir (RW), Woodchat Shrike (RW), La Perle de Dades hotel (RW), Scenic (CG), Greater Flamingos (CG), Dunes (CG), Rock Agama Lizard (RW), Spotted Sandgrouse (CG), Camels (CG), Blue-cheeked Bee-eater (CG), Scenic (CG), Sandwich Terns (CG), Maghreb Magpie (CG), Ruddy Turnstone (CG), Common Redshank (CG), Group (CG), Pharaoh Eagle-Owl (RW), Rick on a camel (RW)*