

# Morocco: Birding & Nature | Trip Report

## April 13-23, 2022 | by Peg Abbott



**Guided by Brahim Mezane, Peter Jones of Spanish Nature, and Naturalist Journeys host Peg Abbott with participants: Andrew, Bruce, Cathy, Erica, Jaye, Joseph, Lise, Liz, Patti, Steve, and Zosia.**



### **Wed., Apr. 13      Early Arrivals – Welcome to Morocco!**

With so much to see in Marrakesh, our group came in over a series of days and took time to see the various gardens, museums and public areas around town. Everyone was met at the airport to make our introduction to Morocco easy. Peg, Peter and a few others started the birding right away by walking





the hotel grounds, finding Eurasian Blackbird, House Bunting, several warblers, European Turtle Doves, Common Woodpigeon and overhead, a Booted Eagle.

## **Thurs., Apr. 14                      Marrakech City | Hotel Gardens Birding**

Before heading out to learn about Moroccan history and culture, we enjoyed a dawn chorus of bulbuls and turtle doves and had fun making a round of the hotel grounds. This morning a Pied Flycatcher was new, a lively male that put on a good show in the front garden. We then enjoyed breakfast on the patio – sitting under big flocks of Pallid, Common and Little Swifts that circled above, along with an impressive Booted Eagle. Then we met our local cultural guide Mustapha, who took us into the old part of the city, taking in various significant historical sites and a bit of the famous souk (market). For many of us, this was an introduction to life and history in a Moslem country.

Our guide sensed that we wanted to learn, and shared a good deal about his day-to-day life, the relationships of Berbers and Arabs within the country, and the general commitment to Islamic ritual and prayer. Because of Ramadan the streets were eerily quiet, since many people stay home unless they must work, and many businesses were closed. The faithful do not eat or drink from sunrise to sunset. So the plaza of the largest mosque and tallest minaret in the city was almost empty, only one other tour group and a few locals walking across mingling with the costumed living history presenters. These impersonated water carriers once so vital in the past glorious days of the big trading caravans.

At the plaza of the Medina, he told us about various religious and historical figures and the history of Marrakech. Then Mustapha sang for us some of the calls to prayer, his voice reverberating through the narrow passageways



between stucco-covered walls. We walked past several mosques, passing street vendors, and marveling at the view of the distant snow-capped Atlas Mountains with tall palms nearby. We had fun with a Berber musician who had a wise and kind smile, shared through a style of music influenced by nomadic travel. One could hear the hoofbeats and footsteps in the rhythm of each song. He demonstrated the instrument he played, made of coconut wood, like a guitar in some ways but with different tones. Mustapha picked up some metal hand symbols and sang along.

We visited an apothecary where we were able to try various lotions and potions, all of which were promised to make us feel younger, more vibrant, and energetic. We laughed and had fun as we tried a few and left with bags full – prepared for our rejuvenation. We had lunch at a good local restaurant, and then spent an hour or so at the Bahia Palace as our day's finale. It seemed humble enough from the outside, though elaborate tile leading to the entry might have been a clue. Inside were fourteen rooms with intricate tile, painted designs and particularly richly clad ceilings. Each was fascinating. And adding to the beauty was the way that light entered each room. Some had thick stained glass that painted moving rainbow tones across the space. We walked back to the bus across Marrakech's main square that in a couple of hours would be full of food vendors and life when fasting was over after dusk. We watched a White Stork fly overhead, landing in a rooftop nest with big chicks we spotted earlier in the day. We also saw our first Common Kestrel, circling above the square. We came back to enjoy the pool and grounds of the hotel, relaxing before dinner back at the hotel, quite merry with conversation.

**Fri., Apr. 15**

## **Marrakech | High Atlas Mountains | Agouim | Oued Anski Bridge**

We packed up our gear to head out today, loading bags at 8:30 to cross the High Atlas Mountains south of the city. Changes in elevation brought changes in vegetation. We watched low shrubbery and palms of the foothills leading out of the city and checked them for a few bird specialties. Peter was able to find us both the Iberian





Grey Shrike, and the Maghreb Magpie. We got good looks at both, but the shrike was most memorable as it flew right towards the bus, hovered above some insect prey, snatched that and went back to its perch. Before too long the road began to climb. We started seeing junipers and then some pines, dotted with wide spacing between them on the rocky slopes. The geology was fascinating, a lot of the rock quite ancient and sheer – some shiny having been compressed so tightly. Bruce shared Peg’s interest in rocks, and we tried to take it all in. We stopped for lunch shy of our intention to eat near the Tizi-n-Tichka pass, as we did not know with Ramadan what restaurants would be open and serving. We lucked out that our “safe-choice” option had very good food, and we tried out chicken and mixed grill skewers, Berber omelets and more. Vendors had rugs and fossils for sale, but we wanted to wait to reach the cooperatives further along our way as we passed into Berber territory once crossing the mountains, where artists got our direct purchases. We made a few bird stops, one comical as we stayed in the van fearing we’d chase away the Woodchat Shrike and Orpheum Warbler, so we jostled positions and views to get everyone on the birds. Fortunately, at the next stops we got out, and got to take in the richness of the watered oases. Palm trees indicated water, and we stopped at several groves, mostly viewing from bridges where we had views up and down the streams. Cathy had a strong interest in maps, and we all enjoyed reviewing the route with her inspiration.

Over time we saw almost 50 species, including both Black and White-crowned Wheatear, Peter’s specialty. A European Roller stole the show, perching in beautiful light that made it shine a rich turquoise against a cobalt blue sky. We had quick views of African Hoopoe but were distracted by the super agile and impressive flight of a courting pair of Eurasian Kestrel. Peter and Brahim helped us sort the various uniformly colored warblers including a tiny Iberian Chiffchaff that Joseph spied from the bridge. We found Eurasian Moorhen and then heard a flock of Eurasian Bee-eaters overhead. With luck they banked and turned, and we got very good views of these super colorful birds. We stopped at a river crossing late in the day, where we found three shorebirds with little effort (Common and Green Sandpipers and Little Ringed Plover) and other species. Amid the arid landscape it was lovely to see running water and a ribbon of green life defining it.

We put in a full day with many hours but had racked up a lot of fascinating birds and drank in the varied Moroccan landscapes – pinching our cheeks that after a two-year wait, we were finally here to see them! We checked into our very gracious Riad Tama near the movie studio town of Ouarzazate late in the afternoon, just



in time to appreciate the late light of day's glow on the reflection pool and patios. The rooms were spacious with local furnishings. Soon we were gathered around a big table, with beautiful food to share, first a pumpkin cheese soup and bread, then a tray of grilled meats, luscious eggplant and cooked vegetables. We were stuffed – when out came flan, few could pass by. Mint tea and we were ready to do our bird list and head to bed. Several of us went up on the rooftop where a near full moon shown over lights of the village in the distance.

## Sat., Apr. 16 **Djebel Sarhro | Draa Valley**

Today's full moon marked the halfway point for the Ramadan holy month and its requirements for fasting by day and resulting feasting by night. We woke up to the mixed sounds of dawn prayer calls from many nearby minarets and a dawn chorus in the bird world. Three Common Bulbul used the hotel pool for their antics, strutting back and forth where the water came in, belting out their musical calls. Peg, Steve and Lise took a walk, following a dirt road into agricultural fields where locals greeted us with "Bonjour," reminding us of the large French presence in Morocco in the past. Many were women, harvesting forage for animals, piling it high onto donkeys outfitted with metal frames ready to load. The donkeys were well taken care of, with thick pads and lively steps, as each reached the areas of cultivation they would bray and squeal only to be answered by others – a sort of all accounted for rallying cry as the day unrolled. One woman teased Peg who carried her go-mug with coffee – oops! That is not on the okay list for Ramadan! (We learned that the Ramadan fasting rules didn't apply to travelers. Whew!) Two new birds emerged for us on this crisp lovely morning: good views of European Serin and Nightingale.

We packed up and drove about a half hour to the first big wadi (a wash or streambed) lined with palms, pomegranates, and figs. We watched House Bunting and Trumpeter Finch, Tekla Lark and Spotted Flycatcher. Eurasian Bee-eaters came overhead and at a nearby stop we found Blue-cheeked Bee-eater as well as Yellow Wagtail. Brahim's keen eyes picked up a Barbary Partridge on the roadside and from the bus we got good views. Today was a long travel day. The Sahara is just not on the way to anywhere! We crossed a mountain range with deeply folded layering, old sediments from the Tethys Sea. Concentric rings, probably huge iron concretions and the different colors were fascinating. Much of the day the landscape was austere. Only along the Draa River





drainage was there a hint of green. Yet the starkness and its expansive nature had an appeal, and overall, the hours passed quickly. Lunch was on a rooftop deck with lovely food, good hospitality and views. We had time for a little catnap as our comfortable Sprinter van rolled along. Erica was getting some good shots out the window of rural life, camels, shops, intricate buildings and signs. We checked into our hotel at the edge of the dunes with time to walk a short loop around. We could see camel herders going in for the night, herding their long-legged animals. A full moon rose over the sands, brilliant!

## Sun., Apr. 17

## Erg Chebbi | Sahara Desert Birding | Fossils

This morning was one of the best of the trip. We started at a small waterhole that Brahim helped build, a place where several species of sandgrouse gathered. Most abundant were Crowned and Spotted and amidst hundreds we were thrilled to find one Pin-tailed. Zosia had this one high on her wish list – wish granted! After ample time to fill our gazes there, we drove on in 4-wheel drive vehicles to various shrub oasis areas of the dunes. We found a great number of birds, several endemics, from Hoopoe Lark to Desert Warbler. There were several wheatears to sort out, including a bright male Desert Wheatear which was especially captivating. We saw the first Cream-colored Courser and luckily were able to find them again several times in the tour. Spectacled Warbler was singing and a good find.

We drove quite a way out to meet a quiet man of the desert, wrapped in traditional garb, who was the self-appointed protector of the Egyptian Nightjar and helped us in respectfully viewing them. He was agitated that earlier another guide had disturbed them. Thankfully we were content to view at a distance and were rewarded by good views of two chicks, each hidden by a different shrub. We stopped at a tourist camp where we admired fine views and the antics of Bar-tailed Lark, Common Redstart and Desert Sparrows. Andrew tried the lawn chairs, chilling in the Sahara. Further down the road we had a go at finding Scrub Warbler, an elusive species with a long cocky tail. Liz was tuned in and kept calling – “it’s here!”, hanging close to Brahim. Eventually Brahim corralled us into more of a circle, and in time all got good looks. It was sporting but part of seeing these drabber, but intriguing desert species of such variety. We also had good views of Maghreb Lark and found two more Cream-colored Coursers attending a tiny chick. Very cute. We had a real treat: lunch at Brahim, our guide’s,



family restaurant in the Sahara edge town of Rissani, known for its dates. The food was delicious, but his young son stole the show, so precious and so happy to see his daddy. Patti, Liz and Lise had fun afterwards in the shop that sold fossils and colorful turbans, trying them on and getting a lesson on how to tie them. Blue is a man's color but several of our women could not resist – back home no one would know! Leaving here we passed again under the grand arch that marks the way to the Western Sahara, still held as Moroccan territory after long dispute.

In time we made it around to the other side of the dunes. It was quite a challenge getting there, with tires spinning in the sand, but tonight we got to sleep in a camp nestled in the orange Sahara dunes, where tents were set up for us with true “glamping” amenities: queen beds, nice textiles, real bathrooms, and lights – all in a circle and connected by Berber carpets between them. What a unique experience! It was so quiet, and our view was the silhouette of some grand dunes against the moonlit sky. We gathered around a small campfire, with the big moon shining overhead. Dinner was well-prepared and we were soon full and sleepy. Andrew had more energy than most and did some moonlight dune wandering. Several more did just that, barefoot in the sand, at sunrise the following dawn. It's not every day one sleeps in the Sahara!

**Mon., Apr. 18**

## **Erg Chebbi | Desert Camp | Nomad Rug Depot | Escarpment of Falcons and Owls**

Desert Sparrows called us to awaken, busy making their nests right among the structures of the camp. We went back to the main hotel for a buffet breakfast. The pastry show was quite something, as were the dozens of Berber carpets covering the floor. Today was the day we'd meet local artisans, so it was good to be able to study some of the textures and patterns. They greeted us warmly at the Nomad Rug Depot, run as a cooperative and perhaps the place our funds would go most directly to the communities if we chose to buy. We had plenty of temptations leading up to this, but this collection was by far worth the wait. Jaye had been diligent in reminding





us to wait and support the locals. The presenter was quite knowledgeable and showed us different styles of rugs and talked about where they were made and by what tribe. We were then turned loose to look and home in on selections. Some carried away small rug bundles and others arranged for shipping. As we were some of the first travelers since the country reopened, we had a feeling that all were grateful to see their livelihoods return. And what beauty! To see so many together, all the colors and patterns was quite remarkable.

We spent about an hour here, and then headed on to a quieter, well-watered spot for lunch. What an oasis! We ate outside at a long table with view of planted fields and the garden. Right from our seats we spied House Buntings and a Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin. Out exploring, Andrew became the African Hoopoe whisperer, calling us to come out quickly and assembling the group for wonderful views of this much hoped for species.

We drove through the Anti Atlas Mountains, headed for another river valley. The grand finale of the day, starting with a nice walk,, was promised time with Lanner Falcons and Pharaoh Eagle Owl. We pulled off near a dramatic canyon and ended up descending on a gentle incline into it. We spied a Berber herder and were surprised when he showed up with binoculars and chatted avidly in Arabic with Brahim. Among the rocks, he helped point out first Mourning and then Black Wheatear on nesting territories and Eurasian Crag-Martins flying busily along the rocks. A Long-legged Buzzard plied the skies overhead. For some time, we scoped out the female Lanner Falcon, a small dot sticking up out of the nest that barely moved. But with luck we were alerted by screaming and in came the male. She went out to greet him, they flew together, and then she came back to the nest to feed the chicks – marvelous views of a powerful and uncommon species. While we took turns at the scopes, Brahim continued, talking with a woman shepherdess, and using his keen eyes to home in on a roosting Pharaoh Eagle Owl – large like our Great Horned Owl, a fellow member of the genus *Bubo*. The afternoon light became golden, and we finally had to force ourselves away. What a magical place! On to our hotel, where we'd have two nights, at Boumaine-du-Dades, a town at the mouth of the famous Dades Gorges.





## **Tues., Apr. 19      Decharge de Boumaine (the Dump) | Riad Dades Birds lunch | Gorges de Dades**

What better way to spend your anniversary of 40+ years than birding, unless that fits with our date to bird the local dump, an eBird hotspot well known as the best spot to spy several of Morocco's endemics. So, with Joseph and Zosia walking hand in hand, we worked our way through colorful trash heaps and did indeed find some treasures. We had great looks at Temminck's Horned Lark, Thick-billed Lark, Greater Short-toed Lark, Red-rumped, Northern and Desert Wheatears, several races of Yellow Wagtail, and Black Kites. A herd of goats and donkeys came through and one old billy posed for us, taking in the distant views of the Atlas Mountains. Peg, Brahim and Peter had been at work to do something special for Joseph and Zosia's anniversary, and we should have seen Muhamad, our driver, take off while we were at the dump. He found a scrumptious and showy cake which he hid, then brought to lunch where we savored it and the occasion. What fun! This was at Dades Birds, a most delicious and friendly oasis.

We wanted some woodland time, so chose to bird an agricultural area with some large trees. Overall, it was quiet, but we picked up European Serin, good views, and heard European Greenfinch. We then headed up the dramatic road to the Gorge that winds between villages with classic kasbahs and mosques, brick buildings with flat roofs. The geology changed as we went, with intriguing colors and patterns all along the way. One feature was rounded rocks called the Monkey Fingers. The Gorge itself was quite steep, and we birded here, finding Tristram's Warbler by following a steep, shrubby ravine and then Gray Wagtail in the stream. Above us soared a Bonelli's Eagle, a very impressive bird. We also enjoyed views of Blue Rock Thrush and near a restaurant with fruiting trees, an African Blue Tit. Another very full day! We returned to dinner and a chance to catch up on our bird list, then off to sleep. Bruce and Peter had developed some congenial banter that was good for a laugh at day's end.

## **Wed., Apr. 20                      Ouarzazate Reservoir | Riad Tamdakhte | Ounila Valley**



This morning we passed by some impressive large kasbahs and drove through the Valley of Roses. We stopped at a small shop for those that wished to buy lotions and cosmetics. Across from the shop was a river with lush vegetation and we spied African Blue and Great Tits, Western Bonelli's Warbler, Eurasian Blackcap, Spotted Flycatcher and a very secretive Common Nightingale. We then passed through a rather bleak area of stony desert, brightened by several sightings of male and female Spiny-tailed Lizards, a most impressive species! Mohamed rescued one that was precariously trying to cross the road, so we got a super close-up view. After some driving, we looked forward to a break at the very large reservoir at Ourzazate, but we had not planned on gale-force winds. We could barely hold our scopes up! We took shelter behind some buildings to look down on Ruddy Sheldrake, Little and Great-crested Grebes, both Black and Whiskered Terns, Great Cormorant, both Little and Great Egrets and above us several swift species. Peg called out an Osprey winging its way low across the water and on phone wires as we left the area. We all had good views of Blue-cheeked Bee-eater – nice! We took a quick overview look at the World Heritage Site of Ait-Ben-Haddou – a stunning kasbah in a dramatic setting. As the wind was still howling, we decided not to try to fit in a tour, contented to see it and get some photographs.

Peg spied a Whinchat as we continued to a lovely guesthouse, Riad ad Tamdakhte, that was among the favorites of our trip. Here we were warmly greeted. Some of the children of the family cheerfully helped with our luggage and the owner poured us wonderful cups of hot mint tea in a cozy room where sun poured in high windows. Erica found a window and curled up to take it all in. A few opted for naps and a rest, while seven of us headed across the road to bird a riparian area around the kasbah used to film the TV series Game of Thrones. It was enchanting, with a well-watered river framed by steep cliffs behind it on one side, and the stunning ruins of a once glorified kasbah as our backdrop on the other.

We walked through irrigated olive trees hundreds of years old with wheat growing underneath. We found at least 60 European Bee-eaters, a group on migration looking for a place to stay for the night. They were restless and landed, then lifted off various branches. What a show of color! We also found Iberian Chiffchaff, White Wagtail (Moroccan race), both Spotted and European Pied Flycatchers, and both European Turtle and Eurasian Collared Doves. We had one of the best meals of the trip here, a special tagine (Moroccan stew) and thoroughly enjoyed sharing the meal and stories. The smells coming from the kitchen drew us all into a long table with beautiful dishes, all soon filled with steamy creations using local foods. A wonderful, memorable evening.





**Thurs., Apr. 21**

## **Ounila Valley | Tizi-n-tichka Pass | Alt Ourir | Tahanaoute**

We hated to leave this lovely riad and our kind hosts. But more scenery and birding lay ahead. We took a loop route on what was once an almost impassible road, now a decent highway and one showing off some truly incredible geology. Much of the scenery here is like that of Southern Utah with red and caramel-colored rock aligned in always changing textures and patterns. We followed the Ounila Valley its length and then ascended. We made a few stops along the route. Near the lunch spot, Peg found Coal Tits that several got to see, plus Mistle Thrush and Common Raven. Around a corner in a small woodland, we stopped to look for Tristram's Warbler with success, and Peter found us two Cirl Bunting and first for the trip, Red-rumped Swallows. This road came out on the road we took on Day One, near Tizi-n-tichka Pass, so we'd made a full circle. This time we got to get out and hike at the pass, and we all thoroughly delighted in the walk. There were so many ground-hugging mountain flowers and we watched for American Dipper in the stream. We found Gray Wagtail and good views of a species in taxonomic review, the Northern Wheatear, known locally and accepted by experts as Seeböhm's Wheatear.

Descending into agricultural lands, we spied a pair of Little Owl perched up for viewing. En route to our hotel we had fine views of Woodchat Shrike, watched Sardinian Warbler come up to sing, flushed five Barbary Partridge, and had a lot of fun watching Stonechats courting with a male feeding his mate. Beautiful Western Black-eared Wheatear shone in the afternoon light. We had fine views of the High Atlas, having descended the grade on the main road and now heading up a different valley, positioning ourselves this evening at a small hotel with good access the following day to a ski resort and high elevation birding.



**Fri., Apr. 22**

## **Tahanaoute Valley | Oukaïmeden Ski Area | Toubkal National Park Atlas Mountains**

Today was a splendid final day, full of energy of spring arriving to the mountains. We had breakfast at the hotel after birding a bit from the rooftop viewing deck. Our first stop was mid-elevation at a section of riverine trees that were grand in scale. There we got fine views of Levaillant's Woodpecker which flew back and forth across the road calling. The area was lush and green, with unexpected wildflowers and once-cultivated iris now escaped in bloom making for some delightful birding.

Then it was up into a beautiful valley, rimmed by the peaks of the High Atlas Mountains and cradling the Oukaïmeden Ski Area (base elevation 7800 feet) and Toubkal National Park. We were not in a rush and had time to search for species. Among the nomadic summer goat herder huts above the ski area condos, we were happy to find Atlas Horned Lark after some searching. Everyone raised their hands in a big high five on this one – success! We had best views of a pair that moved among myriad belly-hugging flowers, making for lovely photography. Over the course of the day and several different walks, we had super views of both Moussier's and Black Redstarts, both Red-billed and Yellow-billed Choughs, a Long-legged Buzzard and a perched Barbary Falcon, now considered a race of Peregrine by eBird but for us still great to see as a distinct bird for this area. The day was sublime, as we had lunch outside with snowy mountain views, but all too soon it was time to head back to the city. As we left the ski resort and headed back down the canyon, five American Coot puttered around a reservoir and below the dam, with diligent searching, Peg called out "dipper"! Our final bird, and a great one at that, a pair of very cooperative White-throated Dipper in the creek. The road was good, we made good time, and returned to the Farrah Marrakech with its nice trees and grounds. The wait staff here were happy to see us back, so friendly. We shared our trip highlights, tallied up our final species, and laughed and talked for one last night.



**Sat., Apr. 23**

## **Departures**

All things must come to an end. A few of the group stayed on with time to explore a bit more of Marrakech, do a bit of last shopping, birding the grounds, and across the street at a stunning small luxury hotel, to enjoy an elegant dinner. The Moroccan cuisine, especially the varied tagines, is a big part of this trip and memorable. Until the next adventure!

*Photo Credits: Group Photo (Peg Abbott - PA), Morocco Building (Erica Olson - EO), Patterned Spice Bags (PA), Sahara Dunes (PJ), Liz & Peter (PA), Pink Gate (EO), Floral Tree (EO), Large Bug (EO), Group (EO), Flower (EO), Building (EO), City Scenes & Palms (EO), Street Performers (EO), Market Colors (EO), White Stork (Peter Jones - PJ), Spice Sacks 2 (PA), Stunning Door (EO), Tortoise (EO), Patio (EO), Birding Atlas Mountains from Tea House (PA), Pool (EO), Draa Valley panoramic (PA), City near dusk (EO), Building Stone (PA), Sahara Kasbah Oasis (PA), Cream-color Courser (PJ), Liz (PA), Pin-tailed Sandgrouse (PA), Scrub Warbler (PA), Roadside rest (PA), Hoopoe Lark (PA), Desert Camp (Joseph Hunt - JH), Lanner Falcon (PA), Kasbah Rugs (PA), Joseph & Peter (PA), Chamomile Bloom (PA), Dune Edge (PA), African Hoopoe (PA), Fresh Dates (PA), Rugs (PA), Birding Group (JH), Landscape (EO), Patty (PA), Camels (EO), Anniversary Lunch (PA), Morocco Map (PA), Seeborn's Wheateater (PA), Dades Gorges Scenic (PA), Fountain (EO), All Smiles! (EO), Atlas Day Lizard (PA), Kasbah (PA), European Roller (PA), European Bee-eater (PA), White-throated Dipper (PA), National Park Sign (PA), Scenic (PA), Levailant's Green Woodpecker (PA)*