

MOROCCO 1 – 5th May 2013

Introduction

The purpose of this short tour to Morocco was to see 5 specific target birds that I didn't see or missed on previous visits to Morocco in winter and early spring: Atlas Flycatcher, Maghreb Tawny Owl, Andalusian Hemipode, Moroccan Shag and African Reed Warbler.

Atlas Flycatcher is a common bird in the Atlas-mountains but previous visits to Morocco were too early in the year to see this species which usually does not arrive before the end of April. Andalusian Hemipode has only recently been (re)discovered in a small coastal area near Oualidia but is rare and notoriously shy and therefore no surprise this bird was still missing on my WP-list. I guess I was just unlucky with Maghreb Tawny Owl and Moroccan Shag on trips to Morocco in the past. And the true identity of African Reed Warbler has only been revealed in the last couple of years (and research is still underway).

There are no organized birdwatching tours that cover all my target birds, so the only option was to organize a private tour myself. Flights and car-hire were easy to arrange but finding a good local guide proved more difficult. Morocco has few birdwatchers and after a fair bit of searching I found <http://moroccanbirds.blogspot.com> that I contacted in the hope they could help. Mohamed Amezian soon responded and provided me with a lot of useful information. Mohamed was also available for guiding and together we worked out an itinerary by e-mail that covered my target birds in the shortest time possible. We booked no hotels beforehand because we didn't know how long it would take to find a target bird and how long we would stay in one area. Finding accommodation was however never a problem, thanks to the help of Mohamed. Although getting around in Morocco is usually not difficult and people are friendly and helpful, English is not widely spoken and it can sometimes be problematic to explain what you are looking for (like a Hemipode!). Therefore Mohamed proved very useful in asking around, translating, taking care of food and drinks, getting access to sites, finding birds, etc. and I am sure my trip would have been less successful and enjoyable without Mohamed. The roads in Morocco have improved a lot and it is now possible to take the (toll) highway all the way from Fez to El Jadida. Pay attention to speed limits that are enforced vigorously.

I used the following itinerary:

We 1	train to Schiphol flight CND391 from Schiphol (14.30) to Fez (17.30) pick-up car at airport Fez and drive to Azrou (80 km) Hotel Azrou (1 night)
Th 2	birding surrounding Azrou drive to Sidi Abed (450 km) birding Cap Blanc (El Jorf Lasfar) and surroundings Sidi Abed stay locally (2 nights)
Fr 3	birding coastal stretch Sidi Abed – Oualidia v.v. (70 km)
Sa 4	drive to Agadir (420 km) birding Tamri Hotel Agadir (1 night)
Su 5	drive to Oued Massa v.v. (150 km) birding Oued Massa Motel Ait Melloul (1 night)
Mo 6	return car airport Agadir (15 km) flight AT422 from Agadir (10.00) to Casablanca (10.40) flight AT850 from Casablanca (12.20) to Schiphol (16.50) train home

Birdlist

Species	Subspecies	1	2	3	4	5
Little Grebe	<i>ruficollis</i>			+		+
Cormorant	<i>maroccanus</i>		4		+	+
Shag	<i>riggenbachi</i>				2	
Little Bittern	<i>minutus</i>					1
Cattle Egret	<i>ibis</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Little Egret	<i>garzetta</i>		+	+	+	+
Grey Heron	<i>cinerea</i>			1		2
Purple Heron	<i>purpurea</i>					4
White Stork	<i>ciconia</i>	+	+			
Glossy Ibis	<i>falcinellus</i>					4
Bald Ibis	<i>monotypic</i>				80	
Spoonbill	<i>leucorodia</i>			+		
Greater Flamingo	<i>monotypic</i>			+		
Mallard	<i>platyrhynchos</i>			+		+
Marbled Duck	<i>monotypic</i>			2		8
Black-winged Kite	<i>caeruleus</i>		1			
Black Kite	<i>migrans</i>	10	1			
Marsh Harrier	<i>harterti</i>		4			
Kestrel	<i>tinnunculus</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Lesser Kestrel	<i>monotypic</i>		+			
Quail	<i>coturnix</i>		+	+	+	
Andalusian Hemipode	<i>sylvaticus</i>			1		
Moorhen	<i>chloropus</i>		+	+		+
Coot	<i>atra</i>		+	+		+
Oystercatcher	<i>ostralegus</i>					2
Black-winged Stilt	<i>himantopus</i>		+	+		+
Avocet	<i>monotypic</i>			4		
Stone Curlew	<i>saharae</i>		+	+		+
Collared Pratincole	<i>pratincola</i>			3		
Little Ringed Plover	<i>curonicus</i>		+	+		
Ringed Plover	<i>hiaticula</i>		+	+		
Kentish Plover	<i>alexandrinus</i>		+	+		
Grey Plover	<i>monotypic</i>		+	+		
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>monotypic</i>		+	+		
Dunlin	<i>arctica / schinzii / alpina</i>		+	+		
Curlew	<i>arquata</i>		1			
Redshank	<i>totanus</i>		+	+		+
Turnstone	<i>interpres</i>		+	+		+
Little Gull	<i>monotypic</i>			1		
Black-headed Gull	<i>ridibundus</i>			+		+
Slender-billed Gull	<i>monotypic</i>			+		
Audouin's Gull	<i>monotypic</i>			+		
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>graellsii / intermedius</i>			+		+
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>michahellis</i>		+	+	+	+
Sandwich Tern	<i>monotypic</i>			+	+	
Common Tern	<i>hirundo</i>			+	+	
Little Tern	<i>albifrons</i>			+		

Black Tern	<i>niger</i>		1	1		
White-winged Tern	<i>monotypic</i>			2		
'Rock' Dove	<i>livia</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Woodpigeon	<i>palumbus</i>	+	+			
Collared Dove	<i>decaocto</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Turtle Dove	<i>arenicola</i>		+	+	+	+
Laughing Dove	<i>phoenicophila?</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Scops Owl	<i>mallorcae?</i>	3	1			
Lilith's Owl	<i>glauca</i>		1	1		
Tawny Owl	<i>mauritanica</i>		3			
Swift	<i>apus</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Pallid Swift	<i>brehmorum</i>		+		+	+
Little Swift	<i>galilejensis</i>				1	
Kingfisher	<i>atthis</i>					2
Roller	<i>garrulus</i>					1
Hoopoe	<i>epops</i>			1	1	+
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>mauritanus</i>		+			
Crested Lark	<i>kleinschmidti</i> <i>riggenbachi</i>		4			
			+	+	+	+
Brown-throated Martin	<i>mauritanica</i>					+
Sand Martin	<i>riparia</i>					+
Swallow	<i>rustica</i>		+	+	+	+
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>rufula</i>			2		
House Martin	<i>meridionalis</i>			+		+
White-throated Wagtail	<i>iberiae</i>			+	+	+
Grey Wagtail	<i>cinerea</i>		1			
Common Bulbul	<i>barbatus</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Wren	<i>kabyorum</i>		+			
Robin	<i>rubecula</i> // <i>witherbyi</i>		+			
Moussier's Redstart	<i>monotypic</i>					3
Stonechat	<i>rubicola</i>					2
Western Black-eared Wheatear	<i>monotypic</i>				3	
Blackbird	<i>mauritanicus</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Mistle Thrush	<i>deichleri</i>	1				
Cetti's Warbler	<i>cetti</i>					+
Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>cisticola</i>		+	+	+	+
African Reed Warbler	<i>guiersi?</i>		2	2		+
Great Reed Warbler	<i>arundinaceus</i>					3
Western Olivaceous Warbler	<i>monotypic</i>					+
Sardinian Warbler	<i>melanocephala</i>		3	+	+	+
Blackcap	<i>heineken</i>		+			
Firecrest	<i>balearicus</i>		+			
Atlas Flycatcher	<i>monotypic</i>		3+			
Coal Tit	<i>atlas</i>		+			
Ultramarine Tit	<i>ultramarinus</i>		+			
Great Tit	<i>excelsus</i>		+	+		+
Nuthatch	<i>hispaniensis</i>		+			
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>mauritanica</i>		+			
Golden Oriole	<i>oriolus</i>					1
Black-crowned Tchagra	<i>cucullata</i>					3
Desert Grey Shrike	<i>algeriensis</i>				2	
Maghreb Magpie	<i>monotypic</i>	2				+

Jackdaw	<i>spermologus</i>	1				
Raven	<i>tingitanus</i>	+	+		+	
Spotless Starling	<i>monotypic</i>	+	+	+	+	+
House Sparrow	<i>tingitanus</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Rock Sparrow	<i>barbara</i>		+			
Chaffinch	<i>africana</i>	+	+		+	+
Serin	<i>monotypic</i>	+	+	+	+	+
Greenfinch	<i>vanmarli</i> <i>voousi</i>			4		2
Goldfinch	<i>parva</i>				+	+
Linnet	<i>mediterranea?</i>		+	+	+	+
Cirl Bunting	<i>monotypic</i>					1
House Bunting	<i>monotypic</i>				+	+
Corn Bunting	<i>calandra</i>	+	+	+	+	+

Species account

Cormorant

Phalacrocorax carbo maroccanus

Small numbers were seen along the coast at El Jorf Lasfar, Tamri, Agadir and Oued Massa.

The subspecies *maroccanus* is ill defined and could in fact belong to White-breasted Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax lucidus*).

Shag

Phalacrocorax aristotelis riggenbachi

Two adults seen at close range just north of the colony of Bald Ibis near Tamri on 04-05-2013 was certainly one of the highlights of the trip and probably concern local breeding birds. About a month prior to our visit (the same?) two or three birds were seen at the same place by a group of birdwatchers led by Arnoud van den Berg. A photo of one of these birds was published in *Dutch Birding* (35-03).

This subspecies is sometimes considered a separate species (Moroccan Shag) and indeed, this crestless Shag looked remarkably different from the nominate *aristotelis* and Mediterranean subspecies *desmarestii*. Numbers of *riggenbachi* Shag in Morocco have declined strongly in the last decades and this must be one of the rarest birds in Morocco nowadays. They however seem to benefit from the protection of the colonies of Bald Ibis and I hope they will do so in the future. The colony of Bald Ibis near Tamri is off-limits to visitors but Mohamed can try to arrange access for visiting birders.



The cliffs north of Tamri where we saw two Moroccan Shags (source: Google Maps)

Marsh Harrier

Circus aeruginosus harterti

In total 4 birds (2 pairs) were seen over the marshes in the coastal strip between Oulad Ghanem and Sidi (El) Abed. Their plumage characters and breeding behaviour all point towards local breeding birds.

Andalusian Hemipode (Common Buttonquail)

Turnix sylvaticus sylvaticus

There are basically two 'main' sites for this species between El Jadida and Oualidia. One site is situated between Sidi (El) Abed and Sidi Moussa and the other site is called Oulad Ghanem and lies about 14 km north-east of Oualidia. It must be stressed however that there is a lot of suitable habitat all along this coastal strip and that birds can probably be found along this whole strip wherever suitable habitat occurs.

Birds return in April to their breeding areas from a yet unknown wintering site (likely an area just 20 km inland) and are usually found in grainfields at this time of year. When Andalusian Hemipodes starts to breed they move to pumpkin fields, bordered by arable field with potatoes, zucchini, corn or grain where they feed. Because crops on arable field vary from year to year, there are no exact stakeouts where this bird can be found.

The best way to find a bird is to listen carefully for the characteristic song of the female, often described as the mooing of a distant cow, but it sounded more like a soft calling Bittern to me. The females start singing in April, but are more vocal in May and June, even during daytime, as we experienced.

In 2006-2010 a lot of research has been done on Andalusian Hemipode, especially in the area around Sidi (El) Abed. A summary of the results was published in *Dutch Birding* (33-02). Dozens of birds were captured for ringing and several nests found. This research has now been stopped and visiting birders can no longer benefit from this program that could sometimes show nesting or captured birds. It is however still possible to stay at the property of Khalid El Marjani and his family, where the research mostly took place.

We stayed here for two nights and learned that not a single bird was heard or found this year by Khalid. Our first afternoon and evening (till 9.30 p.m., when it was pitch dark) in the area around Sidi (El) Abed confirmed this and we did not hear a single bird.

The next morning we started at 5 a.m. in the other area called Oulad Ghanem but we didn't hear any bird either before dawn. We walked a lot of fields and eventually found a farmer who had not only heard but also claimed to have seen a bird that morning. We decided to concentrate on this area and around 10 a.m. heard a female call at least three times in a row in a small field with grain. Despite searching here for a few hours we didn't see the bird and only flushed quite a few Quails who were common in the whole area. Later we tried some other promising fields towards Oualidia to no avail and returned in the afternoon where we heard the female call again at around 5.30 p.m. at exactly the same place. Although we were apparently quite close to the bird we never saw it, but still pleased to have heard this bird so well.



Typical habitat for Andalusian Hemipode around Sidi Abed

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus ridibundus*

About 200 birds were seen in wetlands along the coastal strip about 6 km north-east of Oualidia. These birds clearly showed breeding behaviour (pairs sitting on islands, copulating, territorial defence) and could be the most southern breeding Black-headed Gulls in the world.

Black-headed Gull is now believed to be polytypic (Gulls – Olsen et al).

White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*

Two late birds (one adult summer and one 2nd calendar year) were seen on 03-05-2013 in a marsh near Oulad Ghanem.

Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis ssp.*

When first visiting Morocco in 1989, Laughing Dove was a very rare bird that we searched for in vain. Now this is a common bird all over Morocco. If colonization took place from the east, the subspecies *phoenicophila* is the most likely one to occur in Morocco.

Scops Owl *Otus scops ssp.*

Three birds were heard on our first night in Azrou. The subspecies breeding in north-west Africa is probably *mallorcae*.

Lilith's Owl *Athene glaux glaux*

Only two birds were seen: 1 near El Jorf Lasfar and 1 near Oulad Ghanem. Both birds were hunting in broad daylight.

The taxa *glaux*, *lilith* and *indigena* are now considered a separate species (Lilith's Owl) with the taxon *saharae* now considered a synonym of *glaux* and therefore invalid.

Tawny Owl *Strix aluco mauritanica*

Three males were heard 'hooting' around 5 a.m. (but not the evening before) at the backside of Hotel Panorama in Azrou. The sound is much softer compared to Tawny Owls in Western Europe and can be missed quite easily, especially when there is a lot of other noise like traffic. The subspecies *mauritanica* is sometimes considered a separate species (Maghreb Tawny Owl). Birds did not seem to respond to tape.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopus major mauritanus*

Common in forests around Azrou. A Moroccan endemic subspecies.

Crested Lark

Galerida cristata kleinschmidti / riggenbachi

Several roadside birds seen on 02-05-2013 north of the line Azrou – Rabat belonged to the subspecies *kleinschmidti*. In the coastal strip south from Rabat the subspecies *riggenbachi* was very common.

The subspecies *carthagensis* is the third subspecies of Crested Lark that occurs in Morocco in the area around Oujda and further east. The taxa *macrorhyncha* and *randonii* are now considered a separate species (Maghreb Lark) and also occur in eastern Morocco.

Brown-throated Martin

Riparia paludicola mauritanica

Common in Oued Massa and seen from both the first and second bridge. A Moroccan endemic subspecies.



The entrance of Oued Massa NP

**White-throated Wagtail
(Spanish Wagtail)**

Motacilla cinereocapilla iberiae

Birds were commonly heard and seen at the coastal strip north-east of Oualidia and around Oued Massa.

White-throated Wagtail now consists of the subspecies *iberiae* (Spanish Wagtail), *cinereocapilla* (Ashy-headed Wagtail) and *pygmaea* (Egyptian Wagtail). Ashy-headed Wagtail is a rare but perhaps regular breeding bird in Morocco.

Robin *Erithacus rubecula ssp.*

Common in forests around Azrou. Robins in Morocco are intergrades between the subspecies *rubecula* (mainland Europe) and *witherbyi* from Algeria and Tunisia.

Western Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica*

Several birds were seen between Safi and Tamri.

The taxon *melanoleuca* is considered a separate monotypic species (Eastern Black-eared Wheatear).

Fan-tailed Warbler *Cisticola juncidis cisticola*
(Zitting Cisticola)

Very common in all coastal areas from Rabat south to Oued Massa.

The taxon *juncidis* is sometimes considered a separate species (Eastern Fan-tailed Warbler).

African Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus baeticatus ssp.*

Likely all 'reed warblers' breeding in (Western) North-Africa are African Reed Warblers and overlooked in the past. On this trip African Reed Warbler was found to be common in dry habitat like a kind of large reed used as a windbreak between arable field in the Oualidia-area but also in wet areas like reedbeds in the Oued Massa-area.

Birds were actively singing and could mostly be seen well with a little patience. The most remarkable features were:

1. a light sandy-coloured head with a grey rear-crown and nape, strongly contrasting and much lighter compared to the brown-greyish mantle
2. the brown-greyish mantle contrasting with the brown rump, uppertailcoverts and tail
3. a long white supercilium (extending far behind the eye) bordered above with a dark brown line (like a Booted Warbler), some even with a black 'smudge'
4. a short primary-projection and the primaries closely spaced, resulting in a rounded and short wing
5. underparts and belly white sandy-brown, somewhat dusky
6. dark-brown legs (soles not seen), sometimes looking almost black
7. the lower mandible was completely yellow, some with a washed-out dark tip
8. giving the impression of a small and compact 'reed warbler'
9. I have put a recording of a singing bird on:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Jwji9TVw_A

The subspecific identity of African Reed Warblers in Morocco (and the rest of North-Africa) is not yet established. This could concern the subspecies *guiersi* from Senegal but research has shown that the Moroccan subspecies is genetically distinct so this could concern a new taxon. According to Mohamed (who has done extensive research on this species in northern Morocco) Reed Warblers from south and east-coast of Spain (north to about Valencia) share the same genetic material as the 'reed warblers' in Morocco, so perhaps African Reed Warbler is even more widespread than previously thought.



A little downstream from the first bridge at Oued Massa

Western Olivaceous Warbler *Iduna opaca*

Singing birds were commonly heard and seen at Oued Massa.

The taxa *elaeica*, *laenini*, *reiseri*, *pallida* and *alulensis* are considered a separate species (Eastern Olivaceous Warbler) of which *reiseri* occurs in eastern Morocco (the so-called Saharan Olivaceous Warbler).

Atlas Flycatcher *Ficedula speculigera*

At least three males were found at a random stop in Oak-forest along the P21, about 2 km east of Azrou. The males were actively singing and inspecting hollows in trees and had probably just arrived. Also one bird heard in the centre of Azrou and another south of Ifrane, so probably common in the whole area.

The taxon *speculigera* is considered a separate species although the Iberian subspecies *iberiae* of Pied Flycatcher can resemble Atlas Flycatcher (but with less white on the forehead and a smaller white base to the primaries). The white on the rump was less prominent as I expected it to be.



The centre of Azrou with Atlas Flycatchers nearby.

Coal Tit *Parus ater atlas*

Common in forests around Azrou. A Moroccan endemic subspecies.

Ultramarine Tit *Cyanistes ultramarinus ultramarinus*

Common in woodland around Azrou.

Ultramarine Tit consists of the subspecies *ultramarinus* and *cyrenaicae* (Libya).

Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla mauritanica*

Common in woodland around Azrou. The subspecies *mauritanica* is sometimes considered a separate species (Maghreb Short-toed Treecreeper).

Desert Grey Shrike *Lanius elegans algeriensis*

Only seen near Tamri and Oued Massa, but surely more common.

Desert Grey Shrike now consists of the subspecies *algeriensis*, *elegans*, *theresae* and *koenigi*. In Morocco the dark *algeriensis* occurs along the coast and the paler *elegans* more inland.

Maghreb Magpie *Pica mauritanica*

Two were seen between Meknes and Rabat, more common south from Essaouira. Maghreb Magpie is considered a separate species although the Iberian subspecies *melanotos* of (Eurasian) Magpie can also show a small bare bluish spot behind the eye (but has a shorter tail).

Jackdaw *Corvus monedula spermologus*

One next to the highway near Tiflét was a first for me for Morocco.

Raven *Corvus corax tingitanus*

Common around Azrou and some roadside birds. The subspecies *tingitanus* is sometimes considered a separate species (African Raven).

Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia barbara*

This bird was commonly breeding in Oak-woodland around Azrou with at least a dozen seen. Very surprising to see Rock Sparrow in a forest!

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs africana*

Common in woodland around Azrou but also in coastal areas like Oued Massa. The subspecies *africana* is sometimes considered a separate species (Atlas Chaffinch) and belongs to the so-called *Spodiogenys*-group.

Greenfinch *Chloris chloris vanmarli / voousi*

Four birds seen on 03-05-2013 in the coastal strip near Oulad Ghanem belonged to the subspecies *vanmarli*. Two birds seen further south at Oued Massa belonged to the subspecies *voousi*.

Linnet *Linaria cannabina ssp.*

A common bird in coastal areas, especially between El Jadida and Oualidia. The subspecies occurring in north-west Africa is yet unknown or could belong to the subspecies *mediterranea* (BWP).

House Bunting *Emberiza sahari*

Singing birds were commonly heard and seen at Agadir and further south.

The taxon *striolata*, that occurs in the Middle East, is now considered a separate species (Striolated Bunting).



With the pressure off, time to chill out near Agadir

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