

Western Sahara: 24-30th January 2016

A bird trip report by Bob Swann

Following the discovery of Sudan Golden Sparrows at Bir Anzarane in early 2015 Bill Bailey and myself decided to organise a trip to Western Sahara in 2016. I contacted the Association Nature Initiative (ANI) a conservation organisation based in Dakhla to enquire about the possibility of a few days guiding. They in turn offered a complete package where they would look after us from our arrival in Dakhla till our departure. This involved two nights in the Imperial Playa Hotel in Dakhla and three nights camping in the desert. It was to be all inclusive and include a guide and the use of a 4x4. The price for four people was 300Euro each. We thought this was a very good deal and took them up on their offer. Eric Alblas and Daniel Mauras agreed to join us on the trip.

We booked flights to Morocco and then used Royal Air Maroc to fly down to Dakhla. Eric noted that the original flight times had been considerably altered. Using the RAM call centre we were able to get flights changed at no extra charge.

Note in the account below all km details refer to distances to Aousserd (as shown by roadside markers), unless otherwise stated.

24th January. Bill and myself had flown from London Gatwick to Agadir, by Easyjet, the previous day and had checked in to Agyat Maroc Hotel in Agadir. A pre-breakfast stroll in the open/waste ground round the hotel revealed our first Moroccan specialities such as *mauritanica* **Magpies**, a group of noisy **Common Bulbul**, **Spotless Starlings**, singing **House Bunting**, with **Common Kestrel** and **Pallid Swift** overhead.

We got a taxi back to the airport to get the RAM flight to Casablanca. Here we had a wait of several hours before our flight to Dakhla and were joined by Daniel, who had flown down from Paris. This gave us time to explore some open areas and woodland near the airport. Along the woodland edge we found a **Little Owl**, a few wintering **Song Thrush**, resident **Blackbird**, **Chaffinch**, **Greenfinch**, and a **Serin**, There were lots of **Common Chiffchaff** and amongst them an **Iberian Chiffchaff**. Also present were **Sardinian Warblers** and a **Blackcap**. In more open areas we found **Black Redstart**, **Stonechat** and **Cattle Egrets**. We eventually got our 2030 RAM flight to Dakhla. Here we were met by Eric (who had arrived in Dakhla the day before) and our guide Mohammed Lemine Samlali and taken to our hotel which was close to the airport. We then had a chat about our plans and received the disappointing news that there was no water at the Bir Anzarane site and so no Sudan Golden Sparrows.

25th January. Mohammed arrived promptly at 0915 with a landrover full of supplies. We squeezed our own gear in and then set off towards and down the Aousserd Road, with Mohammed getting us through all the checkpoints without any need for documentation. Our first stop was at Gleib Jidane. In the open desert near some small irrigated fields we saw our first desert birds with a **Hoopoe Lark**, a singing **Bar-tailed Lark**, **Southern Grey Shrikes**, a **Red-rumped Wheatear** and several **White-crowned Black Wheatears**.



Red-rumped Wheatear



White-crowned Black Wheatear

We continued south east suddenly veering off the road at km 130. Here we headed for a mound on the south side of the road where Mohammed showed us some ancient 3000 year old rock carvings. We also found a pair of **Desert Lark**.

Next stop was at km 109. On the north side of the road we had a lunch stop in a oued dominated by acacias and large tussocks of grass. Heavy rains in early November had resulted in a tremendous growth of grasses and other plants so many areas were very green. Straightway we had several singing **Black-crowned Sparrow-larks**. The bushes also held **Chiffchaff**, **Spectacled Warbler**, **Southern Grey Shrikes** and at least three **Northern Wheatear**.

We continued on to km75 where we stopped to check an area of desert with scattered small scrub. About 150m north of the road in an open 'grassy' area I found our first **Dunn's Larks** – a single, then a pair with the male courtship feeding the female. We got excellent views of these birds. Our luck continued when about 100m further north in a sandy area with small bushes I found a singing **African Desert Warbler**. This bird delighted us by giving prolonged close views. The supporting cast in this area included displaying **Hoopoe Lark**, a few **Bar-tailed Larks** and **Spectacled Warblers**. Next stop was km41, another open 'grassy' area. Here again we found more **Dunn's Larks**, including one feeding a small chick that had just left its nest and others singing.



African Desert Warbler



Dunn's Lark

Eventually just before dusk we arrived at Oued Jenna. Mohammed set up camp on the east side of the oued about 3km south of the road. He had come well equipped with a tent, sleeping bag, sleeping mat and pillow for each of us. He then proceeded to cook up a super camel tagene, which we ate under a starry desert sky. As the full moon rose it illuminated the desert and we headed to our beds to the sounds of calling cicadas and grasshoppers.

26th January. Awoke to the song of displaying **Black-crowned Sparrow-larks**. It was cold and windy and as we ate breakfast we watched 12 **Lesser Kestrels** hunting nearby. We spread out in a line across the oued and slowly started to walk north. I was on the west side and soon located a singing **Cricket Warbler** in an area of tussocks and scattered small acacias. After we all got excellent views of the bird we spread out again. We were soon watching **Fulvous Babblers**, **Chiffchaffs**, **Sub-alpine Warblers**, **Sardinian Warblers**, **Spectacled Warblers**, **Southern Grey Shrikes** and lots of **Black-crowned Sparrow-larks**. We found another two **Cricket Warblers**. We reached the road and crossed on to the north side. The wind had dropped a bit and it was getting much warmer. Here we had **Collared Dove**, two **Great-spotted Cuckoo**, a **Hoopoe**, a **Western Orphean Warbler**, a **Black-eared Wheatear** and on the edge of the oued a group of 16 **Stone Curlew**. Surprisingly we had not found any sparrows.



Black-crowned Sparrow-lark



Cricket Warbler

At midday we had returned to the road to meet up with Mohammed. He drove us 2km further east to a large area of tussocks. On the north side of the road we located another **Cricket Warbler** and a family of **Fulvous Babblers**. We returned to the road and cut back SE across a more open stony area towards the camp. Here we had a cracking male **Desert Sparrow**, a **Desert Wheatear** and two **Northern Wheatear**. To our surprise Mohammed had prepared a nice camel risotto for us for lunch.

After lunch we drove on towards Aousserd and stopped at km6 where there is a water tank by a small area of cultivation. We staked out the small pool for a couple of hours. Flocks of up to 25 **Desert Sparrows** dropped in to drink, giving very nice views, along with a couple of **White Wagtail**. Small numbers of **Barn Swallows** were moving north and with them a single **House Martin**. Nice views of a male **Lesser Kestrel** perched on an acacia. Although it was now very warm it was also very windy.



Desert Sparrow



Fulvous Babbler

We drove on into Aousserd and met up with a professor from Rabat, who was studying the desert birds. He explained that the November rains had resulted in ideal conditions for larks – especially Dunn's and Black-crowned Sparrow-larks, but that the current lack of standing water was not good for sparrows, hence the low numbers. We then drove 20km south through the desert to check out the barrage. Predictably it was dry. We found a group of 20 **Desert Sparrow** enroute near a small farm and two pairs of **Desert Lark** on rocky outcrops by the barrage. On the way back we cut NW across the desert finding four **Cream-coloured Courser**, a confiding juvenile **Dunn's Lark**, **Hoopoe Lark**, **Bar-tailed Lark** and a **Desert Wheatear**. Also some large Dabb Lizards by their holes.



Dunn's Lark – juvenile



Cream-coloured Courser

We hit the Assoued Road at km11 and 5km further west a **Thick-billed Lark** flew across the road in front of us. As we searched for it I flushed a **Tawny Pipit**. Eventually got back to camp at 1915. It was another beautiful starry night sky as we ate the chicken and spaghetti that Mohammed had prepared for us.

27th January. After breakfast we again walked north through Oued Jenna to the road. Birds were much as the previous morning. We did find more **Cricket Warblers**, mainly on the west side of the oued in amongst the large tussocks, along with more **Fulvous Babblers**. Had small numbers of **Barn Swallows** flying north and a **Red-rumped Swallow**. We met up with Mohammed at 1100 and returned to the water tank at km6 to stake it out again for sparrows. It was fairly quiet, with fewer **Desert Sparrows** than the previous day. We were entertained by a

family of **White-crowned Black Wheatear**. A **Brown-necked Raven** dropped in and further out over the desert we observed nine **Black Kites**. Lots of **Barn Swallows** were moving north and with them another **House Martin**. Mohammed arrived with another very nice lunch – mutton and chickpeas and at 1500 we gave up and headed back west.

We decided to camp close to the pools at Gleib Jidane. First stop though was for tea at the restaurant, where the bushes only held **House Sparrow**, a couple of **Spanish Sparrow** and **Collared Doves**. After setting up camp Mohammed prepared another fine meal – mutton tagine. In the distance a **Pharaoh Eagle Owl** was calling.

28th January. It was cool and windy again as we ate breakfast. We staked out the pools in the forlorn hope that sandgrouse would come in, but none appeared. On the cliff on the south side of the road we picked out a pair of **Black Wheatear**. On our side we found a pair of **Thekla Lark**, a pair of **Red-rumped Wheatear** and two **Northern Wheatear**. After packing up camp we continued west to Dakhla Bay.

We used the tracks down to fishing stations in order to explore the south side of the bay. The tide was well out but there was a good scatter of waders. These comprised **Oystercatcher**, **Curlew**, **Whimbrel**, **Bar-tailed Godwit**, **Dunlin**, **Sanderling**, **Grey Plover**, **Ringed Plover**, **Kentish Plover**, **Greenshank** and a single **Redshank**. Also out on the mud were many **Grey Heron**, groups of **Greater Flamingo**, **Little Egret**, **Spoonbill** and three **Ruddy Shelduck**. We also found a dark morph **Western Reef Egret** – a local rarity. Many **Great Cormorants** fed in the channels. Sitting out in the bay were a few **Osprey** and they were joined at one stage by a **Short-toed Eagle** that landed next to two Greenshank! The only passerine we found was a **Thekla Lark**.

Having explored the south side we headed over to the north side. At km 17km to Dakhla we stopped for a picnic lunch by a small inlet. Nearby we found an immature **Razorbill** feeding close inshore. We then moved down to km21 to Dakhla where the incoming tide had resulted in the formation of a roost of gulls and terns. It was dominated by **Lesser Black-backed Gulls**, with a few **Yellow-legged Gulls** and **Audouin's Gulls**. There were also c70 **Sandwich Terns** and with them c35 **Caspian Terns** and c25 **Royal Terns**. We walked out across the mud to get closer views. Further offshore was a group of c50 **Slender-billed Gulls**.



Royal Tern



Audouin's Gull

We decided to head back into Dakhla and checked back in to the hotel for a well needed shower and shave. Four **Little Swift** were flying round the hotel. In the evening we went out to explore central Dakhla with Mohammed and got a nice pizza in a local restaurant.

29th January. Our final day in Dakhla. Mohammed picked us up at 0900 and we decided to check the north coast of the Dakhla spit. Here there were many large gull roosts, mainly comprising **Lesser Black-backed Gulls**, with **Audouin's Gulls** and **Sandwich Terns**. A rocky stretch of coast held a few **Turnstone**. We drove up to Pointe de la Sarga at the far end of the spit. Here there were even larger groups of gulls, including seven **Mediterranean Gulls**. One had a green darvik and had been ringed in Vendee, France the previous summer. There was also a large roost of c200 **Caspian Terns** and many **Great Cormorants** – mostly Moroccan ones, but also a few of the nominate race. We scoured the flocks for any vagrant gulls, but without success. Large numbers of waders were present round a tidal pool. Mainly **Grey**, **Ringed** and **Kentish Plovers**, with **Dunlin**, **Sanderling** and a few **Knot** and **Curlew Sandpiper**. By the fishing 'village' a **White Wagtail**.

After a nice lunch of chicken and couscous in a posh seafront restaurant we decided to revisit the north side of the spit, by the lighthouse, for some sea watching. Many **Gannet** were moving offshore, along with several **Great Skua**

and a few **Arctic Skua**. It was soon time to head to the airport and say goodbye to Mohammed before getting our RAM flight to Agadir or Casablanca.

30th January. Bill and myself had most of the day to bird in Agadir before our flight back to Gatwick. I had booked a car and we decided to head for Anza just north of Agadir as a kelp gull had been reported there five days previously. We arrived to find huge numbers of gulls on the beach. We diligently checked through them. They were mostly **Lesser Black-backed Gulls**, with a few **Yellow-legged** and some **Black-headed** and **Mediterranean Gulls**. Unfortunately despite searching for about 4 hours no sign of our target species. The beach also held many **Little Egret**, a pair of **Stone Curlew** and a couple of **Whimbrel**. In the scrub/waste ground behind the beach we had **Zitting Cisticola**, **Sardinian Warbler** and a **Crested Lark**. A bit disappointed that we had failed in our quest we headed back to the airport, spotting a **Laughing Dove** enroute – this was the final and 97th species we had seen since our arrival. We returned the car and then began the long check-in process for our final flight.

Overall despite missing out on the Sudan golden sparrows everyone agreed it had been an excellent trip and that camping out in the desert was certainly the way to do it. Mohammed was an excellent guide, was very organised, knew the sites and was a very good cook! The only downside was that he did not speak English (though he does speak French and Spanish). We were very lucky in that Daniel could translate everything into French and could explain to Mohammed what we wanted to do. Contact with the ANI office in Dakhla prior to the trip was often very intermittent and minimalistic. I think this was partly due to me contacting them in English. As the trip approached I got Daniel to translate messages into French before I sent them. This appeared to work and we did (eventually) get replies. I would recommend that anyone wanting to visit the area should contact ANI either through their e-mail address: infoinitiative@yahoo.fr or via their facebook page.

Bob Swann

Systematic bird list. Note 'north' relates to birds only seen in the Agadir or Casablanca area.

Ruddy Shelduck	Tadorna ferruginea	
Greater Flamingo	Phoenicopterus roseus	
Northern Gannet	Morus bassanus	
Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	
Little Egret	Egretta garzetta	
Western Reef-Heron	Egretta gularis	
Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	north
Eurasian Spoonbill	Platalea leucorodia	
Osprey	Pandion haliaetus	
Short-toed Eagle	Circaetus gallicus	
Black Kite	Milvus migrans	
Stone Curlew	Burhinus oedipnemus	
Eurasian Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus	
Grey Plover	Pluvialis squatarola	
Kentish Plover	Charadrius alexandrinus	
Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula	
Common Greenshank	Tringa nebularia	
Common Redshank	Tringa totanus	
Whimbrel	Numenius phaeopus	
Eurasian Curlew	Numenius arquata	
Bar-tailed Godwit	Limosa lapponica	
Ruddy Turnstone	Arenaria interpres	
Red Knot	Calidris canutus	
Curlew Sandpiper	Calidris ferruginea	

Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	
Cream-colored Courser	<i>Cursorius cursor</i>	
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>	
Parasitic Jaeger	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	
Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>	
Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>	
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	
Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	
Royal Tern	<i>Thalasseus maximus</i>	
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>	
Lesser Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bengalensis</i>	
Eurasian Collared-Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	
Laughing Dove	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>	north
Great Spotted Cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>	
Pharaoh Eagle-Owl	<i>Bubo ascalaphus</i>	
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	north
Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	
Little Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>	
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	
Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	
Eurasian Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	north
Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	north
Brown-necked Raven	<i>Corvus ruficollis</i>	
Greater Hoopoe-Lark	<i>Alaemon alaudipes</i>	
Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark	<i>Eremopterix nigriceps</i>	
Bar-tailed Lark	<i>Ammomanes cinctura</i>	
Desert Lark	<i>Ammomanes deserti</i>	
Thick-billed Lark	<i>Ramphocoris clotbey</i>	
Dunn's Lark	<i>Eremalauda dunni</i>	
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	north
Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>	
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	
Common House-Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	
Common Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>	north
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	
Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>	north
Cricket Longtail	<i>Spiloptila clamans</i>	
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	north
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	north

African Desert Warbler	<i>Sylvia deserti</i>	
Western Orphean Warbler	<i>Sylvia hortensis</i>	
Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>	
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	
Spectacled Warbler	<i>Sylvia conspicillata</i>	
Fulvous Babbler	<i>Turdoides fulva</i>	
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	north
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	north
White-crowned Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i>	
Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>	
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	
Red-rumped Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe moesta</i>	
Black-eared Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>	
Desert Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>	
Eurasian Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	north
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	north
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	north
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	
Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>	
House Bunting	<i>Emberiza sahari</i>	north
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	north
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	north
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	north
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>	
Desert Sparrow	<i>Passer simplex</i>	