

## Trip report Southern Morocco and Western Sahara February 23<sup>rd</sup> to March 8<sup>th</sup> 2016

In the early spring of 2016 Hans de Waard and Jan Lok, experienced birders in most of the region except the far south, visited southern Morocco and the Western Sahara. The main purpose was visiting Dakhla peninsula and the surroundings of the Aousserd Road, where unusually heavy rains produced relatively lush vegetation and great numbers of desert birds.

### February 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> Massa

After arriving at Agadir airport, where our “professional” camera’s and lenses caused some concern with the custom officers, we travelled to Massa (Hotel Palmeraie de Massa). On the way we looked for **Stone-curlew** and found some at Tifnite. A much larger, very vocal flock (25-30 birds) was found in the higher fields round Massa this and the following day. This species could also be heard at night from our hotelroom, as well as a **Little Owl**. In the same habitat **Lesser short-toed Lark**, often together with **Thekla Lark** and some **Crested Lark**, proved to be numerous, singing from the ground as well as in flight. A group of 20 **Calandra Lark** was our only sighting of this species during the trip. A **Tawny Pipit**, flying off among **Meadow Pipits**, was an unexpected bonus.

The 24th was spent exploring Oued Massa and surroundings. The river itself was fairly quiet bird wise. Apart from some waders a group of **72 Bald Ibis** was seen resting at the river mouth. The presence of a **Great Northern Diver** at the mouth was reported by a Welsh birder that evening and could be confirmed by another birder the next day. Unfortunately we missed the bird. Apart from the more common species of herons one **Squacco Heron** was observed. Only 1 **Marbled Duck** and 5 **Ruddy Shelduck** were present.

The partly irrigated fields, marshy fringes, palm and eucalypt groves and hills proved more productive. **Common Quails** were heard calling as was a **Great Spotted Cuckoo**. In the evenings many **Cattle Egret** and some **Glossy Ibis** congregated on the irrigated fields were one **Black-tailed Godwit** was found sleeping. An occasional **Marsh Harrier** hunted the fields. A single **Yellow Wagtail** (Iberian race) was seen.

**Black-crowned Tchagra** were seen (and heard, sometimes singing in display flight) at many more places than the well-known gardens close to the river. The song of **Cirl Bunting** was heard at quite a few places, a small flock of **Siskin** in a Eucalypt Grove was a surprise.

Apart from **Barn Swallows** travelling north in small numbers there were very few signs that migration was well under way.

All together the Massa region produced 73 different species.



*Lesser short-toed Lark near Massa February 23<sup>rd</sup>*

#### **February 25th Massa – Tan Tan Plage**

To get to Tan Tan plage we travelled the coastal route via Sidi Ifni and from there to Guelmim. After arrival we saw **Black Scoter (8)** passing over sea. Leaving the Oued Massa valley in the early morning we encountered a nice number of **Brown-throated Martin (20+)**. We spent quite some time trying to get one decent picture of them, in which we hardly succeeded. On the way the first wheatears began to appear: **Northern Wheatear** on its way north (some males moulting to summer plumage), **Black Wheatear**, **White-crowned Wheatear** and **Red-rumped Wheatear** (singing near an oasis 20 km south of Guelmim).

In the lagoon of Sidi Ifni we found our first **Little Ringed Plover** of the trip and the only **Sparrowhawk** we would see flew over the hills between Sidi Ifni and Guelmim.



*Brown-throated Martin at Massa February 25<sup>th</sup>*

#### **February 26th Tan Tan Plage – Laayoune (Al Ayun)**

Before getting on our way we had a comfortable view on passing seabirds from our room in Hotel Belle Vue: **Parasitic Jaeger (1)**, **Great Skua (several)**, **Northern Gannets** and a resting shearwater

(probably **Cory's Shearwater**). The rocky coast north and south of Tan Tan plage offered an attractive habitat for **Oystercatcher, Common Ringed Plover, Grey Plover, Sanderling and Whimbrel**.

On the way to Laayoune the lagoon of Knifiss was visited and stops were made at several rivermouths, which weren't all equally productive. Just before entering Laayoune a bridge crosses the impressive Oued Saquia-al-Hamra, at the time of our visit full of water and very rich in birdlife.

Not far south from Tan Tan Plage we encountered a large eagle hanging in the wind over the coastal cliffs. The identification was not easy. Luckily some pictures could be taken and eventually with some help of the guys of *Moroccan birds* the bird could be identified as an immature **Golden Eagle**. At Knifiss several **Yellow Wagtail (Iberian race), Meadow Pipit** and **2-3 Red-throated Pipit** foraged round the fishing settlement. One **Osprey** was present at the lagoon. Further along the way the first **Desert Wheatear** of the trip was seen along with some **Red-rumped Wheatears**. At sea a group of **100+ Black Scoters** was seen, actively feeding. Probably the Atlantic coast of the Western Sahara is an important wintering ground for this species.

We arrived in time at Laayoune (Hotel Jordsa) to be able to do some birding at Saquia-al-Hamra. Quite a few waders were present, among them some **Ruff** and **30 Avocet**. Many hundreds of **Cattle Egret** came to their night roosts in the Oued together with **8 Glossy Ibis**. Hundreds of **Marbled Duck** and **Pied Stilt** were spread out over the Oued. The first **5 Slender-billed Gulls** were seen, together with hundreds of **Black-headed Gulls**. The next day and again some days later we could spend some more time at this amazing area.

#### **February 27<sup>th</sup> Laayoune**

A tour eastward via the oasis Lemayed and crossing the dry Oued Saquia-al-Hamra was disappointing and produced hardly anything worth mentioning, apart from **2 Greater Hoopoe-Lark** and a **Long-legged Buzzard (cirtensis)** at Lemayed. In the far distance, where the oued still held some water, several hundreds of **Greater Flamingo** could be seen.

After returning to Laayoune the river was once again very productive. Near the dam a large roost of **1000+ Greater Flamingo** was counted, bringing the total for the day up about 2000 birds. A **Booted Eagle** and some **Marsh Harriers** passed, apparently on migration. A **Barbary Falcon** was seen hunting over the town. A pair of **Little Ringed Plovers** showed courtship behaviour, a **Kentish Plover** shared its patch with **8 Little Stints**, still in their winterplumage. **Pied Stilt, Greenshank, Common Sandpiper and Sanderling** (40, quite some distance from the sea) completed the waderlist. **Slender-billed Gulls (18)** were again present.

The strong wind forced **Pallid Swift (at least 40), Little Swift (1), Common House Martin (several) and Barn Swallow** to fly at a low altitude sheltered by the city walls, offering good photo opportunities. Again several **Iberian Yellow Wagtails** were present.



*Sanderlings at Laayoune February 27<sup>th</sup>*

### **February 28<sup>th</sup> Laayoune-Dakhla**

Including police controls and getting stuck in the sand, while stopping to inspect a roadkill, it took nine hours to reach Dakhla, where Hotel Essaha offered good and reasonably priced accommodation. Untreated sewage from the fishing industry discharged directly into the bay near our hotel attracted some **Turnstones** and **7 Common Sandpipers**.

### **February 29<sup>th</sup> Atlantic Coast Dakhla peninsula; Dakhla Bay**

Off the coast of Dakhla peninsula there wasn't much activity apart from **Gannets** (mostly adult birds migrating north) and **Great Skua** (18 during a brief period passing north or resting at sea). At land large groups of gulls and terns were resting: **Lesser Black-backed Gull (thousands)**, **Audouins Gull (hundreds)**, **Yellow-legged Gull (very few)**, **Sandwich and Caspian Tern (dozens)**.

In the afternoon we visited the eastside of the bay a couple of km's south of the Aousserd road turn off. It was going to be one of the highlights of our trip. We hoped to see the Western Reef Heron and Royal Tern and were not disappointed. A **Western Reef Heron** was seen feeding at the water's edge together with some **Little Egrets**, a group of **15 Royal Tern** was counted resting among other terns (Caspian and Sandwich) and waders.

Twelve **Grey Herons** flew off from the dry desert some 500 meters from the water. **Eurasian Spoonbills (100+)** were migrating north with a very strong headwind which forced them to fly very low over the water. Also an **Osprey** struggled north and another flew with a fish in its talons inland. A **Barbary Falcon** tried to surprise a small wader but failed. The **cormorants** present were predominantly of the race **Maroccanus**.

<i>Waders at a high tide roost at the eastern side of Dakhla Bay Feb 26<sup>th</sup> 2016</i>	
Eurasian Oystercatcher	60
Pied Avocet	1
Kentish Plover	8
Grey Plover	20
Red Knot	60
Sanderling	30
Greenshank	6
Bar-tailed Godwit	80
Eurasian Curlew	160
Eurasian Whimbrel	10



*Royal Terns at Dakhla Bay February 29<sup>th</sup>*

### **March 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Aousserd Road**

On a wonderfully clear day we travelled from Dakhla along the Aousserd Road in the direction of Oued Jenna where we would spend the night under the stars. Halfway the desert turned greener and became alive with birds, the **Black-crowned Sparrow-lark** being the dominant species. According to reports tens of thousands of this rather odd looking lark followed the rains to breed in the area and indeed we saw many young birds. **Several Cream-colored Coursers** were seen, sometimes in family groups with half grown young. **Bar-tailed Lark** was common as was **Greater Hoopoe-Lark**. Raptors were rare, only **2 Long-legged Buzzards** were seen.

The north side of the road at the 200km Dakhla sign was very productive and was crisscrossed on both days. **Dunn's Lark** should be present here, although in very small numbers. After having mistaken immature Black-crowned for Dunn's, eventually we could identify one bird on one of the many pictures we had taken. Possibly more were present but the bird and more important its calls and song were unknown to us and among the bird choir all around us hard to single out. In April this species was reported to have left the area almost completely after the vegetation began to desiccate. Here we saw our only **Cricket Warblers**, three birds singing. In total **4 Common Quails** were flushed here, producing their rolling call. A **Fennec** was a nice bonus.



*Dunn's Lark along the Aousserd Road March 2<sup>nd</sup>*

Oued Jenna offered a savannah-like landscape with Acacias standing in a sea of very tall grasses. We arrived here late in the afternoon and spent some hours the next day (which was unfortunately very hazy) exploring the south side.

<i>A selection of species seen at Oued Jenna March 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> 2016</i>		
Common Kestrel	Male	Territorial behaviour
Stone-curlew	1	Heard calling at night
Eurasian Collared Dove	Some	
Eurasian Hoopoe	1	
Sand Martin	2	Migrating
Northern Wheatear	Several	First females arriving
Western Black-eared Wheatear	3	All males
Spectacled Warbler	6	
Subalpine Warbler	Several	
Desert Grey Shrike	Many	Actively hunting, possibly juvenile larks
Fulvous Babbler	5	
Brown-necked Raven	3	Also 1 on the road consuming one of the many larks killed by passing traffic.

A stop was made on both days at Gleb Jdiane where a leaking watertank had created a miniature marsh habitat. We couldn't find the **Allen's Gallinule** although the bird was reported here again March 2<sup>nd</sup>. A **Trumpeter Finch** came to drink at the pool, a single **White Wagtail** and several **Chiffchaffs** were present, as were **2 Eurasian Hoopoes**.



*Cream-colored Courser along Aousserd Road March 1<sup>st</sup>*

### **March 3<sup>rd</sup> Dakhla – Laayoune**

The first part of the long ride was brightened up by migrating **Black Kites**, 200+ in several groups. Also **Marsh Harriers** were on their way north, 5 males and one female migrating solitarily. On March 6<sup>th</sup> 2015 along the same stretch of road thousands of migrating Black Kites and harriers were seen as was reported by Bart van Hoogstraten. One **Long-legged Buzzard** was seen hunting as was a presumable **Barbary Falcon**. Also **3 Brown-necked Ravens** were present.



*Brown-necked Raven between Dakhla and Laayoune  
March 3<sup>rd</sup>*

### March 4<sup>th</sup> Laayoune – Tan Tan Plage

The day started bright and sunny and without wind. The Saquia-al-Hamra was like a mirror. Taking advantage of the quiet weather we made a count of the **Marbled Ducks**, totalling some 600 individuals. The number of **Little Grebes** counted at the western side of the bridge alone was at least 30. Apart from the usual species present here a **Common Snipe** was flying by and **3 Sedge Warblers** were singing from the vegetation. Numbers of **Common Sandpiper** had increased considerably. A single **marsh tern** (*Chlidonias* sp.) could unfortunately not be identified.

On the way north the Oued Draa was again the most productive of the three rivermouths.

<i>A selection of species seen at Draa rivermouth March 4<sup>th</sup></i>		
Great Cormorant	20	Maroccanus
Grey heron	6	All adult
Eurasian Spoonbill	20	
Osprey	2	
Pied Avocet	20	
Common Ringed Plover	Some	
Kentish Plover	2	
Common Sandpiper	6	
Greenshank	6	
Bar-tailed Godwit	1	
Eurasian Curlew	2	
Slender-billed Gull	1	

Knifiss didn't offer much except the **Red-throated Pipits (2)** were still there. Along the entrance road a **Greater Hoopoe Lark** was displaying beautifully.

The family of raptors this day was represented by several **Common Kestrels**, a **Long-legged Buzzard** and finally a **Lanner Falcon** with, what seemed, a large grey rat in its talons. Most wheatears that were seen were **Desert Wheatears**. **Red-rumped Wheatear** and **Black Wheatear** were less common. A random stop along the coast produced a group of **300 Black Scoters**, again confirming the importance of this region for this species.



*Lanner Falcon with prey along the road from Laayoune to Tan Tan plage March 4<sup>th</sup>*

### **March 5<sup>th</sup> Tan Tan Plage – Taghjicht (Anti Atlas)**

With the friendly assistance of a local we found shelter in what was signposted as a gite rural. It turned out to be a beautiful ancient Berber house where we would stay two nights.

Some distance south of Guelmim we visited two oasis, where **4 Hoopoes**, **2 Woodchat Shrikes** and **1 Subalpine Warbler** made clear spring migration was truly under way. **Chiffchaff**, **Blackcap** and **Black Redstart** were probably still winter visitors about to leave north. **Spanish Sparrow (200+)** was more numerous here than the ever present **House Sparrow (100+)**.

On our way south we didn't take much notice of the sewage treatment basins of the city of Guelmim. This time we stopped and were not sorry we did.

<i>Species at the sewage treatment basins south of Guelmim March 5<sup>th</sup></i>		
Common Shelduck	1	
Ruddy Shelduck	49	
Northern Shoveler	5	1 male, 4 female
Little Ringed Plover	3	
Little Stint	4	
Common Sandpiper	4	
Sand Martin	14	
Barn Swallow	6	
White Wagtail	45	

Noticable today were also a pair of **Barbary Falcons** in Guelmim and 3 singing **Corn Buntings** in a green valley north of Guelmim, where **1 Long-legged Buzzard**, many **Sardinian Warblers** and some **Subalpine Warblers** were also present.

After arriving in Taghjicht it was striking that **Laughing Dove** here outnumbered **Collared Dove** considerably.



*Woodchat Shrike (female) and Spanish Sparrow at an oasis south of Guelmim March 5<sup>th</sup>*

### **March 6<sup>th</sup> Surroundings Taghjicht**

Our main purpose was to find **Bonelli's Eagle** along with some other species with steep rock faces as their habitat. In the Adrar-n-Saras we found a large nest with some white stripes on the rocks nearby, but no birds were seen. More suitable habitat was some distance away and at the end of the afternoon our search was rewarded with the find of a pair that visited a nest site. Other cliff dwellers were a pair of territorial **Barbary Falcons**, a small number of **Pale Crag Martins** and the usual **Black Wheatears** and **Blue Rock Thrushes**. The lower slopes of the Adrar-n-Sawas proved suitable habitat for **Desert Lark**, also a few **Moussier's Redstarts** and **2 Western Black-eared Wheatear** were seen here.

The very green oasis of Amtoudi was alive with birds among them at least **30 Laughing Doves**, **1 Hoopoe**, **2 Grey Wagtails**, **1 Black redstart**, **3 Robin**, **10 Blackcap** and **30 Chiffchaff**.

Noticeable also this day were a total of **6 Woodchat Shrikes** and a group of at least **8**, possibly **15 Corn Buntings** in a nursery.



*Bonelli's Eagle near nestsite. Anti Atlas March 6<sup>th</sup>.*

### **March 7<sup>th</sup> Taghjicht – Inezgane**

Our last full day in Morocco. At the end of the day we paid a brief visit to the Oued Souss, not far from our hotel (La Pergola). Some species we hadn't yet seen during our trip could be added to the list like **Barbary Partridge** ( 2 , still in the Anti Atlas), **White Stork** ( 70, rising from the banks of the Souss) and **Mediterranean Gull** (5 in summer plumage). Five **Dabchicks** were seen in a pond on the golf course. **Common Ringed Plover** was the most numerous wader with 100+ individuals. All in all Oued Souss was a bit depressing with the water pollution seemingly getting worse and gradually more of the river being used as a landfill.

Looking back we had an amazing trip though with Aousserd Road, Dakhla Bay and the surroundings of Taghjicht as highlights.



*Desert Grey Shrike March 7<sup>th</sup>*