

# MOROCCO

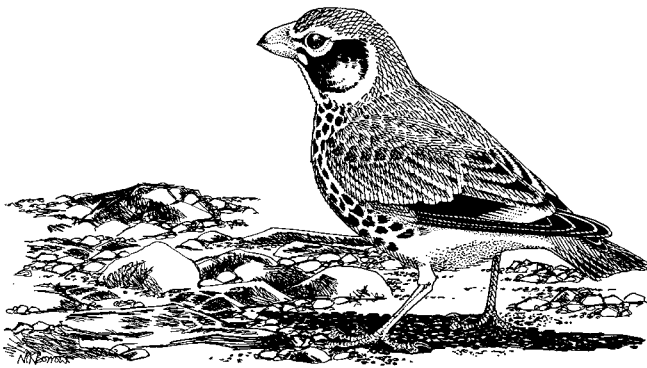
## *The Ultimate North African Bird Tour*

**Saturday 16th April – Saturday 30th April 2011 (15 days)**

**Leader: Nigel Redman**

**Group Size Limit: 12**

**Tour Category: Easy for the most part, occasionally Moderate**



*Thick-billed Lark (Nik Borrow)*

Morocco has the richest avifauna in North Africa and, with its many specialities, including all but one of the North African endemics, ranks as one of the top birding destinations in the Western Palearctic (the zoogeographical term for Europe, North Africa and the Middle East).

This scenically spectacular country has a decidedly undeveloped feel and, for those who like travelling somewhere distinctly 'different', a visit to Morocco will be a memorable journey through a land where many regions seem outwardly little changed in centuries. The combination of dramatic desert and mountain scenery, superb desert oases, strikingly attractive mud-walled towns and villages, colourful tribal people and superb birding ensures that Morocco is one of those places that one longs to return to.

This is a land of contrasts where in the course of a single day one can be watching Firecrests in the forests of the Middle Atlas in the morning and Desert Wheatears on the edge of the Sahara in the

afternoon. During this exciting tour, which is the most comprehensive Moroccan birding itinerary available (our longer itinerary produces more of the country's specialities than any other bird tour), we shall have the opportunity to see the full range of habitats that exist in this diverse country at a time of year when many northbound migrants are passing through. In particular we shall be concentrating on North African endemics and other regional specialities.

Our journey commences in Casablanca on the Atlantic coast. Here we will explore the coastal lowlands and the forests of the Zaër where we will search for specialities such as Double-spurred Francolin, the endemic Barbary Partridge, Black-shouldered Kite, North African Blue Tit and the rare Marsh Owl. From here we will cross the cultivated plains of northern Morocco and climb into the Middle Atlas, where we shall find a rugged patchwork of stony uplands, superb montane forests and small lakes. In these varied habitats we shall find other endemics including the

localized Levaillant's Green Woodpecker, the stunning Moussier's Redstart and the very distinctive Seebohm's Wheatear (formerly treated as a race of Northern), as well as the breeding-endemic Atlas Flycatcher (split from European Pied).

Beyond the Middle Atlas we cross an area of arid, sparsely vegetated plains. Here we have a great chance of finding the shy and little known Dupont's Lark. As we travel further south, we will encounter the starkly dramatic mountain scenery of the High Atlas where we will pause to search for the endemic Tristram's Warbler. Soon we will reach the northern edge of the Sahara. Here, we will explore the stony expanses of the 'hamada', the spectacular sand dunes of Erg Chebbi and the numerous green oases hidden in deep valleys. Amongst the desert specialists found in this area are such North African endemics as African Desert Warbler and House Bunting, as well as the huge Pharaoh Eagle Owl, the mysterious Egyptian Nightjar, the gorgeous Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, the rare and localized Desert Sparrow and, with a bit of luck, the endangered Houbara Bustard.

After crossing the Anti-Atlas we will explore the rocky deserts around Boumalne where specialities are likely to include Black-bellied and Crowned Sandgrouse, the impressive Thick-billed Lark, Temminck's Lark and Red-rumped Wheatear. We will

then follow the Sous valley west to the Atlantic coast at Agadir, pausing en route at the scenic and ancient town of Taroudannt where we have another chance for Egyptian Nightjar and our first opportunity to see Red-necked Nightjar. During our stay in the Agadir region we will explore the nearby estuaries of the Oued Sous and Oued Massa, which at this time of year are packed full of migrating waders, gulls and terns, and also travel north along the Atlantic coast to look for the endangered Northern Bald Ibis and the spectacular Eleonora's Falcon.

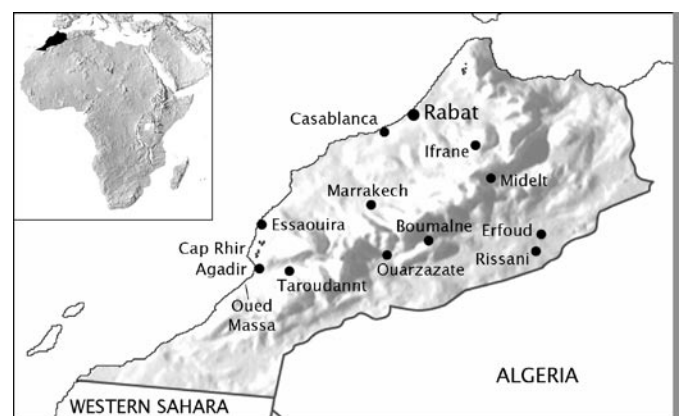
Finally we will explore the magnificent High Atlas above the historic city of Marrakech. Here, with a backdrop of towering, snow-capped peaks and green alpine meadows, we will search for the distinctive North African form of the Crimson-winged Finch.

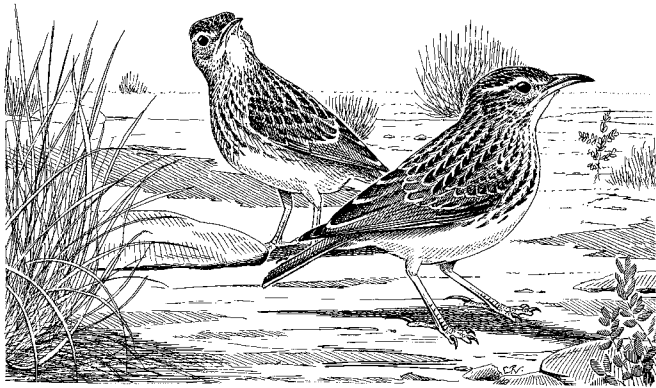
Birdquest has operated tours to Morocco since 1982.

### Itinerary

**Day 1** The tour begins this evening in Casablanca. We will then drive the short distance to Rabat for a two nights stay.

**Day 2** This morning we will visit an area of maquis and cork oak forest known as the Zaër where Double-spurred Francolin can usually be found in its sole Western Palearctic breeding area. Here we should also see such



*Dupont's Larks (Craig Robson)*

interesting species as Black-shouldered and Black Kites, the North African-endemic Barbary Partridge, Crested Lark, Sardinian Warbler, the attractive North African Blue Tit (endemic to the region if treated as distinct from the Canaries forms), Eurasian Magpie of the distinctive North African form (now proposed as a distinct species: Maghreb Magpie) and European Serin. Other birds in the area include Common Kestrel, Common Wood Pigeon, Eurasian Collared and European Turtle Doves, Common Cuckoo, Common Swift, Barn Swallow, Common Nightingale, Common Blackbird, European Goldfinch and Corn Bunting. Later we will visit a small lake which has been protected as a biological reserve since 1976. It is especially well known as an excellent place to find Marbled Duck and Red-knobbed (or Crested) Coot. Other species we may well see include Little and Great Crested Grebes, Great Cormorant, Black-crowned Night Heron, Little Egret, Gadwall, Mallard, Northern Shoveler, Common and Red-crested Pochards, Eurasian Hobby, Common Moorhen, Common Sandpiper, Lesser Black-backed and Yellow-legged Gulls, Sand Martin (or Bank Swallow), Zitting Cisticola (or Fan-tailed Warbler) and Cetti's Warbler,

whilst if we are lucky Ferruginous Duck will be present. At dusk we have an excellent chance of finding a Marsh Owl hunting over the lake shore.

**Day 3** After a final look at the Zaër, we will drive to Ifrane for an overnight stay, birding en route. After crossing broad, rolling, cultivated plains that are the bread basket of Morocco we will climb up into the Middle Atlas, stopping to explore the wooded foothills. On the way we should see such species as Western Cattle Egret, White Stork, Booted Eagle, Lesser Kestrel, Calandra Lark and Spotless Starling.

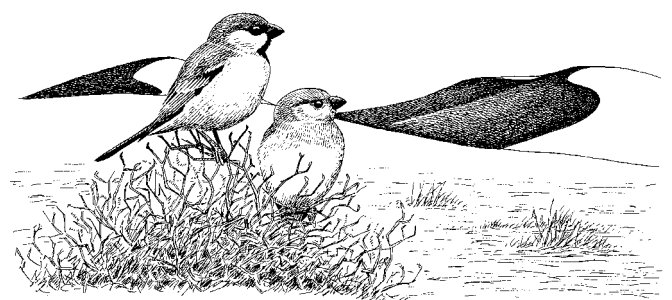
**Day 4** Ifrane is the French colonial equivalent of a hill-station in the India of the British Raj, a summer sanctuary from the heat of the plains and latterly a ski resort. At this season there are few visitors and so this morning we will be able to enjoy the Middle Atlas at its best. The habitat here is a mixture of coniferous and mixed forests, and barren, rocky uplands studded with small lakes. The lovely North African-endemic Moussier's Redstart is a characteristic bird of the area and we should also see two other endemics, Levaillant's Green Woodpecker and Seeborn's Wheatear (split from Northern), as well

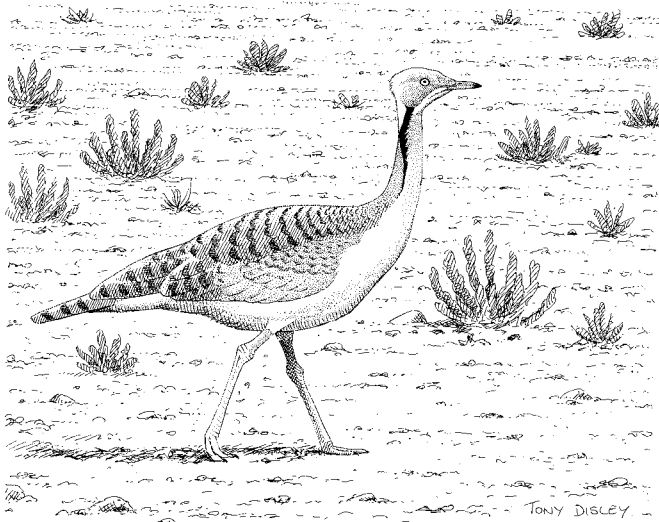
as the breeding-endemic Atlas Flycatcher (split from European Pied), during our forays into the spectacular forests. Other interesting species we may well see include European Scops Owl, Wood Lark, Tawny Pipit, Short-toed Treecreeper, Firecrest, Hawfinch, Common Chaffinch (of the distinctive North African race, a candidate for a split) and Cirl Bunting. Additional widespread species include Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Eurasian Skylark, Common House Martin, Winter Wren, European Robin, Common Redstart, Mistle Thrush, Coal and Great Tits, Eurasian Nuthatch, Eurasian Jay, Common Raven, European Greenfinch and Common Linnet. If we are very fortunate we will come across a troop of Barbary Apes amidst the magnificent cedar forests. Later we will drive southwards to Midelt for an overnight stay, descending into increasingly arid country as we leave the mountains and pausing en route to look for such species as Ruddy Shelduck, Long-legged Buzzard, Lanner, Thekla Lark, Black-eared Wheatear and Rock Sparrow. The barren, semi-desert plains of the high plateau country around Midelt are the home of the elusive Dupont's Lark, a bird that much prefers to scurry away through the low clumps of vegetation rather than fly when one approaches. Getting a good view of this little-known bird can be hard work, but is well

worth the effort. A number of other interesting species occur in this inhospitable habitat including Lesser Short-toed Lark and Desert Wheatear.

**Day 5** From Midelt we travel on southwards through increasingly stark but beautiful mountain scenery until we reach the fringe of the Sahara. After crossing the stony hamada plains we eventually drop down, rather unexpectedly, into the verdant Ziz valley and then continue to our guesthouse, deep in the desert south of Erfoud, for a three nights stay. During the journey we will stop to look for the North African-endemic Tristram's Warbler which at this time of year has ascended the slopes of the Atlas Mountains to breed. We will also see our first true desert birds, such as Desert Lark and White-crowned Wheatear, and with luck Scrub Warbler (a scarce and elusive species in Morocco). We will doubtless also want to stop to admire the remarkable displays of huge ammonites and other fossils and massive crystalline growths that are on sale at the roadside stalls, marvelling at the way the local inhabitants can ferret out such bounty from such rugged terrain.

**Days 6-7** The region south of Erfoud offers some exciting birding in an attractive setting. The palm groves and gardens of Erfoud and Rissani give way gradually to the stony plains, sandy wadi beds and spectacular sand dunes of the Sahara. Birds we should

*Desert Sparrows (Craig Robson)*

*Houbara Bustard (Tony Disley)*

encounter here include Cream-coloured Courser, the gorgeous Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Bar-tailed and Greater Hoopoe Larks, Common Bulbul, Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin, the North African-endemic African Desert Warbler, the North African-endemic Fulvous Babbler, Western Olivaceous and Spectacled Warblers, Brown-necked Raven, House Bunting (now split from Striolated and thus an additional North African endemic) and perhaps Spotted Sandgrouse. We have an excellent chance of finding a roosting Pharaoh Eagle Owl and at night, with persistence, we have a good chance of finding the cryptically-plumaged Egyptian Nightjar, which breeds in this area most years. Houbara Bustard (now restricted to North Africa and the Canary Islands, following taxonomic reassessment) also still survives in this area, but heavy mortality caused by the depredations of wealthy Arab falconers from the Gulf region has caused the population to decline to an alarmingly low level and so nowadays we will need a little luck to find this much-persecuted species. We shall also visit the huge sand dunes known as Erg Chebbi in the Merzouga area where we have an excellent chance of finding the rare Desert Sparrow (endemic to North Africa, apart from a

strangely isolated population in the deserts of Central Asia which could well be elevated to full species status in future). Frequently the clumps of tamarisks amongst the dunes harbour migrants that have just made the long desert crossing from the south, including such species as Tree Pipit, Blue-headed, Grey-headed, Yellow and Spanish Wagtails, Melodious, Subalpine, Garden, Western Bonelli's and Willow Warblers, Common Whitethroat, Blackcap, Spotted and European Pied Flycatchers, Eurasian Golden Oriole and Woodchat Shrike, whilst resident species include Southern Grey Shrike.

**Day 8** After some final birding in the Erfoud area we will cross the desert to Boumalne for a two nights stay. We will break the journey at the dramatic, pink-walled Gorges du Todra which are almost 1000m deep. Here we will be looking out for Bonelli's Eagle, Alpine Swift, Eurasian Crag Martin, Grey Wagtail, Black Wheatear, Black Redstart and Blue Rock Thrush.

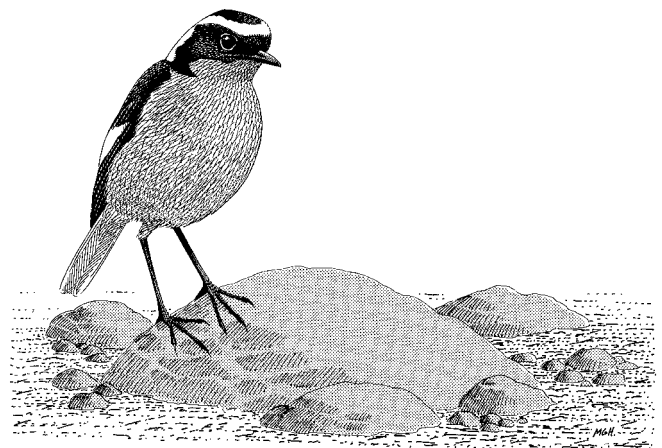
**Day 9** The desert near Boumalne harbours several specialities including Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Temminck's Lark, Thick-billed Lark (a species virtually endemic to North Africa), the showy Red-rumped Wheatear,

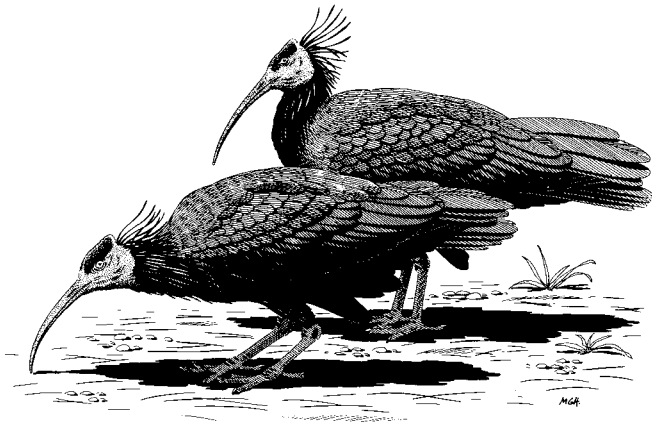
the amusing Trumpeter Finch and sometimes Crowned Sandgrouse. To the north the snow-capped peaks of the High Atlas contrast with the rich colours of the desert plain and the foothills, providing a splendid scenic backdrop to our birding. The nearby gardens are full of the glorious sounds of Common Nightingales in full song whilst at dusk we shall listen for the mournful call of the European Scops Owl and then try to sneak up on one of these splendid little creatures.

**Day 10** Today we will drive to Taroudannt for a two nights stay. We will stop along the way to look for the interesting North African form of the Mourning Wheatear, which exhibits marked sexual dimorphism (unlike other races) and which has a rather localized distribution in Morocco, and also for Barbary Falcon. The deep blue sky, the black, grey and ochre mountains, the green palm groves and the rich pinkish-red walls of the fortress-like villages make for magnificent scenery. As we leave the Sahara and follow the winding road down into the Sous valley the desert gives way to argana woodland, quite reminiscent of the acacia savanna so characteristic of many other parts of Africa, and extensive areas of olive groves and citrus.

**Day 11** The Taroudannt area offers a second opportunity to look for Egyptian Nightjar and our first chance for Red-necked Nightjar. Other birds of the Sous valley include European Bee-eater and European Roller, while Western Orphean Warbler and Spanish Sparrow are also possible, as is the *brookei* form of Peregrine (an interesting form to compare with the closely related Barbary Falcon). The ancient walled city of Taroudannt is an interesting place to explore, what with its bustling souk filled with small stalls and workshops engaged in traditional crafts. Overhead noisy flocks of swifts sweep past, including numerous Pallid and Little Swifts, while Red-rumped Swallows are also often in evidence.

**Day 12** Today we will concentrate on two bird-rich estuaries to the south of Agadir. First we will visit the pocket-sized estuary of the Oued Massa, probably the richest birding locality of its size in Morocco. The whole area is thronged with birds, especially herons, egrets, waders, gulls and terns. We shall concentrate on the upper, marshy parts of the estuary where amongst the more interesting species we may find are Little Bittern, Squacco and Purple Herons, Western Marsh and

*Moussier's Redstart (Michael Hodgson)*



*Northern Bald Ibises (Michael Hodgson)*

Montagu's Harriers, Collared Pratincole, Black-winged Stilt and the localized Plain (or Brown-throated Sand) Martin. Other species likely at the Massa include Grey Heron, Eurasian Coot, Little Ringed Plover, Little Owl, Common Kingfisher, Common Stonechat, European Reed Warbler and Black-crowned Tchagra (or Black-headed Bush Shrike, whose beautiful song often gives its presence away). Later we will visit the Sous estuary, close to Agadir where we will stay overnight. Here we are likely to find large numbers of waders, gulls, terns and other waterbirds including Greater Flamingo, Eurasian Spoonbill, Eurasian Oystercatcher, Pied Avocet, Common Ringed, Kentish and Grey Plovers, Red Knot, Sanderling, Dunlin, Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint, Ruff, Bar-tailed Godwit,

Whimbrel, Wood Sandpiper, Common Redshank, Common Greenshank, Ruddy Turnstone, Black-headed, Yellow-legged and Audouin's Gulls, Gull-billed, Sandwich, Common, Little and Black Terns, and the restricted-range Moroccan Wagtail. We may also come across one of the scarcer visitors to the area such as Mediterranean or Slender-billed Gulls, Lesser Crested, Whiskered or White-winged Terns. We have another chance here for Red-necked Nightjars should we need one.

**Day 13** This morning we will travel northwards along the Atlantic coast in search of the critically endangered Northern Bald Ibis, which still breeds in the Agadir region. We have an excellent chance of finding this strange bird at one of its coastal breeding sites. We will also stop at Cap Rhir for some

seawatching: there is a good chance of encountering Cory's Shearwater and Northern Gannet, and even a moderate possibility of Sabine's Gull. As we continue northwards, following the convolutions of the coastal highway and passing one wave-lashed headland after another, we shall enjoy the dramatic scenery of this meeting place between the High Atlas and the Atlantic Ocean. Eventually we will arrive at a section of coastline opposite Mogador Island, close to the town of Essaouira. Here we should find some attractive Eleonora's Falcons flying in to feed over the mainland opposite their breeding island. Later we will continue across dry, rolling plains to the historic city of Marrakech for a two nights stay.

**Day 14** Much of the day will be spent in the High Atlas below the towering peak of Jebel Toubkal (4167m), the highest mountain in North Africa. Providing the weather is clear we shall be birding amongst truly magnificent scenery with snow-capped summits looming over us and a fantastic panorama spread out below us to the north as we look for the distinctive North African form of the Crimson-winged Finch (a future candidate for a split) in particular, as well as Golden Eagle, Horned (or Shore) Lark, White-throated Dipper and Red-billed and Alpine Choughs, and Rock Bunting.

Marrakech is probably the city that epitomizes Morocco for most people, so we shall be sure to have a look around at the end of the day. As dusk approaches the old part of the city takes on a magical atmosphere: Little Swifts circle around the minaret of the lovely Koutoubia Mosque before going to roost, people throng the streets in traditional Arab and Berber dress, and at the famous Place Jemaa el Fna the bustling daytime commerce of the adjacent souks gives way to a fascinating array of entertainers ranging from traditional story-tellers to fire-eaters.

**Day 15** The tour ends this morning in Marrakech.

#### **Accommodation & Road**

**Transport:** The hotels are of normal Birdquest standard throughout. Road transport is by small coach or minibus and roads are mostly surprisingly good.

**Walking:** The walking effort is mostly easy, but there are a few fairly long walks.

**Climate:** Rather variable. Many days at lower altitudes are warm or hot, dry and sunny, but sometimes it is cool and overcast. There may well be some rain at times. At higher altitudes conditions range from cool to distinctly cold.

#### **Bird Photography:**

Opportunities are quite good.