

Grand Morocco Birding Tour (winter recce) Trip Report

Nov. 14-21, 2019



The impressive Pharaoh Eagle Owl is one of the remarkable sightings of the tour

Report compiled by tour leader Álvaro Peral
Images courtesy of Álvaro Peral



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Introduction

Late November was predictably going to give us guides a little break that was very well put into use as a preparation to our spring tour shown on [our website](http://www.wildandalucia.com/birding-tours/morocco/):

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The tour itinerary below covered all the main habitats and renown bird sites in central Morocco:



The total distance covered was 1424 Km, mostly on good roads and a few Km of tracks. The works on the Tizi n Tichka pass delayed the tour around 45 minutes –which could’ve been worse- and works on the N9 will continue at least till 2022.

I was very glad that my friend Vicent Esteller, from Doñana Wings, joined me on this challenging 8-day tour, which is offered as a 9-day tour to clients. The weather was cold but sunny, with just one day of rain.

A total of 107 bird species were identified, which was a great number considering the time of the year. Please note **this is NOT an official tour trip report**.

Day 1 (14/11/2019) – Arrival to Marrakech

Our Seville-Marrakech flight landed with 30 min delay. Thanks to a careful planning, we quickly got sorted with our rental car, GSM card, local currency, parking and hotel. Being back to Marrakech this time felt somehow as going back home. A nice welcoming dinner at the Djemaa El Fnaa square followed by its lovely fruit juices charged up our batteries for an early start on the day after.



Day 2 (15/11/2019) – Oukaïmeden and High Atlas

Heavy rains followed us in the early morning till we entered the Ourika valley. Fortunately, it stopped enough to let us see the first buntings of the tour. Just by the road we saw a mixed group of **Rock** and **Cirl Buntings** feeding. Further stops just by the road on the way up produced close sights of **Moussier's Redstart**, **Hawfinch** and Greater Spotted Woodpecker. Getting to the summits the area was very cloudy so we decided to drive directly to the sky resort. Just as we entered, big flocks of **Chough** and a few **Yellow-billed Chough** welcomed us.



The clouds suddenly gave way to some nice intervals of sunlight and we went walking across the plateau. In a few minutes, the first **Horned Lark** showed up among some **Rock Sparrow**. These sparrows show a surprisingly dark pattern. Soon after, a few small flocks of Horned Lark followed, came in and out with some heavy wind gusts. The only target species that we missed was Crimson-winged Finch. We got a few **Serin**, Linnet and Meadow Pipit as well.



After this productive start, we headed northeast and as we went on the mountain road we heard **Levaillant's Green Woodpecker** and also ticked **Maghreb Magpie** down at the national road. Sunset got us arriving to Taddart, where our old friend at Le Jardin hosted us, so we enjoyed nice conversations as we tasted the most delicious kefta ever.

Day 3 (16/11/2019) – From the snow to the savannah



The sunrise at the Tichka pass was just as unforgettable as the picture below. There we heard the first **Thekla Lark** of the tour and soon passed the icy stretches to give way to some impressive valleys near Agouim. The following valleys provided an excellent stopover in which we got nice views of **Barbary Ground Squirrel** and **Desert Lark** (images below). It is surprising how much this last species resembles our Alpine Accentor and it should not be named “Desert” Lark for its habitat is pre-desertic hills rather than the desert itself.



A visit to our favourite spot at the Al-Mansour reservoir provided great views of **White-crowned** and **Black Wheatear**, **Moussier's Redstart** and **Great Grey Shrike**. The area showed great bird activity in spite of the windy conditions, and we added Little Grebe, Great Crested Grebe, scores of Thekla and Crested Larks, **Dartford Warbler** and **Hoopoe**.



With this very rewarding stopover, we continued checking a palm grove east of Ouarzazate, where we got Green Sandpiper and excellent sights of **Common Bulbul** with sunset light. We arrived to Boumalne de Dades in the evening, where we spent a comfortable night at the Riad Dades Birds.

Day 4 (17/11/2019) – a day for the tricky ones!

How to miss the famous stinky track east of Boumalne Dades to get some difficult birds? Well, we did our best to enjoy birds on their own environment but a quick visit to the Tagdilt path was actually quite rewarding in terms of species. To start with, we had excellent views of a dozen of both **Thick-billed** and **Lesser Short-toed Larks** (image below, left). A distant flock of **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** passed by twice, presumably before and after they went drinking. **Red-rumped Wheatear** and **Temminck's Lark** were new ticks for the tour list too. The recent earthworks has somehow favoured the birds providing a huge roosting area. On the rock piles we found up two **Long-legged Buzzards**, **Little Owl** and **Hoopoe**.



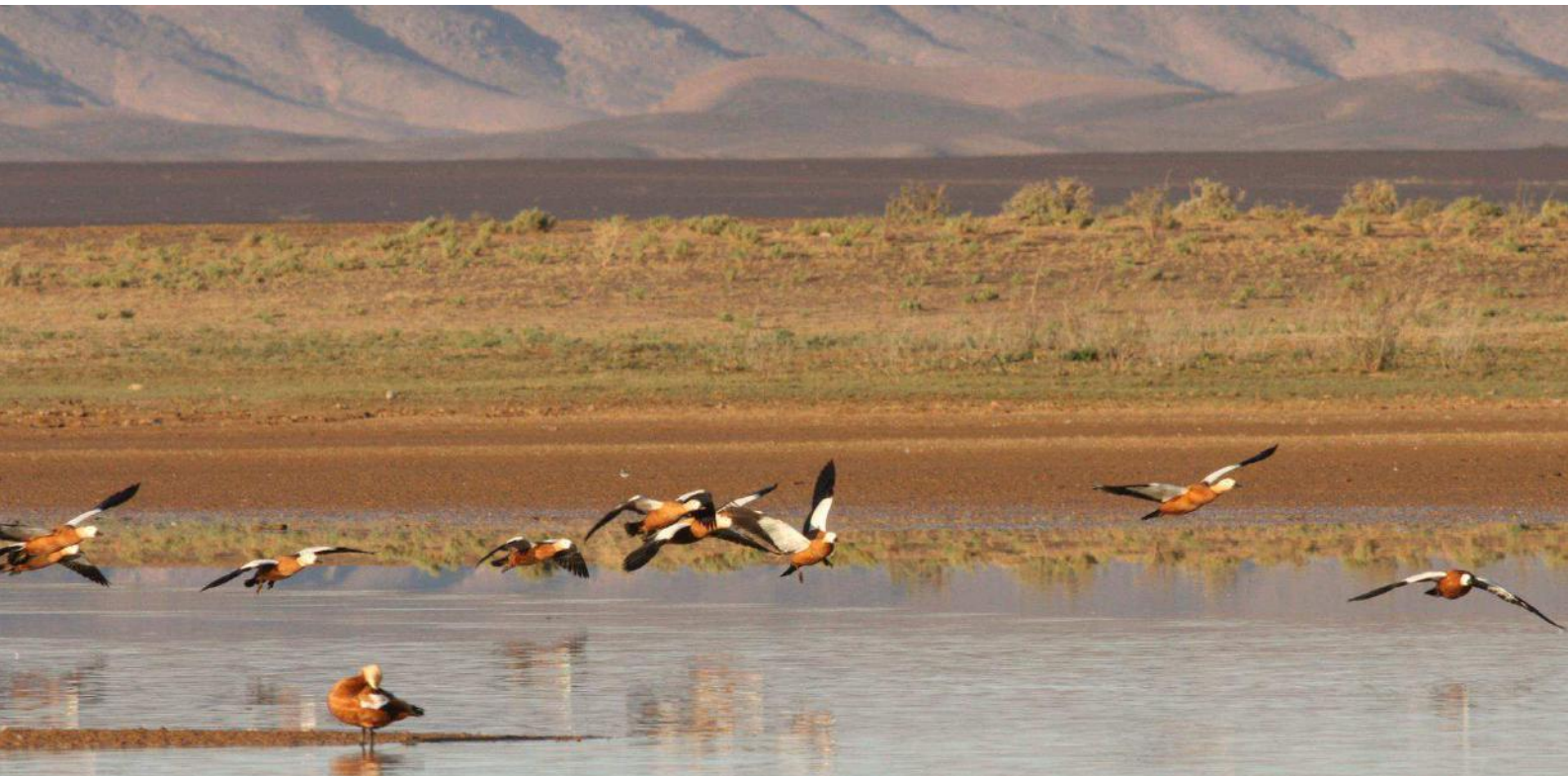
The day couldn't possibly go better. We moved to another spot eastwards, this time we were looking for a birds that we hadn't seen on previous tours: the Maghreb Wheatear. We visited a gorge along one of the many wadis and it took us a long hour to finally get the reward! This stunning male (below, left) showed up briefly, followed by a more cautious female.



One of the top species to find in Morocco is the Pharaoh Eagle Owl (below, right). We scanned crevices along some undisturbed cliffs till the inquisitive look of one of them got us. Finding and observing this species and its habitat was itself a whole experience and justifies on its own a visit to the Maghreb. A wonderful day with lots of good luck and sightings.

Day 5 (18/11/2019) – at the desert

After a night spent on the busy city of Rissani, we hit the road early enough to catch the sunrise at Merzouga. The temperature, as commonly in desertic areas, was below zero but the variety of species justified an early start. We got to a shelter right on time to see the first rays of sun over the Merzouga lake. The catchy call of dozens of **Ruddy Shelduck** accompanied us the whole time. **Brown-necked Ravens** flew over the lake shore every now and then, which didn't seem to bother a group of **Little, Black-winged** and **Temminck' Stints**. We spent a short hour hiding at the shore, and up to 28 birds species showed up, including a small flock of **Pintails**, a few **Yellow Wagtail**, a lonesome **Greater Flamingo**, a pair of Great White Egret, and **Northern** and **Desert Wheatears**.



The palm groves there serve as a great “trap” for migratory birds, but at this time of the year just a few species were recorded. **Laughing Dove** was one of them, as several **Berber Toad** were found near the water. As we drove south of Merzouga we sadly found two fennec fox that were used as a tourist decoy by kids.



After another substantial meal we went to a desert wadi looking for warblers. We scanned the shrub there for a couple of hours and found no warbler, but excellent views of **Hoopoe Lark** and **Desert Wheatear** instead. Another interesting find was what appeared to be a bitter apple or *Citrullus Colocynthis*. It is surprising that this plant is used as an antidote against viper and scorpion bites which actually live next to this plant. Another interesting find was a small lizard, the



Duméril's fringe-fingered lizard (above), that showed very adaptative body transformations to live in the sand. We then checked the surroundings of the great dune to notice that House Sparrow has been displacing Dessert Sparrow, I guess the new amount of sources of water has had a significative impact on this. It was then time to head west but the show had not finished yet: just as we drove a **Cream-colored courser** flew overhead, which was the perfect excuse for another entertaining pull-out. It was actually two of them and didn't seem to be bothered by our presence.



Just before sunset we stopped at one of my always favourite spots to look for **Trumpeter Finch**. It is a place where I've always seen them because there are not many water points in the area. The stop was one of the most rewardings of the tour. The finchs were actually there as we arrived, but soon after, a small group of **Black-tailed Lark** (image below) passed feeding in front of our car. A more distant group of **Thick-billed Lark** were feeding in the grass, but the best sight was a **Barbary Falcon** that apparently had the same idea than us: checking the spot for birds. Although I was still getting used to my new camera's settings, I managed and id picture of it (picture below). This sort of surprise thing usually happens while birding in Morocco, which makes us think of how many birds we have lost in Europe due to mainly habitat transformation. There are huge areas that seem untouched –or at least of wild appearance- in Morocco.



With such an incredible array of sightings, we celebrated the day with another abundant dinner on the way to Boumalne de Dades.

Day 6 (19/11/2019) – central Morocco

We went for an early patrol east of Boumalne de Dades to check that the area wasn't as active as our last visit in spring. It was nice to hear a **Hoopoe Lark** singing very well hidden somewhere in the shrub, their song is very distinctive. After a short cold walk we decided to continue birding from the vehicle, which was the right choice as we covered longer distances and got us close to another **Barbary Falcon** that literally came out from our feet. Several **Lesser-short-toed Lark** and **Desert Wheatear** showed up along the way. A female **Kestrel** was giving a **Meadow Pipit** a horrible time constantly harassing it and waiting for it to come out the stones. In the proximity of Boumalne we found again scores of **Thekla** and some **Desert Larks**.



We paid a quick visit to the Dades gorges, mostly for its scenery. I was glad to show Vincent my favourite snack bar, from where a very obliging Black Wheatear posed for a few pictures (below, left). It was very appealing to stay in but we continued westwards to allow a last stop to look for birds near Kalaat M'Gouna. We actually were eager to have a decent view of the **African Blue Tit**, which we had just heard a few times before on the tour. I remembered this wonderful orchard from a previous birding visit with Virginia and it was great to walk along its narrow paths again.



Among the birds we encountered there was **Little Owl**, **Mistle Thrush**, Northern Wheatear, **Black Redstart**, African Blue Tit, Chaffinch, and scores of **Blackcap** and **Crag Martin**. It was time to hit the road again to arrive to our Ouarzazate on time for some evening birding among the palm groves. It was nearly dark, but we still managed to find **White Stork**, **Sparrowhawk** and Kestrel. Strong winds followed the night, which didn't make the noisy Common Bulbul stop chatting on the palm tops. Although a bit noisy at first, our stay on the Palmeraie Ecolodge was very pleasant and the staff was very friendly.

Day 7 (20/11/2019) – back to town

This was a day to enjoy other aspects of our tour instead of focusing on mainly birds as we had been doing to date. As many travellers know, the charm of Ait Ben Hadu is unparalleled in Morocco. A bit touristic but still a wonderful spot to visit. We started checking the surroundings of the Assif Ounila river looking for Fulvous Babbler. Unfortunately they weren't there, but we got a nice array of passerines, including **Corn Bunting**, **Spanish Sparrow**, Linnet and Sardinian Warbler. Once at the Ksar (fortified town) we took some time to check the little orchards and finally headed up the fortress to say hi to an old friend that owns a shop there.

Being there at the top one enjoys a wonderful panoramic view and understands that Morocco is a country to stop and better enjoy without any need to rush. Enjoying simple living and the presence of neighbours, friends and relatives is something we are reminded every time we visit.





Just as we were about to continue our way we found a pair of **Barbary Falcon** flying over the new town. It was magnificent to see these heraldic birds so well at a reasonable distance. With a very good taste in the mouth we headed west and crossed the high passes of the Atlas allowing a few stops to look for Levaillant's Green Woodpecker, but we weren't very lucky this time. Instead, we found some of their big feeding holes and came across a big night roost of **Woodpigeon**. We got back to Marrakech as scheduled and went again to its fantastic main square for dinner. How not to visit the souk briefly to purchase some nice spices and souvenirs for our beloved ones!

Day 8 (21/11/2019) – Marrakech

Our flights left in the afternoon, so we enjoyed some urban birding in Marrakech. Right as we had breakfast, **House Bunting** and **Common Bulbul** got interest in our breadcrumbs, birding can never be so easy! We also went for a pleasant walk across the very bosky Cyber Parc Arsat Abdeslam.

After these days in Morocco I can just say that it's been a fantastic experience once again and I am looking forward to the upcoming spring tours here.

Thank you for your time and interest taken while reading this tour report.

Best regards,

Alvaro Peral
Alvaro Peral – [Wild Andalucía](#)

