

## Morocco

1<sup>st</sup> November 2014 – 8<sup>th</sup> November 2014



### Costs

My flights with Easyjet cost £104, I only had hand luggage. Hold baggage would have cost another £70! Car hire was around £120 – this included extra insurance to reduce the excess. The car was a Suzuki Alto, this was fine for the roads and mostly fine on the rough, gravel roads but not deep sand! Hotels cost around 75-150dh a night, just under a tenner to just over. The total spend including flights, car hire, petrol, hotels, food etc was £420.

No hotels were booked in advance, I found hotels easily in all places – I did have a Lonely Planet so I had an idea of potential places in different areas though.

### Books

I used the two Gosney guides: Finding birds in Morocco: the deserts and Finding birds in Morocco: coast and mountain. I also used Bergier's: A birdwatchers guide to Morocco. Both were used but the Gosney guides were more detailed with more specific instructions. Bergier does give info about hotels in the area but the guide is quite a few years old so out of date in terms of accommodation recommendations. I also used the Lonely Planet Morocco guide for accommodation and other general tourist information.

### Driving

Driving was fun especially around Oukaimeden and over the Tiz n Tez pass. Roads were good on the whole, the odd pot hole meant you had to keep your wits about you though.

Barring the annoying incident with the police there were no issues with driving though towns and cities could be busy and hectic.

### **Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> November**

Arrived at airport around 19.30 and shared a taxi into town, this cost 40dh after some bargaining, only 10dh more than the bus which I had just missed. Found a cheap hotel (100dh) before a quick exploration of Marrakesk and then bed.

### **Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> November**

I collected the car from airport around 8.30 and after paperwork etc. was leaving around 9.00 and I decided my first stop would be Oukaimeden. A few stops on the way to the top provided views of European Kestrel, Raven and a large flock of Serin plus some Greenfinches. At each stop someone appeared trying to sell me fossils etc. They were friendly but very persistent. Driving up to the top there was in the distance a huge mixed flock of at least 250 Alpine Chough and Chough. At the top there was a small reservoir. Around here there were Moroccan Wagtails, Serins and Linnets. There were also a lot of Chough on the turf feeding. There was no snow apart from at the top of the distant peaks – this didn't bode well for finding the target – Crimson Winged Finch. On the grassy plains were several Seebahms Wheatears.



I parked at the large car park at the end of the track and then walked for maybe 2km along the track. There wasn't much evidence of birds – however after careful scanning of the flat, grassy plain on the left of the path I came across several Crimson Winged Finches – result. Along with these were several Seebohms Wheatears.



Figure 1 Terrible photo through scope of Crimson winged Finches

The weather then closed in, first light drizzle, then rain and then pretty heavy hail. I headed back to the car, had some lunch in a restaurant and drove back down. I made various stops on the way down. Around 5 km from the top I found a track leading into some pine wood, here was masses of Song Thrush, Ultramine Tit, Coal Tit and Blackbirds. No sign of any Levaillant's Woodpeckers though. My original plan had been to cross the Tiz-n-Tez pass and make it to Taroudant by evening. At the start of the pass though heavy rain had caused a mini-landslide and I had to turn back and find accommodation as it was starting to get dark. This was a blessing in disguise as I found a lovely Bed and Breakfast in Ouirgane and had time to properly enjoy the pass the next day.

### **Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> November**

I set off in the morning and back tracked to the 'Asni 9km' (Gosney Coast and Mountains pg. 29) marker to search for Tristam's Warbler. However this search was fruitless, I searched for half an hour, had a good walk around but no luck. I then carried along the road back towards the pass and stopped at the reservoir at Ouirgane. You can get a fairly good view from stopping by the side of the road. There were loads of African Chaffinches around and a Kingfisher and several Moroccan Wagtails. The scenery was starting to get good as

the road climbed. A stop at the side of the road proved really productive with Black Wheatear, House Bunting, Common Bulbul, Willow Warbler, Blackcap and Greenfinch.



Figure 2 Starting the Tiz n Tez pass



Figure 3 Black Wheatear by road on Tiz n Tez

Descending at the other side of pass I entered the Sous Valley, there were various sites here to stop at. The first stop was Tafingoult - described in both Gosney and Bergier. Here is an area of Argan habitat. Some good species here: Southern Grey Shrike, Western Orphean Warbler, Moussiers Redstart and Sardinian Warbler, Gosney suggests the football pitch is the best area, I found a decent walk around the whole area was pretty productive with no one best place.

Next site was the village of Ait Igasse (Gosney Deserts page 26 site 3). Here there are fields, orange groves and a small wadi. Walking around gave views of lots of Crested Larks, these of the race *riganbachi* are quite different looking to those found in Southern Europe, with a much paler plumage and a longer bill. There was also a large flock of Spanish Sparrow here. A black winged Kite also gave good views hovering over some nearby fields.

It was now late afternoon and I drove onto Inezgane – this is just south of Agadir, I stayed at the Hagounia Hotel, which at 148dh was perfectly acceptable. There are lots of cafes and restaurants nearby with cheap food and a car park for people staying at the hotel. This area is also slightly nearer the Sous Massa nature reserve – this is where I would be visiting tomorrow.

### **Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> November**

I arrived at the Oued Souss around 8.30. Before the final car park the road runs parallel to the estuary and stopping along here and walking up to path gives an excellent view of the estuary. Here were masses of Greater Flamingo, Black winged Stilt, Black tailed Godwits etc. A huge selection of waders were on display. There were also lots of Common Bulbul, Sardinian Warbler, Thelka Larks and Moroccan Magpies on show. Further towards the mouth were a range of gulls: Black headed, Mediterranean, Audouins, Yellow legged, Lesser black backed and Slender billed. I parked at the car park near the guard checkpoint and walked along the path, in the bushes were many Serins, Sardinian Warblers, more Magpies and much closer views of the gulls.



Figure 4 Moussier's Redstarts fairly common around Oued Massa area

A guard on a quad bike then approached and asked a range of questions, presumably trying to find a way to get some cash from me. He initially said I needed to pay to take pictures, my camera however was in my bag and I told him that my telescope didn't take pictures. He then asked who gave me permission to be here, I said that I had been before and never had a problem – I hadn't but this seemed like a good thing to say. He then said that ornithologists need to buy a permit,

but he seemed to change his mind when I told him I was an amateur

birdwatcher. Eventually he wished me a good day, shook my hand and was on his way.

I am more than happy to pay entrance fees (if they exist) that go towards the up keep of nature reserves but I resent simply giving money to people who fool tourists into thinking they need to pay.

Driving back later an Osprey was perched on the electricity pylons on the other side of the river. I then drove around 40 km south to the Oued Massa. Again entering the reserve some people stopped my car and claimed to be guides and that I needed to hire them to see the birds. I think as long as you are polite and act confidently and tell them you know what you're doing they eventually give up. I pulled over by the side of the road as it runs next to the river. I had an excellent view of a kingfisher perched on a tree and lots of bulbuls around. Another local approached and said he would show me Bald Ibis, I wasn't planning on going up to Tamri so I thought it best to use some



Figure 5 One of several Ospreys seen in the week

local knowledge. He was very reluctant to give me a price and said we will agree one at the end, I don't know what his idea was, a ridiculously high price at the end? Anyway we eventually agreed on 200dh which seemed fair to me. I was told we would need to go 'off piste' I assumed he meant continuing on the slightly rocky road I was already on, no probs I said as the little Suzuki had coped well so far. However we turned off the road, went over some rockier ground, then hit a sandy road and I quickly had the car buried up to the axels. Oops. Over the course of the next hour I was glad that I had extra insurance on the car as it was definitely 'off piste!' Eventually we caught up with the Bald Ibis at Tifnit – which is 15 km or so further up from Souss Massa – I don't know how often they are found here but there were around 100 here and I went back a few days later on my own and there even more there.



Figure 6 Excellent views of Bald Ibis at Tifnit

Other birds of note were a few Moussier's Redstarts, an Osprey, Glossy Ibis, Spoonbill and Marbled Duck – using Gosney and exploring the different sites he mentions is the best bet to find as much as possible.

After grabbing something to eat in Massa I headed down to Guelmin for some desert birding. The drive took around 2 hours and the sun was just setting over the desert as I entered the town. There are lots of hotels in Guelmin – I can't remember the name of mine but it was opposite the Bus Station and had a big sign saying 'Hotel'. It was 75dh and was basic but fine.

## Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> November

By 8:30 I was at Oued Sayed per Gosney. There is some building work going on, not sure what, but maybe disturbing the area a bit. I walked each side and saw not that much. A few Sardinian Warblers, a Moussier's Redstart and I could hear a Scrub Warbler singing – I couldn't pin the little blighter down – it was right next to me a one stage in the bushes and if I had its song on my phone I would have been tempted to tape lure it out.



I then moved onto Oued Bauhila – again a bit quiet. A word of warning: I parked off the road on what looked like gravel, the rain overnight

however had turned this into a sticky porridge and again I was slightly buried, I managed to get out but not before a bit of panicking though.

Next was the Guelmin 22km post marker. I walked to the south towards the electricity

Figure 7 Lots of Thick billed Larks at Guelmin 22km marker

pylons. This was a

productive area. Feeding on the fields were around 30 Thick billed Larks.



Desert Lark and Red rumped Wheatear were also in the area. It was extremely windy and a lot of dust was getting kicked up so I returned to the car and then moved on. Next stop was the Tan Tan 100km marker. Gosney suggests walking north for a few km, I didn't see a single bird north of the road, the fields south of the



field were far more productive with a couple of Red rumped Wheatear and a single Desert Wheatear. Feeding on the fields were some approachable Temminck's Larks, Desert Larks and a stunning Hoopoe Lark.

By mid afternoon I was done with being sand blasted and had another night in Guelmin before heading back up north the next day.

### **Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> November**



Figure 8 Hoopoe Lark at Tan Tan 100km marker

I left Gulemin and headed back up north, I returned to Tifnit to try and see the Bald Ibis again. Parking on the car park on the cliff tops I had a scan out to sea, a few Gannets off shore but that was about it. On the beach were groups of Yellow legged Gulls and Lesser black backed gulls plus some Sanderling.

The Bald ibis were initially feeding by the town but then flew over nearer to me, there was a group of 30 but then these were joined by another 50 or so. Some great views of these birds, they really are ugly though! The ibis seemed to find the areas where humans had left all their rubbish the best spots with them probing amongst discarded food, plastic bags and paper.



Figure 9 Bald Ibis feeding among some rubbish

I had seen a lot of police check points but this time, I thought little of it. I made sure I wasn't speeding and was trying to be vigilant and careful. My only complaint so far had been that the Moroccan drivers would slam on breaks anywhere near the police check points, which was pretty dangerous in itself. Nearing Inezane was another police check point (maybe the 10<sup>th</sup> I had seen that day) I was pulled over. All my papers were checked – license, passport and visa, vehicle documents, rental agreement, he also thoroughly inspected my vehicle. The police man spoke quite good English – he explained that in Morocco you were not allowed to overtake on solid white lines as it can be dangerous doing this. I agreed whole heartedly explaining that we have the same rule in England. He then told me he had just seen me doing this. I was a bit surprised at this point as I 100% hadn't. I didn't really know how to say politely 'You are making this s\*\*t up'. He took my passport, license and vehicle documents and then sat in his car, after trying to explain that I think he had made a mistake he demanded that I pay a 700dh fine, I didn't have anywhere near this amount. I offered 200dh saying this is all I have and he accepted this. He then shook my hand, smiled and wished me good luck. I said nothing and left.

If anything like this happens to you I would try and offer a lot less than they demand – especially if you didn't actually do anything wrong. I then took all money out of my wallet for the remainder of the trip. If I was stopped again I would show them my empty wallet.

Driving further north I revisited Oued Souss. Over the golf course were some Brown throated Martin. Excellent! With it being later in the day the area was much busier than my previous morning visit so showing some local lads the birds through my scope passed a bit



of time. Another Osprey (or the same one) was perched on the electricity pylons. I then headed back to Inezgane for another night in Monday's hotel.

### **Friday 7<sup>th</sup> November**

This was my last day with the car and I had to have it back to Marrakesh airport by late afternoon. I again visited Oued Souss – this time on the 'Osprey pylon' was a Lanner falcon instead. The rest of the time was spent enjoying the flamingos, waders, gulls and sun before

Figure 10 Lanner on electricity pylon

driving back to Marrakesh.

### **Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> November**

On the bus ride to the airport were some views of Little Swift – a bird I had forgotten that I should have really seen by now! I left Marrakesh sweating in my shorts and t-shirt and

returned to Gatwick with rain lashing down and my raincoat finally making its way out of the bottom of my bag!

It had been a great trip with most of the targets species being seen, I missed a few though, but that's life!

### Species list

Little Grebe  
Northern Gannet  
Great Cormorant – of race *maroccanus*  
Cattle Egret  
Little Egret  
Grey Heron  
White Stork  
Glossy Ibis  
Bald Ibis  
Spoonbill  
Greater Flamingo  
Mallard  
Northern  
Shoveler  
Marbled Duck  
Osprey  
Lesser Kestrel  
Kestrel  
Lanner  
European Coot  
Oystercatcher  
Black winged Stilt  
Ringed Plover  
Lapwing  
  
Red Knot  
Sanderling  
Dunlin

Black tailed Godwit  
Whimbrel  
Curlew  
Redshank  
Greenshank  
Common Sandpiper  
Green Sandpiper  
Mediterranean Gull  
Black headed Gull  
Slender Billed Gull  
Lesser black backed Gull  
Yellow Legged Gull  
Audouins Gull  
Sandwich Tern  
Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon  
Collared Dove  
Laughing Dove  
Little Owl  
Common Swift  
Little Swift  
Kingfisher  
Desert Lark  
Hoopoe Lark  
Thick Billed Lark  
Crested Lark - of race *rissanbachi*  
Thekla Lark – of race *ruficolour*  
Temminck's Lark  
Crag Martin  
Brown throated Martin  
White Wagtail – races of *alba* and *subpersonata*  
Black Redstart  
Redstart  
Moussier's Redstart  
Whinchat  
Stonechat  
Seebohm's Wheatear  
Desert Wheatear  
Red rumped Wheatear  
Black Wheatear

Blackbird  
Song Thrush  
Zitting Cisticola  
Scrub Warbler  
Sardinian warbler  
Blackcap  
Western Bonelli's Warbler  
Iberian Chiffchaff  
Willow Warbler  
Western Orphean Warbler  
Coal Tit  
Blue Tit – ultramarines  
Great Tit  
Southern Grey Shrike  
Magpie – of race *mauritanica*  
Common Raven  
Chough  
Alpine Chough  
Starling  
Spotless Starling  
House Sparrow  
Rock Sparrow  
Spanish Sparrow  
Chaffinch – Africana  
Serin  
Greenfinch  
Goldfinch  
Linnet  
Crimson winged Finch  
House Bunting