

Trip Report: Tripolitania (Libya) – February 2010

In mid February, Ibrahim (our Berber guide and driver) and I were joined by Dr. Paul Bowden and his wife Diana for some intensive bird watching. Our trip was over two weekends - February 12/13 and February 19/20.

Paul and Diana are experienced bird watchers and had good quality optics including photographic and video equipment. Ibrahim and I have extensive local knowledge so together we made a good team. Over 4 days we saw 87 different species. Over a quarter were wintering or passage birds. Paul took video footage and a number of images with a digital SLR. Highlights included not one but two separate encounters with both ***Cream-coloured Courser*** and with ***Moussier's Redstart***.



These were memorable encounters of much sought after species but to concentrate on two species doesn't tell the whole story.

February 11th Tripoli

The story began when Paul and Diana joined me late on the evening of February 11th at the Oasis Club (British Embassy, Tripoli). As we sat out in the warm evening air planning the days ahead, one of the resident ***Barn Owls*** flew over.

February 12th ("Day 1")

We drove out directly westward along the Tripoli road towards Farwa which lies on the border with Tunisia.



As we zoomed down the highway, **Desert Grey Shrikes** were plentiful on the wires. Our first stop was at Zuwarah Saltpan (32.90N, 12.14E). This was flooded though not as much as in previous winters. It held several wintering species including good numbers of **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** (both *Larus fuscus graellsii* and the darker "Baltic Gull" *L. fuscus fuscus*) as well as **Audouin's Gull** and **Sandwich Tern**. The surrounding land held a number of **Crested Lark**.

Next we turned off the main road taking a back road to Farwa. This was quiet and had virtually no traffic. The area (33.03N, 11.83E) was a mixture of scrubland and salty semi-desert. On a warm but breezy day, the scrubland held four different species of sylvia warbler - **Blackcap**, **Sardinian Warbler**, **Spectacled Warbler** and a momentary close encounter with a beautiful male **Marmora's Warbler**. A flock of **30 Common Crane** flew close by for a few minutes. **Crested** and **Thekla Larks**, **Spanish Sparrows** and **Stonechats** were abundant. As the scrub graded to semi-desert we saw **White Wagtails** and one **Desert Wheatear**.

We reached Farwa at the far eastern side of the lagoon (33.06N, 11.81E). This stretch of water and the immediate coast was the only part of Farwa visited. Yet we saw **Grey Heron**, **Little Egret**, **Curlew** and two **Caspian Terns** on the water's edge. There were several waders on side pools, including several **Redshank** in breeding plumage, **Greenshank**, **Kentish Plover**, one **Common Sandpiper** and several **Dunlin**. One **Sanderling** was found close to the beach. In the scrub at the side of the lagoon were several summer plumage **Linnet** and a **Sardinian Warbler**. An **Iberian Grey Shrike**, a **Desert Grey Shrike** and a **Fulvous Babbler** were also seen.

We headed north east to start the coast road back to Zuwarah. We stopped in a coastal area (33.07N, 11.83E) which had a mixed habitat of cypress trees, maquis, garrigue and steppe all close to each other. We saw and heard several **Serin** singing

from the cypress trees and the wires behind. A **Stone Curlew** alighted from close by and flew across the road in an unsuccessful attempt to hide from us under a tree (see photo). In a near-by bush a **Willow Warbler**, presumably on passage, was feeding. Flocks of **Spanish Sparrows** and **Stonechats** in ones and twos were common and we also saw wintering **Black Redstart**.



February 12th ("Day 2")

We started out at the crack of dawn. This was the start of a gloriously sunny and windless day. This time we travelled eastward on the main road towards Wadi Ka'am which is 140 kilometres from Tripoli. We stopped to watch a flock of several **Fulvous Babblers** on bushes next to sea cliffs and what appeared to be an **Iberian Grey Shrike**. On the other side of the road a cypress wood had abundant **Serin** in the trees, **Sardinian Warbler** in the scrub and **Spanish Sparrow** in the bushes.

The valley just north of the reservoir (centred on 32.41N, 14.34E) at Wadi Ka'am is very green when you first come off the main road. In the fields, we saw five **Cattle Egret** darting after food unearthed by a passing plough. A **Little Owl** was asleep in the trees. Another nearby tree held a **European Wryneck** which quickly flew as we stopped to take a photo. A single meadow held a flock of wintering **Meadow Pipits**, a few **Goldfinches**, **European Chaffinches**, **Spanish Sparrows** and a **European robin**. There were more **Sardinian Warblers**, **Serin**, **Desert Grey Shrike**, **Linnet** and a **Common Kestrel** near-by as well as a flock of **Common Starlings**.



The majority of “**Great Grey Shrike**” observed were the paler North African **Desert Grey Shrike (*Lanius elegans*)** which have much whiter breast feathers and lighter grey head and back. However, we did see a few birds that were much more reddish-brown underneath and darker overall resembling the **Iberian Grey Shrike (*Lanius meridionalis*)** found in Spain.



The road rises from sea level to 200 metres at the reservoir. The valley gets less green as you rise. We stopped short of the reservoir to search a narrow wadi which joins the main wadi in the valley below. The aim was to find **Black Wheatear** which we did but this proved to be a great decision in hindsight as this small area held several species. The shrubs in the small wadi held a **Streaked Scrub Warbler**, there was a pair of **Blackcap** in the bushes and a few **Blue Rock Thrushes** flew around the slopes. A **Common Raven** was seen overhead and there were a few **Barbary Partridge** in the valley below.

We took a lunch break and a final look before leaving turned up a pristine male **Moussier's Redstart**. It completely outclassed a near-by **Stonechat** and was foraging on the ground adjacent to the narrow wadi. It appeared totally unafraid of us and walked ever closer towards as we stood transfixed for what seemed an age.

After tearing ourselves way from this view we carried on up towards the dam. However, before we reached it we saw a **Desert Lark** on the last slope along with several **Black Wheatears** which are very common in this area and westward onto the Jebel Nafusa.

On and by the reservoir we saw relatively few birds compared with a previous visit in December. But there were still several **Great Cormorant, Little Egret, Grey Heron and a small flock of Ferruginous Duck**. A **Common Kingfisher** was also found on the bank below the dam wall. In the small ravines by the reservoir there were wintering **Chiffchaffs** of various hues. We also saw **Laughing Dove** and **Rock Dove. Crested Larks** and **Stonechats** were again abundant.

After the reservoir we retraced our steps down the valley across the main Tripoli-Benghazi road to Ain Ka'am. This is the longest permanent river in Libya yet it is not much over 1 kilometre in length. But it is rich in birds. In the tall reeds we saw a resident **Zitting Cisticola** and a resident **Reed Warbler**. It surprises many European birders that most Libyan reed warblers don't migrate.

Naturally there were more **Spanish Sparrows** in the trees and yet more **Stonechats** close by. On the rivers edge we saw two bold young **Moorhens** and a **Water Pipit**. In the water, a **Little Grebe** was diving for food and two **Great Cormorant** were also fishing.

We headed back towards Tripoli as the evening approached. There was time to make a brief stop in part of Garabolli National Park. We saw several **Hoopoe** and more **Sardinian Warbler**, **Serin**, **Fulvous Babbler**, **Desert Grey Shrike**, the ubiquitous **Stonechat** and of course **Spanish Sparrow**. We were then pleasantly surprised to find another **Stone Curlew**.

Hoopoes are resident in coastal Tripolitania in large numbers contrary to the distribution maps found even in the latest field guides.

With the light fading we stopped once more where the road is very close to the sea to film a flock of **Fulvous Babblers** settling down to roost for the night.



During the week

While I settled down to my day job, Paul and Diana had a day to visit the Roman ruins at Sabratah which produced an unexpected sighting on the way of a **Sparrowhawk** in Janzour, west Tripoli as well as a **Barn Swallow** among the ruins. Offshore were a few **Northern Gannet** and a **Cory's Shearwater**.

February 19th ("Day 3")

We travelled up the Jebel Nafusa late on Thursday evening to stay at a beautiful old Berber house owned by Ibrahim's family near Yafran. This was our base for the weekend's birding.

In the very early morning of a very windy day (with dust being blown in from the Sahara) we travelled part down the hills to Yafran reservoir (32.11N, 12.54E). This was frustrating as the reservoir was closed until 9am. The trees around the reservoir were clearly roosts for many birds. Not to be deterred by the closure of the reservoir we birded the immediate area for a time. There were plenty of **Black Wheatear** which are very common in the Yafran area. **Common Starling**, **Linnet** and **Spanish Sparrows** all roost close to the reservoir. **Crested Larks**, **Desert Grey Shrikes** and a **Brown-necked Raven** were also seen before we moved on.

We then went part way back up the hill side to Ain Tamdit (32.17N, 12.47E) at 450 metres. This has a spring in a valley surrounded by palm trees and some scrub in the middle of otherwise dry sloping landscape. The highlight here was a sighting of a pair of **Trumpeter Finch** on the edge of scrub as it graded to barren rock. Otherwise

"the oasis on a hill" housed **Spanish Sparrows** everywhere, **Laughing Doves** in the palms, **Chiffchaffs** in the shrubs and **Crested Larks** on the ground.

After climbing up to the top of the range, we travelled through Yafran and viewed the archaeologically important deserted old Berber town. This site was crammed full of **House Buntings** whose ancestors have probably bred for hundreds of years. This bird is common in all the settlements of the Jebel Nafusa.

We had lunch in Wadi Khourdjet (32.07N, 12.55E). This wadi is beautiful. There are several mini wadis which join together into a wider main wadi. This wadi has a small permanent spring and has a large number of natural trees protected from the elements by the wadi slopes. There is plenty of shade, rare habitat these days. A small flock of **Greenfinches** were seen, in the same place as on a previous visit weeks before. Other birds included **Sardinian Warblers**, **Chiffchaff** and a **Willow Warbler** as well as **Black Wheatear** and a **House Bunting**. The place looks a good candidate for a migrant trap on passage.

Heading back to the car we walked up one of the smaller wadis with low vegetation and quite a slope. We were rewarded with a view of another **Blue Rock Thrush** and another **Moussier's Redstart**. This **Moussier's Redstart** was seen 90 kilometres away from the previous one. It is resident on the Jebel Nafusa again contrary to most current bird guides but the IBA write up on the Jebel Nafusa by Bird Life International has got it right.



After lunch we chose to travel south to Mizdah (31.70 to 31.45N, 12.99E) in the desert. The idea was to do the travelling during the hottest part of the day so we would miss the least amount of bird watching.

The road to Mizdah was eventful despite the very strong sandy wind. At first we mostly saw **Crested Larks** and **Black Wheatears** in the flat wadis that crossed the road. There was a beautiful close encounter with a **Brown-necked Raven** where its colours were clearly seen.

New species for the trip then started appearing in rapid succession as the habitat changed. First we came across a flock of about 30 **Lesser Short-toed Larks**. Then further south we spotted a pair of **Red-rumped Wheatear**.

As we got close to Mizdah, we saw our first **White-crowned Wheatear**. This was a sign that we had truly arrived in the Sahara. Several others were seen in the area and they are the predominant species south of here. In Mizdah, our search for Desert Sparrow proved fruitless but a short walk in an area with sparse vegetation just south of the town disturbed a small flock of **Cream-coloured Courser**.



February 20th ("Day 4")

This was another early start. The big surprise was that it was raining. This often happens in spring when the southern Saharan wind gives way to other wind directions. This type of weather is more normal in late March and early April. Nevertheless, we anticipated there might be some migrants, which had used the strong Saharan winds from the previous days and had then dropped out of the sky with the weather change.

We headed west on the Jebel Nafusa plateau towards the drier parts of the range to visit new habitats and find other birds. Our main stop in the morning was in poorly vegetated fields off the main road towards Nalut and west of Zintan (31.88N, 12.53E). It had stopped raining and the wind had finally started to ease.

We were rewarded with many sightings of **Red-rumped Wheatear** some of which were already showing signs of breeding. We eventually saw our first **Maghreb Wheatear**. Then it became a bit of a wheatear bonzana. In the same small area we found **Northern Wheatear** and **Isabelline Wheatear**, passage birds rather than winter visitors. There was also a flock of **Linnets** and a single **Stonechat**. Possibly the best find of the day, if not the trip, was a small flock of five **Cream-coloured Courser** foraging on the ground close to us. Good film footage and photographs were obtained. The only disappointment was a lack of the rarer lark species (Dupont's and Hoopoe Lark).



After lunch back at Yafran, we made our way back towards Tripoli. This was not before we saw another flock of seven **Barbary Partridge** close to our temporary home.

At the start of our journey back to Tripoli we saw a flock of **Fulvous Babblers** feeding in an almond grove and a pair of **Blackcap** near Kikla. We had an excellent view of a **Thelka Lark** coming down from the main plateau.

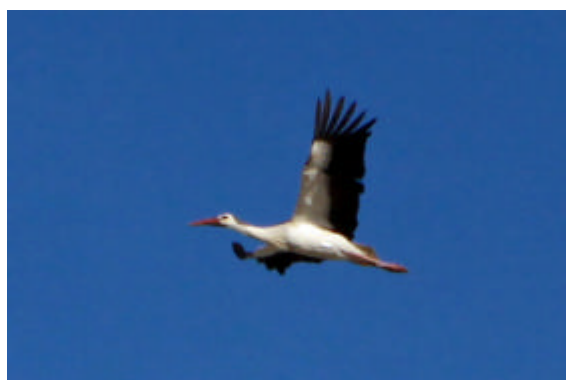
We stopped off at Wadi Zaret reservoir in the late afternoon. This reservoir is towards the bottom of the Jebel Nafusa on a mini plateau at 200 metres. It was not surprising that this expanse of fresh water in a dry landscape attracted a wide variety of birds. There were **Desert** and **Crested Lark**, as well as a mobile flock of twenty **Short-toed Lark**, **Black Wheatear**, **Linnet**, **Stonechat** (again) and **Hoopoe** in the area. On and in the water were a few **Common Teal**, **Little Egret**,

Coot and four **Black-winged Stilt**. Near the water's edge, we found an odd assortment of wintering birds. There were **White Wagtail**, a **Common Snipe**, two **Common Ringed Plover** and quite surprisingly, a single **Northern Lapwing**. Overhead a small flock of returning **House Martin** and two **Pallid Swifts** were seen. Finally, a **Brown-necked Raven** and a pair of **Long-legged Buzzards** were also roaming the area.

On the last leg towards Tripoli as the light faded, we stopped at a protected area (31.11N, 12.54E). We were rewarded with more views of **Barbary Partridge**, a **Little Owl**, **Hoopoe**, **Desert Grey Shrike**, **Spanish Sparrow**, a **Kestrel** and of course another **Stonechat**.

Aftermath

An email from Paul and Diana the day after they left added another species to the list. They had seen three **White Storks** at Tripoli Airport as they were boarding the plane back to the UK. There were also **Barbary Partridge** on the runway margins as seen from the aircraft. This was the icing on the cake and completed their first trip to Libya.



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Species List (Total 87)

Audouin's Gull	<i>Larus audouinii</i>	W
Barbary Partridge	<i>Alectoris Barbara</i>	CR
Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	CR
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	W
Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>	CR
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	MW
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	M
Blue Rock-Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>	W
Brown-necked Raven	<i>Corvus ruficollis</i>	CR
Caspian Tern	<i>Sterna caspia</i>	MW
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	M
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	CR
Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	W
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	W
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	MW

Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	CR
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	W
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	CR
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	CR
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	MW
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	MW
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	MW
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	MW
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	W
Common Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	W
Common Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	W
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>	M
Cream-colored Courser	<i>Cursorius cursor</i>	CR
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	CR
Desert Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius elegans</i>	CR
Desert Lark	<i>Ammomanes deserti</i>	CR
Desert Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>	CR
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	W
Eurasian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	W
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	MW
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	CR
Eurasian Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	W
Eurasian Reed-Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	M
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	W
Eurasian Thick-knee (Stone Curlew)	<i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>	CR
Eurasian Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>	M
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	CR
European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	W
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	W
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	CR
Ferruginous Pochard (Duck)	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>	W
Fulvous Babbler	<i>Turdoides fulvus</i>	CR
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	W
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	MW
House Bunting (African)	<i>Emberiza sahari</i>	CR
Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	W
Isabelline Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>	M
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	CR
Lanner Falcon	<i>Falco biarmicus</i>	CR
Laughing Dove	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>	CR
Lesser Black-backed (Baltic) Gull	<i>Larus fuscus fuscus</i>	W
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus graellsii</i>	W
Lesser Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>	CR
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	MW
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	CR
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	CR

Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>	CR
Maghreb Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe magrebi</i>	CR
Marmora's Warbler	<i>Sylvia sarda</i>	W
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	W
Moussier's Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus moussieri</i>	W
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	W
Northern House-Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	M
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	W
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	M
Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	NM
Red-rumped Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe moesta</i>	CR
Rock Dove (plus Domestic Pigeon)	<i>Columba livia</i>	CR
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	MW
Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>	W
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	CR
Sky Lark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	W
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>	CR
Spectacled Warbler	<i>Sylvia conspicillata</i>	CR
Streaked Scrub-Warbler	<i>Scotocerca inquieta</i>	CR
Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>	CR
Trumpeter Finch	<i>Rhodopechys githaginea</i>	CR
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	M
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	W
White-crowned Black (White-tailed) Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i>	CR
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	M
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	W