

Southern Morocco and Western Sahara trip 22.1.-4.2.2014

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Agadir area birding - picking up local specialties

Already for few years I have planned to make a trip to southern Morocco and especially to Western Sahara. However, timing has not been ideal for few other Finnish bird colleagues, or flights have been too expensive to me. When Aurinkomatkat restarted its package tours to Agadir after 5 years break, I felt that this winter it's time to make the trip if I can find tripcompany. Already in October/November I had discussion with few birders but none of them could find 1-2 weeks free prior to the yearend.

When at Christmas time I saw that Aurinkomatkat had offered extra 200€ discount to the trips at the end of January, we quickly made decision that 3 of us (Seppo Järvinen, Jari Pitkäkoski and I) will leave for two weeks (starting Jan 22nd) and Kalle Larsson would join Jan 29th for the latter week, dedicated to Western Sahara part.

We made plan that during the first week we focus on Agadir area and make 3 days trip to the Atlas mountains. The second week was then dedicated to a very long return trip to Dakhla and Aousserd road. I have been 20 years ago previous time in Morocco and covered well all the areas from Agadir to the Atlas mountains and further north Morocco as well. Jari, Seppo and Kalle were first time visiting country. This also impacted to the plans we had: catch all target species to Seppo and Jari on the first week and for Kalle at least Agadir area species on top of Western Sahara target species. I expected to get species only from Western Sahara.

Unfortunately my phone braked at the end of the trip and I lost all scenery photos which I took with my camera phone. So I only include bird photos. Kalle will show in his blog also scenery and overall trip photos.



***Common Bulbuls** were welcoming us already the airport when we arrived Agadir Al Massira airport on Jan 22nd. Bulbuls were very common in southern Morocco.*

The first full day (Jan 23rd) we spent in Massa where we picked up target species: **House Bunting**, **Moussier's Redstart**, **Black-crowned Tchagra**, **Bald Ibis** and **Plain Martin**.



*In several places of Massa village **House Bunting** call was heard already immediately at the first light.*



*Beautiful **Moussier's Redstart** was surprisingly common in many places in southern Morocco. Massa village alone had at least 5 pairs.*



*To our surprise we found a pair of **Black-crowned Tchagra** close by the road and they showed up well to us. Few other singing Tchagras were heard but not seen close by.*



Bald Ibises we were searching several hours on the northern side of Sidi Rbat and finally found a group of 35 bird near a small village. around 7km N of Sidi Rbat.

Plain Martin was the hardest species to find. Finally at sunset we saw 6 birds flying over Massa pools. The day was ending in very good mood as we got all species we were searching for.



In several places we saw good number of local subspecies of Magpie (ssp mauritanica) with its blue spot behind the eye.



On 28th we did visit so called Paradise Valley which is a bit north of Agadir. There we found a pair of Pied Wagtail (ssp subpersonata). Another local Pied Wagtail we saw at Souss estuary on our last day (Feb 4th).

It's worth to mention that **Laughing Dove** is rather common at Massa village.



Local ssp maroccanus Great Cormorant has completely white at least from the breast up to throat. Further south around Dakhla area we saw birds, which have completely white belly pointing to ssp lucidus.

When Kalle arrived late 29th, we did a short visit to Massa on 30th on our way to Western Sahara. It was windy day and thus, Tchagra and Plain Martin did not show up. Ibis we did not even try to get due to time constraints. However, those species we got on our last full day, Feb 4th. Only **Barbary Partridge** we did miss on our last visit. We saw 3+5 birds with Seppo and Jari on 29th Jan.

In our visits number of waders, terns and gulls were rather low at Massa and Souss estuary.

Atlas Mountains tour

Very early 5.20am on Jan 24th we left with Jari and Seppo from Agadir driving towards east. First lights started to allow see birds eastern parts of Souss Valley around 7am. There we soon picked up 2 **Black-winged Kites**, a dark Booted Eagle and an immature **Peregrine Falcon** sitting on a power line pole. First **Red-rumped Wheatears** and **Thekla Larks** we found around Talioumine. Certainly the first species was new to Seppo and Jari.



Several Red-rumped Wheatears were singing during the first two days of our Atlas Mountain trip. Usually birds were coupled with females on their territory.

Just 1-2km after passing Ouarzazate province border (48km west of Tasenakht) we made one hour walking. I made really dude type decision and left my scope and camera in our car. The area was mentioned to be a **Dupont's Lark** site. However, we did not hear or see the species during our walk. Certainly the habitat is rather much similar as further northeast the area near Zeida where I have seen and heard the species 20 years ago. I found a nice flock of **Thick-billed** (40+), **Temminck's** (25+) and **Thekla Larks** (10+) feeding on this very arid area. Thick-

billed Larks we did not see later and thus, I did not have chance to take any photos later. Luckily two other species I could well photograph next day at Tagdilt Track.

At the southeastern end of Ouarzazate we made next stop in early afternoon to search "Maghreb Lark" which is long-billed Crested Lark (*ssp macrorhynchus*). We found soon a pair which was very scary. I got only very distant documentary shots, photo below.



At the same site we followed long time a warbler pair which in the end revealed to be a **Tristram Warbler** couple, documentary shot below. It was nice target species to Seppo and Jari.



We made few short stops still on our way to Boumalne du Dades. We noticed **Western Mourning Wheatear** by the road, photo below. It has only faint sign of buff color in its vent.



A bit later we saw almost on the last lights two larks which soon revealed to be **Bar-tailed Larks**, photo below.



When photographing this lark we heard a call of **Crowned Sandgrouse** few times without seeing the bird.

At dusk we arrived in Boumalne du Dades where we took a hotel for a night. This long driving day (482km) produced already good number of target species to our trip list.

Early next morning (Jan 25th) we headed directly to Tagdilt Track and explored the area three hours. I must say that it had much less birds than in my previous visit 20 years ago. However, now I had good chance to photograph **Temminck's Larks** (25+), local **Desert Larks** (*ssp payni*) (3+) and **Thekla Larks** (10+), photos below.





At Tagdilt Track we found 3 pairs of **Red-rumped Wheatears** and a male **Western Mourning Wheatear**. As a highlight to the morning a group of 13 **Crowned Sandgrouses** landed 200m from our car when we were already leaving the site. Unfortunately birds were just towards sunlight.

It was time to have coffee break at Boumalne du Dades after which we drove return to Tinerhir to search possible **Lanner** by the road but in vain. We returned Ouarzazate and then further north over the mountains. On the northern slopes of the Atlas mountains when we saw forest we tried to find **Levaillant's Woodpecker** but no outcome. For the night we went to Ait Ourir to a nice Hotel Le Coq Hardi which has good price quality ratio.

Early morning of Jan 26th we continued to Ourika Valley. It was packed with local people and our search for **Levaillant's Woodpecker** was fruitless. Anyhow Jari got **African Blue Tit** to his list and the species was common (40+) in the valley gardens, photo below.





Around ten brownish colored Dippers (*ssp minor*) were on the river running through Ourika Valley.

Later in the afternoon our drive up to Oukaïmeden was nerve taking. Thousands of cars were returning from Oukaïmeden ski resort on the narrow zig-zag road. One motorcyclist was overdriven and it made the chaos even worse. Finally we arrived in first parking area and soon we found 8 **Crimson-winged Finches** (*ssp alienus*) at the parking area near the ski lifts. After sunset we went for a coffee to Hotel Chez Juju to think about what we do next to find the woodpecker. There we got a bird log kept in the hotel and decided to stay the night in the hotel. The notes revealed that a pair of Levaillant's Woodpecker has been in the area for years. So, let's try it in the morning first and after it those villages at lower elevation where the birds has been heard or seen on the way down from Oukaïmeden.

Next morning (Jan 27th) the area was empty and snow covered mountains welcomed us when we got out in a bit chilly morning. Temperature was below zero. **Red-billed** and **Alpine Choughs** were numerous and screaming in the air. We found Mistle Thrushes and two **Rock Buntings** immediately behind the hotel. We walked further up and around 7.30am we heard only once but very clear **Levaillant's Woodpecker** call somewhere from telecoms mast direction. We walked up but could not find the bird. It's very secretive. The same was written in the bird log as well by many birders.

We returned ski parking area and found good number of **Crimson-winged Finches** (50+), Rock Sparrows (20+) and **Horned Larks** (40+) (*ssp atlas*) which we photographed until we headed for breakfast. Below are shown some photos of those species.





Just when we were leaving Oukaimeden I saw a pipit by the lake. It flew closer and I could identify it to a **Water Pipit**.

We stopped several times on our drive downwards 9-12km from Oukaimeden to listen Levillant's Woodpecker in very suitable habitat but we saw only 2 Greater Spotted Woodpeckers.

We felt that we had got so well target species. It was time to drive via Marrakesh to Agadir. Two days prior Kalle's arrival we were checking Tamri's estuary, did seawatching at Cap Rhir and covered better Massa national park and Souss estuary. It was also worth to take easier prior to our long journey to Western Sahara when Kalle would arrive.

Western Sahara part - Cricket Warblers and Sudan Golden Sparrows

Kalle arrived in Agadir and our hotel late afternoon on Jan 29th. We gathered to have short wrap-up for the coming days. The plan was to go first to Massa to try to pick up to Kalle those species

which we can find in max two hours and continue then towards Western Sahara.

The morning of 30th Jan was very windy which made search of Pale (Brown-throated) Martin and Black-crowned Tchagra hard to find. However, Moussier's Redstart and House Bunting we found quickly.

We continued a bit south of Goulimine where we made next stop at Oued Sayed (5km south of Goulimine). One hour walk brought **Fulvous Babbler** family (2ad, 3juv) which was constantly staying in a bush. Apparently its nest was there.



Adult Fulvous Babbler was frequently sitting on the top of a bush where inside were 3 juvenile birds. They were already able to fly but were hesitant to leave the bush. Nice tick to three of us.

We continued to Oued Boukila (10km S of Goulimine). Another half an hour walk brought this nice pair of **Red-rumped Wheatear**, photo below. Also a Tawny Pipit flew over us calling and Corn Bunting was singing.



Just when we had sat down in our car, I and Jari who were sitting in front of the car, saw a small pale bird landing in front of our car near a small bush. We just managed to see it with our bins until wind picked it up and pushed further on. The bird flew 50 meters and then continued with strong wind carrying it on. Seppo and Kalle saw only briefly the bird. It was anyhow clear to Jari and me: **African Desert Warbler**, recently split species and one of my target species. We tried to find the bird where we saw it disappearing but no sign of it anymore. Probably wind had carried it further on over the main road.

Then we had long drive to Sidi Akhfenir where we arrived 6pm. Next small coffee stop we had at El Quatia (Tan Tan Plage) without finding anything special. Strong wind made watching to sea rather challenging together with high waves. Short stop at Oued Chebeika provided four Black

Scooters. The site can be a good place to explore more thoroughly. However, we did not have now time for it.

On Jan 31st we drove first to Khnifiss Lagoon where we spent two hours scanning birds. Main target was to find possible Kelp Gull which has been observed there in the past years.

Low tide made searching challenging. We quickly saw that two pairs of Greater Black-backed Gulls were on the small hills of the island. Few other large size black-mantled gulls were on the other side of the lagoon. Visibility was not so good when the wind was still very strong and clouds with some showers were approaching. Certainly the site has lots of waders, terns and gulls as well as tens of egrets and flamingos to see. We did not see any good candidate for Kelp Gull.

One nice finding was a **Bean Goose** at the sandstrip on the seaside. Also **Lanner** which first sat on the other side of the area but then flew just towards us and disappeared low on northern side. Single **Hoopoe Lark** (photo below) was feeding nearby as well as a male Black Wheatear.



When rain started, we continued our drive. Just northern end of Laayoune after military base was an oued with water. There we estimated 30 Black-necked Grebes and 70 Coots looking from a shortly stopped car on the bridge.

We made a coffee stop at Chtoukan. We did not have any sign of **African Pied Crow** but 15 **Brown-necked Ravens** were flying around the village.

We arrived in Dakhla Bay close to 7pm. We did two very brief stops at KM18 and KM16 but the light was too weak to find anymore Royal Terns. We saw tens of Caspian Terns and Sandwich Terns. In one flock we saw terns in size between these two species. Bill color could not be seen anymore. We drove to Dakhla town and booked three nights from Hotel Erraha which birdwatchers have usually used. During the day we drove over 750km. Previous day we drove almost 500km. It's a long way from Agadir to Dakhla. However, now we are rather close of those sites which should provide very interesting target species.

Already 4.40am we were driving on Feb 1st towards Aousserd which is almost 250km SE of Dakhla. I drove in darkness first 1,5 hours and Jari next hour until we made first stop at KM42 (from Aousserd). I walked the road from KM42 to KM39. Others explored the area around KM42 for an hour. Several lark species (Bar-tailed, Short-toed/Lesser Short-toed, Hoopoe, etc) were singing. Few Cream-colored Coursers and Greater Spotted Cuckoo came to our trip list. Then we continued to KM25, Oued Jenna, which was often mentioned to be a good site for Cricket Warblers. It was absolutely one of our target species which we were prepared to search for two days if needed.

We started to walk southern side of the road. It has acacia trees and some "wheat" type vegetation growing. Local shepherd was at the site with his sheeps and goats.

Few **Subalpine Warblers** were first seen. Then I saw a small pale bird flying closer to me and then landing to an acacia only 25m from me. The bird was having very strange buzzing call. I looked with my scope and saw immediately that it was a **CRICKET WARBLER**. I shouted the others who soon arrived near to me. At the same time Jari had looked two Cricket Warblers 100m from me. Soon we found that at least three birds were around us.



Our main target bird was well visible in an acacia tree. It even allowed photographing when it nervously was having buzzing calls constantly.

Those three birds landed on the ground and were moving constantly forward. It was bit hard to get new photos. I followed for a while them and then continued to look at other species around. Three others followed those Cricket Warblers.

I returned our car for drinking and eating a bit. Then I continued to check northern side of Oued Jenna. I saw only Great Spotted Cuckoo within 200m walking until I got a message from Kalle that a flock of 200 Desert Sparrows had landed to the place where they photographed Cricket Warblers. I thought that it's better to go there as the northern side is so empty. Also I remembered that previous winter Sudan Golden Sparrows were seen among Desert Sparrows around 20km south of Aousserd.

Already 150m from the others I saw that several acacia trees had tens of chirping Desert Sparrows which were very restless: landing to the ground and again returning to acacias. When I was close to Seppo, he said to me: "There is a yellow...". It was so windy that I did not hear well what he said. I requested him to repeat what he said. He repeated: "There is a yellow bird among sparrows". He was looking to a smaller bush which was between us. Then I saw a yellowish bird among Desert Sparrows. I shouted immediately: "It's a **Sudan Golden Sparrow**!" I tried to photograph it but my tele lens servo was running forth and back without stopping around 5 seconds. When it finally stopped, I saw Desert Sparrows landing on the ground but the yellow one was gone from the bush.

We followed those restless Desert Sparrows at least one hour without finding Sudan Golden Sparrows anymore. Half of the flock returned to the area where we were but at least second half went outside of acacia tree area and probably disappeared to wheat type vegetation. As Desert Sparrows were in many groups flying around, it was hard to know where SGSs might be and which sparrow group to follow up.

I heard afterwards from Jari that when he was looking arrived Desert Sparrows in an acacia tree, he noticed bright yellow breast shining towards him. He decided to look the bird with his scope but could not anymore find it. However, then he saw a paler yellow bird sitting in the same tree. Soon again the brighter bird come visible inside from the tree. Now it also showed its chestnut brown

back. It was an adult male. Apparently the other bird was a female based on its paler color and pale brown back. Below photos taken by Seppo K Järvinen from the same bird I saw also shortly. My sincere thanks are due to Seppo allowing use his photos.



As can be seen the bill is pale and upper side is buffy pointing to a female. At certain light underside and the breast looks rather yellowish.



Desert Sparrows were frequently feeding on those wheat type vegetation finding there seeds as well as from the sand.

Below four photos of Desert Sparrows; 2cy male, 2cy male, ad male, female.



I returned once again to photograph Cricket Warblers and this time I found at least 8 birds. Few of them I managed to approach close enough. By pishing I got one male sitting nicely close to me, photo below.



Usually those skulky birds were hopping on the sand near the "wheat" bushes and running quickly between the bushes. Below is shown a crappy shot from one bird which I was following tens of minutes.



We were so pleased with the finding of Cricket Warblers, Desert Sparrows and to our surprise also Sudan Golden Sparrows that we were ready to go on. We drove to Aousserd just quickly check the place. We hoped to find a cafe to get coffee but no luck. We started our return towards Dakhla 1pm.

We did an hour stop and walking at KM70 and a second stop at KM75. The last one was productive. We found our target species, **African Desert Warbler**, which we now were able to photograph very well. I found the singing male only 150m north from the road and soon we all were able to look the bird in its territory, photos below.



At KM100 suddenly flew just low over our car an adult **Lanner**, which forced mandatory stop. I was too late to get any good shots but it was nice to see it circling around and gradually disappearing from us to height.

Now we arrived in Dakhla Bey already at 6pm, so we had well time to search **Royal Terns**. We found first 6 birds and a bit later another 3 birds among Caspian and Sandwich Terns.

The day will be remembered long time because we practically saw all target species and as a top of all, Sudan Golden Sparrow.

Feb 2nd we decided to check out from the hotel and start already our return journey a day earlier. However, prior to driving north we wanted to spend few hours at Gleb Djiane near the water tower. When we arrived in darkness to KM41 from Dakhla where the road leads to north and south, I as a driver got a small driving lesson. As I did not stop exactly to the stop sign but a bit later, I got 700 MAD fines. The paper states that the reason is: "Non respect l'arret imposé pour panneau STOP". I tried to explain: "Je respecte". But police answer was loud and clear: "Tu ne respecte pas!" I quietly picked up 700MAD from my wallet to the table and the police then wrote the fines. When he was writing my paper, another driver got the same penalty and arrived to the same small room by the large roundabout and checkpoint.

At Gleb Djiane water tower we did not see any sangdrouses which we were prepared to photograph. Kalle found 300m from the tower a pair of **Temminck's Lark** to his list, anyhow. After three hours waiting there we continued to KM123 (from Aousserd) where we tried to search possible **Dunn's Lark**. From that point starts on the northern side of the road very good looking acacia tree area which reaches 10km southeast. We walked a bit over an hour and I walked up to 2,5km NE from the road until returning to our car. Acacia habitat still continued at least few kilometers further north.

We found 5+ **Cricket Warblers**, 10+ **Desert Sparrows**, 4+ **Fulvous Babblers** and 1 Great Spotted Cuckoo. It would be worth to study that habitat thoroughly. It's a large area and the habitat is the same we saw very suitable to many desert species at Oued Jenna.

We drove north almost without any stops until Laayoune where we took a hotel for a night arriving there close to 10pm. We made only mandatory coffee stop at Chtoukan gasoline station. During the day we drove a bit over 800km.

Next morning (Feb 3rd) we left Laayoune already 6.20am towards Khnifiss Lagoon where we arrived 8.40am. We spent there 1,5 hours when there was a high tide. We counted at least 9 adult Greater Black-backed Gulls which were mainly in pairs. Additionally were two birds which had a bit exceptional leg colors (not green grey) but the wing tip had too much white. The visibility was great. At least we could not find Kelp Gull at the lagoon. On the seaside were 500+ gulls, mainly LBBGs.

On our way to Agadir we made last stop at KM38 (before Goulimine). Those Goulimine southern side habitats have changed a lot since my first visit 20 years ago. Large areas have been taken for farming. It was not anymore such a good for birding as I remembered from my previous visit in the area. Only two Spectacled Warbler pairs were best to mention in that stop.

Finally at 7pm we arrived in our hotel. Very long journey (3230km) of five days drive return to southern part of Western Sahara was very successful. We had still one full day to search to Kalle some species which we missed on 30th Jan at Massa area.

For gull fanatics I would recommend a fish factory just northern side of Agadir harbor. Also Tamri estuary provided a good destination to photograph roosting gulls. Similarly Massa and Souss estuaries are good to look at gulls though a bit more challenging to try to photograph them.

Some final notes for birders traveling in Morocco and Western Sahara:

- Follow driving limitations; there are lots of places where policemen are checking speed limits with handheld radar equipment. You have to pay fines with cash.
- Be especially careful around Dakhla area where they specifically seem to find targets to offer fines. This was often written in many recent trip reports.
- Car navigator helps a lot traveling in bigger towns and cities. I recommend it and we used it.
- Very good link to follow recent interesting observations in Morocco and Western Sahara is below:

<http://www.go-south.org/>

That link provides also very useful document to traveling in Western Sahara, including useful lodging information. Currently it's only in French but the work for translation in English is going on already.

Note also that by prefiling a document shown in Western Sahara special bulletin helps faster to pass all stoppings in Western Sahara. When details of a person are already written in the paper, the paper given to the police is enough for them.