

Birding Southern Morocco

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Marrakech
Day 2	Ouarzazate
Day 3	Boumalne Dades
Day 4–5	Erfoud
Day 6	Ouarzazate
Day 7	Taroudant
Day 8–9	Agadir
Day 10	Fly London

Departs

February–April and September–October (see website)

Focus

Birds

Grading

A. Limited walking, but plenty of action in this comprehensive birding tour

Dates & Prices

See website (tour code MAR01) or brochure

Highlights

- 4x4 excursions into the Sahara Desert in search of Egyptian Nightjar, sandgrouse, Streaked Scrub Warbler, Desert Sparrow, and Cream-coloured Courser
- Bald Ibis, Tristram's Warbler, larks and wheatears galore plus many other specialities
- A popular mix of charming hotels set against stunning, varied scenery



Moussier's Redstart, Northern Bald Ibis, Cream-coloured Courser



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NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Marrakech

We leave London Gatwick on a direct flight to Marrakech. Usually there is a choice of an early morning or mid-afternoon flight (please note that the afternoon flight will sometimes necessitate a flight supplement which will be advised). For those flying early, we will arrange a guided birdwatching excursion to the ski resort of Oukaïmeden (a distance of 80km) where we will search for the near-endemic African Crimson-winged Finch as well as other alpine specialities such as the "Atlas" Shore Lark, Alpine Chough, Rock Sparrow and Black Wheatear. For this excursion we will be driven straight from Marrakech airport, returning to the group hotel in time for dinner. The cost of this excursion is £80 per person with lunch included.

For those arriving in Marrakech in the early evening, you will be met at the airport and transferred directly to the group hotel for dinner.



"Atlas" Shore Lark © C. Griffin

Please state your preference from the above choices when booking.

Day 2

Ouarzazate

This morning, after a quick search for Little Swifts over the roofs of the city, we leave Marrakech and drive south-east up and over the snow-capped High Atlas via the spectacular Tizi n'Tichka pass. Passing close to Jebel Toubkal, North Africa's highest mountain, the scenery will certainly be dramatic and birds might include Booted or Bonelli's Eagle, Barbary Falcon, Red-billed Chough or Barbary Partridge. We will stop occasionally to explore areas that look promising for such species as Levillant's Woodpecker, African Chaffinch, "Atlas" Coal Tit, or early returning Atlas Wheatear before dropping down to Ouarzazate, the so-called "Gateway to the Desert".

Ouarzazate, a former French garrison town, is largely modern but has a superb old Kasbah, once the seat of the powerful Glaoui clan, former controllers of trade over the Tizi n'Tichka pass. Here we will see our first roof-top White Stork's nests as we drive down to the nearby Barrage de Mansour el Edahabbi. This large dammed lake acts as a magnet to birds in this otherwise arid landscape and we are likely to encounter a wide range of species which, depending on the water level, might include Greater Flamingo, Ruddy Shelduck and Black Stork, various waders, raptors such as Black Kite and Marsh Harrier and a range of migrants perhaps including our first Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters.

Night in Ouarzazate.

Day 3

Boumalne Dades

This morning we will have another chance to visit the Barrage before continuing our drive eastwards along the Dades Valley to Boumalne Dades. This is a journey of two hours or so during which time we will see our first ksars and kasbahs (the fortified mud-built houses and villages) so typical of the region. The Dades valley is particularly beautiful in Spring with the bright green of the barley fields and the white of the almond blossom along the valley floor providing a refreshing contrast to the stark desert landscape all around. En-route we will look for our first desert birds which might well include Long-legged Buzzard, Desert and Thekla's Larks, Desert, White-crowned and Black Wheatears, Trumpeter Finch and, if we are lucky, Maghreb Wheatear or the superb Moussier's Redstart.



Dades Gorge

From our base at Boumalne Dades we are well positioned to explore the varied habitats nearby. In the Dades gorge in the southern foothills of the High Atlas are the most spectacular rock formations and dramatically positioned ksars and kasbahs. The shady groves along the river here ring with the songs of Bulbuls, Serins and Cetti's Warblers whilst Swallowtail butterflies glide gracefully from one patch of sun to another. Amongst the rocks and crags above we will look for a range of birds including Bonelli's Eagle, Tristram's Warbler, Crag Martin, Blue Rock-Thrush, Black Wheatear, and Rock Bunting. We may be lucky to glimpse a Barbary Sheep on the steep slopes.

Lower down, to the south of the mountains, we will explore the stony plains around Boumalne Dades, especially along the Tagdilt track. The silence and sense of space out on the plain is exhilarating and here we have the chance of such exciting bird species as Lanner, Long-legged Buzzard, Cream-coloured Courser, Crowned and Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Temminck's Lark, Red-rumped and Desert Wheatears, and, if we are lucky, Thick-billed Lark. We will also look out for the Fat Sand Rat which is common here (a food source for the local Long-legged Buzzards) and the dainty little Greenish Black-tip, one of the few butterflies able to survive in this harsh environment.

Night in Boumalne Dades.

Day 4 – 5

Erfoud

We will spend this morning taking another look at the Tagdilt Plain generally trying to find any species missed thus far. We will stop in a gorge where we will try to connect with Lanner, Maghreb Wheatear and even Pharaoh Eagle Owl.

In the afternoon we will continue our journey eastwards through increasingly desolate landscapes to



Desert Wheatear © C. Griffin

Erfoud, a frontier town on the edge of the desert about 160 miles from Boulmalne. The oases, gardens and palm groves around Erfoud, and the sandy wadis and stony desert nearby all offer rewarding birding with Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters and a range of migrants, such as Rufous Bush Chats, being particularly notable in our late March/April tours.

The first great sand dunes of the Sahara at Merzouga, a one-hour drive south of Erfoud, are home to Morocco's best range of desert specialities; these include the elusive Desert Sparrow, Egyptian Nightjar, Spotted and

Crowned Sandgrouse, Cream-coloured Courser, Fulvous Babbler, Hoopoe and Bar-tailed Larks, African Desert Warbler, White-crowned and Desert Wheatears, and Brown-necked Raven. Our late winter tours (February and early March) offer the best chances of seeing such species as Scrub, and Tristram's Warblers 'wintering' in the tamarisk bushes around Merzouga.

A stay of two nights here is designed to give you time to enjoy the best desert birding that Morocco has to offer. A 4x4 vehicle trip into the Saharan dunes begins pre-dawn taking in the magnificent sand dunes of Erg Chebbi and offering the chance to see some of the special desert birds, followed by a visit to the Nomadic Berber Depot in Merzouga, and then (once refreshed) a late afternoon look at the Oued Ziz.

The early start enables you to witness sunrise over the desert. This is also the best time for birding opportunities (and a chance to see such nocturnal mammals as Fennec Fox, jirds and jerboas).

Nights in Erfoud

Day 6

Ouarzazate

Driving towards Rissani and then west across the stony desert through Alnif and Tazzarine to the Draa Valley and finally to our hotel at Ouarzazate. Breaking the journey with birding stops and walks en route, especially for Brown-necked Raven, Maghreb Lark and other desert species. In autumn especially, the flowering acacias can attract a wealth of migrant species to feed on the nectar and insects attracted to it. If we are lucky could include a hunting Lanner or a roosting Pharaoh Eagle Owl. By afternoon we will arrive in the Drâa valley where the palmeries attract a different mix of species and is a flyway for trans-Saharan migrants. Finally we cross the stark and dramatic Anti-Atlas range before arriving back in Ouarzazate in

late afternoon. If we have time we will return to Barrage el Mansour Eddahabi before settling into our hotel. Total distance covered today will be about 220 miles.

Night in Ouarzazate

Day 7

Taroudant

After breakfast we will continue our journey westwards towards the coast. We will stop at the Oued Iriri,



Trumpeter Finch

an area of irrigated low intensity agriculture that can be very productive. Past trips here have thrown up Bonelli's Eagle, Montagu's Harrier, a range of Herons, Black Tern, Reed Warbler, Western Olivaceous Warbler, Western Subalpine Warbler, Spectacled Warbler, Melodious Warbler and Trumpeter Finch.

Next, we travel on through a rugged landscape to lunch at the Saffron Tea House at Taliouine, and the saffron producing crocus fields typical of this region. The Saffron flower is in a very short

season in October, but the whole process can be seen. The local beverage can be sampled while migrants pass overhead on migration to or from southern Africa.

On again, we will notice a gradual greening of the landscape as we travel towards the coast. As we descend through the arid hills we will enter into the remnant Argan forests, a threatened habitat found only in Morocco, and then finally into the Sous Valley where numbers of birds can be seen, including Short-toed Snake Eagle, Black-winged Kite, Long-legged Buzzard, Red-rumped Swallow and Woodchat Shrike.

We should reach our characterful and comfortable Riad in Taroudant, with enough time for you to visit the local souk, should you wish. Some previous clients have even enjoyed a Berber massage here! Total distance covered today will be about 190 miles.

Night in Taroudant.

Day 8 – 9

Agadir

We move on today to Agadir, an hour and a half away. To the north of this coastal town, the road winds along a beautiful coastline past dramatic Cap Rhir and on to the small Village of Tamri. The area around Tamri is well known as one of the very few places where the Northern Bald Ibis still occurs and a search

of the surrounding fields, dunes and cliff-top scrub will hopefully bring us into contact with this sought-after and endangered species. The beach at Tamri itself often holds a large flock of roosting Audouin's Gulls and the surrounding scrub buzzes with song-flying Sardinian Warblers.

Heading back south along the coast and after checking into our hotel, we will visit the Oued Souss immediately to the south of Agadir. This small estuary supports large numbers of birds which could well include Greater Flamingo, Eurasian Spoonbill, waders such as Avocets, Black-winged Stilts and Kentish Plovers, Audouin's and Mediterranean Gulls, and terns that regularly include Lesser Crested. The drier areas of salt marsh often hide Stone Curlew whilst the areas of scrub can hold the noisy but elusive Black-crowned Tchagra.

Our last full day in the environs of Agadir will enable us to explore a range of prime birding sites within



Black-crowned Tchagra © C. Griffin

easy reach of the city. We will spend time at Oued Massa – 90 minutes to the south of Agadir. This series of wetlands along the river are one of the most exciting birdwatching sites in Morocco, comprising a rich mosaic of water, reeds, marsh, irrigated farmland and scrub covered dunes. Amongst a wide variety of birds, and depending on the time of year, we have a good chance of finding such spectacular and unusual species as Glossy Ibis, Squacco and Purple Herons, Marbled Duck, Osprey, Black-winged Kite, Black-bellied Sandgrouse and Brown-throated Martin. Black-crowned Tchagras whistle

madly from the scrub, Moussier's Redstarts are common and even Bonelli's Eagle is fairly regular. Almost anything could turn up here and the chance of finding a vagrant from southern Africa or the Americas adds to the excitement of this locality. On past trips we have found African Skimmer, Brown Booby, Fulvous Whistling Duck, Ring-billed Gull and Long-billed Dowitcher.

Nights in Agadir

Day 10

Fly London

Usually we are able to take EasyJet's direct flight from Agadir back to London, using any time available to continue our explorations of Morocco's Atlantic coastline. In the unlikely event of this flight being unavailable, we will take a morning drive back to Marrakech (150 miles) which will take us first across the scenic western end of the High Atlas and then across an area of dry stony arable steppe. Watching out for migrant Black Kites and Lesser Kestrels and singing Calandra Larks we will make a last stop for coffee here before arriving in Marrakech in time for our flight back to London.

Tour Grading

This is a grade A holiday, constituting a traditional birdwatching tour. We will be using a minibus to visit each site, walking at a very gentle pace at each one, and over relatively short distances as we search for the birds of southern Morocco's deserts, oases and wetlands. We cover a fair amount of mileage on this tour; a necessity if we're going to show you the best of southern Morocco in 10 days. The longer drives are interspersed with birding stops.

Weather

February–April and September–October are lovely times of the year to visit southern Morocco. Skies are generally clear with excellent visibility, allowing fine views of snow-covered mountain ranges. You can expect plenty of sunshine and daytime temperatures usually in the late 20s (Centigrade), with cool, but not cold, nights. It is generally fairly dry during these months. February, followed by March and October, will be the coolest month (hats, gloves and fleeces necessary for the mountain pass and early mornings on the steppes), with April and September around 10°C warmer.

Clothing

Please inspect carefully the separate clothing list in your pre-departure information. Clean casual clothes will be necessary for hotel wear. Plenty of warm clothes will be needed for the autumn and early spring tours.

Food & accommodation

Accommodation and all meals are included throughout this holiday (except lunches on Day 1 as described). We use comfortable hotels; generally the best available in the areas we visit. Please be aware that if the tour dates fall within Ramadan then some hotels may not serve alcohol.

Extra expenses

Please note that we do not include all items of a more personal nature such as drinks, laundry, souvenirs and tips.

Booking your place on the tour

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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