

The Best of Tunisia

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Tunis; transfer Hammamet
Day 2	El Jem to Sfax & Thyna Saltpans
Day 3	Bouhedma National Park
Day 4	Dghoumes National Park
Day 5	Desert birding at Douz; Djerba
Day 6	Fly Tunis. Ichkeul National Park
Day 7	Carthage & Bardo Museum
Day 8-9	Jebel El Haouaria (Cap Bon) + pelagic
Day 10	Local wetlands; arrive Hammamet
Day 11	Depart for London

Departs

March / April

Focus

Birds (and some larger mammals)

Grading

Grade A.

Dates & Prices

See website (tour code TUN01)

Highlights:

- Maghreb Wheatear & Cream-coloured Courser
- African Golden Wolf, Oryx, Adax & Dorcas Gazelle
- Pelagic for shearwaters and marine life



From Top: Cream-coloured Courser, Scimitar-horned Oryx, Scopoli's Shearwater



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Introduction

Of all the countries of North Africa (the “Maghreb”), Tunisia has arguably the greatest variety in the smallest area. It is simply dwarfed by its massive neighbours, Algeria and Libya, and is a microcosm of all things North African. While close to Europe (the flight time is the same as to Seville or the Algarve), and having echoes of the French colonial past, it is culturally distinct and offers stunning landscapes, fascinating Roman, Carthaginian and medieval archaeology, and not least wonderful wildlife, in a safe and friendly setting.

Perhaps most appealing of all though, is its relatively small size. It is ideal for a short break, allowing access to the great sand dunes of the Sahara, as well as to the country’s wetlands, woodlands and savannahs. Indeed, for the naturalist, it is refreshing to find that these diverse habitats are so well-protected by a system of National Parks and reserves. These protect Tunisia’s 2,200 plant species (many of which are globally rare or endangered), 358 bird species, 88 different mammals and more than 60 species of reptiles. Tunisia is also home to some flagship “rewilding” projects of extirpated (but native) large mammals.

In the far north of the country, the green hills and valleys are clothed in vineyards, oak woodlands, and towns and villages whose European style enhances an ambience of bucolic charm. It is a landscape similar to that of southern Italy, Sardinia or Corsica. To the east lies a network of wetlands of great appeal to ornithologists, whose flagship is the famous Lake Ichkeul. Further to the south, in the Gulf of Gabes, lie estuarine mudflats and islands more reminiscent of the south coast of England than of Mediterranean North Africa. Inland from the gulf sits a remnant of a scenic savannah landscape that was once widespread across pre-Saharan North Africa, and where even in the twentieth century mega-herbivores roamed, stalked by such predators as Lion, Leopard and Cheetah. To the south, the great golden sand dunes of the Grand Erg Oriental, the northernmost vanguard of the Sahara, welcome us.

Add in superb North African cuisine (think tagines, fresh fish, roasted vegetables, good wine and a plethora of French-style patisseries) and spacious, comfortable hotels, and Tunisia emerges as the perfect step just beyond Europe’s fringes for the exploring naturalist.

Cap Bon



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

Depart London; transfer to Hammamet

We will depart London on our direct flight to Tunis, in north Tunisia. On our arrival we will meet our local guide and driver and make a transfer to our very comfortable hotel in Hammamet. Depending on flight times, there may be a short window for exploration of local wetlands or woodlands.

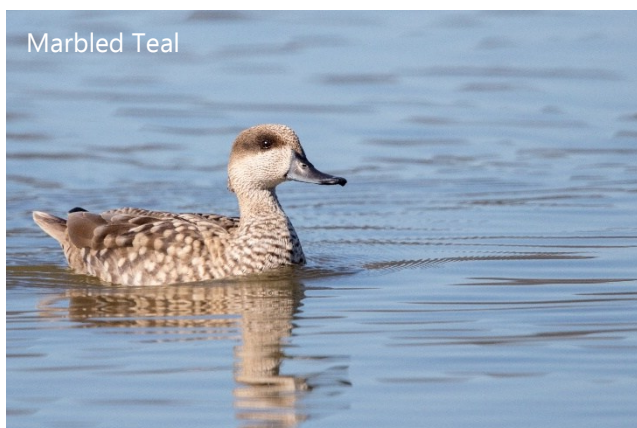
Overnight: Hammamet

Day 2

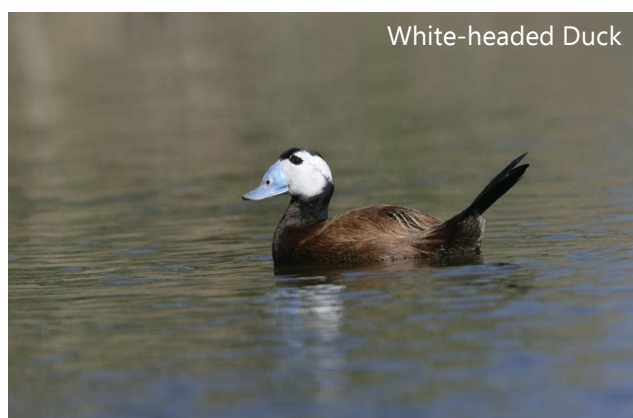
El Jem, Sfax & Thyna Saltpans

After an early breakfast, we will start with a visit to local wetlands, including Jedidi Reservoir and/or Oued Essoud, depending on local water levels. We will be looking for such excellent West Palearctic species as Marbled, White-headed and Ferruginous Ducks, Little Swift and African Blue Tit. Glossy Ibis, Western Swamphen and Western Cattle Egret will be present around various reed fringes and muddy margins, and migrant waders (including perhaps Marsh Sandpiper and Temminck's Stint) should be in evidence.

We will drive south along the coast past Sousse to the town of El Jem, where we will stop to investigate the remarkable Roman amphitheatre (the third largest intact example in the world) that stands huge and incongruous in the modern town.



Marbled Teal



White-headed Duck

We will continue to Sfax for lunch, and then spend the afternoon birdwatching at the vast Thyna Saltpans, where flocks of Greater Flamingo, Slender-billed Gull, Eurasian Spoonbill, egrets, Avocet and Black-winged Stilt will entertain us. Stone-curlew, Kentish Plover, Caspian and Whiskered Terns are likely, and almost any migrant wader is possible – plus many “yellow” Wagtails of different forms, and perhaps Red-throated Pipit. Wild Boar are plentiful and often observed here.

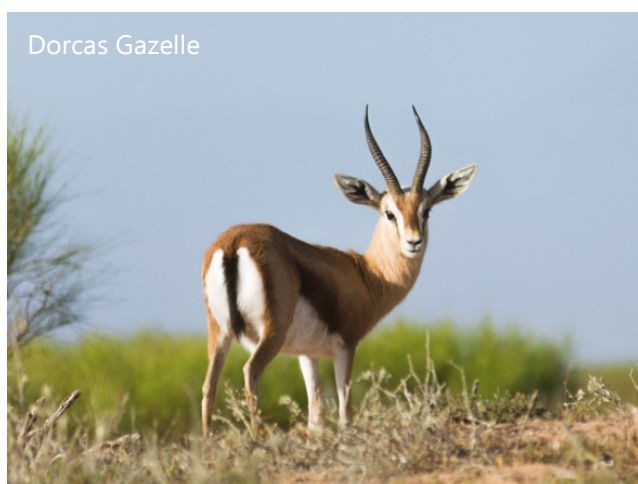
Overnight: Sfax

Day 3

Bouhedma National Park

Inland, to the south-west of Sfax, lie Tunisia's scenic steppes and savannahs. Reminiscent of East Africa, this landscape is a far cry from the breezy salt pans and mudflats of the Gulf of Gabes. After a morning drive inland to the 16,488-hectare Bou-Hedma National Park, we will transfer to 4x4 vehicles (for the next three days) and begin our exploration of the reserve.

Here we will be able to enjoy watching some of Tunisia's larger mammals, several of them successfully re-introduced since their extirpation in the region in the early/mid-twentieth century. Solitary Addax, herds of Scimitar-horned Oryx, and smaller numbers of Dorcas Gazelle all occur in the acacia-covered plains of Bouhedma, and we have a good chance of seeing these species. Ostrich have also been reintroduced and are thriving.



The magnificent backdrop created by the less accessible mountainous part of the park will please the photographers in our party. Here live small numbers of the rare and elusive Barbary Sheep, whilst amongst the rugged terrain at the base of the mountains lives the endearing Atlas Gundi. More elusive mammals (such as the African Golden Wolf and Striped Hyena) also occur, but we will need to be vigilant and lucky to find them.

Amongst the acacia scrub a variety of attractive bird species may be found: Black-bellied Sandgrouse, *elegans* Great Grey Shrikes, and Trumpeter Finch amongst others, and perhaps the North African endemic, Fulvous Babbler. Roosting Red-necked Nightjar is another realistic possibility. Migrants will likely be in evidence, with a chance of Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin, one or more species of subalpine warbler and Western Black-eared Wheatear, Western Orphean Warbler and Common Rock Thrush.

After a full day of birding and game viewing we will drive south, first across rugged terrain, then the mighty dry salt lake of the Chott el Djerid, to our hotel in Douz, for a two-night stay. European Scops Owl often breed in the palms by the hotel.

Overnight: Douz

Day 4

Dghoumes National Park

For many, the highlight of our tour will be the deserts of southern Tunisia, which we will explore over the next two days. We will start in the Dghoumès National Park, searching for such avian desert specialities as Cream-coloured Courser, Brown-necked Raven, African Desert Warbler, Desert Sparrow and Desert, Greater Hoopoe and Temminck's Larks. Sandgrouse and further Scimitar-horned Oryxes are also possibilities, whilst the Fennec Fox is an occasional nocturnal visitor.

According to historical sources, this was the last great refuge of the pre-Saharan population of African Elephants, and it was reputedly from this region that Hannibal and the Berber king Messinissa captured the elephants they needed for their wars. Today, a museum/information centre at our lunch spot sheds light on the interesting history of the region and its wildlife, and merits a visit. The return trip to Douz will take in some fresh and brackish wetlands, with chances of Ruddy Shelduck, Marbled and Ferruginous Ducks, migrant waders and passerines (such as Red-throated Pipit, warblers and up to six subspecies of "yellow" Wagtail!).

Overnight: Douz

Day 5

Deserts east of Douz, then Djerba

The first part of today will be spent exploring more oases, and the deserts east of Douz. Our exact itinerary will depend on recent rainfall and track conditions, but we shall explore a wide variety of different habitats during our visit: sandy dunes, stony deserts, scrub, and any sources of water, as such spots can also turn up a range of trans-Saharan migrants, such as Golden Oriole, Moltoni's Warbler, Western Orphean Warbler, Collared Flycatcher or Common Nightingale.



Desert Sparrow

Likely species in the vast arid landscapes include Desert Sparrow, Cream-coloured Courser, Greater Hoopoe, Temminck's, Desert, Bar-tailed and Thick-billed Larks, African Desert Warbler and Brown-necked Ravens. Other species we will search for include African Scrub-warbler and a plethora of wheatears: Red-rumped and White-crowned will be the stars of the show here, while we shall keep a close eye out for Maghreb Wheatear, recently split from Mourning Wheatear. Our time in the desert sadly at an end, we will drive east across dramatic, rocky scenery, with lunch at a wonderful mountain restaurant. We travel on to the coast and finally Djerba Island, connected to the mainland by a causeway originally built by the Romans. We will check in to our comfortable hotel on the island, ready for our early flight to Tunis tomorrow morning.

Overnight: Djerba

Day 6

Tunis, then Ichkeul National Park

After an early breakfast and domestic flight to Tunis, we will rejoin our minibus and driver and enjoy the scenic and varied habitats of Lake Ichkeul National Park, a beautiful and unspoiled reserve that protects wetlands of international importance. While of greatest international importance as a wintering site for wildfowl, Lake Ichkeul also acts as a crucial staging post for trans-Saharan migrants. Lake Ichkeul is highly unusual in having a variable salinity: winter rainfall supplies substantial freshwater content for much of the year, whilst its connection to the sea, via Lake Bizerte and the River Tinja, ensures that Lake Ichkeul never dries up, and that its salinity is greatly increased during the summer. This unusual situation is responsible for the interesting flora of the lake, which is such an important food source for so many of the waterbirds.

Lake Ichkeul National Park has the further attraction of a wide variety of habitats within its 12,600 hectares, and during our day spent in the park, we will walk in the scrub and woodland of Mount Ichkeul (511 metres). Here, Sardinian Warbler, Blue Rock Thrush, Barbary Partridge and Moussier's Redstart are some of the bird highlights to be found among the crags, wild olive and carob woodland and juniper/*Lentiscus* scrub. Botanists will also enjoy searching for various spring orchid species. We shall enjoy the pastures around the lake where egrets, herons and White Storks feed amongst the only feral Water Buffaloes in the Western Palearctic! At the water's edge we may find Spoonbills, Greater Flamingoes, and a variety of ducks and waders. With luck we may even find the resident Western Swampphen, and we shall be entertained by European Bee-eaters, and a range of butterflies. Our eyes will be on the skies too: birds of prey might include Long-legged ("Maghreb") Buzzard, Black-shouldered Kite, Lanner Falcon and Lesser Kestrel, among others.



In the afternoon, we head to Tunis, ready for our exploration tomorrow of some of the country's most famous cultural sites.

Overnight: Tunis

Day 7

Carthage and Bardo Museum

To make the most of our time in northern Tunisia, we begin with a morning exploring the remarkable archaeological remains of Carthage, one of the great cities of the ancient Mediterranean. Founded by the Phoenicians and later rebuilt by the Romans, the site contains a fascinating collection of monuments, baths, villas and harbours that testify to its rich and varied history. We will also visit the superb Bardo Museum, home to one of the world's finest collections of Roman mosaics and widely regarded as one of Tunisia's foremost cultural treasures.

After lunch, we will visit Sebkhet Sejoumi, an important wetland on the outskirts of Tunis. Depending on water levels and seasonal conditions, this site can support a variety of waterbirds, including Greater Flamingo, White-headed Duck and a selection of waders and other wetland species.

Later, we travel north-east along the coast to El Haouaria on the Cap Bon Peninsula. This strategically positioned headland lies at one of the principal migration bottlenecks in the central Mediterranean and is one of Tunisia's premier birdwatching locations. We will spend the next few days exploring the area, searching for migrating raptors, storks and a variety of other species as they make their way between Africa and Europe.

Overnight: Cap Bon

Day 8

Jebel El Haouaria (Cap Bon)

Eleonora's Falcon



This exciting day at Cap Bon (with very low mileage) will begin amongst the Sidi Ameur Hills where we will search for both migrant and resident birds: Moussier's Redstarts, African Chaffinch and many migrating warblers, flycatchers, and (with luck) Golden Orioles will reveal themselves to us. Soon enough, we will ascend to the top of the mountain at Jebel El Haouaria, where we hope to encounter hundreds of birds of prey and other large migrants as they make use of the thermals and migrate over this north-eastern tip of Tunisia and across the Strait of Sicily. Migration is heavily dependent on the local weather, both on the day and on the days before, but if we catch it right, we could witness thousands of birds migrating north to their summer breeding grounds.

Marsh Harriers will likely be the most numerous species, with all four European harrier species possible, followed by Long-legged ("Maghreb") Buzzard, Sparrowhawk, Black Kite, Booted and Short-toed Eagles, Lesser Kestrel, and Hobby. In 2023, we found a real rarity in the form of a Saker Falcon, our 16th raptor species at the site! Eleonora's Falcon is another

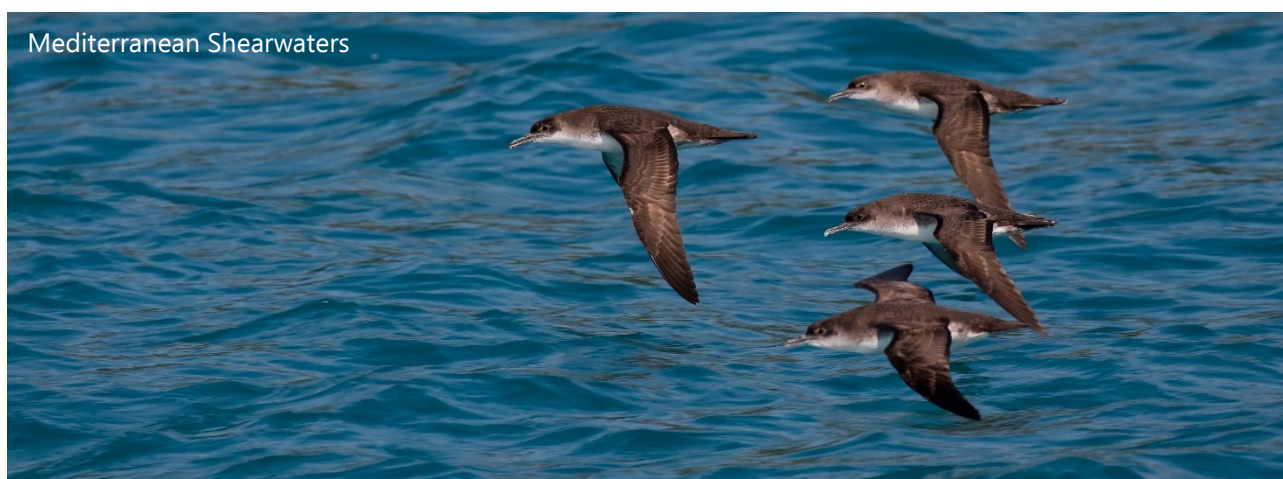
outside (but realistic) possibility. Both White and Black Storks are likely, and the large migrants should be supplemented by big numbers of hirundines and swifts, all heading north.

Overnight: Cap Bon

Day 9

Cap Bon Pelagic

After breakfast we will drive to El Haouaria's Harbour where we will undertake a boat trip in search of the seabirds of the Central Mediterranean. This will be an exciting morning venture as we search for both Mediterranean and Scopoli's Shearwaters, Audouin's Gulls and skuas, whilst we will hope to see large flocks of storks flying overhead, bound for Europe, and perhaps some more raptors making the crossing too. Bluefin Tuna and Ocean Sunfish are also possibilities, even though we shall never stray more than a few kilometres from land.



We shall spend a second afternoon on the Jebel El Haouaria, mopping up any 'missing' migrant raptors, and also enjoying the local flora, and perhaps Spur-thighed Tortoises.

Overnight: Cap Bon

Day 10

Local Wetlands, Sabkha Sulayman & Hammamet

On our final full day in Tunisia, our focus will again be on wetland habitats, both fresh and saline. We will explore a string of small lakes and barrages close to Cap Bon, looking out for Ferruginous Duck, Ruddy Shelduck, Garganey, migrant waders, Western Swamphen and other freshwater species. The low-intensity croplands nearby will offer Corn Buntings, Quail and other landbirds, too.

Our final major birding stop will be at the magnificent Sabkha Sulayman, a huge coastal inlet with water of various depths and degrees of salinity. The birding spectacle here can be amazing: Greater Flamingoes are abundant, and share the waters with extremely numerous Slender-billed Gulls, Black-winged Stilts and a whole range of other waders during migration season, including many in stunning summer plumage (Wood, Marsh and Curlew Sandpipers, Little Stint and Collared Pratincole are all likely). A range of terns,

migrant “yellow” Wagtails of various subspecies and the coastal *algeriensis* form of Great Grey Shrike will add further to the excitement. While Marbled and Ferruginous Ducks are also on the agenda, a real highlight at this site is the globally threatened White-headed Duck, which is very regular here.

Overnight: Hammamet

Day 11

Fly London

We will drive to Tunis airport after a leisurely breakfast and depart back to London.

Tour Grading

This is a grade A holiday, constituting a traditional birdwatching tour. We shall 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 Tunisia’s wetlands, estuaries, savannahs and deserts.

Weather

March and April are delightful months in which to visit Tunisia. At this time of year, spring is well under way, bringing comfortable temperatures, colourful landscapes and excellent conditions for both wildlife watching and sightseeing. We can generally expect plenty of sunshine, with daytime temperatures typically ranging between 60–75°F (15–24°C), although it may feel warmer in sheltered areas and in the south of the country.

Evenings and early mornings can be pleasantly cool, particularly in the desert and mountain regions, so a light fleece or jacket is recommended. Rain is possible, especially in northern Tunisia, but is usually limited to occasional showers, whilst the southern desert regions are generally warm, dry and sunny.

Overall, this is one of the most enjoyable times of year to explore Tunisia, combining comfortable weather with attractive spring scenery, excellent wildlife activity and ideal conditions for discovering the country's remarkable natural and cultural heritage.

Food & accommodation

Accommodation and all meals are included throughout this holiday. We use comfortable en suite hotels (generally the best available).

Extra expenses

Please note that we do not include the following in the cost of this holiday: airport taxes, and all items of a more personal nature such as drinks, laundry, souvenirs and tips.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this tour, you will need to read the Naturetrek brochure and booking conditions carefully and then complete and return a booking form (found in the back of the brochure or on our website, www.naturetrek.co.uk), together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, or should you have any questions about the tour, please call us on 01962 733051 or email info@naturetrek.co.uk