

# Wildlife of the Moroccan Sahara

Naturetrek Tour Report

16th – 23rd March 2026

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White-banded Sandfish



Desert Sparrow



Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse



Addaxes

Tour report by Martin Pitt

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Tour participants: Martin Pitt and Brahim El Barbouchi (leaders) with 11 Naturetrek clients

## Summary



Dorcas Gazelles and Erg Chigaga

The inaugural running of this tour was a wonderful introduction to the remote area around Erg Chigaga in the far south of Morocco. For the majority of the trip, we stayed at the Camp al Koutban on the eastern edge of the sand sea. The simple but comfortable and characterful setting gave us a wonderful opportunity to live in this extreme landscape, albeit with great food and while being well looked after by the retinue of Camp staff. Each day we set off to explore different aspects of the habitats and settings, from gravel plains and sandy bluffs, to oases, dried river beds, and salt flats. We also had a once on a lifetime opportunity to see the impact of rainfall on these parched lands, as overnight rains congregated in the dry river lines and the river grew from nothing to a bubbling torrent before our eyes.

Deserts are marked by low density and low diversity, but each type of habitat has its own special flora and fauna, and each species is highly adapted to the challenge. We found White-banded Sandfish, an almost legless lizard that lives with the dunes, Dorcas Gazelle, Addax and Ostrich, previously hunted to local extinction but now the subjects of reintroduction schemes and support to help them thrive across their former range. At the time of our visit, the reintroduction pens also held African Houbara and Dama Gazelle.

The Fennec Fox is high on everyone's wish list, and seeing one in broad daylight was a rare treat, bettering the normal fleeting glimpses of this enigmatic canid. The bird life included the residents such as Lanner Falcon, Desert Sparrow, three species of sandgrouse, and a mix of larks and wheatears. As expected, migrant species were seen passing through on their journeys northward, including two species of bee-eater, and a plethora of warblers, chats and hirundines. We did not ignore the long human history in this land. We visited the abandoned villages on the Drâa, visited a nomad family, and rode camels into the dunes.

We connected with many of specialties, recording a total of 68 species of birds, together with six species of mammals, and five species of reptiles. The weather was warm rather than hot, but the rain was unexpected, and high winds and the resulting afternoon duststorms, made for challenging viewing conditions. Overall, we had a memorable week being shown the wonders of this area by Brahim, who was born here and has a deep insight into the wildlife of this dramatic environment. Everyone came away with a sense of privilege of having been able to experience the desert first hand, and took away with them a host of memories.

## Day 1

Monday 16th March

### Agadir to Foug Zgoud

The group arrived on time and soon cleared passport control, and we met up with our driver Said, before waiting for the final member of the group who arrived on the Manchester flight. Fortunately, that flight was slightly early, so we quickly loaded up the minibus and embarked on the long transfer to Foug Zgoud on the edge of the Sahara. The journey was long, and we initially crossed the Souss Valley, seeing our first Maghreb Magpies. We saw where the commercial agriculture gave way to Argan forest, and then passed through the saffron growing area around Talioine and Tinfat. We climbed onto the high, arid steppe, before stopping at Tazenacht for mint tea and a comfort break. We then headed south for the final run through the Anti-Atlas Mountains, and down to Foug Zgoud. Here, our comfortable hotel, Bab Rimal was waiting for us, and we arrived just after the sun had set.

We enjoyed our first taste of Moroccan cuisine seated in the warm night air on the hotel terrace, before heading off for an early night to prepare for the transfer to the camp the following day.

## Day 2

Tuesday 17th March

### Foug Zgoud to Camp al Koutban

A few hardy souls explored the hotel grounds before breakfast, and in among the expected House Buntings and Laughing Doves were a mix of resident White-crowned Wheatears and migrant Western Olivaceous and Western Subalpine Warblers. We then breakfasted, and Said was ready to drive us the short distance to the desert edge, where we transferred to our fleet of four Toyota Prados that were to be our transport for our time at Camp al Koutban. We met Brahim, our local guide for our time in the desert.

Before leaving the pickup point, we were introduced to our first true southern species, with singing Desert Larks, and the Maghreb Larks. We headed due south, initially crossing areas of stony desert flanked by heavily weathered bluffs. Although the distance was no more than ninety kilometres, we knew that the journey would be a minimum of three hours, and longer if we stopped for sightings and photo opportunities. Our first real stop was a natural oasis with palms, which was clearly a focal point for activity. We found it alive with our first Woodchat Shrikes and a mix of warblers including both Common and Iberian Chiffchaffs, Sardinian and Western Subalpine Warblers and, best of all, a male Tristram's Warbler. The oasis also held a party of Trumpeter Finches coming to drink, and both Blue Rock Thrush and a lovely male Common Redstart. Too soon, we had to push, on but we stopped for a roadside wheatear which turned out to be a pristine male Western Black-eared. Time was pushing on, and as we headed south the landscape became sandier. We made a final stop at an area of low, well vegetated dunes covered in Halfa grass. An immediate find was a party of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, but despite searching we only managed to add some more Desert Larks in this promising-looking habitat

We crossed the lake bed, and then at last the dunes of Erg Chigaga came into view. Shortly afterwards we arrived at our home for the next five days: Camp al Koutban. We were introduced to Emily, and after a delicious lunch we headed into the dunes for a short, but dramatic walk before sunset. The red sand dunes form one of only two ergs (sand seas) in Morocco, and this one is over forty kilometres long and up to eighteen kilometres wide, and reaches over 300m at the highest point. Before we left the camp, we had seen plentiful Desert Sparrows, White-

crowned Wheatears and Brown-necked Ravens. On one of the dune faces, Brahim pointed out the trail of a White-banded Sandfish, a highly-adapted almost legless skink, and its head could be seen peering at us. Brahim proceeded to catch the sandfish so that everyone could see how it was adapted to life 'swimming' through the sand.

It had clouded over and the wind had started to pick up, meaning the hoped-for sunset would be compromised, so we returned to camp for dinner. At this point the rains began (the first since January 18th), and we hoped that the following day would be unaffected.

## Day 3

## Wednesday 18th March

### Halfway Tree and Daya

We had a fairly relaxed start to the day. However, the tales of rain and wind overnight suggested that the rainfall had been more extensive and/or intense than expected. Brahim went out early and reported back that the wadi was now flooded, so we modified our plans to walk out from camp towards the Halfway Tree and then return for lunch, rather than having a picnic. It was clear that bird movement was in progress, and we soon found the migration stalwarts: Western Subalpine Warbler, Woodchat Shrike and Blue-cheeked Bee-eater. As we crossed the landscape of sand and scattered Sodom's Apples, we started finding additional species: a party of Greater Short-toed Larks, Iberian and Common Chiffchaffs, Willow Warblers and overhead a mix of hirundines. It became clear that another wadi was starting to flood, and we walked over to see, finding the leading edge of the flood as it headed on its route to the north and the Iriki lake bed we had crossed the day before.

We watched as the dry river was transformed into a flowing river, the inextricable march sweeping up vegetation and animals in its path. We watched a gerbil (later identified as a Lesser Egyptian Gerbil) being swept into the river and escaping to cower in the river side bushes: nearly a drowned (desert) rat. Migrant birds were more adept at taking advantage of the new opportunities on offer: a Bluethroat was found hopping on a newly-formed island and Yellow Wagtails were feeding on disturbed invertebrates. A party of Cream-colored Coursers flew over, no doubt wondering what was happening to their home.

We walked back to camp and had a relaxed lunch. At 4.00pm we headed out to an area by Daya, around thirty minutes by Land Cruiser from camp. We left the dunes behind and crossed another area of dry lake bed, where we stopped for a party of five Cream-colored Coursers, probably including the birds we saw in the morning. This time, however, they were reluctant to fly, but rapidly ran in the opposite direction.

We added a Greater Hoopoe-Lark, and then stopped on the edge of the water course, further upstream from the morning's walk, where the stony desert met the valley, and where the landscape was dotted with flat-topped acacias.

Brahim confirmed that this was one of the sandgrouse drinking areas; however, the water level was high and our timing was wrong. We disturbed a pair of Dorcas Gazelles, and they showed well before they sat down in a line of vegetation, probably preparing for the night ahead. We returned to camp for another great meal, and although it was windy, the dry night meant that the camp fire was lit and the local music was enjoyed.

## Day 4

Thursday 19th March

### Daya, Erg Smar and Oued Drâa

We made an earlier start today, with coffee at 7.00am, and we piled into the Land Cruisers to return to the drinking pools in the hope of seeing the morning flight of the sandgrouse. Before we were on station, we found more Dorcas Gazelles, initially three adults and a fawn, and then two further adults, the latter most likely the same pair as the previous night.

We arrived at the drinking area, and although it was too early for sandgrouse, there were a few birds around to keep us occupied while we waited. Woodchat Shrikes were plentiful and a party of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters was also obvious. The bushes held a few warblers, including our first Western Bonelli's and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers. As the day warmed, calling North African Water Frogs could be heard croaking from the floodwaters, and a few were seen warming themselves on the banks

At the allotted time, we suddenly heard the unmistakable sound of incoming sandgrouse. Four Crowned Sandgrouse landed short of the water on the gravel hillside, and we were able to scope them. Over the next half hour, both Crowned and Spotted Sandgrouse flew past calling, but the recent flood meant that they chose to drink just out of sight. Happy, we packed up to return to camp, just as a Lanner Falcon flew in, briefly perching on a nearby hillock and then disappearing.

After a substantial breakfast, we loaded the Land Cruisers and headed south, targeting the area around Erg Smar on the course of the Drâa river itself. This would be the most southerly point reached on our visit. During the journey, we noticed a movement of Common Swifts, heading for Europe and obviously using the Drâa as a flyway. The sandy hummocks here also were home to Dumeril's Fringe-toed Lizards.

We stopped at one of the last operating farms in the area: the remainder were abandoned in the 1980s following the completion of the Barrage de Mansoor Al Eddhabi, near Ouarzazate, which reduced the natural river flow. The well-irrigated fields were a magnet to migrant birds, and before our picnic we found many species including a stunning male Common Redstart, and new species in Western Orphean Warbler and Tree Pipit.

We ate our lunch under a courtyard canopy: an elaborate presentation for a supposed picnic. After this, we walked back along the course of the Drâa itself, although here it is just a sandy pathway through the desert, lined by Tamarisk trees. A well hinted that at least some residual water continued to flow beneath the surface. We visited the remaining mud brick structures, and then continued back to the main track, our path being crossed by a family party of Fulvous Babbler. These birds are cooperative breeders: the previous year's young assist their parents in raising this year's chicks.

By now the wind was picking up, and we headed back to camp for another delicious dinner. News came through that no-one could get through to Foug Zgoud, so another route was discussed and a plan formulated. Later, Hussain the camp manager found a hedgehog close to camp, and those who had not gone to bed were treated with close view of a Desert Hedgehog, showing its distinctive black face and feet.

## Day 5

Friday 20th March

### Al Gouera

After another early start with coffee and a light breakfast at 7.00am, we headed east in the direction of M'hamif. As we crossed the stony plains, we found another Lanner Falcon; however, it was a Fennec Fox that stopped the convoy in its tracks. We got out and watched as the fox crested a rise, dodged in the opposite direction and then reached the apex of the hill and disappeared. What a wonderful start to the day!

We drove on eastward. A short walk when we had stopped for European Bee-eaters yielded little more, but the next stop at a well was more productive. A trekking party came in to water their camels: a timeless scene. Following the camels was a group of four Ostriches, the males fanning their wings at the lone female. On the surrounding plain, a number of Greater Hoopoe-Larks were soon found: they gave great views and photo opportunities. At that point, a Lanner Falcon suddenly piled in, targeting the larks, but missed: a confusion of birds and feathers followed.

Already the wind was picking up, so we headed further east, following a well-vegetated wadi with small rolling dunes. White lumps resolved themselves into a party of eight grazing Addaxes, most standing and sitting with their backs to the wind, and totally unfazed by our presence. After talking our fill of these graceful antelopes, we turned north and had our picnic in a grove of acacias. The wind made life difficult, but we also spent a little while tracking a family party of Fulvous Babbblers through the trees. As the duststorm got more intense, we headed to the animal release pens. The African Houbara pen was full of birds ready for release, but the gazelle pens were empty, except for a party of eight Dama Gazelles. This heavily desert-adapted species is Critically Endangered and is not yet part of the large ungulate release programme. Perhaps there is still hope for the species.



Common Ostriches

The duststorm continued to rage as we continued back to camp, where we sheltered and took dinner. After dark, the wind has dropped enough to go out with our torches, and Brahim guided us through the area close to camp. Although Lesser Egyptian Gerbils were common, we failed to find anything else.

We decided that we would have to leave via M'hamid when the time came, a decision that would add two or three hours to the transfer back to Taroudant.

## Day 6

## Saturday 21st March

### La Oasis Sacré

We had a more relaxed start to the day, as it started bright and calm, but with the same forecast of afternoon winds that had plagued us since we had arrived in the desert. We headed east, keeping a more northerly line across the black stone plain. We stopped a couple of times, first at a wadi line where a single female Spotted Sandgrouse came to drink, and was joined by Maghreb Lark, and Northern and Western Black-eared Wheatears, and then second on the plain itself, for a couple of migrating Booted Eagles. Soon enough, we dropped off the plain into Oasis Sacre, a desert spring which, among other benefits, provided the water for our camp. A large flock of European Bee-eaters greeted our arrival, but more excitingly a pair of Lanner Falcons seemed set on catching them. One had already passed through, scattering the birds from their perches, and a second made repeated passes, unsuccessfully trying to pick off the now flying birds, hindered by the lack of any element of surprise.

We parked and wandered around the small pool at the centre of the oasis: the water was home to a plethora of North African Water Frogs. The surrounding vegetation was popular with a few Common Bulbuls, the first we had seen since leaving Foug Zgoud, the ubiquitous White-crowned Wheatears, and a mix of migrants including Common Redstart, Bluethroat, Nightingale and Western Orphean Warbler. We then walked further down the wadi line to a nomad encampment, catching sight of a Small-spotted Lizard on the way. Here, Hera cooked us a traditional sand-baked loaf. While we were waiting for this to prove and cook, we explored the smallholding, and while chasing some goats, Adam flushed four sandgrouse. These were eventually tracked down, perfectly camouflaged, and gave us stunning views.



Camel ride in Erg Chigaga

All that remained was for us to cross the stony plains, in increasingly windy conditions, and return to camp for our late lunch. The wind was blowing hard, and we all sheltered, hoping it would drop. However, it continued to blow, and we even had a few showers thrown in. Nevertheless, our camels arrived at 5.00pm, and we headed out to the tallest dune in Erg Chigaga. The camels could only go so far, before we made the remainder of the climb on foot. The effort was worth it, for the sight of dunes as far as the eye could see while the setting sun played shadows across the vista. We headed back for our last dinner in camp.

## Day 7

## Sunday 22nd March

### Long drive to Taroudant

This was our final morning, and we made an early start with bags out and a quick breakfast at 7.00am. The clocks had changed back at Eid, so we had effectively lost an hour overnight: it was only just getting light. The first stage was a cross-desert sixty-kilometre dash to M'hamid. Along the way, we saw bee-eaters and a party of eight Black Kites using the same migration route. We hit tarmac by 9.30am, and there transferred to a minibus. After a comfort break and saying goodbye to our drivers, who had looked after us so well over the last few days, we pressed on.

The next stage was to head up the Drâa valley, a land of kasbahs and palmeries, through Zagora; we stopped before Agdz for a drink, lunch and a comfort break. At Agdz, we turned westwards, and by 3.00pm we had joined the road over the Anti-Atlas which we would have travelled on our original route. A couple of brief stops found some interesting species: 'ordinary' Crested Larks of the subspecies *riggenbachi*, Black Wheatears, a male Blue Rock Thrush and a few butterflies, including Greenish Black-tip and that iconic species of the Souss, Painted Lady. The only good thing was that the roads were very quiet; at last, we dropped into the Sous Valley for the final hour's run to the ancient city of Taroudant. We checked into our characterful hotel, a riad within the city walls. We enjoyed our last evening meal together, before turning in for the night, our sleep being disturbed by a massive thunderstorm.

## Day 8

## Monday 23rd March

### Journey home

With a flight in the early afternoon, we had a relaxed start to the day. Breakfast was around 8.00am, and some had a quick walk around the city, while others sat on the roof terrace watching Pallid and Little Swifts, and a flock of European Bee-eaters in the shadow of the by now snow-covered High Atlas to our north.

We left the hotel at 10.00am for the relatively short drive to the airport, and then headed on to our various destinations.

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## Species lists

Birds (H=heard only)

I = introduced	Common name	Scientific name	March 2026							
			16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
	Common Ostrich - I	<i>Struthio camelus camelus</i>					✓		✓	
	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>			✓	✓				
	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>							✓	✓
	Little Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>								✓
	Spotted Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles senegallus</i>				✓		✓		
	Crowned Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles coronatus</i>				✓				
	Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles lichtensteinii</i>						✓		
	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Laughing Dove	<i>Spilopelia senegalensis</i>		✓					✓	
	Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>		✓						
	Cream-colored Courser	<i>Cursorius cursor</i>		✓	✓					
	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>							✓	
	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	✓							
	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>					✓	✓		
	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>				✓				
	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>					✓			
	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>					✓		✓	
	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>			✓				✓	
	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>			✓		✓			
	Blue-cheeked Bee-eater	<i>Merops persicus</i>		✓	✓	✓				
	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Lanner Falcon	<i>Falco biarmicus</i>				✓	✓	✓		
	(Saharan) Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor elegans</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓			
	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Maghreb Magpie	<i>Pica mauritanica</i>	✓							✓
	Brown-necked Raven	<i>Corvus ruficollis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Greater Hoopoe-Lark	<i>Alaemon alaudipes</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Desert Lark	<i>Ammomanes deserti</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓		
	(Atlas) Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata riggenbachi</i>							✓	
	Maghreb Lark	<i>Galerida macrorhyncha</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Temminck's Lark	<i>Eremophila bilopha</i>					✓			
	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>			✓	✓				
	Common Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓
	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>				✓				
	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	✓							
	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Western House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
	Western Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>				✓	✓			
	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>			✓			✓		
	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓		
	Eastern Olivaceous Warbler	<i>Iduna pallida</i>				✓				
	Western Olivaceous Warbler	<i>Iduna opaca</i>		✓						
	Western Orphean Warbler	<i>Curruca hortensis</i>				✓		✓		

I = introduced		March 2026							
Common name	Scientific name	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
Tristram's Warbler	<i>Curruca deserticola</i>		✓						
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>		✓						
Western Subalpine Warbler	<i>Curruca iberiae</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Spectacled Warbler	<i>Curruca conspicillata</i>			✓					
Fulvous Babbler	<i>Argya fulva</i>				✓	✓	✓		
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓						✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>							✓	✓
Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>						✓		
Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>			✓			✓		
Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>		✓	✓	✓				
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		✓					✓	
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			✓	✓		✓		
Desert Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓		
Western Black-eared Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
White-crowned Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>							✓	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Desert Sparrow	<i>Passer simplex</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>			✓	✓				
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>			✓	✓			✓	
Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>				✓				
Trumpeter Finch	<i>Bucanetes githagineus</i>		✓		✓				
House Bunting	<i>Emberiza sahari</i>		✓				✓	✓	✓

## Mammals

I = introduced		March 2026							
Common name	Scientific name	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
Lesser Egyptian Gerbil	<i>Gerbillus gerbillus</i>			✓		✓			
Desert Hedgehog	<i>Paraechinus aethiopicus</i>				✓				
Fennec Fox	<i>Vulpes zerda</i>					✓			
Dorcas Gazelle	<i>Gazella dorcas</i>			✓	✓				
Dama Gazelle - I	<i>Nanger dama</i>					✓			
Addax - I	<i>Addax nasomaculatus</i>					✓			

## Amphibians &amp; reptiles

		March 2026							
Common name	Scientific name	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
North African Water Frog	<i>Pelophylax saharicus</i>			✓			✓		
White-banded Sandfish	<i>Scincus albifasciatus</i>		✓						
Dumeril's Fringe-toed Lizard	<i>Acanthodactylus dumerilii</i>		✓		✓				
Small-spotted Lizard	<i>Mesalina guttulata</i>						✓		
Sudan Spiny-tailed Agama	<i>Uromastyx dispar</i>		✓						

## Other species

Common name	Scientific name	March 2026							
		16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
<b>Dragonflies</b>									
Vagrant Emperor	<i>Anax ephippiger</i>				✓	✓	✓		
<b>Grasshoppers</b>									
Moroccan Locust	<i>Dociostaurus maroccanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
<b>Butterflies</b>									
Greenish Black-tip	<i>Euchloe charlonia</i>							✓	
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>							✓	