

Tunisia – Winter Sun Birding

Naturetrek Tour Report

14th - 18th January 2025



Maghreb Wheatear



Desert Sparrow



Thick-billed Lark



Red-rumped Wheatear

Tour report and images by Martin Pitt



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Martin Pitt (leader) plus local guides and drivers with five Naturetrek clients



Introduction

Naturetrek's trip to Tunisia – Winter Sun Birding was focused on the desert south of the country and the special birds of this normally hot and arid land. The circuit from the island of Djerba took us the rocky oueds, the sandy plains and the mountains that form a diverse set of habitats in this starkly beautiful landscape. We also took in the palm oasis of Ksar Ghilane on the edge of the sand sea and the coastal areas in the shallow seas of the Gulf of Gabes.

We arrived to the wettest and coldest winter in 20 years and the weather was extremely changeable throughout, giving the one-in-a-lifetime experience of frost covered sand dunes and oueds strewn with new growth and flowering plants. It made the viewing conditions challenging but in all we successfully managed to find many of the local specialities including many of the desert wheatears and larks together with Trumpeter Finches, Tristram's Warblers and Brown-necked Ravens that call these southern arid areas home.

Overall we recorded 89 species of birds and four species of mammal. The highlight was an African Golden Wolf, that showed all too briefly. We also found the localised Common Gundi, a species of rodent that has no equivalent in Europe and is surprisingly agile for such a dumpy creature. Overall, it was a great introduction to the Maghreb Sahara even if the weather failed to live up to its billing.

Day 1

Tuesday 14th January

Flight – Luton to Djerba

Flight left exactly on time with only 45 passengers for the 3hr 15 min flight to Djerba. We could see the snow-capped Alps as we crossed over France, then over Sardinia, arriving into Djerba ahead of schedule. Passport control was quick but we got stuck with the importation of binoculars where our permits seemed initially to confuse rather than smooth our way. It was soon sorted and with our passports we returned headed to our comfortable hotel a short drive away

Day 2

Wednesday 15th January

Tataouine, PN Oued Edkoug and Zammour

After our buffet breakfast we left the hotel at 7.30am and headed south in the direction of Tataouine. We crossed the causeway that joins the island to the mainland where Flamingoes, White Storks and egrets were roadside birds. After a comfort stop in Tataouine, we continued to P.N. Oued Edkoug.



The park is at the centre of the reintroduction of large ungulates to Southern Tunisia and over the last twenty years they have focused on Aoudad (Barbary Sheep), Dorcas Gazelle and Scimitar-horned Oryx and have free ranging herds of each. Initially all seemed quiet. After chasing down a Tristram's Warbler, things picked up with a flock of Trumpeter Finches, then Red-rumped Wheatear and White-crowned Wheatear.

We stopped for the herd of Aoudad and realised that the area attracted larks. Key amongst these were a party of nine Thick-billed and a couple of Bar-tailed Larks. We

also noted three Dorcas gazelles keeping their distance.

We were offered drinks and a snack by the park staff and then headed into the surrounding hills. Our picnic spot was overlooking another Oued washout that, after the winter rains was alive with flowering plants and a few butterflies including Painted Ladies. The surrounding hills held Bonelli's Eagle and the Atlas form of Long-legged Buzzard, whilst we tracked a few birds including Maghreb Wheatear, Thekla's and Desert Larks through the flower strewn abandoned agricultural fields.

We tried a few more stops finding odd new species such as Blue Rock Thrush & Black Wheatear, but numbers were low and with the sun starting to set we headed to our hotel for the next couple of nights at Zammour. Our progress was interrupted by a brief sighting of Golden Wolf by one of the cars, but we couldn't find it once we had stopped. Night in the cave hotel at Zammour.

Day 3

Thursday 16th January

Zammour, Ksar Ghilane and Guermassa

A short before breakfast stroll gave views over the rocky desert edge around Zammour and added both Hoopoe and Serin to our list. After a clear night it was chilly, a point reinforced at our first stop post-breakfast where the dunes were speckled with frost.

We kept our eyes open for activity as we headed west. The next stop was at a nomad encampment where the supplementary feeding of the sheep and goats was attracting plenty of larks. Temminck's were by far the commonest species and they were unconcerned by our approach. We soon realised more were around, with Thick-billed being common, Mediterranean Short-toed plentiful and even a few Calandra in the mix. Other opportune

stops added a mix of wheatears with Black, White-crowned and Maghreb following in short order. We headed further west to an Oued that was verdant following the winter rains. A walk here added more desert specials, the eponymous Desert Wheatear and Desert Sparrow and our first Hoopoe Lark. The small bushes held a few skittish warblers and we managed to identify Tristram's and Spectacled amongst the ubiquitous Chiffchaff.

We headed south to a man-made hot spring where more larks were present but also our first waders - Kentish Plovers and a tag along Little Stint, both seeming incongruous in the desert landscape. Pushing on south we stopped at the palm filled Ksar Ghilane Oasis, where we had lunch and watched Desert Sparrows gorging on the unpicked dates.



After lunch we headed back east towards Guermassa on a desert road. Our first surprise was a 12 strong flock of Eurasian Dotterel, perfectly camouflaged on the stony plain. We stopped and searching the area gave us better views of Hoopoe Lark and a few other species but we continued on. Unfortunately, soon afterwards the threatened rain arrived and although we tried to find the elusive Houbara the conditions were against us. After a cafe stop, we called it a day and headed back to the hotel.

Day 4

Friday 17th January

Matmata, Zarat and Boughrara

The rain stopped overnight but the biting wind had built up and it was clear this was going to keep activity low. We headed to the troglodyte village at Beni Kheddache and soon found lots of House Buntings that had been strangely missing to that point. We moved on to a mountain wadi that was a known wintering site of Marmora's Warbler but the wind kept everything hunkered out of sight and we came away with merely a sighting of Common Gundi, a strange Hyrax-like rodent, for our efforts.

We changed course and headed to the coast with the first stop at Zarat plage and our first taste of the sea. Slender-billed Gulls were plentiful and offshore Gannets dived for food, but as the birds were mainly distant we moved on. Our picnic was had within the shelter of a local cafe - not sure what the locals thought of these strange interlopers!



Boughrara foreshore

We then headed to Boughrara where the birds were both close-by and numerous. Lots of egrets, Spoonbills, Flamingoes took top billing, as did the constant fly-bys by Caspian Terns. By the fishing jetty groups of Black-necked and Great Crested Grebes bobbed on the sea at close range. All the time, the flocks of birds were spooked and shuffled by passing Marsh Harriers.

We then moved onto Djerba Island itself, stopping at the water balancing ponds where familiar wildfowl such as Shelduck, Wigeon & Shoveler were plentiful and we watched clouds of thousands of Mediterranean Gulls gather to roost. As the sun set, we headed back to our initial hotel on Djerba and prepared for the final night together.

Day 5

Saturday 18th January

Djerba Island

By 8am, we were breakfasted and packed and for our last day the plan was to circumnavigate Djerba Island stopping to bird as we went. The day was bright and sunny, even if the nagging cool wind had not disappeared entirely, and we would be focusing on the waterbirds, but hoping that some land birds could be picked up along the way.

The sea around the island is shallow and our first stop set the tone with Flamingoes & Slender-billed Gulls just offshore, a fly-by Gull-billed Tern and a flock of Skylark in the stubble of the nearby fields. We continued along the coast, adding a mix of herons and egrets to our lists and finding the first waders. Greenshank would be the norm for the rest of the day but the five Golden Plover were a surprise.

Moving on, we tried the island's east coast, and the exposed seas had been whipped up by the recent winds. A small estuary was full of birds driven by the rising tide. Kentish Plovers and Dunlin were common, and as the tide rose, they were joined by our first Redshank, Whimbrel and Turnstone. The tide also brought in some terns. The obvious Caspians were soon joined by a party of Sandwich and a single Common Tern. However, it was a Kingfisher that fished from the moored boats that kept our attention.

Moving further on we tried to head to Flamingo Island, but were thwarted by the washed away road. The water here was exceptionally shallow, our perception being distorted by seeing Black-necked Grebes fishing off shore, however beyond them the Great Egrets were still wading with ease. Birds were plentiful but we struggled to find anything different. The darvic-ringed Flamingoes showed that birds from both Sardinia and France had come over to winter here.

We had our last ‘picnic’ in a local cafe where time-honoured thanks were proffered to the local team. After lunch we continued on along the coast finding a lone Great Black-backed Gull amongst the flocks and ending close to our starting point. We cut inland through the small fields and ancient olive trees. On a rocky pile we found a sandy coloured Little Owl that seemed very relaxed and gave great views to all. With that we had time for a final coffee before heading up to the airport and checking in for the trip back to Luton.



Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Social Media

We're social! Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and be the first to hear about the launch of new tours, offers and exciting sightings and photos from our recently returned holidays.



www.facebook.com/naturetrekwildlifeholidays



www.twitter.com/naturetrektours



www.instagram.com/naturetrek_wildlife_holidays

Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

I=Introduced		January 2025			
Common name	Scientific name	15	16	17	18
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>			✓	
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>			✓	
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>			✓	
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>			✓	
Feral Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia 'domestica'</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Laughing Dove	<i>Spilopelia senegalensis</i>	✓		✓	✓
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			✓	
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			✓	✓
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>			✓	✓
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	✓		✓	✓
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>			✓	✓
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>			✓	✓
Eurasian Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>				✓
Eurasian Dotterel	<i>Eudromias morinellus</i>		✓		
Kentish Plover	<i>Anarhynchus alexandrinus</i>		✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>				✓
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			✓	✓
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				✓
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			✓	✓
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				✓
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>			✓	✓
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			✓	✓
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>		✓		
Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>			✓	
Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>				✓
Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>			✓	✓
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>				✓
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>			✓	✓
Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>			✓	✓
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>			✓	✓
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>			✓	✓
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓		✓	✓
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>				✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓	✓
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓			
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓		✓	✓
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>			✓	✓
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓		✓	✓
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓		✓	✓
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Ardea ibis</i>			✓	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓		✓	✓
Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>	✓			
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			✓	

I=Introduced		January 2025			
Common name	Scientific name	15	16	17	18
Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>				✓
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		✓	✓	✓
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>				✓
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Brown-necked Raven	<i>Corvus ruficollis</i>	✓	✓		
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			✓	✓
Greater Hoopoe-Lark	<i>Alaemon alaudipes</i>		✓		
Thick-billed Lark	<i>Ramphocoris clotbey</i>	✓	✓		
Desert Lark	<i>Ammomanes deserti</i>	✓	✓		
Bar-tailed Lark	<i>Ammomanes cinctura</i>	✓			
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>				✓
Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>	✓	✓	✓	
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Temminck's Lark	<i>Eremophila bilopha</i>		✓		
Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>		✓		
Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		✓		
Mediterranean Short-toed Lark	<i>Alaudala rufescens</i>		✓		
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓			
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓	✓	
Tristram's Warbler	<i>Curruca deserticola</i>	✓	✓		
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>		H		
Spectacled Warbler	<i>Curruca conspicillata</i>		✓		
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>			✓	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓			
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>	✓			
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓		✓	✓
Desert Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>		✓		
Red-rumped Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe moesta</i>	✓			
Maghreb Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe halophila</i>	✓	✓		
White-crowned Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i>	✓	✓		
Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>	✓	✓	✓	
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Desert Sparrow	<i>Passer simplex</i>		✓		
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			✓	✓
Red-throated Pipit	<i>Anthus cervinus</i>			H	
Trumpeter Finch	<i>Bucanetes githagineus</i>	✓			
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓		
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		✓	✓	
House Bunting	<i>Emberiza sahari</i>			✓	
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			✓	

Others

Common name	Scientific name	January 2025			
		15	16	17	18
Mammals					
Common Gundi	<i>Ctenodactylus gundi</i>			✓	
Dorcas Gazelle	<i>Gazella dorcas</i>	✓			
Aoudad	<i>Ammotragus lervia</i>	✓			
African Golden Wolf	<i>Canis lupaster</i>	✓			
Others					
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>	✓			✓
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>	✓	✓		✓
Striped Hawk-moth	<i>Hyles livornica</i>		✓		
Crimson Speckled	<i>Utetheisa pulchella</i>	✓			
Yellow Scorpion	<i>Androctonus sp</i>	✓	•		