Morocco

Atlas to Sahara in Winter

16th February to 26th February 2024 (11 days)



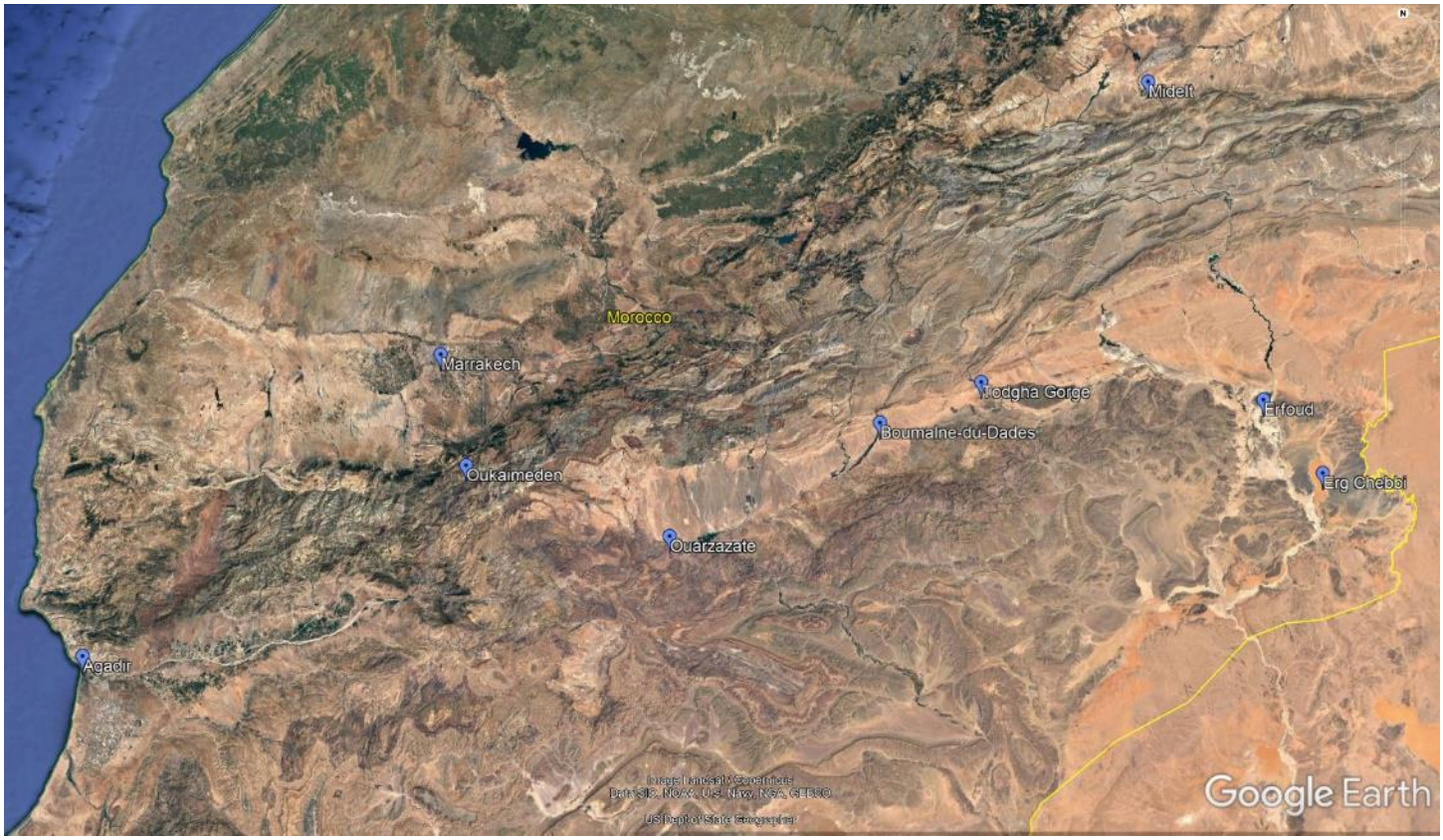
Northern Bald Ibis by Adam Riley

Morocco, with its breath-taking scenery, delicious food, rich history, and fabulous birding, is an essential destination for all birders and travellers. As an independent country after French rule, few Muslim countries offer the combination of such a friendly atmosphere complimented with strong cultural beliefs and few restrictions on visitors. Interesting habitats are found in the various geo-physical regions and vary from the high snow-covered Atlas Mountains and low-lying woodlands to scrub-covered gravel plains, vegetated wadis, and the red sand dunes of the great Sahara Desert.

Cities and towns bustle with activity, where mud-walled buildings line souks (long narrow alleyways) that are filled with bazaars selling carpets and crafts, and laden with exotic spices. What's more, Morocco is also home to numerous special birds and several North African endemics including the beautiful Moussier's Redstart, Tristram's Warbler, Barbary Partridge, Levaillant's Woodpecker, Fulvous Babbler, African Blue Tit and African Crimson-winged Finch. One of our many target species is the Northern Bald Ibis or Waldrapp, one of the world's most endangered bird. We also embark on a pelagic trip off Agadir (weather dependent) to see the critically endangered Balearic Shearwater and other exciting oceanic and coastal species before heading into central and eastern Morocco. Our time on the stony, gravel plains and sandy deserts are likely to be rewarded with the magnificent Pharaoh Eagle-Owl, the dainty Cream-colored Courser, up to four species of sandgrouse, Desert Sparrow, African Desert Warbler, and numerous larks, including Greater Hoopoe-Lark, as well as Temminck's, Maghreb and Thick-billed Larks and the Western Palearctic's most difficult species Dupont's Lark.

Itinerary & Map

Day 1	**Marrakech to Oukaimeden**
Day 2	**Oukaimeden to Agadir via Tizi n'Test Pass**
Day 3	**Pelagic off Agadir & Tamri**
Day 4	**Oued Massa & Oued Souss**
Day 5	**Agadir to Boumalne-du-Dades**
Day 6	**Tagdilt Track & Dades Gorge**
Day 7	**Boumalne-du-Dades to Midelt via Todgha Gorge**
Day 8	**Midelt to Erfoud**
Day 9	**Erg Chebbi & Merzouga**
Day 10	**Erfoud to Quarzazate**
Day 11	**Ouarzazate to Marrakech, final departure**



Birding sites in detail



Moussier's Redstart by David Hoddinott

Ourika Valley & Oukaimeden ski resort. Situated at an elevation of 2 600m in the High Atlas, Oukaimeden is a popular ski resort surrounded by snow-capped mountains and conifer-covered slopes. As we travel up the High Atlas Mountains, the road winds through impressive scenic passes and we will be treated to breathtaking and dramatic views of the surrounding valleys and quaint villages perched atop steep slopes. En route we will enjoy some birding stops, the first of which will give us a chance of the unique Moroccan subspecies (*subpersonata*) of White Wagtail, House Bunting and various egrets and herons. As we wind our way up to higher altitude we will keep watching for the rare Golden Eagle, coveys of Barbary Partridge, Pallid Swift, and two North African endemics; Levaillant's Woodpecker and the stunning Moussier's Redstart. In stands of juniper trees, we hope to find African Blue, Great and Coal Tit, Common Firecrest, Short-toed Treecreeper and Hawfinch. Fat White-throated Dippers reside along the region's fast flowing streams.

Arriving at the ski resort, we should see flocks of swirling, coughing choughs representing both species; Alpine and Red-billed at close quarters foraging in the fields. An isolated population of resident Horned Lark occurs here in good numbers. Other target species at this high elevation include small flocks of the lovely African Crimson-winged Finch (a very localized bird whose numbers are directly correlated to snow levels), Mistle Thrush, Eurasian Wren, Eurasian Jay, Black Redstart, European Robin, Common Wood Pigeon, Cirl and Rock Buntings, Rock Sparrow, Great Spotted Woodpecker, and raptors including Long-legged Buzzard, Peregrine Falcon, Eurasian Sparrowhawk and Bonelli's Eagle.

We will overnight at a lodge in the Ourika Valley where we have a chance of locating Maghreb Owl, endemic to northwest Africa.



Maghreb Owl by David Hoddinott

Tizi n'Test Pass. This incredible pass allows us to access the Dades Valley. Once again, we will pass through spectacular scenery, quaint mountain villages, rushing streams and great birding spots. We will keep a lookout for any High Atlas species we may have missed, while even Barbary Sheep are possible along this pass.

We will make a stop at the Tinmel Mosque, high in the Atlas Mountains. This 11th century edifice is one of the few mosques that are open to Westerners. In the past a co-operative



African Crimson-winged Finch by Clayton Burne

Maghreb Owl could sometimes be found here, and though it has been a few years since it was last seen regularly, we will give the mosque a cursory look over just in case we missed it earlier on the tour. Golden Eagle has been recorded soaring over the surrounding mountains, so we shall certainly keep our eyes over head for a repeat performance.

Dades Valley. We'll follow the Dades Valley all the way to the Atlantic coast. The valley offers great birding and spectacular geological formations before we bottom out and see our first Argan Trees. The unique Argan Tree is one of the oldest trees in the world, endemic to just a small region of only 8 000km^2 in southwestern Morocco.

Agadir. This is a delightful beachfront city in southern Morocco, host to one of the largest of the King's palaces with modern facilities and a superb shoreline. For centuries it has been an important transport hub, an essential port of call for ships and camel caravans and, more recently, for birdwatchers!

Agadir Pelagic. We'll head out early to try for Red-necked Nightjar before making our way onto a pelagic seabird trip off Agadir. The most likely pelagic species we will see are Northern Gannet, Great Skua, European Storm Petrel, and the Critically Endangered Balearic Shearwater. We also stand a reasonable chance for Manx Shearwater, Common Scoter and Parasitic and Pomarine Jaegers, while Cory's Shearwater, Razorbill, Black-legged Kittiwake and Sabine's Gull would require exceptional luck. The diversity and numbers of species varies greatly, and we can never be sure quite of what to expect; however, we are bound to see something interesting!

Tamri. The region just north of Agadir is one of the few localities where it is possible to find the Critically Endangered Northern Bald Ibis or Waldrapp. Once common across central Europe, northern Africa, and the Middle East, today this strange bird only occurs naturally in two areas along the Moroccan coast - just north and south of Agadir (the population is estimated at slightly over 500 individuals as of 2017), and at a recently introduced breeding colony in Spain. We will visit Oued Tamri and the surrounding coastal regions, one of the best-known areas for this species and, with a little luck, secure a sighting of one of the world's rarest and most endangered birds. Oued Tamri also offers us an excellent opportunity to find not only Northern Bald Ibis, but also gives us our best views of Audouin's Gull, while the surrounding scrub is good for the beautiful Moussier's Redstart, Spotless Starling, Blue Rock Thrush, Sardinian Warbler and Spanish Sparrow.



Balearic Shearwater by Clayton Burne

Oued Massa. This morning we will visit Oued Massa where the River Massa, at the end of its



Barbary Sheep by Clayton Burne

journey from the Atlas Mountains spills into a wide estuary teeming with birdlife. We will search the reed-lined shores and sandbanks for Little Bittern, Eurasian Spoonbill, Glossy Ibis, Greater Flamingo, Squacco and Purple Heron, Western Marsh Harrier, and Common Kingfisher amongst other species. Large numbers of waterfowl used to roost here; however, since the river breached and connected once again with the ocean, the waterfowl numbers have subsequently declined.

Searching further upriver where the water is less brackish may still reveal Northern Pintail, Tufted Duck, Northern Shoveler, and the highly sought-after Marbled Duck. Good numbers of waders may also be seen including Eurasian Oystercatcher, Pied Avocet, Little Ringed, Common Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Dunlin, Curlew Sandpiper, Common Redshank and Black-tailed Godwit. A large gull and tern roost should include Yellow-legged, Mediterranean, Slender-billed. Mew and Audouin's Gulls, while Sandwich and Caspian Tern may also appear. With a good dollop of luck, we may find the skulking and notoriously difficult to see Water Rail or flush a roosting, Red-necked Nightjar. Other species we will search for include Eurasian Stone-curlew, Osprey, Black-winged Kite, Great Spotted Cuckoo, Little Owl, Cetti's and occasionally Subalpine Warbler, Maghreb Magpie, Black-crowned Tchagra and seedeaters including Spanish Sparrow, Common Linnet, European Serin and European Goldfinch.

A nearby site could produce Sedge Warbler, Brown-throated and Sand Martins and Marbled Duck. Barbary Ground Squirrels often occur in good numbers, and we may well encounter other small mammals and reptiles.

Oued Sassa. The fabulous Oued Souss estuary is hose to a plethora of waders, gulls, terns, egrets, and herons. This is one of the few sites that regularly produces good waders on our route. Some of the species we are likely to encounter include Greater Flamingo, Eurasian Spoonbill, Eurasian Oystercatcher, Black-winged Stilt, Grey, Common Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwit, Eurasian Curlew, Common and Spotted Redshanks, Common Greenshank, Green, Wood and Common Sandpipers, Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, Little Stint, Dunlin, Ruff and even Pied Avocet, and if fortunate Red Knot. Amongst the gulls we may spot Mediterranean, Audouin's and Slender-billed, while Little Gull is occasionally seen.



African Desert Warbler by David Hoddinott



Pin-tailed Sandgrouse by David Hoddinott

Some freshwater ponds away from the main estuary give us another chance for waders as well as the desirable Marbled Duck.

Agadir to Boumalne-du-Dades. Today we will leave the coast and further explore the wooded slopes of the Dades Valley as we head towards the town of Boumalne-du-Dades. Gradually the trees will become scrubbier and the countryside dryer until we reach the "Hollywood of the desert", Ouarzazate before continuing onwards to the quiet town of Boumalne-du-Dades.

Barrage El Mansoor Eddabhi. Depending on water levels, we might pay a short visit to the nearby Barrage El Mansoor Eddabhi, situated at the edge of town. Here we are likely to see large numbers of waders such as Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers with a reasonable chance of Common Snipe. Western Yellow and White Wagtails are abundant at the water's edge, and even Bluethroat is possible, while large numbers of Northern Shoveler and Ruddy Shelduck are also usually present. We may also find a few of the lake's rarer species such as Black Stork or the *subpersonata* race of White Wagtail

Tagdilt Track. Today we will visit the bird famous Tagdilt Track to search for hardy species that make these stony deserts their home. The high, snow-covered Atlas Mountains contrasting with the stony desert below, makes for dramatic scenery and a memorable morning's birding. The area holds exciting birds including flocks of Black-bellied and occasionally Crowned and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Cream-coloured Courser, Greater Hoopoe-Lark, Temminck's, Mediterranean Short-toed and the very special Thick-billed Lark, Red-rumped, White-crowned and Desert Wheatears, Great Grey Shrike and Trumpeter Finch. Large diurnal gerbils called Fat Sand Rats are common here, often seen scuttling to their burrows, mouths stuffed with vegetation.



Greater Hoopoe-Lark by Clayton Burne

Dades Gorge. The amazing Dades Gorge, scarred by bizarre limestone erosion, decorated with impressive, fortified villages and a stunning 1 000m deep cutting flanked by pink cliffs, is where we will spend the afternoon hours. The impressive Bonelli's Eagle, Red-rumped Swallow, Eurasian Crag Martin, Blue Rock Thrush, Black Wheatear, Grey Wagtail, and



Pharaoh Eagle-Owl by David Hoddinott

the lovely Tristram's Warbler are all possible here. Little Owl can often be seen perched on buildings in this area and Peregrine Falcon has bred in the gorge, sometimes seen in flight, or perched on the cliff face.

Todgha Gorge. Today we'll spend a few hours at the equally impressive Todgha Gorge, where we will search for similar species as at Dades Gorge.

Barrage Al-Hassan Addakhil Dam. If the dam has sufficient water, we'll spend a short time birding for Great Crested Grebe, Ruddy Shelduck amongst others. Raptors are particularly well represented in the area, and we will keep our eyes peeled for Short-toed Snake and Bonelli's Eagles as well as Lanner Falcon.

Zaida Plain. Well head out just before dawn, brave potentially below-freezing temperatures and drive the short distance from Midelt to the desert plains around Zaida. This patch of gravel desert, interspersed with tall Halfa grass is the best site in Africa to look for the rare and localized Dupont's Lark. We will walk across the desolate plains in the dawn light listening out for calling birds, trying to locate these fast and shy larks that have a beautiful oriole-like song. Typically, the larks only sing during these cold hours, and this will give us our best opportunity of hopefully seeing this difficult species. Other great birds in this area may include Eurasian Skylark, both Greater and Mediterranean Short-toed Larks, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Fulvous Babbler, and possibly rarer species such as Crowned Sandgrouse or Houbara Bustard.

Errachidia. In this area, the landscape becomes increasingly desolate and arid. Birds that we will be on the lookout for include Desert Lark and the social Fulvous Babbler. We will also stop to check out an area for the localised Streaked Scrub Warbler, recently placed in its own monotypic family.



Erg Chebbi dunes by David Hoddinott



Levaillant's Woodpecker by David Hoddinott

Errachidia to Erfoud. Departing Errachidia, we head south following valleys thronged with palms, oases, and traditional villages. The French-built administrative town of Erfoud is a small and relatively modern town dotted with both fresh produce and a few handicraft stalls. While not particularly impressive, the town is surrounded by some of the most attractive scenery in Morocco. The area to the south has extensive palm groves and lush gardens that eventually give way to vast stony plains, wadi beds and the spectacular red sand dunes of the great Sahara Desert. Should we have time after arriving, we may head out to make our first forays for African Desert Warbler and Pharaoh Eagle-Owl.

Erg Chebbi. Today will be an exciting one indeed as we explore the great sand dunes and surrounding stony deserts, cultivated oases and villages in 4x4 vehicles. First, we head towards the spectacular Erg Chebbi dune-fields (the largest in Morocco and said to be the highest free-standing dunes in the world). Here we search for the rare and declining Desert Sparrow whilst we have further chances for other gems such as the stunning Cream-colored Courser, Bar-tailed Lark, Greater Hoopoe-Lark, and Spectacled Warbler.

Other specials in the area include African Desert Warbler and, if we are extremely fortunate, the endangered Houbara Bustard. This bird was hunted to near extinction by Arab falconers, but improved protection and reintroduction projects have boosted their populations a little. Chances also exist for various sandgrouse species including Pin-tailed, Crowned and Spotted. Our last few tours have even found Egyptian Nightjar in this area, though this is by no means an expected species! This evening we will visit a known stake-out for the majestic Pharaoh Eagle-Owl.

Merzouga. A nearby freshwater lake (when it has water) is a magnet for migrating ducks and waders, which may include Marbled, Ferruginous and Tufted Ducks, Black-necked Grebe, Black-tailed Godwit, Dunlin and Yellow Wagtail. We should also see Brown-necked Raven while driving through the desert, as well as the recently split Maghreb Lark. Date palms and orchids clog the oases and clumps of Tamarisks in the dune-field hold overwintering and migrating passerines. These may include the beautiful Bluethroat, Lesser Whitethroat, Spectacled Warbler, Eurasian Blackcap and Common Chiffchaff.



Desert Sparrow by Clayton Burne

Ouarzazate. This former French Garrison and administrative centre has retained its

traditional style despite recent development. The Kasbah serves as an excellent example, with the smouldering red-brown walls of the towering façade making for an impressive and memorable site. A fabulous White Stork nest rests right on the walls of the Kasbah.



Crowned Sandgrouse by David Hoddinott

Tizi n'Tichka Pass. This high pass takes us above the treeline and then drops into beautiful, wooded valleys. Here we will search for any additional woodland species we might have missed earlier in the trip. These could include the striking Common Firecrest and Short-toed Treecreeper and this site also provides our best chance for Red Crossbill. We may also obtain further sightings of Levaillant's Woodpecker, while Northern Goshawk is a species worth keeping an eye out for. We'll make one final stop at a local Argan Oil store en route back to Marrakech.

Tour Grading & Key

Overall Ease		Moderate. Suitable for most birding / wildlife interest levels.
Birding Ease		Moderate. Most species provide good visuals in open conditions, but several target species that may require repeat efforts.
Accommodation		Comfortable.
Walking / Trails		Mostly short walks, some on stony/gravel ground. Whilst unlikely, snow/ice underfoot is also possible.
Vehicles / Roads		Good quality tarred roads for the most part. Comfortable minivan/minibus depending on group size. Some long drives.
Photography		Good to very good. Lighting can be challenging. No dedicated hides or feeders
Annoyances		Pelagic has potential to be rough, some long drives. Temperatures can be variable.

Financial Arrangements and Important Notes

Tour dates, prices, single supplement, approximate flight costs and tour spaces are displayed on our website.

Tour inclusions:

- All meals from lunch on day 1 to lunch on day 11;
- All lodgings;
- Drinking water;
- All ground transportation during the tour;
- Pelagic boat trip off Agadir;
- All reserve entrance fees;
- All guiding services
- Tips for local guides, drivers and services.

Tour exclusions:

- Visa fees;
- ANY flights;
- Any beverages (including mini-bar charges at hotels);
- Optional excursions;
- Special gratuities;
- Telephone calls, laundry and other items of a personal nature.

Single Supplement: The single supplement cost for this tour will be charged if you wish to have single accommodation. If RBL cannot provide you with a rooming partner for these nights although you choose to share, the single supplement will become applicable. We will make all reasonable efforts to ensure that a rooming partner is found if you do wish to share.

Tipping: As noted above, gratuities (drivers, hotel staff, restaurants etc.) are included on this tour. However, this does NOT include your Rockjumper leader/s. If you feel that they have given you excellent service, it is entirely appropriate to tip them at your discretion.

- **Due to constantly fluctuating exchange rates, we quote our tours in 4 currencies. The tour price is fixed only in the currency printed in bold, and the actual cost in the other currencies listed will be adjusted according to prevailing exchange rates at the time of final invoicing. The same applies to approximate flight and single supplement rates.**
- **Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registrations, a small group supplement will be offered to confirm the tour.**
- **Tour prices are subject to unforeseen increases in tour related costs and may have to be adjusted as a result.**
- **The designated tour leader/s may be changed at short due to unforeseen circumstances.**
- **The itinerary is indicative only. Changes may need to be made to the order in which the tour is conducted, or some of the venues we visit closer to departure. We will attempt to adhere as close to the original program as possible.**

- Morocco is a Muslim country. The drinking of alcohol is strictly restricted to certain tourist hotels and may only be sold to non-Muslims. It is an offence to consume alcohol outside of these specified hotels, or in view of the public. We therefor do not permit participants to purchase or consume any alcoholic drinks for consumption outside of these hotels.
- Much of our time is spent in vehicles, as we do have to cover long distances to get to the best areas for birds. The more luggage you pack the less room there is in the vehicle, so it is important for the comfort of your fellow travellers that you do not over-pack. Kindly stick to 20kg (44lb) for check in luggage and 8kg (18lb) for hand luggage.
- High temperatures can be expected at some locations on this tour. We do not however have any strenuous walks, and it is generally easily manageable. Nights and early mornings can get very cold in the desert and High Atlas Mountains so please make sure you bring enough layers.

Arrival and Departure Details

The tour starts early in the morning of day 1 from Marrakech, we recommend that you arrive the previous day. The tour will conclude in the late afternoon of day 11 in Marrakech.

The above information in respect of arrivals and departures is a guide only. Precise arrival and departure information will be sent to you in your Tour Confirmation package once the tour has been officially confirmed. If you wish to arrive early and/or depart late and would like assistance in this regard, kindly contact the Rockjumper office.

Marrakesh Menara International Airport, Marrakesh (IATA: RAK) is the main port of entry and exit for this tour and is well serviced by several airlines.

Visa requirements differ by country, nationality of the traveller and duration and purpose of your intended stay. It may be necessary to obtain a visa or an electronic travel authorization in advance of your travel. It is therefore vitally important that you check with your travel agent/consulate/embassy for exact visa requirements. The following website provides detailed information about visa eligibility and assistance with online applications options where viable: Visa HQ for Travel

DO NOT book any flights until the Rockjumper Team have officially confirmed the tour.