

# Morocco's High Atlas

## Wildlife at Leisure

### A Greentours Itinerary

#### Day 1

#### To Marrakech and Imagira

A direct flight to Marrakech takes us to within touching distance of Morocco's highest mountains at the western end of the great Atlas range. From the airport it is just an hour's drive to Imagira, gateway to the mountains. Soon we'll be settling in to the elegant Sel d'Ailleurs, our base for the entire week. We'll have the entire 8-roomed privately-owned hotel to ourselves for the week. The setting is beautiful, amid quiet gardens, with migrant warblers and redstarts flitting through the olive trees every morning.

#### Days 2 & 5

#### Imlil & Aksoual Mountain

A short drive takes us along a wild and beautiful valley to beautiful Imlil. We'll soon find *Asphodelus cerasifolius* and then pass wet cliffs draped in Maidenhair Ferns and the very attractive white purple backed daisy *Anacyclus pyrethrum*. At 4167m Toubkal is a very big mountain and the valley in which sits Imlil offers great views of the mountains surrounding Morocco's highest peak, and indeed all but the top of Toubkal itself. The cherry and walnut orchards in Imlil are home to both Levaillant's Green Woodpeckers and Great Spotted Woodpecker. Large flocks of Alpine Choughs play just above the village and pretty Provence Hairstreaks are found in the gardens. 4wds will take us along a track to the Tizi n'Tamatert, a 2250 metre pass overlooking the village and thence along the flank of Aksoual, a 3900m peak to the south, close by the village of Tacheddirt, at almost 2500m apparently the highest village in the region. The scenery is spectacular with impossibly steep screes descending into deep valleys along the side of which perch houses and equally improbably, terraced fields showing hints of spring green. Suddenly this inhospitable landscape opens to give way to an area of gentle damp turf where *Narcissus tingitanus* shines in the sun. *Narcissus waiteri* glows ghost-like on the serpentinite bluffs that rise above the road, these otherwise free of vegetation. The amazing little daisy *Anacyclus depressus* subspecies *gelidus* has rather innocuous looking daisy flowers that make one gasp when turned over so pure and bright is the scarlet on the underside of the ligules! We'll stop to photograph the pretty little *Bellis caerulea* and even at this altitude we might be surprised to see some fine clumps of *Daphne laureola*. Black Redstarts are particularly common and so too Rock Buntings. *Romuleas* and *Gageas* bloom where there's signs of moisture.

### **Day 3**

#### **Oukaimeden**

We'll start our exploration with a visit to the ski resort of Oukaimeden. A road takes us up to a heady 2600m above sea level. The ski centre is surrounded by a magnificent snowy mountainscape. Toubkal is behind a ridge but we will be just under a 3200m peak and a 3600m peak heads the valley in which we'll park. Wet turf by the stream below the carpark is dotted with abundant *Romulea bifrons* and bright golden yellow miniature daffs whose identity causes much debate though most recently botanists seem to have settled on it being a new species recently given the name *Narcissus jeanmonodii*. Crimson-winged Finches, Shore Larks and Northern Wheatears of the North African *seebohmi* race will be seen on slopes where there's more of the *Narcissus* and some pink *Colchicum triphyllum* too. Descending we'll find another little daffodil, the *mesatlanticus* subspecies of *Narcissus romieuxii*. Growing not far away is another lovely little daisy, *Rhodanthemum atlanticum*.

### **Day 4**

#### **Tiz n'Test**

The main pass over this part of the Atlas takes one through a great variety of habitats from wet roadside cliffs, streams and orchards to dwarf oak forests and semi-deserts. Long-legged Buzzards and Egyptian Vultures drift over as we stop for fine plants of *Erodium atlanticum* growing on steep shaley verges. There are roadside cliffs with lots of red and white *Anacyclus pyrethrum*, as well as *Bupleurum laterifolium*, *Asphodelus fistulosus* and the sea lavender *Limonium sinuatum*. One of the main target species of this tour inhabits the dwarfed Holm Oak woodlands at the top of the pass. The delightful ivory-white *Narcissus waiteri*, a beauty that is easy to miss amid the open forest. Coal Tits, Jays, Chaffinches, Wood Pigeons and Rock Buntings are common in the trees. We'll stop to enjoy a fine lunchtime Berber omelette and té a la menthe served on the pass-top restaurant – very good – especially at 2100m.

We'll descend to foothills rich in raptors such as Booted and Short-toed Eagles, whilst we may see Golden Eagle, Bonelli's Eagle, Peregrine and Barbary Falcon. Tristram's Warbler and Rock Buntings inhabit steep roadside gullies. Moroccan Hairstreaks, Greenish Black-tips and Geranium Bronzes are amongst the butterflies we'll encounter. We'll find the yellow and purple-flowered shrubby milkwort, *Polygala balansae* and will visit a slope where the delicate hoop petticoat daffodil, *Narcissus albidus*, will almost certainly have finished flowering – but we'll need to check!

### **Day 6**

#### **The Amizmiz Circuit**

The lower slopes of the north-facing Atlas are lush with spring flowers at this season, whether it be the abundant and colourful arable weeds in the crops or the richly varied phryganoid vegetation on the hillsides. Lupins, Marigolds, *Cladanthus*, Poppies

and abundant and varied pea flowers make the fields a tremendously colourful sight. Moroccan Orange-tips and Clouded Yellows fly through this dazzling show. *Allium roseum* flowers in both white and red forms and tucked in amongst the *Ferulas* (both *tingitana* and *communis*) are *Scilla peruviana* and Tassel Hyacinth. This is a rich area for pea flowers such as *Lathyrus setifolius*, *Vicia benghalensis*, *Vicia amphicarpa* and *Ononis laxiflora*. *Cistus heterophyllus* flowers pink on the hillsides amongst small 'bushes' of *Coronilla viminalis* and the chunky wine-red heads of *Anthyllis vulneraria reuteri*.

Moving higher we'll encounter the rare and little known daffodil *Narcissus bulbocodium* subspecies *pallidus* flowering amongst the damp turf below junipers with tiny blue and pink Lithospernums and lots of little white Violas. Lower down we'll flush Barbary Partridges while the dazzling colours of Moussier's Redstart will certainly hold us enthralled. We'll find *Dipcadi serotinum* and two very fine toadflaxes, the tall orange and brown stripey *Linaria ventricosa* and the climbing and clambering *Linaria sagittaria*.

## **Day 7**

### **N'Fis Reservoir & Marrakech**

We start the day with a visit to the N'Fis Reservoir down in dry lands at the foot of the Atlas. The calls of Ruddy Shelduck echo across the waters as we walk down to the short the ground dotted with *Erodiums* and *Parentucellia*. Groups of Cormorants fly by and there will be one or two Squacco Herons and Great White Egrets as well as White Storks around the fringes of the reservoir. Overhead we should watch for Booted Eagles and Black Kites heading north. N'Fis can harbour quite a variety of waders and we'll likely see Greenshank, Wood Sandpipers and maybe a snipe or two in the marshy ground at the end of the reservoir. This is a great spot too for Yellow Wagtails and flocks of these lovely birds are a real feature of the site, usually with two, three or even four races present.

In the afternoon we'll go and see a bit of Marrakech itself. We'll visit the city's atmospheric Medina, the central Djemma el Fna square and the Saadian Tombs. Before returning to Imlil and our final offering from the Imlil Lodge's excellent chef.

## **Day 8**

### **Departure**

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