

Morocco

High Atlas Mountains

A Greentours Trip report

10th – 17th March 2018

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Daily Report – Rosemary FitzGerald.

Day 1 Sunday 11 March N'fis valley & Imarigha

Travel was completed on the 10th, with an evening arrival at the ever welcoming Sel d'Ailleurs pension. However wearisome a journey, being led by friendly staff through the rosemary hedges of the garden to one's comfortable individual cottage, then gathering round the fire before delicious dinner is wonderfully restoring. So the first morning saw a keen group enjoying the breakfast treats – Moroccan baked goods are varied and excellent, especially with local honey and preserves – and to make sure all were revived our first morning out was close to base. First stop in the local town, Asni, gave excellent views of a stork population on their nests, then we continued to the N'fis river valley where even short walks from the minibus provided some lovely plants. The white Broom relative *Retama monosperma* was in full flower with its beautiful arching branches overhanging swards of 'weeds' of many colours. The season was late, so views everywhere were stunningly framed by high surrounding snowy peaks, but in the warmth of the river valley Asphodels, the charming tiny daisy *Bellis annua*, wild orange Marigolds of several species, with Toadflaxes and

Fumitories, coloured the fallows and crop fields. In places the minute pansy *Viola kitaibeliana* could be spotted in flower. The river lies in a grand gorge landscape, with the road running tight under rock faces, so it's possible here to see some of the High Atlas specialities face to face from the road verge. Most exciting were the daisy-like *Rhodanthemum gayanum*, its white petals fading into subtle pink tones as flowers mature, and the Atlas endemic mustard *Diploaxis harra* with its long elegant seed pods giving it a stylistic edge over most plants of the cabbage family!

After picnicking in the valley we returned to base and walked from Sel d'Ailleurs into the adjoining countryside, through apple orchards and cultivations to a stony hillside with both flowers to find, and pebbles of an appealing stone with the colours of a smoked salmon sandwich – this turned up throughout the week and fascinated some members. A water storage tank provided good views of native terrapins, and we began to feel familiar with some of the characteristic bird voices, especially the ubiquitous (and very conversational) Bulbuls, the sweet buzzing song of tiny Serins, and the scolding chatter of the smart black and white Sardinian Warblers. The musical voices of Bulbuls, coming just after the morning call to prayer, are so often part of waking up in Morocco.

Day 2 Monday 12th March Asni; Plateau de Kik; Lalla-Takerkoust steppe

Most of this week was blessed with sunny weather, so memories are of ranges of clear snowy peaks framing brilliant green patches of new cereal crops, interspersed with the ochre tones of the mud-brick villages, and the ever-changing drama of north Moroccan geology. This particular day was defined by stunning views, and some unexpected elements of natural

history when a tempting path, before becoming a dead end, led us through an amazing caterpillar event – thousands of ‘woolly bears’ processing across the path, up shrubs and walls – while later a large cowpat was crowded with dozens of busy dung beetles. Star plants in the morning were glamorous clumps of *Iris planifolia* still in flower, and the gorgeous purple spikes of *Linaria maroccana* (which is a parent of several decorative garden toadflaxes). Shrubbery near the caterpillars produced our first good views of the iconic Moussier’s Redstart, a star turn among small birds for colour and elegance, and everywhere the sweet calls of Crested Larks (and views of them on tussocks and stones) helped us become familiar with our most regular companions of the trip.

These excitements were only tasters for a memorable day, as the route next took us along a dramatic gorge where the road clung to the cliff, through to a high village viewpoint above the wide landscape of the Plateau de Kik and the far waters of the Lalla-Takerkouste reservoir. This mountain face is popular for hang-gliding, so the skies may have hovering sportsmen or a Booted Eagle like one we had an excellent view of. The timing was perfect for the spring flora of cultivations, and we lunched under the shade of a line of roadside eucalyptus trees among fields bright orange with marigolds, before wandering in the flowery acres. Looking closely revealed lovely poppy relatives – russet flowers of the horned-poppy *Glaucium corniculatum*, and in a few places the delicious crumpled silky purple petals of *Roemeria hybrida* – a lucky find as these usually drop at midday. A fascinating flowering bulb turned out to be *Androcymbium graminea* with white flowers and grass-like leaves appearing at ground level, but opening prettily in the sun, and growing near it the attractive ‘Brown Bluebell’ *Dipcadi serotinum* with flowers in surprising shades of brown.

Unwilling to end this day, on the way home most of the party walked through olive and carob trees to a viewpoint above the Plateau, rewarded by a cuckoo calling and a view of an uncommon little sage family flower *Ajuga iva* nestling in rock crevices.

Day 3 Tuesday 13th March Tizi Ouzane, Tougramane Gorge, Azimiz, Tizi Ghourane

Walking to breakfast through the gardens at Sel d'Ailleurs was quickly established as a daily challenge for the birders of the party. Chaffinches and Bulbuls predominate of course, soon making observers blasé in spite of the beauty of the local finch subspecies, its rich colouring with flashes of iridescent green making UK birds seem dull in comparison. However the calls of Levillant's Woodpecker, endemic to the Atlas, the rare Moroccan relative of our Green Woodpecker, were frequent each day, but a view proved most elusive. So each day started with a sense of excitement, and today was to be our first experience of going higher into the ever-visible high peaks.

First stop, near Asni, was in open grassy glades among aromatic pine trees, and the target species was to be a butterfly, the endemic Moroccan Hairstreak. This is quite a small butterfly, and at first most of us struggled with its now-you-see-it, now-you-don't flittings, but soon everyone had their eye in and we each felt delighted to be spotting our own rather than relying on Stefano to point in the right direction!

On the plant wish-list for spring in the High Atlas there are always the exquisite miniature daffodils *Narcissus bulbocodium* and *N.romeuxii*. Predicting flowering seasons is always tricky as the mountain climate has so many variables of temperature and rain (or snow) fall. This year turned out to be really lucky for us as a late severe winter meant the pale trumpets of *N.romeuxii* were spotted still fresh in several previously unknown places. It's a neck-twisting search from the minibus windows as the typical habitat is in light scrub along the top of

cuttings above the mountain roads, but Caroline's superlative long-distance eyesight was a huge asset, and once a token flower was located we could all pile out to scramble and search for more.

After winding up the magnificent Tougramane Gorge, we picnicked under blossoming *Retama* bushes above the market town of Azimiz, then decided to explore further up to the Tizi Ghourane pass to the former mining village of Azegour. Here tumbled heaps of red rocks above a small gorge promised good views, so we walked across heavily-grazed stony ground to a large outcrop. Vegetation seemed minimal, except for *Euphorbia* plants which must be unpalatable to the hungriest sheep, so stunning botanical interest was quite unexpected. First finds were the crocus-like flowers of a *Romulea*, almost buried in the ground but opening in the sun in every shade of mauve. The colours were very variable, each group or individual seeming more interesting than the one before, but these turned out to be only the first act, because we shortly began to find an even more lovely, and much rarer, plant. *Asphodelus acaulis* (literally Stemless Asphodel) is better known from the middle Atlas, and indeed turned out to be a new record for the Azimiz district. It has pink-striped buds which open in sun to perfect pale lily-shaped flowers among grassy leaves. Its beauty and the remote site made this find really thrilling, though the red rocks had one more surprise in store. The summer heat and dryness in such exposure must be extreme, but a crevice in the top of the outcrop proved to have a 'pond' with scraps of waterweed and a few tiny tadpoles – an astonishing sight!

This was our first day of seeing the widespread and very handsome Black Wheatear and Southern Grey Shrike, both of which were seen most days after and were always exciting, and we had our one sighting of a Turtle Dove, now sadly so rare and threatened in Britain.

Day 4 Wednesday 14th March Toubkal National Park Museum, Imlil valley, Tizi-n-Tamatert, Tacheddirt

Again sun shone on the snows as we drove higher from Asni to the first stop at the very well-organised small eco-museum featuring the environmental interest of the Toubkal National Park. The Jebel Toubkal, featuring a 4167m peak, is relatively accessible from Marrakech, so a great attraction to hikers and climbers as well as naturalists, so we were entertained but not specially surprised to learn that the museum, and a very smart hotel nearby, had been set up by Richard Branson. What we hadn't expected was a view of the man himself, beaming under a big hat as he shepherded a flock of pretty girls from the museum back to the hotel. Our waves were returned, so we had a really VERY rare sighting to start the day!

Driving up to Imlil was fascinating – the river runs through gorges and steep valleys with farms perched just above spate level. Spring cultivations extend right down onto the gravel fans of the river itself, with orchards of silver-branched walnuts and apples higher up the banks, and stone and mud-brick houses and barns almost invisible against the rocks. The village itself is not to Greentours taste, being a frenetic centre for climbing gear shops, donkey rides, crowded streets and souvenir tat! Expertly driven through the chaos by our calm, cheerful and excellent driver Hisham we were relieved and glad to get higher up a winding road above spectacular (if sometimes dizzy) views towards the hamlet of Tacheddirt. Stopping by grassy banks leading out to a viewpoint above the valley, Stefano promised us a treat, and it could not have been more perfect! The classic habitat for *Narcissus bulbocodium* in these mountains is damp alpine turf, and here in this late spring the sward still had snow-melt water trickling under the grasses. Scattered among small rush clumps were golden trumpets just coming into flower, ideally fresh with sparkles from the seeping water reflected on the flowers.

Later we walked a track near the hamlet, watching women and children working in small fields, and glorying in the splendid views on every side, the snow above us seemed very close, while in the distance across the valley we could see the bright colours of washing spread to dry in the sun round another ochre-coloured village. The season was too early for a tea shop at the end of the track to be open, but we were distracted by the clear (if not very musical) singing of an unfamiliar small bird in an almond tree. It stayed put for us to get very good views, and turned out to be that mythical creature the Alpine Accentor! It's an obscure relative of our Dunnock in the UK, and not very spectacular, but a very popular tick for all our lists!

Walking back, in the magical fashion of days in Morocco with Stefano, we ended up on the roof of a half-built house, drinking mint tea with sugar scraped from a block in the traditional Berber way! It felt as if this had to be the final treat, and we were all sun-soaked and tired, but a final stop down in the river valley, the last sun touching the rocks high above, had everyone excited again when a pale *Narcissus romeuxii* trumpet was spotted on a cliff above a bridge over the rushing river, and we all seized binoculars to work out the extent of the population on tiny rock ledges high above.

Supper this evening honours the very lively day – every kind of meat cooked on the home barbeque, extremely tasty and all completely local – not an airmile involved!

Day 5 Thursday 15th March N'fis valley, Tizi-n-Test

Today we followed one of the most historic of Atlas routes – the old main road from Marrakech, right over the Atlas, and down to Taroudant in the Sus valley south of the massif. The Tizi-n-Test pass at 2092m is famous from ancient and modern travellers' tales, and was looked forward to with some excitement. Starting along the N'fis river valley of our first day, the road then rose higher and higher, through regions marked 'Génévriers' (Juniper forest) up to 'Cyprès' level where we saw magnificent trees of *Pinus nigra* subsp. *mauretanica* mixed with

replanted stock of *Cedrus atlantica* (once made extinct by exploitation but now being successfully reintroduced). These grand trees clinging to sheer slopes above enormous views were an exhilarating sight in bright sunlight, so it was a shock when the road turned a corner and disappeared into a solid wall of cloud. This felt both cold and sodden, and the party felt almost relieved when a scrambling wet recce by Stefano reported the lovely white daffodil *Narcissus watieri* to be barely in bud in this late season, excusing us to lurk dry in the minibus! At the top of the pass the famous café, the Belle Vue, was ironically named with the cloud almost too thick to read the sign, let alone see the view! A surreal interlude was spent drinking welcome hot tea, and watching a Bollywood-style movie (curiously set in the Rocky Mountains) on the television.

Treats were in store on the way home though, as one of the reserves for re-introduced Barbary sheep (a sort of mouflon) is close to the road, and we were lucky enough to see a party of about 40 extremely well. The rams have most impressive long beards, and a great many photos were taken as the group was calm and moving slowly. We also walked a small stony valley where a large Slow-worm was glimpsed, various lizards, a Large Tortoiseshell Butterfly (a rare sight for us Brits), and some Barbary Partridges lurking in bushes at the edge of some orchards, all adding to the experiences of this varied day.

At Sel d'Ailleurs supper was another memorable experience, as our host had prepared an amazing Tangier-style meat dish, cooked all day in an amphora-like jar in a wood fire. This was brought ceremoniously to the table, layers of sealed covering cut off the mouth with a flourish, and a revolting-looking brown stew poured out! A second's shock instantly gave way to greedy anticipation though, because it smelt, and was quite delicious!

Day 6 Friday 16th March Oukaimedan, Ourika valley

This last day began quite literally with a bang. A deluge had fallen in the night, and as we walked to breakfast under the

garden archway today dripping rain as well as golden jasmine blossoms, a large chunk of mud brick and roof tiles fell from the corner of Caroline's cottage onto the path. Temperature felt cold so we wrapped up with fleeces and waterproofs for our visit to the Atlas ski centre at Oukaïmeden, which is at 2314m. New snow was visible on the peaks all round, and above Asni we stopped to look at the views from slopes of snow-crowned junipers. It was most unusual to see the pretty sub-shrub *Globularia alypum* with snow crystals on the blue flowers, when usually it's associated with hot Mediterranean spring weather and the kind of day when the first *Cistus* come into flower! Driving was quite testing with snow and slush on the road, but Hisham's skills held steady, and views of terraced fields and orchards outlined in white were dramatic. Incredibly, a flower was spotted to instigate a *Narcissus romeuxii* stop, where gazing up at a cliff revealed plenty of little daffodils, but gained most of us snowflakes in the eye and down the neck! Even further up we drove into a perfect snow landscape in a forest of mature conifers, every branch lined in white.

Oukaïmeden in these conditions was a strange experience. The cold was breathtaking, making us laugh at the 'No Bathing' notice by the lake, but nobody could resist short bird-watching moments because of the hundreds of Choughs and Alpine Choughs pecking about for scraps near the road, red and yellow beaks brilliant against the grey and white background. We tramped to a restaurant across unbroken snow where we were welcomed to eat our picnic, and order hot drinks including an interesting chocolate-free 'hot chocolate' which seemed gourmet in those circumstances! Walking after that, surrounded by weekend visitors gallantly trying out rented skis and toboggans, was cold and slippery, but bird interest maintained. The Crimson-winged Finches which sometimes gather here were not visible in the gloom, but we saw Shore Larks, Black Redstarts, Mistle Thrushes (so distant from suburban England), and encouraged by some birders with BIG telescopes we persuaded ourselves that a distant little dark bird on a rock could indeed be Finsch's Wheatear!

Driving back on a different road, through the intensely touristy Ourika valley with its hundreds of restaurants and souvenir shops catering for day trippers from Marrakech, felt strange after the other-worldly ambience up in the snow, and a short botany walk in light rain reflected our sadness that this was our last Atlas day, but spirits were raised by spotting several lovely spreads of *Clematis cirrhosa* clambering over shrubs by the road, and landmarks were noted for stopping next morning to photograph these. The most usual garden selection of this delightful early-spring Clematis is 'Wisley Cream' but there is another called 'Ourika Valley' so it was lovely to see it wild in its home habitat.

Friday has the splendid tradition at Sel d'Ailleurs of being the day for traditional couscous, served on a huge platter under an artistic pyramid of vegetables, so this made a fine end to an adventurous day.

Day 6 Saturday 17th March Plateau de Kik

Back-to-the-airport day always threatens to be lowering, and leaving this unique pension in its aromatic gardens is always truly sad. However, provided with souvenir bags of the rock salt long mined nearby (which gives the place its name), and waved off by the friendly staff, we managed to leave in reasonable spirits, and incredibly, at this last minute, John and Ro both had glimpses of Levaillant's Woodpecker in person! Flights were not till late afternoon, and there had been a unanimous group decision to stay in countryside rather than attempting a rushed day in Marrakech. A diversion from the direct route meant that we could return to the glorious flower fields of the Plateau de Kik, and this worked very well to give us a proper day of views and excellent nature study.

Stopping first at the magnificent view point above the low ground, the local birds put on quite a concert, with a Cuckoo and a Hoopoe calling together. Another caterpillar event reminded us of our second day, and it was sheer pleasure to wander again in the Marigold fields, finding plants which now

seemed like old friends. The extra snow of two nights past, combined with the extra growth of grass and cereals after some sunny days, made the views wonderful. A later stop in sheltered fields among crops was haunted by bird song, and we saw the lovely tall Toadflax *Linaria ventricosa* with its glamorous and unusual brown-streaked flowers. The last stage into the city was undertaken with great regret.