

Northern Morocco

Rif Mountains & Littoral Atlantique

A Greentours Trip Report

4th – 11th November 2018

Led by Stefano Doglio & Phil Benstead

4/11 to Tangier

Most of the team met up at Gatwick airport and travelled south on an uneventful plane ride into the Moroccan night. Stefano was there to greet us and despite the late hour we managed a good dinner at the hotel.

5/11 the hotel, Cap Malabata, Oued Aliane and Garde Royale stables area

Many of us were woken up by very heavy rain at 0500 – a heavy shower that was a precursor to a wet day (thankfully our last of the tour it transpired). After a civilized breakfast we walked outside into the light rain and surveyed the area around the hotel. This turned out to be an excellent area and we quickly started to get to grips with some of our target flora. In fact it was so easy we felt slightly deflated... First up Stefano showed us the delightful *Narcissus elegans* – a miniature daffodil. Even classier though was the all-green daff, *Narcissus viridiflorus*, a rather subtle winner for most of us. The supporting cast here included *Scilla autumnalis* and across the road on another building plot we found some battered but still blousy *Colchicum lusitanicum*. Diana found us a single *Narcissus cavanillesii*. At the van we finally met up with Dominique who had arrived earlier the day before from Belgium and had already seen the amazing flora around the hotel.

With rain still pouring down we climbed aboard the bus and headed for Cap Malabata. We poked around in the rain but the visibility was poor. We could not see Europe across the Straits but to be fair we could barely see Africa either. We moved on and parked up by the track to Oued Aliane.

Wells here had our first North African frogs. Our only long-legged buzzard showed well and we found our first great grey shrikes. At one point Phil's loud voice flushed a surprise barn owl from a row of trees. Incredibly the sun came out as we hit the beach allowing us to enjoy views of Spain as well as Mediterranean gull and common sandpiper. Plants along the way included *Delphinium obcordatum* and our first *Mandragora autumnale* (both were to be occasionally encountered during the tour).

Lunch was rather late but mercifully taken out of the rain in a cafe that served life-giving coffees to the masses. Afterwards we drove the short distance to the area near the Garde Royale stables. This proved good for flora and was surprisingly our best site for Odonates. Phil and Hugh got busy with their cameras and documented at least seven species including *Trithemis kirbyi* and *Orthetrum chryso stigma*. Butterflies were surprisingly scarce but we got to grips with Lang's short-tailed blue

here. Flora here included our first beautiful bell-like *Leucojum autumnale*. After a good look around we headed towards Chefchaoun. We did not get far though before Stefano's eagle eyes spotted a surprise colony of *Merendera filifolia*. We walked the area enjoying these autumn bulbs and also an obliging little owl on a nearby post.

The remaining drive on to the extraordinarily blue town of Chefchaoun was quiet, but we were greeted by three griffon vultures when we arrived as they drifted to roost high above the hotel. These were to be the only individuals of these species recorded during the tour.

6/11 **Bou Hachem Forest**

Another leisurely start saw us heading for the van for the drive up into the forest of Bou Hachem. We stopped a couple of times for birds en route but pretty quickly we were in the forest. Here we stopped to enjoy the flowering *Erica*, both *ciliaris* and *australis* were found in flower eventually.

Further up and into the woods and we stopped again. Stefano quickly found what he was looking for – a larva of the North African fire salamander. This is a scarce and threatened species and was one of the highlights of the trip for some. Birds here included singing firecrest as well as other new birds like nuthatch, chaffinch and goldfinch. Driving on we were quickly stopped by a huge troupe of Barbary macaques and we set about trying to get photos. They kept their distance but we came away with reasonable images as they fed and went about their business in the trees. Mistle thrushes mobbed them from hidden perches.

Our last stop of the day was by the forest research station. Here we hoped for sun but were disappointed and did not see the pond terrapins that live in a small pool by the road. However Rosie found us a lovely little North African painted frog to soften the blow. Stefano captured it and we posed it for photos in a nearby rivulet. Also here we found our first autumn ladies-tresses and there were *Crocus serotinus* growing amongst the bracken. On the drive back to the hotel we went through the troupe of macaques. It was very big.

7/11 **Parc Nacional de Talassemtane**

All change today. After another leisurely breakfast we took to a fleet of three 4WD Land Rovers for the drive up through the empty cannabis fields and on up the mountain to the Parc Nacional de Talassemtane. This was our first blue-sky day, plenty of sun but rather cool at altitude.

Birds were rather more evident in the morning, Phil enjoyed rock bunting, chough and raven, and a few sparrowhawks were buzzing about as we drove. A botanical stop produced more flowering *Merendera* and a pair of woodlark. Higher up we found some invertebrates, including our only painted lady records and even egg-laying *Sympetrum striolatum*.

We reached the 'stadium' for lunch with a curious black redstart and three lookout monkeys on a distant limestone pinnacle. Upwards and onwards we headed on into the woods for *Paeonia coriacea* in fruit, an endemic *Hedera*, and the beautiful cedar forest. It was so nice that we temporarily lost our tree man (Dominique) and Robert, but eventually they were returned to the group in time to drop down back to the hotel and dinner.

8/11 Spanish Reservoir, Akchour Gorge and Oued Laou

A stop by the Spanish Reservoir, saw the botanistas walking uphill for a good show of *Narcissus elegans* and the birders walking down towards the water's edge. Corn bunting sang near the van and the reservoir had our first ducks – mallard, teal and pochard, as well as other new waterbirds including red-knobbed coot.

Driving on we headed for the Akchour gorge. Walking the gorge was rather warm work but despite the bright sunny weather we failed to find the hoped-for butterflies and other invertebrates. Cetti's warblers sang from hidden perches. Butterflies on the way back out did include large tortoiseshell and some confusing speckled woods but we left without the prize – two-tailed pasha.

We stopped by the roadside and wrestled with a hungry dog over lunch. A solitary crag martin batted past, our only one of a quiet tour for hirundines. A stop below this produced brief views of two-tailed pasha for Stefano as it flew past the front of the van. The rest of us had to be content with great views of plain tiger and we also found our first flowering *Hyacinthoides lingulata*.

Next was a trip down to the beach at Oued Laou, an eagerly awaited part of the day for the birders. We did not have long but made the most of it. Beach plover flocks included some nice adult male Kentish plovers. A single Sandwich tern was harassed by the gulls, until it had the good sense to swallow the fish in its beak. Stone curlews flew about and offshore our only gannet of the trip was fishing. The scrubby beach vegetation held a few skulking zitting cisticola. Walking back we practiced our French on the flock of school-boys gathering around the minibus and the headed back for dinner.

9/11 Chefchaoun and road to Larache

A change of gear this morning. After breakfast we met up with Yusuf who took us on a cultural tour through the town during the morning. It was likened to herding cats as we tried to keep the group together as we navigated the narrow streets and marvelled at the blueness of everything. If you have not seen images of Chefchaoun, just think of smurfs and you will get the idea. Amazingly we did not really lose anyone until the last fifteen minutes, an astonishing achievement. This was our big chance to shop and things were bought. The soap shop received special attention at length... We also got into a rug shop for the hard sell from the Berber co-operative, some nice rugs were purchased. Lunch was delayed by staff prayers (it was Friday) and so we left town for Larache rather later than we had planned. Large whites were on the wing in the gardens that we walked past en route to the van.

We had little time to spare en route to Larache but we *had* to stop at the huge pottery stall outside Tetouan. Here we bought more stuff and a booted eagle flew overhead. Eventually we reached Larache and settled into this bustling town and a delightful old-fashioned hotel. We did get sardines for dinner but some got more than others...

10/11 Loukkos marsh and road to Asilah

A pre-dawn start for most of us this morning as we headed for the nearby marsh for a pre-breakfast look at the egret roost as it emptied at first light. We pinned a brown rat in the headlights on the track, only our second mammal species of the trip. It was a chilly session at the start, which was quickly livened up by a huge meteorite blazing across the dark sky, a precursor of the mid-November leonid showers? As the night herons clocked off, the stream of cattle egrets heading downstream into town was nice but not as impressive as the massive gathering of glossy ibis out in the marsh. On the way back to breakfast we bumped into a large roost of stone curlew and a small flock of flamingos.

Breakfast consumed it was to the marsh for a more thorough examination. A perched osprey was well received and whilst we watched this we found a nice male bluethroat which perched up nicely for 'scope views. During the morning we also got better looks at many of the species we saw or heard before breakfast, including night heron and kingfisher which both showed well. Dominique saw a rabbit! Butterflies included our only Zeller's skipper of the trip and Hugh did well for dragonflies.

We had been looking at the flora a fair bit whilst birding the marsh (which included some lovely specimens of mandrake) but things hotted up after lunch when we took in a site for *Iris planifolia*. Here Peter found us a nice spur-thighed tortoise and new butterflies included clouded yellow, small copper and the holly blue. The crocus was just across the road. Other stops in the afternoon netted us more *Hyacinthoides lingulata*. The final stop was a riot of *Leucojum* and *Narcissus elegans* and had an obliging great grey shrike.

We enjoyed a surfeit of fish at our last supper and heard the little swift roost in the palms on the way back to the hotel. We said our goodbyes to Dominique here as he would be in an early taxi to the airport before we woke.

11/11 to Tangier

After stowing the luggage in the van our last job in Larache was a visit to the supermarket for Moroccan items. The date supply in town took a serious caning and little pastries came a close second. That just left the drive which was enlivened by the occasional black-shouldered kite. With time in hand we made one last botanical stop for numerous *Hyacinthoides lingulata* and then it was time for the airport. Our flight was delayed but eventually left Morocco after a very enjoyable trip with a lovely bunch of people.

Systematic List Number 1 Plants

To be supplied...

Systematic List Number 2 Birds

| | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Gannet | <i>Morus bassanus</i> | One fishing off Oued Laou. |
| Cormorant | <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> | Frequent in suitable habitat. |
| Black-crowned night heron | <i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i> | Small numbers at the Loukkos marshes. |
| Cattle egret | <i>Bubulcus ibis</i> | Widespread and common in the lowlands. |
| Little egret | <i>Egretta garzetta</i> | Widespread in small numbers. |
| Great egret | <i>Ardea alba</i> | Small numbers in the Loukkos marshes. |
| Grey heron | <i>Ardea cinerea</i> | Only recorded on two dates, common at the Loukkos marshes. |
| White stork | <i>Ciconia ciconia</i> | Widespread, frequently encountered and present in large numbers near refuse dumps. |
| Glossy ibis | <i>Plegadis falcinellus</i> | Huge flock post-dawn at the Loukkos marshes that numbered at least 1500 individuals. |
| Eurasian spoonbill | <i>Platalea leucorodia</i> | Recorded in small numbers at Loukkos marshes. |
| Greater flamingo | <i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i> | A small flock on the edge of the Loukkos marshes. |
| Mallard | <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> | Recorded on three dates. |
| Common teal | <i>Anas crecca</i> | A few on the Spanish reservoir. |
| Common pochard | <i>Aythya ferina</i> | Noted on large waterbodies on two dates. |
| Osprey | <i>Pandion haliaetus</i> | Single bird at the Loukkos marshes. |
| Booted eagle | <i>Hieraetus pennatus</i> | One over the pottery stall en route to Larache on the penultimate day in the field. |
| Black-winged kite | <i>Elanus caeruleus</i> | Small numbers only on three dates. |
| Griffon vulture | <i>Gyps fulvus</i> | Three went to roost on the hill behind the hotel at Chefchaoun on the first night. |
| Marsh harrier | <i>Circus aeruginosus</i> | Small numbers daily in a variety of habitats. |
| Eurasian sparrowhawk | <i>Accipiter nisus</i> | Scattered records. |
| Long-legged buzzard | <i>Buteo rufinus</i> | One on the first day only. |
| Booted eagle | <i>Hieraetus pennatus</i> | One over the pottery stall near Tetouan on the penultimate day. |
| Common kestrel | <i>Falco tinnunculus</i> | Scattered records. |
| Purple swamphen | <i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i> | Seven in a loose concentration at the Loukkos marshes. |
| Moorhen | <i>Gallinula chloropus</i> | Recorded on two dates. |
| Red-knobbed coot | <i>Fulica cristata</i> | Recorded on three dates. |
| Black-winged stilt | <i>Himantopus himantopus</i> | Abundant in the Loukkos marshes. |
| Stone-curlew | <i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i> | Small numbers at Oued Laou and Larache. |
| Little ringed plover | <i>Charadrius dubius</i> | Small numbers at Oued Laou. |
| Common ringed plover | <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i> | Small numbers at Oued Laou. |
| Kentish plover | <i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i> | A few at Oued Laou. |
| Northern lapwing | <i>Vanellus vanellus</i> | Small flock at the Loukkos marshes. |
| Sanderling | <i>Calidris alba</i> | A few on the beach at Oued Laou. |
| Green sandpiper | <i>Tringa ochropus</i> | Single at the Loukkos marshes. |
| Spotted redshank | <i>Tringa erythropus</i> | Loukkos marshes (1). |
| Redshank | <i>Tringa totanus</i> | A few at the Loukkos marshes. |
| Greenshank | <i>Tringa nebularia</i> | Frequently encountered in the Loukkos marshes. |
| Marsh sandpiper | <i>Tringa stagnatilis</i> | Two at the Loukkos marshes. |
| Common sandpiper | <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i> | A few at Oued Aliane and the Loukkos marshes. |
| Black-tailed godwit | <i>Limosa limosa</i> | Small flock at Loukkos marshes. |
| Eurasian curlew | <i>Numenius arquata</i> | Loukkos marshes (1). |
| Common snipe | <i>Gallinago gallinago</i> | Loukkos marshes (1). |

| | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Mediterranean gull | <i>Larus melanocephalus</i> | One first-winter at Oued Aliane. Good numbers at Oued Laou. |
| Black-headed gull | <i>Larus ridibundus</i> | A few along coast (three dates). |
| Yellow-legged gull | <i>Larus cachinnans</i> | Good numbers at coastal sites. |
| Audouin's gull | <i>Larus audouinii</i> | Great looks at a small flock on the beach at Oued Laou. |
| Lesser black-backed gull | <i>Larus fuscus</i> | Very common along the coast. |
| Sandwich tern | <i>Sterna sandvicensis</i> | Oued Laou (1). |
| Caspian tern | <i>Sterna caspia</i> | 1 at the Loukkos marshes. |
| Rock dove | <i>Columba livia</i> | Both feral and occasionally rock versions recorded – seen daily. |
| Common woodpigeon | <i>Columba palumbus</i> | Just three on the first day at Oued Aliane. |
| Collared dove | <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i> | Common. |
| Barn owl | <i>Tyto alba</i> | One at Oued Aliane. |
| Little owl | <i>Athene noctua</i> | Recorded on three dates in small numbers. |
| [Little swift] | <i>Apus affinis</i> | Heard at roost in Larache. |
| Common kingfisher | <i>Alcedo atthis</i> | Small numbers along the river at the Loukkos marshes. |
| Great spotted woodpecker | <i>Dendropicos major</i> | Recorded in small numbers at Bou Hachem. |
| Crested lark | <i>Galerida cristata</i> | Widespread and common. |
| Thekla lark | <i>Galerida theklae</i> | A few on the first two days. |
| Woodlark | <i>Lullula arborea</i> | A pair on the way up to Talassemtane. |
| Plain martin | <i>Riparia paludicola</i> | Recorded on two dates. |
| Crag martin | <i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i> | Just one at the lunchstop below the Akchour gorge. |
| Meadow pipit | <i>Anthus pratensis</i> | Recorded on three dates, mostly heard. |
| White wagtail | <i>Motacilla alba</i> | Widespread migrant (four dates). |
| Yellow wagtail | <i>Motacilla flava</i> | Small numbers at the Loukkos marshes. |
| Grey wagtail | <i>Motacilla cinerea</i> | Scattered records in suitable habitat (three dates). |
| Winter wren | <i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i> | A few on two days only. |
| Common bulbul | <i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i> | Widespread and common. |
| Robin | <i>Erithacus rubecula</i> | Frequently heard, occasionally seen. |
| Bluethroat | <i>Luscinia svecica</i> | Single male at the Loukkos marshes. |
| Black redstart | <i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i> | Small numbers almost daily, but never seen well. |
| Common stonechat | <i>Saxicola torquata</i> | Recorded on five dates and often common. |
| Mistle thrush | <i>Turdus viscivorus</i> | A few mobbing macaques at Bou Hachem. |
| Common blackbird | <i>Turdus merula</i> | Scattered records. |
| Zitting cisticola | <i>Cisticola juncidis</i> | Recorded on two dates. |
| Blackcap | <i>Sylvia atricapilla</i> | Recorded on three dates. |
| Sardinian warbler | <i>Sylvia melanocephala</i> | Widespread and common. |
| Cetti's warbler | <i>Cettia cetti</i> | Occasionally heard in suitable habitat (three dates) – flight views in the Loukkos marshes. |
| Chiffchaff | <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i> | Recorded on four dates. |
| Firecrest | <i>Regulus ignicapillus</i> | Seen at Bou Hachem and heard the next day at Talassemtane. |
| Great tit | <i>Parus major</i> | Recorded in Bou Hachem only. |
| African blue tit | <i>Parus teneriffae</i> | Recorded on the first two days only. |
| Coal tit | <i>Parus ater</i> | Recorded at upper elevations on just one date (Talassemtane). |
| Nuthatch | <i>Sitta europaea</i> | Only at Bou Hachem and Talassemtane, where common. |

| | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Great grey shrike | <i>Lanius excubitor</i> | Scattered records all of the subspecies <i>algeriensis</i> . Southern grey shrike is a taxon not recognised by the Collins Guide. |
| Eurasian jay | <i>Garrulus glandarius</i> | Recorded at Bou Hachem and Tassemtane in good numbers. |
| Red-billed chough | <i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i> | Small flock on the way up to Talassemtane. |
| Western jackdaw | <i>Corvus monedula</i> | Recorded on most days. |
| Common raven | <i>Corvus corax</i> | Recorded at higher altitude (three dates). |
| Spotless starling | <i>Sturnus unicolor</i> | Recorded most days. |
| House sparrow | <i>Passer domesticus</i> | Ubiquitous. |
| Chaffinch | <i>Fringilla coelebs</i> | Widespread at mid and lower elevations. |
| Common linnet | <i>Carduelis cannabina</i> | Very small numbers in agricultural areas (two dates). |
| European goldfinch | <i>Carduelis carduelis</i> | Recorded on four dates. |
| European greenfinch | <i>Carduelis chloris</i> | Recorded on five dates. |
| European serin | <i>Serinus serinus</i> | Single on one date. |
| [Cirl bunting] | <i>Emberiza cirlus</i> | Heard on the drive up to Tallasemtane. |
| Rock bunting | <i>Emberiza cia</i> | One adult on the drive up to Tallasemtane. |
| Corn bunting | <i>Miliaria calandra</i> | Two singing males near the Spanish reservoir. |

Systematic List Number 3

Mammals

□ = introduction or dead. DOR = dead on road.

| | | |
|-----------------|------------------------------|--|
| Barbary macaque | <i>Macacus sylvanus</i> | A huge troupe encountered at Bou Hachem but just three high on a limestone pinnacle the next day at Talassemthane. |
| Rabbit | <i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i> | Single for Dominique at the Loukkos marshes. |
| Brown rat | <i>Rattus norvegicus</i> | One in the dark in the Loukkos marshes. |

Systematic List Number 4

Odonata

| | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| Western willow spreadwing | <i>Lestes viridis</i> | A few near the Garde Royale stables. |
| Winter damselfly | <i>Sympecma fusca</i> | One female near the Garde Royale stables. |
| Migrant hawk | <i>Aeshna mixta</i> | Scattered records. |
| Emperor spp. | <i>Anax</i> sp. | Unidentified individuals at the Loukkos marshes. |
| Epulet skimmer | <i>Orthetrum chrysostigma</i> | One near the Garde Royale stables. |
| Slender skimmer | <i>Orthetrum trinacria</i> | Hugh had one at the Loukkos marshes. |
| Broad scarlet | <i>Crocothemis erythraea</i> | Just one male in the Loukkos marshes. |
| Red-veined darter | <i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i> | A few near the Garde Royale stables and at the Loukkos marshes. |
| Southern darter | <i>Sympetrum meridionale</i> | Hugh had one at the Loukkos marshes. |
| Common darter | <i>Sympetrum striolatum</i> | Frequently encountered on nearly every day. |
| Kirby's dropwing | <i>Trithemis kirbyi</i> | One near the Garde Royale stables. |

Systematic List Number 5

Reptiles & Amphibians

| | | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| North African fire salamander | <i>Salmandra algira</i> | One larval individual in the stream at Bou Hachem. |
| [Stripeless tree frog] | <i>Hyla meridionalis</i> | Heard at the Loukkos marshes. |
| Moroccan painted frog | <i>Discoglossus scovazzi</i> | A few on the Bou Hachem day. |
| North African frog | <i>Pelophylax saharica</i> | Scattered records. |
| Common toad | <i>Bufo bufo</i> | Small one in the Akchour gorge. |
| Spur-thighed tortoise | <i>Testudo graeca</i> | Peter found us one at the <i>Iris planifolia</i> site near Larache. |
| Spanish terrapin | <i>Mauremys leprosa</i> | A few at Akchour gorge and large numbers at the Loukkos marshes. |
| a wall lizard | <i>Podarcis</i> cf <i>hispanica</i> | Scattered records. |
| Spiny-footed lizard | <i>Acanthodactylus erythrurus</i> | A few at the <i>Iris planifolia</i> site near Larache. |

Systematic List Number 6 Butterflies

| | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| Large white | <i>Pieris brassicae</i> | Recorded on three dates. |
| Small white | <i>Artogeia rapae</i> | Recorded on two dates. |
| Clouded yellow | <i>Colias crocea</i> | A few at the <i>Iris planifolia</i> site near Larache and one the next day in Tangier. |
| Small copper | <i>Lycaena phlaeas</i> | A few at the <i>Iris planifolia</i> site near Larache. |
| Lang's short-tailed blue | <i>Leptotis pirithous</i> | Singles on two days. |
| Holly blue | <i>Celastrina argiolus</i> | One at the <i>Iris planifolia</i> site near Larache |
| Plain tiger | <i>Danaus chrysippus</i> | One at the site near Oued Laou. |
| Two-tailed pasha | <i>Charaxes jasius</i> | Stefano had one at the site near Oued Laou. |
| Painted lady | <i>Vanessa cardui</i> | A few on the Bou Hachem day. |
| Speckled wood | <i>Pararge aegeria</i> | A few very orange imndividuals in the Akchour gorge. |
| Zeller's skipper | <i>Borbo borbonica</i> | Seen on the last two days. |