

Morocco – The High Atlas

Lead by Stefano Doglio and Fiona Dunbar

Daily Report by Fiona Dunbar

Day 0 12th March Arrival in Marrakech

The Gatwick, Manchester and Heathrow flights were all on time or even early and having met up with Stefano we walked out of the small and surprisingly attractive airport to the rather plush minibus and our driver Mohammed, waiting to drive us up into the mountains. The temperature was balmy and as we drove stars were bright in the sky as night fell. As we reached our village, locals were sitting outside small cafes and a brightly lit open Islamic arched doorway was almost blocked by neatly paired shoes – the mosque.

At Sel d'Aillleurs, our hosts greeted us and lead us through the gardens filled with succulents and flowering yellow jasmine to our simple and spacious bungalow rooms. A quick turn around and we were sitting down to dinner at around 8 pm. One after another delicious, freshly-made Moroccan dish was set before us – this was to be the way of all the evening meals.



Day 1 13th March The Kik Plateau

After a very civilised breakfast with freshly squeezed local orange juice, freshly made flatbreads and rotis with fig jam and olive oil and coffee we were away at 9.30 am, after watching a few common bulbuls by the main building. For the first time we could see the beautiful red striped cliffs rising in the distance above which we were to be heading today. En route we passed through Ansi again, where obvious earthquake damage (October 2023) could be seen on many if not most of the buildings and a small army of large tents – temporary housing for locals whose homes had been damaged.

Our first roadside stop was for the lovely white gorse relative *Retama monosperma*. Here also were Sardinian Warblers and some lovely views of bright Subalpine Warblers. Our second was when Stefano spotted the red horned poppy *Gaucium corniculatum*. Here we also found the lavender *Lavendula multifida* a very common plant that we where to see flowering everywhere, *Chamerops humilis* or dwarf palm, *Coronella velentina*, *Salvia taraxifolia* and *Calendula arvensis*.

On reaching the plateau we stopped again and walked amongst small fields of wheat and broad bean. The warm sun brought out butterflies – Red Admiral, Large White, Moroccan Orange tip, Speckled Wood. Weaving around the shrubby hedges was flowering White Bryony, and there were nice things like *Papaver rhoeas*. The only sound was birdsong – largely Corn Buntings, also Blackbird and Goldfinch, very smart Moroccan Chaffinches and the odd donkey, no people or traffic noise. As the days went on, the lack of sounds of civilisation were an almost constant pleasure. A Spur-thighed Tortoise made its way briskly into the undergrowth to let us pass! In and over the fields were Barn Swallows and a White Wagtail, and by the path were patches of the very attractive *Aristolochia paucinervis*, *Silene rubella* and the borage relative *Nonea versicaria* with tiny vinaceous flowers.

We approached a rocky area backed by a limestone hill of ridges and outcrops, and straight away were finding desert plants such as *Caralluma europaea*, an interesting little succulent and a family I was particularly hoping to find. There was a yellow flowered Astragalus



Medicago suffruticosa, a bronze -leaved thyme and pink *Ajuga iva*. By the road a Common Redstart flitted past.

Driving down the far side of the plateau, we stopped near a village for the very attractive orange striped *Linaria venticosa*, growing with *Anchusa cretica*. In a walled vegetable plot we could see an *Echium* maybe *horridum*, lots of *Reseda elata* and a mallow, and a flock of Goldfinches flitted and sang in the fig trees behind.

Lunch was on a flat area splashed with patches orange *Calendula stellata*. Once sandwiches biscuits and oranges were consumed, if not before, we were admiring the mix of flowers with the calendula – prostrate mats of purple flowered *Fagonia cretica*, the feathery purple *Volutaria lipii*, an inflated red *Rumex versicarius*, *Reseda alba* and the dark-centred *Reichardia tingitana*. Making our way down a slope towards a gully we found more gorgeous flowering plants, *Convolvulus althaeoides*, stunning pinky purple *Echium horridum* and a shrub of blue flowered *Teucreum fruticans* stood out to me, as well as two Ashodels- perennial branched *racemosus* and the more delicate annual *fistulosus*. Butterflies here included Greenish Blacktips and Green Hairstreak. Stefano lead us down into the gully for a couple of special things – some beautiful specimens of Brown Bluebell *Dipcardi serotinum* and *Helianthemum apeninum*.

Returning over the plateau we stopped at the edge of the escarpment for a view over the lowlands. A Cuckoo called, the first of the year for most of us, and we had lovely close views of a Black Wheatear. Peter and Sheila spotted a Long-legged Buzzard and a Liz an accipiter, probably Kestrel. The shrubby *Withania frutescens* was covered in largish green flowers and is in the nightshade family.

The final stop of the day was for to look for *Iris planifolia*, which we found in leaf, but not until after we had found a different, beautiful purple iris which was hard to pin down and a spike of red *Linaria maroccana*. After later discussion we decided on *Moraea sisyrinchium*.

Back to the hotel, a little later than planned, for a couple hours R & R before supper.



**Day 2 March 14th Tizi Ouzane and Tougramane Gorge,
Amaziz Mountains**

My day started well – I heard a woodpecker calling at 7 am so I wandered out to the pool in my pgs and bins – Levalliant's Woodpecker sitting atop a dead tree at the end of the garden!

Today we were heading towards Tiz Ouzane, starting at an altitude of around 900 m at the hotel and peaking on a low pass; this was close to the epicentre of the earthquake in and all of the mountain villages had a secondary village of tents beside the damaged structures. Our first stop was at the edge of a protected area for Mouflon. In amongst open areas under a mixture of *Tetraclinis articulata* (one of the most important timber trees in Morocco) and *Juniperus phoenicia* we found what we were looking for – Moroccan Hairstreak! A pair of Barbary Partridges flew off as we returned to the van.

At our next stop we walked down a road which contours along a gorge. The road has been widened in the last few years, meaning the cliff dwelling plants we wanted to see were further away, but revealing amazing coloured striations in the exposed rock. We never got close to the strange succulent Asteraceae *Kleinia anteuophorbium*, but we did see a pale Desert Orangetip, Greenish Blacktips and plenty of tufts of purple flowered *Moricandia suffruticosa*. Was it Kay that spotted the frog in the water below?

An arid slope dotted with tufts of lavender was a site for the *Kickxia heterophylla*, a delicate sprawling clambering thing with scattered yellow 'snapdragon' flowers. Bushes of *Cytisus albidus* are usually in covered flower at this time but the late season meant that most were still in bud, but not all.

Although we had seen *Cladantus arabicus* at the last stop, Stefano pulled the bus over for a much better display. A good call as there were lots of attractive things nearby; Weasels snout, *Cynoglossum cheirifolium* with white flowers, a pale lemon-yellow Asteraceae *Andryla integrifolia*



Passing through Amaziz it was market day – mainly oranges of every size, bananas, and onions. We stopped for lunch under the welcome shade of some *Pinus halepensis*. There were lots of Red Admirals and a Cleopatra as well as a spirited debate over the merits of chocolate vs 'other' biscuits.

The road was winding ever upwards and I spotted some *Narcissus romieuxii*! Maybe half a dozen, several metres above our heads and out of reach but great to see even so. As we walked back to the van Stefano shouted – we had all walked past a perfect individual by the roadside. A second stop for more *Narcissi*,

these accessible with some scrambling. Once above the road cutting, the footing was easy. A third stop was for a cluster of 50 plus *Narcissi*, and then we left them behind and headed for the pass. Here we walked out onto a fantastic landscape of rounded craggy red rock outcrops with short turf between, with terra cotta mountains and cliffs behind. Apart from the views Stefano found the stemless asphodel *Asphodelus acaulis* and Keith another *Morea*, the same species as yesterday. We were accompanied much of the time by a (very short) shepherd and his flock of (very tall) sheep.

Our final stop to break the journey home was for a large bush of *Globularia alypum* – another good call by Stefano as in the same spot was a pair of Great Spotted Cuckoos! Kay found a lovely *Centaurea pullata*, too. Birds from the bus included Long-legged Buzzard and Black Wheatear.

As we walked back to our rooms the Levalliant's Woodpecker could be heard calling.

Day 3 15th March Azzaden Valley and Tizi Oussemtun

Today we were heading higher to the Tizi Oussemtun along a different road to previous years as there are currently major road widening works on the road.



After passing through a red canyon eroded landscape around Asni we turned into the Azzaden Valley and began to ascend. Stefano spotted a side track that looked interesting, and we stopped to walk it. It led to a small farming community and we were passed and greeted by an old lady carrying a bundle of fodder bigger than herself amongst others. It was a very peaceful place, and we enjoyed sightings of a Booted Eagle, Sardinian Warbler and Blackcap and the striking purple and yellow *Polygala balanense*.

From here on we were following the road along the side of a spectacular, mountainous valley. Backed by snow-topped mountains the rugged valley towered above us, sometimes with sparse *Thuya*, then quite suddenly with dense, largely Oak *Quercus coccifera* forest on a north facing aspect. This gave way to

scattered *Juniperus phoenecia* bushes and scattered, gnarled and probably ancient *Juniperus oxicedrus* trees. Stopping for blue *Lupinus constantinii* by the side of the road, the silence of the valley except for the distant sound of the river below and birdsong around us

was a treat. The bottom third of the precipitous valley was a marvel of ancient engineering, with incredible terracing over every possible inch and villages stacked on the steep slope. Above the rocky valley side on the higher slopes were signs of old terracing, either no longer used or only used seasonally.

Stefano spotted a superb tuft of the pink flowered Asteraceae *Rhodanthemum gayanum* at an altitude of around 1700m, and here also the *Juniperus oxycedrus* was joined by some spectacular Dwarf Palms which must also be quite old, some were 3 – 4 m high. Another spectacular bend further on we spotted a flock of chough flying acrobatically as they do. We climbed a few more bends in the van and stopped at the beginning of a small village at 1840m where we descended from the vehicle and were surrounded by hundreds of Chough and Alpine Chough.



We took lunch where the road dropped and crossed the river. A large yellow flowered shrub turned out to be *Adenocarpus anagyriifolius*. A vivid green lizard with a row of spots on its side was an African Ocellated Lizard, a second one crossed in front of the van later!

We went on a little further, but as suspected, the road got smaller and Mohammed did a twenty point turn in the van aided by most of the village who were just exiting the mosque.

The return to the hotel was punctuated by a stop at the mineral and fossil shop, both being things Morocco is justifiably famous for. There was haggling and Moroccan tea served to all, just as there should be. A flock of Cattle Egrets flew ahead of us down the road for quite some distance.

Back at the hotel Liz and Margi chose to enjoy the grounds for the rest of the afternoon. The remainder had time for a quick dip in the pool or cuppa before walking out from the hotel to a tank with Stripe-necked Terrapins. The spiny hedges were covered in places with scrambling *Ephedra altissima* and *Asparagus horridus*. The latter had some very recognisable and edible looking shoots. A well-lit Short-toed Eagle put in a good performance over the Terrapin's tank.

Back round the pool there was time for more dipping, and our local noisy Levalliant's Woodpecker put in an appearance on a nearby dead tree.

Day 4 16th March The Tizi n'Test Pass

A pre-breakfast walk around the gardens was very quiet – no noisy Levalliant's Woodpecker this morning. We got good views of the Common Bulbuls and Larry found a Whitethroat.

An early (9am) start saw us on our way up the valley towards the Tizi n'Test pass at 2200 m.

There were cormorants fishing in the clear turquoise water of a reservoir, and a Barbary Partridge meandered up the hill right by the van.

The road up the valley has been widened in the last year, making plants less accessible at the side of the road and the road surface meant very slow going. There was still extensive signs of earthquake damage in all the villages, despite this being further away from the epicentre than we were on day 2. We drove through one extensive area of rubble – what had been a village. There was an organised area of tents, and there were mobile shops cafes in trailers at the roadside. Life generally seemed to be continuing as normal. The mountains and scenery of course were varied and impressive, and at our first stop for the pink and white *Coronilla viminalis* we also found *Asphodelus fistulosus* in flower, a very active group of African Marsh Frogs in the pool by the river and had good views of Grey and Yellow Wagtails and Black Redstarts.

Further up it was sad to see the road widening had taken out an old *Cupressus atlanticus*, a rare and localised tree, though there were a reasonable number of other examples of this fine pine.

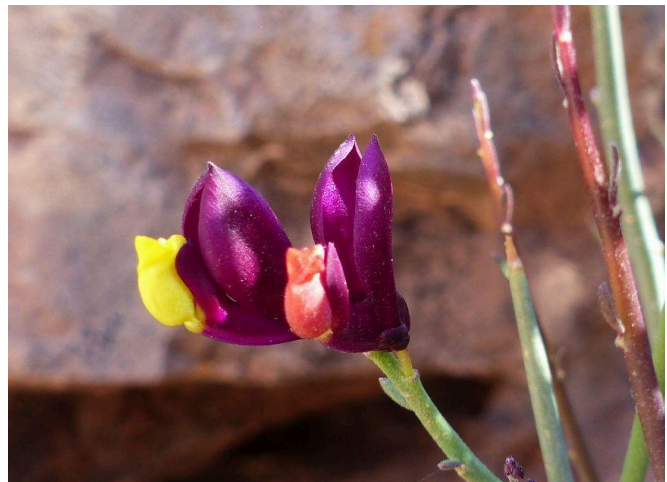
Lunch was under the shade of a *Populus nigra* or Black Poplar. A track up a small valley behind had *Polygala balanense*, but the dry winter and lack of recent rain in this area made it too arid to be worth going further.

The bus wended its way every higher – Liz spotted an a purple *Agama bibromii* crossing the road and by the Moufflon reserve a fine male Moufflon trotted down the road in front of us before clambering up a steep slope!

Reaching the top of the pass Stefano checked the *Narcissus watieri* site but they did not look like they would be flowering here this year, too dry. A welcome break at the Belle Vue Café was very enjoyable, with views over the Tes valley, the High Atlas mountains and beyond, hidden by a haze, the Sahara desert. House Finches flitted around the rocks.

We began our descent. Breaking the journey at a lush green area by a village, we found the yellow pea *Colutea atlantica* with inflated seed pods and budding *Linaria ventricosa*. We were of great interest to the little boys from the village.

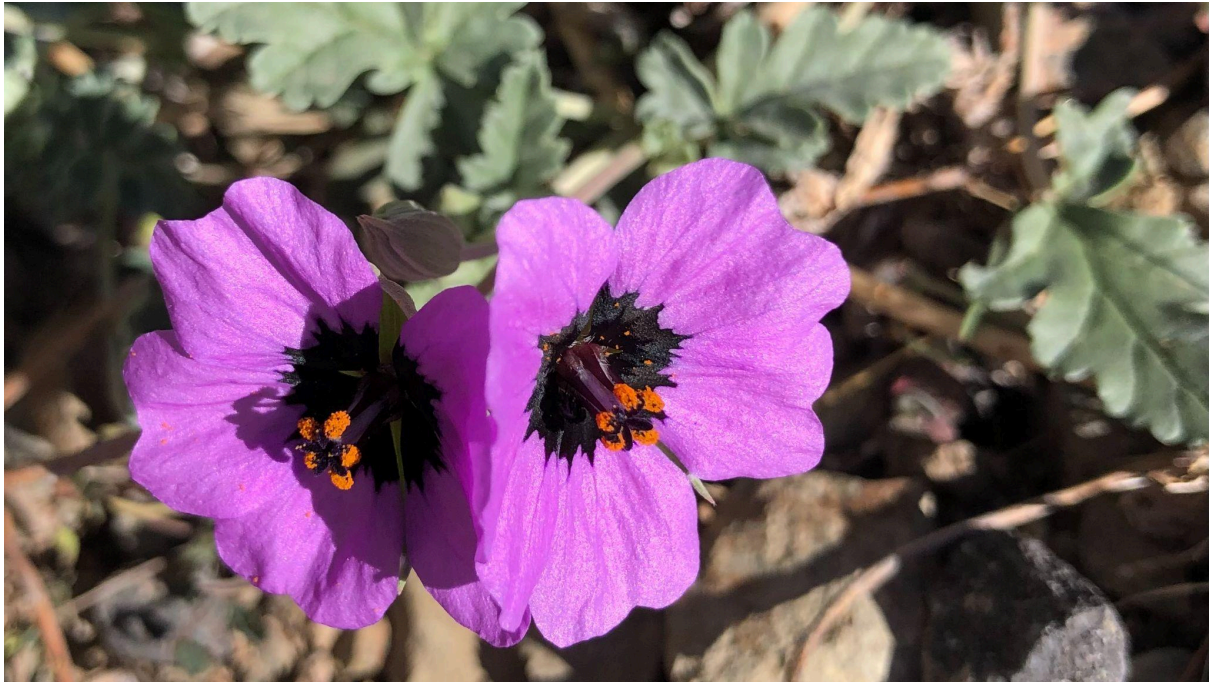
Our final stop of the day was at a very unlikely looking spot, where in previous years a population of the strange and stunning *Astragalus maurorum* put up spikes of yellow pea flowers with protruding vetchy divided leaves. Without this knowledge on Stefano's part we would have driven past the one perfect flowering plant hidden behind a rock. Closer



examination showed young plants already colonising the new road cutting.

We were back by 6, with time to relax, or dip in the pool, or have a g&t before supper at 8. (Or all three.)

Day 5 17th March Imlil and Aksoul Mountain



A shorter day today and a 9.30 start. Driving through Ansi there were numerous white coaches – the secondary school building was damaged and the students were on their way to school in Marackech. We stopped to see if the museum nature was open – which it was not – but enjoyed peering at Richard Branson’s hotel/palace/residence. Our first Scarce Swallowtail flitted past.

A large boulder by the roadside was sporting a beautiful tuft of flowering *Rhodanthemum atlanticum*. Looking past the rock the valley below was planted with white-blossomed prunus sp growing on terraces, a number of which were edged with planted *Iris germanicus*; above us was a grove of walnut trees. Half a dozen Scarce Swallowtails were flying back and forth, along with a Cleopatra and a Large Tortoiseshell

The minibus climbed up towards the pass, passing through the town of Imlil. Well know as a place to hike, climb and mountain bike from, there were gear hire shops along with tourist shops, and more useful food shops with baskets heaped with almonds, walnuts and thyme ie local produce.

With the pass in sight we stopped on reaching an area of the endemic *Cedrus atlanticus*, and had lovely views of a pair of Kestrels. Dropping down the other side of the pass we parked by a grassy area and walked downhill a little way, where we were delighted to find a 40 or 50 *Narcissus bulbocodium* in good condition despite the dry weather. The turf was also dotted with purple *Romulea bulbocodium*, and there were several bushes of flowering *Daphne laureola*. There were shepherds and shepherdesses nearby who were friendly and did not seem bothered or curious as to what the foreigners were doing. Lunch was taken

here. I walked uphill to have a look-see, and found a pair of Moussier's Redstarts on the rocks above. Margi spotted a Small Copper here too.

A short walk after lunch took us to a tea house with a wonderful view where we had a very relaxing break in their garden, with a tray of Moroccan tea and coffee brought out to us with a plate of biscuits and dates. The air all through this valley smelt of wild thyme and chamomile. On the way Kay found creamy large-flowered *Rhodanthemum catananche* and Keith *Anacyclus pyrethrum* – a simple white chamomile like flower until one looked



underneath – the petal undersides are deep, deep red. On the return a grassy slope had more *Nacissus bulbicodium* and a purple *Viola sp*

Heading home, a rocky outcrop that Stefano knew produced a few tiny dark Atlas Day Geckos, an unusual species, a pair of Moussier's Redstarts and a Black Redstart, quite a haul. There was a short stop in Imlil to examine the shops, and again in Ansi for the White Storks nesting on the communications tower before returning to our lovely hotel.

The evening was unexpectedly disrupted by a power surge with exploding lightbulbs and smoking sockets in most of our rooms.



Day 6

18th March

Sidi Fares & the Oukaimedan Ski Resort



Sheila and Peter started the day very well with a pair of perched European Bee-eaters from the pool before breakfast!

Having been met by our trusty driver Mohammed we were on our way, stopping after only a kilometre or two for a group of Lesser Kestrels which we watched for some minutes.

Today we were going to a high area around 2600m, a ski resort though there was no snow there this year. The road took us up through more magnificent scenery, today craggy red cliffs and pinnacles were a feature. We stopped for some magnificent Globularia, and realised that it was amongst the dominant roadside vegetation for some way. I particularly liked a patch of strongly lemon-scented thyme .

Stefano was scanning the vegetation above the road cutting as we went through areas of pine woodland. First there were a couple *Narcissus roumeuxii* visible, and then we stopped at a place where Stefano wanted to look for *Narcissus wateiri* – which he duly found. I tried to find a way up to the flowers but it was very steep. Margi and Liz found a female Crossbill while we were fossicking in the trees above!

Lunch was in a shady area of pines with large boulders. Margi pinpointed a Coal Tit by sound, and we could hear Fire crests calling. A Moroccan gentleman materialised out of nowhere to proffer a selection of fossils and geodes, with some success, and Keith found a few very large (comparatively!) *Narcissus bulbicodium*.

Onwards to the ski resort. We walked up the track towards a summer village used by nomadic herders when they were accessing summer grazing. The *Colchicum triphyllum* were not in flower other than a couple of individuals because of the recent dry winters but there were a couple of patches of tall-stemmed *Narcissus bulbicodium*. Much of the ground cover was a mass of silvery rosettes of an aster, maybe *Catananche ceaspitosa* and a tiny

yellow alpine was scattered about - *Draba verna*. As we returned down the track we had great views of a pair of Black Redstarts who appeared to be nesting in one of the buildings.

Having reached an altitude of 2600m at the resort, we turned for home. Almost our last stop of the day and my favourite was a green area with huge boulders. Lavendula Keith and Kay found a purple crucifer – *Arabis vernis?* right by the van. I spotted a couple of ferns tucked under the boulders. One was Maidenhair Spleenwort and the other I could not reach to identify. Stefano lead us to a patch of the beautiful, delicate white *Narcissus wateiri* – very accessible this time! With it were superb clumps of deep purple, crocus-like *Romulea bulbocodium*. The silver aster abounded along with tall *Bellis sylvestris*. Gill spotted Moussier's Redstarts and Kieth found a yellow *Ajuga iva ssp pseudoiva*, and Kay the tiny, *Viola kitaibeliana*. A campion and minuata await identification from Stefano's flora.

One last view stop and then Mohammed took us back to the hotel.

Day 7

19th March

Marrakech and home



The Bee-eaters were calling as I walked through the gardens to breakfast. Mohammed met us promptly and loaded our bags into the back of the minibus. This time the drive to Marrakech was in daylight and we observed the change in terrain and land use as we descended to the plain with interest. The bus passed through areas of newer buildings before entering the gate of the old city, where we were dropped off. Stefano lead us across the main 'square', though the narrow streets of the souk to the 'Secret Garden' – a restored historic courtyard garden in the oldest and wealthiest part of the town. Inside was a green haven after the heat and bustle of the old town, which was not as busy and overwhelming as I had expected and we were not hassled too much by shopkeepers. Two old town houses built around courtyard gardens were joined in the 1800's but fell into disrepair from the '20s on, to be excavated

and resurrected in 2016. In the latter half of the eleventh century the Almoravids built the city's first khattara - a ground drainage tunnel that intercepts the water of the groundwater aquifer (which begins in the Atlas Mountains many kilometers away) and distributes it to the city's mosques, hammams and fountains and some of the great houses, including that of Le Jardin Secret, which had, therefore, its own water supply, a rare privilege and an additional sign of wealth. One of the gardens was devoted to beautiful exotic African plants, labelled for

the most part, the other was scented plants and shade trees around small pools and stone basins. The overwhelming scent was of orange blossom.

After a relaxed hour we lunched at the café here before retracing our steps through the souk, this time stopping at some of the stalls. There were very good quality rugs and ceramics and I am very happy with my carpet bag! Finally walking a few hundred yards took us to the 12 century Kutubiyya Mosque. The ancient tower, decorated with Islamic arches and tiles and topped with three gold balls and a (disused) gibbet towers over the old town to a height of 77m. It may not have been far but in 33 degrees it was far enough, but worth it. We retired gratefully to a café for a cold drink whilst waiting for Mohamed to collect us and deposit us at the airport 15 minutes away. It was a serene way to end a great tour.

