

## 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 Levillant'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

#### Oukaïmeden

We'll start our exploration with a visit to the ski resort of Oukaïmeden. 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 *Lithospermums* 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**

**Or...**

## **Merzouga's Saharan Desert Pre-tour**

### **Day 1**

#### **To Marrakech**

Our flight arrives into Marrakech early in the evening and so we'll settle straight into our pleasant hotel for the night.

### **Day 2**

#### **Over the Tiz-In-Tichka pass via Al Manssur reservoir to Boumalne Dades.**

We'll start our journey to Boumalne Dades after breakfast. We'll cross the High Atlas via the Tizi-n-Tichka pass, the highest pass in Northern Africa at 2,260 meters above sea level. Along the way, we'll search for Levaillant's Green Woodpecker, African Blue Tit, and the African subspecies of Common Chaffinch. We'll pause for lunch and local birding opportunities, where we may spot Moussier's Redstart and Long-legged Buzzard. Descending into the southern Atlas Mountains, the landscape becomes drier as we head towards the stony deserts near Ouarzazate. Before arriving at our hotel in Boumalne Dades, we'll explore the Mansour Eddahbi barrage. Here, we hope to observe Marbled Duck, Ruddy Shelduck, Black-winged Stilts, Maghreb Lark, Cormorants, Herons, and various waders.

### **Day 3**

#### **Boumalne Dades: The Tagdilt Track. Then to Merzouga**

An early start today as head out into the stony reg desert that rolls out like a carpet from Boumalne Dades. We'll explore the famous Tagdilt Track which is very close to our hotel, searching for some of Morocco's most distinctive gravel desert species such as Cream-colored Courser, Thick-billed Lark, Greater Hoopoe Lark, Temminck's Lark, Desert Lark, Bar-tailed Lark and Red-rumped Wheatear. Our local guides know sites here for the majestic Desert Owl as well as Lanner and Maghreb Wheatear. By the late morning we'll be heading east further into the Sahara. Along the way, we will explore some of the numerous ouadis (seasonal dry rivers) and large palm groves to look for some emblematic species of the region such as the Streaked Scrub-Warbler and Brown-necked Raven. We will arrive in Merzouga in the late afternoon and have dinner at our hotel which has spectacular views of the desert dunes of the Sahara.

### **Day 4**

#### **Merzouga: Erg Chebbi Dunes**

Today we will dedicate the whole day to exploring the sandy dunes and the nearby stony deserts of the Erg Chebbi where we will find some of the most sought-after birds of this part of the world. Egyptian Nightjar, Brown-necked Raven, Hoopoe Lark, Desert Sparrow, African Desert Warbler, both Crowned and Spotted Sandgrouse, and a selection of migrant passerines will all be possible. In addition, we might visit the Dajet

Srj, better known as Merzouga Lake, where we might see Greater Flamingo, Ruddy Shelduck and Marbled Duck. This will however depend on how much water the lake will have since it is usually dry after periods with no rain. That lover of the driest parts of the globe, *Calotropis procera*, is common and will be in flower and we'll hope to see the spectacular *Astragalus gomboeformis* and other desert flora like *Crotalaria saharae*.

## **Day 5**

### **Merzouga: Todra Gorges. Then to Ouarzazate**

After a relaxed breakfast, we will visit the spectacular palm grove of Rissani where we will look for the elusive Fulvous Babbler and the Maghreb Lark. Mid-morning we will start our return journey to the West, following a different road from our arrival in order to enjoy a greater variety of landscapes. During the second part of the day we will visit the famous Todra Gorge and admire the spectacular views of the traditional towns and huge walls where Tristram's Warbler, Bonelli's Eagles, Blue Rock-Thrushes and Crag Martin can all be found. Then we'll have a long journey back to Ouarzazate with some stops along the way.

## **Day 6**

### **Ouarzazate to Aïd Benhaddou then to Marrakech**

One of Morocco's renowned ksars is Ait Ben Haddou, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We'll stop for a visit, allowing time to explore its narrow streets, and adobe buildings, or browse souvenirs. After about an hour at the ksar, we'll journey back, crossing the Atlas Mountains via the Tiz-n-Tichka pass. Following our customary lunch at Restaurant Tichka there will be another chance to look for Levaillant's Green Woodpecker, African Blue Tit and Moussier's Redstart.

## **Day 7**

### **Explore Marrakech. Join man tour in the evening.**

Today you can relax in Marrakech before flying home, or joining the main Morocco's High Atlas tour which starts in the evening. During the day you can visit the old quarter of Marrakech and the impressive Jema-el-fna square which is an unbelievable experience for any visitor.

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