

info@naturetravelbirding.com
www.naturetravelbirding.com



Morocco Birding Tour

15 DAYS/ 14 NIGHTS

OVERVIEW

The Kingdom of Morocco, also known as “the place the sun sets”, or the “western Kingdom” is a country rich in history and culture, located in the far west of North Africa. It overlooks the Mediterranean Sea to the north and the Atlantic Ocean to the west, bordered to the east by Algeria and to the south by Mauritania. Morocco is a member of the Arab League, the Union for the Mediterranean and the African Union. It has the fifth largest economy of Africa. Amongst other things, it is famous for its cuisine, its ancient cities, its literature and its love for football.

The geography of Morocco spans from the 2000 miles of Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea coastlines, to mountainous areas including the Atlas mountains, to the vast Sahara desert in the south.

This scenically spectacular country has a decidedly undeveloped feel and, for those who like travelling somewhere distinctly ‘different’, a visit to Morocco will be a memorable journey through a land where many regions seem outwardly little changed in centuries. The combination of dramatic desert and mountain scenery, superb desert oases, strikingly attractive mud-walled towns and villages, colourful tribal people and superb birding ensures that Morocco is one of those places that one longs to return to.

Morocco has a wide range of biodiversity. It is part of the Mediterranean basin, an area with exceptional concentrations of endemic species. It is considered to be a hotspot for conservation priority. Avifauna are notably variant and the bird list for Morocco includes a total of over 450 species.

As an independent country after French rule, few Muslim countries offer the combination of such a friendly atmosphere complimented with strong cultural beliefs and few restrictions on visitors.

Birding in Morocco is scenic and exciting, and on this Nature Travel Birding Tour we will visit the High and Middle Atlas Mountains, the vast Sahara desert, many stunning and bird-rich gorges and valleys and the picturesque Atlantic coastline.

DAILY SUMMARY

DAY 1	Arrival Marrakesh
DAY 2	High Atlas Mountains
DAY 3	Northeast to Middle Atlas Mountains
DAY 4	Ifrane & Zeida
DAY 5	Zeida, and transfer to Merzouga
DAY 6&7	Merzouga (Erg Chebbi)
DAY 8,9&10	Boulmane du Dades
DAY 11	Ouarzazate and transfer to Agadir
DAY 12&13	Souss Valley and Souss-Massa National Park
DAY 14	Tamri and back to Marrakesh
DAY 15	Optional extra day in Marrakesh. End of tour.

DETAILED DAILY ITINERARY

DAY 1: Arrival in Marrakesh

After your arrival at the Marrakesh Menara Airport you will be met by a company representative and as the arrival is usually late in the evening we will transfer straight to our hotel for our first night in Morocco.

Marrakesh is the fourth largest city in the country and home to almost one million people. It is the capital city of the mid-southwestern region of Marrakesh-Safi, and is located to the north of the foothills of the snow-capped Atlas Mountains. Marrakesh is possibly the most important of Morocco's four former imperial cities, and has a history dating back to 1062. Like many Moroccan cities, Marrakesh comprises an old fortified city packed with vendors and their stalls (the *medina*, a UNESCO World Heritage Site), bordered by modern neighbourhoods. Today it is one of the busiest cities in Africa and serves as a major economic hub and tourist destination.

We start our exciting North African birding tour tomorrow!

DAY 2: High Atlas Mountains

Even before leaving this morning, look around the hotel grounds for House and Striolated Bunting, Common Bulbul, Pallid and Common Swift and even White Stork. We should also see Black Kite, Eurasian Collared Dove, Common Wood Pigeon, Spanish Sparrow and European Bee-eater.

Departure is early in the morning to the ski resort of Oukaimeden (2600 metres above sea level) in the Central High Atlas Mountains, about 80 kilometres (50 miles) to the south of Marrakesh.

On the Haouz plains we will search for Moroccan Magpie, Crested Lark and many other passerines can be found in gardens and on the plain. En route we will also hope to see Western Jackdaw, here at its southern limit.

On the lower slopes of the Atlas Mountain we may find House and Rock Bunting, Moussier's Redstart, Black Wheatear and Blue Rock Thrush. In the small oak trees we find the African Blue, Great and Coal Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper, Hawfinch, Common Firecrest and Tristram's Warbler. The big walnut trees in the valley are good habitat for Levillant's Woodpecker. Other goodies might include Great Spotted Woodpecker and the local race of Short-toed Treecreeper, a probable split in the near future.

On the plateau of Oukaimeden itself, surrounded by snow-capped mountains and conifer-covered slopes, we hope to find Red-billed and Alpine Chough, Alpine Accentor, Water Pipit, Horned Lark and African Crimson-winged Finch, and the *seebohmi* subspecies of Northern Wheatear (possible future split) amongst many others.

The High Atlas is also a good area to see the famous Bearded Vulture and Golden Eagle as we come down to our hotel La Bergerie in Ouirgane, about an hour to the west of Oukaimeden. We could also see Mistle Thrush, Eurasian Jay, Black Redstart, European Robin, Common Wood Pigeon, Rock Sparrow, Eurasian Sparrowhawk and the *mauritanica* subspecies of Tawny Owl.

We will return to our hotel in Marrakesh for our overnight stay.

DAY 3: Northeast to Middle Atlas Mountains

We will again do some morning birding in and around Marrakesh, where we can enjoy some of the common birds living around the city. Little & Pallid Swifts are fairly common, as it is so the recently split African Magpie and the very common Striolated Bunting.

We will also do some birding at a nearby cliff, where we will have first chances for species such as Lanner Falcon, Thekla Lark, Black Wheatear, Barbary Partridge and Spanish

Sparrow. The area is also noted for migratory raptors and flocks of Black Kites or even Black Storks can be seen around.

We will transfer to our accommodation in the Middle Atlas Mountains, where we will arrive at mid-afternoon.

During the night we will try to see Scops Owl and the local race of Tawny Owl, now known as North African Tawny Owl, and a good candidate to become a new full species.

DAY 4: Ifrane and Zeida

We will do some morning birding at the famous lakes around Ifrane. The modern town of Ifrane was established by the French administration in 1928 due to its Alpine climate. Ifrane was conceived as a “hill station”. It is a resort town set high up in the mountains so that Europeans could find relief from the summer heat of tropical colonies. Ifrane is also a popular altitude training destination for athletes and the like.

This area is famous for the good density of Black-necked Grebe and Red-knobbed Coot. Along with them we will have good chances for Levillant's Woodpecker but also Ferruginous Ducks, Garganeys and several other waterfowl. Around the lake is a good area to look for Black-eared Wheatear and the trees around attract a good variety of migratory species.

We will then transfer to our accommodation in Zeida with a number of stops on the way to enjoy the wonderful cedar forests of the Moyen (Middle) Atlas. Here there is even a population of Leopards! With a bit of luck we will enjoy some Barbary Macaques moving in the forest!

Another stop will be done in the high plateau beyond the forested areas. Here we will have our first chances for Seehbom's Wheatear, Atlas Horned Lark, Ruddy Shelduck, Blue Rock Thrush and, if lucky, White-throated Dipper!

We will arrive at our overnight accommodation in the late afternoon.

DAY 5: Zeida, and transfer to Merzouga

This morning we will do some birding on the plains around Zeida. This location has become now the best spot to try to see the scarce and shy Dupont's Lark in Morocco. We will try to discover this enigmatical bird while enjoying many other good birds around. The poorly vegetated plains can host Temminck's Lark, Desert, White-crowned & Red-rumped Wheatears, Tawny Pipit, Crowned Sandgrouse and Cream-coloured Coursers among several other good birds.

We will later transfer to Merzouga (the gateway to the big Sahara), where we will spend our next 3 nights.

DAY 6 & 7: Merzouga (Erg Chebbi)

Merzouga is known for its proximity to Erg Chebbi, a Saharan erg (wide flat sand expanse), and it is for this reason a part of the itineraries of many tourists visiting Morocco. Merzouga has the largest natural underground body of water in Morocco.

This area of Morocco has also been identified as being very similar in appearance and possibly geology to certain areas on the planet Mars. Because of this, there is an interest in this area as a field research location for Mars analogue research.

Here, a good variety of desert specialities can be seen. African Desert Warbler, Fulvous Babbler, Desert Sparrow, Brown-necked Raven, Egyptian Nightjar, Spotted & Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Greater Hoopoe Lark, Bar-tailed Lark, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Houbara Bustard, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Rufous Bush Robin and Lanner Falcon are all possible.

We will also have time for some wetlands, like the impressive Dayet Srij, a large lagoon in the middle of the dunes where it is possible to see good numbers of Greater Flamingoes but also Ferruginous Duck, Marbled Teal, Pied Avocet and a good selection of migratory waders and passerines.

While looking for all of these birds we will also scan for migratory passerines. Here it is possible to see good numbers of Woodchat Shrikes but also Western Bonelli's Warbler, Subalpine Warbler, Common Whitethroat, Willow Warbler, Garden Warbler, Pied Flycatcher and Western Orphean Warbler. Other species may include Common Grasshopper Warbler, Eurasian Golden Oriole, Eurasian Wryneck or Iberian Chiffchaff!

On our last afternoon we will transfer to Boulmane du Dades for a 2 night stay.

DAY 8,9&10: Boulmane du Dades

During these two days we will explore the famous steppe lands around Boulmane du Dades.

The Dadès Gorges are a series of rugged wadi gorges carved out by the Dadès River. The river originates in the High Atlas range of the Atlas mountains, flowing some 350 kilometres (220 mi) southwest before joining the Draa River at the edge of the Sahara. The many-colored walls of the gorges range anywhere from 200 to 500 meters (650 to 1600 feet). The southernmost gorges are known for extensive production of roses, used in the production of rose water. There are also groves of palm and almond trees. Some great photo opportunities here! The area is noted for species such as Temminck's Lark, Cream-coloured Courser, Thick-billed Lark, Long-legged Buzzard, Saharan Scrub Warbler, Red-rumped Wheatear and Crowned & Black-bellied Sandgrouse. Here it is also possible to see Lesser Short-toed Lark and Desert Wheatear while both Barbary & Lanner Falcon can be seen hunting in the area.

During our time here we will also have time to look for the scarce Maghreb Wheatear as well as for Pharaoh Eagle Owl.

We will also explore the wonderful Gorge du Dades, with its bizarre mix of incredible landscape and stunning mud-walled castles. Here we will look for Black Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush, Trumpeter Finch, Moussier's Redstart, Barbary Partridge, Desert Lark, Eurasian Hoopoe and Tristram's & Spectacled Warbler. There are also noted for migratory birds such as Melodious Warbler, Common Nightingale or Western Bonelli's Warbler.

On our last day here we will transfer to Ouarzazate for an overnight stay expecting to arrive to our accommodation at mid-afternoon. Ouarzazate, also nicknamed *The Hollywood of the desert*, is at an elevation of 1,160 metres (3,810 ft) in the middle of a bare plateau south of the High Atlas Mountains. The Ouarzazate area is a noted film-making location, with Morocco's biggest studios inviting many international companies to work here. Films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *The Man Who Would Be King* (1975), *The Living Daylights* (1987), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), *The Mummy* (1999) and *Gladiator* (2000) were shot here, as was part of the TV series *Game of Thrones*.

DAY 11: Ouarzazate and transfer to Agadir

We will enjoy some morning birding in the big reservoir immediately South of Ouarzazate. Here is a good place for migratory waders including Little Stint, Collared Pratincole, Temminck's Stint but also a place where in previous tours we have had Red-throated and Water Pipit. This is also a good spot for Maghreb Lark.

We will move onto Agadir for a 3 nights stay, where we will arrive in the late afternoon. Agadir is located on the shore of the Atlantic Ocean near the foot of the Atlas Mountains, just north of the point where the Sous River flows into the ocean. It is now the largest seaside resort in Morocco, where foreign tourists and many residents are attracted by an unusually mild year-round climate.

On the way we will do some stops since the area is good for raptors including Short-toed Snake, Booted & Bonelli's Eagle and Black-winged Kite. Spanish Sparrow and African Blue Tit are also birds likely to appear.

DAY 12&13: Souss-Massa National Park

The Sous region is the alluvial basin of the Sous River, separated from the Sahara desert by the Anti-Atlas Mountains. The natural vegetation in this region is savanna dominated by the Argan (*Argania spinosa*), a local endemic tree found nowhere else; part of the area is now a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve to protect this unique habitat. The region of Sous is generally fertile and has a high agricultural production.

The entire Sous valley is a good area for birding. It is especially famous for Dark Chanting Goshawk and Tawny Eagle, and Booted Eagle, Black-Winged Kite and Eurasian Kestrel can

also be seen. In the agricultural fields we will also hope to find many different species of passerines.

The Oued Massa Nature reserve, and its neighbour, the Sous-Massa National Park. It is a rich ecology system that consists of the Massa lagoon fringed by massive sand dunes, reed beds and muddy banks. The 34000 hectare park and nature reserve were created in 1991 to protect the unique flora and fauna in this part of Morocco.

The park's main conservation importance is that it holds three of the four Moroccan colonies of the Northern Bald Ibis. Together with the fourth site at nearby Tamri, it holds 95% of the world's truly wild breeding birds of this endangered species! Only about 500 remain in the wild...

We will have an early start to explore the Massa River in Souss-Massa National Park. This is an impressive wetland surrounded by coastal dunes and semi-deserts where good numbers of migratory birds can be seen. Western Olivaceous Warbler, Black-crowned Tchagra, Purple Heron, Little Bittern, Western Swampheaven, Great Reed Warbler, Moustached Warbler, Brown-throated Martin, Moussier's Redstart, Marbled Teal and Eurasian Spoonbill can be seen. The area is also noted for many species of chameleons living in the dense scrubs and the young Argan trees.

During our time here we will also explore the Souss estuary where a good selection of waders and gulls can be seen. Here we can enjoy Lesser Black-backed, Mediterranean, Yellow-legged and Slender-billed Gulls, Ruff, Eurasian Oystercatcher, Great Ringed Plover, Wood Sandpiper, Dunlin, Sanderling, Red Knot, Grey Plover, Eurasian Curlew, Greenshank, Common Redshank, Yellow Wagtails, Western Osprey and many more!

Some seawatching will be also done. The area is also good for migratory sea birds and Pomarine & Parasitic Skuas can appear. Atlantic Gannet can be common in migration and some other species can be easily seen from the coast.

DAY 14: Tamri and transfer to Marrakesh

We will spend most of the day in Tamri. This is a world-famous spot for Northern Bald Ibis.

The plains where they live are also excellent for Algerian Shrike, Thekla Lark, Black-eared Wheatear and Peregrine Falcon. The small Tamri estuary is also an excellent place to look for Spanish Sparrow, Isabelline Warbler, Audouin's Gull, Kentish Plover, Moroccan Magpie, Red-rumped Swallow and several species of migratory waders and gulls.

During the afternoon we will spend some time in the Cape Tamri. This is a good place to look for shags and sea birds (March-April).

In the afternoon we will transfer back to Marrakesh with a final stop near Essaouira, where there is a major colony of Eleonora's Falcon. The Medina of Essaouira is a UNESCO World Heritage listed city, an example of a late 18th-century fortified town, as transferred to North Africa by European colonists. The medina is home to many small arts and crafts businesses,

notably cabinet making and 'thuya' wood-carving (using roots of the Tetraclinis tree), both of which have been practised in Essaouira for centuries.

Essaouira is also renowned for its kitesurfing and windsurfing, with the powerful trade wind blowing almost constantly onto the protected, almost waveless, bay. The annual "Woodstock of Morocco", with an emphasis on gnaoua music, rock, jazz and reggae is also held in Essaouira, attracting 45000 spectators.

We will then move onto Marrakesh where you will either fly out from the airport directly, or be transferred to your hotel (at own cost) for an overnight stay and a flight out of Morocco the next day. This extra day could be an ideal time to explore the wonderful sights, smells and sounds of Marrakesh before you leave for home.

Please note that the detailed itinerary above cannot be guaranteed and it is only a rough guide and can be changed (usually slightly) due to factors such as availability of accommodation, updated information on the state of accommodation, roads or birding sites, and the discretion of the guides and other factors.

Included:

- Accommodation, food, guiding and transport in minibus and 4WD car
- Transfers to and from airport to hotel in Marrakesh
- Private guide
- Private transportation
- Bottled water
- Bird check list
- Park/Reserve entrance fees

Excluded

- Tips
- International flights to and from Marrakesh
- Visa Fees (if applicable)
- Extra soft and alcoholic drinks
- Laundry

Thank you for choosing Nature Travel Birding