

## MOROCCO APRIL 17-30, 2019

**Leaders: Jan Hansen & Local Guide**

*For those of you with a flair for the exotic and a sense of adventure, Morocco is the perfect destination. Though geographically it is just a short distance across the Straits of Gibraltar from mainland Europe, it is worlds away in terms of its culture, cuisine and architecture. The most westerly of the north African nations forming a region known as "The Maghreb," Morocco is a former French colony that has adopted a more Westernized view of the world than most of its Arab neighbors. Though the country is predominantly Islamic, it has played a prominent role in the search for peace in Middle East and also has granted many rights to women that are denied throughout much of the Arab world. It is a prosperous country that has had a stable government throughout most of its history and has developed a decent infrastructure allowing for relatively easy traveling.*

*Geographically it is quite diverse and offers miles of beautiful Atlantic coastline, forested mountain slopes in the Atlas Mountains and the breathtaking dunes of the Sahara Desert. This diversity of habitats results in the richest and most abundant avifauna in all of North Africa. Moroccan specialties include Elenora's Falcon, Barbary Partridge, Double-spurred Francolin, Egyptian Nightjar, Levaillant's Woodpecker, Brown-necked Raven, Moussier's Redstart, African Desert and Tristram's warblers, African Blue Tit, Desert Sparrow and the critically endangered Waldrapp (Northern Bald Ibis) with an estimated remaining wild population of about 500 individuals.*

*In short, Morocco has much to offer to the curious traveler and birdwatcher. With a long history of settlement and occupation by a variety of different people including the Moors, French and Berber tribes, present day Morocco represents a blend of these exotic influences and it is reflected in its customs, food and attitude toward the outside world. Though it is not an oil rich country like so many of the Arab states, it is also not teeming with the grinding poverty one sees in places like Egypt and Algeria. The people of Morocco are warm and friendly and display a degree of hospitality toward westerner visitors that is lacking in most of the Middle East. It also bears mentioning that Moroccan cuisine is delicious! All of this along with the wealth of birds should make this a memorable tour!*

### PHYSICAL REQUIREMENTS & PACE OF THE TOUR

For the most part, this is not a physically difficult tour. Most of our hikes will be a relatively short duration and on mostly flat terrain at the margins of lakes or marshes, through forested areas or on flat, stony plains. The majority of our walks will be one mile or less with 2 exceptions. At Zaers where we will look for DuPont's Lark we may walk for as much as 2 miles depending upon the location of the birds. At Oued Massa we will walk for an entire morning in search of Northern Bald Ibis and this hike may end up being as long as 5 miles. However it will be done at a slow

and easy pace to accommodate all of the participants and will be done over a 4-5 hour period. In the Sahara Desert we will walk in soft sand for as much as 1000 meters to reach a Bedouin camp in the hopes of finding Desert Sparrow and Egyptian Nightjar. For anyone having difficulty with the terrain or heat, which may be as high as 100 F, we will have 4 x 4 vehicles that will always be close by. In the high Atlas Mountain we will walk on moderately steep trails at an elevation of around 8500 feet, but as other walks, these will not be long and will be done slowly and at the pace of the slowest individual in the group.

Throughout the tour we will travel in either a 17-seat bus or in a minivan depending upon the size of the group. On the days that we are in the Sahara Desert we will use 4 x 4 land rovers to traverse the sandy tracks that run through the high dunes. As is the norm on standard birding tours, there will be some days that we will need to be in the field very early to find our target birds. This may involve simple picnic breakfasts and instant coffee as Moroccan hotels are not set up to service typical birding tours with pre-dawn start times. In general, anyone in reasonably good physical condition will be able to participate in this tour without experiencing undue difficulty.

## DAILY ITINERAY

**Wednesday-Thursday April 17-18, Day 1-2, Departures from the U.S. :** Participants will need to schedule their departure flights from the United States today. Most flights will involve overnight travel and participants need to plan their travel in order to arrive in Casablanca on Thursday April 18. Arrival in Casablanca should be scheduled for no later than 9:00 AM as we will be transferred as a group to our hotel in Rabat, which is a 90-minute drive from Casablanca. Along the way we will begin to familiarize ourselves with some of the common Moroccan birds like White Stork, Common Bulbul, Common Chaffinch and Spotless Starling. If the tide is favorable we will do some shore birding near our hotel in Rabat. Night in Rabat.

**Friday April 19, Day 3: Zaers & Lac de Sidi Bourhaba:** We'll take an early breakfast at the hotel this morning in order to depart by 6:00 AM for the one hour drive to Zaers where we will search for Double-spurred Francolin. This grouse-sized bird inhabits an area of scrubby forest and is extremely rare and notoriously secretive. Recent population estimates in Morocco indicate there are just a few hundred birds remaining. They are never easy to see, but chances are best in spring when they call from elevated perches. This will be one of the most difficult birds of the tour and we will spend much of the morning here in the attempt to have everyone see one. Other birds here include Barbary Partridge, Stock Pigeon, Wood Lark, African Blue Tit and Black-crowned Tchagra. After lunch back in Rabat, we will drive north along the Atlantic coast to Lac de Sidi Bourhaba, a shallow freshwater lake with a nice variety of waterfowl and shorebirds. Possibilities here will include Common Pochard, Ferruginous Duck, White-headed Duck, Marbled Teal (uncommon), Great Crested Grebe, Eurasian Sparrowhawk and Eurasian Hobby. Night in Rabat.

**Saturday April 20, Day 4: Boat trip at Merdja Zerga:** Today we will drive further north along the coast to Merdja Zerga NP, a large wetland complex a few miles from the coast. We'll take a boat tour through the wetlands where we should have close encounters with many marsh dwelling species including Greater Flamingo, Northern Lapwing, Eurasian Curlew, Slender-billed and Audouin's gulls, Whiskered Tern, Gray Heron, Eurasian Marsh-Harrier, Eurasian Spoonbill and many more. Though there will be many species available here, our key target will be Marsh Owl, a locally rare species that is resident in this area. With the help of a local guide we should be able to locate one. We'll also spend time birding at the coast where shorebirds, gulls and terns will be abundant. If we are quite fortunate we may even see a Balearctic Shearwater offshore. Night in Rabat.

**Sunday April 21, Day 5: Rabat to Zaida through the Middle Atlas Mountains:** Today we move inland through a broad swath of agricultural fields and into the Middle Atlas range. Along the way we make a stop in the town of Azrou for Lesser Kestrel and spend time in the cedar forests near Ifran where Great Spotted and Levaillant's woodpeckers can be seen. Other birds characteristic of these mid-range elevations include Coal Tit, Wood Lark, Firecrest, Mistle Thrush, Eurasian Blackbird and Eurasian Nuthatch. If we are lucky we may also see Barbary Ape, the only primate found in North Africa. Night in Zaida.

**Monday April 22, Day 6: Dupont's Lark Hunt & on to the edge of the Sahara:** A pre-dawn departure will be necessary this morning in order to reach the stony steppes near Zaida where our target is the secretive Dupont's Lark, one of the Palearctic's most difficult-to-observe species. The larks begin singing while it is still dark and stop as soon as the sun breaks the horizon. Once they cease vocalizing they melt away in the tussocks are essentially impossible to find. However, at dawn, their distinctive "rusty gate" song should allow us to pinpoint their location and we will hope to get a good look at one. Other larks like Thekla, Crested and Greater Short-toed are more common here. After returning to our hotel for breakfast, we will continue traveling southeast to the edge of the Sahara Desert where we will spend the next 2 nights at Merzouga. Along the way we'll make several stops with possible including Tristram's Warbler, White-crowned Wheatear, Desert Lark, Blue Rock-Thrush and Trumpeter Finch. Night in Merzouga.

**Tuesday April 23, Day 7: Exploring the dunes of the Sahara:** Today we will use 4 x 4 vehicles to drive into the spectacular dune system east of Merzouga. Known as Erg Chebbi, this region of the Sahara consist of towering red sand dunes and the scenery here will certainly be one of the highlights of the entire tour. In addition to being beautiful, Erg Chebbi is home to a number of very range restricted bird species and this will be our only chance to find them. Targets will include Brown-necked Raven, Fulvous Chatterer, Cream-colored Courser, African Desert Warbler and Greater Hoopoe-Lark, and with the help of local guides we will also hope to find day roosting Egyptian Nightjar. Finally, we will also seek Desert Sparrow, a declining species now found mainly near Bedouin encampments in the Erg Chebbi region. Sometimes they can be found around an oasis café close to Merzouga; other times they require driving further into the desert. We'll return to the hotel for lunch when the heat sets in, and later in the afternoon will visit an

ephemeral spring-season lake where a nice variety of waterfowl can be found. Night in Merzouga.

**Wednesday April 24, Day 8: On to Boulmane Dades:** After some early morning birding around our hotel, we will begin the 3.5 hour drive to Boulmane Dades. Much of the drive traverses a scrubby desert landscape dotted with otherworldly, earthen features that are the remnants of an ancient irrigation system. We'll stop here and there for photo opportunities and for birds like Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Temminck's Lark, Red-rumped and Black wheatears, Long-legged Buzzard and possibly Scrub Warbler. Night at an elegant hotel in Boulmane Dades.

**Thursday April 25, Day 9: Tagdilt Track and on to Ouarzazate:** The Tagdilt Track is one of Morocco's most famous birding venues and we will spend much of the morning driving and walking through its stony plains. These are the haunts of many species of larks and we will have chances up to 10 different species including Desert, Bar-tailed, Thick-billed, Thekla's, Crested, Temminck's and Maghreb larks. Other birds include Lanner Falcon, Black-shouldered Kite and possibly Pharaoh Eagle-Owl. After lunch we will continue westward toward the city of Ouarzazate. On the outskirts of town we will stop at a reservoir that always hold many bird species. Here we'll hope to find Little Owl, White Stork, Ruddy Shelduck, Black-winged Stilt and many other species. Night in Ouarzazate.

**Friday April 26, Day 10: Ouarzazate to Agadir:** Today will be primarily a driving day as it is roughly 6 hours from Ouarzazate to the coastal city of Agadir. We will stop here and there to break up the drive. Possibilities along the way will include Pallid and Little swifts, Laughing Dove, Cirl Bunting and various larks and wheatears. In Agadir we may find Spanish Sparrows on the grounds of our hotel. Night in Agadir.

**Saturday April 27, Day 11: Oued Massa:** Another early start is in order today as we drive south for an hour to Oued Massa. Here a shallow, meandering stream runs through a series of reed beds to the ocean. Away from the stream the landscape is rocky desert with a few rolling hills and the entire area is interspersed with a few mud hut villages. There are a variety of specialty birds that are resident here including Barbary Partridge, Black-crowned Tchagra, Laughing Dove and Plain Martin. Other more common residents include Corn and House buntings and the strikingly beautiful Moussier's Redstart. However the primary target here will be the endangered Northern Bald Ibis, a strange and enigmatic bird with a bare red face and scraggly mane. Its population in Morocco probably now numbers below 500 individuals, and it is likely to become extinct in the wild during our lifetimes. Despite the overall paucity of this bird, it tends to be relatively easy to find as it moves about in large groups and often feeds in open areas. We will have all morning to slowly walk the trail along the stream to the ocean, and with many sharp eyes and a dose of good fortune we should be able to locate some. Other birds here will include Little Owl, Eurasian Moorhen, Southern Gray Shrike, Eurasian Jackdaw, Common Bulbul, Cetti's Warbler and Spotless Starling. On the beach at the mouth of the stream we can look for Lesser Black-backed, Yellow-legged and Black-headed gulls as well as a variety of shorebirds. Night in Agadir.

**Sunday April 28, Day 12: Oued Souss; Atlas Mountains and on to Marrakech:** If we were unsuccessful yesterday in our search for Northern Bald Ibis, we will drive an hour north of Agadir to Oued Souss, another site where the birds are frequently encountered. This is also a good area for Greater Flamingo, Eurasian Curlew and a variety of shorebirds, gulls and terns. By late morning we'll start the 4-hour drive to Marrakech traversing the High Atlas Mountains enroute. We'll make a few birding stops along the way, but will minimize these in order to reach Marrakech by late afternoon. Marrakech is an ancient city founded over a century ago and filled with fine examples of Islamic architecture, gardens and monuments. Its centerpiece is a thriving market (souk) where snake charmers and vendors of Moroccan spices and foodstuffs abound. It is an unforgettable experience to walk the narrow passageways through the souks and listen to the vendors hawking their wares. We will have a free evening in Marrakech to explore the market and the surrounding historical neighborhood. Night in Marrakech.

**Monday April 29, Day 13: High Atlas Mountains:** Our final day of birding will take us high into the Atlas Mountains via a sinewy road from Marrakech to the ski resort at Oukaimeden. Located at an elevation of 8500 feet and with the snow-covered slopes of Jebel Toubkal as a backdrop, Oukaimeden will be unlike anything we have seen before during this tour and will provide a gorgeous venue for our last excursion. As is true in all mountain regions, the weather will play a big factor in our success. If it is clear and calm, the birding at Oukaimeden can be amazing and our overall list will increase dramatically. Possibilities here will include White-throated Dipper, Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush, Red-billed and Yellow-billed choughs, Crimson-winged Finch, Rock Bunting, Rock Petronia, Northern Wheatear and Horned Lark, and if we are very fortunate we may find a late Alpine Accentor. On the way up to Oukaimeden we will pass through forested areas that are good for Levaillant's Woodpecker, Eurasian Magpie, Spotless Starling, Cirl Bunting and Sardinian Warbler. Night in Marrakech.

**Tuesday April 30, Day 14: Departure flights from Marrakech:** Participants can schedule departure flights from Marrakech anytime today.

**TRIP COST:** The price of this tour will be **\$2895** double occupancy from Casablanca. The quoted price includes all meals beginning with lunch on April 18 and ending with dinner on April 29, twelve nights of accommodations, all ground transportation (this will be in either a minivan or minibus depending upon the number of participants) with a local driver, 4 x 4 transportation with drivers for one day in the Sahara Desert, Guide service throughout the tour provided by Jan Hansen and a local guide and any entrance fees during the tour. It does not include international airfare between the U. S. and Morocco, optional tips for local guides and drivers, alcoholic beverages, laundry or any items of a personal nature or conducted independently of the tour itinerary. The single supplement will be **\$550**.

**REGISTRATION:** A \$500 deposit and a completed registration form are necessary in order to reserve a space on this tour. Registration via email is acceptable, but the deposit and completed paperwork must be received no later than 10 days after the email request.

Final payment for the tour is due 90 prior to departure (January 18, 2019). Final invoices will be sent out in December 2018.

**NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS:** This tour will be limited to 9 participants.

**TRIP INSURANCE:** Trip insurance is strongly suggested in the event that you need to cancel after you have registered. Tour deposits and remittances to Moroccan ground agents have to be made well in advance of the tour and any cancellations made within 90 days of departure cannot be refunded in full. The tour registration form details the refund policy, but cancellations within 60 days of the tour will be limited to the amount that can be recouped from the various vendors and cannot be determined until that time. Trip insurance will be your safeguard against such contingencies.

**ENTRY INTO MOROCCO:** A valid passport with an expiration date 6 months after your scheduled departure date is required for U. S. citizens to enter Morocco. Morocco does not require an entry visa for U.S. citizens, but upon arrival in the country you will be issued a tourist visa, which you must keep throughout your visit. You will need to present this tourist card to the immigration officials in Marrakech upon your departure from Morocco. Some countries require a blank page for their stamp, so it is recommended that you have at least one blank page in your passport for this trip.

**TRAVEL TO MOROCCO:** Flights from the U.S. to Morocco generally involve overnight travel, so you will need to plan your schedule in order to be in Casablanca by the morning of April 18, 2019. If you choose to arrive early to do some sightseeing in the Casablanca area we can help with these arrangements.

**INFORMATION:** For additional information about this tour contact Jan Hansen at 919-259-9423 or at [otusasiotours@gmail.com](mailto:otusasiotours@gmail.com).