Late spring birding trip (3.-9.5.2015) in Northern Morocco

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I made one week birding trip to Northern Morocco during the first week of May. My main targets were to find Small Buttonquail and Atlas Pied Flycatcher to my WP list. Additionally I wanted to see Seebohm’s Wheatears.

I got a good company of Mika Bruun who joined me. Mika had never been in Morocco before, so several birds were new to him though he had been twenty years ago in Tunisia and seen some species which are breeding in Northern Africa. Morocco special species were his interest and certainly to get excellent photos.

We took flights via Lisbon. On our way to Casablanca we had 8 hours waiting time in Lisbon. We tried to search Kelp Gull on Praia da Cabarica beaches where the bird had been seen in the past week. We scanned there large gulls few hours but did not find Kelp Gull. Several dark backed gulls, graelsii Lesser Black-backed Gulls, were on the beach. Few rain showers made birding less easy.

Finally late 6.45pm on May 3rd we arrived in Casablanca when we had left Helsinki 5.40am. Soon we were on the road towards El Jadida where we stayed the first night.

Our first target south of El Jadida was to find Small Buttonquail on the Atlantic coast. We got good information from other Finnish birders who had left few days earlier for a longer trip. Soon after 8am we heard a quiet call of Small Buttonquail in a grain field, exactly the same place as the other group had heard and seen one bird. We tried to see the bird or two birds which were calling frequently but both birds remained in a good coverage of grain which was ready for harvesting. Our first and most difficult target bird was quickly ticked. We continued our trip to nearby lagoons where a group of 80 Pratincolas were flying around.

We continued around 5km SW of Sidi Moussa where we drove through pools and found Marbled Ducks (15) and Red-knobbed Coots (20). Both were good species to us.

6-8 pairs of Marbled Ducks were flying around and displaying on the water as well.
At least three families of **Red-knobbed Coots** were feeding their young ones on the pools.

Around 80 **Pratincolas** were flying over salt pools and over flying raptors got the whole population up to the sky.

**Yellow Wagtail ssp iberiae** had several breeding pairs on the last pool area. Few females were already carrying food to their chicks.
Several Small Buttonquails are breeding in the area according to a local man with whom I discussed. He showed a nest of the species from last year in his mobile phone. Here in the picture Mika stands on the edge of a grain field where we heard 2 birds hooting.

After lunch we had a long drive to Ifrane. It's worth to mention that we saw at least 15 radar places on the road, most of them by the motorway. On one of the first we got small ticket when I reduced my speed too slowly from 120km/h to 80km/h. Driving on motorways from El Jadida via Casablanca, Rabat and Meknes to Ifrane took close to 5 hours. Around 8km before Ifrane by the road R707 we stopped shortly on the last lights immediately when Ifrane National Park showed that we are in good habitat of oak woods. We heard singing our first Atlas Pied Flycatchers in the darkness but the site was reserved for the next morning to explore thoroughly. Also Scops Owl was calling. We drove to Ifrane and booked a hotel (Grand Hotel) for one night. Good dinner was very delicious until we went to well deserved sleep which was a bit disturbed a 10 minutes shouting and dog barking on the backyard middle of the night.

We drove very early at dusk to the same site (8km towards el-Hajeb) and turned then left to the forest gravel road. When the sun was rising up we counted quickly close to 10 Atlas Pied Flycatchers. Additionally Levaillant's Woodpecker was calling. We photographed flycatchers until was time to return our hotel for the breakfast.

Atlas Pied Flycatcher was an easy bird in early May. We counted during the day close to 20 birds from which around 15 was both side of the road R707.
Old oak forests are good habitat to many bird species, not only to Atlas Pied Flycatchers. Nuthatches, Mistle Thrushes, African Blue and Great Tits, Greater Spotted Woodpeckers, Short-toed Treecreepers, Hawfinches and Eurasian Jays were common.

In our return to the hotel we photographed Seebohm's Wheatears, two pairs by the road. It was rather common around Ifrane open rocky fields. The species has still subspecies status of Northern Wheatear according to AERC/TAC but it's expected that it will be lifted to species status in the coming years, so a waiting armchair tick.

This 2cy Seebohm's Wheatear male was accompanied of a female and looked very much like Northern Wheatear except its large black extended throat.

This adult Seebohm's Wheatear male looked at the first glance like a Hooded Wheatear in Israel: long-billed, a bit creamy looking tail. Notice that black tail edge is reaching a bit up at the tail heather edges which I have never seen in Northern Wheatears.

After our breakfast we headed towards south to Tizi-n-Tretten and nearby ski resort which is reaching up to over 2000m. On our way up we saw few Moussier's Redstarts, Thekla
Larks, etc and in the ski resort area several Firecrests and Coal Tits among others. A single Barbary Macaque was by the road.

*Moussier’s Redstart* is always very attracting species. This bird was very cooperative.

I did some daybutterfly photographing whereas Mika was fully focused on bird photographing.

Flowering meadow hills were excellent sites for daybutterflies. Open areas also provided few raptors to our trip list.

After we returned Ifrane to kill our thirst we met also our friends Ilkka and Hannu who arrived in Ifrane from Zeida plains to tick Atlas Pied Flycatcher. We soon guided them to the site where we were in the morning. Now we saw also females. They continued to the coastal sites whereas we wanted to explore Ifrane area longer.

*In our return to Ifrane we saw a low flying Short-toed Eagle by the road. Certainly it meant a quick stop to take photos.*
Now we booked to Hotel La Chamonix and enjoyed a good meal. Next morning prior to our breakfast we walked two hours in the nearby parks where we soon found interesting species.

Two *Melodious Warblers* were singing in the nearby park.

Only few *Cirl Buntings* we saw on our trip. This bird and few others were singing in Ifrane park.

Female *Atlas Pied Flycatcher* has a distinctive brownish throat strap. Two pairs was in the park.
Few adult Black-crowned Night Herons were among a large breeding Cattle Egret colony.

After our breakfast we went again up to Tizi-n-Tretten and continued to Azrou western side meadows from where we then returned again to Ifrane hotel, the same as last night.

Few Thekla Larks were on rocky hills.

A group of 10+ Barbary Macaques were hanging in the forest near the ski hills.
Rock Sparrows were by the garden of a restaurant where we had our lunch by the road from Zeida to Azrou.

Corn Bunting was very common on the fields west of Azrou.
This Woodchat Shrike was very cooperative to photographers on the fields.

Again we decided to return Ifrane to the same hotel as the previous night. We listened a singing male Atlas Pied Flycatcher at the terrace of our hotel just opposite of the road in the park when we were sipping our well deserved beers. Ifrane is very nice but touristic and clean holiday town and provides very good base for the exploration around Ifrane.

Before breakfast we went again to the same forest as previous days and tried to photograph Levaillant's Woodpecker. We chased long time one bird and additionally Mika found a pair which was not cooperative at all.

Usually Levaillant’s Woodpecker was calling and showing far away and high in trees but few times we managed to lure it nearby shortly like the second photo shows.
Several Scops Owls were calling in the forest. This bird we lured shortly close by.

This Booted Eagle we saw flying low over the road when we returned our hotel. The eagle clearly has some kind wound in its left leg when it was its leg all the time.

After our breakfast we left finally Ifrane and headed first to Dayet Hachlat and then to Dayet Aaoua, both shallow lakes E and NE of Ifrane.

A Bonelli’s Warbler showed shortly to us in the forest when we were driving to the lakes. Usually they did not respond or react to our tape.

The first lake hosted a 2cy Greater White-fronted Goose among Ruddy Shellducks on the northern shores when we were on the southern shores.
This 2cy Greater White-fronted Goose was 10th observation of the species in Morocco. It was surprising to find this time of the year as species should be already on their northern breeding grounds.

Four Helmeted Guineafowls were on the southern side of Dayet Hachlat. Though they are clearly domestic birds, they had characters of ssp sabyi which has been breeding in Morocco in the past.

Dayet Aaoua had around 2000 Black-necked Grebes and they had at least 500 nests on a large "nest carpet" near the King's residence. Tens of Red-knobbed Coots were breeding on the lake as well. Photos below.
Few Ferrugineous Ducks we saw on both lakes, more on the latter one.

In the afternoon we left the lakes and drove via Fes to Meknes where we took the hotel for the next night. By the motorway between Fes and Meknes we saw our first Black-winged Kite. Last hour we spent photographing from our room’s balcony flying Alpine and Pallid Swifts which were very numerous. Photos below.
Early next morning (Mat 8) we climbed to the roof of our hotel and counted quickly that around 800 Alpine Swifts were flying nearby in the sky. They were more numerous than Pallid Swifts.

Then we drove to NE side hills near Moulay-Idriss where we explored several hours.

**Western Olivaceous Warbler** was singing near a bridge and showed well to us in bright sunshine. It was only the second bird we saw in our trip.
Several Melodious Warblers were singing in the bushes by the fields. To me its song resembled rather much Booted Warbler songs which I'm familiar in Finland.

The area had beautiful flower meadows like these red poppies.

Our target for the evening was to try to see African Marsh Owl at Merja Zerga. On our drive we stopped few times. One stop was at Souk-el-Arba-du-Rharb where we saw close to 10 Little Swifts flying over the road, photo below.
Finally when we arrived in Moulay-Bousselham, several "quides" attached to us. Soon we made a deal with a person who in the end was only "the second hand". He drove us to the warden of Merja Zerga and he knew where we could see the owl. One nesting site was known and we took photos in the evening light.

I have seen **Marsh Owl** in February 21 years ago when I made my first birding trip to Morocco. That time it was easy to see when owls left their roosting site in the trees on the camping site of Moulay-Bousselham. Today construction and other disturbance have caused owls to move to southern side of the lake. During the same trip 21 years ago I also saw the last **Slender-billed Curlews** in the area.

After driving these two men to their villages we finally continued to Kenitra for our last night.

Early next morning we left our hotel and drove to the area between Sidi-Yahya and Sidi Bettache. Our target was to find **Double-spurred Francolin** by the road R403. On my first trip 21 years ago I only heard several francolins calling but this case we had very good luck when we saw a pair on a track, photo below.
We saw or hear 10+ Black-crowned Tschagras but they were difficult to photograph. Three Stone Curlews were calling early in the morning and two pairs of Ferrugineous Ducks were on a shallow pool. Later by the road we saw another Black-winged Kite but too briefly to get any photos.

It was time to drive to Casablanca airport where we arrived 2.45pm. Our flight was leaving 4.45pm to Lisbon and from there we had night flight to Helsinki. We drove 1695km and got very good list of interesting species to our trip list of 155 species in total in 6 days. We met at the airport five other Finns who had made longer trip to eastern Morocco, up to Rissane, Merzouga, Boumalne-du-Dades, Ouarzazate, Oukaimeden. They had 170 species in 8 days.

My two earlier trips to Morocco have been in winter but now May showed totally new species and I got good number of migratory birds which are not possible in winter trips. Certainly my target species were late arrivals. Morocco can offer lots of good birding in spontaneous trip and I'm sure I will visit the country again in the future.