

## SOC - SCOTLAND'S BIRD CLUB

Highland Bird News

No 110

SEPTEMBER 2008



### EDITORIAL

Welcome to the start of the SOC Highland Branch's 2008/09 season. Wherever you have been, I hope you have enjoyed some rewarding birding in late spring and summer. Despite some very disappointing weather recently, it seems to have been generally a good season for breeding birds, though some migrant breeding species do seem to be present in lower numbers than usual.

Whether this will be reflected in the first year results for the new atlas remains to be seen. The local organizers, Bob Swann, Hugh Insley and Simon Cohen, seem to be generally pleased with the coverage achieved in the first wintering and breeding periods, though there is plenty still to do and they would welcome more participants and new areas covered, I certainly enjoyed my two 10K squares, doing 8 tetrads in each [don't panic - you don't have to do anything like this much!], but I nearly bit off more than I could chew and was fortunate that the weather, particularly the weekend weather in spring, was fairly good. I learned a great deal about Glens Cannich and Strathfarrar and the area around the east side of Loch Quoich and found the whole experience truly fascinating and revealing. For instance, there were more species around in mid-winter than I expected and more Crested Tits in particular; I came across a few "secret" little spots that will long linger in the memory; some interesting dragonflies and butterflies were found and I discovered that ticks are my new best friends - rather unwillingly on my part.

Now, we look forward to some good birding in autumn, that special birding time of year when just about anything can turn up and often unpredictably. What will the next few weeks bring? Will it be a good skua passage at Chanonry Point, will we get a Yankee warbler at Tarbat Ness or will a stunning wader turn up at Udale? Time to get out and make it happen! One of the better ways to find things is to go on our outings. A lot of thought has been put into the programme of trips this year and there are a few new locations and features, not least the pelagic off Gairloch and the club taking over a lighthouse for a weekend. All we need now is some participants. See you out there!

*Al McNee*

### *BIRDING THE WORLD*

Following the success of the branch's trip to Morocco [the subject of tonight's talk and a full report in this newsletter], a planning meeting to discuss another possible trip with Mark Finn/ Birdwatching Breaks is going to be held on Thursday, 13<sup>th</sup> November at 7.30pm at the McNee's humble dwelling - 4 Balnafettack Place, Inverness. If any branch member would like to attend, you are very welcome, but could you please let Al or Jenny know in advance by phoning [01463 220493] or just speak to Al at the September-November meetings? The meeting will try to identify possible destinations and dates and Mark will come to the meeting with some suggestions, but please come with your own ideas and preferences for future trips.

## HIGHLAND BRANCH OUTINGS - 2008-09

*A wide range of interesting trips has been planned, with several completely new locations and an expansion of the weekday "local" outings which proved so popular last year. Contact Ann Sime on 01463 790249 for general enquiries and all Thursday outings. If you wish more details of the weekend outings, feel free to contact the leaders directly. Please try and support these trips whenever possible.*

### SEPTEMBER

Sat 13<sup>th</sup>                    MINCH PELAGIC, GAIRLOCH            Al McNee [01463 220493]  
Trip currently full, but contact Al if you wish to be put on the reserve list.  
Cost £40 per head. Meet at Inverness Retail Park near Pizza Hut at 06.45!

Thurs 25th                LOCAL BIRDING  
Meet at Inverness Retail Park near Pizza Hut at 09.15.

### OCTOBER

Sat 11th                    BRORA                                    Lynda Graham [01463 791292]  
Meet at Inverness Retail Park near Pizza Hut at 09.00.

### NOVEMBER

Thurs 6th                    LOCAL BIRDING  
Meet at Inverness Retail Park near Pizza Hut at 09.15.

Sun 16th                    GRUINARD                                David Galloway [01381 621126]  
Meet at Inverness Retail Park near Pizza Hut at 09.15.

### DECEMBER

Sat 6th                      WINTER DUCKS                          John Carruthers [01381 621545]  
Meet at Inverness Retail Park near Pizza Hut at 09.00.

### JANUARY

Sat 17th                    CRESTED TITS AND CROSSBILLS    Al McNee [01463 220493]  
Meet at Inverness Retail Park near Pizza Hut at 09.00.

Thurs 22nd                LOCAL BIRDING  
Meet at Inverness Retail Park near Pizza Hut at 09.15.

### FEBRUARY

Sat 7th                      FINDHORN VALLEY                      Alex Joss [01463 221661]  
Meet at Inverness Retail Park near Pizza Hut at 09.00.

Thurs 12th                LOCAL BIRDING  
Meet at Inverness Retail Park near Pizza Hut at 09.15.

**MARCH**

Thurs 12th Mar    HAWFINCHES AT SCONE Lynda Graham [01463 791292].  
Meet at Inverness Retail Park near Pizza Hut at 08.00.

Wed-Sun 18–22    ISLAY & JURA    Sinclair Dunnett/Ann Sime  
For timings, speak to Ann Sime

**APRIL**

Fri-Sun 24-26    SPRING MIGRATION ON THE WEST COAST - A WEEKEND AT  
RUBHA REIDH LIGHTHOUSE  
Al McNee/Ann Sime For timings, speak to Ann

**MAY**

Sun 10th            DAWN CHORUS    Simon Cohen  
Time to be confirmed

Sat 16th            WOODLAND BIRDS    Keith Duncan  
Meet at Inverness Retail Park near Pizza Hut at 09.00.

**JUNE**

Sun 21st            ISLAND OF MUCK [and a little bit of Eigg]    Ann Sime  
For timings, speak to Ann *Sime*

*Please try and support these outings. The leaders put a lot of work into making the trips a success, good birding is almost guaranteed and the company is great!*



Rubha Reidh  
Lighthouse –  
our destination  
in April

## GAIRLOCH PELAGIC

This trip has now been confirmed and is on Saturday, 13<sup>th</sup> September. We have to be at Gairloch Harbour at 9.00 am, so we are going to be leaving from the usual spot, opposite the Pizza Hut section of the Inverness Retail Park, at 6.45 am. This should give us long enough to make it to the boat on time. The trip is currently full [with 10 in the party], but if you would like to be put on the "standby" list, let me know by calling 01463 220493. The cost is £40 which is for a full day to 5pm and includes "chum". Those going should bring warm, waterproof clothing, packed lunch and birding equipment. The boat trip is weather-dependent, but if the trip is cancelled we still plan to go to Gairloch and do some serious sea-watching for the likely top selection of seabirds that should be around. At least one small petrel species is almost guaranteed, shearwaters should be to the fore and the odd good gull [eg Sabine's] and skuas should make a fine supporting cast. Given that the skipper is the leader of Hebridean Whale Cruises, a few cetaceans can be hoped for too! [PS The boat does have a loo!]

*Al McNee*

### *Best Highland Bird of the Summer?*

Arguably, it was this **White-winged Black Tern** which was found by Howard Loates at the east end of Inverness Airport on August 11<sup>th</sup>. It then disappeared before being re-found by David Jardine on the 21<sup>st</sup> at the little pool beside the A96, close to the Balloch turn-off. It was last seen on the evening of the 22<sup>nd</sup>.



**White-winged Black Tern** [Al McNee]

## **HIGHLAND BIRD REPORT 2006**

The Highland Bird Report 2006 is now at the printers and it is hoped to have it available at the next meeting. Despite a rise in printing and other costs, the price will be held at £8 [£9.50 if posted out].

As you are probably aware, Dave Butterfield has had to step down as Editor due to illness. It is essential that a new editor and editorial team are established as soon as possible. I have already had indication that some members would be willing to get involved in preparing the 2007 report. Please could those who did so earlier and others who may now be willing to assist, let me know and we will try to get a meeting set up so that the work on the next report can begin quickly.

*Al McNee*

## Dava Moor - Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> March 2008

Nine members came out to join me at Tomatin, by the Little Chef, which is no more! As only two had their names down and the couple of days before were pretty wet, windy and sometimes snowy, it was a nice surprise to have a sunny but chilly morning and a good number of people!

**Greenfinches**, **Chaffinches**, two **Buzzards** and a **Mistle Thrush** were all seen there before we headed into the village itself. **Siskin** and **Starling** were added before we left and headed south. There was not much to see on the old A9 past the Slochd cottages – just a nice detour. In Carrbridge, we went passed the Old Bridge and turned left onto Carr Road. As Al had given me the new walkie-talkies and I had given each car one, Lynda and Ann tested them out! The others had not noticed us going through Carr Bridge and had headed out towards Dulnain Bridge. Anyway the new “toys” brought us all together again. Once clear of the houses, we stopped at a farm and saw **House Sparrows**, **Lapwings**, **Curlew**, **Robin**, **Greylag Geese**, **Rooks**, **Jackdaws** and **Wood Pigeon** – a productive stop!

For those who do not know the road, it meanders east, following the contours of the fields and the River Dulnain, eventually joining the Carrbridge to Dulnain Bridge road. It is a pleasant wee road and can be very productive as it was on this day. I remember looking for the Great Grey Shrike along it one year. Anyway, back to the trip. We stopped at several places, especially as there were quite a lot of geese. At one place, we found several **Pink-feet** with the Greylags and also Ann and Lynda had spotted 4 **Greenland White-front Geese**. Then a flock of about 80 **Golden Plover** flew in and with some majestic turns and acrobatics, landed beside a huge flock of Lapwings. Great!

Mixed flocks of Rooks, Jackdaws and **Oystercatchers** were feeding in the stubble too. A **Pied Wagtail**, **Mallard**, a **Great Tit**, several Curlew, **Pheasant** and **Wren** were all added to the list. The gulls were well represented with **Black-headed**, **Common**, **Herring** and **Great Black-backed** all seen. At a higher point, overlooking the river, we had a coffee break and were rewarded with **Wigeon** on the river, more geese, one with odd flashes of white and a possible redwing flew over the trees and out of sight!

We then continued to the main road, turned left and stopped at a wee lochan (not so wee some said!) on the north side of the road. It is called Loch Mor and I think it must be stocked for fishing. Anyway, we walked along the good path, with geese flying round, a couple of **Tufted Duck** on the loch and several **Chaffinches**. Later on in the spring, it is a good place to see Greylag nesting, sandpipers and various small birds in the trees. It was just a bit early and chilly at the moment.

Then it was on to the Dava Moor, heading northeast. No Red Grouse I am afraid, but a **Raven** was seen. The Cairngorms looked really great with their coating of snow against the blue sky. Lochindorb is a bleak place in the middle of the moor, with the ruined castle in the loch and the lodge in the only plantation for miles around. No sign of birdlife, but a good place for a lunch stop. Four of us braved the chill and ate *al fresco* before our fingers numbed up! After lunch, we headed for Nairn, having decided the tide was wrong for the Findhorn Basin. A **Goldeneye** was seen on a lochan and a **Kestrel** hovered at the side of the road. At Nairn, where a **Mute Swan** was possibly nesting on a tiny island in the river and at the harbour, we were rewarded with a lovely wee flock of **Snow Buntings**. The beach was busy and the buntings were unsettled, flying

back and fore across the river mouth, so we had some excellent views of them. **Turnstones** were also pottering on the harbour walls, 3 **Eider** landed just outside and a **Gannet** was seen way in the distance. A **Grey Heron** flew over the marina.

We headed through Fishertown to the golf course on the west side of Nairn, but alas no Brent Geese or Purple Sandpipers. **Redshank** and Oystercatchers were feeding on the small area exposed by the sea. We set up the scopes for some sea-watching and found **Common Scoter**, **Long-tailed Ducks**, **Red-breasted Merganser** and more Eider. It was getting pretty cold and windy by now so we set off for our final destination of the day, Loch Flemington. There were lots of **Coot**, Tufted Ducks, **Teal**, Wigeon, a **Little Grebe**, a couple of **Moorhens** and a couple of Mute Swans. It was a pleasant end to a successful birdwatching day, and a lot warmer out of the wind!

Gib and Mike drove me back home via Croy and Daviot and we added **Grey Partridge** and **Coal Tit**. Then just after they left, a **Song Thrush** started calling from the top of one of my trees!

We had a really good day with the species list reaching 57. The walkie-talkies are a great idea and very useful to relay information as we are travelling along. The weather stayed dry and often sunny. It was nice to take some of the group to places they had never been to before and it was a good mixture of habitats – agricultural land, moor, lochs and the coast. Aren't we so lucky up here in the Highlands to be able to visit all these on one day?

*Janet Crummy*

## Breeding Waders of Speyside

Or not – as it turned out. The late winter/delayed spring meant that the original plan for this outing could not be followed. However our leader, Keith Duncan, came up with a splendid Plan B which meant that 8 members met him at Insh Marshes car park for the start of a day exploring the reserve. We started with visits to the 2 hides accessible from the car park. The weather was excellent as was the visibility and we had good views over the southern end of the marshes. Almost immediately we saw **Greenshank** plus the usual species such as **Mallard**, **Teal**, **Wigeon** and **Grey Heron** - then we were treated to the sight of a pair of **Wheatear**. As with so many things this spring, these birds seem to be arriving later than usual but it was worth the wait as they were looking quite splendid. Next we opted for an early lunch before setting off for the village of Insh from where we were able to walk right out onto the marsh and down to the banks of the Spey. We had stunning views of 2 **Ospreys** – one of them fishing as we watched. Then along came a **Sparrowhawk**. A little later there was a shout of **Hen Harrier** – a male bird could be seen in the distance. We also saw a number of **Whooper Swans**, **Cormorant** and **Goldeneye** and as a complete contrast had excellent views of a **Reed Bunting** as we returned to the village. For the final part of the outing we parked near the north end of the reserve and walked down the track towards Coull and then through the trees to where we had a view of Loch Insh. The highlight of this part was the unexpected sighting of a **Jay**, but we also saw a variety of other species from **Long-tailed Tits** to **Greylag Geese**.

All-in-all it was an excellent day out with someone who knew the area so well and was full of interesting snippets of information from where to see Wood Warblers to how to trap Mink.

*Ann Sime*

## MOROCCO - MARCH 26 to APRIL 6 2008

SOC Highland Branch's trip to Morocco in 2008 was an undoubted success with 180 species being recorded during our eleven day stay in the south of this fascinating country. We had many birding highlights during the tour recording the vast majority of Moroccan specialties including Houbara Bustard, Northern Bald Ibis, Moussier's Redstart, Desert Sparrow, and above-average numbers of the stunning Thick-billed Lark. In addition to these birds we witnessed an impressive number of migrants moving north through Morocco and onto breeding grounds in Europe and further east.

Once again I am indebted to Mohamed Zaki for making the ground arrangements within Morocco and to Mustafa for driving us around a sometimes manic road system.

### **March 26th: London Gatwick, Marrakech**

**Daily total n/r New trip birds n/r Running total n/r**

**Weather: Clear and sunny 21c**

At 11am we assembled at London Gatwick North Terminal and checked in with British Airways for the flight down to Marrakech. We duly arrived on time at Marrakech with clear blue skies and views of the High Atlas Mountains. After passing through passport control and picking up our bags we were met by Mohamed Zaki our Moroccan guide. A few birds were around the airport notably Collared and Laughing Doves and Spotless Starlings. As we entered the city wheeling flocks of Pallid Swifts. Checked in at the Amine Hotel with a House Bunting in the hotel car park. In the hotel gardens Common Bulbul, and overhead Little Swifts. We met up at 0730 for pre-dinner drinks followed by a buffet meal. In the morning we head towards the High Atlas Mountains and the prospect of several interesting birds.

### **March 27th: Marrakech, High Atlas including the Ourika Valley and Oukaimeden**

**Daily total 63 New trip birds 63 Running total 63**

**Weather: Sunny and clear 21c**

After breakfast we headed out of Marrakech and into a sector of the High Atlas Mountain range. On leaving the city several Southern Grey Shrikes were noted sitting on telegraph poles. We stopped at an olive grove to make a short walk, nearby mosque towers attracting White Storks. On the outer edge Woodchat Shrikes and several finches including European Serin, Greenfinch, Goldfinch and the North African race of Chaffinch. The best bird was a Western Olivaceous Warbler which gave good but brief views before promptly disappearing. As we climbed up into the Ourika Valley another stop produced both pale and dark phase Booted Eagles and a Eurasian Sparrowhawk. Near a mountain village the first of several Moussier's Redstarts, plus Rock Bunting and African Blue Tit. Just beyond the last village we caught up with the localised Levillant's Woodpecker and a male Sardinian Warbler. Overhead sizeable flocks of Red-billed Choughs and lesser numbers of Yellow-billed Chough and Raven. Below the summit we stopped again for White-throated Dipper, Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart and Little Owl. Before lunch we embarked on a semi-circular walk around the higher peaks. Excellent views of Horned Larks, Northern and Black-eared Wheatears and Mistle Thrush. An enjoyable lunch was taken followed by another walk beyond the ski station. A pair of Ruddy Shelduck on the lower lake was an unexpected bonus. The last walk was fairly tough with more views of Horned Larks and importantly up to thirty Crimson-winged Finches a rather localised

and isolated North African endemic. We retraced our steps back down the valley and onto base in the Ourika Valley itself. An excellent first full day in Morocco.

**March 28th: Ourika Valley, Tawha Forest, Touflihte, Tichkaa Pass, Dades Valley**

**Daily total 68 New trip birds 21 Running total 84**

**Weather: Warm and sunny 27c**

Before breakfast we walked slowly around the hotel grounds and adjacent gardens. On a telegraph pole an extremely vocal Levaillant's Woodpecker. Interesting species in the garden itself included Western Olivaceous and Sardinian Warblers, Common Nightingale and Chaffinch. A bonus came in the form of Eurasian Siskins an uncommon and rare winter visitor to North Africa. After checking out our journey took us across vast plains used for cereal production and onto the Tawha Forest. A short stop en route added Black Kite, Yellow Wagtail, Common Stonechat and Corn Bunting. Tawha Forest attracted large numbers of Booted Eagles, Long-legged Buzzard, Eurasian Sparrowhawk and brief views of Barbary Partridges. Wild Boar was also seen feeding in the valley bottoms. At Touflihte an area of pines attracted African Blue, Great and Coal Tits, Common Crossbill and Hawfinch. Lunch taken in a small village at the foot of Tichkaa Pass. The road climbs up to 2600 metres here with spectacular views of the countryside below. At the summit we walked slowly downwards recording Black and Black-eared Wheatears, Moussier's Redstart and Thekla Larks. Our journey took us south east towards Ouarzazate a town famed for film production. A small wadi here attracted good numbers of European Bee-eaters, Willow, Subalpine and Western Bonelli's Warblers, Tree Pipits and Woodchat Shrikes. Beyond Ouarzazate pylons and poles lured Osprey, Short-toed Eagle and Long-legged Buzzards and the first White-tailed Wheatears. Checked in at Rose Mgouna for a two-night stop.

**March 29th: Plateau d'Anved, Dades Oasis**

**Daily total 53 New trip birds 17 Running total 101**

**Weather: Sunny with light south winds 26c**

An early breakfast this morning, followed by a visit to the vast, stony plain of Plateau d'Anved. On arrival at the plateau we quickly encountered scattered feeding flocks of Cream-coloured Coursers. The first of several walks produced Short-toed, Temminck's and Thick-billed Larks, Desert and Red-rumped Wheatears, Trumpeter Finches and a hunting Lanner Falcon. We turned off the main track and explored another area recording Short-toed Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard and a party of Black-bellied Sandgrouse. Overhead a steady passage of European Bee-eaters. Another walk in the desert added Hoopoe Lark and a distant (unidentified) harrier species. Later in the morning the temperature started to rise so we headed back to the small town for lunch. The roof top terrace here was excellent for viewing migrants going north. Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Barn Swallow, House Martin, Common Swift, Blue Rock Thrush and at least two Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters were observed. After lunch we had a leisurely stroll around the oasis and adjacent River Dades. Several migrants were observed including Eurasian Wryneck, Tree Pipit, Common Redstart, Common Chiffchaff, Yellow and White Wagtails and Common Whitethroat. At 1500 hours we revisited Plateau d'Anved with similar birds to our morning visit. Tomorrow we head towards the border with Algeria and the vast sandy landscape of the Sahara Desert.

**March 30th: Plateau d'Anved, Todra Valley, Erfoud, Mgouna**

**Daily total 55 New trip birds 4 Running total 105**

**Weather: Warm and sunny with light north winds 30c**



After checking out we continued our journey in a south easterly direction towards the desert town of Erfoud. A short stop at Plateau d'Anved produced similar birds to yesterday but in lower concentrations. Next stop was beyond a Berber village where White-tailed Wheatears and Trumpeter Finches were fairly common. Picked up supplies before entering the Todra Valley. A few birds here including Eurasian Crag Martins, Blue Rock Thrushes and Western Bonelli's Warblers. Picnic lunch taken at a roadside camp site. Southern Grey and Woodchat Shrikes were common here along with a single Tawny Pipit. The road meandered in a southerly direction as we made further stops in the desert. Areas of dunes with bushes attracted Desert Lark and reasonable numbers of Northern Wheatears including a few showing features of the Greenland races. In an oasis near Erfoud we watched Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, Subalpine Warblers and heard calling Common Quails. The major birding highlight was to come near our auberge. A section of low bushes had displaying and singing Hoopoe Larks, African Desert Warbler and Bar-tailed Larks. Checked in at the desert auberge for two nights, a delightful place on the edge of the Sahara Desert.

### **March 31st: Sahara Desert, Mergouza Lake and Oasis**

**Daily total 68 New trip birds 26 Running total 131**

**Weather: Hot and sunny 35c**

Breakfast taken at 0630 followed by an all day excursion into the Sahara Desert. This was a truly unique experience as we travelled along gravel and sand tracks. The surrounding countryside was dominated by dunes and cliffs and several areas of low-scrub. In a remote village we came across our first Brown-necked Raven and local children selling bracelets and other tourist souvenirs. Over the next four hours we searched many areas for the rare and, localised Houbara Bustard. Initially we could only find Desert, Bar-tailed and Hoopoe Larks the latter often in display flight. At 1120 we eventually located four Houbara Bustards walking slowly through the barren and harsh landscapes - excellent views obtained. Picnic lunch taken under the shade of large trees within a sand dune system. The trees were a magnet for warblers with high numbers of Subalpine, Western Bonelli's and Willow Warblers. Careful scanning added a female Western Orphean Warbler, Western Olivaceous Warbler and Common Redstarts. The best birds were two pairs of Desert Sparrows in display and feeding on discarded bread. Next on the agenda was the large salt-lake of Mergouza which has held water for the last three years without drying out completely. The first section held Little Grebe, Greater Flamingo, Marbled Duck, Common Coot, Ruff, Little Stint, Wood Sandpiper and Whiskered Terns. A bonus here was a Gull-billed Tern looking rather out of place in a desert habitat. Raptors present included Osprey, Marsh Harrier and a juvenile Barbary Falcon. We checked the opposite side of the lake recording Common Teal, Common Pochard, Northern Shoveler, Ferruginous Duck, Common Moorhen and a single Green Sandpiper. Warblers were numerous and included Reed, Sedge, Willow and Common Chiffchaff. Yellow Wagtails were also passing through in good numbers. We ended the day at Merzouga Oasis a lush area for attracting migrants. Similar birds to earlier in the day with the addition of Common Quail, Turtle and Laughing Doves, Tree Pipits, Common Redstarts and other migrants. Returned to base a rather tired and sand/sun blasted group. Another great day for migrants and specialties of the Sahara Desert.

### **April 1st: Mergouza, Ouarzazate (south road)**

**Daily total 57 New trip birds 4 Running total 135**

**Weather: Sunny and warm 30c**

Today was mainly a travelling one as we headed back to Ouarzazate via the southern road. The first birding stop was outside Mergouza where a Rufous-tailed Bush Robin was located in a palm grove. Further down the road several Brown-necked Ravens were seen on top of steep

cliffs. A diversion to another area of cliffs produced excellent views of Desert (Pharaoh) Eagle Owls. It was starting to get hot as we headed in a westerly direction with a stop for Fulvous Babblers in a stand of acacia trees. Picked up supplies for a picnic lunch, in the shade of a small acacia and palm oasis. Several birds were noted here including Long-legged Buzzards, Common Kestrels, Western Orphee, Western Olivaceous, Western Bonelli's and Subalpine Warblers, Southern Grey and Woodchat Shrikes and a pair of Blue Rock Thrushes. Our last birding stop was along a river course overlooked by an old Moorish Fort. Along the river White Wagtail (Moroccan sub-species), Yellow and Grey Wagtails, Melodious Warbler, Common Snipe and a singing Cirl Bunting. The final leg of the journey took us over high passes and dramatic gorges with the latter having Eurasian Crag Martins, Thekla Larks and House Buntings. We reached the old quarter of Ouarzazate and checked in for the night.

**April 2nd: Ouarzazate, Oued Iriri, Sousse Valley, Taroudant**

**Daily total 76 New trip birds 7 Running total 142**

**Weather: Hot and sunny 30c/35c**

Today we started to head west towards the coastal port of Agadir. Our first stop produced a female Montagu's Harrier flying slowly northwards over the desert. Next on the agenda was Oued Iriri a lush river valley area. On the river, a single Common Sandpiper, Little Ringed Plover and White Wagtail. Walking along the river bank we disturbed an adult Black-crowned Night Heron. On nearby cliffs a Bonelli's Eagle, plus migrant martins, swifts, swallows and bee-eaters. The journey west took us through inhospitable and arid habitats, with the addition of a single Whinchat. Lunch taken in a village with orchards and gardens, the latter holding Western Orphee Warbler, Rufous-tailed Bush Robin and other migrants. On entering the Sousse Valley the weather became very hot. The major highlight here being a pair of Common Magpies (North West Africa race) chasing a Great Spotted Cuckoo. We pressed onto Taroudant recording Black Kite and Booted Eagles.

**April 3rd: Taroudant, Sousse Valley, Oued Massa**

**Daily total 94 New trip birds 25 Running total 167**

**Weather: Hot and sunny 38c**

Today we headed to Agadir via the Sousse Valley. A short stop within the Sousse Valley at an elevated point produced several migrants heading north towards the Mediterranean coast. Interesting sightings included Red-rumped Swallow, Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, European Turtle Doves and Common Redstarts. On entering Agadir we turned south towards the Ramsar site of Oued Massa a narrow, shallow lagoon running into the Atlantic Ocean. The lagoon is bordered by low bushes and acacia scrub a classic migration trap. Our first scan of the upper lagoon added Great Cormorant, Squacco, Purple and Grey Herons, Glossy Ibis and, migrant passerines notably Wood, Subalpine, Western Olivaceous and Western Bonelli's Warblers. The weather started to get very hot so an extended picnic break was taken under the shade of acacia trees. From the picnic area another scan of the lagoon added parties of Eurasian Spoonbills, Grey, Wood and Green Sandpipers, Black-winged Stilts, Common Redshank and Little Stints. A highlight during lunch was singing Black-crowned Tchagra which eventually showed well. At 1430 we embarked on a walk towards the beach stopping at three viewing points. An exposed muddy area attracted Audouin's, Yellow-legged and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, Sandwich and Gull-billed Terns and Marbled Ducks. Waders started to become more conspicuous as extensive muddy borders along the lagoon appeared. Avocet, Bar-tailed Godwit, Greenshank, Kentish Plover and Temminck's and Little Stints being observed. In deeper parts of the lagoon Little Grebe, Mallard, Tufted Duck and high numbers of Common Coots. Probably the best birds recorded were European Rollers a rather scarce migrant in Morocco. On the return walk close

views of Eurasian Thick-knee. The heat had drained many of us as we boarded the bus for Agadir where we spent the night. An extremely enjoyable and productive day at Oued Massa, a great African birding spot.

**April 4th: Agadir, Sousse River, Tamri, Casablanca to Marrakech road (east)**

**Daily total 88 New trip birds 15 Final total 180**

**Weather: Hot and sunny with cooler onshore winds along the coast 30c**

After checking out of the Agadir hotel we headed towards the Royal Palace and adjacent Sousse River. The first viewing platform offered us excellent views over the river. Greater Flamingos were present in high numbers. New trip species here included Black-headed Gull, Collared Pratincole, Eurasian Oystercatcher, Eurasian Curlew, Ruddy Turnstone, Dunlin, Curlew Sandpipers and Common Knot. Ospreys were fishing in the river whilst a party of Avocets headed up-river. We walked towards the palace and the extensive eucalyptus trees bordering the palace boundary. The highlight being a Barbary Falcon perched high up in a dead tree. Time was pressing as we left Agadir and headed north along the coast road to the village of Tamri. Before reaching the village we had an Arctic Skua offshore. At Tamri Lagoon we quickly located the very rare and localised Northern Bald Ibis. Waders were few but included a summer-plumaged Sanderling. Lunch taken in a small town and then back to Marrakech. The final birding spot in an orchard and agricultural area produced a few birds. In the former Eurasian Blackbird and Song Thrush. Isolated trees within cereal fields attracted Willow, Subalpine, Western Bonelli's and Melodious Warblers, Rufous-tailed Bush Robins, Common Nightingale and Cirl Buntings. We eventually arrived at Marrakech just after 2000 hours, the delay being the manic traffic of the city itself.

**April 5th Marrakech, London Gatwick, Inverness**

A later start this morning as we made the short journey to Marrakech Airport and the flight back to England. At the airport we said goodbye to Mohamed and Mustafa an excellent and personable team in Morocco. A great trip had come to an end for the Highland Branch of the Scottish Ornithologists' Club.

*Mark Finn, Birdwatching Breaks, April 2008*



## Sat 21<sup>st</sup> June - Island of Handa

Two carloads of members made an early start from Inverness and had an uneventful journey, via Ullapool, to Tarbet. Time had been allowed for birding en route but nothing of particular interest was seen. People were already gathering for the boat crossing to Handa and we were on the second trip across. After a welcome chat from the warden, we spent some time scanning the shore below the “visitor centre”. **Dunlin, Sanderling, Ringed Plover, Oystercatcher** (with young) and **Arctic Tern** were to be seen before we set off up the track towards the north side of the island. **Meadow Pipit** and **Wheatear** were observed before a male **Merlin** sped past heading towards the mainland. A little further on we spent some time scanning an area of bushes where the main entertainment was provided by excellent views of two **Cuckoos**. We then followed the boardwalk north across the island.



The group on Handa [Melvin Morrison]

Near the cliffs we scanned the lochans to find one occupied by bathing **Bonxies** while another was home to 2 **Red-throated Divers**. Quite some time was spent at that first section of cliffs and it was felt that numbers of auks were well down on some years previously. Some **Razorbills** had very young chicks but otherwise few eggs were obvious. **Fulmars, Kittiwakes** and a few **Gannets** were to be seen but scanning to water for cetaceans was unproductive. Next we meandered along the cliff tops to take lunch overlooking the stack where we could watch the **Puffins** amongst the **Common Guillemots** and **Razorbills**. Two **Great Black-backed Gulls** and then a couple of

Bonxies seemed to be standing guard – picking out lunch perhaps?

The leisurely amble round Handa continued with little new on the bird front but quite some time was spent staring into a moorland pool occupied by a colony of **Common Skuas**. The next time we were admiring the one of the party had spotted some distance. It was quite a pod and the consensus probably **Common Skuas** as we strode back at the starting queue for the “last”



Bonxie on Handa [Al McNee]

which was of **Palmate Newts**. entertainment was boardwalk, which helped construct a David Galloway dolphins in the a large and active was they were **Dolphins**. We running out of time increased but we fine aerial dog-Bonxies and **Arctic** out. We arrived point to find a boat. It took the

boatmen 3-4 trips to take everyone off and we must have been just about the longest-staying group on the island. We had had an excellent day. Thank you to the leaders, David and Al.

*Ann Sime*

PS: Note that we are planning another island jaunt next June – to Egg and Muck from Arisaig.