

First record of Cricket Warblers in South Atlantic Morocco, September 2007

Trevor D. CHARLTON

39 Sroughton Court, Sroughton, Suffolk, IP8 3AJ, England (Grande Bretagne)
trevorcharlton@ymail.com

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The primary aim of visiting West Sahara in southern Morocco was to search out a couple of Western Palaearctic species hard to see elsewhere in the region, these being Black-crowned Sparrow-lark *Eremopterix nigriceps* and Dunn's Lark *Eremalauda dunni*. However, the whole trip was eclipsed by finding of a pair of breeding Cricket Warblers *Spiloptila clamans*, not believed to have previously bred in the Western Palaearctic or been recorded in Western Sahara ever before.

Within five days of me arriving alone in Marrakech and driving South to Dakhla in southern Western Sahara, I had successfully located and photographed many of my target birds. These included stunning Dunn's Lark, also a fine supporting cast of African Royal tern *Thalasseus maxima albididorsalis*, African Scrub Warbler *Scotocerca inquieta theresae*, Fulvous Babbler *Turdoides fulva*, Tristram's Warbler *Sylvia deserticola*, Black-crowned Tchagra *Tchagra senegalus* and Desert Sparrow *Passer simplex*.

On 19 September 2007, I was birding an area known as Oued Jenna, 220km south-east of Dakhla. The site is approximately 120km from the Mauritanian border, at a locality recognised for its small population of Black-crowned Sparrow-larks and Desert Sparrows. However, both high winds and extreme heat hampered my attempts to locate the birds, so I submitted defeat and slept overnight in my car. Before dawn the next day I was back on site, but within minutes of exiting the car, a fine male Sparrow-lark flew onto the roadside only a few metres away. On turning to the car to get my camera, the bird flew a long way off into distant semi-scrub desert. My immediate search began on the south side of the road, in an area of desert containing a yellow tussock marram-like grass, with fragmented low Acacia scrub. However, having failed to locate any Sparrow-larks after a one-hour search, I returned to my car to consider an

alternative plan, considering extreme heat and land-mines.

As I crossed the road, a small passerine with a scrub warbler-like jizz, flew in front of me and landed in the tussock-grass. It momentarily dropped onto the sandy ground and hopped around searching for food, before perching back up in the grass. It was clearly not an African Scrub Warbler, nor was it like anything I had ever seen in the Western Palaearctic before. The closest it resembled to me was a *Prinia* species, though I had not seen any of these since birding East Africa in 1995. So frustratingly, I hadn't a clue what I was looking at. After a minute or so of good viewing, the bird flew off calling with what looked to me like a feather, into Acacia scrub near my car. I cautiously followed the bird and was astounded to find two adult birds, both carrying food; pallid looking grasshoppers, being served to a dome-like nest 75cm from the ground in a three metre high Acacia tree. A brief inspection of the nest revealed at least two, probably three or more young, being around four to five days old. I took a few nest photographs and withdrew to a more comfortable distance to watch the adults in more detail.

Both adults were stunning birds, each perturbed by my presence as they frequently called. The calls varied from a high pitched reedy Penduline Tit-like 'sweeeee' call to a repetitive scolding rattling. For the next hour or so I managed to take many photographs of the birds and the accompanying photographs show the most striking plumage features of this distinctive species. In summary, the most prominent identification features were:

- **Head** – Rather flat headed. White crown with short black chevrons forming lateral lines (less heavy and contrasting on assumed female). Lores and supercilium broad and white. Light grey smudge

forward of eye with grey-blue thin line behind eye leading into grey-blue rear crown and nape. Chin and throat white.

- **Upper-parts** – Mantle rufous-buff grading lighter through back to rump and upper-tail coverts (perhaps more subdued in assumed female). Lesser coverts grey with narrow white fringes. Greater primary coverts black with neat white narrow fringing. Median and greater coverts black centred with broad contrasting white fringes forming a very prominent distinction between wings and rest of body. Tertiaries black centred with broad buff to white fringes. Secondaries rich buff. Primaries dark, as long as or shorter than longest tertial. No primary extension.
- **Under-parts** – Wholly white with a light sandy-buff wash to flanks and breast. Under-wing white with contrasting dark grey under-wing coverts.
- **Tail** – Very long and graduated, blue-grey above and white below. Each tail feather with black inverted dart shaped sub-terminal spike with white terminal tip. Under-tail white, with obvious pairs of black sub-terminal spots.

- **Bare-parts** – Eye: iris yellow-orange, large black pupil, orbital ring orange. Bill: long, fairly stout and slightly curved. Upper mandible fleshy-pink with dark horn culmen ridge and tip. Lower mandible fleshy-pink with dark horn tip. Legs: strong, pinkish-flesh.

The only differences between the sexes noted were a lesser amount of crown streaking and contrast on the head and slightly reduced overall colour strength of the assumed female.

Both adult Cricket Warblers continued to bring the same species of grasshoppers to the young at intervals of about two minutes apart. Before delivering food to the nest, adults would perch, tail-wag from side-to-side, gradually moving closer to the nest, offering good observation and photographic opportunities.

After my observations I moved away, taking photographs of the site relative to the road and continued my quest to relocate the Sparrow-larks which I did so successfully, ending a rather special day out in the desert. The whole experience of the spectacular scenery, wonderful habitat, wealth of class birds and overall, the bizarre situation of being intimate with two smart and confiding birds and not knowing what they were is something I will never forget.

Ndlr

La première mention de *Spiloptila clamans* au Maroc date bien de septembre 2007 et non de février 2008 comme indiqué dans Thévenot & Bergier (2008).

Bibliographie

Thévenot, M. & Bergier, P. 2008. Considérations sur les récentes découvertes avifaunistiques dans les environs d'Awserd (région d'Oued Ad-Deheb, Sahara Atlantique marocain). *Go-South Bull.* 5 : 98-103.

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Cricket Warbler *Spiloptila clamans* attending nest; Oued Jenna, 19th September 2007 (© T. D. Charlton)



Cricket Warbler nest site in Acacia, September 2007
(© T. D. Charlton)



Cricket Warbler nest, 75cm from ground (chick visible), September 2007 (© T. D. Charlton)