

MOROCCO including WESTERN SAHARA

November 24th to December 22nd 2014.

Morocco and Western Sahara are visited by many mammalwatchers. Even it was my 5th trip in Morocco and 3rd in Western Sahara I enjoyed to see again the same species, but there were 2 species I had missed before: Sand Cat (seen by many people) and African Ground Squirrel (seen before in other countries). They were my target species.

I arrived in Agadir on a cool sunny day following heavy rain. Many roads were damaged and even people killed. But the worst rains had to arrive 3 days later.

Day 1:

AGADIR, ROKEIN RESERVE near TAKAD (a few km south AGADIR) and ARROUAIS RESERVE near TIFNIT.

I precised that Rokein and Arrouais are fenced reserve with bushes of Eucalyptus, of course not natural vegetation. But if you want to see Scimitar horned Oryx in Morocco you have not a big choice.

This time I saw 30 Oryx and 3 Dorcas gazelles in Arrouais, and 4 Addax, 50 Dorcas gazelles and 3 Red foxes in Rokein (Foxes like Wild boars enter the reserves, but I have been told they are killed by the staff).

Day 2 and 3:

This year I wanted to spend more time in the High Atlas, but with only 2 days without rain I was a little in rush. Again I drove the road crossing this mountain between Tafinegoult, the Tizi'n Test (pass) and Marrakech.

I saw 3 Cuvier's gazelles north of Tafinegoult on the slopes of the hills (may be 10km away from the village). By the end of the day I got 20+ Aoudads at Iguer enclosure (a very large fenced enclosure north of the pass. Unfortunately it was very late and I had not time to count them. They were just below the snow line.

I slept in my car near Ouirgane to be as early possible to the Royal Reserve were I saw Aoudads in 2013. This place is just in front a small enclosure (Amismis) were Aoudads are also present. I saw 18 in the last enclosure and 8 in the Royal Reserve (I didn't stay long as I had to return to Takad before the storm had to arrive.

Before crossing the pass I saw 35 Aoudads in Iguer. I slept at Takad.

Day 4:

During the morning it rained. Afternoon was sunny. I spent the afternoon at Oued Massa National Park seeing 2 Barbary Ground Squirrels and dead Algerian Hedgehogs. During the night it rained a lot.

Day 5:

I got up in a flooded camping (with water at thigh level). I parked the car on a mound. It rained the full day and following night. I slept in the restaurants.

Day 6:

Rain in the morning, then weather improving. But I was informed that many roads were flooded. Many bridges had collapsed. Nevertheless I decided to drive to the south. The main road was cut before Tiznit. There was a detour via the Oued Massa barrage. I was a little scaring to cross it. Then half of the road in the Anti Atlas had collapsed. I arrived late in Guelmin to be told that it was impossible to reach Tantan and Laayoune.

Day 7:

I waited the full day in Guelmin. It was still raining and the streets transformed in torrents.

Day 8:

Road opened and sunny day until the end of the trip. Ouf! I drove to Laayoune and prospected the oued at the border of the town. A wonderfull place for birdwaching.

Day 9

Drive to Dakhla.

Day 10

Late afternoon I drove on the way to Aousserd where I slept in the car. Bad spotlighting with only 5 Savanna Hares.

Day 11

Drive back to Dakhla while birdwatching.

Day 12

Again spotlighting along Aousserd road: 1 African wild cat seen well and 1 Desert hedgehog.

Day 13

Drive Dakhla to Barabas

Day 14

Morning 11 Dorcas gazelles south of Barabas. As I stopped for a Little Owl 60km north of Guerguerat (apparently not known at this latitude) I saw a Golden Jackal in my binoculars. It was 9h30 with already a bright sun and the animal walked directly to my car, then keeping a distance crossed the road and skirted round the car apparently unafraid even I got outside of the car.

Afternoon: Safia Reserve a few kilometers, north of Guerguerat. In the fenced reserve: 18 Dama gazelles (they are 41), 27 Addax including a calf (they are 32). Outside of the reserve footprints of Dorcas gazelle.

Day 15

Barabas and to Lamritz.

23 Dorcas gazelles south Barabas; 1 dead Common porpoise at Lamritz.

Day 16

Drive to Dakhla

Day 17

Night spotlighting on Aousserd road. Nearly nothing (Savanna hare, 2 Lesser Egyptian gerboa, 1 Gerbil sp) until I stopped using my torch. Arriving at Oued Jenna I saw a cat on the side of the road, fast disappearing in the grass. I stopped immediately, pished and switched on my torch. The cat is seating 15m in front of me: a superb African Wild Cat (very pale). Then several times it hid, I pished, it reappeared and I approached it on foot. But still no Sand cat. I slept in Aousserd.

Day 18

I got the information there is Striped Hyanea near the village. Unfortunately, late afternoon when I came back the Gendarmerie told me I couldn't stay there. I returned to Oued Jenna where I spent the afternoon. Then by 7pm (by night I spotlighted). Nothing until 8pm when I got eyes, stopped the car, pished and got a Fennec running to me. Incredible sighting again. I decided to stop to drive while spotlighting and to stop regularly, pish and spotlight. It proved to be far more efficacious (may be because spotlighting alone is not easy). In half a hour between km 154 and 150: I got another Fennec, a Lybian polecat (I prefer Zorilla), a Rüppel's Fox running from far, crossing the road in front of the car and then calling, then a Sand Cat approached on foot. All species were seen after pishing. What a night. I saw also 6 Lesser Egyptian Jerboas and 1 Gerbil. Then very satisfied I decided to drive fast to Gleb Jidiane (I got another Rüppel's Fox in my headlamps) where I slept.

Day 19

Drive to Dakhla.

Day 20

Spotlighting at the Dakhla rubbish dump: just a Black Rat.

Day 21

Drive to Laayoune.

Day 22

Birdwatching at Laayoune (1000 Marbled teals.....), then drive to Sidi Afkhenir.

Day 23

Afkhenir to Guelmin. 1 Fat sand rat in full day light perching on a small bush, then digging a new den.

Day 24

Guelmin to Sidi Wassay. 8 Barbary ground squirrels on the same wall at Massa.

Day 25

Sidi Wassay-Massa-Douera-Takad

No Algerian hedgehogs by night.

Day 26

TAKAD-ROKEIN RESERVE. 18 Dorcas gazelles and 1 Addax in the reserve. 1 Dorcas gazelle outside (escaped). 1 Wild Boar.

Day 27

TAKAD, MASSA, ARROUAIS RESERVE, AIT MELLOUL

40 Scimitar horned Oryx, 87 Dorcas gazelles in the fenced reserve. 2 Barbary ground squirrels and footprints of Egyptian Mongoose at Massa. And finally a colony of at least 6 Striped Ground Squirrels in Argan "forest" south Ait Meloul, a species I am sure I saw in 2013 at the same place, but the squirrel disappeared in a den and never reappeared.

Contrary to Barbary Ground squirrels common everywhere there are rocks or walls, Striped Ground Squirrels don't look for rocks, they den in the ground.

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