

Western Sahara & Morocco 7th – 17th March 2015

Michael Hoit

mikee_hoit@hotmail.com

In late February 2015 I was attempting to come up with a workable idea for a last-minute cheap-ish trip when Tim Sykes and Gareth Knass suggested Western Sahara for Atlantic Humpback Dolphin, plus whatever other mammals and birds we could muster. After scouring the various excellent reports on [Mammalwatching](#) we worked out an itinerary and soon had a plan.

Logistics

We eschewed flying to Dakhla in favour of the long drive; this worked pretty well for us, as we could be flexible when heading back north to Morocco 'proper'. Obviously there are risks with taking a car nearly 1400km each way from Marrakech airport (see, e.g., Richard Webb's [2012 report](#)), and if planning a trip further in advance I'd probably try to fly to Dakhla. At short notice though, the only reasonably-priced option was to fly Royal Air Maroc London-Marrakesh, Marrakesh-Casablanca, Casablanca-Dakhla, with lots of waiting around. Flying to Dakhla and driving back was discounted due to the exorbitant price of a one-way car hire, while flying to Agadir would have saved us some driving time, but was rather expensive on the dates we needed to travel.

So we flew London Stansted to Marrakesh with Easyjet, returning via the same route with Ryanair, for a total of £216; Tim came up trumps with a Ford Fiesta from Holiday Autos for a mere £141 including a second driver and unlimited mileage (fine, except for the small petrol tank, non-existent aircon and slightly feeble engine...).

Most of the logistics and site details are well-covered in other reports (petrol cheaper in Western Sahara than Morocco, forms for police checkpoints etc). The only thing I'd add is that many petrol stations close at night – on our overnight drive we were banking on some being open, but ended up cutting it fine on fuel as we trundled into Laayoune.

We struggled to find hotels on a couple of nights in Dakhla as the entire town was seemingly booked up for a police conference. This led to the interesting experience of sharing floor space with seven other people, in a tiny room atop a very basic hotel, after the owner took pity on us! Anything with a mattress and some sort of access to shower was fine after a couple of days in the desert though.

Otherwise:

Dakhla – One night Hotel Imperial Playa (Boulevard Bin Mohammed V, close to the Palais des Touaregs used by others), decent at a total of £27 for a twin and a single including breakfast, shared facilities; one night Hotel Boulevard (south-southwest of Samarkhand restaurant), which was even better value at under £20 for the same set up. I'm not even sure where the 'locals' hotel we used the owner's floor was... Accommodation is also available in resorts at the north end of Dakhla Bay, although I believe they're on the pricey side and I'm not sure if there are any shops in the area.

Tantan – Hotel Sable d'Or, as used in other trip reports. Very good, about £20 for an en-suite triple.

Taroudannt – Hotel Tioute, Boulevard Mokhtar Soussi. £30 for an en-suite triple including breakfast.

Marrakesh – Riad dar Nabila, Arset Tihiri. £50 for two nights B&B in an en-suite triple, booked through the hotels.com app. Good, a bit of a faff with a car as it's in the city, but quite convenient for the airport.

We did as most do, subsisting on bread, cheese and snacks, with meals in one of the many cafes available once in towns; shops were generally adequately stocked (including the one at the filling station at Aousserd) and we managed to acquire as surprisingly good selection of cakes at times.

Itinerary

7th March – Departed London Stansted 14.40, landing at Marrakesh 18.15. After an excruciatingly slow immigration process, picked up the car, stocked up on food, and departed the supermarket at 20.20. Stopped for food and coffee on the edge of Agadir just after 11pm.

8th March – Left Agadir about midnight, and drove south passing Guelmim at roughly 03.15 reaching Laayoune around 08.30. Departed (after police checkpoints, food and shops) 09.30, passed Boujdour 11.30ish, and after a couple of brief stops reached the Dakhla junction at 15.30. Checked various points for dolphins before finding a hotel in town.

9th March - 07.00-08.30 up to 20km north of Dakhla before breakfast; 11.00-15.00 north end of Dakhla Bay for dolphins before heading to Aousserd Road, Gleb Jidiane area (km15-17) 16.30-dusk. Planned to drive the length of the road overnight but rapidly engulfed in a zero-visibility sandstorm, so we aborted and returned to Dakhla. Welcomed by heavy rain, which continued all night, and after some time found a hotel with vacancies.

10th March – A late start. Awoke to flooded streets, birded the south end of the Dakhla Peninsula, tried unsuccessfully to get the air con fixed in the car, before driving to Aousserd. Waited at Oued Jenna until dusk, before a night drive as far as km140 and back 19.45-23.30, concentrating on km155-145 and km170-190.

11th March – Spotlit same area as last night 03.20-06.15. Birded Oued Jenna and north west to km160 in morning until the wind became too strong. Back to OJ for a snooze, birding there at Aousserd until 19.30. Walked Oued Jenna while lamping until 21.00, then drove as far as km120 spotlighting, before sleeping in the car at km135 at 00.50.

12th March – Spotlighting km135-km160 04.15-06.00. Birded various points on back to Gleb Jidiane, before heading to Dakhla for lunch. Eventually found somewhere to sleep before returning to Aousserd Road for spotlighting: 20.00-23.30 drove the stretch km35-km13 several times, then back to Dakhla to sleep.

13th March – Return journey north after a relaxed start and breakfast. Departed 09.15 and birded various roadside stops before leaving Laayoune at 16.30; brief stop at Khniffis Lagoon, and arrived Tantan shortly after 20.00.

14th March – Birding various sites south of Guelmim in the morning, drove north, Oued Massa 16.30-19.00. On to Taroudannt and found hotel, arriving 20.35.

15th March – Souss Valley east of Taroudannt 05.15-07.10, then spent the day on the Tizi n'Test pass road to Marrakesh; morning c9km north of Tafinegoult for Cuvier's Gazelle, early-mid afternoon Iguer enclosure.

16th March – Oukaimeden (78km and 1hr40 S of Marrakesh), returning to Marrakesh for the night

17th March – Flew back to UK, departing Marrakesh 10.15 and arriving 14.00

The mammals

While the trip was far from a failure, the night drives were frustrating. Perhaps my expectations were too high, but our approach may well have been the wrong one: we decided that instead of covering the whole road in a night with some areas at a slower pace, we would concentrate on sections where previous observers have had most success. For example, we concentrated on km140-155, where [Dominique Brugiere](#) had good sightings just a few months previously. This was done at 20-30km/h, covering these areas more than once each night, and spotlighting until we were too tired to continue. The theory was that we would be thorough and have a high chance of success, but results were patchy at best, and disappointing for carnivores... It is also possible that we should have spent time looking post-midnight, but with moonrise changing from 22.19 on 9th to 00.06 on 12th we concentrated on the period prior to this.

We lost a night due to the sandstorm on 9th, and the night of 10th was very windy, which may not have helped. Of course staying for one more night's spotlighting and then having a more rushed journey back north was possible, but our appetite for this was quite low after such limited success.

I set a few Shermans at Oued Jenna one night – when I checked them later all had been visited and had food removed but none had caught the culprits! Perhaps gerbils are too light-footed for these traps...

Atlantic Humpback Dolphin *Sousa teuszii*

- The trip highlight for me. Based on [this paper](#) on the cetaceans of Dakhla Bay (containing a map of where the species was recorded on survey transects), and sightings in [2010](#) (by Rich Moores, Dan Brown and Alex Lees,) we checked the viewpoint 28km north of Dakhla and then various clifftop spots southwards (for example 20 and 16km north of town) on 8th and first thing the next day. We decided to return to the original spot late morning on 9th on the rising tide; this is easy to locate, being a large limestone outcrop with a car park full of camper vans, at least at the time of our visit. This is a popular spot with kite-surfers, and overlooks the northwestern part of Dakhla Bay, where a lagoon is more-or-less cut off at low tide. After about an hour, I caught a glimpse of a dolphin in a rough patch of water where the tide was rushing in, but despite looking hard for another 25 minutes we could not relocate it. I was just becoming convinced my eyes had deceived me when a larger animal appeared in the same spot! The two animals (the latter with an impressively exaggerated hump) remained in this area and showed on and off for the next couple of hours. Superb. The local police and tourists seemed familiar with the animals, so presumably they are regular at this location and often come quite close; I heard rumours that groups of up to five, including a calf, had been seen recently. However, Common Bottlenose Dolphins are also regular in the bay, and I have since been told (from more reliable sources) that only three Humpback Dolphins remain here! So, sadly, the future of this subpopulation may be bleak.

Algerian Hedgehog *Atelerix algirus*

- One seen crossing the N1 34km north of Guelmim (c7km south of Bouizakarne) in the early hours of 8th.
- Roadkill presumed to be this species a few km before Bouizakarne on the same journey, and on the P2017 south-southeast of Marrakesh on 16th.
-

Egyptian Freetail Bat *Tadarida aegyptica*

- Bats presumed to be this species seen several times (up to two animals together but presumably more present) foraging around acacias in Oued Jenna after dusk on 11th March. These were seen well in torchlight, with the size, structure (attenuated head and neck, large visible ears, long-looking rear end, long wings), flight style and audible vocalisations pointing to this genus; *T. aegyptica* is the species of arid regions and is mapped for a few locations further north in Morocco.
- Research currently being undertaken in the area has very recently confirmed the presence of this, and at least one other, species of bat.

Bat sp.

- A medium-sized bat seen in flight over Oued Massa at dusk on 14th.

Fennec Fox *Vulpes zerda*

- Quite disappointingly, just one individual showed rather poorly (acceptable if you were on the right side of the car!) at 23.30 at km142 on 11th.

Egyptian Mongoose *Herpestes ichneumon*

- A very close encounter as one dashed across the road after we made a wrong turn on the way to Oued Massa on 14th – most pleasing to finally connect with this species. The spot was opposite a marshy pond on a minor road in the villages south of Oued Massa, Google map coordinates 29.988289, -9.644425.

Sand Cat *Felis margarita*

- A frustrating brief sighting of one at c23.00 just west of km153 on 10th – mostly just eyeshine, but after leaving the car I had a quick look at the back and tail before it vanished.
- Another presumably this species at km35 on 12th (again, at roughly 23.00). I only saw eyeshine at first, though the others managed an outline of the animal; after moving, I located eyeshine in a bush and could make out a pale face and pointed ear through the scope, before this individual too melted away...

Wild Boar *Sus scrofa*

- A female with four stripy piglets seen in the large enclosure at Iguer (see below) – this species is widespread in northern Morocco, although I'm unsure if they have been released into this reserve or if 'wild' Wild Boar were fenced in!

Aoudad *Ammotragus lervia*

- Two quite impressive rams above the treeline, with at least 17 females/immatures lower down, in the enclosure at Iguer.
- This very large fenced area seems to comprise most of a mountainside on the east side of the R203 roughly 7.5km north the Tizi n'Test pass (i.e. the Marrakesh side of the mountains).

Cape Hare *Lepus capensis*

- A hare seen at the roadside somewhere between Agadir and Tiznit early on 8th was presumed to be this species based on current taxonomy/distribution.

African Savannah Hare *Lepus microtis*

- All hares on Aousserd Road presumed to be *L. microtis*; certainly the animals seen by day – two in Oued Jenna on 11th, one at km127 on 12th - showed the rufous nape and warm pelage tones associated with this species
- Additionally, c10 on evening night drive 10th, at least 4 pre-dawn drive on 11th, 5+ evening of 11th, and one pre-dawn on 12th.

Barbary Ground Squirrel *Atlantoxerus getulus*

- One 3km west-northwest of Bouizakarne by the A1 and one Oued Massa on 14th; a couple on 15th north of Tizi n'Test; several around Oukaïmeden on 16th.

Lesser Egyptian Jerboa *Jaculus jaculus*

- Aousserd Road: First at dusk on 9th by Gleb Jidiane waterhole, then singles at km180 & km132 on 11th and km27 on 12th. A few roadkill individuals also seen.

Pygmy Gerbil *Gerbillus henleyi*

- Two gerbils that gave excellent views by the roadside at km177 on 11th showed the features of this species. Several other small gerbils were seen at various points along the Aousserd Road were presumably also Pygmys.
- A desiccated small dead gerbil found at Gleb Jidiane on 9th was probably this species, but Pleasant Gerbil *G. amoenus* is a possible alternative.

Lesser Egyptian Gerbil *Gerbillus gerbillus*

- Excellent views of one at km185 on 11th. Gerbils were seen fairly commonly on the night of 11th (fewer on 10th), with most animals seen reasonably well being medium-sized.
- Several roadkill individuals noted, plus a freshly-killed individual watched being impaled on acacia thorns mid-morning by a pair of Southern Grey Shrikes at km164!
- A similar-sized gerbil was seen in rockier habitat around km16 – perhaps trapping here might reveal further species, given the slightly different substrate to the areas where Lesser Egyptian Gerbil has been seen.

Jird sp *Meriones sp.*

- One seen shortly after dawn in the Souss Valley east of Taroudannt (after pre-dawn search for Egyptian Nightjars); just a brief views amongst tussocks on sandy islets in the dry stony river bed.

Fat Sand Rat *Psammomys obesus*

- Several seen around sandy mounds c200m southeast of the bridge at Oued Boukila (11.5km southwest of Guelmim), although there were plenty of signs of this species both sides of the road.
- Burrows, tracks etc. west of the road 22km and 30km southwest of Guelmim, an area where I saw animals in 2004.