

Mammals of Southern Morocco and Western Sahara

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Barbary Ground Squirrel (*Atlantoxerus getulus*)
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Introduction

Over the last few years the Oued Ad-Deheb region of Western Sahara has proven to be a reliable place to observe Sand Cat (*Felis margarita*) in the wild. In particular, a tarmac road (N3) running southeast from the coastal town of Dakhla for 250 km to the small settlement of Aswerd has been especially productive. With a potential supporting cast of both Fennec and Ruppell's Fox, along with Desert Hedgehog, Saharan Striped Polecat and a number of exciting rodents there is little wonder Richard Webb described the area as some of the best mammal watching in the Western Palaearctic.

Keen to explore the area myself I organised a trip to Morocco and Western Sahara with the aim of spending several nights spotlighting the Aswerd road. I was accompanied by John Sadler, Mark Hows and Simon West.

By coincidence Richard Webb was on his second visit to the region and we made contact regularly to exchange information on sightings etc.

Travel Details

Detailed and comprehensive logistical information for Western Sahara can be found in Richard Webb's '*Saharan Predators*' report from December 2012 (available on mammalwatching.com and go-south.org). I strongly recommend anyone planning a trip to the area seeks a copy of this invaluable resource.

We flew from London Gatwick to Agadir with EasyJet at the cost of £129.25 per person including one item of hold luggage each.

Our car was a nearly new Mitsubishi Pajero Sport courtesy of Europcar (booked through Holiday Autos) at a cost of around £740. Although more expensive than a saloon we found the 4x4 was large enough for four adults plus all our gear. Furthermore, the high seating position gave us a better view when spotlighting.

Although the car was in excellent condition, one of the tyres had been poorly repaired causing our first flat tyre. Service was also pretty slow both when collecting and returning the vehicle and Europcar debited an extra £185 from my credit card without explanation. This matter has yet to be resolved.

It's worth noting that Europcar (and most other international rental companies) do not have any depots in Western Sahara should we have had needed their assistance with any mechanical issues. It may be better to use a local company with offices further south e.g. www.laargoubcar.com

Accommodation was easy to find in all areas although we spent several nights sleeping in the car especially when travelling long distances. We used the following hotels:

Dakhla - Hotel Doumss (Av al walaa Hey moulay rchid, Ad Dakhla 73000) Situated on the main street this hotel was basic but clean and cost a little under £30 a room per night including breakfast. Although a little bemused by our antics, the owners didn't seem to mind us entering the premises at all times of the night. The Palais des Touaregs (recommended by others) was fully booked at the time of our visit.

Guelmim – Hotel Adil Moussafir (Avenue Mohamed VI 869 Quartier Al Qods, Guelmin). The marble floors and chandeliers may have been wasted on us but this luxurious hotel was great value at £25 per night for a single room en suite. The restaurant wasn't bad either.

Agadir - Ibis Budget (Commune Urbaine d'Agadir Zone d'Extension Barreau Est Ouest, Agadir) Modern, clean and situated near some decent restaurants. £28.50 for a single en suite.



Dromedary Camel, Aswerd road, Western Sahara

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Itinerary

6 Feb – Arrived in Agadir early afternoon and collected hire car. Drove south to Oued Massa visiting ungulate captive breeding enclosures and Oued Massa Bridge. At sunset headed south towards Dakhla driving through the night.

7 Feb – Continued drive arriving in Dakhla midday. Spent some time scanning bay for cetaceans and birds before finding hotel. Headed out to Aswerd late afternoon but flat tyre forced us to return back to town where we enjoyed our last cooked meal for several days.

8 Feb – Fixed tyre before driving Aswerd road as far as Oued Jenna birding and herping en route. Spotlighted road nonstop from dusk until dawn.

9 Feb – Rested at hotel before driving Aswerd road again. Spotlighted until early hours before returning to Dakhla.

10 Feb – Spent most of day birding and herping Aswerd road. Spotlighted until exhaustion kicked in pre-dawn. Slept in the car.

11 Feb – Wasted day. Drove south 300km to Mauritanian border but didn't cross. Failed to access Safia reserve due to sand blocking route. Cut our losses heading north, stopping in Boujdour for food and driving through the night.

12 Feb – Birded Khnifiss Lagoon near Tarfaya. Leisurely explored several sites en route to Guelmim where we spent the night. Second flat tyre of trip ended spotlighting session.

13 Feb – Visited Oued Boukila and Fort Bou-Jerif. Drove to Agadir via Oued Massa. Night in Agadir.

14 Feb – Spent majority of day near Tafinegoult searching for gazelles and driving the Tizi n' Test Pass. Night in Agadir.

15 Feb – Morning at Oued Massa and surrounding area before returning to Agadir for delayed flight home.



Tizi n' Test Pass, Atlas Mountains, Morocco

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Mammal Watching Sites

Dakhla Peninsula

We spent a couple of hours scanning the bay for cetaceans specifically Atlantic Hump-backed Dolphins which have been recorded at the northern end. Unfortunately rough seas made seawatching unproductive throughout our visit. Risso's and Bottle-nosed Dolphins have also been recorded in the area.

Over two nights we set Sherman traps in the plantation at Taourta with some success.



Pygmy Gerbil (*Gerbillus henleyi*)

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Aswerd Road

The main focus of the trip, we spent several days exploring the N3, travelling as far east as Aswerd. Driving the road during daylight was unproductive for mammals but we did see a wide variety of birds and reptiles. Trapping around the water tower at Gleb Jdiane (km 17) produced a couple of rodent species.

Spotlighting was very fruitful although I agree with Richard Webb that the nearly full moon was a hindrance. We certainly had more success with rodents in the early hours when the moon had waned. Similarly on the last evening when the moon was fullest we didn't see much of anything until well past midnight.

Oued Massa

A popular birding site situated c40 kms south of Agadir, the reserve is home to a number of mammal species including Barbary Ground Squirrel, Egyptian Mongoose and Wild Boar. According to the guides it may be possible to arrange night time access which would be useful for spotlighting purposes.

The area is also the location of a captive breeding project for rare ungulates and it is possible to see Dorcas Gazelle, Addax and Scimitar-horned Oryx which are housed in semi-wild conditions in large enclosures.

Tafinegoult/Tizi n' Test Pass

A reintroduced population of Cuvier's Gazelles can sometimes be seen on the forested slopes above the village of Tafinegoult (c150 km east of Agadir). Tafinegoult is located east of the R203 (Marrakech road) a few kms north of the Taroudant to Ouazazata road.

We spent a couple of hours scanning the slopes mid morning and returned again late afternoon with no success. Richard Webb also spent a significant amount of time here looking for the gazelles with no luck, although the locals insist they are still seen regularly.

Continuing on the R203 we explored the Tizi n' Test Pass travelling as far as the Barbary Sheep reintroduction enclosures (c8km passed the summit restaurant).

Other Site Possibilities

Safia Reserve

Signposted from the N1, 17 km north of the Mauritanian border, this reserve is home to a semi-wild population of Dama Gazelle and Addax. A night visit could potentially produce a number of interesting species including Sand Cat and wild Dorcas Gazelle.

While planning the trip I made contact with the Safia Reserve with the intention of organising access. Unfortunately after some promising initial correspondence, they stopped replying to my emails.

As we were passing anyway, we tried to drive up to the entrance situated 7km from main road. However, we were unsure which track to take and both were covered in deep sand dunes causing our vehicle to get stuck. With time at a premium and without equipment to deflate (and more importantly inflate) our tyres we cut our losses.

Cap Blanc Reserve (Mauritania)

Probably the most reliable place to see Mediterranean Monk Seal in the world, the Cap Blanc Reserve near Nouadhibou is home to at least one tame individual. This animal has lived a small part of its life in captivity and seems to keep apart from the main seal colony that lives in a restricted military zone further north.

To cross the Mauritanian border a visa from Rabat is required. However, periodically it is possible to purchase a visa at the actual border as was the case on our visit.

As we were prohibited to take our rental car into Mauritania we hoped to hire a taxi from Guerguerat. Unfortunately none could be found to take us and with our limited French (and in the chaos of a busy border crossing) we couldn't seem to find an alternative solution. No one seemed to understand why we would only wish to visit Mauritania for one day (at least for legal reasons!) We decided to leave the seal for another trip not wanting to risk further time on what was likely to be a futile quest.

Although 300 km further north than Guerguerat, Dakhla may be a better place to organise a taxi for a short trip into Mauritania. Mediterranean Monk Seals can also be found in Western Sahara but only in heavily restricted military zones near the Mauritanian border.

Species Seen

1.	Desert Hedgehog <i>Paraechinus aethiopicus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One seen crossing Aswerd road around km 32 in the early hours of the 10 Feb. Unfortunately the driver was unable to avoid it and it ended up fatally wounded.
2.	Ruppell's Fox <i>Vulpes rueppellii</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fantastic view of individual shortly after sunset at km 164 on 9 Feb. One seen digging on north side of Aswerd road at km 81 on same night. Distant animal at km 81 on 10 Feb.
3.	Red Fox <i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One observed at dusk on Fort Bou Jerif entrance track, Guelmime, on 12 Feb. Individual picked up in spotlight near Guelmime late evening on 12 Feb.
4.	Fennec Fox <i>Vulpes zerda</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At least 12 seen while spotlighting Aswerd road between 8-10 Feb. All sightings km 88-154 with the majority recorded on the north side of the road.
5.	Saharan Striped Polecat <i>Ictonyx libyca</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very distant animal on Aswerd road on 10 Feb was our only candidate. I was holding spotlight and unable to use optics for a better view. Only MH saw it well enough to pick out features.
6.	Sand Cat <i>Felis margarita</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Distant animal found on south side of Aswerd road at km 125 on 8 Feb. We were able to confirm identification using telescope although it disappeared before we could track it on foot. Excellent views on 9 Feb of individual close to Aswerd road at km 148 (north side). Same animal found several hours later by Richard Webb after it responded to squeaking. A probable Sand Cat also seen on 9 Feb although marker not recorded.

7.	African Wildcat <i>Felis lybica</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One seen at km 195 on north side of Aswerd road on 8 Feb. Identification was confirmed after it was tracked on foot and all features noted. Second strong candidate for Wildcat seen on 10 Feb at km 177. Several feral cats also observed around Oued Jenna and km 171 (Aswerd road). Some may be mistaken for African Wildcat if not seen well.
8.	African Savanna Hare <i>Lepus microtis</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Common on Aswerd road at night.
9.	Barbary Ground Squirrel <i>Atlantoxerus getulus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Several seen roadside while crossing the Tizi n' Test Pass on 14 Feb.
10.	Lesser Egyptian Jerboa <i>Jaculus jaculus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relatively common on Aswerd road at night.
11.	Pygmy Gerbil <i>Gerbillus henleyi</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One trapped in plantation at Taourta, Dakhla Peninsula on 8 Feb. One trapped in scrub around Gleb Jdiane water tower on 9 Feb. Several probable Pygmy Gerbils seen at night on Aswerd Road.
12.	Lesser Egyptian Gerbil <i>Gerbillus gerbillus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At least one seen on Aswerd Road while spotlighting.
13.	Fat Sand Rat <i>Psammomys obesus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A single animal seen from N1 near Dakhla mid morning on 7 Feb. Surprisingly we missed this species at other 'reliable' sites such as Oued Boukila near Guelmime.
14.	Western House Mouse <i>Mus musculus (domesticus)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One trapped in plantation at Taourta, Dakhla Peninsula on 9 Feb. One trapped in scrub around Gleb Jdiane water tower on 9 Feb.



Ruppell's Fox (*Vulpes rueppellii*)
© Mark Hows



Fennec Fox (*Vulpes zerda*)
© Mark Hows



Lesser Egyptian Jerboa (*Jaculus orientalis*)
© Mark Hows



Sand Cat (*Felis margarita*)
© Mark Hows

Semi-captive Species Seen

1.	Dorcas Gazelle <i>Gazella dorcas</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three seen in large acclimatisation enclosure near fishing hamlet of Tifnit (P1014), Sous-Massa National Park.
2.	Addax <i>Addax nasomaculatus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Single animal seen in breeding enclosure (unnamed road near Takat), Sous-Massa National Park.
3.	Scimitar-horned Oryx <i>Oryx dammah</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good numbers seen in large acclimatisation enclosure near fishing hamlet of Tifnit (P1014), Sous-Massa National Park.

Reptiles and Amphibians

African Green Toad (*Bufo boulengeri*) – Oued Massa and Gleb Jdiane

Mauritanian Toad (*Bufo mauritanicus*) – Oued Massa

Saharan Green Frog (*Pelophylax saharicus*) - Oued Massa and Guelmime

Spanish Terrapin (*Mauremys leprosa*) - Oued Massa and Guelmime
Spur-thighed Tortoise (*Testudo graeca*) – Tizi n’ Test Pass
Moorish Gecko (*Tarentola mauritanica*) – Oued Massa
White-spotted Gecko (*Tarentola annularis*) – Aswerd road
Moroccan Day Gecko (*Quedenfeldtia moerens*) - Tizi n’ Test Pass
Elegant Gecko (*Stenodactylus sthenodactylus*) – Aswerd road
Bibron’s Agama (*Agama impalearis*) – Tizi n’ Test Pass
Banded Dob (*Uromastix flavifasciata*) – Aswerd road
Dumeril’s Fringe-toed Lizard (*Acanthodactylus dumerili*) – Aswerd road
Busack’s Fringe-toed Lizard (*Acanthodactylus busacki*) – Oued Massa
Bosc’s Fringe-toed Lizard (*Acanthodactylus boskianus*) – Guelmime
Western Sahara Fringe-toed Lizard (*Acanthodactylus aureus*) – Aswerd road
Olivier’s Desert-racer (*Mesalina olivieri*) – Aswerd Road
Red-spotted Desert-racer (*Mesalina rubropunctata*) – Aswerd Road
Sand Viper (*Cerastes vipera*) – Aswerd Road

Birds

Birding highlights included Bald Ibis, Cricket Longtail and Sudan Golden Sparrow. A full account of the birds seen can be found at www.hows.org.uk

Conclusion

Our primary aim to see a Sand Cat in the wild was achieved and we managed fantastic views of at least two individuals. We were also treated to a wide selection of other Saharan mammals including Fennec Fox, Ruppell’s Fox, African Wildcat and Lesser Egyptian Jerboa. It would have been nice to get decent views of the Striped Polecat although you’ve got to leave something for a future visit.

In Morocco the mammal watching was less productive but we did dedicate some of our schedule to birding and looking for reptiles. With more time to travel north it should have been possible to add Barbary Ape to the trip list along with Common Gundi and perhaps even Greater Egyptian Jerboa.

Morocco and Western Sahara certainly offer some fantastic mammal watching opportunities and I look forward to returning to the region in the not too distant future.