

WESTERN SAHARA & SOUTHERN MOROCCO

Morocco & Western Sahara 6-15 February 2014

Richard Webb, Steve Smith & John Wright.

Contents

- Introduction
- Itinerary
- Mammal-watching sites
 1. Awserd road
 2. Dakhla
 3. Oued Massa
 4. Tafinegoult
- Mammals seen
- Birds
- Logistics
 1. Flights
 2. Money
 3. Car hire
 4. Accommodation
 5. Food
 6. Police checkpoints
 7. References

Introduction

Having had to cancel two trips due to major surgery in late 2013 an opportunity to re-visit Morocco and Western Sahara in February 2014 was a welcome escape from the awful weather in the UK.

The trip was successful although strong winds in the far south and a full moon probably hindered the spotlighting this year. I do not intend repeating everything covered in the previous report so please see my 2012 report for additional details relating to the earlier trip.

Mike Richardson also had a team in the same area on the same dates and his report will provide a useful comparison of the success of the two teams.

Richard Webb

Mammal-watching sites

Awserd road, SE of Dakhla.

- Unquestionably one of the best locations for mammal-watching in the Western Palearctic particularly if you are prepared to put a lot of time in spotlighting. We spent 3 nights here and to be honest would have been better spending more time here and not gone further north. We spotlighted at a slightly slower speed than the previous trip and I suspect that c.30 kph is the ideal speed. In addition it would be worth considering hiring 4x4 (albeit it at a higher price) as Mike's team certainly seemed to benefit from the higher position and two or three animals certainly got away from us as a result of our lower spotlighting position.

- There is some dispute as to whether this road was mined during past hostilities but from what we can now make out most if not all areas west of Awserd are not mined but once you reach Awserd it is a different matter. The road from the start to Awserd is 216Kms long and there is good spotlighting all along the road.
- Spotlighting was probably also impacted by the almost full moon in the evening sky. As in 2012 we saw more when the moon was waning in the early hours of the morning.
- Due to the lack of accommodation along the road you either need to return to Dakhla (53 kms and three police checkpoints from the start of the road), or camp out. At Awserd itself there are no hotels but there is a shop where you can buy additional supplies, bread, drinks etc. if you plan camping out. **Note** there is now also a service station in Awserd with a shop and a café and it looks like they are planning to build some accommodation here. Apparently there is now also a hotel in Bir Anzarine about 60 kms north of the Awserd road.
- Rodents were in lower numbers than in 2012 but carnivores were again well represented although we found Fennec Fox more difficult than in 2012. However Mike's team saw quite a few.
- Sadly domestic cats are now being encountered at the Awserd end of the road and we saw two. One was seen at Oued Jenna along with several feral dogs and another trip that visited the area on 9th February encountered 12 stray cats and witnessed a United Nations pick-up let out at least 10 cats from three large garbage bins. I hate to think what will happen with the purity of Sand Cats in the area if domestic cats start hybridising with them or the African Wildcats in the area.

Dakhla

- Pointe de la Sarga at the southern end of the peninsula on which Dakhla sits is a well-known birding site but at high tide the point and the seafront of Dakhla itself which overlooks Dakhla Bay provide opportunities to look for cetaceans including Atlantic Hump-Backed (at the northern end of its range), Bottle-nosed & Risso's Dolphin although we spent little time looking for cetaceans.

Oued Massa

- A well-known birding site c.40 kms south of Agadir best reached by a turning off the main Agadir to Tiznit road signposted Massa. See pages 84-87 of Bergier & Bergier (see references) for more details.
- We encountered **Egyptian Mongoose** along the river in 2012 and **Barbary Ground Squirrel** near the entrance to the national park on both trips.
- Others have also seen Algerian Hedgehog, Wild Boar & African Wild Cat here.

Tafinegoult

- A small village east of the R203 (Marrakech road) a few kms north of the Taroudant to Ouazazate road. Cuvier's Gazelle occurs in the argon forest above the village but we had no luck on two visits at dusk and dawn despite walking the hills to the NE of the village. To access these hills go through the village until you take a sharp right bend, straight after the bend turn left on a rough track and at the top of the village turn right and park after a few 100 metres. Scan or walk the hills from here.
- Mike Richardson discovered that Barbary Sheep are also being reintroduced to the area and that there are two enclosures further north along the R203 where the reintroduction is taking place but we did not visit this area.

Itinerary

- 6th • Arrived Agadir early afternoon and drove south to Tantan for night stopping just short of Tantan for birding just before dusk.
- 7th • All day driving south to Dakhla with a couple of birding stops on route.
- 8th • 0400 start from Dakhla spending whole day along the Awserd road returning to Dakhla at midnight. A mammal-less spotlighting session other than a solitary Savannah Hare.
- 9th • Morning Pointe de la Sarga. Late afternoon returned to Awserd road returning to hotel at 0600 on the 10th.
- 10th • Morning catching up on sleep, afternoon Pointe de la Sarga and areas near Dakhla Port.
 - Left hotel at 2200 to spotlight Awserd Road until first light on the 11th.
- 11th • Oued Jenna from 0700-1130 then drove back to Dakhla birding on route arriving back at hotel at 1600.
- 12th • Dawn at pumping station in Gled Jidane followed by time spent looking for larks a km east of here. Left at 1100 for long drive north to Laayoune. Short spotlighting session to east of Laayoune to Dchira.
- 13th • Early morning birding Laayoune followed by long drive north to Tiznit.
 - Late afternoon Oued Massa.
- 14th • Morning Oued Massa then drove east to Taroudant and Tafinegoult.
- 15th • Morning Tafinegoult, then returned to Taroudant and Agadir for delayed flight home.

Mammals seen

Nomenclature follows **Mammals of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East** (Aulagnier, Haffner, Mitchell-Jones, Moutou & Zima).

Desert Hedgehog *Paraechinus aethiopicus*

- One dead on the Awserd road at km 32 on the 10th,

Golden Jackal *Canis aureus*

- One at km 119 along the Awserd road on the 9th.

Ruppell's Fox *Vulpes rueppelli*

- 10th – singles at km 33 and 14 shortly before dawn.
- 11th – one at km 94 and singles at two spots between km 170 and 185 pre-dawn. The exact km references were lost due to a technology failure.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*

- Tafinegoult – two on the 14th and one on the 15th.

Fennec Fox *Vulpes zerda*

- 10th – one on the south side of the Awserd road at km 132.
- 11th – one on the north side of the Awserd road at km 116.

Saharan Striped Polecat *Ictonyx libyca*

- 11th - singles briefly at two spots between km 140 and 150 The exact km references were lost due to a technology failure.

Sand Cat *Felis margarita*

- One seen on the south side of the Awserd road at km 148 on the 10th. First found by Mike Richardson's team, to whom thanks are due, we re-found it a couple of hours later by squeaking and then scanning with the lights. We approached it on foot to less than 50 metres although the full moon made approaching it difficult. After losing it we relocated it or another animal on the south side of the road and approached it to within 75 metres at one point it sat out in the open watching us. Unfortunately the spotlight failed at that point. Much better views than in 2012.

African Savanna Hare *Lepus microtis*

- A total of 10 along the Awserd road and another along the main road between the junctions of the Dahkla and Awserd roads.

Barbary Ground Squirrel *Atlantoxerus getulus*

- Two Oued Massa.

Lesser Egyptian Jerboa *Jaculus jaculus*

- Seen frequently along the Awserd road but in much lower numbers than in 2012.

Lesser Egyptian Gerbil *Gerbillus gerbillus*

- At least one seen along Awserd road.
- Small numbers of gerbils were seen along the Awserd road and at least one additional species of gerbil/jird was seen but not identified.

Fat Sand Rat *Psammomys obesus*

- Four at km 130 shortly before dusk on the 8th.

Reptiles & Amphibians

Dabb Lizard, Fringe-fingered Lizard, Spur-thighed Tortoise, Spanish Terrapin, Stripeless Tree Frog, Painted Frog, Edible Frog.

Birds

Highlights included:

- Western Reef Egret – at least six at sites around Dakhla.
- Royal Tern – 13 north of Dahkla
- Pharaoh Eagle Owl – one Awserd road
- Black-crowned Finchlark (Oued Jenna & km 141)
- Thick-billed Lark – five a kilometre east of the pumping station at Gled Jidane,
- Temminck's Horned Lark – six a kilometre east of the pumping station at Gled Jidane

- Cricket Warbler – having dipped in 2012 we saw these easily at four sites between km 152 and Oued Jenna including at least 12 at the latter site.
- African Desert Warbler – singles at kms 141 and 152.
- Desert Sparrow – seen at the tip at km 119 along the Awserd road and then seen at several times within 40 kms of Awserd including c.200 at Oued Jenna.
- Sudan Golden Sparrow – four including three males with the Desert Sparrow flock at Oued Jenna.

Flights

We used easyJet from Gatwick to Agadir, £140 return including checked in luggage for RW, £123 for JB & NG. Good value although the return flight was delayed by nearly three hours by the poor weather in the UK which had resulted in the plane being at the wrong location earlier in the day.

Money

We foolishly changed money at Gatwick. **Don't!** The exchange rate was appalling compared to that available at Agadir Airport, 25% higher? At nearly 13.2 dirham to the pound.

ATMs are readily available throughout the country although you will find that some bank's ATMs will not accept UK cards. However the most widespread banks like Banque Populaire do. Rates at ATMs were slightly better than the rate available at the airport although bank charges normally £1.75 per transaction did apply.

Car hire

After last year's problems with Hertz we booked a car through a local company with depots in Agadir, Laayoune, Boujdour and Dakhla. The car a diesel Hyundai Accent had high mileage and we did end up having to replace two tyres but at £300 was good value for 10 days. They only take cash not cards, which means there is no chance of getting a nasty surprise at the end of the trip. Given that we did over 5,000 kms in 10 days the car did well and had the added bonus of two cigarette sockets so we could power two spotlights simultaneously. On the downside it lacked AC which would have been useful on the long drives in both directions. They can be contacted at:

<http://www.laargoubcar.com/eng/index.php>

Accommodation

Hotels at all price ranges are available in most locations other than Awserd where you would need to camp to stay overnight and accommodation was easy to find although if you arrive in Marrakech late at night you may find a lot of hotels full. Most are mentioned in the Rough Guide or Bergier & Bergier. We used the following.

Tantan - Hotel Sable d-Or – see Rough Guide. Good value at under £45 for a single and double en-suite although service in the restaurant was slow.

Dakhla - Palais des Touaregs - At the northern end of the seafront we paid £35 per room per night pre-booked through www.bookings.com . It would probably be cheaper if you negotiate on arrival without a booking but pre-booking was worthwhile as it was full when we were there. Nice rooms en-suite with a balcony overlooking the bay so potential for cetaceans and seabirds. The owners were very flexible when it came to leaving and returning at unearthly hours of the morning for spotlighting purposes.

Laayoune – Hotel Jodesa - £24 for a single and double en suite.

Tiznit – Hotel Assaka – £24 for three en suite singles.

Taroudant – Hotel Palais Salem - £110 for three singles after heavy negotiation by SS. Don't bother with the restaurant as service is appalling and RW walked out without eating in the end. Just around the corner the Café-Restaurant Bab el Kasbah is excellent value.

Food

On most days we bought breakfast and lunch from local shops, patisseries etc and we only had one cooked meal a day in the evening. Local and western food is widely available and chicken & chips were a staple diet closely followed by lasagne, kebabs, omelettes, tajine etc. In Dakhla the Restaurant Samarkand was excellent and can be recommended although meals are only available at lunchtime and from early evening, 19:30, so it's not ideal if you want a late afternoon meal ahead of an evening spotlighting session.

Police checkpoints

In Western Sahara police checkpoints remain a pain but only because of their frequency. We went armed with a completed checklist (see below). I strongly recommend that you complete 20 or more of these and take these with a similar number of photocopies of your passport to hand over at the checkpoints. It will definitely speed you on your way. I suggest using something like Professeur (Teacher) or Directeur du banque, which seem to be well received for your profession. Definitely don't put journalist even if you are one as this will attract suspicion. It would also be useful to have a few words of French to explain what you are doing and where you are going particularly in Dakhla where you have to go through three checkpoints each time you go to and from the Awserd road.

It is also worth noting that the first roundabout as you come into Dakhla is a well-known speed trap.

Nom :	
Prenoms :	
Date de Naissance :	
Lieu de Naissance :	
Situation Familiale :	
Nom de Pere :	
Nom de Mere :	
Nationalite :	
Profession :	
Adresse :	
Numero de Passeport :	
Date de Delivrance :	
Lieu de Delivrance :	GBR
Date D'expiration :	
Motif du Voyage :	TOURISME
Marque du Vehicule :	
Matriculation :	
Date D'entrée en Maroc :	
Ville D'entrée :	
Numero de Police: (number on entry stamp)	

References

- **The Rough Guide to Morocco – 2010 edition** – useful but not essential for finding hotels etc.
- **Michelin map 742** – probably the best map for Morocco although if you are visiting Marrakech get a city map as well.
- **A Birdwatchers' Guide to Morocco (Bergier & Bergier)** – useful for sites on route from Agadir to Dakhla and for sites elsewhere in Morocco. Additional useful information, if somewhat dated, on hotels etc in main birding areas.
- www.go-south.org – a superb website run by Patrick Bergier providing great information on birding & wildlife in general in Morocco. The following important references are available from this site.
 1. **Ou voir les oiseaux dans le Sahara Atlantique marocain (Bergier)** – essential reference to birding sites in Western Sahara, Pages 69-78 provide detailed information albeit mainly in French to sites along the Awserd road.
 2. **Notes sur quelques mammiferes terrestres observes pres de Dakhla, Oued Ad-Dehab (Chevalier, Thevenot, Bergier)** – includes records including GPS references for species including Ruppell's & Fennec Foxes, Saharan Striped Polecat, Sand Cat etc.
 3. **New data on the terrestrial mammals of the Oued Ad-Dehab region of Western Sahara (Moores, Brown & Martin)** – useful additional information to previous reference.
 4. **Status and identification of hares Lepus sp in Western Sahara and Southern Morocco (Moores, Brown, Martin & Lees)** – suggests that hares in this area are African Savanna Hare and not Cape Hare as previously thought.
 5. **Le Chat des sables (Felis margarita)** – provides useful information on sightings etc. of Sand Cat with some seriously gripping photos.