

TUNISIAN MAMMAL TOUR

- *A Ten Day Search For The Rare and Endangered Mammals of The Pre-Saharan Savannah and Northern Sahara*



Sahara Desert: Djebil National Park in the late afternoon.

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Tunisian Mammal Tour

1 Background and Objectives

In February 2013 a group of mammal enthusiasts had been lucky enough to see Sand Cat, together with a strong supporting cast of other highly desirable species, in a ten day tour led by Tarek Nefzi, a leading Tunisian naturalist and wildlife guide. Since Sand Cat was a species I was extremely keen to see myself, I contacted Tarek some while later to see about organising my own trip to attempt to repeat the first group's earlier success. In consultation with Tarek I set up an itinerary that not only gave me a decent shot at the cat but which also provided good opportunities for other rare species. The trip was set for 19/11/13 to 29/11/13.

The principal target was the Sand Cat, a rare and elusive species that relatively few Europeans had seen in the wild. (As far as I was aware few had even tried to see it!). But I had other important targets too, including Fennec Fox, Ruppell's Fox, Addax, Scimitar-horned Oryx, Dorcas's Gazelle, Dama Gazelle and Rhinoceros Gazelle. The "wanted list" extended also to Barbary Sheep, though with the most likely site, Chaambi, being currently *hors de combat* due to security problems, I expected that to be virtually impossible.

With these targets in mind Tarek proposed an itinerary which focused on Bouhedma and Djebil National Parks. A full five days and nights were allocated to the quest for Sand Cat at Djebil.

2 Logistics

I flew on Alitalia to Tunis, via Rome, an arduous route designed to obtain the cheapest possible fare. However, the stop-over times in Rome were so long that on the outbound leg I booked into a local hotel for the night, thereby neutralising the saving that I would have made compared to direct flights. I might just as well have bought a ticket on a direct flight.

The accommodation in Tunisia varied from the five star luxury of the Carthage Thalasson hotel in Tunis (first and last nights) to the Spartan minimalism of the Berber Caves in Sened (where you need to bring your own mattresses, blankets and sleeping bags). At Bouhedma and Djebil we stayed in Museum dormitories which were a bit grubby but adequate. Djebil was significantly the more comfortable of the two and, given that we were staying in a remote location, it was really quite reasonable. Tarek arranged for local cooks to prepare meals for us.

Tarek can be contacted through his company, Becasse, which is based in Belgium. See his website at www.becasse-ecologie.com. I cannot speak too highly of Tarek; he is extremely flexible and hard working and will do everything in his power to help his clients find the wildlife they seek. He is also very well connected indeed and can obtain permits for sites that the visitor by himself would have great difficulty with. The administrative obstacles put in front of would-be visitors are quite formidable and one could be forgiven for thinking that Tunisia does not want any eco-tourists. Certainly I saw no attempt whatsoever by the

authorities to promote eco-tourism actively and without the help of some-one like Tarek working behind the scenes, frankly, you might as well stay at home.

3 Day-by-Day Record

Tuesday 19th November

I arrived in Tunis in the late morning having connected via Rome from London Heathrow and broken the journey with an overnight stay at a small hotel near Fiumicino Airport. I met my guide, Tarek, who was patiently waiting in Arrivals.

My arrival time gave us about five or six useful hours of daylight and so our itinerary had been set to take us initially to the bat cave at Al-Haouria, to the north-east of Tunis. A special permit was required to access the cave but Tarek had already taken care of that and when we arrived three rangers were waiting for us, ready to open the ancient padlock at the cave's entrance.



The entrance to the batcave at Al Haouria. Author (centre) with the three rangers.

The cave comprised two chambers: a large upper chamber about three or four metres below the entrance and a smaller second chamber located a little deeper underground. There was a narrow passage leading from the first to the second. Both were warm and humid, the second chamber especially so. And both were carpeted in piles of bat guano. It was a perfect environment for roosting and, I surmised, soon to be hibernating bats.

The prospect of barging in on hibernating bats is something that, in most circumstances, would have given me pause for thought. However, the cave was obviously very rarely visited and, provided we were not too brutal with our torches, I reckoned that the disturbance we might cause would not be excessive. The bats would have been only now beginning their winter hibernation and, in all probability, would have until the following spring to recover their equanimity.

We encountered bats immediately on entering the upper chamber, some circling above us, others clinging to the cave roof. It was apparent that two species were present: one giving rapid clicks on the bat detector, peaking in the range 40-45 KHz, the other giving weird, fluctuating warbles at exactly 105 KHz. A closer inspection revealed that the former was the Maghrebian Mouse-eared Bat and the latter Meheley's Horseshoe Bat. The Mouse-eared were by far the most numerous of the two, there being well over a hundred in residence. Most were clinging to the roof though a few had ensconced themselves in holes. As far as I could see, all of the bats in the lower chamber were Mouse-eared. The Horseshoes were relatively few in number and seemed to be limited to the upper chamber. It took us a while to find a couple and positively identify them, though their warbles on the bat detector were more or less continuous.

We had about fifteen minutes in the cave, long enough to make positive identifications but not so long as to cause significant distress to the inmates. I would suggest that anyone reading this and wishing to visit the cave over the winter consider keeping their visit as short as possible and keeping torch use to the minimum necessary, as disturbing the bats causes them to burn energy that cannot be replaced by feeding for several months.

Wednesday 20th November

Our mission the next morning was to drive from Tunis to Bouhedma National Park, a protected area of pre-Saharan savannah lying between Sfax and Gafsa. It took us all morning and some of the afternoon to reach Bouhedma, in which time we accounted for a few birds en-route, including Little Egret, Shelduck and Lanner Falcon.

Bouhedma, though fairly small, offers some delightful habitat. It is mainly dry acacia savannah with both rocky and sandy areas. To the north is a line of thinly vegetated hills with scree in places. There are thus a variety of micro-habitats which offer potential for a range of mammalian species.

Immediately on entering the Park we found a distant Scimitar-horned Oryx, its white coat obvious even at seven or eight hundred metres. And soon afterwards, we encountered a group of nine Addax and a nearby group of Dorcas's Gazelles. Three new species in about twenty minutes! As we left the Addax, a Golden Jackal broke cover some twenty metres ahead of us and galloped away in alarm.

Arriving at the Museum, (where we were to spend the night), we ran into the Head Ranger who offered to guide us for an hour or two. Under his wing we soon found a much larger group of twenty-five Oryx (including three fawns) as well as a second group of Dorcas's. On

the bird front, we found two coveys of Barbary Partridge as well as Thekla Lark and Mourning Wheatear.



The group of nine Addax at Bouhedma.

The Head Ranger claimed to know a good site for Gundi and so we set out to see if they were around. But it was getting late by the time we arrived at the site, (a rubble-strewn slope at the foot of the hills), and the Gundis were either not present or not active. I suspected the latter and, assuming that they were indeed present, I was confident we'd see them the next morning when the sun came up.

A couple of hours night-driving after dinner produced two more Golden Jackal and a mystery canid which might well have been a Red Fox. I found a Cape Hare, which immediately fled and we flushed a Barn Owl. Otherwise, things were fairly quiet. We tried a sandy area which the Head Ranger thought was good for Fat-tailed Gerbil but unfortunately our luck was out on that score.

Thursday 21st November

Our priority, after an early breakfast, was to nail the Gundi - which I expected to be sunning itself on the exposed rocks after a fairly chilly night. So it proved and, on arriving at the site, we straight away found two Atlas Gundis silhouetted against the skyline as they sat in the

sunshine to warm themselves up. Moussier's Redstarts were around too, as were Mourning Wheatears, a Kestrel and a Little Owl.



Scimitar-horned Oryx at Bouhedma.

After a second look at the large group of Oryx nearby, we drove the short distance to Haddeg, a protected area to the west of Bouhedma and one which is notable for Dama's Gazelle. It was midday when we arrived and the sun was now quite warm. Haddeg looked splendid in the sunshine, stands of acacia dotted about in a shimmering expanse of grass. The whole central part of Tunisia must once have looked like this. Now Haddeg stands like an oasis in a sea of degraded pasture, grazed into barren sterility by a surfeit of domestic livestock.

The rangers opened up the gate and we went in search of the three remaining Dama's Gazelle. I learned that all three, survivors of an earlier re-introduction, were males - hardly a sustainable situation unless further introductions of the species were made. The Dama's Gazelle once roamed across practically the whole Saharan region in great numbers. Now they are reduced to pockets like this, most of the last few survivors being in Chad. Sadly, I expect the species to be extinct in the wild in my lifetime.

We found the Dama's without too much difficulty, though the animals were extremely nervous and we couldn't get close enough for a photograph. Naturally, I was delighted to see them but the encounter was tinged with sadness in the knowledge that I was almost certainly destined to outlive the species, at least insofar as it existed in the wild.

We made plans over lunch to return that evening for a night drive. We would be staying that night at the Berber Caves at Sened and so in the meantime we made our way up to Sened to present ourselves to the family who would be cooking for us that evening and who would be lending us mattresses and blankets for our night in the caves.

It was dark when set off again, re-tracing our route back through Menzel Bou Zaiene and over the mountains to Haddeg. We were accompanied by the head of the family who were "hosting" us at Sened, who was keen to see mammals and probably curious as to what sort of things we would discover at night. He immediately made a big contribution by spotting an animal sneaking across the road in front of us - a hedgehog he claimed. We all got out and began searching for it. I suspected it wouldn't have gone far and, sure enough, minutes later our Sened host found it by the roadside curled up tightly in a ball. Close inspection revealed a black face and small ears, enough to identify it as Algerian Hedgehog; (Long-eared Hedgehog was also a possible candidate though that species has a predominantly white face and big ears).



Algerian Hedgehog near Sened.

A little later, another creature shot across the road in front of us. It was a slim-line rodent, medium sized with a long black-tipped tail. It narrowly avoided becoming roadkill! We stopped to consult our various field guides and quickly narrowed it down to the *Meriones* genus, (a Jird), but which one? There were three candidates of which only one was known to

be present in this location, namely Shaw's Jird, (*Meriones shawi*), and so after quite a lot of deliberation we concluded that that was what it was.

In the Park itself we found diurnal animals such as Addax and Dorcas's Gazelle, though not the Dama's. My torch picked out orange eye-shine a couple of times, which turned out to be Cape Hare. The star was a Greater Egyptian Jerboa. Initially I assumed it was Lesser Egyptian but, as Tarek pointed out, it was bigger, more robust and darker in colour. Moreover, the habitat was wrong for Lesser, which lives exclusively in dry, sandy desert areas, not savannah or steppe.

It was one o'clock before we eventually returned to Sened. With a breeze blowing, it was bitterly cold though the caves themselves turned out to be a lot warmer and more comfortable than I had imagined.

Friday 22nd November

We emerged from the cave to be greeted by warm morning sunshine and the chirping and chattering of House Buntings. We gathered our stuff together and drove down to our host's house for breakfast. The plan today was to make the fairly long drive down to Djebil via El-Quattera, Kebili and Douz, picking up the required permits en-route at Kebili.

The scenery became a lot dryer as we headed south and by the time we had reached El-Quattera, the bare sandstone hills were reminiscent of New Mexico or Arizona. We took a late lunch at Douz beyond which the bare, rocky plains and salt pans gave way to a great ocean of undulating sand dunes. The Sahara at last!

We bounced along a rugged sandy track for some forty kilometres before eventually reaching a desert cafe at the Djebil Park Gate. Here, we paused to meet the proprietor who would be cooking for us over the course of the next five days. Five kilometres further on we came to the main entrance of the Park, (the intervening area being a "transition zone"), and to the Museum where we would be staying. There was a minor administrative hiccup here - the authorities in Kebili hadn't told the rangers that we were coming - but Tarek soon ironed this out and after a little delay we were shown to our rooms.

We now had four days and five nights to find our targets, the most important of which was Sand Cat, though I also wanted Djebil's other specialities, namely Fennec Fox, Ruppell's Fox and Rhim Gazelle. Unsurprisingly, we were the only visitors in the Park and so we would have the place to ourselves and would be able to do pretty much as we pleased. All our targets were difficult but this was about as good an opportunity as we were ever likely to get.

Our first spot-lighting attempt took us northwards to an area of dunes where the February trip had seen Sand Cat. In the first hour, as we worked our way along the eastern fence, we found only one group of Addax. But then, heading westwards into the dunes, we got eye-shine: two bright yellow eyes gleaming at us for three or four seconds before disappearing. I guessed that it was probably Fennec but we could make no positive identification. Nor could we relocate the animal despite a determined effort. It had simply evaporated into the dunes.

We gave it about three hours before finally heading back to the Museum at midnight, whereupon we belatedly got our second eye-shine. Again, two bright yellow eyes stared back at us, though this time I got the impression that it was a larger animal. We followed it across a rocky plain, getting intermittent flashes of eye-shine as it occasionally stopped to look round at us. But, as before, we couldn't identify it. I guessed, given the size and the way the animal was moving, that it might be Golden Jackal.

It was a frustrating start but at least we were finding animals even if we couldn't identify them.

Saturday 23rd November

We set out the following morning under grey, cloudy skies to look for Rhim Gazelle which had been spotted a few days previously by one of the rangers in the south-east corner of the Park. We found only Addax, despite a long search, though we did see a few good birds. I was pleased to see Hoopoe Lark and Cream-coloured Courser and we also recorded Black, Red-rumped and Desert Wheatear as well as Desert Sparrow and a Brown-necked Raven mobbing a Montuagu's Harrier.

The morning drive gave us a chance to take stock of the Park in daylight. A horseshoe shaped range of hills dominates the central area of the Park, around which are areas of bare stony ground and sand dunes. Two successive years of drought had denuded the Park of most of its desert grass but clumps of other, hardier vegetation were dotted about here and there. The best sandy areas were the best vegetated and looked ideal for Fennec and Sand Cat. As far as I could tell, the Park did not contain a single tree.

After lunch I decided to take a shower which I expected, given the absence of hot running water, to be a cold one. But no! One of the rangers handed me a very strange contraption - a piece of wood with two four inch nails hammered through it, each wired up to an electric plug. "Hot water" he said, explaining to Tarek in Arabic that I was to fill a plastic bucket with cold water, plug the device in to the mains and insert it into the water. This, it was said, would warm the water. "*System D*" he proudly declared. Would it? I was more than sceptical but decided to give it a try. I had no idea how long it would take (if it worked at all) but decided to try an hour or so. But, despite my initial disbelief, it worked amazingly well and after about ninety minutes I had a bucket of piping hot water. Of course, I had to be careful to remove the System D from the bucket before testing the temperature with my fingers. I found out that "System D" comes from the French *Système Debrouillard* (meaning something ingeniously lashed together to meet a challenge in a particularly resourceful and unconventional manner). It might equally have stood for "System Deathtrap"!

Our second spot-lighting attempt proved to be an exercise in total frustration. We found eye-shine on no fewer than eight occasions without being able to identify a single one. We simply couldn't get close enough; nor could we stay on the animal for long enough. Each time, the animal gave us the briefest stare before moving off at speed. It made no difference whether we stopped and attempted a slow, cautious approach or accelerated and attempted to follow

the animal. I couldn't believe how skittish these animals were. By the time we finished for the evening I was practically tearing my hair out.



The potentially lethal "System D" water heating device.

Several of the animals we could tell were probably Fennecs though we couldn't be certain. And one, the first of the evening, two small green eyes momentarily giving us a cold stare from atop a large sand dune, might well have been a cat. I could have cried at all these missed opportunities. Clearly we would have to work out a different approach if we were to make progress but at least we were finding animals.

Sunday 24th November

We tried again for Rhim Gazelle the next morning but again without success. It was still cool and cloudy and at one point it actually rained. Yes, rain in the Sahara Desert! The usual Hoopoe Larks, Desert Sparrows and Wheatears were about and it was nice to get some really close-up views of Cream-coloured Courser. Less pleasant was the sight of two dead Addax, both carcasses heavily scavenged by Jackals. We discovered later that these animals were, in fact, victims of the drought - in that without desert grass to eat they had been obliged to resort to less suitable vegetation which, in turn, had caused fatal digestive problems.

At midday, two researchers appeared at the gates, evidently working on a project to assess the condition of the Addax in the Park. One of the two, Marie-Claire, later joined us on the evening's night-drive as anxious as we were to try to find a Sand Cat.

The night was very cold, much more so than the previous two, and the animals were correspondingly much less active. We did get one eye-shine in the dunes, two gleaming yellow eyes which quickly disappeared and probably belonged to a Fennec. But opportunity number thirteen came and went without being properly nailed. By now I was becoming fatalistic. And, close to the Museum, on our return journey, we found a young Golden Jackal which we did at last manage to identify.

It was one o'clock in the morning when we finally gave up the chase. Three long sessions for one Jackal! Tarek was starting to get worried.

Monday 25th November

The previous night's drive had taken its toll on the vehicle and we emerged to find that the front off-side tyre was flat. We had a puncture. Tarek replaced it with the spare wheel but obviously we could hardly risk driving around the Sahara for the next two days with no spare remaining and so there was nothing for it but to head for Douz to repair the puncture. With an eighty kilometre round trip in prospect I assumed that that would be the end of any mammal-watching until much later in the day, but to my surprise Tarek immediately came up with a startling suggestion.

One of the rangers was about to embark on a routine patrol on his quad bike. Would I like to ride shotgun? I thought about it for at least one millisecond and climbed aboard. The ranger spoke no English or French and I no Arabic but, before we left, Tarek explained that I would be very happy to see a Rhim Gazelle.

I had a strange feeling that success might be close; the ranger seemed to be heading towards the mountains in a very direct and purposeful manner, pausing a couple of times to scan from side to side as if expecting something marvellous to appear. Did he know something Tarek and I didn't? My suspicions were vindicated after a mere fifteen minutes when he abruptly slewed to a halt and pointed to something ahead. And, amazingly, like a mirage, there they were: two elegant Rhim Gazelles about fifty metres away, their beautiful chestnut flanks gleaming in the sun. The ranger signalled three though I could only see two, both males. The third might have been sitting or obscured by low vegetation. We didn't stop for long; the ranger had a patrol to do and within moments we were off again. It was excruciatingly uncomfortable on the back of the quad bike, sharing a seat designed for one person, but there is no more efficient way to cover ground in the desert. The quad was far more suited to the conditions than a car and could cover both rocky ground and dunes with ease.

We later found a group of six Dorcas Gazelles which until then I hadn't realised were present. And, on the dunes, were clear tracks of cat. These looked like they were fresh from the previous night. I had experimented previously with my own artificial tracks made with my fingers; after twenty-four hours they had become indistinct and after forty-eight hours

almost completely obliterated. Tracks do not last long in the shifting Saharan sands and anything that is recognisable must have been the product of the previous night or of more recent vintage.

The warm early afternoon sunshine didn't last long and by five o'clock it was already getting chilly. By eight o'clock, when we set out for the evening drive, it was freezing and a slight mist hung over the Park. We quickly found a couple of Lesser Egyptian Jerboas, hopping away like miniature kangaroos, and a Golden Jackal which loped across the track thirty metres in front of us without giving even a twinkle of eye-shine.

It wasn't long before we got ourselves jammed in a sand dune. The sand was above the axles and a major digging operation was required to get us out. The problem was that the sand was so fine that as we dug it out from under the car, it just sank further in. I began to wonder if we'd have to excavate the entire dune - or more likely - abandon the vehicle for the night and try to escape with the help of a tractor the next morning. But eventually we did get out, the vehicle slipping and juddering fitfully as it crawled its way to safety.

Thus, after an hour's work, we continued our search. But, it was extremely quiet, and by midnight we were cold and demoralised. Absolutely nothing was stirring. Even the Jerboas had gone to ground it seemed. Marie-Claire later told us that the last two nights had been the first really cold nights of the winter so far. She felt sure that the sudden inactivity of the nocturnal fauna was mainly due to this abrupt drop in temperatures.

Tuesday 26th November

With the Rhim Gazelle now "in the bag" we turned our attention to Saharan Gundi which, we were told, was present in the sandstone cliffs to the extreme south of the Park. We made our way over to the prescribed location, hoping for a second look at Rhim Gazelle on the way. But the fifteen kilometre drive passed without incident and, in bright sunshine, we drove up to the foot of the cliffs to see what was around.

The cliffs extended along a long line of at least a kilometre and there were many east-facing bluffs where Gundis, if they were indeed there, could reasonably be expected to be sunning themselves. But, search as we might, we couldn't find any. As we paused for a brew up we were visited by Desert Larks and a Trumpeter Finch but of Gundis there was no sign whatever. I felt sure that, if they were present, we would see them.

Eventually, having scrutinised every rocky slope available to us, we gave up and headed home, taking what we thought would be a short cut along the outside of the south-eastern perimeter fence. However, like many short cuts I could mention, it took considerably longer than the roundabout route we had spurned. It became a nightmare trek across sand dunes made of talcum powder and steep rock-strewn slopes. How we didn't wedge the vehicle fatally between boulders or sink into a quagmire sand dune I will never know. But, eventually we made it home, albeit at the cost of yet another slow puncture. This time, with only one evening remaining in Djebil, we decided to risk carrying on without a spare.

So, we had one last night to redeem ourselves. It seemed a little warmer at least and I suspected that, after two successive cold nights of inactivity, things might improve. The sky was clear and at dusk there was a dramatically red Saharan sunset, followed by a night of inky blackness. Venus made a glorious sight in the north-east and, above our heads, the Milky Way cut a luminous swathe. It was absolutely still without even a breath of wind.

We were to be assisted by Ahmed, one of the rangers at Djebil, who began by suggesting that we visit the site of an old camel carcass about a kilometre to the south-east of the Museum. He reckoned that, old as the carcass was, the faint odour it exuded still attracted Fennec each night. It seemed worth a try. And, on cue, a few hundred metres from the carcass, we found the by now familiar bright yellow eye-shine that Ahmed instantly recognised as Fennec. I got out and followed it up a hill, hoping for a good binocular view. But, predictably, it disappeared without trace. However, moments later, we got its mate and this time I managed some sort of view, enough to confirm that Ahmed was correct. We had a confirmed Fennec at last!

We headed northwards back past the Museum and towards the dunes which had produced eye-shine a number of times on previous nights and which had been the site of February's Sand Cat sighting.

We progressed slowly along the edge of the dunes, Tarek apparently more wary now about ploughing straight through them. Thus, I found myself spot-lighting a fairly barren area with a hill about three hundred metres away. Suddenly I got eye-shine about half way up the hill at maybe two hundred metres range, two small white-green dots which stared brightly and fixedly back into the beam. Privately, I suspected cat immediately though I didn't dare say so. We got out, the animal still staring back at us. This was most unusual; every other animal we had found had fled within seconds. Tarek had the high-powered torch now and I raised my binoculars, eager to see if my suspicions were true. They were! A dim, grey feline shape appeared and, as it came into focus, it began padding along slowly and purposefully. It maintained its stare as it moved so that the two brilliant white dots could be seen slowly edging along. It was a Sand Cat sure enough, not a fantastic view I would have to concede but good enough to make a certain identification. Then I lost it for a few seconds, only to pick up the eye-shine once more about twenty metres further along the hillside. It paused, those two white dots gleaming fiercely for perhaps five seconds, before finally it was gone. We walked forward to try to follow it to no avail. That was our Sand Cat and we would have to be content with what we had already seen.

We retreated to the car where we regaled Ahmed with the great news of our discovery. It turned out that he had seen Sand Cat once in five years of working in the Park. We had required five nights!

We headed towards the hills in the central part of the Park which Ahmed declared to be a "good area for Ruppell's Fox". I scoured the bare, stony hillsides with the spot-light hoping for a Fox to appear, but it didn't. Half a kilometre later we reached a fork in the track and

Tarek hesitated, unsure which direction to follow. But Ahmed, to our surprise, bade us turn round and re-trace our route. This, as it happened, was inspired.

Back in Ruppell's country, a featureless valley of thinly vegetated bare ground, I suddenly got eye-shine from two animals barely one hundred metres away. Both pairs of eyes were bright orange-yellow, both too big to be cats and probably too big to be Fennec. Tarek and I got out of the car and again Tarek did the business with the spot-light, allowing me to use binoculars. A long-legged pale grey Fox came into view, its alert eyes staring back at me and its bushy tail held in the horizontal. It was indeed a Ruppell's! Too big and too "leggy" to be a Fennec, Ahmed's wise pronouncement had been dramatically vindicated. I didn't have long to view either animal; in a few seconds both of them were on their heels and bounding up the hillside and away.

We scarcely had time to celebrate this success before I found yet more eye-shine, this time a pair of stunningly bright white eyes that gleamed at me momentarily from atop a ridge about a hundred metres away before promptly disappearing. I wanted to go after it on foot but Ahmed suggested that we drive on instead as the track followed a right hand curve and would shortly give us a full view of the lee of the ridge beyond which the animal was lurking. Again, his judgement was uncanny.

We rounded the bend and two small but very bright eyes burnt back at me in the spot-light beam. This time Tarek and I did get out. With Tarek training the spot-light on the animal, which continued to give us the "big stare", I focused the binoculars. I wasn't sure what to expect; the little white eyes didn't seem very Fox-like but surely it couldn't be another cat? At first I couldn't make out any detail, the animal was sitting on its haunches staring straight at us. But then it turned and began walking slowly up the hill. Again, a long, grey feline shape revealed itself. I thought I could even make out a couple of dark markings on the hind legs. It gave a slight jump to clear a boulder and then resumed its slow, purposeful slog up the hill. It paused and turned to glare at us once more for a few seconds but then carried on up the hill, marched over the crest and was gone. Another Sand Cat! Absolutely incredible! I floated back to the car in a state of bemused euphoria. Ahmed was lost for words.

We carried on for another hour but we had had all our Christmases at once and nothing else materialised. We were back home before midnight with all of our targets nailed. It appeared that we had at last found a technique that gave us some chance of identifying what we were finding, namely stopping, getting out, one person holding the high-powered torch and a second using binoculars. Trying the same two-handed approach from within the car was chaotic and following the animal in the car - either very slowly or at full speed - was completely ineffective. It was only once we had got ourselves properly organised that we stood any chance of identifying anything.

In fact, we had learned that finding animals in Djebil was very easy, at least on the milder nights. Even finding cats wasn't particularly difficult. The terrain was so open that if animals were active then you stood every chance of finding them. It was identifying what you had found that was so hard. But by now I had got the eye-shine more or less sorted, as below.

Eye-shine size/colour	Animal behaviour	Habitat	Diagnosis
Large golden yellow eyes close together.	Quick stare then flees. Often no second chance.	Sand dunes.	Fennec Fox
Large yellow eyes with some separation. Eyes high off ground.	Quick stare then flees. Covers ground very quickly.	Anywhere.	Golden Jackal
Large orange-yellow eyes close together. Similar to Fennec.	Slightly longer stare. Less shy.	Rough ground. Hillsides.	Ruppell's Fox
Small white-green eyes close together. Eyes low to ground. Distinctive.	Very long initial stare. Slow moving. Repeated stares.	Sand dunes or hillsides.	Sand Cat

Of course, the animals don't read trip reports and these could only ever be rough generalisations. The behaviour of any individual animal might be different!

Wednesday 27th November

Our original plan had been to head north to Touati to try for Barbary Sheep and Cuvier's Gazelle on our last day in the field. However, Marie-Claire had told us about another reserve to the south-east at Oued Dekouk where Barbary Sheep had been re-introduced about fifteen years previously and where sightings were easy. We therefore abandoned Touati and headed east via Matmara, Toujane, Medenine and Tataouine.



Barbary Sheep at Oued Dekouk.

We arrived at the reserve at just after three o'clock, with two hours of daylight remaining but this was ample time to find the Sheep, a large herd of which were hanging around near the entrance. It was a pleasant change to see an "easy" species!

A little while later we found an interesting cliff with boulder-strewn slopes, habitat that would obviously be ideal for Gundis. And, indeed, three such creatures immediately presented themselves for inspection. I thought they would probably be Atlas Gundis, the species we had already seen at Bouhedma, but using Tarek's telescope we found this not to be the case. These animals were slightly smaller, had proportionally smaller heads, very contrasting white eye rings, white facial markings and grey (as opposed to brown) belly fur. Their fur was also somewhat finer than that of the Atlas Gundis. These were, in fact, Saharan Gundis, the species which had eluded us at Djebil. Oued Dekouk is more or less in the transition zone between the two species and it wouldn't have been surprising to find that Atlas Gundi was also present.

We drove around the edge of the reserve in fading light, spotting a few Dorcas Gazelle as well as two more Barbary Sheep on the far side of a broad wadi. It would have been interesting to try spot-lighting, (Crested Porcupine was reputedly present), but time was against us. We still had to book a hotel for the night in Tataouine and, in any case, we had a monumentally long drive back to Tunis awaiting us the next day.

Thursday 28th November

The drive from the Songha Hotel in Tataouine to Tunis took eleven hours, though we did take a couple of diversions to break the monotony.

First we stopped at Mareth to visit the Military Museum, the site of the famous "Mediterranean Line" where Rommel was decisively routed by the British Eighth Army and Free French forces in 1943. Then, at El Jem, we took a look at the Roman Colosseum and the remains of a prosperous Roman town dating back to the second century. Some of the mosaics in the old Roman villa depicted lions, leopards and cheetahs, species which must have been common at that time in the nearby savannah.

The only wildlife of note en-route was a large flock of Greater Flamingo near Gabes.

Friday 29th November

With an hour to spare at the Carthage-Thalasson Hotel in Tunis, before setting off for the airport, I took a stroll down to the shoreline to see if any interesting birds were about. Looking out to sea, I found a small group of Lesser Black-backed Gulls, a Cormorant and a couple of Whiskered Terns. And in the scrub at the top of the beach was a Sardinian Warbler. Back at the Hotel, there were Common Bulbuls and Spotless Starlings aplenty in the gardens, together with a lone Chiffchaff.

Then, it was back to Tunis Airport and the long and tedious two-legged journey home via Rome Fiumicino.

4 Summary of Results

4.1 Mammals

I recorded 19 species of mammal, including two sightings of Sand Cat and good views of the rarer Saharan Gazelles (Dama, Dorca's and Rhim). The full list is as follows:

Species	Latin Name	Notes
Sand Cat	<i>Felis margarita</i>	Two sightings (different animals) on 26/11.
Fennec Fox	<i>Vulpes zerda</i>	Two sightings (different animals) on 26/11.
Ruppell's Fox	<i>Vulpes ruppelli</i>	One sighting of two animals on 26/11.
Golden Jackal	<i>Canis aureus</i>	Seen often at Bouhedma and Djebil.
Dama Gazelle	<i>Gazella dama</i>	One sighting of three animals on 21/11.
Dorca's Gazelle	<i>Gazella dorcas</i>	Seen at Bouhedma, Haddeg, Djebil and Oued Dekouk
Rhim Gazelle	<i>Gazella leptoceros</i>	Two animals seen at Djebil on 25/11.
Addax	<i>Addax naso maculatus</i>	Seen at Bouhedma, Haddeg and Djebil.
Scimitar-horned Oryx	<i>Oryx dammah</i>	Seen at Bouhedma and Haddeg.
Barbary Sheep	<i>Ammotragus lervia</i>	Seen easily at Oued Dekouk on 27/11.
Cape Hare	<i>Lepus capensis</i>	Common at Bouhedma and Haddeg. Also at Djebil.
Shaw's Jird	<i>Meriones shawi</i>	One en-route Sened to Haddeg on 21/11.
Algerian Hedgehog	<i>Atelerix algirus</i>	One en-route Sened to Haddeg on 21/11.
Greater Egyptian Jerboa	<i>Jaculus orientalis</i>	One at Haddeg on 21/11.
Lesser Egyptian Jerboa	<i>Jaculus jaculus</i>	Common at Djebil.
Atlas Gundi	<i>Ctenodactylus gundi</i>	Two at Bouhedma on morning of 21/11.
Saharan Gundi	<i>Ctenodactylus vali</i>	Several at Oued Dekouk on 27/11.
Meheley's Horseshoe Bat	<i>Rhinoplophus mehelyi</i>	Several at Al-Haouria batcave on 19/11.
Maghrebian Mouse-eared	<i>Myotis punicus</i>	Abundant at Al-Haouria batcave on 19/11.
Total Species Recorded	19	

4.2 Birds

As usual these days, I made no real effort to record birds though the following gives at least some idea of the sort of species to be expected. The list is far from definitive.

Species	Latin Name	Notes
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Common around Tunis.
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	One near hotel in Tunis.
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>	Large numbers on shoreline at Gabes.
Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	On freshwater between Sousse & Sfax.
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	In garden at Skiira.
Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>	One being mobbed by Raven in Djebil.
Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	Common in less dry areas.
Lanner Falcon	<i>Falco biarmicus</i>	One by roadside near Sfax.
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Common throughout.
Barbary Partridge	<i>Alectoris barbara</i>	Several groups in Bouhedma.
Cream-coloured Courser	<i>Cursorius cursor</i>	Common in Djebil.
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	Several offshore near hotel in Tunis.
Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>	Two offshore near hotel in Tunis.

Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	Common near human habitation.
Laughing Dove	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>	Common in less dry areas.
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	One in Bouhedma.
Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	One in Bouhedma.
European Hoopoe	<i>Upopa epops</i>	Several in less dry areas.
Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>	Common throughout.
Desert Lark	<i>Ammomanes deserti</i>	Two in Djebil.
Temminck's Lark	<i>Eremophila bilopha</i>	Common in Djebil
Hoopoe Lark	<i>Alaemon alaudipes</i>	Common in Djebil.
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	Common in towns.
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	Two en-route to Oued Dekouk.
Common Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>	Hotel in Tunis. Also Haddeg.
Moussier's Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus moussieri</i>	Several in Bouhedma.
Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>	Several in Djebil.
Red-rumped Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe moesta</i>	Several in Djebil.
Desert Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>	Several in Djebil.
Mourning Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe lugens</i>	Common throughout.
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	One near hotel in Tunis.
Chiffchaff	<i>Pjylloscopus collybita</i>	One at hotel in Tunis.
Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	Several by roadside.
Brown-necked Raven	<i>Corvus ruficollis</i>	Common at Djebil.
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	Common at hotel in Tunis.
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>	Common throughout.
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Common near habitation.
Desert Sparrow	<i>Passer simplex</i>	Common at Djebil.
House Bunting	<i>Emberiza striolata</i>	Common at Berber Caves, Sened.
Trumpeter Finch	<i>Bucanetes githagineus</i>	One at Djebil.
Total Species	40	