

SAHARAN PREDATORS

Morocco & Western Sahara 15-26 December 2012

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Introduction

In the past few years the area south-east of Awserd (Aoussard) in Western Sahara has become increasingly popular with birders and some with an interest in mammals have found that Fennec and Ruppell's Fox are reasonably common and that Saharan Striped Polecat is also possible. I had originally planned visiting the area in 2010 but cancelled the trip at the last minute. However discovering that Sand Cat had been seen on several occasions in recent years rekindled my interest and I finally visited the area in 2012. It was a very successful trip with the four afore-mentioned species all being seen along with Golden Jackal, Desert Hedgehog, African Savannah Hare & a range of rodents despite the time in the area being truncated due to car problems (see Car hire later in the report).

Like most birders we drove down from Agadir or Marrakech but unless you are keen to visit various birding locations, or to explore the Smara area NE of Laayoune where Sand Cat has also been found I would strongly recommend flying south to Dakhla from Agadir, Marrakech or Casablanca (see Flights) as you waste three days driving to and from Awserd.

While Jeff & Nigel returned home for Christmas I stayed in Morocco to see Barbary Macaque. I also tried but failed to see Greater Egyptian Jerboa.

I would strongly recommend spending several nights around Dakhla (see site guide for more details).

Richard Webb

Mammal-watching sites

Awserd road

- 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 had planned to spend 4 or 5 nights here but due to car hire problems only spent 3 nights here. As a result we tried to cover too much ground each time covering over 190 kms most nights albeit with sections (mainly Gleb Jdiane, km 86-116 & Oued Jenna) at slower speed, c.30-40 kph and the rest at normal speed c.80 kph.
- **Note – this road was heavily mined during the war in Western Sahara and with the exception of Gleb Jdiane and Oued Jenna we would recommend that you DO NOT leave the road. The UN maintain a base at Awserd 216 kms along the road. If you do meet them it is worth telling them what you are doing to avoid problems as they see few visitors. They thought that JB & NG were spies!**
- The road from the start to Awserd is 216 long and was much busier than we expected. We encountered vehicles at least every 10-15 minutes at times including while we were spotlighting.
- Spotlighting was probably also impacted by the almost full moon in the evening sky, we certainly saw more rodents after midnight and pre-dawn when the moon had waned, and by the heavy rains in the area in October 2012. Certainly the area from c.km 130 onwards was very green and spotlighting was more difficult due to the denser vegetation in this area. However there were more rodents in this area.
- 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. If I go back I would probably spend at least 5 nights here and alternate between camping and staying in Dakhla as there's next to no mammal activity here during daylight hours.

- Rodents, i.e. **Lesser Egyptian Jerboa**, **Lesser Egyptian Gerbil**, **Fat-tailed Gerbil** etc, occurred from c. km 80 onwards and no specific details are provided.
- The following details are based on the km posts from the start of the road. These were more reliable than using our speedometer which was extremely inaccurate.
- Km 17 – the start of Gleb Jdiane – we saw two **Golden Jackals** here pre-dawn.
- Km 21 – the area around the pumping station on the north side of the road was covered in small mammal tracks and it would probably be worth spending time staking out the pool at night although all we saw post-dawn was the local dogs. We did set some small mammal traps here without any luck.
- Km 22 – we saw a domestic cat bearing more than a passing resemblance to African Wildcat at a distance around the houses to the north of the road here on three occasions. We also encountered the same animal on the hillside on the opposite side of the road one night and had we not seen it previously at close range may well have misidentified it.



Domestic cat (J.Blincow)



Fat Sand Rat (J. Blincow)

- Km 25 – **Ruppell's Fox** on the south side of the road.
- Km 27 – excellent desert habitat with small dunes on each side of the road. Sand Cat has been seen here but not by us.
- C
- Approx.km 50 – **Desert Hedgehog**.
- Km 78 – **Ruppell's Fox** on the south side of the road.
- Km 83 – **Fat Sand Rat** at dusk on the north side of the road.
- Km 86-116 – an excellent section with several past records of Sand Cat and Fennec Fox. We spent a lot of time spotlighting in this section.
- Km 92-93 – Great views of **Saharan Striped Polecat** on the north side of the road on two consecutive nights.
- Km 98 – **Ruppell's Fox** to the north of the road on two consecutive nights.
- Km 100 – **Fennec Fox** on the south side of the road.
- Km 110 – **Sand Cat** on the north side of the road.
- Km 111-116 - four **Fennec Foxes** on the north side of the road.
- Km 130-191 – increasing numbers of rodents and at least two **African Savanna Hare**.
- Km 130ish – small carnivore seen badly but probably Fennec Fox or Sand Cat.
- Km 147 – **Ruppell's Fox** on north side of the road.

- Km 191 – **African Savanna Hare**. Also at least two previous sightings of Sand Cat here in Oued Jenna.

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 time constraints meant that we spent little time looking for cetaceans on our trip.

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 and **Barbary Ground Squirrel** near the entrance to the national park.
- Others have also seen Algerian Hedgehog, Wild Boar & African Wild Cat here.

Cascades d'Ouzard

- A tourist site and a reliable stakeout for **Barbary Macaque** c.150 kms NE of Marrakech. Park at the end of the road and follow one of the two trails to the falls.
- The left hand trail goes down to restaurants etc. at the foot of the falls, the right hand trail passes the Riad Cascades d'Ouzard and then crosses two bridges and skirts the top of the gorge.
- Ignore the guides that will try to persuade you to take a 7 km trek including caves where you can see the macaques. The macaques were easy to see in the late afternoon. I first saw them along the right hand trail but they then dropped down the cliffs to the river where they could easily be approached on the left hand trail.

Zeida

- Zeida lies in the steppes of the High Moulouya c.400 kms east of Marrakech. I visited the area for one night at the end of the trip, to kill time, but also in the hope of finding Greater Egyptian Jerboa. Although I found plenty of burrows I saw no rodents at all in 2+ hours spotlighting which may have been down to the full moon although conceivably the jerboas may have been hibernating. I concentrated on tracks to the west of the Zeida to Midelt road in the first 10 kms south of Zeida and only saw **Red Fox**.
- The area is well-known for Dupont's Lark and other desert birds. See page 80 of Bergier & Bergier for more details.

Itinerary

- 15th • Arrived Marrakech late morning, collected hire car, drove south to Tantan, c.570 kms.
- 16th • Left Tantan pre-dawn for long drive south to Dakhla. Broke down early afternoon c.550 kms further south, 33 kms south of Boujdour. Hitched back into Boujdour, found mechanic and eventually towed back to garage in Boujdour. Night Boujdour.
- 17th • Back to garage to find car un-repairable. Attempts to resolve issues with Hertz even using a local English-speaking campsite owner proved frustrating so agreed to leave car garaged in Boujdour and found a replacement hire car from a local firm. A far better vehicle than the original. Continued south to Dakhla arriving early evening and checking into hotel.

- 18th
 - Left hotel at 0400 and spotlighted the first 80 kms of the Awserd road prior to dawn. Continued onto Oued Jenna and spent remainder of day in the area between here and Awserd itself spending a couple of hours catching up on sleep in the middle of the day.
 - Began spotlighting again at dusk, 1900, and spotlighted back to the Gleb Jdiane, concentrating on the sections 5-25 km s from Awserd, 100-130 kms from Awserd & Gleb Jdiane. Drove the other sections at normal driving speed. Arrived back in Dakhla at 0100.
- 19th
 - NG & JB birded Pointe de la Sarga during the morning. Had lunch and stocked up with supplies and then drove out to km 86 (130 km from Awserd).
 - Started spotlighting at 1845 and spent 6 hours spotlighting as far as Oued Jenna (25 km from Awserd). Grabbed 90 minutes sleep & then spotlighted back to Gleb Jdiane. Again concentrated on the stretch 100-130 kms from Awserd.
- 20th
 - First light until 0900 at the pools at Gleb Jdiane & then returned to Dakhla to catch up on sleep. JB & NG again preferred to go birding at Pointe de la Sarga.
 - Evening spotlighting session on the section 100-130 kms from Awserd & around Gleb Jdiane arriving back at Dakhla c.2330.
- 21st
 - Left Dakhla 0530. Arrived in Boujdour at 0915 and met up with Hertz rep. Eventually left Boujdour shortly before midday for 800 kms drive back to Agadir arriving shortly after 2200.
- 22nd
 - Met Hertz rep and obtained replacement vehicle. Returned south to Oued Massa where spent remainder of day before driving back to Marrakech for night.
- 23rd
 - Dropped JB & NG off at airport and then drove NE to Cascades d'Ouzard(birding on route) where spent the afternoon around the cascades. Night Ouzard.
- 24th
 - Early departure from Ouzard and headed east to Zeida (birding on route) arriving early afternoon. Late afternoon/evening in steppe south of Zeida.
- 25th
 - Early morning birding steppes south of Zeida then spent remainder of day driving back to Marrakech with numerous stops particularly along road from Zeida to El Kebab. Night Marrakech.
- 26th
 - Returned to airport for flight back to London.

Mammals seen

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

Desert Hedgehog *Paraechinus aethiopicus*

- One seen by JB (RW & NG were asleep) c.50 kms down the Awserd road c.2 hours prior to dawn on the 20th.

Barbary Macaque *Macaca sylvanus*

- 10+ Cascades d'Ouzard.
- Can also be seen at sites around Ifrane c.400 kms NE of Marrakech and Ourika Valley SE of Marrakech.



Barbary Macaque (R. Webb)

Golden Jackal *Canis aureus*

- Two at Gleb Jdiane at 0515 on the 18th.

Ruppell's Fox *Vulpes rueppelli*

- 18th – one an hour before dawn, 0600 at km 78.
- 18th – one shortly after dawn at km 147, seen in daylight in close proximity to a group of c.15 Stone-curlew. Interesting behaviour in that everytime the fox jumped the thicknees also jumped.
- 18th – one at km 98 at c.2230.
- 19th - one at km 98 at c.2000.
- 20th – one at km 25 at c.0600.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*

- One Zeida.

Fennec Fox *Vulpes zerda*

- 19th – Four separate individuals on the north side of the road between km 111 & 116 at c.2200. One only just escaped the attentions of a Pharoah Eagle-Owl which amazingly swooped down to try to catch it as we spotlighted it!
- 20th – One on south side of road at km 100 at c.2130.

Saharan Striped Polecat *Ictonyx libyca*

- One seen between km 92 & 93 just after dark, between 1900 & 1915 on both the 19th & 20th. Fabulous views.

Egyptian Mongoose *Herpestes ichneumon*

- One Oued Massa.

Sand Cat *Felis margarita*

- One seen well but far too briefly at km 110 at 2015 on the 19th.
- There have been other recent records at Gleb Jdiane, km 86, km 101 & km 116, and at least two records at Oued Jenna at km 191. Has also been seen at Piste de Bougoufa to the south of Awserd and 600 kms to the north near Smara. Until 5 years ago only known from three records in Morocco and Western Sahara.



African Savanna Hare (J. Blincow)



Barbary Ground Squirrel (J. Blincow)

African Savanna Hare *Lepus microtis*

- One at Oued Jenna (km 191) at dusk on the 18th.
- Two on the road, exact points not noted, but between km 130 & 180 on the 20th.
- Two others found dead on road.
- We concur with Moores et al (see references) that these are African Savanna and not Cape Hares.

Barbary Ground Squirrel *Atlantoxerus getulus*

- Two Oued Massa.

Lesser Egyptian Jerboa *Jaculus jaculus*

- Seen frequently along the Awserd road mainly east of km 115.

Lesser Egyptian Gerbil *Gerbillus gerbillus*

- At least two seen and photographed along Awserd road.
- Large numbers of gerbils were seen and most were thought to be this species, with at least one Fat-tailed Gerbil (see below) and a third smaller unidentified species also being seen.



Lesser Egyptian Jerboa (J. Blincow)



Lesser Egyptian Gerbil (J. Blincow)



Fat-tailed Gerbil (J. Blincow)

Fat-tailed Gerbil *Pachyuromys duprasi*

- At least one, seen and photographed, along Awserd road near km 90.

Fat Sand Rat *Psammomys obesus*

- One at km 83 shortly before dusk on the 19th.
- Can be seen in good numbers at Oued Boukila 11.7 kms south of Goulimine.

House Mouse *Mus musculus*

- Two in the garage where our hire car was being stored in Boujdour.

Selected other mammal possibilities

Algerian Hedgehog *Aletherix algirus* - Occurs at Oued Massa & Zeida.

Caracal *Caracal caracal* - Tracks have been found at Oued Boukila.

African Wildcat *Felis lybica*- Has been seen along Awserd road, particularly around Gleb Jdiane but note presence of domestic/feral cats in this area as well.

Mediterranean Monk Seal *Monachus monachus* - Breeds around 200 miles south of Dakhla but unfortunately just across the border in Mauritania. Had we not lost time to the car problems we had intended heading south and checking the coast north of the border although please note if you do try this that this area was mined so stay on the road.

Cuvier's Gazelle *Gazella cuvieri* - Occurs at Tafinegoult c.150 kms east of Agadir and also known to occur NW of Smara.

Greater Egyptian Jerboa *Jaculus orientalis* - Occurs around Zeida.

Striped Ground Squirrel *Xerus erythropus* - Occurs in Sous Valley east of Agadir.

Birds

Although not a birding trip the birding was interesting. Highlights included the following: * JB & NG only (at Dakhla).

- Greater Flamingo
- Spoonbill *
- Glossy Ibis
- Squacco Heron
- Great White (Oued Massa), Cattle & Little Egret
- Possible Western Reef Egret *
- Ruddy Shelduck
- Spanish Imperial Eagle (Oued Massa)
- Osprey & Marsh Harrier
- Black-shouldered Kite
- Lanner
- Barbary Partridge
- Stone-curlew
- Temminck's Stint *
- Crowned Sandgrouse
- Audouin's & Slender-billed Gull *
- Caspian Tern
- Pharaoh Eagle Owl including one attempting to catch a Fennec Fox!
- Little Owl
- Levaillant's Green Woodpecker
- Hoopoe, Bar-tailed Desert, Crested & Thekla Larks
- African Dunn's Lark (Oued Jenna)
- Displaying Black-crowned Finchlark (Oued Jenna & Awserd pumping station)
- Blue Rock Thrush
- Moussier's & Black Redstart
- Black, White-crowned Black, Red-rumped, Black-eared, Desert & Seebohm's Wheatear.
- Fan-tailed Warbler
- Spectacled, Subalpine & Sardinian Warbler.
- Southern Grey Shrike
- Serin & Trumpeter Finch
- Rock Sparrow
- Desert Sparrow – several sites within 40 km of Awserd
- Brown-necked Raven



Western Reef Heron (J. Blincow)



African Dunn's Lark (J. Blincow)

Logistics

Flights

We used easyJet from Gatwick to Marrakech, £142 return including checked in luggage for RW, £123 for JB & NG. Good value although Gatwick on the penultimate Saturday before Christmas was a nightmare with too few check-ins open and most people including us having to be fast-tracked to the front of the queue despite being there over two hours before departure.

If you are not planning to go for the macaques Agadir would be a better choice reducing the driving distance by 250 km each way. However unless you want to visit sites on the way south I would either use Royal Air Maroc and fly all the way to Dakhla or use one of the budget airlines to Morocco and then use Royal Air Maroc for the internal flight. RAM fly to Dakhla from Casablanca, Marrakech and Agadir but Casablanca has the most frequent flights but flights from Agadir are the cheapest and Agadir is served by more UK budget airlines so flying via Agadir might be the best option particularly if you decide to do a one-way car hire.

Money

You can officially only take 1000 dirhams in or out of Morocco so we changed money at the airport where the exchange rate at 13.2 or thereabouts was considerably better than that available in the UK. 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

We booked the car hire through Holiday Autos who provided a vehicle via Hertz. This proved to be a costly mistake both in terms of lost time and money. The car was very reasonably priced c£430 for 11 days but the car broke down on the second afternoon 311 kms north of Dakhla and:

- We were initially unable to contact any Hertz office for assistance. We called four and all were closed as is apparently is the norm on a Sunday afternoon. Clearly you are not allowed to break down on a Sunday.
- Having had the car towed back into Boujdour at our own expense £75 (thankfully it was only 33 km) and had a mechanic examine the car Hertz were not particularly helpful so we ended up leaving the car in Boujdour and hiring a replacement car for 4 days to take us to Dakhla.
- Hertz arranged for the car to be shipped back to Agadir but initially expected us to make our own way back north on public transport rather than providing a replacement car. They eventually agreed to drive us back to Agadir and provide a replacement car there.

To add insult to injury when we returned home I discovered that Hertz had deducted two payments totalling over £3600 from my credit card, the deposit which had been authorised but which should not have been deducted given that we had taken out full insurance, and a further payment of over £2200 which was not authorised so should not have been paid by HSBC anyway. At the time of writing Holiday Autos are trying to recover these amounts and the £350 additional costs that we incurred as a result of the breakdown. **The moral of the story don't use Hertz Morocco particularly as they don't have any depots south of Agadir which was 800 km north of where we broke down.**

It is worth mentioning that it appears that most local garages have spare parts for French-made cars but we unfortunately had a VW and the nearest spare parts were 1000+ kms away! Try to get a French hire car.

There are companies in Dakhla that will hire cars and it may be worth investigating the following particularly if you want to fly to Dakhla and/or do a one-way hire between Dakhla & Agadir. They have offices in several cities between the two and do offer one-way hires.

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

Contrary to information in some birding trip reports and the Rough Guide unleaded fuel is available at most if not all garages south of Layoune.

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 £12 for a single en-suite although service in the restaurant was slow.

Boujdour - Hotel du Madès - £12 for a tiny en-suite triple.

Dakhla - Palais des Touaregs - At the northern end of the seafront we paid £22 per person per night for singles. 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.

Agadir – Residence Asaka - £22 per night for a large en-suite single.

Marrakech – Red Hotel - We arrived late at night and ended up paying £45 each including breakfast for a single plus a twin, had we arrived 5 minutes earlier they would have had a triple for £30 per person.

Cascades d'Ouzard – Riad Cascades d'Ouzard - Booked in advance but unnecessary as the site although a tourist attraction was very quiet. However the hotel was fully booked for the following week around New Year. Cost £45 per night including dinner and breakfast. Over-priced but great food. There is no real need to stay here, you could day trip the area from Marrakech or stay in Azilal if continuing east from here.

Zeida - Ksar Timnay Hotel - 10 km south of Zeida on the road to Midelt. Ideally placed to look for birds and mammals on the steppes. Single including breakfast £20. Nice rooms although this was the only place where I picked up insect bites.

Marrakech – Hotel Ibis - £42 for a single.

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 so it's not ideal if you want a late afternoon meal ahead of an evening spotlighting session.

Police checkpoints

The police are nowhere near as troublesome as has often been reported in the past and to be fair I got stopped for speeding and inadvertently jumping a red light and just got waved on with a smile although I think 'Je ne comprends pas' helped.

In Western Sahara police checkpoints are a pain but only because of their frequency. We went armed with a completed checklist (see below). I strongly recommend that you complete 15 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. We saw a speed trap on this roundabout on four occasions as have others visiting the area.

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 mammifères terrestres observés près 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.

Acknowledgements

- Inspiration for the trip came from those who have previously visited and discovered the rich mammal fauna of the area more notably Patrick Bergier and Richard Moores, Dan Brown, Alex Lees & Rob Martin.
- Thanks also to Richard Bonser for providing copies of the checkpoint form which helped us avoid some delays.