

African Savannah Hare *Lepus microtis* near Tantan – a new mammal species for North Moroccan Atlantic Sahara

Richard MOORES ⁽¹⁾ & Daniel BROWN ⁽²⁾

⁽¹⁾ Richard Moores Ecology, 114 Portland Street – Norwich, NR2 3LF (U.K.)
richardmooresecology@gmail.com

⁽²⁾ Dan Brown Ecology, 3/4, 3 Mingarry Street – Glasgow, G20 8NP (U.K.)
danbrownecology@googlemail.com

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The distribution of African Savannah Hare *Lepus microtis* north of the Sahara desert is incompletely known and has been the source of recent debate (e.g. Chevalier *et al.* 2012 and Moores *et al.* 2012).

Moores *et al.* (2012) discussed the status and distribution of *Lepus* species from Western Sahara and southern Morocco following the critical examination of a freshly dead individual on the road between Dakhla and Awserd (Oued Ad Deheb region, South Moroccan Atlantic Sahara) in January 2012. This individual displayed a complete suite of diagnostic features to allow its confirmed identification as *L. microtis*. They also discussed additional live animals they had observed in southern Morocco that had also displayed in-field characters suggestive of this species although critical in-hand features could not be examined. As such, they urged other naturalists to examine any dead *Lepus* species within Atlantic Sahara and southern Morocco to further qualify the true status of hare species in the region.

During another biological expedition to the region in January 2013 we came across a freshly dead road-killed specimen at 28 07.216N 10 23.338 W at 113 metres above sea level, approximately 76 kilometres southeast of Tantan, which permitted a critical examination of identification features (Figures 1 & 2). This specimen displayed the full suite of characters to enable an identification of African Savannah Hare to be reached (for full details on in-hand identification of African Savannah Hare we encourage to re-visit Moores *et al.* 2012), including the diagnostic deep grooves on the incisors, as shown on Figure 2. This would appear to represent the first record of this African Savannah Hare for Morocco outside of the South part of Atlantic Sahara, and illustrates again that further work is required to establish the true status of both this species and Cape Hare *Lepus capensis* in North Africa.

During the expedition, we also recorded a further seven hares that displayed distinct russet napes in the lower Oued Draa valley and north to the lower Oued Noun valley at altitudes between 88 metres and 423 metres above sea level and occupying a variety of desert habitat-types. Whilst the presence of a russet nape mark on these individuals would suggest *L. microtis*, we were not able to inspect other diagnostic features and confirm suspected identifications ¹.

In his comprehensive overview of the distribution and status of large mammals in Morocco, Cuzin (2003) shows a more or less continuous distribution of Cape Hare *Lepus capensis* from the northern part of Western Sahara to the north of Morocco (the majority of Western Sahara was excluded from his mapping) with

Note: we have learned that the *Lepus* Genus in the Palearctic region is currently under review by at least one authority and their results are awaited

African Savannah Hare near Tantan

concentrations of records in the south and around the upper reaches of the Draa valley. Our confirmation that African Savannah Hare is present near Tan-Tan presents a number of questions:

- Do populations of Cape Hare and African Savannah Hare co-exist in the southern parts of north Moroccan Atlantic Sahara or are the old records of Cape Hare misidentifications?
- What exactly is the distribution of Cape Hare in Morocco and North Africa and do in fact all records of hares throughout Morocco relate to African Savannah Hare?

Further research work, both by professional and by amateur biologists, is clearly required.

References

Chevalier, F. ; Thévenot, M. & Bergier, P. 2012. Notes sur quelques mammifères terrestres observés près de Dakhla, Oued Ad-Deheb. *Go-South Bulletin* 9 : 1-6.

Cuzin, F. 2003. *Les grands mammifères du Maroc Meridional*. Thèse de Doctorat, discipline Ecologie animale. Unpublished report.

Moore, R. ; Brown, D., Martin, R. & Lees, A.C. 2012. Status and identification of hares *Lepus* sp. in Western Sahara and Southern Morocco *Go-South Bulletin* 9 : 126-130.



Figure 1. Location of confirmed African Savannah Hare in southern Morocco in January 2013



Figure 2. African Savannah Hare *L. microtis* showing deep grooves on incisors – 76 km southeast of Tan-Tan