

WESTERN SAHARA

12-18 APRIL 2018

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INTRODUCTION

After previous trips to Western Sahara in 2012 & 2014 I returned in 2018 mainly to look for Golden Nightjar which was only discovered in Western Sahara after my previous visits. Ironically we missed the nightjar, only hearing it, but as always had some great mammals including three Sand Cats, two of which were seen well during the day, multiple African Wildcats (we saw none on the previous two trips!), two Saharan Striped Polecats & four Fennecs & two Ruppell's Foxes.

We also spent two nights spotlighting the Bir Anzarine road which I had not visited before & I have included some notes on this below. We did have four spotlighting sessions along the Awserd (Aoussard) road spending short periods sleeping in the car on two of these but spent other nights after spotlighting in Dakhla. It was very windy most of the time & we only had one windless night when temperatures were noticeably higher than on previous nights.

I haven't repeated the logistical information provided in my previous reports but emphasise that fuel & food is now available in Awserd. We did fly all the way to Dakhla this time hiring a Kia Picanto from HAG at Dakhla Airport via www.holidayautos.co.uk. Interestingly we were waived through the checkpoints without being stopped most of the time which probably reflects the growth in tourism particularly kiteboarding, around Dakhla & a more-relaxed approach to Europeans, **However do make sure you are wearing seatbelts** when going through checkpoints as Nick was stopped & fined 300 dirham for not wearing his.

I would emphasise that mammal watching along the Awserd road is straight-forward & you really don't need local guides or 4x4 vehicles. It can be done much cheaper on your own & it is far more satisfying finding your own mammals.

HOWEVER 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.

Richard Webb 20 April 2018

BIR ANZARINE ROAD

We did not visit this road on the previous trips but spotlighted along it twice on this trip given that it is closer to Dakhla & hasn't received as much coverage as the better-known Awserd road. Go straight across the roundabout at the main road instead of turning south towards Mauritania.

- **The first 15 km** – We mainly birded this typical desert habitat during daylight & drove back through it at speed later. However we did have an African Golden Wolf cross the road on the first drive back & just before the hills there is a water pipe c.100 metres to the north of the road which was good for birding & presumably attracts mammals to drink at night.
- **The hills** – After about 15 km there is a short hilly area with some old settlements. On the first night we had two African Golden Wolves, a probable African Wildcat & eye-shine from two other mammals that annoyingly eluded identification.
- **Beyond the hills** – After the hills you come out into open desert again with an industrial plant on the south of the road after a couple of kilometres. After this it becomes more desolate but from about 40-53 km from the main road there a number of patches of better habitat that produced at least two African Wildcats, two Fennec Foxes, African Savanna Hare & several Lesser Egyptian Jerboas. Beyond this it becomes extremely desolate for at least another 30 km although eventually reaches Bir Anzarine where you can take a 4x4 track south to the Awserd road.

Note: there are signs warning that there are mines on either side of the road beyond the industrial plant & although these areas are occupied by camels & presumably their herders it is probably sensible not to leave the road in this area.

Sand Cats have been recorded along this road & some of the habitat we drove through certainly looks suitable for them.

ITINERARY

- 12th** Afternoon drive along Awserd road to Oued Jenna, Evening spotlighting back to Dakhla arriving back at 0345 on the 13th.
- 13th** Late afternoon driving out birding along Bir Anzarine road. Spotlighting back to Dakhla arriving back around 0100 on the 14th.
- 14th** Morning birding around Pointe de Sagra. Afternoon drive out along Awserd road to Oued Jenna. Spotlighting around Oued Jenna then slept in car.
- 15th** Early morning around Oued Jenna & then drove back to Dakhla birding on route. Arrived in Dakhla around 1400 hours. Late afternoon drive out to Gleib Jediane & then on to km 100 on Awserd road. Spotlighted back to Dakhla arriving back around midnight.
- 16th** Morning Gleib Jediane & Dakhla Bay. Afternoon drive out along Bir Anzarine road to about 93 km from Dakhla then spotlighted back to Dakhla.
- 17th** Dropped Nick off at airport & then drove back to hotel for a lie-in. Late morning birding & looking for dolphins north of Dakhla. Afternoon drive out to Awserd. Evening spotlighting around Oued Jenna & 15 km west of Oued Jenna. Night sleeping in car.
- 18th** Pre-dawn around Oued Jenna. Spent most of the day birding back to Dakhla & unsuccessfully looked for dolphins in Dakhla Bay. Arrived back in Dakhla late afternoon.

MAMMALS

Desert Hedgehog *Paraechinus aethiopicus* - One at Oued Jenna on the 14th.

African Golden Wolf *Canis anthus* - Two in the hilly area along the Bir Anzarine road on the 13th with another between there & the main road later the same night.

Ruppell's Fox *Vulpes ruppelli* - Two at Oued Jenna just before dawn on the 18th with a probable 5 km west of Oued Jenna on the evening of the 17th.

Fennec Fox *Vulpes zerda* - Two skittish animals along Awserd road on the 12th with two along Bir Anzarine road on the 13th.

Saharan Striped Polecat *Ictonyx libyca* - Good views of singles c.5 km west of Oued Jenna on 12th & 14th.

Sand Cat *Felis margarita* - A great series of sightings. One 68 km west of Awserd (km 148) on the 12th allowed close approach on foot with the spotlight. Another superb individual, assumed to be an adult male on size, 106 km west of Awserd (km 110) on the 14th was seen close to the road about two & a half hours before it got dark. Finally excellent views of a smaller individual, assumed to be a female, 58 km west of Awserd (km 158) at around 1015 am on the 16th. One daytime sighting is great, two was superb.

African Wildcat *Felis lybica* – An unexpected run of individuals given that we did not see the species on either of the two previous trips. We had been told they were common this year but did not expect seven definite sightings, all seen well at close range with at least three photographed, & two additional probable sightings of the species. By contrast we only saw two possible feral cats whereas we saw several on the previous two trips & Nick was bemused by my concern about feral cats or hybrids but there are feral cats in the area so caution is necessary.

- 12th – one at Oued Jenna scavenging a snake on the road & eating it close to the vehicle. Another about 50 km west of Awserd on the drive back to Dakhla.
- 13th – two singles along Bir Anzarine road c.45-50 km from the roundabout. A third cat seen in the hilly area along the same road was probably this species but the views were insufficient to rule out a feral cat.
- 14th – at least two different animals at Oued Jenna with a third probable nearby although the third was not seen well enough to categorically rule out a feral cat.
- 18th – one Oued Jenna.

African Savanna Hare *Lepus microtis* - Two along Awserd road on the 12th, one along Bir Anzarine road on the 16th & one at Oued Jenna on the 18th with another dead on the road there on the 14th.

Lesser Egyptian Jerboa *Jaculus jaculus* - Common along Awserd road with smaller numbers along Bir Anzarine road.

Lesser Egyptian Gerbil *Gerbillus gerbillus* - At least two seen along Awserd road, one only identified after we sadly ran it over.

Pygmy Gerbil *Gerbillus henleyi* - One along Awserd road.

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

Banded Dob *Uromastix flavifasciata* - Bizarrely only seen on one day when the wind died down & the temperatures rose but impressive numbers with over 50 along Awserd road.

Western Sahara Fringe-toed Lizard *Acanthodactylus aureus* – one Awserd road.

African Green Toad *Bufo boulengeri* - Several young toads emerging at Gleib Jediane.

Horned Viper *Cerastes cerastes* – one Oued Jenna & another c. 5 km west of Oued Jenna.