

Algeria, 10-18 May 2023: a series of unfortunate events

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Algeria is the largest country in Africa by territory, defense budget, and combined oil and gas reserves. Where the money from these reserves goes is a mystery: you don't see expensive cars of corrupt officials on the roads, but everything looks a bit run down. You need an invitation from a local resident or a tour company to get a visa; the process is easy and takes less than a week in New York, but apply at least a month in advance and be prepared to provide additional paperwork if doing it in Europe. Food is great, people are friendly, and security isn't a problem, although there were two attacks on army outposts just two weeks before our arrival. Local bureaucracy, however, is doing more damage to the country than terrorists could ever hope to inflict.

Algeria's northern part is occupied by the Atlas Mountains, their ridges separated by rolling plains. The rest is desert, with two large plateaus in the far south, including Tassili n'Ajjer, the most scenic of Sahara's "sky islands". These plateaus are where the endemic mammals of the Central Sahara are found. In the north the fauna is similar to Morocco and Tunisia, although there is an endemic bird and some endemic herps and plants.

In 2022 we started planning a trip to Algeria, and quickly learned that thermal scopes and binoculars are considered weapons there and are strictly illegal. There were supposed to be four of us, but one person had two family emergencies just before leaving, and another had his cameras seized by Algerian customs and opted to fly back home (in retrospect, not a bad decision). We still don't know why this happened, as others have brought in cameras of any size without problems. In fact, as the customs officers confiscated MKK's thermal scope and binoculars upon arrival to Algiers, they said "you should have brought a long-lens camera instead". When MKK was leaving the country, the scope and binoculars were returned to him, but a bag of batteries was confiscated. VD smuggled his thermal scope into Algeria and to/from Djanet through 11 (eleven) security checkpoints by thoughtfully placing it in carry-on so that it had minimal cross-section on the security screen, and by using a bag of batteries as a decoy to distract attention; nobody tried to confiscate those. VD's binoculars were small and of unusual shape, so he successfully claimed them to be a microscope. VD also had a family emergency just before leaving, but it was too late to change or cancel flights. He brought a mistnet (which we never had a chance to use) and three Sherman traps (which we had a chance to use only once, unsuccessfully).

We decided to go to the far south of Algeria for just two days and spend the rest of time exploring the north and the center with Dr. Mourad Ahmim, Algeria's leading mammologist. We spent a few months in intensive communication with his university, the Department of Forestry, and all our and Algerian consulates. Just before our arrival Mourad learned that (1) we were denied research permits because they now must be obtained through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is impossible to contact, and (2) his university's rector would not let him leave work for more than one day. We should have extended our stay in the far south in response to the news, but didn't.

We flew to Algiers and from there to Djanet, located just inside the immense Tassili n'Ajjer National Park. Foreigners can only go there if invited by a tour company. We hired <https://www.ihaketravels.com/>. During the initial planning they were found to be the only one among 7-8 Djanet-based travel companies to know anything about wildlife. VD spent months extracting wildlife information from them, and learned a few things, but they never bothered mentioning that there are tame **rock hyraxes** in downtown Djanet (which we promptly missed) and that they were not taking us to the best place for wildlife (a canyon with permanent lakes about 100 km by road from Djanet). They also neglected to mention that our tour involved a very difficult 16-km hike with 500+ m elevation gain (and back the next day); we were incredibly lucky to have some clouds and cooler-than-usual temperatures, but still could barely walk for two days afterwards.

We landed in Djanet at 2 in the morning and drove to a camp (24.58743, 9.58545) at the base of Tassili Plateau. Along the way we passed a rocky valley that serves as the town's garbage dump and is full of **golden wolves** at night; we saw ~20. In a grassy patch we saw a very small hare with rounded head, orange collar and short ears, evidently a **savanna hare** rather than a Cape hare, although hare taxonomy in North Africa is currently a huge mess. After a brief rest we hiked up a succession of sandy washes, deep canyons, and gravel plateaus to Tamaghit (24.62503, 9.64604), the company's camp at the entrance to a small valley famous for nearly extinct Saharan cypress trees. There are about 12 of them in that place (and ~200 total), but a few including the largest one had just died due to a 6-year drought. The entire area is incredibly scenic, like Mt. Roraima in the desert, with dark slot canyons, sandstone "mushrooms", and ancient rock art.

Plateaus and washes around Tamaghit, and particularly a tiny watering hole just below it, had lots of tracks of **aoudad**, **dorcass gazelle**, **golden wolf**, and **Ruppel's fox**, as well as some rodent burrows and tracks. But the most numerous tracks were of animals called "wild donkeys" by our Tuareg guides. These equids of the plateau were thought to be a remnant population of **Nubian wild ass** (or another, undescribed subspecies of African wild ass) by early researchers, but in more recent literature they are called "feral donkeys", apparently without supporting data. Our guides were adamant that the animals were fully wild rather than feral. We saw a few of these "donkeys" at the watering hole at night, and were really impressed by the consistency of their phenotype and their extreme shyness. One had recently died at the watering hole, so we took a mummified ear tip and some dung from a place shaded from the sun for DNA analysis.

Other animals we saw were two large male **Saharan aoudad** (one along the access canyon and another not far from the camp), one completely black **Seurat's spiny mouse** (found with the thermal scope not far from the waterhole), and one very cooperative (and excessively cute) **Mzab gundi**; two more of the latter were seen briefly. The gundis were active in the morning and then again after sunset and into the night; look for their droppings in areas with lots of large boulders. We placed the Sherman traps in places with rodent burrows but didn't catch anything.

Back in Djanet, we took a (paid) shower and spent the evening near a chain of small wastewater lakes outside the town (24.43142, 9.45752). A small, pale brown bat was flying around; we didn't get it on the detector but it didn't look like anything known from SE Algeria except **Geoffroy's horseshoe bat**, the only species of that size known from Djanet area. We also saw a lot of birds there, including an intermediate egret, apparently new to Algeria. Then we spent half a night spotlighting in an erg (sea of sand dunes) in the direction of the airport, and saw three rodents: a **lesser Egyptian gerbil** (with white tail crest), a **Tarabul's gerbil** (with dark tail crest and white cheeks), and a **lesser Egyptian jerboa**. Two other gerbils and hammada jerboas are possible in the area but they live on hard soils, not in sands. We saw tracks of **desert hedgehogs** and very small foxes, likely **fennecs**.

We returned to Algiers on a morning flight and were met by heavy rain and unusual cold. The temperature eventually dropped to 8°C in the valleys and much less than that in the mountains, which is unheard of in mid-May. When we were preparing for the trip, we had major difficulty finding a rental car: 11 out of 12 companies in Algiers had no cars available when VD first contacted them four months in advance. But we ultimately got a car through <https://qcalgerie.com/>. They wanted \$500 and a passport as deposits (credit cards don't generally work in Algeria). Parting with a passport would be suicidal, so VD left them his recently expired US passport; they didn't notice. We were happy to hit the road and naively thought that Mourad's absence will not be too much of a problem.

We drove east, planning to explore the Atlas and the deserts to the south of it. But soon after leaving the freeway we were stopped at one of the countless checkpoints (some run by the police and some by the gendarmerie) and told that foreigners are not allowed to drive in Algeria without escort. After much waiting we were given two escort cars, and the whole caravan drove to Bejaia, sirens blasting. In Bejaia the police informed us that our car couldn't leave the hotel parking lot unescorted. This was devastating. We couldn't go anywhere at night, we now had to pay for hotels instead of sleeping in the car, and the best parts of the planned route (mountains above Relizane where **Cuviers' gazelle** occurs, and sands around El Oued where **rhim gazelle**, **fennec**, **sand cat** and other goodies are sometimes seen) were out of reach.

Mourad saved the night by taking us on a long drive through montane forests around Bejaia. We saw a group of **wild boars** on the road to Cap Carbon overlook (36.76915, 5.10217), a **European rabbit** in the hills south of the town (36.68773, 5.09182), and some non-mammalian wildlife. Mourad mentioned **common genet** and **wood mouse** as relatively common in the area, and **Maghreb dormouse** as rare. During the day it's apparently easy to see **Barbary macaques** in the same area where we saw the boars.

We contacted a birding company in Constantine (<https://www.facebook.com/aquacirta>), and arranged a convoy to there; the 2-car escort had to be changed at the borders of police jurisdictions, so it took a total of 30+ policemen to get us to Constantine 250 km away. The birding company could take us out only two days later on such a short notice, but we figured out a way to drive out of town without passing too many police checkpoints, and spent the next day birding, and the evening looking for animals around Massinissa's Mausoleum (36.27213, 6.72509). There were some **European freetails** flying around (likely from roosts in Constantine's deep rocky canyon) and with our thermal scope we saw a few **red foxes**, but there were zero small mammals in the fields, and no rodent burrows anywhere except near the mausoleum, where a few old burrows (likely of **Shaw's jirds**) could be found. Such completely rodent-less areas are also common in northern Morocco. It's possible that sticky clay soils are simply very bad for digging burrows. Or it could be a consequence of the drought: there had been no rain all winter until one day before we returned from Djanet. After half an hour of walking around we were confronted by three armed farmers who thought we were sheep thieves. They spoke the best English we ever heard in Algeria, and we sorted it out quickly, but decided it was time to return to the hotel.

Next day the rain finally stopped (almost), but it was still very cold. The birding guide took us to oak forests at Settah to see Algerian nuthatch (the country's only endemic bird, discovered in 1975, with a total population of ~200) and other interesting species. There was fresh snow in patches above 1500 m. On the way back we stopped at a rocky slope that looked like perfect **North African sengi** habitat, but didn't find any mammals; perhaps the sengis were still in torpor. We also tried to visit Roman ruins at Djemila, a popular tourist site, but couldn't get past the museum because the guards insisted that we needed an authorization from some office in the provincial capital, to be applied for a month in advance.

In the evening we checked a small cave (36.38148, 6.61920) above Constantine that sometimes has bats, but didn't see any, only a long-dead **North African hedgehog** along the trail. Then we placed some bait below our guide's friend's house where **Egyptian mongooses** sometimes show up, but they didn't. We saw a **common pipistrelle** flying around the house (ID confirmed by bat detector). At night we drove to rocky fields near Guettar AlAich (36.18582, 6.55707) to look for mammals. It was a noisy night because local youths were hunting a **boar** with dogs (a bloody affair we'd rather not

witness); the commotion attracted a few **golden wolves** but they remained too far to see well. Then we found a **Savi's pipistrelle** that was in torpor under a small rock on top of a larger rock.

In the morning we managed to drive to Algiers without an escort. The country's roads are in fairly bad shape, including the national highway. There are numerous potholes and speed bumps, but the main problem is checkpoints: they basically paralyze the country's economy by creating humongous traffic jams, even when almost nobody is pulled over. Most of them are only manned from around 5-6 in the morning till 9-10 at night. In Algiers we visited Tipaza (another set of Roman ruins) without any problems and returned the car. VD spent the night at the airport and flew home, while MKK explored the capital for a couple more days.

We were happy to leave Algeria, a country that is being destroyed by its own bureaucracy. All former French colonies suffer that fate to some extent, but Algeria is probably the worst. And we haven't even mentioned all problems we ran into in one week: there were idiotic parking tickets that we had to talk our way out of, flight cancellations (all flights to/from Djanet were cancelled on the day VD flew home), huge chunks of the country are closed to foreigners entirely, etc., etc.

But after a few days we realized that the Djanet part of our trip was actually pretty good, and that it might be a good idea to bring our families to that incredibly scenic area for a few days next year. The hike to Tamaghit would be too difficult for the kids, but we are thinking about going to the gueltas (permanent ponds) in Iherir and maybe to large ergs on the northern side of the plateau, which is crossed by a paved road from Bordj El Haouas to Illizi.

Species list. Near-endemics in **bold**; uncertain IDs marked with asterisks*.

– North African hedgehog	<i>Atelerix algirus algirus</i>	Constantine (dead)
– Desert hedgehog	<i>Paraechinus aethiopicus</i>	Djanet (tracks)
1. Geoffroy's horseshoe bat*	<i>Rhinolophus clivosus schwarzi</i>	Djanet
2. European freetail	<i>Tadarida teniotis</i>	Massanissa's Mausoleum
3. Savi's pipistrelle	<i>Hypsugo savii "darwinii"</i>	Oettour Al Aich
4. Common pipistrelle	<i>P. pipistrellus pipistrellus</i>	Constantine
5. Golden wolf	<i>Canis cf. anthus</i>	Djanet; Guettar Al Aich
6. Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes atlantica</i>	Massanissa's Mausoleum
– Ruppel's fox*	<i>V. rueppellii caesia</i>	Tassili (tracks)
– Fennec*	<i>V. zerda</i>	Djanet (tracks)
7. African wild ass*	<i>Equus africanus africanus</i>	Tassili
8. Wild boar	<i>Sus scrofa algirus</i>	Bejaia; Guettar Al Aich
– Dorcas gazelle	<i>Gazella dorcas osiris</i>	Tassili (tracks)
9. Aoudad	<i>Ammotragus lervia sahariensis</i>	Tassili
10. Mzab gundi	<i>Massoutiera mzabi</i>	Tassili
11. Lesser Egyptian jerboa	<i>Jaculus jaculus jaculus</i>	Djanet
12. Seurat's spiny mouse	<i>Acomys seurati</i>	Tassili
13. Lesser Egyptian gerbil	<i>Gerbillus gerbillus</i>	Djanet
14. Tarabul gerbil	<i>G. tarabul</i>	Djanet
– Shaw's jird*	<i>Meriones shawii</i>	Massanissa's Mausoleum (burrows)
15. European rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus algirus</i>	Bejaia
16. Savanna hare*	<i>Lepus cf. victoriae</i>	Djanet

Information on birds (102 spp.) and herps (9 spp.) provided upon request (dinets@gmail.com, postmorten@gmail.com).



Mzab gundi (*Massoutiera mzabi*)



Tarabul gerbil (*Gerbillus tarabul*)



Savi's pipistrelle (*Hypsugo savii*)