











Western Sahara's Rare Mammals

Destination: Western Sahara **Duration:** 8 Days **Dates:** 31st Jan – 8th Feb

-  Many Fennec Fox sightings including one curious individual who came right to us
-  Many raptors & owls around feeding on the abundance of rodent life near the roads
-  Seeing such a huge abundance of rodents alongside the roads – so much prey
-  Spending time in the daytime to walk around the desert landscape and sand dunes
-  Exploring the sand dunes and desert landscape of the Western Sahara
-  Very good prolonged views of a Libyan Striped Weasel just off the road
-  Prolonged night drives to find all of the rare nocturnal mammals and birds
-  Spotting a total of 59 different species of birds despite a large nocturnal based trip
-  Camping in remote desert camp sites and enjoying stunning views of the stars
-  Sightings of 13 or 14 species of mammals, including some very rare species

Tour Leader / Guides

Martin Royle (Royle Safaris Tour Leader)
Nico (Guide & Driver)
Usman (Driver)
Hermann (Desert Camp Cook & Assistant)
Fatima (Desert House Cook)
Martina (Logistics Manager)

Participants

Mr. Stuart Chapman
Mr. Nick Cox
Mr. Chris Daniels
Mr. John Shrader
Mrs. Karen Shrader

Overview

Day 1:	Dakhla
Days 2-3:	Saharan Desert Campsite
Days 4-6:	Saharan Desert House
Day 7:	Dakhla
Day 8:	Home





Day by Day Breakdown

Overview

Over the last few years the desert roads and wildernesses of the Western Sahara (an autonomous part of Morocco) has become a mammalwatching hotspot. The reason being that certain species which had been difficult to find and observe in the past were getting seen with reliability and the quality of the sightings were good. For the first time ever species such as Fennec Foxes, Sand Cats, African Wolves, Ruppell's Fox and other desert mammals were being seen frequently and we may have even found places where sightings could be close to guaranteed.

So with the pandemic receding and more and more countries opening up Royle Safaris decided to venture into the Sahara Desert with our first tour to the region. In late January - early February 2023 we ran our first of two group tours to the Western Sahara in 2023, our tour would be dedicated to mammals which extended night drives and a major focus on the targeted meso-carnivores and other mammals and less focus on the birds. However we would also stop for bird species where possible, but our focus would be about spending time at night to find the nocturnal species.

Along with the stunning and rare wildlife (often many of the species are only seen along these routes in the Western Sahara) another hero of this trip is the desert landscape itself. The vast expanses of sand and gravel, the high orange dunes and the clear blue skies are mesmerising and then after dark the lack of light pollution leaves people agog with stars upon stars as far as the skies stretch into the distance.

The trip's success started and ended with two facts of desert life which are completely out of our hands. Firstly we had some good luck with very high rainfall around 4-5 months prior to our arrival (the highest rainfall in the area for around 10 years). This precipitation led to a very green desert, lots of vegetation sprouting up and this meant that the rodent life was prolific which would hopefully result in good numbers of mammalian predators. The second part of the luck story was bad luck unfortunately. Due to the higher than usual amount of vegetation the nomads had moved into the region where the sand cats are most commonly seen, we could do some stuff at night around this area, but with so much livestock and campsites it was a difficult balancing act with disturbing the locals whom we were indebted to; to be able to travel around here and the fact that the presence of so many camels and sheep the wild animals had likely left the immediate area. Most annoying was that these herders and their livestock had only arrived in the area 2 days before we were due to arrive there.

But we would try and try hard, armed with high powered spotlights and thermal scopes we have the best chances possible of seeing a range of rare wildlife and on this trip we not hoped to get our targeted species but there are always bonus animals which could be seen with luck and patience.

All in all this week long expedition into the wilds of the Sahara Desert was very successful and any mammalwatching enthusiast will enjoy reading the below trip report.

2024 Western Sahara's Rare Mammals Small Group Tours

We will be running at least one (likely two) trips in 2024, however we have not set our dates yet. We are waiting on a couple of things to fall in place before we can issue the dates. But if you are interested in visiting the area and trying for these amazing species (our second group tour had Fennec Foxes, Sand Cats, Ruppell's Fox and many more – trip report to be published soon) please contact us at info@royle-safaris.co.uk or visit our website (<https://www.royle-safaris.co.uk/itineraries/morocco-rare-wildlife-tour/>) which will be updated with the new dates for 2024 as soon as they are confirmed.



Day 1 Dakhla

Arrival

Due to the most common flight times arriving into Dakhla being in the middle of the night we had some people arriving overnight one or two days before the start of the trip and so it was not until the afternoon of the first day that everyone was in the hotel and checked in.

We all met up and went for dinner in a nearby restaurant overlooking the bay. Earlier that day a couple of clients had a sighting of a **brown rat** in the town as well as some nice house buntings which were hopping around the tables at the breakfast buffet.



Day 2 Sahara Desert (Campsite)

Traveling & Wildlife Watching

This morning everyone breakfasted together in the hotel and met our driver / guides for the trip; Nico and Usman. We loaded up into the two vehicles and departed north along the bay of Dakhla with several stops for birding (one of the few opportunities for daylight birding). Species seen this morning including greater flamingos, many species of wader including whimbrel, Eurasian oystercatchers, bar-tailed godwits, black-tailed godwit, Eurasian spoonbills, red knots, sanderlings and many more species. There were also some terns and gulls overhead and resting in the water also.

Leaving the coast we drove along the Bir Anzaranne road for about 100km before off-roading for about one hour to reach our campsite in the dunes. The rainfall a few months ago was very obvious with much greenery around and brightening up the bare gravel and sand desert. But as we had heard and feared the greenery was attracting the nomadic herders as we saw large numbers of sheep and goats and smaller numbers of the semi wild / feral **dromedaries** which are owned by people but live as close to a wild existence as any **dromedaries** do nowadays.

We did see some nice birds along the way, including cream-coloured coursers, horned larks, greater hoopoe larks, Temminck's lark, wood larks and black-eared wheatears.

We arrived at the camp already set up and with Hermann preparing lunch for us, we arrived a little after 2pm and had lunch and prepared for our first spotlighting session.

At around 7:40pm we headed out and the first animal we found was a **lesser Egyptian jerboa**, there are two jerboa species known from this region (based on some recent studies) and these are best identified with the tail flag (black and white markings on the tail) we couldn't ID everyone as they move very fast and after some good views, we didn't stop for all jerboas, but we did manage to get at least one ID of each species. However it is difficult to ID these two species.

Carrying on the drive we found a few more jerboas, a couple of which appeared to be **African Hammada jerboas**. We then had a canid in the limit of the spotlight beam (it could have been Ruppell's or fennec) we couldn't get a good enough view, but then shortly after we found a **fennec fox** and we managed to call it (with squeakers) in to around 10m away from the vehicle. We did have another **fennec fox** a little later but it was running away from us and never came very close.

The Nico found (with a great spot whilst driving) a **fat-tailed gerbil** which posed very nicely for photos and very close up views, before it dug a burrow and disappeared. We started to return back to the camp and on the way found a roosting lanner falcon on a low bush and then near camp had nice views of a **lesser Egyptian gerbil**.



Day 3 Sahara Desert (Campsite)

Wildlife Watching

Today was quite windy once, the air coming in from the coast can be very strong in the day time, but luckily it drops considerably by evening and through the night. There were some birds around the camp area during the day and we even had views of a sandfish in one of the nearby sand dunes. Birds seen during the day included brown-necked ravens, Dunn's larks, greater hoopoe larks and black-eared wheatears.

Most of the day was for us to rest and prepare for another long night of spotlighting. The first animal we came across was a **lesser Egyptian gerbil** which offered us nice close views as it stayed around a grassy area and had a few convenient escape holes if it chose to get away. We then had a couple of **fennec fox** sightings, one of which we managed to call in, but it didn't come as close as the one yesterday and still stayed a little far for great photography.

Further along and in a relatively well vegetated area which even had some stunted trees around, we found a pair of **Sahara hares** and some more **fennec foxes** including one that was very close but ran away fast. In an area which resembled a grassy field we had another **fat-tailed gerbil** and several **lesser Egyptian / African Hammada jerboas** and then the final **fennec** of the night, it ran into some bushes, but we didn't see it leave. So we turned the cars and lights off and waiting for a while and watched with the thermal. We didn't see if leave but it may have done so before we stopped the cars and we missed it, or it may have gone down a burrow. So after a few minutes of nothing we left and headed back to the camp. We got back around 2am.

Day 4 Sahara Desert (Homestay)

Traveling & Wildlife Watching

This morning we had breakfast and packed up the camp, the whole camp would have to be packed up and Hermann, Usman and Nico worked hard to get this all done and loaded into the vehicles whilst the rest of the group walked around the surrounding areas. Most of the same species of birds were around the camp area again and



then when everything was loaded up and Martina had arrived with another vehicle we left for Assouad at around 1:30pm.

We drove through the desert back towards the main 'track' which would lead us the road that heads from Dakhla south to Mauritania. There were many birds around along the drive, lots of the same species of larks and sparrows which we had been seeing regularly as well as there being large numbers of **dromedaries**. When we arrived at the area which was well known for sand cat sightings we found several nomadic camps, including one which was kind enough to allow us to hire one of their unused tents to have a rest and lunch in. This meant we didn't have to drive all of the way from here (100km or so) to the small village and then back out here for spotlighting.

Whilst we waiting for nightfall we had a walk around a small dried river bed which was well vegetated, lots of nice birds were seen including fulvous chattering, Sardinian warbler, Egyptian vulture, great grey shrike among others but no mammals in the daylight.

As soon as the sun set we headed out for some spotlighting along the way to the house we would stay at in Assouad. Almost straight away we had a **fennec fox** nearby the road, but it didn't hang around and then several gerbils crossed the road, with some alongside the road in the abundant vegetation. In some areas the numbers of gerbils was almost plague proportions (he says with a good level of exaggeration). We saw **pygmy gerbils**, **lesser Egyptian gerbils** and **Tarabaul's gerbils**. It was amazing to see the large numbers of rodents here, they were clearing having a great time with the dense vegetation growing after the unusual rains.

Whilst the numbers of predatory mammals was not at the same levels now (hopefully next year we would see a spike in the mammal predator numbers) but the predatory birds were here in force. During the day the number of kestrels was high, we had seen a couple of lanner falcons, but it was at night where we had several long-eared owls (which is a very unusual record here), barn owl and the largest in the area a great pharaoh eagle owl.

Further along we had a couple of very pale **Sahara hares** and then a mystery canid in the distance followed by a nice (but far) **African golden wolf** moving through the vegetation looking for food. Closer to the village and before we had to stop spotlighting (the village has a military / police station on its outskirts and we didn't want to raise any questions by flashing powerful lights around them), we had several more **Sahara hares**. We arrived at the house very late (or early, depending on how you look at it), unpacked and got some rest.



Day 5 Sahara Desert (Homestay)

Wildlife Watching

We rested a lot of the morning and then when everyone was up and fed we had a short walk in Aousserd and visited an old building where a colony of Egyptian mouse-tailed bats occur. However the man who has the key and would usually grant us access to the house was not around, apparently (despite us arranging this with him in advance) he had gone to Dakhla and we couldn't get inside. We looked into every nook and cranny we could find but couldn't get any views inside. So we decided we would come back in the evening and see if we could see any of them leaving the roost to feed.

In the evening and fading light we saw a couple of so flying fast out of the openings quite high up and away into the sky.

We then headed out for another night spotlighting, it was very quiet tonight in terms of large mammals, the temperature had dropped significantly and maybe the colder weather had kept some of the animals that didn't have to come out in their burrows or perhaps with the wind and cold temperatures the cats and foxes were in the more sheltered areas in the rocky hillsides.

Whatever the reason for the lack of mammalian predators it resulted in a very quiet night, with only **gerbils** (**lesser Egyptian** the most common but some smaller **pygmy** ones around too as well as **Tarabaul's**), **jerboas** (both **African Hammada** (which was much more common this far south of Dakhla) and **lesser Egyptian**) and of course the eerily pale **Sahara hares**. The wind was even keeping the aerial predators away (or at least out of sight) as we didn't see any of the owls we had seen the previous night.

The only other sighting of note was a nice Elegant Short-fingered Gecko on the road which broke up the monotony of rodents and no cats or foxes.



Day 6 **Sahara Desert (Homestay)**

Wildlife Watching

This morning when people had rested there was some casual birding around Assouad in which some nice species such as spectacled warbler, brown-necked raven, long-legged buzzard, common kestrel, banded courser among other species.

Then after dark we headed out for our final spotlighting session and our last attempt for sand cat, the conditions were much better for predators and we had many owls around tonight, even the drive down in fading light revealed buzzards and kestrels. The rodents were all out in abundance once again, we quickly spotted a large animal in the distance, possibly a wolf but we couldn't get a good view of it and so left to look for other wildlife. Then John spotted a **Libyan striped polecat**, it was next to the road when he first spotted it and in typical **polecat** fashion it didn't hang around and ran off into the scrub. But we found it again and got all everyone on the animal which we saw moving around for a short while. It was the only mammal of note tonight, whilst not a sand cat it was still a great sighting and in many ways a much rarer and more elusive species and so we couldn't be too downcast.

Day 7 **Dakhla**

Travelling

Today we left Aousserd in the late morning and spent the day driving back to Dakhla. We reached the hotel in Dakhla by mid- afternoon and said goodbye to Nico and Usman and rested before heading for some food.

Day 8 **Home**

Departure

This morning after breakfast the clients were taken to the airport to catch their return flights home.

Species List

Western Sahara's Rare Mammals Tour / Jan-Feb 2023

Mammals (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Dromedary*	<i>Camelus dromedarius</i>
2	Golden Wolf	<i>Canis anthus</i>
3	Lesser Egyptian Gerbil	<i>Gerbillus gerbillus</i>
4	Pygmy Gerbil	<i>Gerbillus henleyi</i>
5	Tarabul's Gebril	<i>Gerbillus tarabuli</i>
6	Libyan striped polecat	<i>Ictonyx libycus</i>
7	African hammada jerboa	<i>Jaculus hirtipes</i>
8	Lesser Egyptian jerboa	<i>Jaculus jaculus</i>
9	Sahara hare	<i>Lepus saharea</i>
10	Fat-tailed gerbil	<i>Pachyuromys duprasi</i>
11	Brown rat	<i>Rattus rattus</i>
12	Egyptian mouse-tailed Bat	<i>Rhinopoma cytops</i>
13	Fox species	<i>Vulpes sp.</i>
14	Fennec fox	<i>Vulpes zerda</i>

Jan	Feb						
31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	7	~10	~31	5	~56	~10	
			1				
	1		~26	12	~15		
			2		1		
			2	1			
					1		
	3	1	2	4	3		
	~14	3		1			
		2	10	~35	8		
	1	1					
1							
				4			
	1						
	2	5	1				

Birds (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Greater Hoopoe-Lark	<i>Alaemon alaudipes</i>
2	Bar-tailed Lark	<i>Ammomanes cinctura</i>
3	Tawny pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>
4	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
5	Ruddy turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
6	Fulvous chatterer	<i>Argya fulva</i>
7	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>
8	Pharoah eagle-owl	<i>Bubo ascalaphus</i>
9	Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>
10	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>

Jan	Feb						
31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	4	1	4				
	1				1	1	
						1	
	4						
	~10						
			~10				
					2		
			2				
					1		
			~10				

11	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>
12	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
13	Little stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>
14	Red Knot	<i>Calidris sandpipers</i>
15	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>
16	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
17	Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
18	Brown-necked Raven	<i>Corvus ruficollis</i>
19	Spectacled Warbler	<i>Curruca conspicillata</i>
20	Sardinian warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>
21	Cream-colored Courser	<i>Cursorius cursor</i>
22	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
23	Western Reef Egret	<i>Egretta gularis</i>
24	House Bunting	<i>Emberiza sahari</i>
25	Dunn's lark	<i>Eremalauda dunni</i>
26	Temminck's Lark	<i>Eremophila bilopha</i>
27	Black-crowned sparrow-lark	<i>Eremopterix nigriceps</i>
28	Lanner Falcon	<i>Falco biarmicus</i>
29	Eurasian Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
30	Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>
31	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
32	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
33	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>
34	Great Gray Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>
35	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
36	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>
37	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>
38	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
39	Egyptian vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>
40	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
41	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
42	Desert Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>
43	Western black-eared wheatear	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>
44	White-crowned wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i>
45	Black wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>
46	Northern wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
47	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
48	Desert Sparrow	<i>Passer simplex</i>
49	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>
50	Black redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>

	100's						
	~10						
	~10						
	100's						
	2						
	8						
~20	~10			~30	~5	~100	~20
	3	3	1		2	3	
					1	1	
			1			1	
	9		1		1		
	2						
	~15						
3	3						2
		2	1	1			
	4		3				
			1				
	1						
	1				10	3	
	~15		~10				
	4						
	1	2	1	3			
	~10						
			1				
~5	3						
	~20						
	3						
				1			
			1				
	2						
	~10						
			4	1			
		1	3				
				1	1		
	3		1				
	5	5					
~25	~30					~20	~10
		~50	~20			~10	
	~75						
			2				

51	Common chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
52	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
53	Plain martin	<i>Riparia paludicola</i>
54	Little tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>
55	Eurasian Collared-Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
56	Common whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>
57	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>
58	Barn owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>
59	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>

					2	2	
	4						
				3	2		
	~15						
					2	2	
			1				
~10	~15						
			2				
			2				

Reptiles (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Sandfish	<i>Scincus scincus</i>
2	Elegant short-fingered gecko	<i>Stenodactylus sthenodactylus</i>

Jan	Feb						
31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	1						
				1			

Pictures from Martin Royle & Chris Daniels



Lesser Egyptian Jerboa



Fennec Fox



Fat-tailed Gerbil



Lesser Egyptian Gerbil



Lanner Falcon



Elegant Short-fingered Gecko



Dakhla Bay



Desert Campsite



Classic Sahara

