











Western Sahara's Rare Mammals

Destination: Western Sahara **Duration:** 8 Days **Dates:** 26th Mar – 2nd Apr 2023

-  Great views of all our main targets, Fennec Foxes, Sand Cats and many others
-  Close views of the stunning a day roosting Pharaoh Eagle Owl in a tree
-  Multiple Fennec Fox sightings, including an adult and juvenile at a den site
-  Very close Sand Cat sighting of a mother and 2 kittens on foot (just 3m away)
-  Exploring the sand dunes and desert landscape of the Western Sahara
-  Nice prolonged views of a Desert Hedgehog and several rodent species
-  Extra long night drives to find all of the rare nocturnal mammals and birds
-  Spotting a total of 49 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 three canids; Fennec Foxes, African Wolf and Ruppell's Fox



Tour Leader / Guides

Tobie Wharton (Royle Safaris Tour Leader)
Nico (Guide & Driver)

Participants

Ms. Lesley Cupitt
Ms. Nancy Marchant
Mr. Steve Morgan
Mr. Jon Swenson
MR. Ingo Weiss

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.

Following the success of our first trip to the region in 2022 we ran two trips in 2023. The first was also successful (however we did miss the sand cat due to unusually high human activity around the best areas for sand cat sightings), this report is the next trip we ran in 2023 and with the nomadic people having moved off to other areas we were able to explore the areas best known for sand cats on this trip.

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 success of our trip here was down to a couple of facets, firstly we arrive after the locations of this season's dens (for Sand Cats and Fennec Foxes) have been located, which dramatically increases the chances of seeing these animals and also the quality of our guides and drivers is exceptional. 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 only got our targeted species but we were treated to amazing sightings of a pair of honey badgers which are very rarely encountered in the northern Sahara. In fact there is work being done on the North African population of honey badgers as they may represent a different species from the ones in the sub-Saharan.

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.

One of our clients on this trip (Jon Swenson) who is a wildlife biologist brought some Sherman traps and caught some rodents which he ID'd as well as a bat detector which he used and in correspondence with bat expert Nils Bouillard managed to get some ID's.

2024 Western Sahara's Rare Mammals Small Group Tour

We have dates set up for this trip to be repeated again in 2024 and to be guided by our director Martin Royle, the trip is scheduled for 12th – 19th March 2024 and we have only 3 places remaining on this trip. For anyone interested in these trips please contact us at info@royle-safaris.co.uk or visit our website (<https://www.royle-safaris.co.uk/itineraries/morocco-rare-wildlife-tour/>) for more information and direct booking.



Day 1 **Dakhla**

Arrival

The group arrived over a couple of days into Dakhla and once our tour leader Tobie had arrived and everyone was checked into the hotel everyone met up and enjoyed a meal in the town. It was a little difficult to get into a restaurant as Ramadan had just started and many places were closed, but we found somewhere and had some nice food.

Other than this arrival meal there were no activities planned today. Jon had a **desert pipistrelle** he ID'd foraging around a street light near the hotel.

Day 2 **Sahara Desert (Campsite)**

Traveling & Wildlife Watching

This morning everyone breakfasted together in the hotel and then after breakfast the vehicles collected us and we headed north along the bay of Dakhla with several stops for birding (one of the few opportunities for daylight birding).

Species seen this morning along the coast of Dakhla Bay and at a couple of coastal lagoons included greater flamingos, green-winged teals and northern shoveler as well as several Caspian & gull-billed terns and various wading birds feeding on the shoreline. We also had an osprey flying overhead.



Following on from the coast we departed inland and along the Bir Anzaranne road for about 100km before off-roading for about one hour to reach our campsite in the dunes.

The camping team set the tents up in advance and an early supper was prepared before our first spotlighting session.

The first night spotlighting was remarkably successful with multiple sightings of **African hammada** and lesser **Egyptian jerboas**, lesser **Egyptian** and **Tarabul's gerbils**, **Sahara hares** and then the real highlights being 3 separate sightings of **fennec foxes** (one of which was seen as an adult with a youngster on the edge of their den burrow) and also a distant sighting of a female **sand cat**. We got out of the vehicle and approached the **sand cat** and at this point two kittens were seen and we were able to approach very close to them and got fantastic views before they ran off and we left them alone.



Day 3 Sahara Desert (Campsite)

Wildlife Watching

Today the daylight hours were spent resting around the camp and enjoying some birding nearby, desert specialists such as greater hoopoe larks, greater short-toed larks, black-crowned sparrow-larks, cream-coloured coursers and bar-tailed larks were abundant and the occasional brown-necked raven soared overhead.

After dark and dinner we went out again on a drive and found many of the same species of rodents including **African hammada & lesser Egyptian jerboas**, lesser **Egyptian gerbils** as well as **pygmy gerbils**. There were also many of the ubiquitous **Saharan hares** around as well as a nice **African wild cat** sighting.

Jon (who brought some Sherman traps) trapped a **North African Gerbil**.

Day 4 Sahara Desert (Homestay)

Traveling & Wildlife Watching

This morning we had a late start before packing up the campsite, collecting the trail camera we had set the day before; leaving the area, we met new members of camping team who brought us food supplies for the next few days before we drove off road for a few hours to reach the so-called Bougoufa Trail. Here we had some time to rest and gain strength for the next nocturnal spotlighting session.

We started just before sunset tonight we had found a **desert hedgehog** which allowed for some very close and prolonged views and photographs as well as a very accommodating **fat-tailed gerbil** and of course multiple **lesser Egyptian gerbils** and both **lesser Egyptian & African hammada jerboas**.

Heading towards the accommodation in the town of Aousserd we had a view of an **African golden wolf** which was distant and just at the edge of the light but clearly a wonderful **golden wolf** moving through the sparse vegetation looking for food. Jon recorded a large bat flying straight whilst foraging in the thermal and then get a sonogram which in discussions with Nils Bouillard was ID'd as an **Egyptian free-tailed bat**. At around 2am a large golden rodent with a long tail crossed the road in front of the vehicles, based on the sight and the habitat (compacted sand and very little vegetation) Jon ID'd the species as **Sundvall's jird**.

Day 5 Sahara Desert (Homestay)

Wildlife Watching

Once again the day time was spent with some birding and taking rest, then just after dark Jon found some **Egyptian mouse-tailed bats** flying around a rocky outcrop and whilst Nils considered the sonogram to be *Rhinopoma hardwickii* it is now widely accepted that the mouse-tailed bats known from Aousserd are **R. cystops** instead.

At around dusk we headed out again down the road from Aousserd spotlighting. It was a very quiet today and we didn't have any of the higher targeted species. We did see 6 **Saharan hare** one **African hammada jerboa** and a **fat-tailed gerbil** before returning to the house for some rest in the early hours.





Day 6 Sahara Desert (Homestay)***Wildlife Watching***

Today was our last full day looking for wildlife in the desert and it followed the same pattern as the previous days. The spotlighting was once again quiet with the usual **Sahara hares**, **African hammada jerboas** and **lesser Egyptian gerbils** but we did have sightings of a **Ruppell's fox** which was a nice way of finishing the trip.

Day 7 Dakhla***Travelling***

Today we left Aousserd in the late morning and spent the day driving back to Dakhla. We made several stops along the way to stretch our legs and do some birding before reaching our hotel in Dakhla by mid- afternoon, when the trip came to its end.

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 / Mar 2023

Mammals (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Dromedary*	<i>Camelus dromedarius</i>
2	Golden Wolf	<i>Canis anthus</i>
3	Sand Cat	<i>Felis margarita</i>
4	North African Gerbil	<i>Gerbillus campestris</i>
5	Lesser Egyptian Gerbil	<i>Gerbillus gerbillus</i>
6	Pygmy Gerbil	<i>Gerbillus henleyi</i>
7	Tarabul's Gerbil	<i>Gerbillus tarabuli</i>
8	African Hammada jerboa	<i>Jaculus hirtipes</i>
9	Lesser Egyptian jerboa	<i>Jaculus jaculus</i>
10	Sahara Hare	<i>Lepus saharaea</i>
11	Sundvall's jird	<i>Meriones crassus</i>
12	Desert hedgehog	<i>Paraechinus aethiopicus</i>
13	Desert pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus deserti</i>
14	Egyptian mouse-tailed Bat	<i>Rhinopoma cytops</i>
15	Egyptian free-tailed bat	<i>Tadarida aegyptiaca</i>
16	Ruppell's Fox	<i>Vulpus rueppellii</i>
17	Fennec Fox	<i>Vulpus zerda</i>

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	Desert Lark	<i>Ammomanes deserti</i>
4	Green-winged Teal	<i>Anas carolinensis</i>
5	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>
6	Gray Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
7	Fulvous Babbler	<i>Argya fulva</i>
8	Trumpeter Finch	<i>Bucanetes githagineus</i>

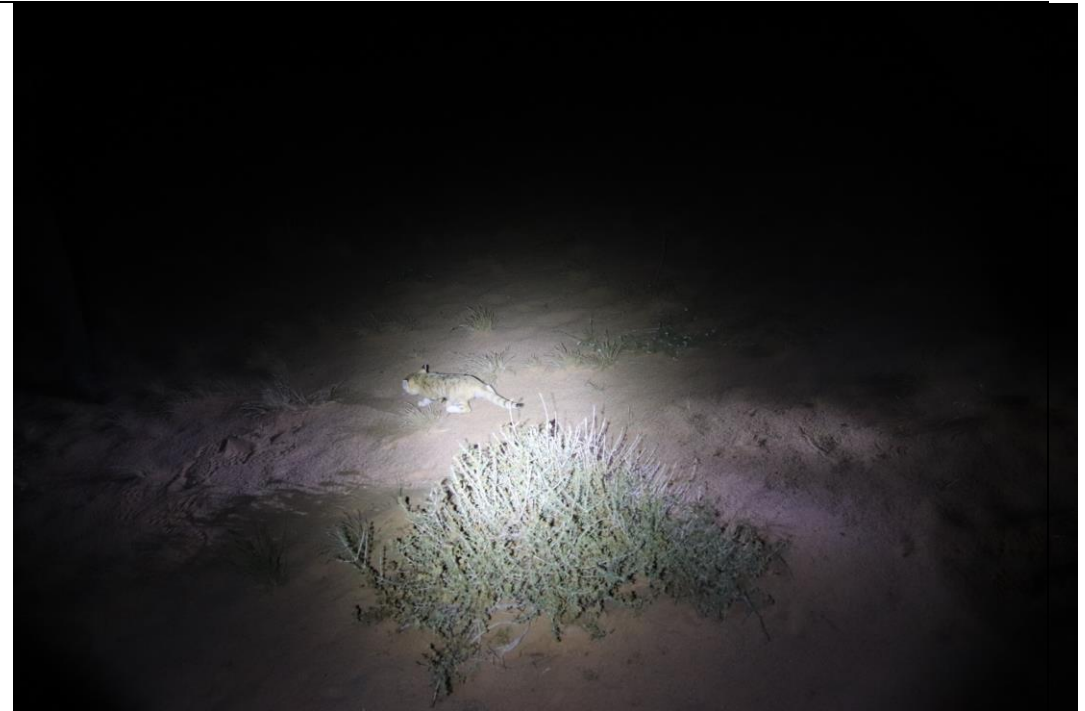
9	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>
10	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>
11	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
12	Egyptian nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus aegyptius</i>
13	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>
14	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
15	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>
16	Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>
17	Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
18	Brown-necked Raven	<i>Corvus ruficollis</i>
19	Cream-colored Courser	<i>Cursorius cursor</i>
20	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
21	Temminck's Lark	<i>Eremophila bilopha</i>
22	Lanner Falcon	<i>Falco biarmicus</i>
23	Eurasian Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
24	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
25	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
26	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>
27	Isabelline warbler	<i>Iduna opaca</i>
28	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>
29	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
30	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>
31	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>
32	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
34	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
35	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
36	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
37	Desert Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>
38	Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>
39	White-crowned Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i>
40	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
41	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
42	Sudan Golden Sparrow	<i>Passer luteus</i>
43	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>
44	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>
45	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
46	Black-bellied Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
47	Rock Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne fuligula</i>
48	Bank Swallow	<i>Riparia riparia</i>

49	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>
50	Laughing Dove	<i>Spilopelia senegalensis</i>
51	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>
52	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
53	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>
54	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>

Pictures from Jon Swenson



Fennec Fox



Sand Cat (kitten)



African Hammada Jerboa



Tarabul's Gerbil



Fat-tailed Gerbil



Desert Hedgehog



Pharoah's Eagle Owl