











Western Sahara's Rare Mammals

Destination: Western Sahara **Duration:** 8 Days **Dates:** 23rd Nov – 30th Nov 2024

-  Brief but a nice sighting of a **Sand Cat** our number one target species for the trip
-  Spotting lanner falcons and many of the Saharan endemic species known from here
-  Multiple **Fennec Fox**, **Ruppell's Fox** and **African Golden Wolf** sightings.
-  Separate great sighting of **Desert Hedgehogs** allowing close up photography.
-  Exploring the sand dunes and desert landscape of the Western Sahara
-  Nice prolonged views of several rodent species including **Hammada Jerboas**.
-  Extra long night drives to find all of the rare nocturnal mammals and birds
-  Spotting a total of 41 different species of birds despite a large nocturnal based trip
-  Camping in remote desert sites and & witnessing the night sky in all its glory
-  Sightings of FOUR amazing **Libyan Striped Weasels** including 3 in one night!



Tour Leader / Guides

Martin Royle (Royle Safaris Tour Leader)
Nico & Ottman (Guide & Drivers)
Michele (Guide)
Manuel (Camp Assistant)
Asma (Assouard Cook)
Martina (Logistics manager)

Participants

Mr. Tomonobu Akiyama
Ms. Hiroko Izumoto
Mr. Yoshiaki Sano
Mr. Shigeaki Suzuki

Overview

Day 1:	Dakhla
Days 2-4:	Saharan Desert Campsite
Days 5-6:	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 and a further two trips in 2024. This trip report is for the second trip in 2024, which was done in the autumn.

All of these trips have been successful in seeing nearly all of our targets (with 100% success for Fennec Foxes, Ruppell's Fox, African Golden Wolf and African Wild Cats), the only one of the main species which has eluded us on a couple of the trips is the amazing Sand Cat. We do have a good success rate in seeing this species, but it is more elusive than the other targeted species.

What we have had great success in seeing are even more elusive species of the Sahara, we have seen the very rare Honey Badger on a couple of occasions (this species is due to be split from the Sub-Saharan honey badger in the next few years) and the very highly sought after Libyan Striped Polecats which we have seen on all but one of our trips!

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 trips to this part of the world are largely down to a couple of facets, firstly we arrive after the locations of this seasons 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 many other species which are very rarely encountered in the northern Sahara.

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.

2026 and 2027 Western Sahara's Rare Mammals Small Group Tour

We have already sold our first autumn 2025 and spring 2026 group tours but if there is enough interested we can look to set up a second set of dates for 2026. However the next scheduled group tour we have would be for autumntime 2026 or possibly springtime 2027. 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 how to make a booking.



Day 1 Dakhla

Arrival

The whole group arrived on time and without any problems and we checked into the hotel, rested for a while and then walked down into the town for some lunch. On the way Tomo spotted a pod of dolphins in the distance just offshore, we watched them for a while and saw the distinct humped back which distinguishes this as the **Atlantic humpback dolphin** which was a very nice way to start the trip.

Later that night we went back to town for some dinner, but other than these meals and the nice dolphins and some common shore birds there was nothing particularly noteworthy about today. Martin just briefed the group on the plan for tomorrow, including the departure time and how the next few days would work, before everyone retired for the night and got some rest.



Day 2 Sahara Desert (Campsite)

Traveling & Wildlife Watching

This morning we had breakfast and then checked out of the hotel before meeting the vehicles at the reception. Here we met Nico (who runs the logistics here along with his wife) as well as his main driver Ottman and the naturalist guide Michele who would be with us throughout the trip.

First we drove north along the bay of Dakhla with several stops for birding (one of the few opportunities for daylight birding). It was a little misty this morning, which is quite unusual for this time of year but it wasn't too long before it was burnt off.

Species seen this morning along the coast of Dakhla Bay included greater flamingos, black-headed gulls, lesser black-backed gulls, Eurasian spoonbills, northern shovelers, black wheatears as well as many others. 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.

We arrived at the camp around 2:15pm; as usual the camping team had set the tents up in advance and lunch was ready (prepared by Manuel) when we arrived. We settled into the camp and rested until dusk when we had dinner and then went out for our first night spotlighting.

Early on and near camp we found a couple of **Sahara hares** and then a **fennec fox** but it was running away from us and running fast, so we left it and shortly after found a very cooperative **lesser Egyptian jerboa** and then an **African hammada jerboa** seeing these two different (but very similar species) so close together was a nice way of comparing the tail flags which are a major point of difference for these species but also it makes you think that there must be a fair amount of interbreeding and so how distinct these two species really are.

We then had a close **desert hedgehog** which allowed us to get out and eye level for some great photography, at the same time a small pale scorpion was nearby, nice to see these out in the desert, wouldn't want to see one in the tent (luckily we haven't had that happen on our trips). We then saw several more **Saharan hares** and in a gravel area a couple of **African hammada jerboas** and two gerbils which disappeared before we could get any real views of them.

On our way back to the camp we had close views of a **Libyan striped weasel**, it was nice and close but brief as it darted down a burrow quickly. We waited a while but it didn't come back up. So we headed back and the last sighting of note was a very close and cooperative **Saharan hare**.



Day 3 Sahara Desert (Campsite)

Wildlife Watching

This morning Michele took Tomo and Hiroko for a walk around the Ouadi to see what birdlife was around. It was misty this morning and there was not much activity until the sun rose and started to burn off the mist. Some of the common bird species such as desert sparrow, desert wheatear and bar-tailed larks started to flit around as the sun rose higher and higher. As well as birds there were some Dumeril's lizards around sunbathing in the morning sun and a small colony of **fat sand rats** nearby, which gave quick views as they viewed us from the entrance of their burrows.

It was a little cooler today than yesterday during the day and so we hoped for some nice sightings after dark. Once again there were many **Saharan hares** and both **African hammada** and **lesser Egyptian jerboas** around and we had a very distant **fennec fox** but couldn't get closer. In a grassy area we found an **African wild cat** and followed it through the grass for a while before it disappeared.

Carrying on we found many more gerbils, mostly we couldn't identify them but we did get views of a couple of **lesser Egyptian gerbils** and then a more cooperative **fennec fox** moving slowly along and allowing close up views until we eventually lost the fox in the grass and we carried on.

Further on stopped for a nice looking tarantula like spider before finding another **fennec** in a similar area to the last one, it may well have been the same one.

On the way back towards the camp we found another **desert hedgehog** and a **fat-tailed gerbil** which always allow for very close views as they freeze in place. The last couple of hours or so was relatively quiet with a nice elegant short-fingered gecko and a **pygmy gerbil**.

Day 4 Sahara Desert (Campsite)

Wildlife Watching

The temperature today was hot again, the little cold snap was over and there was very little activity around the camp today. The group were not too interested in birding and so we didn't do very much around the camp during the days.



Then after dark we went out and would try an area in the north and a more vegetated habitat, so we drove a little faster to get further north than usual. So it was a little quieter as we didn't spotlight as intensively at first. And the first thing we did see was another **Libyan striped weasel** which was running into some thick bushes, we then spotted a couple of **Saharan hares** but it wasn't until we were around 15km away from camp before we started to see more wildlife.

First off it was more **Saharan hares** and then Martin spotted a cat in the torch. It was distant at first, on the other side of a patch of grass, walking parallel. Michele got it in the binoculars and confirmed it was a **sand cat**, in the beam of the torch the leg markings, head shape and distinctive ears were all perfect and visible. We drove closer and the **sand cat** entered the grass and we lost it for a while. We scoured the area, back and forth searching for the cat, but it didn't come back out of the grass (or at least we didn't see it come out), there could be a bush or burrow in the grass where it was holed up. We spent a while here but then had to turn around and on the way back we had not one but two more sightings of **Libyan striped weasels**.

Day 5 Sahara Desert (Homestay)

Traveling & Wildlife Watching

This morning the weather was changing again, it was cooler this morning and overcast, which made packing down the camp more comfortable. We had breakfast 10am and then the camp team started to pack up, we would be leaving the desert camp and heading to a homestay a few hours away. As we waited for Martina (Nico's wife and logistics extraordinaire) to arrive and take the camping equipment back to town (as well as Manuel who was finished with us now) some Maghreb crested larks and brown-necked ravens were around the camp.

So off went Martina and Manuel back to Dakhla and the rest of us (joined by Asma – who would be our cook in Assouard) travelled towards the small village of Assouard.

The drive was around 3 hours and we reached the Bougoufa Trail area; where we would spend the next couple of nights looking for wildlife.

We settled into the house (having a nice shower after a few days without) and had a late lunch before heading out at sunset. During the time here we would be driving and spotlighting along the road back towards Dakhla and at intervals head off road and explore some of the sand and gravel dunes around here. It was quiet at first and so we headed to some nearby rock formations to the west of Assouard and we then found a **Ruppel's fox** before having very nice views of a Saharan sand viper on the road. But that was if for the first half of the journey, so we headed back a little dejected at how quiet it was. But things livened up on the way back, with a very nice close **African wild cat** close to the road (less than 10m away) and then our first **Ruppel's fox** seen very well as well as **lesser Egyptian gerbils**, two species of hare (both **Saharan** and **Schlomberger's hares**) as well as a **Tarabul's gerbil** next to the road and both species of **jerboa** all of which rescued what was otherwise a very quiet night.



Day 6 Sahara Desert (Homestay)

Wildlife Watching

Today we left just before sunset and headed to some large rocky outcrops nearby, we had seen cats and foxes here in the past and walked around the area to see what we could find.

First off we had a nice view of a lanner falcon perched on a rock overlooking the area and some other birds including great grey shrikes and white-crowned wheatears around. As the sun started to dip the bats started to come out, they were most likely **Egyptian mouse-tailed bats** from what we could see and knowing there are large roosts of this species around here.

We then found a **Ruppel's fox** on the rocks and we watched as it climbed up the rocks and giving us great views, distant but nice views as it stared back down at us.

We also watched some ringed wall geckos on the rocks chasing and catching ants before it started to get very dark and too dark to see anything.

Walking around the area Michele found some roosting butterflies in the grass at the same time that Tomo and Martin spotlighted a cat of some sort (looking very promising for sand cat) moving quickly among the rocks. But it disappeared and despite us looking long and hard around here, we couldn't find the animal again.

So we headed back to the cars where Nico was waiting, he had had very good views of an **African golden wolf** which we found and had brief views of before hitting the road and spotlighting along the road again.



There were many **jerboas** of both species around as well as another **Tarabul's gerbil** and then a nice **African wild cat** allowing prolonged views but through tall grass and not letting us get any closer.

Day 7 Dakhla

Travelling

Today we left Aousserd at 11:15am and headed back to Dakhla. The drive was very uneventful and when we returned to the hotel in Dakhla in the late afternoon we rested up before heading into the town for dinner.

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 - Nov 2024

Mammals (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Golden Wolf	<i>Canis anthus</i>
2	African Wild Cat	<i>Felis lybica</i>
3	Sand cat	<i>Felis margarita</i>
4	Lesser Egyptian Gerbil	<i>Gerbillus gerbillus</i>
5	Pygmy Gerbil	<i>Gerbillus henleyi</i>
6	Tarabul's Gerbil	<i>Gerbillus tarabuli</i>
7	Libyan Striped Weasel	<i>Ictonyx libycus</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	Schlumberger's Hare	<i>Lepus schlumberger</i>
12	Fat-tailed Gerbil	<i>Pachyuromys duprasi</i>
13	Desert hedgehog	<i>Paraechinus aethiopicus</i>
14	Fat sand rat	<i>Psammomys obesus</i>
15	Egyptian mouse-tailed bat	<i>Rhinopoma cystops</i>
16	Atlantic humpback dolphin	<i>Sousa teuszii</i>
17	Ruppell's Fox	<i>Vulpus rueppellii</i>
18	Fennec Fox	<i>Vulpus zerda</i>

Birds (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
2	Greater Hoopoe-Lark	<i>Alaemon alaudipes</i>
3	Bar-tailed Lark	<i>Ammomanes cinctura</i>
4	Desert Lark	<i>Ammomanes deserti</i>
5	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
6	Intermediate Egret	<i>Ardea intermedia</i>
7	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>

8	Long-legged buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>
9	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>
10	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>
11	Kentish plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
12	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>
13	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
14	Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
15	Brown-necked Raven	<i>Corvus ruficollis</i>
16	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
17	House Bunting	<i>Emberiza sahari</i>

18	Dunn's Lark	<i>Eremalauda dunni</i>
19	Lanner Falcon	<i>Falco biarmicus</i>
20	Common kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
21	Maghreb lark	<i>Galerida macrorhyncha</i>
22	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
23	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>
24	Large grey shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>
25	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
26	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>
27	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
28	Eurasian curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
29	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>

30	Desert Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>
31	White-crowned wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i>
32	Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>
34	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>
35	Desert Sparrow	<i>Passer simplex</i>
36	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
37	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>
38	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
39	Grey plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
40	Plain crag martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne obsoleta</i>
41	Spotted redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>

Reptiles (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Dumeril's Fringe-toed Lizard	<i>Acanthodactylus dumerilii</i>
2	Sahara Sand Viper	<i>Cerastes vipera</i>
3		<i>Stenodactylus mauritanicus</i>
4	Anderson's Short-fingered Gecko	<i>Stenodactylus petrii</i>
5	Elegant Gecko	<i>Stenodactylus sthenodactylus</i>
6	Ringed Wall Gecko	<i>Tarentola annularis</i>
7	Sudan Mastigure	<i>Uromastyx dispar</i>



(C)Tomo Akiyama

African Hammada Jerboa



Lesser Egyptian Jerboa



(C)Tomo Akiyama

Fat-tailed Gerbil



Desert Hedgehog



Saharan Hare



Libyan Striped Weasel



Fennec Fox



Whimbrel



Sanderling



Bar-tailed Godwit



Spotted Redshank



Black Wheatear



(C)Tomo Akiyama

Dumeril's Fringe-fingered Lizard



(C)Tomo Akiyama

Elegant Short-fingered Gecko



(C)Tomo Akiyama

Saharan Sand Viper



Ringed Wall Gecko

