











Western Sahara's Rare Mammals

Destination: Western Sahara **Duration:** 8 Days **Dates:** 25th Jan – 31st Jan 2025

-  Having four **Sand Cat** sightings, two of which were exceptional and close
-  Finding Pharoah Eagle Owls and many of the Saharan endemic bird species
-  All 3 canid species seen; **Fennec & Ruppell's Fox** and **African Golden Wolf**
-  Getting out and close to various species including several **Desert Hedgehog**
-  Exploring the sand dunes and desert landscape of the Western Sahara
-  Good views of six rodent species including **Fat Sand Rats & Pygmy Gerbils**
-  Extra long night drives to find all of the rare nocturnal mammals and birds
-  Spotting a total of 44 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 17 species of mammal including all major targets for the trip

Tour Leader / Guides

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

Participants

Ms. Sabrina Benzerfa
Ms. Sarah Mahie
Mr. Boaz van Die
Ms. Stephanie Petrashko
Mr. Guillaume Salvai

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 and two more in 2025 (one of which has not yet run and is planned for December).

This trip report is for the first trip we ran in 2025 which took place in January and was run with a full group of 5 pax and was led by our tour leader Ewan Davies.

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; however on this trip we had some unbelievable success.

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, however both of these species eluded us on this particular tour.

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-safairis.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

With most of the group arriving overnight, the day was free and they spent the day exploring Dakhla. Stephaine and Guillaume explored the town, meanwhile Sarah and Boaz visited the beach where they found dolphin bones and 2 types of Dermestes beetle not previously recorded in Western Sahara. Ewan arrived late in the morning and in the afternoon, the group met up and took a walk where the first few birds of the trip were seen including Caspian Tern and Little Ringed Plover.

In the evening we visited a restaurant, we saw our first mammal, a **Brown rat**, and enjoyed a pleasant meal at a local restaurant.



Day 2 Sahara Desert (Campsite)

Traveling & Wildlife Watching

Sabrina was the final member of the group to arrive, flying in overnight, so she met the rest of the group at breakfast. Our local team of Michele and Ottman picked us up at 10am to complete the group and begin the trip proper.

As we left the peninsula where Dakhla is located we stopped a couple of good locations for wildlife. A number of bird species including Greater Flamingo, Eurasian Spoonbill, Curlew, Whimbrel, and Slender Billed Gull were seen, and we had a fantastic early lunch among the rocky hills behind the bay and looked for fossils.

After several hours 'drive we reached the desert camp which would be our home for the next three days, and settled in. We spent some time getting used to the new environment, including Saarah and Boaz putting out a trail camera. After another great meal we headed out for our first evening drive.

Things got off to an amazing start when after only 10 minutes, our first mammal was an **African wildcat** that crossed in front of our vehicles. A good sign of what was to come. A **Fat tailed gerbil** soon followed and sat obligingly under a bush while we took photographs. After that we saw our first **African hammada jerboas**, a pair which again allowed for very close views. There are 2 very similar species of Jerboa present in the area, **African hammada jerboa** and **Lesser Egyptian jerboa**. As we saw a lot of Jerboas, once we had had good views of each, we did not stop to differentiate them each time.

Our next mammal was a **Desert Hedgehog**, we lost it among the grasses but soon found it again and all the group had good views. More **Fat tailed gerbils** and **Jerboas** followed along with many **hares**. Mostly the hares would run as soon as we saw them, but the first was a young animal and flattened itself to the ground. Again current literature suggests there are 2 very similar species present (**Sahara hare** and **Schlumberger's hare**) and after positively identifying both we did not generally check each one. The majority seen from the desert camp seemed to be **Sahara hare**.

Two more gerbil species were seen that evening too, **Pygmy gerbil** and **Tarabul's gerbil**. These would dig into the sand when approached, then look back at you from their burrow.

Along with all of these, two owls were also seen, a Pharaoh Eagle Owl and a Short Eared Owl.

Our final sighting of the night was a distant canid spotted by Boaz, when we drove towards the eyeshine it moved away from us, but those who saw it got enough of a view of its hind quarters to identify it as a **Golden wolf**.



Day 3 Sahara Desert (Campsite)

Wildlife Watching

The group slept in before a late morning brunch. Before this various birds could be found around the camp, including Bar Tailed Larks, Desert Sparrows, and Great Grey Shrikes. Several groups of Spotted Sandgrouse were seen passing to the east.

After eating we took a walk out into the desert to see what we could find. More birds such as Greater Hoopoe Lark, and Desert Wheatears. We checked an area that had the burrows of Fat sand rats, although these did not show themselves.

Several Fringe Toed Lizards were seen, as well as numerous insects. Some of the group had an interest in skeletons so the remains of camels and goats found were of interest, as was the remains of a Golden Wolf. A few bones and one rodent skeleton were taken back to camp for further examination.

We waited out the heat of the day, before unsuccessfully staking out the Sand Rat burrows for an hour or so before dinner.

In the evening we drove out again, this time to a different area with more dunes. More **Fat tailed gerbils** were seen, as well as **African hammada jerboas**, **Lesser Egyptian jerboas** and numerous **Hares**. The first new mammal of the evening came when Boaz again saw eyeshine from the second car. At the very top of a dune was a **Fennec fox**, in a classic pose. The animal ran down the opposite side of the dune but we were able to drive round and find it again. It stayed on the move, but we had a good look at it as it moved away. Not long afterwards a second was also seen briefly before being lost in scrub.

More **Jerboas**, **Hares** and **Gerbils** followed, giving some great opportunities for photography, before eyeshine later on was seen to be our other main target, a **Sand cat**!

Everyone had a look at the cat, although it wasn't that close. We moved closer but were distracted by a second set of eyes. This time an **African wildcat**, unusually both were visible at once. The **Sand cat** evaded us on this occasi-



on, probably by hiding out in the grass, and ended up following the **wildcat** for a little while before returning to camp. Everyone was pleased to have seen our key targets though eager for more.

Day 4 Sahara Desert (Campsite)

Wildlife Watching

The day started early for some, as Guillaume and Michele set out on a morning run before it got too hot. Back at camp tracks nearby suggested there might be something on the trail camera, and indeed, some great footage of a **Ruppell's fox** was taken.

Using a macro lens and some diagrams of rodent dentition, Sarah was also able to identify the desiccated rodent found the previous day as a Fat Sand Rat, although the live ones were still not seen.

In the afternoon we headed back to the dune area for some scenic photography, stopping along the way to photograph some Cream Coloured Coursers and Dunn's Lark. When we reached the dunes, we climbed them and enjoyed the view, before descending to ground level where Michele showed us many examples of Neolithic and Paleolithic artefacts that litter the area, a record of a time when the area was not as dry as it is now.

It seems there was a mass emergence of Striped hawk-moths during the previous night and these quite large moths were a feature of the rest of the trip. They were found on our clothes and in our tents, as well as attracted to the spotlights.

The evening drive got underway with more **Jerboas** and **Hares** before our second **Desert hedgehog** was seen. More eyeshine brought us our first then our second **Ruppell's fox** in quick succession.

The drive then settled into a familiar pattern before Michele suddenly stopped the car, as there was a **Sand Cat** calmly sitting less than ten metres from the driver's side. This animal was unperturbed by our presence and made its way through the grasses where a second **Sand Cat** was also found. For the next ten minutes we followed one then the other before they separately moved away. Elated, we decided this would be a good time to break for coffee.

After a short break we moved on and encountered both of the **Sand cats** again. Eventually we knew one was nearby but couldn't see where. We approached on foot but couldn't locate it.

Using a thermal camera we were able to see that it was in the grass just a few metres from us, so we turned off our lights and watched it on the screen as it decided it had fooled us and slowly got up before trotting away.

Several kilometres on, the third **Sand cat** of the evening was then seen. It was definitely the night of the **Sand cats** for us.

Day 5 Sahara Desert (Homestay)

Traveling & Wildlife Watching

Our last morning in the desert and the group slept in. It was lucky they weren't keen birdwatchers or they would have been disappointed to miss the two Sudan Golden Sparrows that visited the camp just after dawn. After breakfast we packed up the tents and waited for Martina to bring fresh supplies from Dakhla before moving on to our second location.

Back on the road we saw the scenery change as rocky outcrops became more common, both sedimentary and igneous. The wildlife changed as well and once past Waddi Jenna, we began to see large Uromastix lizards beside the road; these are common when the weather conditions are right, but difficult to see otherwise. Arriving at our homestay we unpacked and settled in. Everyone was pleased to have an opportunity to have a proper shower and clean up.

The evening drive gave more views of hare, **Lesser Egyptian jerboas** and **African hammad Jerboas**, as well as geckos and one more **Desert Hedgehog**. The **hedgehog** was found racing across the plain.

At the Wadi an **African wildcat** was seen near the Wadi, but did not hang about. Michele and Sarah were able to hear some bats calling at frequencies that those with good hearing could hear unaided. Michele knew from previous experience that these were **Egyptian free tailed bats**. It was difficult to spot these although one was found overhead by Ewan, our only identified bat of the trip. Once we had driven out as far as we were to go that night, we headed back and the same shy **African wildcat** was seen briefly in the wadi. Nearer to our base a second **African wildcat** gave better views.





Day 6 **Sahara Desert (Homestay)**

Wildlife Watching

Following our routine of a late morning brunch we drove to the Waddi in daylight to see what we could find. It was a hot day but quite windy, which mostly kept the birds from moving about. We did however find a group of Fulvous Babbler, and on the mammal side of things we flushed a couple of **Schlumberger's hares**, which were more easily identified in daylight. We also checked a few likely rocks for reptiles, finding a few more geckos by doing so. For our last evening in the desert, we headed out earlier, taking our dinner with us. We drove out to a rocky area before sunset. Some of the group took a quick hike to the top, while those waiting at the bottom watched a pair of Lanner Falcons enjoying the stiff breeze.

After eating we took a walk between the rocks where we saw a Long Legged Buzzard coming it to roost then had good views of two **Ruppell's foxes**, probably a pair. One at our level and the other up on the rocks. A few larger Ringed Wall Geckos were seen and we watched an **African wildcat** at the summit of the rocks briefly as it watched us before disappearing on the other side.

Back at the vehicle the increasing wind made spotlighting hard work, but we persevered, eventually finding a much more amenable **African wildcat**. Whether it was the wind covering the noise of the vehicles or something else we will never know but it paid us no attention as we had close and prolonged views of it stalking through the landscape, stopping to groom itself and even lie down at times.

Eventually it moved into an area where it was harder to follow so we took that as a sign to take a break for drinks. After which we picked it up again straight away and it again posed for photographs.

Back on the road, with sand in our eyes, a rodent beside the road proved to be a **Fat sand rat**, a species that had eluded us up to that point. This was soon followed by another **Tarabul's gerbil**, and a last few Jerboas before we reached our base.

Day 7 **Dakhla**

Travelling

With our final night over, we packed up and prepared to leave. It was another windy day, which limited visibility on the journey back to Dakhla, and sand forming drifts in the road made driving harder. Once back in town we said goodbye and gave our thanks to Michele and Ottman for all their hard work. After a quick stop at the hotel, the group visited the market in the afternoon to try some local produce.

Then in the evening the group headed out together for a memorable evening meal and enjoyed looking back on highlights of the preceding week.

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 2025

Mammals (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Dromedary**	<i>Camelus dromedarius</i>
2	African golden wolf	<i>Canis lupaster</i>
3	African wildcat	<i>Felis lybica</i>
4	Sand cat	<i>Felis margarita</i>
5	Pygmy gerbil	<i>Gerbillus henleyi</i>
6	Tarabul's gerbil	<i>Gerbillus tarabuli</i>
7	African Hammada jerboa*	<i>Jaculus hirtipus</i>
8	Lesser Egyptian jerboa*	<i>Jaculus jaculus</i>
9	Maghreb hare*	<i>Lepus mediterraneus</i>
10	Saharan hare*	<i>Lepus saharae</i>
11	Fat-tailed gerbil	<i>Pachyuromys duprasi</i>
12	Desert hegehog	<i>Paraechinus aethiopicus</i>
13	Fat sand rat	<i>Psammomys obesus</i>
14	Brown rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>
15	Egyptian free-tailed bat	<i>Tadarida aegyptiaca</i>
16	Ruppell's fox	<i>Vulpes rueppellii</i>
17	Fennec fox	<i>Vulpes zerda</i>

January						
25	26	27	28	29	30	31
	20+	20+	20+	20+	20+	20+
	1	D				
	1	1		2	2	
		1	3			
	1	1				
	1				1	
	10+	10+	10+	10+	10+	
	2			2		
					2	
	10+	10+	10+	10+	10+	
	3	2	2		1	
	1		1	1		
		D	1CT		1	
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CT = Camera trap, D = Dead

*Where very similar/cryptic species occurred for common types, once we had confirmed each of the species. We did not stop to make a species level identification in each instance and have recorded them as the commoner of the two.

**Not wild but a notable animal nonetheless.

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	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
4	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>
5	Pharoah Eagle-owl	<i>Bubo ascalaphus</i>

6	Long legged buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>
7	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
8	Little ringed plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>
9	Rock dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
10	Brown necked raven	<i>Corvus ruficollis</i>
11	Sardinian warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>
12	Cream coloured courser	<i>Cursorius cursor</i>

13	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
14	Dunn's lark	<i>Eremalauda dunni</i>
15	Temminck's lark	<i>Eremophila bilopha</i>
16	Lanner Falcon	<i>Falco biarmicus</i>
17	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
18	Thekla lark	<i>Galerida theklæ</i>
19	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus longirostris</i>
20	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
21	Caspian tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>
22	Great grey shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>
23	Lesser black backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
24	Black tailed godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>
25	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>
26	Black kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
27	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
28	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
29	Desert wheatear	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>

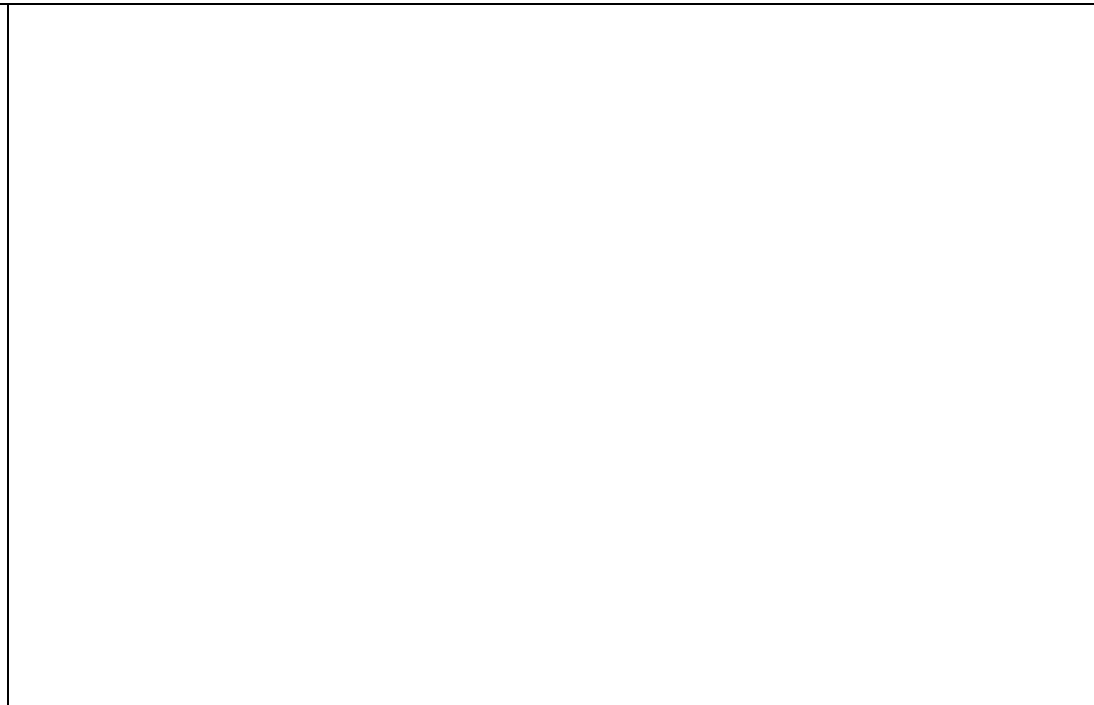
30	White crowned wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i>
31	Black wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>
32	Northern wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
34	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
35	Sudan golden sparrow	<i>Passer luteus</i>
36	Desert sparrow	<i>Passer simplex</i>
37	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
38	Greater flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>
39	Slender billed gull	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>
40	Iberian chiff chaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>
41	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
42	Grey plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
43	Spotted sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles senegallus</i>
44	Rock martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne fuligula</i>
45	Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
46	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>

Reptiles (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Duméril's fringe-fingered lizard	<i>Acanthodactylus dumerilii</i>
2	Dune gecko	<i>Stenodactylus petrii</i>
3	Elegant gecko	<i>Stenodactylus sthenodactylus</i>
4	North African mastigure	<i>Uromastyx acanthinura</i>



Sand Cat



Sand Cat



African Wild Cat



Ruppell's Fox



Desert Hedgehog



Lesser Egyptian Jerboa



Lesser Egyptian Gerbil



Fat-tailed Gerbil



Sahara Hare



Elegant Short-fingered Gecko