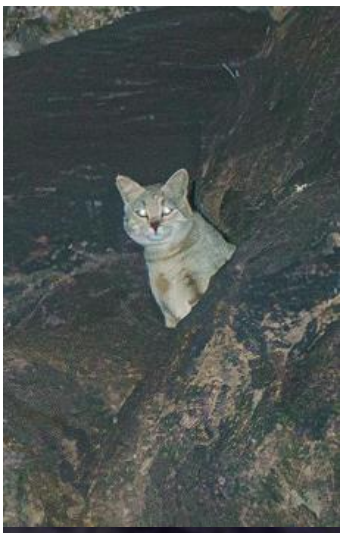
ROYLE SAFARIS

Western Sahara's Rare Mammals

Destination: Western Sahara **Duration:** 8 Days **Dates:** 9th Feb – 16th Feb 2026

- Having a very nice **Sand Cat** sighting relaxed and allowing close photography.
- Having some nice bird sightings including a Golden Eagle and Pharoah Eagle Owl
- All 3 canid species seen; **Fennec & Ruppell's Fox** and **African Golden Wolf**
- Close views on foot of a couple of beautiful **Desert Hedgehogs** whilst out on safari
- Exploring the sand dunes and desert landscape of the Western Sahara
- Good views of all six species of rodents two **Jerboas** and four **Gerbils**
- Extra long night drives to find all of the rare nocturnal mammals and birds
- Spotting a total of 72 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 15 species of mammal including all major targets for the trip



Tour Leader / Guides

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

Participants

Ms. Jill Clark
Mr. Graham Maddocks
Ms. Abby Kwok
Mr. Chi Ki Lau
Ms. Grietje Vlasma

Overview

Day 1:	Dakhla
Days 2-4:	Saharan Desert Campsite
Days 5-6:	Saharan Desert House
Day 7:	Dakhla
Day 8:	Home

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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 were 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, this is the second trip report from our four trips running 2026.

This trip was led by Ewan Davies who had guided here many times and the trip was booked as a small group tour for 5 people, the special focus on the cat species but all mammals, birds and other life was of interest to the group.

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 great past 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.

2027 and 2028 Western Sahara's Rare Mammals Small Group Tour

We have already sold our winter season 2026-2027 group tours and so the next scheduled group tours we have would be for autumn / winter time 2027 and then springtime 2028. 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*

Today the group all made their way to Dakhla individually (most flying into the city, with one member of the group (Graham) arriving a few days earlier and making his own way to the hotel to meet everyone) and once everyone was in the hotel, they freshened up and then met for the first time in the hotel lobby, before heading to Villa Dakhla for an evening meal and a short briefing of what to expect over the following few days of the trip.

Day 2 **Sahara Desert (Campsite)** *Traveling & Wildlife Watching*

The next morning, after breakfast, we were met by Michele and Ottmane, who would be with us for the entire trip and started the drive north out of Dakhla, along the way we made a brief first stop at a site known for Fat Sand Rats, though none were found.

A second stop at the oyster beds proved more successful. Here we saw many waterbirds, including Greater Flamingos, Eurasian Spoonbills, egrets, and Oystercatchers, with smaller waders scurrying along the shore while an Osprey circled overhead.
We ate lunch at the oyster beds before turning east into the Sahara itself. As we drove inland, the desert appeared almost empty, save for scattered **dromedaries** and the occasional raven. Eventually we left the road and headed towards our desert camp, where we settled in for the night.
After dinner we prepared for our first evening spotlighting session. The area was even drier than usual, yet the desert-adapted species that inhabit it continue to thrive. We were rewarded with views of several **Saharan Hares**, **Lesser Egyptian Gerbils**, **Pygmy Gerbils**, and good numbers of **jerboas**. Two species occur here, the **Lesser Egyptian Jerboa** and the **African Hammada Jerboa**, which require close views to distinguish, but both cooperated beautifully, allowing us excellent photographic opportunities.
Although the rodents kept us busy, the first night didn't produce any of our key targets, and it was clear we would need to work hard in the days ahead.

Day 3 Sahara Desert (Campsite) *Wildlife Watching*

After the night's session we slept in, awakened by some birds visiting the camp, resident Desert sparrows and Grey grey shrikes, as well as three species of warbler. After brunch we took a walk down the river bed, where Michele told us of the history of the area and showed us paleolithic and neolithic artefacts that litter the ground there, of great interest to Graham.
In terms of wildlife, lizard Dumerill's fringe-toed lizard, Desert mantis, fast moving Silver ants and a scorpion were seen while Barn swallows, and Eurasian and Pallid swifts passed overhead. Once the sun was at its height we retreated to our tents to wait out the heat of the day, either in our tents, or outside under a tree as preferred by Grietje.
We ate dinner earlier and set out south to an area with many large sand dunes. We climbed one to watch the sunset and a scarab joined us on the summit.
As the light departed we set off spotlighting again. The first eyeshine we saw was a **Saharan hare**, but unlike most, it stayed rather than ran, and everyone finally got some pictures. Shortly afterwards we saw eyeshine again. Two sets this time.. At the base of one of the dunes, there were two **Fennec foxes**. Always skittish they kept their distance but allowed good views as they moved around the dunes before we lost them.
More rodent encounters followed, including a wonderful **Fat tailed Gerbil**, that hid confidently, but entirely ineffectively, behind a blade of dry grass. Nearer the camp the **Ruppell's fox** was briefly seen but quickly fled. As we returned to the camp another **Ruppell's fox** was by our tents, this one would visit the camp every night while we slept, but was rarely seen. We could retire for the night happy that we had seen one of our key targets here.

Day 4 Sahara Desert (Campsite) *Wildlife Watching*

In the morning we headed back to the dunes for a walk. Some good birds were seen with a Greater hoopoe lark on the way there, and a flock of eleven Cream coloured coursers overhead. Come evening we took a vote and decided to divide our time between the dunes to the south and other areas north of our camp. We hoped to see the **Fennec foxes** again, but had no luck. At around 10PM we headed back north and stopped for a midsession break.
No sooner did we start again than Abby yelled "Hedgehog!" Running along beside the vehicle in the open was a **Desert hedgehog**, these insectivores are often encountered but hard to find deliberately so are always a joy to see.
Buoyed by this great sighting, we headed onwards and not long before midnight more eyeshine was found that we were convinced was a cat. Unfortunately we lost the eyeshine among the tussocks of dry grass, but soon found it again. This time we could see it was, although distant, definitely a **Sand cat**, sitting comfortably between the bushes and grass. After watching for some time, we could see it was relaxed and decided to approach. It moved off and we briefly lost it as we got close but eventually had great views of it under a bush. Views as good as you could hope for. A fantastic sighting and a great end to the evening. We returned to the camp elated.

Day 5 Sahara Desert (Homestay) *Traveling & Wildlife Watching*

In the morning after a leisurely breakfast we struck camp and headed towards Aousserd. Where the desert camp had been very dry, there had clearly been rain further east. The desert was very green and there were birds in abundance. Along the way we stopped at a site for Sudan golden sparrow and Black-headed sparrow lark. With

little wind Dob lizards were seen in large numbers beside the road. On arrival at the homestay we had the chance to clean up and settle in before another great meal and another evening spotlighting.
The evening began well, with the trip highlight of a large Desert horned viper crossing the road. These highly venomous snakes will lie in the road at night for warmth, and small ones are seen often if the weather conditions are right. But this one was almost as large as they come, probably around 75-80 cm. This was Davis's most wanted animal of the trip and everyone had a chance for good photos. We saw several more smaller specimens through the evening and Michele herded them off the road for their safety. The wind picked up but we also had good views of a Short-eared owl hunting for jerboas in the first part of the evening, followed by good views of another **Desert hedgehog**. Just before our coffee break, Davis spotted our first **African wildcat** of the trip which was hunting to the south of the road before moving off.
After a coffee break we continued, with the usual supporting cast of Hares, Gerbils and Jerboas, along with a second close **African wildcat** and a distant **Ruppell's fox**. Towards the end of the evening, the wind, which can blow very strong here, was picking up, and it whistled around the house all night.

Day 6 Sahara Desert (Homestay) *Wildlife Watching*

We rose early and had a light breakfast so we could drive out and take advantage of something unusual. To the south a rarely present lake had formed, and was a draw for migratory birds. The day was very windy but on our way down we had good views of more Greater hoopoe larks and Cream coloured coursers as well as Isabeline warbler. On arrival we found a Bonelli's eagle over the lake, and also a young Golden eagle. Other new birds for the trip included Trumpeter finch, Tawny pipit, Tristan's warbler and Crowned sandgrouse.
Driving back north the Golden eagle flew low around the cars as it fought against the wind, giving spectacular views.
Back home of a late brunch and a few hours of down time, before heading out again in the late afternoon to a site Michele thought we could find a few different species of lark. On the way there as we passed through Wadi Jenna, we saw several Hares under the trees including one which appeared to be Magreb hare. Among the desert melons that grow profusely we added Greater short-toed lark, Dunn's lark, and a nice Thick-billed lark on the nest. A pair of Long-legged buzzards moved between the ground and a lone tree, showing nicely.
Towards sunset we drove toward one of the rocky outcrops found in this area of the desert and ate a picnic dinner. The wind was still strong so with a lot of dust in the air visibility wasn't great, so we didn't get the spectacular sunset we'd hoped for, but shining a torch at the outcrop at dusk gave us great views of an **African wildcat** waking up and looking out from its den. We then took a walk between two outcrops, and when Grietje picked up eyeshine again we initially thought it was the same cat. But a second look showed a **Ruppell's fox**. It didn't hang about, but we all saw it well as it ran across the rocky backdrop.
The call of a Pharoah eagle owl could be heard, and Michele was able to find it on the cliff face. Another bird highlight of the trip. More Geckos, ants, spiders and neolithic pottery proved of interest as we circled back to the car, as well as close up views of another **Pygmy gerbil**.
We spent so much time on our walk that it was 10pm by the time we started back to the road, and the wind made spotlighting difficult. Stopping for coffee, the group were asked what they hoped for in our final run along the road. The consensus was **Golden wolf** and we agreed to try our best. Around half an hour later, there it was. A **Golden wolf** in the grasses to the south of the road. It showed nicely before moving off out of range. Another target acheived. More rodents, and a frustratingly lost eyeshine in the grass that was probably another wildcat and we headed for home.

Day 7 Dakhla *Travelling*

In the morning we packed and left. Confused only slightly by the unexpected time change due to the start of Ramadan. The road was quiet in the heat of the day, but a quick stop at a site for Red-rumped wheatear proved successful. Returning to Dakhla we said our thanks and goodbyes to Michele and Ottmane, as well as Esma who had cooked for us at the homestay. In the evening Martina picked us up and took us to a local restaurant for the last meal of the trip and we spent a very pleasant evening listening to her stories of living in the area, and remembering the sights we'd seen and the amazing experiences we'd had with the wildlife of Western Sahara.

Day 8 **Home** *Departure*

This morning after breakfast the clients were taken to the airport to catch their return flights home or continued their time in Dakhla.

Species List

Western Sahara's Rare Mammals Tour - Feb 2026

Mammals (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name	January						
			9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1	Dromedary**	*Camelus dromedarius*		10+			10+	10+	
2	African golden wolf	*Canis lupaster*						1	
3	African wildcat	*Felis lybica*					1	1	
4	Sand cat	*Felis margarita*				1			
5	Lesser Egyptian gerbil	*Gerbillus gerbillus*		2	1	2	~10	~10	
6	Pygmy gerbil	*Gerbillus henleyi*		1	1		1	1	
7	Tarabul's gerbil	*Gerbillus tarabuli*				1			
9	African Hammada jerboa*	*Jacalus hirtipus*		4	6	10+	10+	10+	
9	Lesser Egyptian jerboa*	*Jaculus jaculus*		1	1		1	10+	
10	Maghreb hare*	*Lepus mediterraneus*					1	1	
11	Saharan hare*	*Lepus saharae*		10+	~10	~10	1	4	
12	Fat-tailed gerbil	*Pachyuromys duprasi*			1	1	1		
13	Desert hedgehog	*Paraechinus aethiopicus*				1	1		
14	Ruppell's fox	*Vulpes rueppellii*			2		1	2	
15	Fennec fox	*Vulpes zerda*			2				

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 male a species level identification in each instance and have recorded them as the commoner of the two.

Birds (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Greater hoopoe lark	*Alaemon alaudipes*
2	Bar-tailed lark	*Ammomanes cinctura*
3	Kentish plover	*Anarhynchus alexandrinus*
4	Tawny pipit	*Anthus campestris*
5	Common swift	*Apus apus*
6	Pallid swift	*Apus pallidus*
7	Golden eagle	*Aquila chrysaetos*
8	Bonelli's eagle	*Aquila fasciata*

9	Grey heron	*Ardea cinerea*
10	Fulvous chatterer	*Argya fulva*
11	Short eared owl	*Asio flammeus*
12	Pharaoh eagle owl	*Bubo ascalaphus*
13	Trumpeter finch	*Bucanetes githagineus*
14	Long legged buzzard	*Buteo rufinus*
15	Greater short-toed lark	*Calandrella brachydactyla*
16	Sanderling	*Calidris alba*
17	Dunlin	*Calidris alpina*
18	Ringed plover	*Charadrius hiaticula*
19	Whiskered tern	*Chlidonias hybrida*
20	Slender-billed gull	*Chroicocephalus genei*
21	Black-headed gull	*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*
22	Rock dove	*Columba livia*
23	Brown-necked raven	*Corvus ruficollis*
24	Spectacled warbler	*Curruca conspicillata*
25	Tristrams's warbler	*Curruca deserticola*
26	Subalpine warbler	*Curruca iberiae*
27	Sardinian warbler	*Curruca melanocephala*
28	Cream-coloured courser	*Cursorius cursor*
29	Western house martin	*Delichon urbicum*
30	Little egret	*Egretta garzetta*
31	House bunting	*Emberiza sahari*
32	Dunn's lark	*Eremalauda dunn*
33	Black-crowned sparrow-lark	*Eremopterix nigriceps*
34	Common kestrel	*Falco tinnunculus*
35	Crested lark	*Galerida cristata*
36	Thekla's lark	*Galerida theklae*
37	Eurasian oystercatcher	*Haematopus ostralegus*
38	Barn Swallow	*Hirundo rustica*
39	Caspian tern	*Hydroprogne caspia*
40	Great grey shrike	*Lanius excubitor*
41	Woodchat Shrike	*Lanius senator*
42	Lesser black-backed gull	*Larus fuscus*
43	Yellow-legged gull	*Larus michahellis*
44	Black-tailed godwit	*Limosa Limosa*
45	Black kite	*Milvus migrans*
46	White Wagtail	*Motacilla alba*
47	Yellow wagtail	*Motacilla flava*
48	Eurasian curlew	*Numenius arquata*
49	Eurasian whimbrel	*Numenius phaeopus*
50	Desert wheatear	*Oenanthe deserti*
51	Isabeline wheatear	*Oenanthe isabellina*
52	White-crowned wheatear	*Oenanthe leucopyga*
53	Black wheatear	*Oenanthe leucura*
54	Red rumped wheatear	*Oenanthe moesta*

55	Northern wheatear	*Oenanthe oenanthe*
56	Osprey	*Pandion haliaetus*
57	House sparrow	*Passer domesticus*
58	Sudan golden sparrow	*Passer luteus*
59	Desert sparrow	*Passer simplex*
60	Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax carbo*
61	Greater flamingo	*Phoenicopterus roseus*
62	Common chiffchaff	*Phylloscopus collybita*
63	Eurasian Spoonbill	*Platalea leucorodia*
64	Grey plover	*Pluvialis squatarola*
65	Crowned sandgrouse	*Pterocles coronatus*
66	Thick-billed lark	*Ramphocoris clotbey*
67	Sand Martin	*Riparia riparia*
68	Collared dove	*Streptopelia decaocto*
69	Common shelduck	*Tadorna tadorna*
70	Common greenshank	*Tringa nebularia*
71	Common redshank	*Tringa totanus*
72	Eurasian hoopoe	*Upupa epops*

Reptiles **(* = heard or signs only)**

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Desert Horned Viper	*Cerastes cerastes*
2	Anderson's Short-fingered Gecko	*Stenodactylus petrii*
3	Elegant short-fingered gecko	*Stenodactylus sthenodactylus*
4	Ringed Wall Gecko Tarentola annularis	*Tarentola annularis*
5	North African spiny-tailed lizard	*Uromastyx acanthinura*

Pictures from Abby Kwok and Davis Lau

Sand Cat

Sand Cat

African Wild Cat

Fennec Fox

Domestic (Feral) Dromedary

Fat-tailed Gerbil

Lesser Egyptian Jerboa

Pygmy Gerbil

Desert Hedgehog

Saharan Hare

Cream-coloured Courser

Sudan Golden Sparrow

Greater Hoopoe Lark

Pharoah Eagle Owl

North African Spiny-tailed Lizard

Desert Horned Viper

Anderson's Short-fingered Gecko

Sahara Night Sky