A spontaneous wildlife trip to Morocco – May 2026

6 days, 89 bird species, 8 mammal species and 8 reptile and amphibian species

In May 2026, I decided rather spontaneously to take a short trip to Morocco in search of some new wildlife and adventure. Being a total wildlife nutcase in general, birder and herper, as well as mammal enthusiast, Morocco had been on my radar for a while. Living in Málaga at the time, I often looked over to the African side from the beach. Getting there was relatively straightforward: I drove to Tarifa, left the car parked there and took the ferry across the Strait of Gibraltar.

Naturally, no trip to Tarifa in May would be complete without spending some time watching the spring bird migration. I was treated to thousands upon thousands of migrating raptors crossing the strait, mainly Black Kites, short-toed eagles, honey buzzards, and booted eagles, alongside impressive numbers of White Storks. The ferry crossing itself was surprisingly easy, relatively inexpensive and very comfortable, with regular departures throughout the day.

Once in Morocco, I decided to rely entirely on public transport for the rest of the trip, travelling south towards Marrakech by high-speed train before continuing further into the country.

One of the things I found particularly interesting was watching the birdlife gradually change as I travelled further south. The familiar European species became increasingly replaced by African and, to me, much more exotic species. I was nevertheless surprised to encounter some of “our” birds such as Woodpigeons and Common Blackbirds remarkably far south, even towards the Algerian border in the desert.

High Atlas Mountains

My first excursion outside the cities took me into the High Atlas Mountains. Besides some excellent birds and spectacular mountain scenery, this was where I encountered my first mammal of the trip: a Barbary Ground Squirrel (*Atlantoxerus getulus*).

Unfortunately, something that became increasingly apparent throughout my time in Morocco was the extent of environmental degradation. The sheer amount of litter, the number of stray dogs and cats, and the general state of many natural areas were genuinely depressing. Having travelled through quite a few developing countries, I would argue that Morocco is among the worst I have encountered in this respect. Even from a birding perspective, the contrast was striking. The number of birds seemed to drop dramatically after crossing the relatively short 35 km stretch of water separating Spain and Morocco even for very common species.

Boumalne Dadès and the surrounding desert

After a day in the High Atlas, I continued southwest by bus towards Boumalne Dadès. The landscapes here were absolutely incredible, with enormous canyons, dramatic gorges and impressive stretches of arid terrain.

I kept an eye out for Barbary Sheep during my time in the area but unfortunately didn't find any signs of them. The desert surroundings did, however, provide my first herping opportunities of the trip. Spiny-tailed Lizards and Bibron's Agamas were among the highlights, making for some exciting encounters in an otherwise fairly challenging environment.

Merzouga

From Boumalne Dadès, I headed further south towards Merzouga, where I spent a morning exploring the dunes and the much less visited rocky desert behind them, towards the Algerian border. The lake in the area was also particularly impressive.

One of the biggest surprises of the trip was just how relatively easy it was to encounter Fennec Foxes (*Vulpes zerda*). Following some advice from a guide at BirdingMorocco, whom I had contacted beforehand, I explored a few recommended areas and managed to see three different individuals within just a couple of hours during the morning.

I also spent some time thermal-scanning around the dunes after dark. The Merzouga area is, unfortunately, heavily overrun with tourism. Buggies and 4x4s seem to be driving everywhere, with little regard for the fragile desert environment. On top of this, there are enormous numbers of domestic camels, donkeys and dogs throughout the area. It is difficult not to wonder what kind of future there is for the wildlife in a place experiencing this level of disturbance and destruction.

Despite these concerns, the night-time wildlife was pretty cool. It took barely ten minutes of walking with the thermal imager before I started finding Greater Egyptian Gerbils (*Gerbillus pyramidum*) and Lesser Egyptian Jerboas (*Jaculus jaculus*). Shortly afterwards, I spotted yet another Fennec Fox making its way up a dune.

Getting decent photographs with the thermal equipment was tricky.

Through the Middle Atlas and back to Tangier

With only a few days available, I eventually began making my way north towards Tangier. Along the way, I was fortunate enough to encounter Barbary Macaques (Macaca sylvanus), although seeing them begging beside the road and sitting among enormous piles of rubbish was rather a rubbish experience. There were tourists feeding them everywhere, which only seemed to reinforce their dependence on people. At least I got to see them, even if the circumstances were far from ideal.

The bus journey took me through the Middle Atlas Mountains, which turned out to be a completely different environment from the High Atlas. Here, the landscape was dominated by impressive Cedar forests, with tall trees and woodland that reminded me strongly of Central and Eastern Europe. Unsurprisingly, much of the birdlife also felt very familiar, with many species that could just as easily have been encountered in European forests.

Back in Tangier, I took a public bus towards Cap Spartel and its lighthouse, where I spent the afternoon exploring the surrounding woodland. I eventually found a small meadow tucked away in the forest and decided to sit down and built I type of hide from the surrounding piles of cardboard and other litter against a tree, and wait until dusk, allowing the crowds and tourists to gradually disappear.

It turned out to be a very good decision. Within minutes, I had seen two Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*) and two European Rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) moving through the area. As darkness fell, I also encountered my first North African Hedgehog (*Atelerix algirus*) of the trip.

The following day, I headed back across the strait to Spain.

Final thoughts and wildlife highlights

All in all, it was a relatively short but very rewarding trip. In just six days, I managed to record:

- **89 bird species**
- **8 mammal species**
- **8 reptile and amphibian species**

There were several lifers along the way, with Desert Sparrow being a particularly enjoyable highlight (an underrated little bird in my opinion!), alongside Spotted Sandgrouse and several other interesting species.

What impressed me most about Morocco was the sheer diversity of its landscapes and habitats. Within a relatively short distance, you can travel from Mediterranean woodland and snow-capped mountains to dramatic gorges, rocky deserts and enormous Saharan dune systems. In some places, you can genuinely find yourself surrounded by desert while still seeing snow-covered mountain peaks in the distance. It is an extraordinary country in terms of its natural geography.

At the same time, I came away with mixed feelings about its conservation situation. The amount of litter, habitat degradation, free-roaming domestic animals and uncontrolled tourism and disturbance were difficult to ignore. Morocco clearly has some serious environmental challenges to address if its natural heritage is to be preserved.

One final, slightly unexpected wildlife encounter happened after I had crossed back into Spain. Driving away from Tarifa, I very nearly hit an Eagle Owl that was sitting right in the middle of the main road! Fortunately, I managed to avoid it, and it flew off unharmed. It had initially been looking in the opposite direction, and from the car it genuinely looked like a tree stump.



Barbary Macaque



North African hedgehog



Forest in the middle atlas mountains



Desert Road with snow



Fennec fox in the shade