

Trip report Western Sahara

'in search of the Sand cat'

8 – 15 January 2019



Picture by Janco



Picture by Lennart

Dear reader,

The Sand cat was the next species on my list to see and photograph all worlds 40. Western Sahara seemed to be the best place to try for it judging by the reports on www.mammalwatching.com.

With a friend *Lennart Verheuvél* who also wants to see all the cats, we agreed to do this tour together. Photography is both our passion and we try to make best pictures as possible of any mammal and most birds during the trip. We hope you'll enjoy this report and feel free to comment or ask questions!

Always thanks again to www.mammalwatching.com for presenting such worthwhile trip reports. For us it was of great use and guidance.

Best regards,

Janco van Gelderen & Lennart Verheuvél

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General information

Preparation

We both read a lot of trip reports and Lennart was well informed in these. He arranged the apartment and rental car for our tour.

The apartment was booked through www.booking.com and was called Residence Sahel, it was very spacious and was not expensive, about 260 euros total. It contained 4 beds, but if you would bring your sleeping bag, you could easily fit in 10 I think... Has a kitchen too.

Car was rented from a local company called Laargoubcar (website is www.laargoubcar.com). Renting was cheaper than renting through the usual websites and also a better choice of cars. It seems that on the well known websites you can only rent really small cars for a lot of money.

Transfers

We went by evening train from Holland to Paris Nord and further by metro to the airport Orly Sud. We were lucky because we had the very last train to Orly Sud that evening (!). From there we overnighted in the airport departure hall. Next early morning flew direct to Dakhla arriving around noon.

At Dakhla airport we were picked-up by the man from the car rental and brought to our apartment. There was a mistake in the type of car, so he had to arrange another one. After 1,5 hour waiting in our comfortable apartment he brought us the right model. He forgot to bring a contract, so after we went for that, we were free to go.

Car

Janco had his doubts by just taking a small car. Most reports say that it would be good enough. But he thought a 4x4 would be better. It was twice the price of a small car... but it seemed to be a good choice after all. A small car is probably enough when you stick to asphalt. But we have to admit that choosing the 4x4 also brought us into trouble... because we also took a few offroad tracks and got stuck in the sand two times. We will explain this further in chapter 'safety'.

Navigation

Lennart works with the app Maps.me for navigation. It works especially well with premade maps in My Google Maps. You can export a KML/KMZ file, that then contains all your locations. If you email the file to yourself and open it in Maps.me it should import your sightings. Instructions on how to do this are also easily found on Google (for example this one: <https://www.cyclingabout.com/smartphone-navigation-import-kml-routes-into-the-maps-me-app/>). This worked nicely with importing sightings from other reports. With the map in your phone and GPS-function you can focus on interesting spots.

Money

We took Dirham money from the ATM at the airport. Groceries are easy to get in the local shops of Dakhla.

Safety

At customs we were specifically asked if we carried 'drones' in our luggage. Drones are probably not allowed in this area since it is still an area of dispute/discussion. Cameras and spotlights were no problem.

At the police checkpoints/roadblocks around Dakhla we were never stopped and always waived to drive on.

One afternoon we made a *rather stupid mistake* by taking pictures around a military place (a part of north side of Bir Anzarine village). Actually we did not take pictures of the buildings in the fenced area but of a nearby small building that didn't look military at all. The local villagers (or they might have been soldiers, not sure...) took a phone and soon we were stopped by a military vehicle. The rather friendly officer told us we had to show the photos in our cameras. We had to delete the ones that were taken here (no problem for us). We then had to follow him to the nearby hotel in Bir Anzarine for a short questioning and had to give our passport information. In the end this costed us a good spotlight evening. We were send back to Dakhla and were not allowed to continue our route of which we intended to spotlight later on... in the 'Fennec' area *after* Bir Anzarine. So it's probably sensible to not start spotlighting until you are well clear of the built-up area.

Rental car: Jeep 4x4 > risk of getting stuck in sand!

- We went to the southern coastal point of Dakhla city (Larissa) and drove here further over the sandy beach. This is a soft sandy place and although there are many tracks we would not recommend to do it. You'll easily get stuck in the sand, as we did. Luckily the local very friendly fishermen helped us out and we could continue. We doubt if we would have been able to get loose ourselves...
- We also got stuck offroad in the Sahara, almost 30km from the main road. We had some **very scary** moments since we only got loose on *the third and last try* before we would have given-up hope and were thinking of walking back to the main road. 30 kilometres walking was not a very pleasant prospect. **Our advice is to be very careful!!!!** Our 4x4 didn't have any materials like sandladders or a shuffle. So we'll advice to bring these. Also bring a GPS since dirt roads are not as clear as they seem. We also had no spare wheel. And there is no phone signal further out there. So in the end we were pretty happy we ended up fine, but I still feel the nerves about the situation if I think back.

We would recommend to ask for plates (sand ladders) and a shuffle and maybe a spare wheel at the car rental if you want to go offroad. We think it might even be better to do it with a second car if you go there, so you have a backup. You really shouldn't underestimate this. You will probably be able to walk back to the road, but without gps you will most likely get lost and then you are in big trouble. Taking a good old compass for extra security might be a sensible idea too. And bring water...

Never go alone offroad, unless you are some 'MAC-Gyver'...

We never felt unsafe about (local) people, most are friendly!

Fuel

We could drive to Aousserd and back to Dakhla easily on one fuel tank with our jeep.

The gas station in Aousserd had problems with electricity when we were there.

So it is no guarantee you can get fuel here, better don't take the risk with your fuel level.

Mines

Probably good to leave a comment about those as well here. We can only remember seeing warnings about them really close to Aousserd, nowhere else. The officer from Bir Anzarine warned us about them though, in the area east of Bir Anzarine. We did walk from the road in the area the first night for a sand cat, but we were not blown to pieces... We've done this a few times along the Aousserd road, but you never feel really at ease when you do that (thinking of the warnings...) mostly excitement wins. A local welshman who lived here a while we met at a gas station warned us that mines are mostly placed on top of hills and small ridges, so it's probably smart to avoid the elevated areas if you want to walk in (probably even smarter not to do it at all :)).

We did drive off road along the Bougouffa trail (mentioned in the report of Bombar et al 2018), there were many tracks of 4x4 crisscrossing the area. We cannot imagine if there would be one mine left there, but you probably can never know. We followed mostly to the tracks that were already visible though. There are also quite some camels and goats over this areas, so we guess the chances of stepping on one are very small, but it's probably best to be careful though.

Comments on the itinerary

Aousserd Road

Our intend was mainly driving the road to Aousserd and start spotlighting in the evening in the area 80-20 km before Aousserd. In the daytime we did some birding on the way and had a look around the coast of Dakhla.

We overnighted once near Aousserd in a tent (very sandy area!). All other nights we drove back to Dakhla. We had a good apartment and we wanted to have a good rest. Usually we returned in Dakhla between 2.30-3.30 at night and started next day around noon.

Most animals were seen rather far from the car or quickly crossing the road. All of them were skittish except a Jerboa which was very tame. We had one brilliant sighting of a Fennec two meters from the car but were not fast enough with our cameras, it even waited a second on us....

Overall spotlighting is not very productive and sometimes quite frustrating. We would say around one sighting every half an hour on average. So you have to work pretty hard, especially for the *few* chances you have at the moment you see an animal and try to take a (good) photo.

Also it is strange how different the sightings and species each night were. So take in mind that another night results can be completely different on the same stretches of the road.

Bir Anzarine Road

We drove the road to Bir Anzarine twice, of which one night was failed since we were send back by the military man. This road is however quite productive in the area some 30 km *after* Bir Anzarine (follow the left on the main road at the roundabout just after Bir Anzarine). It's by far your best chance for seeing Fennec Fox.

We saw 12 (!) on the first night. One of which was really, really close, and about 4 that were at about 10-20 meters away. All of them were quite skittish, so you had to be very fast for a photo. We also saw one sand cat, one Rüppels fox and a golden wolf. The advantage here is that it is a more open and mostly flat terrain with only very low vegetation. So you have far spotlight views. Also the Fennec rely more on the berm where there is a bit more vegetation so probably a bit more rodents. So this is probably the best opportunity to see them at close range from the car.

We didn't focus on the area just after Dakhla in the stretch before Bir Anzarine (some 100km) since the good 'Fennec area' is quit far way already. We had our first Fennec in the car lights about 20 km's before Bir Anzirae and on the way back another one at around the same area. We didn't see animals on our way back in our car lights. It could also have depended on our attention because on the first night it was already very late and we did less intensive spotlighting later on (it is cold and you cannot drive as fast).

Based on our experiences we would say focus on only the area after Bir Anzarine.

Trip itinerary & Places visited



TRIPLIST MAMMALS

African Golden Wolf *Canis anthus* – 6 on the second night on Aousserd road, singles on two other nights.

Ruppell's Fox *Vulpes rueppelli* – a few individuals on Aousserd road on different nights. One on Bir Anzarine road.

Fennec Fox *Vulpes zerda* – two individuals on different nights on Aousserd road, but only running away. 12 individuals on the Bir Anzarine road mostly in the area 30km after the village. We were able to see one animal that we manage to get on a photo. A total of 14 Fennecs, with thanks to the Bir Anzarine road ☺

Sand Cat *Felis margarita* – 3 individuals at night time on Aousserd road on three different nights. They were all skittish. One sighting on Bir Anzarine road in the area after the village. A great daytime sighting on the off-road track from the road to Aousserd.

African Wildcat *Felis lybica* – 2 individuals just short after each other on the first night on Aousserd road. One of which was seen very well. Strangely none on the other nights...

Lesser Egyptian Jerboa *Jaculus jaculus* - Seen along Aousserd road with smaller numbers along Bir Anzarine road. Only a few each night.

Lesser Egyptian Gerbil *Gerbillus gerbillus* – A few seen crossing along Aousserd road. They are smaller and have no clear big tail. We did not do any proper biologists stuff like measuring them or anything, we just saw that it was a rodent which was not a jerboa.

African Savanna Hare *Lepus microtis*- a few seen along Aousserd road on different nights.

REPTILES

Sudan Mastigure *Uromastyx dispar* – We saw it finally on the last day in the afternoon in quit impressive numbers on the stretch 50 km before Aousserd. They sit on the slightly higher sandy/rocky area's always close to their burrows and are rather skittish. Mostly they were already moving when the car stopped. This animal might be more easy then we thought, because after we saw the first one we saw a whole bunch of them. This would be more in line with other peoples experiences.

Western Sahara Fringe-toed Lizard *Acanthodactylus aureus* – a few while walking usually near plants.

*Pictures on next pages are by Janco or otherwise by Lennart (as marked)



Picture by Lennart

African wild cat





Golden wolf above & Ruppells Fox beneath





Golden wolf above & Ruppells Fox beneath (both pictures Lennart)





African Savanna hare (picture Lennart)



Lesser Egyptian Jerboa & Sand cat beneath



Picture by Lennart



Sand cat & Desert Eagle Owl





Fennec Fox



Picture by Lennart



Sudan Mastigure

