











Western Sahara's Rare Mammals

Destination: Western Sahara **Duration:** 8 Days **Dates:** 12th Feb – 19th Feb

-  Great views of all our main targets, Fennec Foxes, Sand Cats and many others
-  Close views of the stunning Pharaoh Eagle Owl on the ground hunting
-  4 Fennec Fox sightings, including very close and prolonged views
-  3 sightings of the amazing and tiny Sand Cat, including a nice close view
-  Exploring the sand dunes and desert landscape of the Western Sahara
-  Views of two Honey Badgers, a very rare sighting and a soon to be split species!
-  Prolonged night drives to find all of the rare nocturnal mammals and birds
-  Spotting a total of 54 different species of birds despite a large nocturnal based trip
-  Camping in remote desert camp sites and enjoying stunning views of the stars
-  Sightings of three canids; Fennec Foxes, African Wolf and Ruppell's Fox



Tour Leader / Guides

Javi (Royle Safaris Tour Leader)
Nico (Guide & Driver)

Participants

Mr. Keith Dentith
Ms. Bonnie Shirley

Clients who had to cancel last minute unfortunately:

<Mr. Jens Hauser>
<Mr. John Shrader>
<Mrs. Karen Shrader>

Overview

Day 1:	Dakhla
Days 2-3:	Saharan Desert Campsite
Days 4-6:	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.

So with the pandemic receding and more and more countries opening up Royle Safaris decided to venture into the Sahara Desert with our first tour to the region. In February 2022 we ran our first trip to the Western Sahara, our tour would be dedicated to mammals which extended night drives and a major focus on the targeted meso-carnivores and other mammals and less focus on the birds. However we would also stop for bird species where possible, but our focus would be about spending time at night to find the nocturnal species.

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 trip here was 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 we were treated to amazing sightings of a pair of honey badgers which are very rarely encountered in the northern Sahara. In fact there is work being done on the North African population of honey badgers as they may represent a different species from the ones in the sub-Saharan.

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.

2023 Western Sahara's Rare Mammals Small Group Tours

We have two dates set up for this trip to be repeated in 2023, the first trip is scheduled for 31st January – 7th February 2023 and we have only 2 places remaining on this trip. The second tour is for later in the year and we will release those dates once we have filled our first trip. 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 direct booking.



Day 1 **Dakhla**

Arrival

Just a few days before the start of the trip we had news from some of our clients that they were unable to make it, due to a combination of personal reasons and also covid positive tests (hopefully the very last time that is a factor in people not being able to join a trip), and so the original group of 5 people was reduced to 2. However the show must go on, as they say, and these two clients (Bonnie and Keith) arrived overnight and met our guide Javi in the hotel in Dakhla.

There were no activities planned for the arrival day as many of the flights into the city overnight and so it is just about getting into the hotel and getting some rest before leaving in the morning the next day to enter the desert.

Day 2 **Sahara Desert (Campsite)**

Traveling & Wildlife Watching

This morning everyone breakfasted together in the hotel and then after breakfast the vehicles collected us and we headed north along the bay of Dakhla with several stops for birding (one of the few opportunities for daylight birding). Species seen this morning including greater flamingos, green-winged teals and northern shoveler as well as several plover species and other waders such as black-bellied plovers, Eurasian oystercatchers, sanderlings, whimbrels, Eurasian curlew, bar-tailed godwit, black-tailed godwit, dunlins and many more



Next, we drove along the Bir Anzaranne road for about 100km before off-roading for about one hour to reach our campsite in the dunes. The wind dropped notably by dusk which would vastly improve our chances of seeing wildlife.

The camping team set the tents up and prepared an early supper for us before our first spotlighting session. The first half of the nocturnal search was rather unproductive despite the variety of habitats we visited, including dunes and rocky areas. However patience paid off and finally, we came across the first Fennec fox of the trip on a dune, which showed up at close range. We also had a nice encounter with an obliging Lesser Egyptian jerboa.



Day 3 Sahara Desert (Campsite)

Wildlife Watching

Today was windy once again but it calmed down after dark and the temperatures were nice and mild, all in all, pretty good conditions for us. We had a late start to recover after last night's spotlighting session.

So at around 11am we had brunch and hung around the campsite where we could enjoy the solitude of the region and see a variety of local and migrant birds including: pallid swift, desert wheatear, greater hoopoe lark and brown-necked ravens.

Later on we explored the surrounding areas by 4x4 enjoying the amplitude of the landscape. Our strategy was to familiarize in daytime with the area we were about to explore spotlighting in the dark. We found an old camel carcass with plenty of Golden Wolf Tracks around was interesting.

In the late afternoon we searched the slopes of the dunes in search of our targets, the sandfish, which we managed to observe a couple of times. In the same area we found a dead juvenile Sand Viper, most probably killed by a Fennec fox.

Then after dark we had another spotlighting session which produced three good encounters with Fennec foxes as well as a striking Pharaoh Eagle Owl on the ground.



Day 4 Sahara Desert (Homestay)

Traveling & Wildlife Watching

Today started off windy and overcast and even a little chilly this the morning however by nightfall it was once again calm and warm after dusk.

This morning we had a late start before packing up the campsite, collecting the trail camera we had set the day before; a Maghreb Hare was recorded.

Before leaving the area, we met new members of camping team who brought us food supplies for the next few days before we drove off road for a few hours to reach the so-called Bougoufa Trail. Here we had some time to rest and gain strength for the next nocturnal spotlighting session.

We started just before sunset. A few minutes after dark we found an amazing Sand Cat at very close range. For about 15 minutes we could observe the elusive cat laying at the base of a bush at mere 10m from us. After an intense photo session, we decided to continue our search and leave the area while the cat was still staying under the bush.

Still thrilled by the encounter with the Sand Cat, we came across one more Fennec, 4 Maghreb Hares and a Lesser Egyptian Gerbil. A few kilometres later, we found a second Sand Cat. This time the Cat did not stay still but walked away from us. We could follow its track for a while, getting excellent views of its motion and behaviour, before we saw it disappear in the dark.

Highly satisfied with the Sand cat experience we drove back to the asphalt road and drove all the way to our next accommodation in the remote village of Aousserd.



Day 5 Sahara Desert (Homestay)

Wildlife Watching

The weather was windy, dust with mild temperatures today and after another late start in our desert house, we had a short walk in Aousserd and visited an old building where a colony of lesser mouse-tailed bats occur. This was a fantastic opportunity to observe and photograph respectfully this species of typically north African bat species.

A few Black Kites were also seen on their active migration back to Europe as they flew over the area.

In the late afternoon we visited the nearby Laglat area. A Rocky slope with massive black boulders, scattered vegetation and sandy soil. The first part of the spotlighting session was hampered by the wind and dust. Luckily, as in previous nights, the wind dropped soon after dark. After a slow start, we found a superb Rüppell's Fox, which soon disappeared in between the rock boulders. For the delight of the group, the fox soon reappeared and approached us curiously. Indeed, it stayed atop a rock looking at us and allowing a very close approach.

Next, we continued spotlighting along some strategic areas of the Aousserd road. During the whole night we just met one car on the road. We found several jerboas and gerbils and 4 additional Maghreb Hares. A second Rüppell's Fox showed up by the road. As we were getting ready to call it a day, a majestic African Golden Wolf showed up. We could get good views and record shots of the animal. Indeed, we could clearly see it had a wounded leg.

This was an excellent way to finish yet another highly rewarding spotlighting session. 30 minutes later we were back at the desert house ready to sleep.

Day 6 Sahara Desert (Homestay)

Wildlife Watching

The weather was rather unpleasant today due to strong wind and sandy ambience, so we spent most of the day resting at the desert house in Aousserd. Late in the afternoon we explored a rocky desert area South of Aousserd. Here we could see some ancient rock carvings and had a short hike in the area waiting for sunset.

Soon after we started spotlighting, we detected two Rüppell's Foxes together and approached them on foot. In doing so we found a third animal which turned out to be a superb African Golden Wolf. We could observe the animals for a long period at medium distance and even got some videos and photos of them. The next hour was rather unproductive except for some jerboas.

Next, we gave a second try to the Aousserd road and it was certainly a good decision.

Suddenly we found not one but two totally unexpected Honey Badgers! Even if the species is known to occur in the region, they have very rarely been observed alive over the last decades. Even though we got good views of them, due to the excitement of the moment we didn't manage to get a record shot of this extraordinary record. Amazingly, a few kilometres later we found a third Honey Badger peacefully standing by the side of the road. We couldn't believe our eyes when we saw that the mighty mammals kept foraging in the area, sometimes at very close range. We saw it inspecting the burrows of Spiny-tailed Lizards, its main prey in the region.

On our way back to Aousserd, 3 more Maghreb Hares crossed the road.

Day 7 Dakhla

Travelling

Today we left Aousserd in the late morning and spent the day driving back to Dakhla. We made several stops along the way to stretch our legs and do some birding before reaching our hotel in Dakhla by mid- afternoon, when the trip came to its end.

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 / Feb 2022

Mammals (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Dromedary*	<i>Camelus dromedarius</i>
2	Golden Wolf	<i>Canis anthus</i>
3	Sand Cat	<i>Felis margarita</i>
4	Lesser Egyptian Gerbil	<i>Gerbillus gerbillus</i>
5	Pygmy Gerbil	<i>Gerbillus henleyi</i>
6	Lesser Egyptian jerboa	<i>Jaculus jaculus</i>
7	Maghreb Hare	<i>Lepus mediterraneus</i>
8	Honey Badger	<i>Mellivora capensis</i>
9	Fennec Fox	<i>Paraechinus aethiopicu</i>
10	Lesser mouse-tailed Bat	<i>Rhinopoma hardwickii</i>
11	Ruppell's Fox	<i>Vulpus rueppellii</i>

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	Desert Lark	<i>Ammomanes deserti</i>
4	Green-winged Teal	<i>Anas carolinensis</i>
5	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>
6	Gray Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
7	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</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	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
12	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>
13	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
14	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>

15	Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>
16	Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
17	Brown-necked Raven	<i>Corvus ruficollis</i>
18	Spectacled Warbler	<i>Curruca conspicillata</i>
19	Cream-colored Courser	<i>Cursorius cursor</i>
20	Common House-Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>
21	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
22	Temminck's Lark	<i>Eremophila bilopha</i>
23	Eurasian Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
24	Maghreb Lark	<i>Galerida macrorhyncha</i>
25	Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>
26	Eurasian Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
27	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
28	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
29	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>
30	Great Gray Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>
31	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>
32	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
33	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>
34	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>
35	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
36	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
37	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
38	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
39	Desert Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>
40	White-crowned Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i>
41	Red-rumped Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe moesta</i>
42	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
43	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
44	Desert Sparrow	<i>Passer simplex</i>
45	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>
46	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>
47	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
48	Black-bellied Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
49	Rock Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne fuligula</i>
50	Bank Swallow	<i>Riparia riparia</i>
51	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>
52	Eurasian Collared-Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
53	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>

54	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
55	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
56	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>

Reptiles (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Common sand viper*	<i>Cerastes vipera</i>
2	Sandfish	<i>Scincus scincus</i>
3	North African spiny-tailed lizard	<i>Uromastyx acanthinura</i>