



Introduction

This report is my take on a group trip, focussing on what I saw and did, others on the trip did and saw different things.

The trip was focussed on seeing some desert mammals in Western Sahara on what is the now famous Aousserd road but we were interested in all wildlife on the trip.

We spent some time in Morocco as well to see some of the specialities there.

Simon West, Mike Richardson and John Sadler and Myself flew with Easyjet from Gatwick to Agadir and hired a Mitsubishi Pajero from Eurocar all four of us shared the driving.

Temperatures were mid to high 20's during the day but particularly in the desert at night it was quite cold, and it was quite windy for most of the trip.

The photos are hyperlinked to larger versions.

Diary

6th February 2014

After an age getting our hire car we finally headed south, our first stop was the re-introduction enclosure near Tifinit. We could see several Scimitar Horned Oryx easily from the road. This enclosure is part of a re wilding process reintroducing now lost species back into Morocco. Our first look at Mousier's redstart and in the village Maghreb crested larks. A quick look again at the enclosure and we located a few skittish dorcas gazelles. Heading to the Oued Massa river we stopped at a couple of bridges and quickly caught up with some of the common species such as common bulbul and laughing dove. But we were after Black crowned tchagra which was easily located and plain martin which was a little harder but a couple did come through with other hirundines. Mike was herp hunting and under some rubble found a couple of Mauritanian toads. With dusk falling we started the long drive down to Western Sahara stopping at Tizinit for the first Tagine of the trip.

7th February 2014

The drive through the night was largely uneventful but one fine from the police at one of the many checkpoints the only blot on our copybook on the whole trip. As it got light we made a couple of stops checking out the Tchoukan petrol station but no sign of the Pied crows and they haven't been seen here for a while. We did bump into some thick billed larks and other bits and pieces on the way to Dakhla. We stopped in Dakhla bay searching for cetaceans but the very strong winds led to poor sea conditions during the whole of our stay. We did see a couple of Royal terns in amongst the large number of Caspian, lesser crested and sandwich terns. We headed in to Dakhla itself where we located a hotel but it was full, the one next door was a real health hazard and the third was over £100 per night each, but we found a rather nice one called Hotel Doumss on the main route in at a sensible cost.



Scimitar Horned Oryx



Dorcas Gazelle



Mauritanian Toad



Spanish Terrapin



Black Crowned Tchagra



Plain Martin

After a quick wash and brush up we headed out, setting some small mammal traps in a nearby plantation and then stopping for an osprey. Here a flat tyre was noticed and after some ingenuity we managed to change the wheel with a jack that was too short to lift the car high enough to put a fully inflated tyre on! We erred on the side of caution and abandoned our night drive plans not knowing how remote it would be and what the conditions would be like. We headed for a restaurant in town where another group led by Richard Webb were also dining and we swapped sightings to date and our upcoming plans. We got an early night in preparation for a busy couple of days and nights.

8th February 2014

First we tried to get the car tyre fixed at the garage but they don't do that sort of thing so after some breakfast at the hotel one of the chaps there took us to a back street tyre repair place. The tyre had been repaired previously and was badly perished so an inner tube was fitted and we were back in action. After a quick shopping trip in rather poorly stocked shops we managed to get at least some edible food we headed off. We checked the mammal traps one pleasant gerbil was present, then it was finally out to the Aousserd road. We stopped at Gleb Jedaine water hole and had a dragonfly and a scorpion but little else. We set additional mammal traps here and headed off birding up the road catching up with some of the common desert species a small flock of bar tailed desert larks the highlight.

We were at Oued Jenna for sunset and for our evening meal of bread and laughing cow cheese, crisps etc. as it got dark we started the night drive and after a few km we picked up an African wildcat a great start to the night drive. Savannah hares followed and a few jerboa's before the first Fennec fox and a further three before a distant sand cat was spotted and allowed great scope views. A couple of gerbils and a stone curlew were added to the list before frozen solid we pulled over to warm up and for a couple hours kip.



Brown Necked Raven



Sandwich Tern



Audouin's Gull



Pleasant Gerbil



Hoopoe Lark



African Wildcat

9th February 2014

We awoke after a couple of hours sleep at the Gleib Jediane water hole, a few Crowned Sandgrouse flew in to the area and around but never ventured close, some trumpeter finches and thick billed larks were more adventurous. We checked the traps and had one house mouse and a pygmy gerbil. We headed back into Dakhla checking the traps once more just a house mouse and we collected the traps up after the builder had finished his business in the very nearby bushes! We hit the hotel for breakfast and a couple more hours sleep. We headed back up the Aousserd road mid-afternoon and made a few stops with some gen from Richard Webb and we connected with desert warbler and desert sparrow before reaching Oued Jenna for another dusk dining experience!

The night drive started a bit slow but after 40 km we had our first Ruppells fox and then shortly after a cracking sand cat quite close in and it allowed a couple of photos before slinking off. A couple of Fennec foxes, short eared owl and stone curlew a few gerbils and jerboa were also spotted and a desert hedgehog crossed the road adding to a nice tally of species before suffering enough cold and headed back to Dakhla.

10th February 2014

After some breakfast we headed back up the Aousserd road checking the traps on the way only one resident pygmy gerbil and two of the traps had gone missing which was rather annoying, and no sandgrouse came in either. We birded to road once more quickly catching up with a Dunn's lark but most stops we only encountered the common species. One stop Mike lifted a large rock and a banded dob lizard and a gecko were under it, a scorpion and a weird stick insect looking grasshopper were also found.



Ruppell's Fox



Dromedary Camel



Desert Sparrow



Long nosed Grasshopper



Cistanche Phelypaea

We continued all the way to Aousserd and beyond another doh lizard was spotted before we returned to the petrol station in Aousserd for supplies and also a discussion with the plain clothes police about what we were doing! We headed back to Oued Jenna to do some birding and bumped into a large flock of desert sparrows. I spotted some black crowned sparrow larks and wandered off after them while Simon located one the Sudan golden sparrows reported a week or so before. I came back and we located them once more and managed to follow them for half an hour or so. We birded until dusk and dined exquisitely once more! One final night drive which was significantly warmer than the previous two nights and we were quickly onto an African wildcat, we had a few false alerts with feral cats (apparently the United Nations are dumping them here). Simon spotted a snake and Mike was quickly out to see it we saw four more sand vipers over the next 20km and a few geckos warming themselves on the road. Five Fennec foxes and one Ruppell's fox were spotted, a distant striped polecat and a few hares, jerboas and gerbils over a lengthy drive. We took a break for a while but all fell asleep.

11th February 2014

We drove to the Mauritanian border to investigate the possibility of crossing to try to see the monk seal colony. A visa looked like a possibility but transport across the border seemed to be a difficulty. We pondered our options while we visited the Safia Reserve but we never made it there as the access road was blocked by several sand drifts. We cut our losses and headed north, a seebohm's wheatear and a white stork the only things of note. A police checkpoint in Boujdour tried intimidation tactics to obtain a bribe but calling their bluff and get away with paying anything. We stopped for food at a pizzeria / seafood restaurant which did not have any of the above. We had some meat and chips which we devoured like men who had not eaten a hot meal for 4 days. The police checkpoint leaving town were also after a bribe. We drove through the night stopping in the early hours near Tarfaya.



Sudan Golden Sparrow



Long Legged Buzzard



Sand Cat



Fennec Fox



Sand Viper

12th February 2014

We were at the Khneffis lagoon a little after sunrise, a guide offered to show us round but we declined, he returned 10 mins later saying we required permits for our cameras which we declined as this was just a rouse and the chap left us alone after that. The place was a dump why anyone would want to park their campervan here is beyond me but there were plenty, I can only assume they arrived in the dark! We were looking for Kelp gulls and this is probably the only spot in the WP for them. We had no luck despite an extensive search, I saw a pipit and went off to investigate and managed a couple of photos before I lost it (Confirmed as red throated pipit from the photos). I spotted a couple of new gulls and approached them, one was a Kelp gull and I managed to call the rest of the crew over to get a view. We departed stopping for some common scoter before heading to Oued Boulkila near Guelimin. Here we search in vain for scrub warbler but did get a rock martin come over. We set some mammal traps and managed to get rather muddy before heading to Guelmin, where we stopped at a rather swanky looking hotel which the cheapest of our stay but was by far the best (although the restaurant did not serve chips). Mike and I headed off to Fort Beau Jeriff to set some traps catching up with short toed larks on the way and a red fox on the way back. After some food Mike and I had some random meat selection, John and Simon wisely chose a more sensible dish. We took a night drive back to the fort but apart from stone curlew, little owl and another red fox we did not see much else. Here miles from anywhere we had another puncture (same tyre) and this time it was fully flat and the Jack was actually no too big to go under the lower suspension arm with the fully deflated tyre. But some rocks and ingenuity we overcame the issues and got the spare on and headed back to the hotel, stopping at a small river for some Saharan frogs.



Scorpion sp



Elegant Gecko



Kelp Gull



Golden Fringed Toed Lizard



Cream Coloured Courser



Banded Dob

13th February 2014

We were up early and headed back to Oued Boukila to check the traps but nothing at all and no scrub warblers either, we stopped briefly at Oued Sayad but nothing much was doing here either so we headed back to Guelmin to get the tyre fixed. A small army of guys properly repaired the tyre and insisted we shared tea and bread with them. Once again we headed to the Fort and took a look round the hotel area a couple of Barbary partridges on the way and a bibron's agama lizard. At the hotel we had some entertaining dung beetles, flushed a few quail and tried to photograph a moussier's redstart. Onto the fort itself for a look round a mammal running across the plain to a series of burrows was almost certainly an Egyptian mongoose but we could not locate it near the burrows and it had gone to ground. We headed onwards towards Agadir stopping at the Oued Massa where we found a large flock of glossy ibis and cattle egrets and a squacco heron before heading to Agadir to find a hotel. We dined in a burger joint where the waiters all wore tuxedo's which was a bit weird.

14th February 2014

We headed to the mountains the first stop was Tafinegoult at the foot of the Tizi n Test road, here we scanned the hills for Curvier's gazelles but to no avail but we did catch up with Levaillant's Green Woodpecker, rock bunting and a distant booted eagle. We took a drive up the precarious road spotting a few Barbary ground squirrels and at one stop John spotted a spur thigh tortoise. We had a few lizards and a small colony of crag martins. At the top we enjoyed tea and biscuits at the café who's owner mentioned Mouflon a little further on, the picture on the board was a Barbary sheep so we investigated. We found what he meant a large area of the mountain fenced off with a Barbary sheep reintroduction programme a brief look but we could not find any sheep. Back at Tafinegoult we searched again for the gazelle till dusk without any luck but the moon rise was quite spectacular.



Southern Grey Shrike



Lanner Falcon



Desert Wheatear



House Bunting



Cricket Longtail

14th February 2014

Our last day and we headed for Oued Massa but our first stop was at another re introduction enclosure, but visibility was very poor due to thick mist but just as we arrived it cleared a little and we could see an ostrich on the horizon, and several southern grey shrikes. A little further along the road we finally located and addax, it will be amazing if these fences come down one day and a real wilderness is created. On to the Oued Massa stopping for the only house hunting of the trip. We decided to get a guide for two reasons to see the bald ibis and to put a little money into the reserve. We negotiated a price and took a walk, the chain smoking guide was not very good but we found plenty of stuff ourselves and found some bat roosts which Mike investigated but no bats were present. Some very nice Moussier's redstarts allowed all cracking photos before we took a short drive to the coast to see the Ibis. On arrival there were several cranes and the flock of at least 80 bald ibis flew in to the fields in front of us, amazing to see such a number of birds glad they are doing well. After having our fill we dropped the guide in town and paid him he but he tried it on saying we agreed more but we did not budge and he threw a strop so we left (he was paid the agreed fee). We headed back to the reserve and bumped into a blue rock thrush and then a quick visit to the bridge to eat lunch and bird a little before heading to the airport for our delayed flight.



Dung Beetle



Crag Martin



Spur Thighed Tortoise



Maghreb Crested Lark



White Spotted Gecko



Barbary Ground Squirrel

Birds - 130

Gannet	Cormorant ssp <i>lucidus</i> Cormorant ssp <i>maroccanus</i>	Cattle Egret
Little Egret	Great White Egret	Squacco Heron
Grey Heron	White Stork	Glossy Ibis
Bald Ibis	Spoonbill	Greater Flamingo
Ruddy Shelduck	Mallard	Marbled teal
Common Scoter	Osprey	Booted Eagle
Black Kite	Marsh Harrier	Montagu's Harrier
Long Legged Buzzard ssp <i>cirtensis</i>	Sparrowhawk	Kestrel
Lesser Kestrel	Lanner Falcon ssp <i>erlangeri</i>	Barbary Partridge
Quail	Moorhen	Coot
Common Crane	Oystercatcher	Stone Curlew
Cream Coloured Courser	Little Ringed Plover	Ringed Plover
Kentish Plover	Grey Plover	Dunlin
Green Sandpiper	Common Sandpiper	Redshank
Black Tailed Godwit	Bar Tailed Godwit	Whimbrel
Arctic Skua	Black Headed Gull	Slender Billed Gull
Yellow Legged Gull	Audouin's Gull	Lesser Black Backed Gull
Great Black Backed Gull	Kelp Gull	Sandwich Tern
Royal Tern	Caspian Tern	Lesser Crested Tern
Crowned Sandgrouse	Rock Dove	Woodpigeon
Collared Dove	Laughing Dove	Short Eared Owl
Little Owl ssp <i>saharae</i>	Common Swift	Kingfisher
Levaillant's Green Woodpecker	Maghreb Crested Lark	Short Toed Lark
Desert Lark	Bar Tailed Lark	Dunn's Lark
Black Crowned Sparrow Lark	Thick Billed Lark	Hoopoe Lark
Sand Martin	Plain Martin	Crag Martin
Rock Martin	Barn Swallow	Red Rumped Swallow
House Martin	Red Throated Pipit	Rock pipit
White Wagtail ssp <i>alba</i> White wagtail ssp <i>subpersonata</i>	Yellow Wagtail ssp <i>iberiae</i>	Common Bulbul
Black Redstart	Moussier's Redstart	Northern Wheatear
Seebohm's Wheatear	Desert Wheatear	White Crowned Wheatear
Black Wheatear	Red Rumped Wheatear	Whinchat
Stonechat	Blue Rock Thrush	Blackbird
Blackcap	Sardinian Warbler	Spectacled Warbler
Desert Warbler	Subalpine Warbler	Cricketer Longtail
Zitting Cisticola	Cetti's Warbler	Willow Warbler
Chiffchaff	African blue tit	Southern Grey Shrike
Black crowned Tchagra	Magpie ssp <i>mauritanica</i>	Brown Necked Raven
Spotless Starling	House Sparrow	Spanish Sparrow

Desert Sparrow	Sudan Golden Sparrow	African Chaffinch
Linnet	Goldfinch	Greenfinch
Serin	Trumpeter Finch	Cirl Bunting
House Bunting	Whitethroat	Red Legged Ostrich*

Mammals - 22

Desert Hedgehog	House Mouse	Lesser Egyptian Jerboa
Sand Cat	Fennec Fox	Ruppell's Fox
Red Fox	African Savannah Hare	African Wildcat
Egyptian Mongoose	Barbary Ground Squirrel	Fat Sand Rat
Pygmy Gerbil	Lesser Egyptian Gerbil	Pleasant/ Tarabul's Gerbil
Addax*	Dorcas Gazelle*	Scimitar Horned Oryx*
Dromedary Camel**	Feral Cat**	Gerbil sp
Saharan Striped Polecat		

* Re-introduction enclosures, ** Domestic

Reps - 18

Sand Viper	Spur Thigh Tortoise	Spanish Terrapin
Banded Dob	Saharan Frog	Mauritanian Frog
Olivier's Desert Racer	Red Spotted Desert Racer	Elegant Gecko
White Spotted Gecko	African Green Toad	Busack's Fringe-toed Lizard
Western Sahara Fringe-toed Lizard	Moroccan Day Gecko	Bibron's Agama
Bosc's Fringe-toed Lizard	Dumeril's Fringe-Toed Lizard	Golden Fringe-Toed Lizard

Insects - 15

Dung Beetle	Desert Locust	Ant lion
Painted Lady	Bath White	Large White
Lang's Short Tailed Blue	Hummingbird Hawkmoth	Spurge Hawkmoth
Clouded Yellow	Moroccan Meadow Brown	Lesser Emperor
Southern Darter	Vagrant Emperor	Long Nosed grasshopper

Notes

Western Sahara is a wonderful place to visit, but like Morocco it suffers from terrible litter which does blight some areas terribly.

Shops in Dakhla are a poorly stocked but you can get by, elsewhere shops were well stocked.

The police checkpoints are not too much of an issue just follow the traffic rules and you should not have too much trouble, and have those forms (fisches) and passport photocopies with you.

Punctures seem to be a problem so ensure you know how to change a tyre and check all the tools when you collect your car. Fuel in Western Sahara is much cheaper than Morocco, credit cards are not widely taken so ensure you have plenty of cash, cashpoints were readily available in all towns.

The people were all friendly and we only got a little hassle at a few touristy spots, speaking French would help.

