

# Wildlife of the Moroccan Sahara

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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### Outline itinerary

<b>Day 1</b>	Outbound flights to Agadir. Overnight Fom Zguod
<b>Day 2 – 6</b>	Erg Chigaga & Iriqui National Park
<b>Day 7</b>	Transfer to & Overnight at Taroudant
<b>Day 8</b>	Inbound flights

### Focus

Desert birds & other wildlife

### Grading

Grade B. See notes at end of document.

### Dates and Prices

Visit [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk) (tour code MAR11) or see the current Naturetrek brochure

### Highlights:

- Nocturnal search for Fennec Fox
- A wealth of desert larks including Thick-billed, Greater Hoopoe, Desert and Bar-tailed
- The critically endangered Addax & Dorcas Gazel
- Other desert birds such as Sandgrouse, Cream-coloured Courser, African Desert, Spectacled & Tristram's Warbler
- Possibility of Houbara Bustard
- The magnificent Desert Monitor Lizard and Desert Horned Viper
- A wealth of palearctic birds on migration
- Desert camping under an incredible night sky



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## Introduction

Iriqui National Park, located in southern Morocco, spans approximately 123,000 hectares across the provinces of Tata and Zagora. Positioned at the transition between the vast Sahara Desert and the Draa Valley, the park boasts a strikingly diverse landscape of sand dunes, dry riverbeds, rocky plateaus, and seasonal salt flats. Dominated by the arid Saharan climate, the region experiences scorching summer temperatures, cool winter nights, and minimal, unpredictable rainfall.

The camp is in the shadow of Erg Chigaga, one of only two areas of mobile dunes in Morocco. Here the sand seas of one's imagination are made real, an area of 40km long and up to 18km wide with the tallest dune rising to 300m. The surrounding area of desert is a mix of sand and rocky plains, bluffs and dried river beds that are both surprisingly varied and are each home to specific flora and fauna, as this area is home to a variety of niche specialists.

All of the vegetation is well adapted to extreme aridity, with hardy species such as tamarisk, acacia, and other drought-resistant shrubs. These plants provide essential shelter and food for the park's wildlife, which includes Fennec Fox, Dorcas Gazelle, Addax, and a variety of reptiles. These habitats also host a rich variety of birdlife, including Houbara Bustard, Cream-coloured Courser, larks, wheatears, sandgrouse, and warblers.

Ecologically, Iriqui National Park plays a crucial role in preserving Morocco's fragile desert ecosystems. It is a dynamic environment, and one that has recently been recognised needs both management and a complete web of life, to that effect efforts have been made since the millennium to restore iconic species to the park to assist with its ability to withstand the changing climate. It also serves as a protected area for nomadic communities, supporting their traditional ways of life. Conservation efforts in the park focus on combating desertification, protecting biodiversity, and promoting sustainable ecotourism.

Although primarily part of the Drâa river's catchment, a defining feature of the park can be Lake Iriqui. If rains have been plentiful over-winter, a large saline lake can appear. In these years, the lake can attract supporting both migratory and resident bird species such as flamingoes, herons, and various wildfowl species. A wonderful spectacle in this arid landscape.



Desert Camp

## Itinerary

*NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.*

### Day 1

### Agadir to Foug Zguod

We're scheduled to depart from London Gatwick on a morning flight to Agadir. Upon arrival, we'll journey southeast for the five-six-hour transfer to spend the first night at a comfortable hotel in Foug Zguod.

### Day 2 – 6

### Desert Campsite, Iriqui National Park

We'll depart early from our hotel and travel to our comfortable campsite in the Sahara. Upon arrival, we'll settle into our well-appointed tents before heading out for our first exploration of the desert.

This tour does not follow a fixed daily itinerary. Instead, our experienced guides—well-connected with park rangers, local tribespeople, and other experts—will plan each day based on the latest wildlife sightings and the likely weather conditions. Their local knowledge ensures we'll be taken to the best locations across the park to encounter the region's remarkable fauna.

The landscapes here are truly iconic: vast horizons, big skies, and endless open spaces offer exceptional opportunities for landscape photography. At night, the crystal-clear skies are breathtaking—ideal for astronomy enthusiasts, and a telescope is highly recommended.

This desert landscape consists of subtly different habitat types that support a range of species adapted to each. They can be described as:

#### **Sandy Dunes and Erg Landscapes**

One of the most iconic habitats in Iriqui National Park is Erg Chigaga, right on the camp's doorstep. The dunes that form this sand-sea are shifting continuously due to the wind and create a stunning, ever-changing landscape. The dunes host specialized desert-adapted species such as the fennec fox, Western Sandfish lizard, and various insects that have evolved to survive extreme heat and scarce water. Vegetation in this area is sparse, consisting mainly of drought-resistant plants like tamarisks and desert grasses. Access is limited to on foot or by camel.



Erg Chaigaga © Adam Court

### Reg and Hamada (Stony Deserts and Rocky Plateaus)

Much of the park is covered by reg and hamada—stony desert landscapes with little to no vegetation. These rocky expanses consist of gravel plains and plateaus, shaped by ancient geological processes. While they appear barren, these habitats support resilient species such as the Dorcas Gazelle and Desert Hedgehog. Larks and wheatears are commonly seen, using rock formations for nesting and shelter.

### Oases and Riverbeds (Oueds)



Rüppell's Fox

Dry riverbeds, known as oueds, snake through the park and occasionally fill with water during flash floods. These areas create microhabitats that support richer vegetation, including date palms, acacias, and other water-seeking plants. The shade and moisture provided by these riverbeds make them crucial refuges for wildlife such as Rüppell's Fox, rodents and reptiles. The sandgrouse species that breed out on the plains, fly into drink, Spotted and Crowned in the morning and the elusive Lichtenstein's in the evening. Nomadic herders also use these seasonal water sources to sustain their livestock.

### Steppe and Scrubland

Scattered throughout the park are patches of steppe and desert scrubland, dominated by hardy shrubs like *Artemisia* and *Ziziphus*. These semi-arid zones act as transitional habitats between the dunes and rocky areas, providing food and shelter for herbivores. Predators such as Golden Wolf are elusive but can be found here, preying on smaller animals.

### Lake Iriqui and Seasonal Wetlands

At the heart of the park lies Lake Iriqui, a vast salt flat that transforms into a shallow lake during rare seasonal rains. When water is present, the lake becomes a crucial wetland, attracting migratory birds, including flamingoes, and wildfowl. It serves as a temporary but vital oasis for wildlife in the arid environment. The lakebed is composed of mudflats and saline soils, supporting unique halophytic (salt-tolerant) vegetation.

Overall, Iriqui National Park's diverse habitats create a mosaic of life in an otherwise harsh desert environment. From shifting dunes and barren plateaus to seasonal wetlands and scrubland, each ecosystem plays a vital role in supporting a unique array of desert wildlife. Despite its aridity, the park is an essential refuge for many species. Your guides will endeavour to visit each of these habitat types during your stay, maximising your chances of seeing a high diversity of wildlife. Particular effort will be made to see the declining African Houbara Bustard which maintains a reasonable population in the park. The birds of the desert vary by habitat type with species such as Thick-billed Lark favouring stony deserts while Bar-tailed Lark favours sand. Sandgrouse may occur



Spectacled Warbler

anywhere and are often seen in the morning and evening in flight as they commute to and from distant water sources so keep your eyes on the skies. African Desert Warbler prefers very low vegetation and can be surprisingly elusive in this sparse habitat while Greater Hoopoe Lark is highly visible with their impressive displays. With so much time spent in arid habitats many desert species will be seen. Cream-coloured Courser, Spectacled and Tristram's Warblers, White-crowned, Desert, and Western Black-eared Wheatear, Fulvous Chatterer, Trumpeter Finch and Desert Lark may all be encountered. Raptors are relatively scarce and the majority are migrants, with likely species including falcons, harriers, buzzards, Eagles and even perhaps vultures.

Should there be any water in the seasonal lake, there will be an abundance of birdlife including Greater Flamingo and Marbled Duck. The water body will attract many migrants at this time of year and many waterbirds, hirundines, warblers, chats, bee-eaters and swifts will use the site as a stopover on their journey northwards. If a good fall is encountered, an impressive range of Western Palearctic species may be recorded, and attention should be paid to any cover as it could hold grounded migrants.



Desert Horned Viper *Cerastes cerastes*

Reptiles are represented in this habitat and special effort will be made to find Desert Monitor and Desert Horned Viper amongst many others.

Mammals of these habitats are at low density but are present and rare and attractive species such as Addax and Dorcas Gazelle may be encountered in daylight hours while the diminutive Fennec Fox will be our main target during our night walk unless we have already found one elsewhere.

Each day will be different, and each one will have its highlights and surprises!

## Day 7

## Taroudant

After our unforgettable desert adventure, we'll make our way back to our hotel in Taroudant. This evening, we'll come together for a final dinner – a chance to reflect on and celebrate the incredible array of wildlife encounters and the stunning desert landscapes we've experienced throughout.

## Day 8

## Inbound flights

This morning, we will have breakfast at the hotel, before departing for Agadir in time for our inbound flights.

## Tour grading

This tour is graded B. While there is no strenuous walking on the tour, the substrate will often be sandy, rocky, or uneven and therefore this tour would unfortunately not be suitable for anybody with reduced mobility. The evening walk to the Fennec Foxes is a three hour round trip and is the longest such expedition. Once away from the tarmac roads, the four-wheel-drive journeys are on rough tracks (or no track) and will be bumpy. These journeys are of course essential to get away from the tourist trail and into prime desert habitat. The journey into and out of the desert is approximately four hours from the end of the road. If Lake Iriqui is in flood, the journey times may be longer.

## Food & accommodation included in the price

All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday, starting with dinner on Day 1 and ending with breakfast on Day 8. On the first and last nights, meals will be taken at the hotel or in local restaurants, while in the desert, freshly prepared local dishes will be served at the camp.

Accommodation for two nights will be in a comfortable tourist hotel in Taroudant or Fom Zguid.

The tented camp lies in the shadow of the dunes of Erg Chigaga. It consists of fixed sleeping tents furnished with king-size or twin beds, and equipped with towels, linen and blankets. Each tent has electric lighting.

Meals are taken in a spacious dining tent, although in good weather there may be the opportunity to dine under the stars. The dining tent also has a central charging point. Please note that all electricity is supplied by solar panels and may be limited during periods of poor weather. You may wish to bring a power bank.

Toilet and shower facilities are located in a central block. There are no en suite facilities; however, there are three hot-water showers, three toilets and two hand basins. The showers are gravity-fed, and all facilities are designed with water conservation in mind.

## How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk), or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.



Camp and Milky Way © Brahim Elbarbouchi

