

Western Sahara's Desert Wildlife

Naturetrek Tour Report

10th – 17th February 2025



Fennec Fox



Greater Hoopoe-Lark



Desert camp



Sand Cat

Tour report by Javi Elorriaga and Nacho Barrionuevo
Photos by Javi Elorriaga and Mark Fletcher



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Day 1

Monday 10th February

Dakhla

The group travelled from the UK to Dakhla, with a layover in Casablanca. They landed just after midnight and were welcomed at the airport by Javi, who had arrived in advance to help coordinate the arrival. Meanwhile, the other guide, Nacho, was already out at the desert camp, working with the rest of the local team to get everything ready for the days ahead.

Once everyone had collected their luggage, we took a short shuttle ride to a nearby hotel in downtown Dakhla. We grabbed a few snacks and took a moment to unwind. By 1.45am, all participants were settled in their rooms, catching some well-earned rest before the start of our journey, right here, on the far western edge of the Sahara.

Day 2

Tuesday 11th February

Bay of Dakhla and Desert Camp

The following morning, we enjoyed a relaxed start on the hotel terrace, followed by a briefing to outline our plans for the upcoming days as we prepared to explore Western Sahara together. During this time, we spotted Little and Pallid Swifts, and the trip's first House Buntings.

At 10.00am, we met up with the rest of our local team: Michele, an Italian biologist based in Dakhla with extensive overlanding experience across Morocco and the desert, and Otman, a local guide and expert all-terrain driver.

After meticulously loading our gear into the two 4x4s, we set off northward, following the Atlantic coast along the vast bay of Dakhla, a crucial stopover and wintering ground along the Eurasian-African bird migration flyway.

At the northern end of the bay, we paused at a small, oasis-like patch of greenery surrounding a freshwater source, the so-called Reguiya Source. Here, we enjoyed striking African Plain Tiger butterflies, impressive *Argiope* spiders, migrating House Martins en route to Europe, and our first desert speciality: a Desert Wheatear.

At one point, a pipit flew overhead and called, immediately catching the guides' attention. It resembled a Richard's Pipit, a true rarity in the region! The bird landed on a distant sandy slope, and Javi managed to snap a few record shots after a quick dash. Later, upon reviewing the photos, doubts arose about its identity. Fortunately, thanks to our directions, the bird was relocated some weeks later by a group of Italian birders who obtained clearer views, better photos, and even audio recordings. These confirmed the bird was in fact a Blyth's Pipit: the first record of the species on the African continent!

A bit further along, we came across a remarkable gathering of at least 120 Black Kites resting by the roadside during their northbound migration. We then visited one of the bay's most remote corners of the bay, which is a Ramsar-designated wetland site, where we observed a fine selection of waterbirds, including Greater Flamingoes, Eurasian Spoonbills and no fewer than seven Ospreys.

While we enjoyed a varied picnic lunch, a local pair of Lanner Falcons gave us a loud and acrobatic aerial display as they chased off an intruding conspecific. Meanwhile, a Black Wheatear sang from a nearby rocky perch. After taking in the natural spectacle and the exotic landscape of turquoise waters, white dunes, and beaches stretching into the desert, we continued eastward and reached our campsite by mid-afternoon.

“Margarita Camp” is in a remote area halfway between Dakhla Bay and the village of Aousserd, about 50km off-road, south of the only paved road in the region

There, we were welcomed by Nacho and the camp steward, Samuel, who had everything prepared, including the Jaima tents and an experimental open-sky WC. After settling into our tents, we set out on foot to explore the surrounding area. Several Bar-tailed Larks were seen, and in a nearby *oued* (dry riverbed) dotted with scattered acacias, we enjoyed watching colonies of the striking Saharan Silver Ant, one of the fastest animals on Earth relative to its body size.

We had an early supper before heading out on the much-anticipated first spotlighting session of the trip. With the group divided in two vehicles, and fully equipped with spotlights, we started scanning the vast plains of the *hamada* (a desert landscape consisting of high, largely barren, hard rocky plateaus, where most of the sand has been removed by deflation), sand dunes and vegetated *oueds*.

It was a calm night with no wind and clear skies. We soon spotted our first Sahara Hare, followed by a cat! We managed to approach to within twenty metres and confirmed that it was an African Wild Cat, before it vanished into the dark.

We lost count of the hares after the first dozen, and saw several amazingly tame Lesser Egyptian Jerboas, gerbils, a *Stenodactylus* gecko and some intimidating-looking *Anthsia* predator beetles. As the temperature dropped significantly, we paused for a coffee break out in the field. On the way back to camp, we encountered more hares and finally turned in shortly after midnight. Some participants reported hearing a Pharaoh Eagle-Owl during the night.

Day 3

Wednesday 12th February

Desert Camp

The next morning, we had a late breakfast-brunch and then took a walk through the nearby acacia woodland, where we soon found our main target: a pair of Pharaoh Eagle-Owls, perched in full daylight. They gave excellent telescope views, showing off their striking orange eyes and the pale plumage, typical of desert forms. We also spotted a hare in broad daylight; it was great to complement the many we had seen at night in our spotlights. In the distance, we saw a pair of Long-legged Buzzards, a cooperative Hoopoe, and an incredible desert mantis belonging to the little-known genus *Eremiaphila*, uniquely adapted to arid environments and completely different from those found in Europe.

We spent the middle of the day resting in the shade, sheltering from the harsh desert conditions, and exploring around the camp. Several Desert Sparrows regularly came to drink from the dripping water tank; they are still a common sight here, unlike in Morocco's more heavily-birded areas.

At nightfall, we began our second spotlighting session, enjoying a stunning African sunset behind the dunes. This time, we explored a sand dune-dominated area. As the night before, our first sighting was a hare, but soon after, an incredible Fennec Fox appeared. It crouched behind a bush, watching us curiously, showing off its tiny body and oversized ears. Twice it even stood up and approached briefly. After a few magical minutes and great photo opportunities, it vanished. Undoubtedly, this was one of the tour's highlights, and a top target for everyone. We also spotted the eye shine of unidentified medium-sized mammals on a couple of occasions.

We then returned to the previous night's area, closer to camp. Soon after arriving, we spotted our first Sand Cat: amazing, though it vanished quickly. After a coffee break, we saw what seemed to be two different African Wildcats. Here, we spent some time tracking footprints in the sand, indicating high feline activity in the area.

Not long after, we finally got superb views of a Sand Cat, showing its large head and ears; some of us even managed photos. On the way back, another excellent sighting of an African Wildcat wrapped up the night. Smiling, we went to bed at 1.15am.

Day 4

Thursday 13th February

Desert Camp

We had breakfast at 11.00am to allow us recover from the cold night and the previous night's efforts. Afterwards, we took a stroll around the camp, where we got caught up in examining what seemed to be prehistoric Neolithic tombs: circular piles of stones. A real highlight was a great sighting of a Lanner Falcon flying low and close. We also had several encounters with Temminck's Larks, and we enjoyed the characteristic call of the Bar-tailed Larks. A nearby herd of dromedaries kept by Mauritanian nomads drew our attention. They kindly offered us camel milk, and one fearless soul from the group even tried riding one, though the camel clearly had other plans. Let's just say it was more rodeo than desert stroll!

Later, we revisited the spot where we had seen the Fennec the night before. Interestingly, we came across a Fennec burrow dug in the sand, though there was no visible activity around it.

As we wandered further, we were surprised to find not only migrating groups of Swallows, but also several Neolithic stone tools; arrowheads and even a leaf-shaped biface. It was an exciting and unexpected discovery, hinting at how rarely this area is visited by people. We were also lucky to see another Desert Mantis here. On our way back to camp, we enjoyed watching and photographing the impressive Greater Hoopoe-Larks. We were also lucky to find a pair of Dunn's Larks, one of the region's star species, which treated us to its lovely song. At various times throughout the day, we spotted migrating Black Kites, sometimes in small groups, and got more visits from Desert Sparrows at the camp water tank.

After a bit of rest and another early dinner, we got ready for our third night-time spotlighting session. We decided to head back to the area where we had high feline activity the previous night, and soon started seeing our first Sahara Hares (this night we made our high count of the trip, with 21!) and got a very nice and long observation of Lesser Egyptian Jerboa. Not long after, we got our first eyeshine, interestingly at a very barren area, on top of a boulder. We approached as slowly and as quietly as the cars allowed, to find a spectacular Pharaoh Eagle-Owl

scanning the surroundings for its prey from this improvised promontory, from which it took flight to disappear into the dark veil of the night. After this stunning sight, and some queer red intermittent lights around the setting Venus, we decided to stop for our midnight coffee. With some energy and body temperature regained, we resumed our wanderings on the *hamada*, which produced a quick but satisfactory observation of African Wild Cat and some more Sahara Hares. Then we headed back to the camp and enjoyed a good night's sleep.

Day 5

Friday 14th February

Desert Camp and Aousserd

After our usual late breakfast, while part of the crew began packing up the camp, the group went on a leisurely stroll among the acacia trees surrounding our site, looking for any new migrants that might have found it a suitable stopover on their journey northwards to Europe. We did find a nice male Western Subalpine Warbler and a Common Chiffchaff feeding on the small insects in the foliage, but a rather active family group of Fulvous Chatterers, the first of our trip, quickly eclipsed them. We enjoyed the comings and goings of these inquisitive fellows for a good while. Later, we managed to spot the pair of Pharaoh Eagle-Owls again and got extraordinary views of them amid the thorns of the trees.

By then, little remained of what used to be the camp: just the rectangular “footprints” of the tents in the sand. After greeting Martina and Asma, who came to the camp from Dakhla to supply us with fresh provisions, we bade farewell to Javi and Samuel, who were returning to Dakhla. The rest of the crew and the group took the main road eastwards towards Aousserd.

The fields around this road, although rather barren, can yield interesting sightings, and indeed we were able to spot several bulky Spiny-tailed Lizards basking near the entrances to their burrows. Just before reaching the town, we took a side road to catch better and calmer glimpses of these amazing lizards, with a star guest appearance by our first White-crowned Wheatear; it was an immature individual lacking its namesake crown.

Aousserd greeted us with little in the way of amenities: it was just a trusty gas station and a couple of humble stores. The town, inhabited mainly by soldiers and semi-nomadic camel herders, stands as a quiet testament to broader socio-political forces. With its fading buildings and rust-streaked Land Rovers, the place leaves an impression that goes well beyond its sparse offerings. There, we made ourselves comfortable in our quaint house, and enjoyed the luxury of running hot water during our showers. During the evening, bearing in mind the trip so far and the group's interests, we decided to focus on some new birds and insects by having an earlier morning the next day. So we went to (an actual!) bed earlier today, after an incredibly tasty dinner and some interesting conversations about the local fauna.

Day 6

Saturday 15th February

Aousserd

After our earliest start of the tour yet, and a quick coffee and breakfast, we headed westward to the impressive Laglat Massif, a small range of dark, rocky mountains with some sandy valleys within, dotted with acacias. As we approached the hills, a shape atop a rock caught our attention, enough to make us stop the cars and take a second

look through the binoculars. Lo and behold, it turned out to be a mighty Golden Eagle! This is quite a rare species in the desert, with only a few pairs scattered sparsely across the area: this first sighting of the day really lifted our spirits.

We then ventured deeper into the range and walked beside a well in one of the sandy valleys. This well, along with the surrounding acacias, attracted a great number of birds. A family of Fulvous Chatterers and another of White-crowned Wheatears put on a nice show, while migrant Western Subalpine Warblers and Chiffchaffs scurried through the leaves.

We continued walking through the valley, which narrowed into a gorge, carefully scanning the sand beneath us. Spirits rose again when we spotted the elegant tracks of at least two African Golden Wolves, clear evidence that these mammals were nearby. Unfortunately, despite checking every slope and ledge around us, we didn't manage to see them. However, our scanning did lead to another lucky encounter with the only Barbary Falcons of the trip, interacting in flight, as well as a few Pale Crag Martins, a very scarce species in the Western Palearctic which finds a stronghold in these rocky outcrops, and the always welcome song of the Blue Rock Thrush.

We then moved toward the Oued Jenna, a denser acacia forest and shrubland along a seasonal riverbed, where we found a good number of dragonflies (mainly Red-veined Darters), some large grasshoppers, and an obliging group of Cricket Warblers (or Cricket Longtails), another rather scarce species in the Western Palearctic, with a few populations in Western Sahara.

After this already exciting morning, we drove back toward Aousserd, only to be left in awe by an exhausted Short-toed Snake Eagle resting on a rocky hill beside the road, and a Hoopoe feeding in an acacia thicket near the UN airfield.

After a plentiful and most welcome lunch and a short rest, we headed out in the late evening toward the location of our final spotlighting session of the trip. It's hard to overstate the natural beauty of the Derraman Massif, a black rock inselberg ("island mountain") home to unique ecological communities, rising majestically from the surrounding sandy desert. There, we had a fabulous picnic dinner featuring local dishes and even some Italian specialties!

While still nibbling, we were charmed by the territorial flights of a pair of Lanner Falcons and the song of a Pharaoh Eagle-Owl, heralding what was still to come. After nightfall we began our walk and, with the aid of our trusty thermal imaging camera, we spotted some Arabian Mouse-tailed Bats flying about. The device wasn't as helpful in finding the many Ringed Wall Geckos basking on the still-warm black rocks, but their eyes shone brightly in our torch beams, making the walls shimmer like a starry sky.

Our hearts skipped a beat (actually, several beats) when two powerful green eyeshine reflections stared back at us from the base of a small tree. A magnificent African Wildcat was resting at a mere fifty metres (or less) from us, and remained there for a while, giving us excellent photo opportunities. After some time, it began moving up the steep slope, where we spotted a second individual as well!

We then decided to return to the vehicles, pausing on the way for a tame Anderson's Short-fingered Gecko, which nicely showed its characteristic swollen tail base. With a magical feeling in our systems from this special night walk, we got back in the cars to begin our spotlighting drive.

Shortly after setting off, still by the Derraman Massif, we caught another pair of green eye reflections, this time higher up on a different slope. We could hardly believe our eyes: a beautiful African Golden Wolf! The canid quickly disappeared behind some rocks, but after repositioning our cars and meticulously scanning the slopes with our torches, we managed to relocate it and enjoy long views, even through the spotting scope!

The drive back to camp, full of joy after such a successful evening, yielded more Sahara Hares and Lesser Egyptian Jerboas. Still buzzing from the night's encounters, we went to bed for a most welcome rest.

Day 7

Sunday 16th February

Return from Aousserd to Dakhla

A not-so-early start to the day was met with an impressive breakfast full of local baked goods, lovingly prepared by Asma, our skilled Sahrawi host and cook. The spread featured, of course, the delicious *amlou* (argan oil, almond and honey paste), of which most of the group had already grown quite fond.

After finishing our packing, and while the crew gathered everything to leave the house clean and empty, the group took a stroll through the somewhat deserted streets of Aousserd. There, we enjoyed sightings of some urban-breeding Pale Crag Martins and Brown-necked Ravens flying overhead, along with the ever-present Eurasian Collared Doves and Feral Pigeons.

After a quick and pleasant chat with some policemen, we returned to the house just in time to help load the last few items and get into the cars to start our journey back toward Dakhla.

Along the way, we stopped again at the Ramsar-designated wetland in the corner of Dakhla Bay, where we admired large flocks of resting Whimbrels, Curlews, and Grey Plovers. We arrived at the hotel in the late afternoon, rested for a bit, and then gathered for a wonderful farewell couscous supper on the hotel rooftop. We looked back on the highlights of this very special trip, and savoured our last close views of House Buntings flitting around us.

Day 8

Monday 17th February

Dakhla

On our final day in Dakhla, we had breakfast at the hotel at 7.00am. About thirty minutes later, we took the shuttle to the airport, arriving shortly thereafter. The group then said goodbye to Nacho. The return trip to Gatwick, with a layover in Casablanca, went smoothly and without incident. Another tour came to an end: mission accomplished in the challenging task of spotting the elusive Sand Cat, Fennec Fox and African Golden Wolf and other rare creatures of the desert, in a remote and seldom-visited part of the Sahara!

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Species lists

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	Feb 2025					
		11	12	13	14	15	16
Sahara Hare	<i>Lepus saharae</i>	✓		✓		✓	
Lesser Egyptian Jerboa	<i>Jaculus jaculus</i>	15	✓	21		2	
Lesser Egyptian Gerbil	<i>Gerbillus gerbillus</i>	2					
Arabian Mouse-tailed Bat	<i>Rhinopoma cystops</i>					✓	
Sand Cat	<i>Felis margarita</i>		2				
African Wildcat	<i>Felis lybica</i>	2	3	1		2	
Fennec Fox	<i>Vulpes zerda</i>		1				
African Golden Wolf	<i>Canis lupaster</i>					1	

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	Feb 2025					
		11	12	13	14	15	16
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓					
Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	✓					
Little Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>	✓					
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>						✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓			✓		✓
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	✓					
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓					✓
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	✓					✓
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	✓					
Kentish Plover	<i>Anarhynchus alexandrinus</i>						✓
Eurasian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	✓					✓
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>						✓
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>						✓
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>						✓
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>						✓
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	✓					
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓					
Cream-colored Courser	<i>Cursorius cursor</i>	✓					
Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	✓					
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>	✓					
Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>	✓					
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓				✓	
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓					
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓					
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	✓					✓
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓					✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓					✓
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	✓					
Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>					✓	
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>					✓	
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>	✓	✓				✓

Common name	Scientific name	Feb 2025					
		11	12	13	14	15	16
Pharaoh Eagle-Owl	<i>Bubo ascalaphus</i>		2	1	2	H	
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>				✓	✓	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓					
Lanner Falcon	<i>Falco biarmicus</i>	3	1			2	
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>					2	
Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>	✓					
Brown-necked Raven	<i>Corvus ruficollis</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Greater Hoopoe-Lark	<i>Alaemon alaudipes</i>	✓	✓	✓			
Thick-billed Lark	<i>Ramphocoris clotbey</i>			✓	✓		
Bar-tailed Lark	<i>Ammomanes cinctura</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>	✓					✓
Maghreb Lark	<i>Galerida macrorhyncha</i>						✓
Temminck's Lark	<i>Eremophila bilopha</i>			✓			
Dunn's Lark	<i>Eremalauda dunni</i>	✓	✓	✓			
Pale Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne obsoleta</i>					✓	✓
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓					
European Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis rufula</i>				✓	✓	
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Cricket Warbler	<i>Spiloptila clamans</i>					✓	
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>					✓	
Western Subalpine Warbler	<i>Curruca iberiae</i>				✓	✓	✓
Fulvous Babbler	<i>Argya fulva</i>				✓	✓	
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>					✓	
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Desert Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>	✓	✓	✓			
White-crowned Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i>				✓	✓	✓
Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>	✓					
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓					✓
Desert Sparrow	<i>Passer simplex</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Blyth's Pipit	<i>Anthus godlewskii</i>	✓					
House Bunting	<i>Emberiza sahari</i>	✓					✓

Reptiles

Common name	Scientific name	Feb 2025					
		11	12	13	14	15	16
Sudan Spiny-tailed Lizard	<i>Uromastyx dispar</i>				✓		
Duméril's Fringe-fingered Lizard	<i>Acanthodactylus dumerilii</i>		✓	✓			
Anderson's Short-fingered Gecko	<i>Stenodactylus petrii</i>	✓				✓	
Ringed Wall Gecko	<i>Tarentola annularis</i>					✓	

Invertebrates

Common name	Scientific name	Feb 2025					
		11	12	13	14	15	16
Egyptian Predator Beetle	<i>Anthia sexmaculata</i>	✓				✓	
a darkling beetle	<i>Pimelia</i> sp.				✓	✓	✓
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>	✓					✓
Plain Tiger	<i>Danaus chrysippus</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓
Striped Hawk-moth	<i>Hyles livornica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Vagrant Emperor	<i>Anax ephippiger</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-veined Darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
a desert mantis	<i>Eremiaphila</i> sp.	✓	✓	✓			
Saharan Silver Ant	<i>Cataglyphis bombycina</i>	✓			✓	✓	
Migratory Locust	<i>Locusta migratoria cinerascens</i>			✓		✓	
a banded orb-weaving spider	<i>Argiope</i> sp.	✓					
a wolf spider	<i>Evippa</i> sp.	✓					