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MOROCCO AND WESTERN SAHARA

Date - April 2019

Duration - 22 Days

Destinations
Casablanca - El Jadida - Agadir - Souss-Massa National Park - Arrouais Reserve - Rokein Reserve - Tafraoute - Tizi n' Test - Ouirgane - Imlil - Toubkal National Park - Ouzoud Falls - Ifrane National Park - Tazekka National Park - Dakhla - Aousserd

Trip Overview - Morocco

Having come to rely somewhat on his superb spotlighting skills, I decided that it made sense to schedule my return to Morocco for the Easter holiday period, when James would be home from university and available to travel with me once again. Although I appreciate his excellent company even more than his invaluable assistance on what can be fairly demanding tours, neither are luxuries that I will be able to rely upon for a great deal longer, as his studies will require far more of his time during his second year and of course there are now also more personal demands on any remaining free time. We will be travelling to the Congo, both the Republic and Democratic Republic, together in July 2019 to research a great apes tour that I have been planning for some time, but this will probably be our last major trip together for the foreseeable future. If it is, western gorillas and bonobos will be an appropriately spectacular way to conclude what, from my perspective at least, has been an incredibly rewarding experience and I have to say that I am glad that our remarkable journey did not come to an end in Morocco. That is not to suggest that Morocco is not a beautiful country and that our tour was unsuccessful, as neither are the case and we both thoroughly enjoyed exploring what is undoubtedly an alluring

and historic destination. However, for all its natural and ancient highlights, this relatively small North African territory has a poor record in terms of wildlife conservation and it can consequently be difficult to encounter animals in an authentically wild setting, particularly some of the larger mammal species. I have been informed that the country remains a good one in terms of ornithology, although several of the renowned birding sites have also been seriously degraded in recent times, but the majority of mammals have not received any significant protection and it is almost impossible to find many of the species that once roamed the region. Some of course have been extinct for centuries, including the North African elephants that were used in ancient warfare, perhaps most memorably in the Punic Wars fought between Rome and Carthage, the second of which featured Hannibal's legendary crossing of the Alps on elephant back. The same elephants were massacred in huge numbers in the infamous Roman 'Venatio' games, a form of pre gladiatorial entertainment that witnessed the slaughter of a staggering variety of animals in mock hunts that took place in the Colosseum, Circus Maximus and many other Roman arenas and amphitheatres. Thousands of starved and largely defenceless creatures were often killed in a single bloody day, either in grotesque battles against each other or by the 'bestiarii', fighters trained specifically to kill animals, as opposed to true gladiators, who generally only fought each other. The carnage would always take place before the main gladiatorial contests in the afternoon and between these two main events, wild animals would also be used to execute criminals and slaves in a practice known as 'damnatio ad bestias', which translates as 'condemnation to the beasts'. Atlas bears and Barbary lions were favoured in both unedifying spectacles and thousands of these doomed predators were collected from North Africa across several centuries, including from the area now known as Morocco. Perhaps surprisingly, both the bear and the lion somehow

outlived the wanton and untenable excesses of a teetering Roman Empire that would ultimately witness emperor Commodus personally butchering both animals and men in the arena, albeit cripples and either tethered or wounded beasts that were unable to defend themselves. On one particularly inglorious occasion, before the senators and nobles of Rome, he clubbed a group of unarmed amputees to death and it was on this madman that Ridley Scott would base the similarly unhinged Joaquin Phoenix character in his 2000 film 'Gladiator'. As for the bears and the lions, they survived for basically as long as it took man to become truly civilised and begin killing helpless animals with a gun instead of a gladius and javelin. The last known Atlas bear was thought to have been shot by hunters towards the end of the 19th century and the last wild Barbary lion is said to have been despatched in exactly the same heroic manner in the Tizi n' Tichka pass of the High Atlas during the Second World War, although recent evidence suggests that they may have survived well beyond that period in certain remote areas. A few Barbary lions have endured in captivity and are now part of a belated breeding programme, but despite some initial hope that a tiny population may have survived in the Sahara region, it is now widely accepted that cheetahs were almost certainly hunted to extinction in Morocco by the end of the 20th century and that the leopard has probably now suffered the same tragic fate. Whilst for many years there was believed to be a remnant population in the Atlas Mountains, no evidence has been found to support this claim for more than a decade and if there are any leopards remaining in Morocco, I can only hope that they are never discovered. Bovids have fared only slightly better than the predators that hunted them, with the bubal hartebeest disappearing as early as the 1920s, several years before it received official 'Class A' protection at the London Convention of 1933, a conservation agreement between the colonial powers of the day to preserve a variety of key and vulnerable African species. Gorillas of all kinds were collectively one of 17 mammals granted the highest level of protection, but only the white rhinoceros was included in this Class A category and the black variety instead received the lesser 'Class B' protection, as did chimpanzees. Elephants were also afforded Class A status, but only those with tusks weighing less than 5kgs each, which of course allowed the colonial great white hunters to continue killing the huge tuskers that have now all but vanished from the continent. This was also the case regarding more or less every carnivore, as only the aardwolf and fossa appeared on either list and all of the iconic big cats could still be hunted with almost complete impunity. For all practical purposes, the dama gazelle is also extinct in Morocco and the wider region in general has a terrible record in terms of conservation. If you include Western Sahara as part of Morocco, which I will discuss in more detail later, but for the purposes of this report I intend to, then the addax can be discussed as

another species extirpated in this country and the scimitar-horned oryx has been classified as extinct in the wild for the best part of two decades. All three animals were once widespread in North Africa and there are now thought to be considerably less than 100 surviving addax across their entire range and probably only a few more dama gazelles. To be fair, at least in Morocco some efforts are being made to save all three species and although the dama gazelle breeding programme at Safia Reserve in Western Sahara has not been a great success, the addax and oryx reserves in Souss-Massa National Park certainly have been, as both have witnessed a large number of births and they now individually support healthy addax and oryx populations. Situated just south of Agadir on the Atlantic coast, the adjoining Rokein and Arrouais reserves are also home to the North African or Barbary ostrich, as well as wild boar and dorcas gazelle, one of two remaining gazelle species in Morocco, the other being cuvier's gazelle. We saw all five main residents during two visits to these reserves and whilst I would obviously prefer to encounter wildlife in authentically wild conditions, it was

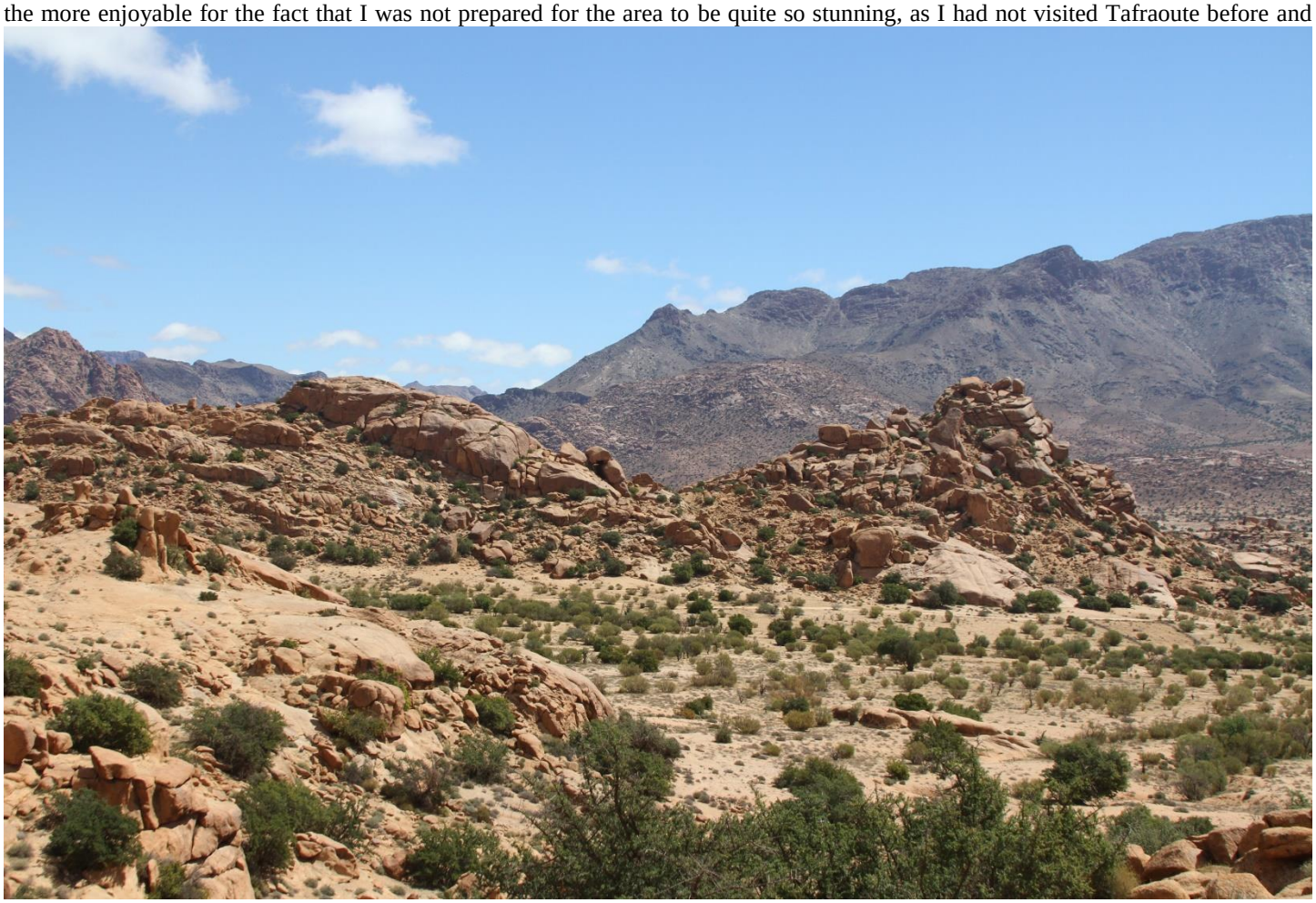
still thrilling to observe addax and oryx in a typically North African setting. Each are majestic creatures and whilst it is up to individuals to decide if they are watching genuinely wild animals, both species are breeding naturally and their reserves are large enough for tourists to feel comfortable visiting, particularly as their entrance fees will help support what I consider to be an important conservation initiative. Certainly I have seen far more habituated animals at various renowned wildlife destinations across the world and our first view of an addax was of a female that had given birth just a few hours before and was nervously standing guard beside the bush that was sheltering her resting young. This was an entirely natural encounter that could have occurred anywhere, with an agitated mother that would have clearly fled had it not been for her overly dependent young. We left her in peace after just a minute or two and although not all of the animals here scatter at the sight of a vehicle, they remain wary and certainly do not approach people as they do elsewhere, particularly in areas where they expect to be fed. Apart from the fact that these breeding programmes should not be necessary, I consequently have no issues with the work being undertaken at these two reserves, as I believe it is helping to save important species that we simply cannot afford to lose and hopefully some of these animals will be released into their former range, which of course is more the issue, as in many cases we are running out of suitable habitat to which animals can be safely reintroduced.

The rest of Souss-Massa National Park is sadly less impressive, as the infrastructure has been allowed to fall into disrepair over the years and there is a great deal of human encroachment and disturbance in and around what was always a fragmented reserve. Local farmers have severely depleted the region's already meagre water resources and several birders have informed me that although the area can still produce some impressive results in terms of the number of species observed, particularly around the Souss and Massa rivers after which the park is named, they also observed that densities are much lower in recent years and that some birds are no longer encountered here at all. That is fortunately not the case regarding the northern bald ibis, as Souss-Massa remains one of the last strongholds of a bird that people travel from all over the world to see. Indeed, despite the serious issues faced here, this is another

success story for a national park that has played a major role in the preservation of an animal that had been assessed as critically endangered since 2000 and was at one stage feared to be on the brink of extinction. Following a successful breeding season in 2017, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, or the IUCN in short, revised their conservation status for the Ibis to endangered and the 2018 season was even better, producing a record number of chicks and taking the population in the region to 708, the highest it has been for decades. If just 708 birds and a global assessment of endangered does not initially appear to be exactly impressive, it actually represents a remarkable achievement for all those involved in the project and provides real hope for the long-term survival of a bird that's appearance can best be described as distinctive. Although our time at Souss-Massa was limited, we made a point of visiting the estuary where the ibis are known to occur and thankfully they were far easier to find than the majority of the mammals that we were hoping to see at this first national park. Initial targets for the area included Egyptian mongoose, common genet and North African hedgehog, as well as two ground squirrels, the frequently observed Barbary version and the far less widespread striped variety. Whilst we did eventually enjoy a superb late morning view of the mongoose crossing the dirt road along the Massa River, the only genet and hedgehog sightings sadly involved dead animals and it did look as if the striped ground squirrel would also elude us until we spotted one entirely by chance on the way back to the addax and oryx reserves. This was even more fortunate than it initially appears, as we would have opportunities to see the other species elsewhere, but probably not the ground squirrels, which have a very restricted range in Morocco and are not thought to occur in the areas that we were due to visit. The Barbary ground squirrels were far more conspicuous and it is easy to distinguish between the two overlapping species, partly on sight, as they do look fairly dissimilar, and also due to the fact that they prefer different habitat. Whereas the commonly observed Barbary squirrel favours rocky areas and can often be found perched on stone walls, its striped cousin dens in the ground and prefers open savannah and even cultivated land. We instantly recognised our lone striped specimen, which was standing in that typically alert ground squirrel pose, but just to be certain, we followed it to the burrow that it eventually disappeared down. A couple of gerbils aside, which I struggle to tell apart in the field even with photographs, our other sightings at Souss-Massa included two groups of wild boar in the addax enclosure, a red fox scavenging on the beach at the mouth of the Massa and several hares, which, purely on range, I would have always identified as Cape hares. Further south in Western Sahara I would have expected the African savannah hare to replace them, but there is currently a great deal of confusion regarding hare taxonomy and one source that I glanced at recently suggests that only one hare species occurs throughout North Africa, which is entirely plausible and I always considered could be the case. However, to further complicate matters, other sources state that the species found in the region is actually the Mediterranean hare and until I have time to research the subject further, I have simply retained the two classifications that I am familiar with. In truth, no one is certain which hare species occur across Africa and I very much doubt that a consensus will ever be reached, either on this continent or any other for that matter. After several relatively unproductive spotlighting sessions, my more immediate concern was to find some of the animals that we were hoping to see and in that regard I was not particularly sorry to be leaving Souss-Massa, which was far too developed for my liking and was actually my least favourite destination of the tour. I thoroughly enjoyed our time with such rare antelopes and there were certainly

some pretty areas, particularly in the evening with the sun disappearing over the dunes and into the Atlantic, but given the breathtaking landscapes that would follow, Souss-Massa could not really compare. That said, including the unidentified rodents, we probably encountered twelve or thirteen species at Souss-Massa and would only see eight more in five major areas and three national parks before we moved on to Dakhla to begin exploring Western Sahara. That is actually the main issue in Morocco and why I would currently be reluctant to run a mammal tour beyond the more or less guaranteed highlights of Western Sahara. The country itself is beautiful and the scenery in many of the regions is as spectacular as anywhere in the world, but the resident wildlife has simply not received sufficient protection and it is consequently extremely difficult to observe most of the larger mammals in a natural setting.

Densities everywhere are low and in a belated effort to try and correct decades of neglect and persecution, which of course I applaud and entirely support, many of the key species are now protected behind fences, including the aoudad or Barbary sheep and the Barbary stag, a red deer subspecies which, as the name would suggest, only occurs in North Africa. Nowhere better illustrates the startling disparity between the gorgeous landscapes and the animals that you would expect to find within them than Tafraoute, which was our next destination and my favourite of the trip excluding Western Sahara. Nestled in Morocco's Berber heartland, after which all things Barbary are of course named, to me Tafraoute is a little piece of heaven, an idyllically silent desert environment, littered with enticing rocks to scramble and hills to climb for no better reason than to savour another sumptuous view. Our short stay was all the more enjoyable for the fact that I was not prepared for the area to be quite so stunning, as I had not visited Tafraoute before and



when I return it will surely be for longer than the two days that we had available. The main purpose of our visit was to search for a small population of cuvier's gazelle that are known to inhabit the rocky desert region just beyond town. Although by no means habituated, they are seen reasonably regularly and, having missed them on a brief exploratory hike, we spotted our first pair from the vehicle as we looked for a new area to search. All of our subsequent observations were on foot, often from the highest vantage points among the rocks, and in all we saw nine of these splendid gazelles during the day and fifteen or so at night, when they were obviously much easier to pick out thanks to their bright eyeshine. We mainly encountered individual animals or pairs and the only group that we managed to find consisted of two adults and two juveniles, all of which were far too nervous to allow us to approach. Whilst our brief stay was clearly an unqualified success and we were never expecting to see large herds of gazelle, we were still slightly surprised that it was proving so difficult to find a great deal else, particularly in what was a largely pristine environment. Several hours of spotlighting yielded our first lesser Egyptian jerboa of the trip, as well as a few hares, and our diurnal efforts, which basically involved walking for more or less every daylight hour, produced a small colony of Moroccan jirds and a family of wild boar, including several delightful squealing piglets. We actually spotted these driving between locations and in an effort to perhaps take a few photographs, I attempted to slowly follow through the desert in the hire car, even across a dry riverbed that looked firm enough to take what was only a two-wheel drive. To be fair, it actually was and the sandy soil was not really an issue, but the bank was far steeper than it appeared and with no clearance, I just nosedived the car straight into the sand at such an acute angle, the back right wheel was sticking up in the air. What followed was an intense and at times farcical struggle in the midday heat to dig under the front wheels and lower the car a few inches at a time onto the flat surface, from where I would hopefully be able to drive it out. When we attempted to rush the process, we buried the car deeper and in all it took about two exhausting hours to dig out, with the assistance of a small mountain of rocks under the wheels to stop them spinning, by which time the boar had grown tired of waiting and had understandably trotted off, no doubt shaking their heads. I would love to say that I learnt from the experience and was a wiser man for it, but I did exactly the same thing on three separate occasions, each with varying degrees of inconvenience, which I guess either highlights my great determination or my even greater stupidity, depending on your perspective. When I was finally able to drive away from Tafraoute, we made what I hoped would be a brief detour to another new area for me, the well known site of a North African elephant shrew or sengi colony. Almost unbelievably, certainly when you consider how remote the colony is in a foreign land and the almost idiosyncratic nature of our quest, another pair of Englishmen were already searching the rocky hills when we arrived and I feared the worst when they told me that there had been no sign of any elephant shrews. We quickly joined the campaign, splitting up to cover more ground and at times sitting quietly to watch particular piles of rocks where we knew our tiny but distinctive quarry had been photographed previously. It is difficult to know in these situations whether the other group are helping or hindering your efforts, but when it started to rain, it looked as if both parties were going to be out of luck and our crestfallen compatriots were heading for their car when one of them spotted a single shrew darting for cover. Within a matter of seconds, four sengi crazed Englishmen were

standing staring at the small gap in the rocks where the diminutive and nasally challenged insectivore had disappeared, with three of them praying that it would break cover at least once more and the fourth smiling smugly to himself that it did not matter whether it reappeared or not. Fortunately for us all, and particularly for the sake of the friendship between the other two protagonists, the elephant shrew turned out to be incredibly cooperative and made several appearances, albeit largely at great speed. I even managed a few reasonable photographs of it either sheltering from the rain or hiding from us and no doubt the mood in the other vehicle

improved markedly for their onward journey, as it is always difficult when one of you sees a main target species that the other misses. This was unlikely to occur as we moved on to Ouirgane via the Tizi n' Test pass, as we would be searching for Barbary sheep in both areas, initially at a fenced reserve just beyond the pass and then at the Royal Reserve at Ouirgane, which is also fenced. Unfortunately, and unlike the antelope reserves at Souss-Massa, no visitors are allowed to enter either of these protected areas and there was instead always a second smaller enclosure at Ouirgane, where people could photograph a few ambassador style Barbary sheep at fairly close quarters. Whilst the sheep in the two significantly larger reserves are living authentically wild lives in entirely natural environments

that just happen to have fences around them, that was not the case with this supplementary caged area and I was not sorry to see that it is no longer in use, as much as I would have personally enjoyed photographing these impressive ungulates. This was particularly the case given that I have not encountered Barbary sheep since I switched to digital photography a decade or so ago and did not therefore have any readily available pictures of the species. Whilst I was obviously hoping to correct that, it was always going to be difficult given that neither reserve is accessible and that in order to search for these animals, you basically have to scan the sections of mountain visible from the road. You can find sheep in this way, but of course they are unlikely to be very close and you usually find that you are watching them at distance with binoculars. The reserve near the Tizi n' Test pass is the easiest of the two for both sightings and pictures, as more of the reserve can be viewed from the road than at Ouirgane and in a few places the fence snakes around the mountain just a few metres above the road, which means that you can get exceptionally close shots if you are very lucky. We were not, but we were not unlucky either and having seen five distant sheep on a mountain peak late on our first day, we saw another three a great deal closer when we returned the next morning. Sadly, we had probably missed them near the fence by just a few minutes, as they were now slowly trotting up a steep slope with their backs to us, which at least resulted in wonderful views, if not great pictures. We did not have any success at the Royal Reserve at Ouirgane and to again illustrate just how challenging it is to find animals in what are all spectacularly scenic regions, we spent the best part of two days and nights scouring the picturesque mountains and river valleys between the two reserves and our not inconsiderable efforts were ultimately rewarded with a solitary hare. We concluded that it was more likely to die of loneliness than be eaten by a predator, but a couple of days later our eight sheep and one lonesome lagomorph were starting to look like a veritable bonanza, as we did not see a single mammal during our entire two-night stay at Toubkal National Park in the High Atlas Mountains. To be fair, the region is more famous as a climbing and hiking destination, than it is for its wildlife and thousands of tourists visit every year to scale Toubkal, which, at 4,167 metres, is the highest peak in North Africa. I had also considered making the ascent, which is not a technical one during the summer months, but in spring

can still be difficult and would have left us no time to explore the rest of the park and look for wildlife. As it was, we may actually have seen more attempting to climb up through the melting winter snow and our local guide, although very friendly and keen to help, clearly did not believe that it made sense to greatly extend our hikes in order to look for animals that he did not expect to find. We did spend time scanning the distant slopes for Barbary sheep, as well as the striped hyenas and caracals that are still occasionally spotted here, but probably more in hope than expectation and we failed to even find the ground squirrels that are apparently commonly observed among the rocks. Indeed, the only mammals encountered were the thousands of goats that the Berber herders would drive along the ridges to the alpine pasture, which no doubt goes a long way to explain the absence of anything wild. Our hikes at least were rewarding in terms of the epic scenery and they were certainly the most demanding of the tour. Even trekking up to our mountain lodge was fairly tough and our longest hike was around eighteen kilometres, much of which was of course uphill. We did not have any access to our car and fell into bed exhausted each night at the very top of a stone tower with commanding views of Toubkal and

the surrounding valley. It would have been difficult to imagine a more unique setting and although I have not recorded every transfer in detail, practically all of them involved memorable drives through the magnificent landscapes that the region is justly famed for. The imposing Atlas Mountains dominate the panorama, as they do much of North Africa, extending over 2,000 kilometres in a series of ranges across Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, which collectively form a physical barrier between the Mediterranean Sea to the north and the vast Sahara Desert to the south. Our next journey would take us from the High Atlas to the Middle Atlas, where we would spend the remainder of this first section of the tour, initially at Ifrane National Park and finally at Tazekka National Park. On the way we would stop at Ouzoud Falls, a series of cascades crashing across different levels to form an impressive spectacle and one of the main tourist attractions of the area. They actually reminded me of a tiny section of the breathtaking Iguazu Falls in South America, but sadly, just like Iguazu, Ouzoud was very crowded and it was also difficult to watch visitors feeding the Barbary macaques that some

locals have trained to sit on the heads and shoulders of tourists for photographs. I have very little time for this type of exploitation and although we enjoyed hiking down to the bottom of the falls and the various contrasting perspectives on the way, we did not linger after climbing out and instead decided to head directly to Ifrane to look for some wild monkeys in a hopefully more serene setting. That was not entirely guaranteed, as both locals and tourists stop to feed the monkeys by the side of the road at Ifrane and this indeed was how we first saw them. To avoid any repeat, we decided to visit the forest very early the next morning and were able to find a small group of macaques that we spent a couple of enchanting hours with as they foraged and groomed almost oblivious to our presence. Certainly they were not disturbed by it and we slowly moved through the light forest together until they reached the main road, at which point we chose to leave them in case we encouraged other drivers to stop and possibly disturb them. I was pleased to see that although they tarried at the edge of the road for a while, they did not appear to be waiting to be fed and were beginning to cross and disappear into the trees as we left. Given some of our frankly less than satisfying sightings to date, it was wonderful to observe such intimate natural behaviour and at one stage we watched macaques mating while the female was still carrying her young from the previous year on her back. We saw a few more later in the day as I tested our beleaguered hire car on what it soon became apparent was yet another four-wheel drive trail, mainly in order to select areas that we hoped would prove to be productive when we returned at night with spotlights. Two in particular largely were and whilst none produced any new species, at least our final night at Ifrane kept us interested with lots of sightings, many of which we had to stop and identify. The vast majority were red foxes and hares, but we also encountered several wild boar, including probably the largest male I have ever seen, as well as at least a dozen mice, a couple of which I took photographs of as they sheltered in fallen trees. We may have surprised a genet as well, but I could not be completely sure and we moved on to Tazekka National Park still hoping to find at least three of our main target species, North African hedgehog, common genet and Barbary stag, a subspecies of red deer that was hunted to extinction in Morocco. The animals at Tazekka were reintroduced from Tunisia in 1994 and are protected in yet another large fenced enclosure. As per the original system with the Barbary sheep at Ouirgane, there used to be a smaller fenced area at Tazekka to enable visitors to see at least a few of the deer, but this is also now derelict and you therefore need to be exceptionally lucky to encounter the only deer species native to Africa. I have to say from the outset that we were not fortunate, but we tried literally everything that we could think of in order to observe this rare subspecies, including requesting permission to enter the reserve, which we were promised, but never actually materialised. Instead we spent a great deal of our time walking and driving along as much of the perimeter as we could access, both during the day on the off chance of spotting a deer near the fence and at night in the hope that eyeshine would be easier to pick up through the dense forest. We even traipsed the fifteen kilometre hike to the top of Mount Tazekka after which the national park is named, purely to give us the opportunity to scan down and search any open areas from above. There were a few, but none were occupied by deer during our vigil and the undergrowth was simply too thick to see beyond. I always accept missing an animal as an integral and inevitable factor

of what I love to do, but it is more frustrating when you are not even able to search effectively and the irony was that a small population of Barbary sheep are also protected in an enclosure at Tazekka and we spotted one of these animals from the road on our first visit. In fact, the bitterly disappointing deer ignominy aside, we were actually relatively successful at Tazekka, which is about as successful as you can ever really hope to be in Morocco. In addition to our only tortoise of the tour on the drive in, which we had to rescue from a busy road, we spotted a genet on our first night, staring down at us curiously from the branches of a tree, and this was followed by an even better view of a second genet in the middle of the road, clearly illuminated by our headlights. These agile and striking predators are a particular favourite of mine and I have to say that I was mightily relieved that we would not be leaving Morocco without having seen one, as they do not occur in Western Sahara and this was consequently our final chance. This was also very much the case with the North African hedgehog, which, appropriately enough, is replaced by the desert hedgehog in the Sahara. Throughout the tour we had probably spent longer looking for this one endearing animal than any other, having sadly seen several

dead on the road and after missing two at Souss-Massa, which another group mentioned they had encountered minutes after we left an area we had been searching together. By the time we reached Tazekka we were clearly running out of opportunities and the situation appeared hopeless as we headed back to our lodge at 4am on our third and final night drive. We continued to spotlight as we always do, but we had both more or less given up and were less than 100 metres from our accommodation when James suddenly shouted 'hedgehog' and I almost swerved off the road in excitement. There was indeed a glorious little hedgehog just a few metres from our car and having spent so long looking for it, we were happy enough just to watch it for a few minutes and to take a couple of pictures before it shuffled off into the night. It was a thrilling and memorable way to complete the first section of what had been a mixed tour and whilst I wholeheartedly support the conservation work taking place in Morocco, which is both essential and overdue given the excesses and neglect of the past, fences in general are an anathema to me and I have to admit that I was ready to move on to the open expanses of Western Sahara, where we would finally have the freedom to explore unhindered, give or take a few thousand landmines of course.

Trip Overview - Western Sahara

For those who are not aware, Western Sahara is a disputed territory and the land mines and other fortifications, most notably a sand wall or 'berm' stretching approximately 2,700 kilometres directly through the Sahara, are used to separate the region occupied by Morocco from the area controlled by the native Sahrawi people. I have to admit that whilst I am keenly interested in a wide range of historical subjects, I do not know a great deal regarding this conflict and had to check several facts, including most of the relevant dates, prior to my latest visit. Ruled by the French and Spanish for much of the first half of the 20th century, Morocco only regained independence in 1956, but Spain continued to control the region known as Spanish Sahara until late 1975, at which point they ceded sovereignty to neighbouring Morocco and Mauritania. For more than two years the Spanish colonists had been involved in an armed struggle with the Polisario Front, a Sahrawi independence movement, and their campaign intensified when the Spanish withdrew and

Morocco and Mauritania took control of the territory now known as Western Sahara. Thousands of troops and civilians were killed on both sides of what has been a long and attritional conflict and tens of thousands of indigenous Sahrawi Arabs were displaced and forced to flee as refugees to Algeria. In 1979 Mauritania relinquished its claim to the territory after four bloody years and the loss of around 2,000 soldiers and a year later Morocco began building the defensive sand wall that would take more than seven years to complete and would incorporate between seven and nine million landmines. The wall was primarily constructed to protect Moroccan economic interests to the west and north from the forces of the Polisario Front to the east, who declared the entire Western Sahara an independent state, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, shortly after Spanish secession. If an abomination of this kind can ever truly replace diplomacy, justice and consensus, then this scar on the landscape can be considered at least a partial success, as armed incursion was now almost impossible and the resulting impasse eventually led to a United Nations brokered ceasefire in 1991, which has since been largely honoured by all factions. This is perhaps surprising given that the ceasefire was in part based on the promise of a referendum in 1992 which would allow the local population to choose between full independence or integration with Morocco. However, in true United Nations fashion, the referendum never took place and almost thirty years later those same local people are still waiting for the opportunity to determine their fate. I am aware that many Moroccans are convinced they have a legitimate claim to the territory and that the Polisario Front is an extremist terrorist organisation with links to al-Qaeda, but there is equally no question that this land initially belonged to the Sahrawi nomads and that they have been the principal casualties in yet another colonial calamity. Colonialism was a game that most of the European superpowers played at one time or another with catastrophic consequences that continue to reverberate through the ages. Literally tens of millions of native people were killed across the globe and barely a region escaped the greed and inhumanity demonstrated by the early European settlers and the imperial powers that inevitably followed. It is difficult for me to judge other nations when my own country was so heavily involved in these obscenities, although

perhaps not with quite the same murderous zeal of the Spanish conquistadors, who undoubtedly practiced an early form of ethnic cleansing in all but name. Conquistador of course translates as conqueror and there can be little doubt that the Spanish rule and negligent disposal of a region of Africa they had no claim to, has resulted in the almost irrevocable situation that we have reached in Western Sahara today, a humanitarian tragedy that has blighted the lives of so many for the best part of five decades and has received relatively little international attention. For those further interested in a conflict almost as forgotten as the desert itself, I would recommend the second edition of *'Western Sahara: Anatomy of a Stalemate'* by Erik Jensen, which details this apparently hopeless dispute from a United Nations perspective, as Jensen was the former chief of the Western Sahara Referendum Mission. As is all too often the case, the prolonged hostilities and subsequent environmental destruction had a devastating effect on the wildlife of the region and the vast majority of the large mammals that once occurred here were wiped out. However, as also often transpires in inhospitable areas where people are either forbidden or it is too dangerous for them to settle, certain more elusive species have flourished and Western Sahara has become one of the easiest destinations to observe a number of small carnivores, including sand cat, fennec fox, ruppell's fox and the recently split African golden wolf, which I will return to later in this report. As such, the region now attracts mammal enthusiasts from all over the world, as well as birders who visit to search for the local desert and shrubland specialities like golden nightjar, Sudan golden sparrow, desert sparrow and a variety of larks, wheatears and warblers. Although there are a few additional options, most of the wildlife viewing occurs on the main road from Dakhla to Aousserd, which stretches approximately 260 kilometres and can be searched independently if the main purpose of your visit is simply to see specific species and you are not necessarily interested in photographing them or exploring the desert beyond this one highway. This would never be the case for me, as the Sahara remains an extraordinary realm and I have always been captivated by a living breathing entity that covers a third of the African continent and is home to a thousand different people and cultures, from the might of the Egyptian pharaohs and rulers of Ancient Carthage to humble Berber herdsmen and traditional nomadic Arabs. They are all as one in a timeless land that has borne witness to the great deeds of men and then watched their empires crumble to dust like so many grains of sand. I always want to spend time in what is the largest hot desert on earth and for this Western Sahara region it makes sense to employ the expertise of a local company, partly due to the landmine situation and also because they know the best areas for most of the major

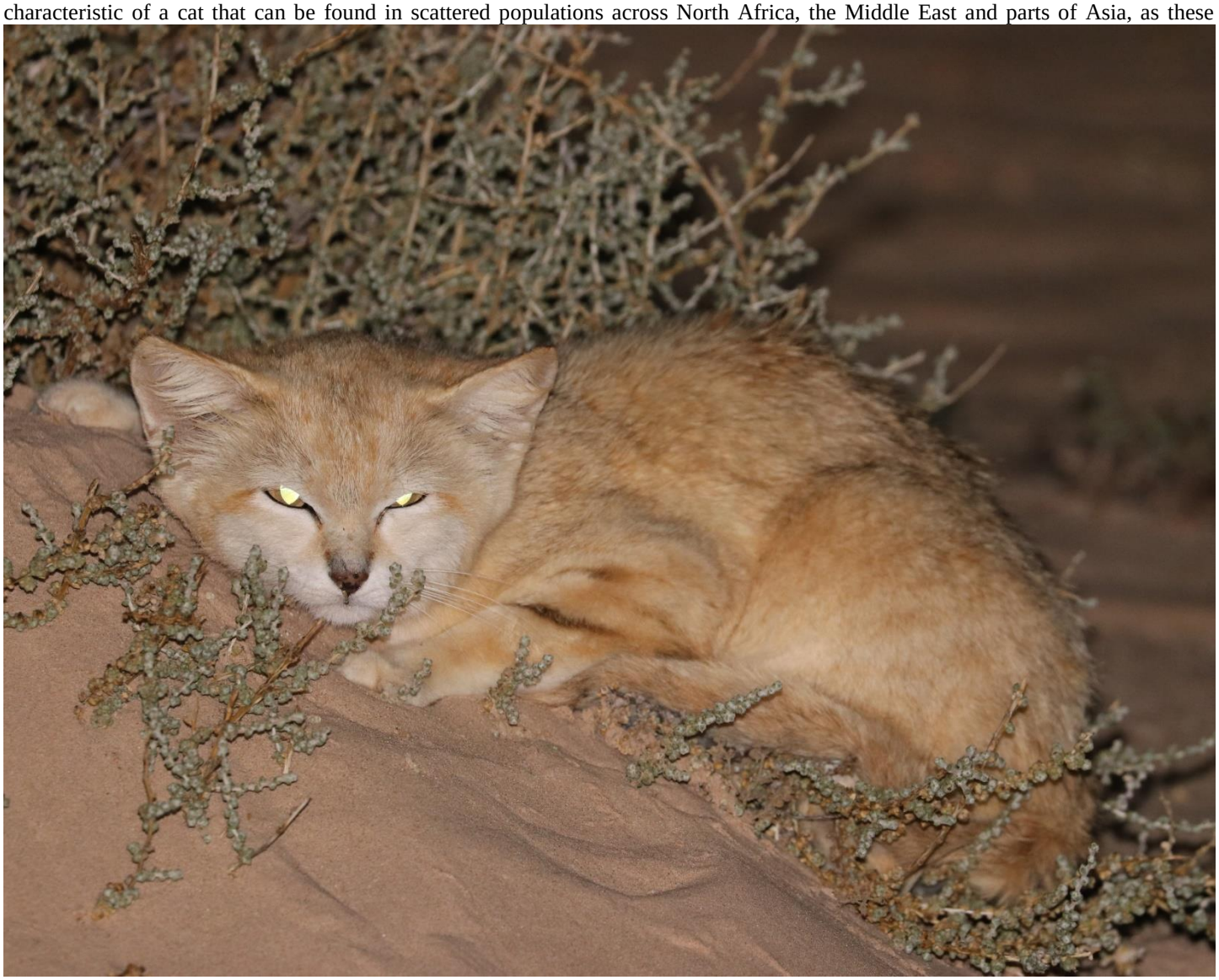
target animals. In addition, they will take any of the stress out of your adventure and allow you to concentrate purely on the fantastic landscapes and wildlife, particularly if you are keen on photographing much of what you see. In this regard, the contrast between the two sections of our tour was remarkable, as I think that I managed shots of a gerbil and a hedgehog on the first leg of our trip when I was driving, spotlighting and attempting to take pictures, whereas in the Sahara I was able to photograph every species encountered at night. Indeed, we were so successful and I had so many opportunities with these animals, that I barely used my camera on the last few nights and we even stopped attempting to identify between species when we could clearly tell that an eyeshine belonged either to a cat or a fox. If this sounds unusual, I prefer my tours to cause as little disruption as possible and there is no point disturbing animals with

spotlights or attempting to follow them across the desert, even slowly at distance, if you have already had a fabulous encounter with that particular species. Thanks entirely to our guides and their local knowledge of the best areas to search for each creature, we were able to observe six sand cats on our very first evening and in all enjoyed more than 50 confirmed sightings of four of the main target species, sand cat, wild cat, fennec fox and ruppell's fox. Excluding nights at Dakhla at the beginning and end of our visit, we spent six nights either camping in the desert or using a house in Aousserd as a base and although the property was very comfortable and it was nice to have access to a hot shower, next time I will dispense with Aousserd altogether and spend all of my time in the desert. Whilst it is obviously more expensive to use local guides and their vehicles, the additional cost, roughly double in my estimation, is entirely justified in order to access stunning new areas that only local people are aware of and to be able to hike safely amid some of the most impressive scenery imaginable. The only real downside of using a local company is that they are generally unable to spend as long in the field as I would like, as they obviously need to devote much of their time to running the camp. We were going out from about 7pm

to 3am, on one occasion until 5am, but eight hours is probably less than half the time I would normally average on a daily basis and James and I consequently spent between three and four hours exploring on foot every day, just to try and see a little more of each area. Given that these walks usually occurred during the hottest part of the day, they were not as successful as they were enjoyable, but I had no complaints in any case, as it is impossible to ask guides with other responsibilities to spend fifteen hours in the field and a fair amount of time was devoted to transfers between sites, which also provided us with another opportunity to explore, albeit at a slightly faster pace. Although they are certainly not practical whilst running a camp for guests, if you were travelling independently in this type of environment, the optimum mammal related field hours would be from around six o'clock each evening to about nine o'clock the next morning. It would also be fair to say that our guides were not wildlife experts as such and were fairly inexperienced in terms of searching for and identifying the less obvious creatures. They are not currently aware of sites for fat sand rat or sundevall's jird,

both of which are diurnal and live in colonies that are reasonably easy to find by searching the right habitat, and whilst gerbils are routinely encountered on almost every night drive, they cannot help to distinguish between the various species that occur here. This was not a massive issue as far as I was concerned, as they will no doubt establish sites for the diurnal rodents in time and they are certainly not alone in not being able to distinguish between various small rodent species, as I often cannot either and some of these animals are almost impossible to tell apart even with fairly good photographs. By eye I believe that we encountered at least five different gerbils throughout the tour, but without expert local assistance, I could only positively identify the three listed towards the end of this report and I think that there must be a great deal of guesswork involved in terms of the mammal lists that appear on other trip reports that I read. Some of these animals can only be identified with the aid of precise measurements or by carefully examining the soles of their feet or the tips of their tail. This is impossible without trapping an animal and I do not believe that it can ever be acceptable to put a small vulnerable animal through this amount of stress, and unquestionably risk killing it, just to say that you have seen a particular species or to add it to the life lists that all too often appear to take precedence over common decency. I have no idea how tour leaders or so called wildlife enthusiasts continue to justify photographs of themselves holding clearly terrified animals purely for identification purposes and I would like to see this form of unethical behaviour outlawed. Trapping, as per the use of radio collars, should only occur for genuine scientific purposes, either as part of an authorised study or conservation initiative. As it was, I failed to identify at least six rodent species on this one trip, but I departed knowing that nothing had died just to appear as a line or two on an ultimately insignificant list. In terms of our local guides, what they lacked to some degree in knowledge, they more than compensated for in enthusiasm and their undoubted experience with the principal desert protagonists proved to be invaluable. In

addition to the multiple sightings already mentioned, they knew exactly where to try when we were struggling to find a golden wolf and although we were never destined to encounter either a Saharan striped polecat, which was probably my biggest disappointment of the tour, or a honey badger, which I frankly had never expected to see, they were to observe both of these rare creatures on subsequent trips. I hope to travel with them again in the near future, as I would like to visit Safia Nature Reserve towards the border with Mauritania, which is home to addax and a small population of dama gazelle and where we are also more likely to find a few of the rarer species that occur in this remote region, including honey badger and even striped hyena. Given our general success and the sheer number of sightings, there is no point me describing every encounter, but I was particularly pleased to see sand cats so early and so well, as James had never seen this animal and our six first-night observations included several at close quarters. This is very characteristic of a cat that can be found in scattered populations across North Africa, the Middle East and parts of Asia, as these



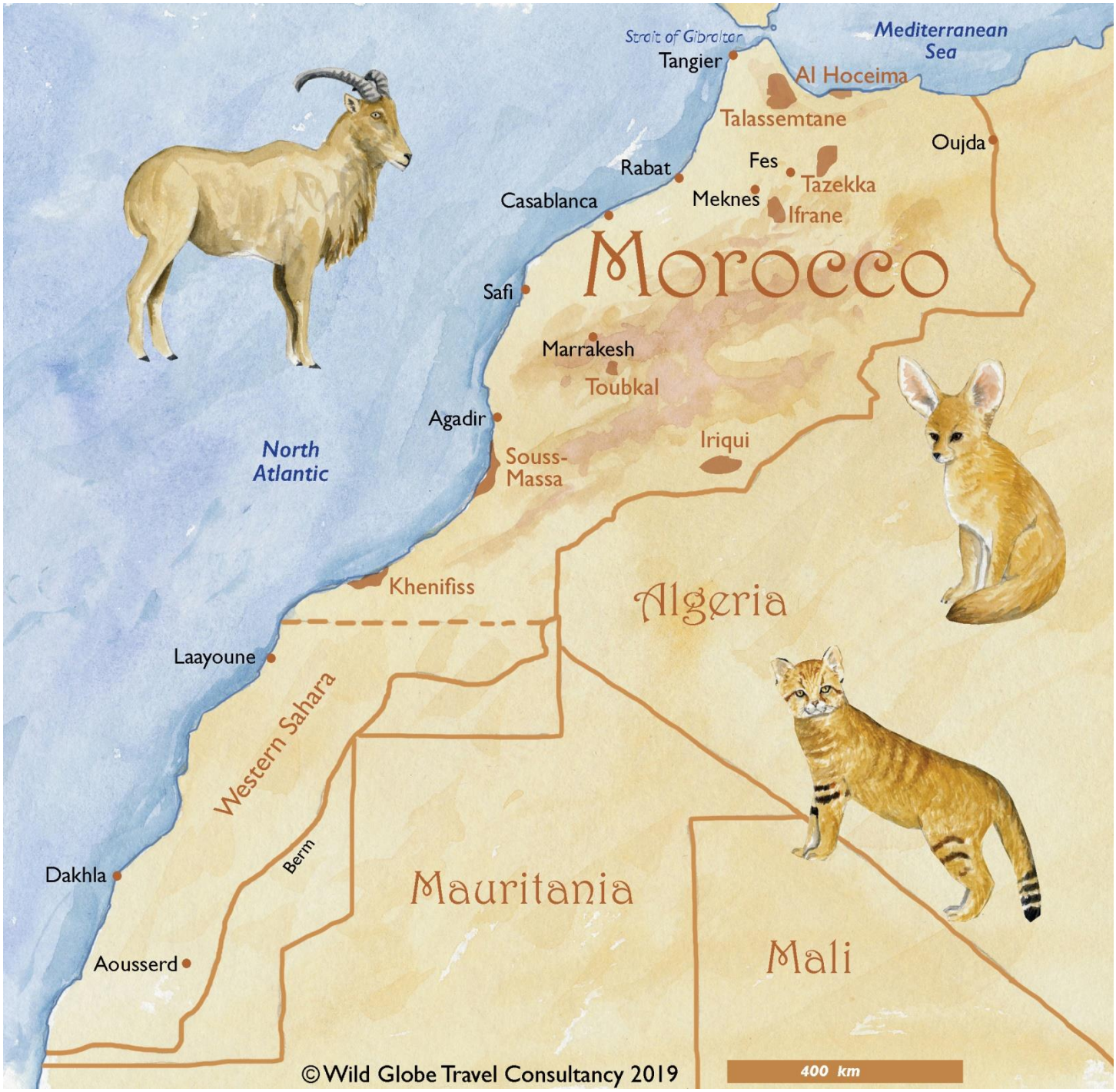
diminutive felines will go to ground almost as regularly as they will run. You can often watch them hiding in the sparse desert vegetation, but I was not aware, indeed no one was until it was discovered in late 2018, that at least some of these cats also rest in bird nests, both during the day and at night. Several have been discovered in raven's nests, perched up to five metres above the ground in acacia trees, presumably to enable these vulnerable cats to rest securely, perhaps in areas where burrows are scarce. The acacia thorns are too sharp and their branches too dense for raptors to penetrate and the cats appear to be mainly utilising nests in trees that have few low branches, which would make sense in terms of protection from terrestrial predators, including golden wolves and the many feral domestic dogs that inhabit the area. I checked several nests in one of the areas where these arboreal cats have been observed and whilst it is possible that one or more of these were occupied, I scanned at distance with binoculars to avoid any unnecessary disturbance. Spotlights are intrusive enough as far as I am concerned, but at least they allow an animal to depart if necessary, particularly if you do not chase at high speed, which would not be the case with a group of people standing under a tree blocking any escape. I have already seen photographs of this exact scenario and I hope that people remember just how easily observed these animals are in Western Sahara without disturbing where they sleep. Whereas most of our main mammal targets were as effortlessly encountered as the sand cat, including both desert fox species and the recently split African wild cat, the same could not be said of another animal that has recently been declared a distinct species, the African golden wolf, which I have always known as the humble golden jackal. DNA analysis has confirmed that the canids found in North and East Africa are actually more closely related to the grey wolf than their golden jackal cousins across Europe and Asia, although there remains disagreement as to their exact scientific classification, given that both canis anthus and canis lupaster have been proposed. Having read a couple of the papers involved, for what it is worth, my choice would be canis lupaster, as it was first used to classify Egyptian canids almost two centuries ago and there appears to be far less supporting evidence for the use of canis anthus. Having said that, I still find it difficult to believe that such a significant species can have been overlooked for decades and it does make you wonder just how many other animals will be reclassified in the coming years. Certainly there is another wolf in Ethiopia that I would not be surprised if it later transpires is also an entirely separate species. For now our immediate concern was finding one, which somehow seemed even more important now that we were looking for the newly described African golden wolf, as opposed to the golden jackal that I had seen on literally hundreds of

occasions over the years, particularly in Tanzania, where they are common in and around the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Crater. The difference of course is purely a psychological one and whilst I am always keen to see any and all dogs, there was definitely a little more urgency and a touch more desperation as the days slipped away and with them the chance of finding a new wolf species, if only in name. For our last night we decided to return to a rocky area that we had already tried, where our guides had seen an adult wolf with a pair of pups perhaps two weeks prior to our visit. Given that the pups were only a few weeks old, it was likely that there was

still an active den in the area, which was a better starting point for one final effort than just driving aimlessly in the hope that we might find the one major animal to have eluded us for the previous five nights. As I always prefer, we left Aousserd with plenty of daylight remaining and as we approached the first vast boulders amid a sea of sand, I saw a golden wolf stand from a prone position and pad slowly behind a larger rock formation. No one else had seen the wolf at this point and as I indicated exactly where it had disappeared, our vehicle got stuck in the loose sand and we had to spend a few minutes attempting to extricate ourselves, unfortunately making a great deal of noise in the process. We had two guides with us at this stage, one driving and one spotting, and when the four of us eventually drove into view, we were all immensely relieved to see that our wolf had not vanished and was instead staring down at us from the top of an adjacent outcrop. It had simply taken up a higher safer position and within a few seconds James spotted one of its pups sitting out in the open. We never did see the other pup, which I hoped had simply not yet left its den, and as the adult departed after maybe five minutes or so, we took the opportunity to climb up to some overhanging rocks for a better view of the young wolf, which sat waiting patiently for its parent to return. We were extremely careful not to disturb the pup as we left and although we had the entire night ahead of us still, James and I were both aware that we were not going to improve on what had been an exhilarating and unforgettable encounter. We certainly tried, and even managed to observe all five of the major carnivores that the region is now famous for on one exceptional final drive, but as we eventually returned to camp, as content as we were tired, we were both still thinking about our beautiful dogs and the fact that it did not really matter to either of us what they were called.

No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	African Wild Cat	Felis lybica	Ten confirmed sightings in Western Sahara.
2	Sand Cat	Felis margarita	At least twelve individuals in Western Sahara.
3	African Golden Wolf	Canis lupaster	An adult and a young cub near Aousserd in Western Sahara.
4	Ruppell's Fox	Vulpes rueppelli	Fifteen to twenty observed as individuals and pairs in Western Sahara.
5	Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes	Observed at each of the Souss-Massa, Ifrane and Tazekka national parks.
6	Fennec Fox	Vulpes zerda	Around fifteen sightings in Western Sahara.
7	Egyptian Mongoose	Herpestes ichneumon	One crossing the road along the Massa River in the late morning at Souss-Massa National Park.
8	Common Genet	Genetta genetta	Two individuals at Tazekka National Park.
9	Addax	Addax nasomaculatus	Routinely encountered in the Rokein Reserve at Souss-Massa National Park.
10	Scimitar-horned Oryx	Oryx dammah	Common at the Arrouais Reserve at Souss-Massa National Park.
11	Cuvier's Gazelle	Gazella cuvieri	Four diurnal sights of nine animals and around fifteen in total at night at Tafraoute.
12	Dorcas Gazelle	Gazella dorcas	Observed in low numbers at both Souss-Massa reserves and a single pair at distance in Western Sahara.
13	Barbary Sheep	Ammotragus lervia	Five and three at the Tizi n' Test pass reserve and an individual high in its enclosure at Tazekka National Park.
14	Wild Boar	Sus scrofa	Encountered at every destination excluding Western Sahara.
15	Barbary Macaque	Macaca sylvanus	Habituated animals at Ouzoud Falls and several groups at Ifrane National Park.

16	North African Hedgehog	Atelerix algirus	One on our final night drive at Tazekka National Park.
17	Desert Hedgehog	Paraechinus aethiopicus	Six individuals in Western Sahara.
18	Cape Hare	Lepus capensis	Observed at every major destination on the first section of the tour.
19	African Savanna Hare	Lepus victoriae	Routinely encountered in Western Sahara.
20	North African Elephant Shrew	Elephantulus rozeti	One individual at a well known site near the small town of Ait Baha.
21	Barbary Ground Squirrel	Atlantoxerus getulus	Common in some areas, but less regularly observed elsewhere and not at all in Western Sahara.
22	Striped Ground Squirrel	Xerus erythropus	An individual standing and running at Souss-Massa National Park.
23	Lesser Egyptian Jerboa	Jaculus jaculus	First observed at Tafraoute and widespread in Western Sahara.
24	Pleasant Gerbil	Gerbillus amoenus	Common at certain sites in Western Sahara.
25	North African Gerbil	Gerbillus campestris	Two individuals at Souss-Massa National Park.
26	Lesser Egyptian Gerbil	Gerbillus gerbillus	Abundant in Western Sahara.
27	Fat-tailed Gerbil	Pachyuromys duprasi	Several sightings in Western Sahara.
28	Moroccan Jird	Meriones grandis	Small colony at Tafraoute.


Strait of Gibraltar
Mediterranean Sea
Tangier
Al Hoceima
Talassemtane
Oujda
Rabat
Fes
Tazekka
Casablanca
Meknes
Ifrane
Morocco
Safi
Marrakesh
Toubkal
Agadir
Iriqui
North Atlantic
Souss-Massa
Khenifiss
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