



White-throated Bee-eater, a most unexpected visitor to Western Sahara and the Western Palearctic (Mark Beaman)

WESTERN SAHARA EXPEDITION

24 – 31 MARCH 2017

TOUR REPORT

LEADERS: MARK BEAMAN and INGER VANDYKE

Our first ever Western Sahara tour was a great success. Not only did we observe such star birds as Golden Nightjar, White-throated Bee-eater, African Dunn's Lark, Desert Sparrow and Sudan Golden Sparrow, but we also scored highly on the mammals that have made spotlighting on the Aousserd Road famous: Sand Cat, Rüppell's Fox, the wonderful Fennec Fox and Saharan Striped Polecat. You definitely do not go to Western Sahara for a big bird and mammal list (our bird list totalled 86 species and our mammal list 11 species): instead you go for some really great birds and some seriously fantastic mammals that are extremely hard to see elsewhere, plus a real adventure in a little-visited corner of the world.

We started off the expedition with a trip out to the little spring at Gleib Jediane (or Jidiane), situated on the first part of the 216-kilometres-long Aousserd Road. We stopped before Gleib Jediane to enjoy a



The dainty Cricket Warbler, one of the 'mega-birds' of Western Sahara (Mark Beaman)

pair of Red-rumped Wheatears, as well as Woodchat Shrike and Greater Hoopoe Lark.

Gleib Jediane has turned up some weird and wonderful vagrants over the years, including an Allen's Gallinule in 2016, but most of the time there is not much there. One goes there in hope, but it is rarely rewarded! Today even the sandgrouse (both Crowned and Spotted sometimes turn up) failed to appear and we had to make do with Eurasian Collared Dove, Eurasian Hoopoe, Southern Grey Shrike, Brown-necked Raven, Barn Swallow, Willow Warbler, Common Chiffchaff, Subalpine Warbler, Northern Wheatear, Desert Wheatear and Trumpeter Finch.

On our way back to Dakhla we stopped off at one of the resort hotels, which largely cater to kite surfers. (Dakhla is world famous among this cult, largely unknown to the cult of birders, owing to its consistent windy weather and surprisingly temperate climate for somewhere on the Saharan coast.) Our target here was the long-staying immature White-throated Bee-eater that had been found by a guest earlier in the year. Rather than head south from where it was born in Mauritania, it had gone north instead. Unfortunately the wind had increased since Inger and I found it easily before the group arrived, but, much to everyone's relief, we eventually tracked it down, sheltering from the strong breeze. What a lovely bird, and a very, very unexpected bonus inside the Western Palearctic.

A few migrant passerines were also present, including Eurasian Blackcap, White Wagtail and Tree Pipit, while a pair of Black Wheatears were also in residence.

Out on the sand flats of Dakhla Bay we found a flock of Greater Flamingoes and five Royal Terns, as well as Great Cormorant (of the striking Moroccan form), Eurasian Oystercatcher, Grey (or Black-bellied) Plover, Common Ringed Plover, Kentish Plover, Red Knot, Sanderling, Slender-billed Gull, our first Audouin's Gull's (we were to see many more!), Yellow-legged Gull, many Lesser Black-backed Gulls, Caspian Tern, Sandwich Tern and Common Tern.

There was no sign of any Atlantic Hump-backed Dolphins, however, and this remained the case throughout our stay. I can only conclude that the large numbers of kite-surfers in the shallow parts of Dakhla Bay these days may be making the accessible parts of the bay inhospitable to this rare animal.



African Dunn's Lark, another major speciality of Western Sahara (Mark Beaman)

Recent sightings and numbers seem to have declined to a low level.

We had decided to keep our hotel rooms in Dakhla throughout the expedition, although we planned to camp out in the desert whenever needful after spotlighting. This proved to be a good choice and it gave us great flexibility so we could respond to ever-changing Saharan weather conditions, and sleep in the afternoon or whenever we wanted.

By very early morning we were out on the Aousserd road armed with powerful lamps, and Pete even brought an infra-red detector along. Hopes were high, as they always are on night drives, but our first spotlighting session proved to be by far our least productive! In over four hours we encountered an African Savanna Hare, five Lesser Egyptian Jerboas (what a delightful little critter, you just long to stroke one!), two Lesser Egyptian Gerbils and a Pygmy Gerbil. Not a sign of a fox, never mind a Sand Cat. After this unexciting start, sleep was welcome.

Today would be our first chance of exploring famous Oued (Wadi) Jenna, which lies not far west of the settlement of Aousserd. Our bad luck continued, however, with 'heard only' encounters with two Golden Nightjars, but things were about to change for the better, indeed much better!

As dawn came upon us the nightjars stopped calling and we began to turn our attentions to the birds of the day. Our first Cricket Warblers caused a lot of excitement as we pursued these spritely and noisy little birds among the acacias and bushes (we were to see at least 20 today), while Fulvous Babblers also proved to be common in the area.

Not long afterwards we spotted a flock of Desert Sparrows (we were to tally about 100 today, a nice contrast to the situation in Morocco and many other parts of the range, where they are not very numerous). While admiring these smart desert denizens I suddenly spotted a flash of yellow and brown, and there it was, a male Sudan Golden Sparrow! We followed the flock for some time and it turned out that there were four Sudan Golden Sparrows in total, three adult males and a female. What a brilliant result for our first visit to Jenna: one of the most sought-after yet unpredictable specialities of Western Sahara was 'in the bag'!



The strictly nocturnal Fennec Fox. What ears! (Mark Beaman)

And our luck really was 'on a roll', because not far away we came across four African Dunn's Larks that we were able to follow for a long time, as well as many Black-crowned Sparrow-larks and three Crowned Sandgrouse. So, yet another 'mega-speciality' of Western Sahara had come our way.

Other new birds today included a pale morph Booted Eagle, an adult male Montagu's Harrier, Cream-coloured Courser, Lanner Falcon, Bar-tailed Lark, Red-rumped Swallow, Western Bonelli's Warbler, Western Olivaceous Warbler and Western Orphean Warbler. The huge blackish North African Spiny-tailed Lizards also impressed.

And that good luck kept rolling on! After supper in some rocky hills, where we added Pale Crag Martin, Desert Lark and White-crowned Wheatear, we returned to Oued Jenna and, this time, scored on Golden Nightjar! Thank goodness!

Now it was time for another spotlighting outing, before we returned to sleep at Oued Jenna. What a contrast to last night it was too! We kicked off the session with a Desert Hedgehog, and not long afterwards our first Fennec Fox (what ears!) and three Rüppell's Foxes (a good try, but the Fennec won the 'biggest ears' contest). And then came the first cats, with two Wild Cats in succession! There were also the prey species; Lesser Egyptian Jerboa, Lesser Egyptian and Pygmy Gerbils, and even a Fat-tailed Gerbil. So, our faith in the Aousserd Road was restored, and more.

Before we left Oued Jenna we came across a male Marsh Harrier and while travelling back to Dakhla, we made a number of stops, one of which produced the dainty little African Desert Warbler. We also encountered three Long-legged Buzzard's of the small North African form *cirtensis*, which looks so very different from its Asian cousin, two more Marsh Harriers, plenty more Bar-tailed Larks, three more Red-rumped Wheatears and a couple of Trumpeter Finches.

We took a break from the Aousserd Road and spent some time around Dakhla. A seawatch from the lighthouse turned up a couple of Great Skuas and numerous Northern Gannets, as well as a couple of Common Sandpipers, but surprisingly not a single 'tube-nose' in spite of the unusual (for this location)



Golden Nightjar, probably the most wanted bird in Western Sahara (Mark Beaman)

onshore wind. The town itself produced Laughing Doves, a Common Kestrel and a couple of Little Swifts, but little else.

Dakhla Bay produced our first Grey Heron of the expedition and numerous shorebirds (including many Bar-tailed Godwits, Whimbrel, Common Redshank, Common Greenshank, Ruddy Turnstone, Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper and Dunlin. Numbers of roosting gulls and terns were huge, and included no fewer than 300 Audouin's Gulls! A couple of Red-throated Pipits were a bonus.

We couldn't resist another trip out on the Aousserd Road, and of course we still had Sand Cat to find! Early morning again found us on our way and this time, after two more Desert Hedgehogs and an hour and a half of careful patrolling, there it was, a Sand Cat sat in front of a small acacia only 15 metres from us! It soon decided to retreat and our attempts to follow it in the sandy terrain, first by vehicle and then on foot, proved quite laughable: it simply kept the same (40-50 metres) distance in front of us whatever we tried. If Sand Cats can laugh it was in fits...

Further down the road we came across a group of five Rüppell's Fox cubs, and not far away an adult and later two more, while we also scored on African Savanna Hare and the usual rodents, plus a Saharan Striped Polecat for some of us.

Oued Jenna produced more Golden Nightjars, and during our return to Dakhla we came across a flock of European Bee-eaters and a group of seven White Storks migrating northwards.

A final spotlighting session produced the same Sand Cat (remarkably, it was sat in exactly the same place!), another Rüppell's Fox and no fewer than three gorgeous Fennec Foxes, as well as the usual rodent suspects.

After our best Golden Nightjar sighting of the expedition at Oued Jenna and another Saharan Striped Polecat, it was time to return to Dakhla for the last time, turning up a Short-toed Snake Eagle, a Common Whitethroat and yet more Red-rumped Wheatears along the way.



The perky little African Desert Warbler (Mark Beaman)

Back in Dakhla, a final exploration of the bay produced seven Little Egrets, a Western Reef Heron and a couple of Eurasian Stone-curlews. Now the only thing left to round off a highly successful expedition was to have a wonderful dinner in Dakhla's best restaurant.

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by (H).

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader/s are indicated by (NL), while those seen only by the leader/s are indicated with (LO).

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g. only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species).

The species and family sequence, taxonomy and species names follow the I.O.C. World Bird List, which is available online at www.worldbirdnames.org/

BIRDS

Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* Common in Dakhla Bay, with up to 200 recorded.

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* A flock of seven flying northwards near Gleib Jediane.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* A total of three recorded in Dakhla Bay.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* Seven on our last day in Dakhla Bay.

Western Reef Heron (W R Egret) *Egretta gularis* One in Dakhla Bay on our last day.

Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus* 80 off Dakhla on a windy day, just two a couple of days later.

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* Up to 11 recorded each time we checked Dakhla Bay.

Short-toed Snake Eagle *Circaetus gallicus* One on the Aousserd Road west of Oued Jenna.

Booted Eagle ◊ *Hieraaetus pennatus* A pale morph at Oued Jenna.

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* One at Oued Jenna and two at Gleib Jediane.

Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* An adult male at Oued Jenna.

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus* A total of five at various points along the Aousserd Road. See note.



This Cream-coloured Courser looks like an enthusiastic digger! (Mark Beaman)

- Eurasian Stone-curlew (E Thick-knee) *Burhinus oedicephalus*** Two at Dakhla on our last day.
- Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*** Six at Dakhla Bay on our first day in the field.
- Grey Plover (Black-bellied P) *Pluvialis squatarola*** Common in Dakhla Bay, where we recorded up to 200.
- Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*** Common in Dakhla Bay, where we recorded up to 250.
- Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*** Common in Dakhla Bay, where we recorded up to 100.
- Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*** Common in Dakhla Bay, where we recorded up to 300.
- Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus (NL)*** Xavier and Armand saw one at Dakhla.
- Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*** Six at Dakhla Bay.
- Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*** Just two at Dakhla Bay.
- Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*** Two on the rocks at Dakhla Lighthouse.
- Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*** A total of 52 recorded in a day at Dakhla Bay.
- Red Knot *Calidris canutus*** Up to 50 recorded at Dakhla Bay.
- Sanderling *Arenaria interpres*** Common in Dakhla Bay, where we recorded up to 300.
- Little Stint *Calidris minuta*** 10 at Dakhla Bay on one occasion.
- Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*** 30 at Dakhla Bay on one occasion.
- Dunlin *Calidris alpina*** Common in Dakhla Bay, where we recorded up to 100.
- Cream-coloured Courser *Cursorius cursor*** Regular records of up to five from the Aousserd Road.
- Slender-billed Gull *Chroicocephalus genei*** Up to five recorded at Dakhla Bay.
- Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*** Two at Dakhla.
- Audouin's Gull \diamond *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus*** Common at Dakhla, where we recorded up to 200.
- Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis*** Common in Dakhla area, where we recorded up to 60.
- Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*** Numerous in Dakhla area, where we recorded up to 2000. A few fuscus.
- Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia*** Common at Dakhla Bay, where we recorded up to 70.
- Royal Tern *Thalasseus maximus*** Five seen at Dakhla Bay.
- Sandwich Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis*** Common in Dakhla area, where we recorded up to 250.
- Common Tern *Sternula hirundo*** A total of four at Dakhla.
- Great Skua *Stercorarius skua*** Two seen off Dakhla.
- Crowned Sandgrouse *Pterocles coronatus*** Three at Oued Jenna.
- Rock Dove *Columba livia*** Some feral birds at Dakhla town but one wild-type bird at the cliffs at Trouk.
- Eurasian Collared Dove \diamond *Streptopelia decaocto*** Found from Dakhla to Aousserd, with up to 16 in a day.
- Laughing Dove *Spilopelia senegalensis*** Up to 6 around Dakhla.
- Golden Nightjar \diamond *Caprimulgus eximius*** Singles seen on two occasions at Oued Jenna and up to two others heard.



Finding Sudan Golden Sparrows among a flock of Desert Sparrows was one of the expedition highlights (Mark Beaman)

Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus* One flying over north Dakhla looked like this species, but the view was brief.

Little Swift *Apus affinis* A few over Dakhla.

White-throated Bee-eater *Merops albicollis* The long staying immature at Dakhla Bay was still present!

European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster* A group of six west of Oued Jenna.

Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops* Three singles at various points along the Aousserd Road.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* An adult male over north Dakhla.

Lanner Falcon *Falco biarmicus* Four singles at various points along the Aousserd Road.

Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis* Common along the Aousserd Road, with up to 16 in a day.

Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator* Singles at the start of the Aousserd Road and at Oued Jenna.

Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis* Fairly common along the Aousserd Road, with up to 8 in a day.

Greater Hoopoe Lark *Alaemon alaudipes* Fairly common along the Aousserd Road, with up to 6 in a day.

Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti* Two in a rocky area near Oued Jenna.

Bar-tailed Lark *Ammomanes cinctura* Common along the Aousserd Road, with up to 15 in a day.

Black-crowned Sparrow-lark *Eremopterix nigriceps* Common in and around Oued Jenna, with up to 55 in a day.

Thekla Lark *Galerida theklae* Up to 12 at Gleib Jediane and two at the start of the Aousserd Road.

African Dunn's Lark *Eremalauda [dunni] dunni* Four at Oued Jenna. See note.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* Widespread, from Dakhla to Aousserd, with up to 18 in a day.

Pale Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne obsoleta* Three at a rocky area near Oued Jenna.

Red-rumped Swallow *Cecropis daurica* One at Oued Jenna.

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus* One at Gleib Jediane.

Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* Up to 5 in a day, with records from Dakhla to Oued Jenna.

Western Bonelli's Warbler *Phylloscopus bonelli* A few records of up to three from Oued Jenna.

Western Olivaceous Warbler *Iduna opaca* Up to three at Oued Jenna.

Cricket Warbler ♢ *Spiloptila clamans* Up to 20 at Oued Jenna and one west of there.

Fulvous Babbler ♢ *Turdoides fulva* Up to 15 at Oued Jenna.

Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* Two at Dakhla Bay and Max had another west of Oued Jenna.

Western Orphean Warbler *Sylvia hortensis* One at Oued Jenna.

African Desert Warbler *Sylvia deserti* One west of Oued Jenna.

Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* One west of Oued Jenna.

Western Subalpine Warbler *Sylvia [cantillans] inornata* Up to five seen at localities from Dakhla Bay to Oued Jenna.

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* Up to five seen at various localities from Dakhla to Oued Jenna.

Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti* Scattered records of one or two at various points on the Aousserd Road.

Red-rumped Wheatear *Oenanthe moesta* Several records of up to three along the first part of the Aousserd Road.

Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucura* Two at a rocky outcrop at the north end of Dakhla Bay.



Lesser Egyptian Jerboas are so cute it is hard to resist a quick stroke (Mark Beaman)

White-crowned Wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga* Two at a rocky area near Oued Jenna.
House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* Occurs fairly commonly from Dakhla to Aousserd around habitation.
Desert Sparrow *Passer simplex* Common on the eastern part of the Aousserd Road, with up to 100 in a day.
Sudan Golden Sparrow \diamond *Passer luteus* Four at Oued Jenna, in a flock with Desert Sparrows.
White Wagtail *Motacilla [alba] alba* Up to seven around Dakhla.
Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis* Three at Dakhla Bay.
Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus* One seen and another heard at Dakhla Bay.
Trumpeter Finch *Bucanetes githagineus* Four at Gleib Jediane and two around Oued Jenna.

MAMMALS

Desert Hedgehog *Paraechinus aethiopicus* A total of three on the Aousserd Road.
African Savanna Hare *Lepus microtis* A total of three on the Aousserd Road. See note.
Lesser Egyptian Jerboa *Jaculus jaculus* **Common** on the Aousserd Road, with up to 15 each visit.
Lesser Egyptian Gerbil *Gerbillus gerbillus* Common on the Aousserd Road, with up to 12 each visit.
Pygmy Gerbil *Gerbillus henleyi* Three singles on the Aousserd Road. Probably overlooked.
Fat-tailed Gerbil *Pachyuromys duprasi* Three singles on the Aousserd Road. As with Pygmy, probably overlooked.
Wild Cat *Felis sylvestris* Two during one session on the Aousserd Road and a third on another night drive.
Sand Cat *Felis margarita* Seen twice on the Aousserd Road, but the same individual was involved.
Rüppell's Fox *Vulpes rueppellii* A total of 12 on the Aousserd Road.
Fennec Fox *Vulpes zerda* A total of 4 on the Aousserd Road.
Saharan Striped Polecat *Poecilictis libyca* Three singles along the Aousserd Road.

NOTES

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus* The North African form *cirtensis* is so very different in morphology from the larger Asian form that it is surprising it is still usually lumped with *rufinus*. Some have proposed splitting it as Atlas (Long-legged) Buzzard.

African Dunn's Lark *Eremalauda [dunni] dunni* The IOC do not yet split this form, which is noticeably different from the Arabian form *eremodites*. The pair of taxa are analogous to, for example, African and Asian Desert Warblers.

African Savanna Hare *Lepus microtis* This form used to be lumped in Scrub Hare *L. saxatilis*.



Part of our stalwart expedition team in Western Sahara (Mark Beaman)

TOP 5 BIRDS OR MAMMALS OF THE TOUR

- 1st: Sand Cat
- 2nd=: Golden Nightjar and Fennec Fox
- 4th: White-throated Bee-eater
- 5th: African Dunn's Lark