

WESTERN SAHARA TOUR REPORT 2023

17 - 24 March 2023

by Diedert Koppenol

This year's tour through the breath-taking landscapes of Western Sahara was a great success with the key specialities seen and delivered a wonderful taste of the spectacular migration passerines perform every year, all the way from Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe. We enjoyed great views of key birds like Golden Nightjar, Sudan Golden Sparrow, West African Crested Tern, Dunn's Lark, Namaqua Dove and Desert Sparrow and recorded a total of 112 bird species, among which were the 3rd Rosy Starling and 9th Lesser Scaup (pending acceptance). The recent rainfalls last fall, and we even had some during the tour(!), had made the otherwise dry and sandy desert look more like an African savannah, with large swaths of green grass and shrubs all throughout the area and along the road. Birding was therefore less confined to small, good patches. Instead, many species were very abundant, with several lark species already having young! This made mammalwatching relatively tricky this year due to the high abundance of suitable vegetation for them to hide in and also to obscure our visio, but gerbils and jerboas were plentiful (we had at least 4 species) and we saw several Desert Hedgehogs, African Savanna Hares and African Golden Wolves!

Our Western Sahara tour started off with an evening arrival in Dakhla, the only city in Western Sahara. The town is quite modern and a lot of construction is still ongoing, with new buildings being put up along the peninsula. Our accommodation is situated nicely outside of town though, all the way at the northern end of the peninsula. Its famous gardens has produced many a rarity already, including White-throated Bee-eater, and is a nice migrant 'trap'.

After a good night's sleep, we started off early with a pre-breakfast walk through the gardens and noting our first Eurasian Collared Doves, Barn Swallows, Eurasian Blackcaps and House Sparrows at the hotel grounds. We quickly went towards the coastline of Dakhla Bay, right outside our accommodation, and started scanning the resting gulls and terns for anything noteworthy. We quickly latched on a few Caspian Terns amongst the Lesser Black-backed Gulls, Slender-billed Gulls and Sandwich Terns present. Also, a single Black-headed Gull was trying to hide amongst them. While scanning, you also had to keep an eye to the sky as there were quite a few terns and gulls flying past. We picked up the first West African Crested Terns this way, which were often announcing their presence quite loudly while interacting with each other.

There were several flocks of shorebirds present at high tide on the beaches and the small ponds left by the tide, including several Eurasian Oystercatchers, a Grey Plover, large amounts of Common Ringed Plovers with one Little Ringed Plover and Kentish Plovers, a group of Bar-tailed Godwits and some Red Knots and Ruddy Turnstones scrummaging around. Two Tree Pipits were present in front of the restaurant as well.

After this productive first birding session we set out towards the desert, but not before we did some more birding in the parking lot. Two showy Black Wheatears were frequenting the rocky hillside here while a Sedge Warbler was hiding in the scrubs at the edge of the parking lot. We set

off, only to find out that one of the car's fuel tank was so empty we didn't make it to the fuel station in time for it to refill. This curtailed our plans a bit, but luckily, we could ferry everyone back to the hotel for some more garden birding while the other car was brought back to life. We set out again after lunch for our drive along the famous Aousserd Road. We would be in for a long haul, as is usually the case with this tour, because our eyes were set on the prizes the Western Sahara which it only gives up at night! Moreover, there was so much to see and therefore distract us on our way to the great Oued Jenna. We made several stops along the way, which resulted in our first Greater Hoopoe-Larks of which some were singing. The large grass held flocks of Greater Short-toed Lark and smaller groups of Dunn's Larks were foraging on and alongside the road! It felt great to have one of the major targets already in the bag so early on in the tour. We observed these larks for quite some time, as most of them weren't too afraid of us humans. En route, we also had several Black Kites, Western Marsh Harriers and a Red Kite flying past. A Common Kestrel was hunting in the roadside and quite a few Northern Wheatears were foraging here as well, feeding up before continuing their migration northwards. A spot in the middle of our journey was especially fruitful with two showy Temminck's Larks and Thick-billed Larks right in front of the cars, which were a bit quick but gave good views.

After several hours of driving and birding, we reached Oued Jenna. Here we would try for one of the prizes of Western Sahara: Golden Nightjar. There had been some sightings just before our arrival, so we had high hopes, although the wind was very strong and it wasn't as warm as we had expected the desert to be. We started at one of the sites with recent reports and listened for any sounds in the starlit wadi. Not a single noise was heard, so we decided to walk in a bit of a wedge formation to see if we could find or hear anything. No nightjars were heard this night but we did enjoy the many Lesser Egyptian Jerboas and Lesser Egyptian Gerbils. We also had a very showy Desert Hedgehog, with its dark face. At about 01:00, we set back towards our accommodation, while spotlighting the Aousserd Road. This resulted in more Desert Hedgehogs and two African Savanna Hares. Sadly, we also saw our only confirmed Libyan Striped Weasel of the tour, killed just minutes before we arrived.

The morning was used for some much-needed sleep, but after a midday breakfast we went out on the Aousserd Road again. We had set our sights for the Sudan Golden Sparrows today and drove all the way down to Aousserd itself, a village just on the edge of civilization and the actual Sahara. A tiny compound a mile before the entrance the village had a pair of White-crowned Wheatears hopping about, with the male displaying his wonderful song a few times.

Making our way just past the village, a small patch of vegetation next to the road held a large group of at least 50 Sudan Golden Sparrows, busy chirping and flying around with food for chicks. Several beautiful males showed nicely, perched in the acacia-type shrubs. A smaller number of Desert Sparrows were also present. A cool discovery here was done while we worked our way along the acacia shrubs as we flushed a Barn Owl! We didn't expect that one out here. Based on plumage, it seems to be the African subspecies, instead of a northern beast. Three Namaqua Doves had been reported here earlier and they flew by chasing each other, but luckily at least one perched nicely for us. Also present here were several Black-crowned Sparrow-Larks, including some singing males. The last noteworthy species here was a very confiding Maghreb Lark on the road which wasn't shy at all and kept coming back to us.

After this very successful birding stop, we went back towards Oued Jenna for our appointment with the Golden Nightjar. Sadly, it had once more forgotten to show up! We decided after an hour or two of searching to slowly drive back to Dakhla, meanwhile spotlighting the entire way. This resulted in views of several African Savanna Hares, A roadkill Fennec Fox (only shortly deceased, we should've driven faster!), many Lesser Egyptian Gerbils and Jerboas, but also several

Rüppel's Foxes! Unfortunately, the area where we saw them did not allow for getting closer and they mostly stayed far away and just on the edge of our flashlight's reach.

Another morning that was turned into the night and we decided to explore the area around the Atlantic Coast off Dakhla and Dakhla Bay. After some birding in the hotel grounds, which produced highlights in the form three Laughing Doves, four Little Stints, four Curlew Sandpipers, amongst the 'standard' repertoire of Eurasian Oystercatcher, Grey Plover, Common Ringed and Little Ringed Plover, Red Knot, Sanderling, Dunlin and the gulls and terns were also present with several Caspian, West African and Sandwich Terns. Also, at least one little Tern flew past, a nice addition to the list!

We made several stops along the road up towards Dakhla at either side of the peninsula, checking all the flocks of gulls to look for anything special such as a Kelp Gull. While we did not find this particular species, we scanned roughly 20,000 Lesser Black-backed Gulls and saw several nice Audouin's Gulls, Mediterranean Gulls, a few fuscus-type Lesser Black-backed Gulls and a few Slender-billed Gulls. The Little Egrets did not reveal any secretive Western Reef Heron, but many Western Cattle Egrets took over closer to Dakhla. We also saw several Great Cormorants, belonging to the subspecies maroccanus. A small detour to some walled-in farmlands turned out to be very nice with several sandpipers feeding on the irrigated fields, including Common Redshank and Common Sandpiper, but we also found Western Subalpine Warbler, White Wagtail and several Barn Swallows foraging here. A beautiful Eurasian Hoopoe quickly flew by. We ended the day at the southern tip of the peninsula, where we searched the salt flats for Spectacled Warbler, but instead found a roost of Western Yellow Wagtails, gathering while darkness set in. Before it was too dark, we had nice views of Eurasian Spoonbills here. We had kept an eye on the wind and weather and decided against another run for Golden Nightjar.

The following morning, we went out for a birding excursion closer to the accommodation, searching any and all patches of scrub along the road. The bushes were teeming with life. Several Woodchat Shrikes were often most notable, next to the many displaying Thekla's Larks, Greater Short-toed Larks and Greater Hoopoe-Larks. Barn Swallows were trickling through as was a single Common House Martin. However, the smaller passerines is what kept us busy, with several Western Bonelli's Warblers, Common Chiffchaffs, Willow Warblers, Western Olivaceous Warbler, Eurasian Blackcaps, Western Subalpine Warblers a Common Whitethroat, White and Western Yellow Wagtails and finally some showy Spectacled Warblers! Our favourite migrants here were a foraging male Common Redstart, a great Bluethroat, a showy Western Orphean Warbler and a tricky Nightingale! However, the local Red-rumped Wheatears stole the show, singing loudly, presumably to let the Desert and Northern Wheatears know which territory this really was. Another Eurasian Hoopoe was around and showed a bit better this time, while a Cream-coloured Courser flew past as well. On our way back for lunch, we had a wonderful Lanner Falcon flying past and a migrating Osprey through the sand as well!

After lunch, it was time for our drive to Oued Jenna again. Our plan was to arrive well before dark to do some additional birding in the wadi itself, but this proved to be quite difficult! We were distracted by the many birds we encountered along the road, flying past or heard singing through the car windows. Highlights included large flocks of Greater Short-toed Larks, Dunn's Larks, a few juvenile Temminck's Larks and many Black-crowned Sparrow-Larks, more Western Olivaceous Warblers, a nice Western Orphean Warbler, more Northern and Red-rumped Wheatears and a flock of Brown-necked Ravens.

Upon arrival in the wadi, we first had our packed dinner. After this, we set out birding the wadi, finding several migrants resting up here before their nightly flight, including a Common Cuckoo,

another Nightingale, a Western Black-eared Wheatear and one of our targets showed up as well: Fulvous Babbler. A small family group was foraging amongst the acacia's and some of the youngsters sat nicely perched for us, while calling their relatives.

After darkness set in, we gathered at our nightjar site and started listening. An hour flew by without a peep, but then suddenly, the wished-for two-toned churr filled the night! A quick scan with the flashlight and there it was, as if attracted by the flight, flying towards us! Its beautiful golden colour instantly showed us where the name came from. The Golden Nightjar flew above our heads for a bit, showing the white and black wing pattern on the outer primaries before landing some 50 meters away and started singing there. It didn't stay for too long so scope views were short, but all had obtained great views, before it disappeared farther into the wadi.

We tried to awake the nightjar an hour later with some playback at a spot further north, which resulted in a response of a singing male and possibly two, but it wasn't easy to tell. We decided to leave the nightjars alone, with another Barn Owl chasing us off. We started our nightdrive back towards Dakhla, which proved fruitful with the many gerbils and jerboas, including a Fat-tailed Gerbil and a Libyan Jird today, two African Golden Wolves that were seen shortly, another Rüppel's Fox, Desert Hedgehog and a quick mammal that could've not been anything else but a Libyan Striped Weasel but sadly it did not show itself again after disappearing in a hole so not everyone got views. Driving back, a thick blanket of sea mist welcomed us when we got close to Dakhla, a very strange meteorological phenomenon which we hadn't expected here in the Sahara!

After we returned at 07:00 this morning to the accommodation, we went to rest and started birding after lunch (of course, lunch is with binoculars as well so we scanned the beaches) along the road close to the accommodation to see if any new migrants had shown up or if we could find any desert targets such as African Desert Warbler. We had no luck with that one, but enjoyed some very great birding. Two Quails were flushed among the thorny bushes, we saw another Bluethroat, plenty of Willow, Western Subalpine and Spectacled Warblers again. Red-rumped, Desert and Northern Wheatears were present as well, as were Eurasian Blackcaps, singing Greater Hoopoe-Larks, displaying Thekla's Larks, plenty of Greater Short-toed Larks, all while Long-legged Buzzards and Lanner Falcons soared overhead! However, the greatest highlight was the finding of a small artificial pond at the edge of the desert, that was there for irrigating the surrounding fields. Water is life, especially when there is none, so here we struck gold! The vegetation towards the pond was full of passerines, including many Sedge Warblers, Western Olivaceous Warblers and Sardinian Warblers. A Red-throated Pipit was foraging in a ditch, with several Wood Sandpipers and a Green Sandpiper were trotting about on the overflow fields. We flushed several more Sedge Warblers our way towards the pond. The pond had a large flock of Eurasian Coot, several Common Moorhen squabbling with each other, a Greater Flamingo foraging in the back along with some Eurasian Spoonbills but the best was the waterfowl. Four Northern Shovelers were shovelling away, amazing to see them all the way down here, this far south! One Marbled Duck was the single one for the tour, a very good bird and a Garganey was seen scurrying off by some as well. Another bird was a bit trickier to identify but turned out to be the 9th Lesser Scaup for Morocco (3rd for Western Sahara)! As if that wasn't enough of a rarity already, while we were scoping out the pond a larger passerine grabbed our attention, as it flew out of the tree we were standing next to. We put our bins on it and quickly saw a black bird with a bit of a rose-coloured tint. Rosy Starling! As it turns out, only the 3rd record for Morocco. What a place this was. As soon as it turned too dark to see anything on the pond, we headed back for dinner. A Little Owl was seeing us off, sitting next to the road, being of the desert form *saharae*.

Another nightdrive was on the books for tonight. We set out just after dark and were soon into some action with two African Golden Wolves running next to the car. Sadly, all wildlife was being

very skittish, but most managed to get views. Then suddenly our night drive was curtailed when we were met with a big cloudburst. Since many of the mammals hunt by sound here in the desert, we soon realised the chances of seeing anything exciting had dropped significantly with the added difficulty of trying to pierce the rain with our torches. After an hour or so, we headed back and called it a night.

This meant we could go for a nice start this morning where we went out birding along the desert road again. Still on the hunt for some birds we hadn't seen yet like the African Desert Warbler, but it was not to be. We did manage to find loads of migrant birds with many Northern Wheatears, Eurasian Blackcaps, Willow and Western Subalpine Warblers but also several Common Chiffchaffs, a pair of Spectacled Warblers, plenty of Thekla's Larks, Red-rumped Wheatears, Great Grey and Woodchat Shrikes, Greater Hoopoe-Larks and many more.

We returned for lunch to our accommodation. Just before you enter the gate, there is a large inlet which was full of birds this time. A large flock of European Flamingos was present along with many Lesser Black-backed Gulls, Black-headed Gulls, Grey Herons, Little Egrets, Eurasian Spoonbills, several Audouin's Gulls, a huge group of Bar-tailed Godwits mixed with other waders such as Sanderlings, Dunlins and Common Greenshanks. During lunch, we birded the beach as well and the Tree Pipit was still present as it had been since the start of the tour, as was the Lesser Ringed Plover, some Ruddy Turnstones and a Curlew Sandpiper.

After our lunch, we went back out for a final stint to the desert roadside and we visited the artificial pond as well. Highlights of the desert birding were the great views of a hunting Lanner Falcon above the tarmac road we had, a very obliging Bar-tailed Lark that was singing its heart out, an unkindness of Brown-necked Ravens, a large flock of Black-crowned Sparrow-Larks and some more migratory birds such as Western Subalpine Warblers. The Rose-coloured Starling and Lesser Scaup were still present at the pond, but we also saw two Common Snipe and a Jack Snipe here. Amazing to see them so out-of-place. Furthermore, the Northern Shovelers and Marbled Teal were present still, amongst the many Eurasian Coots. New was a Ruff foraging on the banks in the back, and we also had a Spotted Redshank this time round. We could only imagine what one could find here one were to check it every day!

After a successful birding day, we went back for dinner, as our transfer to the airport would leave very early the next day. We ended the tour with another great dinner and cold Casablanca beer!

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED

BIRDS

Garganey *Spatula querquedula* One present on a pond at the edge of the desert. Non-leader.

Northern Shoveler *Spatula clypeata* A flock of four present on the pond.

Marbled Duck *Marmaronetta angustirostris* A single individual present on the pond.

Scaup sp *Aythya affinis* One individual, presumed Lesser Scaup, on the pond.

Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix* At least two individuals flushed in the migrant hotspots.

Golden Nightjar ♠ *Caprimulgus eximius* As soon as the weather was right and darkness set in, two individuals started singing. One showing very well albeit shortly.

Little Swift *Apus affinis* Two flying by on the road close to our accommodation. Leader-only.

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* One on migration flushed in Oued Jenna.

Rock Dove *Columba livia*

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Laughing Dove *Spilopelia senegalensis*

Namaqua Dove *Oena capensis* Several in the same area of the breeding Sudan Golden Sparrow 'colony', just past Aousserd.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* Several individuals on a pond at the edge of the desert.

Eurasian Coot *Fulica ara*

Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus*

Eurasian Stone-curlew *Burhinus oediconemus* Heard-only.

Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*

Grey Plover (Black-bellied P) *Pluvialis squatarola*

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*

Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*

Eurasian Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*

Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* A large flock flying past in the early morning. Non-leader.

Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

Red Knot *Calidris canutus*

Ruff *Calidris pugnax*

Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*

Sanderling *Calidris alba*

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*

Little Stint *Calidris minuta*

Jack Snipe *Lymnocyptes minimus*

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

Cream-colored Courser *Cursorius cursor*

Slender-billed Gull *Chroicocephalus genei*

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

Audouin's Gull ♦ *Ichthyaetus audouinii* Relatively common in the resting gulls along the coast.

Mediterranean Gull *Ichthyaetus melanocephalus*

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis*

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*

Lesser Black-backed Gull (Baltic Gull) *Larus [fuscus] fuscus*

Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica*

Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia*

West African Crested Tern ♦ *Thalasseus albidorsalis* Quite common along the beach from our accommodation.

Sandwich Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis*

Little Tern *Sternula albifrons*

Great Cormorant (Moroccan C) *Phalacrocorax [carbo] maroccanus*

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*

Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

Black Kite *Milvus migrans*

Red Kite *Milvus milvus*

Long-legged Buzzard (Atlas L-I B) *Buteo [rufinus] cirtensis*

Western Barn Owl *Tyto alba* Based on photographs, looks likely to be ssp. *poensis* (ssp. *affinis* merged with this ssp), with dark vertical line between eyes.

Little Owl *Athene noctua*

Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Lanner Falcon *Falco biarmicus*

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*

Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*

Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator*

Brown-necked Raven ♦ *Corvus ruficollis*

Greater Hoopoe-Lark *Alaemon alaudipes*

Thick-billed Lark ♦ *Ramphocoris clotbey*

Bar-tailed Lark *Ammomanes cinctura*

Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark ♦ *Eremopterix nigriceps*

Thekla's Lark *Galerida theklae*

Maghreb Lark ♦ *Galerida macrorhyncha* Several along the Aousserd road, near civilization. One very showy individual just past Aousserd.

Temminck's Lark ♦ *Eremophila bilopha*

Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*

Dunn's Lark ♦ *Eremalauda dunnii* Due to the rainfall, this species was among the commoner larks this year!

Sand Martin (Bank Swallow) *Riparia riparia*

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Common House Martin *Delichon urbicum*

Western Bonelli's Warbler *Phylloscopus bonelli*

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*

Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*

Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*

Western Olivaceous Warbler *Iduna opaca*

Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*

Western Orphean Warbler *Curruca hortensis*

Western Subalpine Warbler ♦ *Curruca iberiae* Amongst the commoner migrants of the tour, frequently found foraging in the larger bushes in the desert.

Common Whitethroat *Curruca communis*

Spectacled Warbler *Curruca conspicillata*

Fulvous Babbler ♦ *Argya fulva* A family group was showing nicely in Oued Jenna.

Rosy Starling *Pastor roseus* One individual at the small pond at the edge of the desert, remaining for at least two days.

Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*

Common Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*

Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* Several at the migration hotspots.

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*

Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti*

Western Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica* One in Oued Jenna.

Red-rumped Wheatear ♦ *Oenanthe moesta* Next to Northern Wheatear, the most often encountered wheatear.

Black Wheatear ♦ *Oenanthe leucura* Two showy individuals were present every day in the parking lot of our accommodation.

White-crowned Wheatear ♦ (W-c Black W) *Oenanthe leucopyga* Two individuals showed nicely just outside of Aousserd at the mosque.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Desert Sparrow ♦ *Passer simplex* Quite common during the tour, with a male even feeding on the insects while using the wing mirror as a perch.

Sudan Golden Sparrow ♦ *Passer luteus* A very large group breeding just south of Aousserd, with several Desert Sparrow as well.

Western Yellow Wagtail (form unidentified) *Motacilla flava*

Western Yellow Wagtail (Iberian Wagtail) *Motacilla flava iberiae*

White Wagtail *Motacilla [alba] alba*

Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*

Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus*

Trumpeter Finch *Bucanetes githagineus*

MAMMALS

Desert Hedgehog *Paraechinus aethiopicus*

African Golden Wolf *Canis lupaster*

Rüppel's Fox *Vulpes rueppellii*

Fennec Fox *Vulpes zerda* A freshly killed individual on Aousserd Road. Sadly, no breathing ones.

Libyan Striped Weasel (Saharan S Polecat) *Ictonyx libycus* A fresh roadkill on Aousserd Road and a potential one but views weren't long enough to clinch ID.

African Savanna Hare *Lepus victoriae*

Lesser Egyptian Jerboa *Jaculus jaculus*

Lesser Egyptian Gerbil *Gerbillus gerbillus*

Fat-tailed Gerbil *Pachyuromys duprasi*

Libyan Jird *Meriones libycus*

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

Sahara Sand Viper *Cerastes vipera*

Saharan Horned Viper *Cerastes cerastes*

Helmethead Gecko *Tarentola chazaliae*

Ringed Wall Gecko (White-spotted Wall Gecko) *Tarentola annularis*

North African Mastigure *Uromastyx acanthinura*

North African Rock Agama (Bibron's agama) *Agama imparealis/bibronii*