

## Morocco & Western Sahara, 19-28 June 2015

Contributed by Jos  
Last Updated Wednesday, 12 August 2015

Tempted by the possibilities of Sand Cats and other exotic mammals of the night, this nine-day trip had two main goals: (i) mammals across the region, and (ii) a sampling on the seawatching off Cap Rhir, north of Agadir. The trip was a remarkable success with 17 species of mammal recorded, including Sand Cat and Barbary Macaque, and seawatching that far exceeded my expectations, the absolute highlights being no less than 14 White-faced Storm Petrels and 15 Barolo Shearwaters.

Mid-summer in the Sahara might seem a mad idea, but in reality the temperatures in the Western Sahara were rather milder than might be expected at this season (a pleasant 20-25 C on the coast, 25-30 C inland). That said, temperatures in central Morocco were higher than expected, hitting highs on 42 C in the areas around Tizi n'Test pass, Cascades d'Ouzard and Marrakes. Having visited Morocco twice before and the coastal stretch of the Western Sahara once, my itinerary on this trip was dedicated almost solely to localities for mammals, but in the Western Sahara in particular these largely overlap with the main birding sites anyway. In central Morocco, the only birding sites I visited were Oued Massa, Cap Rhir and Essaouira (for Eleonora's Falcons). Madcap team for the trip consisted of myself and, now a hardcore traveller voyaging onto her fourth continent, a six-year old on her maiden trip to Sahara. More than eager to endure sleeping out in the desert night after night and to scramble up umpteen dunes, it should be noted that as a concession to my companion, several hours each day were spent on beaches, etc, but with Royal Terns and Audouin's Gulls in abundance, this was hardly a hardship! Logistics & Costs My flights to and from Marrakesh were on Ryan Air, arriving early both ways and very well-priced at 60 euros per person outward and just 29 euros return. Car rental was also organized via the Ryan website and cost 130 euros for nine days, the car supplied by Hertz and brand new. They ripped me off by adding a 45 euro 'cleaning fee' for returning the car moderately dusty. We only stayed in two hotels, both costing approximately 11 euros for doubles, otherwise we wild camped each night. Any trip incorporating both Morocco and the Western Sahara is going to see the kilometers whizz by, the Marrakesh to Dakhla route alone chalking up 1400 km each way. If returning to Dakhla during the day, each of the night drives on the Aoussard road gobbles up another 300 or 400 km. Thus, it was no surprise to find that we covered 4615 km over the nine days. Fuel cost about 0.70 euro/litre in the Western Sahara and 1.05/litre in Morocco, with my entire fuel bill coming to 220 euro. In the Western Sahara, there are military checkpoints at regular intervals where all passport and personal details are logged - the soldiers are all very friendly, but it saves a lot of time if you carry a dozen or so photocopies of a paper with your name, address, profession and passport details are readily identifiable in French. Elsewhere, there is a very heavy police presence on the roads of Morocco, roadblocks are frequent and very active guys with radars wait at seemingly every other small town. There don't log passport details, but if you are a few kilometers over the sometimes unclear speed limit, your budget will be dented by about 28 euros, more if going very fast. And be warned, the guy with the radar is often a lone guy concealed somewhere in the street or behind bushes who radios the next checkpoint where you get stopped! DAILY LOG 19 June. Marrakesh, the Long Road South. Into the sultry heat at 9.00 am, touching down at Marrakesh Airport, Pallid Swifts screaming around the arrival gates, a House Bunting in full song inside the terminal. One humongous queue at immigration, then a less than friendly official who struck a line straight through our arrival cards and denied us entry to Morocco! Gee, what a welcome! Rather confused we stumbled back into the mass of other tourists awaiting their turn and sought out another official to find out what the problem was. It turned out that 'hotel' is not a sufficient address for the immigration forms. Hmm, so we borrowed a hotel name from another tourist and tried again. Nope, no still no entry! A rather friendlier official this time said as we had been rejected by one particular immigration guy we needed to return to him again. Oo er, this was not looking good! Anyhow, skipping the queues, we went straight back to his booth and breathed a massive sigh of relief when the thud of a stamp went on my passport, we were in! After that, all went rather more smoothly. Hertz delivered us a plush new shiny car and moments later we were cruising out onto the streets of Marrakesh. Umpteen more Pallid Swifts overhead, Common Bulbuls in roadside shrubbery, a bunch of camels on a roadside junction. One quick police checkpoint and we were off, it was now near 11.00 a.m. and ahead of us lay a drive of 1400 km to Dakhla in the southern sections of the Western Sahara. Didn't make many stops on this first day, just continued ploughing south till the evening, the roads rather busy and slow all the way to Guelmine. White Storks, European Bee-eaters and Turtle Doves near Marrakech, Spotless Starlings around Agadir, Woodchat Shrikes and Thekla Buntings somewhere further south. Some time after dark, 620 km into our journey, I pulled off the road onto a rocky track leading towards the sea near Oued Choika, a fine site to camp for the first night. Trillions of little fish jumped in the water as we shone the spotlight around, the crashing Atlantic made for a fine backdrop. Having also travelled through the previous night, there was no trouble in sleeping that night! 20 June. Dakhla, Aoussard Road. Dawn on the Atlantic coast, vast stone expanses stretching to the east, breakers crashing on a lonely beach to our immediate west. Oystercatchers strutting on the sand, a single Marbled Duck paddling on the stunted stretch of river that we had camped alongside. Had a little while to explore before hitting the road again, two Western Reef Herons in the bay, a single Greater Flamingo too, plus a little gaggle of Night Herons and Little Egrets on rocks by the road bridge. And then it was time to begin the drive again, an enormous 800 km to cover by late afternoon. Numerous military roadchecks, an eventful breakfast on a sand dune with a flock of five Cream-coloured Coursers flying in to join us, then two more, shortly followed by the first Hoopoe Lark of the trip and a couple of Desert Wheatears. Stopped at Khnifiss Lagoon for an hour or so, the little one practiced rock climbing, scattering Black Wheatears as she went, I scoped for large dark-backed gulls. With the tide out, the task was a little daunting, birds scattered far and wide ...ignoring the masses of terns roosting way off in the next galaxy, I set out scanning the nearer islands and sandbanks. Quite productive, a flock of 18 Eurasian Spoonbills plodded intertidal flats just near, assorted

waders included Kentish Plovers, Bar-tailed Godwits and Turnstones, while a small rocky islet looked very promising indeed - atop it a bunch of dark-backed gulls, target bird might just be amongst them. Hmm, despite a total lack of heat haze and pretty good viewing conditions, I was either struggling to identify the bird I sought or there wasn't one there! It wasn't helped by the fact that several candidates were partially hidden behind rocks, tops of backs and heads just about all that was visible. After quite a while of pretty intense scoping however, I was reasonably convinced that all the birds I was looking at were Great Black-backed Gulls, including two pairs with fat bundles of chicks wandering around. These are pretty remarkable birds in themselves, breeding many hundreds of kilometres further south than the normal range, but it would be more than an hour later before another bird appeared on a sand bank miles off to the right that appeared to match the key features for the bird I desired ...greenish legs, broad white trailing edge to the wings, a lighter build to the head, or an active imagination in this last regard, but I am pretty sure it was a Cape Gull. At that range, I couldn't say it was a stunning bird though and, typical blighter, it chose to fly off when I wasn't looking ...oops! Anyhow, with hundreds of kilometres still to go, back to the road we went, crossing into Western Sahara proper and trundling south for ever more, Red-rumped Wheatears popping up every now and then, so too four more Cream-coloured Coursers, another Hoopoe Lark and quite regular Desert Wheatears. Passing a right dump of a small settlement made famous a few years back for the first ever Pied Crows breeding in the Western Palearctic, I paused a while to scan the jumbled litter ...I'm not sure if the Pied Crows have been seen for a couple of years, but regardless, they certainly weren't present this day - a dozen scrawny dogs, 12 Brown-necked Ravens, one Black Kite and one police road block, the sum of life at that stop! Another hundred kilometres and three final checkpoints and finally we were there, rolling into Dakhla town at 6 p.m., the great drive behind us! An hour or so on the beach, then off we went, another drive about to unfold ...one into the night on the legendary Aousserd road! Prior to 2010, Sand Cat was a mystical beast in the Western Palearctic, a mere five records or so, all in the remote wilds of the Western Sahara. Recently however, exploration of the Aousserd road at night has revealed this cat to be rather regular, several dedicated teams scoring success in return for two or three nights spotlighting along the road. So it was, as the sun began to drop, we positioned ourselves at Gleb Jdiane to await dusk. This locality, at km 17 on the Aousserd road, occasionally gets sandgrouse dropping into to drink, but nothing much to report on that evening, so after slinging a few small mammal traps in the vegetation and watching the sun fall below the horizon, we set off eastwards into the night. Compared with about 2012, rodent numbers appear to have crashed along this road, I presume a cyclical thing, and it would appear that carnivores are following. With a spotlight mounted on the car, illuminating up to about 500 metres on the northern side of the road, I trundled along at a sedate 30 km/hour, watching both in front and the north side, little one with a separate light watching the south. Though exciting stuff, slowly advancing through the desert not knowing what would appear, it was unbelievably quiet ...bar some pretty spooky camels emerging from the darkness, not a single rodent or bigger critter disturbed the night for almost two hours. After the long drive from Marrakesh, I did half consider calling it a night and starting afresh the next evening ...but dispelling all such thoughts, two bright shining eyes at km 53 signalled the first mammal of the night - one fine Ruppell's Fox strolling a hundred metres or so to the north of the road, nice. Watched it as it wandered along, the animal eventually turning and heading directly away. Back to the road ...and back to vast expanses of desert seemingly devoid of life. Little one decided to go to sleep, I continued along. Half an hour more, km 76, then a mad little critter zigzagging across the road at great rates of knots. Swung the car headlights onto it, it froze, then hopped to the road's edge. Lesser Egyptian Jerboa, mini kangaroo. This was a superb little animal and after a while began to feed on little tussocks of vegetation, me quietly getting out of the car and photographing it. I was now approaching one of the most productive stretches of the road, the part from km 85 to km 120 accounting for the bulk of all past records of Sand Cat and Fennec Fox. It was past midnight and I was getting rather bleary eyed, the effects of the 1400 km drive were now appreciable. Slowed down to about 20 km/hour and continued. Moments later, I almost jumped out of my seat and started to swear ...I was at km 83 and mere metres from the road, plodding through stunted tussocks, a feline!!! I stopped the car and swung the spotlight, there, now standing still and staring straight at me, one absolutely amazing Sand Cat in all its glory. A bit smaller than I was expected, slightly chubby head, a sandy little thing, lightly striped tail and limbs, what a fantastic animal ...I was not sleepy anymore! And then it turned and ran, up and over a slight ridge, pausing at hundred metres or so to watch again, then off it went again, disappearing to view. Ah, what a good evening I thought. Five kilometres later, another Lesser Egyptian Jerboa danced across the road, then another kilometre beyond, I got stopped by a car. Only the second car I had encountered on the road, this was a local gendarme on his way to Aousserd. Quite a friendly guy, but discovering I was looking for wildlife, rather alarmingly he said permission was needed to use this road at night ...and such permission needed to be sought from Aousserd, still 110 km ahead. I said I was about to turn back to Dakhla, an answer he seemed quite happy with. So that was just about it for the night, he continued towards Aousserd, I did turn around. At 1 a.m., a few kilometres back along the road, I turned into the desert and set up camp. An excellent first night on the road - only four animals in total, but with Sand Cat as one of them, I was not complaining. 20 June. Dakhla, Aousserd Road. Day two on the Aousserd road, no better place to spend down than at the excellent Oued Jenna, sometime haunt of Sudan Golden Sparrows, regular hang-out of just about the only accessible Cricket Warblers in the Western Palearctic. The sun was barely up, the temperature was a pleasant 25 C, a scraggly line of acacias marked the broad wadi. With camels ambling by, we set out on foot - an African Savannah Hare went hurtling off, a Southern Grey Shrike adorned an acacia, one Woodchat Shrike on the next. Moments later, the first distinctive chirps of a Cricket Warbler began to sound out and not many moments later, two were buzzing about in the low branches of an acacia, quite smart birds indeed. Little one was more impressed with the assorted assemblages of bones scattered across the desert, lugging great collections of them back towards the car! Leaving the initial pair of Cricket Warblers, we wandered a kilometre or so further, no less than 15 more Cricket Warblers encountered, several Desert Sparrows too. Also Desert Wheatears and a wandering pair of Brown-necked Ravens. A nearby wadi added a Rufous Bush Chat, more

Desert Sparrows and a flock of Fulvous Babblers. I couldn't stay too long however - I wanted to get back to Gleb Jdiane to check my mammal traps. Four I had set, each with generous supplies of food. And of the four, three had little critters in residence ...a Western House Mouse in one, Pygmy Gerbils in the other two. Roping in my younger companion to assist in the photography of one of the Pygmy Gerbils, she lifted the trap door as I sat on the sand ready with the camera ...click click click, it worked a treat as the individual paused a while. Then much to the little one's amusement, it ran full speed at me, straight under my bum and there it stayed! Hmm, I had not expected that! Lifting myself, as someone else was falling around on the sand laughing, off it scurried again. With that, we returned to the desert for an hour or so ...the best of the birds, three Cream-coloured Coursers, a few Hoopoe Larks and about 15 Bar-tailed Desert Larks. Top critter of the day though was a magnificent Spiny-tailed Lizard, a giant prehistoric looking thing strutting through the desert. As the heat climbed, we returned to Dakhla Bay to while the day away aside the sands and blue waters ...sand castles and paddling, a flock of 200 Greater Flamingoes, umpteen waders of assorted species, 50 or so Royal Terns, lesser numbers of Caspian Terns. Quite a relaxing day, not bad at all. Popping into Dakhla town late afternoon, a couple of Cory's Shearwaters cruised offshore, masses of Sandwich Terns milled, a few more Royal Terns too. Finally the sun began to drop, evening was approaching ...time to return to the Aousserd road, another night drive on the cards. Starting at km 75 at dusk, my plan for this session was to focus on the key 35 km stretch up to km 110, driving it both ways, thereafter wandering right up to Aousserd if I was still awake or had not bumped into anything beforehand. Again, the overwhelming feel was of far lower numbers of animals than reported some years before ...'plentiful rodents' and 'a dozen Fennec Foxes' most certainly did not figure in my notes, but as we two hit the road again, I really only had two targets to think about, namely Fennec Fox and Striped Sahara Polecat. A mere six kilometres into the drive, at km 81, one of these key species appeared just to the north of the road, the spotlight picking out a wonderful pair of Fennec Foxes sitting atop a small mound, quite possibly a den location. Humongous ears on bitty little bodies, classic desert animals. No big reaction from the animal, they sat and while and watched, then upped and ambled off, nice start to the evening. And that was almost it for the night ...in the following four hours, two more Lesser Egyptian Jerboas hopped across the road, one African Savannah Hare went lolloping off through the tussocks. Somewhere approaching 1 a.m., still feeling over the moon with the Sand Cat of the day before, I decided we had actually seen virtually all that we were likely to encounter. The desert was largely quiet, so we pulled off and set up camp for the night 22 June. Dakhla to Laayoune. In a random patch of desert, caught a Lesser Egyptian Gerbil in the traps overnight, another new species and a good way to start the morning. Thereafter, we shifted to Gleb Jdiane to see if any sandgrouse came to drink, but not a single one did. Still, couldn't complain too much - four Stone Curlews lurked in the shade of bushes and a bunch of Trumpeter Finches dropped in. With that, after an obligatory few hours on the beaches of Dakhla Bay, I decided to forego anymore night explorations of the Aousserd road and instead begin the long drive back to the north, albeit a rather more sedate pace. Cream-coloured Coursers in two locations, a superb Hoopoe Lark feeding a small chick, several Red-rumped Wheatears, so the first hundred kilometres rolled past. Just beyond Choukan, about 175 km north of Dakhla, a major surprise ...dark swifts swirling through a rocky ravine. After days of Pallid Swifts, an apparent smaller size and uniform dark plumage immediately caught the eye, the birds in good light and flying low. Plain Swifts, fast agile flight, turning much onto the ravine, overall blackish-brown plumage, barely discernible throats. Abundant on the nearby Canary Islands, Plain Swifts are not confirmed as breeders in Morocco or the Western Sahara, but these certainly seemed to be in suitable habitat. Either way, a cracking record and a new bird species for me, the first of the trip! Next up, a Fat Sand Rat about 200 km further north and another 100 km beyond that, the piece de la resistance of the journey north, the simply amazing Laayoune lagoon. Bordered by towering sand dunes and boasting a string of deep pools and luxuriant vegetation, this is truly the greatest freshwater oasis on the long coast of the Western Sahara. Having previously visited this site in winter, I was keen to sample its delights in summer and we soon found ourselves traipsing over the piles of rubbish at the edge of Laayoune city to access the site. With a good two hours before sundown, we 'surfed' down a last few dunes to grab a perch overlooking the best of the pools ...and what a feast for the eyes it was! To be honest, I was not expecting the pools to hold so many birds in summer, but how wrong I was! The place was teeming ...Marbled Ducks, Ruddy Shelducks, Glossy Ibises, Purple Herons, Greater Flamingos, birds everywhere! Gull-billed Terns patrolling, Pallid and Little Swifts overhead, Eurasian Spoonbills and Squacco Herons at the edges of reeds. Camels plodded up the dunes, I set about making a few counts of the most common species ...with the pools stretching beyond sight, all were conservative estimates, but Marbled Ducks clicked in at a minimum of 800, Ruddy Shelducks at 250, Glossy Ibises at 80 and Little Grebes at 40. Quite a wow factor indeed. Then to cap it all, a Barbary Falcon cruised directly overhead and a flock of about 20 Collared Pratincoles dropped in, hawking the pools for the last half hour of the day. Little one decided to extract a loose tooth at that moment, fortunately not squealing in response. As the day drew to an end, with Black-winged Stilts making a right racket and a flock of Slender-billed Gulls bathing in the shallows, we wandered back up to town. Pallid Swifts by the hundred filling the sky, I did have plans to celebrate by staying in a hotel ...the place we checked out looked a dump however, so we quit those ideas and drove further north, camping instead near Khnifiss Lagoon. 23 June. Khnifiss Lagoon, Tan Tan, Guelmine. Nothing remarkable on this day, mostly just a long day on the road, trundling forever north. A few hours in the early morning at Khnifiss Lagoon produced the best birding of the day - Cape Gull rather easier than a few days before, Great Black-backed Gulls also present (several, plus two pairs with chicks). Also an Osprey, a few Royal Terns, two Black Terns, one Marsh Harrier and other assorted birds such Greater Flamingos and Eurasian Spoonbills. Two Fat Sand Rats were top billing of the day, playing hide-and-peek by the roadside south of Knifiss. Thereafter, it was a story of umpteen desert kilometres rolling by, punctuated by a pair of Long-legged Buzzards somewhere, a bunch of Audouin's Gulls on an extended beach stop-over near Tan Tan and a couple of relatively unproductive strolls in the stone deserts south of Guelmine. Didn't really expect much at the latter sites in the shimmering heat, but did see a couple of Red-rumped Swallows, a few Thekla Larks, Red-rumped Wheatears and the

like. Predictably, the Scrub Warblers and Thick-billed Larks thought better of showing themselves to the two idiots hiking across the summer desert in the middle of the afternoon. Stayed overnight in a hotel in Tiznet, watched with awe as the streets totally emptied as the sun dropped and locals left the streets to break the Ramadan fast ...for 20 minutes not a single person walked the streets or car moved on the roads. 24 June. Oued Massa, Tamri, Cap Rhir. Now back on rather familiar stomping grounds, first port of call this day was Oued Massa. A shadow of its winter glory, the site did still produce a few nice goodies ...several stunning Moussier's Redstarts, a Black-crowned Tchagra scolding a Little Owl, and another skulking in typical thicket. Also ten-a-penny Serins, Turtle Doves purring all over the shop, colonies of Spanish Sparrows, Quails calling from agricultural fields and other nice odds and ends such as European Bee-eaters, Hoopoes and Rufous Bush Chats. Also, rather pleasing two further mammals to add to the trip list - two Egyptian Mongooses in the agricultural areas and a Red Fox trotting along the path near the lagoon. Moving north, my next destination was Cap Rhir, the idea being to check it out in preparation for some early morning seawatching sessions over the subsequent couple of days. Navigated the outskirts of Agadir, then stopped for a couple of hours on a beach jam-packed with Audouin's Gulls, also spotting a family of Barbary Ground Squirrels on the adjacent cliff, a new mammal for the trip. Arrived at Cap Rhir mid-afternoon. Strong offshore winds and a glaring sun at the exactly the wrong angle essentially rendered the site hopeless for productive afternoon seawatching, so I had a quick look round, found some nice access tracks, then wandered a little further up the coast to Tamri, famous site for the only viable population of Bald Ibises in the world. Fortunately I have seen them several times before, because I skillfully managed to avoid seeing any at all on this trip! The lagoon at Tamri held relatively little, a bunch of Ruddy Shelducks, fourteen European Spoonbills and 60 or so Coots, and that was it. Sat for a while on the beach, still no Bald Ibises flying past, so returned to Cap Rhir for the last couple of hours of the day ...good omens for the next morning, Cory's Shearwaters were streaming north at a rate of about 250/hour, eight Gannets also past and, buzzing along little a mini clockwork machine, a splendid Borolo Shearwater ...nice! I began to look forward to next morning! Went to a nearby resort for a bite to eat, returned in darkness to Cap Rhir, one Red Fox running across the road, one unidentified nightjar flitting over (presumably Red-necked). Camped on the headland aside the sea. 25 June. Cap Rhir, Seawatching Bonanza. Peered out to sea at 5.30 a.m., semi-emerged from the sleeping bag and swung the scope into place ...not a breathe of wind and the sea calm, bucketloads of Cory's Shearwaters already skimming the waters, all on a northerly trajectory. Interspersed, lines of Gannets also heading north, Yellow-legged Gulls and Audouin's Gulls hugging the coast. Oo, this was looking good! Clambered out of the sleeping bag to enjoy the spoils, the next four hours were simply phenomenal. Pretty consistent for the whole morning, the Cory's Shearwaters and Gannets were passing in their hundreds, never a moment without at least a few in view. Early on, a single Balearic Shearwater passed close offshore, my only one of the two days, then a Great Skua and the first of six Arctic Skuas. Next up, two very distant Borolo Shearwaters, very distinctive with their rapid flapping, followed by a third much closer in. At 05.50 a.m., a purple patch indeed - a true feast for the eyes, two Sooty Shearwaters zipping north cut directly across the path a pale petrel dancing over the very gentle swell. Immediately switched attention to the petrel, the bird looping back and almost hopping and bouncing across the water's surface on rather long legs. Ashy mantle and coverts, white underside, phalarope-like face mask ...I had hit the jackpot, one splendid White-faced Storm Petrel picking its way north, sailing in broad arches one moment, bouncing across the surface the next. One more Borolo Shearwater came zooming through, mid-distance, again northbound. And so the action continued, non-stop Cory's Shearwaters as 6.00 a.m. and 7.00 a.m. came and went, parties of Gannets regularly punctuating the skies, three more Barolo Shearwaters, then incredibly (so I thought) another White-faced Storm Petrel at 7.15 a.m, this one very close indeed, truly a stunning bird. Many Sandwich Terns offshore, three Lesser Crested Terns also passing, then a Risso's Dolphin joining in the action, breaking the surface a couple of times before vanishing into the deep blue. At about 8.00 a.m., Cory Shearwater numbers seemed to climb even further, estimated numbers for the remainder of the watch being about 440/hour north. Still no let up in the 'added extras' either - yet another three Borolo Shearwaters flew past, while in a five-minute period from 8.30 to 8.35, three more White-faced Storm Petrels appeared, first a single, then close in their wake a pair! By 9.00 am., heat haze was beginning to knock out the middle distances and another half an hour beyond that, birds were beginning to become blurry blobs. This seawatch had by far exceeded my expectations - especially in regard to the multiple White-faced Storm Petrels - so it was with quite a warm glow that I called it a day. 25 June. Cap Rhir, Seawatching Bonanza. Peered out to sea at 5.30 a.m., semi-emerged from the sleeping bag and swung the scope into place ...not a breathe of wind and the sea calm, bucketloads of Cory's Shearwaters already skimming the waters, all on a northerly trajectory. Interspersed, lines of Gannets also heading north, Yellow-legged Gulls and Audouin's Gulls hugging the coast. Oo, this was looking good! Clambered out of the sleeping bag to enjoy the spoils, the next four hours were simply phenomenal. Pretty consistent for the whole morning, the Cory's Shearwaters and Gannets were passing in their hundreds, never a moment without at least a few in view. Early on, a single Balearic Shearwater passed close offshore, my only one of the two days, then a Great Skua and the first of six Arctic Skuas. Next up, two very distant Borolo Shearwaters, very distinctive with their rapid flapping, followed by a third much closer in. At 05.50 a.m., a purple patch indeed - a true feast for the eyes, two Sooty Shearwaters zipping north cut directly across the path a pale petrel dancing over the very gentle swell. Immediately switched attention to the petrel, the bird looping back and almost hopping and bouncing across the water's surface on rather long legs. Ashy mantle and coverts, white underside, phalarope-like face mask ...I had hit the jackpot, one splendid White-faced Storm Petrel picking its way north, sailing in broad arches one moment, bouncing across the surface the next. One more Borolo Shearwater came zooming through, mid-distance, again northbound. And so the action continued, non-stop Cory's Shearwaters as 6.00 a.m. and 7.00 a.m. came and went, parties of Gannets regularly punctuating the skies, three more Barolo Shearwaters, then incredibly (so I thought) another White-faced Storm Petrel at 7.15 a.m, this one very close indeed, truly a stunning bird. Many Sandwich Terns offshore, three Lesser Crested Terns also passing, then a Risso's Dolphin joining in the action, breaking the surface a couple of times before

vanishing into the deep blue. At about 8.00 a.m., Cory Shearwater numbers seemed to climb even further, estimated numbers for the remainder of the watch being about 440/hour north. Still no let up in the 'added extras' either - yet another three Borolo Shearwaters flew past, while in a five-minute period from 8.30 to 8.35, three more White-faced Storm Petrels appeared, first a single, then close in their wake a pair! By 9.00 a.m., heat haze was beginning to knock out the middle distances and another half an hour beyond that, birds were beginning to become blurry blobs. This seawatch had by far exceeded my expectations - especially in regard to the multiple White-faced Storm Petrels - so it was with quite a warm glow that I called it a day. Still fairly early in the morning, we decided to spend the rest of the day visiting the historic walled city of Essaoura a couple of hours further north. Black-eared Wheatear, Lesser Kestrel, Moussier's Redstart, Woodchat Shrike and Cirl Bunting on route, lunch and ice-cream in the town. A most picturesque city, the main attraction for the birder however is the small island just offshore. Strolling through the fish market, trillions of Yellow-legged Gulls packing in, the harbour walls just beyond offer excellent views over the island - and what a view it is, abundant gulls and Great Cormorants breeding on the low plateau of the island, but just above them a swirling flock of Eleonora's Falcons mingling with the gulls! Said to be about 90 pairs breeding on the rocky cliffs of the island, usually at least ten or twelve birds on show at any time, occasional zooming low over the sea to pass directly overhead. So with that, we departed back to Cap Rhir, I again managed to not find any Bald Ibises and, with the wind again climbing and sun all wrong, didn't bother with any seawatching. We drove back to a resort town towards Agadir for pizza, then returned to camp again at Cap Rhir.

26 June. Cap Rhir, Seawatching Bonanza. Another excellent seawatch, though quite different in nature - a slightly rougher sea, a degree of haze at distance from dawn and a lot more drifting of birds, rather than direct passage to the north. Also a large fishing fleet sitting just to the south - didn't seem to be attracting birds to any degree, but perhaps accounting for the more roving behaviour of birds. From dawn till finish, Cory's Shearwaters and Gannets still accounted for the bulk of passing birds, but numbers of both were considerably lower than the day before, especially from about 7.30 when things slackened off considerably. Still, I was not complaining - four Borolo Shearwaters scooted past in the first hour and, just after the last one of those went flying through, so began an absolutely mad half an hour. First up, a Madeiran Petrel slowly meandering north at 7.25, then three White-faced Storm Petrels together five minutes later, followed by two more another 15 minutes later and another just five minutes after that! Then, the icing on the cake, another two White-faced Storm Petrels appeared at 8.00 and instead of heading north as all the predecessors chose to linger off the headland for about quarter of an hour, even settling on the water on occasion. Absolutely superb. Then it promptly went very quiet, Cory's Shearwaters numbers dropped to a dribble, Gannets became sporadic and not a single petrel or rarer shearwater passed for the next hour and a half. As a parting gift, a final White-faced Storm Petrel passed at 9.30, again lingering and settling on the water as it ambled northwards. Haze and murky offshore conditions killed things off shortly after and at 10 a.m., I departed the headland. What a cracking couple of days I had spent here - 15 Borolo Shearwaters, 14 White-faced Storm Petrels and one Madeiran Petrel!

Seawatching summary (25 & 26 June): 25 June (05.30 - 09.30)  
26 June (05.30 - 10.00)

#### Cory's Shearwater

05.30 - 0800: 360/hr 08.00 - 09.30: 440/hr

05.30 - 07.30: 300/hr

07.30 - 10.30: 100/hr

#### Balearic Shearwater

05.30 - 06.30: 1 Borolo Shearwater

05.30 - 06.30: 4

06.30 - 07.30: 3

07.30 - 08.30: 3

06.30 - 07.30: 4

#### Sooty Shearwater

05.30 - 06.30: 2

### White-faced Storm Petrel

1 (05.50)

1 (07.15)

1 (08.30)

2 (08.35)

3 (07.30)

2 (07.45)

1 (07.50)

2 (08.00 - 08.15)

1 (09.30)

### Madeiran Petrel

1 (07.25)

### Gannet

05.30 - 08.00: 425/hr

08.00 - 09.30: 170/hr

05.30 - 07.30: 255/hr

09.30 - 10.00: 50/hr

### Great Skua

05.30 - 06.30: 1

05.30 - 06.30: 1

### Arctic Skua

05.30 - 06.30: 5

06.30 - 07.30: 0

07.30 - 08.30: 1

### Lesser Crested Tern

07.30 - 08.30: 3 05.30 - 06.30: 1

## Yellow-legged Gull, Audouin's Gull

common along the shore, few offshore.

## Sandwich Tern

fairly common offshore. With all the seawatching done, the rest of my trip reverted back to a focus on mammals, two species in particular still on my hit list. Before departing for these however, I added yet one more species in the form of two Wood Mice on Cap Rhir, courtesy of my small mammal traps - not a species I was particularly expecting in Morocco. So leaving the coast, inland we went and up went the temperatures, kilometres rolling by, temperatures soaring! Destination was the Tizi-n-Test pass, a rugged mountain road cutting through the Atlas Mountains south-west of Marrakesh. Any hopes of the higher altitude bringing cooler conditions were dashed as we began to ascent - the early afternoon hitting a nifty 43 C as we navigated the multiple hairpins to begin the climb. Cuvier's Gazelle occurs in these arid foothills, but at the best of times it is exceptionally elusive, so I didn't do much more than pause and scan as I passed, a few Rock Buntings and Black Wheatears the only things seen of any note, though I added Red-rumped Swallow, European Bee-eater and Red-billed Chough as I continued on my way. The main stop in this region was at a lightly forested slope 8km beyond the summit - here, in a massive fenced enclosure that basically engulfs an entire mountain, a small population of Barbary Sheep have been reintroduced. Sitting atop a rock pinnacle and scanning the high grass patches way above the tree line, it soon became apparent that this was not going to bear fruit - any self-respecting sheep was not going to be out in the open in the blazing sun. So began a far harder task, scoping the expanses of pine hoping to spot an animal sheltering underneath. Seeing absolutely nothing for close on an hour, I was on the point of giving up when suddenly a slight movement on a distant half-hidden scree revealed a animal strutting from the shade of one tree to the next! Ah success, albeit definitely needing the telescope, one Barbary Sheep! Well, I was quite happy with that, so decided to continue. One kilometre further, a mere couple of hundred metres from the road and quite plain to see, a group of five Barbary Sheep sheltered under another pine. Hmmph, I had just sat under the baking sun for far too long trying to find them and now here they were right beside the road! Anyhow, nice views were had of this little herd, nicely posing for photographs ...until that is they decided I was too close and off they went, charging off up the mountain. It was now late afternoon, I had a fair way to drive, so on we went. Five Barbary Squirrels were seen on route and then, via umpteen meanders through the mountains, finally we reached Marrakesh several hours later. A couple of hours more, having driven across the flat plains north-east of Marrakesh, I reached my destination for the night, one Algerian Hedgehog seen on the road just before. Camped in the forest, hopefully dawn would bring one more fine mammal. 27 June. Cascades d'Ouzard. A picturesque ravine with a couple of waterfalls plunging over the cliffs, olive plantations flanking the one side and cedar forests on the higher slopes around. This was the Cascades d'Ouzard, the starting point for my last full day in Morocco, somewhere upon those cliffs could be found Barbary Macaques! A touch after dawn, walking a gentle path that flanked the eastern side of the ravine, the view was good - to a backdrop of limestone cliffs, Alpine Swifts hurtling through the ravine, European Rollers at nest on the cliff face, Golden Orioles calling in the olive trees. The Barbary Macaques initially seemed to be absent however ...until about half an hour later when a single appeared on a faraway cliff top on the opposite side of the ravine. After watching it a while, it dropped down the cliffside and was lost to view, so we decided to hike round to see if we could relocate the animal. Grey Wagtails, Western Olivaceous Warbler and several Serins on the way ...but, predictably, no Barbary Macaque when we arrived! Presuming it had descended further into the ravine, we took a path that led down towards the base of the falls, past numerous little tourist cafes, all still closed and quiet. And there, not just a single Barbary Ape, but a whole troop of them! It was like Planet of the Apes, a whole bunch of them clambering down the cliff, jumping into trees and heading directly for human habitation, or the closed cafes to be exact. Minutes later, sitting rather carefully at a table in the open-air eating area, there were Barbary Macaques all around, knocking over chairs, forcing open containers and generally trashing the place. One even managed to open a refrigerated drinks display and empty its contents. Hmm, I guess some restaurant owner was not going to be happy an hour or so later! Two youngsters found some red cloth, a mad game of chase then following, the animals hurtling up and down trees, jumping from table to table and generally creating havoc. I had truly now seen the Barbary Macaques - some were plodding mere metres away, scowling and baring teeth if I ventured too close. A half hour or so of action and the raid was over, the Barbary Macaques clambering back towards the cliff and venturing on. It was still shy of 10 a.m., but my last target of the trip had fallen. The temperature was already 36 C and time for us to depart, Lesser Kestrel and Black Kite seen on the way out. With that, so ended the travels, we returned to Marrakesh and spent the rest of the day in the souks and squares of the Old City, mystical fragrances in the souks, snake-charmers and rising cobras in Djemaa el-Fna. Overhead, Pallid Swifts soared through the 43 C skies, one White Stork too. House Buntings and Common Bulbuls added to the spice. 28 June. Departure. 6.30 a.m., Marrakesh Airport. Common Bulbuls singing in the car par, House Bunting again inside the terminal, Pallid Swifts nesting at the flight gates. Into the air we went, trip over ...and not bad at all it had been!