

Libya (November 16-17, 1995 and June 27-29, 2021)

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Libya is made up of three former Ottoman Empire provinces that weren't united until occupied by Italy in 1912 and still aren't particularly enthusiastic about the unification. The 2011 revolution turned into a civil war that led to the three regions drifting even further apart. A ceasefire was reached in 2020, with general elections planned for December 2021 (although most people don't expect them to actually happen). There is still a lot of foreign meddling, with Turkey supplying advanced weapons to Tripoli and Russian mercenaries occupying major oilfields and some cities in the east. Much of the interior is controlled by local militias, and corruption is thorough everywhere. Hostage-taking is not as rampant as in some other conflict areas in the Middle East, but street crime is common. Fuel shortages are often severe (Libya has the world's 9th largest oil reserves, but the refineries have been destroyed during the war), there are daily power outages, and almost all medical personnel has emigrated. Tourism is non-existent, so people are often amazed to see an unarmed Westerner, and are very friendly. In addition to the official Arabic, surprisingly many locals know a few words of English, French, Italian or Russian.

The country is 10% Mediterranean climate zone and 90% desert. The northwestern and northeastern coasts have moderately hot summers with frequent fog in the mountains, and cool winters with violent rainstorms. The central coast and the interior are very hot, except in winter when night freezes are possible even deep in the Sahara. Dust storms can occur at any time, but more often in spring.

Libya has diverse, largely unexplored wildlife, but the nature protection system is in shambles after nine years of war. There are at least 90 species of mammals, but the current distribution of most of them is poorly known.

Tripolitania (the NW part) is where most of the country's cities and agriculture are. The area around Tripoli (Tarabulus in Arabic) is currently somewhat safe to visit, but the south and particularly the Russian-occupied Sirte region are not. Tripolitania is very arid except for the narrow, densely populated coastal belt and for Jebel Nafusa range which runs parallel to the coast and is covered with garrigue shrublands and some trees, mostly planted. Flora and fauna are similar to Tunisia and NE Algeria.

In 1995 I had a long plane change in Tripoli Airport and easily found **Libyan jirds**, **Latastei's gerbils** and **lesser (I think) sand rats** in dry grasslands (now largely built over) within walking distance of the terminal.

Jebel Nafusa range's rocky northern slopes reportedly have **North African sengi**, **Maghreb myotis**, **Gaisler's long-eared bat**, **Val's** and **common gundis**, and **Maghreb garden dormouse**. Small Karabolli National Park on the coast E of Tripoli is said to have **North African hedgehog**, **striped hyena**, **wildcat**, **Mediterranean monk seal** (?), and **hare**. Other mammals recorded in Tripolitania include **Geoffroy's trident-nosed bat**, **Meridional serotine**, **hammada** and **lesser Egyptian jerboas**, **Cairo spiny** and **Algerian mice**, **fat-tailed**, **Shaw's** and **Sundevall's jirds**, and **North African**, **Tarabul**, **pleasant** and **lesser short-tailed** gerbils. The very rare **sand gerbil**, described from An Nawfaliyah near Sirte, is likely a subspecies of pygmy gerbil.

Fezzan (the SW part) is currently the most lawless and dangerous part of Libya. It is all desert (mostly sandy) with a few oases. Mammals include **long-eared** and **desert hedgehogs**, **Kuhl's pipistrelle**, **African wolf**, **Rüppell's** and **fennec foxes**, **dorcas gazelle**, **lesser Egyptian jerboa**, **lesser Egyptian**, **North African**, **Tarabul** and **pleasant gerbils**, and **hare**. The town of Ghat in the SW near the Algerian border is at the foot of the steep, scenic Jebel Acacus mountains (famous for rock art) where **aoudad**, **Cape hyrax**, **Mzab gundi**, **Maghreb garden dormouse**, and possibly **Seurat's spiny mouse** occur, as well as lappet-faced vulture and Lanza's worm snake, Libya's only known endemic reptile. Waw an Namus in the SE is a remote volcanic caldera with crater lakes, surrounded by a large area of black sand. Its mammals have never been studied; I wonder what animals come to drink from the lakes and whether there are melanistic rodent populations in the area. Possibilities there include various **mouse-tailed bats**, **desert long-eared bat**, **sand cat**, **caracal**, **cheetah**, **striped hyena**, **rhin gazelle**, and **hammada jerboa**. **Vivacious gerbil**, described from Sabha and also recorded from Sawknah area, is likely a synonym or subspecies of pleasant gerbil.

Cyrenaica (the E part) is currently under control of Khalifa Khaftar, a warlord supported by UAE, Egypt and Russia, so if you have a passport of either of these countries you can risk a short visit. It is also mostly desert, badly screwed up by the oil industry. In its northern part is a small (200 x 50 km) island of Mediterranean vegetation isolated by the Sahara from the rest of Africa, centered on Al Jabal al Akhdar ("the green mountain"), a 800-m high plateau around Al Bayda crisscrossed by deep canyons. The wettest, most verdant part of Libya, the plateau has 4-5 endemic mammals (none of them particularly distinctive and some not universally recognized).

Ahmed Khaftar (alas, not Khalifa's relative), an old friend of mine who once studied biology in Moscow, had been inviting me to visit him in Cyrenaica for decades; finally he was about to emigrate so I couldn't delay the trip any longer. Dirt-cheap but irregular charter flights are run by Rosneft from Moscow via Grozny and Cairo to Benghazi and Al Abraq. Benghazi is near the best coastal birding sites; Al Abraq (which I used) is very convenient if you are looking for endemic mammals. The planes proceed to some restricted-access oil towns in the desert and return to the coast two days later, giving you 36-48 hours on the ground. I hopped on such a flight in Cairo and flew to Moscow afterwards. Most passengers were oilmen but some were mercenaries from the infamous Wagner Group, a huge PMC used by the Russian government in many countries to commit war crimes without being held responsible. On the flight in I slept all the time, but on the flight out I couldn't avoid questions, so I said I had gone to Libya to see some gerbils. The questions stopped immediately; I think everybody decided I was a top-secret special agent with a lousy legend, probably on my way home after assassinating some desert warlord. Nobody on the plane would let me use his cell phone.

Ahmed worked in a motorcycle shop in his home town of Al Bayda and provided me with a bike and lots of info. A habituated **Palestinian molerat** lived near his house; it would briefly stick its head out of the burrow if offered a carrot. I had only 37 hours before my return flight, visited four areas and saw 20 species of mammals. Northern Cyrenaica hasn't seen much military action recently, and doesn't look like a war zone at all, but Ahmed advised me to travel with just my passport and gas money due to high probability of being robbed at checkpoints or randomly. I risked taking an old cellphone, a headlamp, a small bat detector and US\$50 in dinars. Most checkpoints were totally benign and I started thinking I should've taken my camera, binoculars and thermal scope, but as Ahmed was giving me a ride to the airport, we were stopped at the last checkpoint by armed people who took all my remaining cash (less than \$5), the headlamp and the cellphone (but not the bat detector), and siphoned almost all gasoline out of the motorbike tank. I was running late for the flight so didn't have time to argue; later I Western Unioned gas money to Ahmed. Foreign currency and credit cards are not accepted in Cyrenaica. Main roads are reasonably good but drivers are a bit aggressive; I wouldn't use a motorbike there again. Gasoline is expensive but street food costs close to nothing. The weather was pleasant (up to 28°C during the day and down to 19°C at night). There was some fog at night so the moon (full on June 24) was barely visible. Mammalian activity still increased noticeably after midnight when the moon was lower in the sky or gone.

1. Wadi Al Kouf National Park protects the largest canyon; I visited only a few sections. Some of the best forest is below the bridge at 32.6969N 21.5655E; I didn't have much time there but briefly saw a **hare** near the road. Qasr Ash Shahdayn (32.6120N 21.5777E) is a ruined castle with a roost of recently split **Horacek's horseshoe bats** in underground vaults (see Benda & Vallo 2012 for other locations). Due to various delays I got there at dusk and saw the bats only in flight (ID confirmed by the bat detector). There were also tiny, endemic **Hanaki's pipistrelles** flying around (described from small caves higher up the canyon; previously considered conspecific with the Cretan pipistrelle). East of the castle the road crosses a wooded area where a **Cyrenaica shrew** (the only shrew in Libya except for the rarely recorded **Etruscan shrew**) ran across the road. Six hours of spotlighting on foot there produced another **Cyrenaica shrew**, a **red fox** and **Algerian mice**, plus assorted geckos (most of which will remain unidentified due to the subsequent loss of my cell phone) and variable toads. Ahmed set a few traps around 32.7291N 21.7364E the night before my arrival, but didn't catch anything. Previously he had caught **Cyrenaica shrews** (common), **black-tailed garden dormice** (rare), various **gerbils**, **Sundevall's**, **Shaw's** and **Libyan jirds**, **Cairo spiny** and **Algerian mice**, and **Cyrenaica voles** (all common). He had also seen **long-eared** and **North African hedgehogs**, **African wolves**, **wildcats**, **common genets**, **Egyptian mongooses**, and **crested porcupines** there. Other species recorded from the park are **Geoffroy's trident-nosed bat**, **Gaisler's long-eared bat** (described from here), **giant noctule**, **Egyptian freetail**, and **striped hyena**.

2. Wadi Labraq (accessible by turning off the highway at 32.7912N 22.0525E and parking at 32.8005N 22.0385E) is another deep canyon, said by Ahmed to be the best place to see **Cyrenaica vole**, the only vole in Africa. I saw a couple of them scurrying around at sunrise in cypress forest about 3 km down the canyon. There is a cave with **Mehely's horseshoe bats** way down the canyon but I didn't have time to hike there. Most mammals found in Wadi al Kouf are also present here. Cyrenaica subspecies of Eurasian wren, chaffinch and blue tit (the latter sometimes considered a full species) are common in deeper parts of the canyon, while Barbary partridge is abundant on rocky slopes (its local subspecies is also a proposed split). Watch for Egyptian cobras, said to be common as well (I didn't see any, just lizards, racers and tortoises, including a tiny, very rare Egyptian tortoise).

3. Dernah is on an arid coast with insanely high density and diversity of **gerbils**: there are **lesser short-tailed**, **lesser Egyptian**, **North African**, **Anderson's** and **pygmy**, but the most common is **Grobben's gerbil**, provisionally considered a subspecies of **pleasant gerbil**. Approaching them without a thermal scope was

difficult, and IDing even more so: I thought I had sorted them all out when I was in Morocco (see the identification chart in my Morocco trip report), but here they all looked a bit different. I'm pretty sure I saw **Anderson's, pygmy**, and many **Grobben's gerbils**, plus one **four-toed jerboa** that I finally spotted after four hours of searching. **Kuhl's pipistrelles** were abundant. The best-preserved habitat with rocky, clay and sandy patches is E of the town, starting at 32.7408N 22.6883E. It was very good for herps as well, particularly geckos and toads.

4. Lamluda-Martuba Road is a paved backroad through the arid interior part of the plateau; it connects to the main highway at 32.7790N 22.1431E and 32.6081N 22.7655E (if starting from the east, turn right after 1 km). It crosses arid grasslands and skirts many wadis and sandy patches. I would probably see a lot of mammals there if I had a thermal scope, but simply driving the road once late at night produced only a **Rüppell's fox**, a jackal-size **African wolf**, a **greater Egyptian jerboa**, and a dozen gerbils which I couldn't identify because the bike's headlight was no longer working. I walked down a side track and saw a **North African gerbil** and a Egyptian saw-scaled viper. Ahmed had seen **long-eared hedgehogs, striped hyenas and wildcats** there; also roadkill **striped weasels** a few times over the years, but a live one only once.

Another road, Al Marj-Mechili-At Tamimi, goes much deeper into the interior, into the lowland desert; it has a lot of traffic but Ahmed has seen **fennecs** and **fat sand rats** along dirt tracks branching off that road.

There are many other interesting places in Cyrenaica. The coast S of Benghazi reportedly has **long-eared hedgehog, greater Egyptian** and **four-toed jerboas, fat sand rat, Anderson's, pygmy** and **pleasant gerbils**; all these species should also occur near Tobruk. A long road across sandy and gravel deserts (look for **hammad** and **lesser Egyptian jerboas** and **dorcas gazelle**) leads to Tazirbu and Al Jawf towns in the far SE where **desert hedgehog, fennec** and a few **gerbils** occur; local **spiny mice** have uncertain taxonomic status. In those towns it might be possible to arrange a trip to the unexplored Libyan part of Tibesti Mts. to look for **Egyptian slit-faced bat, Cape long-eared bat, naked-rumped tomb bat, leopard, cheetah, honey badger, African wild ass, aoudad, addax, rock hyrax, and Mzab gundi**, or to Jebel Uwainat at the borders of Egypt and Sudan where **rock hyrax** and **aoudad** occur and **rhinoceros** and **dama gazelles** were reported as recently as 2000.

Mammals list (all sightings from 2021 unless stated otherwise; endemics and near-endemics in **bold**):

1.	Cyrenaica shrew	<i>Crocidura alexandrisi</i>	E of Qasr Ash Shahdayn
2.	Horacek's horseshoe bat	<i>Rhinolophus horaceki</i>	Qasr Ash Shahdayn
3.	Hanaki's pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus hanaki</i>	Qasr Ash Shahdayn
4.	Kuhl's pipistrelle	<i>P. kuhli marginatus</i>	Dernah
5.	Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes aegyptiacus</i>	E of Qasr Ash Shahdayn
6.	Rüppell's fox	<i>V. rueppelli cyrenaica</i>	Lamluda-Martuba road
7.	African wolf	<i>Canis cf. anthus/lupaster</i>	Lamluda-Martuba road
8.	Cape/North African hare	<i>Lepus cf. capensis whitakeri</i>	Wadi Al Kouf (near the bridge)
9.	Four-toed jerboa	<i>Scarturus tetradactylus</i>	Dernah
10.	Greater Egyptian jerboa	<i>Jaculus orientalis gerboa</i>	Lamluda-Martuba road
11.	Algerian mouse	<i>Mus spretus</i>	E of Qasr Ash Shahdayn
12.	Palestinian molerat	<i>Spalax cf. ehrenbergi aegyptiacus</i>	Al Bayda
13.	Lesser sand rat	<i>Psammomys vexillaris</i>	Tripoli Airport area (1995)
14.	Libyan jird	<i>Meriones libycus libycus</i>	Tripoli Airport area (1995)
15.	Lataste's gerbil	<i>Gerbillus latastei</i>	Tripoli Airport area (1995)
16.	North African gerbil	<i>G. campestris</i>	Lamluda-Martuba road
17.	Anderson's gerbil	<i>G. andersoni andersoni</i>	Dernah
18.	Pygmy gerbil	<i>G. henleyi henleyi</i>	Dernah
19.	Pleasant/ Grobben's gerbil	<i>G. cf. amoenus grobbeni</i>	Dernah
20.	Cyrenaica vole	<i>Microtus mustersi</i>	Wadi Labraq

Birds of note:

Tripoli Airport area (1995): *Oenanthe leucura, Argyra fulva, Ammomanes deserti, Galerida cristata, G. theklae.*

Al Bayda: *G. cristata, Acrocephalus pallidus.*

Wadi al Kouf: *Athene noctua, Corvus corax.*

Wadi Labraq: *Alectoris barbara, Accipiter nisus, Aquila chrysaetos, Lanius senator, Cyanistes teneriffae, Sylvia melanocephala, S. hortensis, Troglodytes troglodytes, Fringilla coelebs, Carduelis cannabina, C. carduelis, Emberiza calandra.*

Dernah: *Sterna bengalensis, Chersophilus duponti, G. cristata.*