

MOROCCO BOUND – A TALE OF HAP AND MISHAP!**by Robert Angus**

So! Now I have retired. My collections were successfully transferred to the Natural History Museum in London in November last year, and my workspace established. The next job was to set up chromosome preparation facilities, and this took a little longer. As it happens I now have two sets of facilities, the main one at the Museum and a second one at Royal Holloway. This was precipitated by an urgent request for help from Ignacio Ribera, just before Christmas. One of his colleagues had found what appeared to be a parthenogenetic leiodid, and they wondered if it might be triploid. A tall order indeed, but I said I'd give it a go – and, well, some you win. To my surprise I succeeded with the chromosomes and found that the species is indeed triploid!

And now the cold and dreary winter dragged on. Not surprisingly, I fell to thinking of warm field work. Last year's bumper crop of *Stictotarsus griseostriatus*-group (*griseo* for short) work is about to be published in *Comparative Cytogenetics*, but there are still outstanding questions about the western Alps and the Moroccan Atlas mountains. Morocco! The word alone generated a certain feeling of warmth. In response to my emailed request for details of his encounters with *griseo* in Morocco Ignacio said I shouldn't start feeling too warm as the localities were all about 2000 metres high and would be under deep snow! However, he gave me details of a number of localities in the Moyen Atlas where he had taken it, and suggested that the second half of April should be a window of opportunity between snowmelt and the summer drought. David Bilton was keen to visit the area of the cedar forests and my daughter Lizzie was also up for the trip, so with the promise of the reconvened team from the second Macedonian trip (see **Latissimus 24**) we set about the arrangements. Commitments, like busses, tend to come in bunches and April was well supplied with them. However we were all free just before the end of the month, and departure was scheduled for Tuesday 20 April, with the return flight on the 27th. It almost seemed too good to be true.

It was too good to be true! The Icelandic volcano blew its top and the flight on the 20th was cancelled. We had seen this coming and agreed on a first fallback position involving flying out on the Thursday (22nd), but keeping the same return date. I successfully transferred Lizzie's and my flights, and phoned David. He swung into action straight away – but within the space of 10 minutes the Thursday flight was full and David couldn't make it! So that just left the two of us. The Thursday EasyJet flight from Gatwick to Marrakech was indeed full to the gunwales, though there was a last minute offloading of baggage from a bloke called Mustapha who didn't turn up for embarkation. "Damn you Mustapha" we thought, "David could have had that seat". Still, we flew to Marrakech without incident and soon collected our hire-car. I had meant to change some money at Marrakech airport, but we were whisked away to the car before I had the opportunity. Never mind, I had a supply of euros and we could

use the ATM machines in Azrou, our destination in the Moyen Atlas.

Then another mishap! As we approached Khenifra in mid afternoon we were run off the road by an oncoming people-carrier with a penchant for the middle ground! We avoided a collision but dropped the two passenger-side tyres down onto the strip beside the road – and they both burst. The people-carrier, oblivious of what had happened, disappeared into the distance. Well, there was a pickle! One



Car with flat tyres

puncture could be coped with, but not two. So, out with the Europcar papers and mobile phones, and we set to work to summon help. At this stage two locals from the nearby village of Ait-Isehak appeared and were exceedingly helpful. They knew the various codes for phoning Morocco from England, and arranged that a relief car would be despatched to a nearby roadside café. As they so eloquently put it, their Berber/Arabic was far quicker and more precise than our schoolboy French! They then shepherded us and the car (on two flat tyres!) to this café. So began the long wait! Our helpers made a number of phone calls to the Europcar office (in Fes), who assured them (and us) the car was on the way, and also gave a number to contact the man who was bringing it. As the hours passed and darkness fell we became increasingly concerned. The driver's number elicited no response and eventually even the locals said they didn't think the car would come that day. Now what? I decided to change the front wheel and drive to a hotel, probably in Khenifra. Immediately the locals (including the Mayor of the village, who spoke some English) took over, changed the wheel and said don't try Khenifra (too far) but there was a hotel (the Transatlas) about 3 km back the way we had come. They telephoned it and then piloted us there. I explained to the manager that I had only Euros and Credit Cards, and they said no problem. So, we got our rooms and prepared to resume the struggle in the morning. Then, just as we were going to have a much needed dinner, there was a commotion outside. The relief car had arrived! The driver took away our burst tyres – references to repairing them made our hair stand on end, but that was now Europcar's problem. After dinner the tyres had been "fixed" (we didn't ask how) and after signing the various papers we were left with the new car and the driver went off with the old one and its tyres.

Next morning we were ready to resume the trip – but there was a minor snag. The hotel wasn't happy with either Euros or Credit Cards, but one of the staff said he would accompany us to the village where we could change our Euros. And this he did, and all was settled. It was a two and a half hour drive to Azrou, a pretty tourist town with the Hotel Panorama well signposted, French banks with ATMs in the main square, and an excellent boulangerie for lunchtime necessities! I had earmarked three localities to search for *griseo* in the time we had left. Lac Afennourir, one of Ignacio's sites, lies at an altitude of about 1800 metres, on the edge of the cedar forest not far from Azrou, and I had found a further possible site at higher altitude (about 2100 metres) – a lake just north of the summit of the Col du Zad, about 30 km S. of Azrou, by checking various ornithological sites on the Internet. The third site, again courtesy of Ignacio, was a lake between Aguel-Tegha and Aghbala, further away, and



in fact near the Transatlas hotel where we had spent the previous night. We decided to start with the Col du Zad as this seemed the smallest area, and reserve Lac Afennourir for the next day. Then we would move back to the Transatlas to study the Aguel-Tegha lake, giving us a useful start on the drive back to Marrakech.

The drive to Col du Zad was straightforward, with the N 13 road rather better than the N8 along which we had travelled from Marrakech. As we reached the further edge of the cedar forest an

animal crossed the road in front of us. "Is that what I think it is?" asked Lizzie. It was

indeed a Barbary Ape, something we had not expected to see as they are wild animals here, not semi-domesticated as on Gibraltar. Neither of us really likes Higher Primates, but it seemed a good omen. We found the lake just below the summit of the Col and were soon collecting. That was more like it! However, the lake was choked with vegetation (including algae), and seemed bereft of beetles, though well supplied with *Notonecta*, small corixids and superabundant medicinal leeches! So, we returned to the car and tried a smaller pool just across the road – and struck gold! Well, *griseo* anyway. It was quite hard going, but we accumulated a total of seven specimens as well as a number of other beetles (including at least two Haliplids of the subgenus *Liaphlus*) for David. I also took some mature *griseo* larvae (later confirmed by the tarsal swimming-hairs), so it was definitely breeding there. Well pleased, we returned to Azrou for some well-earned beer in the Hotel Panorama's bar. Then dinner. Oh dear! The roast lamb managed the total lack of flavour remembered from school Sunday roast. The secret is, I think, to let it go cold then reheat it in a little water! Still, the wine was good. Tomorrow, we decided, we would try the Restaurant des Cèdres in town!



The *griseo* pool at 2150 metres, looking towards the Col du Zad



Habitat of *griseo* and its larva in the pool

Next morning's breakfast was a pleasant surprise, and we then went into town to buy a few souvenirs and some picnic food at the boulangerie. Then back up through the cedar forest and off to Lac Afennourir. There were quite a few people and sheepdogs around, so we were rather careful. Still, we found some nice weedy lakeside pools and started collecting.



One of the species we hoped for here was my *Helophorus elizabethae* (named after Lizzie), but sadly, it was not to be found. There were plenty *Helophorus* there – *alternans*, *occidentalis*, *asturiensis*, *atlantis* and *algericus*. There was also a pretty *Donacia* which turned out to be *D. polita* Kunze (left), a species Russell Coope has found as a fossil in British mid-Pleistocene interglacial deposits from Happisburgh (site 3), Norfolk, which are more than three quarters of a million years old. At that stage we decided to cut our losses and go back to the Col du Zad. We got one more *griseo* but our style was somewhat cramped by a flock of sheep and goats nearby, plus dog. Neither of us trusts sheep-

guarding dogs, and there is rabies in Morocco! I felt safe while in the pool for with all the leeches the dog would probably have been sucked dry if it had come too close! However, the collecting was very poor so we moved on, trying the pools round the lake of Aguelmame de Sidi Ali. Nothing very useful, but one *Helophorus oxygonus* dead on the car roof. So, back to the cedar forests to look for flightless Geotrupidae (*Thorectes*). Sadly none to be found, but quite a few *Scarabaeus laticollis* L. rolling their dung balls. Also, quite a few Barbary Apes. Wild they may be, but, like the Black Bears in America, they have learned to visit picnic sites for food.

Dinner that night at the Restaurant des Cèdres did not disappoint. We had the speciality of the house, an absolutely delicious rabbit tajine. We had decided that it was too far to walk from the Panorama (especially returning after dark), so agreed to save the drinking till afterwards, in the bar of the Panorama. Actually, it was an unnecessary decision – no-one was drinking and I don't think the restaurant is licensed!

So that was the end of our time in Azrou. Next morning, Sunday, we set off back to the Hotel Transatlas, duly reserved rooms, and went in search of the Aguel-Tegha lakes. The road, though surfaced, was narrow and well supplied with potholes, which made us nervous for our tyres, but we found a decent lake and started collecting. No *griseo* this time, but an abundant *Hygrotus* of the *parallelogrammus* group, which we collected for David. We checked a few other lakes, but they were beginning to dry up, and again we faced the sheep + dog problem. Then the weather began to deteriorate, so we retreated to the Transatlas for some pre-dinner beer. And this time, unlike on Corsica last year (see **Latissimus 27**), we reached shelter before the thunderstorm!

And that was it, really. Next day we drove back to Marrakech without incident, though it got very hot and the car's air conditioning seemed to be fighting a losing battle. The Airport seemed totally bereft of signage, but we found it in the end, and then made our way to the Ibis hotel near the railway station, which Lizzie had noticed as we braved the Marrakech traffic. So, a relaxing end to the day, and we flew home the next morning. The *griseos* have now been chromosomed successfully, and are *S. ibericus* Dutton & Angus, the Spanish and Alpes Maritimes species which we found on Corsica last year. Not a surprising result, but also not one to be taken for granted. All in all, it was an enjoyable and very interesting trip. A pity about the tyres on the first car, but the genuine kindness and helpfulness of the people at Ait-Isehak is something I will always remember with deep gratitude.

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