



EXPEDITION DIARY Oman 2007

By Peter Schuette

6 January

Hello everyone and welcome to the Oman 2007 diary. I'm Peter, your expedition leader, and you will be hearing from me regularly over the next few weeks. We're all packed up and will be boarding a flight to Dubai later today. The message from Land Rover in Dubai is that the vehicles are ready and waiting for us. Most of the equipment is in storage in Muscat and if all goes well, then we'll be heading there in the new cars by tomorrow to meet up with Hadi, our local guide and to have some meetings with the Diwan and sponsors.

Also with me are Tessa (McGregor), field scientist, and Dr. Matthias (Hammer), our founder and managing director, who is helping to set things up but will be with us for a week or so only.

All "Insha'Allah" of course, a phrase you are about to become very familiar with... It translates roughly as... 'If Allah wills it' and is a marvellously useful term of complete fatalism and one which has no direct English equivalent. The nearest thing would probably be '...but on the other hand I might get hit by a number 73 bus tomorrow' - uttered in tones of sodden dejection by a clinical depressive with a strong Solihull accent.

Anyway, we all look forward to meeting you in Dubai soon. My Oman mobile number (FOR EMERGENCY USE ONLY OR IF YOU ARE ABOUT TO BE LATE FOR ASSEMBLY) is +968 92700497 and I'll see you in the Ibis lobby.

So long

Peter Schuette
Expedition leader

8 January

Yesterday we arrived in Dubai. Wintertime, 22°C, sunny. Crazy place, with all these shopping malls, hotels and skyscrapers - they don't stop construction.

We picked up the Land Rovers from Wouter, their "3D Communications Manager", who had everything perfectly organised - cars prepped up and ready and with a full tank sitting there waiting for us! After the procedure to get the driving licenses, there followed a 6-hour drive to Muscat. Lunch close after the border to Oman in Arabian style (sitting down and eating with our hands). Arrival in Muscat in the early evening, short meeting with Dr. Andrew Spalton, chief scientist from the Diwan of Royal Court, dinner in Italian style (sitting on chairs and eating with knives and forks - well, at least some of us). Our Muscat base for the next days is a house of the Diwan of Royal Court.

Today Matthias and I checked the kit list, kitted the cars out with emergency water cans, shovels, first aid kits, etc. and did some shopping. Tessa checked our datasheets over and prepared the meeting with Dr. Andrew Spalton and Hadi, our local guide and scientific assistant.

Dinner at the Oman Dive Center (ODC) with Filip, Steffi (who run it) and Andrew (Spalton). Good discussion about (eco)tourism in Oman.

Tomorrow we will be busy with shopping again, then loading all the equipment into the cars for Wednesday's drive to Khasab on the Musandam peninsula. Last but not least we will have another meeting with Andrew and Hadi to sort things out for this and the 2008 expedition.

And finally I would like to introduce all of you to a new document that we will be distributing to all team members in future (attached). It is meant to be a general guide that is applied on all our expeditions. We have field tested it Brazil last year and adapted it and Oman is the first expedition to get the final version. But of course we are always keen to have your comments and we look forward to discussing it with you.

9 January

Today is the last day here in Muscat with broadband internet access, so this may well be the last entry for the next few days. Hadi, our local biologist and guide, has arrived and we all discussed how the expedition will work on a day-to-day basis. More about this in a few days.

The storage room is empty now and the cars are packed for the drive to Khasab tomorrow early morning as you can see at <http://www.imagestation.com/album/index.html?id=2098768871>. We've put a couple of pictures on there including one of (left to right) Hadi, Matthias, myself and Tessa. Don't forget to add yours once you've survived the survey work ;->.

14 January

Yesterday Matthias left Khasab early for shopping in Dubai. Tessa and me left at 5:30 to be in Dubai for a press meeting at 9:00.

At 10:00 we met the first slot team. First briefing in Dubai, drive to Khasab and we arrived at town base at around 14:00. On the way we had the world's slowest one-finger keyboard typer on the Omani border.

After everybody settled in the apartments, we spent the afternoon going through briefings, risk assessment, some of the kit and procedures. In the evening we went to "our" Musandam restaurant for dinner.

15 January

After breakfast and Matthias' introduction into "How do I use a map, put "Fred in the shed" and "where should I go when I am lost?", Tessa held her science talk and explained the datasheets. We also very studiously went through plaster casts of animal tracks and bags of scat (faeces) of tahr, domestic goat, wolf, leopard, caracal and fox, studying and smelling (yum!), so that we will hopefully recognise them again in the field!

Later the drivers went on a driving course for a few hours. Everybody did very well. Tessa took the non-drivers to the Khasab museum (restored in the Khasab fortress) to collect what remains of the botanical collection of plants collected by the Royal Botanical Gardens of Edinburgh in 1987. This will go to the Diwan of Royal Court.

Later on we all met up again for a scramble and introduction to the terrain.

16 January

Today we split into three groups. Tessa took one to check waterholes between Khasab and Wadi As Sayh. The others went by speedboat to the Shamm peninsula and to the Bay Khwar Humsi to survey wadis and ridges. The first real survey day was successful. One large predator scat was found, probably wolf or leopard! But the specimen was perhaps one or two years old. Signs of fox and one caracal scat were also spotted. So quite a success for today! Robyn and Kate did well collecting information from some local people! Not to forget the wildlife like bottlenose dolphins, jellyfish, snakes and a turtle.

But there was still time for creating new names which make sense... So is Amanda now OMANda!

Now everybody has sore legs and is packing their stuff, ready to move into field camp in Wadi Rawdah.

20 January

We've moved into our field camp in Wadi Rawdah, about two hours drive from Khasab along a spectacular mountain road. Shortly after arrival and having put up the Bedu mess tent (which takes all hands to erect), an intrepid group of eight led by Matthias went on an epic overnight survey into the high mountains. We climbed to the top of a ridge overlooking field camp and slept out in the open on a ledge, strung up like beads in our sleeping bags, a several hundred foot drop on one side below and only the stars above. The next day we split into smaller teams and continued our survey by scouring the next valley and slopes for sign. We brought back some sizeable scats that Tessa still has to pass verdict on.

"Comfort zone" is rapidly becoming the phrase of the overnights with estimates ranging from "within" to "several hundred miles out". Everyone pushed themselves really hard and can be justly proud of their achievement on the slopes.

Meanwhile in the valley, Tessa and Hadi led the rest of the team in setting up the small mammal traps and cameras on the lower slopes. Whilst having dinner at camp, Patrick kept eyeing up the slopes hoping to see a flash of a camera trap triggering.

Matthias has left us now and gone back to Europe and we look forward to the next five days of solid research work in and around field camp.

21 January

The team members spent a relaxing day off on a dhow cruise with sunbathing, swimming, book reading and watching dolphins, mantas, sharks and turtles. Unfortunately the day started cloudy but the afternoon was sunny. Tessa and me had time to do some admin and shopping. After everybody had a nice hot shower at town base, we moved back to camp in the evening relaxed and ready for surveying in the following days. Hadi was very busy with organising the helicopter drops, estimating percentage (between 5 and 95%) of likelihood every hour.

22 January

At 2:00 in the night whole camp was woken up by a helicopter flying over base camp and disappearing! In the morning Hadi's found out that there will be no heli drop today because there was an emergency in the night. But Tessa always has a plan A, B and C, so the whole team went out to survey two wadis close to the military check point of Wadi Bih. We set up a camera trap on one of the numerous ledges and caves. We have a team of extraordinary good surveyors, so we spotted lots of signs of fox, caracal and human disturbance. And finally Tessa spotted a caracal on a ledge for a second!!! How exciting!

Back in camp, Sahid (one of last year's guides) showed us a fresh track right before heavy rain began. Tessa was sure: "This is a leopard track from this morning!" The track could be followed for ca. 500 m. This is conclusive evidence that the Arabian Leopard still clings on in Musandam! In addition to this, local people report leopard sightings in the last years and months.

After this exciting news back in camp we enjoyed Poli's fish BBQ. In the evening we held presentations on Namibia and Altai to let everybody dream of the next expedition with Biosphere.

24 January

After heavy rain in the night, the morning was cloudy and chilly. Altogether in the last days the temperatures were very pleasant for hiking - 20 to 25 degrees centigrade!

We headed out one more time to Wadi Bih splitting into small groups and surveying the big open wadi and two small narrow wadis close to the ledge where Tessa found a leopard pugmark and scratch last year. But - no luck- no signs this year!

Beautiful sunny morning and today it happens! The helicopter arrives at 7:30 taking Hadi and Tessa with two camera traps to drop on the plateau east of base camp and for a second drop on the Wadi Bih plateau. After whirling dust into all tents and almost breaking them down, the heli disappears with an incredible noise. Everybody snaps plenty of pictures. I then take the team to the wadi where we meet Tessa and Hadi in the afternoon coming down from the plateau. We spot several goat kills and interesting ledges with caves. In the upper part Tessa spots three old leopard pugmarks.

So after these exciting findings in the last days there can be no doubt that against all the odds the leopard is still hanging on in there in the remote parts of the Musandam peninsula.

26 January

Yesterday after breaking down camp, we moved back to Khasab. On the spectacular drive back, one tyre was completely shredded. Good work Jennifer and it's all Tessa's fault of course ;-> Not only tyres got shredded, several boots reached their demise after two weeks in this terrain also, including mine.

In the apartments everybody was packing - sad but true - the end of slot one is close! Last dinner and little celebration in town.

At 8:00 we left for Dubai dropping the team members at 11:00. A big thanks to the team members for being here and surveying so well! Without you the status of the Arabian leopard would still be a big unknown on the map of Oman.

We are looking forward to Inge's movie and everybody's pictures. Don't forget to share them via www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureexchange

After visiting Arabia's Wildlife Centre in Sharjah and watching Arabian leopard, caracal, ibex, gazelle, Blanford's fox, sandcat and all the other wildlife, we are now back in Khasab preparing everything for slot two. Khalid, Hadi's assistant, is now with us and will stay the rest of expedition and we are looking forward to picking up the second team tomorrow!

30 January

After the second team's arrival, getting familiar with equipment, cars and terrain ("up" is definitely the winner versus "down") in the last days, we went by speed boat to Kumzar in the very north of the peninsula. Led by Abdulwahid (our guide for this day) we passed the village, where each square centimeter of the narrow wadi is used, and witnessed big wedding preparations like boiling soup in huge pots in the middle of the street. We climbed up the steep part of the wadi following and surveying innumerable ledges to the incredibly green plateau (obviously there was a lot of rain in this area) on the top. Stimulated by this, the lunch break turned into a football game, luckily an old ball lay around. On the way back the wedding party had already started with music and gun shots being fired! In the village "public viewing" was in preparation, as the final of the Arabian Cup UAE vs. Oman was about to happen that evening.

By the way, after all these exciting things, a scrape was spotted today, possibly leopard, but old! Caracal sign were seen, lots of fox and small mammals like hedgehog and jird.

Back in town, we once more got the best dinner in town in "our" restaurant like "Chicken 65", dhal and falafel, not to forget the fish!

Bad luck for Tessa on a ledge - unfortunately her camera bag came lose from the rucksack and fell into the wadi. Ian could only save the damaged rest. Can you imagine our field scientist without her camera?

UAE - Oman 1:0 (so no car convoy, no spinning wheels, no V8-noise in Khasab!)

1 February

Yesterday me moved into base camp. Everybody did well packing up all the stuff, but we had to wait for the permit to access Wadi Bih for two more hours! After erecting camp, Tessa and Hadi explained the traps and went out with the whole team to place two new mammal traps in the cave above camp. The way up and down on difficult ground took the rest of the day, but eventually everybody arrived happily and safely back at base camp. We had a fantastic dinner again, Poly's fish BBQ!!!

Today the whole team headed out to Wadi Bih. We split into small groups checking camera traps, placed a new one on a promising looking ledge and surveyed three smaller wadis. Old signs of caracal and fox were spotted by team members confirming the high presence of these animals in Musandam. The camera trap on the "leopard ledge" had shot all its pictures, so we look forward to seeing them once they are developed, especially because we found a caracal track on the ledge. In the afternoon we started the "every day activity - traps and tracks". Checking all mammal traps close to base camp and tracking in three areas in Wadi Rawdah.

4 February

During the last few days team members were busy with "traps and tracks" and surveying smaller wadis. Caracal and fox (probably Blandford's fox, too) signs were also spotted. We are working on a mammal and a bird list and they become longer every day. Unfortunately we also always find many signs of human disturbance like litter or (stone) traps.

Friday afternoon heavy rain stopped the surveys. It happened right after dinner when we were sitting around the campfire. Suddenly the clouds burst above camp and we had to scramble for cover and start digging ditches to protect the big Bedu tent! That's wintertime in Musandam! After everybody rescued their sleeping bags, we met in the almost dry Bedu tent listening to Ian's fantastic voice singing. Because of the heavy rain we have seen water running in one wadi – a rare event!

After a cold and wet night all team members came back to Khasab to relax on a dhow cruise today and to be ready for the last few days of field work from tomorrow onwards.

5 February

During the night there was an incredible thunderstorm. Almost everybody had to dry their sleeping bags and tents. And, of course, no helicopter drop, the weather was too changeable. Unfortunately we also had to cancel the overnigher, which was planned up to the plateau close to Wadi Bih. Instead we went with the whole team to the wadi we have been to ten days ago (also close to Wadi Bih) to set the last camera trap on a promising looking ledge. Some tried to reach the top, but it was very difficult because the heavy rain had loosened the rocks. But team members did well and surveyed a lot of ledges and caves.

Amazingly there was now running water, water falls and filled rock pools in the wadi! After the thunderstorm of the night, the morning turned out to be glorious! In the afternoon on the way down, with Hadi singing, we found a frog in a rockpool. This may be the first found in Musandam! In the evening Hadi and Tessa left for Khasab to give a talk the next day at the Ministry of Environment and Tourism.

6 February

Today we split in to two teams. I did "traps and tracks" with Anja, Sybille and Julie. We set the mammal traps with pet food and while tracking we got really excited about some tracks and pugmarks. We looked forward to showing them to Tessa in the afternoon! The rest of the team went with Khalid back to Wadi Selhad where heavy rain stopped us on Friday! Lots of much human disturbance in this wadi, so not much was found. Our tracks turned out to be domestic dog, so no excitement there. But one track looked like a leopard hind pug, even Tessa agreed! What a pity!

In the evening James from Dubai, a journalist, came to base camp, Tessa, Hadi, some team members and I headed out one more time to show him the mammal traps and the tracking area. On the way back, already after sunset, while the team was waiting for supper, we saw two Blandford's foxes crossing the road!

Back in base camp Poly's comment about the kitchen tent - he had to fight with the wind during the day – was "tomorrow this garbage"! And so it was! Under the stars we sat on the campfire up to midnight waiting for the moon - stunning!

7 February

Beautiful morning! After a late breakfast Tessa, Hadi and I went with the helicopter to the plateau east of base camp. After the steepest descent of my life, we changed films in the two camera traps that had been set on the first helicopter drop! Pictures on the film - we look forward to seeing them developed! Khalid took the team one last time to Wadi Bih to survey a big wadi. After the arduous climb up to ledges and a long walk, unfortunately not much was found in this wadi - too much human disturbance. The "trap and tracks" team came back to camp to take us to the mammal traps, catching up the survey team on the way.

One mammal trap was closed with a Blandford's fox inside! Tessa determined it was a female. In the pouring rain we released the animal! Now the whole team has seen a Blandford's fox, and we have spotted three in the last 24 hours. Plenty of good evidence that they are still around.

In the late afternoon we went to Sahid and Khasoum to say goodbye. One last time we enjoyed Poly's best dinner in base camp.

10 February

On Thursday we split into three teams. Two checked and brought back the mammal traps. The rest of the team helped pack up base camp. After heavy rain during the whole night - I know this from northern Germany, but didn't expect it in Oman - we had to dry the tents and clean everything. The team did very well and so we finished at 10:00. The drive back to Khasab took us more than 3.5 hours as the road was washed away by the rain. We shredded two more tyres, but luckily we arrived safely!

And so the following afternoon everybody began to pack and prepare to leave. We had to say goodbye to the Esra team, the restaurant, the shop keepers and everyone who has helped in the last month and made this expedition a success and hugely enjoyable. Thank you to all of you.

After leaving four team members in Khasab (where they stayed on for a bit of holidaying), we drove to Dubai to drop the rest of the team. Then straight on to Muscat where we arrived in the late evening, unloaded the cars and stored the equipment for another year.

I have just finished wrapping up everything and would like to say thank you to everyone who participated in this year's Oman expedition. Thank you for your hard work, good surveying, enthusiasm, laughter, singing...

It has been a great success - we covered a lot of ground and we found conclusive evidence that the Arabian leopard is still clinging on in Musandam! We found leopard pugmarks, claw rakes and scrape, spotted many signs of caracal and fox, saw one caracal, three Blandford's foxes and one camera trap picture of a Blandford's fox.

The camera traps stay in place, hopefully there will be some results coming in. Tessa will be busy analysing all the data and writing the report. A big thank you to Hadi and Khalid - it was great to have your company! All of you were a fantastic team and I am already looking forward to next year's expedition down in Dhofar!

Don't forget to share pictures at www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureexchange.

Good luck to you all and hope to see you again!

Peter Schuette
Expedition leader