



EXPEDITION DIARY Oman 2008

By Peter Schütte

2 January

Happy New Year and hello to all Oman expeditioners and those involved with the expedition to this first entry of our Oman 2008 diary. I am Peter Schuette, your expedition leader this year, and I will be entertaining or boring you (whichever way you see it!) with this diary over the next month or so.

It's freezing in Germany where I am at the moment and I don't know about you, but I am definitely looking forward to the warmth of Arabia! Preparations for the expedition are in full swing. The Land Rovers should be ready and waiting for us in Dubai, we have found a cook, Khalid, our field guide, is ready and waiting in Salalah, Marcelo, the man with the camels is standing by, our scientist is about to arrive in Muscat from Brazil and meet up with Andrew, the Adviser of Conservation of the Diwan of Royal Court (Omani government) to talk things through, your flight tickets to Salalah (and back) are booked, we're packing up the equipment here in Europe and flying out on Saturday to Dubai to pick up the vehicles and more equipment. You name it – it's all in place. YEAH RIGHT! "Insha'Allah" is a phrase you are about to become very familiar with... It translates roughly as... 'If Allah wills it' and is a marvelously 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.

First change of plan: It won't be me meeting you in the airport lobby at Muscat, but a representative of NTT Oman, our Muscat travel agency partner. He will be at Costa Coffe (how's that for globalisation!) at 09.00 as described in your dossier, distribute tickets and point you in the general direction to check in for your Salalah flight. I'll then meet you at the airport in Salalah with the camels, sorry, Land Rovers. This is not a big deal, but it's always good to have a plan B in case things go pear-shaped, as they tend to on expedition, so if our friend from NTT is not there by 08.30, please give me a ring on my Oman mobile (see below) or ring Ginu from NTT on +968 92 800281 sounding slightly worried that the man with your tickets has not turned up yet!

I'll send another update from Oman once all the staffers have met up there and we know which shape the pear is going to take this year ☺ But enough of scaring you with expedition lore – we do know what we are doing, honest, and we all look forward to meeting you in Salalah soon. My Oman mobile number (for emergency use only) is +968 92700497.

Safe travels

Peter Schuette
Expedition leader

9 January

It was all smooth sailing. No delayed flights, transfers waiting, Land Rovers ready, uneventful 6-hour drive from Dubai through the desert to Muscat, Marcelo ready and waiting there. Then we went to where our gear had been stored for the past year in Muscat and it had for some reason, by someone been moved outside into the garden for the past few months. Everything valuable was gone. GPSs, compasses, binoculars, books – you name it, it was no longer there. Ever so slightly concerned by this, we spent yesterday on an extreme shopping spree around Muscat and Dubai. Rob, Wouter and Johnny from Land Rover were a godsend and pulled out all the stops to help get everything together in time. Thank you! We've just done our Land Rover press conference and we're now all packed up and heading off to Salalah to set up camp. Perhaps I'll send an update before 13 Jan, but more likely, I will see the first group at Salalah airport.

14 January

The first team has arrived and settled in at base camp. On the way there we saw Arabian gazelle on the hills and tracks of hyrax and hyaena. After a beautiful sunset making the mountains around us glow golden, we spent some time around the camp fire getting to know each other. Then it was talks on the science, GPS, compass, the Land Rover driving course, and a first field walk today. Lots of information, lots to take in, as always. All well here and more soon.

19 January

The first week at base is over and we've had lots of sightings of gazelles & hyrax, some ibex, signs of wolf and hyaena and also our first signs of leopard during the camel overnight survey. We've also been to some communities and talked to local people there. The picture that is emerging from the interviews matches what we find in the field. Gazelles are pretty common, as are hyrax colonies. Hyaenas and wolves are around and even get close to the villages to raid the rubbish dumps. There are fewer ibex higher up in the mountains and leopards are around too.

We think we've found a few good places to put our first camera traps and also a number of wadi valleys that look promising for further surveys. The team are in the full swing of things and even survived a couple of uncharacteristically cold nights of 6 degrees centigrade and cloudy (not blue!) skies.

23 January

We covered a lot of ground in the last few days and have also started to work on a bird inventory of mainly partridges, grouse and some birds of prey. Last Sunday's explorer team discovered lots of tracks and spotted some gazelle close to the car.

On Monday, part of the team went on a two-day overnighter with the Land Rovers, driving 5 hours to start with on day one to set up an advanced research camp and then discovering a lot of human disturbance in the survey area. Those left at base camp, went out to interview local people in the village of Mudday. As it's our first time in the area, quite a lot of time is spent explaining why a bunch of foreigners from all over the world is keen to go walking and camping in the remote wadis ;)

The rest of the week we spent looking for other areas that look promising for more surveys.

1 February

We went through extensive field and animal identification training in the first couple of days of the second slot. On Tuesday we ventured out to track and record signs of animals for the first time with the new group. We entered a promising-looking narrow, green wadi. Everybody did well looking for and identifying tracks and scats and of course, most importantly, filling in datasheets ☺

As reward we got to see two ibex running on a ridge! A hyrax colony was also found, another one is just couple hundred metres far from base camp. What a great start for this team!

Wednesday we split into two groups, one went out for two nights to survey a new area. Setting up a small camp for our overnighters is always hard work but rewarding and so our Land Rovers packed with tents, cooking stuff and water set off to make their way to wadi Uyun. The rest of the team back at base camp went for more interviews with local people in the villages and shorter surveys around base camp.

Our results of the last few days: three possible leopard signs (we have to confirm these with Hadi), a waterhole in one of the wadis, a very exhausted survey team after a strenuous 24 km walk in the heat of more than 35 centigrade and a successful exploratory trip to assess access routes into another wadi that we want to survey next week.

So today we are back at base camp, recovering, entering data and preparing for the days that lie ahead.

6 February

Last Sunday the next survey and exploration chapter started. Again we split into two teams. Team one had the task of setting up camera traps. So they headed out with a camel for two nights. Hadi was with them to help decide where the cameras and video cameras should be placed. After successful placement of the traps and a clear night on a mountain ledge under the stars, Hadi's group investigated another wadi. Worrying signs of poaching activity were found, such as freshly skinned ibex, a fireplace and lots of human footprints.

Team two went out to Wadi Huttaw, sleeping on the plateau with a strong and cold north wind blowing down from the Empty Quarter. This was definitely one of the chilliest nights an expedition ever spent on Oman! On the survey we spotted seven hyrax and lots of tracks and scat. Many of the tracks were quite old and in deep sand, so not identifiable, but there is definitely some movement in this wadi! We found a couple of promising scats, which we will now send off to Sultan Qaboos University in Muscat for identification.

8 February

We spent the last few days of this year's expedition re-sampling some promising areas more intensively and carefully, spending more time on ledges and in caves.

To summarise the last four weeks and our efforts, we found three scats in the study area, which are very likely leopard and five more, which we still have to confirm. We spotted a lot of signs of hyaena, wolf, fox, Arabian gazelle, Nubian ibex, hyrax, porcupine and hare. There is still a lot of human impact in this area, not only camel and goat herders but also poaching activity!

We worked successfully on a first-ever bird list of the Dhofar mountains, identifying 30 species, thanks mainly to Roger, Neil and Carole who put a lot of work into it. Our list includes steppe eagle, Verreaux's eagle, Arabian partridge, sand partridge, hoopoe, and so on.....

We started making contact with the locals, interviewing them to supplement our findings.

All this together was an excellent start to getting more information about the presence of the Arabian leopard and its prey and we will continue this work in the years to come.

Last but not least I would like to thank everybody who joined this expedition or who helped to bring it about. You've all done a great job! I know it's not always easy to be flexible in the face of ever-changing plans or to get up in the morning for another strenuous survey or indeed spending a freezing night in an advanced camp. But never forget that without you, we would not be working here!

Hope to see you all again some day.

Peter Schuette
Expedition Leader

P.S. Don't forget to share your pictures! www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureshare