



EXPEDITION DIARY Oman 2009

By Ronald Seipold

12 January

I hope you have all had a fantastic start into the New Year. The next highlight of this year is coming up soon...our expedition to Oman.

Tessa McGregor, your scientist, Erin McCloskey from the Biosphere Expeditions North America office and I, Ronald Seipold, your expedition leader, started preparations some days ago in Europe and then flew to Muscat. We have packed up all the equipment, received our cars (three shiny Land Rover Discovery courtesy of their makers), held a press conference at Land Rover, checked your flights and talked to the Adviser of Conservation of the Diwan of Royal Court (Omani government). Yesterday we arrived in Salalah and met Khalid (Mohammed Al Daan Al Hakmani) who will be our chief field guide – Insha'Allah.

"Insha'Allah", by the way, 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.

Tomorrow (Insha'Allah) I will have an appointment with our cook to prepare at least some basic food menus for you ☺ In the next few days, until the expedition starts (Insha'Allah), we will set up our base camp (Insha'Allah). Tessa and Hadi Musallam, our main contact person with the Diwan who has supported us for many years in Oman, are already in the field to check the terrain. So, up to now, everything is on track.

Please be aware that I won't be meeting you at the airport in Muscat, but a representative of NTT Oman, our Muscat travel agency partner (Insha'Allah). He will meet you as described in your dossier, distribute tickets and help you to check in for your Salalah flight (Insha'Allah). We will then meet you at the airport in Salalah (Insha'Allah). This is plan A, but it's always good to have a plan B when on expedition. So if our friend from NTT is not there by 08.45, 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!

Although it's very warm here at the moment compared to freezing Europe, I would like to remind to bring a set of warm clothes along, as we might get some chilly nights (Insha'Allah).

I'll send another update soon about the 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 92380988.

Safe travels

Ronald Seipold
Expedition Leader

20 January

Just a quick note from the field to say that everyone has arrived safely and is now well ensconced at base camp. We pulled all the stops out for base this year and I think everyone likes it. The food has also been well received and since an army marches on its stomach, all seems well so far :)

Temperatures are pleasant, but last night it rained a lot. Still, I am happy to report that everyone stayed dry in their tents. So much for Arabian desert nights...

We've gone through all the training sessions and everyone is now raring to go out and test their new-found naturalist skills in the field. One thing that has gone pear-shaped is that the 20 camera traps we had bought for the research have not arrived yet and are lost somewhere between Muscat and the inept supplier in Texas. The office are chasing hard, but to no avail so far. Everyone is blaming everyone else, of course!

But in true expedition-style, we switched to plan B, which is to find good spots to place the cameras once they arrive. They then have to stay in the field for weeks or months anyway and the important thing is to find good places for them and that means places close to where the animals move. So one of our main jobs will be to find well-used tracks in the depths of the remote wadis that surround base. Wish us luck.

25 January

The rain finally stopped early Tuesday morning giving us the chance to continue our training sessions outside. Tessa made us familiar with the datasheets and trained us for our surveys. After all this theoretical work we left base camp for our first training in the field. Following the advice of a local, who passed base camp on Monday afternoon, the whole team left in the afternoon towards the small village of Uyun where we split up into two groups. Rames (our local ranger), Erin and eight team members headed for a big waterhole. This very oasis like area, surrounded by cliffs with several caves, offered a surprising amount of birdlife (even water birds). Tracks and scat of fox and other unidentified animals will make us come back again to this place.

The second team met a local camel herder 6 km further east. This very friendly old man and his son were born in this area. After telling him about our project, he showed us a camel baby (only a few days old) and tasting fresh camel milk (really not that different from cow milk). Some neighbours who came by gave us an invitation to visit a group of about 18 men of a local tribe called Bed Kethir. Some of them are camel-herders as well and stay for several months with their camels in this area. There was a lot of great hospitality and interest in what we are doing. The outcome of our informal interview was that they hadn't seen a leopard for at least 8 to 12 years in this area, but the leopard should be still present around Wadi Uyun. We will hopefully find out. Besides our talk, it was a really interesting experience watching all these men sitting outside next to a hut, shielded from the wind by a wooden fence, around a camp fire, drinking tea, eating, chatting and laughing.

On Wednesday all of us went east of base camp to Wadi As Suquah, a very beautiful wadi with ledges, caves, a few Frankincense trees and a waterhole at the beginning, where we prepared a mud trap. Aside from some human disturbance, we found a great number of animal sign within this wadi, such as tracks, scat, feces of caracal, wolf, red fox, Blanford's fox, Arabian gazelle, Nubian ibex, White-tailed mongoose, honey badger, hyrax and hedgehog and furthermore sightings of a hedgehog, a cat snake (?) and some small lizards.

The next day we drove to a place south-east of Titam (close to Irahan), which is located close to the Dofahr Mountain range, an area that Hadi and Tessa spotted during our preparing time. The narrow wadis in broken terrain, thick scrub, ledges and caves appeared to be a very promising leopard area. However, it turned out to be really difficult terrain to survey: no trails, steep, thorny bushes all over the place. We had to turn several times and finally ended up at the same spot. But despite the fact that only managed to cover a small part of the wadi, we found lots of scat and tracks of wolf, fox, wildcat (fresh track). Tessa is convinced we may even find ibex signs here and plans to come back in the next slot at the latest. At night we got some more scattered rain, but there was little wind and the night-temperature is climbing every day.

On Friday we used our Land Rovers for a long distance off-road survey to the very large and deep Wadi Huttaw, south of base camp. On our way we passed several viewpoints that offered us impressive views into this almost Grand Canyon like landscape.

Hadi had asked us to survey this area for the Diwan. So we split into two groups to cover as much area as possible. When we met again, one group was a little bit disappointed about the low number of sign they had found, but the other team report a very high number of different, high quality tracks. Name any animal of this area, and believe it or not, we have found tracks of almost all animals that should be present. And yes, we think we may have found a leopard scat (although it's very old and difficult to identify)! Needless to say that, aided by a pleasant night under a clear sky of bright stars, we sat up by our camp fire, talking about the day's result and what they may mean, for quite a while

Yesterday one group went back to the big natural waterhole close to Uyun to have a closer look at this very special place. Being that close to Uyun, it was no surprise to find high human disturbance. But still the signs we have found were amazing: hyena, porcupine and wolf throughout the surveyed area (including a wolf skull on a ledge), fox, wildcat, gazelle, hedgehog (even scrapes), partridge, sand grouse and, for the first time, fresh ibex prints.

The second group had a longer walk from base camp up to the plateau and came back with signs of ibex, hyena (a lot of them fresh), fox and hyrax, as well as a dead camel. So, again a brilliant day, even though the heat during the day makes surveying hard work, especially on the plateaus.

Now, as we have already reached half time of the first slot, I can say that this team is doing more than well. No accidents, no injuries, everybody is feeling well, the team spirit is tops, the meals are superb and the results of our research very significant and promising. The next chance for you of getting some more information about our expedition is during my next stay in Salalah and that's not before the end of this slot.

Speak to you then.

30 January

Last Sunday was a kind of day-off: part of the group accompanied us to Salalah to spend a few hours in a souk and at the beach. After some shopping, we picked up our new ranger Bakit and an additional team member (Humaid Al Ismaily from Shell, an important sponsor of Biosphere Expeditions in Oman). Axinja, Rob, Isa, Birgit and Ashley together with Khalid and Erin prepared their two-day overnighter and left early lunchtime to drive four hours to Wadi Amat, where we had left two camera traps last year. Those team members who didn't join the overnight stay returned to the big waterhole on Monday. On our way we spotted two gazelles on the plateau. The survey north-west of the waterhole met our expectations. We found a lot of signs of ibex (even fresh ones), wolf, fox (including sent-marks) and porcupine. On our way back to base camp we checked our mud trap at the small waterhole but no prints had been left.

Because all our surveys around the waterhole had been so promising we continued our efforts in this area. Tuesday we made our way directly through Wadi Uyun from base to the point where we finished our survey the day before. Not far from our starting point we spotted gazelle again, this time two females and a male on a slope just about 50 to 70 meters away from the Land Rovers. What a motivating start of our survey. And it was still in the beginning of our survey when Tessa observed a Blandford's fox running up a slope. But the further away we went from the waterhole, the fewer tracks there were. Nevertheless this part of Wadi Uyun is still of interest and we will come back again to have a closer look at some promising ledges and side wadis.

The overnighter returned late in the evening, tired on the one hand, but full of energy on the other. Of course there were a lot of pictures to be shown and stories to be told about their camel riding experience, sleeping outside under a clear sky of stars and the survey itself. Besides human disturbance and poaching activities (especially ibex) the team found abundant partridge, hyrax, gazelle and even caracal signs as well as fox, wolf, ibex, and hyena pugmarks and faeces or scat. Unfortunately none of the two camera traps had taken a picture, even though they been out in the field for a whole year.

Wednesday we left in two groups for a survey of Wadi Suqua, a follow-up of our first survey to the very end including a smaller wadi with heavy vegetation that runs parallel to it. As Wadi Suqua gets more and more narrow and boulders closed the way for camels, there were lots of Frankincense trees. Sadly we also found a bait tree and cartridges, a clear sign of poaching activity. Team members in the smaller wadi found ammunition and two animal skulls with clear gunshot marks. This explains perhaps the low number of tracks and other signs of animals such as gazelle, ibex and porcupine. Rewarding were the sightings of a juvenile porcupine and hyrax in both valleys.

On our last day we split up into three groups. Christian, Rasha, Nicole and Isa left base camp at 04:00 in the morning for an early morning observation at the big waterhole. Hours of waiting were finally (at about 9:00) rewarded by a sighting by Rasha: she was able to take a video of what we think was a black wildcat! There are stories around about this animal, but the existence of this special species has not been proved yet. Tessa has to examine this video on a big computer screen and will let you all know about the result. Well done Rasha!

The second group returned to the area near Iraham to explore a way further down into the valleys. This hardcore team worked their way through difficult terrain and managed to cover much ground. Even though it could not been proven that this is a good area for ibex and leopard and only few prey signs were found (very likely because of human disturbance such as road construction and poaching). We plan to come back to survey further parts of these steep valleys in the next slot.

The third group continued to survey Wadi Uyun towards the south-east of base camp. With the help of Roger and Rob we concentrated on observing birds as well. Besides a sighting of a small colony of hyrax, the number of animal signs was really low. At least we have found some gazelle and fox tracks close to base.

Overall we have found many very promising signs during the first slot that make us look forward to starting with the second slot. Even though the area was mainly new to us we have covered more ground than expected. Well, thank you everybody for your passion, interest, hard work and contribution. It really was a pleasure to be part of this exceptional team. I would like to add my special thanks to Erin who was a tremendous help from the very first minute.

And remember everybody: a high speed camel is much more expensive than a low speed camel because you don't have to feed it with honey, dates and eggs – that's reasonable!

Hope to see some of you back on one of our other expeditions.

7 February

The second slot got off to a good start with everyone arriving including their luggage. Training went well and soon we were out into the field. Right on arrival we were even able to observe three gazelles for quite a while whilst driving the Land Rovers towards base camp. One day later Khalid observed three more gazelles on the plateau near base. So, they are definitely around, it might even be the same group we have seen within the last few weeks.

I would like to welcome Khalifa Hamed Al Jahwari from the Diwan in Muscat, as well as Abdallah Said Al-Toki from Shell and Mohamed our new ranger for this week. Furthermore a warm welcome to Sarah Low who runs the Biosphere Expeditions office in Australia since November 2008 and is attending her first expedition. Until Tuesday we had four more guests: namely the press people representing Times of Oman, Oman Tribune, Driven and host Asma Maqbool from Weber Sandwick. Thank you everyone for your interest. Spreading the word via the media like this is an important part of what we do here and it's good to have all this support from different quarters of commerce and the media in Oman.

We started our field training on Tuesday morning in Wadi Uyun, not far away from the big waterhole. In the afternoon some team members took the chance of getting an introduction to drive our LR Discoverys. It's pretty much of a challenge to go up and down the steep and difficult track near base, but Biosphere Expeditions seems to attract just the talented (or even experienced) drivers.

Wednesday we went back to Wadi Huttaw where we had some promising findings in the first slot. This time we had a closer look at an area in this stunning wadi a bit north of our last survey. And again we had a lot to talk about in the evening. Especially signs of old and fresh ibex including 20 (!) resting depressions. We also found some fresh and old signs of gazelle, although they seem to be less abundant compared to other areas. For the first time during this expedition there were signs (including sightings) of a big and active hyrax population. Furthermore very abundant partridge signs throughout the wadi, some hedgehog and several porcupine signs. Overall it was again a very successful day with tired team members that had to face a long off-road drive, a hot day and a steep slope of about 200 meters from the wadi bottom up to our cars.

Besides Roar's and Grethe's exploding sleeping mats and Roberta's two broken pairs of shoes our gear is holding up well. Spirits are high and it base already feels like home...

Thursday we split into two groups. Team 1 with Tessa and Khalid again went to the big waterhole to examine a narrow and long side wadi north-east of it. The delta of these wadis was so promising when we had been there with members of the last slot that we had to come back. The terrain was pretty difficult to survey due to large boulders along the wadi. As these boulders blocked the way for camels into the wadi, Frankincense trees could spread and grow throughout. Besides one fresh wolf and ibex track at the very beginning, only a few old signs of wolf, ibex, fox and none of gazelle or small mammals could be found. On the other hand, porcupine and partridge signs were abundant and three smaller active colonies of hyrax could be added to our datasheets. Finally the team had an exiting finding: very old scat and a degraded old print of what we think must be leopard! We need more analysis before it can be confirmed, but we have already shown that the waterhole is very critical for Wadi Uyun and more scientific work should be placed right there.

Team 2 with Khalifa, Mohammed, Sarah, Roberta and Ursula headed for the small village of Uyun to interview the locals. Uyun was founded 1974 at a time when nobody used to live in this area permanently. Nowadays about 40 families live in Uyun. By chance the team met Sheik Said Sali Ghawas, a man of about 50 who comes from the area near Amat but has been living in Uyun since the beginning. He is the supervisor of the military checkpoint that we have to pass almost daily, so he was already aware of our presence. In his opinion the current absence of leopard (even though leopard was seen just two years ago in Wadi Uyun) is caused by the roads that give easy access to this area (including poachers), the change of climate (much drier than in the past) and human presence in general. He stated that people nowadays don't have a problem with the leopard anymore (in former times they killed baby camels) and they do understand the government's wishes to protect them. They are more concerned about wolf, hyena and fox that regularly come close to the village to scavenge food. Three years ago a wolf killed seven goats in the centre of the village. Another important piece to our puzzle.

Besides the interview the team was invited for a tea and met a baby camel and some kids of the village that liked to be photographed. Afterwards this team surveyed a small side wadi close to our vehicle parking spot and near the waterhole. Abundant gazelle tracks attracted their interest as well as hyrax sightings.

Yesterday Khalifa, Khalid, Mohamed, Yvonne, Klaus, Tessa and I had to swing a big challenge given by Hadi: a very long drive (a big part of it off-road) led us to the south into the region of Adhkadat Al Madraj (Dhofar Mountain Range) between Wadi Sawa and Wadi Urzuq. We parked at a plateau of about 1130 meters and climbed almost 400 meters down into a steep and narrow gorge to finally follow some ledges to a huge overhang. At this very remote place Hadi several years ago had successfully placed a camera trap. Hadi asked us to put one there again. This really exhausting trip was rewarded by stunning mountain views, very different vegetation and findings that were beyond our expectations: a long trail of leopard tracks (a female with a cub), four scrapes with two faeces (one for sure leopard) and a scent mark! Tessa: "I have never ever had so many leopard findings to state on one data sheet!" Needless to say we were all very excited about this. Pretty exhausted but happy we arrived hours later at the cars where we met Toby, Katie and Ursula who had accompanied us to this place to observe the plateau. Unfortunately they didn't find a lot of animal signs. But they several cartridges and military activity (small rockets).

Grethe, Roar, Roberta and Abdallah carried on surveying in the area close to base. Neither the wadi, nor the plateau yielded any remarkable signs. John (Jay) had to take a break as twisted his ankle yesterday on the way back out of the waterhole side wadi. Let's keep fingers crossed that he will recover soon.

Today is the day-off for all team members and Abdallah, Mohamed, Khalifa and Sarah are to leave the expedition. I would like to thank you all for your help and enthusiasm. It was great spending this first week together with you.

My next diary will arrive you in about one week, actually when this year's expedition in Oman will be already over. Time is flying!

13 February

On Saturday, our day off, we all spent some time in Salalah. In the afternoon we picked up Ali Tahar (from Shell) and Hassan, our ranger for the last week.

On Sunday the overnight team with Tessa, Khalid, Yvonne, Klaus and Toby prepared their stay away from base. They left around midday to drive a long way into a region west of base, called Mudayy. This region was chosen because it is west of Uyun and closer to the Yemeni border, quite remote, with low population and minor human disturbance as well as being within a higher range of the mountains. Topographically most promising was Wadi Aydam, a very long and big wadi, about 15 km away from Harwib and giving us a chance to compare biodiversity and leopard presence.

On the way to the first overnight stop, Rames, a ranger from that area was picked up. After a long drive (over 6 hours) they stopped just before it got dark, to set up tents. Next morning, the team continued their way finally to meet a herder with a camel. After having loaded up the camel with water, tents and food, they surveyed following the wadi until the natural waterhole of Hazzah.

On Tuesday everybody had to get up early to walk and drive about 40 km through Wadi Aydam and Wadi Tahit back to an off-road route finally to arrive back at base in time for dinner.

Besides having a great adventure, this foray gave us a much better understanding of the area – another small piece in a big puzzle. The findings were also remarkable as the team found one possible old leopard pugmark and signs of all kinds of other predators. The camel herder said that he had seen leopard pugmarks about 3 months ago – these were the only ones he had seen for a very long time. Furthermore they found many tracks of ibex and gazelle and had sightings of both species. On the other hand, the survey revealed very high livestock densities (camels and goats) and severe over-grazing along much of the wadi.

The team at base concentrated on surveys in side wadis of Wadi Uyun, east of camp. Having covered a lot of ground from the middle of the wadis up to some high ledges and although all wadis were very different in type, we found few (fresh) signs of leopard prey or other predators. It seems that the longer distance to the big waterhole near Uyun does have an impact on wildlife in these wadis.

Indicators for our hard work are Ursula and Roberta: they have lost their soles (soul?) in the wadis of Oman. With plenty of tape, straps and strings around their boots (setting a new outdoor fashion trend?) they kept on going and going. Also the heat during the day gave us a hard time, but we were rewarded by a great sighting of two gazelles, an eagle and some hyrax. The highlight for John (Jay) was on Tuesday when he was able to leave for some activity away from camp (he had been forced to rest for some days because of his twisted ankle). So, in the afternoon we went by car to the small waterhole to check the mud track trap we had prepared during slot 1. Unfortunately the water level had risen, obliterating the track trap. On our short walk back to the cars, we found a wolf track under an overhang of a huge boulder just next to our trail.

Wednesday was a day for interfacing with the local people. All of us drove back to the route leading to the so-called leopard cave area, where we had seen several small settlements along the way. There we conducted two interviews with different families: one interview was with a herder family that was very open. They keep over 150 goat and camels. They are afraid of the leopard, but tolerate it; hyaena and wolf they hate. They stated that they had seen leopard in that area about three months ago and heard a leopard in November. The second interview was with a herder who keeps about 130 goats. He couldn't remember any signs of leopard in the last few years and therefore had no opinion about the leopard. He was much more concerned about hyaena and wolf as well, as he had already had a few losses of livestock to them.

Thursday, our last day of surveying, we spent in one of the wadis close to base. A sandstorm in the distance filled the air with thick dust – a great scene especially during sunset. Our findings there were similar to the day before yesterday, so besides fox, gazelle and ibex there were few other signs. Again difficult terrain stopped camels from overgrazing and Frankincense trees had a chance to grow.

Amazing how time flies. All team members were more than sad to have just finished their last survey. "Why is it over as we are now really into it?" was the question most heard.

With some pride I would like to mention that this team might have set a new record in packing everything up on Friday. Thank you everybody for your great help! But besides the packing, you have all done a fantastic job in helping us to gain a better understanding of the area and the Arabian leopard's place in it. We are looking forward to continuing our work here.

Finally I must mention our sighting on our way back to Salalah when six vultures and two eagles feasted on a dead goat just next to the road...

All the best to you and hopefully I will see you on one of our next expeditions.

Ronald

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