



## EXPEDITION DIARY Oman 2010

By Ronald Seipold

9 January

Welcome to the 2010 expedition diary. Just a quick one from me, Ronald Seipold, your expedition leader, to say that I am about to escape the European freeze from Frankfurt to hopefully much warmer climes in Oman.

We're all packed and ready to go, the Land Rovers are waiting in Muscat, as is a box of 20 brand-new camera traps and our whole camp equipment. So by the time you read this, I should be in Muscat getting everything ready for you, Insha'Allah.

"Insha'Allah", by the way, is a phrase you are about to become very familiar with. I usually introduce new expeditioners to this phrase right from the start, so I'll do it again in this first diary entry: Insha'Allah 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.

So far so good. I'll e-mail more from Muscat in due course. Please make a note of my Oman mobile number (for emergency use only), which is +968 92380988. I look forward to seeing you all soon.

Safe travels

Ronald Seipold  
Expedition Leader

16 January

First things first: apologies that this diary entry is slightly later than intended, however...

Busy, busy, busy! A successful press conference with our partners at Land Rover in Muscat resulted in some positive press in all the major national newspapers. After that, the set-up team and I made the lengthy trip to Salalah overland. Since then there has been a tremendous amount to prepare over the past few days, but I am happy to report that base camp is now fully operational.

This year's campsite has a slightly different feel to that of last year, due to the neighbouring presence of a camel herder and his inquisitive livestock! However, the site I have chosen is - I can promise you - absolutely stunning. It is located in the heart of a beautiful rocky valley known as 'Wadi Ayoon', where we have conducted research in previous years. The night skies are breathtaking, and the sunrises are awe-inspiring. And yes, it is DEFINITELY warmer than anywhere in Europe at this time! Nonetheless, please note that as evening approaches, the temperature drops significantly, and a set of warm clothes is indispensable.

As meals are always important on expedition, we (the set-up team) have been sampling the wares of this year's catering expert, Ashraf, and we are pleased to report that he is a talented cook with a delicious array of recipes at his fingertips. For those of you who are lucky enough to be joining us here in Salalah, please be aware that I will not be meeting you personally at the airport in Muscat; this duty will be undertaken by a representative of our partner travel agency, NTT. I am, however, very much looking forward to welcoming you to base camp and we will be picking you up at Salalah airport.

As always, this diary must end with an obligatory "Insha'Allah."

23 January

A good start to this year's expedition: no delayed flights, no missing luggage or team members and everyone had a safe trip to Salalah.

On our way to base camp we had a short stop for lunch and enjoyed an awesome view from the mountains towards the nearby coastline. After a walk around camp with a short introduction about camp life and procedures, everybody had some time to settle in. This was followed by a get together and a great dinner by Ashraf, our cook from Bagladesh. We spent our first evening in the field around the camp fire. Everybody was in a good mood and I knew that we will be an easy-going team with the right spirit for the coming challenges.

The next day was filled with a lot of information: talks on science; the background of this project; training sessions on GPS; compass; data sheets and a Land Rover driving course. Tuesday was our first time out in the field, which consisted of a training survey close to base camp, with findings of signs of porcupine, hyena, gazelle, ibex, fox and hyrax. In the afternoon we checked our new camera traps and familiarized ourselves with how to handle them. Finally, we placed one trap a bit up a slope, next to a hyrax colony about 500m away from base camp.

The next day we headed to the most important spot in this area, several kilometres away from camp. It is a big waterhole in Wadi Uyun with a lot of green-like reeds alongside it. This natural water reservoir is very important to most of the animals during the dry season. Signs of carnivores as well as prey species of the leopard and not to mention birds, were seen during last year's expedition. So, for research purposes, it is a real hot spot.

We were welcomed by 12 steppe eagles! During the day we found a lot of signs of porcupine throughout the surveyed area but probably fewer signs of hyaena, gazelle, ibex, wolf and hyrax, than last year. An important research task this year will be to figure out these numbers. We found promising spots to set up three camera traps – one more reason to come back and check the results.

On Thursday we split up into three teams to survey Wadi As Suqah - a side wadi of Wadi Uyun between base camp and the waterhole. We had some amazing sightings: 2 ibex about 250 metres, away half way up a slope; hyrax playing around; a hedgehog and even a Verrioux eagle – a very endangered species.

Yesterday, we went back to another spot which is very important to our research. Locally, it is called 'leopard cave' - an area south-west of base camp within the Dhofar Mountain Range, approx. 70km drive away. This area is very remote and difficult to get to, hidden in steep valleys and down about 1000m in altitude. In the past few years signs of leopard have been found, such as during our expedition last year.

Because of the very difficult and demanding terrain, a small group (Pat, Te, Herbert, Tessa and Khalid) went on this challenging tour. A second team examined the surrounding area for future surveys, as little is known about this area.

Late in the afternoon we all met together on the plateau for our drive home. Well, you should have seen the excitement of everyone, especially from our scientist, Tessa! Beyond all expectations, the 'leopard cave' team found about 45 scrapes, within 250 metres of each other (some of them with fresh urine) a lot of tracks (probably from one male and female), scat (they ran out of scat bags), a rock scent of spray and claw marks on a tree, possibly the first found in Oman!

And believe it or not even our "B"-Team has found leopard scat ! Wow – I am a little afraid of running out of exciting news for my next diary entries.

Well, the first week of this slot is over and we have had successful time. The team has worked hard but has enjoyed every minute. The nights around the camp fire were inspiring, amusing and we played a lot of crazy games. I'm definitely not allowed to tell you more ... The weather helped us adapt to the conditions in the field, as it was often cloudy and therefore not as hot. Some nights are still a bit chilly but overall are pleasant.

Today – Saturday - is our day off. As I am writing this diary everybody is hopefully enjoying a day in and around Salalah. Unfortunately Pat and Claudius, our press guys from Austria and Australia, have to leave us as well as Rames our Ranger who will be replaced by Rames II for the next 10 days. Thank you to all of you: it was more than a pleasure to having you on board, working hard and helping the team.

Let's see what the next week will come up with ...

29 January

After our day-off on Saturday, we commenced the second half of Slot One. We drove to a place South-East of Titam (close to Irahan), which is located in the North of the Dhofar mountain chain. One team surveyed some narrow valleys in rough terrain with thick scrub, ledges and caves- an area we visited last year for the first time. It is a promising region for leopard, despite several nearby settlements. The team found two possible (one probable) leopard tracks, some old faeces, and one possible leopard scrape. We found a great deal of carnivore scat, fresh gazelle tracks and faeces, and saw a hyrax.

Team Two (Jens, Herbert, Khaled and me) explored the mountain range further south-east, in search of a site for an overnight camp for Slot Two. Local people from the small settlements in this area confirmed that we would be likely to find wolf, hyena and even leopard signs there. They warned us that the terrain would be tough, with limited access and difficult pathways. As we returned in the afternoon to meet up with the exhausted members of Team One, we all acknowledged the fact that the weather is definitely becoming hotter by the day!

On Monday we all visited the elementary school in the small village of Uyun. There was much excitement and curiosity at the arrival of so many foreigners! Numerous teachers and students squeezed into one small classroom to listen to a presentation given by Khaled about Biosphere's work in Oman. Khaled appears to have become something of a celebrity in his home country, due to the fact that he took part in a recent documentary film about leopard research and protection. This film was shown on Omani TV, and many of the villagers were aware of this.

We hope that our visit and Khaled's presentation will have further raised awareness of the importance of wildlife conservation, particularly amongst young people, many of whom are currently rather more focused on technology-based education and modern-day leisure pursuits. The current trend amongst many young Omanis seems to be slanted towards gaining a well-paid job in the city, leaving them with little interest in conservation issues.

That same afternoon we surveyed the area of Wadi Uyun which lies between this year's base camp and last year's campsite. We also met and interviewed a local camel herder who is currently ensconced at the same site as last year's base camp. Our survey revealed hyena tracks and faeces (old and fresh), some signs of red fox, ibex and a lot of porcupine, as well as observations of hyrax and five gazelles.

The camel herder showed us a five-day old baby camel, and offered us a taste of fresh camel's milk. He reported no recent signs of leopard in this area, but he had heard a wolf's call just some days previously. He told us about a small waterhole in a side-wadi off Wadi Haydad, of which we had previously been unaware.

We followed the camel herder's advice and the next day a team headed straight for the waterhole. A second team worked its way through the main valley of this huge wadi. On our way into the wadi, we observed nine sand partridges and three Arabian partridges- birds we have not previously noted in this area. Soon after this, our local guide Ramses spotted a gazelle bounding up a slope about 300m ahead of us.

The waterhole proved to be an attractive little oasis shaded by palm trees within a narrow side-wadi. The pool itself is about 50m across and approximately 1.5m deep, with a natural spring which flows year-round. The team found fewer tracks than expected, but they did come across a lot of gun cartridges (17 in total), much human disturbance, and a hide for poachers. Despite this, Biosphere will definitely re-survey this important site for wildlife. The second team, meanwhile, found tracks of ibex and gazelle, which indicate that these animals may well frequent this waterhole.

In the afternoon we prepared for our overnight camp. The entire team left base camp at 3.30pm. Soon after our arrival at the newly selected site, everyone helped to set up camp. Tessa, Sybilla and Tenille then set off to survey a small valley nearby. Afterwards, a pleasant evening was spent around the campfire, with friendly chatter easing us into a comfortable night under the stars.

Early on Wednesday morning we split up into two teams to survey this potentially perfect leopard habitat. Despite our initial recce of this area, both teams struggled to find easy access into the wadis, with ledges, caves, steep drops and scrub abounding. Team One, with Tessa, Ramses, John, Wolfgang, Jens, Sybilla and Herbert, were eventually forced to adapt their original plan and to skirt around the steeper slopes, finally descending to some caves on the side of another wadi. Despite these challenges, we nevertheless discovered two possible old leopard tracks, but these were not distinct enough to be readily confirmed.

After two attempts, Team Two, with Khaled, Roxy, Marion, Tenille and me, we found a route down and were able to descend into the valley. We found fewer signs of wildlife than expected, but I am able to report an exciting observation of a wolf, which was running towards a cave not more than 150m in front of us. Shortly after this sighting we heard some donkeys braying, and- believe it or not- we then saw the wolf chasing two of these donkeys up onto a nearby ridge! The unlucky animals must have crossed his path by chance. In the excitement of all this and watching the donkeys escape, we forgot to take pictures of this memorable incident! Unsurprisingly, we found a lot of fresh wolf tracks in this area which matched up with our sighting.

A long and exhausting overnight camp and survey came to an end with a welcome pot of tea, brewed on the campfire. We will return...!

Thursday saw us split into two teams again; one of which was tasked with returning to the main waterhole which gives Wadi Uyun its name, in order to check the camera traps we had deployed there and to continue our survey of that area. The camera traps worked well and yielded several good quality pictures of porcupine, honey badger, red fox, hyrax, mongoose, possibly a Gordon's wildcat... and plenty of camel legs! These photographs will be analyzed at a later date to confirm the identities of all the species captured on camera.

The second team meanwhile returned to Wadi Haydad to set up a new camera trap at our recently-discovered waterhole, and to extend the survey further up the main wadi. According to Tessa, the tracks and signs in this area indicate a higher level of ibex activity than has been recorded in any previous year.

I must not forget to tell you about our 'pet porcupine' at base camp, who has been photographed several times every night by the camera we have placed by the kitchen tent! (However, professionalism prevents me from revealing the identity of the team members who have been caught wandering past this camera in the middle of the night!)

Time flies, and it is already the end of Slot One. Today we headed back to Salalah and bade a fond farewell to all the members of our first team. Enormous thanks for their hard work, dedication and good humour throughout the two weeks with us. We really appreciated their flexible attitude and high levels of motivation, which have definitely led to some valuable results. Sincere thanks to everyone involved, from us at Biosphere, and from the leopards of Dhofar! I hope to see you again in the future, somewhere in the field.

The support team are now all looking forward to welcoming the participants of Slot Two on Sunday. Safe travels to you all.

I remind everyone that pictures from this expedition can be shared at: [www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureshare](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureshare)

6 February

Slot 2 began successfully last Sunday, with all team members and their luggage, arriving on schedule. We also welcomed to the team, Ali Salim Al-Salimi, from Shell Oman, which is one of our major sponsors here. The ranks were also swelled for the first three days by journalists: John Henzell (from The National newspaper in the UAE); Arya Rudra (from The Times of Oman) and; Adil (from Al Shabiba, an Omani, Arabic language newspaper). The new recruits had an auspicious start to the expedition with a sighting of ten gazelles, en route to camp. We haven't seen such large a group before.

After the training, Tuesday was the team's first full day in the field, with successful surveying around the Ayoon waterhole. Tessa and the team recorded plenty of tracks and signs of various species, and everyone enjoyed seeing pictures of porcupine, honey badger, striped hyena and fox on our camera traps.

Wednesday saw the departure of our press members, whom we would like to thank for their interest in our program. I joined the team in Wadi Thor (a large valley adjoining Wadi Uyun). They had noted tracks and faeces of hyena, wolf, red fox, gazelle, ibex and hyrax. They also had recorded rare wildcat tracks. Just as I arrived, a smiling Tessa descended from a ledge reporting that she had seen a leopard pug-mark; old but extremely clear. This is the closest sign of leopard recorded in the Wadi Uyun region near our base camp.

Later we observed five gazelles and Tessa observed a leopard scrape. This had been an extremely productive and worthwhile day for the team.

The following day we returned to the Dhofar Mountain Chain region to survey new territory. We had made some valuable discoveries here during Slot 1. Strong winds and cloud cover made temperatures quite pleasant, however, rough terrain and numerous boulder fields led to a challenging and somewhat exhausting day for the team members. The reward was that on the way down the mountainside we discovered four possible leopard scrapes, of which one was definitively identifiable by its distinctive scent, which could not have been much more than three days old. Our concentration was momentarily distracted by the sound of three gunshots. Through binoculars we observed a hunter making his way across the hillside opposite where we stood. He quickly moved away and we did not see or hear him again that day.

Once we reached the wadi bed we branched out into three teams. Our combined findings include: honey badger faeces, old wolf tracks, sightings of partridge and hyrax, eleven carnivore scats, hyena tracks and a possible old leopard scrape near eighteen leopard pug-marks (tracks) beneath an overhang. Very valuable and exciting data.

Strong, windy conditions were experienced back at the campsite that evening resulting in some altered tent shapes! Despite this, the team was up bright and early on Friday morning, ready for the next survey. Ben, Leslie, Frances and Toby chose to go with Tessa and Khalid for another tough few hours of mountain climbing and bush-whacking in the same area as yesterday. They forged their way through thick vegetation and steep canyons, with Khalid managing to reach some extremely high and virtually inaccessible caves, where he found two old leopard pug-marks. Old tracks of hyena and wolf were also found in that area.

Team Two, comprising George, Irmtraud, Tess, Ali and Goeran, joined John, Mohammed and me in a survey of an unnamed wadi on the south side of Wadi Uyun, which has its entrance approximately 1km from our base-camp. We recorded fresh and old gazelle and ibex tracks / scat along the sandy ledges. On our return, eagle-eyed Mohammed and Ali spotted the familiar group of five gazelles seen on several occasions in this area. We are all extremely pleased and relieved that the strong winds have dropped and after an unexpectedly hot day we were able to enjoy a balmy evening around the camp fire.

As I am writing this diary the team is enjoying a well-earned day-off in Salalah. Here's to a successful week ahead. The correct link for picture share is [www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureshare](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureshare)

12 February

An enjoyable day off was spent by the whole team in Salalah last Saturday. The next day we interviewed local people in the village of Haluf in the Mushaylah district, which is home to one of our rangers, Mohamed. The team enjoyed traditional Omani hospitality, including being offered tea and the chance to buy local handicrafts. We then spoke to the villagers about their attitudes towards wildlife, and which species they encounter in their daily lives.

On Sunday afternoon we visited our neighbour in the wadi, Salim the camel herder. He demonstrated how to milk a camel and offered the team fresh camel's milk and the chance to ride one of his camels.

As we sat around the campfire that night a few spots of rain began to fall. This soon turned into a major downpour, which saw everyone scurrying for their tents. Fortunately all the tents remained waterproof during the night, except Tessa's, which turned into a small swimming pool! We awoke on Monday to a misty, drizzly morning.

The weather improved in the early afternoon and we returned to Wadi Ayoon to investigate the Mushaylah district. On the way, we saw a gazelle being chased and harassed by a steppe eagle. Toby and Ben ran up and over a rocky bluff to observe and reported that the gazelle managed to escape its pursuer. We also sighted a Blandford's fox and spotted eagles. The terrain here was markedly different to the wadis we have surveyed, and appears to provide a potential wildlife corridor, particularly for predators. The data we gathered has added significantly to our knowledge of the region and its wildlife.

On Tuesday we traveled off-road to a hugely impressive wadi system named Wadi Huttaw and split up into two teams to survey. The team in the eastern area found a few carnivore tracks and some hyrax colonies, with some ibex tracks on the higher ledges. The western team found fresh tracks of hyena, wolf and Blandford's fox, huge colonies of hyrax, a remarkable number of signs of small mammals, evidence of a high amount of game-bird activity, many tracks of ibex, and some signs of gazelle. One group of more than forty Hyrax was seen hopping from rock to rock in a frenzy as the team approached their burrows (who observed whom in this instance...?!)

On Wednesday, Khaled, Tessa, Lesley and Ben headed back to the 'Leopard Cave', to check the camera trap. They returned with a large amount of findings: a wolf track, ibex tracks and faeces, lots of honey badger scat, mongoose tracks, evidence of game birds, a hyrax sighting, and... fresh evidence of continued leopard activity! Tessa is convinced that there are currently at least two adults (possibly a male and a female, and maybe even a juvenile) inhabiting this wadi, as the team found two different sets of fresh tracks, more faeces, scent marks and fresh scrapes. Within a newly-surveyed area of less than 1km they counted 38 new scrapes to add to the previous survey's total. There were three instances where patches of sand had been re-scraped since our previous visit, plus one completely new scrape within the area surveyed by the Slot 1 team. Tessa was particularly delighted to observe fresh pug-marks on top of the Slot 1 team's footprints, which undoubtedly proves the high amount of recent leopard activity in this amazing area.

Due to an unfortunate camera malfunction, we have not been able to successfully capture any photographs of scientific value from our camera trap set by Slot 1. The camera trap has been re-set and will remain in this location, so keep your fingers crossed!

A second team set out on Wednesday morning to explore a new wadi between Wadi Huttaw and the foothills of the Dhofar mountain chain. Descending from a height of about 1000m, they entered an unnamed wadi which was incredibly abundant with frankincense trees. The vegetation in the wadi bed appears to be regenerating, although one renegade camel was observed in the act of munching unashamedly on the leaves of a frankincense tree!

On our last full day the team split into two and set out to collect the camera traps from the field and do short surveys (the photos have yet to be checked so I can't give you any results. Then began the process of packing up the base camp, followed by a summary from Tessa of this year's expedition's scientific findings and results. Generally speaking, there have been higher amounts of gazelle and ibex activity in the area close to base camp compared with last year. Furthermore, a larger degree of possible leopard signs (scat, scrapes and tracks) have been found in various surveyed districts. It also appears that the 'Leopard Cave' area has been in much more frequent use by leopards than in preceding years. These positive outcomes give Biosphere a promising outlook for future conservation work in the region.

As base camp is now packed away and Slot 2 team are ready to depart, I would like to thank everyone involved in making this year's expedition so successful, rewarding and enjoyable. Special thanks must go to our extremely helpful local ranger from the Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs, Mohamed; Ashraf; our incredible cook; my assistant leader John Highmore (well done, big guy - everyone particularly enjoyed your jokes, stories and songs around the campfire!); our cheerful and obliging contact from our sponsors Shell in Oman, Humaid Abdullah Al-Shuaili; and not forgetting Khaled Al Hikmani from the Diwan of the Royal Court, who once again proved to be of invaluable help throughout the expedition, as well as a valued friend and an extremely hardworking colleague, without whom none of our successes could have been attained. Here's to next year!

Team members from Slots 1 and 2, please don't forget to share your photographs on:  
[www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureshare](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureshare)

Safe travels, long-lasting good memories... and I hope to see you again on a future expedition!

Ronald