

## Mammalwatching Oman 2023

27/01/2023 – 12/02/2023

Oman, a country that mainly reminiscent of sand when you have never been there. Nothing turned out to be less true. At the end of January Bjorn Alards, Jelle Naalden, Jonathan Leeuwis and I went on a trip to this Arabian country. Mainly for birds, but we also had some mammal-targets like Caracal and Striped Hyena. By the end of the trip we got quite addicted to the mammals too...

On the 27th of January we had a flight from Amsterdam Schiphol to Muscat Airport, from where we directly drove to the most western side of the country. We arrived just before sunset of the 28th and went out birding in the area of Al Mirayr, which provided our first wild mammals of the trip. A **Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes arabica*)** showed very well in the first daylight. A couple of hours later, in the same area, 5 **Five-striped Palm Squirrel (*Funambulus pennantii*)** crossed our path.



*Funambulus pennantii*, Shinas © Nick Peeters

Because we had no sleep in almost 40 hours, it was not wise to go spotlighting in the first night. Never the less the next evening we spent some time driving around looking for nice animals in the area of Nizwa. This only delivered one Red Fox.

Despite the bad result we tried again the next night and this turned out really well. In one of the wadi's we caught some reflection of a pair of eyes on a mountainside, quite far away. Using binoculars we were able to see some outlines of a medium sized mammal. The behaviour it showed us was like a cat and so was our first thought. Luckily it moved a bit closer and soon it looked a bit like a fox, with huge ears and a big tail. This had to be a **Blandford's Fox (*Vulpes cana*)**! Probably one of the harder species of mammals to see?



*Vulpes cana*, Al Batinah © Nick Peeters

31 January was marked the 'road to Salalah', the big city in the southern part of Oman. But before we arrived here we found a **Cape Hare (*Lepus capensis*)** near the Muntasar Oasis in the middle of the desert. We spend the night at Qitbit Resthouse and the next day we had to drive the last hours to Salalah. Luckily we could visit some of the farms we came across to spend some time birding. During a walk through scrub-vegetation one of the guys hunted by accident a small mouse out of some bushes. A weird jumping mouse with a pale body, long tail with a black and white tip. A juvenile **Lesser Egyptian Jerboa (*Janculus janculus*)** in daylight, quite unusual!

The mammal species were quite cooperative so far and we were getting more fanatic, with 7 nights in the Dhofar mountains ahead!

But first we had to join a pelagic tour near Mirbat, organized by Hatem. Mainly for birds but with some luck a great place to see some species of dolphins and whales. And lucky we were. A large group of **Spinner Dolphins (*Stenella longirostris*)** on the horizon, two **False Killer Whales (*Pseudorca crassidens*)** and my personal favorite a big group of **Risso's Dolphins (*Grampus griseus*)** just beside the boat. Some of them jumping out of the water. Really magical experience to join this group at the same speed and sail with them for a couple of minutes.



*Grampus griseus*, Mirbat © Nick Peeters

After the pelagic we decided to search for **Arabian Gazelle (*Gazella arabica*)** and a couple of hours later we were able to find four of them on a plain. The temperature was still rising and most of the birds were inactive during the afternoon, so we went to another place in search for **Rock Hyrax (*Procapra capensis*)**, which turned out to be quite easy on this location. The last hour of daylight we spent near a Kwahr, a place where a wadi flows into the ocean. While looking at birds above the sea, a small group of **Bottle-nosed Dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*)** swam by. Another mammal-tick!

Because we had such a good time with the mammals, we had no choice but to try our most important mammals: Caracal and Striped Hyena. But first, two **Arabian Wolves (*Canis lupus arabs*)** were watching us. Less than 10 minutes later we had to slam the brakes because of a **Indian Crested Porcupine (*Hystrix indica*)** in the middle of the road. What a night already! During the following hours we found five Arabian Wolves and just before midnight we saw two **African Wild Cats (*Felis lybica*)**, one of them just beside of the road.



*Felis lybica*, Dhofar © Nick Peeters



Getting up early on the 3rd of february was quite hard, but we had to get in the field to see birds and mammals. It takes what it takes and it was worth it. When visiting a wadi near Taqah we found a family of **African Grass Rat (*Arvicanthis niloticus*)**. Already the 15th mammal species this trip.

Because we wanted to see/hear Desert Owl we had to skip the spotlighting this evening, but the next night we were on it again. Unbelievable but true, this night was even better than the night with wolves, porcupine and wild cats.

It all started with a group of 5 **Honey Badgers (*Mellivora capensis*)**, followed by a pair of eyes up in a small tree. A closer look revealed a long, striped tail and so we were watching a **Common Genet (*Genetta genetta*)**! After leaving the first wadi we found in 20 minutes 5 Arabian Wolves (one pack of 3 joined by a stray dog) and 10 minutes later the eyes of a cat lit up beside the road. Within a second it was clear: a **Caracal (*Caracal caracal*)** was on its way to inspect a dead cow. What is happening this night?!

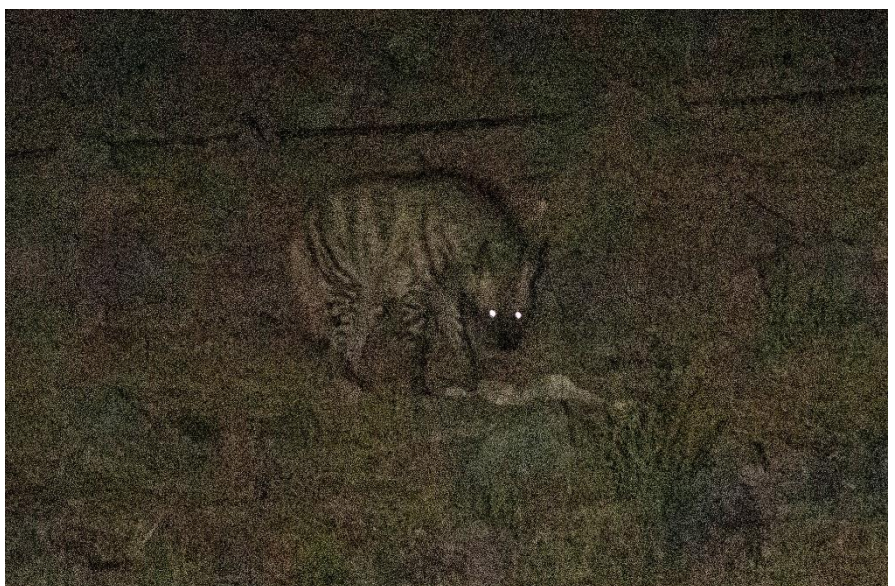


Caracal caracal, Dhofar © Jonathan Leeuwis

After the Caracal we entertained ourselves with 6 wolves and 4 foxes. Just after midnight we decided to get back to the hotel and while driving 80km/h we were still spotlighting for a bit. Turned out really well. 2 Pair of eyes hobbled near a shed. This way of moving around was new for us, so we had to brake and turn around. The first look through the binoculars surprised us: two marten-like animals with a white tail... **White-tailed Mongooses (*Ichneumia albicauda*)** were climbing the shed, before hobbling away from us!

After the 'best night ever' we only had one target left; the hyena. Because the roads were quite busy during the evening, we changed our plans. On the 7th we get up in the middle of the night in a quest to finally find the Striped Hyena, because we were running out of nights...

We found a bunch of Arabian Wolves and some foxes before we saw 3 pair of eyes in a field. Checking them with the binoculars from right to left: wolf, wolf... **STRIPED HYENA (*Hyaena hyaena*)**! We had eye contact for a minute, before it took its prey and left the scene, followed by the two wolves. What a moment! Mission accomplished! The rest of the night we found 14 wolves, some foxes, a porcupine and a second hyena! How the tables can turn!



Hyaena hyeana, Dhofar © Nick Peeters

Our time in Salalah came to an end on the 8th of february and we set course back to Muscat, following the coastal road. Standing on one of the beautifull view points we were able to find our third group of **Indian Ocean Humpback Dolphins (*Sousa plumbea*)**.

During the rest of the ride to Muscat we had not much time searching of animals, but getting some rest is also very important. Rest that we needed during our stay near the sand dunes south of Bidiya. A promising place for 2 mammal species we wanted to see: **Cheesman's Gerbil (*Gerbillus Cheesmani*)** and Sand Fox. The Gerbil turned out to be quite easy, with at least 10 different individuals, interspersed by at least 3 Lesser Egyptian Jerboa's and a unexpected **Sundevall's Jird (*Meriones crassus*)**.

Sadly we were not able to determine a small fox-like animal, which seemed smaller then Red Fox, but the distance was to big for a certain identification. Never the less, as a bonus we got a African Wild Cat.

Our last two evenings we spent in and around Muscat, just to see what we can find. The first evening we went to visit Al Qurm Park, where we found a **Brown Rat (*Rattus norvegicus*)** up in a palm tree and a **Egyptian Fruit Bat (*Rousettus aegyptiacus*)** flew into a tree to eat some fruit, where we were able to photograph it.

The last evening, just before we left the country, we tried to find Desert Hedgehog near Seeb, which failed. Although we found a dead one.



*Rousettus aegyptiacus*, Muscat © Nick Peeters

We really enjoyed this beautiful country and the hospitable people. We came for the birds, but we had a great time doing some mammal-watching too! We saw 25 species of mammals, excluding two species of bats which could be Small Mouse-tailed Bat (*Rhinopoma muscatellum*) and Botta's Serotine (*Eptesicus bottae*), but we only have some photos in flight.

-Nick Peeters





*Canis lupus arabs* + *Canis lupus familiaris*, Dhofar © Nick Peeters



*Ichneumia albicauda*, Dhofar © Nick Peeters





*Sousa plumbea*, Hasik © Nick Peeters



*Jaculus jaculus*, Romail © Nick Peeters