



Hamadryas Baboons

Saudi Arabia 18. 2. – 9. 3. 2023

Jan Ebr

The 2013 Lonely Planet calls Saudi Arabia „the ultimate frontier of tourism“. The country has never been open to leisure travelers, the only western visitors being expats and businessmen – generally anyone with some other excuse to be there outside of simple curiosity. Much has changed in the last few years – SA now issues tourist visa online without any hassle (and, as it turns out, also without any costs as our card payments did not go through, which however did not stop the issuance of the visas). Yet until now there was only one mammalwatching report – from a short 5-day trip by Carlos N. G. Bocos. Even in this limited time, Carlos has seen 12 species; he also comments on some species that they were “common” in some areas, so we had quite high expectations for the country, which we have quickly adjusted after a few days of the trip. After 19 days we have topped Carlos’s list by exactly one species at **13**, despite having covered a vastly larger area and stayed almost four times longer.

For a completely desert country, Saudi Arabia offers a surprisingly long list of species, at least on paper. However, from the 13 possible carnivores, we have only ever seen Red Foxes – what is left then (besides the really hard-to-miss Baboons) are mainly rodents and bats, two groups that can be notoriously hit or miss. The most interesting species live in the heavily populated southwest – and as the best sites can be old houses or plantations, usually in someone’s backyard, looking for them requires a bit of courage and willingness to engage the locals, which is something we really lack. In the central parts of the country, access to reasonable wilderness is much easier, but – except for one amazingly lively site near Riyadh – there has been very little mammal activity during our nighttime searches. It is also not straightforward to tell which animals live where – besides Carlos’s great report, the main source of information for us were IUCN maps and some scientific papers I managed to stumble upon; most of the country is simply not very explored. Still from the 13 mammals we saw, 8 were lifers; moreover we have observed 206 species of birds (including a first record of a species for Saudi Arabia) and 14 species of herps.

In general, visiting Saudi Arabia was easier than I ever thought. I have heard stories of hostilities to tourists but that cannot be more removed from our experience: everyone was either indifferent or friendly – sometimes even too friendly and eager to chat (without having any common language) to the point of disturbing our nature observations – and at the one moment we really needed help (when I forgot to turn off the lights and drained the battery), the first person we came across immediately helped us. During the last decade, a lot has changed in the country – the changes are actually so fast that it’s utterly confusing, because a lot of rather recent info you find is no longer valid – one of the biggest confusions was created by the recent change of which days comprise

the weekend! In more useful terms the changes also include no longer needing to prove your marriage to get a mixed room in a hotel, the ability to get fuel and food during times of prayers and a relaxed dress code for women, which only asks for the shoulders and knees to be covered (which my wife would have anyway). The only annoyances left are the segregation of genders in some establishments (which we did not really test except for the Farasan ferry and do not thoroughly understand) and the silly need to swim in clothes (which however wasn't that annoying thanks to the warm and dry climate where everything dries on you instantly anyway). I was somewhat afraid to bring several cameras and an IR scope through customs, but there were no issues.

To get around, we rented a sedan – Suzuki Dzire – with Avis at Riyadh airport. The staff there was extremely disinterested in business, the car had cigarette burn marks on seats, something giving out metal clanking when passing speed bumps and creaky right front wheel hinge; it vibrated heavily between 80-100 km/h, had some questionable brakes by the sound (and smell in downhills) of them and its battery was swapped out for a smaller one (that's a first as far as I have seen), but it made almost 6000 km without any real issue. Quite importantly, it also had a surprisingly high clearance for a sedan (similarly to cars that you would rent in Argentina) which has proven quite useful. As a bonus, they miscalculated the charge for extra kilometers and took only half of what they were entitled to.

Having a car allowed us to spend most of the nights outside in a tent – camping is allowed anywhere in SA, where it's not restricted for nature protection or other reasons, and it's massively popular also among locals. There are many public toilets around and each stall includes a „mini-shower“ which, albeit originally meant for toilet hygiene, allows you to wash yourself anywhere, making wild camping in the desert much more pleasant. Only in the Jizan lowlands we stayed in hotels for 4 nights because the area is densely inhabited and nighttime temperatures even in February do not descend below 25 degrees. The entire adventure cost only about 800 EUR per person (not being charged for the visa was helpful) – the Wizzair flights from Vienna are insanely cheap, the car rental is reasonable (even though the car was in a shaky condition), petrol costs next to nothing and cheap fast food is widely available even in small villages.

Inaturalist mammals:

https://www.inaturalist.org/observations?d2=2023-03-15&place_id=7358&taxon_id=40151&user_id=opisska

Birding report: <https://www.birdforum.net/threads/saudi-arabia-feb-mar-2023.437389/>

The first night, while looking for a place to camp after a late evening arrival at Riyadh airport, we stumbled upon the most lively site of the entire trip, Rawdat Al Khafs (turn north at 25.43860, 46.45169). In IR, it was very easy to find animals in all directions – there were a lot of **Cheesman's Gerbils**, some **Lesser Egyptian Jerboas**, **Libyan Jirds** and a **Red Fox**, all within a few hundred meters; the Libyan Jirds are observable also during the day. During the next day we tried to get to the Hidden Cave, famous for bats, but did not find any way that would be negotiable in our car. IUCN maps promise Bushy-tailed Jird in this area – we looked for them in the evening on the stony slopes of wadis around 24.9052, 46.1802 and in the – probably less suitable – area around 25.0065, 46.1328 without success.



Lesser Egyptian Jerboa



Cheesman's Gerbil



Libyan Jird



Red Fox

Between Riyadh and the coast, IUCN shows some areas for Sand Cats. Some of them are in nature reserves, that are reportedly difficult to access, or in very remote desert, but one large area is bisected by a road on some maps. This road turns off the main highway at Al Khasrah (23.40791, 43.92701), has good tarmac and looks like it might connect to another highway a hundred kilometers to the northwest. However on mapy.cz, there are 6 km of the road not charted. Those 6 kms aren't actually missing, but what is missing is a series of 10 bridges over wadis within this stretch of the road, each of which has to be bypassed by driving down from the road, crossing the wadi on a dirt track and driving back up. We were quite glad to have reached this part already during the day so that we could properly investigate the optimal strategy for each of the wadis: whether to go left or right upon reaching the missing bridges – unless something changes, the sequence for driving from the south is RLLRRLLL (so driving from the north it's RRLLLRLL). Once we had written this down, navigating the stretch in darkness was easy. The road crosses a large patch of sandy desert in the middle, on which we focused for the Sand Cat search, but found nothing in half a night. While we were already looking for a place to camp, a **Pygmy Gerbil** ran across the road at 23.50727, 43.78362; we were able to follow it to the desert and see it from a very close distance.

The nearby Mahazat As-Sayd reserve is fenced and there is no information on how to access it – we thus planned to just drive along the eastern edge on road 3920 and see if we could spot something. This doesn't really work because the fence is accompanied by a sandy mound and you can't see into the reserve from the road – so instead we stopped every few kilometers, walked to the mound and looked around. This strategy was a bit demanding in the heat of the midday, but it produced a single **Arabian Sand Gazelle** and a single **Arabian Oryx** – one could question whether these animals “count” as they live in a fenced area, but the size of this reserve is comparable to some countries and people happily observe animals in Africa in much smaller enclosures, so I would call it fair game. Both species were reintroduced in the area after the establishment of the reserve, but

they have been breeding in the reserve with considerable efficiency.

IUCN also promises Blanford's Fox along the entire mountain ridge along the Red Sea coast; however on Wikipedia, there is a more detailed map showing “current” and “historical” range – and from this map it appears that the most promising area for the species is around Al Bahah. We dedicated two evenings to the search. In the first, we focused on a really nice side road which turns south off road 3713 at 20.4762, 41.3389 and the nearby stretch of 3713 – here one gets access to steep rocky terrain with fantastic views over several canyons

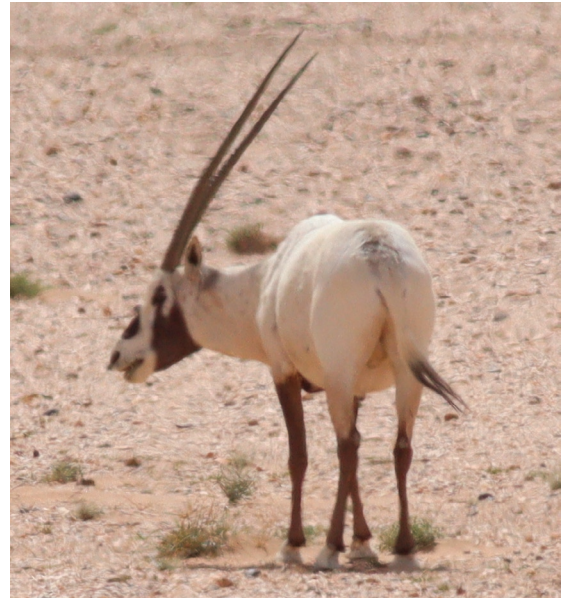


Pygmy Gerbil

straight from the side of the roads. Yet we only found Red Foxes, **Cape Hare** and some domestic cats and donkeys. For the second evening, we drove up and down the road that descends from the mountains at 19.85004, 41.83948, but there was quite a bit of traffic and the area did not look that good.



Arabian Sand Gazelle



Arabian Oryx

Carlos reports several interesting rodents around Tanomah and Abha, but we found these areas difficult to explore due to the population density. Moreover some of the best sites were closed, most prominently the Al Soudah waterfall; in the area in front of the Raidah Escarpment reserve, we were told by the police to leave because the area is dangerous at night. We tried to look at various places for King Jird holes and we did find many, but all looked quite old and disused – the largest amount of evidence for rodent activity was in the small fields around 18.1941, 42.4582, but we found no animals during the day nor during the night. At least we could watch **Hamadryas Baboons** on many occasions.

The lowlands around Jazan are extremely hot even in February; wanting to also observe birds, we would usually get up very early to catch the few bearable hours in the morning, but this limited our mammalwatching at night, as we wanted to sleep; the area is quite difficult to access at night anyway because any activity creates unwanted attention – at the end of the day we were always welcome by the locals, but it's still a bit discouraging to have to explain over and over what we are doing. We explored some agricultural areas at night: at 17.17027, 42.69420 we found a **Gerbil sp.** that we could not reliably identify and at 17.00653, 42.65142 a **Desert Hedgehog**. In the nearby pivot fields, we saw a huge network of tracks of small mammals during the day, but a night-time visit brought absolutely nothing for some reason. We spent three days visiting the Farasan islands, which were fantastic for snorkeling, but we did really look for any mammals there, so we saw none – well, I did see a glimpse of something breaching far in the ocean, but it never showed up again.

On the way back to the mountains, near the Al Sadd lake, Carlos has reported some bats in abandoned buildings, but his coordinates on iNaturalist were not exact, so we are not sure if we explored some of the same buildings or not – in any case, we found a couple of **Egyptian Free-tailed Bats** in an obvious group of semi-ruins at 17.0897, 42.9539.



Desert Hedgehog

Back on the cool and pleasant plateau, we arrived at the area around Al Habalah and immediately found it much more pleasant than Abha, as the population density here is much smaller. In a park close to highway 15 (Al Muruba'a), we found some quite fresh-looking large holes, quite suggestive of King Jird, so we tried to sit around those and watch for a bit. While waiting out the afternoon rain in the car, I accidentally left the headlights on and drained the battery and



Arabian Spiny Mouse



King Jird

so our mammalwatching for the night was confined to walking distance. This has proven quite useful because not only we have found two **Arabian Spiny Mice** in the night (18.11159, 42.86803), but also a **King Jird** right next to our tent in the late morning (18.10999, 42.86739), just after a kind stranger jumpstarted the car and we were getting ready to leave. The next evening, we drove some back roads in the vicinity with no success and then moved to the road that heads east from Ahad Rafidah, as the IUCN maps show Asian Garden Dormouse in the area and this road passes through prime habitat. A combination of driving and walking brought only another Arabian Spiny Mouse next to the road. The road that we picked (east-west road passing through 18.2070, 42.9928) was a bit busy even deep at night; the next morning we found a possibly better road at 18.1432, 43.01288, but did not stay for another night.

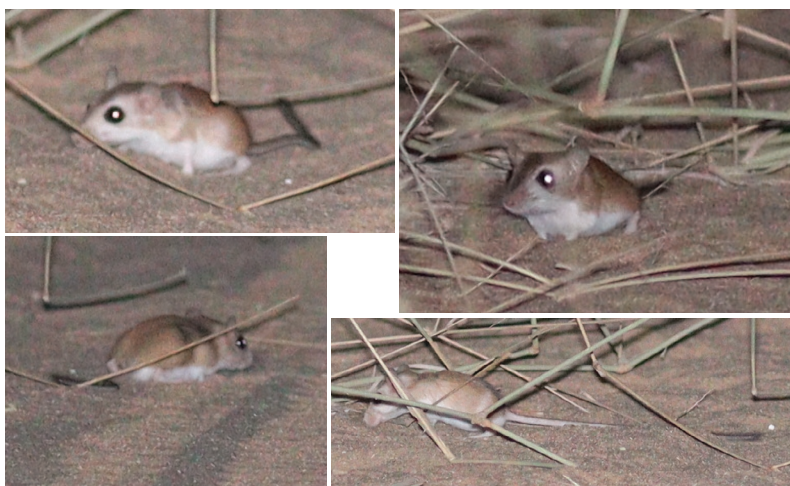
On the way back to Riyadh we looked for mammals after dark along the main road 175 SE of Sultanah as in this sandy area, side tracks are not drive-able in normal cars, and then from the smaller road around 19.9657, 45.4352; later also near Riyadh around the Lakes Park in Al Haer and in Rawdat Nurath north of the airport – all of these sites brought nothing but a few distant Lesser Egyptian Jerboas (conveniently the only Jerboa in the area and thus readily identifiable in IR without having to get on it with visible light).

Mammal list:

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|----------------------|--------------------------|
| Hamadryas Baboon | Egyptian Free-tailed Bat |
| Red Fox | Arabian Spiny Mouse |
| Arabian Oryx | Cheesman's Gerbil |
| Arabian Sand Gazelle | Pygmy Gerbil |
| Desert Hedgehog | King Jird |
| Cape Hare | Libyan Jird |
| | Lesser Egyptian Jerboa |



Egyptian Free-tailed Bat



Unidentified Gerbil sp. from Jazan plains