

Oman 24/12/2019 – 06/01/2020

Oman has been suggested to us by several people as an up-and-coming mammalwatching destination. At the same time it also gained birding appeal after the general acceptance of the definition of the “greater WP” (gWP) realm and its inclusion as a category in the Czech Birding Contest – now there was a new category in the contest that I was not winning yet and that simply could not be tolerated. Thus, we bought tickets (with Qatar), applied for the somewhat expensive on-line visa and booked a car with Europcar (Nissan Sunny, through rentalcars.com as usual). Reports of widespread free wild camping meant that no more arrangements were needed and this indeed turned out to be true as we did not have to resort to a hotel even for a single night (with hygiene being provided by the ocean and the “camel showers” in Ayn Athom).

The visit was extremely pleasant thanks to the stunning nature and generally easy access. The only limitations we encountered were the legal impossibility to drive up the Hajar mountains without a 4x4 (despite the road being nicely paved) and to enter the Wadi Sireen reserve without a guide and then some hassle from the army in the 3rd wadi east of Mudday (the one with the Gazelles but also with the checkpoint), where we were politely asked to leave. As roads are getting paved at an amazing pace, the Nissan was sufficient to drive almost everywhere we wanted, with the important exception of the Ash Shuwaymiyyah wadi, where heavy rains made the road impassable, the Jabal Samhan road beyond the viewpoint (which is just in a dreadful state) and the upper reaches of the wadi above Al Mughsayl, which is impassable to a normal car even when totally dry.

We have split our attention somewhat evenly between birds and mammals and frankly we were quite a bit more successful with the former with 181 species observed, out of which 35 were new in gWP while getting only 7 species of mammals (4 new), despite putting at least a few hours to spotlighting almost every night as well as spending many hours watching the sea from various locations. In the spirit of the recent discussions, I will detail all the instances of unsuccessful searches for mammals to make it clearer how difficult our hobby is – or, alternatively, how profoundly we suck at it.



Red Fox in Wadi Al Muyadin

The most common mammal by far was **Red Fox** with more than 20 seen, mostly when spotlighting from the car; most individuals were of the remarkable desert form with dark belly. We have spent about 6 hours in one evening in Wadi Al Muyadin looking for the Blanford's Fox recently reported by Dominique along the access road with no success – at least we were able to locate a cave, possibly the same one as Jon, where **Small Mouse-tailed Bats** roost at 22.95508N, 57.66725E. (We consulted the pictures taken with a Czech expert – one of the group who discovered a new species of Mouse-tailed Bats in Yemen recently – who confirmed the ID.)

Knowing that our chances to see a Tahr by ourselves aren't that great and that we can't easily enter the Wadi Sireen reserve, we still didn't want to go down without a fight and so we at least explored the reserve from along its borders. From the north, there are many vantage points from which you can scan the vast slopes of the mountains with a scope, for example around the hard-to-identify village at 23.18547N, 58.74164E, but sadly the road to Zahr Sidrah is closed before you get any sensible view (around 23.25323N, 58.59011E). From the south, the views are more limited, which is however compensated by the absolutely stunning landscape – for example the dirt track (easily passable in a sedan) leading to 23.17121N, 58.43283E is simply worth visiting for the views alone and this whole area looks ripe for some spotlighting (for which we did not have time here). At the end, we expectedly did not find any Tahr, but looking for them was a nice way to spend the daytime hours.

We tried to spotlight a bit along the coastal road south of Al Ashkharah, but we lost a lot of time by getting stuck in the sand after pulling up a few meters to a track off the main road – in this sandy area, a 2x2 car really needs to stay on good roads. Eventually a local stopped by (in the dark), told us to release some air from our tyres and simply drove the car out of the pit, which is a thing that by now seems to have become a staple of our middle-east trips; at the end of the evening, we only found just some more foxes. We continued on to the Masirah island and we sea-watched for a few hours from its southern tip, until the rain pushed us out. For a couple of hours before the sunrise of the next day, when the rain relented a bit, we tried to search the beaches for turtles, but with no results, so we left the island and eventually skipped all the way to Ash Shuwaymiyyah, where we however had to give up on the wadi because of the condition of the road, so we continued on towards Dhofar.



Small Mouse-tailed Bat in Wadi Al Muyadin

We have spent some 3.5 days in the Dhofar area, during which we watched for sea life (hoping mainly for cetaceans and tubenoses) at many locations. On the road from Ash Shuwaymiyyah to Sadah we stopped at several viewpoints for 10-20 minutes each and then we made longer sessions in Mirbat at 16.97535N, 54.68920E, at the rocks at the mouth of Khawr Rawri (17.03083N, 54.43979E – also a terrific place to swim!), at the beach near East Khawr (17.01159N, 54.17726E), at the fantastic Cave Marneef in Mughsail (where one can actually be in the shadow for most of the day, so we spent hours there) and in Rakhuyt – all with no success (regarding either of the targets).

At least our night-time exploration was a bit more successful. After arriving to Wadi Darbat in the afternoon, we were somewhat skeptical, because the whole area around the approach road was subject to heavy construction, but when we parked at the end of the road, we quickly found that the upper part of the valley is much more peaceful. After nightfall, we quickly found several **Common Genets** in trees and on the slopes, mainly in the area about a kilometer upstream from the parking; the next day we also found one more from the car along the access road – the construction zone is, as expected, deserted and quiet in the night. In the same area (where the road crosses the stream) we also found a **Wolf**, shamelessly securing its dinner around some local poultry enclosure; another Wolf was found during a spotlighting session at the road between Tawi Attayr and Jabal Samhan at 17.12284N, 54.591686E after first finding a Spotted Eagle-owl in a tree above it.



Common Genets in Wadi Darbat



Wolf in Wadi Darbat

For spotlighting, there are two main options in Dhofar. Firstly, one can search the access roads to the various wadis and springs – not only Wadi Darbat, but also Ayn Hamram and Ayn Athum are handy – on the access road to the later, we heard some wolves howling. Some of the main roads in this area are equipped with artificial lighting, which is quite annoying. The second option is the immense backcountry above the cliffs, where the forest greenery of the coastal range slowly gives way to an agricultural landscape and, eventually, the desert. This includes the road to Jabal Samhan, which is conveniently paved up to the viewpoint, and many other surprisingly good roads between the villages. After several hours in this area, we were however able to make only one more observation – of a rodent, which by range has to be **Arabian Jird**, which we found at 17.14751N, 54.61616E thanks to the help of a domestic cat which we interrupted from hunting it.



Arabian Jird



Striped Hyena

For the last night in the coastal Dhofar, we first walked up the valley above Al Mughsayl in search for the Desert Owl (which we indeed heard), but no mammals were seen besides a lot of domestic camels. After some more spotlighting along the main road to the west, we found a very distant herd which might have been Nubian Ibex, but we hadn't seen them well enough to fully exclude domestic goats. Just when we wanted to pitch up our tent, probably at 16.85596N, 53.72751E, we scanned the surroundings and found the most wanted target of the trip, a lone **Striped Hyena**. There was a camp with some camels and cattle right across the road which may have attracted it.



Arabian Gazelle

The road 45 towards Mudday is not paved, but is in a very good condition. It leads first through some military areas but eventually reaches some very attractive landscape, which we later explored in the night, only to find a lot of Red Foxes. East from Mudday, a series of wadis crosses the (now paved) road, with the third (with the checkpoint) being the one where **Arabian Gazelles** are reported. Indeed, this valley looks the most promising (greenest) of all and we were able to get an extremely distant view of a Gazelle after walking a kilometer or so south of the road. On our second attempt the next day, we were however visited by soldiers in a jeep and politely told to leave.

On the way back north, we spent an afternoon and a night in and around the Muntasar oasis. Despite not finding any interesting mammals, this was one of the highlights of the trip as the oasis is a large patch of greenery with a spring right at the edge of the Empty Quarter. We were completely alone there, accompanied only by a few camels, some birds, an inquisitive Red Fox and a vast empty expanse of desert. We spotlighted towards the south and around Qatbit; later during the next day we found that the road east of Muntasar might have been better. This general area would definitely be worth some more time to explore – and while many places in the desert are probably quite hard to reach, the tracks around Muntasar are fine for a sedan and it seems that even some dune fields are accessible on good roads.



Red Fox