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## Field Report

# Canidae in the Sultanate of Oman

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## Introduction

The Sultanate of Oman (Figure 1) lies at the eastern extremity of the Arabian Peninsula, extending from the eastern border of the Republic of Yemen in the south, along the southeastern border of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, to the United Arab Emirates in the north. Oman covers approximately 314,000km<sup>2</sup>. In the north the country is dominated by the Hajar mountains that rise to 3,000m above sea level (asl), stretching north to the mountainous Musandam region that extends to the Straits of Hormuz. Annual rainfall of approximately 100mm supports sparse temperate montane vegetation throughout the northern mountains.

The fertile Batinah coast separates the Hajar mountains from the Gulf of Oman. To the south of the Hajar mountains are the interior gravel plains, characterised by Acacia woodlands and bounded to the southeast by the Wahiba Sands and to the southwest by the sand seas of the Rub'al-Khali. The central plains include the fog desert of the Jiddat al-Harasis that falls away to the Al Huqf Depression in the east. In the south of the country are the Dhofar mountains, about 300km in length and rising

2,100m asl, including Jabal Samhan, Jabal Qara and Jabal Qamar. For four months of the year (June to September) part of these mountains and the coastal plain are under dense mists and rainfall that result from the southwest monsoon. Consequently Jabal Qara and Qamar are heavily vegetated but Jabal Samhan in the east is largely dry.

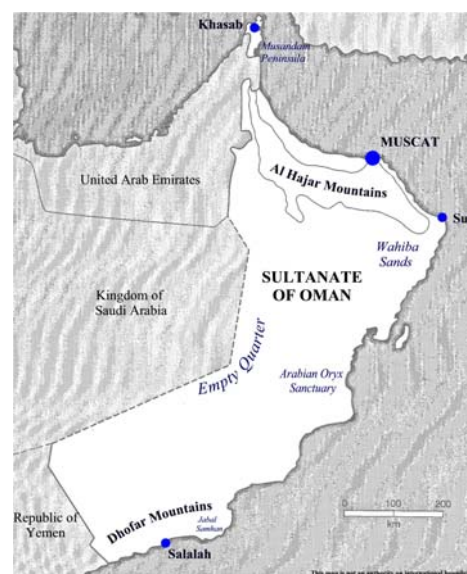


Figure 1. The Sultanate of Oman

## Current status of the Canidae

Four species are known to inhabit parts of Oman; the grey wolf *Canis lupus arabs*, Ruppell's sand fox *Vulpes ruppellii sabaeae*, Blanford's fox *Vulpes cana* and the red fox *Vulpes vulpes arabica* which is becoming increasingly common throughout Oman especially in the vicinity of permanent human settlement.

### *Canis lupus arabs* (grey wolf)

Oman Red List EN/C2a

Given the large number of disused wolf traps in the northern mountains, the grey wolf (Figure 2) must have been considerably more common in the past. There were 17 sightings or track records of groups of one to five wolves (most singly) during 1991-1997 in the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary in central Oman (Arabian Oryx Project records), and photo-trap records from southern Oman show it occurs on the south and east sides of Jabal Samhan (Spalton and Willis 1999) and in Jabal Qamar (Andrew Spalton, unpublished records). Scats and very rare sightings (Andrew Spalton, unpublished records) indicate that it still occurs in the Hajar mountains of northern Oman but it is likely to be more common in southern Oman than elsewhere. Little is known of its life history in Oman.



Figure 2. Arabian wolf on escarpment, Jabal Samhan

### *Vulpes ruppellii sabaeae* (Ruppell's sand fox)

Oman Red List EN/C2a

Confined to the lowland desert areas where it is widespread but rare (Figure 3). During 1990-1997 there were 186 sighting records in groups of one to seven, 61% singly and 24% in pairs, in

the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary in central Oman (Arabian Oryx Project records). Both Linn (1988) and David Insall (pers. comm.) reported it trapped in the Wahibah Sands and Martin Fisher (pers. comm.) sighted it in the dunes on the edge of the Empty Quarter. In the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary and probably elsewhere it has been displaced around settlements by the larger red fox.



Figure 3. Ruppell's fox (adult) in Arabian Oryx Sanctuary

### *Vulpes cana* (Blanford's fox)

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Blanford's fox (Figure 4) was first recorded in 1985 when two specimens were caught in Jabal Samhan, in southern Oman (Harrison and Bates 1989). Camera trap work undertaken to study the Arabian leopard in Jabal Samhan, 1997-2000, confirmed the continuing presence of Blanford's, recording it singly (n=132) and occasionally in pairs (n=12) (Spalton and Willis 1999; Spalton, unpublished data). It is likely to be present elsewhere in the Dhofar mountains although in the vicinity of settlements there is evidence that it has been replaced by the red fox (Spalton, unpublished camera-trap records).

It does not occur in the sand seas and gravel plains of the central region but has been recorded in the western Hajar mountains in the north and across the border in the United Arab Emirates (Stuart and Stuart 1995). In the Eastern Hajar the first records were two animals live-trapped in July 2002 in the Wadi As Serin Tahr Reserve just south of Muscat (Spalton, unpublished data). It is likely that it occurs throughout the Hajar range.



Figure 4. Blanford's fox investigating a camera-trap in Wadi Arah, Jabal Samhan

## Conservation measures

All species are protected by law that is strictly enforced by wildlife ranger units where they are present, particularly in the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary and Jabal Samhan Nature Reserve. There is no interest in hunting any of these species although shepherds will kill the wolf where it is known to predate livestock. Killing sprees where at least ten goats or sheep are killed by one or two wolves are not uncommon.

Prior to 1990 Oman was considered free of sylvatic rabies. Following a first outbreak in 1990 rabies was confirmed in a variety of mammal species including red fox and wolf. Confirmed cases in red fox peaked in 1991 at 101 (Al Ismaily and Al Mauly 1996). In the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary outbreaks in 1991 and 1998 killed many red foxes in the vicinity of settlements but rabies was not confirmed in Ruppell's fox (Arabian Oryx Project records) nor in Blanford's fox (Sultan Al Ismaily, pers. comm.).

Evidence of interbreeding of the wolf with domestic dogs is lacking in Oman. There are dogs in some larger human settlements but the keeping of dogs by the people of Oman's towns and villages is generally an uncommon practice. The Bedouin of the desert traditionally kept saluki hunting dogs but very few remain today.

Since the study of the ecology of the Ruppell's fox in the Wahiba Sands (Linn 1988) and the Jiddat al Harasis (Lindsay and Macdonald 1986) in the mid 1980s no study has been undertaken of Oman's canids. However, a comprehensive survey for small carnivores using

live-capture is due to start in October 2002 and should cover the entire northern mountains range from Sur in the southeast to Khasab in Musandam in the northwest.

Rangers that monitor the reintroduced Arabian oryx on the Jiddat al Harasis continue to report canids while camera-trap work of the Arabian Leopard Survey is helping to determine the distribution of the wolf and Blanford's fox in southern Oman.

## Notes

1. BBC Wildlife Magazine August 2002 includes an article on Oman's leopards that also features photographs of Arabian wolf and Blanford's fox.
2. Sections on wolf and Ruppell's sand fox based on Fisher (1999).

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Andrew Spalton arrived in Oman in 1987 to work on the reintroduction of the Arabian oryx. After six years he transferred to the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, to work on his PhD. Returning to Oman in 1995 he continues to work with the oryx and other projects including researching the ecology of wild populations of Arabian leopard *Panthera pardus nimr*.