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Field Report

Unidentified canid in the Danakil desert of Eritrea, Horn of Africa

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Abstract

An unidentified canid was photographed in the Danakil Desert of Eritrea, Horn of Africa, in December 2002. Seemingly a *Canis* spp., the specimen does not appear to correspond to any canid species known to occur in the region. We report the observation and discuss its possible taxonomic provenance.

Introduction

Seven species of canids have been documented for Eritrea to date (Yalden et al. 1980, 1996; Sillero-Zubiri et al. 2004). These are: golden jackal (*Canis aureus*), side-striped jackal (*C. adustus*), African wild dog (*Lycan pictus*), bat-eared fox (*Otocyon megalotis*), Rüppell's fox (*Vulpes rueppellii*), pallid fox (*V. pallida*) and fennec fox (*V. fennecus*), of which the last three are desert specialists. Geffen et al. 2004 speculated that Blanford's foxes may also be present, and Ethiopian wolves (*C. simensis*) were listed

as present in Eritrea by Coetsee (1971), but their presence was never fundamented. This note reports a recent sighting of an unidentified wolf-like canid in eastern Eritrea.

Results and Discussion



Figure 1. Unidentified canid photographed in the Massawa to Adi-Asseb road, eastern Eritrea (J.K. Tiwari).

On 2 December 2002, while on a survey of the Eritrean coastline, the senior author (J.K. Tiwari) observed and documented (photography and video) an unidentified canid walking alongside the Adi-Asseb road near the village of Idi (13° 35.523' N, 42° 11.315' E). The locality is situated in the Danakil depression (3m a.s.l.) – also known as the Afar Triangle – some 42,000km² of desert habitat characterized by extremely hot and dry weather (~ 60mm rainfall per year; up to 50° C in summer). The area is scantily populated by the Afar tribals herding goats and sheep which browse on the scarce vegetation; some shepherds report stock losses to wild predators similar to the one described here (the local name used for “wolf” is *wucharia*). This remote and inhospitable area, referred to as Devil's Kitchen, has not been visited by many outsiders during the last 30 years due to warfare and security concerns, which may explain why this canid was not reported previously.

The specimen, seemingly a female in regular body condition, was sighted in the afternoon walking 35-40m from the observer's vehicle (Figure 1.). It had a greyish coat, thin long tail, long legs, and extremely large ears. The observed animal does not belong to either of three desert fox species or bat-eared fox, the canid species expected in this region. After discussing this sighting with several scientists with canid experience (see Acknowledgements) we are satisfied that the specimen belongs to a *Canis* spp. It shares some morphological features with *C. lupus arabs* (Arabian grey wolf; Figure 2) such as big feet, but the ears are much larger, not dissimilar to those of *C. simensis* (Figure 2). While no definitive identification diagnosis can take place without morphological or genetic material we speculate that it may be either: a) a grey wolf (*C. lupus*), potentially expanding the African distribution of this species linearly by some 2,000 km; b) *Canis aureus lupaster*. The latter was originally described as *C. lupaster*, and is larger, heavier and with longer limbs than *C. aureus*, but smaller than *C. lupus arabs* (Ferguson 1981). Ferguson argued that this taxon should be considered a small desert wolf, based on cranial, mandible and dental measurements.

Further observations, collection of morphological material or faecal samples will be required to advance either hypothesis. We would encourage any naturalists visiting eastern Eritrea

to keep an eye for these animals. The locality can be reached from Massawa, along the 400km long road to Adi-Asseb. A 4-wheel drive is necessary to negotiate a rugged dirt/asphalt road, and an Afar translator essential to interview local people.



Figure 2. Arabian grey wolf (C. & T. Stuart).



Figure 3. Ethiopian wolf, Bale Mountains (C. Sillero).

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J.K. Tiwari worked on bird and grassland ecology in India with the Bombay Natural History Society for seven years and spent three years in Eritrea conducting surveys of mangrove forests and birds.

Claudio Sillero-Zubiri has been involved with the study and conservation of African Canids for 16 years, mainly Ethiopian wolves and African wild dogs. His current interest is in mitigation of human-wildlife conflict. He is Deputy Chair of the Canid Specialist Group and senior editor of the 2004 Canid Action Plan.