wildlife searching on the world wide web

Whilst new sites are continually being loaded onto computers forming part of the internet, the task of finding relevant and up to date web pages is somewhat reminiscent of crossing the Rub al-Khali on foot - continually diverted by mirages but only finding a real oasis with the aid of an experienced guide, who these days is probably using a GPS navigation device. Such expeditions, whether into the complex kingdom of the computer, or through Arabia's own landscape, can triumph or perish depending upon one's companion.

The limitless reaches of both environments are no places to be without a clear head and the tools to take you to your chosen destination. Just as the personal qualities and knowledge of exploration guides vary greatly, so do the methods and efficiencies of internet search engines. Recognise this fact and you are already on the way to making better use of the world wide web and may even discover that elusive cyber-oasis that forms the target of your search.

Clicking on the search button in Netscape browsers, takes surfers to a selection of web indexing systems. Infoseek, Yahoo, Excite, and Lycos are standard fare. In the name of science and out of sheer curiosity I recently put all of these to the same test, typing in the words: "wildlife Arabia" and waiting to see what each of them came up with. The results were interesting, if not particularly encouraging.
Arabian Wildlife

INFOSEEK RESULTS

Search for: wildlife Arabia

First 10 of 133,092 relevant documents:

1. http://iucn.org/places/saudi arabia:
   - objectives of the NCWCD in Saudi Arabia. 63%
   - IDP update: contact jacobson@primate.wisc.edu. 61%
   - WWF news release re NCWCD/Saudi Arabia’s release of oryx on 4 April 1995. 59%
   - Abu Dhabi tourism and Sunshine Tours. 58%
5. http://www.ee.gatech.edu/users/sam/schedule.html:
   - 1996 GAOC Schedule - Georgia Orienteering Club. 58%
   - Science and the Environment - CD-ROM Chapter Dir. 57%
   - David Byard CV Links 57%
   - General Info. Heard Heard Island 56%
   - Green Case. Green Turtle loss in Arabian Gulf 56%
    - Watson Institute: Board of Overseers. Teymour A. Alireza Rezayat Company Ltd. 56%

COMMENT

This search did at least deliver up ten completely different web sites. Each of these might merit some further exploration although some, indeed most, clearly do not merit inclusion in the top 10 sites on Arabian wildlife. It was not particularly successful at scoring high hits with the first site only listed at 63% relevancy (IUCN’s Regional Offices) whilst a passing reference to wildlife on a tourism promotion page (Abu Dhabi National Hotels Corporation) placed it third out of 133,092 records. In general a mixed bunch of sites leaving the web researcher with plenty of work to sort the grain from the chaff.

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<th>RELEVANCY</th>
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This search, powered by Digital's powerful AltaVista search engine delivered eight completely different web sites in the first ten of its listing. We were interested to see two records concerning Arabian Wildlife's 1995 photographic competition. The fact that these pages are tucked far inside a computer in Scotland that carries Photon ezine is a reminder both of how intrusive computerised indexing has become on the web, and also of how important it is becoming for server administrators and internet publishers to place time-guides on their on-line data. Several relatively new sites appeared in Yahoo's listing, including the UAE ECSSR site, the National Avian Research Centre's site in the UAE and the UAEinteract site which was launched in December 1996. This does help to bolster some confidence in the overall search which showed quite good relevancy. The basic results, served up in the default format, did not indicate percentage figures for appearance of the key words.

**RELEVANCY**

**INTEREST**

**SCOPE**
We were not really excited by EXCITE's listing, four of the first ten records being taken up with two year old news about the Arabian Wildlife Photographer of the Year Competition. Surely one of these entries could have been filtered out and served up. Our disappointment was compounded by the fact that after each entry the words [More Like This] appeared, suggesting that the search mechanism was indeed set up to deliver just one entry where closely similar ones were found. In general the search did not deliver many of the sites that we know to exist, and which we would have expected it to come up with. On the other hand it did give us some unknown sites such as the one relating to Hamadryas baboons at Prospect Park Wildlife Center.
Search for: **wildlife Arabia**

First 10 of 17,106 relevant documents

- [Arabian Wildlife Photographer of the Year Contest](http://www.photon.co.uk/phot/on/june95/arabjudges.html)
- [Planet Publishing](http://www.photon.co.uk/phot/on/planet/planet.html)
- [Arabian Wildlife Photographer of the Year](http://www.photon.co.uk/phot/on/june95/arabwild.html)
- [Kodak Sponsorship of Arabian Wildlife Photographer of the Year Competition, June 1995](http://www.peregrinefund.org/Arabia.html)
- [Peregrine Fund has advised on establishing captive breeding facilities for falcons](http://www.webcom.com/tsx/ngs/cover/cov-8.html)
- [Covers of National Geographic](http://www.reading.ac.uk/AcaDepts/sa/AMS/mcs/wild.html)
- [MSc Course in Wildlife Management](http://www.dec.com/gnn/wic/wics/visart.32.html)
- [Arabian Wildlife Photographer of the Year was](http://www.gnn.com/wic/wics/visart.32.html)
- [Arabian Wildlife Photographer of the Year was](http://www.gnn.com/wic/wics/visart.32.html)

**COMMENT**

The first 4 and two of the last three from the top ten listing are about the Arabian Wildlife Photographic competition - flattering maybe but frustrating in terms of web research. The remaining four sites deal with the Peregrine Fund, covers of National Geographic Magazine, and M.Sc. course in Wildlife Management and the WWF. There was no mention of any of the major regional organisations concerned with wildlife conservation, or of the numerous events and projects related to Arabian wildlife.
Use of the word "Arabia" in the searches resulted in an immediate bias on sites related to Saudi Arabia. The mere existence of the country name would have caused such sites to be registered in the overall search. This points to one of the critical factors concerning such web research: the need for careful selection of key words, designed to focus as closely as possible upon the desired subject. The fact that two separate search systems delivered up the curriculum vita of a wildlife artist living in Australia does call into question the efficacy of the sorting methods employed by these systems. Highest scoring of these is definitely YAHOO which owes its success to Alta Vista's page searching and cataloguing system. In order to verify the search we accessed Alta Vista directly, via Digital's home page, and repeated the search. It came up with an identical set of ten entries; the only difference being that it recorded the date that each of these had been last catalogued. This informed us that out of date pages related to our own activities were still operating in December 1996, alerting us to the need to have these pages removed from the system. All of the entries had been indexed during 1996 with the earliest in May and the latest in December. Our own search was carried out on January 15th 1997.

Using Alta Vista once again we tried it out in a search for sites about the Arabian Oryx. A word count of the 10,000 or so pages on which it found matches recorded 9,915 occurrences of the word "oryx" and 49,099 occurrences of the word "Arabian". Such a search is more likely to deliver sites that are of direct relevance to one's area of interest. In this case the following sites were listed:

  The Arabian Oryx, the only non-African oryx, survives for long periods without drinking water.
  Arabian Oryx: Description: The Arabian Oryx is a graceful white antelope....
- http://www.arab.net/photos/oryx.html
  The rare Arabian oryx....
- http://aztec.asu.edu/phxzoo/oryx.html
  Arabian Oryx...leucoryx. Size: Height at shoulders, 40ins...
- http://www.scz.org/asian/oryx1.html
  Arabian oryx. Click on the small picture to see a larger image.
- http://www.scz.org/asian/oryx2.html
  Arabian Oryx photo by Dean Foy.
- http://www.utoronto.ca/env/lib-hold/db03/files/397-M.htm
  Animal Re-Introductions: The Arabian Oryx in Oman
- http://mamba.bio.ucl.edu/~pbryant/global/makemark/ARABIANORX.html
  Arabian Oryx. Table of Contents. Society Conservation.
- http://www.orxpress.com/oppic.htm
  Arabian Oryx. Oryx leucoryx. Photograph by Pamela Newton....

The World Wide Web can undoubtedly deliver a huge quantity of information of relevance to Arabian wildlife and conservation. Use of search engines is essential but there is considerable variation in the degree of efficiency of these. In our own experience Alta Vista is the best and this can be accessed via Yahoo or by a number of other avenues, including Digital's own web site. Keep in mind that the searches can be up to a year old and must therefore only be used as a basic guide as to where one should look. They will guide you to the track, after that it is up to your own efforts to check out what seem to be the most relevant sites and to narrow down the field. Remember that many new sites are being posted on to the Net and it takes some time for all these to be fully catalogued.

Since writing the above article our own web site: http://www.arabianwildlife.com has been astoundingly successful, with over a million "hits" recorded. It provides the best introduction to Arabia's natural world available on the entire internet.