Can You See The Oryx?

The National Wildlife Research Centre at Taif was established in 1986 with the specific objectives of producing captive-bred animals, reintroducing them into the wild, and monitoring their progress once released. One such project was the reintroduction of the Arabian oryx. Their brief also included supporting conservation efforts within the Kingdom and the provision of research into all aspects of the wildlife and ecology of Saudi Arabia.
During my years in Jeddah, I have attended the monthly meetings of the Saudi Arabian Natural History Society where the excellent and informative talks about the wildlife, culture, geology and architecture of the Kingdom fuelled my desire to explore this beautiful country. In over twelve years I have visited many wild corners of the Kingdom, but until recently, one area, the Rub' al-Khali or 'Empty Quarter' - the greatest sand desert in the world - remained beyond my reach.

I remember vividly one of the early talks at the Society, presented by a French scientist from the newly established National Wildlife Research Centre in Ta'if. This young man, so full of enthusiasm and hope for the future, spoke about two of the Research Centre's captive-breeding projects, one of which was centred around the Arabian oryx.

His exciting overview of the oryx programme was laced with concern that TB was present in the initial breeding herd. The fifty-seven animals were a mixed bunch. Some came from the King Khaled farm at Thumamah (near Riyadh), some from the San Diego zoo in the United States and a few were from Jordan. In an effort to produce a healthy breeding population that would eventually be returned to its desert habitat, the new-born calves were vaccinated and removed from their mothers at birth. Little did I dream that evening, that one day I would be privileged to see the oryx roaming free once more in the wonderful Rub' al-Khali.

The Arabian oryx is immortalised in Arabic poetry and is possibly the basis for the myth of the unicorn because of the profile of its long straight horns. It is able to thrive in even the most arid areas of the Arabian Peninsula. Despite this ability to survive all that 'Mother Nature' could throw at it, the oryx (along with the ibex, gazelles, ostrich and houbara bustard) was not able to withstand the slaughter wrought upon it by humans, that followed the advent of motorised transport and modern guns. The ostrich became extinct about fifty years ago and the oryx was set to follow suit in the early 1970s, for it was then that the last herd in the wild fell prey to hunters' guns on the fringes of the Rub' al-Khali.

Deprived of almost all of its larger native wild animals this great country lost part of its heart and soul. Then, at the last gasp, the nation woke up to its lost heritage and began to redress the balance. As a result, the National Wildlife Research Centre at Taif was established in 1986 with the specific objectives of producing captive-bred animals, reintroducing them into the wild, and monitoring their progress once released. Their brief also included supporting conservation efforts within the Kingdom (in particular, the implementation of public awareness programmes), and the support of research into all aspects of the wildlife and ecology of Saudi Arabia.

Specific reserve areas were set up to receive the captive-bred animals when the time was right. The first of these, the 2,200 square kilometre Mahazat as-Sayd Reserve on the Ta'if to Riyadh road, is fenced. The much larger Uruq Bani Ma'arid Reserve on the northwestern edge of the Rub' al-Khali is open, however, apart from a small core area from which all but wild animals are excluded.

Due to the dedication and enthusiasm of the scientists at Ta'if the first oryx were returned to the wild in the Mahazat as-Sayd Reserve by 1990. Following the success of this initial trial the NWRC planned the release of oryx into the 12,000 square kilometre Uruq Bani Ma'arid Reserve. HRH Prince Sultan Bin Abdul-Aziz introduced the first group in 1995 and within two years, a total of eighty-three healthy oryx had been released. Calves were produced almost immediately and within only two years their number had risen to more than one hundred. The desert's heart was beating again.

It was midday as we drove along the Riyadh road from Najran towards the Uruq Bani Ma'arid reserve. The empty desert surrounded us and sizzled beneath a dancing mirage. On the road ahead, the image of the occasional oncoming vehicle was reflected repeatedly, creating an imaginary convoy that seemed to float across a huge lake of milky-blue water. This apparently watery wilderness is in fact almost bone-dry today but there is evidence everywhere of a wetter and more populous time.

We left the road and bounced across the desert for about one kilometre to reach the welcome shade of a large sandstone outcrop. Upon arrival, however, we found that others had been there before us. No, I am not referring to the unsightly litter left by uncaring recent visitors, but to the ancient graffiti that
adorned every available flat surface of the rocks. Numerous scenes with warriors and game animals conjured up visions of this area of Saudi Arabia looking just like an African savannah of today. And were the early-writing symbols the signatures of the original artists? So many unanswered questions filled my mind.

It was strange eating our lunch in the presence of those echoes from the past. They made me feel acutely aware that I am sharing only a very small part of the epic history of the Earth.

As we continued our journey through the dancing haze, a cliff came into view on the far side of the shimmering blue mirage. This wall of rock was the southern end of the Tuwayq escarpment, a dramatic outcrop of west-facing cliffs that stretches in a great arc, from the Qasim area in the north of the Kingdom to the fringes of the Rub' al-Khali in the south. The cliff that graced the 'shoreline' of our imaginary lake, once graced a very real shoreline at the edge of an ancient ocean where it was part of a thriving and colourful coral-reef ecosystem. Today it was equally as colourful, glowing in the mid-afternoon sunlight in shades of raw and burnt sienna mixed with creams and orange-reds a giant geological layer-cake yet only a small slice of the eternity of the geological past.

A road sign directed us along a rough track towards the face of the escarpment on whose summit a radio aerial marked the site of the rangers' camp at the entrance to the Reserve.

The track, much steeper than it appeared from the road, wound up the cliff through some very soft, sandy stretches (good practice for the driving to come), to the summit camp. Stopping to enjoy the view in the now crystal-clear air, we gazed across the plains far below. Braided drainage-channels criss-crossed the flat expanse towards the far horizon and reminded me of fronds of seaweed, drifting lazily in a slack tide. The nautical theme was continued in a limestone outcrop at the side of the track that was home to several coral and seashell fossils - proof of the area's marine connections in its geological past.

As we continued our journey through the sinuous curves, Abu Ali explained that sand-driving is easier in the cool of the early morning when the sand is firmer and less mobile. From the days of his childhood he remembered everyone riding camels in the area of Sharourah where he grew up but now camels are only kept for their meat and milk.

We crossed the stony plain between two parallel rows of dunes - their trendline determined by the prevailing wind direction - and began to ascend the lower slopes of the 200 metre high dunes on the opposite side. Approaching each slope at an angle, we wound our way slowly and carefully up successive layers of dunes, one stacked upon another, until we reached the acute-angled ridge at the summit. Turning sharply at the top (and this was the most exciting part of all), we crested the dune to immediately nose-dive down the opposing sharp face at a seemingly impossible angle then slalom to the lower slopes again. These enormous hills of sand are up to five hundred metres high further into the desert and the plains between are filled with secondary dunes as well. The under

A limestone outcrop at the side of the track, was home to several coral and seashell fossils

Lizard holding its body high above the hot desert sand

Ancient drawings on the flat rocks
The coffee-hearth in the Rangers’ majlis tent

The Bedouin of the Rub‘ al-Khali are famous for their ability to drive in the dunes
into the core area. Access to the core is denied to all except the wild animals and the wildlife rangers who are the Reserve's 'policemen'. It is thought that the retreat of the oryx was a response to illegal hunting which can be a problem on the periphery of the reserve. In an effort to counteract this problem, the Wildlife Centre have launched an educational awareness programme which aims to inform the local people about the purpose of the Reserve and to gain their co-operation in the venture.

As we descended from our second day dust still hung in the air. It was much cooler now and so we ate our evening khapsa in the cosy ambiance of the rangers' majlis or meeting tent.

Each morning and evening, dressed in their smart grey desert uniforms, they carry out their survey drives across the trackless dunes and stony corridors of the Reserve. In addition, three carefully mapped circuits are driven on one specific day of each month. The Rangers use satellite technology to return to exactly the same locations where they record scientific data relating to the weather, the wildlife and the vegetation. The data is then computerised and analysed to produce an overall picture of the Reserve that aids the daily management and forward planning of the project.

In the late afternoon of our third day, we left the camp for our final game drive. Following a stony corridor for seventy kilometres, we drove straight into the heart of the Reserve. Scattered clumps of dried and brittle grasses shone like gold in the low-angled light of the setting sun as the shadows lengthened on the dunes above us.

This time we were fortunate to observe a family of gazelles at close quarters grazing upon the sparse desert vegetation. An ancient desert well was our next port of call. To the inexperienced eye it was simply a depression in the sand but its presence meant the difference between life and death to the Bedouin before the days of water tankers. These desert wells had to be dug out to get to the precious water below and covered again before leaving, to prevent animals from falling in and polluting the already brackish water supply. Several vultures' nests adorned a lone acacia close to the well, but there was no sign of their avian architects in the vicinity.

Sailing up and down great waves of undulating sand, we crossed one mini sand sea after another and then, from the crest of a higher dune, we saw the white flashes of a group of oryx in the distance. Our luck was in, we were upwind of our quarry and they were completely unaware of our presence. It was wonderful to quietly observe these graceful animals, roaming free once more in their desert home.

But the day's excitement was not yet over and we headed south again to a flat area that looked like an enormous silvery mirror. Our 'mirror' was in fact, the fossil surface of an ancient lakebed that had been below the sand for more than 9000 years. Footprints of wild horses, gazelles and camels were preserved within its petrified crust. Some sinister-looking scratch marks had been fossilised as well. Perhaps they belonged to a tiger that struck terror into the grazing animals of the lakeshore all those years ago?

A 'living fossil' posed beside the 'lake'. It was a small Jurassic-looking lizard, that teetered about on long, spindly-looking legs. This desert adaptation allowed the lizard to hold its body high up off the burning sand and thus helped it to survive the heat of the day.

It was dark now but Abu Ali explained that he navigated by the stars and there was no danger of us getting lost. We worked our way up one high dune and crossed the crest into a deep depression on the other side. To our surprise, lying on the surface all around, were dozens of fragments of broken ostrich shell. This area was once an ostrich-nesting site before the native bird was hunted to extinction. There is good news, however, for red-necked ostrich from the Sudan are breeding at the Wildlife Centre and, in 1997, the first ostrich chicks for more than half a century were hatched in the wilds of Saudi Arabia.

Returning from our game drive, beneath a star filled sky, our final treat was yet to come. Ahead of us, two bright points of light shone like 'cats eyes' set into a tarmac road. But we weren't within sixty kilometres of any sort of road so what could they be?

The desert fox faced our vehicle for just a moment. Its enormous ears were held aloft, as it listened intently for any clue that would identify this strange approaching four-wheeled monster. Then it turned, and slipped away into the darkness of the desert night, providing the perfect finale to an unforgettable experience.