Re-Introduction Updates

Mountain Gazelle in Saudi Arabia

Populations of large mammals in Saudi Arabia have declined dramatically since the First World War as a result of excessive hunting, use of modern firearms and vehicles, and habitat degradation, the latter being mainly due to overgrazing by domestic livestock. The number of domestic animals increased sharply after the government used oil revenues to subsidise the ownership of livestock, the purchase of water tankers and the drilling of boreholes. Saudi gazelles (*Gazella dorcas saudiya*) are probably extinct in the wild and only a few wild mountain gazelles (*Gazella gazella*) survive, occupying very limited parts of their former geographical range.

Hawtah Reserve was established by the National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development (NCWCD) in the late 1980s (RE-INTRODUCTION NEWS 3), in order to protect the area’s population of Nubian ibex (*Capra ibex nubiana*). It is located about 150km south of Riyadh in central Saudi Arabia.

Mountain gazelles were eliminated from the area about twenty years ago by hunting, but since NCWCD rangers have been based in the Reserve, hunting has been almost eliminated. The Reserve includes several major wadi systems, and the heads of three wadis have been fenced to protect the vegetation from the domestic livestock - in particular, the 1,200 camels which live in the Reserve. The Reserve has received about 100mm of rain during each of the last two winters. The summers are dry and very hot.

Since December 1990, 71 captive-born mountain gazelles have been released into the camel-free areas of the Reserve. The gazelles came from the King Khalid Wildlife Research Centre (KKWRC), which is located 50km north of Riyadh and is managed by the Zoological Society of London (ZSL).

The animals were released in groups of four to 19 individuals, after having spent a period of two to four weeks in a pre-release pen. Food and water were provided while the gazelles were penned. The provision of food continued for one to months after they were freed, but the animals soon stopped eating the food provided, preferring to feed on the natural vegetation. Water is still available at the release sites, but only some of the gazelles drink regularly.

During 1991 and 1992, gazelles were released into adjacent wadis, but during 1993, animals were released into a separate wadi system, at a site some 20km south of the earlier releases. Twenty-eight individuals were fitted with radiocollars and all were fitted with ear tags. Each animal was individually identifiable from the shape, size, colour and position of its ear tag. An intensive monitoring programme followed the releases.

Over sixty calves have been born since the release of their parents and over fifty of these were conceived in the wild.

Births occur in all months of the year, but with peaks in distribution during spring and autumn. Individual females may have two calves per year, with singletons being born six months apart.

Twelve gazelles are known to have died since being freed and three have disappeared and are presumed to be dead. Predation was the major cause of mortality. Two individuals were known to have been killed by a wolf who is also strongly suspected of being responsible for the death of six other gazelles. One female released during May 1993 was killed by two feral dogs.

The camel fences do not hinder the movement of the gazelles; some animals have dispersed from the release areas and are now resident lower down the wadis, where they compete for food with the camels. In August 1993, the gazelle population of the Reserve was estimated at between 100 and 130 animals.

Contributed by Kevin Dunham, ZSL and KKWRC, Saudi Arabia.

Swift Fox Roams the Canadian Prairies

The Canadian swift fox (*Vulpes velox*) re-introduction programme (RE-INTRODUCTION NEWS 5) appears to have been a success. After releasing 323 swift foxes (290 captive-raised, 33 translocated from wild US populations) during an experimental three-year programme, a population has become established in an area where it had ceased to exist for over 50 years. Released foxes have survived and reproduced, as have their wild-born young. In fact, the majority of the current small population are unmarked wild-born animals. Some of the foxes from the Canadian release programme have also dispersed into the USA.

The results of this experimental study suggest that the re-establishment of a viable fox population in Canada is possible. The release programme is projected to continue for a further five years, with the use of both captive-raised and wild-caught foxes.

As part of a continent-wide effort, a special two-day Swift Fox Workshop was held in Medicine Hat, Alberta in March 1993, and attended by approximately 30 individuals. This occasion provided an opportunity to exchange useful information on and develop new initiatives for the conservation of the swift fox in North America. The meeting was initiated and co-ordinated by Dr. Ludwig Carbyn of the Canadian Wildlife Service, with assistance from representatives from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

Compiled from material written by Ludwig N. Carbyn, Canadian Wildlife Service.