TRACKING THE NIMR

On a scientific research expedition in Oman, Erin McCloskey searches for the elusive Arabian leopard.

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get in the know! Muscat was occupied by the Portuguese from 1508 until 1648.

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO, A BEDRAGGLED, HEAT-affected Australian by the name of David Willis stumbled into the campsite of a Bedu (Bedouin) family of goat and camel herders. The Bedu family could not have been more surprised to see this lonely foreigner appear at their campfire. The Dhofar region is difficult and inhospitable terrain of dry, steep, scree-sloped canyon gorges and mountains. It is riddled with dry riverbeds (called wadis) and foliated with aggressively spiny acacia trees. What was this man doing wandering by himself in the Dhofar Mountains?

An artist and photographer, Willis was on a personal mission to track and photograph the rare Arabian leopard. He captured the first photos of the leopard in 1995 with the help of camera traps (hidden cameras that photograph passing wildlife using motion detection). Willis soon attracted the interest and support of Dr. Andrew Spalton, the Advisor for Conservation to the most important man in the country, the Sultan of Oman. From 1997 to 2000, Willis and Spalton ran the first official leopard survey in Jabal Samhan Nature Reserve, the only protected leopard habitat in Oman.

The research determined that a viable leopard population exists in the Jabal Samhan Mountains. The vast areas outside the nature reserve however required a labour-intensive survey. In 2005, the Sultan's royal court authorities, the Diwan, invited Biosphere Expeditions to help support the necessary field survey. Biosphere Expeditions is a wildlife conservation organisation that brings research funding and volunteer people-power to projects around the world.

Telling people that I was preparing to travel to Oman met with confused expressions followed by the query, "Um, where is Oman?" Located at the south-eastern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, the Sultanate of Oman is the largest of the Gulf States. It is bordered by Yemen to the south, Saudi Arabia to the west and the United Arab Emirates to the north-west. I would then be asked why I was going to Oman. My response, "I am volunteering on a leopard project," drew more confused glances. "There are lepers in Oman?" "Leopards! I am joining a research expedition studying Arabian leopards."

"Days typically began with crawling out of our tents to witness the sunrise turning the walls of the wadi a soft golden pink."

The Arabian leopard (Panthera pardus nimr), locally known as 'nimr', is one of four subspecies of the common leopard in the Middle East. It is the largest surviving cat species of Arabia and one of the most endangered species on the planet. It inhabits the Dhofar mountain ranges of southern Oman bordering Yemen with a remnant population believed to survive on the Musandam Peninsula of northern Oman. Nimr is the smallest of the four subspecies and has a pale coat with dark rosettes

get in the know! Arabic is the official language of Oman.

and striking eyes that have the appearance of being outlined with kohl - the charcoal eyeliner traditionally worn by the local people. Once widespread throughout the mountainous regions of Oman, Saudia Arabia, Yemen, the United Arab Emirates, Palestine and Jordan, by the 1990s the leopard was locally extinct in most areas of the Arabian Peninsula. The last report in Saudia Arabia was of a dead leopard in 1976.

The researchers selected Wadi Uyun, west of Jabal Samhan, as this year's study area. Our team, consisting of a dozen volunteers from Australia, Europe and North America, received two days of training on field and survey techniques and animal presence identification. Members ranged from a 70-year-old retired schoolteacher to a 25-year-old Aussie gal who had never been camping.

Our job was to survey Wadi Uyun and adjacent wadis to record evidence of human disturbance such as hunting and livestock (camel, cow and goat) grazing. We were also to search for signs of leopard, its prey species (particularly the endangered ibex and gazelle) and other predators. These 'signs' consisted of footprints in the sand, prey remains, scratch marks, furballs and droppings. Our first lesson is to learn the scientific terminology for animal poo, which is 'scat'. Footprints are called 'tracks', 'spoor' or 'pugmarks.'

The first few days of surveying were successful. We found tracks and scat of wolf and fox, hyrax, ibex, gazelle and partridge. We also identified areas abundant with scat and pugmarks of caracal, another large cat in Oman. Slipping into our new roles as field biologists with ease, we bagged several scat and furball samples we hope are from a leopard and send them for DNA-testing in a lab. We also found empty gun cartridges and an ibex hide that suggested that hunters had been present.

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Another component of the research was to interview local people. They sat with us over a bowl of frothy camel milk or a pot of Arabian tea to discuss what we were doing and to share their perspectives on wildlife. Although they agree that the leopard is beautiful, they see no particular benefit in its presence.

Days typically began with crawling out of our tents to witness the sunrise turning the walls of the wadi a soft golden pink. At the mess tent, a large Bedu tent decorated inside with a mosaic of colour, the research team prepared coffees and teas before driving to a remote wadi to survey and collect camera traps. Often the only other people that we encountered were military personnel and Bedu herdsmen.

The survey required that we fan ourselves across the width of the wadis to inspect the sun-bleached white rocks on the fossil-laden ancient ocean floor. We also climbed up steep scree ledges in search of signs of large predators. We routinely detected tracks of fox, wolf, hyaena and caracal. We consumed several litres of water each day working in the hot climate. A handful of tents and a campfire served as our base in the evening.

One evening, after a long day of surveying, we were rewarded back at our campsite by the sight and smell of goat being grilled for dinner. It was accompanied by a big pot of rice and vegetables, along with some tinned fish provided by our camel porter. The flames of the campfire flickered dancing shadows across the wadi wall and a few of us chose to sleep by the warmth of the fire and watch the shooting stars fall from the Arabian night sky. The leopard is out there, somewhere in the night, the elusive nimr of local lore. Over the preceding days we had been privileged to partake in the lives of local people and to share the challenges of conservation in action. As I fell asleep under the stars, I felt that we had also made a small contribution to help this elusive and graceful cat cling to survival in this stark and beautiful land.

GET PLANNING

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The next expedition runs in January and February 2010. It costs approximately A$2550 for two weeks (excluding flights). Room and board are provided while on expedition.
Biosphere Expeditions has also initiated a coral reef survey off the Musandam Peninsula of Oman and UAE that will take place in the last two weeks of October 2009 and costs approximately A$2190 for one-week (excluding flights).

Getting There

Flights to Muscat, the capital of Oman, with Emirates start at approximately A$2000.
www.emirates.com
For more information contact Biosphere Expeditions at 1800 708 261 or visit **www.biosphere-expeditions.org**

get in the know! Oman is famous for its khanjar knives – curved daggers worn with ceremonial costumes.

get in the know! Education in Oman (including tertiary) is free for all its citizens.

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Courtesy of its global partners Land Rover, Snowgum, Oman Tourism and Swarovski Optik, Biosphere Expeditions is offering get lost! readers two free places on Biosphere Expedition's 2010 Arabian leopard expedition to Oman. There are also Swarovksi binoculars and Snowgum gift cards to be won.

BIOSPHERE EXPEDITIONS

Biosphere Expeditions is a non-profit organisation offering adventure-with-purpose expeditions across the globe. These hands-on conservation projects are genuine wildlife expeditions placing ordinary people with no research experience alongside scientists at the forefront of conservation work. The award winning Biosphere Expeditions always work with local scientists and people from the host country, and at least two-thirds of the expedition income is spent on the project directly. Teams are small and an expedition leader from Biosphere Expeditions will show the way.
More information: **www.biosphere-expeditions.org**

WHAT'S TO SEE IN OMAN

Although popular myth has this part of the world down as a vast, flat and empty expanse of sand (and oil), Oman is quite different. In fact, there is a wide range of contrasting landscapes: deserts, mountains, beaches, coral reefs and even tropical habitats in the extreme south. The mountainous region called the Dhofar (where the leopard still survives) is where the expedition takes place. Among the variety of fauna and flora are flocks of migrant wading birds passing through every year; marine, mountain, desert and shoreline ecosystems; endangered Arabian mammals like leopard and oryx; coral reefs with endemic fish; whales and dolphins along the coast, and turtles that nest in large numbers on the beaches running almost along the entire length of the country.
More information: **www.omantourism.gov.om.**

1ST+2ND PRIZE

THE OMAN EXPEDITION

This wildlife conservation and research expedition will take you to the remote desert mountains of the Dhofar region of Oman. Working alongside scientists from the Royal Omani Court, you will be part of a small international team monitoring Arabian leopard presence and contributing to important conservation research. From a field base you will venture out (in the expedition Land Rovers and on foot) in search of leopards and any evidence they have left behind. You will also help set camera traps and liaise with locals about leopard sightings.
More information about the expedition:
www.biosphere-expeditions.org/oman

BIOSPHERE EXPEDITIONS.ORG

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www.snowgum.com.au

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More information on **www.biosphere-expeditions.org/competition**

Oman SULTANATE OF OMAN