



EXPEDITION DIARY Oman 2011

By Paul o'Dowd & Matthias Hammer

27 January

Welcome to the 2011 Oman expedition diary. Just a quick one from us at Biosphere Expeditions to say that staff have started to arrive in Muscat, we have picked up four shiny new Land Rovers, retrieved our equipment from storage and are now in full swing getting the expedition prepared, first in Muscat and then later in Salalah and Dhofar, Insha'Allah.

"Insha'Allah", by the way, is a phrase you are about to become very familiar with. I usually introduce new expeditioners to this phrase right from the start, so I'll do it again in this first diary entry: Insha'Allah translates roughly as... 'If Allah wills it' and is a marvelously useful term of complete fatalism and one which has no direct English equivalent. The nearest thing would probably be '...but on the other hand I might get hit by a number 73 bus tomorrow' - uttered in tones of sodden dejection by a clinical depressive with a strong Solihull accent.

So far so good. I'll e-mail more from Muscat in due course. Please make a note of my Oman mobile number (for emergency use only), which is +968 92380988. I look forward to seeing you all soon.

Safe travels

Paul o'Dowd
Expedition Leader

31 January

A short video diary entry is now on our Facebook page www.facebook.com/pages/Biosphere-Expeditions/132594724471. You'll find it our Wall page.

1 February

Another video diary entry now at www.facebook.com/pages/Biosphere-Expeditions/132594724471.

Preparations going well here with half the team now on its way to Salalah to get the equipment down and start setting up. We look forward to seeing you in Salalah in due course. Remember to meet at Costa Coffe opposite departures (not arrivals, where there's also a Costa!).

More updates from Dhofar, but they are unlikely to be video entries from now on because there are now fast internet connections in the land of the leopard ;)

2 February

Did we say no more video diary entries? Well, that would be true if some of us weren't stuck in Muscat. See www.facebook.com/pages/Biosphere-Expeditions/132594724471 for more.

3 February

Half the team is in Salalah buying food & other supplies and sorting out local staff. The other half have had the Land Rover key flown up by a kind passenger from Salalah to Muscat and are now on their way to Salalah, driving 1,000 km along the edge of the Empty Quarter, where roadside cafes have internet and they could upload another video diary entry to www.facebook.com/pages/Biosphere-Expeditions/132594724471 > tab "Wall" (by the way, you do not need to have a Facebook account to view these video diaries - just click on the link above and then the "Wall" tab and you should be able to see everything).

4 February

We're putting up the camp for you at the moment (see new video diary entry on www.facebook.com/pages/Biosphere-Expeditions/132594724471 > Wall) and are on schedule to have everything ready, insh'Allah. When we arrived here yesterday, the place was untouched from last year except for some evidence of camping by locals and lots of hyaena tracks around.

Temperatures are between 12 C at night and around 30 C during the day and, you have guessed it, the sun shines (mercilessly) all day, so don't forget shades, sunscreen, etc.

Again remember that you will be met at Muscat airport by a rep from National Travel & Tourism (NTT) who will hand your tickets to you. If anything goes wrong at that end, you can ring Ginu from NTT on +968 92800281 and you also have my mobile, which is +968 92380988. We'll see you at the Salalah end.

5 February

Base camp is all set and a couple of us are back in Salalah for the night for extreme printing, laminating, shopping, etc. before picking up slot 1 tomorrow. Watch the video diary update on www.facebook.com/pages/Biosphere-Expeditions/132594724471 > Wall and have a read of the attached for what we have in store for you.

8 February

It's day two of the Oman expedition and after a first day of intensive training we have just returned from our first field day. We conducted a survey of Ayun Waterhole and the wadi that contains it. Many tracks were found including some that caused excitement (it's yet to be determined whether that excitement is justified). The appearance of fresh chiapatis at breakfast, courtesy of our great cook Ashraf, made Marcello and Steve very happy. The team have taken to their tasks with great enthusiasm and keen eyes. It's been a pleasure to slowly scan the tracks with Bill regaling us with stories of his diverse experiences and John bubbling with his passion for biochemistry. I look forward to the chance to spend time on the tracks with each of the team over the coming weeks.

PS. Marcello has just returned and crushed our hopes that we had detected a leopard. Our exciting track was made by a hyaena.

10 February

The great wadi search continues as the expedition team spread out into the landscape in search of evidence of our target animals. The Land Rovers and their drivers are each proving very capable on terrain that would seriously tax a lesser vehicle and operator. Gunda has today negotiated a huge day of rock crawling and sand crossings. The inevitable sand bog was easily overcome with a combination of Gunda's cool head in not revving us into a deeper rutt, a lot of dead twigs under the wheels and Bill getting his back into the task of pushing as the vehicle crawled out of its predicament.

Lots of good data and some valuable local interviews made a fun day a productive one as well.

16 February

If ever there was adequate compensation for not finding clear signs of our target species, it couldn't be better than the spectacular scenery we are witnessing as we negotiate this landscape in our surveys (see www.facebook.com/pages/Biosphere-Expeditions/132594724471 > Wall). The wadis constantly remind us of their coral reef heritage as the team trip over fossils of sea shells and ancient corals. In recent days we have conducted interviews with locals and a team has been visiting schools to both spread and acquire information pertinent to our investigation. Anne, with her Arabic skills, and John with his background in education, have been vital to various communications we have initiated in this regard.

Jackpot!! (probably)

Today three teams surveyed three new wadis in the area of Taytum where a couple of local government officials kindly took Marcelo and I with stories of relatively recent sightings. Each looked promising in its own way and, inshalla, we have found signs of the Arabian leopard in two of them with good indications of excellent habitat in the third. Anne found a paw print, which is very likely that of the leopard in a barren-looking dry wadi while Marcello found scratch marks on a wall, which looked to have been made by a young leopard jumping inexpertly onto the ledge above. Needless to say, camera traps have been installed in all three locations. Watch this space...

18 February

As always with field sign, you can't be 100% sure, but Marcelo is quietly confident that we now have evidence of the diner (Arabian leopard) in the area (see www.facebook.com/pages/Biosphere-Expeditions/132594724471 > Wall for an explanation of the "diner" reference). We need to wait for the DNA analysis to come through, and this will take a while, but it's a great step forward.

Today we saw the team from the first slot off at the Salalah airport. I miss them already. That group of people made my job not just easy, but in fact a pleasure. If that is what I have to expect from teams in the future, then I'm a lucky man. To all of you from Slot One, it was a pleasure to meet you and work with you in this beautiful and challenging place. I hope you all take your kit of field research skills and your fantastic attitudes and lend them to other conservation projects, be it Biosphere Expeditions or elsewhere, in the future. The field needs people like you. Please stay in touch and rest assured that so will we. Thank you, one and all.

21 February

Team two is now settled in at base camp and has just completed the first day of training in the ways of the field researcher. It seems the Force is strong with these ones and I have no doubt that they will contribute greatly to Biosphere Expedition's and Oman's efforts to protect the Arabian leopard.

This afternoon I took half of the many drivers in this team on their 4x4 training session in the Land Rover (see the action on www.facebook.com/pages/Biosphere-Expeditions/132594724471) and, as expected, all were very impressed with the vehicle's capabilities. They all handled the machine with aplomb and with all but two of the team on the driving list, our problem will not be finding enough drivers, but rather finding enough driving to give them all a decent go at the wheel. Marcelo and I are both looking forward to continuing the work we started with the great folk from group one with this eager new team.

28 February

Despite reports of some unrest in Oman, our mountain location remains blissfully quiet. In fact, most of the locals are not even aware of the demonstrations that have happened elsewhere in Oman with the focal point in Sohar, about 1200 km north of here. Needless to say we'll keep our ear to the ground, but as it is now, there is no need to worry. I can't think of a safer place to be than the mountains of Dhofar.

Back to the work in hand, our third day of wadi surveys for the team of slot two was a forey into a previously unvisited area between the dry country of the base camp and the escarpment with its influence from the khareef monsoon. The two survey teams had very ...different experiences within a short distance of each other. One lot found almost nothing of note whilst, searching only 500 meters away, the others came back with a haul of predator scats and skeletal remains.

The day before yesterday, we conducted a number of interviews in the local community. First we had tea with a goat herder and his extended family. They told us a great deal about their relationship with the leopard and confirmed its existence in the area with convincing imitations of a leopard's grunting cough-like call. We also interviewed a very regal looking camel herder who repeated the goat herder's reports of stock loss to leopards and had his son milk a nearby camel for our immediate consumption. The hot frothy milk was excellent and mildly sweet tasting.

1 March

We are now in the camera retrieval phase of the expedition and we have captured a range of images of some interest. Today, camera 4 came in with a caracal trotting down the steps of a waterhole. We've seen a badger, wolves, hyenas, hyrax, and gazelles but as yet, no leopard. After a torturous day in a steep thorny wadi with Bjorn, Julia and Johnathon, Marcello found a large scat which he is pretty excited about. Excitement over excrement for Marcello is cause for hopeful optimism that the scat might just be that of the Arabian leopard.

We now have a box full of scat. I just hope the guys from Land Rover are as excited about us carting it back to civilisation in their beautiful rigs as we are.

The teams who have been on the regular community contact detail have interviewed many people, from goat herders to governors and have amassed an impressive dossier of locations and leads pertaining to stock attacks and sightings of the... Leopard. Most people we've interviewed are convinced that the leopard is resident in the locality with numerous credible accounts of recent contacts and convincing imitations of leopard calls. We have also had a number of candid admissions of a willingness to shoot the animal in an effort to protect livestock. The schools we have visited have expressed a great deal of interest in making our visits a regular annual event and we hope to take them up on their kind invitations.

Tomorrow we are going out to see the uncle of a school girl whose grandfather recently lost a number of goats to something which was in the habit of breaking the necks of its victims.

3 March

Unfortunately, the uncle was not able to take us to a leopard and in fact informed us that the goats were the victims of wolves. His niece had perhaps been a little excited about the possibility of helping these foreign strangers and added some imaginative details to her recollection of her grandfather's stock loss.

Today we broke the back of the big job of packing up the camp at the end of the 2011 expedition. With a bit of time to kill we headed out for a swim at the "local" waterhole. I brought the mask and fins that I have with me for the Honduras Expedition that I will head to after leaving Oman. I got down 11 meters and had further to go before hitting the bottom of the dark and freezing cold crevasse. Very eerie, but beautiful spot.

We will finish the packing tomorrow and head to Salalah to say farewell to the team. Thanks to all for a fantastic effort and some great times.