

Evidence for the persistence of Arabian Wolf (*Canis lupus pallipes*) in the Ibex Reserve, Saudi Arabia and its preferred prey species

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Abstract. Numbers of Arabian Wolf (*Canis lupus pallipes*) on the Arabian Peninsula are in decline and intact ecosystems in which large carnivores prey on larger mammals are virtually absent in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, many canids roaming in the Kingdom are hybrids between feral dogs and wolves. In this study we provide genetic evidence for the persistence of wolves in the Jebel Tuwaiq ecosystem (Ibex Reserve) in central Saudi Arabia and we provide information on the preferred prey species of wolves in this protected area.

Key words. Arabian wolf, Ibex Reserve, Saudi Arabia, prey species, hybridisation, feral dogs.

Introduction

The wolves of the Arabian Peninsula were formerly attributed to *Canis lupus arabs* Pocock, 1934 (NADER & BÜTTIKER 1980, GASPARETTI et al. 1985, NADER 1990, HARRISON & BATES 1991) but more recent publication consider these populations as synonymous with *Canis lupus pallipes* Sykes, 1831 described from Deccan in India (MECH & BOITANI 2004, WILSON & REEDER 2005). The Arabian Wolf on the Arabian Peninsula is in decline occupying approximately 75% of its former range, with an estimated total number of 500 to 600 animals on the peninsula (MECH & BOITANI 2004). Detailed numbers for Saudi Arabia are not available. Wolves are not protected in Saudi Arabia and are subject to heavy prosecution (MECH & BOITANI 2004, NCWCD 2007). The protection in the Kingdom is difficult since the species is considered the nemesis of Bedouins since time immemorial (GASPARETTI et al. 1985). Although not yet endangered the survival of wolves is a serious concern and its long-term survival may be only possible in large protected areas with good populations of wildlife (GASPARETTI et al. 1985).

Published reports on the occurrence of wolves in central Saudi Arabia date back to the year 1947 when HARRISON (1968) reported on an adult male collected near Buraida, north-west of Riyadh, today held in the British Museum of Natural History. In 1977 and 1978 two specimens were shot 30 km west of Wadi Hanifa in the Jebel Tuwaiq mountain ridge (NADER & BÜTTIKER 1980). Another specimen was reported one year later near the same site, followed by a thorough inspection of the area with the help of local Bedouins who assured that numerous animals are still in the district (NADER & BÜTTIKER 1980). In 1979 a wolf was reported killed from Wadi Birk, which represents the southern border of today's Ibex Reserve (VINCETT in NADER & BÜTTIKER 1980). The Ibex Reserve (23°30'N, 46°30'E) at Hawtat Bani Tamim, also situated in the in Jebel Tuwaiq Mountains of central Saudi Arabia was established in 1988 by the National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and