

THE HUNTING OF ENDANGERED MAMMALS IN IRAQ

Omar F. Al Sheikhly

Nature Iraq and University of Baghdad omar.fadhil@natureiraq.org



Fig 1. Harvesting goitered gazelle West of Iraq.



Fig 2. Wolf hunting in Rutba.

Introduction: The status and scope of the larger mammal species in Iraq is still very poorly understood. Many of the current descriptions and distributions are based on out of date information. As in many parts of the Middle East, hunting is considered to be the biggest threat facing the larger mammal species in Iraq. Many individuals and groups are taking advantage of the weak enforcement and implementation of the existing hunting regulations. The absence of definitive knowledge about the conservation status of many of the mammal species has led to an increasing decline amongst the ungulate and carnivore species in particular. The incentives leading to the persecution and extermination of these animals are many and varied and include financial through smuggling as well as traditional practices and beliefs. The following article is based on many interviews, observations, specimen examination and reports from Iraqi hunting associations between August 2009 and December 2011.

Results and Discussion: While many species are being targeted by hunters and smugglers, the following species are the main targets of local hunters, farmers and fishermen in Iraq.

Persian Leopard (*Panthera pardus*) IUCN Status: Near Threatened. Sometimes found on Zagros Mountain on the north eastern border with Iran (Hatt 1959), with old records from Rawa in the west and Wasit province in the east (Harrison 1968). Recent records suggest an adult male was killed in Mandili eastern Iraq in 2009 (Al-Sheihly, pers. comm.). In 1996 the Iraqi Natural History Museum was presented with a female and two cubs which were brought to be mounted by the Museum. These were reportedly killed by an Iraqi hunter in North Iraq (Al-Sheihly, pers. comm.). Details on the hunting of this species did not exist until one specimen was located, ready to be smuggled at one of the national traffic points on 22nd March 2011. The source of this specimen was unknown, but possibly from Northern Iraq.

Stripped Hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*) ICUN Status - Near Threatened: Found in the Western and Southern deserts of Iraq, few observations have been made in Central and Northern Iraq. The species is targeted whenever possible as it is traditionally believed to attack cattle herds. An adult male was shot by locals at Al Cidr Area East of Salah Adin province on 20th April 2011. Another male was reported by the head of the Iraqi hunting association on 17th December 2010 as been shot near Rutba in the far western desert.

Grey Wolf (*Canis lupus*) and the Arabian subspecies (*Canis lupus arabs*) ICUN Status - Critically Endangered: The status of the subspecies *arabs* is not certain. A probable occurrence in Iraq was described by Hatt (1959). According to Lawrence (1956) and Harrison (1968) both *C. l. pallipes* and *C. l. arabs* probably existed in Iraq. On 4th February 2010 after a prolonged chase about 30 km south of Rutba, west of Iraq a small sized wolf showing distinctive features and measurements was killed and examined. It was described as *C. l. arabs* confirming the occurrence of this subspecies in Iraq. Wolves are considered to be the most destructive canine to the sheep and cattle herds all over Iraq and is believed it can attack humans, so unfortunately these animals will be targeted wherever possible. Eighteen recent records of *Canis lupus* hunting were described.

Otters (*Lutra lutra*) and (*Lutrogale perspicillata*): The two species found in Iraq are the European otter (*Lutra*) ICUN Status - Near Threatened which is found mainly along suitable habitats of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. These areas overlap habitat of the smooth-coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*) IUCN Status – Vulnerable. *L. perspicillata* is mainly adapted to the dense reed habitat in the southern marshes of Iraq and is rarely seen. Both species are trapped by submerged cages, traps and nets mainly for their fur. The fur will be sold to smugglers along the eastern borders of Iraq. They use it as a waterproof sac, fill it with contraband inserted inside the gasoline tanks of the smuggling cars. The otter fur sac prevents the contraband from getting wet or damaged. Due to hunting and habitat destruction there has been a marked decline in both species population especially of the endemic race *L. p. maxwelli* with none seen since 1992. Two observations of dead *L. lutra* were made, an adult male which had been shot in Tarmiya north of Baghdad on 23rd April 2009 by local hunter was brought to the Iraqi Natural History Museum. The second, another male was killed on 4th May 2011 by electrocution at Samara Lake south east of Salahadin province in central Iraq.

Wild Goat (*Capra aegagrus*) ICUN Status - Vulnerable. Scattered populations exist in the Kurdistan region north of Iraq and very rare in Singar Mountain in Nenwa province (Harrison 1968). Most population's are affected by the habitat destruction and disturbance during the previous conflict in the area. According to the Kurdistan Regional Authorities, hunting of wild goat is forbidden since the 1990s. Despite this, some unsubstantiated reports of illegal hunting of wild goats have been received.

Wild Sheep (*Ovis orientalis*) ICUN Status - Near Threatened. The full status in Iraq is still uncertain. Isolated populations exists in the Kurdistan Region, with a specimen taken from western Sulaymaniya, northern Iraq (Harrison 1968). George (1969) has listed the Wild Sheep in the Iraqi fauna with no further details. However, no other observations were made until 12th August 2009 when we received a fresh adult male of *O. o. gemelini* killed at Hemreen foothills near Mandili on the eastern borders of Iraq. An adult female was captured near Badra Township in Wasit province east of Iraq on 24th September 2011. These new records shed light and help our understanding of the distribution of this species in Iraq.

Gazelle - Dorcas Gazelle (*Gazella dorcas*) and **Goitered Gazelle (*Gazella subgutturosa*)** both have an ICUN Status – Vulnerable. Goitered gazelle are found mainly in steppes, grasslands, arid lands, and foothills all over Iraq with a higher density in the west, south west and east of Iraq. Hunting is again the main threat to both of these species. They are consumed as a food source, or trapped to be kept as pets. 12 recent records describing hunting of gazelles (all were *G. subgutturosa*) in Iraq have been received.

Conclusion: Iraq is currently discussing becoming a signatory nation to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). However, more effort needs to be made to implement the wildlife hunting regulations which currently exist in order to preserve the endangered mammal species in Iraq. An alarming number of wild animals are still being hunted, killed and trapped by the local hunters. Many of these people do not understand the serious threat they are putting these species under. Of the nine species described above, all are IUCN listed species and need urgent protection by the Iraqi administration to assist their conservation in Iraq.

References

- George, P. V. 1969. Systematic list of Iraqi vertebrates - Aves. *Iraq Nat. Hist. Mus.* 26: 34-63.
- Harrison, D. L. 1964: *The Mammals of Arabia. Insectivora, Chiroptera, Primates.* Vol. I. Ernest Benn Ltd., Kent.
- Harrison, D. L. 1968. *Mammals of Arabia.* Vol. 2. *Carnivora. Artiodactyla Hydrcoidea.* Vol. II. Ernest Benn, Ltd. London.
- Hatt, R. T. 1959. *The mammals of Iraq.* Misc. Pub. Mus. Zool. Univ. Michigan No.106.pps.113.