

OPPORTUNISTIC WILDLIFE TRADE IN YEMEN

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In conservation circles, Yemen is notorious as one of the world's top two markets for rhino horn, and by some estimates the Yemeni trade in illegal horn for *jambiyyah* (traditional dagger) handles caused a 96% decline in East Africa's Black Rhino (*Diceros bicornis*) population between 1970 and 1992. Yemen is also the main source for CITES-protected Arabian Leopards (*Panthera pardus nimr*) and other endangered wildlife. Endemic species including Socotra's "Blue Baboon Spider" (*Monocentropus balfouri*) and the Yemen Veiled Chameleon (*Chamaeleo calyptratus*) are popular in the pet trade and are smuggled to Europe and North America where they command impressive prices. In addition to this lucrative international trade in wildlife and wildlife products, Yemen traffics a significant number of wild birds, mammals, and reptiles domestically. This trade is largely opportunistic as evidenced by the variety of wildlife that is offered for sale at roadsides and intersections. While there has been little, if any, formal study of this traffic, recent tallies of the animals that pass through the Nuqum animal suq in Sana'a show that thousands of animals of numerous species are captured and sold each year in Yemen.

When my student TK informed me that "...about 30 Golden-winged Grosbeaks..." (*Rhynchostruthus socotrana*) were being offered for sale at Nuqum I investigated their claim. Piqued by the fact that this species had recently been declared as Yemen's national bird, I asked them to take some pictures. The birds were in fact Arabian Golden Sparrows (*Passer euchlorus*) but this experience has caused TK to continue documenting the animals that pass through Nuqum with weekly lists and photographs. In the three months since their initial visit on March 16th of this year, they have documented 36 species of birds, 13 species of mammals, and 7 reptile species - not counting those which have been imported such as squirrels and parrots - passing through Nuqum.

The merchants who sell these animals, like the people who catch them, are simply trying to make a living in a weak economy. However, neither have much regard for the animals' welfare, and the manner in which these creatures are handled and kept, sometimes for weeks, is horrendous. The traders are ignorant of many of their animals' needs and not surprisingly, many die of starvation, dehydration, injuries sustained in capture and handling, and diseases contracted in the appalling circumstances in which they are housed.

Customers buy the animals for a variety of reasons. Yemen Linnets (*Carduelis yemenensis*), for example, are favoured as cage birds since they are the only Yemeni birds that sing in captivity. Others, such as Grey-headed Kingfishers (*Halcyon leucocephala*) have novelty value. Still others are used in traditional medicine - porcupine blood, for example, is believed by some to cure diabetes and is taken with juice. Many species including partridges, hyraxes, quails, and the various doves end up on buyers' dinner tables. Owls and hawks are considered charismatic and although the more valuable species such as Peregrines (*Falco peregrinus*) are not traded at Nuqum, at least 12 species of raptors have passed through the suq in the past three months. Some animals such as the baby baboons that frequently come up for sale are 'cute,' and would-be owners buy them without regard for the sad circumstances of their capture (i.e. the mother is usually



Fig1. The condition of this Barn Owl is typical of the animals sold at Nuqum animal suq.



Fig2. Wild caught Caracals are frequently for sale at the Nuqum animal suq.

shot by the captor) or the logistics of keeping them into adulthood. Finally, I suspect many animals are offered for sale simply because the hunter has managed to capture them. Two Coots (*Fulica atra*), for example, came up for sale during the week of April 16th and remained in the market unsold for the two months it took them to die. Three facts have surfaced as a result of TK's sleuthing: 1) Yemen's internal wildlife trade is extensive in both the number and variety of animals involved, 2) many animals suffer needlessly as a result of inhumane handling and care, and 3) the issues woven into this problem; ignorance, poverty, animal welfare, and sustainability are complex, and therefore solving the problem will also be complex. Other than TK's ongoing research, little is currently being done to stem this pernicious trade. Yemen's Minister for Water and the Environment, HE Abdulrahman al Eryani, states that enforcement is out of his ministry's hands and he advocates media exposure as a means of raising awareness. Save Yemen's Flora and Fauna (SYFF), a young and vigorous NGO, is keen to take the lead in an anti-trafficking campaign and is developing an action plan to stop the trade. Of course, the most important thread in a successful campaign will be finding alternative sources of income for the impoverished people who catch the animals and those who sell them. However, creating opportunities in a country where more than 40% of the rural population lives on less than \$1 per day and where there is rising unemployment won't be easy, yet it must be done if we are to slow the flow and preserve Yemen's unique biodiversity.

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Fig3. Porcupines are traded for food, medicine and ornamentation (TK).