

## **Qatar, June 13-14, 2022**

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I had a stopover in Qatar on my way home from Java. Thanks to a flight delay it was 12 rather than 2 hours, so I did some exploring and saw nine species of mammals.

Qatar lies on a very arid, mostly flat peninsula in the Persian Gulf (locally called Arabian Gulf). It has the highest per capita income in the world. Over 80% of the population live in Doha (the capital) and its suburbs. Highways are excellent; you can drive anywhere in the country in less than two hours. 4x4 recommended for off-road exploration (rentals are cheap). People are professional and friendly; everyone I talked with spoke English.

Most of the land is sparsely vegetated gravel desert, but there are sandy patches, particularly in the southeast. The environment is heavily impacted by oil/gas extraction, camel overgrazing, and catastrophic heatwaves. The best time to visit is in late February-early April, when the desert greens up a bit at the end of the so-called “rainy season”. In late April-early November it is very dry and hot; in summer it is usually above 40°C during the day.

About 18% of the country is protected in various [nature reserves](#). Officially you need an advance permit to enter them, but most are unfenced and nobody cares if you drive/walk around. Most reserves are marked neither on the ground nor in Google Maps.

I visited three nature reserves. Al Reem Biosphere Reserve (access from 25.63556, 51.07730 or 25.48803, 50.84714) is a huge chunk of coastal desert in the northwest, larger than all other reserves combined. It is unfenced and has **Arabian oryxes** (there are 16,000 in Qatar) and **Arabian sand gazelles** (very skittish), both reintroduced. At night there were **hares** (**Cape** or **Arabian**, depending on taxonomy), **Sundevall's jirds** and **pygmy gerbils**, plus a jerboa that could be either **lesser Egyptian** or **hammada jerboa** (it's unclear which species occur(s) in the region; I didn't see the animal very well and the habitat was intermediate). Khor al Adaid is an area of sand dunes surrounding a large shallow bay, accessible by a network of 4x4 tracks from 24.86276, 51.51344; it's said to be the best place for carnivores but I had little time there and saw only a **Cheesman's gerbil**. Al Dakhira (access from 25.76771, 51.53639) has mangroves and offshore islands; I was there during the day hoping for **dugongs** (Qatar has the largest population outside Australia) but saw only **red fox** tracks.

Other reserves include Al Sheehaniya (basically a safari park with a herd of **oryxes** just 45 km W of Doha), nearby Al Rafaa (hills covered with wildflowers after rains), Um Qarn and nearby Um al Amad (both with well-preserved vegetation, likely good for rodents), Al Masshabiya (with **oryxes** and **gazelles**), nearby Al Eraiq (with relatively dense vegetation), Um Tais (an island in the far north with breeding seabirds), and Irkaya Farm (a good birding spot). There are also a few very small reserves protecting isolated watering holes. The remote Halul Island has an introduced herd of about 60 **Arabian thars**.

Misfur (or Musfer) Sinkhole (25.17516, 51.21173) is a short cave with large entrance. It has the only known roost of **desert long-eared bat** in Qatar; the roost is not always visible (I saw only one roosting bat), but you can see the bats flying in and out. Mudhlem Sinkhole (25.12288, 51.22821) is longer, with a pool of water. It has a colony of **trident bat** (the most common species in Qatar and the only one recorded in the northern half of the country); **Kuhl's pipistrelle** (common in the southern half) has also been recorded but I didn't see or detect any. Other bats in Qatar are **Sind bat** and **naked-rumped tomb bat**, both known only from a handful of records. A recent [bat survey report](#) lists the coordinates of these and other roosts in the [supplementary file](#).

I saw two old roadkills: a **desert hedgehog** near Umm Bab and a **golden jackal** near Al Wakrah. Other mammals known to occur in Qatar are **sand cat**, **wildcat**, **Rüppell's fox**, **honey badger**, **Libyan jird**, plus three introduced murids in cities/fields. **Striped hyena** might be extinct. Cetaceans are poorly known.

Birding was rather boring, particularly away from the coast (it's said to be much better in other times of year). Pretty much all birds you see in and around human settlements are non-native. In Al Reem there were Socotra cormorants, a sooty falcon, lesser crested terns, Eurasian oystercatchers, crab plovers, and greater hoopoe larks; pharaoh eagle-owls reportedly breed there. In Khor al Adaid there were red-wattled lapwings, cream-colored coursers, and bar-tailed and desert larks; in winter there is a flamingo flock there. In Al Dakhira there were spur-winged lapwings, Sandwich terns and an osprey, plus a graceful prinia in a nearby field. Little owls were hanging around the entrance to Misfur Sinkhole; I also saw a southern grey shrike on a wire in that area. I didn't see any reptiles except for a few geckos, various lacertids and Arabian toad-headed agamas. The only amphibian in Qatar is the non-native African common toad, reportedly abundant in irrigated areas.