

Syria, Bahrain and Iraq, June 24-27, 2021

VLADIMIR DINETS

It so happened that I got friends living and/or working in three Middle Eastern countries that are often considered unsafe for travel. My friends had been inviting me to visit for years, but in 2021 there seemed to be a lull in armed conflicts, and I decided to cash my chips. I used charter flights run by Russian oil companies to briefly visit Syria, Iraq and Libya (the latter covered in a separate trip report), with a stopover in Bahrain. Due to security concerns, I couldn't bring a thermal scope, a camera, a big spotlight or binoculars, and my cell phone was later confiscated at a roadblock in Libya, so there will be no photos. I did bring a small bat detector and a headlamp. The weather was very hot (a thermal scope probably wouldn't have been very useful anyway); the skies were clear if hazy. The full moon was on June 24 but the moonlight didn't seem to make much difference: in Syria there was a lot of glare from the nearby city and in Iraq the sky was lit with gas flares from oil wells. Since neither country is currently on mammalwatchers' radar, I provide some background on local fauna and on potentially interesting sites that I didn't have a chance to visit.

I. Syria

Syria was once the gem of the Middle East. In early historic times it was famous for herds of elephants and various ungulates, plus numerous lions, tigers, leopards, cheetahs and bears. By the late 20th century large mammals were gone. Now, after many years of civil war, there is probably nothing larger than a jackal left, except maybe in the coastal part that didn't see much fighting. The recent history of the country is too depressing to discuss here; sufficient to say that at the time of writing most of Syria is under joint Russian-Iranian occupation, with a puppet government led by a sadistic psychopath; some parts are occupied by Turkey, while the US controls main oilfields but has betrayed its Kurdish allies and doesn't have much influence anymore. A third of the population is living abroad as refugees.

There are still some interesting mammals left. Undescribed species might be present in isolated mountain ranges such as Jabal al-Druze, and in black lava fields such as as-Safa (where the country's only known endemic reptile, the gecko *Hemidactylus lavadeserticus*, is found). **Tsolov's mouselike hamster** was described from the far south in 1991 and not seen since; the exact location is unknown but I suspect it's Yarmouk River Canyon. The mysterious **Katinka's shrew** has been recorded in owl pellets at Jabal Abdulaziz range in Syrian Kurdistan. **Golden hamster** was discovered in 1756, described in 1839, and not seen again until 1930, when a female with pups was captured in Aleppo (Halab in Arabic); her descendants now number in millions and are sold in pet shops all over the world. Forty more years passed with no records from the wild; then the hamster was rediscovered in 1971. It is very rare in a small area of Turkey but common in some years around Aleppo. In Syria it lives in cereal fields but in Turkey occurs in natural grasslands. I always assumed that I would someday go look for it in Turkey, but then got an unexpected opportunity to see it in Syria.

I have a friend (I'll call him Y.) I went to school with in the 1970s. When USSR fell apart he lost his day job and took up a career in wealth redistribution, eventually becoming a skilled unofficial debt collector. In appreciation of his work he was awarded a 10-year gig in Siberian logging industry, and upon completion started working in private security. For the last two years he's been working for a Russian oil company in Aleppo. In March he wrote me that 2021 was a great year for rodents in the area (the rest of Syria was under severe drought). I had a plane change in Aleppo on my way to Iraq, and Y. arranged for me to have a 10-hour visa-free stopover. He met me at the airport and we drove around looking for hamsters. Y. had a big searchlight but decided not to risk using it, so everything we saw was found with small headlamps. Walking around the moonlit fields with bombed-out towns all around us, shady characters scurrying along footpaths, and barn owls hissing in the ruins was a bit spooky, but we were waived through all checkpoints after showing Russian passports.

We started in fields south of Aleppo Airport, around 36.1686N 37.2086E, and immediately began seeing rodents, but all hamsters proved to be **grey hamsters**. There were also **house mice** and **Tristram's jirds**. After an hour of searching we drove to a much larger area of fields east of Hanano neighborhood (starting at 36.2290N 37.2152E) and spent a few hours there, seeing lots of rodents of the same three species plus a possible **Sundevall's jird** and a **Macedonian mouse** in an arid patch at 36.2395N 37.2265E. We saw a few possible **golden hamsters** but they always disappeared in burrows before we could get a good look; it was particularly frustrating because other rodents were rather tame, typical for the times of high density. Finally we found a beautiful **golden hamster** that didn't vanish instantly, admired it for at least 30 seconds, and I even managed to snap a photo with my cell phone. The only larger mammals were **feral cats** and **dogs**. On the way back to the airport we stopped at Al-Khani Cemetery (entrance at 36.2147N 37.2180E), a more arid area where we found a **Wagner's gerbil** but no hamsters. There were **Palestinian molerat** burrows along the edges of the cemetery. To the east is the military sector of the cemetery (36.21632N 37.2284E) where we saw one last **golden hamster** as dawn was breaking; I was particularly happy about this one because it was in a grassy patch that looked more like a natural habitat. The cemetery is less than an hour's walk from the airport. At first light we saw a **social vole** and a small bat flying over; it was too high for my bat detector but could be a **Kuhl's pipistrelle**. I had a couple more hours before my flight to Bahrain and we tried some morning birding, but didn't see anything interesting except for a few larks and wheatears.

If I had more time, Aleppo Citadel would be worth checking for bats (looks very promising from the air), while Sabkhat al-Jabbul, a salt lake about 15 km to the southeast, is a known birding site, particularly good for plovers.

Mammals list (near-endemic in **bold**)

1.	Golden hamster	<i>Mesocricetus auratus</i>	Hanano area, Al-Khani Cemetery (military part)
2.	Grey hamster	<i>Nothocricetulus migratorius migratorius</i>	Aleppo Airport area, Hanano area
3.	Social vole	<i>Microtus socialis goriensis</i>	Al-Khani Cemetery (military part)
4.	House mouse	<i>Mus musculus musculus</i>	Aleppo Airport area, Hanano area
5.	Macedonian mouse	<i>M. macedonicus</i>	Hanano area
6.	Wagner's gerbil	<i>Gerbillus dasyurus</i>	Al-Khani Cemetery
7.	Tristram's jird	<i>Meriones tristrami</i>	Aleppo Airport area, Hanano area
-	Sundevall's jird	<i>M. crassus</i>	Hanano area (ID uncertain)
-	Palestinian molerat	<i>Spalax cf. ehrenbergi</i>	Al-Khani Cemetery (mounds only)

Birds list

Hanano area: *Tyto alba* (heard only), *Otus scops*.

Al-Khani Cemetery area: *Sturnus vulgaris*, *Oenanthe hispanica*, *O. isabellina*, *O. lugens*, *Ammomanes deserti*, *Melanocorypha calandra*, *Calandrella brachydactyla*, *Petronia petronia*.

Aleppo Airport area: *Columba livia*, *Streptopelia senegalensis*, *Athene noctua*, *Passer domesticus*, *Fringilla coelebs*.

II. Bahrain

I had four hours in Bahrain before my flight to Iraq. Normally you need a visa to leave the airport, but if you have a long wait and a Russian passport you can get a one-day "shopping pass". Bahrain is a peaceful, hot (39°C during my visit), very arid archipelago connected to Saudi Arabia by a causeway; the northern part is seriously overdeveloped but the south (where I didn't have time to go) is mostly desert. Local mammals include **desert hedgehog**, **Sind bat**, a few **gerbils**, **Sundevall's jird**, reintroduced **Arabian oryx** and **Arabian sand gazelle**, and a bunch of non-native species such as **Etruscan shrew** and **Indian grey mongoose**.

I took a taxi to Busaiteen, an artificial peninsula west of the airport where it is reportedly possible to see **dugongs** and even snorkel with them. No such luck, but I saw a pod of **humpback dolphins** far offshore (from 26.2975N 50.5784E) and a **hare** in a clump of shrubs (26.2730N 50.5955E). Watch also for various terns, Socotra cormorant, crab plover, and the Bahrain subspecies of desert lark. I also found a golden grass skink and a glossy-bellied racer there.

The best place for **dugong** is said to be Hawar Islands near Qatar, accessible with organized tours. **Humpback** and **Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins** are often seen during boat crossings to the islands, and **finless porpoise** is possible.

Mammals list

1.	Indopacific humpback dolphin	<i>Sousa cf. chinensis plumbea</i>	Busaiteen
2.	Cape/Arabian hare	<i>Lepus cf. capensis arabicus/atallahi</i>	Busaiteen

Birds list

Busaiteen: *Alectoris chukar*, *A. philbyi* (?), *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis*, *Sterna bengalensis*, *S. bergii*, *S. albifrons*, *S. repressa*,

Dromas ardeola, *Streptopelia senegalensis*, *S. decaocto*, *Prinia gracilis*, *Ammomanes deserti*, *A. cinctura*, *Euodice malabarica*.
Airport area: *Oena capensis*, *Psittacula eupatria*, *Acridotheres tristis*, *Pycnonotus cafer*, *P. leucotis*, *Passer domesticus*.

III. Iraq

Iraq also was once rich in wildlife, but decades of brutal dictatorship, war and sectarian conflict have taken a heavy toll on the environment. The safest and easiest part to travel, the Iraqi Kurdistan in the north and northeast, is also the most verdant, scenic and wildlife-rich (it even has **leopards**, and reintroduced **Syrian brown bears** in the recently created Halgurd Sakran National Park), but it is better accessed from Turkey than from the rest of Iraq. The northwestern part of Iraq, called Al Jazeera ("the table"), and the area around Baghdad are totally screwed up ecologically. The western desert reportedly still has **Arabian sand gazelles**, **wolves** and **sand cats**, but is considered unsafe to travel away from highways. The main natural attraction of Iraq, the huge wetlands around the confluence of Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in the southeast, is recovering after Saddam Hussein's attempts to drain the marshes completely, and can be visited rather easily. It is the best part of Iraq to look for its endemic and near-endemic mammals (**Euphrates jerboa**, **Mesopotamian gerbil**, and **long-tailed bandicoot rat**), birds (Basra reed-warbler and Iraq babbler), and turtle (Euphrates softshell).

A few tourists and pilgrims visit Iraq for its archeological sites. Those are mostly of interest to people who are seriously into ancient history: the most impressive stuff has been either transported to European museums, looted, defaced by Saddam's botched restorations, or dynamited by ISIS. If you'd like to check out at least one ancient site, go to Great Ziggurat of Ur, said to look best at sunrise but good for wildlife at night (see below) and really impressive in moonlight.

You need an invitation or a letter of intent to get an Iraqi visa; I don't know if their consulate would consider mammalwatching a sufficient reason for a visit. I used my Russian passport to avoid having Iraqi stamps in my American one: they might cause you a lot of problems, so consider visiting Iraq just before your passport expires, or apply for a new one after the trip. Iraqi Kurdistan is more open: you can reportedly drive there from Turkey and get visa at the border.

The main dangers in Iraq are landmines and hostage-taking paramilitary gangs; you have to know the Arabic word for landmines (لغم أرضي “lughm ardy”), travel quickly, sleep in guarded compounds or in the car away from settlements and roads, and make sure nobody knows your plans. It’s best to self-drive because usually it’s the drivers who sell their passengers to hostage-takers. Roads are remarkably good; driving is fast and easy. Don’t approach guarded or military convoys and compounds, or you can be mistaken for a suicide bomber. Use insect repellent in deserts as well as in wetlands: there are lots of sandflies carrying various kinds of leishmaniasis including the dreaded kala-azar. Malaria has been eradicated, dengue is rare outside Basra, but mosquitoes in the marshes can bite you to death. Beware of heat stroke.

I talked to a few locals and found them remarkably West-friendly. Southern Iraq is almost 100% Shi’ite; the Shi’ites were an oppressed majority until the Second Gulf War handed them political power. They see the West not as an enemy, but as a clumsy, unreliable and sometimes backstabbing ally in their defense against the Sunnis, their existential threat.

The weather is usually comfortable in winter (when night freezes are common and snowfalls are possible in the north), but very hot in late spring, summer and early fall; in the south the heat is often combined with high humidity. My visit coincided with a heat wave (they are becoming increasingly frequent and severe); the temperature was 51°C during the day and 32°C at night, with ~100% humidity in the marshes (frequently dipping your t-shirt in the marsh helps a lot). The (somewhat) rainy season is November to May, peaking in December-January. The sandstorm season is March to May.

I was invited by my friend Michael Maikov to give a lecture about desert fieldwork safety to the employees of his company’s office in Nasiriya, and used the opportunity to look for wildlife in the area. I didn’t expect much biodiversity but ended up seeing 60+ species of birds and ~20 species of mammals (out of 70+ still occurring in the country); the best mammal was the endemic **long-tailed bandicoot rat**, likely never seen alive by a zoologist before. Winter rains had failed so desert rodents were scarce. Very few reptiles and amphibians were active, probably due to the extreme heat.

1. Hawizeh Marsh

The largest and best-preserved marsh, it is a part of the newly created Mesopotamian Marshes National Park. It is on the Iranian border, so carry as many official-looking papers as possible. A good access point is 31.7036N 47.7461E; I chose it because a **smooth-coated otter** had been camera-trapped there. After launching an inflatable boat we explored the marsh in western direction, away from the border. We saw at least 20 rodents, mostly in non-flooded reedbeds along the periphery; the ones seen well were mostly **brown rats** and **short-tailed bandicoot rats**, but one seen at 31.6927N 47.7052E was certainly a **long-tailed bandicoot rat**: we spotted it swimming across a channel, turned on the lights as it was climbing out of the water, and clearly saw the long tail and the distinctive orange-and-white rump pattern (see Kryštufek *et al.* 2020). We also glimpsed a small, short-tailed rodent in the reeds that looked like a (**Persian?**) **water vole**, but couldn’t be 100% sure. There were lots of **long-fingered myotis** flying very low over water and **Botta’s serotines** higher up, plus some **Rüppell’s bats**, also flying low. We saw a **boar**, but it was deep in the reeds and we could see only a dark shape; also heard some **golden jackals** but never saw them. At dawn an otter swam across open water but disappeared before we could get close; it was very dark, typical for the local subspecies of **smooth-coated otter** (**Eurasian otter** also occurs in Iraq, but mostly in large reservoirs up north). In winter the marsh is reportedly filled with millions of waterbirds, and even in the hot months the birdlife is spectacular: we saw lots of Basra reed-warblers, Iraq and Afghan babblers (in trees along the edge), and marbled teals; other goodies included hypocolius (also in trees) and African darter, plus the local subspecies of black francolin, little grebe, western swamphen, and gracile prinia. Watch for giant Euphrates softshell turtles in muddy shallows; the only other herps were marsh frogs.

2. Al Mazlaq

A village in clay desert on the road to Hawizeh Marsh, destroyed and abandoned during the Iran-Iraq War. We stopped there because a **wildcat** crossed the road (at 31.7511N, 47.7382E). Never saw the cat again but found a **Balochistan gerbil** (with grey tail tip), and saw a **Euphrates jerboa** (grayish, long-eared) and a **hare** crossing the road nearby. Good birding in the morning: look for white-tailed lapwings and various larks, but beware of landmines.

3. Nasiriyah

A city on half-dry Euphrates River where the office I was visiting is located, surrounded by farmland. **Kuhl’s pipistrelles** and **Sind bats** were flying around the perimeter fence floodlights of the office compound. We saw a **lesser Indian mongoose** and a **hare** on the NE outskirts of the city. Numerous burrows in dry fields were likely of **Mesopotamian** or **Indian gerbils**. Birds included Dead Sea sparrows and hooded crows of the local subspecies (a likely split); we also found a javelin sand boa on a road. Michael had seen a few **long-eared hedgehogs**, **red foxes** and **golden jackals** in 14 months.

4. Ur

The ruins of this Sumerian city (entrance at 30.9696N 46.1151E) are atop a *tell* (man-made mound) with some jird burrows along the edges; these could be either **Sundevall’s** or **Libyan jirds**. **Naked-rumped tomb bats** and **Botta’s serotines** were flying above the ziggurat, and we were excited to spot a **Mesopotamian gerbil** (the only gerbil in the area completely lacking elongated hairs at the tail tip) and a pallid scops-owl near the entrance gate.

5. Al Busayyah

A military base in the western desert, obliterated in a tank battle during the First Gulf War and inhabited by a friendly Bedouin family at the time of our visit. There are only a few nomad families left in Iraqi deserts as these are rendered uninhabitable by the climate change. The base is accessible by a road (deflate your tires) through mostly sandy desert with many washes and gravel patches. The road starts at 30.7477N 46.3538E (after getting off the highway, turn left onto the road that at first goes parallel to it) and kind of ends at the base ruins (30.1127N 46.1088E). We drove up and down once (took about 3 hours) and got two **hares** (or maybe the same one twice), a few **Cheesman's gerbils** (with white tail tips), two **Arabian jerboas** (yellowish, short-eared), **Kuhl's pipistrelles** (picked on the bat detector at the ruins), a Egyptian nightjar, a pharaoh eagle owl (also at the ruins), a few geckos, and two snakes: a Field's horned viper and a Morgan's desert cobra. Finally, we spotted a roadkill **red fox** on the way to Basra for my early morning flight to Cairo.

Mammals list (endemics and near-endemics in bold)

1.	Naked-rumped tomb bat	<i>Taphozous nudiventris magnus</i>	Ur
2.	Kuhl's pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus kuhli ikhwanius</i>	Al Busayyah (detector only), Nasiriyah
3.	Rüppell's bat	<i>Vansonia rueppellii</i>	Hawizeh Marsh
4.	Sind bat	<i>Rhyneptesicus nasutus pellucens</i>	Nasiriyah
5.	Botta's serotine	<i>Eptesicus bottae hingstoni</i>	Hawizeh Marsh, Ur
6.	Long-fingered myotis	<i>Myotis capaccini bureschi</i>	Hawizeh Marsh
7.	Smooth-coated otter	<i>Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli</i>	Hawizeh Marsh
-	Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes pusilla</i>	Basra-Nasiriya highway (roadkill)
-	Golden jackal	<i>Canis aureus aureus</i>	Hawizeh Marsh (heard only)
8.	Lesser Indian mongoose	<i>Herpestes auripunctatus pallipes</i>	Nasiriyah
9.	Wildcat	<i>Felis silvestris iraki</i>	Al Mazlaq
10.	Boar	<i>Sus scrofa lybicus</i>	Hawizeh Marsh
-	(Persian?) water vole	<i>Arvicola persica?</i>	Hawizeh Marsh (ID uncertain)
11.	Short-tailed bandicoot rat	<i>Nesokia indica</i>	Hawizeh Marsh
12.	Long-tailed bandicoot rat	<i>N. bunnii</i>	Hawizeh Marsh
13.	Brown rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus norvegicus</i>	Hawizeh Marsh
14.	Cheesman's gerbil	<i>Gerbillus cheesmani cheesmani</i>	Al Busayyah road
15.	Mesopotamian gerbil	<i>G. mesopotamiae</i>	Ur
16.	Balochistan gerbil	<i>G. nanus nanus</i>	Al Mazlaq
-	Jird sp.	<i>Meriones crassus</i> or <i>M. libycus</i>	Ur (burrows only)
17.	Euphrates jerboa	<i>Scarturus euphraticus euphraticus</i>	Al Mazlaq
18.	Arabian jerboa	<i>Jaculus loftusi</i>	Al Busayyah road
19.	Whatever hare*	<i>Lepus cf. capensis arabicus</i> <i>L. cf. capensis arabicus/connori</i>	Al Busayyah road Al Mazlaq, Nasiriyah

*The taxonomy of Middle Eastern hares is remarkably murky; in Iraq the ones east of the Euphrates (*connori*) seem smaller than *arabicus* west of it, and might even prove to be *L. tolai* eventually. The ones in Bahrain (see above) are sometimes said to be an endemic subspecies *atallahi* (possibly shared with Qatar), but it is seldom recognized.

Birds list (some common species omitted; near-endemics in bold)

Al Qurnah: *Athene noctua*, *Dendrocytes medius*, *Lanius meridionalis*, *Riparia riparia*, *Acrocephalus pallidus*.

Hawizeh Marsh: *Francolinus francolinus*, *Anas angustirostris*, *Tadorna tadorna*, *T. ferruginea*, *Circus aeruginosus*, *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, *Anhinga melanogaster/rufa*, *Ardea purpurea*, *Platalea leucorodia*, *Threskiornis aethiopicus*, *Porphyrio porphyrio*, *Recurvirostra avocetta*, *Larus genei*, *Sterna caspia*, *Halcyon smirnsensis*, *Alcedo atthis*, *Hypocolius ampelinus*, *Cisticola juncidis*, *Prinia gracilis*, *Ac. stentoreus*, **Ac. griseldis**, **Argya altirostris**, *A. huttoni*, *Emberiza schoeniclus*.

Al Mazlaq: *Vanellus indicus*, *V. leucurus*, *Glareola pratincola*, *Merops persicus*, *Coracias bengalensis*, *Corvus ruficollis*, *Alaemon alaudipes*, *Eremopterix nigripes*, *Calandrella rufescens*, *Ammomanes deserti*

Nasiriyah: *Columba palumbus*, *Otus scops*, *Tyto alba*, *M. orientalis*, *Ceryle rudis*, *Apus pallidus*, *Corvus cornix*, *Hirundo fuligula*, *Melanocorypha calandra*, *Gymnoris xanthocollis*, *Passer moabiticus*.

Ur: *V. indicus*, *O. brucei*.

Al Busayyah road: *Bubo ascalaphus*, *Caprimulgus aegyptius*.

Basra-Nasiriya highway: *Streptopelia decaocto*, *Pycnonotus leucotis*, *Galerida cristata*.

Useful Arabic words

bat خفاش khafaash	gerbil جربيل jarbil	rat فأر far
dolphin دولفين dualifin	hedgehog قنفذ qanafadh	shrew زبابة zubaba
dugong الأطوم al'utum	jerboa الجربوع aljarbue	wild cat قط qat bry
fox الثعلب althaelab	jird جيرد jayard	wolf ذئب dhiib
gazelle غزال ghazal	oryx مارية حيوان maryt hayawan	zoologist عالم الحيوان ealim-alhayawan
jackal ابن أوى abn awaa	otter قندس qandus	