

ARABIAN WOLVES PERSIST IN THE TUWAYQ MOUNTAINS OF SAUDI ARABIA

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Introduction: The Arabian wolf (*Canis lupus pallipes*) on the Arabian Peninsula is in decline occupying approximately 75% of its former range, with an estimated total number of 500 and 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 (Cunningham et al. 2009). Their protection in the Kingdom is difficult since the species is considered the nemesis of Bedouins since time immemorial. 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). More recently Cunningham & Wronski (2010a, b) reported that Arabian wolves still occur over vast parts of Saudi Arabia, probably in larger numbers than previously assumed.



Fig. 1. Arabian wolf captured near Janadriyah north of Riyadh in central Saudi Arabia.

was reported killed from Wadi Birk, which represents the southern border of today's Ibx Reserve (Fig 1) (Nader & Büttiker 1980). The Ibx Reserve (23°30'N, 46°30'E), also situated in the Jibal Tuwayq Mountains of central Saudi Arabia (Fig 2) was established in 1988 by the Saudi Wildlife authority (SWA) to protect the last Nubian ibex (*Capra nubiana*) in central Saudi Arabia.

Until 2005 no further confirmed sighting of wolves, wolf tracks or wolf scats were reported in this part of the Jibal Tuwayq. In 2005, ecologists of King Khalid Wildlife Research Centre (KKWRC) postulated that wolves still occurred in the Ibx Reserve, particularly in Wadi Ghaba, in which the Nubian ibex density is notably higher than in other parts of the reserve. Since 2008, larger canid tracks were routinely observed in Wadi Ghaba and the number of Nubian ibex killed by large canids increased, suggesting the continued presence of wolves in the Ibx Reserve. Wronski & Macasero (2008) reported on the increase of large canid (wolf kills) in Wadi Ghaba and provided genetic evidence of Arabian wolves in the Ibx Reserve.

First image of an Arabian wolf from Jibal Tuwayq: Here, we present for the first time an image taken from a wild Arabian wolf encountered in the Ibx Reserve, Jibal Tuwayq in central Saudi Arabia (Fig. 3). The picture shows an adult animal photographed by a camera trap placed at N23 26 15.3 E46 27 35.7 on 18 November 2011. The camera trap (Trail Master TM 35-1) was placed on the plateau of Jibal Tuwayq at a path frequently used by wolves. The image was taken in the early evening at 8:56 pm. Arabian wolves in the Ibx Reserve are reported to move in small packs of two to four animals (Al Haza, pers. obs.). It is further reported that at least two packs inhabit the Ibx Reserve, one in the area where the camera trap photo was taken, i.e. Wadi Hullayyah/Wadi Ghaba, another one further north in the area of the Wadi Aylan system (Al Haza, pers. obs.).

Fig. 3. The first image ever taken from an Arabian wolf (*Canis lupus pallipes*) in the Ibx Reserve. (© Qais S. Al Haza).



Fig. 2. The Arabian Peninsula and the location of the Ibx Reserve in the Jibal Tuwayq in central Saudi Arabia.

In the central parts of Saudi Arabia, namely the Jibal Tuwayq ecosystem, wolves are the only remaining large predators. The Ibx Reserve represents an intact part of the Jibal Tuwayq ecosystem, in which Arabian wolves can still prey on their natural prey species, such as mountain gazelle (*Gazella gazella*) and Nubian ibex (*Capra nubiana*). It is of great importance for the Jibal Tuwayq ecosystem in general and for the Ibx Reserve in particular that this large predator species continues to survive. Every effort should be made to raise public awareness of the importance of large predators for the functioning of an intact ecosystem.

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