

# Operation Oryx— the success continues

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In the past six months there have been two notable developments in the follow-up of Operation Oryx, whose history was summarised in *Oryx* in 1982 (Vol. XVI, pages 406–410). A first release was made in Jordan, in October 1983 and a second one in Oman in April 1984. The Royal Jordanian Conservation Society should be most warmly congratulated for having been able to release, with substantial help from both the World Wildlife Fund and the Oman Government, no fewer than 31 oryx into the Shaumari Reserve near Azraq, which although fenced extends to 22 sq km. This herd derives from four pairs originating from Operation Oryx, sent from San Diego Wild Animal Park in California in 1978, and three more animals presented by HH the Prince of Qatar. Their release into the extensive natural habitat at Shaumari by HM King Hussein crowns a notable effort and provides further justification of the foresight of the ffPS in undertaking Operation Oryx 22 years ago. It is unlikely that Arabian oryx can be released into the open desert in Jordan in the foreseeable future, since the available areas are too close both to populated areas in Jordan and to the Saudi Arabian frontier, which they could not be prevented from crossing and where they could not be safeguarded.

Oman is more fortunate in having vast desert areas, which it can protect and which were within the past 15 years or so actually inhabited by the white oryx, as Arabs prefer to call it. The release of Oman's second herd of eight is almost as exciting as the release of its original herd of 10 in January 1982, for it takes place against the background of the triumphant success of that first release. The first herd now numbers 13 and is completely established as a wild herd, quite independent of

any human influences apart from very necessary protective surveillance.

The Oman story began with the determination of HM the Sultan to restore to his country an animal which had been exterminated there by poachers from other parts of the Arabian peninsula. Incidentally these poachers, as recounted in *Oryx* Vol. XII, pp. 347–50, not only exterminated the white oryx in Oman, but apparently also made it extinct in the wild, as no news has been received since 1972 of any being seen. The grapevine among the bedouin is such that if any had survived it would have become known. The Sultan's plan, masterminded by his conservation adviser, Ralph Daly, was to set up a base camp in the Jiddat al Harassis, a part of central Oman close to the place where the last animals were killed in 1972, and to involve the Harassis tribe in the project from the start. The result is a most impressive settlement at Yalooni, where most of the 42 bedouin now employed in the project are based, together with Mark Stanley Price, the Oxford zoologist who directs it, and his wife.

Since March 1980 eight male and nine female oryx have been received from the San Diego Wild Animal Park (which has played a vital part in the whole operation), all originating from Operation Oryx, and kept in the first place in a large fenced enclosure at Yalooni, where six calves have been born. On 31 January 1982 10 oryx were released, four of them radio-collared, so that their movements could be traced by their constant bedouin guards. These radio-collars have enabled Mark Stanley Price to produce a series of most impressive maps showing that the oryx have at one time or another occupied almost all parts of

*Oryx* Vol 18 No 3

the desert within 50 km of Yalooni, extending at times as far as 75 km. They have successfully located areas of green grazing that developed after localised rainfall, and managed to survive the three hottest months of 1983 without drinking any water. Ability to do these things is of the essence of their ability to survive in the wild. The total area they live in, and which they can be assumed to know intimately, is now some 1500 sq km, while more territory has been explored and found wanting. On one occasion they travelled 60 km in one night, thought better of it, and returned the whole distance the following night. Without radio-collaring, nobody would ever have believed that such a thing could happen. The herd now numbers 13, eight births in the wild having been balanced by three calf deaths and two animals which left the herd and returned to Yalooni.

The second herd of 10/11 was released on 4 April, and there will be great interest in how it relates to the first herd. The Jiddat al Harassis is

extensive enough to accommodate at least two herds, and radio-collaring will doubtless produce another fascinating story where chance or a heavy shower bring the two herds within sight or smell of each other.

The ffPS should take great satisfaction in the success of the Oman reintroduction, which is the first time an animal which has actually become extinct in the wild has been successfully reintroduced. The breeding rate of Arabian oryx in captivity is such, especially since fortunately there is no great demand for these animals in the zoo world, that there is likely to be no difficulty in obtaining stock for fresh introductions elsewhere in Arabia. We may hope that within the next 10–15 years several herds will have been re-established, for instance in the vastnesses of the Rub al Khali and other parts of Saudi Arabia. Oman and Jordan have led the way. There are five other Arab countries which could follow, once the Middle East crisis is resolved.



### Hairy-nosed wombat

*Lasiorninus krefftii* is one of Australia's two species of hairy-nosed wombats and survives only in a 15.5 sq-km area in east-central Queensland, part of which has been declared a national park and fenced to exclude cattle. It grows to a length of 1.3 m, is nocturnal, eats grass, constructs complex tunnel systems and was previously persecuted by European settlers.



### Thylacine

The thylacine (or Tasmanian wolf) *Thylacinus cynocephalus* is generally regarded as extinct. Reported possible sightings still occur, although none has been confirmed. It once occurred in mainland Australia but was possibly replaced there by the dingo *Canis familiaris* and the remnant population in Tasmania was exterminated after government bounties were made available for its destruction. The last known animal died in Hobart Zoo in 1934.