



Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.

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JORDAN

Date - August 2021

Duration - 12 Days

Destinations

Amman - Shaumari Wildlife Reserve - Azraq Wetland Reserve - The Dead Sea - Mujib Biosphere Reserve - Fifa Nature Reserve - Dana Biosphere Reserve - Petra - Dibe'en Forest Reserve - Ajloun Forest Reserve

Trip Overview

Having visited the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, to give the country its full title, briefly in 2019, I was due to return the following year to explore several wildlife reserves that I had not been able to include on that original short tour. Unfortunately, and I have no idea how many more times I am going to have to write this, that trip was cancelled as a result of the global coronavirus pandemic and it did not look as if I would be able to return to Jordan until 2022 at the earliest. That would all change when the UK Government began categorising countries in terms of safe travel or otherwise and decided that Uganda, where I was due to visit and despite an incredibly low number of cases, was a high risk country and would be added to the dreaded 'Red List', which basically meant that James and I would have to spend eleven days in quarantine at an airport hotel upon our return to the UK, at considerable expense. As much as I love my son and value the precious time we are able to spend together, the thought of the two of us sharing a tiny hotel room for so long was simply too horrific to seriously contemplate, for both of us to be fair, and we therefore had to look for another country to travel to from Uganda that would firstly let us in, and from where we could eventually return without having to quarantine.



After days of research and a great deal of debate, we eventually chose Jordan, largely because it fulfilled each of those essential criteria and also as a result of my cancelled 2020 tour, which I could now simply adapt for a slightly shorter duration. Of course, with our government bungling their way through a series of increasingly bizarre and desperate covid policies, there was always the chance that Jordan would also be added to the red list and I did begin to see myself as an Odysseus type figure, endlessly trying to return to his beloved Ithaca following the fall of Troy. Certainly the government guidelines were considerably longer than the 'Iliad', and far more difficult to understand, and instead of just telling people that if you want to travel or socialise in restaurants and bars, you have to be vaccinated, we had reached the ludicrous stage whereby all four home nations, so basically England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, were making up their own rules and quarantine procedures. With the politicians of each country shamelessly attempting to make political capital out of what remained a global emergency, their citizens were crossing borders just to go for a drink or to avoid certain travel restrictions. At times I was reminded of 1920s America during prohibition, when thousands of Americans would cross the border into Tijuana and other Mexican towns to drink legally. In any case, our government's somewhat incoherent quarantine strategy had at least provided me with an unexpected opportunity to return to Jordan, albeit for a slightly shorter period than I had originally intended. The cancelled itinerary had been planned over fifteen nights, but now with barely twelve available, we did not land in Amman until almost midnight, we would have to forego most of the historic sites that I had hoped to visit, including the Crusader castles at Ajloun and Kerak, as well as the impressive Roman ruins at Jerash. This is always the case when anything goes wrong, as obviously I need to ensure that the wildlife elements of my tours are not compromised, which usually means cancelling everything else if necessary. Whilst this is always a shame, it is particularly so in Jordan, as for me there are four main reasons for visiting this remarkable country, its enthralling history, its sophisticated ancient culture, its spectacular desert landscapes and its struggling wildlife. You could place the first three in any order in terms of importance, but, however you ranked those attractions, wildlife would always come last. Not for me of course, but wildlife in Jordan and across much of Arabia has received scandalously little protection over the years and it remains incredibly difficult to observe animals here. My time at each reserve would still be impacted, but not to any significant degree and as James had not been with me on my previous visit, I took some time on our first full day to briefly introduce him to Shaumari Wildlife Reserve and Azraq Wetland Reserve, both of which are within an easy drive of



Amman. Shaumari is the flagship Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature reserve and is home to reintroduced populations of Arabian oryx, Arabian sand gazelle and Asiatic wild ass, as well as other naturally occurring wild animals. I will not go into a great deal of detail regarding either Shaumari or Azraq on this occasion, as the information that appears in my 2019 trip report all still applies. However, I will mention that the wild ass, either introduced or reintroduced here, depending on your view, is not the original full species for the region, as the Syrian wild ass subspecies *equus hemionus hemippus* that once roamed these lands is sadly extinct and the animals released to replace them are the Persian wild ass subspecies *equus hemionus onager*. Whilst we saw the Arabian oryx and Asiatic wild ass, both of which are relatively easy to find, we missed the Arabian sand gazelle on our one short drive within what is a tiny reserve. We spent even less time at Azraq, but I wanted James to at least see this reserve, as Azraq is a hugely important oasis, in what is an exceptionally arid country and had almost been lost in the 1990s, when it was reduced to just 0.04% of its original size. Most of the water was pumped to urban communities or used for agriculture, often illegally, and although the reserve does now receive a regular supply of water, only around 10% of the original wetland habitat has been restored. On my last visit I had seen a wolf here in the early morning, but as our hour or so at Azraq was spent in the searing afternoon heat, there was not much chance of a wolf and we were probably lucky to even see the water buffalo that have been released on the reserve. Again you can read further details of both reserves in my 2019 trip report and also regarding the RSCN, who manage all of the protected areas in Jordan and of which I am a member. To call the RSCN a significant wildlife organisation would be very much understating the issue, as they are the only major conservation society in Jordan and one of the most important in the region, which, it has to be said, has an appalling record in terms of wildlife protection. Indeed, the RSCN was created in 1966 in an attempt to repair some of the damage caused by decades of neglect and the unregulated hunting that had devastated wildlife populations not only in Jordan, but across the entire Arab world. They currently manage or assist with twelve reserves and I would be able to explore five on this trip, having visited three previously. I had initially intended to include a sixth in the north of the country, but time would not permit on this abbreviated version and of the

other three, two are new and one is a birding site in Aqaba. I will perhaps get an opportunity to investigate these at a later date, but given the access issues experienced throughout this expedition and how difficult it was to even look for animals in large protected areas, I am not convinced that visiting the periphery of additional reserves is likely to be a great deal more productive. Of course in time you would probably see everything, but that is not particularly promising in terms of prospective mammal tours and during my two recent visits, which totalled just over three weeks, I was able to observe just seventeen of the 50 or so mammals that occur in Jordan, including a couple of introduced species. This was not totally unexpected given the extremely challenging conditions, vast, desperately arid areas with relatively low diversity and extremely low densities are never going to produce the number of encounters that you might anticipate elsewhere, but the fact remains that five of these sightings took place in what you could at best describe as semi-wild conditions and I had simply not realised that there was so little public access to most of the country's major protected areas.



Even as an RSCN member, with assistance from some of the local guides, it was impossible to access the areas that we needed to and most of the time we were searching in fragmented or disturbed areas around the edge of each reserve, especially at night. I have absolutely no issue with national parks or even entire regions being closed to visitors, including both locals and tourists, if the habitat and resident wildlife is in turn being protected, but all too often you find that no paying guests means no animals, as hunters and poachers are not concerned with rules or boundaries and will take advantage of an empty park to continue their illegal activities unhindered. Having spoken to a number of officials and rangers, including many at the RSCN, this is certainly the case in Jordan, as populations have really only increased significantly in heavily protected reserves, so principally Shaumari, and elsewhere many species still appear to be struggling. Of course, given the very fact that our access was so limited, this was difficult to determine for ourselves, but we did encounter serious issues at our final destination, Ajloun Forest Reserve, where you can actually access the majority of the reserve, but really only to see how poorly it is being maintained. Meanwhile, we started at Mujib Biosphere Reserve, which is situated on the Dead Sea and features the type of breath-taking scenery for which Jordan is quite rightly renowned. At over 420 metres below sea level, the Dead Sea is the lowest point on our planet, but this is a mountainous region and the heart of the reserve is the dramatic Wadi Mujib, a deep canyon carved out over millennia by the river that flows down into the dead sea and that



we would later be hiking through. The entire reserve is visually staggering, although I could make that comment about much of the country to be fair, and the steep slopes protect, among others, a small population of Nubian ibex, which are extinct across much of their range and exist at Mujib largely as a result of an RSCN reintroduction programme. Given its rather unlikely inception, I did not have any specific mammal targets for this tour, but I have spent a lot of my time over the years searching for these magnificent creatures, of which there are several distinct species across Africa and Eurasia. All have been highly persecuted and the Nubian variety is probably most easily viewed on the other side of the Dead Sea in Israel, where they are routinely observed at a number of sites, often at close quarters. That was not likely to be the case at Mujib and I had expected a lot of hiking and scanning over the next few days, not that this would be any hardship within such a remarkable landscape. As it was, I spotted a female almost at the beginning of our first proper hike and after checking the surrounding area for a few minutes, we were eventually able to observe two adult females and two young. We spent over an hour with this small group, as I still anticipated that ibex would be hard to find



elsewhere and indeed, we would see just one more individual animal in three full days at Mujib, which James spotted the next evening when we drove down off the mountain. Of the three major reserves that we spent most of our time at, so Mujib, Dana and Ajloun, we received the most assistance here at Mujib, with two very friendly and enthusiastic local RSCN guides taking us on a succession of morning hikes and night drives. They even put some bones out to attract foxes one evening, not that finding red foxes was a particular problem, and whilst we really enjoyed our time with them, the real issue was that they very rarely accessed the reserve beyond a certain limited area and consequently had no real idea where to begin to look for the animals they knew occurred here, but had never seen. Their job, as opposed to actively patrolling the reserve, was to make sure that people were not getting in and as such, none of the mountain trails had been maintained. Even the battered old 4x4 vehicle they had at their disposal struggled to cope with the sheer volume and size of the fallen boulders that littered the neglected tracks and although we did manage to drive down to the canyon floor on one occasion, our spotlights were bouncing around so much that it was more or less impossible to search. Even then, the water at the bottom was too deep for us to explore any further on foot and apart from several curious red foxes, which, as is so often the case, were the most commonly observed animals throughout the tour, the only other mammals encountered were a couple of cape hares. I did see what I believed was probably a blanford's fox peering down over a steep canyon wall, but again we were in the vehicle and by the time the spotlight had stopped bouncing, the no doubt befuddled animal had departed. The most frustrating aspect of our stay at Mujib was that we were not allowed to access the hiking trails at night, as I suspect that our results would have been very different if we could have explored the reserve quietly at night for several hours, instead of maybe an hour each evening in a deafening vehicle on the worst road this side of Madagascar. That said, at least we were getting some assistance and for everyone else the situation must be practically impossible, as there are only four public hiking trails throughout the entire 212 km² reserve and three of these have been closed. The remaining accessible trail is a canyoning experience, so a combination of hiking, swimming and rock climbing in the shade of the resplendent Mujib gorge, which was a great deal of fun, but obviously completely useless for finding wildlife. The situation was even worse at Fifa Nature Reserve, a very small protected area situated at the southern end of the Dead Sea, which we devoted half a day and an evening to. The reserve has clearly not been created with visitors in mind and is surrounded by human settlements. As such, it is difficult to locate and after waiting for the local RSCN representative to find someone to eventually show us around, our guided walk lasted barely half an hour, with no opportunity to explore further on our own. We were also driven around the area at night, but it is more community land than a strictly protected reserve and apart from the usual red foxes, bless them, the only nondomestic animals were two Nubian nightjars. I had hoped that what was becoming a fairly dismal situation might improve somewhat at Dana Biosphere Reserve, which, at 320 km², is the largest official reserve in Jordan. We had four nights here at two different locations, just to give ourselves the best opportunity to succeed, and I knew that Dana maintained an extensive network of hiking trails, which would also improve our chances. Unfortunately, you are not allowed to access these at night and apart from two brief nocturnal drives with RSCN guides aside, which did finally take place within the heart of the reserve and were far more productive as a result, we spent most of our time at night searching areas on the edge of the reserve in our own vehicle. We did enjoy some success in this fashion, particularly within a small fragmented patch of land that I thought must be a purely public space given how many people visited at night to cook and listen to music, but was actually part of the main protected area. For all our travails, Dana is another ravishingly beautiful reserve and if you are failing to see animals, you are at least failing against a stupendous

backdrop that most people would be happy to simply spend time admiring. I am the same of course and I try to remember this when a tour is not going well, as I have always been able to accept that animals can be difficult to find and that you are not always going to be successful. My only real issue is not being able to explore an area adequately and this remained a constant source of frustration on this expedition. For all the good that I at least hope they are doing, the RSCN have made it more or less impossible for normal Jordanians to enjoy much of their own wildlife and yet the ibex are still being poached here at Dana and their numbers remain pitifully low. As much the same can be said of almost every vulnerable species in the country, something is clearly not working and certainly the larger reserves are not receiving the level of protection required, despite the widespread restrictions that we encountered on a daily basis. Whilst this is second nature in any case, we made sure that we were hiking the mountain trails at first light, as local herders are allowed to drive their goats to water inside the reserve and as soon as you hear the distant first bells of the day, usually by 9am, you know that the goats are coming and there is not going to be a great deal more to see. This was repeated on a daily basis and



eventually, after one hike too many had been disturbed by literally hundreds of goats, I decided to cut our losses and took James to nearby Petra, as he had never been to this historic and almost mythical ancient city. To be entirely fair, it is so hot in the afternoon that you would be extremely lucky to find anything other than a lizard, so I knew that we did not have a great deal to lose and had been hoping that we would have the opportunity to stand in awe at Petra together. For those who would like further details, I covered this UNESCO cultural World Heritage Site in considerable depth after my previous visit in 2019 and instead of just repeating myself here, I would suggest that you refer to that report in direct relation to this second tour, not only regarding the extraordinarily sophisticated Nabataean civilisation that created Petra, but also in terms of the wildlife sightings. Although I saw less previously, I was not at all disappointed, as that initial foray had been largely planned as a wilderness adventure that only included two small reserves, with the rest of the trip devoted to Petra and Wadi Rum, one of my favourite destinations on the planet. This time I was visiting the largest protected regions in the country and have to admit that I travelled with higher expectations. These were at least partially realised at Dana and our long days in the field and steep demanding hikes were rewarded with more success here than everywhere else combined. In fact, the seven mammals observed at Dana were the most at any single location in Jordan over both trips by a full three species and the highlight was undoubtedly the striped hyena that we surprised walking along a dirt track, having finally been allowed to access the main part of the reserve at night in a vehicle. Although the hyena promptly loped off in customary fashion, we had an excellent view and it was a case of proving exactly what could be achieved with just a little effort. Not that we were able to convince our local guides, who all insisted how incredibly lucky we had been and that they never see such rare animals, which was also the case when I spotted a wolf at Azraq on my previous trip. However, the fact remains that I found that wolf on only our second morning excursion and this hyena had been seen on our first real spotlighting drive within the park. We would have unquestionably been more successful with a little genuine assistance from the RSCN, but there is just no will to help or to even find these rare animals for themselves and it is perhaps no coincidence that our guides did not contribute a single sighting during our entire time with any of them, which is quite remarkable when you consider that these are trained rangers, who often live within the reserves and are supposed to know these animals. Instead, either myself or James spotted everything and at Dana this included another female Nubian ibex with two young and a rock hyrax at distance, whilst scanning for the ibex. Our red foxes did not let us down either and in addition to another cape hare, mammals six and seven at Dana were golden jackal, an individual and then a pair, and a solitary Egyptian jerboa,



all of which were encountered beyond the main section of the park. Our final destination was going to hopefully be a little easier, as we were permitted to explore Ajloun Forest Reserve on our own at night, although only on foot. We also had a few promising targets, including the reintroduced roe deer that Ajloun is known for and also the caucasian or Persian squirrel, which is rare in the region, but apparently not uncommon at this reserve. One of the few tiny woodland areas in the country, only around 1% of Jordan is classified as forest, Ajloun is a hilly reserve situated in the highlands north of Amman and wild boar, Indian crested porcupine and southern white-breasted hedgehog can all be seen here as well, although I am not sure how regularly. We spent three days looking, but before we reached Ajloun, we stopped off at Dibe'en Forest Reserve, another woodland area, but at 8.5 km², even smaller than the 13 km² of Ajloun. The Persian squirrel also occurs at Dibe'en, but we had no luck during the three hours we searched and were not allowed to enter the fenced reserve that protects a small population of introduced fallow deer, perhaps because they do not want anyone to notice that these animals are the European fallow deer species *dama dama* and not the native Persian fallow deer *dama mesopotamica*, which is extinct in Jordan? In fact, the Persian species is extinct across much of its former range and now only occurs in Iran and Israel, where it was reintroduced in 1976. I am hoping to visit Israel again within the next twelve months and this is one of the animals that I will be specifically searching for. At Dibe'en we were denied the opportunity to photograph the European variety for whatever reason and eventually spotted a few by scouring the perimeter of the reserve. After taking a couple of furtive shots through the fence, we moved on to Ajloun to begin the more serious task of trying to find the reintroduced roe deer, which may or may not have been native to Jordan. Certainly it occurred in neighbouring Israel and Lebanon at one stage and apparently there is a single fossil record from Neolithic times in Jordan. In any case, a great deal of effort and expense has gone into conserving a basically widespread European species here in the Middle East and a captive breeding programme was established in 1988 in order to reintroduce the animal at Ajloun. Unfortunately, and entirely unbeknown to me when I arranged our visit, all of the roe deer released here, and any that were subsequently born in the wild, have been killed by hunters and there has not been a single sighting for more than five years or indeed any evidence, in the form of scat or footprints, that this species continues to exist in Jordan. Although my RSCN contact was far more helpful here at Ajloun, there is only so helpful you can be when your star species has been wiped out and it is difficult to understand the thinking behind this particular conservation initiative. When you consider the number of species either lost or struggling in the region, and just how little habitat is actually suitable for this type of animal, the roe deer seems a strange choice to try to bring back, but once you have made that decision, and dedicated so many resources to a breeding programme, why would you then make so little effort to protect the animals you release? Ajloun is not patrolled and although it is fenced, large sections of the fence have not been maintained and it is a simple matter for anyone to walk in. Indeed, when we were spotlighting one evening, we came across a few dwellings and were approached by an armed local herdsman, who had seen our lights and wanted to know what we were doing. As most Jordanians are, he was incredibly friendly and invited us to join him for tea, but the point is, we encountered someone with a gun without ever actually exiting the reserve, so basically the roe deer appear just to have been left to take their chances, with fairly predictable consequences. Obviously, that these vulnerable creatures have been slaughtered within a protected reserve is far more disturbing than the fact that we would not now be able to see them, but it was still not the best start and on our return from a first night drive outside the park, we passed a dead white-breasted hedgehog, killed on a ten kph stretch of road, within 200 metres of the reserve reception. I still find it astonishing that drivers can be quite so thoughtless within actual wildlife sanctuaries, but at least this indicated a healthy hedgehog population and we also discovered plenty of evidence that at least a few squirrels were thriving here, given the large number of pine cones that had been eaten and discarded. Excluding the poor doomed roe deer, we could have almost rescued the trip with just these two animals, such are the narrow margins between a relatively successful tour and one that does not quite work. As it was, we would see neither, despite devoting an inordinate amount of time purely to the squirrel and even returning to Dibe'en to try



again there. We also probably spent too much time in a hide that had been placed in front of an artificial waterhole, despite the fact that wild boar and porcupine have been known to use this water source. The problem is, the hide has been placed far too close to the water and is completely open, so more or less anything with a larger brain than my dog will be able to smell, hear or even see anyone within. Animals are more likely to be seen on the walk to the hide than from inside and the only mammals encountered within the actual reserve were several wagner's gerbils on a night walk, although we almost certainly heard a hedgehog snuffling through the leaf litter, but it went to ground almost instantly and without any further noise, we could not locate it. We fared slightly better beyond Ajloun, with a couple of jackal sightings and an African wild cat, which was spotted pacing around the perimeter of the reserve. As with wild cats in so many locations, it was impossible to say how genetically pure this animal was, but it certainly had all of the characteristics of the wild variety and was definitely not simply a feral domestic cat. It was perhaps not the most spectacular way to



finish our tour, but at least we had something diverting to show for our effort at Ajloun and to be entirely fair, I think that we probably ran out of steam a little towards the end. This may have been partly as a result of the difficulties faced at each reserve, but we had also been away for 42 days straight and most of those days had involved long hours in the field. We usually keep going pretty well and whilst this trip was no exception, in that we searched to the last hour, our enthusiasm wavered noticeably towards the end and it reached the stage whereby we were not really expecting to see anything. Having discussed seeing them with one of my RSCN

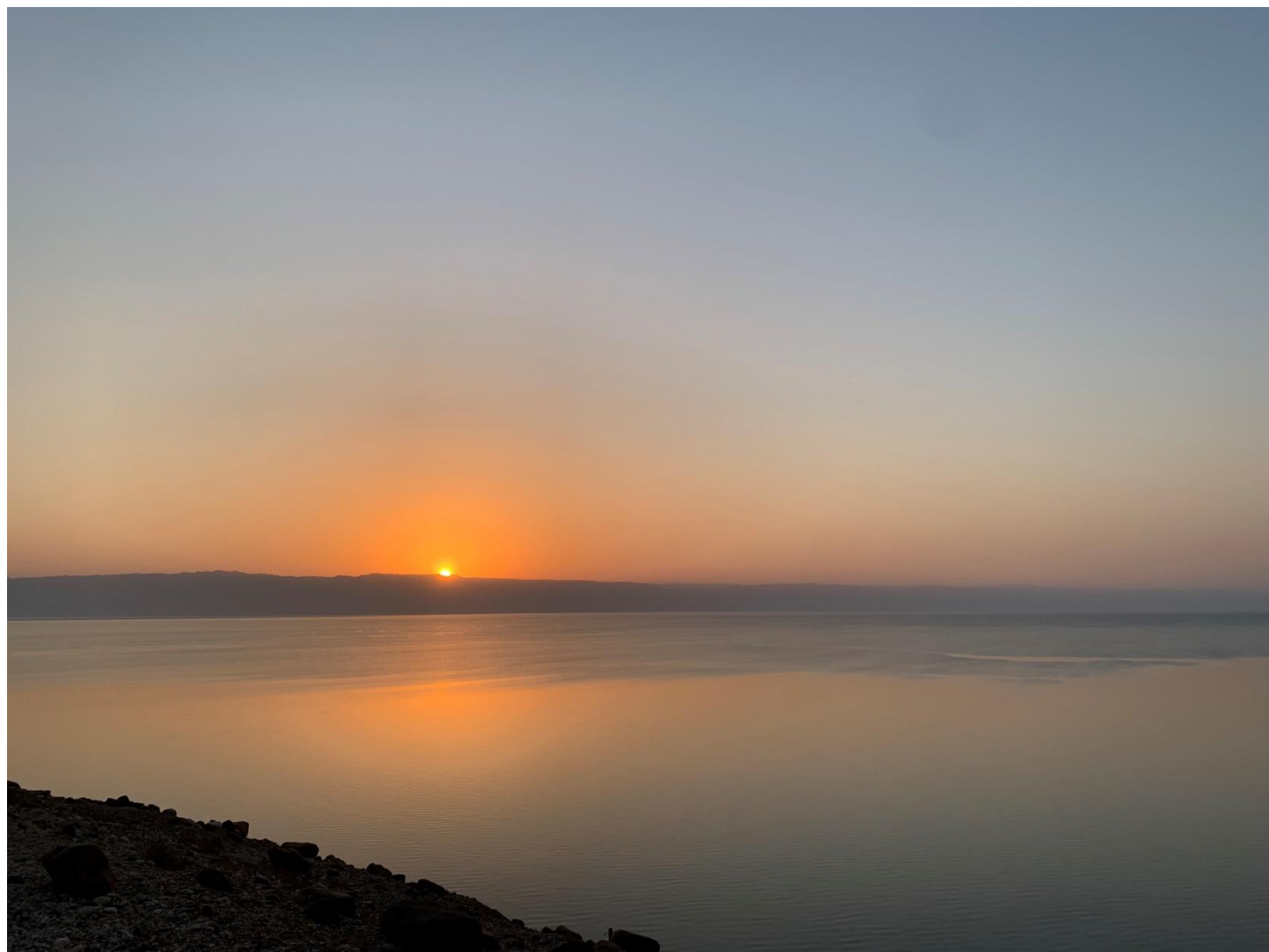


contacts when I was planning the original itinerary, it was hard to hear that actually the roe deer were wiped out years ago and as much as I had hoped to run wildlife tours in Jordan, I cannot see how at this stage, not given the current restrictions and obvious conservation issues. The country itself is another matter entirely, as Jordanians are among the friendliest people in the region and you could visit for the wonderful hospitality alone, as well as the history, the culture, the views, the mountains, the deserts, the castles, Petra, Wadi Rum, the Red Sea, the Dead Sea and did I mention the landscapes? Visit this intoxicating vibrant country for all of these reasons and maybe find some remarkable animals as well, but perhaps do not visit Jordan for the wildlife alone. With four planned trips cancelled as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, as well as others in development, I was not to travel again in 2021 and finished the year with an eclectic mix of destinations, from Wales and England in Europe, to Rwanda and Uganda in East Africa and finally Jordan in the Middle East. My highlights in Jordan were sadly limited to the Nubian ibex we tracked down at Mujib and the striped hyena we surprised at Dana and it is not too often that I can say a tour of my own country was far more successful than one I had arranged abroad. That was the case in these mixed up times and whilst the daytime views of a hazel dormouse and western polecat were as exhilarating as they were unexpected, it is impossible to look beyond Wally the walrus as the ultimate star of that trip. To see a walrus in my own country was a magical experience and I thought would certainly be the highlight of the year. That it ultimately was not, signifies just how exceptional my most memorable moment was and how deeply it touched me. Given that I had initially

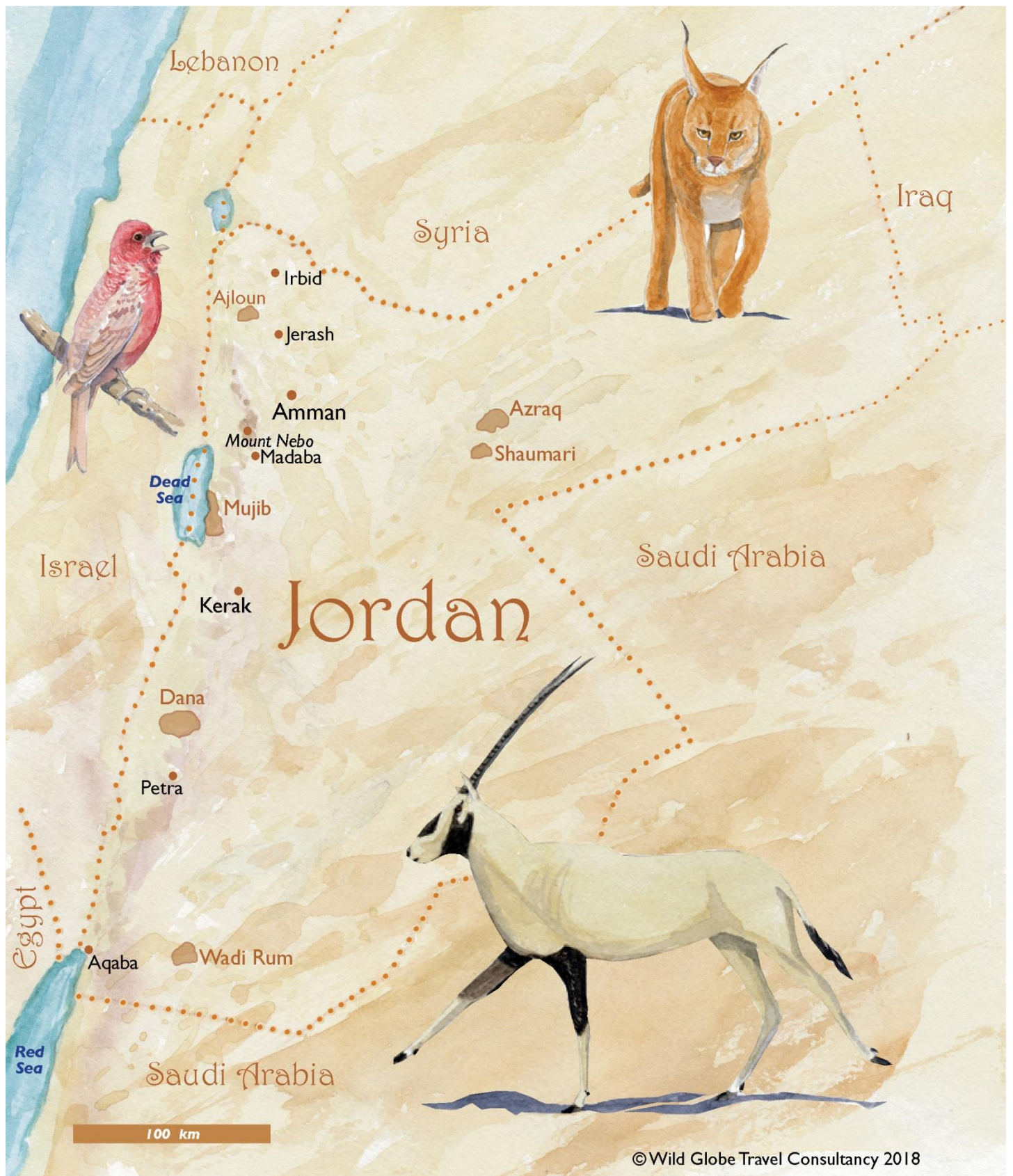


planned my Rwanda and Uganda tour around the three mountain gorilla national parks, it was perhaps always likely that my highlight in East Africa was going to involve a gorilla. Whilst this did turn out to be the case, despite numerous other exceptional encounters, it was actually a very low intensity and peaceful moment that had such a profound effect on me, with an adult female gorilla, carrying her young on her back, waiting patiently for me to move my leg before she walked past, simply to avoid treading on me. The entire episode lasted barely 40 seconds, but it was one of those momentous occasions that never leave you and remind you why exactly you do what you do.

No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	African Wild Cat	<i>Felis lybica</i>	One juvenile just beyond Ajloun.
2	Golden Jackal	<i>Canis aureus</i>	An individual and a pair at Dana, an individual and three together at Ajloun.
3	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Observed at every reserve except Dibeen, which we did not visit at night.
4	Striped Hyena	<i>Hyaena hyaena</i>	One on the road and then running at Dana.
5	Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>	A small captive population at Dibeen.
6	Arabian Oryx	<i>Oryx leucoryx</i>	Routinely observed at Shaumari.
7	Nubian Ibex	<i>Capra nubiana</i>	Two sightings at Mujib and one at Dana.
8	Asiatic Wild Ass	<i>Equus hemionus</i>	One small group at Shaumari.
9	Water Buffalo	<i>Bubalus bubalis</i>	A single animal at Azraq.
10	Rock Hyrax	<i>Procavia capensis</i>	One at distance at Dana.
11	Cape Hare	<i>Lepus capensis</i>	Two individual animals at Mujib and one at Dana.
12	Lesser Egyptian Jerboa	<i>Jaculus jaculus</i>	One at the side of the road at Dana.
13	Wagner’s Gerbil	<i>Gerbillus dasyurus</i>	Several individuals at night at Ajloun.







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