



Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.

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CHAD

Date - February 2022

Duration - 34 Days

Destinations

N'Djamena - Zakouma National Park - Ennedi Natural and Cultural Reserve - Faya Largeau - Bembeche - Ounianga Kebir - Ounianga Serir - Demi - Mourdi - Bichagara - Niola Doa - Fada - Guelta d'Archei - Terkei Kisimi - Guelta de Bachikélé - Kalait - Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Wildlife Reserve - Moussoro

Trip Overview - Zakouma National Park

Having had this tour cancelled two years in a row, initially as a result of a logistical issue and then due to the dreaded coronavirus pandemic, I would finally make it to Zakouma National Park in February 2022, having wanted to visit this reserve for far longer than those two frustrating years. Unfortunately, my poor luck in the region had not entirely changed, as I was meant to travel directly from Chad to Epulu in the DRC, primarily to search for the almost mythical Okapi, and that section of the tour was cancelled when a new director took over at the Okapi Wildlife Reserve and decided that he would not now accept visitors. At the time I was bitterly disappointed, not to mention fairly annoyed given the extremely late nature of his decision, which I was informed of just days before I flew, but as it was, the five weeks that I spent in Chad were among the best I have experienced anywhere in the world and it would be difficult to even begin to conceive a more productive tour. My success at Zakouma in terms of sightings was nothing less than staggering, but that was only part of a remarkable picture and what followed as I explored the utterly enthralling Ennedi Plateau and



Ouadi Rimé, a ground breaking reserve managed by the outstanding Sahara Conservation Fund, was far beyond even my expectations and must rank as one of the greatest wildlife tours I have either organised or been involved with. In all I would spend two weeks at Zakouma, slightly longer at Ennedi and almost four full days at Ouadi Rimé, or the Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Wildlife Reserve, to give this magnificent and incredibly significant sanctuary its full title. I was already aware that Zakouma was a very special reserve, as I have friends who have visited previously, and I had similarly been advised that the Ennedi Plateau was like no other place on earth, which I can certainly attest to. However, I was still not entirely prepared for just how dramatic the region is and I was particularly heartened by the conservation efforts taking place at Ouadi Rimé, which had a highly profound effect on me. I would like to remain involved to at least some degree and to look at ways in which low impact tourism can be used to help fund the extraordinary work taking place there. I will elaborate further later in this report, but my first stop was Zakouma National Park, which is administered by African Parks, a non-profit conservation organisation that manages several African reserves, including Ennedi Natural and Cultural Reserve. I have visited several African Park properties in recent times and they do tend to try to attract what are known as ‘top-end’ clients, with luxury lodges and inflated prices to match. That is not the case at Zakouma, where the accommodation is fairly basic and a stay is at least affordable, if not exactly cheap. The park itself is situated on the southern edge of the Sahel, a semi-arid transitional zone that stretches across the entire continent between the vast desert area of the Sahara to the north and the tropical Sudanian savannah to the south. As such, Zakouma is home to an almost unique collection of species, most of which disappear as soon as you venture north towards the more arid Ennedi region, situated deep within the Sahel. In combination these two destinations have the potential to produce a spectacular and contrasting array of wildlife, from the desert specialists that you might hope to see on a Saharan expedition, so sand cat, African wolf and various foxes for example, to the iconic animals that most tourists expect to encounter on a typical safari, including elephant, lion and buffalo. This was always the attraction for me and is partly why it took me so long to visit the area, as I was determined to devote sufficient time to both of these ecozones and the vastly divergent habitat and wildlife of each. Equally, I needed to visit Zakouma after the rains, as I have seen film of the area during the wet season and basically the entire park is underwater, which is why the lodge and main living quarters are raised a couple of metres above ground level. Indeed, the contrast between the two seasons is so extreme, you would not recognise the park during the rains and all of the temporary structures have to be constructed, and the roads re-graded, for each tourist season, which begin at the end of November and continue until roughly mid May, depending on when the first deluges arrive. I would have actually preferred to visit even later than my arrival date of the 28th of February, when the reserve would have been far drier, with large herds concentrating around the



shrinking water sources, followed of course by the inevitable predators. Unfortunately my travel dates were determined by the doomed DRC extension and even by the time I departed in mid March, the water levels in the park were higher than I had expected. That said, and the rainy season aside of course, when the animals disappear and you can only traverse the reserve by boat, I do not believe there can be a bad time to visit this incredible park and I would urge anyone interested in wildlife to try to get to Zakouma at least once, it really is that special. Whilst I have always enjoyed watching and photographing them, I am not a birder by any means, but the sheer variety and volume of the birdlife here is quite extraordinary and I have never seen several species in such numbers. Towards the end of the day, flocks of red-billed quelea converge in their millions, literally blocking out the sky above Rigueik Pan, renowned for its huge concentrations of wildlife, and it is not unusual to photograph a giraffe or a pride of lions adorned against a breathtaking backdrop of thousands of black crowned cranes, spur-winged geese, white-faced whistling ducks and a legion of other



fabulous waterbirds. Almost four hundred different bird species have been recorded at Zakouma and you could easily see between 150 to 200 of those without making a great deal of effort. Just out of interest, as I never record individual bird sightings and have no life list of either birds or mammals, I made a rough count of around 80 varieties in a single day and was barely trying. As I will expand upon, although the park is equally famous for its impressive herds of elephant and buffalos, as well as a superb collection of bovids, it really comes into its own at night, when it is not only possible, but likely, that you will encounter an outstanding variety of predators, many of which can be difficult to observe elsewhere. Serval, wild cat, large-spotted genet, honey badger, African civet, white-tailed mongoose, side-striped jackal and spotted hyena are all more or less nocturnal certainties, provided you are prepared to devote at least a reasonable amount of time to the cause, and there is also every likelihood that you will stray upon caracal, striped hyena, pale fox and African wolf, again given sufficient time and effort. Leopard and common genet are currently difficult, although certainly possible, and of the non-carnivorous nocturnal species, northern lesser galago are guaranteed and African savannah hare more or less so. Crested porcupine are harder, I saw my first on my eighth night drive and chancing upon ground pangolin, armadillo or four-toed hedgehog, is always exactly that, a complete matter of chance. Just to illustrate the sheer quality of the night drives, and this is picking one at random and not simply the most successful, in one evening I recorded four servals, one wild cat, two honey badgers, nine



civets, fourteen large-spotted genets, five white-tailed mongoose, one spotted hyena, six galagos, two pale foxes, one side-striped jackal, five lions and one crested porcupine, not to mention a barn owl and many of the usual suspects commonly observed during the day. Simply phenomenal and when the dazzling array of birds and mammals are not catching the eye, massive west African crocodiles and Nile monitor lizards vie for your attention, as well as equally impressive rock pythons, which I was informed appear in outlandish number just after the rains. I was to see only one during the dry season of my visit, although other groups did find more, and that one encounter almost ended very badly, as I spotted the head of a perhaps four-metre long python just on the edge of a low concrete



bridge we were driving across. I repeatedly screamed at my guide to stop the vehicle and when I jumped out to check that the snake was okay, his head was touching the front tyre and one more revolution would have crushed it. To say that I was relieved was something of an understatement and ultimately I had to pick up its huge tail and encourage it to slither away to safety, which it achieved remarkably quickly given its not insignificant girth. I was actually surprised that my guide had not seen it in the first place, but he was a fairly strange individual and is famous at our camp for doing things exactly as he wants, rather than as his guests want or need. Considering that he had been doing the job for years, he was probably the worst driver I have ever known in terms of positioning the vehicle for his clients to take photographs and he instead always stopped where he had a great view of an animal, never mind his passengers. We were not helped by the language issue, as he spoke absolutely no English and I quickly realised just how poor my French now is, not that it was particularly strong in the first place. Having said that, he made no attempt at all to bridge our communication void and thought that saying something in French often enough would somehow magically transform his words into English. When that clearly did not work, he would promptly give up and just drive off. Needless to say, this did not always go down entirely well with me, but all of the locals looked up to him as the best guide in the park and I decided that it was more important to have a good and hardworking guide, than a particularly friendly one. Not that he was unpleasant per se, just that he only wants to do things his own way and is not overly interested, initially at least, in any advice or even collaborating with his guests. Indeed, I was told that he has refused all offers of formal training, both in terms of wildlife or how to deal with tourists, despite clear gaps in his knowledge regarding the former and an almost dismissive view of the latter. Things did improve as soon as he realised that I knew what I was doing and during our two weeks together, I did come to more or less admire his, let us say, independent and resolute outlook, which of course I recognise in myself to some degree. In any case, none of this appeared to be a significant issue in



terms of sightings, as 48 major mammal species occur at Zakouma, excluding bats and most rodents, and over the course of the next two weeks, I would encounter 43 of them, many on multiple occasions. I am not aware of anyone to have experienced this level of success here previously, which makes sense given the length of my stay, and it will probably surprise most people, certainly when you consider how easy these sumptuous predators can be to observe elsewhere, that of the five mammals to elude me, a leopard was the most noteworthy. Indeed, when you go on to read what else I encountered, missing a leopard probably appears unthinkable, but they can be extremely difficult to see at Zakouma and none were spotted ten days prior to my arrival. Similarly, there were no observations by other groups during my stay and when I last checked, as I knew several people visiting after me, there had not been a single leopard sighting for more than six weeks. Of the remaining four annoyingly elusive mammals, common genets were clearly less common than I would have liked, armadillo and pangolin are always a case of good fortune and much the same can be said of the four-toed hedgehog, which occurs across some of the busiest tourist routes in Africa, but is very rarely seen. Other people will of course have their own definition of what exactly counts to them as a major mammal, but in addition to the 48 that I knew had been recorded here and would consciously search for, two other species were also thought to be a possibility, African wild dog and marsh mongoose. Wild dog do not actually make their home within the park, probably as a result of the high predator numbers, and although they have been observed moving through it, I was informed that the last such occasion was in 2017. That is not to say they have not entered the reserve since, just that they have not been seen. There is also an area beyond the park where you can search for them, but sightings are apparently very rare and I did not attempt to look for them on this occasion. The marsh mongoose situation is slightly different, as this species has never been recorded on any official surveys at Zakouma, including several camera trap projects, but has apparently been spotted by at least two individuals. On range and habitat, there is no real reason why this nocturnal carnivore would not occur here, but as I will discuss below, it is also possible that they have been misidentified. In terms of the animals actually observed, as this first section of my tour involved just one destination, I decided that instead of writing a standard report, which would normally be compiled on a place by place basis, I would change the format somewhat and describe a little about each species and how they were encountered, beginning with the carnivores:

1. Lion (*Panthera leo*)

Lions are common at Zakouma and we encountered multiple individuals, pairs and prides, most of which featured sub adults and young cubs. None of even the most impressive males have the pronounced shaggy manes that you see in cooler regions and associate with these apex predators. The largest pride observed had I think eighteen members, it is difficult to be entirely certain when adults often go off to find shade on their own, particularly the males, and most of the activity involved either playful cubs or adults gorging themselves on several animals killed during my stay, including a buffalo brought down on one of the main waterside tracks. This ill-fated buffalo would in death go on to provide probably the best example of how obstinate my guide could be, as we were initially only seeing single spotted hyenas and almost no jackals and I suggested on more than one occasion that it would probably make sense to



try the buffalo carcass at night. He was clearly reluctant to do so, but, as we gradually watched the poor buffalo diminish, I eventually insisted and sure enough, within minutes of our arrival one evening, we were treated to the spectacle of female lions leaving the remains in order to chase away hyenas, not to mention the side-striped jackal hovering for an easy meal. It was the only major predator interaction of the trip and we missed the vast majority of it entirely due to the fact that my guide preferred to do things his own way, rather than accept or even consider guidance. As I mentioned previously, things did improve as he realised that I was as experienced as him and ultimately he would use the spotlight to locate eyeshine and then rely entirely on me to identify it with binoculars. Given that he was also driving, it was probably the most efficient system and by the end of my stay, we were working really well together. I also quickly realised that we shared a dislike of collared animals, as he barely stopped whenever he saw one and sadly several lions were collared, ostensibly to research where exactly they disappear during the rains, when the park is largely underwater and they have to abandon their territory in search of higher land and prey.

2. Cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*)

The cheetahs at Zakouma are the rare northeast Africa subspecies *acinonyx jubatus soemmerringi* and they are notoriously difficult to see. There had been no sightings for the entire season before I arrived, which had already been in progress for more than three months, but on just my third afternoon, I spent half an hour or so watching two. This was one of the sightings that convinced me to stay with my guide despite our initial communication difficulties, as it was the type of spot that guides build their reputations on and I still have no idea how he saw one of the two cheetahs lying on its side in the shade of a distant tree. We had actually spent a very hot afternoon trying to find a vast herd of elephants drinking along the river, which sounds easy enough, but you have to cover a lot of possible sites and we found the exact location just too late, with the last few elephants disappearing up the bank and into the bush. We were therefore heading back to camp reasonably quickly, when suddenly we stopped and my guide asked me to check under a tree maybe 40 metres away with my binoculars, as he very rarely used his own. Even knowing roughly where the tree was, it took me about 30 seconds to locate the first cheetah and even if he had perhaps spotted a distinctive tail flick, which is often how these elegant hunters reveal themselves, he did so as the driver of a vehicle travelling at around 40 kph and from a distance where I needed to use binoculars to confirm what the actual species was. It was a spectacular sighting by any standards and I quickly picked up the second animal, which proved to be far more nervous and had sheltered in thicker cover. Everyone back at camp was delighted that the first cheetahs of the year had finally been seen and four days later I was watching another three, which this time I spotted. I would love to say that my sighting rivalled the previous one, but this was just one of those standard spots that I would always hope to make with my guide driving, particularly as it was on my side of the vehicle. At first glance I actually thought that it was a leopard, possibly because I had been informed that one cheetah sighting at Zakouma was spectacular enough and that a second would be something akin to a miracle, but I quickly recognised the distinctive frame of a cheetah and within a few minutes we had located another two. Again we



spent around half an hour watching and photographing the three adults, two of which we got fairly close to, as my guide called in our specific location for the other guests, which had also been the case during the first encounter. However, despite knowing their exact locations, which were in entirely different sections of the park, no one else saw any of these five animals and a month after I left, my two cheetah encounters remained the only sightings to date.

3. Caracal (*Caracal caracal*)

Excluding the elusive African golden cat, which I have never seen, caracal has been my nemesis in Africa to some degree, as I have encountered relatively few over the years, certainly given how widespread they are and how long I have spent searching areas in which they occur. Indeed, my last caracal sighting was actually in India and I have only seen one in Africa during the previous fifteen years and then only briefly. Once I had identified the distant eyeshine that my guide had stopped for, my sighting at Zakouma went a long way to rectify that, as this was an extremely calm animal that we were able to follow for about fifteen minutes and take some reasonable photographs. For once, I even had long enough to appreciate its elegant poise and gorgeous markings, from its dappled underbelly to the stripes across the back of its legs. I was only sorry that my son James had missed it, as he was not able to travel with me on this occasion and has never seen a caracal well or indeed in Africa. He would undoubtedly struggle to believe that we might see a caracal before a leopard and having observed five of the six cat species that occur at Zakouma within my first six days, I have to admit that I thought it would only be a matter of time before I added a leopard to complete a full set, which is very unusual for a single park. In fact, I believe that I have only ever done it once before, perhaps unsurprisingly in the Serengeti, and it was again not to be, as the elusive leopard, so easy to see elsewhere, proved to be a cat too far.

4. Serval (*Leptailurus serval*)

In complete contrast, I have always been incredibly fortunate with serval and usually chance across at least one on every trip, regardless of how difficult they may be to see in each area. The previous year, for example, I had watched one in Akagera National Park in Rwanda, where they had not been observed for seven months. Not that rarity is really an issue at Zakouma, which must be the best place in all of Africa to see these graceful small cats. In all I encountered 32 servals during my two-week stay, 27 at night and five in daylight, and of the fourteen nights that we went out spotlighting, servals were observed on twelve. On several occasions we spotted pairs hunting together, as well as an adult with a single younger animal, and at least one of these hunts was successful, with a serval pouncing in characteristically athletic fashion into the long grass before emerging with a huge rat hanging out of its mouth. All of that said, there are no absolute guarantees when dealing with wildlife and one group staying for six nights left without seeing a single serval or indeed a wild cat or pale fox. I am not entirely sure how this occurred, but I can only guess that they decided to spotlight for an hour or so on the way back to the lodge for dinner each night, as opposed to spending most of the evening out in the

field. Lodges often try to impose these earlier night drives on their guests, as it is much easier than having to ask guides to go out again late after dinner. However, they are never as effective and a combination of the two will massively improve your chances of seeing nocturnal species, so an initial attempt just as it gets dark, followed by a far longer spotlighting session into the night. Alternatively, just take something to eat with you and skip dinner, which is what we did on several occasions. To be fair to my guide, as soon as the lodge manager translated the species that I was hoping to search for, he immediately said that we needed to spend much longer looking at night, which worked brilliantly until the final evening, at which point we were both fairly exhausted and he slowly drove off the road fast asleep.



5. African Wild Cat (*Felis lybica*)

Although I would go on to see them in far more significant numbers later in the trip, particularly at Ouadi Rimé, where they are widespread, I struggled somewhat with wild cat at Zakouma, observing six in all. I appreciate that six still probably sounds fairly impressive, and indeed I was delighted that half of those sightings were exceptional in terms of distance and duration, but I was spending a long time in the field and never encountered more than one on any given evening, which basically meant that we had eight entirely blank nights in terms of this particular small cat. Whilst not a problem for me, it does indicate that you are by no means guaranteed to see wild cat at Zakouma and two of the groups that I spent time with left without doing so, both of which were only spotlighting on the drive back for dinner. At least when you do see them here though, you can be certain they are genetically pure and I believe that this would probably apply to much of Chad, as there were very few domestic small animals in any of the areas that I visited and this was specifically the case regarding domestic cats, which I barely encountered.

6. Side-striped Jackal (*Lupulella adustus*)

These jackals are another interesting transitional species at Zakouma, as their range extends right across the continent as far north as the Sahel, but no further. Although admittedly based largely on anecdotal evidence, they also do not appear to exist in high numbers here and I encountered around a dozen, split fairly evenly between diurnal and nocturnal sightings. I only saw one pair together, but like wolves, they are monogamous, which is very rare for mammals, as only between 3% and 5% of all mammal species mate for life. As all of us dog lovers are no doubt already aware, many of these are dogs, as true sexual or genetic monogamy is more common among canids than any other biological family.

7. African Wolf (*Canis lupaster*)

Just a few years ago, two jackal species were recorded at Zakouma, the aforementioned side-striped jackal and the golden jackal. However, DNA analysis has since confirmed that the African canid is actually a distinct species to the golden jackals of Europe and Asia and was consequently renamed, initially as the African golden wolf and now simply as the African wolf. Ever since, many visitors have been desperate to find an animal they barely gave the time of day to previously, such is our almost mythical fascination with wolves. They are not at all common at Zakouma, where my limited success consisted of one sighting of three animals moving

together at night. Whilst I enjoyed a clear view of all three, as was the case with African wild cats, I would have far more success with African wolf beyond the national park, with some exceptional daylight sightings at both Ennedi and Ouadi Rimé.



8. Pale Fox (*Vulpes pallida*)

For many, particularly those with a keen interest in canids like myself, the opportunity to see a pale fox is probably a good enough single reason to visit Chad, as these diminutive foxes exist more or less only in the Sahel region that I have already described and are probably easier to see here than anywhere else. That said, they are not at all guaranteed at Zakouma and two groups left without seeing any during my stay. Fortunately, my guide knew the whereabouts of a den at the park headquarters and it was simply a matter of us parking the vehicle within a few metres and waiting for the foxes to emerge. As it was, we arrived slightly too late and when two cubs cautiously appeared, barely sticking their heads above the entrance, we realised that we had probably missed the adults. This ultimately worked in our favour, as the hesitant cubs entertained us while we waited for their parents to return, all the time growing more confident in the light that we had carefully placed to the side of their den, as to not disturb or frighten them. Eventually they did both emerge, although one was clearly more assured than its smaller sibling, and within an hour or so we had enjoyed wonderful views of the entire family. The parents never tarried for long, just briefly checking on their young charges before disappearing into the night to forage. Whilst utterly delighted to have seen an entire family, which were clearly living a completely wild existence, I was still aware that these foxes were used to the presence of people and was hoping that I might see at least one away from the park headquarters. It did take a while to achieve, which further illustrates just how easily they can be missed at Zakouma, but on my tenth night drive I encountered a pair in a different section of the reserve, one on one side of the road and one on the other. At least I presumed they were a pair and three nights later I saw probably the same two foxes in more or less the same place, but this time

clearly together. I always knew that I had additional opportunities to see this species at Ennedi and Ouadi Rimé, where apparently they are much easier to observe than Zakouma and although I struggled at Ennedi, due largely to a serious issue with my guides, as soon as I received some assistance with the spotlighting at Ouadi Rimé, I began seeing more and more, including one running around with a jerboa in its mouth.



9. Spotted Hyena (*Crocota crocuta*)

We were yet to see a spotted hyena when I finally persuaded my guide that it would make sense to at least try the buffalo carcass that a huge pride of lions had been feasting on for the past few days and even as we approached we could make out hyenas in the distance. Sadly, for the hyenas at least, so could the lions, who were clearly not willing to abandon their hard fought meal and made several concerted efforts to chase the hyenas away. While this initially worked, with no hyenas returning during our vigil, these determined and organised predators will usually only be denied for so long and by the time we returned the next morning, all that apparently remained of the ill-fated buffalo, was a few dozen vultures and a handful of marabou storks. Despite the fact that these are the only social hyenas, indeed spotted hyenas are the most social of all carnivores and live in large hierarchical clans, I never encountered more than three together during my visit and would eventually see eleven across seven different sightings, which probably reflects the dominance of lions in the park.

10. Striped Hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*)

In contrast, striped hyenas are monogamous and have to survive without the protection of a powerful clan. They are also the smallest of the hyenas and as such are primarily scavengers and largely nocturnal. All of these factors make them far more difficult to observe, but they are a favourite animal of mine, as all hyenas are in truth, and I have always made a great deal of effort to find them across their extensive range, from Africa and the Middle East all the way to India and the foothills of the Himalayas. There is no real way to search specifically for them at Zakouma, as no dens are currently known and they are thought to occur in very low numbers. They also usually only appear late at night and I believed that for all these reasons, I probably had more chance of finding one at either Ennedi or Ouadi Rimé. Whilst this did prove to be the case to some degree, as I would ultimately enjoy even greater success at Ouadi Rimé with this species, my one encounter at Zakouma remains memorable, not least for the fact that it was so unexpected. We first noticed the hyena walking slowly along one of the narrow trails we had just turned down and after following it for a few minutes and taking a couple of pictures, it became clear that it was making its way towards the river. To do so it had to cross a fairly extensive open area, but it was visibly nervous and reluctant to leave the shelter of the treeline, where I had photographed it. I therefore indicated that we should hang back slightly and wait for the hyena to emerge, instead of driving closer and continuing to try for better shots. Having placed my camera to one side, we repositioned the light to allow the hyena to make its way to the water in shadow and away from the direct glare of our spotlight. I remain uncertain whether we disturbed it in the first place or if it was simply being as cautious as such vulnerable solitary animals need to be in order to survive, but it appeared to be oblivious to our presence as it drank deeply for several minutes. Eventually it turned away and slowly ambled back towards the safety of the forest, where it disappeared into the gloom. We made no attempt to follow, as sometimes you have to realise how privileged you have been and learn when to let go. It is not easy of course, but I departed in the knowledge that I had enjoyed a special encounter with a rare and extraordinarily beautiful creature, which is always far better than having chased something away.



11. Honey Badger (*Mellivora capensis*)

Another carnivore with an extensive range stretching beyond Africa all the way to the Middle East and Central and South Asia, the honey badger found at Zakouma is the Lake Chad ratel subspecies *mellivora capensis concisa*, which occurs throughout the Sahel region and as far east as the Horn of Africa. I had always considered that the Kalahari Desert was probably the best place to observe these tenacious little predators, but having encountered 31 during my stay here, including fourteen in one astonishing night, I am no longer entirely convinced. Indeed, I observed at least one honey badger on eleven of my fourteen night drives, but the absolute highlight was watching the chaos unfold as families of six and four inadvertently converged within a few metres of our vehicle. Although there was no actual fighting, probably because they know exactly the type of harm they are capable of inflicting upon each other, the ensuring noise and commotion reminded me of the Looney Tunes Tasmanian Devil cartoon, with honey badgers scattering in all directions. We could still hear them after the last one had vanished and over the course of the next hour or so, as we continued back and forth in the same area, we kept bumping into adult and juvenile badgers, as the indomitable parents attempted to roundup their offspring.



12. African Civet (*Civettictis civetta*)

As with several other species in Chad, African civets have an extensive range, but only occur as far north as the arid Sahel region that divides the continent. They are extremely common at Zakouma and I saw over 50 during my stay, including at least one on thirteen of the fourteen night drives. Strictly nocturnal, they are also solitary creatures and, one pair aside, all of my sightings involved individuals, nine on one particular evening. Most are either oblivious to or just ignore safari vehicles and on several occasions we were able to watch one foraging for an extended period without disturbing it.



13. Egyptian Mongoose (*Herpestes ichneumon*)

Perhaps surprisingly, given that these small predators are strictly diurnal, my first view of an Egyptian mongoose occurred at night, when we were searching an area for a possible leopard and heard scurrying in the leaf litter. After waiting eagerly for a few minutes, the distinctive form of an Egyptian mongoose emerged, followed shortly by a second. The entire episode was actually very strange, as these two animals were then disturbed by a group of banded mongoose, which are also diurnal and barely ever observed at night. The banded mongoose had not been in the same area and were just running through in characteristic fashion, but to see both of these animals together late at night, it was well past 10pm, was extremely unusual and I did wonder if there might be a bushfire nearby. That happily did not prove to be the case and normal proceedings were resumed for my last two encounters with this species, both of which took place during the day and involved single animals darting across the road in front of our vehicle, which is so often the way in which these energetic creatures are spotted.

14. Slender Mongoose (*Herpestes sanguineus*)

My total experience of this solitary mongoose at Zakouma consisted of four almost identical sightings, that is to say, a relatively small pale animal darting across the road and scurrying into the bush as fast as possible. They were always slow enough to identify as slender mongooses, but too fast to take any more than a reference shot of and this is fairly typical of the species.

15. White-tailed Mongoose (*Ichneumia albicauda*)

The only nocturnal mongoose officially recorded at Zakouma, white-tailed mongooses are routinely observed at night and I encountered between 25 and 30 during my stay. Around eight of these were melanistic, which basically means that the animal has a disorder that produces an increased amount of the dark pigment melanin, thereby darkening the skin and fur. Consequently, these eight white-tailed mongooses all had black tails, which, superficially at least, may have given them the appearance of the marsh mongoose, *atilax paludinosus*, which is entirely black and also nocturnal. There is definitely a similarity between the two species, even more so at night in a moving safari vehicle, and I mention it because at least two visitors believe they have seen a marsh mongoose at Zakouma. There is no apparent reason why they would not occur here, certainly the habitat is suitable and their known range includes the entire area of the national park and slightly beyond. However, they have never been recorded in any park surveys or photographed on any camera trap studies, which itself is unusual, unless they exist in incredibly low densities. It is even feasible that there is or was a single transient animal in the park that was observed by both guests, as I know that at least one of the two is fairly experienced in terms of wildlife and have no real reason to doubt what he saw. It would just be a surprise if they had gone unnoticed for so long, but it could equally be that they are only now colonising the park and I suspect that it will not be too long before this new species is officially added to the park mammal list.

16. Banded Mongoose (*Mungos mungo*)

By far the most common of the diurnal mongoose species at Zakouma, and the only social one, I observed about ten groups of banded mongoose in all, including the aforementioned group at night, which inadvertently disturbed their foraging Egyptian cousins. Although I was eventually able to take a few reasonable shots, at least for reference purposes, they were usually moving too fast for photographs and we never came across a settled group all feeding together.

17. Large-spotted Genet (*Genetta maculata*)

If you were impressed by the number of honey badgers and African civets observed, both pale into insignificance in comparison with the large-spotted genets, which were encountered on every nocturnal excursion, often in double figures, for a final total considerably in excess of 100. Whilst I would not normally record multiple sightings in such detail, I was aware that the common genet, *genetta genetta*, also occurs at Zakouma and that although some operators and guides continue to mistake the two, the dominant species here is very much the large-spotted variety. They are actually fairly easy to tell apart, as the common genet has a highly distinctive white tail-tip, routinely smaller spots and a distinguishing dark crest along its back, which it raises when alarmed. I was determined to observe both species and therefore made a point of identifying every single genet that we encountered. I failed on a few occasions of course, when an animal disappeared before we could get close enough to be certain, but I was fortunate to have access to a number of reliable guides and tour leaders during my stay and between us we positively identified more than 300 genets, not a single one of which was a common genet. Whilst it is therefore of course entirely possible that visitors have encountered a common genet at Zakouma, it is inconceivable that they have seen them routinely and in these cases have undoubtedly confused the two species. As disappointed as I was not to have found both animals, certainly given the extensive effort devoted to the cause, genets can be fairly calm and even inquisitive, which can result in superb views, often at close quarters. This was very much the case at Zakouma, where several large-spotted genets allowed me to approach the trees they were resting in, as they obviously feel far safer above the ground than on it.



18. Red-fronted Gazelle (*Eudorcas rufifrons*)

Another of the Sahel species that you would visit Zakouma specifically to see, the red-fronted gazelle was one of three gazelles that I was hoping to see in Chad, but the only one that occurs here. They clearly prefer arid savannah and were almost exclusively observed in the drier southern section of the reserve. They also apparently occur at Ennedi, although I spent more than two weeks there without seeing one, and my sightings were restricted entirely to Zakouma, where I encountered them in small numbers on approximately half of my diurnal drives. As is the case with several of the plains species at Zakouma, they can be extremely nervous and difficult to photograph, although I did eventually manage to take a few nice shots of what are decidedly attractive ungulates.



19. Roan Antelope (*Hippotragus equinus*)

Speaking of attractive, there are few more striking antelopes than roan and Zakouma is as good a reserve to see them at as I am familiar with, certainly if you exclude the game farms in South Africa, where they have been translocated beyond their natural range. I encountered them more or less daily, usually on several occasions and including spectacular herds of up to 50 animals. There are said to be six subspecies, I believe that the version that occurs at Zakouma is currently classified as *hippotragus equinus scharicus*, but according to their IUCN taxonomy assessment, the validity of most of these remains questionable. What is clear, is that this magnificent antelope has been hunted to extinction across much of its former range, no doubt at least in part as a result of its conspicuous appearance, and now exists in shrinking fragmented populations in some areas.

20. Waterbuck (*Kobus ellipsiprymnus*)

When I first visited Africa there were two distinct waterbuck species, the common waterbuck, found to the east of the Rift Valley and as far south as South Africa, and the defassa waterbuck, which occurs to the west of the Rift Valley and as far north as the Sahel. They were very easy to tell apart, as the common waterbuck has a distinguishing white ring on its rump, which looks, as so many children have observed over the years, exactly like a toilet seat. It is now, rather unimaginatively it must be said, named after that ellipse-shaped ring, as the ellipsen waterbuck. Although I will always think of them as disparate animals, they are now considered subspecies of one main waterbuck species and to some sources, these are the only subspecies that occur. However, other authorities maintain that there are numerous subspecies and the variety in Chad has been classified by some as the sing-sing waterbuck *kobus ellipsiprymnus unctuosus*. Whatever their precise name or genetic classification, at Zakouma they are very easy to find and were observed in healthy numbers on a daily basis, especially around the pans and swamps they traditionally favour.



21. Hartebeest (*Alcelaphus buselaphus*)

At this time of year, many of the animals at Zakouma have young and this was the case with the lelwel hartebeest subspecies *alcelaphus buselaphus lelwel* that occurs here, which were more difficult to photograph than to see, as most of the herds had small calves and would immediately move on whenever we approached. Indeed, many of the animals here are extremely nervous around vehicles and although the hartebeest were not quite as badly affected, any large groups of elephants would automatically disappear as soon as they heard our car and the buffalo were even more sensitive and would regularly stampede. I did eventually manage to photograph a few reasonably calm individuals, but I spent a disproportionate amount of time attempting to do so, certainly in comparison to most of the other antelopes.

22. Topi (*Damaliscus lunatus*)

Having said that, if anything, the Topi were perhaps even worse and although they congregate in impressive numbers around Rigueik Pan, and more sparingly elsewhere, they were always somehow walking away from my camera and I have numerous shots of those characteristic blue flanks and disappearing rear ends. The animals at Zakouma are the tiang subspecies *damaliscus lunatus tiang* and they are known locally and to most visitors simply as tiang.



23. Oribi (*Ourebia ourebi*)

Oribi were one of the less commonly observed antelopes, but they were still encountered on a more or less daily basis and although the species at Zakouma has occasionally been described as the Sudan oribi subspecies *ourebia ourebi montana*, other sources insist that any differences between these animals account to little more than regional variations and that none of the many so called subspecies are valid. My best view was of a lone female standing by the road following a morning spent searching for a black rhinoceros, which the head researcher actually stopped for, just to give an indication of how rarely this species is spotted unless you are able to spend extended periods exploring the reserve.

24. Red-flanked Duiker (*Cephalophus rufilatus*)

Another species that occurs in a narrow band south of the Sahel and another major reason for visiting Zakouma, which is as far north as these small duikers can be found in Chad. According to my guide, they were almost impossible to observe, but as soon as we started looking, he pointed out several within the first few days of me mentioning that I would like to spend time searching specifically for them. Unfortunately, his initial assessment had actually been more accurate than anything that followed, as all of the duikers that he spotted were the common variety, which occur across much of the continent, again south of the Sahel. It was only when an actual red-flanked duiker stepped out in front of our vehicle in the middle of the afternoon, that he immediately realised the mistake I had been trying to convey for several days in my pigeon French, as these small antelopes are highly distinctive and you would never confuse one for a common duiker. For a start, on average they are probably a third smaller and their coat is largely reddish-brown except for a broad dark strip along their back and uniformly bluish-grey legs. We both knew instantly that this was the animal we had been searching for and I took several seconds to confirm the sighting with my binoculars, at which point I reached for my camera and the duiker jumped into the long grass. I fired off one quick shot, more in hope than expectation really, but I got nothing and we had a brief glimpse of another disappearing into the vegetation the next day. No matter, as the first view could not have really been any better, only longer, and was all the more satisfying given that it had taken well into day ten to achieve.

25. Common Duiker (*Sylvicapra grimmia*)

As previously alluded to, common duikers were much easier to see than their smaller cousins and were encountered more or less every day, although never in high numbers. This is fairly typical of the most widespread of all duiker species, as they are generally solitary, but will tolerate each other where necessary and are not uncommonly observed in pairs. As with all duikers, only the males have horns and they have been recorded at altitudes of up to 5,600 metres.



26. Greater Kudu (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*)

You could easily visit Zakouma without observing this hugely impressive antelope and although I was fortunate enough to encounter a small herd on just my third morning, I only had four sightings in all and never of more than five animals. Only two of these were male, with their imposing spiral horns and distinctive beards, and all four encounters took place in the arid southern section of the park. Unlike the lesser kudu, which has a fairly restricted territory from Ethiopia south to Tanzania, the greater kudu still occurs as far north as Sudan on the Red Sea and as far south as Port Elizabeth in South Africa, although it has disappeared from much of its former northerly range.

27. Kob (*Kobus kob*)

Kob are widespread at Zakouma and are probably one of the easiest antelope to both observe and photograph, as they are generally fairly calm and can often be found lying down in the afternoon. There are known to be at least three subspecies, the version in Chad is buffin's kob *Kobus kob kob*, but some sources consider that the puku, a similar antelope found in severely fragmented populations across much of Central Africa, should also be considered a kob subspecies, as opposed to a distinct species. As so often in these scientific matters, I have no real view on the issue and only know that in general I spend far too much time photographing what to me are one of the most handsome antelopes on the continent.





28. Bohor Reedbuck (*Redunca redunca*)

Although abundant at Zakouma, predominantly around Rigueik Pan, bohor reedbuck can be difficult to see elsewhere and on my previous African tour, which involved a full month in Rwanda and Uganda, my only sighting involved a mother and young. Admittedly I was not always based in suitable habitat, as these reedbucks are usually found on or around floodplains, particularly those involving severe seasonal variations, but even so, the numbers observed at Zakouma are remarkable and they are also incredibly relaxed here and take very little notice of the passing vehicles.



29. Bushbuck (*Tragelaphus scriptus*)

Apart from the baboons that would feed just beyond the populated areas, bushbuck were the only mammals encountered reasonably regularly around camp and I spent a few of my lunchtimes photographing a mother and young living close to my room. They became fairly used to me during my two-week stay and elsewhere they were more or less equally relaxed, especially around the various water sources, where they could be observed on basically every drive. As one of the most attractive antelopes, particularly at Zakouma where their markings are so conspicuous, I did attempt to record both sexes, but bushbucks were one of the many 'ordinary' animals that my guide did not really understand I might want to photograph and he constantly drove past them. When I was able to convince him to stop, it was usually in the worst possible position and I consequently have far fewer shots of the animals that were by far the easiest to observe.

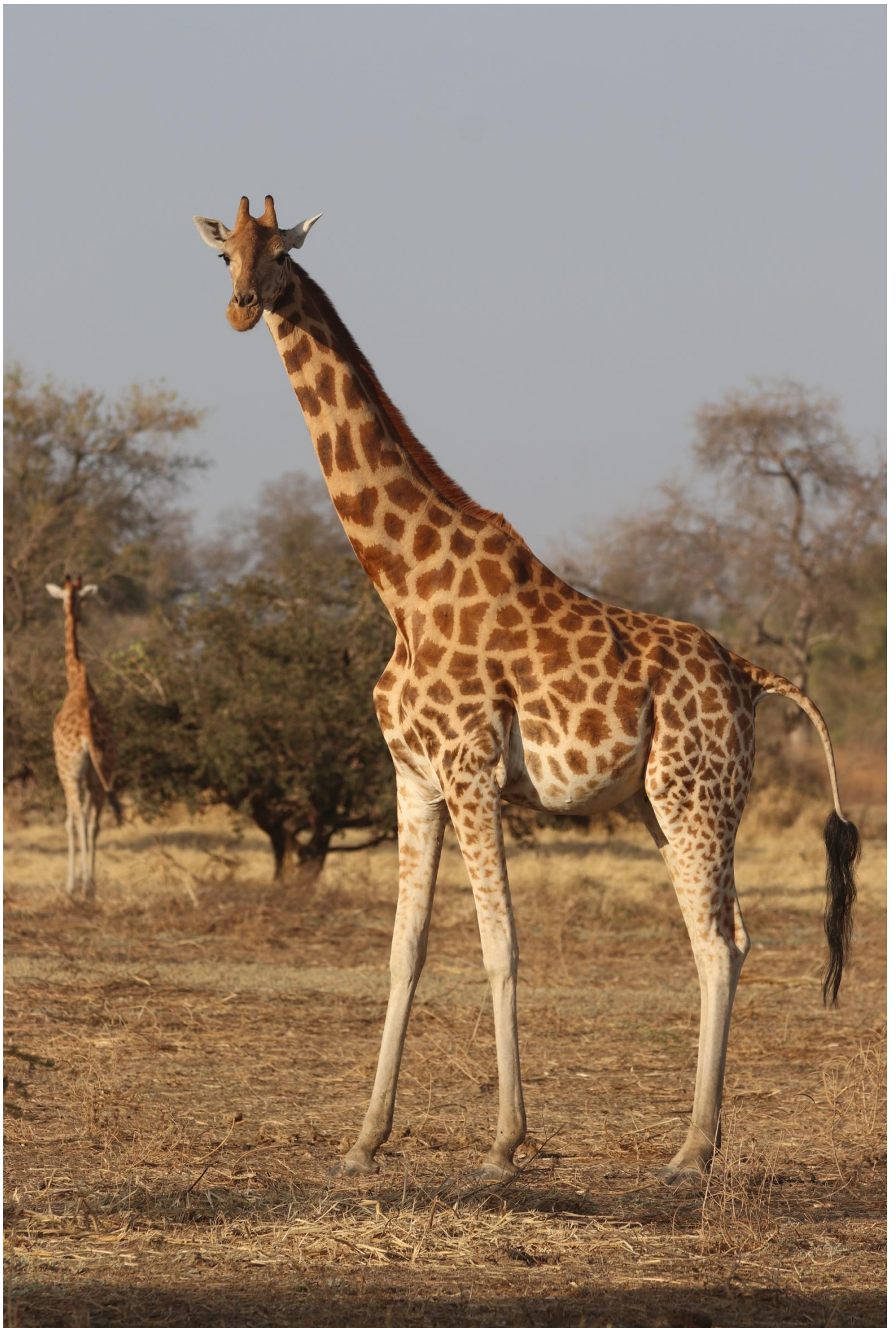


30. African Buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*)

This was not overly a problem regarding the buffalo, which were observed in such high numbers, it would have been difficult not to take a few decent pictures. That said, most of the photographic opportunities involved small groups or individuals, as the larger herds were far less tolerant of our vehicle and would regularly stampede as soon as we approached or even drove by. In fact, the situation became so bad on a couple of occasions, that I asked my guide to pull over and let the buffalo charge past, before they could do any serious harm to either themselves or any other unsuspecting creatures in their path. Some of the herds were several hundred strong, which is a success story in itself for both Zakouma and African Parks, as the buffalo population had plummeted to about 220 animals back in 1986, but has since recovered to more than 12,000. The subspecies that occurs at Zakouma is the Sudan buffalo *syncerus caffer brachyceros*, which is much closer in appearance to the African forest buffalo *syncerus caffer nanus*, than the considerably larger Cape buffalo *syncerus caffer caffer*, which is the species that occurs in the tourist hotspots of Kenya, Tanzania and Southern Africa and is consequently the animal that most people conjure when they think of a typical African buffalo. In addition to the very obvious size difference, its horns are a different shape, as they are across all three subspecies, and it varies far more in colour than the typically black Cape version.

31. Giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis*)

If I had to pick one animal as the symbol of Zakouma National Park, it would probably be the giraffe, partly because they are such a familiar and iconic feature of the landscape, but largely because the kordofan subspecies that occurs here is critically endangered. In fact, this reserve represents a last stronghold for the species, as there are estimated to be less than 2,000 remaining in isolated areas of Chad, the Central African Republic, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo and around 1,000 of these endure here on the Zakouma floodplains. According to the latest IUCN taxonomy assessment, there is only one distinct species of giraffe and the kordofan subspecies *giraffa camelopardalis antiquorum* is one of nine currently recognised subspecies, although conflicting sources have suggested that several of these should be considered entirely separate species. Recent evidence actually supports these genetic splits and the most likely outcome, at least the one that most sources now appear to agree on, would produce four distinct giraffe species, northern, southern, reticulated and Masai. The kordofan version would be reassessed within the northern giraffe category, along with the existing subspecies from West Africa, South Sudan and Ethiopia. Whilst these taxonomic classifications can be important in terms of helping to conserve threatened species, they are of course fairly meaningless from the back of a safari vehicle and I probably took more photographs of giraffes than any other animal at Zakouma, particularly of them cautiously stooping to drink in typical fashion at various water sources.



32. African Elephant (*Loxodonta Africana*)

The elephants at Zakouma are another fabulous success story of which African Parks can be justifiably proud, as it is believed that around 4,000 elephants were slaughtered here between 2002 and 2010, but only 24 have been killed since the organisation took over in 2010 and there have been no elephant poaching casualties at all since 2016. The population is now believed to be around 600, but it took years for the traumatised elephants to begin breeding again and in 2018 127 elephant calves were recorded, compared to just one back in 2011. These are very small steps of course when you consider that there were around 300,000 elephants in the region as recently as the 1960s and, understandably enough, the surviving elephants remain highly nervous. As such, they generally stay together in either one massive herd of almost the entire population or two or three smaller groups of upwards of 150, which consequently provides visitors with the almost unique opportunity to observe some of the largest gatherings of elephants in all of Africa. Whilst this is clearly an immense privilege, it is not as easy as you might initially think, as the elephants here really do not forget and will not knowingly tolerate our presence. They quickly disappear as soon as they hear a vehicle approaching or even pick up our scent and it is usually necessary to abandon the car and advance on foot downwind, which basically means the wind is blowing the animal's scent in your direction and not the other way round. I made two attempts to find this super herd and whilst the first was largely unsuccessful, we arrived just as the last few elephants were climbing the riverbank and moving into the forest, the second produced one of the most spectacular and memorable sightings of this or any other trip. It also provided a real insight in terms of how nervous these poor animals still are, as we had been waiting patiently in the vehicle for what we suspected was a large herd, certainly from the noise they were making, but within a few seconds of the lead elephants emerging, the wind suddenly changed direction and they all turned and disappeared back into the bush. It took four hours for them to return and only after we had moved the vehicle and taken up a new position on foot, again downwind. This time, they were completely unaware of our existence and over the next hour or so our patience was rewarded with the extraordinary spectacle of maybe 250 elephants drinking and bathing together in one flooded clearing. To describe the experience as magical would be doing it no justice at all, particularly in a region where these gentle giants have been so badly persecuted, and whilst the adults drank thirstily and stood watch, their young splashed and rolled in the shallow water, completely oblivious to the bloodshed that has taken place here. We had other wonderful elephant encounters with smaller splinter groups and a few lone bulls, but nothing else even approaching this astonishing hour and it will remain my abiding memory of Zakouma.



33. Black Rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*)

At one time both black and white rhinoceros roamed southern Chad, but both species were poached to extinction decades ago and it is thought that the last black rhino was killed at Zakouma in the early 1970s. It was therefore heartening to learn that in May 2018 six black rhinos had been translocated to Zakouma from Addo Elephant National Park in South Africa. Sadly, within a few months of their release, four of the rhinos had died and whilst it was confirmed that poaching was mercifully not involved, the reality was almost as bad, as apparently they had not reacted well to their new environment and had not been able to retain sufficient nourishment in order to survive. For such rare and significant animals to basically starve to death, of course does not reflect well on African Parks and this disaster followed a similar tragedy a few months earlier in Kenya, when eleven black rhinos died after being reintroduced to Tsavo East National Park, largely from salt poisoning, having been given water with a higher salt content than they were used to and

could tolerate. To be completely fair to African Parks, who do have an excellent conservation record, the rhinos had initially been held in a boma for the first two months of their stay and then within a fenced sanctuary for roughly the same period. However, they were evidently not monitored adequately when they were finally released into the main reserve, as one or two might have died if they were being carefully examined on a daily basis, but it is unlikely that all four would have perished. The two surviving rhinos, both of which are female, were immediately captured and after a long period of veterinary care and observation, have since been rereleased. Thankfully they are doing well and it was always hoped that further rhinos would have been released at Zakouma by now, including males in order to begin the essential breeding programme. That was certainly the intention until the coronavirus pandemic intervened and I was informed that the next batch of rhinos should now be arriving towards the end of 2022. So with just two of possibly the most cautious animals on the planet to search for, which spend almost every second of daylight hidden deep in the bush, I had already accepted that I was very unlikely to encounter a black rhino at Zakouma. My only chance was to accompany the trackers who monitor the rhinos each day and having made the request to do so more or less as soon as I arrived, I was finally able to join what turned out to be a large team on the eleventh day of my stay. In reality, the team, which included trackers, researchers, and guides, was simply too big and I would have been far more successful with just the head tracker, but this is the first time that African Parks have allowed a visitor to track rhinos at Zakouma and I remain extremely grateful for the significant effort made on my behalf. The process itself took about four hours, as the rhinos have been fitted with internal microchips and the trackers go out on motorbikes looking to pick up one of the signals. They begin where the rhinos were last recorded and within about two hours we had a faint signal that we were initially able to follow in vehicles and then on foot. Although we did not cover a great distance, the walk itself took about the same amount of time given how quiet we needed to be and we eventually got to within a few metres of a rhino hidden in dense vegetation. The head tracker whispered to me 'it's here' and just as I was making out her rough shape in the undergrowth, she either picked up our scent or just sensed our presence and suddenly bolted in a cloud of dust. After four hours, she was gone in barely a heartbeat and my only real view was of her powerful rear-end disappearing into the bush, which barely even registered at that explosive speed. Whilst I have to admit that I was slightly disappointed not to have experienced a better view of such a majestic creature, it was thrilling just to be able to track rhinos in Chad and of course a complete privilege, given that I was the first tourist to see a black rhino at Zakouma for at least half a century.



34. Olive Baboon (*Papio Anubis*)

Olive baboons are one of six baboon species and are easily observed at Zakouma, both out in the field and within the vicinity of my lodge. They are so common, that most people do not take a great deal of notice of them, but these are highly impressive beasts in their own right and the large males can be formidable. I believe that I experienced a first-hand example of this during what was undoubtedly the most distressing single moment of the tour, when we came across a baboon that I can only describe as having been savaged. I thought that it was dead at first, but was then horrified to find out that it was actually still alive, as it lay on its front with its intestines exposed and its lungs hanging out of its back. The damage was nothing short of horrific and looked as if it had occurred in a fight with another baboon, or perhaps several, as a predator would have finished the job and began feeding. Leopards, for example, prefer to attack from behind and will generally aim at the back of the neck and throat, but this poor animal had wounds everywhere and they were unquestionably inflicted by a tremendously powerful adversary with a ferocious bite. If my guide carried a gun I would have shot it and as it lay there panting slowly in the baking heat of the afternoon sun, I did consider putting it out of its misery with a rock. Perhaps I should have, but at least it was lying still and I knew that if I approached on foot, it would have to try to get away and would die in agonising panic, as it had turned its head slowly towards us at the noise of the engine and was evidently conscious of our presence. We drove away as the vultures circled and I can only hope that it did not suffer for a great deal longer.



35. Tantalus Monkey (*Chlorocebus tantalus*)

These relatively small primates, at least in relation to the other two diurnal primate species at Zakouma, were also very common and would occasionally spend time foraging peacefully around the lodge. They were observed on every drive and are very similar in appearance to several other monkeys in the chlorocebus genus, including vervet and grivet monkeys. Unlike the olive baboon and patas monkey, both of which I would encounter during my stay in Ennedi, the tantalus monkey does not occur a great deal further north than the capital N'Djamena.



36. Patas Monkey (*Erythrocebus patas*)

Of the four primate species at Zakouma, patas monkeys were by far the most scarce and the most nervous. The majority of sightings involved distant views or of animals scurrying quickly across open ground towards the safety of the trees. In contrast to the smaller tanzanian monkeys, there was no real opportunity to sit and watch them at the base of a tree, which was a shame in a way, as the males in particular are striking, with a deep rust coloured coat, distinctive black and white facial markings and a bright blue scrotum.

37. Northern Lesser Galago (*Galago senegalensis*)

The only nocturnal primate that occurs at Zakouma, the northern lesser galago, or lesser bushbaby if you still prefer its old-fashioned moniker, was observed on multiple occasions on every night drive and we eventually stopped even approaching its distinctive eyeshine. Like all bushbabies, with their large bulbous eyes and equally conspicuous big rounded ears, their appearance is unusual bordering on comical and they are certainly the most obviously arboreal mammal at Zakouma, as they appear hopelessly vulnerable bouncing around on the ground and almost untouchable above it. Indeed, they are so incredibly agile, they hunt almost entirely by speed and can jump more than three metres from branch to branch. According to current classifications, the northern lesser galago is the only galago species in Chad, compared to ten and nine individual types in Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of the Congo respectively.

38. Common Warthog (*Phacochoerus africanus*)

The utterly charming warthog was another animal that my guide did not consider stopping for and although they are common at Zakouma, I again consequently struggled to take a decent picture. I eventually found myself pretending to photograph something far more acceptable to my guide's sensibilities and then surreptitiously shooting a warthog somewhere off in the background. Despite their abundance, they are by no means as tame at Zakouma as they are elsewhere and generally kept their distance, which makes sense when you consider exactly how many different species prey on them and particularly their defenceless young.



39. Rock Hyrax (*Procavia capensis*)

One of five hyrax species and the only one that occurs beyond Africa, none of the camp management or guides could quite understand why I was interested in something as supposedly insignificant as a rock hyrax, despite my efforts to explain that I was equally interested in all mammals, large and small. To be entirely fair, once my requests had been translated, my guide did everything possible to try to find the animals that I wanted to see and for the hyrax this involved a long drive to the extreme southern boundary of the park. I have always relished the fact that you never know exactly what you will encounter when looking for wild animals and it was on this drive, to an obscure area that we had no reason to visit other than the hyrax, that I experienced my first and ultimately only good view of a red-flanked duiker. To quote the lyrics of Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, the immortal song-writing partnership behind the quintessential British rock group The Rolling Stones:

*You can't always get what you want,
But if you try sometimes, you might find,
You get what you need*

However, on this occasion I was fortunate enough to get both and within an hour of stopping in front of the duiker, I was sitting in the middle of a small colony of hyrax. Whilst I would go on to encounter many more of these extremely endearing creatures at Ennedi, I barely got another glimpse of the duiker.

40. African Savannah Hare (*Lepus victoriae*)

The hares in certain parts of Africa are one of the few mammals that I identify based on where they occur, as opposed to what they look like, as there remains a great deal of uncertainty in terms of which animals occur where and even regarding those that should be classified to full species level. Although the IUCN openly state that they are flawed and require urgent review, I currently accept their taxonomic assessments of both the African savannah hare *lepus victoriae* and the Cape hare *lepus capensis*, principally because nothing more accurate currently exists. This rather glaring lack of knowledge notwithstanding, this works well enough until you visit an area where the two species overlap, as it is basically impossible to tell them apart, even with decent photographs and regardless of what any so called experts tell you. Although the two pairs of incisors can prove to be diagnostic, as those of the savannah hare display a distinctive groove that is absent from the cape hare, you would basically need to find a dead one to be certain and even then it is highly unlikely that these will eventually prove to be the only two separate species in the region. Thankfully the situation is fairly straightforward in Chad, as the Savannah hare apparently occurs at Zakouma and the cape hare at Ennedi, which would mean that I had the opportunity to encounter both types on this tour. I doubt though that even these range classifications are entirely accurate and it would not surprise me if both species occur beyond their known areas. As it was, Zakouma played its part in terms of the savannah hare and I observed five in all, far fewer than I had expected in two full weeks.

41. Crested Porcupine (*Hystrix cristata*)

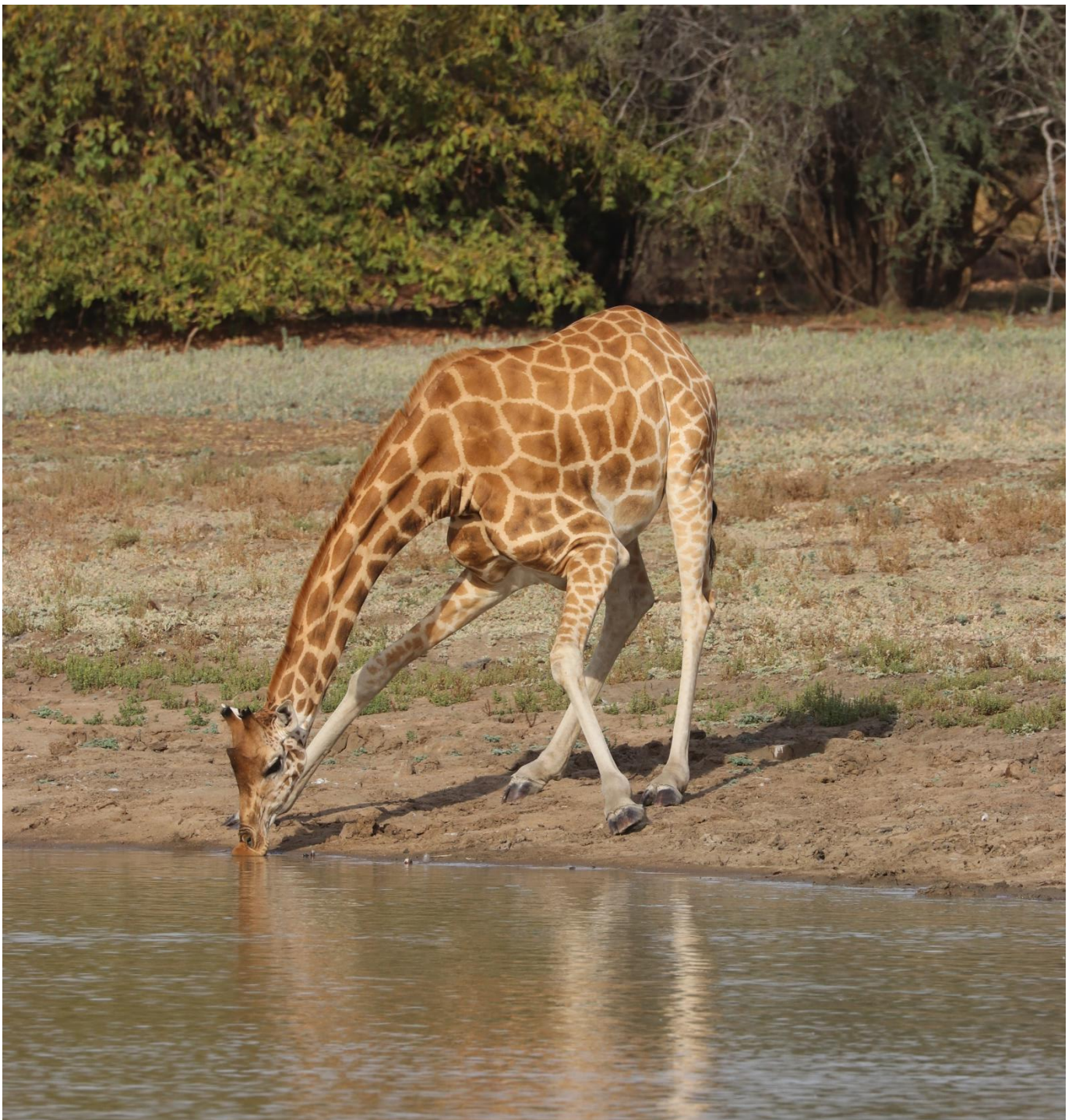
The same possibly could be said of the crested porcupine, as these strictly nocturnal rodents are not particularly easy to see anywhere really, but I would have still expected to chance upon more than two given the amount of time we spent driving at night. As it was, it took over a week to find the first, running along the road as usual, and although the second was encountered fairly close to camp, we were not able to find it again.

42. Gambian Sun Squirrel (*Heliosciurus gambianus*)

Although my guide at first attempted to convince me that this was some kind of diurnal galago, with the assistance of a couple of guide books and a great deal of interpretation by various guests and members of staff, we were finally able to agree on it being a Gambian sun squirrel. Even taking the insurmountable language barrier into account, the identification process was far more convoluted than it ever really needed to be, certainly when you consider that this is the only arboreal squirrel in the entire country and we more or less only saw them in trees. We eventually encountered half a dozen or so and the final one cooperated to such a degree, I was able to take a couple of reasonable identification shots.

43. Striped Ground Squirrel (*Xerus erythropus*)

I also got a few nice photographs of the only ground squirrel in Chad, including of one that decided it would hide behind basically a few twigs a couple of metres from our vehicle. Most of the rest were observed running in traditional fashion and although they were not common anywhere as such, the striped ground squirrel was one of only four mammals that I would encounter at all three destinations, the other three being African wild cat, African wolf and pale fox.







Trip Overview - Ennedi

For those who have not visited the Ennedi Massif, it is difficult to know how exactly to describe it, otherworldly initially came to mind and at one stage I flippantly jotted down that it reminded me of Wadi Rum on steroids, which, on reflection, is reasonable enough given how extraordinary both destinations are and the fact that Ennedi covers such an immense area. Although I have to admit that I do not know the precise region included as part of the massif, according to UNESCO, Ennedi incorporates an area approximately the size of Switzerland, which is not difficult to believe when you consider that Chad itself, at more than five times the size of the United Kingdom, is the third largest entirely landlocked country on the planet. Now largely managed by African Parks, Ennedi is situated within the aforementioned Sahel region, the semi-arid transitional zone that stretches across Mauritania, Mali,



Niger, Chad and Sudan in that order from the Atlantic Ocean on the west coast to the Red Sea on the east. A combined UNESCO natural and cultural World Heritage Site, Ennedi actually incorporates a second UNESCO area, the Lakes of Ounianga, but this one is an entirely natural site and includes the saline and freshwater lakes of Ounianga Kebir and Ounianga Serir, which are about 40 kilometres apart. These then are the basic facts, but the glorious reality is far removed from the dry detail, as Ennedi is quite simply a breathtaking eighth, ninth and tenth Wonder of the World, a sculptured masterpiece formed over eons by wind and water to produce the most spellbinding collection of gorges, valleys and natural rock formations anywhere on earth. In places the landscape is utterly unimaginable, with towering sandstone structures rising incongruously from the seemingly barren plains and intricately misshapen rocks of every colour and shape adorning a sea of sand and dust, like flowers in the earth. As the sun rotates, so the palette changes, painting a million different vistas as it moves and illuminating the timeless rocks that appear to balance so precariously, as if to defy both gravity and the very erosion that has shaped them. Wondrous arches stand as citadels to the ages that formed them and people reach out from the past and touch our lives with the traces they left behind. To travel across Ennedi is to experience a kaleidoscope of stone and light, a humbling journey of humanity and mortality and a very real sense of insignificance. If you are not enthralled or at least inspired by these epic surroundings, I suggest that your soul is already a great deal harder than the stone that has endured here since the dawn of time. I of course use that term in a non religious sense, as there is no feeling of anything contrived here, just a sense of the natural world and of a permanence almost beyond our comprehension. People have lived in the region for thousands of years, indeed the rock art dates back to around 6,000 BC or 8,000 BP, as I prefer to use the scientific term *'Before Present'*, as opposed to the outdated religious one *'Before Christ'*, but all that remains are echoes of their lives, however magnificently these have been etched across the landscape. Indeed, tourists travel from all over the world to visit the fabulous rock painting and petroglyph sites here, many of which include intimate details of family life and the animals that once occurred in the region, including a vast number of images of domestic animals, as this was once a lush region with plenty of rain and was perfectly suited to the farming of cattle. In many ways the art of Ennedi tells the story of climate change, as the entire Sahara region began receiving far less rain and by about 3,000 BP that traditional pastoral existence was changing and the local people were relying more on horses than cattle, which was reflected in their art. As the desertification process accelerated and the land became more arid, so by around 2,000 BP, horses were being replaced by camels, which has continued to this day and which we can again verify from the rock art dated to the period. The wild species that once occurred here are also well represented, including elephants, rhinos, giraffes and cheetahs, and most of these incredible depictions have survived because they were created within the protection of often large overhangs, hollowed out by the wind and the sand over millennia. This undoubtedly means that our ancestors lived where they created this art and although the rock art itself was not the main purpose of my visit, it was impossible not to be moved by these eternal scenes of family life, particularly knowing that







the mothers and children exposed here thousands of years later, were actually living and sleeping within touching distance of their likeness. More or less all life at Ennedi now revolves around the permanent water sources and these precious desert pools, or gueltas as they are locally known, are used by the nomadic camel herders during the day and, clearly from the number of tracks that I was able to identify, by a large variety of wild animals at night. In some cases these vital water sources are visible literally miles away, as a green oasis of palm trees and other vegetation seemingly plonked in the middle of the scorched desolate landscape, but others are hidden within the shadows of steep canyons and the only clue can be a trail of camels or donkeys trudging their way across the desert towards the sanctuary of the shade and water. To the north the eighteen lakes of Ounianga Kebir and Ounianga Serir are the largest and deepest in the Sahara and although several have a high saline content, the salt concentration of Lake Yoa is about six times higher than the oceans, the majority are freshwater remnants of when the region experienced a great deal more rain and huge underground reservoirs were formed. Even for someone completely at ease within a desert environment, as I have always been, these lakes were something of a relief after several searing days without water and they must have represented paradise to the nomadic tribesman who would travel for weeks between sites with their animals. With the lush palms and golden sand rippling in the clear inviting water, the lakes at Ounianga certainly resemble a Garden of Eden, but as hard as I searched, I was unable to find any snakes and had to make do with several refreshing swims. In terms of the specific sites visited, although I have listed a few of the major attractions within 'Destinations', there are too many at Ennedi to include them all and some are simply known by the name of a feature as opposed to an actual place, so Elephant Arch or Aloba Arch for example. As it was, I had sixteen nights available to explore more or less anywhere and the only unfortunate element of my time here, indeed of the entire trip really, was the fact that my guides knew very little about animals and were completely disinterested in helping me look for any, including at night, when I really needed their assistance, or at least their vehicle. These were three new guides who I met at N'Djamena and whilst they were obviously very experienced in terms of the Ennedi landscape and tourist destinations, for some reason, they just did not want to go out at night. The language issue again did not help the situation, but the head guide knew sufficient English to produce a succession of excuses to avoid spotlighting, from the fact that there were either too many people, too many domestic animals or even too many rocks in one instance, to the fact that there were no wild animals anyway or that it was too dangerous to look for them. I was particularly impressed by that last pretext, as it was not apparently so dangerous that I could not walk alone for more than three hours and then return to camp only to find that my guides were so concerned for my safety, they had all gone to bed. In all we went out on just four of the sixteen nights and then for barely five hours in total, which was a great shame, as we did enjoy considerable success and even the guides seemed excited when we found something. Fortunately, I had already seen some of the likely nocturnal species at Zakouma, including caracal and striped hyena, and across the three destinations, I would eventually encounter more or less all of the species that I had hoped to, including all three of the desert adapted foxes that occur at Ennedi. Not that this justifies their refusal to help, as I had agreed the spotlighting sessions in advance with the local operator, not to mention having paid extra for them, and he had apparently informed all three of my guides that this was the case, which of course they just shook their heads and shrugged their shoulders at. Despite my obvious frustration at not being able to explore such a natural wonder adequately, Ennedi is such an outstandingly beautiful and serene destination that I was determined not to let any disappointment ruin my stay and instead I walked on my own each night. Although I could obviously not cover anywhere near the ground that I needed to, this was actually a great deal of fun and I enjoyed significant success. The only slight issue was that I was already hiking several hours each day, as I would automatically get up at five and walk until the guides broke camp between seven and eight and would go out again as soon as we stopped anywhere, generally for several hours. I usually just carried water and dry bread and would often climb up to a viewpoint and sit scanning the horizon and drinking in the majesty of





my surroundings. On one memorable occasion, I spent the last two hours of daylight watching a pair of sand martins swooping and soaring on the evening breeze and despite the initial temptation to try to capture the moment, I was pleased that ultimately I did not even reach for my camera. I did not bother with a camera when I walked on my own at night either, as it is hard enough trying to identify animals with a spotlight and binoculars, let alone trying to take pictures with a camera and flash. Instead, I would savour what I saw as well as I could on my own and I always had my phone in case I bumped into anything extremely rare and equally slow, so perhaps a four-toed hedgehog or a ground pangolin. I would ultimately see neither, but these species are notoriously elusive and in all likelihood, I would have failed to find either with or without a vehicle to spotlight from. Indeed, the only mammal that I may have missed as a result of my guide's collective torpor, was a sand cat, as they have been photographed here and I would have had far more chance with this species in a vehicle than on foot. I had also hoped that I might achieve even a distant view of a Barbary sheep or two, as I know that a reasonably healthy population exists in the Ennedi massifs, despite the head guide informing me they had all been shot. Whilst I scanned an awful lot of peaks, I would need far more knowledgeable local assistance in terms of suitable sites to search and when I return, it will be with an experienced wildlife guide. Perhaps the type of guide who walks with you, instead of running ahead and scaring the wildlife away, which is exactly what occurred when we visited Guelta d'Archei in order to hopefully spot one of the four female West African crocodiles that endure here. These are smaller cousins of the Nile crocodile *crocodylus niloticus* observed in such high numbers at Zakouma and although the West African species *crocodylus suchus* exists in other regions, these four may be the last surviving members of a population that thrived thousands of years ago when the Sahara was a green oasis, littered with lakes and covered in verdant grasslands. Now they exist in total isolation, as the nearest possible population is over 700 kilometres away in the Tibesti region of northern Chad and no one has been able to confirm whether any crocodiles have even survived there, given the unrest that continues to blight the area. I was consequently keen to try and photograph one of these extraordinarily rare reptiles and we waited until the guelta was completely deserted to give ourselves the best possible chance. Sadly I had not anticipated that my guide would begin running as soon as he spotted a lone crocodile in the distance and by the time I reached him, it had darted across the sand and into the water. Whilst I had still enjoyed an excellent view, I should have been able to sit quietly watching the animal at distance and this was the last time that I attempted anything wildlife related with any of my guides on foot. Instead I waited on my own for several hours just in case the crocodile returned and as it got dark bats began diving out of the night sky to hunt above the water. Soon there were dozens and I was quickly lost in yet another enthralling natural event within this astonishing landscape. For all the issues with my guides, I never forgot, well at least not for more than a few minutes, how fortunate I was to be able to explore such an epic region and these are the wild species that I was privileged to encounter whilst basically doing what I love:

1. African Wild Cat (*Felis lybica*)

I encountered three obvious wild cats at Ennedi, two whilst spotlighting on my own and a third on one of our four brief nocturnal drives. However, I observed four cats in all and I am reasonably confident that the final one was a sand cat, as they have been photographed here as recently as 2019 and from its distinctive shape and size, this one just did not look like a wild cat. It was also

perched half way up a thorn bush, which is far more typical of a sand cat, but I only had a brief glimpse with the spotlight before it surprised me and dropped to the ground. I would have only needed a second or two with the binoculars to confirm either way, but we were unable to find it again despite searching the area on foot and I have not therefore included it as a confirmed sighting.

2. African Wolf (*Canis lupaster*)

Having struggled somewhat with this species at Zakouma, where I saw three together on one night drive, I was delighted to start encountering them during the day at Ennedi, beginning with one that I noticed high up on some rocks, peering down at me in typical fashion. Partly because this was the first wolf I had observed in daylight, but more because I just love doing it, I immediately decided to try to second guess where it would go and head it off, which was going to take some time given how far away and high it was. After hiking for more than an hour and a half, I thought that perhaps I had made a mistake in terms of the direction I had assumed the wolf was heading in, but my real mistake was misjudging the distance involved, which I then compounded slightly by beginning to relax. This is fatal of course, as you then stop concentrating and suddenly find yourself rounding the base of another rocky slope and more or less walking straight into your quarry. I was not sure which one of us was more surprised, but another few seconds and we would have actually bumped into each other and the wolf reacted far quicker than I ever could, turning on its heels and sprinting away before I could even raise my camera. Although I had missed the ambush shot I had been attempting, the one I have of the wolf in full flight is far more fitting of the occasion and the next day I spotted a pair in that radiant early morning light, which we spent about half an hour following at a comfortable distance. There would be one more pair of wolves at Ennedi, on our fourth and final night drive and then I would have the choice to either stay with the wolves or leave to check a much smaller eyeshine in the distance.

3. Pale Fox (*Vulpes pallida*)

On that same final nocturnal drive I encountered my only pale foxes at Ennedi, a pair that we spotted beside their den and which kept retreating within it. Given their scarcity here, I waited a while to get a reasonable reference shot, as they are clearly not the dominant fox species at Ennedi, at least not in the many areas I searched. Interestingly, the situation would again change at Ouadi Rimé, where the pale fox was the only fox species encountered.



4. Ruppell's Fox (*Vulpes rueppellii*)

When you consider that it had already produced African wolves, pale foxes and a probable sand cat, the last of my four night drives clearly highlighted just how successful I might have been at Ennedi and this was before I noticed a faint eyeshine in the distance whilst we were sitting with the wolves. My mind was still very much on what I considered to be a missed opportunity with the sand cat and I therefore decided fairly quickly to leave the wolves and to see how close we could get, just in case it was another cat. On this occasion, I stopped the vehicle further away as we approached, as I would have been able to identify the possible sand cat with binoculars and did not want to make the same mistake twice. As it was, I could see clearly that it was a fox, but that it was too big to be a fennec and was probably another pale fox. It was only as we got closer that I noticed the end of its tail looked white and after stopping again to check, I was able to confirm that the tip was unquestionably white and that we were subsequently watching the first ruppell's fox of the trip. My guides did not have a clue of course and basically shouted fennec whenever they saw a fox, which is evidently the generic name for every fox in the region. I, on the other hand, could not have been more delighted, as I had been hoping to see all three of the fox species that occur at Ennedi and ultimately this would be my only ruppell's fox of the entire tour, as I was later informed that they are very rarely observed at Ouadi Rimé.

5. Fennec Fox (*Vulpes zerda*)

From my limited experience, the fennec fox appears to be the dominant fox species at Ennedi and of the eight encountered in total, four were observed in daylight. Although they have the same distinctive black tail tip as the pale fox, they are considerably smaller and have significantly larger ears. Indeed, it would be hard to mistake them for either of the other two species that occur here, or for anything else for that matter, based on their ears alone. The ones observed during the day were remarkably calm, including a pair that initially bolted into their den, but then popped up again at different entrances and promptly curled up and fell asleep in the fierce late sun. We actually left them in the end and this also occurred on a couple of occasions at night, including with one that I spotted on foot and then sat and watched hunting for the best part of an hour.



6. Dorcas Gazelle (*Gazella dorcas*)

Yet another threatened gazelle, they really are one of the most persecuted groups on the planet, the dorcas gazelle has disappeared from much of its former range and now exists in fragmented populations across its remaining territory, although in greatly reduced numbers almost everywhere. One of the largest populations is in Chad, but at Ouadi Rimé and not Ennedi, where we saw relatively few, despite the fact that this is essentially ideal habitat. Given how incredibly nervous they all were, they would automatically bolt as soon as they became aware of our presence, it is fairly obvious that these small gazelles are still being poached and I was relieved to finally see a few of these attractive animals standing still and at relatively close quarters at Ouadi Rimé.

7. Dromedary (*Camelus dromedaries*)

In addition to the large herds of these traditional domestic animals, we encountered several individuals and small groups living wild. None had any of the markings that you associate with being owned and my guide said that most would have been born in the wild and were living free, which is not unusual within such a vast sprawling landscape.



8. Hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibious*)

Not observed at Ennedi at all, but the only animal seen between destinations and included here because they were encountered on the day that I departed N'Djamena for Ennedi. Hippos are normally fairly easy to see in the Chari River at N'Djamena, indeed you can often even spot them coming in to land. However, that was not the case during my brief return to the capital from Zakouma, as the water level was too low in their usual area and I therefore had to drive beyond the main city centre. This was fine, but what followed was completely bizarre, as my guide hired a local with a wooden canoe in order to reach the hippos, which seemed reasonable enough until I found out that the canoe was leaking and that my guide intended to walk along the riverbank virtually beside me. In fact, our canoe never ventured more than a metre or so from shore and as we hugged the bank and I got soaked, my guide walked along completely dry, occasionally having to wait as we laboured against the current. I thought at least that our aquatic craft, I can barely call it a boat, would come into its own when the hippos were finally spotted, but instead the boatman just grabbed some reeds in the shallows to keep us still and pointed at the hippos out in the middle of the river. I could have walked to the same spot to watch them in half the time without getting wet and would have enjoyed a considerably better view higher up on the riverbank. Unsurprisingly, I opted to walk back, leaving the by now bedraggled boatman to trail behind, even with the current now in his favour.

9. Olive Baboon (*Papio Anubis*)

In direct contrast to Zakouma where they are abundant, I was informed that baboons are rarely encountered at Ennedi and that our best chance would either be on the way in or out. This proved to be the case, when I spotted a small troop running along the rocks at a small oasis towards the southwest of the reserve a couple of days before we were due to leave.



10. Patas Monkey (*Erythrocebus patas*)

The same oasis was home to a large population of patas monkeys, which I spent almost an hour with on my final full morning before moving on to Ouadi Rimé, having already observed a similarly impressive group a few days earlier. The area was obviously a good one for primates with plenty of vegetation and water and these were the last I would encounter in Chad.

11. Rock Hyrax (*Procavia capensis*)

Hyrax were commonly observed at a few sites, including Guelta d'Archei, but I was completely shocked when an entire pack of these voracious predators swarmed down across the rocks and attempted to drag me back to their lair. Okay, so that is not exactly what happened, but they did swarm and this is the first time that I have observed this behaviour from probably the most harmless creatures on the planet, excluding perhaps manatees. However, instead of actually trying to savage me, they all ran down the rocks, had a quick look and sort of collectively wiggled their noses in the air, at which point they clearly decided I was not a huge threat and just sloped off. As comical as it was, it was equally refreshing to see these superbly adapted desert animals in an entirely natural habitat and not scrounging scraps around a safari lodge.

12. Cape Hare (*Lepus capensis*)

The second hare species of the trip and, as per the situation with the African savannah hare, these were identified on where they were observed rather than what they looked like. That said, I did manage to get very close to one on foot during our second night drive and to take a few nice shots, just before our guides beached the car on some rocks and we ultimately had to abandon for the evening. I eventually encountered twelve in total, all of which were spotted on the four nocturnal drives.



13. Striped Ground Squirrel (*Xerus erythropus*)

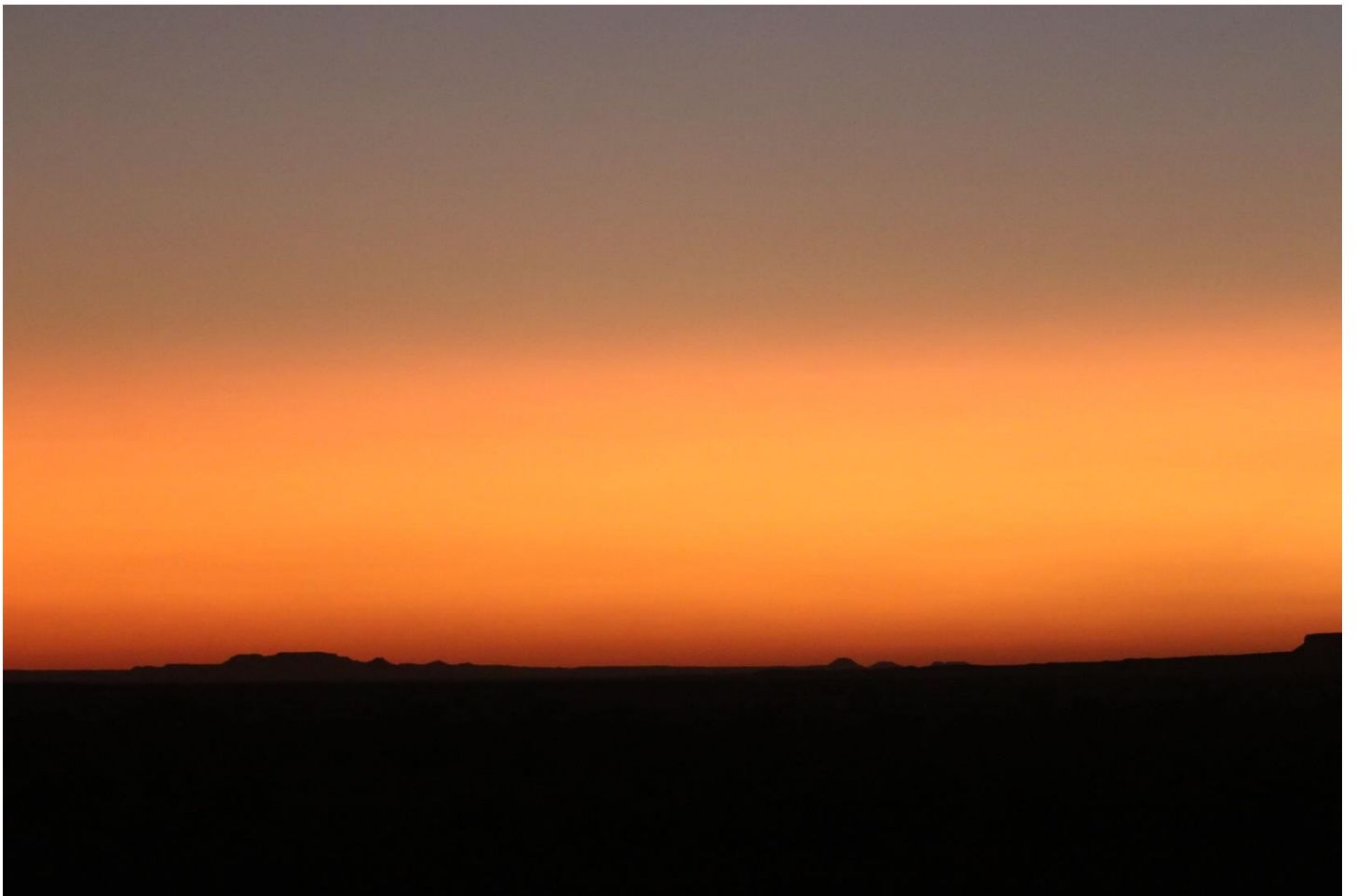
One on the drive into Ennedi and one on the drive out, both were running at full speed and none were spotted in between.

14. Lesser Egyptian Jerboa (*Jaculus jaculus*)

Not officially recorded as occurring anywhere in Chad, as you might expect, the lesser Egyptian jerboa was difficult to observe on foot, in fact I did not see any walking, but much easier from our vehicle, depending on the area, as some were more productive than others. This is common with jerboa species, which often occur in high numbers at suitable sites, and on our four nocturnal drives, sightings ranged from none, one and three, to more than ten. I have no idea why they have never been recorded in Chad, or at least why no jerboa species are said to occur here, as they are extremely easy to find and to photograph at both Ennedi and Ouadi Rimé and I took a number of nice images without even devoting a great deal of time to the task.







Trip Overview - Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Wildlife Reserve

Having read about Zakouma and Ennedi, you will understand just how special Ouadi Rimé is when I state without any hesitation, that I saved the best of my three destinations in Chad until the end. I have to admit that this was not intentional, as I was initially due to visit Ouadi Rimé before Ennedi, but I am so glad that it worked out this way, as this reserve is home to one of the most significant conservation initiatives on the planet and consequently some of its rarest species. Managed by the Sahara Conservation Fund, which was created in 2004 to address the catastrophic decline in species across the Sahara and bordering Sahel region, Ouadi Rimé protects three of the most threatened mammals not just in North Africa, but across the globe. The scimitar-horned oryx has been extinct in the wild for more than thirty years and the other two species, the critically endangered addax and dama gazelle, are inexorably heading the same way. Ouadi Rimé remains a stronghold for both, as the addax population here has now passed 100, which is highly likely to



be significantly more than every other possible site combined, and the population of between 40 and 50 dama gazelles is believed to be the largest of the four known surviving populations of Niger and Chad. Conceived by the biologist and inaugural CEO John Newby, the Sahara Conservation Fund reintroduced the first oryx here in March 2016, a herd of 25 bred by the Environmental Agency Abu Dhabi, or the EAD in short, and in January 2020 fifteen addax arrived from the same state of the art breeding facilities. With the huge financial backing of the EAD, who have funded the entire project from conception, further reintroductions have followed and both species have subsequently thrived and are breeding successfully. The situation with the dama gazelle is different, in that a small wild population has endured here and it is now a case of adding to that population, partly by again introducing animals bred in captivity, but also in terms of rescuing individuals from basically doomed herds elsewhere. Having been in touch with John Newby to arrange my visit, I was disappointed to learn that he would not be at Ouadi Rimé during my stay, but I was conversely fortunate that the zoologist Tim Wachter would be, as I was able to accompany him in the field each day and he went out of his way to fit me into his busy schedule, even taking me out spotlighting each evening. I would add that Tim is the Senior Conservation Biologist at the Zoological Society of London and has been involved in scimitar-horned oryx conservation since 1985. He has been a part of the oryx reintroduction programme at Ouadi Rimé since its inception and I was thrilled to be able to spend time in the field in such expert and personable company. In a way, I felt as if I had more or less travelled full circle, as the Zoological Society is of course responsible for London Zoo, which, as a boy, I used to climb into at night, just to spend more time with the animals. Tim and I had trodden widely different paths from our time in London, but our journeys converged with basically the same interests in Chad and I very much hope that I will have the opportunity to assist with the remarkable conservation efforts taking place here. I did make a company donation as soon as I returned home, but most people who visit Ouadi Rimé as guests of the SCF do not and I am hoping that it will be possible to initiate a small sustainable tourist operation here, something entirely sympathetic in terms of both the environment and the essential work that guests would have the unique privilege of participating in. Although it is relatively comfortable for the researchers and staff



who work there, not to mention complete luxury to someone who had not seen running water or a flush toilet for sixteen days, the existing Oryx Base Camp was not built with tourists in mind and I slept in a tent just beyond the perimeter. However, it would be fairly straightforward to build a small secluded camp within easy distance and, as spectacular and incredibly significant as they undoubtedly are, there is more to this reserve than the three threatened antelopes that I have already mentioned. As previously within this report, I will write about my experiences with each of the mammals individually, but Ouadi Rimé protects an array of desert flora and fauna and the SCF are actively involved in the preservation of a host of African avifauna, including six species of vultures, the

Nubian, Arabian and denham buzzards and the regionally extinct North African ostrich subspecies *struthio camelus camelus*. In addition to some of the vultures, I would encounter the Nubian and Arabian buzzards daily, the denham buzzard is only observed during the rains between August and October, as well as two of the hand-reared ostriches released to date, a single male and female, although not together. This short summer rain is the only precipitation experienced at Ouadi Rimé and with no permanent water sources, many of the inhabitants, all of which are supremely adapted to survive in these harsh arid conditions, rely almost entirely on the desert melons that proliferate for their water consumption. I spent much of my time monitoring some of the collared or tagged antelope in the vehicle with Tim and his team, but I also got up at first light in order to walk on my own, as the landscape here is ravishing and the desert always looks its best in the early morning light and during that golden hour just before dusk. I would make sure that I was always out in the field to savour both and in so many ways Ouadi Rimé was the perfect way to conclude a tour that would fall within the trip of a lifetime category. As you will go on to read, my late afternoon with a herd of wild dama gazelle will forever remain a highlight of my wildlife travels and at Ouadi Rimé it is not so much a question of what you see, it is understanding the importance of still being able to see it.

1. African Wild Cat (*Felis lybica*)

Having encountered eleven wild cats on our first night drive, we did not devote as much time to this species on subsequent evenings, particularly after Tim informed me that sand cats did not occur this far south and it was not therefore necessary to check every cat quite as closely. That said, we still encountered more than twenty of these elegant predators over four nights and watched one hunting for several minutes. After one failed attempt, it pounced gracefully through the air and moved off into the night in a single fluid movement, accompanied on this occasion by an unsuspecting rodent fixed firmly in its jaws.



2. African Wolf (*Canis lupaster*)

African wolves are the most commonly observed predators at Ouadi Rimé and are just as likely to be encountered in the early morning and late afternoon, as at night. Given the almost total absence of water, at least two pairs were attracted to a leaking pipe just beyond the fenced camp, but in general they could be seen anywhere and at more or less any time. I recorded well over twenty in all and although they are by no means tame throughout the reserve, there is a lot of human activity around the antelope breeding pens and they are certainly used to our presence in this area.

3. Pale Fox (*Vulpes pallida*)

Having not seen any at Ennedi until the final night drive, the pale fox was the only fox species observed at Ouadi Rimé and apparently both the ruppell's fox and the fennec fox are rare in the south eastern section of the reserve that we were largely exploring at night. In all we would see thirteen, including several pairs around their dens and one with an unfortunate jerboa hanging forlornly out of its mouth.



4. Striped Hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*)

This was probably the bonus mammal sighting at Ouadi Rimé, not so much because striped hyenas are especially rare here, but because the initial sighting involved a hyena cub that was being seen beyond its den during the day, causing some of the reserve staff to believe that it had been abandoned. It did not look that way to either Tim or myself, as the pup appeared to be in fairly good condition and was far too young to survive if that had been the case. The initial camera trap photographs proved to be inclusive, as they showed the cub moving beyond their limited perspective, but no parents coming as far as the actual den, probably because the area had been so badly disturbed. Tim therefore suggested that they change the setting to video and sure enough, just after I left, they recovered film of one of the parents moving in and removing the cub by the scruff of its neck. As relieved as I was to hear that the episode had ended well, this was always likely, as I had already observed both parents within a short distance of the den and had been able to follow one of them on foot for some distance in the early morning light. This was another major highlight of a trip packed full of them, as was watching the young cub peering out of its den, waiting expectantly for one of its parents to return.

5. Libyan Striped Weasel (*Ichonyx libycus*)

After a brief view of my first Libyan striped weasel, I thought that I had probably seen a zorilla, or a striped polecat as it is now more commonly known, as the two species are superficially similar and where they both occur, the larger zorilla is usually more commonly observed. However, it soon became apparent that this was the smaller and more elusive of the two mustelids, as the Libyan version has a distinctive white ring around its face, which is broken on the zorilla. Having not seen this species for several years, I was as surprised as I was elated to spot individuals on three of the four night drives and our final encounter, on my last night at Ouadi Rimé, was by far the best. In all we probably spent half an hour or so following or sitting with an extremely relaxed weasel, that would disappear down a burrow and then emerge shaking itself and scratching its head. It did this on a number of occasions and in the corresponding photographs you can very clearly make out ants crawling around its head and either ticks or ant pupae in its fur, possibly from where it was raiding their colonies.



6. Dorcas Gazelle (*Gazella dorcas*)

Given the critical status of the three other antelope species found here, reintroduced or otherwise, it is easy to forget that the dorcas gazelle is also endangered and that Ouadi Rimé remains a stronghold for this animal as well. In fact, the dorcas gazelle has been extirpated across much of its historic territory and now largely survives in small severely fragmented herds. The estimated population of at least 44,000 individuals at Ouadi Rimé is therefore hugely significant and this striking little gazelle is the animal that you will encounter most often at this reserve, although not always at close quarters. Whilst they are far more tolerant of vehicles here than at Ennedi and I was eventually able to enjoy some reasonably close views, they are still clearly nervous of people and you can usually only approach individuals or small groups, as the larger herds will generally still scatter in our presence.



7. Dama Gazelle (*Nanger dama*)

Ostensibly, the thought of watching a few gazelles through binoculars almost a kilometre away, probably does not overly appeal to the average tourist, even on safari, but the late afternoon that I spent with a small herd of dama gazelle was undoubtedly the highlight of my trip. I am not sure which of the dama gazelle and the addax is officially classified as the most endangered antelope on the planet currently, indeed, I do not believe that anyone can know for certain at this stage, but there are believed to be fewer than 150 of each species and both are protected at Ouadi Rimé. Indeed, the largest remaining population occurs here and the 21 individual animals that we counted on that extraordinary afternoon probably represents the largest surviving herd anywhere on earth. Sadly, there is not a great deal of competition, as only four populations are known to endure, two in Chad and two in Niger, with the outside possibility of a fifth in Mali, although there have been no accurate records from that area for more than a decade. At least one of these populations, in the Manga region of Chad, is no longer considered sustainable and the numbers have decreased so significantly there over the years, that the Sahara Conservation Fund mounted a rescue operation in February and were able to successfully capture three females and a single male, all of which were transferred safely back to Ouadi Rimé. This is how important every single animal has become in the fight against extinction, as there are dama gazelles in captivity, but their genes are not as diverse as their wild counterparts and it is imperative that genetically diverse animals are used for breeding purposes. There are thought to be between 40 to 50 wild dama gazelles remaining at Ouadi Rimé, one source I read quoted 47, with a further sixteen in captivity waiting to be released. Some of these sixteen were born within the holding pens built specifically on the reserve and several additional calves are currently expected. The captive animals will be introduced in small groups as the numbers increase, but to date none of these gorgeous gazelles have been released and all of the dama currently observed at Ouadi Rimé are part of the existing population. Apart from a couple of animals that have taken to hanging around the breeding pens, I had two main encounters here, that unforgettable afternoon with the main herd and an earlier and altogether shorter view of a solitary female perched on the brow of a hill, which Tim spotted and instructed me to photograph in no uncertain terms, as he knew how keen I was to see this species and was almost as excited as me. The longer sighting was a far more relaxed affair in the best possible light and although we were not close, I cannot really convey how special it felt to spend time with an entire herd of literally one of the rarest mammals on earth. As I wrote at the time, I was more than happy to watch the sun go down on these few animals, as long as it never does on the species.



8. Addax (*Addax nasomaculatus*)

In January 2020, almost four years after the first 25 scimitar-horned oryx were released at Ouadi Rimé, fifteen addax followed and in July of that same year, it was announced that a first addax calf had been born in this region of Chad for more than four decades, which was followed a couple of days later by a second. Further introductions have ensued and there are believed to be in the region of 100 addax now at Ouadi Rimé, with 25 more due to be released in August 2022. This is already the largest population of addax anywhere in the wild and when you read the discouraging accounts of other possible sites, including the Termit and Tin Toumma Reserve in Niger, which the Sahara Conservation Fund surveyed in June 2015 with devastatingly disappointing results, it is even possible that the animals at Ouadi Rimé now form the last viable addax population. As such, it remains a concern that they are not breeding as successfully as the oryx, but the population is still increasing slowly and I personally observed several calves among the small herds encountered. Having also seen several herds of addax in semi-wild conditions at several destinations, including at Souss-Massa National Park in Morocco, as with the other two critically endangered species observed here, it was an absolute joy to watch these magnificent antelopes roaming free once more. Whilst they are similar in appearance, both the male and female have spectacular spiralled horns and a distinctive white band beneath the eyes, the females are smaller and their elegant horns are not as thick as those of the male. Whilst I did not spend as much time with this species, primarily because there are fewer, but also because Tim was working more with the oryx during my stay, these were the animals observed just before we spotted the herd of dama gazelle in the distance, so we basically went from one of the most endangered antelopes on the planet to the only real competition for that unenviable title, which rather emphasises the level of conservation you are experiencing when you visit Ouadi Rimé.

9. Scimitar-horned Oryx (*Oryx dammah*)

The 14th of March 2016 is a significant date for conservation, not only in Africa, but across the globe, as it was the day on which a species returned to its sub-Saharan heartland after an absence of almost 30 years and an animal that no longer existed, at least in the wild, began once again to leave its tracks in the dust. The scimitar-horned oryx was hunted to extinction across Chad in the early 1980s and elsewhere within a decade or so and on that auspicious day back in 2016, the Sahara Conservation Fund released 25 captive oryx at Ouadi Rimé, many of which are still alive today. Since then an additional 200 oryx have been released and as I write this piece, Tim Wachter has just confirmed that twenty more are waiting for their own moment of freedom. This reintroduced population has more than doubled in just six years, indeed some of the females released in 2016 have again produced young this year, and the current population size is currently estimated at around 450, encouragingly close to the initial target of 500 breeding adults. Whilst I have observed these truly majestic animals in semi-wild conditions previously, these encounters have not always been in areas where the oryx would naturally occur, but that is not the case at Ouadi Rimé, as most of the oryx in collections around the world are descendants of animals captured in this very region. In much the same way, they could not be living a more natural existence, as the reserve is not fenced and the oryx are free to move wherever they choose, which many have, with the usual uncertain consequences for wild animals. They are not fed, there are no artificial water sources and they receive no veterinary care, indeed, the opposite is the case, as at least one has been shot and several others have been killed or injured by the devastating fires that this arid region is prone to. Whilst they are breeding successfully, they are also preyed on, particularly in terms of the young, and when you take all of these factors into account, it is very clear that this animal is no longer extinct. It has certainly not recovered, which can never be considered the case whilst just one population exists, but the oryx here are more than surviving without the assistance of humanity, they are positively thriving and will continue to do so as long as the area itself remains protected. This is key of course, as the region remain highly vulnerable to human encroachment and overdevelopment, particularly regarding the illegal wells that are being constructed in order to manage large herds of camels, many of which belong to wealthy businessmen who do not even live in the area. Despite this issue and the many other challenges facing a conservation initiative of this scale, Ouadi Rimé, has quickly become the most important sanctuary in the region and, in my opinion at least, one of the most significant in the world, certainly when you consider what is being attempted here and how hugely successful it has been in such a relatively short period of time. For my small part, I was thrilled to be able to spend time with Tim and the rest of the team monitoring the animals here and although I did not count the exact number of oryx encountered, I unquestionably observed more than a hundred in total, largely in herds of up to about 25. If the numbers themselves do not sound especially impressive, you have to remember that you are talking about 'wild' scimitar-horned oryx at Ouadi Rimé and there is simply nowhere else in Africa you can even dream of writing that.

10. Aardvark (*Orycteropus afer*)

Having not seen a single aardvark during 33 successive nocturnal activities, 21 of which were in vehicles covering a lot of ground, on my last night drive we encountered two of these insanely endearing, but highly anxious animals within perhaps twenty minutes of each other. Unless they are not aware that they are being observed, aardvarks invariably run and these two were no exception, although the second one appeared slightly less nervous and we were able to get marginally closer and to watch it for longer. In terms of those that I have made the effort to positively identify, so excluding bats and most rodents as usual, the first aardvark was the 57th and final new mammal species of the tour.

11. Cape Hare (*Lepus capensis*)

The two individual hares observed on the first night drive turned out to be the only ones I would encounter during my four-night stay, which was perhaps surprising until you consider the extremely high density of predators in the areas we were searching. Although I did not dedicate a great deal of time to the endeavour, I did take a few reference shots of one, just in case they might eventually help to identify the exact species that occurs in this region.

12. Striped Ground Squirrel (*Xerus erythropus*)

My only sighting at Ouadi Rimé consisted of a fleeting glimpse of one dashing across the road and although there is very little that I can add to that transitory event, at least it ensured that the striped ground squirrel would be the only non-predator observed at all three destinations.





13. Lesser Egyptian Jerboa (*Jaculus jaculus*)

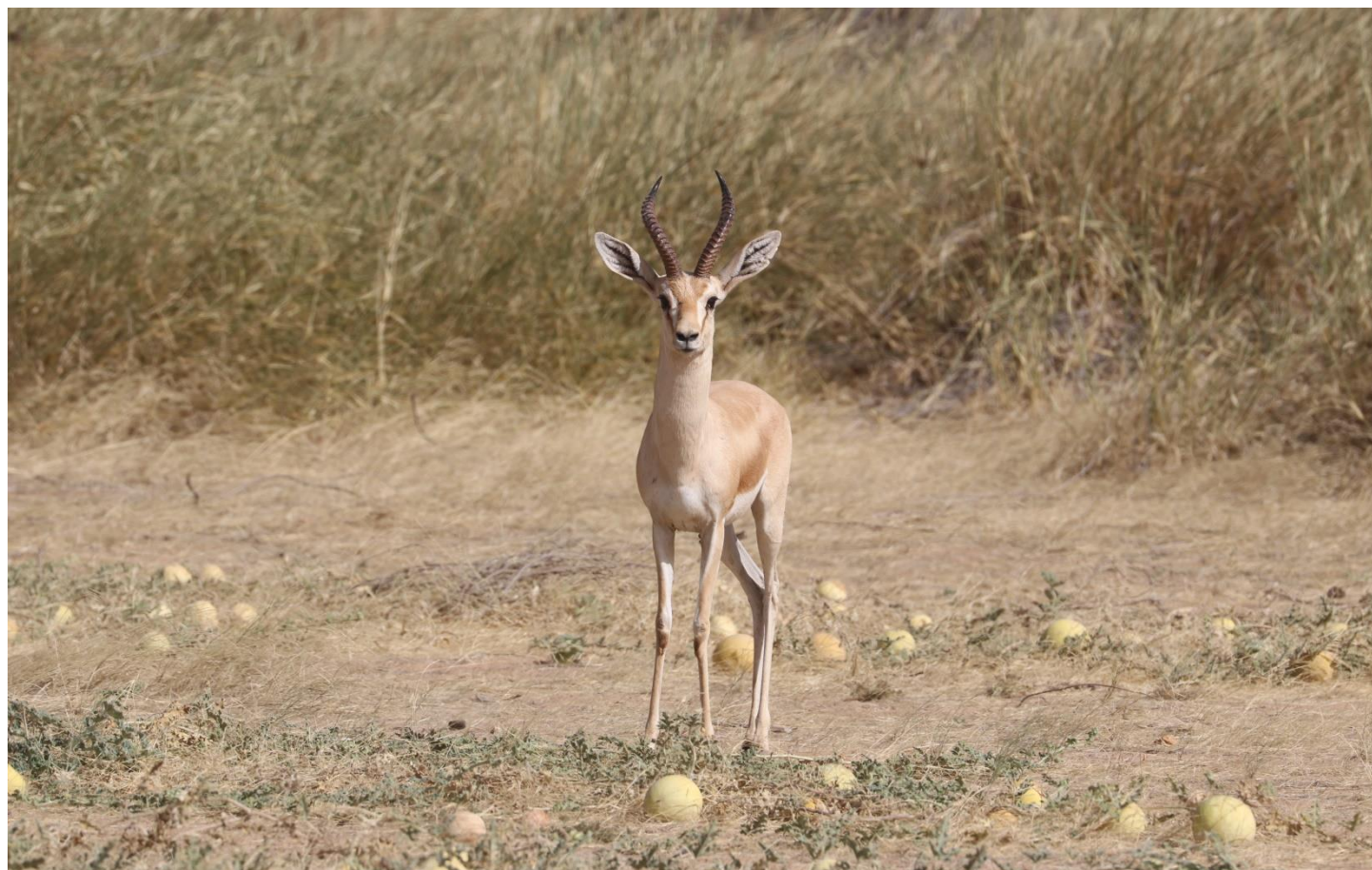
Jerboas were common at Ouadi Rimé and were observed on every night drive excluding the last, when the vast majority of our time was devoted to fleeing aardvarks and one highly accommodating Libyan striped weasel.

14. Pgymy Gerbil (*Gerbillus henleyi*)

Although I photographed at least two other distinct gerbil species, and have included a photograph of one of them here, the pygmy gerbil was the only species that I was able to identify. They were abundant at Ouadi Rimé, although apparently absent at Ennedi, and it remains possible, perhaps even likely, that I encountered four or five different gerbil species across both desert landscapes.







No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Lion	<i>Panthera leo</i>	Routinely encountered at Zakouma.
2	Cheetah	<i>Acinonyx jubatus</i>	Two sightings of five animals at Zakouma.
3	Caracal	<i>Caracal caracal</i>	A single animal on a night drive at Zakouma.
4	Serval	<i>Leptailurus serval</i>	Over 30 sightings at Zakouma, mainly at night.
5	African Wild Cat	<i>Felis lybica</i>	Encountered at all three destinations.
6	Side-striped Jackal	<i>Lupulella adustus</i>	Around a dozen animals at Zakouma, including one pair.
7	African Wolf	<i>Canis lupaster</i>	A single sighting of three at Zakouma and diurnal and nocturnal encounters at Ennedi and Ouadi Rimé.
8	Pale Fox	<i>Vulpes pallida</i>	The only fox observed at all three destinations.
9	Ruppell's Fox	<i>Vulpes rueppelli</i>	A single sighting on a night drive at Ennedi.
10	Fennec Fox	<i>Vulpes zerda</i>	Eight animals at Ennedi, including pairs.
11	Spotted Hyena	<i>Crocuta crocuta</i>	Seven sightings at Zakouma involving eleven animals in total.
12	Striped Hyena	<i>Hyaena hyaena</i>	One on a night drive at Zakouma and three in daylight at Ouadi Rimé, including a cub.
13	Honey Badger	<i>Mellivora capensis</i>	Over 30 at Zakouma, including an encounter with a family of six and a family of four.
14	African Civet	<i>Civettictis civetta</i>	Observed on every night drive at Zakouma except one.
15	Egyptian Mongoose	<i>Herpestes ichneumon</i>	Two individuals during the day and a pair at night at Zakouma.
16	Slender Mongoose	<i>Herpestes sanguineus</i>	Four brief views at Zakouma.
17	White-tailed Mongoose	<i>Ichneumia albicauda</i>	Abundant at night at Zakouma.
18	Banded Mongoose	<i>Mungos mungo</i>	Several sightings at Zakouma, usually of groups running.
19	Libyan Striped Weasel	<i>Ictonyx libycus</i>	Three individuals at Ouadi Rimé, all on different nights.
20	Large-spotted Genet	<i>Genetta maculata</i>	Extremely common at Zakouma.

21	Red-fronted Gazelle	Eudorcas rufifrons	Several sightings at Zakouma, but always in low numbers.
22	Dorcas Gazelle	Gazella dorcas	Low numbers at Ennedi and common at Ouadi Rimé.
23	Dama Gazelle	Nanger dama	Three sightings at Ouadi Rimé, including a lone female and a herd of 21.
24	Roan Antelope	Hippotragus equinus	Common at Zakouma, including in relatively large herds.
25	Waterbuck	Kobus ellipsiprymnus	Routinely encountered at Zakouma.
26	Hartebeest	Alcelaphus buselaphus	Observed in high numbers in certain areas at Zakouma.
27	Topi	Damaliscus lunatus	Large herds in parts of Zakouma and lesser numbers elsewhere.
28	Oribi	Ourebia ourebi	One of the less abundant antelopes at Zakouma, but still encountered on most days.
29	Red-flanked Duiker	Cephalophus rufilatus	Two individuals on consecutive days at Zakouma, one in the open in good light.
30	Common Duiker	Sylvicapra grimmia	Observed in low numbers on more or less a daily basis.
31	Greater Kudu	Tragelaphus strepsiceros	Four sightings of never more than five animals.
32	Kob	Kobus kob	Common and routinely observed at Zakouma.
33	Bohor Reedbuck	Redunca redunca	Abundant in certain areas at Zakouma.
34	Bushbuck	Tragelaphus scriptus	Regularly observed at Zakouma.
35	Addax	Addax nasomaculatus	A handful of small herds and a few individuals at Ouadi Rimé.
36	Scimitar-horned Oryx	Oryx dammah	Observed on a daily basis at Ouadi Rimé.
37	African Buffalo	Syncerus caffer	Routinely encountered at Zakouma, often in large numbers.
38	Giraffe	Giraffa camelopardalis	One of the most commonly observed species at Zakouma.
39	Dromedary	Camelus dromedarius	Several feral individuals and small herds at Ennedi.
40	African Elephant	Loxodonta Africana	One herd of around 250 animals and regular views of small herds and individuals.
41	Hippopotamus	Hippopotamus amphibius	A small group in the Chari River at N'Djamena.
42	Black Rhinoceros	Diceros bicornis	A brief glimpse of one running at Zakouma.
43	Aardvark	Orycteropus afer	Two individuals on the final night drive at Ouadi Rimé.
44	Olive Baboon	Papio Anubis	Routinely observed at Zakouma and observed on one occasion at Ennedi.
45	Tantalus Monkey	Chlorocebus tantalus	Widespread at Zakouma.
46	Patas Monkey	Erythrocebus patas	Relatively scarce at Zakouma and encountered twice in large numbers at Ennedi.
47	Northern Lesser Galago	Galago senegalensis	Abundant at Zakouma and routinely observed on the night drives.
48	Common Warthog	Phacochoerus africanus	Routinely encountered at Zakouma.
49	Rock Hyrax	Procavia capensis	Low numbers at one site at Zakouma and observed on several occasions at Ennedi.
51	Cape Hare	Lepus capensis	Observed at Ennedi and Ouadi Rimé.
52	African Savannah Hare	Lepus victoriae	Five animals in all at Zakouma.
53	Crested Porcupine	Hystrix cristata	Two on night drives at Zakouma.
54	Gambian Sun Squirrel	Heliosciurus gambianus	Low numbers at Zakouma.
55	Striped Ground Squirrel	Xerus erythropus	Observed in low numbers at every destination.
56	Lesser Egyptian Jerboa	Jaculus jaculus	Common at certain areas of Ennedi and at Ouadi Rimé.
57	Pygmy Gerbil	Gerbillus henleyi	Several sightings at Ouadi Rimé.

A number of additional species were observed, but not identified, including one likely sand cat, at least two distinct gerbil species and several bats.





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