

Life and behaviour of wolves

The Arabian or Desert Wolf

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Little is known about this rare sub-species of the grey wolf. Sandra Benson tracks down the facts.

HISTORICAL RANGE

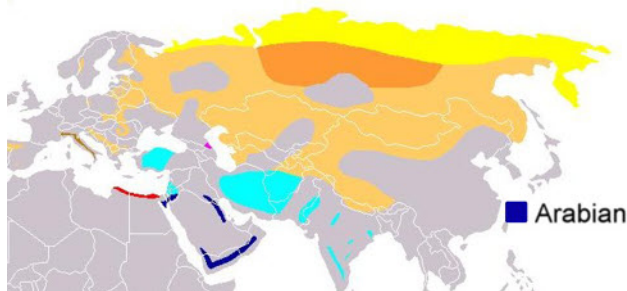
The Arabian wolf (*Canis lupus arabs*), is one of the smallest sub-species of the grey wolf. It was once found living throughout the entire Arabian Peninsula, but now can only be found in small clusters of Southern Israel, Oman, Yemen, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and possibly in parts of the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt.

This small wolf lives in one of the most extreme environments on earth; the arid and semi-arid areas of the Middle East. Inhabiting mountainous areas, gravel plains and desert fringes,



these wolves have large home ranges which they patrol constantly. They escape the heat by digging deep dens and burrows, but as they cannot survive without water, they do not wander far into the great sand deserts.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) desert has seen the extinction of many indigenous species and among these is the Arabian wolf, not seen wild in this area since the 1980s. To see this wolf in the UAE one would need to visit Arabia's Wildlife Centre in Sharjah (www.breedingcentresharjah.com)



PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

The Arabian wolf is a desert adapted canid and although one of the smallest wolves, is one of the largest canids in Arabia.

Their coat hairs are thin, short, wiry and light in colour, varying from light brown through to a greyish yellow, with the stomach being paler or white. The hair on the back remains long, which is thought to be an adaptation against solar radiation. In winter their coats are thicker and longer, but not as long as its northern subspecies.

An adult wolf stands approximately 25 - 26 inches (63- 65 cms) at the shoulder and weighs an average of 40 - 45 lbs (18 - 20 kgs). The desert wolf is very lean; to survive it must carry no excess weight or fat. It is honed down to optimum weight and physique by constant exercise and the ceaseless effort of seeking prey.

The ears are large compared to other wolves, this adaptation enables the Arabian wolf to dissipate heat and keep the blood

Scientific Classification

| | |
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| Kingdom: | Animalia |
| Phylum: | Chordata |
| Class: | Mammalia |
| Order: | Carnivora |
| Family: | Canidae |
| Genus: | Canis |
| Species: | Grey Wolf (<i>Canis Lupus</i>) |
| Sub Species: | Arabian Wolf (<i>Canis Lupus Arabs</i>) - recognised in 1934 |
| Conservation Status: | Critically endangered |
| Legal Status: | No protection, except Oman but rarely enforced |

cool. As the Arabian wolf, like other canines, possesses no sweat glands, it helps control body temperature by evaporation from the lungs, by rapid panting.

Arabian wolves are unique, as their middle two paw toes are fused. Their eyes are yellow as with all wolves, but some are found with brown eyes, thought to be an indication of interbreeding with feral dogs, which adds to the threat of survival.

DIET

This is a true hunter constantly on the move tracking and killing prey. It has the stamina to cover long distances, but also has to cope with heat gain and water loss.

Arabian wolves will hunt small to medium animals from cape hares, dorcas gazelles and ibexes, foxes, small birds, reptiles, rodents and insects. They are a solitary hunter which will take any carrion it can find but like all wolves they will also eat fruit and plants.

They are opportunistic feeders, hunting mainly at night and will attack and eat any domestic animal up to the size of a goat, the consequences of which result in farmers retaliating by shooting, trapping or poisoning the wolf.



SOCIAL LIFE

They live in small groups mainly due to lack of prey, and tend to congregate together only during the mating season, but have been known to form larger packs if food is less scarce.

They usually hunt solitarily, in pairs or occasionally in small groups of three to four wolves.

This sub-species has rarely been known to howl, perhaps due to the fact that it is usually on its own.

The only time that the Arabian wolf is known to be territorial is when its pups are born.

PACK SIZE AND BREEDING

Unlike most of their Northern sub-species, their breeding season starts in October and runs through to December. Gestation is 63 - 65 days, resulting in normally two to three pups, but litter sizes of up to twelve have been known. This is unusual as most desert animals usually only produce a single young to increase the survival chances of both the offspring and the mother.

The pups, like all canines, are blind at birth, and are weaned between six to eight weeks when the parents begin regurgitating food for them.



THREATS

Interbreeding with feral dogs is a hazard and a threat to the integrity of this sub-species.

Arabian wolves in Oman have also contracted rabies. In the Arabian Peninsula and Jordan, vast areas are used by the nomadic Bedouin for grazing livestock, and they consider the wolf to be the major predator of their goats and sheep. Systematic shooting, trapping and poisoning has nearly eliminated the Arabian wolf from most areas in the Middle East.

CURRENT STATUS

In Oman, the wolf population has increased since hunting was banned and there is a possibility that they will re-establish themselves.

In Israel, there are between 100 - 150 over the Negev and the Ha'arava. Harassing or killing wolves is prohibited but there is no livestock damage or predation compensation

In Syria, the Arabian wolf is unprotected; an exact population number is unknown but is estimated at 200. There is no compensation paid for livestock damage or predation.

The Lebanon has approximately 50 Arabian wolves, with no legal protection and no livestock damage compensation

Jordan's wolf population is unknown, but estimated at 200. There is no protection and no livestock damage compensation

Saudi Arabia has between 300 - 600 wolves with no protection and no livestock damage compensation

In the UAE the Arabian wolf is extinct.

THE FUTURE

The primary concern for conservation of the wolf in Arabia is their safety. The ideal situation would be a national park, and protection status is crucial.

Captive breeding is the second most important focus. Arabian wolves are currently being bred in Oman and held in captive breeding programmes in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Compensation is required on proof that there is livestock damage and predation.

Greater education about these beautiful creatures could contribute towards helping people understand how humans can co-exist alongside this rare wolf.