



# Al Asad au Natural



Volume I, Issue III

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## Special points of interest:

- For a howling good time, check pages 2 & 3!
- More of your questions answered on pages 2 & 3.
- A visit to a famous pond is described in the Birders' Corner on page 4...
- **Next Issue:** What are Wadi Monkeys?

## Inside this issue:

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"Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war!"

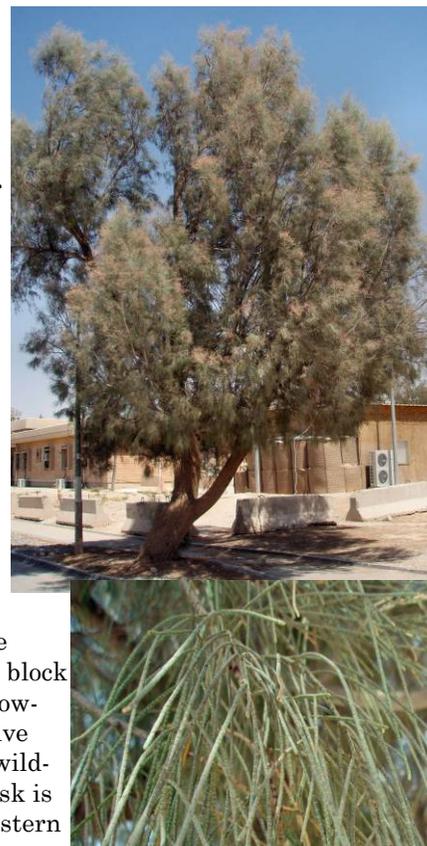
- Marc Antony  
from *Julius Caesar*

## Creature Feature

### Tamarisk Tree

With the date palm and eucalyptus, the tamarisk, or "salt-cedar", is among the most common trees on post. Native to the old world, this tree is another invasive plant that has been propagated all over, to include the southwestern U.S. The tamarisk is highly specialized to the desert. It has a deep root system, specialized needle-like leaves, and the ability to excrete excess salt through leaf structures. It can tolerate salt concentrations in the soil 30 times greater than most other trees. These factors make tamarisk a problem outside of its native range—once it salts the soil around it, the only thing that will

grow there are other tamarisk trees! Dense stands of tamarisk are militarily important because they create "no-go" terrain, but are even more significant for their impact on the environment. Tamarisk groves force ground water from heavy rains around them, causing rapid erosion. Also, the dense groves and salty soil block other plants from growing, eliminating native plant diversity and wildlife habitat. Tamarisk is a problem in the western U.S. for these reasons and because it increases fire frequency (fire promotes its growth), but in its natural range it is the



favored tree of many local birds such as the *Hippobolais* family of warblers, e.g. Olivaceous warblers.

## Who's Living Under My CHU?

Persian Field Mouse is an all too common resident of our offices. In addition to potentially exposing humans to disease, a mouse infestation will also attract snakes, not all of whom are suitable office-mates! Keep

food sealed and your area clean to discourage these



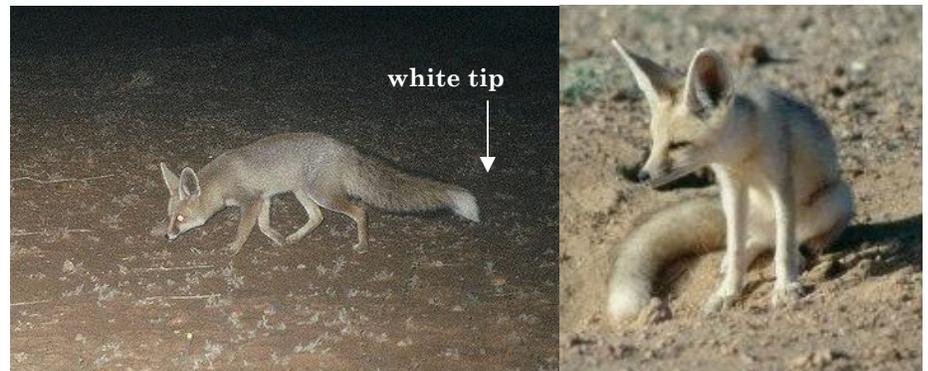
guys. Spring-loaded traps, which cause immediate death, are more humane than glue traps, which cause slow suffocation. Small rodents are a crucial source of food for larger desert animals like foxes, owls, and snakes.

## Rueppell's Fox

Iraq's smallest wild canine is the Rueppell's fox, or Sand fox. Averaging only about 6 pounds and standing 11-12" at the shoulder, this desert fox is often described as being the size of a cat. They are much smaller than the Red fox, which we often see in Ohio. It is easily identified by its exaggerated ears (better to dissipate heat with), black markings on its nose, and bushy white tipped tail. Rueppell's fox eats insects, small rodents, carrion, and fruit. They are nocturnal, and live in pairs or small social groups which seldom stay in a specific territory for more than a week. These small foxes coexist with the Golden jackal, with both sides largely ig-

noring the other, but in time a growing jackal population will cause a decline in foxes, much the way that growing coyote populations cause declines in the foxes back home. This decline is mostly

caused by the larger canine out-competing the smaller for limited food sources. Rueppell's fox has the special adaptation of fur on the bottom of its feet, thought to make it easier to get traction on soft sand.



## Golden (Common) Jackal

The Golden jackal is the medium sized canine found at Al Asad, and is by far the most numerous. Jackals are similar in diet and habits to coyotes in the U.S, but smaller, with the average coyote weighing in at 35 lbs. and large ones topping 55 lbs. while the jackal runs between 15 and 35 lbs. Jackals typically form a small pack of a monogamous pair, their pups, and a couple of

older offspring who are not yet attached and help raise the young.



The Egyptian god Anubis had the head of a Common jackal, which was a sign of good fortune.

## Questions from the Field (part one)

*What were the large spotted beetles in Kuwait?*

**Domino beetles** have long legs to keep away from the hot sand and also tend to come out at night. Their diet consist mainly of smaller insects.



*What is the dark coating found on some desert rocks?*

**Desert varnish** is a smooth coating that forms on some rocks exposed to the intense sun of the desert. This coating is caused by a chemical reaction when the rock, fine clay dust that covers the rock,

# Striped Hyena

**(a near threatened, possibly endangered species)**

The largest wild canine on Al Asad is the Striped hyena at up to 120 lbs. It is also the canine most likely to avoid humans, and the least numerous. I have seen only a single hyena on post, and have found few tracks, always of a lone animal. This is probably because although hyenas will occasionally congregate in small groups, they prefer to forage alone. Hyenas are omnivores, and in addition to carrion will eat small animals, insects, and fruit. Although nomadic in nature, they will stay within 6 miles of a source of water. The Striped hyena has a mane, which it will use to make itself appear larger when it is threatened. Hyenas prefer to live in

dens in caves with narrow entrances. In Middle-eastern folklore, the hyena is often portrayed as treacherous or stupid, or sometimes as genies or even vampires! In truth, hyena attacks are extremely rare and then usually involve small children. They have been known to attack small livestock, but are more of a pest when they raid melon or date crops. Some instances of livestock raiding may be mistaken in-

stances of scavenging already dead animals. In short, they have more to fear from us than we from them, as they are poisoned, hunted as varmints, killed for their body parts as ingredients of folk-medicines, or to use in “hyena baiting” (dog fights).



*Dog tracks can often be separated from cat tracks by the claw marks—cats often retract their claws but dogs do not*

## Tracks in the Sand

Fox tracks are small and often have indistinct borders due to fur that grows between their pads.



Jackal tracks are usually 1.5–2” in width. The other tracks are from the large Wood pigeon.



Hyena tracks are much larger!



## Questions from the Field (part two)

iron, and manganese from bacteria living on the rock are exposed to the heat of the sun and react together. Over time the varnish forms a smooth, hard, and dark coating, with a high concentration of iron and manganese. This coating has different properties from the rock underneath, making it necessary to

break the rock open for identification. Indians in desert areas of the U.S. often created cliff petroglyphs by carving through the dark layer of varnish and exposing the lighter rock below. Soluble rocks like limestone or those prone to erosion or chemically less stable are not likely to form varnish.



*Hieroglyph Canyon, Superstition Mountains, AZ*

# Pics of the Week!

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE UNOFFICIAL  
UNIT NATURALIST...  
PUBLISHED EVERY 2 WEEKS, MORE OR LESS

Send your photos, questions, and submissions to  
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this publication. It does not reflect any official views from the  
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stolen from other sources and greatly appreciated!



*Always Right, Sustain the Fight!*

**371st SB**

A young jackal  
waits for a  
drink at the Al  
Asad oasis (top),  
while a Ruep-  
pell's fox checks  
out the CHUs  
near pad 3  
(bottom, submit-  
ted by SFC In-  
gles, a pad 3  
resident).



## Birders' Corner

Joint Base Balad is an interesting place for birdwatchers—in 2004 a soldier stationed there started the blog “Birding in Babylon”, which captured a huge following and has since been published in book form. Knowing this, I was excited to have an opportunity to visit Balad and bird the laundry pond featured in many of the “Babylon” stories. I was not disappointed! Although this large man-made pond has little vegetation, it’s size and location near the Tigris River make it a good spot for a number of migrating shorebirds and ducks, and home to several local birds as well. On my first visit, I estimated well over 300 ducks and grebes, with over half being the latter. Most of the grebes were **Little grebes**, but I thought I saw a few **Slavonian grebes** in the mix. For ducks, I was able to pick

out two types, the **Ferruginous(A) duck** and the **Marbled teal(B)**. Most colorful among the birds present was the **Common kingfisher (C)**, its neon blue back flashing in the sun. Also present were a number of shorebirds, notoriously hard to identify in the fall, some terns, and the easy to identify **Spur-winged plover(D)**. Some exciting waders were also around—a **Squacco heron(E)** and several **Black-winged stilts(F)**. The birds present changed daily, as many were using this pond as a rest stop during their fall migration south.

