



# Al Asad au Natural



Volume I, Issue 4

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## Creature Feature

### Special points of interest:

- Will eagles soon visit Al Asad? See page 2.
- Poisonous lizards? Page 2!
- Cool pics! Page 4.
- **Next Issue:** I'll let the cat out of the bag!

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"One swallow does not make a summer, but one skein of geese, cleaving the murk of March thaw, is the spring."

- Aldo Leopold

### "Wadi" Monkey

One of the most intriguing things I noticed about older maps of Al Asad was an area of the wadi marked "Wadi Monkey Reserve". What in the world is a Wadi Monkey? It turns out to be the local nickname of a shy, ground-dwelling monkey from West Africa whose real name is the **Patas Monkey**. The Patas monkey lives in open savanna and semi-deserts, and is the fastest runner of all the primates, capable of reaching 55km/h! They are about 85 cm tall and have a tail that is about 75 cm long. These monkeys live in groups of about 12, with a female leader and only a single adult male until the



breeding season, when additional males will join. After reaching maturity at age 4, males will leave the group and join all male groups. Patas mon-

keys eat gum (from trees), seeds, and tubers. How did African monkeys show up in Iraq? When Al Asad was an Olympic training facility, Uday Hussein (Saddam's son), imported them as a showpiece for visiting dignitaries. Although originally released around the oasis and palm grove, the monkeys moved down the wadi to the wet area near the water treatment plant, where they lived on fruit, grubs, and insects. It is believed that Al Asad's "Wadi" Monkeys were captured and removed to a zoo or breeding park, probably in the late 1990's, but I am still researching their fate and will update this story when I find out more!

## Who's Living Under My CHU?

### Golden Skink

This larger lizard is easily identified by its bold markings and small, smooth scales. The Golden skink can measure up to 9" in length and is harmless to humans.



# The Eagles (and others) Are Coming!



Bird migration occurs each spring and fall as some birds move between northern breeding grounds and warmer areas for the winter. Iraq is a crossroads for birds migrating between Asia and Europe and either Africa or Arabia. Being close to the Euphrates river and featuring a permanent source of water (the oasis) and an attractive diversity of habitat (the wadi, the palm grove, the trees around buildings, etc.), Al Asad is an excellent resting place for these long distance travelers. Some birds migrate thousands of miles, and when they must cross over large areas of desert or water, places where they can

rest and refuel are critical to their survival. Migration is a dangerous time for birds, exposing them to predators, exhaustion, and a variety of man-made hazards like windows, wind turbines, and radio towers. Wind turbines are most profitable when placed in high wind areas like along ridges or sea coasts. These areas tend to funnel migrating birds (especially hawks and shorebirds), resulting in a blender effect. Now we are trying to place turbines in slightly less profitable but more bird-friendly locations. Radio tow-

ers kill birds at night when it is thought the safety lights confuse the birds into thinking they are seeing stars in an open sky. Towers with strobe safety lights reduce this effect. In some places (along the shores of Lake Erie, for instance), predators like the great horned owl will congregate in order to prey upon the concentrated migrants. Some places also time

hunting seasons with migration, a particular problem for the European roller here in Arabia. Migration makes protecting birds more complicated, as you must protect the habitat in one country where they breed, another where they

spend the winter, and also all the critical stops along the way. In Ohio, we have protected breeding habitat for the Cerulean warbler, but its numbers are still decline-

*Arctic terns travel about  
24,000 miles per year  
during migration!*

## Questions from the Field...your questions answered!

### Do Monitor Lizards Have a Poisonous Bite?

**Probably.** Monitors are large, fast lizards with strong jaws and aggressive teeth. It is known that their bite can cause symptoms like dizziness, muscle aches, and rapid heartbeat. Their mouths hold a lot of bac-

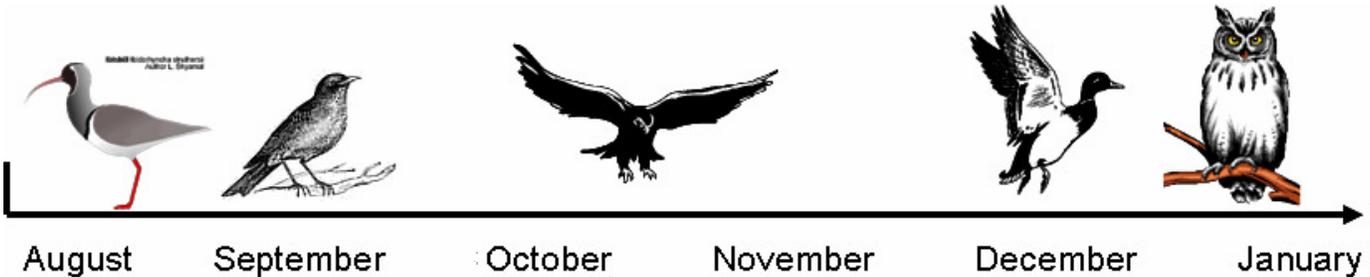
teria, and monitor bites are prone to dangerous infections. But are they poisonous? Until recently only two types of lizards were known to have poison glands, the Gila monster and the Mexican beaded lizard. Now a 2006 study has suggested that two other families of lizards may produce mild venom—the iguanas and

the monitors. This venom is a neurotoxin. Add strong claws and this lizard should not be picked up! Desert monitors have a body of up to 2' in length and powerful tails that can add another 28" for a total of 4-5' in length. They are omnivores, their diet including cobras, rodents, bird eggs, birds, frogs, and carrion.

ing due to habitat destruction on its South American wintering grounds. Different types of birds move at different times of the year. Shorebirds like plovers or sandpipers usually move first, starting migration in August. Next the passerines (thrushes, warblers, etc) move, followed by raptors (hawks and vultures). December and January may see additional movement of ducks and gulls as open water disappears under ice to the north. Also, during some years an increased number of

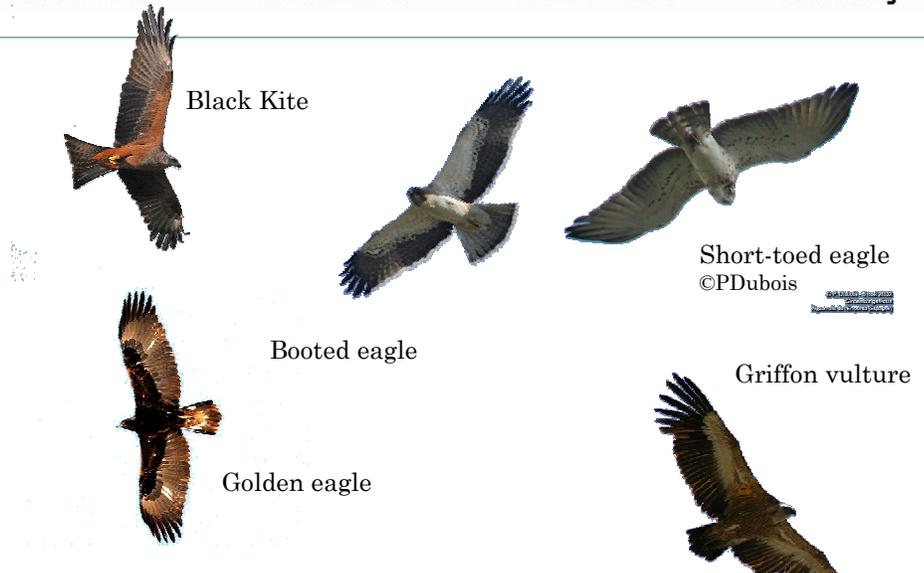
owls or finches may show in winter when their food sources (small rodents and mast crops, respectively) experience cyclical declines. The number of species that migrate through Iraq is not known for certain, but is probably similar to the 360+ that are known to go through Kuwait, which includes about 85% of the world population of white storks. The total number of birds migrating through may be similar to the estimated 500 million birds that migrate through Israel. Here

at Al Asad, migration is running a little early this year. Shorebirds (I believe I saw a lost white stork and have seen some little egrets) should mostly be through, and we saw a huge wave of passerines (especially shrikes, warblers, and wryneck woodpeckers) pass last week. We should see some additional passerines, and over the next few weeks start to see raptors. Some likely sightings here would include Short-toed, Booted, or Golden eagles, Griffon or Egyptian vultures, Pallid



harriers, Common or Honey buzzards, and Common kestrels. Preserving important birding areas may provide Iraq with an opportunity for the same ecotourism currently enjoyed by Israel and Oman.

*In the U.S., we think of "buzzards" as vultures. In Europe, Africa, & Asia, "buzzard" describes a hawk of the Buteo family, similar to Red-tailed hawks in Ohio*



Monitors are most active in the morning, spending the rest of the time in burrows that are often the abandoned holes of other animals. They are powerful diggers, and their nostrils are close to their eyes as an aid in breathing while digging. Some monitors may hibernate during colder months. In the spring monitors will lay 10-25 eggs in a covered pit. Monitors are nicknamed "dragons", and many like the desert monitor are **Endangered**.



# Pics of the Week!

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE UNOFFICIAL  
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Send your photos, questions, and submissions to  
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*Always Right, Sustain the Fight!*

**371st SB**



Recent lunar eclipse submitted by MAJ Eilers



2 Woodchat and 1 Masked (right) shrikes enjoy the bird bath!

## Birders' Corner

Exciting migrants were the story here lately! Some of the highlights included a **Bluethroat** (A), a **European nightjar** (similar to whip-poor-wills at home) (B), **Wryneck** woodpeckers (C), and a **Little crane** (D). Also seen were a flock of 18 **Little egrets**, a **Yellow wag-tail**, **Great reed warblers**, a **Nightingale**, and 5 varieties of shrikes (**Great grey**, **Lesser grey**, **Red-backed**, **Masked**, and **Woodchat**). Three raptors were also observed, a **Common kestrel**, a **Black Kite** and a **Pallid harrier**.

*Birds I've Identified on Al Asad*

to Date: **55**



A



B



C



D