



Sandscript

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The Pancratium lily (top) and the wild melon (bottom) are just two of the many plants to flower during the Sahara's all-too-brief wet season.

For the benefit of people and nature

It had been a rough and gritty night. A vicious sandstorm kicked up by distant thunderstorms had blown into camp around midnight and hadn't let up until just before dawn. Shaking out my bedding I looked up towards the rising sun and saw what appeared to a dozen grey caterpillars crawling slowly across the horizon. On closer inspection the caterpillars turned into centipedes, each one made up of hundreds of camels' legs. A caravan of biblical proportions was on the move. Rapidly packing up camp we headed off to meet it, thoughts of Lawrence of Arabia's encounter with the massed tribes in the Wadi Rum firmly in our minds.

Following hearty salaams, news was exchanged. The

caravan, led by veteran guide Mahamat of the Uled Turki, was five days out of Djedid with another six to go, travelling day and night, before arriving at the salt mines of Faya, where chunks of natron would be purchased, packed into palm-woven baskets and stored as salt lick for the animals over the coming winter. Did we have tea or sugar to spare? Tobacco? Perhaps a skin or two of water? Or medicine for Ali who was bitten on the arm by a stroppey camel in a fit of pique? Parting with what we could we each went our ways with friendly waves and mutual wishes for God's favour on our various enterprises.

Throughout the month we spent in Chad's Ouadi Rimé reserve, a South Caroli-

na-sized expanse of grassland and thorn bush, we were constantly reminded of the importance of the place for the thousands of nomadic people who live there, depending for their survival on the very same resources of pasture, shade, seasonal water and space as the wildlife we had travelled to see and to survey with a view to improving their conservation status and chances of survival. Time and time again we were also reminded of the mutual benefits that careful land management and sound conservation can bring not only to wildlife but also to people. Better practices and careful planning before new wells go in and tracks are cut can truly result in win-win solutions for all concerned.





New-born dorcas gazelle calf patiently waits in the shade for mum to return from feeding nearby (John Newby/SCF)

Baby boom

The short wet season, from July to September, is a glorious time in the Sahara. Forget about the sauna-like heat and humidity, mosquitoes and blister beetles and focus above all on the amazing greenery and nature's annual cycle of renewal that is so obvious at this time of the year.

The wet season is a time for hatching and for calving. Birds large and small time the laying of eggs and rearing of young to correspond with a seasonal abundance of seeds and insects. Both the Nubian and Arabian bustards breed during the rains and adult birds can be seen furtively creeping through the grass in an attempt to escape detection of themselves and their nests, or in an attempt to escape with 2-3 anxious fledglings in tow. Out of cover, the young birds fall easy prey to snake eagles, lanner falcons or marauding black kites.

Dorcas gazelles also breed during the wet season, although they can have young at other times of the year as well. Baby gazelles very quickly learn to follow their mothers but it is not unusual for females to hide their young during the first few days of life while they themselves graze, sometimes quite far from their offspring. To find a hidden calf, just watch the mother. When approached by man or scared by a predator, the usual instinct is to flee, and so when a female stays put it is a good sign that baby is not too far away. A careful search often reveals the calf under a nearby bush or beneath a shady tussock of grass. Sometimes the sandy-colored calves can also be seen 'hiding' in full view by lying flat on the ground, their super-soft fawn and russet pelage blending perfectly with the surroundings. Even at birth these youngsters have the ability to jump up and dash away

on unsure and spindly legs if approached too closely.

When in the field, we take great care not to disturb wildlife, especially mothers with young calves or chicks. They are incredibly vulnerable to predators at this stage and a lone dorcas gazelle calf is easy pickings for a golden jackal or striped hyena, let alone airborne eagles (top right a golden eagle) and hawks. With mum alongside, however, the story is different and an adult female gazelle can quite single-mindedly send a jackal packing.

For smaller birds, like the chestnut-bellied sandgrouse or cream-colored courser, the answer lies in close parental care and camouflage. Adult chestnut-bellied sandgrouse (bottom right) offer their bodies as shade to their young as the birds shuffle around in search of grains and insects to eat.





Extremely rare albino dorcas gazelle running with other herd members in Chad's Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Game Reserve (John Newby/SCF)

Rare white gazelle spotted

"In almost 40 years of travel throughout the Sahara and Sabel I have never seen a white dorcas gazelle before" summed up SCF's Director, John Newby, when presenting his team's findings on a recent survey of Chad's Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Game Reserve to ministry officials in Chad's capital city N'Djaména.

John and team-mates, Tim Wachter and Renata Molcanova, were there as part of SCF's ground breaking Pan Sahara Wildlife Survey (PSWS); an outstanding initiative that continues to turn up new extremely valuable information on the fauna and flora of some of Africa's least studied countries.

The project, funded most generously by HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, through the Emirates Center for Wildlife Propagation, is nearing the end of a 2-year pilot phase in which it has to

date surveyed 6 sites in Niger and Chad.

During the recent survey carried out in Chad in September, further sightings of the critically endangered dama gazelle were made (see *Sandscript 9* for previous news). Also present were many dorcas gazelles, including our pale friend shown above.

It is at this time of the year the reserve is also home to a large number of migrant birds, mostly from Europe but also inter-tropical migrants from within Africa. One very striking example is the magnificent Denham's bustard (top right), one of the largest and most graceful of the entire group. The birds seem to arrive in pairs and only spend 2-3 months in the region before flying back to countries like the Central African Republic, Uganda and beyond. During their stay, the bustards inhabit areas of dense, seasonal grassland, gorging

themselves on the abundant grasshoppers and locusts present.

Unlikely as it seems, the desert is also a hotspot for migrating waders and other waterbirds, that enjoy the abundant pondlife of the temporary pools and wetlands. These ephemeral waterholes also provide much-needed stopover and resting points to long-distance migrants, some of which like the many thousands of swallows, swifts and martins eventually head on to Southern Africa.

Whereas white storks are fairly often seen on migration, the sleek, grey Demoiselle crane (right) is a far less often observed bird. This year we were lucky and spotted several large groups of this flighty and increasingly rare species.

Reports on PSWS surveys can be found in the [Resources section](#) of our website.





The champion fundraisers of Windermere Secondary School, Orlando, Florida (Photo courtesy of Scott Tidmus)

Rock on Windermere!

“As the children of the Windermere Elementary School in Orlando, Florida, have shown, each of us can make a real difference if we work together for a common cause.”

Commenting on the incredible efforts of the school to raise \$2500 dollars in support of our Adopt-an-Ostrich campaign, Scott Tidmus* also stressed the inspiration generated by the commitment of the children concerned.

Aided by his wife, Lynn, a science teacher at the school, Scott has spoken to the children of Windermere Elementary on several occasions about the conservation work they can do. And Lynn was able to use the Adopt-an-Ostrich program as a means to teach the kids about desert ecosystems and the animals that live there.

A Coins for Conservation challenge was set up to see which grade could raise the

most money, and see just how many ostrich the school could adopt. The second graders were the winners, raising over \$800 in the process. They were treated to a special presentation and had their picture taken for the local media.

To the amazement of all involved, Windermere students were able to raise \$2500 over a three-week period. Most of the money came from looking around for change, talking to neighbors about their fundraising activity and sharing the story of the ostrich in Niger. Needless to say, with the adoption of five ostrich by this elementary school, these kids can do amazing things.

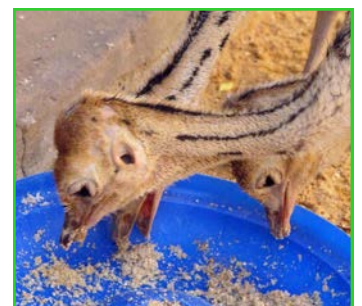
Funding raised though the Adopt-an-Ostrich campaign is being used to provide food, safe housing and care for ostriches in Niger. In recent weeks the project has also been able to recruit a site manager for captive-breeding center we

are managing at Kellé, in the east of the country.

In December, Scott Tidmus and other colleagues from the US-based AZA Ratite Taxon Advisory Group will travel to Niger to join local staff in moving at least 6 adult ostriches from Niamey, Niger’s capital city, to Kellé. By doing so, we will be increasingly the reproductive capacity of the site and boosting the rate at which young birds can be produced for eventual release into the wild, where the ostrich is now extinct.

More information on this great project can be found on the [homepage](#) of our website or by clicking [here](#) to go directly to information on how to make your pledge in support of the program.

** Scott Tidmus (right) is a long-time friend of SCF and a Zoological Manager at Disney’s Animal Kingdom, a partner organization that also strongly supports us.*





The wild melon is a vital source of food and moisture to a large range of desert animals (Photo: John Newby/SCF)

Life-savers: the wild melon

Of all the plants that grow in the desert few can be more valuable to wildlife than the wild melon *Citrullus colocynthis*. A relative of the delicious watermelons we cultivate, this wild melon is anything but sweet, and the fruits and vines are extremely bitter.

What the wildlife is after is not a tasty treat but the precious water the melon contains. In an environment where it rains only rarely and in minute quantities at that, water-rich plants like the melon are literally the only source of moisture many animals will see throughout most of the year.

On deep sands or along the

edges of temporary streams and pans, the melon grows on long vines that can in good years of rainfall cover substantial areas, creating a vibrant mat of green fleshy vines, bright plump fruits, yellow flowers and an abundance of insects and other critters that find sustenance and shade therein.

It isn't just the gazelles and antelopes that consume the melons but a whole host of other animals, including carnivores like the golden jackal, porcupines, gerbils and jerboas, and even the mighty ostrich. Nothing is quite as comical or as amazing to see a whole vine, fruits and all, slowly disappear down the gullet of a hungry ostrich.

As can be imagined, the melons are also an important resource for livestock, especially during the cooler months when the vines grow their best and when an animal like the camel can remain several weeks without drinking if water-rich plants are available for it to eat.

For humans, too, the melon can be a life-saver in times of famine. Each one contains many seeds and these are collected, dehusked and roasted to provide a nutritious, alternative food supplement. The plant is also reported to have medicinal values as a purgative, cathartic and hepatic stimulant.



Sandscript is the twice-yearly newsletter of SCF, the **Sahara Conservation Fund**.

SCF is grateful to Mathew Field, Renata Molcanova, Tim Wachter, Bill Houston, Scott Tidmus and John Newby for the articles and images used in this issue. Donations to our work can be made by [clicking here](#).



SCF's mission is to conserve the wildlife of the Sahara and bordering Sahelian grasslands.

Our vision is of a Sahara that is well conserved and managed, in which ecological processes function naturally, with plants and animals existing in healthy numbers across their historical range; a Sahara that benefits all its inhabitants and where support for its conservation comes from stakeholders across all sectors of society.

To implement our mission, we forge partnerships between people, governments, the world zoo and scientific communities, international conventions, non-governmental organizations and donor agencies. A powerful network with a common goal – the conservation of deserts and their unique natural and cultural heritage.

If you would like to know more about our work and how to contribute to our projects, please contact us at scf@saharaconservation.org We would love to hear from you!

Desert All Stars: Addax & Oryx Foundation

In a further demonstration of its generosity and loyal support to SCF, the Addax & Oryx Foundation has recently approved a whopping grant of 300,000 euros in support of our work in the Sahara to conserve its wildlife. This new grant brings the total amount of support received from the Foundation to over 850,000 dollars since 2006.



Formally established in 2007, the Addax & Oryx Foundation is based in Switzerland. The Foundation is committed to contributing to sustainable development projects. In its actions, the Foundation endeavors to support those who are most forgotten and give them renewed hope by providing them with aid that enables them to plan for the future, both individually and collectively. The Foundation focuses on Africa and the Middle East and on four core areas: education, health, community development and the environment.

It is in this last domain SCF is privileged to partner with the Foundation and funding to date has been heavily focused on our conservation work in Niger, including aerial survey funded in part by the Foundation (photo below).

While working towards the creation of a vast, new protected area, SCF's efforts have also been focused on the community-based aspects of health, food security and education, areas of interest that further bind our relationship with the Addax & Oryx Foundation.

The Foundation provides support for the management of projects and relies on the skills, expertise and advice of organizations and institutions that are specialised in development aid. We are truly proud and honored to be one of those organizations.

