

Sandscript

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Keeping the engine running

Nothing SCF does in pursuit of its mission is possible without the generous support of donors big and small, public or private, one-time or repeating. When you visit our website, see one of our presentations, or read an issue of *Sandscript*, we hope you take a moment to look at all the names, logos and other acknowledgments we try to place in each piece to honor those who provide the financial and in-kind support needed to make each project possible.

We are extremely grateful for each and every voice that has joined SCF's chorus calling for the preservation of Saharan wildlife. In this issue of *Sandscript* we want to take a moment to call special attention to a group of partners whose support underpins everything we do: our core support donors. As anyone in the NGO business knows, the hardest money to raise is that to fund basic operations, like salaries, office costs, telecommunications and the like – in short, everything that keeps the staff in place, the lights on, and the engine running so that SCF is positioned to respond to new challenges and opportunities, pursue project funding, and implement our program.

Consider this: for every \$1.00 of core support received in 2012, SCF was able to raise \$7.50!

Each and every success is therefore directly attributable to our loyal core supporters. Whether it's establishing the largest wildlife reserve in all of Africa, the ongoing development of an in situ breeding program to restore the Saharan ostrich in Niger, the ground-breaking science of the Pan Sahara Wildlife Surveys, or the building of a major reintroduction of scimitar-horned oryx in Chad, there are SCF core support donors quietly behind the scenes making it all possible.

Please join us in recognizing the valiant efforts and generous donations of those organizations and individuals that have provided core support to SCF from January 2010 to August 2013.

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SCF Deputy Chair

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People, young and old, are a critical part of SCF's mission to conserve the desert's natural and cultural heritage, promoting their role and values in a productive and sustainable world.



Barbary sheep (left) and armed poacher (right) captured one day apart by a camera trap in the Termit Massif of Niger

Gotcha!

Listed as Critically Endangered by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, the dama gazelle is one of the world's rarest and most endangered antelopes. Formerly common across its grassland habitats of the Sahelian zone of Africa, it now only exists in a small handful of tiny, isolated populations in Niger and Chad. With overhunting by far the major cause for its demise, the dama gazelle is also prone to encroachment of its preferred habitats by livestock development and agriculture, as well by severe drought and desertification. In all, there are probably no more than 300 dama gazelles in the wild today. SCF has been working to conserve the gazelle for several years and the need for more non-intrusive ways of monitoring the presence and distribution of this shy and highly vulnerable species are urgently required to formulate viable management plans.

In 2010, the Mohammed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund generously awarded SCF \$26,200 for the purchase

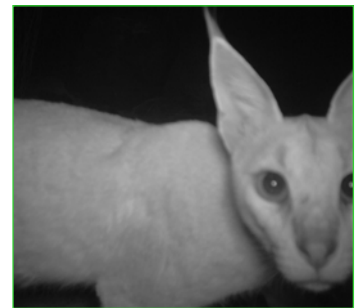
and deployment of a grid of camera traps to help monitor and manage a significant population of the dama gazelle in Niger's newly created Termit and Tin Toumma National Nature Reserve.

In recent years, hunters from the local population of Toubou pastoralists have been the gazelles' main threat, with animals being shot opportunistically in ones and twos. Work with the herders and their community leaders is, however, having a positive impact. Recognizing the value of working closely with the local people to conserve the gazelle, the Saint Louis Zoo WildCare Institute recently donated \$10,000 to employ community game guards with a dama gazelle-specific mandate to work with the local community. The two guards were recruited from among the local Toubou people to help SCF in its efforts to raise awareness locally about the plight of the dama gazelle and serve as both ambassadors and protectors for the dama conservation effort. The

guards provide a vital link between SCF and the local people and their activities include assisting in the installation and maintenance of the camera trap grids.

As we go to press, the first batch of data from the camera traps is being analyzed. And as could be expected, other species besides the dama gazelle have been caught on camera. We are particularly thrilled to report sightings of both the Barbary sheep and the locally very rare and elusive African lynx or caracal. Also captured on camera are armed poachers (see above) looking no doubt for Barbary sheep and dama gazelles. The above pair of images was taken just several hours apart.

With this type of data and information we are far better set than before to identify hotspots for extra surveillance and key areas of passage used by the animals as they move between areas of grazing, shade, etc. The impact that visual evidence of wildlife presence and threats is also a key factor in mobilizing support locally for action and increased vigilance.





The deserts of North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and part of Western Asia as seen from space (NASA Visible Earth)

United in conservation

Seen from space, the Sahara desert is one of the most obvious and spectacular features of our beautiful planet. Also striking is the way the Sahara melds into an even vaster system of deserts to the east of the Red Sea and onwards across Western and Central Asia into China. Of particular significance is the Arabian Peninsula and the land bridge with the Sahara that have permitted the flow not only of wildlife but also of people throughout the ages.

The Sahara and Arabia are united, not only geographically but also socially, culturally and ecologically. It is not surprising, therefore, that much common ground exists also when it comes to nature conservation. The similarity in life forms and challenges related to climate change, desertification, sustainable use and development, make for similar conservation agendas and opportunities for cooperation and the sharing of skills and experience.

SCF has been extremely fortunate in being able to join hands in partnership with organizations on the Arabian

Peninsula and in particular the United Arab Emirates. The strength of these relationships is not only contextual and based on our mutual love of the desert and its unique biodiversity but also because of our common interest in some of the most endangered species on earth: the addax, the scimitar-horned oryx (right), bustards and the dama gazelle.

SCF's program has benefitted enormously from the partnership and generous sponsorship of a number of UAE institutions.

In 2009, we were beneficiaries of an extremely generous grant from the Private Department of HH Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi. His support allowed us to develop and implement the pilot phase of a truly unique 3-year project to gather data on Sahelo-Saharan wildlife and to train African professionals in data gathering and wildlife monitoring.

Our long-term partnership with Al Ain Zoo has provided valuable core support to SCF and is set to continue through the signing of a new agree-

ment that will provide much-needed funding for dama gazelle, Barbary sheep and vulture conservation in Niger.

Grants from the Mohammed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund have allowed us to develop a robust global strategy for the restoration of the scimitar-horned oryx and for the conservation of the dama gazelle in Niger (see page 2).

Lastly, SCF is working closely with the Environment Agency of Abu Dhabi to plan and implement one of the most ambitious and exciting projects ever undertaken: the reintroduction of the scimitar-horned oryx. In a new agreement just signed, SCF and EAD have laid out a broad framework for cooperation that could see the oryx back in the wild in central Chad within the next 2-3 years.

United we stand, and united we move forward to embrace some of the most pressing conservation challenges of our time. SCF salutes our friends and fellow conservationists in the UAE and thanks them for their generous support and partnership.





The sublimely graceful swallow-tailed kite is a gregarious bird of prey nesting and roosting in active colonies (Photo: John Newby/SCF)

Eye on the sky

Besides ground-based fieldwork, monitoring land-use by people, livestock and wildlife, SCF teams also take good care to keep an eye on the skies above. Africa is home to one of the world's most spectacular arrays of large predatory birds. This includes eagles, like Beaudouin's snake eagle (centre), hawks, buzzards and vultures – collectively known as raptors. Being predators, dependent on a full array of prey species, a healthy population of raptors is considered a good indicator of ecosystem health. Sadly, there are signs all is not well with raptors across the Sahel; lengthy road counts repeated 35 years apart recorded a 90% drop in vulture and eagle numbers outside protected areas since the 1970s.

To maximise our input to this critical situation, SCF consistently records all observations of birds of prey made during fieldwork. Our data collection system lists all the raptor species of mainland Africa, allowing swift recording of place and time, numbers, habitat and activity, for any species encountered. The need to

think in continental, rather than just national or regional terms was underlined when the SCF team in Niger discovered a greater kestrel (top right), the first record ever of this species for West Africa, some 3000 km from its nearest known range in Ethiopia.

More generally, raptor recording has resulted in SCF creating significant new knowledge across all species in a comparatively poorly known region, and we are making this information widely available. The African Raptor Data Bank is an initiative enabling a web-based display of African bird of prey distributions on a continent-wide scale, combining recent with historical records. SCF has just contributed over 1400 observations of birds of prey made in Chad since 2010, covering 38 species and over 8000 individuals. The records range from diminutive gabor goshawks to the massive golden eagle – a first for Chad. The data also reveal dramatic seasonal changes in numbers and distribution of locally common species such as grasshopper buzzards (bottom right) and

swallow-tailed kites (above), and migrants such as the harriers and kestrels. The data can be viewed on the ARDB website at http://gis.habitatinfo.com/java/ardb_viewing/

In addition, the SCF team has assembled a unique record of the distribution, relative abundance and breeding behaviour of six vulture species right across Niger and Chad. With vultures currently the focus of much concern, this is the first time a baseline for these important species has been established in this area. The results are being published with numerous maps and illustrations in the September 2013 issue of the Bulletin of the African Bird Club (<http://www.africanbirdclub.org/bulletins/index>).

Our bird of prey records are a good example of the way SCF seeks to maximise impact by collecting information in a systematic and carefully targeted way. And at the same time turning habitual scanning of the skies for rare and exciting species along the lengthy journeys to remote study sites to good use.





Reunited! The chestnut-bellied sandgrouse parents are reunited with their chick (John Newby/SCF)

Hang on, we're coming!

Sandgrouse are amazing birds. Similar in size to pigeons or prairie chickens, they are a common feature of Africa's grasslands. They are quite gregarious, forming large flocks that can number thousands. They are also well camouflaged for life in the desert, where marauding hawks and falcons can see their prey from way up in the sky.

Sandgrouse breed during the hottest months of the year, when temperatures climb well over 40°C and water is an extremely rare commodity. Shade, too, and it is not uncommon to see adult birds protecting their chicks with their bodies (right). But it's the quest for water that brings with it some incredible adaptations and behaviour. With chicks unable to fly and water

often tens of kilometres away, the adults undertake regular visits to drink, often with clockwork precision at dawn and dusk. As they wade into the shallows to slake their thirsts, specially dense and absorbent breast feathers collect moisture which is then flown back to the waiting chicks to sip up.

This April while surveying wildlife in Chad we came across a number of chestnut-bellied sandgrouse with the tiniest of new-born young. As the adult birds moved slowly through the dry grasses in search of seeds to eat, the chicks would follow as best they could on tiny, uncertain legs. On one occasion, our presence caused a potential disaster, with the adult birds not sure whether to flee or

stay put with junior. Being now separated from its parents by several metres the chick decided to stay put and wait for help, its cryptic plumage blending in so well with the surroundings (right). Finally plucking up courage, the adults made a loop back towards our vehicle and a beeline to the chick. Between their soft clucking and the chick's peeping contact was soon re-established and the happily reunited family was soon on its way again.

Deserts are astounding places, offering some of the most grandiose sights on earth. It is often in the details and day to day minutiae, however, that the truly amazing can be seen and the incredible adaptations for life in such an austere environment.



Sandscript is the regular newsletter of **SCF**, the **Sahara Conservation Fund**.

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

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@saharacconservation.org We would love to hear from you!

To donate to SCF just scan the QR code below or visit our website by [clicking here](#).



Candid camera snaps world's rarest gazelle



This well-placed remote camera monitors the presence of one of the world's last remaining populations of the critically endangered dama gazelle. Only 300 are thought to remain and SCF's projects in Chad and Niger cover about half of these magnificent creatures. The male and young female (closest to the camera) dama gazelles photographed here are in Niger's Termit & Tin Toumma National Nature Reserve.