



# Al-Asad au Natural



Volume I, Issue 12

I February, 2009

## Special Points of Interest:

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- An Expanded Pic of the Week Section! Page 3.
- Macavity the Mystery Cat **CAPTURED!** Pic of the Week Section, Page 3!
- **Next Issue:** Will au Natural Jump the Shark with a **Special Edition?**

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“For he’s a fiend in feline shape...But when a crime’s discovered, then Macavity’s not there!”

-Old Possum’s  
Book of Practical Cats

## Creature Feature

### Desert Hedgehog

The Desert hedgehog is one of the smallest hedgehogs, measuring 5.5” – 11” long and weighing only 10-18 ounces. They live 2-4 years in the wild. When threatened, hedgehogs tighten their skin and roll into a ball, raising their ~3,000 spines, special stiff hairs, in defense. Desert hedgehogs actually have fewer

spines than their European cousins, giving them less weight to carry in the hot sun, but also making the ball defense less effective. For this reason, they may run away or even try to ram their attacker before rolling up. Hedgehog spines are not poisoned or barbed, and do not easily detach like a porcupine’s. Preyed upon by birds of prey, foxes, mongooses, and a few

other animals, hedgehogs are omnivores, but eat mostly insects. Like possums, moles, and honey badgers, they carry a special protein in their muscles that makes them partially immune to venom. For this reason they can eat bees, wasps, and some venomous snakes, but also eat amphibians, bird eggs, and even berries and melons. A hedgehog in the garden is a potent form of insect control – a

### Hedgehog Facts:

- \* are lactose intolerant
- \* spine hairs are stiffened by keratin
- \* can pass ringworm (a fungus) to humans!



single ‘hog can keep a small garden insect free – but can be poisoned by ingesting insects treated with chemical pesticides.

## Who’s Living Under My CHU?

### Antlions

Antlion pits are common in soft or sandy areas around Al Asad. Antlions are the larva of a flying insect that resembles a damselfly. Their steep-sided pits allow them to

capture & then eat other insects & arthropods.



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# Professional Racer Visits the 371st!

When Al Asad Vector Control got a call of a possibly sick bird that had landed on post and was letting people approach it, they weren't expecting to find that it was really a trained bird! The VC team recognized the bird as some type of pigeon, and noticed it had bands on its legs, indicating ownership. When they brought it to me, I agreed with their assessment that this pigeon was either a homing or racing pigeon, and took it to our unit translator to have the band information read. The bird was then taken to the post vet, where it was deemed to be healthy, and released near food, cover, and water. That night I posted the band information on a birdwatchers' website, and a few hours later one of my Iraqi friends (an ornithologist for Nature Iraq) emailed that he had just gotten off the phone with the bird's owner! It turns out that this bird is about 6 months old, does not have a name, but lives in the Rifa 'aee sub-district along the Gharraf River north of Nassiriya. After a race several days ago, the bird was released to fly north to a Baghdad roost, but went too far west and missed the target! He was happy to hear the bird is o.k., and is hopeful that it will catch its bearings and return home. It is not uncommon for homing pigeons or racing birds



to get off track – by some accounts nearly 40% miss their intended location – but hopefully this bird will follow the wadi and find its way home. Homing pigeons are domestic races of pigeons bred and trained to carry messages or race. There are hundreds of varieties, some of which sell for \$5, and others that can sell for hundreds or even thousands of dollars if the bird has a winning pedigree. Racing is very popular – there are hundreds of

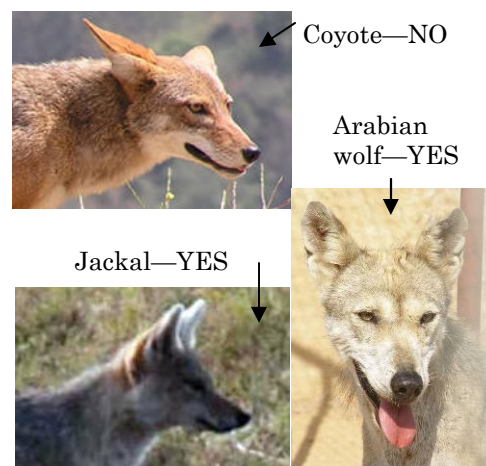
clubs in the U.S. and over a dozen in England, and other clubs all around the world. The racing season is usually in the fall, and races are normally between 100 and 800 miles, but can be longer. The birds can cover these distances at speeds between 35 and 60 mph! The birds are taken to a start point away from a place they know and released. The first one to arrive at the target location wins the race. Other breeds are raised to stay aloft for long periods, tumble in the air (a natural trick some species do to evade predators), or for their looks. Races can have 6 figure purses, and at least one race offers a million dollar top prize! It is not fully understood how these birds find their way home (or how migrating birds navigate), but recent studies indicate that a combination of skills are required. Birds seem to use visual clues from the landscape, from the position of the sun, stars, and moon, from Earth's geomagnetic fields, and possibly from other sources as well. One of the reasons that it is recommended that towers be marked with blinking red lights is that solid white lights may confuse birds moving at night who mistake the lights for stars, causing them to run into the towers and be killed. Let's wish this bird a safe and speedy trip in the right direction!

## Questions from the Field— Your Questions Answered!

### Are there Coyotes in Iraq?

**No.** The Coyote, *Canis latrans*, is native to North and Central America. In Iraq you find the Golden jackal, *Canus aureus*, occupying the same niche in the environment. The jackal is a little smaller. In southern Iraq the smallest sub-

species of Gray wolf, the **endangered** Arabian wolf (*Canus lupus arabs*) can also be found, and is not much larger than a coyote. It is also possible that a few **critically endangered** Iranian wolves, *Canus lupus pallipes*, may linger unreported in the mountains of northern Iraq. But no coyotes!





## The Dusty Lens—Pictures of the Week!



The Vector Control team shared this picture taken last summer at Ramadi of a family of Marbled teal. The team observed the birds trying to cross a busy road, and stopped traffic to allow them to pass safely. At the time, they did not realize that they were assisting an **IUCN listed Vulnerable** species!



For over a month shredded bodies of pigeons have been found at the palm grove, sometimes near mysterious large cat tracks. It was suspected that these pigeon depravations were the work of a wily Jungle cat, and sure enough one of these native cats was recently trapped near there. This cat was an older female, as evidenced by her heavily worn teeth. After vaccinations and a microchip, she was released near the capture site. Jungle cats would be attracted to the reeds around the oasis and are tolerant of human habitation (like bobcats, they will sometimes live in abandoned buildings), but are secretive and not aggressive towards humans. The pigeons have a different opinion!



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

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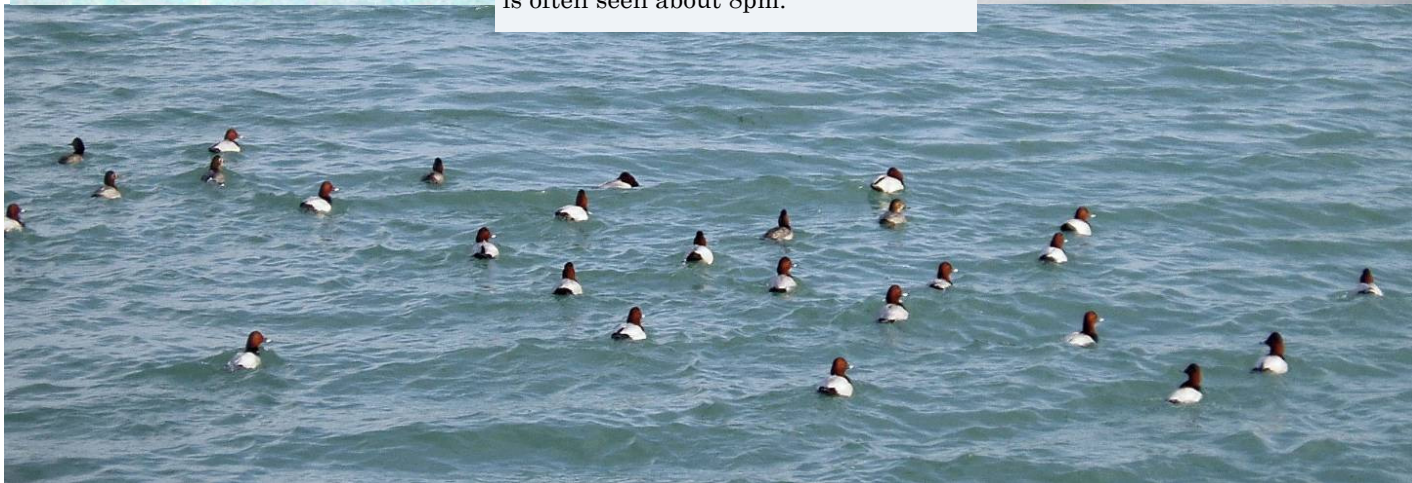


*Always Right, Sustain the Fight!*

**371st SB**



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## Birders' Corner

Species identified  
on Al Asad to date:

**102**

Winter birdwatching in Ohio often features ducks, and the same is true here in Iraq. Lake Al Asad has been home to a few **Little grebes** (top) and a single female **Pochard** (right) this winter, and LTC Gouhin found a raft of at least 30 Pochards on his recent visit to Victory Base Camp (below). Regional birders want to know if the Little grebe, a near endemic sub-species, breeds at Al Asad, which it probably does both at the lake and in the wadi stream. In other bird news, I finally glimpsed the large bird that has been buzzing the treetops between our office and the PX at night, and confirmed that it is an **Egyptian nightjar** (left), similar to Ohio's Whip-poor-will, feeding on insects as it goes from tree to tree. With its 21" wingspan, it is a big bird and sometimes gets mistaken for an owl. It is often seen about 8pm.