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First records of sand cat in Dhofar Governorate, Oman

Little is known about the distribution of the sand cat *Felis margarita thinobia* in Oman. We report here the first confirmed records of this species from Dhofar governorate and update records for the country.

The sand cat is the smallest of Oman's four felid species and the only one that is a true desert dweller known from the sand seas of

the Empty Quarter (Ar Rub Al Khali) and the Sharqiyyah Sands of eastern Oman. The first records, all from the Empty Quarter, originated

from Ramlat al Ghafa in 1948 (Hayman & Harrison 1950) and south west of Ibri and Umm as Samim in 1967 (Harrison & Bates 1991). The first confirmed record from the Sharqiyyah Sands was made by one of us (AAR) south-east of Bidiyah in March 2002 (A. Al Rasbi, pers. comm.).

In December 2006, a female sand cat was caught in Wadi Al Umayri which lies close to the Umm As Samim in the Empty Quarter (Fig. 1). This capture was part of an initiative to establish the first captive breeding programme for this species in Oman. Another female was caught in the same area in March



Fig. 1. Female sand cat captured in Wadi Al Umayri in December 2006 and taken into captivity in Muscat (Photo H. Al Hikmani).



Fig. 2. Photograph of a female sand cat captured and released back to Wadi Al Umayri in March 2007 (Photo H. Al Hikmani).



Fig. 3. Sand cat in Dhofar, Oman (Photo Environment Authority).



Fig. 4. Sand cat footprints south-east of Al Mazyunah (Photo H. Al Hikmani).

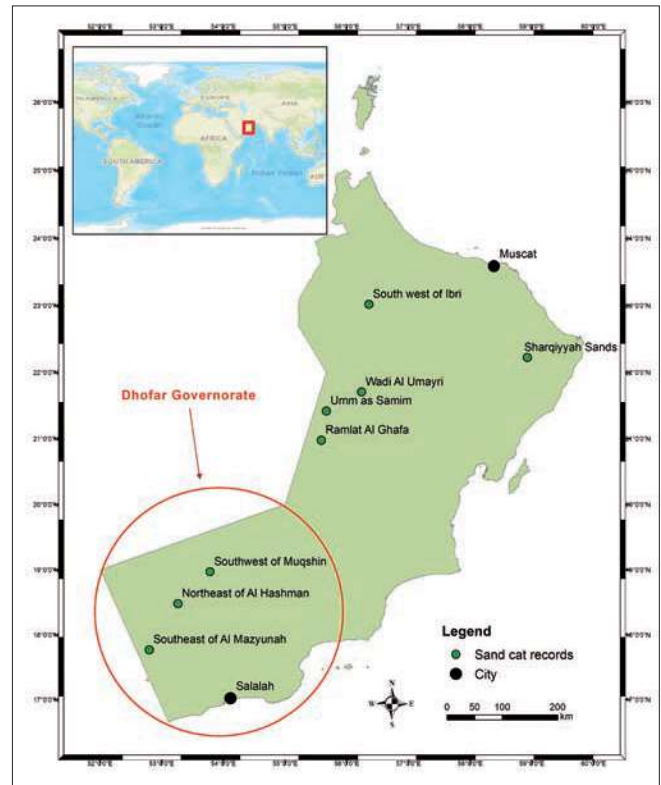


Fig. 5. Map of Oman showing the locations of sand cats records.

2007, but released back to the wild (Fig. 2). A month later, in April 2007, two animals (a male and female) were caught south of Wadi Al Umayri, and taken into captivity to join the female captured in 2006. Further records of sand cats, including sightings of kittens in the Sharqiyah Sands, were collected by one of us (AAR) between 2007 and 2018.

Much of Oman's Empty Quarter lies in the Dhofar Governorate but despite reports of sightings from local people and a survey in 2006 there were no confirmed records in Dhofar. Banfield et al. (2014) erroneously reported animals captured from Muqshin in 2007 and 2008; these were actually the animals captured in Wadi Al Umayri in 2006 and 2007.

Confirmed records of sand cat in Dhofar governorate

On 2 and 17 February 2021, a camera trap set up by wildlife rangers from the Environment Authority photographed the sand cat in an area south west of Wadi Muqshin for the first time (Fig. 3). Just two months later (March 2021), a sand cat was found dead in a water trough used by beekeepers northeast of Al Hashman, and another animal was photographed southeast of Al Mazyunah in January 2022 (Fig. 4). These confirmed sightings present the first records of sand cat in Dhofar

and extend the known range south by about 400 km (Fig. 5).

The sand cat is classified as Least Concern on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™ (Sliwa et al. 2016) and as Data Deficient on Oman's National Red List (Fisher et al. 1999), but its ecological need, current distribution, and population size are still very poorly understood. These additional records have helped our understanding of the distribution of this elusive species and hopefully will help in the development and implementation of much needed conservation measures for this endangered species in Oman.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following people for their help with field work and camera trapping in Dhofar: Ramas Alshashai, Hassan Jadad, Ghanem Jadad, Khalid Jadad, Musallam Jadad, Nasser Jadad, Abdullah Jadad, Mubarak Jadad, Asad Jadad and Mohammed Al Hamar. We would also like to thank the Director General of the Environment Authority (Dhofar) for his support.

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