

CAT

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news





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Original contributions and short notes about wild cats are welcome

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Cover Photo: First photographic evidence of a Pallas's cat in Bhutan. The animal was captured in Jigme Dorji National Park on 17.11.2012
Photo: Jigme Dorji National Park

MUHAMMAD SADDIK BARZANI¹

A recent record of Eurasian lynx in northern Iraq

A Eurasian lynx *Lynx lynx* was photographed in the Barzan area in Iraqi Kurdistan in December 2011. There are only three other records from the last century documented for this region.

On 2 December 2011 after returning from Erbil I received a phone call from Madian Sabah Barzani to say that a shepherd and his four dogs had caught a 'strange big cat' near Barzan (36.926°E/44.041°N) in Iraqi Kurdistan, where I live. Figure 1 shows the habitat where the animal was captured. The dogs had caused a slight injury to the animal, but it seemed fairly fit so MSB persuaded the shepherd to release it in a quiet area of rocky woodland south of Barzan town and about one km from the River Zab.

I arrived at the release site as soon as I was able, and the following morning we went to look for the cat. Surprisingly, we soon found it and I was able to identify it as a Eurasian lynx. We took photographs (Fig. 2) to support the identification; in size the animal was about three or four times larger than a domestic cat. Figure 2 shows clearly that the animal had an injury to one of the legs and I wished we had an anaesthetising gun in order to immobilise the animal and treat it properly. The next day we looked carefully around for the lynx, but there was no sign of it. We will, of course, never know if the animal survived, but because it was not badly injured I believe that it had a good chance.

The Barzan area, its mountains and forests, is a protected environment, managed in a sustainable way by the local people since

the last century. In 1960 the hunting of wild goats *Capra aegagrus* and roe deer *Capreolus capreolus* was banned because of a concern about the easy availability of automatic guns. Now all methods of hunting (guns, explosives, traps and electrical devices) are strictly forbidden. Villagers in the Barzan area occasionally report 'large cats' which are probably lynx and there is certainly a good food supply for such carnivores with an estimated 5,000 wild goats and a good population of roe deer. Other mammals recorded commonly in the Barzan area by camera traps include golden jackal *Canis aureus*, grey wolf *Canis lupus*, brown bear *Ursus arctos*, wildcat *Felis silvestris*, striped hyaena *Hyaena hyaena* and Indian crested porcupine *Hystrix indica*. There have also been two reports of leopard *Panthera pardus* in recent years and in the 1960s and 1970s many were hunted.

The Eurasian lynx is still widely distributed from Scandinavia, the Baltic States, Russia and south-east Europe, Turkey, Iran through Central Asia to Tibet, China and Mongolia. It was largely extirpated from Western Europe but has been reintroduced to Switzerland and six other countries (Breitenmoser et al. 2008) in the 1970s and 1980s.

In Iraqi Kurdistan it appears to be very rare with only three other records cited: one collected from Zakho which is in the British



Fig. 2. Eurasian lynx in northern Iraq injured by dogs. The wound is visible on the left hind leg (Photo M. S. Barzani).

Museum of Natural History and two brought to Erbil Liwa in winter 1953-54 (Hatt 1959, Harrison & Bates 1991). These together with the Barzan observation are the most southerly records in the Middle East, except for a reported occurrence in Palestine in the late 19th century (Harrison & Bates 1991), which was however never confirmed.

Because of the secretive and nocturnal behaviour of the lynx we do not know the true population in Kurdistan, but I would like to encourage a dedicated survey of the mammals of this very rich area for wildlife.

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Fig. 1. Habitat where the lynx was captured by dogs in northern Iraq (Photo M. S. Barzani).