

“Operation Oryx” : The Second Stage

By Ian Grimwood

In 1962 Major Grimwood, chief game warden of Kenya, led the Fauna Preservation Society's "Operation Oryx" in the Eastern Aden Protectorate, described in *ORYX* VI, 6, December, 1962. The object was to capture enough Arabian oryx to establish a breeding herd in captivity in the hope of saving the species from threatened extinction. Two males and one female only were captured, thanks largely to the fact that the same princely hunting party that had reduced the oryx in the Protectorate to such straits had returned just before the expedition got there and slaughtered all but a handful of the survivors. So two eminent owners of captive Arabian oryx were approached: H.E. Sheikh Jabir Abdullah al Sabah of Kuwait and H.M. King Saud of Saudi Arabia. Sheikh Jabir Abdullah most generously gave his one remaining female to the FPS, as was described in *ORYX* VII, 2, August, 1963, and "Salwa" joined the herd at Phoenix Zoo in Arizona. In this article Major Grimwood describes the generous response of King Saud, his own visit to Riyadh in March this year to collect the animals, a photograph of which is on Plate 8, and summarises the status of the Arabian oryx to-day.

IN July, 1963, Mr. Sherman P. Haight of New York was informed by the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Washington that H.M. King Saud had graciously agreed to present four Arabian oryx to the World Wildlife Fund to add to the Phoenix herd. This was good news, but the task of collecting these animals posed a considerable problem. Not only was the cost of air transport high, but no airline other than Saudi Arabian Airlines plies to Riyadh, and that company could not undertake the transport. However, in March, 1964, through the good offices of Pan American Airways, a special charter was arranged to fly the animals to Beirut, from where they could be flown to Rome by PANAM freighter. This time the U.S. National Appeal of the World Wildlife Fund undertook to share the cost with the Shikar-Safari Club, and I went to Riyadh to collect the animals.

On arrival at Riyadh I found there no fewer than thirteen oryx, all in excellent condition, in the new zoo, which had been established some five or six years before by Prince Fadh-al-Faisal in his capacity of Head of the Riyadh Municipality; on behalf of this body the Prince presented me with two males and two females, two of which, a fifteen to eighteen-month old female and a slightly older male had been born in the zoo; the other pair were older wild-caught animals in the prime of condition. Sa'ad bin Aburashid, the director of the zoo, was unable to say where they had been caught but he thought that all the oryx had come from south of the Rub-al-Khali. From the condition of all the animals in the zoo and the interest he takes in their welfare it is apparent that Sa'ad bin Aburashid is thoroughly competent at his job, and even though, by this gift to the

World Wildlife Fund, the females in the Riyadh herd were now to be reduced to three (one of which was heavily pregnant), the herd is a valuable second string to the Phoenix breeding centre. The four animals for Phoenix were flown to Rome on March 14th and taken to Naples by Dr. F. Cuneo, the Director of the Naples Zoo and the officer in charge of the Naples quarantine station, who had most generously agreed to take care of them at his own expense for the sixty days they had to spend there before being flown on to New York at the end of May.

Meanwhile a check on the number of Arabian oryx in captivity in zoos had shown the position to be worse than expected. Of the two animals in the London Zoo, one a female, Caroline, had been generously loaned and sent to Phoenix with the first three. Apart from those at Kuwait and Riyadh only two captive oryx have been traced in Arabia. They are a pair (one with one horn and the other hornless—sexes unknown) seen in the Taiz Zoo, Yemen, in August, 1963, by Mr. James Cortada, the American Chargé d'Affaires, who reported that nothing is known of their origin, and the authorities are unwilling to part with them.

The quest for information about oryx in the wild aroused the interest of a number of officers of both the British and United States Foreign and Consular Services, the Sultan of Muscat and Oman's Armed Forces, the Trucial Oman Scouts, the Hadhrami Beduin Legion, the Desert Locust Survey, and both the Arabian American Oil Company and the Shell Company of Q'atar, as well as of private individuals. Thanks to their co-operation, and their questioning and sifting of information from their staffs, the position has been further clarified. It now seems almost certain that the Arabian oryx is extinct along all the northern and western fringes of the great sand sea of the Rub-al-Khali, although rumours of their existence in the Jauf area of Yemen still persist. It has also disappeared from the western end of the southern fringe, and as Colonel Gray of the Hadhrami Beduin Legion reports that no oryx have been sighted in the Wadi Shuwait-Wadi Mitani area since the Society's expedition of 1962, that might be taken to mean as far east as latitude 52° 50' E. The last stronghold of the species appears to be east of this, in Oman, along a front of only two hundred and fifty miles, and nowhere more than 100 miles in depth. From certain parts of that area have come several reports of oryx being sighted in some numbers in 1962 and 1963 by the few Bedouins traversing the region, and also a later report from the survey party of an oil company which recorded twelve in one group as well as several sightings of smaller numbers. It seems possible that there may be one or two hundred animals still surviving in that region. To the east of the sand sea certain isolated populations still occur in the country of the Duru and Wahiba and a herd of twenty was photographed in the former region by an officer of the Sultan's Armed Forces in 1962. Reports from Muscat and Oman all say that the oryx are not heavily hunted because of the Sultan's orders protecting them. But it was not the hunting of local Bedouins which wiped them out elsewhere so much as the highly organised, mechanised hunting parties from the north.

Apart from the direct benefit to the species concerned, one of the most encouraging features of the latter phases of "Operation Oryx" has been

the demonstration of how general is the interest and how world-wide the assistance offered to an attempt of this nature. No expedition would have been possible without the co-operation of the Hadhrami Beduin Legion and the Royal Air Force, and further help was given by the Kenya Government, the East African Wild Life Society and a wide range of other organisations and individuals. Since then the rulers of two Arab countries have given further animals and the Zoological Society of London has loaned one. An American zoo undertook the establishment and running of the breeding centre, assisted financially by an American sportsmen's association, the Shikar-Safari Club. The Royal Air Force twice more provided transport when no other was available, and the American Air National Guard performed similar services in getting the animals from Clifton to Phoenix. British United Airways and Pan American Airways went to great trouble to arrange special services and facilities. The veterinary and animal health authorities in Kenya, Britain, the United States and Italy made special concessions and arrangements and the Italian authorities undertook to quarantine them free of charge.

Both British and American oil companies operating in Arabia were active in the collection of information and have given practical help wherever possible. The Arabian American Oil Company gave financial help to the World Wildlife Fund for the original expedition, and built the crates and carried out all arrangements for the removal of the oryx from Riyadh. The World Wildlife Fund, with the Shikar-Safari Club, financed the move of the last four oryx from Riyadh and played a major part in solving the transport problems. Finally, scores of people have given unstinted aid in obtaining information or in solving problems as they arise. International co-operation on this scale bodes well for further attempts which will almost certainly have to be made to save other vanishing species.

To sum up events since the Society's "Operation Oryx" in 1962 :

(a) Further information has been obtained about the status of the Arabian oryx in the wild. This shows that though persecution has led to its rapid extermination throughout the greater part of its range since the turn of the century, there is one small area in Oman where the natural population is still little disturbed and where it is protected by decree of the Sultan. This may number a few hundreds. Provided it can be safeguarded from organised hunting parties from outside the country there seems no reason why this population should not persist. In addition certain small pockets of oryx still remain to the east of the Rub-al-Khali.

(b) A viable breeding nucleus has been established at Phoenix, Arizona. Here there are two adult females, two adult males and a male calf belonging to the Fauna Preservation Society, one adult female, belonging to the London Zoo, to which a male calf was born in May this year, and two pairs belonging to the World Wildlife Fund, making a total of six males and five females. With an animal which is as hardy and willing to breed in captivity as the Arabian oryx has proved to be, this total should suffice to allow the species to be bred and built up in captivity with the object of eventually re-introducing it to selected and safe parts of its natural range.

(c) A second breeding herd of three females and eight males is now known to exist under adequate management at Riyadh in Saudi Arabia.