

In Search of Rare Antelopes on the Horn of Africa  
November 8-23, 2018

As a lifelong mammalwatcher, my interest in antelopes of the Horn of Africa was launched when as a youth I saw a group of mounted dibatag at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. Later I learned about the beira antelope breeding program that had existed at the Al Wabra Wildlife Preserve in Qatar. This added more fuel to my passion to see these animals in the wild. But it was not an easy matter to see these rare antelopes. The dibatag live in Somalia and the



Dibatag exhibit at Field Museum of Natural History

Ogaden region of Ethiopia. The former is not currently an eco-tourist destination and the latter was not open to visitation until relatively recently.

I spent New Year's Eve in 2013 at a lodge in the Bale Mountains of Ethiopia trying to get some ideas of access to seeing dibatag from a State Department staff person based in Jijiga (the gateway to the Ogaden) without success.

Thanks to this blog, the magic day finally arrived in December 2017. A trip report from Tomas Carlberg was posted from March of 2017 highlighting his visit to the Ethiopian Somali region. My heart skipped a beat when I read his description of

seeing dibatag! I immediately emailed Håkan Pohlstrand who was a main organizer of the trip and committed to going in 2018.

That trip was scheduled for November 2018. As the departure date grew nearer, I kept thinking about the prospect of seeing beira. I had read a few birding reports over the years of trips to Somaliland that included seeing them. I found that travel to Somaliland was complicated by the fact that the region had broken away from Somalia in 1991 and formed an independent government. After some stops and starts I was able to make successful contact with Mr. Abdi Jama of NatureSomaliland. He wrote back that he would be happy to show me around.

So, I was all set for a 2 week adventure in the Horn of Africa.

## Trip Overview

**Somaliland** November 8-13

I arrived in Hargeisa the capital of Somaliland on November 8 after a nonstop flight from Chicago to Addis Ababa followed by a short 2 hour layover to catch the flight to Hargeisa. I had a bit of jet lag and at one point almost boarded a plane to Juba-South Sudan by mistake but luckily was corrected at the gate!

I was able to obtain a visa on arrival in Hargeisa. Abdi met me after clearing customs and took me to a local restaurant for lunch. They served a delicious roasted camel dish –a new food item in my travels. Afterwards we went to a store for some supplies and I learned of the yin-yang of some aspects of life in Somaliland.

When Somaliland broke away from Somalia it formed what is today a multi-party democracy with a separate government and currency from Somalia. Unfortunately, the international community has not recognized Somaliland as a separate country and considers it to continue to be a part of Somalia. Therefore, the Somaliland currency is not accepted outside of the country. This has led to the development of an electronic currency whereby it is possible for residents to make payments and receive funds with their cell phones. There are no cash registers to be seen but electronic account numbers are used instead.



Electronic Price on Gas Pump



Abdi buying some supplies for the trip



The next six days were spent camping in various parts of the country. Due to security concerns the staff consisted of Abdi, a cook, a driver, and two security personnel. Somaliland requires security personnel for every tour. During my time in Somaliland, I had no feelings of danger or safety concerns and people were friendly.

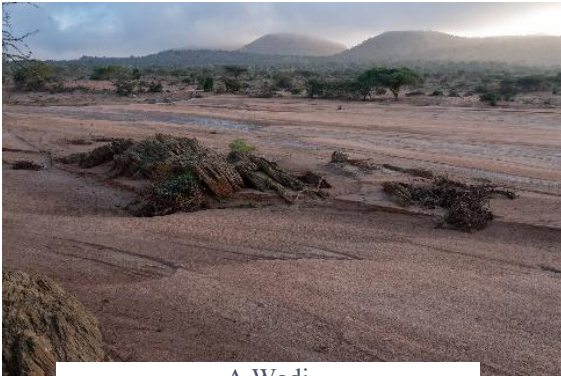




The Staff

The camping was very comfortable and the food was excellent. We all fit into a large 4x4 vehicle which we used for the duration of the trip.

Our Vehicle



A Wadi



Camping by a Wadi

## KEY AREAS VISITED

### Debis Valley



Hills of the beira

This is an area of rocky hills that are inhabited by beira. We did some hiking around some of the hills looking for **beira** and saw track and scat but did not have any luck seeing them on the first day.



Beira markings and scat



We did some see other birds and reptiles including some very large leopard tortoises.



Leopard tortoise

Abdi had asked some local residents to identify locations of beira and it seemed they were staying at the top of the hills.

We were finally able to see a few running from one hill to another. It was a brief but excellent view.



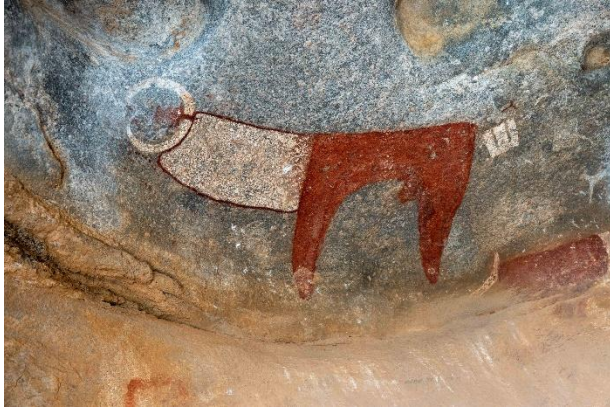
Beira pair



Beira

## Laas Geel

This is an area near Hargeisa which has very well-preserved rock art of which many paintings are long-horned cattle along with some representations of wild mammals. The paintings go back 5,000 years and demonstrate the long history of people in this region.



Ancient Aurochs

## Faaro-Deero Coastal Strip

For one day we descended from the relative height of the highlands (4,000+ feet) to the coastal strip adjoining the Red Sea. The temperature increased greatly as we descended to the coast (from about 70-75 F to at least 90F in places). The coast is quite hot and dry and as it was Friday, so people enjoyed the first day of their weekend in swimming in the Red Sea. We did see a few **Dorcas gazelles** as we drove along an inland portion of coastal strip.



Red Sea



## Shaarub Bush Country

This area consists of dry scrubland dominated by acacias. There appeared to be some kind of northern gerenuk migration as we saw over 40 **gerenuk** as we did a game drive. There were also many **Salt's dik-dik**. We also got good views of little brown bustards and the localized somali courser..



Northern Gerenuk



Salt's Dik-dik



Little Brown Bustards



Somali Courser

## Ununuf Plains Complex

We spent the better part of day driving on these plains. This area was the surprise of the trip as it had several groups of **Speke's gazelles** and good numbers of various bustard species co-existing with camel herders. Abdi said that the plains continued for some distance and it would be interesting to spend more time in this area as cheetah are reported from some areas,





1 Golden wolf

We headed back to Hargeisa on the 13<sup>th</sup> and on the way had a great view of a golden wolf.

Abdi Jama was an excellent tour guide and highly recommended for anyone interested in visiting Somaliland. He has worked as a filmmaker in Botswana and spent some time in the United States. His website is [www.naturesomaliland.org](http://www.naturesomaliland.org) and can be reached at [abdi@naturesomaliland.org](mailto:abdi@naturesomaliland.org). Nature Somaliland is trying to monitor and advocate for species preservation and conservation in Somaliland.

## Ogaden Region of Ethiopia

November 14-20

I flew back from Hargeisa to Addis Ababa on the 13<sup>th</sup> and the next day went back to the airport for a flight to Jijiga, Ethiopia where I met the group headed by Håkan Pohlstand and Brook Kassa. Håkan is an outstanding wildlife photographer as attested by his recent book [Ethiopia's Wildlife Treasures](#). Brook coordinated the logistics for the trip. The chief guide was Hassan Yussuf Kaariye who we met in Jijiga. Hassan has been working with various scientists in studying dibatag since the mid 1990's. One of my fellow travellers Stefan Lithner posted an excellent trip report in 2019 <https://www.mammalwatching.com/wp-content/uploads/SL-Ethiopia-2018.pdf> so I won't rehash all of the details here. Instead I would like to give some impressions of visiting this area. (The trip also visited Alledeghi wildlife reserve as referenced in Stefan's report but not covered here)

### Camp Gurdumi

It was a thrill to be in the Ogaden after wanting to go there for so many years. The campsite was in an excellent location under a large acacia and surrounded by many tall termite mounds and mixed acacia forest. We were able to see **Gunther's dik-dik** and some other species a short walk from camp. One day Håkan also took us to an area close-by that had good views of **Speke's pectinator**.



Speke's pectinator





Guenther's Dik-dik

We would go out early each morning and mid afternoon in search of dibatag. We saw many tracks and some scratching in the earth and two of our party got good views one afternoon but it was very challenging as they are quite shy. One afternoon Håkan went with me to make another attempt and he saw one but I could not see it as it quickly slipped away.



Dibatag scratchings and scat

Searching for Dibatag



It was frustrating to not see one but seeing all the evidence of their activity and the environment in which they lived filled in many questions I had since seeing the museum mounts.



Each day when we came back to camp after early morning hikes, I would hike out into the bush surrounding the camp and observe birds and other wildlife. Often I would sit under different large acacias to watch the comings and goings of bee-eaters, hornbills, camels and dik-dik. It was a time of intermittent rain so the sky was often very dramatic. There is nothing like observing nature in the bush in the Ogaden.



We left Camp Gurdumi on the 19th and headed back towards Addis Ababa over several days. Visiting environments that are not well known for eco-tourism is always a memorable experience. As serious mammalwatchers know, finding rare mammals is never a guaranteed experience. Often the journey is as important as the fleeting views of species we seek.