

Short Communications:

Bengal Fox (*Vulpes bengalensis*) in the Salt Range, Pakistan

Rizwan Irshad and Tahira Ahmad

Section of Environmental Biology,
Department of Plant Sciences,
Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad

The Bengal fox (also called Indian fox, *Vulpes bengalensis* Shaw, 1800) is endemic to the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent (Vanak 2005). In its range, the species has though a relatively wide distribution from the foothills of the Himalayas in the north to the southern tip of the Indian peninsula (Home 2005), yet nowhere the species is abundant. According to the canid Action Plan of IUCN (Johnsingh and Jhala, 2004), Pakistan falls along the western extremity of the range of its distribution, where the species largely occupies semi-arid, flat to undulating terrain, scrub forest and grassland habitats, which are suitable for its foraging and denning activities.

Roberts (1997) reviewed distribution of the Bengal fox in Pakistan and the animal has been reported to be relatively common in Nara Canal area in the Sindh and in the Cholistan desert, while some scattered population was reported from the northeastern Punjab, having a typical oriental distribution, occurring as many subpopulations with declining trends (Figure 1). The species has not been reported from the Salt Range and further west from North Western Frontier Province (Pakistan), Iran or Afghanistan (Sheikh and Molur 2005, Roberts 1997). Mian (2003) while exploring the fauna in 53 stands of houbara bustard in Balochistan (Pakistan), has indicated the presence of Indian fox in 14 stands with a density as high as 0.9 animals km⁻² in certain stands. The species is found sympatric with red fox, Asiatic jackal and Indian wolf. The global distribution of the Bengal fox as depicted in the Canid Action Plan 2004 of IUCN, also suggested that extent of distribution of the species remains short of the eastern and southern limits of the Salt Range. Status of this animal species was recognized as near threatened and was included in the list of species demanding special conservation efforts (Sheikh and Molur 2005).

During an exploratory study on extent of distribution and population density of wild canids in the Salt Range, Pakistan, the wild Bengal fox presented sightings at different times and at different locations (Figure 2). The first sighting of a single animal was presented in the Central Salt Range during November 2005.

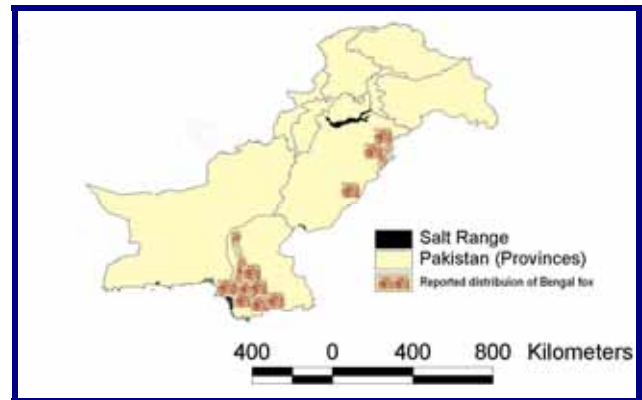


Figure 1: Distribution of Bengal fox in Pakistan.

Bengal fox was observed at separate occasions in the same general area located close to Surar Kas (Nullah). The area had a sparse vegetation cover predominantly provided by isolated trees or bushes of *Acacia modesta* associated with tree species, including *Tamarix aphylla*, *Olea ferrugenia* and *Capparis aphylla* appearing as stunted shrubs. *Gymnosporia royleana*, *Grewia tenax* and *Adhatoda vasica* constituted the major part of the shrub layers. Agricultural fields were also located close to the wild tracts.

The Bengal fox presented another sighting in December 2005 in the Eastern Salt Range when the animal was feeding on a broiler hatchery refuse, mainly comprising of dead and deformed chicks. The area surrounding the hatchery refuse dump was mainly undulating heavily eroded alluvial substratum.

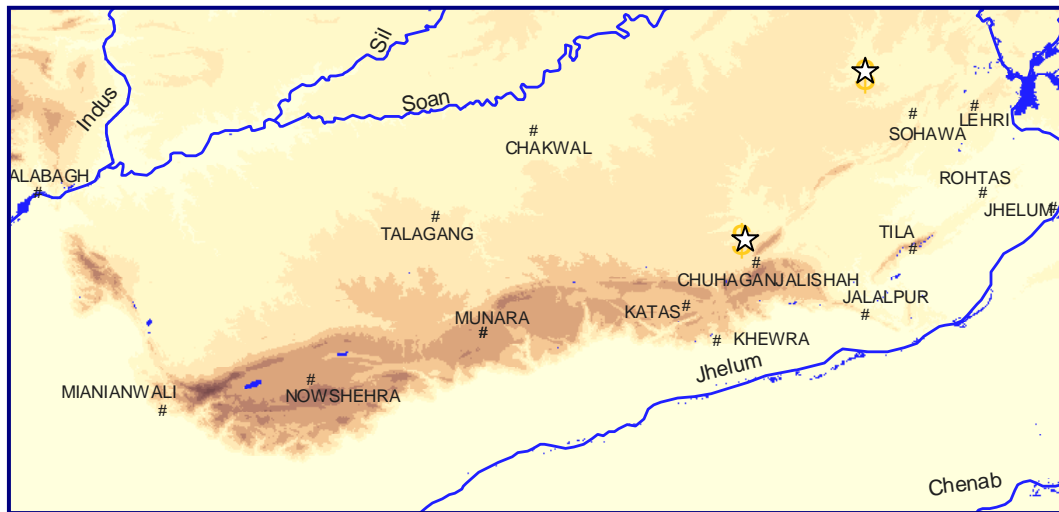


Figure 2: Observation of Bengal Fox (*Vulpes bengalensis*) in the Salt Range (Present study).

A dirt road, railway track and an oil exploration rig were also present in close vicinity. Vegetation cover was relatively poor, dominated mainly by *Acacia modesta* and mesquite (*Prosopis sp.*). Dumping of commercial poultry hatchery refuse invites diverse faunal species, like wild carnivores, raptors and stray dogs. A good population of mongooses occupied a series of dens in close proximity of the dumping site. Mongooses were observed to carry eggs and debris inside the dens. Wild canids, including Asiatic jackal and red fox were very frequently observed on the dumping site.



Bengal fox (*Vulpes bengalensis*) in zoo.

Different sightings of the Bengal fox during 814 km of the transect line search of the Salt Range, provide sufficient indication of the presence of this fox species in the

area. The present study was not designed to collect data on distribution of Bengal fox, and hence the direct sightings can be regarded as casual sightings. No attempt was directed on the collection of indirect evidences (foot prints, scats etc.) of the present distribution of the species or towards collection of information available with the general population. The population data could not be subjected to a detailed analysis; however these sightings suggest the presence of an appreciable population of the species in the Salt Range.

No previous report (Roberts 1997, Sheikh and Molur 2005) suggests the presence of the species. It is difficult to say that the presence of the Bengal fox in the Salt Range indicates an extension in the previous distribution or the species could not be recorded by the few earlier reports available for the area.

Bengal fox is one of the least studied canids (Home 2005) with scientific information being restricted to few studies (Johnsingh 1978, Manakadan and Rahmani 2000). Interspecific competition for resources among carnivores (Lanszki and Heltai 2002, Paquet 1992, Macdonald 1977) and killing of smaller predators, like fox species, by larger carnivores has been documented (Scheinin *et al.* 2006, Kamler 2002, Palomares and Caro 1999). In this regard, further studies are indicated on food and feeding habits, denning and

factors influencing the persistence of species in Salt Range, Pakistan.

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