

Does *Leptailurus serval* (Schreber, 1776) (Mammalia Felidae) occur in Western Egypt?

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ABSTRACT

The serval cat, *Leptailurus serval* Schreber, 1776 (Mammalia Felidae), has never been cited from Egypt and Libya in recent time. Here we report the presence of a mounted skin (with skull inside) in a local shop inside the Shiwa Oasis (NW Egypt). The scarcely-spotted pattern exhibited by this skin adds interest to this record. We suggest to secure the specimen to a Natural History Museum and begin an ad hoc investigation in the region.

KEY WORDS

Shiwa Oasis; Serval; Sahara.

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INTRODUCTION

The Serval, *Leptailurus serval* (Schreber, 1776) (Mammalia Felidae), is relatively abundant and widespread in Africa with several subspecies and is listed as Least Concern by the IUCN Red List (Thiel, 2015).

There is only one known population of Serval from north of the Sahara, in the Maghreb (Hunter & Bowland, 2013) and it is classified regionally as Critically Endangered. The species has never been historically reported from Libya and Egypt (Hufnagel, 1972; Osborn & Helmy, 1980; Aulagnier et al., 2010). However, as far as Libya is concerned, Holocene remains of the species have been found in Western Libya (Peters & Pöllath, 2004). We noted, incidentally, that a recent map (Hunter & Bowland, 2013) overlooked the distribution of the species along Eritrea - where the species is definitely known from multiple records (Yalden et al., 1980) and probably the Red Sea hills of Sudan.

During a trip to the Shiwa Oasis (NW Egypt), precisely on 6 May 2012, one of us (A.O.) ob-

served in a local shop at the feet of Shali Fortress a very badly mounted skin of a medium sized cat. Two photos were taken of the specimens (Fig. 1), that was immediately identified as a *L. serval*, although it showed a particularly scarce marking pattern.

Siwa Oasis lies approximately 300 km south of the Mediterranean Sea coast, near the border with Libya. It extended in a west-east direction between 29°06'-29°21'N and 25°16'-26°08'. Surface area is about 1100 km² (Goodman et al., 1986).

We consider now useful a publication and description of this specimen as a mean to attract attention to the issue and collect more data (eventually securing the specimen for a museum collection). In first instance, we find the fact that the whole skin is mounted (with skull inside) as an indirect evidence of the local (or very close origin) of the animal, even if we can consider some commerce of sub-Saharan serval skins a likely possibility.

Two distinct coat patterns are known for the serval, and were formerly considered two distinct spe-



Figure 1. Serval mounted skin found in a shop near the Shali Fortress, Siwa Oasis, 6 May 2012 (photo by Aldo Oriani).

cies (Pocock, 1907); the typical serval pattern with relatively big marking, and the servaline one with minute marking. The present atypical skin is practically spotless, except a number of big black patches found dorsally. From the hind legs two black lines reach the flanks. Underparts are yellowish rather than white.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy the woolly appearance of the coat except for the dorsal area. It seems as the serval was killed during a molt phase. The skin presents a much deeper pelage tone from the 'typical' sandy-buff. This is somewhat surprisingly considering this pattern is found, as a rule, in more humid regions (Rosevear, 1974).

Can such a medium-sized species have escaped researchers until now? Rosevear (1974) reports for West Africa that "*is a not uncommon animal.... Yet as it is only exceptionally on the move during the day, and then mostly skulking in undergrowth, it is rarely seen save in car headlights or by night hunters with powerful lamps*". It is reasonable that only through ad hoc research we could discover

more details on distribution and conservation status of the Sahara serval.

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