



Al-Asad au Natural



Volume 1, Issue 1

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Special points of interest:

- I had to sharpen my “quill” to write this week’s “Creature Feature”
- What just ran over my toes? See “Who’s Living Under My CHU?”
- Interested in the Oasis? Check page 2!
- Why does MAJ Rogers carry his binoculars everywhere? See page 4.
- **Next Issue:** “Geology Special Edition”!

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Leave No Trace:
Take Only Photos,
Leave Only Footprints!

Creature Feature

Crested Porcupine

Someone mentioned finding a porcupine quill the other day, which sounded out of place since I was not aware that porcupines lived here. Apparently neither was the local Vector Control office, who were very surprised 2 years ago when they set out box traps to catch wild dogs, and ended up with a 40 pound porcupine! (pictured)

The crested porcupine is the largest of the porcupines and a member of the rodent family. They can weigh up to 51 lbs and measure nearly 30” in length. It is nocturnal and spends its days usually in underground burrows. In captivity they can live for 21 years.

Their diet includes bark, roots, fruits, veggies, and also some insects. They gnaw bones for calcium and to sharpen their incisors.

These porcupines average 2 litters per year, each with 1-3 young (less in the wild, more in captivity). The young are born during the rainy season with soft quills. After a couple of weeks, they are eating regular food and their quills are hardened, and they leave the bur-



row. Contrary to popular belief, porcupines do not shoot their quills, but a stick can become infected and life-threatening.

Who’s Living Under My CHU?

Mediterranean House

Gecko What just scampered under my CHU? Often the answer to this question is going to be the Mediterranean gecko. These guys aren’t very big (3-6”) - but there are a lot of them! The gecko

eats insects like ants, roaches, and moths. They are native to southern Europe but invasive worldwide, to include the southern U.S. Due to their small size they seldom impact on native species.



Abraham's Well

(Parts of the following history of the oasis and village at the Al Asad Air Base, Iraq, came from an interview with MG Ibrahim Mohammad of the Iraqi Army and one of his colonels on May 21, 2005, conducted by LCDR Terry Eddinger and



CDR Rondall Brown. In the Spring of 2006, additional improvements were made to the oasis and palm grove, updated within this reading by MAJ Jim Oliver. This article has been further modified by this publication's editorial staff.)

A VISIT TO THE AL ASAD OASIS IS literally like taking a step from a stark, desert wasteland to a lush, green sanctuary. The pool teems with small minnows, some tan and others black. Frogs line the banks intermingled in the reeds, warily retreating to the water when someone approaches. Birds sing in the surrounding trees and bushes and, occasionally, waterfowl visit the pool for a

swim. It's a complete ecosystem.

According to Arab legend, Abraham, the patriarch of the Hebrew Bible, the Quran, and other Islamic writings, visited the oasis at Al Asad on his journey from Ur to Haran (Gen 11:31; *Stories of the Prophets*, Al Imam Ibn Kathir, *Ibrahim*; the Quran does not mention

the journey). According to the legend, he stopped at the oasis, drank from its water, and bathed himself. He and his family camped here for a short time before moving on to Haran. The Arabic name of the village near the oasis is *Eyen Al Asad*, which

"Around 1920, six large families...moved to the oasis."

means Spring of the Lion. Perhaps the name was derived from a time when this area was a wilderness area with all kinds of wild animals, including lions.

The oasis had neither settlement nor village before

1920 other than occasional occupation by Bedouins who passed through with their flocks and stopped for water. Over the centuries, most people in the region lived much closer to the Euphrates River preferring to stay close to the lush land and trade route that the river naturally provided.

Around 1920, six large families from a town between Kirkuk and Mosul moved to the oasis. The Shitwi group formed the largest family. These families built the buildings of the village (that now stand in ruin near the ASP), planted the date palm grove, and eventually built a school. In its prime, the

palm grove provided a good cash crop for the village.

In 1985 Saddam Hussein decided to turn the surrounding area into an Iraqi Air Base, which he hired Yugoslavians to build. He paid the villagers a very small sum of money for their land and moved them to other loca-

Abraham's Well (cont.)

tions, such as Hit, Baghdad, and Baghdad. A few of the people remained behind and stayed unnoticed for ten more years, since at that time the base did not take in the oasis area. However, in 1995, the base was expanded to incorporate the oasis. The commander of the base found a document stating that all of the villagers had been evicted in 1985 and so he evicted the remaining villagers.

Marines, soldiers, and sailors took on a cleanup project of the oasis on April 16, 2005. These volunteers collected trash and debris from the water and surrounding area, including around the ruins of the buildings. Their efforts restored respect to the site.

In March 2006, the 67th Area Support Group, Host Nation Section, began a project with local Iraqis to clean

the oasis and the surrounding palm grove. Iraqi's were brought in to clean up the oasis by removing the weeds and trash around the water. The workers also prepared the date palms for the upcoming growing season. The workers climbed the trees barefoot, using equipment and techniques that have probably been used for hundreds of years to cut down old and dead tree limbs. This helped prepare the

palm trees which had not been cultivated for at least three years. Located within the palm grove are fifteen to twenty varieties of dates which are planted throughout the area, the ultimate goal of this project is to provide an excellent source of food for the area villages.

Regardless of the authenticity of Abraham's visit, people treat the oasis with reverence out of respect for local customs and beliefs. (ed. note: Abraham's Well, also known as Mamre, is actually located in ancient Canaan.)

Inside Fact: Date palms require intense cultivation when young, and need annual pruning for maximum production. The dates ripen from July thru August.

Questions from the Field - your questions

What kind of tree is that?

One of the first questions I was asked was to identify the tree outside the back door of the TOC—the tree with the water bottle and the nesting dove. It is a **eucalyptus tree**. This native Australian has over 700 varieties and has been

planted all over the world. It is an invasive nuisance in California. Most are evergreen with narrow, oily leaves. The oil makes the leaves and bark flammable, and can even put a flammable haze in the air. Koalas eat the leaves, and nectar from its' flowers feeds bats, insects, birds, and opossums. The oil is a

strong disinfectant, and can be toxic in quantity. In Iraq, the golden oriole nests in tall eucalyptus trees.



PIC of the WEEK

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE UNOFFICIAL
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PUBLISHED EVERY 2 WEEKS, MORE OR LESS

Send your photos, questions, and submissions to
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Always Right, Sustain the Fight!

371st SB



Hoopoe photograph submitted by 1SG Day at CP Virginia.
This species does migrate through Al-Asad.

Birders' Corner



Blue-cheeked Bee-eater (*Merops persicus*)

I chose one of Al-Asad's most colorful residents to launch the Birders' Corner—the Blue-cheeked bee-eater. These birds can be seen every day near sunset as they fly

north up the wadi along the west side of post. They can likely be seen at sunrise as well, but I have not made it up early enough to find out!

With an overall length of 11-12", including a long, pointy tail, these noisy emerald green birds are not hard to spot!

They eat bees, wasps, and hornets, but their favorite food is probably dragonflies. They

also prefer to perch on telephone wires, from which they sortie out to grab their prey in mid-air.

These gregarious birds nest in colo-

nies, making long tunnels in sandy banks where 4-8 white eggs will be laid. Both parents care for the eggs.

Blue-cheeked bee-eaters are fairly common, and are also seen at CP Virginia in Kuwait.

