

STAMP STORIES

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In my first two stories I described stamps that depict entomological topics because that is one of the areas that I collect. But since this journal is about the entire continuum of biology, for this edition I have decided to look at a different animal phylum.

My inspiration came from this traffic sign. It is an animal crossing warning that shows the silhouette of some sort of exotic animal and is one you might expect to find on a remote, poorly paved road somewhere on the Dark Continent. However, this one happens to be located much closer to most of us than that.

I will deal with where I encountered it later, but when I saw this sign, it inspired my impulse as a collector to imagine a photo collection of different traffic sign examples—something of a life list perhaps. I suppose somewhere such a collection exists. I would like to see it. I think an exhibit of the actual signs would be interesting, too. But I suspect there are legal issues with obtaining and possessing them, though I have some old fraternity brothers who might have some source material.



In 2007, Botswana, Malawi, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe jointly issued souvenir sheets containing stamps that show the national animal of each country. It is on one of these stamps that we find the animal from our sign, for it shows a gemsbok (*Oryx gazella*), also commonly called by its genus name.

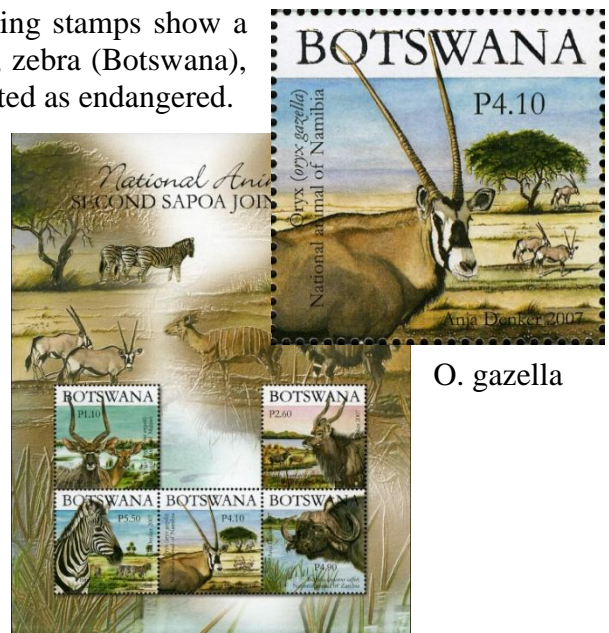
The oryx is the national animal of Namibia. The remaining stamps show a Thomson's gazelle (Malawi), sable antelope (Zimbabwe), zebra (Botswana), and cape buffalo (Zambia). Several of these species are listed as endangered.

The oryx is a large antelope and besides the gemsbok, there are two other species native to the arid parts of Africa. A fourth species is native to the Arabian Peninsula. They have a very close relative called an addax that also inhabits North Africa.

All oryx species prefer near-desert conditions and can survive without water for long periods. They live in herds, but often you only see individuals or small groups. Newborn calves are able to run with the herd immediately after birth. Both males and females possess permanent horns that average one meter long. The horns are narrow and straight except in the scimitar oryx (*O. dammah*), where they curve backwards like a scimitar.

Their horns are lethal—the oryx is known to kill lions with them—and oryxes are thus sometimes called the “sabre” antelope (not to be confused with the sable antelope). The horns also make the animals a prized game trophy, which has led to the near-extinction of two species.

A cursory search of stamp listings reveals more than 65 different stamps that show the four oryx species and the related addax.



O. gazella

The gemsbok is native to the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa. They are brownish-gray with striking black markings in the face and black stripes on the flanks and legs. Males can weigh up to 550 pounds with females slightly smaller at 450 pounds. They can run 35 miles per hour.

A closely related species, the beisa, or East African oryx (*O. beisa*), inhabits the Horn of Africa region and is smaller with fewer black markings than the gemsbok. It was once thought that the beisa was a subspecies of the gemsbok, but they are genetically distinct since the beisa has 56 chromosomes and the gemsbok has 58. A subspecies, the Fringe-eared oryx (*O. beisa callotis*), is native to Kenya and Tanzania. Neither the gemsbok nor the beisa are threatened.



O. beisa



O. dammah

The scimitar oryx (*O. dammah*) is the only oryx with clearly curved horns, ochre neck, and no dark markings on the legs. Its habitat was the Sahara Desert and it is considered extinct in the wild. The scimitar oryx is smaller than the gemsbok weighing about 440 pounds with horns so thin that they can break easily. Their light coat reflects the desert heat. They can also adjust their metabolism to tolerate high temperatures that would be lethal to most mammals. Several captive breeding programs exist to save the species.

The Arabian oryx (*O. leucoryx*) is the only non-African species and the smallest member of the Oryx genus, weighing only about 150 pounds. It has a bright white coat and slightly curved horns. Historically, this species ranged over the entire Arabian Peninsula, but they are currently endangered having been re-introduced into Arabia and Israel and Jordan after extensive hunting rendered them extinct in the wild. The Hebrew word *re'em* may refer to the Arabian oryx. The King James Version of the Bible, where the word appears seven times in the Old Testament, translates it as “unicorn,” and some think the legend may be due to this animal. But modern versions of the Bible translate the word as “wild ox.”



O. leucoryx

Relatively few Americans have actually seen a wild oryx outside of a zoo and in its natural habitat, and I am among them. These encounters did not occur in Africa or the Middle East, although I did spot many gazelles while patrolling the Sinai Desert. But that is another story. No, these spottings actually took place here in the southwestern United States, and that is where the photo in this story was taken.

In the 1960s, the late Frank C. Hibben, former professor emeritus of archaeology at the University of New Mexico, but then chairman of the New Mexico Game Commission, realizing the climate and terrain of the New Mexico area was identical to their natural habitat, arranged to have 18 gemsbok brought to the U.S. These animals remained quarantined, but in the early 1970s, the Game Commission introduced 93 of their offspring into the White Sands Missile Range. The idea was to build a herd of a few hundred to provide exotic big-game hunting opportunities for local hunters.

As so often happens when manipulating the ecological environment, the planners forgot one important detail. New Mexico does not have any lions. In their native habitat in Africa, lions and other predators control the oryx population, and only about ten percent of oryx calves reach the age of one year. In New Mexico, predators are not effective at controlling them. On top of that, oryx are very prolific and breed year round. As a result, there are now an estimated 6000 of these animals wandering around the Southwest, which is more than exist in their native Kalahari Desert.

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The herds eat desert grasses, yucca, buffalo gourds, mesquite bean pods, and tumbleweeds. As there seems to be an overabundant supply of these plants, the animals are not depleting the native growth, although some ranchers complain about their grazing on private land. But they do impose one serious problem and that is as a traffic hazard. It is common to hear about incidents where some vehicle has struck an oryx with devastating effects to both, and when my colleagues and I work on the range, we receive daily safety cautions about this. Even the most rugged vehicle (other than a tank) that strikes a 500 pound animal will sustain damage and possible injury to its occupants. I have had oryx chili made from the unfortunate beast in one of these confrontations and it was very tasty.

In order to control the oryx population, New Mexico offers big game hunting opportunities with once-in-a-lifetime permits. Since 1974, hunters have taken approximately 5000 animals. Gemsbok are one of the few antelope species where female trophies are sometimes more desirable than male ones, though both are impressive.

If you have the opportunity to travel to the White Sands region (and by the way the National Monument there is worth the trip), keep your eyes peeled for one of these antelopes and for one of these animal crossing signs. Perhaps you can start you own collection of traffic sign photographs.