

## SHORT NOTE

## Range extension in the Bat-eared Fox *Otocyon megalotis* in Namibia

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The bat-eared fox *Otocyon megalotis* seems to be expanding its range in southern Africa (Rautenbach 1982; Smithers 1971, 1983; Stuart 1981). The range expansions recorded to date were towards the north in Botswana (Smithers 1971), northwards and eastwards in Zimbabwe (Smithers 1983), towards the east in the Transvaal, South Africa (Rautenbach 1982), and eastwards and southwards in the southern Cape Province, South Africa (Stuart 1981). In all these cases no clear obstacles existed that could have been regarded as a faunal barrier to inhibit emigration from areas in which bat-eared foxes were known to occur.

On 28 November 1991 we sighted two bat-eared foxes at 18°06'S 23°25'E in the Mudumu Mulapo of the eastern Caprivi, Namibia. The sighting occurred at 10h00 in broad daylight, and we had ample time to observe the two foxes.

The occurrence of the species in the eastern Caprivi can be interpreted in one of two ways. It is either due to the active range expansion of bat-eared foxes as recorded elsewhere, or it can be regarded as confirmation that the species occurred historically, albeit rarely, in the area.

If this record is regarded as a further example of active range extension, it would imply that the species successfully established itself eastwards or northwards across the Kwando-Linyanti-Chobe River system. The species is known to be present in the western Caprivi (Shortridge 1934; Smithers 1971) and in the Chobe Game Reserve at Kasane (Smithers 1971), the latter area often being quoted as recently included in the range of the species. Both these areas are separated from the eastern Caprivi by the perennial Kwando-Linyanti-Chobe River system. Pienaar (1970) regarded perennial rivers as a major faunal barrier for *Otocyon*, but Rautenbach (1982) doubted his conclusions, mainly based on a personal communication from Tinley that the species readily swims across rivers in Zimbabwe. The man-made bridges across the river system, such as those located at Kongola and Kasane, could also facilitate migration. Another alternative, although unlikely, is that these animals represent a southeastward extension from Angola. The status of bat-eared foxes in Angola adjacent to the eastern Caprivi is unknown, but they are known to occur further west (Crawford-Cabral 1989).

On the other hand, Shortridge (1934) noted that the Balme manuscript refers to bat-eared foxes in eastern Caprivi at the Maschi River. Wilhelm (1933) also observed bat-eared foxes in the eastern Caprivi, and he also commented that the Maschi River is an alternative name for the Kwando. Prompted by our observation, East Caprivians were questioned about the occurrence of bat-eared foxes, and they were generally not familiar with the species (H.J.W. Grobler pers. comm.). Ansell (1978) remarked that reports of bat-eared foxes from the Kafue flats, Livingstone, and the Kalomo district in Zambia could not be confirmed.

Our sighting therefore raises the interesting possibility that a low density population of *Otocyon megalotis* might have been present in the eastern Caprivi for a long time. Such a conclusion does not, however, imply that the species occurs across the Zambezi River in Zambia too.

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