



ĀHŪ

ĀHŪ, gazelle.

i. The gazelle in Iran today.

ii. The gazelle in literature.

i. The Gazelle in Iran Today

Two species of gazelle occur in Iran, *Gazella sub-gutturosa*, represented by one subspecies, *G. s. sub-gutturosa*, the goitered gazelle; and *G. dorcas*, represented by two subspecies, *G. d. fuscifrons*, the jebeer gazelle, and *G. d. bennettii*, the chinkara (Groves, Harrington).

The goitered gazelle, the āhū proper, gets its English name from its larynx which produces a visible swelling in the throat. A medium-sized gazelle with a relatively stocky body and short legs, the male weighs up to 45 kg and stands 75 cm at the shoulder, while the female is slightly smaller, weighing up to 35 kg and standing 70 cm at the shoulder. The coat color is light sandy brown with white underparts and rump patch, and an indistinct slightly darker lateral band. Its facial markings are typical of gazelles: dark bands running from the horns to the nose and from the eyes to the mouth separated by a white band; on older individuals the face turns progressively whiter. The male has horns up to 45 cm long, arising close together and curving outwards and backwards and in at the tips in a lyre-shape; the female is hornless.



The goitered gazelle is by far the more common of the two species and inhabits the broad alluvial valleys and plains, dominated by perennial shrubs such as *Artemisia* spp., in and adjacent to the Alborz, Zagros, and Khorasan mountains. In winter it forms aggregations at the foot of the mountain ranges; the largest of these are found just north of Isfahan and around Semnān, Dāmḡān, Šāhrūd and Sabzavār. Herds of up to two hundred individuals are commonly seen. They start to form in December at the onset of the rut, and then disperse in the spring to the higher ground before the females drop their young in May. Females will usually move farther into the mountains than the males, seeking out rugged, broken terrain to protect their young. During the rut males are territorial and try to keep estrus females within their territories and mate with them. During the summer sources of water are widespread enough that their need for water does not limit their range. Unlike jebeer gazelle they will visit springs where there is permanent human settlement.

The jebeer gazelle, whose name is derived from the Persian dialectical form *jabīr*, is smaller than the goitered gazelle, the male weighing up to 30 kg and standing 70 cm at the shoulder, and the female weighing up to 23 kg and standing 65 cm at the shoulder. The coat color is light sandy brown with white underparts and rump patch and the lateral band is indistinct or absent. The male has horns up to 30 cm long with a less pronounced curve than those of the goitered gazelle. The female also has horns which are straight, parallel and thin, varying between 10 and 30 cm on adult individuals. The chinkara has a smaller body and a redder coat color than the jebeer.

There is very little overlap between the ranges of the jebeer and the goitered gazelle. The jebeer inhabits the subdesert plains surrounding the large basins in the central plateau; the Dašt-e Kavīr, the Kavīr-e Lūt, and the Sīstān basin. It also occurs in the lower valleys and plains of the Persian Gulf watershed from Būšehr eastwards. In the Makrān Coast it is replaced by the chinkara, whose range stretches into India. The jebeer is thinly distributed over its range, and does not perform any seasonal movement. It occurs in small groups, usually less than five individuals. In winter the groups become larger, up to twenty individuals, but they never form the large aggregations of the goitered gazelle. The rut takes place in November and the young are dropped in April after a five-and-one-half month gestation. Males are territorial only during the rut, and they set up their territories mainly around springs. The females go off on their own to drop their young, seeking out broken, sheltered terrain. During the summer jebeer are dependent on water and come in to springs to drink.



Out on the plains the vegetation is too low to offer shade, so in summer, during the middle of the day, jebeer will commonly move into the foothills to rest. They do not visit springs where there is a lot of disturbance or where there is permanent human settlement (O'Regan). The chinkara has not been studied in Iran. Its habitat in the Makrān coast is hotter and more humid than that of the jebeer, and it occurs in closer proximity to cultivation and permanent settlement.

The status of both species of gazelle is threatened by human settlement, cultivation, domestic sheep and goats, and hunting. Settlement and cultivation have reduced the range of the goitered gazelle most, since they have taken over much of its favored habitat, particularly in its winter range; this probably accounts for its almost total extinction in the Qazvīn plain. The jebeer's range is too arid for extensive cultivation and settlement, so it has been less affected by these factors. Domestic sheep and goat act to reduce gazelle numbers by competition for the same food plants. Hunting also reduces their numbers, though in most instances hunting alone would not cause local extinctions of populations since there is enough rugged and impenetrable terrain to act as a refuge. In the sixties and seventies there was effective protection, particularly against hunting and grazing by domestic flocks. But since the revolution, reports indicate that there has been an increase in indiscriminate hunting, and that domestic flocks have reentered the reserves. It is to be expected, therefore, that there has been a reduction in the numbers of gazelle. Their ranges, however, should be much the same. Owing to their reproductive capacity, the populations should increase rapidly once effective protection is reinstated.

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(B. P. O'Regan)

ii. The Gazelle in Literature

In Persian literature, āhū (or *gāzāl*) is used as a metaphor to describe the beloved, often in compound expressions, e.g., *āhū-časm*, *āhū-ye sīmīn*, *āhū-ye šīr-afkan*, *āhū-karām*, *āhū-ye Tatār*, *āhū-ye Kōtan*, and *āhū-ye moškīn*. In one of the earliest poems written in New Persian, Abū Ḥafṣ Soğdī likens the lover to a mountain deer left on a plain without a mate. In the *Šāh-nāma* the *āhū* and the wild ass (*gōr*) are the most accessible game; occasionally the *āhū* symbolizes the peace of the wilderness that flees at the noise of approaching armies. After pointing out that the gazelle can easily be trapped, Sa'dī employs the word *gāzāl* in its metaphorical sense as well: "No wonder when a gazelle falls into a snare, but wonder it is when a gazelle traps a man." In animal fables the gazelle does not necessarily have stereotyped characteristics; chapter five of *Kalīla va Demna* repeats the Aesopian fable of the trapped deer set free by a friendly mouse. In chapter six of *Marzbān-nāma* the gazelle is a sagacious mediator who brings about an understanding between the wild animals and the dog who wants to rule them. In *Laylī o Maǰnūn* Neẓāmī describes how *Maǰnūn* manages to set a few ensnared gazelles free by giving his horse to the hunter. Perhaps inspired by the Arabic *Dīvān* attributed to Qays al-Āmerī, Neẓāmī likens the eyes, breast, and legs of the deer to those of Laylī. Similar episodes are to be found in *Laylī o Maǰnūn* written in imitation of the work of Neẓāmī by poets such as Jāmī, Maktabī Šīrāzī, etc., but the most significant treatment of the deer as a companion for the forlorn lover comes in a *matnawī* by Ḥāfeẓ (*Dīvān*, pp. 354-56; A. J. Arberry, *Fifty Poems of Hafez*, Cambridge, 1947, p. 131). The gazelle's gentleness and beauty also appear in Iranian folk literature such as *Yā zāmen-e āhū*, a *ta'zīa* (passion play) of unknown authorship. A trapped gazelle begs Imam Reẓā to intercede for her so that she can feed her young and then return. The Imam stays in her place until she returns, whereupon the hunter frees her and becomes the Imam's disciple.

See also Šafā, *Adabīyāt* I, 3rd ed., p. 172.

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