



# Tick Tracks

by Maria Fremlin

Can you imagine a tick so big that it leaves a track in the sand?

Well, I am going to tell you about one that can do just that.

Last January we went on our first camel trip in the Moroccan desert. There were only two dromedaries, camels with one hump. Amlal had a light grey coat and a fetching nose ring, was 20 years old, and ready to retire, I rode on him. My husband rode on Ben Abu, which was much younger, only 7, he had an almost white coat. Both were very handsome animals, very docile and hard working.

Our young camel-drivers, Mustapha and Aziz, looked after them very well, fed and watered them and deticked them as well. The ticks were very easy to spot because they were around 8 mm and liked certain places. For instance, there were convenient tick pockets just above the eyebrows.



A female tick amongst the camel's fur



Also there were ticks crawling inside the tent the four of us shared; as our camel-drivers were quite relaxed about those exceptionally we didn't mind either. Ticks are ectoparasites, feed externally on a host, and can carry serious diseases and one must be very, very careful.

Our second camping place was on dunes and at the crack of dawn we got up to read the latest desert news, a bit like they do in the bush. There were plenty of fresh tracks, most of them rather mysterious to us, besides none of the culprits seemed to be in sight. Except when we came to a winding double track, at its head there was an enormous tick (see picture 2). Phenomenal!



Picture 2 - Fed female camel tick, 18-20 mm, walking on the sand, and leaving a double track behind; note that the front pair of legs is lifted. The head is underneath the dark hard patch in front, the scutum; it belongs to the hard tick family Ixodidae. The other dark patch just behind the hind leg is a spiracular plate, involved with breathing. Photo taken on 17 January 2008 by Maria Fremlin.

[Note: this picture is also available here  
<http://maria.fremlin.org/ticks/target11.html>]





Back at home I did a bit of surfing in the Internet, as I was keen to know about these ticks, and found some amazing facts.

The tick in the photographs is an engorged female camel tick - ticks can distend (stretch) their bodies enormously as they feed - and she was looking for a place to lay her eggs in the sand, after that she will soon die. Because conditions in the desert are very harsh she will wax each egg as she passes it, from underneath, to the top of her body. When the eggs hatch the tiny larvae, 6 legs, will jump onto a warm blooded furry animal, and a small one will do. No problem, there were plenty of desert mice tracks there. Then they will change into nymphs, 8 legs from now on, and eventually become adults like the ones we saw. At that stage they feed mostly on camels, hence their scientific name: *Hyalomma dromedary* (Acari: Ixodidae).

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