

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

DNHG Membership

Hurrah for **Diana Oates**, our new Librarian! She has taken on the long-dormant task of looking after our precious library collection, housed at the EHA upstairs from our regular meeting venue, and we are most grateful to her for stepping forward.

Prof. Dr. Ulli Wernery of Dubai's Central Veterinary Laboratory, was the principal author of a recent report on West Nile Fever in the UAE. Evidence of exposure to a mild strain of the disease has been detected in a small percentage of horses in the UAE, based on laboratory methods; only one animal with significant symptoms has been reported (triggering the study). West Nile Virus is transmitted by mosquitoes from infected birds. Horses and humans are 'dead-end' hosts that cannot transmit the disease. West Nile Fever received considerable public attention when it was detected in the northeastern United States in 1999, and has since spread throughout that country.

Biology teacher **Tom Horton** took a bit of a busman's holiday in Botswana's Okavango Delta, a vast inland swamp and one of Africa's premier wildlife environments. Tom mentioned that he was particularly

impressed by what he learned about the role of the lowly termite in shaping the landscape there. The Okavango floods regularly and the tall termite mounds (they can exceed three metres) serve as nuclei for the deposition of silt in eddies, resulting in sediment accretion and the formation of islands within the swamp.



Majlis Al Jinn

Speaker Coordinator **Angela Manthorpe**, building on skills dating from her days as a spelunker in the very different environment of English caves, recently descended Oman's Majlis Al Jinn, one of the largest underground chambers in the world, and a free abseiling (rappelling) descent of ca.160 metres. Angela described this as "quite exciting" and we hope to hear more in due course.

It is now membership renewal time. New memberships and renewals are good for the coming year (Sep 2007 to Sep 2008).

DNHG Membership remains a bargain at Dhs.100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds TSB Bank account no. 173746. (Please note we *cannot* cash cheques made out to the DNHG.)

DNHG membership entitles you to participate in field trips and helps pay for our lecture hall, publication and distribution of our monthly newsletter, the *Gazelle*, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects.

This month's Contributors

The Editor would like to thank the following for their reports and contributions:

Gary Feulner
Angela Manthorpe



Under the patronage of H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan



Inter-Emirates Weekend

Thursday 28 February – Saturday 01 March 2008

Venue: Mafraq Hotel, Abu Dhabi
Rate per night (incl. breakfast & service charges, not dinner)
638 Dhs – Double Room
580 Dhs – Single Room

Provisional Program:

- * Elephant tracks – full day (Mark Beech, Drew Gardner)
- * Liwa Dunes tour – full day (Andrew Bean, Dick Hornby)
- * Sand ecology, near Sheikh's Palace on Hameem Road – half day (Allestree Fisher)
- * Birding, site to be announced – half day (Andrew Twyman)
- * Plant identification near hotel (Allestree Fisher)
- * Saltbushes – short walk near hotel (Dr. Shahina Ghazanfar)
- * Light-trapping insects near hotel – evening (Brigitte Howarth)
- * Star-gazing – evening, after dinner (leader to be advised)

Workshops:

- * GPS Workshop
- * Taxonomy / Plant identification with Dr. Shahina Ghazanfar, professional botanist from Kew Gardens & author of *The Flora of Oman Vols 1 and 2*.
- * Work under the microscope
- * Herbarium & photography for children

Competitions:

- * Photo competitions for young & old
- * Painting / drawing for children

One of the highlights of the weekend is the presentation of the Bish Brown and Sheikh Mubarak awards which takes place at the dinner Friday night, 29th Feb. Note: whether you are staying in the hotel or not, you should book the buffet dinner, costing 99Dhs.

DNHG members wishing to stay at the Mafraq Hotel need to book by Sunday 10th February and should mention the ENHG when booking.

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Further information will be sent out by email. (If you have any questions,

you can write to Allestree Fisher on afisher@hct.ac.ae)

Trips for Early 2008

Hajar Mountains Nature Walk - Gary Feulner
Feb 02

This is a long day's wadi walk in an area of permanent water. Details will be advised by email.

Hajar Mountain Hike - Gary Feulner
Feb 15

This is an uphill adventure to see olive trees and the rare yellow Caralluma. Details by email .

East Coast Shelling - Anne Millen
Friday 22 February

We will go to a place Sandy Fowler calls 'Conus Corner', which is north of Khor Fakkan, and probably go on to other beaches afterwards. 10am meet at Sandy Beach Motel, near Snoopy Island, and then proceed north together. Bring water, food, hats, sunscreen, plastic bags, a magnifying glass if you have one, and, since the state of the tide is unknown, patience. (If bringing children, please be aware that conus shellfish are very poisonous.)

Birdwatching with Dave Bradford
Mar 7 / 8
Details to be advised.

Mangrove Ecology Walk - Gary Feulner

This is a low tide look at the Ajman mangroves. Details will follow.

Roses on Saiq Plateau - April next year, perhaps ...

There were not enough people to run this, but we hope to do it again next year.

Our Next Speaker

Dr. Dennis J. Russell is Associate Professor of Biology at the American University of Sharjah, where he has taught and researched for eight years. His M.Sci. is from University of Washington, Seattle, and his research field there was mainly phytoplankton ecology and the symbiotic relationships between epizooic diatoms and copepods. He completed his Ph.D. at the University of Hawaii, Honolulu, where his research was on the effects of introduced marine species on the coral reef ecosystem.

Dennis' first university position was as Professor of Biology for 15 years at Seattle Pacific University, Washington, USA. He was a biologist for eight years at the University of Alaska, Juneau and while there he was actively involved in the conservation and protection of the American Bald Eagle.

His interests are not confined to marine biology. Dennis' present research activities and latest publication involve the conservation and recovery of the marine green turtle *Chelonia mydas* and the preservation of their marine plant pastures in Hawaii and in the UAE, but he is also conducting research regarding the ecology and conservation of desert plants, especially *Calotropis procera*. He has some interesting theories about *Calotropis* and *Leptadenia* to put forward in his talk.



Calotropis
Photograph by Anne Millen



Local Biogeography: Traveling the Species Gradient

Travel is a broadening experience. This is true not only from a cultural point of view, but from a biological point of view as well. Even within our own area of eastern Arabia, traveling south into Oman along the mountains, for example, the attentive observer can watch the appearance of new species, and/or the disappearance of old ones. These are not changes that result from a change in habitat *per se*, such as traveling westwards in the UAE from mountain front to gravel plain to sand desert. Rather, they are changes within the same overall kind of habitat, and presumably reflect more subtle gradients in factors such as temperature (average or extremes), rainfall (amount or pattern), sunlight or elevation (and of course, those factors themselves can be inter-related). Some observed changes can be explained by more localized habitat parameters such as rock type, etc., and some anomalies can perhaps be explained by historical accident, but these do not account for overall regional gradients.



Acridocarpus orientalis

Perhaps the easiest such changes to observe are those involving trees and large shrubs, which are readily visible and do not run or fly away. Only south of Wadi Jizzi, for example, in the Wadi Kitnah area, does one first begin to see the so-called oriental cherry, *Acridocarpus orientalis*. This is a large shrub which resembles the wadi fig *Ficus cordata salicifolia* and which to some extent occupies the latter's wadi and wadi wall niche in that area. However, *A. orientalis* also colonises mountain slopes and is a major component of

mountain vegetation throughout the Hajar Mountains to the south, up to about 1300-1500m. A bit further south, the large tamarisk tree *Tamarix aphylla* becomes abundant in broader gravel wadi beds, e.g., Wadi Ajran, although *T. aphylla* is all but unknown in the UAE.

Faunal changes are seen as well. For example, two butterfly species that become abundant in the mountains to the south of Wadi Jizzi are rarely if ever seen to the north. One is the giant skipper *Coeliades anchises*, and in this case the reason is relatively clear and is related to the changes in the flora: the larval foodplant of the giant skipper is *Acridocarpus orientalis*, mentioned above, and the butterfly's distribution closely follows that of its foodplant. The second is the desert orange tip *Colotis liagore*, but the reason why it isn't found further north is unknown.



Coeliades anchises

An example from among vertebrate organisms is *Pristurus carteri*, a diurnal gecko with a pointed snout. *P. carteri* is common on the ridges and plains of much of southern Oman, from Salalah northwards. It was recorded for the first time on the Ibri anticline on a DNHG fossilizing field trip a year ago, and has since been found almost to the UAE border near Al-Ain, but never to the north. The reasons are speculative at this point: Why are the gravel plains and foothills of the UAE not a satisfactory home? Or is *P. carteri* just beginning to immigrate? Report by Gary Feulner



Pristurus carteri
Photograph by Angela Manthorpe

Lots of "News" from Northern Oman

If you go where you haven't gone, you'll see things you haven't seen. Chairman Gary Feulner followed this strategy during the successive Nov-Dec holidays, and reports happily as follows: "I knew that Northern Oman, including the Mahdhah area, had been relatively favored by autumn showers this year, so I made several weekend forays to that area. One goal was to scout the large area between Ibri and the Jebel Akhdar, probably best known for the "beehive tombs" at Al-Ayn. I visited not so much for the archeology as for plants, animals and geology, but I was not disappointed in any respects. For example:

Birds: The stony plains and gentle stony hillsides were lush with what seemed to be Liechtenstein's sandgrouse bedded down for the night; the birds were both gregarious and garrulous, but very well camouflaged. Also, the plain leaf warbler gave excellent views on two mornings in camp. (Am I the only one who has noticed that it's easier to get close to birds in the wild in Oman?)

Plants: On gravel plains deep within the mountains I encountered a "same but different" – a plant with a distinct resemblance to one I know, yet clearly different. From *Flora of Oman*, vol. 1, by Shahina Ghazanfar, I was able to identify it as *Morrettia phileana*, a sister species of the common *M. parviflora*. A key characteristic is that the plant is covered in tiny coarse, stellate hairs that come off if the plant is touched. The stellate nature of the hairs was confirmed under magnification. I also confirmed that some of the hairs come off when the plant is touched, and many of those stuck to my fingers. It is best not to rub your eyes while handling such a species.

On the middle slopes of J. Kawr, the largest of the "exotic" blocks that dot the west flank of the Hajar Mountains, I found several unexpected plants, several 'known' but still unidentified, and several new to



Email your reports to pvana@emirates.net.ae, (Arial 10 justified) and send your photographs as separate jpg files, or deliver them to Anne for scanning.

me (an experience I seldom have any longer in the UAE and neighbouring areas of Oman); one of the latter was particularly intriguing and I speculate that it may be a kind of wild rose. I must now acquire vol. 2 of *Flora of Oman*.



Unidentified plant, Jebel Kawr, Oman

Dragonflies: Enroute to Ibri, within the mountains, I found a dragonfly that I could not begin to identify – and neither can anybody else, it seems from correspondence. Happily, in the interim Bob Reimer of Al-Ain seems to have photographed the same species in Wadi Tarabat, so there's hope that with better photographs we can make some progress.

Butterflies: The star of the show, so far, was a small skipper butterfly encountered on the middle slopes of Jebel Kawr. It was unknown to me but I was able to observe it well and photograph it sufficiently to get an expert confirmation as the Arabian grizzled skipper, a rare butterfly which (despite its common name) is centered in the horn of Africa and is known in Arabia from perhaps only a few dozen specimens from Yemen and Dhofar. It was not suspected in Northern Oman. Moreover, it is not a migrant species and is therefore considered to represent a relict population. A more complete report will be published in *Tribulus*.

Archaeology: I encountered cairn

tombs in the shadow of Jebel Misht as well as on the middle flanks of Jebel Kawr. This area of Oman is of course famous for cairn and 'beehive' tombs (there are more than a thousand at Bat and on the ridges to the east), but those at Jebel Kawr may be newly recognized and will be duly knitted into the register. Report by Gary Feulner



Tomb, Jebel Kawr, Oman

Locusts in November

Sightings of large locusts were reported in November 2007 at locations ranging from the RAK desert to the edge of the Jebel Akhdar, and several points in between – seemingly somewhat more common than normal. All of those reported recently were single individuals; there was no indication of the higher densities that are thought to trigger mass migrations. (The difference between 'locust' and 'grasshopper' is one of behavior and physiology, not one of taxonomy, but not all species are known to swarm.)

In the UAE, the most common large locust is *Anacridium melanorhodon arabafrum*, a relative of the Egyptian tree locust *A. aegyptium*. It does not swarm but can nevertheless be a pest of date palms and other trees. The most serious swarming species in the UAE and Oman is the desert locust *Schisto-*

cerca gregaria, which has been known to swarm from central Oman, especially after favorable rains.

A photograph below of one of the recent sightings from the Mahdhah area suggests that it may be none of the above, but rather *Cyrtacanthacris tatarica*, a paleotropical species seldom recorded in the UAE and northern Oman. If so, it is worth noting that an identical animal was photographed in the UAE (Wadi Asfani) last spring. Interested readers can find more information about UAE grasshoppers in Prof. Mike Gillett's paper in *Tribulus*, vol. 10.2 (2000), now available on the internet at: www.enhg.org. Report by Gary Feulner



Cyrtacanthacris tatarica(?)
from the Mahdhah area

Snail Tucker

Jumeira beach often yields a few small cuttlefish "bones", which are useful supplements for cage birds and, apparently, good solid tucker for pet snails. The bones are usually picked clean and quite battered. Some months ago, after cyclone Gonu threw many interesting things onto the beach just north of Kalba, I did find a small short thick twisted one whose irregularity suggested it to be damaged or diseased. But usually, they all look very much the same and are equally appealing to the snails.

Recently, though, I found a different one at the north end of Jumeira beach. Very narrow for its length, it has just the smallest shreds of the chitinous edging suggesting that it is in pretty much the shape it should be. Websites about cuttlefish and cuttlefish bones advise that the species cannot be identified from worn specimens. Unfortunately, the pos-



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Plants – Valerie Chalmers

Mammals & Seashells - Recorders needed!

The recorders are not necessarily scientific experts in their designated fields. In fact, most are not. However, they are interested and knowledgeable amateurs - please contact them if you have any interesting reports or queries.

The intention is that information will be channelled through to the *Gazelle* editor, so new information can be shared with all our readers.



terior end is rather worn and does not retain all its features.



Dorsum of *Sepia cf trygonina* (above) and *Sepia pharaonis* (below),

An Australian website listed 52 common species and 62 rare! *Seashells of Eastern Arabia* was more helpful in that it was briefer – it describes and illustrates two found in the Gulf of Oman and Masirah and lists four more that occur there. This long specimen does seem to correspond to the description that Bosch et al give for *Sepia cf trygonina*.



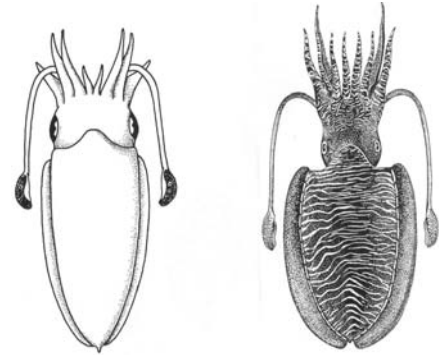
Ventral surface of *S. trygonina* and *S. pharaonis*, both from Jumeira Beach

Members have occasionally seen what they thought were cuttlefish eggs attached to seaweed thrown up on Rams beach, but no one has any information on species, and it is not clear whether there are species differences in the eggs.



Sepia eggs

Many cuttlefish are very colourful and *S. pharaonis*, with its rippled strips is one of the loveliest. I have never seen a photograph of *S. trygonina* - perhaps because it is pale and less interesting - but the differences between these two can be seen in drawings from a UN fisheries website.



S. trygonina (left) and *S. pharaonis*

Whilst *S. Pharaonis* is found from the Red Sea and Gulf all along the coasts to southern Japan and northern Australia, *S. trygonina* has a much smaller area of distribution given as the southern half of the Red Sea and the Yemen and Oman coast as far as Masirah Island. Bosch et al report bones on the beaches of the Gulf of Oman. This raises the possibility that, as the bones are so buoyant, distribution of the bones may not truly reflect distribution of the animal. *Report and photographs by Anne Millen*

Vertebrate Fossils from Western Abu Dhabi

Val Chalmers and Gary Feulner attended a lecture at the ENHG in Abu Dhabi on the miocene vertebrate fossils of western Abu Dhabi, by Prof. Andrew Hill of Yale University. A Yale team is renewing work on these fossils under the auspices of the new Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage. The original work, in which Prof. Hill was involved, began in the 1980s and has provided a portrait of a large, braided river flowing through a savannah-like environment that was probably still relatively arid away from the river banks.

At that point in time, 6-8 million years ago, the Arabian Gulf was still dry land, the Zagros had only just begun to rise, and the local fauna was a mix of African and Asian species, many having their closest affinity with sites in East Africa and Chad – fish, crocodiles, turtles, antelopes, rodents, primitive horses,



pigs, hippopotamuses, cats, and even a primate and a rhinoceros. Elephants are especially well represented as fossils, but Prof. Hill noted that this is probably due to the better preservation of their robust bones, rather than to exceptional abundance. Camels were absent, however, because they originated in the New World and didn't reach the Near East until about 2 million years ago. It appears that at least two kinds of ostrich-like birds were also present, one especially large and robust, which may help to account for the exceptionally thick ostrich eggshell that has been known for years from the Western Region.

On the basis of limited palaeocurrent data analysed to date, Prof. Hill and his colleagues have tentatively concluded that the river system in question flowed from NW to SE and was probably part of a palaeo-Tigris/Euphrates. It is known that somewhat later, in the pleistocene (1.8 million to 10,000 years ago), a river system flowed intermittently east from the mountains of south-western Arabia, across the Empty Quarter, and then NE across the area of the present day Sabkha Matti, in the extreme west of the UAE. However, the miocene drainage system could still have been a precursor of the pleistocene one, since the Sabkha Matti lies west of, and therefore still 'upstream' from, the miocene fossil sites.

Prof. Hill also made the interesting point that two of the more unusual creatures present – a saber-toothed cat and Arabia's only fossil primate -- are so far known from only a single bone (actually a tooth) each.



Monkey canine

Photograph from "Abu Dhabi 8 Million Years Ago", eds. Mark Beech & Peter Hellyer

This emphasises, for amateurs, the importance of *not* collecting fossils or other items as "souvenirs" and putting them to a shoebox at home. In the case of the Western Region, with the Yale team on the job all fossil

materials should be left *in situ*. It was evident from some of Prof. Hill's photos that what looks to the amateur like just a scatter of small bits of bone could be the disintegrating remains of a diagnostic and valuable fossil, e.g., a large skull.



Apparently nothing much ... but in fact eight million year old elephant jaws prior to excavation (from Beech & Hellyer *op cit*)

Items which seem to have special importance, if encountered, should be photographed, GPS coordinates taken and reported to the Yale team via ADACH or the NHGs. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Alas, Poor Wadi Deftah ...

Wadi Deftah has been a favorite spot of UAE naturalists and campers since the 1970s, and has been a venue for DNHG field trips over the years, from "easy" nature walks to more challenging hikes in summer heat. It featured, among other things, three generations of bridges across the main wadi (including the original palm log), an attractive oasis, a gorge and pools with permanent water and fish, and archeology in the form of extensive rock art and a community of stone dwellings on a hillside, in use into the 1960s. In the oasis and the nearby wadi have been found two of the UAE's least seen reptiles, its rarest freshwater snail, and one of its most distinctive scorpions.

Many of those who knew Wadi Deftah will be saddened to learn that it has become one of the most recent victims of progress – and evidently not the last. A major road and tunnel system have now been driven deep into the mountains, apparently headed for the scenic traditional village of Shis, at the head of the Wadi Madha watershed, which drains to the East Coast through the Omani enclave of Madha.

As of New Year's Day, old bridges were gone; at the plantations, the right bank has been halved, the gorge destroyed, the pools polluted and the fish are gone. Upstream, the rock art has been entirely destroyed (it is difficult even to identify the terraces it once covered) and the wadi bottom has been excavated for massive concrete culverts that will channel floodwaters out of harms way. For a kilometer above the plantation, the wadi has been turned into an industrial and quarry site.

On the East Coast side, much of the hydrology of Wadi Shis and Wadi Madha has been destroyed in recent years by thoughtless road construction and over-extraction, but the village of Shis had retained more or less its original charm, as well as its permanent natural water. The record suggests that little account may be taken of this; one is well advised to see it now.

Let us hope the new road makes some people happy, and speeds them and their cargo to their destination 20 minutes faster than the old route via Fujairah (the new road winds through the mountains, so it cannot be a speedway). And let us hope it brings greater prosperity to the East Coast, although this may come at the expense of its attraction as a getaway from the metropolis of the Arabian Gulf coast.

But let us also hope that at least someone will drive along the new road slowly – slowly enough to watch and wonder, and maybe even to stop and park (if parking is



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possible) and to take account of what was there before, untouched, in what was called, less than 20 years ago, the "wild and almost inaccessible mountain terrain between Masafi and the East Coast" (A.R. Western, *The Flora of the UAE: An Introduction* (1989). Report by Gary Feulner



Precis orithya

Blue pansy butterflies were commonly seen in Wadi Deftah after rain

Photo from *The Emirates: A Natural History*

*And a bit more news ...
(but not for the front page!)*

Chairman **Gary Feulner** reports auspicious news for the New Year: "I started the New Year with a hike up one of the Musandam peaks, where I was very pleased to encounter two animals that I have never before seen in the field. One was the Egyptian spiny mouse, which I had previously seen only in a researcher's trap. "My" specimen was however not much more wild; in fact it was dead in a water tank, from which I extracted it – and left a note to potential users.



The second was *Asaccus gallagheri*, a rare gecko, disturbed at a tumbled-down grinding hut in a terraced settlement. The yellow tail of the male was unmistakable." Thanks to Gary for this information and hesitant thanks to Angela Manthorpe for the photograph. (A good picture of the rare gecko mentioned above is on www.uaeinteract.com where you will find the information under 'Terrestrial Reptiles'. Ed.)

Look the Part!

The DNHG has navy blue sweat shirts, with the DNHG emblem embroidered in silver. Sizes: Large and Extra Large Dh65/- each, and silver grey polo shirts with the DNHG emblem embroidered in black. Sizes: Medium, Large and Extra Large Dh50/- each. The quality of both items is excellent! See Val Chalmers at the next meeting.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

Lectures at Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management, 7.30 for 8.00pm

- Feb 03 Ecology of *Calotropis procera* and *Leptadenia pyrotechnica* in the UAE -
Dr Dennis Russell
- Mar 02 Conservation in developing countries: examples from Oman -
Dr Shahina Ghazanfar

Field Trips (Members only, please. Details inside.)

- Feb 02 Hajar Mountain Nature walk with Gary Feulner
- Feb 15 Hajar Mountain Hike with Gary Feulner
- Feb 22 East Coast shelling with Anne Millen
- Feb 28 - Mar 01 InterEmirates Weekend, Mafrak
- Mar 7/8 Dirding with Dave Bradford
- Mar 15 Mangrove Ecology Trip with Gary Feulner
- Apr 28 Wadi Bih with the Radhakrishnas
- April 11 - 15 Sundarbans Mangrove Forest, India