

GAZELLE

Vol 23 no 2 February 2008



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

DNHG Membership

Non-resident member **Peter Cunningham** has completed his move from Namibia to Saudi Arabia, where he is a senior ecologist at a reserve called Mahazat as-Sayd near Taif -- around 2200 sq. km in size, flat and dominated by *A. tortilis*. His initial work focuses on the feeding ecology of *reem* gazelle (sand gazelle) and he will make recommendations on the stocking rate and carrying capacity. He describes the area as very African-like and similar to southern Namibia.

Peter remarked on January's icy weather in northern Saudi, including black frost that killed off most of the ornamental plants and even burnt the *Ziziphus*, which he found unusual - evidently the coldest weather since the 1970's according to some people. More to the point, he admits he was caught off guard and unprepared clothes-wise for the cold spell, coming from a 40° Namibia.

Editor Anne Millen was recently in Chile where, up a mountain, she found swarms of dragonflies. They were large and plentiful but impossible to photograph. (See Gary's article on dragonflies p. 6) Foolishly, she thought she might see something of the forest by going canopy gliding. Not so. She flew through the trees so fast that she

saw only a blur of green and there could have been condors.



Fast stop needed

She and Peter had a better view of the forest when visiting an alerce park. The alerce (*Fitzroya cupressoides*) is threatened by forest clearing, theft and smuggling.



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:

Rashmi de Roy
Jenny and Colin Hill
Willy & Helga Meyer
Gary Feulner
Stefan Beck
Richard Morris



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.

Tel: 02-582 2666

Fax: 02-582 2899

Email: mafraq@emirates.net.ae

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

East Coast Shelling - Anne Millen
Friday 22 February

We will go to Sandy's 'Conus Corner', north of Khor Fakkan, and on to other beaches. 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.) It is not too late to decide to come: email Anne (p.7)

Dubai Temple Tour with Sandhya Prakash
Saturday 23 February
Details advised by email.

Saih Shuaib overnight – Mary Anne Pardoe
7-8 March
Details advised by email

Mangrove Ecology Walk - Gary Feulner
Saturday 15 March

Gary Feulner will lead a several hour introduction to the inter-tidal lagoon and mangrove environment at Khor Zawrah, Ajman, including fringing saltbushes, algal (cyanobacterial) mats, intertidal mud, mangroves and tidal channels, and taking note of fish, molluscs, crab, bird and insect life en route.

The visit is timed for low tide, but as we wade into the mangroves, participants will get wet, muddy feet, and clothes mud-spattered. Quick-dry clothing is advantageous as we may wade shallow channels.

Schedule: Depart from downtown

Dubai at ~9:00am. Estimated return to Dubai ~3-3:30pm. What to bring? Minimum 2 litres of water; footwear that will tolerate salt water and mud (wetsuit booties, canvas sneakers or the like); hat and/or sunscreen, daypack, lunch, camera, binoculars, etc. It is recommended to have wash water and a change of shoes and/or clothing in the car.

Limit 15 people. Call Gary for sign-up, details of meeting place and further info, at 330-3600 x 630 (office) or 306-5570 (home).

Spring Birdwatching with Dave Bradford
Friday 21 March

David Bradford will lead a birding trip to see a wide variety of resident and migrating birds in their breeding plumage. Start at 8.00am at the Dubai Pivot Fields next to the sewage treatment plant on the Al Awir Road, on to Al Warsen Lakes then up to the coast north of Umm Al Quwain for a session of shore bird watching. Depending on time and interest, we may go to a beach just north of the Barracuda Hotel, and we could continue on north to Ras Al Khaimah and bird some of the agricultural areas. We will finish up in mid to late afternoon.

Participants should bring a packed lunch, water, hat, etc. David Bradford will bring a telescope for general use. Binoculars are recommended if you want to get close looks at the birds.

[Directions: The Pivot Fields are the large enclosed field area next to the sewage treatment plant on the Al-Awir Road. Take the turnoff to the right AFTER Dragon Mall (towards the sewage plant et al.), then fork left immediately. The pivot fields (fenced area ringed with trees) will be on your left. Follow the road along the fence to the corner, where there is an entrance with a small gate. Meet there at the corner, outside the entrance.]

And ... **The Sunderbans**
11-15 April (see p.8)



Annual General Meeting and Elections

Our March 2007 lecture night will also be our Annual General Meeting, at which a new Committee will be elected for the coming year. The outgoing Committee has consented to continue to serve, but we need a volunteer to serve as Treasurer. Details of this position are provided below. If you are interested, or would like more information, please contact Gary Feulner or Valerie Chalmers or another Committee member.

Apart from Committee positions, there is a particular need for field trip ideas and for people to lead field trips. Almost all of our trips are led by other members, not experts or professionals. A certain amount of enthusiasm is a prerequisite, but beyond that, our Field Trip Coordinators and other Committee members can provide guidance.

DNHG Treasurer Needed

We are once again in the market for a Treasurer. This position requires a modest amount of attention on a regular basis in order to account for our membership income, regular and miscellaneous expenses and book sales. Experience with bookkeeping is an advantage, as is familiarity with basic computerized accounting programs. We bank at Lloyds TSB in Jumeirah but the actual deposit of cash funds can be arranged through other Committee members, if necessary. The Treasurer would be expected to attend monthly meetings of the DNHG Committee (currently held on Tuesday evenings immediately following monthly lectures). Interested members should contact Chairman Gary Feulner or Vice Chairman Valerie Chalmers (see p. 7).



Our Next Speaker

Dr. Shahina Ghazanfar is a botanist at the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew. She has previously lived, worked and traveled in Oman, Pakistan and Nigeria and made major contributions to the study of the vegetation and flora of those countries. For many years she was a member of the faculty at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman and is the author of an annotated checklist of the flora of Oman (1992) and, more recently, *Flora of Oman*, vols. 1 and 2 (of four projected volumes). In addition she has published numerous journal articles on qualitative and quantitative aspects of the flora of Oman. She has a particular interest in the conservation of the flora of Oman and of Arabia generally.

Dr. Ghazanfar studied at Univ. of Punjab, Pakistan, and Univ. of Cambridge, U.K. Her principal current responsibilities at Kew involve the flora of tropical Africa. She is also an official of the Linnean Society of London.

Conservation Conference

Chairman Gary Feulner recently attended the annual conservation conference held at the Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife, in Sharjah. One of this year's themes was the management of protected reserves. Reports were presented on four UAE efforts, all still in their early stages.

One was expansion of the Al Maha resort to become the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve, including the gradual exclusion of camel husbandry from the entire area. Second was the EWS-WWF effort, in conjunction with the government of Fujairah, to create a protected area in the Wadi Wurayah watershed. Third was a study which will develop a proposal for the management of wildlife on Sir Bani Yas, emphasizing Arabian rather than exotic species. Fourth is the Shar-

jah initiative to establish a bird-watching reserve on the Sharjah-Ajman border; at the site of the former Ramtha Wetlands (Ramtha Tip), now called Al-Wasit. That area is now dissected by major highways, but plans to fill and build on what is a natural groundwater collection area have been shelved.

All of these areas except Wadi Wurayah have already been modified to a significant extent by human activity, and the reserve initiatives will have to accommodate continuing development of one sort or another in the immediately adjacent areas. In the case of Wadi Wurayah it is hoped that the proposal will spare this typical East Coast wadi from 'development', almost uniquely.



DNHG members with the large amount of rubbish they collected from Wadi Wurayah, during a trip there in December 2005

Inevitably, for one who has been acquainted with these sites since the 1980s or early 1990s, it was disconcerting to hear certain of the views and proposals of outside consultants coming late to the game. And it was somewhat surreal to hear several of them recite the standard planning mantra of taking account of local populations as "stakeholders" (and showing pictures of local women weaving baskets) when none of the areas in question has a native resident population, and most are under unitary control. But it is gratifying that some attention (rather than none) is being paid to attracting and/or preserving and enjoying local wildlife. *Report by Gary Feulner*



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.

"Wet" Wadi Hike Near Masafi

The DNHG's wadi hike in the Masafi area in early February was a rare experience due to the presence of flowing water along much of the route. This also made for precarious passages in a few places – rock hopping, cliff hugging and, for a few, plain old splashing through, which were not part of the trip advertisement (neither were the flooded access roads).



Flooded access roads

The sound of flowing water made us all feel cooler, in case the lingering northerly breezes of the shamal weekend did not.



The lower part of the wadi



Hikers in the wadi

This winter's rain had obviously raised the hopes of local farmers and the two small fields where we have parked our vehicles in previous years were now fenced and planted with squash, tomatoes, etc. One happy farmer was on hand to wish us well and took particular note of our large and multi-national group, including a couple of youngsters (shabab).



Go MaryAnne!

The flip side of the very recent rain and lower temperatures was that few plants were yet in flower and there was a general dearth of observable animal life. One exception was a feral goat that surveyed us from the highest peak in the area; another was the multitude of tadpoles and occasional adult toads. The adults were overwhelmingly the Arabian toad *Bufo arabicus*, but Field Trip Coordinator Jenny Hill provided photographic evidence of the relatively rare Dhofar toad *Bufo dhufarensis*, not previously recorded in this wadi. As to insect life, the Chairman spotted only three butterflies, to which William Pardoe added a hummingbird hawkmoth.

A scientific highlight for the day was the taking of a specimen of a mountain dragonfly, evidently a species of *Orthetrum*, that has been seen by a number of observers over the

years, but that has remained unidentified from photos alone. A good opportunity presented itself and David Palmer contributed his genuine Tilley hat for the capture. The specimen will go to a European expert on Arabian dragonflies. The only dragonfly species flying were this and the vagrant emperor *Anax ephippiger*, discussed elsewhere in this issue (see 'Emperor Dragonflies Swarming' p.6)



The going get rougher



... and rougher

In contrast to our last visit, we saw no snakes, vipers or otherwise. This could have been due to the lower temperatures, but there is reason to fear that it may be due to the development of a local camp far up the wadi; the laborers in charge would probably not tolerate poisonous snakes along their commute.

An equally sad effect of even such small scale development is that a permanent pool near the camp, which heretofore has been a reservoir for wadi fish and aquatic insects, now has a suction pump stuck in it, the fish are gone, most



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

Reptiles - Dr Reza Khan
res 344 8283
off 344 0462
fax (off) 349 9437

Archaeology - David Palmer
cell: 050-7387703
office direct line: 04-2072636

Birds - David Bradford
davebradford9@hotmail.com

Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi
res: 06-5247 958
off: 06-5583 003
email: lankefi@emirates.net.ae

Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

Geology - Gary Feulner
res 306 5570
fax 330 3550

Insects – Gary Feulner

Fossils - Valerie Chalmers
res 349 4816,
fax 340 0990
email: valeriechalmers@hotmail.com

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.



of the reeds have been cut, and the pool is largely lifeless. Was it drained at one point, or polluted? Today, there is water elsewhere in the wadi, but what will happen when the (normal) drought returns? *Report by Gary Feulner, photographs by Stephan Beck and Richard Morris*



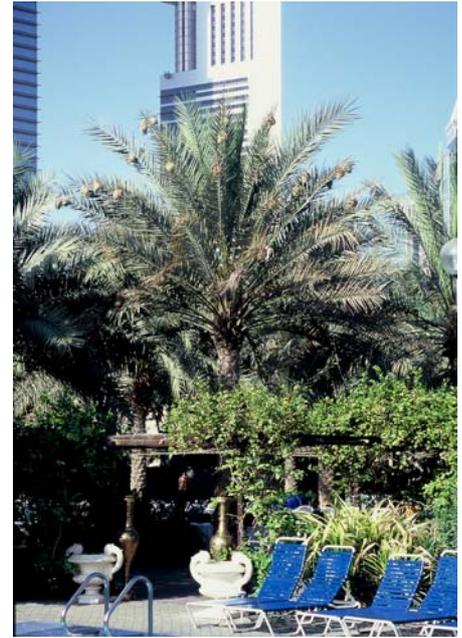
Ruins in the wadi near Masafi

Wadi Bih Border Closing

Jenny and Colin Hill report that, as of mid-January, the UAE border post in Wadi Bih is closed to passage by expats, period, no exceptions. Jenny and Colin and guests were coming from the Dibba side and had to return that way in the dark. Inquiries to the border officials were not revealing. Jenny knew better than to ask why (although this was shortly after the UAE visit of the American president). But how long? Who knows? A day, a month – maybe a year. Our sources in RAK are keeping their ears open to the status and the prognosis. We have postponed the planned Wadi Bih field trip until the situation is clarified.

Cookie Capers: Songbird Pecking Order

I was lounging by the pool at my apartments club, the mid-February sun helping me to recover from a cold made worse by an ambitious hike. As I was dressing to leave, another patron put aside nearby a small serving tray with the remains of coffee service: pitcher, milk, cups, sugar – and, on a saucer, a butter cookie that had gone uneaten.



The club before demolition, a weaver nesting site

In short order, the saucer was visited by a lesser masked weaver*, a vivid yellow male. The weaver took a bite of cookie and flew off to a nearby shrub. I sat back down to watch the action. Up jumped a red-vented bulbul who perched on the saucer lip and, apparently by design, gave the cookie a yank so that it fell off the tray and onto the surrounding concrete pavement and broke in two. This attracted the attention of a palm dove and house sparrow, but both of these and the bulbul deferred to the returning weaver, although it is smaller than all but the sparrow. The weaver took one piece and flew off with it to a distant palm, where it ate undisturbed, if awkwardly perched, clutching both the cookie and the stem of a palm frond.



Lesser masked weaver nests, and a male weaver

Meanwhile, back on the concrete, the palm dove held sway, of a sort.



While the bulbul watched from a distance, the palm dove pecked at small crumbs from the ground, while still trying to guard the main prize, the remaining piece of cookie. But while the sparrow would back off in any direct confrontation, the palm dove was no match for the sparrow's agility and persistence, and after a minute or so the sparrow had seized the main piece and flown off across the pool. (It seemed a rather large load for a small bird, and I kept waiting for a splash.)

So: the lesser masked weaver dominated all; the palm dove dominated the house sparrow, but somewhat in the way that a bull dominates a matador (the sparrow moving in for the "kill" when the opportunity was right); and the red-vented bulbul, despite initial interest, did not join in the contest (Why not? Temperament? Not as comfortable on the ground? No sweet tooth?).



Male lesser masked weaver

[*The lesser masked weaver was a bittersweet sighting. These weavers, an introduced species, had been common at the club for many years, evidenced by as many as 75 hanging nests that graced the mature palm trees of the original facilities. However, the old club was bulldozed for 'development' a few months ago, along with its acquired flora and

fauna. I wondered where the weavers would go, since the new temporary facility has many fewer and much smaller palms, without developed canopies. A few males have returned to site, but it remains to be seen whether they will nest at this poor approximation.] *Report and photographs by Gary Feulner*

Emperor Dragonflies Swarming

The typical January migration (or at least swarming) of the vagrant emperor dragonfly (*Anax ephippiger*) was in evidence throughout the area once again this year.



Anax ephippiger

They could be seen from the relatively idyllic setting of Wadi Khadra (over pools adjacent to the plantations) in the Mahdhah area of Oman, to the urban setting of downtown Dubai (the entrance road between Emirates Towers and the DIFC). They were also observed on a DNHG field trip deep within the mountains near Masafi in earliest February.



Anax imperator

The so-called "emperor" dragonflies are the largest local dragonflies. The UAE has three species but the vagrant emperor is the only one which flies in groups and the only one which is routinely seen far from water. The other two are territorial. The distinctive electric-blue males of the blue emperor (*Anax imperator*) patrol territories at fresh water bodies and will not tolerate intrusion by other males. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Member's Night June 1st – speakers wanted

This is a reminder to members old and new that in June we will be holding member's night. For those who don't know, member's night is a popular DNHG tradition in which we turn the floor open to members and give them the opportunity to give a short presentation on a topic of their choice.

Topics can be natural history, culture or travel related and do not need to be about the UAE, so the scope is fairly wide. We are now seeking volunteers for June.

Presentations should be up to 20 mins max, and we can provide all the necessary equipment. If you'd like to volunteer or want to discuss this in more detail, please contact Angela Manthorpe, Speaker Coordinator (email manthorpe2005@yahoo.co.uk, Mobile 0506451743).

Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary – Easy Access

Access to the Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary has been greatly simplified. According to the Marine Environment & Sanctuaries Unit at Dubai Municipality, individuals, families and small groups can enter the sanctuary by simply registering at the entrance. The tim-



	name	tel home	tel office	fax
Chairman	Gary Feulner messages: 306 5300	306 5570	330 3600	330 3550
Vice Chairman	Valerie Chalmers email: valeriechalmers@gmail.com	349 4816	no calls pls	340 0990
Treasurer	<i>Needed! Can you do it?</i>			
Membership Secretary	Lena Linton email: linton@mailme.ae	050-474 3595		
Membership Assistant	Anindita Radhakrishna email: anin@emirates.net.ae	282 3952	050-656 9165	
Speaker Co-ordinator	Angela Manthorpe email: manthorpe2005@yahoo.co.uk	288 6232	050-645 1743	
Fieldtrip Co-ordinator	Pradeep Radhakrishna email: wgarnet@emirates.net.ae	282 3952	050-450 8496	
Fieldtrip Co-ordinator	Jenny Hill email: jennyhill76@hotmail.com		050 8861508	
Fieldtrip Co-ordinator	Sandhya Prakash email: springconsult@gmail.com	050-5512481		348 2868
Special Projects	Beryl Comar email: comar@emirates.net.ae	344 2243		344 2243
Newsletter Editor	Anne Millen email: pvana@emirates.net.ae	394 7076	no calls please	394 7075
Publisher	Peter van Amsterdam email: pvana@emirates.net.ae	394 7076	335 5495	394 7075
Librarian	Diana Oates email: dianaoates@hotmail.com	050-4969544		
Book Sales	Jo & Rachel Raynor email: joray@emirates.net.ae	334 6183		
Postmaster	Sandi Ellis email: peterjon@emirates.net.ae	050-644 2682		
Chief Engineer	Jesse Ellis email: peterjon@emirates.net.ae	050-8993413		

ings are 9 am to 4 pm, Saturday through Thursday. Five individuals are permitted per bird hide, at one time.

The Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary was officially inaugurated in February 2005. The sanctuary features three birdwatching hides, from north to south: the lagoon hide (Al Buhaira), the flamingo hide (Fantir) and the mangrove hide (Gurm). Each hide offers a panoramic view of the sanctuary and is equipped with picture panels depicting many of the most common birds that can be seen. *Thanks to Rashmi de Roy, also of WWF UAE, for this updated access information.*

Jumeira Beach Surprises

Helga and Willy Meyer, keen observers of the comings and goings of Jumeira Beach, wrote that in

January, after a big storm, they found this sea snake on Jumeirah beach. Scanning *The Emirates: A Natural History*, it seems that it may be the viperine sea snake (*Praescutata viperina*) which has a somewhat similar description. Perhaps one of our readers can identify it correctly.



Sea snake on Jumeira beach

On 1st February, they returned to the beach during the storm and found that quite a bit of the sand had gone.



Jumeira beach in the February storm

Thanks to Willy and Helga Meyer for photographs and information.

Letters to the Editor

Do you have some comment, suggestion or query on natural history that you would like our members to know about or answer? Just want to tickle things up a bit?

Please send your letter to any of the committee members listed, by fax or e-mail, or direct to the editor, Anne Millen email: pvana@emirates.net.ae.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- Mar 02 Conservation in developing countries: examples from Oman -
Dr Shahina Ghazanfar
- Apr 06 Cave and Karst research of Soqatra Island, Yemen -
Dr Peter De Geest

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

- Feb 22 (Fri): Shelling on the East Coast – Anne Millen
- Feb 23 (Sat): Dubai Temple Tour – Sandhya Prakash
- Feb 29-Mar 01: Inter-Emirates Weekend (Mafraq Hotel, Abu Dhabi)
- Mar 07-08: Saih Shuaib overnight – Mary Anne Pardoe
- Mar 15 (Sat): Mangrove Nature Walk – Gary Feulner
- Mar 21 : Dubai and West Coast Birdwatching – David Bradford
- Mar 29-30 TBA
- Apr 11-15: Sunderbans Mangroves (via Kolkata) – Pradeep & Anin Radhakrishna

Additional trips may be announced by e-mail circular.