

GAZELLE

Vol 18 no 4 – April 2003



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Fanfares and Farewells...

Congratulations to Ducab (Dubai Cable Company) on winning the GCC's top award for application of environmental standards by an industrial organization. Ducab's General Manager, **Colin Paskins**, is a longtime DNHG member, trip leader and occasional contributor to the pages of the *Gazelle*. In 1997, Ducab became the first manufacturing company in the Middle East to achieve ISO14001 certification, and since then they have continued to upgrade their health, safety and environmental standards. Ducab participates in environmental events such as the annual 'Clean Up the World.' Colin admits that while on their cleanup rounds, the Dubai teams have several times come across snakes – but have kept away from them rather than trying to identify them!

Geoff Cosson will be leaving us this month, returning to Norwich, UK, which he rates as "a fine city." Geoff has been a regular at our lectures and on field trips since his return to the UAE a few years ago, after a stint in Dubai a decade earlier. We wish him well and hope he won't rule out another try.

Barbara Couldrey, who is regularly afoot in the mountains near RAK (and is on a first name basis with the border guards in Wadi

Bih) has finally taken it upon herself to see that our mountain birds are not neglected in the weekly twitchers' accounts. In recent weeks Barbara has reported the first cuckoo of the season (seen and heard, but rather late this year) and also an aerial "dogfight" between two short-toed eagles.

Marijcke Jongbloed really does leave this month to go to France. Her work here is "finished and not finished", and she promises to remain in close contact with the DNHG and even to supply the desperate editor with Latin names.



Fi Skennerton, former Membership Secretary of the DNHG, writes from South Africa (where she has not retired at all) that she looks forward to her *Gazelle*, wishes it had more goss and has "thus far have only seen several ostrich, some baboons (ugly beasts), a couple of tortoises and a dead snake". Her address is fi-fishhoek@mweb.co.za

DNHG Membership

DNHG membership remains a bargain at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dhs. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at meetings (see Membership Secretaries Lena Linton and Anin Radhakrishna) or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account no. 173746 and posted to us at PO Box 9234, Dubai. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.) Membership is valid from September 2002 to September 2003.

DNHG membership entitles you to participate in field trips and helps pay for our lecture hall, publication and distribution of *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:

Jo Raynor
Jenny Irwin
Phil Salvador
Imke Moellering
Lena Linton
Colin Paskins
Mohammed Arfan Arsif
Gary Feulner
Sandy Fowler



Field Trips etc ...

Fun Before the Summer Heat...

Stargazing Friday 24 April, 7.00pm on

For a comfortable stargazing evening, bring the following:

April sky chart, a torch with dim or a red lens (this can be a piece of red plastic bag and a rubber band), a beach chair or floor mattress, snacks and drinks.

Join Emirates ring road, from R/A intersecting E311 Emirates Road with Road D57 Jebel Ali-Lahbab. Drive 2.8km towards Lahbab, stop a few metres past the road sign Al Ain-Hatta-Oman, and turn right into the opening, across the sandy area and some 40m away from the road. Park *slowly* away from the telescope position! Numbers are not limited.

Saiq with Peter van A.

May 1&2

Saiq Plateau in Oman has terraced gardens, ancient olive and juniper trees, roses and fish! Peter van Amsterdam is leading a dash to catch the last of this season's roses. We intend to stay Wednesday night (April 30) at the Ibri Hotel, drive to Saiq on Thursday morning, smell the roses, and spend the night at the Jebel Akhdar Hotel.

Numbers are limited. Contact Peter on pvana@emirates.net.ae for bookings (or a place on the waiting list).

Sharjah Desert Park May 29 / 30

This place has it all, and it has it in the shade. Details will be available at the next DNHG meeting, and in the May issue of *Gazelle*. If you have never been there, this may be a good chance to see it away from the crowds. We hope that a special viewing can be arranged for us, as numbers will not be limited.

Ink it in!

The DNHG's annual end-of-season function will be at the Dubai Country Club in the Oasis Restaurant on Thursday, June 12th. The annual photographic competition will be held, and there will be a natural history team quiz which is always a lot of fun.

Tickets will be on sale at the May meeting, See also the flyer included in the May issue of *Gazelle*.

Photographs submitted for the competition should be a minimum size of 5" x 7" (125cm x 180cm) and mounted in matt white.

See you there for a great evening!

Library News

Our Librarian Deanne White reports that all goes well with the library in its new location at the Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management, upstairs from where we meet each month. Tonya Huculac who provided so much help has returned to Canada, and the new librarian is Tania Gore, assisted by Fatima. Please feel welcome to go up to the library before meetings, and see our excellent collection.

Gary Feulner reports that a complete set of *Fauna of Arabia* (19 volumes to date, spanning 24 years) has been donated to the DNHG library through the courtesy of the Editor-in-Chief, Dr. Fareed Krupp, now of the Senckenberg Institute in Frankfurt, and the joint publishers, King Abdul Aziz City of Science and Technology and the National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development, both of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Pro Entomologia of the Natural History Museum in Basle, Switzerland, and the Forschungsinstitut Senck-

enberg of Frankfurt.

Fauna of Arabia is perhaps the foremost scientific journal devoted to the description and study of the vertebrate and invertebrate fauna of the Arabian Peninsula. In particular, it features numerous authoritative reports and monographs on various taxonomic groups.

And...

ConocoPhillips and Dubai Petroleum Company have made a very thoughtful gift to the DNHG of surplus back copies of *GeoArabia*, and they will undertake to pass on future extras.

GeoArabia is a quarterly professional journal of Middle East petroleum geosciences, published with sponsorship from many of the international oil companies operating in Arabia, including ConocoPhillips.

Special thanks go to DNHG member and DPC geologist Phil Salvador for suggesting and arranging for this donation.

Our Next Speaker

New Zealander **Liz Maley-Craig** is a long-term resident of the Emirates and has had a long-term interest in gardening against the odds. She spoke at our Members' Night meeting one year, and everyone was so dissatisfied with just twenty minutes that we have asked her back for a whole evening. Get your questions ready – Liz is a mine of information.





New DNHG Committee

Congratulations and best wishes to the new DNHG Committee, who will serve until March 2004. The new Committee members are listed on page 7.

Annual Reports

Annual Reports by the DNHG Chairman and Treasurer's Report were presented at the AGM on March 2. Copies are available on request. Chairman Gary Feulner highlighted progress on many fronts, including the DNHG's move to a new lecture venue at Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management, the corresponding move of the DNHG library, and increasing membership levels. Areas that were singled out for further attention include ironing the bugs out of our audio-visual arrangements, development of a DNHG website for archival and communications purposes, and increasing our roster of active field trip leaders.



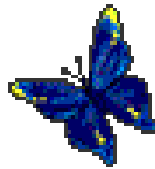
Members' Night

Our June 2003 program will be Members' Night, which consists of several 15-20 minute presentations by members. Experience has shown that almost everybody has something worth sharing with the rest of us, and we encourage you to do so. Volunteers should contact our new Speaker Coordinator Roz Buckton, Chairman Gary Feulner or any other Committee member.

Inter-Emirates Thanks

Thanks and congratulations are in order for all those who made Inter-Emirates Weekend a resounding

success, particularly DNHG Vice Chairman Valerie Chalmers. She was ably assisted by Lena Linton, Beryl Comar and Pradeep Radhakrishna, and volunteer trip leaders David Bradford, John Fox, Sandy Fowler, Jenny Irwin and MaryAnne Pardoe, not to mention the professional efforts of Lamjed El-Kefi. We have received a number of notes of thanks from participants in other groups and Valerie has conveyed the DNHG's own thanks to the Oceanic Hotel and to the Fujairah National Museum. Reports on various Inter-Emirates excursions are included in this issue.



Conservation Workshop

For the fourth consecutive year, Sharjah's Environment and Protected Areas Authority was host to a regional workshop designed to produce a Conservation Assessment and Management Plan (CAMP) for endangered Arabian species, including prominently the Arabian leopard, Arabian tahr and Arabian oryx as well as gazelle, wolves and various other animals. Last year's CAMP added fish for the first time and this year's conference added the frogs and toads of Arabia.

Attendees included knowledgeable representatives of local, national, international and private institutions, and many find the informal contact that takes place among researchers in different countries to be one of the most valuable aspects of the conferences, facilitating increased communication and cooperation in the future.

This year, there was good news on a number of fronts, and many researchers were cautiously optimistic for the future. Taxonomic studies based on DNA analysis

has sorted out Arabia's scattered sub-populations of "mountain" gazelle. Agreement on the creation of a studbook for oryx in the UAE may help to improve management of existing captive herds, many of which are in private collections. Arabian tahr have been seen in increasing numbers on the rocky slopes of Jebel Hafeet in Al-Ain, thanks in part to the purposeful discharge of water. On the other hand, over the past year there have been no known sightings of either Arabian leopard or Arabian tahr within the rest of their UAE range, most probably due to continuing drought.

The UAE's amphibians - two species of toads - are both relatively widespread. On a worldwide scale, amphibians seem to be declining in numbers, but in the UAE, no crisis is apparent and the cycles of rain and drought effectively mask such longer term trends. *Thanks to Gary Feulner for these reports*



—REPTILE—



*Please send your reptile report to
Dr Reza Khan*

Letters to the editor

Any news or views you would like published in our monthly newsletter? Want to tickle things up?



Please contact any of the committee members listed, by fax or e-mail.



Field Clips

E.mail your reports to pvana@emirates.net.ae, (Arial 10 justified) or deliver them to Anne Millen on floppy disk at monthly meetings.

Spring Flowers Trip

The spring flowers trip, to an area close to the Al Owais Dam, was attended by 21 people. We managed to record 49 different species of plants and were very lucky to find that some ephemerals in the more sheltered and shady areas had managed to survive the hot dust storms from the weeks before. Blue pimpernel (*Anagallis arvensis*), the tiny violet (*Viola cinerea*), milkwort (*Polygala eriopetera*) and the mini snapdragon (*Misopates orontium*) being four of my favourites.

Several members were introduced to some of the common plants that can be easily found: the lovely Asphodel lily (*Asphodelus fistulosus*), the velcro plant (*Forsskaolea tenacissima*), and the Arabian primrose (*Arnebia hispidissima*). Ibrahim showed us the wonderful smell of incense grass (*Cymbopogon parkeri*) by burning a small clump. We were amazed at the lovely aroma, the length of time such a small amount burned for and then the lovely perfume left on the rocks in the form of a very oily residue. Definitely worth putting on your next campfire. The best find of the day for me was *Physalis minima*, which Marycke lists in her checklist as rare and which is related to the Cape gooseberry.

We also had enthusiastic photographers and insect lovers with us. A tower head insect, among others, promoted much discussion. I hope everyone enjoyed the afternoon as much as I did! *Report by Jenny Irwin*

Through the lens....

The fear of mankind is inherent in all birds. With care, however, this can temporarily and often largely be allayed, though it is not very often that it can be completely overcome. A bird's temperament, however, differs greatly with different individuals, frequently of the same species.

Here in these two pictures the



egret is fishing undisturbed, though I am not positioned very far away. These pictures were taken with a 300mm lens at Khor Dubai.

A special kind of patience reso-



luteness is essential. This reminds me of the world renowned photographers Sir Eric Hosking and Walter Higam who have contributed most significantly towards ornithological science. Both these photographers, in spite of being blind in one eye, produced marvelous pictures that have stood the test of time.



The white cheeked yellow vented bulbul and the red vented bulbul are found in great numbers in the Garhoud Nursery and Al Wasl Hospital. Park your car in the lot at Al Wasl Hospital and observe the bulbuls, mynahs, sunbirds, warblers and many other species at close range.



UAE is a twitchers delight with the spring migrant population at its peak this month. Watch for wheat ears, shrikes, warblers and terns, not to forget the *Hypocolius* feeding merrily near the plantations close to Al Jazira Resort Hotel. *Nature Notes and photos by Arfan Asif*

Some Reports from the Inter-Emirates Weekend:

Visit to Fujairah Museum, Fort and Heritage Centre

On our visit to the museum, fort and heritage centre, we were accompanied by Mr Madani, the curator of the museum, who was able to explain the many points of interest. The museum, which is only about 400 metres from the fort, was particularly interesting for the exhibits from the local tombs which date back to 2000BC and the early photographs of the Fujairah area.

The fort, which stands on a natural rocky outcrop, was still under renovation and not open to the general public. Entrance was via traditional wooden gates with a 90 degree turn before one entered



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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.

the central courtyard. There were two main circular corner towers, and the lower rooms included a date storage area. There was a majlis at the upper level where the sheikh dispensed justice. A rectangular area, covered with gravel, in the courtyard was pointed out as the punishment/execution spot.

The heritage centre was behind Fujairah, almost in the mountains, just beyond the sulphur springs, which were sign posted as 'Sulfuric Rest!'. The centre displayed a number of traditional handicrafts and the local ladies making dyed palm frond ribbons showed the amazing dexterity of their fingers. A friendly welcome awaits visitors there.

One or two of us then made our way to Kalba to the museum and fort there. Unfortunately the fort was not open. The museum is correctly called Sheikh Saeed House and is open during the week 9-1 and 5-8 and on Fridays 5-8. For information, telephone 09-2774442 or go to www.shjmuseum.gov.ae. Useful site for Fujairah: www.fujairah-tourism.ae. *Report by Lena Linton*

Thursday Afternoon on a Dhow ...

What better way to start a weekend away than a restful afternoon cruise aboard Lamjed's excellent dhow! A pleasant breeze and hazy sky was welcome after the rain storm some had left behind in Dubai. Even before leaving the harbour, bird watchers were treated to a variety of herons.

Our cruise took us along the coast to Haffa where families still live perched on the rocky slope sides of the inlet and every little bit of sand was occupied by a fishing dinghy and paraphernalia. Pulling into a small bay with a disused? palm plantation we had the chance to snorkel, swim and explore the beach. The first snorkelers were rewarded for their promptness by the presence of a green turtle swimming with us

along the cliff edge. However the turtle proved very sensitive to sound and went off to more peaceful environs. So when swimming with turtles it pays not to clear your snorkel even if you are choking! Other submarine sightings included a large ray, sea-horse, plus a colourful variety of reef fish. A sea snake and a number of rays were also sighted while the boat was underway. Returning after dark, the lights of Dibba gave an extra dimension to the trip, soon to be replaced by the rush to the hotel for a shower and dinner for which we had built up quite an appetite. *Report by Jo Raynor*

... Or All Day on Friday

The day started a bit inauspiciously as the participants drove to Dibba through steady rain falling from gray skies. Fortunately, as we were boarding and stowing our gear the weather began clearing. Our host and captain - Lamjed Kefi - welcomed us aboard and briefed us on the functioning of his beautiful dhow, surely one of the more comfy ones around. We made our way up the coast of Musandam, admiring the rugged scenery. Not admired were the moderate swells which began to have their way with some peoples' stomachs. We spotted whale sharks in the distance, but were unable to get a close look. Eventually we stopped for lunch and recreation in a sheltered cove. Some snorkled, some scuba'ed, some explored the beach and some just lay about. On our way back cloud cover broke and we arrived in port under sunny skies. Many thanks to Val Chalmers for organising a great day out! *Report by Phil Salvador*

Sandy's Shelling Trip

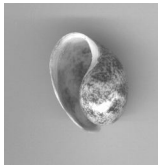
With the rain and the tide both against us, sixteen hopeful souls from all the groups set off north for Graffiti beach, pausing briefly to admire the *Terebralia* colony in the storm drain close to the hotel. Graffiti beach was productive of a splendid variety of shells including



Reports...

numerous cones, with the Pardoe family amassing a goodly number including large *Betulinus* specimens. Best finds of the day were two *Mitra mitra*, the biggest Arabian mitres and arguably the prettiest.

The rain stopped, giving perfect shelling weather, and the south end of the Corniche was next. Sadly the very high spring tides restricted shelling to the highest zone, but enough variety was still present to keep most shellers happy. I was personally pleased to find a specimen of *Pleuroploca trapezium*, one of the largest shells in UAE waters, on the Corniche beach. The party broke up after 1300 hours, most with plastic bags full of specimens. Thanks for the very positive feedback that has been received since! *Thanks to Sandy Fowler*



Jellyfishing, East Coast

The following exchange of correspondence may be of interest to DNHG members of both an academic and an entrepreneurial bent. Gary Feulner wrote to our Marine Recorder, Lamjed El-Kefi, as follows:

"One of my office colleagues took a dhow trip up the east coast of the Musandam during the 'Eid. One of the things that most impressed him was not the mountain scenery, but the fact that the waters were full of large brown jellyfish with white tentacles. He said they looked like big brown mushrooms with white stems, and he estimated that they were about 30cm in diameter. They sailed through these for almost an hour and a half. He said they were so thick you couldn't jump in the water without hitting one, although the jellyfish remained about a meter below the surface.

"I'm not sure I've seen anything

that quite resembles his description. Can you provide any more information? Do you know what this jellyfish is? Is this a seasonal occurrence?

"P.S.: Being a good businessman, my colleague also said that he wished he knew of a commercial use for them – he could be a millionaire."

Lamjed replied, knowledgeably as usual: "This proliferation of "cabbagehead jellyfish", also known as the "cannonball jelly" *Stomolophus meleagris* (different from what is known as the "mushroom jellyfish"), is commonly found in the Musandam and along the East Coast. We witnessed the same during our DNHG dhow trip last November. We assured members & guests that these are not a hazard to humans before they went swimming amongst the peaceful wanderers. The bell is firm with brown pigment. It can grow to about 25cm in diameter. Its tentacles and oral arms are a short, fingerlike, rigid stalk extending from underneath. This carnivorous swimmer is a very important part of the marine web! They appear among the unpleasant clouds of plankton and algae that cover the waters of the Gulf of Oman. Think of the Musandam without these millions of harmless jellyfish and the plankton bloom will remain, clogging the waters for years instead of weeks.

I don't know of any commercial value for this species but its bigger white brother *Rhopilema verrilis* (known as the "mushroom jelly") is less lucky as it is considered a delicacy and consumed in large quantities both fresh and pickled in China and Japan! As you know in these countries they are hopeful of catching the slightest protein, so anything that moves is food. Add to it some imaginary virtues and it becomes a delicacy! What an entrepreneur needs to become a jellyfish millionaire is an enchanted fairytale through the Southeast Asian computer web! As for us divers, we patiently wait for favorable winds and currents to clear the

waters from these unpleasant as much as essential visitors. If only their visit could be somehow shorter! *Thanks to Lamjed El-Kefi and Gary Fuelner*

Argonauta at Last

Regular trips to Rams produced the first paper nautilus I have seen this year on March 21, a small one at 24 mm., and with some damage. Below is a picture of a nautilus with creature taken on the same beach some years ago.

The main beach has produced few



shells in my visits. It is covered in sponges, perhaps disturbed by the stormy weather of February and March. This beach, and the East coast certainly as far as Sohar in Oman, have also had many brown jellyfish washed up, a colour I have not seen before. Do we have a jelly fish recorder in DNHG? Do we need one? This may be a field untrodden (squelch) by amateur naturalists.

The beach at Jazirat al Hamra has yielded some particularly large Grayana cowries, over 70mm. Sadly, many have lost their shine but there were some good specimens. Try the North end, near the coast guard station at low tide, when you can walk past the wire. North of Rams, on a rocky beach on the way to Shaam, I found the largest sand dollar I have seen, over 150mm diameter. So after 18 years shelling, as Sandy also says, there is often something new! *Report by Colin Paskins.*



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That Rams!

Archaeological staff from Ras al-Khaimah Museum, including Resident Archaeologist Christian Velde, Imke Moellering, and Beatrice de Cardi, went to Rams beach at the end of February after a heavy storm. What they found was quite surprising, as they had been to this place many times in spring after stormy weather.

The beach was covered with sponges of various shapes and types, some bright red, up to half a meter high. There were lots of sea cucumbers and/or sea slugs, as well as blue and brown jellyfish. Nearly all of the shells in between the "wall" of sponges were alive and local people were collecting them for lunch. Due to the heavy storm bigger shells than normal had been washed ashore and several concentrations of different shell types could be seen. Pearl oysters were especially numerous.

Something none of the observers had ever seen before were thin orange "sticks", approximately 20 cm long, lying between the sponges. The amount of sponges, sea slugs and shells was breathtaking to the three observers, as they had never seen anything like it. Unfortunately nobody had brought a camera and two days later it was all gone and washed back into the sea.

Have any DNHG members seen such a phenomenon? Obviously it was not entirely unknown to local residents. Can anyone identify the "orange sticks"? *Thanks to Imke Moellering for this report.*

(Ed: On the Inter-Emirates weekend, in late March, Rams beach was again covered with sponges, though smaller than those Imke mentions. Many had pearl oyster shells attached, but there were no orange sticks.)

Tribulus is here

We now have copies of the latest Tribulus (12.2 Autumn/Winter 2002). Just a bit late, this Journal continues its fine standard with a striking photo of a Desert Hyacinth *Cistanche tubulosa* on the cover.

The islands of Abu Dhabi predominate with a good round-up of archaeological and insect surveys. It is not often we get such a rounded view of places such as Marawah Island all in one journal. In addition, trips to the fish souk will never be the same following Phillip Iddson's article on the sunfish. Only the recipe was missing!

Crabs, new owflies and the usual round-ups mean that the Tribulus continues to keep us in touch with new discoveries in the Emirates. This cutting edge information makes this publication a great record, over the years, of the changing environment here in the UAE.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- May 4 Liz Maley-Craig: Aspects of Gardening and Landscaping in the UAE
- June 1 Members' Night
Stefan Beck: "DNHG Nature Walks - an armchair version"
David Bradford: "A Natural History Trip to Armenia & Georgia"
Ian MacGregor: "Dubai Central Laboratory's (DCL) new 'DCL Geobase'"
- June 12 End-of-season Party and Annual Photographic Competition

Field Trips (DNHG members only, please).

- May 1 & 2 Roses on the Saiq Plateau with Peter van Amsterdam and Anne Millen
- May 28 or 29 Sharjah Desert Park