

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

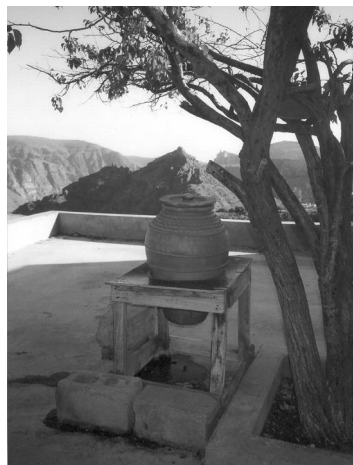
Farewell, and Welcome Back!

Pam and John Cole, two of the DNHG's most venerable members, and veterans of other, kindred organizations such as the Arabian Leopard Trust and Feline Friends, will be leaving the UAE to return to England this summer. We wish them well but we will miss their company on trips. Most of all, we will miss their contribution to the spirit of community that has helped to make Dubai such a nice place to live.

Farewell, too, to **Ian MacGregor**, who will be returning this month to his native New Zealand. We're sure that in the Kiwi environment he'll keep up his long history of outdoor activities, and also the inquisitive turn of mind that made him a welcome addition to DNHG field trips.

Peter Cunningham's family will be leaving the UAE this summer to rejoin Peter in Namibia, where he teaches and explores. One sad result is that Peter will likely no longer be a regular visitor to the UAE, where he has contributed so much to our knowledge of the local wildlife.

Roz Buckton spent 10 days in Oman recently, climbing at various sites with a visiting party that included none other than the illustrious Chris Bonnington of Everest mountaineering fame. Roz's story appears in more detail at page 4.



Water Jar, Jebel Akhdar, Oman

Sandi Ellis, and her children **Jesse, Chase, Mykayela** and **Laith**, recently returned from a visit to New Zealand. Amongst other typically Kiwi activities, they went hunting for wetas, found one in a rotting log and managed to bring it home to Dad. Highlight of the trip for the children was seeing penguins in Auckland's underwater park, and "finding a one-eyed, grumpy seal on the rocks at Rau-

DNHG Membership

DNHG membership remains a bargain at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dhs. 50 for singles. You can join 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 now to September 2004.

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:

Barbara Couldrey
Dr Larry Woods
Mohammed Arfan Arsif
Gary Feulner
Roz Buckton-Tucker
D. Diskin



Field Trips etc ...

Start Thinking about Next Season...

Already some trips are being organised for the new season but we welcome more suggestions and ideas from members. Even more, we welcome those who are willing to give it a go and lead a trip to some favourite site or interesting place. You do not have to be an expert on what you take us to see – you can invite one along or just wing it!

Falcon Hospital / Saluki Breeding Centre 25 Sep

As yet no details are available, but this trip was an outstanding success last time and there have been many requests to repeat it.

Arabia's Wildlife Centre October

This place has it all, and it has it in the shade. If you have never been there, this may be a good chance to see it away from the crowds, as we hope to arrange a private visit. Details and confirmation of the date in a later *Gazelle*. Watch this space.

Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor,

Your April 2003 issue of *The Gazelle* reports Barbara Couldrey as seeing "an aerial dogfight between two short-toed eagles" on a recent visit to the mountains near RAK. Having once viewed an event in the skies over my home island of Saltspring in British Columbia, Canada, that could be described in a similar way, I wonder if what Barbara observed was not actually part of a mating ritual? I ask because I observed two bald eagles locked in audible claw-to-claw combat and plummeting towards the ocean one morning. They released their grip on each other and pulled up just metres before

slamming into the water.

When I related this story to local birding experts, I was told by the eagle aficionados amongst them indicated that what I took for violence was actually an act of love. Does anyone know of research on the mating habits of eagles or is this still fertile ground for study? Should my suspicions be confirmed, I suppose one possible title for a forthcoming book or article on the subject would have to be *Raptor Romance*.

Sincerely,
Larry Woods

Reprinted below is a letter that appeared in Gulf News. It should be of concern to anyone interested in the wildlife and environment of the UAE, not only in relation to the specific site mentioned (the Wimpey Pits), but for what it says about the continuing failure (on all sides) to ensure that information about the natural environment is disseminated and taken into account in public and private decision-making. Subsequent reports indicate that it may already be too late to save the Wimpey Pits (although suggestions are eagerly welcomed), but can we save the next such site by the simple expedient of public and official awareness? How can this best be achieved?

Letters To The Gulf News Editor

May 16, 2003

Save the precious freshwater lakes for the birds

From Mr. D. Diskin, Dubai.

This is a difficult letter for me to write - but I feel the issues involved are important. An article in your Business section (May 12) details a new development called Chinatown at Al Aweer. I am very familiar with this area, which is largely lifeless desert; ripe enough for development, I agree. However, part of this area consists

of large freshwater lakes created by treated water from the adjacent sewage works. These lakes are currently being filled in - at an alarming rate - by the developers to create the Chinatown.

In ecological terms, particularly from an ornithological viewpoint, these freshwater lakes are amongst the best - if not the best - not only in the UAE, but probably the whole Arabian Peninsula. The lakes hold a number of significant breeding bird species and hold many wintering species from the North that are scarce elsewhere in Arabia. In Europe, in similar circumstances, this area would be highly protected. So, in all honesty, in ornithological terms, this area is outstanding. One of the best sites in Arabia.

This is, however, not Europe, and what applies there environmentally clearly does not apply here. I have spoken to a number of expatriate friends about this and they just shrug their shoulders and say this is the way it is. So we all shrug our shoulders and watch bulldozers fill in one of the most important freshwater sites in Arabia, without saying a word.

But it needn't be so. It would be possible to build Chinatown, and leave the lakes intact so you have development and nature side by side, a nature reserve in an urban environment.

Carefully managed, this would be advantageous in terms of ecological tourism and of residents being aware of the environment in the UAE.

My suggestion would be to stop the infilling of the lakes immediately and to build Chinatown around the lakes. Leave the lakes and make the immediate area around them into parkland. Then you create a balance between development and conservation. But I am probably whistling in the wind.



End-of-Season Function June 12

Those who attended will agree that this was an excellent evening. As usual, it was principally organised by Val Chalmers, with some willing helpers. We thank Val and her helpers for their efforts.

We extend our thanks and appreciation to our many sponsors whose generosity and support added so much to the enjoyment of the evening:

Le Meridien Al Aqah Beach Resort:

Weekend stay for two in Royal Club Suite plus dinner and breakfast

Shangri-La Hotel, Dubai:
Overnight stay plus dinner

The Ritz-Carlton, Dubai:
Dinner for two at La Baie
Tea for two

The Fairmont, Dubai Spa:
One beauty treatment

Dubai Country Club:
Dinner for two in the Wind Tower Restaurant

Kanoo Travel:
Buffet lunch for two at Café Insignia

Peter van Amsterdam:
Four printer cartridges

Julia Johnson:
Signed copy of *The Pearl Diver*

Congratulations to the prize winners of the Photographic Competition:

1. Richard Chapman - Ghost Crab
2. Mohammed Arfan Asif - Green Bee Eater
3. Jane Roberts - Falconer

And congratulations to the winning team in the quiz:

Winners: Pyjamas 64 marks
2nd: Colonials and Mike 62 marks,

Better Red than Fred 62 marks
4th: The Don't Knows 59 marks
5th: Bitzer This and Bitzer That 58 marks
6th: Nomis 57.5 marks



Book Reviews:

The Phoenix

Issue No. 19 of *the Phoenix* has been published and a limited number of copies are available through the DNHG. Interested birders should contact Gary Feulner. Saudi Arabia's National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development sponsors *the Phoenix* and it is published in association with the ABBA (Atlas of Breeding Birds of Arabia) Project. A highlight of issue No. 19 is a report, with photographs, on the ABBA visit to the Yemeni islands in the Red Sea. Other contents include reports on first breeding in the UAE by the Common Coot and in Oman by the White-Collared Kingfisher, a breeding survey of Bubiyan Island in Kuwait and reviews of a host of new Arabian natural history publications.

Handbook of Birds of the World

The DNHG has received notice that volume 8 of *Handbook of Birds of the World* will shortly be published. This is an authoritative and uniformly praised series with genuinely spectacular photos, but it is relatively expensive. Volume 8 (covering Broadbills to Tapaculos) is advertised at a pre-publication price of GBP125. More information can be found at www.hbw.com.

RAK Toad Survey

Barbara Couldrey joined Gary Feulner to implement an amateur research plan by visiting various freshwater and agricultural sites along the mountain front in northern Ras al-Khaimah. The purpose was to determine and record the distribution there of the UAE's two toad species. A study by Gary and Peter Cunningham, published in *Tribulus*, reported that the so-called Dhofar toad (*Bufo dhufarensis*) is the only toad present in the mountainous regions of the Ru'us al-Jibal (Musandam). Gary and Barbara concluded that the same appears to be true of lowland sites from Dhayah south to Tawiyah.

The investigation had its share of human interest as well as scientific interest. Local owners and agricultural workers sometimes took great interest, sometimes none at all, in the enterprise. Among other things, Barbara and Gary were treated to freshly harvested carrots, and a leafy, erect variety of *Portulaca* called *barbeer*. They also learned that *ruth* is a mixture of cow dung and dried fish that is bagged and put into elevated cisterns, allowing it to percolate into the water that flows out via aflaj into the surrounding fields.

The Dhofar toad is generally said to be nocturnal, although it is not exclusively so, and only a few adults were seen. At the dams below Wadi Bih and Tawiyah, however, thousands to tens of thousands of juvenile Dhofar toads were present, hidden among the cracked and drying mud of the receding shoreline. Unseen at first, the tiny toads emerge en masse at the first sign of disturbance, creating a bewildering array of movement (which probably helps to protect them). In one instance some dozen toadlets emerged in sequence from the shelter of a flattened Masafi bottle. *Report by Gary Feulner*



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.

Climbing in Oman

In January I joined a team of British climbers in Oman - Sir Chris Bonington, Derek Walker, Les Brown and Alan Hinkes. Alan is one of Britain's leading high-altitude mountaineers, having climbed twelve of the world's fourteen 8,000 metre peaks. No other British climber is close to this target, first achieved by the legendary Reinhold Messner. Derek and Les are also renowned for new routes and first ascents around the globe.

There is an active climbing scene in the UAE and in Oman. Notable was the climb in 1979 of Jebel Misht in the interior by three French mountain guides by a very hard route which was duly christened the 'French Route'. The current team planned to visit the Misht / Ibri area, to climb some new routes rather than the many recently recorded, some of them multi-pitch routes necessitating an overnight bivouac and the hauling of large quantities of water.

We headed first to Nizwa, where we established our 'base camp' in the Falaj Daris hotel, to visit Wadi Shur behind the Nizwa hotel, where several climbs had been recorded. We were joined by John Gregory and Dee McEnery from Ras Al Khaimah. John is an experienced rock climber, as is Dee. We walked up the wadi to some crags that looked reasonably sound, and, in three teams, managed some short, if not exactly newsworthy, climbs.

For two or three days, we tried other routes near there and explored the Wadi Ghul and Wadi

Tanuf areas, where climbs had been recorded and which looked promising on first sight. However, the rock was generally too loose and unsafe. Chris and Derek found a good route, if loose in parts, on a slab high above the wadi. Les and I tried a nice-looking wall in Wadi Tanuf, only to discover at the end of the first pitch, or rope-length, a huge block which was detached from the rest of the rock and perched precariously above us on a flake. Unable to avoid the risk of dislodging it, we opted to climb back down. On a route near Wadi Ghul, Derek and Alan had a similar experience, retreating after one pitch.

As the trip reached its halfway stage, with perhaps the most memorable climb being Derek and Alan's ascent of the flagpole at Nizwa fort, we decided to camp in the Jebel Misht area. The mountain's huge limestone walls made an impressive sight, and it was easy to see why it has attracted so much attention. Our plan was to camp further on near Jebel Asait in an area where shorter routes were possible. We made our way round steep hairpin bends to a little *barasti* village without electricity. At a lush terraced oasis, an elderly Omani cordially indicated camping spots. The view from the edge of the terrace over distant ranges was spectacular!

Early in the morning, we hiked up to the high rock walls rising out of the scree above the village. Alan, Derek and Les tried an established route, while Chris and I went to look for another line. Having sighted a possible one, he led the first pitch, which was pleasant and quite easy, about 'V. Diff' in English grading, but no sooner had he started on the second than the now-familiar band of loose rock appeared. We did no more roped climbing that day, but the enjoyment of exploring a new area and simply being in the hills ensured that it was not a wasted one. Well beyond the summit ridge of Asait, we scrambled up a small peak, took photographs, and re-

turned to the village, where a reception committee of elders with impressive beards brought out coffee and dates. Small boys and girls lined up shyly to shake hands and exchange names. Back in camp, we learned that the others' route had also proved loose and uninviting.

It seemed unlikely that the rock was suddenly going to improve with further exploration, and the team decided to experience Muscat and to try some of the documented routes there. I had to return to Sharjah for other commitments, but it was nearly Eid Al Adha and John and Dee were on their way back for another climb with the group. *Thanks to Rosalind Buckton Tucker for this report.*



Tid Bits from RAK

Barbara Couldrey has not let the heat get her down and shares with us the following natural history news from RAK:

25 May: Observed red wattled lapwing parents noisily drawing attention away from two flightless young off the RAK old town water frontage. Interesting to see them in a built up area.

28 May: Hundreds of Socotra cormorants heading north drew a black veil over the sea just offshore from RAK town. Some settled on the water to feed on the huge schools of sardines.

29 May: Was driving from Manar Mall in the direction of the new golf course, past some dead, water-deprived mangroves, when I spotted a huge grounded bird being harassed by two red wattled lapwings. Not having binoculars with



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Insects – Gary Feulner

Fossils - Valerie Chalmers
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fax 340 0990

Plants – Valerie Chalmers

Mammals - Marijcke Jongbloed *until someone else volunteers.*

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.

me, I got out of the car to check on the commotion. Lo and behold, it was a Bonelli's Eagle, awkwardly walking through the mangroves in its long whitish, fluffy pants, probably after chicks or eggs. It did not immediately take fright and then only as far as the nearest pylon. One parent lapwing continued its harassment. The eagle took off with its assailant in hot pursuit. At one point the lapwing dived at and made contact with the back of the eagle which did a couple of summersaults to escape. This gave me a good view of the two large white patches on its upper back.

Finally, development has inevitably reached some of the seemingly more inaccessible areas of the Ru's Al Jibal. One day, after a steep 5-hour climb up into the high jebel we encountered a cart track, the beginnings of a large beautiful local stone house, and a helicopter! Our 'down' took 5 minutes! Cheating really, but fun.

Thanks, Barbara

Not "How High?" but "How Hot?"

The field trip blurb for the April 11 nature hike in Wadi Deftah said: "Biggest comfort concern will be heat" – good general advice for summer in the UAE, and summer seems to have come early this year. The temperatures in early April were already at 38 degrees C (100 degrees F). Several scheduled participants looked at the forecasts and canceled, but 10 stalwarts met in Masafi for the day's outing.

Lower Wadi Deftah includes a gorge and plantation, and it wasn't long before we had seen several types of butterflies and dragonflies, wadi fish and Arabian toads, and several varieties of flowering and fruiting plants. In particular, there were red berries on both *Solanum nigrum* (a nightshade) and the hanging *Cocculus pendu-*

lus (a member of the curare family), both probably toxic if not deadly, and round figs on the wadi fig *Ficus cordata salicifolia*. Our route through the plantation also took us past introduced agave plants, native to America, that had recently sprouted.

The local cultivators have extended the vehicle track up the wadi for a kilometer above the plantation. They took care to bypass the old cemetery, one of the largest in the Hajar Mountains, but they were not so scrupulous about the boulder art that adorns the wadi terraces. Much remains, both representations (camels, men) and symbols ("eyeglasses" and "feet") but a few more elaborate petroglyphs have been lost. In this instance, both viewing and conversation were performed to the accompaniment of a diesel pump installed at a well on a terrace. Unfortunately this convenience also seems to have sounded the death knell for the traditional dams and pools that used to characterize the upper gorge area of Wadi Deftah.

Rain had fallen, probably a month or two before. *Asphodelus* lilies had come and gone, as had the "cabbage plant" *Physorrhynchus chamaerapistrum*. The remains of both lined the wadi banks. Annual plants were few, but occasional seedlings of this or that poked up through the coarse wadi gravel.

Butterflies included lots of Desert Whites and the season's first White-Edged-Rock Brown, a species that still keeps a temperate zone life cycle and winters as a pupa, emerging in March or April (only to spend the summer looking for shade).

Before too long the group detoured into a smaller side wadi. Here there were intermittent bedrock pools, where even light rain is concentrated, and in the pools were diving beetles and dragonfly



Reports...

and beetle larvae. In emergency, even small pools are a place for heat-weary human travelers to cool off by moistening hats, handkerchiefs or shirts. Pools are a magnet for non-human vertebrates, too, and we saw at least three Oman lizards (*Lacerta jayakari*) in the vicinity of pools.

Rock climbing hadn't been in the trip description, but Gary claimed he'd forgotten those ("just a few") obstacles, and it turned out there was hidden talent in the group – Andrew Hornsby and Ian MacGregor both admitted to a rock climbing past ("long ago," they said) – while the light-footed ladies (Jo Raynor and Mary Anne Pardoe) fairly floated up. Equivalent gymnastics were sometimes required to get by clumps of oleander that choked several points in the wadi.

Finally, the "end" was at hand. The wadi began to zig and zag along fractures in the bedrock, rising in blocky steps at every turn, and we could see that the final slopes of the ridges that ringed us, steep and treacherous in the crumbling ophiolite rock, were not far away. Those were not for us – climbing in the heat is physiological madness, not to mention that we had already learned the difficulties of dealing with rocks that become too hot to touch. We turned and descended, marveling that we had in fact a bit of a "view" already, thanks to our slow but steady ascent.

The Chairman's gold doubloon for the day went to Jo Raynor, whose sharp eyes added a new pond site for the tiny freshwater snail *Gyraulus convexiusculus* (one of only four freshwater snail species in the UAE) and identified the remains of the mangrove mud snail, *Terebralia palustris*, at this decidedly non-coastal site.

The sartorial splendor award for the day went to Andrew Hornsby – who remained unrumpled and

looking, even at the end, as if he might be stopping in on the way back at a garden party, his safety brogues only slightly scuffed. A close runner-up, however, was Brenn Campbell.

Stefan Beck once again served as official photographer, and was generous enough to post a set of trip photos on the web. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Through the Lens ...

It was the American photographer, Dr. Frank M. Chapman, who was one of the first to construct a blind to photograph birds at nest. There are two aspects, which are of prime concern to the photographer. The first is that the environment of the nest should not be disturbed. Under no circumstances should plants be cut down or broken in order to give the camera a clear view. Secondly the welfare of the subject is of prime importance.

Red-wattled Lapwing at Nest



Photographing from a hide requires great patience, a calm temperament and respect for the species being photographed. It also requires good knowledge of the nesting behaviour and habitats. The red wattled lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*) was photographed from a hide (23 May 2003, Khor Dubai). The 'did you do it bird' is notorious for its call and its nervousness. Among the birds I have encountered, I feel it is the most easily alarmed bird, sometimes even when you are far from its nest and

not paying attention to it. It is also well known for making those close swoops on the intruder!

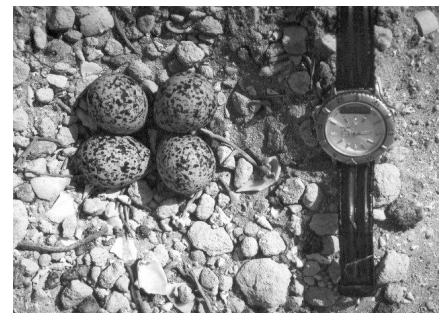
Incubating



The nest, as can be seen from the photographs, is very simple: a slight depression outlined with shells or stones. They are not very easy to spot in the wild. It is most likely that the clutch of four eggs successfully hatched, since I saw three of the young. I was not as lucky as on previous occasions to watch the actual hatching. The chicks, once dry, immediately leave the nest. I photographed one of the young as it rested while wandering off in short spurts.

Red-wattled Lapwing Eggs

The Royal Photographic Society



Nature Group's Code of Practice advises the following: A hide should always be used where there is reasonable doubt that the birds would continue normal breeding behaviour otherwise. No part of the occupant (eg. hands adjusting lens settings, or a silhouette through inadequate material) should be visible from the outside of the hide. Hides should not be erected at a nest site where the attention of the public or any predator is likely to be attracted. If there is a slight risk of this, an assistant should be in the vicinity to shepherd away potential intruders.



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No hide should be left unattended in daylight in a place with common public access.

Chick

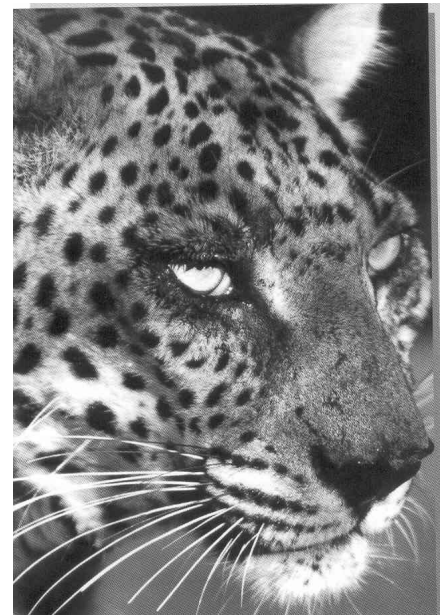


Thanks to Mohammed Arfan Asif for these nature notes and photographs.

Contacts for Natural History Organizations – Volunteers Needed

We would like to publish in the *Gazelle* a list of contact information for UAE natural history and environmental organizations generally, e.g., ERWDA, the falcon hospitals, the zoos, the biosaline research center, the meteorological offices, the Emirates Environmental Group, and the Abu Dhabi and Al-Ain Natural History Groups.

We need a volunteer, as usual, to help compile the list, which we would plan to maintain and update, and publish once or twice a year as a resource for members. If you can help, please contact Gary Feulner



Photograph by Marijcke Jongbloed.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- | | |
|--------|--|
| 14 Sep | Desert ecology and archeology of Abu Dhabi's Umm-Az-Zamool area – Dr. Chris Drew |
| 03 Oct | Freshwater life in the UAE – John Burt |
| 5 Nov | Parasites and how they find their hosts – Dr. Rolf Schuster |

Field Trips (DNHG members only, please).

- | | |
|--------|--|
| 25 Sep | Falcon Hospital / Saluki Breeding Centre |
| Oct | Arabia's Wildlife Centre |
| Oct | Lamjed's Dhow Trip |