

GAZELLE

Vol 18 no 8 – September 2003



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

New Faces and Old

Thanks to the many members who have eased our burdens by renewing their memberships by mail in response to Membership Secretary Lena Linton's e-mail. **Eugene Nosal** takes the prize for the first such renewal of the season. Of course, we know that many others of you *would* have been first, but for the fact that you were away enjoying your summer vacations.

Many of you may have read in the newspapers that an apparently disoriented whale shark (the world's largest fish species) was successfully towed out of Dubai Creek in August under the supervision of **Mohammed Abdul Rahman Hassan**, the Head of Marine, Environment & Sanctuaries Unit, Environment Department, Dubai Municipality, who is one of the DNHG's complimentary subscribers. More recently, **Rob Allan** contacted him to report a second small whale shark that seemed to have taken up residence in Dubai Marina. We look forward to a further status report from Rob.

Member Khalid Rafeek has recently moved to Abu Dhabi, where his new job takes him to some "lesser known places." That has given him the opportunity to make some interesting observations. While staying at the Rest House in

Al Wigan, 100 km south of Al Ain, he noticed a pair of Rufous Bush Robins building a nest, extending the known breeding range of this species within the UAE. Khalid remains very proud of his circle of friends in Kerala, with whom he has recently identified a new food-plant for the larvae of the Malbar tree nymph butterfly, a rare endemic to the Western Ghats (the hill range) in south India. His friends have also made some important nesting observations of an endangered bird, the White-Bellied Shortwing.

We are pleased to welcome back to Dubai educator **David Palmer**, a former Member's Night speaker and a regular field trip participant.

Mary Beardwood, a former Committee member and author of the *Children's Encyclopaedia of Arabia*, has been back in England for most of the year but she and Mike plan a trip back to the U.S. (and their sailboat) in November. Mary hopes to visit Dubai early in 2004.

Ian MacGregor, now resident in his native New Zealand, writes that he is walking to keep fit and is planning a stint as a ski bum in Europe during the year-end holiday period.

DNHG Membership

September marks the start of the new DNHG membership year. 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 Bank account no. 173746 posted to us at PO Box 9234, Dubai. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.)

Please take a minute at the next meeting to ensure that we have full contact information for you, including an e-mail address, so that we can advise you more efficiently of additions and changes to our schedule, and other matters. The DNHG does not share its membership or e-mail information.

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:

Arfan Asif, Gary Feulner,
Marijcke Jongbloed, Mike Jennings



Field Trips etc ...

A Good Start to the Season

Arabia's Wildlife Centre ? Friday 10 October

We have once again arranged a private visit to Arabia's Wildlife Centre. This is an excellent opportunity to see this state-of-the-art facility and to observe (in air-conditioned comfort) a full spectrum of Arabian wildlife. We may also be able to have a look behind-the-scenes. Participants should be at the Centre promptly at 9:00am. Arabia's Wildlife Centre is located on the grounds of the Sharjah Natural History Museum and Desert Park at flyover #9 (formerly flyover #8!! – they have been re-numbered) on the Sharjah-Dhaid road. Drive through the gate and into the complex, and a few hundred metres along on the right. In order to confirm that arrangements are on track and to enable us to have an estimate of numbers in advance, please contact Peter van Amsterdam on pvana@emirates.net.ae

Falcon Hospital / Saluki Breeding Centre Thursday 16 October

Details can be obtained from David Snelling on david.snelling@emirates.com

Musandam Dhow Trip Friday 7 November

Lamjed El Kefi, the DNHG Astronomy and Marine Life Recorder, runs Al Marsa T and T which specialises in Musandam Dhow Trips operating from Dibba Port, Oman and these trips are superb. No visas are required but some form of identification such as driving licence or photocopy of passport should be with you.

Details are as follows:
Meet in Dibba Port (Al Mina) Oman at 8.00 a.m. for registration and embarkation at 8.30 a.m.

Price is for full day cruise per person (less group discount). Minimum group 20 persons: maximum 35 to 40 persons; children open. Price net: Dh235/- per adult. Children under 12 years at 50%: Dh115/-. Children 3 years and under free.

Day Cruise to Haffa and Lima Bay includes breakfast, hot lunch, coffee/tea, soft drinks and water from dispenser.

Bring hat, sunblock and swimming gear.

Available on board at extra cost:

Bottle water (small) Dh1/-

Beer Dh10/-

Wine (per glass) Dh10/-

Mask Dh20/- per day

Fins Dh20/- per day

Snorkelling set Dh35/- per day.

A deposit of Dh120/- will be required to secure your place on the trip. Contact Val Chalmers to book: vmc@latifaschool.co.ae or fax on 04-3400990. Location map is also available on request.

Wadi Bih with Peter van A. Friday 14 November

Peter can be contacted after 30 September for details.

Hajar Mountain Nature Hike Friday 21 November

Gary Feulner will lead a full day nature hike in the Hajar Mountains. Mixed emphasis on plants, animals, insects, archeology, agriculture. Overall elevation change will be small, but there are no trails, the ground is typically rough and uneven, and we will often ascend and descend slopes between the wadi bed and terraces. Suitable for regular hikers or fit and energetic novices. Full details will be published in the October newsletter.

Birdwatching and Bullpushing at Kalba

Date to be confirmed: ?Dec

Larry Woods is arranging this trip and can be contacted for details

on lwoods@aus.ac.ae

And some possibilities:

Bahrain Pearl Diving October

Valerie Chalmers has information about this, and would like to hear from you if you are interested in going. Contact details p.7

Turtles at Ras al Junaiz 'Eid (November)

This is a long trip but a wonderful experience. Expressions of interest to the field-trip co-ordinators are invited.

Saiq Plateau, touring/hiking Festive Season

Gary Feulner is planning to lead this trip. Watch this space!

Our Next Speaker

John Burt is a lecturer at Zayed University in the Department of Natural and Quantitative Sciences, with a research background in freshwater biology. For the past two years John has been examining desert streams of the Emirates and northern Oman. Presently he is being funded for a three year study of hyper-alkaline streams, which are unique to the area.

John's presentation will discuss present knowledge of freshwater environments locally, the challenges and opportunities these ecosystems face, and will also touch on community involvement and education. This presentation is designed for the layperson.



Natural History in France

The incredible heat wave that we had this summer had an interesting effect on the night flying moths. They obviously do well in the heat and we had thousands and thousands of them. Driving during nighttime felt like driving in a blizzard – a golden blizzard.

I had many close-up looks as I sat at the computer just below the open window with the desk light on. The most common one was an even gold colour with large triangular wings, followed by a tiny one with narrow folded wings in dark copper. Some had marvelous markings on the wings, like those of the Oleander Hawkmoth. One that I liked especially had brown upper wings lined with gold, with its hind wings and abdomen in bright cardinal red. Another one was copper coloured with red edges. Several had furry heads and thoraxes, while one had a bright gold spot on the middle of the forehead amongst the furry covering.

Some had mere strings as wings. Others had large oval antennae, like snowshoes. I wished I could preserve some of them, but whenever I found them dead the next day, their glorious colours had faded and they all looked straw-coloured. The only larger, day-flying moth that I see a lot here is the Hummingbird Hawkmoth.

The moth "plague" reminded one of my friends of an event that happened here a few years ago. A huge horde of caterpillars appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and started trekking across the land. The column was 20 kms long and 500 metres wide. Houses that were in their path were covered with a thick layer of crawling insects, and you could not close the windows because of the mass of flesh. Some people tried to keep them out of their garden by blow-torching them, but it had absolutely no effect. It lasted for 3 or 4 days, and then there was a frost at night and the next day people

could sweep and shovel masses of dead bodies out of their gardens. I have no idea what this could have been, but I have seen that there is an insect museum somewhere in the region and I'll go there to find out.

I have seen larger wildlife, mainly roedeer, almost daily. And as roadkills I have found a badger, hedgehogs, and a black and white viper. The neighbour's dog was eviscerated by a wild boar in the plum orchard next to my garden.

The hunting season will be starting soon and I have found several pigeon shooting hides in the forest. Some live pigeons are tied to small platforms and hoisted to the top of the pine trees, where their flapping attracts the attention of other pigeons. When the platform is lowered apparently the wild pigeons follow their distressed brother down to the ground where they can be easily shot by the brave warriors in their hides.

Grapes and plums are being harvested and the whole countryside smells a bit alcoholic from lost fruit that ferments on the ground.

Report by Marijcke Jongbloed

Where do I find...??

The correct address to find the weekly UAE Twitchers' Guide is www.uaeinteract.com (the official website of the Ministry of Information and Culture). Just open it up, go to Birds, and the way to the page is clearly identified.

Reports for the Twitchers' Guide can be sent to Peter Hellyer at (Hellyer@emirates.net.ae) or to Simon Aspinall (hudhud10@emirates.net.ae)

Reports for inclusion in the national database maintained by the Emirates Bird Records Committee should go either to Colin Richardson (editor, UAE monthly report) at colinr@emirates.net.ae OR to

the EBRC Secretary, David Diskin at dadiskin@emirates.net.ae

... And here is some news from the Twitchers' Guide:

A summary of the July and August records show the gradual build-up of the migration. Best of the rare birds, apart from the East Coast common nobby, came from the Al Wathba Camel track, which produced an Oriental pratincole and a Caspian plover, while Dubai's speciality raptors, the shikras, successfully raised a second brood at Safa Park.

Despite the infilling of the Wimpey Pits, the birds are hanging on in the areas that have not yet been filled, with record numbers of little grebe, and the resident rarities – lesser flamingo, purple gallinule and red-knobbed coot still present.

For the Bird of the Summer 2003, Andrew Twyman's Oriental pratincole was a good candidate, but we'll pick Simon Aspinall's common nobby at Ra's Dibba – and thanks to all those who submitted records while we were away.

Many thanks to Peter Hellyer for this information.

Letters
Editor



to the

Dear Mrs. Millen,
Please take note of my new E-mail address: echinojos@planet.nl which is in use already. After October 15th my old address: jos@echinojos.demon.nl will no longer be in use.

Best regards,
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the Netherlands
+31 30 2721778
echinojos@planet.nl



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.

Dhofar – Post-Monsoon

A year ago *Gazelle* reported on a visit to Dhofar by Marijcke Jongbloed and Pam Cole in September, towards the end of the *khareef*, the season of the southwest monsoon in Dhofar. For more than two months each year, from late June to September, moist winds from the Arabian Sea sweep across the Salalah plain and turn to cloud, fog and rain along the southern edge of the mountain escarpment that rings the area, creating – temporarily -- a moist environment that is without parallel in Arabia. Gary Feulner visited Dhofar earlier this month to see the *khareef* for the first time, and shares some additional comments.

There are pluses and minuses to visiting Dhofar during the *khareef* season. The more popular tourist hotels in Salalah (now 5-star) tend to be heavily booked in response to a high level of tourism from within the Arabian Gulf. Air schedules and air fares can be difficult to pin down and are subject to change. And the weather, while unquestionably a change of pace, is not necessarily ideal for sight-seeing. On the upper escarpment one can sometimes encounter heavy fog for miles on end.

On the other hand, an extensive network of good paved roads plus some good gravel roads allows access to even many out-of-the-way places by rented sedan, without need of 4WD. A government tourist map coupled with Dhofar's typically good road signage makes it fairly easy to plan and execute

customised itineraries. Numerous sites are popular for their pools, flowing streams and greenery, including 'Ain Razat, 'Ain Hamran and 'Ain Jarsis, all relatively near to Salalah, and Wadi Darbat, somewhat higher in the mountains. Bananas and coconuts are grown in plantations on the coast. On the way "home" each evening I stopped to enjoy a quiet coconut milk at a roadside emporium.

Khareef mornings in Salalah are usually damp and misty, which discourages hyper-early starts. It does not normally rain heavily on the coastal plain, but the moisture accumulates as dew. The sun normally came out by noon, but there was usually a breeze (sometimes a stiff breeze) and intermittent clouds, so temperatures remained moderate (in the 20's). The coastal plain is mostly quite barren of vegetation, due largely to overgrazing by camels, but the many wadi beds that cut the plain are relative oases for trees and shrubs.

On the wet southern edge of the plateau above the escarpment, the rolling grassy hills with scattered trees resemble the English or Scottish countryside, complete with a purple-pink flower (*Impatiens balsamina*) that, from a distance, resembles fields of heather ... except that in some places one can see beyond the escarpment and down 800 metres to the brown and dry coastal plain. Another attractive field plant is a large white gladiolus, *Gladiolus ukambanensis*. And like Marijcke before me, I couldn't resist stopping to photograph the "mosques in the meadows."

Despite the common perception, the *khareef* is not a blessing for all plant life. Some of the larger shrubs and trees adapted to generally dry conditions suffer during the *khareef*. The well-known *Calotropis procera* (Sodom's Apple) is common on the southern edge of the plateau, but is largely

defoliated by the rain and mist, creating a population of dark skeletons among the green fields. Likewise *Acacia tortilis* (*samr*) and *Ziziphus spina-christi* (*sidr*), both common in the UAE, are common on the plateau above Salalah but lose most of their leaves during the *khareef*.

Driving north across the plateau, one quickly moves into the rain shadow and the drier zone of gullies and hills in which the frankincense tree is found – sometimes as the only tree. I saw a number of small frankincense in the hills near 'Ayun (a magnificent area of wadi springs), but I certainly have the impression that there were many fewer trees in evidence along the road than on my only previous visit to Dhofar in 1990. One reads that overexploitation and grazing by camels may be endangering this historic tree.

My own itinerary included two large sinkholes, the dry Kahf Taiq and the wet Tawi 'Attir. The latter required a bit of educated guesswork to locate, and is sufficiently deep that it was impossible to see to the bottom (where a species of freshwater fish thrives) from the upper rim. At both sinkholes I saw the common semaphore gecko of the Near East, *Pristurus rupestris*, but it was interesting to confirm what the textbooks say - that the Dhofar populations of this animal are relatively dark and the males have a vivid and contrasting white stripe on the underside of their tails, which makes their characteristic tail signaling all the more conspicuous.

Another distinctive Dhofar reptile that I saw both at the coast and in the dry hills inland, among frankincense trees, was *Pristurus carteri*, a peculiar gecko that resembles an agama lizard in appearance and habits. Birdwatchers can be fairly certain to add species such as Tristram's Grackle, Grey-Headed Kingfisher, African Rock



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

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Birds - David Snelling
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Seashells - Sandy Fowler
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Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi
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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

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.

Martin and White-Breasted White-Eye to their lists.

It has been a long time since I got excited at seeing camels, but even I could not resist stopping for a photo of a large herd of camels browsing in a green, hilly forest on the escarpment, complete with termite mounds. *Report by Gary Feulner*



More on Escaped Cage Birds

The following letter was received from Mike Jennings of ABBA (Atlas of Breeding Birds of Arabia) in response to a report in the July/August *Gazelle*:

"I saw your note in the last *Gazelle* about escapes and exotics in Dubai. You might be interested to know that nobody has yet reported the confirmed breeding of bishops, widow birds or whydahs in the UAE although they have been there for years. If you find evidence of breeding I would be very interested to have the details. In fact if you find any breeding evidence you could write a 'new breeding species' slot in the next *Phoenix*.

"I am afraid my sources on African birds are limited (the African Handbook series is not yet up to this group) so I cannot provide a definitive answer to your questions about the unidentified bird. The nearest I got was Red-collared Widow-bird *Colliuspasser ardens* which has a long black tail and black body and face. The crown, nape and a necklace onto the breast are red."

Specimens Wanted: *Bulla ampulla*

From time to time we advertise for specimens or information about particular plant or animal species for the benefit of professional researchers. Recently a request has come in from the Natural History Museum in London for specimens of the shallow water mollusc *Bulla ampulla*, one of the family known as "Bubble Shells" (#823 in *Seashells of Eastern Arabia* by Bosch et al.). Shells are frequently found as flotsam but live specimens (ideally about a dozen) are required for anatomical study and molecular phylogeny (DNA comparison).

This shell can be up to 40mm, but juveniles may be only 10-15mm. *Bulla ampulla* is typically found on seagrass and, as far as is known, it has a relatively unusual life history. It tends to occur in seasonal "blooms" after which it becomes scarce.

We have a report of large numbers of juveniles found in early November a few years ago in the lowest intertidal zone on coarse seagrass and algae within Ras al-Khaimah khor. Alive, the shells were mottled dark brown - actually more or less transparent shells with the body of the animal showing through.

By coincidence, a photo of *Bulla ampulla* was featured on page 7 of last month's *Gazelle* (July/Aug 2003) to demonstrate the technique of scanning whole shells.

If any members (particularly wading shell collectors, snorkelers or divers) encounter this organism, please keep the Natural History Museum in mind. Contact Gary Feulner for further information.



Reports...

Amphisbaenids in your Back Yard?

Professor Ted Papenfuss of the University of California at Berkeley, a former DNHG speaker, continues to travel much of the Near East in search of reptiles. Ted is the "field man" for a group that is using molecular genetics (DNA studies) to unravel the history of speciation and migration in various groups of reptiles.

Ted passed through Dubai this summer, enroute to Dhofar and Puntland (the tip of Somalia), but he expressed a particular interest in obtaining some amphisbaenids from Dubai. It seems that specimens of what were thought to be the same animal – the amphisbaenid *Diplometodon zarudnyi* -- in Iran and southern Oman appear to be different at the molecular level, and the scientists wish to have material from an intermediate location, to see if there is a genetic gradient or if there are in fact two genetically distinct populations.

Amphisbaenids are legless reptiles, neither snakes nor lizards, that look somewhat like large earthworms. For more information, see (coincidentally?) the May 2003 *Gazelle*, at p. 2 They can be common in suburban environments as well as in the wild. In Jebel Ali village a few years ago, hundreds emerged from the flooded ground after a heavy rain.

If you encounter an amphisbaenid, this is your chance to make a contribution to science. The recommended procedure, if you cannot keep it alive for a short time, is to freeze it in water. Most standard preservatives will interfere with the biochemical techniques used by the University of California team.

In any case, call Chairman Gary Feulner, who will be happy to receive and/or deal with specimens and will contact Ted Papenfuss.

Freshwater Turtles, Tortoises Threatened

[The Sydney Morning Herald recently carried this article, and I feel it is worth reproducing to warn people against trading in or keeping turtles and tortoises as pets. Ed.]

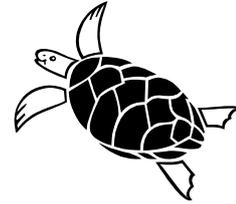
Two-thirds of the world's 300 tortoise and freshwater turtle species are threatened with extinction, mostly because of poaching, and nine turtle species have already vanished, Conservation International, as US group, reports. Demand from Asia's food and traditional medicine markets was a major threat facing animals, and more than half of Asia's 90 tortoise and freshwater turtle species are now endangered or critically endangered.

"Turtles have been around since before many dinosaurs walked the planet and have survived relatively unchanged for about 250 million years. But mankind's actions have brought them to the brink of extinction. It is our responsibility to bring them back," said the group's president.

Tons of live turtles are being imported each day to southern China from South East Asia and beyond, with more than 10 million individuals traded each year. The animals are also threatened by development, habitat destruction and fragmentation, pollution, invasive alien species and unregulated pet trade collection, said the group.

The Turtle Conservation fund has established a five-year global project to save the animals. This will concentrate on "bio-diversity hot-spots", and it is hoped that 21 of the world's most endangered turtle species may be saved. But the

rest of the world should beware of exploitative activity.



DNHG Field Trip Policies

Members are reminded that DNHG field trips are cooperative ventures among the participants, for their mutual benefit and enjoyment. DNHG field trip leaders are not normally professionals or experts, but fellow members who have agreed to share their time and their knowledge with other participants, on a volunteer basis. The relationship of trip leaders and participants is that of co-venturers, not professional and client. For these reasons field trip participation is limited to DNHG members and their bona fide non-resident guests.

Various dangers are inherent in travel in and around the UAE and in the exploration of the natural environment, whether by automobile, by boat, on foot or otherwise, and whether on-road or off-road, in the cities or countryside, in the mountains or deserts or at sea. By participating in DNHG field trips, members accept these risks, and they accept responsibility for their own safety and welfare.

Field trip participants are normally required to sign a waiver form to this effect. Without these understandings, the DNHG would be unable to sponsor field trips or to recruit volunteers to lead them.

Field trips vary in both format and organization, depending on the



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Chairman	Gary Feulner	306 5570 messages: 306 5300	330 3600	330 3550
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nature of the trip, the number of participants, and the preferences of the field trip leader. If the number of participants is limited and sign-up is required, members should make every effort to honor their commitments or to give timely notice otherwise, as a courtesy both to the trip leader and to other members who might like to have the chance to participate.



[Editor's note: In following issues of gazelle, a list of the ENHG trips will be included. Richard Perry, of AD ENHG, wrote that he hoped to "ensure closer ties between the two groups, at least through their

respective newsletters. In the first instance I would like to see at least reference to each other's lectures and field trips simply to raise awareness of each other's existence amongst members and also in the event that members might be interested in attending.

We would of course need to ensure various caveats are in place, such as local members take precedence on trips with limited spaces etc. This is perhaps an issue we should raise with our respective committees."]



New Dams

Spring and summer excursions to various sites along the mountain front between the Hatta road and the Dhaid-Masafi road confirmed the completion of new dams in a number of wadis in the area.

These included (from S to N) Wadi Baraq
Wadi Nasas
Wadi Daynah (Mudainah)
Wadi Mansab
Wadi Shawkah
Wadi Baqarah/Wadi Mimdooh. No doubt there are others that could be added to the list.

Thanks to Gary Feulner for this information.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- 5 Oct Freshwater life in the UAE – John Burt
2 Nov Parasites and how they find their hosts – Dr. Rolf Schuster

Field Trips (DNHG members only, please).

- 10 Oct Arabia's Wildlife Centre
16 Oct Falcon Hospital / Saluki Breeding Centre
07 Nov Lamjed's Dhow Trip on the East Coast
14 Nov Wadi Bih
21 Nov Hajar Mountains Natural History Walk
?12 Dec Birdwatching and Bullpushing at Kalba