

GAZELLE

Vol 22 no 11 November 2007



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

DNHG Membership

The Good, the Bad, and the Near-believable

Barbara Couldrey was understandably elated to have seen a live caracal during an 'Eid visit to the summit of Jebel Jais, the second highest in the Ru'us al-Jibal. Barbara wrote, " While descending steeply from the summit of J. Jais ... I flushed out a caracal lynx! The first live one I've seen in the wild. I saw it twice as it slinked down the hill ahead of us. We also saw 2 Oman lizards and a few old pink *Dianthus*." Chairman **Gary Feulner** sent his congratulations and added, "... very near where I saw my own first (and last) live caracal about 15 years ago, a pair that Charles Laubach and I spooked while ascending to the summit from the NW."

Less happy was Barbara's news that vehicle tracks have been pushed to the summit in this area and in the Hidden Peak area, above the so-called "Stairway to Heaven" ascent (which has claimed at least a couple of lives and necessitated numerous helicopter rescues since it was first written up in a popular guide). The opening up of those areas to vehicle access, along with the road in progress to the summit

of J. Rahabah and the track to the radar station atop J. Yibir, means that the UAE's tallest peaks have all now been domesticated. Those with a taste for finding their own way will have to look elsewhere.

The Chairman's (virtual) gold doubloon goes to **Bill Chedister**, who let on during the Al-Ain Zoo trip that he has read *The Emirates – A Natural History* cover to cover. Bill was quick to add, however, that he has not memorised everything in it. In fact, he mentioned that in the course of his reading he had written down and looked up more than 200 words. At the urging of *Gazelle* editor Anne Millen, ever on the lookout for germane natural history copy, Bill has volunteered to share his research with us in a "Word of the Month" feature. For those of you with a head for figures, that could be 20 years' worth.

Purple rain? In western Queensland in late October, **Anne Millen** witnessed a storm that, propelled by strong winds, lifted red dust in front of the heavy dark blue rain cloud and turned that half of the sky a surreal and intense purple. Subsequently, a fierce gale struck and the little rain that did fall after it was, of course, disappointingly clear.

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:

Cheryl Bray
Trish Cox
Gary Feulner
Sandra Knuteson
Charles Laubach



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



Lots to do and learn!

These are the confirmed trips, but there are others in the offing. Additional trips will be advertised by email circular.

Bastakia Windtower Houses - Peter Jackson 10 November + ?

The book is published (see p.7) and the walk was full in 24 hours. We are hoping the Peter will run a repeat for the 23 members who missed out and are keen to join him! The second walk will be announced by e-mail circular.

Ibri & Ibri Anticline - Val Chalmers et al 23-24 November

This is a two day, possibly two night, trip into Oman and includes Ibri Fort, Sulayf, an exploration of the anticline and if time permits, a look at the Bat Tombs.

Birdwatching - Dave Bradford End November

Dave will lead a second trip when all is new and different because of the cooler weather.

Wadi Bih - Pradeep Radhakrishna 7 December

This is an all day trip up over the Hajar from Wadi Bih to Dibba Oman, visiting a spectacular mountain village en route and possibly taking a swim at Dibba Oman at the end. Details can be obtained from Pradeep: wgarnet@emirates.net.ae

Sundarbans Mangrove Forest - Pradeep & Anin Radhakrishna Eid al Adha 19 - 24 December

This trip is to a world heritage site with 4268 sq kms of mangrove forest, is the home of the Royal Bengal tiger, the most majestic animal to roam the forests of the world. The Sunderbans are part of the world's largest delta

formed by the rivers Brahmaputra, Ganges and Meghna. One third of the Sunderbans is covered by water and the face of the forest is in perpetual flux. During high tide the jungle is afloat and when the water recedes the forest floor reveals the myriad facets of its biosphere. It nurtures a unique aquaterrestrial ecosystem where land and water play equal roles in creating and preserving life. The area is known for its wide range of fauna. The most famous among these are the man-eating Royal Bengal tigers (about 400) numerous species of birds, spotted deer (about 30,000), crocodiles and snakes. We will also be spending a day in Calcutta now called Kolkata exploring the several centuries of history and architecture. The trip has been planned during the Eid holidays so that we do not miss any working days. Full details are going out by email; if you don't receive them, or wish to register, please contact Pradeep at wgarnet@eim.ae

The trip is filling up fast, so if you want to secure a place, do so asap!

Wadi Hatta Clean-up 24 November, 9:30 am

Sandra Knuteson, from American University of Sharjah has suggested a joint DNHG-AUS litter clean-up of Hatta Pools.

Sandra wants to show the impact of tourism on the Hatta Pools. If the area can be cleaned before National Day weekend, she can sample for litter and water quality before & after (Thursday & Tuesday) the holiday to show exactly the impact one holiday weekend can have. Sandra will provide litter clean up supplies & water; we can provide transport and enthusiasm.

The day she's proposing for the field trip is in "Clean Up The World Week". The theme this year is: One World, One Eco-System, One Humanity." Contact Sandra at sknuteson@aus.edu and she will email the details. Time is short - do it now!

New Field Trip Coordinator

The DNHG Committee is delighted to welcome Jenny Hill as an additional Field Trip Coordinator. It is not an onerous task, but as we all have other commitments, the load of such positions needs spreading about a bit. Jenny will bring a fresh outlook and energy to the position, but the support, suggestions and enthusiasm of members is always necessary. Let us know what you would like to see and learn about!

Our Next Speaker

Doug Allan is a freelance wildlife and documentary cameraman specialising in wildlife and human documentaries. He is a marine biologist by training, and spent 10 years as a research diver and then a base commander with the British Antarctic Survey station – the start of his love affair with ice. He was awarded the Fuchs Medal and the Polar Medal for his work.

Since becoming a professional cameraman in 1984, he has completed many challenging assignments, both above and below water, including filming on Everest, along the length of the Andes and in the deserts of Africa. Many of his sequences have been screen-firsts, including filming orcas attacking gray whales off California, polar bears hunting belugas and eider ducks feeding beneath the sea ice of Hudson Bay.

He is one of the world's top wildlife cameramen, and his awards include two Emmys, three BAFTAs, several Wildscreen Panda wins as well as awards at most of the world's most prestigious wildlife festivals. He has filmed major sequences for many of the award-winning BBC series including *The Blue Planet* and *Planet Earth*, and his prize-winning photographs are featured in agencies and books worldwide. www.dougallan.com



An Iftar Experience

In October, members of the ENHG from Al Ain and Abu Dhabi, together with DNHG members were privileged to be invited by Major Ali to an Iftar buffet on the beach at Jebel Ali. Having gathered just off the Sheikh Zayed Road, our small convoy of vehicles made its way over the rough sand tracks to the fenced off enclosure of Emirates Marine Environmental Group (EMEG), and through the gate towards the beach .

Having parked, we explored the area down to the sea, paddling through small lagoons and inlets of water, some to sit and observe whilst the more energetic swam or sauntered along the tide line, examining the cast up shells and other treasures.

Later, as the sun began to sink towards the horizon, we went to the Iftar tables, having had our appetites whetted by the smells of cooking. It was a memorable meal as it was so lovely to be able to share what was a very special time for Major Ali and his helpers, who had invited us to join them when they broke their day's fast. What a wonderful setting it was too! After eating, Major Ali gave a short, informative talk about what Ramadan means to the local Emirati people.



Iftar

We were also lucky enough to be able to see close up some dhubs, which had been rescued from various sites where construction work had intruded into their native habitat. These lucky creatures were being cared for in safety for a few

weeks before being released back into a safe haven in the wild.



Major Ali holding a dhub

For some of us who went on the trip earlier this year to Dhub Valley, during the Inter Emirates Weekend, and still did not manage to catch a glimpse of these shy and nervous reptiles, it was wonderful to finally see them and at such close quarters.



Baby dhub

Dhubs were not the only examples of wild life, which we had the opportunity to see.



Nocturnal visitors - rabbits!

By nightfall it was clear that it was a favourite place for rabbits, and we were amazed to see not just a few

of these animals, but possibly over a hundred, all scampering around the buildings on the site. They were obviously used to people and were well cared for, being sleek and shiny and extremely active!

From all of us who attended, we would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to Major Ali for his hospitality and such a well-organised, interesting time. Thank you, Major Ali! Thanks are also due to Dr Andrew Bean for organising the trip. *Report by Trish Cox, photographs by Valerie Chalmers.*

Shrinking Habitats

A group of about ten DNHG birders assembled at the Pivot fields early on a nice cool morning - such a relief after the heat of summer. . We didn't have to walk far to see hundreds of birds of many different species. Highlights were about a hundred chestnut bellied sandgrouse flying around, some of which eventually settled right in front of us allowing good views through Dave's telescope. This is a species which is becoming increasingly difficult to find as its coastal plain habitat is eaten away by development. A rare male pallid harrier was spotted perched on one of the pivot sprinklers and a single glossy ibis, several white tailed plovers, blue cheeked bee-eaters and collared ratincoles added quality to the day's birding. Around the perimeter track we added a few common birds such as the grey francolin to our list.



Some of the birding group at the entrance to the Pivot Fields

We then drove the short distance to the Al Warsan lakes which sadly is only a shadow of its former self - the once great Wimpey pits. We now had to peer through the chain



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.

link fence at a few water birds swimming on the lake. Several species of duck were seen including some nice male and female pochard. Dave then spotted a purple heron skulking in the reeds which was seen by the rest of the group when it took to flight across the lake.



Al Warsan lakes [formerly Wimpey pits]

A few hardy souls then drove up to Umm Al Quwain for a spot of shore birding. We started off birding from the balcony of the new Emaar sales centre looking out across the inlet to Khor Al Beidah where in past years we have enjoyed some great birding but now alas access is prohibited as the developers construct hundreds of new villas. From the balcony we saw western reef heron, dunlin, and slender billed gull.

When the security guards became unduly agitated we moved a short distance north and gained access onto the shore line on a rough vehicle track. Here we saw our bird of the day - the rare and beautiful crab plover which is restricted to the shores of the Arabian Gulf. This bird has unusual adaptations including nesting in a burrow which it digs itself and in using its massive bill to catch and crack open crabs, its main food source.

The shoreline had plenty of waders to keep us busy including bar tailed godwit, terek sandpiper, oyster-catcher, several whimbrel calling with their distinctive fluted whistle,

amongst many others. By early afternoon, we decided to head for home having seen a total of 58 species including several rare and unusual species. For a full list, contact Dave at DBradford@emaar.ae Thanks to Dave Bradford for this report

Al Ain Zoo by Night

The field trip to the Al Ain Zoo in October had lots of members from both Dubai and Abu Dhabi, though being a Friday it was crowded and is obviously one of the hot spots for locals as well. It was interesting to see all the animals, from local species that are threatened with extinction to more exotic animals from Africa.



African gazelle

Zoos can be rather depressing places but having been to larger ones in Calgary, Toronto and San Francisco I've also seen that they can be educational as well when there are enclosures that mirror the native habitats of the animals. Al Ain Zoo has tried to provide large enclosures with environments that meet the animal's needs.



Nubian Ibex

There were large numbers of oryx, Nubian ibex and axis deer as well, of course, as the ubiquitous flamingos, in large outdoor enclosures

where the animals had room to scamper about and climb over the large boulders. It was an interesting juxtaposition to see both the Arabian as well as African Oryx. The hyenas were not the large species I'm used to seeing with large heads and muscular necks, but had features more like foxes or coyotes.



Wolf

There were also a number of cats, including a couple of beautiful leopards that played to the crowd by reclining close to the window. The servals (*Leptailurus serval*) were further away and difficult to photograph through the wire enclosure, but they seemed very relaxed gazing around from their rocky perch. The Nocturnal House provided a venue to see the animals while they were more alert, including small cats and the very active jerboas which put on a lively show chasing each other around so fast you could barely see them.

To see the entire zoo took from shortly after 5pm when we first gathered to 7pm when we broke for supper in the cafeteria, including the reptile house and primates. The meandering paths allow viewing of the animals from a number of different perspectives and heights so there are lots of chances to see and photograph them. While it was difficult to see the big cats through the glass, we were safely on the other side! This was reassuring particularly as the lion made a continuous sonorous growling. The lone gorilla seemed to be hiding and could benefit from more company, and generally a more stimulating environment, or is that just anthropomorphism?

The grande finale was the bird show which provided a plethora of information about falcon breeding



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.



and birds of prey. (There was also a little humour with the white rats racing along the rope fence). The owl, golden eagle and falcons gracefully swooped down, almost touching the heads of the audience.



Owl

The birds had been trained to fly to a number of different lures, including a red laser light, and one of the birds broke open an egg, an example of what it would do in its natural habitat. The bird show expanded on the excellent lecture given earlier in the month by Dr. Tom Bailey on falconry and added an important educational component.

The zoo was still buzzing with people at 9pm as we left, showing what a popular place it is on Friday nights. While our evening provided lots of time to stroll around and see all the animals, it would have been interesting to visit the educational centre and hear more about the history of the zoo and the philosophical approach towards the raising and breeding of these animals. Many zoos now have captive breeding programs with the goal of rebuilding dwindling wild stocks. The Al Ain Zoo provides a great educational opportunity to see wild animals in a setting that allows us to observe them, while the helpful plaques provide background information. Many thanks to Andrew Bean for organizing this event and introducing us to this wonderful zoo.
Report by Cheryl Bray



Hornet Sting

The red-brown and yellow oriental hornet *Vespa orientalis* has been abundant this autumn, especially along the mountain front north of the Al-Ain/Buraimi area, which received abundant late summer showers. I am normally relatively tolerant of these wasps, which are inquisitive more than aggressive, but large numbers made for inattentiveness and one managed to get caught in a fold of my shirt sleeve and sting me on the biceps. This was only the third time in many years and I have never been sensitive to bee stings, but I was alone and the cautions of others rang in my ears: "You never know! You can always *become* allergic!"

So I pulled out my trusty Aspi-Venin kit, a small, syringe-like suction device once marketed by Marijcke Jongbloed - in what seems like the Dark Ages. I wonder if they are still available. Intuition was not enough to make it work, so I pulled out the directions (I have the same problem with mobile phones). And sure enough, at the end of a push on the plunger (counterintuitively) a remarkable vacuum was created. I could see why the directions say "Do not use on eyelids." (Other parts are also contraindicated.) I tried this several times. I did not feel much different, but I had learned something new. The area of the wasp sting was sensitive for more than 24 hours and the site of the sting itself was visible for a week.

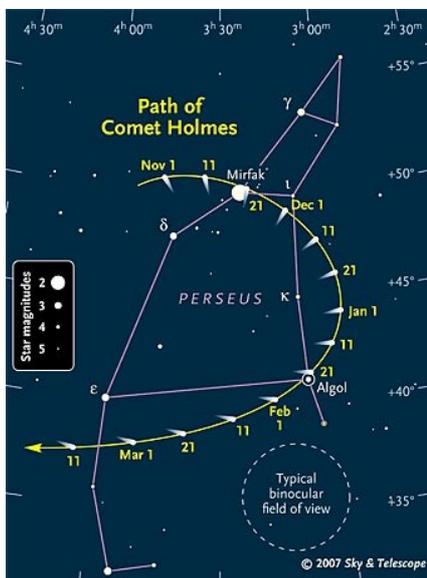
Marijcke herself commented as follows: "I have never been more impressed with the effect of the aspi-venin pump than when I used it on a dog that had been stung by a stingray. The dog who was shivering and whining with pain, actually relaxed as I sucked the serum out of his wound and the pain was obviously relieved as the poison diminished."

One happy prospect for hikers and picnickers: the hornet hibernates for the "winter" so few if any will be seen in December, January and



Comet Holmes

This celestial object is visible in Dubai in the early evening. It will be making an arc through the constellation Perseus for the next several months. I saw it on November 10 with binoculars from my front yard at about 9:30 pm. At the moment, it's the fuzzy snowball in the same binocular field of view as the star Mirfak (the brightest star in Perseus, halfway between Cassiopeia and Capella).



Not much of a tail through binoculars, but definitely a comet. *Report by Charles Laubach*

Toad Wrestling

It was late afternoon in a wadi in the Mahdhah area, where there is currently plenty of water as a result of summer rains, and the Arabian

toads had begun their rusty-hinge croaking in anticipation of nightfall. But at this hour they were still skittish, and usually broke off their calls at my approach, at a distance of five or ten metres. I was surprised, then, when croaking continued very near me, at a distance of only about 2 metres. I looked down and around and found the explanation: preoccupation - two toads locked in an embrace, one latched firmly atop the other at the edge of a large pool. I had interrupted something.

I backed off to observe without interfering, but it quickly became obvious that both toads were croaking, the throat sacs of both top and bottom partners swelling with each rasping croak. This is not the normal order of things. What to make of it? A case of mistaken identity? The fruits of liberal parenting trends? I continued to watch.

The top toad seemed to want to hop the two of them forward, further ashore, but several such efforts scooted them into another small puddle, the top holding the bottom underwater, continuing to croak. Then suddenly they came unstuck and both clambered back onto dry land where, after a moment's pause, the former bottom mounted the former top. They rested thus for almost another minute, both croaking again. Then, suddenly again, the (new) top dived off into the main pool, leaving the original top on the bank, now croaking alone from what seemed to be prime waterfront real estate.

What had I witnessed? Most probably, a mating contest between the two males for a favoured spot from which to croon for the night. In their own way, I suspect, they had established their relative strength or stamina. The reversal of position at the end may have been a final flourish, but with both parties recognizing that the ascendant toad hadn't the energy to continue the contest. Although consistent with male breeding behaviour in many animals, I was not previously aware of physical contests for territory among toads. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Lime Butterfly

One of the larger and more eye-catching butterflies seen in the UAE, particularly around plantations, is the Lime Butterfly *Papilio demoleus*. This is a close relative of the so-called African Lime Butterfly or Citrus Butterfly, *Papilio demodocus*. Indeed, some experts have considered them the same species, although they do not seem to overlap. The Lime is found in the UAE, northern Oman and Asia, whereas the African Lime is found in Dhofar, SW Arabia and Africa. Torben Larsen, author of *Butterflies of Oman and Butterflies of Saudi Arabia and its Neighbours*, has written instructively of *P. demodocus*:

"The Citrus Butterfly is fascinating since it is an essentially forest butterfly which pushes out to the very limits of its ecological capacity. The wonderful thing is that it does so in two radically different ways. Its normal host plants are wide-leaved Rutaceae; cultivated citrus – not indigenous to Africa [or Arabia] is now its most frequent host plant, which means it can now live well away from the forest belt that was once its natural home. Citrus gets planted right out on the edge of the desert, be it in Burkina Faso, Niger, Botswana or Arabia. The butterfly opportunistically establishes itself far into what was previously an impossible habitat. In such areas, with Citrus as host plant, the larva is dark green with some brown adornments, as it is all over the rainforest zone.

"But in Arabia and in the extreme southwest of Africa ... *P. demodocus* has established itself in a very different, and less opportunistic, manner. It has managed to adapt to more unusual subdesert host plants, with small leaves. In Arabia it is mainly *Haplophyllum* (Rutaceae) ... and in fact the larva mainly feeds on the cortex of the plant stems. It has a completely different, variegated pattern that renders it well camouflaged on these plants.



	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		
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
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"Looking at the two different larvae, it is difficult to believe they belong to the same species, but I have been unable to find any differences between the adult butterflies. It seems that the patterns have developed as differential camouflage on their very different host plants."

The probability that the Lime Butterfly *P. demoleus* might be able to do the same in our area may be limited by the absence of suitable alternative plants. The only wild Rutaceae in the UAE is the pungent, yellow-flowering *Haplophyllum tuberculatum*, which can be common along the mountain front in rainy years, but was been very scarce in recent drought years. *Report by Gary Feulner, excerpts from Torben Larsen, Hazards of Butterfly Collecting, Cravitz Printing Company (2004)*



Wood's Wasteland ... er ... Wetland ... well, Larry's Dump

There was speculation about flesh eating bacteria ... about a young alligator ... about toxic waters ... but don't bother speculating anymore. Wood's Wetland, the pond area in the old waste dump outside University City in Sharjah, that many DNHG members knew as Larry Wood's Dump, is being filled in, one truck at a time.



The Sharjah dump reclamation area

No more wetland bird habitat, no more alligator suspicions, no more toxic pond. Of course, it may mean toxic ground water, but that would have happened already. *Thanks to Sandra Knuteson for this tidbit and photograph.*

Books:

Windtower by Anne Coles and Peter Jackson is published by Stacey International, and will be available through major outlets in the UAE. It is both an in-depth architectural study of windtowers and their dynamics, and a stunning visual feast. It will be reviewed in our next issue of *Gazelle*.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- Dec 9 The Making of "Planet Earth" – Doug Allan
- Jan 13 Marine Turtle Conservation – Nancy Papathanasopoulos
(Please note later date)

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

- Nov 23 - 24 Ibri and the Anticline with Val Chalmers
- Nov 24 Wadi Hatta with AUS
- Dec 7 Wadi Bih with Pradeep Radhakrishna
- 19 - 23 The Sundarbans with the Radhakrishnas

Additional trips may be announced by e-mail circular.