

# GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

**DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP**

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

## Members' News

***DNHG Membership  
Renewal Time!***

### *In Memoriam:*

**Dr. Alexander P. "Sandy" Fowler** died in Dubai on 23rd November, from complications associated with the treatment of an aggressive lung tumor. Sandy and his wife Beryl Comar discovered and joined the DNHG soon after they came to Dubai some 20 years ago. Both served on the DNHG Committee during the 1990s, when Sandy was Treasurer.

Although he was always modest and self-effacing, we quickly learned that Sandy would never say no to a request to help out. For many years he also served as the DNHG's Seashell Recorder and he earned the Bish Brown Award in 2005 for his *Rough Sheller's Guide to the UAE*. He donated attractive and diverse collections of UAE seashells to both ERWDA (now EAD) and the Jumairah English Speaking School, our former lecture venue.

Sandy's activities took him beachcombing at many UAE localities, and also into the desert at Sweihan, Liwa and in the Western Region, still quite remote in the 1990s.

Sandy retired from his medical practice in late 2004 and celebrated by climbing Mount Kinabalu (on Borneo) and Mount Kilimanjaro (a trip he shared with us at Members Night in 2005) before settling down



to somewhat more sedate touring and trekking in, *inter alia*, Mexico, Spain and Cyprus. Sandy and Beryl were trekking in the mountains in Cyprus as recently as October and it is difficult not to feel that his death was one of those that came too soon.

Carol Goodwright wrote, "It was Sandy who introduced us to the delights of shelling in Eastern Arabia and from our first DNHG outing with him to Mercato Beach in Sept. 07, we were hooked. His expertise was phenomenal and his enthusiasm for 'pretty things', as he called the shells that day, was infectious. Personally, I owe him a huge debt as shelling not only opened a whole new world of wonders for us in the UAE, but, more importantly, brought me into a circle of shell enthusiasts with whom I shared many shelling 'adventures'. Sandy kept in touch after he moved to Cyprus, kindly identifying several species I was unable to find in my sheller's bible."

DNHG Membership remains a bargain at Dhs.100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at our meetings or by sending us your details and a cheque made out to: Lloyds TSB Bank account no. 60600669933501. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG. Please also note our account number has changed.) Subscriptions paid now are good through to September 2010.

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. **Please see note p.2**

### **This month's Contributors**

**The Editor would like to thank the following for their reports and contributions:**

Layla Laubach (and Frank)  
Carol Goodwright  
Barbara Couldrey  
Valerie Chalmers  
Lamjed El-Kefi  
Mairead Porter  
Renee Williams  
Gary Feulner



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



## Some interesting trips!

Elephant Trackways with Mark Beech  
15 - 16 Jan

These extraordinary tracks, still there after eight million years, are not easy to visit - permission has to be obtained. Mark Beech will be taking a group to see them and other fossils. Details will be announced at the next meeting and by email.

Shelling with Anne Millen  
Fri 29 Jan

This will probably be to Rams beach or another Northern Emirates beach, depending on tides, devastation and accessibility. Register with Anne Millen at [pvana@emirates.net.ae](mailto:pvana@emirates.net.ae)

Three Forts trip with Amrik Singh  
Sat 30 Jan

Valerie Chalmers is organising this trip to the three Fujeirah forts, and depending on the tides on that day, it may be a good time to take a quick look, after the forts, at Khor Kalba as well. Details will be announced closer to the time.

The InterEmirates Weekend, held by ENHG Al Ain  
25 - 27 Feb

This is a wonderful weekend of trips, workshops, shared knowledge and fun. Early booking is essential, as Al Ain hotels are always busy. As soon as we have more information, we will let you know. This will be well in time to make the bookings.

## Notices:

### *Wanted: Chief Engineer*

The post of Chief Engineer is coming vacant, and we are looking to find a new Chief Engineer promptly as the success of every lecture depends to a greater or

lesser extent on our sparky. You need to be reasonably tech-savvy as the school's equipment is modern, and you need to be able to attend the monthly lectures on a regular basis and liaise with the school regarding our requirements for the lectures.

If you feel you would like to fill this role and have the skills, contact Gary Feulner or Valerie Chalmers (see p.7) or indeed any committee member, and we will welcome you and help ease you into the position

### *Wanted: Librarian*

The DNHG is in need of someone to oversee the care of the DNHG's library collection, including liaison with the Librarian at our monthly meeting place, Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management, where the library is housed. Recently-acquired books remain to be catalogued, along with an eclectic backlog of individual reprints and photocopies of scientific papers, booklets, etc. The Librarian is also invited to read and report on items in our collection.. If you are interested, please contact Chairman Gary Feulner or Vice Chairman Valerie Chalmers.

### *And the Vexed Question of Membership Renewal*

Please note that receipt of the Gazette and entitlement to participate in field trips depends on current membership. If you have not renewed your membership by our January meeting, we will remove your name from the list of current members, removing these entitlements. Contact our membership secretary Anindita by email: [anin@eim.ae](mailto:anin@eim.ae)



Evening in Salalah, Dec 2009

## Our Next Speaker

**Dr Richard Hornby** spent most of his childhood in Kenya. He has a background in zoology but also a keen interest in botany and ecology in general. For about twenty years he worked with the Nature Conservancy Council in southern England. After a period as an ecological consultant in Southern England, he moved to Abu Dhabi in 1993 to set up the National Avian Research Centre (NARC), which is now part of EAD. After a spell with the UAE Federal Environmental Agency (FEA) he became an independent ecological consultant, based in Abu Dhabi. He extended his interests into marine and coastal ecology, and carried out a number of coastal surveys.

In 1997 Dick joined the staff of The Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems, to work as an Academic Editor, while continuing with ecological consultancy. The encyclopedia is devoted to bringing together a comprehensive and integrated body of knowledge for use in correcting current practices which threaten the Earth's essential life support systems.

In 2005 the consultancy work became a little more official, and he established Nautica Environmental Associates, jointly with Veryan Pappin. The company has always been busy and has grown to about a dozen people. Dick takes the lead with all the terrestrial work and has carried out many surveys in UAE, Qatar and Bahrain.

For about ten years Dick has also been involved with co-leading natural history holiday tours, mostly in Mediterranean Europe. He was the Chairman of Emirates Natural History Group from 1993 to 1999.



## Salalah

Nov. 27<sup>th</sup> – first full day:

Salalah, the main town of the Dofar region, is fringed by mountains that in July and August change (thanks to the yearly monsoon) into a lush green. Instead of date, the palm in Salalah is the subtropical coconut. The Frankincense tree that provides the sap so sought after in the ancient world enhances Salalah's fame.

An enthusiastic group of 21, with our Omani guide, Mahad Issa and competent van driver, climbed up from the coast past wandering camels, cattle and termite hills to Jabal al Qara – the location of the alleged tomb Job (Nabi Ayoub). While admiring the view, many noticed yellow fruit growing on small bushes of *Solanum incanum* as well as hollow dirt trails possibly left by dung beetles.



*Solanum incanum*

Traveling west along the coast, we stopped at Mughsayl Beach with its cliffs and natural blowholes, now covered with metal safety grills, that sprayed excited children. Cormorants and herons were seen off shore.



Blowholes

A trip to Salalah would not be complete without seeing frankincense trees (*Boswellia sacra*) thriving in their natural habitat.



*Boswellia sacra*

These famous trees grow in dry wadis to a height of around 15-20 feet. Their branches seemingly grow directly from their roots and the papery bark creates a rustle in a breeze. Their unique curly leaves are dark green. Our guide scratched into the bark of one tree and we watched as the aromatic cream sap appeared – a glimpse into the rich history of this fascinating region.



Creamy sap oozing

*Second day:*

We headed east along the coast to the castle in Taqah, Ben Ali's Tomb, the old fishing harbour in Mirbat and finally to Wadi Dabat.

We drove east along the coast where the fishermen cast their nets and catch huge shoals of sardines which are then processed for many purposes including cattle fodder. From the nearby hill we observed turtles and dolphins.

Nearby in the village of Taqah we enjoyed looking around the reconstructed castle/fort and seeing how the Wali (governor) used to live.



Taqah castle

From there we visited ancient Sumhuram at Khor Rori Archaeological Site, high between two ridges. This is thought to date back to 1st - 4th century BC and may be the legendary palace of the Queen of Sheba. We walked around the three areas, the Temple of Sin, residence, and store rooms. This overlooked the important frankincense port until trading stopped when the sand bar blocked it up.



Sumhuram ruins

We then visited the ancient cemetery around the Mausoleum of Bin Ali which showed the practice of placing one stone at the head and foot of the grave for a man and an additional stone in the centre for a woman.



Cemetery



Ben Ali's large tomb had separate entrances and areas for men and women. We just observed but the Arab ladies there prayed and left walking backwards as a mark of respect.

We had a wonderful meal in Mirbat where we enjoyed panoramic views of the harbour, bay and mountains from the many windows and delicious grilled fish. Later, we walked around the old harbour and saw the latest catch being transferred to vans for onward shipment to Dubai and elsewhere.



Wadi Darbat

Wadi Darbat was our last stop and a big surprise. We drove up the rocky mountain road and there on the top was a huge plateau with a river and trees and hundreds of grazing camels. But the biggest surprise was the huge number of visitors all along the river. Despite this, we enjoyed amazing waterfalls and rolling green pastures thanks to our happy smiling guide.

### Third day:

On the last day of our tour of Salalah, the sky was a bit cloudy. Eight of the group wanted to see some old ruins in the desert, so they went there in taxis. My family and I did the city tour as planned.

First we drove down street July 23 (named after the day Sultan Qaboos became the Sultan of Oman in 1970) to the Sultan Qaboos Mosque. The mosque was built this year, and recently opened. It had some very beautiful engravings of some verses from the Quran on the walls of the prayer room. All the women had to cover entirely from their hair to their ankles (not the face though). But I didn't, because I'm still young.



Sultan Qaboos Mosque

We went to the handicrafts market and the gold and silver souk, but most of the shops were closed as it was still Eid. They sold jewelry, swords, camel sticks, and lots of other weapons from the gulf. The souk where we went next included frankincense shops. After that, we stopped by an archeological park to visit the Museum of the Frankincense Land. It taught us about the history of Oman in relation to frankincense.



Museum of the Frankincense Land

Then we went to a different part of the museum: the fish and ships section! There were models of boats and ships of all sizes. There was also the enormous bow of a ship which you could climb up on and pretend to steer.

Afterwards, we drove by some farms that grew papayas, coconuts, and bananas. We stopped by some booths selling fruit and drank some fresh coconut milk. The fruits they were selling were papayas, coconuts, bananas, custard apples, onions, melons, watermelons, and some fruits (or vegetables) that I never even knew existed!



Frank, Layla and Charles Laubach at one of many stalls selling local produce

Thanks for these reports go to Renee Williams for Day 1, Mairead Porter for Day 2 and Layla Laubach (and Frank who did the note-taking) for Day 3. Photographs are by Valerie Chalmers, Mairead Porter, and Aida Laubach



Some of the DNHG group with their Omani guide

Gary Feulner and Narayan Karki travelled with the group, but followed a customised itinerary based on Gary's prior visits to the area, including the dry sinkhole, cave and underground lake at Kahf Taiq, the hidden pools at 'Ayun and an overlook from the escarpment of Jebel Samhan.



Cliffside cave at Kahf Taiq (photograph by Gary Feulner)



## Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

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

Archaeology - David Palmer  
050-7387703  
office direct line: 04-2072636  
dpalmer@ud.ac.ae

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

### Seashells - Recorder 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.



### What a Treat!

On 11 December I decided to climb up to the Yabana ridge in the Ru'us al Jibal and kick the rock that so rudely knocked me off the mountain in February this year. We had just reached the small fenced in area on the ridge, which I visit annually in spring to see the wild irises and gladioli, when, to our surprise and delight, an Arabian caracal lynx (*Caracal caracal schmitzi*) darted out from behind rocks inside the enclosure.



*Caracal caracal schmitzi*

We watched it quietly for about 5 minutes, but then it tried unsuccessfully to crash through the impenetrable wire fencing. It must have found a way in but we could not locate a hole. I opened the gate and eventually it escaped at great speed. Just outside the enclosure we found the half eaten carcass of a baby goat.



Jet black ear tufts and behind the ears

The caracal is a beautiful animal rarely seen in the wild in daylight hours. This one had a healthy, glossy coat with jet black colouring behind its ears. The long ear tufts were just as dark. Previously, I have only come across dead ones, hung from trees by mountain farmers as a deterrent. The caracal lynx is at risk of becoming an endangered species in this area, mainly due to the invasion of

mankind - destroying its habitat and diminishing the availability of its natural prey (small mammals, birds, reptiles, etc.), hunting, and traps set by the farmers in order to protect their goat herds. *Report by Barbara Couldrey, photographs by Henry Martin.*

### Above the Quarries

Wadi Ashwani, south of Siji, was a favorite haunt of Marijcke Jongbloed, one of the earliest naturalists to popularise the natural history of the UAE and later the founder and coordinator of the Arabian Leopard Trust. It was a favourite destination for off-road outings in the 1980s and early 1990s. Today the wadi, and neighbouring Wadi Siji, have been almost totally despoiled by extensive quarrying, destroying the tourist potential of what would otherwise have been a congenial area.



Quarrying in Wadi Ashwani

Access by traditional tracks is also now disrupted by dams and quarry roads. These improvements have encouraged the expansion of local animal husbandry, and a large colony of "mountain" dhubs *Uromastyx leptieni* (see the July/Aug 2005 *Gazelle*) appears to have disappeared due to competition for forage with domestic goats. Nevertheless, with perseverance one can transit the quarry areas to explore on foot the uppermost wadis beyond. There, it must be said, life goes on.

In these remnants, the wadis were refreshed by the recent summer and fall showers. Autumn flowering plants were in bloom recently, including the *sidr* tree *Ziziphus spina-christi*, the desert thorn



*Lycium shawii*, the large wadi grass *Saccharum ravennae* and grazed cushions of *Grewia erythraea*, as well as more delicate annuals such as *Andrachne aspera* and *Kickxia hastata*. Somewhat to the south of the quarry areas, the rare yellow *Caralluma*, *C. flava* is also in flower.



*Caralluma flava*

With a bit of effort one can ascend in these areas to summit ridges that give views of Masafi, Deftah and Fujeirah itself, but also reveal the scale of the destruction around them. A Globe Skimmer dragonfly *Pantala flavescens*, a strong migrant often found far from water, scouted us at a high point.



A view from the top, towards Masafi

The area of Wadi Siji and Wadi Ashwani was known for its somewhat exotic geology, being a good area to observe some late stage, "granitic" or "acidic" dykes in the upper part of the ophiolite sequence. These can still be seen in occasional wadi walls and in waterfalls in gulleys.



Compositional banding in the upper part of the ophiolite

Thanks to Gary Feulner for report and photographs.

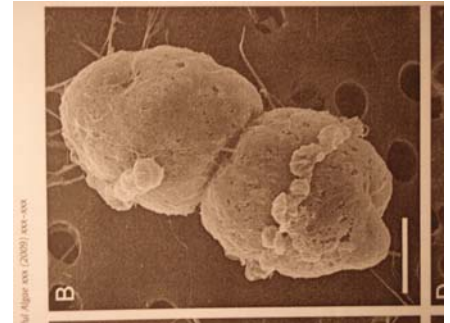
## Last Year's Red Tide

A scientific paper on last year's 'red tide', which affected both coasts of the UAE, is enlightening but gives little reason for future optimism. That event was an algal bloom that affected the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Gulf from August 2008 to May 2009 and later. It was notable for its size and intensity, causing massive fish kills, damaging coral reefs, restricting fishing and recreational activities and forcing desalination plants to cease or modify operations due to clogging of intake filters and/or fouling of reverse osmosis membranes.

Researchers from Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution and the UAE identified the organism responsible as a planktonic marine alga, the dinoflagellate *Cochlidium polykrikoides*. It is widespread in tropical and warm temperate waters worldwide and is known to have caused mass mortality of wild and farmed fish elsewhere. In some areas *C. polykrikoides* only recently emerged as a dominant species responsible for red tides (now also called harmful algal blooms of HABs).

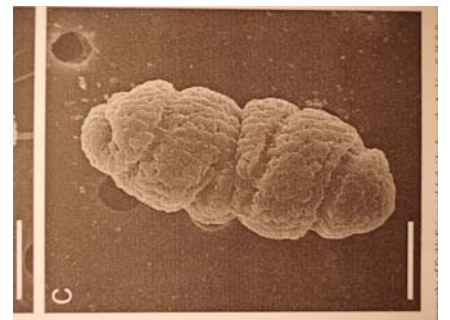
The paper goes on to explain that while red tides have been known from the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman for many years, the first fish kills in the Arabian Gulf were recorded only about a decade ago and are synchronous with a well-documented global expansion and intensification of HABs in general. How the red tide kills fish and shellfish remains to be fully resolved, but three basic mechanisms are thought to be involved: (1) the production of toxic substances; (2) the production of chemicals that react with oxygen and deplete the oxygen concentration of the seawater; and (3) the production of mucus-like substances (polysaccharides) that physically suffocate other or-

ganisms by clogging their breathing organs.



Scanning electron micrograph of *C. polykrikoides*., a two-celled chain showing transverse flagellum of each cell.

Unfortunately, a pattern exists of subsequent recurrence of algal blooms following an initial outbreak, suggesting that *C. polykrikoides* may become a persistent HAB problem in the UAE and Oman. This is probably facilitated by the life cycle of the organism, which is not fully understood but includes a cyst stage that can be deposited in sediment. In addition, the general ability of *Cochlidinium* to sustain growth at a wide range of temperatures and its preference for high salinities is likely to contribute to the ability of this dinoflagellate to proliferate in the specialized environmental conditions of the Arabian Gulf.



A two-celled chain following treatment to remove polysaccharide mucilage coating.

Reference: Richlen, M.L. et al., "The catastrophic 2008-2009 red tide in the Arabian gulf region", *Harmful Algae* (2009), doi:10.1016/j.hal.2009.08.013.

Report by Gary Feulner, with thanks to Christophe Tourenq of EWS-WWF for providing a copy of the paper



	<b>name</b>	<b>tel home</b>	<b>tel office</b>	<b>fax</b>
Chairman	<b>Gary Feulner</b> messages: 306 5300	306 5570	330 3600	330 3550
Vice Chairman	<b>Valerie Chalmers</b> email: valeriechalmers@gmail.com	394 8872	050-4558498	
Treasurer	<b>Louisa Akerina</b> email: Louisa.akerina@gmail.com		050-241 5045	
Membership Secretary	<b>Anindita Radhakrishna</b> email: anin@emirates.net.ae	282 3952	050-656 9165	
Speaker Co-ordinator	<b>Martina Fella / Michelle Sinclair</b> email: martina_fella@hotmail.com			
Fieldtrip Co-ordinator	<b>Pradeep Radhakrishna</b> email: wgarnet@emirates.net.ae	282 3952	050-450 8496	
Fieldtrip Co-ordinator	<b>Jenny Hill</b> email: jennyhill76@hotmail.com		050-8861508	
Fieldtrip Co-ordinator	<b>Sandhya Prakash</b> email: sandy_pi@yahoo.com	050-5512481		348 2868
Newsletter Editor	<b>Anne Millen</b> email: pvana@emirates.net.ae	394 7076	no calls please	394 7075
Publisher	<b>Peter van Amsterdam</b> email: pvana@emirates.net.ae	394 7076	335 5495	394 7075
Librarian	<i>Needed</i>			
Book Sales	<b>Mairead Porter</b> email: portermme@hotmail.com		055 656 1949	
Postmaster	<b>Sandi Ellis</b> email: peterjon@emirates.net.ae	050-644 2682		
Chief Engineer	<i>Needed</i>			

## The "Humongous Thistle"



*Notobasis syriaca*

Good things come to him who waits. **Gary Feulner** recently spent a couple of afternoons at the Sharjah Natural History Museum, browsing through the herbarium there, which contains many specimens collected by some of the earliest students of UAE plants, including Rob Western (author of *The Flora of the UAE – An Introduction*) and Dr. Marijcke Jongbloed (author of, inter alia, *The Living Desert* and *Wild Flowers of the UAE*). Gary was researching a couple of specific points but took time to browse more generally. He was surprised but

gratified to find that one of his very earliest collections, a distinctive plant from high in the Musandam (given the field name "Humongous Thistle") has been identified in the interim by Nael Fawzi of UAE University as the Syrian Thistle, *Notobasis syriaca*. However, neither Gary nor anyone else has recorded this plant since its collection in 1997.

## The World's Three Tahr

More recently, **Gary Feulner** joined **Binish Roobas** on vacation in Kerala, SW India, an excellent but unsung natural history destination. Kerala is well known for its backwater boat trips but it also includes the forested mountain slopes, tea plantations and above-the-treeline summits of the Western Ghats. Binish and Gary and friends tracked down birds, butterflies and dragonflies in various environments at several well-managed wildlife sanctuaries. Even Binish added new species,

Email your field reports and news to [pvana@emirates.net.ae](mailto:pvana@emirates.net.ae) (Arial 10 justified). Please send your photographs as separate jpg files, or deliver them to Anne Millen for scanning.

and Gary became one of the few people to see all three of the world's species of tahr in the wild: Arabian, Himalayan and, now, the Nilgiri. All three, unfortunately, are threatened, but the Nilgiri population has increased under protection from hunting, after being nearly exterminated in the early 20th century.



Nilgiri tahr *Nilgiritragus hylocrius* in the Western Ghats

## Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

Jan 10	Dr Richard Hornby – A Race around the Natural History of UAE
Feb 7	Dr. John W. Reynolds – Earthworms
Mar 7	Dr. Drew Gardner – Bats
April 4	Dr. Susanne Hofstra – Ancient Mesopotamian & Mediterranean Scripts

**Field Trips (Members only, please.)**

Jan 15-16	Elephant Trackways
Jan 29 (Fri)	Shelling at RAK
Jan 30 (Sat)	Three Forts, Fujeirah
Feb 25-27	InterEmirates Weekend, ENHG Al Ain

Further field trips, details or changes may be announced or confirmed by e-mail circular.