

GAZELLE

Vol 17 no 1 – January 2002



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

And What News!

The **DNHG** has a new venue for our monthly meetings! See page 6 for more, and the map on page 7.

Natural curiosity? Long-time member **Colin Paskins** didn't hesitate to interrupt a business lunch at a beachside hotel to catch what he described as "one of the strangest insects I have seen," scurrying purposefully towards the door. Colin popped it into a film canister in the interest of science. The verdict: a mole cricket, probably a *Gryllotalpa* species, closely related to the European mole cricket. The most distinguishing feature is the shape of the front claws, which are modified to resemble broad, toothed scrapers and are used to burrow in soft soil. They spend most of their life underground eating plant roots and small insects. They in turn are one of the underground prey items of the Hoopoe, which probes the soil with its long bill.

Those of you lucky enough to beg or borrow a copy of the new Shell calendar for 2002 will find that it is illustrated with photographs by our own **Lamjed El-Kefi**, one of our very few members who seems to be equally comfortable on land, at sea and exploring outer space.

DNHG AGM and Elections

The DNHG will hold its annual general meeting at our March lecture. At that time we will also elect a new Committee for the coming year. Most of the current Committee are prepared to stand for re-election, but a few would be happy for relief or assistance. And, Dubai being Dubai, we will be losing some Committee members due to overseas moves and changes of employment.

We particularly need help with
(1) organizing field trips (as a Field Trip Co-Coordinator),
(2) accounts (as Treasurer)
(3) book sales.

If you would like to help, we would like to hear from you. Within limits, we can tailor responsibilities to suit your time and talents. The DNHG has prospered in recent years because members have generously stepped up to do what they could.

If you have an interest, or need further information, contact our Chairman Gary Feulner or any of the other Committee members (all listed on page 7).



DNHG Membership Renewal

The DNHG membership year begins in September, so renewal is now overdue. Membership remains a bargain at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dhs. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at meetings (see Membership Secretary Fi Skennerton) or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account no. 173746 and posted to Fi at PO Box 29561, Dubai. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.) Membership is valid from September 2001 to September 2002.

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:

Peter Cunningham
Patricia Rosetti
Gary Feulner
Marijcke Jongbloed



Field Trips etc ...

Desert Dinner 24 January 2002

Yes, the last date was wrong! Apologies to all those who were more pleased by the original date. This BBQ/dinner is to celebrate 15 years of the DNHG, and will be held in the dunes just off the Jebel Ali/ Hatta Road, near the big Ghaf grove.

Take the Al Ain Road for about 24km, turn right onto the Jebel Ali road, and travel 9.3km to the striped umbrella on the right hand side of the road. Go through the fence, across the gravel plain and park your car. Carry your stuff (or get a 4WD to ferry it) a few metres behind the first dunes and there you are! Everybody can attend regardless of vehicle.

You will need to bring your own dinner, drinks, and anything else (eg a coat – it will be very cold) for an evening in the desert. Contact Anne Millen and Peter van Amsterdam at pvana@emirates.net.ae for further details

Mushrif Park with Reza Khan 25 January

Reza will meet everyone at the entrance to Mushrif Park at 9.00am. To get there, drive past the airport on the Al Khawaneej road, and after quite some distance, the park is signposted on the right-hand side of the road. Perhaps easier would be to take the Emirates road and come back a few kilometres. No registration necessary. Contact Reza on 04 – 344 8283 if you need further information.

RAK to Falaj al Moalla 1 February

This trip is now closed. If you have any queries, contact Peter on pvana@emirates.net.ae

Siir Bani Yas Island 7 & 8 February 2002

David Snelling is arranging this trip to the island. Registration as soon as possible is essential, but they can take quite a large group, and it may turn out to be possible to go from Abu Dhabi, shortening that drive. Further details can be obtained from David Snelling on david.snelling@emirates.com

Something with Gary 15 February

Gary Feulner will be organising a trip and the details will be available at the 3 February meeting.

Inter-Emirates Weekend Liwa Hotel 7 & 8 March 2002

The dates and location of the Inter-Emirates weekend are firming up, and this is always a really wonderful weekend with an enormous variety of things to see and do. Information will be provided in plenty of time for you to book and make your plans.

Wildflowers in Ghubra Bowl, Oman 22 – 23 March

Peter van Amsterdam and Anne Millen will lead a trip to see the spring wildflowers. Marijcke Jongbloed will be along to identify the plants. This will be an overnight camp and numbers will be limited as the amount of flat ground is very small. 4WD is needed, and the weather will play an important role – the whole place is a giant wadi. It may be possible to cross the Jebel Akhdar from Nakhl to Tanuf, but this will require a sturdy 4WD and a cool head! Further details from Peter closer to the time, or on pvana@emirates.net.ae

Possible Project?

Your editor is wondering if it would be possible to get together enough DNHG people (and friends as well) to pick up the rubbish on Rams Beach. If you've ever been there, you'll know what a giant task this would be, but you'll also know what a very beautiful beach it is, or could be. If you would like to be part of it, please contact Anne Millen on

Our Next Speaker

John Balfour, who will speak on pests in Dubai, originally comes from Australia and has been in the UAE since 1987, as Head of the Pest Control Section of the Health Department of Dubai Municipality.

Leading up to this job were the acquisition of a BSc in Zoology in 1981, from the University of Sheffield and a Certificate in General Pest Control in 1983 from the British Pest Control Association.

His duties in Dubai range from identifying pest species, intercepting them at ports and airports, keeping them under control to prevent disease while at the same time developing and using methods to do this in a way that is not harmful to Dubai residents.

Much of his work is concerned with developing educational programs and training courses, and keeping records that could be needed by institutions such as the WHO. The new Pest Control Centre in Al Barsha houses laboratories, a small factory to make rodent poison biscuits, a workshop for equipment maintenance, a library and a large reference collection of insect specimens. John's enthusiasm and passion for his job make stories about cockroaches and mosquitoes extremely interesting.



Hajar Mountain Hike (November)

Exhilaration, not exhaustion, marked the faces of the party at the top of the pass at early afternoon. It had been a good morning in the wadi near Hatta town, an excellent introduction to the natural history of the Hajar Mountains – fruiting figs, sprouting wadi grass and flowering oleander in the wadi, a calm but circumspect carpet viper at our first pools, a few fish and a few Arabian toads surviving the drought, a graveyard terrace with broken pottery of various sorts, another terrace with sunken foundations and a soapstone lid, tiny rock geckoes and several large Jayakar's (Oman) lizards, predictable appearances by the Arabian paper wasp and the oriental hornet, a bit of boulder art here and there, and even a carcass of Brandt's hedgehog. Trip leader Gary Feulner had even broken into a trot to try to catch a second glimpse of a lone ungulate with an unusual "jizz." It was a disappointment only for botanists. A recent light shower had made little impression and out of the wadi bed only the milky-sapped *Euphorbia larica* was dressed for show.

The afternoon brought a cautious descent over much loose scree to reach a smaller tributary wadi. Then, several detours in search of evidence of the smooth stone slabs of the 'dinner plate people.' Two isolated flowering *Tephrosia apollinea*, the 'only game in town,' attracted three species of small butterflies — the Mediterranean Pierrot, the Small Cupid, and lots of Blue Spotted Arabs. The latter is not a typical mountain species but its numbers throughout the UAE seem to have exploded with increased plantings of its larval foodplant, the toothbrush tree *Salvadora persica*. Finally, a shutout in the wadi bed, which ended in a 10 metre vertical waterfall, requiring a backtrack and another detour – a gentle reminder about the potential problems of descending by untested routes.

Some field tips: A number of members made good use of close focus binoculars to observe small but easily disturbed wildlife such as lizards and butterflies. Several people felt that a walking stick would have been useful for descending on scree.

The group was careful to leave all archeological material in place, but three samples were taken of exceptional material that will be presented to resident professionals for evaluation. Mike Lorrigan spotted a shard with a sort of cuneiform design (Mike is intrigued by the recently popularized theory of Sumerian migration to Arabia and Egypt) and Deanne White added a green-glazed shard with etched design of curved lines. Both of these were photographed and then bagged and labeled with description and location. They were identified two weeks later by Christian Velde, resident archeologist at the National Museum of Ras Al-Khaimah, as Islamic period, 15th-16th century A.D.).

But the gold doubloon for the day goes to Larry Woods, who turned up a small rectangular soapstone lid, decorated with a spare pattern of stitch-like lines. This was likewise photographed and labeled, and was identified by Christian Velde as an Iron Age artifact, c. 1200-1000 B.C. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Herbarium

There has been rain here and there and hopefully this will bring forth some of the spring flowers, which have been conspicuously absent over the last few dry years.

Since there is no plant guide of the region available at the moment (one is in preparation!) those of you who like to know what they are seeing can identify plants in various ways:

1. The easy way: Taking pictures, including close-ups of flowers and fruits and other salient points of the plants and showing those to other DNHG members who have

studied the local wild flora (Valerie Chalmers, Gary Feulner, Dr. Reza Khan, Marijcke Jongbloed – to name a few).

2. The way to really learn: Taking specimens and comparing those with the herbaria at the UAE University in Al Ain or at the Sharjah Natural History Museum at the Desert Park.

3. The scientific (but slow) way: Sending specimens to famous centres like Kew Botanical Gardens, Edinburgh Botanical Gardens or Prof. Loutfy Boulos in Egypt (addresses can be had from M. Jongbloed). The reason this way of identification is usually slow, is because the experts are always very busy!

How to collect specimens

Here are some tips for collecting specimens for identification.

Out in the field, all you need are zip-lock polythene bags of different sizes. For identification it is best to collect whole plants (if they are not too big), but never collect a whole plant if there are only a few of them around. You don't want to prevent them from propagating! For identification especially the seeds are important (from the fruit one shall know the tree!). In any case, take a good-sized sample that includes flowers, fruits, if possible roots, and leaves (note that some plants have different leaves close to the ground and higher up!) Place the plant in the bag, expel the extra air so the bag is flat and seal it. In this way the plant will stay relatively fresh for up to two days, giving you time to get home and put them in the press. It is best to put each plant in a separate bag, because mixed bags could give confusion, if seeds or flower petals are shed. But in a pinch you can put plants together in a large bag. Make notes on the location where you found the plant, the substrate on which it grows and anything else of interest.

(Continued on next page...)

At home you need a plant press.



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.

Gary uses big books, but a better option is a press, which allows air to pass through. One can be made quite easily by nailing parallel slats perpendicular to each other, like a trellis. If you make the two "boards" the size of a folded newspaper, you can use newspaper as the main drying material. Each specimen has to be put inside a folded piece of paper towel. (In Europe you can get a special type of semi-transparent tissue, but here paper towels can be used.) Also inside the tissue you place a piece of paper with the number of the specimen, the field data, the collection date.

Put plenty of newspaper on the outsides and tie the "trellises" together with strong string or a belt or tape with clasps or a buckle. During the first few days after putting in a new lot of specimens, put the press outside in the sun and wind, standing upright against a chair. Make sure to take the press inside at night (dew!) or when the gardener waters the garden!

If you use an expert abroad to help you with identifications, you have to send a specimen to him/her, which he/she then gets to keep for his/her herbarium. In that case the two specimens can be dried together, and a separate label will have to accompany the specimen to the expert. I send the specimens inside the paper towel, as it ensures further drying and it is light. But cartons have to be placed around each bundle of specimens, so they cannot be folded during transport.

For a good result, the drying paper (the newspaper) has to be changed after a couple of days, especially if the specimens are

thick-leaved and juicy. Leave the specimen inside the paper towel until it is completely dry, because it may be damaged if you try to get it off the paper while it still sticks. As the specimens dry, the binding of the press has to be tightened from time to time.

If you want to keep your specimens indefinitely, you have to mount them on acid-free paper, which can be bought here at al Harab's stationery in Deira, unfortunately in rather large quantity. I have the paper cut to slightly larger than newspaper size, with some papers a little more than double that size to serve as Family folders (grasses: Poaceae, Daisies: Compositae or Asteraceae, etc. (the proper names can be found in the Checklist of UAE plants). Several mounted specimens of different genus can then go in the same folder.

In order to get rid of minuscule bugs that may be lodged inside with the plants and could destroy your specimens, it is important to freeze the specimens before putting them away. You place a five inch stack of mounted cards inside a large Spinneys bag, and shove another one over the opening. Tape the bags together with masking tape and make sure every opening is covered. Then freeze it in any freezer for about 5 days. This action has to be repeated once every six months. In this way plant specimens can be kept for hundreds of years.

Making a herbarium specimen is good fun. You can be very creative, putting the specimens on the paper in a nice way, adding photographs and sometimes drawings, and most importantly, the label with all the data. *Thanks for this to Marijke Jongbloed*



Rat-Tailed Maggots

In late November I was hiking in a wadi behind Hatta village, mostly trying to ascertain whether the largest of the native fish species was managing to survive the drought. I found it in only one permanent pool. However, I also encountered and explored an upper tributary of the wadi that was new to me. Seeing mating dragonflies on a gravel terrace alerted me to look for water, and I found the tributary had benefited somewhat from a recent shower.

A few times I lifted up 'tumbleweed' (blown in brush, mostly the dried tops of what seemed to be *Crotalaria aegyptiaca* and possibly *Salvia macilenta*) in small, shallow, pot-hole puddles in the bedrock. Twice this procedure revealed so-called "rat-tailed maggots" – the larvae of certain hoverflies -- in the water underneath. These look like inch-long yellow-pink worms with a hair-like tail. I found 2 in one pool and 5+ in another. Two were actually clinging to the tumbleweed, and a third may have been clinging loosely until I disturbed it. I even raised one out of the water attached to its shrub, hanging by its tail. Although I had seen rat-tailed maggots before, I hadn't realized these tails were flexible, much less prehensile. They are often directed upwards and I had supposed they served a breathing function.

It is the strategy of these organisms to breed in shallow, ephemeral pools, with the larva pupating in the mud and the adult fly emerging when the pool dries out. I observed only a single adult hoverfly in the area, or what I thought was a hoverfly. I duly reported all this to Dr. Brigitte Harworth of Al-Ain, who has a special interest in hoverflies, and from my description she seemed to think the adult fly was in fact a wasp. *Report by Gary Feulner*



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The recorders are not necessarily scientific experts in their designated fields. In fact, most are not. However, they are interested and knowledgeable amateurs - please contact them if you have any interesting reports or queries.

The intention is that information will be channelled through to the *Gazelle* editor, so new information can be shared with all our readers.

Rams Pontoon

Patricia and Robert Rosetti report that access to Rams Beach has been restored for 4WD vehicles, over a pontoon to the left of the old bridge. This can only be crossed at low tides. They went to Rams on the second day of Eid, December 2001, and found 5 paper nautilus - Argonauta hians - just below the high tide mark.

2 x 7 cm - slightly damaged
1 x 6.5 cm - one side badly broken
1 x 5.5 cm - in perfect condition
1 x 5 cm - in perfect condition

Herpetological Conference in Sri Lanka

The 4th World Congress of Herpetology was held from 2-9 December 2001 in Bentota, a scenic coastal resort town south of Colombo, in Sri Lanka. Just over 300 delegates attended the conference which is held every four years.

The scientific programme included topics such as behavioural and morphological asymmetries, ecology, evolution, habitat fragmentation and conservation, medical and veterinary issues, phylogeny, predator-prey interactions, reproduction, social aggregation, snake bites and feeding behaviour as well as tortoise and turtle matters. An in-conference tour was conducted to a local turtle hatchery and a boat cruise to see the local monitor lizards dozing in the mangrove swamps. These can reach up to 2m in length.

I attended the conference as a relative novice compared to the "who's who" in herpetology, and presented a paper on the feeding ecology of the Spiny-tail Lizard (*Uromastix aegyptius microlepis* or "Dhub") from the UAE. Spiny-tail Lizards are large ground dwelling herbivorous (plant eating) lizards found on gravel terrain and inter-dune compact soils throughout the UAE, although nowhere common. Judging from my study

population, in the Al Ain area, plants favoured include the coarse desert grasses (*Pennisetum divisum* and *Stipagrostis plumosa*) as well as the evergreen herbs, *Moltkiopsis ciliata* and *Monsonia nivea*. Perennial plant species form the basis of their diet in the UAE while most other Spiny-tail Lizard studies indicate their preference for annual plant species. This can, however, be ascribed to the lack of rain in the study area since initiating this study in May 1999. The lizards are also almost exclusively herbivorous with arthropods making up less than 1% of their diet compared to 6% for *Uromastix acanthinura* (another Spiny-tail Lizard species from Morocco).

Post congress tours to a number of nature reserves were also on offer and I chose Yala and Bundala National Parks, the latter a Ramsar Wetland, located in the "dry" (rainfall only 700mm p.a.) southeastern part of the country. These parks are rich in birds, most unfamiliar to me, such as the Indian Pitta, Open-bill and Painted Storks, Purple Coot, Great Stone Plover and Pheasant-tailed Jacana, to name a few. Elephant, Buffalo, Chital (Spotted Deer), Samba Deer and even the elusive leopard were evident. Interestingly, the first park warden of Bundala National Park was a South African who was interned in the vicinity as a prisoner-of-war during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902.

With 176 reptile species and 59 amphibian species (the highest species density in South Asia – 55% are endemic), Sri Lanka is a must for reptile enthusiasts. It is with sincere appreciation that I thank the ENHG, Al Ain Chapter, for partially funding my Spiny-tail Lizard studies and making my attendance to the conference possible.

Report by Peter Cunningham
(plc@emirates.net.ae)



special reports ...

Local Archeology Activities

December and January have been busy months for locally-based archeology. The survey of Musandam terraced settlements led by Prof. Derek Kennet, under the patronage of Sheikh Sultan bin Saqr al-Qasimi, visited more than 30 areas in December and returned with several crates of potshards (plus one Chinese ceramic soup-spoon).

The survey effort was also the occasion for RAK resident archeologist Christian Velde to catalogue, digitalise, enhance and inspect existing aerial photos of the mountain areas. Christian may be the perfect professional for this enterprise, since during a review of land-based photos he demonstrated an uncanny sense of orientation, seeming always to know where the photos were taken and from what direction.

An incidental result of both the field studies and the inspection of aerial photos was the discovery of at least 8 new Hafit tombs (c. 5000 years old) in the high Musandam. Most of these today resemble only large piles of stones but a couple show well preserved corbelled chambers and vestiges of vertical exterior walls.

Emergency archeological surveys were also conducted in Fujairah (by representatives from ADIAS) and Ras Al-Khaimah (by representatives from the National Museum of Ras al-Khaimah) along the route of the new pipeline from Fujairah to Al-Ain. We look forward to hearing the results of all of these investigations. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Non-Flowering Plants

Former *Gazelle* editor Neil Curtis is now engaged in conservation studies and public relations projects in Canada, but couldn't resist writing to highlight another interesting Arabian resident. Neil's current interest in plant taxonomy,

he says, has led him back to "our old friends" *Ephedra foliata* and *E. intermedia*. Both are leafless plants found in the UAE. *E. foliata* is a straggling climber found in mountain wadis and also in sand deserts between Dubai and Al-Ain, where it can be found climbing in ghaf trees. *E. intermedia* is a low shrub found only in higher mountains.

The two *Ephedra* species are the only gymnosperms (non-flowering seed plants) native to the UAE, and, with the coniferous Juniper tree of the Jebel Akhdar, the only gymnosperms native to Eastern Arabia. Most gymnosperms are conifers but the genus *Ephedra* belongs to a sub-group called Gnetophytes. Neil writes to point out that *Ephedra* feature "double fertilization," which, he says, "is interesting if you're into plant evolution: 'The occurrence of double fertilization in *Ephedra* assumes added significance in light of its critical phylogenetic position as a basal member of the most closely related extant group of seed plants (Gnetales) to angiosperms [flowering plants].' (Friedman 1990). Sounds like our friends are some of the closest living relatives of the whole flowering plant group. Interesting!" *Report by Gary Feulner*

A New Home for the DNHG !

Commencing 3 February 2002, the DNHG's monthly lectures will be held at **The Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management**, located opposite "Wild Wadi" near the Burj Al-Arab and the Jumeirah Beach Hotel. The Emirates Academy features a 140-seat auditorium, excellent acoustics and a built-in audio-visual system. We are very pleased with the warm welcome they have extended to us. The DNHG has matured (along with some of its members) and the time has come for a greater measure of creature comforts. We think members will find the new venue attractive and con-

genial, and we believe it will enhance enjoyment of our programs. Coffee, snacks and meals are available in the restaurant, on the left in the back garden.

The Emirates Academy auditorium is adjacent to the main entrance. The facade resembles an Arabic fortress, with four flags flying at the front gate. These are normally illuminated at night. The entrance is visible from Beach Road but is set back about 100 metres from the road. Direct access is currently over an open lot; for easiest access for cars, it is best to follow the map on page 7. There is a paved parking lot within the gates.

For those coming via Sheikh Zayed Road/Abu Dhabi Highway, the best exit is flyover #4 (Al-Barsha/Dubai Police Academy).

The Emirates Academy operates under local patronage in academic association with Ecole Hôtelière de Lausanne. As its name suggests, it is a local and regional centre for the education of hotel, resort and restaurant professionals. The Emirates Academy has expressed the desire to make a positive contribution to the Dubai community and an appreciation for the educational goals of the DNHG. Having discussed the matter at length, the DNHG Committee believes that the new venue represents a good "fit."

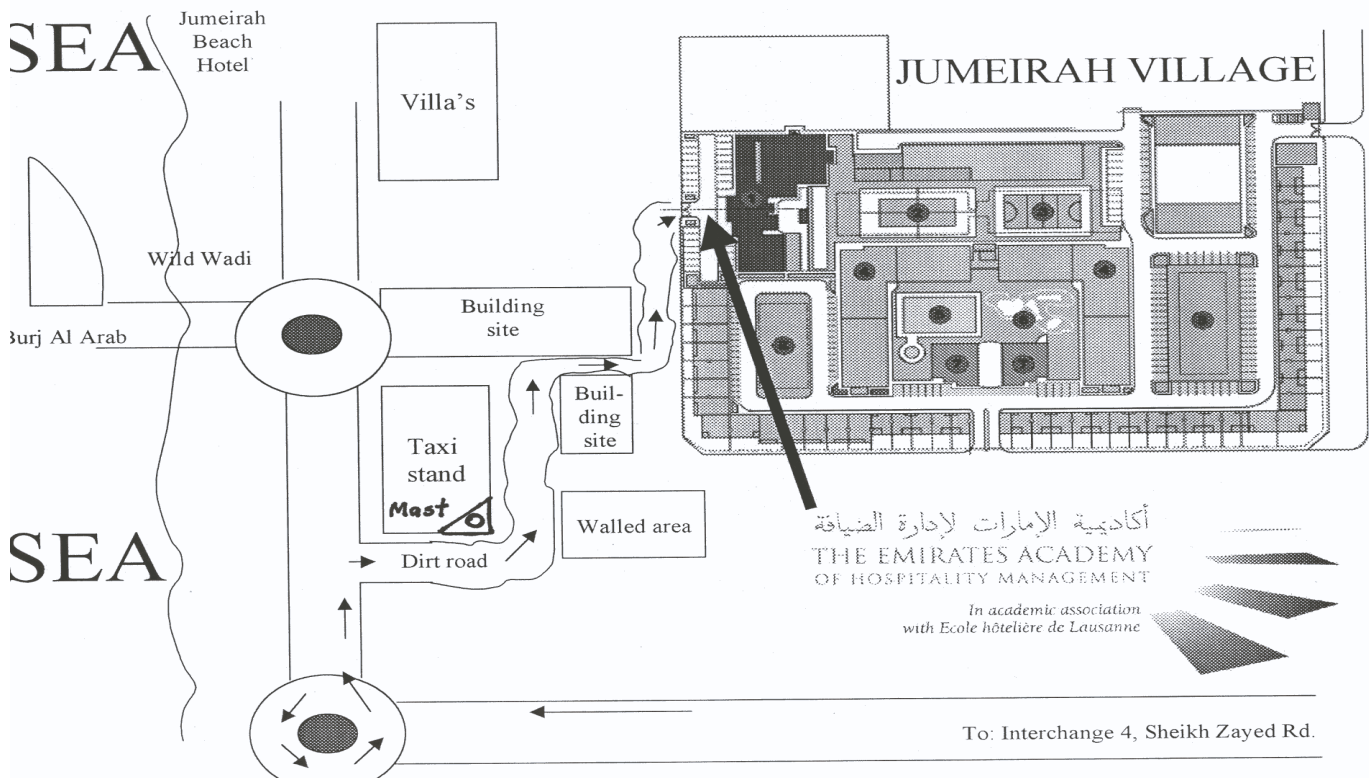
Thanks are due to a number of DNHG Committee members whose time and effort culminated in this move. It is appropriate to recognize, in particular, Fi Skennerton, Patricia Rosetti, Marijke Jongbloed, Anne Millen, Peter van Amsterdam and David Snelling. We look forward to seeing you at our new home on February 3. Doors open as usual at 7:30 pm for an 8:00 pm start.

See the map on page 7.



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EMIRATES ACADEMY OF HOSPITALITY MANAGEMENT



Dubai Natural History Group Programme

Lectures at Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management (see map), 7.30 pm for 8.00 pm

3 February	John Balfour on Protecting Dubai from Pests
3 March	Two Films by Yusuf Thakur: "The White-Collared Kingfisher" and "The Dugong"
April	To be advised
May	Professor Ted Papenfuss on some aspect of herpetology
June	Members' Night

Field Trips (DNHG members only, please).

24 January	Desert Dinner to celebrate 15 years of DNHG, Jebel Ali/Hatta Road
25 January	Mushrif Park with Reza Khan
1 February	RAK to Falaj al Moalla with Peter van Amsterdam
7-8 February	Siir Bani Yas with David Snelling
15 February	Gary's trip
7-8 March	Inter-Emirates Weekend at Liwa Oasis
22-23 March	Wildflowers in Ghubrah Bowl with Peter van Amsterdam and Anne Millen