

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Near and Far...

New member **Marit Mubarak** described with excitement her observation of a metre-long monitor lizard prowling at high noon in late spring near her home in the Al-Barsha area. This was probably the grey monitor *Varanus griseus*, which ranges across arid regions from the Sahara to Pakistan.

Neil Curtis, a former *Gazelle* editor, now residing with his family in British Columbia, has written to say that he is nearly finished with his master's in Resource and Environmental Management, focus on tourism, recreation, parks and conservation. He's off to the Rockies for some research with Parks Canada in mid-June - all very exciting.

Susie and Jim Balderstone, who live on the tenth floor of Al Musallah Towers in Bur Dubai, report that they are seeing an increasing number of birds amongst the potted hibiscus on their balcony. Susie has spotted swifts, bulbuls, purple sunbirds and doves, and they have observed several raptors, which they thought to be peregrines, on top of the adjacent tower block.

Dianne and Ragnar Frost are among those who are leaving Dubai and the DNHG this summer. Ragnar will be here a little longer, and they promise to go on any trip that's going, on the first weekend in October when Dianne will be here for half term break.



Barbara Couldrey is an award-winning golfer on RAK's acacia plains course, but in mid-June she took her eye off the ball long enough to make an interesting natural history observation: "In the middle of the course I came across a small scrape 15.5cm wide containing 4 eggs ... 3.5cm long and tapered ... a dark turquoise colour, with black irregular splodges. Haven't looked in my bird book at home yet, but could it be a red-wattled lapwing? They were in the middle of a hard area of flats and not a bird in sight. I went back to check the measurements and had great difficulty finding the 'nest' - so well disguised." Do any of our members recognize such distinctive eggs by their description?

DNHG Membership

DNHG membership remains a bargain at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dhs. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at meetings by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds 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. . Membership commenced from now will be valid for our upcoming September 2002 to September 2003 membership year.

This month's Contributors

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

Sandi Ellis
Valerie Chalmers
Elizabeth Buchanan
Larry Woods
Dianne Frost
Gary Feulner
Marijcke Jongbloed



Field Trips & Clips ...

One last one....

Saiq Plateau with Peter van Amsterdam 20 – 21 June

This trip is now closed. If there is any problem contact Peter at pvana@emirates.net.ae

and some stories to tell

Siir Bani Yas Safari

"That was a great trip to Africa!" our daughter Elizabeth exclaimed as we left the jetty and headed for home. "Now we don't have to go on a Kenyan safari!"

We had not known what to expect on our overnight DNHG excursion to Siir Bani Yas Island in mid-April. We certainly did not have in mind herds of oryx, deer, mountain goat, giraffe, gazelle and antelope, flocks of ostrich, emu and rhea, face-to-face (and rear) encounters with tahr, gemsbock, eland, llama and zebra, or glimpses of just about any other sizeable four-legged creature that has looked into the lens on "National Geographic" or "Wild Kingdom." Is this my camera or was this all just a dream?



Giraffe!

The title of the brochure we received upon arrival after our 35-minute journey by dhow from Jebel Dhanna said it all (often with interesting spelling and grammar): "Seer Baniyas Dreams Island" with an explanation in the brochure: "H.H.Sh. Zayed would like to protect all kinds of animals and birds which threading by distinction and he would carry out his dream to be

true by changing the desert to green oasis" (sic).

After a brief but revealing introductory tour en route to our lodging (basic, but gratis!), many of our party of 25 took a break to bathe in the dazzling blue water. The shelling was interesting, the ocean refreshing, and the deer that nipped through the gate to the beach amusing. A feast of quail (later found to be raised in great numbers on the island, as are all of the other vegetables and main courses served in this grill) capped an illuminating day. This was followed by an evening swim, a campfire (without the fire), and the spotting of a skink (also heading for the beach) by Larry Woods and our fearless fieldtrip leader David Snelling. It may well be that this skink was the only native non-avian fauna seen on the island.



Good views from transport

The beautiful breakwaters and corniche of Siir Bani Yas, built by a transient community of people who work in the island's various development and service activities sponsored by His Highness, are only the first of many surprises for the visitor. On rising the next morning to an Emirati breakfast (eggs), we headed off in our convoy of buses to survey the rest of the island before lunch. A long canal as respite for water fowl, intermittent majlis, bird-feeding towers, and a stop at a spectacular 360-degree villa viewpoint ("Hey, John Fox, are those the quail we ate last night in the pen in the garden? And are those pheasant beside them?") kept us intrigued. Equally intriguing was the report from our local guide that we had actually passed within 15 metres of the pre-Islamic Christian site exposed by Peter Hellyer's

team (now carefully covered to allow for further work) when we were observing the zebra that morning.



Devopment on Siir Bani Yas

Lunch (quail or pheasant?) and a quick dip mixed with snorkeling to cool off preceded our return voyage to the mainland. Our unplanned yet unequalled safari through unnatural history was complete, all thanks to the generosity of Sheikh Zayed, our new friends on Siir Bani Yas, and the persistence, good humour and organizational skill of Twickenham's gift to the DNHG. May other members have the same special opportunity! *Report by Elizabeth Buchanan and Larry Woods, and photographs by Larry.*

Our Next Speakers

We have an interesting and varied line-up of speakers for our new season beginning in September. Please note that the first lecture is on September 15, the *third* Sunday. Here are the first three:

Dr. Brigitte Howarth will talk on "Mimicry in Insects" on September 15th.

Dr. Waleed Yassin al Tikriti will present "Recent Discoveries in Archeaology in the Al Ain Region - Ancient Irrigation Systems" on October 6th.

Dr. Graham Pinn will speak about "Herbal Medicine" on November 3rd.



Musandam Weekend Cruise

Four divers (including instructors), and six snorkellers (including three would-be divers) set out from Dibba at about 10pm on the evening of the 25th April. Our departure was a couple of hours behind schedule, but that didn't matter; in the office, we had time for cool drinks and a chat to get to know each other before boarding.

The dhow itself was brilliant. There was plenty of space both below and above decks, air conditioned cabins, for those who chose the expensive version of the trip, showers and flush toilets, and a kitchen rivalled by none, providing 3 fantastic meals each day.

The dhow



Our hosts, Siobhan and Adrian, were superb. Easy going, fun to be with, yet caring and concerned about all the passengers, ensuring that everyone got what they wanted out of the trip and had a good time. Activities included diving for the experienced, test dives for the would-be divers, snorkelling, bird, turtle and dolphin watching, trips in the rubber dinghy and beach combing. The company was just great, the scenery spectacular and the atmosphere magic. Being away for two nights provided a rare opportunity to wind down more than we usually get the chance to do on DNHG weekend trips. By the time we got back to Dibba (again about 2 hours behind schedule, which didn't matter at all as I don't think any of us were in any hurry to return to reality) we were in a very holiday mood. Without doubt, this is a trip to be recommended! *Report by Dianne Frost*

Arabia's Wildlife Centre

Too hot to go out to the desert? That's what we thought, so we arranged to enjoy a tour of Arabia's wildlife in air-conditioned comfort at Arabia's Wildlife Centre in Sharjah, at the Sharjah Museum and Desert Park complex at flyover no. 8 on the Sharjah-Dhaid road.

Our private Friday morning visit was a good opportunity for quiet contemplation of the wildlife, including study of such arcane points as the distinctions between the Sawscale and Carpet vipers, or the Brandt's and Ethiopian hedgehogs, or the development (or lack of development) of eyes in the blind cave fish. Some species we noted were Namaqua doves and the normally elusive sand partridge, the latter still relatively skittish, as in the wild.

Many of the zoo residents seem to have adjusted very well and are breeding quite successfully. Among the new arrivals are baby vipers, baby amphisbaenids (legless lizards), a baby porcupine and two baby leopards.

A look "behind the scenes" risked taking some of the mystery out of the desert habitats so carefully and effectively recreated for display, but was a fascinating reminder of all that's entailed. The areas behind the displays are reminiscent of a hospital, complete with patient charts, records and feeding instructions. Other areas are devoted to breeding mealworms, mice or rabbits as food for other animals. There's never a "day off" at the zoo, but thanks to Paul Vercammen for taking time out from his regular Friday chores (he arrived toting a bale of hay) to take us behind the scenes and answer questions. *Gary Feulner*

Oasis Recycling Factory

The DNHG group who visited the Oasis Paper Industry on May 9 spent a fascinating afternoon. Mr Rajan Ahluwalia set up the rags-to-paper plant in Al Quoz, which gives 30% to the Emirates Thalassaemia Society. He started in Mumbai with 80 ragpickers who collected gar-

bage from 40,000 flats each day. At a depot, organic and inorganic material is sorted and sold. The householders are charged and the ragpickers paid. Further income is made from selling the glass, cans, plastic, paper etc. This made environmental and commercial sense, as the proceeds went back into the community.

The recycled paper looks and feels good. It is used for gift boxes, envelopes, greeting cards, certificates, or as art material. It is classy and elegant, coming in various textures, thicknesses, colors and special effects, such as crinkled or with fibers of straw, silk or flower petals.

The raw materials are rags from textile mills. Mountains of rags lie outside the factory, under the stars. We were daunted by this pile. You can see it in this photo of Laith, aged 4, taken by Jen Robinson.



In
pro-

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duction of recycled, partly hand-made paper, the rags are sorted and dusted to keep contaminants from the pulp. They are put into piles according to color by two workers each morning, then chopped into uniform pieces by machine, and beaten to a pulp with water. A moulding machine makes sheets, or a wire frame is used. The sheets are lifted individually to be forced manually through a press to squeeze out extra water. The sheets of paper are dried on the floor. Sheets may be calendered – smoothed between plates or cut according to the order placed. Altogether, it is a very labour intensive yet simple process. We were convinced the process is environmentally friendly, with nothing wasted even the water. *Report: Sandi Ellis*



Reports and News...

E.mail your reports to pvana@emirates.net.ae, (Arial 10 justified) or deliver to Anne Millen on floppy disk at monthly meetings.

Scene from a Movie?

From Sharjah, **Larry Woods** reports 120 greater flamingos resident at the sewage ponds and garbage dump next to University City on a May morning in 40C heat. Their pond appears to be cut-off from the main pond where a large flock of black-winged stilts (which frequent the American University of Sharjah campus most evenings) dominate, each standing guard atop a half-submerged rubber tyre. The real excitement for the bird-watcher (and the birds?) comes when the main pond is approached on foot. As the intruder is spotted, several stilts take to the air, as if transforming themselves into a squadron of jet fighters warding off enemy forces. This site is after all across the road from the Muwaileh army camp. Typically, one or two of the birds will be assigned swooping duty and will repeatedly dive to within 15 metres of their target before veering off to their right (your left). This noisy game of "Stilt" will apparently go on until the intruders withdraw. If you have never seen "The Birds", Larry can arrange this torment for you. Bring your own film crew. This may also help us identify the large, lone duck-like resident Larry guesses is a garganey, shelduck, widgeon, black-necked grebe, red-wattled lapwing, or turnstone. More positive identifications of common mynas (at their nest holes) and a ringed plover were made on this visit.

Driving around the site seeking alternative viewpoints, Larry came across what would appear to be the source of the "rocks" on which the stilts perch. If you have never seen a massive tyre dump and

pondered the meaning of (and opportunities presented by) its location next to housing, businesses, schools, institutions of higher learning, and flamingos, Larry can



arrange for this as well.
Flamingo territory

Indeed, in autumn 2002, Larry plans to organize a DNHG fieldtrip to observe the birds of Sharjah's University City and environs. So if you need a set of tyres (or even several sets, no matter the size!), watch this space for details and make plans to join him. *Report by Larry Woods*

A Day Digging Dhubs

Those who attended Dr. Ted Papenfuss's lecture, may recall that the recent discovery of a new species of spiny-tailed agama (dhub) was mentioned. The characteristics of the new species were reported in *Gazelle* some months ago. Since Ted has collected dhubs from places as far apart as Al Ain, Djibouti, Iran, Oman and Somaliland, he was naturally interested to acquire a couple of the new species as well to complete the DNA sequences that will tell him about the origins of the various populations. I had managed to get the collecting permit from ERWDA, later complemented with a CITES certificate allowing the transport of the animals that are on CITES list II.

I mobilised some labour and we set off to the plain across from the Sharjah Desert Park one morning at 5 am. We had surveyed the site a few weeks earlier, and found that there were 18 active burrows in a 1000 x 500m area - the Sharjah dhubs are obviously weather-

ing the persistent drought better than the dhubs that Peter Cunningham has been studying. His group of dhubs has almost completely succumbed to the lack of food, resulting from the drought. We had been lucky to find one burrow of a baby dhub, while another burrow was also relatively small. Even so, it was hard work digging up the animals.

Ted had brought a slender fishing pole, which he inserted into the burrow's entrance poking around to see which direction it was going. The diggers then started their work. The fishing rod enabled them to keep track, because as soon as the sand started caving in, it was hard to see which way the hole was. It turned out that the burrow *spiraled* down at quite a steep angle! When the pit was almost a metre deep, another poke with the rod met some pliant resistance, which turned out to be a 12 cm long dhub. It was very warm to the touch and light in colour, which indicated that it must have been on the surface enjoying the rising sun as we arrived.

The next burrow was larger and the pit was close to 180cm deep when the burrow leveled out and a 35 cm large dhub was found sitting among the rubble of his home. Both dhubs are now in a terrarium at my house, waiting for their trip to the USA. Only one will be used for the DNA testing, while the other will join last trip's *Lacerta jayakari* in the teaching collection of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology in Berkeley. *Thanks for this report to Marijcke Jongbloed*

—SHELL—
—REPORT?—



Please send your shell reports to Sandy Fowler



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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.

End of Season Get-together

Our last event for the 2001-2002 year was our get-together held at the Dubai Country Club on 13 June. As always, it was a very enjoyable and successful evening. Tess Kazim and Mike Lorrigan set the quiz, and Rosemary Laila's table won. The photographic competition drew an array of interesting photographs and the prize-winners were:

1. Jen Robinson - Two Camels
2. Marijke Jongbloed - Ficus Roots in the Musandam
3. Ragnar Frost - Flamingo over the Empty Quarter

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

Le Meridien Dubai

Weekend for two in deluxe room

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Two dinners for two

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Crowne Plaza Hotel

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Dubai Country Club

Dinner for two

Dusit Dubai

Dinner for two

Emirates Towers Hotel

Dinner for two

Café Habitat

Lunch for four

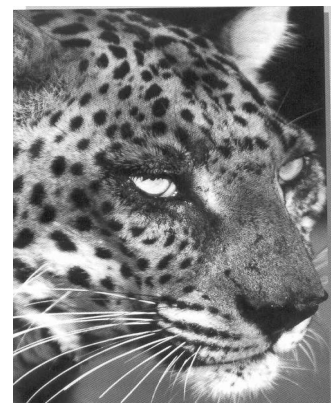
Marijke Jongbloed

Original signed print by Spencer Hodge of Arabian Leopard

Changing of the Guard at Emirates Natural History Group Abu Dhabi

Steve James, who has been Chairman or Vice Chairman of the Emirates Natural History Group in Abu Dhabi for most of the past decade, as well as a trip leader extraordinaire, is stepping down from the ENHG Committee in order to be able to devote more time to his doctoral studies. Many DNHG members will remember Steve as a speaker, and others will know him as one of the UAE's pre-eminent birdwatchers. When he arrived in the UAE, Steve could claim that he had visited about one-third of the world's countries and seen one-third of its birds. Now he says he's at about half and half. At Steve's initiative the ENHG has sponsored selected smaller scientific research and conservation projects in the UAE and the surrounding region.

Replacing Steve as ENHG Chairman will be Simon Aspinall, another well known UAE naturalist. Simon began his career in the UAE as a researcher for the National Avian Research Centre, with the enviable responsibility of studying - full time -- the birds of the UAE. This has made Simon one of the most well traveled and knowledgeable observers, and he has shared that knowledge in several publications, including his *Status and Conservation of Breeding Birds of the UAE*.



Thank you!



Tales and Legends of the Gulf

So many of our members were fascinated by Saleh al Halyan's presentation at our June Members' Night, that we asked Saleh for his text. Here it is:

I first grew up in Kuwait till age 10 when it was time for my father to come back home. Many locals had to travel, from the late forties up to the mid-sixties, to neighboring countries looking for jobs to make a living. The UAE today is very different from the time when I was a kid growing up in a very small community with a total population of about 180,200 of which 114,400 locals and 65,800 expatriates (a 64 to 36 %) in 1968. In those days life was very simple. If you wanted to go someplace you had to walk. You didn't have too many cars, TVs, ACs and many of these modern things that we enjoy today. People had a lot of time on their hand, so socializing was one way to spend it and have something to do. Very few locals had a formal school education, and you usually believed what you heard from others. Homes were built beside each other, so close that you could hear your neighbors' conversations all day long and into the night. Not many houses had electricity so there generally was silence to the exception of human voices. No machinery roaring, no equipment humming, at night especially, the silence made you hear things and the dark even see things too. At night people got together. The children would form a ring, in an open area, sitting on the sand and singing, playing or telling stories. Adults would gather in the open area in front of one of the houses drinking tea and coffee and having long conversations. Most of the conversations were about day-to-day events, the latest news from a traveler who just arrived from another country, poetry - and most people would memorize many poems-, and also sharing old stories and legends.

These old stories and legends came to this part of the world from Africa through Oman and from Iran and neighboring countries. Cinderella for example has a local equivalent story which is "Bint Al Samak", the daughter of the fisherman. My grandmother (God rest her soul) when we lived in Kuwait loved to tell me about some of these stories like the one of the "Sabea", the Lion who had to follow a knight from one area to another and which had an interesting dialogue between the two. These are the only stories that I heard from her then, because Al Ahmadi the oil company city we were living at was so modern with its cinema, park, zoo, two clubs, public library, sport stadium, schools, TVs and many other things that we were always very busy doing many things outside the house.

When we moved to the UAE we found a situation as I described before where social life was the main activity. There and then I started to hear too many stories. Adults and kids experienced pleasure mixed with fear in telling stories that they heard from their parents, grand parents and from others. The stories were so scary sometimes especially late at night that you needed someone to walk you home. People in general used to believe these stories and their figures like genies or spirits were true. Some still will swear that it is true and really exists. Some stories were the creation of the adults when they wanted a better control on their rascal kids,

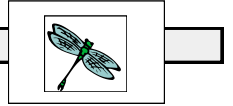
Humar Al Gallah , the "donkey of the afternoon" would appear to us kids if we didn't sleep after lunch and sneaked outside to play. We used to get scared but kept sneaking out anyway and... never saw the donkey!

Saba Daryah, the "Father of the Sea" in Parsi, is another scary character, a hugely built genie living in the sea. who appears to the fishermen and pearl divers while

they are asleep, between the beginning of the evening and dawn and raises havoc by breaking things and snatching sailors to the water to eat them. Most ships kept two guards watching over the ship and if Saba Daryah appeared they had to say "Saw and axe" and the genie would go back into the water. People swear they have seen Saba Daryah in old Sharjah by the old souq, coming out of the sea in the middle of the night and walking between the houses dragging big noisy chains behind him before going back to the water.

Al Rulla tree in Sharjah used to be the center of all activities in the emirate. Eid celebrations took place under that tree and were so famous that people used to travel from other emirates to enjoy the festivities. The famous Sharjah horse race was the main event until a tragic accident put an end to it. Rumors said that genies live at the top of the tree. My mother told me that when she was a little girl she was coming back home one night walking with her friend and they passed underneath Al Rulla tree. My mother's friend was speaking loudly so my mother asked her to keep it down but her friend Fatimah answered "So what, I am not afraid" and the moment she finished her sentence they heard a voice from the tree saying "Fatoom (which is a nickname for "Fatimah") you are not afraid? Stop a minute!" My mother and her friend started to run but at that moment, someone came down the tree and chased them up to the house. To this day my mother would tell you the story as it had just happened yesterday.

Menwer meaning "Lighted" was another genie which always appeared at night as a light of some kind in the far distance. It could be a lighted ship or a fire in front of a tent or a house far away. It got you disoriented and you lost your sense of direction to end up far away from your destination. It would appear to you if you were tired of course so you had to stop



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and make a little prayer to make it disappear.

Um Alduwais is another genie, a beautiful lady which personally I believe to be the creation of women of that time. Um Alduwais appeared to men at night and was extremely beautiful, smelling very good and wearing a lot of jewels. She seduced men and took them away from their home to have her way with them. The problem was that this genie has one leg made of a saw and the other of an axe. So guys would die... unless they were clever enough and carry hidden in their pockets either salt or ash to throw in the genie's eyes, take the jewels and run intact. As a result, men in those days were very scared of very beautiful women.

Another scary genie was **Khattaf Raffay** who appeared as a very

big sail, which ran over and collided with other ships causing destruction and sinking them. Sailors said they witnessed the Khattaf Raffay splitting ships in two and sailors drowning. In the old days ships sometimes sailed in-groups especially for pearl diving or fishing.

Most of the above mentioned stories were created either to entertain, to scare somebody or to explain unknown phenomena. A famous place for genies and their stories still now is Oman, especially places like Al Jabal Al Akhder, Nezwa and Bahia. My great auntie had many visitors from Oman in the old days, I used to serve them when they visited and I heard them talk. Some Omani genie they say had the ability to fly at night from Dubai to Al Satneh in Oman and come back the same night.

In the UAE now the stories of genies are something of the past and the young generation has no idea about that heritage and history. These old days had a very special flavor when simple people were living so close together like almost one family.

Our thanks to Saleh al Halyan for these wonderful stories.



Dubai Natural History Group Programme

Lectures at Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management (see map p.7), 7.30 for 8.00pm

Sept 15 Mimicry in Insects – Dr. Brigitte Howarth

Oct 6 Recent Discoveries in Archeology in the Al Ain Region - Ancient Irrigation
Systems – Dr. Waleed Yassin al Tikriti

Nov 3 Herbal Medicine – Dr. Graham Pinn

Field Trips (DNHG members only, please).

Watch this space! Some reasonable bets so far are:

Sept 27 Birding with Gary Feulner

Late Oct Qatar

Nov 22 Wadi Bih with Peter van Amsterdam and Anne Millen