

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Tourist Season....

A lone sacred ibis was observed recently by **Jan Denning** at the Emirates Golf Club (wadi course), adding to the already colourful bird population there.



Threskiornis aethiopica

Not only has the bird claimed residence of a particular patch for grazing, but has befriended a curlew which now keeps it constant company. **David Snelling** passed on the information that the sacred ibis, although a vagrant, has a feral population in Safa Park - possibly escapees from Dubai Zoo. I do not know where our golfing birdie comes from but it is a fine specimen with its distinctive markings, and seems quite unworried by golfers passing nearby. Jan writes,

"As the bird is always seen in close proximity to the ladies tee box, perhaps that is my clue to its gender". **Marijcke Jongbloed** adds that the sacred ibis originates from Iraq, and might visit here. She adds that there is a large resident population free-flying in Al Ain zoo. They escaped during a storm but had nowhere to



go so they just stayed.
Thanks to Terry Vaughan for the photographs.

Jean Allan is losing the battle with a small lateral-thinking rodent with a very long tail. A trail of biscuit pieces designed to lead him out the door were carefully and rapidly collected and stowed away behind a cabinet, and there was nothing to suggest that the miscreant went out the door at all.

DNHG Membership Renewal

The DNHG membership year begins in September, so renewal is overdue. Membership remains a bargain at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dhs. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at meetings (see Membership Secretaries Lena Linton and Anin Radhakrishna) or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account no. 173746 and posted to us at PO Box 29561, Dubai. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.) Membership is valid from September 2002 to September 2003. Members who have not renewed for the current year will not receive newsletters.

DNHG membership entitles you to participate in field trips and helps pay for our lecture hall, publication and distribution of *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:

Christine Namour
Jan Denning & Terry Vaughn
Gary Feulner
Marijcke Jongbloed
Jackie Maguire & Liz Darracot
Mohammed Arfan Asif
Ian Holt
John Fox



Field Trips etc ...

Off and running!

Shelling with Sandy Fowler January 3, 2003

Sandy will lead a day trip to one (or maybe more) of his favourite shelling beaches. Contact him for further details at shellman@37.com or ph/fax 04 – 344 2243

Jebel Sumayni Hike Friday, Jan. 17

Gary Feulner will lead a full-day mountain hike to the plateau summit of Jebel Sumayni, along the mountain front east of Shuwaib. Suitable for experienced and fit hikers. Overall ascent will be 700m (2500 ft). Must descend, too. Route is scenic but no trails and ground is often rough and uneven. Rare plants, odd rocks. Total walking distance 10-12 km, anticipated total walking time 8-9 hours. Bring boots or sturdy shoes, minimum 3 litres water (plus a 4th in car), lunch, hat, sun cream, camera, binoculars, etc. 4WD necessary. Leave Dubai 6 am (days are short). Est'd return c. 7:30 pm. Max. 10 people. For further information, sign-up and logistics, call Gary (after Christmas) at 330-3600 x 630 (office) or 306-5570 (home).

Hajar Mountain Fossilizing, Camp & Wadi Walk January 23 & 24

Mike Lorrigan and Richard Dennis will be leading a weekend trip on the above dates. It will involve a visit to a fossil site, 'Gastropod Gulch', for an hour or so on Thursday afternoon, followed by a drive of about 45 minutes, with one stop on route, to view some interesting formations, then to an overnight camp on top of a wadi. The following morning the group will explore the wadi in a walk of about 5-6 hours duration. Those who prefer a shorter walk can be accommodated. It is not a particularly difficult walk, but a reasonable level of fitness is required. Proper walking boots, small torch, sunhat,

suncream, plus minimum 3-4 litres of water per person required. Departing Dubai around 12 noon Thursday 23, returning to Dubai between 6-7 p.m. Friday evening. Waterproof tops recommended in case of unexpected rain (which has happened on more than one occasion in the mountains!). Places limited to maximum ten vehicles - 4WD required. For further details e-mail me at oxymoron@emirates.net.ae or telephone/fax on 3352791.

Saluki Breeding Centre and Falcon Hospital Thursday, February 6

David Snelling proposes to lead another trip here, after the outstanding success of the last. Details not available yet, but expressions of interest can be emailed to David at david.snelling@emirates.com

Bat Tombs, Jebel Shams and Rim Walk, Oman February 20 & 21

Peter van Amsterdam and Anne Millen will lead a weekend trip that will involve one night at a hotel and one camping (or two camping if you're tough). We will spend Wed. 19 at the Ibri Hotel, proceed early on Thursday to the Bat tombs, the beehive tombs, and up the jebel to a camping spot. On Friday, we will go further up and do the 'rim walk' which should be done once in every lifetime. It is a packed weekend, and you need to be of average fitness. (Last time the smokers all dropped out.) As time will be short, you need to have plenty of picnic food and of course, loads of water. More details in the Jan. issue.

Edge of the Empty Quarter, Oman March 13 & 14

Peter van Amsterdam and Anne Millen will lead a trip through the gravel desert on the edge of the Rub' al Khali. We will camp overnight. Details not set as yet.

Inter-Emirates Weekend 20 & 21 March (proposed)

The date and details are yet to be confirmed, but this is always a very stimulating weekend. If you would like to lead/organise some event, please contact Val Chalmers at home on 04 – 349 4816

Qatar Late March

This trip is on the agenda, so keep one eye on this space.

Our Next Speaker

We are delighted to welcome, as our next speaker, a life-member and former chairman of the Dubai Natural History Group, Alan Dickson. He will be speaking to us on "Energy and the Environment".

Alan Dickson arrived in Dubai in 1979. He had been working in Pest Control in the UK for the previous two years, after completing a degree in zoology and a doctorate in "Insect Populations" at the Scottish Crops Research Institute. He started his own pest control company Ridapest in 1982 and another company in alternative energy equipment Solstice in 1993. In spite of the great potential of alternative energy use, the market has not been good, and Alan refers to it as an expensive hobby rather than a business!

Alan attended the very first DNHG meeting and became vice - chairman in 1986, and then chairman from 1987 till 1995.





Musandam Dhow Trip

The underwater delights of Fujairah's Snoopy Island, coupled with the bonus of not having to rise at the crack of dawn on Friday morning, proved too tempting for most dhow-trippers to resist. And so, for the majority of participants, the November day trip on Lamjed El-Kefi's dhow evolved into a very enjoyable weekend away.

After a brief sojourn at the Sandy Beach Motel, the group reconvened in Dibba Harbour and boarded the Al Marsa dhow, breakfasting on croissants and rolls as we sailed out into the Gulf of Oman. We proceeded up the coast, past the tiny Portuguese-built settlement of Haffah, accessible only by sea. At first sight the village appeared deserted, but a satellite-dish betrayed signs of habitation. The first wildlife to be spotted was a couple of regal-looking ospreys, perched atop rocky outcrops, surveying the waters below for their next meal. The hoped-for dolphins were, alas, rather elusive, but a shoal of batfish, dorsal fins protruding from the water, provided an interesting diversion, and the water was speckled with reddish-brown mushroom jellyfish.



Osprey

We anchored up at Limah and watched some turtles coming up for air before donning our masks and snorkels and having a swim ourselves. There was quite a lot of algae but fortunately it did not interfere too much with our views of the colourful array of fish below. After a very tasty kingfish curry and assorted salads for lunch, a

few energetic souls went kayaking round the island, while the more slothful amongst us lounged around on deck. Afternoon tea was accompanied by a sumptuous chocolate birthday cake for David.



Watching and waiting...

Dusk fell as we sailed back to Dibba, and after the sun slipped behind the mountains, the astronomers began looking skywards. The stars were not the only bright objects of interest on the return journey - phosphorescent plankton illuminated the boat's wake and flashed past in streaks of iridescent green. Suitably relaxed, we disembarked, and headed for the west coast. *Thanks to Jackie Maguire and Liz Darracot, and to Ian Holt for the photographs.*



Return to Harrah

Geoff ("Copper") Cosson organized a return visit to Harrah in mid-October, with Ian MacGregor along as engineering and architectural consultant and Gary Feulner along to encourage perspiration. This area near Wadi Hilw was the climax of a DNHG archeology field trip earlier in the year.

After starting the day with an inspection of the new tunnel entrance north of Hilw, the trio ascended to a traditional watchtower for an overview of the area. This revealed more extensive sites of traditional settlement than previously realized, including (apparently) several generations of architectural styles. One style, not otherwise common in this area, consists of very thick-walled dwellings with a low door built into the front wall. In several instances, beside the "doorway" was a large flat stone that could have served to cover the entrance. Many foundations contained a built-in fireplace within.

Sadly, parts of these clustered sites have already been lost to a combination of the new highway and access roads for the installation of high voltage power lines. It is unfortunate that, apart from the roads and towers, these processes seem to result in a great deal of "collateral damage" to the environment in the form of visual scarring by tracks, quarrying, etc., on the hillsides, which mars the otherwise very attractive mountain scenery.

Several ridgetop sites contained evidence of copper ore in a white (quartz or feldspar?) matrix*, and one stone framework was possibly an abandoned and filled mineshaft. At the main copper ore site, a low, square stone platform had been partially dismantled since the earlier DNHG visit, disclosing an interior chamber of unknown purpose. Nearby, Geoff found an excellent hand specimen of sulfur compounds. In the area of greatest copper slag accumulation, double-indented anvil stones used for milling the ore were abundant, but (as before) convincing hammer stones were much harder to find. *Report by Gary Feulner*

*Gary has since added, "I have at last done the hardness test on the white matrix, and my pocketknife lost. So it's quartz."



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.

Robber in the Bushes

During the month of November, Jebel Ali was abuzz with activity. Christine Namour's two children, Noel and Romey, discovered a large hive of Indian Dwarf Honeybees in the Bougainvillea bushes in their front yard. At first glance, the hive looked like a black striped Gordon's Wildcat sitting amongst the branches. Because of the docile nature of this particular bee species, they were able to observe them in close proximity while the bees busily tended their honeycomb.

The Namours were not the only ones interested in the bees' activities. One day, during her daily bee observation, Christine noticed something peculiar on a branch near the hive which resembled a giant black bug. Curious, she went to her kitchen and retrieved a container in which to collect the specimen. She reached between the branches and gently tapped the creature with a long handled spoon trying to dislodge it from its perch. Immediately the creature reacted by pulsing up and down on its legs while emitting a squeaking noise. She then saw that the creature was, not one but



two, Death's Head Hawk Moths.
Acherontia atropos.

Why were they so close to the hive? Was it coincidence? Were they using the bees as protection? Were they eating the honey? How did they locate the hive so well hidden in the branches?

Unsure of the answers to these questions, Christine researched the possible relationship between the Death's Head Hawk Moth and the bees. She discovered that unlike most hawk moths, the Death's Head Hawk Moth has a short proboscis and cannot get nectar from deep-throated flowers. Instead the moth feeds on honey from beehives and tree sap. Because of this, in some parts of the world, the Death's Head Hawk Moth is known as the Bee Robber.

The squeaking noise is used to pacify and control the bees while robbing them of their honey and is made by the moth forcing air out of its proboscis. More than likely, the moths locate the hives by smelling the bees' pheromones.
Report by Christine Namour



Through the Lens....

Bonelli's eagle

There was no way I could agree with my friend just to drop anchor while the Bonelli's Eagle was perched majestically above a mini-hill overlooking the resplendent nature canvas of Khor Al Baidah in Umm Al Quwain. It was a dot in my viewfinder. After trekking a good distance the sand-hill was conquered, as was the accompanying shot of the bird overlooking the vast blue expanse of the Khor. It turned back to give me two exposures before it glided to the mangrove territory below.

Birds in flight present grace and beauty. Motor-drives, proper gadgetry and exposure parameters



along with fast reflexes enables one to arrest action.

Black winged stilts

Now the picture of the **Black Winged Stilts** in flight was not shot on continuous mode exposure as would be guessed. The result did surprise me with its beautiful pattern and composition. What would surprise many of my DNHG friends more is that this shot was taken during our trip to Wimpey Pits, field trip led by David Bradford on Sept. 27, 2002 and all of them saw this scene right in front of them ! Standing alongside Gary Fuelner, I had exposed this one-frame-shot which showed three different wing positions of the stilts in flight. No doubt luck. But believe me, one has to peer



through the viewfinder constantly to catch this luck.

Seagulls and grey heron

This picture of the **Seagulls** and **Grey Heron** take-off was predetermined. It was taken from a stationary car with a bean bag on the window ledge. Obviously birds do not fly towards you or angle to the direction closer to your position when they are disturbed. The flock here took-off due to an approaching car from the opposite direction



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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.

and to my advantage !

Nature photography field notes by Arfan Asif

Fossiling at Jebel Buhays

A group of about 25 explorers climbed the peak of Jebel Buhays on the morning of November 8 to observe geological bedding, collect fossils, and photograph the fossilized fauna *in situ* contexts. Jebel Buhays has a fairly diverse marine fauna of the mid Cretaceous period (ca. 100 million years ago), which has been surveyed by members of the DNHG in earlier years. A road was constructed by the power company about 3 years ago and the amount of collecting has increased dramatically. Only specimens already eroded out of the bedrock were collected and were identified at the bottom of the jebel at the conclusion of the outing.

Fortunately, the specimens in their original positions still remain and can be readily seen vis a vis other fauna in their last deposition. The locality is certainly worthy of conservation. To this end, the field trip was conducted with the understanding that fossils that are especially well preserved or that may be novel were better being identified by an expert, and possibly donated for study, rather than deposited in a shoebox at the back of a closet. The excursion was a fine team effort --with special thanks to Pradeep Radhakrishna, for publicizing and organizing the trip, Valerie Chalmers for identifying specimens during and after the collecting, and Gary Feulner, for interpreting the geomorphology.

The echinodermata are to be sent by Valerie to a colleague at the British Museum of Natural History for identification. One coiled ammonite approximately 40cm in radius was donated by Jack Hicks of AUS to the Sharjah Museum of Natural History. And one ammonoid-looking specimen may be an uncoiled, cone-shaped cephalopod. If so, this apparently is a

heretofore unrecorded species in the mountain range containing Jebel Buhays.

In geomorphology, Jebel Buhays site clearly shows the transition from greenish-black bedrock (ophiolite), which was once ocean floor pushed into ridge-like crust, to coarse conglomerates formed when the sea first encroached on the bedrock, to finer grained sediments (mostly calcareous sandstones) deposited in a shallow coastal sea. It is the latter sediments in which the fossils are preserved. In the immediate area of our search, fossil bearing strata tended to be best exposed near the base of the sandstone unit, but these shallow water sediments are generally fossiliferous and fossils can be expected throughout the area.

The paleoecology was surely one of a shallow sea, probably a part of the much discussed Tethys Sea (in today's landforms the sea stretched from the Himalyas to Central America). The jebel is a particularly productive locality for echinoids, rudists, gastropods, corals, sponges, what I am identifying as clumps of algae and occasionally ammonites. The extant fauna, along with the lack of vertebrate remains except for an occasional fish tooth, suggest a warm shallow sea sheltered by a reef. Reefs are simply defined as masses of rock lying near the water surface which obstruct currents as barriers. While we usually think of reefs as constructed of coral, the tropical reef communities were also made of sponges, algae, snails and fish, as anyone who has snorkled off Khor Fakkan would readily recognize. Because of the crushing motion of waves against the reef, many of the bottom-dwelling molluscs secrete calcium to create a strong outer skeleton. This is also true of the sea worms, which were identified with calcified tubes. Together, the fossil bearing stratum may have represented a carbonate platform about 4 meters deep.



The site is particularly noteworthy for the abundant and generally well preserved rudists. Rudists are bivalve molluscs which look like large ice-cream cones with a small flat oval trap door on top. The upper rim of the cone has teeth and sockets for the trap door lid. The cone attached on a hard surface on the sea floor; often one finds rudists in colonies of as many as several dozen specimens, which probably served to brace one another. When cross-sectioned, the cone is divided into a fairly sizable circular central cavity for the main body, plus a number of vertical cavities and canals. Several specimens at Jebel Buhays protrude 30-50 cm, out of an undercut sandstone cliff face and are almost completely exposed so as to make rather spectacular viewing.

Report by Professor John Fox

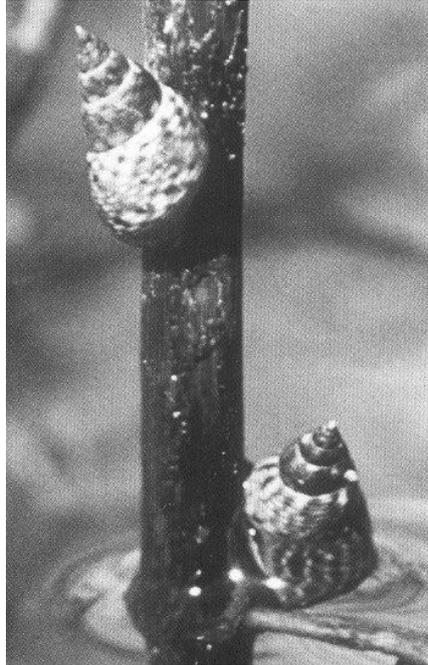
Mangrove Tree Snails Reach Dubai Creek

I was recently "grounded" for a weekend by work (not tragic while the weather was still hot), but there are always a few small natural history projects on my agenda that can be fitted in here and there. One was to determine whether the mangroves at the head of Dubai Creek (Ras al-Khor) have yet been colonized by the mangrove tree snail.

The mangroves at Ras al-Khor are now somewhat more than a decade old, having been planted as seedlings by decision of the Government of Dubai. On a couple of occasions over the years, DNHG members have been updated by speaker Kevin Hyland on efforts to persuade flamingos to breed in the area.

The local mangrove tree snail, *Littoraria intermedia*, is found in Arabian Gulf mangrove forests from Ras al-Khaimah to Abu Dhabi, and indeed around the Indian Ocean as well. As mangrove tree snails go, ours is not much of a climber, being found almost al-

ways within half a meter of the high tide mark. A number of its Indo-Pacific relatives climb (and live) several meters up into the canopy. *L. intermedia* reproduces by releasing pelagic (sea-going) larvae which ensure wide dispersal. I wondered, had these larvae



yet made it up Dubai Creek to the "new" mangroves there?

(Photograph from Mary Beardwood's excellent book, *The Children's Encyclopaedia of Arabia*, 2001, p.116)

Ras al-Khor is now a wildlife protection area and access is restricted, whether by vehicle or on foot. However, the mangroves have prospered and now stretch intermittently along the shoreline, downstream to the floating barrier across the khor above the Al-Jadaf shipyards. In order to avoid the flamingo feeding area (and to avoid being escorted out), I visited the farthest mangroves, beyond the "Restricted Area" signs. I knew from experience that the mangrove tree snail is most abundant on the forest edges in any case, and can be found even on new, small mangrove shrubs.

All of the mangroves appeared to be *Avicennia marina*, the only species found naturally in the Arabian Gulf today, but the individual

shrubs were exceptionally lush and thick and full of erect green shoots that I have not seen before in the UAE's native mangrove forests. I examined a number of large and small shrubs without finding any tree snails. Then, within a "clearing" in a round shrub almost my height, I found more than a dozen large tree snails in the lower branches, all very close to the water line. I examined a number of additional shrubs and found more tree snails, almost all relatively large (>1.7 cm) but never more than a few per shrub. All of the snails I saw were speckled brown in color (the norm), without any of the orange morphs occasionally seen elsewhere (impressionistically, about 1 in 20 or 25 snails).

It seems, in any case, that the tree snail larvae are able to make it up Dubai Creek, past dhows and abras and jet skis and shipyards. I wonder whether there is any reason for concern at the dearth of juveniles, but my inspection was really too limited to generalize.

Report by Gary Feulner

Tiger Beetles

Tiger beetles (Cicindelids) are related to ground beetles, including the bombardier beetles, domino beetle and sabre-toothed beetles. Tiger beetles are mostly predatory and have large eyes and large, paired, curved, toothed jaws. There are some 2,000 species worldwide, mostly in the tropics. The Arabian tiger beetle fauna of some 40 species is impoverished when compared to, say India (250 spp.) or North America (111 spp.).

The UAE has at least 9 species. Most of the UAE species are marked by distinctive spots or stripes, which makes identification relatively easy. Those recognized to date have been reported in two papers by Jurgen Wiesner (1993 and 1996, in German, but you can figure it out), which cover primarily coastal species, and an article in *Tribulus* 5.2 (1995) by Professor



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Michael Gillett of UAE University, describing the tiger beetles found in the Al-Ain area. Oman species were covered by Cassola & Rihane (1996). Copies of all of these papers (including color plates) are in the DNHG Library, at the Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management, courtesy of Mike Gillett.

In the UAE, many tiger beetles join mad dogs and Englishmen among those who go out in the midday sun. The diurnal (daytime) species frequent damp ground along the shoreline of water bodies. As many as three species can sometimes be found together foraging vigorously alongside coastal khors (in ascending size order, *Hypaetha copulata emiratensis*, *Lophyridia aulica*, and *Hypaetha schmidtii*), saline ponds inland (*Lophyridia (Lophyridia) histrio* and *Lophyridia aulica*), or wadi pools (*Lophyridia (Lophyridia) histrio*, *Lo-*

phyridia fischeri elongatosignata and *Lophyridia diania*). It is not apparent what they are feeding on under these conditions, since little if any other macroscopic life is usually seen, and their large jaws seem unnecessary.

Not all tiger beetles are diurnal, however. The largest UAE species is the iridescent green *Mega-cephala euphratica*, a nocturnal species, widespread but localised, that lives on flat saline ground and may be a scavenger. William Pardoe, brother of the DNHG's Chief Engineer, James, collected a live specimen along the Arabian Gulf coast, and was kind enough to show it off at the Inter-Emirates Weekend held in Al-Ain last year.

Mike Gillett mentions that there are many excellent websites on tiger beetles, particularly for the North American fauna. *Report by Gary Feulner*

DNHG Library Opens

The DNHG library collection is now housed at the library of the Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management. Beginning in the new year, normal library hours will be from 9am to 7pm, but on monthly DNHG lecture nights the library will be open until shortly before lecture time. Members are invited to have a look.

At the moment, our collection of natural history books is fully catalogued, but our collection of individual papers and periodicals remains a work in progress. The DNHG collection is available on a reference basis, i.e., on premises. Except on meeting nights, members should be prepared to show their DNHG membership card for library access.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

January 12 - Alan Dickson on 'Energy and the Environment'.

February 2 - TBA

February 23 – Andrew Spalton on Arabian Leopards in Dhofar. (Note that this is an extra meeting)

March 2 – Marijcke Jongbloed's valedictory talk and AGM.

April/May - David Mallet on Tiger Conservation in India / Dennis Russell.

Field Trips (DNHG members only, please).

Friday 3rd January – Shelling trip with Sandy Fowler

Friday 17th January – Mountain/uphill trip with Gary Feulner

Thursday/Friday 23rd/24th January – Fossil/Wadi trip with Mike Lorrigan

Thursday 6th February – Saluki Breeding Centre and Falcon Hospital visit organised by David Snelling

Thursday/Friday 20th/21st February – Trip to Bat Tombs, Jebel Shams and Rim Walk with Peter van A.

Thursday/Friday 13th/14th March – Empty Quarter Trip organised by Peter van Amsterdam and Anne.

Thursday/Friday 20th/21st March – proposed weekend for Inter-Emirates Weekend (to be confirmed later).