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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي



Confronting the panther in the Philippines. Photo supplied by Alan Dickson

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Contributors

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

Gary Feulner, Valerie Chalmers, Martina Fella, Alan Dickson, Anne Millen

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

Sept Speaker



Topic: Spring bird migration through Abu Dhabi
Speaker: Oscar Campbell
Date: September 15th 2013

Oscar Campbell, chairman of the Emirates Bird Records Committee, has spent years observing with delight spring migration through the UAE. This, concentrating mainly on observations made on the island of Abu Dhabi, will form the subject of his talk.

Oscar began birding from a bicycle on the shores of Lough Neagh, Northern Ireland at the age of 10. He still does this on his irregular trips back home but nowadays his local birding involves pounding the sites close to Abu Dhabi, logging the vagaries of spring and autumn migration, for which he has developed a particular fascination. He also greatly enjoys looking at waders, birding Oman (where he has had made numerous trips) and ruminating over large gulls, at any likely location from Killybegs to Mafraq.

Oscar became Chairman of the Emirates Bird Records Committee (EBRC) in September 2010, and is currently working closely with the Emirates Palace hotel, producing information on local birds for their website and carrying out weekly censuses in their grounds. He is also a regular contributor to several ornithological publications and enjoys taking pictures that sometimes appear on this website and elsewhere.

He grew up in Ireland but lived in Scotland and England after going to university. He moved to the UAE in August 2006. Currently, he teaches Chemistry at a school in Abu Dhabi and, when not doing that, spends much of his time studying birds anywhere and everywhere in the UAE and beyond.

Oscar in Madagascar, Photo Credits: <http://www.uaebirding.com/uaeguiding.html>

Field Clips

Life After DNHG: 'Extinct Cat' in the Philippines?

Former DNHG Chairman Alan Dickson wrote recently to bring us up to date and, incidentally, to demonstrate that he is still attentive and inquisitive about natural history. He spent 3 months last winter at his family properties in the Philippines, which he praises as not as cold as Northern Scotland and not as hot and humid as Dubai's summer.

Alan's property outside Manila is set in the mountains, surrounded by tropical forest with several lakes and streams (and overlooking a golf club). He has had many encounters with local wildlife on his early morning walks. "I enjoy my walks around the golf course, especially on a Tuesday when it is closed for maintenance and I can walk down fairways. At dusk the bats are active and just after dawn swifts swarm. As a result, despite inviting mosquito bites by sitting outside watching these, I had only had 2 bites during my 3 months."

One of the noteworthy animals Alan has come across is "the local Water Monitor Lizard that grows to over 2 meters. It thrives on the fish (Tilapia) in stocked lakes, but unfortunately it is itself a delicacy amongst Filipinos."

Alan also described another and more exhilarating encounter, less than 5 minutes' walk from his house: "A somewhat large cat (panther/leopard size) growled loudly at me in pounce position, with fangs and claws extended, only about 2 meters away. . . . *Cont. on next page...*

There was a nervous moment as I froze – any sudden movement on my part and I may have ended up as 'eviscerated toast'. I shall always remember the sight of those claws and fangs as it fixed me with the vertical pupils of its green eyes and with its pointed ears, all set in a jet black face and similar body with grey spots.

“At last it seemed to decide I was no direct threat to it and calmed down, taking a couple of steps towards me – at which point my genitalia (though covered in my shorts) were only about 50cm from those fangs I had been staring at a few seconds earlier.

“Then, seemingly more curious than aggressive, and possibly also deciding I was a bit on the large size to drag away for breakfast, the cat slinked off into dense undergrowth. But before disappearing it turned and looked at me and gave a medium loud roar – although no longer the aggressive loud growl it had given me a minute before.

“I went to a number of large bookstores in Philippines to try to find out more about local wildlife but none had anything very useful, at least in English. However, my 90+ year old father-in-law, who lived next to mountains almost all his life as a farmer, thought he knew exactly what I was talking about when I described it -- a "Moosan" or Bear Cat, the largest predator in the Philippines. In his younger years he used to hunt them as they came down from mountains at night and preyed on his chickens; the pelts could be sold. But he had not heard of any in over 40 years.

“I followed up and learned these are smaller than what I encountered and avoid human contact, although they can be dangerous if cornered, injured or surprised. But in addition, they are supposedly now extinct on main island, having been hunted down, and now only exist in a remote nature reserve on Palawan.

“I had surprised this one and it more than surprised me! Although unharmed, it left me shaken and decidedly stirred. My adrenalin level hit a far higher peak than even the last time I drove down Sheikh Zayed Road.

“Anyway, the cat came to know me and I know it. And having seen large paw prints in mud in dry season at fringes of lake directly behind our house, it may have traveled through our garden many times at night.

“As time passed, I became convinced it was an escaped panther (a melanistic leopard) from a private zoo. The property developer was intending a zoo on the estate and had ostrich and a herd of deer but a typhoon in late December damaged the enclosures and they escaped. No panther was supposedly there but there are reports of security guards having seen a large black cat. This was consistent with reports that a reward had been offered at the golf clubhouse to anyone who sighted a large animal and could describe it and give its location. Most recently I heard that it had been recaptured.

“With hindsight, I am able to recall that it appeared to be in perfect condition and, despite its initial aggressive pose, it soon calmed and approached me to within arms length before sauntering off casually into the dense undergrowth. Hence I believe it had had previous human contact.”

Contributed by Alan Dickson



A Water Monitor, the second largest lizard to the Komodo Dragon; the Binturong (Moosan or Bear Cat), endemic to the Philippines;. Photos supplied by Alan Dickson

Field Clips

Patience is rewarded: Mystery objects are moth fecal pellets

It was years ago, in company with Angela and Stephen Manthorpe, that I first encountered the objects shown in the accompanying photo, in a wet wadi in the Hajar Mountains near Shawkah. They had a regular structure that looked a bit like miniature corncobs, and sometimes they broke transversely into slices. They were concentrated on damp ground at the margins of wadi pools, evidently as flotsam, especially under or adjacent to oleander shrubs, but they were not a match for the seeds or any other part of the oleander plant itself – or of any other local plants, as far as I could tell. Some were pale colored, others were darker. What were they? I could only store the information in the hope that someday I would find a clue, if not an answer.

Enlightenment came only recently, in the rather different environment of the hill country of Nepal. On a weekend walk, Narayan Karki's daughter, Anita, spotted the distinctive hairy caterpillar shown in the accompanying photo. Narayan proposed to raise the caterpillar to learn what moth species it would become. We took it home and kept it supplied with fresh, leafy foodplant, a common local species. After 10 days it began to pupate, making its cocoon from its own colorful hairs, which it first plucked and stuck, temporarily, to a bare vertical branch. An accident ultimately aborted successful metamorphosis, but along the way we had seen enough to answer my long-pending mystery . . .

A caterpillar's job is to bulk up – to eat as much as possible, as fast as possible, in preparation for metamorphosis. The Nepali caterpillar was no exception, and as it ate, it excreted the inedible fibrous material into neat dark fecal pellets that resembled . . . *little corncobs*, although somewhat smaller than those I had encountered in the UAE.

The UAE objects, then, must be the fecal pellets of a moth caterpillar. Their large size and their close association with oleander shrubs suggests that they are probably the droppings of the caterpillar of the Oleander Hawkmoth, *Daphnis nerii*, which can be found throughout much of the UAE, in wild environments as well as suburban gardens and municipal landscaping. Oleander is its preferred foodplant, and is where female moths lay their eggs.

That realization took me even further back, to information that I hadn't stored as well in memory. In about 2000, DNHG member Christine Namour had raised some Oleander Hawkmoth caterpillars that she collected in her backyard. She had permitted me to record the process (feeding, larval development, pupation and emergence) on film (yes, 2000 was pre-digital!). So I duly checked my photos of the distinctive caterpillars, raised in a shoebox home, and found, sure enough, that the mystery was indeed solved. The caterpillars were surrounded by dozens of carefully sculptured fecal pellets looking like little corncobs.

Contributed by Gary Feulner



Clockwise from top left: Mystery "corn-cobs" from a wet wadi near Shawkah; A distinctive, hairy Nepali caterpillar; Oleander Hawkmoth caterpillar, raised in a shoebox and surrounded by sculptured fecal pellets; Oleander Hawkmoth (*Daphnis nerii*), dressed as if in jungle camouflage.

Photo Credits: Gary Feulner

Sir Bu Nair Trip

This past Easter my family and I went sailing to Sir Bu Nair Island with a night stop at Moon Island where we came across several groups of bottlenose dolphins. Some of them were busy hunting and feeding and not really interested in coming close to the boat. Those who had already feasted on the many large schools of small sardines and mackerels came close to the boat to surf in the wake and to show off with acrobatic underwater maneuvers. We noticed several mothers with babies which is always especially nice to see.

When leaving Moon Island and setting sail towards Sir Bu Nair, we spotted a small hawksbill turtle floating on the water surface. The poor thing was covered in barnacles and was not able to swim properly any more. As we had already rescued several such turtles in the past years, we knew what to do. We quickly picked her up and put her in the boat's sink filled with freshwater. This is very important to rehydrate the turtle and most of all to kill all the saltwater creatures growing on her.

The following day the turtle was already much more active and we observed her feeding on some of the sea anemones that had grown on her back and that now, due to the fresh water exposure, had fallen off dead and floated in the sink. We then chopped some squid into very small pieces to feed her. It was so nice to watch her picking those up bit by bit. After another day, some of the larger barnacles fell off or got so loose that we carefully managed to clean the turtle completely. Near the shore of Sir Bu Nair we released her in a beautiful coral reef. She gracefully swam around the reef and immediately started picking small creatures from the corals. We observed her for a long time. The little turtle showed no fear of us, as if she had understood that we were no threat to her.

On Sir Bu Nair we had to look for shelter in the small harbor as the weather had turned really bad. Winds of close to 30 knots and high waves made it too dangerous for us to stay off-shore. The rough sea had washed a 13 meter long whale onto the shore near the harbor! The large animal must have been dead for some time as it had already started to decompose. The fat and oil draining from the whale created a hundreds meters long oily layer on the water and the smell of the rotting flesh was just indescribable. The whale was clearly visibly a male and belonging to the baleen (*Balaenopteridae*) group of whales. An exact specification of the species would probably only have been possible through genetic analysis. Out of the four baleen whale species that have been recorded in UAE waters, which are the Blue Whale (*Balaenoptera edeni*), the Bryde's whale (*Balaenoptera edeni*), the Fin whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*) and the Humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) the latter can be excluded for the identification of the whale carcass as it clearly did not show the Humpback whale's exceptionally long flippers. What might have led to the death of this large mammal remains a mystery as the carcass showed no obvious signs of a collision with a ship.

In the harbor of Sir Bu Nair we were able to observe the beautiful sooty gulls (*Larus hemprichii*) who have an important breeding colony on the island.

Cont. on next page...



This page (from top): A rescued hawksbill turtle recuperates in the sink; 13-metre whale carcass washed ashore; Sooty gulls.

Next Page: Moon Island.

Photo Credits: Martina Fella

Field Clips



After a few days of storm and even rain it was again safe enough to leave the harbor and set sail towards Dubai. To break up the long trip a little, we decided to spend another night at Moon Island. Shortly after we reached there at noon we made an amazing discovery. In full daylight a fully grown hawksbill turtle made her way onto the beach to look for a suitable nesting sight! The reptile left the water and crawled about 40 meters onto the beach where she seemed to look for a good spot to start digging.

Then some fishermen who must have spotted the animal from far away came speeding to the beach with their motorboat and tried to catch the poor turtle. Luckily the Island's security staff had noticed what was happening and interfered...but of course the turtle got scared and quickly disappeared again into the safe water.

What did the fishermen want to do with the turtle? Did they not know that this was a protected and highly endangered species? We never found out, but it was amazing to see that this species accepted artificial islands as 'safe' breeding grounds. Several older hawksbill turtle tracks and even eggshells proved that this was not the only attempt of the species to breed on the island.

Contributed by Martina Fella

Squirrels and Friends



DNHG Recorders

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Seashells, Birds and Mammals - Recorders needed!

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

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

Are You a Techie with Time?

The website sub-committee would like to find volunteers who can help with maintenance of the on-line newsletter, and to upload the wealth of information and photographs from past *Gazelles*. Full training will be given. Contact any Committee person - we will be very pleased to hear from you!

Squirrels and Friends

I was interested to read, in the June edition of *Gazelle*, about the Indian palm squirrel noticed by Michel de Martigny. A couple of similar squirrels are very common in Sri Lanka. There are, altogether, four species of diurnal squirrels and two nocturnal species which are flying squirrels. There are two 'giant' species, both described as Indian. Perhaps the four subspecies of palm squirrel (*Funambulus palmarum*) came too.

I am inclined to think Michel's is at least a close relation of the palm squirrels here. They are 'three-stripe' squirrels with bushy tails and a distinctive loud chirrup. When a dozen or so get going in my garden, the noise generated is surprising. They seem to be friends of the very common 'seven sisters', the yellow-beaked babblers (*Turdoides affinis taprobanus*), gregarious and garrulous 'little brown jobs' that delight me with a visit most afternoons and progress (north to south, or do I just imagine that, as people imagine they get around in sevens?) by hopping through the garden accompanied by several squirrels. My photographs of the two together never seem to come out well, perhaps because both squirrels and *T. affinis taprobanus* are well camouflaged and really quite people-shy. My guess is that the squirrels are looking for seeds and thereby disturb insects for the birds.

These birds, by the way, are equally as noisy as the squirrels, and occasionally I have heard what seemed to be a combined concert, an extraordinary din in which I can distinguish no single sound. But there they are, the birds fluffing and screeching and the squirrels flicking their tails with every shrill chirrup.

I would be interested to hear from Michel whether his 'chipmunks' resemble the Sri Lankan palm squirrels, and whether he has observed the chirruping and tail-flicking behaviors.

Contributed by Anne Millen



*Previous Page: Palm Squirrel. This Page: Yellow Beaked Babblers dustbathing.
Photo Credits: Anne Millen*

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

Sep 15 Oscar Campbell: Spring Bird Migration through Abu Dhabi

Field Trips (Members Only)

Details of future field trips will be announced/confirmed by e-mail circular.

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When possible, please contact committee members outside office hours

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Contributions

Do you have a field report, unusual finding, interesting news article, book review, amazing photograph, or community news to share?

If so, email your contributions to: gazelleeditor@gmail.com
(Arial 10 justified).

DNHG Membership

Membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. Membership is valid from Sep 2013 to Sep 2014. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to HSBC account no. 030100242001. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.)

Payment can also be made by cash deposit at a bank or ATM, using our IBAN number AE900200000030100242001. However, this process does not identify you as the payer. If you wish to pay by cash, please also scan and e-mail a copy of your payment confirmation to the Membership Secretary, so we know whose money we have received.

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*, our post office box, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects.