



GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي



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Common wonder gecko. Photo Credit: Ajmal Hasan

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Contributors

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

Gary Feulner, Binish Roobas,
Ajmal Hasan, Sonja Lavrencic

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



Kerala Photo Credit: Gary Feulner

October speaker

Topic: Mycenaean Pylos: a palace site in Bronze Age Greece

Speaker: Dr. Susanne Hofstra

Date: October 6th 2013

Dr. Susanne Hofstra will be our guest for October, delivering an illustrated talk on the Mycenaean Pylos, a site from Bronze Age Greece.

Dr Hofstra has been in the UAE since 2008. She is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History and Archaeology at the United Arab Emirates University in Al Ain. Previously she taught at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, Greece as well as at various universities and colleges in the USA. Her Ph.D is from the University of Texas at Austin.

Her training is in Mediterranean archaeology, with a speciality in Bronze Age Greek Mycenaean culture. Susanne's current work deals with artifacts from the Mycenaean site of Pylos in southern Greece.

Kerala Natural History Tour

30 Nov - 6 December 2013 (7 days, 6 nights, Sat-Fri)

DNHG member Binish Roobas will repeat this popular excursion to a sampling of Kerala's premier wildlife sites:

- ◆ Houseboating on Lake Vembanad and birdwatching at Kumarakom in the backwaters of the coastal plain.
- ◆ Birdwatching at Thettakad (featuring Ceylon Frogmouth & Black Baza) in wet deciduous forest of the rolling central midlands.
- ◆ Light trekking in the highlands of the renowned Western Ghats at Eravikulam National Park (home to the Nilgiri Tahr).
- ◆ Thorny shrub forest of Chinnar National Wildlife Sanctuary (where elephants, gaur and grizzled squirrel may be seen).
- ◆ Scenic waterfalls at Athirapally.
- ◆ and . . . a dedicated *shopping trip* in Cochin City (by popular demand!).

Binish took his degree in zoology and worked as a naturalist guide in Kerala before coming to the UAE. He continues to visit these areas regularly when he returns to Kerala privately.

Accommodation will be in unpretentious hotels and lodges. Travel will be by minivan. Estimated basic cost: AED 2500 (sharing) / AED 3250 (single room) including accommodation, meals, road transportation and entrance fees, but *excluding* airfare and Indian visa.

For more details and itinerary, contact Binish Roobas: johanruphus@hotmail.com.

Yala Natural Park and the South of Sri Lanka

The south of Sri Lanka is less known and less touristic than the crowded west coast. This is probably thanks to the relative remoteness of the South. Although distances are not that great, until recently the journey from the only Sri Lankan Airport in Colombo on narrow Sri Lankan roads took too long to make the journey feasible for a short visit.

After the defeat of Tamil Tigers (LTTE – Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam) in May 2009 the Sri Lankan government started to invest heavily in the infrastructure and promotion of tourism, especially on the south and east coasts of the island. The first proper highway was built, connecting Colombo and Galle on the South West coast as well as the second airport in Mattala, next to the biggest southern city, Hambantota.

Bearing the name of current president's family, Rajapaksa, the Mattala airport is nicknamed the Eco airport, thanks to the efforts to limit its impact on the environment. Apparently at least 15% of its energy needs will be derived from renewable sources (biomass, solar, wind). On top of the sustainability efforts, further socio-economic impact on the region is even more ambitious.

One of the main attractions of the South, and Sri Lanka in general, are the natural parks and reserves. Yala Natural Park is the biggest and the most popular. Natural Park and natural reserve combined, Yala is currently composed of five blocks (of which only two are open to visitors) covering 126,786 hectares.

The most famous Block 1 used to be a hunting reserve until 1938. Now Yala is famous for its abundant wildlife with one of the world's densest population of leopards, *Panthera PardusKotiya*, a Sri Lankan unique leopard subspecies.



Above: Crocodiles sunbathing. Below: Painted Stork, fishing. Photo Credit: Sonja Lavrencic

Around 25 are estimated to be roaming around Block 1 and the total population of Yala is estimated to be around 250 to 300 leopards. The sightings are of course not guaranteed, but seem to be quite common, especially during the dry period. During our half-day safari we managed to see two, sprawled on the branches in the distance, lazily digesting their lunch. They created quite a commotion in the vehicles on the nearby dirty tracks; however, the rules are very strict and visitors are not allowed to leave their vehicles and the vehicles are not allowed to leave the dusty park roads. This contributes to the fact that the animals are obviously not stressed, giving the opportunity to observe them in their natural habitat and daily routine.

Despite the strict rules occasional closer encounters with animals are possible, especially when animals are

Yala Natural Park and the South of Sri Lanka cont.d

“trespassing”. Leaving the park at the end of the day in a queue of vehicles we ran into a big male elephant blocking the road. He was not too impressed by the buzzing vehicles and didn’t show any intent to retreat into the bushes. Instead, he charged towards the vehicles that came too close and we all had to make a big loop off road to avoid him.

Apart from herds of wild elephants, we also had the opportunity to observe dozens of crocodiles over 5 meters long gathered at the banks of half-empty pond, sunbathing with their jaws wide open and plenty of wild water buffalos cooling in the water. We saw a remarkable variety of birds: painted stork fishing with their long beaks wide open, spoonbills, egrets and oriental darters. We even managed to spot the rare black-necked stork. There are about 215 bird species in the park, many of them migratory birds escaping the northern winter such as white winged black terns, curlews and pintails. There are plenty of local birds as well, like jungle fowl, hornbills and orioles.

Visits to the park are only possible as a safari with park vehicles and trackers. The trackers are usually quite knowledgeable and know the treks and animal habits in detail, as well as being excellent drivers negotiating potholed roads in chase of elusive leopards, herds of wild elephants, sloth bears, sambars, spotted deers, mongooses, jackals...

Contributed by Sonja Lavrencic

Upcoming Trip to Yala Natural Park, Sri Lanka

The DNHG will organize a trip to Yala Natural Park and some other sights of South Sri Lanka in the beginning of December.

Trip details are as follows:

Thursday, Nov 28: Departure from Dubai with Fly Dubai at 23.10 from Terminal 2.

Friday, Nov 29: Arrival to Mattala airport at 6.45 am. Transfer to Lake View Cottage. Visit to Tissamaharama Buddhist temple. Afternoon trip to the coast and visit to Kirinda temple. Evening bird watching tour on Tissa lake. Overnight in Lake View Cottage.

Saturday, Nov 30: Full day safari in Yala National Park. Overnight in tree houses.

Sunday, Dec 1: Trip to Ella. Stop at Buduruvagala, ancient Buddhist temple with 10th century rock carved statues. Stop at Ravana Falls. Overnight in Ella.

Monday, Dec 2: Ella sightseeing and hike to Little Adam’s Peak. Return to Tissa in the evening. Overnight in Lake View Cottage.



Wild buffalo cooling in the water. Photo Credit: Sonja Lavrencic

Tuesday, Dec 3: Early morning transfer to Mattala airport. Depart with Fly Dubai at 7.40 am. Arrival to Dubai at 11.25 am.

The group is limited to a maximum of 12 people due to limited lodging facilities.

Estimated cost of the trip per person:- 270 USD (food, lodging, transport and Yala entrance fee included – based on sharing double or triple room).

30 USD Sri Lankan visa (can be bought on line.) 1000 AED air ticket with Fly Dubai. Extras and tips are not included.

If interested please contact Sonja at lavson@gmail.com

Reptiles Update (July through September 2013)

I am extremely happy to finally tick off my most sought after reptile species in the wild on the Arabian peninsula – *Teratoscincus keyserlingii* (Common wonder gecko).

After numerous abortive trips since 2010, I finally found this beauty in the UAE desert (location withheld due to sensitivity) on July 20, 2013 after having searched for more than 4 hours in the dark along with another friend interested in documenting reptiles. Both of us considered it our good fortune, finding it just as we were headed back towards the highway after a long and extremely humid trek.

It was a nice big adult specimen that measured approximately 14 cm in length and had the most amazing body coloration that I have ever seen on any reptile species on Arabia. It lay motionless, seemingly relaxed as we took pictures of it. I guess it had not seen many humans (on foot at least) as it got onto my forearm while I was lying on the desert sand in front of it taking pictures and actually started licking the sweat off my forearms. It was quite an experience. Just as this was going on, I noticed a smaller gecko suddenly turn up out of nowhere. It looked distinctly *Pristurus*-like and as I moved my attention to this tiny critter, I began to realize it was not a *P. rupestris* (rock semaphore gecko) as this was not exactly the right habitat (sand dunes) and the markings on the body were so different.

Knowing I had some good documentary shots and passing them by Drew Gardner later, it was confirmed to be *Pristurus minimus* (Least semaphore gecko) which I had previously not documented. So you can imagine a wonderful July night was spent on the sands. Not surprisingly, I returned to the same location on July 25, 2013 and found another separate healthy wonder gecko specimen, again after hours of searching.



Common wonder gecko Photo Credit: Ajmal Hasan

The sad part of the above treks, however, was the effort I had to spend to find it. Previously, I have spent over 8 trips in the same location but never been successful in documenting this species. Even when we found it, they were lone individuals suggesting that their population density had immensely degraded (Drew Gardner and others had reported finding several

specimens on one trip in the same general locality a few years back). The area is being developed for another massive tourism project and that probably says it all! I believe the specimens I saw were from a very small population pocket that somehow manages to survive given the construction mayhem.



Above: *Pristurus minimus*. Below: Banded ground gecko. Photo Credit: Ajmal Hasan



On a trip to Wadi Shawka, Ras Al Khaimah on September 6, 2013, I found a banded ground gecko (*Bunopus spatularis hajarensis*) – another species that I have been looking for. It was found under a log of wood and initially I almost mistook it for *B. tuberculatus* (its cousin from the sands) but the coloration and patterns on its body made me realize it clearly was not!

With this find, my tally of UAE terrestrial reptiles has swelled up to 36 out of an estimated 54. I hope to find more species this year with my next immediate target species being *Pseudocerastes persicus* (Persian horned viper).

Contributed by Ajmal Hasan

Field Clips

Summer Surprises

Dubai isn't the only place for summer surprises! Below is a sampling of some out-of-the-ordinary natural history sightings from the past summer, courtesy of Binish Roobas:



1. (above left) The colorful, 'long-nosed' *Hypolixus nubilosus* is a small weevil, widespread in the foothills and gravel plains of the Northern Emirates, but its distinctive colors are not always well preserved in collected specimens.
2. (above right) The Racer Bug *Mirperus jaculus* (Family Alydidae) was seen in diverse wadi environments in September. It is among the many insects featured in *Insects of Eastern Arabia* by D.H. Walker and A.R. Pittaway, available online at <http://www.enhg.org/trib/>.
3. (below left) The alert, light brown perching bird in the photo looked uncomfortable in the summer heat and allowed close approach to the large Acacia where it took refuge along Wadi Madaq in mid-September. The jury is still out, but it is believed to be a juvenile female Red-Backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*. It wagged its tail regularly, up and down, a behavior not mentioned in any of three birdwatching guides for the region.
4. (below middle) The Arabian Cicada *Platyptera arabica* is more often heard than seen. It stops buzzing if approached too closely, and is not easy to find. In the UAE it is present into at least mid-September.
5. (below right) The Striated Heron *Butorides striata* is normally found along the coast or lagoons. The heavily striped juvenile in the photo, however, was spotted perched deep in a ghaf tree near the lake at Al-Ain's Green Mubazzarah, sheltering from the midday sun. Build it and they will come! Dabbling in a concrete channel under the tree, seemingly oblivious to the heat, were a half dozen domesticated geese, several of them showing likely input from the White-Fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*.



DNHG Recorders

Reptiles - Dr Reza Khan

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Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi

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off: 06-5583 003
email: lankefi@emirates.net.ae

Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

Geology - Gary Feulner

res: 306 5570

Insects – Gary Feulner

Fossils - Valerie Chalmers

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Plants – Valerie Chalmers

Archaeology—MaryAnne Pardoe

mobile: 050 724 2984
email: maryannepardoe@yahoo.co.uk

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!

Summer Departures

Among the DNHG's own summer migrants is Binish Roobas, who returned to his native Kerala in September.

Binish will repeat his popular Kerala natural history trip during National Day week 2013. He leaves behind a record of many contributions to the *Gazelle* (including some in this issue) as well as being a member of winning quiz teams and a photographic winner at our annual End-of-Season dinners.

Binish will also have two papers in the upcoming *Tribulus* on UAE mudskippers and the rare fringe-toed lizard *Acanthodactylus boskianus*.

He looks forward to spending time with his new baby girl but he expects to be back in the UAE before too long.



Binish Roobas in the field.

Library, Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi, (EAD)

Established in 1998, the Library holds an excellent collection of environmental resources. It caters to a wide community of researchers, scientists, environmentalists, faculty and students. It's the only environmental Library in the United Arab Emirates with over 15,000 resources in the English and Arabic languages. The primary focus of the collection is to have resources on various aspects of Environment and Wildlife.

A big collection of e-Books, e-Journals and Databases from Springer, ebrary and EBSCO is accessible within and outside the Library. The primary focus of the collection is to have resources on various aspects of Environment and Wildlife. The regional publications and EAD technical reports are the major attraction of the collection and provide baseline data for the researchers. The OPAC is accessible at <http://library.ead.ae>.

The Library is located in the first floor of Al Mamoura -1 on the Muroor Road, Abu Dhabi (opening hours 7.30am - 3.30pm, Sunday-Thursday). Contact info: email library@ead.ae or phone 02 6934633, 050-6613894.

Research Project: Request for Information

Declan O'Donovan writes: "I am writing in the hope that some of you might be able to help me with a research project I am conducting.

"As part of a PhD project, I am investigating the ecology and status of the Dhub or spiny-tailed lizard (*Uromastix lepteni*) in the Emirate of Dubai. I am looking for records of sightings and active burrows, previous research data which might be unpublished regarding their distribution, anecdotal information or general observations would also be most welcome. As a matter of urgency, I would like to find any burrows which might be in areas of renewed building development with a view to moving the animals to safer and more secure locations.

Anyone with any information they would like to share can contact me at: declan@shp.ae

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

Oct 06 Susanne Hofstra: Mycenaean Pylos: a palace site in Bronze Age Greece
 Nov 03 Professor Rob Whelan: Plant/Pollinator Relationships

Field Trips (Members Only)

15 Oct - 19 Oct Trip to Salalah, Oman
 28 Nov - 3 Nov 4 day trip to South of Sri Lanka including Yala National Park
 30 Nov - 6 Dec Kerala Natural History Tour

Further field trips, details or changes to trips will be announced/confirmed by email circular

DNHG COMMITTEE 2013

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 AE90020000030100242001. 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.