



GAZELLE

مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

Fast Reactions!

In a separate item in last month's *Gazelle*, we gave an account of a very interesting and productive Ramadan evening of lizard watching in the desert of inland Dubai.

But in fact one of the most entertaining performances of the evening was not by a lizard but by a lone **Cheesman's Gerbil** (*Gerbillus cheesmani*), a species that is often solitary. We came across one foraging in the open, and, although it initially fled some 5 meters back to a burrow in a sand hummock under desert grasses, it evidently wanted to go back out. This set in motion a long-running routine that was by turns comic (for us) and frustrating for all concerned.

We learned, in particular, that gerbils have very, very fast reactions. Binish had set up a camera on a tripod about 2 meters from the burrow entrance. Most of the time we could see the gerbil within the sloping burrow and it emerged at regular intervals (of less than a minute), despite our presence and despite our lights. At the burrow mouth, it



A flying gecko! Slevin's Dune Gecko reacts instantaneously to the camera's shutter and flash

would watch, sniff and then advance into the open. *Click!* At the sound of Binish's shutter in the desert silence, the gerbil would abruptly turn tail and flee into the burrow – so fast that his camera would only catch it "going away", even at a shutter speed of 1/300 second. This was repeated at least two dozen times, with neither side relenting – or learning – until the humans gave up and moved on.

We satisfied ourselves that it was the sound of the shutter, not the camera flash, that was causing the problem. Using a second camera without an audible click, we were able to take photos from about 3 meters, including flash photos with a pre-flash red-eye light. Our voices likewise did not seem to spook the gerbil.

One collateral virtue of this conundrum was that the "going away" photos actually helped to identify the gerbil in question. Only two gerbil species inhabit the desert hinterland of Dubai. The two are similar in appearance and many of their distinguishing features are difficult to see in the field, especially at night. Cheesman's Gerbil has more white markings, as shown in our photo. But in addi-

tion, the tufted tail is diagnostic. Cheesman's Gerbil has only a sparsely tufted tail tip, whereas the Baluchistan Gerbil (*Gerbillus nanus*), has a prominent tuft. So our disappointing photos actually helped to confirm that our subject was indeed a Cheesman's Gerbil.

Later in the evening there was also a reptile entrant in the "fast reactions" sweepstakes. On firmer sand and fine gravel we found a small *Stenodactylus* gecko which, from the habitat, we suspected to be different from what we had been seeing. Binish closed in stealthily for a tripod shot. The result, shown above, shows that this gecko, too, was able to react faster than the camera's shutter. We were able to identify it as **Slevin's Dune Gecko** (*Stenodactylus slevini*), but its ability to 'fly' is not mentioned in any of the available guides.

Contribution by Binish Roobas and Gary Feulner



Cheesman's Gerbil emerging from its burrow despite the presence of observers nearby

Inside this month

Shell-shock!
Redback Spiders
Whose Holes?
Chukar Partridges
Know your Marine Mammals

Contributors

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

Andrew Childs, Binish Roobas,
Johannes Els, Nick & Marilyn Olliff,
Ada Natoli and Gary Feulner

Announcements

New DNHG Recorders for Mammals and Seashells

We are pleased to welcome two new volunteers to serve as DNHG Recorders for Mammals and Seashells.

Lynsey Gedman will be our new Mammal Recorder. Originally from the UK, in recent years Lynsey has been engaged in wildlife documentary filmmaking in the UAE and Africa, where she is also a trained safari guide and wildlife specialist through the Field Guides of South Africa Institute.

Andrew Childs will be our new Seashell Recorder. He is originally from the UK but is a 14-year resident of Dubai. With his partner Vicky, he has amassed a seashell collection from the UAE and Oman of over 500 identified species - as well as a lot of on-the-job training in where and how to find and identify seashells. An account of one of Andrew's more difficult IDs appears on page 3 of this issue of *Gazelle*.

The DNHG Recorders are intended to be a resource for members as well as a clearinghouse for information about their respective areas of UAE natural history. They are generally not professional experts but interested and enthusiastic amateurs. Members are encouraged to contact the concerned DNHG Recorders with questions or information about their specialities.

Next Month's Speakers

DNHG are delighted to welcome Dr. Brigitte Howarth and Dr. Janine Tan who will be giving a talk titled:

'Have you seen the largest beetle in the wood?'
Preliminary patterns of dispersal and movement in
***Anthracocentrus arabicus*.**

Despite its large size, the giant Arabian longhorn beetle (*Anthracocentrus arabicus*) is rarely observed as it is seasonal and nocturnal. Its distribution spans the Arabian Peninsula and parts of Africa and ecological data is sparse for this species. *A. arabicus* adults are thought not to feed and larva are believed to be associated with the roots of the regionally endemic 'Ghaf' tree (*Prosopis cineraria*).

During October to December 2013, a field study was conducted where a defined 'Ghaf' population in a sandy desert environment within Al Ain, was examined for the presence of *A. arabicus* adults.

The study monitored the different movements of *A. arabicus* by marking, releasing and recapturing individuals. Findings indicated that *A. arabicus* display restricted movement patterns, and have an unbalanced male/female ratio. These findings, along with adult longevity and population density, are discussed in the context of conservation given the rapid development in the UAE with fragmentation and loss of habitat. This study will lead to future research.

Dr. Brigitte Howarth is an experienced ecologist, with a BSc in applied ecology from the University of East London, and a PhD in ecological and behavioural entomology from the University of Central Lancashire. With over 15 years experience in the region, Brigitte has a thorough knowledge of the UAE and Oman's ecology, fauna and flora. Her responsibilities at Zayed University include chairing the department of Natural Science and Public Health, as well as delivering lectures in ecology. Brigitte is also the Chairman of the Al Ain chapter of the Emirates Natural History Group.

Dr. Janine Tan completed her doctorate on the large pine weevil, '*Hylobius abietis*: a major pest in plantation coniferous forestry'. Her research was conducted at Forest Research, the research division of the Forestry Commission, UK, and awarded by the University of Ulster. Since 2012, she has been working at Zayed University in the UAE, teaching biology and ecology. In 2013 she began her preliminary studies with Dr. Brigitte Howarth on the Arabian long horn beetle (*Anthracocentrus arabicus*).

DNHG Field Trip: Desert Recon (Afternoon/ Evening) - Friday, October 10

Gary Feulner and Binish Roobas will lead a late afternoon and evening reconnaissance in the Dubai desert near Endurance Village. Our main focus will be on animal life (insects, reptiles, birds and mammals). Reports and photos from this area have been featured in recent issues of *Gazelle*. We will walk in low dunes, up to ca. 0.5 km from our vehicles.

Departure: 3:00pm from Trade Centre area

(Alternate rendezvous points are possible for those coming from "New Dubai" or Sharjah)

Estimated return to Dubai: 10:00pm

Trip limit: 16 people

4WD preferred, but not required.

For sign-up, meeting point details and other instructions, e-mail Gary at grfeulner@gmail.com. (NB: Gary is traveling and will be unavailable until Oct 5th.)



Shell-shock – a first step into the challenging world of beach-find identification

I have noticed that the beaches of the East coast and the Northern Emirates tend to offer greater variety of shells than the local beaches in Dubai. However, it was whilst I was browsing the tide-line at a Jumeirah location which we have christened “Bad Palace beach” that I came across an odd item that raised my curiosity. I was not sure if it was a stone or a shell, but it was unusual enough to pick up as an oddity. Two weeks later I found similar examples, and it confirmed that I should identify them for inclusion in my collection.

The “shells” appeared to be made of small stones, shell fragments or shingle, cemented together in a curved, flask-shaped, form, with no openings except for a small figure-of-8 double-vent hole at the ‘top’. They were one inch long, rounded and bulbous at the base, tapering towards the vent, all with a similar overall shape, but varying in detail. No signs of any animal inside them. But were they shells, or larvae of some sort, or maybe a by-product of the construction taking place offshore? Despite much scrutiny, I couldn’t match them in the Bosch book “Seashells of Eastern Arabia”.



I put a request for assistance on the UK Natural History NaturePlus forum “Identification on the seashore” at <http://bit.ly/1pibrAS> but did not get any response. I then chopped one of the shells open; it was quite brittle, and I was surprised to see that despite the irregular exterior, the inside had a perfectly smooth cream-coloured wall. There were no other visible markings inside to give any indication of the former occupant.

Enquiries to local naturalists supported my impression that these were protective casings of some sort, produced by a benthic marine invertebrate. The vent holes and the consistent overall form were considered significant. But which organism was responsible? Discussion alerted me to groups of organisms other than molluscs, such as sipunculans (peanut or trumpet worms), that might be candidates.

I continued my research using Google, and I came to the conclusion that it could perhaps be *Cucurbitula cymbium*. This is listed as #1259 in the Bosch book, but with a photo that did not at first glance fit too well with the specimens that I have found. I was ultimately convinced of the match when my web-browsing turned up a new site, and I stumbled across <http://bit.ly/1zLswEK> - I was sure that I had found a match.



The identification was confirmed by Mike Hardman at the Natural History Museum in the UK. Another frequent contributor to the “Identification on the seashore” forum, “Rhossilian”, added the following comprehensive detail:

Amazing that the inhabitants are not only mollusks, but bivalves. In Google images there is a photo showing the rather crude valves of Cucurbitula cymbium from the Natural History museum in Rotterdam at <http://bit.ly/1zLsQ68>

Information on the species is hard to find; there is an academic abstract on them at <http://bit.ly/1slXF91> with photos, but written in Dutch.

But it is also in chap.5 of 'The Silent Sentinels - the Demise of Tropical Coral Reefs' at <http://bit.ly/1slYtuM>

The chapter starts with bacteria & (many screens down) reaches mollusca, bivalves & Gastrochaenidae = boring bivalves, which are "able to dissolve calcareous matter as well as to line their dwellings, particularly the siphonal parts" ... & "The small G.(Cucurbitula) cymbium settles on shell debris and, after penetration, builds 'glu'-tubes to encase itself."

I have never found *Cucurbitula cymbium* in any other location in UAE or Oman, but sometimes find more examples on that same beach. I am no nearer to an explanation as to why. The shells are all slightly different, and remain an interesting curiosity, particularly those which have large fragments of shell embedded in their exterior.

Report by
Andrew Childs

Field Clips



The male redback is much smaller and less conspicuous than the female

Redback Spiders

The redback spider, sometimes chauvinistically (or pejoratively?) called the Australian redback, has been a UAE resident for a long time. Stories abound, not least in the pages of *Gazelle*. A tolerant former *Gazelle* editor only became concerned about a redback nest in the top of a storage closet in her home in Jumeirah when a crop of juveniles hatched. She sprayed the nest with pesticide only to watch as the juveniles quickly parachuted to safety on silken threads. She had succeeded only in creating a domestic diaspora.

The taxonomy of the redback is an arcane subject and there has been debate about the extent to which the Australian redback (*Lactrodectus hasselti*) differs from the North American Black Widow (*L. mactans*). Some have considered the first to be a subspecies of the second. There is no question that the elongated red marking on the abdomen of most UAE redback females resembles the Australian pattern (a sort of elongated zipper) much more than the American one (a red hourglass). However, the genus is widely distributed and other species or geographical variations might be present. At least one UAE record exists (a professional determination) of *L. dahli*, an all black relative (i.e., with no colored markings).

In the UAE, the redback has been seen mostly where people are present to find it, in suburban gardens and peripheral domestic environments, but it has also been found in more rustic settings, for example, within the mountains at Wadi Baqarah (Bagarah), at a site littered with evidence of ancient copper-mining, and along the shores of the lake behind the Rufaysah Dam in Wadi Shi, Khor Fakkan. However, both of those sites are arguably still perianthropic.

So it was of special interest when, in mid-May, we found a redback and its web, complete with egg case(s), a couple of hours up an obscure wadi within Wadi Wurayah National Park. Credit goes to Binish, who has



Binish photographs the untidy web of the female redback

been keeping a special eye out for spiders, which remain largely unstudied in the UAE.

The untidy web close to the ground is typical of redbacks. As entomologist (and former DNHG Chairman) Dr. Alan Dickson has explained, redbacks are specialized to prey on ground beetles. Most ground beetles have very hard exoskeletons and so the redback is armed with especially powerful jaws. Those allow it to pierce not only beetle exoskeletons but also human flesh, and inject venom deeply. It is this quality, as much as the potency of their venom, which makes the redbacks potentially dangerous to humans.

We learned subsequently that a redback spider had been observed at the waterfall area in Wadi Wurayah just a month previously, but the waterfall was until very recently an extremely popular picnic area and the spiders there could have been introduced with human vehicles or firewood or other supplies. A check of the area quickly revealed (to Binish, anyway) a small web with a male redback, much smaller and less conspicuous than the female.



A female redback and her spherical egg case, found in a remote tributary of Wadi Wurayah

Contribution and photos by
Gary Feulner and Binish Roobas



Whose Holes?

For more than twenty years I have noticed, occasionally, small holes – obviously burrows of some sort – in banks of medium to fine gravel in mountain wadis in the UAE. But who makes them, and why, have remained a mystery. Only a few months ago, on an outing to look for rare plants, did I find what seems to be the answer.

In an upper tributary of a wadi on the East Coast, in mid-afternoon, I came upon a female Sinai Agama (a/k/a Blue Rock Agama) *Pseudotrapelus sinaitus* beside just such a hole, obviously up to something – but what? The location was then in sun, but it would probably have been shaded by a cliff for much of the earlier part of day.

Of course, being present at the scene of the crime does not constitute proof of guilt, but at least it was now possible to limit the alternatives:

(1) An agama burrow (permanent or temporary)?

The wadi bottom seems an unlikely place for a permanent refuge and the loose gravel substrate seems a difficult medium to maintain. Moreover, on other occasions I (and many other observers) have seen Sinai Agamas flee to shelter in crevices among rocks. Nevertheless, the burrow resembles those I have seen used overnight in the Sabkha Matti by the related Spotted Toad-Headed Agama *Phrynocephalus maculatus* – a sort of reptilian bivvy sack. That does not explain, how-

ever, a second hole less than half a meter away, except perhaps as an aborted or abandoned burrow.

(2) An agama 'nest'?

The lizard was a female in breeding color and the Sinai Agama is said to breed in spring and summer (see former ENHG Chairman Dr. Drew Gardner's new book, *The Amphibians and Reptiles of the UAE and Oman*, published by Chimaira). So it's possible we encountered a female lizard in the process of excavating shallow burrows for the purpose of laying eggs. The burrows seemed too conspicuous to be the finished product, but the fact that the lizard did not flee suggests a certain attachment to the site. The female in question appears to be unusually plump and perhaps gravid. The Sinai Agama is said to lay a small clutch of five to nine eggs; there is no mention of burrows or of multiple clutches, but again, perhaps the second burrow was an aborted effort.

(3) Somebody else's burrow or nest, the target of an agama hunting foray?

The Sinai Agama is known to eat a wide variety of insects. Did the burrow belong to a prey species, e.g., an insect such as a burrowing wasp, and was the lizard hunting? This seems unlikely. The Sinai Agama is not an active hunter, but rather a sit-and-wait, ambush hunter. In this instance its position in the mouth of the burrow, and its

posture, are inconsistent with an ambush hypothesis.

The second hypothesis, burrowing to lay eggs, was the favorite among several experienced naturalists I consulted. Johannes Els, Head of Herpetology & Freshwater Fish at the Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife, in Sharjah, was the most forthcoming. He wrote to explain as follows:

"As with crocodiles, the female of most lizard species will dig several test holes in the substrate before they acquire a desired location to deposit the eggs. The surrounding substrate humidity will determine the nest location, as humidity is important to ensure the survival of the soft leathery eggs. The depth of the holes range from 15cm-20cm deep. These test holes will remain open or sometimes partially covered."

"After the female P. sinaitus has laid her eggs she will cover up the hole and leave the eggs to their own survival. A female can produce 2-3 clutches of eggs per year depending on environmental factors. It can be clearly noticed in the photographs that this female is indeed gravid and as stated, in full receptive mating colours."

"In the wild P. sinaitus rarely use burrows for retreat during the night or during extreme temperatures. They will favour rock crevices for shelter and can often be found sleeping completely exposed during the night on bare rock surfaces or near the base of vegetation."

Contribution by Gary Feulner
with thanks to Johannes Els



Caught in the act? A female Sinai Agama, apparently excavating a hole

Field Clips

The Chukar Partridge

The Chukar (*Alectoris chukar*) is a member of the pheasant family Phasianidae and is a rotund partridge reaching 32-35cm in length. The name is derived from its noisy song *chuck-chuck-chukar-chukar* and it is the national bird of Pakistan.

Both sexes are very similar in appearance, mature males being slightly larger with a more pronounced, rounded spur on the lower back leg. Chukars prefer to run rather than fly when disturbed and usually travel in coveys of 5 to 30 birds outside of the breeding season, when they form into monogamous pairs.

Native to Asia, ranging from Israel and Turkey, Afghanistan to India and Nepal, the Chukar has been introduced into many other countries as a popular game bird. Due to its pugnacious nature during the breeding season the Chukar is also a popular fighting bird. In Afghanistan it has been reported that prized fighters have been sold for up to \$200US.

The Chukar was introduced into the UAE from Iran by the Portuguese in the 16th century. It can be found in mountainous areas of the UAE and on many off-shore islands. There have been sightings in the Masafi region and on the western side of Wadi Wurayah. The Chukar pictured, is one of a pair found casually wondering around the car park at the top of Jebel Hafeet.



Within the UAE the Chukar has been confined to the areas in which it has been introduced due to its reliance on sufficient food and water supplies and has not expanded its range like the similar and also introduced Grey Francolin (*Francolinus pondicerianus*).

It eats a variety of seeds and insects and the one pictured was caught stealing crisps from an unsuspecting picnicking family!

Contribution by Nick & Dr. Marilyn Olliff

Know your Marine Mammals

The UAE Dolphin Project has kindly provided some tips and diagrams on how to identify marine mammals from land or boat. So next time you're by the sea, keep your eyes peeled for these visitors to Dubai's shores! It would be greatly appreciated if you could report any sightings to www.uaedolphinproject.org to help aid with the research.



Bottlenose Dolphin

The Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphin (*Tursiops aduncus*) has a robust body, reaching approximately 2.6 metres. It is grey in colour and sometimes the ventral spots are visible. It is recognisable for its falcate dorsal fin and is a very fast and strong swimmer, often seen riding bow waves of boats. It is found locally in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah and Fujeriah.

Travelling in groups of 5 to 35 it is known for its inquisitive and playful nature.



Humpback Dolphin

The Indo-Pacific Humpback Dolphin (*Sousa chinensis*) can be easily recognised by the raised fleshy hump on its back, which supports the backward-curving dorsal fin. It can reach up to 2.5 metres in length and is frequently encountered in the UAE. It can be found in groups of 2 to 20 individuals and doesn't exceed depths of more than 30 metres.

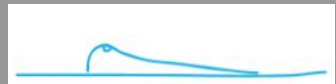
When surfacing, the snout is sometimes pushed out of the water, followed by the body in a gentle arc.



Finless Porpoise

The Finless Porpoise (*Neophocaena phocaenoides*), like the name suggests, lacks a dorsal fin and resembles an upright tyre when surfacing. Measuring 1.5-2 metres in length, it prefers shallow sandbanks and mangrove-lined islands. Its coloration is dark grey/ black and the small dimensions with the lack of dorsal fin make it difficult to spot.

Sightings have been reported in Abu Dhabi, Jebel Ali and, in January and May 2014, it was sighted in Dubai.



Dugong

The Dugong (*Dugong Dugon*) is among the few of the world's herbivorous marine mammals, mainly feeding on seagrass. It reaches a length of 3 metres and breathes by tensing its fleshy lip into a curve and raises its nostrils out of the water.

It can be found in the waters west of Abu Dhabi, which hosts the world's second largest population, but has been sighted off Jebel Ali. A sighting in Dubai has also been reported by a fellow member in a previous Gazette!

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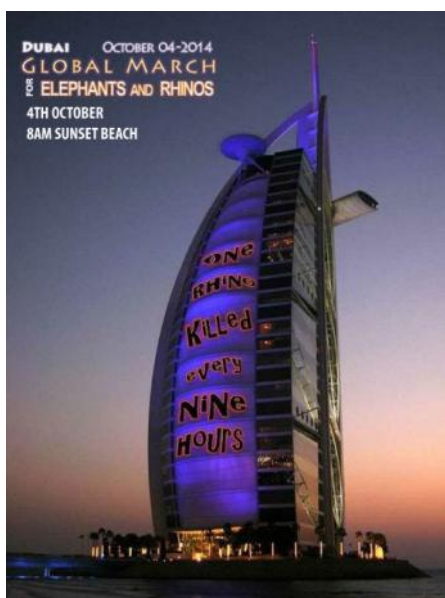
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Bird Recorder needed!

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.

**Madinat Jumeirah Survey**

The DNHG has been invited by Madinat Jumeirah resort to conduct a program of visits to survey and give a preliminary accounting of the diversity plant and animal life on the property -- one of Dubai's largest. Details were discussed with representatives of the Learning and Development and the Sports and Recreation units of the resort. The survey was welcomed by the DNHG as an opportunity to examine in detail the prevailing "wildlife" of a diverse and extensively landscaped resort environment, and by Madinat Jumeirah as an opportunity to develop information that will assist them in better understanding, appreciating and managing their natural environment, and that is likely to be of interest to many of their guests.

Three teams have been organized to conduct the survey: (1) terrestrial animals (invertebrates and vertebrates, including birds), (2) plants (mostly landscape plants, but including some local 'weeds', and (3) marine life (the resort has not only a beachfront but a jetty and ca. 2 kilometers of salt-water canals). An additional team will be established for seashells.

Team leaders have been assigned and will be responsible for organizing and coordinating visits and compiling the information collected, including taxonomic identification (to the extent possible). Team leaders for "Animals" are Gary Feulner and Binish Roobas (invertebrates) and Jo and Steve Raynor (vertebrates); for "Plants", Val Chalmers and Liz Maley-Craig; and for Marine, Lamjed El-Kefi and Angela and Stephen Manthorpe.

Teams will visit Madinat Jumeirah independently, as small groups (2-5 persons), on schedules to be established by the team leaders. Visits at different times of day and covering multiple seasons are planned in order to attempt to give as complete an account as possible.

DNHG members are invited to participate in one or more of the teams, on a rotating basis. Volunteers should expect to participate in the process of finding, photographing and/or identifying target species, and should be prepared to put their nose to the ground, get their hands dirty, get their feet wet, or whatever else the relevant activity requires.

Interested members may volunteer by contacting the relevant team leader.

- (1) Animals (Gary Feulner): grfeulner@gmail.com
- (2) Plants (Val Chalmers): valeriechalmers@gmail.com
- (3) Marine (Lamjed El-Kefi): lamjedk@hotmail.com
- (4) Seashells (temporarily Gary Feulner): grfeulner@gmail.com

Initial summer visits by the animal team have recorded some 20 resident birds, most of which are probably breeding on the property, including a few exotic species that would be unlikely to survive outside Dubai's parks, gardens and resorts. Results for invertebrates were less dramatic, reflecting a pest control regime characteristic of similar properties, but there is still the prospect of interesting discoveries. A preliminary marine visit to the canal system showed a variety of organisms in small numbers, including fish, crabs, molluscs, sponges hard and soft coral, anemones and seaweed.



Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

October 12: Dr. Brigitte Howarth and Dr. Janine Tan: *'Have you seen the largest beetle in the wood?'*
Preliminary patterns of dispersal and movement in *Anthracocentrus arabicus*.

November 02: Dr. Timothy Powers: The Islamic Centuries in Al-Ain and the Buraimi Oasis

Field Trips (Members Only)

October 10: Evening Desert Recon

November 02 - 07: Andaman Islands field trip (6 days/ 5 nights)

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

DNHG COMMITTEE 2014

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 Dh. 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.