



GAZELLE

مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي



Boat from the Sharjah Maritime Museum



The stunning aquarium ceiling display



Our wonderful guide Mr. Al Nabooda

DNHG Field Trip: Sharjah Aquarium and Sharjah Maritime Museum

On June 13, members of the DNHG met inside the Sharjah Aquarium for a guided tour of both the Aquarium and neighbouring Sharjah Maritime Museum. Members started to arrive from 9am and were dazzled by the stunning ceiling display of various marine animals hanging inside the Aquarium's main entrance.

When we had finished at the Aquarium we made our way next door to the Sharjah Maritime Museum that holds an immaculate collection of sailing vessels from the region. I particularly liked the display of stone anchors and the hand-made rope and nail fish-traps made from palm leaves. These I felt are a much more environmentally friendly alternative to the wire ones that are used today.

Mr. Al Nabooda from the Sharjah Museum Department met the DNHG and kindly escorted us around the Aquarium, introducing us to many of its inhabitants and members had the opportunity to hold a starfish from the 'touch pool'.

The museum also has one of the few surviving examples of a stitched up dhow boat known as a Battil. The incredibly beautiful Battil is roughly 80-90 years old and is a small double-ended fishing vessel that would have had a crew of up to eight people.

We also saw two Green Turtles; one was asleep between the rocks and a scuba diver was feeding the other. Mr. Al Nabooda informed us that sometimes the turtles get carried away during feeding time and can nip the diver's hand. The scuba diver was also feeding the resident Bowmouth Guitarfish, Arabian Angel Fish, Banner Fish and lots of Damsel Fish.

Many thanks go to Valerie Chalmers for organizing yet another excellent field trip and also a big thank you to Mr. Al Nabooda and the Sharjah Museum Department for taking the time to accommodate us.

Contribution and photos by Helga Meyer



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Contributors

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

Helga Meyer, Beverly McKay, Binish Roobas, Nick Olliff, Tamsin Carlisle and Gary Feulner

Announcements

Next Month's Speaker

The DNHG are delighted to welcome D Nick Dixon who will be giving a talk titled:

“Sheikh Zayed Desert Learning Centre at Al Ain Zoo: Our vision, mission and how we will deliver them.”

**At 8p.m. on Sunday
13th September**

D Nick Dixon has more than 30 years experience in the museum and science centre sector. He has worked as a Curator, manager in a funding agency, consultant and museum Director.

Much of this experience was gained in the United Kingdom, but in recent years he has worked in Saudi Arabia, Singapore and now the United Arab Emirates. Nick's professional agenda is to support the development of institutions that closely reflect the culture in which they are located; which address the needs and expectations of local audiences and which help to project the values of the local society.



REMINDER: DNHG Membership Renewal

It's that time again! DNHG membership is due for annual renewal this September 2015 for the 2015-2016 season.

If you would still like to be part of the DNHG and receive our monthly newsletter, notices on upcoming lectures and events and/or join our many field trips then please make sure to renew your membership to be included on our mailing list.

Membership still remains a bargain at 50Dhs for individuals and 100Dhs for families, all of which contributes to hiring the lecture hall, incidental expenses of speakers, publications, additions to the library and occasional special projects.

Renewing is easy and can be done at September's meeting, or by making a bank transfer (details on page 8), or by contacting our Membership Secretary, Anindita, by emailing: anin@emirates.net.ae

Wanted: Field Trip Coordinators

If you would like to join the 'Field Trip Coordination Team' or are interested in leading your own field trip then we would like to hear from you!

Field trip leaders do not need to be professional experts but just be generally interested and enthusiastic. We have a variety of field trips to choose from or are happy to help if you would like to organize your own.

To find out more, please contact Sonja Lavrenčič on: lavson@gmail.com

Book Review: Landmarks

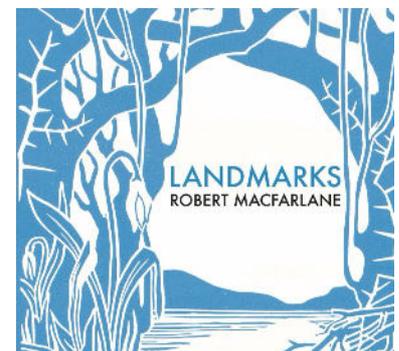
The *Financial Times* recently published a review of a new book titled 'Landmarks' by Robert Macfarlane, which might be of some interest to members of the DNHG.

It is a book about the disappearance of words that are used to describe landscape and natural phenomena. It is also a reflection, by the author, of some of the classics of British "nature writing."

The full review written by Melissa Harrison can be found in the following link:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/56015218-bc3c-11e4-a6d7-00144feab7de.html>

Contribution by Beverly McKay



Launching the 'New Look' DNHG Website!

The DNHG Website Committee are pleased to announce the 'New Look' Dubai Natural History Group website: www.dnhg.org

The website is intended to be the 'go to' place for all information regarding the DNHG, including detailed information on upcoming and previous lectures, back dated copies of the *Gazelle* newsletter, upcoming and previous field trips, details of the DNHG committee and information regarding DNHG membership with a downloadable 'Membership Form'.

Also included on the website is a 'Resources' page full of information, including links to affiliated groups, free online guides, online newspaper articles, featured *Gazelle* articles, books available from the DNHG library and bookshop, and even some tips on where to go exploring in the UAE.

Many thanks to the website committee for all their hard work and members who donated photos. "We hope you enjoy the site!"



Black-winged Stilt

Wels Catfish
with fry

Coypu



Pool Frog

DNHG Field Trip: Slovenian Walks on the Wild Side

The recent DNHG tour of Slovenia (June 5-13) stood out for me as being the only trip I can remember on which I have encountered and photographed wild species from all four classes of terrestrial vertebrates—mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibia—in the space of little over a week, with even a few bony fish species thrown in for good measure.

My first notable wildlife encounter of the trip occurred in the evening of the very first day, right beneath the veranda of the farmhouse in a hilly area near the Austrian border where we would spend the next two nights. Examining a large shrub for any arthropods it might be harbouring, I was considerably surprised to encounter the apparently endless body of a glossy, greenish brown snake draped through its branches. The snake was no doubt equally surprised, and promptly revealed its head to me by making for its den—not, however, disappearing before I had snapped one good photo in the fading light.

Delighted by my discovery, I ran over to our host and tour-guide, Dixi, grinning idiotically and pointing at my camera screen. Did he know he had a snake living under his porch? I quickly added that I was pretty sure it was non-poisonous

and doing a good job of curbing the local mouse population.

“Yes,” Dixi answered without hesitation, “And please don’t tell the others.”

The reclusive serpent was duly identified by a herpetologist on the iNaturalist.org website as an Aesculapian Snake with the apt scientific name of *Zamenis longissimus*, as it can reach lengths of over two meters. It belongs to the cobra family, Colubridae, but is completely non-venomous. Adults eat small mammals, rodents up to the size of rats, as well as birds and lizards, suffocating their prey by constriction.

Next morning, I awoke to find a pair of Black Redstarts (*Phoenicurus ochruros*) outside my bedroom window, visiting their nest under the eaves of the rear veranda. Goldfinches (*Carduelis carduelis*) and Blackbirds (*Turdus merula*) were calling from the trees. I quickly discovered a row of Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) nests located, appropriately enough, under the eaves of a large barn, with attentive parents flitting in and out, while White Wagtails (*Motacilla alba*) carried nesting materials to roof tops. To

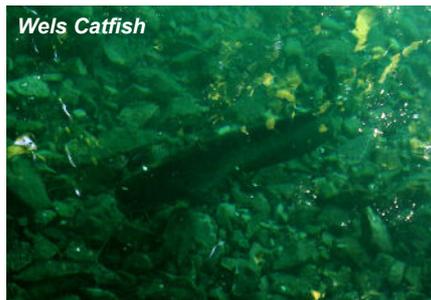
be sure, there were also many sparrows around, and in this rural setting they turned out to be European Tree Sparrows (*Passer montanus*).

As we started our tour, visiting many beautiful spots in Slovenia’s three Alpine mountain ranges, these and other avian favourites from my European youth kept popping up. At another farm, a small colony of House Martins (*Delichon urbicum*) were busily gathering mud for their nests; Alpine Swifts (*Apus melba*) wheeled constantly overhead uttering their high-pitched screams. On the shore of a mountain river tumbling through a deep gorge, I watched a grey wagtail, distinguished by a brilliant flash of yellow under the base of its tail, picking through rocks for insects and, on a picture-perfect lake, Mute Swans (*Cygnus olor*) mingled with Mallard ducks (*Anas platyrhynchos*).

The lake also contained a large population of Wels Catfish (*Silurus glanis*), a native of central, southern and Eastern Europe that can reach enormous sizes of over 400 kg. The female produces up to 30,000 eggs per kilo of body weight, laying them in a nest which the male guards until they hatch. On an island in the lake, I spotted the tails of several

(Continued on page 4)

Field Trips



DNHG Field Trip: Slovenian Walks on the Wild Side cont.

(Continued from page 3)

large catfish protruding from under a muddy bank riddled with tree roots overhanging the shore. The fish would not budge, no matter how clumsily I crawled around, alerting them to my presence while I tried to catch a glimpse of their heads. One of my photos revealed the reason by auto-focusing on a cloud of newly hatched fish fry I hadn't even seen. The large catfish were evidently mature males, resolutely guarding their nests.

While still in the Alpine region, visiting an old mill, I discovered tadpoles and what looked like small newts or salamanders on the bottom of the brook feeding the millrace. I wasn't at all confident of capturing a photograph sufficiently clear to identify these amphibians, but the distinctive blue livery of at least one specimen strongly suggested the breeding colors of the male Alpine Newt (*Ichthyosaura alpestris*). Too bad there wasn't time for further investigation!

As the mountains gave way to vineyards and finally Mediterranean coastline, new bird species appeared. We visited a historic saltpan area on the coast, which was also a

sanctuary for water birds. There, I spotted a few familiar old friends from the UAE, including Black-winged Stilts (*Himantopus himantopus*) and a Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) fishing most successfully for sprats. Adding a dash of local flavour, these were joined by Mediterranean and Yellow-legged Gulls (respectively, *Ichthyaetus melanocephalus* and *Larus michahellis*).

Ending our tour in the Slovenian capital, Ljubljana, I paid a visit to the local botanical garden which featured, among other things, some well-presented pond environments rife with animal as well as plant life. Here, making themselves thoroughly at home, were several more fish species (smaller catfish, carp and others) as well as numerous Pool Frogs (*Pelophylax lessonae*) and Red-eared Terrapins (*Trachemys scripta elegans*). The frogs, at least, were native to the region, while the terrapins were presumably naturalized.

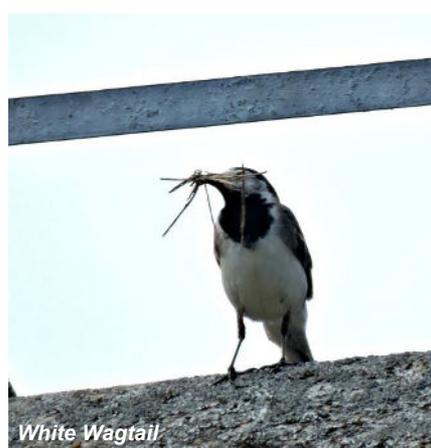
That really just left the mammals, although a few of us had briefly spotted a solitary squirrel along a woodland path climbing to a lakeside castle. However, after

scolding us from a treetop, the skinny and dark grey squirrel scampered away, declining to be photographed. Little did I know that a final wildlife encounter was awaiting me in the very heart of Ljubljana.

Our final group activity was a short boat cruise on the slow-flowing river bisecting the capital, mainly to view historic bridges and buildings. Just as we passed under Ljubljana's iconic central bridge trio, the tour guide pointed to a spot near the bank, exclaiming "Oh, a Coypu!" Unfortunately, no one else managed to spot this large aquatic rodent or could tell me whether it was swimming or on the bank. Shortly thereafter the boat disembarked its passengers, and I decided to walk a short distance back along the river to investigate.

There, on a small grassy triangle between two of the three central bridges, I was rewarded by the sight of a beautiful, glossy Coypu browsing on wild flowers: my final unforgettable wildlife encounter in the small but richly varied corner of southeastern Europe, Slovenia.

Report and photos by
Tamsin Carlisle



The Dubai Marina

When I first announced that I would be moving to the Dubai Marina 3 years ago I was met with groans from all my friends, "Marina? Too much traffic!" and while the traffic can be quite bad, the Marina has offered a wide range of aquatic life right at my door step.

On 2 separate occasions I have seen large shoals of approximately 30 Cownose Rays, either *Rhinoptera jayakari* or *Rhinoptera yayanica*, surfacing outside the Marina Yacht Club from my apartment window.

Peering over the railing during morning walks around the Marina you can expect to find large 'bait balls' of hundreds of tiny juvenile fish. And with any 'bait ball' it doesn't take long for predators to start emerging: Longtailed Butterfly Rays (*Gymnura poecilura*), Needlefish, Twobar Seabream, young Grunters and Black-eared seagulls.

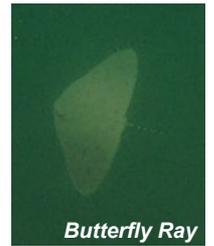
Where the concrete wall of the Marina gives way to the rocky breakwater lives small colonies of Mangrove crabs and plenty of fish will come and see what you are doing if you sit there long enough.



'Bait Ball'



Cownose Rays



Butterfly Ray

Night time walks around the Marina are just as interesting. Large swimming crabs break the water's surface, some carrying large clusters of eggs, while Cobias and Jellyfish swim in the blue neon lights under each bridge.

When the dinner dhows dock for the night the waters around them churn with fins and tails of large fish taking advantage of the 'tourist leftovers' being tossed overboard by the workers.

The Marina may not have the variety or colour of a coral reef, but the water is usually clear enough to see down to the sandy floor and it's always worth a look over the edge as you can never tell who might be looking back at you!

Report and photos by Peter Olliff

DNHG Field Trip: Desert Recon

Despite the high temperatures of the Dubai summer, nights in the UAE can still be bearable enough to venture out into the field as the DNHG did last October on a Desert Recon Field Trip, first stopping at a Ghaf Oasis near Lisaili in the late afternoon followed by a desert night walk near Al Qudra lakes.

It was a windy afternoon as DNHG members made their way to the Ghaf Oasis. The resident Dab lizards had already bedded down for the night due to the bad weather, but we still managed to see Mountain Gazelles and a Yellow Toad-Headed Agama as well as many bird tracks and a few butterflies around the Ghaf Oasis.

Suddenly a severe dust storm picked up forcing members to flee back to their cars. Patiently everyone waited out the storm and were rewarded by a beautifully clear night in which to conduct a desert night walk at our second stop near Al Qudra lakes.

Almost immediately into our walk we came across a Cheesman's Gerbil, who seemed unperplexed by our presence, apparently pre-occupied by the bonanza of insects our torches were attracting for it to feast upon.

We watched the gerbil for quite some time before making our way a little further into the desert where we found many Arabian Sand Geckos and Big-Headed or Dune Sand Geckos.

The desert sand was also dotted with tiny holes, each containing a resident 'jack-in-the-box' type spider. In one instance shining a torch on one particular hole attracted a large flying ant. As soon as the ant settled on the ground the spider leapt out of the hole and pounced on it. The spider then quickly danced around the struggling ant, wrapping it tightly in its web, before pulling it back into its hole.

It was a great night out and congratulations to everyone on their keen eyesight, which meant we observed a good spectrum of de-

sert life. Hopefully in the coming months the DNHG can arrange another similar night field trip.

Contribution by Gary Feulner



Arabian Sand Gecko



The 'Jack-in-the-box' Spider



Cheesman's Gerbil

Field Clips



The Kalba Bird of Prey Centre

If you are still at a loose end for something to do this summer then may I recommend a trip to the East Coast to visit The Kalba Bird of Prey Centre.

Located at the base of the Hajar Mountains, just off the Sharjah-Kalba Road, the small centre is open during the summer from 10am to 6pm. The live bird demonstrations only operate between the months of November to March, but it is still a nice excuse to get out of Dubai and see the aviaries containing the regions remarkable

birds of prey including Egyptian Vultures, Short-toed Snake Eagles and small variety of owls.

The centre also houses a few farm animals (goats, camels and cows) and the newly refurbished Al Ghail Fort, built in 1903, which has some interesting displays of local weaponry and history of the area.

Entry to the centre costs 5 dirhams and, while most of the centre is outdoors, there is a large air-conditioned cafeteria with a good view of the fort, a well-stocked bookshop and the 2 display rooms inside the fort are also air-conditioned.

If you are already in the area a trip to Khor Kalba is also worth the effort. The area of mangroves is officially closed to the public, but you are allowed to walk under the railing and the length of the bridge to the edge of the Khor.

From the bridge you can see large schools of fish and, if you are lucky, sea turtles surfacing in the strong current (I counted 3 turtles the last time I was there). There are many birds wading along the shore and if you walk along the water's edge on the mainland side you can see many hermit crabs and fish.

Also in the area is Al Hayl Fort, where an enthusiastic caretaker will give you a tour of the empty rooms for free, but a tip is advisable.

Report by Peter Olliff



Notes of Vietnam

During our 3 years in Ho Chi Minh City (2010-2013) I had the chance to travel with my husband to the jungle and beach building site of Ho Tram every week.

Ho Tram is located north of Vung Tau on an underdeveloped stretch of coastline. The road there is full of potholes, people, motorbikes, trucks and animals and it would take us 3 hours by car to just drive the 124 km!

As the site along the beach was slowly cleared of trees, lush jungle flora, and the occasional unexploded bomb, I was lucky enough to encounter a few beautiful and exotic animals that I managed to catch on camera. These included lizards, dragonflies, crabs and a water python, which was unfortunately clubbed to death and eaten by some Vietnamese security guards.

While visiting a forest waterfall in Dalat I came across the pictured green and blue caterpillar. After further investigation I have been unable to identify it, but think it may be a type of Slug Caterpillar from the family of moths known as Limacodidae.



*Unidentified
Slug Caterpillar*

I also found a baby Kukri Snake, which is a harmless snake that lives near human dwellings to feed on mice, cockroaches and crickets. I tried to inform the locals that Kukri Snakes are harmless, but they didn't take any notice. Apparently in Vietnam only a dead snake is a good snake!

Report and photos by Helga Meyer



Lizard



Dragonfly



Baby Kukri Snake

DNHG Recorders

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Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

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Birds - Tamsin Carlisle
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Don't forget: **The DNHG is also on** **Facebook**

You can now 'Like' and 'Follow' us on Facebook to receive regular updates on upcoming regional events, reminders for monthly lectures and field trips, as well as general information on the natural history of the UAE.

<http://facebook.com/DNHG.UAE>

If you have an event or photo that you would like to share on our facebook page, please message us directly on our FB page.

We look forward to
hearing from you!

Wanted: New Gazelle Editor

The DNHG's monthly newsletter, *Gazelle*, has been an important element of the group since its inception more than 25 years ago, helping us keep in touch and share information about group activities and UAE natural history generally. We have been fortunate to have had an unbroken record of talented and enthusiastic editors.

The Editor's position has traditionally had great independence. Among those who have enjoyed the role are the late Jim Hart, Marijke Jongbloed, Beryl Comar, Neil Curtis, Anna Griffin, Anne Millen, Clare O'Hare and Sonja Benjamin. Many have found it a 'bully pulpit'. If you have an interest in natural history and would like to indulge it, and to help us disseminate interesting local natural history information (sometimes information that can be found no place else), please consider this opportunity.

Exceptional computer skills are not required. More important are interest, a reasonable command of written English, a willingness to commit the necessary time on a regular basis and a measure of sensitive editorial judgment with the occasional dash of diplomacy. Members who feel they might be interested are invited to contact Chairman Gary Feulner or Vice-Chairman Valerie Chalmers.

This invitation is especially extended to our many enthusiastic new members. Long experience in the UAE is not a requirement. Indeed, a fresh perspective may be an asset.

DNHG Field Trip Policies

As we are getting ready to start a new season of the DNHG, members are reminded that DNHG field trips are cooperative ventures among the participants, for their mutual benefit and enjoyment.

DNHG field trip leaders are not normally professionals or experts, but fellow members who have agreed to share their time and their knowledge with other participants, on a volunteer basis. The relationship of trip leaders and participants is that of co-venturers, not professional and client. For these reasons field trip participation is limited to DNHG members and their bona fide non-resident guests.

Various dangers are inherent in travel in and around the UAE and in the exploration of the natural environment, whether by automobile, by boat, on foot or otherwise, and whether on-road or off-road, in the cities or countryside, in the mountains or deserts or at sea. By participating in DNHG field trips, members accept these risks, and they accept responsibility for their own safety and welfare.

Field trip participants are normally required to sign a waiver form to this effect. Without these understandings, the DNHG would be unable to sponsor field trips or to recruit volunteers to lead them.

Field trips vary in both format and organization, depending on the nature of the trip, the number of participants, and the preferences of the field trip leader. If the number of participants is limited and sign-up is required, members should make every effort to honor their commitments or to give timely notice otherwise, as a courtesy both to the trip leader and to other members who might like to have the chance to participate.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

September 13: D Nick Dixon: The Sheikh Zayed Desert Learning Centre at Al Ain Zoo.
"Our vision and mission and how we will deliver them."

October 4: *Speaker and topic to be announced via circular email and on facebook*

Field Trips (Members Only)

TBA via circular email, *so don't forget to renew your membership!*

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

DNHG COMMITTEE 2015

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 100 Dhs. for families and 50 Dhs. for individuals. Membership is valid from Sep 2014 to Sep 2015. 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.