



GAZELLE

مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

DNHG Field Trip: *Masirah Island*

'The Miracle of Life'

The sun had set in a flaming glory and we were enjoying our "5-star" dinner on the small and relatively rocky beach we had nick-named 'Snorkeling 1 Beach' on Masirah Island. The beach is located on the lower west end side of the island and we had considered it a safe place to camp where we wouldn't disturb any turtles.

As the night wore on we sat comfortably in our chairs, enjoying the cool breeze and a huge fish donated by some local fisherman that same morning, when a member of the group felt a tickle next to his foot and bending down exclaimed "Ah! Here is a hatchling!"



Olive Ridley hatchlings out of their nest

Everyone moved closer to investigate and we were delighted by the discovery of a newly-hatched turtle. We aimed our torchlights further along the sand and saw another baby turtle. Moving our torches even further we saw another and then another. In our ignorance we had camped right next to a nest and were lucky enough to be there on the very night the baby turtles were hatching!

Altogether there were approximately 50-60 hatchlings moving around the beach. Our torchlights appeared to be disorientating the hatchlings, so jumping to our feet we switched off all our torches, except for the strongest one which we placed by the sea as a guide. It was amazing how quickly most of the hatchlings turned and headed in the right direction with their funny and clumsy crawl towards the sea.

We soon discovered that, protected by the darkness of night, the

beach was magically alive! Dozens of hermit crabs were frantically moving around, exploring each other in a massive experimental orgy or checking out potential housing options for the near future. To our dis-

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Contributors

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

*Konstantina Sakellariou,
Beverly McKay, Helga Meyer,
Peter Olliff, Tamsin Carlisle
and Gary Feulner*



Possible remnants of a whale on the beach

Announcements



New Gazelle Editor Wanted

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, Marijcke 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.

End of Season

And so we reach the end of yet another eventful season of the DNHG. This season has seen the discovery of new species in the UAE, a very successful Inter-Emirates weekend, many exciting field trips, excellent and informative monthly lectures and the launch of the DNHG facebook page.

This year's End-of-Season Function has been postponed to November to take advantage of the cooler weather. Please keep an eye out for the circular email of details to be sent out later in the year.

We would like to wish everyone well for the summer and members are reminded that there will be no lectures during July and August. Lectures will resume in September to welcome in the new season of the Dubai Natural History Group.

- DNHG Committee

Whale Sharks Sighted

The Emirates Diving Association reported 2 sightings of whale sharks in Musandam at the end of last month. The first sighting was a male, approximately 4-5 meters in length, off the Wonder Wall dive site and the second was a similar-sized female near Lima Rock.

Whale Sharks are the world's largest fish and can reach up to 16 metres in length and have been recorded off the East Coast and in the Arabian Gulf, with confirmed sightings in Kuwait, Abu Dhabi, Jebel Ali and 20 kilometres off the coast of Bidiya.

They are known locally as channaz and are highly migratory, following and feeding off blooms of planktonic organisms.

To view the video of both sightings, please visit the DNHG facebook page:

www.facebook.com/DNHG.UAE



Sharjah Fort Re-Opening

This month Sharjah Museums have announced the long awaited re-opening of Sharjah's Fort 'Al Hisn' located in the heart of Sharjah city.

Open from 8.00am to 8.00pm Saturday to Thursday and 4.00pm to 8.00pm on Fridays entry to the fort is currently free of charge until July 20.

Once the home to Sharjah's ruling family, the fort was built in 1823 by the late Sheikh Sultan bin Saqr Al Qasimi and played an important role in several social, political, commercial and military developments in the region.

For more information please visit the website:
www.sharjahmuseums.ae/Our-Museums/Sharjah-Hisn-Museum.aspx



Rüppell's Weaver
Ploceus galbula
Ras al Khaimah
April 2015

Rüppell's Weaver

During April 2015 I managed to take the above photographs of a male Rüppell's Weaver (*Ploceus galbula*) from my studio window ledge where I feed various birds in Ras al-Khaimah.

Also, slightly earlier this spring, I have seen a female of the same species in our area. The females are much more drab in colour than the brightly coloured males and resemble a house sparrow.

The Rüppell's Weaver is a small insectivore most notable for constructing elaborately woven, gourd-shaped nests, which can be seen hanging from trees and large shrubs.

The weaver, named after the German zoologist and explorer Eduard Rüppell, can be found in Africa and the Middle East ranging from the UAE, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya.

*Contribution and photos by
Beverly McKay*

The Elusive Red Spider

During a wadi walk near Nehaila Dam in RAK I came across a completely red spider, which had weaved it's web between 2 rocks.

Thinking it was a bit unusual I mentioned my sighting to our resident spider expert who told me "There's no such thing as Red spiders" and, when I showed him my blurry photo, another DNHG member exclaimed it wasn't a spider at all, but a kind of tick.

Determined to prove myself, I returned to the wadi but was unable to find the spider again. So if anyone comes across a completely red spider, or any other spider that looks out of the ordinary, please let us know and if possible try to take a photo of it! Many thanks in advance!

gazelleeditor@gmail.com



DNHG FT: Masirah Island cont.

(Continued from page 1)

may their shells were pristine, unlike the ones we kept finding broken on the beaches.

Large Ghost Crabs also lurked about waiting to grab a young turtle as easy prey. There were also some other sand-coloured crabs, which moved so swiftly you felt like it was just air moving sand under your feet.

As one member of the group acted as lighthouse keeper, guiding the turtle hatchlings to the water's edge, the rest of us wandered up and down the beach ensuring all the little turtles were moving in the right direction and were safe from predators. There was much excitement every time a little turtle entered the sea that we were inclined to clap and cheer, as though they were our own children taking their first steps.

Once the last hatching was in the sea we walked the whole beach to see if we could see anymore or maybe

even some turtles nesting, but only chanced upon a couple of smaller lone turtles. We also found the remains of what might be a whale - of course it was covered with dozens of hermit crabs that were exploring it in great detail.

The next morning none of the crabs could be seen, except for the odd Ghost Crab, and the only evidence of the previous night's frantic activity were the numerous crab trails in the sand. It was as if the beach had magically come alive during the night, only to be put back to sleep with the first rays of the sun.

Later we learned that the young hatchlings were Olive Ridley Sea Turtles (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), which can only be found in small numbers on Masirah Island within the whole Arabian region.

It was a true blessing to have had the opportunity to witness the miracle of life on the lonely and exotic beaches of Masirah.

*Report and photos by
Konstantina Sakellariou*

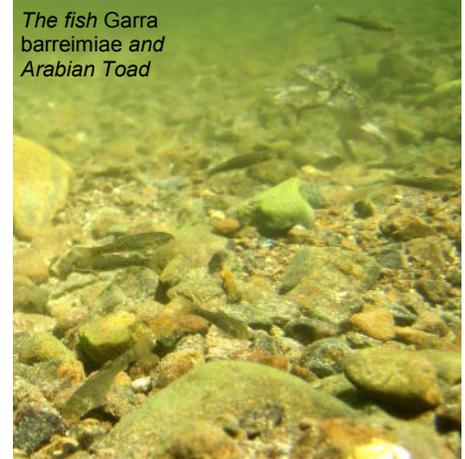
Field Clips



Water Scorpion



A Water Scorpion breaking the water's surface with its breathing tube



The fish *Garra barreimiae* and Arabian Toad

Underwater in a Wadi

Determined to squeeze in a few extra walks before the summer hits, last month I re-visited the wadi near Shawkah Dam where I had led a winter field trip. Already the hot weather had taken its toll and the previously flowing wadi stream and large pools were now reduced to small ponds and puddles. While it is disappointing to see, it does confine all the aquatic wildlife into concentrated areas making them easier to spot and observe.

Each pond was full of *Garra barreimiae*, the most common native fish species found in the UAE. Many of them were also stranded in tiny puddles destined to completely dry up as the summer progresses. In some of the shallowest puddles, exposed to the sun, many of the fish had already died, presumably from overheating and/ or oxygen depletion caused by overcrowding.



A wadi puddle with many stranded fish

It is still undetermined how *Garra* populations survive in wadis that appear to 'dry out' completely. The eggs of *G. barreimiae* cannot survive outside of water, so do not remain dormant and hatch when the wadi flows again. Gary Feulner, who first mapped the detailed distribution of fish species in the wadis of the UAE and northern Oman, has been led to hypothesize

that *G. barreimiae* may be able to survive the disappearance of surface water by going underground or "fossicking", retreating temporarily to interstitial space deep within the wadi gravel, where groundwater remains present, and going more or less dormant until conditions improve. Some dragonfly larvae have been found to do this. *G. barreimiae* and several other species of *Garra* are well known to be tolerant of subterranean conditions, but this hypothesis has yet to be confirmed.

In more accessible locations, UAE municipal authorities and private individuals often manually repopulate wadi pools with fish for mosquito control, but the fish species used for that purpose are the Arabian killifish *Aphanius dispar* and the introduced tilapia (usually hybrids of *Oreochromis* spp.).

In the case of my field trip wadi, however, there are permanent pools at the bottom of the wadi, which can serve as a reservoir. The *G. barreimiae* are known to travel upstream by using their sucker-like mouths to drag themselves up rocks. The surviving fish could therefore wait in the larger pools and climb up to repopulate the upper streams and pools when the wadi flows again.

The *G. barreimiae* can tolerate temperatures of up to 40 degrees and are easy to spot darting around wadi pools and sucking over rocks with a specialised mouth plate. They grow up to 7cm and are still sometimes caught and eaten by human mountain residents.

Water Scorpions were also pre-

sent. These may be locally common, especially when larger pools have dried up. Here, in the limited amount of water, I spotted at least 4 without actively looking.

Despite their name, Water Scorpions are a type of water bug named after their overall resemblance to a scorpion, with pincers on their forearms and long slender 'tail'. The tail is actually a siphon tube, which the Water Scorpion pushes through the surface of the water to collect air to breathe, storing it under its wings for later use. They are not strong swimmers and usually hunt by ambush, but they can be seen crawling along the wadi floor searching for prey or near the water's edge, bums up, collecting air.

There were many other aquatic insects present and I also spotted a few Dragonfly Larvae sitting amongst the algae on the wadi bottom. There were also much larger dragonfly larvae skins floating on the water surface that had been

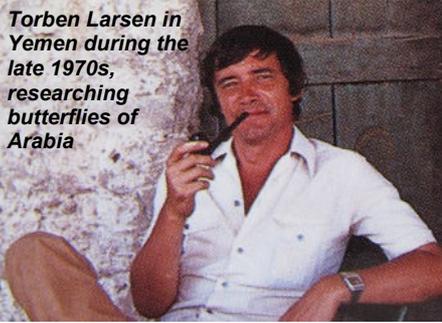
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Dragon Fly Larvae



A school of Water Boatmen



Torben Larsen in Yemen during the late 1970s, researching butterflies of Arabia

In Memoriam: Torben B. Larsen (1944-2015)

Torben Larsen "wrote the book" on Arabian butterflies – several books, in fact, intended for serious popular audiences, and two scholarly monographs. *Butterflies of Oman* (1982) and *Butterflies of Saudi Arabia and its Neighbours* (1984) remain the most authoritative pictorial references for Arabian butterflies generally, and they are likely to remain so for some time to come. The latter was based on his two monographs, one (in 1983) giving an account of each of the Arabian species and the other (in 1984) analyzing the biogeography of the Arabian butterfly fauna.

Butterflies of Oman has been out of print for some time but, with the author's cooperation, it is available online via the DNHG and ENHG websites. *Butterflies of Saudi Arabia and its Neighbours*, published by Stacey International, is still available through The Natural History Museum in London.

Torben was a Danish citizen but spent a number of childhood years in India, where his passion for butterflies was instilled. That passion gradually overtook his formal profession as a demographer working in the international sphere. In the 1970s he traveled widely in the Arab world, ultimately publishing on the butterflies of Lebanon and Egypt as well as Arabia, and earning his Ph.D. in 1984 with a dissertation on Butterflies of the Middle East.

In the 1990s he turned his attention to Africa, producing in 2005 the monumental *Butterflies of West Africa*, covering nearly 1500 species. Along the way he found time to produce the many stories collected in

the cult classic, *Hazards of Butterfly Collecting* (2004). It is as a student of African butterflies that he is currently best known, and at the time of his death he was at a late stage of completing what some would call the thankless task of reviewing African skipper butterflies (family Hesperidae).

But Torben never forgot Arabia and he remained, as an individual, one of the principal resources for Arabian butterfly studies, always welcoming to enquirers. He continued to keep an eye on reports from Arabia, and to offer his friendly critiques, guidance and (always) encouragement. He gently queried suspect conclusions (e.g., a record of the Small Copper *Lycaena phlaeas* from the Musandam) and enthusiastically endorsed unexpected but well-supported finds (e.g., isolated relict populations of the Arabian Grizzled Skipper *Spialia mangana* – coincidentally an African skipper – high in the mountains of northern Oman and the UAE). The DNHG's monthly newsletter, *Gazelle*, was on his reading list, and from it in 2014 he recognized the presence of the Cycad Cupid *Chilades pandava*, an Asian butterfly not previously known from Arabia.

His circle of professional friends and correspondents was exceptionally broad and the communications among them since his death are a testament to the influence of his intellect and personality. To all of them, his death seems untimely because, as so many have observed, in recent correspondence he was full of enthusiasm for his on-going (and ramifying) projects.

Torben never returned to Arabia after publishing his studies here, and I made his acquaintance only rather late in both our lives, through correspondence in relation to new and rare species in the UAE and Oman, and commentary on a draft of his paper on the resilience of West African forest butterflies in the face of habitat destruction. So I never had the opportunity to meet him in person. As a result, the Torben Larsen I knew remained the youngish adventurer from the late 1970s in the photo

on the book jacket of *Butterflies of Saudi Arabia and its Neighbours* (1984). But that photo captures very well the signature combination of diligence and irreverence that stayed with him throughout his life. It is the way I will always think of him, and I think he would be happy to know that.

Contribution by Gary Feulner

Underwater in a Wadi cont.

(Continued from page 4)

discarded after the metamorphosis into adulthood.

Other common residents were small schools of Water Boatmen, which are small predatory water beetles who swim on their backs, underwater. They collect air bubbles to breathe and are strong fliers. This was proved to me when I was about 10 years old and refused to believe my Uncle when he told me they had wings. To prove the point he drained his swimming pool onto the lawn and we watched the Water Boatmen fly back into the pool as he refilled it.

Above the water surface were plenty of Arabian Toads, Oriental and Yellow Wasps, small birds and Cicadas ringing out loudly in the now less green Oleanders. By this time it had become very hot and while heading back to the car I stumbled across a very disgruntled looking eagle, evidently an escaped hunting bird, who let me get so close I could hear it panting in the midday sun. It was clearly not having a good day.

Report and photos by
Peter Olliff



Field Clips

Turtles Released Back into the Wild



At 8am on Friday 5th of June the EMEG Reserve, in conjunction with the Turtle Rehabilitation Centre, released 5 rescued turtles back into the Arabian Gulf as part of this year's World Environment Day.

Many excited onlookers watched as the four Hawksbill and one Green turtle, all approximately 3-4 years old, were released after being nursed back to health.

The turtles had been found either injured, underweight and/ or covered in barnacles and put into care at the 'Turtle Warren' in the Burj Al Arab Turtle Rehabilitation Centre.

When they were brought into the Rehabilitation Centre, the turtles were freed of barnacles by plac-

ing them in 'sweet' water. Turtles can tolerate 'sweet' water, while barnacles cannot and they eventually release their grip on the turtles and fall off. This is done as manually removing barnacles can damage the turtle's shell.

Report and photo by Helga Meyer

Also in another bout of 'turtle releasing', the Jumeirah Group in association with the Dubai Turtle Rehabilitation Project (DTRP) celebrated this year's 'World Sea Turtle Day' on June 16 by releasing 45 turtles back into the Arabian Gulf from the Al Qasr Hotel beach.

Five of the turtles were satellite tagged to monitor their progress back in their natural habitat.

Beat the Heat this Summer!

Yes it's hot outside right now, but there are still a few places you can visit to get your 'Natural History' fix!

Sharjah Desert Park - Located past the cement factory on the E88/ Al Dhaid Road, the Sharjah Desert Park is a large complex housing the **Arabian Wildlife Centre**, a completely indoor zoo with many very well looked after reptiles, amphibians, birds, fish and mammals from across Arabia, the **Children's Zoo**, a small collection of farm animals where you can feed the resident camels, donkeys, goats and ducks, the **Sharjah Botanical Gardens**, with a wide variety of native plants and the **Natural History Museum**, complete with model dinosaurs.

Entry costs 15 dirhams and there is a great indoor local cafe in the Arabian Wildlife Centre that overlooks a large desert area with Onyx, Gazelles, Flamingos and many other larger mammals.

For more information please visit their website:

www.breedingcentresharjah.com/Wildlife%20Centre.html

Dubai Butterfly Garden - Next to the Dubai Miracle Garden, the Butterfly Garden is a collection of large air-conditioned domes, which houses a wide variety of butterflies from the Philippines and Colombia. There isn't any information about the butterflies, but the staff are surprising knowledgeable and even know the latin names of all their resident butterflies.

Entry costs 50 dirhams and there is a small indoor coffee and cake shop in the entrance to the Butterfly Garden.

For more information please visit the website:

www.dubaibutterflygarden.com

Ibn Battuta Mall - A shopping mall might not be on the top of your list for places to visit, but Ibn Battuta Mall has been designed to reflect the architecture of 6 areas Ibn Battuta visited: China, India, Persia, Egypt, Tunisia and Andalusia. Throughout the mall there are many displays detailing the travels of the famous Arabic traveler with some great illustrations, models and artifacts.

For more information please visit the website:

www.ibnbattutamall.com



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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. To find out more, please contact one of our Field Trip Coordinators.

DNHG Facebook

Come join our 730+ followers!

<http://facebook.com/DNHG.UAE>**Website Review: *iNaturalist******Confessions of a dysfunctional recorder***

Those of you who know me have surely realized that I am organizationally challenged. To put it bluntly, I am messy in thought and deed, easily distracted from routine or mundane tasks, allergic to paperwork, and constantly perplexed by others' obsessions with sorting, filing and accounting in areas where I find myself transfixed by shifting patterns and overlapping spectra in a million muddled shades that defy precise classification.

While this can have advantages when it comes to creative thinking, it is a major problem when I am faced with what to me is the monumental task of recording and organizing my natural history observations in a form that others might be able to reference and use. I have long sought tools to help me with this endeavour, all the more urgently since becoming Bird Recorder for the DNHG. It is therefore with some satisfaction that I can report I have recently found one such tool in the constantly evolving wiki-world of online common enterprise.

The resource I refer to is the "iNaturalist" website:

www.inaturalist.org

It is essentially an open-access database of natural history observations from around the world that is growing by the day as users enter their records. This is where anyone interested in natural history, from casual observer to professional researcher, may enter observations after signing up for free membership, regardless of location and whether or not they have been able to identify their subjects. Although not absolutely required, photographs and/or sound recordings may be added, and the site's computers can sync metadata on time and place from image and sound files so that there is frequently no need to enter these by hand. A request for help with identification may also be submitted, simply by ticking a box. The site also automatically creates a life-list of taxa observed for each user, and additional lists according to user specifications.

I have been enthusiastically submitting new observations to the site for the past few weeks, as well as gradually sending in my photo-records from previous months and years. The feedback I have received from the inaturalist community has been tremendous, first thanking me for posting observations from locations where they do not have many members active and secondly providing courteous and often expert assistance with identification problems.

Another outcome is that I have received requests to submit several of my observations to ongoing research projects that various users have established on the site, giving me the satisfaction of knowing that I have contributed to the advancement of knowledge about the natural world.

I believe this is a website that other DNHG members would find educational and useful and urge all to check it out.

*Review by
Tamsin Carlisle*

iNaturalist.org

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

**Please note there are no lectures scheduled for July and August.
Lectures will resume in September.*

Field Trips (Members Only)

Aug 21-27: Kyrgyzstan

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 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.