



GAZELLE

مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي



There was a Sand Boa who tried to swallow a Sparrow

During a picnic last month near the artificial lakes in the Bab Al Shams area, nicknamed Al Qudra Lakes, my family and I were fortunate to witness an amazing spectacle. In the loose sand under some nearby Ghaf trees we spotted an Arabian or Jayakar's Sand Boa (*Eryx jayakari*) who had just caught an unwary Sparrow. Unfortunately we didn't observe the actual catch, but the bird still looked very fresh.

The snake appeared unperturbed by our presence and we sat beside it, watching, as the Sand Boa wound itself around its prey and began searching for the bird's head from where it could start swallowing its meal.

The Sand Boa was approximately 40cm in length and made the Sparrow appear massive in comparison.



How could this small Sand Boa manage to swallow an animal much wider than its own head?

In typical snake-like manner the reptile dislocated its jaw and managed to engulf the bird's head. At a certain point we thought the bird's pointy little beak would puncture the snake's skin as it protruded from the inside.

The snake was clearly struggling to cope with its large prey and wound its body tightly around the bird to squeeze it into position. Again and again we heard the bird's delicate bones cracking under the snake's applied pressure.

After swallowing the bird's head we wondered if the snake's mouth would be wide enough to pass the bird's shoulders. The snake was already showing signs of exhaustion and it paused for several minutes before each new attempt to swallow its supper.

It was truly incredible to watch and it appeared the snake was going to succeed, but, after an hour of struggling, the snake eventually spat out the bird. It made a few chewing movements to interlock its jaw bones back into place and then effortlessly dived down, head

first, back into the depths of the loose sand, leaving behind the dead bird, with its head wet from 'snake juices'.

The Sand Boa had bitten off more than it could chew and left with an empty stomach.

Jayakar's Sand Boas are quite widespread throughout the Arabian Peninsula and presumed to be very common but, being nocturnal, they are rarely seen. It was the first time my family and I had seen one. During the day they bury themselves deep in the sand and come to the surface at dusk to hunt for prey.

They are not poisonous and kill their prey by constriction. Mainly feeding on small rodents, ground geckos and possibly worm lizards, the snakes submerge themselves in loose sand, with their eyes raised above the surface and lie in wait ready to catch any small creature that happens to pass, with a side-ward flick of the head.

Report and photos by Martina Fella

Inside this month

FT: Lost Chambers Aquarium

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Contributors

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

Martina Fella, Margaret Swan, Barbara Couldrey, Helger Meyer, Binish Roobas, Tommy Pedersen and Gary Feulner

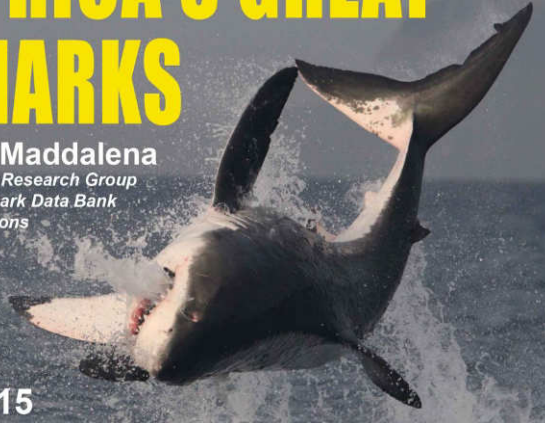
Announcements

Next Month's Speaker

SOUTH AFRICA'S GREAT WHITE SHARKS

Dott. Alessandro De Maddalena
 Member of the Mediterranean Shark Research Group
 Curator of the Italian Great White Shark Data Bank
 Collaborator of Apex Shark Expeditions

7.30pm
 Sunday 7 June 2015



The lecture lasts approximately two hours, and is accompanied by magnificent photographs taken during 16 expeditions that were organized in South Africa from 2010 with Apex Shark Expeditions. The lecture covers the following topics: biology and predatory tactics of the great white shark, field observations and cage diving in the False Bay, South Africa. The talk will be given in English. These lectures are part of a tour that so far had a total of 43 dates with an attendance of over 4,000 people.

Alessandro De Maddalena (Milan, Italy, 1970) is one of the world's foremost shark experts. He is a researcher, writer, illustrator and photographer. De Maddalena is an independent researcher, a collaborator for Apex Shark Expeditions, the curator of the Italian Great White Shark Data Bank, a founding member of the Mediterranean Shark Research Group, a Regional Investigator for the Global Shark Attack File, and an Ambassador of the Undersea Soft Encounter Alliance. He's the author of 19 books on sharks, 35 research reports and 78 articles in popular and professional magazines, published in 18 Nations. De Maddalena has hosted many Expeditions / Courses in Shark Biology in South Africa (operated by Apex Shark Expeditions), and Expeditions / Courses in Orca Biology in Norway (operated by Strømsholmen Sjøsportsenter). He has given lectures on shark biology at many universities, museums and diving associations around the world.

A Season for Goodbyes

Once again, summer will see the departure of several long-time, active DNHG members.

Susan Offerdahl will be headed to Myanmar to take up what is sure to be an exciting teaching opportunity in a country where there is once again reason for hope.

George and Gail Gordon will be shifting permanently to their retirement home in the Ebro Delta region of eastern Spain, itself a well-known natural history destination.

And **Barbara Couldrey**, although still regularly afoot in the mountains of the Musandam (see her report in this issue on Trumpeter Finches), will trade Ras al-Khaimah and her Bedu acquaintances for a flat in London. Barbara has very kindly left with us a number of out-of-print and hard-to-get local reference books from her collection.

We wish each of them well and we hope that the marvels of electronic communication will make it easier to stay in touch. We invite any other members who may be leaving to let us know their plans.

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.



DNHG FT: *Behind the Scenes at the Lost Chambers Aquarium*

On Saturday May 9, a group of DNHG member's went behind the scenes at the 'Lost Chambers Aquarium' at Atlantis on the Palm Jumeriah.

After dividing into two smaller groups our first stop was a noisy area of the very large 'Ambassador Plant Room'. Here, water taken from the sea goes through a complicated process to eliminate any risk of cross-contamination between sea and aquarium water. It is then filtered and any sand is extracted to ensure clarity before being used in the aquarium.



Zebra Shark eggs incubating in the hospital wing

From here our guide led us to a food preparation area, where 500 kilos of food is prepared each day for the aquarium's inhabitants. A large, detailed whiteboard indicates the quantities of food destined for different tanks. The food not only consists of fish, but cucumbers and other vegetables as well. Fish are monitored when feeding to make sure they are regularly eating, as this can be an indicator of good health.

We then entered the hospital wing, which houses coded tanks containing different aquatic species. Any newborns are brought here to prevent them from being consumed by

higher order predators. In the hospital wing we saw Zebra Shark eggs stored in racks, similar to oyster beds, and our guide explained that it takes 18 months for the eggs to hatch. The ones in the photograph have presently been incubated for ten months. In another tank were lots of baby jellyfish and our guide explained that lots of jellyfish in the sea indicates low oxygen levels.

Our next stop was the 'Ambassador Lagoon' aquarium, where a myriad of fish constantly swam around sunken 'artifacts'. Our guide explained that 95% of the inhabitants are from the Arabian Gulf and went on to say that divers regularly clean the inside glass of the aquarium, where the water is changed every hour. Quietly observing the graceful amblings of different species in the 'Ambassador Lagoon', an oxygenation system could be observed disguised as a large, ancient cauldron, sending out bubbles swirling towards the surface, like some fascinating underwater spell.

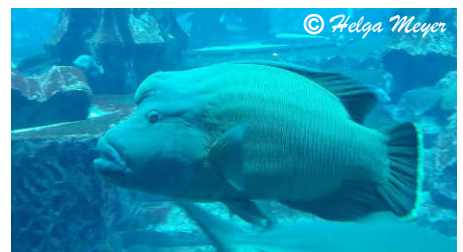
Water samples are constantly being taken for testing and later we saw this process being carried out by staff at the laboratory of the 'Marine Mammal Facility'. Dr. Anna explained in great detail the importance of monitoring all of the marine creatures within the Atlantis complex, where most of the water is kept at a constant temperature of 26.5 degrees, tolerable for all of their inhabitants.

Sean, an animal trainer at the facility, later explained that the fur seals, which had arrived from Germany, had adapted to the Dubai heat by having their pool temperature lowered. He also explained the differences between seals, fur

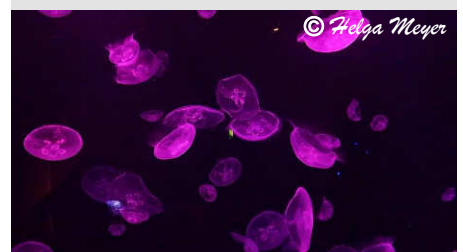
seals and sea lions and how relationships are built up with the mammals at the facility. Sean stressed how important it is to check the health and well-being of all water-based mammals.

We also learned that dolphins are trained to give blood and, in order to do this cooperatively, dolphins are taught to submit blood samples which are painlessly taken from a vein in their flukes. From around two to four years old dolphins start responding to a high-pitched whistle or 'bridge', which can be heard by the dolphins at the far end of the tank.

Report by Margaret Swan



Humphead Wrasse



Jellyfish



Bowmouth Guitarfish

Field Clips



A male Trumpeter Finch
at a Musandam spring

Trumpeter Finches

Barbara Couldrey reports seeing lots of pretty Trumpeter Finches (*Bucanetes githagineus*) in early April at a small man-improved spring on a hillside in the Musandam. Her photo, she admits, doesn't do justice to the salmon-colored beak.

This follows a January sighting by Binish Roobas on Jebel Qitab, in the Olive Highlands.

In both cases, the birds must have read the book (*Birds of the UAE*, by Aspinall & Porter, 2011), which says of their habitat, quite accurately: "Bare rocky and stony hillsides and wadis . . . ; visits pools and waterholes."

The trumpeter finch is still only poorly known locally. Aspinall & Porter add the note: "Nomadic. May breed [in] UAE."

Contribution and photo by
Barbara Couldrey

In Memoriam: Professor Loutfy Boulos (1932-2015)

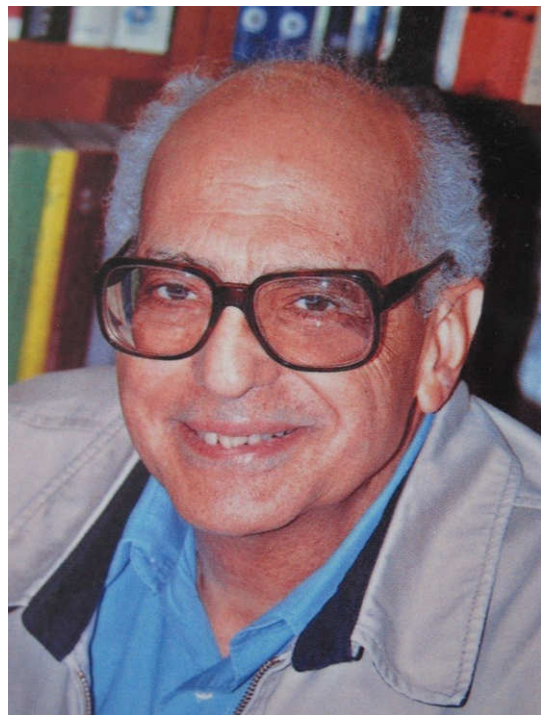
Prof. Loutfy Boulos, emeritus professor of botany at the University of Alexandria, Egypt, died in April 2015 at the age of 83.

A recognized leader in the field of plant taxonomy in North Africa and the Middle East, he received his M.Sc. from Cairo University and his D.Sc. from the University of Montpellier, France. Thereafter he was at various times a member of staff at the universities of Cairo, Libya, Jordan and Kuwait, and was responsible for establishing the national herbaria of Libya, Jordan and Kuwait, as well as the herbaria of the International Livestock Centre in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and the National Research Centre in Cairo.

He was the author of numerous scientific papers on the taxonomy of various groups of flowering plants and on the floras of North Africa and the Middle East. Among his reference works are *Medicinal Plants of North Africa*, *The Weed Flora of Kuwait*, *The Street Trees of Egypt*, *The Weed Flora of Egypt*, and his crowning achievement, the four-volume *Flora of Egypt*, published by Al Hadara Publishing, the last volume of which was completed in 2005. In retirement, he maintained a regular association with the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew.

Although he never conducted research of his own in the United Arab Emirates, his regional expertise made him one of the principal resources for taxonomic information and guidance to amateur botanists who led the early investigation of the flora of the UAE. At his death, his son remarked that the UAE specimens sent to him over the years for identification remained an important part of his personal herbarium.

In that role, he was a friendly but demanding mentor, first to Dr. Marijcke Jongbloed and later to myself



(through her introduction) in our efforts to explore the botanical diversity of the Emirates. ("Number your collections consecutively!" "Write your labels clearly!" "Don't abbreviate! – Does 'W.' mean 'wadi' or 'west'?")

In my own continuing field work in the mountains of the UAE, I have found *Flora of Egypt* to be the single most useful botanical reference in investigating problematic species, partly because of its extensive coverage (2125 species in 758 genera) and partly because of the decision to supplement that coverage with copious detailed illustrations, mostly by Margaret Tebbs.

With the passing of Prof. Loutfy Boulos, Arabian natural history has lost a most productive, cooperative and genial researcher and guide.

Contribution by Gary Feulner

DNHG Field Trip: Andaman Islands

The Andaman Islands sit across the Bay of Bengal from their parent India, closer to the coast of Myanmar and stretching north from Sumatra. Although the Andamans featured in one of the earliest of Arthur Conan Doyle's stories about Sherlock Holmes, they have generally been little heralded in the modern era, except among naturalists for whom remote archipelagos are certain to contain biological oddities and the lessons to be learned from them. Apart from rare plants and animals, the Andamans are still home to several tribes that have only limited (and too often bloody) contact with outsiders.

We based our week-long exploration at Wandoor, south of the capital at Port Blair. The surroundings of our modest resort offered the opportunity to observe many typical Indian Ocean wading birds, land crabs and also the endemic Emerald Gecko. But our very first twilight and evening on Wandoor Beach provided one of the natural history highlights of the trip: We 'discovered' the Yellow-Lipped Sea Krait (*Laticauda colubrina*) coming ashore by night to climb among the picturesque tangled driftwood where we ourselves had climbed by day.

The Yellow-Lipped Sea Krait is a venomous terrestrial snake that has partly adapted to life in the sea. It closely resembles the many bona fide sea snakes found in the Indian Ocean, being yellow with transverse black bands and a flattened tail. It has, however, retained many terrestrial ways. As a result, these snakes greatly perplexed the many experienced DNHG observers, most of



Yellow-Lipped Krait climbing over driftwood under the watchful eyes of DNHG naturalists



Floating up a mangrove channel (note Binish's Chalmers Engineering cap!)

whom "knew" that sea snakes are more or less helpless when out of the water.

On our second day we transited the length of South Andaman Island and crossed Middle Strait by ferry. The transit of South Andaman must be done in an escorted convoy to prevent unpredictable interactions with the tribal people, the Jarawa. Once across the strait we traveled by small boat up a mangrove channel, where we saw two species of mudskippers and a number of lizards, then hiked overland through mangroves and forest to a small cave in the limestone sediments.

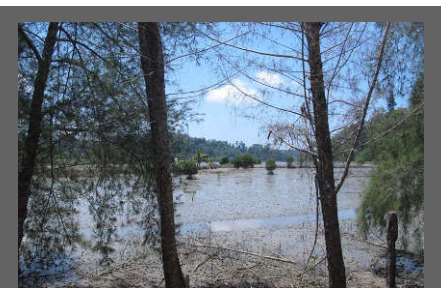
Other outings during the week included a mangrove tour and a birdwatching tour led by personnel from ANET (The Andamans and Nicobar Islands Environmental Team, Center for Island Ecology) and a visit to the last surviving sawmill and to the highest point in the Andamans, Mt. Harriet. The mangroves contained many mollusc species the same as or similar to those found in the UAE, but they were distinguished by a variety of different mangrove tree species – and by the presence of salt-water crocodiles. In several areas we could observe the residual effect of the 2004 tsunami.

Diving and snorkeling opportunities are strictly controlled but our snorkeling excursion on Jolly Buoy Island in the Mahatma Gandhi Reserve received rave reviews from the participants.

Nor did the trip ignore human history. The Andamans were a British colonial outpost, used as a port, a logging center and later as a penal colony for political prisoners. The Indian government continued the latter use for a number of years until it was finally abandoned. We visited an entertaining and informative sound and light show at Port Blair's infamous "cellular jail", and several museums told the story of the geology of the islands and the anthropology of the several native tribes.

All in all it was a diverse and very interesting week, for which we have our intrepid and indefatigable trip leader Binish Roobas to thank. (Binish has included a separate report on Andaman butterflies in this *Gazelle*.)

Report and photos by Gary Feulner



View of the mudflats from our resort



Field Clips

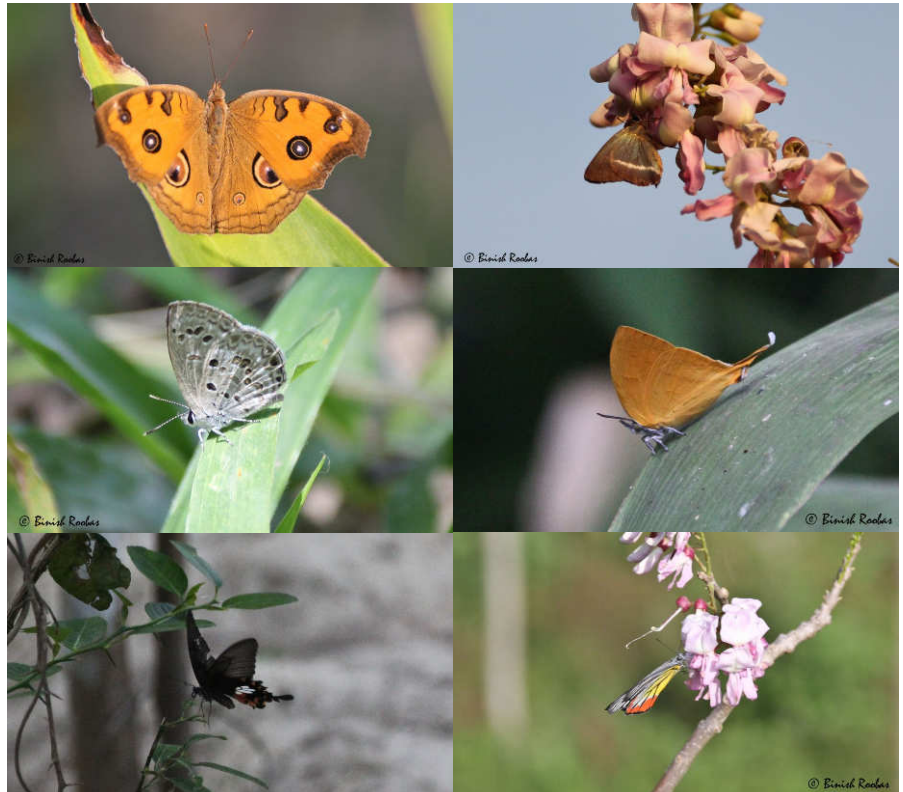
Butterflies of the Andamans

Butterflies are like flying flowers. Our recent trip to the Andaman Islands brought a number of butterflies to my attention.

The Andamans have over 200-plus species of butterflies with a lot of endemics. Most of the butterflies are related or similar to those of the Indian subcontinent and Indo-malayan species.

We noticed quite a number of butterflies in different environments despite our relatively short stay.

I managed to photograph a variety of butterflies which included; Common Dartlet (*Oriens goloides*), Common Pierrot (*Castalius rosimon*), Common Sailor (*Neptis hylas*), Common Snowflat (*Tagiades japetus*), Dark-Brand Bushbrown (*Mycalesis mineus*), Forget-Me-Not (*Catochrysops strabo*), Indian Common Line Blue (*Prosotas dilata*), Indian Cupid (*Everes lacturnus*), Pale Grass Blue (*Pseudozizeeria maha*), Plane (*Bindahara phocides*) and the



Clockwise from top-left: Peacock Pansy (*Junonia almana*), White Banded Awl (*Hasora taminatus*), Yamfly (*Loxura atymnus*), Painted Jezebel (*Delias hyparete*), Andaman Helen (*Papilio prexaspes andamanicus*) and the Lime Blue (*Chilades lajus*)

Pointed Lineblue (*Lonolyce helicon*).

Report and photos by
Binish Roobas

N.B. Keep an eye out for more of Binish's photos of Andaman's butterflies on the DNHG facebook page.

Eversmann's Redstart

It was recently brought to our attention that we had misidentified the pictured bird when posting to the DNHG facebook page.

Originally identified as a Red-tailed Wheatear we were quickly alerted that it was in fact a male Eversmann's Redstart (*Phoenicurus erythronotus*) in winter plumage, which is considered a rare migrant/ winter visitor to the UAE.

The photograph was taken by our current Editor in Zabeel Park early last November. Tommy Pedersen from www.uaebirding.com states 'It is a very rare bird to come across, and not seen in Dubai since 2011!' which shows the importance of sharing any observations you make out in the field for scientific recording.

In the summer Eversmann's Redstarts breed in the mountains of Central Asia and southern Siberia, reaching 5400 metres above sea-level. In winter some birds move downhill, while others migrate longer distances to Iraq, Iran, Pakistan and occasionally into eastern Arabia.



Since 2010 there have only been 10 recordings of the bird in the UAE ranging from Dalman Island, Abu Dhabi, Jebel Hafit, Wadi Bih, Jebel Jais, Masafi Wadi and now Zabeel Park.

During the summer Eversmann's Restarts mainly eat insects and swap to a diet of fruit and seeds during the winter months.

Contribution by Tommy Pedersen

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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 710+ followers!

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

DNHG Field Trip: *Kyrgyzstan 2015***DNHG Field Trip: Kyrgyzstan 2015**

Trip Leader: Binish Roobas

Dates: August 21-27, 2015
(7 days, Fri-Thu, plus arrival and departure flights)

Price* (10-12 pax): AED 2500 per person

Itinerary:

Day 1: (Thu-Fri, Aug 20-21): Thursday evening flight from Dubai (22:40). Arrive Bishkek 04:45 on Friday. Transfer to hotel. Excursion by car to the fishponds outside Bishkek to see birds. Stay in hotel.

Day 2: (Sat, Aug 22): Day trip to Ala Archa National Park. Hike to the waterfall, picnic lunch, stay in hotel.

Day 3: (Sun, Aug 23): By car to the yurt camp Tuura-Suu at 2200m, south side of Lake Issyk-Kul. Hike in the mountains, visit local shepherd, visit village, see birds, experience nomadic life.

Day 4: (Mon, Aug 24): Afternoon to Altyn-Bulak, yurt camp at the shore of Lake-Issyk-Kul, dry semi-desert area, swim or hike in the bad lands.

Day 5: (Tue, Aug 25): Visit Bokonbaevo to see felt making and meet Eagleman, then to Kyzyl-Suu to see how yurt frames and yurt decorations are made. Next to Chon-Kemin a valley at the border with Kazakhstan. Stay with a local family.

Day 6: (Wed, Aug 26): From Chon-Kemin back to Bishkek, on the way stop to visit the Burana tower, remnant of a town at the Silk Road. Stay in hotel in Bishkek.

Day 7: (Thu, Aug 27): Day to visit Bishkek, do shopping, visit the Osh bazaar, farewell dinner and concert on traditional instruments. Evening checkout and early morning departure to Dubai (05:55). Arrive Dubai 08:15 on Friday, Aug 28.

***Price includes everything, except: flights, visas, bottled beverages, personal expenses, insurance, lunch on free day, and tips.**



**For more information and sign-up contact
Binish Roobas: johanruphus@hotmail.com.**

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

June 7: Dott. Alessandro de Meddalena: South Africa's Great White Sharks

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

Field Trips (Members Only)

June 5-13: Slovenia

June 13: Visit to Sharjah Aquarium and Sharjah Maritime Museum

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.