



# GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

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**Contributors—**

Thanks to the following for their contributions this month:

*Angela Manthorpe, Gary Feulner, Margaret Swan, Peter Hellyer and Nick Cochrane-Dyet,*

**For inclusion in the next Gazelle, send your contributions to:**

[gazelleeditor@gmail.com](mailto:gazelleeditor@gmail.com)



*Visit Sharjah Aquarium and meet this Anemonefish, endemic to the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. Living amongst the tentacles of a sea anemone in a symbiotic relationship, this small fish bravely stands guard!*



**The weird and wonderful sand around Snoopy Island**

**S**ummer in the UAE and when it gets too hot to hike, I turn my attention to scuba diving. We have a variety of habitats to choose from here; many head to the East Coast where the water is cooler and sites have abundant coral growth and a wide variety of fish. I do the majority of my dives on the wrecks off Dubai and Sharjah where, in depths of 20 – 25m, the soupy water reaches 35 – 36°C, and a few times a year I take overnight dhow trips to the



## Announcements and Recorders

### Monthly Virtual Speaker Information

Sunday, 13th September, 2020, at 8pm via Zoom

**Speaker:** Alan Stephenson

**Lecture Title:** Managing Wildlife in Dubai

Alan Stephenson will present a short talk on Managing Wildlife in Dubai, UAE. He was with the Cape Department of Nature Conservation in Grahamstown, South Africa, He studied Nature Conservation Management and completed an MSc in Zoology. In 2011 he accepted a post to manage wildlife for a member of the Ruling Family in Dubai.

This lecture will present a facet of UAE life and culture that many of us have heard about, but that very few of us have been exposed to at first or even second hand. The practice of keeping wild and exotic animals in zoos, collections or reserves, whether public or private, has a long history. As just one example, giraffes and many other large African animals were presented as gifts to the Emperor of China as much as 600 years ago.

In recent decades, however, the practice of keeping wild animals in captivity has become the subject of sometimes impassioned criticism, for a variety of reasons. Nevertheless, both public and private zoos, etc., continue to receive official and institutional support in virtually all jurisdictions – also for a variety of reasons, and backed by demonstrable public interest.

In relation to our upcoming lecture (and all DNHG lectures), members are reminded that it is not the intention of the DNHG to either endorse or criticize any institutions, groups, individuals, practices or points of view, but – as always – to try to bring you authoritative information that you might not readily encounter elsewhere, especially relating to the natural environment, history and culture of the UAE. We appreciate the willingness of our speakers to share their knowledge and expertise with us, and the time and effort they devote to doing so.

### Chairman's Message

We are very pleased to be back in touch with DNHG members after a summer hiatus. The pandemic prevented us from conducting our normal monthly lectures during the spring months, but we have tried to stay in touch through the *Gazelle*. In addition, the DNHG Committee has been active over the summer, with the result that **we can now offer a program of virtual monthly lectures for the new season beginning in September, on our usual Sunday evening schedule.**

In consideration of the restrictions on our lectures and field trips due to COVID-19, **all members who were paid up for 2019-2020 will be automatically renewed for 2020-2021**, without a renewal fee.

**Please refer to the announcement above about our September lecture**, and to the calendar on page 8 for October and November presentations. **Virtual attendance will require advance registration. Please refer to the procedures set out at page 7.** We hope that these will be familiar to most of you. Specific meeting information will be sent to all registrants.

Most of the DNHG Committee is present in the UAE and has shared the experience of the pandemic and lockdown with most of you. The exceptional rainfall of the past winter and spring have been a boon to UAE plants and animals, but travel restrictions have limited active natural history investigations, so **we welcome reports of member observations, even those made in your homes and gardens, including queries about what you have seen.**

We hope that members and their loved ones have weathered the pandemic without illness and with a minimum of disruption, but we know that economic and practical considerations have led to the departure of a number of families and individuals from Dubai, either temporarily or permanently. To all of them we wish a safe and comfortable landing.

I would like to express my thanks as Chairman to the current members of the DNHG Committee, whose dedication during the present adversity has preserved the efforts by so many of our predecessors over the years. We look forward to resuming the DNHG's customary activities at the earliest opportunity. We all owe thanks as well to the UAE and Dubai authorities, whose decisions have so far helped to minimize the potential public health impact of the pandemic in a country whose demographic challenges are unique on a world scale.

Gary Feulner, DNHG Chairman

### DNHG Recorders

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# Spotlight!

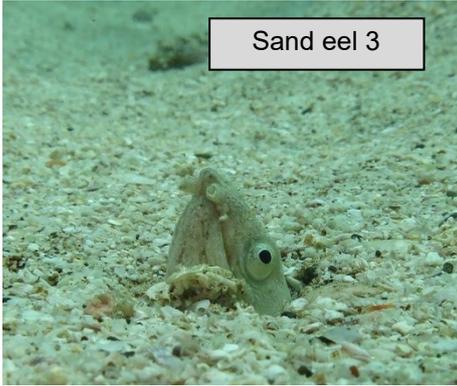
## Submerged Sand Dwellers at Snoopy Island, by Angela Manthorpe (watch some of these creatures in action on our [facebook page](#))



Sand eel 1



Sand eel 2



Sand eel 3

Some of the discoveries Angela found whilst scuba diving around Snoopy Island, Fujairah. They accompany the article on pages one and four.



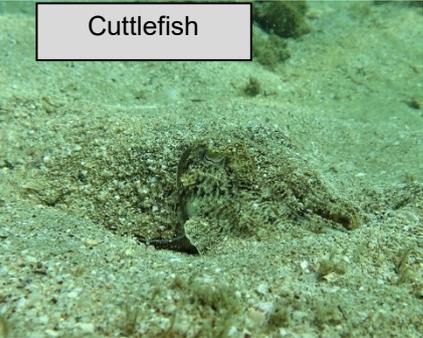
Hermit crab 1



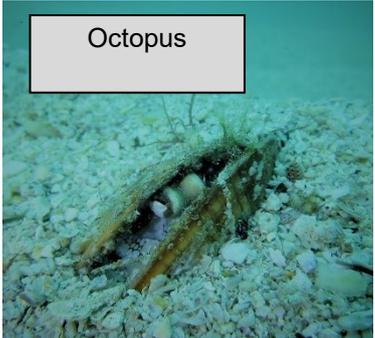
Hermit crab 2



Porter Crab



Cuttlefish



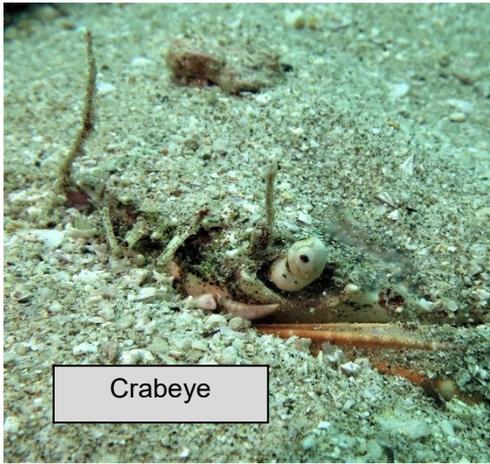
Octopus



Swimmer Crab



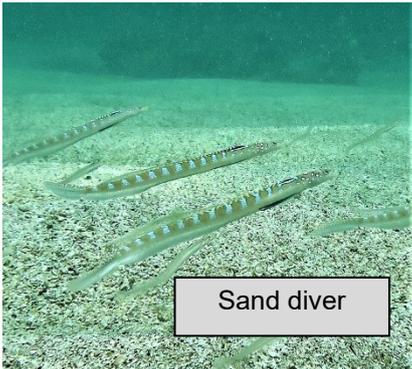
Sand lizard fish



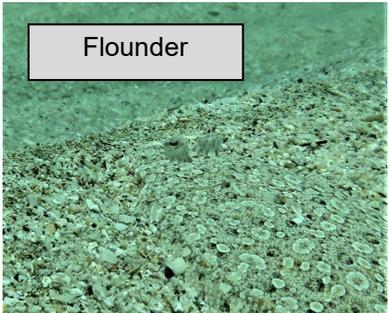
Crabeye



Six-spot Goby



Sand diver



Flounder



Moses sole

# Field Clips

(Continued from page 1)

Photographs relating to this article can be seen on pages one and three

Musandam.

This year has been a bit different of course. Covid-19 restrictions have stopped us launching boats, the border with Oman has been closed and the dhow trips cancelled, but, as a result, I've been spending more time exploring the shallows of Dubai and Fujairah. My favourite site is Snoopy Island, opposite the Sandy Beach motel in Fujairah and, during August, I dived there 3 times, spending over 9 hours underwater.

Snoopy is great for snorkellers and divers alike. The rocky island provides sanctuary for numerous colourful fish – sergeant majors, sohal surgeonfish, big green broomtail wrasse, parrotfish, mullets, orange spot trevally and snappers. If you're lucky you might see cuttlefish, moray eels, a turtle, a ray or maybe even a shark. But I like meandering over the sand next to Snoopy, looking for the things that don't really want to be seen – the ambush predators, the shy, the unusual and the camouflaged critters that go about their business in an unobtrusive way, sometimes under the surface. My dives have yielded a wonderful cast of characters; here are some of the best:

## Snake eels

I've got used to seeing 3 different species of snake eel. They're not snakes, but marine fishes with a pointed tail that they use to burrow backwards into the sediment, leaving only their head protruding. And there they sit, trance-like, ready to ambush fish and crustaceans that venture too close. I find them intriguing and one day I'm going to park myself next to one and see if I can catch it catching dinner.

## A cornucopia of crabs

The comical crabs of Snoopy are diverse, opportunistic and have perfected numerous ways to hide. Hermit crabs protect their soft abdomens inside hand-me-down gastropod shells and the anemone hermit crab adorns its shell with sea anemones. Living in symbiosis, the crab is protected by the stinging tentacles and the anemone gets carried around to food sources. They must have a penchant for different anemones as I've spotted 2 types – Photo 1 shows the common, large anemones, and Photo 2 shows the crab hosting a smaller species.

Porter crabs – until this summer I'd never spotted a porter crab (Dorippidae) in the UAE. These crabs have modified fifth legs with a hook at the end that enables them to carry around other organisms such as upside-down jellyfish and fire urchins as camouflage. I spotted a live sand dollar on the surface and, thinking it was unusual, as they are normally just under the sand, I picked it up and was amused to find a crab hanging on the underside in a really determined way.

Blue swimming crabs – *Portunus armatus* - they bury themselves during the day and come out at night to feed. They

are spectacularly entertaining underwater – flattened hind legs make them speedy swimmers and they dance around brandishing red-tinged pincers. I can't help it, but I usually scream if they lunge in my direction. The one shown here was easily the largest I've ever seen with a carapace of 15-20cm in width, but with only one eye. I assume it has fought many battles.

## Discrete cephalopods

Cuttlefish are really common on Snoopy island and I spotted them on all 3 dives, often in pairs. This particular one was sitting quietly on the sand and would occasionally flick its mantle to bed down even further under cover.

Finding an octopus was a real highlight! In over 20 years of diving in the UAE I've only spotted one other octopus. This little fellow had found a home within the 2 halves of a colourful bivalve but I spotted its eyes poking out as I drifted past.

## Fish that don't want to be seen

Sometimes you have to stalk your prey. On my first dive I caught sight of a fish diving into top of the sand ridge and sitting with only its eyes poking out. It wasn't until my third dive that I took a photo that enabled me to identify the sand lizard fish.

Gobies – around Snoopy there are many gobies that live in symbiosis with shrimps and you see them sitting at the entrance to the burrow on look-out duty as the shrimp busies itself with the housekeeping. But my favourite is the six-spot goby, seen here in a pair. They are very nervous, and were ready to dive into their burrow – shown bottom right – if I made a sudden move.

Sand divers – another first sighting this summer was the elegant, almost ethereal sand diver. Make a sudden move and they...yes you guessed it...dive into the sand. When the coast is clear they seem to emerge on mass. The colourful males have spectacular, sinuous fins.

Leopard flounders and Moses sole – both are flat fish and well disguised on the sand, but the eyes of the leopard flounder are more prominent and can swivel almost 180 degrees, giving it excellent all-round vision; the skin looks like it's painted with flowers.

Scorpion fish – are masters of camouflage on the reef, blending seamlessly into the rocks, so why-oh-why do I keep finding them sitting on the sand?!

I could go on at length about the great array of invertebrates – the predatory gastropods, the tube anemones, sea pens, sand dollars and nudibranchs, but if you'd like to see my other interesting finds, why not follow me on Instagram @wideeyedwonderworld.

You'll also find a few video clips from these dives on the [DNHG Facebook page](#).

Contribution by Angela Manthorpe

## Field Clips

### Old and new

During October last year, the DNHG visited the Sharjah Aquarium and the adjacent Maritime Museum. At that time, members enjoyed being taken there on the air-conditioned ferry from the mouth of the Creek, passing the newly-established fish market, aptly named the 'Dubai Waterfront.'

Unsure if the ferry service was back to normal, the two of us decided to go by car earlier this month. We saw different things on the way, both old and new.

The website stated that the Aquarium opened at 2pm on Fridays and we found this to be a quiet time of day, both on the roads and at the aquarium. On entering, and being subjected to the familiar body temperature check, we walked around this well-maintained aquarium. We wondered what the fish thought of these strange, mask-wearing humans. I noticed that the touch pool was dry and cordoned off, probably because of Covid risk.

Sharjah Aquarium is unique in that the marine species here are all from the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. Some creatures can be seen by individuals when snorkelling or diving, as described in Angela Manthorpe's article on page one.

If readers are planning a visit soon, go to the aquarium first, as the museum next door does not open on Fridays until 4pm. The entrance ticket for the Aquarium also includes entry to the Maritime Museum next door. This is also worth a visit. The exhibits there provide a fascinating timeline of seafaring in and around the Gulf. Timewise, it will take around 40 minutes in each building, to see everything. There is a small café offering a limited menu at the aquarium, where free internet is also available.

It is always worth checking online for opening times, as museums have shorter opening hours during the summer months and during the holy month of Ramadan.

*Contribution by Margaret Swan*



Modern art structures welcome visitors to the Sharjah Aquarium (above). Tall, modern buildings can be seen in the distance.

In the photo below, fish traps are created with wire. Fishing boats are also seen here at the marina, near the Sharjah Aquarium.



Leaving Dubai, we noted the current progress of the 'Museum of the Future'. Here, modern building materials allow for unusual designs, whilst displaying traditional design on the façade.

On arrival at the aquarium car park, we saw that traditional building materials, such as the coral, stockpiled below, is being used for a restoration project. In contrast to the elliptical shape of the shiny building above, this building has a solid, low-rise shape, blending into its surroundings.



The new fish market in Sharjah reflects traditional design below, in this long building, using modern materials. We only drove by but assumed that the interior would be air-conditioned, unlike its open-air predecessor by the side of the busy road, now demolished.



## Observations and Research

### Recalled to Life: Recent UAE Mammal 'Re-Discoveries'

Newcomers to the UAE, both laymen and academics alike, often make the mistake of thinking that little or nothing is known about "wild" areas of the UAE, or the plants and animals that are found there. In fact, a great deal of work has been done to catalog the biodiversity of the UAE, beginning in the 1970s and continuing into the 1980s and 1990s, culminating in published guidebooks, checklists and Red Lists. Many of those resources, unfortunately, have been eclipsed if not forgotten in the digital era.

More recently, field work in the 2000s revealed much of the tremendous diversity of UAE insects and other arthropods. In the past decade, molecular genetic techniques have allowed cryptic species to be recognized and described from among the UAE's reptiles (including snakes, geckos and agamas). Throughout, the number of bird species recorded in the UAE has continued to increase, and the same is true for records of marine mammals in UAE waters.

For terrestrial mammals, the situation has been more equivocal. Blanford's Fox was recognized in the Hajar Mountains in the mid-1990s and the Arabian Tahr was confirmed there at the same time. The Arabian Jird was distinguished as an independent species in the past decade (see the April 2020 *Gazelle*). But several larger mammals such as Striped Hyena, Indian Crested Porcupine, Honey Badger (or Ratel) and Arabian Leopard were all generally thought to have become extinct in the UAE by the early 2000s, if not before.

Records of two of those species in the past few years – the **Indian Crested Porcupine *Hystrix indicus*** and the **Honey Badger or Ratel *Mellivora capensis*** – confirm that they have in fact survived, although apparently only in very small populations that warrant their UAE designation as Critically Endangered. Those re-discoveries are briefly described here for the benefit of members who may have missed the original good news – and as a reminder that surprises still await attentive observers.

A localized population of Indian Crested Porcupines was recognized in 2015 by researchers from Wadi Wurayah National Park. Camera trapping in the foothills near the periphery of the park confirmed an earlier speculative sighting. Subsequent interviews with farmers in a neighboring community revealed that the animals in that area had been known to them, and tolerated, for more than 30 years. A couple of years later, a second small community of porcupines was reported by a team of researchers from the Environmental Agency – Abu Dhabi (EAD) near the coastal promontory of Mirfa, in the western region of Abu Dhabi, again adjacent to modest cultivation. The latter sighting is arguably susceptible to explanation as the result of escapees from a private collection; however, it is consistent with an anecdotal record from western Abu Dhabi in the 1960s by Arabian oilman and herpetologist John Gasperetti.

Globally, the Indian Crested Porcupine ranges from central India northward to the "stans" of Central Asia and westward to the Levant, including the northern Arabian Gulf coast, with isolated populations in Yemen, Dhofar (where a quill was found during a DNHG visit) and central Oman. Its IUCN conservation status globally is Least Concern.

The Honey Badger has a broad global range from India through Arabia to most of Africa, and it occurs in a wide variety of habitats. For that reason it is classified as Least Concern

globally. However, it is evidently very rare in the UAE and, although it is currently classified as Data Deficient, it is likely to be under threat in the modern era. Records exist from both western Abu Dhabi and from low elevations in and around the Hajar Mountains. Tracks were found in western Abu Dhabi in the 1940s (these are believed to have been mentioned by Wilfred Thesiger) and as recently as 2010. Tracks were found in the Sweihan area in the mid-1990s, where they were associated with attacks on occupied collecting traps set out for small desert mammals. In 2005, three specimens (one alive, two dead) were reported from near Ruwais.

In the Northern Emirates, sightings have been mentioned to me by experienced naturalists over at least two decades, although never published, from the Hatta area and (in 2016) from further north along the western flank of the mountains. In the latter instance the animal was seen not long after dark, feeding in a trash area at the edge of a popular picnicking site, close enough to a human observer to be illuminated by the dome light of his vehicle, through the open door.

*Contribution by Gary Feulner*



**Indian Crested Porcupine *Hystrix indicus* (Photo Credit: Tierpark Hellabrunn, München, Wikimedia Creative Commons)**



**Honey Badger *Mellivora capensis* in Howletts Wild Animal Park, Kent, England (Photo Credit: C.T. Cooper)**

# Announcements



## DNHG Zoom virtual meetings—guidelines and protocol

Members may already be familiar with the way Zoom operates, as this is a popular platform adopted by several schools for distance learning. The DNHG has also adapted to this new, virtual world and will start the new season with online lectures.

The first meeting will be live online at 8pm on 13th September, 2020. In order for this to prove successful, some guidelines need to be followed:

The moderating host will admit registered participants into the meeting at 8pm. Prior to this, you can click on the Zoom link to be admitted into a virtual waiting room.

To avoid the 'boomerang' effect, all participants will be muted. Please do not un-mute yourself whilst the speaker is addressing the audience.

Should you wish to ask questions at any time during the meeting, these can be sent to the moderator in a private chat. The questions will be collated by the moderator and relayed to the speaker at the end of the meeting.

If there is sound interference through your laptop or 'phone, plugging in headphones or earbuds will help.

In the speaker view above, live chat comments from the chat room pop up just underneath the speaker's face. To avoid this distraction, comments can be turned off. A helpful video is provided by Zoom for those unfamiliar:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygZ96J\\_z4AY&feature=emb\\_rel\\_end](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygZ96J_z4AY&feature=emb_rel_end)

More details about how to register for the first DNHG virtual meeting will be sent to members via email.

## Sightings requested

It will not come as a surprise to readers of 'The Gazelle' that a lot of exotic birds and other animals have been introduced to the UAE. Some of the bird species have established large and growing self-sustaining populations, often posing a threat to our own native fauna.

Less well-known is the scale, and potential impact, of the introduction of other animals. Amongst these, palm squirrels are probably the species most often seen, since they have established themselves widely on both the Arabian Gulf coast and the UAE East Coast.

A much larger animal is now being reported, however, and this note is an appeal for any sight records to be submitted.

The species is the Patagonian Mara, Patagonian Hare or Dillaby, native to Argentina, where it is classified as 'Near Threatened' by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, IUCN.

Resembling a large jack-rabbit, the Mara has distinctive long ears and long limbs. According to Wikipedia, "Its hind limbs are longer and more muscular than its fore limbs and it has a longer radius than humerus. The feet are compressed, making them hoof-like. The fore feet have four digits while the hind feet have three digits. Its tail is short, depressed, and hairless. It has a gray dorsal pelage with a white patch on the rump separated from the dorsal fur by a black area. In addition, the mara has a white underside with a somewhat orange flank and chin. The average Patagonian mara has a head and body length of 69–75 cm (27–30 in) with a tail of 4–5 cm (1.6–2.0 in). It weighs 8–16 kg (18–35 lb)."

So—large enough not to be missed!

Mara have so far been seen in the Al Qudra area of Dubai and also on Saadiyat Island, adjacent



Photo taken by  
Nick Cochrane-Dyett

to Abu Dhabi. So far there have been no indications that they are breeding. Since they are said to prefer temperatures of around 20 degrees Celsius, they may find the UAE unsuitable! However, because of their size, they have no natural predators.

We would like to hear of any other sightings, preferably with a GPS location, to plot current distribution, particularly any records of parties of adult and young animals.

Records of any other mammals, whether wild, feral populations or newly-introduced species, are always gratefully received.

Please forward sightings to the following two people:

Peter Hellyer [peterhellyer@yahoo.com](mailto:peterhellyer@yahoo.com)

Jacky Judas [jackyjudas@gmail.com](mailto:jackyjudas@gmail.com)

*Contribution by Peter Hellyer*



## Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) Programme

Monthly lectures are presently transmitted via Zoom, starting at 8.00pm

**13 September:** Alan Stephenson will present a virtual illustrated talk on 'Managing Wildlife in Dubai'

**Scheduled Field Trips (Members only):**

The DNHG field trip program has been temporarily suspended in compliance with UAE coronavirus precautions, which are still in force.

## DNHG COMMITTEE 2020

When possible, please contact committee members outside office hours

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## DNHG Membership

DNHG membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at Dh100 for families and Dh50 for singles. Membership for the current year is valid from September 2020 to September 2021. In consideration of the restrictions on our lectures and field trips due to COVID-19, **all members who were paid up for 2019-2020 will be automatically renewed for 2020-2021**, without a renewal fee.

New members can join by (i) sending to the Membership Secretary (see above) a completed one-page membership form, which can be downloaded from our website ([www.dnhg.org](http://www.dnhg.org)) and (ii) making payment to our Emirates NBD account by cash deposit or transfer from your bank or ATM, using our IBAN number:

AE640260001012012013302. However, this process does not always identify the payer. So if you wish to pay by cash deposit, please also photograph or scan a copy of your payment confirmation and send via e-mail 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.