

# GAZELLE

Vol. 13 no. 6 - June 1998



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

**DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP**

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

## Members' News

Spring has been the season for sad good-byes. We must now report that former Chairman and current Speaker Coordinator **Jim Footitt** is leaving Dubai this month to take up employment with a Singapore-based company in Brunei. Jim expects to return to Dubai at least once or twice between now and Fall, when **Stella Hart** will join him in Brunei.

This is a great loss to the DNHG, but we hope it will be Jim and Stella's gain and that they will have time to enjoy the tropical bird life and other natural history of Brunei (and maybe host DNHG visitors). Jim has bought new bird books already.

**Mike Lorrigan** and **Tess Kazim** braved May heat to explore Wadi Bih and traverse the high pass and terraces at Aqabat on the way to Dibba. The track was still washed out in Wadi Khabb Shamsi on the Dibba side in early May, however.

Even worse, their rented 4WD (which shall remain nameless) suffered two flat tires in Wadi Khabb Shamsi. Mike and Tess got a ride out with sympathetic visitors, but had to leave the gear-laden 4WD in the wadi and make arrangements for the rental company to retrieve it. Despite Mike's sensible insistence, the company first sent a saloon car for this job, which not surprisingly was unsuccessful.

Vice Chairman **Valerie Chalmers** lectured in May on UAE fossils to the Emirates Natural History Group in Abu Dhabi, emphasizing the Cretaceous fossils of Fossil Valley near Al-Ain.

For those who may want to contact **Carolyn** and **Dieter Lehmann** in Florida, their address is: 2630 Parisian Court, Punta Gorda, Florida 33950, USA, tel: 001-941-637 5457, e-mail: lehmc@yahoo.com.

Former members and Committee members **Angela** and **Stephen Manthorpe** visited in May from Jakarta to augment their scuba instructor qualifications. Their situation in Indonesia is uncertain in light of political events there, and so they are considering the possibility of an impromptu round-the-world tour.

Thanks to **Rod Fox** for his contribution last month which allowed many birders, including *Gazelle* editor **Neil Curtis**, to see the yellow billed storks at Dubai Creek. Rod has also agreed to fill the now vacant Bird Recorder slot, so we hope to be hearing from him more regularly (and, of course, he hopes to be hearing from you too).

**Barbara Couldrey** is proud to report that Al-Rawi, the English language newspaper of the Higher Colleges of Technology (with which a number of DNHG members are associated), has introduced a 'green' column. In the April issue Barbara herself contributed an account of a weekend hike across the mountains from RAK to Dibba, via Jebel Qi'wi (1735m).

Another of those leaving us will be **Ian Robson**, our former Field Trip Co-ordinator. Ian and Heather and family will be returning to the U.K. at the end of June. Ian will be working there on a construction project at one of Britain's nuclear power plants - perhaps an opportunity to watch accelerated evolution in action.

### This month's contributors

The editor would like to thank the following members for their reports:

Gary Feulner  
Theri Bailey  
Barbara Couldrey  
Geni White

Why not send in your own contributions? e-mail [neilc@emirates.net.ae](mailto:neilc@emirates.net.ae), or fax committee members on the numbers shown inside.



## Members' Night Remembered

Thanks to our Members Night speakers: Stephen Green, speaking on land snails, Tony Johnston, with a tour of the Musandam, Colin Paskins, who shared his collection of cone shells with us, and Diana Darke, who introduced some of the archaeological sites of the UAE.

It was encouraging how the speakers managed to involve the audience, especially the handouts to go with the snails and the shells presentations, and Tony's slides of the Musandam made many of us dream of an escape from the summer heat. It is particularly worth noting that all of them had the courage also to share with us some of what they did not know, in addition to occasional setbacks in the field. This keeps it interesting, and gives hope to the rest of us.



**Winter in the Ru'us al Jibaal: Shihuh tribesmen encountered on an outing earlier this year, when the weather was still cool enough to allow climbing to high altitudes. Unfortunately, trips to the more remote areas, such as the mountains or the open desert, are more than most of us will be able to manage for the next couple of months over the summer. In consideration of the heat and**

**the school vacation period, the DNHG field trip schedule will not resume until late September, probably with a birding trip to sample the Fall migration.**

**However, watch your newsletter, as members may yet wish to initiate suitable Summer trips such as museum visits, morning beachcombing or fossiling, etc.**

## Traveler's Advisory

While it's probably a little hot to be setting off immediately, the name 'Masirah' crops up often enough to warrant a mention – particularly if you're planning a trip once the summer period is over.

*Gazelle* editor Neil Curtis visited Masirah Island, lying about 20km off the eastern coast of Oman, during March this year, and reports that the geography of the island makes a visit outside of the cooler months look rather a daunting prospect. While the extreme north of the island has a small and rather bustling town, Helf, the rest of the island is extremely dry and barren, with almost no vegetation or shelter from the sun.

While Masirah is a major attraction for shell collectors, this particular trip proved somewhat of a

disappointment, and very few shells were collected. While this may have been due to tidal or weather conditions, collectors are advised to seek information from experts before departure on which beaches are likely to yield the riches finds.

The island is reached by ferry from the tiny port of Shana'a, and the one and a half hour ride costs OR10 for smaller cars and OR15 for 4x4's and trucks. There are up to 4 ferries on the route, but sailings only take place at high tide. Be warned that a rather haphazard system of filling the boats is operated, and early arrival is advised. Furthermore, cars, trucks and lorries are packed tightly on the ferries (such that room is not even left to close the ferry gates), and 'intervention' may be required to avoid scratches and dents. There is a graded track

around the entire island (4x4 only), and it is easy to find campsites.

The journey to Shana'a can be undertaken around the edge of the Wahiba Sands – quite an adventure in itself – or via Sinaw and Hayy across the vast gravel plains. A surfaced road is now approaching completion, but weather conditions can still be treacherous. While the author had a beautiful drive in March '98, Michael Jennings (*The Phoenix, No 14, Dec 1997*) reports terrible weather conditions across the south of Oman during his March '97 expedition – including four days marooned on the gravel plains by floods from Wadi Halfayn and Wadi Adnan.

*Report by Neil Curtis*



## More on Wadi Snails

Stephen Green and son Adam, fresh from finding a totally new wadi snail near Hatta, arranged a visit to a wadi near the popular Khudayrah Pools to collect a snail believed to be *Bulinus wrighti*, first observed in this area only a year ago by Chairman Gary Feulner. This snail is known from the Jebel Akhdar and from Yemen, where it is considered a host for the parasite that causes bilharzia. Specimens were spotted and collected by sharp-eyed Adam and will be sent to the Natural History Museum in Britain for positive identification. For reasons so far undetermined, the snail is present only in the upper reaches of the wadi, far from any human presence or activity. *Report by Gary Feulner*

## Snake Swallowing

Gary Feulner reported in last month's *Gazelle* that he had recently taken a calculated risk in photographing a viper swallowing a toad, based on the conventional wisdom that a snake, once it has begun to swallow, cannot easily reverse the process. It may be that this photo session involved more risk than calculation, since Andre Mader, the reptile expert at the new Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife, pointed out that he has seen vipers regurgitate their prey very rapidly indeed. *Report by Gary Feulner*

## Swimming Vipers

It is part of the conventional wisdom that the local mountain vipers do not swim or enter the water, and there is certainly much observational evidence to support this behavioral generalization. However, like all generalizations, it may not always hold true. Stephen Green sat down one recent weekend to rest from the summer heat beside a narrow rivulet in the shade of a wadi cliff, only to realize that he had seated himself next to a carpet viper. Steve hit the 'eject' button immediately, leaving behind two of the deepest heelprints ever seen,

while the snake shot off in the opposite direction, crossing about 18" of water to reach the relative shelter of the wadi wall, although it had a clear path along the length of the wadi. Several observers watched the snake for a while, as it sought an easy passage back across the stream. Finally it headed for a small silty promontory covered by some debris, but to reach this it had to swim for somewhat more than its body length, which it did by making two vigorous sidewinder-type motions. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Giant Waterbug

[to be supplied by Stephen Green]  
*Report by Stephen and Adam Green*

## Giant Mud Creeper

The giant mud creeper, *Terebralia palustris*, is alive and well in the UAE. This heavy and distinctive snail, shaped like a tall cone, was eaten by the prehistoric inhabitants of the UAE and its broken shells are a common feature of coastal archeological sites from the 5th through the 1st Millennia. It is also known from raised 'fossil' beach deposits. However, despite the interest of both archeologists and local shell collectors, no demonstrably recent shells are known and only a single live specimen has heretofore been reported from the UAE in modern times, at Khor Kalba. Thus it was with some surprise that Gary Feulner recently happened across a large and apparently healthy population of hundreds on the East Coast near Khor Fakkan, in an open concrete storm drainage channel subject to tidal inundation. Maria and Bill Larkworthy subsequently braved the heat to make more detailed observation and measurements. Descriptions of the typical habitat of *T. palustris* have emphasized an association with mangroves, but it appears that a simple estuarine environment may be sufficient. This could have implications for the paleo-reconstruction of the natural environment at relevant archeological sites. Further investigation is eagerly awaited. *Report by Gary Feulner*

## Mountain Scorpion Identified

Approximately 14 species or subspecies of scorpions are known from Arabia. In the UAE, studies of desert areas by NARC have identified 6-7 species, but it was considered that more remained to be identified from mountain areas. Recently, photographs of a large and accessible specimen permitted the identification of *Buthotis jayakari* in the mountains of the East Coast of the UAE. This is a relatively large scorpion (up to 8 cm) with a red-brown body and yellow legs and tail. It was known to occur in the mountains of northern Oman and Dhofar, and has since been seen at Jebel Hafeet as well. *Report by Gary Feulner*

## Dubai Fish Farm Off-limits

Neil Curtis confirms the experience of other DNHG members this Spring that the Dubai Fish Farm, a popular birding site adjacent to a palace near Dubai Creek, is now effectively off limits to casual birders. Recent visitors have routinely been requested to leave, always politely but always firmly. It's no longer sufficient to explain that you're just watching the birds.

The good news is that it is apparently possible to obtain a permit to visit. We hope to be able to provide details in the future. (By way of compensation, Neil reports seeing three gazelles running wild in the scrubland behind the ponds as he trudged towards Khor Dubai after being moved on 23<sup>rd</sup> May – presumably escapes from the palace.)



## Weekend trip to the Musandam February 1998

Twelve members set off on an overnight trip with Northstar Expeditions, travelling in their Discovery cars to Khasab via Ras Al Khaimah. After an al fresco lunch at a Khasab restaurant, where we noted that the local flies seemed to prefer vegetarian dishes, we took a boat trip among the fjords. Sadly, there were no sightings of sharks, whales or porpoises, which apparently come in closer when the sea is warmer.

However, at Telegraph Island – now uninhabited, but previously a British signal post – we did see spectacular corals and fish. Also, although we could not land to identify them, the island's vegetation clearly supported many butterflies, and we spotted a single immature heron. We landed at an uninhabited beach, where the shellers scoured the sands for new finds, which included two good specimens of *Cypraea carneola*.

After a relaxing barbecue dinner and a good night's sleep at the Khasab Hotel we drove out next day into the hills around Jebel Hareem, reaching around 2,000 metres. At that height we noted painted lady *Vanessa cardui*, an unidentified bug and an unidentified spider. The spider was photographed by Luban Mrhac, who later considered its red spots to be parasitic tics.

Overall the weekend was extremely enjoyable, with good group interaction and many spectacular mountains. The amount of photographs taken constituted somewhat of a competition, with Mrhac Luban leading Katrina Lynes by a spectacular 112 frames to 97.

Report by Geni White

Northstar Expeditions can be contacted tel: 328 702

## Whale-Watching

Several DNHG members joined a mid-May dhow trip organized by the ENHG of Abu Dhabi to travel offshore to the edge of the continental shelf in the Gulf of Oman in hopes of seeing cetaceans (it's the season) and unusual seabirds.

The weather was hot but otherwise auspicious for the voyage. Unfortunately the only whales seen by most participants were the gunwales, although a small group at the stern reported a spinner dolphin. However, we did see several somersaulting rays (who knew they did this?), several large sea turtles and one brightly patterned small one, several sea snakes, some tiny 'flying fish,' some larger jumping fish and some small jellyfish, as well as several small hammerhead sharks in the fish souk at Dibba.

A number of birders added ticks for Audobon's shearwater, red-billed tropicbird and abundant bridled terns, all seldom seen from land.

Thanks go to organizer Steve James of Abu Dhabi. A copy of his excellent cetacean identification materials has gone to the DNHG Library.

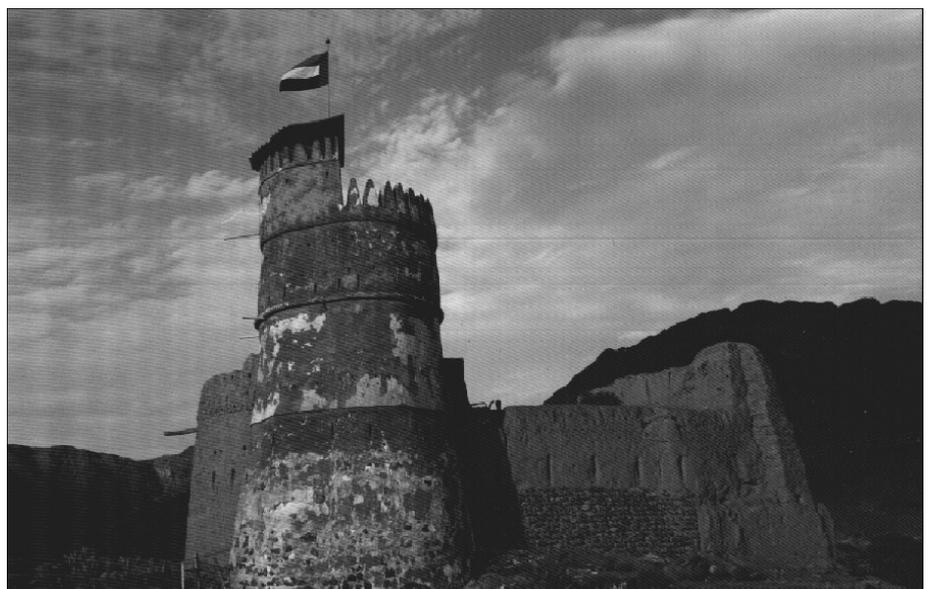
## Photo Reference Collection

The DNHG Photo Reference Collection continues to grow. Special thanks are due to the following for their recent contributions: Luban Mrhac (squash bugs, isopods), Geni White (sea snake), and Gary Feulner (beetles and more dragonflies).

## Heavy Duty Tow Ropes

A heavy duty tow rope can be a valuable off-road asset. Ordinary tow ropes from the automotive souk will not always do the job to pull a vehicle out of sand or mud, or off the top of a dune if it has bellied out with wheels in the air.

Heavy duty tow ropes, both braided and strap style, are available ready-made at certain Dubai hardware stores. A Dubai manufacturer of lifting cables also does an occasional business in custom made 12-ton towing cables for vehicular use. Chairman Gary Feulner will be happy to provide details. An additional tip: make sure that the hook or other fastening on your towing cable fits the towing ring(s) on your vehicle.



Bitnah fort in the evening light: one of the photos on the DNHG Web page - see for yourself at [www.GoDubai.com/dubai\\_history.html](http://www.GoDubai.com/dubai_history.html)



## New Recorder appointed

We're pleased to welcome Rod Fox this month as new recorder for bird life in and around the Emirates. We look forward to reports from Rod in coming issues of Gazelle, but for this we rely on you too - please send your bird reports to:

Rod Fox (Bird Recorder) data:  
tel: 608-7634 (ofc)  
tel: 365178 (res)  
fax: 668552 (ofc)  
e-mail: foxline@emirates.net.ae

## Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

Archeology - Diana Darke  
(483 017)  
Seashells - Sandy Fowler  
(res 442 242, fax 442 242)  
Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi  
Geology - Gary Feulner  
(res 3065570, fax 313371)  
Fossils - Valerie Chalmers  
(res 494 816, fax 452 727)  
Insects - Gary Feulner  
(see above)  
Mammals - Marijcke Jongbloed  
(off 311 411, fax 311 000)  
Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi  
Plants - Valerie Chalmers  
(see above)

Reptiles - open  
(please contact DNHG Chairman if you are interested in filling this post)

The recorders are not necessarily scientific experts in their designated fields. In fact, most are not. However, they are interested and knowledgeable amateurs - please contact them if you have any interesting reports or queries.

The intention is that information will

## Bird

—INSECT—  
—REPORT—



Please send your Insect reports to Gary Feulner

## Insect Menagerie

In addition to her gifts to the DNHG library, Carolyn has left behind her collection of unusual local insects, for donation to a suitable institution or collector.

These include such specimens as the Locust Terror *Prionyx crudelis*, a large black wasp that follows and preys on locusts flocks (and is able to fly off with large locusts); the Polkadot Antlion *Palpares cf. dispar* which looks like a large, spotted-winged dragonfly; *Acanthophorus arabicus*, a robust 9.5cm desert beetle with sturdy jaws; and a 9.5cm stick insect, *Phasmida* sp.



**Underside of Plain Tiger, *Danaus chrysippus chrysippus* on *Rhazya stricta* near Jebel Rawdah. For an interesting report on this species, see the latest issue of *Tribulus*, Bulletin of the Emirates Natural History Group.**

—SHELL—  
—REPORT—



Please send your Shell reports to Sandy Fowler

## More on Ras Ghantoot

On the coastal environment field trip to Ras Ghantoot in May, one small but unusual gastropod, found alive, initially stumped both trip leader Dick Hornby and our own, experienced Maria Larkworthy.

This has subsequently been identified as *Viriola corrugata* (Family Triphoridae). Dr Hornby has kindly provided a full list of finds (2 pages) that is available from the Chairman on request.

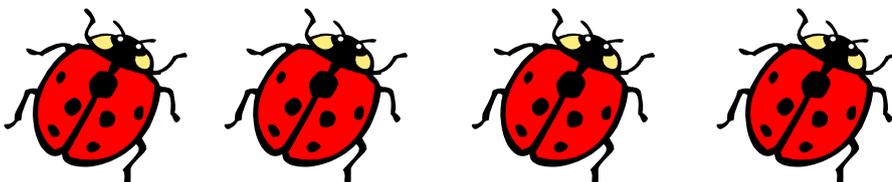
## DNHG Donates Seashell Collection

The DNHG has donated a very attractive and educational seashell collection to the Jumeirah English Speaking School (JESS) in appreciation for their giving us a home at an affordable rate for many years.

The collection contains multiple specimens of more than 60 varieties of shells and represents the very conscientious and creative efforts of Committee member Dr Sandy Fowler. Such was Sandy's dedication that when he found the spaces for the shells were larger than his collection's ability to fill them, there was only one solution - to go out and collect even more

It is intended for hands-on use and demonstrates the complementary aspects of the natural world - beauty and diversity combined with order and comprehensibility.

Members who have seen the collection have asked how they too can get one. Thanks also to Ian Robson and Al-Futtaim Tarmac for constructing a case for the display.





## ERWDA research on dugong in UAE waters gets under way

Tony Preen, a leading world expert on the endangered dugong, has arrived in the UAE to conduct a preliminary study on dugong in UAE waters with the staff of the Marine Environmental Research Center of the Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency, ERWDA.

Based on this study and his fourteen years of experience, Preen will also assist ERWDA's researchers to design a more long-term research programme on these important sea creatures. The dugong, known locally as 'baghr al bahr' or the 'sea cow', can grow up to three metres in length and weigh up to 500 kilogrammes. It is the only marine mammal that feeds on vegetation, in fact exclusively on sea-grass.

It is very little studied, firstly because in the past they have been excessively exploited for their meat, oil and hides and secondly because dugong are difficult to observe in the wild, being very shy animals that only surfaces to breath for 1-2 seconds every few minutes. Found only in the Indian Ocean and the south-western Pacific, the dugong population resident in the shallow waters of the western UAE is believed to be one of the largest surviving populations anywhere in the world. Its protection is therefore essential.

Other populations of dugongs are found off the coast of Queensland, and other parts of northern Australia. The populations have been extensively studied by Tony Preen, who is based at the James Cook University in Townsville, Queensland. Preen's expertise has brought him to Arabia before when he studied dugongs in the Gulf and Red Sea in the 1980s.

To assist in this programme, ANZ Grindlays Bank, headquartered in Australia, has donated a satellite transmitter to ERWDA. It is intended that the transmitter will be one of several used, at a later date, to help determine the movement of the dugong.

*Report submitted by e-mail by Theri Bailey*

## Crown of Thorns Starfish in Oman

Correspondent David Nam of Sultan Qaboos University recently passed along the following marine life message:

"I went to the Daimaniyat Islands [off the Batinah coast north of Muscat] to survey the Crown of Thorns Starfish outbreak. In the area where we went we saw 100 in a 30-metre dive. All the table coral at 4-8 metres was dead, and they were feeding at the 8-10

metre depths. They had had an outbreak of the COTS in Oz many years ago and they still haven't fully recovered from its devastation.

"We saw a huge pod of spinner dolphins on the way to the Daimaniyats, several pods totaling about 500 according to the marine biologist with us. We had them at the side and bow of the boat, and with the sun behind us and clear ripple free water, it was a sight to behold. You could even hear them speaking to each other. They were launching themselves out of the water and spinning right beside us, an amazing experience."

*Report by Barbara Couldrey*

## Library Report

### History of Masirah Island

A benefactor who wishes to remain anonymous has donated to the DNHG Library a copy of a manuscript history of Masirah Island, Oman, with an emphasis on exploration and natural history, by a Mr Colin Richardson (no relation to our own Colin Richardson of UAE birding fame).

The manuscript relates what is known of the early history of the island from limited archeological investigation and from Greek and Arabic historical references. The latter half of the manuscript deals with 20th century events, mostly involving the British military presence, and concludes with a brief account of Masirah's use as a staging point for the ill-fated American attempt to effect a military rescue of American hostages held by Iran in the wake of the latter's revolution.

### Microcosmos

Michel de Martigny has donated a video of Microcosmos to the DNHG Library. This film, an award-winner at Cannes last year, was photographed with a specially designed camera and covers a day in the life of the denizens of a meadow in the French countryside. The effect of extreme close-up photography is remarkable in its ability to 'humanize' the cast of tiny invertebrate characters as they go through their daily routines.

True to the dictates of modern cinema, the screenplay includes a mix of action (a wrestling match between stag beetles), love interest (a passionate embrace between land snails), comedy (slapstick pratfalls by various beetles), and natural disaster (a rainstorm). And despite the fact that the UAE is very far from being a French meadow, many of the invertebrates shown are close relatives of ones that can be found in the UAE, e.g., the *Argiope* spider, swallowtail butterfly, whirligig beetle, ladybird and praying mantis, among others.



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Member at Large	<b>Sandy Fowler</b>	442 242	no calls pls	442 242

## More on Snakebites

A second recent snakebite report emphasizes the need to treat local snakes with respect, and highlights the potentially serious problem of internal bleeding. Peter Rothfels of Al-Ain, our April speaker on stone arrowheads and tools, was taught as a youth how to handle snakes. However, he admits he was out of practice when, a few months ago, he tried to pick up an immature viper he encountered in a mountain wadi by grasping it behind the broad, triangular head. The small snake (most likely a carpet viper) was able to turn and bite him on the finger.

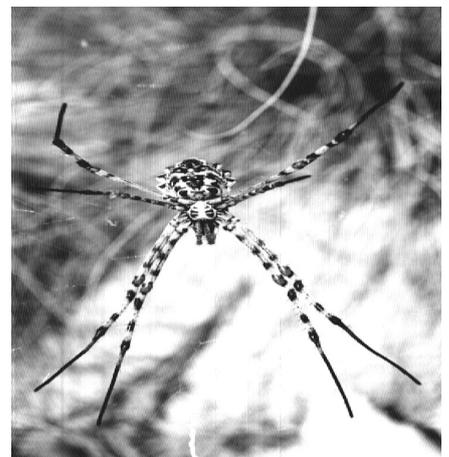
Peter was not overly concerned and continued the day's activities with his children, but by evening, about 8 hours later, he noticed that the swelling was spreading up his arm and that there was acute localized swelling in the form of a discolored lump on his leg about the size of a

tennis ball. At that point he paid a visit to the hospital. Only then, as well, did he begin to experience pain and headache.

At the hospital an EKG and blood tests were administered. The medical staff were very concerned because the blood tests showed significant impairment of clotting. Antivenom was administered immediately and Peter was put on a continuous intravenous drip to restore coagulants. During this time it was insisted that he should remain very still, as motion could trigger internal or external hemorrhaging that could lead to death. Fortunately this treatment was effective and Peter was back in action the next day, but it cannot be recommended to follow his example.

A recent item in National Geographic magazine also observes that animals bitten by snakes sometimes bleed internally because the venom contains an anticoagulant. For this reason medical researchers have analyzed snake venoms in search of a drug that would prevent blood

clots that can trigger heart attacks. A major drug company has credited investigation of a protein found in the venom of the sawscale viper, a local species, with allowing it to design a drug that may save thousands of lives a year. For snakebite victims, however, this is one more reason to take matters seriously.  
*Report by Gary Feulner*



## Dubai Natural History Group Program

DNHG will take a break during the summer vacation period. We will, however, publish a July/August issue of *Gazelle*, which should reach members in late August, so we urge those of you who are here to keep in touch with news and observations.

Our monthly lectures and field trip schedule will resume again in September, and we look forward to seeing you all again then:

### Lectures at Jumeirah English Speaking School, 7.30pm for 8.00pm

- Sep. 13:        '**UAE Birdwatching**' - Colin Richardson  
Oct.  4:        '**The Reluctant Lepidopterist**' - Dr. Michael Gillett  
Nov.  1:        '**Floral Environments of the UAE**' - Benno Boer

### Field Trips - further details to be announced (DNHG members only, please)

Early September: Fall Birdwatching

from:    **D.N.H.G.  
P.O.Box 9234  
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UAE**

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Title Surname  
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