



GAZELLE

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مجموعتنا دورية للتاريخ والطبيعي

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Contributors—

Thanks to the following for their contributions this month:

Roxanne Whelan, Lamjed El-Kefi, Angela Manthorpe, Ulrike Andorff, Alexis Biller, Binish Roobas and Gary Feulner.

Send in your contributions by 25th May, for the attention of the:

gazelleeditor@gmail.com



Himalayan Butterfly Visitor

Garden Watch!



This Hoopoe, one of a pair, was seen on 28th April.

See inside for more garden observations that took place during this month.

The periodic rains of the past fall and winter, which have continued into spring, may prove to be the heaviest since the record-setting years of the mid-1990s. That may be an inconvenience to city-dwellers, but it presents a tremendous opportunity for naturalists because the rain promotes exceptional plant growth, which in turn is a boon to local fauna.

Not only are plants and animals more abundant overall; there is also a greater opportunity to see rare species, many of which exist near their margins of tolerance in the UAE climate and thrive only in wetter years. In addition, a number of flying species, including butterflies, dragonflies and grasshoppers (and probably many others) are opportunistic migrants, visiting the UAE when times are good.

This latter phenomenon is believed to account for the UAE's latest "new" butterfly, the Indian Fritillary (*Argynnis hyperbius*), which was 'discovered' in Wadi Wurayah National Park (WWNP) in mid-February by DNHG Insect Recorder Binish Roobas, during the course of an invited visit to update earlier surveys of WWNP's already

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Announcements, Errata/Update and Recorders

**Monthly Speaker—Sunday,
3rd May, 2020, 7.30pm for 8.00pm**

Lecture Title: "Sharjah Strandings response on marine turtle threats and program: Insights on mortality factors."

Speaker: Fadi Yaghmour will co-present with Fatin Samara and Isra Alam

With five years of experience in conservation and wild-life management in critical marine habitats of the Sharjah emirate, Fadi's work has focused on providing advisory support for the local governmental leaders as well as identifying and filling gaps in the scientific literature to support evidence-based conservation action on threatened marine fauna. As the research team leader for the east coast chapter of the Environment and Protected Areas Authority scientific research department, Fadi has lead the development, management and maintenance of the Sharjah Strandings Response Program which has facilitated research, rescue and rehabilitation of sea snakes, sea birds, cetaceans and sea turtle throughout Sharjah waters. Using this program, he is currently leading several research projects focused on the ecology, natural pressures and anthropogenic threats of marine turtles which aim to

MEETINGS ARE CANCELLED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE

A correction...or should we call it...an update

In the February edition of *Gazelle* I reported having spotted a Libyan Jird (*Meriones libycus*) in the Sharjah desert. Paul Vercammen, Director at Arabia's Wildlife Centre Sharjah Desert Park, kindly pointed out 'there are no Libyan jirds around Sharjah Desert Park' and that our jirds 'are all the endemic Arabian jird *Meriones arimalius*'. Apparently the local species was distinguished from the Libyan Jird more than a decade ago and it's now considered that the Libyan Jird is restricted to the west of its formerly recognised distribution, mostly in North Africa.

Similarly, several years ago, when reporting the snake bite which resulted in my impromptu hospital visit, I identified the culprit as the Oman Carpet viper *Echis coloratus*, only to be told that, due to a name change, it was in fact *E. omanensis* which had bitten me.

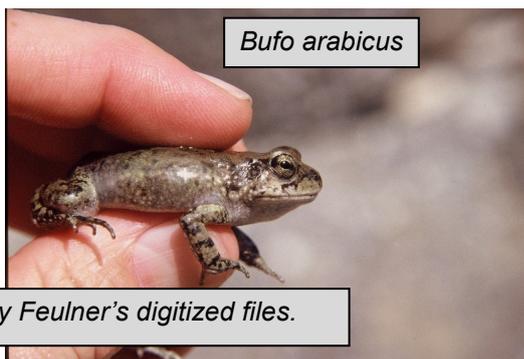
On both occasions, the reference books and source materials that I used were out of date. These episodes highlight the difficulty, particularly for amateur naturalists, of staying up to date with the latest scientific research, especially taxonomic nomenclature. There are many reasons why trying to put a name against what you saw is fraught with difficulty. Here are a few:

1. Names change

Take the 2 species of toad that we find in the UAE. They used to be called *Bufo arabicus* (and before that *B. orientalis*) and *Bufo dhufarensis*. You will find those names used in *The Emirates: A Natural History*. Research continues however, and scientists' understanding of the relationships to other organisms



Bufo dhufarensis



Bufo arabicus

These photos are from Gary Feulner's digitized files.

DNHG Recorders

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moves on. After several intermediary name changes, the toads are today classed in two different genera - the Arabian toad (*Sclerophrys arabica*) and the Dhofar toad (*Duttaphrynus dhufarensis*). [See *Gazelle* for [September 2015](#) and [March 2016](#).] Even well-established names sometimes change: The venerable "Acacia" is now officially to be called "Vachellia" everywhere outside Australia.

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Spotlight on the ‘Nesting Instinct’

Purple Sunbird Nest in a UAE garden, by Lamjed El-Kefi



“Hummingbird” nest in the garden!

The nest must have been ready sometime in March. We discovered it with the two shy chicks in early April but I had no clue about the parent bird who could make such a sophisticated nest! I was amazed and surprised to see it made from used, recycled material. I made a simple hide and started taking photos of the heads of the chicks. They did not look like any particular kind to me.

There are a couple of Purple Sunbirds (*Cinnyris asiaticus*) that are familiar with our garden and I made a few trials in taking their pictures when they were humming over the flowers of Aloe Vera. Purple Sunbirds are seen in pairs, feeding chiefly on nectar which they take from flowers whilst hovering like hummingbirds. (They will also take insects, especially when feeding their young.) To my surprise I saw our familiar "hummingbirds" coming and feeding the nest! So I set out to take as many photos as I could to capture the nest with the parents. The photos above show their work.

Contribution by Lamjed El-Kefi (with thanks to Panos Azmanis for bird identification).

Editor's Note: Lamjed also sent a video of the mother feeding the chicks, which cannot be shown here but can be seen on our [facebook page](#). Sunbirds are just as happy building their nests on terraces, as can be seen in this previous edition ([on page 3](#)) by [Sonja Lavrenčič](#).



One of the parents



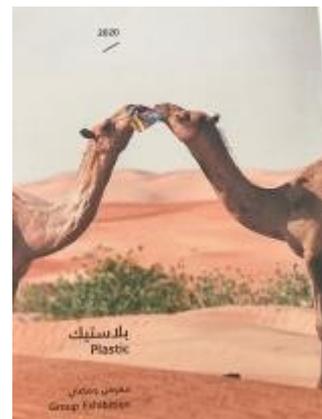
Stone the Crows!

A pair of White-eared Bubluls (*Pycnonotus leucotis*), residing in a Jumeirah garden, started nesting soon after their fledgling had been killed by the large number of neighbourhood crows.

Unfortunately, nature took its course, as the crows were still keeping an eye on developments. All three chicks were taken, once they had fattened up.

Contribution by Margaret Swan

DNHG Member Gosia van Unen organized a trip to the Tashkeel “Plastics” Exhibition in early March - photos by Alexis Biller



Field Clips

(Continued from page 1)

well-documented plant and insect diversity.

The Indian Fritillary is common in the Himalayan regions of Northern India, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nepal, and it has been found in southern Iran, but at least a small number have also managed to make their way to WWNP, where Binish was able to photograph both a male and female of the species at two sites. These records may also be the first for Arabia.

The Indian Fritillary, especially the female, shows some similarity (mimicry) to the conspicuous but toxic resident butterfly known as the Plain Tiger (*Danaus chrysippus*). That resemblance helps to protect it from predators, but also disguises it from scientific observers. In WWNP it was first seen flying among a group of Plain Tigers, and it was distinguished only by small differences in size, color and its behavior in flight.

Most likely this 'new' species is an opportunistic migrant that arrived from populations in southern Iran to take advantage of favorable conditions created by abundant rainfall in the Hajar Mountains from October through March. In fact, small numbers have probably done exactly the same thing in earlier 'wet' winters over the past several decades or longer, and simply escaped notice by observers who might have recognized it. At least a couple of other rare, northerly butterflies were also found in unusual abundance in UAE mountain areas in February.

The Indian Fritillary is most at home in somewhat cooler surroundings, so it is unlikely that it will remain for the UAE summer, but it is nevertheless a pleasure to welcome this attractive butterfly and add it to the UAE list, which now numbers 58 species.

Contribution by Gary Feulner

Photo: Indian Fritillary (*Argynnis hyperbius*) male basking in Wadi Wurayah

Vivid Red Starfish at the East Coast

In March, after some thunderstorms and heavy wind storms mainly from the west, the currents of the Indian Ocean brought beautiful red starfish onshore at Al Aqah. With the help of the latest guide book "Echinoderms of the Sultanate of Oman" by Michel Claerebout the starfish was identified as "*Asterodiscides elegans belli*, Rowe, 1977" which Michel confirmed. According to Michel's guide book, this species has only been observed a few times, in the deeper water near Bandar Al Kayran and in the Daimaniyat Islands. So the find of 5 "*belli*" is rather extra-ordinary on a small stretch of sandy 3 km beach, within a period of 2 weeks. The diameter of the pillow-shaped starfish is 9 - 18cm long; its poorly marked arms are



characterized by a pair of distinctive overdeveloped plates at the end of each arm. The ones found were in the range of 10 to 14cm. The fresh ones are deep red. Once ashore the red gills start to turn orange, which is also the remaining colour when dried. One does not need to travel far to experience nature at its best.

Stay safe!

Contribution by Ulrike Andorff

Field Trips

Malaise Trap Sample Sorting (IEW Weekend)

The malaise trap in Wadi Shawka (more specifically a smaller tributary named Wadi Qinan) is a joint research project between Dr Brigitte Howarth (Zayed University) and RAK Wildlife Project. It has been in situ in Wadi Qinan since October 2015 and, by changing the bottle every two weeks (even during the hot summer months), we now have over 100 samples. The aim is to see what species are present, and how the abundance and diversity change seasonally, in a wadi environment.

Analysing malaise trap samples is no easy task. Once we collect the sample bottles, they are added to the research collection and safely stored in bottles of 70% ethanol for future sorting and identification. For those who are not so fond of

your sample down to <math><5\text{mm}</math>. Taking regular breaks from the microscope is the only way to keep your eyes focused. Once you get your eyes trained, and sorting through many samples, you tend to remember what you have seen before or what might be considered most interesting. I try and take many photos with a macro lens or through the microscope to record what is in each sample. Every sample is different and differs over the seasons and will produce many new records for the UAE, and maybe even for science! At the moment, our aim is to sort, with identification coming later. We have some exciting news from Wadi Qinan we hope to share by summer and will keep you posted..!

Contribution by Roxanne Whelan



An example from the sorting process (NB Not from Qinan)



A Hymenoptera (wasp) through the microscope



Each blue box is 1mm. Yes, we keep the body parts, too.

insects, once you have them under the microscope your love for them will grow, trust me! The colours, spots and strips, wing venations and tiny little hairs are fascinating. It has been a steep learning curve over the last couple of years to learn the different insect groups.

The first and most important task after adding the sample into the database, is to create museum-grade collection labels so that each specimen can be referenced to the collection date, collector and GPS co-ordinates. The samples are also analysed by Brigitte and Zayed University students. The majority of specimens are kept in small tubes with 70% ethanol, but some can be dried and pinned with the expertise of Brigitte.

When I start sorting a sample, I tend to go by size, and then by order (Hymenoptera, Diptera, Lepidoptera et al.). For example I will start removing the largest specimens by eye and if there is only one of each kind they go in their own tubes. If I then start seeing the same 'species' or those that are very similar looking I will separate them into their own boxes (to be added together in a tube later). Sometimes, one box is an Order e.g. Hemiptera, and from there I will remove all of the Cicadidae (family), and so on. I also always make sure even if I know a specimen's Order by eye. I put it under the microscope to check there are no other miniscule flies or moths tangled up in their legs, which is often the case.

More often than not, there will be more than one of each, and this sorting and separating continues until there are only <math><1\text{mm}</math> wasps and springtails left! It does get quite difficult once you get



A cuckoo wasp, only 3mm.

Field Clips from the East Coast

Portugese Man of War

On one of my walks at the end of February along the Indian Ocean at the East Coast an unusual looking jellyfish attracted my attention. From research I learnt that it is a "Bluebottle" or also called "Portugese Man of War". When floating, it resembles a bottle or an old Portugese man-of-war ship with its sails up. Despite not having a cannon on board, this animal has a vicious sting leaving red welts wherever a tentacle touches the skin. It is actually not a jellyfish but belongs in the order of Siphonophores, i.e. a colonial individually very small, predatory animal that reproduces asexually through a budding process. The scientific name is *Physalia utriculus*.



The Bluebottle has a gas filled air sac known as a pneumatophore which is muscular and bilaterally symmetrical. It has a ridged, curved and tapered shape with the tentacles at the thick end. This keeps it afloat, resulting in movement through the wind by acting as a sail moving them down wind at an angle. The tentacles have large numbers of stinging cells on them which are similar to a tube. These tubes have a mechanism to pump poison through its sharply pointed end. The Bluebottle is a carnivore and enjoys small fish or plankton. Among their predators are Sunfish and loggerhead turtles. The Bluebottles usually live offshore in very large groups, so even surprising to find a single one on the beach. Though, strangely enough, another one was discovered just a km south on the same beach stretch 2 weeks later. Watch out... you can get stung on the beach as the tentacle, even if broken from the body, will still have the ability to sting for a long period of time. Once stung, immediately get the tentacle off you, best without touching it. Remove the large quantities of the minute stinging cells tubules (0.001 mm in diameter) with a sharp object such as a broken shell piece and then wash with sea water. The pain will start to ease after 15 minutes. The unusual shape invites you to step on it like on a bubble-wrap, but indeed not recommended, especially not with bare feet and in shorts.

Contribution by Ulrike Andorff (Editor's Note: I believe that applying vinegar or even urine eases jellyfish stings)

Paper Nautilus at the East Coast

Walking the beaches at the East Coast has been a regular pleasure since I have moved to this spot almost 3 years ago. Adding to Sonja Lavrencic's report about her unexpected large numbers of paper nautilus finds at the West Coast in the end of December, we have been wondering for years about the absence of these treasures at the East Coast. It was explained with the rougher Oman Sea in comparison to the Arabian Gulf and the mainly rocky shoreline from Qidfa to Dibba minimizing the chance of beaching.

At the beginning of April, I was utterly surprised and overwhelmed with joy to find 11 fresh, completely intact *argonauta hians* (Lightfoot, 1786) over a span of four days. One of them still had the dead octopus attached to it, the eggs were visible inside, and another two also showed egg remains, suggesting that they came ashore with the last tide. three *argonauta hians* are of a remarkable dark brown colour, the ridges with pointed tubercles in black. Two nautilus each measure 130 mm/140 mm in length and 80 mm/90 mm in height, making them not only the largest in my collection but also supersedes the length of 90 mm as published in D. Bosch's "Seashells of East". The smallest paper nautilus measures 50 mm long and 30 mm high. An additional five slightly damaged, though all of good size, were found at the East Coast during that period.



The question arises why were they found this year at the East Coast? Besides Sonja's assumptions, several reasons are suggested:

1. the Oman sea was extremely calm during the period enabling the *argonauta hians* to float ashore smoothly;
2. the tide schedule was favourable;
3. with the COVID-19 restrictions, the beaches were much less frequented, campers were completely absent, and less SUVs speeded along the shorelines avoiding destruction of the shells;
4. last but not least: it is about "to be at the right time at the right place". This season was indeed phenomenal for beached *argonauta hians* in the Northern Emirates.

Contribution by Ulrike Andorff



Errata/Update

(Continued from page 2)

2. New species are recognised

Sometimes, species that we thought were the same are subsequently recognised as two or more different species. Physical or behavioural differences can be extremely subtle and it's often on the basis of molecular genetics that the species are first confidently distinguished from each other. Such 'hidden' species are often referred to as cryptic species. Examples include the UAE's Sinai Agama (aka Blue Rock Agama), once considered to occur throughout Arabia but now recognised as three separate species inhabiting, respectively, Western Arabia, Dhofar and the Hajar Mountains. The Western Arabian species kept the original name and so today, the UAE's *Pseudotrapelus sinaitus*, which you will find referred to in available publications – *Amphibians and Reptiles of the UAE and Oman*, *Wild about Reptiles* etc - is correctly called *P. jensvindumi*.

Mistaken identity

Sometimes species are just confused with similar species from adjacent regions. Gary Feulner in 'The Flora of the Ru'us al-Jibal', *Tribulus* volume 19, cites two such examples from the Asteraceae family. Firstly, *Launaea bornmuelleri*, the stems of which have a somewhat geometric or zig-zag appearance: 'this is the species identified in most earlier eastern Arabian literature as *Launaea spinosa* (Forssk.) Sch. Bip...The true *L. spinosa* is restricted to the northern coastal mountains of the Red Sea'. Secondly, *Senecio flavus*, a purple-leaved species which 'has previously been confused with *Senecio flavus* (Decne.) Sch. Bip, a Mediterranean species'.

So, what is the solution for the amateur with a shelf full of reference books? Although I try hard to report sightings with the latest species names, I don't spend my evenings reading scientific papers.

Happily, the news from the experts is positive on all fronts and should not be a major concern for amateur naturalists interested in making a contribution to our knowledge.

You **don't** need to throw out or ignore your reference shelf. Most of the information provided in earlier references about UAE plants and animals – appearance, habitat, diet, breeding or flowering times, etc. – remains valid and useful. In fact, much of that information may not be repeated in more recent references. The only thing that a new or changed name directly signifies is the precise evolutionary relationship of the local organism to other similar organisms.

You also **don't** need to be bashful about reporting your observations and finds about local plants and animals, using the best name you can find. If you have used an older name, most relevant experts will recognize that and will treat the information accordingly. Moreover, even experts can't always keep abreast. In particular, experts in one field of study are often not aware of taxonomic changes in another.

As always, of course, you **do** need to be careful and consistent in making your observations, so that if you say you saw a Sinai Agama (or *P. sinaitus*) in the hills near Shawkah, we can be confident in treating it as the same species that you reported as a Sinai Agama from near Siji – and we can consider both to be the species now recognized as *P. jensvindumi*.) It is also very helpful to indicate the reference that you have used in assigning a name to the species you've observed, and your reasons for your decision.* An erroneous identification (especially if confidently asserted) is much more of a problem than not having the most current scientific name.

[*Not all species are equally easy to recognise. For example, the "Sinai Agama" is distinct by appearance and habitat from other UAE lizards, but the UAE's two jirds, Arabian and Sundevall's, are very similar in both appearance and habitat.]

Finally, there **are** lists and sources to which experts turn to determine the currently recognized "valid" names for individual species of plants and animals. These references differ for different taxonomic groups. In some instances, there may be multiple 'competing' lists, and not all experts will necessarily agree with all determinations in a given list. And of course all lists are themselves in constant flux; most such lists are reviewed and updated only periodically, so they cannot keep up with the very latest research results.

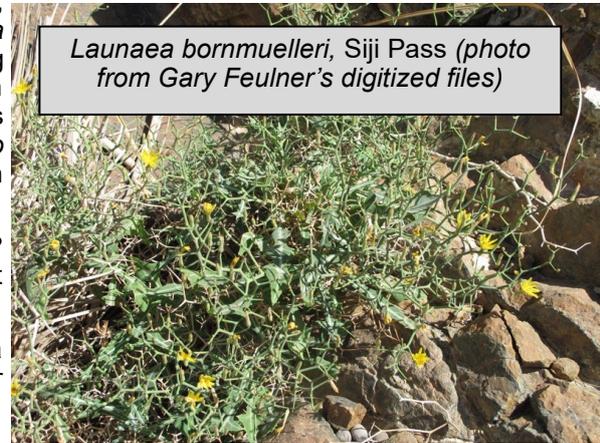
In a future *Gazelle* item we will try to set out some of the principal references used by specialists to determine the currently recognized valid names for various taxonomic groups.

Contribution by Angela Manthorpe (initiating author) and Gary Feulner (photo of *Pseudotrapelus jensvindumi* by Binish Roobas)

Acacia Plain, Wadi Bih (photo from Gary Feulner's digitized files)



Launaea bornmuelleri, Siji Pass (photo from Gary Feulner's digitized files)



Pseudotrapelus jensvindumi,
Al Ain Zoo (Binish Roobas)



Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) Programme

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

May 3: Our scheduled meetings have been cancelled until further notice. See below for details.

Scheduled Field Trips (Members only):

The DNHG field trip program has been temporarily suspended in compliance with UAE coronavirus precautions. For field trips previously booked, members should contact the appropriate field trip leader for more information.

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When possible, please contact committee members outside office hours

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DNHG Membership

Membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at Dh100 for families and Dh50 for singles. Membership is valid from September 2019 to September 2020. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to Emirates NBD account number 1012012013302. (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: 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.