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Contributors—

Thanks to the following for their contributions this month:

Angela Manthorpe, Ada Natoli, Kerstin Binoth and Margaret Swan

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By 25th March, 2021



Exhibit A: Praying Mantis egg case

A mystery solved!

Sometimes when you're out in the field you find unusual natural phenomena, but the purpose or origin can't be explained. Today there are numerous resources – plant identification apps for smartphones, iNaturalist, and other websites and Facebook groups to assist in the identification of these mystery objects.

A few years ago, I spotted Exhibit A stuck to a plank near the large Baobab tree at Dhalkut in Dhofar, Oman. I posted the photo in Gazelle with a query and was able to flush out a learned reader. Marijcke Jongbloed told me that it was the egg case of a praying mantis, also called an ootheca.

Back in June 2016 while scuba diving off Fujairah, I spotted Exhibit B. It was a fairly rigid mass, fixed to the underside of a rock and to me it bore a passing resemblance to a hyacinth, but an underwater version. It wasn't

Exhibit B: Egg case of a gastropod



Exhibit B: Caught in the act



Dolphin Watch!

See page 2



(Continued on page 4)

Announcements and Recorders

Monthly Virtual Speaker Information

Sunday, 7th March, 2021, at 8pm via Zoom

Presenter: David Darell-Lambert

Lecture Title: "Yanbu: A hidden migration magnet"

At the age of nine I was taken on school outing to a RSPB reserve. Noisily waiting in a hide a Kingfisher dashed past and started my passion for birds. Since then I have travelled all over Britain looking at birds and I have also visited Saudi Arabia, Canada, Tunisia, St. Lucia, Egypt and Italy to name a few. Recently developing a huge pass for the Middle East.

Since 1988 I have undertaken a variety of bird surveys in urban parks, coastal sites and health lands, covering nocturnal species, winter wildfowl counts, high tide roosts and breeding populations.

In 1991, I began illustrating the London Bird Report and then became a local bird recorder for six years. Since the mid 1990s I have led groups of birdwatchers around various parts of United Kingdom with groups ranging from four to eighty people.

I have expanded my identification skills to include butterflies and dragonflies, which adds to my strong knowledge of British wildlife. I was the chair of the Ornithological Section of the London Natural History Society for ten years plus a trustee. Photography plays a large part of my interest and my photographs have been published in a number of specialist journals.

Now sound recordings have become fascinating area and can be listened to from Xeno Canto or Soundcloud. Currently uploading up records, photo and sound recordings to eBird.

As for my media work I have appeared on Sky News, BBC New (including various local channels), ITV's Carlton Country, Radio 4's Questions Questions, Thames News and made appearances in Lost In London, The Telegraph and a documentary The Queen's Garden.

The photo on the right was taken in 2018 when David carried out recordings on Yanbu, Saudi Arabia.



Dolphin Watch!

After six years, a new survey to investigate the status of the wild dolphin population inhabiting Dubai waters has finally started! Thanks to the support of Atlantis, the Palm, Dubai, Zayed University, F3 Dive team and the permit from Dubai Municipality, scientists will be conducting boat-based transect surveys for a full solar year to gather information regarding the occurrence, frequency and residency of these marine species.



During the last 2013-2014 survey, 20 sightings and photo-identification data analysis allowed the identification of 92 individuals of Indo-Pacific Bottlenose dolphins, 23 individuals of Indian Ocean humpback dolphins and counted 3 encounters with the elusive Indo-Pacific finless porpoise. These, together with over 1300 sightings reported by the public have enabled us to start gathering an idea of the different distribution of these species in UAE waters and identify hotspot areas of occurrence. Furthermore, they have been employed in successfully identifying Important Marine Mammal Areas in UAE (<https://www.marinemammalhabitat.org/immas/>), an important tool to raise awareness of the presence of these species among the relevant stakeholders and to address marine mammal conservation concerns. This year, the first three surveys already recorded two sightings of Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins and one of finless porpoises just along the busy Dubai coastline. As last time, extra eyes and hands are welcome as well as your sighting reports. Please report your sightings at www.uaedolphinproject.org! Every sighting reported makes a difference to help to protect these species and their environment. And if you are interested in joining the team for a survey and know more about the project please send an email to sighting@uaedolphinproject.com

Contribution by Ada Natoli (PhD) UAE Dolphin Project

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From the Editor:

From a preview of one of the pavilions at the forthcoming Expo 2020, to beekeeping in the UAE, sustained living seems to be a popular topic this month.

In other news, it is good to know that the 'Dolphin Project' has been given the go-ahead (see left). In the meantime, Angela Manthorpe keeps us in suspense about a mystery object.

Enjoy your read!

Spotlight!

Al Qudra Lakes, by Margaret Swan



Black-winged Stilts



Trees with roosting Egrets



Cormorants



Egyptian Geese



Swans



Heron

Terra—Sustainability Pavilion at Expo 2020, by Margaret Swan



Emirati musicians and dancers welcome visitors to the pavilion



Art installation consisting of plastic bottles and discarded computer parts



A timeline under the giant solar canopy shows the increasing use of commodities over the years



Jumeirah Beach Find, by Margaret Swan



A brittle star emerges from a large, but still intact pen shell, which had caught up in a collection of stones on the tideline.

The stones had presumably broken off from nearby breakwaters and breakwalls.

More common on the rockier east coast, this is the first time I have seen a brittle star on this sandier beach. Other 'passengers' inside the shell included small limpets.

Field Clips

(Continued from page 1)

until April 2019 when browsing the cabinets at the Natural History Museum in Ottawa, Canada, that I discovered that it was the egg case of a gastropod and subsequently I found a murex in the process of laying an identical egg mass, as shown in the photo (see page 1).

I've started posting photos of unusual marine life and insects on iNaturalist, and I find that firstly some clever artificial intelligence (AI) tool tells me what genus or family it's from and then, if I'm lucky, an interested expert will step in to identify it to species level. But what if you don't know if the item is question is natural or not? Take Exhibit C. I spotted those in a pool in Wadi Shawkah in 2006. I hadn't a clue what they were – shaped like little corn cobs, could they be small pellets of fertilizer, or some sort of animal feed? Well finally, after a 14 year wait, I just solved the mystery. Exhibit C is the fecal pellet, or frass, of a large caterpillar. And I know that because a couple of weeks ago I found these deposits in a large bush of *Rhazya stricta*, along with a magnificent 8cm long specimen of *Daphnis nerii*, an Oleander Hawkmoth caterpillar. These pellets were around 7mm long, and judging by the amount in the bush, the caterpillar had been there a while, just eating, eating, and growing in size.

Incidentally, now that I have an eye for frass, I'm spotting it all over the wadi beds, particularly under sidr trees (*Ziziphus spinachristi*). This frass is much smaller in size, only a couple of mm long, but it has the same convoluted shape. A couple of camping friends recalled being subjected to a light rain of frass when lunching under a sidr tree – the voracious caterpillars were out of sight in the canopy above but hard at work devouring the tender leaves.

Contribution by Angela Manthorpe

Ottawa Museum exhibit



Exhibit C



Frass

Sustainability at Expo 2020

Those of us from pre-supermarket times can remember waking up to the arrival of the electric milk float. My sister and I would listen to bottles of milk being deposited on the doorstep, closely followed by the clink of empty bottles being carried back to the now empty space in the crate. The whirr of the float would then start up, moving further down the street.

Parents would take an empty shopping bag or two to the greengrocer, where fresh fruit and vegetables were weighed and tipped straight into the shopper's bag (or bags).

Once 'gone at the elbows' it was time to pull the wool from that cardigan to knit it up again for a smaller sibling. I could reminisce more with the 'clippie' doormats made from old clothes but, times have inevitably changed. Plastic has become a much easier and economical option commercially. So much so, that it has replaced glass bottles, string shopping bags and even some textiles and fabrics! Sustainability is not all about plastic, however, and this is the focus of one of the pavilions at Expo 2020.

As local Emiratis welcome visitors with their traditional music and dance, inside the pavilion there is an array of information in a variety of media formats. To spark awareness amongst the younger generation, thought-provoking interactive activities have been created. Models can be worked to find out about the local falaj system for example, whereas other activities include touchscreens and levers. A housekeeping team is constantly on the lookout, hastily disinfect screens and levers after each use. Hand sanitizers, now a common sight in public spaces, are also strategically installed.

Choose between the 'Ocean Walk' or the 'Tree Roots Walk' but you can visit both by going around again. As there are no signs, perhaps this one-way system is temporarily in place due to the Covid situation. However, there are many volunteers who are happy to assist and guide people around both areas. In 'Ocean' consumer waste is blatantly displayed, bringing home the fact that rubbish has been dumped there, out of sight but not out of mind here at the pavilion. To paraphrase a sign '*Plastic has now reached the deepest part of the ocean where it has been ingested by marine life, thus entering into the food chain where it finally ends up on our dinner plates.*'

Outside the pavilion, plants and herbs grow below the strikingly gargantuan canopy, which is studded with solar panels to capture the sun's heat. We learn that harnessing solar energy in this way generates 4GWh of electricity per year, powering the whole building.

Technology has developed at a startling rate over the past hundred years or so and we cannot go back to the olden days. However, we can learn a thing or two from the older folk!

Contribution by Margaret Swan



In the photo above, reeds grow alongside solar-pannelled 'umbrellas' at 'Terra—the Sustainability Pavilion.' The pavilion is temporarily open until 10th April, 2021

All things being well, Expo 2020 is scheduled to open to the public on 1st October, 2021. To find out more and how to obtain tickets, visit:

<https://www.expo2020dubai.com/en/discover/pavilions/sustainability>

Field Clips

Oleander Hawkmoth caterpillar

Spotted in mid-January. The caterpillar of *Daphnis nerii*, the Oleander Hawkmoth, has puffed up its front body and tucked its head in to reveal 2 large eyespots. Although the caterpillar was in a prominent position on the bush, if threatened it can use those false eyes to frighten predators away.

The larvae are often found on *Nerium oleander* the poisonous but colourful oleander bushes which are common in the UAE's wadis. This particular specimen was found on a sprawling bush of *Rhazya stricta* between the desert and the mountains near Al Ghail. *Rhazya stricta* is from the same Apocynaceae or Dogbane family as oleander and is also poisonous; because goats and other livestock won't eat it, it can become very dominant in areas that are otherwise heavily grazed. You can see from the photo that the larva has devoured several leaves near the top of the bush.

See what mystery was solved by this sighting on page 4.

Contribution by Angela Manthorpe



Photographs

Top: Oleander Hawkmoth Caterpillar

Centre row:

Left: Oleander Hawkmoth Caterpillar close-up

Middle: Sidr dinner

Right: Look what the caterpillar left behind

Far right: Another view of the Oleander Hawkmoth Caterpillar



Field Clips



Apis florea collecting nectar from Tulsie flower

Honeybees in the UAE

My first experience with honeybees in the UAE must have been about 12 years ago or so when we discovered a wild colony had decided to settle in our garden, happily building their hive. Coming from Europe, we were used to call Municipality in cases such as this, who would come and rehome the useful creatures somewhere more suitable.

When we called Municipality here, we were informed that someone would come to take care of the problem as they were considered 'illegal'. When we asked what this would entail, we were happily informed that they would be

killed. Needless to say we did not pursue this option as they did not pose a problem for us. Without bees and other insects in the world, no pollination would take place resulting in no food for us humans. A problem that had become apparent in the Sichuan province in China when pesticides had all but killed their bee population and the 'human bee' had become the new norm in order to sustain their pear farming. Source: <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/life-without-bees-hand-human-pollination-rural-chi/>)



Abandoned comb



Typical single open-air comb of *Apis florea*

Years later during one of my random internet searches, I learned that a Beekeepers Association had established itself in the UAE. Again I took this as a positive development and did not do anything further until another wild bee colony decided to settle in our garden. This time I was more curious and did a little research. It turned out these were *Apis florea*, also known as Asian Dwarf Honeybee, a tiny red-brown bee that typically measures between 7 to 10 mm (a relatively small size compared to other honeybees), with colonies typically containing of around 5,000 individual bees. They were very busy little bees indeed, zooming around from flower to flower in our garden, occasionally stopping



All kitted up, with tools at the ready

over at our water fountain collecting water to cool their hive in the height of summer. About six months later the magic was over and we discovered to our great dismay that the colony had moved on. They left the comb empty and deserted, which made me wonder ... Why did they move? Were predators at fault here?

Again I turned to the pages of the UAE's Beekeepers Association website for more information which confirmed that *A. florea* characteristically builds a single, exposed open-air comb usually on tree branches or shrubs (as we had observed in our garden), which makes it vulnerable to predators, such as ants or even geckos. We had plenty of both in our garden. However, after closer inspection it was more likely that they simply swarmed out in search of 'greener pastures' with more nectar and pollen to be collected. But this had me hooked now to find out more and I signed up for potential beekeeping course (if and when they should become available as they are

usually held during the winter months in Dubai). With the general COVID-19 situation having a firm grip of our live at the time I soon forgot all about it until I received a notification that a new Novice Beekeeping course would become available soon and was open for registration. So I thought, why not?

The course was held in Sustainable City in Dubai. It turned out to be very informative and enjoyable, giving me the chance to meet like-minded people from a variety of backgrounds, whilst still following all COVID-related rules. I most certainly learned a lot and have gained a new appreciation for bees and beekeepers. I might even become a hobby beekeeper in the near future.

To find out further information, visit: <http://www.beekeepersassociation.ae/>

Contribution by Kerstin Binoth



Apis mellifera
Queen bee surrounded by her busy workers

© Kerstin N. Binoth

Editor's Comment

Last month, Angela Manthorpe wrote about bee hives in the mountains, evidence that bee keeping has been a sustainable part of life in the UAE for many years.

It would appear that an increasing awareness of beekeeping in the UAE is becoming apparent. Past Gazelle articles have focused on this, the most recent being last year, when a beekeeping course was undertaken at Hatta.

Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) Programme 2021

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

- 7 March:** David Darell-Lambert will present an illustrated talk on "Yanbu: A hidden migration magnet."
- 4 April:** Christophe Tourenq will present an illustrated talk on "Saving our Species program: a governmental conservation initiative to secure the future of New South Wales biodiversity; cases from the Hunter Central Coast region"
- 2 May:** Oscar Campbell will present an illustrated talk on "The Giant, the Damsel and the Slender Scotch Burnet"

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

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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) 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.