

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

This month, we say farewell to **Cecile Javelle** who, with her children, participated in and contributed to many DNHG field trips. In this issue, Cecile remembers her favourite place in the Emirates (see p. 3). She wishes all DNHG members a wonderful and exciting year in 2009, in the Emirates or elsewhere, and thanks us for the many enjoyable and instructive times we shared with her family. We wish her well, too!

Marijcke Jongbloed, resident in France between the Gironde and the Garonne rivers, in Bordeaux, wrote recently, "A few days ago I was walking with the dog and I saw the cranes going south again. Some of the flights were made up of thousands of birds and the sky was filled with their chatter. As I watched I saw how, on one of the flights, twenty or so birds at the point of the flight peeled off to the right and bunched up to be overtaken by the other birds who smoothly closed the gap so that fresh birds could do a stint at the heavier work of flying up front. The others zipped into the rows again further down. I had read about this behaviour but never seen it and found it quite amazing. I remembered how we used to do that, too, when we biked to school (in strong head winds) long ago!"

Members who look forward to **Mohammed Arfan Asif's** photographs and observations, usually the product of great care, skill and patience, will not be disappointed by one of his latest, the superb starling, *Lamprolornis superbus* (below), an East African native that has been seen from time to time in the UAE at sites including Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Lahbab and RAK, as well as Sharjah University City area where Arfan saw his in a flock of 12-14. It is one of the most colourful birds, by far, that can be seen locally.



In October, Arfan was invited by the Photographic Society of Macao - SAR China to exhibit his works as part of the "Exhibition on the Works of World Renowned Photographers" held in Macao on 26th October as part of their 50 years Golden Jubilee Celebrations. He found it a great opportunity to visit the far east and interact with International photographers from the US, Europe, Australia and China. Congratulations, Arfan!

DNHG Membership

DNHG Membership remains a bargain at Dhs.100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at our meetings or by sending us your details and a cheque made out to: Lloyds TSB Bank account no. 60600669933501. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG. Please also note our account number has changed.) If you have not renewed before January 2008, your membership will lapse. (See p.7)

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*, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects.

This month's Contributors

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

Mohammad Arfan Asif
Marijcke Jongbloed
Cecile Javelle
Gary Feulner
Martina Fella



Under the patronage of H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan



Coming up ...

RAK Mountain Hike with Stefan Beck

23 Jan Email will be circulated.

Temple alley walk with Sandhya

31 Jan

Sandhya shows the hidden wonders of Bur Dubai. Numbers limited. Contact Sandhya: sandy_pi@yahoo.com

Donkey Fox Wadi with Mike Lorigan

20-21 Feb

This weekend trip will take place sometime in February and will involve an overnight camp and fox watching on the Friday night followed by walk on the Saturday morning finishing around 2 p.m. Further details by email. For further information and to register please contact Jenny on jennyhill76@hotmail.com

Masirah Island with Nancy P.

25 - 28 Feb

Nancy Papathanasopoulou is offering a trip to Masirah. Max 10 people. Stay in hotel. February - April: Excellent for hawksbill and Olive Ridley turtles, great for birds. Please contact Pradeep promptly: wgarnet@emirates.net.ae if you want to go. The trip requires a full 4 days away from Dubai.

Oasis at Musah with Brien Holmes

7 March

This trip will involve a walk looking at oasis and wadi habitats with an emphasis on vegetation. Oman vehicle insurance required and passport with a valid visit visa or residency visa for the UAE. For further information and to register your interest please contact Jenny on jennyhill76@hotmail.com

Stargazing with Lamjed

13 Mar (TBC)

Bastakiya walk, Peter Jackson

21 March

This is a ramble through the very old areas near the creek mouth, with architect and wind-tower authority Peter Jackson. Details by email.

Other trips in March and April

Dates TBA

Proposals are in for a trip to the Breeding Centre, Sharjah, archaeology sites

in RAK with Christian Velde, and the elephant trackways, Abu Dhabi. All these will be detailed soon by email or in Gazelle. In April there may be a visit to the roses on the Saiq Plateau, but you will need to book (and stick with your booking, well in advance.) Not to be missed!

Inter-Emirates Weekend

Thursday/Friday/Saturday
26/27/28 March 2009

It is time to book!

Each year in March/April the UAE's three Natural History Groups – Emirates Natural History Group Abu Dhabi, Emirates Natural History Group Al Ain and the Dubai Natural History Group – get together for an educational yet social weekend involving a dinner and various activities and trips. It is a chance to meet up with people/old friends from the other groups. The event is organised annually by one of the groups in rotation. This year it is the turn of the Dubai Natural History Group.

IEW 2009 will be based at the Oceanic Hotel, Khor Fakkan and the programme will begin on Friday morning, 27th March (though there may be stargazing on the evening of Thurs 26th.) The hotel has made a block booking of rooms for the Thursday and Friday nights on a first-come first-served basis. However, in view of the increased tourism in Khor Fakkan and the peak season date of IEW, **it will be necessary to confirm and guarantee your booking by the end of February 2009.**

Hotel rates (per night) are:
Double Bed/Twin-Bedded Room – **Dh 660** (inclusive of breakfast & tax)
Single Room – **Dh 540** (inclusive of breakfast & tax)
Children below 12 years may stay free in their parents' rooms with meals 50% of cost.
Without breakfast, room rates are **Dh 580** for Double Bed/Twin-Bedded Room and **Dh 500** for Single Room
Cost of an extra bed in a room for an adult **Dh 120**
A suite can be booked but you need to ask the hotel.

On Friday evening there will be a buffet dinner (**Dh 96** per person). Packed lunches will be available for Friday and Saturday – please arrange these directly with the hotel once you have been supplied with your booking reference.

It has been arranged with the hotel that all reservations should be made through the DNHG. To make a reservation, please email Lena Linton on linton@mailme.ae with your requirements as regards rooms and buffet dinner. Lena will email you the booking reference and then your credit card information will need to be sent to the hotel. If unable to use credit card, then to send a cheque to given address.

Trips will be many and varied. There will be trips up Wadi Wurraya, a dhow trip, and many others - birding, shelling, mountain walks, forts, musea, archaeological sites and ...

On the evening of Friday 27th we will be holding the Inter-Emirates photographic competition. The format of this is under review - bigger, brighter, bolder - and there will be different categorisation.

Please note the need to book early.

Our Next Speaker

Donald S. Arfan, from the Philippines, started his professional work when, as an undergraduate student in 1995, he joined several environmental assessments and forest expeditions as a field technician / assistant biologist. His interest in birds, particularly eagles, flourished when he joined the Philippine Eagle Conservation and Research Programme as a biologist from 1997 to 2002 during which time he travelled extensively into the forested mountains all over the Philippines studying the eagles.

A graduate of the University of the Philippines (B.Sc.) and Ateneo de Davao University (M.Sc.) Donald is associated with the Biological Sciences Department of the University of St. Thomas. It was during these times that he led several of his students in conducting research on a broad range of topics including ecology, molecular biology and systematics. Despite the busy academic schedule, he continued to participate in significant biodiversity studies on such subjects as the effects of fragmentation in lowland forests on herpetofaunal communities. He has co-authored several publications on Philippine biodiversity that appeared in major and national peer-reviewed journals. He is currently an environmental consultant with Environmental Resources Management, based in Abu Dhabi.



Email your field reports and news to pvana@emirates.net.ae (Arial 10 justified). Please send your photographs as separate jpg files, or deliver them to Anne Millen for scanning.

Fond Memories of "Paradise Beach"

The first time Cecile Javelle and her children went to this place, an abandoned oasis to the north of Khor Fakkan, she would not have imagined that, after so many years, it would remain her favourite nature spot in the Emirates.



The dead palm gardens

That day, as her children explored the ruins of a village, they came to a rusty gate, entered the grounds and one of the children said, "Wow, this is paradise". So they've seen the gates of paradise, and they are open. (Since then, the gates have fallen apart; Cecile doesn't know what *that* means!) She dubbed the place "The Paradise", since she did not know the real name of the village at first.



The 'gates of paradise'

Cecile wrote: The place is a treat for a hobby photographer and naturalist, and an adventure playground for bored city children. Even on Eid day, there were only five cars (including ours). Look at tide tables and choose your day so you can explore the shore at low tide, and observe the sea life on the rocky ground. Wear sandals or shoes – you need to protect your feet.



The endless queue of tankers to the port of Fujairah ...



and a view of the rocky shore at low tide

At low tide, you can spend hours looking at the thousands of brittle stars which enjoy life hidden under every available rock.



Thousands of brittle stars can be observed on the shore. This one was turned over to see its tiny mouth



Brittle star

Brittle stars are not venomous, and they only eat plankton, so you can pick them up (very carefully), enjoy the scratchy touch, and watch them as they initiate slow and graceful but determined movements to escape you and go back to water.

The rocks are covered with barnacles; crabs, mussels, oysters, and

various shells. Under them, there are brittle stars, urchins, crabs, sea cucumbers and various shellfish slowly moving around. If you walk in the middle of the fasht, and stop, you will become aware of many tiny movements and bubbles coming out of holes, all hints of a rich shore life. The surface is scattered with dead branched coral. Here is a rough list of what Cecile saw: cerith shells, two species of chitons (tentatively *Aconthopleura vaillantii* and a smaller; purple one), olive shells, cowries (like *Cypraea ocellata*), empty cone shells, acorn barnacles, murex shells, oysters, mussels, clams and other bivalves and gastropods. Cecile's joy was to discover two spots with live corals. Though she was unable to identify them with confidence, it was a delight to find them and take some pictures.



Red coralline algae?



An anemone



A crab



Sea urchin walking on the ground (you can see the pedicellaria)



Ceriths

:The northern part of the beach is bordered by, according to Cecile's geological map, Mirbah gabbro, with patches of Bithnah gabbro. The samples she managed to break revealed dark-green microgabbro, which she thought looked very much like diabase dykes.



The gabbro outcrop at the northern end of the beach (GbM)



Barnacles



Living corals

The main red-brown mountains to the west represent the major component of the mantle section: a rock type called harzburgite. If you have time, go to the Oman Madha enclave, one of the best places to observe harzburgite conveniently.



Sea cucumber?



The harzburgite mountains

The dead palm trees lying around are a good opportunity to verify that palm trees are more closely related to plants like grasses, sedges and lilies than to most other large tree species.



Oysters

The ground of the beach itself is the same that you find all along the East coast; coarse cemented carbonate sand including a lot of shells. The geological term is "fasht", and this hard but uneven ground supports a rich marine life.

In the dead palm garden, traditional building techniques can be studied in the walls of a fisherman's derelict house; it was made of coral boulders held together by clay and sandy mortar.



Big chiton hidden under a rock



Coral block architecture

Palm trees have hollow "trunks" made of the sheath of leaves



The place is great for a picnic, preferably in the fisherman's house, facing the sea and contemplating the endless file of tankers queuing



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

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fax (off) 349 9437

Archaeology - David Palmer
050-7387703
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dpalmer@ud.ac.ae

Birds - David Bradford
davebradford9@hotmail.com

Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi
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Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

Geology - Gary Feulner
res 306 5570
fax 330 3550

Insects - Gary Feulner

Fossils - Valerie Chalmers
res 349 4816,
fax 340 0990
email: valeriechalmers@hotmail.com

Plants - Valerie Chalmers

Seashells - Recorder needed

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 be channelled through to the *Gazelle* editor, so new information can be shared with all our readers.



to bunker or enter the Gulf. The place used to be cosier when there was a sofa right in the middle of the ruins. It's gone now, but you can still sit quite comfortably on the walls.



The place used to be cosier ...

Children can play hide and seek and imagine all sorts of adventures in this forest of dead palm trees, and, last but not least in this country, do a beach clean-up. It's quick because the place is almost deserted, but rubbish is washed ashore from ships.

So this for us was paradise. It is called Al Zubarah and is directly south of Al Bidiyah mosque. No four-wheel drive is needed. Drive towards Fujairah, and when you see the second Al Zubarah roundabout, turn left on Khalil Bin Ahmed street, go straight until you can't any more, turn left and try to find the entrance to the beach ... Cecile's car, happily, found it for her. *Thanks to Cecile Javelle for her affectionate memories and photographs.*

Hawksbill Turtle Rescued

Readers may recall that from time to time there have been young hawksbill turtles found on the beaches of the Emirates so debilitated by encrustations of barnacles and other marine growth that they have been unable to feed and have fetched up close to death. Dr Richard Hornby wrote about this in our February 2004 issue of Gazelle, and included some scientific details. Recently, Martina Fella wrote of finding such an unfortunate little turtle. Martina wrote:

In early January, my daughter and I went for a walk on Jumeirah

Beach and near the so called "kite-surfing beach" found a small sea turtle. It must have been washed onto the beach by the rough seas of the past week and then been trapped in a small pool of water that eventually became separated from the sea.



The small turtle in a sorry state

It had probably tried to climb the steep sand slope that had built up around the small pool. When we discovered it, it was half buried under the sand and was not moving any more. Only when we picked it up did we notice that it was still alive.



Martina's daughter, delighted to find the turtle was alive

It seemed very weak and unhealthy - it could not open its eyes and the entire body was covered in large numbers of barnacles. One big barnacle was even attached right next to the turtle's nose.



An extra-awkward barnacle!

It seemed obvious that it could not just be released back into the sea. My first thought was it to take the



little fellow to Major Ali, but it was already late in the afternoon so we would have reached his camp in the dark. Therefore I decided to take it to the Atlantis Hotel to ask the marine specialist there for some advice. The Atlantis staff were extremely friendly and did not hesitate to offer their help.



The turtle in the quarantine tank

Mrs Natasha Christie (Director of Small Exhibits) put the little turtle into a large round quarantine tank where to my surprise it immediately started paddling around. Mrs Christie even paddled managed to hand feed the turtle some small pieces of squid. Then a colleague of Mrs Christie removed the large quantity of barnacles from the poor creature.



The barnacles were removed

When it was put back into the tank, we could really see what a relief it must have been for the turtle to be able to swim again without all the 'extra baggage'. Dr Jaime Bernal (Staff Veterinarian) had a look at it as well and suggested keeping it for a few days to let it rest. As the sea was still very rough, it may otherwise have been washed ashore again the same day. It is hoped that when it has built up some strength after its starvation and ordeal, the little turtle will be out in Gulf waters

again. Marine experts identified it as a 2-3 year old hawksbill turtle.



Thanks to Martina Fella for text and photographs.

Thru' the Lens ...

Butterflies are beautiful to see, but technically difficult to photograph; they are small, fast and not easy to find. I have often seen people running behind them to no avail, but a little effort and technique can help you make interesting and colourful butterfly pictures.



As with bird photography, my approach is to find out more about the creatures. Their weakest point is that the butterfly is a cold-blooded creature and needs to bask in the sun with open wings (closed wings for some) to warm up their flight muscles to sufficient temperature that they can work. In this region, the heat allows flight activity to start earlier and last longer. Therefore, by waking up early on those dewy mornings you will find them perched, static, on a leaf or twig, waiting for you to set up your camera tripod and take pictures.



The butterfly in this static condition will be able to change only its direction and pose. The depth of field is shallow when you are very close to the subject. Basic technique includes setting the camera at exactly the same height as the subject and keeping the camera parallel to the wings in order to get the complete wing and subject in sharpness. You need to block the path of the wind if it is affecting the wings. Aperture is highest priority and should be carefully set in order to get only the subject in focus, leaving the background totally out-of-focus. You could play with the ISO setting to get the most appropriate combination of aperture and shutter speed.

The other approach, which is less demanding but which I have rarely used, is to use flash and freeze the subject's movements. This technique with shutter speed priority may help sometimes in catching interesting action, but may not prove successful always since the butterfly moves fast and is small to fill the frame.



It is also very interesting to shoot butterfly larvae (caterpillars) which can be very colourful. You can sometimes find hundreds or thousands clustered close to each other when they migrate (for reasons not yet fully understood). But best of all, photograph them when, metamorphosed, they emerge from the pupa or during courtship. *Text & photographs by Mohamed Arfan Asif.*





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Intertidal Mollusc Diversity

Our November 2008 speaker, Dr. Suzanne Williams of the Natural History Museum in London, visited the UAE under the auspices of the Environment Department–Abu Dhabi (EAD) to collect UAE specimens for her work on the molecular phylogeny of several groups of intertidal and shallow water molluscs. At a number of sites she was assisted by Chairman Gary Feulner.



Two large turban shells *Lunella coronata*, upper right and lower left

On the East Coast, they sampled a turban shell species that was earlier distinguished in the field and proved to have a distinctive DNA profile.

From her latest observations and collection, Dr. Williams suspects there may be several more cryptic species* present among the coastal marine mollusc fauna of the Arabian Gulf and Gulf of Oman. Her DNA studies will confirm this.

One phenomenon that neither Gary nor Dr. Williams had anticipated was the gastronomic popularity of the common turban shell *Lunella coronata*, one of the species they sought out and collected. On a weekend visit to a small rocky seashore site where this animal was plentiful, they observed several groups of visitors, both Europeans and Asians, collecting hundreds for consumption. If this represented an average weekend, it is somewhat remarkable that *L. coronata* has managed to maintain its numbers at the site in the face of such predation pressure – but in fact it seems to have done so for at least the past 4-5 years.



Examples of *Lunella coronata* from SEA, by Bosch, Dance et al

[* Cryptic species are related but distinct species that are extremely difficult to differentiate by traditional observational and anatomical means, but that show consistent differences in DNA. Cryptic species are now known to occur among various mollusc groups, as well as butterflies and other animals.] *Report & photograph by Gary Feulner*

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

01 Feb The Philippine Eagle - what do we know after 100 years? - Donald Afan

Field Trips (Members only, please. Details inside, p.2)

23 Jan RAK Mountain Hike

31 Jan Temple Walk

20-21 Feb Donkey Fox Wadi

25 - 28 Feb Masirah Island

7 Mar The Oasis at Musah

13 Mar (TBC) Stargazing

21 Mar Bastakia Windtowers Walk

26 - 28 Mar InterEmirates Weekend at Khor Fakkan

Further field trips, details and any changes will be announced by e-mail circular.