

GAZELLE

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مجموعتنا روثي للتاريخ والطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

DNHG Membership Renewals

Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary Inaugurated

The Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary was officially inaugurated on February 28 by Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al Maktoum and by the Director General of Dubai Municipality, Qasim Sultan. The sanctuary features three birdwatching hides, from north to south: the Lagoon Hide (Al Buhaira), the Flamingo Hide (Fantir) and the Mangrove Hide (Gurm).

Each hide offers a panoramic view of the sanctuary and is equipped with telescopes and picture panels depicting many of the most common birds that can be seen. Binoculars are supplied to visitors at the time of entry. At present, guided visits are permitted only on Sundays and Wednesdays from 8 am to 12 noon.

Visitors must apply to: Marine Environment and Sanctuaries Unit, Environment Department, Dubai Municipality, PO Box 67, Dubai, Tel: +9714-206-4240 / 4244 / 4260, Fax: +9714-227-0160. The application form can be downloaded from: <http://www.environment.dm.gov.ae> or collected from, and submitted to, the foregoing department. Apply three days prior to visit. At least two working days are required to process the permits. The application as well as comments can be e-mailed to marabdullah@dm.gov.ae.

The inauguration of the Ras Al-Khor birdwatching hides was attended by several DNHG members including Dr. **Reza Khan**, Director of Dubai Zoo, Prof. Dr. **Ulrich Wernery**, Scientific Director of Dubai's Central Veterinary Laboratory, **Rashmi DeRoy** of WWF, and DNHG Chairman **Gary Feulner**. DNHG Bird Recorder **David Bradford** was unable to attend — he was in Cambodia, looking for the Giant Ibis.

Judith Stafford and **Diane Lazenbury** spent a few days camping in Oman and report finding a new tarmac road up to the ridge above Hoti Cave. Opposite the cave, enough land for about 10 football pitches has been levelled and it is called 'The Hoti Development Area'; perhaps a new hotel. They were unable to find a campsite nearby.

* * *

Members may be interested to follow the tracking of Maju, a juvenile green turtle released off Dubai late last month, on www.seaturtle.org/ Maju is a small green turtle which was rescued from a beach in Dubai, in 2002. Following rehabilitation and care in a special enclosure, she has now been released and tracked with a transmitter to determine her dispersal and behaviour following the rehabilitation process. At present, she is following the coast of Iran, travelling east, close inshore.

The current DNHG membership year runs from September 2004 to September 2005. Membership remains a bargain at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account no. 173746. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.)

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:

Richard Morris
Prof. Lawrence Woods
Jenny Irwin
Gary Feulner
Mohammed Arfan Asif
Diane Lazenbury



An Encore and Then ...Some New Pieces?

Roses on the Saiq Plateau
Thur-Fri, April 7-8 (leaving
Wed 6)

Peter van Amsterdam will lead yet another attempt to catch the roses in full bloom. Please let him know as soon as possible if you plan to go, as it is not the roses but the hotel rooms that are elusive. The Jebel Akhdar Hotel arranges entry permits for the military area along with bookings. The hotel is a pleasant place, and there's a lot more to do on the Saiq Plateau than smell roses. Contact Peter on pvana@emirates.net.ae for details and bookings. Early booking is essential.



UAE Archaeology Seminar in Al-Ain

The Third Annual UAE Archeology Symposium will be held in Al-Ain on April 6-7 (late afternoon and evening on Wednesday, plus Thursday morning). Interested amateur archeologists are welcome to attend. The venue has not been confirmed at this writing, but is likely to be one of the major hotels in Al-Ain. The symposium is intended to provide a forum for short presentations and informal discussion of current archeological research in the UAE, with participation by a number of visiting researchers, as well as resident archeologists.

Presentations are expected to include the following topics: Flint tools at Umm Az-Zamool; flint sources and use in the Northern Emirates; distribution and variety of Hafit cairns in the UAE and Northern Oman; analysis of the latest Umm An-Nar excavations at Hili;

tomb architecture in the Wadi Suq period; the evolution of Dubai's coastline in archeological times; the Sufouh-2 coastal site in Dubai; further excavations at the Muweilah site in Sharjah; excavation of a mound in RAK; Portuguese forts; and UAE rock art.

The exact location of the symposium should be finalized by the time this newsletter reaches members. If you are interested in attending, contact Gary Feulner, David Palmer or Johanna Raynor (see p. 7 for their contact details).

DNHG Field Trip Policies

Members are reminded that DNHG field trips are cooperative ventures among the participants, for their mutual benefit and enjoyment. DNHG field trip leaders are not normally professionals or experts, but fellow members who have agreed to share their time and their knowledge with other participants, on a volunteer basis. The relationship of trip leaders and participants is that of co-venturers, not professional and client. For these reasons field trip participation is limited to DNHG members and their bona fide non-resident guests.

Various dangers are inherent in travel in and around the UAE and in the exploration of the natural environment, whether by automobile, by boat, on foot or otherwise, and whether on-road or off-road, in the cities or countryside, in the mountains or deserts or at sea. By participating in DNHG field trips, members accept these risks, and they accept responsibility for their own safety and welfare. Field trip participants are normally required to sign a waiver form to this effect. Without these understandings, the DNHG would be unable to sponsor field trips or to recruit volunteers to lead them.

Field trips vary in both format and organization, depending on the nature of the trip, the number of participants, and the preferences of the

field trip leader. If the number of participants is limited and sign-up is required, members should make every effort to honor their commitments or to give timely notice otherwise, as a courtesy both to the trip leader and to other members who might like to have the chance to participate.

—SHELL—
—REPORTS—



*Please send your shell reports
to Sandy Fowler*

Our Next Speaker

Prof. Helmut Brückner is a professor of geography at the University of Marburg in Germany. He is coming to the UAE in April to participate in an archaeology conference in Al-Ain and has very kindly agreed to speak to the DNHG while he is here. The title of his talk is "Geoarchaeology and the reconstruction of palaeo-environments in the Middle East."

Prof. Brückner has pursued a multidisciplinary approach to the study of the evolution of environments at a number of ancient sites in the Middle East, integrating geological and geomorphological information with written records and archeological evidence in order to detail changes in coastlines, river deltas and alluvial floodplains, along with the implications for human inhabitants. He will present case studies from well known sites in Turkey (including Miletus, Ephesus and Troy) and Mesopotamia (Uruk).

He will also discuss his findings concerning the evolution of coastal Dubai over the last 7000 years, which he commenced studying initially in connection with the interpretation of the Sufouh 2 archaeological site.



Bats in Your Belfry? Borrow Val's Ladder!

Flexibility and patience: two keywords learned by DNHG fieldtrippers on our 25 February visit to the Bat Falaj at Wadi A'Dahir, just over the UAE-Oman border near Buraimi. No one showed more flexibility and patience with us than our guides from the Al Ain Natural History Group. They could not have been more accommodating and we remain grateful for the time Jerry, Brien, Ali and others devoted to our cause. Their useful nudges and encouragement helped see us through several interesting challenges.

Who will forget their reaction when Valerie Chalmers mentioned that she had brought a ladder? At first responding that it was not needed to get into the falaj, our helpers quickly perceived its utility; perhaps this was the reason their initial plan of dividing our group of 20 in half was rapidly abandoned. So instead of taking half of us in search of wild flowers, they took us all from the Iron Age Umm al Nar graves beside our vehicles, past ancient copper smelting "circles" (some still containing mud bricks with hand marks), a remnant of an era when, as part of a cottage industry undertaken by farmers, this area supplied much of the copper for the entire Mediterranean region. All the trees nearby were cut down every 700 years to provide energy for the process! Down the hill from this is the wonderfully restored falaj, complete with almost a dozen access chimneys.

In groups of six or seven, we entered via Val's ladder, some of us straight on, many of us sideways due to the narrowness of the falaj itself (approx. 0.5 m). Height was not a problem, the falaj having probably been deepened to several metres by the constant search for a declining water table. Moving forward, beneath the mouse tail bat colony and seven of the chimneys, we all ended up sideways, brushing up against walls which appeared furry because salt had precipitated

out of the rock. The bats were hospitable (as were the fish in the water!) despite being awakened from their early morning slumber, with some flying or landing nearby. A few of us did not wish to be reminded of their presence, but everyone made it in and out without incident. Even some of most hesitant members entered and lived to tell the tale. Our hosts, bat and human alike, were impressed with our flexibility and our willingness to experience new feelings in new spaces.

Emerging invigorated, swapping footgear and enjoying lunch in light rain, our Al Ain leader, Brien, shepherded our team of DNHG "goats" on top of the falaj system so we could get a sense of the depth by peering down the sometimes-overgrown chimneys. Advancing up onto the gravel plain beside the wadi and then down, up, and down again into the wadi, we recorded more flowers, were introduced to rocks wearing "desert armour," explored circles marking the sites of old buildings, saw false fox traps, pondered over more graves, marveled at wild orchids, and surveyed small pools for water scorpions, tadpoles, long strands of toad spawn, and – you guessed it - several toads. At some points, rock obstructions in the wadi forced some of us to crawl along the gravel and wonder if we were on a hike with Gary Feulner after all!

After completing our circuit and taking a well-earned break beside a hand-dug stone well, we set off down the widening wadi with flora now our primary concern. Cisterns dotted the edge of the wadi floor here and an elaborate system of pipes and pumps was seen climbing the walls to the plantation above. A seep burgeoning with vegetation was also explored at this level. But what comes down must go up, and the DNHG goats were destined to scale the side of the wadi one more time to access the plantation and observe a working falaj system. Having been greeted by a sickly pomegranate, lively lemon, lime, guava, mango and palm trees soon dotted our route,

which took us past metal doors and windows decorated like playing cards, cliff-walking along the falaj, alongside abandoned parts of the adjoining village, and back to our vehicles. How do you tell when the decrepit buildings we saw were last refurbished? "Remember – the presence of sawn timber tells you that this place was renovated at some point after WWII," explained Brien, having just moments earlier detailed the principles behind the vertical sun clock outside the plantation mosque.

We were extremely well prepared for flower-spotting by our leaders, Jenny Irwin and MaryAnne Pardoe, who supplied all members with a colour-coordinated list accompanied by an exquisite colour-coded booklet containing photos and drawings. Here is Jenny's summary: "We recorded 90 species, including many *Epipactis* orchids, growing with maidenhair fern, *Adiantum capillus-veneris*. We saw two of the plants Marijcke Jongbloed records as rare - *Sweinfurthia imbricata*, on the way down to the falaj, and the small fumitory, *Fumaria parviflora*, growing in the wall as we came into the plantations.

When Mary Anne and I visited two weeks earlier, there were two plants that I had expected to see but were not in evidence, namely *Boehavia elegans* and *Cometes surratensis*. However, in the time

LOOK THE PART!

The DNHG has navy blue sweat shirts, with the DNHG emblem embroidered in silver. Sizes: Large and Extra Large Dh65/- each and silver grey polo shirts with the DNHG emblem embroidered in black. Sizes: Medium, Large and Extra Large Dh50/- each.

The quality of both items is excellent!





E.mail your reports to pvana@emirates.net.ae, (Arial 10 justified) or deliver them to Anne Millen on floppy disk at monthly meetings.

between our visits they were obviously growing very fast as on the 25th I saw them growing everywhere I had expected. The *Rumex vesicarius* was a joy to behold and growing in a profusion I have never seen before!

"I was very impressed that most people used the booklet and the checklist so thoroughly – it was well worth the time spent compiling them. I now cannot wait to visit the Al Ain area again for more natural history."

I think this sentiment sums up the feelings of all participants, although we would each be quick to remind Jenny to re-enlist the first-rate assistance of our Al Ain cousins and to borrow Val's ladder! Report by Larry Woods and Jenny Irwin

Albino Tadpoles

I have often remarked that, even after many years of excursions in the UAE, I still never go out without seeing something new or different. As the latest proof, in a wadi not far from Shawkah that I visit once or twice each year for an "easy day," I encountered a medium-sized pool (ca. 5m in diameter and 60cm deep) containing seven large, plump albino tadpoles – translucent pinkish white in color, with a distinctive yellow organ showing through on one flank.

Conventional wisdom would argue that the absence of the normal cryptic coloration should make these tadpoles more susceptible to predation. Be that as it may, the seven tadpoles had survived long enough to have developed legs, and I could find only five normally

colored (green-brown) tadpoles, all of similar size. The mouthparts - a central beak and adjacent rows of "teeth," made of keratin (like human hair and fingernails) and used for scraping algae - were readily visible in the albino specimens, black against the pale skin. This made for easy identification as *Bufo arabicus*, the Arabian toad. I plan to visit again in a month or two to see if any of these have survived to become albino toads. Report by Gary Feulner

Astronomy at Umm As-Samim

Chairman Gary Feulner joined the PDO Ras Al-Hamra Astronomical Society's field trip to the Umm As-Samim area of Oman, the infamous inland sabkha of central western Oman, popularized by Wilfred Thesiger, who recorded Bedu legend that it could swallow up goats, camels and men. The Umm As-Samim is a roughly circular area about 50 km in diameter, that sits at the edge of the Empty Quarter and collects the drainage from the large area west of the Jebel Akhdar. It is reached (today) by means of oil company tracks from Fahud. Randall Penney of Muscat, who captained the expedition, explained that drill cores through the surface sabkha indicated that it was generally about 6 - 7 m thick, and rested on bedrock consisting of Miocene sediments. Ambiguous markings along the way led to some unscheduled exploration and we arrived at camp at dusk.

The attraction for amateur astronomers was the absence of light pollution, since the nearest light sources were some 50 km distant from our camp on large red dunes near the edge of the sabkha at the Saudi border. Evening activities began with a lecture on the mid-winter sky, aided by a laser pointer. This included reference to some familiar stars and constellations as well as some less familiar ones. Who knew, for example, that the brightest star in the sky, Sirius, is a double star? And what is the second brightest star in the local sky? [It is Canopus,

in a constellation called The Keel, low in the horizon in Southern Arabia, and invisible in Europe.]

On hand for closer viewing were 11" and 20" telescopes, courtesy of Randall Penney and Johan Vandorp. These afforded good views of, *inter alia*, Saturn's rings (including the central gap, called the Cassini Gap), the Great Nebula in Orion, the Crab Nebula, the Owl Nebula in the Plough (the Big Dipper), and Gamma Leones, one of the most easily viewed double stars in the sky. Also on the menu were several star clusters and galaxies, many identified only by their Messier or "M" catalog numbers.

The return journey offered more time for examination of the sabkha environment. In sunlight, the vast sabkha creates mirages that appear to make distant dunes, or even small surface irregularities, float above the horizon. Occasionally, tire tracks struck out across the open sabkha – to where? The sabkha surface varied from very rough and disturbed by expansion and contraction due to desiccation and crystallisation to much smoother, apparently as a function of increasing sediment cover. Life was scarce in the dunes at the sabkha edge; only two plant species were observed, but both were in flower and seed – *Calligonum crinitum* and *Zygophyllum* sp. Probable hare tracks were found at the *Zygophyllum* and two species of dragonfly were seen – *Hemianax ephippiger*, the Vagrant Emperor, and *Pantala flavescens*, the Globe Skimmer (one specimen of each, both strong migrants). Report by Gary Feulner

Beware Old Khutwah

Richard and Cathy Morris spent several hours in the oasis of old Khutwah in mid-March. Richard wrote: We had been warned by ENHG members about possible theft from the car at the village. Because of this, we were cautious about leaving the car with anything valuable inside and we experienced no problem. However, another person parked near us had his car



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Plants – Valerie Chalmers

Mammals - 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.

opened with a wire of some kind and he lost a video camera. We had earlier, on a mid-afternoon check of our car, seen a suspicious-acting guy with a white, short wheelbase Patrol near the cars. This was at the first parking area after entering the village. Members visiting this area should beware. *Thanks to Richard for this information.*

Rain in the Hills

On the Wadi Bih trip, in February, it was pleasing to see the recovery of vegetation after such a long drought. In the partly-abandoned village high above Wadi Bih, the huge *Ziziphus spina-christi* (*sidr*) were festooned with bright green shoots some distance back from the dead ends of the branches.



At the back of the village, beautiful *Amygdalus arabica* were in full bloom, an astonishing sight for anyone who has only seen them looking like a pile of sticks.



On the Rim Walk in the Jebel Akhdar in March, the effects of the rains were not so obvious on the vegetation as on the roads. At times, we inched along, rock by rock. But the

walking track has been made easier (or harder) by the creation of steps through rock falls or very rough terrain, and we made good time. Above, an Egyptian vulture circled, and beside the track, small plants of many kinds were peeping through. The one specimen brought back from under the overhanging cliffs of the hidden village was identified by Gary Fuelner, who wrote, "I was out for a hiking overnight and the mountains are full of plants in flower. Seeing them, it was clear that your plant was *Morettia parviflora*. This was determined on the basis of the flower and buds. Your specimen was a bit small overall, and the leaves were not typical in shape. (Leaves are notoriously variable in many species, and "real" botanists do not rely on them.) *Text & photographs by Anne Millen*



Death of a Dumpsite

Part 1



Professor Larry Woods attended the International Conference on Landfill Site Remediation held at the American University of Sharjah (AUS) from 17-19 January 2005. Those (DNHG) members who have participated in the two fieldtrips to the dumpsite near Sharjah's University City organized by Larry in recent years will be inspired to learn that the entire meeting was about the "Larry Woods Dumpsite". First a fieldtrip, now an international conference!



An impressive display of cooperation between physical scientists, local authorities and environmental technology firms was on display throughout the gathering. Regardless of what might be in the landfill, it was already obvious that we had a hot topic on our hands!



Remediation, for the purposes of this conference, was defined as "recovery, revival, to make usable again." Various projects in Switzerland, Germany and the Netherlands were discussed early in the meeting in an effort to offer a comparative perspective and alert the uninitiated to the intense international competition for new ideas and contracts in



this line of business. Let this local remediation project serve as a trial that will in turn serve as a model for such projects throughout the UAE and the world, one participant exhorted. The central question up for debate was thus set: Would the Sharjah project be a one-off experiment never to be repeated or would it serve as a model to forge international standards for landfill site remediation? Put another way, were we really discussing a case of "thinking globally, acting locally"?

Of the seven clean-up options reported by a team from the University of Sharjah in 2001, it had been agreed by local authorities that the best one was full rehabilitation. A private firm, Emirates Environmental Technology (EET), was commissioned to undertake the project, and work on the site began in earnest in June 2004. EET was given an opportunity to live up to the emerging ideal of corporate social responsibility. Health, safety and environmental standards were to be met and these would hopefully help establish guidelines for landfill remediation throughout the region, an answer to the thorny question of whether the project here should adhere to American, European or international standards or whether these foreign practices should be adapted to local conditions.

Environmental awareness among the local population is increasing, and the authorities will be seeking to ensure that the remediation project had a lasting educational impact. Questions began. Had a survey of flora and fauna on the site been done prior to the commencement of its use as a dump? No. Was one done before the current remediation process began? Not systematically. When I asked in the first afternoon session on basic principles for landfill rehabilitation whether or not anyone had been concerned about the flora and fauna that had colonized the site – "Is it ethical to simply displace or destroy them?" – I was told by a German presenter that in Europe they must be taken into account and moved intact, if possible. This

said, another European participant observed that there is a related question that must be considered: "Is it ethical to let these species develop on these dump sites if the plants and animals living there are becoming contaminated and deformed?"

Day Two began with the University of Sharjah team reviewing their preliminary assessment of the site from 2001 and discussing the replacement site established 30 km from the city center in 2000. Unfortunately, the new landfill has not initially been planned to operate in a sustainable manner and was already undergoing a refit. Sharjah generates more waste per capita than anywhere in Europe! (A later speaker from the Sharjah Municipality contended that one week of Sharjah's household waste would cover one football field ten metres deep!) Smiles returned to the faces of the participants when the next presenter detailed the use of "smelling squads" (which walk perpendicular to the wind direction) and the measurement of "smelling units" (which are different from "sniffing units," we were reminded) on a remediation project in Holland. Thanks to Larry Woods.

Thru' the Lens ...

Shooting wildlife in the protected environment of a sanctuary has its own pros and cons. The main advantage, of course, is that you know the exact species to expect, and can manage your time. The concentration of species and the privacy of natural reserves are a major attraction. Some countries bank on them for sustaining the economy.



Night Heron

Ranganathitu, 67 square kilometres and about one hundred kilometres from Bangalore in Southern India, is a beautiful bird sanctuary where one can watch migratory birds from Siberia, North America and Australia. The late Dr. Salim Ali, an internationally known ornithologist, discovered the birds on these small islets on the Kaveri River in 1940 and persuaded the local authorities to protect them. Today it is a major tourist attraction. A boat ride around the islets gets you very close to the birds.



The Kaveri River

As it is close to my home city, I have visited it frequently to watch and photograph the variety of birds that roost and breed here. The birds most commonly found here (and some found throughout the year), are the median, small and pond cattle egrets, spoonbills, open bill and painted storks, stone plovers, white ibis, river terns, night and purple herons, pelicans, cormorants, darters, peafowl, wild ducks, partridges, Indian cliff swallow, lesser whistling teal, weavers, waders, and a few birds of prey. There are also bats, and sleeping crocodiles on the rocky outcrops.



Marsh Crocodile

One has to be steady when shooting from a swaying boat. The oarsmen in this sanctuary are experts; they are used to photographers so much that they know exactly how to position their boats relevant to the



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light and distance from the subject. They know how to help you get the best view and avoid distracting backgrounds.



Nature Photographers

The appropriate season to visit the bird sanctuary is June to November, though I would narrow it down to August to October. Drizzling rain is quite common even during this period and one has to be lucky with good light. A towel is a must to protect your equipment from splashing water and rain.

The sanctuary can be visited while on the way to the vast wildlife sanctuaries of the south-western part of the country; namely Bandipur, Nagarhole, Mudumalai and Periyar sanctuaries. Frans Lanting was here a couple of years ago focusing his lens on the tigers and elephants of Bandipur.



Juvenile

Ranganathitu and these other lovely sanctuaries are easily ignored since most tourists to India tend to focus more on Rajasthan, the Ganges belt and the Taj. However many twitchers supplement their itinerary with Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary which is in close proximity to the color and architectural heritage of Rajasthan. *Photographs and text by Arfan Asif*



Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

Apr 3: Deciphering the Past: Geoarchaeology and Palaeoenvironments in the Middle East - Prof. Helmut Brückner

May 1: The Biology of Swordfish in the Arabian Gulf - John Hoolihan

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

Apr 6-8 Roses on the Saiq Plateau - Peter van Amsterdam