

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Summer's Coming....

Angela Kent, who left the DNHG a year ago to move to Qatar, will be returning to the Emirates in September to teach at Al Ain University. She reports that the Qatar NHG are still keen to have us visit, and are interested in a speaker from our group. Angela was a keen participant in field trips when in Dubai, so will no doubt enjoy the Al Ain group's busy programme.

Plant recorder **Valerie Chalmers** reports that she has identified three of the four plant specimens DNHG members brought back from the Saiq Plateau but still cannot identify a prickly one. Val wrote, "The small creeping flattened specimen is a Euphorbia. The larger woody specimen (shrub) with pinkish flowers is *Ehretia obtusifolia*. (Family Boraginaceae). My book says 'it has been seen growing up to two metres high along water channels near Sayq in Oman'. The smaller shrub with tiny mauve/pink flowers is *Lantana petitiana* (Family Verbenaceae), described as a 'small mountain shrub in Oman usually found above 2,000 metres elevation. As in the cultivated plant, the small flowers, often of differing colour, are borne in dense, head-

like spikes. There appears to be no well-known Arabic name for wild *Lantana*, a plant of little economic importance. It has been called *sifsif*.' I will press the prickly specimen and see if I can get it identified in UK." Marijcke Jongbloed has suggested popping it in the scanner, to see if she knows it.

Chairman **Gary Feulner** has been on holiday for three weeks. Gary's 'holidays' are busmen's when it comes to natural history, so we are looking forward to hearing what he has really been up to.



No, captions are not wanted

We wish success to all our young members who are facing major exams soon. This includes our equipment engineer **James Pardoe**, who calmly manages to keep the audio-visuals going for our monthly meetings.

DNHG Membership

DNHG membership remains a bargain at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dhs. 50 for singles. You can join at meetings (see Membership Secretaries Lena Linton and Anin Radhakrishna) or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account no. 173746 and posted to us at PO Box 9234, Dubai. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.) Membership is valid from now to September 2004.

DNHG membership entitles you to participate in field trips and helps pay for our lecture hall, publication and distribution of *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:

Mohammed Arfan Arsif
Gary Feulner
Peter Cunningham
Valerie Chalmers
Marijcke Jongbloed



Field Trips etc ...

One for a Hot Day...

Sharjah Desert Park Perhaps 6 June

This place has it all, and it has it in the shade. If you have never been there, this may be a good chance to see it away from the crowds, as we hope to arrange a private visit. Details and confirmation of the date at the June 1 meeting or you will receive an email.

... And Then Find Your Own Fun ...

Nature Info on the Web

Natural Emirates, edited by Peter Vine, a compendium of UAE natural history subjects intended for educated laymen, can be accessed on the Internet at:

<http://www.uaeinteract.com>

There is a book but it has not been available at retail stores in Dubai. Now copies can be obtained at the Sharjah Natural History Museum – one of many good reasons for a visit. Here is an interesting snippet as an example:

Amphisbaenid

One UAE reptile-like animal that is neither snake nor lizard, is the amphisbaenid (*Diplometopon zarudni*). Its short stocky body grows to approximately 20cm in length. Much stronger than the thread snake and equipped with a spade-like snout, it is able to burrow in fairly compacted soil but is very rarely seen, since it is nocturnal and spends most of its time underground. Completely harmless, it feeds on insects which it hunts mainly underground, leaving a clearly visible raised trail on the surface. It is pinkish to purple in colour, dotted with small black spots and squares.

Get your tickets soon!

The DNHG's annual end-of-season function will be at the Dubai Country Club in the Oasis Restaurant on Thursday, June 12th. The annual photographic competition will be held, and there will be a natural history team quiz which is challenging and a lot of fun.

Tickets will be on sale at the June 1 meeting, See also the flyer included in this issue of *Gazelle*.

Photographs submitted for the competition should be a minimum size of 5" x 7" (125mm x 180mm) and mounted in matt white.

See you there for a great evening!

Letters to the editor

Any news or views you would like published in our monthly newsletter? Want to tickle things up? Feel welcome!



Please send your material to any of the committee members listed, by fax or e-mail, or direct to the editor.

Our Next Speakers

Members' Night

Stefan Beck: "DNHG Nature Walks - an armchair version"

Stefan Beck has been a regular participant in DNHG mountain hikes and nature walks, going where some still fear to tread. He finds the Hajar Mountains quite different from Germany. Now, thanks to Stefan's digital camera, you too can enjoy these outings without the sweat and uphill slogs.



David Bradford: "A Natural History Trip to Armenia & Georgia"

Dubai veteran birdwatchers David Bradford and Colin Richardson made a trip in 2001 to Armenia and Georgia to see some rare bird species and to enjoy the mountain scenery and wildflowers. David will share their experiences with us.



Ian MacGregor: "Dubai Central Laboratory's (DCL) new 'DCL Geobase'"

Ian MacGregor, a Civil Engineer and Researcher at the DCL will briefly outline what "Geotechnical Engineering" is about (including mention of the occasional failure e.g. the Leaning Tower of Pisa) and then talk about the DCL Geobase which contains data from thousands of holes drilled into the ground of Dubai Emirate. He will show examples of the output such as three-dimensional modeling of ground strata, and cross sections of what underlies Dubai.



Turbo Collection

Researchers at The Natural History Museum (formerly the British Museum (Natural History)) would like to have samples of the local marine gastropod *Turbo radiatus* in connection with a taxonomic study and clarification of the genus *Turbo* worldwide, using DNA analysis. *Turbo radiatus* is said in *Seashells of Eastern Arabia* by Bosch et al. to be an intertidal species, but it is not clear that this is strictly true, and it may be that snorkeling is required.

Can any of our members who are shell collectors tell us where they have found *Turbo radiatus* shells? Do we have anyone (collectors, snorkelers or divers) who can tell us where it can be found alive? If so, please contact Gary Feulner (contact info on p. 7). Only a small number of specimens are required, but it is necessary to collect live molluscs, not just shells, for DNA studies.

Contacts for Natural History Organisations – Volunteers !

We would like to publish in the *Gazelle* a list of contact information for UAE natural history and environmental organisations generally, e.g., ERWDA, the falcon hospitals, the zoos, the biosaline research center, the meteorological offices, the Emirates Environmental Group, and the Abu Dhabi and Al-Ain Natural History Groups.

We need a volunteer, as usual, to help compile the list, which we would plan to maintain and update, and publish once or twice a year as a resource for members. If you can help, please contact Gary Feulner. (Gary will be back in Dubai on 26 May.)

Hello from France

May in southern Europe is the month of wild orchids. The first one to show its lovely flowers was the Pyramidal orchid, *Anacamptus pyramidalis*. They grow mainly along the side of the roads and in

some meadows. I was very careful not to pick any, only to discover that the road verges are regularly mowed by Frenchmen who obviously do not appreciate orchids. Next to the gate of the "dechetterie" I found two other species: the Greater Butterfly orchid - *Platanthera chlorantha*, and the Man orchid *Aceras anthropophorum* with its comical flowers shaped exactly like a tiny man with a hydrocephalus (very big head).

The "dechetterie" is a marvelous facility. You drive onto an asphalt square that is higher than the surrounding area. Three sides of the square are perpendicular, so that large containers can be shoved up against them, the parking place coming flush to their long sides. Metal flaps bridge the gap between the parking place and the container. There is one for papers and cartons, one for metals, one for glass, one for plastics, one for aluminium, one for garden waste, one for wood, and one for "undesirables" (not people!). There are separate areas for oil and paint wastes. You can drop all your stuff in the containers, but also scrounge around to see if there is anything you can use. Especially in the category "undesirables" there are all sorts of things that might come in handy sometime. The fourth side of the square is taken up by a portacabin, where the master of debris has his office. He keeps the place meticulously clean and tells you to take the tops of your plastic or glass bottles. This handy place is only a kilometer from my house, but is sign-posted from as far away as thirty kilometers all around. So anyone trying to find my hamlet, can just follow the signs to the "dechetterie", provided he has found the right area, at least.

From the papers I have two bits of news that might interest people as far away as the Middle East. This weekend there will be a referendum in Corsica about the problem of the plastic shopping bags.

Some 100 million bags are used in Corsica alone, and according to a spokesman it takes 400 years for a bag to be degraded in this climate. Three alternatives are provided for people to vote for, the cost of each solution to be passed on to the consumer, of course. One is the introduction of a more durable plastic bag at 1 Euro that can be re-used many times; secondly, a paper bag that only costs 0.08 Euro but poses the ecological problem of exploitation of forests; and thirdly a bag made of the fibres of leaves of corn, which can be composted. This last one will cost between 0.05 and 0.14 Euro depending on size. I think I know what I would vote for!

The disaster with the tanker "Prestige" has been more or less forgotten already, with local communities advertising that the beaches are clean and the water is safe for swimming. But in actual fact the problem is far from over: there is still between 30,000 and 40,000 tons of oil in the two parts of the wreck, that lie at depths of 3,500 and 3,800 metres in the ocean. There are still 17 leaks that disgorge more than 120 tonnes of oil every day (the Spanish government admits to only 2 tonnes of leaked oil per day). The submersible "Nautilus" has been re-contracted to see if these leaks can be closed. This 8 metre-long submarine can dive to 6,000 metres and allows three people to carry out repairs. But the wrecks will remain time-bombs if a permanent solution is not found. One is to entomb the two parts of the wreck in coffins of titanium, the other is to pump out the remaining oil after having liquefied the thick oil. This latter solution, successfully applied in the disaster with the "Erica" shipwrecked along the Brittany coast, is the cheapest. The Spanish environment organisation "Nunca Mais" keeps a close eye on the proceedings and maintains pressure on the governments of Spain and France not to ignore the problem. *Thanks to Marijcke Jongbloed.*



Field Clips

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

—BIRD—
-REPORT-



Inter-

Please send your Bird Reports
to
David Snelling

Emirates Birdwatching

Inter-Emirates twitchers were in the expert hands of David Bradford for visits to a well-balanced menu of East Coast sites – mangrove, beach, marsh and field. At Khor Kalba, David arranged initially for several breeding pairs of the White-Collared Kingfisher (an endemic subspecies) to show themselves well, and then followed up by luring both Sykes' Warbler (for which Khor Kalba is the only Arabian site) and Clamorous Reed Warbler into good view by playing back their recorded song – in the case of Sykes' Warbler, an elaborate melody.

On the beach near Fujairah port, many waders, terns and gulls attended the hauling-in of fishermen's catches, but it was a surprise to find a half dozen Little Egrets in the surf as well. We saw lots of Sooty Gulls (an east coast specialty) and watched one fisherman calm and release a yellow-legged gull that had become entangled in the nets. Among the other species making noteworthy appearances were a lone Greater Black Headed Gull and several Arctic Skuas, whose modus operandi is to chase and harass other seabirds until they drop their catch.

The Qurayyah Pools wetlands proved disappointing from a bird-watching point of view (although it was home to dozens, if not hundreds of Black Winged Stilts), but participants who stayed on to look around more generally at the site found a deposit of raised beach sands, a couple of tomato plants growing wild, a redback spider and an ancient (probably stone-age) shell midden. They also chased up a wildcat!

After a very civilised lunch break at the Oceanic Hotel, the field trip continued on to the grounds of the Fujairah National Dairy Farm, for yet another suite of birds, led by the familiar Indian Rollers, Indian Silverbills, House Sparrows and House Crows. More unusually, Common Snipe were flushed from several bulldozed ponds, giving David Bradford the chance to instruct on the finer points of snipe identification on the wing (it's easier than on the ground). A Green Sandpiper and a pair of Garganey were observed among flotsam of empty laban containers, and in the air House Martins were spotted, along with at least one Sand Martin and a Red-Rumped Swallow. Along the way, Mary Bradford did her good deed for the day by freeing one of the milking cows from a bit of polyethylene rope that had become entangled in its teeth.
Report by Gary Feulner

Through the lens...

Photographs of birds in flight present grace and beauty. They also represent freedom of movement and are a joy to watch. Remember the best-seller *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. Natural history data on flight patterns are yet another interesting aspect. But believe me, photographing a bird in flight is not easy. Just as every other technique has its own difficulties and needs preparation, so does this. It demands quick reflex action. One has to pre-plan and visualize the final result to be successful.

If your camera has shutter speed priority well and good. If not, depending on the birds direction one can preset the shutter speed; for example 1/500 sec across, 1/250 sec on an angle and 1/125 sec if approaching. These are rough figures to give an idea only. It all depends on the lighting conditions and how fast a shutter speed you can afford with relevant aperture. The aperture can be fully opened, or one f-stop less to get the fastest shutter speed. Auto-focusing or manually pre-setting focus – it is a personal choice. Panning is yet another technique that can get beautiful blurred backgrounds and feeling of speed. Wings can get blurred and in some instances to good effect.

Some cameras have custom settings; sports, macro, etc. and some have a motor-drive facility. Your calculation, exposure, focus and personal judgement determine the final effect. In these split second, mostly hand-held shots, you have to capture the subject in good composition too.

Here are some photographs taken using these techniques.

The striking broad white band across the black wings of the **Oys-**



tercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*), with its characteristic snipe like orange-red bill blunt at tip, and red legs, was a delight to see in flight. This photograph was taken at Khor Dubai Wildlife Sanctuary on the Rashidiya side.

The Black headed gull (*Larus ridibundus*), featured in flight, is very



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Plants – Valerie Chalmers

Mammals - Marijcke Jongbloed *until someone else volunteers.*

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.



common and widespread in this region. This shot was taken near the abra station on the Bur Dubai side of the creek.

The third photograph features a Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) with its conspicuous black dotted line



on mid fore neck. It is a common bird of passage and can be found in good numbers during winter along the Dubai creek.

The fourth photograph features the Greater Flamingo



(*Phoenicopterus ruber*) at Wimpey Pits.

Nature notes and photographs by Arfan Asif

The following is a repeat of an article published last year when we

were approaching the animal-abandonment season. A full bibliography is available from Peter Cunningham or from the editor.

Domestic Cats: A Threat to the Environment in the UAE

It is not certain when the domestication of cats occurred, but what is confirmed is that humans have always had an affinity for this feline. Ancient Egyptian art including the city Bubastis, that was devoted to their worship (Anderson & de Winton 1902), confirms this early association with humans. As they are highly versatile creatures with a very wide habitat tolerance, they can become feral very successfully and have managed to establish themselves as feral populations in as diverse situations as the Kalahari Desert in Botswana to Marion Island in the sub-Antarctic (Skinner & Smithers 1990). Marion Island is a good "bad case scenario" as five cats were originally introduced in 1949 (van Aarde & Robinson 1980) to control house mice, but by 1977 an established feral population of approximately 3,400 were ravaging the marine bird population. An alarming natural increase per annum of 23% (van Aarde 1978) was estimated for the feral cat population which resulted in a dramatic eradication programme to rid the island of this scourge.

A pair of breeding cats, which can have two or more litters per year, can exponentially produce 420,000 offspring over a seven-year period (Savage 2001). It is estimated that the United Kingdom and the USA have 1 million and 60 million feral cats, respectively (Hartwell 1996). The problem is thus daunting with few real solutions offered. This note touches on a few issues concerning feral cats and possible implications.

Hybridisation

A most disconcerting issue is the genetic pollution through hybridisation. According to Skinner & Smithers (1990) and Griffin & Simmons (1998), the African wild cat



Reports...

(*Felis lybica* – conspecific with *F. silvestris* from Arabia) interbreeds with the domestic cat where they come into contact. This results in fertile hybrids (Bothma 1996) and possibly the decline of pure-bred African wild cats anywhere near settled areas, rendering the species vulnerable (Smithers 1986). The fate of *F. silvestris* from Arabia is probably similar. Harrison & Bates (1991) state that great difficulty is experienced in differentiating between domestic cat and Wild Cat in Arabia. This could indicate historic interbreeding with the possibility that little if any genetically “pure” Wild Cats remain locally. This would however have to be determined genetically.

Excessive predation

Fitzgerald (1988) states that the diet of feral cats include small mammals (70%), birds (20%) and a variety of other animals (10%). The diets of feral cat populations, however, reflect the food locally available. Observation of feral cats shows that some individuals can kill over 1,000 wild animals per year (Bradt, 1949). It is estimated that over a billion small mammals and hundreds of millions of birds are killed by cats (including domestic cats) each year in the USA (Coleman & Temple, 1996). In Australia both feral and domestic cats kill more than 100 native Australian species of birds, 50 mammal and marsupial species, 50 reptile species, and numerous frogs and invertebrate species (Anon, 1997a). Worldwide, cats may have been involved in the extinction of more bird species than any other cause, except habitat destruction (Coleman, Temple, & Craven, 1997).

Cats are skilled and successful hunters, as anyone who has ever watched a stalking cat would confirm. Virtually any species smaller than it is fair game. Bambaradeniya *et al.* (2001) state that domestic/feral cats, as opportunistic predators and scavengers, are an additional threat to the herpetofauna of Sri Lanka while Pero &

Crowe (1996) recognize that nest predation by feral cats may cause potential danger to game birds. Cats can result in dramatic declines of birds as indicated on Marion Island with its vulnerable ground nesting and burrow nesting marine birds. By 1965/66 the once common Diving Petrel no longer nested on the island due to heavy predation by cats.

It is not documented how many cats are officially and/or unofficially resident in and around towns and cities throughout the UAE, but it can fairly accurately be assumed that an alarming number of reptiles and small mammals must certainly fall prey to them. What the effect on local bird and reptile populations is could only be speculated. For the defence of feral cats the following has been documented. Hartwell (1995) states that cats prefer to hunt introduced “pest” species (pigeons, rabbits, mice, etc.) and even co-exist with the marsupial “Native Cat” in Tasmania. Ally Cat Allies (ACA) state that the impact of feral cats on bird populations is negligible and that the decline of bird and other wild-life populations is rather directly linked to the loss of natural habitat (Anonymous, 1997b).

It is feared that feral cats also compete with native predators by reducing the availability of prey species. The effect that feral cats have on the local environment is something that has to be investigated further.

Disease

Contagious diseases of domestic cats can be important since these diseases can possibly be transmitted to wild cat species (Bothma 1996). Cases such as feline leukemia spreading to mountain lions (Jessup *et al.* 1993) and feline panleukopenia (feline distemper) spreading to the endangered Florida Panther (Roelke *et al.* 1993) have already been documented in the USA. Domestic carnivores should always be considered a potential source of contamination for wild ones. Mönnig & Veldman

(1989) name cat flu (Parvovirus disease) and cat tapeworm (*Taenia taeniaeformis*), last mentioned transmitted through rats/mice, as two important diseases which are linked to domestic cats. How these diseases affect wild cats is also unknown. Feral cats are thought not to act as a vector for rabies although they are susceptible to the disease and do die from it. Toxoplasmosis is another disease transmitted by cats and can cause blindness, birth defects and miscarriage in humans (Anon 1997a).

Eradication

On Marion Island it took almost 15 years of crude methods ranging from the introduction of Cat flu and actively hunting to poisoning to eradicate a few thousand cats in a relatively small and isolated area (Bester *et al.* 2000). However, extermination is not simple or straightforward and is often counter-productive. No eradication method is 100% effective in eliminating cats and those which evade the exterminators breed several times a year depending on climate and available food/shelter, thus quickly re-colonising the area (Hartwell 1995). Cleared areas also attract new cats from outside due to the vacancy of a favourable habitat with under utilised food/prey.

Australian studies found that the neutering of several feral colonies led to an overall reduction in cat numbers as the resident, non-breeding populations deterred other cats which would have swarmed into a vacated area (Hartwell 1995).

Eradication methods, even if implemented humanely, cannot solve the feral cat problem. Trapping and neutering does however offer a longer-term solution although it is very expensive. The only way to keep an area cat-free is to remove food sources (edible refuse, prey species, handouts by cat-lovers), something, which is often impossible or impractical.



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What you can do

Very little scientific work has focussed on the influences of domestic and/or feral cats on their immediate environment in the UAE. The concerns as documented in this note do however acknowledge a potential threat and warn against the long-term implications of the further establishment of feral cats throughout the country.

It is thus strongly suggested that the feeding of feral cats be dissuaded and an effective neutering and/or eradication programme be implemented to protect indigenous and endemic species, and ultimately the UAE's heritage, from falling prey to feral cats. Further research is also necessary to determine the extent of the problem.

*Keep only as many pet cats as

you can feed and care for.

*Control reproduction and humanely euthanise unwanted cats.

*On farms, keep only the minimum number of free-ranging cats needed to control rodents.

*Neuter your cats or prevent them from breeding, and encourage others to do so.

*Support or initiate efforts to require licensing and neutering of pets. In areas where such laws already exist, insist that they be enforced.

*Locate bird feeders in sites that do not provide cover for cats to wait in ambush for birds.

*Don't dispose of unwanted cats by releasing them in rural areas.

*Eliminate sources of food, such

as garbage or outdoor pet food dishes, that attract stray cats.

*Don't feed stray cats.

*If at all possible, for the sake of your cat and local wildlife, keep your cat indoors.

*Contact your local animal welfare organisation for help.

For further information contact:
Peter Cunningham



[pcunningham@polytechnic.edu.ae]

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

June 1 Members' Night
Stefan Beck: "DNHG Nature Walks - an armchair version"
David Bradford: "A Natural History Trip to Armenia & Georgia"
Ian MacGregor: "Dubai Central Laboratory's (DCL) new 'DCL Geobase'"

June 12 End-of-season Party and Annual Photographic Competition

Field Trips (DNHG members only, please).

Friday June 6? Sharjah Desert Park

Trips being planned for the new season:

Sept Saluki Breeding Centre, Falcon Hospital

October Lamjed's Dhow Trip