

# GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

**DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP**

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

## Members' News

*DNHG Membership  
Renewals*

### *Thanks & a Welcome Back*

**Barbara van Meir** has secured a donation of 12 years of *National Geographic* magazine to the DNHG library. These will make a welcome addition for browsers. In addition to its travel pieces, National Geographic has long been a leader in the sponsorship and publication of popular reports on research about topics such as deep-ocean rifts, dinosaurs and human paleontology.

**Barbara Couldrey** took a break from RAK to trek with friends in the Karakoram region of northern Pakistan, ascending the Baltoro glacier to the base camp for K2, the world's second highest peak. Barbara reports: "The trek was quite tough in places, especially the Gondogola Pass. We also did it in very quick time. Jumping crevasses on the Baltoro was quite an experience! We nearly lost one of our party down one! Weather not very good so no clear view of K2 but still the scenery was spectacular. The Karakoram Highway was another experience altogether (19 hours Islamabad to Skardu ... and back)! What a feat of engineering – a narrow ribbon of road blasted out of a sometimes quite unstable mountainside, high above the boiling, muddy Indus River carrying the melt from many glaciers." And (the

Chairman adds) crossing the geologic suture between the Indian and Asian tectonic plates.

Erstwhile committee member and stalwart of the DNHG **Dr Sandy Fowler** takes to his wings on 26th August to go to Guadalajara. Sandy and Beryl plan to live in an expatriate community at Lake Chapala, a fresh water lake so big that it moderates the climate. There Sandy will be able to indulge his interest in natural history and has promised the occasional dispatch. These will be most interesting if the web sites that your ed. found are anything to go by.



The pier in 1976 ... and in 2002

These two photographs are from a website called [www.amigosdelago.org](http://www.amigosdelago.org) but many sites relating to conservation issues can be found online, the most interesting being [www.earthobservatory.nasa.gov/Newsroom](http://www.earthobservatory.nasa.gov/Newsroom).

September 2005 starts our new DNHG membership year. Please make our lives easier by renewing early. 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:**

Moh'd Arfan Asif  
Mike Jennings  
Barbara Couldrey  
Gary Feulner  
Dr. John Fox

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



## Things to look forward to ...

**Angela and Stephen Manthorpe** were also at altitude over the summer. They took a 2 week holiday in July to go trekking in Ladakh. Their brief report, "Fantastic views and the whole area is well worth a repeat visit some time", makes us hope that we will have a fuller report in our October issue.

Our new Speaker Coordinator, **Geoff Sanderson**, will not be putting his money where his mouth is, but rather his feet. He will stand in to deliver the first lecture of the new season, in September. This promises to be an interesting kick-off for a varied programme. Jonathon Ali Khan's lecture has been put off until October. In addition to Jonathan's talk, we hope to have DVDs of the *Arabia's Cycles of Life* series available at the September lecture. Members interested in purchasing any of these should remember to bring along the necessary funds.

## E-Gazelle !

Remember that you can request the DNHG's monthly newsletter, the *Gazelle*, by e-mail. If you think you would prefer this, please e-mail our publisher, Peter van Amsterdam, (pvana@emirates.net.ae) and give him your details to be placed on the address list.

We offer members the opportunity to elect to receive the *Gazelle* by mail or by e-mail. The latter is quick and easy for you (and you see the photographs in glorious colour) and will save us a small but significant amount in annual postage. We will circulate a request in due course, for this purpose.

## 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 organisation, 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 honour 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.



## And not ...

Returning from summer holidays to find your garden or neighbourhood populated by stray cats can be an unpleasant experience and a considerable health hazard especially for children. Dubai Municipality has a control policy that revolves around keeping one spayed female for each Municipality rubbish bin, and putting the rest down. This works well in terms of rat and pest control, and ensures that the bin-keepers are not smelly or quarrelsome. So don't just put up with it—take action!

## Our Next Speaker

Geoff Sanderson, a landscape architect and horticulturist, is a Fellow and past President of the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects. He is a founding member of the Australian Institute of Horticulture, and recipient of numerous design awards and the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects' medal. Fifteen years of a rich career have been spent in the Gulf region, mostly in Bahrain and UAE.

Currently Geoff is undertaking a PhD through the University of Melbourne concerning "optimum soil and irrigation conditions for hot arid region landscapes". The thesis is an 'after work' activity using field research from Al Ain, sanctioned and supported by Al Ain Municipality.

Geoff is now Operations Manager of Green Concepts, an international consultancy based in Dubai. Until January 2005, Geoff was in Al Ain as Principal Landscape Architect with Shankland Cox. His main duty was consultant adviser to Al Ain Municipality, the Town Planning Department and the Al Ain Economic Development and Tourism Promotion Authority. While in Al Ain Geoff took a special interest in the date palm and other plants of cultivation.



## Mountain Dhubs

On his last UAE outing, a day before returning to Canada, retiring Speaker Coordinator David Palmer saw his first *dhub* (spiny-tailed lizard, *Uromastix* sp.) in the wild. Unlike most dhub sightings, however, this was not in the desert but along a graded track in the mountains south of Siji. Two dhubs were seen, each of which retreated to its burrow on the rolling gravel terrace. Gary Feulner was along and returned a week later with Charles Laubach to inspect the area more closely. Within an area of about 0.25 sq km they found some thirty good dhub burrows, of which they estimate at least 15-20 were in current use. They also found another 25-30 collapsed or eroded burrows.

A question that struck all of the observers is what were all these dhubs eating? The vegetation in the immediate area was both very sparse and very dry – and is unlikely to have been much better during the past five years.

A few e-mail inquiries turned up no one among the 'usual suspects' who had encountered dhubs within the mountain front in the Northern Emirates, but we were alerted to a recent sighting from the Jazirah oasis, within the mountains near Khutwah (in the Al-Ain/Buraimi area). We were also informed that the type area for *Uromastix leptieni*, a species of dhub only recently distinguished from the UAE's more common *Uromastix aegyptius microlepis*, is Wadi Siji. The discovery of *U. leptieni* was by German herpetologist Rolf Leptien, with its distribution ranging from around Muscat through the Batinah coastal plain and the eastern foothills of the Hajar Mountains to the Musandam Peninsula in the north. The westernmost locality is Jebel Ali, approximately 50 km southwest of Dubai.

Peter Cunningham, one of the DNHG's non-resident members who has studied dhubs near Sweihan, wrote from Namibia to explain that *U. leptieni* can be distinguished visually by a row of visible enlarged

tubercles (scaly bumps) along the sides of the body. Peter adds that the colour pattern of juvenile *U. leptieni* differs from that of *U.a.microlepis* – "reddish brown to dark brown with a dark brown to black reticular pattern; no yellow "spots".



*Uromastix aegyptius microlepis*  
(from [www.uaeinteract.com](http://www.uaeinteract.com), the web site of the UAE Ministry of Information and Culture)

Chairman Gary Feulner would be pleased to hear from DNHG members who may have seen *dhubs* in the mountains over the years, given that areas such as Wadi Siji, Wadi Ashwani and other wadis to the south were, in the 1980s, regularly written up in the local newspapers as destinations for weekend sightseeing and camping. Wadi Ashwani was a favourite of Marijcke Jongbloed, and is featured in *Living Desert* and many of her other publications. Time marches on, however, and David, Gary and Charles were all surprised and saddened at the scale of the quarrying that now afflicts these areas. *Report by Gary Feulner*

## Goby Gone?

Gary Feulner and Charles Laubach paid a sultry July visit to Wadi Qahfi to see how the population of the "Hatta goby" (*Awaous aeneofuscus*) had fared following the relatively good rains of winter 2004-05. Gary's last visit was in May 2004, when he was able to find only four gobies within the area of pools they were known to occupy. That was the lowest number so far recorded on a scouting visit (the high was a count of approximately 80 individual fish).

In July 2005, however, Gary and Charles found no gobies at all. The

reasons are speculative, but two possibly contributing phenomena were apparent. First, the flowing water had rearranged three of the larger pools that had held a number of bigger gobies, filling them to diminish both their size and depth. Second, as on previous visits since 2000, when the drought period has permitted the maintenance of a vehicle track in the wadi, there is evidence that the area of the goby pools is regularly visited for fishing purposes. That evidence consists of extensive damming and channeling, as well as the construction of fish weirs and abundant litter of cut-off mineral water bottles fashioned into fish traps, like mini-*gharghour*.

The fishing activity is probably directed at the traditional prey of the local mountain residents, the small, dark *Garra barreimiae*, a carp family member that is the most common wadi fish. But it seems inevitable that the goby population must suffer 'collateral damage' as a result. Moreover, since the goby is somewhat larger than the other native fish, and distinctive, it is likely to attract attention from local fisherman as a novelty. Since 1998, gobies have also been actively collected from the site in unknown numbers by institutional and private collectors.

If in fact the gobies have been

## 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.

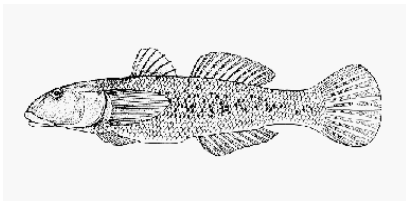






E.mail your reports to [pvana@emirates.net.ae](mailto:pvana@emirates.net.ae), (Arial 10 justified) or deliver them to Anne Millen on floppy disk at monthly meetings.

eliminated from Wadi Qahfi, it is especially unfortunate, since the small population there was essentially an isolated one. Owing to dam construction in Wadi Hatta and the high rate of water use in the Hatta area generally, it is unlikely that Wadi Qahfi (a tributary of Wadi Hatta) will again flow to the sea. This negates the possibility of recruitment of new fish from the sea-going population of fry, in accordance with the normal life cycle of the species. [For more information about the Hatta goby, see Feulner & Cunningham in *Tribulus 10.1* (Spring 2000)] Report by Gary Feulner



*Awaous aeneofuscus*

### Lonely Ravens?

Traveling in Oman in February, in the Umm As-Samim and on the extensive gravel plains to the north, Gary Feulner saw few birds, mostly occasional Brown-Necked Ravens that seemed to be attracted by the presence of human visitors and the accompanying prospect of scraps. Gary commented that it was somewhat odd to see single BNRs on most occasions, since they tend to come in pairs (or more).

Mike Jennings of ABBA provided the probable explanation: "The mystery of the lone ravens might be explained by birds nesting at this time of year. First of all a bird will be incubating for about 2 weeks or more and then one bird will remain at the nest for another week or so

whilst the chicks are very small. I think most incubation is in February. Hence the chances of seeing only one raven in February is much greater than at other times of the year."

### Book Review

#### *Tribulus 15.1*

*Tribulus vol. 15.1* is now out and should be available at our September lecture meeting (at the usual Dh. 15 price). The latest issue contains numerous short reports on, *inter alia*, an extended discussion of spoon worms as well as shorter reports on anomalous shell middens near Al-Ain, the first UAE record of Jerdon's Orphean Warbler and the first breeding record of Purple Gallinule, more WW II plane crashes in the UAE, and several reports of uncommon butterflies from the Ru'us al-Jibal and the Al-Ain area. In addition, there are reports of various conferences, local field studies and other natural history publications.

### Thru' the lens ...

With Wimpey Pits and Larry Woods Dump site relegated to history, I have had to move towards the north for my photography.



Khor al Baidah in Umm Al Quwain is a must for twitchers. It is a favourite for the crab plovers, and, along with the great knots, sand plovers and sandpipers, the place is a haven for waders.

Interestingly, one finds huge sand dunes adjacent to the mud flats attracting desert birds — larks, desert wheatear and desert warblers. The more serious twitcher can see a

wide variety of desert birds and waders in close proximity.



There is also a variety of plants, some coastal, some desert.



Years ago, I had approached the place by taking the mud path by the palace, carefully ignoring the prohibitory signs. The opportunity to photograph the Peregrine Falcon, which I had erroneously identified as the Bonnellis Eagle was the reason for that. On that occasion, I was not caught as seems to happen these days. People get quite suspicious of my antics - they wonder what I could possibly be doing in a small tent in the middle of nowhere.

Now I have realized that the best approach for Khor al Baidah is from the main road that leads to Ras Al Khaimah, and it raises a good deal less suspicion. There is a dirt track adjacent to a huge dune just a couple of kilometres from the signal on the main road. This is probably the most common approach though one can approach the Khor from many directions.

I have always admired the speci-





## Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

Reptiles - Dr Reza Khan  
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Archaeology - Prof. John Fox  
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Birds - David Bradford  
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Geology - Gary Feulner  
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Insects – Gary Feulner

Fossils - Valerie Chalmers  
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vmc@latifaschool.co.ae

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.

mens of the Desert Hyacinth (*Cistanche tubulosa*) which grows near the khor.



But I will not be there this summer. For a while, I will escape to Bangalore to shoot some more specimens of the macro world on rainy mornings. Lal Bagh, pictured below is an historic botanical garden right in the heart of Bangalore city.



Lal Bagh has an incredible variety of birds and trees, and I just wonder what surprises it has in store for me this year! *Text and photographs by Mohammed Arfan Asif*

### Travelers' Advisory Mountain Walking In Northern Oman

A number of well-marked hiking trails also now exist in the Jebel Akhdar and possibly elsewhere, courtesy of Oman's Ministry of Tourism. Trails are known to exist in (at least) the Jebel Shams area (Jebel Shams, the Rim Walk and the descent of Wadi Ghul), the area

above Al-Hamra (near Sharafat Al-Alamain) and in Ghubrah Bowl. Presumably a trail guide or overview has been or will be published to orient would-be trekkers who are unacquainted with the area. If any members have information about such a guide, it would be welcomed.

It should be cautioned that although these trails are well marked, they follow traditional routes and make substantial ascents and descents. As a result, they can be very strenuous and, in places, tricky. In the Ghubrah Bowl, for example, the marked trail includes a narrow ledge where a length of gnarled olive provides the footing that Mother Earth omitted.

For those more willing to find their own way, an excellent book has been available for several years, *Adventure Trekking in Oman*, by Anne Dale and Jerry Hadwin. Unlike all of the guidebooks published in the UAE to date, this one conscientiously describes a very large number of routes (49 in all, plus variations) so that not all of the pent-up demand is focused on the same few sites that, then, quickly become overused and abused. A warning is in order, however: The book lives up to its "adventure" billing, and many of the walks are ambitious even for regular hikers. Most involve ascents and descents of 1000 metres or more, often over difficult terrain. A number of routes require ledge walking and some require rock climbing or scrambling. This, of course, is not so much the doing of Dale and Hadwin as it is the nature of the Oman mountains, but it does mean that most of their offerings should not be too casually undertaken. *Report by Gary Feulner*



*Bilad Seit from near Sherif al Alamein  
(Photograph Anne Millen)*





## K-T Line in Jebel Akhdar??

Prof. Reg Victor, in his lecture in February, showed a single geological slide, of a conformable sedimentary contact that was said to be the K-T (Cretaceous-Tertiary) boundary, i.e., a continuous sedimentary record of the passage in time from the Cretaceous to the Tertiary, about 65 million years ago.

The K-T boundary, where it is preserved elsewhere in the world (e.g., on both sides of the Mediterranean and in Mexico) is marked by a layer of sediment rich in the element iridium, which is interpreted as the residue of a meteoric impact. Evidence for a meteorite impact in the vicinity of the Yucatan Peninsula at about 65 mya exists in the form of structural and mineralogical evidence (a palaeo-crater, shatter cones and high pressure crystal forms of quartz (SiO<sub>2</sub>). The hypothesis of a meteorite impact neatly explains, albeit at a general level, the mass extinctions that occurred at the end of the Cretaceous, including the extinction of the dinosaurs. That hypothesis rapidly won acceptance among geologists, with the significant exception of many dinosaur paleontologists, who found evidence that dinosaurs were waning even before their final extinction, and who sought a less catastrophic explanation for their disappearance. In the past few years, a small number of geologists have attempted to elaborate on evidence showing that the meteorite horizon dates to several hundred thousand years before the stratigraphic boundary of the Cretaceous.

In fact, the Jebel Akhdar photo was not new to several DNHG members. Our own Diane Lazenbury returned from the Saiq Plateau last spring with a photo of the same outcrop and the same explanation, given her by an apparently knowledgeable expat guest at the Jebel Akhdar Hotel. She very thoughtfully mentioned the site and passed the photo on to Gary Feulner, geologist *manqué*, for comment. "There must be some misunderstanding," said

Gary. "It's extremely unlikely to be the K-T boundary." His objection was simple. No Tertiary rocks have been mapped in the Jebel Akhdar and they are unlikely to have been overlooked. If there's no "T", you can't have a K-T. Moreover, the limestones and dolomites of the Saiq Plateau are mostly Permian and Jurassic, not Cretaceous. Possibly, Gary suggested, the outcrop represents another stratigraphic boundary, perhaps the Permian-Triassic.

These concerns were expressed to Prof. Victor after his lecture. He is not himself a geologist, and he promised to follow up with further inquiries to verify the information. He has now reported back that the outcrop in question is indeed considered unlikely to be the K-T boundary. This, at least was the view of several experts he consulted. They, too, suggest that it might be the Permian-Triassic boundary (which can be seen elsewhere in Oman and the UAE) or perhaps a subsidiary boundary within the Triassic. Unfortunately, it has so far not been possible to track down the geologist who first reported the contact (and who presumably conducted or collaborated on the geochemical studies), who has since left Oman. Until further notice, however, Prof. Victor plans to delete the slide from his presentation.

More important than any error or confusion is the possibility for further enlightenment. If the contact in the photograph does indeed represent some other significant stratigraphic boundary, and if it is in fact rich in iridium, then it is arguably of even greater interest than if it had been the K-T boundary, for this would indicate a second major boundary that correlates (apparently) with evidence of meteorite impact. The Permian-Triassic extinction event, for example, was biologically even more significant than the Cretaceous-Tertiary extinction, in terms of the statistical changes in taxonomic groups across the boundary, but its causes remain speculative. At the moment, however, information about the out-

crop in the photo must be considered equally speculative. *Report by Gary Feulner.*

*(Ed.: When we went up to the cutting the first time, there were two black lines, one at chest level, and one at ankle level. Somewhere, I have a photograph of this. The lower line is now covered by a layer of rubble, but it might be interesting to dig the debris away and determine the composition of the two layers and whether they are the same material.)*



*The upper black line (Photo A. Millen)*

## Part 2 of John Fox on Julphar & Kush

As the focal point and first stop on the tour, Christian provided an in-depth view of Julfar as a trading city which comes into view on the threshold of European historiography of the 1500s, when and where the Portuguese established an outpost. There is no question that Julfar is the town associated with the site, which was historically identified with the archaeological remains in the 1960s. The site has been protected since 1968, and was the first site to be done so in the UAE). Julfar was investigated again by an Iraqi team in 1971, and more recently by a multi-country European expedition during 1989-1994. The site itself is huge for being a low rising archaeological tell on a low



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bluff overlooking the shore line about one hundred meters away.

Ceramics suggest a chronology for Julfar from ca. 1200s- to the early 1600s. Blue and white Ming period porcelain shards litter the site and speak not only to trade connections with the Far East (not necessarily China) but more probably to Malacca which was a Chinese port town in Malaysia under the Portuguese took over in the early 1500s. The settlement of Julfar was spread along about four kilometres of coastline, and was built almost completely of mud brick architecture and the less permanent thatched housing of palm fronds stuck into the ground (arish). Lime plaster facades were introduced in the 1500s to Julfar, just before its citizens relocated about five kilometres south to modern Ras al-Khaimah. The population probably varied by 10,000 to 30,000 persons,

depending upon the season of the year, if the traders were out to sea, and whether residences in the adjacent (landward) palm gardens are included. The palm groves at Julfar are the largest in the Oman Peninsula, followed by those in Al Ain and Dibba.

It seems reasonable to infer that the citizens of Julfar would have maintained houses in Hormuz, and in India (probably Gujarat, as they did in Bombay during the 19th century). Monumentality in architecture was not part of the vision at Julfar, for the small two roomed mosque lacked a minaret (minarets were not introduced to the Gulf until the mid-twentieth century). However, a massive rampart four metres high, with a ditch or moat three metres across, defended the city and its palm groves on its southern city limit. This rampart was identified by Christian Velde last year, and is the

most massive construction of antiquity known to date in Arabia. However, it was constructed essentially of rounded wadi stones, so that the organization of labor to construct the rampart probably was not that much more involved than tending the palm orchards. Rounded watch towers were situated every 150 metres along its seven kilometre length.

The lure of the sea apparently outweighed the need for fresh water, which had to be carried from the palm gardens some one to two kilometres to Julfar. This was also true of the other shoreline settlements, such as Ras al-Khaimah a few kilometres south, where the citizens of Julfar relocated in the late 1500s and early 1600s, as well as at Sharjah and Dubai two centuries later. *Thanks to Professor Fox. The third and final part will appear in the October*

## Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

Sept 18      Date Palm Cultivation - Geoff Sanderson

Oct 02      The Making of "Arabia's Cycles of Life" - Jonathan Ali Khan

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

Field trips to be announced.