

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Narayan Karki teamed up with **Gary Feulner** to conduct a summer survey of the distribution of a "new" large wadi grass, only recently recognized as distinct from the more common *Saccharum ravennae*. Both grasses are relatives of sugar cane. A full report is in preparation. One side benefit of the study was the chance to witness flooding in Wadi Shawkah after a late afternoon thunderstorm.



Wadi Shawkah in spate

Former DNHG member **Khalid Rafeek** is currently resident in Abu Dhabi but his work now sometimes takes him to Oman and he has used that opportunity to study and photograph Omani butterflies in his spare time. Recently he put his efforts during a Dhofar visit into his special passion for butterflies that live on parasitic plants, by seeking

out the Arabian Sapphire *Epamera glaucus*. He collected as much guidance as possible from knowledgeable naturalists including Torben Larsen, who literally "wrote the book" on Arabian butterflies, but none were enthusiastic about his chances of finding or photographing this generally reclusive butterfly. In the end, he succeeded beyond his (and their) wildest dreams, finding the semi-parasitic Loranthus vine (*Plicosepalis acaciae*, Family Loranthaceae, which includes European mistletoe) in full, bright red flower, with the Arabian Sapphire in flight at multiple sites, and getting excellent photographs – not only of the butterfly but also of the caterpillar and pupa. We look forward to a full report in due course.



Arabian Sapphire on *Acacia* flower
Photograph by Khalid Rafeek

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.) Subscriptions paid now are good through to September 2010.

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:

Nancy Papathanasopoulou
Colin Murray
Angela Manthorpe
Binish Roobas
Khalid Rafeek
Ziad Makhoul
Gary Feulner
Colin Emmitt



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



End-of Season Photographic Competition

These are the winning photographs from our end-of-season competition, with a short piece about them by each photographer.

Life on Earth: Plants/Animals/
Fossils: Ziad Makhoul – Turtle on Masirah Island.



Old loggerhead mother turtle, exhausted after nesting.

He wrote, "This is the face of a 60 year old loggerhead mother turtle at 5am. She travelled the Indian Ocean dodging fishing boats and predators and, in the last two and a half hours, crawled up on Masirah beach to above the high tide line. She then found a suitable spot to dig her nest in the soft sand, laid her eggs and carefully compacted the sand to cover the nest, wiping out all traces. She is exhausted, here, and even has sand in her eyes, but the mission is completed! And within the next 20 minutes, before sunrise, she will reach the sea and get hydrated again."

Earth & Environment: Landscapes/
Geology: Colin Emmitt – Calcareous Pools



Calcareous pools

Gary Feulner, on behalf of Colin explained, "Formations like this are found at a number of mountain front locations from Hatta south to Mahdhah. Ground water percolating slowly through the ophiolite rock becomes highly alkaline and relatively calcium-rich. When it emerges, it reacts chemically with atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂), precipitating calcium carbonate (CaCO₃) as travertine."

Man & his Influence: Archaeology/
Architecture/Culture (People)/
Environment: Angela Manthorpe -
Palm Frond Boat



Shasha

Angela wrote, "I found it near the beach in Umm Al Qawain after the InterEmirates trip to RAK a couple of years ago. It appeared to have been abandoned." Gary Feulner added, "It is called a *shasha*. The shasha is the subject of a short article by archeologist Michelle Ziolkowski in *Tribulus* vol. 10.1 (2000), called "The Shasha - traditional fishing craft of the UAE's East Coast". In *The UAE, Visions of Change* by Noor Ali Rashid, it is mentioned that, traditionally, in-shore fishing was often undertaken in a shasha, a small boat fashioned from palm fronds, whereas off shore fishing was done in a dhow.

Best Photo Overall: Binish Roobas – Juvenile Cobra. Binish received the DNHG trophy.

(We forgot to tell Binish that the photographs were to be from DNHG trips, but perhaps it's just as well - we would have missed out on seeing this superb photograph and reading the story behind it.)



Juvenile cobra

Binish wrote, "This picture was taken in Kerala when I was working as a naturalist at a nature resort called Coconut Lagoon. The resort was situated at the mouth of a river joining the biggest lagoon in Kerala known as Vembanad Lake. Adjoining this area were rice paddies in which there were plenty of reptiles, birds, amphibians and fish. My friend and I found this small snake in a heap of stones at a water tank near the paddy fields. Some villagers were throwing stones at it and it was injured near the neck, in the area where the cobra's spectacle sign is visible. We caught it, thinking it was a rat snake and washed it in water to get rid of the dirt from the body (in the picture you can see the nictitating membrane covering the eyes and a water drop below the body surface). After some time, it regained its strength and raised its head which was when I took the picture with the resort in the background. When we placed it on the ground, it showed the real character of a cobra, spreading its hood at us - which made us realise that we had caught a cobra instead of a rat snake! Later, we set it free in a bush where it was safe from everyone."

Thanks to Ziad, Colin, Angela, Binish and Gary for the information and photographs.



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.

New Slug from Satwa

Binish Roobas has recently reported and photographed what seems to be the UAE's first new terrestrial mollusc record of the century – a still unidentified slug – and from Satwa, of all places. Binish's normal routines take him through Satwa on a regular basis and his academic training and field experience incline him to keep a lookout for wildlife, wherever it may be. (Among other things, he has noted that at least two species of birds nest on the stone facades of the flyovers at the Trade Centre roundabout.) He also carries a camera in his pocket most of the time, ready to seize an opportunity.

Like many Dubai residents, Binish is already very familiar with the common, flat-bottomed slug, *Laevicaulis alte*, a native of East Africa that is rampant in some lawns and gardens. In Satwa, it can be seen on landscaped areas and adjacent walkways from twilight through the early post-dawn hours.



Laevicaulis alte, dawdling and "at speed"

But Binish also knew that *L. alte* is so far the only known land slug known from the UAE. So when,

one morning in early April, he saw "something different", he knew it required attention. At the time he was on the way to a job interview, slightly behind schedule and dressed to impress, rather than for slug-hunting, but he detoured long enough to get a good photo so that further inquiries could be made, and passed the news along.



Binish's photograph of the new slug

Both Dr. Eike Neubert, an expert in Arabian land snails, and non-resident DNHG member Stephen Green, who has studied and collected in the UAE, both agree that the slug in the photograph seems to represent something new; Green has tentatively suggested a resemblance to an Indian ocean species. The challenge now is to try to find another one (Binish has seen only one in four years of intermittent observation) that can be collected for expert identification.

Good accounts have been given of the seven native land snails of the UAE, and of six common introduced snail and slug species. However, new species must certainly be introduced from time to time with exotic plants, soil and manure. Most introduced species will probably not be well-suited to the UAE climate and are unlikely to thrive, but some could possibly survive and multiply at least locally, in the many landscaped environments found in modern Dubai and the UAE.

Binish's experience points up the possibility of making significant discoveries even in your own backyard (or your neighbour's). For more encouragement see the Chairman's "Snail Call" in this issue of the *Gazelle*. Report by Gary Feulner

Our Next Speaker

ENHG member **Michael A. Creamer** is a well-travelled, well-versed aficionado of all things maritime. In his career he has played a variety of roles, including ship's carpenter and crew member on several historic sailing vessels, model ship collection curator, sailing ship restoration director (on the barque ELISSA), US Coast Guard Captain, marine consultant & surveyor (esp. on Mexico's most modern marina, Puerto Isla Mujeres), nautical archaeologist (see his work on the Tulum below), and writer of several articles on maritime topics, with his work featured in three documentary films. He is currently focusing on his role as a devoted family man and is working happily on a long-planned book.

Michael is interested in the development of ship building and sailing techniques in various regions of the world, and presents an interesting theory of a possible early migration from North Africa to Central America. He has many photographs of still-extant traditional ship-building designs.

His interpretation of the function of the Tulum - a Mayan lighthouse from the year 1,000 AD tests the hypothesis that two sets of windows in a pre-Columbian Mexican coastal fort were precisely engineered to guide sailors in to shore, both in daylight and at night, through a narrow break in a treacherous coral reef.

Masirah Island, Oman Part I: Birds Crossing

The island of Masirah in the Sultanate of Oman is known to play host to a large number of bird species. Due to this extraordinary wealth, it has been included in the list of the Important Bird Areas of Oman, together with the neighbouring Barr al Hikman wetlands with which it forms a unique and unified set of wetlands.



Glossy ibis foraging at the sewage run-off in Ras Hilf, Masirah Island

A total of 328 species of birds has been recorded and reported in the past on Masirah, including some uncommon and vagrant species for the area. This is, indeed, the highest number of bird species recorded anywhere in Oman.



Greater flamingos landing en masse, Ras Hilf, Masirah

Although the resident birdlife of Masirah is mainly made up of species from the Arabian Peninsula, the migratory and vagrant species found here originate from other areas. Located at a crossroad of bird movement, Masirah can attract birds from India and Pakistan to the east, as well as wintering birds from as far north as Siberia. The island is, undoubtedly, a 'magnet' for traveling birds that have crossed deserts, open seas and sometimes more than one continent.



Greenshank on the mudflats of the East Coast, Masirah.



Common Kingfisher resting on a twig in the run-off, sewage plant area, Ras Hilf

The inter-tidal and sub-littoral mudflats, the shallow coasts and the few and precious freshwater wetlands (wadis) provide valuable habitats for migratory and passing birds as well as for certain nesting species.



Bridled tern (above) and Sandwich tern (below) in flight



Among the noteworthy species of shorebirds to be found on the island are the crab plover (*Dromas ardeola*), the lesser sand plover (*Charadrius mongolus*), the greater sand plover (*Charadrius leschenaultii*), the oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*), the turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*) and the bar-tailed godwit (*Limosa laponica*).



Osprey waiting and watching

All these species are recorded in large concentrations during wintering, as are several species of gulls and terns, particularly the sooty gull (*Larus hemprichii*), the swift tern (*Sterna bergii*) and the Caspian tern (*Sterna caspia*). In fact, all 18 species of terns found in Arabia have been observed here, Masirah being the only place in the whole region where this is the case. In addition, several species of raptors, including the osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) and the marsh harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*) can be found during the winter months in significant numbers.



Spoonbill

Large numbers of wintering birds can be seen here from November to February. Spring migration (from mid April to mid May) and autumn migration (from mid September to mid November) are the periods when several rarer migrants may occur. Among those are the pintailed snipe (*Gallinago stenura*), the rufus turtle dove (*Streptopelia senegalensis*) and the pheasant-tailed jacana (*Hydrophasianus chirurgus*). Thanks to Nancy Papathanasopoulou for text, and Colin Murray for photographs.



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Geology - Gary Feulner
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Fossils - Valerie Chalmers
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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.



Wildlife in Mushrif Park

Several recent visitors have been delighted by the relative abundance of wildlife at Mushrif National Park, along the Khawaneej Road in Dubai, which makes an attractive venue for summer visits. A June morning visit produced a surprise sighting of a monitor lizard *Varanus griseus*, being 'mobbed' by mynahs. When first encountered by a human observer on a nearby bicycle path, the lizard threatened with a rasping, throaty hiss, before running off to its burrow over a dune, still followed by the birds.



Monitor lizard tracks (above) and burrow

Other 'action' involved the large *Cataglyphis* ants, sometimes called Desert Runners, several of which were seen trying to carry back to the ants' nest, still alive, medium-size pale-striped caterpillars of a sort that seemed to be relatively common within surface debris.



The caterpillar species collected by *Cataglyphis* ants

The caterpillars used their legs, and particularly their rear claspers (normally used for hanging as a pupa) to cling to leaves and twigs passed en route, thereby impeding the ant's progress. From what we saw, caterpillars above a certain size were not taken. One ant seemed to engage in "problem solving": after being repeatedly frustrated by the caterpillar's grasping at obstacles, it changed grip and held the rear end of the caterpillar in the air, where the claspers were ineffective.

Elsewhere in the park, dead but well-preserved specimens were found of two large beetles: Among ghaf trees was an *Anthracocentrus arabicus*, the UAE's largest beetle, with the longest pair of jaws I have yet seen (14 mm jaws and total length 82mm). Freshly drowned in a fountain pool was a male(?) rhinoceros beetle *Oryctes* sp. (at least three spp. can be found in the UAE).



Rhinoceros beetle, *Oryctes* sp.

At pools in the World Village and Rock Garden areas, several species of dragonflies and damselflies were present, and the Small Cupid butterfly was common everywhere - on ghafs, hedges and low ornamentals. All of this is accompanied, by day, by the constant "hoo-hoo'ing" of the abundant Collared Doves, many of them perched at the very tops of trees.

Evening visitors report an equally large but different cast of characters: toad-headed agamas, skinks, owls, sand boas, hedgehogs, domino beetles and lots of desert hares, not to mention two species of vipers. [Note: *The local vipers*



are definitely dangerous and should be treated with care. In the event of a viper bite, seek medical attention immediately.] Report and photographs by Gary Feulner

Book Review

UAE Insect Project, Vol. 2

Volume 2 of *Arthropod Fauna of the UAE* has been published and we hope to have copies available when monthly lectures re-commence in September. These volumes are the product of collection and taxonomic study coordinated by the UAE Insect Project, sponsored by H.H. Sheikh Tahnoon bin Zayed Al Nahyan and directed by Tony van Harten, who is also the editor of the published volumes. The sections on different taxonomic groups are written by international specialists and the UAE Insect Project has turned up many records new to science, not to mention new to the UAE. Many entire insect families had not previously been recorded.

The latest volume includes more than 500 species and several hundred colour photographs, covering 63 families, mainly in four taxonomic Orders: various beetle taxa (Coleoptera), butterflies and moths (Lepidoptera), bees (Apoidea) and certain wasps (Hymenoptera), and various groups of flies (Diptera). Excellent photographs of most species give amateur naturalists an opportunity to make progress on their own, although it is not recommended to start with the confusing array of similarly colored oil beetles (Meloidae).

The text also provides information about range and habitat, where these are known. This often provides interesting context for local observers. Among other things it gives an indication whether the UAE is part of the core territory of a species (as it is for many Eremic zone species), or whether we are likely to be a marginal habitat. Occasional photos show habitat or other features such as the distinctive stick-box cocoon of moths of

the genus *Amicta*, and the hula-skirt cocoon of the related genus *Oiketicoides*.



Cocoons of *Amicta mauretanic* (4&5) and *Oiketicoides* sp. (6), from *Arthropod Fauna of the UAE, Vol. 2*

In comparison with the magnitude of the effort, it is a minor complaint that existing records not published in the traditional scientific literature, or for which reference specimens could not be located, have sometimes been ignored, with the result that some relatively well-known insects are described as "new" to the UAE. Perhaps the best example of this is the brightly coloured bombardier beetle *Pheropsophus africanus*, which can fire a chemical blast from its posterior that irritates and discolors the skin in a manner similar to nitric acid.



Cocoons of *Amicta mauretanic* (4&5) and *Oiketicoides* sp. (6), from *Arthropod Fauna of the UAE, Vol. 2*

Additionally, although the accounts of most groups are certainly the most thorough available and most are probably quite comprehensive, that is not necessarily true for groups that have previously received individual study. For example, prior surveys of UAE tiger beetles (Coleoptera: Cicindelinae) by Weisner have disclosed at least a dozen species, but only four of

those have been collected and identified in connection with the Insect Project. Weisner is referenced but the extent of his study and results are not expressly indicated. It is, however, acknowledged in the text that since a light trap was the principal collecting device, collecting by hand and pitfall trap will increase the number of non-flying species significantly

Sand dollars in the UAE

Angela and Steve Manthorpe, keen divers and photographers, have from time to time collected sand dollars, which Angela says are quite common on the seabed and beaches.

Angela wrote, "Following last month's *Gazelle* article on reconstructing a sand dollar I wanted to point out that as a scuba diver, I frequently come across sand dollars. I've taken a few photos of the ones that are most common (no Latin names I'm afraid).



Photo A

Those shown in photographs A and B are the largest and most sturdy sand dollars – the tests are robust and don't break easily. Both are commonly found on the firm seabed surrounding the wreck of the Mariam Express off Sharjah (approx 20km offshore, depth over 20m).



Photo B



| | name | tel home | tel office | fax |
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Photo C

The specimens shown in photo C are extremely delicate and would certainly break up before reaching the shore. Not common, but found in soft sandy areas off the East Coast around Snoopy Rock (shallow depths up to 10m).

Photo D, a more robust test than C above and commonly found in the soft sandy areas off the East Coast around Snoopy Rock and occasionally washed up on the beach.



PhotoD

Thanks to Angela Manthorpe for text and photographs. If members have collected sand dollars in the UAE that not shown amongst Angela's collection, they are welcome to send photographs to Gabelle.

Snail Call: Snails and Slugs Wanted

Your unwanted land snails and slugs are of interest for scientific study and an accounting of the terrestrial and freshwater snails of the UAE. All specimens will be gratefully accepted by Chairman Gary Feulner, and contributors will be kept informed of progress and pedigrees. Dead shells are preferred; we'll follow up if you've got something unusual. There have already been a few surprises. It's easy. Just bag 'em and tag 'em! Please remember to record the location and the habitat, as well as your name, the date, and any remarks.

Members' Night December 6

This is your chance to make a 20 minute presentation on the natural history subject of your choice. Be in!! Angela Manthorpe, DNHG Speaker Coordinator would like to hear from you. Email Angela at: manthorpe2005@yahoo.co.uk

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

| | |
|---------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sept 13 | Michael Creamer - Early Ships, Navigation and Trade Round the World |
| Oct 4 | TBA |
| Nov 1 | Jane Budd (Sharjah Breeding Centre) - 'The Arabian Leopard' |
| Dec 6 | Members' Night |

Field Trips (Members only, please.)

Field trips for the coming month will be announced by e-mail circular.