

GAZELLE

Vol 18 no 9 – October 2003



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Thank you, thank you!

Thanks are due to **David and Jill Hawker**, who have generously **donated** a slide projector and screen to the DNHG. This is very much appreciated, as a spare projector takes some of the sweat out of ensuring a smooth-running lecture programme.

Thanks, too, to **Patricia Valiant** of Sharjah and **Phil Salvador** of Dubai, who have volunteered to assist in compiling/updating our list of contact names and addresses for UAE organizations engaged in wildlife, conservation, environmental and natural science activities. This is a big job but a very important one for the future of conservation in the Emirates.

And thanks are due to our librarian, **Deanne White**, who has liaised with the new librarian at the Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management, Jane Campbell, to store our material whilst the Academy library is moved into new space. Yes, that is why it was available at the Oct 5 meeting.



And a few bits of News:

Camera Traps

The ENHG in Al-Ain has been experimenting with some new motion-triggered cameras, which they have tried out in the area of Jebel Qatar. They recorded some 50 "events" and got several good photos of Blanford's fox – the only species to appear, however. They plan to try again in the desert for lizards, jerboas, etc. They have kindly offered to let DNHG members try them out if anyone is interested. The cameras is said to be easy to set up.

Membership cards

Lena Linton and Anindita Radhakrishna, our membership secretaries, advise that at the next meeting, 2 November, you can collect your membership cards. They will be at the membership and booksales table in the little ante-room.

Take time, too, to have a look at the books and journals available from our sales team, Jo and Rachel Raynor.

DNHG Membership

September marks the start of the new DNHG membership year. DNHG 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 posted to us at PO Box 9234, Dubai. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.)

Please take a minute at the next meeting to ensure that we have full contact information for you, including an e-mail address, so that we can advise you more efficiently of additions and changes to our schedule, and other matters. The DNHG does not share its membership or e-mail information.

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:

Arfan Asif, Gary Feulner,
Marijcke Jongbloed,



Field Trips etc ...

So Much to Do!

Musandam Dhow Trip Friday 7 November

Lamjed El Kefi, the DNHG Astronomy and Marine Life Recorder, runs Al Marsa T and T which specialises in Musandam Dhow Trips operating from Dibba Port, Oman and these trips are superb. No visas are required but some form of identification such as driving licence or photocopy of passport should be with you.

Details are as follows:

Meet in Dibba Port (Al Mina) Oman at 8.00 a.m. for registration and embarkation at 8.30 a.m.

Price is for full day cruise per person (less group discount). Minimum group 20 persons: maximum 35 to 40 persons; children open.

Price net: Dh235/- per adult. Children under 12 years at 50%: Dh115/-. Children 3 years and under free.

Day Cruise to Haffa and Lima Bay includes breakfast, hot lunch, coffee/tea, soft drinks and water from dispenser.

Bring hat, sunblock and swimming gear.

Available on board at extra cost:

Bottle water (small) Dh1/-

Beer Dh10/-

Wine (per glass) Dh10/-

Mask Dh20/- per day

Fins Dh20/- per day

Snorkelling set Dh35/- per day.

A deposit of Dh120/- will be required to secure your place on the trip. Contact Val Chalmers to book: vmc@latifaschool.co.ae or fax on 04-3400990. Location map is also available on request.

Wadi Bih with Peter van A. Friday 14 November

Registration is necessary. Please let Peter know by email (p7) if you are planning to join this trip. Closer to the time, he will ascertain whether or not Wadi Bih is open, and contact you with the details.

Hajar Mountain Nature Hike Friday 21 November

Gary Feulner will lead a full day nature hike in the Hajar Mountains. Mixed emphasis on plants, animals, insects, archeology, agriculture. Overall elevation change will be small, but there are no trails, the ground is typically rough and uneven, and we will often ascend and descend slopes between the wadi bed and terraces. Suitable for regular hikers or fit and energetic novices. [Caveat: It has been said that Gary tends to 'forget' the hard parts.]

Schedule: Depart from downtown Dubai at ~7am. Estimated return to Dubai ~7pm. What to bring? Minimum 3 litres of water (plus a 4th in the car), boots or very sturdy shoes, hat and/or sunscreen, daypack, lunch, camera, binoculars, etc. Limit 12 people. Call Gary for sign-up, meeting place or further info, at 330-3600 x 630 (office) or 306-5570 (home).

Birdwatching at Kalba and Bullpushing at Fujairah

Friday, 12 December

This all-day trip will begin with birdwatching at Khor Kalba. Spotting the rare white-collared kingfisher will be our main objective, but several other species abound in the mangrove. The beach there will also be of interest to shellers. After lunch, we will visit the Fujairah Museum and (hopefully) Fort, before observing the traditional bull-pushing competition.

Departure/rendezvous point: on the roadside of Highway 44 (the Hatta/Oman Road), just beyond the Highway 611 junction/circle (on the Hatta side of the circle, as you approach a stadium on the right). We will depart from the rendezvous point at 7:30 am sharp. Alternatively, you can meet us at the Khor Kalba mangrove parking area at about 10:00 am. We will travel to Kalba via Hatta and the

new tunnel and will return via Masafi and Dhaid (departing Fujairah at about 5:30 or 6:00 pm). A 4W-drive vehicle is not required. Remember to bring your lunch, water, hat, binoculars, camera and other essentials. Contact Larry Woods at lwoods@aus.ac.ae for information and to let him know you are coming.

Turtles at Ras Al Hadd Tues-Thurs Nov 25-27 (Eid)

Turtle watching is one of the more unique experiences of the region, but this is a long trip requiring essentially a full day to travel down and a day to travel back (~8-10

Our Next Speaker

Dr. Rolf Schuster is a parasitologist at Dubai's Central Veterinary Laboratory. He studied veterinary medicine at the Moscow Veterinary Academy. He was a lecturer at the Institute for Parasitology of the Humboldt University of Berlin for ten years and then spent a year as a parasitologist in the Basic Animal Health Service Project in the northern district of Malawi (East Africa) (1992/93).

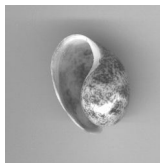
He returned to teaching as senior lecturer and professor of Parasitology at the Institute for Parasitology and International Animal Health of the Free University of Berlin, where he taught for a decade before coming to Dubai in 2003. He has also conducted research programmes and/or taught in Russia, Albania, Mongolia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, and South Africa.

His main fields of professional research are parasitic worms (flukes, tapeworms), parasites of wild animals and fish, and the ecology of parasites.



hours each way). A basic plan for participants on a 3-day schedule is as follows: Day 1 (Nov 25) is travel down, at least most of the way. Day 2 (Nov 26) is remainder of travel, leisure and overnight near the turtle beaches, in Sur or elsewhere. Night 2 is turtle watching, with a guide, from a nearby camp. Day 3 (Nov 27) is return to Dubai. Those with more time can customize their itinerary to and from, and group plans could evolve. We need to make reservations ASAP, and then forward deposits. If you are seriously interested, please contact Anin Radhakrishnan or Gary Feulner (details on p. 7).

Be prepared to answer the question where you would prefer to overnight on the first night. The choices are: (1) at a camp on the edge of the Wahiba Sands, some 2-3 hours from the turtle area; (2) in the turtle area itself (either at the turtle 'camp' or in Sur, about half an hour away), or (3) in Muscat (still about 4 hours from the turtle area). We can't absolutely guarantee availability of any of these. Cost for Wahiba Sands camp and turtle camp is estimated Dh. 150/person/night (including dinner and breakfast). Hotel rooms in Muscat at 'Eid (and Oman National Day) would likely be Dh.300 or more. Turtle-viewing permits are Dh.20/person. Plans are to meet in the area, not convoy, but convoys can probably be arranged on request. Sur is accessible by a good paved road, via the Wahiba Sands area. However, the roads in the turtle area proper, and the coast road between Muscat and Sur, are graded roads best suited to 4WD.



And an exciting possibility:

Bahrain Pearl Diving Early '04

A trip to Bahrain to have a look at the pearl diving industry and to go diving /snorkelling ourselves has long been mooted. Because it is a relatively expensive undertaking, we would need very definite numbers, a firm commitment, and money in advance. We would plan to take a weekend, and may be able to get a discount for a block booking for the flight. At present, a return flight is approximately AED800.

A company called Aquatique runs a Padi diving centre and boats, and has equipment for hire:
Mask, snorkel & fins BD5.000/day
Boyancy controller BD4.000/day
Regulators (incl. Alt. air, SPG, depth gauge & compass BD5.000
Tank (200bar/3000psi) BD5.000
Weightbelt BD2.000/day
Weights BD 0.100/lb/day
Wetsuit BD3.000/day
U/W computer BD10.000/day
U/W light BD2.500/day
Air fills BD 1.500/tank
Proof of diving certification is required prior to hire of any life support equipment. Hire charge applies whether used or not..

There are three wrecks and three coral areas suitable for snorkelling. Day trips are offered, and if diving you can see some 30 species of coral and in excess of 300 species of fish. The water temperature varies from 34C to 18C.

Saiq Plateau, touring/hiking Festive Season

Gary is planning this fairly active trip to the Jebel Akhdar in Oman. Details are not yet available, but keep one eye on this space!



Don't

Forget those Amphisbaenids!

It's not too late to collect an amphisbaenid for science. Prof. Ted Papenfuss of the University of California will be passing through Dubai again at the end of October. His research team would love to have a local sample for purpose of DNA analysis, in order to make better sense of the genetic relationships of the divergent populations to the north and south of us, in Iran and Oman.

Amphisbaenids (we hope most readers will recall) are legless reptiles, neither snakes nor lizards, that look somewhat like large earthworms. They can be common in suburban environments as well as in the wild. They are normally subterranean but may emerge after heavy rain – or possibly after heavy sprinkling (hint, hint). If you encounter an amphisbaenid, this is your chance to make a contribution to knowledge. The recommended procedure, if you cannot keep it alive for a short time, is to freeze it in plain water. Most standard preservatives will interfere with the biochemical techniques used by the University of California team.

If you are successful, call Chairman Gary Feulner, who will be happy to receive and/or deal with specimens and will be in contact Ted Papenfuss.

Letters to the Editor

Any news or views you would like published in our monthly newsletter? Feel like tickling things up?



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



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.

Dhayah Salt Marsh

Go to new places and you see new things! The same is true on a smaller, environmental scale. The salt marsh at Dhayah, north of Rams, on the edge of Khor Hulaylah is a unique environment within the UAE.

Khor Hulaylah has an extensive intertidal zone with a modest fringe of mangroves and a typical assortment of marine fauna for such an area. It has been reported that mudskippers (small walking fish, *Periophthalmus* sp.) were found here in the past. However, inshore of the mangroves is an extensive field of rushes (*Juncus rigidus*) with occasional patches of reeds (*Phragmites australis*) and a rare sedge (*Cyperus laevigatus*). These latter are nurtured by freshwater springs that emerge here, percolating from beneath the mountain front less than 2km away. The reeds, in fact, betray the sites of greatest freshwater influence.

One of the most interesting, but disconcerting, aspects of the Dhayah salt marsh is that the environment changes laterally on a very small scale: from fresh water pools to intertidal mangrove channel to thick rushes on damp mud, over a matter of 5 to 10 meters or less.

The shoreline along the marsh consists of salty and sometimes salt encrusted mud. At regular intervals causeways, the foundations for power stanchions, jut a short way into the marsh, but most are overgrown and eroded, now also the foundations for mesquite

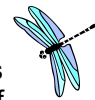
and tamarisk. Occasional pools of shallow water occur at or near the shoreline, and it is possible to identify these as fresh water due to the presence of the common freshwater snail *Melanoides tuberculata*, which are abundant on a bed of loose organic matter. It's worth noting that although the snails appear to be resting on the bottom of the pool, the organic matter is actually in a rather fluid, colloidal suspension and can be as much as knee deep. The possibility of such deception is one more of the many reasons to carry a walking stick in the field.

Also present in the permanent freshwater accumulations at the edge of terra firma were my old friends the Arabian killifish *Aphanius dispar*. This fish, which grows to no more than about 5.5 cm, is probably the most common fish species in the shallow, residual intertidal pools of most Arabian Gulf khors, but it is equally at home in freshwater and is found in many UAE wadis as well.

Travel within the salt marsh was not easy. The rushes were tightly packed. Not only is *Juncus rigidus* aptly named, but it has pointed tips as well, that left my legs looking like the victims of a severe attack of measles. There was, however, the thrill of discovery. First, the discovery that if I moved slowly, it wasn't too painful. Then the discovery of numerous individuals of the Lesser Emperor dragonfly *Anax parthenope*, a large but not very common UAE species. Normally these are seen only on the wing but I saw a half dozen perched on the stalks of rushes. With patience and a little luck I was able to get my first serviceable photographs. I suspect I was the beneficiary of the sweltering September noon, which made them overheat if they flew for too long. So there's a silver lining in everything.

Also present was the Blue Banded Ischnura damselfly, known for its prolonged copulations. I watched

one pair, intermittently, in *flagrante delicto* for about an hour. [I saw another small dragonfly, a female of a type known to me, but I am still uncertain exactly which of two confusing local species it is. Dragonfly identification is done 'professionally' by reference to features such as wing venation or genital characteristics, that are difficult or impossible to see clearly in photos. Moreover, one needs authoritative identification keys, which are not readily available for all of our local species.] The presence of all these dragonflies was another indication that the water around them was fresh or brackish, and not strictly intertidal (marine), since dragonflies do not lay their eggs in seawater.



In the tops of a few clumps of rushes I saw an orb-web spider of a kind I have never seen before. It builds a three-dimensional web, like a box about 20cm on each side. At a guess, it is an *Argiope* (the web included the characteristic white, zig-zag stabilimentum) but it was clearly different from the common, large orb-web spider found throughout much of the UAE.

In just a few places, small clearings among the rushes exposed the damp, muddy intertidal substrate, which seemed to retain a film of water due to the property of the clay. Here I found an intertidal snail new to me, a pulmonate (air breathing) snail called *Melampus castaneus*. This known brackish water species had previously been reported from a mangrove tree in Abu Dhabi emirate by Dr. Richard Hornby. Deep within the rushes I found it on mud adjacent to the stalks. In areas of less dense reeds and nearer to open channels, where there were more crab burrows, I found it only hidden within the base of clumps of stalks. Crab predation seemed to be the most likely determinant of



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Insects – Gary Feulner

Fossils - Valerie Chalmers
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fax 340 0990

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.

this pattern. I found no *Melampus* at all in rushes immediately adjacent to open channels, where burrows and other evidence of crabs were abundant, but I cannot say whether this was due solely to crab predation or perhaps also to the fact that these channels were probably fully marine rather than brackish, i.e., they were completely flushed by sea water at highest tides. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Through the Lens...

Early summer was quite productive with a good study of the Red Wattled Lapwing (featured earlier in *Gazelle*) and the Green Bee Eater. The latter even fetched me a prize at the DNHG End-of-Season function.

The Green Bee Eater is a smart bird and probably tests a nature photographer's patience to the



limit. The bee eater shown below was photographed in Jadaf. To my surprise the lapwing had made its nest only one metre away from the bee eaters! The lapwing was not photographed since its nest was in between concrete blocks. But the lapwing did make my photography of the green bee eater at nest and at perch a difficult task, with its never ending "did you do it" crackle.

The bee eater's nest, a hole burrowed on a hard mound of mud, was quite low on this occasion and



proved easy to photograph.

Stationed in my hide, and with the strategy explained in my earlier column, I was able to make a



good picture of the green bee eater with a bee approaching its nest. I visited the site quite regularly and found the bird quite comfortable with the presence of my hide stationed six feet from its nest. The chicks used to peep out now and then. On an earlier occasion I had dug up the nest after the chicks left. I was amazed to find the tubular canal reaching nearly six feet in length and ending up in an oval room!

Thanks to Arfan Asif for text and photographs.

UAE Freshwater Fish

At our October lecture, reference was made to the UAE's three native species of freshwater fish. The question was asked, what are those three species? Time did not permit a digression on fish, but the question is deserving of a brief answer. It is true that only three native fish species occur in the UAE, all in wadis in the Hajar Mountains. They are:

(1) *Garra barreimiae* is the UAE's most common wadi fish. It is a small (adults 4.5-7.0 cm), dark, mottled, bottom feeder. Larger adults sometimes show more colourful red, white or blue markings. They resemble aquarium catfish as they nuzzle their way over gravel and rock surfaces, but they dart about frantically when approached in shallow pools where they are vulnerable to terrestrial and avian predators.

(2) The Arabian killifish *Aphanius*



dispar, a small, pale fish, is found in many UAE mountain wadis, although its primary environment is coastal lagoons (*khors*), where it may be the most common fish in shallow waters. It is able to tolerate a wide range of salinity, from freshwater to hypersaline. The Arabian killifish is somewhat smaller (adults ca. 3.5-5.5 cm) and paler than most *Garra barreimiae*. It also swims nearer the surface and often "hovers" characteristically with the tail curved slightly to one side. Females are mottled golden brown with numerous dark, vertical, zebra-like stripes. Males are pale and faintly white-stippled but the tail fin bears 2-3 dark vertical bands. In breeding colour the lips and fins of the male are vivid blue-white and the tail is fluttered like a matador's cape when displaying.

The Arabian killifish is a surface feeder by design, but in the wadi environment it is highly opportunistic. It is an efficient predator of mosquito larvae, and for this reason it has been introduced into various man-made water bodies in the UAE, including cisterns, agricultural runoff channels, bulldozed ponds and water tanks.

(3) *Cyprinion microphthalmum*, a minnow-like fish, is the largest but least common of the UAE's native species. It is a streamlined mid-water swimmer. Within the UAE proper, it is found in only two wadi systems, and only in larger pools, but it is relatively common in the mountains of northern Oman. Adults are recognisable by their size (up to ca.12 cm) and their large, transparent, deeply forked tail. In breeding colour the lips, gill areas and pectoral fins become a vivid pale blue. Immature fish are mottled golden brown and can be difficult to distinguish from juvenile *G. barreimiae*.

No mountain wadis in the UAE flow continuously at the surface throughout the year, but fish can nevertheless be found in most of them. Unlike some specialized

fish species elsewhere, the local wadi fish cannot survive the prolonged desiccation of their environment in a dormant state, nor do they produce drought resistant eggs. Instead, they must be able to survive for extended periods in small, isolated pools, then propagate and disperse rapidly when the wadis flow again after rain.

An additional naturally-occurring species, the freshwater goby *Awaous aeneofuscus*, occurs in a few wadis in northern Oman, adjacent to the UAE border near Hatta. This fish lives as an adult in pools in larger streams, but typically breeds downstream and disperses via the marine environment.

Two non-native varieties of freshwater fish also occur in the UAE. One, the tilapia (*Oreochromis* spp.), a member of the Cichlid family, has been actively introduced in recent times and is now established in a few larger wadis and a number of man-made environments. The other, the molly (*Poecilia* spp.), a well known aquarium species, is known from irrigation channels at a single agricultural plantation outside Dubai.

More details, as well as a distribution map, can be found in an article published in *Tribulus* v.8.2 (Winter 1998). *Report by Gary Feulner*

Buzz Pollination: Marijcke finds a challenge

In an Australian magazine that someone sent me, I read a very interesting article about buzz pollination. It is a special type of insect pollination, done by bumble bees in Europe and by special native insects in Australia. In buzz pollination, the bees vibrate their flight muscles as they sit on a flower (while keeping their wings closed) and this causes the pollen to dislodge so it falls on the bee's body. This is only done with certain

plants, mostly of the nightshade and borage families (also of Sterculaceae). The honeybee, whose activities are thought to deplete the nectar and pollen resource for native insects and birds, cannot perform this flower-buzzing feat so that the pollen resources of buzz-pollinated flowers remain available to native pollinators. Buzz-pollinated flowers lack nectar, so that they must rely on other means to attract the insects that can carry their (male) pollen to the female part of another flower. The trick is to limit how much pollen is released and to place it where the animal cannot remove all of it before it is rubbed against the female parts of the next flower. Buzz-pollinated species achieve this by having small pores in the anthers (male parts) and a highly directional delivery of the pollen. These plants can have the following characteristics: anthers with pores; dry, small pollen grains; exposed anthers arranged in a cone; cup- or disc-shaped flowers that often hang down; contrasting colours of flower parts; and lack of nectar.

After reading this interesting bit of know-how, I thought it would be fun to challenge the DNHG members to a bit of research.

In the UAE, one plant that has flowers that look like the described Australian species is *Trichodesma enetrotrichum*. Also the flowers of the nightshade family (*Solanum* spp.) answer to this description. In the UAE we have two plants in the Sterculaceae family: *Melhania muricata* and *M. philipsiae*. They are rare and I have not personally seen one. The description of the flowers does not seem to apply to those on the pictures that Gary Feulner took for the Wildflower book.

Since we do not have bumblebees in the UAE, as far as I know, it would be an interesting research project to see if there is any insect to be found on either *Trichodesma* or the nightshade family members, that could be buzz-pollinating



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these plants. The buzz of the vibrating insect can (in Australia) be heard at several metres' distance.

So, next spring, check out the *Trichodesma* plants - there are lots of them along the Al Ain-Mahda road and along the Wadi Halw track to the East coast from Hatta. No one has the excuse that he does not know the plant; it is in the Wildflower Guide. Or check if your garden has a nightshade weed, *Solanum nigrum*. The larger wild nightshade *Solanum incanum* grows on the roadside in Wadi Khabb Shamsi. Are there any insects buzzing on the flowers with folded wings? If so, what are they? If you don't know, try and catch one for Brigitte Howarth in Al Ain to identify.

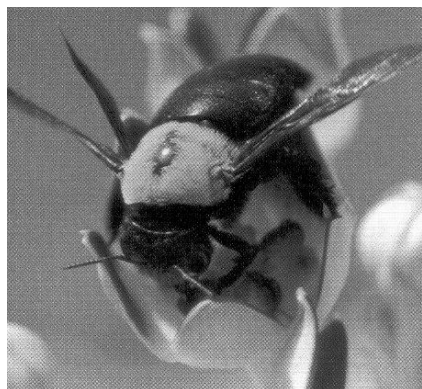
(From Landscape magazine Vol 19 nr 1, spring 2003)

Thanks to Marijcke Jongbloed for

this information and her challenge!

Photograph courtesy of Mary Beardwood, from her wonderful book, The Children's Encyclopaedia of Arabia, 2001

Border Closing in Wadi Bih



According to reliable reports, the UAE border in Wadi Bih has been closed to transit (by non-nationals,

at least) since Dubai 2003 and continuing through the present. Even tour companies have been denied the use of this popular route and have been required to enter and exit upper Wadi Bih from the Dibba side only (via Wadi Khabb Shamsi).

It is hoped that the state of affairs in Ras al-Khaimah will soon revert to normal, but in the meantime potential visitors to Wadi Bih should have alternatives in mind (and petrol in the tank) in case they are turned around at the border.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- 2 Nov Parasites and how they find their hosts – Dr. Rolf Schuster
7 Dec Desert Conservation in the African Sahel - John Newby
11 Jan '04 The Hajar Mountains and Their Plate Tectonic Evolution – Ken Glennie

Field Trips (DNHG members only, please).

- 31 Oct Birdwatching? [Watch for an e-mail with details]
07 Nov Lamjed's Dhow Trip on the East Coast
14 Nov Wadi Bih with Peter van Amsterdam (if the road is open)
21 Nov Hajar Mountains Natural History Walk with Gary Feulner
25–27 Nov Turtle Watching at 'Eid, viewing overnight 26-27
12 Dec Birdwatching and Bullpushing at Kalba
Dec Festive Season visit to Saiq Plateau (hiking and touring) with Gary Feulner