

GAZELLE

Vol 20 no 10 – October 2005



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

*DNHG Membership
Renewals*

Autumn comes

Robert Llewellyn-Smith has returned to the UAE as an advisor to the Ras al-Khaimah Environment Protection and Industrial Development Commission, to help establish a conservation unit and set up some protected area nature reserves. Many DNHG members will remember that Robert, who was born in Kenya and has worked at the Yalooni oryx preserve in Oman, was resident in Ras al-Khaimah for several years on behalf of the Arabian Leopard Trust, studying wildlife in the mountains and assessing and cultivating local environmental awareness. In the interim, Robert spent four years in the UK with Earthwatch International. He knows that RAK is developing fast, and has taken a deep breath for the challenge. Welcome back, Robert, and good luck.

In September, **Barbara Couldrey** returned to her early morning walks, and in fog, on the Bin Majid beach in Ras Al Khaimah, she realised she was not alone. Very close in-shore, thousands of cormorants (probably Socotra) were winging it up the coast in the direction of the Musandam, in V or line formation. Some birds dropped down into the sea, perhaps for a rest or food, then rejoined the slipstreams again.

There was one albino bird ... or was it a gull caught in the exodus? This migratory flight lasted 15 minutes, non-stop – a lot of birds!

Dr Sandy Fowler sent a hasty email to say that he is in Ajijic, in Mexico and is still in culture shock. He remarks that the climate is very pleasant and the Mexican people are very kind and helpful to gringos and so far he likes it. No mention of natural history as yet.



Ghaf Trees by Gaynor Mulholland

Ghaf trees wanted

Dr David Gallacher of Zayed University would like to look at growth rings in *Prosopis cineraria* (ghaf). This is usually done with a tree corer, but the method must first be proved and calibrated on the species, using cross sections. The main purpose is to try to estimate the ages of trees, both relative and absolute. Please let David know of anybody who could supply him with trees that are being cleared for development, so we can put their deaths to some good use. E-mail david.gallacher@zu.ac.ae

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:

Jo and Steve Raynor
Valerie Chalmers
Gary Feulner
Angela and Steve Manthorpe
Barbara Couldrey

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



Here we go!

Jo's Desert Trip October 28 early morning

Jo has you on the sand by 6.30, and off again 8.30, and will surprise you with what else is around at that time. Email: joray@emirates.net.ae

Stargazing with Lamjed Thursday 24 Nov 2005

Lamjed writes, "On 10th November 2005, the gibbous moon stays high in the sky until late, so that is not a good night for viewing. Neither is Thursday 17th November, with a full moon! Therefore I propose the stargaze be rescheduled to Thursday 24th November". Lamjed has provided celestial maps which I will publish in the November issue of *Gazelle*, together with details of when and where to meet.

Hajar Mountain Nature Hike with Gary Feulner Friday November 11

Gary Feulner will lead a full day hike on a 'one-way' traverse through the mountains in the area NW of Masafi. We will follow mountain wadis, with a single low pass and occasional permanent water. The ascent to the pass will be ca. 250m and is gradual. Total hiking distance is ca. 11 km. There are no trails and travel in the wadis, although "flat", is typically uneven and occasionally rough. This trip is suitable for experienced hikers or fit and energetic novices.



Photo by Barbara van Meir, from last winter's ascent of Jebel Sfai

The "one-way" nature of the route will require positioning vehicles be-

forehand, and therefore an early start and a relatively late return. It will also require a larger-than-normal proportion of drivers (4WD required).

Schedule: Depart from downtown Dubai at ~6:30am. Estimated return to Dubai ~7-7:30pm. 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, details of meeting place and further info, at 330-3600 x 630 (office) or 306-5570 (home). [Note: Gary is away until Oct 23.]

Wadi Bih with Peter van A. November 18

Peter will take a full day 4WD trip to Wadi Bih. Children are welcome, but must not run wild in the deserted village. It is frail and precious. Bring stout walking shoes, loads of water, a picnic lunch, sunhat and screen, and swimming gear. We go across the Musandam to Dibba Beach. Email Peter van Amsterdam closer to the time for details: pvana@emirates.net.ae



Anin and Aditya Radhakrishna at the deserted village above Wadi Bih

Wadi Wurayyah with Larry Woods & John Chilton Friday December 9

Larry Woods (of dubious Dumpsite fame) and John Chilton

(emirateseconomist.blogspot.com) will lead a field trip to Wad Wurayyah in Fujairah. This wadi possesses what is evidently the UAE's only year-round waterfall. When John and Larry visited recently, it also had an abundance of friendly, foot-nibbling wadi fish. Given the amount of garbage encountered at the surprisingly deep swimming hole, we propose to use this trip for a helpful wadi clean-up as well in order to play our role in the happy demise of yet another dumpsite! 4-WD a must. Full details will appear in our November issue

Our Next Speaker

Dr. Hasan Naboodah is Director of Zayed Centre for Heritage and Culture in Al Ain. He is also a professor at UAE University, and a renowned authority on the history of Islam in this area.

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.





Visit to Namib Desert

We stopped off twice in Namibia, en route to St Helena and returning. I went on two fascinating desert safaris to the sand dunes of the Skeleton Coast led by Tommy of tommy-tours@yahoo.com (based in Swakopmund) who was quite a character and very knowledgeable about the Namib Desert.



Tommy would shoot off to a sand dune and come back with assorted lizards, geckos, beetles etc. Invertebrates seen included *Stenocara eburnea* (small black and white dung beetles), *Onymacris unguicularis* (the head-standing beetle) and *Carparachne aureoflava* (Dancing White Lady) a spider which rolls down sand dunes.



Reptiles included *Palmatogecko rangei* (the palmato gecko, above) which is usually nocturnal, *Meroles anchietae* (the shovel-snouted lizard which is also known as the sand-diving lizard and which has two bladders – 1 for urine and 1 for water. It also does a thermal dance!), *Typlacontias brevipes* (Fitzsimon's Burrowing Skink), *Bitis peringueyi* (Peringuey's adder which is a sidewinder and drinks fog water - we saw both male and female sidewinders).



Tommy found several Namaqua Chameleons (*Chamaeleo namaquensis*) near the 'dollar bushes', so called because their leaves are full of water and they look like dollars.

There were plenty of jackal foot-



prints to be seen and on the second trip we were lucky enough to see one in the distance. Tommy reckoned it had an injured leg. The trips have certainly wetted my appetite to explore the Namib Desert further! *Report and photographs by Valerie Chalmers.*

Looking Sheepish

Five Barbary sheep (*Ammotragus lervia*) or Aoudad have been sighted and photographed at the Hatta dam at the end of August.



There are 2 nice big males and a female with 2 younger offspring. The older and bigger one has an abscess on the left upper jaw: Actinomycosis? Aoudad live on rocky arid mountains in Northern Algeria to Mauritania, Egypt and Sudan.



They are agile climbers. Hatta and surroundings are ideal for this species. As they are not indigenous to the UAE. I am sure they have been released in Hatta. *Thanks to Dr Uli Wernery for this.*

Dhofar in Two Weeks

Salalah! Land of frankinsense, mist, abundant springs and lush green mountain-sides, and not a shopping mall in sight! The *khareef*, a season of mist and rain when the monsoon sweeps over Dhofar's high mountains, is the main attraction in July-August as an escape from the Gulf's excesses. Driving thirteen hours across utterly barren plains definitely underscores this and nothing feels better than descending the cool green mountain roads into the town. Apparently there is a view in less misty seasons. It is an experience I thoroughly recommend, but just be sure your car's cooling system is up to it! We enjoyed 14 straight days of mist. After a while you find yourself ascending those same mountain roads in search of the sun!



We missed most of the 'official' natural and historical attractions so I can't tell you about the frankinsense heritage sites; Al Baleed, Samahran, and Ubar, or Job's tomb or most of the parklike springs or the *khareef* festival. We've saved



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

these for the next visit. Dhofar is a place where you can stop for a photo and be inundated with lizards, go looking for trees and fossils and find beautifully worked flints, wander down a dry wadi and discover a hidden Jebali cave settlement.



Oman is full of contrasts

We spent a whole morning searching for the Dhofar Museum which has a small Arabic sign only. It has friendly staff. (ask to see his fossils in the bottom drawer!) and a great map marking various sites of interest to natural history types. Armed with a photo of this map, a tourist map and brochure from the police checkpoint on entering Dhofar, we were somewhat equipped to discover the region. It will be even better when the maps catch up with the road building which has made so much of the region available to the family saloon. Fortunately some places are still marked as dirt tracks. Wadi Darbat was one such area, boasting a fine spring (with a bilharzia warning sign) and the potential for hikes, though too many mosquitoes this time. In a huge limestone 'cave' were traces of numerous rock paintings. The local nomadic tradition of building corrals and basic housing in large limestone overhangs has remained unchanged over millennia. The local Jebali people are still seminomadic. The impact of the civil unrest of the 1960s are still very

much in evidence with a numerous army/police posts in the mountain villages. More than once we mistook 1960s sniper emplacements for archaeological sites.



The Road to Nowhere

One sun seeking trip resulted in a lizard hunting bonanza. In the arid region, on one small flat top area we found not only two *pristurus* gecko species (*P.carteri* and *P.rupestris*) in abundance but also a blue-tailed Oman lizard (*Lacerta cyanura*), and a too-fast agamid.

An authority on Oman lizard species, E.N Arnold, has this to say about the *P. Carteri*: Observations on the ecology of many species are noted, especially for the aberrant gecko genus *Pristurus*, one species of which, *P. carteri*, behaves like a small, ground-dwelling diurnal agamid. Resource partition, at least amongst the lizards, appears to be largely based on parameters of time, food (especially prey size), hunting method and space. *Journal of Oman Studies – Special report 2 (1980)*



Pristurus carteri

A short drive and we were back in lush green and discovered *P. rupestris* likes it wet too! Report by Jo Raynor. Part II of Jo's article, and more beautiful pictures, will appear in our November issue.

Ladakh

Ladakh is a small area of Jammu & Kashmir, in India, close to the Chinese (Tibetan) border. Being north of the main Himalayan range Ladakh experiences very little rain and in particular is sheltered from the Indian monsoon during July & August, making this an ideal time to visit. The regional capital, Leh, sits at an altitude of 3,500m, and arriving here by plane is spectacular, as you fly in over the snowy Himalayan peaks, before swooping down into the wide and rocky expanse of the Indus valley. Occasional bright green irrigated fields bring a splash of colour to the grey landscape. The only other means of access to the area is by road from Manali or Srinagar, but heavy July rains in Himachal Pradesh caused this route to be closed for a couple of weeks.

Ladakh is predominantly Buddhist and is heavily influenced by Tibetan culture given the large number of Tibetan refugees in the area.



Along the Indus valley there are many monasteries or Gompas – some, like that at Thiksey (above), reminiscent of the Potala palace in Lhasa. We spent 3 days visiting villages along the valley to help with acclimatisation before setting off, with a guide and ponies, to follow a circular route across the Stok Range and into the Markha valley.

Climbing out of the Indus valley the terrain slowly changes, from narrow boulder strewn valleys dotted with wild roses and low shrubs, into wide boggy meadows used by nomadic herdsmen to graze their large flocks of sheep, goats and occasional yaks. There are several species of wild sheep roaming this area and camping around 4,000m one evening we were lucky to catch sight of



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

Reptiles - Dr Reza Khan
res 344 8283
off 344 0462
fax (off) 349 9437

Archaeology - Prof. John Fox
jfox@aus.ac.au
(Temporarily away - hold your reports)

Birds - David Bradford
davebradford9@hotmail.com

Seashells - perhaps you?

Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi
res: 06-5247 958
off: 06-5583 003
email: lankefi@emirates.net.ae

Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

Geology - Gary Feulner
res 306 5570
fax 330 3550

Insects – Gary Feulner

Fossils - Valerie Chalmers
res 349 4816,
fax 340 0990
vmc@latifaschool.co.ae

Plants – Valerie Chalmers

Mammals & Seashells - Recorders 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.

a pair of magnificent large horned rams – possibly the Ladakh urial, followed the next day by a large herd of bharal, or blue sheep. The bharal have apparently caused taxonomists some difficulty as they can't decide whether to classify them as sheep or goats. The land above 4,000m is also home to the cuddly and very sociable marmot.



Our expectation of these large rodents was of something about guinea pig or rock hyrax size, so imagine our surprise when we found that they are actually much larger in body size than the average house cat!

The highest pass on the Markha trail is Kongmaru La at 5,150m. It started to snow as we toiled up the hill, but the colourful prayer flags and the views of the surrounding peaks were a welcome reward as we caught our breath at the top.



It was around this area that we caught sight of a lammergeier, a common raptor in the Himalayas. These large birds are also called bone-breakers, from their habit of carrying bones to great heights and then dropping them so that they can access the marrow inside.

Following the trek we took a quick jeep trip down to an area of high altitude lakes near the Chinese border. The scenery here is much wider, with fewer dramatic peaks and on our last day we were rewarded with a sighting of a pair of

Tibetan wild asses or kiang – which occur only in Tibet and Ladakh.



At Tso Moriri lake lucky birders might see black necked cranes which come here to breed in the summer months. Whilst we didn't see any cranes, we did encounter bar headed geese with young, and during the course of the trip also saw large flocks of ruddy shelduck, several chukars, horned larks, brown headed gulls, a citrine wagtail, great rosefinch, hoopoe and many black redstarts in the valleys.

The altitude in Ladakh takes some getting used to, and the 'roads' are pretty rough, but for those who like a challenge, the Buddhist gompas and mountain scenery are impressive and the area presents the opportunity to see unusual high altitude wildlife. *Thanks for text and photographs to Angela & Steve Manthorpe.*

...And the Karakoram

Ever since being enthralled by Eric Sipton's and Bill Tilman's books, I have wanted to see the Karakoram in Northern Pakistan. As I have also followed the often tragic attempts on the summit of the world's second highest mountain, K2 (8,611m), my choice of trek was to Concordia, where the giant Baltoro and Goodwin Austin glaciers meet, offering views of many peaks over 8,000m, including K2. And to make it a round trip, the Gondogoro Pass (5,690m) was included.

It is necessary to take a guide, especially for the days of glacier walking/camping among a labyrinth of crevasses, and porters to carry



tents and food. We found the Baltis kind, helpful and full of fun. The short trekking season provides their annual income ... our guide is hoping to give his children a good education. On the drive out we visited his remote mountain village where life is harsh but happy, and where people share their wheat crops, potatoes, apricots and chickens. On trek, the sirdar brought out his scales every morning to top up loads to 25kgs per porter, except over the pass where 20kgs was the maximum! Their footwear? White plastic slip-ons with grooved soles! I wished I had taken more than the dozen pairs of socks as handouts.

We took the spectacular Karakoram Highway both ways, 19 hours by bus. What a feat of engineering! Built by a Pakistan/Chinese joint venture between 1966 and 1978, it is a ribbon of road blasted out of a sometimes unstable mountainside, high above the Indus River, which was a boiling, muddy torrent carrying melt from many glaciers.



L to R, the Hindu Kush, the Karakoram and the Himalaya

Just before turning off the 'Highway' onto the Skardu track, we stopped to view the meeting of three great mountain ranges – the Hindu Kush, the Karakoram and the Himalaya. The trek was at times arduous, especially following the great Baltoro Glacier from its huge dark, moraine covered snout to Concordia.



The Baltoro Snout

We were four days and nights on the glacier, where the sometimes indistinct trail passed over (we jumped!) or around numerous crevasses and gushing melt-offs. It was at this point that we left the mountain roses and vegetation and joined the snow covered granite towers and hanging glaciers, stretching up and back from the Baltoro as far as the eye could see. Breath taking! At Concordia, the weather closed in with rain and snow, but we did get brief sightings of K2, Broad Peak and others.



K2 and Broad Peak from Upper Baltoro Glacier

Awesome K2 (8,611m) stood alone at the end of the Goodwin Austin Glacier, like a bride at the altar, with a veil of ice and snow plunging to the depths below. Not one climber has reached the summit this season.

From Concordia we trekked up the Upper Baltoro and onto the moraine free ice of the Vigne Glacier before bedding down for a few hours prior to climbing over the Gondogoro Pass – starting out at night, to avoid avalanches. I'm not a technical climber so clinging, unclipped onto fixed ropes with icy snow underfoot, was quite a challenge!! But if the porters with their rubber shoes and heavy loads could do it ... so could I! In the pitch black, I wondered how far I would fall if I let go! The crampons in my rucksack would have helped, I suppose, but having never used them before I felt it was an 'unknown' to be avoided. 'One of the most fantastic mountain views in the world' was denied us on the top of the pass at dawn, but the long steep descent on more fixed ropes to the glacier way below was awaiting us! It didn't disappoint.

The trek out, down more glaciers, some very broken up with huge crevasses, was spectacular and we had beautiful weather. We were surrounded by huge spires and gigantic fields of ice tumbling down into our glacier. We nearly had a tragedy when one of our members slipped on the thin moraine covering white ice while negotiating a crevasse crossing – a rock arrested his slide. No one is roped together while trekking on the glaciers but it is absolutely essential to follow the guides very carefully. Speaking of glaciers, we met a Canadian professor who was studying landslides and glaciers. He commented that, so far, three mini areas in the world have been isolated where glaciers are not receding, i.e., in the Karakoram, northern Norway and southern New Zealand.



K2 from Concordia.

Vegetation, including the beautiful pink, scented mountain roses, eventually greeted us again as we descended. *Report and photographs by Barbara Couldrey.*

Minnow Gone

The rarest of the UAE's three native fish species, the minnow *Cyprinion microphthalmum*, is now extinct at one of its only two UAE sites - Wadi Hadf, where it had been present in the Sinadil gorge, an enclave shown on most maps as jointly administered by Ajman and Oman.

A summertime visit by Gary Feulner and Charles Laubach showed that the minnow was absent in the permanent pools in the gorge, and a follow-up visit failed to find it in the smaller, upstream pools where it had also once been present. It was



	name	tel home	tel office	fax
Chairman	Gary Feulner messages: 306 5300	306 5570	330 3600	330 3550
Vice Chairman	Valerie Chalmers e.mail: vmc@latifaschool.co.ae	349 4816	no calls pls	340 0990
Treasurer	Ranju Kapoor e.mail: ranjukapoor@hotmail.com	295 4816	050-553 7016	2959515
Membership Secretary	Lena Linton e.mail: linton@emirates.net.ae	344 2591		344 2591
Membership Assistant	Anindita Radhakrishna e.mail: anin@emirates.net.ae	282 3952	050-656 9165	
Speaker Co-ordinator	Geoff Sanderson e.mail: geoffrey_ssanderson@hotmail.com	050-6569242		
Fieldtrip Co-ordinator	Pradeep Radhakrishna e.mail: wgarnet@emirates.net.ae	282 3952	050-450 8496	
Fieldtrip Co-ordinator	Peter Jackson email: pj.architect@gmail.com	2882713	335 4545 050-5521005	3354338
Fieldtrip Co-ordinator	Sandhya Prakash e.mail: sandhya@clavib.com	050-5512481		348 2868
Special Projects	Beryl Comar e.mail: comar@emirates.net.ae	344 2243		344 2243
Newsletter Editor	Anne Millen e.mail: pvana@emirates.net.ae	394 7076	no calls please	394 7075
Publisher	Peter van Amsterdam e.mail: pvana@emirates.net.ae	394 7076	335 5495	394 7075
Librarian	Jenny Irwin e.mail: jenny_irwin2000@yahoo.com	399 9201		399 9201
Book Sales	Jo & Rachel Raynor e.mail: joray@emirates.net.ae	334 6183		
Postmaster	Sandi Ellis e.mail: peterjon@emirates.net.ae	050-644 2682		
Chief Engineer	James Pardoe e.mail: James@extremereviews.net	394 3821		

last definitively recorded in mid-1999, when it was abundant in the gorge.

Since the gorge has retained permanent water, even during the prolonged drought of ca. 1999-2004, other factors seem likely to be responsible. An obvious suspect is pollution from expanded agricultural activities upstream. The water in the gorge pool, once very clear, is now somewhat green and cloudy, with visibility no more than about a metre. The only fish present are a small number of the catfish-like *Garra barreimiae*, the most common wadi fish. The drought may have contributed to the situation, however, by drying up the few larger upstream pools that served as refuges for the minnow.

The largest of the UAE's three native species, the minnow is gener-

ally found only in relatively large pools. It remains present in modest numbers in Oman, in wadis along the mountain front in the Mahdhah area, as well as the large wadis of the Batinah coast. *Report by Gary Feulner*



(Editors note: There are many interesting sites on the internet that you can access for (reasonably) up to date information on all of Arabia's fauna. On species under threat of extinction, www.cbsg.org/reports/reports gives good information and the uaeinteract site is excellent. (If you look up their information on Cyprinion, you will find our own Gary Feulner quoted.)

Traveler's Advisory

"Emirates Road" (Route 311) is now open all the way to RAK, making it a relatively hassle free way to get to the far side of Sharjah as well as Ajman, Hamriyah, Umm Al Qaiwain and Jazirat al-Hamra, all of which have museums, forts, khors, souks, historic districts and/or other sites of natural history and archeological interest.

It is also an interesting way to traverse the relatively open desert inland of Ajman, UAQ and RAK, but casual visiting is impeded by continuous camel fencing. For vehicle access you must rely on the formal highway exits - of which, thankfully there are quite a few, even though many of them seem to go "nowhere." Nowhere can be interesting, though.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- Nov 13 The Early History of Islam in the UAE and Oman - Dr. Hasan Naboodah
Dec 04 The Archaeology of Bahrain - Brien Holmes

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

- Oct 28 Morning desert walk - Jo Raynor
Nov 11 Hajar Mountain Nature Hike - Gary Feulner
Nov 18 Wadi Bih exploring - Peter van Amsterdam
Nov 24 Astronomy Night (Thurs night) - Lamjed El-Kefi