

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Goings and Comings

Returning from the US in October, Chairman **Gary Feulner** passed several days with Dr. Marijcke Jongbloed, UAE natural history author, DNHG life member and former Committee member, as well as former Coordinator of the Arabian Leopard Trust, at her traditional farmhouse in the Gironde countryside outside Bordeaux. According to Gary, Marijcke's own property is something of a natural history preserve, complete with deer, horses, boars, badgers, lizards, toads, salamanders, land snails, dragonflies, butterflies and a variety of birds. The region is rich in Romanesque churches, picturesque vineyards and trees festooned with globes of mistletoe, but the highlight of Gary's visit was a trip to see the famous Lascaux cave paintings, which date from the peak of the last Ice Age, 18,000 years ago. For Marijcke's many friends, Gary reports that she seems to be thriving. And, among other things, she seems to have learned her way around every one-lane country road over vast areas.

We are pleased to welcome **Stefan** and **Martina Beck** back to the DNHG, after a short absence in

Kuwait. Although now resident in Abu Dhabi, they continue to enjoy our lectures and field trips. For November's Hajar Mountain nature hike, Martina won the draw (Stefan had to stay home and watch the kids) and demonstrated her Austrian heritage, scrambling up and down slopes to investigate and photograph all and sundry. We hope she will share a few photos with the *Gazelle*.

Speaker Coordinator Needed!

Dubai's business imperatives have caught up with Geoff Sanderson, who has been forced to take a break from the Committee activities that he has been engaged in with both the DNHG and the ENHG in Al-Ain. This leaves us in need of a Speaker Coordinator to take over beginning in January 2006.

The Speaker Coordinator's job is to solicit and follow up on ideas, contact and book potential speakers, arrange for them to appear at the appointed time and place, and assist in other arrangements and courtesies as host. The full Committee is available to assist, but we need someone to take the lead on this important function.

DNHG Membership Renewals

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.

And please note!

There's a cut-off point. If you have not renewed by the next meeting (Dec 4), you will not receive the December newsletter.

This month's Contributors

The Editor would like to thank the following for their reports and contributions:

Jo and Steve Raynor
Moh'd Arfan Asif
Gary Feulner
Dave Bradford & Sandya Prakash

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



Adventures!

Fossil Site/Overnight Camp/ Foxwatching/Hike 24 - 25 November

Mike Lorrigan and Richard Dennis will lead this trip. It will start on Thursday lunchtime from Dubai with the following itinerary:

Visit to 'Gastropod Gulch' Fossil Site - lots of fossils to see. No hammers please! This will be followed by a short trip to an overnight campsite in the mountains. During the camp, foxes will be observed with the use of bait and lamps. Fox sighting guaranteed. Next morning there will be a three to four hour hike in the mountains. Starting at approx 9.30-10 a.m.

Trip ends about 2.00 p.m. Friday.

You will need a four wheel drive vehicle, camping equipment & food, back pack, water, strong footwear, hat, sunscreen. The Friday walk is only of moderate toughness and there is an option to take a short cut back for those who wish to. This is an ideal trip for newcomers to the UAE to get acquainted with the desert and mountain walking. If you only wish to come for the walk on Friday you are welcome to do so. (We will meet you at an agreed point on Friday morning). Overnight camping trip limited to 8-10 vehicles. To reserve a place on the trip, e-mail Mike Lorrigan on oxymoron@emirates.net.ae or fax him on 3940678.

Stargazing with Lamjed Thursday 24 Nov 2005

Lamjed El-Kefi has had to move the stargazing site from our old favourite spot to a little further up the road. He has provided a new map together with the November celestial maps which Lena Linton has sent out to all members by email. Take your binoculars - you'll be surprised how much you see with them, and bring a mat so you can

lie supine and look. Details on the map or email Lamjed at lankefi@emirates.net.ae.

Temple Walk with Sandhya Thursday 8 December

Sandhya proposes to do a temple walk through the bylanes of Bur Dubai, recounting stories about customs and traditions and giving an outline of the temples.

The meeting point will be the Dubai Museum gates in the morning. Timing will be confirmed to those who register. Participants must be modestly dressed. Space for 10 to register with Sandhya Prakash by email at sandy_pi@yahoo.com.

Wander & Wade in Wadi Wurayyah Friday 9 December

Larry Woods (of dubious Dumpsite fame) and John Chilton (emirateseconomist.blogspot.com) will lead a field trip to Wadi Wurayyah in Fujairah on Friday, 9 December. 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! The wadi is divided into a commonly visited lower portion and a less explored upper region. A 4-WD, swim suit, towel, good walking shoes, camera, lunch, snacks and a healthy amount of water are musts. Our convoy will depart from the parking lot opposite the Sharjah Library in University City at 8:00 am. Folks without a 4-WD can leave their cars in this lot and ride in 4-WDs with open seats.

To get to the meeting point: Take Emirates Road (311) towards the new National Paints exchange, keep to the right avoiding the fly-

over, turn right in accordance with the sign for Kalba, and then take the first overpass on your right, which leads you back across the road you have just left and into University City. The Sharjah Library is the building on your left as you come off the overpass. Our return to Dubai/Sharjah is likely to be mid-evening. If interested in wandering and wading with us, please contact Larry Woods at lwoods@aus.edu so we know you are coming.

* * * * *

Jean Allan has promised to lead another of her famous Bastakia walks. As she sometimes visits a local family, numbers will be strictly limited, and all participants must be appropriately dressed.

Our Next Speaker

Dr Hasan M. Al-Naboodah is Director of the Zayed Centre for Heritage and History, in Al Ain. He has been associated with Al Ain University since 1989 and from 1992 to 1996 was Assistant Dean for Research in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Studies. In 1996, he received a Fullbright Scholarship.

Dr Al-Naboodah's Research interests include Arabic and Islamic history and civilisation, Gulf history, the history of the UAE, Arab genealogy, and his specialist area Ibadism.

Three books on related subjects have been edited by Dr Al-Naboodah. He has written nine papers, in English and in Arabic, and has received the Al-Owais Prize for Scientific Research for his work on "Maritime Trade of the Trucial Coast Down to 1904", 1994.

Between 2000 — 2004, Dr Al-Naboodah was a member of the International Jury for the proclamation by UNESCO of "Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity".



Part II of the Raynor Family's Dhofar Trip

The lush vegetation is dominated by an endemic tree *Anogeissus dhofarica*, although lush is a comparative term. The wide-bladed grass looks denser than it really is and is over-grazed by the local mobile road obstacles – cattle.

This region is a raptor paradise for bird watchers in the right season. We were out of season but did manage at least 4 species, tentatively identified as kestrels, steppe eagles, lappet wing vulture and a very large dimorphic eagle pair. One was dark brown with white slightly mottled breast and the other tawny brown – any ideas anyone?



Male *Omania splendens*, a Dhofar endemic

At Tawi Attar, a deep sinkhole, known for its birds, we were entertained by a busy pair of grey-headed kingfishers feeding their fledglings what appeared to be large grasshoppers. We also found porcupine quills – apparently porcupine is a popular dish in the Jebel – and yet more lizards, including a spectacular Hadramaut agama *Acanthocercus adramitanus* and a skink (maybe *scincus toofastforus*).

At another sinkhole, supposedly deeper and above the mist, we stumbled around in zero visibility until guided by a local. It was straight ahead and 200 metres deep! We conducted measurement exercises with stones and echos in lieu of actually seeing anything.

In the hotel gardens we watched iguana (I think) sunning themselves in the trees. Despite abundant tadpoles in the standing puddles we only spotted one toad. Perhaps

they are lizard fodder! These same lizards were easily seen in the banana and coconut plantations scuttling up the palm trunks.



Fossilised Gastropod

In an area where a number of large marine mammal fossils have been found we wandered off the 'newly paved' road 200 meters and found some large shell fossils, including gastropods and sea urchins. Those in perpetual lizard mode spotted several Sinai agamas *Pseudotrapelus sinaita*, including a brightly marked juvenile.



Flint axes, scrapers / knives?

Both at the fossil site and in a dry wadi full of frankincense trees just north of the main police checkpoint we found several large flint implements lying on the surface. While these could be from Neolithic times, flint has remained a useful resource until quite recently, mainly as firelighters.

During a picnic on the cliffs over looking the turbulent Indian ocean we were surprised to find a large irritable scorpion sharing our site. Roughly identified as *Leiurus quinquestriatus*, it is a variety of which 'envenomation is not recommended'. Thanks to Jo Raynor and family for these reports and photographs.

Hajar Mountain Nature Hike

No one will ever mistake a UAE wadi for the Serengeti, but it was the wildlife that got most of the comments on the DNHG's mid-November nature hike – a one way traverse through the mountains NW of Masafi, led by Chairman Gary Feulner. After trekking through distressingly dry terrain (dead oleander and *sidr* trees) on our ascent to a low pass, we descended through a wadi that contained intermittent pools throughout its lower reaches.



These were home to heartening numbers of wadi fish (*Garra barreimiae*) and toads (all the Arabian toad, *Bufo arabicus*), as well as examples of other pond life such as water scorpions.

The highlight of the trip was a record one-day count of 5 carpet vipers *Echis omanensis* (formerly *E. coloratus*). After the first 3, a race was on to break the record, spearheaded by Jo and Rachel Raynor and Richard Dennis. All of the vipers were encountered, characteristically, beside wadi pools, and all were, equally characteristically, calm and well behaved. We observed them all from a respectful distance but several must nevertheless now be numbered among the most photographed snakes in the Emirates. A few eventually retreated from the attention, taking refuge within rock piles or dense clumps of wadi grass. It would not have been very difficult to dispatch them, unfortunately, with either a blade or a club, which is believed to happen all too often. Very few carpet vipers are found within an hour of the nearest vehicle access.

Two other snakes were seen, one a wadi racer *Coluber rhodorachis*,



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

and the other a sand snake *Psammodphis schokari*. The latter was identified courtesy of Angela Manthorpe, who managed to photograph it within its brushy hideout. The snake was initially reckoned the more common wadi racer, but Angela later compared her photo of the vividly striped head with photos/descriptions in *Snakes of the Arabian Gulf and Oman* (by Michael Gallagher) and *Wild About Reptiles* (by Marijcke Jongbloed). Says Angela: "Just shows that (1) it's useful to have a camera at the ready and (2) you just can't make assumptions!!" We also saw a large Oman Lizard *Lacerta jayakari*, a Fan-Footed Gecko *Ptyodactylus haselquistii*, and numerous Dwarf Rock Geckos *Pristurus rupestris*.

Bird sightings were somewhat scarce, probably due in part to the size of our group, but a Short-Toed Eagle twice soared obligingly overhead. Although butterflies were not abundant, we saw a total of seven species, including a number of the Blue Spotted Arab, a species that is generally not found in the mountain wadi environment. *Sidr* trees *Ziziphus spina-christi* were in flower and gave a nice scent to many areas, attracting many smaller butterflies. Other insects included some of the season's last hornets *Vespa orientalis* and several species of dragonflies staking out or patrolling pools. One red male dragonfly could not be identified and may correspond to a new species recognized early this year by Dr. Wolfgang Schneider from the pools at Wadi Wurayyah.

Our good luck for the day was perhaps guaranteed when 'Greg' Gregory showed up in the morning wearing what appeared to be a Himalayan prayer shawl – although

this ultimately proved to be a tea towel and later doubled as a ghutra. The wadi was as advertised: no trails and flat overall, but rough and uneven underfoot. Occasional narrow gorges and low waterfalls provided diversion, literally and figuratively. The group held up well despite the relative heat; several old hands were along but even newcomers to the UAE remained strong and steady to the end, if not at peak form. Special thanks go to Mike Lorrigan for keeping count enroute and ensuring that the Chairman adhered to Frank Buck's motto: "Bring 'em back alive!" Report by Gary Feulner

Thru' the Lens

Conoor! I expected it to be the usual hill station down south. The name is derived from 'Kunnu' and 'Oru' which, in the local dialect, means jagged landscape and grazing slopes, respectively.



The naturalist can get drowned in the natural bounty of the Nilgiri (Blue Mountains) Biosphere. A relative who resides there says this place is ideal for natural history particularly research in botany. He is right. The variety of plant species that I encountered amazed me.



Kurunji, a *Strobilanthes*, is the speciality of this region. It is said there are over 200 species of *strobilanthes* found throughout the world and the Nilgiris is home to nearly 30 of these. These plants flower only after long intervals - six or twelve

years. Some species can even take 30 years to flower. The most common species found in Nilgiris, the Kurunji (*Strobilanthes kunthianus*), is found on dry slopes. It is a bushy shrub, up to 10 feet in height and covered with blue-bell like flowers.



The tribal population of this region is in itself a great subject for study. 'Todas' still adhere to their ancient way of life and they remain dependent on nature for their livelihood. It has to be seen to be believed. Of course one has to go deep into the forest to find them, since they live in remote hamlets.

Endowed with a wealth of flora, fauna and animal life, Nilgiris is famous too for its eucalyptus trees.



Apart from these, a wide variety of trees including Douglas Firs and exotic plants have been introduced here, from various parts of the world. Since most of these trees are deciduous in nature, they have a barren appearance during summer. Blessed with a gentle climate, three main types of soil are found in Nilgiris: clay, clayey loam, and loam with laterite soil.

This region is also great for twitchers as there is an enormous variety of birds. Conoor has an old world charm about it. The old British bungalows situated in Upper Conoor and the All Saints' Church along with Sim's Park form important landmarks in Conoor. Sim's Park;



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.ae
(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.

named after Mr.J.D.Sim, a member of the Governor's Council, was laid out between 1874-76. It is a well maintained botanical garden and has an interesting variety of plants.



The nearest airport is in Coimbatore, 100 km away, which is well connected to other major cities in Southern India. The best time to visit this hill station is between April and June, or September and November, but it remains pleasantly cool throughout the year.



With an average altitude of 1900 meters above sea level, Conoor's climate can match that of any other hill station in the world. Conoor with its rolling mountains, grassy meadows, marigolds and rhododendrons is a natural history paradise. *Text and photographs by Mohammed Arfan Asif*

Jetty Jetée

For many years I was an intermittent observer of the shallow water and intertidal marine life on the north jetty at Dubai's "Open Beach." This produced interesting observations of some 30+ species of living gastropods (including two still unidentified), a few others as the shells of hermit crabs, a few living bivalves, several kinds of crabs and a number of fish species (notably a distinctive goatfish and several colourful species of gobies or blennies).

Some interesting questions emerged. I found that the array of species present was different from one visit to the next – at least at intervals of several months or more. Horst Kauch, a diver and professional shell collector, confirmed that this matched his own experience, but the reason remains unknown.

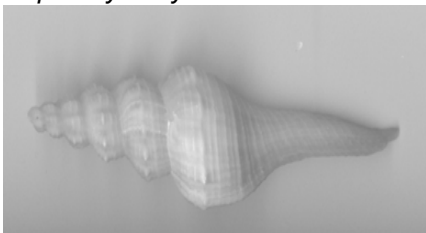
Another question, posed by Dr. Sandy Fowler, was: Why are almost all of the mollusc species found alive on the jetty (mostly gastropods) not found as shells on the beach (most of which are bivalves)? Is this because of some peculiarity of the currents, or material transport? Do the gastropod shells simply fall among the rocks of the jetty and does this protect them from being carried to the shore? Or are hermit crabs to blame? Are there so many that any empty gastropod shell is seized and (re)used as a home?

In recent years my observations have generally been somewhat less interesting. The jetty area was roped off to prohibit bathing (who knows why?), although this is not usually an impediment for men with white beards who are looking at little snails. However, the artificial addition of sand was causing the beach to prograde in the area of the jetty, narrowing and steepening the shallow water area between the intertidal zone and deeper water. This diminished the number of species present.

Now, my investigations will be forced to take an extended break. On a visit in early September 2005, I found the jetty area totally transformed – mostly destroyed, but with the evident promise of more to come ("much, much more" since we're in Dubai). A much larger and (no doubt) commercially appealing jetty is obviously in the works. Will Brighton Pier come to Dubai? On the beach itself, it seems that the addition of large volumes of sand has added to the diversity of seashells that can be found, but beware: not all of them are necessarily local or even Arabian Gulf species.



UAE birdwatchers have seen it all before, renown man-made sights re-made: Ramtha Wetlands and Wimpey Pits are perhaps the best examples; I cannot claim such distinction for "my" little jetty. But . . . there are many shellfish in the sea. Once all the commotion has settled down, here and at the many other construction sites along the coast of the northern Emirates, perhaps some of them will come back and I (or some enthusiastic newcomer) will have an even larger "field area."
Report by Gary Feulner



Dave's Bird List

Sandya Prakash reports a good turn-out and a successful bird-watching trip 7 October 2005. Below is the birdlist supplied by Dave Bradford.

Pivot Fields:

Cattle Egret
Grey Heron
Glossy Ibis
Marsh Harrier
Black Winged Stilt
Collared Pratincole
Little Ringed Plover
Kentish Plover
Red Wattled Lapwing
Little Stint
Temmink's Stint
Ruff
Palm Dove
Collared Dove
Blue Cheeked Bee-eater
Indian Roller
Hoopoe
Crested Lark
Sand Martin
Swallow
Yellow Wagtail
White Wagtail
Red Vented Bulbul
Isabelline Wheatear
Southern Grey Shrike
Common Mynah
House Sparrow

Wimpey Pits [Al Warsan Lakes]:

Little Grebe
Little Egret
Great White Egret
Grey Heron
Purple Heron
Osprey
Moorhen
Coot
Black Winged Stilt
White Tailed Plover
Black Tailed Godwit
Common Sandpiper
Yellow Legged Gull
White Winged Black Tern

Khor Dubai:

Greater Flamingo
Pacific Golden Plover
Black Winged Stilt
And then, alas, police stopped play before any further birds could be recorded.

Ed: Members who have joined since March 2005 might find the following useful:

The Ras al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary features three birdwatching hides, from north to south: the Lagoon Hide (Al Bhuhaira), the Flamingo Hide (Fantir) and the Mangrove Hide (Gurm).

Each hide offers a panoramic view of the sanctuary and is equipped with telescopes and picture panels depicting many of the birds that can be seen. Binoculars are supplied to visitors at the time of entry. At present, guided visits are permitted only on Sundays and Wednesdays from 8 am to 12 noon.

Visitors must apply to: Marine Environment and Sanctuaries Unit, Environment Department, Dubai Municipality, PO Box 67, Dubai, Tel: +9714-206-4240 / 4244 / 4260, Fax: +9714-227-0160. The application form can be downloaded from: <http://www.environment.dm.gov.ae> or collected from, and submitted to, the foregoing department. Apply three days prior to visit. At least two working days are required to process the permits. The application as well as comments can be e-mailed to marabdullah@dm.gov.ae

Voracious Gerbils

About 15 members enjoyed Jo's desert ramble in the dunes around Margham in late October. It was a peaceful and picturesque morning. Sculptured dunes, lovely coolish air and tracks were the order of the day. The mystery of the day was a number of deep grooved patterns that some thought were snakes but, on examination, were deeper than normal snake trails and were found in conjunction with entrances to gerbil holes. We spotted increasing numbers of both holes and tracks. Of course at this time all good gerbils are tucked up in bed but they were likely to be the Baluchistan gerbil *Gerbillus nanus*. As we neared the clump of Ghaf trees that were our turning point we happened on a obviously well inhabited gerbil burrow. There was some alarm as the well-dried hind leg of a goat lay nearby! Yikes! Had they eaten the rest? On reflection there were also dogs in the vicinity but it does appear the gerbils were not adverse to a nibble on skin and bone. Here apparently was the answer to our mystery. The deep grooves were these gerbils dragging their prey home! Gerbils normally eat grasses, roots and insects. On the return leg members dispersed some-what and a few of us did observe snake tracks (probably a viper), Schmidt's fringe-toed sand lizard *Acanthodactylus schmitti*, spiders and butterflies. We also found a well-desiccated leveret (baby hare) tucked under a shrub. It still had a full coat of soft light fur - obviously undiscovered by those gerbils! This area is easily accessible from the main roads and a good spot for wildlife. Just don't go when the gerbils are out. *Thanks, Jo!*





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ENHG Al-Ain Website

Spurred by our November lecture on Dilmun by Brien Holmes, Chairman of the Al-Ain ENHG, we remind you of that group's website: www.enhg.org. On the site you can find information on sundry UAE natural history subjects, including an archive of articles from the Abu Dhabi ENHG Bulletin (the successor to *Tribulus*), published from the mid-1970s through 1990.

Old *Tribulus* Volumes Wanted

This summer, the ENHG journal, *Tribulus*, will begin its fifteenth year of semi-annual publication. Since it began, it has become increasingly important as a source of published data about the natural history and archaeology of the Emirates. Much of the material published in *Tribulus* is available nowhere else.

As the journal continues to expand its reputation overseas, the Editorial Board are receiving an increasing number of requests from overseas academic and other scientific institutions for sets of *Tribulus*. Unfortunately, it is not possible to meet all of these requests, since some of the issues are out of print, and reprinting would make no economic sense.

If any DNHG members are leaving the UAE, and do not want to take their copies of *Tribulus* with them, then the Editorial Board would be delighted to have them back!

Anyone wishing to hand back copies should contact any member of the DNHG Committee, who will arrange to get the copies to the Editorial Board. Many thanks, in advance! Request by Peter Hellyer, Managing Editor, *Tribulus*



The real one: *Tribulus arabicus*
This is one of the many beautiful and detailed photographs in Marijcke Jongbloed's *The Comprehensive Guide to the Wild Flowers of the United Arab Emirates*.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- Dec 04 The Early History of Islam in the UAE and Oman – Dr. Hasan Al-Naboodah
Jan 15 Oil Exploration and Production – Razak Sheikh

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

- Nov 24 Astronomy Night (Thurs night) - Lamjed El-Kefi
Nov 24-25 Donkey Fox Wadi Camping & Hiking – Mike Lorrigan/Richard Dennis
Dec 08 Dubai Temple Tour (Thurs)– Sandhya Prakash
Dec 09 Wadi Wurrayah – Larry Woods & John Chilton