

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

DNHG Membership Renewals

Out & About in the Last of the Golden Weather

At least a couple of our members have recently been afield in Kuwait. Bird Recorder **David Bradford** paid a short visit to the north of the country to add the Basra Reed Warbler to his life list. Also in the north, Chairman **Gary Feulner** saw a diverse spectrum of wildlife - including hundreds of dhubs - in and around a private reserve. A report is forthcoming.

fine orange lines showed up better on scanning than with the naked eye.



Bosch, Dance et al do not give much detail in *SEA for Notocochlis*, but mention that they were previously identified as *Tanea lineata* (Roding 1798), and belong to a species "which will be described as new to science elsewhere. They occur in the Gulf of Oman and at Masirah."



Heather and Roger Neal found these shells, some of them quite unusual, in March on Jumeira Beach, where there is an ever changing collection. And Editor Anne Millen was delighted to find a specimen of *Notocochlis*, not listed for the southern Gulf in *Seashells of Eastern Arabia*. But who knows where it might have come from! Faded and somewhat battered, its

Barbara Couldrey writes from RAK, "The reward for keeping an old pair of binoculars in the car ... 10 European bee-eaters, sitting in a tree on the back road through Nakeel, Ras Al Khaimah. They were preening their glorious feathers, catching lunch and were being curiously observed by a hoopoe and two palm doves.

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.

Memberships taken up in May will be good for the coming year, through to September 2007.

This month's Contributors

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

Roger & Heather Neal
Gary Feulner
Jo Raynor
Colin Paskins
Barbara Couldrey & Louise Sewell

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



Please note ... Access to Pivot Fields

The so-called Pivot Fields located near the Dubai sewage treatment plant along the Awir Road has become one of the UAE's best birding sites. This is, however, private land and the fodder operation is a commercial one. Thus the following notice from the editors of *Twitcheer's Guide* is particularly important: "Will observers please avoid driving on the grass – or we could find that access to the site is rapidly withdrawn! We have been warned – the owner REALLY doesn't like it!"

The New Season's Field Trips

Come September, we will all be fresh and rearing to go. Where? Now is the time to start planning your field trip/s. If there is a place or field of interest that you think others would learn from and enjoy, put your idea to the Field Trip Coordinators. You may not need help to organise it, but if you do, they will assist you. The usual oversubscription for trips is testimony to the keen interest in and need for a variety of activities. Start thinking and planning!

End of Season Get-Together

Val Chalmers has booked the Oasis Restaurant for the annual DNHG dinner that concludes the season. Details are all included on a sheet with this *Gazelle*. Please book early, as it is always a very popular event, and it makes Val's life easier! Tickets will be available at the Members' Night meeting, 4th June, or if you will not be there, you can post your request with a cheque, as on the bottom of the flier.

Access to Buraimi

Access to Buraimi from the Dubai side, which has been circuitous for more than a year, is currently entirely blocked for construction, with entry possible only from the Al-Ain

Our June Speakers

Architect **Peter Jackson** first worked in Dubai in the early 1970's. In 1975 he researched and co-authored "A Windtower House in Dubai" with Dr Anne Coles. He has written many papers of architectural research, and in 1986, a book, "Historic Buildings of Harare". In 1976, he moved to Zambia, and in 1980, jointly established a new practice in Zimbabwe; Architects Partnership won several architectural competitions and for many years he was Honorary Historic Buildings Advisor to the City of Harare. In 2002, with his teacher wife, Jutta, he returned to Dubai, and joined Godwin Austen Johnson Architects. Since then, he has been able to pursue his interest in windtowers, and recently visited Iran to research more about them. He will tell us about his recent work and investigations.

Barbara Van Meir studied Archaeology of the Ancient Near East at the University of Ghent, and Nautical Archaeology at Texas A&M University. She spent a year in Asia upon graduation, on a graduate trainee programme unrelated to archeology, and on returning to Europe, she was based in Milan and Madrid – not so good for nautical archeology either. But she moved to Dubai in the spring of 2003, and has been able to pursue her interest in this and many other things. She is an active member of the DNHG, and has accompanied Gary Feulner on several of his mountain hikes, taking photographs and contributing to the natural history information available here. She has also helped secure publications for the DNHG library. Belgian by birth, she speaks six languages.

Steve Raynor is a civil engineer who hails from New Zealand, and is currently teaching engineering at the Dubai Men's College. Although he has traveled widely, he has until now occupied himself mainly with engineering things. But his interest in paleontology and archeology was stimulated here by his adventures on various DNHG field trips, and he has been very happy to find that his surveying and engineering skills are so useful to the ADIAS work at Baynounah. He is going to share some aspects of the detailed process required to record the fossil finds.

side. Sources in Buraimi indicate that what is planned is a full-fledged UAE border post, which will require passports to be shown and possibly a visa.

Perhaps in the modern world it is too much to hope that old ways can be preserved, but for those of us who have lived here for more than a few years, it is sad to see the passing of this very "friendly" border that allowed easy access to such popular sites as the Buraimi souq and oasis, Fossil Valley, Jebel Qatar and the still relatively idyllic oases of the Mahdhah hinterland. *Report by Gary Feulner*

News from Ajijic

(pronounced A - hee - HEEK)

Sandy Fowler's lost January report has come to hand, with a stunning picture of a hummingbird, and will be published in the next *Gazelle*. Sandy is enjoying the natural history of Mexico, and reads and comments on *Gazelle* every month.





Snake Handling

Two researchers from the University of Wales are studying the evolutionary relationships of vipers of the genus *Echis*, which is found in dry regions from Pakistan to North Africa. In the UAE the genus is represented by two species: the saw-scale viper (*Echis carinatus*) of sand and gravel plains and the carpet viper (*E. omanensis*) of the mountains. The latter was recently distinguished as a separate species from the carpet viper (*E. coloratus*) found in the rest of Arabia.

Their study focuses on DNA and other biochemical attributes, requiring them to obtain blood and venom samples from these snakes. Although captive specimens from known locations are available, it was considered desirable to take at least a small number of samples from wild specimens. I was solicited to assist in taking the researchers to a locality where they could expect to find the carpet viper and, in the process, see its local environment first hand. The carpet viper is primarily nocturnal but can often be found by day, and we were able to accomplish that in relatively short order in late afternoon in the Hatta area.



Palpating to find the heart

The snake handling techniques employed were not especially high tech. They used a snake hook (resembling a geologist's hammer with a large metal hook at the end) to prod the snake in the desired direction and into a narrow-diameter clear Plexiglas tube, open at both ends. Once the snake was in the tube, they

inserted a smaller diameter tube into the open end. The snake can be prodded to advance to the second tube if the first proves too wide. Once the front half or so of its body is in a suitably narrow tube, the snake can be more or less immobilized by holding the rear half. The Plexiglas tube permits close observation of the body, including scale counts. (Take note: the snake can reverse out of the tube if released.)



Sampling a tubed viper

A syringe was used to take a blood sample. Ideally this is done from near the tail, but in small snakes that can be problematic and a sample is best taken from the heart, which is located by retracting the snake somewhat (the heart is about the 1/3 point) and palpating the body. I can confirm that the snake seemed to suffer no ill effects from this procedure.

A venom sample would normally be taken by 'milking' the snake, but upon release from the tube our snake struck at the foam handle of one of the snake hooks and left a couple of satisfactory globules of venom on the foam. I was surprised and chastened by the strike. No drum roll, no feints, just business - and a big gape. Then it was picture time. The snake was calmed by covering it with a broad-brimmed hat. After that, reliance was placed on its good nature, a long lens and the watchfulness of the second handler.

We made a second, longer outing the following day to an area where vipers have regularly been seen, but although we encountered almost the full suite of diurn-

nal wadi reptiles, we found only the shed skin of a viper. Most likely this emphasizes that by late April, when midday temperatures reach 33°C and above, the vipers change their winter basking habits because the rocks where they would bask are simply too hot.

The two researchers, both Ph.D. herpetologists, were particularly impressed by the large number of toads in the Hajar Mountain wadis we visited, perhaps mindful of declining amphibian populations elsewhere. They were also struck by how developed the UAE appears, even in relatively outlying areas. They commented that on the drive to Hatta, which used to be reckoned a pretty one, we were never out of sight of urban/industrial/agricultural sprawl. Report by Gary Feulner

Fragile Finds on Rams Beach

On 12 April friends proudly showed me three perfect paper nautilus shells they had found that day on Rams beach. As I haven't seen any in significant numbers for some years, I hastened off the following day. My haul was very interesting, including among others:

A dozen *Argonauta hians* (the common paper nautilus), in various sizes.



A juvenile *Cypraea grayana* (# 258 in *Seashells of Eastern Arabia*). This bluish-brown coloured shell immediately reminded me of the tones in one of my cowrie shells. However, the shell is longish and thin walled with a wide open aperture from top to bottom and no teeth. Seeing it on a subsequent field trip, Rob Schmidt suggested that it was nevertheless a young cowrie. Following up, I have discovered that cowries grow spirally like any other gastropod until they reach adulthood, when the outer lip turns in, thickens and teeth are formed on both sides of the opening. (SEA



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

shows the development of a cowrie at # 278.) From the colours and the large size, it is possible to identify my shell as a juvenile *Cypraea graryana*, which can grow to 80mm. Its habitat is said to be intertidal under rocks and in crevices. I have also now been able to identify another shell in my collection as a juvenile cowrie!



Phylloda foliacea (# 1129 in SEA). This bright orange bivalve is a very thin-walled and has unusual thorn-like spines/teeth along the back edge of the shell (what are they for?) and a distinct keel. It is smooth except for the posterior area which has very fine radial ridges. They are said to be sand dwellers and live offshore.



Hydatina zonata (formerly *H. velum*) (# 831 in SEA). I found 5 of this exquisite, extremely fragile gastropod shell. It is a waxy off-white colour with three parallel bands of white accented by brown margins. It is classified with sea slugs (Order

Opisthobranchia), most of which have no shell at all, and in life the large, flowing body of the animal may eclipse the pretty shell. The habitat of these animals is intertidal and they eat burrowing sea worms. All these shells were found washed



up among soft corals and sponges, which probably served as protection. But it must have been some surf to uproot so much! Report by Barbara Couldrey, Photos by Louise Sewell

Birds at Ducab

Colin Paskins has noted many birds at Ducab's factory. This list, he says, may be incomplete and inaccurate because he is no expert birder! He writes: Our cable factory is in a distant part of Jebel Ali, out of the Free Zone, our only neighbours the Shooting Club and Jebel Ali Hotel, neither of which are close. We do have some trees around the site, and extended the plantation about three years ago, watering with (treated) waste water from our factory operations.



The irrigation has attracted the above wader, and sometimes we see as many as eight. I am sure someone can identify it.

Over the years I have also seen:
- Quails - they don't seem to fly, they must have run a long way to reach our vegetation!

- Green Bee Eaters - once one sat on my window ledge and used it to crack open a beetle
- Bulbuls, both red and yellow undersides
- Collared doves
- Sparrows of course
- Mynahs
- Crested larks
- Occasional seagulls
- Hoopoes - we have planted some grass at the factory and also have a grass football pitch
- Wagtails - I have only noticed pied.

Perhaps we should start a formal recording system. We are an industrial site, but the birds do give a melodious start to the day, particularly in early March when some are nesting. Report & photo by Colin Paskins

Spring Migration Birdwatching

David Bradford's "Turf 'n Surf" itinerary netted us more than 50 species in field, lake and lagoon environments in mid-April. Many of these were in full breeding colours, making them both exceptionally attractive and easy (or easier) to identify.

Among our sightings at the Pivot Fields were the Red-Throated Pipit (some nearly red-breasted), Glossy Ibis, Chestnut-Bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, four different subspecies of Yellow Wagtail, and Streaked Weaver (now resident in the reeds there). Neighbouring Al-Warsen lake is not the site it once was, but we could see (among the many Little Grebes) a few Moorhen and Coot, plus a Great White Egret and a female Tufted Duck (although the latter might have gone unidentified in David's absence).

Our visit to Khor Al-Beidhah in UAQ gave us a good opportunity to see and distinguish a number of wading birds in their characteristic summer plumage. Practice exercises included, among others, discrimination between Greater and Lesser Sand Plover, between Ringed Plover and Lesser Ringed Plover,



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

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Birds - David Bradford
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Seashells - perhaps you?

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Fossils - Valerie Chalmers
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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.

and between Black-Tailed and Bar-Tailed Godwits, as well as picking out the single Curlew Sandpiper from among all the small plovers. It appears that "development" will soon start along Khor Al-Beidhah, probably before the migrants return this autumn - the marker flags are already planted. This may cost us what is probably the best site for shorebirds in the northern Emirates.

Further north along the coast, in scrub vegetation onshore, we saw the relatively shy Willow Warbler and had good views of the rarer but more prominently perching Whinchat, visiting enroute to Central Asia. *Report by Gary Feulner*



Dave Bradford and keen birders on the Inter-Emirates weekend birding trip, RAK. (Photograph Rob Schmidt)

Hajar Mountain Nature Hike

Despite the pervasive quarrying and dam construction along the mountain front south of Dhaid, there are still a few places where it is possible to get away from it all. The April 7 hike, led by Gary Feulner, made a circuit through one such area in upper Wadi Daynah and Wadi Mansab (although the final pass was nearly a circuit breaker). The route traversed a number of different environments, including extensive terraced fields and a well-preserved cairn tomb of a sort very rare within the mountains.

Although the area remains rather dry and we encountered no standing water, sufficient rain had obviously fallen this winter to refresh the flora. *Sidr* trees were in fruit and we enjoyed their berries, as well as the citrus tang of the leaves of the annual dock *Rumex vesicarius*.

Among the plants in flower were three species of *Euphorbia*. The yellow-flowering acacia, *A. ehrenbergiana*, was just beginning to flower and the Dwarf Palm *Nannorrhops ritchieana* had sent up new flower stalks. A surprise was the relative abundance of the prostrate mountain indigo *Indigofera arabica* with its brick red flowers.

The most unusual sighting of the day was made after only about 15 minutes in the field, when a very pale Honey Buzzard passed overhead from north to south, at a great height, probably on migration. This is a very rare bird in the UAE (most sightings have been in Abu Dhabi) and we have David Bradford to thank for an on-the-spot ID. Also noteworthy were several sightings of Liechtenstein's Sandgrouse in broad daylight.

Butterflies were generally scarce but we saw many Blue Pansies, a characteristic wadi butterfly which often suns itself obligingly in the wadi bed. Paolo Orsini called our attention to the ungainly flight of the large Sulphurous Jewel Beetle, which looks like it needs help. The most common insect of the day was the Pitted Beetle. This black beetle is one of the few ground-dwelling insects that is regularly active in heat of the day - but it always has a rather dutiful aspect to its travels and never seems to be having a good time.

As to mammals, we saw a trio of donkeys (a pregnant female and, apparently, another female with a young colt). [Tip: The way to spot donkeys standing on a hillside is to scan for their white muzzles.] More unusual were droppings of caracal (thanks to Richard Dennis) and mountain gazelle. Four sightings of the Blue Rock Agama *Pseudotrapelus sinaitus* indicate that this species too is responding to the winter rain. *Report by Gary Feulner*





Flippin' Lizards!

Recently on a trip into the dunes to practice with her new camera Johanna Raynor observed some interesting lizard behaviour. *Acanthodactylus schmidtii* (Schmidt's fringe-toed lizard) is always an easy subject due to its common and widespread occurrence and its willingness to sit still!

While trying to photograph one lizard she was surprised to find her target had mysteriously disappeared from in front of the camera. She located it a good 30 cm to the right of where she had last seen it. Reviewing the photo explained this. The photo although blurred showed the lizard in mid-air clearly flipping through the horizontal axis.



Johanna conjectured that she had done something to alarm it and what she had captured was probably a defence strategy for eluding predators. The flipping possibly could help the lizard change direction in the air or help increase speed or distance. She would be interested to know if others have observed this behaviour. The photos have been forwarded to Drew Gardner and we may have more information later. Report by Jo Raynor

Diverse Dragonflies

In March I visited a minor wadi in the Mahdhah area where, at the mountain front, a small settlement exists and a series of bedrock pools have been "improved" for human and agricultural use. Just above this area, at a 10m long natural pond that had not existed when I visited the site two years before, I found 12 species of dragonflies – an impressive number given that

only about 24 species have been identified from the UAE and neighbouring northern Oman. My mid-morning visit gave me an opportunity to watch how all of these "similar but different" organisms divided up the available pond habitat among them.

Of the three smallest (all damselflies), one, the Blue-Banded Damselfly (*Ischnura evansi*) kept to the shelter of overhanging reeds on the N bank; the second, the Powder Blue Damselfly (*Arabicnemis cerulaea*) divided its time between perching in the reeds and low sorties along the pond margins and adjacent gravel; the third (*Arabineura khalidi*), a dry wadi specialist, was not seen at the pond itself, but only over the adjacent gravel wadi bed.

Most of the dragonflies were of the perching variety. These included four different "red" dragonflies (although only the males are red). The Gulley Darter (*Trithemis arteriosa*), the small, thin-bodied red dragonfly common in rocky wadis, was present but with more competition than usual. This species perches prominently on rocks or vegetation. It is quite tolerant of human presence and seems to be equally fearless in the presence of other dragonflies. Males would fly out to investigate and/or harass individuals even of larger species (which is most).

Two similar "red" species were also present, the Orange Darter (*Trithemis kirbyi*), which tends to perch on gravel, and a single male and female of the Purple-Blushed Darter (*Trithemis annulata*). The latter is normally found at larger ponds or more moist agricultural areas. It perches mostly on vegetation and the male seemed sufficiently dominant to be able to claim or reclaim a perch from *T. arteriosa* after an extended sortie.

The Sinai Lobetail (*Paragomphus sinaiticus*) is somewhat larger than most other local dragonflies. It perches on open bedrock (or sometimes wadi gravel) and regularly

returns to a chosen perch after relatively short sorties. It can be very well camouflaged despite its banded body and orange tail.



Immature Sinai Lobetail

Ruling the roost was the broad, flat-bodied Crimson Darter (*Crocothemis erythraea*). Normally associated with more stagnant water, this species may have been present in the area due to nearby oasis agriculture. The red males were clearly dominant among the perching dragonflies and other species would cede their places on prominent vegetation. This species also seems to have a bit of an "attitude." I watched as, humorously, a persistent male Crimson Darter landed – three times over a minute or two – on the tail of a nearby Sinai Lobetail, apparently in an effort (unsuccessful) to get it to move to another piece of real estate.

At the bottom of the pecking order was the Black Darter (*Diplacodes lefebvrei*). This small perching dragonfly was found only on damp gravel at the upstream and downstream ends of the pond. Since elsewhere it perches on vegetation, it may be that it was unable to maintain a better perch in competition with the number of other species present. Even on the gravel, it gave way to all other dragonflies that approached. That same caution made it very skittish and difficult to approach and photograph.

The green and black Oasis Skimmer (*Orthetrum sabina*) was present and mating. This is a widespread dragonfly but one that is more typically associated with stagnant (and even foul) water. It



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is also the only species that I have ever observed feeding on another dragonfly. In that instance I did not see the capture, so it could have been feeding on carrion, but scavenging is not characteristic of dragonflies and I have seen the Oasis Skimmer take a butterfly on the wing.



Girdled Skimmers mating

The Girdled Skimmer (*Orthetrum chrysostigma*), so named for the slightly pinched "waist" of the powder blue male, is a common species of rocky wadis, probably second only to *T. arteriosa*. It perches

on rocks but males may sometimes patrol for extended periods. It is another relatively skittish dragonfly and gives way even to the smaller *T. arteriosa*. In very high temperatures it perches in the shade in a hanging position.

Finally, the largest species present was the Emperor Dragonfly (*Anax imperator*), including a female depositing eggs in submerged vegetation. The electric blue male is unmistakable, usually patrolling relatively high, but there is a limit: one to a pond. This dragonfly may spend two years as a nymph in British ponds, but in Arabia it must grow up much more quickly.

Happily, most of the species observed were mating or laying eggs, so we can hope that they will be on view for some time to come. Report by Gary Feulner

Ghost Crabs

Have you ever seen these big yellow crabs castle building? It's fascinating. I watched them on the Bin Majid Hotel beach in RAK a week or so ago. There were no turrets one day and 50 the next day with more under construction. The crabs carried the diggings from their holes to their building site, about a meter away, deposited the load and then 'hugged' the top of the pyramid to make it secure before tidying up the sides. This process continued until their holes were big enough, then some crabs went off to nibble on the big blue jelly fish washed up on the beach, or just peeked out of their holes ... looking for a mate? Thanks to Barbara Couldrey for this snippet, and to the Editors, The Emirates: A Natural History, for photo.



Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

June 4

Members' Night:

Peter Jackson

Bastak: An Iranian Village

Barbara van Meir

Aspects of Nautical Archaeology

Steve Raynor

Elephant Tracks in Western Abu Dhabi

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

Jun 15

End-of-Season Dinner