

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

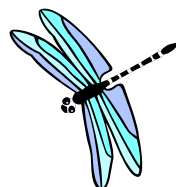
Minie's eggs and others

In the September *Gazelle* a bird's nest with 8 eggs was reported. It mentioned that the nest was of a pigeon, but that was erroneous. The bird that was sitting on the nest was a palm dove. Bird expert Michael Jennings reacted by email saying that he thought a practical joke might be played on the unsuspecting reporter. Palm doves generally lay two eggs in a clutch, rarely three or four. Eight in one nest seems totally impossible. The reporter double checked with **Minie van der Weg** and was able to confirm to Mike that it was no hoax, and that the picture was a true record. In the meantime marauding mynahs seem to have emptied the nest of eggs.



New member **Mohammed Arfan Asif**, who has contributed some pictures of the red wattled lapwing's nest this month, is now a regular columnist for 'Middle East

Photography' magazine published in Dubai. The November issue has an article on portraiture 'Face Value', which he considers his forte and his column 'View from the Gallery', in which he reviewed the BBC Wildlife Photography Exhibition held in the Wafi Centre as part of DSS during August.



Dr. Reza Khan's daughter **Zeenath** is the head of the University of Wollongong's Environmental Club, and recently organized several events for the University's Animal Awareness Week.

On one of Peter van Amsterdam's forays to the desert behind Al Maha, **Susie Balsestone** and Perth visitor **Enid Hopps** struggled to identify three absolutely tiny birds that hopped about in the thorn tree above the lunch spot. **Jean Allan** offered Colin Richardson's book, and Peter offered a helpful suggestion (Indian roller!), but they failed to make a positive identification and the speculation long outlasted lunch.

DNHG Membership Renewal

The DNHG membership year begins in September, so renewal is now due. Membership remains a bargain at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dhs. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at meetings (see Membership Secretaries Lena Linton and Anin Radhakrishna) or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account no. 173746 and posted to us at PO Box 29561, Dubai. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.) Membership is valid from September 2002 to September 2003.

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:

Valerie Chalmers
Christine Tsagarakis
Moh'd Arfan Asif
Gary Feulner
Marijcke Jongbloed



Field Trips etc ...

Saluki Breeding / Falcon Hospital / ERWDA

October 24 (Thursday)

This trip is now closed. Marijcke Jongbloed will inform those who have registered of the details.

Birds (and Other Curiosities) of the AUS and Environs November 1

Larry Woods' tour will include large ponds adjacent to Sharjah's University City and a walkabout on the campus of the American University of Sharjah. Special attention will be paid to the impact of humans on the natural history of the area and changes to the flora and fauna brought about by the building of AUS. This tour will begin at 7:30 am sharp and will run for much of the morning. To get to the meeting point from Dubai, take the Emirates Road (Highway 311) to the National Paints roundabout, go right, take the first U-turn opportunity, and then (now heading back towards the city of Sharjah) take your first right. Bring a hat (or helmet!), water, binoculars, cameras, good walking shoes and your bird book. A 4WD may be helpful but is not essential. For a preview, see Larry's article in the June 2002 issue of the *Gazelle*. And please contact him at 06-5152513 (o), 06-5153139 (h), 050-7575389 (mobile) or lwoods@aus.ac.ae by 29 October to let him know you are coming so he can smooth your entry into the AUS campus. Group limited to 40 so be early.

Paleontology near Dhaid November 8

Prof. John Fox and Pradeep Radhakrishna will lead this trip, meeting at 8:45 am sharp at Dhaid Grand Mosque - the biggest one. It will take about 4-5 hours. The trip will be targeting responsible naturalists who will not damage the site or fossils...clearly no hammers and implements allowed, and the group should stick together. A reasonable fitness level is necessary since it will

be a tough climb. Bring your own water etc. You need to sign up, so interested participants should email Pradeep at: wgar-net@emirates.net.ae or call res. Ph 04-2823952 between 6 & 9pm or fax 04-2820703. Limited to 12 persons.

Falconry Display November 14 (Thursday)

Marijcke Jongbloed has organised a show-and-tell of falconry by Ian Blakeway in the desert at the camel race tracks off intersection number 2 on the road to Al Ain. Meet at 4 pm at the World Trade Centre hotel (formerly Hilton) carpark. We leave at 4.15 p.m. sharp. There is no restriction on numbers, no need to sign up, but if you are not there on time you are on your own to find the place.

Hajar Mountain Nature Walk November 15

Gary Feulner will lead a full day nature hike in the Hajar Mountains near Hatta. Overall change in elevation will be small, but there are no trails, the ground is often rough and uneven, and we will frequently ascend and descend slopes between the wadi bed and terraces. Total distance 8-10 km, total time 6-8 hours, slow pace. Suitable for regular hikers or fit and energetic novices. Bring boots or sturdy shoes, minimum 3 litres of water (plus a 4th in the car), lunch, hat, sun cream, camera, binoculars, etc. 4WD preferred. Meet at Hatta at 8:15am sharp, estimated return (to Dubai) c.6:45pm. Maximum 15 people. For further information, sign-up and logistics, see Gary at the Nov 3 meeting or telephone 330-3600 (office) or 306-5570 (home).

Wadi Bih with Peter van A. November 22

Bring everything you could possibly need including stout shoes, a 4WD and your swimming gear. Children are welcome but should not run wild in the deserted village as the houses are ancient and frail. Contact Peter, who will be away until mid-November, for registration and de-

tails on pvana@emirates.net.ae

Musandam Dhow Trip November 29

Lamjed Kefi has a reputation for great dhow trips. Meet in Dibba Port (Al Mina) Oman at 08.00 am for registration and embark 08.30hrs. Price is for Day Cruise per person (less group discount). Min group 20, max 35, children open. Price net: AED 235 per adult, children under 12 years at 50%: AED 115, children 3 years and under free. Day Cruise to Haf-fa & Lima Bay includes: breakfast, hot lunch, coffee/tea. Soft drinks & water from dispenser. Bring hat, sunblock and swim gear. Available onboard at extra charge: Bottle water (small) AED 1. Beer AED 10. Wine (per glass) AED 10. Mask AED 20 per day, fins AED 20 per day, or snorkeling set AED 35 per day.

Contact Val Chalmers for bookings at: vc@latifaschool.co.ae or fax number 04-3400990. Contact Lamjed for enquiries on 050 481 5068 Location map available fax 06 5583 018.

Our Next Speaker

Dr. Graham Pinn has worked in the UAE for several years as a medical specialist. He first practised in Sharjah, then left for Southeast Asia and has recently come back to Dubai. He first developed an interest in traditional medicine when working in the South Pacific in the 1980s. He also experienced the benefits and disadvantages of this approach when working in the Seychelles. Subsequently he went on to take a herbal medicine course at the Australian College of Natural Therapy in Brisbane. He has since written many articles on the subject for journals in a number of countries and currently has a book for the medical profession in press.



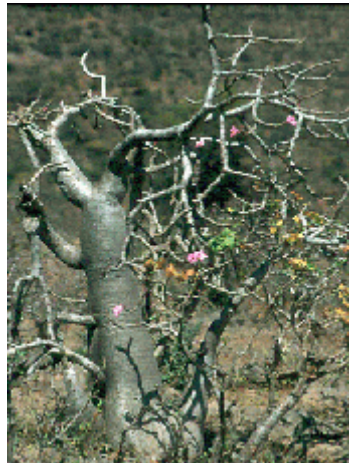
Salalah after the Khareef

DNHG members **Pam Cole** and **Marijcke Jongbloed** spent four days exploring the surroundings of Salalah in the third week of September.

Arriving at midday on a Saturday, we quickly checked in at the hotel and drove westward along the coast in search of blowholes and frankincense trees. Because Marijcke was eager to photograph plants for her work-in-progress it was decided to drive as far as we could go up onto Jebel Qamr before the light failed. Just before the road started to climb we passed a wetland that extended on both sides of the road. It was well populated with several species of herons, at least one stork and many other wading birds. Unfortunately neither of us had brought binoculars, so we had to make do with the telelens of my camera. As soon as we had climbed a few hundred meters, the roadsides started to become green. Soon veritable meadows stretched along both sides of the road.

Where the road was blocked by a police post just before the border to Yemen, we stopped and explored the plain at the top of the jebel. Immediately the strange and wonderful flora of this region showed itself in picturesque *Draecena* trees, odd-shaped *Jatropha* bushes and small flowered *Caraluma* species. Some very strange and wonderful grasses grew in great abundance. *Dactylocnemum scindicum* which is very rare here in the UAE was absolutely everywhere. Further downhill the same applied to *Achyranthes aspera*, which was not only much more abundant than anywhere in our region, but also much larger. One beautiful specimen of a red-flowered *Aloe* was spotted by Pam. Near the blowholes at Mughsayl, there were large stand of *Abutilon pannosum* and *Commicarpos helenae*. The blowholes are a feature of the coast, where the waves pound on the rocky shore and force themselves

through erosion holes, spouting spray to several meters high, depending on the state of the sea. Nearby is a rather basic restaurant with a terrace that has a nice seaward view, where we had tea. We did not get a good look at the frankincense trees that grow in the gullies along the Jebel Qamr road, because dusk fell quickly, so we decided to come back later unless we found the trees elsewhere. In the evening dozens of plant specimens had to be sorted and pressed and afterwards we had dinner on the beachside terrace of the hotel.



Adenium obesum

The next day we set out for the Eastern mountains. The coastal plain was very dry and without much vegetation, although some nice specimens of *Haplophyllum* *Tribulus* and an unknown huge *Cassia* were recorded. We explored one mountain road that runs along the top of famous Wadi Darbat. The grass and wildflowers were knee-high forming small meadows everywhere you looked. It was hard to believe we were still in Arabia. We stopped to photograph the view towards Khor Rowri, the outlet of Wadi Darbat, which used to be an ancient harbour but is now blocked off by a sand bar. We followed the road till the top of the mountain where another photostop was necessary to record the "Austrian" mountain meadow scenes around us. When I stepped out of the car I found another plant that is rare here lining the road in

masses: *Eclipta alba*, a pretty small daisy-like flower.

We turned back to visit Wadi Darbat itself. This is a very green area along a permanent watercourse, with rapids and a waterfall during the rainy season. The rapids had already dried up and we did not go as far as where the waterfall could have been. There was so much to see in the meadows at the foot of the cliffs. We found a huge spider in a web that was at least one meter across, festooned with a dozen or more smaller spiders - babies or males? The pools had some herons and other waders, and Pam saw a kingfisher.

In the gravelly banks along the road some very pretty small wildflowers made tiny rock gardens. All the plants were strange and different from any I knew.

We drove back to the main road to continue our trip up to the top of Jebel Samhan. Our little Nissan Sunny could barely make the grade but it soldiered on bravely and huffed and puffed its way to the top. We stopped briefly in a very strange village that you had to enter through a gate and that was remarkable in that it consisted of an open air market and hundreds of school kids milling about. We bought some bread and cheese in a small shop to have a picnic later. Then we left the tarmac to follow a graded road up the mountain.



Adenium obesum flowers

The greenery started to disappear and a more familiar landscape of rocks and low shrubs appeared. We spotted a few marvelous specimens of the desert rose *Adenium obesum* with its bulbous gleaming white trunk, bizarre branches and hot pink flowers. Finally we arrived



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.

at the escarpment of Jebel Samhan. We had a picnic sitting on the edge of a cliff that dropped down a thousand meters to the coastal plain. The silence was overwhelming. Raptors circled lazily in the air above, the sun was hot and the air smelled of the sage that grew all around. Apart from a few rock geckos we did not see any reptiles.



Pam hunting spiders

On the way back we tried to find Tawi Attayr, a hole in the ground that is supposed to be 250 meters across and therefore hard to miss, you would think. The guidebook's instructions made us walk across a boulder-strewn plain, but we did not find the hole. That evening in the hotel we met Colin Richardson, who was guiding a group of birdwatchers from Cyprus. He said it was indeed difficult to find if you did not know its location. We also did not experience the strange anti-gravity feature that is mentioned in the guidebooks - mainly because we were not looking for the spot. Apparently there is a certain

place between two hills where your car will roll uphill when you put it in neutral.

On our third day we wanted to drive the entire length of Jebel Qara that stretches all along the northern edge of the Salalah plain. The guidebook mentioned large stands of frankincense trees, but although we looked for them all the time, we did not find any. We stopped numerous times to photograph plants or enjoy views. Two sightings stand out as wonderful memories: one of a greybacked kingfisher sitting on a branch of an olive tree. The other of a small beetle that Pam caught: it was an overall golden colour iridescent with green and blue when the sun struck it at the right angle. I tried to photograph it, but as it would not sit still that was not a success. The other sight that always amused us was of "mosques in the meadows" - a very unusual sight.

On the very top of the mountain the greenery dried up within the space of a hundred metres, giving way to the usual Arabian desert landscape. A roadside café served a copious curry lunch that caused the digestive system to work overtime for the next few days. Descending to coastal level we soon drove through meadows with waving grass and bright patches of colour where wildflowers grew. A stop at a permanent wadi with a park, which I think was called Ayn Jarziz, was a pleasant interlude. The pools had lotus flowers (most likely introduced) and lots of dragonflies and kingfishers. A short visit at Ayn Razat, another park with many birds (according to Colin) concluded the day.

The last morning we went back towards Mughsayl because Pam still had not seen a frankincense tree. We found one off the road after an hour's drive and it even produced some sap for us. I found many interesting dry desert plants in the surroundings. When we arrived back at the hotel to check out, Pam nudged me and pointed

towards the center of the small roundabout in the entrance: "Is

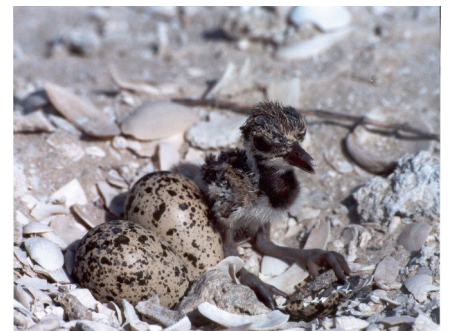


that not a frankincense tree right there?" And so it was! And we had just driven two hours to see one! *Report and photographs by Marijke Jongbloed.*

Phew! Patience Pays

First minutes

Sweat drenched in my hide, I was finally able to capture on film the



emergence of the red wattled lapping chick and its inaugural trot. It was a scorching summer morning (July 12, KDW sanctuary) and the three nests were in a radius of six metres, with one a kilometre away with a clutch of four.

....and a little while later

The characteristic egg and the nesting technique give good camouflage in the surroundings and can easily go unnoticed. The 'did-you-do-it' bird gives away its secret by walking, crouching or trying to divert your attention with its characteristic rancour.





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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.

Report and photographs by Mohammed Arfan Asif.

Irrigation channels

The lecture by Waleed Yassin at the October meeting concerned irrigation channels. Most of those in the audience had always thought that these channels that you can see in function in almost



any oasis are called "falaj" (pl: aflaj), but we learned otherwise. That name is reserved for the part of the irrigation channels that runs underground. The above ground channel is locally called a "ghayl" - now we know why so many settlements are called by that name.

Not a falaj after all

For those who are new to the area a short overview of what aflaj are all about follows:

A true falaj is dug from a permanent water source somewhere along the mountain front. It is dug underground, with an airshaft opening up to the surface every fifty or one hundred metres. The channel has to be at an angle in

order for the water to flow, but not so steep that the end of the falaj comes out below the level of the fields that it is supposed to irrigate. When the falaj comes closer to the surface, it becomes more efficient to dig it as a ditch rather than a tunnel. However, in order to prevent evaporation and pollution, the ditch is then covered with slabs of rock or bricks until it finally emerges at the washing place in the oasis that is usually situated at a spot before the cistern where the water for irrigation is collected. From there surface channels (ghayl) branch out to the various fields.

Generally the system of using underground channels to bring water to fields over large distances is thought to have come to Arabia from Iran and Iraq, where these channels are called "qanat" or "kahriz". Evidence from the finds of the Al Ain archeological team points to an earlier date for the local systems than was accepted till now, so that it seems possible that the engineering skills passed the other way - from here to other countries. *Report by Marijcke Jongbloed.*

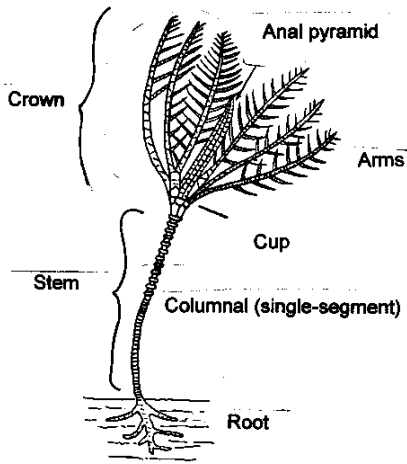
Identification of Fossils found on Saiq Plateau

During our two trips to the Saiq Plateau, the first one in May 2001 and more recently that of 20th/21st June, I collected and photographed a variety of fossils. These have been examined by the Palaeontology Department of the Natural History Museum in London. Rocks containing crinoid stems and other rocks containing crinoid debris plus fusulinid foraminifera were collected. Various specimens of gastropods and pipe corals were seen in the rocks and echinoderm and mollusc debris were also identified from rock samples. The dark grey cliff-forming limestones in which most of the specimens were found are the Saiq Formation which is one of



special reports ...

the lowest units of the Hajar Supergroup, being entirely (late) Permian.



CRINOID

Crinoids or sea lilies belong to the Phylum Echinodermata of the Kingdom Animalia which is a phylum of marine animals covered with a skeleton composed of calcite plates or spines. Crinoids are flower-like echinoderms, often beautifully coloured, which grow in colonies on the sea floor.

Some fossil forms were free moving but most usually lived attached by a stalk or stem to the sea floor. The arms usually provide food to



Fusulinids x3

Upper Carboniferous

FUSULINID FORAMINIFERA

the mouth. The stem is formed of variously shaped discs or columnals (single segments) surmounted by a circlet of arms. All have

five-fold radial symmetry but vary in shape, plates and arms. They have been found in rocks ranging from the Ordovician to Recent times.

Foraminifera belong to the Phylum Sarcodina of the Kingdom Protocista. They are aquatic, single-celled animals, the majority being marine. They have tests or shells (skeletons) which may be chitinous, calcareous or composed of cemented foreign particles. They are common as fossils, ranging from rocks of Cambrian age upwards. Some may be minute but others are larger.

The larger Foraminifera, a quarter of an inch or more in diameter, occur in tropical waters, especially around coral reefs. Those found on the Saiq Plateau were identified as fusulinid foraminifera (or fusulinids). These cigar-shaped foraminifera were composed of many chambered whorls, with each whorl completely enveloping the inner whorls. They were very important in Upper Carboniferous and Permian rocks, both as rock formers and zonal indices. They are amongst the 'great' Foraminifera, ranging up to over 2 inches in length. They must have flourished in clear-water marine environments.

Report and illustrations by Valerie Chalmers.

Dubai Birdwatching Trip

The Wimpey Pits may be the UAE's largest expanse of fresh water. Created in the 1990s, they are one of those happy accidents that occur when the environmental devastation wrought by development turns out to create a new and welcoming habitat for wildlife (other than mice, cockroaches and crows). Thanks to the now defunct Wimpey construction company who dug them, and the Dubai Sewage Treatment Plant who recharges them nightly with effluent, they are now one of the UAE's "hottest" birding sites.

David Bradford recalls how he first "discovered" the site and put it on the local birdwatching itinerary: Walking his dogs nearby, he saw a flight of ducks pass overhead and descend purposefully over a dune ridge, in a way they would normally only do at water. Intrigued, he followed immediately and, lo and behold!

David was also the birdwatching guide for our field trip, which was a good thing, because distinguishing many water birds – plovers, sandpipers, stints, snipes, terns and ducks in eclipse plumage -- is not an easy task. For those new to birdwatching, it was a joy to watch flamingos swimming like swans and to watch the flight of the colorful Egyptian Goose. Those interested in the finer points were



pleased to have on-the-spot instruction in discriminating between the Little Stint and Temminck's Stint, or between the Greater and Lesser Ringed Plover. Without David's assistance, we'd have created quite a breeze flipping through the pages of our bird books.

Among the more exotic species seen were the White Plover, visiting from Asia, and the Broad-Billed Tern, something of a UAE specialty, but the bird of the day by David's account was a lone female Ruddy Shelduck. David feared that, alone and apparently oblivious to the attention we paid her, she might have been an ailing straggler on migration, but eventually she swam off as if in good health.

By the time we visited the nearby



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Pivot Fields – a very different habitat with a very different assortment of birds -- the late September heat had taken its toll on group numbers, but the hard core soldiered on and was quickly treated to good views of an Eastern Desert Shrike (formerly considered a pale subspecies of the Great Grey

Shrike). We also got to watch dozens of Cattle Egrets enjoying the ride (and the spray) on one of the pivot irrigation sprinklers, and with them a small flock of Glossy Ibises. Occasional juvenile wagtails kept identifications from being too simple.

Thanks to David Bradford for sharing his time, his telescope and his knowledge. *Report by Gary Feulner.*

Arabian Oryx Website

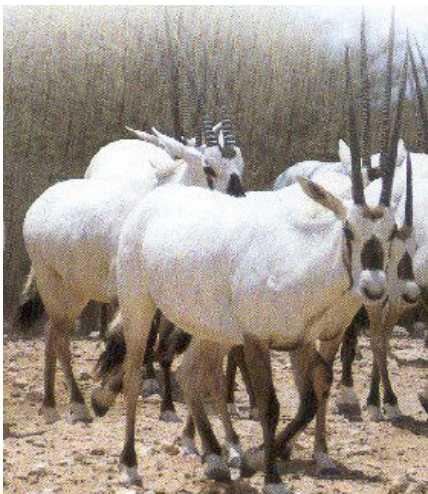
Catherine Tsagarakis of the National Wildlife Centre at Tarif, KSA, writes that she is glad to inform us that they have just posted on the web a site dedicated to the Arabian oryx, on behalf of the National Wildlife Research Center/National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. You can find it at:

www.arabianoryx.com.

This website intends to detail the Arabian oryx project in Saudi Arabia, to describe major conservation achievements and on-going reintroduction projects, and to provide a database concerning the ecology of this endangered desert ungulate species. It also provides a detailed bibliography (with many downloadable PDF files) and more than eighty pictures. For those who already have a website mentioning the Arabian oryx, please do not hesitate to contact Catherine if you are unable to find it in the links section. She will be happy to add it. She will look forward to reading your comments and suggestions.

Thanks to Catherine Tsagarakis for this information .

Catherine's contact details are:



Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

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|-----------------|---|
| Nov 3 | Herbal Medicine – Dr. Graham Pinn |
| December 15th | Fossils – Valerie Chalmers |
| January 5 or 12 | The leopard research program - Andrew Spalton (we hope) |
| March | Marijcke Jongbloed's UAE memories. |

Field Trips (DNHG members only, please).

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|--------|--|
| Oct 24 | Saluki Breeding/Falcon Hospital/ERWDA – Marijcke Jongbloed |
| Nov 01 | Sharjah Wildlife Sites – Larry Woods |
| Nov 08 | Paleontology – John Fox |
| Nov 14 | Falcon Display – Marijcke Jongbloed [Thursday] |
| Nov 15 | Hajar Mountain Nature Walk -- Gary Feulner |
| Nov 22 | Wadi Bih excursion – Peter van Amsterdam |
| Nov 29 | Musandam Dhow Trip – Lamjed Kefi and Valerie Chalmers |