

# GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

**DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP**

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

## Members' News

### *Rainforest for a Change*

Our Chairman, **Gary Feulner** is back from a short visit to the tropical rain forest, hiking and canoeing on a natural history oriented trip to the upper Amazon. Says Gary, "The local guide was a son of missionaries to the Cofan indians who grew up in the forest and now lives with the Cofan and works with various experts from Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History. He was extremely knowledgeable and was a real asset to the trip.

"Our American guide was an enthusiastic birdwatcher so we saw and identified plenty of birds, including the primitive Hoatzin with its Mohawk hairdo (which I was said to resemble after one motorboat ride); the Russet-Backed Oropendola, which dips its whole body with each call and sounds like a large drop of water landing in a still pond; the raucous Yellow-Rumped Cacique; the cryptic Common Potoo; a flock of two dozen Scarlet Macaws; and the imperturbable, kingfisher-like White-Eared Jacamar. By night I learned to identify the faint burbling call of the Ferruginous Pygmy Owl and the more obtrusive calls of the Tinamou and the Parauque. The only avian over-

laps with the UAE were the Great Egret and Cattle Egret.

"The Amazon also has the richest butterfly fauna in the world (much of it still unstudied). On my own I was able to distinguish more than 50 varieties (I about ran out of evocative field names) including several species of giant, brilliant blue butterflies of the genus *Morpho*, which includes some of the world's largest. I was also able to distinguish some 20 dragonflies/damselflies, including river, pond and forest species.

"The undoubted highlights, however, were (1) a giant anteater at close range (but our Cofan guide backed me off quickly – they are considered unpredictable and have very powerful claws) and (2) a band of red howler monkeys that we successfully stalked in the forest (they were calling like an army of banshees – if you didn't know what was making the noise, you would never, ever approach).

Special treats were pink river dolphins and tree snails the size of baseballs. I also managed to see (but otherwise avoid) electric eels, stingrays, piranha, barbed catfish, and leeches. Blissfully unencountered was the despicable *candiru*."

### *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 Dh. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at meetings (see Membership Secretary Fi Skennerton) or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account no. 173746 and posted to Fi at PO Box 29561, Dubai. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.) Membership is valid from September 2001 to September 2002.

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:**

Geoff Sanderson, Gary Feulner, Marijcke Jongbloed, Maggie Bell, Jo Perrett, Prof. Ulli Wernery, Prof. John Fox, Mary Beardwood



## Field Trips etc ...

### Ramadhan Specials...

#### Fossilling and Camping 22-23 November

Mike Lorrigan will be leading a trip to a fossil site in the Madam area, which he discovered two years ago when walking with a friend Ken Harvey. It is mainly composed of tightly packed gastropods and some rudists, sea urchins, etc. Mike said, "It really was a spectacular sight to come across all these gastropods packed so closely together. There were hundreds of them and it looked as if they had died packed tightly together in the rapidly disappearing water of a shallow lagoon. That was Ken's theory and we would be interested to find out what conclusions others draw. There are fossils lying all around the area."

The trip will depart from the World Trade Centre Hotel covered car park at 3.00pm Thursday 22nd November. Overnight camp and BBQ. Fossil exploration Friday morning followed by lunch and afternoon departure back to Dubai. 4 WD essential. Overnight camp restricted to 8 vehicles. Those who do not camp on the Thursday can join the fossil exploration on Friday morning. Valerie Chalmers will be joining the group on the Friday to assist with fossil identification.

#### History and Archeology Tour of Ras al Khaimah Friday 30 November

Mary Beardwood will lead a field trip with Christian Velde, resident archaeologist at Ras al Khaimah who is currently working on Bronze Age sites, on November 30th. It will include recent history.

Meet at the Bin Majid Hotel, on the left as you come into Ras al Khaimah, at 9.30am sharp.

This is limited to 25 people. Con-

tact Mary Beardwood on mike-mary@emirates.net.ae

#### Al Ain Camel Souq and Hilli Archeological Site Friday 21 December

Peter van Amsterdam will lead a day trip to visit the colourful and somewhat grotty camel souq in Buraimi, followed by the Hilli archeological site for a lunchtime picnic. Your Christmas visitors are welcome, and a 4WD is not necessary. For details, register with Peter by e-mail at pvana@emirates.net.ae

### ...and New Year Treats

#### Fossilling Trip with Abu Dhabi Group 18 January 2002

Valerie Chalmers will lead a joint trip with Steve James and the Abu Dhabi group to some of the most interesting fossil areas in the Emirates. This will be a full day trip and will probably require a 4WD and prior registration. Details will be published in *Gazelle* closer to the time.

#### Uphill Hike with Gary January 2002

Gary Feulner will lead a walk up one of the Hajar mountains. These are for the fit and energetic, but Gary's broad knowledge of UAE flora, fauna and geology makes the strain well worthwhile. Details coming.

#### Whale and Dolphin Watching in Oman Jan/Feb/Mar 2002

Details are yet to be finalised and will be published in a later issue of *Gazelle*.

#### Wildflowers in Ghubra Bowl, Oman March 2002

Peter van Amsterdam and Anne Millen will lead a trip to the Ghubrah Bowl to see the spring wildflowers. Marijcke Jongbloed will be along to identify the plants. This will be an overnight camp and numbers will be limited as the amount of flat ground is very small. 4WD is needed, and the weather will play an important role – the whole place is a giant wadi. Further details later.

#### Our Next Speaker

Dr. Reza Khan, who will address the DNHG on 9th December, has been the Head of the Zoo section at the Public Parks and Horticulture Department of Dubai Municipality since 1989.

He graduated from Dhaka University, Bangladesh, in Zoology, and got his Ph.D. at Bombay University in India. After working as a lecturer, assistant and associate professor in Bangladesh from 1973 to 1987 he took up the post of curator at Al Ain Zoo and Aquarium. He has authored 8 books and over 50 scientific articles on wildlife, zoo management, nature conservation and environment in national and international journals and books, published in Bangladesh, India and the UAE.

For the past 15 years he has been involved in the study of wildlife of the UAE and the neighbouring areas of the Sultanate of Oman. A long-standing and enthusiastic member of the Dubai Natural History group, he has lectured to us on a variety of subjects. This time he will focus on the new zoo and nature reserves planned by the Dubai Municipality.



### *The Turtle Trip, a Total Trip*

Many tired but happy people returned home with wonderful memories from Mary Beardwood's trip to the turtle beach at Ras al Junaiz in late October. They travelled via the Nahar Resort, Wahiba Sands, and Wadi Bani Khalid and packed a lot into the weekend,

Maggie Bell wrote, "It was a super weekend ... the sand duning was great – to watch!! The lunch whilst trying to escape the hornets kept everyone on their toes, and the turtle beach was something to remember for ever"

Jo Perrett said, "It was exhausting, from the driving, but a wonderful weekend ... The highlights were many from: feeling that we were tumbling over a cliff in the Wahiba Sands whilst dune bashing; swimming in a surreal oasis; flying through the air trying to follow Abdullah in the pitch black, every bone shaking plus the car's and at the speed of light; to the serenity of the turtle beach at dawn to watch the mothers and babies crawling to the sea.

Dr Ulli Wernery described the



Green turtle heading to the ocean

scene at the beach. "After 10pm, we were guided to the beach which was a couple of hundred metres away from the campsite. Our Omani guide found a huge turtle deep in a sand crater laying eggs, one by one up to a hundred. This may take more than two hours, an exhausting job. We were allowed to touch the eggs: size, colour and consistency are like tennis balls. After a short sleep in the noisy camp, we again were at the beach before sunrise at 5.00am. Turtles returning back to

the sea. What a strenuous, exhausting exercise for 100kg animals without legs and through deep craters made by previous laying turtles. The whole group of onlookers stood in silence when the turtles finally submerged into their habitat, the ocean. We were so lucky to also watch tiny green turtles emerging out of the sand through little holes, but with sadness we had to witness that only very few – maybe 1% only – made it into the water. Predators everywhere: gulls, foxes, crows, crabs and when they have reached their wet habitat, there are even more.

We headed home to Dubai after a once in a lifetime experience."

*Thanks to Mary Beardwood for forwarding these excerpts, and Ulli Wernery for the photographs.*

### *Beautiful Bird Watching*



Turtle babies killed by crows (note the shell)

They say beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and you sure need a bird's eye view to appreciate the appeal of the politely named Wimpey Pits, in reality a sewage farm with a lotta aroma. October 12th's well-attended birding trip there nearly ended 'in the mud' after the leader's car blew up on the Hatta Road the night before. But thanks to Universal Car Rentals and its elderly 11<sup>th</sup> hour Hyundai Accent, the jinx was kept at bay for a good birding excursion with one or two magic ornithological moments.

A beautiful sunny day raised spirits, flamingos swimming like swans raised eyebrows, the incessant chittering of little grebes raised blood pressure, and bee-eaters floating above the sand like living jewels raised the experience into the celestial sphere.

Highlights of the trip, which continued on to the pivot fields, included golden oriole, black-necked grebe, squacco heron and great views of white-tailed plover - enough to satisfy even the most jaded observer.

Special thanks to David Bradford whose fieldcraft is legendary, and to chairman Gary Feulner who returned next day to bag a clutch of cripplers - tawny pipit, European roller, pallid harrier, juvenile Bonelli's eagle, eight species of butterflies and moths and a party of twitchers led by Colin Richardson! *Report by David Snelling in full flight.*

### *Forts of the Nizwa Plain*

On the no-flats tour of the Nizwa Plain forts, we first visited Salaif, the old fortified area of Ibri. Sadly, there were no signs of restoration. Jabrin castle, built as the residence of the Imam, is gracefully laid out and well preserved. It is full of surprises – an upstairs room for the Imam's horse, and secret passages and hiding places.

Bahla fort is still being restored – it is huge, with many floor levels. We visited Tanuf, sobering in the light of recent events, and saw the lovely still-functioning falaj that supplies the modern village nearby.

By the time we arrived at the souq in Nizwa, the colourful animal market was in full swing. In the souq, Omanis from far and wide made their purchases and hawked their old possessions. If you go to the Friday goat and cattle market, be early – it is over by 10.30am.

On the way home, we took the Miller family to the beehive tombs at the foot of Jebel Misht, and so it was that we came home via Bat and the 5,000 year-old chambered tombs described by John Fox on page 5. *Report by Anne Millen*



# Field Clips &...

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

## "Ginger" Tree?

The "thumb" of Omani territory that projects north across the Hatta road in the area of the Madam Plain has been steadily developed in the past decade, first with a large police station and then with numerous plantations relying on pumped groundwater and expat labor.

Driving past a new-ish such plantation late one weekend morning (after the birds and the bees had retreated to the shade) I noticed an erect, wispy tree that I had never seen before, being used as a breaker between rows of ground crops. It resembled a sort of *ghaf* tree, but more delicate, with yellowish bark, pinnate leaves and long, thin, slightly sinuous pods.

I stopped to examine more closely from the fence and was greeted by a friendly worker. He apologized. He didn't know the name of the tree in English, and it doesn't have an Arabic name because it isn't normally found here. But in Urdu, he said, it is called "ginger." "Ah," I said, "We have the same name in English. So that's what it is!" Sophisticate that he was, he reminded me that I should not be surprised, as there were many words the same in Urdu and English – "button," for example (or "batan").

My friend Sher turned out to be from Baluchistan ("the Makran," he said) and I accepted his offer of tea. The *barasti* dining hut was all but covered by a climbing *Ipomoea* sp. (Morning Glory family), a relative of the sweet potato. I have now seen this insulation technique in several places, but only in the past few years. After

scalding my palate as usual on the sweet white tea (those thermos flasks really work!) I enjoyed a brief tour of the plantation, about 250 meters on a side.

The principal crops here were *shamam*, a yellow mallow, *bamiyah* or okra, whose seedlings are grown under white plastic until they are about 8-10" high, and *lubyen* or peas. The latter I mistook for broad beans until I was given the Urdu name of *matar*, familiar from many a restaurant menu.

Despite my initial assumption, the "ginger" tree does not seem to match up to the spice of the same name. Knowing *Gazelle* editor Anne Millen to be acquainted with useful plants such as henna, I asked her about ginger. "The sort of ginger that the spice comes from is a native of SE Asia, *Zingiber officinale*, Family Zingiberaceae" said Anne. "It could scarcely look less like a ghaf. It's a low-growing, perennial plant with very large green leaves (lance head) which spreads laterally from rhizomes. It is usually found in damp situations or where there's frequent and abundant watering. The plump rhizomes provide the delicious spice. Sounds like more research is needed to identify the new version." Can any members enlighten us?

Anne also recalled her own un solicited lesson in comparative linguistics, learned from a Salalah policeman. He had her practice a number of Arabic words before moving on to "hrah'jo." When she'd had quite a few goes at this, he patted the communication device on his belt and said, "English same-same." *Report by Gary Feulner*

## Snail Call!

A reminder, especially for new members: your unwanted garden snails and slugs are wanted for scientific study and an accounting of the terrestrial snails of the UAE. All specimens will be gratefully

accepted by Chairman Gary Feulner, and contributors will be kept informed of progress and pedigrees. Suburban gardens are home to several native Arabian snails, but also a number of introduced species. There have already been a few surprises and we know that more are out there. Dead shells are preferred; we'll follow up if you've got something unusual. It's easy. Just bag 'em and tag 'em! Please remember to record the location and the habitat, as well as your name, the date, and any remarks.



## UAE Archeology Website

Members interested in local and regional archeology may want to visit the website of the Abu Dhabi Islands Archeological Survey (ADIAS) at [www.adias-uae.com](http://www.adias-uae.com). The site contains lots of information not readily accessible elsewhere.

## UAE Fish Website

Mark Beech of the University of York, who is currently engaged in a study of animal bones (and particularly fish bones) found in association with UAE archaeological sites, maintains a web site titled "UAE Fishes: A Web Guide". It is located at:  
<http://www-users.york.ac.uk/mjb117>

## Letters to the editor

Any news or views you would like published in our monthly newsletter? Please contact the editor or any of the committee members, preferably by e-mail. We welcome members opinions and experiences.





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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.

### The Bat Tombs, Oman

A detour during the Forts of the Nizwa Plain trip on November 9, 2001 took one vehicle of DNHG explorers to the Bat tombs outside Ibbri. While sketching a map of the principal rounded masonry temple/tomb beside the road, a clustering of man-made structures were seen silhouetted on a ridge about one kilometre north. We were surprised to discover about thirty circular, beehive-shaped, masonry tombs below the ridge, and rubble structures, perhaps collapsed tombs and what were once probably towers, stretching for several kilometres along the ridge. Few ceramics were noted, but three lithic (chalcedony) tools were noted, including a projectile point of the Arabian bifacial tradition (ca. 5000-3100 BC). In short, this was an early major archaeological complex. One circular building, with its foundation intact of finely dressed masonry, oriented to east-west cardinality (90-270 degrees).

The largest structure contains on top twelve chambers and a circular, stone-lined well in the center, and occupies the southwestern edge of the archaeological complex. Speculatively, this positioning cosmologically represented the sun set farthest to the south on the western horizon during the winter solstice, when the night hours were longest (the realm of the dead). We do not know the function of this structure. However, it is reminiscent in size, construction, and orientation of the Hilli tower/tomb/temple in Al Ain, about 120 kms away. And the innumerable circular tombs recall the approximately 20 beehive-shaped tombs at Wadi al Ayn, Oman, about 15 kms away and the burials at Jebel Hafit near Buraimi/Al Ain.

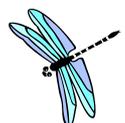
The numerous tombs at Bat date ca. 3200 to 2700 BC, with grave goods of Jamat Nasr ware, which may have been imported from Southern Mesopotamia. This

grave complex is also known as the Hafit type, from the first excavations at Jebel Hafit (1962). This raises the spectre that these first builders of monumental architecture were in fact Mesopotamian colonists.

Probably wetter conditions five thousand years ago supported greater sedentary populations, at least part of the year, who cultivated wheat and barley in falaj-watered gardens shaded by date palms, and herded goats, sheep, and cattle. These staples were domesticated in nearby Mesopotamia. There is some speculation that Oman provided raw copper for the Early Bronze Age Sumerian cities on the banks of the Euphrates River in southern Iraq. Accepted opinion has it that copper was loaded on camels from western Oman and stopped at the various oases (e.g. Bat, Al Ain) en route to the island of Umm an-Nar, off modern-day Abu Dhabi city. Presumably the Mesopotamia ceramics came to Bat along this same network. This approximate date also marks the historical threshold (Protohistoric, Early Dynastic period), when the name Magan appears in the cuneiform tablets to refer to the peninsula.

Based on inference, Bat was a religious, political, and economic central-place for a wide region. Thirty tombs would support an interpretation that different allied lineage segments across a wide territory placed their dead in communal funerary complexes. The similar size and construction of the tombs suggest fairly egalitarian social ranking. Other than the large tower/tomb to the southwest, no ritual buildings stand apart in size that would suggest a local sheikh.

*Report by John Fox, Archaeological Reporter*





## special reports ...

### Possible Projects ...

During a recent trip to Nizwa, via Muscat, Geoff Sanderson, of the Al Ain group, met an interesting person with an equally interesting shop in Muscat. In addition, he learned of a UNESCO project in Oman which may interest some of our members. Geoff wrote:

"I came across Muna N. Ritchie in Muscat at the Omani Heritage Gallery near the Intercon, and she told me about the Bahla Oasis Project which is UNESCO funded and is now underway. I am especially interested in the Bahla project and I see an opportunity to link with the Oman group and arrange a little seminar say in Nizwa where we could all hear about the project from the various parties involved and maybe help in some way. I also see the possibility of arousing UNESCO interest in Buraimi Oasis which is deteriorating rapidly.

"If UNESCO is looking for another project, we could support the nomination of the Buraimi Oasis which would complement the work done in Al Ain. The Al Ain Committee scheduled a discussion of this for their last meeting on 6 November."

Geoff continued: "If you are interested in the crafts and art of Oman, you may want to visit Muna's shop in Muscat. The city organizes a festival each January which makes it a popular destination at that time of year.

"Muna told me that at the last Festival she organised for most of the 'known' artists and craftspeople of Oman to come together outside her gallery and work on pots, metals, weaving, silversmithing, rug making etc. This was very successful and she managed to get some of the almost lost techniques revitalised because of sharing of experiences amongst these artisans.

If you are interested in heritage crafts or just wish to visit her shop

in Muscat, contact Muna by email at: [ohgmq@omantel.net.com](mailto:ohgmq@omantel.net.com) Muna has a superb collection of heritage crafts at little more than you pay in the wilds of Ghul. You can also visit her web site at [www.omaniheritage.com](http://www.omaniheritage.com)."

*Thanks to Geoff Sanderson.*

### ..& Socotra - a special place

"We hope that our national efforts to protect Socotra's unique wildlife will be supported by local and international assistance. The island's uniqueness should be the gateway for environmental tourism in Yemen. The long isolation of the islands from the African continent has resulted in very high levels of endemism on the islands. Of the 850 plant species found in the islands, at least 277 are endemic. The higher terrestrial plants have been best studied, yet new species keep being discovered. The animal world is characterized by the absence, except for introductions by man, of mammals (exception made for bats), amphibians, and perhaps primary freshwater fish. Animal groups stand out by the presence of numerous endemics, including birds. Many species remain to be discovered. These facts reflect the long geological isolation of the islands. Animal groups that managed to survive on the islands stand out by the presence of numerous endemics, including birds. Many groups remain to be discovered, especially in the marine fauna." (Preface from <http://www.al-bab.com/yet/soqotra.htm>)

Other net sites about Socotra . . .  
<http://www.ftiyemen.com/socotrapic.htm>

<http://www.yemeninfo.gov.ye/ENGLISH/CULTURE/Yemen.htm>  
<http://www.arabmanet/biosfauna.cfm?bid=14>

*Thanks to Brien Holmes*

### Another Species of "Dhub"

A few weeks ago I had a phone call from Molly Mcquarrie who asked me if I knew anything about

a new species of Spiny-tailed lizard (Uromastix) in this region. That was news to me, as was the fact that Drew Gardner, herpetologist, who used to teach at Sultan Qaboos University, is now in Abu Dhabi working at Zayed University.

A few days later he e-mailed me: "I was speaking to Molly McQuarrie the other day at the ENHG. She had brought in 2 baby dhabbs which were as different as chalk and cheese. One was Uromastix leptieni and the other Uromastix aegyptia microlepis. Really interesting to see the different juvenile colouration. I was wondering about your studies on dhabbs. They should be Uromastix leptieni, with the babies an overall dark colour (no yellow cross bands?) I think it will be really interesting to try to draw a line across the country where the two species meet and look for any signs of hybridisation."

Of course, I referred him to Peter Cunningham, who has been studying the dhubbs around Al Ain for a long time. Apparently a man by the name of Thomas Wilms is the one who has made the distinction between the two dhubbs. From the list of characteristics below it is apparent that it will not be easy to distinguish adults unless you have them in your hands. But babies are quite different. However, from my own experience, babies are not easily observed.

Now that you know this interesting bit of natural history, please keep your eyes open for dhubbs and try to determine which of the two species you are seeing. Then report it back to me or Drew Gardner ([Drew.Gardner@zu.ac.ae](mailto:Drew.Gardner@zu.ac.ae)) and we will try to integrate all records. If you have any clear, close-up pictures of dhubbs and you still know where they were taken, please give us a copy for study. Sometimes it is possible to count scales from pictures.

*(continued on page 7)*



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Differences between *Uromastix aegyptia microlepis* and *Uromastix lepteni*:

Character	<u>U. aegyptia microlepis</u>	<u>U. lepteni</u>
Juvenile colouration	Grayish-brown with pale to bright yellow cross-bands and sometimes reddish spots (ocelli)	Reddish brown with dark brown stippling (vermiculation)
Ventral scales between neck (gular) and groin (inguinal) folds	149 – 193 (mean 171.9)	112 – 130 (mean 121.3)
Scales around mid-body	255-391	238-294
Tail whorls	20-24	22-24
Flank scales	No enlarged scales	Enlarged tubercles extending from sacral region almost to insertion of front legs

Report by Marijcke Jongbloed



## Dubai Natural History Group Programme

**Lectures at Jumeirah English Speaking School, Gymnasium 7.30 pm for 8.00 pm**

- |            |  |
|------------|--|
| 9 December | Dr Reza Khan on "Plans for the new Dubai Zoo and Dubai Nature Preserves" |
| 6 January  | Gianna Minton from Muscat on "Whales and Dolphins"                       |
| 3 February | Ted Papenfuss on some aspect of herpetology (to be confirmed)            |

**Field Trips** (DNHG members only, please).

- |                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| 22 – 23 November | Camping and fossilling trip with Mike Lorrigan                          |
| 30 November      | History and archeology tour to Ras al Khaimah with Mary Beardwood       |
| 21 December      | Al Ain camel souq and Hilli archeological site with Peter van Amsterdam |
| January 2002     | Uphill hike with Gary Feulner   |
| 18 January 2002  | Joint fossilling with Abu Dhabi group and Valerie Chalmers              |
| Jan/Feb/Mar 2002 | Whale watching in Oman  |
| March 2002       | Wildflowers in Ghubrah Bowl, Oman, with Peter van Amsterdam             |