

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

IEW 2012

This year's IEW, hosted by DNHG, was a successful event and thanks are especially due to Vice-Chair Val Chalmers for organising the event. Reports of various trips and competitions are contained in this edition of the Gazelle and more will follow in the April Gazelle. A highlight of the night was Tim Kennedy's talk and screening of his film "The Floating Life of Dubai Creek".

Former ENHG Al Ain Acting Vice Chair (and 2007 Bish Brown Award winner) Bob Reimer, who died this January (see February 2012 Gazelle) was given a special mention. Brigitte Howarth read out a statement from his wife Barb about how much he had looked forward to attending the 2012 IEW gathering, and those of us who knew him felt he was with us in spirit.

2011 Sheikh Mubarak Award

The Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohamed Award for Natural History is the country's premier natural history award. It is intended to acknowledge the contributions made by an individual, primarily through original research and publication, to the scientific study of the archaeology, history and natural history of the UAE.

Former ENHG (Abu Dhabi) Chairman Dr Andrew (Drew) Gardner was awarded the Sheikh Mubarak Award for 2011 for his extensive publications and research on reptiles and many other aspects of natural history and ecology in the UAE and Oman over the past two decades.

Drew was not with us on the night but he provided an acceptance speech by e-mail, reproduced below.

After many years of announcing the winners of the Sheikh Mubarak and Bish Brown awards at the Inter Emirates Weekends, I must express my sincere apologies not to be able to be with you on this occasion to accept the Sh Mubarak award myself. It is of course a tremendous honour, and I am deeply grateful to the committee of the Abu Dhabi ENHG for the recognition of my work on Arabian ecology and herpetology over the last 24 years or so.

We left Abu Dhabi about three weeks ago to move to Western Australia. After so long in the Middle East, it is an exciting adventure. I have been offered a job as a zoology consultant with a small specialist firm based in Perth. They undertake ecology surveys, targeted rare species surveys, and zoology re-

DNHG Membership

DNHG Membership remains a bargain at Dhs.100 for couples/families and Dh. 50 for singles. You can **join or renew at our meetings or by sending us your details and a cheque** made out to: Lloyds TSB Bank account no. 60600669933501. (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, our post office box, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects.

Seashells, Birds and Mammals - Recorders needed! Contact a committee member for further details.

Editor wanted!

The Gazelle's current editor is departing from Dubai in June, leaving the position vacant. If you can assist, please contact any member of the committee for further information.

This Month's Contributors

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

Gary Feulner
Binish Roobas
Martina Fella

Neil Tovey
Keith Taylor
Drew Gardner

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



search into bats, reptiles, marsupials and various invertebrate groups, mainly working in the Pilbara region. However we are still working through the bureaucracy, visas etc, and it may still be a while before I can actually start work. Australian and UAE red tape are certainly on a par! In the meantime, the sun is shining, flocks of cockatoos are wheeling around, and life is good!

Bish Brown Award

The Bish Brown Award is given to a person who has made a significant contribution to promoting wider interest in the objectives of the UAE's three natural history groups through means such as educational activities, raising public consciousness in the media, playing a leading role in NHG activities etc. The award was endowed by former Vice Chairman, Terry Adams and former Secretary, Caroline Adams, to commemorate the founder of the ENHG, J.N.B. 'Bish' Brown. The award comprises a silver mounted eagle, to be held for one year by the recipient, and a cash prize.

Current ENHG Al Ain Chair and 2006 Sheikh Mubarak Award winner Dr Brigitte Howarth was the Bish Brown Award recipient for 2011, in acknowledgement of her tremendous contribution to all aspects of the volunteer work of all of the Natural History Groups in the UAE. In addition, under a Memorandum of Understanding with the ENHG (Abu Dhabi), she has taken on the curation of the invaluable Bish Brown Arthropod Collection, containing specimens collected by Bish and other ENHG members over many years, and has published articles about the significance of several of those specimens.

Graveyard of the 10,000

The "Where in UAE is it?" quiz at IEW contained a photo of the "Graveyard of the 10,000" near the coast at Dibba, Oman.

This elicited a number of requests

for background information about the site. The basic information is thus:



The Quick & the Dead

At the time of the coming of Islam, coastal Oman (Muscat, the Batinah Coast and Dibba) was under occupation by the Sassanian Persians. The interior of Oman was ruled by the Julanda' tribe, based in Nizwa, who were the uneasy viceroys of the Persians. When in 630 an emissary from the Prophet invited the Julanda' and their subjects to take up Islam, they did so. They also, with religion as an added impetus, rose up and ousted the Persians from Oman some years later.

Following the death of the Prophet (peace be upon him), internal political rivalries re-surfaced in Oman, and religion was caught up in these. Rebels, led by Dhu'l-Taj Lakit bin Malik al-Azdi of Dibba, rejected Islam and challenged the rule of the Julanda', initially driving the Julanda' princes into hiding. The latter alerted the Caliph Abu Bakr, who sent three armies via 'Tuwwam' (Buraimi) and Wadi Jizzi, which joined with Julanda' forces at Sohar, from where they marched north to engage rebel forces massed at Dibba, then a thriving port and market town. Accounts indicate a closely fought battle, some reporting 10,000 dead and 4,000 captured. The fallen combatants are buried in the graveyard. Many of the prisoners were taken to the Hijaz, and Dibba was sacked and burned, a blow from which it never recovered.

Forces from Muslim Bahrain re-

portedly joined the battle, by one account as decisive reinforcements. It is interesting to note that the Bahrainis are said to have arrived by a route that would today strike us as rather indirect. They skirted west of the Sabkha Matti and thence eastward across the desert to Buraimi.

Additional colourful details and historical context can be found in *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates* (Frauke Heard-Bey, 1982) and *The Coming of Islam and the Islamic Period* (Geoffrey King, 2001) in *United Arab Emirates: A New Perspective* (Al Abed & Hellyer, eds., 2001) and the sources cited in each. Shorter accounts are given in *Fujeirah, An Arabian Jewel* (Peter Hellyer, 1998) and *Hidden Riches: An Archaeological Introduction to the UAE* (Peter Hellyer, 1998). Report and photo by Gary Feulner

Our Next Speaker

Neil Tovey

Neil Tovey, age 38 hails from south Wales and has been based in Dubai since 2005. A geologist by education, his full time profession is now in marketing.

Neil started birding at the age of 7, inspired by his father's passion for the same hobby. A member of the YOC, RSPB, WWT, plus the Gower Ornithological Trust and Glamorgan Bird Club, Neil travelled extensively throughout the UK and participated in many surveys through the RSPB and BTO. Extensive birding through Europe followed and he has now birded in over 40 countries worldwide.

He is a very active member of the Emirates birding scene and a member of the Emirates Bird Records Committee. Neil also pioneered bird guiding services in the UAE and has participated in multiple surveys and environmental impact assessments throughout the UAE, including Al Wasit Nature Reserve and Wadi Helo, both in Sharjah.



Email your field reports and news to clare.ohare@gmail.com (Arial 10 justified). Please send your photographs as **separate .jpg files** (preferably compressed for documents) or deliver them to Editor Clare O'Hare for scanning.

IEW: Coastal Lagoons

This trip visited three different types of lagoon environments: (1) the mangrove khor and mudflats at Khor Zawrah, Ajman; (2) the hard fasht (fatoush or beachrock) coast at Rafa'ah, Umm al-Qaiwain; and (3) the estuary of Khor Madfaq, on the UAQ/RAK border, an episodic river mouth.

At Khor Zawrah, the mangroves along the lone remaining 'wild' khor have thrived over the past decade, notwithstanding the obliteration of a large adjacent mudflat and much of the seaward mangroves where DNHG trips visited in earlier years (and home to two still unidentified small gastropods). The lush growth made it difficult for the group to penetrate into the mangrove forest, and at one point necessitated a lengthy retreat from the "Heart of Darkness" against the rising tide – an especially challenging exit for our youngest and smallest participant, Liam Downey.



Wading on a beachrock platform near Rafa'ah (by Sonia Lavrencic)

Some faunal changes at Khor Zawrah from earlier years, noted by trip leader Gary Feulner, included: the increasing abundance of the gastropod *Turbo coronatus* (syn. *Lunella coronata*), absent a decade ago, in both the channel and mangrove forest environments; the abundance of the colonial tube worm *Pomatoleios kraussi* in the

upper channels; an evident decline in the number of common mud creepers *Cerithidiopsilla cingulata* (syn. *Cerithidea cingulata*); an impressionistic decline in the abundance of mangrove tree snails (*Littoraria intermedia*); and the absence of fiddler crabs (*Uca annulipes* et al.).



Turbo coronatus, now an abundant colonizer at Khor Zawrah (the pale green, turban-like shell)

[Would-be visitors to Khor Zawrah should note that access to the khor can be problematic. The khor is now under a new regime of protection by the Ajman Municipality and Planning Department's Environmental Protection Section. Signs warn against a variety of prohibited activities, but in practice enforcement is interpreted by the frequent patrols to mean that one should have permission to be there.]



The beachrock coast of Khor al-Beidhah near Rafa'a is also now more difficult to access, but is rewarding. It is best known as a modern analogue for the Sufouh-2 site archaeological site in Dubai Media City, where wild-caught camels were butchered nearly 4000 years ago, evidently on a clean, flat cement-like platform at the water's edge. Our visit was at a spring tide, and the high water surmounted the platform as we watched, refreshing the thousands of tiny winkles *Echinolittorina ara-*

bica burrowing into the rock surface to feed on endolithic algae.

Khor Madfaq is the mouth of a watershed that, after the heaviest rains, drains the mountain and gravel plains from Masafi to Mleiha. This estuary was once home to mudskippers and spoon worms but is today better known for kite surfers (and in our case for air-rifle target practice) and its views of the modern-day Aztec city rising at nearby Jazirat al-Hamra. This site also added another "What is it?" challenge in the form of the mystery "donuts" found there (see photo below).



Mystery "donuts" at Khor

A potentially more ominous mystery was the absence of fiddler crabs (*Uca annulipes* et al.) at all three sites. Although a scattering of claws were present, we saw no live fiddlers at all. Were we simply visiting at the wrong state of the tide (late on a rising tide)? A scouting trip a week before, on a falling tide, had found nearly the same absence, with only a few fiddlers at Khor Madfaq. Was it perhaps too cold? The local fiddlers are not known to sit out the winter season. Or is something else happening to discourage the propagation of fiddlers along the Northern Emirates coast?

The day's most photographed species was the plucky, compact Violet Crab, *Eurycarcinus orientalis*, which will be the subject of a separate account. *Report by Gary Feulner*

IEW Dubai Creek

Dubai Creek is now accessible by Metro and we started this trip at the Al Ghubaibah station on the Green



Line, near Carrefour, only 100 metres from the waterfront. From there we walked through the busy material souk, now more or less a tourist souvenir district.

The narrow lanes led us to the first Indian Temple surrounded by tiny Indian temple shops filled with incense smoke and Indian music. It was as if we had stepped into another world! We passed by a second, even larger, Indian Temple before the lane brought Al Fahidi Fort, home of the Dubai Museum, into view. Walking past the Ruler's Court, we then entered the tranquil area of the Bastakia where we were able to enjoy strolling through the quiet lanes and admire old trees, wind towers and peek onto some of the nicely renovated and restored yards.



We then followed the creek further inland. On the side of the creek where normally all the dhows transformed into floating restaurants are towed, we discovered, to our great surprise, the burned remains of two huge dhows, presumably moved in order not to block the busy dhow harbour on the other side.

The dhows had been fully loaded with goods (including cars) when one of them suddenly caught fire because of a faulty diesel generator. As this happened days before our tour the smell of burned wood, chemicals and rubber was still in the air along with the burned and completely melted remains of the cargo.

A short ride on a RTA Waterbus took us to from Al Seef to Al Sabkha Station just next to the Dhow harbor. Walking along the many beautifully decorated wooden ships it was fascinating to see the 'Floating Life' of the Dubai Creek.

There were piles of cargo everywhere on the pavement with men from all over the Gulf region sitting on the boats or on the cargo drinking tea and waiting for the ship to set off for another trip across the Gulf.

Finally we reached the Spice Souk and then we entered the ever busy Gold Souk and then reached the Deirah Central Bus Terminal.

From here one could already smell the nearby fish market! Our first impression when we reached there was shocking! As it was now nearly 5 p.m. the first lorries had started to unload their gruesome cargo... countless huge sharks of all kinds, including hammerheads! The biggest of them was around 3 meters in length, the smallest maybe 20 cm!



The sight was really shocking and many of our group members saw this for the first time. However, those who visit the Dubai Fish market on a regular basis will know that this is very common. There seems to be few, if any, restrictions regarding the protection of endangered species. The only purpose of these sharks was it to get their fins cut off and trade them to (mainly) far eastern countries where shark fin soup is still a widely consumed delicacy.

Passing through the main area of the fish market, we all noticed the many baby-hamours that were sold there. The vendors praised their goods by remarking that the fish was from Dubai waters and not from other regions of the Gulf. One can only imagine what effects this will have on the hamour population in UAE waters.

From the Fish Market we headed towards the pedestrian tunnel, which is largely unknown, that took

us again to the Bur Dubai side of the Creek. We once more noticed that the pace of life in this part of the town is far more laid back than in modern Dubai.



We then walked towards the heritage village, passing the Diving village and the old Ruler's houses before reaching Al Ghubaibah Metro station again. According to Anne Millen's pedestometer we walked about nine kilometers. Hopefully all participants spotted some interesting new things and want to go back to find out more by themselves. Happy exploring! Report and photos by Martina Fella

IEW: Intermediate Desert: Dubai Hinterland

The IEW trip to Dubai's hinterland traversed the area inland of the Jebel Ali to Hatta Road and along the border with Abu Dhabi -- an area once called the Southern Loop, that is today much modified and has therefore much neglected from the point of view of plant and animal life. It is difficult to appreciate that only 20 years ago it was genuinely remote, without even good graded roads.



Tracks of Brown-Necked Raven

Following the Lisaili road, we stopped at a still relatively wild area in sight of Endurance Village, dotted with scattered ghaf trees, *Leptadenia pyrotechnica* and *Pennisetum divisum*. No sooner had we opened



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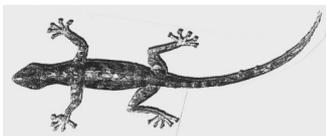
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Seashells, Birds and Mammals - Recorders needed!

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.



the car doors than we encountered the tracks of a Monitor Lizard (*Varanus griseus*), which we followed to reveal the beast's meanderings among the shrubs that dotted the low dunes. Tracks and droppings of gazelle were also common, and it appears they may receive supplemental food and water, but it also appears that camels have been kept away from the area for some time. Tracks of Brown-Necked Ravens (see photo) were common. Tracks of Desert Hares and Hoopoe Larks were also seen but were not common.



Black-Crowned Finch Lark

New to several participants was the Black-Crowned Finch (or Sparrow) Lark, a distinctive looking bird that nevertheless blends into oblivion on the sandy gravel plains of the area. Another highlight was a sighting of the uncommon Striped Fringe-Toed Lizard (*Acanthodactylus gongrorhynchatus*), a relative of the more common White Spotted Fringe-Toed Lizard (*A. schmidtii*).



Striped Fringe-Toed Lizard

The group also stopped west of Endurance Village for a brief visit to 'Gazelle Rock', a prominent mesa of cross-bedded sandstone, where they discussed whether the sands had been deposited as dune sands or as river deposits.

The final stop was at low, rolling dunes along the Truck Road from Saih Shuaib to Al-Faya, covered by succulent *Zygophyllum* (now *Tetraena*) sp. Here, tracks close to the road told the story of a still thriving community of lizards, rodents and arthropods, and their sometimes confusing interactions, despite the rumble and din of the many huge trucks. Here, also, we were introduced to the mystery of the solitary sand spheres, presented to readers elsewhere in this issue of *Gazelle*.
Report by Gary Feulner

IEW: Birdwatching in the Northern Emirates

Neil Tovey's IEW expedition started the day with a good selection of waders at Khor al-Beidhah in Umm al-Qaiwain, including some distant Crab Plovers, one of the UAE's signature birds.



Adult and immature Crab Plover (by Binish Roobas)

However the day's highlight was closer to home, at Dubai's Pivot Fields, where Neil found 6 Sociable Lapwings, the second highest count ever in the UAE for one of the rarest plovers on the planet. 3 birds had been present all winter so the other 3 had just turned up. Says Neil, "Seeing these beautiful waders was a truly memorable experience." *Report by Neil Tovey and Gary Feulner*

Crab Claws: Right Hand / Left Hand

While scouting for the coastal lagoons trip for IEW, Gary Feulner and Binish Roobas encountered a number of the so-called Violet Crab, *Eurycarcinus orientalis* (Infraorder Brachyura, Family Xanthidae), a common denizen of the UAE's muddy intertidal environments. This



crab was new to Binish, who immediately noticed something that had escaped Gary in years of intermittent sightings: The two claws of the crab, although normally roughly equal in size, are distinctly asymmetrical.



The Violet Crab *Eurycarcinus orientalis* in threat posture

In the several individuals we inspected at Khor Zawrah, the pincers of the right claw were consistently more massive, deeper and relatively shorter, whereas those of the left claw were longer and thinner. The effect was somewhat like having both a hammer and tongs. The difference was particularly evident when the crabs assumed a "threat" posture, standing erect with arms outstretched, facing a perceived attacker. When the claws are held in the normal position, it can also be seen that only the large claw features a vivid orange patch near the tip, which is possibly used in sexual signaling.

We observed differential use of the two claws for burrow maintenance. When engaged in excavating or tidying up their burrows, the crabs would regularly emerge with a glob of sticky mud, plus or minus mangrove leaves and other debris, which they would deposit at a distance of ca. 10-20 cm from the entrance. The mud was always held against the body primarily with the more streamlined left claw, whereas the right claw served more of a back-up function.

Suggestively, although not conclusively, we also saw one crab (already under observation) slink off with a small mud creeper *Potamides conicus* (now *Cerithiodopsis conica*) which it had plucked from the mud with its more streamlined left claw. We speculat-

ed that it would hold the snail in the same way and then crack the shell with the right claw, but the crab retreated to its burrow, snail still in hand, before we could confirm or deny this.

It is not unusual for crabs to have asymmetrical claws, but some of the principal groups that exhibit this phenomenon seem to do so for reasons other than simple differential dexterity. In some species of hermit crabs (Infraorder Anomura, Family Paguridae), one of the claws is developed into a shield that can be used to block the aperture of the host shell. In fiddler crabs (Infraorder Brachyura, Family Ocypodidae, Genus *Uca* et al.), the extreme asymmetry of the male claws seems to have been driven by sexual selection; the enlarged claw is used to signal to prospective female mates and/or intimidate other males. All of these phenomena are easy to observe in the UAE.

A further surprise awaited us at a second coastal site, at Khor Madfaq on the UAQ/RAK border, where we also saw a Violet Crab and observed the same asymmetry of the claws, but this time we noticed that it was the right claw that was the slender one. A dead specimen along the nearby shoreline showed the same reversal of our original left and right pattern. This left us wondering what is the status of "handedness" in crabs. Are left and right-handedness equally common? Or is one a rare trait, as is occasional left-handed (sinistral) coiling in normally right-handed (dextral) gastropods. In either case, might the prevalence of "handedness" vary from one crab population to another? *Report by Gary Feulner and Binish Roobas*

The Mystery of the Solitary Spheres

On a dune ridge in a 'wild' area of the Dubai hinterland near Endurance Village, Keith Taylor of Abu Dhabi, visiting with the IEW trip, turned up the hollow hemisphere in the photo – about 1-inch in di-

ameter, made of fine sandy material like a small, thick eggshell, but very hard and rock-like in texture, as if the sand grains had been glued tightly together, and having the texture and appearance of rough, fired clay.



A hollow hemisphere of brittle, sandy material (photo by Keith Taylor)

Speculation as to its origin was inconclusive, but Dom Antonucci, also of Abu Dhabi, revived the discussion later in the day with his discovery of an intact 1-inch diameter ball of similar material -- very hard, although lighter than a stone of the same size, with two small holes apparent on one side.

Speculation focused immediately on the spherical dung balls rolled by some scarab beetles (called Dung Beetles and represented in southern Arabia by the large and abundant *Scarabaeus cristatus*), which are buried in the sand before the beetle lays its eggs in them. That hypothesis was encouraged by the outside texture of the ball, which under magnification appears to be dimpled on a fine scale, as if by the tiny feet of the beetle rolling it.

But . . . dung beetle balls are not hollow originally, or brittle. They are packed with animal droppings and rolled in loose sand. Might they become hollow as the newly-hatched larva eats through its larder? Could the outside of the ball become crusted and brittle due to interaction of the sand coating with the moisture and organic substances present in the original dung of the interior? Or does the beetle itself somehow cement the outer surface? If so, how and at what stage of the process?

And how, then, does the beetle lar-



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va emerge from such a hard "shell"? Does an intact ball represent a failed breeding attempt, unearthed prematurely (or much later) by the shifting sands? Finally what accounts for the two tiny holes. Are these where the female beetle inserted her ovipositor? Or is the answer more sinister? Has something else (a predator or parasite?) entered or exited? If the latter, does that explain the "failure" of this particular ball?



Photo: An intact sphere, showing the tiny holes

Readers who can identify these balls and unravel any of these mysteries are invited to contact the Editor. Report by Gary Feulner

And finally

The winners of the IEW photo competition were as follows:

Life on Earth: Plants /Animals/ Fossils - Winner: Tamsin Carlise with "Piper on the Strand".

Earth and Environment: Geology/ Landscapes - Winner: Steve Manthorpe with "It's a hard life!";

Man and His Influence: Archaeology/ Architecture/Culture (People)/ Environment - Winner: Angela Manthorpe with "Descent".

Best Photograph Overall: Winner: Angela Manthorpe with "Descent".

Copies of the prize-winning photos will appear in forthcoming editions of the Gazelle.

Winning the Photo Quiz was the team comprised of DNHG members Sandi Ellis and her daughter, Layla, Martina Fella and Geoff Sanderson, with an impressive 19 correct answers (out of 30). Con-

gratulations to all! Please contact the editor if you would like a copy of the photo quiz.

Dolphin Survey

There is virtually no information on the occurrence of small cetaceans along the Dubai coast, although occasional sightings are reported. Dr. Ada Natoli is conducting a brief survey to gather a better idea of the presence and rough frequency of dolphins in the Dubai waters interviewing and collecting information regarding any occasional sighting. If you have seen dolphins in Dubai or surrounding waters and you would like to share your experience, please get in contact with Ada Natoli: Mob: 0509551742, email: ada.natoli@gmail.com

Answers to February's Wildlife quiz:

Photo 1: Laughing Dove
Photo 2: red-vented bulbul
Photo 3: Plain leaf warbler
Photo 4: White-cheeked bulbul
Photo 5: Purple sunbird (male)
Photo 6: Purple sunbird (female)

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

April 1 Neil Tovey: A population study of Collared Kingfishers at Khor Kalba

May 6 Ronnie Gallagher: Evidence for Caspian Sea level changes, cause and potential significance

Field Trips (Members only, please)

TBC

Further field trips, details or changes to trips will be announced/confirmed by e-mail circular.