

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP



GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي



A beautiful Camel Spider spotted on a night visit . See more reptile sightings on page 6

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Contributors

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

Gary Feulner, Gail Porter, Valerie Chalmers, Linda Rademan, Andere Applet, Ajmal Hasan

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

Saiq Plateau and the Roses

Date: Thurs 11 - Sat 13 April 2013

Contact: valeriechalmers@gmail.com.

Oman's Jebel Akhdhar is famed for its agriculture – its seasonal fruits such as peaches, oranges, apricots pomegranates - its roses which bloom through March and April, villages set on the side of the Mountain, terraced farms, Wadi Bani Habib, wonderful views etc.

This trip includes a stay in Ibri, a visit to Al Sulaif Fort en route to the Saiq Plateau, a night on the Plateau and visits to many places of interest up there, including some rose gardens.

The details have been advertised by email and, if you are planning to go, please contact Valerie Chalmers on valeriechalmers@gmail.com.

Jebel Ali Sikh Temple



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Date: Fri 15 Mar 2013

Availability: 15 people

The largest gurudwara of the Gulf region has been opened for the public in Dubai. Gurudwara Guru Nana Darbar has been constructed at a cost of \$20 million. Although Dubai has 50,000 Sikhs staying here, it had no gurudwara.

Vice-President and Prime Minister of Dubai, H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, granted 25,400 sq feet of land for the gurudwara in the Jebel Ali area.

At one time, the very thought of building a gurudwara in the heart of an Islamic state was considered nothing short of an Arabian mirage but the once-unimaginable has now happened making it the first 'official' Sikh temple in the whole of the Gulf.

Our Next Speaker

Date: Sun 3 Mar 2013

Speaker: Yusuf Thakur

Topic: The Films of Yusuf Thakur - a Screening

Yusuf Thakur, a wildlife filmmaker. Yusuf will be screening two short films he has made ("The Legendary Mermaid" & "Tracking Mermaids") as well as explaining some of the filmmaking, and having a question/answer session after each film.

About Yusuf: Yusuf spoke to the Abu Dhabi Chapter in 2009 and this is what the announcement said about him:

"As a wildlife filmmaker, Yusuf Thakur brings a rare passion for the environment and animals into sharp focus with every project. The qualities that separate the good from the best in wildlife filmmaking are apparent in the international nods of appreciation every Yusuf Thakur wildlife film has received. The sensitivity, patience and complete knowledge of the technical aspects of filmmaking stem from a passion to appreciate and preserve the planet's riches.

Yusuf's film, *Abu Dhabi—Home of the Legendary Mermaids*, is based on the research conducted by EAD (Environment Agency Abu Dhabi) and the subsequent conservation effort in order to protect and preserve the habitat, and the dugong population in the waters of UAE.

The project was started in 1996 and continues to this day. This film brings to light not only the work done by EAD, but explains in detail dugong anatomy and behaviour with fantastic High Definition footage of dugongs filmed in the wild.

Dugongs are extremely shy and secretive animals, and it's very rare to have an encounter with one at sea. Thus, this film serves as an excellent medium to educate the general public in the Gulf as well as worldwide about dugongs and the need to protect their habitat, in order to ensure the survival of this elusive animal—the 'legendary mermaid'."



Dugong

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Sharjah Archaeology Trip



We followed our recent trip to Sharjah Museum with a visit to three archaeological sites. The first of these was Muwailah (see photos opposite).

This site was discovered and excavated from 1994 to 2001 and is in the middle of a residential area. It was a very interesting site to visit being so central and being dug up comparatively recently when one thinks of all the construction work that has been going on in the neighborhood.

It was amazing that we were allowed to wander all over the dig - the only limitations appeared to be our own - depending on our balancing on the various walls and rough tracks.

All the sites we visited that day were extremely interesting and gives the lie to the fact that so many believe there has been no history in this part of Arabia.

The Sharjah Archaeological Museum is definitely worth a visit as it is well laid out and the staff appeared to be very knowledgeable.

The following is an extract on the Chronology of Muwailah from the [Bryn Mawr website](#):

“Typically in near eastern archaeology a mix of historical dates and assumed correlations with events (such as destructions) have been used to date Iron Age sites.

In southeastern Arabia, researchers are not encumbered by this type of data so rely on carbon-14 dates. We have over thirty C-14 dates from Muwailah and

these indicate that the main area of the settlement (Area C) came into existence by the ninth century BC.

The massive destruction that characterizes all deposits in Area C have provided plenty of carbon material. Some samples, such as entire carbonized dates, should have existed in the carbon cycle fairly close to the time at which the settlement was destroyed.

These indicate that the site was certainly destroyed between c. 800 and 600 BC. A destruction in the first fifty years of this timeframe (800-750 BC) is most likely but could not be absolutely insisted upon at present. The ancient settlement was, therefore, very short lived by archaeological standards.”

Report & Photos by Gail Porter



(above and top) Muwailah Archaeological Site, Sharjah
Photos by Gail Porter

Field Trip Report

Photographic Workshop

Roberta Lattuada, a member of the DNHG, arranged an extremely informative and educational photographic workshop in January.

The group of very fortunate prospective photographers attended three nights of interactive lectures with Michiel Fokkema, a professional Photographer from Rotterdam. Roberta kindly offered her home as the venue for these evenings and treated us with a superb tiramisu on the final night.

Michiel's input was excellent – although for some the pace and level of information was a little daunting! But – we all persevered and were then given the opportunity to try our new-found skills during a weekend in Al Ain.

The great 'shoot' started at the camel race track outside Dubai on Friday morning. It had rained the previous evening so we were able to even capture the odd puddle of water. Michiel answered a myriad of questions and maintained a poised calmness at all times!

We continued the shoot at the camel and goat market on the outskirts of Al Ain and the group then drove through to Al Ain where Roberta had arranged a discounted night at the Hilton Hotel.



Camels and goats all done, our next stop was the Al Ain zoo. Cameras clicked away and again Michiel answered many questions and gave helpful directions as to which camera settings to choose.

From the Zoo we went to the Al Ain hot springs. By that time night had come. The springs are surrounded by mountains and the public park area was lit up with strong street lights as well as fires from BBQ's. This proved to be a wonderful venue because of the bustle of people, different lighting and attractive outdoor setting.

On Saturday Michiel introduced us to the software programme 'Lightroom' and we learnt more about the art of manipulating a photograph.

Report by Linda Rademan

Field Clips

Jayakar's Lizard

The Jayakar lizard (*Omanosaura jayakari*, formerly known as *Lacerta jayakari*) is a typical lizard of the Lacertidae family, with a rather flattened body, long limbs, long toes and a very long tail, which in this species is twice the length of the head and body.

This slender lizard has an adult length between 48 and 60 cm. The color and patterning is variable but usually fawn brown to greyish-green or bluish-grey, often with pale blue or grey spots and irregular light and dark markings. The belly is white or creamy-white.

The male sometimes shows pale grey-blue crisscross patterning on the throat and it has a longer and more robust head. It is also heavier and bulkier than the females of the same length and shows femoral pores.

Although it is a relatively common species, it is endemic to the mountains of the United Arab Emirates and northern Oman. It is also one of our largest lizards, after the monitor lizard and the *dhub* or spiny-tailed lizard. It is generally found in the mountainous areas (up to ca. 1700m), on rocky slopes and ledges near wadis and in rocky oases.

They even live in cultivated areas, in stone walls, gardens and plantations, and they sometimes climb in branches of small trees, up to three meters above the ground level. These poikilothermic (cold-blooded) lizards love to take a sunbath in the morning sun. When it turns too hot or during night time the lizards shelter under rocks or in crevices.

The Jayakar lizard is omnivorous and it feeds on vegetation, fruits, leaves and seeds as well as animal prey, including smaller vertebrates like juvenile mammals or birds, other lizards and arthropods and larvae. In some regions the Jayakar lizard is able to survive without any freshwater access, by drinking dew.

These lizards are able to breed throughout the year. Three to five weeks after mating, the female deposits 7 to 10 eggs under rocks, in crevices or in loose sand. The eggs are left to be incubated by the heat of the ground, 25° to 29°C and a relative humidity of 90%.

The offspring hatch after 90 to 120 days. In captivity, the hatchlings are prone to rickets (bone deformity owing to Vitamin D deficiency). The eggs often get eaten by ground beetles (Carabidae) and mole crickets (Gryllotalpidae). Birds, foxes and cats are the most common predators of adult Jayakar lizards, but they are also caught by snakes, lizards (including their own kind) and rodents.

Report by Andere Applet

The Ebb and Flow of *Terebralia palustris*

The large mud creeper *Terebralia palustris* has a special place in UAE history and pre-history because it was a significant food resource for early human populations in the area. Shells are common not only at ancient shell middens along both coasts but also at many inland sites, up to about 2,000 BP. By virtue of their adaptation to survive extended exposure in the upper intertidal habitat, these animals would have survived transport for extended periods and therefore could have served as an excellent travel food.



Abundant *T. palustris* along the lower channel in January 2013

By about 2,000 BP, however, their numbers had greatly declined along the Arabian Gulf, and they became extinct there. Today living populations of *T. palustris* exist at only two sites in the UAE. One site is within and adjacent to the mangrove forests at Khor Kalba, where the *T. palustris* population was earlier estimated at a minimum of 50,000 to 100,000. The other is the concrete storm channel just north of the Oceanic Hotel in Khor Fakkan.

The storm channel population was first 'discovered' in 1998 and, at its peak, the population was estimated to be in excess of 14,000. It has since received international attention as a *T. palustris* site wholly without mangrove vegetation. Nevertheless, it has lived through many vicissitudes in the ensuing years.

In late spring 2007, tropical storm Gonu threw up debris that blocked the mouth of the storm channel, severely restricting tidal flow and turning the channel environment into a stagnant pond. In July 2007 an ad hoc rescue team armed with shovels attempted to restore a measure of flow by digging a narrow trough across the top of the debris. Their efforts achieved only modest success because, as they dug deeper, they found the debris consisted of large boulders that could only be moved efficiently by machine.

The trough they dug remained in evidence into early 2008, but the *T. palustris* population languished as algae covered most of the lower channel by late spring 2008. Efforts to obtain official assistance proved unavailing. In the middle reaches of the chan-

nel up to a third of the shells seen were dead; in the upper channel it was a majority.

So in late spring 2010 I was elated to find the channel open again. However the channel was blocked again by July 2010, following tropical storm Phet. One result of the blockage in each instance was sedimentation in the upper channel, creating islands of soil that were colonized by vegetation but that are not optimal habitat for *T. palustris*.

At the same time, road construction commenced alongside the upper channel, as well as decorative fencing of the channel itself and the creation of a park along part of the downstream length. All of this "development" bore the possibility that the channel would be used for disposal of tar, paint and other harmful chemical and physical waste.

Against this background, my heart sank when I next visited in early 2013 and saw that the former waste land adjacent to the lower channel had been turned into a construction site for the renovation of the Oceanic Hotel. Closer inspection, however, revealed that the *T. palustris* population is in its best condition since Gonu – thanks (it appears) to no one, or to everyone.

The blockage at the channel mouth is cleared, and it seems there will be an incentive to keep it cleared so that the channel remains an amenity rather than an eyesore. Upstream, siltation and the growth of vegetation have continued in the middle reaches of the chan-



The situation in the middle reaches of the channel has created islands with vegetation

nel, which remains worrisome, but flow continues (albeit accelerated) through a winding stream channel and at least 1000 *T. palustris* can be found in this area, evidently healthy.

Report & photos by Gary Feulner

Report on Reptiles Apr - Sept 2012

In the 2nd part of our series on reptile sightings for 2012, we have an exciting mix of lizards, snakes and spiders.

April 2012

During a trek around the Mubazzarah dam in Al Ain, I chanced upon a rather jittery desert race runner lizard.



April: *Desert Race Runner*

May 2012

Besides the white spotted lizards and Eastern sand skinks, I chanced upon a very pretty Yellow spotted agama in the Sharjah desert.

June 2012

A couple of night trips with like-minded herpers and we found an Arabian horned viper, Arabian sand boa, hook-nosed thread snake, leaf nosed snake, Sindh saw-scaled viper, Slevin's sand gecko and many dune / Arabian sand geckos. We also found a beautiful camel spider.



May: *Yellow Spotted Agama*

July 2012

Following reports of a heavy downpour in Wadi Shawka (RAK), a trip yielded dozens of tiny *Bufo dhofarensis* juveniles that had hatched after the rains. A trip to the Khor Kalba coastal plains also yielded my first Eastern sand gecko. These geckos were about in good numbers. A late July trip to the Margham desert area in Dubai and we chanced upon a very sedate spiny tailed lizard which actually was caught off guard quite a distance from its den.

September 2012

A night trip in the Sharjah desert yielded more Arabian / dune sand geckos and my second leaf nosed viper find this year.

Keep an eye out for more sightings in future Gazelles.

Report & Photos by Ajmal Hasan



June: *Arabian Horned Viper*

Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

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off 344 0462

Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi

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Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

Geology - Gary Feulner

res: 306 5570

Insects - Gary Feulner

Fossils - Valerie Chalmers

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Plants - Valerie Chalmers

Archaeology, 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.

Rima Jabado wins Bish Brown Award 2012

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.

While working on her seminal research on the status of little-studied populations of sharks and other elasmobranchs in the waters of the UAE and Oman, PhD candidate **Rima Jabado** has energized the ENHG and the wider environmentally-aware community to action, calling for volunteers to assist in her regular fish market surveys and publicizing the cause of en-

dangered shark species in numerous articles in the local media. In tandem with that effort, she has run a mark-recapture study to come up with fishery-independent catch data. Both of those initiatives were partially supported by ENHG Research & Conservation grants.

Because of her tireless efforts to publicise this key conservation issue, educating and involving the local community, from expatriate and local fishermen—through concerned expatriate environmentalists, up to Emirati government officials—while at the same time producing a wealth of data that will soon allow local policy makers to accurately assess the current but dwindling stock and distribution of shark species and effectively address their conservation, Rima Jabado is an especially deserving recipient of the Bish Brown Award.

Oscar Campbell receives Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Annual Prize for Natural History

Mr. Oscar Campbell, current chairman of the Emirates Bird Records Committee, has been selected by the Committee of the Emirates Natural History Group (Abu Dhabi) as the winner of the Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Annual Prize for Natural History for 2012.

Oscar came to the UAE six years and, with a lifelong interest in birds and ornithology, was rapidly co-opted to membership of the Emirates Bird Records Committee, which, in collaboration with the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi, EAD, maintains the official database of birds recorded in the UAE and also serves as the body for assessment of and acceptance of descriptions of rare birds reported in the country.

He has been Chairman of the EBRC since 2010.

Oscar Campbell fits neatly into the historic pattern of an extraordinarily energetic and active 'amateur' natural historian - a non-professional who is producing work of serious scientific value.

In his nomination for the Prize, it was noted:

"Oscar embodies the essential spirit of the founding fathers and mothers of the natural sciences. Unlike those first luminaries, he is not a man of leisure with independent means and desire for travel. Neither a Humboldt nor a Darwin, he is a full time teacher. Sustained neither by his private purse, patrons nor university grants, he is the impassioned 'Amateur' in the finest sense of the word. Oscar Campbell represents the qualities that gave us the discipline of natural history to begin with."

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

Mar 3 Annual General Meeting followed by Yusuf Thakur Presentation of two films on dugongs entitled: 'Abu Dhabi, Home of Legendary Mermaids' and 'Tracking Mermaids'

Field Trips (Members only, please)

Mar 15 Jebel Ali Sikh Temple
Mar 16 Deira Souks & Museums
Mar 28 - Apr 3 Tadoba Tiger Sanctuary
Mar 29-Apr 6: Nepal Hill Country
Apr 11-13 Saiq Plateau & the Roses

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

DNHG COMMITTEE 2012

When possible, please contact committee members outside office hours

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Contributions

Do you have a field report, unusual finding, interesting news article, book review, amazing photograph, or community news to share?

If so, email your contributions to: gazelleeditor@gmail.com
(Arial 10 justified).

DNHG Membership

Membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. Membership is valid from Sep 2012 to Sep 2013. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to **HSBC** account no. 030100242001. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.)

Payment can also be made by cash deposit at a bank or ATM, using our IBAN number AE900200000030100242001. However, this process does not identify you as the payer. If you wish to pay by cash, please also scan and e-mail a copy of your payment confirmation to the Membership Secretary, so we know whose money we have received.

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.