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Indian Flying Fox, Maldives. Photo Credit: Sonya Benjamin

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Contributors

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

Gary Feulner, Mike Jennings, Ada Natoli, and Mairead Porter

November Speaker

Topic: “Ground-dwelling parrots, a rat in a feather suit, and marsupials as pollinators... Australians are a weird mob, but can they teach us something about pollination in the UAE?”

Speaker: Rob Whelan

Date: November 3rd 2013

Professor Rob Whelan has been in the UAE since 2008. He was President of the University of Wollongong in Dubai from 2008 to 2011, after a 25 year career as a researcher and teacher in ecology at the University of Wollongong in Australia, where he was Dean of Science from 2002 until 2008. Rob took up a senior advisor position in the office of the Provost at the United Arab Emirates University in 2012. He has responsibility for strategic planning, academic quality assurance, and international accreditation. During his career at the University of Wollongong, Rob's research has been on fire ecology and the ecology of threatened plants and animals. He has published over 100 scientific papers, has supervised over 40 Masters and PhD research students, and is the author of '*The Ecology of Fire*', published by Cambridge University Press. Rob was responsible for establishing and sustaining long-term research projects, over a 20 years period: one on the effects of fire on two threatened bird species (the Eastern Bristlebird and the Ground Parrot), and the other on seed production in Banksias. Rob chaired the New South Wales National Parks Advisory Council and a statutory review of the Nature Conservation Trust Act for the NSW State Government and he was a panel member of the National Inquiry into Bushfire Mitigation and Management. He was Vice President of the Ecological Society of Australia and editor of its professional journal, *Austral Ecology*.

The UAE Dolphin Project

The UAE Dolphin Project (www.uaedolphinproject.org) is looking for any photographic record, before the big expansion and construction work took place, that depicts dolphins in UAE waters. We are aiming to try and estimate the frequency of dolphin sightings in the past and also trying to collect any possible source in this respect.

The material may be used in a project promotional video but full credits will be reported. If you have any old picture that you will be happy to share please contact ada.natoli@uaedolphinproject.org. Thank you for your collaboration. Ada Natoli, project director.

Spinner Dolphins in Mauritius. Photo Credit: Sonya Benjamin



A Curious Caper Corrected

The report of the Wadi Nahyan Canyon walk at IEW which appeared in the March 2013 *Focus* included a photo (repeated here) of a distinctive trailing plant, several meters long, with large, turgid, yellow-green leaves. It was identified in the report as *Rumex limoniastrum* but is in fact the caper *Capparis cartilagenia*. Both plants are among the more interesting ones to be found in the UAE and deserve brief discussion for the benefit of amateur naturalists.

Capparis cartilagenia is one of two caper species found in the UAE, the other being the more delicate *Capparis spinosa*, the edible caper whose buds are pickled as a condiment in Europe. *C. cartilagenia* is relatively common and often quite large. It normally grows as a hanging plant but on Jebel Hafit it can also be found as an erect or trailing shrub, as in the Wadi Nahyan photo. Numerous specimens can be seen along the lower half of the switchback road leading to the top of Jebel Hafit, where *C. cartilagenia* is one of the largest and most conspicuous shrubs. Both UAE capers can be distinguished from most other plants by the presence of one or two paired spines at the base of the leaves. Both also have distinctive and relatively showy flowers, in which the cluster of dozens of large stamens is larger than the pale pink-white petals.

C. cartilagenia is the best UAE example of a plant species that totally avoids the geochemically distinctive ophiolite (basic and ultrabasic) rocks that make up most of the Hajar Mountains of the UAE and northernmost Oman. Instead, *C. cartilagenia* is found only on the carbonate rocks (limestones and dolomites) of the Musandam peninsula and Jebel Hafit, and on intermittent carbonate remnants in between (e.g., the fossiliferous rocks of Jebel Fayah, Jebel Rawdhah, Jebel Sumayni, Jebel Qatar, etc).

Rumex limoniastrum, endemic to the Hajar Mountains, bears a superficial resemblance to *C. cartilagenia* and *C. spinosa* but has no spines and does not bear fruit. It is also a very rare plant – so rare that, despite searches by professional botanists, it went unrecorded from 1837, when it was first collected in the Jebel Akhdar by French botanist Aucher-Eloy, until 1999. In fact, beginning in the early 1990s, UAE naturalists had encountered and taken note of the plant (which they christened "Spineless Caper") at several remote locations in the Hajar Mountains and Jebel Akhdar, but it remained unidentified until Ian Curtis, an amateur botanist visiting the UAE under the auspices of the Sharjah Natural History Museum (Dr. Marijcke Jongbloed was then the director), was able to avail himself of the resources of the Royal Botanical Garden at Edinburgh. He identified *R. limoniastrum* (a specimen from Jebel Masafi) and clarified a number of other problematic UAE taxa.

Like many other Polygonaceae (the buckwheat/knotweed family), *R. limoniastrum* is evidently edible and has been found primarily on cliffs, ledges or other sites inaccessible to browsing quadrupeds. *Report by Gary Feulner*



Left: *Rumex limoniastrum* on a wadi wall; Right: *Capparis cartilagenia* from Wadi Nahyan. Photo Credit: Gary Feulner

Field Clips

Summer Surprises: Dragonflies

UAE dragonflies have received a lot of attention in recent years, so it was a surprise when two dragonflies new to the UAE were recorded in mid-June 2013, both from the mountains along the Gulf of Oman coast. A full report will be published in the upcoming *Tribulus*.

- *Urothemis thomasi* Longfield, 1932 was found in mid and upper Wadi Wurayah, the largest wadi on the East Coast of the UAE. *U. thomasi* is restricted to eastern Arabia and Somalia. This adds a ninth(!) red dragonfly species to the UAE list.
- *Ischnura nursei* Morton, 1907 (a/k/a *Rhodischnura nursei* (Morton, 1907)) was found at lake sites on both flanks of the Hajar Mountains. It is a small, clown-painted damselfly previously known from the semi-arid regions of northern India and southern Pakistan, and more recently recognized from southern Iran.

Other unusual dragonfly records from the past summer include the following, courtesy of Binish Roobas:

- The rarely seen female of the Sinai Hooktail *Paragomphus sinaiticus* was encountered near permanent water in Wadi Shawkah, sheltering in the shade of a wall at midday.
- The Vagrant Emperor *Anax ephippiger*, which in winter swarms regularly in the UAE and Oman over a broad area of the desert, mountains and coast, made a rare summer appearance in mangroves on the Arabian Gulf coast of the Northern Emirates.
- The Black Pennant *Selysiothemis nigra* is normally a pond dweller but is also a strong migrant. It was seen in August and September at several mountain wadis on the west flank of the Hajar Mountains and at Zakher Pools in Al-Ain. Most often this species is found in swarms, but a few individuals had perhaps lost their way and were found as singles in unpromising mountain environments.
- Where *S. nigra* is swarming at water, the Slender or Oasis Skimmer *Orthetrum sabina* is likely to be found, because it specializes in taking larger prey such as other dragonflies and small butterflies. It was caught in action in mid-August, catching and eating a Black Pennant. It very sensibly began by eating the head of the prey, which eliminated further resistance.

Contributed by Binish Roobas and Gary Feulner

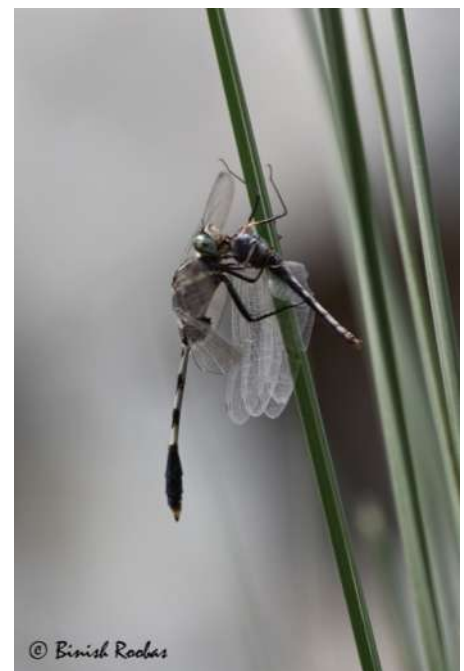


Photo Captions

Top: Vagrant Emperor *Anax ephippiger* (female) on mangroves along the Arabian Gulf coast.
Photo Credit: Binish Roobas

Center: *Paragomphus sinaiticus* female.
Photo Credit: Binish Roobas

Bottom: The Slender Skimmer *Orthetrum sabina* devouring a *Selysiothemis nigra*.
Photo Credit: Binish Roobas

See Page 5 for additional photos



Photo Captions

Above: *Urothemis thomasi* (male), first collected in Arabia by Bertram Thomas and new to the UAE.
Photo Credit: Gary Feulner

Top Right: *Rhodischnura nursei*, also new to the UAE.
Photo Credit: Binish Roobas

Right: A lone Black Pennant *Selysiotthemis nigra* (juvenile male), a very confusing specimen.
Photo Credit: Binish Roobas

Seminar for Arabian Studies 2013

Seminar for Arabian Studies 2013

This annual seminar took place this year from July 26-28 at the British Museum in London. Mairead Porter, former DNHG Librarian, was in attendance and sent us the following report:

"I went along on Sunday, the final day, because of an interest in burial archaeology in Eastern Arabia. I heard Derek Kennet, formerly resident archaeologist in Ras al-Khaimah speak about Qarn al-Harf. He told of the rescue excavations at a Wadi Suq cemetery in RAK. Members of the DNHG had seen this – thanks to Christie Grieve's organisation – when we went on a weekend trip to RAK in February. There was a 2nd lecture on Hafit tomb entrances in Wadi Andam in Oman given by W.M. Deadman. Numerous entrances have been discovered and there is speculation about the evidence they provide and their seasonal nomadic use.

However the final talk of the morning by Maurizio Tosi proved to be the most exciting. He spoke first about the investigation at a major site at Dibba which is well under way and yielding an abundance of artefacts including beads – 4820, local as well as from India and prestige badges worn on clothes, etc. But it was the recently discovered site at the edge of Rub al as'Safah, Oman that promises to be a major find. The story goes that some tourists found axes and arrow heads and didn't move them (applause) but contacted the Omani Heritage office. When Mr Tosi and his team arrived at the site they found that it was a large Iron Age industrial complex. On the first day they found 152 pieces and overall found quivers, arrows, furnaces, hoes and lots more. Hopefully the DNHG will get to see this in the future.

The remaining talks covered Nabataean inscriptions and archaeology and management of time, and spatial allocation of water in an oasis irrigated with a falaj: a case study in Adam, Sultanate of Oman. This seminar offered a wonderful opportunity to hear about all the amazing work that is being done in the whole region from Qatar to Yemen. For more information on the past conferences – over 35 years – and in-depth listings of this year's speakers, visit: <http://www.thebfsa.org/content/seminar-arabian-studies>." *Contributed by Mairead Porter*

Field Clips

Caterpillar Detective

Mike Jennings, Coordinator of ABBA, the Atlas of Breeding Birds of Arabia project, wrote recently from Cambridge-shire to comment on an article in the July/August Gazelle and to add some useful experience:

"I liked your article in the recent Gazelle on caterpillar droppings. I hope all the budding zoologists reading the note took on board the importance of storing stuff away for later identification.

Another aspect is that these droppings can often be an indicator to the presence of caterpillars especially the large ones like the hawkmoths. As kids my friends and I used to enjoy touring the hedgerows looking for Privet Hawkmoth caterpillars. Trouble is they are a devil to spot in the foliage and you could never be sure they were present on any particular bush.

We all knew what the droppings looked like and one of us (I don't think it was me) had the bright idea to avoid fruit-less searches by laying newspaper under the bush the previous day. If they were present there would be droppings. It was actually better than that as the newspapers often indicated where the brute was in the bush and if soft it was often directly above. After this discovery we all very quickly became Privet Hawk millionaires.

Just recently I noticed these dropping on our patio under a cherry tree, which very quickly led me to a Lime Hawk caterpillar, not a species we had often in childhood."

Contributed by Mike Jennings via Gary Feulner



Hawkmoths are among the largest moths outside the tropics. Several species can be found in the UAE. The photo shows an Eastern Death's Head Hawkmoth *Acherontia styx*, sheltering from rain in Dubai. An useful website for Eurasian hawkmoths is *Sphingidae of the Western Palaearctic*, <http://tpittaway.tripod.com/sphinx/>, which includes the Middle East. Photo Credit: Gary Feulner

DNHG Recorders

Reptiles - Dr Reza Khan

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off 344 0462

Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi

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email: lankefi@emirates.net.ae

Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

Geology - Gary Feulner

res: 306 5570

Insects – Gary Feulner

Fossils - Valerie Chalmers

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email: valeriechalmers@gmail.com

Plants – Valerie Chalmers

Archaeology—MaryAnne Pardoe

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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.

Are You a Techie with Time?

The website sub-committee would like to find volunteers who can help with maintenance of the on-line newsletter, and to upload the wealth of information and photographs from past *Gazelles*. Full training will be given. Contact any Committee person - we will be very pleased to hear from you!

Kerala Natural History Tour

30 Nov - 6 December 2013 (7 days, 6 nights, Sat-Fri)

DNHG member Binish Roobas will repeat this popular excursion to a sampling of Kerala's premier wildlife sites:

- ◆ Houseboating on Lake Vembanad and birdwatching at Kumarakom in the backwaters of the coastal plain.
- ◆ Birdwatching at Thettekad (featuring Ceylon Frogmouth & Black Baza) in wet deciduous forest of the rolling central midlands.
- ◆ Light trekking in the highlands of the renowned Western Ghats at Eravikulam National Park (home to the Nilgiri Tahr).
- ◆ Thorny shrub forest of Chinnar National Wildlife Sanctuary (where elephants, gaur and grizzled squirrel may be seen).
- ◆ Scenic waterfalls at Athirapally
- ◆ and . . . a dedicated *shopping trip* in Cochin City (by popular demand!).

Binish took his degree in zoology and worked as a naturalist guide in Kerala before coming to the UAE. He continues to visit these areas regularly when he returns to Kerala privately.

Accommodation will be in unpretentious hotels and lodges. Travel will be by minivan. Estimated basic cost: AED 2500 (sharing) / AED 3250 (single room) including accommodation, meals, road transportation and entrance fees, but *excluding* airfare and Indian visa.

For more details and itinerary, contact Binish Roobas: johanruphus@hotmail.com.



Kerala Photo Credit: Gary Feulner

Research Project: Request for Information

Declan O'Donovan writes: "I am writing in the hope that some of you might be able to help me with a research project I am conducting.

"As part of a PhD project, I am investigating the ecology and status of the Dhub or spiny-tailed lizard (*Uromastix leptieni*) in the Emirate of Dubai. I am looking for records of sightings and active burrows, previous research data which might be unpublished regarding their distribution, anecdotal information or general observations would also be most welcome. As a matter of urgency, I would like to find any burrows which might be in areas of renewed building development with a view to moving the animals to safer and more secure locations.

Anyone with any information they would like to share can contact me at:

declan@shp.ae

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

Nov 03 Professor Rob Whelan: Ground-dwelling parrots, a rat in a feather suit, and marsupials as pollinators... Australians are a weird mob, but can they teach us something about pollination in the UAE?

Dec 08 Members' Night: Gary Feulner, Angela and Stephen Manthorpe

Field Trips (Members Only)

28 Nov - 3 Dec 4-day trip to South of Sri Lanka including Yala National Park

30 Nov - 6 Dec Kerala Natural History Tour

Further field trips, details or changes to trips will be announced/confirmed by email circular

DNHG COMMITTEE 2013

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 2013 to Sep 2014. 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.