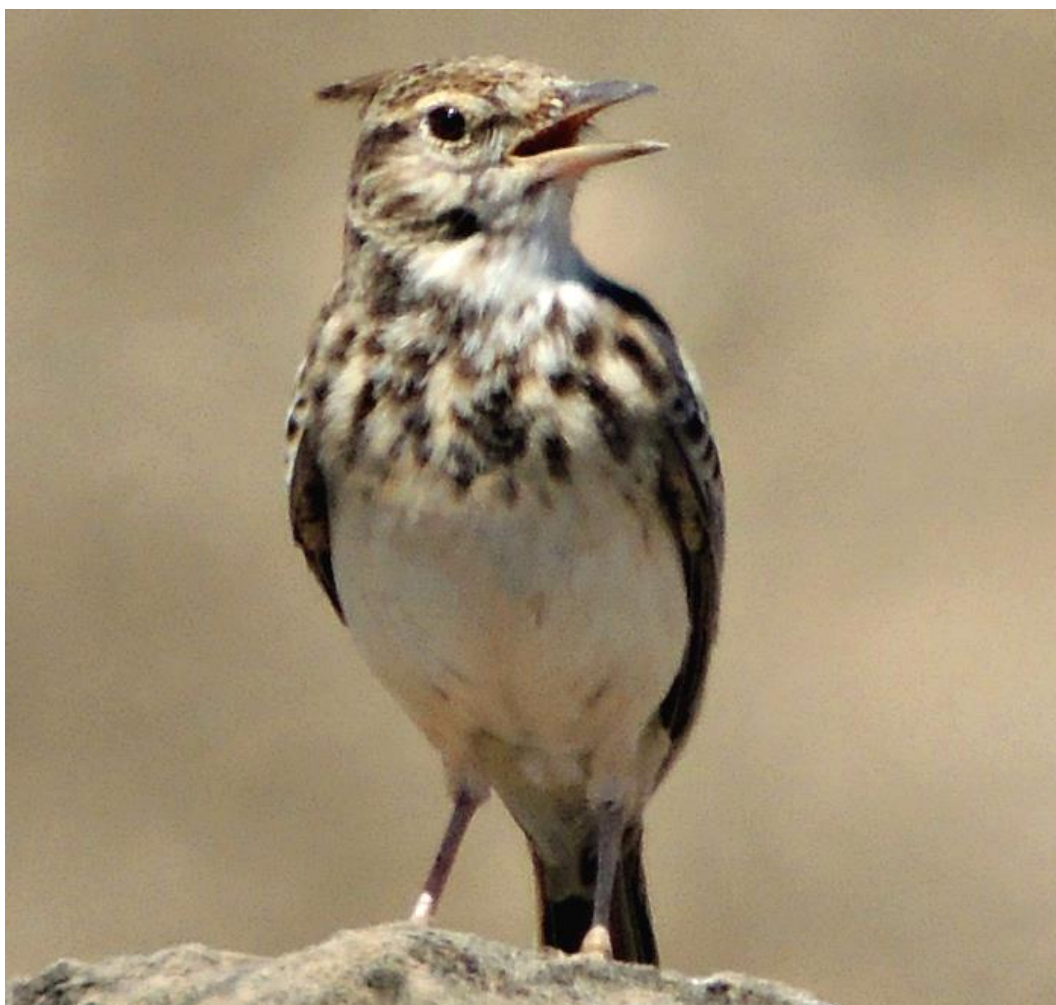




# GAZELLE

Vol 28 No 12 December 2013

مجموعتنا روثي للتاريخ والطبيعي



Crested Lark. Photo Credit: Tamsin Carlisle

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## Contributors

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

Monique Arnail, Valerie Chalmers, Nicki and Mike Marriott, Tamsin Carlisle, Gary Feulner, and Barbara Couldrey

## Our Next Speaker

Dr. Peter Nagy will be giving a lecture on January 12<sup>th</sup> titled "Camels: animals of the future. Myth, reality and challenges at the world's first large-scale camel dairy farm."

Dr. Peter Nagy obtained his veterinary degree in 1990 at the University of Veterinary Sciences in Budapest, Hungary. He started his professional career at the Department of Reproduction and Obstetrics of the University where he stayed until 1999 as assistant professor. He was working on large animal reproduction, theriogenology, endocrinology and obstetrics involved in clinical work, teaching and research as well on these fields. He obtained his PhD title in 1998 on Equine seasonality. In 1998-1999 he spent one year as a post-doctoral fellow at INRA, France to study the neuro-endocrine



control of reproduction in mares. He started his "camel career" in 2000 when he was offered a position in the Sultanate of Oman to develop an artificial insemination and embryo transfer program for racing dromedary camels. He was invited to come to Dubai in 2003 to develop the world's first large-scale camel milk farm. Since 2006, he has held the farm manager's position at Emirates Industries for Camel Milk & Products, but he is also actively involved in R&D of the company. He is a founding member and diplomat of the European College of Animal Reproduction (ECAR).

## Members' News: Inter-Emirates Weekend

The Inter-Emirates Weekend is an annual event open to paid-up members of all four natural history groups in the UAE – Emirates Natural History Group - Abu Dhabi, Emirates Natural History Group - Al Ain, Dubai Natural History Group, and Emirates Natural History Group - Fujairah. It is organised annually by one of the first three groups in rotation. This year it is the turn of the Abu Dhabi chapter. IEW 2014 will focus on places to explore inside and within easy reach of the Capital.

**Dates:** Thursday February 20th to Saturday February 22nd, 2014.

**Location:** The Abu Dhabi Gate Hotels – the Ibis and the Novotel. Information on room rates, booking and the buffet dinner have been circulated via email.

### **Proposed Activities:**

#### Thursday evening

Registration for trips and activities from 5:30 pm at IEW welcome table in Ibis Hotel lobby.

Registration and payment for Friday dinner. *Please email [interemiratesweekend2014@gmail.com](mailto:interemiratesweekend2014@gmail.com) by 31st January in order to reserve your place.*

Dinner on an informal basis at the Ibis/Novotel or at nearby locations.

Insect trapping near the hotel

Stargazing near the hotel

#### Friday

Boat trip, snorkelling, diving - am or pm

Field ecology/baseline survey trip west of AD: to Dew Forest, mesas, flamingo spotting - all day

Kayaking in the mangroves - am or pm

Al Samaliyah island visit, including photography - am

Nature photo processing - pm

Emirates park zoo - am

#### Friday evening dinner programme:

Natural History quiz and annual NH Awards presentation

#### Saturday

Sheikh Zayed Mosque tour - am

Masdar tour - pm

Birdwatching at Al Wathba Reserve - pm?

Boat trip to see flamingo colony and birding - am

Al Samaliyah island repeat visit - am

Boat trip, snorkelling, diving - am or pm

Kayaking - am or pm

AD Baseline survey trip (site to be determined) – am

Abu Dhabi Wildlife Center – am or pm

Emirates Heritage Village (AD breakwater) – am

*Further details regarding the trips and activities will be sent out by email.*

## East of Salalah

A DNHG group flew to Salalah on 15th October for a 4-day visit to enjoy the greenery of Dhofar, one of the 11 Governates of the Sultanate of Oman directly exposed to the South West Monsoon known as the "Khareef".

Our first day brought us to the East of Salalah. We first stopped in Ayn Al Rhazat, a green foothill location where people were bathing in a beautiful green lake surrounded by limestone caves. Nearby, a park with flowers and various magnificent trees was open to the public. Around this paradise environment live foxes, wolves and hyenas. We did not see any, but a bit further on, we started to see camels grazing in large numbers. Our guide indicated at that point that Dhofar has a population of 250,000 inhabitants....and 70,000 camels!

Later we reached Wilayat Taqah. We passed the Sultan's palace, "Al Mamaras", which was surrounded by tropical plantations of coconut, banana and papaya trees. The Dhofar region is the most famous for Oman banana production. Thirty-one varieties are collected from Salalah farms!

Then we drove along the coastal road where there was more tropical plantations, followed by the houses of Taqah town with a view onto a magnificent white beach. The number of fishermen's boats and nets on the beach bore witness to the importance of the fishing industry, especially sardine fishing. The village houses, big and pretty, were all decorated with the local soft yellow limestone. We stopped on a beautiful white cliff from where we had a majestic view over the town of Taqah. Turtles and fishes could be seen swimming around in the sea.

We next visited Taqah Fort, one of the major forts of the Wilayat, which dates from the 19th century AD. Initially the house of the Governate's Wali (mayor), it is now a museum with decorated rooms, old artifacts and a handicrafts shop.



Above: Mirbat harbour. Below: View from cliff of Taqah. Photo Credits: Monique Arnail



We next drove to another beautiful wadi, Wadi Dirbat, about forty km east of Salalah and an important wadi for Khor Rori. On the side of the foothill road, up to the wadi we could also observe many termite heaps.

After lunch in Mirbat, an important center for fishing, we visited the Ben Ali tomb which is surrounded by a huge cemetery. Ben Ali was a great scholar of Islam, believed to have brought Islam to the region, which at the time was opposing central government rules. His tomb still attracts many devotees as a shrine.

On the return to Salalah we visited the Frankincense land, known for growing one of the best qualities of Frankincense. Frankincense was a major export commodity from this area and well known by the ancient Egyptians, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Persians, Hindus and Chinese. We stopped in Khor Rori to tour the ancient ruins of Sumhuram, which were largely saved due to the legend of witches living around them which scared away potential looters. After touring the impressive remains we visited the small informative museum on site before heading back to Salalah for the night.

Contributed by Monique Arnail

## Field Trip Report

### A Day of Contrasts

Day 2 began with a trip to the Rub Al-Khali. We first visited the coastal plain with green plantations of coconut, banana and papaya before climbing into the mountains to the north. These, although not green, still showed the remnants of lush vegetation that had grown during the monsoon – Khareef (rains that fell in August and September). Another change in landscape happened as we dropped down on the northern side of the mountains on to the featureless dry, flat, stony desert. However, recent discoveries of underground water has allowed agriculture to develop with boom irrigation schemes turning the desert green with large round fields of grass for animal feed. Other agricultural projects have also developed here including the large Al Safah chicken farm (apparently the chicken farms are in isolated locations to minimise the spread of disease).

Our approach to the Rub Al-Khali was with the 3 vehicles all taking different routes across the flat stony desert with plumes of dust streaming behind. A short stop in a slight depression, which obviously had received water, showed just how productive the desert can be with a selection of plants, animals and birds challenging people to identify them. We then proceeded into the sand dunes proper, with some of our drivers showing off their skills by driving up the dunes. Our stop allowed people to try climbing the dunes, which was very challenging due to their steepness and the loose, hot sand.

We retraced our steps and headed back across the stony desert with a stop at Shisr Fort archaeological site. This site was once an important stop on the overland frankincense export route. This site is considered by some historians to be the lost city of Ubar, mentioned in the Koran and other historical documents. Here they are building a new town for the Bedouin with all facilities.

After a stop for a rather late lunch, we continued back towards Salalah, with our first afternoon stop at the Frankincense Park at Wadi Dawkah. This small plantation allowed us to examine the trees close up and see how

frankincense is produced by wounding the trees and allowing the sap to escape and solidify.

The day ended with a drive through the mountains which were dissected by steep valleys, reminding many people of places in Europe. The final stop was at the springs and white cliffs of Ayn Sahainoot, with large pools and flowing water. Despite the bilharzia warning signs, many were bathing there and challenging one another with the height of their dives. We did not join them!

A short drive back to the hotel brought the day of contrasting landscapes to an end.

*Contributed by Nicki and Mike Marriott*

### The City Tour

On our last day in Salalah our Omani guide, Mahad Issa, took the remaining 8 of our party (3 had flown back to Dubai the night before) on a city tour by minibus. Our first stop was a visit to the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque which was



*Upper right: A white cliff at Ayn Sahainoot. Photo Credit: Nicki and Mike Marriott*

*Lower Left: Aqil Friday Mosque. Photo Credit: Valerie Chalmers*

*Lower Right: Monolithic column with octagonal shaft. Photo Credit: Valerie Chalmers*

built in 2009 and has two minarets and a shining façade. We next stopped to photograph the Aqil Friday Mosque with its whitewashed minaret whose shape looks similar to an incense burner for frankincense. Mahad told us that this is the traditional Hadramut style minaret. This was followed with a visit to the gold and silver souk. From there we drove to Al-Baleed Archaeological Park. We had visited the Museum of the Frankincense (also present in this park) the day before but this time we were transported in electric vehicles for a tour of the Al-Baleed archaeological site. The history of Al-Baleed goes back to pre-Islamic time and it was a main settlement in 2000 B.C. During the late Iron Age it was an active central city known as Zafar, Al-Baleed and was prosperous during the Islamic era. The site is rectangular in shape, covering an area of 64 hectares. We walked around the city wall with its towers or bastions built into the wall for protection against attack and other areas which included the citadel, Al-Baleed Mosque plus several other smaller mosques. The earliest examples of monolithic columns with octagonal shaft, common to most religious buildings can be seen at Zafar, Al-Baleed. The last stop on our tour was a quick visit to a camel meat market where people could sample cooked camel meat. We flew back to Dubai in the early evening of the same day. Many thanks are due to Andrew McTiernan for all his hard work in organizing such an excellent trip.

*Contributed by Valerie Chalmers*

## Dhofar Birds

Tristram's Starling or Tristram's Grackle (*Onychognathus tristramii*), is a highly gregarious starling species native to the entire western coastal strip of the Arabian Peninsula and southeast corner of the Mediterranean region. Dhofar is at the extreme southeastern tip of its range, so it was fitting that we encountered this bird - a new species to me - on Day 3 of our tour, which took us west from Salalah along a coast that became progressively more rugged as we approached the Yemen border.

Named after the Reverend Henry Baker Tristram, a 19th-century English clergyman, Biblical scholar, traveller and ornithologist who attempted to reconcile Darwinian evolutionary theory with biblical teachings, Tristram's starling is a cliff dweller. It builds its nests on rock faces and is omnivorous, feeding equally on insects and plant material. Males have mainly glossy black plumage, while females are duller, tending to charcoal over head and body. Both sexes, however, have bright orange feathers along the outer wing, which flash prominently in flight.

Besides being an excellent identifying feature, it is possible that these brilliant wing patches have a social-signaling function. This is conjecture, but I did observe Tristram's starlings foraging as a group, with a small number of individuals apparently acting as an advance guard to scout out new food sources and eventually being followed by the rest. The wing patches, along with whistling calls, may aid flock cohesiveness, helping group members keep in contact when they are on the move.

As might be expected, we encountered these birds at the exact point where Dhofar's prominent Al-Qara limestone escarpment meets the sea as a series of rugged cliffs above blow-holes, which are a well-known natural attraction of the area. On the rather calm day of our visit, the blow holes were not so interesting, only occasionally throwing up a faint mist from the waves rolling in below. The view along the spectacular sandy strip of Al-Mughsayl beach, however, was entrancing, as was the assortment of wading birds on display in the barrier lagoon. Greater Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*), Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*), Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*), Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) and Black-backed Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*) were seen in close proximity to each other, exhibiting the classic mix of species of East African and Eurasian origin that typifies the special ecology of the Dhofar region.

Indeed, in both climate and ecology, the coastal strip of Dhofar province has more in common with the Horn of Africa than the bulk of the Arabian Peninsula, from which it is separated by the physical barrier of the Al-Qara escarpment. East African influence was also apparent in the distinctive flora we encountered in wadis cutting through the rugged limestone terrain, and to some extent on cliff tops close to the Yemen border. Some of the stand-outs were Frankincense trees (*Boswellia sacra*) growing naturally, not in plantations, Dragon trees (*Dracaena serrulata*) and Desert Rose (*Adenium obesum*), the last in full bloom.

Returning to Salalah, we had a brief stop in the downtown souq, where we became acquainted with the four grades of frankincense that are still among the Dhofar region's most important exports. Our day was unexpectedly topped off by an outdoor performance by a group of local musicians and dancers, including one fellow in a full-length grey thobe who gave masterly renditions of Arabic airs on the bagpipes. Of course, the historic influence of British seafarers on coastal Oman could have introduced the instrument's Scottish version to the locals. On the other hand, it's more than likely that shepherds in this corner of Arabia were playing their own bagpipes long before any Scotsman set foot there!

Contributed by Tamsin Carlisle

Top to Bottom: Tristram's Starling pair; Cinnamon-breasted Bunting pair; Lesser Black-backed Gulls; African Collared Dove; Crested Lark; Little Swift

Photo Credits: Tamsin Carlisle



## Field Trip Reports

### Wadi Sfai

Gary Feulner's wadi hike in Wadi Sfai, in the center of the Hajar Mountains of the UAE, confirmed at least two things. First, that we have not had a wadi walk in a while; there was plenty of pent-up demand and the trip was oversubscribed by a factor of two. Second, it is always possible to go out and see something new and different, even in familiar places.

The upper wadi is ringed by 1000 meter ridges but our hike did not ascend far from the wadi and its terrace banks, except briefly to negotiate a low pass for a 'short-cut' return route. At the start, the walk skirted an elongated plantation where we noticed two out-of-the ordinary crops – (1) a large, woody gourd and (2) red chilis (the latter spotted by our determinedly "no spice" Field Trip Coordinator, Sonja Lavrencic).

In the wadi and on adjacent terraces we were introduced to some of the most typical mountain plants, including the yellow-green, leafless *Euphorbia larica*, the *ghaf* and *sidr* trees (*Prosopis cineraria* and *Ziziphus spina-christi*, respectively), the small prostrate *Indigofera arabica*, with occasional brick-red flowers, and the aromatic (smelly?) shrub *Haplophyllum tuberculatum*. Later in the day we inspected a flowering and seeding specimen of the gangly, 2-meter woody milkweed *Periploca aphylla* and found that, up close, the seed had a strong aroma, a bit like burning incense.

We also saw all three of the UAE's three climbing/hanging plants – the gymnosperm *Ephedra ciliata*, the milkweed *Pentatropis nivalis*, and the curare family plant, *Cocculus pendulus* – including all three species climbing in a single *ghaf* tree, something not previously recorded.

Tamsin Carlisle scored a trio of her own, finding three different predaceous diving beetles in a single small, eutrophying pond -- the Polka-Dot diving beetle (*Hydaticus (Prodaticus) pictus*), the Striped Diving Beetle (*Hydaticus (Prodaticus) histrio*) and a more subdued, mottled one (perhaps *Eretes sticticus*, the Fawn Diving Beetle, previously recorded at this site) that seemed to spend more of its time foraging on or near the bottom sediment.

The most unusual record of the day (by the Chairman's reckoning) was of several vividly banded *Bunopus spatularus*, the Spatulate-Tailed Rock Gecko. This gecko hides beneath stones and is considered to be nocturnal. We turned up one (literally) near our lunch spot, but Mike Marriott reported that he had earlier seen two more of the same.

Our 'finds' for the day continued until we were almost back at our cars. There, opposite the plantation, we noticed previously overlooked rock art on two large bedrock faces. Somewhat curiously, they featured an ibex motif, very similar to what Stephen Manthorpe has showed us from Tajikistan, at his Members Night presentation just a few nights before. Were there once ibex in this central area of the Hajar Mountains? Or was the ibex motif a cultural import?

Contributed by Gary Feulner



Top to Bottom: Red chilis growing in a wadi bank plantation; A close-up of *Cocculus pendulus*; *Orthetrum ransonnetii*; Rock art showing an ibex theme. Photo Credits: Gary Feulner

## Playtime!

For me, one of the highlights of our visit to Yala National Park (Sri Lanka) was watching a group of elephant mums and babies at a large water hole. After an early morning quenching of thirst and a roll in the mud, it was playtime for the young. The mothers retreated to dry land and watched while the little ones climbed over one another, pushing and shoving, using their trunks to over-turn their playmates. It was very funny to see fat elephant legs with their big round pads sticking out of the water, then a woosh of water when the animals righted themselves – only to start the game again. Another amazing moment during our safari lunch break at the beach, was watching a whale breaching offshore, too distant to identify the species. From this southerly point of Sri Lanka ... next stop the Antarctic!

Contributed by Barbara Couldrey (see page 7 for a photo)

**DNHG Recorders****Reptiles - Dr Reza Khan**

res: 344 8283  
off 344 0462

**Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi**

res: 06-5310467  
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email: lankefi@emirates.net.ae

**Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi****Geology - Gary Feulner**

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**Insects – Gary Feulner****Fossils - Valerie Chalmers**

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**Plants – Valerie Chalmers****Archaeology—MaryAnne Pardoe**

mobile: 050 724 2984  
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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!

**Errata Corrige**

*Unfortunately some mistakes and wrong photo credits sneaked into the report on Turkmenistan in the previous issue of Gazelle (November 2013).*

*The photos should be credited as follows:*

*Page 1 Akhal Teke horse photo: MaryAnne Pardoe*

*Page 3 Akhal Teke horse photo: Andrew McTiernan*

*Page 4 Darvaza Crater photo with silhouettes of DNHG travellers: Courtesy of National Geographic team*

*Page 5 Nokhur cemetery photo (top): Mairead Porter*

*Page 7 Darvaza Crater at dawn: Andrew McTiernan*

*Additionally, an editorial mistake has been made on page 4, within the Darvaza Gas Crater piece. The last sentence should read as follows:*

*"The gas is still burning today, more than 40 years later."*

**Upcoming Field Trips**

The DNHG has a number of upcoming field trips, both in the UAE and further abroad. Due to the large volume of trips, exhaustive details cannot be given within this month's issue. Details and information regarding the following trips will be sent out by email.

Friday January 17th: Dubai to Kalba Geology Trip with Jean Paul Berger

Friday January 24th: Hajar Mountain Wadi Walk

Friday January 31st: Wadi Shuwayahah Walk

Friday February 7th: Dibba Geology Trip with Jean Paul Berger

Friday February 14th: Wadi Walk with Gary Feulner

February 13th to 18th: Sri Lanka Trip (#2)

February 20th to 22nd: Inter-Emirates Weekend in AUH hosted by ENHG-AD

May 25th to 31st: Trip to Georgia

*Below: Elephants in Yala National Park, Sri Lanka. Photo Credit: Barbara Couldrey*



## Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

**Sunday January 12<sup>th</sup>:** Dr. Peter Nagy will be giving a lecture titled: *"Camels: animals of the future. Myth, reality and challenges at the world's first large-scale camel dairy farm."*

### Upcoming Field Trips (Members Only)

See Page 7 for full list of upcoming trips and events.

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](mailto:gazelleeditor@gmail.com) (Arial 10 justified).

## DNHG Membership

Membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at Dh. 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 AE90020000030100242001. 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.