



GAZELLE

مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي



© Ravi Rajagopal

DNHG Field Trip: Wadi Bih

Twelve DNHG members, led by Sonja Lavrenčič, headed to Ras al-Khaimah on April 10 for an exploration of Wadi Bih; an extensive watercourse which once served as a caravan route through Ras al-Khaimah and Musandam.

The wadi lies under Jebel Jais, considered one of the highest points in the UAE, and presents a magnificent though very harsh landscape. At the time of our visit all the channels were completely dry and one branch of the watershed was barricaded by the Jabana landslide. Between two ridges is a broad alluvial plain with a scattering of acacia trees, and our route took us in a loop around this area, skirting the edges of the slope.

The valley has a small modern settlement, and we encountered signs of earlier habitations at intervals. A tributary ravine named Wadi Ghabbas shelters a handful of ruined stone houses among Sidr trees (Christ's-thorns), and another collection of homesteads stands across the plain under the opposite slope. In the midst of the plain is a large cemetery and, in another spot, we saw isolated graves which, judging from their size, appeared to be that of an adult and three infants.



© Ravi Rajagopal

Notable monuments to the exertions of earlier residents are the heavy stone walls of terrace fields seen around the wadi. The retaining walls were built over several seasons in locations where they would catch layers of alluvial wash; the accumulation of moist deep earth would then yield a crop of high-grade barley, which was packed off to the coast and used especially for *sfai* flatbread.

We examined two cisterns, stone-lined and of rounded rectangular form. In other environments the green opaque water with its drifting skim and fringe of withered grass might not be thought enticing but, in this desiccated terrain, whatever is wet is welcome. The cisterns have become small wild-

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Contributors

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

John Dayton, Ravi Rajagopal, Herbert Otto, Sonja Lavrenčič, Lamjed El Kefi, Helga Meyer, MaryAnne Pardoe, Peter Olliff and Tamsin Carlisle

Announcements

Don't forget! **Annual General Meeting**

The DNHG's Annual General Meeting will be held at our lecture on **May 10**.

The AGM has been postponed from its normal March date due to the absence of the Chairman, Gary Feulner.

The AGM will feature a brief report by the Chairman and the Treasurer, followed by election of officers to the DNHG Committee for the coming year.

Members who would like to volunteer for responsibilities on the Committee should contact the Chairman, or Vice-Chairman Valerie Chalmers, or any other member of the Committee.

Wanted: **Gazelle Editor**

The DNHG's monthly newsletter, *Gazelle*, has been an important element of the group since its inception more than 25 years ago, helping us keep in touch and share information about group activities and UAE natural history in general.

If you have an interest in natural history and would like to help us disseminate interesting local natural history information for the monthly *Gazelle*, please consider this opportunity.

Exceptional computer skills are not required, and we can provide you with software training and support. More important is interest, enthusiasm, basic command of written English and a willingness to commit the necessary time on a regular basis.

Any members, new or old, who feel they might be interested in becoming the new *Gazelle* Editor are invited to contact any one of the DNHG Committee Members.

Next Month's Speaker

The DNHG are delighted to welcome Dr. Richard (Dick) Hornby who will be giving a talk entitled:

"Evolutionary Dead-ends in Eastern Arabia"

After working for twenty years in nature conservation in southern England, Richard moved to Abu Dhabi in 1992 to set up the National Avian Research Centre (NARC), which became part of ERWDA (now EAD).

When the organization was well established he moved to the UAE Federal Environmental Agency (FEA), as principal advisor on wildlife and land use issues. He then extended his natural history interests in the marine environment and, for six months in 1996/97, he conducted a full survey of the biodiversity of the whole mainland intertidal coastline of UAE.

Since 1999 he has been the project manager or principal biologist for many ecological baseline surveys and environmental impact assessments in the Arabian Gulf region and co-founding partner in Nautica Environmental Associates LLC since 2006.

He has gained a reputation as a leading ecologist in the UAE, with a broad and in-depth knowledge of terrestrial and marine plants, birds, mammals and invertebrates.

Since 2001, Richard has also co-led more than fifteen botanical and natural history holiday tours to different locations in Greece, Spain, France, Romania, Italy, Oman and southern Africa. He maintains an extensive collection of digital photographs of plants and animals in Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

Flora & Fauna Survey Jumeriah Oasis Village

Jumeriah Oasis Village, located in the centre of Al Quoz 2, is part of the staff quarters for the 'Jumeirah Group' and houses approximately 5,000 Staff. The village covers an area of some 11.53 Hectares and is extensively landscaped with more than 2000 trees, large numbers of shrubs, ground cover, and some 'wilder' areas. The visible wildlife on site includes various birds, insects, rodents and reptiles.

Overall there are 37 accommodation buildings plus club houses, a mosque, plant and equipment areas and a sewage treatment plant.

Oasis Village has been 'Green Globe Certified' and Jumeirah would like to continue to improve and develop their 'green' credentials by conducting a survey, similar to the one carried out at Jumeirah Beach Hotel grounds some time ago. This survey could then be used to enable the management of the property with due concern and care for all creatures living at Oasis Village.

We'd like to welcome any DNHG member's interested in conducting a survey to contact **George Gordon** on 055 500 9756 at Oasis Village before **May 20, 2015**.

He will happily take you on a tour of the grounds to enable you to assess the feasibility of a survey and what it could add to the knowledge of wildlife in the Emirates.



© Peter O'Neill

Mediterranean Pierrot
(*Tarucus rosaceus*)



© Herbert Otto

DNHG Field Trip: *Butterflies in Wadi Sfai*

In March 2015 I was invited by the Dubai Natural History Group to give a talk on '*Butterflies of the UAE and Oman*' and while in town I had the opportunity to join a DNHG field trip to hunt for butterflies.

Meeting up with DNHG members we travelled through the characteristic sand dunes outside the city to get to the rocky asphalt-like gravel hills, dissected by many wadis.

The group of 17 were in jovial spirits and our destination was a modern-meets-old-school village named Sfai about 50km from Dubai.

Like Reinier Terblanche says, referring to butterflies, '*A desert is a special area where the 'extras' have been cut away and we are left with only the 'essentials'*'. Many of the butterflies were close relatives of African counterparts with similar genera and, at times, sharing species like the African Monarch which here is also called a Tiger.

Walking up the uneven terrain of the dry wadi bed we found our first prize – a possible Balkan Pierrot (*Tarucus balkanicus*) and on the plant right next to it a Desert White (*Pontia glauconome*) laying eggs.

Later on we found a freshly-hatched 'Blue Pansy' or, as we know it down south, the Eyed Pansy (*Precis orithyia*). This female was so fresh she was still drying her wings, yet closed them up to camouflage herself as we desperately tried to photograph her immaculate colours.

Carefully we literally prodded her along and she thankfully opened her wings for us to photograph.

One DNHG member, Binish Roobas, excitedly found a Leaden Ciliate Blue (Black-stripe Hairtail or *Anthene amarah*) noting that it was a rare species for this area. I have been informed this butterfly has been seen in several places in the UAE this past winter, suggesting it may be profiting from the heavier than average rains of the last three years. Back in my current hometown of Sohar I have also observed this butterfly near the tree *Acacia tortilis*, a common food source of the larvae.

At this point we stopped for lunch under a large *Zizyphus spina-cristi* and, true to form a little way off feeding on *Tephrosia*, we found the adult Mediterranean Pierrot (*Tarucus rosaceus*). As a larva this same butterfly possibly fed on the tree we just sat under.

Our route took us around a hill, where we witnessed a pair of Desert Whites mating, and then back to the car park. Here we found another Leaden Ciliate Blue which I mistakenly thought was a Desert Babul Blue (*Azanus ubaldus*) – a fitting way to end a very gratifying trip.

In all we had seen 8 of the approximate 45 Emirates butterflies. What struck me was the number of freshly-hatched butterflies we had seen as are evident from the

photographs. This means that summer is spring here. It must be the lucky season.

Report and photos by
Herbert Otto



© Herbert Otto

Blue Pansy (*Precis orithyia*)



© Herbert Otto

Leaden Ciliate Blue (*Anthene amarah*)



© Herbert Otto

Desert White (*Pontia glauconome*)



© Herbert Otto

Painted Lady (*Vanessa cardui*)

Field Clips



Paper Nautilus on Gulf Beaches

This year's Paper Nautilus season seems to be more abundant and peaking later than usual. In the last couple of weeks DNHG members have independently found a number of Paper Nautilus 'shells' on gulf beaches, including some perfectly preserved and colourful specimens raging from 8 to 9cm in length.

Paper Nautilus (*Argonauta* sp.) are not really nautilus, but a type of octopus that lives close to the sea surface. The paper-thin, white to beige, brown and black calcareous 'shells' are not true cephalopod shells either, but egg cases made by the female. The female traps a bubble of air inside

the 'shell' to keep it afloat near the water's surface and will live in the shell's entry, guarding the eggs inside until they hatch. The empty shell is then discarded where it drifts ashore. Once on the beach these fragile 'shells' quickly become bleached and crushed. Fresh, undamaged nautilus 'shells' are therefore prized for being relatively rare finds.

Even rarer are sightings of live Argonauts themselves. They are open-ocean cephalopods of subtropical and tropical seas and are one of the most sexually dimorphic cephalopods. The females are considerably larger than the males, live longer and reproduce many times, while males are thought to reproduce only once.

Due to their pelagic habitat (any area of water away from the shoreline and the sea bottom) and the fact they don't seem to survive in captivity, not much is known about this prehistoric animal. Cephalopods are believed to have appeared during the late Cambrian Period, more than 400 million years before the first primitive fish began swimming in the ocean.

Report by Sonja Lavrenčić



FT: Wadi Bih cont.

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life sanctuaries. I observed toads swimming about the rim, gobbling insects. Bright red and purple dragonflies, probably of the *Trithemis* genus, were also present, with a possible type of Swallow diving across the surface.

Wadi Bih showed some other birdlife and there were frequent bird calls throughout the trek. On closer search we were rewarded with the discovery of many varie-

ties of Wheatears that made their presence known by calling from electrical cables and treetops as well as from shady rock ledges. Both juveniles and adult varieties of Wheatears were seen. In addition were of course the widespread Collared Doves. Some Sidr trees were full of fruit and this was an attraction for White-eared Bulbuls which were also seen aplenty. Also witnessed towards the afternoon was a lone Pale Crag Martin giving us a fly-by.

Wadi Bih possesses considerable attraction both in the majesty of the landscape and the human associations of its past, and is a likely site for further expeditions, especially at times when the channels hold water. Thanks go out to Sonja for her able leadership on this expedition.

Report by John Dayton and Ravi Rajagopal



Hume's Wheatear



Sidr tree full of fruit

Slender-billed Gulls
(*Chroicocephalus genei*)



© Tamsin Carlisle

Al-Wathba Nature Reserve and Abu Dhabi Wildlife Centre

In recent weeks, three DNHG field trips have focused on bird life. They included two outings to the Al-Wathba Wetland Reserve near Mussafah in Abu Dhabi emirate, and one to local birding sites in the Jebel Ali area.

The Al-Wathba reserve was established as a protected area for wildlife in the late 1990s, when Greater Flamingoes (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) were discovered nesting in the shallow lake created by an accidental seepage of municipal waste water. Since then, water levels in the series of wastewater pools at the site have been managed to ensure optimum conditions for the growing colony of resident flamingoes during the critical June/July nesting period. This requires expanses of wind-protected water that are neither so deep that they

threaten to submerge nests that have their bases on the lake floor, nor so shallow as to put the nests in easy reach of terrestrial predators such as foxes. Salinity must also be appropriate to support a dense population of brine shrimp as the flamingoes' main food source.

In winter, the flamingoes at Al-Wathba are a mix of resident and migratory birds. Their numbers have been growing steadily in recent years, reaching a peak of roughly 5,000 individuals earlier this year compared with about 4,000 birds overwintering in 2013/14. Along with adults sporting predominantly pale pink plumage with orange-red wing patches clearly visible in flight, we were able to discern a number of near full-grown juveniles distinguished

by brownish plumage. These may have been birds hatched last summer at one of the two flamingo breeding sites currently active within the Al-Wathba reserve.



© Lamjed El Keji

Tortoise from the
Abu Dhabi Wildlife Centre

With over 250 bird species recorded from the site, it was not surprising to find a few other year-long residents nesting in the area. Notably, we observed Black-winged Stilts (*Himantopus himantopus*) behaving amorously during our first visit, on March 28. On our April 18 return, we spotted two of these birds incubating eggs on small islands within a pond behind a raised levee separating it from the main flamingo habitat.

Other highlights during the first trip included a sighting of a large, resident Dhuf, Spiny-tailed Lizard (*Uromastix aegypticus microlepis*) guarding its den, and Greater Spotted Eagles (*Clanga clanga*) on the far shore of the flamingo lake. One was feeding from a kill that in size and shape was consistent with a flamingo carcass.

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© Lamjed El Keji

Field Trips

Al-Wathba Reserve and AD Wildlife Centre cont.



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We also encountered a flock of Slender-billed Gulls (*Chroicocephalus genei*) resting on yet another pond behind a protective wire fence. They took flight as dusk approached, providing a spectacle only surpassed by an ensuing sunset flight of flamingoes.

On our second Al-Wathba visit, Curlew Sandpipers (*Calidris ferruginea*) and Common Ringed Plovers (*Charadrius hiaticula*) put in welcome appearances.

Also on our second al-Wathba trip, we were also able to visit the Abu Dhabi Wildlife Centre, which is where attempts are made to rehabilitate illegally imported wildlife and other “exotic” animals that Abu Dhabi authorities have confiscated from traffickers and those who purchase their stock-in-trade. The majority of these animals are from feline species, including some such as Cheetahs that are critically endangered. Among the felines, sizes ranged from small Leopard cats and Servals all the way to mature Lions and Tigers.

While it was sad to see these majestic animals in cages or behind stout, electrified fences, we were happy to learn that the wildlife centre, which is under the patronage of Abu Dhabi’s Sheikh Mansour, has a decent track record of pursuing deals with countries of origin to get at least some of its inmates “repatriated” with the goal of returning them to the wild.

But such negotiations proceed on a case-by-case basis and inevitably Abu Dhabi ends up footing most of the bill. In addition, many confiscated animals have suffered from inappropriate diet and lack of medical care, while some have been intentionally abused, meaning many require lifelong care in captivity.

Report by Tamsin Carlisle

To find out more about the Al-Wathba Wetland Reserve and information regarding visiting hours and location map please visit their website:

<http://www.ead.ae/al-wathba-wetland-2/>

DNHG Field Trip: Jebel Ali

On April 24, a small group of DNHG birders ventured onto the greens of the Jebel Ali Golf Resort and to the lagoons of the nearby Jebel Ali Marine Reserve on a final trip to round off the spring migration season.

At the golf course, we got up-close and personal with a number of the usual suspects, including Indian Rollers (*Coracias benghalensis*), Little Green Bee-eaters (*Merops orientalis*), White-eared and Red-vented Bulbuls (*Pycnonotus leucotis* and *P. cafer*), and Graceful Prinias (*Prinia gracilis*). Overhead, we watched migratory European Bee-eaters (*Merops apiaster*) hunting high-flying insects, while a falcon circled without hovering. My photographs showed pink feet,

which has led me tentatively to identify it as a female Amur Falcon (*Falco amurensis*), an infrequent visitor to the UAE and a great way to finish off the season.

At the wetlands reserve, we were greeted by a sighting of a red-legged wading bird that turned out not to be a redshank, but instead a Terek Sandpiper (*Xenus cinereus*), which is distinguished by its upward-curving bill. We also saw Lesser Sand Plovers (*Charadrius mongolus*), Common Greenshank (*Tringa nebularia*), Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) and Western Reef Heron (*Egretta gularis*), as well as a few crabs.

We were hot and thirsty when we got back to the car, but all agreed it had been a worthwhile outing.

Report and photos by Tamsin Carlisle



Female Rose-ringed Parakeet



Indian Roller

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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.

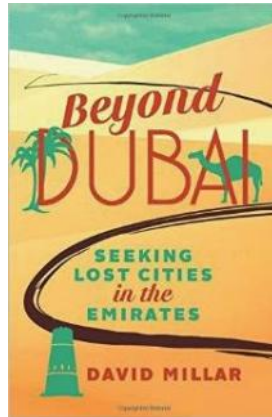
Please contact any Committee person - we will be very pleased to hear from you!

DNHG Facebook

Come join our 690+ followers!

<http://facebook.com/DNHG.UAE>

Book Review: David Millar's 'Beyond Dubai'



"This is the book that has been missing from the Dubai travel literature."

I really enjoyed this book, it was a breath of fresh air after some of the drivel that has been written about Dubai. The author has a wonderful tongue-in-cheek sense of humour and a great eye for Dubai *ironies*.

But it's not just a book about the tallest building in the world and skiing on snow when it's 45 degrees outside. David has made the effort to go behind the scenes and look into the history of the country; not just the Trucial States and British domination of last century, but the evidence of habitation thousands of years ago. He reveals a history that even many of the residents are not aware of.

Under the guise of persuading his girlfriend that the UAE has a history worth noting, he travels around the country and parts of Oman, searching out evidence of life in the past. Burial sites, old cities, settlements and historical remains are visited and briefly explained - enough to whet ones appetites for visits of our own.

There is also some interesting discussion about the history of the Gulf itself, which, in its distant past, was once dry land, and possibly even the site of 'The Garden of Eden'.

One criticism from our book group was that the humour was very British/Canadian; other nationalities found it somewhat patronising, but humour is always a very personal thing. We felt that photos would also have been a great addition.

This is a book that I would highly recommend to visitors and residents of Dubai alike. It is informative and readable and well worth reading.

Review by MaryAnne Pardoe

If you'd like to obtain a copy of 'Beyond Dubai' we have several copies available from the DNHG book store which can be purchased at any of our DNHG monthly lectures.

Alternatively 'Beyond Dubai' can be ordered online through the author's new webpage: www.beyonddubai.net

Wanted: Field Trip Coordinators

If you would like to join the 'Field Trip Coordination Team' or are interested in leading your own field trip then we would like to hear from you!

Field trip leaders do not need to be professional experts but just be generally interested and enthusiastic. To find out more, please contact one of our Field Trip Coordinators.

Field Trip Coordinators:

Sonja: lavson@gmail.com

Angela: manthorpe2005@yahoo.co.uk

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- May 10: Dr. Richard Hornby: Evolutionary Dead-ends in Eastern Arabia
 June 7: Dr. Alessandro de Meddalena: South Africa's Great White Sharks

Field Trips (Members Only)

- May 9: The Lost Chambers (Atlantis the Palm) Behind the Scenes trip
 May 22-23: Overnight Trip to Masirah Island
 June 5-13: Slovenia

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

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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 100 Dhs. for families and 50 Dhs. for individuals. Membership is valid from Sep 2014 to Sep 2015. 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.