



GAZELLE

مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي



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The dolphins' dorsal fins

Contributors —

Thank you to the following members for their contributions this month:

- *Angela Manthorpe
- *David Kingston
- *Jill Jackson-Kennedy
- *Kartik Balasubramaniam
- Marios Mantzourogianis
- Michelle Sinclair
- *Nicolas Shin
- *Rasna Gerwal
- *Sanjay Gairola

UAE Dolphin Project - June 2025

DNHG volunteers surveying potential dolphin sightings

Our team of six met at 6.15am in Dubai Harbour, Dubai Marina, for day 2 of a 3-day survey. In true Dubai style, we were an international group from six different countries and three different continents. Our team comprised of Dr Ada Natoli, the founder of the UAE Dolphin Project, the boat driver and four volunteers.

As the small boat headed out of the harbour, Ada briefed us on the morning's survey exercise. She showed us photographs of the three species of dolphin we would look for: the Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphin, the Indian Ocean humpback dolphin and the Finless porpoise, and she described their physical characteristics and typical habitats, and the observations we should record. The volunteers were to work in pairs, standing at the front of the boat with one scanning the sea from west to north, the other from east to north, and both from close up to far distance. Each pair was supposed to be on duty for an hour while the others rested - but we were all so keen that we all participated almost all of the time.

It was a hot day (41C), but we kept ourselves protected from the sun and the breeze, and the platter of fresh fruit brought around by Ada aided our comfort.

We headed out towards Jebel Ali Port, staying close to the coast in typical

DNHG membership renewal for 2025-2026 season!

The new season starts in September and with that many interesting field trips and activities are in the pipeline for our members! At our first September lecture you can easily renew your membership by paying cash to Valerie Chalmers, DNHG's Vice Chairman. For more information please go to page 7.

Announcements and Recordors



Monthly Lecture

**Monday 22 September 2025 starts at 8 pm
at the Central Veterinary Research Laboratory (CVRL)**

Google maps link for location: <https://maps.app.goo.gl/>

Topic: 3,000 km across the Empty Quarter

Speaker: Dr Gary Brown

Abstract: The talk gives an overview of the natural history of the Empty Quarter and its fringes based on the personal experience of the speaker over two decades.

The Empty Quarter, or Rub' al Khali, is the largest sand sea (amalgamation of sand dunes) in the world. It is situated mainly in the south/ south-east of Saudi Arabia (KSA), but also includes the southern half of the UAE as well as the adjacent parts of Oman and Yemen, covering an area of at least 550,000 km². Although such extensive sand seas are rather rare, the Empty Quarter is often regarded as the quintessential "desert landscape" characterised by endless sand dunes and sparse or no vegetation. The latter is partly true for the extensive plains that interrupt the dunes but not necessarily for the sand dunes themselves. The forbidding landscape also appears to be devoid of animal life but, wake up in the early morning and walk over the dunes, and in many places, it is hard not to miss the numerous tracks and trails created by creatures great and small. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, there are a number of wells, pools and even man-made lakes in the Empty Quarter, some of which act as a magnet for wildlife.

About the Speaker: Dr Gary Brown has an advanced academic degree (post PhD) in the arid land ecology of north eastern Arabia. He combines long-standing academic experience, including numerous (>60) research papers in internationally peer-reviewed scientific journals and book chapters (which are included in the recent Natural History of the Emirates book), with a substantial involvement in consultancy work. As such, Gary has accumulated 40 years of practical international experience in environmental assessments, conservation planning and land resource management in countries of the Arabian Peninsula - in particular UAE, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia – (as of September 2025, exactly 30 years!), and parts of Europe. He possesses detailed knowledge of the flora and vegetation of the Arabian Peninsula, Britain, central Europe and the Canary Islands, including specialised habitat surveys, habitat restoration (in particular deserts) and restoration of contaminated land, such as oil and heavy metal-polluted areas. Gary also has a good grasp of the lichen flora of Britain, central Europe and the Arabian Peninsula. Furthermore, he has detailed knowledge of the birds of Europe and the Arabian Peninsula as well as an overview of the reptiles and amphibians in those regions.

Gary has been substantially involved in conservation work with international organisations (e.g. UNESCO) over the past decades, especially in the Arabian Peninsula (Oman, UAE, Kuwait, Qatar). He is currently senior advisor to the KSA Government for the United Nations-funded desert restoration programme resulting from the Gulf War. Apart from working on various giga-projects in Saudi Arabia (most notably NEOM), Gary also undertakes a lot of projects in the UAE, where he worked for several years in ERWDA (now called the EAD).

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From the Editor:

2025 - 2026 season will bring many more interesting trips and lectures! Please share with us through the email below your observations, stories, photos and captions of wildlife, nature and history in the UAE or abroad.

Email: gazelleeditor@gmail.com

Deadline: any time before

20-September-2025

...for the September edition...

Your contributions bring the Gazelle newsletter to life and encourage continuous learning of our History and Nature!

(continued from page 1)

humpback territory. When we reached the port, we started our transect survey into typical Bottlenose territory. The boat headed out perpendicular from the coast for 20km, turned left for 3km, returned towards the coast for 20km, turned right for 3km and continued in this fashion for several hours until we reached the far edge of the Jebel Ali Palm (still under construction).

Sadly, we did not see any dolphins on this day and Ada was intending to cover the coast closer to Abu Dhabi the following day. However, it was a truly enlightening trip, with Ada answering our numerous questions along the way. Much is still unknown about the total population of dolphins in the Gulf off the UAE coast, though I believe it is recognised that the coastal development and land reclamation has had a detrimental effect in particular on the habitat of the humpback. Whilst the dolphins move along the coast from Abu Dhabi to Dubai and beyond, they do not appear to venture out towards Musandam where other pods are found. It is not yet known if the pods are territorial or if they socialise with each other.

Individual dolphins are identified by their dorsal fins, which are as unique as an elephant's ear.

I had studied the sightings map on the UAE Dolphin Project's website prior to the survey and noted that it had not been updated for some years. Ada admitted that the task of keeping it up to date with all the reported sightings which they receive, was difficult to maintain - perhaps a task for a future DNHG volunteer or two?

Aside of the dolphin search, we carried out water quality tests in several locations, dropping equipment deep into the sea and taking readings after it was raised. I was pleased to see that the quality of the water in the Gulf is good. Ada also asked us to observe plastic pollution and she recorded each sighting. Mineral water bottles were the most common, with a particular brand seeming to appear regularly to the extent that we wondered if a boat/ ship had lost several cases of these overboard?

Many bird sightings were also recorded especially as they perched on buoys marking the locations of fishermen's cages below.

Finally, I was particularly fascinated by the container ships anchored in seemingly random locations 20km offshore, waiting for their turn to enter Jebel Ali Port. We saw the pilot boat from the harbour come out to guide one of the ships in, their route marked by red buoys on the right side and green on the left.

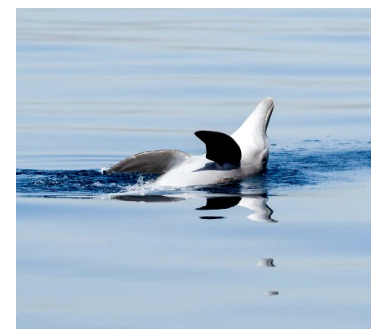
So whilst no dolphins were sighted on this occasion, the entire experience was fascinating and I would happily do it again.



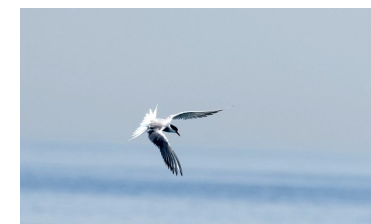
A bottlenose dolphin breaching



A dorsal fin close up



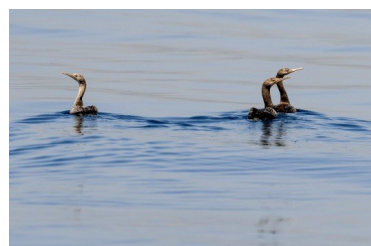
A bottlenose dolphin "basking"



A common tern



Bridled terns



Socotra cormorants



Our volunteers taking a rest ...



But still on the look out as you never know what you may spot next, or not !



A pair of volunteers in action

Contribution by Rasna Gerwal

Photos by Marios Mantzourogianis (wildlife) & Michelle Sinclair (humans)

Some personal highlights of the Sicily trip (6 -15 June 2025)

Cucunci - the fruit of the common caper

Contribution and photos by Angela Manthorpe



Caper bush with fruit (taken in Oman)

During the DNHG Volcanoes of Sicily trip we found the caper plant, *Capparis spinosa*, to be particularly abundant across the Aeolian islands. We have the same species in the UAE and Oman, but all across the Mediterranean the plants are cultivated to produce capers which have been used as a popular cooking ingredient for centuries. The caper is the unopened bud of the caper plant, picked well before it is due to flower, and preserved in salt or brine. The island of Salina is said to produce some of the best capers in the world.

News to many of us, however, was the use of cucunci, the local name for the caper fruit (pronounced cucunchee). The fruit look like small cucumbers and have a subtle striped appearance; inside there is a fleshy pulp which contains the seeds.



Caper flower with buds in the background



Salted cucunci

The fruit appear if the flower is allowed to bloom and wilt, and they are similarly salted for preservation and then served in salads or as a snack (wash first)!

Marijcke Jongbloed's "Wildflowers of the UAE" notes that the fruit are rich in Vitamin C and could be eaten to prevent scurvy; the seeds were also used to treat a variety of ailments, including sciatica and skin ailments.



Interior of the fruit

A visit to Salina

Contribution and photos by Jill Jackson-Kennedy

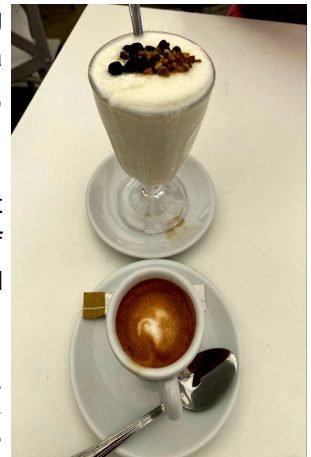
Leaving volcano hikes behind us we took a ferry to Salina, a semi-agricultural island renowned for its vineyards and caper growing. Named for the salt fields which were originally dug by the Romans, Salina is a favourite day trip destination among the Sicilians and Italians alike who come to enjoy the beaches and good food.



Arriving in the port of Santa Marina Salina where a fisherman was repairing his net, the group walked along the east coast to the small village of Lingua Punta. There, on the south-east tip of the island we swam and explored, finding a boardwalk to the Roman salt fields and a picturesque lighthouse.

We had a delicious lunch, but I think I can say that, after all the magnificent splendour and excitement of the effusive volcanoes, one of the highlights of Salina was a humble but truly delicious *ricotta ice-cream granita* with salted caramelised capers and chopped pistachio!!!

Left:
A local fisherman repairing his net



Right:
A scrumptious dessert with coffee



Village of Lingua Punta



The boardwalk and lighthouse



The explorers having a well-earned lunch

Phoresy – Hitching a "No Frills" Ride

Contribution by Kartik Balasubramaniam;
photos by Kartik and Angela Manthorpe

During the March DNHG field trip to the Yabbanah landslide in Wadi Bih, I took the accompanying photo of a black and white Resin Bee (genus *Pseudomegachile*) perched on a *Tephrosia* bloom.

Examining the photo much later, at leisure, I was intrigued by the two symmetrical reddish protrusions on the thorax - which are not part of the normal external anatomy of any bee. And indeed they are not! They are phoretic mites.

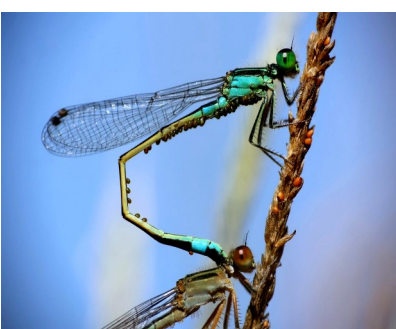
Phoresy (also called phoresis) is a temporary, symbiotic relationship whereby the phoront attaches itself to a host – solely for the purposes of travel or dispersal. Typically, the phoront is an animal, such as a mite or nematode worm, with limited ability to travel great distances on its own, and thus relies for dispersal on the assistance of a highly mobile host, such as a fly or bee.

Phoresy is distinct from the phenomenon of parasitism, where the parasite gains nutritive value from the host (although some phoronts have been known to have later exhibited parasitic behaviour).



A Resin Bee with a symmetrical pair of red phoretic mites
(photo by Kartik Balasubramaniam)

For the host, therefore, phoresy is, in principle, a low-cost, no-benefit relationship.



A mating pair of Evans Bluetail damselflies. The male (top) is burdened with probable phoretic mites
(photo by Angela Manthorpe)

In the case of "my" Resin Bee, interesting questions arise. For example, is their symmetrical positioning a matter of coincidence, or do they somehow "know" or learn that this is necessary to avoid upsetting the bee's aerodynamic balance? And what would happen if other mites attempted to hitch a ride on the same bee? Do the mites (or the bee) have a mechanism to prevent imbalance or overloading? If not, is phoresy always "low cost"?

Discussing my photo with other DNHG members, Angela Manthorpe showed me her photo (also presented here) of a male damselfly (Evans Bluetail - *Ischnura evansi*) at one of the Hatta Lakes, seemingly overburdened with mites – yet still apparently able to fly and to mate successfully (and presumably happily). All but one of the mites is positioned on the underside, and the majority are "front-end loaded".

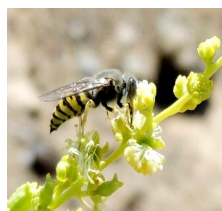
Angela had earlier shared her photo with CVRL parasitologist Dr. Rolf Schuster (a longtime DNHG member recently retired to China), who opined that these dragonfly mites might well be phoretic mites, not parasites. Rolf also mentioned that he had seen phoresy on bumble bees in Germany, sometimes so heavily loaded that they could not fly (so much for nature's delicate balance!). Rolf added that phoretic mites can also be found on houseflies and also non-flying but wide-ranging, active hosts such as certain ants. So, the next time you observe a flying insect, or even crawling ones, keep an eye out for smaller ones that may be hitching a ride.

For further information please click on the following links:

- (a) <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5749251/>
(b) <https://www.amentsoc.org/insects/glossary/terms/phoresy/>

Through Sanjay Gairola's Lens - A variety of plant pollinators... and they are not all butterflies!

On the *Ochradenus aucheri* - the Mother of Bees" - the following arthropods were spotted by Sanjay on one of his 2025 field trips



Sand wasp



Beetle



Western honey bee

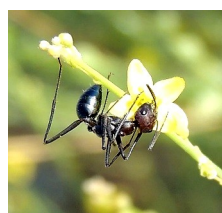


Oriental hornet



Hoverfly

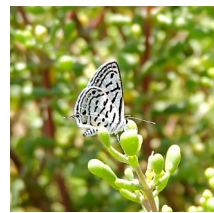
.... while other arthropods were spotted on various other types of plants



Ant on
Cleome pallada



Desert white on
Cleome pallada



Balkin pierrot on
Zygophyllum qatarense



Western pigmy blue on
Calligonum crinitum

Memories of last year's Musandam dhow trip

Contribution and images provided by Nicolas Shin

Sea Salps : from cloning to sequential hermaphroditism

On our last dhow trip in Musandam, while snorkeling in waters that were greener than usual - thick with algae and swirling with tiny marine life - I came across a creature I had never encountered before. At first, I thought it was just a drifting piece of jelly, a translucent barrel-like blob floating effortlessly in the current. But, as I got closer, I realised it was not alone - there were chains of them, pulsing gently in perfect synchrony.

This was my first encounter with a sea salp, one of the ocean's strangest yet most fascinating creatures. Neither jellyfish nor plankton in the traditional sense, these gelatinous tunicates are nature's tiny, living filters, silently drifting through the sea while playing a surprisingly big role in marine ecosystems. Intrigued, I had to find out more. What I discovered was even more fascinating than their ghostly appearance - these creatures have an extraordinary reproductive cycle that allows them to multiply rapidly and shape entire ecosystems.

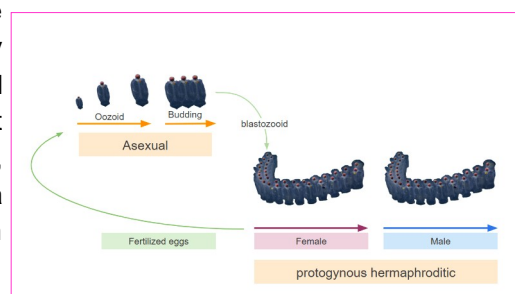


Sea salps

Sea salps have a complex and highly efficient reproductive strategy, alternating between **asexual and sexual phases**, which correspond to two distinct life forms: **solitary and aggregate** (Andersen, 1998; Madin & Purcell, 1992). This dual strategy enables them to respond rapidly to environmental changes, ensuring both rapid population growth and genetic diversity.

In the solitary phase (oozoid), an individual reproduces asexually through budding, forming chains of genetically identical individuals known as blastozooids. These chains, sometimes composed of hundreds of individuals, remain connected and move as a synchronised unit, which not only enhances their ability to filter-feed on phytoplankton but also improves their chances of escaping predators (Madin, 1990).

In the aggregate form, sea salps switch to sexual reproduction. Each individual in the chain starts as a female and later transitions into a male, a reproductive strategy known as **protogynous hermaphroditism**. This prevents self-fertilisation and enhances genetic diversity within the population. Unlike many marine organisms that release large numbers of gametes into the water, salps employ internal fertilisation, where the developing embryo remains within the parent until it reaches a free-swimming stage. This increases the survival chances of offspring, particularly in nutrient-scarce environments (Godeaux, 1998).

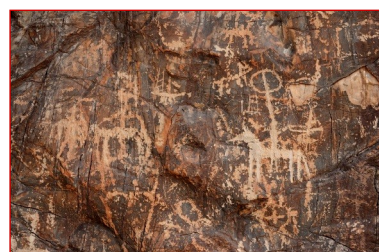
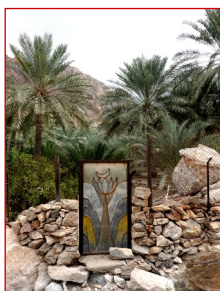


The reproductive strategy

Sea salps' dual reproductive strategies enable them to rapidly exploit favourable environmental conditions, leading to population booms. Such blooms can occur within days in response to phytoplankton surges, with exponential population growth rates that surpass many other zooplankton species (Deibel & Lowen, 2012). Their ability to filter large volumes of water also makes them important players in carbon cycling, as they can transport carbon to deeper ocean layers when they die and sink (Henschke et al., 2016).

Let's see what surprises this up and coming October trip to Musandam brings.....

Through David Kingston's Lens - Impressions of Ain Al Sharyah Hiking Trail... a geological hike!



January 2025

Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) Programme 2025

DNHG Lectures 2025

22 September	Gary Brown	- Crossing the Empty Quarter
06 October	Nils Bouillard	- Eavesdropping on the bats of the UAE
20 October	Agnieszka Dolatowska	- History Written in Layers of Sand : Archaeological Interpretation of Al Jazeera al Hamra
03 November	Dr. Brigitte Howarth	- Workshop on the Insect Collection of JAAENHG, the Joint Al Ain & Abu Dhabi Natural History Group

We are being spoilt in October with two interesting lectures in the same month !

Note: Our monthly lectures are now being held at the Central Veterinary Research Laboratory (CVRL), 17 Street Za'abeel 2, DIFC
Google maps link for location: <https://maps.app.goo.gl/HXjmpJvaHxZXwheS8>

DNHG Field Trips 2025

07 September	- Opportunity to observe the 2025 Total Lunar Eclipse (19.30 - midnight)
06-13 September	- Makalali Game Reserve, South Africa (Discover the African Bush)
28 September - 04 October	- First Mawmluh Nature Festival in India
16-19 October 2025	- 3-day/ 3-night dhow trip to the Musandam in Oman (<i>minimum number - 20 participants</i>)
29 November - 03 December	- Tiger Safari, Ranthambore National Park, India

Note: If you have any suggestions for DNHG field trips please do let Sonja Lavrenčič know.

For more information on upcoming lectures, field trips and membership please refer to the DNHG website www.dnhg.org
To sign up for the field trips only, please contact: Sonja Lavrenčič at lavson@gmail.com

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When possible, please contact committee members outside office hours

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DNHG Membership

DNHG membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at Dh100 for families and Dh50 for singles. Membership for the current year is valid from **September 2024 to September 2025**. Initial and renewal fees can be paid in cash at lecture meetings or remotely as described in (2) below.

New members can join in person at monthly lecture meetings or remotely. There are only two requirements:

- (1) Complete the one-page Membership Application available at meetings or by download from our website (www.dnhg.org) and hand or e-mail it to the Membership Secretary (see above);
- (2) Pay the membership fee, either in cash at a lecture or remotely by cash deposit or bank transfer to our Emirates NBD account, using our IBAN number AE640260001012012013302.

Important: The banking process does not always identify the payer, so please include a note in the transfer stating the member(s) name(s) and send the Membership Secretary an e-mail with a reference number or photo of the payment slip, 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 (*Gazelle*), our post office box, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects.