

GAZELLE

Vol. 13 no. 9 - October 1998



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Comings, goings and other interesting projects

Dr Marijcke Jongbloed, Director of the Sharjah Natural History Museum and Desert Park and Co-ordinator of the Arabian Leopard Trust, has been named by Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands to the Order of the Golden Ark, the Netherlands' most prestigious conservation award. Among previous honourees are Sultan Qaboos of Oman, awarded for the creation of the Yaalooni wildlife reserve in the Jiddat Al-Harasis.

Marijcke will travel to Holland for her investiture in November. This is Lady Marijcke's second knighthood. The award is a tribute to her personal efforts and to the far-sighted support of the government of Sharjah in promoting environmental education, conservation and research.

Gary Feulner reports on natural history aspects of his vacation among stone age tribes in the rain forests of Irian Jaya (New Guinea): "Birdwatching in the rain forest is as difficult as it's said to be. I was able to make out birds of paradise, and hornbills, which congregate and sound like a mini-hurricane when they take flight. Otherwise, most birds other than Brahminy kites and a few open field passerines were heard rather than seen.

"On the other hand, I was able to distinguish some 18 species of dragonflies and damselflies (including the pan-tropical globe skimmer, *Pantala flavescens*, also found in the UAE), at least 30 species of butterflies, a number of camouflaged grasshoppers and stick insects, and a large variety of web-building spiders.

"Because of the scarcity of mammalian game in New Guinea, many arthropods, especially grasshoppers and spiders, are eaten by rain forest peoples for protein. A favourite, artificially cultivated and gathered for feast occasions, is the larva of the capricorn beetle, which looks a bit like a shell pasta and has a slightly sweet, cherry-flavoured taste."

Mike Kerley enjoyed a relaxing holiday in Cyprus but reports sadly that, in the absence of most other game, local hunters have taken to shooting bee-eaters. Dressed in camouflage and armed with 12-gauge shotguns, they proudly display the skins on their belts. Mike found this practice less than sporting, since the bee-eaters have the habit of lining up by the dozens on wires and fences near the many bee-keeping operations on the island. However, in view of the commercial importance of bee-keeping, the hunters may well have a measure of local support for their activities.

Membership Renewal

The DNHG's new membership year commences in October 1998. We look forward to an interesting program of lectures and field trips as well as local natural history news and various member projects.

The membership fee remains a bargain at Dhs 50 (singles or couples). You can join or renew at meetings (see Membership Secretary Anna Griffin) or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account No. 173746. (Please note we *cannot* cash cheques made out to the DNHG).

This month's contributors

The editor would like to thank the following members for their reports:

- ◆ Barbara Couldrey
- ◆ David Nam
- ◆ Neil Curtis
- ◆ Peter van Amsterdam
- ◆ David Sheldon
- ◆ Gary Feulner
- ◆ Bob White
- ◆ Marjcke Jongbloed

Photographs in Gazelle

We are now able to include several photos in each issue. Please pass any you think might be suitable to the editor at DNHG meetings.



Field Trips

Stargazing

Thursday October 22

Columnist David McNaughton and DNHG Astronomy Recorder, Lamjed El-Kefi will lead a tour of the night sky at a marvellous desert viewing site out from Jebel Ali. Participants may obtain a detailed map from Field Trip Co-ordinator Katrina Lynes tel/fax 558 529.

In order to enjoy the sunset and watch Jupiter appear after the first sighting of the new moon, those interested will need to be arriving from 5.45pm. This promises to be a great evening with keen astronomers from Abu Dhabi and Muscat also invited. 4WD preferred, but not necessary. Telescopes a definite advantage!

Contact Katrina Lynes on 558 529 (res) or Val Chalmers on 494 816 (res) to book your place, and for instructions on how to find the site.

Turtles of Ras Al-Hadd

Mid-term break
October 29 (trip now full)

We always enjoy our members offering to share their experiences with one another, and Judith Stafford has suggested a camping based trip to Oman, to view the internationally recognised site of Ras Al Hadd where turtles abound. Obviously if you are interested in joining her visa's and permits will need to be organised.

All those genuinely interested should contact Judith ASAP so she can arrange the permits on your behalf to enter the site. Visas for Oman, if needed, will need to be arranged independently.

Contact Judith, on 376020 (res). Messages may be left.

Mountain Hike in Wadi Haqil, RAK

Friday November 6

Mountain Hike in Wadi Haqil (Friday, Nov. 6): Barbara Couldrey will lead a short but very satisfying circuit hike in one of her favourite wadis. The hike is not considered strenuous but the wadi is steep and the ascent will involve scrambling over rock in places. Participants should have hiking experience in uneven terrain.

The day will include a brief introductory visit to the RAK Museum and a visit to the traditional pottery kilns in Wadi Haqil. Meet at RAK Museum at 9:00 am. (Allow approximately 1-1/4 hours to reach RAK Museum from the Dubai World Trade Centre). 4WD required in W.Haqil, possibility for passengers will depend on numbers and availability.

Bring sturdy footwear, a bonafide day pack, water, a bag lunch and sun protection, plus optional camera and binoculars. For more information call Barbara at 07-210330 (ofc).

Ras Al Khaimah Mangroves

Friday November 13

Gary Feulner will lead a small group into the mangrove forest of RAK Khor. Mangrove areas are well known as nurseries for many species of fish and marine invertebrates. This trip will be a close encounter with the mangrove swamp and its wildlife.

Morning 9am departure from Dubai, returning 6pm. Plan on 4-5 hours outdoors. Bring water, recommended 3 litres, and a bag lunch, sun protection, old clothes and lace-up shoes - not sandals - for the swamp, decent clothes for afterwards, plastic bags for wet and muddy items, optional

binoculars and camera.

Limit 12 people. For information and sign-up contact Gary at 313 320 x500 (ofc), 306 5570 (home) or 313 371 (fax).

Fossil Hunting at Jebel Buhays

Friday November 20

Valerie Chalmers will lead this trip to an area containing a diverse assemblage of tropical echinoids and other invertebrate fossils from the latest Cretaceous - the end of the age of dinosaurs.

Depart 8:15 am from the Hilton covered car park. Bring water, lunch, sun protection and plastic bags for fossils. Please note it is expected that participants will make unique specimens, if any, available for professional study.

Option for overnight camping on Thursday night with a contingent from the Abu Dhabi Natural History Group, plus birdwatching at dawn. For more information call Valerie at 442853 (home).

Our Next Speaker

Dr Benno Boer has conducted research in the UAE for many years on behalf of the Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency (ERWDA) and its predecessor, the National Avian Research Centre (NARC), where he is a habitat specialist.

Benno is a particular expert on the flora and environments of the deserts of Abu Dhabi. In company with regional experts, he has added more than 50 new species of plants to the list of those occurring in the UAE. He is also currently involved in the publication of an updated flora of the UAE.



Calling all naturalists!
Send in reports of your outings to the editor by e-mail, or deliver them on floppy disk at monthly meetings

Fall Birdwatching 25 September 1998

Rod Fox and his cast of hundreds (well, more than 30 at any rate) set off for Ramtha in 9 cars on the morning of 25/09/98. Forty minutes later, we were gazing out over Ramtha's fast diminishing pools, looking for avian activity.

For a moment, the bank overlooking the first pool bore a striking resemblance to the Stretford End, with the crowd straining to get a view. The usual residents were in residence, joined by a large number of migrants, with Sand Martins and Swallows being particularly noticeable.

No real surprises amongst the wader list (Common, Green and Wood Sandpipers, Little and Temminck Stint, Dunlin, Godwit, Redshank and single Curlew Sandpiper, Spotted Redshank, Little Ringed Plover and Marsh Sandpiper), but the star birds were undoubtedly a hovering kingfisher and a rather more shy Glossy Ibis. Blue-cheeked and European Bee-eaters also put in a flashy appearance, whilst fans of DBJ's enjoyed good views of 2 Spotted Flycatchers and a lone Pallid Swift. A female Marsh Harrier also performed well, keeping the crowds happy.

Fans of tacky seventies movies would have enjoyed our re enactment of the 'Convoy' film, with the road to RAK airport acting as backdrop. The green fields near the Airport lacked the White Storks of the week before, but still produced nice birds in the shape of three Red-throated pipits, sheltering under trees in the company of Hoopoes and Bee-eaters. Isabelline Shrike,

Great Grey Shrike and Isabelline Wheatear were also present, with the Hirundines showing off their abilities whilst drinking on the wing from a water tank.

A quick run up to Khatt lake produced no new species for the day, but did yield the usual Red-wattled Lapwing and Little Grebe. Several Redshank, Little Stint, Ruff and a single Greenshank made an appearance. However, no new sightings were made of the infamous Khatt Lake monster turtle.

After a swift sojourn into the Bin Majid hotel for a comfort stop, the entourage made their way to Khor Al Beidah for the 3pm high tide roost. This is a virtually unspoilt site, and did not disappoint.

Grey Plover, Lesser and Greater Sand Plovers, lots of Dunlin and Curlew Sandpipers, Whimbrel, Oystercatcher, both Godwits, Caspian, Saunders Little, & Crested Terns and more than 100 Crab Plover were present on the sandbank 100m offshore. As the cars were dispersing a Hoopoe Lark appeared to finish off a pleasant day out.

Report by Dave Sheldon

News from RAK

Jebel Qa'wa (1794m) has always drawn me, not only for its elegant shape, variety of ascents and spectacular views of two coastlines, but it always manages to provide interesting encounters.

Nearing the summit of Qa'wa Friday 9 October we met a delightful young local couple descending from a mountain village. The girl beamed at seeing another female on these rugged slopes and firmly shook my hand. Later, while descending, we found ourselves on the same path as a little old man

with few teeth, heavily laden with a large 'bundle' and leading a very healthy donkey, even more heavily laden. He engaged us in friendly chatter, looking to the rain filled clouds above saying 'zain, al humdil-lalah' as big spots of rain sizzled on the hot rocks. Dibba came into the conversation but I wasn't sure whether he was coming or going. He pronounced Qa'wa 'Kiwi' which delighted me.

Other interesting encounters were:

* In different locations - 3 decapitated kid goats, heads intact, with their skins lying nearby totally devoid of flesh. Having seen 2 caracal strung up in a village on the Dibba side of Qa'wa peak last April I wondered whether this might be a hunting ground, though saw no droppings.

* On a ridge near the summit I spotted a solitary stocky animal with long red-brown hair, stubby horns and a beard. It fitted the description of a tahr but I could not be sure.

* There were dozens of small blue/black beetles (approximately 1cm long) on the rocky summit stones.

* Tiny 3" dark grey lizards darted about the rocks also.

** Birds: 1 kestrel, an eagle (possibly Bonelli's), male and female desert wheatears, Humes wheatears, many pale crag martins playing the thermals at the summit, and lower down in more vegetated pockets scrub warblers darted about.

It was a grand day.

Report by Barbara Couldrey



Jebel Qa'wa (1794m) taken from the summit of Jebel Hagab, Rus al Jebal. Photo: Barbara Couldrey



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(see above)
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(please contact DNHG Chairman
if you would like to fill this post)

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.

—SHELL— —REPORT—



Please send your Shell reports to Sandy Fowler

Molluscs Undermine Musandam

The perimeter of the Musandam peninsula is characterised in most places by sheer cliffs which result in a very reduced inter-tidal zone which is further limited by the shallow tidal amplitude. The upper limit of inter-tidal fauna was close to 2 m above the lower limit of spring tides. Nevertheless, within this narrow band, distinct zonation of the fauna was maintained, intertidal algae being virtually absent in most places.

The two dominant faunal zones were those of the oyster, *Saccostrea cucullata* (Born) and, below it, that in which the rock (limestone) was penetrated by the burrows of the date-stone molluscs, the bivalves *Lithophaga cumingiana* Dunker and *L. obesa* Philippi [the latter is now known as *Leiosolenus obesus*]. The boundary between these two zones was strikingly regular on both exposed and sheltered shores, a fact possibly resulting from the calm nature of the sea on most days and the high summer temperatures and low relative humidity close to sun-heated rock.

The combined effect of these factors is probably to relate desiccation stress precisely to inter-tidal height. A further factor resulting in a straight boundary at the junction of the *Lithophaga* and *Saccostrea* zones might be competition for space between them. It is possible that the high longevity of both molluscs [estimated to be ten years or more] contributes to the stability of the junction between them.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the inter-tidal zone, however, is

the tendency for deep undercuts to develop, largely resulting from the activity of *Lithophaga* spp. They were deepest in situations sheltered from wave-action and shallowest where vertical jointing in the largely horizontally-bedded limestone resulted in cliff-fall. The deepest inter-tidal undercuts seen were 5m in horizontal extent, at the head of Khor ash-Shamm.

From data presented elsewhere on the rate of burrowing of *Lithophaga* spp. in the Musandam area, it appears likely that the rate of penetration is approximately 0.9 cm/yr, and that the mean rate of inter-tidal cliff sapping in sheltered places is 0.25cm/yr. Thus a 5 m undercut in a sheltered situation will take roughly 2,000 years to develop.

However, most undercutting is shallower, providing evidence that cliff-fall in most places occurs more frequently. It seems likely that *Lithophaga* spp. are the main cliff-sapping agent in the Musandam area.

Excerpted from "The Musandam Expedition 1971-72: Scientific Results, Part I: Biological Aspects" by P.F.S. Cornelius

—MAMMAL— —REPORT—



Caracal just below the summit of Jebel Qa'wa, Ru'us al Jibaal - April 1998. Photo by Barbara Couldrey



—BIRD—
—REPORT—



Please send your Bird reports
to Rod Fox

Expat Bird

A male Red Bishop is currently in residence showing off its incredible breeding plumage in a very small reedbed outside JESS.

Interestingly, it is following the seasons of its homeland, where the males take up breeding behaviour in October.

However, I believe its singing and growing of extravagant plumage is, alas, all in vain, as the nearest wild females are in Africa!

Report by Dave Sheldon

—PLANT—
—REPORT—



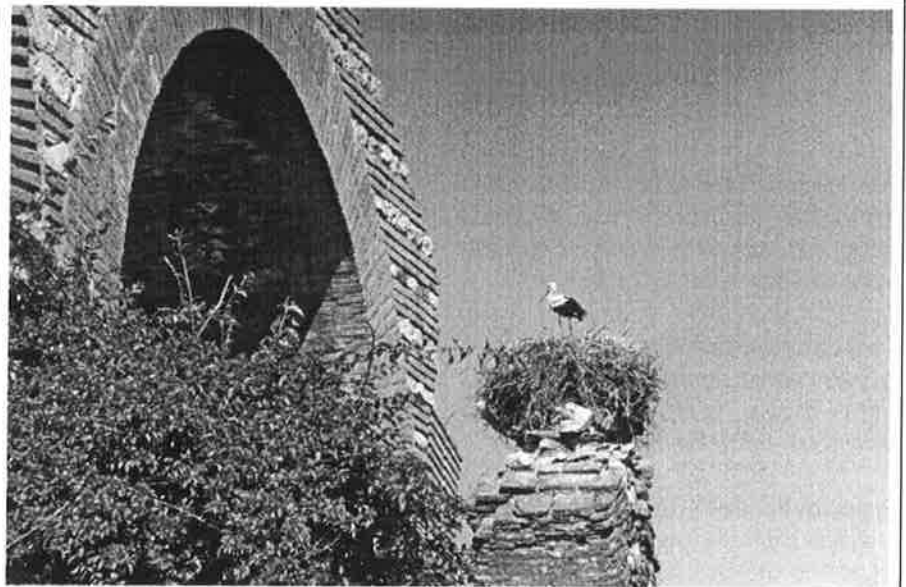
Please send your Plant reports
to Valerie Chalmers

More on Mesquite

Despite the ongoing local campaign against *Prosopis juliflora*, the tree has an honourable reputation elsewhere.

Although it is now widely introduced in the Near East, it is native to the arid south-western United States and northern Mexico, where it is known as mesquite. An American specimen was found to have roots growing down more than 55 metres – the deepest tree roots known.

Bahrain's "Tree of Life," a solitary but well-known landmark in the desert there, is a *Prosopis juliflora*.



A flock of 8 white storks was seen at Al Wathba Camel Race Track, just off the truck road from Abu Dhabi to Al Ain, Friday 16 October. These birds nest in Europe during the summer (photo taken of storks nesting on the ruins of a Roman aqueduct in Selcuk, Turkey, July 1998, above), and migrate southwards in winter. The majority of the Eastern European migrants follow the Nile down to their African wintering grounds, while some stray down the Gulf coast instead. Colin Richardson reports a flock of some 300 seen around Abu Dhabi Airport in September 1994.

Report by Neil Curtis

Photo by Bob White

Uses of a wiremesh fence

If you are a vine, you lean against it...

If you are a shrike, you use it at a vantage point from which to hunt...

If you are an agamid, you use it for sunbathing...

If you are a desert lark, you use it as podium to sing from...

If you are a cat you use it to climb over...

If you are an argiope spider, you use it to hang your nest in...

Suggestions received from
Marycke Jongbloed

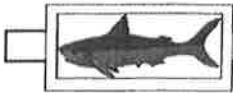


Oceanic tortoise

While an expatriate family were out on a fishing trip beyond Fahal Island (Muscat) they spotted a 'turtle' on the surface. They motored up to it but amazingly it did not dive. They hauled the creature on board only to find it wasn't a turtle at all but a 1.25-metre tortoise, which was covered in dried sea salt. It was just about on it's last legs.

It turned out to be an African Giant Tortoise and has now made a full recovery, digging big holes and tunnels in its finder's walled garden. These animals are banned for export and it is thought that it may have been thrown overboard by a boat coming from Africa when stopped by the coast guard, or it fell overboard on its journey. David thinks that there could be trading in exotic animals in the UAE.

Report received from David Nam in Oman



Saltpan vegetation

The following are notes from an outing to the area around Ras Hisyan, along the coast between Jebel Ali Hotel and the Abu Dhabi border.

Caryophyllaceae (Carnations)

Sphaerocoma aucheri

Light green, globular, succulent leaves on distinctive pink stems.

Zygophyllaceae (Caltrop)

There is still considerable discussion regarding the taxonomy of this family. In the Liwa, for example, the author has noted two apparently distinct *Zygophyllum* spp., the difference between which was not attributable to the respective features of *Z. simplex* and *Z. hamiense* illustrated in Jongbloed (1987).

Western (1989) extends the numbers of *Zygophyllum* spp. occurring in the UAE to three with the addition of *Z. qatarense*. However, Mandaville (1990) suggests that in Eastern Saudi Arabia there may be intermediates and hybrids between the variously proposed *Z. hamiense*, *Z. qatarense* and *Z. mandavillei*. He argues that *Z. qatarense* is the characteristic *Zygophyllum* sp. of the Gulf coast, and that this rather variable species was previously attributed incorrectly to *Z. coccineum*.

One species of *Zygophyllum* was recorded at Ras Hisyan, probably tending more towards *Z. hamiense/qatarense* than *Z. simplex*.

Plumbaginaceae (Leadwort)

Limonium axillare

Small, salty leaves, preferring low sand dunes above salt pans rather than the pans themselves. Western reports that this species flowers Oct-April.

Tamaricaceae

Once again, positive field identification was not achieved with another of the region's more commonly occurring saline plants.

Where Jongbloed (1987) illustrates only *Tamarix aucherana* for the UAE, Mandaville lists seven species of *Tamarix* spp. occurring in Eastern Saudi Arabia. Western lists both *T. arabica* and *T. aucherana*, joining Mandaville in suggesting that *T. arabica* is the more common. Given the choice, we have opted for *T. arabica*.

Chenopodiaceae (Saltbushes)

This family includes some of the most typical of the saltpan species, yet presents many challenges for the taxonomist.

Mandaville suggests that the family should in fact be split into three families (Chenopodiaceae, Salsolaceae and Salicorniaceae), before going on to state that: "The saltbushes are difficult to key adequately because of their strong tendency to morphological convergence, often across generic and even family section lines".

Our experience at Ras Hisyan bore out the latter comment, with certain morphological features running between at least three of the species recorded.

Cornulaca monacantha

One of the more easily identifiable saltbushes, this species has an overall dry and prickly appearance quite unlike much of the rest of this family.

Halocnemum strobilaceum

This species usually adopts a very distinctive geometrical structure, with branches leaving the main stem in a neat, quadruple pattern. However, some specimens, assumed to be *H. strobilaceum*, were collected with longer, independently branching stems. Other specimens were hard to distinguish from what appeared to be younger specimens of *Halopeplis perfoliata*.

Halopeplis perfoliata

Known to the author by the field name 'Red pearls', this species may well be the origin of the village names 'Al Hamra', 'Al Hamriya' and 'Al Hamanriya' (all based on the Arabic word for 'red') so frequently encountered along the Gulf coast of the northern Emirates. One im-

pressive area of *H. perfoliata* to have so far avoided property developers' attention lies just south-west of Dubai Police College, and from the highway appears as a striking sea of red vegetation covering the sand. Specimens collected at Ras Hisyan ranged from those presumed to be more mature, featuring distended burgundy red 'pearls' surrounding the stems, to those exhibiting newer growth resembling stems of *Halocnemum strobilaceum*.

Salsola baryosma

While this species, according to most observers, is one of the more common components of the coastal environment from Umm Al Qaiwain southwards through the UAE, *Salsola baryosma* has only tentatively been identified by the author. Western (1989) reports a smell of rotten fish when the leaves are rubbed between the fingers – future fieldwork will take this advice into account.

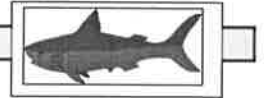
Suaeda vermiculata

A larger shrub, found at Ras Hisyan in sheltered coastal bays, on low sandy ground under the main line of dunes. While identification was clear, it was interesting to note the distension and yellowing of older leaves before final blackening, a morphological process similar to that of *Halopeplis perfoliata*. Despite the ease of identification of this species, a final trap still awaits the easily tongue-twisted saltbush taxonomist, who is urged to note with caution the existence of another quite separate saltbush species, *Salsola vermiculata*, listed in Mandaville (1990).

References:

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Jongbloed, M, 1991. The Green Guide to the Emirates, Motivate: Dubai
Mandaville, JP, 1990. Flora of Eastern Saudi Arabia, Kegan Paul: London
Western, RR, 1989. The Flora of the United Arab Emirates, UAE University: Abu Dhabi,

Report by Neil Curtis, 18.9.98



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Book Report

The Shell Birdwatching Guide to the United Arab Emirates by Colin Richardson and Simon Aspinall

First published 1998 by Hobby Publications, Liverpool & Dubai, with the support and encouragement of Shell.

This excellent pocket sized guide is a must for anyone visiting the Emirates for a Birdwatching visit, and for residents who are not yet familiar with the best viewing sites. In conjunction with other birding books for the area it forms a comprehensive picture of what can be seen here.

Not only does it cover such topics as travel information, dress code and health advice but also contains detailed directions to the 44 sites and the best means of transport to

reach them. The maps are clear and informative and the 8 pages of colour photographs are a pleasing example of the spectacular scenery to be found in the Emirates.

There is an extensive Species List at the back of the book, as well as an annotated checklist with site index and birding calendar.

Worth every penny of the Dhs 60, and available from Colin Richardson, c/o Hobby Publications, P O Box 50394, Dubai, UAE, and Magrudy's Bookshop in Jumeirah.

Report by Peter van Amsterdam

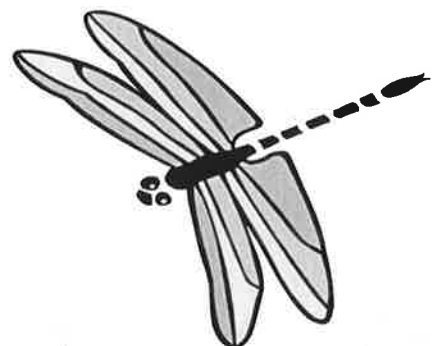
Dragonfly Video

Occasional visitor and amateur entomologist Graham Giles has kindly donated another natural history video to the DNHG library, this one featuring a compilation of UAE dragonflies and damselflies.

Turtle Watch

The following message is published at the request of the Government of Ras Al Khaimah: "The sardine fishermen operating on Rams Beach and elsewhere sometimes turn netted turtles on their backs and leave them to die. If you see such a turtle, check it.

"If it is still alive it can be turned over and got back into the sea. They often appear dead, so a careful look is necessary. It's very rewarding to save a turtle, though often hard work. They are heavy. If you can't manage on your own, please get help. It's an awful way to die."



GAZELLE

Dubai Natural History Group Program

Lectures at Jumeirah English Speaking School, 7.30pm for 8.00pm

- Nov. 8: **'UAE Ecosystems, Man's Impact and Management Techniques'**
- Dr Benno Boer (Note: this meeting is on the *second* Sunday of the month)
- Dec. 6: **Arabic Food and Arabic Cooking**
- Phillip Iddison

Field Trips - further details to be announced (DNHG members only, please. Details inside)

- Oct. 22: **Stargazing**
- A guided tour of the Fall sky
- Oct. 29: **Ras Al-Hadd**
- An expedition to the easternmost tip of Arabia.
- Nov. 6: **Mountain Hike in Wadi Haqil, RAK**
- A scenic and dramatic introduction to hiking in the Ru'us Al-Jibal
- Nov. 13: **RAK Mangroves**
- A natural history excursion into the Heart of Darkness
- Nov. 20: **Fossil Hunting at Jebel Buhays**
- Investigate a tropical lagoon from the late Cretaceous

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