



# GAZELLE

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مجموعتنا دورية للتاريخ والطبيعي

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**Contributors—**

Thanks to the following for their contributions this month:

Gary Feulner, Sonja Lavrenčič, Tamsin Carlisle, Barbara Couldrey, Francesca Elena Mitta, Angela Manthorpe, Helga and Willy Meyer

Send in your contributions by 25th February, for the attention of:

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**A Rare Find!**

Photo: *Orobanche aegyptiaca* from Wadi Ghalilah. The flowers show the diagnostic pair of white stripes on the lower lip. (Photo by Angela Manthorpe)

*Orobanche aegyptiaca* Redux

2019 was evidently the year of the parasitic *Orobanche aegyptiaca*. Harold Bekker's photo in the April 2019 *Gazelle*, from the Huweilat area near Hatta, was only the second documented occurrence of this species within the UAE (the first was also a DNHG record from years ago by former Field Trip Coordinator Martina Fella). Harold's recent record focused the attention of sharp-eyed UAE plant aficionados and resulted in additional records from the Ru'us al-Jibal (the mountains of the Musandam peninsula) evidencing a very broad elevation range for *O. aegyptiaca*.

(Continued on page 4)

**Crab feasts on dead octopus!**

See story on page 6



© Sonja Lavrenčič

## Announcements and Recorders

### Monthly Speaker - Sunday, 2nd February, 2020

**Lecture Title:** "Sharjah Architecture Triennial, Edition 1:  
Rights of Future Generations"

**Speaker:** **Mahnaz Fancy - Communications & External Relations Manager,  
Sharjah Architecture Triennial.**

Mahnaz will speak about the overarching themes of the Triennial and how those connect with the mission of this latest cultural platform in the Emirate of Sharjah.

Raised in Karachi, Paris, Abu Dhabi and New York, Mahnaz is the Communications & External Relations Manager at Sharjah Architecture Triennial and a cultural critic with over 15 years of experience in leading non-profit institutions. After pursuing a PhD in Comparative Literature at the University of Chicago that concentrated on colonialism and aesthetics, she launched several initiatives for supporting contemporary arts communities in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia (MENASA). Most recently, she served as Executive Director of ArteEast, the leading US-based organization in the field. Working closely with local, regional, and international stakeholders from philanthropic, academic, and creative sectors, Mahnaz has organized exhibitions, festivals, conferences, professional workshops and public educational programs. She continues to write and speak on regional arts and their social impact in an interconnected world.



Common Five-ring Butterfly (*Ypthima baldus*), taken by Tamsin Carlisle in Nepal.

### DNHG Recorders

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### From the Editor:

Narrated by Jeremy Irons, 'The History of the Emirates' was televised in the UAE during December. Missing this 'trilogy' of documentaries due to travelling, I viewed the three episodes in-flight on my return to Dubai earlier this month.

Whilst each episode covers many aspects of natural, archaeological and cultural history, new technologies are also incorporated, including drone footage and motion graphic animation. The website states that it is now showing in 79 countries in 37 languages. Visit [www.historyoftheemirates.com](http://www.historyoftheemirates.com) for a sneak peek.

Former DNHG member, Narayan Karki kindly invited members to his daughter's wedding in Nepal this month. Despite much mist and rain, the celebrations went ahead. See Tamsin Carlisle's photographs leading up to this event, on the Spotlight page.

Now in its 10th year, The Emirates Airline Festival of Literature takes place next month. Primatologist, Jane Goodall starts off a busy week on 1st February, when she presents "A Reason for Hope." The main author programme, however, will take place over the following weekend. More details can be found at: <https://www.emirateslitfest.com/events-calendar/>  
Enjoy your read!



*Two young DNHG members enjoy a trip to the International Center for Biosaline Agriculture.*

*Photo by Francesca Elena Mitta*

### Shell information on facebook

Seashell expert and DNHG Recorder, Andrew Childs has set up a facebook group with seashell information from this region. Members are encouraged to share photos and have their shells identified through this medium.

Look for "Marine Mollusca of the Arabian Peninsula~A Malacological Confederated Group" or [click on this link](#)

# Spotlight!

## Birds, spotted at Khadadevi Rural Municipality Makadum, Nepal, by Tamsin Carlisle

Great Barbet (*Psilopogon virens*)



Speckled Piculet (*Picumnus innominatus*)

Cinereous Tit (*Parus cinereus*)



Himalayan Black-lored Tit (*Machlolophus xanthogenys*)

## Wedding Celebrations in Nepal, by Tamsin Carlisle



## DNHG trip to the Soil Museum, by Helga and Willy Meyer



# Field Clips and Obituaries

(Continued from page 1)

First, Angela Manthorpe reported another springtime record from the rocky slopes above Wadi Ghaililah, north of Ras Al-Khaimah, at an elevation of ca. 400-500 meters. Later, Gary Feulner recognized *O. aegyptiaca* in a January 2019 photo from near the highest point in the UAE, on the upper slopes of Jebel Jais at ca. 1800 meters. This highest record, however, was in an area of recent exotic plantings, raising at least the possibility that the several *Orobanche* plants present could have been introduced with foreign seed or soil.

As described in Marijcke Jongbloed's *Wild Flowers of the UAE*, *O. aegyptiaca* can be distinguished from the more common *O. cernua* by examining the flowers. In *O. aegyptiaca*, the tubular flower (corolla) of five purple-blue petals is marked on the interior by two conspicuous, broad, sub-parallel white stripes on the lower lip (see the cover photo by Angela).

Contribution by Gary Feulner and Angela Manthorpe

## Obituaries

It is with regret that we inform you of the passing of two people who connected strongly with nature and contributed much to educating others in their respective fields.

### In Memoriam: David Snelling

Our deepest condolences are expressed here for the family of David Snelling, who succumbed to a year-long illness on 26th November 2019.

He and his wife, Laura were active members of the DNHG. During his time in Dubai, David not only led field trips, but he also served on the Committee as the DNHG Bird Recorder.

After leaving the UAE in 2004, David became a volunteer guide at Kew Palace, where he is pictured here.



### In Memoriam: Jonathan Ali Khan

The DNHG pays its respects to Dubai wildlife filmmaker Jonathan Ali Khan, who died in early January at age 59. He was involved in many research and conservation projects during the course of a 25-year career in Dubai, where he also grew up. Probably his most famous work was the multi-part series called *Arabia's Cycles of Life*, produced for television and available on DVD, which took the popularization of Arabian wildlife from the books and field guides of the 1980s and 1990s into the visual, digital world of the 21st century. More recently he produced a documentary about Arabian sharks that was shown on the Discovery Channel. Much of the last year of his busy life, however, was devoted to the care of his wife, who was hospitalized in a coma following complications from a severe asthma attack, and died in July 2019. We extend our condolences to his extended family.



## Flower Meadows



Whilst on the subject of flowers, Barbara Couldrey, who lived in Ras Al Khaimah for many years and loved exploring the mountains, writes that readers may be interested in these floral photos.

The top photo is a dedicated wild flower meadow in a London Park. They appear in most London Boroughs and in urban areas around the United Kingdom. They provide a wonderfully cheerful sight and a great habitat for bees, birds, bugs, butterflies and many other species.



The second photo I took in February, 2007 on a terrace high up in the Ru'us al-Jibal after a wet autumn. It shows the rare *Adonis dentata* and *Roemaria hybrida*.

Contribution by Barbara Couldrey

## Field Clips

### Yellow Aphids

A few years ago, on a sweltering August day near the village of Hiluw, I encountered clusters of yellow-gold aphids on buds of the familiar Sodom's Apple plant, *Calotropis procera*, positioned as if they were waiting for the buds to open. I took a photo and resolved to investigate – someday.

Tiny insects are typically difficult to identify to species from photographs alone, so I expected that the task would be a protracted exercise. And in fact the chore would have remained on my "rainy day" list had I not seen the same aphids again in early December 2019, in company with Sharjah botanist Dr. Dave Aplin, on the native milkweed *Pergularia tomentosa*.

Dave recognized them and knew what I did not – that these particular insects, *Aphis nerii*, commonly known as milkweed aphids or oleander aphids – are both cosmopolitan (found worldwide in tropical and warm temperate regions) and well-studied, because they are pests of a number of ornamental plants.

Their preferred host plants are members of the families Apocynaceae (oleander, dogbane, etc.) and Asclepiadaceae (milkweeds) – both recently reclassified into a single family – and they are worthy of comment for a number of reasons. To begin with, their conspicuous color is probably intended as a warning that they are unpalatable due to the toxins that they imbibe from their host plants. They are avoided by most bird species and spiders, although they are nevertheless preyed on or parasitized by a number of insect species.

More unusually, males of this species are unknown in the wild. All adults are females and they reproduce by parthenogenesis; the young are clones of unfertilized females. Furthermore, the young are deposited as nymphs, not eggs, and the nymphs develop through several moults (instars) directly into adults, without a pupal stage. Most adults are wingless (apterous), but winged (alate) adults may also develop, especially under conditions of overcrowding or when the host plants are senescent (aging or dying). This facilitates migration to new host plants.

The principal damage that these aphids cause to host plants is aesthetic, but they can multiply rapidly and they feed colonially, and repeated infestations can result in stunted plant growth. They are also capable of transmitting certain plant viruses. Additional information can be found online, for example at this University of Florida website: [http://entnemdept.ufl.edu/creatures/orn/shrubs/oleander\\_aphid.htm](http://entnemdept.ufl.edu/creatures/orn/shrubs/oleander_aphid.htm)

Contribution by Gary Feulner with thanks to Dr. Dave Aplin



Yellow aphids *Aphis nerii* on a *Calotropis procera* bud



*Aphis nerii* on stem of *Pergularia tomentosa*

## Field Clips

### Out of season paper nautilus on UAE beaches

**A**t the end of December, just before New Year, I went on one of my usual beach walks. I didn't expect to find much. It was more about being outdoors, walking, enjoying the weather and the beach.

To my surprise, within the first hour or so, I found a complete, fresh paper nautilus at the high tide line, semi-interred in the sand. A few meters further on there was another one and, a bit further, one more. Three paper nautilus within 10 m of the beach in December? Usually we go 'hunting' for fragile, paper thin, delicately crafted shells in March or April and usually we find one or two per season, if any. The last few years were particularly meagre, I found my last ones some 5 years ago...

For those less familiar with shelling and beach finds, paper nautilus *Argonauta* species, are not really nautilus but



octopuses. Paper-thin, white, grey or beige with brown and black enhanced ridges, these calcareous 'shells' are not related to shells either; they are egg cases made by *Argonauta* females only. The female lives in the shell's entry and guards the eggs until the young hatch. After which the discarded empty shell drifts to the shore. Once on the beach these fragile shells get quickly bleached and crushed. Fresh, undamaged nautilus are therefore prized, relatively rare finds and March - April beach expeditions are the best time to find freshly discarded shells.

While I was trying to get my head around these unseasonal finds, elaborating different amateur hypotheses like global warming that made octopuses speed up the cycle and the young hatch a few months early, I found a few more, all fresh, just beached, intact specimens. A total of 6 within 2 hours of beach walk. How, why? I have never found more than one or two on a lucky day and in my 15 years of shelling in the UAE I have collected maybe a total of ten specimens, some of them damaged.

Even rarer than paper nautilus finds are the sightings of live Argonauts: they are open-ocean cephalopods of subtropical and tropical seas. They are one of the most sexually dimorphic



cephalopods. Females are considerably larger than males, live longer and produce many times, while males are tiny and are thought to reproduce only once. *A. argo* females continue to grow and reproduce after spawning, while males die after the loss of their hectocotylized third arm that serves for fertilization

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## Field Clips

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and which the female cuts off in the process and stores it in her mantle cavity.

Due to their pelagic (i.e. away from coast and sea bottom) habitat and the fact that they don't seem to survive in captivity, not much is known about this prehistorical 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.

Therefore my next find was so much more astonishing and while it still didn't give an explanation to why, it at least gave a context to what is happening...

In the middle of the intertidal area, still wet from retreating water I found a beached Argonauta, a paper nautilus with a (barely alive) octopus inside, still guarding the bag of unhatched eggs. Although I'm usually against any form of interventionism in nature, the still moving octopus prompted me to an impromptu rescue attempt. Twice I took the octopus and its eggshell back in to the water, as deep as I could without getting completely soaked, hoping that it will float away, or (with my human self-preserving logic) at least drop the case and save itself for future procreation.

In the second attempt I accidentally dunked my 'phone into the water and for a couple of minutes I shifted my attention to saving the 'phone. When I got back, the octopus was already gnawed at by two crabs, missing some of the tentacles while still clutching the egg case with the others. One crab let go but the other worked deep into the octopus – and that was the end of it. It all left me strangely sad. Usually I'm ecstatic when I find a paper nautilus. And so many intact ones are every beachcombers dream. But it just didn't feel right.

It didn't end there. My next find was a big, grey specimen of paper nautilus, approx. 10 cm, next to a ghost crab hole with a sack of eggs still attached inside, obviously saved for the crab's next lunch.

And then more and more nautilus further down the beach, some just washed out, varying in size from the above mentioned 10 cm to the smallest of 4 cm, all fresh and perfect. I kept finding them, a total of 12, until dusk chased me away – so I can only imagine how many more were beached that day...

When cleaning them at home I realized that most of them had remains of unhatched eggs still inside.

Of course I had to go and check the beach a few days later, as soon as I could. I found the same situation but to a lesser extent: 8 perfect fresh specimens, 2 damaged and 2 fragmented, indicating another two beached nautilus. Midwinter, in two separate days within less than a week on one singular beach, I found 24 paper nautilus. My guess is, that

these were all unhatched, beached, eaten by predators. But why? What would cause it?

Researching further, I discovered that mass strandings of Argonauta are not that uncommon: In 1982 an estimated 6,300 female argonauts (*A. argo*) weighing some 600 kilograms were caught in coastal set nets in the western Japan Sea over a two-week period.

Mass strandings of argonaut females have also been reported from a number of Australian coastal localities such as Port Phillip Bay and Corner Inlet in Victoria, Thistle Island and Yorke Peninsula in South Australia, Montague Island and Narooma in New South Wales and Flinders Island in Tasmania. A fellow DNHG sheller later told me about at least two mass beach strandings of Argonauta in UAE in the last 10 years.

The reasons are still unknown, hypotheses include particular



Total finds in two days amounted to 22 paper nautilus © Sonja Lavrenčič

combinations of winds and tides, or argonauts following krill schools. Suggestions of a seven-year cycle in these strandings are not supported as these animals are likely to have a life span much shorter than seven years.

I have, however, also found a rather alarming paper explaining how "the pelagic life-habit of these cephalopods makes them particularly vulnerable to ocean acidification. Unlike an internal skeleton, which can be protected from seawater while still needed, the Argonauta egg case is exposed to sea water from inception. These egg cases, unprotected by mucous or epithelium, with high surface-area and low volume, and presumably without the capacity to adjust to a less soluble carbonate mineral, are exceptionally vulnerable to dissolution as ocean pH decreases (\*)".

And this might be the real bad news, not only for the paper nautilus, but potentially also for all molluscs excreting those beautiful, perfect, colorful calcium carbonate forms called shells – and finally for our planet as such.

Contribution by Sonja Lavrenčič

(\*) From: Proceedings of the 12th International Coral Reef Symposium, Cairns, Australia, 9-13 July 2012, full paper available here: [http://www.icrs2012.com/proceedings/manuscripts/ICRS2012\\_8A\\_1.pdf](http://www.icrs2012.com/proceedings/manuscripts/ICRS2012_8A_1.pdf)

## Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) Programme

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

- February 2:** Mahnaz Fancy will present an illustrated talk on "Sharjah Architecture Triennial, Edition 1: Rights of Future Generations"
- March 1:** Petra Walker will present an illustrated talk on "The Southern Ocean: Where land and sea meet"
- April 12** Peter de Geest will present an illustrated talk on "Some results of 20 years cave and karst exploration on Socotra island: From biodiversity, over cultural heritage, water management, towards regional regreening projects"

### Scheduled Field Trips (Members only):

- February 1:** DNHG Trip to Suwaidi Pearls Farm
- July 30 - August 6** DNHG Trip to Northern Sumatra

*Field trip details will be circulated to members via e-mail*

## DNHG COMMITTEE 2019

When possible, please contact committee members outside office hours

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## DNHG Membership

Membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at Dh100 for families and Dh50 for singles. Membership is valid from September 2019 to September 2020. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to Emirates NBD account number 1012012013302. (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: AE640260001012012013302. However, this process does not always identify the payer. So if you wish to pay by cash deposit, please also photograph or scan a copy of your payment confirmation and send via e-mail 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.