

GAZELLE

Vol 15 no 6 June 2000



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Summer time

Donna Simon joins the ranks of those leaving us this summer. Donna and her husband will be returning to the New World, maybe Florida maybe Venezuela – sunny climes in either case. We wish her well and know she will continue to explore the great outdoors.

Jan Denning our Field Trip Coordinator has decided to step down from the Committee. Our thanks to Jan for all her efforts over the past seven months.

DNHG Chairman **Gary Feulner** had the opportunity to tour Iran recently, with an itinerary that included many historical and cultural sites on the central plateau as well as hiking in the central Zagros Mountains. He kept an eye on the wildlife and environment and the first part of his report is on Page 2.

Editor **Anna Griffin** recently spent some time in Nepal, climbing up to the Annapurna Base Camp. For one who is nervous of heights, water and snow this was quite an achievement. Her report is on Page 5.



Evening Visitors to Sabtan

Robert Lewellyn Smith and Marijke Jongbloed drove up Wadi Bih to visit the village of Sabtan at the top of the pass and admire the views. After looking round the village they stopped to meet an old friend called Hassan (the sole occupant of the village). It was about 7pm and prayers had just finished when a hedgehog came into the wire enclosure and started sniffing about. It was joined by another and then another. It transpired that each evening Hassan puts out water and dates for the hedgehogs to feed on. Before long in the torch light they counted 30 Brandt's hedgehogs! They were amazed! Hassan claims that one group follows another with the last leaving at sunrise and that this number each night can reach 400.

N.B. Robert and Marijke discussed the number of 400 and suspect that it may be the same hedgehogs coming at least twice to be fed. But that still leaves an awful lot of hedgehogs! Robert also mentioned that he often finds hedgehog skins with the insides eaten by a predator. So supporting the hedgehog population may help the predators too!

Report by Robert Lewellyn Smith

DNHG Membership

DNHG membership remains a bargain at Dhs 50 (singles or couples). You can join or renew at meetings (see Membership Secretary Fi Skennerton) or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account no 73746. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG).

Memberships taken out from June to August will be valid for the coming membership year (September 2000 to September 2001).

DNHG membership entitles you to participate in field trips and helps pay for our lecture hall, publication and distribution of our monthly newsletter, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects.



This month's Contributors

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

Gary Feulner
Anna Griffin
Robert Lewellyn Smith
Anne Millen



AN OMANI EXPERIENCE

Please note change of date to:
11/12 October

In order to forge closer links with Members of the Muscat Historical Association, we are planning a joint venture on the 11th/12th October to visit Ras al Had beach, the site where Green Turtles can be seen nesting. Perhaps some hatchlings will also oblige by appearing at the same time. We have arranged our weekend to start on the Wednesday evening, with an Omani meal plus traditional music, at the beautiful penthouse flat of Siw Rantapoo. Siw has 10 rooms available for bed and breakfast at very reasonable prices. On Thursday we shall be camping on the beach. Ras al Had is a 5 hour drive from Muscat, and 4 wheel drives are needed. It is a long journey, but well worth it!

If you are interested in putting your name down for this trip please contact Vicky Burrowood 3422546 e-mail mikemary@emirates.net.ae or Pi Skonerton 3557760 e-mail skonert@mkiicubai.co.ae

15 passes will be available for our group. We shall have a guide with us to tell us all about the life cycle of the turtles. A true adventure is promised!

Iran Natural History

Gary I-tahior reports

Researchers in various fields have remarked that the flora and fauna of the Hajar Mountains (and in particular the mountains of the Rufus al-Jibal -- the Musandam Peninsula) are more closely related to the flora and fauna of Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan than they are to the flora and fauna of Dhofar, Yaman, the 'Asir and other mountainous areas of the Arabian Peninsula.

Plants. The central plateau of Iran, where major cities such as Tehran, Esfahan and Kerman are located, has an average elevation in excess of 3000 ft. It is dotted with hills and

mountains and in many places bears a physical resemblance to the mountain front of the UAE and Oman, except that it is more vast. The same is true of parts of the Zagros Mountains. The famous Achaemenian ruins at Persepolis, for example, are set among limestone and dolomite cliffs and plateaux that recall those of the Rufus al-Jibal. Since in many instances I was only some 500 km from the Musandam, I hoped and expected to encounter at least a few "old friends" among the flora.

As it happened, I did find what seemed to be a few familiar species, but only a few -- the saltbush *Anabasis setifera* (a coastal species in the UAE), *Ephedra pachyclada* (also known from Pakistan), the spiny *Astragalus fasciculifolius* (but only with white "lampions"), the wild caper *Capponis spinosa* (which was in flower), and possibly *Corydalis uliginosa*. Otherwise, for the most part, the local and lower montane fauna looked "similar, but different." There were many more apparent generic affinities, such as *Helictropium*, *Indigofera*, *Echinops*, *Salvia*, *Thymus*, small *Artemisia* and many spiny Compositae, but not the species I know from the UAE. With hindsight I am inclined to attribute this to the relatively high elevation and colder winters of the central plateau, relative to the UAE and Oman.

Legumes were common, perhaps not surprisingly, since their ability to fix nitrogen is probably a great advantage in a nutrient-poor environment. As in the UAE, plants in Iran are subject to heavy grazing pressure from goats and sheep herded by nomadic tribes. They must also be adapted to an arid climate. Thus the most common plants are typically spiny and/or have small or succulent-like leaves.

The central plateau is in fact an undulating surface, never out of view of mountains, and main roads rise almost imperceptibly to as high as 8,000 ft. Thus the vegetation is sometimes seen to change without apparent explanation as one drives along. Pistachios, which grow on 1-1/2 meter bushes, are extensively cultivated on the central plateau, and

are a major Iranian export.

Our hiking was at 8,000-9,000 ft. in the central Zagros, west of Fakhlan. This was just below the snowline and the vegetation there was, not surprisingly, very different from the Hajar Mountains. The Zagros receive more precipitation but the species present must be able to survive freezing temperatures, winter snow, and heavy seasonal grazing. There were no trees, and flatter areas were dominated by a single spiny, flat-topped leguminous shrub that resembles a mini version of our own *Acacia tortilis*.

Yellow and pink wildflowers -- lilies, daisies and clover -- were locally common. A shrub resembling a wild rose flowered a vivid pink where it was protected from grazing. Overgrazed plateau surfaces were crisscrossed by extensive networks of steep gulleys. Two types of wild onions now grow especially well on rocky floodplains along the rivers in this area, cleared for agriculture at some time in the past, leaving rock mounds and walls. The smaller of the two onions is regularly collected by both settled and nomadic Bakhtiars.

At lower elevations in the Zagros (4,000-7,000 ft.), mountain slopes supported trees including olives and willows, while fruit trees (plum, apricot and apple) and pomegranates were cultivated on slopes and terraces within the floodplains.

The second part of this article about the birds, reptiles, butterflies, snails and mammals will appear in July/August edition of Gazelle.





Bat Cave Scouted

Gary Feulner, Helen Emery and John Marin descended briefly from Nick Hopper's March field trip to reconnoiter a large cave in Wadi Naqur. The cave had been noticed years earlier by former DNHG member Marin Parker, but was not investigated. Exploring with flashlights, they found the cave to be a tunnel sloping uphill for some 30 metres or more, consisting of two main living-room size chambers separated by a low passageway, and ending in a narrow "hallway" before tapering down to a crawlspace. Beyond the initial chamber, the air in the cave was hot and humid, estimated at 90+ degrees F (32+ degrees C) and 100% humidity.

The floor of the cave was mostly covered in fine dust. Dozens of unidentified small bats were present, perched on the roof of the low passageway and the interior chambers. A number of these look flight when disturbed. Also present were a smaller number (perhaps 5-6) of larger bats having an estimated wingspan of about 10 inches. These were presumed to be Egyptian fruit bats. The skeletons of one or more dead goats and a dead donkey were found in the inner chamber, as well as a deserted nest of Arabian paper wasps and numerous mud nests of potter wasps.

It is proposed to visit the cave again with proper equipment and in company with more experienced cavers in order to investigate more thoroughly and knowledgeably.

Chukar

Thanks again to Catherine Al-Halyan, this time for close up photos of the Chukar, courtesy of the Sharjah animal souk. The Chukar *Alectoris chukar* is a member of the partridge family and has a distinctive black "head-dress" and an attractive vertically striped "vest." It is found in the UAE only at higher elevations in the Ru'us Al-Jibal, a biogeographically typical extension of its range in the mountains of the Levant, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is heard as often as it is seen, and its gregarious

cucking is one of the more pleasant sounds of the Musandam area, along with the melodic song of Hume's Whoopoe and the occasional cuckoo. The Chukar is said to be common as a cage bird and early reports considered its presence in the Ru'us Al-Jibal to be attributable to the release of captives, although this view has been abandoned.

Scorpions Afoot: Murphy muelts Houdini!

Murphy's law applies in natural history no less than in other areas of life. Steve Green and Gary Feulner recently collected several scorpions from the Masaf area for the purpose of conveying them to an expert in the United States for full identification. Available guides permit the conclusion that they are Diplocentrids, a family only recently known to be represented in the UAE.

Three of the scorpions were placed in a single plastic container, along with a comfortable bed of dirt and dried grass, and Gary took them home. The container was 4 cm high, much taller than any of the scorpions could reach, and scorpions cannot climb smooth walls such as plastic or glass. Gary recognized the possibility that, in theory, at least one of the three scorpions could escape by climbing atop the other two, but observation suggested that there was little chance of this happening. And so, on the second night at home the soft-hearted Chairman of the screw top open and slightly ajar, to allow the scorpions to get more air.

Possibly it should have been kept more firmly in mind that scorpions are nocturnal, i.e. they are active primarily at night. In the morning, when Gary checked again before heading off to work, the largest scorpion was still on the bottom of the container. The middle size one, however, was hanging by its claws from the inside of the rim (grinning?). The smallest one was nowhere to be seen, and, given the

opportunities for concealment on Gary's desk, had to be left for blacklighting practice after dark (scorpions fluoresce in UV light).

Gary suggests (from experience?) that manipulations, transfers etc. of live scorpions at home are best conducted over a white, tiled kitchen floor, or better still a large porcelain mixing bowl, so that if any slip-ups occur the scorpions can be easily seen and can't get away or get good traction.

Yellow-Headed "Hornet"

Thanks to Colin Haskins for noticing and collecting an unusual wasp that overstayed its visit to his balcony. It looks like a somewhat enlarged version of the red-brown and yellow *Vespa orientalis*, the local hornet that has been known to ape many a wadi picnic, except that it has a yellow head marked only by dark eye spots and a pair of formidable curved jaws.

A number of wasps exhibit a similar colour pattern of yellow heads and a red-brown body. This phenomenon is known as Mullerian mimicry. It was first postulated by Fritz Muller that the development of common colour patterns by several species, all of which are unpleasant, benefits them because potential predators have only to learn a single "warning" signal, and therefore learn it more quickly. Several *Vespa orientalis* look-alikes are depicted in Insects of Eastern Arabia, but none has a yellow head.

Colin's specimen now resides in the DNHG's insect collection, most of which was contributed by Carolyn Lehmann, one of the DNHG's two Life Members.

Reports by Gary Feulner





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(see above)

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 exchanged through the *Guide* editor, so new information can be shared with all our readers.

It's Henna Blossom Time

Henna blossom is one of the delights of summer in Dubai. If you are muttering that there are certainly not many, do not miss this one. It is lovely.

The fragrant Henna tree, *Lawsonia inermis* L., is one of the 500 species within the family of Lythraceae native to northern Africa, Asia and Australia. Although it originates in the temperate zone, it is a hardy perennial shrub and has been naturalised and cultivated in the tropics of the Americas, Australia, India, Egypt and the Middle East. It is sometimes classified as *Lawsonia Alba* or *Lawsonia Rubra*, and is often colloquially called Egyptian Priest or Mignonette tree.

Henna has clusters of tiny white or rose-red flowers with a strong sweet scent reminiscent of the tiny annual Mignonette that is sometimes found in cottage flower beds in Australia and elsewhere. The variety grown in Dubai seems to be the Alba, the white one. The trees commence flowering in this area around June, and continue through the hottest months until September.

The tree itself is a scraggy affair, with a tangled canopy of fine leaves ideal for survival in desert conditions. The reported life zone of henna is 15 to 27 degrees centigrade with an annual rainfall of 0.2 to 4.2 metres, and a soil pH of 4.3 to 8.0. Although it is generally described as a shrub, it can reach a height of up to 6 metres.

The dried powdered leaves contain 0.5 to 1.5% lawsone, the chief constituent responsible for the ability to produce colourfast orange, red and brown dyes. Henna also contains mannite, tannic acid, mucilage, gallic acid, and naphthaquinone. It has been used since ancient times to dye hair, nails and skin, and a greater colour range was sometimes obtained by mixing it with indigo (*Indigofera*) or other plant material. To be made a more permanent dye, the pH must be about 5.5, achiev-

able by adding citric or boric acid. In the modern world is widely used in hair shampoos, conditioners, and rinses, and in wood stains, fabric and textile dyes.

Henna has had many medicinal uses as well. It was used for its astringent, anti-haemorrhagic, gastrointestinal anti-neoplastic, cardio-inhibitory, hypotensive and sedative effects and as a folk remedy for amoebiasis, headache, jaundice, leprosy and emenorrhoea. This dizzying list may tell us more about the lack of alternative treatments than it does about henna! Henna extracts do show antibacterial, anti-fungal and UV light screening activity, so painting your finger and toe nails and the soles of your feet might be a good idea.

There are quite a few examples of henna trees around Dubai, but they were usually grown out of sight in the courtyards of old Arabic houses. The easiest one to identify and smell is the lone, lovely tree in the courtyard of the Majlis Gallery, on Al Fahidi roundabout in Bur Dubai. As you step through the tunnel like door into the courtyard, the sweet fragrance makes the hot air do light!

Simon, J L, Chadwick, A F and Craker J E. 1984. *Herbs: An indexed Bibliography 1971-1985 The Scientific Literature on Selected Herbs, and Aromatic and Medicinal Plants of the Temperate Zone*. Archon Books, 770pp, Hamden, CT.

Accessed on the Internet at: www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/med-aroc/featsheets/HENNA.html

Report by Anne Millen

E-mail your reports to griff@emirates.net.ae, (Arial 10 justified) or deliver them on floppy disk at monthly meetings.



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Exploring the mountains of Nepal

To see the majestic Annapurnas at dawn, from the Base Camp, is awe-inspiring. Crossing landfalls, avalanches and raging torrents of pale green water Anna Griffin and her colleagues reached a height of 4130 metres. Spring had just arrived in the Himalayan range with the sound of cuckoos, and the sight of red rhododendrons (the national flower), magnolias, wild orchids, strawberries and lavender primulae all in flower. Golden eagles and buzzards soared on the thermals, there are many sizes of raptor here and it was difficult to identify them all. There was a first sighting of a pair of ashy drongos, a streaked spiderhunter, and a blue whistling thrush. There were dippers, white capped water redstart, and a plumbeous water redstart fishing in the rivers and a magpie robin at a shop front in Pokhara, as well as

the usual LBJ's. There were plenty of frogs in the water channels alongside the footpaths and bright red and blue dragonflies were observed in the lower regions following heavy rainfall. Unfortunately for the environment all rubbish is thrown over the side of the mountains and there are signs everywhere 'please take your rubbish home with you', though few visitors do so.

Report by Anna Griffin

Bird Watch for May

Dubai has shown a touch of exoticism during May according to the *Twitchers' Guide*, when a male white winged widowbird, a southern red bishop, a spotted munia, a Brahminy mynah and a nest-building streaked weaver were all seen in Safa Park. A ferruginous cuckoo was spotted on the boating lake. The roads around the lake have been the place to see the red bishops for a few years now.

At Dubai Crooksida Park there were two golden orioles, a European roller, a red throated pipit and a female Northern wheatear. A river warbler (3rd record) was caught by a cat in a garden in Jebel Ali. Fortunately it was rescued and released, minus a few feathers.

From Abu Dhabi's Khalidiya Palace Hotel came reports of the golden-backed weaver colony in the eucalyptus trees with at least 7 active nests. At the Al Wathba came back the first marsh warbler of the season was recorded as well as three pairs of breeding avocets, black winged stilts and Kentish plovers also breeding. In Mushrif Palace Gardens, a nightingale was recorded. *The above report is taken from Twitchers' Guide, edited by Simon Aschali and Peter Hellyer, PO Box 45553, Abu Dhabi. e.mail: hellyer@emirates.net.ae*

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Dubai Natural History Group Programme

Lectures at Jumelrah English Speaking School, Gymnasium 7.30 pm for 8.00 pm

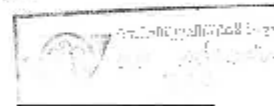
Sep 17 Peter Cunningham - Adaptations of Desert Mammals/Reptiles

Oct 1 Kathy Bird - The Dhofar Region of Oman

Field Trips (DNHG members only, please).

Oct 1-12 An Omani Experience
From Muscat to Ras al Hed Beach where Green Turtles lay their eggs

There are many exciting trips planned for the Autumn. Details will be published in the July/August newsletter—so watch this space!



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