



GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

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Contributors—

Thanks to the following for their contributions this month:

Esmat Elhassan, Cheryl Robertson, Hilary Holloway, Margaret Swan, Gary Feulner, Binish Roobas, Sergey Irgashev and Lesley Murphy

The July and August issue will be combined. Send your contributions to:

gazelleeditor@gmail.com

by 25th August, 2019

Read about these colourful birds on page 6 (photo by Cheryl Robertson)



Success at Reserve

The first successful breeding attempt of White-tailed Lapwing (*Vanellus leucurus*) in the Al Marmoom Desert Conservation Reserve (Al Qudra lakes)

Observer: Esmat Elhassan, Dubai Municipality

Observation Dates: 29th April, 2019 (initial bird sighting) 11th May (eggs in nest)

Whilst studying the breeding birds in Al Marmoom Desert Conservation Reserve during the breeding season 2019 (summer) we came across a pair of White-tailed Lapwing (*Vanellus leucurus*) close to other breeding species like Red-wattled Lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*) and Black-winged Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*).

The daily observation from the team showed that the pair were staying in the same area and we had a strong feeling that they were going to start breeding. Subsequently the nest was found on 11 May with three eggs under the shade of the Acacia trees on an island within the lakes area



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Announcements and Recordors

**Monthly Speaker -
Sunday, 15th September, 2019**

There will be no lectures during July and August

Lecture Title: "The Status & Conservation Of Terrestrial Herpetofauna in the UAE"

Biography: Johannes Els

Johannes Els is the Head of the Herpetology and Freshwater Fish department at the Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife/ Environment and Protected Area's Authority of Sharjah over the last 10 years where he is involved in various conservation projects both in situ and ex situ throughout the Arabian Peninsula. He authored and co-authored several peer reviewed scientific papers including the IUCN Red List on the conservation status and distribution of reptiles of the Arabian Peninsula.

Johannes is a member of the Middle East and North African IUCN/SSC viper specialist group, IUCN West Asia amphibian specialist group and the IUCN SSC/WI freshwater fish specialist group. He assisted with various nature documentaries such as Wild Arabia (BBC 2013), Arabian Inferno (Blink Films 2017), Wild Dubai (Plimsoll Productions 2018) and Dead by Dawn (National Geographic 2019).

About the talk:

The United Arab Emirates contains a diversity of desert habitats with 62 species of terrestrial herpetofauna currently recorded, with three of these considered to be present in the UAE as a result of introduction. Among the 62 confirmed species and subspecies present within the UAE, one terrestrial species is now considered to be endemic to the UAE (*Asaccus caudivolvulus*), 13 species are endemic to the Hajar Mountain range (shared with Oman) and there are 20 species that are endemic to the Arabian Peninsula. Of the 59 species of terrestrial herpetofauna considered native to the UAE, three species are Critically Endangered, six species Vulnerable, one species Near Threatened, 45 species Least Concern, and four species Data Deficient. Habitat loss remains the overriding threat to terrestrial herpetofauna, particularly the conversion of land to urban areas.

From the Editor:

This has been a quiet month trip-wise with the outside temperature and humidity soaring. However, nature carries on regardless and observations at Al Qudra reveal a rare sighting (cover feature).

Meanwhile, Red Kites are sighted in England (page 5). Also in England, an abundance of migratory birdlife was observed on Northumberland offshore islands.

Back in Dubai, read about local flying insects on page 3.

Wherever you go this summer (perhaps you are staying in the UAE) why not share your wildlife photos with our readers. We would love to see them.

Enjoy your read!



Departing for pastures greener? Send your summer contributions to the Gazelle for the July/August issue.

Online resource launched!

Researchers, academics and students alike can now access a new database. The National Archives of the United Arab Emirates was set up by the Ministry of Presidential Affairs. From documents to photographs, this historical resource has been made available for all.

Visit <https://www.agda.ae/> to explore the region's historical records. There are tips on how to search the site but please read the 'Terms and Conditions' for the correct protocol of usage.

DNHG Recordors

Reptiles - Dr. Reza Khan
050 6563601

Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi
res: 06-5310467 off: 06-5583 003
lankefi@emirates.net.ae

Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi (contact as above)

Geology - Gary Feulner
res: 04 306 5570
grfeulner@gmail.com

Insects - Binish Roobas
050 243 8737
johanrphus@hotmail.com

Fossils - Valerie Chalmers
res: 04 4572167
mobile: 050 8305018 email:
valeriechalmers@gmail.com

Plants - Valerie Chalmers
(contact as above)

Archaeology - Anelisa Lambert
056 6904508
anelisalambert@gmail.com

Seashells - Andrew Childs
050 4590112
andrew.childs@eim.ae

Bird Recorder— Panos Azmanis
050 7083555
azmanis.vet@gmail.com

Mammals—Jacky Judas
04 354 9776
050 6181026
jjudas@enwwf.ae

Spotlight!

This month Spotlight focuses on an unusual moth and a bee colony



Eastern Death's Head Moth

Binish Roobas confirmed the identification of a Death's Head Moth, which was found by Lesley Murphy in her bedroom.

Gary Feulner was also contacted earlier this month with another sighting by Sergey Irgashev around the villas in Madinat Jumeirah.

Gary explains that *'this moth is one of the UAE's largest and has an interesting story.'*

The name "Death's Head" refers to the mark on the back of the head, which looks like a skull. It can also make a sound like a chirp. The scientific name is Acherontia styx; in Greek mythology, "styx" is the river that flows through the Underworld.



This species is not rare, but they are nocturnal (like most moths) so we don't normally see them by day unless they are injured or sick or cold or wet (such as after storms).

Their caterpillars eat plants from the tomato family (which includes many poisonous species) but at Madinat Jumeirah they are probably using one of the hedge plants, Clerodendron inerme, which has medium size white flowers with thin petals.'

Photographs of the moth with wings extended and at rest at the Madinat can be seen below.

Contributors are Gary Feulner, Binish Roobas, Sergey Irgashev and Lesley Murphy



Flight of the honey bee!

The host branch holding the honeycomb was just below an upstairs bedroom window, pushing strongly and menacingly against the wall. It needed to be lopped and now that the bees had left it was time for action! A visit from bee experts confirmed that the honeycomb had been abandoned so a team of tree loppers were called in.

Appearing two years ago, this was the second such disc-shaped honeycomb in our garden, the first being quite low down and close to the ground. (See *Gazelle - July/August 2017—Abuzz aboard a bougainvillea*). I assumed this was the same colony which had migrated beyond the reach of ground-based

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Field Clips

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predators.

Apis florea, an Asiatic dwarf honey bee is native to the UAE. Knowing very little about bees, it was puzzling to observe the differing sizes of hexagonal cells (see the main photo on page 3). This subsequently prompted many questions. Did a larger species muscle in? Could it be something to do with food source? Would lack of nutrition over the summer for example, affect how big the next generation could grow?

One research paper found online reveals that this particular honey bee varies in size. (Ruttner, F & Mossadegh, Mohammad & Kauhausen-Keller, D. (1995). *Distribution and variation of size of Apis florea F in Iran*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1051/apido:19950604>. 26. 10.1051/apido:19950604.) Data studied from 15 different sites compare bee size in mountainous and coastal regions. However, this variance in bee size over a large area cannot be compared with our one honeycomb housing different sized cells.

Regretting the fact that I forgot to place something on the photos for scale, Wikipedia provided statistics on the cell size of each *type* of bee in the same colony. It would seem then, that this is the the most probable explanation. Drones are larger than worker bees and therefore, drone larvae would possibly require a larger cell.

Photos below show a cross section of the comb and one of the edges of it. Note how precisely and neatly sealed together they are.

More information on local bees can be found on the Beekeeping Association's website:

<http://www.beekeepersassociation.ae/all-about-the-honeybees-in-the-uae.html>

(Contribution by M. Swan)



(Continued from page 1)

surrounded by short vegetation. Shortly afterwards the clutch increased to four eggs.

The bird built his nest on the ground making depressions and used the surrounding twigs for nest-lining. Like other lapwings, the normal clutch size for *Vanellus leucurus* is 4 eggs—very similar to those of *Vanellus indicus* with black spots but smaller in size. The eggs were numbered, measured and floated. Then we placed temperature loggers to check the nest temperate and humidity.

All eggs were successfully hatched on 7th June 2019 with an incubation period of 28 days. The incubation period is normally affected by a disturbance level on the nest which leads to an increase or decrease in the incubation period. We hope that the chicks can survive to reach maturity but the predation is high in the area based on our study of Red-wattled Lapwing where predation can reach over 60% on chicks. The main predators are avian species like Common Myna (*Acridotheres tristis*), Brown-necked Raven (*Corvus ruficollis*), Marsh Harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*), Grey Shrike (*Lanius meridionalis meridionalis*), Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) and others.

Al Marmoom Desert Conservation Reserve became the most hospitable place in UAE for breeding birds, especially the lakes area where thousands of trees were planted. The trees provide good nesting sites for passerines beside the importance of the lakes for breeding waterbirds, especially the ground nesting. Waterbirds observed breed mainly in islands to avoid predation and disturbance by visitors as the area hosts around 3000 visitors on weekends. Awareness among visitors need to be improved as their activity can become a threat to the breeding birds as they are sharing the same shelters and views with birds.

Contribution by Esmat Elhassan

Field Clips

Red Kites in East Yorkshire

The area is quiet with small towns, villages and occasional houses and farms. To the north are gentle limestone hills with wooded valleys and springs. The agriculture is mainly arable with some sheep. It is windswept and there are areas of open countryside with small woods, stands of a few trees, all bent to the wind, and the odd individual tree.

Much of the land is owned by the Warter Priory Estate and the estate is a well-known shooting area. For business reasons the estate breeds many game birds, particularly pheasant. There is an abundance of indigenous wildlife, foxes, mice, rats, hedgehogs, rabbits and hares. All this makes it an ideal environment for the Red Kite.

This species of raptor was almost extinct in the UK in the mid 1970s. A bird reference book in 1972 said it was “*only found in Wales*” and described it as “*almost extinct in the UK*”. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) had counted the numbers of pairs to keep records of the decline.

Following a conservation programme and reintroduction, these magnificent birds have spread from Wales to Central England and beyond. Since breeding pairs were numbered at less than 1800 recently, the RSPB has stopped counting.

I first noticed them about three years ago. I must admit here to knowing little about birds with the exception of a few that come into my garden. This superb, large bird was soaring, with another, on summer thermals, rising gently above the hills and diving rapidly to seize small mammals or carrion. They will also eat earth worms but the ecology in the area probably allows them to feed well on mice and carrion from foxes. The control of the shooting estate reduces poisoning, which is still a contributory cause of death of Red Kites in some areas. Belief that they would take new lambs is probably a myth as they are not so strong and unlikely to try as other food sources are plentiful. Although I heard a mother complaining on the radio last year that Red Kites were visiting a school playground and stealing pupils' sandwiches at lunchtime!

The body feathers are a russet red-brown colour with an orange, strongly forked tail. Under the wing, when the bird is in flight, the feathers are dark but with a striking pale patch at the bend of the wing and a pale grey tail. It is distinctive and beautiful to watch. For me, as a novice bird watcher, it is utterly mesmerising.

The birds breed in late March. They will use old nests of their own or other large birds and they like small groups or individual trees. Red Kites are known to decorate their nests with other items like cloth or sacking they may find in fields. Usually there are two eggs and both parents share incubation. The young hatch after 31 days, fledge after 45 but remain close to the nest site and both parents will feed them until they are independent. Red Kites can be solitary birds, but if food is plentiful they can be seen in larger groups. I have seen five or six in a close area. Wonderful!

The wingspan is up to 165 cm. They rise high on thermals and turn, swoop and fly so quickly that photographing them in flight was beyond me.

Since learning to recognise these birds I have been more interested in general. In the middle of February 2019, my snow covered garden was invaded by a massive flock of quite large, thrush-like birds, which were after a few surviving apples on the trees and wind falls. I investigated them and took advice. They were Fieldfares from northern Europe on a migration flight to England. It was quite astonishing and they were so numerous that they trampled



Red Kite by Uncle Bucko (source: Creative Commons)



Kite by Aimee Kelleher (source: Creative Commons)

the thin 50 cm. of snow to nothing.

I owe the Red Kite much more than the pleasure of watching them—a wider interest in birds.

Contribution by Hilary Holloway

More photos of Red Kites can be seen at:

<https://search.creativecommons.org/search?q=red%20kite%20east%20yorkshire&provider=li<&searchBy>

Field Clips

DNHG members Cheryl Robertson and Margaret Swan both visited Northumberland separately and only a day apart in June. Puffins and other migratory birds nest at this time of year and respective observations were plentiful. Cheryl explored the Farne Islands, whereas Margaret observed wildlife on and around the lesser known Coquet Island. Read on to find out how each visit unfolded. Cheryl writes:

There are advantages and disadvantages for both offshore trips. For the more adventurous, the Farne Islands are further out and the visit would require more time; passengers can alight on 2 or 3 specific islands and walk about at their leisure. If short of time, however, Coquet Island would seem to be the perfect choice for a snapshot of Northumberland's migratory birds.

Staple Island

About 33 kilometres from Coquet is Staple Island, one of 15 to 28 islands (depending on the tide) that make up the Farne Islands protected by UK conservation charity National Trust. During summer around 150,000 breeding pairs of seabird jostle for space on these volcanic outcrops of igneous rock just off the Northumberland coast, providing a temporary safe home to some 23 species including Atlantic puffin, razorbill, guillemot, common eider, kittiwake, cormorant, gull, Arctic tern and shag.

In blustery weather on 4th June this year (2019) three friends and I took a Billy Shiel boat trip (one adult ticket is £20) from the fishing village of Seahouses to Staple Island two kilometres into the North Sea. Visitors can land on this island only in the mornings during the breeding season from 1st May until 31st July, and there are boat trips to Inner Farne in the afternoon only.

The captain gave a commentary over the tannoy but most of his words were whipped away by the wind. On approaching Staple Island, cliffs packed to the rafters with seabirds of every description loomed into view. Fulmars played on the updrafts; cormorants made dramatic silhouettes as they spread their wings against a turbulent sky; fishing seabirds dipped and dived into the water next to us. It was an astounding sight.

The choppy water sometimes makes alighting from the jetty difficult. The island itself is uneven and slippery with numerous crevices which is why the National Trust states that it is only accessible to fit and able people. We had one hour to explore so clambered onto land and took the footpath that leads over the top of the white guano-spattered island, the pungent whiff impressive. Guests must be careful where they tread for nesting birds are rather well camouflaged. Flanking the walkway an eider duck – almost the same colour as the rocks – cosseted her chicks.

Puffins with their brilliant summer-time beaks were busy feeding sand eels and other small fish to their pufflings (babies) hidden in burrows dug into the side of a steep bank. The Farne Islands provide an ideal habitat because of the soft soil, lack of ground predators, cool temperatures and abundant fish nearby.



Each puffin pair lays only one egg a year! They are classed as vulnerable on The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species because of a steady decline in their population over the last 25 years. Although the number of pairs of birds had increased from 39,962 in 2013 to 43,956 in 2018 the population was still below that of 2003 when 55,674 pairs were recorded, according to Gwen Potter, Countryside Manager for Northumberland Coast



and Farne Islands, National Trust, speaking to BBC Springwatch.

She said that an annual puffin census would now be conducted instead of every five years because of the downward trend in global numbers and concern about the quality and quantity of their favourite food sand eel, as well as more frequent storms. In fact, nine days after we had left Staple Island 300 pufflings perished on nearby Brownsman Island after being flooded out of their burrows in a terrific storm. This deluge also caused the death of many ground-nesting Arctic tern chicks. Nature at its worst!

Before setting off to the island we had heard rumours of having

Field Clips

to wear a hat because of potential dive bombings from agitated Arctic terns fiercely protecting their nests, but there were no such incidents this time round.

The remainder of the 2 ½ hour trip included a tour around Inner Farne, a look at a colony of grey seals that were languishing on the rocks or bobbing about in the water just off Staple Island, and a visit to a series of high, isolated and weathered rock stacks known as The Pinnacles, which are featured as one of the 1001 Natural Wonders You Must See Before You Die by Michael Bright. They really are!

Back at Seahouses, starlings made mincemeat out of scraps of our fish and chips and later, when we walked along the coastal cliffs near Beadnell, we saw a nursery party of eider ducks and ducklings swimming with incredible resilience against the swell of a restless sea. An adventurous duckling veered off course but was thankfully rescued by an adult and brought back to the fold.

The eider has an interesting history – it is famous for first being protected in AD 675 by a law established by Saint Cuthbert, the patron saint of Northumberland, but that is another story!

Contribution by Cheryl Robertson (Mandy)

Coquet Island

Just off the Northumberland coastline and lesser known than the Farne Islands, Coquet Island is home to many migratory birds.

Coquet Island provides a nesting site for 90% of the UK's rare Roseate Terns. 'These are the main attraction,' the boat captain explained. I, myself, was keen to see the Puffins—and I wasn't disappointed. They were there in great number, some flying over the sea with fish in their colourful beaks, their partners nesting on the island. Our visit took place on 5th June.

The island is managed by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and members of the general public are not allowed to land. As it was a calm day, however, our boat steered fairly close to the shore and we saw a nesting terrace where wardens could be seen, fully focused on their research. Other birds that can be seen here include fulmars, kittiwakes and oystercatchers. We observed a variety of Terns, Guillemots and Eider ducks.

I saw many Arctic Terns but I must admit that in the distance I confused them with similar-sized Black-headed seagulls. Later, I found out that Arctic Terns have a black 'cap' whereas with Black-headed seagulls, the black of the summer plumage goes all the way down under their beaks.

Having seen a few Grey seals previously on the rocks at Whitley Bay lighthouse, they were here in abundance, curiously peering at the sixteen passengers on board. Seals move fluently in water but are cumbersome on land. One seal was seen laboriously lumbering over land to rest on a dry rock.

If considering a visit during the summer, take a waterproof

jacket and a hat as the sea here can be quite rough.

Boats to Coquet Island embark from Amble and trips prove very popular. It is advisable to book in advance. The whole trip to Coquet Island is on a restored wooden lifeboat. It lasts one hour in total and costs £10 per person.

Readers can also 'virtually visit' the nesting terrace via three livestream webcams.

Visit <https://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/conservation/projects/coquet-island-seabird-sanctuary/> to observe Puffins and Roseate Terns on their island habitat.

Coquet Island contribution by Margaret Swan



Grey seal, black-headed seagulls and Terns



Common Eiders and Terns co-exist on the beach



A brother of local heroine, Grace Darling, once managed this lighthouse on Coquet Island. The foreground shows some of the nesting sites as seen from the boat.

Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) Programme

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

- September 15:** Johannes Els will present an illustrated talk on
"The Status & Conservation Of Terrestrial Herpetofauna in the UAE"
- October 6:** Marina Tsaliki will present an illustrated talk on
"Vegetation mapping and plant species diversity in Ras Al Khaimah"

(Please note that there are no lectures during July and August. Lectures resume in September)

Scheduled Field Trips (Members only)

- August 9—16:** DNHG Trip to Serbia (Belgrade and Zlatibor)
- October 4—11:** DNHG Trip to Greece

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

DNHG COMMITTEE 2019

When possible, please contact committee members outside office hours

	Name	telephone	email
Chairman	Gary Feulner	04 306 5570	grfeulner@gmail.com
Vice Chairman	Valerie Chalmers	050 830 5018	valeriechalmers@gmail.com
Treasurer	Puneet Kumar	050 452 4820	puneetcps@gmail.com
Membership Secretary	Aubrey Baugh	052 103 5167	aubaugh@gmail.com
Speaker Co-ordinator	Michelle Sinclair	050 458 6079	sinclairm2004@yahoo.com
Fieldtrip Co-ordinator	Sonja Lavrenčič	050 256 1496	lavson@gmail.com
Member-at-Large	Pradeep Radhakrishna	050 450 8496	wgarnet@eim.ae
Member-at-Large	Anindita Radhakrishna	050 656 9165	anin@eim.ae
Newsletter Editor	Margaret Swan	050 798 4108	gazelleeditor@gmail.com
Librarian/Book Sales	Angela Manthorpe	058 135 4143	manthorpe2005@yahoo.co.uk
Postmaster	Sandi Ellis	050 644 2682	sandiellis@gmail.com
Chief Engineer	Binish Roobas	050 243 8737	johanruphus@hotmail.com
Website Co-ordinator	Sandhya Prakash	050 551 2481	sandhya@consultbeacon.com
Greeter at meetings	Helga Meyer	055 821 7266	willyroaming@gmail.com

Postal Address: DNHG, PO Box 9234, Dubai, UAE

DNHG Gazelle

Field Reporters

Do you have a field report, unusual finding, interesting news article, book review, an amazing photograph or community news to share?

The July and August Gazelle will be combined and circulated to members (prior to the September meeting)

Send your contributions to:

gazelleeditor@gmail.com

DNHG Membership

Membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at Dh100 for families and Dh50 for singles. Membership is valid from September 2018 to September 2019. You can join or renew at the monthly meetings.

DNHG membership entitles you to participate in field trips and help 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.