



# GAZELLE

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مجموعتنا دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

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**Contributors—**

Thanks to the following for their contributions this month:

*Claudia Steuber, Dr Rolf Schuster, Helga Meyer, Youmna Chaoul, Angela Manthorpe, Tamsin Carlisle, Margaret Swan, Heidi Struiskma, Binish Roobas and Gary Feulner.*

**Send in your contributions to the:**

[gazelleeditor@gmail.com](mailto:gazelleeditor@gmail.com)

**By 25th August, 2020 for inclusion in the July/August edition of the Gazelle.**

**Hello! Hello! Hello!**

**What's going on here, then?**  
(story inside)



## Endangered Dolphins in Abu Dhabi

Indian Ocean Humpback Dolphin Calf (*Sousa plumbea*)

© Claudia Steuber

At the end of May I was able to see at least seven of the around 700 individuals, counting local population, of the endangered Indian Ocean Humpback Dolphin (*Sousa plumbea*). It was for me the first time ever to see humpback dolphins.

*Sousa plumbea* has a much smaller distribution range than the Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphin (*Tursiops aduncus*) and prefers shallow coastal habitats with a water depth below 25 metres.

An intensive survey by Environment Agency — Abu Dhabi (EAD) in collaboration with the Bottlenose Dolphin Research Institute (BDRI) in 2014-2015 found the Abu Dhabi population to be the largest remaining population of the endangered species in the world.

With an approximate length around 2.50 metres, the humpback dolphins are similar in size to the bottlenose dolphins, but their characteristic bump in front of their dorsal fin makes them easy to distinguish from the latter.

During two boat trips around some Abu Dhabi islands I sighted the same group twice.

One of the individuals was clearly identified as it had an old scar at the tip of its dorsal fin and a calf at its side.

The first time I saw them was in very shallow coastal waters when we passed by quickly. The second sighting was around one kilometre away from the coast when we saw the slim grey bodies of a dolphin herd in deeper water.

We switched off the motor of the boat and a miracle happened. Three of the group were pretty interested in us and started to approach. They curiously put their long grey heads out of the water to have a look at us. It was a mother with its calf and a second adult dolphin. Although the calf stayed by its mother's side most of the time, it once swam away from her and approached our boat to have a closer look at us. This was a very special moment that will be a long-lasting memory. They surrounded the boat for around ten minutes whilst the boat motor remained switched off. Finally, they had

(Continued on page 4)

## Announcements, Clips and Recorders

### Monthly Speaker Information

As is usual, there will be no monthly speaker for the months of July and August.

The date of the first meeting for next season will be circulated to members via email once we know when Universities, schools and colleges will be allowed to reopen.

#### New Guide Book

A comprehensive field guide has recently been published by Motivate Media Group, regarding freshwater fish in and around the Arabian Peninsula.

**Freshwater Fishes of the Arabian Peninsula** is co-authored by Jörg Frehof, Johannes Els, Gary Feulner, Nashat A. Hamidan and Friedhelm Krupp.

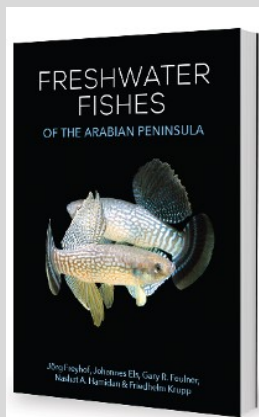
At the time of going to print, this publication does not appear to be available in local bookshops just yet, or indeed on the online giant, Amazon.

At present, one online source is advertising the book for 80 dirhams and the link is as follows:

<https://booksarabia.com/freshwater-fishes-of-the-arabian-peninsula.html>

Subscribers to the newspaper 'Gulf News' can also avail a 10% discount and the book can be ordered via their website:

<https://store.gulfnews.com/products/book.html>



#### From the Editor:

As we approach the end of the season, we thank you for your understanding that no lectures or trips were possible during the Covid 19 lockdown.

We hope to resume normal activities in September but, once again, this will depend on restrictions in effect at the time. We will have a clearer picture of the situation as we move through August. We will also keep members updated through email.

In the meantime, if you do plan to travel over the summer, we would love to hear of any experiences you encounter from the natural world, for inclusion in this newsletter.

Alternatively, if you are staying in Dubai, we would also be interested in hearing about your sightings, discoveries and photographs.

The next edition of the Gazelle will cover July and August.

Enjoy the summer break and also, enjoy your read!

#### New Publication on Fujairah Mound Excavations

Heidi Struiksmá brought to our attention a new study, published by the Crown Prince of Fujairah, H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Hamad Al Sharqi.

Australian-Emirati archaeologist Dr. Michele Ziolkowski has focused her attention on large earth mounds in gardens which had formerly been interpreted as 'clearance mounds'. However, pottery fragments were discovered, dating as far back as the Bronze Age 'Wadi Suq' period, from around 2,000 BC to 1200 BC.

It being a very recent publication, the book entitled "**Fujairah's Date Palm Gardens: A Preliminary Survey**", does not appear to be in circulation as yet but, it was reported by the news agency WAM and also 'The Gulf Today.'

Further details can be found at the following link:

[\(link here to the press release\)](#)



#### Tidal Treasure (see page 5)

#### DNHG Recorders

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# Spotlight!

## The Pandan Tree (observed in Myanmar), by Helga Meyer



1



2



3



4

1) and 2) The seeds of the Pandan tree, (the tree is also known as Screw palm)  
 3) The fruit of the Pandan tree (female)  
 4) Male Pandan tree with yellowish flower  
 5) The seeds fall to the ground where birds and insects eat the remaining fruit flesh



5

## Prior to the lockdown, an Arabian Toad and a blue dragonfly were observed in the Showka area, by Ms. Youmna Chaoul



## Field Clips

(Continued from page 1)

inspected us enough and disappeared again.

The local population is highly important for the conservation of the species. It was great to see at least one mother with a calf, giving the hope that the population is still increasing and that Abu Dhabi remains an important breeding location.

Contribution by Claudia Steuber

### Further reading:

(<https://www.thenational.ae/uae/world-s-largest-population-of-indian-ocean-humpback-dolphins-found-in-abu-dhabi-1.617969>).

Díaz López, B., Grandcourt, E., Methion, S., Das, H., Bugla, I., Al Hameli, M., Shaika Al Dhaheri, S. (2018). The distribution, abundance and group dynamics of Indian Ocean humpback dolphins (*Sousa plumbea*) in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi (UAE). *Journal of the Marine Biological Association of the United Kingdom*, 98(5), 1119-1127. doi:10.1017/S0025315417001205



© Claudia Steuber



© Claudia Steuber



© Claudia Steuber

### A Flowerpot Snake

At the beginning of this month I was called to one of our offices in CVRL (Central Veterinary Research Laboratory) after one of the colleagues had detected a worm-like creature crawling on the ground. At the first glance, the reddish-brown animal reminded me of a miniature millipede but its movement was rather winding like a snake.

To observe details and come to a conclusion the 7 cm long and nearly 2 mm round 'worm' was examined under the stereoscopic microscope.

To our big surprise a forked tongue was seen coming out from the rounded end of the body. With this observation it was clear that we had to deal with a reptile, a Brahminy blind snake or flowerpot snake (*Ramphotyphlos bramius*).

In his book, *The Amphibians and Reptiles of Oman and the UAE*, A.S. Gardner (2013) listed blind snakes as probably introduced to Arabia from Southern Asia.

Brahminy blind snakes live in loose soil, rotting tree trunks and roots where they meet their dietary requirements, such as insects, mites and their development stages. They are known to be egg-laying parthenogenetic females with a triploid set of chromosomes.

Within potted plants these inconspicuous, tiny reptiles travelled



to other parts of the world. The Latin word *bramius* in the species name comes from Brahmin which is a caste among Hindus and this indicates the origin of the snake.

Dr Rolf Schuster (photo from Wikimedia commons)

## Field Clips

### Tidal Treasure!

An exercise track borders the beaches along much of the Jumeirah coastline and it is proving to be very popular with walkers and joggers. However, it was closed during the Covid 19 disinfection programme in Dubai, as were the beaches themselves.

Late May saw some restrictions lifted. Initially the track opened and mask-wearing walkers would often see fish jumping out of the water, in and around the shallows.



Ground nesters, such as the Red-wattled lapwing, had been raising young in the beach grassy areas, and were now making a fuss, as people passed by their domain.

Shortly after the running track re-opened, the beaches also became accessible for visitors abiding by the precautionary

safety restrictions.

Earlier this month, when walking the shoreline on the early morning low tide, I noticed the waves were stronger than usual. The sea must have been quite turbulent during the night, as the beaches were littered with discarded items from the sea. I observed various shells, bits of plastic, pebbles, sea grasses and other types of marine vegetation. (see photos below and on page 2).

Many cuttlefish 'bones' of varying sizes had also been deposited on the beach. Composed mainly of aragonite for buoyancy, these 'bones' are often washed up, and are not an unusual sight on this beach following a strong tide.

In one of the Jumeirah bays, a concentrated scattering of small discs lay on the sand, from the high tide mark all the way down to the sea. These were clear, gelatinous life forms in an assortment of sizes, the largest being around three inches in diameter.



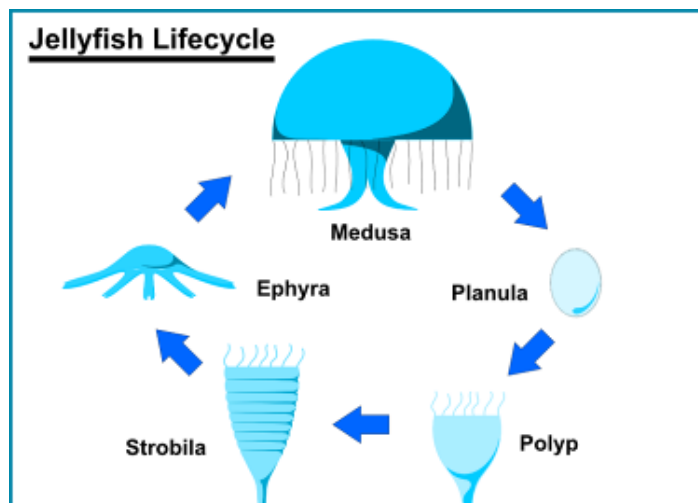
Glaringly catching my eye, was the attractive way the morning sunlight played, illuminating and refracting light through the clear, transparent bodies. The jellied mass magnified and distorted objects underneath in a similar way to that of a magnifying glass, though to a far lesser extent.

I had previously seen salps and jellyfish on this shore but these discs did not bear similarities. One of them however, revealed tiny tentacles under the rim perimeter (see photo above right).

With thanks to Angela Manthorpe for identification, these turned out to be jellyfish larvae (see the Planula stage in the diagram below, courtesy of Sunset Marine Labs).

There could be a lot more to discuss regarding this ancient life form but not within the scope of this newsletter. Readers can find out about the Moon Jellyfish life cycle by [watching this video](#).

Contribution by Margaret Swan with jellyfish identification by Angela Manthorpe



## Field Clips

Just before the Covid-19 lockdown in Dubai I was wandering around the outskirts of Mushrif Park one morning. A sweet, high-pitched bird call attracted my attention and, looking up, I spied the unmistakable outline of a Southern Grey Shrike, *Lanius meridionalis*, perched prominently in the treetop. It reminded me of an observation from April last year when I led a small group for an exploration of the Hanging Gardens, just beyond Buraimi in Oman. The gardens lie on the dramatic escarpment of Jebel Qatar and the name comes from the cascading vines of *Cocculus hirsutus* which drape like curtains from the vertical rock face.



We started early, clambering enthusiastically up and down the slopes and over the enormous boulders but, as the heat rose unrelentingly, we resorted to shuffling between shady areas in search of respite. Lingered around the acacia bushes I spotted

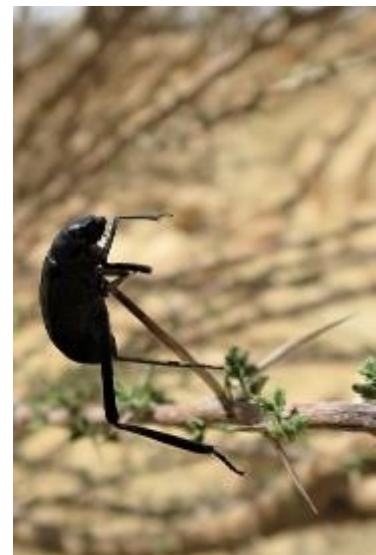
a couple of sulphurous jewel beetles, and it was funny, once I'd 'got my eyes in' I started seeing them all over. But then I spotted something unusual...a pitted beetle stuck on an acacia thorn. To be clear, this wasn't something that could have happened by accident...the beetle was clearly impaled! How strange I thought and, as I continued the hike, I found another one. Curiouser and curiouser.

Back home I resorted to a Google search to solve the mystery, using variants of 'thorn, beetle, impaled', and that's how I found my likely culprit - the Southern Grey Shrike. The Latin name – *Lanius* – means butcher, and it's well documented that shrikes, or butcherbirds as they are also known, use sharp points to secure prey. Shrikes predate on lizards, mammals, beetles and even other birds; they drop down on prey and kill them, generally with a bite to the back of the neck to sever the vertebrae. Shrikes have hooked bills like raptors but, as they don't possess talons with which to grasp prey, they resort to thorns or the spikes of barbed wire, to immobilise the food while they feed. The beetles that I found were intact and didn't look like they had been eaten at all; it's noted that sometimes the male will use prey larders to mark territory or to attract a mate. Researchers have also found that toxic prey such as certain grasshoppers and butterflies, are impaled and left for a few days, allowing the toxins to break down before consumption.

Contribution by Angela Manthorpe



## A Thorny Issue!



## Field Clips

### Giant Land Snails

Helga Meyer, our former "greeter" now resident in Myanmar, wrote in the *May Gazelle* that it was raining snails and frogs there. She included photos of a colorful, rather bloated frog and "giant" 5-inch (12.5 cm) snails. The frog (rice frog / chubby frog / bubble frog) appears to be a native of Myanmar, but the snails in Helga's photo are the Giant African Land Snail *Achatina fulica*, an invasive species present in most of the lands in and around the Indian Ocean.

They can also be found today in many other far flung places, including the Pacific Ocean island of Guam and certain neighborhoods in downtown Miami, Florida, where they are reportedly present in such numbers that they crunch underfoot in people's backyards.

Among the secrets of *A. fulica*'s success are: (1) fecundity -- they are hermaphroditic and each snail is able to lay up to 160 eggs at a time; and (2) resilience -- mature snails are able to tolerate substantial dehydration and are able to burrow and to aestivate or hibernate in soil to survive temperatures which are too high or too low for them to remain active. In these states they seal their apertures with a thin layer of hardened mucus to limit dehydration and await better conditions.

They are not invincible, however. Their native land is tropical (but seasonal) East Africa, and they are not equipped to tolerate the sustained freezing temperatures of cold temperate regions, or the extremely high summer temperatures of a country like the UAE. The accompanying photo shows a Giant Land Snail in Kerala, where they can be a crop pests.

Contribution by Gary Feulner (photograph by Binish Roobas)



### Leucistic Eurasian Blackbird (*Turdus merula*)

Tamsin Carlisle finally saw this reclusive, somewhat unusual, blackbird in her garden in Turkey. Tamsin stated, "I've been hearing him for weeks, singing in the evenings from a nearby copse and he seldom breaks cover. But this morning, shortly after dawn, he appeared briefly on our lawn."



Tamsin adds that he is leucistic, meaning he has a mutation that prevents pigment from being laid down in some of his plumage. It isn't particularly common but crops up in quite a wide range of different birds.

To provide another example, here below is a photo of an Indian Mynah bird that Tamsin took in Dubai. This bird also displays leucistic colouration.

(with thanks to Tamsin Carlisle)



## Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) Programme

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

There will be no meetings until further notice (via email to members).

### Scheduled Field Trips (Members only):

The DNHG field trip program has been temporarily suspended in compliance with UAE coronavirus precautions. For field trips previously booked, members should contact the appropriate field trip leader for more information.

## DNHG COMMITTEE 2020

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.