



# GAZELLE



مجموعتنا دورية للتاريخ والطبيعي

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**Contributors—**

Thanks to the following for their contributions this month:

- Angela Manthorpe
- Margaret Swan
- Jackie Strick



**What can you see in this green tree?**

(see a lot more on page number 4)



**Snakes alive...**

I've seen quite a few snakes in the past 12 months, often as a blur of movement as they move out of my way, sometimes lurking by wadi pools, ready to snap up their prey, and occasionally approaching me inquisitively underwater. A couple of summer encounters stick in my mind.

Early one morning in mid-May I stopped at the village of Al Harah in the Omani exclave of Madha on the East Coast. The village has had a makeover and there's a shaded seating area, a path through the palm grove and a staircase to the tower that overlooks the oasis. I glanced over at a light fitting on one of the new buildings and thought the wire looked a little untidy, at which point 'the wire' detached itself and started an ascent of the vertical wall. Sprinting over for a closer look I was intrigued to find a Wadi Racer (*Platyceps rhodorachis rhodorachis*) exploring this exposed environment above the door lintel. After a few moments the snake flipped itself off the wall, landed with a slap and disappeared at speed behind a water dispenser.

Late one evening in June I was poking around in Mushrif Park near a vertical wall of

(Continued on page 4)

## Announcements and Recordors

### DNHG Virtual Monthly Speaker

7th November, 2021 at 8pm (via Zoom)

**Presenter:** Dr Dave Aplin

**Lecture Title:** “Surviving—ingenious strategies without legs”

#### Biography:

Dave began his love of plants at the age of ten, growing and exhibiting dahlias. Despite leaving school before his 16th birthday, he achieved a National Certificate in horticulture, First Class degree in botany and a PhD in plant ecology.

His entire career has spanned both horticulture and botany and included: developing and featuring in the BBC's Victorian Flower Garden series; Curator of the National Botanic Garden of Belgium; consultant at the Royal Botanic Garden Jordan; and Senior Executive of Sharjah Botanic Garden, that sadly failed to break ground. He was also Acting Director of Sharjah Seed Bank and Herbarium.

Dave is happiest with his hands in soil, telling people about plants and seeing plants in their native environments. He was fortunate to extend the range of a few UAE species during his time in the country. He now lives in West Dorset, UK, where he developed a bespoke soil testing company ([www.soilvalues.com](http://www.soilvalues.com)) during the pandemic, but always has an eye open for opportunities,

**Synopsis:** The inability to relocate when the going gets tough could be seen as a major disadvantage. Plants tackle this by adopting ingenious strategies to survive. This presentation investigates this fascinating subject with focus on the UAE's native flora.

Read more about botanising in the UAE at:

<https://www.soilvalues.com/post/uae-botany>



#### Expo 2020

Readers may be interested in visiting Hammour House at Expo 2020, which celebrates coral reefs, the hammour fish and the historic relationship of Emiratis and the sea.

Check out their scheduled events at:

<https://www.expo2020dubai.com/en/calendar/attractions/hammour-house>

Expo 2020 was launched on 1st October and will run through until 31st March 2022.

### DNHG Recordors

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#### From the Editor:

As the weather cools down, snakes seem to be the flavour of the month—and they are hungry!

Travel limitations are opening up and some members have managed quick getaways.

Readers are encouraged to send any wildlife photos of interest to::

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

We look forward to hearing from you. In the meantime, enjoy your read!

# Sssssspotlight!

Caught on camera, by Jackie Strick



Focusing on its meal, this Afro-Asian sand snake (*Psammophis schokari*) didn't seem to mind being photographed. Both photos were taken at the Breeding Centre, Sharjah Desert Park. In the second photograph the snake had consumed the juvenile rat's head. Unfortunately, the snake had moved on when Jackie looked for it two hours later.



## Snaps from the Seychelles, by Margaret Swan



The top three images were taken in the Botanical Gardens where there were many mature trees bearing fruit. Coincidentally, there were fruit bats going to roost in the tallest trees and making quite a fuss as they were doing so. I'm always surprised to see how large these bats are and how high they fly, silhouetted against the clear, blue sky.

I can't identify the dragonfly/damselfly in the middle photo. However, the lizard on the right looks like a Seychelles skink (also note the interesting fungus on the tree stump).

I wondered if the two large spiders on the left were of the same species. They certainly looked similar but I had doubts as they were spotted in different habitats. One had made its huge web between two bushes and across a pathway. That spider was bigger than my hand! The slightly smaller one on the right was busy constructing its web close to the water in a mangrove forest. A boardwalk through the mangroves provided the opportunity to see this up close. From photos that I have seen, they both look like the Palm Spider which can grow quite large.

## Field Clips

(Continued from page 1)

fossilized dunes. The agitated calls of the sparrows drew my attention and, as I approached, I realized that 'the thin branch' protruding from one of the holes in the wall was actually a Schokari Sand Racer (*Psammophis schokari schokari*). The snake had a lifeless sparrow clamped firmly in its mouth and, as I watched, it extended its body down the wall, dropped to the ground and headed for cover under a nearby bush. What impressed me most was the way in which the snake was able to move swiftly over the ground seemingly without moving its head, which was held upright.

Drew Gardner in *The Amphibians and Reptiles of Oman and the UAE* notes that both snakes are excellent climbers. The Wadi Racer is harmless and "probably the most frequently encountered snake in cultivated areas...and especially in wet wadis". With the Schokari Sand Racer the snake will hold prey until immobilized by its venom and will then swallow it head-first; "the effect of the venom on man has not been studied".

So as temperatures drop and a new hiking season begins, I'm going to be looking both down and up for our native snakes.

Contribution by Angela Manthorpe



### Fly, Swim, Crawl: Life in the Seychelles

The Seychelles is only a four hour flight from Dubai but it has a completely different environment, providing a unique ecology for many species of flora and fauna, many of which are endemic.



Seychelles Blue-pigeon

I was surprised to see a bird early one morning with a red mask and what looked like a fur collar! Later I found out that it was a Seychelles Blue-pigeon (*Alectroenas pulcherrimus*). Although listed in the Red List Category, it is evaluated as 'Least Concern'. Birdlife International states that:

*"The population size has not been quantified, but it is not believed to approach the thresholds for Vulnerable under the population size criterion (<10,000 mature individuals with a continuing decline estimated to be >10% in ten years or three generations, or with a specified population structure)."*

Source: [http://datazone.birdlife.org/species/factsheet/seychelles-blue-pigeon-alectroenas-pulcherrimus?gclid=Cj0KCQjw-6LBhDIARIsAIPRQcJHI2VRTnCvQISnIHxM1VO1a\\_XHNopd-thvmBq60G9f5vxYTf8Jct0aAgJaEALw\\_wcB](http://datazone.birdlife.org/species/factsheet/seychelles-blue-pigeon-alectroenas-pulcherrimus?gclid=Cj0KCQjw-6LBhDIARIsAIPRQcJHI2VRTnCvQISnIHxM1VO1a_XHNopd-thvmBq60G9f5vxYTf8Jct0aAgJaEALw_wcB)

Another day, whilst snorkelling around some of the smaller islands, I spotted a Green or Hawksbill turtle on the ocean floor. Visibility was poor and the water was turbulent in this location but I managed to capture an image which you can see on the right.

I was disappointed on this occasion to see evidence of coral bleaching at various points (see Angela Manthorpe's article last month regarding similar happenings at Snooply Rock). However, efforts are being made to encourage healthy coral growth with rows of small coral specimens, suspended on what looked to me like undersea washing lines in a 'coral nursery'.

The green gecko on the left was exploring our balcony prior to leaping into the tree. It is not camouflaged against the dark wood but, did you spot it in the tree on page 1?

Contribution by Margaret Swan



Green gecko

Known locally as a Red Cardinal, this Red Fody (*Foudia madagascariensis*) seemed very used to visiting our table. Wikipedia states that the Red Fody, native to Madagascar, is an introduced species to Indian Ocean Islands.



Turtle (above), bee (below)



## Field Clips and Announcements

### Water scorpion?

Scorpions are not natural born swimmers, so when I found this fine *Hottentota jayakari* entangled in algae in a small pond in Wadi Shawka I decided to fish it out and record it for posterity. This species can be found most commonly in mountain wadis and on lower slopes. I'm pleased to say that after a spell in the sun, *H. jayakari* started to revive.

Contribution by Angela Manthorpe

### Editor's Note:

This text was revised following publication to correct the name to *Hottentota jayakari* and not *Androctonus crassicauda* as originally stated. Thanks to Gary Feulner for the observation and additional notes.



### PhotoWalks

Tashkeel is an arts-oriented institution and DNHG members were made very welcome on a visit to a plastics exhibition in March 2020.

They are now organizing two documentary style photowalks this Autumn as follows:

- 13th November—PhotoWalk Nad al Shiba 1 (see top photo). This is primarily oriented to observing gardens and photography but longtime DNHG member Liz Maley-Craig will be on hand to identify and discuss many of the horticultural and landscaping species observed. Further details can be found at: <https://tashkeel.org/workshops/photo-walk-nad-al-sheba>
- 11th December—Photo and Art Walk. This walk will cover Meydan Racecourse (see bottom photo). More details at: <https://tashkeel.org/workshops/photo-and-art-walk-meydan-racecourse>

More photograph examples can be seen on the links.

A second series of photowalks is planned for the Spring of 2022.



## Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) Programme 2021/2022

Monthly lectures are presently transmitted via Zoom, starting at 8.00pm

7 November: Dr Dave Aplin will present an illustrated talk on “Surviving ingenious strategies without legs.” The inability to relocate when the going gets tough could be seen as a major disadvantage. Plants tackle this by adopting ingenious strategies to survive. The presentation investigates this fascinating subject with focus on the UAE’s native flora.

December: Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the UAE, a special programme will be announced soon.

9 January: Dr Sanjay Gubbi will present an illustrated talk on “Tiger Conservation: The Art of the Possible.”

Please note that field trips will only take place in accordance with current Dubai Government regulations. Participants will remain socially-distanced and capacities are limited. Proof of vaccination or proof of PCR test not older than 72 hours is required upon registration/arrival and masks should be worn at all times.

### DNHG Field Trips

5th November: Tell Abraq Archaeological Site

12th November: Yabbana landslide walk.

## DNHG COMMITTEE 2020/2021

When possible, please contact committee members outside office hours

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## DNHG Membership

DNHG membership remains one of Dubai’s best bargains at Dh100 for families and Dh50 for singles. Membership for the current year is valid from September 2020 to September 2021. In consideration of the restrictions on our lectures and field trips due to COVID-19, **all members who were paid up (or considered paid up) for 2020—2021 will be automatically renewed for 2021-2022**, without a renewal fee.

New members can join by (i) sending to the Membership Secretary (see above) a completed one-page membership form, which can be downloaded from our website ([www.dnhg.org](http://www.dnhg.org)) and (ii) making payment to our Emirates NBD account by cash deposit or transfer from your 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.