



GAZELLE



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

Inside this month:

Wadi Faya by Night	1
Announcements and Recorders	2
Spotlight!	3
Wadi Faya continued	4
Exploring the Peloponnese	5
Peloponnese	6
GN English Boarding School Nepal	7
DNHG Programme	8



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Exploring the Peloponnese
see page 5



Wadi Faya by Night: DNHG Field Trip Report

Sharjah's Wadi Faya is a major sand wadi crossing the desert west of the Jebel Faya ridges (including Jebel Mleiha and Jebel Buhais). Early this year it was the destination for two daytime field trips with exciting results, including mating behaviour by the charismatic Yellow Toad-Headed Agama (*Phrynocephalus arabicus*).

A later nighttime visit by two of our members, reported in the April *Gazelle*, prompted a nocturnal field trip by the DNHG in May. We saw quite a number of desert denizens and our visit reinforced the point that, as a home and as a resource, the desert is shared not only in space but in time. Many of the creatures we saw by night were strictly nocturnal, not seen by day. And as is often the case on field trips, many of them became mini-media stars, most calmly enjoying (or enduring?) their "fifteen minutes of fame". Some highlights are reported here, with the help of photos by Chandrashekar Sardesai and Kerstin Binoth.

Just after the sun went down we caught sight of a cautious Baluchistan gerbil (*Gerbillus nanus*). We could identify it by its slightly greyish back and dark-tufted tail (which it was kind enough to show), but also by the fact that it had made its home on relatively firm, compacted ground adjacent to active plantations. Its sister species, Cheesman's gerbil (*Gerbillus cheesmani*), favours sandier habits. Both gerbils, however, are likely to construct their burrows in the sand mounds that accumulate around larger shrubs.



DhandaNot
© Chandrashekar Sardesai
Baluchistan Gerbil
(Photo by C. Sardesai)

(Continued on page 4)

Announcements and Recordors



Monthly Speaker

Monday 17 October at 8pm

Speaker: Angie Raab

Presentation: Canine Conservationists

A helicopter pilot turned storyteller turned conservation photographer turned dog handler - that is Angie Raab in a nutshell. Angie followed her passion for Africa and all things wild by packing up her camera, getting on an airplane and experiencing what everyone warned her about - Africa gets into your blood and, once it has, it will no longer let go of you.

She stayed on this stunning continent to chase her dream of bringing the change she wished to see in this world and do her bit by using her camera to narrate the stories - stories of bravery, passion and wonder; stories of the people on the ground protecting some of the world's last truly wild places. Over the years she not only embedded within ranger units all over the continent, but also founded a small non-profit organisation, partnering with a zoo in Germany, to support Boots on the Ground where needed until she became one of them. The activities ranged from rhino dehorning to K9 training and breeding projects and rewilding some of our endangered species.

During the onslaught of Covid, Angie started training as a multi-purpose dog handler and ended up in the field of rhino protection and detection dog training to curb wildlife trafficking. Up until today Angie has been continuously supporting conservation by consulting with reserves and other entities in the field, as well as building K9 units. She works in the bush, deserts and oceans. More often than not she ventures out of her comfort zone into the rain forests of Congo, Expo 2020 in the United Arab Emirates or in Southern Africa where her heart belongs.

Over the years Angie has been working with African Parks Network, Chengeta Wildlife, Boots on the Ground, Global Conservation Force, Wesley Visser - Scent Imprint Dogs, Gaven Holden Smith - Tracking & Conservation K9, Clinton Cilliers - Tactical K9 Africa, Project Rhino K9, Sibuya Game Reserve, Dinokeng Game Reserve, just to name a few.

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From the Editor:

As winter is approaching and the weather is cooling down, it is time to discover the jewels of nature.

Please write to us at the email below with your observations of wildlife in the UAE or abroad by 25 October 2022.

gazelleeditor@gmail.com

We look forward to hearing from you.

Spotlight! Ladakh wildlife by Mary Langhan and photos by Ibrahim Zakhour

The Himalayan Marmot (Pika)

There are 15 species of marmot living primarily in Asia, Europe and North America, and while North Americans may know the *Marmota monax* by its common name of groundhog, the relative we observed while hiking in Ladakh was the **Himalayan marmot** (*Marmotahimalayana*) or 'pika' as it is known locally – a large ground squirrel, about the size of a housecat that inhabits high-altitude grasslands in Tibet, Northern India, Pakistan, and Nepal.

These furry rodents live in large colonies, burrowing 2-3.5 meters deep, with up to 30 other individuals. They are truly high-altitude champions, surviving Ladakh's harsh winters by hibernating 6-8 months of the year.

Although the snow leopard preys upon them, the marmot population benefits from certain protections given to the critically endangered snow leopard (*Padgett & Small, 2022*). However, the expanding tourism of the region – where 30,000 plastic bottles are tossed daily in Leh during the tourist season – is a different kind of threat. Garbage dumped into the world's highest landfill attracts wild predatory dogs and in some areas uninformed visitors feed the marmots, potentially harming the animal's ability to survive long-term in their natural habitat. (*RoundGlass Sustain, 2020*).

But ... that sunny August afternoon, we came upon the chubby pikas in their natural mountain meadow habitat, far from town and far from the snow leopards (whose tracks we saw elsewhere) and they were enjoying summer. They were shy with us but frolicking socially among themselves and the sight cheered us on towards the end of our hike that day.

References:

*Padgett, L., & Small, C. (2022). *Marmota himalayana* (Himalayan marmot). Animal Diversity Web; University of Michigan Museum of Zoology. https://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Marmota_himalayana/

*RoundGlass Sustain. (2020). All is Not Well with the Himalayan Marmot [YouTube Video]. In YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jL4IDMI7B1Y>



Himalayan marmot (*Marmotahimalayana*) or 'pika' as it is known locally



Snow Leopard track (*Panthera uncia*)

The GN English Boarding School in Nepal - go to page 7 for the latest news!



Monsoon rain delays travel



Gary, Narayan and the Excavator



Balloting for student offices



Box meals for day students



Upgrading the school vegetable gardens



Narayan on the campaign trail

Field Trip

(Continued from page 1)

On the rolling sandy flats of Wadi Faya itself, a small orb-web spider (Family Araneidae) had constructed a near-vertical web strung between small, stringy shrubs of Rimth (*Haloxylon salicornicum*). Our attention gave us an introduction to the field naturalist's version of the Heisenberg principle – that we can't observe something closely without influencing what we are watching. Our lights attracted flying insect prey to the web, less than one foot (30 cm) wide. At first this proved a bounty for the spider, who wrapped several fresh meals for her larder. But before too long she seemed overwhelmed by the relative onslaught and retired to a corner of the web. As more flying insects landed, some of them, relatively large and struggling, were able to escape, but only after tearing sizeable holes in the web. Seeing how we had upset the normal order of things, we took our lights and withdrew.

Calotropis procera (Sodom's Apple), a large milkweed species, is common in the sandy bed of Wadi Faya. Long a favourite of photographers, *Calotropis* has often been criticised in recent decades as an invader, although it is native to the area and we have only ourselves to blame for conditions in which it appears to prosper unduly. In any case, it is undeniably popular with a variety of insect life. During our night visit, Redbugs (Class Heteroptera, Family Pyrrhocoridae) were congregating there to mate and presumably to oviposit (although we did not observe the latter). They were concentrated in particular on the opening fruits of the *Calotropis* but did not appear to be feeding. The warning colours of Redbugs may advertise the noxious chemicals imbibed by them and/or their nymphs, in this case from the *Calotropis*.

Another insect found congregating on *Calotropis* was the Longhorn Beetle (so-called, although the long appendages are clearly antennae, not horns), shown mating in the April *Gazelle*. This time we found many of them clustered on the flowers, where they appeared to be feeding on the pentagonal yellow-white centers (the stigma).

During the course of the night we saw five or six species of geckos – proving that it is not always a simple matter to make an identification. Mottled or speckled coloration is common to several gecko species, as are white tubercles along the flanks. One of the easier geckos to recognise was the Big-Headed Sand Gecko *Stenodactylus doriae*, which is frequently encountered on open sand where it has no ready cover to flee to. Some other interesting "finds" are also shown in the accompanying photos.



© Kerstin N. Binoth

Naturalists studying the web (Photo by K. Binoth)



DhandaNot

© Chandrashekar Sardesai

Orb-web spider with a freshly wrapped meal. (Photo by C. Sardesai)



DhandaNot

© Chandrashekar Sardesai

Redbugs congregating & mating on *Calotropis* (Photo by C. Sardesai)



DhandaNot

Big Headed Sand Gecko - *Stenodactylus doriae* (Photo by C. Sardesai)



© Kerstin N. Binoth

Longhorn Beetle (Photo by K. Binoth)



© Kerstin N. Binoth

Camel spider with thin pointed jaws, possibly an adult (Photo by K. Binoth)



© Kerstin N. Binoth

Small cup-shaped nest found in a tree near a plantation, most likely that of the White-eared Bulbul (Photo by K. Binoth)

Contribution by: Gary Feulner

Photos by:
Chandrashekar Sardesai and
Kerstin Binoth

Field Trip

Lesser known details discovered while exploring the Peloponnese

Although the Classical Era, mainly represented by the glory of Athens, seems to monopolise our idea of what was possibly the essence of the ancient Greek civilisation, the heart of Greece has been traditionally beating in the Peloponnese. The "Island of Pelops" is a hand palm-shaped peninsula south of Athens which, in the 19th century AD, turned into an island thanks to the Corinth Canal (Isthmus), finally living up to its name. The archaeological and historical wealth in this relatively small piece of land ranges from the Bronze Age to the present day, from the first Greek civilisation to the sparks of the Independence War and the beginning of the modern Greek State. As such, the number of places to see and corners to explore is so overwhelming that limiting oneself to a strict minimum of sites is always challenging.

Being Greek, I was raised with all the legends and stories that define the evolution and identity of my people. So unavoidably I gradually grew a bit numb to the effect that most "must-visit" sites like Mycenae, Epidaurus, or Ancient Olympia may have to be left to a foreigner. Yet there is always something new to discover, even for me: a detail that is too profound to forget or sheds light on the daily life of my ancestors, going beyond the broad headlines. So here are some of the lesser-known points worth noting from our last Greek exploration: nice reminders for those who joined the trip or inspiration for those who would like to visit in the future.

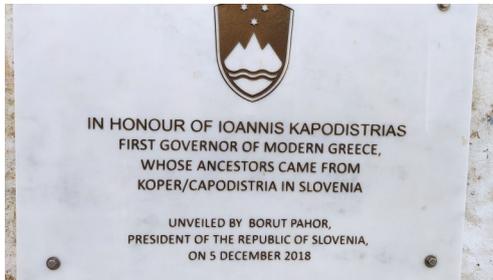
For example, one of the reasons Corinth turned into a significant naval power was that its people found a way to take advantage of the city's geographical location between two natural ports. To do so they built a road – the "diolkos" – on which they would manually move a boat from one port to the other, saving the cost and danger of Peloponnese's circumnavigation while also amassing significant riches in the form of "tolls". In 146 BC, Corinth was still the wealthiest city in the Greek world; hence its destruction by the Romans was the final nail in the coffin of the Greek era.



A small, at first glance, inconsequential stone bridge in Arkadiko – between Nafplio and Epidaurus – is considered the oldest, still standing bridge in Europe, built by the Myceneans whose engineering ingenuity is not fully recognised yet.



In Nafplio (the first capital city of the modern Greek state) close to the church of St Spyridon where the first Governor of Greece, Ioannis Kapodistrias, was assassinated, a plaque has been placed by the Republic of Slovenia. It commemorates that the family of Kapodistrias originated (in the 12th century) from Koper/Capodistria (back then under Venice, today in modern Slovenia) before they landed in Corfu, where they were Hellenised and turned into Greek Orthodox.



Another hidden gem in Nafplio: the Metropolitan Church Agios Georgios (St George) has on its ceiling a copy of Da Vinci's Last Supper, painted at the beginning of the 18th century by the Venetians when they recovered the city from the Turks.



Epidaurus is known to all Greeks as the site that hosts the biggest and perhaps most perfect amphitheatre still in use. Our summers are marked by the performances that take place there and every Greek worth his salt has, at some point, visited or attended a modern version of an ancient drama. However, Epidaurus was mainly a sanatorium where the health of the people improved by focusing on three components: the body (hence the attention to a healthy diet, clean water, daily exercise and perhaps the use of medicinal herbs offered in the sanatorium); the mind (hence the mystical Tholos with its underground labyrinth, where a patient was asked to enter after a meditative preparation to get Asclepius' advice); and the soul (hence the theatre where the patients would achieve at an emotional level a much-needed catharsis).



The museum of Nemea hosts the only race starting blocks found today (for some reason, we have not seen similar in other stadia of famous Games, like Olympia or Isthmia). To start a race, the ancient Greeks would not take the position to which we are used today but

(Continued on page 6)

Field Trip

(Continued from page 5)

instead would stand straight, the toes of one foot place into a vertical hole carved into the starting line stone.



The Byzantine town of Mystras hosts numerous beautiful churches and monasteries worth exploring. However, the Metropolis has additional emotional value to us Greeks, as on its floor one can see a marble plaque with the sign of the two-headed eagle. It indicates the spot where Constantine XI Palaiologos was anointed Emperor of the Byzantine Empire, knowing that, most probably, he would be the last. Indeed, he was.



Nestor's Palace in Pylos is the best preserved Mycenaean palace destroyed in antiquity by fire. However, as a silver lining the fire baked several clay plaques full of writing so they lasted until today. Their quantity and content helped significantly decipher Linear B and ultimately changed our understanding of history.



Cape Tenaro is the southern most point of continental Europe and according to ancient beliefs, another mythical entrance to the Underworld. To reach its end the road was long and winding and, under the heat I was not sure if it was worth the effort even though the rugged landscape dotted with the typical, local tower-like buildings emanated the whole essence of Mani. The end of the road is also marked by the Sanctuary and Death Oracle of Poseidon Tainarios: an insignificant rock structure overtaken by grass. Inside its altar, though, the passersby leave a small votive – a rock, a memento of significance, a flower, a shell – to keep the prayers alive even if Poseidon's power has diminished.



We may think that cheating in the Olympic Games is a modern phenomenon but this is not true. Perhaps doping was not so frequent in antiquity but bribery was and if revealed was severely punished. In Olympia, next to the Stadium entrance, there is a line of square pedestals called "the bases of Zanes" (Zanes being the plural of Zeus in the local dialect). They hosted bronze statues dedicated to Zeus, their construction financed by the fines imposed on those caught cheating in the games. As a result, the athletes and their city were dishonoured, and their disgrace was broadcasted to the world to minimize such incidents.



Deep into the mountains of Arkadia there is the tiny church of Agia Theodora, famous for the 17 plane trees that miraculously grow from its roof, without any sign of root either on the outside or in the vaulted interior of the chapel. Unfortunately, despite the so-called miracle, the road to reach the church is too difficult (albeit stunningly beautiful) that I do not think I will repeat this adventure soon – at least, not in a minivan.



The archaeological museum of Theba is perhaps one of Greece's most magnificent and vastly underrated museums. Amidst its many treasures and valuable information is the analysis of how the Mycenaean's drained the lake Kopaida and turned the swamp into cultivation land using their engineering knowledge and a series of natural holes in the area. This fantastic feat remains unknown to most locals and visitors, yet it changed the economic and social landscape of the region allowing Theba to turn later into one of the major city powers of the ancient world.



The above points are only a few from the many collected during our recent trip. They certainly do not do justice to the unique experiences that we had. However, remembering them allows us to relive some of the beautiful moments we shared and reinforces our will to continue exploring new places and unknown destinations.

Contribution and photos by
Konstatina Sakellariou

Field Clip

Contribution and photos by Gary Feulner

GN English Boarding School - an update



New school entrance

GN English Boarding School sits on a hillside at 1500 meters in rural Nepal, about 5 hours by road from Kathmandu. It was established in 2012 by Narayan Karki, a former DNHG member, when he returned home after a decade in Dubai. Its aim is to provide a high quality English-medium education in the rural environment. Over the years the school has hosted nearly 50 DNHG members for visits to Kathmandu, the school and the regional countryside and towns.

Chairman Gary Feulner, the founding sponsor of the school, visited in June 2022 for the first time since the start of the Covid pandemic and has returned with hellos and news of developments over a difficult period. Like most of the world, Nepal was shut down by Covid-related restrictions, although in the end it did not suffer the high mortality rates that afflicted many developed countries.



Afternoon assembly

Schools were closed for a time and then on split shifts and shortened hours to minimise crowding and personal contact. In between teachers improvised with socially-distanced visit to student residences, often teaching in front of local porches.

The Covid period was an especially difficult one for GN, as a private school in a rural area. Enrolment was down and income was down because parents could not pay. Also down was income from an excavator that had been purchased to supplement school income with contract work from a previously robust government road-building programme. Narayan and most of his family contracted Covid but were able to avoid hospitalisation.

The decision was made, nevertheless, to focus on the long term in view of continuing development in the Makadam area, including direct road access and the shift of many government offices locally. The suspension of classes provided a convenient occasion to complete earthquake retrofitting (using reinforced concrete jacketing) and many other improvements to buildings and grounds (stairways, plumbing, soundproofing and accommodations).



Earthquake retrofitting

The school received national attention in mid-2021 when the entire 10th grade graduating class (its first) won full scholarships to continue their "plus-two" education (11th & 12th grades) in Kathmandu.



Class Two classroom

Early in 2022 Narayan was encouraged to run in local elections and was elected as the only opposition member of a 17-

person local council. He ran under the banner of the Nepali Congress party, whose national strength is in Kathmandu, not in rural areas, but his reputation was sufficient to win a seat. As a minority of one, his position is not an easy one, but it has allowed him to insist that matters are discussed and acted on openly and on the record, which is conducive to good government.

The current school year started in June. Enrolment is reasonably strong at about 125 students in Nursery through 10th Grade, and is expected to rise after the Dasain holiday month of October. The teachers are, as always, a mix of Nepalis from the local area (Ramechhap District) and nationally. During Covid and before, Narayan has had able administrative assistance from his oldest daughter, and now from his youngest.



Two new cows

Among the latest initiatives: The school now has three cows to provide milk for boarding students, and the school vegetable gardens have been expanded and improved with the three-fold goals of self-sufficiency, practical experience for students, and an example to the surrounding communities. These are plans that Narayan had articulated long ago, when the school existed only in his mind.

Narayan sends his best wishes to the DNHG and hopes that it may be feasible in 2023 or beyond to host DNHG visitors once again. In the meantime, high on his wish list is the possibility of volunteers who can assist with English language programs for Nursery and Kindergarten students, and training for their Nepali teachers. Nursery and Kindergarten are conducted on a Montessori basis.

Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) Programme 2021/2022

DNHG Lectures

17 October Angie Raab will present an illustrated talk on
“Canine Conservationists ”

DNHG Field Trips

27 - 30 October The 10th Great Himalayan Bird Count 2022
1 - 9 December Cambodia also known as Kampuchea
11 - 18 December Northern Laos

For more information and sign-up please contact Binish Roobas at binishroobas@hotmail.com

Please note that field trips will only take place in accordance with current Dubai Government regulations. Participants need proof of vaccination or proof of PCR test not older than 72 hours upon registration/arrival. Participants of field trips abroad are required to adhere to the regulations of the countries transiting / visiting.

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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 2021 to September 2022. 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 were automatically renewed for 2021- 2022, without a renewal fee. As we will be starting hybrid meetings from September, renewal fees can be paid at meetings or by the methods mentioned below.

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) 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.