



GAZELLE

مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

DNHG Trip to Southeast Sri Lanka

From July 3-8, 2014, fellow DNHG members, Tamsin Carlisle, Francesca Cesca, Tamara Fely, Teresa Kerr, Ziad Makhoul and Sarah Young, embarked on a trip to South-east Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka is a land of surprises and riddles. For instance, why is chop suey a culinary staple in rural backwaters with no other discernible Chinese influence? And why does a land devoid of lions since prehistoric times feature a stylized golden lion on its national flag?

While washing down large helpings of Chinese-style fried noodles and rice, and only occasionally a coconut-infused Sri Lankan curry, with lashings of the local Lion Lager, few of our group dwelled on such mysteries. Yet the morning of our last full day on the island found us climbing through tea gardens to Lit-



A Painted Stork (*Mycteria leucocephala*), one of many bird species spotted in Yala National Park

tle Adam's Peak while wondering how this minor summit and the more imposing Adam's Peak both got their names.

The answer points to a long history of commerce and cultural exchange between Sri Lankan merchants and sea-faring Arabs who, as far back as 361 AD, called the island Sarandib, corrupted from a Sanskrit phrase meaning "island where lions dwell". That became Serendip in a Persian fairy tale which inspired England's 18th-century man of letters Horace Walpole to coin the noun "serendipity" in reference to fortuitous chance discoveries.

Meanwhile, Islamic tradition identified Sarandib as the place where Adam landed after being booted out of Eden. The "proof" was a distinctive boulder near the peak of a locally revered holy mountain bearing an indentation in the shape of a large human foot.

To colonial British, the idea of "Adam's Peak" became intertwined with Middle Eastern legends suggesting Sri Lanka as the location of the Garden of Eden, and the name stuck. Sinhalese locals call the mountain Samanalakanda (butterfly mountain) or Sri Pada (sacred footprint) while Tamils call it Sivanolipatha Malai. The two groups respectively claim the "footprint" was left by Buddha or Lord Shiva.

As for Little Adam's Peak, it simply resembles Adam's Peak in shape. In the few months since my previous visit, someone had erected a small shrine near the summit, echo-

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Contributors

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

Tamsin Carlisle, Helga Meyer, Binish Roobas, Stephen Green and Gary Feulner



The Sri Lankan Flag

Announcements

Our Next Speaker

Our guest speaker for September will be DNHG Chairman, Gary Feulner, with a talk titled:

The Terraced Settlements of the High Musandam

The mountains of the Musandam peninsula, north of Ras al-Khaimah, are shared by the UAE and Oman. This is the highest area in Eastern Arabia north of the Jebel Akhdar. Until the modern era, the high Musandam (the *Ru'us al-Jibal* or "the Mountain Tops") was home to an extensive network of seasonal settlements -- remote but vital oases set in a stark and dramatic landscape, some with scores of dwellings and populations sufficient, over time, to fill graveyards of several hundred souls.

That way of life has passed. Although a few of the more accessible high settlements have been expanded, most have been effectively abandoned. Far from roads and hidden from view, they are scarcely even imagined by visitors who traverse the few roads that reach the high Musandam. And there are fewer visitors as border restrictions have been progressively tightened.

DNHG Chairman Gary Feulner has explored the Musandam region for more than two decades. His account of the Musandam flora was published in 2011 as a special volume of *Tribulus*. In 2001 and 2002 he served as team member and guide for an archaeological survey of the terraced settlements of the Musandam by University of Durham archaeologist Derek Kenet, formerly resident archaeologist at the National Museum of Ras al-Khaimah.

Gary's talk will take us to the high Musandam and introduce us to many details of those settlements -- terraced fields, homes (the *bayt al-qufl*), implements, ornaments, irrigation, art, etc. -- and to some of what is known about the way of life they represent.

CVRL Book Launch 'Camelid Infectious Disorders'

Last month the *Central Veterinary Research Laboratory, Dubai* celebrated the launch of a new book titled '*Camelid Infectious Disorders*' at the Al Murjoj Rotana Hotel.

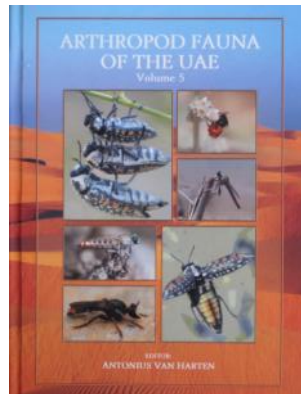
Co-authors Prof. Ulli Wernery, Dr. Joerg Kinne and Prof. Rolf K. Schuster spent 4 years compiling the book, which aims to provide important reference documents for clinical veterinarians, diagnosticians, camelid owners and the camelid industries throughout the world.

Camelid refers to old world camels (dromedary and Bactrian camels) and new world camels (llamas, alpacas, vicuna and guanaco).

A detailed report can be found in the following link:

http://www.khaleejtimes.com/kt-article-display-1.asp?xfile=data/nationgeneral/2014/July/nationgeneral_July6.xml§ion=nationgeneral

Arthropod Fauna of the UAE, vol. 5



Volume 5 of this series, edited by Dr. Tony van Harten, is now available at DNHG meetings.

The Department of the President's Affairs has sponsored publication of Volumes 5 and 6, which will conclude publication of the results of the UAE Insect Project, an initiative that commenced in 2004 under the sponsorship of Sheikh Tahnoon Bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

That project, and *Arthropod Fauna of the UAE*, have made the UAE the best-studied country in the Middle East in terms of insects and many other arthropods. The totals include at least 372 species and 15 genera that are new to science.

If you like "bugs" and wasps, then Volume 5 is for you! There

are hundreds of photos of each, including, for "bugs" (Order Hemiptera, suborder Heteroptera), photos of males and females of many species. Volume 5 also includes updates on a few groups (e.g., grasshoppers, jewel beetles and Tenebrionid beetles) as well as initial coverage of Robber Flies (Asilidae) and several smaller arthropod groups (e.g., water mites, fleas and antlions).

The volume is priced at AED 110, once again putting it (by design) within reach of amateur enthusiasts. Amateurs should be warned, however, that the comprehensive coverage and wealth of illustrations does not necessarily make it easier to identify exactly what you have found in the garden or in the field. Instead, Volume 5 may often seem to provide too many alternatives, sometimes a bewildering array of very similar-looking insects which require consideration of very specific details.

That, however, is a fact of life in the insect world, and a generic determination is sometimes the best that can be done by non-specialists, even conscientious ones. This reference will at least let you take a stab at it, and learn in the process.

Review by Gary Feulner



Lichens on “Plastic”

London-based DNHG member Stephen Green wrote recently with an observation and a question that implicates more general considerations of ecology and evolution:

"About twenty odd years ago I helped someone collect lichens for Kew in Bahrain. I thought they needed clean air! And trees or rocks. More recently, the gas man visited our home in Langley to mend a broken boiler and when

he was here checked the meter. I was more interested in the lichen. With Heathrow and an incinerator a few miles away it was a real surprise to find this growing on what seemed to be solid plastic. Have you ever seen that?

"I thought of the mastic. But it is also along the gap between the frame and the door. No other product. We were the first people to move into the estate twelve years ago. So there's a definite time frame for growth."

Stephen followed up to mention that, sensitized, he had subse-

quently noticed similar growth on coarse ceramic tiles on a neighbor's garage roof – but those were at least synthetic approximations of natural rock, on which lichens are characteristically found.

His observations are a reminder that organisms don't always 'read the book', for example about this or that "needing" clean air, etc.

Perhaps lichens will still be there with cockroaches after the next cataclysm (cosmic or nuclear).

Since plastics are organic, and some can be dissolved by relatively simple organic solvents, maybe Stephen's observation shouldn't be a complete surprise. But if that's the case, when and how did lichens 'learn' to use plastics, which haven't been with us for much longer than a century.

Contribution by Stephen Green and Gary Feulner



Small Cupid Frenzy

Helga Meyer kindly submitted some photos (above and right) that she took of the Small Cupid butterfly, *Chilades parthasius*, after witnessing them mate and lay eggs in her garden.

"On Monday morning, June 9, I had the good fortune to see many butterflies in a frenzy to mate and some females were also laying eggs on a cycad plant. They seem to mate for ages and I observed one couple stuck together for 1.5 hours at least, while a lot of other males tried to interfere."

The appearance of the Small Cupid can vary dramatically. These photos show very fresh, relatively colorful specimens, but older, worn butterflies (and perhaps dry season forms) can look very pale and almost featureless, except for the three dark spots on the underside of the hindwing, arranged in a right angle.

It is a dry adapted species that ranges from NE Africa across Arabia through Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan to the dry parts of northern India and Nepal.

It can be an exasperating butterfly to watch, because, relative to other species, it takes quite a long time to settle down after it has been disturbed. However, like other species, it is somewhat easier to photograph when it is distracted, e.g., by feeding or mating.

Helga observes that the eggs were so small that "maybe a magnifying glass is needed" to see them. There were also many birds trying to catch the butterflies.

From her description the birds

sounded like Red-Vented Bulbuls, *Pycnonotus cafer*, found in towns and villages from the UAE eastwards to at least Nepal and which definitely take butterflies when they can.

Luckily for the butterflies, the bulbuls appeared to be going for the false eyes on the butterflies' hindwing, presumably mistaking it for the butterflies' head and the "small and beautiful" butterflies got away.

You can learn more about the Small Cupid (and other UAE butterflies) from Butterflies of Oman, by Torben & Kiki Larsen. It's now out of print but available online at enhg.org.

Contribution by Helga Meyer & Gary Feulner



Field Clips



© British Rootas

Slevin's Sand Gecko, showing color banding in body and tail

Ramadan Desert Nights

The evenings of early Ramadan were relatively cool and dry this year and the desert inland of Dubai proved to be not only comfortable but also excellent for wildlife watching, especially lizards.

We chose the area west of Lisaili, where a couple of DNHG field trips have been conducted in recent years. The area is en route to Endurance Village and on the margins of the broader Marmoom Protected Area. Starting in grey light before a hazy sunset, we found three diurnal lizards enjoying the last of the daylight hours:

- A **Dhub** or **Spiny-Tailed Agama**, *Uromastyx aegyptia leptieni*. An individual, nicknamed "The Watchman" from earlier visits, surveyed his surroundings from a boulder just



A dhub stands watch beside the road

beside the road. It's good to know that, despite being quite conspicuous, he (or she) can continue to go about his daily routine, unmolested by the many people who now pass close by this spot each day, both by vehicle and on foot. The dhub will, however, withdraw to his burrow if approached too closely.

- Nearby, at the base of a large clump of Desert Knotweed grass *Pennisetum divisum*, we saw a juvenile **White-Spotted Fringe-Toed Lizard**, *Acanthodactylus schmidti*. This is the most common of the UAE's six Fringe-Toed lizards. The juvenile (distinguished by its small size) already showed the characteristic pale blue-green tail of an adult, but the tail was also more conspicuously marked than most adults found in open sand environments, with partial transverse bands of darker color. The juvenile appeared to be foraging, probably for a 'bedtime' snack. (Also found in the same area, on a trip during Inter-Emirates Weekend a few years ago, was a lizard cousin, the rarer Saudi Fringe-Toed lizard, *A. gongorrhynchatus*. The Lisaili area is at the very edge of its geographic range in Eastern Arabia.)

- At sunset, on the edge of dune sands, we found two juvenile **Yellow Toad-Headed Agamas**, *Phrynocephalus arabicus*. One of them paused for a while, gently undulating the thin, dark tip of its tail. Tail tips of this sort in other species have been thought to be used for attracting prey, although

that has been proven in only a very few cases. Both of the juveniles demonstrated another ability, one that we had seen before: they 'shivered', vibrating their bodies to sink vertically into the sand. One disappeared completely, leaving only the faintest traces on the sand surface to tell us where it had been.

Animal tracks were abundant in the area, of gazelle, lizards, snakes, birds, insects and small mammals. Once the sun went down, it wasn't long before we encountered a new cast of characters, the nocturnal fauna, featuring four more lizards:

- Several **Arabian Sand Geckos**, *Stenodactylus arabicus*. This species is easy to distinguish by its small size and short-toed, webbed front feet. Like some other *Stenodactylus* geckos, the scales are not prominent and the relatively smooth skin gives the impression of being translucent, giving a window into the



© British Rootas

"Up periscope!" A young Yellow Toad-Headed Agama peers from the sand

body of animal. We often found these on open sand.

- Several **Dune Geckos**, *Stenodactylus doriae*, with their distinctive large head and short tail. They seem to stand higher at the shoulders than at the hips. They became habituated to our presence and would forage nearby, sometimes in the light from our flashlights, retreating only if we approached closely and/or moved precipitously. Nevertheless, the Dune Gecko tended to stay near the periphery of desert shrubs.

- On firmer sand and fine gravel, a lone **Slevin's Dune Gecko**, *Stenodactylus sleveni*, made an appearance. At first glance it could easily be mistaken for a Dune Gecko – a mistake we made in the field. But

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Young White-Spotted Fringe-Toed Lizards may have a distinctly banded tail

(Continued from page 4)

we had taken note of the different habitat and so we paid attention to the subtle differences when we were able to compare them in our photos. Apart from technical anatomical differences, the color pattern of Slevan's Dune Gecko is more distinctly banded, both body and tail, whereas the Dune Gecko, by comparison, is only sparingly marked with scattered darker streaks.

- Under a large, spreading *Leptadenia pyrotechnica* shrub (the Fireworks Bush) we found a lone **Baluch Gecko**, *Bunopus tuberculatus*, more common in somewhat less sandy environments. This species, named for the prominent white bumps along its flanks, looks more like a typical lacertid lizard, with a smaller, narrower head and a much longer tail than the *Stenodactylus* geckos. It was also more skittish; we were never able to approach to within a meter of it.

Some practical tips for night viewing: The half moon was more than bright enough to allow us to walk confidently about the desert terrain, but spotting small wildlife requires a flashlight or lantern. Some observ-

ers believe that a more diffuse light, e.g., from a lantern rather than from a flashlight, may be less threatening to small wildlife. We experimented with two types of flashlights and found that a traditional incandescent bulb flashlight provided much greater contrast than a newer, energy-saving LED headlamp, and made it a great deal easier to see lizards, and especially animal tracks, by night.

In general, all the nocturnal animals we saw were tolerant of our lights, but they were less tolerant of fast movement or close approach. When frightened they would flee a certain distance, ultimately to cover in a shrub. An Arabian Sand Gecko actively preyed on flying insects attracted to a flashlight set on the ground, and a Dune Sand Gecko sat for some time in front of another light at a distance of about 30 cm, evidently without discomfort.

Our successful outing was a reminder that a desert evening can make a good warm weather field trip for DNHG members. So watch your e-mails!

*Report and photos by
Binish Roobas and Gary Feulner*



Delicious Dates!

A fellow DNHG member took some great photos of dates this month while in Jumeirah 3. The date fruit is usually harvested between late June to early October and can take up to 7 months to go through four distinct ripening stages.

The initial stage **Kimri** is when the fruit is an immature green colour. The young fruit increases in size and weight before reaching the **Khalal** stage, where the fruit changes to yellow and remains swollen and crunchy like an apple.

At the **Rutab** stage the fruit darkens to an amber, brown or almost black. The fruit softens and becomes juicy and must be picked delicately if harvested. This is also referred to as the 'wet' stage.

The final stage, **Tamar**, is when the fruit loses a lot of water and becomes chewy. The high sugar to water ratio prevents fermentation and acts as a preservative, providing people with a staple diet when taking long journeys through the desert, mountains or sea.

Contribution by Helga Meyer



Dune Sand Gecko, motionless at a light

Field Trips

Sri Lanka cont.



On Little Adam's Peak

(Continued from page 1)

ing the large permanent shrine around the Adam's Peak footprint rock. The new shrine is guarded by a resident temple dog which, like most of its ilk, spends much of its time sleeping and the rest begging food from visitors. It gratefully accepted a drink of water from Teresa but was unimpressed by her offering of jackfruit.

Jackfruit and spiny, red-rinded rambutan were two of the more exotic fruits we sampled throughout a trip on which Sri Lanka's "Garden of Eden" reputation was amply supported.

Moreover, while the lush island's lions may be symbolic, its leopards, sloth bears and, indeed, serpents are real enough. However, all eluded us. Instead, we had to settle in Yala National Park for a sighting of a pack of some half dozen Sri Lankan Jackals, *Canis aureus naria*, the local subspecies of Golden Jackal, and a close-up encounter with a small herd of female Sri Lankan Elephants, *Elephas maximus maximus*, and calves including a closely guarded new-born.

Back at Lake View Cottage hotel on the outskirts of Tissamaharama, a large land monitor lizard, *Varanus*



The spiny, red-rinded rambutan fruit

benghalensis, allowed us to approach closely as he methodically dug up and devoured frogs that had burrowed into soft earth bordering a stream.

Up the coast at Bundala National Park, we may have seen Sri Lankan Spotted Chevrotains or Mouse Deer, *Moschiloa meminna*, disappearing into dense bush at dusk. The diminutive nocturnal ungulates moved too fast in fading light to allow us to photograph them, but no other native Sri Lankan mammal species matches the size and general characteristics of the animals observed.

In addition to our wild elephant encounter, the natural history highlight of the trip was the profusion of wetland birds on display in the two lowland coastal national parks.

In Yala we found large aggregations of Spot-billed Pelicans, *Pelecanus phillipensis*, Eurasian Spoonbills, *Platela leucorodia*, Sacred Ibis, *Threskiornis aethiopicus*, and others at a few big waterholes still present during the dry season. In total we observed and photographed five stork species - Painted Storks, *Mycteria leucocephala*, Open-bill, *Anastomus oscitans*, Woolly-necked, *Ciconia episcopus*, Black-necked, *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*, and Lesser Adjuvant, *Leptoptilos javanicus*.

In the extensive marsh and lake-shore areas at Bundala we saw Oriental Darters, *Anhinga melanogaster*, numerous wading birds including Black-winged Stilt, *Himantopus himantopus*, and Indian Stone Curlew, *Burhinus indicus*, the locally rare Glossy Ibis, *Plegadis falcinellus*, Yellow-wattled Lapwing, *Vanellus malabaricus*, Pheasant-tailed Jacaranda, *Hydrophasianus chirurgus*, and Purple Swamphen, *Porphyria porphyria*.

Birds of prey were also spotted frequently in all lowland locations visited, including the two national parks and Tissamaharama Lake, which is actually a man-made reservoir. Our sightings included Crested/Changeable Hawk Eagle,



Crested Hawk Eagle

Niseatus cirrhatus, White-bellied Sea Eagle, *Haliaeetus leucogaster*, Brahmini Kite, *Haliastur indus*, and Grey-headed Fish Eagle, *Ichthyophaga ichthyaeus*.

Departing briefly from our itinerary, we took advantage of an opportunity to visit the Elephant Transit Home on the outskirts of the inland Udawalawe National Park where, from an observation platform, we watched rescued elephant orphans being fed milk and cut switch-grass. The orphanage's aim is to reintroduce as many as possible rescued youngsters to the wild. Several female "graduates" have been accepted by the matriarchal wild elephant herds roaming the park and in the past few years have bred and successfully raised calves.

With regard to the missing Yala leopards, we did run into a long queue of safari vehicles lined up for a chance to peer at a large spotted cat reportedly sleeping out the heat of the day deep in the shade of thick bush. We decided not to stick around as the potential harassment level seemed excessive.

So the only remaining enigma was why, once again, we were dining on chop suey.

Report and Photos by
Tamsin Carlisle



Elephant Transit Home

DNHG Recorders

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UAE Dolphin Project Calling Volunteers!

The UAE Dolphin Project is currently conducting its first summer survey of the Dubai coastline to assess the status of the local dolphin population.

If you would like to volunteer and join the research team on the project boat, please send an email to:

sighting@uaedolphinproject.org

Looking forward to hearing from you, Ada Natoli (PhD), Project director of the UAE Dolphin Project.

Andaman Islands Field Trip 2-7 November 2014 (6 days/ 5 nights)

Binish Roobas has organised a customised DNHG visit to the Andaman Islands, a remote archipelago in the Bay of Bengal between India and Myanmar.

The Andamans are blessed with a luxuriant evergreen tropical rainforest that shelters a mixed flora comprising Indian, Myanmar, Malaysian and endemic plant species. So far, about 2200 varieties of plants have been recorded, out of which 200 are endemic and 1300 do not occur in mainland India.

Despite their isolation from adjacent land masses, the Andamans are surprisingly rich in animals, with about 50 species of mammals, 270 species of birds, 64 species of reptiles, 225 species of butterflies and a wide variety of shells and corals. More than 10% are endemic to the Andaman Islands.

The planned itinerary is as follows:

Day 1: Fly to the Andamans and get together at our hotel.

Day 2: Mangrove 'walk and wade': A guided trail through the intertidal mangrove forest and mudflats of Lohabarrack crocodile sanctuary. Afternoon sunset boat trip.

Day 3: Early morning bird-watching (Wandoor Chidya Tapu, Mt. Harriett). A local naturalist will accompany the group. Evening at Wandoor beach.

Day 4: Samudrika Marine Museum and Anthropological Museum. Afternoon shopping trip to Port Blair and visit the infamous jail.

Day 5: Cinque Islands boat trip. Night owl watching with naturalist.

Day 6: Depart for the airport and return to Dubai.

- Limit of 10 people. Accommodation will be in an unpretentious resort.

- Estimated basic cost: AED 2300 (sharing) or AED 2600 (single), including accommodation, meals, road and boat transportation and entrance fees, but *excluding* airfare and Indian visa. (An Indian visa must be obtained *in advance*.)

- Estimated R/T airfare from Dubai (via Chennai): AED 1700.

For more information and sign-up, contact Binish Roobas at johanruphus@hotmail.com or 050-243-8737.

A deposit of AED 1500 will be required for sign-up.

Seashells, Birds and Mammals - Recorders needed!

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 channelled through to the *Gazelle* editor, so new information can be shared with all our readers.

Are You a Techie with Time?

The website sub-committee would like to find volunteers who can help with maintenance of the on-line newsletter, and to upload the wealth of information and photographs from past *Gazelles*.

Full training will be given. Contact any Committee person - we will be very pleased to hear from you!

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

September 14: Gary Feulner: The Terraced Settlements of the High Musandam

October 12: Brigitte Howarth and Janine Tan: The Giant Arabian Longhorn Beetle

Field Trips (Members Only)

November 02 to 07: Andaman Islands field trip (6 days/ 5 nights)

Further field trips, details or changes to trips will be announced/confirmed by email circular

DNHG COMMITTEE 2014

When possible, please contact committee members outside office hours

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Contributions

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

If so, email your contributions to: gazelleeditor@gmail.com

(Arial 10 justified).

DNHG Membership

Membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at Dh. 100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. Membership is valid from Sep 2013 to Sep 2014. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to HSBC account no. 030100242001. (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 AE900200000030100242001. However, this process does not identify you as the payer. If you wish to pay by cash, please also scan and e-mail a copy of your payment confirmation 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.