



GAZELLE

مجموعتنا في التاريخ والطبيعي

Wandering through the gardens at the Fujairah Hilton on 31st October 2015, my daughter and I were surprised – and my daughter was absolutely delighted – to see a little squirrel running across the grass, under the wire fencing of the tennis court and then on into the trees at the other side.

It was small with clear dark stripes on its back. I should have taken a quick picture, but didn't. A quick Google search, though, suggests that it was probably an Indian palm squirrel or three-striped palm squirrel, *Funambulus palmarum*, native to India and Sri Lanka, but introduced in the 19th Century to Madagascar, Réunion, Mayotte, Comoro Islands, Mauritius, Seychelles and Australia, where it has since become a minor pest.

A closely-related species, the Northern palm squirrel or five-striped squirrel, *F. pennantii*, is found in the Andaman Islands, Nicobar Islands (where it is introduced), India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Iran. The



Indian Palm Squirrel – naturalized or not?

Taken by Joseph Viker, previously published in the April, 2011 issue of the *Gazelle*.

Fujairah animal, however, was darker, with less stripes.

“No squirrels are native to the UAE, although a number of individuals of the Persian squirrel (Sciurus anomalus) survived from at least 1999-2003 in parks and gardens in Abu Dhabi, having originally been introduced for the pet trade.” (Hellyer & Aspinnall, The Emirates: A Natural History, p. 330).

I'm not aware of any subsequent records of Persian squirrels in Abu Dhabi, or elsewhere in the UAE.

The editor, though, has drawn my attention to three previous reports of Indian palm squirrels that have appeared in *The Gazelle*. One, in April 2011, was of one photographed near a Fujairah housing complex by local resident Joseph Viker (above), and another, from February 2014, of three seen over a period of around nine months by Minie van de Weg at the Fujairah Maternity Hospital. The third record, from Jumeirah 3, was of a 'pair'

seen by Michel de Martigny in his garden, and reported in *The Gazelle* for June 2013.

Although Indian palm squirrels clearly arrived here as pets, subsequently either escaping or being deliberately released, they're evidently well on their way to becoming naturalised residents. It would be interesting to plot any future sightings, to get an idea of how quickly their numbers increase – if, indeed, they do.

Contribution by Peter Hellyer

Any future sightings, please send details to Peter at hellyer@emirates.net.ae

Sightings could include how many, location, time of day and, if possible, a photograph.

Details of two or more together, especially if some seem to be youngsters, would be particularly useful, Peter adds. (Ed.)

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Contributors—Thanks to the following for their reports and contributions:

Peter Hellyer, Gordon Higgs, Gary Feulner, Sonja Lavrenčič, Esmat Elfaki Mohammed Elhassan and Binish Roobas.

Announcements

Next Month's Speakers

The DNHG are delighted to welcome the following members, who will present the following topics at our annual 'Members' Night':

Malgorzata de Latour-Abdalla—*'Selected Bees visiting Sodom's Apple flowers in Urban Sharjah in the years 2008-2010'*

Malgorzata is a native of Poland. She has lived in several Arab and Western countries. Following her arrival to the Emirates in 2003, she became fascinated by the local nature, which she explored extensively. Additionally, she found interest in local folklore, which she studied from museums, periodicals and direct contacts with Emirati friends. Seeing local folklore disappearing and restricted to local festivals and museums she decided to share her knowledge of it with the expatriate community at large. On the subjects of Emirati folklore and nature in the years 2006-2007, she contributed articles to the Sharjah English newspaper "Gulf Today".

During the years 2008-2010, Malgorzata conducted an informal photographic study on the insects visiting Sodom's Apple plants in urban Sharjah. In her study she documented over 100 insect and spider species living off these bushes.

Malgorzata is currently working on a book about the Sodom's Apple and its importance in the local ecosystem.

Steve Raynor—*'Birds and wildlife of Costa Rica and the challenges of jungle photography'*

Steve and Johanna Raynor travelled to south western Costa Rica to photograph birds, reptiles and insects. This talk showcases the photographs that did work and offers tips and traps for photographers in a jungle environment.

Steve developed an interest in birds and photography only after joining DNHG in 2002. He has since travelled to many places to capture images of birds, including Oman, Iceland, Sri Lanka, and Alaska and found the Costa Rica jungle the most challenging environment so far.

Tamsin Carlisle—*'Chilades pandava butterflies in the UAE: a case of mistaken identity'*

Tamsin Carlisle trained as an evolutionary biologist and obtained a BA in zoology from Oxford University and a Ph.D in evolutionary ecology from University of California at Santa Barbara. However, life intervened, and she has spent most of the past three decades working as a business journalist, mainly covering the Canadian and Middle East oil and gas sectors. She is currently DNHG Bird Recorder, but takes a broad interest in the fauna, flora and ecology of the Arabian Peninsula, especially from an evolutionary perspective.

8pm on Sunday, 6 December, 2015

**Inter-Emirates
Weekend
IEW 2016**

**18—20 February
2016**



The 2016 Inter-Emirates Weekend will be hosted by:

The Emirates Natural History Group, Fujairah

And will be based in:

Hilton Fujairah Resort,

From 18th to 20th February, 2016

There will be a programme of trips centred on the East Coast. More details to follow

So, save the date!

Leaving Dubai

Nora Ni Neachtain, a longtime Dubai resident and DNHG member, will leave Dubai next month for Cyprus. Nora is an educator by profession and has served with several Dubai institutions. She is already in touch in Cyprus with Colin Richardson, another DNHG veteran and author of *Birds of the United Arab Emirates* (1989). Colin has set a good example by continuing his exemplary birdwatching career in retirement in Cyprus. We wish Nora well in her new home.

Contribution by Gary Feulner

From the Editor:

There are some really interesting articles this month, not least the ringing of migratory birds at Ras al Khor (page 5).

The DNHG annual get-together took place at Dubai Offshore Sailing Club, earlier this month. Rain fell the previous day, but was kind enough to stay away for the evening. Thanks to Valerie Chalmers, for organizing this event—and for setting the natural history photograph and video quizzes!

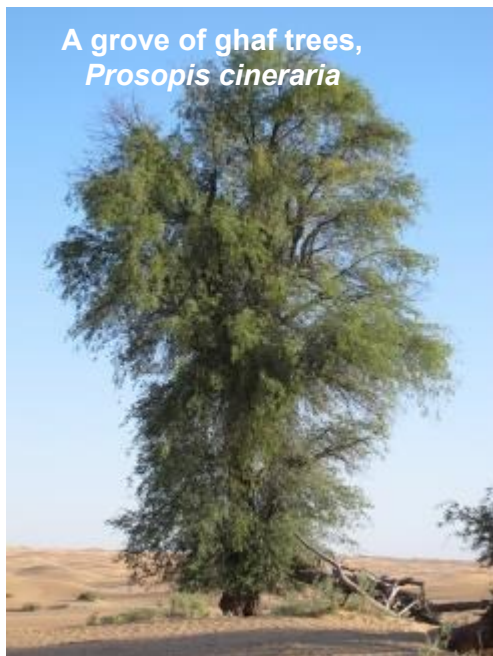
Read about the forthcoming trip to Nepal, and also note that the dates have been confirmed for the inter-Emirates weekend (see above).

Ras al Khaimah was the place to be this month for spotting creatures, it would seem. Read about the Little Owl and the Arabian Toad-Headed Agama on page 6. Those of you that are out and about, don't forget to send your clips to gazelleditor@gmail.com

Thanks to Dr. Jacky Judas, of the EWF/WWF, who spotted an error in last month's issue. The photo on page 3, labelled 'Great Bustard' was actually an Houbara Bustard. We apologise for this inaccuracy.

Field Clip

Why does a ghaf tree have thorns on its trunk?



A grove of ghaf trees,
Prosopis cineraria



'Button' thorns on a ghaf tree trunk in Jumeira

The ghaf tree, *Prosopis cineraria*, is a well-known part of the UAE landscape. It is distinguishable by many features, including its large size; single trunk; hanging branches with intermittent flattened, triangular thorns; pinnate (feather-like) leaves; long, 'bottle-brush' yellow flower heads; and long, thin, yellow-orange pods. In the UAE, ghafs often display a flat-bottomed 'umbrella' profile due to regular browsing by camels.

Recently I noticed another feature of the ghaf tree – and a puzzling one -- that had escaped me for more than 30 years. While on an errand in suburban Jumeira, I spied a small grove of well-watered ghaf trees along a sidewalk and I stopped briefly to scout the trunks for spiders. On each trunk, at more or less eye level and above, I found scattered thorns, flattened and triangular like those on the hanging branches, each oriented with the long axis vertical and mounted on a smooth, button-like mound.

The puzzle (apart from why I had never noticed them before) is: What can be the purpose of these scattered thorns positioned directly on the ghaf tree trunk? Many trees, especially in tropical regions, have evolved physical defenses against predators. But the thorns on the ghaf tree are not densely spaced enough to deter small animals like insects, lizards, birds

or squirrels, there are no large tree-climbing animals in most of Arabia, and the danger of abuse from tree-hugging environmentalists remains small. Moreover, the thorns appear at a height greater than that of most browsing quadrupeds found in the region, except the camel. Can they, then, be intended to

deter browsing of the ghaf tree bark by camels?

Ghaf tree branches are regularly cut and fed to captive camels, sometimes leaving the trees looking dangerously depleted. Do the camels eat the bark as well the leaves? For that matter, do all ghaf trees exhibit the 'button' thorns I saw in

Jumeira? (I have since noticed them on ghafs at Ras al-Khor, the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve and the new Wasit Wetland Centre.)

Or is it wrong, in this instance, to ask about the "function" of the thorns on the ghaf tree trunk? Could they be merely residual? Having originally formed on young, succulent branches (and served then as a deterrent to browsing), have they simply been retained as the tree grew and not discarded or resorbed as shoots turned to branches and trunks? Is there no "cost" to the tree in keeping them? How would you decide between the alternative hypotheses? These questions provide food for thought on your next natural history foray in the UAE. *Contribution and photos by Gary Feulner*



Thorns on a young ghaf tree branch and shoots

Trip and Field Clip

Nepal Hill Country,

April 1-9, 2016



Natural History Group members have once again been invited to experience the verdant scenery and village life of Nepal's hill country – traditional houses, mountain trails, terraced cultivation of rice, corn and millet, footbridges across rivers, water buffalo milk, temple ceremonies, traditional dancing, and more – including 4 days homestay and optional day hikes. Also birds, butterflies, etc. Sightseeing in unforgettable Kathmandu to start. Return via highlands of the upper Sunkosi River, with temple visit and a detour to the Chinese border. Total 9 days 8 nights.

Our visit will include a mix of touring by vehicle, day hikes, cultural interaction and natural history observation. In the hill country, in and around the village of Makadum in Ramechhap District, our host will be Narayan Karki, a former DNHG member known for his energy and enthusiasm, who has a wealth of knowledge about village life and customs.

[NB: This will be a customized visit. The village area is part of the Indigenous Peoples Trail network, but that initiative has not yet been developed into standardized commercial offerings. Accommodation in the hill country will be at a private school and a rural hotel. Previous visits by the NHGs in 2012 to 2014 have gotten very good reviews. Also, improved road access will allow us to use private 4WD vehicles to reach Makadum directly, rather than requiring the 'memorable' truck journeys of previous years.]

Limit 10 participants. Approx. basic cost: AED 3500 plus airfare (est'd AED 1650) and Nepal visa (AED 150). For more details and itinerary, contact Gary Feulner: grfeulner@gmail.com or 04-306-5570.



Urban Redbacks

In a discussion in *Gazelle* a year ago (July-Aug 2014) we emphasized that the UAE's Redback spider, which is typically seen in suburban sheds and gardens, can also be found far from the beaten track, and we have since found many additional examples. The fact that it is at home in wild environments in the UAE may reflect its native status. Despite its close resemblance to the typical form of the adult Australian Redback (*Lactrodectus hasselti*) – including an elongated red, accordion-shaped marking on the back of the shiny black abdomen – the weight of current opinion among arachnologists is that the Redback found in the UAE represents a separate regional species, although details remain under study, including molecular genetic work.

Whatever its ultimate pedigree, the UAE's Redback is nothing if not adaptable. The purpose of this note is to mention two recent sightings in thoroughly urban (even hyper-urban) environments in Dubai. The first was at the entrance to Gary's apartment in the Trade Centre Apartments. Beside the main doorway to Block C is a low brick ledge where smokers and horse racing staff awaiting their pick-up can sit and thumb their smartphones, still in range of the wi-fi in the lobby behind them. But there too, Binish noticed the telltale low, tangled, untidy web of a Redback, complete with spider. Miss Muffet beware!

The second site was even more unlikely, at the edge of the sidewalk on Financial Centre Street, the highway running inland from Sheikh Zayed Road past Dubai Mall and the Radisson Hotel. Binish was passing by in business dress but his attentive eye caught the by now familiar Redback web, complete with resident spider, at the base of one of Dubai's ubiquitous red-and-white concrete barrier, less than two meters from high speed metropolitan traffic.

The Redbacks do not necessarily seek out such extreme environments, of course. Their principal means of dispersal is probably by "ballooning" as juveniles, on strands of silk carried by the wind. As adults, their mobility is probably more limited and they must try to make the best of the situations in which fate has landed them. It appears, however, that they have considerable capacity to persevere.

A UAE Redback female, *Lactrodectus* sp.



Contribution
and photos by
Binish Roobas
and Gary
Feulner

Be careful where you sit.
Redbacks sit here, too!

© Binish Roobas

Migratory Birds from Poland in Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary



A bird-ringing project was launched in late 2013 by the Natural Resources Conservation Section, Environment Department of Dubai Municipality, aiming to tag migratory birds to determine their migratory pathways for better management of their habitats. But tagging is only the other half of this program. In order to assess the pathway, the birds have to be recaptured and tagged/ ringed by bird ringers. Bird ringers around the world would then share the information thereby establishing the pathways of different bird species.

During our winter ringing activities on 12th October 2015, a ringed Broad-billed Sandpiper (*Limicola falcinellus*) from Poland was recaptured in one of the mist nets in the Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary at the mudflat area, which is the preferred feeding site for the bird. It is probably one of the birds ringed by the University of Gdansk as indicated in its ring. Full details of the bird were sent to University of Gdansk in Poland for verification. Professor Przemyslaw Busse, the President of the SEEN (SE European Bird Migration Network) informed us that the bird was ringed in northern Poland (mouth of Vistula River)

on 30 July 2011, already as an adult bird. The bird seems to have successfully made his annual journey for almost 4 years. It is the first Palearctic recovery in Dubai during our course of the project. Professor Przemyslaw Busse also expressed his interest to have collaboration between Dubai Municipality and SEEN with focus on passerine species as he informed us that they didn't find any connection with people from the Arabian Gulf countries for the previous years to cover this gap of information on this region.

The broad-billed sandpiper is strongly migratory, spending the non-breeding season (Sept—May) from easternmost Africa, through south and south-east Asia to Australasia. It is highly gregarious, and forms flocks with other calidres waders, particularly dunlins. They forage in soft mud on marshes and the coast, mainly picking up food by sight. They

mostly eat insects and other small invertebrates. During the low tide, the birds with other waders occupy the whole intertidal mudflats, looking for food under the soft mud.

Another ringed water bird was also recaptured on October 13, 2015. A Kentish Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) was ringed last March 12, 2014 by the NRCS, Dubai Municipality. This bird may have returned to the Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary from migration or it has stayed in the area or in the country because of the availability of food. Either way, it is a great indication that the Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary is a good environment for this species.

The broad-billed sandpiper and the kentish plover are included in the list of species to which the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA) applies.

The areas where these migratory birds are recaptured indicates that the habitat is environmentally sound. The areas may have a lot of stress and threats, but it has continually been a haven for species seeking refuge from its long flights. And that is the significance of the Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary in the life cycle of many of these species.

Contribution by Esmat Elfaki Mohammed Elhassan, Ornithologist, Dubai Municipality.



Field Clips

Arabian Toad-headed Agama.

This Arabian toad-headed agama (*Phrynocephalus arabicus*) was kind enough to pose for the camera, recently.

This particular specimen was observed in the desert beyond Ras al Khaimah airport.

A member of the Agamidae family, more interesting facts about this amazingly fast lizard, can be found at the following website:

<http://www.arkive.org/arabian-toad-headed-agama/phrynocephalus-arabicus/>

Contribution by Gordon Higgs



Owl Sighting

This photograph was taken whilst sitting by



the camp fire at dusk in the neighbourhood of Sili village, Wadi Sha'am, Ras al Khaimah.

Tamsin Carlisle identified this bird of prey as a Little Owl (*Athene noctua*), which occur in two colour phases in the UAE—pale in the desert and dark in the mountains.

Sonja Lavrenčič

Birds at Ras al Khor

The three bird photographs in the centre column were taken by Tamsin Carlisle, on a recent visit to Ras al Khor.



Eastern Great Egret



Flamingo and Egret



Heron and Stilts

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Insects - Gary Feulner

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Mammals - Lynsey Gedman mobile: 050 576 0383 email: lynseygedman@hotmail.com

Seashells - Andrew Childs mobile: 050 459 0112 email: andrew.childs@eim.ae

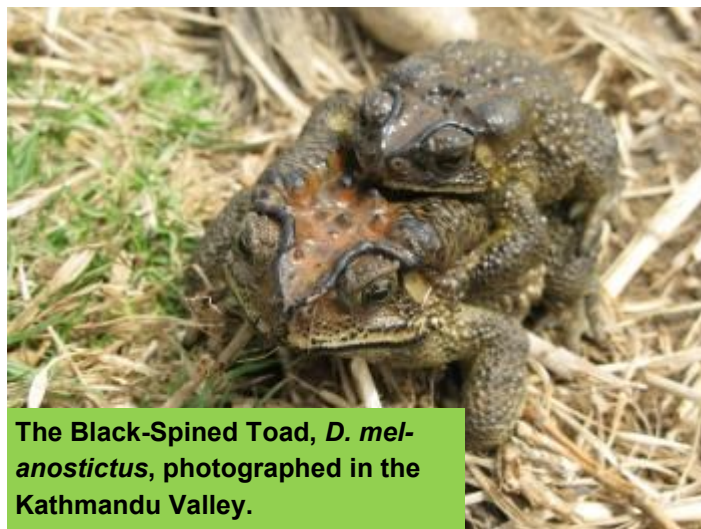
Birds - Tamsin Carlisle mobile: 050 1004702 email: tamsin.carlisle@platts.com

Field Clip

Sufouh "Mystery Toad" ID'd

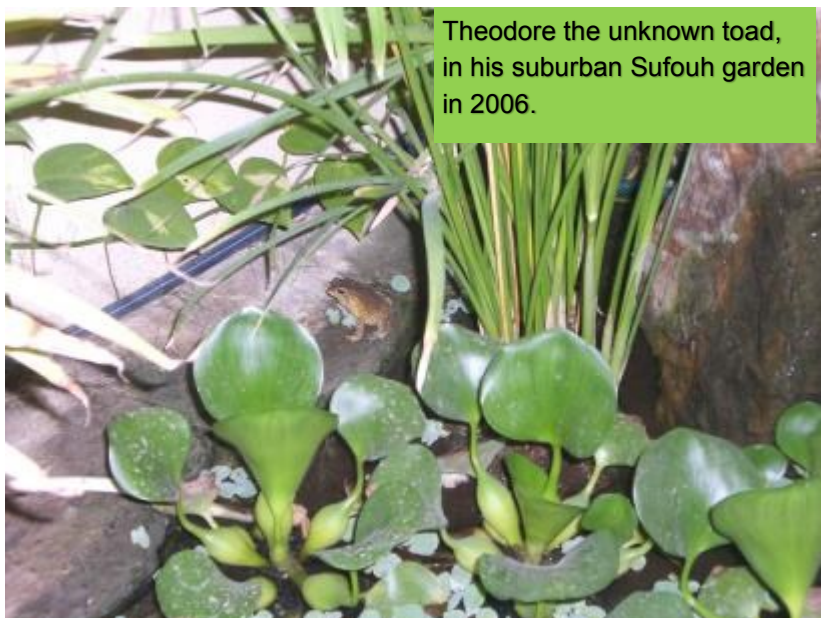
The *Gazelle* case files include a number of unsolved mysteries. One of those was the case of Theodore the toad, who turned up in mid-2006 in an attractively landscaped and well-watered residential garden in suburban Sufouh, where for a time he crooned regularly by night. He was featured in the July/August 2006 *Gazelle*, complete with photos, but no ID was ever suggested, so it was impossible to know how he had arrived in Dubai, or from where.

species able to thrive in a variety of habitats, so it is not unreasonable to suppose that, having perhaps arrived with imported horticultural materials, it could maintain a foothold among the lawns and gardens of suburban Dubai. The *Gazelle* reports were not followed up at the time and no further reports have reached us, but the existence of garden



The Black-Spined Toad, *D. melanostictus*, photographed in the Kathmandu Valley.

Theodore the unknown toad, in his suburban Sufouh garden in 2006.



toads may not be recognized as exceptional arrivals to "New Dubai".

It would be of great interest to confirm the current status and to know if Asian Common Toad visitors remain part of the local landscape.

DNHG members are encouraged to be attentive to

this possibility and to forward any information to Chairman Gary Feulner or to the *Gazelle* Editor. Photographs would be helpful to confirm IDs. The Black-Spined Toad is nocturnal. Accounts of its call are variable. The Sufouh toad was said to make a prolonged low croak, lasting up to 30 seconds. It can be ID'd visually by several features (see accompanying photographs). Please note, however, that the best rule for toads is "Look but don't touch." The Black-Spined Toad (and to a lesser extent the UAE's two native toads) should not be picked up or handled as glands in their skin produce chemicals that are toxic to humans.

Contribution by Gary Feulner

With the benefit of subsequent experience, however, I had an "Aha!" moment when I happened across those old photos last month. It is now clear that the mystery toad is none other than the Asian Common Toad *Duttaphrynus melanostictus*, a large nocturnal toad sometimes called the Black-Spined Toad. *D. melanostictus* is native to South and Southeast Asia, including Sumatra, Malaysia and Borneo, but it has also been introduced to the south and east of the Indonesian archipelago. It is generally considered to be a beneficial species, because it eats various insect species that humans regard as pests.

The original account in *Gazelle* also mentioned reports of toads on the grounds of an educational institution in the Sufouh area, including relatively large individuals, raising the possibility that by 2006 the mystery toad was already more widespread in Dubai than was generally realized. *D. melanostictus* is a generalist



A close-up view of Theodore, showing the prominent dark brow ridges, pale yellow tympanum and profuse black-spotted spines – all characteristic of the common Asian toad *Duttaphrynus melanostictus*.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

December 6: Members Night: Malgorzata de Latour-Abdalla, Steve Raynor and Tamsin Carlisle

January 10: Frauke Heard-Bey: UAE history and culture.

Scheduled Field Trips (Members only)

December 5: Sunset Mangrove Bird-Watching Boat Trip in the Abu Dhabi Eastern Mangroves

December 11/12: Desert Picnic (optional camp)

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

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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 fully justified)

DNHG Membership

Membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at Dh100 for families and Dh50 for singles. Membership is valid from September 2015 to September, 2016. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to HSBC account number 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 AE900200000030 10024001. 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 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.