

GAZELLE

Vol 19 no 12 – December 2004



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

DNHG Membership Renewals

Congratulations and a welcome!

Congratulations to **Peter Cunningham**, a former DNHG speaker and one of our overseas members, who has received Namibia's "Biologist of the Year" award at a ceremony key-noted by the Prime Minister of Namibia. The award was given in recognition of Peter's "numerous studies of Namibian fauna, most notably its reptiles, and his work in training students for research. His work in the popularization of science has been published extensively in national and international journals." Peter is currently Senior Lecturer in the Department of Nature Conservation at Polytechnic of Namibia.

It is a pleasure to welcome new member **Charles Laubach**, who comes to Dubai from Abu Dhabi, where he was for many years a Committee member of our sister group, the ENHG, as well as a popular summer field trip leader and a lecturer on amateur astronomy.



Reminder! Make sure your membership is current. If it runs out, so does your *Gazelle*.



Kookaburras
Dacelo Novaeguineae

Editor **Anne Millen** spent October in Central Queensland, Australia, and was delighted to be woken every morning by a chorus of birds. The loudest of all was a kookaburra who sat on the clothes line studying the garden and making an occasional lightning-fast swoop on an insect or reptile. One morning he was quiet, though he kept opening his beak as if he were about to make that ridiculous call. Eventually, he stretched his neck forward, opened his beak even wider and dropped something onto the lawn below. It was a pellet, over 3 cm long and about 1.5 cm in diameter, of body parts! Tiny bones, exoskeletons, teeth and all things indigestible were compressed together into a bullet-shaped lump. It made him happy, though, and he sat laughing on the clothes line for longer than usual that morning.

The current DNHG membership year runs from September 2004 to September 2005. Membership remains a bargain at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account no. 173746. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.)

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*, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects. Please note that if you have not renewed before the January *Gazelle* is posted, you will not receive a copy. You'll have been struck off the list!

This month's Contributors

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

Valerie Chalmers & Peter Jackson
Mohammed Arfan Asif
Gary Feulner
Jo Raynor
Richard & Cathy Morris



Field Trip Schedule for 2004-2005

The DNHG Committee has tried to sketch out a basic program of field trips for the coming season. Some dates are tentative and subject to confirmation. Full details will be provided nearer the respective dates. The Committee will also be trying to draw on member expertise to schedule additional trips.

- Jan 13 Falcon Hospital / Saluki Breeding Centre
- Jan 20-21 [Eid Al-Adha weekend]
- Jan 28 Hajar Mountain hike – Gary Feulner
- Feb 4 or 11 Dubai Birdwatching – David Bradford
- Feb ___ Jebel Akhdar rim walk – Peter van Amsterdam
- Feb ___ Wadi Dhahr bat falaj – Jenny Irwin & Mary Ann Pardoe
- Feb ___ Wadi Bih – Peter van Amsterdam
- Mar 3-4 Inter-Emirates Weekend (TBA)
- Mar 18 East Coast dhow trip – Lena Linton
- Apr 6-8 Roses on the Saiq Plateau – Peter van Amsterdam

Hajar Mountain Hike Friday, January 28

Gary Feulner will lead a full day hike on a circuit that ascends Jebel Sfayy (1000m+) in the central Hajar Mountains. This will take us into wild olive country and, if we are lucky, we may see the rare yellow *Caralluma* in flower. The ascent will be approximately 600m, there are essentially no trails, and the ground is typically rough and uneven. In addition, the short daylight hours of winter impose time constraints. Accordingly, this trip is suitable only for experienced hikers or very fit and energetic novices; it is not a good "first" hike.

Schedule: Depart from downtown Dubai at ~6:30am. Estimated return to Dubai ~7-7:30pm. What to bring? Minimum 3 litres of water (plus a 4th in the car), boots or very sturdy shoes, hat and/or sunscreen, windbreaker, daypack, lunch, camera, binoculars, etc. Limit 12 people. Call Gary for

sign-up, meeting place or further information, at 330-3600 x 630 (office) or 306-5570 (home).

Help Wanted: Field Trip Coordinator

All who participate in our field trips seem to enjoy them, but it takes a certain amount of effort to make them happen. The job description for a Field Trip Coordinator is to have or solicit ideas, identify and recruit potential trip leaders, and provide "how to" guidance and encouragement. This need not be done in a vacuum. The Committee is available to assist, but Committee members all have other primary responsibilities.

At the moment, the DNHG is relying on a relatively small number of trip leaders. We are worried that a few of these are going to stop making suggestions, because every time they suggest an idea, they are asked to lead!

Letters to the Editor

Any news or views you would like published in our monthly newsletter? Feel like tickling things up?



Please send your letter to any of the committee members listed, by fax or e-mail, or direct to the editor.



Our Next Speaker

Reginald Victor is the Director of the Centre for Environmental Studies and Research (CESAR) at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. He has a special interest in the conservation and sustainable development in arid mountain ecosystems.

The Jebel Akhdar Initiative, with which Reg is closely involved, is a research project that addresses the need for biodiversity conservation, natural resource utilization and sustainable development, under the guiding principles of Oman's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan. It is made up of nine different sub-projects: (1) Climatic data. (2) Inventory of biodiversity, (3) Flora and vegetation, (4) Birds, (5) Water quality, (6) Soil properties, (7) An evaluation of grazing, (8) Planning and management of ecotourism resources, and (9) Environmental impact assessments.



Eid Trip to the Turtles at Ras Al Junaiz

Thirty-five members of the Dubai Natural History Group assembled at the Al Areesh Camp in the Wahiba Sands on the evening of 12th November after a long delay at the Hatta Border Post followed by a fairly long drive down from Dubai! Those of us who travelled in convoy were met in the dark by Salem and carefully guided into the camp. Al Areesh Camp is situated in a delightful location on the edge of the dunes. After supper and being entertained by local musicians, we retired to spacious fixed tents (huts) with single beds.

The next morning, after breakfast, some members went dune driving whilst others enjoyed a camel ride and visited the local Bedu who had come to sell their wares. The majority of the group then set out for the Al Naseem camp at Ras Al Junaiz, making a detour en route to Wadi Bani Khaled. This wadi is described in the guide books as one of the most picturesque wadis in the interior of Oman and it certainly lives up to its description. We managed to get up to the rush-lined pools this year, even with a detour! Some members went for a swim whilst others walked on further to try and get to the Moqal cave. Unfortunately they were unable to get into it. One member noticed some echinoderms in the rocks near the cave.

From Wadi Bani Khaled we drove to Al Kamal and took the blacktop coast road which was a very pleasant and interesting drive. We reached our destination before sunset. Al Naseem Camp is only a short distance away from the turtle beach.

After a delicious supper we were taken down to a private beach at 9.30 p.m. to see the green turtles coming ashore to lay their eggs. We managed to see a few turtles come ashore and we watched one lay her eggs. Then we all arose at 4.20 a.m., leaving the camp at 4.30 a.m. with Ali, our guide, to watch

the turtles return to the sea. This time we only saw one turtle making its way back to the sea.



Female turtle returning to sea after laying
(Photograph by Peter Jackson)

A few baby turtles were seen hatching and emerging from their burrows but sadly they seemed to be hatching out prematurely as they were still attached to the yolk sacs. Many sets of tracks made by foxes and some made by a 'cat' (feral? seen by some of us) were spotted near the turtle nests. Unfortunately we saw very many eggs which had been attacked/eaten/opened by the predators. Perhaps the baby turtles were hatching out too early because the eggs had been disturbed by the predators.



DNHG members observe the tiny turtles
emerging
(Photograph by Val Chalmers)

After breakfast, the majority of the group set out for Muscat via Sur. En route to Sur from Ras Al Hadd we came across some rocks containing fossils which was quite exciting. We have yet to have them identified. After a delay due to a puncture, several of us, in convoy, took the coast road from Sur to Quriyat. This scenic route has much to offer. About 22 km from Sur is the Mausoleum of Bibi Miriam. Although in ruins, it is the only building remain-

ing from the ancient port of Qalhat which was razed by the Portuguese in 1507. Further on are the towns of Shab and Tiwi. We stopped to explore Wadi Tiwi which is a delightful wadi with running water, lots of shade with orchards and flowering plants. We were able to drive up it for some distance. We were unable to locate the Bimah Sink Hole this time which was a great pity. The sink hole is an example of karst activity where the groundwater has dissolved the limestone below the surface until the exposure is too wide to support the weight of the overlying rock and the roof caves in.

From Bimah we passed near to Wadi Daiqah, the coast road finally ending near Quriyat. We then made our way to Muscat. We met up with the rest of the group at the Safeer Hotel Suites where we stayed the night and had a delicious supper. Next day most of us explored Mutrah Souq, presently under major renovation, before returning to Dubai. Our journey back to Dubai was quite eventful with rain and hailstones near Sohar! These later caught up with us in Dubai. However, everybody seemed to have enjoyed the trip very much. *Report by Valerie Chalmers and Peter Jackson*

Jebel Ali Butterfly Migration?

Did anyone else see the butterflies coming in off the sea in late September? Can anyone enlighten us as to whether this is a periodic migration or merely a one time occurrence? We are not precise scientists, but these very plain blue-gray butterflies had about a 3 cm wingspan and came onto the beach in wave after wave on a Friday outing at Jebel Ali beach the third week of September. As we stood out in the water, they would land on our heads to rest before continuing on to the seashore and inland. We were there for 6 hours or more and the little beauties were arriving all day. Sometimes one of them would plop into the water near where we were swimming and at first we thought they were stranded. How-



E.mail your reports to pvana@emirates.net.ae, (Arial 10 justified) or deliver them to Anne Millen on floppy disk at monthly meetings.

ever, they are obviously adapted to rest in the water with the wings outspread because as soon as we tried to touch one, it would spring back into flight. Where do they come from and where do they go?

[Editor's Note: Butterflies are sometimes blown far out to sea. I have seen small numbers of them more than fifty nautical miles south of Sri Lanka. Gary Feulner suggests that these butterflies may have been *Lycaenidae*, and in particular members of the group known collectively as "Little Blues." Several species of Little Blues are common in the UAE, but no more positive identification is possible at the moment.]
Report by Richard and Cathy Morris

Johanna's Eggs

A trip to Liwa during the National Day holiday led to two discoveries for the Raynor family. One was the Liwa area landfill. Now we know why there were anti-littering signs on that dirt road. The other was these egg shells.



Oval-shaped, leathery and about 2cm in length, they were found in the centre of a clump of dead bush. What laid them? Clearly the eggs of a lizard or snake, their size eliminated many species.

Advice from Drew Gardner was that the only two candidates eligible for

eggs this size were the Desert Monitor, *Varanus griseus*, and the Arabian Horned Viper, *Cerastes gasperettii*. A possible sighting of *Cerastes gasperetti* (unconfirmed due to maternal instinct), in the immediate vicinity, inclines us to think they these are the eggs of the Horned Viper.

We later found many more fragmentary shells at the base of the dunes amongst scrubby bushes indicating a healthy population. Any further insights and comments would be much appreciated.
Thanks to Jo Raynor for this puzzle.

Snails & Rails

Reading a paper about UAE land snails published in a German publication, DNHG member Dr. Rolf Schuster, a parasitologist at Dubai's Central Veterinary Research Laboratory (and a former DNHG monthly lecturer) wrote to recall his own instructive experience with land snails. Fresh water snails are commonly recognized to be potential carriers of human and animal parasites. Terrestrial snails are generally considered to be much less of a risk, but this is not always the case.

Says Rolf: "15 years ago I also dealt with xerophilic land snails in connection with lanceolate liver flukes [in sheep and other domestic animals]. We were wondering why this particular fluke occurred only in certain areas (farms) of the district under observation. Using abattoir data we were able to draw a map of distribution of the fluke. A couple of years later I came into contact with a hobby malacologist. He drew a distribution map of *Helicella obvia*, a snail that was known to be one intermediate host of the fluke. Both maps fitted perfectly with only one exception: there was a line-like area where the snail occurred without any fluke findings in sheep. The explanation was that this line was a railway connecting Berlin with Poland. Grazing along railways is not allowed. Thus, no liver flukes in this territory." Contribution by Rolf Schuster

Thru' the Lens ...

No doubt we are in desert land. For sure, when we zoom along Sheikh Zayed Road, we tend to forget this fact, but go a few miles on the Al Ain road and you will catch the dunes. Forget the road to Abu Dhabi; very soon even the binoculars will fail!

Fellow members of desert trips occasionally mention that finding life in the desert is a bit difficult and sometimes one has to return with nothing to talk about. But one should really have a closer look at the desert. The sand is itself an attraction. Shape, form, texture and quality and quantity of light are viable shifting elements of sand dunes. Dunes constitute the basic element of landscape photography here, and I am fascinated by these ripples in the sand. Dune features develop from slight topographical irregularities or objects like stones, twigs, etc. Once a dune begins, it often builds on itself by creating a highly localized wind pattern. Then the dune begins migrating with the prevailing winds until its journey is interrupted by a larger obstacle.



I am told Saudi Arabia has dunes 500 metres high that are 80 kilometres miles in length! We don't have that close to Dubai, but one can definitely look around and find great red dunes on the road to Al Ain. My favourite spots are between Margham and Al Faqa. Recently, on the trip to Jabeeb, I discovered great sand dunes a few kilometres further on from Al Faqa. Just cross those barbed wires and you have a great range of fine sand dunes. I also like the Al Za'ala range on the truck road between Al Ain and Abu Dhabi. Al Zaala has higher and lighter-coloured sand dunes than the ones near Al Faqa. The beauti-



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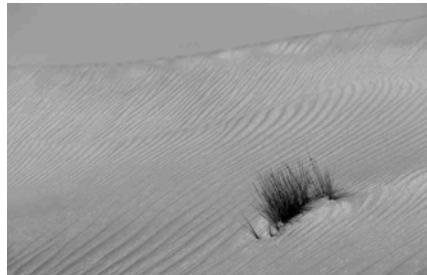
Plants – Valerie Chalmers

Mammals - **Recorder 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.

ful sand dunes near Maddam are at the mercy of the buggies and the tourist trade. (What about a Desert Protection Act?)



When faced with a vista of dunes, your first impulse might be to photograph everything on view, but it is often more effective to isolate and simplify a composition. Proper exposure and good composition can make simple formations enchanting and moody. My strategy is to use a long lens and scan the overall scene in front until something catches my eye. You need to traverse the dunes by foot to get great shots. When the wind is blowing strongly, be careful. It may do wonders for the dunes, but it is time to take cover for your camera's sake.



Lower sun angles make the most dramatic images. Textures and shapes are accentuated. In low light, expose for the highlights. I prefer Spot metering. Take the reading of the lighter area and if your camera does not have spot metering, zoom to the longest focal length, take the reading, keep it in mind and then recompose and manually set the reading.

Accessories like polarizing filters help to saturate the colors and create dramatic shots. The other filter that can be used is the split neutral density filter (graduated filter). For monochrome, I would recommend a yellow filter. In nature photography, use filters in moderation. A UV or

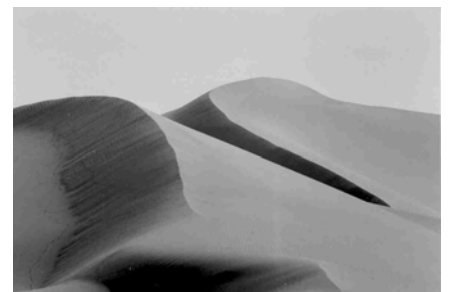
Skylight filter will protect your lens when shooting in windy conditions, without affecting the exposure. Have a lens shade or hood, since you may encounter lens flare.

During your adventures among the dunes, minimize your contact with the sand, so that it permeates neither camera nor clothes. Have a camel airbrush ready in your bag. Be sure to brush off the sand when changing films or lenses. If even a little sand creeps into your camera, you have had it. Keep your back to the wind when working with an open camera.



Vegetation, gazelle tracks, camel tracks and sandfish tracks can add contrasts to the starkness of the dunes. Footprints or any evidence of man can make or break your image. Avoid walking on the dune you intend to include in your photograph!

Check the weather before venturing into the desert. It is harsh and challenging and may threaten those who go unprepared. It is indeed an exceptional place which reveals the inner, hidden beauty of the earth.



As the wind piles the sand at an increasingly steep angle, gravity causes miniature avalanches and Edward Weston's sand dune studies came to mind (except the ones with the props) ... all time classics. *Photographs and text by Arfan Asif*



Jebel Qatar Hike

Jebel Qatar is the isolated plateau that looms over Fossil Valley and can be seen from the road to Al-Ain. Its vertical walls make it seem remote and impregnable, reminiscent of Arthur Conan Doyle's "Lost World". The plateau is, in fact, all but impregnable to a direct assault, but our DNHG team detoured to follow a rough but established route to the top.

The initial ascent of the access wadi, involving climbs up several waterfalls, seemed designed to weed out all but the most intrepid. These were followed by a rugged trail up rock-strewn slopes. Only then did we encounter a more well-worn trail that took us safely past the vertical cliffs. Once on top, however, the adventure was only just beginning. The plateau appeared flat, but there were many steep sided wadis to be crossed, some as deep as 50 metres and there were (as advertised) no trails. Our reward for the continuing effort was exhilarating views over the surrounding countryside, and a lunch spot perched above the waterfall that empties into the Hanging Gardens. A great many rolls of film were shot in the course of the day, not least by our "Through the Lens" columnist, Mohammed Arfan Asif.

The area was very dry and barren overall, as expected. However, the showers of two months ago were not without effect. Occasional seedlings were found in the shelter of rocks on the ascent and a few *Tribulus terrestris* flowered in silt in wadi bottoms, along with gangly sprays of *Aerva javanica*, looking like clusters of pipe cleaners. *Hibiscus micranthus* had flowered and set seed not long before. Rob Schmidt spied a few *sidr* trees (*Ziziphus spina-christi*) in fruit, which we sampled, but the general verdict was that this is an acquired taste. We also saw numerous specimens of the *Maerua crassifolia* tree, which is common on Jebel Qatar and in the Hanging Gardens area below, but is extremely rare (if not absent) within the UAE proper.

Richard Morris pointed out a cac-tus-like *Caralluma*, a species rare on J. Qatar.

Birds were few in number and variety, but included (thanks mostly to David Bradford) the Plain Leaf Warbler, a restricted range species found elsewhere primarily in Iran. Other sightings included Rock Dove, Red-Tailed Wheatear, House Bunting, Desert Lark, Sand Partridge, Yellow-Vented Bulbul, Purple Sunbird (a single male in winter plumage) and a Steppe Eagle soaring in the distance. Rare pools drew some of these birds to drink. The Pale Crag Martin was expected, but we also got to see a nest at a waterfall and, nearby, an adult uncharacteristically perched rather than in flight. For a separate report of the most significant avian sighting of the day, a pair of Bonelli's Eagles, see "Raptor Nests on Jebel Qatar" elsewhere in this issue.

Insects were similarly rare, except for flies at lunch. A single large dragonfly was seen, most likely the Vagrant Emperor *Hemianax ephippiger*, a species that has repeatedly been seen to swarm or migrate in January.

A number of Dwarf Rock Geckos (*Pristurus rupestris*), including many small juveniles, were observed, leading to the suspicion that breeding may have been triggered by the recent rain showers. In a wadi, Larry Schwab and David Bradford described what can only have been a Blue Rock Agama (*Pseudotrapelus sinaitus*). This mountain species has been distinctly scarce during the recent drought years, except in localities near permanent water, so its emergence may also be related to the showers.

Perhaps the most unexpected natural history observation was of two tadpoles in a large pool atop the plateau. We will be combing the records to see if toads have previously been recorded from Jebel Qatar. But, in addition, which of the two UAE toads do they represent? How did the toads get up there?

And how long did they wait for rain before spawning? Report by Gary Feulner, with thanks to David Bradford for bird identification and information.

Part V of Drew on Geckos

As most geckos are nocturnal, they have large and very sensitive eyes. Most nocturnal species have complex pupils that open wide at night, but contract to vertical slits during the day to protect the sensitive retina. However the geckos can still see well in bright light as the slits have slightly enlarged pinholes to let in sufficient light. Geckos do not have moveable eyelids, and so cannot shut their eyes. Instead the eye is covered by a transparent spectacle, which is periodically shed along with the rest of the skin. It is not uncommon to see geckos clean their eyes by licking them with their long, rounded tongues. The retina of geckos has been the subject of much study. Almost all vertebrates have a dual visual system - multiple types of cone cells enable them to see colour during the day, while highly sensitive rods enable them to see during the night, but not in colour. In general, diurnal animals have more cones and fewer rods. Nocturnal animals have lower cone densities and often fewer spectral types of cone than their diurnal relatives. Among the reptiles, lizards have been day-active for such a long time that they have completely lost their highly sensitive rods. Later in evolution, some lizards - the geckos - turned to a nocturnal life-style. As a result, gecko cones became very similar in morphology and function to the rods of other vertebrates, but with one significant difference: geckos retained several spectral cone types. They might thus be the only vertebrates that use three spectral types of photoreceptor to see at night.

In our area there are five species of aberrant geckos which are active during the day. These are the semaphore geckos of the genus *Pristurus*, so named because they use their tails to signal to each other. These day-active geckos



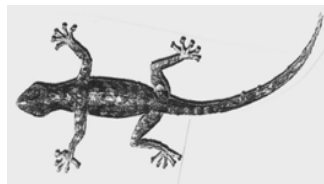
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have round or oval pupils which remain open during the day. The dwarf rock semaphore gecko *Pristurus rupestris* is one of the most common lizards in the area and is found in almost all habitats from the coast to the summit of Jebel Shams over 3000 metres above sea level, only avoiding open sand and gravel deserts. These minute and active geckos can be observed on walls and in gardens. They frequently interact with other individuals and use a variety of signals including vertical tail curling, wagging the tail from side to side, tail flicking, along with various body postures. The precise meanings conveyed by these signals are not yet fully known, and remains to be translated by careful observation and experiment.

The other species of semaphore geckos also signal with body postures and their tails, but using different languages of gestures. Visual signalling would be a less effective

means of communication in the dark, and so nocturnal geckos often have well developed vocal cords, sensitive ears and a repertoire of calls which may be used for territorial defense or attracting mates.



Raptor Nests on Jebel Qatar

Probably the most significant bird sighting made by the DNHG group that ascended Jebel Qatar on Dec. 10 was a pair of Bonelli's Eagles, which flew over the Hanging Gardens area, very conveniently, while the DNHG group was perched for lunch. This allows a more confident answer to the years old mystery of what raptor makes the several large

nests that can be seen on inaccessible cliffs to either side of the Hanging Gardens waterfall (see, e.g., the September 2001 *Gazelle*). The nests appear (through binoculars) to be neat constructions roughly the size and shape of automobile tyres, and made of twigs.

David Bradford had previously recognized them as similar to the nests of Bonelli's Eagle, which is known to breed in the UAE, but he had never before actually seen Bonelli's at Jebel Qatar. Other candidates included the Egyptian Vulture, once common in the Al-Ain area and seen occasionally at Jebel Qatar, but scarce in recent years.

The nesting season for most raptors locally is December to February, so the observers knew to be on the lookout, and the excellent sighting was gratifying. *Report by Gary Feulner, with thanks to David Bradford.*

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

Jan 9: Jebel Akhdar: Natural History and Conservation Initiatives – Prof. Reginald Victor

Feb 6: Archaeological Discoveries on Merawah Island – Dr. Mark Beech

Field Trips (Members only, please. Details inside.)

Jan 13 Falcon Hospital / Saluki Breeding Centre

Jan 20-21 [Eid Al-Adha weekend]

Jan 28 Hajar Mountain hike – Gary Feulner

Feb 4 or 11 Dubai Birdwatching – David Bradford