

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

News from Afar

Former Speaker Coordinator **David Palmer** reports from Canada on life after Dubai, including skiing in British Columbia, visits to Spain, Portugal and Morocco, an extended stay in Newfoundland and Labrador ("a lovely and fascinating place with a ravaged marine ecosystem") and an upcoming journey to south India. He was sorry to miss our lecture on the archeology of Bahrain ("I spent a long weekend there a few years ago and was amazed at the huge fields of cairn tombs."). He recommends Richard Dawkins' *The Ancestor's Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Evolution* (2004), which traces back the probable common ancestors of humans and all other currently living species. Dawkins guesstimates the date of our common ancestor – or 'concestor' in his coinage – with the mollusca phylum, and all the other protostomes, at nearly 600 million years ago.) He also recommends a magazine intended for the informed layman called *Current World Archeology*.

Our thoughts and best wishes go out to **Allestree Fisher** and his wife **Pam**. Allestree, whom many members will know as the very active and engaging Field Trip

Coordinator for the ENHG Abu Dhabi, has had a stroke and is currently having physiotherapy in England. He nevertheless has hopes of returning to the UAE in time for Inter-Emirates Weekend in March. We hope to see you there, Alestree!

Mary Beardwood writes that she is now working on a reprint of *The Children's Encyclopaedia of Arabia*, which will happen later this year. "It originally came out in 2001, and is due for an update. I am being given the opportunity to add new material if I want so I was wondering if a piece could appear in *Gazelle* asking for any new information that has arisen on the Natural History scene during the last five years. Photographs would be particularly useful too. Now I am no longer in Dubai I feel I miss out on news there. On each page we are going to try acting a 'factoid' which gives some interesting, hopefully really surprising, facts. Anything that includes numbers, such as in the Guinness Book of Records! "

Chairman **Gary Feulner** has joined the winter migration to the Southern Hemisphere, but is not seeking warmer climes. He is visiting Antarctica, which is now possible as a (limited) tourist destination for those game enough to cross the Great Southern Ocean.

DNHG Membership Renewals

September 2005 starts our new DNHG membership year. Please make our lives easier by renewing early. 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.

This month's Contributors

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

Barbara Couldrey
Gary Feulner
Angela Manthorpe
Valerie Chalmers

Under the patronage of H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan



Everyone's favourites...

Desert Walk with Jo Raynor Feb 24

Jo will have an 8.30am start (it's cooler) and go off Tawi Nizwa Road which is on the left off Dubai Hatta road. Meet at the round-about just off the highway after the shops. Walking from road so 4WD not required. Bring water and sun protection, snacks if nec., camera, notebook, shoes for sand walking. Max. 2 hours on the sand. Jo's details for info and/or registering: joray@emirates.net.ae Ph 050 4789633

Dubai Temple Tour with Sandhya Prakash Mar 3

This remarkable little walk, combined with Sandhya's encyclopaedic knowledge, is a delight. For details, contact Sandhya by email: sandhya@clavib.com

Donkey Fox Wadi (Richard Dennis & Mike Lorrigan) Mar 9-10

Requests for this trip come up frequently, so Mike and Richard will take another group. It is usually an overnight camp. For details, contact Richard Dennis by email: richang4@yahoo.com or Mike Lorrigan: oxymoron@emirates.net.ae

... and then there's ...

Inter-Emirates Weekend Thursday-Friday, 16-17 March 2006

IEW 2006 will be based at the Ras Al Khaimah Hotel, Ras Al Khaimah and the programme will begin on Thursday morning, March 16. The hotel has made a block booking of rooms for the weekend on a first-come first-served basis. However, in view of the increased tourism in RAK and the peak season date of IEW, **it will be necessary to confirm and guarantee your booking by the middle of February 2006.** We recognize that not all find it

ideal to plan so far ahead, but the hotel cannot hold the rooms on any other basis.

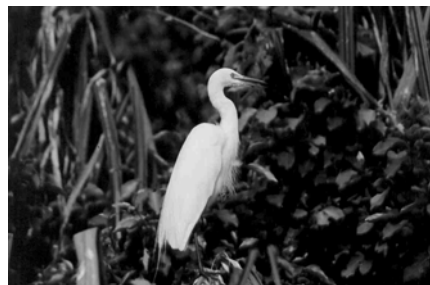
Hotel rates (per night) are:
Double Room/Twin Room – **Dh 350**
Single Room – **Dh 300**
All room rates inclusive of breakfast & tax
Children <12 years may stay free

To make a reservation, either e-mail the hotel: rakhotel@emirates.net.ae or fax 07-236-2990, Attention Reservations – Johnson. Hotel phone number is 07-236-2999. Mention Dubai Natural History Group - Inter-Emirates Weekend when you make your booking. When you have your booking made and confirmed, please let Valerie know that all is in order.

The present status of the bookings is that we are almost full and are going on to a reserve list. However, please continue to book up to the middle of February even if you are put on the reserve list. We will try to sort out rooms for you, even if we book you in at an alternative hotel not far away.

On the evenings of Wednesday 15th and Thursday 16th, excerpts from Arabia's Cycles of Life series will be shown. Copies of the DVDs will be available at wholesale prices to members.

On Thursday evening there will be a buffet dinner (Dh 60 per person incl.) On the evening of Thursday 16th we will be holding the **Inter-Emirates photographic competition. Details appear on p.7.**



Photograph: Moh'd Arfan Asif

Packed lunches are available for Thu and Fri for Dh 55 and menus

will be sent to participants.

Activities already booked for the Thursday and Friday include:

An in-depth visit to the Dhayah area on the Friday – a cross section of the environment, archaeology, history and culture of Ras Al Khaimah to be led by Christian Velde

A trip into the mangroves to be led by Dick Hornby on the Friday

Birdwatching trips on both Thursday and Friday to sites such as Khor Al Beidah, Al Jeezeerah Khor and Hammraniyah fields etc to be led by David Bradford

Shelling at Rams beach fairly early Thursday morning led by Anne Millen

Off-road driving "over the top" from RAK to Dibba, via Wadi Bih (Friday only) led by Peter van Amsterdam. People going on this trip will need to bring their passports with them to show at the border post.

A mountain hike on the Thursday to be led by Barbara Couldrey who will take participants to the Ras Al Khaimah Museum to see the models of pottery kilns and then on to Wadi Hagil itself where the pottery kilns are located. From there a walk to a waterfall.

Dhow trips in and out of the mangroves to photograph birds and other wild life

Visits to RAK Museum. This museum is always well worth a visit.

Brigitte Howarth will be arranging some insect activities around the hotel.

Further details will be given at the March meeting and in the next *Gazelle*. For more details in the interim, contact DNHG Vice Chairman Valerie Chalmers on telephone 04 -3494816 or valeriechalmers@hotmail.com.



Announcements:

Annual General Meeting in April

The DNHG's Annual General Meeting is normally held at our March lecture and is the occasion of the Chairman's annual report and the election or ratification of the DNHG Committee. This year the AGM will be postponed until April due to the fact that a number of Committee members will be traveling in late February and early March

The postponement gives us an additional opportunity to invite member participation. We thank those who have recently volunteered to fill vacant Committee positions, but it is always helpful to have reserves.

Apart from Committee positions, there is a particular need for field trip ideas and for people to lead field trips. Almost all of our trips are led by other members, not experts or professionals. A certain amount of enthusiasm is a prerequisite, but beyond that, our Field Trip Coordinators and other Committee members can provide guidance.

New Committee Members!

We are pleased to welcome (and thank) two new members to the DNHG Committee, who will commence their duties immediately. It would be difficult to overemphasize how important it is to spread the DNHG's work around.

Larry Schwab has volunteered to take over as Treasurer, relieving Anindita Radhakrishna, who has been filling in temporarily. Larry is longtime resident of the middle East and a veteran off-road explorer of the UAE and Oman.

Angela Manthorpe will assume the position of Speaker Coordinator. Angela and her husband Stephen returned to the UAE a year ago, after a seven year absence, and resumed their outdoor activities, including diving, hiking and fossil hunting. During their earlier resi-

dence Angela and Stephen served for a year as acting DNHG Co-Chairs.



Angela Manthorpe in salt caves at Ghaba
Photograph Anne Millen

Book Review:

Abu Dhabi 8 Million Years Ago, edited by Dr. Mark Beech and Peter Hellyer, is a well illustrated 68-page booklet describing the Late Miocene fossils of western Abu Dhabi and the savannah environment which they record.



Elephant jaw in situ (Scale 1 metre)
From *Abu Dhabi 8 Million Years Ago*

The various chapters describe the history of research, the evidence derived from the study of the relevant sedimentary units and the fossils contained in them, special features such as the numerous elephant trackways that have been found, and the conservation methods that have been used to preserve fossil remains and to make three-dimensional reconstructions of the living animals they represent.

A special bonus is the photographic catalog of important fossils found in the area, as well as a number of artistic renderings of the landscape and wildlife of that day. For interested amateurs, this publication is a bargain at the DNHG price of Dh 20. *Review by Gary Feulner*

Traveler's Advisory:

The value of a tyre repair kit proved itself to several DNHG members on a trip to the Huqf area of Oman. Two flats resulted from punctures by the long thorns of *Acacia ehrenbergiana*. A standard tyre repair kit (Dh 19 at Ace Hardware) can plug such a simple puncture in the field and will hold up (members can testify) for hundreds of kilometres.

The kit consists of two sizes of a rubber plug (thread-like but thicker), a tool to clean and smooth the hole (by pushing in the remainder of the thorn or other puncture agent, if necessary) and a tool to thread and insert the plug. We learned from experience that these are the same tools that professional puncture shops use. *Report by Gary Feulner*

DNHG Library Open for Use:

Members are reminded once again that the DNHG library collection is now open for reference use within the library at the Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management, where our monthly lectures are held. The library is upstairs to the left, in the back of the building. The DNHG collection is in a cabinet in the library's utility room.

Access to the DNHG collection and the library's reading room is permitted during regular opening hours. Currently EAHM Library hours are Saturdays to Tuesdays, 9AM to 9PM; Wednesdays and Thursdays, 9AM to 6PM; Fridays closed.

Members must present their DNHG membership card to the receptionist in the EAHM lobby in order to access the Library on the 1st floor, and again to the Librarian or Library Technician on duty. As a precaution, it is recommended to phone in advance to be sure that there is not a meeting taking place in the workroom.





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

A Colourful Encounter

During a recent walk in a tributary of Wadi Shawkah, between Dhaid and Madam, we disturbed a blue rock agama (*Pseudotrapelus sinaitus*), which treated us to a colourful display during our lunch stop. When we first spotted the agama under a small bush it had a rather ruddy red colouration and blended in well with the background.



Agama with red hue...

However, after leaving that spot in favour of an exposed rock face in full sunlight, the reptile almost immediately started to change colour and after little more than 5 minutes, his head and shoulders were bright blue.



...and now blue!

Apparently the males do this when they are either angry or engaged in a courtship display - but we're not sure what the cause was on this occasion.

Gary Feulner notes that this sighting, one of two during the day, was

a welcome one, as the blue rock agama is one of the animals that seems to have suffered most during the recent years of drought (mid-1999 to mid-2004). Although this reptile had earlier been one of the commonest in the mountains and wadis of the UAE, Gary's personal records show a significant fall in sightings during the drought years, with numbers recovering only since the rains in winter 2004/2005.

Note: Apologies to those who receive the print rather than e-mail version of Gazelle, as you won't be able to appreciate the colour change quite so clearly. Report by Angela Manthorpe

A Tale of Two Acacias

Two species of acacia tree are found in the wild in the UAE, *A. tortilis* and *A. ehrenbergiana*. *A. tortilis* is the most common tree of the gravel plains and mountain foothills of the UAE. The same species is common in "lion country" in East Africa. It has a characteristic "upside-down triangle" shape, branching upward and outward from a single trunk, either at the soil surface or immediately below it. The top of the tree is typically flat or gently rounded. In the UAE the growth form can be affected by grazing, with the result that the "normal" tree appears to be growing from a much denser basal shrub. A good place to see this phenomenon is on the Sahl Gharif, the gravel plains between Madam and Jebel Raudhah, along the road to Hatta.

A. ehrenbergiana can also be found in flatter areas within the mountains (for example, in Wadi Ashwani), but it is much less common there than *A. tortilis*. It becomes more common, however, on gravel plains and sandy flats farther from the mountains, where the substrate is finer and possibly more saline. *A. ehrenbergiana* is the dominant tree of much of southern Oman, the vast plains areas between the mountains and the sands of the Empty Quarter. It is readily distinguishable from *A. tortilis* by its growth form,

since it grows as a shrub, i.e., as numerous sub-parallel vertical trunks. Also, it rarely grows as large as *A. tortilis*.



A. tortilis
Photograph Marijcke Jongbloed's book on wild flowers of the UAE

Identifications made on the basis of growth form can be confirmed by closer inspection, as follows:

(1) Leaves: All Acacia leaves are somewhat feather-like and are subdivided into pairs of "pinnae" which are in turn subdivided into pairs of leaflets. *A. ehrenbergiana* leaves have only one or two pairs of pinnae. *A. tortilis* leaves typically have more than two pairs of pinnae each, and if you examine a number of leaves on a bona fide *A. tortilis*, you should soon enough find one that exceeds this number.

(2) Thorns: *A. tortilis* has paired thorns typically arranged in alternating pairs of straight thorns and recurved thorns. *A. ehrenbergiana* also has paired thorns, but only straight pairs. Caveat: Where *A. tortilis* is grazed, new branches may have only straight pairs., which are presumably more effective at discouraging browsers.

(3) Flower Colour: The small, round flowers of *A. ehrenbergiana* are bright yellow, whereas (in our area) those of *A. tortilis* are buff-coloured. Report by Gary Feulner



A. ehrenbergiana and *A. tortilis*
From Marijcke Jongbloed's Comprehensive Guide to the Wildflowers of the UAE



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

Reptiles - Dr Reza Khan
res 344 8283
off 344 0462
fax (off) 349 9437

Archaeology - Prof. John Fox
jfox@aus.ac.ae
(Temporarily away - hold your reports)

Birds - David Bradford
davebradford9@hotmail.com

Seashells - perhaps you?

Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi
res: 06-5247 958
off: 06-5583 003
email: lankefi@emirates.net.ae

Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

Geology - Gary Feulner
res 306 5570
fax 330 3550

Insects - Gary Feulner

Fossils - Valerie Chalmers
res 349 4816,
fax 340 0990
vmc@latifaschool.co.ae

Plants - Valerie Chalmers

Mammals & Seashells - 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.

Dear Peter,

My name is Jan Schreurs and I have maintained a website on Oman since our arrival here some four years ago. It grew out of a need to keep family informed. I noticed the website is referred to in a recent issue of *Gazelle* with some upbeat notes. I am happy to see that people appreciate the information that I have collected over the years and it will keep growing.

I cover various excursions into the Huqf area on that website, but I hope you noted the strong messages on care, respect, and also access regulations.

The vast Huqf area in Oman is part of a Unesco Heritage Site to protect the oryx. It is also an environmentally sensitive area with rare wildlife and exceptional geology, covering a timespan of some 700 million years.

It is important that the authorities know who is in the area as much as it is important that people know what is special in the Huqf. Two years ago, two of my colleagues were shot at by military who were chasing an oryx poacher. Police and military only ask questions after shooting. If they don't know that there are people in the area, they may mistakenly think you are there to hunt down one of these marvelous creatures that are still poached on far too large a scale.

You will find on my website all information (and) some plain instructions on what to do and what not to do. There are many rocks in the Huqf, but some sites get ravaged by visitors, each taking a small piece. I noticed the rudist reef mentioned in your *Gazelle* story and I am sure you respected what you saw. Others have not done that and have trucked away vast amounts. There are rudists still in a 'live' position and those should be left in peace perfectly (they have appeared in several geology papers already). Hammering is no-go and if people want to take a souvenir, there is sufficient on the scree, I would say. Another example would

be the fossil wood. There is not much of it, and quite a bit has disappeared over time. It does not take many visits to completely bio-erode a fossil tree, it seems. There are some very old rocks in the Huqf, covering the transition of the Cambrian to the Pre-Cambrian. There are the Permian glacial rocks, and the list can go on. Needless to say that it is better to observe, take photographs and leave the rocks as they have been for the last 542 million years.

Greetings
Jan Schreurs

http://home.hetnet.nl/~lilian_jan_schreurs/oman/oman2001.htm

http://home.hetnet.nl/~lilian_jan_schreurs/oman/Nhuqf.htm

http://home.hetnet.nl/~lilian_jan_schreurs/oman/Nhuqf.htm

http://home.hetnet.nl/~lilian_jan_schreurs/oman/Jaaluni.htm

http://home.hetnet.nl/~lilian_schreurs/oman/RasSud.htm

Thank you, Jan.

Other websites that may be of interest to members are the following:

www.gso.org.om

www.geocities.com/

www.holiday-in-oman.com/

or you can have such a good look at the area on Google Earth that you hardly need to go! This is an armchair desert-explorer's dream. You have to download it, and for those areas of the earth that the US is not too interested in (or is too interested in), it can be pretty poor, but for those like Oman that have clear skies and dramatic geography, it is plenty of fun. You can even see what that mighty escarpment and the Huqf sabkha look like by tilting it up for a horizontal view!

Letters to the Editor

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



"Lucas" the lizard

"Watch out for Lucas!" was my sister's cry as I stepped out of the door of her house in Tweed Heads, Australia this January. Lucas is a juvenile eastern bearded dragon (*Pogona barbata*) who lives up on the steep tree covered bank behind the house. It makes a daily sortie down to the small grassed/planted area just outside the back door to nibble at herbs and grass and to lie in wait for unsuspecting insects. It's a slow mover and freezes on being disturbed, making it very difficult to spot. However, this particular specimen is quite domesticated and one can potter about around it. As the sun goes down, it saunters slowly back up the hill for the night.



Pogona barbata

The harsh spiky appearance of these lizards belie their placid temperament. If truly disturbed or threatened, they puff themselves up, extend the 'beard' (a moveable piece of cartilage) under the throat and open the mouth wide to reveal a bright yellow lining. If picked up they will struggle, but rarely bite. They grow to a total length of around 55cm. Their diet is mainly vegetable matter but a munchy insect is never passed up, especially by juveniles. They live in open forests, heathland, scrub and my sister's garden! Their main requirement is trees that they can utilize for escape, sunbathing and simply surveying their territory. Lucas has been spotted on the fence, on the clothes line upright, in the lemon tree ... and on the back step.
Thanks to Barbara Couldery

(Ed: This brings back fond memories of my childhood in Australia!

We children called these reptiles frilly lizards and used their friendly nature and fearsome looks to scare the bejazes out of visitors.)

Wadi Ducks

Hikers in mid-January flushed a flock of 10 ducks from their resting place in a series of pools in the rocky gorge of a tributary of Wadi Shawkah. Angela Manthorpe was able to identify them in flight as Mallards. This seemed an unlikely spot for ducks, but the mallard winters here and it is written of this species that it can be found at almost any wetland. So perhaps they have read the book. Another possibility is that they were attracted to the general area by the Wadi Shawkah Dam, which is currently quite full. On a late afternoon visit to the lake at the dam, only little grebes were seen.

Almost exactly a year before, in January 2005, Gary Feulner had flushed a half dozen ducks in the same gorge area, but from their black and white wing patterns those earlier ducks were reckoned to be Pochard or perhaps ferruginous duck. Both are winter visitors and are said to favour freshwater bodies, particularly lakes and pools.
Report by Gary Feulner

LOOK THE PART!

The DNHG has navy blue sweat shirts, with the DNHG emblem embroidered in silver. Sizes: Large and Extra Large Dh65/- each, and silver grey polo shirts with the DNHG emblem embroidered in black. Sizes: Medium, Large and Extra Large Dh50/- each. The quality of both items is excellent!

See Val Chalmers at the Inter-Emirates weekend in RAK.

Our Next Speaker

Dick Hornby has a PhD in zoology (birds) and his professional background was in nature conservation in southern England. He resigned from English Nature in 1991 and after a period as an ecological consultant, he moved to Abu Dhabi to set up the National Avian Research Centre (NARC), which became part of ERWDA (now EAD). NARC was primarily concerned with wild and captive falcons and houbara bustard, the traditional prey in falconry. When the organisation was well established he moved to the UAE Federal Environmental Agency (FEA) to advise on wildlife and land use issues.

In July 1996 he transferred to Southern Water McDowells in Abu Dhabi where he was involved with a range of environmental and ecological projects, including writing Management Plans for the Arabian Leopard Trust and directing a major ecological survey of the whole coastline of the UAE.

He developed his expertise in marine life and has done a lot of coastal and marine ecological consultancy work in UAE and Qatar. He has a keen interest in terrestrial and marine plants, birds, mammals and invertebrates. He has recently been involved in establishing an environmental consultancy company in Abu Dhabi, Nautica Environmental Associates, of which he is a Managing Partner.

In March 1997 Dick joined the staff of The Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems, to work as Academic Editor and Assistant to the Editor in Chief. This huge project is concerned primarily with global environmental issues and sustainable development. The work is being commissioned through hundreds of scientists around the world, and is devoted to bringing together a comprehensive body of knowledge for use in correcting current practices which threaten the earth's essential life support systems.

Since 2001, Dick has co-led natural history holiday tours, as a botanist and ornithologist, to different locations in Greece, Spain and France, and he is planning to spread his wings to do more in Africa.



	name	tel home	tel office	fax
Chairman	Gary Feulner messages: 306 5300	306 5570	330 3600	330 3550
Vice Chairman	Valerie Chalmers e.mail: vmc@latifaschool.co.ae	349 4816	no calls pls	340 0990
Treasurer	Ranju Kapoor e.mail: ranjukapoor@hotmail.com	295 4816	050-553 7016	2959515
Membership Secretary	Lena Linton e.mail: linton@emirates.net.ae	344 2591		344 2591
Membership Assistant	Anindita Radhakrishna e.mail: anin@emirates.net.ae	282 3952	050-656 9165	
Speaker Co-ordinator	Geoff Sanderson e.mail:geoffrey_ssanderson@hotmail.com	050-6569242		
Fieldtrip Co-ordinator	Pradeep Radhakrishna e.mail: wgarnet@emirates.net.ae	282 3952	050-450 8496	
Fieldtrip Co-ordinator	Peter Jackson email: pj.architect@gmail.com	2882713	335 4545 050-5521005	3354338
Fieldtrip Co-ordinator	Sandhya Prakash e.mail:sandhya@clavib.com	050-5512481		348 2868
Special Projects	Beryl Comar e.mail: comar@emirates.net.ae	344 2243		344 2243
Newsletter Editor	Anne Millen e.mail: pvana@emirates.net.ae	394 7076	no calls please	394 7075
Publisher	Peter van Amsterdam e.mail: pvana@emirates.net.ae	394 7076	335 5495	394 7075
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Chief Engineer	James Pardoe e.mail: James@extremereviews.net	394 3821		

Inter-Emirates Weekend 2006 Photographic Competition

Guidelines and Judging

The Inter-Emirates Photographic Competition is open to amateur photographers who are members of the Abu Dhabi chapter of the ENHG, the Al Ain chapter of the ENHG and the Dubai Natural History Group. Participants are invited to enter a maximum of two (returnable) photographs on any natural history subject (e.g. archaeology, architecture, birds, culture and heritage, geology, insects, landscapes, mammals, plants, reptiles etc) which has been taken in the UAE and Oman. Photographs should be a minimum size of 5 inches x 7 inches (125mm x 180mm) and should be mounted. Each photographer is requested to

write the following information on the back of each photograph:

- Photographer
- Phone number
- Email address
- Title of photograph
- Specify *where* photograph was taken e.g. Dubai Creek and not UAE
- Approximately *when* the photograph was taken

Photographs may be presented to IEW 2006 organisers any time from Wednesday 15th March until 5 p.m. on Thursday 16th March and they will be on display prior to the buffet dinner on 16th.

Each individual attending IEW 2006 will be given a voting form to vote for up to 3 entries. The three winning enteries will be announced during the evening and then the prizes will be presented.



What is this?

The picture above shows some small soft, barrel shaped pellets found beside a wadi pool in a tributary of Wadi Shawkah. Each one was about 1cm long and broke easily into layers when picked up. I'm quite willing to accept that they are the very latest in specialist goat feed, but does anyone know any different? *Angela Manthorpe*

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

Mar 5 Coastal Marine Life of the UAE – Dr. Richard Hornby

Apr 2 [TBA]

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

Feb 24 Desert Walk (Jo Raynor)

Mar 3 Dubai Temple Tour (Sandhya Prakash)

Mar 9-10 Donkey Fox Wadi (Richard Dennis & Mike Lorrigan)

Mar 16-17 Inter-Emirates Weekend in Ras Al Khaimah