

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

DNHG Membership

DNHG members **Steve** and **Angela Manthorpe** have just returned from 3 months in India during which they visited some of the country's National Parks, encountering man-eaters and blood suckers en route. The photos show them firstly at Amber Fort, near Jaipur, and the result shortly after of getting caught in the exuberant Holi Festival celebrations. Next month's *Gazelle* will carry a report about the parks.

Enthusiastic natural history photographer **Ajmal Hasan** has been out and about looking for reptiles. In early May, he scouted an area of Saih as-Shuaib and in that one trip photographed five species: an eastern sand skink, a yellow spotted agama, a toad-headed agama, three Leptin's spiny tailed lizards and a Schmidt's fringe-toed lizard.

DNHG Membership remains a bargain at Dhs.100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at our meetings or by sending us your details and a cheque made out to: Lloyds TSB Bank account no. 60600669933501. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG. Please also note our account number has changed.) Subscriptions paid now are good through to August 2011.

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.



Angela and Steve Manthorpe at the Amber Fort, Jaipur



Yellow spotted agama



... and shortly after!

Binish Roobas will spend most of June this year in India. Among other things, he has accepted an invitation from former naturalist colleagues to join a bird survey project in the Himalayas of NE India (Dehradun, Uttarakhand), focused on "rediscovering the mountain quail." Binish comments that for a native of Kerala, traveling in the north of India is like visiting a different country. We look forward to results and photographs.

This month's Contributors

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

- Nancy Papathanasopoulou
- Sonja Lavrenčič
- Richard Hornby
- Chris Teasdale
- Valerie Chalmers
- Gary Feulner
- May Yoke

Oliva bulbosa and Paphia undulata



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



Sharjah Aquarium with
Sandhya Prakash
Sat 22nd May

Meeting time is 8.45 am at the main entrance to Sharjah Aquarium. The tour takes place from 9 - 10 am. They have suggested a group of 40 but can accommodate more, and there will be an English speaking guide to lead us. For location, refer to the aquarium website www.sharjahaquarium.ae It is on Al Khan Road, Sharjah. No charges. Just turn up! For any queries, contact Sandya on sandy_pi@yahoo.com

End of Season Function
Thurs 10 June

Please see separate flyer on this.
Book asap!

And ... more local trips will be
advised by email.

Exciting things in the pipeline:

Masirah Island

Depending on turtle activity, Nancy Papathanasopoulou will accompany us on a repeat visit to Masirah Island, possibly in June. There's always a breeze on Masirah! Details by email.

Socotra Island

A trip to Socotra during Eid Al Fitr in September has been suggested. This will be via Sana'a. Pradeep will shortly be sending an email to members requesting expressions of interest. It should go without saying that the organisers need members to be decisive, and reliable about your decision!

And Zanzibar!

A shelling trip to Zanzibar has been proposed and details will soon be available.

Book Review

Arthropod Fauna of the UAE
Vols 1 & 3

Vols. 1 & 3 of *Arthropod Fauna of the UAE* will be available for sale at the June lecture (Vol. 2 has been on sale for several months). This publication is not marketed commercially. The hard cover volumes report on the survey of UAE insects, spiders, centipedes and other arthropods by the UAE Insect Project. They include specialist accounts of the organisms by individual taxonomic groups.

The text is not easy reading for the layman, but the many photographs will give the interested naturalist a better understanding of the diversity of arthropod species found in the UAE (not to mention some insight into the arcane world of arthropod taxonomy). The photos will also facilitate the identification of individual organisms within the groups covered, but the volumes should not be mistaken for field guides.



Marine Mammal Rescue Course

The one-day marine mammal medic course, which the ENHG is helping to organise, will most likely be held in October 2010. The course will be held on a weekend. The venue is not yet confirmed. There is a fee of GBP90. The direct link to the online information on this course is: <http://www.bdmlr.org.uk/training/shipping.php> which will give potential participants a good idea of what the course is about.

Pre-registration will remain open until September. Please contact directly Keith Taylor, vice-chairman of ENHG Abu Dhabi on kjtaylor13@yahoo.com

Our Next Speaker

Keith Wilson is Director Marine Programme, Emirates Marine Environmental Group. He has 32 years experience in the water and aquaculture industries, management of fisheries and marine protected areas, environmental impact assessment, development project management, and management of marine and coastal resources in the UK, Asia and the Middle East.

Keith has written many scientific papers and several books on conservation, marine fishes and dragonflies. He is an accomplished photographer both above and below water with numerous wildlife photographs used commercially in books, journals and newspapers.

Keith has a BSc (Hons) in Physiology and Biochemistry and an MSc in Applied Hydrobiology, together with a host of post-graduate qualifications and memberships. He includes amongst his achievements being a founder member of the Hong Kong Institute of Environmental Impact Assessment, a member of the Royal Entomological Society, UK, and is a recognized international expert on the Odonata (dragonflies) of China.





Email your field reports and news to pvana@emirates.net.ae (Arial 10 justified). Please send your photographs as separate jpg files, or deliver them to Anne Millen for scanning.

Furbelowed Watering-pots in Abu Dhabi

Recently while engaged in environmental monitoring in connection with the Raha Beach development, we came across some curious objects that turned out to be old specimens of a very curious bivalve mollusc. The species is *Brechites attrahens* and it has the extraordinary common name of furbelowed watering-pot! As can be seen in the photo, the shell of this mollusc is a greatly elongated calcareous cylinder. Our largest specimen is 20 cm long. The animal lives vertically in soft sediment, probably normally in the shallow subtidal zone. Our discovery was at a depth of 3.5 metres, beside a recently dredged channel to the north of Sammaliah Island, near the Raha Beach development.



Brechites attrahens

This mollusc begins its adult life as a conventional-looking bivalve but then begins to grow a huge hollow tube, with the original bivalve shell attached to the outside. The bottom end of the animal develops into a perforated rose, similar to those on old watering cans.

Around this grow radiating hollow tubules like the petals on a daisy. Presumably this whole structure is a kind of anchoring device.

The other end is quite different, bearing a series of frills similar to the furbelows, or flounces, on Victorian dresses. We have not yet been able to find out very much about the anatomy or way of life of this strange creature, but it would seem to be a reasonable guess

that the furbelows represent annual growth periods, so our specimens would be eight years old. We imagine that a siphon, or probably two (one intake and one exhaust), emerge from the top end, through the last furbelow.



The perforated lower end

There seem to be no previous records of *Brechites attrahens* in UAE. In the most authoritative guide available, 'Seashells of Eastern Arabia', Bosch et al. give the distribution as being only Masirah Island, off the east coast of Oman. The species is not listed in the very impressive checklist produced by the late Sandy Fowler, and neither was it recorded by Rev. Biggs in his earlier grand study of seashells in the region. It was recorded, however, by Stephen Green in his beautiful book 'Seashells of Bahrain', but only as broken specimens. Stephen gives a maximum length of 10 cm, only half that of our find. The species is said to have an Indo-Pacific distribution. It is so distinctive that it is not easily overlooked, so there can be no doubt that the species is very rare in this region. In fact it may no longer survive in the Arabian Gulf. Our specimens and Stephen Green's are all old, and we have never encountered a live one after working through many thousands of in-fauna samples.

The specimens we found near Sammaliah Island were being exposed by the meandering of a natural channel that drains water off several square kilometres of intertidal flats and mangroves. Lateral movement of the channel may have been stimulated by the dredging of a channel in 2008/2009 to allow boats easy

passage to Yas Island. When the watering pots were alive they must have been at the surface and able to filter-feed in open water, but they were subsequently buried by deposition of fine silt and sand. This is the material that was being eroded away by the flow in the channel. All the fine particles and small shells are being washed away, leaving behind debris of quite large shells. Some of the watering-pots are still vertical and half buried. We have no way of knowing how long the shells have been there but it could easily be a matter of centuries.

We will be extremely interested to hear if anyone else has encountered Furbelowed Watering-pots in Abu Dhabi, UAE, or indeed anywhere else. Does anyone have any specimens? Is there any more information about distribution, habitat or life history? Is it an endangered species?! Report and photographs by Dick Hornby and Chris Teasdale.

Shelling on the East Coast

At the beginning of February, Anne Millen led a shelling trip to the East Coast. The group met in Khor Khalba, close to the mangrove reserve, and explored the long sandy beach there, starting from the corner of the rocky pier. The tide was very low and we enjoyed long stretches of exposed beach with plenty of shells.

There were many *Murex* hiding their spines in the sand above the high tide level.



Murex scolopax
From Dr Sandy Fowler's *Rough Guide*



Murex are one of the reasons you should never go shelling bare-footed: stepping on their long thin spikes can be very painful. The deep, tightly-twisted cavity usually takes a long time to be cleaned naturally and Murex are often quite smelly when brought home. On the good side, a freshly dead murex usually has its intricate long spines still intact.

Equally smelly and also in the sand above the high tide level, there were many *Babylonia Spirata* of different sizes. These still had mollusc flesh covered by an operculum, as if poisoned and washed ashore.



Babylonia spirata
From Bosch et al *Seashells of Eastern Arabia*

The Khor Khalba beach is also rich with *Oliva Bulbosa* of different colours, patterns and polish, as well as *Architectonica*. Some large specimens of the bivalve *Paphia Ondulata* could be found at inter tidal height.



Conus Betulinus

Next stop was Khor Fakkan. In the middle of this coastal town, right next to the road is a public beach that every keen sheller would tend to avoid: too central, too close to the busy port, too urbanised with benches and picnic gazebos. Luckily Anne knew that this is one of the best beaches on east coast for finding *Conus*.

Anne warned us at the beginning of shelling that a cone should only be tackled with tongs, as it has a

poisonous, harpoon-like tooth with which it paralyses prey, and can be painful and even deadly for humans. We found plenty of different ones, mostly *Conus Betulinus*, the biggest ones ranging from 10 to 15 cm - luckily clean shells only, without poisonous inhabitants. The beach is also rich in *Strombus*, *Turitella*, *Neverita*, *Ficus*, *Semicassis*, *Fusinus*, *Ancilla* and many others.



The three Ns: Natica, Neverita, Notocochlis

Anne showed us small *Crepidula Walshi*, a fragile shell that has a small pocket under bigger cover in which the mollusc lives.

In the shallow waters of low tide were found beautifully ornamented live cowries (*Cypraea*). Following the rule never to kill any mollusc or hermit crab for their shells I took only pictures. In the mud at the corner of the beach I found a few *Terebralia Palustris*, a mollusc that is commonly eaten by the locals. It was quite amazing booty for such a public beach! And to think that when I was last in Khor Fakkan I snubbed this beach completely. Instead I climbed the hill next to the Oceanic hotel to get to the secluded "Heart Beach" only to find a single cowry! But I was rewarded that day by seeing a big turtle swimming right next to the beach.



Part of the group, Khor Fakkan port

The third beach that we visited, towards the end of the day, was just before Dibba - a narrow belt of beach between the two private villas. This beach can be unpredictable: full of shells on some days and with hardly any shells on other days. Indeed, ours was one of those empty days. But we were rewarded by beautiful corals of all shapes and patterns that covered the beach in high banks. Some of them looked like pieces of modern art. I managed to find two cones though: *Conus textile* and a large specimen of *Conus striatus*. By then, the sun was setting and we reluctantly set off to Dubai. Report by Sonja Lavrenčič, photographs by Sonja and Anne Millen

Light Trap Session and Reptile Moonwalk

On a lovely evening, at the beginning of the InterEmirates weekend, a group of about 15 Natural History Group members met with Dr Brigitte Howarth, Vice-Chairman, ENHG Al Ain, at the Al Ain Zoo roundabout and Brigitte took us to a sandy habitat surrounded by dunes which was not far from the sewage works. We joined others who had gone to the first session at 5.30 p.m. with Bob Reimer. A light trap (mercury vapour light) had been set up just before dark to attract the insects which were present after dark. By the time the second group reached the venue, several insects had been seen in the light trap and more continued to be attracted throughout the evening.



Brigitte and friends at the light trap

A hawkmoth decided that the light trap was a favourable place to visit and seemed quite happy to remain with us.



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Plants – Valerie Chalmers

Seashells - 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.



Convulvulus Hawkmoth

Then a scarab beetle (*Scarabaeus bannuensis*) also had the same idea and is seen in the photograph along with small moths and other insects.



Brigitte collected many insects during the light-trapping session which she used for her 'Insect Orders in the UAE' workshop next day and these included members of the Diptera (true flies), Lepidoptera (butterflies and moths), Hymenoptera (bees, wasps, ants), Coleoptera (beetles), Hemiptera (true bugs - Brigitte used that term!), Orthoptera (grasshoppers) and Neuroptera (nerve-winged insects like antlions).

Dragonflies were also seen at the light trap and Bob Reimer identified them as a female *Anax ephippiger* (Vagrant Emperor) seen in the photograph and two female *Anax parthenope* (Lesser Emperor) dragonflies.



Anax parthenope

Later in the evening Dr Drew Gardner, Chairman, ENHG Abu Dhabi, took us to look for reptiles and bats in the sand dune area and near to Ghaf trees and bushes. We did not see any bats but we did find three types of gecko. These were *Stenodactylus doriae* Dune Sand Gecko, *Stenodactylus arabicus* Arabian Sand Gecko and *Bunopus tuberculatus* Baluch Rock Gecko.



Dune sand gecko, *Stenodactylus doriae*



Baluch Rock Gecko, *Bunopus tuberculatus*

Workshop: using keys to identify reptiles

On the last morning of the Inter-Emirates weekend, several members attended Dr Drew Gardner's workshop on using keys to identify reptiles at Al Ain English Speaking School. Drew provided bottled specimens of geckos and we used his key to Geckos - Family Gekkonidae - which he has produced to identify geckos found in both the UAE and Oman. Geckos which he provided included members of the Genera *Asaccus*, *Hemidactylus*, *Bunopus* and *Stenodactylus*. We had seen members of the last two genera on the reptile moonwalk on Thursday 25th February. It was interesting to be able to examine geckos so closely and without them mov-



ing! It was also useful to be able to see distinguishing features such as size and position of tubercles in different parts of the body surface and toes with adhesive pads with lamellae as opposed to those which were simple or with fringes of pointed scales.

I found the workshop most helpful and also fun to do! *Both these reports by Valerie Chalmers, photographs by Val and May Yoke.*

Failaka Island Hadras: A Menace For Dwindling Biodiversity?

As part of the Kuwait Turtle Conservation Project and following reports of our Kuwaiti team members that "there were turtles in the waters around Failaka Island", we ventured there one weekend last November in order to scout for turtle presence on the island and integrate our findings to our sea turtle research and conservation work.



The turtle team at the resort on Failaka

Failaka Island lies 20km east of Kuwait City and 50km from the southernmost tip of Iraq. Its area is approximately 24 sq. km, and it is triangular in shape with its base in the west and tip in the southeast. It is 14km in length and varies in width between 8km in the west and 2km in the east. The island is flat, apart from a small hill 10m high in the extreme western part. Hellenic ruins have been discovered on the island, along with Dilmun ruins from 5,000 BC and excavations are still ongoing by Kuwaiti and western archaeologists.

A resort exists on the island, promoting Kuwaiti heritage and biodiversity in a very dedicated and professional way. The facility is run by Mr and Mrs Hartley on behalf of a member of the Royal family of Ku-

wait. Generous hospitality was offered to KTCP members who enthusiastically recommend it to anyone interested in a very high quality stay in Failaka, during which a lot can be learned about the country and the island even without leaving the resort at all.

Combining a desert inland and vast tidal mudflats, Failaka is not, as it turns out, a nesting stronghold for turtles. KTCP team members, mainly involved with turtle nesting areas on Qaru and Umm Al-Maradim islets in the south of Kuwait, toured the perimeter of the island looking for tracks, old or new nests and any other possible evidence of turtle presence on the beaches but found only a suspected old turtle nesting area, surprisingly situated next to the ferry dock. But green (*Chelonia mydas*) and hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) turtles come to the shallows close to the coast to either forage or mate, and there they often perish, unfortunately not due to natural processes, but because they get trapped in a 'hadra'.

A hadra is a coastal fish trap, traditional to Kuwait and to some other Arabian Gulf countries. It is a barrier of reeds around a limited area off the coast. At the end of the barrier, an enclosure made of two parts is erected. The bigger part is called 'al housh', followed by a smaller one called 'al ser', which lies at the limits of ebb tides.



Hadra

There are many hadras constructed along the seashores of Failaka Island, in past years all along the shores of mainland Kuwait as well. During low tides, fishermen collect fish trapped in the hadra. KTCP members were told by locals that turtles often get caught in them and are often harvested for food by fishermen, who are mostly unaware of

these animals' worldwide protection status. Rays, sharks, seabirds and small dolphins - resident populations of Spinner dolphins (*Stenella longirostris*) and Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins (*Sousa plumbea*) seem to be part of the island's marine wildlife - often get caught in the hadras as well, dying a slow and purposeless death only to be discarded as "useless" by the fishermen who are interested in what are considered "edible fish".



Burned turtles on Failaka

The geographical area of the island and Kuwait in general has suffered major ecological disasters, such as the massive oil spills following the Gulf War of 1990, the fires of the oil wells set by invading Iraqi forces and currently the raw sewage crisis which began in September 2009 and is ongoing, with unknown consequences on the marine environment of the country.

Ten years ago, hadras were common all along the coastline of Kuwait but acknowledging the severe damage on marine wildlife the government banned them by law. Nowadays, special permits are needed for owning hadras and the population has been discouraged from using them. Very few are encountered now on the mainland. But Failaka Island and nearby islet Miskan are exempted from this law and KTCP team members found fifteen on Failaka and six on Miskan.



On Miskan Island



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Kuwait is a wealthy Gulf country where professional and recreational fishing are very popular. Most of it is exercised sustainably, with the seventy government shrimp trawlers operating their nets using TEDs (Turtle Excluder Devices), true pioneers of this practice in the region. With the marine environment under such stress in the Gulf and in Kuwait itself, it is hoped that the use of hadra and any unsustainable fishing practices will soon be abandoned, giving wildlife the chance it deserves in regenerating and surviving the many existing trials of life in the waters of the Gulf. An awareness campaign and an eventual legal and institutional framework is needed to address this serious issue. *Report & photographs by Nancy Papathanasopoulou*

Bats in your Belfry? Who ya gonna call?

Our March lecturer on bats, Dr. Drew Gardner of Abu Dhabi, emphasized the still-elementary state of our knowledge about bats in the UAE, and invited information from members about bat sightings, roost-

ing places and behaviour. The question period revealed that many members have had encounters with bats from time to time. Dr. Gardner subsequently clarified that the sort of information that would be most useful is the location of roosting sites where bats can be observed at rest, or other sites where large numbers of bats can be observed regularly. Reports of occasional or one-off sightings are regrettably not usually particularly helpful, since bats are known to be widespread in the UAE and it is generally very difficult, even for experts, to identify or photograph bats on the wing nocturnally. *Thanks to Gary Feulner*

Latest Phoenix

Phoenix vol. 29 (2010)

The latest annual volume of the journal *Phoenix*, a felicitous by-product of the *Atlas of Breeding Birds of Arabia* (ABBA) project, is now available. This volume contains short reports on, *inter alia*, a very large flamingo breeding col-

ony on one of Abu Dhabi's off-shore islands, a number of first breeding records from Arabia and descriptions of Arabian birding sites worthy of preservation, as well as the first published description of a sand partridge nest from Arabia (in the Hajar Mountains of northernmost Oman, adjacent to the UAE border).

Equally welcome is the news that the *Atlas of Breeding Birds of Arabia* itself is due for publication by mid-year.

Greetings from Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi

Suhail Manzoor of the Environment Agency in Abu Dhabi recently wrote to ensure continued receipt of *Gazelle* and mentioned that DNHG members should feel free to browse their library at: <http://library.ead.ae> to find various titles that may be of interest. The library is open to the public but borrowing is restricted to EAD staff only. *Thanks to Suhail Manzoor of EAD.*

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

Jun 6 Keith Wilson – Dragonflies

Jun 10 End-of-Season Dinner

Field Trips (Members only, please.)

May 22 Sharjah aquarium

June 10 End-of-Season Function

Further field trips, details or changes will be announced or confirmed by e-mail circular.