



GAZELLE



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

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Small Cupid underside

Contributors —

Thanks to the following members for their contributions this month:

- Angela Manthorpe
- Dominika Durtan
- Gary Feulner
- Teresa Kerr

Take a close look

In the new guidebook *Butterflies of the United Arab Emirates including Northern Oman* by Feulner, Roobas et al., there is a comment under the Small Cupid (*Chilades parrhasius*) section that says "in late summer, when flowering plants are generally scarce, *C. parrhasius* adults in mountain wadis can reliably be found at the inconspicuous yellow flowers of *Chrozophora oblongifolia* (Euphorbiaceae)".

In early October I was hiking near Shawka and I was drawn to a small example of the aforementioned bush because of the frenzied dancing of five to six Little Blues around the crown. As I am still learning to identify butterflies in the field, I settled in for a close look at who was there.

I have recently invested in a pair of close focus binoculars (Pentax Papilio II) and, armed with this amazing piece of kit, I was able to study the butterflies in detail from only 0.5m away. It is possible to identify most of the Little Blues (*Polyommata*) by looking at the patterns of spots, stripes, colourful lunules and tails on the underside. For easy comparison the butterfly guidebook includes a page showing the undersides of 12 of our 16 Little Blues side by side – and that is a page I now keep on my phone.

(Continued on page 4)

Madagascar: Lemurs and more...
see page 3



Announcements and Recorders



Monthly Lecture

Monday 14 November at 7.40 pm

Topic: Songs of the Water Spirits
An award-winning environmental film produced by Allegria Films

Director: Nicolo Bongiorno

Director's statement

“Ladakh is an extraordinary place. There are legends that even unite the paths of Buddha and Christ. And people like me, who live in the globalized West, have always dreamed and seen the Himalaya's and Tibet as a stronghold against the excesses of modernity. But the truth is the opposite, the problems of life in our modern society end up re-emerging among the most remote Himalayan mountains. Here, climate change, decadence, urbanization, and traffic pollution are, in some cases, even more brutal. Is it really the end of that magical and mystical dreamed world, full of mysteries rich in meaning? My hope is that the courageous dynamism of some visionary minds working across the platforms of culture, research and technology can break the ongoing vicious cycle and open a new way”.

Source of director's statement and photo :

<https://allegriafilms.com/works/songs-of-the-water-spirits>

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From the Editor:

Winter has arrived and Mother Nature is beaconing.

Please write to us at the email below with your observations of wildlife in the UAE or abroad by 25 November 2022.

gazelleeditor@gmail.com

We look forward to hearing from you.

Spotlight! Madagascar through Dominika Durtan's lens

Nature and landscape

The nice thing about traditional houses is that their colour reflects the local soil composition as they are built with the material sourced at the place. Thus they complement the farming landscapes with their clay coloured facades and straw roofs.



Amazing landscapes with the widest palette of the earthy tones, colours of clay ranging from red through to copper brown, orange, pink and beige to white.



Wildlife spotting

Observing lemurs in a private reserve.



And of course let us not forget the baobab trees.

Street life with all its glorious hustle & bustle



Wild silk workshop: comparison of the farmed mulberry with wild silk cocoons.



Fragrant Geranium essential oil distillery by the road.

Dominika's personal favourite - a giraffe beetle (*Giraffe giraffe*).

Vanilla orchid plantation

A massive spider.



Vanilla orchid plantation - pollination of the flowers is done by hand in Madagascar since the particular species of *Melipona* bee is not on the island.

(Continued from page 1)

What my observation revealed was that there were actually three species in attendance: the Small Cupid (as expected), Mediterranean Pierrot (*Tarucus rosaceus*) which is very common in the UAE and two or three of the less common Leadon Ciliate Blue (*Anthene amarah*). The latter is easily distinguished in the field due to a brown stripe on the underside of its forewing. All the butterflies were ready at one point to open their wings, which made my identification straightforward. For example, the UAE's two Pierrot species (*T. rosaceus* and *T. balkanicus*) are impossible to distinguish unless you get a view of the topside.

C. oblongifolia is common in the UAE mountains and wadis and can grow to a metre or more in height. The leaves are pale, hairy and pointed and the little green strawberry shaped fruits are distinctive but you have to look hard to see those inconspicuous yellow flowers. I moved on to study a taller bush and a larger Little Blue flew in – this was the *Lampides boeticus*, the Pea Blue. In addition to the size differential, it has a pale band running down the underside, which makes it relatively easy to identify. This particular specimen was unconcerned by my presence and, as it fluttered from flower to flower, it too opened its wings for lengthy periods. Other butterflies which came to nectar on the same plant included several Blue Pansies (*Junonia orithya*) and a Desert White (*Pontia glauconome*); the flowers also attracted a myriad of bees, flies and other bugs.

As a side note, when the swarms of desert locusts appeared in the UAE in 2020, I noticed that *Chrozophora* was a favourite of the nymphs or hoppers. The photo shows a particularly denuded specimen (possibly a sister species found in sandy environments) in the desert near Wadi Faya.



Mediterranean Pierrot underside.



Mediterranean Pierrot topside.



Pea Blue underside



Pea Blue (female) topside.



Leadon Ciliate Blue underside.



Desert White dry season form, very pale hind wing underside.



Blue Pansy (male).



Leadon Ciliate Blue (male) topside.

Contribution and photos by
Angela Manthorpe



Chrozophora in Wadi Faya.



Locust nymphs on *Chrozophora* in Wadi Faya.

The Strong & Beautiful Horses of Ladakh

During our 11-day Ladakh Trek our 11 beautiful pack horses became our trusted, steady, strong, admirable and resilient friends...not only generously and courageously carrying all our camping and cooking gear but also keeping us company along the high paths and displaying their beauty to us while grazing at the campsite in the evenings. Even the pretty young foal continued alongside her working mother throughout the entire trek!

They had to carry all the camping and cooking gear (plus food!) up steep mountain slopes to high altitudes of 3,000 to 5,000 metres. Then they had to keep their balance on steep descents and precipitous cliff pathways while descending into one of the valleys. Furthermore, the horses had to navigate numerous wild river crossings which they courageously took on without hesitation even on the last day after 24 hours of heavy rain, when the water-level was high and rising and the river flow strong and tumultuous!

We admired them so much and felt deep gratitude towards them. One evening in the mountain village of Umlung in the Markha Valley a member of our group generously initiated and bought the horses a special 'bumper' meal to which we all contributed - barley straw and grass hay from the local farmer. For the next hour our horses seemed in bliss - enjoying this sumptuous meal. Some of them had loud bells around their necks and we were told the purpose was so as not to lose them and to help prevent attacks by wolves and snow leopards! One late evening they came grazing around the campsite and some members of our group were kept awake by the bells!

Here are some facts about the breed or most likely cross-breed in some cases:

It is called the 'Zanskari' breed of mountain horses and it is concerning to read that the breed is considered 'endangered' even with a conservation programme in place.

The **Zaniskari** or **Zanskari** is a breed of a small mountain horse or pony from Ladakh. It is named after the Zanskar valley and is similar to the Spiti breed of Himachal Pradesh but the Zaniskari horse is better adapted to working at high altitudes. This breed shows similarities to the Tibetan breed of the neighbouring Tibet as it is medium in size and often grey in colour. The Zaniskari is considered endangered as there are only a few hundred alive today and India has implemented a conservation programme.

In 1977 the population of Zaniskari horses was estimated at 15,000-20,000. However, the population declined rapidly due to mechanisation and increases in the number of roads in its native area as well as indiscriminate cross-breeding with other horses. It is thought that now only a few hundred purebred animals remain and are mainly located in the valleys of Ladakh including the Zanskar Gorge from which the breed takes its name.

The Zaniskari horses are strong, compact and well built and particularly adapted to work in the hypoxic environment of Ladakh. Their height is usually 120-140 cm and their body length about 95-115 cm.

The most usual horse coat colour is grey but they can also be bay, brown, black and chestnut. Our Horses were a pretty mix of all colours!

The Zaniskari horses are particularly adapted to work as pack animals in the high altitudes and under challenging conditions of their native region which lies between 3,000 and 5,000 metres above sea level where the temperatures may reach -40°C . They are strong and sure-footed and have excellent stamina.... And we certainly witnessed that!
 Ref.: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zaniskari>

Contribution and photos by Teresa Kerr



An Accidental Botanical Garden

The silt deposited behind mountain dams after occasional flooding is relatively fertile. It often gives at least a temporary home to plant species not otherwise seen in the mountain environment, including both native UAE species and exotic species. Many of the latter are species found on the margins of lakes, rivers, wetlands or agriculture regionally or worldwide. Researchers from the Sharjah Seed Bank and Herbarium (Tamer Mahmood, Hatem Shabana and Sanjay Gairola) published an account a few years ago of plant species found in association with ca. 60 dams and water breakers in UAE mountain areas.

The dammed silt is also a repository for seeds of many of the native plants found within the entire upstream areas of the watershed, although most of those species will not germinate or thrive under the conditions in or around the dam basin itself. Botanist Nuri Asmita of Wadi Wurayah National Park recently showed me an area near the boundary of the park where silt had been excavated from behind Wadi Wurayah Dam and spread over a broad gravel terrace nearby. (Excavation is done at many larger dams to maintain the depth of the basin, to enhance potential recharge and to use the silt for agricultural purposes).

The process of dumping and bulldozing the silt using heavy machinery has created a landscape with its own modest "geography" (miniature hills, plateaux, slopes, flats and gullies) and a variety of substrates (ranging from silt to fine and coarse gravel to wadi cobbles that had been transported along with the silt) – all within an area estimated to be about 200 meters square. Within that area was an abundance of perennial shrubs and a few remaining annuals, contrasting greatly with the adjacent barren gravel terrace. Many may have originated from seeds in the silt and all had presumably benefitted from the heavy rain in late July, although most annuals had come and gone.

I was able to record more than 30 species in the course of a brief casual visit. Most were characteristic of the slopes, terraces and wadi banks of Wadi Wurayah (e.g. two woody species of *Convolvulus*, *Heliotropium breviliimbe*, *Indigofera coerulea*, *Lavandula subnuda*, *Taverniera cuneifolia* and *Tephrosia apollinea*) but here they were thrown together in a convenient but unusual mix. A few were species not normally found in the mountain environment e.g. *Citrullus colocynthis*, *Cleome brachycarpa*, *Physalis minima* and *Portulaca oleracea*, as well as club fungus (otherwise unidentified). Only one species was clearly non-native: the prostrate *Glinus lotoides*, first recorded in the UAE by the SSBH team.

The shrubbery also created homes and resources for animal life, including grasshoppers, wasps, antlions, spiders, flies and butterflies, and we were able to observe a number of their interesting interactions. But those are stories for another time. . .



All the plants shown here are growing on silt dredged from behind Wadi Wurayah Dam. In the low, flat area in the foreground, water had puddled after rain. Growing there are *Glinus lotoides* (pale green) and drying *Portulaca oleracea* (dark).

Glinus lotoides, a regional species first recorded in the UAE only a few years ago in association with mountain area dams.

A moribund club fungus. *The Green Guide to the Emirates* (Jongbloed 1991) sketched a selection of diverse UAE fungi but these have never been studied.

Dhofar Toadlets

The Dhofar Toad *Duttaphrynus dhufarensis* is much more common in the UAE than is generally recognised. It is one of two toads found in the country but, because it is primarily nocturnal and lives its life mostly away from wadi pools and streams, it is seldom encountered. Nevertheless, it has been found throughout the mountain regions, even in wadis without permanent water, up to ca. 800 meters near Fujairah and ca. 1200 meters in the Musandam.

Overnight campers in the mountains have told occasional stories of hundreds of toads hopping through their campsites after modest rain, presumably on the way to breed in wadi pools. In the months after major flooding, Dhofar toadlets numbering tens of thousands have been observed emerging at dusk from the drying, mud-cracked silt on the margins of the temporary lakes formed behind mountain front dams. DNHG members observed hundreds at the Qusheesh (Siweiki) Dam on a field trip in May 2017.

Dhofar toadlets are more uniform in appearance than adults. Their skin is pale brown, speckled with black. In dorsal view they have a flat-ended snout. In profile, they have a prominent black stripe through the eye, a readily visible eardrum, just behind and slightly lower than the eye, and the snout slopes backwards from "nose" to mouth. The tiny black toe tips may also be visible.

On a late October 2022 visit to the East Coast, we encountered occasional Dhofar toadlets in the wadi environment, where water was still flowing in the aftermath of the major storm and flooding in the southern mountains in late July. But we also found many more Dhofar toadlets in an otherwise dry mountain front area that featured a combination of natural vegetation and irrigated decorative plots. Those toadlets are surely the progeny of immediate post-storm breeding three months earlier.

This leads us to predict that Dhofar toadlets (and adult toads) are likely to be (and remain) very common during the coming months in and around the areas of the East Coast that were flooded and that afford some level of vegetation cover, including agricultural areas, parks and gardens.



Dorsal view of a Dhofar toadlet at Qusheesh Dam.
Photo by Tamsin Carlisle



Profile of a Dhofar toadlet from Fujairah (see text for key features).
Photo by Angela Manthorpe

Contribution by Gary Feulner and Angela Manthorpe
Photos by Gary, Angela and Tamsin Carlisle



An adult Dhofar toad on the margins of a mountain plantation.
Photo by Gary Feulner

Yusuf Thakur - My Evolution as Filmmaker to a Naturalist

For links to Yusuf Thakur's films please click on this link and scroll down to "Previous Lectures" (Monday 26 September 2022) :

<https://www.dnhg.org/lectures.html>



Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) Programme 2022/2023

DNHG Lectures

14 November Screening of the film “Songs of the Water Spirits”
Introduction by Film Director Nicolo Bongiorno

DNHG Field Trips

1 - 9 December Cambodia also known as Kampuchea
11 - 18 December Northern Laos

For more information and sign-up please contact Binish Roobas at binishroobas@hotmail.com

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DNHG Membership

DNHG membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at Dh100 for families and Dh50 for singles. Membership for the current year is valid from September 2022 to September 2023. In consideration of the restrictions on our lectures and field trips due to COVID-19, all members who were paid up (or considered paid up) for 2020—2021 were automatically renewed for 2021- 2022, without a renewal fee. As we have started hybrid meetings from September 2022, renewal fees can be paid at meetings or by the methods mentioned below.

New members can join by (i) sending to the Membership Secretary (see above) a completed one-page membership form, which can be downloaded from our website (www.dnhg.org) and (ii) making payment to our Emirates NBD account by cash deposit or transfer from your bank or ATM, using our IBAN number AE640260001012012013302. However, this process does not always identify the payer. So if you wish to pay by cash deposit, please also photograph or scan a copy of your payment confirmation and send via e-mail to the Membership Secretary, so we know whose money we have received.

DNHG membership entitles you to participate in field trips and helps pay for our lecture hall, publication and distribution of our monthly newsletter, the *Gazelle*, our post office box, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects.