

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP



GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي



Oryx. Photo Credit: Evelyn Brey

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Contributors

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

Gary Feulner, Valerie Chalmers, Evelyn Brey, Anne Millen, Steve Raynor, Amelie Fella

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

End-of-Season Function



Samail, Oman. Photo Credit: Steve Raynor

The annual End-of-Season Function was again held in the Utsav Room in the India Club on Thursday 13th June 2013. The evening took the form of the Annual Photographic Competition followed by a video quiz. The audience voted for the photographs they thought best in each category and for an overall winner.

Evelyn Brey was the winner of the 'Life on Earth: Plants/Animals/Fossils' section with her photograph entitled 'Oryx'.

Steve Raynor won the prize in the 'Earth and Environment: Landscapes/ Geology' section with his photograph entitled 'Samail'. The winner of the 'Man and his Influence: Archaeology/Architecture/Culture (People) /Environment' section was our youngest entrant, Amelie Fella, with her photograph entitled 'Dubai Skyline'. Evelyn Brey's 'Oryx' photograph was also voted the overall winner for 2013. She received the DNHG Trophy and two Dh100/- Virgin Megastore vouchers. Both Steve and Amelie received Dh100/- Virgin Megastore vouchers.

The video quiz was based on an extract from 'Surviving the Times', one of the episodes from the DVD set 'Arabia's Cycles of Life'. The winning team, with a very impressive 32 correct answers out of 32, was comprised of Johanna and Steve Raynor, Rakesh Rungta, Binish Roobas, Tamsin Carlisle, and Ashish Halge. All received small boxes of chocolates! Packets of DNHG Logo cards were distributed to lucky ticket numbers.

Our thanks go to the India Club for once again hosting the event and for another excellent buffet. Also to Pradeep for doing the booking, liaising with the India Club and choosing the menu and to Fran M'Caw and Trish Cox, in particular, for their help in setting up the Photographic Competition on the night.

Contributed by Valerie Chalmers

See cover for "Oryx" by Evelyn Brey and page 3 for "Dubai Skyline" by Amelie Fella



Dubai Skyline. Photo Credit: Amelie Fella

Members' News

Life After DNHG: Living in a Zoo



Former *Gazelle* Editor **Anne Millen** joined husband **Peter van Amsterdam** in Dubai recently and gave an enthusiastic account of life "at home" in Galle, Sri Lanka, where, Anne exclaimed, "It's like living in a zoo!"

A particular favorite was the story of the 2 meter garden snake that climbed the Christmas tree to eat the eggs laid by the birds that nested in the chandelier above. Perhaps we can persuade Anne to embellish this and other stories at Members' Night later in the year.

Contributed by Gary Feulner

Photo Credits: Anne Millen

Field Clip

"Chipmunks" come to Dubai: Indian Palm Squirrels

Michel de Martigny was an active DNHG member in the late 1990s and has recently re-settled in Dubai. His curiosity was piqued when he found he had a pair of "chipmunks" in his garden in Jumeirah 3 this spring, active in the early morning (before 6:00 am) and very talkative. He didn't recall having seen such animals here before. Had I seen any? Did I know more?

I hadn't, but I did. Anything is possible in Dubai, of course, but I guessed that Michel had most likely seen an Indian palm squirrel, whose coloration (light brown with pale longitudinal stripes) would remind a Canadian like Michel of North American chipmunks. Michel's photo confirmed my guess, but that is still very interesting news.

The first record of an Indian palm squirrel in the UAE was published in *Gazelle* in April 2011, based on a photograph taken at a Fujairah housing complex by Fujairah resident Joseph Viker, who showed it to Christophe Tourenq of EWS-WWF. It was confirmed by the DNHG's Binish Roobas, who explained that two very similar looking species exist in India – the three-striped palm squirrel in the south and the five-striped palm squirrel in the dry north-west. Both can live happily in association with humans and either could potentially become established in UAE plantation or garden environments.

In the Fujairah instance there was no indication that the squirrel represented more than a single escaped pet. Michel's information, however, and another mention that reached me without elaboration in the interim, suggest that the palm squirrel may now be present more widely in suburban Dubai, and may breed here as well. In particular, Michel's photos seem to show juvenile animals; Binish points out that the tail is not as large as in adults and the fur appears slightly waxy.

Have other DNHG members encountered these "chipmunks" too? All information will be gratefully received.

Contributed by Gary Feulner



A "chipmunk" in the garden – an Indian palm squirrel, probably a juvenile. Photo Credit: Michel de Martigny

Nepal Hill Country Trip

For the second year in a row, our customized field trip to the Nepal hill country (March 29 – April 6) was exceptionally well received. This reflects not only the many attractions of Nepal but also the thoughtfulness, care and attention of our Nepali hosts, led by former DNHG member Narayan Karki.

In Kathmandu for a day, we visited the Buddhist stupa at Bodha, the largest in Asia; the sprawling Pashupati temple grounds along the sacred Bagmati River, complete with temple, cremation ghats and protected forest; Patan Durbar Square and the surrounding markets – overloaded both with traditional architecture and (on the occasion of our visit) with residents lured by a local fair; and finally the tourist enclave of Thamel, still something of a throwback to the '60s and '70s.

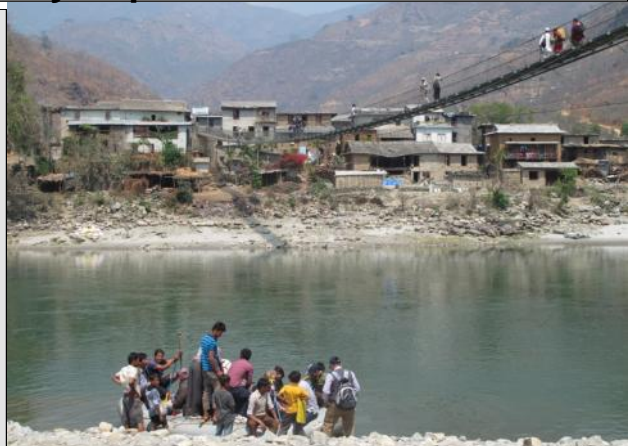
The truck ride uphill to Makadum lived up to its arduous reputation, but once there we were comfortably ensconced in the newly completed teacher accommodation at GN English Boarding School, where our stay coincided with the inter-term break. The rooftop terrace gave a commanding and invigorating view of the hill country and the Tamakosi Valley. By day we hiked in the hills and/or hung out in the village. In the evenings we (along with many villagers) enjoyed cultural programs including local dancing and a mock local wedding ceremony.

Keith Wilson kept both his eyes and his ears open for birds and tallied more than 70 species, including some new to him like the Woolly-Necked Stork. At the elevation of Makadum, it was still a bit early in the season for many insects and other arthropods, but, with enthusiastic assistance from some teenage would-be scientists, Keith also inspected for life in forest streams, turning up freshwater clams and larvae of dragonflies, caddisflies, and other arcane flying insects.

We returned from Makadum via still higher country, with views of the snowy Ganesh Himal range and a detour to the Chinese border. En route, our celebrity status earned us a photo op with the (literally) red-faced members of the newly elected board of the Ramechhap Chamber of Commerce.

Contributed by Gary Feulner

[PS: Narayan Karki has written to update us on the volunteer teacher situation at GN English Boarding School, which was reported in the last Gazelle. Thanks largely to our friends at ENHG and St. Andrews in Abu Dhabi, the school will now host five summer volunteers, mostly from NYU Abu Dhabi, who will visit in pairs from June through August. In addition, the school's original long-term volunteer will arrive in July; the family medical problems that delayed her have been diagnosed and resolved. Finally, the school has received expressions of interest in other long-term positions extending through the balance of the school year, which are being pursued. Narayan extends a big thank you to all who have tried to help.]



Top to Bottom: Footbridge and 'ferry' crossing at Sitkha. A ceremony at Kandadevi Temple. Our 'orchestra' for an evening dance program. Charikot, an overnight stop on our return. Photo Credits: Gary Feulner

Field Clip

Are Tilapia Invasive in the UAE?

An engaging and otherwise enlightening account of the DNHG's field trip to Wadi Musah, in the May 2013 issue of *Gazelle*, included a paragraph that repeats unattributed allegations to the effect that introduced Tilapia fish have displaced the native wadi fish *Garra barreimiae* from various locations in the UAE, Oman and Bahrain. To the best of my knowledge this is untrue and deserves further discussion.

"Tilapia" is the common name used to refer to certain species of Cichlid fish in the genera *Tilapia* and *Oreochromis*, originating in East African rivers and widely introduced elsewhere, worldwide, as a food fish and for control of mosquitos and aquatic plant growth. Their invasive potential is now well-recognized (too late, in many cases) and they are invariably included within the 'top 100' invasive species of plants and animals globally. Many anecdotes exist about how difficult it is to remove them once they have colonized a pond or other site.

But there are exceptions to every rule, and the UAE is an exception for Tilapia. Although Tilapia are raised here and although they are available from, and sometimes introduced by, local government agencies, they have generally not succeeded in colonizing natural environments in the UAE or northern Oman. A corollary is that there is no basis for asserting that they have had a significant impact on native wadi fish – *Garra barreimiae*, *Cyprinion microphthalmum* and *Aphanius dispar* – in natural environments.

That is especially true for *G. barreimiae*, the most widespread fish (by far) in Hajar Mountain wadis. *G. barreimiae* is nothing if not a 'survivor'. This is recognized by the IUCN, which (contrary to the account in the May *Gazelle*) considers it 'Least Concern', not 'Threatened', a conclusion that was reviewed as recently as mid-2012. (The mention of Bahrain is gratuitous, as no *Garra* species are native to Bahrain.)

Tilapia in the UAE and northernmost Oman are normally found in man-made environments, especially dammed ponds, in most of which *G. barreimiae* and *C. microphthalmum* do not occur. Where Tilapia have been introduced into natural environments, as in Wadi Qahfi (the Hatta Pools wadi), they have not thrived over the long term and their populations have repeatedly disappeared. In at least one artificial environment, the irrigation ditches at Ruwayah plantations, Tilapia have failed over the past 15 years to displace the introduced mollies (*Poecilia* sp.) that share their habitat. Nor do Tilapia seem able to displace the Arabian killifish, *Aphanius dispar*, a native species that is also bred artificially and frequently introduced to ponds and tanks for mosquito control.

A possible exception is the main waterfall pool at Wadi Wurayah, where the Tilapia population reportedly exploded at the expense of *G. barreimiae*. But that pool is exceptional and is also not a very "natural" environment, being a popular swimming hole at least two days a week as well as the recipient of numerous other fish species from time to time. Tilapia have never colonized other sites in Wadi Wurayah.

Cont. on next page...



Left: Tilapia showing red fins, perhaps reflecting genetic input from *Oreochromis mossambicus*. Photo Credit: Gary Feulner

DNHG Recorders

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Seashells, Birds and Mammals - 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.

Are You a Techie with Time?

The website sub-committee would like to find volunteers who can help with maintenance of the on-line newsletter, and to upload the wealth of information and photographs from past *Gazelles*. Full training will be given. Contact any Committee person - we will be very pleased to hear from you!

Are Tilapia Invasive in the UAE?, *cont.*

The exact reasons why Tilapia have not been invasive in the UAE remain speculative, just as the link between smoking and lung cancer has long gone unexplained in detail, but the evidence for the conclusion is similarly strong. The Wadi Musah account characterizes the Hajar Mountain environment as "unforgiving"; the answer may lie in that generalization. It is a challenge to point to any introduced macro-organisms of any kind that have proven invasive in natural environments in the UAE; perhaps the environment is so extreme that only those organisms most specifically adapted can survive.

In the case of wadi fish, the greatest effects on native fish populations have been observed to result from local fishing techniques (which target *G. barreimiae*), the use of pesticides, the construction of dams, physical destruction of mountain front environments and the extraction of water from the watercourses. These are the biggest threats. And of course all wadi fish are vulnerable to global or regional climate change which increases aridity, diminishing rainfall, increasing evaporation and eliminating surface water.

None of the foregoing should be considered a defense of the introduction of Tilapia. The Omani government policy which outlaws Tilapia is a prudent one and the UAE should adopt a similar policy. But to be alarmist about the threat of invasive species in the face of existing evidence is to encourage the misallocation of priorities and resources. *Contributed by Gary Feulner*



Top: *Garra barreimiae*, the most common wadi fish in the Hajar Mountains.



Left: A molly (*Poecilia* sp.) at Ruwayah plantation, showing reversion from the black color of commercial aquarium specimens to wild coloration.

Bottom: A fish trap in the Hajar Mountains.

Photo Credits: Gary Feulner



Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

15 September 2013

Oscar Campbell: Spring Bird Migration through Abu Dhabi

Field Trips (Members Only)

Details of future field trips will be announced/confirmed by e-mail circular.

DNHG COMMITTEE 2013

When possible, please contact committee members outside office hours

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Contributions

Do you have a field report, unusual finding, interesting news article, book review, amazing photograph, or community news to share?

If so, email your contributions to: gazelleeditor@gmail.com
(Arial 10 justified).

DNHG Membership

Membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. Membership is valid from Sep 2012 to Sep 2013. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to HSBC account no. 030100242001. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.)

Payment can also be made by cash deposit at a bank or ATM, using our IBAN number AE900200000030100242001. However, this process does not identify you as the payer. If you wish to pay by cash, please also scan and e-mail a copy of your payment confirmation to the Membership Secretary, so we know whose money we have received.

DNHG membership entitles you to participate in field trips and 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.