



# GAZELLE

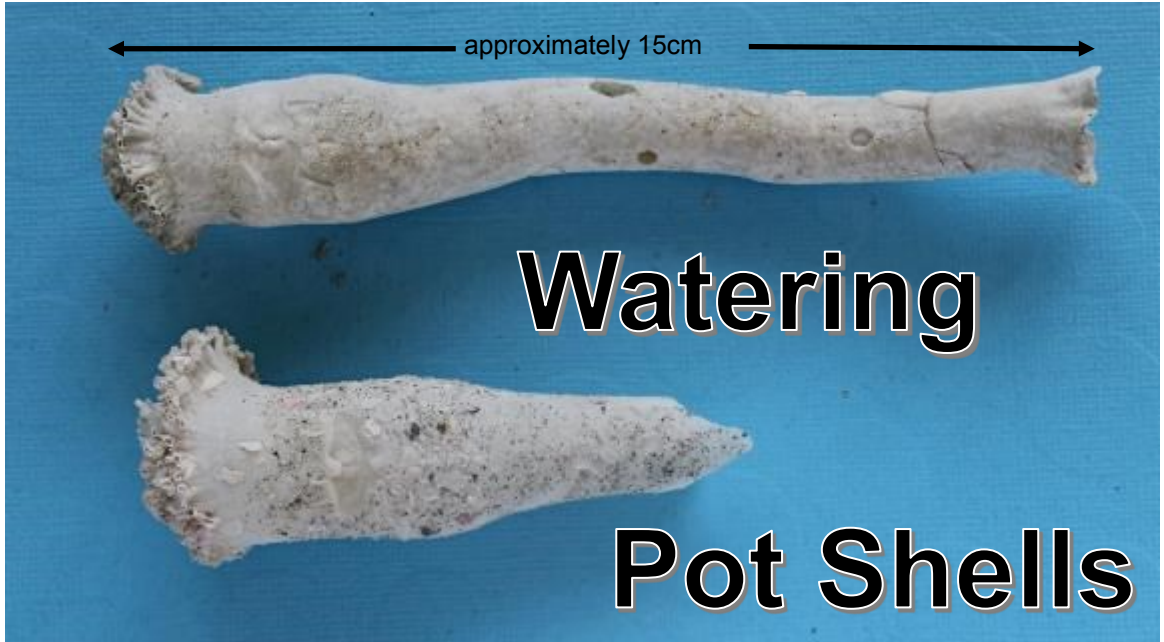
مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

[www.dnhg.org](http://www.dnhg.org)

## Watering Pot Shells – *Brechites attrahens* (Lightfoot, 1786)

Many shell collectors focus on gastropods because of their varied spiral forms, and pass over the more mundane bivalves, which are sometimes deemed to be generally less interesting. There is however one curious and unusual bivalve present in the Arabian region, which is often the last one in any shelling reference book, almost as though it is an afterthought!

After more than three years of shell collecting in the UAE and Oman, we took a weekend trip to some beaches in the Ash Sharqiyah South Governorate on Oman's East coast to explore some new areas. I was fortunate enough to



find my first specimen of a Furbeled Watering Pot, *Brechites attrahens* (Lightfoot, 1786) in less than 20cm of water, on sand flats at the early morning low tide. I was excited as these shells are quite fragile, but this one appeared to be more or less complete and is approximately 15cm

long. The bonus was to find a second shell later that day, albeit missing the top half of the tube, but with the amazing perforated base intact. The broken shell was found washed up at the back of the same beach, a short way above the high tide line.

The juvenile shells are extremely small and nacreous, and start out life as a normal bivalve shell. A calcareous tube, which is sometimes encrusted with sand grains, is secreted by the mantle and grows out from one or both of the embryonic

valves. The valves then flatten out and remain visible, seemingly embedded in the wall of the tube. The small shell valves

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**Contributors**—Thanks to the following for their reports and contributions:

- Andrew Childs, Binish Roobas,
- Gary Feulner, Marijcke Jongbloed,
- Alexis Biller, Ajmal Hasan,
- Tamsin Carlisle and Nancy Nolan.

## Announcements and Recorders

### Next Month's Speaker—8pm on Sunday, 8th May,

The DNHG are delighted to welcome the following speaker, who will present an illustrated talk on:  
*"Tracking Socotra Cormorants for Conservation"*

**Dr Sabir Bin Muzaffar** - a wildlife biologist specializing on the ecology, migration and diseases of birds. He received his B.Sc., M.Sc. and Ph.D. degrees from Memorial University, St.John's, Newfoundland, Canada where he worked on the ecology, parasites and diseases of seabirds in eastern Canada. His research examined host-parasite-pathogen interactions and was key in determining the geographic spread of helminths and diseases of puffins, murrelets, razorbills and gulls (among others) and their associations with climatic anomalies in the Northwest Atlantic. He then did his post doctoral research at the University of California, Davis on the ecology and migration of waterfowl in Europe and Asia, with special reference to the role of migratory birds in the geographic spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 (bird flu). This work shed light on the migratory movement of ducks and gulls and was instrumental in dispelling myths about their involvement in large-scale, long-distance spread of bird flu. Dr. Muzaffar has also worked on the ecology and conservation of a wide variety of wildlife in Bangladesh, where he was born, including the critically endangered Hoolock Gibbon, Asiatic bears, and migratory birds.

He has published extensively in peer-reviewed scientific journals and is currently an Associate Professor at the Department of Biology, United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain. His current work involves the long-term study of the ecology of the globally threatened Socotra Cormorants breeding on Siniya Island as well as other birds.

#### From the Editor:

Shells are fascinating to many, and our cover article on page 1 features a rare find in Oman recently.

An insight is given into life in Nepal through the eye of the lens in *Spotlight* (Page 3). Also in *Spotlight*, view some effects on the desert from recent downpours and see photographs from the fascinating field trip to Mleiha.

Last month's cover article on the Mleiha Archaeological Centre prompted a field trip during April. The response was so overwhelming, that an additional trip was organized for the following day. Thanks to DNHG committee member Ajmal Hasan, for giving up both days of his weekend, in order to provide excellent tours of both the museum and surrounding, significant areas. The photo opposite, taken by Alexis Biller, commemorates the opening of the Centre, in January this year.

Read about falling lizards in India on page 5, whilst back home in the UAE, an invasive plant (page 4) is making its presence felt.

A 'whodunnit' mystery gradually unfolds on page 6 when strange evidence was found at a crime scene.

Finally, a reminder of forthcoming trips and lectures are listed on page 8. Further trips will be announced by email. Enjoy your read!

#### Bish Brown Award Winner

You may recall that the Bish Brown Award winner this year was named as John Stewart-Smith, who has contributed so much during and prior to the launching of the Emirates Natural History Group.

John is presently visiting the United Arab Emirates to receive his award and will present a special talk on *"ENHG Abu Dhabi—its earliest beginnings as told by its first Chairman."* This will take place at the Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management on Sunday, 1st May at 8pm.



#### DNHG Recorders

**Reptiles - Dr. Reza Khan** 050 6563601

**Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi** res: 06-5310467 off: 06-5583 003 email: lankefi@emirates.net.ae

**Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi**

**Geology - Gary Feulner** res: 306 5570

**Insects - Gary Feulner**

**Fossils - Valerie Chalmers** res: 050 455 8498 email: valeriechalmers@gmail.com

**Plants - Valerie Chalmers**

**Archaeology - MaryAnne Pardoe** mobile: 050 724 2984 email: maryannepardoe@yahoo.co.uk

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**Birds - Tamsin Carlisle** mobile: 050 1004702 email: tamsin.carlisle@platts.com

# Spotlight

Mleiha Archaeological Centre, by Alexis Biller



Rain in the desert, by Ajmal Hasan



People of Nepal Hill Country, by Tamsin Carlisle



## Field Clip

### *Amaranthus albus* in a newly-created field in Wadi Maydaq



couple of plants in a freshly-created field along upper Wadi Maydaq in the summer of 2000. Marijcke Jongbloed knew it from the Al-Ain area, where she considered it a rare plant of waste ground environments. It is very variable in appearance, depending on the growing conditions and on whether it is in leaf, flower or seed, so my specimen was sent to the late Prof. Loutfy Boulos in Cairo for a positive identification.

I did not encounter this species again for a dozen years, when I found it common in thick silt deposited on the edges of the basin behind the Wadi Shawkah dam. A few years later, I noticed it a kilometer below the dam, in silt deposited in puddles at the road crossing north of Shawkah, where the subsurface flow backs up before entering a small bedrock gorge.

### Dam Invader: *Amaranthus albus*

*Amaranthus albus* is a good example of a plant that is expanding its presence in the UAE in response to the expansion of favorable habitat, in this case the silt deposited behind dams after flooding in mountain wadis.

*A. albus* is a prickly, erect annual which can grow to ca. 60cm. Also known as pigweed amaranth, it is a weed species of cultivation and waste ground in temperate regions including the Americas, Europe, Africa and Australia (where it is considered invasive). It was new to me when I first encountered a

More recently, I found it in Fujairah, at the edge of the lake behind the Tennis Court Dam, which is fed by overflow from the Wadi Ham dam. There it was present in silt in the 'delta' created by the inflow channel.

The accompanying photos show the scope of variability of *A. albus*. The erect form is a constant, branching stiffly like a candelabrum, but the leaves fall off as the plant matures, leaving pseudo-whorls of the spiny inflorescence clustered at the leaf attachments (axils). Most online photos are from the US and Europe and show a much leafier plant.



***A. albus* at Tennis Court Dam, showing new leaves**

The explosive growth of dams in the UAE since the mid-1990s has coincided, paradoxically, with a period when the alleged benefits of non hydro-electric dams (e.g., for recharge or water use) has increasingly been questioned. A recent flood incident following rains on the East Coast was



***A. albus* in Wadi Shawkah, showing details of the seeding spike**

attributed in part to the failure of a small dam inland, aggravated by the ponding of water behind unintended dams created



***A. albus* in Wadi Shawkah, showing the "candelabrum" growth form**

by new roads and other infrastructure, but reporting did not dwell on this and instead announced that more than two dozen additional dams were scheduled for construction in order to prevent flood damage. This replaces the historical approaches of channeling water flow and not building permanent structures in known watercourses.

*Contribution and photos by Gary Feulner*

## Field Clip

### Falling Lizards

India's Western Ghats mountains are rich in flora and fauna, including many reptiles adapted to different habitats. During a short stay in the Coorg region of the Western Ghats, known for its coffee and its wildlife, I had the opportunity to spend time in the forests on a regular basis.



One day I happened to see a big green lizard (a species new for me) on the ground near a huge tree (more than 30 meters high). I observed it closely and realized that it had just fallen from the tree, although it was apparently uninjured by the fall. As I watched, it walked directly back toward the trunk and slowly climbed the tree, disappearing among the high branches.

It had long spines on its neck and upper back, and looked like a dragon, but it was well camouflaged with green coloration all over the body and definitely arboreal with a long tail. I wasn't carrying my camera then, so I lost the chance to take a photo for identification.

I spoke to a number of naturalists in Coorg, who all said that this behaviour – lizards falling down from trees – is very common in that area. But none of them was able to actually name the lizard I described and no-one showed any interest in identifying a locally common lizard. So I was left to search through my own experience with similar lizards and remember a few species that might be related to it, e.g., Common Green Calotes, Roux forest lizard, Blood Sucker lizard and some others.

A few days later, one of my friends came to tell me about a 'dragon' that had just fallen from a tree. I ran to the spot with my friend and saw a lizard like the first one I had seen. This lizard seemed to be in shock momentarily, perhaps because it had landed a hard surface. My friend managed to take a few photos before it climbed back to the same tree it had fallen from. Those photos helped me identify the lizard to species: It was the Large-Scaled forest lizard *Calotes grandisquamis*, first scientifically described in 1875.

I went on to learn about more it and came to know that is very common among evergreen patches of the Western Ghats and around tea, coffee and cardamom plantations. It is shown in many publications and online images, but without answering the questions about its behaviour that made this lizard so interesting to me. Why does the lizard always fall to the ground? And why doesn't this hurt the lizard? Do these lizards have the ability to climb down? I have seen them climbing up, but never down.

Most of the lizard's claws are bent backwards, allowing it to climb up firmly and fast, but they are not designed to climb down. It seems the Large-Scaled forest lizard uses the falling adaptation to reach the bottom of tall trees more efficiently than any other possible ways it knows. Its body must be designed to resist injury during the falls, and it recovers its arboreal position quickly, to avoid any possible ground predators. Why does it descend in the first place? In some cases, this may be the simplest way to change its position within its tree. But falling down could also be a way to escape from arboreal predators like birds and snakes or other reptiles.

(Continued from page 1)

that have merged into the tube wall can be seen in the photo, about 2cm above the perforated base, appearing just as small nodules. The resulting siphon is enormous compared to the two juvenile valves.

The tube is open at the top, and is slightly flared; the bottom of the tube is sealed with the perforated disk, with small slightly raised open tubes, reminiscent of a watering pot spout. The base is fringed with a lamellar frill with tiny finger-like projections. The animals bore into the soft substrate, and stick vertically out with just the open top of the tube visible above the sand, spending their whole lives in that position. They feed by drawing in water and food particles through the base perforated disk.

This is truly an unusual bivalve, and is one that has a fascinating development cycle. Previously reported in *Gazelle* issue from May 2010 when some specimens were found in Abu Dhabi area, this is the first time that I have found any during my visits to beaches in UAE and Oman. I would be very interested to hear if any other specimens have locally been found recently.



Contribution by Andrew Childs

## Field Clips

**N**ature sets the stage and we follow. Scouring the hills of the greater Jebel Faya area for features of geological and palaeontological interest that would help to understand the evolution of that area, Gary Feulner and Sonja Lavrencic found themselves investigating instead a more modern mystery – murder, most fowl.

On a rubble-strewn slope they found a bill – surely a duck's bill. How had a duck come to be in this spot? Wild ducks, at least healthy ones, would have been extremely unlikely to alight anywhere near the arid jebels in this area. Nearby, we found feathers, white feathers in several scattered clumps or clusters. They were too white to belong to the pigeons (rock doves) that nested in the cliffs above, or the brown-necked ravens that watched us as they circled at a distance. The duck was the decedent, then.

But who had done this dastardly deed, and why? Picnickers? It seemed an exposed, uncomfortable and difficult spot for that, and there was no other trash. We looked uphill and saw, in a sandy patch among stony ground, several holes that were clearly burrows or aborted burrows dug by a fox. So our speculation was aborted, too.



**The evidence in hand:  
the bill of a duck**



**Sonja inspects the scattered feathers**



**Fox burrows on the slope**

The fox was the culprit, that seemed certain, but it had gone to some effort to enjoy its meal at leisure. The white duck most likely came from a farm, but the nearest farm (if it had ducks – we didn't investigate) was two kilometers or more away – a considerable distance for the fox to carry a duck carcass. The scattered clumps of feathers suggest that dismemberment of the carcass was also not a simple chore. Foxes must still work for a living, and take-away dinner is not necessarily a convenience.

*Contribution and photos by Gary Feulner*



**Orange-bellied Himalayan Squirrel  
*Dremomys lokriah*; Family:  
Sciuridae  
Makadum, Nepal (Tamsin Carlisle)**

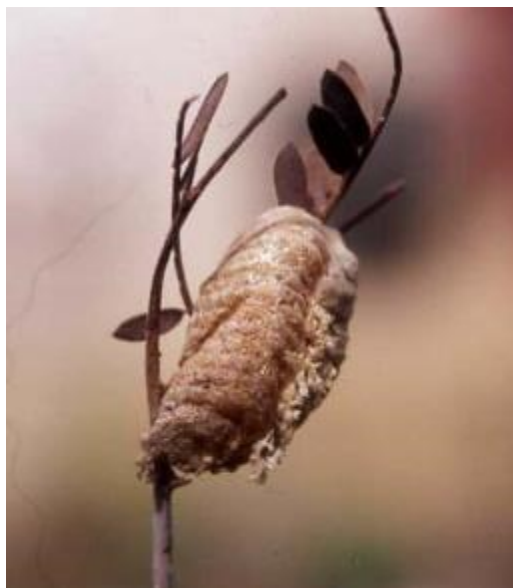
## Field Clips

Last month Angela Manthorpe requested identification of an object, which was attached to a metal fence surrounding a baobab tree in Oman (below left). Angela suspected that it was possibly an egg case.

Marijcke Jongbloed, author of several natural history books on the UAE and recognized for her research into the Arabian Leopards, swiftly responded and sought out a photograph (below right) from her time in the UAE. Marijcke explains:

*"I think this looks a lot like the nest of praying mantises or similar insects. The ones I have seen were usually more regular like a piece of plastic foam."*

Marijcke added that she also recalls taking a photograph when little praying mantises swarmed out of the nest.



## Rain in the Sharjah Desert

DNHG member, Ajmal Hasan, was exploring the Sharjah desert after a spate of rainfall in February that flooded many low-lying areas, especially near mountain foothills. Below is one of the photos he took of the large temporary lakes that were left behind after the water deluge that descended from the limestone mountains of Jebel Faya/Mleiha and carved a wadi path all the way up to the Al Dhaid road (I/C No. 10). Such water inundation has not been seen by him since 2008 and the vast pools did not dry up until late March. More photographs can be seen on page 3.



## White-crested Laughing Thrushes



These birds appeared in a Jumeirah garden during March. The sighting was subsequently reported to the 'UAE Birding' website by Tamsin Carlisle. Tamsin identified the birds as a pair of *White-crested Laughing Thrushes*. They were observed around 6pm, taking a bath prior to going to roost.

## Giant water bug (*Lethocerus patruelis*)

This photograph was taken near Hatta during the early 1990s by Nancy Nolan and shows a giant bug in the process of killing and consuming a toad. The tissue box was placed there for scale. According to Diane Donohue, *'To kill its prey, the Giant Water Bug jabs the*



*Giant water bug mid-kill, c. early 1990s.*

*captive again and again with its beak while holding on with its powerful front legs. It will eat other insects, tadpoles, small frogs and fish.'* Read more at:

[www.enhg.org/bulletin/b16/16\\_23.htm](http://www.enhg.org/bulletin/b16/16_23.htm)

One wonders if there have been any recent sightings.

# Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- May 1: John Stewart-Smith, first Chairman of ENHG  
 May 8: Dr Sabir Muzaffar, wildlife biologist  
 June 5: Dr Panagiotis Azmanis DVM, Dr.med.vet, Dip ECZM (Avian)

## Scheduled Field Trips (Members only)

- April 30: Al Hefaiyah Mountain Conservation Centre  
 May 6—7: Overnight dhow trip to the Musandam  
 July 22—28: Kyrgyzstan

Further field trips, details or changes to trips will be announced/confirmed by email.

## DNHG COMMITTEE 2015

When possible, please contact committee members outside office hours

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## Contributions

We need a variety of contributors. 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 fully justified)

## DNHG Membership

Membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at Dh100 for families and Dh50 for singles. Membership is valid from September 2015 to September 2016. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to HSBC account number 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 AE900200000030 100242001. 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 help 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.