



# GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

**T**he Shikra is a small but feisty bird of prey with a mysterious past in the UAE and, seemingly, a dynamic future. Common and native to south central Asia, the Indian sub-continent and across large areas of tropical Africa (from South Africa to Yemen), its appearance in the UAE in 1996 was unexpected to say the least; the subsequent rapid confirmation of breeding in Dubai (in 1997) was even more so. The species is not particularly known as a migrant or long-distance traveller and the reason for its sudden and rapid colonization of suburban Dubai is something of a mystery; the possibility of escaped or deliberately released birds has been mooted, although there is no direct evidence for this. Since its arrival and until very recently, the Shikra has been strictly limited to the greater Dubai area, where it has become a common,



Shikra - a bird on the up!

Adult Shikra, resting in the shade of a tall tree in a garden near Safa Park

03.08.2017

<b>Inside this month:</b>	<i>page</i>
Shikra—a bird on the up!	1
Announcements and Recorders	2
Spotlight!	3
Odd Ducks—hairdos And don'ts!	4
Announcements and Field Clips	5
Leatherback Turtle	6
The Look of a Hunter	6
Strange or Normal?	7
Lectures and field trips	8

albeit stealthy resident. Pairs regularly nest in the tall trees of Safa Park (where a sharp, distinctive *ke-vik!* call is often more readily detected than the bird itself) and it can also be seen soaring, for example over the mangroves of Ras al Khor or the Zabeel area.

**Contributors—**  
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Its appearance in any green area in Dubai is quite feasible, including, with a bit of luck, even small gardens, as long as some shady trees are present for cover.

In general demeanor, the Shikra is dashing but rather furtive, preying on small birds (presumably in the suburbia of the UAE species such as sparrows and bulbuls) and lizards (apparently the main food in Africa). Prey is taken by flying low and making startling hit-and-grab attacks by using long, snatching legs and sharply taloned feet. Much time may be spent on a secluded perch, simply watching and waiting. The only

(Continued on page 7)

## Announcements and Recorders

### Monthly Speaker -

8pm on Sunday 15th October, 2017

Dr Sophie Mery will present an illustrated talk on

### *“Recent archaeological research in coastal Umm Al Quwain”*

Dr Mery works for the archaeological department of the University of Nanterre. Her archaeological work is concentrated mostly in the United Arab Emirates. She specializes in ancient ceramics and has worked extensively in the Oman peninsula on Neolithic and Bronze Age sites. Her long-term researches on ancient Middle East ceramics involve the use of morpho-functional analysis, archeometry and technology.

Dr Mery worked for the CNRS as a researcher in 1992 after obtaining her Doctorate in Oriental Archaeology at the University of Paris in 1991. She has been the director of the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) since 2010. She directed the French archaeological missions in Abu Dhabi from 1995—1999. She is especially interested in Neolithic and Bronze Age sites and has also participated in archaeological digs in Iraq and Pakistan. She also gives lectures on ceramology at the University of Paris.

Dr Mery has led archaeological teams and worked on sites in Umm Al Quwain, Rasl Al Khaimah and Abu Dhabi.



Tombs in Umm Al Quwain

### From the Editor:

From humble beginnings in 1977, ENHG Abu Dhabi has flourished into an organization that has earned a respectable reputation within natural science circles. Congratulations are expressed on the 40th Anniversary by Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan, UAE Minister of Culture and Knowledge Development and Patron of both the ENHG and DNHG. Many expeditions and discoveries have taken place, inspired by the original founding members and new discoveries are still continuing today.

Our next speaker, Dr Sophie Mery for example, will present an illustrated talk

on recent archaeological research in coastal Umm Al Quwain.

Birds observed this month include some unusual sightings. Odd ducks in Al-Qudra, sport unusual hairstyles, whilst Shikra sightings are not going unnoticed in the suburbs of Dubai. (page 4 and cover article).

Abroad, UK coastal rock arrangements have been observed, as well as the culture of Croatia and finding 'dragons' in Slovenia (pages 7, 3 and 5).

Back in the UAE, the plight of the leatherback turtle is highlighted on page 6, along with the Locust Terror!

Enjoy your read!

If you're out exploring, be aware that it was announced through local media this month that from October 15th, speed limits will be reduced to 110km per hour on two major Dubai roads (Emirates Road and Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Road). [Click here to read the full article from 'The National' newspaper.](#)

## DNHG Recorders

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# Spotlight!

**DNHG Trip to Omani mountains (Sharaf Alamayn) for the Eid Al Adha weekend, by Sonja Lavson and Sandra Grenet**



**Vegetation from a DNHG wetlands walk, by Tamsin Carlisle**



*Typha domingensis*



*Amaranthus albus*  
(above and left)



*Pulicaria glutinosa*

**Croatian Culture, by Margaret Swan**





## Field Clips

### Odd Ducks:

#### Hairdos and Don'ts

A really good day in the field is educational as well as entertaining. But like formal education, the process often involves homework. That was certainly true of our summer visit to the Al-Qudra lakes in Dubai's Al Marmoum protected area. Along with the many exotic species we reported in last month's *Gazelle*, we also saw some exotic-looking ducks whose story proved to be very different.

Among the very first of the waterfowl to attract our attention was a pair of black ducks sporting a tufted crown that reminded us of the hairdo currently in vogue among young men in Dubai shopping malls. We supposed these ducks would prove easy to identify, and we thought little of the fact that they were swimming in tandem with a pair of white ducks because, in the

circumstances of Al Qudra, many species (including obviously 'domesticated' ducks) are thrown together at close quarters, and they seem to make alliances of convenience.

Some time later, however, we began to notice a medley of



**Hanky-panky is suspected**



**'Exotic' tufted black ducks**



**A tufted Mallard duck**

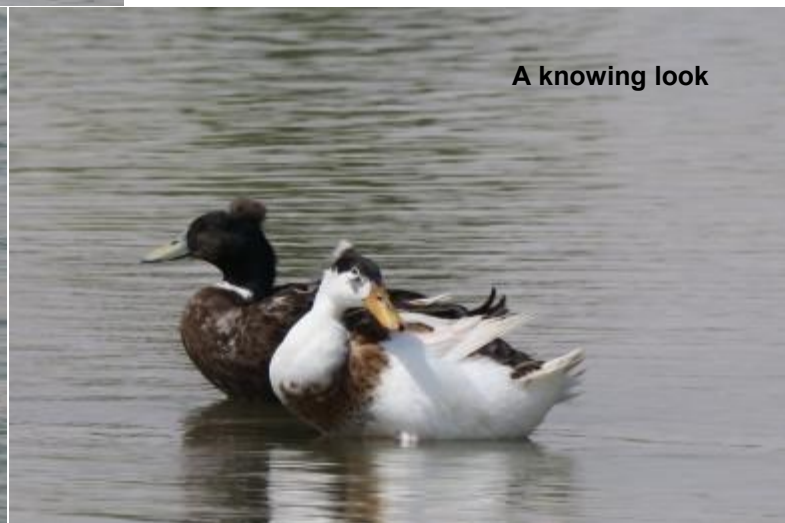
© Binish Roobas

ducks of various sizes, shapes and colors, all sporting similar tufted crowns. A few had obvious affinities (e.g., with Mallard ducks). The conclusion was inescapable: there had been some hanky-panky going on here!

But did any of the ducks we saw represent a pure-bred, 'tufted' species? Answering that question provided our education.

In a nutshell, online research quickly confirmed what readers who are familiar with waterfowl breeding will already know. The "tufted" condition in ducks and geese is the product of a single, dominant gene. And however cute the tufted look may be, the gene in question is not benign. The tuft conceals a skull deformity, typically an opening at the crest of the skull, above which fatty tissue and the tuft of feathers grows. This puts the individual duck at increased risk of injury or infection. In addition, the gene is potentially lethal: if a copy is inherited from both parents (the homozygous condition), the egg will simply not hatch.

*Contribution by Binish Roobas and Gary Feulner*



**A knowing look**



# Announcements and Field Clips

Source: Sean Gallup/Getty  
Images Europe



## Happy 40th Anniversary, ENHG!

**T**he Emirates Natural History Group -- Abu Dhabi celebrates its 40th anniversary this month. Below is the statement issued on the occasion by H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan, UAE Minister of Culture and Knowledge Development, and Patron of both the ENHG and DNHG.

Statement by:

H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin Mabarak Al Nahayan,  
Minister of Culture and Knowledge Development

On the 40th Anniversary of the establishment of the Emirates Natural History Group:

*"It is with considerable pleasure that I offer my congratulations to the Emirates Natural History Group, ENHG, as it marks the 40th anniversary of its establishment back in 1977.*

*I have myself been Patron of the ENHG for over 30 years. During that time, I have seen the way in which its Abu Dhabi chapter, and younger ones in Al Ain, Dubai and Fujairah, have devoted time and attention, enthusiasm and expertise, to promoting a wider understanding of the natural history and heritage of the whole of the Emirates.*

*They have done this through their regular public meetings, through*

*dedicated fieldwork and research and through their publications, while many of the ENHG's active members have made a substantial contribution over many years to our knowledge of our environment and all that it contains. In so doing, Group members have played an important part in promoting the philosophy of environmental conservation that now forms a key element of Government policies and practices.*

*Over the years, for example, ENHG members have played an instrumental role in drawing attention to the need to protect Abu Dhabi's Eastern Mangroves and the Al Wathba Wetland Reserve. It was during an ENHG visit to Sir Bani Yas, in 1991, that the first evidence was identified of the pre-Islamic Christian monastery that is one of our most important archaeological sites.*

*The late Sheikh Zayed once said that: "We cherish our environment because it is an integral part of our country, our history and our heritage."*

*He believed that in the process of protecting it, there was a role for individuals and non-governmental organisations, as well as for Government.*

*Over the years, with considerable success, the ENHG has followed the path that he laid down.*

*I wish the Group well and look forward to being associated with it for many years to come."*

## Dungeons and Dragons

I don't mean Komodo dragons or dragonflies, found in the natural world, or even the, once popular computer game! I mean dragons

of the mythical kind. They were everywhere in Ljubljana, the capital city of Slovenia — on lampposts, floors, manhole covers and even guarding bridges!

The dragon is the most recognizable symbol of this city, and is incorporated into many features, including car number plates! Legends link the dragon with St George and also Jason and the Argonauts.

It was stormy, and raining heavily on the day we visited earlier this month, but that didn't dampen the spirit of exploring this beautiful, fairy tale city. In any case, I felt quite safe as obviously, the rain would dampen any passing dragon's fire.

Towering above the city, is the castle, where the fabled dragon once dwelled. The most popular way to reach the top is by funicular railway, an experience in itself!

Ljubljana is known for its green spaces and university population. Fresher students were observed painting each others' faces with, what appeared to be, permanent markers! It was their first day of term, they happily told me. They didn't seem too bothered about the rain or dragons either. *Contribution by M Swan*



**Careful where you walk—dragons  
are everywhere!**



**Dungeons within  
Ljubljana Castle**

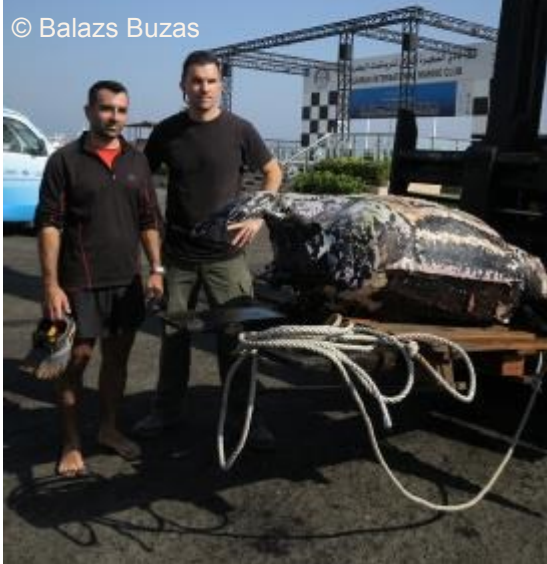
## Field Clips

### Leatherback Turtle

The turtle skeleton presently prepared by taxidermists of the Central Veterinary Research Laboratory, Dubai is of a leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) found dead off the Emirate of Fujairah, approximately 6 kilometres east of Fujairah City. Although of worldwide distribution this species is

Balazs Buzas, zoo manager of Al Mayya Sanctuary (right) and visiting herpetologist Nathanael Maury with the leatherback turtle found off Fujairah.

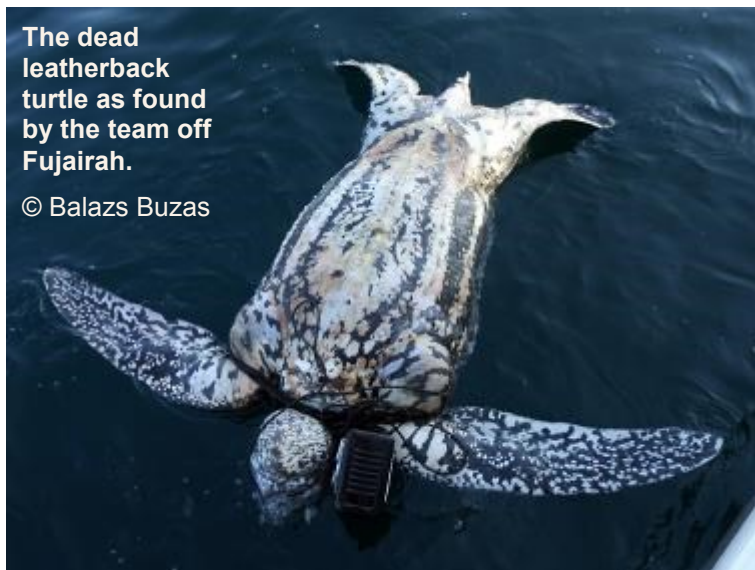
© Balazs Buzas



listed as critically endangered by the IUCN due to its steeply declining numbers. Populations in the Indian Ocean remain generally unassessed and unevaluated. Sightings from the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman surrounding the UAE are few, with all anecdotal records originating from off Dubai. This

The dead leatherback turtle as found by the team off Fujairah.

© Balazs Buzas



particular specimen, the first of its kind ever found in Fujairah waters, was discovered floating on its back, entangled in fishing gear earlier this year by a research team of Al Mayya Sanctuary surveying sea snakes in the area, sponsored by HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Hamad bin Mohammed Al Sharqi, the Crown Prince of Fujairah. The circumstances of its recovery and the significance of the find are reported in greater detail in Marine Turtle Newsletter published by SEATURTLE.ORG. Once assembled the skeleton will be put on public display in Fujairah.

Contribution by Balazs Farkas

### The Look of a Hunter: the Locust Terror

Invertebrate and vertebrate life are not always so very different. Or, at least, the constraints imposed by physics on form and function may lead to surprisingly similar engineering designs. Who, for example, can look at the accompanying photos of a local insect without perceiving its wolf-like form and marking it as a predator, and probably a fearsome one? The silhouette is that of a classic cartoon villain (think of Scar, from Disney's *The Lion King*).

It is, in fact, the UAE's most massive wasp, *Prionyx crudelis*, the so-called Locust Terror. *Insects of Eastern Arabia* (Walker & Pittaway, 1987) says of *P. crudelis*: "In Africa, packs of this large ferocious wasp follow locust swarms and prey on the

weaker individuals. In Arabia, [it] generally confines its attention to species of *Anacridium* and *Heteracris* [two large locust genera]. It is capable of flying with heavy grasshoppers to its nest."

In the UAE, single individuals have been seen throughout the mountain regions. The photos shown here are from Wadi Tarabat in spring 2017. Four other species of *Prionyx* wasps are also known from the UAE. Two were recognized in the 1980s by Kenneth Guichard and two more were added by C. Schmid-Egger in volume 4 of *Arthropod Fauna of the UAE* (van Harten, ed., 2011). Most of these species have a core range from Africa to India.

Contribution by Gary Feulner

A profile of the Locust Terror.



A slightly more endearing frontal view.





## Field Clips

(Continued from page 1)

species that Shikra could be confused with in the UAE is the larger, bulkier Eurasian Sparrowhawk, a regular but even more furtive winter visitor. Compared to that species, adult Shikra are cleaner grey above, often warmer, more rusty below on and paler and less marked on the underwing. However, differentiating the two species is often tricky in typical brief views and the slimmer, smaller shape of Shikra is only likely to be evident to experienced observers. Distinguishing juveniles is actually much easier than adults; obvious long and heavy blackish blotches and spots on the underparts point straight to Shikra (compared to the fine, greyer barring of all Sparrowhawks). Unlike Sparrowhawks, male and female Shikra are rather similar and hard to separate unless seen together (males are slightly paler and cleaner than their mates). One other point worth bearing in mind is status: Sparrowhawks are rare in the UAE outside November to March inclusive and any bird out with that period is much more likely to be a resident Shikra.



A selection of images of Shikra taken in the UAE is available on the informative UAE birding website ([www.uaebirding.com](http://www.uaebirding.com)) at <https://www.smugmug.com/gallery/n-qjL8C/> whilst comparative images of Eurasian Sparrowhawk can be viewed at <https://www.smugmug.com/gallery/n-7nLmW/>.

There have been few observations of nesting Shikras in the UAE. Nests are likely to be loose constructions of twigs, well-hidden in tall and shady trees. In common with many resident landbirds, the breeding season is mainly from early spring until mid-summer. Data from Africa indicate that two or three eggs are usually laid, with the latter commoner.

Until very recently, Shikra were virtually unknown in the UAE outside the greater Dubai area, although two autumn and early winter records from remote and arid Sila'a in the far west (close to the Saudi border) hint at the intriguing possibility that a few, at least occasionally, do reach the UAE under their own steam, presumably from Iran or Pakistan. Since 2013, however, something remarkable and quite unanticipated has occurred. Shikra appeared for the first time ever on Abu Dhabi Island in June of that year and, by July 2014 had been found in Al Ain also. By 2015 there was evidence of breeding at both locations and birds have also been recorded at other locations such as Al Wathba inland of Abu Dhabi Island and Ghantoot, on the Dubai-Abu Dhabi border. The species looks set to become well-established in both Abu Dhabi Island and Al Ain in the near future and may also colonize roadside plantations and farms in much of the country in the coming years if this rate of progress is maintained. If that happens, suburban birdwatchers anywhere in the country, not to mention observant drivers, can indeed look forward to further sightings of this dashing bird in parks and local gardens before too long.

*Contribution by Oscar Campbell, Chairman of Emirates Bird Records Committee*

### Strange or Normal?

Everywhere I go with Rusty, my Dalmation along the coast, I find evidence of recent activity of people with rocks.

I find it really intriguing and interesting. As opposed to archaeological rock art, much of this is ephemeral. It will leave no trace. Rather like flint and wooden implements, our interpretation of prehistoric society will be total skewed by lasting evidence.

Who would ever have thought that in an age of iPhones and space travel, *Homo sapiens* would still go to the beach and spend time leaving an anonymous "I was here message."

Is it strange behaviour or normal?

*Contribution by Stephen Green, overseas member and student of rock art and stone tools in the UAE.*



# Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

October 15: Dr Sophie Mery on 'Recent archaeological research in coastal Umm Al-Quwain'

November 12: Dr Gary Brown on 'Habitats and Habitat Mapping in the UAE'

December 10: Members' Night

## Scheduled Field Trips (Members only)

October 14 - 22: DNHG Field Trip to Southern Vietnam

*Field trips will be  
circulated to  
members via e-mail*

## DNHG COMMITTEE 2017

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?

Do you have any photos from countries you've visited over the summer? What wildlife or local culture did you see?

Send your contributions to:

[gazelleeditor@gmail.com](mailto:gazelleeditor@gmail.com)

### **DNHG Membership**

Membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at Dh100 for families and Dh50 for singles. Membership is valid from September 2017 to September 2018. 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 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 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.