

# GAZELLE

Vol 17 no 10 – November 2002



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

**DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP**

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

## Members' News

### *Welcome to old friends*

It is a pleasure to welcome **Theri and Tom Bailey** back to the UAE, after a brief interval away. Terry and Tom were previously with ERWDA, where Tom was a veterinary doctor and Terri was the environmental education officer and jack-(or jill?)-of-all-trades. Tom is now a wildlife and falcon vet at the Dubai Falcon Hospital and they have returned to Dubai with their young son Malachi.

We also welcome back, after a somewhat longer absence, **Charlotte and David Smith**, DNHG members of a decade ago who have returned for another stint in the UAE. Charlotte is in fact a former editor of the *Gazelle*. David has been in the country for almost a year, working on the Palm Island project, while Charlotte arrived here again just last month.

Angela and Stephen Manthorpe, former DNHG Committee members, passed through Dubai recently on their way to a diving holiday in the Maldives. They took a day out to join friends for a tour of the mountain countryside north of Masafi, where light rain has been sufficient to brighten the mountain colors, but not - so far - to fill pools or encourage annual plant growth.

*Gazelle's* editor and publisher, Anne Millen and Peter van Amsterdam ran off to the American south-west for two weeks recently. They saw many birds of prey and enjoyed the wonderful geology, but saw few animals. In Death Valley, a coyote approached them – apparently begging!



Wily Coyote

In suburban San Francisco, visitors to the back yard included a small family of deer, racoons, black squirrels, lovely blue-jays and many small birds.

### **Please Note!**

**The December meeting will be held on Monday, 9th December.**

### *DNHG Membership Renewal*

The DNHG membership year begins in September, so renewal is now due. Membership remains a bargain at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dhs. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at meetings (see Membership Secretaries Lena Linton and Anin Radhakrishna) or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account no. 173746 and posted to us at PO Box 29561, Dubai. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.) Membership is valid from September 2002 to September 2003.

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.

### **This month's Contributors**

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

Khaled Nasef  
Christine Namour  
Moh'd Arfan Asif  
Jo Raynor  
Larry Woods  
Gary Feulner  
Marijcke Jongbloed

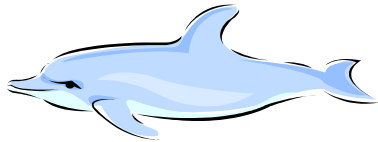


# Field Trips etc ...

*A few trips squeezed into a busy month!*

## Wadi Bih with Peter van A. November 22

Bring everything you could possibly need including stout shoes, a 4WD and your swimming gear. Children are welcome but should not run wild in the deserted village as the houses are ancient and frail. Contact Peter for registration and details on [pvana@emirates.net.ae](mailto:pvana@emirates.net.ae)



## Musandam Dhow Trip November 29

This trip is now full (35 people) and those registered should contact Lamjed with any queries.

As there is a waiting list, another trip may be run - Lamjed Kefi has a reputation for great dhow trips. Details: Meet in Dibba Port (Al Mina) Oman at 08.00 am for registration and embark 08.30hrs. Price is for Day Cruise per person (less group discount). Min group 20, max 35, children open. Price net: AED 235 per adult, children under 12 years at 50%: AED 115, children 3 years and under free. Day Cruise to Haffa & Lima Bay includes: breakfast, hot lunch, coffee/tea. Soft drinks & water from dispenser. Bring hat, sunblock and swim gear. Available onboard at extra charge: Bottle water (small) AED 1. Beer AED 10. Wine (per glass) AED 10. Mask AED 20 per day, fins AED 20 per day, or snorkeling set AED 35 per day.

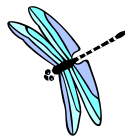
Contact Val Chalmers to join a waiting list at: [vc@latifaschool.co.ae](mailto:vc@latifaschool.co.ae) or fax number 04-3400990. Contact Lamjed for enquiries on 050 481 5068 Location map available fax 06 5583 018.

## Shelling with Sandy Fowler January

Sandy will be running a shelling trip sometime during the cool weather. These are always good value as Sandy has a wealth of knowledge and there are many interesting beaches. Watch this space – the date has not been set as yet.

## Qatar Late March

Val Chalmers has contacted the QNHG Chairman regarding a possible trip to Qatar and it seems likely that a trip can be arranged. Not all details are settled yet. We will rent a bus for sight seeing. A number of members have expressed interest in visiting the inland sea in Qatar. Some will do that on the Saturday. Some people to visit from Thursday to Friday and some from Thursday to Saturday. We will get a quote from Qatar Airways for 20-30 people to travel, and some quotes and details of hotels. Registering will not take place until the dates and details are settled.



## *Sheikh Mubarak Prize and Bish Brown Award*

Nominations are invited from paid-up members of the Emirates Natural History Group (Abu Dhabi), the Emirates Natural History Group (Al Ain) and the Dubai Natural History Group for the two annual ENHG awards - the Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Annual Prize for Natural History and the Bish Brown Award.

See page 7 for details.

## *Well, why not??*

Don't wait for a Field Trip Co-ordinator to approach you – he can't read your mind!

If there is an interesting place you know, and you think others might enjoy it too, consider leading a trip to it. If you know nothing about the subject, invite the recorder along – or do some preparatory study and stagger us all with your knowledge.

Any member is welcome to lead trips. Get in touch with Pradeep Radhakrishna (details on page 7) and advise him of your plans. We look forward to hearing from you!

## Our Next Speaker

***Note the change of date!  
The meeting will be held on  
Monday, 9 December.***

*The alternative date was selected in order to avoid the 'Eid weekend and another major cultural event, and to accommodate a prior booking at Emirates Academy.*

Our December speaker, Valerie Chalmers has lived in Dubai for 27 years and is a biology teacher at the Latifa School for Girls. Her interest in paleontology stems from a one-year geology course at university. She furthered her interest when she joined the Ladies Ecology Group in 1979 and started to collect UAE fossils. She is a founder member of the DNHG and is currently vice chairman, secretary, and plant and fossil recorder. Valerie regularly visits the Paleontology Department at the Natural History Museum in London, and they have helped with the identification of fossils and maintained close links with her.



### Chirping Camel Spider

Nature is where you find it. And persistence pays. Christine Namour was exiting the co-op, arms filled with groceries, when she heard a faint clicking sound as she descended the few steps. She looked down just in time to see a strange, beige creature scurrying around her sandal-clad feet. Startled, and in fear of being bitten, she jumped out of the way, inadvertently trampling the poor creature. Not one to let an opportunity to collect a specimen go by, Christine was resourceful. She had no sample bags, but decided that her eyeglasses case would do as a container until she got home. Fortunately, the creature was still intact enough for identification purposes.

She consulted local naturalist Gary Feulner to confirm the identity of her find: "Yes, a camel spider. The confusing 5th pair of 'legs' up front are the greatly enlarged pedipalps, which serve as feelers. And see the unmistakable large, pointed head and jaws, the two little eyes and the five pairs of racket organs (like little suction cups on stalks) - organs of unknown function, on the underside of the abdomen."

And she mentioned the clicking noises. "Errrr, ah, yes, yes, of course, dear, of course. Uh, maybe it was the leaves rustling?" This was unsatisfactory, so off she went to the Internet, where, among other things, she learned that camel spiders (also called sun spiders, wind spiders and solifugids) do in fact chirp. It is said that they can produce a twittering sound by rubbing their large and fearsome-looking chelicerae [jaws] together.

You will be happy to know that Christine gave the dead camel spider to her 9-year old daughter's science class where it will be displayed and studied by tomorrow's amateur naturalists. *Thanks to Christine Namour.*

### Through the lens....

In nature and wildlife photography, an effort has to be made to capture added natural history value. This makes the photograph more meaningful and informative and for the photographer an exciting endeavour. The small world of insects and other creatures have great potential for yet unknown discoveries. A sturdy tripod, cable release, macro lenses and loads of patience are a pre-requisite though, to capture interesting details, patterns and colours. The variety and diversity of species here in the Emirates is unbelievable. The weather is definitely an impediment for most of the year, but for the adventurous, it should not be an excuse.



*Utetheisa pulchella*

The mating speckled crimson footman (*Utetheisa pulchella*), a day flying moth, was shot near the beach in Ghantoot.



The spanking crabs (species?) were photographed recently in the vicinity of Dubai Festival City in Khor Dubai. The wind and the sensitivity of the species were important factors for capturing these images, as it is for most of macro photography. *Thanks to Arfan Asif for text and photographs.*

*Saluki, Falcon, Houbara Trip*

Three different visits, three different animals, one thing in common. Hunting.

At our first stop, the Arabian Saluki Centre, we were greeted by Hamad Al Ghanem and his staff. With a family heritage of breeding salukis Hamad is committed to preserving the pure desert hunting strains of the saluki breed which originates in this region. It would be fair to say Hamad sees himself as a guardian of this breed.

The newly built kennels are four-star dog style, hygienic and air-conditioned, and we visited about forty dogs and puppies. Having been licked and sniffed by a variety of regal friendly, smooth and feather coated salukis, we proceeded to visit the kitchen. These really were four-star, hotel style! We were given the run down on the complex diet of these exceptional canines with the braver of us trying the dog food! Not bad, if a trifle bland. Hamad also explained the range of supplements, both traditional and modern, which kept these dogs in top condition, reminding us that they are not just for show but fine tuned hunters. Learning that the saluki hunted for its owner's dinner and then shared that meal it's easier to understand the kitchens.

Then it was out into the heat for display of hunting prowess. The saluki's traditional prey are the desert hare, gazelle, and houbara. As these are now all rare and protected, Hamad purpose breeds rabbits with which to train his dogs. Our hunt began with a win to the rabbit which promptly ran between our feet and hid behind the aircon units! The saluki, being a sight hunter, was unable to find the clever bunny! Second time round the dog put on an impressive display of speed to run down its prey which was promptly retired back to the trainer's bag. While these dogs have natural instincts to hunt, they require plenty of training to hunt successfully and safely, which is all part of life at





## Field Clips ...

***E-mail your reports to pvana@emirates.net.ae, (Arial 10 justified) or deliver them to Anne Millen on floppy disk at monthly meetings.***

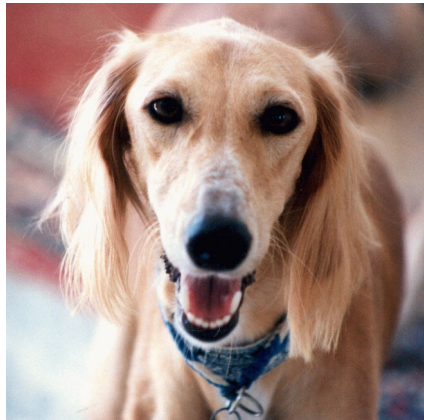
the Arabian Saluki Centre, as are the pool and obstacle course. After plying him with questions about breeding, pedigrees, colours, hunting and other saluki facts we farewelled our host to visit another animal often seen in a hunting tableau.

En-route to the falcon hospital around the corner we stopped to examine an irrigated piece of land. Here aficionados explored the various grasses and bushes of which there were a surprising variety. So to the Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital. This new facility focuses on the health of both owned hunting falcons and those destined for release to the wild. We were most gratefully to vet Margit Meyer who saved a last patient so we could observe the procedure, which included an anesthetic and dressing change. We also learnt the use of the large volume of falcon wings, tails and feathers lying around. They are literally glued on to replace broken feathers! The tour revealed a state of the art facility dedicated to the health of birds as integral a part of the hunting scene as the saluki. The fine lunch we had there was a treat - so much better than a picnic in the heat of the day! And we were all impressed when one of our number demonstrated how to remove the front bumper of her brand new Honda X-trail. No effort at all!

So, one car short, we went on to Sweihan, to the National Avian Research Centre (NARC) in search of the houbara. The houbara, the traditional prey of the falcon, and saluki, was once an annual winter migrant to this region. As a response to dwindling numbers of houbara to hunt, much in depth research is underway to boost

numbers. The NARC research covers surveys of the birds in the wild and a captive breeding program. We began our visit with an interesting slide presentation of the findings of their field surveys of the breeding grounds in Kazakhstan and China. Those who unwillingly dozed through this can be forgiven as it was a long drive! The staff were happy to repeat themselves when asked during a subsequent tour of the breeding program facilities. This included the incubators, food room (we weren't interested in tasting the crickets!) and climate and light controlled bird enclosures. Quite rightly, bird safety and wellbeing were upper-most with our viewing necessarily brief.

Saluki



At the end of the day, this trip left us better able to appreciate the role of hunting in the preservation of national culture and also the role hunting is playing in the impetus to preserve three very remarkable animals. *Report by Jo Raynor & photograph Marijke Jongbloed.*

### ***On Sites and Sightings: An Argument for Dumps***

Our 1 November tour of sites featuring natural and unnatural history in and around Sharjah's University City began somewhat ominously. Alas, the pair of Little Green Bee-Eaters I wanted to show my guests were not home. Their nest hole was there, but they were not. Unruffled, I led the group towards a massive tire

dump (located adjacent to half a dozen new schools) and promptly came close to losing everyone in oil-soaked mud. Things could only get better – and they did!

Almost immediately Gary Feulner spotted a dragonfly like no other he had ever seen. A real reversal of fortune, especially with Arfan Asif's telephoto lens at the ready! (So enthused was Gary that he returned the next day, only to find that this was an oddly-behaving female version of a species he had earlier identified, but the tale of discovery was inspiring while it lasted!) The eerie sight/site of "Rubber Alley" then gave way to sightings of bank mynas seemingly destined to lose their sand bank of homes soon to an encroaching city, wheatears, swifts (or martins?), ringed plovers, yellow-vented bulbuls, crested larks and our wandering bee-eater couple. These feathered friends were found on and above a purple pond of goo, complete with assorted abandoned boats left over from the time of Noah or washed in by the last tidal wave to hit Sharjah creek. More on water levels later.

Reversing our course, we discovered an excellent flowering salt-bush habitat for the study of the western pygmy blue butterfly, one of the UAE's smallest ex-pats. On the other side of this pond we hoped to spy on the 100 or so back-winged stilts, opportunists extraordinaire, that call the dump home, at least until it is filled in, covered over and built upon, as seems to be the plan. Our mission was uneventful; not once did they send up the stilt air force to fend us off. Wrong season perhaps. Next spring might bring more aerobatics if the dump has not become a building site.

Moving closer to University City, we approached the dump and sewage ponds from one last angle, this time parking alongside the new dirt pier that now projects out into "Lake Sharjah." With the opening of our car doors a black-tailed godwit and a moorhen took



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Birds - David Snelling  
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Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi  
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pearldiv@emirates.net.ae

Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

Geology - Gary Feulner  
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Insects – Gary Feulner

Fossils - Valerie Chalmers  
res 349 4816,  
fax 340 0990

Plants – Valerie Chalmers

Mammals - Marijcke Jongbloed  
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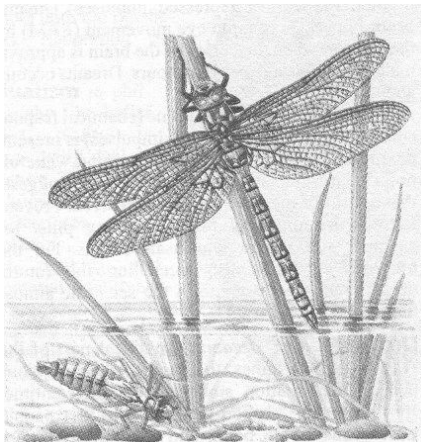
mjongbld@emirates.net.ae

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.

flight, while a family of grey francolins made a run for it. Moving along the shoreline in search of flamingos, female sunbirds flitted, red-wattled lapwings rose, a brown-necked duck (or a goose) swam, ravens circled (chased by smaller birds), and an unidentified eagle swooped low before settling on a nest. But my flamingos were gone. Why? A stream of green water trucks hooking their hoses to a pump gave us the reason: the side pond is being drained and the flamingo's habitat is already gone. Blooming morning glory (*convulvous*) nearby provided limited consolation, as did John Fox's theories about the source of the water here and the level of the water table. Could the presence of an Iron Age community in nearby Muweilah be explained by the existence of this water?

Having made far more dump discoveries than we thought possible, our next stop was the Iron Age site



in question. These remains, now hemmed in by new housing developments, but thankfully guarded by a protective wall of sand and a soon-to-be fence, were being worked on by teams from the University of Sydney in the late 1990s. Two short articles on them have appeared in *Tribulus*. The site's main claim to fame is that it has yielded what is believed to be the earliest examples of writing in the Emirates. Our first stop was the fenced graveyard, where we found two well-marked graves (one with what looked like a grave-

stone, possibly displaying writing). A Southern grey shrike sat atop a tree as sentinel while we crossed to the remains of several buildings, picking up mangrove snail shells as we went. Neatly laid foundations, stone door hinges, shell-laden walls, grinding stones, and a large pillared *majlis* elicited various comments and much speculation.

From this historical gem, the domes of the American University of Sharjah can be seen looming next door. Negotiating security, our now weary band of erstwhile bird-watchers were aptly welcomed on campus by red- and yellow-vented bulbuls, nesting house sparrows, acrobatic Indian rollers, low-sitting and very accommodating ring-necked parakeets, a patient tawny pipit trying to get a pre-Ramadan meal, and a member of a species rarely found on a Friday morning - the Dean of Arts and Science.

Our tour closed with our band of weary dump detectives using my campus apartment as a blind to spy on the birds beyond the windows. In keeping with the beginning of our day, the birds were otherwise engaged. Undaunted, little Harry, son of Chen and Yu Qiang, now a DNHG stalwart, somehow found the energy for play while the rest relaxed in the hospitality of the two Elizabeths, musing all the while about the current contents of my "backyard" and what that contents might have been long ago.

(Gary Feulner reports that photographs of two of the flowering salt-bushes and tamarisks which we spotted will appear in Marijcke Jongbloed's forthcoming flora book. Seems even Marijcke found things in the dump she had never seen!). *Thanks to Larry Woods.*



## *special reports ...*

### *Coral Reef In Jebel Ali Conservation Area*

Jebel Ali coral reef, with thirty-four species of coral recorded, is among the richest in the Gulf. The richest is around the Saudi Arabia islands with some fifty species recorded while, by contrast, there are some two hundred species in the Red Sea. The Jebel Ali coral reef is therefore important in the context of Dubai and in the Gulf as a whole but not so important in terms of the wider region. Visitors to Dubai would not come specifically to see the coral but it could be an added attraction on their itinerary. Unfortunately, a mass mortality of certain species of coral, notably *Acropora* was recorded in 1998. Recently, I have been involved with a team in surveying the current condition of coral reef in eighteen different monitoring stations or locations.

Coral colonies were found to be growing at all survey stations. Nineteen species of coral were recorded at the eleven monitoring stations analysed, with an average percent surface cover of 21%. The percentage cover of living coral varied from 61.78% to 0.87% at various survey stations. The most common coral at all stations was *Porites lutea*. The remaining species varied in occurrence. with some species such as *Stylophora pistillata* only occurring at one station. All of the living corals appeared healthy with no sign of disease. Dead branching coral (*Acropora* sp.) was present at all stations and was covered with fine turf algae, oysters and sponges which had overgrown the dead coral skeleton. Some dead coral had been colonised by new coral colonies such as *Porites lutea* and other boulder corals. No coral was observed that was recently dead or bleached. New coral colonies were found at all stations representing new recruitment and growth.

The seabed to the north coral reef was dominated by seagrass, *Halophila ovalis* and *Halodule uninervis* with the pearl oyster *Pinctada radiata*. The seabed to the south of the coral reef was dominated by an assemblage of three species of brown seaweed, *Sargassum angustifolium*, *Sargassum binderi* and *Sargassum boveanum*.

A total of forty-six fish species were observed at the coral monitoring stations, but the numbers are likely to be higher due to the visibility at times being less than 5 metres. Coral reef fish such as the dark butterflyfish, *Chaetodon nigropunctatus*, were present indicating a healthy reef. Many juvenile fish were also present. *Thanks to Khaled Nasef for this report.*



BROWN ALGAE *SARGASSUM*  
WITH LUMP CORAL





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## **Sheikh Mubarak Prize and Bish Brown Award**

Nominations are invited from paid-up members of the Emirates Natural History Group (Abu Dhabi), the Emirates Natural History Group (Al Ain) and the Dubai Natural History Group for the two annual ENHG awards - the Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Annual Prize for Natural History and the Bish Brown Award.

Any individual, whether or not they are members of the Groups, can be nominated for either of the awards, with the exception of the elected officers of the ENHG in Abu Dhabi. Nominations can be sent either by post (to Simon Aspinall, Chairman, ENHG, PO Box 45553, Abu Dhabi) or by e-mail (to any committee members of the ENHG) or can be hand-delivered.

Qualifications for each of the awards are set out below. In nominating a candidate or candidates,

please provide a brief summary (no more than 200 words) of justification for the nomination - i.e. an explanation of what they have achieved.

Closing date for nominations will be 31st December 2002. Selection of the winners will be undertaken by the Committee of the ENHG (Abu Dhabi) at its first meeting of the 2003 year. The Committee's decision is final.

The **Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Annual Prize for Natural History** is given to a person who has made a substantial, original, scientific contribution to knowledge of the history, natural history, culture, archaeology or palaeontology of the United Arab Emirates, such contribution being reflected through means such as publication and lectures. The Award was instituted by the ENHG Patron, HE Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan, and includes an inscribed silver dhow

and a cash prize.

The **Bish Brown Award** is given to a person who has made a significant contribution to promoting wider interest in the broad objective of the UAE's three natural history groups - the spreading of information and of awareness - though such means as educational activities, raising of public consciousness through the media, playing a leading role in activities of the Groups, etc. The Award is represented by a silver eagle, to be held for one year by the recipient, and was endowed by former ENHG Vice Chairman Terry Adams and former Secretary, Caroline Adams, to commemorate the founder of the ENHG, J.N.B. 'Bish' Brown.

Both Awards will be presented to their recipients by HE Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan, UAE Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, at a ceremony in the New Year.

## Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

December 9 UAE Fossils: Ancient Seas, Reefs and Lagoons – Valerie Chalmers  
Note! The December meeting is on MONDAY.

January 15 Manmade changes to the environment around AUS University – Dennis Russell

February 2 Zoo-archaeology; The Camel Burial Site in Media City (provisional)

February 23 Research on the status of the Arabian leopard in south Oman – Dr. Andrew Spalton  
(Extra meeting)

March 2 Arabian memories: UAE, Oman and Yemen – Marijcke Jongbloed:

### Field Trips (DNHG members only, please).

Nov 22 Wadi Bih excursion – Peter van Amsterdam

Nov 29 Musandam Dhow Trip – Lamjed Kefi and Valerie Chalmers

Jan Shelling with Sandy Fowler

Late March Qatar