

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Good Deeds and Fun...

Twice in recent months, Abu Dhabi-based member **Dr. Richard Hornby** has encountered young hawksbill turtles burdened with barnacles and pearl oysters.



In each case he was able to do a good deed by cleaning them up and releasing them. One instance was SW of Jebel Ali, in a back beach lagoon where the turtle seemed to have been trapped somehow. A similar juvenile nearby was already dead. The second site was in western Abu Dhabi, west of Mirfa.



Of the latter, Dick says: "[The little turtle] was about 22 cm long and definitely struggling with its load. It swam off strongly once cleaned up." (*More about the hawksbill turtles in our next issue. Ed.*)

"*Terrestrial Molluscs of the United Arab Emirates*", authored by Chairman **Gary Feulner** and overseas DNHG member **Stephen Green**, was published in December 2003 in *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Malakologischen Gesellschaft (Communications of the German Malacological Society)*. The paper features photographs and descriptions of the native land snails of the UAE, as well as the most common introduced ones. A reprint will be deposited in the DNHG Library and copies are available from Gary on request.

During a recent break in Paris, **Barbara Couldrey** happened upon a shop full of wonderful minerals and fossils, including a huge amethyst geode and a fossilized ray: Galerie Michel Cachoux, 16 rue Guenegaud, 6th arrondissement, 75006 Paris.

Barbara also reports having seen two barn owls, one near the RAK hotel a month ago and the second flying over a car park in RAK town about 2 weeks ago.

DNHG Membership

September marks the start of the new DNHG membership year. DNHG membership remains a bargain at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account no. 173746 posted to us at PO Box 9234, Dubai. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.)

Please take a minute at the next meeting to ensure that we have full contact information for you, including an e-mail address, so that we can advise you more efficiently of additions and changes to our schedule, and other matters. The DNHG does not share its membership or e-mail information.

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:

Barbara Couldrey
Janet Matthews
Tony & Janis Johnston
Gary Feulner



Field Trips etc ...

Inter-Emirates Weekend!

Inter-Emirates Weekend 2004 will be held in Al-Ain on **March 25-26 (Thu-Fri)** and will be hosted by the Al-Ain chapter of the ENHG.

The Al-Ain ENHG has considerable practice serving as local tour guides in connection with various festivals, and a full range of alternatives is planned, including: the restoration work being done on the city's oases, watchtowers and forts; camel brain research; DNA research; Khutwah archaeological finds; copper smelting; some interesting wadi walks; the Wadi Tarabat study as well as a few challenging activities (mountain walks etc); and possibly a couple of desert drive options. Al-Ain bug enthusiasts are planning a night of collecting. Phil Iddison will also be in attendance and has volunteered to do a special walk with emphasis on building construction (materials, techniques, etc).

Dinner on Thursday evening (in an exotic locale) will be combined with a photography competition, with winners to be chosen 'by the people'. The theme will be fairly general to encourage participation, but photos should be from in or around the UAE.

For the children -- what else -- playing in mud! The group has some clay collected and could challenge youngsters—and the not-so-young—to style some pots!

Information about accommodation and rates will be provided when available. You can also find further details via the ENHG website at www.enhg.org.



Scheduled DNHG trips:

Wadi Daftah with the ENHG
Thurs &/or Fri, March 4 - 5

This will start with a walk in Wadi Daftah with Alastree Fisher, then go via Tayyibah to the camp site at Wadi Zikt, via Dibba. On Friday, to Zubara for a swim, then, for those who want to, to Luluyah for the hill-side tombs, and on to Tell Kalba for lunch, returning via the tunnel and Hatta. Those interested either email Valerie Chalmers on vmc@latifaschool.co.ae or valeriechalmers@hotmail.com or phone 04-3494816 and leave a message. Val will arrange a meeting place for those interested in coming on the Thursday or for the whole weekend.

Julfar & Kush with Christian Velde
Friday, March 12

Jo Raynor will organise this trip, which follows on from Christian's wonderful lecture in February. She can be contacted by email for details: joray@emirates.net.ae The RAK archeology trips are always very popular so register soon.

Roses of Saiq with Peter van Amsterdam
April 14 – 16

Contact Peter closer to the time for details :
pvana@emirates.net.ae

ENHG's Programme:

Lectures:

Lulu Skidmore – Everything you wanted to know about camels
March 2

Abdul Nasser Al Gifri –

Zayed Complex for Herbal Medicine
March 16

Field Trips:

Wadi Daftah (see previous column) studying flora, insects, shells and archeology.
March 4 – 5

Please remember that apart from joint trips such as the Wadi Daftah one, the ENHG members have priority on their trips. Our publishing schedules do not march, but remember that you can always look up the details of all trips on their website <http://www.enhg.org>

Our Next Speaker

Prof. Dr. Hans-Peter Uerpmann is an archeobiologist at the University of Tübingen, where he has been affiliated since 1972, and since 1989 as a professor. He studied veterinary medicine as an undergraduate and later archeology and anthropology. At Tübingen he was involved for many years in the *Tübingen Atlas of the Middle East*. Among other things, he has a particular interest in the history of domestic animals.

His work at the 5th Millenium BC Jebel Buhays site, under the auspices of the Sharjah Archeological Museum's Directorate of Antiquities is now quite famous. Jebel Buhays is the oldest UAE mainland site (except for coastal shell middens) and it records a surprisingly large and affluent population.

Dr. Uerpmann's wife, Margarethe, and at least one of their three children are also archeologists, each of whom has made interesting discoveries in Sharjah in their own right.



DNHG Website: Your Name Here

Members interested in the Inter-Emirates weekend, March 25-26 (see p. 2), will want to visit the website established by the Emirates Natural History Group in Al-Ain, at www.enhg.org. While there, have a look around. Enjoy the convenience of web-based access for contact information and schedules. Enjoy, in particular, the ability to explore a wealth of otherwise hard-to-find information published in past newsletters and bulletins of the ENHGs in Abu Dhabi and Al-Ain. Enjoy, even, the many personal touches.

The DNHG has been invited to participate on an equal basis in this website, which is structured to accommodate all three UAE natural history groups, but we await a volunteer with sufficient IT skills to liaise with Al-Ain about the technical and procedural requirements, and then liaise with our membership to convey what is necessary to satisfy those requirements, and bring other, less sophisticated, volunteers up to speed. The Al-Ain ENHG has (and is likely to continue to have) the technological skills necessary to maintain the overall site. The DNHG would therefore have to take responsibility for the formatting, sending and/or posting of its own material in a compatible way.

Several years of *Gazelle* reports already exist in computerized format and could be entered into a permanent archive quickly and with relative ease. A format needs to be established for current information, along with procedures for updating it on a monthly basis. Those are the basics. After that, other features could be added.

Establishment of a DNHG website has been highlighted as a priority in two consecutive annual reports. Third time's the charm? If you think you would be able to help us set up DNHG participation in the

site, as described above, please contact Chairman Gary Feulner or Editor Anne Millen (details on p. 7). If we can organise this during the spring, we have summer to practise and have a fully-fledged site for the 2004-05 season.

Annual General Meeting and Elections

The March 7 lecture will also be the DNHG's annual general meeting and elections. At that time we will elect a new Committee for the coming year. Most of the current Committee are prepared to stand for re-election, but a few would be happy for relief or assistance.

If you can help, we'd like to hear from you. Within limits, we can tailor responsibilities to suit your time and talents. Everyone in Dubai is busy. The DNHG has prospered in recent years because members have stepped up to do what they could. We rely on you to continue this tradition.

This year, we are in particular need of a new **Librarian** to finalize the cataloguing of our existing collection (largely completed) and administer new additions, maintain an index, etc. We also need a **Speaker Coordinator**, whose job is to solicit ideas, then contact, book and liaise with speakers for our monthly lectures. If you have an interest, or for further information, contact Chairman Gary Feulner or any of the other Committee members (listed on page 7).

We also need, at least on a temporary basis, a **Website Coordinator or consultant** – not necessarily to do the work, but to get us organized so that we know what needs to be done, and how to do it.

DNHG Library Open for Use

We are pleased to announce that the DNHG library is now open for reference use. The collection is housed in the library at the Emirates Academy of Hospitality Man-

agement, where our monthly lectures are held. The library is upstairs to the left, in the back of the building. The DNHG collection is in a cabinet in the library's workroom, pending the EAHM library's move to expanded quarters.

Access to the DNHG collection and the library's reading room is permitted during regular opening hours to DNHG members and other permitted users of the EAHM Library. EAHM Library hours are Saturdays to Tuesdays, 9am to 9pm; Wednesdays and Thursdays, 9am to 6pm; Fridays closed. These hours are subject to change.

Members must show their DNHG membership card to the receptionist in the EAHM lobby in order to access the Library on the 1st floor, and again to the Librarian or Library Technician on duty. As a precaution, it is best to phone in advance to be sure that there is not a meeting taking place in the workroom. DNHG members are asked not to use the workroom as a reading room, but to move into the Library to read books once they are selected.

At the moment, the DNHG's book collection is fully catalogued, with the exception of the recently acquired *Fauna of Arabia* series and the archeology collection donated by Peter Hudson. Work is continuing to catalogue our collection of individual articles, research papers and periodicals, including newsletters from other natural history groups.

Our Librarian Deanne White has conscientiously led the formulation and implementation of these arrangements. Thanks also to EAHM librarian Jane Campbell (herself a DNHG member and knowledgeable explorer of the UAE), who has given us a warm welcome, and to member Mae Cutler, who has assisted with sorting and cataloguing the DNHG's individual papers and miscellaneous materials. It is difficult to overstate the potential value of making



And More...

the DNHG library, at last, so readily available. We hope that all of you will take advantage of that potential.

Masirah or Bust

Peter van Amsterdam and Anne Millen braved uncertainty – both scheduling and information -- to take a trip to Masirah Island, off the coast of southern Oman, near the Wahiba Sands. Gary Feulner was unexpectedly free and tagged along. Here are some miscellaneous observations by that trio of DNHG stalwarts:

- It is possible to travel on paved road all the way to the ferry landing on the mainland side.
- The Friday souq in the plains town of Sinaw makes a delightful stop enroute (but wear your old shoes for the fish market).



Goat market, Sinaw

- There are hundreds of Hafit tombs in the area north and south of Sinaw, along the gravel terraces overlooking Wadi Andam and its tributaries
- The scenery for the last 2-1/2 hours, south of Barzaman, is rather, well . . . "open." The road crosses major wadis, such as Wadi Halfein >8 kms across, that are known to prevent passage after heavy rains. The last 40-50 km skirts sabkha.
- The ferry schedule is more regular than we had been led to believe. In fact, the two or three ferries in service seem to allow departures every two or three hours.
- Masirah is only sparsely populated and it is possible to camp in

most places. The various settlements marked on maps have no services available. There is little light pollution, so the starry sky can be quite clear.

- The hills of Masirah are multicolored, made of green and brown ophiolite, red cherts and yellow Tertiary limestones. There is evidence of recent emergence on the NW coast, where flat-lying, highly fossiliferous sediments are now raised up to some 15-20 metres.
- The island seems to have been largely cleared of feral goats, although we saw evidence of goat trails. There is no shortage of feral cats.
- Masirah is known for its rare shells, but the shelling was not what we expected. During our visit, on both coasts the shells on the beach tended to be very well worn. On the NW coast, the beach often graded into 50-100 metres of mud flats or stony pavement.



Unidentified mammal, SW Masirah
Any suggestions?

- On the beach at the ferry landing on the mainland, Anne and Gary found shells of *Terebralia palustris*, the large mud creeper generally associated with mangroves and notoriously scarce, if not absent, on the coast of South Arabia today. The area inland of the ferry landing is a very large sabkha, and one explanation may be that the shells are older ones, dating from a time when the sabkha was a mangrove-fringed lagoon.
- Ospreys were common, especially along the rocky west coast. So were grey herons and various gulls.

- The small hotel (6 rooms) near the ferry dock at Masirah is scheduled to expand to twenty+, the coming year.

- Putting up the tent gets easier and more routine every night, meaning that you can wait until the sun is closer to the horizon before looking for a place to camp.
- The roads on Masirah can be very rough, especially at the south end of the island, mostly due to washboards.
- Preventive maintenance on your vehicle – and some spare cash just in case -- is important if you are traveling far from home. Gary lost a rear shock absorber but was able to drive home. Had it been a front one, repairs would have been required locally, probably at the cost of a day or two.

Grave with 'chest plate', NE Masirah



Peter, Anne and Gary are already thinking ahead to another journey into the nearby Huqf area and the Jiddat Al Harasis. *Report by Peter, Anne and Gary*

Wadi Maidaq with John Burt

It was another beautiful sunny day in the UAE when thirteen adults and 6 children set off for a day in Wadi Maidaq. This wadi has very easy access over gravel roads. We were lucky to have John Burt, from the Biology Department of Zayed University, with us. John leads many field trips here with his students and is very familiar with the area.

Our first stop was at the old town of Maidaq and its 'Watch Tower'



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Archaeology - Prof. John Fox

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Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi

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Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

Geology - Gary Feulner

res 306 5570
fax 330 3550

Insects – Gary Feulner

Fossils - Valerie Chalmers

res 349 4816,
fax 340 0990

Plants – Valerie Chalmers

Mammals - Marijcke Jongbloed *until someone else volunteers.*

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.

which offered great views around the valley. John thinks it was not a tower on the main crossing route from coast to coast, as 'Off-road Explorer' indicates, but a lookout for the oasis.

We scrambled over the rocks,



which seemed to have lava characteristics yet are peridotite rocks. These were formed from molten rock very deep below the surface (approx. 10 km.) in the earth's mantle below the crust of a former ocean. Their chemical composition is such that they are called "ultrabasic" rocks and it is the percolation of water through rocks of this unusual composition that results in the hyperalkalinity. They had lots of holes in them that looked almost like gas pockets, but were formed by weathering. Peridotite rock is not stable at the surface temperature and pressure, and is therefore prone to chemical weathering, especially in the cracks and shade where moisture is retained. The holes seem to be self-propagating.¹

We headed down into the oasis, through a small gate that is meant to keep out goats, not people....we hoped! The few Pakistani workers were pleased to see us. The falaj system was in good repair and although dry when we were there, did show remnants of recent water flow. We saw how they managed the opening and closing of parts of the falaj with sandbags and other obstructions. Besides the typical date palms, there were mango and lemon trees. The lemons hung down on a long branch, and the pulp around the fruit was approx. 1/2" thick.

In a well estimated to be 20m

deep, the local worker thought there was likely to be 5 metres of water. A cement holding tank to capture the water during the big downpours was empty when we visited. The only wildlife on this part of the trip were the flies!

We headed down the road and cut off to the left where we weaved through the rocky terrain to the edge of the wadi, which showed signs of water seepage through the rocks, at the top, with small pools of water at the bottom. The seepage at the top was hyperalkaline water that percolates up out of the 'ultrabasic' rocks and creates a calcium cap on the rocks. The water tested 11.38 on the pH scale (7 being normal). pH is measured on an exponential scale so that a pH of 11.38 is 10,000 more alkaline than neutral water. The alkaline crystals form layers similar to thin ice in the winter and silt to the bottom of the ponds. These alkaline ponds were surrounded by a distinct algae that has a gelatinous coating around the main molecule to help protect it from the alkaline water. The water has a slippery, soapy feeling to the touch.²

Toad in the Wadi



Down on the wadi floor there were a series of pools that got progressively less alkaline. Small bugs showed up in a pool with a pH of 10.3 and fish swam in a pool with a pH of 9.8. John had brought some 'bug kits' so the children took great delight in picking up 'bug specimens' along the way. One little boy caught 8 toads (catch & release!), some small fish, water scorpions and other small crawlers. There was a falaj system at the edge of this wadi that was used for a nearby oasis.



Field Reports...

We brought up some of the alkaline crystals, water and live algae to view under the microscopes that John brought along, but we did not see any other types of life. Further along, we discovered a 'natural' falaj that was the width of



a pen and ran along the top of the rock. The banks of the small waterway had been formed naturally by the calcification of the sides, built up over time. There were remnants of others that had been in existence in the past but had dried up, perhaps due to a blockage somewhere, and natural diversions created other new ones. Water was seeping out of the rocks in several places and some small stalactites and stalagmites were discovered in eroded rock overhangs.

Our picnic lunch spot in the oasis, under the shade of the date palms, was a pleasant, restful place except for the hungry little flies! On our way back, Nathan Raynor caught and held a Wadi Racer by its tail. It was very thin with almost a bluish hue. We were glad it wasn't a viper!

On our way out, we stopped at a small graveyard, which had 25-30



gravestones. Most had a stone at the foot and head, and were lined up with a north/south axis. We

were told they lay the bodies in a foetal position with their faces pointing towards Mecca which explained the orientation. There were some ruins near the wadi and in the vicinity of the graveyard and although we did not determine the age of the gravesites, the rocks around each burial site seemed to be in fairly good repair.

We drove on through the wadi to near Al Hamya where we reconnected with the highway. It was a very enjoyable day, with little driving, and was very educational fun for the children.

¹ - Gary Feulner ² - John Burt
Report by Janet Matthews

Eid at 3 Palm Lagoon

The chance of a long Eid break does not present itself often so we planned to pack a quart into a pint size pot and head south to central Oman to visit the petrified forest and rudist reefs of the Huqf escarpment and then on for a spot of birdwatching at 3 Palm Lagoon.

As usual, work, age and lethargy overtook us so that by the time we left Dubai our ambitious plans had already been truncated to the latter half of our tour. Malesh! The geological locations would still be there for the next time.

There are now excellent paved roads from Sinaw to Shawqirah along the coast of Central Oman, and it is possible to drive from Dubai to 3 Palm Lagoon in about 11 hours. We called in at Shuair beach to search for pecten shells and then spotted gazelle on the way to the lagoon.

Over the years there has been a steady increase in 'development' throughout this area and the three original palms have now reduced to one very sorry looking tree and a younger one, the two other palms having disappeared and the nearby well, so recently improved, full of the detritus of modern man!

To our horror we discovered another small group of campers al-

ready on the prime spot where the lagoon is retained by the beach sandbar. Huff and puff! Fancy having to share the prize with others! We located ourselves in a beautiful, tribullus strewn hollow in the beach dunes overlooking the lagoon, teeming with birds, approximately half a kilometre away from our neighbours.

The following three days were absolutely filled to the brim with inactivity as we observed the lagoon and its feathered residents and migrants. A special delight was to look out for raptors arriving and then wager on the effect they would have on the ducks and smaller waders. Egyptian vultures and ospreys were pretty much ignored but a visiting steppe eagle and then a long legged buzzard set the whole lagoon in motion, except of course for the flamingos and spoonbills that honked a bit and then kept on with their regal bottom-trolling to provide food for themselves and the smaller waders that thrived amongst them. Camels visited in the early evening and, after they had performed the miracle for us of walking on water across the far shallows, usually attended our camp for a quick rummage through the rubbish bag.

The clarity of the atmosphere and the total lack of artificial illumination from nearby towns made for special sunsets and night skies. We were lucky to see flocks of near black pale-footed shearwaters in tumbled, ragged flight along the coast to a backdrop of an orange orb melting into a pool on the marine horizon. One evening a Cheesemans gerbil gave us an hour long show of 'how to dig out your bunker and show disdain to visitors' - a first after our many years of observing their morning tracks around our camps.

A pair of crested larks were frequent visitors to our camp and were extremely tame. Green sandpipers screeched noisily through the dunes on low level raids to the lagoon and one morning a single barn swallow kept us company in



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an adjacent bush, his black back plumage glistening brilliantly in the sunlight.

Finally, we had to leave. We visited Wadi Gharm on the way to Madra-kah and were rewarded with the sight of an osprey carrying a fish over a pink lagoon we thought only existed further south at Al Kahil. Along the road to Duqm we saw a golden eagle and more gazelle. Duqm beach itself was teeming with seabirds in their thousands probably sheltering from the strong breezes of the day before.

And so North again enjoying the clearest and best views of the Huqf to the West and then the Wahiba to the East that we have ever enjoyed. We chose the long and much overlooked route home through Sinaw, Mudaybi, Lizk,

Samad, Bid Bid and down to Ru-sayl where, after coffee and muffins, we headed home along the Batinah highway.

Bird Inventory:

Grey Francolin
Sparrowhawk
derling
Crested Lark
Steppe Eagle
Dunlin
Barn Swallow
Golden Eagle
Curlew
Greater Flamingo (all phases)
Long Legged Buzzard
Green Sandpiper
Spoonbill
Egyptian Vulture
Socotra Cormorant
Western Reef Heron
Osprey
and Ducks
Grey Heron

San-

Gulls

Shearwater
Great White Egret
Plover (various)
Cattle Egret
Whimbrel
Thanks to Tony and Janis Johnston for this report

Desert Hares

In the January issue of Gazelle, the Johnstons reported seeing a desert hare in the Creek Park area, Dubai. Barbara Couldrey reports that "About 10 years ago I used to see them regularly darting in and out of the sandy scrub area on the Sheikh Zayed Rd side of Sheikh Mohammed's stables. I wonder if this area still exists with all the building that's gone on since then!"

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

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|---------|---|
| Mar 07 | Jebel Buhays - the UAE's oldest mainland archeological site - Hans-Peter Uerpmann |
| Apr 04 | Geckoes of the UAE & Oman - Prof. Drew Gardner |
| May 02: | An Early Survey of a Bastakia Windtower House – Peter Jackson |
| Jun 06: | Members' Night |

Field Trips (DNHG members only, please).

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| Feb 26 | Gravel Plains on the edge of the Empty Quarter with Peter van Amsterdam |
| Mar 4-5 | Wadi Daftah with the ENHG |
| Mar 12 | Julfar & Kush with Christian Velde |
| April 14-16 | Roses on the Saiq Plateau |
| Mar 25-26 | Inter-Emirates Weekend in Al Ain (<i>Note change of date</i>) |