

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

End of Season Get-together!

This popular function will be held in the Oasis Restaurant, Dubai Country Club on Thursday, 10th June 2004 at 7.30 pm for 8.00pm. It will cost Dirhams 80/- per person and this will include a varied buffet meal and two bottles of wine per table.

The Annual Photographic Competition will be held at the function. Members are invited to enter a maximum of two (returnable) prints on any natural history subject from anywhere in the world. Photographs should be a minimum size of 5 inches x 7 inches (125 mm x 180 mm) and should be mounted. The photographs will be displayed there and the competition will be judged by everyone present. The photograph with the most votes will be declared the winner.



More interesting than this!

There will also be a wide-ranging natural history team quiz with surprise prizes.

Tickets are available from Valerie Chalmers.

If you were unable to make the Members' Night meeting on Sunday 6th June and would like tickets, please phone Valerie on either 04-3494816 or 04-3442853 (which has an answer phone) or fax her on 04-3400990. Please do this by Monday 7th June at the latest as she has to give numbers to the Dubai Country Club on Tuesday 8th June (morning).



Letters to the Editor

Any news or views you would like published in our monthly newsletter? Feel like tickling things up?

Please send your letter to any of the committee members listed, by fax or e-mail, or send it direct to the editor.

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.)

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.

New members who join in May will be automatically enrolled for the coming membership year (Sep 04-Sep 05).

This month's Contributors

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

Barbara Couldrey
Jo Raynor
Mohammaed Arfan Asif
Valerie Chalmers
Gary Feulner
Colin Paskins



Field Trips etc ...

Next Season ...

Jabeeb Camels and Iron Age Trip

This has been postponed because it is too hot even for the camels! Details will be published sometime after September.

Bastakia

Jean Allan had just promised to lead tours/walking trips through Bastakia when the temperature made a leap into the 30s and 40s. These will now take place in October and November when you can actually enjoy them. She can only take small groups of 10, so when details appear in *Gazelle*, please contact her and keep to the arrangement. You'll be surprised at where she takes you!

And it is time for you to think about what trips you could organise next season. Consider whether you might take people to your favourite spot and show them whatever it is that interests you there. All suggestions are welcome.



Transport Problems?

We understand that there are members who live in parts of Dubai [eg Bur Dubai / Mirdif] who do not have their own transport and are experiencing difficulty in getting to and from our lectures. We would like to hear from lecture attendees living in the far corners who do have their own transport and are prepared to give others a lift. It may well be just a lift home, if you've come straight from work, but that would be appreciated.

If you can help please contact Jen Robinson, Treasurer, 050-5982494

Help Wanted

The DNHG still needs a Librarian and additional Field Trip Coordinator for the coming year.

Librarian: The hardest work is done. Outgoing Librarian Deanne White has overseen the move and cataloguing of most of the DNHG Library collection, which is now open for use at the Emirates Academy library. This is the most accessible that our library collection has ever been, and we hope that it will prove a convenient reference. However, a small amount of new and miscellaneous material remains to be catalogued, and a modest amount of regular effort is required to ensure that systems are observed and record-keeping is maintained.

Field Trip Coordinator: All who participate in our field trips seem to enjoy them, but it takes a certain amount of effort to make them happen. The job description is to have or solicit ideas, identify and recruit potential trip leaders, and provide "how to" guidance and encouragement. This need not be done in a vacuum - the Committee is available to assist, but Committee members all have other primary responsibilities. At the moment, the DNHG is relying on a relatively small number of trip leaders. We are worried that a few of these are going to stop making suggestions, because every time they suggest an idea, they are asked to lead!

Library News

Our latest book acquisitions are: *A Field Guide to the Seashores of Eastern Africa* and *Archaeology of the United Arab Emirates*. These will be reviewed in our next issue of *Gazelle*. At the May committee meeting, it was agreed that we should buy a copy of *Sulphur Mines* to add to our library.

Our Next Speakers

Mohammed Arfan Asif is familiar to most readers of the *Gazelle* for his columns on wildlife photography. A pharmacist by profession, he has maintained a second career as a photographer, including exhibitions of portrait photography in the U.K. and a number of international awards in photographic competitions. In the UAE, he has been a columnist and contributor to the local newspapers and magazines and a judge in local photographic competitions.



Dr Sandy Fowler has been in the Emirates since 1987, courtesy of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, and a DNHG member since 1988 or 1989 (it's so long he can't remember!). He has been a family doctor at Dubai London Clinic since 1996, and is known to enjoy collecting the odd seashell and leading the occasional DNHG shelling field trip. He is the proud author of the so far unpublished "A Rough Sheller's Guide to the Northern Emirates", second edition of which is now in production.



Johanna Raynor is a mother of four and has lived in Dubai for three years. Johanna grew up in New Zealand with an awareness of the natural environment. Curiosity drives the Raynor family trips which have included digging for thunder eggs in Oregon, driving over the Swiss Alps in winter, climbing to the top of an active volcano in Vanuatu and stalking storks in Slovakia. Organising her own personal tour groups, Johanna has managed many hours of preparation on the internet. Consequently, she knows a little about lots and is always interested in learning a little more.

An Umm al Qaiwain Tour

Barbara Couldrey had planned a fishing trip from Umm al Qaiwain in early May, and was disappointed when the sea was too rough to set out. That proved to be a blessing in disguise, however. Barbara writes that: "We were supposed to go fishing out of UAQ this morning but sea too rough. Khalid, the charming, well educated local who had invited us decided to take us on a walking tour of the mangroves (low tide) and islands instead. He is a determined conservationist – he even had us pulling soft weed off new mangrove plants to ensure they live. They are using these new plants to replenish the Dubai Khor. This same green weed was being collected by fishermen to put in their fish traps – some fish only live on this weed. He also explained about the salt water filtering procedure through the roots. He also mentioned that there is no water on the UAQ Khor islands so the gazelle filter salt water through their hoofs! It was a lovely cool morning and five hours well spent, ending in a tour of the fish souk. Khalid's father-in-law (very old) is helping archivists in Abu Dhabi with cultural details. Khalid's father was a captain on pearling boats. Report by Barbara Couldrey.

Masirah Island

I travelled to Masirah separately from Gary, Anne and Peter (see Feb 04 Gazelle), but am less efficient at making a report!

Close to the ferry terminal on the mainland was the carcase of a mammal, here photographed with our Chairman giving it close study. He believed it to be a porpoise. On the island itself there were a few camels, and clearly hares too,



based on the road kill. Many of the graded tracks on Masirah are real bone shakers. Vegetation was sparse, but I did find the nice desert hyacinth.

There were also flamigoes, including an immature pictured here...



and the inevitable herons.

My main hope was to find new



shells, ideally an *Actaeon eloise*.



Having been directed to the beach where these were possible, I scoured for 2 hours without luck. However, one expatriate resident there told me that he had only found 2 in 15 years! He repeated the sad tale that I had heard before that a well known malacologist had come with a suction pump and hoovered up a lot of living specimens, presumably for cleaning and sale.

But I did find a nice *Purpura panama*, (Bosch et al p.122, illustration 488) and, new to me, a *Trochus Firanus* (same book, p.34, illustration 39). Later shelling at favourite haunts on the mainland also produced little, so perhaps it was just an unlucky time. Masirah

is quite extensive, and 2 - 3 full days would be needed to explore all the beaches thoroughly. I have a map of shelling sites, which could be faxed to anyone interested. Report by Colin Paskins.

Help Wanted with Exotic Birds Breeding in Dubai

In *Phoenix* No. 20, reviewed in last month's *Gazelle*, editor Mike Jennings lamented the paucity of reports about breeding by exotic bird species introduced to Arabia as escapees.

From the information he presents, it appears that breeding information is largely lacking for many of the species known to have been seen throughout the 1990s in Dubai, including in particular such birds as the Golden-Backed (or Jackson's) Weaver, the lesser Masked Weaver, the Red Bishop, and several undetermined Whydahs or Widowbirds. These species have typically appeared in artificial environments (e.g., Safa Park, Al-Mamzar Park, the Za'abeel Fish Ponds, and presumably the several golf courses), but they have generally not received attention from the local birdwatching community. In particular, it appears that no significant data exists about specific evidence of breeding habits, sites or seasons.

Nest-building has been reported for the two weaver species, but Mike Jennings cautions that these species seem to be compulsive nest builders, so that construction activity is not necessarily a sign of actual breeding. Known nest-building sites in Dubai for the Golden-Backed Weaver are at the Za'abeel Fish Ponds, in larger trees overhanging the ponds (as many as 50 birds were reported in spring 2002), and for the Lesser Masked Weaver at the Za'abeel Fish Ponds and in decorative date palms near a swimming pool at the Dubai World Trade Centre Apartments Club. Breeding evidence for exotic species - direct or



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.

circumstantial - will be welcomed by Mike Jennings, Phoenix, and the ABBA project. Report by Gary Feulner

—SHELL—
—REPORT—



Please send your shell reports to Sandy Fowler

New Intertidal Mollusc for the UAE?

A combination of professional scientific interest and amateur observation appears to have added a new mollusc species to the UAE lists. As previously advertised in the Gazelle, scientists at The Natural History Museum in London (formerly the British Museum - Natural History) have been interested in obtaining specimens of the gastropod genus *Turbo* from the UAE and Oman, to assist in their study of the worldwide classification and evolution of this genus using DNA techniques.

The intertidal turban shell *Lunella coronata* (# 89 in Seashells of Eastern Arabia by Bosch et al.) was once classified as a *Turbo*, and is currently so classified once again (as *Turbo coronatus*). Gary Feulner obliged the museum by collecting from the Jebel Ali, Ghantoot and Khor Fakkan areas, but he found that most of the "*L. coronata*" he collected near Khor Fakkan were atypical. Among other things, they were dark (rusty brown to charcoal grey) rather than mottled pale green, and they had little of the "coronation" (whorls of short

spines) that gives the species its name. Overall they closely resembled in colour and shape the ophiolite pebbles among which they were found.

L. coronata has been described as a variable species and Gary wondered if the unusual Khor Fakkan specimens might reflect a locally dominant trait, conferring camouflage (and therefore survival) value. However, there did not seem to be a gradation between the typical and atypical forms. Other more subtle features distinguished the two as well, and almost all specimens could be categorised as either one or the other. This conclusion was confirmed by additional observations on the East Coast at Murbah.

On the basis of those observations, preliminary DNA work treated the two forms separately and confirmed a genetic difference. The atypical form was thought to show a close resemblance to a species of *Turbo* previously known from Yemen and Djibouti, but not (so far) from the UAE or Oman. It is hoped that more definitive results will be available later in the year.

Specimens of the larger (to 5 cm) *Turbo radiatus* (# 93 in *Seashells of Eastern Arabia*) are still desired by the London researchers. *T. radiatus* is found on rocks or coral in shallow waters of the UAE and is apparently best collected by snorkeling or scuba diving. Dick Hornby says that specimens he has seen have been heavily encrusted and therefore difficult to recognize. Divers or snorkelers who might be interested in assisting in the search should contact Gary Feulner. Report by Gary Feulner



Through the

lens....

One of the first lessons learned in bird watching: if there is a twig or scrap in the beak then for sure it is nest building in process and if food is held and not gulped down, then aha... there are chicks in the nest!



Green Bee Eater with food

But wait. Nature has endowed these small creatures with simple but effective intelligence. If the bird knows it is being watched then for sure your patience will be tested... until you give up. They have an uncanny knack of keeping away and misleading you. Once, after waiting patiently for about 20 minutes, I concluded that I had at last located the nest, but I found to my surprise a half dead caterpillar in the nest. The clever bird had dropped its food on an abandoned nest to keep me off-track! Perseverance is the name of the game.



Nests can be anywhere. They can be there on a mass of water weeds floating on vegetation, or just a pad of sodden weeds, rushes and debris like those of the

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Fossils - Valerie Chalmers

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Plants – Valerie Chalmers

Mammals - **Recorder needed**

The recorders are not necessarily scientific experts in their designated fields. In fact, most are not. However, they are interested and knowledgeable amateurs - please contact them if you have any interesting reports or queries.

The intention is that information will be channelled through to the *Gazelle* editor, so new information can be shared with all our readers.



dabchicks and grebes.

What about the most common twig platforms on trees; the untidy ones like that of the crow, the massive ones of the cormorant and herons or the flimsy ones through which the contents are often visible from below!

There are those that excavate a tunnel in earth banks sometimes as long as three metres like the bee eaters, kingfishers and hoopoe. These horizontal tunnels end in a widened egg chamber.



Then there are the interesting ones - nests on leaves stitched together like the tailor birds and ashy wren warblers, the cup-shaped nests of the flycatchers and orioles and the pendant nests of the weaver birds, sun birds and flower peckers.



And perhaps the oddest of all are the ones on bare rock. Just a depression in sand above tide mark

on seashore or in a dry river bed... that's where the plovers nest. In simple scrapes sparsely lined, obliterative colors protect the eggs and young of the terns and lapwings. The river tern has its nest on a shallow scrape on bare rock! Nests on trees are difficult to



reach and photograph. Interestingly the hornbill has its nest on a tree hollow walled up with the bird's droppings after the female has settled herself within, leaving only a narrow slit through which the male feeds her during the self imposed confinement! The wall is broken down after the young hatch out and both parents forage for the young thereafter. Finally the most common around here ... and no marks for guessing.

There are many different kinds of



nest, each in its own way beautiful and appropriate to that species - an inheritance through countless generations. Amazing. *Text & Photographs by Arfan Asif*





Field Clips...

A Central American Natural History Tour

I was in Central America in late April, on a natural history tour of the southern Mayan world, encompassing the lowlands of Belize (the former British Honduras), Guatemala and Honduras. March and April are the dry season there, so I minimized culture shock.

The itinerary featured prominently the expansive Mayan site of Tikal, with huge pyramidal temples poking out of the jungle where monkeys (black howlers and spider monkeys), coatimundis, many birds and (reportedly) occasional jaguars can be seen. Tikal was contrasted with the somewhat smaller but better preserved site at Copan, in Honduras, at the southern margin of the ancient Mayan world. Part of the reason for differential preservation is attributable to geology - the Copan site is built principally of volcanic rocks, whereas most other southern Mayan sites are of limestone. At all sites, only a fraction of the existing ruins have been uncovered. Much more remains beneath the forest.

The major Mayan sites in Belize were only excavated in the 1990s and remain less well known. A visit to a large riverbank site at Lamanai was the occasion for a night excursion by boat to look for crocodiles, but this also proved an excellent way to approach (and even photograph) tropical birds, including several types of kingfishers, rails and hawks, as well as fishing bats.

I recorded some 135 birds inland, in the rainforests and fields, thanks in large part to a superb guide who seemed to know every bird's call, and how to call them into view. Favourites included the large jabiru stork (seen nesting with a chick - if you can call a two-foot bird a chick); Montezuma's oropendola (a raucous builder of hanging nests among the Tikal ruins); the great curassow (a large ground bird with a distinctive

'hairdo'); the black vulture, which roosts gregariously (and ominously) in barren trees; several types of toucans (perennial tourist favorites); several types of trogons (the group which includes the famous quetzals); and the northern jacana, which walks on lily pads and in which the breeding female keeps a harem of males. "Bird of the Trip" was the blue-crowned motmot, whose brilliant blue tail carries two "outriggers" resembling small fly-swatters of extra feathers at the ends of parallel quills that extend beyond the main tail.

I did wonder why I had to go quite so far to see birds with names like Virginia warbler, Tennessee warbler, etc., but this was a good reminder of where such "familiar" birds go for the winter. And to exemplify the concept of biogeographic provinces, it is worth noting that only one of all the birds I saw in the New World can also be found here in the UAE - the cattle egret (which in Central America I saw almost invariably in small groups alongside cattle or horses). I also saw a "purple gallinule" amongst lily pads in a Mayan reservoir, but it turns out that the New World bird of this name is a different genus and species from the European bird that is a rather infrequent visitor to the UAE.

Belize also boasts the longest barrier reef in the New World (and second longest in the world). Snorkeling at protected sites behind the reef near Ambergris Caye, I learned that nurse sharks and even the large southern stingray can be safely approached and even handled, although I was not the first to try (nor was I the first into the water with them). Overhead, I became accustomed to the sight of magnificent frigatebirds hanging in place above the shoreline like so many kites, aimed into the stiff easterly trade winds. The (demonstrable) presence of salt-water crocodiles kept me out of the coastal mangrove swamps, but I did manage to scan for tree snails by using binoculars. *Report*

by Gary Feulner

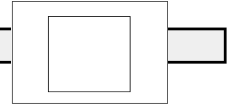


Drew Gardner has sent us a long article on geckos, and it will be serialised over the summer. Here is the first installment of a fascinating story:

Geckos

What is the difference between a gecko and a lizard? This is really a non-question, because a gecko is a lizard. As to reptile classification generally, don't ask what a reptile is, as that is a much harder question! In fact in many modern classifications there is no such thing as a reptile (Class *Reptilia*) - several ancient groups such as the crocodiles or turtles have a similar taxonomic status to mammals or birds. In fact, birds are really reptiles with feathers, and ornithology becomes a sub-branch of herpetology. But in everyday use we all know what reptiles are: they include crocodiles, turtles, lizards, worm lizards and snakes, and of course the *Rhynchocephalia* now only represented by two species of tuatara on islands off New Zealand. In earlier times there were also dinosaurs, pterosaurs, ichthyosaurs and plesiosaurs and a host of others now extinct.

Back to geckos: they are one family of lizards, order *Squamata*, suborder *Sauria*. There are about 16 families of lizards, and around 4000 species worldwide. Other families include agamids, chameleons, skinks, iguanas, monitors



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etc. So geckos are a special type of lizard. While most lizards are ground dwellers and diurnal, the majority of geckos are nocturnal and some are amongst the best climbers in the animal kingdom.

Of all the lizard families, the skinks have the most species worldwide (1300), and the geckos are the second biggest family with about 800 species. Their closest relatives may be the snake lizards of Australia such as *Lialis*. Although they look very different they share many features such as the structure of the tongue and eye.

However, here (Oman and UAE) geckos rule. Of the 94 species of native reptiles in the area, 59 are lizards and of these 27 are geckos. Almost half of the lizard species in our area are geckos. This is gecko paradise. That compares with just four species of

geckos in Europe and none in Britain. Our geckos here illustrate almost the full range of gecko diversity and include several endemic species.

Perhaps the best known gecko here is the yellow-bellied house gecko, *Hemidactylus flaviviridis*. This is the species found on many houses in Abu Dhabi and other towns and cities. They are plump creatures, up to about 15 cm long, with pinkish brown backs and large eyes. They are usually seen at night on walls and ceilings, particularly around outside lights where they lie in wait for their prey of moths and mosquitoes to land within range. During the day they become much darker, live in undisturbed corners of buildings, such as in air conditioning ducts or even behind pictures on the wall. They are usually solitary creatures, remaining faithful to one

territory and hence giving the impression of being faithful household pets.

To be continued... *Drew Gardner*



Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

06 Jun Members' Night:

Mhd. Arfan Asif - Wildlife Photography (Birds and Macro)

Johanna Raynor - Nature Reserves of Northern Thailand

Dr Sandy Fowler – Conidae: The Cone Shells

10 Jun End of Season Get-together, Dubai Country Club