

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

DNHG Membership

Marijcke Jongbloed noticed the picture of the third bird nest in Anne Millen's garden (p. 6 *Gazelle* December 2006) and wrote, "I think your description of the last nest says 'graceful warbler' to me. I just re-read it ... and yes, definitely! I had them every year in my garden (in Satwa). The only bulbul's nest I ever found was a very tidy, cupped round nest about 15 cm in diameter. Anything very untidy and flimsy is usually a pigeon's structure! But the nest on the photo is too complicated for a pigeon, so I don't know." Anne measured the second nest (below; the one she suggested had been frequented by bulbuls) and it has a 6cm internal diameter. Much too small for a pigeon, and perhaps too small for a white cheeked bulbul. Stuck to the branch left of the nest is some scat littered with tiny <1mm seeds. Perhaps this is a clue not to the bird but to a four-footed thief which has raided the nest.



Annual General Meeting and Elections

Our March 2007 lecture night will also be our Annual General Meeting, at which a new Committee will be elected for the coming year.

In particular, we need a volunteer to serve as Librarian, and we could use an additional Field Trip Coordinator. If you are interested, or would like more information, please contact Gary Feulner or Valerie Chalmers.

Your Gazelle

The Committee is considering making email the standard method of distribution of the *Gazelle*. It would be easier and cheaper for us, and would mean members receive it quickly and with the photographs in glorious colour. It may also mean that registration for field trips would be sooner and tidier.

Please consider whether you really want the old-fashioned black-and-white hard copy cluttering up your house - you don't, do you? - and let our membership secretary Lena Linton know if email would suit you better. Lena's email is linton@mailme.ae

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. (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.

This month's Contributors

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

Johanna Raynor

Barbara Couldrey

Marijcke Jongbloed

Moh'd Arfan Asif

Angela Manthorpe

Gary Feulner



Under the patronage of H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan



Off and running again ...

Hajar Mountain Nature Hike with Gary Feulner Sat 27 January

Gary Feulner will lead a full day nature hike in the Hajar Mountains near Hatta. Mixed emphasis on plants, animals, insects, archeology. This will be a walk, not a climb, but there are no trails, the ground is typically rough and uneven, and we will often ascend and descend slopes between the wadi bed and terraces. In addition, we will cross one low pass with loose scree on the descent. Total distance ~9km, total time 7-8 hours, slow pace. Suitable for regular hikers or fit and energetic novices. Bring boots or sturdy shoes, minimum 2 litres of water, lunch, hat, sun cream, camera, binoculars, etc. 4WD preferred. Leave Dubai c.7:00am, estimated return c.6:30pm. For further information and sign-up, contact Gary at 330-3600 (office) or 306-5570 (home).

Bur Dubai Temple Walk with Sandhya Sat 10 February

Sandhya will take a small group through the narrow alleyways of Bur Dubai, explaining the traditions and significance of what you find along the way. Contact Sandhya to obtain further details and register at sandhya@clavib.com

Spoonworms & Desert Plants with Dr Richard Hornby Fri 23 February

At last, the tide will be right! Details will be announced at our February meeting, and registration can be done then also. This promises to be an interesting excursion, so scrape the mud off your wading shoes.

Shelling Trip with Anne Millen Fri 09 March

This trip is tide-dependent too - I do hope I have it right! Low water

seems to be at 10.30am, so we will meet at 10am. The location might be decided on the day, but it will be one or more of the Jumeira beaches. We will look at the tiny shells, so you will need to bring either good eyesight or good magnification.

Wadi Tarabat (below Jebel Hafit) with Val Chalmers

Val is liaising with Brigitte regarding this and no date is yet fixed. It will happen!

Old *Tribulus* Volumes Wanted

The ENHG journal, *Tribulus*, will begin its fifteenth year of semi-annual publication. Since it began, it has become increasingly important as a source of published data about the natural history and archaeology of the Emirates. Much of the material published in *Tribulus* is available nowhere else.

As the journal continues to expand its reputation overseas, the Editorial Board are receiving an increasing number of requests from overseas academic and other scientific institutions for sets of *Tribulus*. Unfortunately, it is not possible to meet all of these requests, since some of the issues are out of print, and reprinting would make no economic sense.

If any DNHG members are leaving the UAE, and do not want to take their copies of *Tribulus* with them, then the Editorial Board would be delighted to have them back! Anyone wishing to hand back copies should contact any member of the DNHG Committee, who will arrange to get the copies to the Editorial Board. Many thanks, in advance!

Letters to the Editor

Do you have some comment, suggestion or query on natural history that you would like our members to know about or answer? Please send your letter to any of the committee members listed, by fax or e-mail, or direct to the editor, Anne Millen.

Our Next Speaker

Dr Reza Khan is well known in Dubai as the manager of the Dubai Zoo. He began his career in Bangladesh by completing his M.Sc. in Zoology (Ornithology) in Dhaka, and then his Ph. D., also in Ornithology, in Bombay. His interests and fields of expertise are now very broad indeed. He works on biodiversity, environment and wildlife studies in Bangladesh, India and the UAE, raising public awareness about saving wildlife and habitats, popularising the subject of nature conservation, and enhancing captive breeding (zoo management) and propagation of endangered species.

Dr Khan's research on the biodiversity of the UAE has led to the production of two books, *The Indigenous Trees of the UAE* (1998), and *Wild Cats of the UAE* (1999). As well, he has written eight books in Bengali. He writes frequent scientific papers and received awards, including the Sheikh Nahyan Bin Mubarak Bin Mohammed Award for Natural History and Biodiversity by ENHG, and last year, the Shonglap Award for Natural History Works in the UAE as a Bangladeshi expatriate, Dubai. He has written many newspaper articles, which have contributed much to public awareness of conservation issues in the UAE. Dr Khan will be telling us about the Sunderbans Mangrove Forest.



Australian freshwater mangrove flowers
(*Barringtonia acutangula*)



Mleisa Fossil Footprints Trip

Twenty-four DNHG members took the long, straight trip to the western desert on 8/9 Dec 2006, for a visit to the site of the Late Miocene Proboscidean Trackway at Mleisa (known as the elephant footprints). We arrived to find that autumn rains had almost turned the depressed pan where the trackway is located into a lake. Fortunately the tracks were not obscured and we were able to join up with Dr Mark Beech, Dr Walid Al Tikriti and guests from Harvard University currently undertaking field work in the region who were able to give far more information and guidance than the trip leaders. A more full technical report on this site can be found in *Tribulus*, Vol 13.2 2003.



Near the site, a few fossilised turtle bones and a small bifacial flint blade were found. An adult female yellow-spotted agama (*Trapelus flavimaculatus*) posed obligingly for photos.

After a walk across the trackway, we left to explore another site shown to Steve Raynor by local Bedu the previous winter. This site had not yet been visited by Dr Beech and we were a little concerned that it would be underwater also. Fortunately again, the trackway was exposed. Unlike the Mleisa site, the prints were not sunk into the rock pan but standing out in relief. It will be interesting to hear what further examination of this site shows.

As late afternoon approached, the group separated as those staying in hotels or returning to Dubai left for the trip back, and the campers were informed that this site was in the middle of an area protected for

the release of houbara and that we would have to move on. Finding another rock pan filled with water a few miles west, we camped with a 'lake view'. It was not long before camp was established and fires lit, to the delight of younger members of the group. A night-time stroll turned up very little evidence of fauna apart from a few lizard holes. A single Arabian toad-headed agama (*Phrynocephalus arabicus*) found the next morning showed the dark markings usual when they are cold.

After breaking camp the group of now five cars continued with the vague idea of 'looking to see what was there'. At this point the experience and palaeontological background of DNHG member Tom Williams came into play as his practised eye guided us toward potential fossil sites. These skills were quickly rewarded with the discovery of a site producing the proximal tibia (lower leg bone) of a hippo, some hippo tooth enamel and catfish skull bones.



Piece of hippo tibia

We were fascinated by these findings but not half as fascinated as the camels who flocked to join the party. This kept those less fossil-minded entertained.



After a thorough look around, and informing Dr Beech of the site co-

ordinates, we continued on our way, roughly sweeping an easterly arc from our campsite. Our lunch stop, again thanks to the skilled eye of Tom Williams, turned out to be an even richer fossil site than the first. We recorded a far larger spread of fossils and tentatively identified turtle bones and shell, crocodile, and more large mammal remains. As yet we have no feedback on this site and look forward to hearing more.



The abundance of fossils made up for lack of fauna (apart from camels) with only one other lizard species, the potted toad-headed agama (*Phrynocephalus maculatus*) making an appearance. After lunch, still revelling in our finds, which were all left in the field as found, we headed back to the road for the journey home, stopping for coffee at the 'petrol station on the edge of nowhere'. Report and photographs by Jo Raynor.

Congratulations to Mohammed Arfan Arsif

Mohammed Arfan Asif, who frequently contributes a column on wildlife photography to *Gazelle*, always with splendid photographs, has run up a string of successes in world competitions. Here are some of his achievements:

Award - Poland: Mountain Landscapes (including photos taken during a mountain walk led by Gary Fuelner)





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

A portfolio of his mountainscapes, titled 'Natural Sculptures' has been awarded the FIAP (Federation Internationale de L' Art Photographique) Ribbon in the 26th version of Mountain Landscape 2006 of Jan Sunderland Photographic Competition. The exhibition, recognised by the International Federation of Photographic Art, was held in Nowy Targ in Poland. Arfan's portfolio of eight photographs featured the Hajar mountains of UAE and Western Ghats of India.



Award - Singapore: Nature Division (the same photo that won a prize in the DNHG's annual competition) Arfan has been awarded the FIAP (International Federation of Photographic Art) Gold Medal for his photograph of 'Small Green Bee Eaters' in the Photographic Society of Singapore organised International Salon of Photography 2006. Arfan's photograph was taken in Dubai. This rare sight was captured on film after patiently waiting for many hours during the course of three weeks while observing the bee eaters nesting activity.



Award - UAE: Onshore Arabia 2006, Dubai, United Arab Emirates Awarded 3rd Prize, 5000 Dhs for

Wild Life Photography. The portfolio includes Small Green Bee Eater pair.



Mohammed Arfan Asif receiving his Onshore Arabia 2006 Award

Miscellaneous:

In 2006, Arfan's photograph of the 'Small Blue Kingfisher with fish' was awarded a prize in the Holland Photography Circuit, becoming in the process the first participant from Middle East to be chosen in this prestigious photography circle.

His nature notes on the small green bee eaters was published earlier this year in The Phoenix, a natural history publication on breeding birds of Arabia, published from UK. *Thanks, Arfan, for these details. Congratulations!*

'Boarding Now for Kazakhstan!'

While sorting out lost luggage last week at Dubai Airport, Barbara Couldrey saw an amazing sight near the luggage carousel.



Thirty hunting falcons were sitting on special little perches waiting to go through customs!

The falcons had just been flown in from Saudi Arabia and were soon to fly off to Kazakhstan in a special jet, one seat per 'passenger'.



They were all hooded and did not seem at all perturbed by the noise and movement around them, though the floor needed a wash an hour later! *Report and photographs by Barbara Couldrey.*

Huqf Revisited

There's plenty to explore in the vast open spaces in Oman's central region and after a short visit in 2006 Gary Feulner and Angela and Steve Manthorpe chose to return to the area over the recent Eid and New Year holiday. Accompanying them on the trip were DNHG members, Mary-Ann Paddison and Mike Wren. (Peter van Amsterdam and Anne Millen had in fact been the ones to suggest a repeat visit, but unforeseen circumstances prevented their participation.)

The trip started with a visit to the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary at Yalooni (Jaaluni). Established in 1994 and covering approximately 27,500 sq km, the sanctuary is situated mainly on the Jiddat al Harasis, a flat limestone plateau around 150m above sea level. The sanctuary is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and those wanting to visit Yalooni must apply first through their website (<http://www.oryxoman.com>). Allow plenty of time to complete formalities and to receive approval for your application, as without this paperwork you will not be permitted to camp within the reserve.

The reserve is currently home to some 210 Arabian oryx, down from a high of 400 or so. Unfortunately



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

Reptiles - Dr Reza Khan
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off 344 0462
fax (off) 349 9437

Archaeology - David Palmer
cell: 050-7387703
office direct line: 04-2072636

Birds - David Bradford
davebradford9@hotmail.com

Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi
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Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

Geology - Gary Feulner
res 306 5570
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Insects – Gary Feulner

Fossils - Valerie Chalmers
res 349 4816,
fax 340 0990
vmc@latifaschool.co.ae

Plants – Valerie Chalmers

Mammals & Seashells - Recorders 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.



the animals have been heavily poached, with the result that most of the formerly free-ranging population has now been pulled back into a large fenced area. We were told that approximately 145 animals are kept within the enclosure, while another 65 remain at large within the sanctuary, in small groups. The largest such group consists of 9 animals and is the only wild group that includes females (two), which are favoured by the poachers.



Oryx

The wild animals were said to be very wary, fleeing at the sight or sound of approaching vehicles. As the oryx also have a huge area in which to roam, the chance of seeing these animals in their natural habitat is limited. Mindful of the adage that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, we therefore took some time in the fading light to observe the animals in the pen. Outside the fenced area we also found a solitary oryx and a small group of "reem" or sand gazelle, quite happy to wander close to the car until you pulled out a camera, at which point they turned tail and ran.

In addition to the breeding programme the reserve operates a guide service to assist in exploring the area. Visitors are strongly encouraged to engage a guide, and from our own experience we would endorse that recommendation. Therefore, bright and early on the morning of the 30th we drove into the one-street town of Al Ajaiz, to rendezvous with our guide, Hamad. Leaving one car behind, we stopped briefly at Hamad's camp, joining in the Eid celebrations. The goat had already been skinned and a huge pot was on the boil and as we sat around sharing coffee, halwa, sweet noodles and goat's liver more family members pulled in

to the camp to join in.



Cooking the goat

There's something impressive about the bedu's unerring sense of direction, as following no track, and without the use of compass or GPS, Hamad proceeded to guide us to our first goal – the sink holes at Bama. Here in the flat, sparsely vegetated landscape we found an exposed area of limestone pavement and set in it, 4 fairly large sinkholes. Two of the more intrepid members of the party promptly disappeared down the holes to find gloriously soft sand, but the low passageways didn't lead very far. Gary was equally impressed by several odd trees (*Cordia* sp.) which (he later read) in fact make their home in localized low areas on the plain.



Digging for water

Driving on to the North we flushed out three gazelle on the plateau before arriving at the edge of the remarkable Huqf escarpment overlooking the 'badlands' and sabkha which run almost all the way to the coast. A very rough track took us 40m down the cliff face and on to the site of a permanent water hole, with Hamad pointing out Ibex tracks in the sand. Following lunch we headed off to find some of the geological remains for which Oman is so famous. The glacial striations at Wadi Khlata are a remnant of the period approx 290 million years ago



when Oman was much closer to the South Pole and glaciers covered the land. Embedded in the ice were rocks as large as boulders and as the glaciers moved inexorably forward the rocks scoured the bedrock beneath. The striations that remain are amongst the best in the world and provide a window on a seemingly incongruous chapter in Arabia's past.

With light falling, and with some distance to cover to return to Al Ajaiz, we didn't have time to stop at the oasis at Boy, although it would have made a great campsite.



Ras Duqm

In total contrast to the scenery of Yalooni and the escarpment, the next morning we pulled into the stunning bay at Ras Duqm. The birdwatching is good and we spent some time with binoculars out spotting, amongst others, sooty gull (surprisingly tame adults and juveniles), lesser black-backed gull, marsh harrier, Caspian tern, desert wheatear, western reef heron, osprey and a couple of oystercatchers. The beachfront also yielded an array of interesting marine life with remains at the high tide line of several small sharks (fins intact), catfish and interestingly, what appeared to be a daggertooth pike conger (*Muraenesox cinereus*).



Daggertooth pike conger

Perhaps the most striking feature of this creature was its teeth, which

John E. Randall in his *Coastal Fishes of Oman* describes: "teeth on side of jaws in two to three rows, those at front of jaws enlarged; vomerine teeth in three rows, those of middle row greatly enlarged, triangular, compressed with a basal cusp at each end". The eel "occurs on mud substrata to depths of 100m" so I'm optimistic that I'll never bump into one when diving!

The wind had been picking up during the night and early morning so in an increasing sand storm we made our way on through Duqm to Wadi Shuram, in search of our next geological site. On entering the wadi we were met by an Omani soldier who assisted with route finding and gave us courage to push on through a broad wadi filled with soft sand. Here, on an escarpment we located a field of enormous stromatolites. Dating from the late Pre-Cambrian era (800 – 595 million years ago), these are the oldest fossils in Oman.



Stromatolite with Angela for scale

The Oman Natural History Museum describes them thus: "Stromatolites are dome-shaped or pillar-like structures built by primitive, single-celled algae that secrete calcite and trap sedimentary particles". We'd found pocket-sized stromatolites on our previous trip, but the largest here was around 6m wide.



The mega stromatolite

Having seen in the New Year tucked behind a ridge for shelter

from the wind, our final day took in the coastal barasti settlement at Filim. Wandering the dusty village street was like taking a step back in time – I can't remember the last time I saw barasti houses like these outside a museum in the UAE. Just offshore here we looked out to the island of Mahout – the largest mangrove area on the south coast of Oman, and to the east, over the low wetlands of the Barr al Hikman.



Barasti housing

Leaving Filim we had a short drive to the new road from Mahout to Ghaba. Off to either side of this road the sandstones have been weathered into dramatic shapes and after a few detours to check out the local geology we set off on the long drive home.



Wind-sculpted sandstone

As we said after our last trip, there's still so much more to see down there, and with the freedom to drive across vast areas without a fence in sight, it's a joy to explore. Report by Angela Manthorpe, with helpful comments from Gary Feulner.





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Winter Birds

If you think that all the birding excitement is over with the autumn migration, think again. The holiday season has produced a number of interesting sightings, reported as always in *Twitchers' Guide*.

Among the more out-of-the-ordinary visitors (many new to this observer) were northern lapwings at the Dubai Pivot Fields and Sharjah Tip; buff-bellied pipits and a long-staying European stonechat at the Pivot Fields; a lesser flamingo (still?) at Wathba Lake; a great grey shrike (not the bird it used to be?) at Bateen Air Base; a brambling at the Mercure Hotel atop Jebel Hafit; pale martins at Sharjah Tip; a brown-throated martin at Maqam in Al Ain; sociable plovers at Al-Hibab fields; and finally, trumpeter finches and a juvenile rosefinch near Jebel Hafit. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Delayed Gratification

Many of us have taken the relatively abundant rains of autumn and winter as a harbinger of a greening of the UAE, and even a possible return to the "good old days" of the late 1980s and 1990s, when it was often necessary to consult the weather forecast before going out for the weekend.

So far, however, the vegetation has been muted in its response. The reason, as recognised and explained to me very simply by mountain Bedu: it's still too cold for most of the plants. Frost was reported by campers in Rawdah Bowl (elev. 500m) on the first weekend in January. Thus a few resistant annuals are abundant, but many, and most perennials, are biding their time – giving us hope for spring. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Snail Call

A reminder, especially for new members: your unwanted garden snails and slugs may bring delight to our Chairman. They are of interest for scientific study and an accounting of the terrestrial snails of the UAE. All specimens will be gratefully accepted by Chairman Gary Feulner, and contributors will be kept informed of progress and pedigrees. Suburban gardens are home to several native Arabian snails, but also a number of introduced species. There have already been a few surprises and we know that more are out there. Dead shells are preferred; we'll follow up if you've got something unusual. It's easy: just bag 'em and tag 'em! Please remember to record the location and the habitat, as well as your name, the date, and any remarks.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

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| Feb 04 | Wildlife of the Sunderbans Mangrove Forest – Dr. Reza Khan |
| Mar 04 | To be confirmed |
| Apr 01 | UAE Climate Change and the Archeological Record – Dr. Adrian Parker |

Field Trips (Members only, please. Details inside.)

- | | |
|--------|---|
| Jan 27 | Hajar Mountain Nature Hike – Gary Feulner |
| Feb 10 | Dubai Temple Walk – Sandhya Prakash |
| Feb 23 | Spoonworms & Desert Plants – Dr. Richard Hornby |
| Mar 09 | Shelling on Dubai Beaches — Anne Millen |