

GAZELLE

Vol 23 no 4 April 2008



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Sue Hunter, David and Liz Palmer, Mary Anne Pardoe, Johanna Raynor and Gary Feulner all attended the Fifth Annual Symposium on Recent Archeological Discoveries in the UAE, sponsored by the Zayed Center for Heritage & History in Al-Ain. Some of the reports made the local newspapers. Stay tuned for more details in next month's *Gazelle*.

Hans Rau recently joined the rarefied ranks of those who have visited the Umm As-Samim ("Mother of Poisons") area of interior Oman.

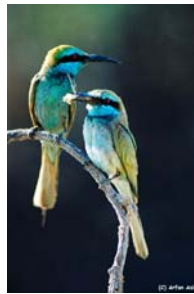


Surface of the Umm As-Samim

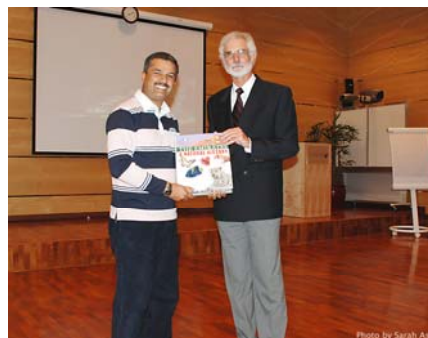
The Umm As-Samim is a vast inland sabkha on the eastern edge of the Empty Quarter, and a particularly wet and treacherous one. Its reputation was known to (and propagated by) Wilfred Thesiger, who repeated bedu stories of raiding parties and flocks of goats that had been swallowed up. The water is supplied by the outflow from several wadis that drain from west of

the Jebel Akhdar. It is accessible today primarily by gypsum-surfaced tracks constructed to accommodate oilfield operations.

Well, now we know - it's genetic. **Mohammed Arfan Asif** won the ENHG Inter-Emirates photographic competition's first prize for his photograph of a pair of little green bee-eaters, taken at Jadaf before it became something else.



Below, he is seen receiving his prize from Gary Feulner, and the photograph was taken by his young daughter **Sarah Asif**.



DNHG Membership

DNHG Membership remains a bargain at Dhs.100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at our meetings or by sending us your details and a cheque made out to: Lloyds TSB Bank account no. 60600669933501. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG. Please also note our account number has changed.)

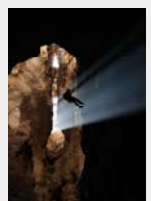
DNHG membership entitles you to participate in field trips and helps pay for our lecture hall, publication and distribution of our monthly newsletter, the *Gazelle*, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects.

New memberships and renewals are good until Sep 2008.

This month's Contributors

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

Nancy Papathanasopoulou
Angela Manthorpe
Val Chalmers & Di
Carol Goodwright
An Pas
Helga & Willy Meyer
Gary Feulner



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



More Members' News

David Snelling, who is a former Field Trip Coordinator and also Bird Recorder on the DNHG Committee, has been spotted in Kew Gardens. Rather early in the season, he was observed guiding visitors around Kew Palace.



Field Trips

These are thinning out now that we have reached the end of the golden weather. Let our Field Trip Coordinators know what you would *like* to do. Some trips planned but not yet finalised:

Stargazing with Lamjed El-Kefi

Date and details will be advised in next months' *Gazelle* or by email.

Brainstorming session on sea shells with Anne Millen Friday May 09

Please contact Anne Millen if you would like to attend. It will be at 10am. Bring your unidentified shells and magnifying glass.

Book Reviews:

Creatures of Arabia co-authored by DNHG member Fran Labonte

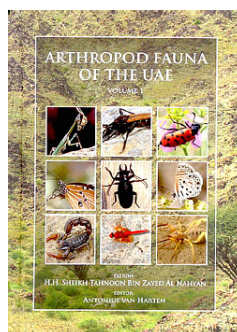
Awareness of how important it is to secure the interest and concern of coming generations in the environment and the varied denizens of Planet Earth is growing. Happily, more books are being published for children in the UAE, and it is heartening to see our members amongst the authors.



The *Creatures of Arabia* series, appropriate for Key Stage 2, looks at how a great variety of animals adapt to life in the harsh Arabian environment and climate, examines local habitats and threats to animals, and addresses conservation issues. Each book covers one group - mammals, birds, sea creatures, and reptiles and amphibians, and has been carefully researched and illustrated. They are published by Jerboa Books, and can be bought separately, or as a pack of four. The Arabic version of the *Creatures* books should be in the stores by the summer.

Arthropod Fauna of the UAE, Vol. 1

Arthropod Fauna of the UAE, Volume 1, edited by Antonius van Harten, under the patronage of H.H. Sheikh Tahnoon bin Zayed Al Nahyan, has just been published. This book (and the three projected additional volumes) are the product of a continuing multi-year project to survey and identify the insects and other terrestrial arthropods of the UAE. DNHG members will recall a lecture by Tony van Harten reporting on the methodology and status of that project. Volume 1 includes many families of beetles, wasps, flies and moths as well as mayflies, cockroaches and *Psocoptera*.



The new volume is extensively and even attractively illustrated with photographs and drawings, making it especially useful for laymen unfamiliar with all of the many arcane arthropod groups.

Sale and marketing arrangements remain to be finally determined but we hope to be able to make copies available at upcoming meetings as a convenience to members. Tony van Harten has very kindly donated a copy to the DNHG library, with the compliments of his Patron. *Thanks to Gary Feulner for this review.*

Our Next Speaker

Drew Gardner is fascinated by geckos, but his interests do not end there. He has a BSc in Zoology from Edinburgh University (1st class honours), and a PhD from Aberdeen University. His thesis was on the evolutionary ecology of day geckos in the Seychelles. He followed this up with post-doctoral research on Arctic charr (a salmonid fish) based in University College, London. He worked for twelve years at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman, researching the reptiles and mountain ecology, and named three new species of gecko in genus *Asaccus* during this time. He has now been at Zayed University for seven years.



Drew has now completed over fifty environmental consultancy ecology surveys in Oman and the UAE, and published about forty research papers and book chapters on conservation, lizards, snakes, fish, insects, birds and juniper woodlands. If you want to know about the behavioural genetics of fruit flies, breeding habits of Trinidad petrels or geckos in French Polynesia, ask Drew.



One Day In The Liwa

Dr. Dick Hornby's InterEmirates Weekend convoy took about two and a half hours to reach the edge of the Liwa and the Mahreb dune - supposedly the tallest, with a sheer face up which, once a year, there is a 4xWD competition. None of our squadron would have contemplated attempting such a feat! Here we progressed amongst dunes of varying shapes and sizes, interspersed with dips, at the bottom of which was water-laden sabka coated with a fine dry crust. It was incongruous to find the water table so high, being some kilometres from the Liwa oasis itself.



Liwa dune

Dick pointed out *Seidlitzia rosmarinus*, family *Chenopodiaceae*, the goosefoot or glassworts, a lush plant that lives at the south facing foot of the dunes and is particular to this area.

Also spied were locusts, varying sized holes beneath bushes, homes to creatures unknown. Certainly we found burrows large enough for the Ruppell fox.



The home of a Ruppell fox?

As we were looking at a dune, a hare, which bolted from not far from its foot, ran at right angles to

the top without slowing its fast pace once. We all thought it was aiming for a bush just under the summit but it continued over the top. Some spied a second hare also making a quick dart, disturbed in its usually quiet habitat.

As we lunched in a secluded open valley between two fair sized dunes, Dick pointed out a diagonal wide track, along the side of one which was the end result of a seismic survey. And, yes, more gas and also sulphur has been found which will shortly mean more inroads in the virgin dunes. More locusts were seen, lizard tracks (one showing tail marks) and we also saw goat and camel dung. *Zygophyllum qatarense*, family *Zygophyllaceae*, the bean caper or caltrops, was now present in addition to *Seidlitzia rosmarinus*.



Seidlitzia rosmarinus



Zygophyllum qatarense
with *Seidlitzia rosmarinus*

A spot of duning then followed with one of our number bedding his vehicle well and truly, causing our leader a similar mishap in the latter's attempt to assist the former.

Up over a soft dune with plenty of opportunity for 'bedding in', we reached a sandy / stony road that threaded its way between the dunes and eventually, alas, onto the main road back towards Abu

Dhabi. However, at one last stop we spied the most locusts, hopping from bush to bush when disturbed but also, scattered, motionless, on a nearby dune and, in the main, facing the same way. It was also a specific area for desert roses and indeed some were found here. *Zygophyllum qatarense* was the only plant to be found here. Thank you, ENHG Abu Dhabi, for a superb day! Report by Di, first two photographs by Carol Goodwright, plant photographs by Val Chalmers

Leech in Oman – a sticky subject?

On a recent trip to the abandoned village of As Sab on Jebel Shams I was surprised to spot a leech swimming in the pool above the village. The leech was approximately 6 cm long when swimming freely, which it did in an undulating motion. It was bright green in colour and when fished out of the pool for closer examination, was found to have an orange stripe along its edge and was darker green on the underside. Its body was clearly segmented and it had a large sucker on its rear end.



Limnatis nilotica?

In *Tribulus* 1.1, April 1991, Bish Brown reported finding a leech "in the falaj below the fort at Aboule, near Mahdah, Oman...In the same channel there was one toad, some tadpoles and few very small fish. As leeches normally suck blood these are probably its source of food." I assume from Bish's description that we found the same species – tentatively identified as *Limnatis nilotica* (Savigny, 1822). Subsequent information from Reza Khan and Gary Feulner indicates that these can be found in wadis in



Email your reports to pvana@emirates.net.ae, (Arial 10 justified) and send your photographs as separate jpg files, or deliver them to Anne for scanning.

the Mahdhah area, from Wadi Khadra south to Wadi Sarfanah. I didn't see anything else in the pool but assume there were toads at least, but as the leech would represent a major burden to such a small creature, can anyone confirm that this is a likely food source?



The 'Hidden Village' pool, Jebel Shams

As an aside, the walk to As Sab is one of the most spectacular in the Jebel Shams area and is well signed from the village of Al Khitaym, overlooking the grand canyon. Following a fairly level route this makes an ideal morning or afternoon walk and is suitable for all abilities. Report and photographs by Angela Manthorpe

Abandoned Bats in Jumeirah

Most residents of Jumeirah near Safa Park are worried about where they themselves will live, as their houses are vacated and demolished to accommodate the extension of the Business Bay khor. A few residents, however, have lamented the fact that the demolition of many older villas will disrupt and displace the local bat population, which roosted in at least some older homes. Inspection by interested naturalists revealed that the resident bats at one villa, which enjoyed the garden by night, were a population of what appeared to be Kuhl's Pipistrelle. This species

lives in colonies and is known to frequent buildings and ruins (see "Wild about Mammals" by Dr. Marijcke Jongbloed).

Various measures were considered that might improve the prospects for the displaced bats, but ultimately there was general recognition that, in the short term, any attempt to focus public or official attention on the presence of bats in the area might very well have an effect quite the opposite of encouraging their preservation. Limited individual measures are open to bat-loving refugees (e.g., "bat boxes").

But more generally, there remains the prospect of scientific inquiry, as many houses currently stand abandoned but undemolished. This presents the opportunity for an investigation and a rough census. Any members who might be interested to devote time and energy to such a project over the next couple of months are invited to contact Chairman Gary Feulner or Vice Chairman Valerie Chalmers, who will put you in touch with knowledgeable researchers who can guide these efforts. Report by Gary Feulner

Tiny Beaches, Big Finds

The March shelling trip to east coast beaches started out with a few problems - an oil spill near the Al Aqah hotel, high tide at 10am, a predicted shimaal, and a reconnoitre that failed to identify positively the 'conus' beaches. Undaunted, seven members came and had a surprisingly successful and enjoyable day.



Sharing finds on a bank of coral

Sandy's little "Conus 1" beach, found serendipitously, was piled high with coral, some fresh, and

amongst it we found cones aplenty - *Conus striatus*, *taeniatus*, *flavidus*, *textile*, and some as yet unidentified. Too many species to mention were found - *Cypraea*, *Cymatium*, *Pinctada margaritifera* and even *Homalocantha anatomica*.



Some of the finds

An Pas found curios such as *Malvufundus regula* and the various strange stages of *Cypraea* juveniles (below). These frequently present a puzzle; *Cypraea* begin as thin-walled simple curls, open and dark with a whitish covering layer.



We all tried without success to get crabs out of their homes and had to abandon some interesting shells.

Two happy hours later, we moved to the second tiny conus beach. No conus, but over the groyne, we picked up five *Lambis truncata sebæ*. The big beaches further south were disappointing, but what a day! Report by Anne Millen, photographs by Anne, Jenny Hill & An Pas

Descent into the underworld! Part 2

Angela continues the story of free abseiling into the Majlis al Jinn

The descent is pretty fast – between 5 and 10 minutes depending on how much you want to look around. Once on solid ground we had time to explore the cave itself. Beneath each of the 2 main entrance holes in the ceiling there is a large debris cone made of original roof material and rocks that have fallen in over the years. The pile



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

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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.



beneath Asterix hole was topped by several goat skeletons, some with their legs tied, one wonderfully mummified, and several pairs of brightly coloured Omani women's trousers (legs not tied!) In the northern side of the cave was a large damp patch that looked like it had only recently dried out from the December rains; the sticky mud had formed into hexagonal mounds. In the centre of this area were 2 low stalagmites several cm wide, created by drips falling from the ceiling some 120m above us. Against the wall we found some drapes and a forest of stalactites, but the most interesting formations were the heligmites - 'upward growing erratic stalagmites' that look not dissimilar to branching corals.



Those of us in the cave around mid-day were rewarded with the sudden arrival of a sunbeam, streaking in through the Asterix hole. The shaft of light caught the dust particles in the atmosphere in a broad beam and the well defined pool of light on the ground made a great spot for our best 'beam me up Scottie' poses.



Inside the Majlis al Jinn

While we were exploring the cave our topside support team radioed to tell us that another group had arrived on top and were preparing to descend the First Drop hole, which is the largest entrance into the Majlis. Entering through this hole puts you on top of a very large debris

mound, consequently the abseil is quite a bit shorter at only 118m in length. Using a winch system this team dropped 3 or 4 people into the cave for a quick look around before winching them back out - and maybe this is how tourists will be dropped in, in future!

After only one hour of exploration, we gathered back around the rope for a group photo and then the first team member started the long climb back out of the cave. Although the descent is quick and easy, one of the things we'd been practising in the preceding months was climbing back up 150m of rope. You do this using specialist equipment that slides easily up the rope on ascent but grips tightly when put under pressure. What we hadn't been able to account for during our practice sessions was the considerable bounce in this length of rope and the effects of the altitude, so that in the end it took each of us around 1 hour to ascend, giving us plenty of time to look around and ponder the precariousness of our position. By the time our last team member emerged from Cheryl's drop it was dark on the surface and bats were flitting through the slot.

Although very rough and rocky on the plateau we found enough flat ground to pitch our tents, and round a warming fire we toasted the success of our inaugural caving trip - at least we all lived to tell the tale! *Thanks to Angela Manthorpe* (Ed: Angela has supplied a bibliography which you may obtain by emailing her. And local press reports indicate the Majlis is now closed to the public until arrangements are made to regulate tourist use. Check this out before you plan a trip to it!)

Olive Ridley Turtles of Masirah Island:

Tracked Through the Oceans for the First Time in Arabia

Masirah Island, Oman, hosts four species of nesting turtles, Loggerheads, Greens, Hawksbills and Olive Ridelys. The Olive Ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) nesting population is the only important one in the Arabian Peninsula. Mainly

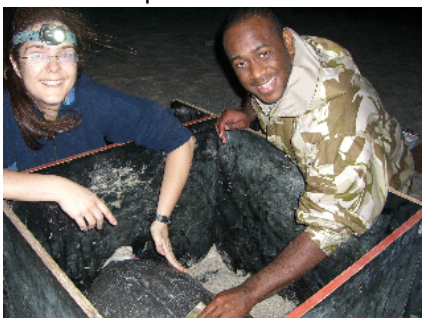


due to the difficult access to their nesting beaches, these turtles have hardly been studied at all, and no migration information is available to date. It is hoped that this project will shed light on their feeding, nesting and migrating behaviour.



Cementing on the transmitter

The Olive Ridley is the smallest turtle, weighing up to 45kg and reaching up to 80cm of curved carapace length. They have a sister species, the Kemp's Ridley, which is the most endangered turtle species on the planet. In Arabic, Olive Ridleys are called "Tekshar" or "Zaytooni". They are best known for their huge synchronized nestings, called "arribadas", on some beaches of the world, such as Orissa, India and Ostional, Costa Rica, but in Masirah this is not happening. Unlike those in any other part of the world, Olive Ridleys in Masirah nest on the same beaches as Hawksbills. Like other turtle species, females lay about 100-120 eggs every time they nest. However, like everywhere else, these animals tend to cover their nests in a characteristic "thumping" way, different from all other turtle species.



The main diet of the Olive Ridley consists of crabs and shrimps, but also jellyfish and seasquirts. Their jaws are powerful despite their small size. Threatened like all other turtle species, Olive Ridleys are illegally hunted for their skin, used to make leather (illegally, too) in Mexico. But the biggest threat to these turtles is being caught as by-catch in fishing nets.

A recent study has revealed that turtles of this species dive down to 200 metres. Deepest of all hard-shelled turtles? Possibly. This is still being studied, and it is hoped this satellite telemetry project will demonstrate it.

The Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs of Oman has recently intensified its efforts to gain more knowledge of sea turtles, focusing on satellite telemetry. Within the context of these efforts and as a continuation of the three-year turtle conservation project, which included the pioneering and successful Loggerhead turtle telemetry mission on Masirah Island in May 2006 (more about that in a future issue of *Gazelle*), TOTAL S.A. Muscat and TOTAL Corporate Foundation for Biodiversity and the Sea are now sponsoring this Olive Ridley telemetry project. Later, in the summer of 2008, a Green turtle telemetry project will take place at Masirah providing evidence of migration routes and raising awareness of this threatened and depleted population.



Wired! Nine transmitters were attached to Olive Ridley turtles.

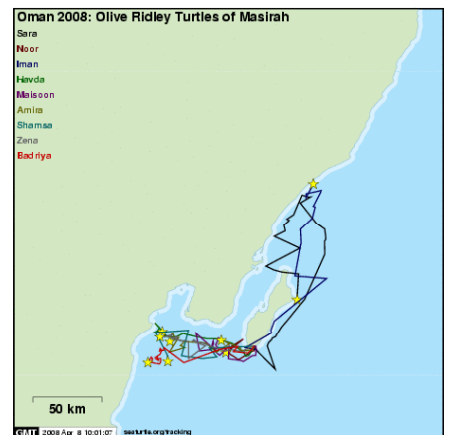
The turtles were sought on what seemed to be the "busiest" beach for Hawksbill and Olive Ridley turtles in Masirah Island this time of the year. A rough beach line of 4

kilometres (south-east beach of Ras Shibab) was scouted by the team every night just before and after high tide. A quota of one to two Olive Ridley and Hawksbill turtles were spotted every night, as well as tracks of previous nesting turtles. Seven turtles received regular location transmitters (Kiwisat 101) and two received location and depth-measuring transmitters.



To find out more about these turtles migrations and follow them on the web, click on the following link:

http://www.seaturtle.org/tracking/index.shtml?project_id=278



Satellite map of the 9 turtles movements on 8 April 2008

Report by Nancy Papathanasopoulou, Masirah Turtle Conservation Project Coordinator

Next month: Meet the turtles! Nancy tells us about their individual sojourns.





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Environmental Impact Assessments

Environmental Impact Assessments are big business in the UAE at the moment, but many experienced persons are sceptical about whether the resulting EIAs are taken into account to any significant extent in planning development projects, or whether they are just another bureaucratic and/or PR box to tick off on the road to official approval and public and international acceptance. There is certainly room for cynicism, as in the case of studies done after site preparation has started.

Some EIA consultants have insisted, however, that (although they are not allowed to reveal details) certain project owners and project consultants have been very receptive to information about sites of environmental or historical concern,

and have been willing to make changes, both large and small, to accommodate their preservation. This is encouraging and is a reminder that there is value in staying in the game, even when the odds seem to be against you, rather than throwing in the towel.
Report by Gary Feulner

On the Beach ...



Helga and Willy Meyer report finding this very yellow locust dead on the beach opposite the Town Centre. They enquired whether Gary Feulner knew about these locusts, and he did not. Have any of our members seen such a locust in the UAE (or elsewhere)?

The Meyers have kept the locust, dried and well preserved, if you would like to see it.



And on the subject of 'beach locusts', Jenny Hill and Colin found a live one on the coral beach (below) during the February shelling trip to the east coast. It looked more like the usual suspect, and is shown here for comparison.



Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

May 04 Geckoes of south-east Arabia - Drew Gardner

Jun 01 A southern route out of Africa: how new discoveries in the UAE are rewriting the
Palaeolithic history of the Arabian Peninsula - Dr Julie Scott-Jackson

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

May 09 Sea shell identification workshop with Anne Millen

Additional trips and details may be announced by e-mail circular.