

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعية

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

DNHG Membership

Marijcke Jongbloed has written from France to inform us that the dense arbours in Mushrif Park, depicted in the June issue of *Gazelle*, are formed by the coral vine, *Antigonon leptopus*, a member of the Polygonaceae (buckwheat family). In between correspondence Marijcke is continuing her writing with several books published and soon-to-be published, gardening and hosting old friends from the UAE – and learning about viticulture.



Flowering exterior of the arbour formed by coral vine, *Antigonon leptopus*

Richard Morris and friends were enjoying a mid-summer lunch under a ghaf tree along the mountain front when he noticed movement on a dead branch and saw the colourful insect shown opposite. They photographed it and watched its activity. As Richard describes it, "The insect repeatedly covered the same circu-

lar route on the branch as if he was looking for his lost keys."

The insect is the sulfurous jewel beetle, *Julodis euphratica*, one of the UAE's larger and more colorful beetles. They are not common but not rare either. They also fly, somewhat noisily and with a distinctly tail heavy orientation that makes one wonder if they'll succeed in staying aloft. Some smaller members of the jewel beetle group are less common, and also less flashy, but with iridescent blues or greens.

What identifies these insects as beetles (Order Coleoptera) and not "true bugs" (Order Hemiptera) is the hard carapace and the absence of visible wings. The wings are folded beneath the hard cover, which opens up to fly, somewhat like a James Bond car.



Sulfurous jewel beetle, *Julodis euphratica*

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.) Subscriptions paid now are good through to August 2011.

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:

- Marijcke Jongbloed
- Richard Morris
- Gary Feulner
- Ajmal Hasan
- Narayan Karki
- Richard Hornby
- Jean Allan
- Drew Gardner



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



Autumn Birding Morning Friday 24 Sept

Gary Feulner will lead a trip to the Dubai Pivot Fields, one of the best birdwatching sites in the immediate vicinity for most of the resident birds as well as early migrants. Afterwards we will make short (and optional) visits to Al Warsen Lake and Hide #3 at Ras al-Khor (closed Friday, but we can watch through the fence). A pair of binoculars will be essential.

Meet promptly at 7:30am at the pivot fields. (Remember, the birds get up early.) Take the Awir Road (towards Awir) and turn right after Dragon Mart (as if you were going to the sewage plant). After only about 75m, turn left and follow the road to the corner of a tree-lined plantation on the left. Just around the corner is the entrance, where we will meet. We may have to walk in, not drive, so bring a small pack with water, reference books, etc. We will finish before lunch.

Call Gary for info or questions: 04-306-5570 (home/messages), 04-706-0111 (office/messages), 050-553-9830 (mostly off), or e-mail grfeulner@gmail.com. New members can join at the site.

Sharjah Aquarium & Maritime Museum with Sandhya Fri 8 Oct

Details coming. Wonderful day!

Eco-Tour Kayaking in Abu Dhabi Fri 15 Oct

This trip is run by Noukhada Adventure Co. Cost is Dhs 200 (100 for children) for a two hour trip. For details, contact Jenny Hill jenny-hill76@hotmail.com

Dibba plant nursery with Christophe Tourenq Sat 6 Nov

Please note: the contact person is Valerie Chalmers, *not* Jenny. valeriechalmers@gmail.com

Turtle Rescue Centre, Burj Al Arab Several dates in November

The Centre is being renovated, so as yet we have no firm dates. These trips, coordinated by Val Chalmers and on several days because of the numbers of people who expressed interest, will take place in November.

Zanzibar with Sonja Lavrenčić 12 - 17 or 20 November

Registration for this trip is now closed and all details finalised.

Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve 26/27 Nov (to be confirmed)

No details are available yet, but it is likely to be a full day in the desert.

Socotra Island 1 - 8 Dec

Details are finalised. There are still a few places left, but if you want to join, you need to contact Pradeep wgarnet@emirates.net.ae as soon as possible. Cost will be approx. Dhs 6050. There will be a day in Sana'a on the way to Socotra where there will be one overnight camp.

Nature Hike with Gary 10 Dec

This will be a wadi walk in the mountains "with a few ups and downs" and will be a full day. Details available closer to the time.

Further trips proposed:

- * Sharjah Aquarium and maritime museum
- * Camping trip to Jebel Shams and Hoti Caves
- * Breeding Centre for Endangered Species, Sharjah Desert Park
- * Sir Abu Nu'air
- * Musandam dhow day
- * Bat-spotting

Our Next Speaker

While living in Bahrain, amid an estimated 170,000 burial mounds and a landscape unlike anything he had ever seen before, **Brien Holmes** had the very good fortune to crash an archaeology conference and enjoy a field trip with Geoffrey Bibby. When he reached Abu Dhabi a few years later, and then Al Ain, he was fortunate to discover a trove of material in the Bulletins of the Emirates Natural History Group. Brien would describe himself as an enthusiastic amateur with a curiosity born in years working as a journalist, in Canada and the Gulf, who has had the very good fortune to meet some incredible and unselfish individuals who, like him, seem to work for the weekends. He has had more careers while living in the Gulf than Joseph had colors on his coat. Currently, his official title is 'managing editor' of publications at United Arab Emirates University in Al Ain.

Many years ago, Brien volunteered to assume the duties of Chair of the Al Ain chapter after the death of our previous Chair, until a new Chair could be appointed. He's been hopeless at finding a replacement and fears he may suffer the same fate.

He has taught a variety of computer, business and economics courses at assorted universities and colleges; he's been hired as an instructor in English, as we all seem to do from time to time, and has been assigned a variety of mass communications courses given his early careers in newspapers and television. He has had the very good fortune to work with some of the region's most experienced naturalists, including one of the world's authorities on spiny-tailed lizards. In his free time he loves hiking in the mountains, mapping copper mines and copper smelting sites, and sharing his enthusiasm and experiences with anyone who shares his interests.



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

Hardly Expecting a Crowded Beach ...

Ajmal Hasan, DNHG member and current Chief Engineer, has been busy during the hot summer months heading out to the beaches, deserts, wadis and mountains of the UAE.

At the end of July, he and Andy Jones (a fellow DNHG member) were at Umm Al Quwain breakwater and witnessed a spectacular sight - a huge flock of perhaps >10,000 Socotra cormorants which were diving for fish by the shoreline and coming on shore to dry their wings. He managed to take a few pictures from afar as these birds are extremely shy and would take wing from hundreds of metres away as soon as they realised they were being approached.



Socotra cormorants
Phalacrocorax nigrogularis
Umm Al Quwain

Ajmal's photograph has been short listed for the Ocean in Focus Conservation Photography Contest 2010 with the Marine Photo Bank Project (www.marinephotobank.org) - an initiative of SeaWeb). This has encouraged him to go out and buy a new camera, a high-end Canon SLR "to bring out the photographer in him". *Thanks to Ajmal Hasan for text and photograph.*



Walking Catfish

Downtown Dubai is not the only place to find "Summer Surprises". It was a revelation to learn this summer that the African Catfish, *Clarias gariepinus*, is present in the UAE and has reportedly been here for as long as eight or nine years, having been brought from Bangladesh as a combination sport and food fish, to be caught in small numbers on weekends for the table.



A young African catfish, *Clarias gariepinus*

A native of Africa, where it has an almost pan-African distribution in rivers, lakes and swamps, the fish farming potential of *C. gariepinus* was recognized in the 1970s and 1980s and it was introduced in many places elsewhere. In Bangladesh it is known as *maghour* and is a popular food fish (my sources in rural Bangladesh reckon it "very tasty").

It is hardy, tolerant of foul water conditions and can be fed just about anything. In ideal conditions it can grow up to 1.5m in length and 50kg in weight. In the UAE, specimens up to 5 kg are reported and I have personally seen a ~2kg fish caught on a hook and line. It is omnivorous and, although primarily a scavenger, it has a large mouth and can take live prey including other fish and occasionally even water birds.

In its present circumstances, in a restricted access area where no native fish (and reportedly no fish at all) were previously present, it is primarily a curiosity. There is considerable doubt whether it could thrive in typical natural UAE envi-

ronments. No *Clarias* catfish are native to present day Arabia or Iran. Nevertheless, in less extreme environments it is generally considered a potentially troublesome invasive species. It is a relative of the smaller Southeast Asian *Clarias batrachus*, the so-called walking catfish, which has made headlines for decades by overrunning much of the state of Florida in the southeastern United States. Both *C. batrachus* and *C. gariepinus* have accessory breathing organs and can "walk" modest distances, using stiff spines in their pectoral fins, and can thereby migrate overland to escape deteriorating conditions or to reach small ephemeral water bodies that other fish cannot.

Report and photograph by Gary Feulner

Fan-Footed Gecko Catching Dragonflies

The relatively dry weather of June made the mountain wadis pleasant enough, even in the summer heat, and gave us a good opportunity to watch the fan-footed gecko (*Ptyodactylus hasselquistii*) in action, stalking and catching the small red dragonfly, the gully darter *Trithemis arteriosa*, that is the most common dragonfly in the local wadi environment. Our observations were made by day on sub-vertical rock cliffs adjacent to wadi pools, all at sites sheltered from direct sunlight but at midday hours, from late morning to mid-afternoon.



Fan-footed gecko *Ptyodactylus hasselquistii*
Photograph by Drew Gardner

In the first instance we were watching the gecko, perched head-downward on the cliff, when it suddenly darted forward (downward)



about 30cm (in what seemed to be a slightly interrupted movement) to take a *T. arteriosa* male from behind, catching it by the abdomen. The dragonfly tried to escape by flapping its wings, but the gecko (apparently using its front legs to assist) maneuvered its prey into a head-first position and commenced swallowing. With the dragonfly half-way down, the gecko ascended the short distance to its original perch and finished swallowing in what seemed to be about two more gulps, then finished the meal by wiping its lips on the rock face.



Male gully darter *Trithemis arteriosa*, the most common dragonfly in Hajar Mountain wadis

This made us more attentive to the other fan-footed geckos we encountered the same day in similar circumstances. One, very patient, waited while a male *T. arteriosa* perched in two nearby locations, each about 30cm or less away. But each time, the dragonfly was either above or to the side of the gecko, and the surface in between was undulating or creviced, which (we supposed) made a successful attack more difficult. More importantly, in each case the dragonfly was facing the gecko. Eventually, after several minutes and several changes of position by the dragonfly, the gecko did attack by darting forward, but it seemed a half-hearted effort and was unsuccessful. Perhaps it was made more to change the status quo than with any hope of success. *Report by Gary Feulner and Narayan Karki*



Ants Carrying Ants

In the course of inspecting various environments in Mushrif Park, we found a nest of large desert runner ants (probably *Cataglyphis* sp.), of which there seem to be a number of different species in the UAE. The ones in question at Mushrif had a red head and thorax and black abdomen.

Immediately in front of the entrance to the nest, a small number of ants were "sweeping the porch", depositing and then distributing sand excavated from within the nest. Scattered ants traveling within a few metres of the entrance attracted our attention because they were carrying odd-shaped bits which appeared to be other similar ants, or parts of other ants.



Desert Runner ants in Mushrif Park: transferor and transferee separated

We caught several of these in a film canister, each time with the result that we netted two ants, both very much alive, active and able-bodied, and very similar in appearance. Close inspection, however, showed that one member of the pair always had a slightly larger head and smaller abdomen than the other.

Apparently what we were seeing was one caste of the ant colony carrying another caste, over distances of four metres or more. The ant being carried (which we supposed was the one with the smaller head and jaws) seemed always to fold its body to create a more compact (and more enigmatic) load.

Only two weeks later we were surprised to see the same phenomenon in the mountains near Shawkah. Again, the ants were *Cataglyphis* sp.,

but this time an all-black species. Most of the ants we saw were carrying bits of what appeared to be the flowers of *Acacia tortilis*, but a few seemed to be carrying other ants.

We captured a pair and determined that, again, they were of the same two types, and this time we confirmed that in fact the big-jawed ant was doing the carrying. That was easy because, in the second instance, even captivity in a film canister did not overcome the ants' instincts, and they resumed the carrying posture, with the carry-ee re-folded into a convenient bundle.



Desert Runner ants from Shawkah: ants in transport posture

The reason for such behaviour was not evident to us from observation, but we found it discussed in the monumental *The Ants* (Hölldobler & Wilson, 1998) under the rubric of "adult transport". It is common in many kinds of ants for workers to lead and/or carry ants of other castes, and even other workers, when emigrating to a new nest, which itself is a common occurrence for ants. The adult transport phenomenon is sufficiently instinctive that the folding and carrying postures differ among major groups of ants, and can therefore be used broadly as a taxonomic guide.

Consistent with established wisdom, in our *Cataglyphis* ants, which belong to the Sub-Family Formicinae, the transferee ant folded itself into a tight fetal position and was carried looking rearward. *Report by Gary Feulner and Narayan Karki*

Members' Night will be held on 12 December. This is your big chance to present a talk on your favourite natural history subject! See p.7 ...



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

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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,
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Plants – Valerie Chalmers

Seashells - 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.



A Wonderful Summer if You Have Cold Blood

In early August, Ajmal Hasan visited Hatta Pools where he came across some beautiful Arabian toads (*Bufo arabicus*) which were plentiful.



Bufo arabicus

The same day he heard some commotion amongst a small crowd of labourers behind the Hatta Fort Hotel. On investigation, it turned out that a snake, a wadi racer (*Platyceps rhodoracis*), had unfortunately ventured near their accommodation and they were beating it mercilessly. His shouts from afar to stop were too late as the snake was severely mauled (but still alive) when he finally stopped the mayhem. Alas, it breathed its last in his hands. Able to converse in their tongue, he advised them not to attack this snake the next time it was encountered but rather to let it pass or, with extreme care, have it transported back to the wadis or mountains where it belonged, as its venom is not potent enough to harm humans - it is rather designed to kill mice and other small rodents.



Wadi racer, *Platyceps rhodoracis*, in a somewhat sorry state

In Al Ain towards the end of August, Ajmal was fortunate to be at Al Jimi Oasis where he was searching for the now infamous oasis snakes of Al Ain (possibly rat snakes) that have been reported by a fellow herper. He found a white-eared bulbul chick that had fallen on the grass below its nest whilst being taught to take wing by its parents.



Juvenile white-eared bulbul

With so many cats in the immediate area, the chick was in danger and Ajmal was able to locate its nest (thanks mainly to papa-bird's frantic chirping) on a nearby tree where, with some difficulty climbing and a few pecks from papa, he was finally able to place it back in its nest.

During a visit to the Al Batayeh desert area in Sharjah in early September, Ajmal came across many toad headed agamas and white spotted lizards.



White spotted lizard
Acanthodactylus schmidti

He noticed unusual behavior from the toad headed agamas. Whenever he splashed some water on his face to cool off and a few drops fell near them, they sank into the sand and buried themselves as soon as water drops hit the desert sand. He tried this out with three separate individuals and all did ex-



actly the same. This got him wondering why they didn't do this when they saw him in the first place. He was able to videotape this and you can watch it on the internet at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Lamt34PiK4>.



Toad headed agama
Phrynocephalus arabicus

Ajmal's next trip is planned for the end of September when he intends to search for and photograph the Persian wonder gecko and saw scaled vipers in the wild, probably in the vicinity of Qarn Nazwa. *Text and photographs by Ajmal Hasan.*

"Wadi Long-Legs"

Most members will be familiar with the so-called "Daddy Long-Legs" spiders, which belong to the Family Pholcidae. In more northerly temperate regions such as the U.K., Pholcids are found only in buildings, but they are considered cosmopolitan in warmer climates. They are not, however, common in UAE mountains and wadis. I had never seen one until, on an early July wadi hike near Juwayf with a hot wind blowing in from the desert, I took a cooling-off break in a deep pothole pool.

Under a shady overhang, not far from where a number of damselflies were sheltering, I noticed the familiar shape of a daddy long-legs, slightly orange-coloured, on a thin sheet web spun parallel to and just above (actually just below) the slanting surface of the rock. At first it did not respond to my movement and I thought, despite its fresh look, that it might be dead or be a moulted exoskeleton or exuvium.

But when I touched its leg, it flinched and began to vibrate its web back and forth. That reaction is typical of daddy-long-legs (and also of many orb-web spiders). Identification to the family level was confirmed by the pattern of the 8 eyes, with two clusters of three large eyes at either side and two smaller eyes between them.



"Wadi long-legs" spider, Family Pholcidae, from a wadi near Juwayf

Imagine my surprise, then, when I encountered a similar spider just a few weeks later, far to the north in the Musandam range. It was Narayan Karki who called it to my attention on the roof of a long, low cave below a massive dry waterfall in a tributary of Wadi Bih. We managed a few photographs, although this was an awkward process. The spiders from the two sites were obviously very similar, but the abdomen of the cave spider was much more distinctively patterned and seemed to be somewhat more bulbous and less bristly.



A Pholcid spider in a cave in the Musandam, showing the spherical egg case (at right) and the moulted exoskeletons of baby spiders (white wisps at left)

The cave spider also displayed the spherical, thinly wrapped cluster of eggs characteristic of Pholcids. Our photos show the egg cluster sus-

pending in the web rather than held in the female spider's jaws, as is typical. However, our photos also show the moulted exoskeletons of numerous baby spiders, so perhaps the eggs we saw had already hatched. *Report and photographs by Gary Feulner*

The Importance of Dietary Semantics:

Richard Hornby comments on Gary Feulner's article "The Importance of Dietary Salt" in our last issue

On occasion I have experienced severe pains and cramps as a result of imbalance in salt levels. I generally sort it out by drinking Pocari Sweat or Isostar when in the field. My main symptom when it has gone wrong is a pain in the lower right side of my chest - presumably a muscle cramp in a funny place. If my salt balance has been wrong after some trip, I am likely to suffer attacks of cramp in bed at night, maybe up to three days later.

I once had a bad experience on Saadiyat Island. I went out early one morning to catch a boat to the island. I had thought that the few cans in the frig were Isostar but they turned out to be ... erm — not a drink that rehydrates but a certain popular 'energy drink', and I could not buy any Isostar on the way! I took one with me and set out on a good long walk.

It was May, and pretty hot. I walked a long way, drank lots of water, but after a while I felt fairly fatigued, so thought I would try the 'energy drink'. Big mistake! I had to walk about 5 km back in the middle of the day, so I took frequent dips in the sea, but I found when I relaxed in the water that I immediately had cramps in my calves. I therefore walked pretty well directly back along the beach to a "rest house" but when I got there I had to climb a little incline of about one metre, and my calves immediately locked up, so that I couldn't even stand! In fact I fell straight onto my back.



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Fortunately I was rescued, took some salt and within 30 minutes I was fine. But if those cramps had got me when I was walking along the shore, I might not have been alive today! *Thanks to Richard Hornby for this warning.*

Website for Hawkmoths

Members interested in hawkmoths (Family Sphingidae), which are among the larger moths found in Dubai and the region, now have a new resource, a website created by A.R. (Tony) Pittaway, called *Sphingidae of the Western Palearctic*. The URL is <http://tpittaway.tripod.com/sphinx/>



Caterpillar photographed by Jean Allan in her Umm Suqeim garden, March 2007



Not fussy, just very hungry

Among the commonly observed hawkmoths in Dubai are the Oleander Hawkmoth, the Death's Head Hawkmoth and the Silver-Striped Hawkmoth. The new website includes images of the adult, larval and pupal stages of some 90 species as well as information about their ecology and (dynamic) distribution. The website is, naturally, especially useful for European observers as well.

Tony Pittaway is already well-known as a co-author of *Insects of Eastern Arabia* (Walker & Pittaway 1987), a classic gem that can now be accessed in pdf form on the

www.enhg.com website. *Thanks to Christophe Tourenq of EWS-WWF for alerting us to this new resource.*

Members' Night

This is your big chance. Members are invited to give a short talk or lecture on the natural history topic of their choice.

If you have interesting photographs and detail about a natural history subject that fascinates you, put it together and contact our Speaker Coordinators Martina Fella and Michelle Sinclair (details above) for a slot on our Members' Night programme.

Talks should be 20 minutes in length and illustrated either by PowerPoint or slides. Technical aspects can be dealt with by our engineer Ajmal Hasan.

So ... if you are interested, start now by contacting Martina or Michelle!

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

Sun Oct 3	Brien Holmes: The Falaj Systems in and around Al Ain.
Sun Nov 7	Sabir Bin Muzaffar: Ecology and Conservation of Migratory Birds.
Sun Dec 12	Members' Night

Field Trips (Members only, please.)

Sep 24	Dubai Autumn Birdwatching Morning
Oct 8	Sharjah Aquarium and Maritime Museum
Oct 15	Eco-tour Kayaking in Abu Dhabi
Nov 6	Dibba Plant Nursery
Nov (several dates)	Turtle Rescue Centre
Nov 12 - 17 / 20	Zanzibar
Nov 26 / 27 (TBC)	Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve
Dec 1 - 8	Socotra Island
Dec 10	Mountain/Wadi Nature Hike

Further field trips, details or changes will be announced or confirmed by e-mail circular.