

GAZELLE

Vol 25 no 10 October 2010



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

News from Afar and a Farewell

Chairman **Gary Feulner** is currently out of e-contact in Nepal, but before going incommunicado he wrote to mention that, apart from enjoying colorful Kathmandu, he had already encountered more than 20 species of dragonflies, and even a species of *Garra* (the UAE's most common wadi fish), all within a half kilometer radius of **Narayan Karki's** home on the outskirts of the city.



Carol Goodwright, one of our keen shell collectors, wrote from the UK, "In Devon, Sylais and I visited a strange little house with 16 sides called A La Ronde near Exmouth. It was built in the late 18th century by wealthy spinster cousins who travelled around the world for 10 years collecting shells. Many of the shells were recognisable to me from our Dubai days, others collected from

the Phillipines, Australasia and the Americas. All the shells were beautifully labeled. The house, with a kind of lighthouse lantern on the top floor entirely decorated with local shells, was built with so many sides so that the most could be made of natural light."



The DNHG says farewell this month to **Helga and Willy Meyer**, who have been active members for several years and are very keen shell collectors and beach combers. From that point of view, they will probably enjoy their new home, Vietnam. Helga and Willy hail from Namibia, so they are looking forward to seeing the very different Asian flora and fauna. We wish them well and hope to hear news of their activities there.

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.) 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:

- Carol Goodwright
- Michael Jennings
- Mairead Porter
- Narayan Karki
- Brien Holmes
- Gary Feulner



Photograph by Carol Goodwright

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



Jebel Shams Trip 28 - 30 Oct

Plan: Thurs 28th, independent travel to Iabri Hotel via Al Ain Mazyad border. Stay overnight. Cost per room 360R (roughly 360Dh) You must book your own rooms: ph 0096825689955 and ask for Fatima or Leo. Booking under Margaret Porter / Dubai Natural History Group. 7 rooms are reserved, mixture of king and twin beds. Dinner will be available when you arrive (extra, not expensive and good) if you book it when making room booking.

Fri 29th, early breakfast (small extra charge) drive on to Jebel Shams area. Friday may include the rim walk and/or walk up Wadi Damm. This will be finalised later and you will have full information before travel. Camp that night on or near top of Jebel Shams. Warm clothing needed as temperature will drop significantly. Bring everything you need.

Sat 30th, continue exploration of Jebel Shams in morning, return to Dubai via Al Ain in the afternoon.

Check out this link for more info and pics; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jebel_Shams For registration contact sonja@publicisgraphics.ae 0502561496 or Mairead: porter-mme@hotmail.com 0556561949

Dibba plant nursery with Christophe Tourenq Sat 6 Nov

Permission has been obtained from the Ministry of Environment and Water for a group of Dubai Natural History Group members to visit the Dibba Plant Nursery, a well-maintained nursery of indigenous plants and trees. The plan is to meet at the Nursery at about 9.30 a.m. We are also hoping to study some of the archaeology in the surrounding area after our visit to the Nursery. Maximum number for trip is 25. To sign up for the trip and for further details please contact Valerie Chalmers on 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. Places will still have to be limited to 20 each trip. For registration please contact valeriechalmers@gmail.com

Zanzibar with Sonja Lavrenčič 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

Pradeep advises that details are finalised and the trip is full, with 24 participants. Any further people registered will be placed on a waiting list in case there are emergency cancellations. For anything in connection with this, contact Pradeep wgarnet@emirates.net.ae as soon as possible.

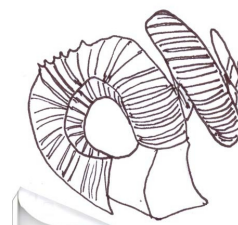
Hajar Mountain Nature Hike 10 Dec

Gary Feulner will lead a full day nature hike in the Hajar Mountains near Hatta. Mixed emphasis on plants, animals, insects, geology and archeology. This will be a walk, not a climb, but there are no trails, the ground is typically rough and uneven, and we will ascend and descend several slopes between the wadi bed and gravel terraces. In addition, we will cross one low pass with loose scree on the descent, requiring careful attention to footing.. 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 3 liters of water, lunch, hat, sun cream, camera, binoculars, etc. 4WD preferred. Leave Dubai ~7:00am, estimated return ~6:30pm. Limit 15 people. For further information and sign-up, contact Gary at grfeulner@gmail.com or call 306-5570 (home) to leave message. (Note: Gary is currently out-of-town until Nov 24 and will also be away on the DNHG's Socotra trip in early Dec.)

Our Next Speaker

Valerie Chalmers has lived in Dubai for 35 years. She taught biology at the Latifa School for Girls for 19 years and retired in 2006. Her interests in plants and fossils stem from her plant ecology courses and one-year geology course which formed part of her B.Sc Special Honours Degree in Botany from King's College, London University. She furthered her interests when she joined the Ladies Ecology Group in 1980 and started to collect both plants and fossils. She is a founder member of the DNHG and is currently vice-chairman, secretary and plant and fossils recorder. Valerie was awarded the Bish Brown Award for 2003 in recognition of her contributions towards a better understanding and appreciation of the natural history of the UAE. She has regularly visited the Natural History Museum in London for many years and members of the Palaeontology Department, notably Dr Andrew Smith and Dr Noel Morris, have helped with the identification of fossils which she has collected on her fossils trips in the UAE and Northern Oman and have maintained close links with her.





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.

Garra Feeding on Drowned Hornets

The large, red-and-yellow oriental hornet (*Vespa orientalis*), a common inhabitant of UAE wadis, is a formidable insect that has sent many a pack of picnickers packing. It has, however, a fatal weakness: Although it must drink regularly and comes to puddles, pools and seeps for that purpose, it is too heavy to take off from the surface of a puddle or pool if it has made a landing on open water. Yet for some reason Mother Nature has not yet eliminated that propensity, with the result that one can regularly find at least small numbers of dead (drowned) hornets floating on the surface of wadi pools.

Watching summer pond life in a large pothole pool in the Juwayf area in northernmost Oman gave us new insight into how the common wadi fish, *Garra barreimiae*, makes use of the windfall protein represented by dead hornets, in a generally resource-poor environment. By design, *G. barreimiae* is a bottom feeder. Its mouth is specialized and resembles a modified suction cup. It is typically seen close to the substrate (the bottom or rocky sides of a pool) and feed on algae or detritus. Normally only fry, adolescents or the smallest adults are found swimming in mid-water or above.

The main pool we observed, more than 2 meters deep, was mostly shaded when we arrived at about 8:30am. Hornets as well as birds (Desert Lark and Hume's Wheat-ear) were visiting to drink and some 10 or so *V. orientalis*, most dead but some recently landed and still struggling, were seen on the surface, along with a couple of dead dragonflies and a small assortment of other miscellaneous flying insects. We watched from the steep cliff walls about 3m above

the water surface, but had a good view.

To our surprise, medium-sized *Garra* repeatedly surfaced individually to investigate hornet and other insect corpses floating at the surface. If a suitable one was found, the fish pulled it underwater and descended out of sight, presumably to enjoy the feast, most likely in company with other *Garra*.



The common wadi fish, *Garra barreimiae*, a specialised member of the carp family

Optimism seemed to be the order of the day, because the fish often visited the largest and most conspicuous hornet corpses first, but they were almost invariably unable to deal with these, most likely because the fresh corpses were still too buoyant. The fish would attach to the hornet, almost always at the head, and then spin the corpse in circles trying to get a grip and/or pull it under. This might be repeated with another large hornet corpse before finally settling on something smaller, more decomposed and waterlogged, and pulling it under and out of sight. We watched this phenomenon at least a dozen times.

Thereafter, we paid closer attention at other wadi pools to the association between fish populations and the number of hornet corpses present, and we were satisfied, at least impressionistically, that where there was a substantial number of fish, there were fewer insect corpses on the surface, as if the fish were in fact 'cleaning up', at least eventually. Other apparent scavengers on the floating hornet carcasses included backswimmers (an aquatic bug).

We also saw at least one *Garra* feeding on the underside of a wadi fig leaf floating at the surface, and several *Garra* together feeding on a waterlogged leaf in mid-water. In the latter instance the fish appeared to be eating the leaf itself, rather than feeding on any surface growth. Report by Gary Feulner and Narayan Karki

Pheasants in the Musandam

The UAE remains full of surprises, large and small, for the attentive naturalist. A big one recently was to encounter pheasants in the higher Ru'us al-Jibal (the mountains of the Musandam region). In the course of a day's hiking in early May we came across four birds, two alive and two dead (a carcass and a severed head), spaced over a distance of about 2-1/2 kilometres and including the upper reaches of two different watersheds, at more than 1000 metres elevation.

The birds in question were the common pheasant *Phasianus colchicus* (also sometimes called the ring-necked pheasant, the Chinese pheasant and/or the true pheasant). The common pheasant, like the vast majority of pheasant-like birds, originated in Asia but it is now considered naturalized in Europe and North America.

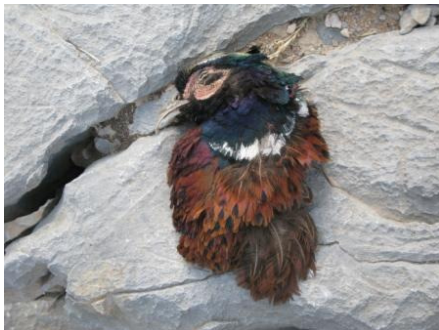
The more detailed taxonomy of this species is a nightmare because it encompasses some 30 subspecies in 5-6 groups ranging naturally from the Caucasus to China. The subspecies vary in colouration, especially wing coverts, rump coverts and presence or absence of a white neck ring. This natural diversity is further complicated by extensive captive breeding, hybridisation of breeding stocks and introduction worldwide for sport hunting purposes. [Source: Wikipedia]

The birds we saw in the Ru'us al-Jibal seem to have been hybrids of subspecies from the western



(Caucasus) and central (Mongolian) population groups, as indicated by their brown mottled wing coverts, chestnut to purplish rump coverts and prominent white neck ring.

The pheasants were probably introduced into a localised area, almost certainly for hunting purposes, as they have been elsewhere. This is supported by the neatly severed head. We could not determine the cause of death of the carcass, which was largely intact. The area in question, which is within the UAE, has recently seen an upsurge in the population of expatriate laborers involved in the refurbishment and/or new construction of homes in several of the high terraced settlements in the area, and a corresponding increase in visits by local owners.



Severed head of a common pheasant *Phasianus colchicus* from the high Ru'us al-Jibal

No doubt it seemed like a good idea to introduce the birds for sport, but it is open to question whether the pheasants can be expected to survive in the arid to semi-arid climate of the Ru'us al-Jibal. The birds were most likely introduced during the past winter (they were not encountered during multiple visits a year earlier) and they therefore benefited from above average winter rain, but they had yet to face the test of the Arabian summer. On the other hand, the natural range of the Common Pheasant includes semi-arid steppes of Central Asia, including northern Iran, so their survival can't simply be written off. An equally serious concern for the prospects of propagation and establishment, however, is that all four of the birds we encountered

were males. At any rate, it will be interesting to monitor the fate of these newcomers.

All four of the pheasants we saw were found in gently sloping gravel wadis with a (relatively) abundant cover of almond trees *Prunus arabica*. The first pheasant was particularly tolerant of our approach. Initially it simply walked away from us, despite an encounter at relatively close range (ca. 8m, but through brush). It moved more quickly as our interest became increasingly obvious, and finally, alarmed by our persistent approach, it flew some 100 metres ahead and took shelter out of sight.

Report and photograph by Gary Feulner



Volunteer Shark Research Assistants From October 2010 TO December 2011

Brien Holmes sent the following advertisement. Applications were to be in before the beginning of October, but if they are short of hands, you may still be lucky now.

Volunteer research assistants are required to assist with the long term research and monitoring program of the 'UAE Shark Monitoring Project'. The project is part of a PhD study on the shark fishery in the UAE with a focus on species diversity, distribution and abundance, feeding ecology and the fin trade.

The research is focused on four of the seven Emirates in the UAE and all field work will be conducted from Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah. All laboratory work will be carried out at the Marine Biology Lab at the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) in Al Ain.

The research project will run from

October 2010 to December 2011. This is a long term project and volunteers are expected to commit to the project for at least 5 days of field work during the whole period.



Sharks at Dubai fish market
Photograph by Martina Fella

This is an excellent opportunity to gain experience in shark identification, landing sites and market surveying, dissections, analyzing stomach contents, staging reproductive systems, fishing gear configuration and general data collection skills that can be obtained from participating in marine fieldwork.

Research assistants will be responsible for assisting the project leader in all aspects of research and associated tasks for land-based, boat-based and laboratory activities. Duties include, but are not limited to:

- 1. Land-based activities:

Weekly field work at one of the landing sites across the UAE (4:30 am in Abu Dhabi; 4 pm in Dubai; 7 pm in Sharjah; 6:30 am 1:30 pm and 7 pm in Ras Al Khaimah)

Volunteers will be required to spend 2 to 3 hours with the project leader at these sites to collect data on landed sharks (species id, measurements, DNA samples, stomach contents).

Volunteers can also assist in the processing and data analysis of



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

Reptiles - Dr Reza Khan
res 344 8283
off 344 0462
fax (off) 349 9437

Archaeology - David Palmer
050-7387703
office direct line: 04-2072636
dpalmer@ud.ac.ae

Birds - David Bradford
davebradford9@hotmail.com

Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi
res: 06-5247 958
off: 06-5583 003
email: lankefi@emirates.net.ae

Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

Geology - Gary Feulner
res 306 5570
fax 330 3550

Insects – Gary Feulner

Fossils - Valerie Chalmers
res 349 4816,
fax 340 0990
email: valeriechalmers@hotmail.com

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.



shark stomach contents at the UAEU in Al Ain.

Data entry, equipment cleaning and maintenance and other lab task may sometimes be required.

2. Boat-based activities:
Conducted 2-3 days a month at various locations (weather permitting).

Volunteers must be comfortable on a small fiberglass boat (up to 10m in length) in moderate sea states. Daily trips will be up to 12 hours long.

Assistants will help deploy fishing lines and nets as well as sample and tag sharks using a catch and release method. Data collected will include species identification, measurements, stomach contents and DNA samples. Equipment cleaning duties will be shared.

Conditions: This is a volunteer position and is unpaid. Applicants must organize and pay for their own way to the study sites. Alternatively, they can join the project leader and depart from Dubai Marina prior to each survey.

Important Skills / Qualifications:

Reliable, good attitude, work ethic and able to get on well with other in a small team;

Ability and willingness to work long hours outdoors, in hot weather and smelly fish markets and an interest in ecology and marine science;

Competent swimming and proof of medical insurance are a **must** for volunteering on the boat activities; Previous field work experience specifically with fisheries is preferred but no prior research experience is required and full training will be provided.

How to apply:

Applicants should send an email introducing themselves to the project leader Rima Jabado at rjabado@uaeu.ac.ae or rimajabado@hotmail.com. The email should include a brief outline of why

they would like to participate in this project, which activities they are interested in, their availability (in terms of locations, days of the week, and time) and any other relevant details.

Applicants were to be notified of the outcome by October 1st 2010 and will be required to start surveying immediately.

A Note from Our Librarian



We have a small but very interesting collection of DNHG books in the Emirates Academy Library which is located above our monthly lecture venue. So why not come a little early to the next lecture – after 7pm - and I will be there to show you what is available. You can browse through the rare and wonderful books. They cannot be taken from the library but they give a good indication of what is/was generally available and you can then order your own copies with ISBNs etc.

You can also go there any time the library is open – the helpful Academy staff will guide you. Bring your DNHG membership card with you.

Opening times; Sun-Wed 8am to 10pm; Thursday 8am to 6pm; Sat 10am to 8pm; Fridays and holidays closed. Phone 043155555 if you are unsure. *Thanks to Mairead Porter for this information.*



Natural History Publications

Members are reminded that several useful publications about local natural history can be purchased at DNHG meetings and are not otherwise readily available. These include the following:

Snakes of the Arabian Gulf and Oman by Michael Gallagher. This remains the most comprehensive and authoritative guide to local snakes. Published in booklet form, it includes color photographs of all of the terrestrial snakes and many of the sea snakes that can be found in the UAE, and is very attractively priced at Dh. 20. Among other things, it should be a "must" for school libraries and scout groups.

Collectible Eastern Arabian Seashells by Dr. Donald Bosch. This is a basic field guide in booklet form with a waterproof cover, intended as a "take to the beach" book for children. It introduces the major shell groups with photos. Dr. Bosch has kindly made copies available to DNHG members at a price of Dh.25.

Wild Cats of the UAE, written by Dr. Reza Khan and published by the Dubai Municipality. This is a systematic guide to the indigenous cat species of the UAE and is also intended as a teaching tool that introduces some basic biological and ecological concepts. Dh. 25.

Wild About Cats, by Dr. Marijcke Jongbloed, surveys the endangered native cats of Arabia and discusses current efforts to study and protect them. In so doing it also chronicles Marijcke's own transformation from nature-loving physician to founder of the Arabian Leopard Trust and an award-winning conservationist. Dh. 75.

Natural Emirates, edited by Peter Vine, a beautifully illustrated and authoritative introduction to the geology, flora and fauna of the UAE, is available in limited quantity at Dh. 135. Individual chapters are written by local experts, amateur and professional. This volume makes an excellent gift item.

Desert Ecology of Abu Dhabi, edited by Patrick Osborne, is a compendium of reports by ERWDA/NARC professionals on various aspects of UAE desert flora and fauna. The price is Dh. 120.

Indigenous Trees of the UAE, by Dr. Reza Khan, is a guide to the native trees and large shrubs of the UAE. Its abundant illustrations make it particularly useful for identification purposes and it includes a wealth of information about the life cycle and uses of these trees. Dh. 30.

Letters to the Editor:

About Socotra Cormorants ...



Much interest was generated by Ajmal Hasan's photograph (above) of perhaps >10,000 Socotra cormorants on a beach at Umm al Qawain. Asked about the status of this bird, Gary Feulner replied, "I understand that it is range-restricted (eastern Arabia plus, I think). Within that, it breeds/nests at only relatively few sites, some of which are, however, quite large. Correspondingly, they are known to fly in very large flocks. Endangered status arises from total numbers worldwide, restricted populations, and eggs all in only a few baskets."

He suggested contacting Mike Jennings for comment, and Mike wrote, "Gary is quite right. This species, although apparently numerous, really is in a sticky position and is probably the most likely of the Arabian endemics to go extinct if its breeding colonies are not properly protected. It is difficult for most people to understand that a species that can be seen in thousands like this

can actually be endangered. But it faces a whole range of modern day threats that have contributed to a continual decline in its numbers in the last half century.

"These threats include industrialisation of its island colonies (at least 7 islands have been lost in this way in the UAE in recent decades), oil pollution (the whole flock in the picture could be annihilated if they came into contact with a large oil slick or a slick drifted onto their nesting area), egg collecting for human consumption (still a problem in this day and age - colonial birds with big eggs are much sought after), feral predators such as cats and dogs which soon destroy breeding activity, and human tourism and recreation which is a major issue too. (Tourists are amazed at how close they can get to nesting cormorants - then the whole lot leave in a blind panic scattering eggs and young and leaving others to succumb in the hot sun).

"I suggest in the atlas there are about 100,000 pairs left in the Gulf and the Arabian sea but that's not many faced with these levels of threat. In this case, this flock could have been the entire breeding population on Sadiyah / Sinayah island." *Mike Jennings*
arabianbirds@dsl.pipex.com

And Ummm ... About the Umbo

A DNHG member who wishes to remain anonymous has written to ask whether these are juvenile and adult versions of the same shell.



It is impossible to say, though they both have the very similar 'wrinkled' part (and the small shell has little more than that!) which is the umbo.



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Vice Chairman	Valerie Chalmers email: valeriechalmers@gmail.com	394 8872	050-4558498	
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Speaker Co-ordinator	Martina Fella / Michelle Sinclair email: martina_fella@hotmail.com			
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The umbo represents a stage in development. Bivalve shells grow co-marginally around the post-laval shell, which usually remains as the beak, and the area surrounding the beak is referred to as the umbo. (Bosch et al in *Seashells of Eastern Arabia* note that some authors regard the beak and umbo as one and the same — the post-laval stage.) Beyond that, the shell continues to grow into its distinctive form.

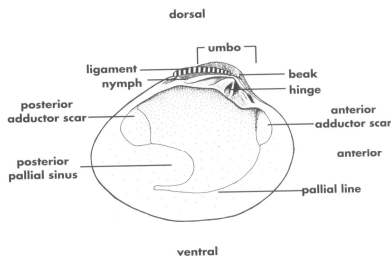


Figure 1 Internal features of a typical bivalve

From Bosch et al
Seashells of Eastern Arabia

In some shells the umbo is very clear; others have one that just appears the same as the rest of the shell. Bosch et al have diagrams at the beginning of their section on bivalves which are most helpful for

amateur shell collectors in learning how to identify the parts of a bivalve shell and the terms used. There are many such diagrams — bivalves aren't easy! *Ed.*

Reminder: Snails and Slugs

Your unwanted land snails and slugs are of interest for scientific study and an accounting of the terrestrial and freshwater snails of the UAE. All specimens will be gratefully accepted by Chairman Gary Feulner, and contributors will be kept informed of progress and pedigrees. Dead shells are preferred; we'll follow up if you've got something unusual. There have already been a few surprises. 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.



Laevicaulis alti

Members' Night!

We are pleased to announce that we have three keen members who will give presentations on Members' Night. The title of each talk and bio-details for each speaker will appear in our November issue of *Gazelle*.

This is a good time for *next* year's speakers to start thinking! If you have interesting photographs and detail about a natural history subject that fascinates you, consider giving a presentation and in plenty of time next year, contact our Speaker Coordinators Martina Fella and Michelle Sinclair (details above) for a slot on our Members' Night programme in December. It comes around soon enough! Talks should be 20 minutes in length and illustrated either by PowerPoint or slides. Help with technical aspects of your presentation can be given by our engineer Ajmal Hasan.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

Sun Nov 7 Valerie Chalmers : 'Fossils of the UAE and Northern Oman'
Sun Dec 12 Members' Night

Field Trips (Members only, please.)

Nov 6 Dibba Plant Nursery
Nov (several dates) Turtle Rescue Centre, Dubai
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.