



GAZELLE



مجموعتنا دورية للتاريخ والطبيعي

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Contributors—

Thanks to the following for their contributions this month:

Angela Manthorpe, Margaret Swan and Nanette Fairley.

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Life on Moon Island

Eagle Ray

Saint George may have killed a dragon—but are there others around?

(See page 5)

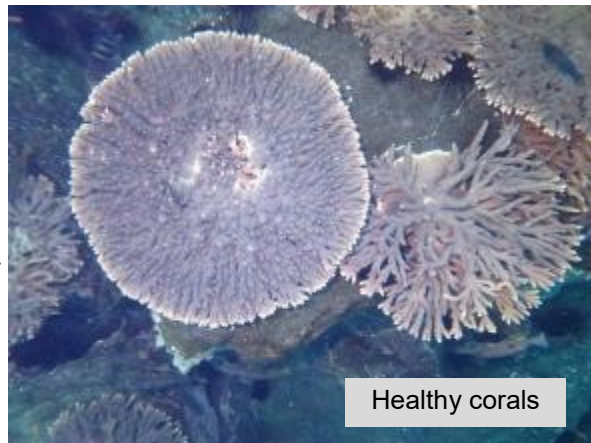


A crescent of sand

There's a wild, uninhabited destination that's becoming increasingly popular as a weekend getaway in the UAE. It's about 70km from Dubai, a little awkward to reach but, once there, you can guarantee that you'll have the place almost to yourself.

I'm talking about Moon Island and that 70km distance is offshore.

I visited recently with Sharjah Wanderers Diving club (BSAC406). It took us a little over 1.5 hours to reach the island on flat seas from Al Khan. As you approach the island it's the pale sand that you see first, rising no more than a few metres above sea level; a telecom tower and a couple of buildings sit at one end. The island curves in a crescent shape (hence the name), with a wide bay for anchoring on one side and, on the far side, a



Healthy corals

(Continued on page 4)

Announcements and Recorders

Monthly Virtual Speaker Information

Sunday, 2nd May, 2021, at 8pm via Zoom

Presenter: Oscar Campbell
Lecture Title: "The Giant, the Damsel and the Slender Scotch Burnet"

This talk will introduce the audience to a select sampling of the wonderful natural history of the Isle of Mull, one of Scotland's larger inner Hebridean islands. It will connect Mull to the north of Ireland using Tertiary geology before concentrating on just one of a small, eclectic cluster of flashy burnet moths whose UK distributions are concentrated on the north west coast of Scotland.

Biography:

Oscar Campbell began birdwatching from a bicycle on the shores of Lough Neagh, Ireland at age 10. He still does so on visits back home but nowadays birding involves pounding sites in and around Abu Dhabi and (Covid-permitting) further afield across the UAE and (well) beyond. Although birds were (and still are) his primary interest, he also knows a little bit about bugs and flora, especially in the UK, where he lived until moving to the UAE in August 2006. Prior to this, he lived in Scotland for six years, where as part of an MSc, he spent six weeks on the Isle of Mull studying the ecology of a rare burnet moth. Currently, he teaches Chemistry at a school in Abu Dhabi, although he tries to keep this a strictly a part-time hobby compared to his ornithological career...

Oscar has been Chairman of the Emirates Bird Records Committee since September 2010. He is a regular contributor to various ornithological publications and has been working with Gary Feulner, Binish Roobas and others for some years on a new butterfly guide to the UAE, to be published in 2021. He enjoys taking photographs and making sound-recordings of birds and he has large collections of both archived online. As well as wild places, books on science and history and strenuous exercise, he also enjoys rock music at a rather louder volume than his wife generally is prepared to accept.

New Membership Secretary

We are pleased to announce the new Membership Secretary is Alessandra Pipan. Welcome to the team, Alessandra!

We also say farewell and express our appreciation to outgoing Membership Secretary, Aubrey Baugh.

We thank Aubrey for her hard work and wish her and her family well as they embark on a new chapter.

Youth Earth Summit Day—22 May 2021

Do you have a smart agricultural solution in order to restore our Earth and conserve our forests and biodiversity? Find out more at:

<http://www.emiratessoilmuseum.org/events/youth-earth-summit-2021-yes>



DNHG Recorders

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From the Editor:

The biogeography of Socotra hasn't changed much throughout its entire existence. During April, Nanette Fairley visited the island and writes about her amazing experience on page 5.

At the time of going to print, Oscar Campbell had just given an excellent presentation describing the unusual geology of the Giant's Causeway. Focusing firstly on fable then fact, he went on to describe the unique flora and fauna, mostly on the Scottish side.

Meanwhile, on Moon Island ...

Enjoy your read!

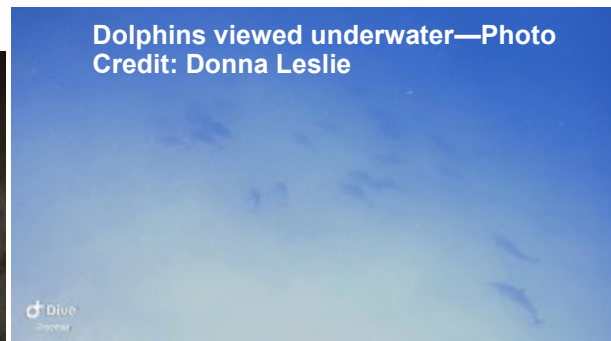
Spotlight!

Socotra Island, by Nanette Fairley (report on page 5)



Small lake in Hoq Cave

Dolphins viewed underwater—Photo
Credit: Donna Leslie



Vultures waiting for the remnants
of lunch!

Dolphin Pod on surface



In the mangroves on Golden Beach

The Flower Farm, by Margaret Swan



There is a lot more to see at the Flower Farm in Wadi Asimah - or rather, there was!

Flowers being seasonal, this private farm closed its gate in April and will re-open in January, 2022. Visit the web for more details and a range of reviews.

(top row left to right: butterfly, black flying insect, Bee hives, Arabian Oryx).

(bottom row left to right: sunbird, Indian Roller, bee or wasp).



Field Clips

(Continued from page 1)

boundary of rocks to protect the mound from the waves. Moon island wasn't on the charts in the 90s and information from those involved in offshore construction tell me that it was completed around 2008 by the same contractor that built Palm Jebel Ali. It was sometime around that date that I was returning from a dive about 90km offshore and remember being shocked to spot this unexpected land mass in the open sea.

Although the sea in April is a little chilly for my liking (25 degrees C), we'd gone to see what the diving was like. The visibility was good (more than 10m) and the rocks were covered in a variety of colourful hard corals, encrusting and branching species. Sergeant majors and black spot snappers were abundant over the rocks. Slightly deeper, a large shoal of small barracuda, a few hamour, 2 bar bream and, overhead, a few milk fish. Notable sightings - the sort of things that make you say 'great dive' - included 3 large male cuttlefish sparring for the attention of the smaller female, an inquisitive sea snake (*Hydrophis lapemoides*), quick and agile, which came undulating over the sea bed before heading for the surface and, to my delight, a close encounter with several unusual eagle rays. *Aetomylaeus milvus* is a species I'd never seen before. As the photo shows, it has really distinct markings, very different from the usual spotted eagle rays and, unusually, one larger ray allowed me to get really close for some identification photos and video.

Camping is allowed on the island and, in the morning, I took the opportunity to see what has colonized this relatively new neighbourhood. Overnight the ghost crabs had been hard at work and the waterline was fortified with towers. Beachcombing revealed a single dolphin vertebra and an abundance of shells - many ornate gastropods, carrier shells (*Xenophora sp.*), and colourful bivalves such as *Decatopecten plica* which favours rough ground and offshore habitats. There is little vegetation on the island but by the waterline I found a few sandy mounds covered in the succulent leaved *Sesuvium portulacastrum*, aka sea purslane and, on the higher ground, *Salsola imbricata* appeared to be the only plant, one garnering the attention of the tiny Western Pygmy Blue butterfly *Brephidium exilis*.

On the return leg, speeding home at approximately 60 km/h, a cormorant came alongside and, with little apparent effort, overtook us. To visit, there are several commercial operators offering trips....alternatively, befriend someone with a boat!!

Contribution by Angela Manthorpe



Sheltered bay



Sea purslane



Sea snake



Socotra: A Jewel in the Indian Ocean

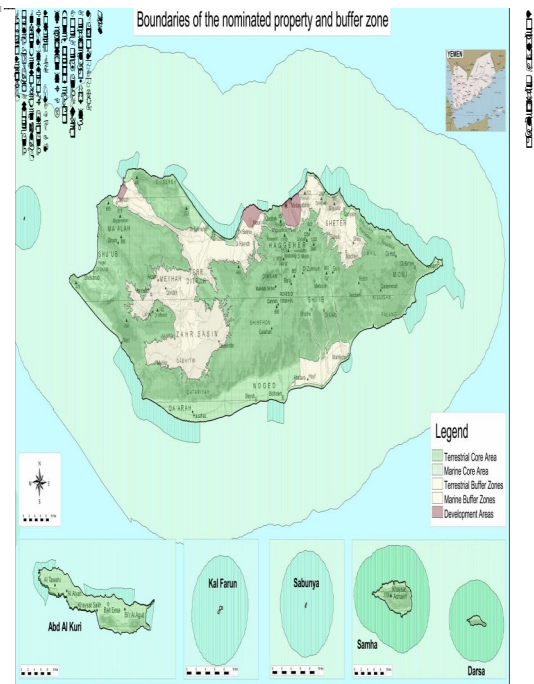


Last week I had the privilege to travel to perhaps one of the most amazing places on the planet. Rich in biodiversity, The Socotra Archipelago, has been termed the “Galápagos of the Indian Ocean”. Off the Yemen mainland and thus unaffected pretty much by the wars there, this island is currently a two-hour, direct flight from Abu Dhabi. I say, currently, as there has been advice that the flight will stop on May 21st. Let’s hope, for both visitors and locals that this is temporary!

The Socotra Archipelago consists of four islands which are located in the Indian Ocean. The largest, Socotra, has an area of 3,600 km² and a mountainous interior rising to more than 1,500 m. This island is where we spent our time. Apparently two of the other islands have very small populations of fishermen and Darsa is uninhabited. The population of the Socotra archipelago is estimated at 60,000, mostly living on Socotra, and concentrated in the capital, Hadibo and the second largest town at the opposite end of the island, Qalansiyah.



Dragon’s Blood Trees



Map supplied by UNESCO

In 2008, Socotra was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site.

According to UNESCO, “37% of Socotra’s 825 plant species, 90% of its reptile species and 95% of its land snail species *do not occur anywhere else in the world*. The islands also support globally significant populations of land and sea birds (192 bird species, 44 of which breed on the islands while 85 are regular migrants), including a number of threatened species. The marine life of Socotra is also very diverse, with 253 species of reef-building corals, 730 species of coastal fish and 300 species of crab, lobster and shrimp.”

But perhaps what it is best known for is the Dragon’s Blood trees which make an impressive sight. Their sap is harvested every

(Continued on the next page)

Field Clips

(Continued from previous page)

four years and used medicinally, and also for nail varnish and makeup. The honey from the bees that pollinate the Dragon's Blood trees is very dark in colour and is a speciality.

Although no one knows for sure, these trees are thought to be 800-900 years old. They are extremely slow growing so it was a real loss when several were uprooted in the cyclones of 2015 and 2018. A Czech research team has planted a nursery which is protected from becoming goat food. The tree I am standing beside was planted 20 years ago which gives some indication of how precious the current adult trees are.

So much more to share about Socotra but I will limit it to a few things ...

Hoq Cave was a 1.5 hour hike up from a rocky plateau. It is part of a cave complex running through the limestone plateau that stretches over most of the island. This cave has been found to contain pottery, a tablet from the 3rd century AD and inscriptions in early Indian, pre-Arabian and Ethiopian languages.

Desert Rose bottle trees (*Adenium socotranum*) were blooming beautifully when we were there.

Dolphins – such a delight to swim with approximately 100 dolphins early one morning off the Shuab coastline. The water was so crystal clear we could see them both on the surface but also swimming around the sand on the bottom beneath us. What an experience!

Lots of birds! – I am not knowledgeable about birds so apologise for not knowing what I was looking at. But they were plentiful!

While there are really no facilities for visitors, camping, no bathrooms, lack of meal choice (fish or goat!), this place is truly spectacular. Of course, with the poverty on the island, it is difficult for them to maintain this gem, but the locals we met are truly doing their very best. Well worth a visit. To read more go to:

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/socotra-yemen-biodiversity-photography>

Contribution by Nanette Fairley

(More photographs can be seen on page 3)



Devastation from recent cyclones



20 year-old 'baby' Dragon's Blood Tree



Dragon's Blood Tree 'forest' on Diksam Plateau



Stalagmites and Stalactites



Desert Rose Bottle Trees

Field Book Review

Review of the Field Guide to Emirates

Guides to the Natural History of the UAE have to date been more suited to the coffee table than the backpack, but that's just changed with the recent publication of the 'Field Guide to Emirates' from Maani Publishing.

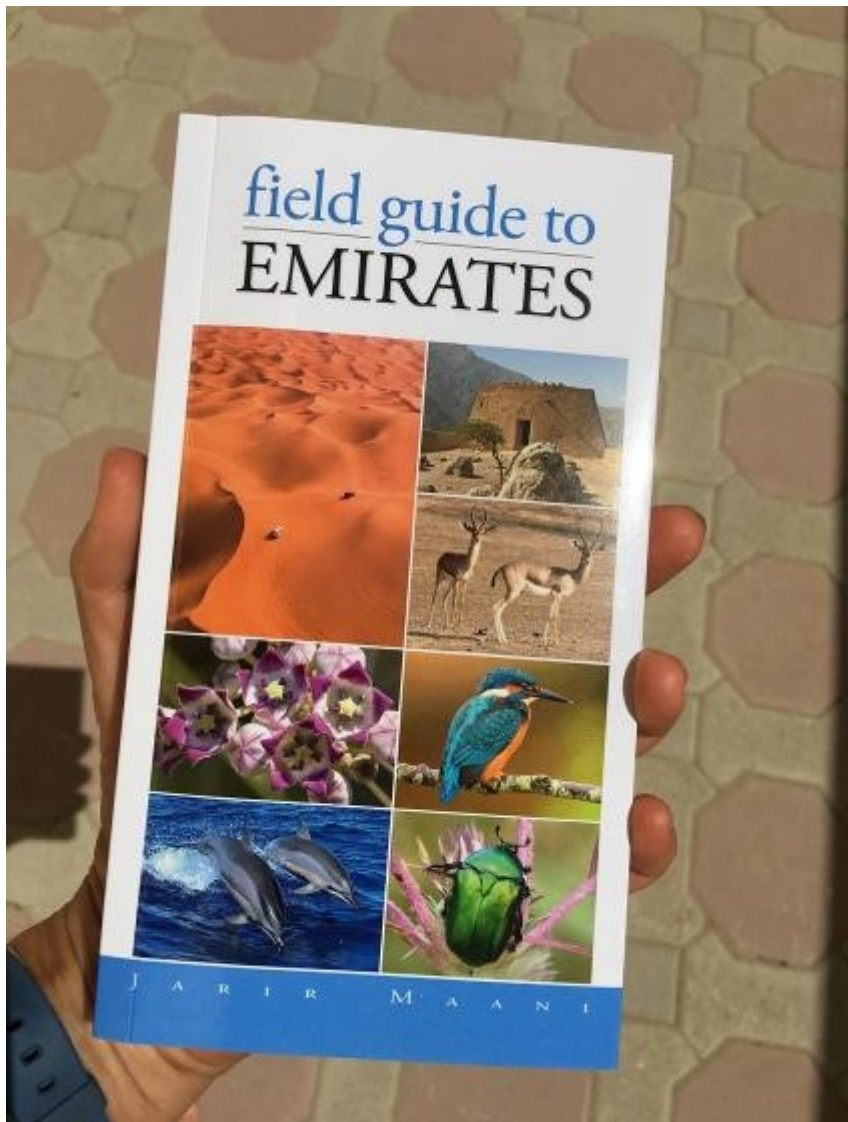
This handy guide is small enough to carry on a hike, and it's packed full of photos to illustrate common flora and fauna – 80 pages on plants, 70 on birds, plus insects, mammals, marine life and more. The book starts with informative sections on the geology and environment – dune types, an overview of habitats, a note on desert varnish. The section on archaeology is particularly good, with an overview of different periods, GPS coordinates for numerous sites including towers, forts and petroglyphs, and details on local museums for those who'd like to delve deeper. This isn't just a guide for tourists, there's plenty of detail in here for residents and, with the pandemic restricting our sphere of travel, this provides a wealth of information for those who'd like to get to know the UAE better. Did you know for example there are 41 protected areas and parks in the country? Well the guide gives you the GPS locations of those too.

I've taken the guide on several hiking trips, but I've only scratched the surface on how useful it is. The coloured tabs enable you to zoom in quickly on the right section; great photos enable a quick comparison of similar species, and the text gives you more insights to deepen your knowledge. There's a handy flip-out scale on the back page to measure sizes and tips on how to navigate by day and night. The section on animal tracks is really useful for deciphering nocturnal activities in the desert and, throughout the book, I found explanations for some of the unusual items that you might spot in the field - the delicate housing of the bagworm moth, the egg deposit of a praying mantis and the nymphal case from a dragonfly.

Eagle-eyed readers might spot a few errors – a misclassified plant here, out of date taxonomy, photos that don't quite match local characteristics, but these are only minor niggles and shouldn't detract from what is an excellent addition to our reference material. My hiking companions had this to say – 'comprehensive', 'well laid out', 'wonderful photos', and I've heard The Field Guide to Emirates referred to as a 'mini encyclopedia'. I think you will be surprised by the range of the book.

I'd like to tell you more about the author, but unusually the book has no Preface. There's an overview of the book on the website: www.fieldguidetoemirates.com, and you can order directly, priced at AED102.

Contribution by Angela Manthorpe



Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) Programme 2021

Monthly lectures are presently transmitted via Zoom, starting at 8.00pm

- 2 May:** Oscar Campbell will present an illustrated talk on "The Giant, the Damsel and the Slender Scotch Burnet"
- 6 June:** Christian Wilson - Operations Manager of the Al Hefaiyah Mountain Conservation Centre, Kalba. Gamekeeper, FGASA Field Guide and Conservationist, will present an illustrated talk on:
 "Al Hefaiyah Mountain Conservation Centre and other EPAA Conservation projects on the East Coast"

The DNHG field trip program has been temporarily suspended in compliance with UAE coronavirus precautions, which are still in force.

DNHG COMMITTEE 2020/2021

When possible, please contact committee members outside office hours

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DNHG Membership

DNHG membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at Dh100 for families and Dh50 for singles. Membership for the current year is valid from September 2020 to September 2021. In consideration of the restrictions on our lectures and field trips due to COVID-19, **all members who were paid up for 2019-2020 will be automatically renewed for 2020-2021**, without a renewal fee.

New members can join by (i) sending to the Membership Secretary (see above) a completed one-page membership form, which can be downloaded from our website (www.dnhg.org) and (ii) making payment to our Emirates NBD account by cash deposit or transfer from your bank or ATM, using our IBAN number AE640260001012012013302. However, this process does not always identify the payer. So if you wish to pay by cash deposit, please also photograph or scan a copy of your payment confirmation and send via e-mail to the Membership Secretary, so we know whose money we have received.

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*, our post office box, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects.