

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Colin Paskins' birthday provided the occasion for a snail search of his well landscaped grounds and garden (for which Colin gives all credit to the previous owners). Three species were found. Two are arid region species widespread in the Middle East and North Africa, enjoying a little R&R at Colin's house. The other is a New World snail, easily spread by human activity and now found in well-fenced tropical and subtropical lawns and gardens worldwide. Also present was the brown garden slug *Limacoides* *sp.*, common throughout southern Dubai and active primarily by night, but recognizable by its slime trails.

Thanks to Mike and Jill Oates, Orrian veterans who have signed on as our new Bird Recorders. And proving that you don't have to go far afield for some action, this summer they enjoyed watching a pair of Indian silverbills nest twice in their own Jumeira back yard.

Donna Simon, before leaving us for the US very kindly donated to the DNHG Library her collection of local newspaper and magazine articles on places of natural history interest. Some of these date to the 1980s. A number of the sites mentioned have been overtaken by the march of time or have become common knowledge. Others however, remain much as they were then. A

number of entries are *Gulf News* maps prepared by the late Mr B Rajan of the Dubai Water and Electricity Department, locally known as the "Father of Maps."

Gary Faulner took advantage of home leave in the US to deposit some pickled scorpions for identification by Dr Graeme Lowe in Philadelphia, who is studying the scorpion fauna of Oman. Gary also made a stop in Europe to save accumulated snail samples with Dr Eike Neubert. Neubert's survey of the freshwater and land snail fauna of Arab is served as a magnet for previously unreported information, and he is now engaged in compilation of a supplement.

Dr Marijke Jongbloed has been busy, as usual, with a number of natural history (and other) projects about which we hope to hear more in the future. Among other things, she is the author of two new books, just released, that are reviewed in this newsletter.

Congratulations to Lamjed El-Kefi who recently won first prize in the fish category of the Under Water Photographic World Championship, which was held in Egypt.

See report by Lamjed on Page 2 and the photograph on Page 5

DNHG Membership is due for renewal in September

DNHG membership remains a bargain at Dh50 (singles or couples). You can join or renew at meetings (see Membership Secretary Fl Skennerton), or send us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account no 173746. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.) Membership is valid from September 2000 to August 2001.

DNHG membership entitles you to participate in field trips and helps pay for our venture hat, publication and distribution of our monthly newsletter, 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:

Gary Faulner
Dr Sandy Fowler
Michael Jennings
Dr Marijke Jongbloed
Lamjed El-Kefi



Green Turtle Trip to Ras al Hadd 11/12 October

10 more places have been made available for this trip due to popular demand. The following have already registered:

- Cynthia and Hugh Paton
- Davis/Morag + daughter
- Jean and Rob Allan
- Jan Denning
- Ian and Anne Holt
- Claire Smith Vicor
- Mary Beardwood
- Elaine Harmsworth
- Peter and Anna Griffin
- Valerie Chalmers + Fran McCaw
- Nella Frico
- Andy and Yvonne Kerec
- F. Skennerton
- 2 Racemans

If any of the above are unable to attend please notify Fi Skennerton as soon as possible as others are waiting in the wings (2 Rademan children being first)

The weekend will start on the Wednesday evening, with an Omani meal plus traditional music, at the beautiful Muscat penthouse flat of Siw Rantapaa. The DNHG has back booked Siw's bed and breakfast rooms. The cost for the evening meal and B & B will be R07,500. Please contact Siw direct to make your reservation:
Tel: (968) 807320
Fax: (968) 807460
E-mail: siwomani@omantel.net.om

On Thursday we shall be camping on the beach. Ras al Hadd is a 5 hour drive from Muscat, and 4 wheel drive is necessary. It is a long journey, but well worth it.

If you require any further information please contact Mary Beardwood 3422543, e-mail: miko@mary@omtel.net.ae or F. Skennerton 3557150, e-mail: skennertf@mk.dubai.co.ae

15 passes will be available for our group. We shall have a guide with us to tell us all about the life cycle of the Lulus. A true adventure is promised!

Omani Visa

Multiple Entry Visas valid for 2 years can be obtained from the Omani Consulate for Dh5420.

Single Entry Visas can also be obtained at the Omani Consulate.

Congratulations

To the winners of the Photographic Competition at the End of Season Get Together:

- 1st Clare Kunz (second year running) with a stunning photo of an African Leopard.
- 2nd Libuse Mrhac
- 3rd Lubomir Mrhac

Our thanks for the generosity of all our sponsors who donated so many prizes. They were:

- Al Azbar Stainless Glass
- Jumeirah Beach Hotel Wild Wadi
- Le Meridien Jumeirah Beach Hotel
- Metropolitan Beach Club
- Oes sli toa
- Patricia and Robert Roatti
- Park Hotel
- Ritz Carlton Hotel

The Grouper Winner

This summer the OMAS 8th Under Water Photography World Championships took place in Somalia Bay, South-Safaga Egypt. Lamjed El-Kafi was invited to participate, and he and his diving buddy/model Amina formed the Tunisian team. Amina was a former member of the National Swimming Team and has won a few medals herself at swimming events. The competition was intense with teams from many European countries. The Egyptian media asked Lamjed if he thought the Tunisian team would win, to which he replied "Of course, I am here to win and have a good time". On the morning of the last day each team had to submit four slides to the judges, one slide for each of the four

categories, Fish, Macro, Wide-angle and Creativity. The Judges deliberations went on late into the night, until finally the best 10 slides were projected to the tense audience. The Fish category was the first to be presented in descending order, as Lamjed sat on the edge of his seat thinking that his photo must be better than those. 3rd, 2nd and finally 1st place, and Lamjed was jumping out of his seat with joy as his slide of a Coral grouper (*Cephalopole mislata*) and a Cleaner wrasse (*Labroides dimidiatus*) filled the screen. Unfortunately Amina was not there to celebrate their win, she had to return home earlier in the day.

Report by Lamjed El-Kafi

Wordsport link for those championships is:
http://www.wordsport.com/wsr/gallery/0,2194,0_40_40_127_11_227_0_0,00.html

Our Next Speaker

Peter Cunningham is an ecologist/wildlife biologist by training and is currently studying the ecology of Spiny-tailed Lizards as part of his PhD requirements. He is involved with other research mainly related to reptiles and mammals in the UAE and he has published numerous scientific and non-scientific articles.

Peter was born in South Africa and has been living in Al Ain for just over two years. Prior to the UAE he managed a Wildlife Sanctuary in Namibia, as well as lecturing at the Polytechnic and University of Namibia where he taught Desert Ecology and trained Nature Conservation students. When time permits Peter undertakes as an Environmental Consultant.



Donkeys Dropping

I found myself out hiking one July Friday when the radio forecast: 44 degrees and 85% humidity in Dubai. I had purposely gotten up early and was out of the car by 07:00 to beat the heat and to see what was up and about (since the birds and the bees try to beat the heat, too). I chose an area with a few permanent pools, but things were pretty barren after more than 2-1/2 years without rain.

Somehow a few donkeys are still making out, barely. Well used trails and fresh droppings were evident but I nevertheless saw two recently dead adults, one still couched partially in the shade of a low palm where it had sought its last refuge. I later scooped two "herds," one of four and another of three individuals that had been resting in the shade of trees.

The latter instance was very sad. The three scrawny donkeys bled, but one fell down on some bedrock just 100 metres off and didn't have the strength to get up. I felt terrible but I didn't know what to do. My general policy is not to "interfere" with nature, but in this case I was already the cause of the problem. The poor donkey was fully exposed to the noon sun, and I believe it would not have survived if it had lain there all day, so I thought I might be able to give it enough of a refresher to get it on its feet. I approached slowly with a tangerine in view and tossed sections. The donkey ate one section but he mired.

More from a sense of obligation than hope, I tried again. I filled a small, broad sample jar with water from my tank, standing at a distance of about 6 feet from the fallen donkey, so it could see (and hopefully recognize) the water as it poured from the bottle. Then I slowly handed it forward. That did the trick, at least. With a couple of awkward lurches the donkey was on its feet, emaciated, wobbly, staring uncertainly but unmoving, looking like a concentration camp survivor. I set the water down and backed off.

The donkey didn't drink, but, with its path clear, it at least walked (not ran) back to the shade of the palms it had left.

The end was probably near for that poor beast, since it appears that infection and illness had set in. At a guess, he wouldn't last more than another couple of days. The nearest water was only a kilometre away and is surely known to all donkeys in the area. Indeed, it may partly account for their presence there. The ailing donkey might have made it that far by night, when it's cooler, but the real problem is probably food quality. There's little or nothing sprouting, moist and nutritious enough, apparently, to overcome the combined effects of dehydration, malnutrition, infection and the continuous stress of high heat.

Report by Gary Feulner



Moringa peregrina – Giving up the Ghost?

Hiking in mid-June into the mountains north of Mehdiyah, Peter Cunningham and Gary Feulner noticed a number of *Moringa peregrina* trees (the wispy "broom" tree of lower mountain slopes) barren of leaves but laden with long green pods (more than 75 pods on several local). This was despite the fact that other trees in the area – mostly *Acacia lanifolia* and *Zizyphus spinaristi* – seemed decidedly the worse for wear as the current drought continues. One possibility mooted by Peter and Gary: Have conditions gotten so bad that individual *Moringa* trees have "decided" that they may not survive? And have they therefore dropped their leaves and channelled their energy into the next generation, in the form of seeds that can better weather the drought and emerge when conditions improve?

Robber Flies / Tiger Beetles

The periphery of the plantation area in Wadi A Ramthah, near Mehdiyah, Oman, was a hunting ground in late June for a number of unusually large, long-bodied robber flies called Highwaymen (*Apoclees femoralis*). One was seen feeding in mid-morning on a tiger beetle (apparently *Lophyrus hisirio*), itself reckoned to be a fierce predator. Robber flies are not particularly common in the wadi environment, but tiger beetles of several species are among the few insects that can reliably be found active in bright sunshine in the heat of the day – most often on damp ground adjacent to water, either wadi pools or coastal scree-trails. Exactly what the tiger beetles are eating is uncertain, as no other macroscopic prey is usually seen under these circumstances.

Report by Gary Feulner

Chrozophora has its "Day in the Sun"

The pale green, dusty-leaved *Chrozophora* is a common but relatively nondescript perennial found in and around mountain wadis. In mid-June 2010, however, with most of the competition suffering from more than two years of drought, it was one of the very few plants flowering and fruiting, so its inconspicuous flowers were nevertheless the centre of attention for many butterflies. This was true on both the east and west flanks of the mountains. Butterflies seen on *Chrozophora* included flocks of the common Mediterranean Pierid, Small Cupid and Blue-Spotted Arab as well as individuals of the rarer Leopard butterfly and the African Malcol Skipper (a first for the report).

Report by Gary Feulner



E-mail your reports to griff@emirates.net.ae. (Arial 10 justified) or deliver them on floppy disk at monthly meetings.

Iran Natural History

(continued from June Gazette)

[This is the second and final part of Gary Feulner's report of natural history observations made during a visit to central Iran and the Zagros Mountains in April 2000.]

Birds. The most noticeable bird was the Hooded Crow but the most numerous & certainly the House Sparrow. Both are seen in all urban and suburban areas and parks, independent of altitude. The Magpie is seen occasionally in cultivated areas. At higher elevations in the mountains (above 8,000 ft.) I saw many Linnet's Whinchat and Northern Wheatear, as well as a Rock Thrush, the latter named Stone Lark. Ravens of undetermined sort, and a pair of Yellow Wagtails that foraged by following two grazing donkeys.

The birdwatching highlight of the trip was unquestionably the chance to see the mating ritual of the Great Crested Grebe, found here at the eastern limit of its European range. Some 50 birds were observed from our camp alongside a shallow channel at 7,200 ft. At least five pairs performed, inflating their throats and crests, twining necks, diving and running on the water. Also seen beside the lake were a small flock of Whooper Swans and a Purple Heron.

Herptiles. Reptiles and amphibians were scarce. I found frogs and tadpoles in a few pools alongside Zagros rivers at lower elevations. A six-inch lizard with blue green furcolor was seen while hiking at 8,000 feet.

Butterflies. Four distinctive spe-

cies were observed, all near the snowline at 8,000 to 9,000 feet. Not surprisingly, they do not seem to be among those known from the Arabian Peninsula and are probably a Palearctic species. One seemed to be the Small Tortuseshell (*Aglais urticae*), a relatively ubiquitous European species belonging to the Nymphalid family. In Great Britain it is found even on the highest mountains and remote Scottish islands. Another was a second Nymphalid (resembling the Brown Wall butterfly), the third was a Pierid (a Yellow), and the last was a Lycaenid (a Little Blue).

Snails. Freshwater snails were observed at only two sites. In a small decorative fountain at Bam, a city on the southern plateau, the ladder snail *Physella acuta* was abundant. This is a widespread snail well known in Europe (and Dubai, at the Zafreen fish ponds) and readily introduced by human activity. A dammed lake at 7,000 ft. was home to three species - a member of the *Radix/Lymnaea* complex (very similar in appearance to the UAE's *Radix natalensis*), a large ramshorn snail resembling *Lindaplanorbis exustus*, and an unknown winkle-shaped snail. Specimens of each have been forwarded for expert identification.

No land snails were found at any site. They may be absent near the snowline and limited elsewhere by the sparse vegetation that results from overgrazing. At least one species has previously been recorded from historical sites near Hersepolis and is still awaiting anatomical examination of preserved specimens, but did not have the chance to investigate for snails in those areas.

Mammals. The only mammals seen while hiking were Qashqai and Bakhtiari nomads and their domestic animals - sheep and goats (which often wear bells), monkeys and dogs. Numerous mole hills were observed near our campsite among onion holes at 8,000 ft. These were likely made by one of the resident species of

mole-vole (genus *Ellobius*). I was fortunate to return with a copy of *Mammals of Iran* by Hooshang Ziaei. Although the text is in Farsi, Latin scientific names and distribution maps are included, pictures and text are numerically indexed, and size measurements and some other information can generally be deciphered.

Mystery solved

Some months ago I wrote about and showed slides of some mysterious tracks in the desert. In May the riddle of the tracks' owner was solved, when I found a track of a gerbil, which turned into the track of the mystery mammal. First there were the typical two side by side footprints of a jerboa, then a small distance away there were the same two footprints about 5 cm apart, then at a larger distance the 'mystery' print of two footprints one after the other with some 12 cm between them. Since then I saw a very instructive drawing of the way a jerboa moves in Jonathan Kingdon's book *Mammals of Arabia*. A jerboa does not hop like a kangaroo with both hind legs together or a gerbil, which hops with all four legs together. A jerboa does running jumps, placing the two hind legs behind one another in a stretched step and then taking the mammoth jumps that those small rodents are famous for. During the hot months the tracks at the top of the creek have increased in number, and several dry footprints making the same track have appeared. Obviously the jerboa population at the creek is doing well.

Report by Marijke Jansbloed





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The recorders are not necessarily scientific experts in their designated fields, but they must be not. However, they are interested in all knowledgeable amateurs - please contact them if you have any interesting reports or queries.

The intention is that information will be channelled through to the *Sizable* editor, so more info. reports can be shared with all our readers.

—SHELL— —REPORT



Please send your shell reports
to Sandy Fowler

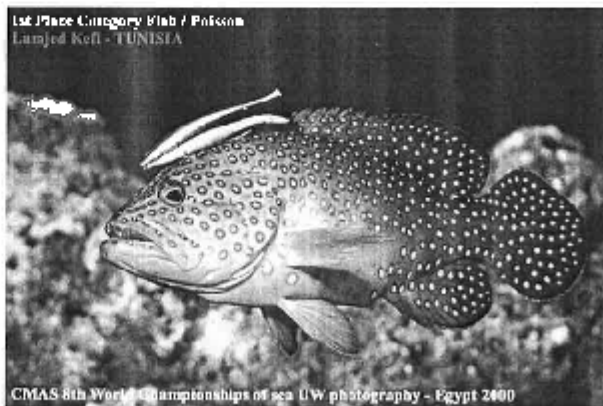
The year 2000 is drawing to a close and as usual, I am unsurprised by the lack of shelling reports received in the past 12 months. Gary Fenner has been diligent with his sightings and comments, but from almost everyone else - silence. But thank you to those members who took the trouble to report paper nautilus findings in the spring. They will be added to Beryl's ongoing Nautilus database, and may prove of value to some researcher in the future.

This year a fairly storm-free winter and lack of strong winds meant poor pickings on the beaches. But reports are needed, especially of shells being found where they have not been reported. "Seashells of Eastern Arabia" is the principal guide to the area but it was published 5 years ago. I occasionally find ones that are not recorded in the book. As an example, I found an orange stippled gastropod on a beach north of Khor Fakkan in May this year. Should have been easy to identify, but it wasn't. A local authority or

shells suggested it might be *Cantarus wagneri*. I was not convinced and took it to the Natural History Museum in London, where they identified it as *Lafinus turris*, a relative of the spindle shell family (*Fusinus arabicus* is the best-known example). As far as "Seashells of Eastern Arabia" goes, hopefully there will be a second edition sometime in the future, and shell reports will be invaluable in updating data. So please send in those reports. They may not seem important to you, but they may be to someone else in the future.

Shellers might be interested to know that I have gone over "Seashells of Eastern Arabia", and listed ALL the gastropods on an Access database. I still have to surmount the courage to tackle the bivalves. Interested shellers can set this database up on their own computers, modify it according to their preferences (I have no interest in Kuwaiti shells, or shells only 1mm long, so deleted them from my own list), and then use it as a check off for their own collections. Anyone wanting a disc copy of it may contact me at home.

Report by Sandy Fowler



Photograph by Lamej El-Kel which deservingly won the CMAS 8th UAW Photography World Championships this summer



Herp-hunting for Geckos and Lizards

Since not everyone was in Dubai at the time my extensive article on hunting lizards with Berkeley researcher Ted Papenfuss appeared in the Gulf Friday magazine, and for the sake of recording animal related sightings in Gazelle, I have written down what we enumerated on our short survey in May. First, the purpose of the collection was to contribute to an ongoing research programme in which DNA studies done on reptiles of the entire region from China to the Mediterranean attempt to establish the relationships between the various reptile species and subspecies. These studies can help to understand why particular species have developed differently, and can provide data for arguments about necessary protection of certain sensitive habitats.

The first location we visited was the subkha near Ras Ghanada, where I hunted *Tarantoliscus solchus* years ago with Patrick Osborne. We were successful there right away with spotting two and catching one of these colourful lizards. The books mention that this lizard was first found at Jebel Miliha while I encountered it earlier from Khawanej. Interestingly between these three locations Ted and I tried the area near Qam Nizwah on the last day of his stay and came away with the same result: two lizards spotted, one caught. It is likely that the entire coastal sandy plains and dunes area provides habitat for this wonderful gecko.

The next location was the oasis of Wadi Layyibah near Dibba. There we managed to catch two small Jayakeri lizards, one of the two endemic to the Hajar mountains. Also a number of toads were collected from its various pools. A wadi racer (*Coluber diodonchis*) was seen but not approached. One of the oasis labourers took us to his house along the main highway and there we found one *Bufo arabicus* and a Fan-footed gecko.

A very hot day in the hills near Khor Fakkan that evening, looking for *Aescopus* spp. was completely unsuc-

cessful, as was the next day's search for the 'Duo-ta'ed lizard in wadi Marood.

On the way to Al Ain via the mountain route, we found *Acanthodactylus schmidti* in some low bushes along the road, and tracks of many *amphisbaenids*, a subterranean specimen that particularly interested Ted. But it was a really too hot to find any specimens at that time. A further visit to the spot some days later very late at night also yielded no results. Among and around the amphibaenid tracks was the clear track of a large Monitor lizard.

We met Peter Cunningham near Mahda and together headed for Subaitna, where we collected another Fan-footed gecko, a really beautiful specimen of the Jayakeri's lizard and some toads we assumed to be *Bufo dhofarensis*, because they had rather large eardrums. More careful examination at home revealed that the eardrums were larger than in *Bufo arabicus*, but they did not touch the corner of the eye as they should in *Bufo dhofarensis*. Hopefully the DNA study will reveal what we have here!

The next location was adjacent to the sewage plant of Al Ain, where an area of low red dunes harboured all sorts of treasures: at night we caught two small geckos, *Stenodactylus arabicus* and *Stenodactylus donae*, as well as a superb specimen of the sand boa *Eryx jayakeri*. In the morning we tried to find the *amphisbaenids* that had left their tracks, but that was not successful. Catching a few sand skinks unawares was also no easy task but thanks to Peter Cunningham's prowess it turned out alright. One of the Al Ain skinks now sits in a beautiful terrarium in the museum for zoological studies in Berkeley, California.

A visit to Jebel Haloot was next. On the way up to Ted spotted a *pseudotrapelus sinaitus* sunning on a rock and deftly caught it with

his car-radio antenna car radio. On the plain at the foot of the mountain a specimen of *Acanthodactylus ophiourus* was added to the collection. A nice Spiny-tailed lizard was observed sitting near its burrow, to which it retired when we got too close.

Ted plans to come back next spring for a longer expedition which will also hopefully include the Oman area of the Musandam - an important link between Arabian and African flora and fauna.

Report by Marijke Jongbloed

Book Reviews

Sophie the Sand Fox

"In the south of the country stretches an immense sea of sand. . . This is the gold and silver kingdom of the sand creatures. And the princess of this realm was Sophie the Sand Fox." In her latest storybook, *Sophie the Sand Fox*, Dr Marijke Jongbloed takes young and old alike on a tour of this magic kingdom and its many and varied inhabitants and shows us the warmth and drama of their daily lives. Along the way she holds up a mirror to some of man's ways as well. The text is illustrated with a wealth of photographs and drawings and is fast-paced and informative. Thanks go to sponsors Emirates Airlines and Sky Cargo. We hope to have copies of this new release available to members at our September meeting.

Field Guide to UAE Reptiles

Reptiles play an important role in arid zone ecosystems but there has never been a comprehensive guide to the lizards, snakes, skinks, geckos, turtles and toads of the UAE. Now we have it and it was well worth waiting for. Dr Marijke Jongbloed has taken up the task and given us *Wild About Reptiles: A Field Guide to the Reptiles and Am-*

Continued overleaf



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Continued from previous page

Philosophy of the JAE. Suitable for both casual readers and more serious armateurs, and spiral-bound for easy use in the field, this guide is sure to be a best seller.

It is divided into two sections, first an engaging narrative discussion of many of the more noteworthy groups and species, and then a brief systematic description of all species known from the UAE. English names are given along with scientific names for each species. In a salutary exercise (but one that is sure to rattle a few feathers), Marijcke has in some instances abandoned English names heretofore used locally. In favour of "common" names used elsewhere or recommended by experts, in the interest of regional and international consistency. It is hoped that others will follow her example. However, she is always

careful to include earlier local names, so that readers can sort out possible confusion.

The book is in part a tribute to the late Bish Brown of Abu Dhabi, who was a mentor to many UAE amateur naturalists and who took a social interest in reptiles. This field guide incorporates excerpts from Bish's notes made in contemplation of publication before his untimely death. But Marijcke has also taken advantage of the research and advice of other professionals who have studied the reptile and amphibian fauna of the UAE and Oman, including C N Arnold, Michael Gallagher, Drew Gardner and J Gaenoroti.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the sponsorship of Abu Dhabi's Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency (ERWDA) for this invaluable field guide. We hope to have copies available at

The 'Pine' tree

At the last meeting before the summer one of our members asked me the name of the local "pine tree". At the time I could only remember that the Latin name translated into horsetail or horsehair. The proper name is "*Casuarina equisetum*", it is introduced and grows up to 20 m tall.

Report by Marijcke Jongbloed

For Sale

Maria Larkworthy has a well used collector's cabinet for sale. It was made locally and has two doors, 8 drawers and a sliding glass. It is top. It measures height: 115cm x width: 120 cm x depth: 60cm. Please contact Maria for further details: 050 6596977

GAZELLE

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

Lectures at Jumeirah English Speaking School, Gymnasium 7.30 pm for 8.00 pm

Sept 17 Peter Cunningham - Adaptations of Desert Mammals/Reptiles

Oct 1 Kathy Bird - The Dhofar Region of Oman

Field Trips (DNHG members only, please).

12/13 Oct The Omani Experience
From Muscat to Ras al-Had Beach to see Green Turtles

18 Oct Return to Wadi Bih with Peter van Amsterdarn

27 Oct Birdwatching in and around Abu Dhabi with Simon Aspinall



Mrs Valerie CHALMERS
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From: DNHG, PO Box 9234, Dubai, UAE