

# GAZELLE

Vol 16 no 11 – December 2001



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

**DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP**

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

## Members' News

### *New Museum*

DNHG members have made a significant contribution to a new museum which will be opening its doors around Eid al Fitr. It is located adjacent to the Creek park and is easily recognized by the primary colours of its buildings. It is a children's museum with lots of interesting facts and figures, as well as interactive displays and computer games.

One section holds the fossil collection of **Marijcke Jongbloed**, comprising a good selection of gastropods, bivalves, echinoderms and miscellaneous fossils. Most of the identifications were done by **Valerie Chalmers**.

Marijcke was also involved in providing some of the texts of the interactive games dealing with natural history of the UAE. It will be pleasing to see the public enjoy this new learning place for kids and adults.

### *Newest Member*

November was notable for introducing our youngest-ever field trip participant. **Harry**, who is less than one, accompanied his parents **Dr Chen and Mrs Qiang** on the recent tour of Ras al Khaimah led by Christian Velde. Harry's sly

charming smile was bestowed on all as he happily blew raspberries through his first history and archeology lessons.

### *Dating Game in RAK*

A preliminary archeological survey of terraced settlements in the mountains of the Musandam Peninsula has been underway in December, led by Prof. Derek Kennet of the University of Durham, former resident archeologist at the National Museum of Ras al-Khaimah. A major aim is to attempt to find evidence to determine the date at which these settlements were first established, which remains uncertain. The survey team has been assisted by Chairman **Gary Feulner** and visiting former DNHG member **John Martin**. **Barbara Couldrey** of RAK has filled in for Gary as mountain guide on several occasions. Others who have provided support are **Brian Jolly**, John Martin's host in Dubai, and **Chris Woolford**, who supplied emergency flares for use by the survey team.



### *DNHG Membership Renewal*

The DNHG membership year begins in September, so renewal is now due. Membership remains a bargain at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at meetings (see Membership Secretary **Fi Skenerton**) or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account no. 173746 and posted to Fi at PO Box 29561, Dubai. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.) Membership is valid from September 2001 to September 2002.

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:**

Mary Beardwood  
Gary Feulner  
Marijcke Jongbloed  
David Snelling



## Field Trips etc ...

### New Year Treats...

#### Hajar Mountain Hike Friday 11 January

Gary Feulner will lead a full day mountain hike to terraced settlements in the Ru'us al-Jibal (Musandam). Suitable for experienced and fit hikers. Overall ascent will be c.600 m (2000 ft.). Must descend too. Route is scenic but trails are poor or non-existent. Ground is often rough and uneven. Total distance 8-10 km, anticipated total time 8 hours. Bring boots or sturdy shoes, minimum 3 litres of water (plus a 4th in the car), lunch, hat, sun cream, camera, binoculars, etc. 4WD necessary.

Leave Dubai at 6:30am. Estimated return c.7pm. Maximum 12 people. For further information, sign-up and logistics, see Gary at the Jan. 6 DNHG meeting or telephone 330-3600 (office) or 306-5570 (home).

#### Fossilising Trip with the ENHG 18 January 2002

Valerie Chalmers will lead a joint trip with Steve James and the Abu Dhabi group to some of the most interesting fossil areas in the Emirates. This will be a full day trip, so come prepared for everything. Prior registration with Val is required, on 04 - 349 4816.

Meet Val in the World Trade Centre Hotel covered car park (formerly known as Hilton Hotel car park) at 8.00am.

#### Desert Dinner 25 January 2002

A dinner will be held to celebrate 15 years of the DNHG. It will be held at a carefully chosen place in the desert, so that everybody can attend regardless of vehicle. It's possible!

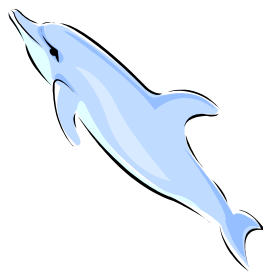
You will need to bring your own dinner, drinks, and anything else you might need (eg a coat) for an evening in the desert. Contact Anne Millen and Peter van Amsterdam at [pvana@emirates.net.ae](mailto:pvana@emirates.net.ae) for further details

#### RAK to Falaj al Moalla 1 February 2002

Peter van Amsterdam will lead a 4WD trip through the northern desert. This will be a day trip, and the desert driving requires moderate skill. Details from Peter at [pvana@emirates.net.ae](mailto:pvana@emirates.net.ae)

#### Sir Bani Yas Island 7 & 8 February 2002

David Snelling is arranging a trip to this fascinating island. Further details will be published in January's *Gazelle*, but pencil it in now.



#### Inter-Emirates Weekend Liwa Hotel ? 7 & 8 March 2002

Both the dates and location of the Inter-Emirates weekend are tentative, but this is always a really wonderful weekend with an enormous variety of things to see and do. Information will be provided in plenty of time for you to book.

#### Wildflowers in Ghubra

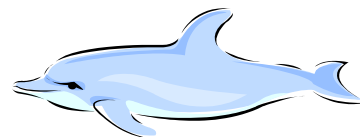
#### Bowl, Oman March 2002

Peter van Amsterdam and Anne Millen will lead a trip to the Ghubrah Bowl to see the spring wildflowers. Marijcke Jongbloed will be along to identify the plants. This will be an overnight camp and numbers will be limited as the amount of flat ground is very small. 4WD is needed, and the weather will play an important role – the whole place is a giant wadi. It may be possible to cross the Jebel Akhdar from Nakhl to Tanuf, but this will require a sturdy 4WD and a cool head! Further details later.

#### Our Next Speaker

Our next speaker, at our regular meeting at Jumeirah English Speaking School, will be Gianna Minton whose topic will be "Baleen and bones: recent developments in whale and dolphin research in Oman."

Gianna comes from Muscat and has been involved in this area for a long time, bringing to her talk a wealth of interesting detail and some surprising results from recent research.



Please check our next *Gazelle* carefully for details of the venue for the February meeting – it may change.



### Camping and fossilling, Madam

About 70 million years after the main event, the full Thursday convoy arrived at the campsite at the base of an escarpment, forty minutes drive from the Madam roundabout. Tents were pitched and some people took the opportunity to appreciate the sunset before night closed in. There was then a bustle of activity as fires and barbeques were prepared. Once the meals were over the main bonfire was lit and the party sat around it to be well entertained by Jonathan Pardoe with his guitar. James Pardoe set up his telescope at the other end of the camp and gave a steady stream of campers the opportunity of exploring the night sky. My thanks to both of them!

Next morning, I met the day visitors group, headed by Valerie Chalmers who had very kindly agreed to attend as the fossil expert. The whole party then embarked on a short fifteen minute walk to the site which had been identified by a friend and myself two years ago. There was a bubble of excitement when the first fossils were spotted on the ground, but this was nothing to the astonishment of the group as it was shown the tightly packed gastropod beds that were exposed a short walk up an incline.

The group then spent the next hour and a half exploring the site and everyone went away satisfied with their samples which were literally everywhere to be found. After identification and lunch back at the campsite, most of the party headed back to Dubai, Sharjah, or other destinations, while Rosemary, Judith and I took a relatively leisurely walk in an adjacent wadi.

The fossils collected by the group were identified by Valerie, who reported:

"It is really a very interesting site to visit and worth exploring further. There were literally masses of *Acteonella* – both large and small forms. Other gastropods found were a few *Campanile* (a large

form), a *Cerithid*, *Trochacea* (a flattened form) and several *Natica*. Once you have got over the shock of seeing so many specimens of *Acteonella* (gastropods) together, there are many other interesting fossils to be found. Various colonial corals were seen, but no solitary corals. No Echinoderms were found. Bi-valves found included many specimens of the rudists – *Hippurites*, *Durania* and *Dictyoptychus* (the larger forms) and one specimen of the small toothlike rudist, *Glabrobournonia*." According to Valerie, the fossils dated the site at approximately 70 million years.

Report by Mike Lorrigan, with thanks to Valerie Chalmers

### Saiq - on the roof of the world

In 1978, when we first arrived in Oman, a visit to Saiq in Jebel Akhdar was for a lucky few. There was no road, so the occasional trip by helicopter or STOL aircraft to this area, controlled by the military, was the only method of transport. Today the area is open to anyone with the time and curiosity to make the trip, made possible by the construction of a steep, winding road with a hotel at the top.

The Jebel Akhdar is the highest mountain range in the whole Arabian Peninsula, with peaks standing more than 10,000 feet above sea level. Farms growing a wide variety of fruits such as apricots, apples, grapes and pomegranates fall in terraces down the hillsides and the local farmers are proud to take you for a tour through their land pointing out their crops. Roses, used to make the famous rosewater, are in bloom in the summer months.

At the village of Saiq itself visitors were greeted with an invitation to the majlis for coffee and dates with the men of the village, whilst giggling children pressed around the door. As in other unexplored parts of the world, the birth of tourism has been a double-edged sword for the people of Oman. In recent years some picturesque villages of Jebel Akhdar have been over-

visited by tour companies. Tourists with huge intrusive cameras have become a nuisance to the inhabitants, but the people in this remote area remain little visited at present, and their traditional welcome is genuine and heartwarming.

There are several villages to visit only a few miles drive from the hotel. For natural history enthusiasts life abounds in the wadis, aflaj and mountainsides. As dusk fell I had a good view of a Ruppell's sand fox. He boldly stared at us for a few seconds before disappearing into the bushes. It was the highlight of my weekend.

How to get there:

Your trip needs to be planned well in advance. The hotel has 24 double and single rooms, clean and well furnished with T.V. but can get fully booked at weekends. A double room costs approximately 250 dirhams. The hotel has a dining room, serving breakfast, lunch and dinner. Food is good basic fare and reasonably priced.

The Jebel Akhdar Hotel, email<jakhotel@omantel.net.om> (fax 00968 429119), will get you the passes you need. Passport details of the head of each family need to be provided, plus the registration number of your car. 4WD is definitely necessary, as the road is unsealed and very steep.

When confirming the reservations, the hotel will fax you a copy of your road pass. Do not forget to carry it with you. The military check point is just north of Birkat Al Mawz, near Nizwa. The journey up to the hotel takes some time – do it in daylight!

Report provided by Mary Breardwood

### Desert Morning Rambles

Looking for "action," I set out early on several weekend mornings in September to examine various patches of desert in the area inland from Dubai to Sweihan where I thought there was a greater than average chance of finding life or signs of life. All of these areas, of



## Field Clips ...

**E.mail your reports to [pvana@emirates.net.ae](mailto:pvana@emirates.net.ae), (Arial 10 justified) or deliver them to Anne Millen on floppy disk at monthly meetings.**

course, suffer to a greater or lesser extent from overgrazing, which afflicts the entire Northern Emirates. Nevertheless, by choosing carefully among *ghaf* groves and vegetated hollows I knew from past exploration, and by watching carefully, I was able to make quite an interesting time of it. One site was sufficiently attractive that I returned by night.

In some areas that at first glance appeared to be totally drought-stricken, there was a bewildering array of small tracks. These show up especially well in the early morning light. Some looked like mini tire tread – insects, I suppose. Others showed the clear feet and tail marks of small lizards. Isolated small, vaguely star-like marks are made by grasshoppers and robberflies, that come and go by air but are heavy enough to leave an imprint.

The large, nocturnal Urchin Beetle, which has a spiny perimeter, seems to be particularly abundant in this area at the moment (by night I saw dozens) and I learned that it makes a track that can easily be confused with that of a large scorpion.

The tracks of a sand skink or sand fish (*Scincus* sp.) were punctuated with intermittent small depressions beside the track where, it seems, the sand skink had "tested" the sand with its snout, for food or consistency. The tracks gave the skink's identity away when they showed clearly that the animal had dived underground, still leaving a faint surface trail.

In an area near a roadside plantation the tracks of grey francolin were abundant and I got an education in how different they can appear in hard or soft sand, and

on flat or sloping terrain.

At another location I saw the clear tracks and probable burrow of a grey monitor lizard (*Varanus griseus*), with its large outstretched "little" toe. A nighttime visit revealed more tracks in the same area.

Some of the tracks I encountered, although relatively large and distinctive, still puzzle me, and I can only speculate as to such unlikely possibilities as lame hares or limping jerboas. I have kept photos to show to experts.

In the air, roadside plantings of the toothbrush shrub, *Salvadora persica*, continue to attract large numbers of Blue Spotted Arab butterflies, which spill over into adjacent desert areas.

Antlions were also seen – various kinds: blotched wings, speckled wings and crooked bodies – just a few each morning (and also by night), but still more than I have seen at other times of year. Antlions, which in flight resemble dragonflies, are the adult form of the larvae that make the small conical pits frequently seen in silty patches of ground.

At least two kinds of squash bugs were about, and I photographed them to make a record of the different color patterns. In each case they attracted my attention initially by flying past me. A lone and scraggly, but flowering, *Calotropis* (Sodom's Apple) was an oasis for insect life. Ants, wasps and butterflies (Small Cupid and Blue Spotted Arab) fed on the pollen.

At several sites ants (of various kinds) were among the most abundant creatures observed, although some of the smaller ants might easily escape notice unless you are looking for them. In one *ghaf* "forest" the Desert Runner ant (*Cataglyphis* sp.), a large, fast ant that carries its abdomen pointed in the air, was the most conspicuous animal species present.

Beside the *Calotropis* was a midden of gazelle droppings. Fencing, not only along the roads but also

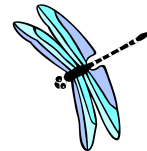
within the desert, restricts the movement of larger animals such as gazelle and forces them (as well as occasional observers) to enter and exit under gates and through holes in the fence. That they did so was evident from their tracks.

Fox tracks, normally fairly common, were not, at the sites I visited. I encountered only a single one. Might this have something to do with the drought? *Report by Gary Feulner*

### UAE Archeology Website

Members interested in local and regional archeology may want to visit the website of the Abu Dhabi Islands Archeological Survey (ADIAS) at [www.adias-uae.com](http://www.adias-uae.com).

The site contains lots of information not readily accessible elsewhere.







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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.

### The Elusive Pratincole

At Al Awir and Pivots last Friday, in search of elusive rarities, I found only the pectoral sandpiper although there had been reports of a little pratincole. Then I went to Mushrif Park on Sunday night hoping to spot a striated scops owl on the lawn under the floodlights and there were 400 picnickers on the grass! Al Awir is always interesting and possible at any time, and has few sightseers, cricketers, etc. Now, it has a good wader population and plenty of ducks, but later there may be raptors too. However work has started in the area to build a massive housing estate and its days are numbered. The same holds true for the once great area behind EGC. Think I'll take up plane spotting! *Report by David Snelling*

### Viper Viewing

Barbara Couldrey of the DNHG's RAK contingent led a small group of hikers up Jebel Qa'wah in mid-November. While they were spread out along the ridge near the summit, one couple encountered a viper among some rocks at about 1700m. Apparently Barbara had instructed her charges well, since they stood their ground and took photographs, copies of which have been donated to the DNHG's Photo Reference Collection. These reveal the snake to be a false horned viper (*Pseudocerastes persicus*), distinguishable by the two small protuberances beside each eye.

This snake is most often seen on rocky ledges but it can also be found among rocks on open ground. It is said to be limited to elevations above about 400m, a range which is consistent with known UAE observations. It has a more robust triangular head and appears somewhat larger and heavier overall than the more common carpet viper (*Echis coloratus*) and sawscale viper (*E. carinatus*) also found in or near the mountains. The false horned viper differs from the other two *Echis* vipers in being neurotoxic (versus haemotoxic). The J.

Qa'wah observers reported that the snake "hissed" at them. Similar reports exist, but former *Gazelle* editor Neil Curtis once reported that he heard this snake make a sort of whining sound. *Report by Gary Feulner*

### Non-Flowering Plants

Former *Gazelle* editor Neil Curtis is now engaged in conservation studies and public relations projects in Canada, but couldn't resist writing to highlight another interesting Arabian resident. Neil's current interest in plant taxonomy, he says, has led him back to "our old friends" *Ephedra foliata* and *E. intermedia*. Both are leafless plants found in the UAE. *E. foliata* is a straggling climber found in mountain wadis and also in sand deserts between Dubai and Al-Ain, where it can be found climbing in ghaf trees. *E. intermedia* is a low shrub found only in higher mountains.

The two *Ephedra* species are the only gymnosperms (non-flowering seed plants) native to the UAE, and, with the coniferous Juniper tree of the Jebel Akhdar, the only gymnosperms native to Eastern Arabia. Most gymnosperms are conifers but the genus *Ephedra* belongs to a sub-group called Gnetophytes. Neil writes to point out that *Ephedra* feature "double fertilization," which, he says, "is interesting if you're into plant evolution: 'The occurrence of double fertilization in *Ephedra* assumes added significance in light of its critical phylogenetic position as a basal member of the most closely related extant group of seed plants (Gnetales) to angiosperms [flowering plants].'" (Friedman 1990). Sounds like our friends are some of the closest living relatives of the whole flowering plant group. Interesting!" *Report by Gary Feulner*



## *Archeology Field Trip*

The archeology field trip on November 30<sup>th</sup> drew a large crowd, and resident archeologist Christian Velde was an enthusiastic and inspiring guide for the day. With a convoy of over a dozen cars, it was not surprising that some were lost on the way – though it was rather strange that they turned out to be a) committee members and b) lost in FRONT of the convoy!!! It was all sorted out in due time thanks to mobile phones!

We first visited the tombs of Dhayah. Although the number of tombs at this site is smaller than the 100 tombs of Shimal, they are more interesting to the lay visitor, because there is more left of the structures to see. Fourteen tombs lie scattered over the plain, each 12 to 14 metres long. When they were intact they would have been about 2.5 metres high with the inside double chambers measuring 1.5 meters wide by more than ten meters long. They were erected and used in the Wadi Suq time, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium, around 1600 BC. They occur all along the limestone mountains of Ras al Khaimah and can be seen as an elongated form of the Umm an Nar tombs. They had corbelled roofs. The way in which this construction was achieved can still be seen clearly even now: huge flat rocks were half buried in the ground at an angle of approximately 60 °, with successive rocks positioned on top of the lower ones, until they met each other in the middle.

*A corbelled roof*

The outer sides of the tombs were

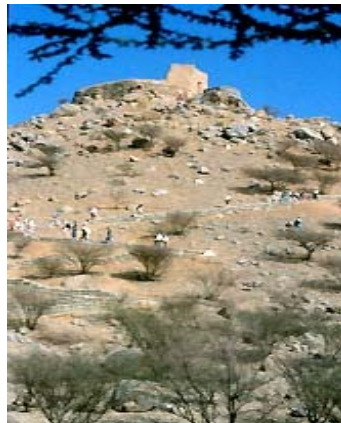


quite straight to a height of about one metre. The whole structure would have been covered with gravel and earth. Inside some of the tombs a large flat rock was

positioned horizontally, like a table. The use of this structure is not entirely clear.

They were so-called “kinship” tombs, holding the remains of extended families, from newborn babies to the elderly. When they were full, they held between 20 and 40 bodies. The tombs could be entered for new burials through an entrance either midway on the long side of the tomb or at the end. People were buried with flexed knees, in any way that space allowed. Some were accompanied by grave goods, i.e. beads, arms and a special type of pots, that differed from the ones that were used in the habitations. Very little of these grave goods remained after the tombs had been looted many times in the past.

After viewing the tombs a visit was paid to the fort at Dhayah, which lies on a steep hill rising up out of the plantation-filled plain.



*The DNHG ascends*

A set of unobtrusive steps, that Christian had a big hand in designing, leads up one side, and the buildings on top have been carefully and faithfully restored. Christian gave a very interesting talk about the history of the mountain tribes and the last battle that was fought around this fort.

The second site to be visited was the palace complex at Fayyah. This summer residence of the sheikhs of Ras al Khaimah has been extensively renovated in the last decade. It consists of a small mosque, a double-storey tower and the actual palace, all in one compound. The palace is the place where the Treaty of 1820 (peace between the British and the local tribes) was signed. The two metre high surrounding wall is still under construction. We could not visit the palace, as there was a bird breeding inside that should not be disturbed. The mosque however was viewed in detail, while Christian explained that the locally made mudbricks were plastered with double-burned lime in a process for which workmen from Iran had been hired.

The ceiling was beautiful with mangrove wood crossbeams, and areesh matting, held together with palm fibre ropes. In the courtyard a slightly raised platform without a roof turned out to be the minaret!



*Fayyah Mosque, before and after.*

We owe many thanks to Christian Velde for his excellent and interesting explanations and his patience in answering the many questions that were fired at him by the group.

*Report by Marijcke Jongbloed*



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### Book Review:

#### *Working for Wildlife*

Ed. Marijcke Jongbloed

Last month saw the launch of a new book "Working for Wildlife", that tells the story of the activities of the Arabian Leopard Trust.

"Working for Wildlife" is a scrapbook of memories compiled from the ALT archives – from newspaper articles, newsletters, correspondence, and other sources. It is beautifully illustrated by photographs of events and activities, as well as with the designs that supporting artists made for the ALT to further the cause. Its publication in print has been made possible by the sponsorship of Shell Markets ME Ltd., one of the staunchest supporters of the ALT from the very beginning.

The story of the ALT work is quite fascinating and well worth reading.

It shows what remarkable things can be achieved from small beginnings and a big desire to succeed. The stories of community and school involvement make delightful reading.

The print run is small, as the book is mainly meant as a farewell gift of the ALT to its sponsors and supporters. But a small number will be for sale at Dhs 75 in bookshops, with the proceeds to be divided between the two local animal charities: K9 and Feline Friends.



### Library:

*Natural Emirates*, edited by Peter Vine, a compendium of UAE natural history subjects intended for educated laymen, can be accessed on the Internet at:

<http://www.uaeinteract.com>

This will be good news to members who have been frustrated in their attempts to obtain hard copies. The book has never been available at retail stores in Dubai, but copies can be obtained at the Sharjah Natural History Museum – one of many good reasons for a visit.

Another site worth visiting is the Arabian Wildlife Magazine at:

<http://www.arabianwildlife.com>

## Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- 6 January      Gianna Minton: "Baleen and bones: recent developments in whale and dolphin research in Oman"
- 3 February     Professor Ted Papenfus, on some aspect of herpetology

**Field Trips**            (DNHG members only, please).

- 11 January     Hajar mountain hike with Gary Feulner
- 18 January     Joint fossilling trip with Abu Dhabi group
- 25 January     Desert Dinner to celebrate 15 years of DNHG
- 1 February     RAK to Falaj al Moalla with Peter van Amsterdam
- 7-8 February   Sir Bani Yas Island with David Snelling
- ?7-8 March     Inter-Emirates weekend