



# GAZELLE



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

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## Contributors —

Thanks to the following members for their contributions this month:

- Aarabhi Vimal & Anjana
- Agnieszka Dolatowska
- Angela Manthorpe
- Binish Roobas
- Claudia Steuber
- Iain Dodson & Rahul Shah
- Kay Deeming & Tim Chester
- Marion Schilly & Valerie Chalmers

Kerala  
... see page 5



Contribution and photo by Angela Manthorpe

## A visitor unmasked

Mushrif Park is such an expanse of greenery on the edge of the city that it must have an irresistible appeal to avian visitors, and every now and again it throws up a surprise. In early February I was poking around in a wet area overgrown with reeds, when I spotted a little bird above me. It was about the size and shape of an Indian Silverbill, *Euodice malabarica*, but with a very distinct red mask and a buff breast and belly. Although I was careful to raise my camera slowly the movement still spooked the bird and I was only able to snatch an out-of-focus shot...but then, even a poor photo can be diagnostic.

The bird did not feature in “Birds of the UAE” so consulting instead “Birds of the Middle East” (Porter, Christensen, Schiermacker-Hansen), the closest match was the Arabian Waxbill, *Estrilda rufibarba*, resident in Southern Saudi Arabia and Yemen. I sought the opinion of Oscar Campbell, Chairman of the Emirates Bird Records Committee, and this was his response:

“Well, your ID is pretty close... but I would think Common Waxbill is a lot more likely. This is an African species but is quite a widespread escapee. It is now established in places such as South Europe, Azores, Mauritius etc. It would be hard to tell Common from Arabian in the slightly soft photo but Common is far more likely as an escapee/release. Having said that, it is rare or very rare in the UAE; I do not ever recall seeing one here!”

There is always the possibility of cage birds turning up – like the time I spotted a Cockatiel (*Nymphicus hollandicus*) screeching from the top of a tree stump - but the Waxbill looked quite at home in the reeds and was a captivating observation.

## Announcements and Recorders



### Monthly Lecture

Monday 17 April 2023 at 7.45pm

**Speaker:** Dr. Agnieszka Dolatowska

**Topic:** From the archaeologist's diary—Mes Aynak (Afghanistan)  
"A forgotten city of the Silk Road"

#### Abstract:

About 40 km southeast of Kabul, there is a large hill under which the second-largest copper deposit in the world is located. This enormous and relatively easily accessible treasure has tempted people for centuries. It seems that the first traces of metal mining may have come from the Late Bronze Age. However, the extraordinary economic potential of this place was fully exploited between the 1st and 7th centuries AD. During this period, a vast city functioned around the hill as part of the Buddhist Gandhara controlled by the Kushan empire. The city was a cultural meeting point between east and west.

In the years 2011-2015, Agnieszka worked in Mes Aynak as one of the archaeologists of the international team with the aim of discovering the secrets of this extraordinary place. These four years spent at one of the most spectacular archaeological sites were an unforgettable professional and life experience for her. Some of these experiences will be revealed during her lecture.

#### Biography of Speaker:

Agnieszka is an archaeologist from Poland who has been working in Jazirat Al Hamrah Heritage Village (RAK) since 2016 as part of a project to revitalise the site. She has probably moved several tons of soil from one place to another during her many excavations.

### DNHG Recorders

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### From the Editor:

We are slowly heading toward summer now but Mother Nature always has surprises for us.

Please share through the email below your observations, stories, photos and captions of wildlife and nature in the UAE or abroad.

*Email:* [gazelleeditor@gmail.com](mailto:gazelleeditor@gmail.com)

*Deadline:* 21 April 2023. We look forward to hearing from you.

## IEW 2023 winning photographs



**Claudia Steuber - Animal Behaviour**  
Shield-tailed Scorpion (*Apistobuthus pterygocercus*)  
feeding on insects that were attracted by my headlight



**Claudia Steuber - Urban Life / Wildlife**  
Camel spider (*Galeodes arabs*) hunting insects



**Angela Manthorpe Black and White**  
Foothills - Jebel Jais— Taken from the mountains above Jebel Jais road (using my Samsung mobile phone)



**Angela Manthorpe - Unusual plant or animal**  
Longhorn beetle - Taken at night in the desert near Wadi Faya  
(using my Samsung mobile phone)



**Angela Manthorpe—Animal Behaviour**  
Dog eat dog—did you know that some dragonflies eat others?  
The Green Marsh Hawk/Slender Skimmer (*Orthetrum sabina*)  
devouring a Red-veined Drowpwing (*Trithemis arteriosa*) dragonfly



**Angela Manthorpe - Natural Humour**  
Researching the family tree - A cow observes rock art in a Hajar Mountain wadi

## Inter-Emirates Weekend 2023 Gala Dinner

Contribution by Marion Schilly and Valerie Chalmers

The Gala Dinner was held in the ballroom of the Centro Hotel, near Sharjah Airport on the evening of Saturday 26 February 2023.

A highlight of the evening was an illustrated talk entitled "**The Unique Coral Reefs of the Arabian Gulf**" which was given by Professor John Burt, Associate Professor of Biology, NYU Abu Dhabi. John's talk was followed by the presentation of the Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Award for Natural History and the Bish Brown Award.

### Sheikh Mubarak Bin Mohammed Award

The Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Prize for natural history is given to a person who has made a substantial, original contribution to knowledge of the history, natural history, culture, archaeology or palaeontology of the UAE, such contribution being reflected through means such as publications and lectures. The award was instituted by the ENHG Patron, H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan, and comprises an inscribed silver dhow and a cash prize.

The winner of the Sheikh Mubarak Award was **Johannes Els**. Johannes has supplemented his official responsibilities at Sharjah's Environment and Protected Areas Authority, based at Arabia's Wildlife Centre, with extensive fieldwork, laboratory study and publication, as well as public outreach. The Sheikh Mubarak Award recognizes his research, writing, editing and coordinating role in published (and some still unpublished) taxonomic research on the fish and reptile faunas of Eastern Arabia. This includes *Freshwater Fishes of the Arabian Peninsula* (2020), for which he was effectively the managing author; and, in collaboration with the Barcelona-based Institute of Evolutionary Biology, *Reptiles and Amphibians of Oman* (2021) and *Reptiles of the Hajar Mountains* (2022) (an abbreviated field guide), as well as professional papers. He has also lectured on the reptiles and amphibians of the UAE at most UAE natural history group venues and other public and professional forums.

### Bish Brown Award

The Bish Brown Award is given to a person who has made a significant contribution to promoting wider interest in the objectives of the UAE's three natural history groups, through means such as educational activities, raising public consciousness in the media, playing a leading role in NHG activities, etc. The award was endowed by former ENHG-Abu Dhabi Vice Chairman, Terry Adams and his wife, former Secretary, Caroline Adams, to commemorate the founder of the ENHG, J.N.B. 'Bish' Brown. The award comprises a silver mounted eagle, to be held for one year by the recipient, and a cash prize.

The winner of the Bish Brown Award was **Angela Manthorpe**. Angela has explored the natural environments of the UAE as a hiker, diver and amateur naturalist throughout the course of her residence in Dubai over most of the past thirty years. She has served the Dubai Natural History Group in many capacities, including Secretary, Co-Chair, Speaker Coordinator and Librarian. In recent years she has paid particular attention to investigating, documenting, and sharing her observations of terrestrial environments. Her curiosity ensures that she returns from almost every field outing with new information and/or generalisations. Her efforts have emphasised under-studied and under-appreciated subjects such as arthropods and their ecology, including predator-prey relationships and relationships to particular plants. All these she has shared with a larger audience, clearly and engagingly, in print and photographs through frequent reports in *Gazelle*, the monthly newsletter of the DNHG, and in online photographic forums. In 2021-22, she was instrumental in putting online pdfs of two important UAE plant references no longer available in print. She also now assists in the curation of the arthropod collection maintained by the ENHG.

## Photo Competition

Like the previous years our photographic competition took place during our Inter-Emirates Weekend. The below five categories were selected and shared with members. The winners received as prizes Magrudys vouchers for the value of AED120/-.

### The Categories:

1. Urban Life/ Wildlife
2. Natural Humour
3. Black & White
4. Animal Behaviour
5. Unusual Plant/Animal

### Congratulations to the winning pictures!

- Top 1 - Claudia Steuber (Category Animal Behaviour) and Angela Manthorpe (Category Unusual Plant/ Animal)
- Top 2 - Angela Manthorpe (Category Unusual Plant/ Animal)
- Top 3 – Angela Manthorpe (Category Animal Behaviour)

Thanks to Angela and Claudia for sharing their stories on how the photos were taken, which situation led to the shot and what devices were used. Their enthusiasm should carry us throughout the year, inspiring us to capture the moments of nature, architecture, and wildlife around us, to be ready for photograph entries next year.

Kerala is located in the southwest region of India between the Lakshadweep Sea and the Western Ghats mountain range, and it has a 550km coastline. Climatically this state consists of three distinct areas which we were lucky enough to visit and which provided insights into the location of species at different altitudes: the western coastal plains, the central midlands region of rolling hills (900m) and the rugged, cool mountainous Western Ghats (1500m) region. The Western Ghats are recognised by UNESCO as a world heritage site and are a hotspot of biological diversity including Mammals (118 species), Birds (500 species), Reptiles (193 species) and Amphibians (151 species).



Venbanad lagoon

We learned about the Black Pearl Fish, how its internal skeletal system allows it to cope with the osmotic effects of living in the lagoon where there is mix of seawater and freshwater depending upon monsoon rains and tidal flows.

Our next stop was Vagamom (in the mid plains area at 900m). The plantation surrounding the house where we stayed grew vanilla 75 years ago; however, the crops in this area have changed over the years due to climate change to primarily coffee and rubber. Cocoa trees, chili bushes, papaya and nutmeg trees were also found in this vicinity. Birds seen here included greater racket-tailed drongos, black-



© Binish Roobas

Booted eagle

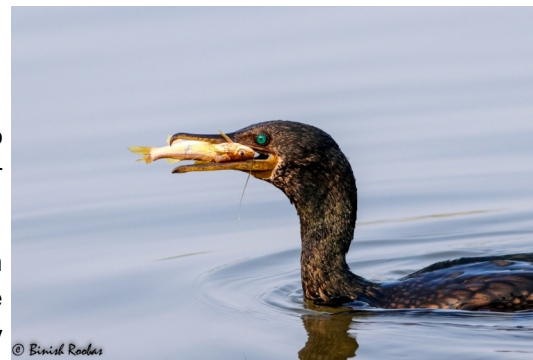
napped orioles, yellow-billed babblers, flower peckers, yellow-browed bulbuls, flame-throated bulbuls, red-whiskered bulbuls and crested serpent eagles. Interestingly, we also saw five eagles of two different species soaring high overhead.

Our next stop was at Thattekad (still in the mid plains area), where we caught our first glimpses of grey Malabar hornbills, orange mini vets, crimson sunbirds, pygmy woodpecker, velvet-fronted nuthatches, Malabar parakeets, cenarius tits, flame-backed woodpeckers and golden-fronted leafbirds. The most unusual looking bird we came across happened to be fast asleep and camouflaged within its chosen tree, a camera shy Sri Lankan Frogmouth. Well worth a search on google for an image.

Heading up into the Western Ghats, we stayed in Munnar and had a wonderful early morning walk through a tea plantation where we came across some different species: bush chats, common hoopoes, Palani laughing thrushes, rose finches and, somewhat unexpectedly, two Indian muntjac deer. We then visited a tea factory and museum, where our local guide, Hadlee, showed us how the leaves are processed to make tea. The unexpected continued to happen on this particular day, since we were lucky enough to witness a crested serpent eagle whilst travelling in the car. As it flew away, the rookies amongst us thought the game was over, but the professional amongst us (Binish Roobas) tapped on our car window and asked us to get out .... Moments later we witnessed the eagle hauling a snake into a tree for its morning snack.

Upon arrival in Kochi, we headed south to start our tour in the Backwater Area outside Kottayam, with a boat ride on a Vembanad lagoon. Our boat ploughed through the invasive water hyacinth plants in the early morning sunrise.

Here we spotted pond herons, purple herons, black drongos, common kingfishers, stork-billed kingfishers, lesser whistling teals, brahmny kites, cattle egrets, whiskered terns and mallard ducks. We were in awe of the Indian cormorant who dived for its breakfast, catching and consuming at least six catfish as we watched.



© Binish Roobas

Indian cormorant



Crested Serpent Eagle with snake kill

(Continued on page 6)

(Continued from page 5)

We squeezed in a trip to Marayoor through the sandalwood forests to see cane sugar being boiled in huge pans to make jaggery, and also some spectacular Neolithic Dolmen Megaliths.



Indian giant squirrel

Our final destination was Periyar Tiger Reserve, where we enjoyed a boat trip and a final early morning nature walk. In the Reserve we witnessed a phenomenal array of wildlife, including the orange-headed ground thrushes, red scrub fowl, grey hornbills, woolly neck storks, Indian red mongoose, sambar deer, river terrapins, smooth coated otters, Indian wild boar, black monkeys, macaque monkeys, elephants, dusky squirrels and finally our favourite, the Indian Giant Squirrel. The Giant Squirrel's head and body length was approximately 40cm, with another 40cm length of black bushy tail. The morning sunlight caught the dual aspect of its fur, which sported a beautiful dorsal orange bronze patch and a brown face on a background of glossy black.

Too soon our spectacular trip came to a close.

This description includes only a small percentage of the birds, butterflies, other animals, plants and trees we saw and of the knowledge we acquired whilst we were hosted on such a well-organised tour. Everything went so smoothly, and the locations, accommodation, food, and activities were just perfect.

With thanks to DNHG and Binish Roobas from us all!



The intrepid explorers



Srilankan Frogmouth



Indian muntjac



Black drongo



Woolly necked stork



Peninsular rock agama



Nilgiri langur

## Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) visit to the Abu Dhabi BAPS Hindu Mandir site

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of February, the DNHG group led by Rahul Shah went on a site visit to the BAPS Hindu Mandir, the first Hindu stone temple under construction in the emirate of Abu Dhabi. The temple is located on the arterial road from Abu Dhabi to Dubai.

This mandir is set to be an iconic landmark consisting of a temple with seven shrines intricately carved out of white marble and pink sandstone, an amphitheater, an exhibition hall, a library and book shop, classrooms, a sports centre, a food court, a majlis, thematic gardens, and community centres with a total capacity to seat 5,000 people.

We had a warm welcome from devotee volunteers at the site and were taken to the temporary assembly hall where we performed a shila pooja (brick worship) and watched a detailed presentation that covered the timeline of the structure. The construction of the Abu Dhabi Hindu temple is being undertaken by the BAPS - Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, a religious organisation that has already completed over 1,100 Hindu shrines in different parts of the world. This temple is being built with stones, marble, and pink sandstone especially imported from Rajasthan - India, and is expected to last a thousand years.

The most distinctive features of India's ancient architecture are its temples, Chaityas, Viharas, Stupas, and other places of worship. These traditional temple constructions are based on the canonical texts in the Sanskrit language broadly known as Shilpa Shastra that were in existence since the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium CE. The Abu Dhabi temple construction method is a unique fusion of ancient Indian architecture and modern technology. This temple is built as per the Nagara style of temple architecture that is popular from the 5th century CE onwards in the Northern states of India.

The structure, when complete, will be 32 meters tall and will feature engravings portraying the stories of Hindu gods, friezes decorated with various arts and animals, and over a thousand carvings of deities in the exterior brackets. The exteriors are made of pink sandstone and the interiors will feature Italian white marble that is handcrafted by village artisans in India. The temple will be supported by over 400 intricately carved pillars and over 25,000 pieces of stone, each with a unique number. The temple will have seven shikhars that symbolically represent the seven emirates of the UAE and will house the different Hindu deities. The steps to the temple will also depict the universal values of other ancient civilisations.

This unique structural construction is also a feat in sustainability. The temple is built without any iron or steel reinforcements and has a green foundation with 55% flyash to keep the environmental impact at a minimum. Materials like bamboo sticks and glass slabs are used along with the concrete to compensate for the tensile and compressive strengths of the structural foundation. Creating a 3D model of the entire stone-carved structure for meeting governmental regulations was a major challenge for the team. This is the first time in history that a traditional Hindu mandir was fully digitally modelled. Also, this will be the first temple in the world with over 300 embedded load and temperature sensors emitting live data to scientists for decades to come for early detection of structural anomalies. The temple will also feature solar power arrangement and water conservation methods.

The BAPS Hindu Mandir is expected to open doors to devotees in February 2024. This will be a traditional stone temple of harmony for the whole world to see, as rightly remarked by the President of the UAE and Ruler of Abu Dhabi, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

*Contribution by Aarabhi Vimal and Anjana - Photos by Rahul Shah and Iain Dodson*



Shila pooja (brick worship)



Brick after blessing ceremony (Iain's photo)



Stories in stone—a bridge of faith



Inspecting the construction of the temple



## Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) Programme 2022/2023

### DNHG Lectures 2023

- 17 April From the archaeologist's diary -Mes Aynak (Afghanistan)  
"A forgotten city of the Silk Road"
- 1 May "The fauna of parasitic arthropods in the UAE" by Dr. Rolf Schuster

### DNHG Field Trips 2023

- 1 - 2 April Daymaniyat Islands in Oman — Dhow and camping trip
- 19 - 23 April: Tiger Safari in Ranthambore National Park, India (Trip Full)
- 20 - 28 May: In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great, Greece

*For more information and sign-up please contact:*

\* *Binish Roobas at [binishroobas@hotmail.com](mailto:binishroobas@hotmail.com) for Kerela, Ranthambore National Park*

\* *Sonja Lavson at [lavson@gmail.com](mailto:lavson@gmail.com) for Greece*

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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 2022 to September 2023. As we have started hybrid meetings from September 2022, renewal fees can be paid at meetings or by the methods mentioned below.

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](http://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.