



# GAZELLE



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

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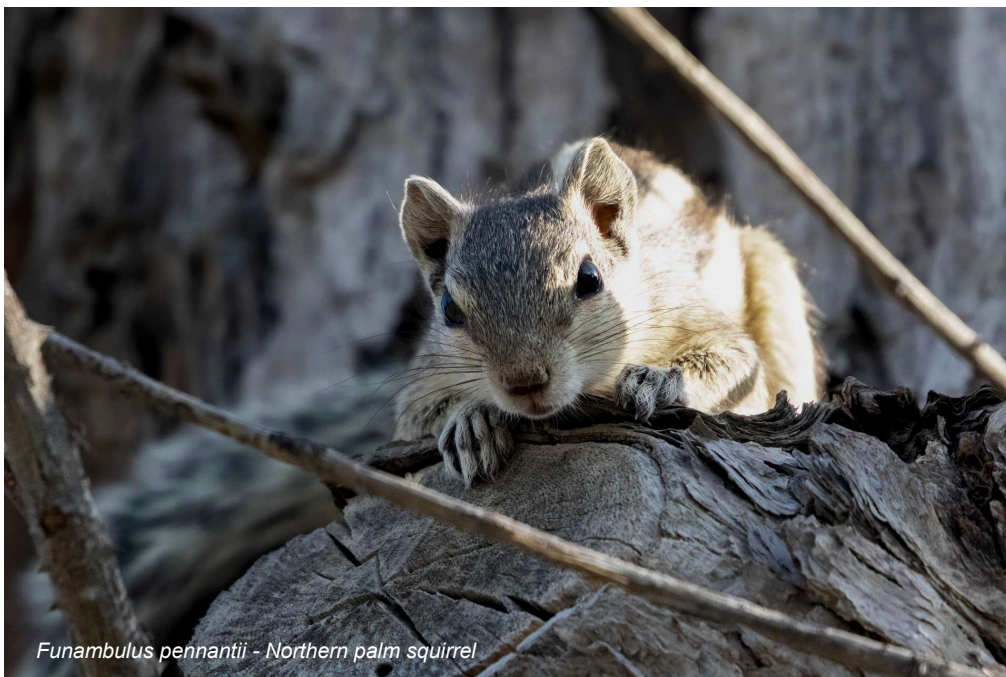
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## Contributors —

Thanks to the following members for their contributions this month:

- Binish Roobas*
- Chandrashekhar Sardesai*
- Gary Feulner*
- Hazelle Page*
- Iain Dodson*
- James Conder*
- John Duffy*
- Kateryna Fomenko*
- Noémi Prázsmáry*
- Sonja Lavrenčič*
- Valerie Chalmers*
- Valerie Lindsay*

Kalba Dam walk  
..see page 6..



*Funambulus pennantii* - Northern palm squirrel

## Mushrif Park Field Trip

Contribution by Iain Dodson  
Photos by Valerie Lindsay

On the morning of Sunday 26 February, as part of the Inter-Emirates Weekend programme of field trips, Angela Manthorpe led a morning visit to Mushrif Park. A long-term resident of nearby Mirdif Angela has for years been a regular visitor to the park and during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, in particular, she really came to value having this green space on her doorstep.

Inaugurated in 1974, Mushrif Park is one of the oldest parks in Dubai and, due to its large areas of natural forest must certainly rank as one of Dubai's wildest! In the blurb for the field trip Angela had described the area as a haven for a wide variety of flora and fauna, suggesting that we were likely to see "birds, butterflies, all manner of insects and maybe a cheeky mammal or two". And from the very outset our small group was not disappointed! Just a few metres from our car-parking rendezvous point a large tree was playing host to a group of Northern palm squirrels (*Funambulus pennantii*), known also as the five-striped palm squirrel. Living up to the first part of their Latin name the squirrels were certainly lots of fun as they scurried up and down the trunk of the tree and balanced like tightrope-walkers, from which the name *Funambulus* derives, on the thinner branches doing their best to avoid being photographed. It was the first time I had seen palm squirrels in the UAE, a species I associate more with the tropical environment of Sri Lanka and South India than with the arid conditions of Arabia.

Ticking off "cheeky mammal" from our Mushrif Park *I-SPY* list of things to see, we ventured further into the un-manicured part of the park. Winding our way among the

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## Announcements and Recorders



*Generalised scabies in Arabian oryx*

*Tick infestation of a camel*

### Monthly Lecture

**Monday 8 May 2023 at 7.45pm**

**Speaker:** Dr. Rolf Schuster

**Topic:** "The Fauna of Parasitic Arthropods in the UAE "

#### Abstract:

It is estimated that the number of arthropod species varies between 1.1 and 5 million and accounts for more than 80% of known living animal species. As parasites causing skin lesions, blood loss and being vectors and/or intermediate hosts (for malaria, sleeping sickness, Lyme disease, tick meningoencephalitis and others) many arthropods are of medical and veterinary significance. Other arthropods belong to pests or are venomous. Arthropods also can cause parasite delirium.

Due to the extreme hot climate the spectrum of parasitic arthropods in the UAE is limited but, changes in the habitat and introduction of new hosts, may increase their significance in the future.

#### Biography of Speaker:

Dr. Schuster graduated as a veterinarian from Moscow Veterinary Academy. He was Lecturer at the Parasitological Institute of Humboldt University of Berlin for 12 years. Subsequently, for 10 years, he was Senior Lecturer and Professor at the Institute for Parasitology and Tropical Veterinary Medicine of the Free University of Berlin. Since 2002 Dr. Schuster has been the head of the parasitology department of the Central Veterinary Research Laboratory (CVRL) in Dubai. His research evolves around tropical and subtropical Africa and Mongolia.

### DNHG Recorders

**Reptiles - Dr. Reza Khan**  
050 6563601

**Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi**  
res: 06-5310467 off: 06-5583 003  
lankefi@emirates.net.ae

**Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi**  
(contact as above)

**Geology - Gary Feulner**  
res: 04 306 5570  
grfeulner@gmail.com

**Insects - Gary Feulner**  
(contact as above)

**Fossils - Valerie Chalmers**  
res: 04 4572167  
mobile: 050 8305018 email:  
valeriechalmers@gmail.com

**Plants - Valerie Chalmers**  
(contact as above)

**Archaeology - Anelisa Lambert**  
056 6904508  
anelisalambert@gmail.com

**Seashells - Andrew Childs**  
050 4590112  
andrew.childs@eim.ae

**Bird Recorder - Panos Azmanis**  
050 7083555  
azmanis.vet@gmail.com

**Mammals—Jacky Judas**

### From the Editor:

Please share with us 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:* 20 May 2023. We look forward to hearing from you.

## Spotlight! - Damaniyat Islands - some unforgettable moments

### James Conder recalls the Bridled terns

One of the most unforgettable aspects of our night on the Damaniyat Islands were the Bridled terns ... although opinion remains divided as to whether the terns were an aspect of the trip to be celebrated or not. Our first sighting of a Bridled tern was en route to the islands - a single bird taking a rest from its own pelagic adventures by perching on a broken plank floating over the waves. Bridled terns are medium-sized terns - attractive packages of sleek lines and graceful curves that advertise their acrobatic flying skills. Most distinctive is the black cap on the head, black eye-liner and white bandana across the temple - they appear to be feathered in preparation for an energetic game of tennis.

Far less attractive are their calls, which we were about to become a lot more familiar with. We were none-the-wiser throughout our lovely day exploring the islands. Not until after night had fallen and our own feast of fish was done, did the Bridled terns begin to announce themselves. We were initially excited to hear the evening filling with noise, the gurs and hurs of thousands of terns converging on the islands, intent on sharing the night with us. Briefly flashing our torches on the rocks in the bay revealed they were crowded with terns, but the birds were not content to settle just there. Soon the roosting birds seemed to be everywhere we turned (pun intentional), swooping over our heads screaming past our ears or bursting out of the vegetation behind the beach. Some seemed rather irritated to discover tents over their favourite spot of sand. The hubbub of their cackling calls grew and persisted throughout the night. Having arrived on the islands to spend the night, the terns seemed to have little interest in actually sleeping! Not all our nature lovers could extend their affection towards this night-long lullaby. Geraldine dubbed them the "unbridled raving terns". Respite from the din only arrived about an hour before dawn when all the terns abruptly headed back out to sea and peace was restored to the Damaniyat Islands.

The Bridled terns are representative of the islands' importance. Over the summer months, they become important nesting sites for a variety of seabirds, including the Bridled terns, whose numbers were estimated at close to 10,000 pairs in the 1990s.



Bridled tern - photo by James Conder



Bridled tern - photo by Chandrashekhar Sardesai

### Barbara Van Meir explains about the dangers of green algae overgrowth

As we set out to the Damaniyat Islands during the recent DNHG trip, conditions were extremely calm and the flat sea was mostly... green. Whilst some of the patterns were undeniably beautiful these green swirls are algae blooms and they are far from harmless!

Algae blooms occur when there is an overgrowth of algae, usually due to nutrient pollution caused by industrial production, desalination plants, agricultural activity, tourism and general urbanisation. The process whereby a body of water is progressively enriched by nutrients, especially nitrogen and phosphorus, is called *eutrophication*.

The overgrowth of algae can block sunlight from reaching underwater plants and other organisms, causing a depletion of oxygen. When the algae eventually die, the oxygen in the water is further consumed. The lack of oxygen makes it impossible for aquatic life to survive. In addition, some types of algae blooms produce toxic chemicals.

In Omani coastal waters the dominant strain of algae is the green *Noctiluca scintillans*, which causes a so-called 'green tide' especially during the North East Monsoon between January and March. (There is also a red variety which causes the famous red tide phenomenon.) Green *Noctiluca* has become very abundant in the Gulf of Oman in the past two decades possibly because the warming of the seawater linked to climate change, which has changed the dynamics of the plankton on which *Noctiluca* feeds.

Less harmful than some, green *Noctiluca* still causes fish kills due to the lower oxygen concentrations which occur when the bloom decomposes.



Green algae - photo by Kateryna Fomenko

.... more about Damaniyat Islands in the next edition of Gazelle.....

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native ghaf trees (*Prosopis cineraria*), and the introduced invasive mesquite (*Prosopis juliflora*), we witnessed a profusion of yellow flowers, in the form of *Senecio glaucus*, covering the ground, clearly thriving after the recent January rains. We soon encountered evidence of insect life as well, in the form of an old abandoned honey comb.

Next, Angela led us up the steep dune, the top of which afforded a fine panoramic view of the 5.25 square km expanse of the park. As well as containing picnic and barbecue areas and the more formal gardens and lawns, the territory of the park also includes the observatory, known officially as the Al Thuraya Astronomy Centre. Much has been done by the Dubai Municipality over recent years to increase the range of activities on offer in the park. Since my last visit almost ten years ago I noticed the addition of a climbing park, Aventura, with rope swings and zip lines built among the trees. There are several cycling options now on offer, including a surfaced track around the park, and mountain biking trails through the wilder wooded parts, with routes from 5km to 20km+. Bike hire is available.

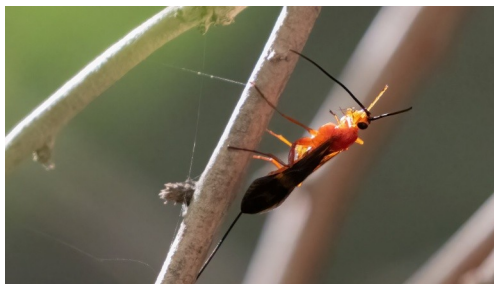
It was on the edge of the mountain biking trail that we encountered our next specimens of flora in the form of the green leafy milkweed (*Calotropis procera*), infamous for its milky white latex-like poisonous sap which has a reputation for causing blindness if the sap accidentally makes contact with human eyes. Nearby there was a wild grass, (*Cenchrus echinatus?*), that seemed to be producing a black dust-like mould and the prickly desert thorn bush (*Lycium shawii*). Two types of fungus were also in evidence – again not something one usually associates with nature walks in the UAE – several examples of rather dried-up bracket fungus growing on trees, and the mushroom-shaped specimens on the forest floor.

After admiring some truly colossal ghaf trees, with their vast drooping branches, colonised by swathes of vines (*Pentatropis nivalis*) rising up from the ground, Angela led us further into the depths of the wildest part of the forest. Angela's blurb had promised "overgrown areas with rough branches and tripping hazards" and once again we were not disappointed! The reward for pushing through into what reminded me of "Fanghorn Forest" from *The Lord of the Rings* books and films, was a reminder of just how much wildlife there is just beyond our back doors, here in the UAE. Within a few minutes we had noticed several birds' nests, belonging to the white-eared bulbul (*Pycnonotus leucotis*), sometimes known as the white-cheeked bulbul, including one nest which had a clutch of three eggs within.

Thanks to Angela Manthorpe and Gary Feulner for their support with species identification.



Bracket fungus



Ichnumon wasp



Dragonfly



*Cinnyris asiaticus* - Purple sunbird



*Coracias benghalensis* - Indian roller



*Upupa epops* - Eurasian hoopoe



*Pycnonotus leucotis* - White eared bulbul



Northern palm squirrel

## Hillside Grottoes - What for ?

Driving the hills and valleys of Italy it is fairly common to see along roadsides and embankments small arched grottoes, manmade and usually colorfully decorated, dedicated to one or another of the Roman Catholic saints. It was a surprise, however, on a recent tour of rural farming areas in the geologically diverse Dibba Zone of Fujairah and Ras al-Khaimah, to observe a welter of somewhat similar hillside grottoes, built more or less crudely from local stones.

Investigation of a sampling of them did not immediately reveal their purpose; they were empty. We had occasionally seen similar, but not identical structures erected to protect specimens of the local succulent *Caralluma*, whose young shoots are eaten and sometimes sold in local markets, but the *Caralluma* is not found in the area in question.



*More than half a dozen crude stone grottoes on a hillside in the Dibba Zone, south of E87*



*This grotto is host to an active comb of the Dwarf Honeybee - Apisflorea*

Only much later in the same day's journey did we witness evidence of the real purpose – no surprise to local residents and farmers traversing a remote hillside, we looked inside one more such grotto and saw a well-formed honeycomb and bees. The grottoes are shelters intended to attract the local honeybee *Apis florea*, the Dwarf Honeybee or Little Bee, whose combs are then harvested by the shelter builder for their honey.



*An individual grotto on the hillside shown*

No doubt the 'mining' of this 'liquid gold' is accompanied by a well-established code of practice and ethics governing territories, claims and claim-jumping. Perhaps it is also accompanied by an evolving body of technological or architectural expertise concerning the design features most likely to successfully attract a Dwarf Bee colony.

Does anyone know more?

*Contribution and photos by Gary Feulner and Binish Roobas*

## “A Forgotten City on the Silk Road”

Technical difficulties at our April 17 hybrid lecture meeting left us unable to share the presentation with our zoom audience.

We apologize to our speaker, archaeologist Dr. Agnieszka Dolotowska, and to our disappointed Zoom attendees. In consideration of the exceptional content and its regional significance, Dr. Dolotowska has agreed, at our request, to repeat her presentation on a **Zoom-only basis**, on 15 May 2023 at 8 pm sharp. Access will be provided from 7.45 pm onwards.

Details will be advised to DNHG members by e-mail circular.

## A walk above the Kalba Dam, 18 March 2023

Contribution by Hazelle Page and John Duffy  
Photos by Hazelle Page, Noémi Prázsmáry & Sonja Lavrenčič

“A gentle near end of season hike in the mountains above Kalba Dam before it gets too hot”, was the sales pitch.

We rendezvoused at 8 am at the dam car park with our walk leader Sonja. There were nine of us and a dog in the group and we were to climb a well-graded path up to the top of one hill and then traverse a ridge onto another hill-top before returning to our starting point. The highlights of the trip were good company, views of hillsides still green after the winter rains and the coastal plain around Kalba.



Kalba - a view from the top

On route to the top we saw lots of insects including a good sample of butterflies the majority of which were Desert Whites *Pontia glauconome*, a few *Catopsilia florella* (an African emigrant) and a black and white Diadem *Hypolimnas misippus* ‘hill-topping’ at the top of the second hill.



*Convolvulus virgatus* - Bindweed family



The bright green grasshopper



White cocoon egg mass of an orb web spider

A bright green grasshopper and the spherical white cocoon egg mass of an orb web spider - *Argiope* species were both spotted after climbing up some rocks to take a photo of the *yellow-flowered* *Abutilon fruticosum*, (Mallow family) that had caught the eye. The flowers appeared to be doubles.

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Early on in the walk and as promised, we came across a posing Hajar Rock Agama, *Pseudotrapelus jensvindumi* waiting for our arrival to show off its amazing turquoise colouring. At the end of the walk as we descended a Eurasian Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus* from the Bird of Prey Centre gave us an impressive display of riding the thermal currents.



*Reseda aucheri* - Mignonette family



*Pseudotrapelus jensvindumi*  
Hajar rock agama is "never too shy to pose"



Green hills above Kalba Dam with  
*Echinops* species

The walk was indeed a gentle hike with no injuries to report from the group including pride. An after-climb picnic and natter under the shade of a Sidr tree was a great end to the day.



*Cometes surattensis* - Pink family



*Pseudogallonia hymenostephana* - Madder family



*Abutilon fruticosum* - Mallow Family

As a postscript to the walk a few of us visited the Sharjah Art Foundation renovated gallery space at the Kalba Ice Factory to view part of the Sharjah Art Biennale 15.

With thanks to Angela Manthorpe, Valerie Chalmers and Iain Dodson for their help with the identifications.



The hikers

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

### DNHG Lectures 2023

- 8 May "The fauna of parasitic arthropods in the UAE" by Dr. Rolf Schuster  
 15 May "Mes Aynek (Afghanistan) – "A Forgotten City on the Silk Road" by Dr. Agnieszka Dolotowska  
 A repeat presentation - online via Zoom only

### DNHG Field Trips 2023

- 20 - 28 May: In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great, Greece  
 September: Discovering Slovenia (*itinerary to be revealed later*)



For more information on upcoming lectures, field trips and membership please refer to DNHG website [www.dnhg.org](http://www.dnhg.org)  
 To sign up for field trips, please contact: Sonja Lavson at [lavson@gmail.com](mailto:lavson@gmail.com)

## DNHG COMMITTEE 2022/2023

When possible, please contact committee members outside office hours

	Name	Telephone	Email
Chairman	<b>Gary Feulner</b>	04 306 5570	grfeulner@gmail.com
Vice Chairman	<b>Valerie Chalmers</b>	050 830 5018	valeriechalmers@gmail.com
Treasurer	<b>Puneet Kumar</b>	050 452 4820	puneetcps@gmail.com
Membership Secretary	<b>Alessandra Pipan</b>	054 777 1183	lssndr.ppn@gmail.com
Speaker Co-ordinator	<b>Michelle Sinclair</b>	050 458 6079	sinclairmichelle611@gmail.com
Fieldtrip Co-ordinator	<b>Sonja Lavrenčič</b>	050 256 1496	lavson@gmail.com
Member-at-Large	<b>Pradeep Radhakrishna</b>	050 450 8496	wgarnet@eim.ae
Member-at-Large	<b>Anindita Radhakrishna</b>	050 656 9165	anin@eim.ae
Newsletter Editor	<b>Heidi Struiksmma</b>	055 899 2222	gazelleeditor@gmail.com
Librarian/Book Sales	<b>Angela Manthorpe</b>	058 135 4143	manthorpe2005@yahoo.co.uk
Website Co-ordinator	<b>Alexis Biller</b>	055 103 9014	alexis.biller@gmail.com

Postal Address: DNHG, PO Box 9234, Dubai, UAE

## 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.