

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

End of Season Function

Our annual gathering before people leave for the summer will once again be held in the Utsav Restaurant, The India Club, off Oud Metha Road on Thursday, 14th June 2012 at 7.30 p.m. for 8.00 p.m. It will cost Dirhams 70/- per adult and Dh35/-for children 5-12 years for a varied buffet meal.

For a change this year we will be running another 'Where in the UAE' photo quiz, modelled on the successful one held during IEW 2012. If you have any photos which you would like to see in the quiz please send them by email to Clare O'Hare (clare.ohare@gmail.com) by Thursday 7th June 2012. The scope is wide – anywhere within the 7 Emirates - new and hidden secrets, old favourite places and even those that have disappeared. Let us know who/where/when the photos were taken. This information will be displayed with the photos after the quiz.

Tickets will be available at the meeting on Sunday 10th June. So make a date in your diary. If you cannot make the meeting, please email Valerie Chalmers

(valeriechalmers@gmail.com)

IEW Photo competition winners

Continuing our series of IEW photo competition winners, this month's photograph is the winning entry in the Life on Earth category: Tamsin Carlise's "Piper on the Strand".



Book launch

A book launch was held on Friday, May 25 at the Fujairah Hilton to launch "Focus on Fujairah - Through Minie's Lens 1964-2001", a book that recounts Minie's life in Fujairah. The book is a "stunning photographic journey through Fujairah and surrounding areas."

Minie (Wilhelmina van de Weg) and Joan Elliot arrived in the UAE in 1964 and were soon established in Fujairah where they helped to set up a midwifery clinic.

DNHG Membership

DNHG Membership remains a bargain at Dhs.100 for couples/families and Dh. 50 for singles. You can **join or renew at our meetings or by sending us your details and a cheque** made out to: Lloyds TSB Bank account no. 60600669933501. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.)

DNHG membership entitles you to participate in field trips and helps pay for our lecture hall, publication and distribution of our monthly newsletter, the Gazelle, our post office box, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects.



This Month's Contributors

Valerie Chalmer
Christine Verreydt
John Martin

Sonja Lavrenčič
Brigitte Howarth

Under the patronage of H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan



Trip to Georgia, 20—27 October 2012 (Eid holidays)

Gamarjoba!*

In April, I was extremely lucky to spend two weeks in Georgia: this is located on one of the earth's great crossroads (the Silk Road) and it has often been named "the most beautiful country on earth". With the spectacular snow-capped Caucasian mountains, the fertile valleys, beautiful forests, ancient monuments (many of them from the BCE-era), cave monasteries, the excellent food, wine and chacha (local grape vodka), and of course the people themselves, Georgia offers a lovely escape from the UAE heat.

Tourism has only just started: Georgians are putting the Soviet era behind them and look forward to developing and opening up their country to the rest of the world.

I had the pleasure to be in the company of Marina Javakishvili, a local guide, who took me to the most remarkable places in the province of Kakheti in East Georgia. We visited remote and mysterious monasteries, beautiful parks, villages and cities and even an obscure chacha distillery in a shack of an old villager Nicola.



Beautiful Kvarrel Lake

Marina has proposed a programme for the DNHG in October. This is the month of vintage

and festivals in the Kakheti region: a lot of sightseeing and activities are guaranteed. Marina's son, Zura Javakishvili, is an ornithologist and will hold an evening lecture for the group in Tbilisi, the beautiful capital, about the diversity of natural landscapes and wildlife in Georgia.

Details of the trip:

Dates: 20 to 27 October (during the Eid break)

Average price of the trip: 550 euro per person (based on 12 people). This includes transport to/from Tbilisi airport, accommodation, sightseeing and most meals. There is no discount for children as the price is already kept to the minimum.

Rooms: the price is based on twin sharing basis. If you would prefer a single room, this can be arranged but the price has still to be confirmed by the local guide Marina.

Flights: Flydubai (around 1000 AED pp) – flights are early in the morning. The Dubai Tbilisi flight lasts only 3 hours and the airport is just a 15 minute drive from Tbilisi city centre.

Local Guide: Marina Javakishvili

Trip coordinator: Christine Verreydt – if you are interested, send an email to infinistan@gmail.com. You will receive a full program of the trip.

Local Trip Coordinator: Sonja Lavenčič



KVEVRI pottery: The unique Georgian method of Kvevri wine-making has been included on the UNESCO list: the millennia old tradition is used for fermenting and ageing wine in pitchers (which are called kvevri in Georgian).

Our Next Speaker

Brigitte Howarth

I arrived in the UAE with my family in September 1998 after having just recently successfully defended my Ph.D. thesis entitled 'Batesian Mimicry in the British Syrphidae'. My first degree is in applied ecology. My interest in research stems from a holiday job I was offered as an undergraduate to work alongside scientists and Ph.D. students at a research unit at the University of East London. The unit was involved with all aspects of soil ecology, specifically environmental impact and recovery rates of land that had been reclaimed after coal mining. Later during my first degree I was introduced to entomology and discovered hoverflies. Their mimicry of stinging Hymenoptera became my Ph.D. research, some of which has been published in scientific journals.

Together with my Ph.D. supervisor, we were also successful in attracting funding from the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) in England to develop an immunological test to determine whether birds are stung by bees and wasps, an idea I put forward to test whether birds have an innate aversion to Hymenopteran colouration. Continuation of this research is ongoing here in the UAE with a Research Incentive Fund grant from Zayed University (ZU), where I am currently employed as Assistant Chair of the Department of Natural Science and Public Health.

I am currently working on extending the dipteran records for the UAE but am also interested in other insect orders and the ecology of all habitats they occur in. For the past few years I have been curator and custodian of the Joint Al Ain and Abu Dhabi Insect Collection but have held various other posts within with the Al Ain Chapter of the Emirates Natural History Group (ENHG), laterally as Chair of the Chapter. As often as I can I spend time in wadis and the desert environment, observing, identifying, and recording fauna and flora, culminating in periodic publications.



Email your field reports and news to clare.ohare@gmail.com (Arial 10 justified). Please send your photographs as **separate .jpg files** (preferably compressed for documents) or deliver them to Editor Clare O'Hare for scanning.

Agricultural & Botanical notes from Nepal

Our visit (in late March) coincided with the dry season so many of the fields were already ploughed but not as yet seeded, awaiting the rains of April and the summer Monsoon. We travelled through broad river valleys, across steep hillsides and on to open ridges at elevations between 2000 and 9000 feet above sea-level. The big rivers were flowing freely with snow-melt from the distant mountains but around Makadum village the watercourses were mostly dry as these "hills" (only 9000 feet high!) don't attract snow.

The district is well populated, except for areas of "jungle" on the less cultivatable hillsides and the conifer plantations on the higher levels, with numerous scattered farmsteads on the steep and terraced hills and small townships at river crossings and road junctions. The land is generally intensively farmed; narrow strip terraces on the steeper slopes and squarer fields on the river banks. We saw little machinery in use, only the odd tractor at lower elevations, and farming is by ox- and people-power.

The main staple food crops are rice, corn (maize), wheat and barley.



Breakfast of rice and

Rice (paddy) needs more water as the fields need to be flooded during the earlier stages of the cultivation cycle. We saw seedlings being transplanted in the lower fields. The seed beds are small bright green

areas amongst the dust-coloured fields and the foot-tall plantlets are planted out by hand, back-breaking work.

Corn had been planted in many of the upland fields but was only just emerging from the soil. The dried cobs of the previous crop hang safely under the eaves of many of the houses. Small areas of wheat and barley were approaching maturity, and being reaped by hand, but the planting of the next crop awaits the rains. Threshing was taking place on the clean paved areas in front of some of the houses.

Potatoes are grown mainly at higher elevations but with some in a few fields down at river level. Those on offer in the market were uniformly small with very dark purple skins.

Mustard is grown for oil-seed and the leaves are cooked as one of the many types of "sag" spinach-like greens. Many plants were in flower and the mature stems were being cut and bundled.

Vegetables in the fields included onions, garlic, peas, broad beans, tomatoes, cabbage and coriander. In their season carrots, eggplants, courgettes and probably many other, more exotic, foodstuffs will appear.



Milking the buffalo

The farm animals are buffalo, cattle and goats. In general fodder is brought to the tethered animal although, under supervision, the goats are allowed to browse in the "jungle" and on some crop-residues in the fields. Around the houses many trees of several species are vigorously pruned and the branches carried to the animals in large bundles by the women of the household. Some trees are reduced to bare trunks – Nepalis are

great tree-climbers – but seem to survive this harsh treatment. Corn stalks, wheat straw and wild grasses are collected for animal food, some being stored in a "haystack" half way up a tree out of reach of the animals. Not much is wasted; buffalo, cows and goats seem to eat almost anything. On the higher slopes we saw dry pine needles being collected and carried down for animal bedding. The spent bedding and the manure are collected and stored in middens before being taken to the fields and ploughed in. Everything is carried in the ever-present huge conical baskets, supported by a head-band, almost always by the women.

Domestic fowls are chiefly hens, often with a string of chicks in tow, but we saw a surprising number of ducks considering the generally dry conditions.

Wildflowers were present everywhere, but perhaps not as numerous as they would be later in the year, but we didn't seem to have much time in our busy schedule for serious botanising. Some plants were familiar – the Christmas poinsettia grows here as a large shrub; an *Ageratum*, closely resembling bedding plants in my UK garden, is a roadside weed; a recognisable nettle grows wild (but from previous experience, I know that this is a variety not to tangle with!). Growing casually by the path along the river were marihuana plants. One gorgeous cream-flowered orchid was flourishing in a tree beside one of the higher paths. Bamboos of several species were common and used for many purposes, from scaffolding to string.

The trees were all unfamiliar. Several species of *Ficus* (fig) grow – some for fruit, many for leaf-fodder, and a couple have religious significance. Other hardwood trees were being felled and pit-sawn into beams and boards for house construction and repair. The conifer plantations on some of the higher slopes resembled those in Scotland but the pines were of different species.

We had an interesting visit with



something new around every corner (and there were lots of corners on these winding mountain tracks!). It would be good to return at a different season to see more of the farming year.



Local house

Report by John Martin (a founder member of DNHG, now living in UK) and photos by Sonja Lavrenčič

Visit to Makadam village and Indigenous Peoples Trail in Nepal

A small group of 10 DNHG troopers visited the Nepali countryside and followed the Indigenous People Trail at the end of March. The field trip was organized by ex-DNHG member Narayan Kharki and DNHG Chairman Gary R. Feulner. The trip to Makadam village and surrounding areas gave the DNHG members an invaluable insight into indigenous, rural areas of Nepal that are not easily reachable and are not (yet) exposed to tourism. Special thanks to Narayan, without his contacts, knowledge and endless energy this trip would not have been possible.

After a day of sight seeing in Katmandu we started our journey to the Nepal Hill Country by driving through the Bhaktapur area with brick factories and seasonal workers – during monsoon months they are rice field farmers and during the dry season brick workers. We drove through the slopes of the green terraced valleys, across rivers, through villages with interesting architecture: two storey pebble stone buildings had outside stairs, sometimes two sets of V shaped separate stairs for separate first floor entrances. Houses were painted in bright orange and Narayan explained each family “owns” a house color.

Just before lunch we got to the bridge at Sitkha village. Villagers in Sitkha are not used to foreigners, they stared at us in shy wonder. A local girl asked me a trick question: why are you here? It's difficult to explain to somebody who never left her one street village what wanderlust is. Travelling for fun is an unknown concept for these people, their travels are usually long walks, uncomfortable overloaded bus rides and then some more walking before they reach the destination. Narayan told us that it used to take him 6 days to get from his village to Katmandu.

After lunch we all climbed in the back of the truck and start our slow, dusty ascent up the narrow, bumpy road in the steep hills of Hill Country to Makadam village, our final destination.



The Band: Village orchestra

We knew that the villagers were eagerly expecting their first overseas guests, but nobody expected the welcome that they prepared from us. We were greeted by the local music band (two trumpets, two drums and two long 'horns') and the welcome committee adorned us with flowers, scarves and red tikkas.



Schoolyard transformed

They accompanied us on the descent to the village and the group grew continuously, joined by new villagers. Just before the entrance to the village we went through a green welcome arch and in be-

tween the two queues of school children who were shouting their welcomes in chorus. It was all so unexpected, so overwhelming that we felt like royalties and were touched almost to tears.

Once comfortably seated in the schoolyard the villagers treated us with music, dancing and singing. We were surrounded by curious kids and our every move was followed by hundreds of black eyes. Our communication attempts provoked salves of laughter in the background of music and dancing that continued well into the evening.

Narayan took us on the walk through Makadam village: 5000 people scattered on the slopes of few hills. Every little piece of steep slopes is fenced into terrace fields with houses in small family groups next to their fields, some of them quite isolated. There's no centre of the village, although nowadays the international school (built on the land donated by Narayan) and the cooperative shop nearby feature as a centre where everyone gathers on special occasions - such as arrival of travelers from Dubai.

Some houses have small sun collectors on the top – the only source of electricity in the area, albeit the initial investment is prohibitively high for the villagers. The landscape with the views on the green terrace fields and steep valleys is enchanting, almost romantic, but life is hard here. Always smiling and cheerful villagers have to endure hard manual work on narrow terrace fields, long, cold winters and remoteness from the commodities and comforts of city life. Houses don't have chimneys and kitchens with open fires are unbearably smoky which wears heavily on women and their daily kitchen chores. But for us foreigners the village life was beautifully exotic: we watched buffalos being fed and milked, we cuddled baby goats and little chicks, drank sweet spicy tea and tried to communicate with villagers through smiles and gestures.

We had the unique opportunity to participate in the sacrificial hike up to the Kandadevi temple (1985m),



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

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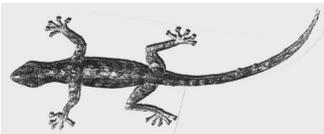
Fossils - Valerie Chalmers
res 349 4816,
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email: valeriechalmers@hotmail.com

Plants – Valerie Chalmers

Seashells, Birds and Mammals - Recorders needed!

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.



where we sacrificed a goat according to ancient traditions.



Hiking to the temple

Arriving at the temple after the hike we first rang the many bells to wake up the gods. Goat sacrificing ritual started with washing hands, getting a chunk of rice paste, adding money to it, while Mongolian priests said their prayers, including wishes for Makadum village and our safe travel.



Sacrificial goats and guardians

We then threw the rice paste with money into the temple; the goat was sprinkled with water and ready for sacrifice. We only heard the sound of the blood from its slit throat on the tin plate, the goat kicked couple of times, then the headless neck stump was covered, legs bound and the boys carried the goat back to the village, while we continued our hike through the pine forest and along the ridge top back to Makadum. Goat's meat was served for dinner that night, but the main purpose of sacrifice was to assure our safe travel through Nepal and safe return.



Butterfly

Another day we visited the Galba Bazaar, Mongolian village at the 1990 m mountain pass. From there we hiked to the top of the 2407 m high mountain Agleshwori Danda, through the pine forests and meadows, admiring big, colorful butterflies.

We also had a chance to observe the monthly village goat slaughtering ritual. Every month one of the village families slaughters a goat or two and the entire community participates in sharing the goat's meat. This particular morning two of Narayan's goats were beheaded and it was good to see how every little piece of the animals was used. Blood was collected and heads and legs baked in the fire. Goats were then puckered (surprisingly not skinned), shaved and smeared with brown paste.

Every single part of the goat (bones, skin, meat, liver) was then chopped into 21 equal pieces for the 21 village families and the meat was piled up for weighing. Each family received two kilogrammes of same parts of the goat, precise and fair, under the watchful eyes of village representatives. Meanwhile the women cooked the blood with pieces of skin and spices in a big pot. Once the meat was distributed - some divided their pile of meat further into two identical piles - all butchers got served crushed rice on a leaf and a spoonful of goat blood soup on the top. It looked tasty.



Dividing the goat

The best treat was however the evening performances. Each evening the school yard was transformed into the stage with us occupying the best seats, surrounded by villagers. On the first evening we were treated to local dances.

The most impressive performance was the one of traditional healing



and foretelling. It started out as staged performance: three men with long white skirts and porcupine hats lit a small altar fire and protected it well from the wind - it is bad luck if this fire dies during the performance. Then they lit a bigger fire in the middle of the stage and started dancing around it. One of the villagers pretended to be sick and the witch doctor exorcised his illness.



Witchcraft healing

As the dancing progressed, performers and some villagers entered a trance like state in which they were able to walk through the fire, eat burning charcoal or even sit on it – all accompanied by repetitive chanting. Once in the trance they were able to foretell the future and answer the questions from villagers. But answers were often cryptic and villagers had to make their own sense of it. It was certainly a pity that we couldn't understand the language and had to rely on the later explanations of the event, but we nevertheless felt privileged to be able to observe such an authentically traditional and intimate ritual.

Once we caught the easy rhythm of the village life, we could probably stay there for days, oblivious to time passing, but the morning came when we had to say goodbye and board our truck again. Goodbyes took a while as the entire village gathered again to see us off, decorating us with new scarves, flowers and red tikkas. It was hard to leave, not knowing if we would ever see these people again. Hopefully yes. Narayan's school is eagerly looking for teachers, educators and animators and we will certainly be very welcome if we decide to go back again.

We drove through mountains and valleys to the mountain town of

Charicot. Half of the buildings there are hotels, Charicot is an important administrative and business centre of the area. While walking through the shopping street, bazaar, one of the girls started to giggle uncontrollably: we were the first foreigners she has ever seen.

Before heading back to Katmandu we recharged in hot springs of Tatopani and then drove through the valley to reach rainy Katmandu in the evening.

On the last day Narayan in his endless generosity invited us all for lunch to his new house in Katmandu. In the last series of good-byes, this time from Narayan and his family, we got decorated with new scarves, flowers and tikkas before we were accompanied to the airport. *Report and photos by Sonja Lavrenčič*

Inter-Emirates Weekend: Coastal Desert Ecology Trips to Mushrif Park

Two groups visited Mushrif Park at the IEW 2012. The first was led by Brigitte Howarth and their first exploration was into a grove of Ghaf with the occasional non-native tree, all of which we discussed, in particular the spread of Mesquite throughout the park.



Ghaf and Mesquite

Mesquite was introduced to the UAE for greening purposes from South America and, when a non-native plant is introduced and it survives the harsh new conditions, it becomes invasive. This is because the ecosystem balance is not in place i.e. in its native environment the Mesquite will have a whole host of species that depend on the seeds, pods, or leaves.

Having been brought to a new environment, all the species that utilize the tree are left behind and now the introduced tree, known as an exotic species, is able to become established. Being able to germinate far more seeds than the Ghaf, new saplings are appearing in habitats all over the UAE where previously only the local Ghaf was predominant. The long-term effect is that, should there be a negative effect on the Ghaf, not only the tree will suffer but all the organisms that depend on the habitat and trophic niche provided by the Ghaf will also suffer, leading to biodiversity and habitat loss.

The second focus was primarily to look on in awe at the large clump of the toothbrush plant *Salvadora persica* and, nearby, a flowering example of *Calligonum comosum*.



Calligonum comosum

The latter has a small but beautiful white flower with very bright red anthers and is therefore very distinctive. The location also offered a different kind of evidence of the presence of some species in the form of tracks in the sand. Not surprising, for a short while we were side-tracked by reptile, invertebrate and bird tracks before heading back to the cars and walking over an asphalted area to decrease somewhat the amounts of *Neurada procumbens* seeds that had attached themselves to the soles of our shoes.

Although perhaps almost a pest to those walking through the sand, this example of dispersal is most ingenious where the seed attaches to and travels with an unsuspecting 'host' some distance before being shed and therefore ensuring the spread of genetic diversity through a habitat.



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The second leg of the trip took us to quite a different sort of habitat near a second carpark where some of the sand was exposed to irrigation water.



We often forget that sand is full of life and a lot of it is in the form of a seed bank. Many hundreds of plant species in the UAE are annuals, where the life cycle is repeated annually from seed, germination, plant growth, flower formation, seed formation and the demise of the plant, leaving behind the seed in the sand. Under the right conditions, some-

times decades apart, seeds are able to begin the cycle again. This area offered some spectacular wild flowers like *Hippocrepis areolata*, a small plant with a very ornate, almost antler type of seedpod. By now our younger audience had worked hard at finding and comparing Ghaf and *Acacia* seedpods, finding egg shells, reptile burrows, termites, and all sorts of other fauna and flora and had begun to proactively, their parents in tow, pick up rubbish and kite thread, the latter sprawling between trees and shrubs like a spider web! Our last two deliberations were on a small outcrop of aeoleonite where nearby we observed antlion pits and a Desert Thorn shrub (*Lycium shawii*) completely covered by the perennial vine *Pentatropis nivalis*. Report and photographs by Dr. Brigitte Howarth.

The second group was led by Valerie Chalmers and it visited similar areas to Brigitte's group. I was pleased to find again and be able

to show the group a Ghaf tree with two climbers, the perennial vine, *Pentatropis nivalis*, (the blade-leaved milkweed) and *Ephedra foliata* (shrubby horsetail), a Gymnosperm (Ephedraceae Family), with minute leaves (if present) which also bears male and female cones. This siting was reported in the June 2011 Gazelle, with a photograph, following a trip to the park in April 2011.

An unexpected siting and one worth highlighting was that of *Rhynchosia shimperi*, a member of the Pea Family (Fabaceae). This plant which has rounded or heart-shaped trifoliate leaves on very short stalks that look like the Ace of Clubs, stumped me in the field and had to be worked out at home! It is uncommon but is seen in and around Dubai, usually in sand, from time to time. It was the first time that I had seen it in Mushrif Park over the years.

Report and photograph by Valerie Chalmers

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

Lectures at Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management, 7.30 for 8.00pm

June 10 Dr. Brigitte Howarth – Stories of the Insect World

Field Trips (Members only, please)

June 14 End-of-season function

Further field trips, details or changes to trips will be announced/confirmed by e-mail circular.