



# GAZELLE

مجموعتنا دورية للتاريخ والطبيعي

The vegetation on the gravel plains along the mountain front south of Dhaid has suffered badly in recent years, probably from a combination of overgrazing, cutting, extraction and perhaps disruption of the local water table due to massive quarrying, road-building and pipeline construction. Acacia trees in parts of this area are in extremely poor condition, many without leaves or bark, and some clearly dead, despite several years of at least historically average rainfall.

Understory vegetation in affected areas is extremely limited, consisting mostly of sparse, small, prostrate plants of *Tribulus terrestris* and *Corchorus depressus*. The only larger green shrubs are the toxic *Rhazya stricta*, a member of the oleander and dogbane family (Apocynaceae), which, when dominant, is a sure sign of overgrazing.

Nevertheless, there is always some organism ready to turn lemons into lemonade. Many butterflies feed on the flowers of *Rhazya stricta*, including several large and conspicuous



## Life in a Wasteland

The green shrubs are *Rhazya stricta*, here an indicator of overgrazing.

species such as the Plain Tiger, Lime Swallowtail and Painted Lady. *Rhazya stricta* is also a foodplant for the larvae (caterpillars) of the Striped Hawkmoth *Hyles livornica*, which we found even on the degraded plains.



Lime Swallowtail butterflies nectaring on *Rhazya stricta* in Oman.

[DNHG members are reminded that both *Insects of Eastern Arabia* and *Butterflies of Oman* can be consulted online at [enhg.org](http://enhg.org) at Home/Publications/ebooks, thanks to arrangements made with the authors by the DNHG and the late Bob Reimer of Al-Ain.]

Contribution by Gary Feulner



The acacia trees on the Dhaid plains south of Kadra are in very poor condition.



A Striped Hawkmoth caterpillar nectaring on *Rhazya stricta* on the Dhaid plains.

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**Contributors—Thanks to the following for their reports and contributions:**

Gary Feulner, Binish Roobas, Dr R Rajagopal, John Martin, Tamsin Carlisle, Valerie Chalmers and Helga Meyer.

# Announcements

## Next Month's Speaker

*The DNHG are delighted to welcome the following speaker, who will present an illustrated talk on "The foundation of the UAE: Why is it a federation?"*

**Frauke Heard-Bey** - Frauke Heard-Bey studied in Heidelberg and Berlin. She received her Ph.D. from the "Freie Universität" of West Berlin in 1967 and followed her husband David to Abu Dhabi in the same year. David had already been with the Abu Dhabi Petroleum Company since 1963. Frauke joined the Centre for Documentation and Research in Abu Dhabi, part of the Presidential Court, in 1969. She was with the Centre for 39 years. The Center (now the National Archive) specialized in collecting archival material about the Gulf from foreign sources such as the India Office Library in London, the state archives of Portugal, Holland, Germany, France and several other countries.

Frauke's research into the social, economic and constitutional history and current developments of the countries of the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula have led to several books and over 70 articles in foreign academic journals, joint books, published seminar papers and reviews.

Notable publications include: *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates: A Society in Transition* (1st. edn. London, Longman, 1982); 3rd edn. Motivate Dubai 2004, French edition, *Les Emirats Arabes Unis* (Paris: Karthala, 1999); German edition, *Die Vereinigten Arabischen Emirate zwischen Vorgestern und Übermorgen*, Dubai and Hildesheim, 2010, Motivate and Georg Olms Verlag.

*Die arabischen Golfstaaten im Zeichen der islamischen Revolution. Innen-aussen- und sicherheitspolitische Zusammenarbeit im Golf-Rat* (Bonn: Europa Verlag, 1983), a historical and political study about the origins of the GCC.

*The United Arab Emirates: Transition in a Federal State*, Occasional Paper No. 20, SOAS, Centre of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, London, 2001.

*From Tribe to State. The Transformation of Political Structure in Five States of the GCC*, N.15 – 2008, CRiSSMA Working Paper, Università Cattolica, Milano.

**8pm on Sunday, 10th January, 2016**

### From the Editor:

The cooler weather found many out and about during this busy time. As mentioned at the last meeting, it is worth bearing in mind that the border posts on the Dubai/Hatta road are closed and people are advised to follow alternative routes.

It's amazing what life can be found in a somewhat desolate landscape. Not only in the Dhaid area (page 1), but also there is news of a newly-developed wetland bird sanctuary, which opened in Sharjah last month. There's more regarding this from two different perspectives on pages 5 and 6.

Learn about the secrets of the Velcro plant on page 4 and, should you happen to be wondering what can possibly kill a tarantula, find out more on page 7.

*Finally, as we start the new year, readers are reminded about the Inter-Emirates weekend in February. Details and links are on our [facebook page](#). This weekend is for members only and a reminder to renew membership is in the adjacent column.*

### Important Reminder!

#### Membership

DNHG membership was due for annual renewal in September 2015, for membership through to September 2015.

Members who have not renewed by 15th January 2016 will be

**removed from our mailing list.**

To renew your membership please contact our Membership Secretary, Anindita, by emailing:

[anin@emirates.net.ae](mailto:anin@emirates.net.ae)

Memberships can also be renewed at the January lecture on 10th January 2016.

Membership is still a bargain at only 50dhs for individuals and 100dhs for families.

See back page for bank details (if renewing by this method).

### **David R. White-Cooper (1941-2015)**

Long-term members of the DNHG may remember David White-Cooper who was a member from the very early days of the group until his departure from the Emirates in the autumn of 1991. We have been advised that David died in the Spring of 2015.

He organised many field trips into the UAE wadis and mountains and some have passed into legend. He was famous for his camping equipment (or lack of it) which included a full-size double mattress. On one occasion, returning by a new route downstream in a wadi, he kindly assisted several lady members down a particularly steep mini cliff-face before carrying a member's dog down the same cliff. The dog was a full-size Alsatian! Additionally famous was David's camp cuisine which was sometimes impractically elaborate (to say the least).

David leaves behind his wife Glenys and three grown-up children. This news comes to us from John Dawson, director of the Dubai British Council through most of the 1980s, via John & Di Martin, DNHG founder members until their departure from UAE in Summer 1991. All three of the latter are alive and well!

*Contribution by John Martin*

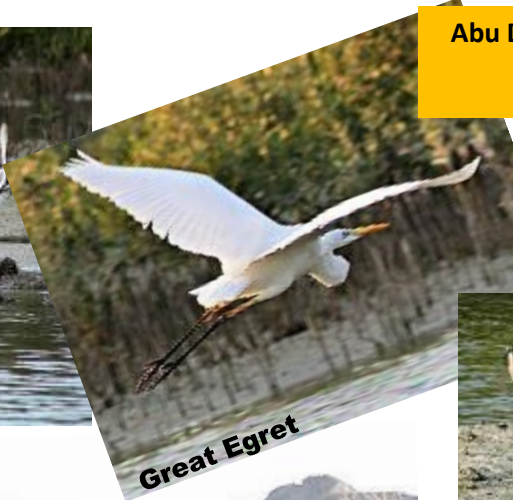


# Spotlight

**Al Qattara Oasis, by Helga Meyer and Valerie Chalmers**



**Redshanks**



**Great Egret**

**Abu Dhabi Mangrove boat trip, by Tamsin Carlisle**

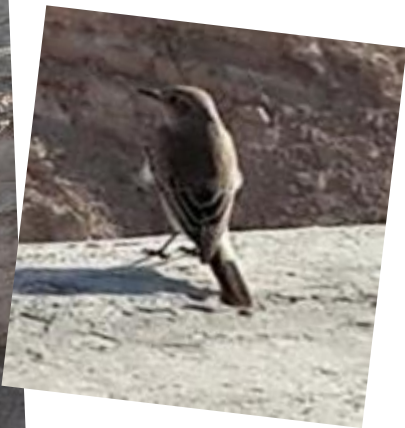
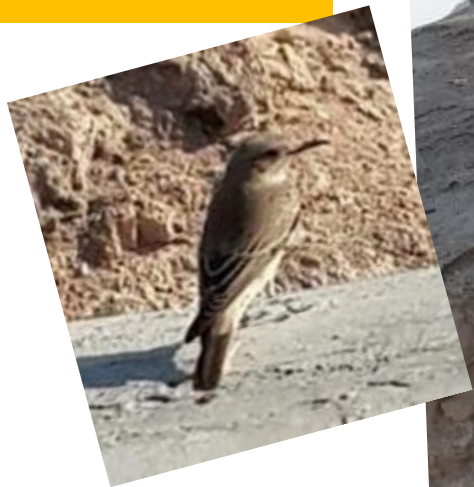


**Little Tern**



**Whimbrels**

**Jebel Hafit sighting of a flycatcher, by Helga Meyer**





## Velcro Magic

It was on a relatively large velcro plant on waste ground in seaside Khor Fakkan that we first saw the flies that didn't fly. The significance of this took a while to register. Gary had passed back and forth beside the shrub a couple of times while trying to track a spider within it. Each time he noticed a large greenbottle fly (Family Calliphoridae) on a leaf, but thought nothing of it. It was Binish who first made the point: "Did you notice that the flies are stuck on the leaves?" And so they were – two large greenbottle flies and a single local honeybee, the Little Bee *Apis florea*. Flies, notoriously, do not sit quietly when people pass close by.



The velcro plant, *Forsskaolea tenacissima*, a type of nettle.

The "velcro plant" *Forsskaolea tenacissima*, a member of the nettle family (Urticaceae) is one of the UAE's more common and recognizable small shrubs. Its primary habitat is the thin silt among rocks and stones in Hajar Mountain wadis, especially in shaded spots, where it can be very abundant after rain. But it can also grow on waste ground among other scrub bushes and as a weed in plantations. It features broad leaves with stiff, curved hairs on their upper surfaces that act like the curved hooks on a velcro surface and attach firmly to clothing, packs, shoelaces, hair and other leaves – and, apparently, at least to certain bees and flies.

But our simple observation raised a number of questions (as usual).

First, why had we never before noticed the phenomenon of trapped insects on these leaves? Was this another case of a dog that didn't bark? Although *Forsskaolea tenacissima* is common, most plants are much smaller than the one that attracted our attention, more like annual weeds than shrubs, and we had previously found no reason to inspect closely. In



A large greenbottle fly stuck on a leaf of the velcro plant.

fact, it is advantageous to avoid walking through this plant in order to avoid leaves becoming attached.

Second, does the velcro plant trap a large percentage of the insects that land in it, or only a careless or unwary few? If the former, we ought to have seen more trapped insects over the years, unless most species have learned to avoid this plant.

Third, why does this plant (and no other, among UAE species) go to such extremes to defend itself, by not only repelling or

*(Continued on page 7)*



A local honeybee stuck on another leaf.



# Wasit Wetland Centre, Sharjah—Two Reviews

## 1) Wasit Wetland Centre

The Wasit Wetland Centre in Sharjah was inaugurated by HH Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, Member of the Supreme Council and Ruler of Sharjah on 23 November, 2015.

On learning about it through the newspapers I made it a point to visit as it was close by in Sharjah. It is easy to locate, being near the

main arterial roads and is positioned on the Sabah Salem Al Sabah Street no S121, near the roundabout at the end of the road. The Centre opens its doors from 9 am to 5 pm on weekdays.



**Eurasian Curlew**

At the entrance one is admitted for 15 Dirhams and there is adequate parking available. A short walk from the parking area leads to the walkway, which slopes down to the information centre and the aviaries.



**Black-tailed Godwit**

I was escorted by the staff around the aviary which house many compatible species like Pied Avocets, Black Tailed Godwits, Eurasian Curlews and Little Ringed Plovers. Opposite each aviary on

the other side of the wall are information posters which give a detailed description of habitat, lifespan, breeding and migratory habits of the bird.

**Marsh Harrier**



A variety of birds such as Oystercatchers, Pink Backed Pelicans, Ruddy Turnstones, Sandgrouse and Goliath Heron are also seen in the aviary. There is much information on topics such as food, feet and beak pattern of

various birds, which is playfully illustrated for the benefit of children on tables where they can sit around and learn about them.

There is also a ferry cart driven by security staff which takes one around the lake situated in the reserve. The distinguishing feature of the reserve is its diverse ecosystem with saltflats (sabkhas), ponds and a large open lake. There are many bird hides along the way, where one can disembark from the cart and spot any waders from close quarters. The cart path is 4.5 km long.

The friendly ferry cart drivers willingly stop anywhere where one wants to spot and photograph any bird. On that day the birds encountered were Western Marsh Harrier, Common Snipes in plenty, Black-Winged Stilts, Kentish Plovers, Ringed Plovers, Grey herons, Green Bee-Eaters and Sandpipers. Many Grey Francolins can be seen scurrying along the cart path. All in all a great effort on conservation and intent to spread awareness on wetland birds. The opening time of the reserve in future may be possibly preponed to facilitate some early morning birding around the lake.

**Contribution by Dr R Rajagopal**



**Tristrams**



**Pied Avocet**



**Ruddy Turnstone**



**Kentish Plover**



**Common Snipe**



**Ringed Plover**



## 2) Wasit Wetland Centre

Sharjah's Wasit Wetland Centre opened to the public in late November and is likely to become a hit with both day trippers and more serious naturalists alike. The site is the one known to UAE old-timers as Ramthah tip, a/k/a Ramthah wetlands, on the border between Sharjah and Ajman. The area is a low-lying one, situated at the 'mouth' of a subterranean



**The estuary species aviary, featuring a family of the Pink-Backed Pelican**

drainage system, one of a few such channels by which water falling in the Hajar Mountains drains to the sea. (When the Shuwaib Dam broke in 1987, during a period of heavy rains, it was at Wasit that the outflow water ponded, held back only by the main coast road.)

The new Centre consists of an air-conditioned visitor centre and aviaries, plus a ca. 4km outdoor trail that follows the perimeter of the long narrow park. The architecture of the visitor centre gives it a secluded feel and the preserve as a whole is sheltered from the adjacent urban skyline and highway overpasses by



**Signage for the Goliath Heron, almost life-size**

a dense border of tall *Conocarpus* trees (effective, although non-native).

The main attraction of the visitor centre is a viewing gallery that gives access to the six themed aviaries that surround it – wadis, mudflats, marshes, shrublands, reedbeds and estuaries. These aviaries afford excellent, close-up views of many species, both rare and familiar, that can hardly fail to please. Even if you have seen, for example, countless Oystercatchers and Ruddy Turnstones, it is still a thrill to see them at a distance of only 5 to 8 meters. Moreover, the views are accompanied by excellent signage on the interior wall of the viewing gallery – large, clear and engaging. The same is true of the signage in the reception area, which makes many interesting points in an accessible way.

The aviaries include a number of Arabian species not generally found in the UAE. Among the rarer or unfamiliar species that can be seen are the Northern Bald Ibis, Arabian (Red-Legged) Partridge, Pink-Backed Pelican, Goliath Heron,



**The Goliath Heron, a truly big bird!**

Tristram's Grackle, Arabian Helmeted Guineafowl and Pied Avocet.

The 'wild' area of the Centre preserves, to an admirable extent, the original character of the area, sans most of the rubber tyres and other waste that had accumulated there over the years, and the feral dogs. The perimeter trail permits visual access to most areas and there are a small number of bird hides at strategic places, as well as sitting areas (or outdoor classroom space) in environments such as mesquite scrubland and reedbeds where perching birds and other species can be observed at closer range. Golf buggies are available for guided tours of the perimeter

trail, and will operate on a 'hop-on, hop-off' basis to allow easy transportation from hide to hide.

Physical access to the open, shallow ponds and mudflats along the axis of the preserve is more problematic, as it always has been, because the ground is muddy and variably waterlogged. Water levels within the preserve fluctuate with rain and are also influenced by agricultural off-take from the aquifer further inland. Water levels were reportedly almost a meter higher earlier in the year than at the time of opening. Likewise, salinity levels in the ponds are variable, making it a difficult place for aquatic life, but potentially an interesting place to study the physiological and other adjustments necessary to successful colonizers.

Two aquatic species that continue to thrive there are the Arabian Killifish *Aphanius dispar* and the small, brown-and-white striped conical gastropod *Cerithideopsisilla conica* (formerly *Potamides conicus*). Both of those species can tolerate high temperatures and both high and low salinity, but they are probably living "on the edge" at Wasit. Smaller, air-breathing molluscs could also potentially be found around the base of reeds and shrubs.

The Centre is currently open during normal business hours, but, recognizing that much of the wildlife does not keep normal business hours, plans are already under consideration to introduce a system of access by ID card, in order to permit more serious birdwatchers and other interested naturalists to visit during the dawn and dusk hours.

Wasit Wetland Centre is under the management of Sharjah's Environment and Protected Areas Authority (EPAA) and more information can be found online at: [www.epaashj.ae](http://www.epaashj.ae)

By Gary Feulner



***Cerithideopsisilla conica*, one of the unheralded denizens of Wasit Wetland Centre**

## Field Clips

discouraging but actively disabling visitors? (continued from page 4)

And finally, why are the leaf hairs not effective against all trespassers? The spider we were watching – the widespread *Thyene imperialis* (the Imperial Jumper) – was actively hunting on the large shrub we saw, notwithstanding the possibility that a slip could bring entrapment and death.

A research product for an inquiring but sedentary naturalist would be to settle into a folding chair near a flowering shrub of the velcro plant and watch for a few hours.

Epilogue: We normally do not interfere in nature's dramas, but occasionally we have succumbed to the temptation to give erring organisms a second chance. In this instance, the two greenbottle flies were already dead, but the honeybee was not, and Binish successfully freed it (with great care) to fly again.

Contribution by Gary Feulner and Binish Roobas



This Imperial Jumping Spider (*Thyene imperialis* – a male is shown here) navigated the velcro plant without difficulty.

© Binish Roobas

### A Vulnerable Villain

In fiction, at least, the tarantula is usually the villain of the piece – a lurking menace, a least, or an active threat. A tarantula crawled up the arm of a very young-looking Sean Connery in an early James Bond film. UAE tarantulas look the part, dark slightly fuzzy and vaguely primordial, waiting in ambush by night in the mouths of their silk-lined burrows.

But experts know better. These hairy primitive spiders (Family Theraphosidae) are just part of the food web (pun intended). Researchers complain that it is difficult to collect specimens of tarantulas using pitfall

traps, because the spiders that fall into the traps are generally eaten by other animals before they can be retrieved.

I witnessed their vulnerability recently while hiking in the Ru'us al-Jibal (with Angela Manthorpe and Sonja Lavrenčič, to scout possible DNHG hikes). I stepped down from our ledge trail to maneuver around a low tree branch, and below me I saw a flat, dark mass moving slowly up the sub-vertical face of the ledge below. The relentless but irregular movement told me ants were pulling something, something big. It was a spider – a big spider, either a tarantula or a huntsman.

Once I found my balance I could pay closer attention. It was a tarantula, a dead tarantula, one of perhaps several kinds found in the UAE, all thought to be *Ischnocolus* species, but all awaiting the

results of expert study. The ants, dozens of them, were mostly very small, with small red heads and thin red thoraxes and a larger sub-spherical black abdomen. Four much larger ants were in attendance and sometimes lent a hand; they were similarly colored but with much larger heads and big jaws – undoubtedly a soldier caste of the same species.



A dead tarantula being carried up a rock face by (mostly) tiny ants.

Exactly what had brought about this result will remain unknown. The spider was dead but it was still flexible. It appeared undamaged and carried no obvious parasites. This argues in favor of its having been killed by the ants rather than having been scavenged, although ants are notoriously quick to turn up at a meal. I don't know what kind of ants these were, but on the assumption that they could dispatch a tarantula, I was careful when I picked the spider free of the ants with my field tweezers, lest I be the next one hauled up the rocks.

Contribution by Gary Feulner



A UAE tarantula perches by night in the mouth of its silk-lined burrow.

### DNHG Recorders

**Reptiles - Dr. Reza Khan** res: 344 8283 off: 344 0462

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

**Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi**

**Geology - Gary Feulner** res: 306 5570

**Insects - Gary Feulner**

**Fossils - Valerie Chalmers** res: 394 8871 email: valeriechalmers@gmail.com

**Plants - Valerie Chalmers**

**Archaeology - MaryAnne Pardoe** mobile: 050 724 2984 email: maryannepardoe@yahoo.co.uk

**Mammals - Lynsey Gedman** mobile: 050 576 0383 email: lynseygedman@hotmail.com

**Seashells - Andrew Childs** mobile: 050 459 0112 email: andrew.childs@eim.ae

**Birds - Tamsin Carlisle** mobile: 050 1004702 email: tamsin.carlisle@platts.com

The Al Dhafra Festival in Al Gharbia continues until 30th December. Click [here](#) for further details.

# Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

February 7: Peter Hellyer

## Scheduled Field Trips (Members only)

February 18—20: Inter-Emirates Weekend

March: Photography Workshop (final date to be confirmed)

April 1—9: Nepal Hill Country

April 1—17: Andaman Islands

Further field trips, details or changes to trips will be announced/confirmed by email

## DNHG COMMITTEE 2015

When possible, please contact committee members outside office hours

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|------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|---------------------------|
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| Vice Chairman          | <b>Valerie Chalmers</b>      | 050 455 8498 | valeriechalmers@gmail.com |
| Treasurer              | <b>Rakesh Rungta</b>         | 050 774 4273 | rakeshrungta10@gmail.com  |
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## Contributions

Do you have a field report, unusual finding, interesting news article, book review, amazing photograph, or community news to share?

If so, email your contributions to:

gazelleeditor@gmail.com

(Arial 10 fully justified)

## DNHG Membership

Membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at Dh100 for families and Dh50 for singles. Membership is valid from September 2015 to September, 2016. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to HSBC account number 030100242001. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG).

Payment can also be made by cash deposit at a bank or ATM, using our IBAN number AE900200000030 100242001. However, this process does not identify you as the payer. If you wish to pay by cash, please also scan and e-mail a copy of your payment confirmation to the Membership Secretary, so we know whose money we have received.

DNHG membership entitles you to participate in field trips and help 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.