

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

There's Life Beyond Dubai

Dr. Marijcke Jongbloed traveled to Qatar in July to assist in the environmental assessment for an industrial site at Ras Laffan on the north coast of the peninsula. Advance information indicated a surprising count of more than 100 species of plants.

Mary Beardwood, on leave in England and sailing in the U.S., has made contact with several notables in Arabian natural history, including D.H. and A.J. Walker, father and son author and illustrator of *Insects of Eastern Arabia*, and Cedric Collingwood, the leading authority on ants of Arabia. We hope to hear more from Mary when she returns.

Former *Gazelle* editor **Neil Curtis** sends his regards to DNHG 'old-timers' and reports optimistically from British Columbia: "... a new, bigger and cheaper house, a much better daycare setup for Dylan, and I have become pretty good at using my Masters course as a way of generating income!"

"It was funny to arrive here as an absolute novice compared with having built up quite a bit of knowledge/contacts in the Emirates, but now I am 'up there' again. Of course in BC there's a load more experts around, lots of books to

consult, and thousands of people into the backcountry and hiking, but given a bit of patience I think I am carving a bit of a niche for myself -- backcountry planning and management, with a focus on commercial recreation. It follows right on from a suggestion from Marijcke on research into guided hiking outings across the Ru'us al-Jibal as a way of getting local buy-in to protected area proposals. Watch out Emirates!

"Only recently did I get the opportunity to do my first real climb. About 1500m (I think), fantastic weather, up into the alpine to a peak on the Canada/US border in the Cascades. Fantastic lakes, gorgeous fresh water, and lots of snow to play around in higher up. Glissading down on our boots was a blast! Also finally getting better with the plants. Of course the problem here is that there are just so many of them [and] very few of the families match up with those I learned in eastern Arabia."

On the professional front, Neil has had temporary and part time assignments with the BC Ministry of Environment's land management division, British Columbia Assets and Land Corporation (working on the commercial recreation team) and the Greater Vancouver Regional District's 'Park Partnership Initiative' (where he's running the

website, publishing the newsletter, and doing media relations).

DNHG Membership

DNHG membership will be, from September 2001 when your next year's membership is due, Dhs. 50 for singles and Dhs. 100 for couples and families.

This is still the best bargain in town! You can join or renew at meetings (see Membership Secretary Fi Skennerton) or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account no. 173746. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.) Membership is valid from September 2001 to September 2002.

DNHG membership entitles you to participate in field trips and helps pay for our lecture hall, publication and distribution of our monthly newsletter, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects. Our new fee will allow us to find a more permanent home for the library, and a more convenient venue for our meetings.

This month's Contributors

The Editor would like to thank the following for their reports:

Sandy Fowler, Neil Curtis, Gary Feulner, Marijcke Jongbloed, and the EEG.



Field Trips etc ...

September's coming!

The trips planned are varied and interesting and we expect there will be a big demand for places on them. Please contact the leader to reserve a place as soon as you are sure you can go, and remember that others may be on a waiting list, so cancel early if that is what you have to do.

Salalah 5-7 September

Fi Skennerton plans a busy time in Dhofar Province, Oman: exploring the souqs the night you arrive, Thursday at exploring Wadi Darbat up in the Jebel with waterfalls and lush growth, Friday morning at the blowholes before the flight back.

The approx. cost per person is Dhs. 1365 + tax for a twin sharing room at the Hamilton Plaza (4 star), airfare and part shares in a 4WD i.e. 4 people per car. For further details contact Fi Skennerton.

Arabian Horse Breeding Centre, Al Awir Friday 28 September

Fi Skennerton will arrange a visit to the Centre. This will be a day trip, and numbers may be limited. Contact Fi for details closer to the time.

Bird watching with David Snelling Friday 12 October

Location will be chosen according to the whims of our feathered friends at the time. Contact David Snelling for details.

Stargazing Thursday 18 October

Lamjed El-Kefi will conduct one of his wonderful tours of the universe

from the desert outside Dubai, in the evening. Bring your own binoculars, but queue for a turn at Lamjed's amazing telescope.

Wadi Bih Friday 19 October

Peter van Amsterdam will lead a day trip through spectacular Wadi Bih. Contact Peter by e.mail for bookings and information.

Wahiba Sands/Turtle Watching at Ras al Hadd, Oman 24-26 October

This popular trip will be repeated with the added benefits of all that was learned from the last one. It is a long drive, but a most rewarding experience and we plan to stay at the Nahar Tourist Resort. Mary Beardwood will lead the trip, and can be contacted for details.

Forts of the Nizwa Plain, Oman 7-9 November

Peter van Amsterdam will lead this extensive exploration of Sulaif, Jabrin, Bahla and Nizwa forts, with many interesting little diversions, both intentional and not. We plan to stay the first night at the Ibri Hotel, and the second at the Wadi Dariz in Nizwa. Limited numbers so book early.

Fossiling Trip with Al Ain and Abu Dhabi Groups November/December

Valerie Chalmers and Steve James will lead this trip to some of the interesting fossiling areas in the Emirates. Watch this space.

Beach combing with Sandy November/December

Shell recorder Dr Sandy Fowler will lead one of his delightful days on the beaches of the UAE. Sandy knows the good shelling spots and can answer all your questions. As well, you will come home with some beautiful specimens to display.

Our Next Speakers

Hanne and Jens Eriksen moved to Oman from their native Denmark in 1986, when Jens was appointed associate professor of Chemistry at Sultan Qaboos University. Later, he was appointed assistant dean of the Department of Science.

The Eriksens' passion for wildlife photography developed over the following years, and they are now renowned for their bird photographs, which won them first prize in the Bird Photographer of the Year competition of the magazine *British Birds* four times in the last decade. They have also won first prizes in countries as far apart as Scotland, Singapore, Denmark, Saudi Arabia and Oman.

Not only was Jens the Recorder of the Oman Birds Records Committee for nine years but he and Hanne are also known for their stamp collections and the two catalogues of Birds on Stamps and Mammals on Stamps. They often come to the UAE to do photoshoots for *Arabian Wildlife Magazine*, *Natural Emirates* and the linked websites.

Their three-month trip to South America and the Antarctic, that the September talk is about, was a lifetime dream that became reality in the autumn of 1999. The stunning slide show that they present contains only a fraction of the thousands of slides they took on that trip.



Hotter Than, Well . . .

The weatherman predicted 48 degrees at the coast and 43 inland, but dry air and a wet wadi made it a perfect late June day in Wadi Sarfanah, in the mountains E of Al-Ain. Because it has permanent water, this wadi has long been inhabited. The ancient falaj is now concreted, but tunnels dug in earlier times to traverse awkward parts of the wadi banks are still visible. So is scattered copper slag on nearby gravel terraces, although no mining or smelting site was obvious to untrained eyes.

In the wadi, Arabian toads (*Bufo arabicus*) were calling and mating and we saw an exceptionally large robber fly (the Highwayman) make a meal of a red and yellow hornet (*Vespa orientalis*) – some would say it was a fitting end to the latter trouble-maker. Large Nile leeches (*Limnatis nilotica*) were common in the water, as they are in a number of the larger plantation wadis and falajes from Khudayrah pools southwards. A wadi racer seemed to have only minor difficulty navigating the slippery slopes of a narrow waterfall chute, despite the absence of arms and legs.

Above the wadi were several recent mud cup nests of Pale Crag Martins, always under shaded overhangs. Nearby were clusters of the white, circular egg attachments of the Fan-Footed Gecko, which specialises in reverse slopes. Within a protected grotto we found an abandoned Rock Dove nest just a foot above the waterline, and even a solitary small bat (probably the Naked-Bellied Tomb Bat).

The highlights of the day? It was a three-way tie: (1) a pair of mating wadi racers, (2) a pair of Lappet-Faced Vultures, and (3) a lone clam shrimp (gravid with yellow eggs) in an isolated puddle on a bedrock terrace. Normally clam shrimps are seen only shortly after rains. *Report by Gary Feulner*

...Shelling at Khor al-Qurm

Rumours of impending development of Khor al-Qurm, the pretty lagoon between Jazirat al-Hamra and Ras al-Khaimah, prompted Gary Feulner and Sandy Fowler to explore it this summer, despite the heat, before it was “improved.” As recounted in Sandy’s *Rough Sheller’s Guide*, he had tried once before to visit the barrier beachfront the easy way, and learned that it was not so easy. This time they waded across the khor, through a gap in the flamingoes.

What started as a general look-see and record of the area turned into an interesting exercise in dehydration physiology. Gary seemed impervious to dehydration, but of course, he’s younger than your Seashell Recorder. Sandy found himself trying to see how well fluid balance could be maintained and minimal dehydration suffered during five hours on a shadeless beach in the late June sun, despite being well experienced and knowledgeable in the problem.

The initial lengthy wade out through a few inches of water, estimated to be at 40 degrees C, revealed remarkable numbers of mud creepers, *Cerithidea cingulata* and some brown and white banded *Potamides conicus*, numerous *Ostrea kotschyi*, and an occasional *Clypeomorus bifasciatus persicus*, all happily grazing in such seemingly inhospitable conditions. Occasional tight clumps of mud creeper shells proved to be the work of hermit crabs.

Several isolated islands separated the shore from the seaward beach, with mud flats and channels between. The landward shorelines up to and even under vegetation yielded plentiful specimens of the brackish water pulmonate snail *Salinator fragilis* and the small striped mussel *Musculista senhousia* (both previously uncollected by Sandy). Each of two heavy *Barbatea* mussel shells

found in the silty intertidal zone housed a *Nodilittorina arabica*, a tiny wrinkle which normally lives on intertidal rocks.

Along the sheltered shores of the islands there were a few dozen scattered but rather small mangrove bushes. These are the Arabic *qurm* for which the khor is somewhat optimistically named. Two of the largest were in flower and splendidly scented. A few mangrove tree snails (*Littoraria intermedia*) were found on lower stems as a bonus. At least five species of crabs were noted on the mud flats but little bird life was seen, save for the Greater Flamingoes on the way out and disturbed Crested Larks on the spits.

The beachfront itself yielded nothing spectacular in shelling terms, but near the crest of the beach Sandy was delighted to find an old specimen of the large, elongated clam *Lutraria australis* to swell his collection by three species for the day. Most surprising was finding a vehicle track on the outermost beach. Just how they accessed it was a mystery that was investigated without success.

The channel at the south end of the khor was also scouted (how *did* they get that car across?) but was unimpressive save for the amount of local fishermen’s jetsam – the worst I have ever seen – and colonies of the large, knobby *Thais savignyi* on the rocks at and just above the tide line. Towards the south end of the barrier island, embedded shells were common in the beachfront rocks, which appeared to be recently lithified sediments.

It was perhaps not the most exciting or memorable of shelling visits either has made, but this is now the only relatively undisturbed khor remaining in Ras al-Khaimah, and its loss, in the name of “development,” would be irreplaceable and environmentally inexcusable. *Report by Sandy Fowler*



Field Clips ...

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

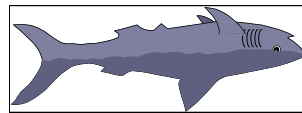
Fish or Foul?

On a summer visit to the plantation and wadi at Khudayrah, north of Mahdhah, I noticed Arabian killifish (*Aphanius dispar*) in the wadi where the road crosses to enter the plantation. This was a surprise, since I had carefully studied the fish populations in this and a number of other wadis several years ago, and I had not found the killifish here, only the common wadi fish *Garra barreimiae* and the larger *Cyprinion micropthalmus*. I knew, however, that killifish are sometimes introduced for mosquito control, and recent human introduction would explain why they were found only at the road crossing and not higher up the wadi.

Sure enough, when I asked an older resident about this, he informed me readily that the Municipality provided two types of fish, a large one and a small one. The small one is apparently the killifish and the large one is almost certainly Tilapia (*Oreochromis* sp.). Assuming that the Municipality in question is the Municipality in Mahdhah or Buraimi, the introduction of Tilapia seems to be a departure from normal Omani practice, since, with one exception (also in the greater Mahdhah area), I have not seen Tilapia in Oman, although it is now relatively common in UAE water bodies situated near human habitation or cultivation.

I also noticed a number of dead fish and toads at Khudayrah, and relatively few large fish. I wondered about the reason for this, knowing that traditional fishing (via a dam and weir) is still practiced in

this wadi. However, my informant replied immediately that this was the result of pesticide (in powder form, if I understood correctly) used to kill mosquitoes. It also kills off the big fish, he said, and only the small ones survive. Other sources in Oman have acknowledged the indiscriminate effect of such pesticides, but have pointed out that the former scourge of malaria is still unhappily recalled throughout Oman, and that the visible control programs are popularly well-regarded. Report by Gary Feulner



Summer Surprises

Who says summer wildlife watching has to be dull? A July visit to the plantation and wadi at Khudayrah featured, among other things:

- in the main plantation and satellite fields, dates, figs, mangoes, limes, guavas and even a few arbors of grapes.

- at the plantation, two of the UAE's more reclusive reptiles, the skinks *Mabuya tessellata* and *Ablepharis pannonicus*.

- under cultivation, alfalfa (lucerne) and the characteristically associated Asian Grass Blue butterfly.

- in the wadi, the rare willow (*Salix acmophylla*), a cat skeleton and skull (wildcat?), and several giant waterbugs (*Lethocerus* sp.) in all stages of development from eggs to nymph to adult.

- also in the wadi, a hand-dug channel some 100m long to bring additional surface water into the established concrete falaj system.

- up a side tributary, a timid but friendly local camp dog cooling off in a bedrock pool, and a pair of Liechtenstein's sandgrouse.

- on the gravel plains above the side tributary, gazelle droppings and the rarely-seen banded gecko *Bunopus spatulurus*.

- overhead, above the main palm groves, an aerial squadron of more than two dozen European

bee-eaters, performing maneuvers.

- on the road home, a flattened specimen of the flamboyant blue and orange Blue-Headed Lizard, *Trapelus flavimaculatus*.

- in the shade whenever possible, a couple of warm but satisfied DNHG visitors; and we weren't the only ones – as always on a Friday in Khudayrah, we encountered local residents strolling or picnicing up the wadi, and in this instance also a small group of non-resident UAE nationals. Report by Gary Feulner

Oryx Nosh on Desert Squash

One of the many commonplaces of Arabian natural history is that the so-called "Desert Squash" (*Citrullus colocynthis*) is unpalatable and is not eaten by any higher animals. This accounts for the conspicuous yellow "tennis balls" seen by so many roadsides and other disturbed sandy terrain in the UAE. And indeed, the desert squash, called *Hanzal* in Arabic, is used as a symbol of bitterness in Arabic poetry.

Well, live and learn. Greg Simkins, Reserve Officer at Al Maha Desert Resort, had at first propagated this conventional wisdom to visitors. Then he noticed that the Arabian oryx at Al Maha were *eating* the squash, and indeed, a recent visit confirms that, while the plant is present in scattered locations around the property, there are no "tennis balls" except in the chalet area inaccessible to animals. Greg did a bit of research and found that the oryx have an enzyme that neutralizes the toxins in the desert squash, making this additional food resource available to them – a very sensible strategy for one of the most desert-adapted large mammals. Report by Gary Feulner



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

Reptiles - Dr Reza Khan

res 344 8283
off 344 0462
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Archaeology - Volunteer required

Birds - David Snelling

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Fossils - Valerie Chalmers

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Plants - Valerie Chalmers

Mammals - Marijcke Jongbloed

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The recorders are not necessarily scientific experts in their designated fields. In fact, most are not. However, they are interested and knowledgeable amateurs - please contact them if you have any interesting reports or queries.

The intention is that information will be channelled through to the *Gazelle* editor, so new information can be shared with all our readers.

Shell Report June 2001

DNHG member **Yvonne Kerek**, has reported finding a specimen of *Argonauta argo* on Rams beach in April this year. To the best of my knowledge, this has not been recorded before within the Gulf, but the specimen is without doubt *A. argo*.



A photograph of her *A. argo* at the top and of *A. hians* below clearly shows the difference.

In addition, she produced 2 specimens of *Vasum turbinellus* and a good specimen of *Harpa ventricosa* found on a small beach by Khor Fakkan, and previously identified as being found at Masirah Island and Southern Oman only. This underlines the need for reporting shell finds. Although "Seashells of Eastern Arabia" will probably remain the standard text on shells of the area for all time, it will need updating - it probably needs it now. If you're not sure of your finds - call me!

Report by Sandy Fowler

—SHELL—
—REPORTS—



Please send your shell reports
to Sandy Fowler

DNHG Field Trip Policies

Members are reminded that DNHG field trips are cooperative ventures among the participants, for their mutual benefit and enjoyment. DNHG field trip leaders are not normally professionals or experts, but fellow members who have agreed to share their time and their knowledge with other participants, on a volunteer basis. The relationship of trip leaders and participants is that of co-venturers, not professional and client. For these reasons field trip participation is limited to DNHG members and their bona fide non-resident guests.

Various dangers are inherent in travel in and around the UAE and in the exploration of the natural environment, whether by automobile, by boat, on foot or otherwise, and whether on-road or off-road, in the cities or countryside, in the mountains or deserts or at sea. By participating in DNHG field trips, members accept these risks, and they accept responsibility for their own safety and welfare. Field trip participants are normally required to sign a waiver form to this effect. Without these understandings, the DNHG would be unable to sponsor field trips or to recruit volunteers to lead them.

Field trips vary in both format and organization, depending on the nature of the trip, the number of participants, and the preferences of the field trip leader. If the number of participants is limited and sign-up is required, members should make every effort to honour their commitments or to give timely notice otherwise, as a courtesy both to the trip leader and to other members who might like to have the chance to participate.

Enjoy the field trips!



special reports ...

The following was forwarded to *Gazelle* by Marijcke Jongbloed:

Lonely tree uses 'surrogate mother' to reproduce

One of the world's oldest and rarest trees, a desert species of which just 231 are left, is able to use a 'surrogate mother' from another species in its drive to survive, French scientists report.

The Saharan cypress, specimens of which have lived up to 4,700 years, was once plentiful in the Sahara, but has now dwindled to near extinction with just a small group of ageing trees left in the desert's Ajjer plateau.

It was placed on the list of the world's most endangered plant species in 1984.

The tree has resorted to desperation techniques to try to get round this threat, according to a team led by Christian Pichot of the Mediterranean Forestry Research Unit at Avignon, southern France.

In most species, the seed is produced as a result of fertilisation between the female sex cell, the ovule, which is located on the plant, and the male sex cell, the pollen, which is borne by wind or by propagators such as bees.

Pichot's team found that the Saharan cypress is able to use another species, the Provençal cypress, to perform a sexual conjuring trick.

Its pollen lodges in the female sex tissues of the Provençal cypress, where off spring were produced and nurtured, but without cross-fertilisation. In addition, all of the offspring were identical to the Saharan cypress' pollen. In normal cross fertilisation, only half the male's chromosomes would be handed on to the offspring, but in this case, all of them were transmitted.

(Original source unknown)

End of Season Get-Together

Our last event for the 2000-2001 year was our June get-together held at the Dubai Country Club. As always, it was a very enjoyable and successful evening. The photo competition drew some remarkable photographs, and not a few surprises. The prize-winners of the competition were:

Myrla Koenderink – Kissing camel

Jane Roberts – Falcon in flight

Pam Cole – Sheikh Saeed House, Shindaghah

Thanks also to all those others who contributed to such an interesting array of photographs.

We extend our thanks to our many sponsors whose generosity and support added to the enjoyment of the evening:

Patricia Rosetti

1 x dinner for 2

Crowne Plaza Holiday Inn

1 x Sports Bag

Le Meridian Mina Seyahi

1 x Dinner for 2

Jumeirah Beach Hotel

1 x Dinner for 2

Oasis Hotel

1 x Dinner for 2

Al Bustan Rotana

2 x Dinner for 2

Dubai Park Hotel

1 x Dinner for 2

Dubai Country Club

1 x Dinner for 2

Metropolitan Beach Resort

1 x Dinner for 2

Metropolitan Hotel

1 x Dinner for 2

MMI Tee shirts

Endangered Cranes Seized on Arrival

Two demoiselle cranes, listed with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) as endangered species in Pakistan, were recently confiscated at the Abu Dhabi International Airport by officials from the

customs and ERWDA. CITES prevents the export and import of endangered species so that they can be conserved in their natural habitat.

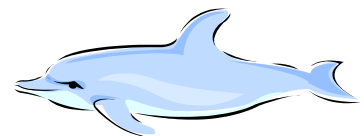
The demoiselle cranes were found with their legs tied together and wings wrapped in cloth. There were no accompanying documents, neither the CITES permit nor the approval from the UAE Ministry of Agriculture & Fisheries, for the import of these beautiful birds. According to the law, by allowing the transportation of endangered species, the airline has contributed to the illegal traffic of wildlife and has breached the law.

The birds have now been rescued and are kept at the National Avian Research Centre of ERWDA as it is the official avian rescue and rehabilitation centre in the UAE. Once the birds complete their quarantine period and are deemed free from infectious diseases, they will be returned to a wildlife agency in Pakistan where they can be released back into their habitat.

Though such inhuman acts of transporting endangered species in such pathetic conditions make us cringe, we should find hope in the noble act of the government which came immediately to the rescue of these birds.

Everyone has a role to play in conservation; we should make it a point to stop using materials made from endangered species. By saying '**No**' we can contribute immensely to the conservation of wildlife.

Our thanks to EEG for this report from their August Update





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Phil Iddison's new Cordia tree

Phil Iddison of Al-Ain, a former DNHG speaker and our Inter-Emirates guide for a tour of the Al-Ain oasis, has been on the trail of an unidentified Cordia tree encountered during the tour. Starting with two known specimens, Phil has located other specimens in the Al-Ain/Buraimi area, and, in his photo collection, a previously unheralded specimen from the East Coast. He has also turned up another (but different) unknown Cordia on the grounds of one of Al-Ain's international hotels. But while the search is going well, the research is stymied. Phil's tentative judgment is that neither of the new Cordia species is among those listed in Plants of Dhofar, Trees of Oman, Flora of Egypt, or other references so far consulted.

Arabian Wildlife No. 11 (Summer 2001)

For those who left town a bit early for the summer, the latest issue of Arabian Wildlife will be available at our September meeting. This issue includes, among many others, articles about humpback whales, smuggled cheetahs, radio tracking of Gordon's Wildcat, sailfish, mangrove sites on the Batinah coast, spiders, sea turtles, and the traditional and modern use of the Henna tree.

Also included is a short report on the discovery of tadpole shrimp (Triops sp.) in UAE soils. The tadpole shrimp is a primitive crustacean, famous for its ability to survive drought for as much as a decade, and then emerge and multiply rapidly in desert ponds after rain. Tadpole shrimp are found elsewhere in Arabia and other arid

regions, but had never been reported in the UAE. Are these what Christine Namour's herons were eating in puddles at Jebel Ali after last autumn's rainstorm in Dubai? (See the October 2000 Gazelle)

"Natural Emirates" on Web

Natural Emirates, edited by Peter Vine, a compendium of UAE natural history subjects intended for educated laymen, can be accessed on the Internet at: <http://www.uaeinteract.com>

The book has never been available at retail stores in Dubai, but copies can be obtained at the Sharjah Natural History Museum – one of many good reasons for a visit. Another site worth visiting is the Arabian Wildlife Magazine at:

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

September 16 Hanne and Jens Eriksen from Oman: From Equator to Antarctica (a sound and light production).

Field Trips (DNHG members only, please).

5-7 September Salalah with Fi Skennerton

28 September Arabian Horse Breeding Centre, Al Awir

12 October Bird Watching with David Snelling

18 October Stargazing with Lamjed El-Kefi

19 October Wadi Bih with Peter van Amsterdam

24-26 October Wahiba Sands/Turtle Watching at Ras al Hadd

7-9 November Forts of the Nizwa Plain, Oman

Nov/Dec. Fossiling Trip with Al Ain and Abu Dhabi Groups

Nov/Dec. Beachcombing with Dr Sandy Fowler