

GAZELLE

Vol 17 no 5 – May 2002



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Summer's coming...

New member **Khalid Rafeek** of Ajman was enthusiastic about a long vacation in his native Kerala, where he participated with local friends in observing and photographing the first breeding record of the Sri Lankan Frogmouth, a nocturnal insect eater that lives in thick forest and resembles a heavy billed nightjar. When perched by day, the bird looks like a knot of wood. Khalid and his friends also photographed the first breeding record of the Black-Bellied Tern in South India. Says Khalid of his trip home, "It was the best birding experience of my life."

Mary Beardwood, before departing for the summer, has kindly obtained and donated to the DNHG Library "an oldie but a goodie" - a copy of *Wild Flowers of Northern Oman*, a reference book by James P. Mandaville, illustrated by Dorothy Bovey. Mary's donation was made in appreciation for the use of the DNHG Library for research for her own *Children's Encyclopaedia of Arabia*. Mary also reminds members that the Family Bookshop, which has a couple of branches in the Muscat area, also has many other excellent but not widely distributed nature books, including such titles as *Butterflies of Oman* and Samir Hanna's *Geol-*

ogy of Oman.

Barbara Couldrey, one of our RAK members, has continued to put her hiking habit at the service of archeological studies in the mountains. In recent months, and into the heat of May, Barbara has reported and pinpointed several new Hafit tombs in the mountains of the Ru'us al-Jibal and has taken and plotted a gridwork of GPS positions at several mountain settlements, the latter in preparation for professional archeological mapping from aerial photographs (a project begun under the supervision of former RAK resident archeologist Prof. Derek Kennet). Barbara likes to start early to avoid the heat, and she seems to have few complaints apart from the discomfort of trying to take an occasional break on hot rocks.

Gail Gordon has been looking for camel's milk ever since Dr. Ulli Wernery's talk on camels and the benefits of drinking camel milk. She reports that 100% camel milk is now on sale at Spinneys. Says Gail, "I've bought some and it tastes delicious...I'm probably the last to know it's in the market, but just in case others haven't noticed the small bottles I thought I would let the DNHG group know!"

DNHG Membership Renewal

DNHG membership remains a bargain at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dhs. 50 for singles. 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 and posted to Fi at PO Box 29561, Dubai. (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, the *Gazelle*, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and, occasionally, special projects.

This month's Contributors

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

Valerie Chalmers (and for last month as well!)
Mary Ann Pardoe
Marijcke Jongbloed
Peter Hellyer
Gary Feulner
Peter Cunningham



Field Trips etc ...

*If summer comes, can fall
be far behind?*

Saiq Plateau with Peter van
Amsterdam
20 – 21 June

We plan to stay at the Ibri Hotel on Wednesday night, 5th June, and drive via Jabrin Fort to the Saiq Plateau on Thursday morning. Bookings must be made at the Jebel Akhdar Hotel, and the hotel arranges road passes for the military area. This is an exacting business, so contact Peter as soon as possible so that the procedure can be got under way: pvana@emirates.net.ae

STOP PRESS STOP PRESS STOP PRESS

After many months of waiting in vain for the arrival of Berkeley herpetologist **Dr. Ted Papenfuss**, he finally turned up rather suddenly and will be in and out of Dubai several times between now and the end of June.

His research is concerned with studying the DNA of the reptiles (mostly lizards) of the arid countries, and linking the spread of the various species to the geological changes that took place in the region over time. His work has taken him to remote areas of Afghanistan, Iran, to Socotra and Somalia and many other countries. His journeys have been chronicled in National Geographic magazine and the Smithsonian magazine.

Ted has agreed to give us a talk on **Tuesday June 4th** at our usual venue. We are very fortunate to have someone of his fame and repute as a visiting lecturer! He will even bring some live lizards from a trip to Somalia, from which he will have returned the day before (inshallah).

We realize that this talk comes immediately after our regular June meeting, but we thought this was too good a chance to pass up.

Even those of you who are not exactly nuts about reptiles - don't let that prevent you from hearing Ted's fascinating stories and seeing the amazing lizards that share this world with us.

Some News! DNHG Library Plans

Plans are now underway to move the DNHG library collection to our monthly lecture venue, the Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management, where it will be available on a reference basis. This will allow browsing and study, on premises, at the Emirates Academy library. Beryl Comar, who has maintained the collection in her home for a number of years, has arranged for listing, stamping and packing. DNHG Librarian Deanne White will arrange for transfer of the collection to the Emirates Academy library and for recording and cataloguing in accordance with international library standards, in cooperation with Emirates Academy Librarian Tonia Huculak.

We hope to complete the move during May or June, and in any case in time for the new season in September. Further progress and details will be announced in the *Gazelle* and at meetings. In the meantime, it would help us to know if there are any members who may have professional library training that would enable them to assist with the relatively time consuming job of cataloguing.

Don't forget the end-of-season function at the Dubai Country Club, June 13th. The annual photographic competition will be held, and there will be a natural history team quiz which is always a lot of fun.
See the flyer included in this issue. See you there for a great evening!

Our Next Speakers

Salah Al-Halyan was born and raised in Sharjah and has worked in the insurance industry in the United States and the UAE. He is best known to many members through his local newspaper column on insurance and personal investment matters. Salah and his wife Catherine have been regular participants in DNHG field trips over the years, when he has shared with us local lore.

David Palmer will speak on the Archeology of the Mileiha Plains. David was born in England, but has lived most of his adult life in Ontario, Canada. He has been in the UAE for two years and presently co-ordinates curriculum and testing at the English Language Centre, Univ. of Sharjah. In his own time he has been a keen explorer of the UAE and Oman. For family reasons he will be returning to Canada for at least a year, but he hopes to be back and participating again in DNHG activities before too long.

Helena Reichert hails from Greece, the country that gave us, amongst many other things, medicine. Medicinal herbs grow in great abundance in Greece and Helena grew up in a village here they were used as a matter of course for many ailments. Although she has not studied the subject, she is brave enough to tell us some things about the plants from her region.





Inter-Emirates Weekend at Mafraq

The Mafraq Hotel was the base for a program of diverse and out-of-the-ordinary activities at the 2002 Inter-Emirates Weekend in April. The most commonly heard complaint was that there was not time enough to do everything, even though many of the outings were repeated on both Thursday and Friday!

At the hotel itself were a collection of animals of various sorts (including microscopic), a snake photo quiz, a bird quiz, a flower hunt, and insect collection equipment (in use after dark). For night owls, astronomy was an option, and in addition to good views of summer constellations such as Scorpio, Cygnus, Aquila and Lyra, the skywatching group was treated to a flash from the Iridium 29 satellite, on schedule at exactly 04:44:21, spotted by the DNHG's own Andrew Hornsby.

Two desert ecology trips ventured into the sands towards Sweihan. The Friday trip took advantage of the experience of the Thursday afternoon trip and took the easy way in to collect the traps that had been laid. These produced six Cheesman's gerbils (we examined the distinctive white hair on the soles of the feet) plus a sand boa (we viewed its two tiny vestigial legs). Seen "in action" were an Arabian toad-headed agama, a desert race runner, a dhub and its burrow, two gazelle, and a desert hare (glimpsed briefly). A male rock thrush joined the usual compliment of desert birds in the shelter of a couple of *ghaf* trees. The group even spotted and collected some pottery and ostrich shell jewelry (noting the site) for donation to ADIAS. What trip leader Chris Drew (of ERWDA) still does not know is that his departure route, although it was executed without major difficulty, involved trickier sand driving than most people will ever do!

Abu Dhabi's nearshore islands

have played a major role in its history and natural history, and boat trips to several areas were part of the itinerary. A Thursday boat trip saw Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins and, on land, a fox and tern eggs. Futaisi Island was a popular Friday boat trip destination, with two groups covering different itineraries. One group focused on archeology and made its way slowly across the island to the fort, stopping enroute at a Late Islamic water-collecting cistern in a garden, said to be the best example in any of the islands. From pottery shards they learned to distinguish 'chocolate chip' 18th to 19th Century ware and earlier Julfarware, made in Ra's al Khaimah. Also examined were oyster shell middens, typical of Abu Dhabi, and a graveyard with graves oriented N-S (very Late Islamic) and a mosque sitting on top.

Wildlife seen along the way included ospreys in the air and, on land, large spiny-tailed lizards (dhubs) and several sand gazelle. Three types of salt bush dominated the vegetation and these were *Arthrocnemum macrostachyum*, *Halocnemum strobilaceum* and *Halopeplis perfoliata* (Glass Beads). Participants rated it a long but enjoyable walk and eventually reached the fort where they took a well-earned rest in the shade. Trip leader Dick Hornby took a few people off to look for a 'little creature' with a tuber-shaped body which pokes its long slimy tongue (less than 1cm long) out of the wet sand. For birders, a special highlight of the Futaisi Island trip was a 3-metre osprey nest (the product of generations of birds) and the elusive Rufous Bush Chat. All this was followed by a swim and an excellent lunch.

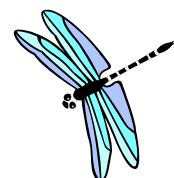
Also for birdwatchers, there were morning and afternoon trips to the Al Wathba fodder fields, the site of many species new to the UAE in recent years, and the normally restricted Al Wathba lake (formerly Al Ghar lake), a wetlands site where flamingoes have repeatedly made attempts to breed. At the lake we saw various waders and shorebirds

and posed for photos in front of the hide visited by Prince Charles. Report by Gary Feulner and Valerie Chalmers, with help from Mary Ann Pardoe

[P.S.: Next year is Dubai's turn to host Inter-Emirates Weekend, and it's never too early to start thinking about ideas.]



Identification by Prof. Loutfy Boulos has confirmed the presence of wild pistachio trees *Pistacia khinjuk* in the mountains of the Musandam area, in a tributary of Wadi Khabb Shamsi. The trees were first noticed by Gary Feulner and Barbara Couldrey. A follow-up visit counted 16 trees along some 3 km of wadi. Several of the trees were in flower in mid-March and in fruit in early April. Gary admits he made the decision to visit this particular wadi shortly after realizing it was one that had escaped him over the years, but he and Barbara were on the lookout, knowing that this area near the main gorges of Wadi Khabb Shamsi contains several species of trees and shrubs that are otherwise very rare. Most of these grow there as cliff plants, out of reach of animals and humans alike. The pistachios were no exception, but Gary and Barbara were able to make their way to a few specimens for a closer look.





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.

Toads in Mountain Cisterns

A few months ago, a DNHG field trip to the mountain settlement of Sal Dhayah, north of Ras al-Khaimah, featured the dramatic rescue of a young goat trapped in a dry cistern. In early May, Barbara Couldrey and Gary Feulner returned to the area and found, to their surprise, that two traditional stone-lined cisterns at either end of the settlement had been filled with almost a meter of water. Although several other cisterns were empty, the two in question remained better served by their original falaj troughs, and this appears to have made the difference, apparently concentrating runoff from recent showers.

Equally surprising was to find toads and tadpoles in the cisterns. In one, dozens of tadpoles and tiny toads swam at the surface, the toadlets often resting at the waterline along the vertical walls. Barbara spotted a single, rather large adult at the shady end, apparently trying to exit, persistently but unsuccessfully, by climbing the 2 metres or so to the top of the cistern. In the second cistern there were only large tadpoles, some with well developed legs. Many of these tadpoles had developed the habit of swimming at the surface in an upside down position, feeding on surface organisms and debris (including many *Acacia tortilis* blossoms) with their ventrally located mouths.

The large size of all of the tadpoles and the presence of toadlets in one cistern indicates that the rain responsible for their birth fell as much as a couple of months ago or more. It is an interesting

question, however, just where these toads came from and where they will go. Most cisterns at Sal Dhayah are 2 to 4 metres deep and Barbara and Gary agreed, consistent with what they witnessed, that toads would be unable to exit these cisterns unless the water level was at or near the lip. This raises the possibility that, during periods of limited rain, toads are born and grow to adulthood wholly within the confines of a single cistern, where (if they survive to adulthood) they must burrow and aestivate in the drying mud of the empty cistern (which they can do for periods of two years or more), emerging with the next rains to breed, but dispersing only if the rain is sufficient to cause the cistern to overflow. Although these cisterns may be larger than many of the ephemeral natural pools in which local toads breed, it is generally possible for toads to escape from natural pools, and adult *B. dhufarensis* are usually said to be found away from water rather than in it. In any case, once dispersed, adult toads would be constrained to return to water to breed. In or near settlements, cisterns will often be the most reliable venue.

The widespread but rather circum-spect presence of toads in the Musandam area has only recently been appreciated. It was reported on in an article in *Tribulus* 11.2 (Autumn/Winter 2001) by DNHG members Peter Cunningham and Gary Feulner, who found that virtually all of the toads within the mountains of the Musandam region are the Dhofar toad *Bufo dhufarensis*, whereas the most common toad by far in the mountains of the UAE from Khatt and Dibba southwards is the Arabian toad *Bufo arabicus*. The Sal Dhayah toads and tadpoles were inspected with binoculars and, consistent with expectations, they were found to be Dhofar toads. *Report by Gary Feulner*



Birders, please note...

The correct address to find the weekly UAE Twitchers' Guide is www.uaeinteract.com (the official website of the Ministry of Information and Culture). Just open it up, go to Birds, and the way to the page is clearly identified.

Any reports should be sent to me (Hellyer@emirates.net.ae) or to Simon Aspinall (hudhud10@emirates.net.ae)

Reports for inclusion in the national database kept by the Emirates Bird Records Committee should go either to Colin Richardson (editor, UAE monthly report) (colinr@emirates.net.ae) OR to the EBRC Secretary, David Diskin (dadiskin@emirates.net.ae)

and archeology nuts...

Members interested to follow up on developments in Abu Dhabi archaeology, following last month's talk by Dan Hull, Resident Archaeologist of the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey, ADIAS, might like to take a look at the ADIAS website, which can be found at www.adias-uae.com

The site contains latest press releases, a publications list, an archive of ADIAS radiocarbon dating results, a picture gallery and more, as well as links to other sites related to Arabian archaeology.

Webmaster for the site is Dr. Mark Beech, who also maintains the UAE Fishes Guide mentioned in last month's Gazelle.

With the annual archaeology season drawing to a close in early May, Dan has now left ADIAS and has returned to the University of York where he plans to pursue doctoral research. He is being replaced in October by Mark Beech, who joins the ADIAS team, including Peter Hellyer and Simon Aspinall. Mark will also join the *Tribulus* editorial board from the autumn.

Thanks to Peter Hellyer for this information.



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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.

What's in a name? Wadi Khabb, etc.

To those in the know, the name of Wadi Khabb will sound familiar. But don't be fooled -- there's danger afoot for the unwary. Wadi Khabb (plain vanilla) is a large wadi that drains much of the mountains in the area E of RAK airport, and flows out SSW to Tawiyyan. At least half of it, and all of the driveable track, is in the UAE, and it continues to be extensively developed for agriculture. Confusion often arises, however, with Wadi Khabb Shamsi, which constitutes the Gulf of Oman side of the "over-the-top" route from RAK to Dibba, via Wadi Bih. Wadi Khabb Shamsi is wholly in Oman. To add to the confusion, an early and populous branch of Wadi Khabb Shamsi is Wadi Khabb Naqbi.

What is a *khabb*? And what do these names mean? The answer seems to depend a little bit on who you ask. William Lancaster, an anthropologist who asks similar questions in the mountains for a living, cautioned that it is surprisingly difficult to get agreement on such points, and he demurred. According to a Shihuh friend of Gary Feulner, in the Ru'us al-Jibal (the mountains of the Musandam region) a *khabb* denotes a shallow hole or depression, possibly best translated as trough or basin or hollow. If so, however, a bit of understatement is at work, since all of the *khabbs* are formidable wadis and none meets the average flatlander's of "shallow." But a Ras al-Khaimah government official who also grew up in the Musandam says that he understands *khabb* to be just a local word for a "fork" or "branch" of a wadi.

In any case, the name has been applied to other places such as Wadi Khabbayn ("Two Khabbs"), a tributary of Wadi Bih which in fact branches near its mouth into two nearly equal forks. The name Khabb Shamsi is said with greater certainty to refer to the Al Bu Shamis tribe (not the sun or

shams) and Khabb Naqbi is likewise said to be named for the Naqbiyyin tribe. Report by Gary Feulner

Powers of Suggestion

In the November 2000 *Gazelle*, the item "What's in a Name? Umm and Abu" complained that nobody seemed to know what Umm Al-Qaiwain means.

Umm usually means "the mother of", implying origin. Minie van de Weg and Stephen Green have both stepped up to say that it means "Mother of the Two Powers." According to Minie, this is a contraction of the formal Arabic expression. Steve cited a written reference which traces the name to the reputation of the Emirate as both a land and sea power. In either case this recognizes the "ain" ending as the Arabic dual, indicating a pair of something. A minority view wonders about a dictionary definition of *qiwa* as a wasteland, and *qaiwain* as two of them.

Thanks to Gary Feulner.

And another "...ain"

Several members of the Jebel Akhdar trips have wondered about the name of Sharif al Alamain, that high point between the villages of Hat and Al Hamra in Oman. An Omani friend told me that it means "the commander of two worlds". My old Hans Wehr Arabic-English Dictionary gives the root of *sharif* as meaning nobility, eminence or an elevated place. Preceded by *ala*, it goes off into all those wonderful connections – to be honoured, to control, to be within shooting distance, to be on the verge or brink.

Alam is defined as "pain or suffering", and 'alam (with the glottal stop before the a) as "world". One would have to know the correct Arabic spelling to be sure. Both seem likely, especially if you have ever walked up there!

Ed.



special reports ...

Snakes: Cause for concern?

Most people are more afraid of snakes than weapons or other people. This is understandable as certain snakes are venomous and can cause fatalities, but the probability of being fatally bitten by a snake is low. The following table was published in the New Scientist of 3 March 2001 and indicates potential cause of human death and the probability of being affected.

<i>Cause of death</i>	<i>Probability</i>
Traffic accident	1 in 100
Murder	1 in 300
Fire	1 in 800
Firearms accident	1 in 2500
Electrocution	1 in 5000
Passenger aircraft crash	1 in 20 000
Asteroid or comet impact	1 in 20 000
Flood	1 in 30 000
Tornado	1 in 60 000
Venomous bite or sting	1 in 100 000
Firework accident	1 in 1 million
Food poisoning by botulism	1 in 3 million

[Now of course everything is relative, for instance, if you find yourself unlucky enough to be in Angola the probability of being blown up by a landmine would be quite high.]

Twenty-one species of snakes belonging to six families occur (including offshore) in the UAE. Of these, only four terrestrial species (Family Viperidae - True Vipers) and eight marine species (Family Hydrophiidae) are potentially dangerous.

Of the four Viper species found in the UAE the Saw-scaled Viper (*Echis carinatus*) is potentially the most dangerous, with case fatalities reported as 5-10% in hospitalised cases. Saw-scaled Viper venom is haemotoxic or vasculotoxic causing local pain and swelling and widespread bleeding. Carpet Viper (*Echis coloratus*) and Sand Viper (*Cerastes cerastes*) venom is potentially dangerous although symptoms are less severe than for the Saw-scaled Viper and fatalities are rare. Very little is known about the False-horned Viper (*Pseudocerastes persicus*), a potentially dangerous snake of high altitudes, but rarely encountered. Sea snake bites are not painful and 50% of bites do not result in envenoming. The venom is neurotoxic and results in muscle paralysis.

Bites of the rear-fanged Colubrids, mildly toxic and/or harmless snakes, may occasionally result in envenoming with pain and local swelling being common. As a general rule-of-thumb in the UAE, snakes which are long and slender are harmless, while short and stocky snakes are potentially dangerous.

First Aid

Evacuation of the unfortunate person to the nearest hospital or clinic (most large hospitals and clinics have anti-venom) is advisable, especially if bitten by a potentially dangerous or unidentified snake. A pressure bandage (splint limb if possible) should be wrapped around the bitten limb and mobility restricted where possible resulting in delaying the absorption of venom. Fortunately bites of venomous snakes encountered in the UAE rarely develop irreversible life-threatening situations within six hours.

Snakes are extremely beautiful and interesting creatures, certainly not out to "get" humans, or afflicted with the devil. In fact, most snakes I have encountered are passive and only strike or try and defend themselves when actively harassed. In all cases the snakes have always tried to escape before attempting to defend themselves. Inflating the body and rubbing the scales on the flanks together causes the early warning rasping sound used by Saw-scaled Vipers. An interesting theory exists that this warning sound has evolved in an arid environment instead of hissing, which results in the loss of water vapor.

A quote by an anonymous source I came across recently sums it up:

"We only conserve what we love. We only love what we know. We only know what we are taught."

Report by Peter Cunningham (plc@emirates.net.ae)



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Congratulations!

Natural History Awards

Inter-Emirates Weekend was the occasion for presentation of the ENHG's annual natural history awards. The Sheikh Mubarak Award, which honors contributions by a professional to the understanding of UAE natural history, went to **Peter Cunningham**, a DNHG member whose information and reports on diverse natural history topics have frequently appeared in the *Gazelle*, in *Tribulus*, and in a number of professional publications. The Bish Brown Award, which honors non-professionals for similar achievements, went to **Ibrahim Zakhour** of Al-Ain, the popular, long-time trip leader of the ENHG in Al-Ain.

The DNHG congratulates these deserving award winners!

RAK Museum Website

The website of the National Museum of Ras al-Khaimah, www.RAKmuseum.gov.ae, is now online, and is recommended to anyone interested in UAE archeology, history, culture, jewelry, handicrafts etc.

The site is admirably straightforward, informative and easy to use. Subject areas are well indexed and the site features both background information and illustrations and descriptions of specific items in the museum's collection. The site has been prepared under the supervision of RAK museum's resident archeologist Christian Velde, who welcomes comments.

The information and exhibitions currently available on the site will be further expanded when Christian returns in October.

Recommended Fish Website

For anyone interested in fish identification – or in website design -- Phil Iddison of Al-Ain, a former DNHG speaker, has written to extol the virtues of an excellent website: www.fishbase.org/home.htm.

Says Phil, "[I]t is worth exploring as an example of just how good a site can be in terms of offering solid information in a well organized manner." Phil adds (too pessimistically, we hope) that this is perhaps "only possible with someone like FAO as sponsor."

—SHELL—
—REPORT?—



Please send your shell reports
to Sandy Fowler

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

Lectures at Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management (see map p.7), 7.30 for 8.00pm

June 2 Member's Night: [Short presentations by members]

Medicinal Plants of Greece – Helena Reichert

Archeology of the Mileiha Area, Sharjah – David Palmer

Local Natural History Stories – Salah Al-Halyan

June 4 Reptiles of the Arid Countries – Dr Ted Papenfuss

June 13 Annual end-of-season dinner, with photographic competition and quiz

Field Trips (DNHG members only, please).

June 20 – 21 Jabrin Fort and the Saiq Plateau with Peter van Amsterdam