

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Barbara Couldrey and **Gary Feulner** took time out in early January to assist a visiting archeology student in a follow-up to last winter's archeological survey of mountain settlements in the Musandam region. The latest study aimed to examine a few settlements in detail, with particular attention to the area of terraced fields, the number of dwellings and the number of graves – this in an attempt to evaluate the population supported in these areas in earlier times. These studies are being conducted under the supervision of Derek Kennet, formerly resident archeologist in RAK, and now a professor at the University of Durham.

Barbara also assisted in environmental studies in connection with proposed seismic work along the mountain front in Ras al-Khaimah. This included a botanical impact study by **Marijcke Jongbloed** and an ambient noise survey.

Former DNHG member **John Martin** will be visiting in late January and early February. John returns to the UAE most winters as an archeological field assistant or for other natural history projects such as botanical collecting. He has first UAE records of a number of plants to his credit. In Dubai,

John is often hosted by our own **Brian Jolly**.

Former DNHG member **Myrla Koenderink** is visiting Dubai for a bit of summer in winter. She and husband **Jerry** returned to Canada two years ago, but still miss desert trips. Myrla hopes to catch up on some.

There's nothing like being in the right place at the right time: **Christine Namour** recently fielded a telephone call from a lady asking for information from the DNHG, and managed to astound – and more than satisfy -- her caller. The lady had found a large "worm" on jasmine in her garden. It had fascinated her young son and she wondered what it might be. Little did she know that she had called a local expert on the care and feeding of Hawkmoth larva, in this case the Eastern Death's Head Hawkmoth *Acherontia styx*, which lays its eggs on wild and cultivated jasmine. Christine was able to provide full instruction and guidance on how to stock a shoebox with jasmine and await pupation and metamorphosis over the coming month.

DNHG Membership Renewal

The DNHG membership year begins in September, so renewal is overdue. Membership remains a bargain at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dhs. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at meetings (see Membership Secretaries Lena Linton and Anin Radhakrishna) or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account no. 173746 and posted to us at PO Box 29561, Dubai. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.) Membership is valid from September 2002 to September 2003.

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

This month's Contributors

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

Christine Namour
Gary Feulner
Marijcke Jongbloed
Mohammed Arfan Asif
Sandy Fowler (who is in Africa again)





Field Trips etc ...

Enjoy the cool weather!

Hajar Mountain Fossilizing, Camp & Wadi Walk January 23 & 24

Mike Lorrigan and Richard Dennis will be leading a weekend trip on the above dates. It will involve a visit to a fossil site, 'Gastropod Gulch', for an hour or so on Thursday afternoon, followed by a drive of about 45 minutes, with one stop on route, to view some interesting formations, then to an overnight camp on top of a wadi. The following morning the group will explore the wadi in a walk of about 5-6 hours duration. Those who prefer a shorter walk can be accommodated. It is not a particularly difficult walk, but a reasonable level of fitness is required. Proper walking boots, small torch, sunhat, suncream, plus minimum 3-4 litres of water per person required. Departing Dubai around 12 noon Thursday 23, returning to Dubai between 6-7 p.m. Friday evening. Waterproof tops recommended in case of unexpected rain (which has happened on more than one occasion in the mountains!). Places limited to maximum ten vehicles - 4WD required. For further details e-mail me at oxymoron@emirates.net.ae or telephone/fax on 3352791.

Saluki Breeding Centre and Falcon Hospital Thursday, February 6

David Snelling proposes to lead another trip here, after the outstanding success of the last. Details can be obtained from and reservations made with David Snelling at david.snelling@emirates.com

Hawasina area February 12 – 14 (Eid?)

Gary Feulner will be leading a trip to the Saiq Plateau if time permits over Eid. Details can be obtained from Gary. See the little note on this page (And a bit more members' news).

Bat Tombs, Jebel Shams and Rim Walk, Oman February 20 & 21

Peter van Amsterdam and Anne Millen will lead a weekend trip that will involve one night at a hotel and one camping (or two camping if you're tough). We will spend Wed. 19 at the Ibri Hotel, proceed early on Thursday to the Bat tombs, the beehive tombs, and up the jebel to a camping spot. On Friday, we will go further up and do the 'rim walk' which should be done once in every lifetime. It is a packed weekend, and you need to be of average fitness. (Last time, the smokers all dropped out.) As time will be short, you need to have plenty of picnic food and of course, loads of water. The list is almost full for this trip.

Birding trip February 28 or March 7

Pradeep will be coordinating a birding trip on one of these weekends. It will be a day trip to a site not too distant from Dubai and you can contact him at wgar-net@emirates.net.ae for details closer to the time.

Edge of the Empty Quarter, Oman March 13 & 14

The list for this trip is full. Peter will contact those on it by email, closer to the time. A few details are yet to be sorted!

Inter-Emirates Weekend 20 & 21 March

The date is now firm and the venue

announced! The Inter-Emirates Weekend will be held at the Oceanic Hotel, Khor Fakkan and we will obtain the best rate we can for rooms and breakfast. Details will be published in the February *Gazelle*, along with details of the activities that are being worked out.

This is always a very stimulating weekend, and members are encouraged to plan early for their attendance. If you would like to lead/organise some event, please contact Val Chalmers at home on 04 – 349 4816

Qatar

This trip will probably have to be postponed. There are many who would like to do it, so we hope to run it in more settled times.

And a bit more members' news....

Chairman **Gary Feulner** fled long hours in the office to spend the year-end holiday on the Saiq Plateau, courtesy of the 2000m Jebel Akhdar Hotel. By day, foggy plateaux, cliffside villages and wadis verdant with figs, pomegranates, peaches and walnuts made for a diverse program. By night, a log on the fire and a turkey with trimmings added just the right festive touch. Gary is already thinking about when to lead a DNHG trip back for further exploration. Eid al Adha?

Peter Hellyer and **Simon Aspinall** report in *Twitchers' Guide* for the week ended 17th January that it was "A miserable selection this week, (though that's due to the fact that most of our regular resident correspondents are off birding elsewhere!) A pity, because the swans and other highlights are probably still around at the Wimpey Pits if anyone went to look for them!



Geology of



Invasive Alien Plants – The Dangers Of Mesquite

Invasive alien plants have led to large tracts of land becoming unproductive from an agricultural point of view with as much as 4% of the global GDP affected. This excludes the extensive loss of biodiversity as invasive alien plants compete for water, light, space and nutrients to the detriment of indigenous flora.

The UAE is no exception as this green scourge unobtrusively creeps into areas until its often too late and/or requires huge effort in manpower and finances to eradicate. A problematic species in the UAE is the exotic *Prosopis juliflora* species or commonly known as Mesquite [*Prosopis cineraria* or Gaff is indigenous and should not be confused with the alien species].



Prosopis juliflora - foreground
and
Sidr (*Ziziphus spino-cristi*) - behind

Mesquite belongs to the Fabaceae Family along with Acacias. Its natural distribution includes the coastal regions of Mexico southwards to Colombia and Venezuela, including the Caribbean Islands, and is one of most common and successful alien invasive tree species worldwide, especially in arid coastal regions. It requires little water, prefers exposure to full

sunlight and can tolerate temperatures of -18°C, factors that make it very competitive.



Leaves of *Prosopis juliflora*, with yellow 'acacia-like' flowers and long pale seed-pods

South Africa gives us a clear example of how dangerous exotic plants can become. It is estimated that 750 tree and 8,000 shrubs have been introduced of which 198 species are invasive. Approximately 300,000 hectares are affected by *Prosopis (glandulosa)* [Texas Mesquite] alone and almost 10 million hectares or 8% of the surface area (this trend could be doubled in the next 15 years if not controlled) affected by one or other alien invasive species. As well as destroying ecological balance, invasive alien plants reduce the hydrological functioning of large water catchment areas – something “water-hungry” UAE cannot afford. In South Africa this results in between 6% and 10% of the water loss and excludes other problems such as the destruction of indigenous species, untimely fires and soil erosion.

Areas affected by the alien *Prosopis* in the UAE are previously cleared and disturbed lands in the Digdagga, Ras al Khaimah and Rams areas on the Gulf Coast as well as the area along the coast between Fujairah and Khor Fakan. Other areas also colonised by this alien are bulldozed sites during road construction (between Hatta and Siji) and dam building (Hatta, Jebel Hafit, Wadi Bih areas). The potential problem is possibly not obvious yet, but evidence from South Africa indicates that *Prosopis* effectively competes against indigenous flora and can

become so dense that livestock cannot pass through and thus utilise the affected area effectively. *Prosopis* leaves and seeds are well utilised as browse by domestic stock therefore possibly the initial lack of concern by local farmers.

In southern Oman this alien invasive has reached unprecedented proportions where it is estimated that 2.3 million self-seeded trees (under four years of age) are present in a section of the Dhofar coastal plain. This threat has only recently been recognised in Oman and there is great concern over its spread to the Escarpment Mountains through seed depositing by browsing camels.

Gardeners (individuals, nurseries as well as municipalities) should make use of indigenous plants as well as “good” exotic plants that are non-invasive and water wise. The 21st century trend towards water wise eco-gardening will not only enhance the aesthetics of gardens, but also attract birds and other wildlife.

Another species with the potential to become invasive, especially in water rich wadis, is *Nerium oleander* [synonym - *mascatense* recognized from the local wadi's – all parts of the oleander are poisonous and even avoided by herbivores].

Why do some species become invasive?

- Similar climates & soils (well adapted)
- Similar ecology & prone to fire
- Grow fast – maturing and bearing seeds within five years
- Produce large numbers of seeds
- Growth outstrips that of indigenous plants
- Seeds spread easily
- Released from original predator pressures

What are the economic impacts of



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

invasive plants?

- Increased water loss
- Loss of biodiversity
- Loss of potential productive land
- Loss of grazing potential & livestock reduction
- Poisoning – humans & livestock
- Increased costs for fire protection
- Erosion
- Siltation of dams

What can we do to combat alien invasive flora?

- Prevent new invasion
- Control existing invasion
- Keep land clean of alien species
- Join control groups
- Report invasive species
- Do not buy invasive species
- Do not import/export invasive species
- Respect quarantine laws
- Lobby those in positions of influence to take appropriate steps

It is thus imperative that this "green threat" is recognized as such and that steps be taken to eliminate and eradicate aliens – especially *Prosopis* species – before they become well and truly established in the UAE.

Thanks for this report and both photographs to Peter Cunningham (pcunningham@polytechnic.edu.na)

(Perhaps a commercial use, like that for *P. glandulosa* which is very popular as barbeque wood in Texas and the south west US, can be found for *P. juliflora*. Does anyone know if it flavours as well as 'Texas Mesquite' ? Ed.)

Ostrich Rumps

On a detour from a desert field trip last spring, Peter van Amsterdam showed us some African wildlife at a farm near Al Maha. The ostriches, unfortunately, all seemed to be suffering from bald rumps, which were picked at by the other birds. Long distance DNHG member Peter Cunningham read about this in the *Gazelle* and has written to comment. Peter says he had visited the same site several years before and the poor birds had been plucked clean even then. He asked ostrich breeders in Namibia about this. Their response was as follows: Either a mineral deficiency (calcium based) or stress and/or boredom. Once the feathers have been plucked the blood attracts flies which inevitably stimulate the birds to carry on picking at the site thus resulting in constantly 'clean' areas. This can be alleviated by supplying a mineral (calcium/phosphorus) based lick. It's more difficult to remedy if it's caused by stress/boredom.
Report by Gary Feulner

Small But Effective

The western pygmy blue butterfly (*Brephidium exile*), a native of the west coast of the United States and the smallest butterfly in North America, was first observed and identified in the UAE by Professor Michael Gillett of Al-Ain in 1998. Mike noticed the butterfly on the *Sesuvium* plant, a low, silver-green succulent, of which at least one species is native to the UAE and several others are used extensively for landscaping. Subsequent investigations found the western pygmy blue in downtown Dubai, at Ruwayyah, and near Al-Awir, also on *Sesuvium*.

In the United States, the larval food plant of this butterfly is said to be "glasswort" – a succulent, salt-tolerant plant, just as the native *Sesuvium verrucosum* is here. More recently, Marijcke Jongbloed and Gary Feulner observed large

numbers of western pygmy blues at Professor Larry Woods' rubber tyre dump site in Sharjah (see November's *Gazelle*). The butterfly was most abundant on circular mats of *S. verrucosum*, but was also common on shrubs of two other saltbushes *Zygophyllum* sp. and *Sueda vermiculata*. If this little butterfly import is happy with these common UAE saltbush species, we can expect it to have a bright future in its new home.
Report by Gary Feulner

On the Edge

On a January weekend, Sandy Ellis, Peter van Amsterdam and I set off south of Al Ain to explore an area we had never visited before. We travelled through Wagan to Al Qa'a, amazed at the extent and intensity of farming in the wadis near those little towns. How come, Sandi and I said to each other, we have never seen a can of UAE vegetables in a supermarket when there are at least three (apparently fully functional) vegetable canning factories in Abu Dhabi Emirate?

At Al Qa'a, the fence marking the border between the UAE and Oman loops out close to the Umm Al Zamool road, and there we drove along the excellently maintained track beside it. Although the fence is a serious one - three metres high with a roll of razor-wire on top - we did not realise just how serious until we had travelled about five kilometres and came to some of the lads guarding a gate and later us.

The next day, rested and fresh from the hotel and happy that we had not slept on concrete after all, we crossed into Oman and went south into the gibber plains. Vegetation is sparse, and we saw only a few camels, but many piles of bones and a few large birds of prey. The latter were nearly in luck - a speeding hay truck on a deep gravel track missed us by a miracle and a few centimetres. Turning into the eastern-most



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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.

sands of the Empty Quarter, we passed through beautiful desert, red dunes dotted sparsely with big ghaf trees, and into the strange area where Wadi Dank peters out against the sands. Here, the ground is pale grey and powdery, and a shattered forest and scattered debris give an eerie feel to the silent landscape. The few abandoned camel camps give a clue to the sad mismanagement of what may at one time have been a verdant ghaf forest. Past stumps and fallen trunks, hacked trees and piles of branches, we came suddenly on the sands again, huge dunes 'walking' inexorably forward over the far reaches of Wadi Dank.

On the dunes, there were dozens of blue-black beetles, so navy that Sandi named them 'jeans beetles'. They were, I assume, dung beetles, although my reference material makes no mention of dung beetles that are navy blue. They were running around everywhere, but I saw only one showing any interest in dung, and he was attempting to bite into a hard lump, rather than rolling it along in the characteristic way. *Report by Anne Millen*

Help, Bird Watchers....

DNHG member Dr. Reza Khan reports that two juvenile socotra cormorants and two juvenile flamingoes have been released by Dubai Zoo in Safa park to see how they manage to adapt to a life in freedom. Bird-watchers might want to keep this in mind in case they think these birds are breeding here.

Reports on the birds' whereabouts will be welcomed by Dr. Khan. (tel 344 8283 or zoo 2497280)



Shelling Field Trip

Fifteen budding sea shell collectors gathered at the south end of the Khor Fakkan corniche for the first field trip of the year, the January shelling trip. Members Ron and Ruth Wolfe carried out some rather intricate navigational manoeuvres but did finally make it to the right place in the end.

Although no new shells were found, the first beach yielded a specimen of *Latirus turritus*, previously unrecorded in Eastern Arabia but found on a previous field trip and identified in the Natural History Museum in London. A good collection of specimens, including cones, was found by most people and Wentle cove did grudgingly give one wentletrap, a specimen of *Epitonium aculeatum*.

The weather was ideal, the crowd enthusiastic, the shells varied and (I hope!) enjoyed by all.

Thanks to Sandy Fowler for this report.



Globe

skimmers

Skim-

The migratory globe skimmer dragonfly *Pantala flavescens* was seen at widespread locations in the UAE mountains during October and November, from the Musandam to Hiluw to Hatta, and also in the Sharjah desert, probably encouraged by the recent occurrence of scattered rains in the area. The globe skimmer is one of the world's most cosmopolitan dragonflies, being found throughout the tropics and subtropics, including South America, the Middle East, New Guinea and even Easter Island. It is a medium-sized dragonfly. Males are reddish-yellow with a yellow "mask" and females are yellowish-green, sometimes with red accents.



special reports ...

When not flying rapidly, they carry their abdomens in a slightly dipped orientation, which helps to identify them. They tend to fly rather continuously by day, generally from about 1 to 2-1/2 metres off the ground, hovering occasionally.
Report by Gary Feulner

Through the Lens....

Nature photographs and field notes by Arfan Asif

Sometimes we return from field trips without much to talk about and in my case without capturing anything much on film. In fact, I thought that this trip on a cold January morning early this year, near Al Awir Sewage Treatment Plant, would turn out to be such a day.

Just when I was about to pack my bags without even having removed cap from camera, a full size dragonfly with full size appetite landed on a twig two metres away.

The first picture shows the attack and pinning down of the hapless damselfly and the start of the devouring process, which didn't take much time - 10 seconds !

What stunned me was that, when the dragonfly had nearly finished its meal, another damselfly landed millimetres away and watched the final moments of one of its kind. The dragonfly paid no attention and flew off.

The third picture shows the same species of damselfly mating.

Overcoming subject movement caused by constant wind is a test in itself. A piece of cardboard blocking the wind is a great help. Keeping the axis of the subject perpendicular to the camera ensures focus right through the subject, since we realise that depth of field is a limitation in this kind of photography.





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The DNHG library is there for you!

The DNGH would like to thank Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management librarian and DNHG member Tonia Hulack for her enthusiastic welcome of the DNHG collection and ongoing assistance to our librarian Deanne White.

Deanne reports that, with the generous help of Tonia, the DNHG library collection is now housed at the library of the Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management and is available for members' reference use during normal library hours, 9am to 7pm. On monthly DNHG lecture nights the library will be open until shortly before lecture time and members are invited to go up to the library, which is above the main hall, to have a look.

At the moment, our collection of natural history books is nearly catalogued – there are only about 15 left to do, though books keep appearing. Our collection of individual papers and periodicals remains a work in progress. The DNHG collection is available on a reference basis, i.e., on premises. Except on meeting nights, members should be prepared to show their DNHG membership card for library access.

Snail Call

A reminder, especially for new members: your unwanted garden snails and slugs are wanted for scientific study and an accounting of the terrestrial snails of the UAE. All specimens will be gratefully accepted by Chairman Gary Feul-

ner, and contributors will be kept informed of progress and pedigrees.

Suburban gardens are home to several native Arabian snails, but also a number of introduced species. There have already been a few surprises and we know that more are out there. Dead shells are preferred; we'll follow up if you've got something unusual. It's easy. Just bag 'em and tag 'em! Please remember to record the location and the habitat, as well as your name, the date, and any remarks.



Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- February 2 Dennis Russell – “Manmade Islands of Green in a Desert Environment”
- February 23 Andrew Spalton on Arabian Leopards in Dhofar. (Note that this is an extra meeting)
- March 2 Marijcke Jongbloed’s valedictory talk and AGM.
- April 6 Claudia Gruber and Angela von Driesch on Sufouh 2 site / camels
- May David Mallet on Tiger Conservation in India

Field Trips (DNHG members only, please).

- Thursday 6th February – Saluki Breeding Centre and Falcon Hospital visit organised by David Snelling
- February 12th-14th (Eid?) - Saiq Plateau/Geology of the Hawasina area with Gary Feulner
- Thursday/Friday 20th/21st February – Trip to Bat Tombs, Jebel Shams and Rim Walk with Peter van A..
- Friday February 28th /March 7th – Birding with Pradeep Rradhakrishna
- Thursday/Friday 13th/14th March – Empty Quarter Trip organised by Peter van Amsterdam and Anne
- Thursday/Friday 20th/21st March – Inter-Emirates Weekend at Khor Fakkan