

# GAZELLE

Vol 18 no 10 – November 2003



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

**DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP**

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

## Members' News

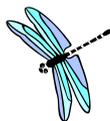
### *Congratulations to Jo and Arfan Asif!*

The gold doubloon for the month goes to **Johanna Raynor**, who answered the call to collect an amphisbaenid for science. Jo and some others were 'misbehaving', looking for insects and scorpions on an archeology field trip with the Al-Ain ENHG, when they turned up a piece of metal in the desert near Jabeeb (about half way from Dubai to Al-Ain) and found an amphisbaenid underneath. Jo's specimen, complete with GPS coordinates, was transferred to Prof. Ted Papenfuss, a former DNHG speaker, when he passed through Dubai at the end of the month. Ted was overjoyed and relayed the news immediately to his University of California colleagues. He has promised to keep us apprised of the results and to explain, in his own words, the significance of the DNA investigations of this organism.

**Minie van de Weg** has been a keen observer of nature during her long career in Fujairah (and is so credited, with thanks, by Marijke Jongbloed in her *Wild Flowers of the UAE*). Apparently Minie did not drop her guard, even while on leave in her native Holland. She returned with a photo of a striking-

ly large and perfectly formed wasp's nest, looking rather like a bandaged skull hung in a tree. The photo caused even greater excitement, not to say consternation, when it was at first (mis)understood to have been taken in the UAE.

**Mohammed Arfan Asif**, whose photograph of a Green Bee Eater won a prize at the 2003 DNHG End-of-Season party, has had some of his wonderful photographs published in the October issue of *Photography Middle East Magazine*. The prize-winning Green Bee Eater photograph is reproduced in full page colour along with some of his other works on nature subjects.



Thanks to all those who have renewed their membership for the coming year and updated their details. Please consider whether or not you may be able to contribute as our Speaker Coordinator, or as our Mammal Recorder. Chairman Gary Fuelner discusses the ins and outs of the latter on page 4.

### *DNHG Membership*

September marks the start of the new DNHG membership year. DNHG membership remains a bargain at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account no. 173746 posted to us at PO Box 9234, Dubai. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.)

Please take a minute at the next meeting to ensure that we have full contact information for you, including an e-mail address, so that we can advise you more efficiently of additions and changes to our schedule, and other matters. The DNHG does not share its membership or e-mail information.

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 occasional special projects.

### **This month's Contributors**

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

Arfan Asif  
Gary Fuelner  
Barbara Couldrey



## Field Trips etc ...

### Hajar Mountain Nature Hike Friday 21 November

Gary Feulner will lead a full day nature hike in the Hajar Mountains. Mixed emphasis on plants, animals, insects, archeology, agriculture. Overall elevation change will be small, but there are no trails, the ground is typically rough and uneven, and we will often ascend and descend slopes between the wadi bed and terraces. Suitable for regular hikers or fit and energetic novices. [Caveat: It has been said that Gary tends to 'forget' the hard parts.]

Schedule: Depart from downtown Dubai at ~7am. Estimated return to Dubai ~7pm. What to bring? Minimum 3 litres of water (plus a 4th in the car), boots or very sturdy shoes, hat and/or sunscreen, daypack, lunch, camera, binoculars, etc. Limit 12 people. Call Gary for sign-up, meeting place or further info, at 330-3600 x 630 (office) or 306-5570 (home).

### Turtles at Ras Al Hadd Tues-Thurs Nov 25-27 (Eid)

Turtle watching is one of the more unique experiences of the region, but this is a long trip requiring essentially a full day to travel down and a day to travel back (~8-10 hours each way). A basic plan for participants on a 3-day schedule is as follows: Day 1 (Nov 25) is travel down, at least most of the way. Day 2 (Nov 26) is remainder of travel, leisure and overnight near the turtle beaches, in Sur or elsewhere. Night 2 is turtle watching, with a guide, from a nearby camp. Day 3 (Nov 27) is return to Dubai. Those with more time can customize their itinerary to and from, and group plans could evolve. We need to make reservations ASAP, and then forward deposits. If you are seriously interested, please contact Anin Radhakrishnan or Gary Feulner (details on p. 7).

Be prepared to answer the ques-

tion where you would prefer to overnight on the first night. The choices are: (1) at a camp on the edge of the Wahiba Sands, some 2-3 hours from the turtle area; (2) in the turtle area itself (either at the turtle 'camp' or in Sur, about half an hour away), or (3) in Muscat (still about 4 hours from the turtle area). We can't absolutely guarantee availability of any of these. Cost for Wahiba Sands camp and turtle camp is estimated Dh. 150/person/night (including dinner and breakfast). Hotel rooms in Muscat at 'Eid (and Oman National Day) would likely be Dh.300 or more. Turtle-viewing permits are Dh.20/person. Plans are to meet in the area, not convoy, but convoys can probably be arranged on request. Sur is accessible by a good paved road, via the Wahiba Sands area. However, the roads in the turtle area proper, and the coast road between Muscat and Sur, are graded roads best suited to 4WD.

### Birdwatching at Kalba and Bullpushing at Fujairah

Friday, 12 December

This all-day trip will begin with birdwatching at Khor Kalba. Spotting the rare white-collared kingfisher will be our main objective, but several other species abound in the mangrove. The beach there will also be of interest to shellers. After lunch, we will visit the Fujairah Museum and (hopefully) Fort, before observing the traditional bull-pushing competition.

Departure/rendezvous point: on the roadside of Highway 44 (the Hatta/Oman Road), just beyond the Highway 611 junction/circle (on the Hatta side of the circle, as you approach a stadium on the right). We will depart from the rendezvous point at 7:30 am sharp. Alternatively, you can meet us at the Khor Kalba mangrove parking area at about 10:00 am. We will travel to Kalba via Hatta and the new tunnel and will return via Masafi and Dhaid (departing Fujairah at about 5:30 or 6:00 pm). A 4W-

drive vehicle is not required. Remember to bring your lunch, water, hat, binoculars, camera and other essentials. Contact Larry Woods at lwoods@aus.ac.ae for information and to let him know you are coming.

And more overleaf...

Saiq Plateau, touring/hiking

### Our Next Speaker

**John Newby** was born in Lincolnshire, England, and studied Zoology and Ecology at Aberdeen University. In 1971, as the first United Nations Volunteer in the field, he took up a position as Wildlife Biologist in the Republic of Chad. In 1972 he was dispatched to the desert for a short trip that was to last eight years and included a job with WWF, a civil war, a marriage and three beautiful daughters. In 1980 he moved to Niger to establish the 80,000 km<sup>2</sup> Air and Ténéré National Nature Reserve -- one of the first integrated conservation and development projects, encompassing both conservation and environmentally-sound social development activities.

In 1991 he moved to Switzerland to head WWF International's Africa & Madagascar Programme and then, in 1998, WWF's Endangered Species Programme. After 28 years with WWF and an increasing frustration that deserts were being overlooked in the headlong rush for biodiversity hotspots, in 2002 he accepted a job with ERWDA in Abu Dhabi, where he heads up the Terrestrial Environment Research Centre.

Along the way, he has been decorated on two occasions by governments in Niger (they change quite often) for services to nature conservation, he has won a Rolex Award for Enterprise, and has been made an Officer in the Order of the Golden Ark. He counts himself privileged also to have seen the desert at a time when wildlife was still abundant and desert dwellers lived in simple harmony with their surroundings.



## Festive Season Wed-Sat, Dec. 24-27

Celebrate the holidays at 2000m in the cool, crisp air of the Saiq Plateau. Gary Feulner will lead intermediate day hikes in the mountains (~500m vertical rise) and welcomes active participants. Easier walking and touring options are also available. There is a good basic road network with many spectacular viewpoints. Basic programme: Depart Wed. morn., Dec. 24, arrive Saiq mid-afternoon. Day hikes on Thu-Fri, Dec. 25-26 to (1) overlook of Ghubrah Bowl and (2) cliffside terraces of Mabint. Easier options are to explore Wadi Bani Habib or the plateau. Sat., Dec. 27 morning at leisure and afternoon return to Dubai [Alternative possibility: Depart Wed. night, Dec. 24, overnight at Ibri Motel; on Thu., Dec. 25, continue on to Saiq Plateau.] Accommodation at Saiq will be at the Jebel Akhdar Hotel, where there will be a log on the fire. Basic cost: OR 26.8 (Dh. 268) per double room per night. Call Gary for sign-up or more info, at 330-3600 x 630 (office) or 306-5570 (home). For holiday reservations, sign-ups are required by 1st week of December.

### And the ENHG's Trips:

Jebel Ali Family Activity Weekend (4WD) with Alan McGee

20-21 November

Birds et al with Simon Aspinall

5 December

Archeology and Dhubs (4WD) with Allestree Fisher

18-19 December

If you would like to join any of these trips, please contact Allestree Fisher, who is the ENHG's excursion secretary, on telephone 02-6775717 or email him at

allestree.fisher@hct.ac.ae

Remember that ENHG members

have priority for places on these trips, as ours do for our trips.

## On to Other Things...



### Still Buzzing

Marijcke Jongbloed's note and 'challenge' in last month's *Gazelle* informed us (among other things) that there are no bumble bees in the UAE. What, then, was the large, fuzzy bee in the accompanying photo (juxtaposed by the editor)? *Insects of Eastern Arabia* (Walker and Pittaway 1987) identifies it as a carpenter bee. One major difference between the two is that whereas bumble bees are social insects, carpenter bees are solitary.

In Arabia there are a number of species of carpenter bees, all of them belonging to the genus *Xylocopa*. Most of these are blackish in colour. The carpenter bee in the October photo is almost certainly a male of the species *Xylocopa aestuans*, the Canary Carpenter Bee, found in the UAE, which has a yellow-green thorax with a black center marking. The female is distinguished by having a dark yellow-green abdomen as well.

Former DNHG Chairman Dr. Alan Dickson, a pest control expert (among other things) has said that carpenter bees are also very slow to sting, and must be provoked before they will do so. Does this give us the makings of another 'challenge'?

Report by Gary Feulner

(Oops, the editor apologises and confesses to a greater interest in column inches than in bees.)

## Escape Artists

The common garden slug, *Laevicaulis alte*, recently joined a growing list of animals that have escaped from captivity in my apartment. I had borrowed a few from the garden to photograph by daylight (they are nocturnal). Kindness led me to punch a number of air holes in the top of the container, a plastic cup of soil. The holes were all smaller in diameter than a pencil, but that proved quite enough for even a relatively large slug. When I returned a while later, it was free and stretched out beside the cup, once again a robust 1 cm wide, looking (I thought) slightly bewildered at the environment of the kitchen countertop.

The previous animal to exit via an airhole (a small airhole, honestly), was a moth I also wanted to view by daylight. I only hope it isn't taking its revenge on my best business suits. And I long ago learned not to leave the container top "just slightly" ajar. That little courtesy has cost me a hunt for a land snail and a scorpion. The scorpion escaped by balancing atop the two other scorpions in the container. How was I to know I had collected the Wallenda troupe? Fortunately, it met a quick accidental demise, which saved me blacklighting my apartment.

The distance record (so far?) was set by a mangrove tree snail, which exited its teflon pot (with fresh mangrove leaves), descended a platform of books built pre-



# Special Reports...

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

## Whale Sharks

The September *Gazelle* mentioned occurrences this summer of apparently disoriented whale sharks in both Dubai Creek and Dubai Marina.

Naturalist and filmmaker Jonathan Ali Khan, currently heading the Cycle of Life Natural History Film Project, has recently commented on the existence of whale shark nursing grounds in the Musandam area.

Jonathon noted that most of the sightings in UAE waters are of juvenile whale sharks, unlike other areas of the world where they are either older juveniles or adults. It raises the possibility, he says, that the Arabian Gulf could be a key site for the survival of this endangered species worldwide.

*Report by Gary Feulner*

## Letters to the Editor

Any news or views you would like published in our monthly newsletter? Feel like tickling things up?



Please send your letter to any of the committee members listed, by fax or e-mail, or direct to the editor.

cisely to discourage it, and crossed the sofa to settle on the underside of a cushion. I should perhaps have known better since, once refreshed with a bit of water, it had done a couple of turns of the pot rim before settling down. *Report by Gary Feulner*

## DNHG "Recorders": What, Why and How?

The DNHG has long had designated "Recorders" for various animal groups and for astronomy, geology, plants and archeology. The Recorder system is intended to serve several purposes.

First, in the absence of local institutions dedicated to the comprehensive study of the natural history of the UAE, the natural history groups in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Al-Ain have, since their inception, undertaken to fill this gap and to seek out and maintain a record of such information.

Second, the Recorders were intended to serve as focal points for the exchange of information between persons interested in a particular field or animal group. Knowledgeable recorders can also direct newcomers to information sources. Recorders have never been expected to be "experts" -- simple demographics preclude this -- but only interested and conscientious amateurs.

How has the Recorder system worked in practice? The results have been mixed. For birds, the number of individuals involved in birdwatching in the UAE and their level of activity and dedication has let to the establishment, independently of the individual natural history groups, of an amateur but well organized system for the recording of data, with weekly, monthly and annual compilations of reports published, and with individual reports subject to review by the Emirates Birds Records Com-

mittee.

For other groups such as wild mammals, which are less often seen, reports by non-members tended to find their way to the Arabian Leopard Trust through much of the 1990s, and there was often good reason not to publish reports of threatened species such as leopard, caracal or Gordon's wildcat.

For other taxonomic groups, particularly a diverse group such as insects, it is difficult for even the most conscientious Recorder to be particularly knowledgeable about very many aspects, and it is even more difficult for most lay observers to "report" effectively on what they have seen. Photographic records are one way to address this. The DNHG maintains a Photographic Reference Collection of several hundred prints and slides, but the organization remains basic and probably no more than half of the entries are fully identified.

Sampling (collection) is another way to "record" observations of unusual organisms or phenomena, but collection should only be undertaken where there is a reason for close examination or comparison. This might include, for example, specimens reasonably believed to be significantly out-of-the-ordinary.

Many individuals have developed a serious but specialized interest in particular animal groups, which outstrips the interest or ability of the designated Recorders. In such cases those individuals have generally maintained their own records. This is encouraged, but with the caveat that it is to be hoped that the resulting information will ultimately be shared in the form of publication or deposit of the records into an institution or library where it will be available for the benefit of all, and can be integrated with other knowledge and observations.

Some subject matter poses special problems for Recorders.



## Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

Reptiles - Dr Reza Khan  
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off 344 0462  
fax (off) 349 9437

Archaeology - Prof. John Fox  
jfox@aus.ac.ac

Birds - David Snelling  
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fax 2950758  
050 – 5526308

david.snelling@emirates.com

Seashells - Sandy Fowler  
res 344 2243  
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shellerdoc@yahoo.com

Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi  
res 06-5583 003  
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lankefi@emirates.net.ae

Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

Geology - Gary Feulner  
res 306 5570  
fax 330 3550

Insects – Gary Feulner

Fossils - Valerie Chalmers  
res 349 4816,  
fax 340 0990

Plants – Valerie Chalmers

Mammals - Marijcke Jongbloed *until someone else volunteers.*

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, for example, does one "record" as a Geology Recorder or Astronomy Recorder? In the case of Geology, records are currently organized conceptually by categories such as: faults, folds, fossils, unusual mineral deposits, exceptional outcrops of particular rock types, good examples of particular geologic or physiographic features (e.g., raised beaches). In the case of Astronomy, the recorder might undertake to keep members abreast of currently observable astronomical phenomena.

Inevitably, the predilections of individual Recorders (not to mention their spare time) will determine what additional volunteer contributions they may make, for example by leading field trips, writing newsletter items, correspondence with foreign experts, etc.

It is possible that with the further evolution of local professional and/or official institutions, the critical role of the natural history groups may pass, and with it the role of the Recorders, but perhaps it should never be supplanted entirely, since there is a virtue in maintaining user-friendly contacts at



the local level.

Finally, for all DNHG members, what makes a useful record? What, where and when – if not in detail, then at least generally. What makes a fair question to the Recorder? Anything you don't know about the subject but would like to. *Thanks to Chairman Gary Feulner for the foregoing discussion*

## African Emigrant Butterfly

The African Emigrant butterfly was seen in substantial numbers in October in the mountainous area NE of Masafi, after an absence from most of the UAE for some four years during the prolonged turn-of-the-century drought. Numerous pairs were seen courting.

The African Emigrant is a relatively large butterfly, yellowish-white (males) to pale greenish-yellow (females) in colour, with only a few rather pale darker spots in the center of each wing. The outer tips of the front wings are relatively pointed. It is a strong, normally high flier, but at a distance it could possibly be mistaken for a Caper White. At rest, the butterfly hangs beneath the leaves of large shrubs such as oleander or *Dyerophytum*, where it seems to become almost invisible.

In previous years when I have seen this species, it always appeared to be "passing through" an area, moving directionally and determinedly. In the Masafi area, however, many individuals seemed to remain at or around a particular site, at least temporarily, usually in areas of vegetation. Whether this was in order to feed and/or breed, I do not know, although the presence of courting pairs suggests that breeding takes place locally.

The presence of these butterflies, as well as other evidence, suggests that the area NE of Masafi received at least some rain in late summer (the Globe Skimmer dragonfly *Pantala flavescens*, another strong migrant, was also common in these same areas). But it remains in question whether the presence of the African Emigrant was due to the hatching of larvae or the migration of adults from elsewhere into the area, in either case triggered by rain. The larvae of this species are not known to be



# Reports...

drought resistant, which may argue for the latter explanation, i.e., migration into a favorable area.  
*Report by Gary Feulner*

## Mountain Parakeet Caper

In early November Barbara Couldrey was doing one of her favorite short walks above Wadi Haqil (the kiln wadi near RAK) when she passed by a now-famous, large, hanging caper plant (pictured in Wild Flowers of the UAE) and found it in flower and fruit (various stages from green to ripe red).

To her surprise, also perched in the shrub was a large [Ring-Necked?] Parakeet. These parakeets are resident in RAK town, as they are in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, but they are typically found in urban or park environments and they are not known to have been seen within the mountains.

Barbara speculated that the parakeet had been enjoying the ripe fruit, but she was puzzled that it did not fly, even with the close approach of two observers. Instead, she says, it just sat motionless and seemed to roll its eyes. She wondered if intoxication of some form could have been the cause of



this phenomenon.  
*Thanks to Barbara Couldrey for this information*

## Through the Lens ...

Nine years ago I read Marycke Jongbloed's *The Living Desert*. Her experience with the cicada

struck me. How could such a dull creature ever attract a nature photographer's attention? Nature photographers do have preferences, which are probably colour, features, action, and rarity of species. In this case it is the breath-taking transformation and the challenge to photograph that in sequence. My holiday location was at an altitude of 1400 metres above sea level. Kudremukh in the Western Ghats of Southern India, which receives an annual rainfall of 7000 mm. is undoubtedly a paradise for the nature lover. The Silent Valley further south is so named because the Cicada does not exist there. Nevertheless, a safari operator has named his enterprise 'Cicada Trails'!



The Cicada belongs to the family Cicadidae and order Homoptera. The winged-stout-bodied-blunt-headed insect with sucking mouth parts makes a shrilling sound through its abdomen. The sound is apparently to attract females and



deter predators. Eggs hatch into nymphs. The nymphs remain underground for a variable time between one to seventeen years after which they finally emerge and achieve their adult form. A nymph that was probably ready to become an adult was spotted. Sometimes predictions can go wrong in

this exercise, so we simply watched.  
The nymph firmly caught hold of



the twig and what unraveled in front of my eyes was a spectacular phenomenon, which words cannot express. Rather, my pictures attempt to show it. The photo session took nearly three and a half hours to complete!

My two companions on this trip, lovers of nature, photographed the cicada as it emerged. The results were amazing and the technique of using more than one light provided great detail, colour, clarity and sharpness. The macro lens at 300mm focal length provided the right perspective and image size. The entire effort was good team work.

The long session, among the continuous reverberations of a buzzing sound that could get to the nerves of many, was spent discussing the natural bounty of the rain forests, while our eyes, and the camera on its tripod, were fixed on the insect. By mid-night the mission was achieved. The beautiful cicada had emerged successfully and we photographers were in awe.

*Text and photographs by Mohamed Arfan Asif*

## The Blue-Tailed Lizard

The Blue-Tailed Lizard (*Lacerta cyanura*) is a medium to small lizard that is endemic to the mountains of the UAE and Oman. It has, as its name implies, a bright blue tail, but also a bright blue chin and throat. The body colour is normally medium grey-brown but may sometimes show longitudinal



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stripes. The largest adults do not greatly exceed ~16 cm, half of which is the long, thin tail.

I have always considered the Blue-Tailed Lizard to be uncommon and most likely to be found near wadi pools, e.g., in Wadi Wurayah or Wadi Deftah. However, I saw them on six consecutive weekend outings in October and early November 2003, all in areas N of Masafi but otherwise widespread, including Wadi Wurayah, the Tayyibah area, the Maidaq area and a tributary of Wadi Bih in the Ru'us al-Jibal. Moreover, on four outings I have had multiple sightings.

In the Wadi Bih instance, the habitat was atypical - among very large boulders in a steep watercourse. There I surprised a pair among flotsam atop a boulder in a

crack, and later saw another lone individual. Near Maidaq, as I sat quietly at a temporary pool, a Blue-Tailed Lizard emerged from a crack and cautiously came to drink not more than 2 meters from me. Apparently it is not common for arid region reptiles to drink, but Dr. Reza Khan has previously reported drinking by the Blue-Tailed Lizard.

—BIRD—  
-REPORTS-



Please send your Bird Reports  
to  
David Snelling

Why this sudden abundance of Blue-Tailed Lizards? Why, indeed? All of the areas in question are known or suspected to have

benefited from heavy summer showers. Were these sufficient to enliven a dormant population? Or is the Blue-Tailed Lizard one of the many desert specialists that are able to reproduce very rapidly and in large numbers when conditions are favourable. But if the latter is the case, then they must also mature very rapidly, too, since all of the individuals I saw appeared to be adults.

*Report by Gary Feulner*

Peter Hellyer reports in *Twitchers' Guide*, "On 3<sup>rd</sup> November, a wander around the south-western corner of Dubai found a blue-throat, a great reed warbler and a desert warbler in a small (dead) test garden 5 km. out on the Palm island spit. A purple heron was coming in off the sea at Ra's Hisyan, in the Jebel Ali Conservation Area, where two Terek sandpipers, 70

## Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- 07 Dec Desert Conservation in the African Sahel - John Newby
- 11 Jan '04 The Hajar Mountains and Their Plate Tectonic Evolution – Dr Kenneth Glennie  
[Note: Our January lecture will be held at a venue to be announced]
- 08 Feb The World of Julfar – Christian Velde

**Field Trips** (DNHG members only, please).

- 21 Nov Hajar Mountains Natural History Walk with Gary Feulner
- 25–27 Nov Turtle Watching at 'Eid, viewing overnight 26-27
- 12 Dec Birdwatching and Bullpushing at Kalba
- 24– 27 Dec Festive Season visit to Saiq Plateau (hiking and touring) with Gary Feulner