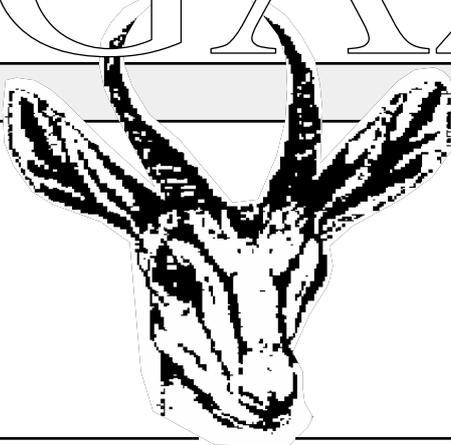


GAZELLE

Vol 19 no 11 – November 2004



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

DNHG Membership Renewals

In Memorium: Sheikh Zayed

The DNHG joins the nation in mourning the death of the President of the UAE and Ruler of Abu Dhabi, H.H. Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. In addition to his many accomplishments on the local, regional and international stage, Sheikh Zayed was well known for his love and respect for the natural environment, and for his efforts to preserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the UAE. This attention, and his charitable contributions to conservation efforts worldwide, were recognized by various international awards, including, among others, from the WWF and the Linnean Society of London.

Andrew and Carol Hornsby have written to let us know that they will be returning to the UK in December and to recall DNHG field trips as a very happy and memorable part of their UAE years. We wish them well in their home outside London, where they plan to stay in touch.

The DNHG Library is the recipient of a number of books on the natural history and culture of the Sultanate of Oman, a donation from the late **Rosemary Leila**.

Rare bird and butterflies...

Dr.Reza Khan, head of the Dubai Zoo, recently sighted a rare white stork on the Dubai - Al Ain highway according to a report in the Gulf News. It was spotted on top of a lamp post near Al Faqa in the Abu Dhabi Emirate.



On a recent field trip, **Richard and Cathy Morris**, relatively new to Dubai but old hands in the 'Asir region of Saudi Arabia, remarked casually that they had been surprised on a September visit to the beach by a migration of Little Blue butterflies from offshore. Instead of thanks, they got a Chairman's lecture on how little is known about such phenomena (and others) and how important it is to report and describe these observations. They have promised more details, which are eagerly awaited.

The current DNHG membership year runs from September 2004 to September 2005. Thanks to our many members who have already renewed promptly. 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. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.)

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 and contributions:

Sandy Fowler
Richard Dennis
Mohammed Arfan Asif
Gary Feulner



Field Trips etc ...

Jabbeeb Camels and Iron Age Trip

Friday 26 November

This half-day trip is planned to include camels, dunes, bugs and an Iron Age site. Just about an hour from Dubai towards Al-Ain, we will head off the main highway and go through the camel farm area near Jabbeeb. We will have a short look at the camel camps and then go on to some low dunes to examine the insect life and animal tracks. Transiting over a few additional easy dunes will allow us to examine a couple of Iron Age pottery scatter sites first discovered by Brien Holmes of Al-Ain, who will be on hand to guide us. 4WD is necessary (a shovel and tow rope should be standard equipment) and numbers will be limited. Non-4WD'ers may be able to fill empty seats. For sign-up and meeting time and place, contact Vice Chairman Valerie Chalmers (see pp. 5 or 7 for contact details).

Jebel Qatar Hike

Friday 10 December

Gary Feulner will lead this full-day outing to the steep-sided plateau of Jebel Qatar, overlooking Fossil Valley. This trip is suitable for regular hikers or fit and energetic novices. The ascent to the plateau is some 300 meters, with additional ups and downs as we explore on top. Trails are poor or non-existent and the ground is typically rough and uneven. Views are generally excellent and exhilarating, but plant and animal life enroute will likely be limited by the continuing drought.

Schedule: Depart Dubai ~7am. Estimated return to Dubai by 7pm. What to bring? Minimum 3 litres of water (plus a 4th in the car), boots or very sturdy shoes, hat and/or sunscreen, lightweight clothing, daypack, lunch, camera, binoculars. Limit 12 people. Contact Gary for sign-up, meeting place or further info at 330-3600 (ofc), 306-5570 (home) or grfeulner@shuaacapital.com.

Field Trip Schedule for 2004-2005

The DNHG Committee has tried to sketch out a basic program of field trips for the coming season. For planning purposes, this is set out below. Some dates are tentative and subject to confirmation. Full details will be provided nearer the respective dates. The Committee will also be trying to draw on member expertise to schedule additional trips.

- Nov 26 Jabbeeb Iron Age Site (details in this newsletter)
- Dec 2-3 [National Day weekend]
- Dec 10 Jebel Qatar hike (details in this newsletter)
- Dec 9 Bastakia Windtower walk
- Jan 13-14 ['Eid Al-Adha weekend]
- Jan 20 Falcon Hospital / Saluki Breeding Centre
- Jan 28 Hajar Mountain hike
- Feb __ Jebel Akhdar rim walk
- Feb __ Wadi Dhahr falaj and bats
- Feb __ Wadi Bih
- Mar 3-4 Inter-Emirates Weekend (site TBA)
- Mar 18 East Coast dhow trip
- Mar 30- Apr 1 Roses on the Saiq Plateau

Bastakia Windtower walk with Jean Allen Thursday 9 December

Jean Allen will lead a morning trip through the Bastakia area of Bur Dubai. The trip will start at 9.45 am from the Majlis Gallery near the Al Fahidi round-about and will last 3 to 4 hours. Wear comfortable walking shoes, bring a bottle of water, hat and dirham coins for the parking meter. If at all possible Jean will take you into one of the houses still occupied by a local Emirati family. Attendance is limited to 10 people. Sign-up with pvana@emirates.net.ae. |

For Dubai residents looking for a change, it is useful to keep in mind that Abu Dhabi based twitchers visit the Al-Wathba fodder fields most weekend mornings, and are normally happy to have additional pairs of eyes along. Contact Simon Aspinall if you want to join.

Our Next Speaker

Wolf Hilbertz has been involved professionally in the UAE and elsewhere in the propagation of artificial reefs, including the use of innovative technologies. His presentation will consist of a lecture and a video program produced for television broadcast.





Hajar Mountain Camping Trip

On Thursday afternoon in early November, 14 brave naturalists set out from Madam on an action-packed expedition into the Hajar Mountains. After a brief introduction to the principles of convoy driving, the party set off to their first destination, a huge collection of fossils nestling at the base of the mountains, not far from Shwaib reservoir, a site nicknamed "Gastropod Gulch" by the late Rosemary Leila. After a short drive over some very bumpy terrain, we arrived at a wall of many thousands of fossilised molluscs. Fortunately, Valerie Chalmers was on hand to identify the bulk of these as (1) gastropods of the genus *Acteonella*, which are occasionally referred to as "dinosaur eggs," and (2) rudists, roughly conical, asymmetrical bivalves which seemed to resemble modern day wheelie-bins (but much smaller). It was reassuring to note that the fossil site, although increasingly "known," still seemed relatively unspoiled by human interference.

It was a first visit to the site for Chairman Gary Feulner, who rated it highly, both for the abundant and photogenic fossil outcrops (including a nearly 2-meter thick bed of rudists) and for the dramatic geologic history it revealed. Gravel beds and soil horizons had formed on what must have been emergent islands of the underlying ophiolite rocks, before they were covered by the shallow sea in which the fossils were deposited. The fossils themselves littered the slopes, weathering out from the massive source beds.

The next destination was an attractive calciferous stream, located part way along a recently metalled road. This had a number of notable features. It seems to flow throughout the year, despite the recent dry years and, owing to a very high mineral content has created an interesting terracing effect (earning it the nickname of the "Wedding Cake") due to the precipitation of calcite deposits called travertine. This is due to the very high alkalinity

of the stream water when it first emerges after percolating slowly through the ophiolite rocks. It is, however, quickly neutralized by reaction with carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and not far downstream we managed to identify various life forms in the water, including algae, numerous water-boatmen, dragonfly larvae and, in isolated pools, thriving populations of "Garra" fish (*Garra barreimiae*), the small, dark fish found in many mountain wadis. Despite fears of their demise, these fish have managed to hang on at this site throughout the drought of the past few years, although in just a few small pools. It is difficult to imagine how they can find enough food. Gary Feulner believes that they survive principally on algae deposits that form on the rocks, but he was unable to totally refute an interesting theory, from Richard, that the fish survive by eating their own faeces.

In late afternoon we joined Mike Lorrigan (whose car was in the process of breaking down) at the "Donkey-Fox Wadi" campsite. This was a rocky plain overlooking a deep wadi. The highlight of the evening began surprisingly early, at about 7 pm while most of the camping group was still feeding. Mike was testing out his ultra high-powered spotlights when he caught a glimpse of a pair of eyes glinting in the distance, not far from Gary's tent. Following urgent calls of "There it is! I think we've got one!" it was quickly established that the movement in the wadi was not related to our esteemed Chairman at all, but was in fact our first sighting of a desert fox. These are the same species as the European red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) but are generally pale silver-brown colour, albeit with the characteristic white tail tip. They had no doubt been attracted by the tempting smells of chicken gizzards and "Pedigree Chum" that Richard Dennis had skillfully deposited at the base of the wadi a few hours earlier.

Throughout the night we were able to see at least three individual foxes

approach and eat the food. As the night drew on the foxes seemed to become increasingly brave and we were able to watch them inspecting and eating the "bait," despite the attention from the spotlight. They clearly had a preference for the beef sausages that someone had kindly thrown over the cliff, and only seemed to want to eat the expensive dog food when all other options had been exhausted! Our attempts at identifying individual foxes from their size and markings were fairly unsuccessful, and only one fox at a time was seen actually at the food. But, judging by the varying degrees of bravery shown by the foxes and the observation that they seemed to be carrying the food in their mouths, rather than eating it immediately, it seems likely that we had located a family of at least two adults and possibly some cubs that stayed in the distance.

Another interesting natural observation that evening was the apparent discovery of a camel spider. Unfortunately no evidence of this encounter survived for later inspection.

Friday morning saw a fairly leisurely start. The hike commenced with a look at fox prints and donkey droppings, which were noted in abundance throughout the walk. The vegetation was dry, dry, dry, reflecting the sixth year of relative drought, but a few shallow puddles in bedrock indicated a brief shower in the past couple of weeks, and mosquito larvae had taken advantage of these. The Chairman noted that, in default of other opportunities, the few butterflies about were centered on the minuscule yellow flowers of the gray-green *Chrozophora oblongifolia*.

Our hiking route was an imaginative one, pioneered with loving care by Mike and Richard, that took us over, under around and through various wadis and passes in the vicinity of "Donkey Fox Wadi". At least two feral donkeys were spotted in the wadi and these proceeded to stay a few hundred meters ahead of us for over an hour.



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.

ters ahead of us for over an hour. Early on in the walk, close to what we thought was a goat skull, Tracey Giles was excited to discover some glistening rock that seemed to resemble gold! Gary Feulner, in his capacity as resident geologist, reassured us all that it was no more than a common mineral deposit (bastite, a form of serpentine that has broad reflecting surfaces similar to pyrite), but not before he had tried to pocket the "not very special mineral" for later investigation.

Another highlight was to see a grove of the dwarf palm *Nannorhops ritchieana* in late fruit, decorated by stalks full of round red "berries." This plant is rarely seen in fruit, and the observation seconds other reports that it may fruit in the autumn as well as the spring.

Although it is already November, temperatures were in the mid-30s (centigrade) and towards midday the group was often spotted resting in a line in the narrow shade afforded by steep cliffs. Only the younger members of the Morris clan seemed immune to the heat, with energy to spare, as they ran uphill and down. Oh, to be 13 again! Everyone, however, had followed injunctions to bring plenty of water, and Mike and Richard even had rehydration salts on hand, just in case. The hikers returned safely to their vehicles by about 2:30 pm and the party dispersed. Some of the more adventurous of the group then decided to cool off at Hatta pools, which were joyously refreshing and well worth the drive! Everyone seemed to enjoy the trip, despite the heat, and Mike and Richard intend to repeat the expedition in January. Report by Richard Dennis and Gary Feulner

Natural History at the "Top of the World"

Gary Feulner vacationed in October in the Mt. Everest region of Nepal (apparently vying with Dr. Sandy Fowler to see who can go the highest this winter). Gary offers the following natural history observations, with particular reference to our experience of the Arabian Gulf:

"Nepal is a country of great diversity, from jungles to the world's highest peaks. The capital city of Kathmandu, the gateway for most visitors is sprawling and still subtropical at 4,000 feet, and is home to many bird species typical of cities and towns all around the Indian Ocean margin: House Crow, Common Mynah, House Sparrow, and Red-Vented Bulbul. New to me, however, was the Black Kite (also called the Pariah Kite) which was a common sight soaring over many areas of the city.

"The Everest region (Solo-Khumbu) is very different from the Arabian perspective. In that area the tree line is at 13,000-14,000 feet and there is permanent snow above 17,000-18,000 feet. Today, in the trekking era, permanent settlements have been established in areas above 16,000 feet, whereas traditional agricultural settlements were limited to areas below 14,000 feet.

"For the most part, the vegetation is unfamiliar. Mid-elevation forests of oak, maple, pine and birch give way to higher elevation forests of Himalayan fir, with distinctive purple-blue cones. Everywhere, there are rhododendrons – 26 species of them (the Himalayas are the center of rhododendron biological radiation) – from thickets of tree-size rhododendrons and large shrubs at medium elevations to hillsides of dwarf rhododendrons above the tree line. Many of the latter are used locally as an ingredient in incense. The highest growing species, with somewhat reddish leaves, is called (appropriately enough) the snow rhododendron. The red pigment in this and other plants is an adaptation to protect against UV light at high elevation. A number of com-

mon species had bright red leaves, and both roses and berberies added particular color to the landscape.

"Even in Solo-Khumbu, there are Arabian affinities in the natural world. The most dramatic reminder is the Himalayan tahr. I saw fine examples of this closest relative of our endangered Arabian tahr, the Himalayan variety being somewhat larger and more shaggy. A high altitude plant was immediately identifiable to me as a species of the primitive genus *Ephedra*, akin to *Ephedra pachyclada* of the Hajar Mountains, Baluchistan and northern Pakistan. In fruit, the Everest variety (*E. gerardiana*) has bright red fruits.

"Dry stone houses, shelters and field walls, set above or adjacent to seasonally dry or reduced streambeds, bore a disconcerting resemblance to similar structures in the mountains of the Ru'us al-Jibal (Musandam Peninsula). This emphasized the basic constraints of dry stone construction methods, but also gave some insight into what life might have been like in the mountains of eastern Arabia in earlier, wetter times.

"Another familiar but disconcerting touch was a single Hoopoe – today a common but very distinctive sight on Dubai's many manicured lawns – in a field where we were camped at 13,500 feet. Our Sherpa guide explained to me that, locally, people who tend to do things backwards are called 'Hoopoes' because this bird is known to migrate to high elevations in the winter, and return to lower valleys in the summer.

"The high mountain environment is an extreme one, not rich either in abundance or diversity of species. Thus we saw relatively little animal life overall. In particular, traveling after the summer monsoon, we saw almost no insects other than grasshoppers and flies. However, we did see examples of the most common ungulates (Himalayan tahr, musk deer, and serow) as well as a few pikas (a rabbit relative) and a mar-



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Insects - Gary Feulner

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Plants - Valerie Chalmers

Mammals - **Recorder needed**

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.

ten. And of course we traveled with yaks, now virtually all domesticated, which below about 9,000 feet are cross-bred with cattle to produce a sterile beast of burden called a *dzo*.

"In the mountains I scored 25 new bird species. Avian highlights were a superb Lammergier (Bearded Vulture) flying low overhead at 17,000 feet and a flock of two dozen Tibetan Snowcocks clucking and browsing their way through our camp at 17,300 feet ("Gary, quick, look out of your tent! There's a flock of chickens in the yard!"). A chef in our group thought they looked quite succulent, but our Sherpa guide advised that they were considered sacred and were not hunted. My highest altitude bird record was of an Alpine Accentor, a dark cinnamon coloured bird that resembles a plump sparrow. A couple of these greeted us at the summit of Kala Patar (18,400 feet), a popular viewpoint for Mt. Everest. This was also the bird that proved the most difficult for me to identify confidently from the available guidebooks. Accentors are a group of birds related to sparrows and buntings that are poorly represented in eastern Arabia (by the occasional Radde's Accentor) but there are six species that occur in the Himalayas, most at higher elevations.

"It was also interesting to observe the succession of 'black birds' with elevation, from the House Crow in Kathmandu to the Jungle (or Large-Billed) Crow in alpine forests to Red-Billed and Yellow-Billed Choughs above the tree line. Reportedly, Ravens can be found at still higher elevations, particularly attracted to the camps of mountaineering parties. It is said that they can dismantle a tent in short order."

Report by Gary Feulner

Shelling field trip report

17 members turned up for the mini-field trip to Sheikh's beach, and although the tide had already turned, a reasonable number of shells were still collectable on the lower tide line. The restraints of Ramadan ended the trip by 1130 hrs with members checking out the higher lines of shells, but at least 50 separate species had been collected in that time. No new species were identified, but the message of "small is beautiful" got home for sure. The magnifying glass was in constant demand and more than once evoked responses of "wow" and, "oh, it's beautiful".

With the hand lens, the fine struc-



ture of *Divalinga arabica* above was admired by some, and *Timoclea arakana* below by others.

Several sharp-eyed members also managed to find specimens of the



diminutive *Parvicardium sueziense*, and were equally delighted by the appearance under magnification.





Field Clips...



any members are still struggling with the identification of their shells from this trip, I'll be pleased to help them out, if I can, at any time. Call me at home (04-3442243) and we'll arrange a get-together.

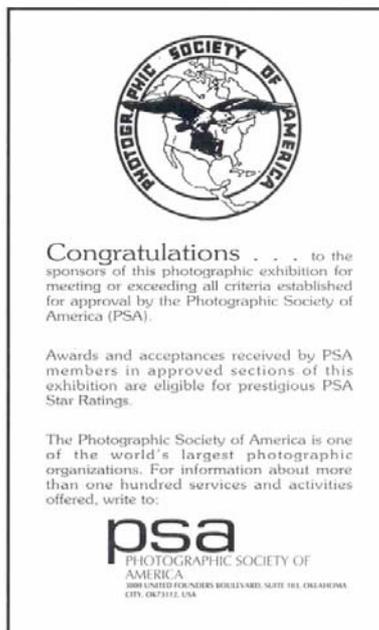
Report by Sandy Fowler

Thru the Lens

Nature Photography is a specialised field on its own. We have those exemplary photographers out in the wild capturing unbelievable vistas of our earth for magazines like BBC Wildlife, Outdoor Photographer, National Geographic, etc. However, for amateurs the best place to exhibit nature works is the Photographic Salon (Exhibition/Competition). Salons are regularly organised all over the world throughout the year and some of them are recognized by world photographic bodies like Fédération Internationale de L'Art Photographique (FIAP) and the Photographic Society of America (PSA).



By participating in these salons, your nature photographs are judged by experts and if accepted you reach out to a larger global audience. The photographs are returned with acceptance labels and salon catalogue. The catalogue is itself an education with some having all the accepted ones published and some only with the prize winners. It indeed provides a fair perspective of the styles and approach adopted by photographers of different backgrounds and cultures.



An award is definitely an encouragement. An acceptance makes you feel satisfied that you have successfully communicated to a wider world out there. Rejection however need not be the end of the road for a photograph. Judging photography is very subjective and may not be constant. A 'Nature Print' has to be minimum 10 x 12 inches and a 'Nature Slide' is generally of 35mm format with cardboard or plastic mounts (Avoid glass mounts). Participating in salons is not economical these days with \$10 being average entry fee per section. Added to this is the phenomenal increase in postal charges.

The major International Nature photographic event is undoubtedly the BG Wildlife photography contest

organized by BBC Wildlife magazine and The Natural History Museum. Two years ago we had the fortune to see the prize winners at the Wafi Mall here. The Austrian Super Circuit www.supercircuit.at is also a big one.

You can obtain all the information about the salons and even download the entry forms from the links provided in the PSA and FIAP websites.

Some of the forthcoming salons in the UK having Nature category are: www.southamptoncameraclub.co.uk; www.bonaccordcameraclub.co.uk; welshinternationalosalon.co.uk; www.scottish-photographic-federation-salon.org; www.ncpf.co.uk.

Definitely the salon is the most appropriate avenue to showcase your eye for nature.

Report by Arfan Asif

Birds of the Rub' Al-Khali

We have received for the DNHG Library an 80-page report entitled The Birds of the Rub Al-Khali Periphery, which compiles the results of six ornithological surveys undertaken from 1995 to 1997 for the Atlas of Breeding Birds of Arabia (Surveys nos. 17-22), covering parts of Saudi Arabia, Oman, Yemen and the UAE. The report includes not only information about the bird species present (and their numbers), but also basic habitat descriptions.

Oldest Archaeological Site in the UAE

The Abu Dhabi Islands Archeological Survey (ADIAS) has recently received some exciting news. Two charcoal samples from the initial occupation horizon at site MR11 on Marawah island have been successfully radiocarbon dated to around 7600 years BP. This makes the site the oldest confirmed archaeological site in the United Arab Emirates. The samples were AMS radiocarbon dated by the Scottish Universities Environmental Re-



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search Centre at Glasgow University.

The MR11 site is not only the earliest known site in the United Arab Emirates, it also has the best-preserved and most sophisticated buildings of Neolithic date that have so far been discovered anywhere in Eastern Arabia (see ADIAS May 2004 *Occasional Newsletter*). Among finds discovered this spring at the site were a human skeleton, the earliest inhabitant of Abu Dhabi so far discovered, as well as the most complete Neolithic pottery vessel ever found in the UAE. Reprinted from ADIAS *Occasional Newsletter* – November 2004

Snail Call

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

formed 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.



Camera Traps

The ENHG in Al-Ain has been experimenting with some new motion-triggered cameras, which they have tried out in the area of Jebel Qatar. They recorded some 50 "events" and got several good photos of Blanford's fox – the only species to appear, however. They plan to try again in the desert for lizards, jerboas, etc. They have kindly offered to let DNHG members try them out if anyone is interested. The cameras said to be easy to set up.

UAE Archeology Website

Members interested in local and regional archeology may want to visit the website of the Abu Dhabi Islands Archeological Survey (ADIAS) at www.adias-uae.com. The site contains lots of information not readily accessible elsewhere.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

Dec 5 Artificial Coral Reefs – Wolf Hilbertz

Jan 9 Jebel Akhdar: Natural History and Conservation Initiatives – Prof. Reginald Victor

Field Trips (Members only, please. Details inside.)

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