

GAZELLE

Vol 20 no 4 – April 2005



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

DNHG Membership Renewals

Well done!

Congratulations are in order for three of our members honoured at Inter-Emirates Weekend in March. **Dr. Sandy Fowler**, long a member of the DNHG Committee, received the annual Bish Brown award, in recognition of his efforts on behalf of natural history education, appreciation and study generally, and in particular for his seashell collection, database and his "Rough Sheller's Guide to the UAE."



Sandy in typical pose

Another winner was **Steve Raynor**, who won the natural history identification quiz set out by Drew Gardner. This consisted of 26 natural or archeological objects or phenomena. Steve led the field with correct IDs of 15 items, ranging from nummulites to musket balls to gypsum crystals to a stone tobacco pipe. Steve graciously (and diplomatically) shared the credit with wife

Johanna. Steve was also a member of the winning quiz team.

Mohammed Arfan Asif, our "Thru the Lens" columnist, took first prize (fittingly enough) in the IEW photo competition. His winning entry was a close-up of a kingfisher with a freshly caught fish in its beak.



One of Mohammed Arfan Asif's lovely photographs, which, from next month on, you can see in colour if you choose e-Gazelle (see notice page 2)

* * *

Coming in our May issue: Reports on the trip to the roses of the Saiq Plateau, Part 1 of John Fox on Julphar & Kush, and the secrets of 'digiscoping'.

The current DNHG membership year runs from September 2004 to September 2005. 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:

MaryAnne Pardoe
Jo Raynor
Prof. Lawrence Woods
Valerie Chalmers
Mohammed Arfan Asif
Gary Feulner



Something Different...

Early Morning Desert Walk
Thursday April 28 and
Friday May 6

Jo Raynor is planning a wander in the sand at 6.30 am, in the dunes near Margham. You will have time to take a close look at the flora and fauna of the dunes. Meeting details will be given closer to the date, but note the early start time. Bring water and a sunhat, your camera and any books you might have for identifying what you find. The trip will be 1 - 2 hours and a four wheel drive is not necessary.

Two Forts and a Fight
Friday May 20

Peter Jackson will lead a trip to the east coast to look at the current restoration work to the houses and Fort at Old Fujairah, followed by a display of Bull-Pushing at 4.00pm. It is also planned to visit Fort Hayl in Wadi Hayl on the way. If interested please contact Peter Jackson at pj.architect@gmail.com Details will be circulated by email closer to the time, when arrangements have been finalised with Fujairah Museum

Spoon Worm and Coastal Ecology Walk
Date TBA

Now there's a tease. Not a shred of information available, so get in fast when it is.

End-of-Season Dinner and Photo Competition
Jun 9

This is always a popular event and gives you a chance to challenge Arfan Asif and Gary Feulner. Go for it! Details of the photographic competition will appear in the May *Gazelle*, but start clicking and studying now!



ENHG Lectures:

03 May Brien Holmes: Topic to be announced

17 May Sandy Fowler: Sea Shells and Man

07 June Brigitte Haworth: Insects of Wadi Tarabat

And now... E-Gazelle !

This month you can request the DNHG's monthly newsletter, the *Gazelle*, by e-mail. If you think you would prefer this, please e-mail Peter van Amsterdam and ask for your April copy to verify that the system works for you.

Once we are sure that e-mail delivery works reliably, we will offer members the opportunity to elect to receive the *Gazelle* by mail or by e-mail. This is quick and easy for you (and you see the photographs in colour) and could save us a small but significant amount in annual postage. We will circulate a request in due course, for this purpose.

The e-mail initiative should also address the recent complaints of some members (especially at AUS) that they have not been receiving their newsletters in a timely manner (or, indeed, at all).

This advance required us to master the technology to convert the *Gazelle* (which is prepared in Publisher) to a pdf format that can be viewed conveniently on most computer systems and also downloaded in a reasonable amount of time by members without broadband service. The initiative was undertaken by publisher Peter van Amsterdam and benefited greatly from advice and prodding by Committee members Pradeep Radhakrishna, Peter Jackson and Sandhya Prakash.

Book Review

Phoenix No. 21

The latest annual *Phoenix* has reached us, compiled and distributed by ABBA (Atlas of Breeding Birds of Arabia). This issue reports on new breeding records for Arabia (the Woodchat Shrike and the

Pheasant-Tailed Jacana and, as always, briefly reviews a number of other publications about Arabian natural history in general.

Of particular interest to Dubai residents is the call for detailed breeding reports for the Southern Red Bishop (*Euplectes orix*), an African exotic that has maintained a presence in Dubai for some fifteen years, principally at Safa Park and the Dubai Fish Farm - apparently surviving numerous prunings of the vegetation at both sites. In their native environment in southern Africa they nest in small groups or colonies in reedbeds. The nest is also constructed of reeds and is egg-shaped with a side entrance.

Other UAE contributions include David Diskin on "The Breeding Birds of Al Warsen Lake" (i.e., Wimpey Pits), Simon Aspinall on "The Mysterious Status of the Gulf Pallid Swift," and Colin Richardson on "The White Tailed Plover - Now an Established Resident in the UAE."

Our own Mohammed Arfan Asif contributed a marvelous photo of an adult Red-Wattled Plover cooling its speckled eggs with its wet breast feathers.

Our Next Speaker

John Hoolihan is a longtime resident of Abu Dhabi and is a fisheries scientist with ERWDA there. His interest in fish extends to the past, as well as the present and the future. He is one of the few people who can distinguish many of the fossil shark teeth that are found in the UAE.

John has a particular interest in sailfish which are one of the most important fish for the recreational fishing sector of the UAE tourist industry. Many people travel here each year from Europe and elsewhere specifically to catch, tag and release sailfish, and a good deal of research has been done on them in Abu Dhabi. John will speak on the biology of the Arabian Gulf Sailfish.



Inter-Emirates Weekend

If you think IEW is just a social occasion, think again. It's that, too, of course, but this year's IEW, hosted by the Abu Dhabi ENHG, had something for everybody, even the most experienced and well-traveled members.

Chairman Gary Feulner counted the following "firsts": Miocene elephant tracks; a very large colony of rare spoonworms; two new intertidal molluscs living under fasht or beachrock; a visible layer of endolithic algae, living just under the surface of the rock (and "grazed" by some of the intertidal mollusc species, which erode the rock as they feed); a pair of the sabkha gecko *Stenodactylus khobarensis*, with its distinctive raised nostrils; and a new butterfly (albeit pinned in a glass case by Al-Ain ENHG members), the African Cupid, found in bean fields along the mountain front in the Mahdhah area. All this, plus the astonishing development that has taken place along the low lying coast of Abu Dhabi emirate between Taweelah and Abu Dhabi airport in the past decade.

Following are some further reports on IEW field trips:

Birdwatching at Al Wathba Wildlife Sanctuary

Established in 1998 as the first legally recognised sanctuary in the Abu Dhabi emirate, the sanctuary covers five square kilometres and includes natural and semi-natural habitats split into three lakes. The first lake is fed by the cleaned water from the sewage plant. This runs into a brackish lake and finally into the furthest lake which is saline, fed by run off water from local farm irrigation. The area supports more than 250 species of birds, more than half of the species found in the UAE, along with 10 species of mammals, 13 species of reptiles and 40 species of plants. Several of the non-migratory species resident here include Black Winged Stilts, Bulbuls, Sun Birds and Reed Warblers. The sanctuary is ideally situated between Europe and the fur-

ther destinations of migratory birds and provides a vital resting spot for these species.

John Newby, the director of the sanctuary, explained that their 5 year plan included environmental education, select tourism for bird watchers and naturalists, and ecological research. A visitor centre is anticipated within the next year. Water quality is monitored automatically at five sites around the sanctuary. This equipment is solar powered and downloads information on temperature, pH and water levels directly onto a computer. Changes in pH and temperature can affect the population of Brine Shrimp which are the main food source for Flamingos. One of the few tasks where external control is necessary is the cutting back of reed growth in the less saline areas. Left to their own devices the reeds would quickly encroach into the lakes. Reeds can be used for animal fodder or the manufacture of charcoal tablets, baskets or barasti fencing.

Although this environment is on the fringes of suitability for Flamingos, attempts have been made since 1993 to encourage these majestic birds to breed. Flooding has caused the greatest problems as the birds nest only a few centimetres above the water level and nests can get washed away. To prevent this, raised islands have recently been created and 30 to 40 flamingo pairs attempted to breed this year. Unfortunately the heavier rain resulted in eggs floating in the lake. The next step appears to be the construction of a sluice gate to give accurate control of water levels. In spite of all the problems, flamingos did manage to breed a few years ago.

Over 150 pairs of Kentish Plover are breeding at Al Wathba and these are being studied by researchers from Bath University UK. Either one of the parent birds care for the eggs and young, or alternatively both, or neither. Researchers hope to determine what influences this parental behaviour. So far it appears that older birds are more responsible!

While touring the area we saw the Desert Hyacinth in full flower. This parasitic plant is pollinated by insects and dies off several times each year. We were also fortunate to see a Spiny Tailed Lizard. About 50cm long, this large lizard lives in groups of 2-3 and hibernates in winter, closing off the entrance to its burrow so that it appears uninhabited. There is a population of 12 – 15 on the site.

We extend our sincere thanks to John Newby and his colleagues for this trip. I have a copy of the bird list for the area which John Newby has kindly authorised for private use. Please e-mail me if you would like a copy. *Report by MaryAnne Pardoe*

Miocene 'Elephant' Trackway

Having had my interest whetted by a report in Trib.13.2 and a previous speaker about the presence of this site, where tracks of Miocene era (8 - 6 million years ago) 'elephants' are clearly visible I jumped at the chance of trip when it came up on the recent IE weekend. However such opportunities have their cost and first we were subject to a long drive. Any return visits are sure to include overnight plans! We started the site visit with a visit to a prominent outlier which very conveniently showed the subsequent layering of sediments after the footprints were laid down. This has helped those examining the site in establishing the age of the prints. Those less geologically minded also noted the presence of fox scat and owl pellets and droppings. The footprints nearby were clearly visible in the hardened calcareous mudstone of the oval shaped plain, and the measurements quoted by Will Higgs regarding the size of the animals - more correctly Proboscidean rather than Elephant - became more believable as we checked out the paces. Not just one but a number of tracks are visible. We soon spread out, examining, measuring, photographing and discussing with increasing complexity. A few members dispersed to examine the mammal, bird lizard and plant life of the shifting sand area around the



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

plain. Abundant fossilised ostrich eggs were also a feature of this site. After a scattered late lunch break, we moved on to a fossil bed towards the coast which provided material to augment a ADIAS display of late Miocene fossils found in the Western Abu Dhabi area. Unfortunately time was short but we did unearth a few specimens. Among them a crocodile tooth and back plate, catfish skull, and bone pieces from large mammals. I was excited to find a foot bone from the three-toed horse-ancestor (whose name I cannot decipher from my notes). A weary bunch of travelers returned late to the Hotel to soak way the dust. Thanks to the trip leaders and experts for this chance to learn on the field! *Report by Jo Raynor*

Trip to Futaisi Island

About 40 members set out early for Futaisi island on the Friday morning. Our first stop once on the island was to see the well-preserved water-collecting cistern in the garden. Only run-off water was channelled into it. It is at least Late Islamic.

We then looked for spiny-tailed lizards (Dhubs). One was spotted starting to emerge from his burrow and, on seeing people approaching, momentarily got stuck trying to re-enter his hole! Ospreys were seen circling above and their nest was spotted. We also stopped to examine pottery shards.

After this the group split into two – a birding group and a plants/mangrove group. Allestree led the latter group (including myself) which headed off towards the fort. Several sand gazelle were seen grazing not far from us.

Three types of salt bush form part of the dominant vegetation and these are *Arthrocnemum macrostachyum*, *Halocnemum strobilaceum* and *Halopeplis perfoliata* (Glass Beads). *Zygophyllum simplex* and one or two specimens of *Lotononis platycarpa* and *Arnebia hispidissima* were also seen in bloom. On arrival at the mangroves which unfortunately were not in bloom, some members waded into the intertidal mud to look for spoon worms which had been seen before on Futaisi Island. As soon as someone excitedly yelled spoon worm, most of us waded into the mud to have a look at them! This unusual creature forms very distinct mounds in the intertidal mud and pokes out its long slimy tongue (proboscis) to search for food. It filter feeds and the particles of food can be seen moving along the tongue. It can extend its tongue for up to one metre and then it suddenly retracts it quickly back into the hole, once it has had enough!



Spoonworm feeding

Several spoon worms were seen in action. We will all look forward to seeing the body of the creature when Dr Dick Hornby, who is the expert on spoon worms, is able to dig one out. The group then made their way back to the reception area, stopping at the cemetery where Allestree and I looked for more plants. Unfortunately most of

the annuals seen were not well advanced and very small, making identification not so easy. *Report by Valerie Chalmers*

Spoon Worms at Ras Hanjurah

Dr. Richard Hornby of Abu Dhabi showed off this site with a very large population of the spoon worm *Ikeda cf. taenioides*, a little-known organism still known locally only by its long, thin proboscis (actually, a prostomium), looking much like a flat shoelace, which it extends to feed over the mud in shallowest water on the rising and falling tide. A Japanese expert will visit in the autumn to see his first live examples. In the meantime, Dick hopes to be able to extract and inspect a whole animal, which lives buried in the coarse, shelly debris that underlies the surface mud.

Apart from the chance to get their feet wet, this trip gave participants the chance to see a young mangrove forest (complete with the mangrove tree snail *Littoraria intermedia*); the enigmatic circular depressions made by feeding flamingos (which look like the impressions of so many car tyres); the large but mostly monospecific gastropod populations of the soft mud flats (*Potamides conicus* grading seawards to *Cerithidea cingulata*); and the various life forms that inhabit the scattered outcrops of beach rock or fasht (including endolithic algae that grows just beneath the surface of the porous rock and the small gastropods that feed on it and erode pockmarks in the rock, particularly the easily overlooked *Echinolittorina arabica*, formerly *Nodilittorina arabica*). The latter is one of the few intertidal gastropods that can tolerate the heat of exposed rock surfaces in the Arabian summer. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Death of a Dumpsite Part 2

Continuing Larry's report: By the second afternoon, we were ready to get "down and dirty" and to make the much anticipated site visit. An



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

Reptiles - Dr Reza Khan
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Archaeology - Prof. John Fox
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Seashells - Sandy Fowler
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Fossils - Valerie Chalmers
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vmc@latifaschool.co.ae

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.

EET spokesperson took us through the contents and scale of the landfill and project area, stressing that the company had been given a tight eighteen months timeline – the viability of which was frequently questioned during the conference - to clean an area equivalent to one-third of the entire unusually flat and unusually large landfill. Construction for a new highway cutting across the landfill and running alongside the sector they were remediating would begin in three months, hopefully using clean back-fill generated by the project.



Sorting machines had begun work on-site in September 2004 and 157 EET employees were now actively engaged as excavation, sorting plant, and engineering support staff. Their biggest challenge is not the sorting and removal, but how to handle the water running through the site from University City towards downtown, a problem that had even prompted them to build their own dam to try to seal off their work site from the lagoons beside the nearby sewage treatment plant. While the treatment plant no longer pumps water into the lagoons and was weeks away from being connected by pipe to the main treatment plant in the city, a way has not been found to stem the incoming flow of water from irrigation in University City.

As predicated, the highlight of the conference was the fieldtrip to the "under remediation" landfill site! It was fascinating, especially for someone who had been there before under different circumstances. As we arrived in our fleet of three buses, ten flamingos greeted us


and a large raptor swooped low. My chariot stopped first at one of the two sorting plants. To actually see the process of sorting through all of this garbage in action was astounding, inspiring and reassuring, as piles of wood, metal, plastic, concrete and other cast-offs took shape.






This system accounts for 40% of the project costs, alongside the cost of excavation/transportation (18%), air quality technology (14%) and overhead (9%). (A separate tyre shedding operation was going on nearby and slowly reducing the size of the huge tyre dump on the site, with the output – unsuitable for re-treading - being shipped to India.) We were then introduced to the technology of "smell wells" and shown the EET dam, where we were treated to an excellent view of - and show by – a raptor (a Tawney or Steppe Eagle, or possibly a Marsh Harrier) displaying its intriguing ability to hover just above lagoon-side bushes before lowering itself into the center of a bush and then rising up again. As we drove away, three more of these raptors joined the parade. Arriving at the site offices and laboratories, a dozen flamingos took flight from beyond the perimeter fence.

Despite working in the desert, the real problem for EET is the water in which the flamingos once thrived. A high artificial water table runs at 1 to 3 meters below the waste. Still, company officials say they are now confident that with the help of nature (evaporation and the slope of the land), run-off water coming in from outside to flush the site clean, and some trucking of water to other sites and users, there will be no water on the site in two years. In the meantime, those passing by the



"lake" inside the new Emirates Road circle adjacent to the Sharjah army camp should realize that this water did not simply result from the heavy rains of autumn 2004 and some of the problems being solved are well beyond the purview of this project. The longer-term goal for the highly valued piece of land being remediated is to be sold and a shopping mall built upon it. 

Our final day began with a discussion of an extensive chemical survey undertaken in late 2004 via trail pits dug on the site and some drilled wells. Mercury, lead, cadmium, chromium, sulphate ammonia, TPH and heavy metals were all found in varying amounts, predictable given the construction, industrial, medical and household waste in the dump. One delegate called for more scientific logic and societal input to shape decision-making in the UAE in the face of the now overwhelming strength of developers' dollars. 

Thanks and congratulations are due those who organised, contributed to and participated in this unusual yet timely conference. The next time you have an opportunity to attend a conference on garbage, go. Take your critical thinking skills with you, put your own production of waste in perspective, and discover new directions for your own work and life! *Thanks to Larry Woods, both for attending the conference and reporting on it.*  

Thru' the Lens ..



Lion in Serengeti

Portraiture has always been my first love and animal portraits are interesting and probably more difficult

than human portraits. My first subject a decade ago was a smart German Shepherd, 'Rocky', and I realized in this session how difficult it was to get a dog to pose the way you wanted. I have hardly done any serious portraiture of dogs since then! However, the subject of this month's column is the exceptional Saluki (Arabic saluqi, of Saluq, an ancient city in Iraq). The saluki is an integral part of the cultural heritage of Arabian hunting traditions. Categorized as a sighthound, they hunt by sight and not scent as do other hunting dogs. The nomadic Bedu of the Middle East have been breeding these tall slender silky coated canines for ages and their existence in Arabia dates back to over 5000 years. They are well known for their intelligence, stamina, loyalty and speed and are considered the oldest breed of hunting dogs.



Aseel saluki

The DNHG morning visit to the Arabian Saluki Centre founded and managed by saluki-enthusiast Mr. Hamad Al Ghanem of Dubai was a revelation. Hamad has been breeding the Aseel Salukis - the purest breed of Arabian hounds, for over seven decades and is an authority on the Arabian tradition of breeding Salukis. The centre also breeds and studies falcons.



Vets work on a falcon

During our visit to the temperature controlled rooms which have indi-

vidual exercise runs attached, a Saluki family became, astonishingly, very informal with the group. They are known to be quite reserved with strangers but never nervous or aggressive.



Cheryl Bradford and saluki pups

Salukis produce a sweet-smelling secretion from special glands at the back of their heads, and are the only breed of dog with a single layer coat - no downy undercoat - for surviving the heat of the desert. These two features mean they never develop a typical dog smell. I took the opportunity to shoot some pictures of the Salukis maintained here for breeding, boarding, training, grooming and health check ups.



Cheryl plays with pups

The Al Ain Racing Centre in Al Ain features Saluki and greyhound races during the cooler months. I did go there once to see the salukis in action. The Empty Quarter in the Arabian Desert (Rub Al-Khalee) is their favourite hunting ground. I learned that villages around remain strongholds of Saluki breeding and the best time is thought to be October and March when it is relatively cool and often wet. *Photographs and text by Arfan Asif*

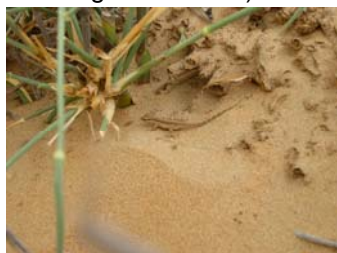




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Jo's Walk in the Desert

The Easter break and cloudy skies encouraged me to take my children away from their computer screens and out for a walk in the desert. I was grateful to the lizard and minute plant life of the area along the Margham road for ensuring my children's attention was caught. (They almost forgot the bribe of driving lessons to get them out!).



Pristurus Minimus

We were lucky to spot five species of lizard in a very small area. The high-lights were a large Dhub sunbathing at midday and a tiny lizard

that posed beautifully for the camera. This lizard was identified for us by Drew Gardner as *Pristurus Minimus* a species uncommonly spotted and rarely photographed.

On the strength of this success I am offering to open my wanders as field trips to members who want a short jaunt into the desert to amble around. Be warned, I am no expert, just curious. See field trips or call for details: Johanna Raynor 050 4789633

HAO's book selection:
courtesy Aramco World magazine

Stars and Numbers: Astronomy and Mathematics in the Medieval Arab and Western Worlds. Many of the brightest stars in the heavens today have Arabic names – testimony to the great influence of medieval Arab and Islamic astronomy on

European science. Paul Kunitzsch. Ashgate/Variorum Collected Studies Series. ISBN 0-86078-968-3. Hardback GBP59.50

The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization. Middle Eastern scholar Richard Bulliet presents a new concept which challenges common stereotypes about the irreconcilability of Muslim-led and Christian-led societies. Columbia UP. ISBN 0-231-12796-0. Hardback US\$24.50.

Silk Scents and Spice: Retracing the World's Great Trade Routes. Since the late-1980's, the author has been a frequent traveller on three of the world's most historically significant trade networks. The Spice Routes wove together Europe, the Arabian Peninsula, India and Asia by sea. John Lawton, 2004. UNESCO. ISBN 92-3-103927. Hardback Euros 19.80.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

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|---------------------|--|
| May 1 | The Biology of Swordfish in the Arabian Gulf - John Hoolihan |
| Jun 6 | Members Night: |
| * Sandhya Prakash | The Birds in Common of Bharatpur and Dubai |
| * Sandy Fowler | An Ascent Of Mount Kilimanjaro |
| * Barrie Harmsworth | The Evolution of the Dhow From Ahmed Ibn Majid to Khadam Rashid Al Muhairi |

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

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|-------------------------------|---|
| Thur Apr 28
&
Fri May 6 | Early Morning Desert Walk with Jo Raynor |
| [TBA] | Spoon Worm and Coastal Ecology Walk |
| Fri May 20 | Old Fujairah Fort, Bull Pushing and Wadi Hayl Fort with Peter Jackson |
| Jun 9: | End-of-Season Dinner, Quiz and Photo Competition |