

GAZELLE

Vol 26 no 10 October 2011



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Two New Faces on the Committee

This month we are very pleased to announce that we have two new volunteers to fill Committee positions. **Rakesh Rungta** will take over the position of Treasurer from **Louisa Akerina** who now seems to be a fairly permanent and happy resident of Sri Lanka. Rakesh and family are keen field trip participants and already well known to many members.



Rakesh, Cherry and Laxmi with other shellers on an east coast trip, 2010

And **Clare O'Hare**, who is also well known to field trip participants, will take over editorship of the *Gazelle* from **Anne Millen** who will soon be a fairly permanent and happy resident of Sri Lanka too. Anne has edited the

Gazelle for over 10 years, and claims to have enjoyed every minute of it. Clare will be editing the November *Gazelle*, so please be thoughtful and kind - send her plenty of reports and photographs to smooth her path. We welcome both Clare and Rakesh, and the Committee looks forward to working with them!

Heather and Roger Neal are leaving Dubai after quite a few years here. They too were keen shelling trip participants, and Roger enjoyed photographing tiny specimens.

Mo and Pete Steer sent greetings from a grey and chilly UK. They report that their main task has been gardening - seven years growth has required some serious action, but they have still found time to pop down the field to their local reservoir and go bird watching, where there is a large variety of species seen. Their intention is to visit Dubai in early December and hope to time it so they can attend our Members' Night meeting.

DNHG Membership

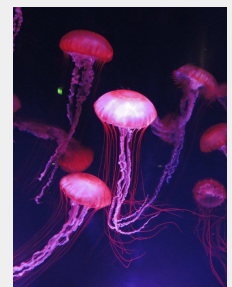
DNHG Membership remains a bargain at Dh.100 for couples/families and Dh. 50 for singles. You can **join or renew at our meetings or by sending us your details and a cheque** made out to: Lloyds TSB Bank account no. 60600669933501. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG. Please also note our account number has changed.)

DNHG membership entitles you to participate in field trips. It also 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:

Nancy Papathanasopoulou
Dareen Almojil
Deanne White
Renee Williams
Karen Leschke
Linda Olsen
Aris Vidalis



Jelly fish under pink light, Atlantis aquarium
Photograph by Karen Leschke

Under the patronage of H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan



Al Ain Wildlife Park & Resort Fri 21 Oct

As the night zoo has now stopped for the winter season we will be doing a day trip to the zoo. Meet outside the entrance gate at Al Ain Wildlife Park at 10am. A member of the educational team will be our guide. Proposed activities are reptile handling (maximum 25 people), giraffe feeding (extra cost) and the bird show. People are free, however, to wander around and view the animals at their leisure. There is a nice picnic area so we suggest members bring a picnic lunch.

Entry Dh15.00 for adults and Dh5.00 for children. If you are interested in going on the trip please send an email to Jenny Hill - promptly as time is short - on jennyhill76@hotmail.com



The wildlife can be close at Al Ain zoo
Photograph by Roger Neal

East Coast: Kalba to Fujairah with Brien Holmes Fri 28 Oct

Brien Holmes has kindly agreed to lead another trip, this time to the east coast, taking us from Khalba to Fujairah with stops at various sites of interest. It will be a full day trip. Sonja is still sorting out the details with Brien, but she hopes to have it finalised today. Coordinator/contact person for the trip: sonja@publicisgraphics.ae

Kerala for Eid 4 - 12 Nov (approx.)

This nine-day trip is now closed, with a complement of 16 people.

Sharjah Museums 18 Nov

The details of this trip will be broadcast by email closer to the time. There are many museums in Sharjah, all interesting, so this will be an excellent trip for young and old. Watch for details via email.

And some trips to bear in mind pending details:

Wadi Wurraya Hike Fri 25 Nov

Geology Trip with JP Berger Fri 9 Dec

Shelling with Anne Millen Fri 16 Dec

Wadi Al Shah Fri 13 Jan2012

Astronomy Night with JP Berger Fri 20 Jan

InterEmirates Weekend 24 - 25 Feb 2012

The 2012 InterEmirates weekend will be hosted by the Dubai Natural History Group. Planning has already begun, and it is likely that it will be a first - held in Dubai itself! Usually it is a weekend away for Dubai's turn to host, so this will be an exciting weekend. Planning for trips, activities and events is afoot, but if you have ideas of what you'd like to do, think others might learn from or enjoy, please contact any of the Committee members and tell them your idea.



A Call for Speakers: Members' Night 11 December 2011

Members' Night will be held on December 11 this year. This is your big chance to present a talk on your favourite natural history subject. Help with Powerpoint / other technology is available, and the Speaker Coordinators will give you any assistance you need to make your presentation a really rewarding experience. Natural history topics that are related to the UAE/Middle East are preferred, but if you have a good talk on flora or fauna elsewhere, that's fine too.

Our Next Speaker

To be announced



Letters to the Editor

Do you have some comment, suggestion or query on natural history that you would like our members to know about or answer? Just want to tickle things up a bit?



Please send your letter to any of the committee members listed, by fax or e-mail, or direct to the editor, Clare O'Hare, clare.ohare@gmail.com. Any accompanying photographs should be sent as separate, attached .jpg files.



Remember: New Editor!

Email your field reports and news to **Clare O'Hare** (clare.ohare@gmail.com) (Arial 10 justified). Please send your photographs as **separate .jpg files** (preferably compressed for documents) or deliver them to Editor Clare O'Hare for scanning.

The Lost Chambers Found by Renee Williams and Deanne White

On a hot Friday morning in September, around 60 inquisitive DNHG members gathered in the Atlantis Hotel for a very special behind-the-scenes aquarium tour. Named *The Lost Chambers*, the aquarium is based on the Atlantis theme. Divided into smaller groups of around ten, each group was accompanied by a knowledgeable guide quoting fish facts and the mythology of Atlantis with equal facility.



The huge aquarium, Atlantis resort
Photograph by Karen Leschke

Experts from among the 165 marine specialists who manage the resort ecosystem, including vets, biologists, divers, laboratory managers, food technicians, mechanics and curators, spoke with DNHG members along the way. Among those experts was Robert Bennet, Large Exhibits Manager, who introduced us to the sharks (above).



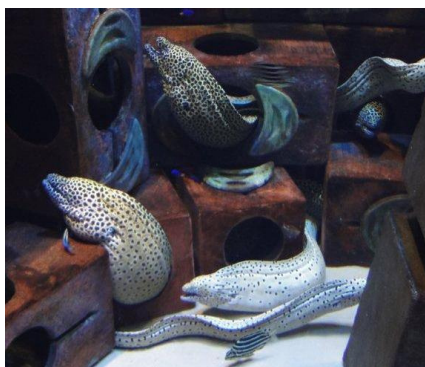
The large tank from above
Photograph by Karen Leschke

For those who have seen the front of the large tank from the hotel side, it was a surprise to discover many additional tanks housing a huge variety of fresh and salt water fish from around the world - over 65,000 in all. The environment of the tanks is crystal clear with obviously healthy and active inhabitants.

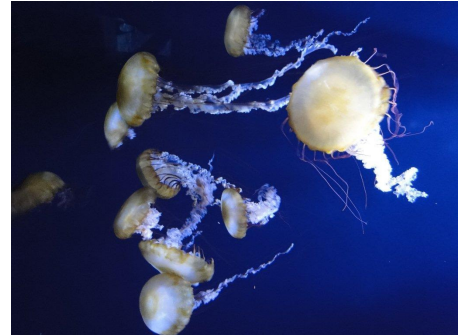


Stingray.
Photograph by Karen Leschke

The tour was sprinkled with fish facts...did you know that the giant Queensland groupers start life as females, later becoming males in order to procreate, or that moray eels have a second jaw with teeth located in their throats?

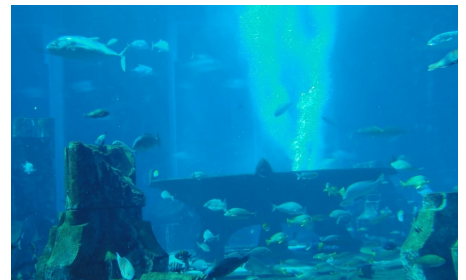


Moray eels
Photograph by Karen Leschke



Jelly fish
Photograph Karen Leschke

Most mesmerizing of the exhibits were the jellyfish tanks. Members later viewed *Cassiopeia andromeda* (upside-down jellyfish) in the marine lab hospital where it is hoped they will successfully breed. *C. andromeda* is frequently found on shallow sandy bottoms in the southern Arabian Gulf.

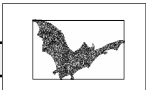


The aerator in the large tank
Photograph by Linda Olsen

The groups were shown the huge machinery room where the tank water is cleaned through the process of sand filters, heat exchangers, waste removal, and ozone injection. Ozone is manufactured on site to reduce transport and storage costs. A crew of 30 closely monitors all systems to ensure correct temperature and salinity. With the turnover rate in the Ambassador Lagoon at 50,000 gallons per minute, this is no small feat.



Seahorse
Photograph by Karen Leschke



Fish and corals. Photograph by Linda Olsen

Coral specialist and Lost Chambers manager, Dennis Blom, explained his work at the aquarium propagating soft corals. We were able to view some of his successes in the exhibits. His propagations list is impressive: *Turbinaria reniformis*, *Siderastrea* sp., *Euphillia divisa*, *Euphillia glabrescens*, *Dicusoma* sp., *Euphillia panacora*, *Porites harrisoni*, *Leptastrea* sp., *Acropora dowingi*, *Caulastrea* sp., *Duncanopsammia axifuga*, *Sinularia brasica* (green & brown), *Acanthastrea achinata*, and *Echinopora lamellose*.



Fish, anemones and soft corals
Photograph by Karen Leschke

Very impressive was the quarantine area with its support for animal rescue. At the ready are two full-time vets, large marine animal carriers, and big holding tanks for rehabilitating animals.



Marine mammal recovery tanks in the veterinary laboratory and hospital area
Photograph by Linda Olsen

An on-site laboratory handles ongoing analysis of the marine animals and water quality. Steve Kaiser, VP, Marine Science and Engineering, stressed that they are sincerely interested in assisting with marine animal rescue and rehabilitation.



Fish tanks in the marine hospital laboratory
Photograph by Linda Olsen

Acknowledging previous controversial press regarding a whale shark at the aquarium, Kaiser reinforced that the whale shark had been rescued from local fishermen, nursed back to health, and subsequently returned to the Gulf. After release, the tagged animal traveled to the coast of Iran and then to Oman before the monitoring device fell off in about five week's time along the Qatar coast. Kaiser encouraged us to call the Atlantis Hotel in a timely fashion if we find a live marine animal in need of assistance, since most times when the marine mammal rescue staff learns about a situation it is often too late.



Little nemos in hospital
Photograph by Karen Leschke

The more than three hour's tour gave all the fortunate participants a unique view of the inner workings of this world-class aquarium. The staff's enthusiasm and dedication to the animals and their welfare, coupled with the passion to educate the public, facilitate species procreation

and contribute to scientific knowledge in the field of marine biology, make this an exemplary facility. *Report by Renee Williams and Deanne White, photographs by Linda Olsen and Karen Leschke*

Unusual Encounters: A Corn Crake and a Little Crake in Qaru, Kuwait

During its three years of research on sea turtles as well as their underwater and beach habitats, the Kuwait Turtle Conservation Project (KTCP) has not been indifferent to bird populations – migrant or vagrant mostly - of the islets Qaru and Umm Al-Maradim, which are KTCP's main research areas. Both consist of a sand cay surrounded by a vibrant coral reef, and their sizes are minuscule. Qaru has a diameter of 200m sporting no flora at all, and Umm Al-Maradim is about 500m long and wide with some sparse bushy vegetation on its sandy soil.



Qaru Island
Photograph by

Sponsored by TOTAL Foundation and TOTAL Kuwait since July 2008, a number of scientists and volunteers from many countries gathered in Qaru and Umm Al-Maradim several times a year in order to observe, assess and reflect upon wildlife conservation on these two ecological treasures of Kuwait.



Qaru Reef
Photograph by



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

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off 344 0462
fax (off) 349 9437

Archaeology - David Palmer
050-7387703
office direct line: 04-2072636
dpalmer@ud.ac.ae

Birds - David Bradford
davebradford9@hotmail.com

Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi
res: 06-5310467
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email: 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
email: valeriechalmers@hotmail.com

Plants – Valerie Chalmers

Seashells and Mammals - Recorders 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.



Sea turtles, sharks and at least 125 fish species (not counting the long list of molluscs and crustaceans) live here, some of them breeding and some foraging on the extended reef areas. In Umm Al-Maradim, in March 2009, within three days of cold, rainy weather, KTCP members observed 45 species of birds, including 200 chiff chaffs, pipits, a rufus-tailed rock thrush and a stone curlew.

The team was, however, not prepared for two most unusual sightings, both occurring for the first time in the summer and in totally barren Qaru.



Crex crex

Firstly, a corn crane (*Crex crex*) was sighted on an early June morning. After a long night shift observing green turtles, the KTCP team caught a glimpse, at the crack of dawn, of an unusual, "chicken-like" bird flying under the main communications tower of the island. A closer view and the photography of team environmentalist Aris Vidalis revealed that the bird was indeed a corn crane.



Lost, stolen or strayed - the corn crane

Its populations mostly live and breed in Russia and Belarus, and

during its migrations it travels in flocks - a solitary bird is never seen. It inhabits grasslands and farmlands and breeds in bushy areas. It is common in its home and not at any risk of extinction. It is very unusual to encounter it in offshore sandy islets, anywhere, worldwide!

Its passage to Qaru, and outside the regular migration season, was random and rare, rendering the sighting extraordinary. Later research in literature revealed that this bird is the first one ever recorded on the island and one of the very few in the country. Over the years, a few sightings of this species have occurred mostly in the Sabah Al-Ahmad reserve during mid-spring or autumn, which are the most common migration seasons for birds. The bird seemed to be in good health, but maybe a little subdued by the extreme heat, which at times was over 60 degrees Celsius in the shade.

Almost a full month later, in the hottest hours of the afternoon, Aris Vidalis was outside with his camera when he noticed a medium-sized bird hopping from the hot sand to the shade of the Coast Guard Station terrace, finding refuge under the team's wet towels on the benches. With great difficulty Aris approached the bird and took photos of it.



Porzana parva

The bird then flew off to the pier of the island, where it was followed by Aris and photographed some more. Careful study of the photos revealed the bird to be a little crane (*Porzana parva* – the distinct red mark at the base of its bill made this identification certain). It is even more rare in Kuwait than the corn crane. These small birds, like corn cranes, belong to the Rallidae family, breed in Eastern Europe and just into Western Asia. To KTCP members' knowl-



edge, they have not been reported in Kuwait before. They are supposed to winter in Africa and look for food on mudflats.



Little crane, *Porzana parva*

Both birds are abundant in their homelands and the IUCN Red List qualification for both is that of "Least Concern". They breed in their homelands from May till August. So what were these single individuals doing during breeding season in Qaru instead? And on their own, when they always seem to travel in numbers?



The distinctive red spot is visible

Sightings such as these demonstrate the extremely high ecological importance of Qaru and Umm Al-Maradim, which, due to their geographical position, provide sanctuary to all kinds of wildlife, often creating unique opportunities for observations and raising the need for further research regarding, among others, avifauna. Barren and remote at first, without sources of freshwater, these sand cays host passing bird populations of many kinds and at all seasons. Clearly, more constant research is needed in order to discover more about their role in local and regional biodiversity and ecological processes. *Report by Nancy Papathanasopoulou nancyktcp@gmail.com, photographs by Aris Vidalis, Kuwait Turtle Conservation Project*

Galapagos Underwater

Located almost 1000km off the coast of Ecuador, Galapagos offers unrivalled wildlife encounters on land, as Colin Paskins' recent photo-story showed. But what about underwater? We joined a dive trip recently to find out for ourselves.



Darwin Arch, Galapagos Islands

The Galapagos is in the centre of several major ocean currents: the Cromwell current brings cold water across the Pacific to the Western islands; the Humboldt current brings cold water from Antarctica (cold enough for penguins and fur sea lions to live at the equator), and the Panama current brings warmer water to the Northern islands. This means that the climate in the islands is decidedly non-tropical but divers find, in adjacent parts of the archipelago, very different marine life and water temperatures.

Our first dives were around the central islands of San Cristobal, Santa Cruz and Bartolome with abundant sea lions, a favourite amongst divers. The youngsters in particular appear at speed, spinning and spiralling and with a snort of bubbles, veer off at the last minute, only to return again and again; adults meanwhile cruise serenely by. It wasn't until we took the long haul to the isolated islands of Darwin and Wolf, however, that Galapagos really lived up to its reputation as one of the world's top dive destinations. Our first dive at Darwin had us hanging on to the rocks in a stiff current as shoals of hammerhead and Galapagos sharks cruised by only metres away, and then from above, a pregnant whale shark descended like a great mothership.



Hammerheads galore

Our next dives yielded large shoals of big eye jacks, a dolphin and many more sharks. Moving on to Wolf Island, the sharks were joined by a family of eagle rays which allowed us to get really close, plus large pelagics such as blue finned and giant trevally and, on the surface, a large pod of bottlenose dolphins.



Marine iguana

After 4 days in water temperatures up to 24°C (warm for Galapagos in September but cold for tropical diving which is usually around 28 to 30°C), we headed for the west of Fernandina for our cold water test. On hearing that the water was only 15°C there was little enthusiasm for the first dive of the day and instead we zipped over to watch 2 minke whales surfacing up close. Still, the shallow dive here was one of the best. In only 8m we found several Galapagos marine endemics - marine iguana clinging to the rocks grazing algae, a flightless cormorant on a brief visit and Galapagos fur sea lions, plus a large golden Pacific seahorse and small Galapagos horned sharks.

Moving round the corner of Isabela, the largest island, we endured 14°C in search of sunfish (molamola), incredibly, finding five on one dive.



Mola mola



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As we sped along the wall in the current a huge yellowfin tuna then a manta flew past; on the sand numerous green turtles and the grumpy looking red lipped batfish sat motionless and in the shallows a Galapagos penguin made a brief appearance.

So after 10 days and almost 30 dives, what can we say? Well, Galapagos is certainly a challenging dive destination because of the cold and the currents, but for the chance to dive with marine life that you just don't find anywhere else, and the sheer quantity of large marine life, we now know that it's just as fantastic underwater as it is on land. *Report by Angela Manthorpe, photographs by Angela and from internet.*

A Domestic in Suburbia

In residential Jumeira, right on busy Al Wasl Road, a family of grey francolin regularly feed in my garden. They have visited it for years, and

once nested here. They seem to be a family because at present there are two large ones and one smaller. The smaller one is *always* between the mature birds. Dad (or Mum) walks slowly along in the lead, neck stretched high, not feeding but observing. The smaller one and the tail-end-Charlie keep following but feed voraciously on, I think, grass seed. They notice even minimal movement behind tinted glass in daytime. One day, I tried to photograph them when they were dozing in a dustbath, but they are ever vigilant, and purposefully decamped.



Spotted! The grey francolin leave their dust bath in their customary formation

Perhaps they are nesting again, or scouting for a place. Recently, I noticed some movement behind a low bush, and was intermittently monitoring it when a pale, pretty dove (a frequent visitor too) alighted on the lawn in front. There was a flurry of grey, some harsh noises and posturing and the dove was quickly and firmly seen off. Then the two big ones emerged with an air of indignation, stalking off across the garden with necks stretched high. *Text and photographs by Anne Millen*

Firewood: Free to a Good Campsite

Planning a desert dinner, camping expedition or singsong round a campfire? Anne Millen has firewood for all. A big tree has fallen in her garden, and there are lots of small to mid-sized branches for the taking. And the trunk if you can do anything with that! Call Anne on 050-4556372 or Peter on 050-6425077. Bring an axe, a saw ... whatever you have.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

Nov 13 To be announced

Dec 11 Members' Night

Field Trips (Members only, please)

Oct 21 Al Ain zoo

Oct 28 East coast: Kalba to Fujairah

Nov 4 - 12 Kerala nature trip

Nov 18 Sharjah museums

Further field trips, details or changes to trips will be announced/confirmed by e-mail circular.