



GAZELLE



مجموعتنا في التاريخ والطبيعي

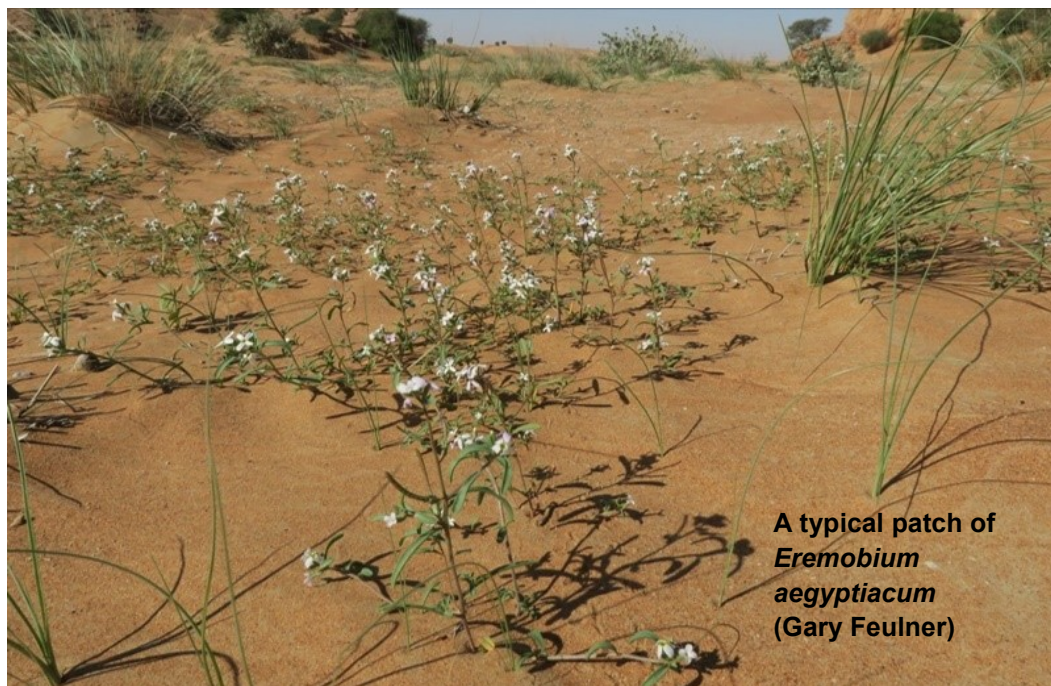
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Contributors—

Thanks to the following for their contributions this month:

Teresa MacGregor Kerr, Kerstin N. Binoth, Gary Feulner, Binish Roobas, Val Lindsay, Giulio Russo, Monica Falini



A typical patch of *Eremobium aegyptiacum* (Gary Feulner)

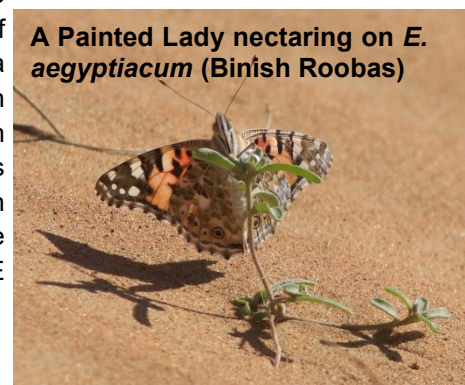
Not Just Another Pretty Flower

As two lots of DHNG field trip participants can testify, the desert annual *Eremobium aegyptiacum* has been flowering throughout February 2022 in the Wadi Faya area of the Sharjah desert, in thousands of sandy hollows and flats, benefitting from the heavy rain on New Year's Eve. *E. aegyptiacum* is the species that graced the cover of Marijke Jongbloed's *Living Desert* (Motive Publishing, 1987), a volume that was one of the first to introduce the diverse and fascinating natural history of the UAE to a general audience.

But *Eremobium* is not just a pretty flower. In mid-February it was obviously a major source of energy-rich nectar for the thousands (probably tens of thousands) of Painted Lady butterflies (*Vanessa cardui*) that were migrating from and through the UAE as they slowly make their way north to spend the summer in cooler climes. The migration of Painted Ladies from southern Arabia northwards is an annual phenomenon, although the number of butterflies involved varies from year-to-year depending in part on the conditions encountered along their route. They return south in the autumn, and in most years the Painted Lady is among the most common UAE butterflies throughout the winter.

Contribution by Gary Feulner

A Painted Lady nectaring on *E. aegyptiacum* (Binish Roobas)



Wadi Naqab page 6

(photo by Giulio Russo)



Spot the DHNG members!

Announcements and Recorders

Virtual Monthly Speaker

3rd April, 2022 at 8pm

(via Zoom please register in advance at [this link](#))

Presenter: Dr. Koustubh Sharma.

Lecture Title: “**Snow Leopards**: the ambassadors of the Mountains of Central & South Asia.”

Dr. Koustubh Sharma has been involved in active research and conservation since 2001. He has been working with the Snow Leopard Trust, Seattle, USA since 2007, and currently serves as the Assistant Director of Conservation Policy and Partnerships. Since 2014, he has also served as the International Coordinator of the Global Snow Leopard and Ecosystems Protection Program (GSLEP) whose secretariat is based in Bishkek.



At the GSLEP Program, Koustubh works with a small team with support from international organizations to coordinate this unique alliance that brings together governments of the 12 snow leopard range countries, Non-Government Organizations and Conservationists. At the Snow Leopard Trust, he assists in implementing research, conservation, training and building collaborations across several countries.



Dr. Koustubh obtained a PhD in Wildlife Zoology from the University of Mumbai in 2006 after pursuing his Masters in Physics in 2001. He conducted the first detailed study of the rare four-horned antelope while working with Bombay Natural History Society in Central India for his PhD.

Koustubh's academic interests lie in population ecology, conservation biology, policy, data visualization, and technology for conservation. He has so far authored about 40 scientific publications and has presented his work in nearly the same number of international conferences.

Condolences

The DNHG expresses its condolences to Judy Roberts on the death of her husband, Colin. Judy and Colin were long-time members of the DNHG who retired to England in about 2015. Judy, a well-known Dubai artist, created and donated to the DNHG the gazelle logo which has been our proud emblem for more than 35 years. Colin had suffered for several years from the effects of a stroke but was able to remain at home after an initial convalescence, thanks to Judy's help.

Morocco's Plant Power

In the Moroccan pavilion at EXPO2020 there's a magnificent room, set up like an old-style pharmacy and, with mirrors at either end, it appears to extend for miles. It's entitled 'Plants Power' and is dedicated to the medicinal uses of plants. Morocco has catalogued over 4,200 species and uses 600 for medicinal and cosmetic purposes. I spotted the familiar fists of *Anastatica hierochuntica* in a jar labelled 'nerves' and pink chunks of Gum Arabic (*Acacia senegal*) for the treatment of eye diseases and gastrointestinal issues. I hope you see it before the end of EXPO!

Contribution by Angela Manthorpe



DNHG Recorders

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From the Editor:

A new Gazelle Editor is required from the end of May. If you are interested in becoming part of the team, please contact Valerie Chalmers, Margaret Swan or Gary Feulner (see page 8 for details). Some knowledge of desk top publishing would be advantageous but not necessary as training will be provided.

The Inter-Emirate weekend took place on 25/26 March 2022 in Abu Dhabi. More about this in the next issue.

With the holy month of Ramadan almost upon us, we wish our Muslim members “Ramadan Mubarak!”

STOP PRESS! The 2021 Awards on 29th March were presented as follows:

- Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Prize was awarded to Dr. Jacky Judas.
- The Bish Brown Award was awarded to Claudia Steuber, Chairman of ENHG Abu Dhabi

Spotlight!

DNHG Field Trip to Wadi Naqab, by Monica Falini

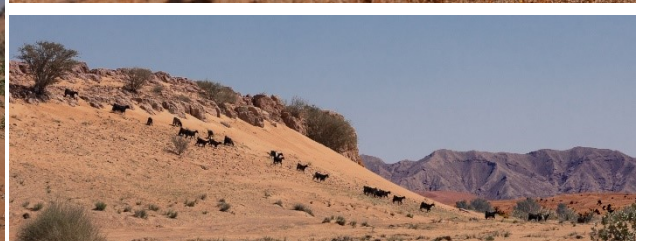


DNHG trip to Al Qurm Nature Reserve, Kalba, by Val Lindsay



(from left to right) A crab proudly displays his larger claw, a two cormorant disagreement over ownership, salt is expelled through the leaves of the coastal mangrove.

DNHG February Wadi Faya Hike, by Kerstin Binoth



Field Trips

What on Earth? – the Oleander Hawkmoth

Browsing through mountain foliage still prospering from the New Year's deluge, we were nevertheless unprepared for the marvelous spectacle – no other word will do – of a newly emerged Oleander Hawkmoth *Daphnis nerii*. Looking like a cross between a Yoda-like alien, a superhero and a manta ray in camouflage dress, to come upon it unexpectedly inspired a mixture of fear and wonder.

The moth is active by night, sheltering in foliage by day, so, although it is present in many suburban gardens, it is seldom seen. Its large caterpillar is camouflaged in green or brown colors, but it can be recognized by its large, pale blue false eye-spots, which can be inflated to intimidate predators. Most other UAE hawkmoth larvae have a posterior "horn" that is relatively long, dark and straight, but the horn of the Oleander Hawkmoth is short, yellowish and drooping. Eggs are spherical and are laid on the leaves of the oleander shrub (*Nerium oleander*).

Contribution by Gary Feulner and Binish Roobas



A picture perfect Oleander Hawkmoth *Daphnis nerii*. (Gary Feulner)



A mature caterpillar of the Oleander Hawkmoth, showing the prominent false eye-spots posterior to the true head. (Gary Feulner)



An immature caterpillar, brownish but also with prominent blue eye-spots. (Gary Feulner)



Spherical eggs are laid on oleander leaves. (Binish Roobas)

Squirreling Away

Local travel in February revealed two more locations for the Five-Striped Palm Squirrel *Funambulus pennantii*, a native of the northern Indian subcontinent and Iran that has become increasingly at home in UAE parks, plantations and landscaped sites. One new location was a renovated plantation in Fujairah, a couple of kilometers within the East Coast mountain front; the other was among the huge ghaf trees that grace the venerable Ain al-Faydhah Rest House in Al Ain (now a One-to-One Resort). On the other hand, we spent several hours at Dubai's Creekside Park, from where the squirrels had been reported about five years ago, without seeing any at all.

Contribution by Binish Roobas and Gary Feulner

The Five-Striped Palm Squirrel *Funambulus pennantii* at a Hajar Mountain plantation. (Binish Roobas)



Research Study

Novel Study Examines Sea Snake Mortality from Oil Spills

A team of researchers from Sharjah's Environment and Protected Areas Authority (EPAA) has recently published a paper titled "**Oil spill causes mass mortality of sea snakes in the Gulf of Oman**". The study presents observations of an oil spill which caused mass mortality of sea snakes in the East Coast city of Kalba between Nov 13-19, 2021. The study is believed to be the first-ever assessment of oil spill-related mortality of sea snakes.

Oiled sea snake strandings were collected and examined to determine their percentage body cover with oil along with the presence of oil in their gastrointestinal/respiratory tracts and on their sensory and respiratory surfaces. 39 sea snakes of 4 species were examined; 19 *Hydrophis platurus*, 12 *Hydrophis lapemoides*, 5 *Hydrophis spiralis*, 2 *Hydrophis ornatus* and 1 unknown; all but one of them were dead when collected. The majority (82%) were observed to have oil covering 75-100% of their bodies. Likewise, in the majority of specimens, oil also covered their snouts and eyes. A large proportion of the specimens were also found to have oil in the mouth, esophagus and stomach.

Current IUCN Red List assessments regard oil spills as a threat to only the most common sea snake in the region (*Hydrophis platurus*), and

only a limited threat at that (previous and unlikely). The EPAA study suggests that sea snakes are probably more susceptible to the hazards of oil emersion in marine environments than previously believed. The EPAA results suggest that the physical properties of the November 2021 oil slick (viscosity and stickiness) were the main cause of snake mortalities, but spills of "lighter" oil can also harm or kill marine reptiles due to inhalation of toxic volatile gases when they surface to breathe.

Copies of the full paper can be requested from the corresponding author, Fadi Yaghmour: fadi.mohd@epaa.shj.ae. Thanks to EPAA and Fadi Yaghmour for this information and summary

Contribution by Gary Feulner



A yellow-bellied sea snake *Hydrophis platurus* in shallow coastal waters. (Gary Feulner)

Toad-headed agama action

Participants in Gary Feulner's recent rambles around Wadi Faya were treated to courtship displays by the Arabian Toad-headed Agamas (*Phrynocephalus arabicus*), one of the commonest lizards in the UAE. For those who didn't attend, here's an account from an initial scouting trip. Note that you can identify breeding males from the blackened tip of the tail.

We spotted a male agama on the crest of a dune. He was displaying in a rather nonchalant way – initially the tail was held straight behind with just the black tip curled in. Then, at intervals, the tail was curled up across the back, coiled a little tighter, held for a few moments and then straightened again above the sand. As we watched the little agamid was startled by an approaching Plain Tiger butterfly (*Danaus chrysippus*) and with a quick shimmy it buried itself in the sand with only the tip of the tail and its head protruding. He emerged gradually and then suddenly sprinted along the dune crest, rolled his tail again and proceeded to wag his tail side to side in a strikingly vigorous manner – if you imagine someone waving frantically to attract the attention of a friend in a crowd, you'll get the idea.

Knowing that he'd spotted a likely mate we studied the sand bowl below – and eventually spied a female, but only because she moved. The eager male ran down the dune face and took up a prominent position; more tail wagging ensued. He ran round the female to an opposite position, flailing again. At this point the female sprinted 1-2m in his direction and a tumbling and grappling ensued with the female flopping onto her back twice, giving us a view of her white belly. It was over in an instant with the female taking up a position in a shallow depression and, after watching for a while, the male ran off up the dune. Binish Roobas captured the action but the coming together was so brief that we weren't sure if they mated or not.

On the second ramble we found a male in a prominent position atop a tuft of grass with the female a metre or so away under a bush. The courtship seemed to be more leisurely on this occasion; I don't recall the insistent tail wagging but the two did appear to mate successfully before we left them alone. Val Lindsay captured some great shots on this occasion.

Contribution by Angela Manthorpe with photos by Val Lindsay and Binish Roobas



(top) male by Val Lindsay

(middle) female by Val Lindsay

(bottom) acrobatics by Binish Roobas

Field Trips

Wadi Naqab Hike – 6 March 2022

We arrived at the starting point finding many other cars there already, due to this hike now being officially 'on the map' – even signposted now!

So parking was actually quite a challenge! But once all there, after collecting a few 'walkers' from the parking area a few kms out of the wadi, we set off. We met several other hikers in 'sporti/gym-wear' enthusiastically taking on Wadi Naqab.

The dramatic high walls of the wadi soon embraced us and it certainly is a huge, alluring and majestic wadi to explore, with towering cliffs above, most of the way. It also has some interesting little scrambles and 'cliff walks' along the side but is nicely signposted and one can follow red arrows to find the best bouldering or scrambling route. Some scrambles even had metal 'ladder steps' to help.

Sonja pointed out the trees of the UAE which we encountered: Sidr (*Ziziphus spina-christi*), Acacia (*Vachellia tortilis*), Moringa 'Drumstick' tree (*Moringa peregrina*) and Wadi Fig tree (*Ficus cordata*) - all looking very healthy after the substantial winter rains this year.

Some lovely round rock pools appeared, some still with water in them, though stagnant of course. At one pool some wild bees were hovering. Giulio identified them as: *Apis florea*, a species of small, wild honey bee from southern and southeastern Asia (also called 'dwarf honey bee'), which span the continents of Africa and Asia and are also seen in the Middle East. They have open nests and small colonies, and are important pollinators [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apis_florea].

At some points, huge landslides on the sides of the wadi were most impressive, with gigantic boulders sprawled down and around.

Further up, the wadi is called 'Wadi Koub'.

As the towering walls came closer together and the wadi narrowed, it seemed to be leading on to the end but then a large dam of water appeared, meaning we could not continue. Some considered wading through it, but others advised not as there were sadly some bodies of goats lying around so risk of infected water was high.

We saw two beautiful Blue Pansy butterflies (*Junonia orithya* here) near the dam soon thereafter.

Before returning, some members scouted up a side 'ladder' scramble to try and find the renowned Wadi Naqab circular route, but an Arabic guide from another party advised us that the route is very difficult to find and rather long. So we continued back down the wadi the same route.

First we enjoyed lunch on a spectacular cliff-face, each finding a suitable vantage-point to rest and enjoy! David then gave us some interesting facts about the geology on the opposite wadi-wall, being an ancient layered seabed pushed up by great tectonic shifts.



Some more information found: 'Wadi Naqab displays remarkable tectonic uplift, particularly in a stratigraphic column extended over the Triassic – Jurassic boundary dating back 200 million years. Associated with a period of mass extinction, the end of the Triassic era is thought to have triggered massive methane release and the fossil record in the wadi reflects this, with rich deposits of fossils to be found in the area' [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wadi_Naqab].

We arrived back at the cars after 5 hours, meaning the hike took 4 hours (adding on 1 hour lunch break).

Wadi Naqab is a highly recommended hike, being a spectacular wadi to venture through, with an interesting and varied route - some rock scrambling but well supported by signs, arrows and metal steps/hand-holds. It is approximately a half-day's duration and with a moderate level of difficulty/fitness required. Thank you very much to Sonja for this wonderful Wadi Naqab experience!

More photographs can be seen on page 2.

Contribution by Teresa MacGregor Kerr

Field Trips

Is the Tiny Grass Blue spreading to new and natural environments?

Recently we have observed individuals of the Tiny Grass Blue butterfly at two locations that seem far removed from any occurrences of its customary larval foodplant in the UAE, the landscaped *Ruellia simplex* (Family Acanthaceae). At Creekside Park in Dubai we found a courting pair in a bed of cultivated white petunias among many other exotic trees and shrubs, but no *Ruellia*. Further afield, in Wadi Faya in the Sharjah desert, we found a single individual resting on a patch of Desert Squash *Citrullus colocynthis*, then setting out again across the sand towards a rocky outcrop where a variety of native species were common. Are these sightings an indication that the butterfly is beginning to spread on its own?

The Tiny Grass Blue *Zizula hylax* (also known in India as the Gaika Blue) is the most recently recognized of the UAE's resident butterflies. It was first identified in 2016 from photos taken by night at Emirates Towers in Dubai. There, it was found to be closely associated with the now-common landscaping plant, *Ruellia simplex*, marketed commercially as the Mexican Petunia or Purple Showers. The same association was quickly demonstrated elsewhere in urban and suburban Dubai, and in Abu Dhabi. This led to the (not unreasonable) hypothesis that the butterfly had probably been introduced with its landscaped host.

It is difficult to know how long the Tiny Grass Blue may have been present here before it was recognized, because it is very small, low-flying and inconspicuous, and it closely resembles a common and well-known UAE species, the Asian Grass Blue *Zizeeria karsandra* (called in India the Dark Grass Blue). Only someone who was actively looking for "something different" would be likely to have noticed and distinguished *Z. hylax*.

Although not previously recorded in Dubai or the UAE, the Tiny Grass Blue has a very large global range covering most of the Old World tropics, including southern Arabia, southern Iran and Baluchistan, and the Batinah Coast of Oman. There are also a relatively large number of known foodplants on which its larvae (caterpillars) are able to feed, including a few widespread species that are more or less common in the UAE. One of those is *Tribulus terrestris* (Family Zygophyllaceae), a native of our mountains and gravel plains but also an urban weed.

As a result, the presence of the Tiny Grass Blue in the UAE is not entirely a surprise. It is also reasonable to wonder whether it might begin to expand its abundant urban presence to include villages, farms and natural areas. *T. terrestris* was moderately common at the Wadi Faya site, along with large numbers of another Zygophyllaceae, *Fagonia ovalifolia*.

Contribution by Binish Roobas and Gary Feulner

Photo:

(1) The Tiny Grass Blue *Zizula hylax* in Wadi Faya. (Binish Roobas)

(2) The Mexican Petunia *Ruellia simplex*, a favorite larval foodplant of the Tiny Grass Blue. (Gary Feulner)



Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) Programme 2021/2022

Monthly lectures are presently transmitted via Zoom, starting at 8.00pm

3 April

Dr. Koustubh Sharma will present an illustrated talk on “**Snow Leopards**: the ambassadors of the Mountains of Central & South Asia

**Gazelle
Editor
Wanted!**

(see page 2 for details)

DNHG Field Trips

2 April

Old mosques of RAK—an overview of different types of old mosques

21—29 May

Archaeology of Peloponnese (Greece)

Please note that field trips will only take place in accordance with current Dubai Government regulations. These have been relaxed but participants still need proof of vaccination or proof of PCR test not older than 72 hours upon registration/arrival.

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When possible, please contact committee members outside office hours

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DNHG Membership

DNHG membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at Dh100 for families and Dh50 for singles. Membership for the current year is valid from September 2020 to September 2021. In consideration of the restrictions on our lectures and field trips due to COVID-19, **all members who were paid up (or considered paid up) for 2020—2021 will be automatically renewed for 2021-2022**, without a renewal fee.

New members can join by (i) sending to the Membership Secretary (see above) a completed one-page membership form, which can be downloaded from our website (www.dnhg.org) and (ii) making payment to our Emirates NBD account by cash deposit or transfer from your bank or ATM, using our IBAN number AE640260001012012013302. However, this process does not always identify the payer. So if you wish to pay by cash deposit, please also photograph or scan a copy of your payment confirmation and send via e-mail to the Membership Secretary, so we know whose money we have received.

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*, our post office box, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects.