



GAZELLE



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

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Contributors—

Thanks to the following for their contributions this month:

Tim Chesher, Mary Eden, Yousuf Thakur, Gary Feulner, Binish Roobas, Michelle Sinclair



A pool in Wadi Qinan fringed by Oleander (*Nerium oleander*). The vegetation shown here, withstood flood waters approximately a metre higher, just a few days earlier.

Summer Hiking - A wet wadi, wildlife, and some reminders for off-trail safety

The torrential rains over the Fujairah coast on Thursday, July 28, led us to alter our weekend plans for a night hike under a new moon for some stargazing. We thought we would check out the pools in the Wadi Qinan tributary of Wadi Shawkah instead, having not experienced them refreshed in the summer.

Starting about 5 am, just before dawn, we left the car at the entrance to the tourist camp constructed a few years ago, and then crossed the camp to pick up the narrow wadi immediately north of it, with the aim of hiking a loop finishing at the pools.

The temperature had cooled off a little, following the rains, and it was (only!) about 32°C as we set off. Within 15 minutes it was light enough to hike without head torches, and we continued up the wadi, which heads southeast, gradually climbing.

Approximately 45 minutes into the hike we came across a snake. In fact, two of us had stepped over it and it was our third member who spotted it. The broad, triangular head,

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Sumatra
A pictorial introduction
see page 3



Announcements and Recorders



Monthly Speaker

Monday 26th September at 8pm

Speaker: Yusuf Thakur

Presentation: “My Evolution as Filmmaker to a Naturalist”

Yusuf Thakur is a qualified filmmaker based in the United Arab Emirates. He has a degree in Film Direction and has been producing nature and wildlife documentaries for the past twenty years. As a wildlife filmmaker, Yusuf brings to his work a rare passion for the environment and wildlife, bringing into focus its natural beauty, which is evident from his international award winning films on regional wildlife. His sensitivity, patience and in depth knowledge of the technical aspects of filmmaking, stems from a passion to appreciate and preserve the planet’s riches. After a decade of filming he set up the “Visual Effects & Productions LLC” (VFX) which, under his original philosophy of “the best people, the best equipment”, has developed substantially over the past 19 years. Yusuf has been filming wildlife in the Middle East since 1993 and to date Yusuf has produced over fifty documentaries, from start to finish. His focus is mainly on bird species of the Gulf in different habitats such as mangroves, deserts, mountains and islands.

A few examples of his work are Raising A Family - Sooty Falcon, Jewel of the Mangroves, Endangered Dugong, Home of the Legendary Mermaid, Tracking Mermaid, Bloodbath, Kilimanjaro’s Elephants and Raising A Family of Kestrel.

Please visit the DNHG website for further information about Yusuf, his work, achievements and awards: <https://www.dnhg.org/lectures.html>

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From the Editor:

And so the summer begins ...

Whilst the UAE is quiet at this time of year, many readers will be travelling.

Please write to us at the email below with your observations of wildlife either abroad or in the UAE.

gazelleeditor@gmail.com

Enjoy your read and have a great summer break!

Spotlight! Northern Sumatra through Michelle Sinclair's lens

From villages, markets and farms



To volcanoes, rainforests and islands



Field Clip

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indistinct skull markings and characteristic body markings show it was an Oman Saw-Scaled Viper *Echis omanensis*, a Hajar mountain endemic and the most commonly encountered mountain snake (after the distinctively long, thin Wadi Racer *Platyceps rhodorachis*). It was about 75cm, adult size for the species. Consistent with other daytime reports of this placid snake, it did not move as we took a few photos before leaving it alone. We were, after all, guests in its home.

It is worth cautioning, however, that the Oman Saw-Scaled Viper has potent hemotoxic venom (causing internal bleeding) and has been responsible for debilitating medical reactions. And it *will* strike if provoked. Unfortunately, its camouflage and its phlegmatic disposition increase the possibility of unintended human-snake interactions. In case of a bite, it is recommended to pay a visit to a hospital where the victim may be encouraged to remain a few hours for monitoring. We continued up the wadi bed, before scrambling up and over a ridge as the wadi bends southwards. We had breakfast on the ridge top, with views of the massive quarry to the south, and then dropped down into a tributary that heads back NW and ultimately joins Wadi Qinan and its pools.



Oman Saw-Scaled Viper *Echis omanensis*, a Hajar Mountain endemic, is normally placid and inoffensive, but is potentially dangerous.

As we neared the pools the water table was high, so that some of the pools were connected with a shallow stream, and grass and other flora wrapped around trees indicated that the water had been up to 1m higher in recent days. There were lots of toads and small fish (the endemic wadi fish *Garra barreimiae*, a specialised member of the carp family) in the small pools.

Upon reaching the lowest, largest pool, about half a kilometre from the tourist camp, we spent a lovely half hour bathing. The water (post-rain) was very clear and we saw a school of largish fish – approximately 6" long, with striped lower backs. These have since been identified as Tilapia *Oreochromis spp.* and are evidently introduced from time to time by parties unknown. They have never been seen in upper pools, and hopefully never will be.

Health and safety precautions:

Although beautiful, mountain hikes can be dangerous and it is important to go very well prepared, especially in the summer. We take the following precautions:

- In the summer we stick to routes we know – winter is the time for exploring. High summer temperatures are the hiker's biggest enemy.
- Never go solo. Even on a flatish hike it is so easy to go over on an ankle.
- Carry a GPS (I use a Garmin) and if possible load the intended route onto it. Keep in mind that it is always problematic to leave one watershed for another. If you do not get it right, you could wind up very far from where you want to be.
- Take a *large* quantity of water. We use 3-litre bladders in our rucksacks, frozen overnight, plus backup water 0.5-litre plus an energy drink. This for a 4 hour hike. The frozen backpacks also help cool us a little.
- Take some food – we mostly go for fruit but nuts and seeds are a good backup. And energy bars if you like them. Have a little breakfast before starting so that you are not heading off on an empty stomach.
- If you expect to be out for more than a few hours, especially in summer, it is best to limit your caffeine intake – including many popular "energy" drinks. Maybe you need a jolt to wake up but caffeine is a strong diuretic and causes your body to expel the water that you most need to conserve.
- Take a first aid kit, including plasters (some of the rocks are razor sharp), anti-inflammatories, and crepe bandages with pins.
- Block up and/or cover up.
- Long sleeves and hat/cap and, obviously, good hiking shoes.
- Let others know you are off, your intended route and expected time of return or contact.
- Carry mobile phones, although be aware that you can often lose signal (that is part of the attraction!)

Contribution by Tim Chesher (with background from the DNHG Committee) and photos by Mary Eden

Field Clips

Drama and Duty: The Red-Wattled Plover in the Wild

The Red-Wattled Plover *Vanellus indicus*, aka Red-Wattled Lapwing, is an elegant bird but it has suffered from overexposure. Uncommon thirty years ago, it has thrived and multiplied in the UAE not only in its native freshwater wetlands, but also in and around modern irrigated plantations, fodder fields and the wetlands sometimes inadvertently created in association with roads, dams and other infrastructure. Today it is best known as the pesky, squawking "Did-you-do-it?" bird that interrupts the peace of cautious, silent birdwatchers and other naturalists visiting such environments. Its boldness and tolerance of humans has given it an advantage.

But the Red-Wattled Plover (RWP) is not just a lucky winner of the perianthropropic sweepstakes. A mid-May visit to a prosperous wadi bank plantation in the mountains near Al Ghayl reminded us (Binish Roobas, Yusuf Thakur and Gary Feulner) of the real dangers these birds face in the natural environment and the skills, instincts and perseverance that they bring to the task of survival and propagation.

A small concrete dam had been constructed in the wadi bed, between the terraced date palm gardens on either side. It had been two months since rain had fallen and we stopped to look initially at the aquatic life that could be found in the shallow pools that remained. Before long, however, we saw that our arrival (by vehicle) had disturbed a nesting RWP. We expedited our observations and withdrew to a respectful distance. With difficulty, we could pick out the four speckled eggs among the similar-sized rounded cobbles of a low mound that had been, weeks earlier, a stony island in a modest pond behind the dam. Once isolated, the little island was now protected on one side by no more than 2-3 centimetres of water, and so vulnerable to terrestrial predators.

But the four eggs were becoming at risk of overheating. With our withdrawal, the female resumed her post on the clutch, with only the slightest hesitation but without any pretense of contentment, mouth open and panting. It was about 11:30 am and our equipment already showed the air temperature in excess of 40°C. What must it be on the stones of the island? The peak of the day had not yet been reached. It was late in the season. Yusuf had already seen nesting RWPs and chicks much earlier in the year. Was this a second clutch for the mother-to-be? We were asking ourselves these questions when two large raptors appeared overhead, circling acrobatically over the centre of the wadi.

They were Oriental Honey Buzzards *Pernis ptilorhynchus*, as Binish and Yusuf recognised on sight – large, boldly striped birds – and their coordinated flight, soon higher and father afield, led to the suspicion that they were a courting or mating pair. We wondered, belatedly, if they were perhaps merely hunting and, if so, had they had seen the RWP nest. After a few minutes, they flew downstream and out of sight among the palms. But it was only a matter of a minute or two before we had our answer.

As we sat beside our vehicle in the shade of a large palm, watching the overall scene, the male OHB swept up the wadi at a height of about 3 metres and landed, with an impressive flaring of its wings, on top of the concrete dam, just five or six metres from the nesting mother and eggs. But something was wrong.



Red-Wattled Plover (Photo: Binish Roobas)



The clutch of four speckled Red-Wattled Plover eggs. (Photo: Binish Roobas)



The Oriental Honey Buzzard circling over the centre of the wadi. (Photo: Binish Roobas)

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Field Clips /

(Continued from page 5)



Oriental Honey Buzzard landing on top of the concrete dam. (Photo: Binish Roobas)

We will never know exactly what, or why, but the OHB, having got so close, lost its nerve and flew off almost immediately. The male RWP, patrolling in the vicinity had boldly charged the predator immediately but it is also possible that the presence of the three observers, all intently watching and at a distance too close for comfort, was sufficient to put the OHB on guard. In fact, as we were no more the 30 metres from the dam, the buzzard would have been an easy shot for a ready and competent marksman. That, it seems, may have tipped the balance, because there were no further attempts before our departure about a half hour later, although the male RWP continued to patrol the wadi upstream and down.

Our story might have ended there but Yusuf lives in nearby Al Ghayl and was able to visit the site periodically during the following month to observe and film the subsequent events. For a long, hot month, the mother bird sat all day on the open ground, her beak open and panting. At intervals she wetted the brood patch of feathers on her chest in the still-drying pond to keep the eggs cool. But by mid-June, Yusuf was able to report the happy news: all four eggs had hatched, surviving heat and predators, and he had seen the young chicks in action.



The patient, persistent Red-Wattled Plover female, incubating and, protecting her eggs. (Photo: Binish Roobas)

The RWP is not the only bird that has prospered in the modern UAE. The OHB was once considered only a vagrant in the UAE but sightings in recent years, mostly in Ras Al-Khaimah, raise the possibility that it might now be a regular, if uncommon, passage migrant.

Contribution by Binish Roobas, Yusuf Thakur and Gary Feulner



The Red-Wattled Plover female, wetting the brood patch. (Photo: Binish Roobas)



Red-Wattled Plover female with two of her four chicks (Photo -Yousuf Thakur)

The Annual General Meeting Minutes

The DNHG's Annual General Meeting for 2022 was conducted at the June 2022 lecture meeting and covered two years, since no AGM was conducted in 2021. Chairman Gary Feulner apologised for his absence at his school in Nepal. His summary report was read by Vice Chair Valerie Chalmers.

“The past two years, commencing in March 2020, have been an extraordinary and extraordinarily challenging time for the world, and for most local organisations such as ours. So it is a credit to our members, our Committee, our Trip leaders, our Recorders, to all those who have pitched in many different ways, and to the ethos that we have created together over the years, that the DNHG is still strong and active. We made a relatively seamless transition to Zoom meetings and in 2022 we have resumed a relatively full programme of both foreign and UAE field trips. But these things did not just happen; they took concerted attention by all of the concerned Committee members and others.

Let me also take note of the efforts of our sister groups in Abu Dhabi and Qatar to take advantage of the new Zoom world and to share their offerings with us. It's been my experience that Dubai participants are much in evidence in these Zoom audiences, as they were for the NYU-Abu Dhabi online symposium on UAE natural history in December 2021, on the occasion of the UAE's 50th birthday.

We now look forward in the new season, starting in September 2022, and to continuing our lecture program on a hybrid basis, with in-person meetings being 'broadcast' by Zoom. We appreciate having the full assistance of the Emirates Academy IT team to help make that happen.

Also on the IT front during the Covid period, we posted online the two classic illustrated works

on UAE plants: Rob Western's *Flora of the UAE: An Introduction* (from 1989), and Marijcke Jongbloed's *Wild Flowers of the UAE* (2003). We hope to do the same for other out-of-print or hard-to-get classics; we view this as an important public service. In 2021 we also recruited an IT professional and active member, Alexis Biller, to the Committee to help keep our expanding digital domain under control.

Our monthly newsletter, *Gazelle*, has always been part of the glue that holds us together, so it was with sadness that we bid adieu last month to long-time editor Margaret Swan, but happily another stalwart member, Heidi Struiksma, has consented to take up the Editor's quill (or mouse?). We thank her and wish her well, and we hope she will enjoy it as much as her predecessors have seemed to.

Financially, the DNHG reserves built up slowly over the past twenty years served us well and made it possible to keep members on our books without renewal fees for the past two years. The new membership year will commence in September 2022, however, and we will be reinstating the renewal requirement and fee. We expect that the meeting place rental paid to Emirates Academy will increase, taking account of the use of additional equipment and expertise for hybrid meetings.

At end-May 2022, we have somewhat more than AED 26,000 in our current account, approximately AED 71,000 in a fixed deposit account, and somewhat more than AED 2,000 in petty cash, for a total of very nearly AED 100,000."

Following the Chairman's report, the election of DNHG Committee members was conducted. The current slate of members was re-elected, with the substitution of Heidi Struiksma for Margaret Swan as Gazelle Editor and the discontinuation of the Postmaster position with the departure of Sandi Ellis for the U.S. The membership of the new Committee is listed on page 8.

Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) Programme 2021/2022

DNHG Lectures

26 September Yousuf Thakur will present an illustrated talk on
 “My Evolution as Film Maker to a Naturalist”

DNHG Field Trips

7—19 September Madagascar (with a shorter version between 11—19 September)

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

DNHG COMMITTEE 2021/2022

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 2021 to September 2022. 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 were automatically renewed for 2021- 2022, without a renewal fee. As we will be starting hybrid meetings from September, renewal fees can be paid at meetings or by the methods mentioned below.

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.