

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Here, there and everywhere during Eid

A number of members travelled during 'Eid Al-Adha, some with an emphasis on natural history. Here's a sampling:

Mike and Mary Beardwood visited Yemem for a week. Mary says it was a "fantastic adventure but even us long term residents of Arabia suffered from some culture shock. The sight of the hotel guns and other weapons must be deposited at reception" seemed to say it all. However if you have any aspirations to understand the history of the area Yemen is a must."

Valerie Chalmers went ever further afield, to Johannesburg, South Africa, where she braved some of the last of the rains that had flooded Mozambique and visited several nearby game parks. She also roughed it with a visit to the Sun City resort.

The 'Eid was a bit like old home week in the Jebel Akhdar. **Peter van Amsterdam** and **Anne Millen** did the breathtaking (and knee-shaking) "rim walk" high on the walls of Oman's Grand Canyon. On their way home they me...

... **Gary Feulner**, who, with **Nick Hopher**, had climbed to the summit of Jebel Shams for a view of the Wadi Sahtan bowl. Anne supposed that the high Jebel Akhdar was an unlikely place for snails but Gary was able to report that at least 5 species of land snails were present, including 3 endemic species, i.e., found only in the mountains of northern Oman and the UAE. Gary remarked on Nick's knack for spotting likely snail graveyards.

Brian Jolly was also in the Jebel Akhdar, but the only natural history observer he's so far reported was a sighting of Gary.

It is nice to be remembered (and also to be reminded that there is life after Dubai). **Lex Nelson** and **Glenice Alkon** now in New South Wales have kept up their DNHG membership. They write "We enjoy receiving the newsletter but always feel a little sad that we cannot join in the activities any more". However they are discovering plenty of things of interest in their own backyard.

An unusual sight greeted **Anna** and **Peter Griffin** when they ventured out to dine at the Dubai Marine Beach Club recently. They

saw two mute swans floating out to sea. At first Anna thought the pair must be artificial but when they started to move further out to sea and were attempting to feed along the way, there was no doubt that they were real.

Members' Night 4th June 2000

This is the last meeting of the season. Following tradition we shall have four members each speaking about his/her chosen topic of interest. (See Page 8).

The speakers this year will be:

Helen Emery
Mike Louigan
Luban Mirhac
Kim White

Further details will be found in the May issue of Gazelle

This month's Contributors

The Editor would like to thank the following for their reports:

Jen Denning
Gary Feulner
Anna Griffin



Inter-Emirates Weekend

A full report will appear in the May edition of *Gazelle*. The weekend was very well attended, with record numbers participating. Our thanks to Beryl Comer, Valerie Chalmers and Peter Griffin, and the field trip leaders for giving of their time and making the weekend such a success.

Wadi Naqab Trek

Wadi Naqab is the largest Musandam watershed south of Wadi Bin Nick. Hephher's field trip last month was intended to introduce participants to trekking in the Musandam and to a terraced settlement deep within the mountains for a better appreciation for the life that many local people led until relatively recently. Nick had emphasized general fitness as a prerequisite, and this was particularly important since the day turned out to be somewhat hotter than expected.

The car journey up the wadi – 45 minutes over a rough track, will be enough to keep this route off the tourist circuit. Not far beyond the end of the vehicle track the wadi becomes a very steep sided gorge. The 'Trail' is generally in the boulder wadi bed, but ascends and follows the cliff-sides in a few places to circumvent major obstacles such as boulder falls with house-sized boulders.

Vegetation is usually relatively sparse in Musandam wadis, and because of the continuing drought many of the scattered trees were in poor condition. Nevertheless, a few fig trees (both wadi figs and mountain figs) had managed to bear fruit, and a few *Moringa* trees were in flower. Other local and natural highlights included a large (25 cm) shelf fungus and one of the first White-Edged Rock Brown butterflies of the season. The WERB, like the unloved yellow and red brown hornet,

Vespa orientalis, still keeps a temperate climate life cycle. It hatches in the spring, then spends the summer trying to keep cool before breeding and dying in the fall, with the new generation wintering as slow growing larvae.

The terraced settlement was a mix of old and new. One house had a painted metal door, a modern lock and a new roof on an annex to the original structure. Others had caved-in timber roofs. The fields intended for cultivation were steeply terraced and now barren, but their one-time productivity was evident by the presence of a number of stone stonchousos, some still well saved. Several abandoned dwellings contained large jars, some plastered together along a wall in traditional fashion. Nick made a special point to show off the gracing hut, complete with four grinstones of imported origin, two of green schist and two of conglomeratic limestone.

Perhaps the most striking observation of the day was the number of dead goats observed en route, some four dozen or so, both young and adults, lying intermittently along the wadi bed and scattered within the settlement – testimony, most probably to the severity of the current drought. Most of the victims had died with demonstrably full stomachs. Goats do not normally need to drink regularly but the dry vegetation seems not to have provided sufficient moisture.

Report by Gary Heulner

Olive Tree in Wadi Hayl

Reza Khan was proud to announce that his Inter-Emirates field trip, studying the indigenous trees of the UAE, found a one hundred year old wild olive tree at less than 150 meters elevation in Wadi Hayl.

It is presumed to be a descendant of the wild olive population found on the north and north east slopes of the high ridges a few kilometers to the south and west of Wadi Hayl.

Rams Beach Shelling

The 26th March found Peter and Anna Griffin and friends at Rams Beach where they lured up several *Nautilus* along the tide line. One shell contained an octopus with eggs and another just the eggs. This was an exciting first find for them and on their return they handed over the shell containing the eggs and octopus to Beryl Comer and Sandy Fowler for further analysis.

Our Next Speaker

Mark Beech is a British environmental archaeologist based at the University of York in the UK. He has been coming out to the UAE each year since 1994 to carry out fieldwork for the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey (ADIAS) project and the National Museum of Ras Al-Khaimah. For the past three years he has been carrying out his PhD research on modelling ancient marine resource exploitation in the Arabian Gulf, especially focussing on the UAE Gulf coastline. This talk will focus on his analysis of archaeological fish bones from the region. Archaeological remains of fishing equipment, traditional fishing methods as well as the state of modern fisheries will also be discussed.

For further details about Mark Beech's research you may visit: <http://www-users.york.ac.uk/~mjb17>
This site is a mirrored at: http://home.freeuk.net/mark_beech/



Send in your reports to griff@emirates.net.ae, or deliver them on floppy disk at monthly meetings, or fax to 394 0352 (minimum point size 14 please).

Mangrove Mystery Snail Identified

The December 1999 Gazette reported on a mystery snail found on a mangrove leaf by Dr Richard Hornby in a forest on the Da'alyah Peninsula, west of Abu Dhabi. Dr Eike Neubert of Frankfurt viewed a sketch and gave his opinion that it was clearly a member of the Family Melampidae (formerly Ellobiidae) and he believed it was genus *Melampus*. This is also the view of Horst Kauch, our February speaker, who identified it as *Melampus castaneus* (#853 in *Seashells of Eastern Arabia* by Bosch et al.). This determination was recorded via Dr David George of the British Museum (Natural History).

Hornby has found this snail at several sites, in different habitats, but only in mangroves, all around high water mark. Although the specimen collected by Dick Hornby did not show the characteristic teeth on the external wall of the aperture, Horst says this characteristic is absent in juvenile shells.

SEA says of the Melampidae/Ellobiids that they are "an extensive family of air-breathing gastropods characteristic of muddy, brackish water biotopes, such as mangrove swamps." They are also typically very small (Dick Hornby's specimen was only 8 mm) and are often overlooked. Eike Neubert writes that he has recently collected some 8 new species of this family from the Arabian Gulf, and more can be expected. He says they are common

littoral species that can easily be found in any seashore debris, if you inspect carefully for tiny shells. He warns that names are subject to change, however, as the group needs a serious taxonomic revision.

Report by Gary Feulner

Snug as a Slug in a . . .

The DNHC's efforts to record the land snail fauna of the UAE have already turned up some surprises. The most recent is an unusually large garden slug found in the nostril of a racehorse in Abu Dhabi. The horse in question, after its morning meal and a swim, began to show signs of discomfort. Experts were quickly summoned but found no obvious cause and suspected colic. Suddenly, after about ten minutes, the horse snorted vigorously and blew out an 8.5 cm garden slug. This was at first feared to be a leech. The specimen found its way to Dr Ulrich Wehnery at Dubai's Central Veterinary Laboratory, then to the Dubai Post Control Laboratory, and finally to the DNHC.

The slug appears to be identical with *Laevicaulis alta*, the only slug yet known from Arabia. It is a common garden slug in Dubai and elsewhere in the Gulf, but is confined to areas of human habitation or agriculture and is therefore thought to be introduced by human activity. The species is believed to be native to Africa, but it is now widespread around the Indian Ocean.

How did it come to be in a racehorse's nostril? The prime suspect is alfalfa or Lucerne, fed to the horses every few days and grown locally in Al-Ain. It is said to arrive fresh and very moist. The guaranteed moisture of an agricultural environment may account not only for the slug's presence but also for its size, which tops that of the largest reported from Africa in the scientific literature (8.0 cm). *L. alta* is not

known to be associated with pathogenic organisms, but an 8.0 cm slug in a nostril must be presumed to cause breathing difficulty.

Concern about leeches was not unfounded, however, as the racehorse story describes the classic infection path for large mammals, in particular horses and cattle, by the leech *Limneris natica*, which is known from the UAE and Oman (e.g., Abouls and Kilian) and which can reach a similar size.

Report by Gary Feulner

Giant Mud Creeper at Khor Kalba

Inter-Emirates Weekend allowed Gary Feulner to resume his investigations of two distinctive molluscs at Khor Kalba. In addition to leading a field trip, he stayed on to survey the population of the giant mud creeper, *Tarbotula palaestris*, which he estimates conservatively at a minimum of some 20,000. Although *T. palaestris* was a common faunal resource on the coasts of the Northern Emirates until about 2000 years ago, it is now thought to be extinct in the Arabian Gulf and the Khor Kalba population is the only natural site population in the UAE.

In addition, he found that the mangrove tree snail, *Littoraria intermedia*, is present in mangrove shrubs even at the uppermost reaches of each of the three main channels at Khor Kalba.

Both the giant mud creeper and the mangrove tree snail have pelagic (ocean-going) larval stages. This allows them to colonize far-flung but suitable sites throughout the Indian Ocean, and also to maintain genetic homogeneity despite the existence of apparently isolated local populations.



The Arabian Ostrich

The Arabian ostrich (*Struthio camelus syriacus*) is now extinct. It was a smaller bird than the various living African forms and was first fully described only in 1919 by Lord Rothschild. Within two decades of its being named, the Arabian ostrich had become extremely rare and perhaps extinct, without any study of it having been made in the wild.

The ostrich has been known to the human inhabitants of the oases and stopovers of Arabia and nearby areas of the Middle East since ancient times. The ostrich figures regularly in prehistoric rock paintings throughout the region and the eggs have been found as grave goods in prehistoric burial mounds in Bahrain. There are several mentions of it in the Bible and in the Koran.

The Arabian ostrich was a subspecies of the world's largest living bird. Because of its size, even travellers who did not normally observe wildlife remarked upon it when seen. It left tracks which were easily recognizable, its skins and products were sold in the souks, and its eggshells lay in the desert long after they had hatched. Thus there are many written records available today. It is ironic that we know more about the nineteenth and early twentieth century range of this bird than of any other Arabian bird species.

In plotting a map of the former distribution from the various records, it became apparent that there were two separate populations of the ostrich in Arabia. This was seemingly not identified before. One population inhabited the edge of the Rub' al Khali -- the Empty Quarter -- in southeastern Arabia. The other population was in north-western Arabia, around the present Saudi Arabia frontier with Jordan.

In the Rub' al Khali the ostrich appears to have become extinct around 1900 to 1910, although none of the available records is precise as to either date or place. Unlike the Rub' al Khali, the northern half of the Arabian peninsula was explored during the nineteenth century by a number of Europeans but very few actually saw an ostrich alive in the wild. Several "last records" are mentioned. Some put extinction as early as 1852 but others indicate that a few birds survived until about 1944. There is one report that a dying ostrich was found as late 1966.

The recorded information on the life history of Arabian ostriches is very small, and much of it is now known to be erroneous or fanciful. The general environment in which the ostrich lives in Africa necessitates far-ranging wandering for food and water, and the species is therefore nomadic. The desert areas of Arabia where the bird was formerly found are almost as arid as these African regions and the Arabian birds would certainly have been nomadic. The ostrich is omnivorous: its food is mostly vegetable -- roots, leaves, flowers, fruits, and seeds -- but insects, reptiles, and other small animals are also eaten. The Arabian ostrich almost certainly managed without free water in the wild. Water would simply not have been available for much of the year over most of its range. The bird seems to have bred in mid-winter, 12 to 21 eggs being laid. Both parents incubate the eggs and the chicks hatch in spring.

Ostriches are known to have a complex social structure. In Africa, the male ostrich often collects a harem of several females which all lay in the same nest. There is no evidence of one female laying in several nests.

By all accounts, the ostrich was always extremely wary of man, for good reason. It was universally pursued for profit and food and ostriches were valuable prizes,

especially for their feathers and oil. Ostrich chicks were taken whenever possible and were easy to tame and rear. They were kept to sell to travellers, reared for the pot, or kept as pets. The eggs were eaten as a delicacy. The shells were used as oil-lamps and water containers, to decorate mosques, and as souvenirs of pilgrimages. The feathers decorated shoes.

It is probable that the species would have survived traditional hunting from horseback but the massacre from motor vehicles from the 1920s and 1930s brought a rapid end, and the Arabian ostrich was hunted to extinction.

Excerpted and adapted by Gary Feulner, from M.C. Jennings, "The distribution of the extinct Arabian ostrich Struthio camelus syriacus Rothschild, 1919" in Fauna of Saudi Arabia, vol. 8 (1986). Mike Jennings is currently the coordinator of the Atlas of Breeding Birds of Arabia (ABBA) project, and the editor of its annual newsletter, Phoenix. You can visit the ABBA website at <http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/arabianbirds/>.



Reminder: Snails and Slugs

Your unwanted land snails and slugs are wanted for scientific study and an accounting of the terrestrial and freshwater snails of the UAE.

All specimens will be gratefully accepted by Chairman Gary Feulner, and contributors will be kept informed of progress. There have already been a few surprises. It's easy. Just bag 'em and tag 'em! Please remember to record the location and the habitat as well as your name, the date, and any remarks.



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The recorders are not necessarily so-called 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 Gazette editor, so new information can be shared with all our readers.

Geology of Oman

For touring Oman with an emphasis on natural history, Samir Hanna's Geology of Oman is highly recommended. This spiral-bound guide not only explains the geology and geologic history of northern Oman; it also includes 17 self-drive field trips with detailed geographical and geological notes. These make for an excellent day, weekend or long weekend. Most people who've seen it have asked, "Where did I get one?" Unfortunately, like so many natural history books, it is not readily available in the UAE. It is published by The Historical Association of Oman and can be ordered through Dubai bookstores or from the Family Bookshop in Oman, which has branches in Muscat and its suburbs.

Latest Tribulus

Tribulus no. 9.2 (Autumn/Winter 1999) is now available. This issue contains articles on mosses of the UAC mountains, archaeological investigation of Wadi Safad on the East Coast, the story of Al-Wathba lake where flamingoes now breed, excavation of the Portuguese fort at Bidiyah, a newly established population of rock hyrax on Jebel Hafeef, a couple of demoscopes new to the UAE, and a wadi that flows to both the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. It also contains a number of short reviews and research notes. Copies are available at DNHG meetings for Dh5 15.

Hidden Riches

Hidden Riches, by Abu Dhabi author and amateur naturalist and archaeologist Peter Hallyor, was unveiled to DNHG members at its Emirates Weekender. This lavishly and attractively illustrated book is aptly subtitled "An Archaeological Introduction to the United Arab Emir-

ates." It provides a welcome and relatively extensive chronological account of the history of human society in the LAE as a whole, from what little is so far known of stone age culture here, through the successive Hafit, Umm An-Nar, Wad-Suq, Iron Age, Hellenistic/Parthian, Pre-Islamic and finally the early, mid- and late Islamic periods.

Throughout, the author draws on first person accounts by many of the archaeologists who have worked in the UAE, and relates findings here to events and cultures elsewhere in the greater Near East. Added bonuses include a time chart and an illustrated account of the major archaeological projects that have been undertaken in the country. If the interested amateur were to buy only one book about the archaeology of the UAE, Hidden Riches should be it.

Traveller's Advisory

Car Trouble Double

It's always inconvenient to have automobile trouble in out-of-the-way places. When it happens, there's nothing more welcome than assistance from an out-of-the-way workshop.

Unfortunately, a potential problem in these situations is the possible use of imitation and substandard parts. This usually means there's a further price to be paid down the road. Recent experience of a couple of DNHG members leaves them wondering whether "emergency repairs" may have been responsible for (1) a clutch that failed unexpectedly within less than two years, and (2) narrow brake tires that suffered three flats in two days on well-used off-road tracks.



Off Road Etiquette on DHNG Field Trips

Here are a few safety pointers for those unfamiliar with the etiquette of travelling "off-road" in a group, whether it be driving or hiking:

- 1.0 Before the day of the field trip, find out about the itinerary and any particular points, such as levels of fitness for hiking, driving skills and equipment required.
- 2.0 Field trip members should stay together as a group under the trip leader's guidance. Nobody should strike out alone or as a splinter group.
- 3.0 Upon departure in a group/convoy make sure you have identified both the leader and the appointed "tail-end Charlie".
- 4.0 You have the responsibility to maintain the minimum safe driving distance whilst following the vehicle in front of you (allowing for dust clouds and stones thrown up, as well as animals).
- 5.0 You have the responsibility to be aware of the vehicle behind you. If it has a problem and the driver must slow down or stop, attract the attention of the driver in front of you by flashing your headlights and/or sounding your horn. Before stopping to render assistance. Your signals should filter through to the leader, so that the convoy doesn't get spilt up.
- 6.0 Points made in 4.0 and 5.0 also apply to hiking: keep up the pace but be aware of possible problems/stragglers behind in an effort to maintain the integrity of the group.
- 7.0 Any problems should be directed to the trip leader and/or "tail-end Charlie".
- 8.0 Under no circumstances should anyone leave a convoy or hike, to set off home, without notifying the trip leader.

Guidelines drawn up by Jan Denning

Dick Hornby steps down as ENHG Chairman

Dr Richard Hornby, professional biologist, first scientific Director of the National Avian Research Centre (NARC), lecturer and author of several commissioned studies of the flora, fauna and environment of the UAE, and Chairman since September 1993 of the Emirates Natural History Group in Abu Dhabi, stepped down as ENHG Chairman in March in order to accommodate increasing professional responsibilities as Academic Editor for the Encyclopaedia of Life Support Systems, a project of Abu Dhabi's International Centre for Water and Energy Systems. Fortunately, Dick will remain available as a resource for all those interested in the wildlife

and environment of the UAE.

The Abu Dhabi Islands

Studies of the western islands of Abu Dhabi have shown that they played a crucial part in the country's ancient history. Says Peter Helyer, Director of the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey, "Many of the western islands are almost deserted today, but the evidence from archaeological surveys and excavations shows that they have been of major importance for the development of the country from around 7,000 years ago until the end of the pearling industry around fifty years ago. Islands like Kafai, the two Yasals, Sir Bari Yas and Merawah, and as far east as Abu Al Abyadh and Da

Khushaishan (Al Aryam), were part of a marine based society that exploited the resources of the sea, not just for survival, but for International trade.

"Before the collapse of the pearling industry, Abu Dhabi's western islands were a crucial part of the country's economy for thousands of years," Helyer added "The archaeological evidence shows that these islands are an integral part of the history of the country and of its people."

Excerpted from an article from the Emirates News Agency May 25th 1999



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Bird Watch for March

The spring migration may be coming to an end but the breeding season is well under way with a pair of white-tailed plovers at Dubai's Wimpey Pits, and a pair of Bonelli's eagles at Qurrayat, both displaying. A grasshopper warbler was seen at the Emirates golf course, along with an adult white-eyed buzzard.

A new wave of arrivals was in evidence including European bee-eaters and Rufous bushchats. At Mushrif Park were a spotted eagle and a masked shrike, while three daytime roosts for Bruce's (straw) song owl were located. At the Wimpey pits in Dubai were ringed and grey plovers, bar-tailed godwits, Texas and curlew sandpipers and a black eared wheatear. A possible buff-bellied pipit was seen in Creekside Park. A short-

eared and a barn owl were reported from Nadia Sheba.

Elsewhere in the Emirates, a red-footed falcon was over Al Wathba, and the great knot is still at Umm al-Qaiwan. A crested honey buzzard and a honey buzzard were seen over Abu Dhabi's Mushrif Palace Gardens. Rufous bushchats are now appearing at Al Jazeerah Khor.

The above report is taken from *Teethers' Guide*, edited by Simon Aspinall and Peter Hsiyar, PO Box 45553, Abu Dhabi,

e-mail: hsiyar@emirates.net.ae

Excerpted by Anna Griffin



Welcome to the DNHG Committee

And thanks to James Pardoe who has volunteered to help set up and operate our audio-visual equipment at meetings, succeeding outgoing Engineering Officer Bob White. James and his mother Mary Ann have been regulars at monthly meetings and field trips since their arrival in Dubai last Autumn.

We still have a vacancy for Membership Secretary, the requirements for this position are computer literacy and familiarity with Access database, and a necessity to attend meetings, where most of the members join or renew. Please contact any of the committee members if you feel that you could help out in this capacity.

GAZELLE

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

Lectures at Jumeirah English Speaking School, Gymnasium 7.30 pm for 8.00 pm

June 4: Members' Night
John Emery - Ethiopia: People, Culture and Religion
Mike Lorrison - Kuwait Oil Fires
Luban Mriac - Scorpions' Tales
Kim White - Raising Egyptian Tortoises

Sept 17 Peter Cunningham - Adaptations of Desert Mammals/Reptiles

Field Trips (DNHG members only, please).

April 20/21 Sir Bani Yas Island
A chance to see the flora, fauna and archaeological sites
on this privately owned island.



Mrs Valerie CHALMERS
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From: DNI G, PO Box 9234, Dubai, UAE