

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP
PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Mountains, beaches and gardens

The off-road trip from Ras Al-Khaimah to Dibba, via Wadi Bih, is one of those must-do UAE journeys, popular with residents and visitors alike. Most people drive it, some hike it, and Editor **Anna Griffin** recently stepped away from the keyboard to run it, as part of the annual Wadi Bih Relay Race.

Member **Joyce Goldsby** reports seeing large numbers of small jelly fish washed up along the Jumeirah Beach. Anna Griffin noticed this as well at Mina Seyah beach. The jelly fish were poetically described by her young visitor as looking like 'teardrops on the sand'.

Peter and **Anna Griffin** were delighted to have a visit from a blue rock thrush, which flew down into their garden to take a dead mouse left by a neighbour's cat. This brings the total bird count in their garden to 20. Can anyone beat this record?

Please note that our
May meeting will be
held on the 30th
April.

Our Next Speaker

Dr Marijcke Jongbloed arrived in the UAE in 1983 and worked as a General Practitioner in both Al Ain and Dubai until 1986 when she was appointed manager of the Sharjah Desert Park project, until summer 1999. Marijcke is currently freelancing, with the major objective of completing the definitive flora for the UAE and adjacent areas within the next three years. Marijcke has been looking specifically at plants, as well as everything else living in the desert since her first day here. She has written several books about natural history, and "Green Guide to the Emirates" (published by Motivate) was the first of its kind in 1989. In 1993 after a winter in which many of the bigger cats of the desert were killed, Marijcke set up the Arabian Leopard Trust. ALT is still working on its last objective of helping to create a nature reserve for cougars in the northern mountains.



New DNHG Committee

Want to get more involved?

The Committee for the year 2000 is looking for new volunteers to help in running the group. In particular:

- 1.0 Membership Secretary to attend meetings and keep records of membership.
- 2.0 Engineering Officer to set up the projector and microphone at meetings.
- 3.0 Sales Assistant to help with the sale of publications at meetings.

If you feel that you could help please contact any of the committee members, names and numbers can be found on page 7.

This month's Contributors

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

Valerie Chalmers
Janke Cunningham
Peter Cunningham
Helen Emery
Gary Feulner
Anna Griffin



Field Trips

Trek up Wadi Naqab Friday 24 March

Nick Hophur will lead this trek and will meet everyone at the Hilton Hotel carpark next to the Hilton Fitness Centre at 6.30am. The trek will be rigorous and will take approximately 8 hours, with breaks. Participants must be physically fit and play an active sport on a regular basis. The intention is to acquaint members of how the UAL mountain tribes people lived prior to the advent of oil, and how they survived in such barren and inhospitable places.

For more details and to sign up, write Nick Hophur, phone 052 4819071 or fax 2216288.

Wadi Walk Friday 7 April

Alan Hartley will lead this walk of 3 to 4 hours, along a wadi of the Hatta/Madina road. Reasonable fitness is required. 4 wheel drive preferred though not essential. The trip will be limited to 15 people. Bring plenty of water and wear appropriate footwear.

For further details and to sign up, contact Jan Denning or phone/fax 3311463.

Abu Dhabi Western Region Coast

The coastal bluffs of the Sila' Peninsula and Shuwaihat Island in Abu Dhabi's Western Region are unique within the UAE: cliffs and terraces of red, pink and white sandstone and gypsum stepping down to the sea; a shoreline that ranges from sandy beach to deeply sculptured rock pavement; strandlines strewn with pearl oysters and clear gypsum slabs; "backlands" with tables and towers

of sculptured soft stone like the ruins of an ancient city; and plateaux paved with nodules of pink gypsum.

Donna Simon fell in love with this area years ago when she worked in Ruwais. She still delights in it and was the perfect guide for last month's DNHG visit. A steep unroute whetted everyone's appetite with views of a crystal clear sea and fringing reef. Also, the exotic species count rose with a pair of monkeys at a fishermen's camp. Overnight was on the beach north of Sila' beside a low tide that seemed to recede for miles - discouraging all but one determined snorkeler. A lack of 25 Laminogoes was a good omen.

On Friday Donna led the group north over hill and dale along the shoreline to Ras Mushayyib. Highlights included 3 dolphin skulls, the backbone of a small dolphin, a pair of flamingo wings (inhabited by a small centipede), a dead green turtle and several dead cormorants, some great black-headed gulls, a banded lead-headed agama and a pair of osprey nesting within a stone's throw of the main graded track to the point (giving hope for conservation efforts after all). On the down side, human-generated flotsam was everywhere abundant on the seaward shorelines.

Most of the group headed for home at mid-afternoon. Those who remained creviced past more fishermen's camps and around the restricted area of the 'Jisziyyah Island cape and on to Ras Ghumays, the westmost of the 3 capes of the peninsula, stopping here and there to beachcomb and to watch birds, fish, molluscs, dragonflies, etc. Fox prints were common in many localities. The trip closed memorably at the farthest reaches of the UAE with dramatic views from the high bluffs looking west across a bay to Saudi Arabian territory.

Because this area is seldom visited, it still holds promise of many

surprises. For birders it was a wheatear weekend with several kinds in evidence, as well as a Caspian tern, grey heron, western reef heron (both dark and white phase) plus a desert warbler, swallow, pallid swift, oystercatcher, isabelline shrike and several unidentified warblers and larks.

Beachcombers found some familiar intertidal species but also some unfamiliar glossy winkles not readily identifiable and a variety of delicate sponges and seaweeds. The area would well repay a weekend (or more) of closer scrutiny by interested amateurs.

Several participants, including Donna, were heard making plans to return again. And now may be the time. At Ras Ghumays, at least, it is uncertain whether public access will survive final completion of the naval base and airstrip now under construction.

Report by Gary Feulner

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.





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).

DNHG Fossil Trip to Jebel Rawdah and Jebel Buhays

30 members set out in convoy on February 1st to visit these two fossil sites.

At Jebel Rawdah late Cretaceous marine sediments directly overlie ophiolite on the northern side. However, at the south-eastern end they rest on deformed and steeply dipping sedimentary rocks of the Hawasina group. On arrival at the chosen site (the south-eastern end) we stopped for a brief break and a briefing before setting out to hunt for fossils. A good selection was collected over a period of one and a half hours. This proved to be the more lucrative site in terms of fossils found. In the lower beds specimens of the gastropod *Acteonella* together with the large nudist *Dictyoptychus*, specimens of hippurids, the echinoids *Faujasia* and *Orthopsis miliaris*. Succeeding beds revealed many examples of the solitary discoidal coral *Cyatholites* the bivalve *Scabratrigonia* (Trigonidae) in many places, the larger benthic foraminifera *Lofusis*, the large echinoid *Hemipneustes* (two species – *H. arabicus* and possibly *H. persicus*), the smaller echinoids *Globator*, *Conulus*, *Haltopsis* and *Nucleopygus*, lots of gastropods including many examples of the flattened type (*Trochacea*) and *Natica*, and many bivalves including *Neithou*, lophate oysters, mussels and cockles. Further up were more examples of *Dictyoptychus* and the large gastropod *Campanile*. Another type of solitary coral *Pattalophylla* and specimens of the small nudist *Glabroboumonia* were also found at this site.

After an identification session followed by lunch, we made our way to Jebel Buhays, where Upper Cretaceous

Simsima Limestones unconformably overlie basaltic lavas (ophiolites) which once formed the ancient sea floor on which the sediments have accumulated. We approached Jebel Buhays from the front side and went to investigate a different area from the one on our last trip in November 1998. We searched for fossils for about an hour after a short briefing. Small specimens of the gastropod *Acteonella* came from a hard 80 cm thick sandy biocalcitic shell bed at the base of the Simsima formation plus specimens of the gastropod *Campanile* and fragments of the nudist *Durania*. Beds rich in echinoids including *Globator* and *Nucleopygus*, in particular, gastropods and olivines and the small nudist *Glabroboumonia* succeeded the shell bed. Above this was a bed full of large shells of *Acteonella* and other molluscs. A few specimens of the large nudist *Dictyoptychus* and the gastropod *Campanile* were also found here.

After another identification session we made our way back to Dubai.

Report by Valerie Chalmers

Viper Vetted

Careful readers will remember that Catherine Al-Hayani stood her ground to photograph the viper that surprised the lead hikers during the DNHG's 'wet' wadi walk in December. Catherine has duly reported back with prints which show the snake from a safe but useful distance. The problem is to distinguish between the closely related carpet viper (*Echis coloratus*) and sawscale viper (*Echis carinatus*). The color patterns of the two are similar, complicated and somewhat variable, so that it is necessary to focus on other diagnostic details. Expert taxonomic techniques, which rely on such features as the number of scales below the eye, are of relatively little use in the field. Knowledgeable field workers have nevertheless pointed out a number of distinguishing characteristics that can be observed in captive animals (for example, at the new Arabian Wildlife Centre in Sharjah) and are consistent with field observations. Among these are:

- (1) The head of the carpet viper is always broad and triangular, whereas the head of the sawscale viper is often more oval in shape.
- (2) The carpet viper never exhibits white markings except along the spine, whereas the sawscale viper may show smaller white streaks and splashes on its upper sides.
- (3) The carpet viper has a dark line on the side of its face that runs diagonally down and backwards from the eye.
- (4) The sawscale viper has a distinct, multi-lined "arrow" shaped marking on the top of its head, whereas the carpet viper typically has no markings (but may have pale or indistinct markings).

If a good photograph can be taken, it may also be possible to compare the overall color pattern with either a live specimen or a photographic reference. Excellent photographs can be seen in Christian Grass's article "Terrestrial Reptiles and Amphibians" in *Natural Emirates*, and in Michael Gallagher's booklet, *Snakes of the Arabian Gulf and Oman*.

On the basis of all of the foregoing, Catherine's viper appears to be a carpet viper (*Echis coloratus*). The only cause for doubt is the presence of a noticeable but not distinctive arrow-shaped marking on top of the head. The carpet viper was the expected choice, since this is by far the more common of the two in the mountain environment. There exists, in fact, some difference of opinion concerning whether the sawscale viper can properly be called a mountain dweller at all. It has been said to avoid rocky areas and although it has been reckoned the most common snake in most environments in the UAE and Oman, this generalization has been qualified as to the mountains and deep sand deserts. As always, reader observations and photographs can help to answer questions such as this.

Report by Gary Fulmer



The Dhow Trip

This adventurous group met at Dibba on the breezy morning of Friday 18th February, and located the dhow which was to take them up the Musandam Peninsula.

A superb mountain backdrop was observed as they moved away from the harbour, with typical Omani houses along the sandy beaches just outside Dibba. A scattering of Samur trees, acacia tortilis, dotted on the mountain looked like mushrooms, giving small areas of shade. A few Hanging Caper capper's cartilagenia and Wadi Fig ficus cordata salicifolia, seemed to be clinging to the rock surfaces, looking so green in this arid area.

The dhow passed several small fishing boats with fishing nets set, attracting gulls and terns for an easy breakfast. The wind became quite gusty and one or two hats were skilfully rescued from the sea by the crew. The dhow chugged past some deep caves and ventured into a couple of bays as well as a natural harbour with a busy village community of stone houses, and a white mosque which dominated the water front.

The crew dropped anchor at a small bay where some brave souls swam and snorkelled in the company of a number of jelly fish. The water, though murky, was thought to be warmer than Dubai.

Three sightings of osprey as well as one little grey heron. Two grey wagtails were seen in the harbour area on return to Dibba, as well as a very dead hammer head shark.

Thanks to Peter van Amsterdam for organising such an interesting and restful day.

Report by Anna Griffin

The Jebel Bu Faraj Hike

On Friday 25th February 19 people turned out for the 'nike/scramble' climb up Jebel Bu Faraj. In this

year's first recorded temperature of 30 degrees C. Apparently the name means 'Father of the Solution (to the problem!)' The hike did prove more strenuous than several people had expected, so it could be said that it is an aptly named mountain!

The group set off, following the wadi bed as it wound and rose up the side of the mountain, which meant a fair amount of scrambling over boulders. However, Helen had chosen this particular route as the alternative (going straight up the side of the mountain), would have been much steeper, with loose rocks. They were lucky enough to see several water scorpions in a rock pool, along with a solitary dragon fly and numerous toads. In the lower part of the wadi there were several Sidr trees. These trees are indigenous to mountain and wadi regions in this part of the world, and bear fruit and flowers twice a year. Salah Al Halyan said that the fruit is regarded as a local delicacy and can be found for sale in the market at Dhadid. Sidr trees are also very thorny and tend to catch in the clothing of passers by.

The only mammals they saw were camels and feral donkeys which roam the plains around the mountain but Helen thought she saw an Indian Roller near the top, but at 1000 metres was this rather high for a Roller? Other, small unidentified birds were seen, and the usual crows. The top of Bu Faraj offers some spectacular views of the area, and forms part of the border between Oman and the UAE. Today there is a huge concrete bollard in place, with plaques showing the Omani and Emirati national emblems on each side. Ten years ago while hiking in the Rus al Jibal area between RAK and the Musandam, it was quite common to see old lateral dishdashas on crossed sticks, rather like a scarecrow, on the top of mountains. It was assumed these were being used as border markers!

Report by Helen Emery

Bird Watch Feb/Mar, a brief overview

The Spring migration is well under way. Some highlights from the Dubai area include a pair of striated scops owls and a redstart at Mushrif Park, and a spotted eagle and long-legged buzzard over Khor Dubai. A meadow pipit and 11 song thrushes were in Safa Park. A woodchat shrike, red-rumped swallow, pied wheatears, blue rock thrushes, chiffchaffs and Menetries and orphean warblers as well as a purple heron at Emirates Golf Course.

In Za'beel were the first of the season steppe grey shrike, as well as woodchat shrikes and a pale phase booted eagle. Dubai's Wimpay pita had numerous little grosbeak young, white tailed plovers, marsh and Montagu's harriers as well as Tomlinson's stints and citrine wagtails.

Elsewhere in the Emirates red-breasted mergensers were reported at Dreamland beach in Umm al Qaiwain. Hypocolius remain at Ghentul where an Egyptian nightjar was also seen, while an adult golden eagle performed well in the deep desert. Abu Dhabi's golden plover continues to delight and a golden eagle nest with a single chick was found by a group including British explorer Sir Wilfred Thesiger in the Empty Quarter in Southern Abu Dhabi.

At the Al Wathba camel track a pale phase booted eagle, a crested honey buzzard, marsh and pallid harriers, ruff, courser, bimaculated larks and many more – obviously a good place to visit for the birder.

The above report is taken from *Twitchers' Guide*, edited by Simon Aspinall and Peter Hellyer, PO Box 45553, Abu Dhabi, o.mail hollyer@emirates.net.ae





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Plants - Valerie Chalmers
(see above)

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 Gazette editor, so new information can be shared with all our readers.

Seasonal Time Budget Comparison for Spiny-Tail Lizards (Dhubs)

Winter observations of the daily activity pattern, of a population of Spiny-tail lizards (*Uromastyx aegyptius microlepis*), in the Al Ain region has resulted in the following comparisons: (Summer comparisons are indicated in parenthesis).

The lizards emerge later during the hot summer months, with the earliest emergence recorded at 09h10 (08h55) and the peak between 10h30 and 12h00 (with an average ambient temperature of 22°C (30°C) at emergence). More time above ground is spent basking, with an average of 2 hours 32 minutes (1h40m) spent on this activity. Basking accounts for 23% (14%) of the total available daylight. Five of the 20 study individuals did not emerge at all to bask and/or forage, something not

observed during the summer observations. Time spent foraging was on average 53 minutes (23 minutes) which is 8% (4%) of the available daylight. A peak foraging period occurs between 12h00 and 14h00 (09h00 and 10h00) with lizards returning to their burrows when the ambient temperature is 23°C (40°C). Only 45% of the observed individuals ventured out to forage as opposed to 95% during summer. This can be attributed to the individuals weighing up the cost/benefits of energy expenditure during foraging when the available vegetation is scarce and of low quality (higher cellulose & lignin and lower protein values of vegetation). Lizards spend more time basking, after foraging bouts, compared to the often immediate submergence during summer. The latest submergence of an individual witnessed during winter was at 15h55. Dhubs spent more of the available daylight hours, during winter, above ground (31% vs 13%) and less time submerged 68% (87%). The furthest distance travelled to forage by an individual was 120 metres (280 m) with the mean distance being 48 metres (60m). A faecal analysis of 85 fresh pellets

was conducted to determine insect utilisation during winter as a source of protein supplement. No insect remains were found although 11% of the pellets analysed contained sheep faeces and 4% date kernels and feathers, respectively. This suggests a more opportunistic foraging behaviour during winter than during summer. No differentiation was made between the sexes as it is virtually impossible to tell the sexes apart in the field and it would also be expected that the behaviour and diet selection would change after good rains, something not able to be determined during this study. A total of 480 observation hours (40 dhubs) was conducted (summer and winter) during the above mentioned study.

Interested parties are welcome to contact Peter Cunningham (tel: 03-7675587 or e-mail: jankc.cunningham@hct.ac.ae) for more information.



DNHG Membership/Renewals

DNHG membership remains a bargain at Dhs 50 (singles or couples).

You can join or renew at meetings (see Membership Secretary Kathy Birc) or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account number 173748. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG).

DNHG membership entitles you to participate in field trips and helps to pay for our lecture hall, publication and distribution of our monthly newsletter additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects.



Arabian Carnivore Conservation Conference

Sharjah's Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife was sponsor and host in February to a conference on Arabian carnivores and the Arabian tahr, facilitated by representatives from the Conservation Breeding Specialist Group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The conference assembled field researchers and breeding and animal management specialists from the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Oman, as well as international specialists, with the aim of developing a conservation assessment and management program (CAMP) for all species and a more detailed population habitat and viability assessment (PIVA) for the Arabian leopard and the Arabian tahr.

In a combination of small working groups (for canids, felids and tahr) and plenary sessions, the experts tried to assemble current and historical information about occurrences and ranges, identify and evaluate threats (if any), and determine priorities for research and conservation, including in some cases captive breeding of endangered and other species.

The conference materials included a thick briefing book that compiles excerpts from the still relatively sparse published information that exists about the carnivores represented in Arabia. A copy of this invaluable resource has been made available to the DNHG for its library.

The final conference reports and recommendations are in preparation. Listed below are a few general observations that may not emerge expressly from the conference reports, but that seemed significant to a knowledgeable non-professional observer:

- Both the natural and human envi-

ronments for conservation can be very different in different Arabian countries. For example, the Arabian wolf population in Saudi Arabia is considered stable. Similarly, the Arabian leopard population near Salalah is thought to be exceptionally dense and is not considered to be under active threat due to its occurrence in a remote and uninhabited area. The overall size of the area, however, limits the scope for population expansion.

- Some animals thought to be "extinct" in the UAE may not be. For example, there are at least three recent indications that the ratel or honey badger may still be with us, and may range from Abu Dhabi to the East Coast. Nevertheless, numbers are extremely small.

- Computer modeling indicates that maintenance or increase of the Arabian leopard population is extremely sensitive to adult female mortality (or removal by trapping).

- It appears that the entire Hajar Mountain population of the Arabian leopard is now restricted to the northernmost areas only, i.e., from approximately Al-Ain north to the Musandam. If so, this population almost certainly represents an isolated breeding population, since its nearest neighbors are in the Salalah area. Since approximately half of this range lies within the UAE, this emphasizes the UAE's special responsibility for the conservation of this endangered cat in the wild.

Report by Gary Feulner

Bark stripping for medicinal purposes?

During recent hikes with Gary Feulner in the Musandam, we noticed that the spiny perennial *Astragalus fasciculifolius*, a member of the Leguminosae (pea) family, was heavily utilized by domestic/feral goats. This hardy shrub is

common throughout the Ras al Khaimah and Fujairah mountains. The spiny tops are traditionally used to stuff windows of mountain homes so as to keep birds and small mammals out. Reasons for the goats browsing this seemingly unpalatable shrub are uncertain and possibly due to the "drought" conditions experienced throughout the area. However, another reason could be for medicinal purposes. During "drought" conditions the physical condition of ungulates deteriorates leading to stress and often an increase in the internal parasite load. Under these conditions ungulates would therefore utilize vegetation with medicinal attributes, determined during evolution. This phenomena is known to occur with wildlife in Southern Africa, where the bark from the tree *Albizia arbutifolia* (worm-cure *Albizia*) is stripped to eradicate internal parasites under stress (drought or injury) conditions. Other plants also used by wildlife to cure them of internal parasites include *Aloe* species. Whatever the reason, the utilization of *Astragalus fasciculifolius* is interesting, as regular hikers in the Musandam and Hajar mountains have not previously reported the obvious heavy browsing pressure by goats on this shrub, and should be investigated further.

Report by Peter Cunningham

Natural Emirates:

<http://www.uaeinteract.com>

Arabian Wildlife

Magazine:

<http://www.arabianwildlife.com>

UAE Fishes: A Web

Guide:

<http://www-users.york.ac.uk/mjb117>

The Bahrain Bird Report

<http://www.geocities.com/Yosemite/5264>



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DNHG Annual General Meeting

Our March 5 meeting was also the Annual General Meeting. Chairman Gary Feulner reported that membership stands at more than 160 paid memberships and the bulk of DNHG funds (Dhs 20,000) has been put in an interest bearing time deposit.

Also noted were the active programme of field trips, the successful recruitment of new field trip leaders, the continuing development of the Gazelle, and an encouraging trial of the "workshop" concept for members with a particular interest in a specific field.

Thanks were expressed to the

DNHG's monthly speakers, all of whom speak without financial compensation, and to those members who have volunteered to serve on the DNHG Committee. Their dedication makes the group's activities seem effortless, although these in fact require a great deal of individual time and energy.

Special acknowledgement was given to Chalmers Engineering, which for many years has provided our public address system, as well as logistical support and beverage service at meetings.

Most of the outgoing Committee members had agreed to stand for re-election, and a new Committee for 2000-2001 was elected as shown on this page.

Thanks were expressed to retiring Engineering Officer Bob White, who has served for four years and will be returning to North America at the end of the school year.



Letters to the editor

News? Views?

Write to us at PO Box 9234, or simply fax / e-mail Anna Griffin or any of the committee members listed on page 7.

GAZELLE

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- April 2 All things Weird and Wonderful Dr Marijke Jongbloed
- April 30 Fishing through time in the Arabian Gulf: the archaeological story – Mark Beech
(Please note that this is our May meeting)
- June 2 Members' Night
- Field Trips (DNHG members only, please. Details on page 2.)
- March 24 A trek up Wad Naqab with Nick Hepher
- April 7 A Wadi Walk with Alan Hartley



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From: DNHG, PO Box 9234, Dubai, UAE