

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Summer catch-up

DNHG member **Yusuf Thakur** has had a major breakthrough for the wildlife movie he showed to us last year. "Jewel of the Mangroves" has been shortlisted for the 18th International Festival for ornithological films in Menicoute in France. The finals will be held there on October 29th. This is the third time this movie made it to the finals of an international festival. Earlier occasions were international festivals in Portugal earlier this year and Brazil last year, where he bagged a prize. It looks as if the Kingfisher film is following in the footsteps of Yusuf's earlier film on the Sooty Falcon of Bahrain, which was awarded half a dozen prizes in the late 1990's.

Yusuf also reports that 1000 copies of his dugong film are being distributed to UAE schools courtesy of the Environment Research and Wildlife Development Agency (ERWDA) in Abu Dhabi. We wish Yusuf the best of luck in October and will report on his expected (and much deserved) success in our November *Gazelle*.



Fujairah resident **Mini van der Weg**, the most outstanding nature observer on the East Coast, took this photograph of a pigeon's nest in a bush in her garden. A clutch of eight eggs must be outstanding! The bird is still sitting on the nest at the time of writing, so we do not know yet how many of the eggs will hatch. Some crowding in the nest is to be expected...



Pigeon nest, Fujairah
Photo: Minnie van der Weg

Patricia Rosetti, former DNHG book sales officer, was in Dubai recently on her way to join her husband, Robert, in the Philippines, and visited **Beryl Comar** and **Sandy Fowler**. She missed having lunch with the mendicant monkey; more about that on page five.

DNHG Membership Renewal

The DNHG membership year begins in September, so renewal is now due. Membership remains a bargain at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dhs. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at meetings (see Membership Secretaries Lena Linton and Anin Radhakrishna) or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account no. 173746 and posted to us at PO Box 29561, Dubai. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.) Membership is valid from September 2002 to September 2003.

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

This month's Contributors

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

Gary Feulner
Marijcke Jongbloed
Beryl Comar
Sandy Fowler



Field Trips etc ...

Stepping Up

Pradeep Radhakrishna has volunteered to serve as a field trip coordinator, which we have needed for some time. Pradeep and Anindita and their children have been participants in a number of DNHG field trips over the past year, so we take this as a sign of satisfaction.

DNHG field trips depend, however, on ideas and leadership from among our members. So when Pradeep or another Field Trip Coordinator asks you about your ideas or preferences, or asks if you would consider leading a trip to a site or area of your choice, please don't be shy about stepping up to help. Pradeep's contact details can be found on the penultimate page. Many thanks, Pradeep!



Interesting Field Trips...

Birdwatching at Dubai sites Sep 27

The itinerary will include Wimpey Pits, Dubai Pivot Fields and (subject to admittance) Dubai Fish Farm. It will be warm (bring water) but worth it. Meet at 7:30am sharp at the Wimpey Pits. Meeting point is on the paved road to Dubai sewage treatment plant (off Al Awir - Hatta road), at a small concrete "blockhouse" on the right. 4WD recommended. Contact or Gary Feulner for further information.

RAK Museum & Jazirat al

Hamra Oct 11

Peter & Jen Robinson will lead this trip, meeting participants at the Ajman City Centre Car Park at 9.00am. 4WD not necessary, but please bring your personal bits and pieces – sunhat, water, etc – and refreshments. The tour will start with a ramble in the deserted village of Jazirat al Hamra (or a bit of shelling if you prefer) and go on to the RAK museum, which we hope will be opening early. To register or get more details (or give them, if you know the history of the village!), contact Peter or Jen on 050 598 2494. You can e.mail Peter but he can't reply so give your phone no.

Saluki Breeding / Falcon Hospital / ERWDA Oct 24 (Thursday)

Marijcke Jongbloed is arranging this interest-packed day trip to three sites. She will provide details at the October meeting, as members may not receive their October *Gazelle* in time for it.

Birds (and Other Curiosities) of the AUS and Environs Nov 1

Larry Woods' tour will include large ponds adjacent to Sharjah's University City and a walkabout on the campus of the American University of Sharjah. Special attention will be paid to the impact of humans on the natural history of the area and changes to the flora and fauna brought about by the building of AUS. This tour will be begin at 7:30 am sharp and will run for much of the morning. To get to the meeting point from Dubai, take the Emirates Road (Highway 311) to the National Paints roundabout, go right, take the first U-turn opportunity, and then (now heading back towards the city of Sharjah) take your first

right. Bring a hat (or helmet!), water, binoculars, cameras, good walking shoes and your bird book. A 4WD may be helpful but is not essential. For a preview, see Larry's article in the June 2002 issue of the *Gazelle*. And please contact him at 06-5152513 (o), 06-5153139 (h), 050-7575389 (mobile) or lwoods@aus.ac.ae by 29 October to let him know you are coming so he can smooth your entry into the AUS campus. Group limited to 40 so be early.

Hajar Mountain Nature Walk Nov 15

Gary Feulner will provide details in the October *Gazelle*.

Wadi Bih excursion Nov 22

Details of Peter van Amsterdam's trip will appear in October's issue of *Gazelle*.

Our Next Speaker

Walid Yassim al Tikriti has been active as an archaeologist in the UAE for the past 25 years. He is based in Al Ain, where he is attached to the Al Ain Museum. He has participated in the many digs of the region - from the Hafeet tombs, to the Hili tomb and the extensive residential finds around Qatara and Hili - as well as in digs on the East coast.

Walid hails from Iraq, a country of great archeological fame. He has been a speaker for the three natural history groups of the UAE regularly. This talk will concentrate on ancient irrigation systems used in the Al Ain area.



The English Connection

Gary Feulner was in Oxford in August for a professional training course (proving that it's never too late) and while in England he arranged to spend some time in the field and in the laboratory with various friends and acquaintances who have been involved with UAE natural history over the years. All of these individuals remain interested in Arabia and are potentially valuable resources for information and advice.

Graham Giles, whose several visits to Dubai in the late 1990s resulted in an illustrated checklist of the dragonflies and damselflies of the UAE, was Gary's host for several days among the moors and caves of Derbyshire, the Chiltern hills and the canals of Oxfordshire, in search of dragonflies, butterflies, birds, orchids and other rare plants.

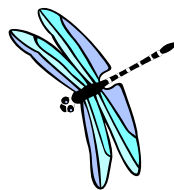
Stephen Green, who has published on Bahrain's seashells and on freshwater snails and boulder art of the UAE, remains an overseas DNHG member. Steve has a busy workload in London but took a day out to track down, among other things, rare snails (imported to England by the Romans as a food source), orchids, deadly nightshade and England's seldom seen poisonous adder. Steve and his daughter Rachel, a graduate student in conservation, will soon be taking a weekend field course on English land snails.

Michael Gallagher, another overseas DNHG member and an editorial advisor to *Tribulus*, was for many years a principal advisor to the Oman Natural History Museum. His name is associated with almost all aspects of the natural history of Oman (as well as with 19 species or subspecies of organisms -- including bats, rodents, geckos, fish, beetles, moths, scorpions, termites and more). Gary tracked him down for lunch and an excursion in West Sussex, where he is enjoying retirement on the beach, in between continuing cor-

respondence with current students of the wildlife and environment of the UAE and Oman.

At The Natural History Museum in London, David Reid showed off museum collections of Arabian intertidal molluscs and gave some insights into his current research, which focuses on DNA studies relating the taxonomy and distribution of intertidal winkles in the Indo-Pacific region. This may sound esoteric, but the results have the potential to become, literally, textbook examples of the process of speciation. Specimens and other information for this research have been provided from the UAE with the assistance of Gary Feulner and Sandy Fowler.

Also at The Natural History Museum, Gary donned a lab coat to view the schistosome (bilharzia) parasite and its host snail, *Bulinus wrighti*, courtesy of Vaughan Southgate and Mike Anderson, who are involved in public health research. *B. wrighti* is an ideal host both for cultivating the parasite in the lab and for conducting field tests. It is found at a few remote sites in the UAE and Oman, and a few years ago Gary and Stephen Green supplied specimens to the museum in an emergency, after their laboratory population had crashed.



Why

omy?

Taxon-

While in London recently, Gary Feulner attended a lecture at the Linnean Society of London, the venue where papers by Darwin and Wallace on evolution by natural selection were first presented almost one hundred and fifty years ago. The lecture was one of a series on "the taxonomic crisis" -- the problem of the current dearth of specialists (and students) trained and able to accurately identify and discriminate

between discrete species of organisms. The lecture that Gary attended dealt with interactive computer programs that are being developed to make the "art" of taxonomy more accessible to non-specialists. The results were impressive, relying on the power of computer organisation to assist in sorting and manipulating observed characteristics. However, the success of such programs for any group of organisms still depends on knowledgeable researchers having first done the underlying taxonomic work, determining and organizing the characteristics that can be used for taxonomic discrimination. Like most data processing programs, it's a case of "garbage in, garbage out."

By *why* is taxonomy important? In short, who cares? The eminent American entomologist and evolutionary biologist Edward O. Wilson once described "the special satisfaction of taxonomy. It is a craft and a body of knowledge that builds in the head of a biologist only through years of monkish labor. The taxonomist enjoys the status of mechanic and engineer among biologists. He knows that without the expert knowledge accumulated through his brand of specialized study, much of biological research would soon come to a halt. Only a specialist expert enough to recognize the species chosen for study ("Ah, that is a carabid beetle of the genus *Scarites*") can unlock all that is already known about it in the literature. From journal pages and museum specimens he is able to go promptly from the already discovered to the exhilarating unknown. If a biologist does not have the name of the species, he is lost. As the Chinese say, the first step to wisdom is getting the right name.

"There is much more. A skilled taxonomist is not just a museum labeler. He is a world authority, often *the* world authority since there are so few taxonomists, on the group he has chosen. He is steward and spokesman for a hun-



Field Clips ...

E.mail your reports to pvana@emirates.net.ae, (Arial 10 justified) or deliver them to Anne Millen on floppy disk at monthly meetings.

dred, or a thousand, species. Other scientists come to him to seek entry to his taxon – sharks, rotifers, soldier flies, weevils, conifers, dinoflagellates, cyanobacteria, and so on down the long roster comprising over a million species. He knows not only the classification but also the anatomy, physiology, behavior, biogeography and evolutionary history of the group, in fine detail both published and unpublished. In conversation he will speak as follows: "Come to think of it, there is an enchytraeid I ran into in Honduras with a reddish color, and that just might be the invertebrate hemoglobin you're looking for." Or, "No, no, the main center of that particular moth family is the temperate forests of southern Chile. Those species haven't been worked on yet, but there is a big collection in the National Museum made by the Hensley expedition in 1923. Let's check it out." No CD-ROM, no encyclopedia can replace the taxonomic expert." [from E.O. Wilson, *Naturalist*, Warner Books (1994)]
Thanks to Gary Feulner.

(Editor's note: For the lighter side of taxonomy, follow the Australian-Polish war over orchid naming, reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald*)

Cairo Wildlife

I tried to make the most of a recent impromptu business visit to Cairo, staying on briefly to see some sights, including, this time, the Cairo Zoo and adjacent botanical gardens. I had noticed abundant Cattle Egrets among the fertile fields of the Nile Valley, but

I was surprised to find them nesting in profusion in large, spreading Acacia trees in the zoo and gardens, including many in branches overhanging the surrounding city sidewalks. All of them seemed, however, to belong to a local subspecies best described as the Sooty Cattle Egret. From my hotel room overlooking the zoo grounds I could see dozens of opportunistic raptors in residence as well. And from bridges across the Nile, I had good views – rare top views – of squacco herons gliding over the river. I also added papyrus, whose flower is the symbol of Lower Egypt, to my collection of regional plant photos. A number of different kinds of butterflies were attracted by the landscaping at the zoo, but the only one of these I could recognize seemed to be the Plain Tiger.

For those interested in the fabulous archeological history of Egypt, now is the time to go. Tourism is, sadly, much depressed, and I was able to photograph various popular sites including the Granite Pyramid at Giza and the Step Pyramid at Saqqara, without visitors in view. *Report by Gary Feulner*



Wedding Cake

Along the "Mahdhah 64" track, at about the 6.5 km mark, sits a lovely set of small, terraced pools, nestled in oleander and formed by

the precipitation of white travertine (amorphous calcium carbonate) from the slow flow of water down a slope. The whole resembles a tiered wedding cake and makes a delightful short stop for visitors and old hands alike. I first noticed the site more than a decade ago, before the Mahdhah 64 track had been much improved, but because it was no more than about 75 metres off the track, I worried for the day when it would be "discovered" and would be trashed.

Throughout the early and mid-1990s, however, I was heartened to see, on each visit, that most other visitors were as respectful of the spot as I was. Plastic bags and other litter were almost always at a minimum – few enough to encourage me to remove those I saw. Wadi fish swam in the small pools below the terraces, and on different occasions I have seen there a wadi racer and a blue-headed agama in full blue-and-orange display.

Those days are gone, however. On recent visits I have encountered plastic bags in abundance – with a preference for the sturdier black, yellow or white rather than the flimsier blue – and a small farmstead was begun earlier this year on the opposite side of the road, perhaps in part to take advantage of the water. The fish are gone, too, although I can't say why. Pollution or other disturbance by human visitors are possibilities, as is the continuing drought, although groundwater continues to feed the terraces and several of the pools below remain up to a half meter deep, but stagnant. Let's hope that the rain, when it comes, will clean out most of the trash and bring some of the freshness, if not the fish, back to this pretty area. *Report by Gary Feulner*



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The recorders are not necessarily scientific experts in their designated fields. In fact, most are not. However, they are interested and knowledgeable amateurs - please contact them if you have any interesting reports or queries.

The intention is that information will be channelled through to the *Gazelle* editor, so new information can be shared with all our readers.

Monkey Business

Some exotic wildlife is being reported in Dubai these days. Throughout last month, mammal recorder **Marijcke Jongbloed** kept getting calls from concerned residents about a small monkey that was roaming the gardens mainly in the neighbourhood between the zoo and the American school. It has been spotted as far away as the Dubai Physio Clinic. The zoo had no monkeys missing. When the monkey turned up in **Beryl Comar and Sandy Fowler's** garden, Beryl has been feeding it nuts and bananas at lunchtime (1.15pm!) and tentatively identified it as a Vervet monkey, Marijcke saw it some time later in the same gardens and thinks it is a female Rhesus macaque. In any case, it is an escapee and it seems to be holding its own in freedom so far. Rhesus monkeys are often kept as pets and are usually quite lonely as they were meant to live in an extended family. However they can never be introduced into existing monkey families where they would be considered a threat and would be torn to pieces by the dominant animals. The escapee could probably survive if left alone, but she will be quite miserable without any mates. It would be best off if it could be paired with a single male so that it could have a chance to have its own family.

Marijcke has also received reports concerning the introduction of squirrels. It seems this is being done on purpose by some unscrupulous individuals - maybe for hunting purposes. The squirrels will have a hard time surviving in the city, unaccustomed to the climate and food. *Thanks to Marijcke Jongbloed.*

Snail Call

A reminder, especially for new members: your unwanted garden snails and slugs are wanted for scientific study and an accounting of the terrestrial snails of the UAE.

All specimens will be gratefully accepted by Chairman Gary Feulner, and contributors will be kept informed of progress and pedigrees. Suburban gardens are home to several native Arabian snails, but also a number of introduced species. There have already been a few surprises and we know that more are out there. Dead shells are preferred; we'll follow up if you've got something unusual. 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.

—SHELL—
—REPORTS—



Please send your shell reports
to Sandy Fowler

Sandy Fowler, our seashell recorder, reports that he has found some further specimens of the two rare shells, *Malea pomum* and *Terebra triseriata*, mentioned in *July/August Gazelle*. He is planning another foray to some of the USE's best shelling beaches later in the year, when the weather is cooler. Watch the field trip notices for details and date.



Sandy and shellers on an East Coast beach



special reports ...

News from Afar...

Peter Cunningham writes that he has "been away to the remote north-western part of Namibia - Kaokoland - on a student excursion where we saw plenty of desert elephant and loads of game (springbok, oryx, ostrich, zebra, etc.), mainly as a result of unprecedented good rains over the last three years. This excursion served as an introduction to communal conservancies - latest trend to conserve wildlife in communal areas - something that could also be implemented in the UAE, Oman, etc., where the communities conserve their own resources and benefit directly from game products outside a formal park system. Many problems, specially human related - what else!"

In the "Life After Dubai" category, former *Gazelle* editor **Neil Curtis**, now in graduate school in British Columbia, wrote to us with a sigh of relief at the end of a "big adventure." He had just finished "a three month research stint at 'The Ice' [BC's Columbia Icefield] studying visitor management, but still plenty of zoology, botany and geology. Unfortunately no grizzly bear." Neil is down to his last semester at graduate school. Then what? Says Neil, "I'll keep you posted."



UAE Archeology Website

Members interested in local and regional archeology may want to visit the website of the Abu Dhabi Islands Archeological Survey (ADIAS) at www.adias-uae.com. The site contains lots of information not readily accessible elsewhere.

Travellers' Advisory

Hatta Heritage Village

If you still think that Hatta Fort is a 5-star hotel, you haven't been to Hatta Heritage Village to see the real thing, now restored amidst other traditional buildings, displays of date processing and palm products, a small falaj and oasis area, and the twin watchtowers that once gave Hatta the name of Hajarayn ("Two Rocks").

One of the displays lists, maps and depicts a large number of the UAE's forts and towers, some of them relatively unheralded. These include Dubai's Al-Fahidi Fort (now Dubai Museum), Naif Fort (once the northern entrance to Dubai, now renovated as a police station), and the Shindagah and Nahar towers, as well as less heralded landmarks such as Al-Mujayreb Fort (on the Oman border south of Al-Ain) and the Bay'ah Fort at Dibba.

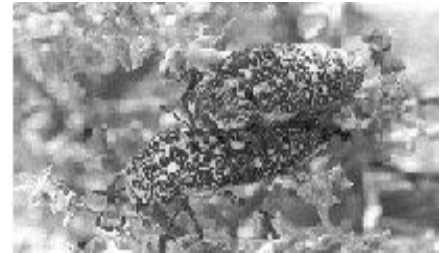
Hatta Heritage Village is located in the middle of old Hatta Village itself. Turn right at the Hatta Fort R/A and drive across the small bridge and uphill past the police and fire departments. Then turn left after about 2 km, just before a rocky hill on the left. Hours are 8am to 8pm daily, but some displays may be open or operating only on weekends. *Thanks to Gary Feulner for this information.*

Productive Summer



Keen wildlife photographer and new DNHG member **Arfan Asif**

took this photograph of *Julodis euphratica*, the Sulphurous jewel beetle, at Khor Dubai, near Jadaf, in July. The photograph below



shows the beetles mating.

Julodis euphratica
Photographs: Arfan Asif

Burning Bush

Dubai TV came up with a rare gem the other day. It showed a bush - a member of the Cistus or Rockrose family - in the Middle East (Jordan or Palestine) that produces a large amount of ethereal oils. When the temperatures are high, this oil evaporates and hangs around the plant like an invisible but highly inflammable cloud. The slightest spark, such as is produced by two rocks hitting each other, causes a fireball explosion that engulfs the bush. That story we all know. But the result of this "miracle" is not generally known. The ensuing fire destroys all competing vegetation around the bush, giving its seeds a better chance to develop. The seeds, by the way, need fire in order to be released from the nutlike fruits that encase them. *Reported by Marijke Jongbloed.*

A Tough Time for Fish

Divers from some of the Dubai clubs report that last month there were many dead and dying fish on the bottom, even out where the Gulf is a little deeper. They also report that visibility is very low close in to Dubai, and speculated that it may be caused by major construction projects, as in some areas close to these, it is nearly nil.

For those interested in fish, there is a website: www.fishbase.org



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Book Reviews

Traditional Buildings in Al Ain

Most DNHG members know Al-Ain as a place to go for tradition, and know about the Al-Ain Museum, the camel souk, Jebel Hafit and the adjacent Hafit tombs, the Hili Archeological Park, and the several extensive oases. Phil Iddison of Al Ain, a former DNHG speaker, has previously prepared an excellent and easy to use guide to the partially restored Al Ain oasis, available through the DNHG.

Now, for the "downtown" set, Phil has prepared an illustrated guide to *Traditional Buildings in Al Ain* that lets you take a personal tour of various mosques, houses, forts, Sheikh Zayed's palace, the aflaj, watchtowers and other traditional structures that survive in Al Ain.

The guide includes maps and basic information about traditional building materials and techniques, as well as architectural styles. Special thanks are due to Phil's employer, Hyder Consulting, which sponsored publication of the guide. *Traditional Buildings in Al Ain* is available at DNHG meetings at a nominal price of Dhs. 10.



Birds of Fujairah and the UAE East Coast – a Checklist.

Twitchers' Guide is pleased to announce this new publication. Compiled by co-editor Simon Aspinall, (also the Chairman of the Emirates Bird Records Committee), the 32 page booklet, with 21 colour pictures by the compiler and also by award-winning wildlife photographers Hanne and Jens Eriksen,

provides a full list of the 321 species so far recorded in Fujairah and on the East Coast (out of a national list of around 420), and also gives details of status. Prefaced by an introductory article in both English and Arabic, the checklist has been sponsored by the Union Water and Electricity Company, UWEC, which is currently engaged in constructing a power and desalination plant on the coast north of Fujairah city.

The booklet is second in a series, the first, *Birds of Abu Dhabi* (both the emirate and the island), having been published last year. Both the Fujairah and Abu Dhabi checklists are available for purchasers in Britain and Europe from: S. Aspinall, 7, Dussindale Drive, Norwich, Norfolk, NR7 OTZ, UK. Price 3.50 pounds sterling incl. p & p.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- Oct 6 Recent Discoveries in Archeology in the Al Ain Region: Ancient Irrigation Systems – Dr. Waleed Yassin al Tikriti
- Nov 3 Herbal Medicine – Dr. Graham Pinn

Field Trips (DNHG members only, please).

- Sep 27: Birdwatching at Dubai sites -- Gary Feulner & David Bradford
- Oct 11: RAK Museum & Jazirat al Hamra – Peter & Jen Robinson
- Oct 24 Saluki Breeding/Falcon Hospital/ERWDA – Marijcke Jongbloed
- Nov 01: Sharjah Wildlife Sites – Larry Woods
- Nov 15: Hajar Mountain Nature Walk -- Gary Feulner
- Nov 22: Wadi Bih excursion – Peter van Amsterdam