

GAZELLE

Vol 21 no 11 November 2006



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

DNHG Membership

Keen interests fostered

Fran LaBonte, one of our Ras al-Khaimah resident members, is now a published natural history author. Fran's *The Arabian Date Palm* was very recently published. It investigates how date palms are grown and how through history they have provided everything from delicious dates to houses, baskets, fans and toys. Although written for school children, this volume will also be of interest to adults and visitors to the UAE. Copies will be available at our sales table on lecture nights, beginning in December.

Returning from leave in the US, Gary Feulner stopped to renew some DNHG friendships while visiting natural history sites in the west of London. These included the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew with Stephen and Adam Green, who contributed to the study of UAE freshwater and land snails in the late 1990s, and the London Wetland Centre along the Thames with Graham Giles, who as a frequent visitor in the late 1990s produced an annotated checklist of the dragonflies of the UAE. Finally, Gary paid a visit to malacologists David G. Reid and Suzanne Williams at The Natural History Museum, who are studying the taxonomy, evolu-

tion and biogeography of various groups of Indo-Pacific molluscs, including organisms found in the UAE and Oman. Hopefully the Chairman can wring a monthly speaker or two out of these contacts at some point.



Echis omanensis

Barbara Couldrey has provided another report (and photo) of a carpet viper (*Echis omanensis*) in the Musandam, this one in mid-October in an atypical setting. Ascending steeply from Wadi Bih via a rough trail in a scree gully, Barbara encountered the viper on the path not long after daybreak. True to form, it was not aggressive but retreated slowly under a rock. This report is especially noteworthy because most sightings of the carpet viper are in wadi beds and in reasonable proximity to water, whereas in this case, there was no apparent water source at all.

Our new membership year began in September, so please remember to renew at the next meeting if you have not already done so. Membership remains a bargain at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account no. 173746. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.)

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 and contributions:

Martina Fella
Barbara Couldrey
Gary Feulner
Prof. Ulli Wernery
David Palmer
Valerie Chalmers
Lena Linton

Under the patronage of H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan



A couple of changes ...

Ibri Anticline with Gary Fuelner and Val Chalmers
Friday/Saturday 24&25 Nov

Val and Gary have volunteered to organise this trip, and those coming should by now have an email detailing the plans.

Elephant Walkways with Steve and Jo Raynor
Friday /Saturday 8&9 Dec

Jo advises that the trip is now full, and they will let participants know by email the details needed.

Musandam Dhow Trip with Lamjed El-Kefi
Friday 15th Dec

Meet at 8.00 am for 8.30 departure, at Dibba, Oman in the fishing harbour inside Al Mina. There is no border post, but you must bring a copy of ID card / copy of UAE residence. The dhow sails from Dibba north along the coast to discover isolated fishing villages and secluded bays up to Lima Bay. Anchor for lunch and swim at leisure. Return to Dibba around 5.30 pm. You'll see fish, birds, coral if you snorkel, and perhaps dolphins. Snorkeling equipment can be rented from the office if anyone wants to use them during the trip. Special rate for DNHG - 270 Dhs per person inclusive of a light breakfast, buffet lunch, tea, coffee, water. Other drinks available for sale on board. Children up to 12 - 135 Dhs; children below 6 free. Booking will be closed at 35 persons. Payment needs to be done at or before December DNHG talk in advance. Contact Lamjed 4815068 at lankefi@emirates.net.ae or Sandhya at sandy_pi@yahoo.com for a map.

Trips planned :

Field Trip with Gary Feulner

This walk will be arranged when it is a little cooler.

Temple Walk with Sandhya

This walk is in Bur Dubai, and is full of wonderful surprises.

Wadi Tarabat (below Jebel Hafit) with Val Chalmers

Val is liaising with Brigitte regarding this and no date is yet fixed.

Spoonworms
Sometime in spring

This trip is tide-dependent, and the tides are not being very helpful. Sometime next year, March or thereabouts, they'll be right, and we will let you know in plenty of time.

And ...

The Trek of a Lifetime!

Mike Lorrigan is planning a trip that he has wanted to do for the past 20 years and is looking for 8-12 willing participants from the DNHG and all Natural History Groups in the Emirates to join him.

Target:

Everest Base Camp, Nepal. Starting from the town of Lukla, the party will trek and camp all the way up to Everest Base Camp, accompanied by porters. Most of the walk will be through Sagarmatha National Park. After a short stay at Everest Base Camp, the party will trek back to Lukla. The current proposed dates are late March/early April, but there is flexibility depending on who is interested. The first summit of Everest was achieved by Hillary and Tensing on 29th May 1953, so if people want to be at Base Camp for the anniversary, the trip can probably be scheduled to achieve this, and the dates adjusted accordingly. Mike is flexible.

The basic itinerary is as follows:

Fly from UAE to Katmandu
2 days stay in Katmandu
Flight to Lukla
Overnight stay in Lukla
Trek starts next day. Approxi-

mately 6-8 days trekking to Everest Base Camp – depending on altitude acclimatisation of the group.

Arrive Everest Base Camp
Stay at Base Camp one/ two days.
Return trek to Lukla
On arrival in Lukla, one night hotel stay

Fly back to Katmandu
Two nights in Katmandu, including celebratory meal at Rum Doodle Restaurant – made famous by parties from Everest dining there.
Return flight to UAE

Total trip from start to finish ... maximum 23 days. Actual trekking will be between 14 and 16 days.

It is proposed to camp along the

Our Next Speaker

Dr habil. Ulrich Wernery has been a DNHG member since coming to Dubai in 1987 as Scientific Director of Dubai Central Veterinary Laboratory (which many people call "the camel hospital").

Prof Wernery is a microbiologist and Doctor of Veterinary Science. and lectured in Munich. His "venia legenda" is exotic animal diseases. At the CVRL, which is a diagnostic center for animal diseases with 90 people, his main professional interest is in infectious camel diseases, on which he has written a book. He is also an authority on the haematological and biochemical reference values of racing camels, falcons and horses in tropical climates. He has written four books and nearly 300 scientific papers.

Outside the laboratory, Ulli is an avid bird watcher (see p.3), photographer and camper, and can sometimes be found playing field hockey..



way to Base Camp from Lukla and back, so everyone in the party needs their own good quality tent, or share with another. The bulk of your kit will be carried by porters; you will just be carrying a day pack. Very warm clothing and top quality sleeping bag are needed for night time. Overall though, the weather at that time of year is very pleasant during the day, and according to the organizers, crampons will not be needed for boots, right up to Base Camp. You do not have to be superfit for this trek but a good level of fitness is required. A dedicated fitness programme starting two months prior to setting off is highly recommended for anyone interested.

The trip will also include a flight out from Katmandu, with Buddha Air, to see the summit of Everest. Depart from the hotel at 5.00 a.m., back in the hotel by 8.30 a.m. - an amazing experience! Mike has done this!

If interested, please e-mail Mike on oxymoron@emirates.net.ae. The trip is open to non-Natural History Group members if not enough members register.

Galloping Gastropods ... or More Haste More Speed!



Barbara Couldrey spotted two errors in her article in the October *Gazelle*: the Iberian Wood Slug (*Arion lusitanicus*) is rather bigger and more sluggish than reported. It crawls at 5 - 9 metres per hour and can grow to 15cms long. In the picture above, the slug is attacking a prototype of an effective electric barrier and is about to re-

coil. Thanks, Barbara, for correcting the error. Still a horrible thought!

Rare bird visitors

During my recent spring bird watching trip at Nad Al Sheeba on the 3rd of March 2006, I sighted several rare bird species. On the lawn in front of the Green Horse Stable two beautiful superb starlings (*Spreo superbus*), which are common in East Africa from Ethiopia to Tanzania were feeding on the ground. Maybe escapees?



Spreo superbus

Not far away from the stable a lesser white-fronted goose (*Anser erythropus*) was resting on the turf of the horse race track next to the artificial lake. This species is the smaller form of the white-fronted goose, which breeds in Finland and Northern Russia. It is darker in color and has more white at the base of the smaller bill, which extends up to the forehead.

Close to this sighting I found a small dead bird with a silver ring on the left leg from Brussels Museum. To the best of my knowledge, it was a warbler.



Dead bird

I sent the ring with the pictures of the bird to Walter Roggeman, the curator of the museum. He confirmed that the ring was attached to

Parus montanus (willow tit) many years ago in Luxembourg. However, *Parus montanus* is a sedentary species in Western Europe and would never migrate all the way to Dubai. After many letters, we still could not solve the problem, but I believe it was a case of mistaken identity on the Brussels side. Report and photographs by Prof. Ulrich Wernery



Dead bird with ring

Ancient Landscapes of Abu Dhabi

Several members attended a fascinating lecture by Mark Beech, a recent DNHG speaker, at the Meridien Hotel near Dubai airport on September 26th. The lecture was arranged by the Emirates Environmental Group. Mark, formerly with the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey, has a new job. He is now Head of Division, Cultural Landscapes, at a new organization called the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage. His title was "The Ancient Landscapes and Environment of Abu Dhabi."

As a result of fossils found in the coastal areas of western Abu Dhabi (especially around Ruwais and Shuweihat), Mark was able to reconstruct the savannah landscape of the area in the miocene era, 6 to 8 million years ago. A large river system ran from the interior of Arabia to the coast of Abu Dhabi, inhabited by turtles and crocodiles. Fossils of ancient forms of hippopotamus, giraffe, antelope, wolverine and sabre-tooth cat, among others, have been found, as well as fossilized forests of palm and acacia. Appropriately there were also horses here those millions of years



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

ago, in the form of hipparion, a primitive three-toed horse, ancestor to the modern horse. Fossilised ostrich eggshells, Mark pointed out, are commonly found in many parts of the UAE.

The fossils found closely resemble animals known from this period in North Africa, East Africa and Pakistan, suggesting that during this period of low sea levels and land bridges between continents animals could migrate freely in an east-west direction.

One of the most exciting of the recent discoveries is an enormous fossilised upper tusk from a huge four-tusked elephant species, *Stegotrabelodon syrticus*. In addition to remains of the animal itself, trackways of its footprints have been found. (Steve and Jo Raynor are planning to lead a DNHG field-trip to see them in December.) Mark described how experiments were undertaken at Blackpool Zoo in the UK to measure the stride of modern elephants and extrapolate from that to find the likely size of these primitive elephants. The results of those experiments have since been supported by further fossilised bone findings, so we now know that *Stegotrabelodon* probably stood a mammoth four metres high at the shoulder.

In response to a question, Mark explained that the age of such ancient fossils is determined by palaeomagnetic dating. This is a technique by which iron fragments in the sediments in which the fossils are embedded are examined to determine their magnetic orientation. Since we know the shifting of the earth's magnetic poles, including reversals of polarity, for millions of years, we can tell when those sediments were laid down. By contrast, radio-carbon dating can only be

used for materials going back a maximum of forty or fifty thousand years.

There is a small but interesting exhibit of the ancient remains, including the massive tusk, at the Authority for Culture and Heritage's HQ at the Cultural Centre in Abu Dhabi, and Mark recommended a visit to anyone passing through.

In the second part of his lecture Mark turned his attention to more recent times, and the evidence of human occupation in Arabia. Stone tools from about 50,000 years ago have been found in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman and more recently in the Jebel Buhais area of Sharjah. (Mark recommended a visit to the new exhibit on Jebel Buhais at the Sharjah Archaeological Museum.)

He pointed out that the Arabian Gulf is only about 18,000 years old. Before that, a mighty river ran from Iraq all the way to Hormuz. The Gulf - which remains a very shallow sea to this day - gradually filled in with the melting of glaciers at the end of the last Ice Age. Most of the Stone Age sites in the UAE probably existed along the valley of the great ancient river, and later beside the banks of the slowly expanding Gulf, so now are lost beneath its waters.



Pot from MR11 excavation site, Marawah Island

The earliest remains of buildings found in the UAE are on Marawah Island and date back as far as seven and a half thousand years

ago. The excavations there were the topic on which Mark presented to the DNHG in 2004. Findings include fine pottery imported from Iraq (as well as low-quality local imitations), delicately fashioned oyster buttons, and evidence of the cultivation of dates and domestication of sheep and goats.

People lived not only on the coastal islands, but also migrated deep into the desert in the summertime, especially to the oases in the south-eastern deserts of Abu Dhabi east of Liwa, 350 kms from the coast. They did not just hunt there, for there is evidence of domestic occupation as well as tombs. Seven thousand years ago there was probably more rainfall in that area, and the existence of lakes for a good portion of the year. In fact, Mark showed us a photograph of a large lake caused by the heavy rainfall in the winter of 2004-5.

Mark pointed out that patterns of human occupation in the UAE over the past several thousand years reflect climatic cycles, evidence for which comes from various sources including stalactites in caves in the mountains of Oman. The key element is the extent of the South Asian monsoon. When it comes further north and west it brings rainfall to this area and allows for agriculture and habitation by humans as well as animals. When it recedes it causes aridity like that of the present day.

About 6000 years ago the area became uninhabitable once again, only to revive about 4000 years ago with the Bronze Age civilisation of Umm-al-Nar. Later on, after another interregnum, there was an even greater flourishing of human occupation in the Iron Age, with the development of falaj technology, the domestication of camels, and the resulting creation of overland trade routes. The area has been arid for most of the past 2000 years, partly as a result of climatic cycles but also - increasingly - as a result of human occupation. *Report by David Palmer, our new Archaeology Recorder.*



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Mammals & Seashells - Recorders needed!

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.



Birdwatching in the RAK Mangroves

In mid-October, twenty-six members of the DNHG set out on a glorious afternoon, from the Fish Souq in Ras Al Khaimah, aboard two dhows en route for the mangroves. Although it was a warm day, there was a very pleasant breeze.



We were very fortunate to have our DNHG birding expert, David Bradford, present to identify the birds seen. On boarding the dhows, two juvenile Socotra Cormorants were found swimming around the dock and one accepted a dead fish thrown to it by our bird recorder!



David was on one dhow and phoned me on the other dhow every time a different bird was spotted. Together with his phone calls and identifications also being made by several keen birders on my dhow, we were able to gain more knowledge about the birds which were on and around the mangroves. Birds seen were: Socotra Cormorant, Western Reef Herons (both white and blue phases), Great White Egret, Little Egret, Little Green Heron, Grey Heron, Purple Heron, Caspian Gull, Saunders' Little Tern, Lesser Crested Tern, White Cheeked Tern, Redshank, Greenshank, Common Sandpiper, Whimbrel, Curlew, Oystercatchers,

Bar Tailed Godwit, Red Wattled Plover, Palm Dove, Collared Dove, Little Green Bee-eater, Common Mynah, Indian Silverbill, Black Kite, Marsh Harrier and House Sparrow.



Getting stuck in the mud from time to time added extra excitement to the afternoon. We returned to the Fish Souk at about 5.30 p.m. Our thanks to Barbara Couldrey for liaising with Abdulla, the owner of the dhows and to David, of course, for his expertise. *Report and photographs by Valerie Chalmers*

History of the Old Library



(formerly The Dubai Lending Library, est 1969)
DUCTAC Centre,
Mall of the Emirates
Tel 3414777 ext 207
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The Library began in 1969 (back in Trucial States times, before the UAE was formed). Surprisingly, it began with some yo-yos. Lady Verney, from the UK sent them to her grandson who was stationed in Sharjah, when he complained about having nothing to do. The yo-yos were passed on to the children at the International School who were duly told to write to Lady Verney to say thank you. She, Lady Verney, was so impressed that she decided to send her own collection of books to the school. She was a widow and



her eyesight was failing and she wanted to see the books go to a good home, where they would be appreciated.

The books were actually passed on to Margaret Bullard whose husband was the Political Agent at the British Embassy at the time. From there the books found a home in one of the offices in the Commercial section of the British Embassy in Deira. And so the Dubai Lending Library began. From that date on, the collection of books grew and grew.

The library has had several homes since the early days, The Holy Trinity Church being one, where the library was known as the Community Library.

In 1985 the library moved into a portacabin, at the Dubai International Art Centre, in Jumeirah. The portacabin was erected with the help of John Darby and Arthur Jarman, both long term, well respected residents of Dubai. In fact Mr Jarman was still living in Dubai until a few years ago and was a regular member of the library.

In 2002 The library changed its name to The Old Library (for economic reasons) and in 2004 The Old Library moved to a small villa in Umm Suqeim as the DIAC premises and our portacabin were due to be demolished. This was a temporary home for the Library prior to our expected move to the Mall of the Emirates.

In June 2006 The Old Library relocated to the Mall of the Emirates to become part of the DUCTAC (Dubai Community Theatre and Arts Centre) complex.

The Old Library is an independent, English Language library which provides a service for the expatriate and local English speaking community. It is an organisation that is staffed entirely by volunteers and being a non profit, community service, all funds are re-invested into the Library.

The Old Library has a rather di-

verse collection of approx 14000 books – to suit all ages and tastes. At present our system is a manual operation, but we are in the process of becoming fully computerised. Our fee structure is based on an annual membership with small charges for book rentals.

The Old Library will be open in the DUCTAC from October 2006. Opening hours are 10.30am to 1.30 pm and 3pm to 6pm Saturday to Thursday. *Thanks, Lena. Our new Archaeology Recorder should be interested in this.*

Migrant Birds at Dibba

The Fujairah National Dairy Farm in Dibba has emerged in the past two years as one of the most exciting birding sites in the UAE. It has certainly taken top billing this autumn. Among the uncommon species seen there on migration in October were: Pectoral Sandpiper, Amur Falcon, Western Red-Footed Falcon, White Stork, Honey Buzzard, Brown-Throated Martin, Black-Winged Pratincole, Brown Shrike, Olive-Backed Pipit and Little Swift. Thanks to the weekly *Twitchers' Guide*, at www.uaeinterac.com, and the website run by UAE Bird Recorder Tommy Pedersen at <http://www.tommypedersen.com>

Dugongs in Dubai!

In mid-October, Martina Fella sent in an extraordinary report of dugongs off the Dubai coast: "I thought it might be of some interest to the DNHG that yesterday morning (Oct. 17) we saw a group of dugongs only a few hundred meters from the shore, in front of the open beach next to the Jumeirah Beach Hotel. They were definitely dugongs and not dolphins. There were about 10-12 animals, amongst them also young ones. We observed them from our boat (a catamaran) but they seemed very shy and it was difficult to approach them closely (although at one point we got as close as about 5 meters). After watching for more than half an hour we decided it was best to leave

them alone again. We had the impression that the dugongs had lost orientation as they kept moving back and forth within the same area." According to *The Emirates - A Natural History*, dugongs have never been spotted off the Dubai coast in recent times. *Thanks to Martina Fella for her report*

Goby Gone for Good

An early November visit to lower Wadi Qahfi, post-rain, failed to turn up any sightings of the so-called Hatta goby (*Awaous aeneofuscus*) in the area it was known to inhabit from at least 1998 through mid-2004. This appears to confirm the pessimistic assessment from July 2005 that the goby is now extinct in this area, which represented the largest of the only three goby sites known in Northern Oman in recent years. The goby was previously reported to be absent from both of the other two sites as of mid-2004.

As many as 78 gobies were counted in Wadi Qahfi in March 2000 over a several kilometre stretch of wadi, and the local population was estimated at 100-200 fish. Sightings dwindled to only five, with four in a single pool, in May 2004. This, it appears, was not enough to survive under the circumstances. The responsible factors are probably a combination of the exceptional drought of 1999-2004, coupled with increased local fishing activity, using dams and weirs. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Letters to the Editor

Do you have some comment, suggestion or query on natural history that you would like our members to know about or answer? Want to tickle things up a bit?



Please send your letter to any of the committee members listed, by fax or e-mail, or direct to the editor, Anne Millen.



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Where to Find Us

This is an updated map of the location of the Emirates Academy of Hospitality where our monthly lectures are held and where the Dubai Natural History Group library is housed. The library is upstairs to the left, in the back of the building. The DNHG collection is in a cabinet in the library's utility room. Access to the DNHG collection and the library's reading room is permitted during regular opening hours. Currently EAHM Library hours are Saturdays to Tuesdays, 9am to 9pm; Wednesdays and Thursdays, 9am to 6pm; Fridays closed. Members must present their DNHG membership card to the receptionist in the EAHM lobby in order to access the Library on the 1st floor, and again to the Librarian or Library Technician on duty. As a precaution, it is recommended to phone in advance to be sure that there is not a meeting taking place in the workroom.

THE EMIRATES ACADEMY OF HOSPITALITY MANAGEMENT



Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

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|--------|---|
| Dec 10 | Camel Milk: The White Gold of the Desert - Prof. Ulli Wernery |
| Jan 07 | The UAE Insect Project – Dr Antonius van Harten |

Field Trips (Members only, please. Details inside.)

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| Nov 24&25 | Ibri Anticline - Val Chalmers and Gary Feulner |
| Dec 08&9 | Elephant Walkways in Abu Dhabi - Steve and Jo Raynor |
| Dec 15 | Musandam Dhow Trip - Lamjed El-Kefi |