

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Summer Was Wonderful!

DNHG member **Dean Polley** did a remarkable thing this summer — he visited the needy school children of the Muhoza I, Muhoza II, Nyamagumba, Kabaya and Cyuve Primary Schools of the Ruhengeri District in Rwanda to deliver, with help of company sponsors, 290kg of much needed school stationery. You can find out more about Dean's trip on <http://www.deanpolley.com>



Dean Polley with staff and children of Nyamagumba Primary School

Valerie Chalmers met up with former DNHG long-time members Pam and John Cole and also former member Sandra Saary, in August, at the Hawk Conservancy Trust near Andover, Hampshire, UK. They spent a fascinating time exploring the grounds of the Trust and watching flying displays by owls, falcons, eagles, hawks, vultures, black and red kites and even a secretary bird! The Hawk Conser-

vancy Trust is well worth a visit - there are also hides to watch wild red kites and herons feeding and activities such as ferret and duck races and raptor safari trailer rides.

Our Namibian member, **Peter Cunningham**, continues his successful career in wildlife research and education. In addition to his responsibilities at Polytechnic of Namibia, training the next generation of conservationists, he is the editor of *Roan News*, the magazine of the Wildlife Society of Namibia, and the author of *A Guide to the Tortoises of Namibia* (of which there are seven species).



Beryl Comar visited Mexico and came back with wonderful pictures and information about the hummingbirds that frequent Dr Sandy Fowler's garden. If space permits, *Gazelle* will publish them in a future issue.

DNHG Membership

Our new membership year begins in September, so please remember to renew at the next meeting if you have not already. 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:

Barbara Couldrey
Gary Feulner
Richard Dennis
Angela Manthorpe

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



Our Next Meeting

Please note that our next meeting will be held on *October 8*, instead of the first Sunday of the month, which is our usual practice.

Field Trips for the New Season

**Birdwatching at Nad Al Sheba with David Bradford
Friday 29th Sept.**

This trip is probably full as we go to print, but on the off chance of joining it, contact David Bradford at davebradford9@hotmail.com

**Wadi Bih with Peter van A.
Friday 27th Oct**

This is a day trip that involves mountain driving, a short sharp walk to a traditionally constructed stone village, and perhaps a swim on Dibba beach to cool off. Email Peter for details at pvana@emirates.net.ae

**Astronomy with Lamjed El-Kefi
Friday evening 10th Nov**

Details will be provided in the next *Gazelle*. This is an evening not to be missed, especially if you have never looked through a really big telescope. It is necessarily out of town, away from the lights, but is usually in a spot that does not require a 4WD.

**Ibri Anticline with Anne Millen & Peter van A.
Friday/Saturday 17/18th Nov**

This will be a camping/fossilising trip but it would be possible to stay at the Ibri Hotel and join in by day. Peter and Anne will do a recce and announce details at the November meeting. (This is National Weekend in Oman, so the date may have to be changed.)

**Elephant Walkways with Steve and Jo Raynor
Friday 08th Dec**

It is a long drive to the western desert of Abu Dhabi, but it is possible as a day trip. There are 8 million year old elephant tracks, and other interesting possibilities. Details will be available closer to the date.

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

You have to plan well ahead and stick to your commitment with this one, but it is a wonderful trip up the east coast, into fjjordland.



Other trips that are planned but not yet confirmed

**RAK Khor Dhow and Birdwatching with Val Chalmers
Either 13th or 14th Oct**

Val does not yet have all the details but members will be advised either at the meeting on 8th October, or by email.

**Falcon Hospital
A Thursday in Nov/Dec**

Details even sketchier. Watch this space.

**Field Trip with Gary Feulner
Date TBA**

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

nounced in our next issue of *Gazelle*. These walks usually require moderate fitness

**Temple Walk with Sandhya Prakash
Date TBA**

**Wadi Tarabat with Val Chalmers
Date TBA**

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

Our Next Speaker

Dr David Gallacher has a broad background in agricultural production, stemming from a childhood on an Australian dryland sheep and wheat farm. After completing a Bachelors degree in agriculture at Melbourne University, he went on to complete a Ph.D. in plant genetics. He then worked in horticultural industry development in Australia, livestock production in Vietnam, and root crop conservation in the Pacific Islands. In 2002 he moved to the UAE, and in 2003 started working for Zayed University (Dubai campus). Soon after, he commenced a research project with the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve with co-worker Dr Jeffrey Hill.

David's current research interest is to understand the consequences of recent land management changes to natural ecology in the UAE, and how these can be corrected for future preservation. Like many, he has developed a love of ghaf trees, writing about them in *Tribulus*. He soon plans to use GPS collars to track the movements of oryx within the Reserve.

For a full list of David's publications, visit http://www.zu.ac.ae/profile/David_Gallacher.aspx



Kilimanjaro Climb

According to the helpful signpost at the top, Kilimanjaro, at 5895 metres above sea level, is the tallest mountain in Africa, and the world's highest freestanding object. The mountain also, according to my guidebook, is so huge that it forms its own ecosystem, separate from the surrounding African plains. Armed with this knowledge it did not escape my notice, whilst trudging higher and becoming increasingly cold and exhausted, that we were passing through five distinct climatic zones during our tortuous journey to the summit.



View of the five levels of Kilimanjaro

The warmest and easiest walking conditions were on the lower slopes. The water that flows off the mountain and the rich volcanic soil is ideal for agriculture and these support quite large communities of animals (and people). During our first day of ascent we passed through a region that was heavily cultivated with coffee, bananas, grazing land and maize. At about 1800m we entered the forest zone, home to numerous birds, leopards, colobus monkeys, small antelopes, squirrels and loads of butterflies. Unfortunately we didn't see many animals as the trees kept getting in the way. The loud noise generated by dozens of pairs of boots and hiking poles probably didn't help either!

At around 2800m we passed into the "Heath and Moorland Zone". From here we were no longer shaded by the trees and were hiking through cooler, but sunnier conditions. The terrain was generally rocky with heather and other shrub-like plants proliferating. It was in this zone that we started to see giant lobelias and *Senecio*

kilimanjari that, to me, resembled huge cacti. Our campsite at the end of this zone was on the Shira Plateau, where lions, elephants, buffaloes, eland and klipspringers occasionally roam. This probably explains the presence of armed guards for that particular evening.



Senecio kilimanjari

The fourth zone, the "Highland Desert", between 4000 and 5000m, receives a very low rainfall, approximately 250mm per year. As we were well above the clouds at this point, the nights were uncomfortably cold, but the days were sunny, and warm, requiring liberal use of sun-block and rapid changes of clothing at sunrise and sunset. At this altitude most people developed headaches and a few of our colleagues were unable to continue to the summit, due to classic symptoms of altitude sickness (vomiting, lethargy, breathlessness). Just getting out of the tent to go to the (not very pleasant) toilet was a major ordeal at this point and left most people exhausted and with a racing heart-rate!

In such inhospitable conditions only the hardest of creatures and plants (and people!) can survive for long and only about 55 kinds of plants exist above 4000m, compared to many hundreds in the other zones. Most of these plants are grasses, mosses and lichens. Some large animals have been spotted in this zone, as have scavenging ravens, but they are all thought to have been just passing through, preferring to live at lower altitudes.

The final summit zone, above

5000m is the driest and least hospitable. Precipitation is probably less than 100mm per year, but it supports a range of permanent (yet evidently shrinking) glaciers. Oxygen is approximately half that at sea level and there is little atmosphere to protect bare skin from the sun's radiation. This causes obvious problems for trekkers who begin their final ascent at midnight, covered in arctic clothing, and promptly strip off their outer layers at about 7am, once the rising sun threatens to cause over-heating. Some lichens manage to cling to a grim existence here and the highest recorded flowering plant, *Helichrysum newii*, has been spotted at 5670m near the remains of the volcanic crater, where it spends its nights keeping warm next to volcanic vents that emit sulphur and steam. In 2003 scientists concluded that molten Magma exists just 400m beneath the crater's surface. Amazingly, in 1926, the frozen remains of a leopard were found up here (its ear was brought down as evidence!).

One of the most note-worthy features of the mountain is its shrinking glaciers. When the explorer Hans Meyer investigated the summit in 1887 he found that the crater was entirely full of ice and snow, and that a wall of blue ice extended down the side of the mountain for 200m. These days the crater rim and crater floor are largely free of permanent ice and the glaciers seem to be melting and receding. According to National Geographic Magazine: "The ice fields Ernest Hemingway once described as "wide as all the world, great, high, and unbelievably white in the sun" have lost 82 percent of their ice since 1912 — the year their full extent was first measured. If current climatic conditions persist, the legendary glaciers, icing the peaks of Africa's highest summit for nearly 12,000 years, could be gone entirely by 2020."

Report by
Richard Dennis





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

'Hafit' type tombs in Norway



While tramping along the wet, forested ridges above Skein in the Telemark this August, we happened upon two 'Hafit' type tombs. The stones are granite, the top of the mound has been broken into and contents removed some time ago and there is a small doorway without a lintel. They are nestled in among the spruce trees and blueberry bushes at Fiskebekkasen, typically on a ridge. A rough translation from the adjacent information board said that they are early Bronze Age. One is 12m wide and 2m high, the other 8m wide and 1.5m high.



Rock carvings

They were usually for single occupancy of well-off individuals who

were buried with some of their possessions, such as jewellery, and necessities for the after life such as eating/cooking utensils and food.

There are apparently several of these tombs in the area, but no evidence of habitation ... except some fascinating late Bronze Age rock carvings showing long narrow rowing boats and large circular motives (?wheels). We looked at some just outside Skein, near Henrik Ibsen's family farm. Report by Barbara Couldrey.

Fujeirah Seashells

Longtime Fujeirah resident and DNHG member Minie van de Weg invited Anne Millen and Gary Feulner to have a look at her collection of seashells, mostly from the East Coast but also from RAK and Oman, including Ras al-Hadd. Knowing that Minie usually has a few surprises up her sleeve, Anne and Gary went armed with copies of *Seashells of Eastern Arabia* and a camera.

Minie's collection consists of at least 1000 specimens, attractively displayed in what can best be described as Victorian style (small children should be kept at a distance). This was far too many shells to review comprehensively in a short visit, so Anne and Gary focused mostly on specimens that seemed out of the ordinary for one reason or another. Before long, the A/C became less necessary, as Anne, Gary and Minie flipped pages furiously.



Anne was intrigued by an apparent *Thais* sp. (#491 in *SEA*), that seemed (above) to resemble an enigmatic shell that she's been tracking on Dubai beaches. Gary was excited to see *Telescopium*



telescopium (#186), a large, conical mud snail (above) best known from the soft mud flats of the Indus delta (the Rann of Kutch). Only a few specimens are known from the East Coast and it does not seem to live here, but obviously individuals make their way here from time to time.



Minie herself asked about a cowrie from RAK that resembles *Cypraea grayana* (#258) but is nevertheless different in form and colouration and, in particular, is much lighter overall and has many more fine "teeth" in the aperture (above). She had numerous specimens of this but a satisfactory match could not be found in *SEA*. Among the larger specimens were *Tibia insulaechorb curta* (#211) and *Tutufa (Tutufella) oyami* (#378).



These three specimens, it seems, were included as a test. Gary was confident that a few shells repre-



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

Reptiles - Dr Reza Khan
res 344 8283
off 344 0462
fax (off) 349 9437

Archaeology - Prof. John Fox
jfox@aus.ac.ae
(Temporarily away - hold your reports)

Birds - David Bradford
davebradford9@hotmail.com

Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi
res: 06-5247 958
off: 06-5583 003
email: lankefi@emirates.net.ae

Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

Geology - Gary Feulner
res 306 5570
fax 330 3550

Insects - Gary Feulner

Fossils - Valerie Chalmers
res 349 4816,
fax 340 0990
vmc@latifaschool.co.ae

Plants - Valerie Chalmers

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.



sented land snails (above), and of the sort more likely to be found in Europe. (Where are these from, Minie? Did you collect them while you were back in Holland? After some thought, Minie did allow that those specimens might have come to Fujairah in her pocket.) A large Tonnoid(?), biconical but unornamented, of which Minie had three specimens from different localities, also left Anne and Gary completely stumped (at least until they consult *Seashells of the Dutch Coast*).



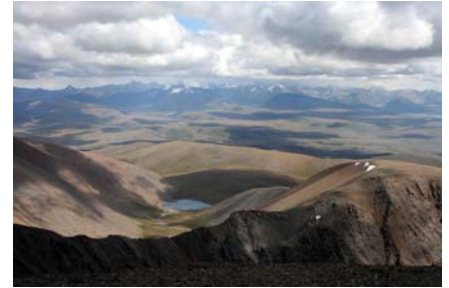
Purple sunbird chick peeping out of nest

The garden of Minie's compound, an oasis of green in what is now the midst of downtown Fujairah, provided a temptation to linger. It is easy to see how Minie has made numerous natural history observations there over the years - and how many exotic species might find a refuge there. Most recently she had the pleasure to watch Purple Sunbirds nesting, and to photograph a baby sunbird poking its head out of the hanging nest. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Snow Leopards in the Altai Republic

Being made redundant unexpectedly has its advantages...after all, coming at the start of June, it gave me just enough time to book the last place on a project to survey snow leopards in the mountains of the Altai Republic, Central Asia.

The Altai Republic is one of the poorest regions of the former Soviet Union and borders China, Mongolia, Kazakhstan and the Tuva Republic. Its mountains were listed as a World Heritage Site in 1998 in recognition of their outstanding biodiversity and habitat for several endangered species.



Looking towards Mongolia

I joined a research team from Biosphere Expeditions (BE), one of a number of organisations that take paying volunteers to work alongside scientists and assist in data gathering and research work. The purpose of our research was to survey the local environment to look for evidence of snow leopards and their prey species and where possible to gather information on other wildlife including other carnivores, birds and small mammals. The area has been little studied and the data that BE has gathered over four years of work provides baseline information that could be used in the development of a management plan for the region in the future.



Our camp overlooking the steppe

Our tented camp was approximately 1,000 km south from Novosibirsk, one of Russia's largest cities and was set in a wooded river valley at 2200m, with a view over the vast steppe to the North and with ridges and peaks rising to 3500m to the South.

Let's be clear though - we never expected to see a snow leopard! The BE project was in its fourth



year this year, and in the previous three years, only two leopards had ever been sighted during the two months of summer research, although additional signs such as scat (faeces), pugmarks and scrapes (where the animals urinate) were found every year. Herders living in the area over the winter months do occasionally see leopards, but in the summer months it is much harder to see the animals as they are so well camouflaged against the rocks and there is little snow in which to see tracks. Interviews with local nomadic herders indicate that the number of animals has fallen significantly from the last generation to this one and studies estimate that only between 40 and 80 snow leopards live in the Altai mountains. This year in the main survey area one of the groups found an old scrape and a potential leopard track in the snowline (but it could have been a lynx track).



Anyone spot the snow leopard?

So, what did we do all day? Well, the idea was to survey different habitats in the area to build up data on the species living there; this meant recording all signs such as scat, tracks, fur, bones and actual sightings of any animals and birds; to collect all carnivore scat for further analysis and to collect bird of prey pellets for analysis on which mammals made up the majority of their diet. The habitats ranged from the vast open steppe, forested slopes, glacial valleys and bare, rocky ridges up to 3500m. The expedition was able to accommodate those with special interests so that for example, keen ornithologists could concentrate on the bird list, and those with a knowledge of plants had the freedom to focus on the wonderful diversity in this area.

During the course of one month in

Altai I had the opportunity to survey all main habitats and the chance to observe wildlife at fairly close quarters was one of the joys of the expedition. The forests were particularly interesting because, although deforestation and forest fires are eating away at this habitat, the Siberian larch and pine are home to smaller mammals like red squirrels and Siberian chipmunks; there was evidence of wolf, fox, deer, bears and wild boar and, if you looked carefully around the numerous tree stumps, you could often find raptor pellets.



Red squirrel

The valleys and ridge tops provided evidence of a reasonably healthy population of argali (wild sheep) and ibex (wild goat), which are the main prey of the snow leopard. In addition to frequent scat, occasional tracks, fur and sleeping depressions, we did manage to observe groups of both argali and ibex (in both cases up to 15 animals in the group - males, females and young). Argali and ibex are particularly well camouflaged and often the only way we knew the animals were there, was from the sound of falling rocks as they climbed away from us, and generally we got no closer than about a kilometer from the animals. On the ridge tops we found scat from a manul, a small cat predator, and one group observed a family group of wolverine.



Scat comparison

Needless to say you develop an

ability to pick out piles of scat from the backdrop of rocks and vegetation and learn to distinguish which pile belongs to which creature!

The steppe supports a huge number of small mammals including numerous ground squirrel, which scattered in every direction as we drove past, stopping to stand up and look round before diving into their burrows; marmots, which are unfortunately under threat from local hunters who value their fur for making hats; hares, several species of mouse, shrew and vole, and at night, jerboa were a common sighting bounding along the tracks.



Siberian chipmunk

For birders the area is a paradise. Every day we saw raptors – most commonly black eared kites, and frequently steppe, imperial and golden eagles, plus cinereous vultures, buzzards, long eared and little owls. On the steppe we saw the magnificent demoiselle crane, groups of red-billed and yellow-billed chough, northern and Isabel-line wheatears, hoopoes and skylarks. The river valleys were home to citrine, grey and white (or pied) wagtails, stonechats and various redstarts, pipits and warblers amongst others. Game birds such as Altai snowcock, rock ptarmigan and partridge were also common.



Black eared kite

The Altai Republic is a wonderfully



	name	tel home	tel office	fax
Chairman	Gary Feulner messages: 306 5300	306 5570	330 3600	330 3550
Vice Chairman	Valerie Chalmers e mail: vmc@latifaschool.co.ae	349 4816	no calls pls	340 0990
Treasurer	<i>Needed!</i>			
Membership Secretary	Lena Linton e.mail: linton@emirates.net.ae	344 2591		344 2591
Membership Assistant	Anindita Radhakrishna e.mail: anin@emirates.net.ae	282 3952	050-656 9165	
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diverse area, at present little touched by tourism. Snow leopards are active in the area, and although we didn't see any ourselves, the data that we gathered on these big cats, on their prey species and on the local wildlife and plants adds to the understanding of its diversity and highlights the need to protect this fragile area from unrestricted development.

If you'd like to know more about how you can take part in such an expedition take a look at www.biosphere-expeditions.org, or www.earthwatch.org – between them, they run over 100 projects worldwide. *Report by Angela Manthorpe*



Summer Rain

A number of places in the mountains received rain from showers in August and early September, with the result that more water is currently flowing than had generally been seen in recent years. Included are (at least) Shawkah and Fili (where the new dams are full) and the Hatta area, where showers were somewhat more modest but have still refreshed the landscape and left plenty of wadi pools. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Who 'Ya Gonna Call?

Below is the text of a real e-mail received on a summer Thursday by the London-based publisher of various books on UAE wildlife, and forwarded to several local naturalists for their reply. We hope they were carrying their Blackberries:
Subject: red back spider

Hello. What do you recommend in case of a red-back-spider's bite? Especially in case of a baby? Is it in any case necessary to give anti-venom? To which hospital should I go? (I live in Dubai.) Thanks!
Dr. [name deleted]



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?

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

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- Oct 08: Vegetation Decline in the Dubai Inland Desert: Past and Future - Dr David Gallacher
Nov 05: Rock Art – Dr. Michelle Ziolkowski

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

- Sept. 29 Birdwatching at Nad Al Sheba - David Bradford
Oct 27 Wadi Bih - Peter van Amsterdam
Nov 10 Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi
Nov 17 Ibri Anticline - Anne Millen & Peter van Amsterdam
Dec 08 Elephant Walkways in Abu Dhabi - Steve and Jo Raynor
Dec 15 Musandam Dhow Trip - Lamjed El-Kefi