

# GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

## Members' News

*Going, going ... gone!*

**Rob and Jean Allan** photographed wildflowers near Hatta before the big dust storm in March. They found large areas of well-grown *Brassicaceae* and *Polygonaceae*.



The yellow *Diploptaxis harra* is known as 'mountain mustard'  
The pale pink/violet is *Erucaria hispanica*



Mustards and sorrel adorn a hillside

According to Marijcke Jongbloed, it is known by various Arabic names such as *humayth*, *hommeid*, *hummad*, *hambad* and *hambasees*. It is used as a citrus-tasting salad green or cooked with meat, and after rain, people can be seen out in the foothills picking the fleshy, sometimes slightly red leaves. It usually flowers from February to April but you are too late to see it this year!



The prolonged rains have caused the mustards to grow very long flower stems

Prettiest of all, and just visible as a reddish blush in the next picture, was sorrel (*Rumex vesicarius*) of the family *Polygonaceae*.



*Rumex vesicarius*  
Photographs by Rob Allan

### *DNHG Membership*

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:

Rob and Jean Allan  
Diane Lazenbury  
Valerie Chalmers  
Rob Schmidt  
Gary Feulner



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



Falcon Hospital Trip with Pradeep & Anin  
April/May (to be confirmed)

This trip is just one day and can be done in hot weather. Pradeep has been in touch with the authorities, but as yet they have not given a date. The details will be announced either at the next meeting or by email.

Bastakia Windtower Houses: a walk with Peter Jackson  
May

Peter Jackson has offered to lead a walk through Bastakia, visiting the old wind tower houses by the creek which have been researched for his book. I think he is wandering around Bastakia at this very minute, because I cannot contact him for details! It will take place sometime in May after the book is published, and will be approximately three hours on a Friday morning. Watch this space.

End-of-Season Dinner, Photographic Competition and Quiz  
Thurs June 14

Valerie Chalmers has confirmed with the Dubai Country Club the date of the End-of-Season Dinner, Photographic Competition and Quiz. Please note the date and keep it free. This annual event is always great fun. Details for the photographic competition and for obtaining tickets for the evening will appear in May's Gazette. Start preparing for the new improved photographic competition!

### Future Field Trips ...

The Committee does its best to organise interesting and varied field trips, and ideally, we would like to have a trip every weekend in the cool months and an occasional trip for those languishing here over the long hot summer. If you would like to lead a trip, or would like to visit a place or learn about some UAE natural history subject, contact one of the Field Trip Coordinators, who will be pleased to help you organize it.

### Is this the same critter?

These two very alarmed lizards were tipped out of a long-open bag of dry potting mix by editor Anne Millen. The one opinion she has had is that they are both the common house gecko, one younger than the other. But on consulting *The Emirates; A Natural History*, Anne is wondering if the second is *Stenodactylus donae*. Your tuppenceworth, please.



Photographs by Anne Millen

### Mind the Croc !

Twitchers' Guide (see [www.uaeinterac.com](http://www.uaeinterac.com) <<http://www.uaeinterac.com>> ) recently included an alert worth passing on to DNHG members. In the large lake still present within the Sharjah dump site between Sharjah University City and National Paints roundabout, a crocodile first reported a year ago is now said to have reached approximately 2m in size. It presumably is someone's discarded pet. Experts at Sharjah's Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife have been alerted and it is hoped that they can arrange to capture the animal and find a more suitable home for it (and, we hope, identify it), but until further notice birdwatchers and others visiting the site should exercise appropriate caution. This site was known to most DNHG members as the "Larry Woods Dumpsite". After first introducing

us to it as a nature site, Larry reported on plans for its reclamation and remediation, which are currently being implemented. According to one report, the thousands of rubber tires on the site proved to be home to a substantial population of the saw-scaled viper (*Echis carinatus*) Thanks to 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 email: [pvana@emirates.net.ae](mailto:pvana@emirates.net.ae).

### Our Next Speaker

**Dr Mark Beech** studied archeology in London, and completed his M.A. (Hons.) at Sheffield and his D.Phil. at York University, UK.

He has worked in the zooarcheology laboratory in Birmingham, UK, and done archeological and paleological research in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Pakistan, another project in the Czech Republic (Mark is fluent in Czech) Jordan, Iraq and Kuwait. In between, he has worked on other archeological research projects with universities in the UK.

Since October 2002, he has worked as Senior Resident Archeologist for ADIAS, both managing ADIAS and researching the archeology of the coast and islands of Abu Dhabi. He and his family now live in Abu Dhabi.



### Desert Plants, Spoon Worms ... and Glorious Mud

Fifteen members of the Dubai Natural History Group met up with Dick Hornby not far from Tawee-lah Power Station, in Abu Dhabi Emirate. Dick then took us to the sand dunes near the power station to look at the desert plants. We spent about an hour and a half there and identified over twenty plants.



*Arnebia hispidissima* (Family Boraginaceae).

The full list of plants found can be obtained from either Val Chalmers (see p.7) or Editor Anne Millen, but these were the families present: Asteraceae (Compositae), Boraginaceae, Caryophyllaceae, Chenopodiaceae, Cistaceae, Cyperaceae, Fabaceae, Orobanchaceae, Plumbaginaceae, Poaceae (Graminae), Resedaceae, Zygophyllaceae.

Two boys, who were with their families, handed over a plastic bottle containing two geckos – one pale in colour and found on sabkha and the other warty and usually found under stones. Dick identified them as *Phrynocephalus maculatus* (pale) and *Bunopus tubercuatus* (warty).

We were very interested to see a large number of hawkmoth caterpillars present, feeding on *Fagonia ovalifolia* and *Helianthemum lippii*. (See Dick's article, March Gazette.) We then proceeded to Ras Hanjurah and, after lunch, walked across the wet mud to the mangroves to look for spoon worms.



Good examples of the desert hyacinth, *Cistanche tubulosa* (above), were seen flowering and *Arthrocnemum macrostachyum* was seen in abundance. Dick pointed out many flamingo feeding mounds en route to the spoon worms.



Dick Hornby with flamingo feeding mound

We did see some spoon worms! Further into the mangroves, conditions became wetter and muddier and two members of the group unfortunately got stuck in the mud; one member having to crawl out!



Spoonworm emerging

Dick identified for us a variety of crabs including *Metaprograpus messor*, *Macrophthalmus depressus* (blue) and *Eurcarcinus orientalis* (violet) and also mud snails – *Potamides conicus* in profusion and *Cerithidea cingulata*. (They are actually from separate families – Cerithiidae and Potamididae - but generally are known as ceriths or mud snails.)



Spoonworm out

We would like to thank Dick Hornby very much for taking us to the two sites to spend a most enjoyable day. Report and photographs by Valerie Chalmers

Ed: Regarding Dick Hornby's article on Hawkmoth caterpillars, Marijcke Jongbloed wrote, "The caterpillar article was interesting, but I have just sent an e-mail to Dick that he need not fear for their survival. After the last big rains in 1995-6 I saw thousands of them around the Desert Park, and on the high mountain terraces along the wadi Khasab road. Earlier, after the big rains of 1984-5 they were along the roadsides of the Madam-Dhaid road. I am sure they are in many other places where I did not happen to look."

### IEW Visit to Hafit Tombs & Mezyad Fort

Our excellent guides for Saturday morning's excursion were Marion Campey (leader) and Geoff Cosson and our first port of call was the Hafit Tombs, situated at the foot of Jebel Hafit.

Seventy million years ago, Jebel



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

Hafit was uplifted from the ocean floor, hence its many marine fossils, but it is also renowned for more than 500 graves on both its northern and eastern sides, built approximately 5,000 years ago. Of course, over the intervening centuries their roofs had fallen in and walls collapsed so it was not surprising therefore that the majority of those on the northern side were inadvertently used as a source of building material for the very early expansion projects around Al Ain. However, forty years ago His Highness, the late Sheikh Zayed Al Nahayan, fortuitously brought in archaeologists to survey the area and now those remaining on the eastern side are protected by the Department of Antiquities, part of the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture & Heritage in Al Ain.



*Partially reconstructed tomb.*

The Hafit graves, also called the Mezyad graves after the village near the eastern side of the mountain, are unlike the tombs of the Umm an Nar period because each tomb is built as a single round, or oval, chamber. One, two or three ring-walls encircle the chamber and rise to about 3 to 4 metres above ground, with the rough hewn stones corbelling inwards to form a dome-like structure. A narrow entrance faces south. This raises the question of whether the inhabitants worshipped Shamash, the Sun God, as did the Mesopotamians. Although

plundered over the centuries, some imported Mesopotamian pottery has been found from the Jemdet Nasr period (late 4<sup>th</sup> - early 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC). Finds of vessels made of soapstone, as well as beads of a much later date, would indicate that these graves continued in use and / or were re-used during the Iron Age.



*Re-constructed tombs*

The area visited comprised a few tombs which had been totally re-constructed by the archaeologists, as well as a couple that had only been partially reconstructed. The latter gave not only a clearer idea of the internal size (without having to squeeze through the tiny, claustrophobic opening) but also the stone corbelling to the roof.

Within the same area were a handful of tombs which lay in their natural state of collapse, be they at ground level or up the lower slopes of Jebel Hafit. Luckily the heavy rains of the past week made climbing easier by washing away the overlay of blown sand and loose shale.



*Indigofera arabica*

En route to and from the site both Jenny Irwin and Val Chalmers took note of the flora. Over 39 different species were identified which in-

cluded *Cleome brachycarpa* and *Cleome rupicola*, *Forsskaolea tenacissima*, *Hippocrepis constricta*, *Indigofera arabica* and *I. intricata*. *Citrullus colocynthis* was seen in great abundance en route to the tombs.



*Forsskaolea tenacissima*

Jo Raynor found some fossils not far from the tombs – an oyster, part of an echinoderm and two gastropods (one round and one cone-shaped).

Mezyad Fort was formerly the border post and can therefore be found easily by turning right at the last roundabout immediately prior to the current border crossing. We entered via outer gates to the grounds and parked immediately adjacent to the fort's massive wooden gates. The size of this fort quite took us aback. Partially obscured by palm trees, its size from the road is misleading.



*Mezyad Fort*

Prior to the federation of the United Arab Emirates the fort was last used by the Trucial Oman Scouts - local camel mounted soldiers under British officers - and, as so often found in the British Army, the fort had been whitewashed.

But today it is on the verge of being more sympathetically restored using original materials: mud bricks



## Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

Reptiles - Dr Reza Khan  
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off 344 0462  
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Archaeology - David Palmer  
cell: 050-7387703  
office direct line: 04-2072636

Birds - David Bradford  
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Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi  
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Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

Geology - Gary Feulner  
res 306 5570  
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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.



for the walls which are then covered with a scree of mud & straw; a cover of gypsum to the crenulations (to add a cover impervious to rain); scooped out palm trunks as drainage spouts from the roof. As well, all around the upper level are the ubiquitous slits through which rifles would have been trained on advancing foes, and traditional small round horizontal poles embedded in the corners of the towers as a ladder to the upper level. Given the thinness of the poles versus the not-so-trim ENGH members, plus the half metre spacing between the poles / steps, it is believed that nobody attempted an ascent!



Entering Mezyad Fort

In the massive square courtyard, numerous young date palms had been planted and the well rebored. The rooms off the courtyard were many and, although only a couple were unlocked, one could see that the same level of craftsmanship had been applied. Arabic wall niches were prevalent as were the traditional ceilings (not of mangrove trunks, because of the distance from the sea but of palm tree trunks cut to the standard length, topped with palm thong matting, with a further layer of a mud / straw / gypsum mixture, giving a finish strong enough to walk upon).

The first floor of the south-east tower was quite evidently the Commanding Officer's quarters as it had an inner bedchamber with a view over the courtyard and an outer room with windows on two sides, giving a clear, unimpeded view from the far end of Jebel Hafit right around (anticlockwise) to Al Ain, with the Omani mountains acting as a backdrop. With its back to the

sheer wall of Jebel Hafit and all approaches on flat terrain, the siting of the fort is excellent - as was the whole morning. Thanks to our two leaders and their enthusiasm, which was so infectious.

At the end of the visit, in the shade of the main portal, Jenny Irwin briefly described some of the plants she had found that morning. She also commented on the total number of plants that she and Val Chalmers had seen in what appeared to be a fairly barren landscape.

Mezyad Fort is well worth the effort of journeying to, through, and beyond Al Ain. Although the gate to the outer garden / farm is manned and looks 'by invitation only', it is (at the time of going to print) open to the public. *Report by Diane Lazenbury and photographs by Val Chalmers*

### IEW Visit to Dhub Valley

Have you ever seen a dhub in the wild? The majority of the participants on this afternoon's adventure had not.

With keen anticipation and many a finger tightly crossed in anticipation of a sighting, nine tightly packed 4x4s set off in search thereof. Twenty minutes, two underpasses, twelve roundabouts and an airport later, we turned off onto twelve kilometres of bone rattling track through dunes which gradually became scrub desert - the habitat of the dhub. The convoy turned into Dhub Valley and halted a few kilometres later.

Leading us, with first-hand knowledge of the occupied burrows and a wide knowledge of dhubs were Jeff Imes (Al Ain) and Drew Gardiner (Chairman of the Abu Dhabi Chapter). Within moments of halting one was sighted basking outside its burrow but bolted when the numbers of viewers increased, leaving the majority without a sighting. At this junction Drew gave us a synopsis of the creature we were hoping to spy:



*Uromastyx acanthinurus*

The 'spiny-tailed lizard' (*Uromastyx acanthinurus*, of the *Agamidae* family) is known locally as a 'dhub'. Of the *Uromastyx* genus, there are over 15 species and even more subspecies, which spread from North Africa to India. The largest is the carnivorous monitor (*Varanus griseus*), the second largest our spiny-tailed (a vegetarian). Somewhat fearsome in appearance, with its armour-like suit and dagger-sharp tail, it does not willingly harm. Of a dark grey/black/brown background, they vary in shading with reds/oranges/yellows and even greens spotted randomly over head and body. Little is known of their mating habits but young hatch between August and September.



*Dhub burrow*

The dhub burrow is announced by a small crest of fine sand adjacent to a hole between 15 / 30cms wide by 10cms high. However, if probed it is evident that it tapers noticeably and, most interestingly, spirals downwards in bites of 45° until it reaches a depth of approximately 2 metres. Although part of a group, they live singly, with juveniles even digging their own burrows from an early age.

Drinking not a drop of water during its life, it survives on living, dying and dead plants found on the bar-

ren plains that border sandy deserts. With its slow metabolism, the dhub manages on a low calorie diet and sometimes goes weeks without eating anything. Indeed, in captivity they have been known to survive a year without nourishment. It takes what liquid it requires either from its food source (which is often salty due to the locale) and from dew (in the event that it is up early enough!). At about 0800 hrs the dhub leaves the burrow to search for food, taking about half an hour before returning to take the sun near the burrow's entrance and going back below ground to rest. Another sortie is sometimes made in late afternoon, but not for long, before more sleep is required. Hence sighting them is a mixture of timing, patience and luck.

Dhub Valley is probably the furthest west where they are found within the Al Ain region. The uplifted limestone of Jebel Hafit (part of the thrust belt of the Oman mountains), with its shallow ground water below, creates a cemented sand ideal for the Dhub in which to burrow as the ground above its den is very firm, thus avoiding collapse. And the presence of shallow water abets the growth of scrub plants, whose root systems are short.

Depending on the region, predators can vary between eagles, hawks, foxes (usually attacking whilst the dhub is exposed when on the prowl for fodder). Counter-measures are their agility and spiky hard skin. The black desert cobra is also a foe, attacking the dhub in its burrow.

Numbers in Dhub Valley have declined due, most probably, to overgrazing by camels. Indeed, one carcass was sighted during our 2<sup>nd</sup> stop. As the trip's purpose was to sight a living one, we drove on and some members of the group, quick enough to escape the confines of their vehicle, were briefly rewarded. Later in the afternoon, en route back to the ungraded track, a lucky few sighted another absorbing the last of the day's warmth.

One dung beetle (*Scarabeus* sp) was found and some very small,

round, sand coloured seeds (perhaps!) which Drew Gardener amassed to research. Both Gary Feulner and Val Chalmers made notes on the plants seen in the area which included *Centaurea pseudosinaica*, *Seetzenia lanata*, *Monsonia nivea*, *Savignya parviflora* and *Moltkiopsis ciliata*. Report by Diane Lazenbury, with special thanks to Drew Gardner. Photographs by Val Chalmers.

## Spring Migrants

About twenty members and guests gathered at the Dubai Pivot Fields, within sight of the long queue of sewerage tankers that ensures the existence of this excellent bird watching site. Vehicle access to the pivot fields is no longer permitted, so we followed David on foot through the irrigated fodder fields and occasional ponds and reed beds.



*The pivot fields*

The surprise bird was an escapee Saker falcon with its falconer's leg jesses still visible. A resident marsh harrier attempted unsuccessfully to intimidate this interloper, and was in turn mobbed by nesting white tailed and red watted lapwings.



*Dave about to harass a plover*

Beautifully constructed nests of the feral streaked weaver were sighted, along with their hopeful



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male owners. Spring migrants were well represented by large numbers of red throated pipit, and all four subspecies of the yellow wagtail, ranging from the black-headed *feldeg'* through the grey-headed *thunbergi* and *beema* to the all-yellow headed *lutea*.

The expedition then visited the nearby Al Warsan Lakes (formerly called Wimpey Pits), now a rather forlorn, fenced-in adjunct to International City. Nevertheless, the birds still visit, and we were treated to a good view of a well-camouflaged purple heron, and the diving pochard (*Aythya ferina*).

We then headed north to Umm Al Quwain, to drive past the Ruler's palace to Khor Al Beidah. Large groups of resident and migrant shore birds were present, with bar tailed godwits in their beautiful rus-set red breeding plumage.



*Khor aAl Beidah*

The significant sighting for most of us was the crab plover, but we were left with the strong impression that current and future housing development will soon remove all access to this site.



*The vanishing habitat*

We finished the day with lunch at the northern tip of the khor, watching the tide come in. Thanks once again to Dave Bradford for a very enjoyable and informative outing. *Report and photographs by Rob Schmidt*

### *A Curious Little Herbivore*

Anne Millen recently found a strange 23mm shell, *Martesia striata*, on Sohar beach. According to *Seashells of Eastern Arabia*, it is usually found in submerged wood and is closely related to the *Teredinidae*, the curse of wooden ships.



*L to R: one of the Heliacus (Architectonidae), Martesia striata, prob. Diadora singaporensis (broken) (The outer two just kept the scanner lid up!)*

## Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

May 06                      Recent UAE archaeological discoveries – Dr. Mark Beech

June 03                     Members' Night

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

April / May                Falcon Hospital with Pradeep & Anindita Radhakrishna

May                         Bastakia Walk with Peter Jackson