

GAZELLE

Vol 22 nos 7&8 July/August 2007



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Surprise on Rams beach

Just after the June issue of *Gazelle* went to print, **Sandy Fowler** wrote, "Just a quick report on my foray to Rams beach, 22nd June. Yes, a little crazy, but Beryl was teaching in RAK for two days and the beach called me!

The track down to the breakwaters is now in places very full of drifted sand. Our little Pajero lo bogged down halfway along the track and I had to use the diff lock *and* let some air out of the tyres.



Argonauta hians
From "Seashells of Eastern Arabia" by Bosch et al, edited by S. Peter Dance

The breakwaters kindly donated the occasional murex and grayana cowrie, but I was quite astounded to find a small, damaged but very real

specimen of *Argonauta hians*. Not the time of year, eh?

I visited Jazirat al Hamra beach the next day and was saddened to see what has been done to the khor there! Neither the beach itself nor the shells have changed much, though there was a dead turtle on the beach. It was a big specimen, at least one metre long, with the shell almost cut in half toward its rear. Looked very like a ship's propeller job."

Now ...

Now is the time to think about field trips. Mountain walks, marine trips, forays into Oman, black-lighting in the nearby desert ... if you have a request or idea, contact any of the Field Trip Coordinators and let them know what you are planning, or would like to do. We particularly need more people to *lead* trips. It is not difficult, and you do not have to have any expertise. There are quite a few very knowledgeable members (see page 5 for the Recorders, for example) and with any luck, one of them will be interested in coming along and will help with identifications etc. Wing it! These excursions, whether part day or a whole weekend, are great fun and you will be surprised at what you learn.

DNHG Membership

It is now membership renewal time. New memberships and renewals are good for the coming year (Sep 2007 to Sep 2008).

DNHG 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 TSB 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:

Roger Neal
Sandy Fowler
Gary Feulner



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



Calling All Divers & Sailors: Coral Reef Monitoring in Fujairah

The Fujairah Municipality and National Coral Reef Institute (NCRI), Florida, USA, advises that coral reef monitoring stations have been installed along the east coast between Fujairah and Dibba. The structures consist of limestone tiles attached to stainless steel racks, and they are used to monitor new coral recruitment in the area as polyps settle and grow over time. Please do not disturb them!

The stations are an important part of research being done on reef recovery after Cyclone Gonu. Because you can easily dislodge coral polyps, crack the tiles or otherwise distort the results of the monitoring, please stay away from them; don't toss your anchor over in reef areas, be careful with your fins and do not touch or remove any part of the stations.



Book Available:

Discovering Qatar, Frances Gillespie

Those members who couldn't make the Qatar trip (or who did, but didn't buy the book) may wish to know that *Discovering Qatar*, by Fran Gillespie, is available for sale in Dubai at Virgin Megastores, where it has reportedly been on their "Top 10" list in recent months.

Paradise Lost

By summer's end, the "Mahdhah 64" track will have an Omani border post. This track, running just within the mountain front, has long been one of the most convenient and yet unspoiled destinations for those wishing

to enjoy the beauty of the Hajar Mountain countryside. As recently as 20 years ago the southern portion of the route, from Juweif to Mahdhah, was just tyre tracks. The track was graded in the early 1990s, then well graded, and it has been asphalted for the past 5 years or so. Now, even street lights are coming and are installed from Mahdhah almost to Juwaif.

The border station at the northern end, a few kilometers from the turnoff on the Hatta road, is nearly complete. Officials on site say that it will be a "real" border check; passports will be required. A visa and formal entry will probably not be required, however, unless and until a second border post is built in the Wadi Qahfi area, through which a popular circuit can be made. The majority of UAE visitors are likely to follow that route or return whence they came. (In this respect, it will probably be like the new UAE and Omani border posts at Buraimi.)

It seems a pity to introduce officialdom into such area, and the results may be more than merely 'inconvenient' for the many UAE residents whose passports are still held by their employers. But progress is on the march. Already the new road is becoming an established commercial artery. On a recent Saturday morning, there was a steady stream of trucks heading northwards, about one a minute. They varied in size but some seemed above the posted 30 ton limit. In late afternoon, the stream seemed to reverse direction. This makes it much more difficult to enjoy a leisurely drive along the track, and also potentially much more dangerous. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Environmental Communications Officer

EWS-WWF (Emirates Wildlife Society – World Wildlife Fund) is seeking a Communication Officer to start after the summer break. The candidate will be in charge of website maintenance, press work,

and working closely with the Business Development & Marketing Director and the Education and Awareness Manager.

Candidates must be bilingual Arabic-English, with good writing skills in both languages and interested in the environment. (Experience in journalism would be an advantage.) For more details, and correspondence, contact (mentioning "Communication Officer EWS-WWF"): Razan al Mubarak, Director, Email: aayyash@ead.ae, Tel: +971 2 6347117, Fax: +97126341220

Mystery Pong

Several members have mentioned a terrible stench along the coast of Umm al Qawain, just north of the flying club. Staff at a near-by resort said it came "from the sea", or "from swamps to the north". When the Ed. caught a whiff, it certainly did not smell like algae bloom or any other normal healthy marine smell. Does anyone know the cause of this emanation?

Our Next Speaker

John Burt is a lecturer in biology and environmental sciences at Zayed University, and is involved in the United Nations University marine management project in Dubai. His PhD research examines marine ecological processes, and focuses on the dynamics of fish, coral, and other invertebrate communities found in the Jebel Ali reef and on a number of man-made rocky reefs throughout Dubai.

John returned to Canada for a few years, and since he has been back in the UAE, he has devoted research attention to shallow-water marine environments along the Dubai coast, instead of the wadis.



Summer Snorkeling in Dubai

The new north jetty at Dubai's Open Beach is a recommended locality for a pleasant snorkeling visit. I used to patrol the old jetty and, after sulking for a year and a half following its demolition and replacement, I finally paid a visit to the new one, which is longer and drops off more quickly into deeper water. Most of the denizens of the old jetty seemed to have returned, but there were a number of interesting changes.

Now common, but previously rare, is the oyster *Pinctada* cf. *nigra*, a close relative and look-alike of the pearl oyster, *Pinctada radiata*. Likewise very common (too common) is a brown algae that resembles curled wood shavings, *Padina boergesenii*. Green algae is now present in several varieties, including not only the familiar filamentous varieties, but also types resembling holly leaves and bright green bottle brushes. Also new, but common, were two types of tunicates (sea squirts), one of which, called *Phallusia nigra*, requires little further description.



Botryllus sp.,
From *The Emirates - A Natural History*,
Ed. Peter Hellyer & Simon Aspinall

Perhaps most noticeable to the average observer, the number and variety of fish is increased from years past, including a number of brightly coloured reef fish, several species of blennies and gobies ranging from bland to resplendent, and many shapes and sizes of more nondescript schooling fish. Most of the fish were small, but I saw a single large parrotfish that seemed to be about a foot long.

Among the new mollusc species present were two that have previ-

ously received attention in the pages of the *Gazelle*. *Thais carinifera*, which as a shell on Dubai beaches had puzzled Anne Millen for some time (until the British Museum stepped in to help), is currently common on the jetty. In life, it has a distinctive red-orange operculum, which let me be certain that I had encountered it only once in the past.



Thais carinifera

I also saw a small number of *Turbo radiatus*, which a year ago was the subject of a research request (satisfied by Angela Manthorpe). This relatively large mollusc is typically overgrown, not only with filamentous algae but sometimes also with leafy types, yet it seems to be an active grazer. I dislodged only one, to confirm my identification and view the distinctive 'cat's eye' operculum, and when I replaced the animal it 'ran' off to hide behind some algae. To my surprise, the body of *T. radiatus*, although seldom well exposed, is extremely elegant, with a dense speckling of black on a white background, and red-orange accents at the base of the tentacles and on the crown of the head, setting off a jet black 'nose' and tentacles.

The wildlife on the jetty was so engrossing that I spent some 2-1/2 hours in the water, and failed to remember to take sufficient precautions against the sun. As a result, a follow-up visit the next day had to be made in more or less full purdah.

It is worth mentioning that an excellent local reference for intertidal and shallow water marine life is *The Emirates - A Natural History*, the compendium published in 2005 by Trident Press and edited by Peter Hellyer and Simon Aspinall, which has chapters on the marine environment generally, the shore and shallow seas, marine plants, marine

invertebrates and marine fish. Report by Gary Feulner

Oman Oryx Reserve De-Listed

Oman's Arabian Oryx sanctuary has become, sadly, the first site to be removed from UNESCO's World Heritage list. Oman's Arabian Oryx project was established in 1979 by Sultan Qaboos bin Said to re-establish a wild population of the rare antelope that had been hunted into extinction in the wild. Oryx that had been bred in captivity in the United States were released into the sanctuary, which was added to the UNESCO list in 1994.

In 1996, the population was 450 but persistent poaching beginning in the late 1990s led to a decline in numbers. The wild population has since fallen to 65 with only around four breeding pairs, making its future viability uncertain. Adult females were a prime target for poachers, but according to Omani sources many were killed or injured in the process. "Many were found dead having succumbed to capture stress or had just been dumped, trussed, in the desert by poachers trying to escape capture."



Oryx in the Jiddat al Harasis, Oman
Photograph by Angela Manthorpe

These continuing disappointments inevitably diminished the enthusiasm of the Omani government for persevering with the project, especially in the face of pressure for oil and gas prospecting within the large area of the park. The Omani government has reportedly now reduced the size of the park by 90%, and it is understood to have voluntarily initiated the review by UNESCO. More information is available at Oman's official Arabian Oryx Web site (www.oryxoman.com). Report by Gary Feulner



Email your reports to pvana@emirates.net.ae, (Arial 10 justified) and send your photographs as separate jpg files, or deliver them to Anne for scanning.

Abu Dhabi "State of the Environment" Report

The Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi (EAD) released its report titled "State of the Environment Abu Dhabi" in mid-March. The report can be found in Arabic and English at www.soe.ae. The report is a summary of data developed or compiled by EAD and its partners, including local and federal government bodies and academic and other institutions. Being written for the internet, it will not tax your patience to read individual subject items, although it may tax your patience to find them all and navigate among them. There is, however, a good site map (good enough that many other sites could usefully emulate it).

Brisk in its coverage, the report is equally refreshing in its candor. Among other things: It acknowledges that a number of significant species have gone extinct in the area (oryx, hyena, wolf) and that others are at risk, both on land and at sea (dugong and other marine mammals, and certain sharks); it identifies overgrazing as the major threat to biodiversity in desert areas (infrastructure development is the main culprit in coastal areas); it questions the wisdom of ever-expanding and essentially unregulated agricultural and afforestation projects, both of which increase the strain on groundwater resources; it questions water use policies generally (Abu Dhabi water use is 26x renewable supply and per capita consumption is double that of developed European countries); and it recognizes that the 300km of coastal sabkha to the west of Abu Dhabi represent the best example of this landform anywhere in the world.

Although the report is not primarily quantitative, the reader is exposed along the way to a variety of interesting numerical facts, for example: groundwater still accounts for 80% of total consumption; an estimated 3000 Arabian oryx are in captivity in private collections in Abu Dhabi; the only known breeding colony of the red-billed tropic bird in the Arabian Gulf is on Zirku Island; summertime sea temperatures can exceed 34°C; and there are more than 240 species of fish in Abu Dhabi waters.

The report strikes a few false notes, e.g., the suggestion that donkeys are a problem on Jebel Hafit and the suggestion that a second species of mangrove may have been present in the Arabian Gulf in the past. These would be inconsequential except that similar suggestions have in the past been the basis for misguided policy proposals, such as the culling of non-existent donkeys and the introduction of exotic mangroves.

The report itself, however, makes no proposals. It is a research or description document, not a political or prescriptive one. It does, however, record regulatory initiatives already taken, including a 2006 law regulating well-drilling and the establishment of protected reserves at Al Wathba, Merawah Island and the Yasat Islands, as well as the proposed reserves at Jebel Hafit and Umm Az-Zamool. Report by Gary Feulner

At the Pivot Fields



During summer, Roger and Heather Neal visited the pivot fields, near the sewage treatment plant beside the Hatta Road. This area has been the scene of many birding trips with Dave Bradford, and Dave confirmed that these are indeed white tailed plovers and a red wattled lapwing.



White tailed plover

The first records of these birds breeding in the UAE have all come from man-made wetlands such as the Pivot Fields.



White-tailed plover eggs



Red wattled lapwing

Thanks to Roger Neal for these photographs.

Save the Terebralia

Why head for the East Coast on a sultry July morning with six large shovels and a car full of hired laborers? One of the less heralded effects of tropical storm Gonu was to block the mouth of the concrete storm channel near the Oceanic Hotel in Khor Fakkan, by throwing up a large berm of sand and shells, not to mention a foundation of brick and cement block-sized rocks and boulders. This was unfortunate, because the channel is home to a unique population of the large intertidal mud snail *Terebralia palustris*, which was thereby cut off from the sustaining ebb and flow of the tide.



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

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

Archaeology - David Palmer
cell: 050-7387703
office direct line: 04-2072636

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
email: valeriechalmers@hotmail.com

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.



The channel before Gonu, at low tide

T. palustris has a prominent place in the archaeological and cultural history of the UAE, having been a common food item at both coastal and inland sites. The Oceanic storm channel population is noteworthy because it is one of only two living populations in the UAE, and because it is the largest population, worldwide, reported to exist without any connection with mangrove trees. As an inhabitant of the upper intertidal zone in the tropics and subtropics, *T. palustris* can withstand high temperature, exposure and even desiccation for several weeks (for example between spring tides), but as time passed, the survival of the animals in the channel was becoming increasingly problematic.



The channel after Gonu, with rescuers at work

The water trapped behind the new berm, when I first investigated three weeks after the storm, was becoming increasingly warm (and therefore oxygen-depleted) and opaque. Something needed to be done. The magnitude of the task (removing a meter and a half of material over a distance of some 10 meters) argued for official intervention and mechanized equipment. The relevant authorities were approached, but, as always, the wheels of the bureaucracy grind slowly. If action came, but too late, it would be of no use to the *Terebralia*, so an emer-

gency effort was mounted in mid-July to try to dig, by hand, a channel that would allow the highest tides to breach the berm.

Digging for 3-1/2 hours in the morning left us short of completion, but with the goal in sight. We had hoped to continue until noon, but all agreed: by 11am it was too hot to continue. So we broke for lunch and a rest on Khor Fakkan's attractive waterfront, and resumed at 4pm. By 6pm we had completed the planned effort.



Terebralia palustris, with smaller *Cerithidea cingulata*

The work was far from easy, because it proved to be no mere shoveling of sand and shells. Throughout, we were bedeviled by the presence of larger rocks, fist size to typewriter size, lodged within the sand, interrupting smooth shovel strokes and requiring us to stop, bend, and lift. The laborers grumbled (but only in Bengali) that if they had known how hard the work would be, they would not have come. Nevertheless, they were hardworking and even enthusiastic, reserving a special diligence for the largest boulders.

A welcome addition to the rescue effort was East Coast resident and UAE naturalist Christophe Tourenq (also a former DNHG speaker). This was a busman's holiday for Christophe, who is Project Director for the EWS-WWF Wadi Wurayah study, and it was gratifying to have his immediate and unstinting support, even on his personal time.

When the work was finished at day's end, the tide was out, but we had a sense that we had accomplished what we set out to do. Happily, Christophe was able to make a



repeat visit at high tide the following morning and sent the good news: Success! The high tide, coupled with the sea swells, flowed through the trough we had dug and into the main channel. In addition, we had cleared enough sand and shell debris to allow some of the water to percolate below the surface, through the larger rocks near the bottom of the berm.

We hoped these measures would serve to refresh the water trapped behind the berm and restore the intermittent flow of water to the *T. palustris* in the uppermost reaches of the channel, which had been dry for some five weeks, and thereby give the animals sufficient relief to hold out until a more comprehensive 'fix' can be engineered. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Seeing Both Sides

Editor Anne Millen and Peter van Amsterdam visited the east and west coasts of the US in early summer. The Cape Codders apologised for the weather, but Peter and Anne enjoyed experiencing the big lows rolling up from the south that, together with strong currents, have both helped form Cape Cod and torn at it constantly. They found that the old Marconi station, built in the early 1900s, has mostly fallen into the sea; the beach has eroded tens of metres since it was built, and is clearly still on the move.



Erosion, Marconi Station, Cape Cod



Cape Cod beaches yielded few shells

Not much of a plant person, Anne was surprised at the variety and tenaciousness of the beach plants that survive this process of accretion and erosion.



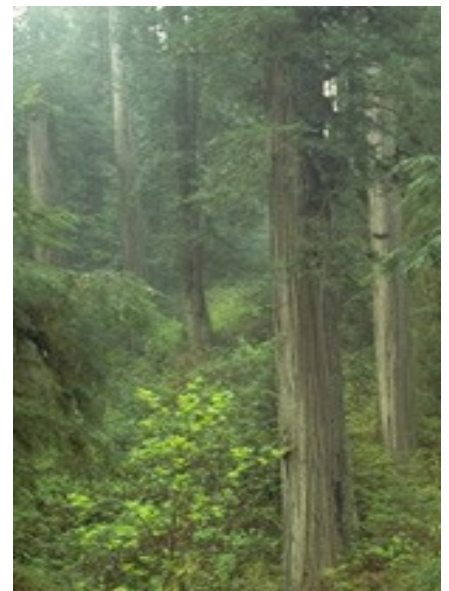
Beach plants, Cape Cod

On the west coast, north of San Francisco, all was different. There were few beach plants and even fewer shells. Not too much accretion happens there, except for that at river mouths.



Beach and beach plants, north California coast

Wild west-nor'west winds batter this coast incessantly, pounding the sea against the cliffs and pouring mist up over them and far inland, where mist-fed plants grow huge and lush. *Report by Anne Millen*



Water Conservation

According to recent newspaper reports, the UAE Ministry of Water and Environment has unveiled a three-year environmental plan



	name	tel home	tel office	fax
Chairman	Gary Feulner messages: 306 5300	306 5570	330 3600	330 3550
Vice Chairman	Valerie Chalmers email: valeriechalmers@hotmail.com	349 4816	no calls pls (note new email)	340 0990
Treasurer	Sim Hasker email: haskers@hotmail.com	343 1076	050-5074691	
Membership Secretary	Lena Linton email: linton@mailme.ae	050-474 3595		
Membership Assistant	Anindita Radhakrishna email: anin@emirates.net.ae	282 3952	050-656 9165	
Speaker Co-ordinator	Angela Manthorpe email: manthorpe2005@yahoo.co.uk	288 6232		
Fieldtrip Co-ordinator	Pradeep Radhakrishna email: wgarnet@emirates.net.ae	282 3952	050-450 8496	
Fieldtrip Co-ordinator	<i>Fun job, and two others to share the work.</i>			
Fieldtrip Co-ordinator	Sandhya Prakash email: sandhya@clavib.com	050-5512481		348 2868
Special Projects	Beryl Comar email: comar@emirates.net.ae	344 2243		344 2243
Newsletter Editor	Anne Millen email: pvana@emirates.net.ae	394 7076	no calls please	394 7075
Publisher	Peter van Amsterdam email: pvana@emirates.net.ae	394 7076	335 5495	394 7075
Librarian	<i>Librarian's skills needed!</i>			
Book Sales	Jo & Rachel Raynor email: joray@emirates.net.ae	334 6183		
Postmaster	Sandi Ellis email: peterjon@emirates.net.ae	050-644 2682		
Chief Engineer	Jesse Ellis email: peterjon@emirates.net.ae	050-8993413		

focused on rationalising the use of water resources by reducing reliance on groundwater and shifting to desalination. The plan will reportedly involve creating awareness among UAE nationals and will aim to promote "sustainable" development and monitor and enforce compliance through groundwater surveillance, environmental inspections and recognition of superior 'green' performance.

Water use in the UAE is among the highest per capita figures in the world, and it is generally acknowledged that some 90% of this is non-domestic, that is, agricultural, industrial or ornamental (for example the roadside plantings that now extend deep into the desert and westward all the way to the border with Saudi Arabia and Qatar at Sila'). However, various informal sources have reported the discontinuation of the system of local 'forests' (ghabat),

the extensive nursery tracts that can be found throughout many of the desert regions of Abu Dhabi. At the moment, the ultimate disposition of those tracts is uncertain.
Report by Gary Feulner

It's Not Who You Are, It's What You Do

After a day in the field in June, Chairman Gary Feulner was having a quiet dinner at the Ibri Hotel in Oman when the waiter approached hesitantly. "Excuse me, sir," he said, "but I think I know you from before. Have you been to the Jebel Akhdar Hotel (on the Saiq Plateau)? I used to work there." "Why, yes," replied Gary pleasantly (and the waiter did look somewhat familiar), "I've stayed at the Jebel Akhdar Hotel a number of times, including two Christmas visits."

Flattered, the Chairman briefly contemplated what aspect of his distinguished appearance or demeanor had so marked him in the man's memory. Or perhaps it was a generous tip. But as he considered what to say next, he was spared further speculation. "I thought so," grinned the waiter happily. "It was you who caught the scorpion in the dining room!"

(The scorpion, it turns out, was a small Buthid, *Babycurus exquisitus*, endemic to the high Jebel Akhdar region, identifiable in part by a tuft of long bristles on the underside of the stinger. Its nearest relatives are in Yemen and Ethiopia. The Saiq Plateau was a modest extension of its known range and the hotel dining room was a previously unreported habitat.) As told to *Anne Millen*



Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

Sept 16 John Burt - Marine Ecosystems in Dubai

Oct 7 To be confirmed

Nov 4 Tom Bailey - Falconry in the UAE

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