

# GAZELLE

Vol 23 no 3 March 2008



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

**DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP**

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

## Members' News

Congratulations to **Barbara van Meir** and **Paolo Orsini**, who tied the knot in early February in Paolo's native Italy. Barbara and Paolo have been regulars at DNHG lectures and field trips and we look forward to welcoming them back next month as newlyweds.

**Mohd. Arfan Asif**, well known to most of us as a nature photographer, has recently won the Al Thani Gold Medal for portraiture on the basis of images captured in Afghanistan.

Chairman **Gary Feulner** is this year's recipient of the Sheikh Mubarak Award, named in honor of Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Al Nahayan, former UAE Minister of the Interior and father of DNHG patron Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan. The award is conferred by the Committee of the Emirates Natural History Group, Abu Dhabi, and was given in recognition of Gary's contribution to knowledge of the country's natural history through original research, supported by extensive publication.

Since 1996, Gary has researched and published on a variety of UAE natural history topics, including popular works on the geology of the UAE; the definitive surveys of the distribution of wadi fish, toads, freshwater and land snails and the

large mangrove mud creeper *Terebralia palustris*; more particularised studies on topics such as tail signaling in mountain geckos, stream capture, landslide dams and intertidal lagoon molluscs; and short reports on a variety of the UAE's lesser known flora and fauna.



Gary receiving the Sheikh Mubarak Award from ENHG Chairman Drew Gardner

**Jean-Paul Berger**, who teaches Earth and Life Sciences at Dubai's Lycée Georges Pompidou, was previously posted in Djibouti, where he took full advantage of the opportunity to explore the geology of one of the world's most singular areas, the Afar Depression - a "triple junction" where three geologic plate boundaries meet, all of them axes of crustal spreading. The Afar Depression is also one of the lowest and most forbidding places on earth. You can see and read more about this area (en Français) on Jean-Paul's website: <http://www.jpber-ger.com>

### DNHG Membership

DNHG Membership remains a bargain at Dhs.100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at our meetings or by sending us your details and a cheque made out to: Lloyds TSB Bank account no. 60600669933501. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG. Please also note our account number has changed.)

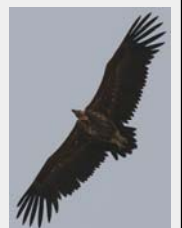
DNHG membership entitles you to participate in field trips and helps pay for our lecture hall, publication and distribution of our monthly newsletter, the *Gazelle*, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects.

New memberships and renewals are good until Sep 2008.

### This month's Contributors

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

Ulli Wernery  
Trish Cox  
Ulrike Andorff  
Val Chalmers  
Angela Manthorpe  
Barbara Couldrey  
Gary Feulner



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



## Enjoy the Golden Weather!

Exploring Dubai's Desert Hinterland – Jo Raynor  
Mar 29 (Saturday)

Meet at Al Faqah by 7.45am, on the Dubai - Al Ain road and explore the sandy desert in one of the less spoilt areas of Dubai Emirate. We will stop to look at plants, bugs etc, as well as taking a look at an old well. We saw dhubs and gazelle there last month. 4WD required as there is some off road driving (*not* duning) with soft sand but mostly track. Due to warm midday temps we are leaving early and returning between 1 & 2pm. Picnic possible too. Limited to 6 cars. If you don't have a 4WD, we'll try to fit you in. 2WD is fine as far as Al Faqah. Email [joray@emirates.net.ae](mailto:joray@emirates.net.ae) to register or for further details. Or text her your name & email to 050 4789633. Please include a mobile contact..

Spring Birdwatching in the Northern Emirates – David Bradford  
Apr 04 (Note changed date)

Start at 8.00am at the Dubai Pivot Fields next to the sewage treatment plant on the Al Awir Road, and proceed from there to several spots in Dubai and the northern Emirates. Dave not only knows his birds but where to find them and when! See last month's *Gazelle* for directions to find the Pivot Fields. Only the date has changed.

Sunderbans Mangroves (via Kolkata) – Pradeep & Anin Radhakrishna  
Apr 11-15

This is one of the most unusual and adventurous trips the DNHG has organized. Those who attended Dr Reza Khan's talk on the Sunderbans will have some idea of this amazing place. There are only a few places left on the trip, so if you want to go, you should contact Anin / Pradeep asap (details p.7).

## Upcoming Archeology Conference in Al-Ain

The Zayed Centre for Heritage and History, part of the Emirates Heritage Club, is once again organising the Annual Symposium on Recent Archaeological Discoveries in the United Arab Emirates. It will be held at the Mercure Hotel atop Jebel Hafit, Al Ain, and this year's dates are Thursday 3rd April and Friday 4th April, beginning on Thursday afternoon at around 5.00 pm and ending around Friday lunchtime.

Up to 15 papers are due to be presented. These will cover the Palaeolithic site at Jebel Faya, Sharjah (Hans-Peter Uerpmann), the Neolithic site at Akab, Umm al-Qaiwain (Vincent Charpentier and Sophie Mery), Neolithic flints from Dalma, Abu Dhabi (Heiko Kallweit), the Umm al-Nar burials at Hili, Al Ain (Kathleen McSweeney), the Iron Age village at Muwailah, Sharjah (Peter Magee), hidden mountain-top villages in Ra's al-Khaimah (Christian Velde), rescue excavations at Wadi Madhab, Fujairah (Rob Carter) and much more.

DNHG members are welcome to attend, but will have to make their own room bookings. The Mercure may be fully booked, so it may be necessary to make other arrangements in downtown Al Ain, or at nearby Ain Al-Faidah, and drive up and down to the mountain to attend the sessions.

Anyone planning to attend should inform Peter Hellyer ([peter@extinfo.gov.ae](mailto:peter@extinfo.gov.ae)), so that arrangements for meals and coffee can be made. DNHG Archeology Recorder David Palmer ([dpalmer@ud.ac.ae](mailto:dpalmer@ud.ac.ae) or 050-738-7703) will try to keep abreast of details and may be able to help coordinate transportation for members wishing to attend.



## Our Next Speaker

As a child, **Peter De Geest** wanted to become an explorer. At 15 he discovered speleology, a hobby that led him to study geology at the University of Ghent, Belgium. He graduated with distinction in micropaleontology, building up experience in geological mapping, litho- and biostratigraphy; extraction techniques and the use of optical and scanning electron microscopes. In free time he organised underground field trips and trained others in the basic single rope techniques.

At 25, Peter started the Socotra Karst Project (SKP) expedition and began his PhD at the University of Brussels. He received a scholarship to study "Holocene Palaeoclimate reconstruction with the use of isotopic and geochemical research on speleothems of Socotra Island", and travelled twice a year to Socotra for fieldwork. He deciphered speleothems (stalagmite) records by closely monitoring the actual calcite growth in relation to the present monsoon climate on the Socotra Island, and, applying these transfer functions into the past, reconstructed a very high resolution (seasonal variations) palaeoclimate signal, covering the last 6000 years. The validation and interpretation of these variations remains, however, extremely complex, postponing the defence of his Ph.D.thesis. By approaching speleology as a multidisciplinary science, the SKP team revealed archaeological evidence of a rich cultural history, discovered new endemic cave fauna and brought additional natural resources to the surface. He has received many awards for his work and publications, and worked on several films.

Peter is now geologist at a dredging company conducting geotechnical studies and QC management. He is Country Representative for the UK based NGO "Friends of Socotra" and still steers the SKP, which recently mapped the longest cave of the Middle East on Socotra.



### Inter-Emirates Weekend 2008

The Inter-Emirates Weekend was organised by the ENHG Abu Dhabi and held at the Mafrag Hotel from 28<sup>th</sup> February to 1<sup>st</sup> March. Some of the participants who arrived on Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> took part in Allestree Fisher's entertaining quiz and later did some star-gazing.

Friday 29<sup>th</sup> was trips day with 2 long-day and 3 short-day trips to choose from. (Reports of some of these to follow.)

On Friday evening a group dinner was held at which the winners of two annual awards, the Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Award for Natural History and the Bish Brown Award were announced, together with the winners of the Photographic Competition.

The Sheikh Mubarak Award is presented to a nominee who, in the opinion of the ENHG Committee, has made a major contribution to knowledge of the country's natural history, archaeology or history, through the carrying out of original research, supported by extensive publication. The Award, this year, went to DNHG Chairman Gary Feulner (see additional details under Member News).

The Bish Brown Award is presented to a person, who, in the opinion of the ENHG Committee, has made a major contribution to promoting awareness about the country's natural history, archaeology or history, through increasing public involvement and participation. The Award this year went to Bob Reimer of ENHG, Al Ain for his service to the Al Ain group and the UAE NHGs generally through his work on the ENHG website, particularly the web archiving of *Tribulus*, various database initiatives and his continuing studies of dragonflies.

The winners of the Open Photographic Competition were:  
1<sup>st</sup> Prize – Mohammed Arfan Asif of DNHG for his photo of a pair of little green bee eaters.

2<sup>nd</sup> Prize – Angela Manthorpe of DNHG for her underwater photo of a whale shark

3<sup>rd</sup> Prize – Drew Gardner, Chairman, ENHG Abu Dhabi, for his photo the gecko *Pristurus carteri*. Each of the prize winners received a copy of one of the UAE's new natural history volumes.

After dinner, several members went insect-trapping in the hotel grounds with Brigitte Howarth and others took the opportunity for further star gazing.

On Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> March, special guest, Dr Shahina Ghazanfar, from Kew Gardens, ran a workshop on the saltbush flora of the UAE/Abu Dhabi. After a short talk on methods of plant collecting, labeling requirements and the role of herbarium specimens, participants went on a perimeter walk at the Mafrag Hotel to examine saltbushes and other plants. Specimens were collected and then participants returned to the workshop to try to identify the specimens, using simple keys provided by Shahina. This proved to be an insightful exercise.



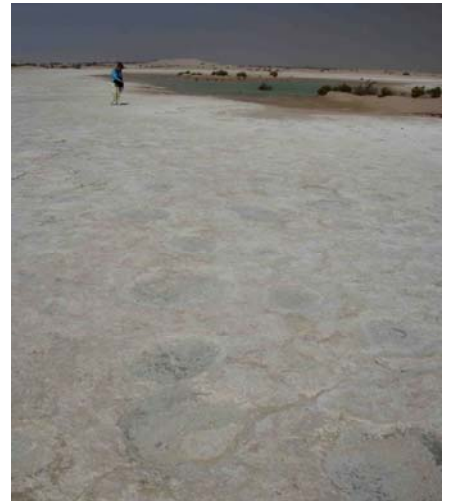
Dr Shahina Ghazanfar of Kew Gardens

On Saturday afternoon, many people closed the weekend on a sand-driving session led by Andrew Bean. All in all it was a most enjoyable weekend. Thank you, ENHG Abu Dhabi, for organising it. Next year it is the turn of the DNHG again! *Report by Valerie Chalmers*

### The Elephant Trackways Trip

During the InterEmirates weekend this year, we were thrilled to have Drew Gardner take us to see the fossilised elephant trackways. Many of us were particularly lucky as, not having 4WDs, we were invited to fill spare seats in others' vehicles. We

headed towards the white stony plain at Mleisa where these enormous footprints made by those giants of long ago were discovered, as recently 2001, by Mubarak al Mansouri. Drew gave a short and most informative talk, in which I learned that elephants step into the footprints of their forefeet with their hind ones, thus leaving imprints which resemble the marks of a biped and not a quadruped.



Tracks at Site 1

At the first site there were some large footprints but, to the layman's eyes, these were nowhere near as impressive as those at the second. At the latter we were stunned by the tracks made by what was, arguably, a huge bull.



Prints of a large male, Site 2

These ran perpendicular to a whole series of footsteps marking



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

the movements of various beasts of different sizes, possibly the herd of females with calves of a variety of ages.



Group tracks

How amazing it was to realise that these marks, made by creatures who had lived up to eight million years ago, had been preserved for us to marvel at in the 21st century. It was a very humbling experience! Also visible at the second site were, we were told, the tracks of gazelle.



Gazelle track with 72mm cover for scale

In profusion, scattered over the ground at both sites, were pieces of fossilised ostrich eggs, indicating other wildlife which was once abundant in this area. Many of the pieces retained their original markings and indentations and an amazing range of shades and tints - yellows, browns and beiges. 'Desert roses' were also found in abundance, varying in size and beauty.



'Desert roses'  
Photograph by Val Chalmers

Although we had gone in search of fossilised remains of animals of long ago, we were also rewarded with sightings of modern inhabitants of the area. A fair sized dhub, which we surprised as it sat and watched the whole convoy pass by, seemed to display little sign of the shyness which supposedly characterises it. Drew identified two of these for us as the Spotted toad-headed agama *Phrynocephalus maculatus* which is the slightly larger species found on hard surfaces ...



*Phrynocephalus maculatus*

... and the Arabian toad-headed agama *Phrynocephalus arabicus* which has a curling the black tail tip with which it signals. It lives on sand.



*Phrynocephalus arabicus*

Some lucky members of the party also glimpsed a desert hare and there were quite a few sightings of lizards. Along the side of a fenced and tree-planted reservation, many of us were able to catch a glimpse of the gazelle within its boundaries.

At the end of a long, hot day, we had enjoyed first-hand experience of life in the desert both long ago and in modern times! Thanks to everybody who made this trip so memorable. Report by Trish Cox, photographs by Angela Manthorpe

## A Dream Comes True

Every expatriate living in Dubai who has invested in a 4WD, dreams of bashing through the Emirates long stretches of beautifully colored sand dunes. Knowing that certain skills are required, the majority never try it. But during the I/E weekend, the offer we have been longing for came: an introduction to sand driving for beginners!

The leader, Dr. Andrew Bean, handed out a twelve page pamphlet (originally by Alan McGee) and we started reading the "Dos & Don'ts" of sand driving. Andrew's cell phone number on the bottom helped put me at ease!

With de-flated tyres (20 psi), we drove at 60km/hr in a convoy on a sandy road to the famous "Two Tree" location, trying out our new knowledge to avoid getting stuck in sand. Up a small hill, down, around a curve and - oh no - a herd of camels crossing our path! Just managing to pass in-between two rather brave camels I halted my 4WD. Andrew jumped out of his vehicle waving his arms, stopping the rest of the convoy to save unnecessary blood money. Apparently undisturbed by our presence, the camels slowly moved on, except for the curious who observed the show for a while longer, posing for numerous photos.



We emptied Andrew's trunk and ... yes, you do need to have a large one for all the gear required for a sand drive! Sand mats, 5+ gallons



## Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

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

Archaeology - David Palmer  
cell: 050-7387703  
office direct line: 04-2072636  
dpalmer@ud.ac.ae

Birds - David Bradford  
davebradford9@hotmail.com

Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi  
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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.



of water, tow ropes with shackles, plank of ply wood, basic tool kit, shovel, tyre pressure gauge, spare tyre, tyre repair kit, compressor, jump leads, torch, heavy duty gloves, spare petrol, fully charged cell phone, sun lotion, luggage net, first aid kit – just to name a few.

After a detailed explanation of the essentials, the sand drive lecture commenced. Tips and tricks about how to drive up a dune, approach the top, get over the peak, and down, how and when to control the speed, how to handle the steering wheel, how to use the brakes - all to avoid losing control of the beloved vehicle, tipping, flipping and damaging it. On the beginner's hill, we learnt physically the ABC of pushing the car (1-2-3- push!), towing a car (was I proud as my little one towed a 4x4 almost double the size!) and also getting towed (1-2-3-go! and stoooooppppp!).



After this, we moved over to a higher dune which looked like a giant to us. Those who made it would surely be certified! The spectators held their breath at a safe distance while Andrew took two attempts to finally fly over the sand dune with a big bash. What a scene! When he came to a stop, water dripped from the bottom of his vehicle. Andrew explained that sand dune driving can result in damaging the vehicle, e.g. broken spoiler, radiator, wind screens – anything can happen. A quick look in the engine will establish the reason for the running water; in this case only a leak in the wind screen tank ...

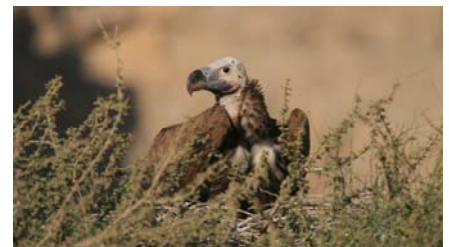
Who's next??? Hesitation ... until a brave lady volunteered and managed the dune with excellence. All the rest of the group followed and the students were happy with the results!

The afternoon flew as fast as the sand around our tyres. The sun

hung deep on the horizon when we started to pack up. Andrew, pleased with his students' progress, offered to host a second course to further develop our sand dune skills – we were all thrilled! Within just a few hours, we developed the confidence to drive through sand, got to know our beloved vehicles even better and already dream about driving over giant sand dunes in remote places. Andrew, we thank you for this fantastic experience. *Report and photographs by Ulrike Andorff*

### Lappet-faced Vulture Breeds near Shwaib

Ulli Wernery reports that he was in the desert on 01 March 2008 and was able to watch a lappet-faced vulture pair soaring over Sheikh Tahnoon's palace in Swaib. They were quite close and he was able to photograph them. Then, while setting up camp next to the mountains in the vicinity of Swaib, Ulli suddenly noticed a big head with a long beak protruding over the edge of a huge green acacia canopy.



*Lappet-faced vulture*

The vulture was sitting on its nest. He slowly approached the tree and the vulture dug down into the nest, invisible. When he was standing under the tree, Ulli could hear the chick(s) calling. Later in the evening he saw both adults high up in the air, a great sight.



*The vulture soaring*

*Report & photographs by Ulli Wernery*



## Descent into the underworld! Part 1

Bobbing gently up and down on a flimsy rope 120m above the ground with the nearest wall over 100m away, I finally realized a dream that had started in the mid 1990s when I first heard about the Majlis al Jinn, or 'meeting place of the spirits'. Although I'd done quite a bit of caving at University in the UK, nothing could have prepared me for the sheer size and scale of the Majlis. This isn't just any old cave - when it was first explored and brought to the world's attention in 1983 it was the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest known cave chamber in the world. 310m long, 225 metres wide and with a domed ceiling 120m high, it is capable of holding more than a dozen 747s parked wing to wing in its base and is big enough to contain almost two Great Pyramids.



Selma Plateau

The entrance to the Majlis is at approximately 1400m on the north-eastern edge of the Selma plateau, on the Jebel Bani Jabir anticline, which is the plateau you see on your right hand side driving south along the Omani coast beyond Quriyat. Access from the coast is via two graded tracks.



The way up

The shortest route is currently impassable on the way up; the longer route is do-able but still very rough and steep. In the past, access to the cave involved hiking in from the nearest village with the support of

local guides and their donkeys, but now you can drive right up to the entrance, and from our beach side campsite to the cave, it took us less than two hours. The terrain here is fairly barren, supporting a few sparse trees and the local villagers rely on herding goats for a living.

There are only three ways into the cave, all of which involve free abseiling descents of varying lengths and, starting with a casual conversation with friends at the dive club last year, I now found myself dropping into the Majlis via the longest and most dramatic hole – Cheryl's drop – 158m from top to bottom.



Goodbye and good luck!

Having rigged our rope and clipped on, the initial descent of Cheryl's drop is on a very human scale. The slot is around two metres wide and initially you have to push away from the wall as you descend. After 40m, you emerge from the confines of the slot into the roof of the chamber to be greeted by a totally awe inspiring sight.



Light spills in from two large holes in the ceiling and your eye is drawn to these first, how the rock face below the Asterix hole is worn and shaped, how smooth the debris mounds look. The formations are exactly like the pictures I had studied in my April 2003 edition of National Geographic, when a team of researchers descended the cave to explore the potential for tourism here. But more than anything I was stuck by how quiet it was in the chamber – I couldn't see or hear Nevil, who had preceded me into the cave, and without a clear point of reference it was hard to put the scale of the cave in context.

*Next Month: Angela explores the interior, and tells of their ascent. Report & photographs by Angela and Steve Manthorpe*

## "Springtime" in Musandam

Our RAK correspondent, Barbara Couldrey writes: After reluctantly pulling out of the "yellow caralluma" walk, I compensated with a visit to our local mountain village of Baqal and was rewarded by an abundance of bright green grass after recent rains. On one terrace, chukar (*Alectoris chukar*) and sand partridge (*Ammoperdix heyi*) were foraging alongside one another. It was a good opportunity to see just how much smaller the sand partridge is. Perhaps spring is in the air as these birds are now in pairs.

The wild almond trees (*Amygdalus arabica*) were a mass of pink blossom and there were fresh caracal-lynx droppings in two separate locations – good news!



*Amygdalus arabica*



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Then on 7 March, I made my annual pilgrimage up to the enclosed field on the Yabana ridge above Wadi Bih to check on the wild gladiolus and irises. They didn't disappoint. I've never seen the purple mountain lily *Ixiolirion tataricum* at this location but they have been photographed here. Apparently they like to be up around 1000m or more and the ridge is just within range.

The spring flowers, otherwise, were a little disappointing. The terrace where I saw exotic specimens this time last year was bare - no wonderful purple or scarlet poppies or the rare *Adonis dentata*. A few scrappy *Rumex vesicarius* were poking their red heads out between rocks and the widespread *Caralluma* had a flower head or two, but no fresh green shoots. No white splashes of flowering *Convolvulus* and only a few puny *Asphodelus* and one or two mauve

*Farsetia aegyptia* from the mustard family, among others. Is it all just late this year? I fear not.



*Gladiolus italicus*

I did see *Gladiolus italicus* which, as usual, is only seen where it is protected from goat grazing, e.g., in fenced fields or growing up through clumps of thorny shrubs.

I counted more than twenty chukar in one group, foraging at Palm Hollow on the route up Yabana.

And a PS: There is still no news on opening the UAE border post at Wahi Bih / Wadi Khubb Shamsi again. However, one can still drive up from the Dibba side, enjoy the top ... and return by the same route. *Report and photographs by Barbara Couldrey*

### Members' Night Jun 01

Contact Angela Manthorpe at manthorpe2005@yahoo.co.uk if you would like to give a presentation on Members' Night. The topic can be natural history, culture or travel related and does not need to be about the UAE, so the scope is fairly wide. We are now seeking volunteers for June. It should be 20 minutes maximum, and we can provide all the necessary equipment and help. (See p.6, Feb. 08 Gazelle.)

## Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- Apr 06          Cave and Karst research of Socotra Island, Yemen -  
Dr Peter De Geest
- May 04          Geckoes of south-east Arabia - Drew Gardner
- Jun 01          Members' Night

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

- Mar 28:          Exploring Dubai's Desert Hinterland – Jo Raynor
- Apr 04:          Spring Birdwatching in the Northern Emirates – David Bradford
- Apr 11-15:      Sunderbans Mangroves (via Kolkata) – Pradeep & Anin Radhakrishna

Additional trips may be announced by e-mail circular.