

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Thank You! Keep in Touch!



Steve, Rachel, Daniel and Johanna Raynor

This month we sadly farewell **Jo, Steve, Rachel and Daniel Raynor** who will be moving to Oman and living in Madinat Al Ilam. Over the years, the Raynor family have contributed a lot to the DNHG. Jo and Rachel have been responsible for book sales at each meeting, a great convenience for members. They have presented talks and conducted many short trips looking at desert ecology and some long ones to such places as the elephant trackways at Mleiha, where Steve was instrumental in measuring and recording the position and alignment of the tracks. They will be sorely missed.

We will need a replacement book sales person, so if any member would like to do that, please contact Valerie Chalmers, and you will be enthusiastically welcomed!

Farewell, too, to biology teacher **Tom Horton**, a regular on some of our more out-of-the-way field trips, who is taking up a teaching position in Shanghai. Tom is looking forward to continuing his interest in fossils and paleontology in areas of western China where landmark finds have been made in recent years. Next month's *Gazelle* will include an article by Tom on fossil remains from the time of the Tethys Sea in Wadi Hitan, Egypt.

Colin Paskins reports going shelling in Oman, taking the 'old' coast road from Quriyat towards Sur. He wrote, "There is a massive highway under construction to replace it. The first town you come to is Dibab. To the left of this, facing the sea, is a school. If you take the track to the left of the school you reach a stony beach which is very rich - sometimes - in shells. Surprisingly, they usually survive being washed up over the rocks."



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.) Membership taken now will be good for the period through to August 2009.

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

This month's Contributors

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

Colin Paskins
Anne-Marie Bui
Carol Goodwright
Cecile Javelle
Valerie Chalmers
Gary Feulner
Jan Fischer
David Palmer



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



Summer Activities

Members' Night has been postponed and will be held in December. That gives you plenty of time to think about what *you* might talk about. Contact Speaker Coordinator Angela Manthorpe if you have an idea for a presentation on your special interest.

Shellers show and swap evening with Carol Goodwright Thursday 3rd July at 7.30pm

Bring your mystery shells to identify or show to other enthusiasts, and any you have to swap. Please let Carol and Sylais know if you are coming - light supper. Mobile 050 – 8716760 / email Carol for instructions on how to get there: cgoodwright@yahoo.co.uk

Star Gazing with Lamjed Date TBA

This is an easy one and great fun. Lamjed has a *huge* telescope through which you'll see things you've never seen before. Nevertheless, bring your own binoculars and a mat to lie on (or your head falls off). Watch this spot and your email.

End-of-Season Dinner

This year's End-of-Season Dinner and Photographic Competition was held at a new venue – Utsav Restaurant at The India Club. We were served an excellent Indian buffet which was carefully selected by Pradeep Radhakrishna and 43 members attended the function. Our thanks to Pradeep for arranging for the group to hold the function at the India Club.

In our photographic competition entries were received for all five categories and the winners were:

Best Photo Overall: Mohammed Arfan Asif – Bee Eaters. Mohammed received the DNHG trophy.

Plants: Tom Horton – Water Lilies in Botswana (next column)



Animals: Cecile Javelle – Family of Dolphins in Khor ash Sham, Musandam, Oman



Geology/Landscapes: Angela Manthorpe – Descent into Majilis Al Jinn



Archaeology/Architecture: Carol Goodwright – Entrance to Tomb in Hili Gardens, Al Ain



Culture and Heritage: David Palmer – Goats in Wadi Khabb ash Shamsi



All received vouchers from Magrudy's and our grateful thanks to Magrudy's for sponsoring the Photographic Competition and to Angela Manthorpe for organising this.

The Table Quiz was set by Simon and Lena Linton. There was actually a tie between The Doors and The Corner but, as the Corner had an advantage with Gary being in their team, it was decided that the winners were The Doors (Angela and Stephen Manthorpe, Jenny and Colin Hill, David Palmer and Tom Horton)!! The winners each received a goodies bag from Oasis Paper Industry which was kindly organized by Sandhya Prakash. The runners-up – Gary Feulner, Binish, Cecile Javelle, Jean-Paul Berger, Hannah Gonzales and Clare O'Hare each received a DNHG Poloshirt. Many thanks to Simon and Lena for setting what was quite a stiff quiz; it certainly got our brains working!



'The Doors'

Chalmers towels and caps provided draw prizes for 12 members.

Gary presented the Raynor family with a family rock and our grateful thanks for all the hard work that they have put in over the years. We wish them all the very best for their move to Oman.

At the end of the evening, Gary made a presentation to Simon Linton of a photograph of his late mother Pam Linton, taken by Mohammed Arfan Asif at a previous End-of-Season Function, in remembrance of her. Pam was a DNHG member for several years and attended many lectures and events.

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



A Cultural Experience with EMEG

In early March, members of DNHG had the privilege of being invited by Major Ali for another visit to Emirates Marine Environmental Group site at Shaikh Ash Shaib near Ghantoot. Soon after arrival, our group of twenty adults and four children were shown a film of the recent activities of EMEG, and Major Ali explained the early way of life in the UAE before it became as modern as it is at present.



DNHG visitors with Major Ali (centre)

While pursuing their work in conservation and marine issues, EMEG have also initiated an education programme that is open to youth of various schools in the Emirates, as well as to adults – residents and visitors. Their objective in introducing the traditions and culture of the UAE is to make the public aware of the role played by nature in providing necessary resources to previous generations that allowed them to live and to survive during difficult times. Nowadays, thanks to modern technology, this close tie between men and nature has become less perceptible, but not less important, since the delicate balance between man and environment must be preserved.



Learning how to open oysters

Our group was able to experience various tasks that were part of daily activities, such as drawing

water from a well, transportation by boat and camel, and opening pearl oysters after the catch. We also had the chance to have close look at traditional tools utilized by pearl divers and merchants.

We were lucky enough to be welcomed by national ladies under their tent, where coffee and tea were prepared and offered according to the local customs. This was followed by a session of bread baking following the old method and using traditional utensils, and a display of some kitchenware such as grindstones and coffee roasters.

Later, the group were given the opportunity of planting out a mangrove sapling to afforest a belt of the EMEG site that used to be a mangrove area.



Planting mangroves

Major Ali showed us the last dhubs that were rescued and placed under the care of his team.



Dhubs are placid creatures

Sadly, EMEG will no longer be able to collect these creatures and other reptiles from the various construction sites, because they are facing difficulties in finding suitable habitats to which they can release them, every plot of land now being claimed for development.

As planned, some people of our group took time to do beach cleaning. We noticed that plastic jetsam

forms a large part of the rubbish that can be found along the beach and in the sea. Unfortunately, the weather conditions (strong wind and cloud) did not encourage divers to go underwater as visibility was much reduced.

After sunset, all the little rabbits of the camp came out of their shelter, scampering around the camp in search of food. Those who had planned to stay overnight struggled a little to fix their tents securely as the wind did not stop blowing until late.

Major Ali had mentioned that it was the time of year when sea turtles used to come at night to lay eggs on the beach. The next morning, while walking along the sea, we very much hoped to find traces of their visits, but alas, there was nothing in sight. The number of turtles returning to this beach for nesting has declined year after year, according to EMEG's records. This is not surprising when we see how this coastal region is bitten by development.

Regrettably, EMEG camp has lost its lovely tranquillity since a recreation facility opened next door, invading the area with deafening music, especially Friday nights, the entire night. And opposite EMEG camp, construction of Palm Island is in full swing; from this side of the sea, one can hear the persistent noise of the chain of trucks, tractors and other machines, even during week ends.

In spite of a busy schedule, Valerie Chalmers spent some time with the group in the afternoon, took photographs and made a list of plants (available if you email her for it). From the group that visited the EMEG camp, many thanks to Major Ali for his hospitality and generosity as usual, and for offering us a full day of interesting cultural experiences! Also thanks to MaryAnn Pardoe for co-ordinating the visit (and for preparing the camp fire). *Thanks to Anne-Marie Bui for text and to Carol Goodwright and Cecile Javelle for photographs.*



Sundarbans Forest Trip

A measure of the success of this trip to West Bengal is that all of the participants wished they had booked additional time in this fascinating part of the world.

It was a year ago that Dr. Reza Khan lectured on the Sundarbans region of India and Bangladesh, an inter-tidal forest occupying the vast and many-channeled mouth of the Ganges-Brahmaputra watershed – the largest and most diverse mangrove forest in the world, with more than 30 mangrove plant species (more than half the world total) and a cast of larger animals including crocodiles, monkeys, wild boar, spotted deer, monitor lizards, Olive Ridley turtles and the Royal Bengal tiger. The Sundarbans tiger population is the largest in the world, currently estimated at more than 550. The ecological importance of mangrove forests (inter-tidal coastal or estuarine forests) globally is increasingly well-known.



Mid-sized channel in the mangroves

Among other things, the trip was intended to be a more concrete introduction to the mangrove environment in general and the Sundarbans forest in particular. Travel within the forest was by 60-foot boat, reserved for our group, with an expert local guide (a former honey gatherer and poacher) and regular tea service. Accommodation within Sundarbans was at the Sundarbans Tiger Lodge, the most upscale of a small number of tourist camps, a charming place with A/C cabins, landscaped grounds and good food. Contrary to some advance concerns, mosquitoes

were not a significant problem; estimates ran from a few to none.



The expedition team

In most of the Sundarbans, it is not permitted for visitors to enter the mangroves on foot or even in smaller boats – not least because the Royal Bengal tiger has earned a reputation as a man-eater and will not hesitate to attack in those situations. Moreover, the Sundarbans is a World Heritage Site and within India it has a core zone that is off-limits even to local people, without a permit. From our boat we were nevertheless able to closely inspect several sets of recent tiger tracks in shoreline mud, as well as an estuarine crocodile, mud skippers, and more than 3 dozen bird species (plus another dozen or so in and around inhabited village areas on the fringe of the reserve). From protected concrete watchtowers and elevated walkways on land we were able to observe spotted deer, monitor lizards, monkeys, various raptors and the large lesser adjutant stork.



Guide points to tiger tracks

Notwithstanding the unique character of the Sundarbans environment, there was enthusiastic agreement that cultural aspects deserved equal mention as highlights of this short excursion. Kolkata (Calcutta) must surely rank as one of the most 'colorful' cities of the world, with



Some of the Sundarbans team in Kolkata

more people and detail in view at any given time than the mind can absorb. Once outside the city, the drive across the countryside to Sundarbans revealed a world of canals, mud brick berms, family plots with small ponds, rice fields, fish farming, tanneries and smoking heaps of scrap leather, and the tall chimneys of brick kilns, punctuated by village markets with flocks of bicycle porters – all this unfolding to the raucous accompaniment of our bus horn as the driver hurtled through.

Perhaps most memorable of all, we were in the Sundarbans for Bengali New Year, and were able to witness the late afternoon celebrations in two villages near our accommodation. Colorful ceremonies involved drums, tambourines, incense, flowers, offerings, blessings and elaborately costumed characters, followed by a show of faith (auguring luck for the coming year) in the form of a succession of young men who jumped from a bamboo scaffold onto an outstretched net poised over a set of knife blades (only semi-symbolic).



Bengali New Year celebrations

For some of us, this was followed by a cheerful introduction to the details of life in a scrupulously clean mud brick home.



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

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Fossils - Valerie Chalmers
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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.



We owe special thanks to Pradeep and Anindita Radhakrishna for following through with the idea of a Sundarbans trip, despite the effort and the obstacles; and to their friend Joydeep Ghosal of Kolkata, who organized and led our itinerary, an elegant and sophisticated adventurer who in "real life" leads outdoor educational expeditions for the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme. *Report by Gary Feulner, photographs by Gary and Joydeep Ghosal*

Musandam Peninsula Dhow trip from Dibba.

The dhow trip which took place on Saturday 31st May, got off to a disappointing start. The already depleted group assembled on the quay side at the appointed departure time, only to be told by the local organisers that the excursion was now to be a half-day and wouldn't leave until 11.00! We retreated to a nearby hotel for coffee and took a walk along the beach until the appointed departure time.

Once aboard the beautiful, air-conditioned dhow, our disappointments were set aside as we left Dibba harbour and sailed up the coast for about 45 minutes before anchoring in a safe inlet, where we could swim or snorkel.



The Musandam coast is a series of lovely bays

The water was very warm and inviting, though not particularly refreshing from the intense heat of the day. The dhow's motor launch was at our disposal and it ferried people to the beach to look for shells and later up the coast a little further to a nearby fishing village. The on-board lunch was very good and after-

wards people swam or sunbathed in the afternoon sun. We returned to Dibba Oman in the late afternoon. As we came into the harbour, we noticed that the fishermen had just landed their catch.



Fisherman sort their very varied catch

A crowd had gathered on the quay side and we soon joined them and admired the variety of fish that had been brought in – tuna, parrot fish, squid and shark among them.



Sharks

Report & photographs by Carol Goodwright

Book Review:

Snakes of Arabia: A Field guide to the Snakes of the Arabian Peninsula and its Shores by Damien Egan.

It's easy to recommend this field guide, which is comprehensive, clearly written and well illustrated with photographs and drawings, even though many readers may be reluctant to get close enough to snakes in the field to check some of the finer points. It also seems to reflect the enthusiasm of the author for his scaly subjects. (Many DNHG members will remember Damien Egan as a knowledgeable and engaging speaker on Arabian snakes.)



Apart from identification, I found a wealth of new information in the guide about the habits and habitats of various snakes, including species that I see regularly. For example, the guide tells us that the normal prey of wadi racers "succumbs to toxic saliva after being "chewed" upon for several seconds", but the snakes are "harmless to humans and bites result in itching for a short time." (One wonders how this knowledge was gained.) Similarly, I learned that the local carpet viper (now distinguished as the Oman carpet viper, *Echis omanensis*), which I have always commended as an even-tempered, rather phlegmatic viper, is "highly aggressive" by night and "will not hesitate to bite."

This volume is the first serious field guide published by Motivate since some of the early volumes of its Arabian Heritage Series, released in the late 1980s (*The Living Desert*, *Mammals of the Southern Gulf*, *The Living Seas*) – most now out-of-print and off the shelves. It is branded as an "Arabian Heritage Guide" so perhaps in time we can look forward to a few more.

The book is available at local bookstores including Magrudy's, Borders, etc., as well as from Motivate's own retail shop in Garhoud, near Compu-Me, just next to Chilies' restaurant and around the corner from Irish Village. *Review by Gary Feulner*

Archeology Symposium held in Al Ain

Part 1 of David Palmer's Report:

Several DNHG members attended this year's symposium on recent archaeological discoveries in the UAE, held in the Jebel Hafeet hotel on a Thursday evening and Friday morning in early April. This was the fifth such event in a series which started in 2003 (no conference was held last year). The annual event, which is organized by the Zayed Center for Heritage and History, is a chance for archaeologists working in the UAE, both permanent and

visiting, to find out what the others are doing, and to discuss the emerging big picture.

Palaeolithic Sharjah

There were lots of interesting updates on on-going excavations. Probably the most newsworthy was the very first one presented on the Thursday evening by Hans-Peter Uerpmann in characteristic low-key manner. Uerpmann reported on results from two seasons of digging in front of a rock shelter on the west side of Jebel Faya by the Tübingen-Sharjah team.

Jebel Faya is between Al Madam and Mleiha, just along the road towards Dhaid from Jebel Buheis, where the same team excavated a large neolithic necropolis for several years. Uerpmann talked to the DNHG a few years ago about the spectacular Buheis findings, some of which are now on display in the Sharjah Archaeological Museum.

Until now the oldest securely datable traces of human occupation in the UAE have been neolithic, dating back less than ten thousand years, such as those found on Marawah Island in Abu Dhabi, which have been the subject of talks to the DNHG by Mark Beech. Uerpmann, like others, has been convinced for some time that there is evidence of palaeolithic occupation in the UAE, especially along the western edge of the Hajar mountains, and this year for the first time he has produced datable finds.

Pushing back the history of the UAE

Under the Iron Age and neolithic layers at Jebel Faya, Uerpmann's team found four - or possibly five - deeper layers containing evidence of the working of stone tools (cores, scrapers, flakes etc.), which they labeled (from top to bottom) A through E. Some of the inorganic material in these layers was dated using the Optical Solar Luminescence method, which is able to determine when it was last exposed to the sun. The most recent palaeolithic layer (A) produced a date of

about 28,000 years before present, while material in the vicinity of layers C and D produced a date of about 85,000 years ago. It's possible that further excavations will yield even older evidence.

With this one result, the pre-history of the UAE has been extended by ten times. It is an important finding also with regard to the routes that human beings took out of Africa, and Uerpmann's team has tried to compare the Sharjah stone-tool findings with those of similar age from Africa, but so far there don't appear to be similarities. This may indicate that the palaeolithic residents of the UAE developed their own culture, and were not just passing through on their way from Africa to Asia.

Copper smelting in Wadi Hilo

Another interesting report by Uerpmann was from the copper mining and smelting site in Wadi Hilo, also in Sharjah emirate. The site lies between the modern town of Wadi Al Hilo and the tunnel on the new road from Sharjah to Kalba. It has been excavated over the last two years by a German team led by Johannes Kutterer. The site was visited several years ago on a DNHG field trip led by Gary Feulner.

A vein of copper ore which runs across this wadi was exploited in the early Um al Nar period (4th millennium BC). Excavations have revealed the foundations of stone buildings which were probably workshops, and the base of an ancient watchtower (thought at first to be a circular tomb) next to the restored modern one. A casting pit and some huge copper ingots were found. As the DNHG field trippers observed long before the excavation, many pieces of stone at the site bear circular indentations caused by the crushing of copper ore on them using smaller stones. From the amount of slag that still litters the ground the excavators estimate that 20 to 40 tons of copper were produced at the site.



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Re-excavating a pit-grave at Hili

Sophie Mery from the French Archaeological Mission to the UAE reported on their excavations at Hili near Al Ain. They have determined that there were four phases of construction of the monumental tombs there between 2700 and 2000 BC. In particular, the team has been re-excavating Tomb N, which is inside the walled area of the Hili archaeological park and was previously excavated in the 1980s.

Tomb N is a long pit-grave, unlike the circular above-ground ones more common at Hili, and dates from the end of the Um al Nar period, just before the cultural shift that introduced the Wadi Suq period. There were at least 600 burials in the tomb during the one to two hundred years that it was in use. There is evidence of a high incidence of young deaths, presumably from infectious diseases. When more space was required in the tomb, old bones were removed and

burned on top of the tomb. In eight seasons of investigation the French team has found 2200 items in the tomb, including 900 pottery vessels.

A fishing camp in UAQ

Sophie Mery also reported on the results of four seasons of work on Akab Island, directly across the water from the old town of Um Al Quwain. The settlement there, which is nearly 7000 years old and was occupied for hundreds of years, was discovered in 1989. The inhabitants built a succession of light circular structures, leaving large numbers of post holes for archaeologists to find. They exploited the resources of the lagoon, kept sheep, cows and dogs, and had the technological resources to fish in the open sea for tuna. The findings at Akab Island include a large number of craft objects such as beads, with many parallels to finds in Oman, such as

those found at Ras Al Hadd (of turtles fame), also excavated by the French, indicating a common culture with sites in Oman at this period. *Thanks to David Palmer who continues with part 2 of his report in the July-August issue of Gazelle*



More Members' News

In late May, **Judith Stafford** was surprised to be told that there was an owl walking around in the car-park near her building in Karama. On investigation, she did indeed find a very large owl but in such a dark corner that she could not really say what colour it was or describe it. She wonders if owls are common in Dubai, and if so, what species?

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

Sep 14 The Rodents and Small Mammals of the Arabian Peninsular
 – Bjorn Jordan

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

Jul 3 Shell enthusiasts' show & swap evening with Carol Goodwright

Additional trips, details and changes may be announced by e-mail circular.