

# GAZELLE

Vol 23 no 10 October 2008



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

## Members' News

Almost the golden weather ... but not quite

**Dr. Tom Williams**, a paleontologist by training turned consultant by profession, has added skill and enlightenment to a number of DNHG field trips in the past couple of years. Tom is returning this month to Los Angeles. Tom has donated a collection of local and general natural history books and papers to our library. Titles include: *Biomes of the Western Arabian Gulf*, *Pearls in Arabian Waters*, *Introductory Soil Engineering*, *Wildlife in Bahrain* and *How Greek Science Passed to the Arabs*. Thank you for thinking of us, Tom, and best wishes in the wilds of L.A.

Renovation of the hotel complex where he works will allow **Binish Roobas** to take a two-month holiday in his native India, where he plans to continue his earlier natural history pursuits. We look forward to a colourful report when he returns.

In late September, **MaryAnne** and **Jonathon Pardoe** organized an *iftar* in the desert, to which the van Amsterdams went. It was not far from highways, traffic, roaring 2-wheel and 4-wheel bikes and a new, very solid pipeline fence paralleling the Hatta road.



*Calotropis procera* flowers

MaryAnne and Anne did not go far before finding the curious seed pods of *Calotropis procera*. Most of the fluff carrying the seeds had blown away, but they did manage to find one intact.



*Calotropis procera* seed pod

**Fazal** and **Sarah Shah** wish to encourage other DNHG members to take part in the Mission Green Earth event on 17 - 19 October. See [www.missiongreenearth.ae](http://www.missiongreenearth.ae)

### *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:

Nancy Papathanasopoulou  
Gary Feulner



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



Coming up ...

Star Gazing with Lamjed  
17 October from 6:00pm on  
location to 8:30-9:00  
lat: 24 53'.538  
long: 055 19'.862

Come earlier if possible - sunset is at 5:50pm. You should have an email with details. Please register with an email confirmation Pradeep & Lamjed [wgarnet@eim.ae](mailto:wgarnet@eim.ae) , [lankefi@eim.ae](mailto:lankefi@eim.ae). Pls feel free to contact Lamjed for more details or directions on 0504815068

Visit to Al Ain Zoo at night  
between 5-8pm  
Friday 24 October 2008

The ENHG Abu Dhabi have invited both the ENHG Al Ain and the DNHG to join them on a night visit to Al Ain Zoo on Friday 24<sup>th</sup> October. This is a repeat of the visit last year which was very popular and most enjoyable. The aim is to arrive at the zoo by 5pm to meet up with contingents from the Abu Dhabi and Al Ain groups and also meet a zoo curator who will greet us at the zoo.

This is an opportunity to visit the zoo's exhibits during the late afternoon and then at night, when a lot of the animals are much more active. The comparison of animal activity levels is fascinating. We will have dinner around 7pm and people can choose to visit the zoo restaurant, which often has long queues, or bring their own picnic dinner. There is an excellent bird show as well around 7.30pm.

**Dr Andrew Bean, the ENHG Excursions Secretary needs to give numbers of people attending on the morning of Wednesday 22 October. Would all those who are interested in going on the trip please email Valerie Chalmers by Tuesday 21 October at the latest: [valeriechalmers@gmail.com](mailto:valeriechalmers@gmail.com)**

*Trip details and dates will be advised at meetings, or by email, or if time permits, in Gazelle.*

### Paper recycling factory

The Al Qoz factory where paper is made using pulp and rag was featured in an article in our Jul/Aug *Gazelle*, p.3, prompting requests for another one. Children welcome. Date to be announced.

### Bastakiya walk with Peter Jackson

This is a ramble through the very old areas near the creek mouth, with architect and wind-tower authority Peter Jackson. Not to be missed but ... numbers limited! Watch this space.

### Sharjah Museum / Weekend Family Workshop

Date & details to be finalised.

### Sharjah Aquarium

The Sharjah Aquarium is new and promises to have an interesting array of marine life. This is a good trip for children.

(These two proposed trips prompted Christophe Tourenq to forward a map of the various musea in Sharjah. There are at least sixteen including the aquarium. If space permits, the map will be in next month's *Gazelle*. Meantime, you can find out more information by having a look at [www.sharjahmuseums.ae/education.htm](http://www.sharjahmuseums.ae/education.htm))



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- Members are encouraged to propose and lead field trips, and if you would like to do so, you should contact the Field Trip Coordinators (p.7) with details.
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### 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? Just want to tickle things up a bit?



Please send your letter to any of the committee members listed, by fax or email, or direct to *Gazelle* editor, Anne Millen, email: [pvana@emirates.net.ae](mailto:pvana@emirates.net.ae)

### Our Next Speaker

**Dr. Suzanne Williams** is a native of Australia and a molecular geneticist working at The Natural History Museum in London. Her recent work has focused on the taxonomic classification of Indo-Pacific mollusc groups using DNA analysis, the distribution patterns of related species, and the inferences that can be drawn about patterns of migration and evolution through geologic time.

Dr Williams will talk to us about the basic nature of DNA analysis and then demonstrate why it sometimes forces changes in traditional schemes of taxonomic classification, and how the two are reconciled.

### Remember: Members' Night in December

In December, we will hold our very popular Members' Night, when DNHG members have a chance to present their particular areas of interest. Two are already booked, but there is a spare slot and if you would like to fill it, please contact Angela Manthorpe at [manthorpe2005@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:manthorpe2005@yahoo.co.uk) Your presentation should be 20 minutes maximum, and we can provide all necessary equipment and help.



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

### Summer Science

Despite a heavy summer workload in the office, I took time out in the name of "science" to collect a local intertidal mollusc for study by an Australian researcher. *Salinator fragilis*, a species whose shell is common as flotsam in khors in the Northern Emirates, was once thought to represent a single species present around the Indian Ocean. However, recent work has showed that the widespread populations in question actually represent a complex of several different species.



Khor Zawrah collection site



Mollusc collector in paradise

All of them are primitive air-breathing snails and, despite the external similarity of their shells, they display a considerable range of anatomical diversity, as if these

early forms were experimenting to get it right. It is expected that the Arabian Gulf specimens will constitute a new species.



Specimens in hand

I was contacted after publishing in *Tribulus* with Dick Hornby on the UAE's inter-tidal lagoon molluscs, by a Dutch researcher who encouraged him to contribute to the Australian studies. I had the advantage of knowing where the UAE's '*S. fragilis*' could be found alive – although they favor knee-deep mud. Unfortunately, since "development" seems to target khors and other coastal sites, one cannot be optimistic about their continued survival.

A fringe benefit was that the Dutch researcher sent me several "old" (1970s) papers on Arabian Gulf molluscs by the late Kathleen Smythe, to whom *Seashells of Eastern Arabia* (Bosch et al. 1995) is dedicated. Smythe's work was based on collecting by herself and Michael Gallagher (who was later to make major contributions to the exploration and study of the fauna and flora of Oman).

Although the march of scientific "progress" is reflected in the strangeness of some of the nomenclature used in those earlier papers, it was sobering to see how much was then known that has essentially been forgotten, and is effectively unavailable to UAE-based naturalists, in the absence of professional scientific libraries. Smythe, for example, was already knowledgeable about the coastal sites at which *Salinator fragilis* could be found alive – knowledge not easily come by even today. Report by Gary Feulner

### Emirates Towers: A Natural History Survey

The record-breaking temperatures of mid-July were probably not the best time for a survey of the natural history of the Emirates Towers grounds, but the timing guaranteed that fair weather friends were excluded. Emirates Towers is now almost 8 years old. The grounds are attractively landscaped and well maintained, but because they are planted mostly with exotic species, and because they are regularly weeded, pruned and sprayed, they will probably never have as rich a flora and fauna as a wild area.

Not surprisingly, mobile animals such as birds made a better showing than other groups. I counted 11 species, all common Dubai urban and suburban birds except the pied mynah, which I have previously seen only at Safa and Al-Mamzar Parks. Grey francolin have demonstrably bred on the grounds (parades of mother and chicks could be seen on spring mornings). Most of the others probably nest there as well, including almost certainly red-vented bulbul, white-cheeked bulbul, house sparrow, common mynah and the ubiquitous palm dove, with collared dove, graceful prinia, purple sunbird and hoopoe only somewhat less likely.



African Emigrant *Catopsila florella*,  
A species not usually seen  
in Dubai

Butterflies were another story. I saw only three species – possibly because the local butterflies do not "recognise" the exotic landscaped plants: two Lime Butter-



flies, a single Small Cupid, and a single Western Pygmy Blue (a naturalized species, found as usual on the low succulent *Sesuvium*). A dead African Emigrant was found on the grounds and presented to me only days before, my first encounter with that species in a non-wild setting.

Dragonflies apparently treat the smaller pond on the Sheikh Zayed Road side as a typical man-made pond. I found the four species I would most have expected: the purple-blushed darter (*Trithemis annulata*), the carmine darter (*Crocothemis erythraea*), the oasis skimmer (*Orthetrum sabina*) and the blue-banded damselfly (*Ischnura* sp. - we have to be more cautious in identifying them, now that a second species has been recognised locally).



Oasis skimmer (*Orthetrum sabina*)  
From *The Emirates: A Natural History*  
eds. Peter Hellyer & Simon Aspinall

Other insects were scarce. The local honey bee *Apis florea* (the "little bee" or "Asiatic honey bee") was common on *Sesuvium*, as usual, and I encountered about four large black bumblebees (as I had in a wadi near Hatta the previous day). Otherwise I saw only single sightings of a small number of wasps, hoverflies and beetles, plus a few different kinds of black ants.

Land snails had been slow to make an appearance on the grounds (regular landscaping treatment is thought to include snail poisons), but in recent years two species that thrive in local

lawns seem to have gained a small foothold.



The tell-tale trail

One (*Allopeas gracilis*) has been known in the UAE for hundreds of years; the other (*Polygyra cereolus*) is an introduced species that has become naturalised in the modern era. The common garden slug, *Laevicaulis alte*, has been present for a somewhat longer period of time and is now widespread, as can be determined by its telltale slime trails, although apparently not in large numbers.



*Laevicaulis alte*  
(Try taking this photograph up to 400% or more - Ed.)

Most of the "weeds" among the shrubbery are in fact seedlings of the cultivated species. A few local weeds are present, however.



*Portulaca quadrifera*

The most common were two Amaranths (probably *Amaranthus viridis* and *A. graecizans*, but these are

difficult to distinguish and I have never spent much time with weed species) and two tiny-leaved prostrates: *Euphorbia serpens* and *Portulaca quadrifera*, the latter sporting little yellow flowers. Report and photographs by Gary Feulner

### Khamisa: Green turtles of Masirah Island tracked for research, not eaten

Masirah hosts four species of nesting turtles. Some have been studied better than others and the Masirah Turtle Conservation Project, sponsored by TOTAL Corporate Foundation for Biodiversity and the Sea and TOTAL Oman with the cooperation of the Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs in the Sultanate, has attached satellite transmitters to 10 loggerheads (*Caretta caretta*) in May 2006 and 9 Olive Ridelys (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) in March 2008, unveiling their migratory paths and several of their other secrets.



Gina, a female green turtle, found after a long hard search  
Photograph by Nancy Papathanasopoulou

It was time to do the same for the much-suffering green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) of Masirah, a species that, unlike anywhere else in Oman, has traditionally been eaten here. Its eggs are harvested and cherished as a delicacy and an aphrodisiac. It was time for *Khamisa* – the local Arabic name for this type of turtle – to let us know what she is doing after her dangerous venture to Masirah Island if she is lucky enough to escape her keen hunters, who, more often than not, come from countries other than Oman.



## Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

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

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

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

### Seashells - Recorder 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.



### *Green turtles in the world, in Oman, in Masirah:*

Green turtles occur throughout tropical and warmer temperate waters of the world, and are nesting in many areas in the Gulf, usually in small numbers. Like all sea turtles, they, too, are classified as endangered species. They are known to migrate very long distances in search of food as it has been demonstrated through flipper tagging over the years. They nest on over 275 beaches in Oman, the most famous of which is the 45 kilometer stretch of beach in Ras Al Hadd, where nesting occurs throughout the year and at least 20,000 females emerge here for this purpose. This population is of worldwide importance and is acknowledged as such by all international organizations studying sea turtles and marine biodiversity.



The Najma team

Masirah Island hosts an estimated population of 250-500 green turtles a year. Studying them here is difficult, as nesting areas are more or less situated all over the island, sometimes in hidden beaches surrounded by rocks, and the stretches where they can be found are over 60 kilometers long. In addition, the difficulty of access to the island itself has contributed to researchers not being able to reach green turtles and study them in detail.

However, one thing is certain: this difficulty of access to them in Masirah does not affect the local population and many visitors from other Gulf countries, who traditionally eat green turtle meat and eggs. From the times when there were not many sources of food on the island, locals have been enjoying the taste of green turtle meat

and the protein provided by its eggs. Nowadays, Omani legislation strictly prohibits this and threatens with fines, but the local rangers, despite their efforts, cannot possibly patrol the whole island day and night during the whole year, which is when green turtles can occur in Masirah. Nesting females fall prey to beach butchery and eggs are being dug out of the sand very often, especially during peak nesting season, in August and September.

### *One more turtle telemetry project in Masirah:*

Education, information, and the presence of research teams on the island have made a bit of a difference in the attitude of Masirians towards green turtle meat and egg consumption. Schools have been informed, questions have been answered, fishermen educated on the importance of the species for their fish stocks, young people won't touch turtle meat. But more needs to be done if green turtles are to survive. According to all accounts, their population has been dwindling dangerously for the past two decades and it looks as if they are now seriously threatened with extinction in this area.



Nancy with Najma before release

Within the context of these efforts and as a continuation of the three-year turtle conservation project, it was decided by project leaders that the depleted population of green turtles should be further investigated through satellite telemetry. Like with the previous two nesting species, here, too, post-nesting greens would



show their migration routes to researchers and allow conclusions to be drawn towards more efficient protection for survival.

### *How it was done:*

Eastern Masirah is the best area to look for green turtles, starting in July and through until mid-October. The scientific team went in the end of August, but only managed to find one to tag. Gina was tagged in Ras Radum Beach (20.44' N 58.84' E) after long hours of searching. A second expedition was organized for the end of September, during which Najma was discovered and tagged 5 kilometers south of Nughut (20.45' N 58.85' E). They both received regular location transmitters (Kiwisat 101).



*Najma heading for open waters*

To find out more about these turtles migrations and follow them on the web, click on the following link: [http://www.seaturtle.org/tracking/index.shtml?project\\_id=310](http://www.seaturtle.org/tracking/index.shtml?project_id=310).

*Thanks to Nancy Papathanasopoulou, Masirah Turtle Conservation Project Coordinator for text and photographs*

## *Reflections of an Amateur Naturalist*

[Earlier this year DNHG Chairman Gary Feulner received the Sheikh Mubarak Award for 2007, in recognition of his record of original natural history research and publication. Gary's remarks on that occasion are re-printed here, at the suggestion of several DNHG members who were in attendance. – Ed.]

Thank you very much for the honor of the Sheikh Mubarak Award. I would like to take advantage of this occasion to share with you just a

few brief thoughts based on my own experience as an amateur student of local natural history. Some are intended to encourage, others to counsel, and among this audience I am sure that many will resonate with your own experience. Each of the main points I would like to make can be summarized by a single word.

### Enjoyment

I wish you all as much happiness and satisfaction as I have found in exploring and studying the wildlife and environments of the UAE over the past many years.

### Opportunity

There are plenty of different kinds of plant and animal groups and natural phenomena to keep you busy. But because the environment is relatively harsh, total numbers of species in most groups are low and it is relatively easy to master them. In addition, because there has been relatively little detailed scientific study in the UAE, there remains an opportunity for amateurs to make a significant contribution.

### Novelty

Even after all these years, I still never go out without seeing something new or different – as participants in recent DNHG field trips can attest.

### Patience

If you don't know what you're seeing or can't explain certain phenomena, relax. But don't discard the information. Store it in memory, and sooner or later you'll see or hear of clues to a better understanding.

### Care

Be conscientious, and be honest. If you're not really certain it was a striped hyena you saw at Liwa yesterday, don't go around saying it was. Wrong information, once circulated, is very, very hard to correct.

### Context

The UAE is a very different sort of place for most of us, but it is not another planet. Most aspects of natural history here have been studied to some extent, and a reasonable amount is known. Seek out and consult what is known, before

you spin theories out of the air. You are not required to accept the conventional wisdom, but you should at least be aware of it.



*Gary Feulner at the microphone after receiving the Sheikh Mubarak Award*

### Sharing

The more information is disseminated, the smarter all of us will be. However, information exchange is a two-way street. Be prepared to give information, as well as receive it.

### Sadness

It is extremely sad for me (and no doubt for many of you), after all these years:

- to see the high dunes flattened;
- to see the tranquil sea shore "developed";
- to see the mangroves and the khors dredged or filled;
- to see the mountain front quarried without interruption;
- to see huge roads built like railways in places where nature was previously an arm's length away;
- to see roadsides "beautified" in a way that obscures the natural beauty of the landscape beyond;
- to see walls and fences absolutely everywhere, in a country one of whose great charms was its accessibility;
- to see unique sites destroyed without thought;
- and to see that almost no one seems to care about all of this.



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But lest I end on too pessimistic a note, rest assured I have a least a few more research projects in the works, which I hope to complete before I leave one day. *Thanks to Gary for the text of his remarks.*

### *A bit more Members' News to hand ...*

**Patricia Rosetti-Browne** was one of several members who did not receive *Gazelle* last month, and it prompted her to write to us including some news of her doings. She is currently in Bangkok, and reports that she does not get out of town as often as she would like. She continued, "However after just over a year we still find plenty to discover on day trips.

"Bangkok – as you may know – is quite a green city. There are trees and shrubs around the hotel pool, resident squirrels (keen on palm tree hearts!) and a number of birds. In addition to the usual mynas and

sparrows (keen on left-over rice), I have so far spotted the common koel (*Eudynamis scolopacea*), house swift (*Apus affinis*), yellow-vented bulbul (*Pycnonotus goiavier*), large-bill crow (*Corvus macrorhynchos*), brown shrike (*Lanius cristatus*), scarlet-backed flowerpecker (*Dicaeum cruentatum*), oriental magpie-robin (*Copsychus saularis*) which is our favourite alarm clock on sunny mornings, and warblers & fantails (no exact identification yet)."

### *Calling Stray Biologists ...*

Dr. Dennis J. Russell of the Biology Department at American University of Sharjah has contacted the DNHG with the following request:

Please inform people that we have a job opening in the Biology Department at American University of Sharjah. We need a part-time

(adjunct) biologist to teach 1-3 sections of Biology 103 Human Biology, for non-major freshmen. Applicants need to have a PhD in any field of biology.

Classes will begin January 25th, 2009 (Spring semester 2009).

Please have anyone interested contact me as soon as possible: Dr. Dennis J. Russell (06-515-2406) or by email at [drussell@aus.edu](mailto:drussell@aus.edu)

### *... and Researchers*

The editors of *Wildlife Middle East* advise that they are looking for contributions of articles from colleagues (particularly in Iran, Syria, Jordan, Bahrain, Turkey, Palestine, Kuwait, Iraq and Oman) for their next issue. Please contact the editors with any ideas or contributions that you may have. [editors@wmenews.com](mailto:editors@wmenews.com)

## **Dubai Natural History Group Programme**

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

Saturday 8 November Taxonomy and DNA Studies - Dr Suzanne Williams

Sunday 14 December Members' Night

**Field Trips (Members only, please. Details inside, p.2)**

October 17 Star Gazing with Lamjed

October 24 Visit to Al Ain Zoo at night between 5-8pm

Further field trips, details and any changes will be announced by e-mail circular.