

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

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.) Subscriptions paid now are good through to September 2010.

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.

Condolences

The DNHG extends its condolences to our Patron, H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan, on the death last month of his father, Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Al Nahayan, the former UAE Minister of the Interior.

More than a decade ago, Sheikh Nahayan established the Sheikh Mubarak award in natural history, in honour of his father. Sheikh Mubarak had not played a public role for many years, but is remembered as a very popular and well-regarded man.

In Touch

Gary Feulner's continuing study of Musandam plants has recently seen him in contact not only with professional experts but also with two of the DNHG's three life members – Carolyn Lehmann in Florida and Marijcke Jongbloed in France – in order to obtain more details about some early records. (The DNHG's third life member is former Chairman and Ph.D. entomologist Alan Dickson, whose continuing UAE careers include pest control and solar energy.)

Mairead Porter has taken on the role of DNHG Librarian. She and **Valerie Chalmers** enjoyed meeting Jane Campbell (librarian) at the Academy, in February, and seeing what needs doing. More on the DNHG library in the April issue of *Gazelle*.

Carol Goodwright was recently in Dubai for the TESOL conference but spent time with DNHG friends and in particular the shelling group, catching up with, amongst others, **Ulrike Andorff** who is happily staying on in Dubai. She went shelling on Mercato beach, finding, amongst the tiny beautiful shells, a fragment of a small cuttlefish bone heavily impregnated with oil.



The size indicated that it was quite small when it died, and raises the question of just how much oil juvenile sea creatures can survive.

This month's Contributors

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

Sonja Lavrenčič
Willy & Helga Meyer
Barbara van Meir
Valerie Chalmers
Barbara Couldrey
Louisa Akerina
Ajmal Hasan
Moira Towler
Gary Feulner
H. Martin
Richard Morris



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



Temple Walk with Sandhya Sat 27 Mar

Sandhya will lead a temple walk through the wonderful alleys of Bur Dubai. Dress appropriately, but you can bring your camera. Contact Sandhya on sandy_pi@yahoo.com

Jimi Oasis Field Trip with Brien Holmes Fri 09 April

Meet: Foah, Al Ain
Time: 10am (leave Dubai by 830am). The trip will last about 2-2.5 hours. This leaves time after the walk for a meal or touring of the Al Ain area.

This walk, originally designed by Phil Iddison, takes visitors down into the heart of the Jimi oasis, is one of the oases that formed the Buraimi Oasis complex mentioned in travelers' accounts of the region, to enjoy date gardens, falaj systems, mud walls and more. Visitors are often amazed they are in the heart of a city of almost 500,000 citizens with traffic on major thoroughfares just metres away. Bring proper hiking/walking footwear as the ground is dusty, uneven and occasionally damp. Please bring water, snack, camera, notebook and binoculars. This is an ideal outing for families. For sign up contact Jenny Hill on jen-nyhill76@hotmail.com

Evening Bat Watching Early April - TBA

Saiq Plateau and the Roses 29 April - 01 May

This trip includes a stay in Ibri, a night on the Saiq Plateau and visits to many wonderful places up there, including some rose gardens. The details have been advertised by email, and if you are planning to go, please make your hotel bookings immediately and contact Valerie Chalmers on valeriechalmers@hotmail.com.

Marine Mammal Rescue Course

Are any members interested in doing a one-day marine mammal medic course in the UAE organised by Sir Alan Knight, Chairman of International Animal Rescue? There is a fee of GBP90. The course will be held on a weekend to be arranged. The direct link to the online information on this course is: <http://www.bdmlr.org.uk/training/shipping.php> which will give you a good idea of what the course is about.

Please contact directly Keith Taylor, vice-chairman of ENHG Abu Dhabi, by the beginning of April on kjtaylor13@yahoo.com

American University of Sharjah's Environmental Day

The American University of Sharjah is holding an environmental study day on Thursday 15th April, the theme of which is: *Our Environment, Our Life*.

It will run from 9.15am to 3.30pm, in the main Building, Rotunda and Hall A.

It will feature displays on topics such as biodiversity, recycling, air pollution, alternative energy, water quality, sustainable development, sustainable architecture, waste management and environmental careers. There will be four distinguished speakers who may not delight but will certainly surprise and inspire.

RSVP or obtain further information:
Department of Biology and Chemistry, American University of Sharjah.
Tel. 06-5152433 or 2411
Email: EnvDay@aus.edu



Our Next Speaker

Dr Susanne Hofstra is an assistant professor of Archaeology in the Department of History and Archaeology at UAEU. Previously she taught at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, Greece as well as at various universities and colleges in the U.S., mostly in the Midwest states; her Ph.D. is from the University of Texas at Austin.

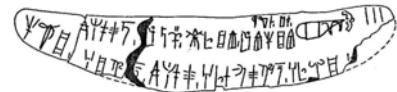
Susanne's main area of research interest is Mediterranean prehistory, especially the cultures of early Greece, Crete and Turkey, and their languages and scripts.

She has also worked on several archaeological field projects in Greece including the Stanford Skourta Plain Survey and Mochlos excavations in central Greece, and the Pylos Regional Archaeological Project in the Peloponnese of southern Greece.

Susanne's current focus is the study of material from the 1950s-1960s excavation of the Bronze Age palace site of Pylos (main occupation period 1650-1200 BCE).



Greek Linear B tablet



Linear B 'chariot' tablet found in the Knossos 'Armoury', 1904

Linear B 'chariot' tablet found in Knossos 'Armoury' 1904



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

400km There, 8,000,000 Years Back

Mleisa 1 and Mleisa 2 are two hidden archeological sites in the desert of western Abu Dhabi, Al Gharbia. Far from the usual travel routes, the access to the sites is strictly limited, as they lay next to highly protected oil pipelines. The inaccessibility of the area, lack of signage and strict surveillance (even the dirt road to the sites is monitored by cameras) are probably the best protection the two sites can get and not much more than ordinary fences are needed to protect the two ex-wetlands. Now fossilised in stone, capturing the footprints of prehistoric elephants, ostriches and gazelles, they indicate the rich wildlife and vegetation of the Late Miocene epoch, some 6 to 8 million years ago.



Dr. Mark Beech took us to Mleisa 2 first, challenging us to find elephant footprints on our own. Not easy - we didn't have the faintest idea what were we looking for. But with his help we managed to identify the big round footprints. Dr. Beech explained that the prehistoric elephant, known as *Stegotrabelodon elephantid*, was bigger than modern elephants, about 4m shoulder height. It was equipped with four tusks over 1m long, two in upper and two in lower jaw, used as chopsticks for cutting and pulling branches. The size and weight of the tusks required extremely strong muscle and jaw structure.



In November 2002 and in February 2003, an ADIAS team found two fossil elephant tusks, one 2.54 metres long and the other 1.9 metres long, at a site near Ruwais. After long and complicated excavation and preservation, the tusks are now held in Abu Dhabi, not accessible to the wider public. All fossils from Al Gharbia archeological sites will be displayed in the museum of paleontology that ADACH plans to open in 2013.



In the middle of arid desert, standing on fossilised 8 million year old mud, Dr. Beech painted a picture of the area from 6-8 million years ago: monsoon climate with periodical rivers, fertile plains of savannah like oasis populated by many animal species, such as crocodiles, ostriches, gazelles, big cats, four-tusked elephants, strange hoofed horses, monkeys and many smaller animals. It was the alternation of wet and extremely dry seasons that helped to fossilize elephant tracks and preserve them for millions of years. Tracks were well known to Bed-

ouin tribes of the area, who described them as "giant camel footprints".

Archeological site Mleisa 1 is even more striking: a vast ex wetland with the texture of the 8 million years old fossilized mud and a solitary rock in the middle in which erosion exposed the history of geological deposits. Unfortunately and despite the fence protecting the area, vandals managed to carve graffiti on the rock. Improved fencing of both sites is necessary since moving dunes keep covering and destroying the existing ones. Well in the middle of the white flatland (which can be seen on Google Earth), lie hundreds of footprints made by herds of giant elephants crossing the mud, intertwined with the smaller tracks of baby elephants. The sight is impressive, partly because of the size of each footprint and the distance between them that suggest the remarkable size of the animals, and partly to the number of well preserved tracks, crossing the stone field.

Dr. Beech explained that comparison with similar findings from the same period in other parts of the world suggest that the Al Gharbia late Miocene fauna traveled freely between Asia and Middle East through the natural bridge connecting the two continents. The remains of the bridge now form Qatar peninsula.





In total, there are more than 40 Miocene sites (dating from 23 million to 5 million years ago) in Abu Dhabi, mostly along a 200 km stretch of the shoreline. Although oil developments threaten the archaeological sites in the area, Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage (ADACH) managed to set a solid base for preservation and study of natural history in the area, establishing cooperation with international teams from Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, University of Poitiers in France and the American Western University of Health Sciences. ADACH teams get regularly informed about causal findings and have the authority to – at least temporarily – suspend the works, until the area is analysed, documented and findings preserved. However, the speed of oil and tourism developments in the archeologically rich areas calls for even more coordination and strictness in preserving the archeological sites.

Dr. Beech instructed all the participants never to collect anything from the two visited sites or during any other natural trips in the area. Instead, photos should be taken, the location should be recorded and ADACH promptly informed. Collecting, even though later delivered to ADACH, can destroy archeological findings as often it is just as important where and how the fossils were found as the fossils themselves. Not to mention that most of the findings are ex-

tremely fragile and need special procedures (supporting and gluing) before they can be removed. *Report and photographs by Sonja Lavrenčič*

The Three Forts Trip: Bithna Fort

The Fujairah Coast is particularly rich in forts, and we visited three examples during a recent field trip. On a bright morning in February, 28 members gathered at Bithna Fort, the first of the three forts. We were guided by Amrik Plaha, who has been responsible for many restorations of forts both in Oman and in the UAE and now works for the Fujairah authorities to bring their historic buildings back.

Bithna fort stands near the village of Bithna, situated in Wadi Ham, a valley which runs through the Hajar mountains between Fujairah and Siji. The archaeological find in the late 1980's of an iron age tomb in the village shows the site's longevity, and is a sign of the existence of early overland connections between the East coast of the peninsula and inland sites as well as the West coast.



The round tower, Bithna fort

Built in the first half of the eighteenth century, Bithna fort dates to a time when this area formed part of the Omani Imamate's sphere of influence. Around 1725, fighting commenced over succession of the

Ya'aribah dynasty of the Imamate, and a struggle developed between two tribal factions, the Hinawi and Ghafiri. This developed into a civil war in which, in 1737, shortly after the accepted date of construction of 1735 for Bithna fort, the Persian army was invited to participate. It is in this context that the fort originally protected the strategic access route through the mountains. Its importance in times past is reflected in the fact that it was chosen as the representative image for the Emirate of Fujairah on the inaugural issue five dirham banknote, which was first printed in 1973.

Bithna fort was essentially a guard post, and as such, it mainly boasts two impressive round towers. The fort is entered through a stone-built narrow entrance in the thick walls leading to a hall-like half-covered room. A stone bench allowed the guards at the door to sit. There is a well, and thick steps leading up.



The entrance to Bithna fort

On the first floor, there is a large uncovered courtyard-like space, entrances to the towers, and a room that runs the length of the fort which housed the guards. From the towers, there are clear views over the fields and houses of the nearby village as well as the access route through the mountains.

Restoration of the fort is still under way, and workmen were busy on one of the towers and upper wall when we visited. Amrik has been working with the same crew on many of Fujairah's old buildings over the past years, using a mix of modern and traditional techniques to rebuild them to their former state and make them accessible to the public. *Report and photographs by Barbara van Meir*



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

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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.



Al Hayl Palace

Situated approximately 10km SW of Fujairah, Al Hayl palace was the summer residence of the ruling Al Sharqi family of Fujairah and was probably used as a base for surveillance and defence of the surrounding area. It is one of the best preserved forts in Fujairah and is thought to be around 150 to 180 years old. Ongoing restoration work is being done by a team led by Amrik Singh Plaha who reports directly to the Ruler of Fujairah.



The watch tower, Al Hayl palace

The buildings are made of stone and mud brick mixed with straw. The compound is fortified and well defended and within these walls are the living areas including a well preserved majlis whose walls are plastered with lime with attractive detail cut out around the windows. There are also niches cut into the walls, a decorative feature used presumably for ornaments. The upper levels of the majlis are reached by what are little more than ladders with wooden and stone rungs set into the corner of the rooms; the ascent of these was not for the faint hearted and defied several of us! The views from the top of the tower were worth the climb and looked out over the compound and the countryside.

Outside the main compound was another majlis, for visitors to use whilst waiting for an audience with the sheikh. On the hillside outside the walls there is a watchtower with a commanding view of the surrounding restored village and date palm plantation.



The stair to the viewing level

Report and photographs by Moira Towler

Awhala Fort

Awhala village is situated in the SE corner of Fujairah, 25 km south of Fujairah city, and in it, Awhala Fort which lies right on the edge of Wadi Hilu. This fort was recently investigated by archaeologists and was discovered to be built on the top of an Iron Age defensive structure dated back to ca. 800 BC.



The circular watchtower, Awhala fort

The fort is an enclosed compound with a circular watchtower, measuring 9.00m in diameter and of total height 11.00m. It contains domestic features such as a reception room, bedrooms and a majlis and there is a well in the south-western corner of the internal yard.

The fort is constructed of rocks and a lime-based plaster and was restored between June 2003 and June 2005.



The view from Ahwala fort

(This information was taken from handout provided by the Fujairah Tourism and Antiquities Authority of the Government of Fujairah. Photographs by Valerie Chalmers.)

Springtime Again in the Rus al-Jibal

The Arabian almond (*Amygdalus arabica*) is in full, delicate bloom. It is only found above 600m and was previously the reward for those prepared to make a stiff climb, but can now be seen from many of the new mountain roads. The wood of this shrub is used to make handles for the small tribal axe (yirz) and walking sticks. The fruit, encased in a small, extremely hard shell, is edible and has a very strong almond flavour.



Amygdalus Arabica
Photograph Barbara Couldrey

Another spectacular spring treat is the agama lizard (*Pseudotrapelus sinaitus*) trying to attract a mate by skillfully changing the colour of its skin.

We stood watching it transform from rock brown to a magnificent bright blue, then it bounced up and down on its front legs trying to impress or attract ... well, who? It must have been us, as we saw only one.



Pseudotrapelus sinaitus



Hmmm!
Photographs H. Martin

And, two weeks later (27/2/10), above Baqal village in the mountains near Wadi Naqab, we spent further rewarding time in the field. In the space of 20 minutes' quiet observation, the following more notable species were seen:

A pair of trumpeter finches with their bright pink beaks and distinctive call/song
A male blue rock thrush; four male rock thrushes and one female!
A pied wheatear, and many Hume's
A male and female (closely resembling a kestrel) cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*). The male was at one stage being pursued by a brown-necked raven resulting in spectacular aerobatics by both birds. The female watched from a tree. The male cuckoo called throughout the encounter and saw the raven off!



Rock thrush
Photograph by Richard Morris

There were some interesting nests, some decorated with colourful plastic threads and leaves. I didn't see anyone at home. All the activity was no doubt due to the lush green terraces, full of seeds and flowers, including the mountain lily and iris ... and spring fever! Report by Barbara Couldrey

Louisa Catches a Python

Louisa Akerina, enjoying touring in Sri Lanka, wrote that she was getting to know the local reptiles. In January, she was staying near Kandy when a large snake was found in her friend's grandmother's back garden.



The snake caught



Placid fellow!

Louisa wrote, "Eventually the snake was caught with a long lasso / cable wire by two local men. Then it was slowly and gently pushed into a bag and put into a tuktuk to be released in the jungle area where it can roam freely away from the children. It was a thrilling experience."





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Ajmal Hasan, on being asked about it, replied, "The pictures seem to depict an Indian rock python (*Molurus molurus*) or a subspecies (*Molurus pimbura*). It is a very beautiful snake and I am glad you were able to relocate it back to its natural habitat.

"Pythons are non-poisonous but pack a nasty bite as they have large teeth. Therefore they should be handled with care. The method you have mentioned in capturing it seems pretty ok except that rope should preferably be used instead of cable wire as the metal may cause injury. For other snakes, handling gets very complicated depending on many factors, including size and venom. My personal advice is extreme caution even with non-venomous snakes (and a snake stick)! Thanks to Louisa Akerina for her story and photographs, and to Ajmal Hasan.

Mercato Beach Sightings ...

Willy and Helga Meyer saw three dolphins at Mercato beach last month and Willy was able to take

some photos. This is the first sighting of dolphins in Dubai for the Meyers in eight years. Helga remarked, "Maybe it's a good thing that most of the dredging and off-shore work has stopped."



Willy also found a complete sand dollar - not too common a sight on Dubai beaches.



Willy had earlier sent *Gazelle* a photograph of a dead sea snake from the same beach ...



... and some little yellow fungi amongst the shells, no doubt indicating that the sand had had a good fresh water wash.



Thanks to Willy and Helga Meyer for these snippets.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- April 4 Dr. Susanne Hofstra – Ancient Mesopotamian & Mediterranean Scripts
May 2 Ada Natoli – Conservation Genetics: Dolphins in the Mediterranean

Field Trips (Members only, please.)

- Mar 20 Morning walk in Mushrif Park (plants)
Mar 27 Temple Walk in Bur Dubai
Early Apr Bat Spotting Trip
Apr 09 Jimi Oasis Ramble
Apr 29-May 01 Saiq Plateau and the Roses

Further field trips, details or changes may be announced or confirmed by e-mail circular.