

# GAZELLE

Vol 25 no 4 April 2010



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

## Members' News

### *A Mother's Day Treat*

**Martina Fella** wrote recently, "Over the past years my husband and I have come across small groups of dugongs on several occasions. We have seen them near Palm Deira and once very close to the beach near Burj Al Arab. We have reported this to the DNHG, but due to a lack of photos not everyone believed they were really dugongs!

"Well, these photographs were taken in March at 10.00 a.m. between Jumeirah Beach and The World. On a very calm sea, we noticed some movement of the surface and when we slowly approached, we could clearly see a mother dugong with her very small baby.



Mother and baby swim in calm waters

We kept distant with our boat to avoid scaring them unnecessarily, but to our surprise, the baby dugong suddenly decided to come close to the boat and have a look. It

came so close, we could almost have touched it!



The little dugong ...

Then Mama Dugong came to guide the little fellow away from us.



... being taken away

We wondered what the two dugongs were doing there all by themselves, especially as the area can't really be considered a feeding ground for them. We did notice that other sightings of dugongs in Dubai all took place at roughly the same time of year, February / March. I believe not many people are aware that our coastal waters, so close to the city, attract them for some reason.

### *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 August 2011.

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

### **This month's Contributors**

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

Michelle Sinclair  
Valerie Chalmers for coordinating so many IEW reports  
Barbara Couldrey  
Martina Fella  
Gary Feulner  
David Palmer

IEW  
In Al Ain oasis  
Photograph by  
Michelle Sinclair



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



## Evening Bat Watching April - TBA

Details of this trip are not yet confirmed with Drew Gardner but will be announced by email.

## Saiq Plateau and the Roses 29 April - 01 May

This trip is now fully subscribed. For matters relating to it, contact [valeriechalmers@hotmail.com](mailto:valeriechalmers@hotmail.com).

## End of Season Function 10 June

More information on this will be available soon.

### Further trips TBA:

#### Sharjah's musea

Sandhya Prakash is investigating trips to some of Sharjah's musea which are many and sometimes unusual. These are suitable for children and families as well as interested individuals.

#### Masirah Island

Depending on turtle activity and whether Nancy Papathanasopoulou is available to accompany us, there may be a repeat visit to Masirah Island. This will probably be in May, but there's always a breeze on Masirah!

#### Socotra Island

A trip to Socotra during Eid Al Fitr in September has been suggested. This will be via Sana'a. It will require somewhat more than our usual detailed and careful organisation if it is to go ahead, so Pradeep will shortly be sending an email to members requesting expressions of interest. It should go without saying that the organisers need members to be decisive, and reliable about your decision!

## 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](mailto:kjtaylor13@yahoo.com)

## DNHG Library Access

Now that Mairead Porter has taken over the job of Librarian, she would like to encourage DNHG members to visit it and see the small but very interesting selection of books held there. It is located at the Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management where we have our monthly talks. Opening times are Sun-Wed 8am to 10pm, Thursday 8am to 6pm and Sat 10am to 8pm. The Academy librarian will allow you to read the books at the library during these hours. Please note that access is on a reference-only basis for our collection, a great deal of which would be extremely difficult if not impossible to replace.

The DNHG library would welcome donations of relevant books/papers or suggestions of titles that you think should be included. Please contact Mairead Porter by email [porter-mme@hotmail.com](mailto:porter-mme@hotmail.com)

Mairead will be attending to book sales for 30 minutes before meetings and can guide you to the library. During the day, a small M0re Cafe is open and located near the library. During term time, lunch, cooked by the students, is available.

## Our Next Speaker

**Dr Ada Natoli** is a specialist in population genetics. She recently moved to Dubai and is currently working as external collaborator with several universities and international organisations in UK, Italy, Spain, Switzerland and New Zealand. She focuses her research on marine mammals but has a broad background covering plant genetics and general ecology.

She holds a PhD in molecular ecology from the University of Durham, UK, where she completed her thesis on the molecular ecology of bottlenose and common dolphins, comparing these species and their population structure on a worldwide scale and in the Mediterranean Sea. Her main interests are investigating the evolutionary mechanisms generating population structure, and supporting conservation and management programs. She holds a Masters in Biology – plant genetics - from the University of Milan, Italy, and worked as plant genetics researcher at the University of Piacenza.

Ada spent a number of years conducting field research with the Tethys Research Institute working on several projects monitoring the cetacean population in the Mediterranean Sea, and Canary Islands. She is member of the IUCN/SSC Cetacean Specialist Group and has been a member of the Italian delegation and invited participant several times to the International Whaling Commission. She is a member of the scientific steering committee for the monitoring and conservation of cetaceans in Italy and published in several peer-reviewed scientific journals.

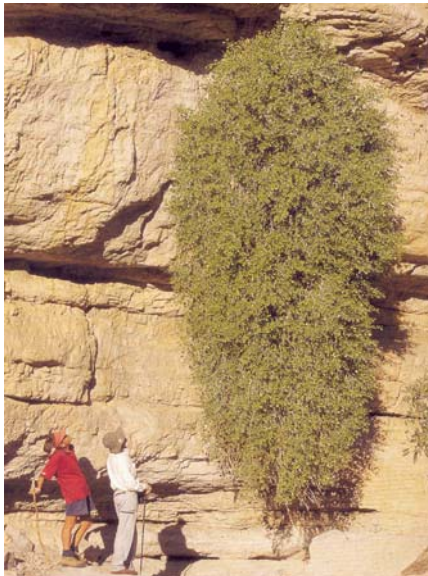




Email your field reports and news to [pvana@emirates.net.ae](mailto:pvana@emirates.net.ae) (Arial 10 justified). Please send your photographs as separate jpg files, or deliver them to Anne Millen for scanning.

### Caper Casualty

An unfortunate victim of the heavy rains in the UAE on March 2 was the beautiful hanging caper, *Caparis cartilagenia*, located in the Wadi Hafarah tributary of Wadi Haqil, made famous by the photograph, taken in ca. 1996, which appears on page 258 of Marijke Jongbloed's *Wild Flowers of the United Arab Emirates*. Wadi Hafarah is a favourite of Barbara Couldrey, who has monitored the state of the big caper over time.



The caper in happier days

It suffered greatly during the dry years at the start of the current decade but returned to reasonable health thereafter. Most recently, Barbara reported with bittersweet relief that the plant had escaped the destruction caused by construction of a truck road up the formerly pristine Wadi Hafarah.



The remains of the caper now

The body of the plant now lies like a skeleton in the wadi bed, but the rootstock is still in place in the cliff above, and Barbara holds out a slim hope that it might someday be able to regenerate.



The rootstock on which hope depends

Happily, there is precedent for such a resurrection. Barbara herself has recently reported the return of a large, straggling shrub of *Cordia sinaica* on the cliffs above lower Wadi Naqab. That species was first recorded from the UAE in about 2001, and only a few plants were ever observed, all from the same locality. They seemed to disappear during the drought of the early 2000s and a relatively careful inspection in mid-2008 came to the conclusion that they had probably succumbed. Perhaps, then, it should come as no surprise that plant species established here have evolved mechanisms that enable them to survive the lean years inherent in an arid and cyclical climate.

Report by Gary Feulner & Barbara Couldrey

### Old Friends in New Places

Gary Feulner, largely absent from Dubai for months now, recently wrote: Personal travel in the last few months has taken me over a considerable breadth of the Old World tropics and subtropics, from sub-Saharan West Africa (the Niger River and environs) through Salalah and on to Kerala and Nepal. With the exception of Kerala, these areas are also within or on the periphery of the Eremic Zone,

the zone of arid climate that overlaps the boundary of the three principal Old World biogeographic provinces – the Palaeartic (Eurasian), Afro-tropical (Sub-Saharan Africa) and Oriental (South and Southeast Asia).

This provided me with an interesting opportunity to take note of what changed and what remained the same as I traveled. The observation of species variation in parallel with biogeographical gradients was a major factor in Alfred Russel Wallace's formulation, in parallel with Charles Darwin, of the hypothesis of evolution by natural selection.

Some of the biogeographical constants across the realm I traveled will also be familiar to residents of the UAE. One is *Calotropis*, the so-called Sodom's Apple shrub, which is found in all four places. *Calotropis procera*, the UAE species that colonises low dunes, sand flats and silty waste ground in the UAE, is also found on the top of the Jebel Qara escarpment above Salalah, and in Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa (where, however, the fruit is elliptical rather than banana-shaped as in the UAE). In India and Nepal the *Calotropis* species present is not *C. procera* but *C. gigantea*. The two plants closely resemble each other and are most easily distinguished if they are in flower. (See also the January 2010 issue of *Gazelle*.)



*Calotropis procera*,  
in Burkina Faso



Another shared theme was the *neem* tree, *Melia azederachta*, which is common from Timbuktu to Kathmandu, at least in association with human settlement. A native of India, where it is used for a wealth of medicinal purposes, the *neem* was introduced to West Africa and now appears to be naturalised there. In the UAE it is typically grown as an ornamental and can be seen along many roadsides.

Two other introduced plants seem to have become naturalised in all areas – *Lantana camara*, which seems to be strictly an ornamental, and *Ricinus communis*, which is used to make castor oil. In the UAE *Lantana* is limited to gardens and plantations but *Ricinus communis* sometimes colonizes wadi banks. A third plant found in the UAE, the prickly nightshade *Solanum incanum*, sometimes called the bitter apple or thorn apple, was seen in all but West Africa, where, however, it is also present.



*Solanum incanum*

Among birds, the most conspicuous common link was the black kite (or pariah kite) *Milvus migrans*, which is readily distinguished by its slightly forked tail.



*Milvus migrans*, Salalah

The black kite is rare in the UAE but is a common raptor and scavenger in each of the other areas I

visited, including urban environments. I saw hundreds aggregating at dumps at Mopti, along the Niger River, as well as outside Salalah, and I watched another dive to pluck a baby chicken from the ground at 2100m in the Himalayan foothills.

Another bird common to all of the places I visited, as well as the UAE, is the cattle egret *Bubulcus ibis*, which in most often found among taller grass but can also be found in gravel riverbeds of the Himalayan foothills – with or without livestock. This adaptable bird is one of the small number of tropical and subtropical species that has successfully crossed the Atlantic to the New World. In Cairo, Egypt it is common in the urban environment, nesting *inter alia* in trees around the perimeter of the Cairo Zoo.

The common kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* is also present in all of the areas I visited, although I found it to be uncommon in Mali. It was well known to villagers in the Nepali foothills for its hovering behaviour.

The palm dove or laughing dove, ubiquitous in the UAE, is equally so in West Africa, and perhaps that should be no surprise, since its scientific name is *Streptopelia senegalensis*. However, it gives way eastwards to other species, in Nepal the oriental turtle dove *Streptopelia chinensis*.

Among mammals, the porcupine was a somewhat unexpected common thread. Although no live animals were encountered, quills were found in all four areas. In West Africa the quills were not seen in the field, however, but in the colourful, eclectic display of a dealer in fetishes. The species involved are closely related but not identical: the crested porcupine *Hystrix cristata* is found in North and sub-Saharan Africa whereas the Indian (crested) porcupine *H. indica* is found in Arabia and the Indian sub-continent.

Among butterflies, the lime butterfly, a swallowtail, is common to all areas, but in fact two different species are involved: *Papilio demodocus* (the African lime) in Africa and southern Arabia, *Papilio demoleus*

in Northern Arabia and Asia. The caper white *Anaphaeis aurota* was seen in all but Nepal, and the yellow pansy *Junonia hierta* and pea blue *Lampides boeticus* were seen in all but West Africa (where, however, the latter is understood to be present).



*Anaphaeis aurota*, from Mali

I encountered relatively few reptiles, but agama lizards were seen at both ends of my travel spectrum, in West Africa and Nepal, and it is interesting to note that the three different species observed shared the common trait of an orange head when displaying.



Orange-headed tree agama, the *maragaya*, from Mali

Report and photos by Gary Feulner

## InterEmirates Weekend:

At the InterEmirates weekend dinner, ENHG Chairman Drew Gardner announced the 2009 Sheikh Mubarak Natural History Award, named after the father of our Patron, Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak, and “given to acknowledge the contributions made by an individual, primarily through original research and publication, to the scientific study of the archaeology, history and natural history of the UAE.” It was awarded to Dr. Christian Velde, the chief archaeologist at the National Museum of Ras al-Khaimah,



## 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.



for successfully re-organising that museum and for overseeing, contributing to and publishing on an important programme of excavation, restoration and conservation, leading to a number of important discoveries, including the largest defensive structure known in Arabia - the long wall (10+ km) that formerly protected the town of RAK/Julfar.

The Bish Brown Award, named after the ENHG's founder, is "given to a person who has made a significant contribution to promoting wider interest in the objectives of the UAE's three natural history groups, through means such as educational activities, raising public consciousness in the media, playing a leading role in NHG activities etc." It was given to ENHG members Hanne and Jens Eriksen, who have been promoting SE Arabian Natural History and especially birds through their photography and publications for the last 20 years or so. Their bird photography is world renowned, having won numerous international competitions. Their books include a *Birdwatching Guide to Oman* (2001, 2008), *Common Birds in Oman* (2005) and *The Birds of Al Jebel Al Akhdar* (2007) among others. They have published a bird calendar each year for at least the last 10 years. Their bird images have appeared on stamps, bank notes and a huge arrange of publications. *Thanks to the Editor, ENHG Focus*

### Moonwalk to Khutwah Village 1 and ...

On a clear moonlit night, our guide Brien Holmes told us, our bodies cast no shadows which might impede night vision when we walked through the wadis and hills. Everything was bathed in a beautiful silver light. A number of the participants tried to capture the magic of that moonlit landscape digitally and all were unsuccessful.

The village of Khutwah did not appear to be fully inhabited. We did pass a home where a group of men were enjoying a majlis and

they seemed remarkably unperturbed by a group of strangers walking through their village at night. We walked through the village, past the date palm oasis and into the valleys and foothills of the Hajar mountains.



The village of Khutwa 1 in the background

We walked along a falaj system which has been restored. Restoration of the falaj system in this entire area is on going as farming activity appears to be on the increase. Once fallow and disused for a number of years, the oases in the Khutwah area are now restored and have become highly profitable. Figs, bananas, papayas, pomegranates, mangos, lemons, lime, fresh herbs/produce (such as mint, parsley, basil, and rocket) plus a plethora of date palms grow in the oasis.

The landscape is barren and it hard to imagine any life or industry existing here at any one time but we were told that copper smelting was a cottage industry carried out by the community when and as time permitted. Smelter remains have been found in the Khutwah wadi area.



Falaj system close to Al Daher oasis

The Khutwah wadi and hills are popular with visitors over the weekend and most of us on the moonlight walk were grateful that



we could enjoy the peace, quiet and calm offered by the night time walk. What was noticeable was that visitors are not making much effort to keep the area clean – perhaps due in part to a lack of facilities.

We came upon an abandoned homestead surround by hills and in a valley. It was totally isolated. The majlis, animal pens, kitchen and living quarters could easily be seen from the remaining walls. Anyone living here would have had to be tough and accustomed to a frugal and isolated way of life. Oman has encouraged people living in these remote villages to move into towns and government housing where it is easier and cheaper to provide families with all the facilities for modern-day living. Standing in the middle of the abandoned homestead surrounded by hills one can easily understand how expensive and difficult it would be to bring water and electricity to such a place.

We noted few signs of any animal life except for a few burrows. It is possible that such a big group of people might have sent small animals running for cover!

## ... Al Dhaher Oasis

The next morning we visited the Al Dhaher oasis which lies close to Khutwah Village 1.



Al Daher oasis

The falaj system in the wadi has been restored and the oasis was beautifully maintained - we saw enormous cabbages and other fresh produce growing in the vegetable patch.

We were able to walk up to the entrance of the bat cave but did not enter into it as the entrance is really very narrow.



Vegetables and their lifeline, the falaj

We managed to walk only part of the wadi by the Al Dhaher Oasis before having to turn back in order to be on time for afternoon activities. *Reports and photographs in these two articles by Michelle Sinclair*

## Jebel Hafit Tombs, Mezyad Fort and ...

There are hundreds of cairn tombs scattered along the eastern side of Jebel Hafit – estimates of the number vary - most of them just looking like piles of rocks, including some very large piles. They date from the 3rd millennium BC, though some may have been re-used in iron-age times. It is sometimes hard to know whether you are looking at a tomb or just a pile of rocks. The Jebel Hafit tombs were among the earliest archaeological sites investigated in the UAE, when Sheikh Zayed invited a Danish team working in Bahrain many years ago to make a side-trip to Al Ain. The rest, as they say, is pre-history.

About half-way along the eastern flank of the mountain there is a group of half a dozen tombs which were reconstructed several years ago, somewhat speculatively, by the archaeological team permanently based in Al Ain. The NHG group, more than thirty of us, led by Amer, inspected these reconstructions, crawling in through the small entrance ways.

Then we proceeded to the fort at Mezyad, which is off to the right just before you reach the current border post. Mezyad is a large fort with a fairly simple rectangular design and four corner towers. It was of course a border stronghold, and plans to

make it more of a tourist attraction, with a museum, have not come to fruition probably because it remains in a sensitive area close to the border fence. Inside, there is plenty of efforts of restoration and preservation work, with reconstructed walls and piles of unused mud bricks, but this work was apparently put on hold some time ago. The large interior courtyard, which at one point housed areesh structures, now contains palm trees and other plants. Along each of the four walls are a large number of barrack-like rooms, sometimes in a double row. The place still looks like a barracks – as it once was, for the Trucial Oman Scouts. It is the last of the facilities used by the Scouts that has not been destroyed or reconstructed beyond recognition.



Mezyad fort  
Photograph by David Palmer

It's an atmospheric place, close to the mountain and the border and set on the edge of its own oasis. It has a pleasing air of dereliction, and gives a strong sense of the recent past. It feels as if the Trucial Oman Scouts left their lonely outpost only a few years back, and might at any point come sauntering back to reclaim it and aim their Enfield rifles through the slots in the fortifications, watching hawk-eyed for encroachments on the oasis from rival powers.

## ... Al Ain Oasis, with Phil Iddison and Amer

For many members of the various NHGs, the Al Ain Oasis (the one you enter from next to the Al Ain National Museum) is among the first places they visited when they started to explore the UAE. But not



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many of us have the privilege of visiting it under the guidance of Phil Iddison who produced a series of authoritative booklets several years ago on such aspects of local life as building, farming, diet and clothing. An engineer by trade, Phil has now moved back to the UK, where he cultivates a large allotment and regularly harvests stone tools from it. He was persuaded to return for this year's Inter-Emirates Weekend.



In Al Ain Oasis  
Photo by Michelle Sinclair

Phil, ably supported by Amer, led us through the oasis with an optimistic bounce in his step and an irrepressible half-smile of anticipation and enjoyment on his face. He showed us the details of palm-tree

cultivation and date production, and the use of every part of the palm-tree for a variety of things.



Tending dates

Photo by Michelle Sinclair



Threshing dates  
Photo by Michelle Sinclair

Phil also explained the way the land is divided up and allocated, the restoration of the oasis in 1999-2000, and the materials (traditional and modern) used for walls, gates and irrigation systems.



The restored falaj and channeling  
Photo by Michelle Sinclair

He pointed out the occasional intriguing large mounds under which there may well be archaeological evidence of thousands of years of use of the oasis. *These two reports by David Palmer and photographs by David Palmer and Michelle Sinclair. More reports of trips and activities held on the InterEmirates weekend will be published in our May issue of Gazelle.*

## Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

May 2            Ada Natoli – Conservation Genetics: Dolphins in the Mediterranean

June 6           Keith Wilson – Dragonflies

**Field Trips (Members only, please.)**

Apr (TBA)       Bat Spotting Trip

Apr 29-May 01 Saiq Plateau and the Roses

May              Trips TBA

June 10         End-of-Season Function

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