

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

David Bradford, who has led many wonderful birding trips for the DNHG, is leaving Dubai. David was a senior manager for construction of the Burj Khalifa. That's a tough act to follow and apparently he is not going to try. The DNHG and the birdwatching community will certainly miss his considerable expertise. We wish David and Mary all the best for the future.

Elizabeth Stanley is retiring from her position as Assistant Provost, Zayed University, Dubai, to go to live in Colorado. She will live not far from her son and grandchildren, but does not plan to be too settled – she is keen to travel more. Best wishes, Elizabeth!

In early June, **Martina Fella** and her family saw what looked like a shark breaking the surface of the glassy sea between Dubai World and Palm Deira. They approached and were amazed to see that the fin did not belong to a shark but to a rather large ray.



There were five of them playfully chasing after each other in the water close to the surface, for about five minutes of spectacular acrobatics before they disappeared in the depths of the sea. As cephalic flaps could clearly be seen on their heads, Martina knew that they belonged to the Mobulidae family of rays that feeds on plankton.



By size and colour (olive on top and white below), Martina thought it was Thurston's devil ray (*Mobula thurstoni*), though this has not previously been reported in the Arabian Gulf. Keith Wilson suggested the longhorned devil ray, *Mobula eregodootenkee*, not uncommon in local waters though classified as Near Threatened (IUCN Red List). He attached links to photos he took earlier this year in north Musandam and Muttrah fish souq. <http://picasaweb.google.co.uk/KDPWilson/MuttrahFishMarket#5448551131287626370>

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:

Linda Rademan, Vicky, Shiela, Sally and Dalene
Angela Manthorpe
Valerie Chalmers
Sonja Lavrenčič
Martina Fella
Gary Feulner



For some, the end-of-season dinner was just too much!

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



Zanzibar with Sonja Lavrenčić

Eid al Fitr, approx. Sept 10 to 15, or 10 to 18

Sonja has visited Zanzibar before, and has sent a quick overview of what's planned (see pp.6 & 7). She needs a minimum of 10 people. Please contact Sonja by email (lavsonja@yahoo.it or sonja@publicisgraphics.ae) if you are interested in the trip or if you have further questions.

Birding Trip Late September

Gary plans a trip to some good local spots, and will give details closer to the time.

Turtle Rescue Centre, Burj Al Arab Oct/Nov TBC

Details will be circulated by email closer to the time.

Socotra Island Prob. Eid Al Adha, approx. Dec 1 to 4

The trip to Socotra will be either over Eid Al Adha, approx 1st to 4th December, or early next year. Details are not yet sorted, but will be available as soon as possible. For information, contact Pradeep wgarnet@emirates.net.ae

Further trips proposed:

Camping trip to Jebel Shams and Hoti Caves

Ministry of Environment and Water
Dibba plant nursery

Breeding Centre for Endangered Species, Sharjah Desert Park

Sir Abu Nu'air

Musandam dhow day

Bat-spotting

Camping and half-day canoeing in Umm Al Qawain mangroves

End-of-Season Dinner

The annual end-of-season dinner and photographic competition, held at the India Club, was a bit different this year. Instead of a quiz, we had a show-and-tell (or rather, don't tell) in which members brought curiosities they'd found and tried to stump the experts. To a large extent they succeeded. The experts, Gary Feulner, Jean-Paul Berger, David Palmer and Lamjed El-Kefi, had a hard job with many of the pieces. So did the audience, who were offered a prize to identify them.



Team Pardoe, Sonja in foreground

Martina Fella and Anne Millen tied for first place (with a score so low we won't divulge it!) and received copies of Marijcke Jongbloed's *Wild About ...* series.



The curious natural history objects

The most curious curiosity of all was light, white balls found by Gary Feulner near the beach at Ghantoot. After we had deliberated long and hard, he sawed one in half, and we were astonished to find it tightly packed with a short grayish-green fibre. The white coating was extremely thin. No one volunteered to lick it to see if it was salt!

The photographic competition brought a good selection of work. Congratulations to **Rob Whelan** who was winner of the Life on Earth: Plants/Animals/Fossils section. His spectacular photograph

of the grey crowned crane was also the overall winner for 2010.



Belearica regulorum

Rob wrote, "The grey crowned crane, or East African crowned crane, *Belearica regulorum*, occurs in dry savannah in Africa, south of the Sahara. It does not migrate by itself, but this one got to Al Ain Zoo somehow!" Rob was on a bridge at Al Ain Zoo when he saw the crane below just as it bent to drink, creating his prize-winning photo.

The winner of the Earth and Environment: Landscapes/Geology section was Lamjed El-Kefi with his Empty Quarter landscape.



Lamjed's Empty Quarter landscape

Martina Fella won the section on Man and his Influence: Archaeology/Architecture/Culture (People)/Environment section with her portrait of an old man in Oman.



Old man, Jebel Akhdar

Report continued on p.7



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.

A visit to the Saiq Plateau in Oman

On our first trip to the Saiq Plateau in the Jebel Akhdar in April, the Ibri Hotel provided a much needed rest after a full day's work and a long drive. Next day, we found the gradient of the unique mountain road a little intimidating initially, but soon relaxed and stopped on occasions to admire the views.



An ancient juniper

Valerie arranged a wonderful itinerary and our first point of call was at a cluster of small villages which appeared to cling to the sides of a perilous slope. It was remarkable to see how the terraced areas descended the side of the steep rock face – quite a feat of engineering!



Terraced gardens (View at 400%)

The local Omani people grow a variety of vegetable and fruits on the terraces. The rose terrace was not in full bloom, but we were pleased to see a few blushing pink flowers. It is amazing that what one would consider to be a delicate bloom can thrive in such a seemingly inhospitable area.



A Jebel Akhdar rose

The Jebel Akhdar Hotel is a little haven of quiet tucked away in the cool air of the mountain top. The temperature on the plateau is about 10 degrees cooler than it is 'down below,' so it is pleasant enough to switch off the air conditioner and enjoy fresh air.



Blue Pansy butterfly, basking

On Saturday morning we set off for Diana's viewpoint and were privileged to have an interesting talk by Jean-Paul Berger on the geological formations in Oman and in that area. We found ourselves being spied on by a small lizard that was not afraid to have his photo taken!



Probably the Dwarf Semaphore Gecko, *Pristurus rupestris*

Our last stop was at lovely deserted Wadi Bani Habib village where we explored the ruined homes and admired the lush fruit trees. It was interesting to see what walnuts look like on a tree –

rather different to those we buy in a packet from a supermarket shelf.



Walnut growing in Wadi Bani Habib

The weekend was just too short, but our drive back to Dubai had one small highlight – it rained for about 30 seconds! Thanks to everyone at the DNHG for the wonderful memory.



Giant Skipper butterfly (*Coeliades anchises*) feeding on the flowers of *Echinops erinaceus*

Report and photographs by Vicky, Sally, Shiela, Dalene and Linda Rademan

Prowling the Indian National Parks

In early March Steve and Angela Manthorpe visited Ranthambore National Park in Rajasthan, north India. Angela reported: The park comprises dry deciduous forest, rocky crags and several lakes with adjacent grassland; access is provided via jeeps and trucks. Wildlife is plentiful and used to the vehicles so we had frequent close encounters with sambar and chital (spotted deer), wild boar and langur; marsh crocodiles and mon-goose were more distant and whenever we stopped the tree pies would swoop in to scrounge



Tree pie

snacks. However the stars of Ranthambore are the tigers with around 40 estimated to live in the 1330 sqkm park. On our first drive we saw tiger prints in soft sand and on this and the next drive tigers were spotted in zones adjacent to ours. Our third drive proved to be the lucky one as we gained access to a zone where tiger sightings had been consistent over previous days.



One of the tigers

Nothing is guaranteed with wildlife watching but after a lengthy drive the guides spotted 2 young tigers lazing in the grass – apparently a brother and sister that had only recently separated from their mother. We spent over an hour watching them rolling around, stretching and yawning and, towards the end of our allotted time, the female made a half hearted attempt at stalking a sambar deer.



Chittal — also tiger food

We had to leave before it got dark however, and as we rushed to the exit we were rewarded with a close sighting of a leopard which are even more numerous than tigers in the park.

Ranthambore is easy to visit from the UAE with frequent flights to the international airport at Jaipur, with a two hour train ride to the town of Sawai Madhopur, only 10 km from the park. Local hotels are plentiful and arrange park entry for you.

Then in April, we visited Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary in Kerala, South India. This very popular park is located in the hilly Western Ghats and encompasses a 26 sqkm reservoir created in 1895 - the black stumps of submerged trees are still visible throughout the lake, making an eerie and picturesque sight.



The Periyar reservoir

Access is either via boat trips or guided walks, including a 2 or 3 day 'Tiger Trail' trek. We saw gaur (Indian bison), sambar and wild boar from the boats but only at a considerable distance, however the elephants, for which the park is famous were nowhere to be seen. A 3 hour nature walk gave us an opportunity to get up close and personal with the little stuff including tree frogs, numerous butterflies and moths and the park's infamous leeches – so small and tenacious that the guides provided leech resistant socks (below).



We also had closer sightings of the long tailed langur, giant Malabar squirrel, wild boar, monitor lizard and several magnificent Indian hornbills.



Periyar tree frog

Just as with Ranthambore, Periyar is very accessible from the UAE via Kochi airport. *Article and photographs by Angela Manthorpe*

Rescuing a Juvenile Hawksbill

Martina Fella recently wrote: A few weeks ago, we came across a juvenile hawksbill turtle during a boat trip. It was far out in the open sea off the coast of Jebel Ali Palm that we spotted what first looked like a ball of seaweed or driftwood. Only at the last minute did we realise that this was actually a live turtle! It was so overgrown with barnacles, sea anemones and other crustaceans that it was barely recognisable as a turtle. It seemed that an entire eco system flourished on its shell and flippers!



The floating ecosystem

The poor little fellow was so heavily loaded that it could barely swim, and we were able to pick it up from the water easily and take it onto the boat. We knew that it was impossible to remove the barnacles from its shell without seriously injuring the turtle. One should never try to remove barnacles from a turtle. The



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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.



wounds will bleed heavily and can lead to the death of the animal. Some of the barnacles were of enormous size and deeply embedded in the turtle's shell. Therefore we decided to take the animal back home, wrapped in a wet cloth to protect it from drying out.



Even *Hexaplex* has hitched a ride

Back at the house, we kept it overnight in the bath tab filled with fresh water. I once read that this is the best way to get the barnacles off the shell as they die in fresh water and then eventually fall off. To be sure that this was the right thing to do with a sea creature, I phoned turtle specialist Nancy who confirmed this kind of treatment is safe.



The underbelly of the little hawksbill

The following day I contacted the Turtle Rescue Centre at the Burj Al Arab. The turtle was then taken there to be treated and cared for professionally. Once the basic medical checks and treatments are completed all rescued turtles of the center will be transferred to the Madinat Jumeirah Turtle Rehabilitation Centre where they will be kept for some time until they are fit enough to be released back into the sea. *Report and photographs by Martina Fella.*

Studying Ship Strikes

DNHG members may be interested to know of the existence of a International Whaling Commission website to post and record ship collisions with whales and suggest means to reduce the danger of such collisions. Ship strikes are now recognised as a significant cause of mortality for whales globally. Every segment of the maritime industry is concerned, as well as sailing boats. You can follow this link to the folder: http://www.iwcoffice.org/sci_com/shipstrikes.htm

Further information and printed copies of the folder can be obtained by contacting Alexandre de Lichtervelde, Chair of the IWC Ship Strikes Working Group, at: Alexandre.delichtervelde@health.fgov.be.

Managing Dwindling Fish Stocks

EWS-WWF are leading a campaign to educate the public to do their share in the conservation of fish stocks in waters adjacent to the UAE. EWS-WWF is a national environmental NGO which works at federal level to conserve biodiversity and promote sustainable living through education and conservation initiatives.

They have categorised edible fish into three groups, over-fished (red), running into trouble (orange) and adequate stocks (green). They recommend you buy from the green list which include: *jesh um al hala* (orange spotted trevally), *faskar* (two bar seabream), *ebzimi* (black streaked monocle bream), *anfooz* (yellow bar angelfish), *shari esh-keli* (pink ear emperor), *yanam* (sordid sweetlips), *Naiser* (Ehrenberg's snapper).

The 'Choose Wisely' campaign is endorsed by the Ministry of Environment and Water of the United Arab Emirates. Look up the campaign website for interesting and useful details about fish, fish con-



sumption and fish stocks: www.choosewisely.ae

But at the Fish Market ...

Despite the effort made to conserve endangered species in Dubai and recent publicity about the shark-fin trade, these photos were taken just a few weeks ago. Marina Fella wrote to Gazelle: The number of sharks on display at the Dubai fish market one evening was just amazing. And we were told that this was just the beginning of the annual shark-season! Every evening there are sharks for sale there, sometimes more, sometimes less.



Sharks at the market

We saw so many different types, even hammerhead and leopard sharks. Some of them were of enormous size and we were told that they were caught on the UAE East Coast or Oman. Even baby black tip reef sharks were being sold in large numbers.



Hammerhead waiting for the fins to be chopped off

On the floor next to the dead sharks were piles of dried shark fins destined to be traded to the far eastern markets. One shark fin trader told us that one kilo of dried shark fins would get him US\$100 on the Hong Kong market. Once the sharks were sold, their fins were chopped off, and the carcasses



Shark fins destined for the far east

were put back into a cool-truck. We were told they would be sold to Iran. Nobody could tell us what the (often already very smelly) carcasses would be used for. Thanks to Marina Fella for this report.

Notes on the Zanzibar Trip

Last Eid, Sonja visited Zanzibar and had a great time, but not enough time! This Eid al Fitr (which probably falls around September 12), she is organizing a similar trip for DNHG members.

Zanzibar has great beaches, great shelling and still unspoilt nature and traditional life: flora and fauna, islands, coral reefs, mangroves, traditional crafts and local art. Prices in Zanzibar are very reasonable and people are extremely friendly. English is widely spoken and understood. It also has a fascinating and long history. Archeological findings show 20,000 years of human occupation in Zanzibar. It was an important trading point between Africa, India and Middle East, and was colonised by Portugal, Oman (during which time it became a center of the slave trade), and Britain, which abolished the slave trade in the 19th century. Although part of Tanzania, Zanzibar remains till today a semi-autonomous region.

Coral Rock Hotel is on the south east coast of Zanzibar, about one hour's drive from Stone Town. It has 20 traditional bungalows all facing the lagoon. Breakfast and dinner are served on the coral rock extending into the lagoon. There are plenty of trips that can be or-

ganised from the hotel: to neighbouring islands, the nature park with colubus monkeys, swimming with dolphins, spice plantations, feeding turtles, mangroves visits, etc. Last but not least, the Coral Rock Hotel has proven their low impact on the environment and benefits for local society.

Sonja has prepared a detailed itinerary, which can be shorter if necessary, and (as far as possible) costed the trip. Including air fares, hotels and transfers to/from the Coral Rock, prices are:

Total travel 9 days (Fri – Sat), 7 nights Coral Rock + 1 night in Stone Town, 5508 AED

Total travel 6 days (Fri – Wed), 4 nights Coral Rock + 1 night in Stone Town, 4833 AED

An email will be circulated with much more detail - this is just to whet your appetites!

Montezuma's Revenge?



Argemone mexicana

On the DNHG trip to Salalah last November, I was surprised to find at two tourist sites a conspicuous plant with thistle-like leaves and large, bright yellow flowers. It was not planted as an amenity but was growing on waste ground and along the roadside. Inquiry to a botanical professional quickly identified it as the Mexican prickly poppy *Argemone mexicana*, a species with the potential to become invasive in seasonally arid climates. It was nevertheless a great surprise to find the same plant a few months later along dusty roadsides in a Nepali river town. Report by Gary Feulner



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... End-of-season Dinner Continued

Rob Whelan received the cup and two 100Dh book vouchers from Magrudy's, and both Martina and Lamjed received 100Dh book vouchers.



The photographic prize winners
From left: Martina, Rob and Lamjed

Thanks go to the India Club for hosting the event and for an excellent buffet; to Pradeep for doing the booking/liasing with the India Club and for choosing the menu; to Michelle Sinclair and Fran M'Caw, in particular, for their help on the night and to our four members of the panel of experts. *Thanks to Valerie Chalmers for her efforts, too, and for the detail for this report.*

"Green" Building: A Sparrow Condo

On an early summer visit to Mushrif Park we made a point to try to inspect different habitats for signs of life. Within the grassy lawns and walkways near the Oasis Garden are two tunnel-like arbours consisting of a metal frame thickly covered by a (still unidentified) pink-flowering climber.



An arbour in Mushrif Park

Within the cool and dark of the arbour, we found to our surprise that the interior of the roof cover was pock-marked with closely-spaced nest holes of the house sparrows, *Passer domesticus*.

Although the house sparrow usually nests colonially (e.g., in trees, bushes or holes in buildings or rocks), the density of nests at the arbor site is exceptional. *Report and photographs by Gary Feulner*



House sparrow nests in the roof of the arbour

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 e-mail, or direct to the editor, Anne Millen, email: pvana@emirates.net.ae.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

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|------------|---|
| Sun Sep 19 | Nessrine Alzahlawi, Conservation Officer, Emirates Wildlife Society-WWF:
The problem of overfishing in the Gulf region |
| Sun Oct 03 | Brien Holmes: The falaj systems in and around Al Ain. |

Field Trips (Members only, please.)

- | | |
|-----------------|----------------------|
| Sep 10-15 or 18 | Zanzibar |
| Sep TBA | Birding trip |
| Oct/Nov | Turtle Rescue Centre |
| Dec 1-4 TBC | Socotra Island |

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