

GAZELLE

Vol 25 no 12 December 2010



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعه

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Hands up if you're staying ...

Michele and Paul Antoine Mayer are leaving Dubai in January 2011. They wrote to thank Valerie Chalmers and other DNHG members for their dedication and effort in sharing so much information on the region throughout the years. They are returning to France, with a detour via Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, for a 'new field trip' full of new discovery - retirement. The Mayers will be missed on field trips. The Ed. recalls driving up to Saiq with a large convoy of DNHG vehicles, and finding the Mayers stopped on a steep slope. Peter asked if he had a problem, and Paul Antoine said, waving his hand at the car and Michele in it, "Yes. She is over'eating again".

Moira and Kevin Towler are going as well. Moira wrote, "We are leaving on the 23rd December and one of the things I will really miss is the DNHG. I have very much enjoyed the field trips and the talks which opened up a side of the Emirates that I never dreamed existed. When we moved here three years ago we didn't even bring our walking boots as we didn't think there would ever be an opportunity to wear them". The Towlers are returning to the UK.

And last but not least of those leaving Dubai in the next couple of months is longterm DNHG member

Diane Lazenbury. She has been a stalwart of field trips and report-writing, and the DNHG will miss her contribution. Di will live in Gibraltar. The DNHG wishes the Mayers, the Towlers and Di well in the future!

Whilst in Thailand recently, our Special Projects Person, **Beryl Comar**, visited **Patricia** and **Robert Rosetti**. The Rosettis left Dubai for Manilla and are now in Bangkok. Beryl arrived there in time for the end of the festival of Loi Kratong, a recognition of the importance of water in their lives.



Willy and Helga Meyer took their first and only trip to Muscat just before they left Dubai. There, whilst swimming, they encountered a beautiful little jellyfish with four wine-red dots. Then there were more ... and more. They came in with the tide, every wave bringing more of them. But after Helga got quite badly stung on the upper arm, the Meyers abandoned swimming with jellyfish!

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.) **The cut-off for renewal of membership is January 31. See notice on p.2.**

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 McLean
- Sonja Lavrenčič
- Moira Towler
- Mairead Porter
- Rob Whelan
- Sue Hunter
- Gary Feulner



Sa'ab Bani Khamis, the hidden village
Photograph by Moira Towler

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



Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve 22 January 2011 (day trip)

This will be a visit to Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve (the expanded Al Maha Reserve) starting with a talk on desert conservation and research activities followed by a visit to the reserve and research programmes. Greg Simkins will conduct the tour.

You will need a 4X4 vehicle and sand driving experience. This is an area of big soft dunes. It will be limited to 5 vehicles only, and there is a Reserve entry fee. Pradeep will take registrations on a first-come-first-serve basis so be quick. Email wgarnet@emirates.net.ae

Kayaking in Umm al Qawain Date TBA

This has two options, both costing 120 Dhs/head. 1. A large boat (which does lunch) and carry conoes/kayaks for visiting the mangroves (minimum of 20 persons). 2. Stay at the club (lunch too!) and kayak out to the mangroves from there. Details to be settled shortly.

Marble Quarry at Hijari near Sohar, Oman Sat 19 March 2011

Hans-Joachim Rau will take members to a marble quarry in the village of Hijari and to the factory in Sohar. Details to be confirmed.

And on the agenda for 2011...

For the following trips, details will be published/mailed as soon as known, but pencil them in now:

Forts of Dibba Oman
January (TBC)

InterEmirates Weekend, Liwa, hosted by ENHG Abu Dhabi
17-19 February

Tilal Liwa Hotel is providing the venue this year. Camping is also an option. Field trips and activities are already planned and will be published in our January issue.

Socotra direct from Sharjah
Wed - Sat, during March (TBC)

Sana'a, Yemen
Easter (2nd last w/e in April)

Jebel Shams Camping
Late April

Masirah Island
May

* * *

Membership renewals:

Please note that if you have not renewed your membership by 31 January 2011, your name will be taken off our list. This means you are not entitled to participate in field trips, will not receive email notification of events and will not receive the *Gazelle*. Details for renewal are given on p.1.

Turtle Rescue

Warren Baverstock, Aquarium Operations Manager at the Burj Al Arab acknowledged our thanks after the three popular trips with the following note: *Please spread the word amongst your group that we have started to receive sick turtles and that presently they are coming from the Abu Dhabi area. From experience, I am sure that this will slowly move towards Dubai over the coming couple of months and so if any of your group hears of, or finds, a sick or injured sea turtle, drop us a line.*

Kind regards,
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Nautilus register

Beryl Comar's address, for reporting nautilus finds, is:
comar@emirates.net.ae

Remember to give her the dimensions of the shell, a description of it (eg darkly marked, perfect, broken,

oil-smearred, etc), date, and beach where it was found.

Our Next Speaker

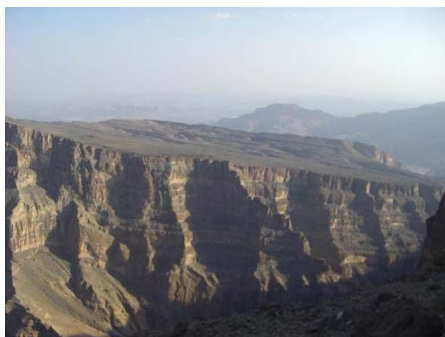
Dr Sabir Bin Muzaffar is a wildlife biologist specialising in the ecology, migration and diseases of birds. He received his B.Sc., M.Sc. and Ph.D. degrees from Memorial University, St.John's, Newfoundland, Canada where he worked on the ecology, parasites and diseases of seabirds in eastern Canada. His research examined host-parasite-pathogen interactions and was key in determining the geographic spread of helminths and diseases of puffins, murre, razorbills and gulls (among others) and their associations with climatic anomalies in the Northwest Atlantic. He then did his post doctoral research at the University of California, Davis, on the ecology and migration of waterfowl in Europe and Asia, with special reference to the role of migratory birds in the geographic spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 (bird flu). This work shed light on the migratory movement of ducks and gulls and was instrumental in dispelling myths about their involvement in large-scale, long-distance spread of bird flu. Dr. Muzaffar has also worked on the ecology and conservation of a wide variety of wildlife in Bangladesh, where he was born, including the critically endangered Hoolock Gibbon, bears, and migratory birds. He has published extensively in peer-reviewed scientific journals and is currently an Assistant Professor at the Department of Biology, United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain. His is currently initiating a project on the ecology and conservation of the Socotra Cormorant on some of Abu Dhabi's islands.



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.

Field Trip to Jebel Shams, Oman, October 2010

Jebel Shams (Mountain of the Sun) is part of Al Jebel Akhdar region which is the largest structural domain in the Western Hajar Mountains of Oman. At 3010 metres, Jebel Shams is the highest point in the Arabian Peninsula and from it can be seen the most wonderful views of one of Oman's biggest attractions, the 'Grand Canyon'.



Wadi Nakhr canyon

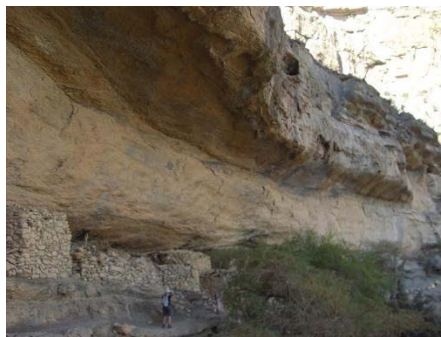
Oman contains, in a relatively small area, nearly all of the geological features that can be found on earth. Al Jebel Akhdar is an anticline (an uplift); hard limestone rocks form the high mountains of the southern side of the anticline and the near-vertical northern cliffs. The crest of the anticline has been eroded away exposing the older rocks beneath and large wadis have cut through the northern and southern flanks of the anticline. One of the largest wadis cutting through the southern flank is Wadi Nakhr, commonly referred to as the 'Grand Canyon'. (Ref: Field Guide to the Geology of Oman, Samir S. Hanna). The age of these rocks is hard to comprehend; at one point along the road to Jebel Shams, near Misfat Al Khatawir, we were driving along what had been, 90 million years ago, the bottom of the sea!

Our group of 14 spent the first night at the Ibri hotel before setting off the following morning for Jebel Shams, passing through the town of Bahla

with its ancient fort. We drove through the village of Al Hamra and along Wadi Ghul, stopping where Wadi Nakhr emerges from the gorge to view an abandoned village on the hillside. Since Sultan Qaboos came to power in the 1970's, his building programme has brought modern housing and electricity to rural Omanis, resulting in the abandonment of many old stone-built villages.

Continuing the drive towards Jebel Shams, we reached the end of the tarmac road and went onto a gravelled track leading to our destination, the village of Al Khitayn (or Khatum or Khateem!), passing the turn off where the energetic can hike to the top of Jebel Shams. This area is well known for multicoloured woven rugs; Al Khitayn is no exception. Stalls were set out to entice the susceptible and several of us succumbed to these beautiful rugs.

Al Khitayn is the starting point for a walk variously known as the Rim Walk, the Hidden Village Walk, the Abandoned Village Walk and the Balcony Walk, the latter name giving an idea of the nature of the walk! The one-person-wide path, starting at about 1000 metres above the canyon floor, clings to the edge of canyon wall with a sheer drop down on one side to the canyon floor. It winds its way gradually down to the abandoned village of Sa'ab Bani Khamis, situated some 500 metres vertically up from the bottom of the canyon.



Sa'ab Bani Khamis

The village is hidden from view from above and below and the little collection of stone huts were built into a shallow overhanging 'cave' in the canyon wall. The village was at one

time home to about 15 families who eked out a living in this difficult location until about 30 years ago. The path we walked along was the only easy access to the village; the village certainly would have been safe from attack by enemies. (*There is another, a climb almost straight up the canyon wall, just beyond the village. Ed.*)

The terraced gardens of the village hanging above the vertical drop to the canyon floor provided watermelons, onions, chilli-peppers, tomatoes, wheat, pomegranates and lemons. In addition to farming the gardens the families kept sheep, goats and donkeys. The water supply for the farming came from a spring at the base of the limestone cliff that flowed into a small falaj system.



Bird hunter

Whilst we were exploring the village, three local Omanis out hunting birds caught up with us and suggested a visit to the hidden lake and pointed vaguely in its direction. Some of the more adventurous of our group agreed to follow them. The lake is just above the dry waterfall, but the path to it is tricky, signed only with small stone pyramids – sometimes made of just three stones put together - and requiring some climbing. But the hidden lake is definitely worth the effort, nestled above the village and hidden by the rocks, its calm surface reflecting the vertical rocks above. Even in the middle of the dry season the lake has water. During the



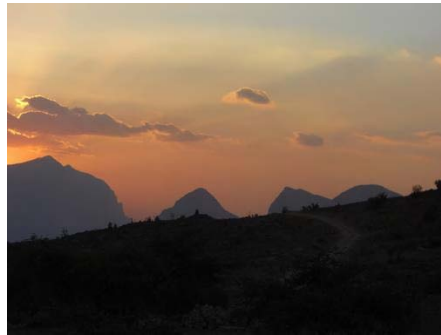
rainy months, the lake is filled and emptied by spectacular waterfalls, some reaching 500 metres in height. The hunters lead us into the cave behind the lake where water, filtered through the massive rocks above, drips into a small pond. They invited us to drink. We decided to forget all the warnings about drinking water from an unknown source and tried it. It tasted delicious, fresh and sweet. Even such a water connoisseur as Fausto agreed that this water was excellent!



Drinking water

The climb back was even trickier; it was very easy to miss the signs and end up trapped between the high steep rocks or lose the path on the top of the terraced fields.

Those of us not venturing to the lake arrived back at Al Khitayn in time to see a wonderful sunset before descending to camp next to the Jebel Shams base camp.



The next morning, we travelled back towards Bahla on our way to visit nearby Jabrin Fort.



Jabrin

Jabrin Fort is one of the finest and most attractive forts in Oman, being designed initially as a palace by Bil'arab bin Sultan an Imam of the Ya'aruba dynasty in the 1600's and later converted to a fort. The castle has been restored to its former glory including rooms with magnificent teak panelled and decorated ceilings. The fort was built with local stone in separate stages and consists of two blocks with adjoining courtyards in the centre. The rooms in both wings have high ceilings and plastered walls and the principal room of the fort is known as the Sun and Moon room. This room has a richly decorated ceiling, panelled with teak and decorated with floral motifs and verses from the Quran.



Several storeys up, the view is very good

The main staircase has a domed roof that is covered with tiles on the interior. The roof is accessible from several staircases and has a commanding view of the surrounding plain and villages dotted with palm groves and in the distance the peaks of Jebal Akhdar.

We ate our picnic lunch in the shade of a large tree and then headed home. Thanks go to Mairead and Sonja for arranging this most enjoyable trip! *Thanks to Moira Towler for her report and photographs. Information about the lake above Sa'ab Bani Khamis and the accompanying photo were provided by Sonja Lavrenčič*

Zanzibar, Spice Island

The happy group that returned from the Zanzibar shelling trip engaged in many other activities there, and *Gazelle* hopes to give you most of their stories over the next few issues.



The Zanzibar group

Diving with Dolphins

Almost everyone in the group signed up for the 'dive with the dolphins' trip. That meant getting up at 5.30 for a 6 am departure, on a morning that looked a bit grey and gloomy. At the beach we were loaded on to two boats - 'proper' boats with motors,



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email: valeriechalmers@hotmail.com

Plants - Valerie Chalmers

Seashells and Mammals - Recorders needed!

The recorders are not necessarily scientific experts in their designated fields. In fact, most are not. However, they are interested and knowledgeable amateurs - please contact them if you have any interesting reports or queries.

The intention is that information will be channelled through to the *Gazelle* editor, so new information can be shared with all our readers.



though hardly speedboats. We soon left the calm seas of the lagoon, where we did see some humpback dolphins, also commonly seen in the Musandam fjords. We did not linger there; after investigating a couple of fishing nets because dolphins apparently patrol them for an easy feed, we ploughed on (literally) through an increasingly choppy sea, and eventually could see rolling waves and a number of boats clustered. Some folk were, by this stage, almost green!

This is where the dolphins apparently congregate to herd fish for a feed. As we reached the area, it was complete chaos. When dolphin fins were spotted, all the boats would race to that location, whereupon several people in masks, snorkels and flippers would throw themselves into the water from each boat and swim madly around in all directions. We were unimpressed by this lack of 'connection with nature' and even less with the absence of any safety constraints. So much for being eco-friendly!



Dolphins feeding

Things started to calm down a bit as some of the boats dispersed. Perhaps it was the big black cloud looming on the horizon. Perhaps they had had enough or perhaps they just headed off after groups of dolphins. Some of us, led by Rob and Michelle with Bent close on their heels (or fins) decided that we had not come all this way for nothing and that it was sufficiently safe to jump in.

Despite the gloomy weather, the sea bottom was clearly visible, as were the 20 or more dolphins graciously swimming, frolicky and interacting with each other in the warm

waters of the Indian Ocean. One had a fish in its mouth. The most memorable thing was the incredible cacophony of dolphin "talk" that you could hear once your head was underwater.

Every now and then, a couple of dolphins would peel away from the pack and shoot up to the surface, presumably to take another breath and come straight back down to the group. It was impossible to keep up with them, but Michelle made some valiant efforts to keep up long enough for photos; her underwater hockey training came into its own! We made it back to the boat through the swell, clambered back on, ready to start all over again. Brett, Christie and Jeanette joined us so there were 4 or 5 in the water the next time. We were nearly close enough to touch them!

The big black cloud was upon us as we headed for home. It pelted down and, although we had a tarpaulin stretched over a rickety frame, we all got completely saturated on the return trip. A free shower! Two women who joined our trip were not doing so well (with their designer handbags) on a long, wet trip in an old African outboard motor boat, and ... their anti-seasickness medication failed them.



Getting a rough ride home!

Cold, wet and exhilarated by our experience, we dined at the local al fresco restaurant. Cold boiled eggs,



hot chappatis and Tanzanian coffee did the trick after another day in Africa! Thanks to Rob Whelan for this report, and to Rob and Michelle McLean for the photographs.

Inland Forests and Spice Groves

The Jozani Forest in Zanzibar covers a huge area and has three varieties of mangroves within the forest, as well as other trees including red mahogany. The different mangroves have very distinctive seedlings (or rather propagules) which fall when ready, their spear-like shape driving them into the mud below.



Mangrove propagules*

The mangrove boardwalk allowed us to get very close to the mangroves in an area which floods with each high tide, above the level of the boardwalk. We saw small crabs, fish, and one very large snail.



Sue's 'horribly large' snail

The forest is home to the Zanzibar red colobus monkeys. This species does not have opposable thumbs, unlike most monkeys. We were advised to keep our distance, as these monkeys are susceptible to human cold and flu germs and could get sick or even die if handled by anyone who is ill. These monkeys were so playful, jumping up and down tree branches, rough-and-tumbling in front of us like boisterous children – they certainly put on a good show.

*Propagules are neither seeds nor seed pods. In our next issue of Gazelle, Gary Feulner explains this term.

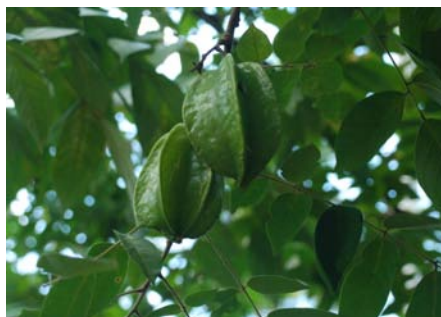


Red colobus monkeys, playing

On arrival at the spice farm, we sampled some of the infusions made from spices produced locally – cinnamon tea, ginger tea, as well as Arabic coffee with cardamon. We saw, and sampled, unusual fruits such as jackfruit and starfruit as well as some more everyday ones, e.g. pineapples, bananas, and many of the spices we use regularly.



Jackfruit



Starfruit



Pineapple

Peppercorns come in several colours, but in fact all come from the same pepper bush; the colour is dependent on how mature they are when picked and how they are dried.



Peppercorns (upper R and middle L)

Cloves, which have many medicinal uses such as relieving toothache, as well as for cooking and of course for making pomanders by sticking cloves into oranges, or something many of us bought, rings of cloves.



Cloves

For those of us used to ground dried nutmeg, it was surprising to see the fresh version, beautifully glossy, with a pinkish-red lacy covering which is purported to have hallucogenic properties.



Nutmeg

We also saw and sampled casava, a tuberous root vegetable. Before we left we were treated to a giddy display of how to climb the tallest coconut trees as one of our



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guides shimmied up a tree to throw down some coconuts.



Only half way up

Very sharp knives hacked at the coconuts, alarmingly close to fingers, and even toes, but without incident.

We all had the chance to drink from the coconut and to eat a little of the fresh coconut flesh.



Coconuts, cut for us

Palm leaves were 'origamied' into frogs, crowns, ties, and baskets with impressive speed – we all left with interesting souvenirs, after a fascinating day out. *Report and photographs by Sue Hunter*



Look the Part!

The DNHG has navy blue sweat shirts, with the DNHG emblem embroidered in silver. Sizes: L & XL Dh65/- each.

Also, silver grey polo shirts with the DNHG emblem embroidered in black. Sizes: M, L & XL Dh50/- each. The quality of both items is excellent. See Val Chalmers at the next meeting.

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, on pvana@emirates.net.ae. Any accompanying photographs should be sent as .jpg files.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- | | |
|-------|---|
| Jan 9 | Sabir Bin Muzaffar: Migratory Bird Conservation and Bird Flu |
| Feb 6 | TBA |
| Mar 6 | Christian Velde: Recent Rescue Excavations in Julfar Al Nudud |

Field Trips (Members only, please.)

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| Jan 22 | Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve |
| Feb 17 - 19 | InterEmirates Weekend in Liwa, hosted by ENHG Abu Dhabi |
| Mar 19 | Marble Quarry at Hijari near Sohar, Oman |

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