

# GAZELLE

Vol 26 no 5 May 2011



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

## Members' News

Chairman **Gary Feulner** and Bob Reimer of Al Ain, co-authors of the "Illustrated Checklist of the Dragonflies of the UAE", published in *Tribulus*, vols. 17 & 18, played hosts in late April for a visit by Dr. Wolfgang Schneider, the outgoing president of the Worldwide Dragonfly Association and one of the foremost experts on Arabian dragonflies.

**Di Lazenbury** returned to Dubai in April to help celebrate the DNHG's 25th anniversary. She brought with her news of the discovery in Gibraltar of a new weevil (a blind, subterranean one) found on both sides of the Strait, and believed to be the first plant or animal species named after a Gibraltar.

**Mohammed Arfan Asif** has been awarded a Fellowship (FICS) of the Image Colleague Society International - California, USA. His thematic panel comprised of 25 images of dunes in monochrome tint, titled *The Rhythm of the Dunes*. The focus of my panel was the forms created by the ever changing dunes and an attempt was made to create a relationship between the dune formations and emotions that they could subjectively depict. He has also been awarded the PSA 4 Star Exhibitor Award (4\*PSA) by the Photographic Society of America for the Color Projected Image Division. This rating is based on the number of pictures (for

a specific division) exhibited in International exhibitions recognized by the PSA. The rating required 144 acceptances with 48 titles. Mohammed Arfan has 191 Color images (Slides & Digital) with 69 titles spanning 29 countries in this particular division. Congratulations, Mohammed Arfan!



Editor **Anne Millen** was lucky, on a recent visit to Colombo, to photograph this Indian paradise flycatcher in a suburban garden. This bird flies so fast that most of her pictures were just a blur. The colourful little seed-eater below took things much more calmly.



### 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.)

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:

Ajmal Hasan  
Binish Roobas  
Martina Fella  
Gary Feulner  
Mairead Porter  
Valerie Chalmers

Setting off in the kayaks  
to the mangroves of  
Umm Al Quwain

Photograph by  
Martina Fella



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



## Hot Days ... But Plenty To Do

### RAK with Brien Holmes 27 or 28 May (TBC)

The RAK trip is one that can be done in May as there is some driving and some short stops. There is usually time for a few things after lunch and the options include:

The dhow yard in the morning before lunch

Shimal with Umm an Nar tombs, Wadi Suq tombs, Julfar tower, 'Sheba's Palace', and pottery ovens  
Wadi Sha'am with the *yanz* and abandoned villages

Various other sites in and around the city. Further details and the date will be announced by email. Sonja found further information and photos on the ENHG website:

<http://www.enhg.org/field/rak03/rak03.htm>

### Musandam Boat Trip Fri 10 June

We will meet at Al Marsa office in Dibba Port (Al Mina) Oman at 8.30am therefore we recommend you leave Dubai by 7.00am at the very latest.

Please find the location map for Al Marsa office attached. We will cruise along the Musandam coast to Lima, where we will stop for swimming, snorkelling and lunch.

Please bring with you swimming and snorkelling gear, sun-tan lotion/cream and a hat. Alternatively you can hire snorkelling gear on the boat for Dh35/-. There are two kayaks on the boat that can be used free of charge. We will return to Dibba Port at 5.30 p.m. There is an air-conditioned cabin on the dhow. Scuba diving will be available with prior booking and extra costs. Please contact Sonja at [sonja@publicisgraphics.ae](mailto:sonja@publicisgraphics.ae) for further information on scuba diving.

Special rate for DNHG group will be Dh300/- per person. Rate includes light breakfast, lunch, tea break, coffee, water and one soft drink during lunch. Additional drinks can be purchased on the boat (beer@ Dh15/-per can and wine@ Dh100 /-per bottle).

Children: 0 - 5 years free, 6 -10 years 50% of the adult rate and above 10 years the adult rate.

Please note that this trip *must be paid for in advance*, preferably at the DNHG June meeting on Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> June. If you are unable to attend the meeting please email Valerie Chalmers at [va-leriechalmers@gmail.com](mailto:valeriechalmers@gmail.com) as soon as possible for alternative methods of payment.

Minimum number of participants is 20 people; maximum number 35 people. The trip will be confirmed as soon as we receive 20 payments.

As we will be crossing Omani check points, please bring passports or UAE- ID cards with you.

If you are definitely interested, please contact Sonja Lavrenčič on [sonja@publicisgraphics.ae](mailto:sonja@publicisgraphics.ae) as soon as possible as payment needs to be made, the latest by Sunday 5 June.

### 'The Splendours of Mesopotamia' Exhibition and Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi Sat 11 June 2011

This trip is now full, with 40 people registered and seven on the waiting list.

### End-of-Season Dinner 16 June

Watch for emailed details and be ready to get your tickets from Valerie Chalmers at the June lecture.

### Water Bottling Factory with Fausto Tazzi 18 June

Following one wonderful and informative tour of the plant, Sonja has arranged another, and it will include, for those who are interested in participating in it, an introduction to the 'WET' programme (Water Education for Teachers). Sonja will provide details by email and members of the DNHG who are teachers are especially welcome! More details about the WET programme will also be provided.

\* \* \*

## Library Timings

Mairead Porter, DNHG Librarian, advises that opening times of the library are:

Sun - Wed: 8am to 10pm

Thurs: 8am to 6pm

Sat: 10am to 8pm



Mairead has given a link (below) to the Emirates Academy which provides a map, but she noticed that it points to King's College! The Academy, though, is clearly visible; i.e., if you already know where to look for it, you'll find it!

<http://www.jumeirah.com/en/Jumeirah-Group/The-Emirates-Academy/Contact-Us/>

## Our Next Speaker

**Dr Mark Beech** has a Bachelor of Sciences degree in Archaeology from the Institute of Archaeology, University College London (1985), a Masters Degree in Environmental Archaeology from the University of Sheffield, U.K. (1987) and a PhD in Archaeology from the University of York, U.K. (2001). He has conducted archaeological surveys, excavations and research in the UAE for more than 17 years, and has also carried out fieldwork in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, France, Jordan, Kuwait, Pakistan, Qatar and the U.K.

From 2002-2006 he was Senior Resident Archaeologist for the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey (ADIAS). Since 2006 he has been Cultural Landscapes Manager in the Historic Environment Department within ADACH. In June 2009, he was awarded the Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Al Nahyan Prize for Natural History by Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, for his services to the archaeology of the UAE.

Email: [mark.beech@adach.ae](mailto:mark.beech@adach.ae)  
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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 Miller for scanning.

### DNHG's 25th Anniversary Celebration

At our April lecture, we celebrated 25 years of fun, learning and achievement with a cake and half an hour of chat and memories before the meeting.

Joelma Stokkel who designed and made the cake chose to use a variety of symbols relating to life in Dubai and the desert and seas around us.



Joelma Stokkel and the cake

Valerie Chalmers, who was a member of the Ladies' Ecology Group which pre-dated the DNHG, assisted Chairman Gary Feulner in cutting the cake. Valerie is a founder-member of the DNHG and her contribution to it spans many years and many areas. On weekends a keen sailor, she is currently Vice-Chairman, but doubles as our mainstay!



Valerie Chalmers & Gary Feulner (obscured)

Also present were Alan Dickson, Beryl Comar and Ann-Marie Bui, all of whom have served on the Committee during their long memberships.



Following the cake, the merry-making and the AGM, attendees heard Rima Jabado and Ada Natoli speak about hawksbill turtles in Dubai waters.



Rima Jabado, Major Ali and Ada Natoli

### A Seahorse in UAQ

In April, whilst snorkeling in the shallow sea grass area of the UAQ mangroves I found a tiny seahorse. This was the first time I had ever come across one. They are just so perfectly camouflaged that, when attached to a piece of sea grass, they are all but invisible. The little creature was only about four centimetres long. To be able to take some photos of the specimen, I put it into an empty plastic lunch box. Unfortunately the photographs are not very good as it was very difficult to focus on something so small moving around in wobbly water!

Shortly after its photo-shoot, the seahorse was released to exactly the same spot where I found it. This is important; sea horses are monogamous which means that they stay with the same partner for their entire life (about four years, in captivity). So if there was a Mr. or Mrs. seahorse waiting, the couple were happily reunited.

Back home I tried to identify the particular seahorse. This turned out rather difficult. In none of the

books I have at home was there a picture that resembled it. Then I tried the internet. Finally, after going through countless related websites I finally found some useful information about seahorses on [www.qatarvisitor.com](http://www.qatarvisitor.com). The author of the article on seahorses in Qatar suggests that there are five different species of seahorses to be found in Qatari waters. These are: *Hippocampus fuscus*, *H. Kelloggi*, *H.lichtensteinii*, *H. kuda*, and *H. jakari*.

The specimen from UAQ seemed, from the photographs, to look most like *H. fuscus*. An exact identification is very difficult as seahorses, like chameleons, can change their colors according to their environment. Maybe one of our marine fauna experts would be able to tell? Report and photographs by Martina Fella



*H. fuscus?*

### Inter-Emirates Weekend: Introduction to West Liwa

Andrew Bean and Gary Feulner led a full-day tour of various sites and environments in the west of the Liwa crescent. The crescent of oasis villages that makes up the Liwa area is now served by a divided highway and many of the dune slopes are cloaked by nurseries – and in one case a lawn! Gesturing over the whole, Gary reminded the group that this was a dramatic change from even 25 years ago, when the only road was a graded track, gatched in places and overblown by sand in the extreme west, where there were no oases.



The restored fort at Khannur, Liwa  
Photograph by Valerie Chalmers

Early stops focused on cultural sites. The restored fort at Khannur was impressive in size for a remote area without sophisticated construction materials. An adjacent plantation featured not only palms but also the *sidr* tree *Ziziphus spina-christi* and the large tamarisk *Tamarix aphylla*, both found naturally only in mountain wadis and adjacent gravel plains. We also puzzled (as do many professionals!) over the species identification of several flowering *Tribulus* growing as weeds within the plantation. *Eruca sativa*, sometimes cultivated, was found on adjacent waste ground.



An enigmatic *Tribulus* sp. in a Liwa plantation  
Photograph by Valerie Chalmers

At the nearby fish farm, tilapia, bulti, carp and catfish were said to be raised for local consumption, although we saw only tilapia. Several members also watched numerous small digger wasps painstakingly excavating burrows in the low sand berms, obviously following an ingrained template for construction.

We had lunch among the expanded plantations at 'Aradah, the most westerly modern oasis, and climbed part way up the dunes for a view of the overall setting. On stable dune sands, the most common vegetation

by far was the succulent *Zygophyllum mandavillei* (a close match for its sister species *Z. qatarense*, common in Dubai and adjacent coastal areas. An added benefit for some was the opportunity to observe some unusual insects at the plantation and to photograph resting examples of the migratory Vagrant Emperor dragonfly *Anax ephippiger*, present throughout the UAE at the moment, but normally seen only on the wing.

We continued south-west towards the border road, to an overlook of the "ghost town" of Al Brair (Librair), the former border station, from where it was possible (for the young and young at heart) to climb to a dune peak with a commanding view of the mosaic of remote megadunes and sabkha flats that characterizes the Liwa area. On the dune slopes we saw the two plants most characteristic of mobile dune sands: the large, wispy *Calligonum crinitum* and the sedge *Cyperus conglomeratus*.



A yellow toad-headed agama, 'camouflaged'.  
Photograph by Binish Roobas

A few members watched a Yellow Toad-Headed Agama *Phrynocephalus arabicus* try to conceal himself by vibrating and burying most of his body in the sand. Insects seen on the dunes were a small Sand Swimmer beetle with a characteristic gold "necklace" and a jewel beetle, perhaps the Desert Knotweed Beetle *Capnotis excisa*, which frequents *Calligonum*. A number of our visitors were also struck by the very dark brown breed of camels that can be found in Liwa and the Western Region generally.



Camels in the Liwa  
Photo by Binish Roobas

Some saline ponds created by excavation demonstrated the relatively shallow depth of the water table and were home to extensive reed beds of *Phragmites australis* and an unidentified *Tamarix* species. They provided a convenient opportunity to look for sand roses. We saw relatively little natural wildlife there, although the parasitic Desert Hyacinth *Cistanche tubulosa* was common.



Panorama from high in West Liwa dunes.  
Photograph by Gary Feulner

We closed the day with a visit to Tal Moreb, which is billed as the tallest dune in the UAE. While that is debatable, in its present artificially maintained form it may in fact be the largest uninterrupted slip face, now devoted to dune buggy riding. The road to Tal Moreb snakes for some 20+ km into the north central Liwa area, making accessible not only Tal Moreb but also much of the region that could otherwise be reached safely only by a well-prepared expedition. (Of course, even now, a foray off-road into the high dunes or sabkha flats should not be undertaken casually and should include precautions for self-rescue.)

The trip ended very happily with a sighting and photographs of sand gazelle *Gazella subgutturosa* on the way back to the hotel. *Report by Gary Feulner and Valerie Chalmers*

## What's Under the Dunes?

The Al-Faya Truck Road crosses the north-eastern part of the Abu Dhabi hinterland, beginning at the Dubai border. The truck road is not recommended as a transit route but it gives access to desert environments that cannot easily be seen along the heavily developed main coast road to Abu Dhabi (E11).



## 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: 06-5310467  
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 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.



Traveling southward on the truck road towards its junction the Abu Dhabi to Al-Ain Road (E22), the dunes rise and the continuous rolling sands, dotted with bright green *Zygophyllum*, give way to a pattern of large, elongated dune ridges and intervening sabkha flats. One of these areas, near the 21 km 'milestone', attracts particular attention because in several places the steep south faces of the dune ridges are eroded to reveal tall cliffs of cross-bedded aeolian sands, revealing that the cores of these big dune ridges are today well consolidated (although not fully lithified) and erosion-resistant.



Cliffs of consolidated cross-bedded dune sands along the Al-Faya truck road

It is generally accepted that the pattern of major dune ridges in the UAE was formed in the Pleistocene era (before c.18,000 years ago). Since that time, the main ridges have been reworked only superficially by modern day winds. In particular, the position of the main dune ridges in most of Abu Dhabi has been stable over historical time. A look back at aerial photographs and maps of Liwa from 50 years ago, for example, shows the same patterns and geographic coordinates as today. The consolidation of earlier layers within the big dunes could be one factor contributing to this stability.

The cause of the cliff erosion in the area adjacent to the Al-Faya truck road is not known, and is open to question. Most likely it is due to quarrying of the sand for roadfill and other construction purposes, since such cliff faces are extremely rare naturally. In the same area, the adjacent sabkha

has demonstrably been extensively quarried in places, creating large lakes where the saline groundwater is exposed, including one lake about 1 km from the cliffs.



View from cliffs showing lake in sabkha

However, if quarrying was responsible for the cliff exposures, it must have stopped no later than some 5 to 10 years ago, since the cliffs show no direct evidence of quarrying and the environment at the base of the cliffs seems relatively undisturbed and has been re-vegetated. *Report and photographs by Gary Feulner*

### Umm Al Quwain Lagoon and Mangrove Trip

In early March, the first participants of the DNHG boat and kayaking trip arrived at the UAQ Marine Club to be welcomed by a lovely blue sky, bright sunshine and a light sea breeze. Many enjoyed the view over the tranquil mangrove lagoon from the club's coffee shop. When everybody was present and aboard the lovely two-level open boat, we settled down on the bean bags on the upper deck or at a table with chairs in the shade of the lower deck.



On the boat to the lagoon

At first, we made our way slowly along the shore into the lagoon, passing by palaces, fishing harbors



and wharfs. When we reached the shallower part of the lagoon, the captain maneuvered back past the UAQ club and headed slowly towards the UAQ harbor. It was very interesting to see all the old dhows, fishing boats, oil tankers and even the massive metal pillars of the oil rigs. Leaving the harbor and the city behind, we turned toward the vast mangrove area.



In the lagoon

When we had reached a lovely spot in the middle of the lagoon, the boat was anchored. From here, it would be easy to take the eight canoes that we carried with us to explore, in turns, the nearby mangroves and mud lands and watch the greater flamingos that were gracefully wading in the shallow waters nearby. Despite the rather chilly wind that had meanwhile picked up, many decided to give it a go. One keen explorer even spotted a sea turtle very close to his canoe!



Kayaking to the mangroves

Others were happy just to relax on the boat enjoying the beautiful surroundings. At the lunch buffet, there was something for everyone. After lunch some brave ones even decided to go for a swim. Unfortunately the wind was now really strong and unusually cold, but nearly everybody was well equipped with jackets and jumpers.



Thick mangrove growth

By mid-afternoon, the tide was going down rapidly exposing many of the mud plains that were earlier flooded. That was what the bird watchers were waiting for! More and more coastal birds came to feed on small animals in the mud. There were curlews (*Numenius arquata*), whimbrels (*Numenius phaeopus*), oystercatchers (*Haematopus ostralegus*), osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*), Kentish plovers (*Charadrius alexandrinus*), Socotra cormorants (*Phalacrocorax nigrogularis*), western reef herons (*Egretta gularis*), a common kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) and, as a real highlight, the endangered crab plover (*Dromas ardeola*). More and more greater flamingos came flying by in beautiful 'V' formations, scouting the shallow lagoons.



There were plenty of birds to see

As the boat headed slowly back to the Club, we saw that the very low tide had transformed the huge lagoon into a vast mud plain and the late afternoon sun dipped it all in a golden light.

By 5.30pm, we were back at the Club and, although many participants were probably glad to get out of the cold wind into their warm cars, everybody I spoke to was clearly amazed that only one hour drive from Dubai one can find such

an amazingly beautiful place. Let's hope that UAQ is aware of the treasure they have and that this piece of paradise will be protected as it is for future generations. Thanks to Martina Fella for report and photographs.



Cold but happy

## EMEG Marine Reserve, Ghantoot, with Major Ali

Over 40 members turned up for this informative and relaxing day. Major Ali welcomed us and provided us with Arabic coffee, fruit and pancakes.



The welcome

We then watched his up-to-date video on what EMEG has achieved including impressive conservation of coral and marine life. We learnt that 30,000 pieces of coral have been transplanted off the reserve shore and are thriving. Additional concrete structures have been laid on the sea bed which enable new corals to grow and marine life to thrive. New oyster beds have been 'planted' and pearl diving may be resumed. A hamour breeding area has been



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introduced and children release the bigger fish into the sea. His team of 40 are involved in many activities including transplanting turtle eggs to safety within the reserve – the previous night a nest had been violated and all eggs removed.

Then most of us helped with a beach clean-up and it was surprising what had blown in – including a car mud flap. Swimming was a popular choice before the delicious lunch which EMEG provided - BBQ fish, rice and more.



The children enjoyed safe waters

Afterwards we had many choices but we opted for listening to Major Ali talking about his family history – it gave us a fascinating insight into 60

years of trading, pearl diving and Bedouin life. Many of us finished the day with another swim and walk along the beach.



Major Ali's reminiscence

We came away refreshed and encouraged that the good work EMEG does will have a long term effect on the marine environment. We were also very appreciative of Major Ali's kindness in giving up his Saturday family time to be with us and the excellent food and drinks he provided. *Report and photographs by Mairead Porter*

## *An Ocellated Skink Saved*



Ajmal Hasan chanced upon this ocellated skink just 30 metres from his workplace near the Etisalat building in Sharjah. It was disturbed by construction work and Ajmal was happy that he got to the commotion in time to save this beauty from the labourers who were intent on killing it, thinking it poisonous. Giving them a short lecture on these beautiful lizards and ensuring they just leave them alone the next time they find something similar, Ajmal released it to an area nearby where there were a lot of shrubs and not many human settlements around. *Report and photograph by Ajmal Hasan*

## Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

Jun 05            Dr Mark Beech: Archaeozoology Or Zooarchaeology - How Do Archaeologists Study Animal Bones?

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

May 27 or 28    Ras Al Khaimah with Brien Holmes of ENHG

Jun 10            Musandam Dhow Trip

Jun 11            'The Splendours of Mesopotamia' Exhibition, and the Grand Mosque, Abu Dhabi

Jun 16            End-of-Season Dinner

Jun 18            Water Bottling Factory

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