

GAZELLE

Vol 26 no 9 September 2011



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Taking advantage of his first summertime visit to the US in many years, Chairman **Gary Feulner** conducted a spare time survey of dragonflies and damselflies at various ponds and marshes in his native area on Long Island, in the New York suburbs. This turned up a total of 21 species - 15 dragonflies and 6 damselflies. In contrast to the typical situation in the UAE and Arabia generally, it proved possible to make a confident identification of all of the observed species by reference to printed guides and internet sources. A few species were surprisingly showy -- resembling those more characteristic of tropical or subtropical regions.



Celithemis eponina,
the halloween pennant, an attractive
dragonfly of the eastern U.S.A.

Angela and Steve Manthorpe, continuing to visit unusual spots around the world particularly marine habitats, were recently in Costa Rica, diving. Angela wrote, "A single photo can't

do justice to the huge number of hammerheads that we saw at Cocos, along with whale sharks, eagle rays, tuna, Galapagos and tiger sharks. Now, we are embarking on a yacht to sail, via the San Blas islands, to Cartagena in Colombia."



Shark soup at Cocos Island

Sometimes, they do keep their feet on the ground. En route to Costa Rica, they visited the Lancashire Badger Group and spent two hours watching a group of five badgers – a parent and four cubs – at a sett by the River Ribble.



Badger in sett

DNHG Membership

DNHG Membership remains a bargain at Dhs.100 for couples/families 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. It also 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:

Gary Feulner
Martina Fella
Mike Jennings
David Stanton and FPALY

Porcupine
Photograph courtesy
of FPALY



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



Langtang Valley Trek with Sonja Lavrenčič 23 Sep - 1 Oct

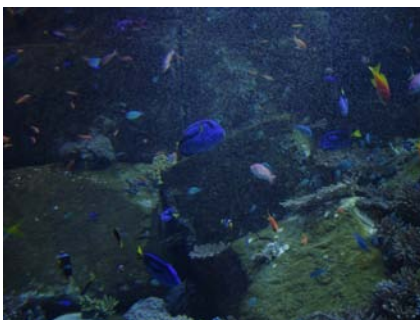
Arrangements for this are now finalised. It is a very small group, but Sonja is still speaking to us. Now we can only look forward to hearing about it.



Langtang Village
Photograph from Wikipedia

Behind the scenes: Atlantis on the Palm Fri Sep 23

Anin advises that this trip has proven to be exceptionally popular and we already have somewhat more than the crowd of 60 that Atlantis can handle. Consequently we are not taking any more sign-ups for the September 23 trip. We will try to arrange a second visit on another date to accommodate the additional interested members. Watch this space!



Fish at Atlantis aquarium
Photograph by Anne Millen

Sharjah Museums Oct 7 (TBC)

There are many museums in Sharjah, all good, and all an excellent choice for a hot days' outing for the whole family. Further details will be circulated by email.

Al Ain Zoo Oct 14

No details available yet - might be an evening trip, when the animals venture out of shelter. Watch this space (or watch for an email). This is one for the whole family, too.



Grey crowned crane, at Al Ain Zoo
Photograph by Rob Whelan

Donkey Fox Wadi with Mike Lorrigan Oct 14 - 15

This popular trip involves an overnight camp and a wadi walk. For further details and registration, email trip coordinator Christine Verreydt at infinistan@gmail.com



In Donkey Fox Wadi
Photograph by Jenny Hill

Kerala for Eid Nov 4 – 9 (approx.)

We are gauging interest for a diversified nature trip to Kerala, likely to be a more or less circular route by mini-bus, along with lesser excursions on foot and boats. You would have a chance to explore the flora and fauna of

the backwaters, Periyar and the Western Ghats. (Google them – you'll be amazed.) If the trip has enough people, expect to commit and pay by Oct 9. For registration, further details, contact Pradeep wgarnet@emirates.net.ae



Along the backwaters, Kerala
Photograph by the late Rob Allan

Our Next Speaker

Nancy Papathanasopoulou is an environmental law and management expert. She has been working on sea turtle conservation and environmental research for twenty years, in several capacities (volunteer, student, lawyer, legal consultant, team member, project coordinator, project manager) and in several countries. Since 2003 she has been mainly working on sea turtles, birds, their habitats and conservation needs in the Arabian Gulf Area as a project coordinator. Before that, she worked in France and in Greece, in law offices, International organizations and the Ministry of Environment in Greece. Apart from wildlife scientific research, her work involves cooperating with local and national authorities on institutions, legislation, and management plans based on sustainable development, environmental education as well as environmental information centres. Through such conservation projects as the ones carried out by TOTAL on Masirah Island, Oman and three offshore atolls in Kuwait, the authorities as well as the public are informed about the status and protection of marine wildlife and their habitats at national, regional and international levels. Nancy is currently based in the United Arab Emirates.



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 Editor Anne Millen for scanning.

Sand Gazelle Studies

Overseas member Peter Cunningham recently forwarded two papers recording his studies (with Torsten Wronski) of Arabian Sand Gazelle *Gazella marica* (recently 'upgraded' from *Gazella subgutturosa marica*, a subspecies of the Asian Sand Gazelle) at the Mahazat as-Sayd reserve in Saudi Arabia. Copies will be deposited in the DNHG library.

Both studies looked at population dynamics, a matter of particular concern for management of the herds at Mahazat as-Sayd. The reserve is fenced and, although it is very large, in a wild state the Sand Gazelle populations would migrate over even larger areas in response to rain and forage availability.



Sand Gazelle, seen along the desert roads leading back from the Liwa

One of the principal findings was that during a prolonged drought mortality affected males more severely than females and dependent young, probably because of the extra energy expended by males during the seasonal rut and, for adolescent males, perhaps because they were excluded by social dynamics from preferred foraging territory.

Group size, and variations in group size were also studied. Sand Gazelle are relatively solitary; 40% of Sand Gazelle observations were of single animals and group size was almost always fewer than 10 individuals. However, average group size was greater during the winter and spring than during the summer,

and greater when the animals were resting than when they were foraging, consistent with the hypothesis that group size is correlated with the local scarcity or abundance of food resources. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Birds and Leopards in Eastern Yemen; A Unique Experience

For four weeks during January and February this year Carol Qirreh and I were very fortunate to be volunteers with the Foundation for the Protection of the Arabian Leopard in Yemen (FPALY) in the extreme eastern part of the country near the Oman border. The trip also doubled as ABBA Survey 43.



Caracal
Photograph courtesy of FPALY

The Leopard survey in the Al Hawf Protected Area which is being coordinated by the FPALY Executive Director, David Stanton, has been running since September 2010 with eleven camera traps deployed to try and prove the occurrence of the Arabian leopard (a distinct subspecies) in eastern Yemen.



Honey Badger
Photograph courtesy of FPALY

With a huge amount of luck on our second day in the field we were present when the first two pictures

were obtained of a leopard. The credit goes to the two young Yemeni biologists Murad Abdullah and Waleed al Rayl who have worked on the project for several weeks and were responsible for siting the successful camera.



In eastern Yemen, near where the first leopard was captured on film
Photograph by Mike Jennings

The cameras have also proven the existence of a very healthy mammal population in the region including an unbelievable nine carnivores, hyena, caracal, wolf, honey badger, genet, red fox, white-tailed mongoose and wildcat.



Hyaena,
Photograph courtesy of FPALY

The birds were good too. The Al Hawf Protected Area is part of the Mahra region of southern Arabia which includes Dhofar Oman, where the SW Monsoon touches the coast and produces a unique habitat of drought deciduous woodland and, at times, lush pastures and flowing wadis. Mahra is a mini centre for Afrotropical species, both resident and breeding summer visitors. The only endemics seen in the area were the Arabian partridge which is common (and turned up regularly on camera traps) and the Arabian wheatear, also common. Raptors present included Verreaux's eagle, Bonelli's eagle both likely to be



breeding and short-toed eagle which may also breed. Other typical birds of the region recorded were Lichtenstein's sandgrouse, African scops, Hume's desert eagle and little owls, black-crowned tchagra, African paradise flycatcher, Arabian warbler, Abyssinian white-eye, Tristram's grackle (extremely common down to sea level and collecting scraps from houses), blackstart, long-billed pipit, golden-winged grosbeak (regarded as an endemic by some) and cinnamon-breasted bunting.



Tristram's grackles at the house on the coast
Photograph by Mike Jennings

A single barn swallow was the only obvious migrant but there were a number winter visitors, such as blue rock thrush, black redstart, wheatears and wagtails and a red-breasted flycatcher, probably the first record for Yemen. What is absent from this region is also interesting. There are no house sparrows, crested larks or brown-necked ravens, no dogs, and the invasive mesquit thorn and Mexican poppy have not yet arrived.

The coast is generally rather dull for a birder - thousands of sooty and 'large white-headed gulls' (though I accept that some people find these exciting). Scoping offshore failed to find a single tubenose or sulid. However along the shore as on the Salalah plain there are a number of landlocked coastal khors (saline water bodies) which held good numbers of duck, waders and other wintering shorebirds. Khor Dumquat had five species of duck and numerous herons including the first striated heron in eastern Yemen, glossy ibis, Eurasian spoonbill etc. Khor Al Ghaydah further west had huge numbers of loafing gulls and terns but we had only limited time to visit it, although

we did count no less than 11 ospreys there. We failed to turn the few whimbrels and Eurasian curlews present into the probably extinct slender-billed curlews. Al Ghaydah town is the easternmost outpost of the black kite in Arabia (and incidentally the house sparrow in Yemen), it is common and those there in January and February were all apparently yellow-billed so they are resident in the region (See: Mundy, P. 2011. Phoenix 27:2).

The Leopard Project in the Al Hawf Protected Area is due to run until at least the end of 2011 so anyone interested in volunteering to assist can contact David Stanton for details. Volunteers are provided with accommodation in a beach-side house (this may be on a rental basis), will need to be able to commit to at least a months' work and meet their own food costs, general expenses and fares to and from the Al Hawf region. *Thanks to Mike Jennings for this report and to Mike and FPALY for the photographs. FPALY hold copyright for these photographs.*



Arabian partridge
Photograph courtesy of FPALY

Foundation for the Protection of the Arabian Leopard in Yemen

Gary Feulner explains further about the project::

David Stanton, Director of the Foundation for the Protection of the Arabian Leopard in Yemen, recipient in 2011 of a second Research and Conservation Grant from the ENHG-Abu Dhabi, has recently written to inform the UAE NHGs that two additional Yemeni field researchers were at that moment receiving a week of training in Oman and the conservation pro-

jects outlined in the grant proposal are now in the planning stages.

David also wrote to tell us of a "crowdfunding" bid that the Foundation has inaugurated on the online site "Kickstarter", to raise an additional sum of money to fund camera equipment and personnel to track and help conserve Arabian leopards in an area north of Sana'a. Those who would like to learn more about this project (separate from the project the ENHG has already funded) and consider pledging any amount at all to meet the September 30 funding deadline, are encouraged to check out the project profile at: <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/2001600289/nightwatch-catching-arabian-leopards-with-camera-t?ref=email>

The profile includes a six-minute video that describes the project and a hierarchy of incentives to encourage support. It includes video footage of Arabian leopards taken at Sharjah's Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife, which was set up by Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qassimi, the Ruler of Sharjah, to consolidate the work initiated by the Arabian Leopard Trust. The first breeding male that the ALT brought to the Breeding Centre came from the Wada'a region of Yemen and was acquired from the person who had captured him and who is now employed to do research in the area in order to protect the Arabian leopard.

The Foundation has expressed its gratitude to its many friends who share a common interest in preventing the extinction of the Arabian leopard. They are urged to network with your friends, family, and acquaintances to join the growing number of philanthropists who support this project. *Thanks to Gary Feulner.*

Ed.: Well! This is what the press call a developing story! Here's a 'stop press' from David Stanton:

Hello Nightwatch backers, The past 24 hours have been phenomenal! We have now reached more than 60% of our funding goal and there are close to 100 of you. Thank you for your rapid response to



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

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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.



the last update. For those of you who have not seen the film about our Foundation on Al Jazeera, I have just posted a link at the bottom of the project profile and this update (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IA2ylaY4w4I>). I have also posted a link to our website (www.yemenileopard.org) which should be easier to find than the existing link on the project home page. I should have thought of these things earlier.

Thank you for your support and for your advocacy. This is the quintessence of teamwork! *Thanks to David Stanton*

A Turtle Myth-Buster?

At the end of April this year my family and I went sailing to a man-made island quite some miles out in the open sea of the Gulf. It was made a few years ago, but due to its isolated location, far away from the mainland, the island is, up to now, not inhabited by any plants or animals from mainland UAE.

But, to our great surprise, we spotted a fresh turtle track crisscrossing an area of the beach, leading inland, turning back towards the sea and then ending in a clearly recognizable *nest*!



Turtle tracks leaving the beach

It was very obvious that the nest had carefully been closed again with sand and that the turtle then headed back into the sea. We were absolutely delighted about this discovery, especially as Major Ali mentioned, during our last visit to Gantoot just a month before, that up to that time, there had been no recorded or

observed instances of turtles nesting on any of the artificial islands in the area. So finding this nest was really special and extremely good news. It seems to indicate that marine wildlife may slowly accept artificial islands as 'natural' habitats.



The tracks led to a nest

We came to the conclusion that the turtle was one of the critically endangered hawksbill turtles as the traces clearly showed that the turtle moved along the beach by alternately sweeping the left and right fore flippers backwards. A green turtle would have left horizontal flipper traces exactly parallel to each other.



The very distinctive tracks

Things got even better when, the following day, we discovered another nest which may have been already a few weeks old, at the other end of the island. We speculated that it might have been the same turtle as the size of the tracks was identical to the ones of the



'fresh' nest. Females usually return to the nest several times in a season with two week intervals. *Report and photographs by Martina Fella*

A Late-Night Avian Escapade

On my way to the September committee meeting, on the road behind DIFC, I caught a glimpse of what appeared to be a large bird, flapping in the gutter by the fast lane. Glossy grayish-brown, a bit of black, almost fluffy ... I had no firm details on arrival at the meeting, and even began to wonder if it wasn't just dirty newspaper blown by the cars. But on the same road on the way home, I looked again, and yes, it was a large bird, by now quite still. Gary answers his phone very late at night, and when I picked him up, was equipped with torch, camera, plastic bag, tongs ...

En route to the scene of the accident (we hoped it was an accident, not bird 'flu), Gary recalled that he had very recently seen a number of peahens on the adjacent and attractively landscaped grounds of Emirates Towers, some so tame that they perched beside groups of lurching labourers and were unfazed by a passing jogger.



The beautiful peahen on the road

That lack of wariness was probably their undoing, especially amidst the merciless flow of rush hour traffic. Gary added three days later, "I "ran" the Emirates Towers grounds again today and came across about 10 peahens, in loose groups of six and four, including obviously smaller (but similar looking) juveniles. So I'd speculate that there are about a dozen in total.

"One part of the grounds has a bad case of some kind of climbing Ipomaea (five-part flowers with pale purple flowers)." *Report by Anne Millen, photograph by Gary Feulner*

Book Review:

Arthropod Fauna of the UAE, vol. 4, edited by Antonius van Harten

Many experienced UAE naturalists will think that editor and coordinator of the UAE Insect Project, Tony van Harten, has saved the best 'til last. Volume 4 of the *Arthropod Fauna of the UAE* series treats a number of distinctive and well-known but poorly studied local insects, and at last puts formal names on what are, for many of us, familiar faces. These include the large and colorful jewel beetles (Family Buprestidae), whose varying colors are depicted and assigned to different species and subspecies.



Striped predaceous diving beetle
Hydaticus (Prodaticus) histrio
Photograph by Gary Feulner

Also covered are almost all of the UAE's water-dwelling species, such as the water scorpion (not a *Nepa* species but *Laccotrephes fabricii*); the giant water bug (*Lethoceras patruelis*, the UAE's largest insect and the only *Lethoceras* sp. in the Near East); an array of water boatmen (Family Corixidae, also called backswimmers); the several large predaceous diving beetles (Family Dytiscidae – spotted, striped, speckled, bronze-edged and others) and a host of much smaller ones that are collectively the most reliable denizens of UAE mountain pools, but whose exact markings can often only be guessed at, as they tend to remain in constant

motion when exposed; and the delicate water measurer (*Hydrometra maindroni*) that frequents the margins of stagnant pools.

Ants (Family Formicidae) are also included, making Vol. 4 the principal reference for UAE ants, as far as I am aware, although armchair entomologists may find it difficult to distinguish most ant species confidently using the photos of laboratory specimens, as good as they are. Easier to recognize from their photographs are two distinctive organisms that have languished unidentified in my photo collection for many years: a brown-winged owl fly *Ptyngidricerus venustus* (Family Ascalaphidae), and a long-nosed ribbonwing *Halter nutans*, Family Nemopteridae.



Brown-winged owl fly, male
Ptyngidricerus venustus
Photograph supplied by Gary Feulner

There are also numerous reports on different taxa of flies and wasps. These are generally less accessible to non-professional readers, but a review of the text can be enlightening as to the specialisations that create such diversity, for example a genus that feeds exclusively on decaying matter on seashores around the world. DNHG member Dr. Rolf Schuster of the Central Veterinary Research Laboratory is the co-author of a report on a group of flies that infest and cause disease in domestic quadrupeds and birds.

The UAE Insect Project, initiated and sponsored by H.H. Sheikh Tahnoon bin Zayed Al Nahayan has been a massive undertaking, with results far in excess of what was originally anticipated. Tony van Harten will be leaving the UAE this summer, but material remains for an additional two volumes of *Arthropod*



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Fauna of the UAE. We may certainly hope that approval will be forthcoming for the completion of this work.

Vol. 4 will be available to DNHG members beginning at our September 18 meeting. The sale price is a bargain at AED 100. *Review by Gary Feulner*

DNHG Field Trip Policies

Members are reminded that DNHG field trips are cooperative ventures among the participants, for their mutual benefit and enjoyment. DNHG field trip leaders are not normally professionals or experts, but fellow members who have agreed to share their time and their knowledge with other participants, on a volunteer basis. The relationship of trip leaders and participants is that of co-venturers, not professional and client. For these reasons field trip participation is limited to DNHG members and their bona fide non-resident guests.



Bull pushing, Fujairah
Photograph by Larry Woods

Various dangers are inherent in travel in and around the UAE and in the exploration of the natural environment, whether by automobile, by boat, on foot or otherwise, and whether on-road or off-road, in the cities or countryside, in the mountains or deserts or at sea. By participating in DNHG field trips, members accept these risks, and they accept responsibility for their own safety and welfare. Field trip participants are normally required to sign a waiver form to this effect. Without these understandings, the DNHG would be unable to sponsor field trips or to recruit volunteers to lead them.

Field trips vary in both format and organisation, depending on the nature of the trip, the number of participants, and the preferences of the field trip leader. If the number of participants is limited and sign-up is required, members should make every effort to honour their commitments or to give timely notice otherwise, as a courtesy both to the trip leader and to other members who might like to have the chance to participate.

A Call for Speakers: Members' Night 11 December 2011

Members' Night will be held on 11 December. This is your big chance to present a talk on your favourite natural history subject. Help with Powerpoint / other technology is available, and the Speaker Coordinators will give you any assistance you need to make your presentation a really rewarding experience. Start thinking. Start planning.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- Sep 18 Liz Maley-Craig: Socotra
- Oct 09 Nancy Papathanasopoulou: Bird Fauna of Kuwait's Wetlands
(Note changed date)
- Nov 13 To be announced
- Dec 11 Members' Night

Field Trips (Members only, please)

- Sep 23 - Oct 1 Kathmandu & 5½ days' trek in the Langtang Valley
- Sep 23 Behind the scenes at Atlantis
- Oct 7 Sharjah Museums
- Oct 14 Al Ain Zoo
- Oct 14 - 15 Donkey Fox Wadi camp
- Nov 4 - 9 Kerala nature trip

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