

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

DNHG Membership

Obituary

Many will be saddened to hear that Barbara King, who was a DNHG member, was killed in a car accident in August. She was returning from a day trip to Oman, something that she loved to do. Barbara was a keen participant in DNHG field trips.

As yet it is not known if there will be a memorial service for Barbara, but Lena Linton will let members know if/when there is. Barbara was well known as she was a teacher at Al Ittihad School and a member of Dubai Singers.

Summer activities

After a late June visit to Syria, **Barbara Couldrey** wrote: "Syria is a MUST. Great people. Apart from lots of old stones and fascinating souks we saw some super lizards ... even one with big spots on its thighs."

Former Speaker Coordinator **David Palmer** will be back with us in September, teaching in Dubai. Among other things, he says he is looking forward to seeing us again at DNHG monthly meetings – if he does not have a Sunday night

teaching assignment, which apparently is quite possible!

Current Speaker Coordinator **Angela Manthorpe**, currently a lady of leisure, has booked several speakers for the fall season and has a number of other feelers out. She has been plenty busy with natural history projects of her own between June and September. Said Angela: "I'm going to Siberia on July 15th with Biosphere Expeditions to look for snow leopards. Incidentally the expedition manager in Siberia will be the same lady who ran the project in the Musandam - so I'll try and hook her for a speaking slot if she's back here!! In fact, why don't DNHG fund my trip as I'm taking my speaker responsibilities so seriously??!!" Angela is now back, cheekier than ever, and is going on holiday! But she has promised to find time to tell us something about her experiences in Siberia in the next issue of *Gazelle*.

Anne Millen recently found a jumping spider (one of the *Salticidae*) on bright yellow curtains, and it was ... yellow! In an earlier *Gazelle*, Gary Feulner reported seeing a white crab spider (family *Thomisidae*) on white plastic, but does anyone know if colour adaption is common in jumping spiders?

Our new membership year begins in September, so please remember to renew at the September meeting. Membership remains a bargain at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds Bank account no. 173746. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.)

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:

Bob Reimer
Gary Feulner
Barbara Couldrey
Roger Neal
Dr Sandy Fowler

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



Our Next Meetings

Please note that our next meeting, being the first after the summer break, will not be held on the first Sunday of the month which is our usual practice. To allow members to get back and settle their feathers, it will be held on **Sunday, September 17.**

And then, because the **October meeting would be too close, it too will be delayed and held on October 8. Same place, same time.**

DNHG Treasurer Needed

Our Treasurer's position has once again fallen victim to the flux of employment in Dubai. The Treasurer's position is not a burdensome one but is obviously important to the group. Computer literacy, familiarity with books of account, and availability one night a month for Committee meetings are the principal requirements. If you think you might be interested in helping out, please contact Gary Feulner or Valerie Chalmers (contact details page 7).

DNHG Librarian Needed

We continue to need a volunteer to serve as Librarian. If you think you might be interested in spending more time with our books and papers, please contact Gary Feulner or Valerie Chalmers (contact details page 7).

Field Trips for the Coming Season ... !

As yet no field trips have been scheduled for the coming season, but many ideas are afloat. Please think about interesting places or things that you know of, that others would enjoy, and contact the Field Trip Coordinators with your ideas, offers, or wish lists.



Al Ayn, one of the Saiq Plateau's many beautiful villages that DNHG members have visited

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.

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 to the contrary, as a courtesy both to the trip leader and to other members who might like to have the chance to participate.

Our Next Speaker

Ian Jones graduated in mechanical engineering from Monash University in Australia in 1970, when wind and acoustics were very new and exciting disciplines. Since then he has gained a Fellowship diploma from the RMIT university. He is a Fellow of the Institution of Engineers, Australia, and an affiliate of CIBSE.

Ian started his career in the production and environmental engineering of furnaces, smelters and refineries. He has been a manager and then a company director at Vipac for 20 years, living in Singapore for six of those, and commuting in and out of the Middle East for the last six.

Here, Ian has been working on, amongst other projects, a novel investigation to quantify the thermal comfort performance of the Wind Tower Houses in Bastakiya. It started with continuous measurement inside two tower rooms over last summer. Then computer modelling (CFD) and scale modelling (Wind Tunnel) were added to further the understanding.

The result is an appreciation of the magnitude and the disposition of the internal airflows, and their combination with temperatures to affect the thermal comfort in the rooms. The scientific work is soon to become a small supporting portion of a delightful new book being authored by Peter Jackson and Anne Coles.



The Elusive Mole Crabs of Jumeira Beach

Do you remember this photograph, from the July/August 2004 *Gazelle*? And Gary's final question: Taking account of the overall shape, the folding tail, and the broad, stubby legs curved forward, does the mole crab in fact locomote backwards when it burrows, or for that matter, when it swims in the surf? Well, **Sandy, Mykayela** and **Laith Ellis** have provided the answer: No, they go forwards, bringing their tails behind them.



In mid-June, the Ellis children were shelling on Jumeira beach when they saw two big, almost dead, mole crabs on the beach. Then, as they crouched over an exposed shell patch, their sharp eyes picked up a sudden movement in the shallows. It was close to low tide, and as each little wave washed back into the sea, dozens of mole crabs shot out of the sand, scurried down the beach with the wave and dived back into the sand just before the water was gone. They moved 30 or 40 cm each time. Most of them seemed small, but one wave held one large one with many little ones.

New questions arise: did we have mole crab breeding season in late spring/early summer? Is the low-tide line where they live? Do they swim at all or only scuttle about on the sand? Are they there all the time, even for the long periods when no dead ones wash up on the beach? What of the two-year gap between summer 2004 when the beach was littered with dead adults,

and the next sightings now? We need even more answers, please!

Anne Millen found out a little more: if you dig your toes under the little V-shaped ripples as a wave recedes, you will come up with ... mole crabs!

Summer Birdwatching News

A lesser flamingo, *Phoenicopterus minor*, was observed in late June at Al Wathba Lake, a first for Abu Dhabi. The lone bird visited for just a single day and joined a flock of the more common greater flamingo, but it could not escape the watchful eye of researchers from the Univ. of Bath, based at Al Wathba to study the Kentish plover. By day's end the news had spread and it was seen by six other birders.

The house bunting of Arabia and Iran, which inhabits remote mountain areas, has been officially distinguished from the similar bunting of North Africa, common in villages there. The local bird has kept the original scientific name, *Emberiza striolata*, but has acquired a new "common" name, the mountain bunting or striolated bunting. The North African bird has kept the common (and more fitting) name of house bunting, but will henceforth be known scientifically as *Emberiza sahari*. In addition to their different habitats and behaviour, the two were found to exhibit slight but consistent differences in plumage and vocalizations.

Finally, the mystery of where cattle egrets breed has been cracked – after some eight years of uncertainty among the organized UAE birdwatching community. A casual remark by Simon Aspinall alerted wildlife manager Kevin Hyland (who is responsible for Dubai's flamingo breeding efforts, among other things) that this was still an unknown for the amateur community. That resulted in a visit to a nearby private residence to see a colony of some 35-40 nesting pairs. The colony is said to have grown from an

initial two or three pairs years ago.

All this and more is reported on a weekly basis in *Twitter's Guide*, at www.uaeinterac.com. You can report to *Twitter's Guide* via Peter Hellyer at hellyer@emirates.net.ae or UAE Bird Recorder Tommy Pedersen at 777sandman@gmail.com. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Musandam Carpet Viper

Barbara Couldrey doesn't let the heat spoil her fun, and has sent us a June report of a carpet viper (*Echis omanensis*, formerly *E. coloratus*) in the mountains of the Musandam south of RAK – one of only a handful of records for this species from the Musandam. The site was a cistern in the seasonal (but now largely abandoned) terraced settlement of Sal, at about 500m.

Says Barbara: "The cistern was in centre of village, west side, near the wadi and about 200m before turning into the main exit wadi. It was a restored cistern with wooden cover - full of water. Viper was either drinking or sleeping in entrance hole, tail out. When we started taking photos with flash it turned around to exit. It wasn't aggressive - we watched it for 10 minutes or so. It did a few side winding tricks when we started following it, then it slid quietly away towards a large, close by *ghaf* tree. We have a video of the side winding!" Barbara's field companion Valérie Gondoux has favored us with the attached photo.



Echis omanensis

The carpet viper is not typically found near human habitation



E.mail your reports to pvana@emirates.net.ae, (Arial 10 justified) or deliver them to Anne Millen on floppy disk at monthly meetings.

(although this may be due more to persecution than to choice of habitat), but Barbara's sighting is typical of the species in one way: it is near water. The carpet viper is not known to actually enter water and it could not easily have exited the vertical walls of the cistern if it had done so, but in this case, apparently, the water level was high enough that the snake might have been drinking (the elongated posture suggests drinking more than sleeping).

There is, however, a more sinister alternative for its presence: Was it simply enjoying the shade, or was it possibly waiting to prey on birds that might also come to drink and perch, innocently, in the shade of the entrance hole? Cisterns are magnets for resident mountain birds in summertime.

The carpet viper is not generally thought to hunt or take birds, and that would probably be exceptional, but it is neither impossible nor unusual for snakes generally. For example, the sand snake *Psammodphis schokari*, found across North Africa and Arabia, is said to take birds regularly, and has been reported subduing a red-tailed wheatear at midday in a dry falaj in the oasis of Khutwah (*Tribulus* 10.2: 27-28). Report by Gary Feulner

Lawn Beetle

Editor Anne Millen made a present of a large (3 cm), caterpillar or grub-like insect that she had found in a burrow under a paving stone in a walkway in her backyard. "What is it?" asked Anne. "I have a vague recollection of seeing things like it when I was a child."

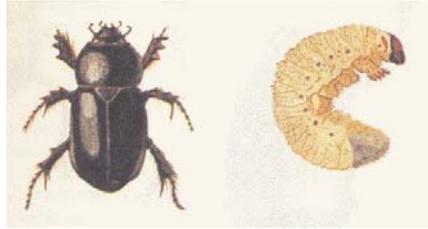


Illustration of the grub from *Insects of Eastern Arabia*

Chairman Gary Feulner, having once munched on sago worms (the larvae of a large weevil that breeds in rotting sago palms), recognized the specimen as the larva of a beetle (and a large one), but which sort of beetle? A general reference (the Dorling Kindersley *Handbook of Insects*) showed characteristic larvae for many different beetle families. From this it emerged that the combination of three characteristics – the "C" shape of the larva, 3 pairs of well-developed jointed legs, and well-developed jaws – indicated some sort of scarab beetle (*Scaraboidea*), a group which includes dung beetles and chafers. (Weevil larvae, by contrast, would have the "C" shape and jaws, but not well-developed legs.)

That conclusion proved to be correct, but it was the long way around, since the insect in question, and its larva, is pictured in *Insects of Eastern Arabia* (which otherwise mostly ignores larvae). One reason is that this particular larva is more likely to be encountered. It is the lawn beetle (*Pentodon algerinum*). IEA says that it is "found in oases and grass filled wadis, but has extended its habitat to gardens and lawns where, in many areas, it has become a pest." Its larva is typical of chafers. The larvae "live a subterranean existence, feeding on grass roots." Anne is hoping that the hoopoes, which can be seen forcing their beaks into the sand in the devastated area, are going to solve the problem for her. Report by Gary Feulner

Bandaged Agamas?

Barbara Couldrey and Valérie Gondoux have twice recorded a phe-

nomenon not previously highlighted in the blue rock agama, *Pseudotrapelus sinaitus*: a colourless patch at the base of the tail, seen during the past summer on animals at two sites.



Female agama with banded tail

Mrs. Agama was seen at the Musandam terraced settlement of Sal (described above in the viper item in this issue). Said Barbara: "It looks as though it has just come from some band-aid treatment at the local hospital! I nearly stood on it initially. It sat for ages while we photographed it ... until I sneezed. Then it took off, hiding under Val's squatting form!" A few weeks later they encountered the same thing in a bright blue, displaying male.



Male agama with banded tail

The "band-aid" was the subject of much discussion. Neither Barbara nor Gary Feulner had noticed it in these lizards before. Was it somehow related to damage and regeneration of the tail, as is common in many lizards (and particularly our local geckos)? Probably not, since it turns out that the blue rock agama (and most agamas) are distinguished from many other lizards by not having the ability to shed their tail (autotomy) in response to an attack. But what then? Camou-



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

Reptiles - Dr Reza Khan
res 344 8283
off 344 0462
fax (off) 349 9437

Archaeology - Prof. John Fox
jfox@aus.ac.ae
(Temporarily away - hold your reports)

Birds - David Bradford
davebradford9@hotmail.com

Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi
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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
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fax 340 0990
vmc@latifaschool.co.ae

Plants - Valerie Chalmers

Mammals & Seashells - 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.



flage? Or is it part of their sexual allure? The latter is the theory of Paul Vercammen of Arabia's Wildlife Centre in Sharjah, according to Barbara. Apparently it helps to look like a war hero! *Report by Gary Feulner*



*An agama just being blue
(from Angela Manthorpe's February
2006 Gazelle article)*

The Pygmies on Jumeira Beach

It is a happy fact that some babies look like their mothers and some do not (see Barbara Couldrey's article on shells in the May 2006 *Gazelle*), and a curious fact that some mothers look like babies but are not. At the northern end of Jumeira Beach, piles of tiny shells accumulate, and these are a fascinating mixture of mothers and babies. Many of these shells are adults, despite their very small size, which accounts for the greater variety of tinies compared with larger shells on this beach. Sandy Fowler once wrote, "Remember that some shells are very small. *Smaragdia souverbiana* is no more than 4-5mm maximum size as an adult, but a bonny wee shell!"

Sandy commented, on seeing the photograph below, "There are at least thirty species here, and they are *not* all juveniles; many are adult size. I am pleased to see specs. of

Perrinia stellata SEA #28 (bottom left) 10mm

Punctateon fabreanus #821 (bottom right) 13mm

Bassina calophylla #1191 or *foliacea* #1192 (top, 2nd from right) 20mm

probably *calptia Hysterix* # 683 middle, 2nd from right) 25mm

And a baby *Cardites bicolor* #1062 which can get up to a whopping 55mm.

The first two I didn't add to my own collection until 2003 or 2004 when I started to look really closely at the small shells of Jumeira Beach."

Unfortunately, the beach is marred by increasing amounts of flotsam, jetsam and beachgoers rubbish, and the Municipality has taken to sweeping the beach with a machine in the mornings. In the late afternoons, it is torn up by quadbikers. If you want to see or collect shells, you are best to go to the beach very early in the morning after a good on-shore blow. Be prepared to do your collecting on hand and knees, and perhaps take a magnifying glass to see that your specimens are undamaged. As Sandy Fowler says, don't assume there's nothing of interest until you have got down and looked. Sandy also recommends taking a plastic bag of shells and sorting through them at home, if the weather is too hot to make shelling pleasant, returning the rejects on your next collecting trip. *Report by Anne Millen*



*The biggest, Dentalium octangulatum (SEA,#865), bottom left, is 24mm long
Photographs by Roger Neal*



Splendrillia persica 744



Suburban Toads

The June message for Gary Feulner was intriguing. A toad had recently turned up in a garden in a venerable Sufouh compound. The owner, a 10-year resident, had become fond of him and wondered if anyone could tell her more about him. She had contacted the natural history section of the UAEinteract website.



The Sufouh garden toad

The threshold question was: was this one of the two local toads - in which case we could identify it easily enough - or was it an exotic escapee from someone's private menagerie? The Dubai climate would not be every toad's cup of tea, and most exotics would have a difficult time of it. So the odds seemed to favor one of the local species, possibly collected as a pet on a weekend outing.

The owner's accompanying flash photo was taken by night, but from a discreet distance so as 'not to blind the poor thing.' This confirmed that it was a toad, but the distance was a bit too discreet to reveal very much else. Another, bolder, photo and some questions followed. The new photo showed that the toad had the large tympanum of the local *Bufo dhufarensis*, but the snout was shorter and more pointed than either of the local species. In addition, the owner described the toad's call (which let us know that it was a male): a 30 second low creak. It was this call which had first alerted the owner to the toad (she thought it was some sort of machinery) and which revealed his presence each night. The photo and call ruled out the two local species.

As to what it is, the photo and a description of the call have been referred to a few local professionals, but it is not clear that anyone in the UAE is particularly well versed in the international pet trade in toads (if that is in fact the source). As to how it is surviving, wherever it came from, it has found a genuine oasis in the owner's garden, where it inhabits a heavily shaded enclosure with a small pool. It avoids the worst of Dubai's heat by emerging only by night (well after sunset).

Inquiries turned up reports of toads on the grounds of an institution in the Sufouh area. Plans have been made to investigate these when the weather becomes a little more pleasant. In the meantime, any information that members can supply about toads elsewhere in Dubai, or about likely pet species, will be gratefully received. *Report by Gary Feulner*



Gary Feulner demonstrated a keen interest in amphibians at an early age. This photograph was taken in the rice-growing area of Katy, west of Houston, Texas. Photograph by Sandi Ellis

Photographic Identification

One of our May speakers, Bob Reimer of Al Ain, wrote earlier this year with the following information that may be of interest to members with taxonomic inclinations:

"Further to our discussions ... I happened to trip across a resource yesterday that contends in this day and age you should be able to identify insects from a photograph if you have proper photographs of the correct characters. It then goes on to list the characters required by

family.

<http://mcz-28168.oeb.harvard.edu/etypes/specificimages.htm>

"This site had some tremendous resources on how to record insects and plants. I've downloaded their "MANTIS" database and will evaluate it to see if it might fit our needs for recording. They are supposed to be coming out with an update to it imminently.

"I've also been corresponding with [UAE Bird Recorder] Tommy Pedersen about some bird identifications and asked him a bit about Wildlife Recorder (http://www.wildlife.co.uk/birding_software/Default.htm) which he is using for UAE Bird records. It looks like the programme can be used for more than just birds. Unfortunately this programme costs more than MANTIS (which is free) but has the benefit of having a PDA portion to aid in recording."

Thanks to Bob Reimer for this information.

Book Reviews:

New *Tribulus*

Tribulus 16.1 is now available and is a bargain at Dh 15. The latest issue includes features on possible long-term periodicity in UAE rainfall, evidence for live *Terebralia palustris* in late Islamic times in the Abu Dhabi area, a new type of stone tool from Umm al Zamool neolithic sites, radio tracking of the UAE's flamingoes and a new orchid found in the UAE, along with natural history news, book reviews, a list of recent scientific papers published in professional journals, and an index to *Tribulus* vols. 11-15 (2001-2005).

On-Road in the UAE by Gareth Leggett (Zodiac Publishing)

This weighty guide, published in December 2005, sets out to ex-



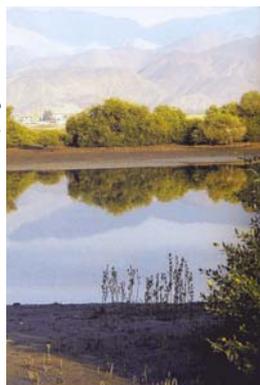
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pand the horizons of those who, like Lena Linton, have never been further than the Sharjah souq. The trips described can all be done in a day, do not require a GPS or 4WD, and are given a "route rating": road quality, shade/amenities, accessibility, time taken and Leggett's overall opinion are given a 0-5 score for quick reference. This is a good idea because the instructions, although simple, are dense. Every little detail – every sign, roundabout, mosque, post office, side road, side trip – is described in order, which is great if one of you does not mind spending the trip with nose in book. In an attempt to make this easier on the go, the right hand page of each description gives a symbolic version: a column of straight on, right, left and U turn arrows, and a corresponding column of mosque, roundabout, bridge, fort, stunted tree and petrol station symbols. It is weird when you first look at it, but it works quite well.

The trips are all short and handy, and by no means comprehensive, but for the many people who come to Dubai and would like to get out of town, it is a good start. It is full of tempting pictures (without captions, so you just have to assume that that is what you'll find) and encouraging notes (*unlocked cars are likely to be broken into, at Khutwah!*).

The DNHG does not have copies, but it can be found at bookshops.

One of the enticing illustrations in On-Road in the UAE



*DNHG members on a trip to Fujairah with Larry Woods, in 2003.
Photograph by Scott Rousseu,*

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?

Please send your letter to any of the committee members listed, by fax or e-mail, or direct to the editor, Anne Millen.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- Sep 17: Natural Ventilation in the WindTower houses of the Bastakiya:
measurement, scale modelling and computation – Ian Jones
- Oct 08: The Arabian Horse – Lucy Munro [to be confirmed]
- Nov 05: Rock Art – Dr. Michelle Ziolkowski

Field Trips (Members only, please. Details inside.)