

# GAZELLE

Vol 22 no 5 May 2007



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

## DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

### Condolences

The DNHG extends its sympathies and condolences to our Patron, H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan, and to his family, on the death of his son, Sheikh Saeed.

### Members' News

**Professor Larry Woods** will be leaving the UAE next month to return to his native Canada. In addition to his responsibilities at the American University of Sharjah, Larry has given his time and talents to a number of other activities, including the DNHG, where he has been a frequent field trip participant and field trip leader, perhaps best known for introducing us to the "Larry Woods Dumpsite," which has been associated with a number of natural (and unnatural) phenomena over the years. For the immediate future, Larry will be living a back-to-basics life at his home on a small island in the Vancouver area. We wish him well.

There is some place like home. **Jim** and **Susie Balderstone**, in Dubai earlier this year from their



new home in Shanghai, brought photographs of a visit to the deserts of Mongolia. They had visited friends on an Australian agricultural aid project there, and were astonished to see that, apart from a good fall of snow and the camels having two humps, the deserts of Mongolia and the UAE share many similar features.



Left: low dunes and hardy plants  
Top: the aid project  
Above: rodent holes in soft reddish sand

### DNHG Membership

Membership remains a bargain at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. We are now accepting memberships and renewals for coming year (Sep 2007 to Sep 2008). Memberships taken up in May or June will be good through September 2008. 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:

Lamjed El-Kefi  
Mike Lorrigan & Richard Dennis  
Diane Lazenbury  
Valerie Chalmers  
Jim and Susie Balderstone  
Gary Feulner  
Peter Hellyer & Simon Aspinall



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



## Falcon Hospital Trip with Pradeep & Anin / Val Chalmers 26 May (probably)

This is a one day trip, and is mostly inside. As the time is close, the details will be sent to all by email.

## End-of-Season Dinner, Photographic Competition and Quiz Thurs June 14

See the flier enclosed and start preparing for the new improved photographic competition!

## Bastakia Windtower Houses: a walk with Peter Jackson October

Peter Jackson's walk through Bastakia has been delayed and will be now take place in lovely cool weather in October. It will be approximately three hours on a Friday morning. Watch this space.

## Summer trips, June to August

Several summer trips are under consideration, so if you are keen to do something, contact the Field Trip Coordinators. Ideas are very welcome - don't leave us to *guess* what you'd like to do!

\* \* \*

## UAE Twitchers' Guide: The Final Whistle

After a little bit more than 13 years of more or less regular weekly publication, with the exception of the summer months, the UAE Twitchers' Guide is now ceasing publication. Those wishing to keep up to date with the latest UAE news will find [www.tommypedersen.com](http://www.tommypedersen.com) (UAE Recorder Tommy Pedersen's website) carries all of the most important news (almost always updated daily), as well as an ever-growing list of historical records. Previous issues of Twitchers' Guide will continue to be found on the [www.uaeinteract.com](http://www.uaeinteract.com) website, run by Trident Press for the UAE's Emirates News Agency, WAM.

Twitchers' Guide first began as a weekly newspaper column in February 1994 in the daily Emirates News being compiled by Simon Aspinall and Peter Hellyer in response to the discovery of an Eversmann's redstart in Abu Dhabi. Following the closure of that newspaper in 1999, it has been disseminated by e-mail and on the [www.uaeinteract.com](http://www.uaeinteract.com) website. Since it began, we, but usually Peter on his own, have tried to cover the most important UAE news, with a whole host of rarities and numerous UAE firsts being reported, as well as reports on migration, unusual breeding records and other items. It has been a pleasure to do it, but, with Tommy's website now up and running, there is not the same need for it that there used to be. And while the UAE was still very much of an unknown place in birding terms thirteen years ago, it's now pretty well-known, and regularly visited, even if the rare and unusual continue to arrive.

We are grateful to all of our contributors over the years, both past and present UAE residents and the many visitors who have sent in their records. We could not have managed to keep it going without them. We will keep birding in the Emirates, of course - but without this weekly chore perhaps we too will have a chance to get out some more!

Our best regards to all those who have been on our mailing list over the years. Good hunting, but please keep reporting. *Thanks to Peter Hellyer & Simon Aspinall*

## Book Reviews:

Our June issue of *Gazelle*, we will carry details of Phoenix 23, and several old and new books about Oman, but if you are impatient for reading matter, *Wildlife Middle East News* Issue 4, March 2007, pdf can be downloaded from: [www.wmenews.com](http://www.wmenews.com)

## HAO Calendar 2008

Get clicking! The Historical Association of Oman would like to remind all their members and friends (that's us, DNHG members!) of the theme for the HAO calendar 2008 - this will be "Traditional buildings of Oman - preservation is part of our heritage".

Closing date for CDs or prints is Thursday 7 June 2007.

## Our Next Speakers

**Marion and Brian Marquand** hail from New Zealand but have spent most of their lives wandering about overseas - in such climes as Switzerland, The British Isles, Spain, The Philippines, Poland, Africa and Kuwait. Now they are working in schools here in Dubai. They have always been very interested in the natural, cultural and social histories of the countries in which they have lived. They have collected enormous numbers of artifacts and photos of the various environments and will be happy to share their Kuwait Desert sector with you this June.

**Mike Lorrigan** has been an active member of the Natural History Group for almost ten years. This year he fulfilled a 22 year ambition to trek to Everest Base Camp which he did in April together with Richard Dennis another member of DNHG. Mike is Managing Director of Spearhead Training, a management training company in Dubai, that also has offices in Abu Dhabi, Sharjah and Qatar.

**David Bradford**, man of mystery, has led many popular trips in the UAE, and is well known by DNHG members to be a relentless birder. He recently went off adventuring to Yemen, accompanied only by his field glasses, notebook and camera, and has some interesting tales.





## Musandam Fossil Burrows

On a trip to Wadi Rawdah on the Musandam Peninsular, Lamjed El-Kefi stopped to take photographs and found some astonishing rocks in the foreground.



Wadi Bih, north of the border post



A network of burrows

Gary Feulner, on seeing the photographs, wrote, "The "fossils" are burrow casts – the empty burrows of marine organisms that made their home in the sediment (or tunneled through it), filled in by material deposited later.



Typically, burrow casts are found on the bottom of a particular strata. The largest ones in your

photos are quite impressive in size. There are certain horizons in the sediments of the Musandam where burrow casts are relatively common. Orange rocks, such as the ones in your picture, are a good place to look. Interesting to speculate what made such a large and long burrow in the first place.



I note one photo shows the site, along the road descending to the junction of Wadi Bih and the entrance to Rawdah Bowl." (opp, left)  
*Rawdah Bowl*



Thanks to Lamjed El-Kefi for photographs and geologist Gary Feulner for his comments.

## Visit to Afrathe & Haywan

At the commencement of the rule of His Majesty, Sultan Qaboos bin Taimur, Afrathe was inhabited but, with the advancements he brought to Oman, with electricity, piped water and roads, the village was vacated for the new one built adjacent. During the IEW, Bob Reimer led a group around the ruins of the village located at the foothills of the Hajar mountains.



Notwithstanding the 30+ intervening years of dereliction, the former homes and cattle shelters could still be clearly seen. In the main these were comprised of oblong shaped houses of one room on one level with a niche or two in the walls and traditional Arabian ceiling / roofs supported by palm trunks, some hewn out for the purpose of roof water spouts. One house even boasted a triangular window. However, there were, most surprisingly, several one room structures which had had a pitched roof (for the gable ends of the buildings were still intact even though the roof was now, of course, rotting on the floor).



Afrathe house

For the village to have survived it needed a water supply and it could be clearly seen that this came from man-made channels to the source.



Aflaj

Although seeping water would have pointed the villagers in the right direction, actually getting to its sources is believed to have been by building a fire on a rock fault line, then cooling it quickly with water, thereby cracking the underlying rock which in turn thus enabled them to chisel out the rock down to the source. In places the water was bubbling up, albeit very gently and erratically, from a source below (spring water); in some instances it was leaching from the surrounding rock. There were a number of both and water collected in shallowish





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

open man-made 'tanks'.



*Checking the plumbing*

Given the flow of water was only slight, it was therefore not surprising that it had a calcite 'skin', both in the majority of the channels but also over the complete expanse of water in the large holding tanks. An anti-malarial device par excellence!



*Large tanks*

There were also lumps of tufa to be seen. Pronounced 'toofah', it is formed when water evaporates from lime rich water leaving calcite (calcium carbonate) to crystallize, often with impurities of iron oxides (rust) which gives it its yellow and red colouration. It is often found on cliffs, in caves and quarries. If conditions are favourable it forms quickly and plants, mosses and invertebrates often become encrusted in the calcite and are preserved as fossils.

Over 48 plants were logged and photographed by Val Chalmers. These included three species of *Fagonia* (*F. bruguieri*, *F. indica*, and *F. ovalifolia*, *Gaillonia aucheri*, *Convolvulus virgatus*, and three mem-

bers of the Cyperaceae - sedge family – *Cladium mariscus*, *Cyperus conglomeratus* and *Schoenus nigricans*.



*Gaillonia aucheri*

Two species of beetle were sighted (**one triangular in shape; the other a domino beetle**) and one dragonfly which was seen hovering frustratedly over the calcified skin on a water tank.



*Di Lazenbury admires the neat construction*

Such was the interest in the site that we overran our time and hence had to forfeit seeing Haywan. Another time, inshal'lah. *Report by Di Lazenbury, photographs Val Chalmers.*

## *Thirteen days to Everest Base Camp*

Trekking to Everest Base Camp remained a dream for 22 years but deciding that if I didn't do it now, I probably never would, I got Richard Dennis interested in coming along. We listed the trip with the UAE NHGs, but interest was not forthcoming, except from a couple of individuals. Then when everything appeared to be going pear-shaped, Richard found two places left on a trip departing from Kathmandu on the 1<sup>st</sup> April. We grabbed them!

Things needed to be simplified. The

planned seven week fitness programme became four and a half. Richard, who had done Annapurna Base Camp, a few years ago, convinced me to 'tea house'. Given the bad weather and cold and miserable campers we saw higher up on our trek, I was glad that Richard's views prevailed, and the tea houses had improved since Krakauer's 1996 trip!

In Kathmandu, we and our 10 companions and guide were given a detailed briefing and warned about the symptoms and dangers of high altitude sickness. We then prepared for a 5.30 a.m. departure to Lukla the next day. The flight to Lukla (about one hour) is not for the faint hearted! Lukla lies at an altitude of 2840m, Base Camp at 5364m, and the summit of Everest 8850m (29035 feet).

After the death of a 1970s Japanese trekking group near Pheriche - which lies at only 4270m - all heading to Base Camp are advised to insert acclimatisation days into their schedule for the approach to Base Camp. Despite this, according to our guides, an average of one in five trekkers have to turn back due to altitude problems, and others may not reach Base Camp due to bad weather. Success is not guaranteed.

The difference altitude makes is startling eg. if sea level is 100% in terms of oxygen intake, Base Camp is around 50% and the summit of Everest, 33%. Therefore as you ascend, you are having to suck in more air to get the same amount of oxygen. The combination of ascending, some times very steeply, and having to breathe in more air to get the oxygen you need, is very physically demanding. As you get higher, it can drain you – especially when trying to sleep at night.



*Himalayan tahr*



## Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

Reptiles - Dr Reza Khan  
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Archaeology - David Palmer  
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Birds - David Bradford  
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Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

Geology - Gary Feulner  
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Fossils - Valerie Chalmers  
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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.



Our first day was a relatively gentle walk of about 7 km to Phakding where we stayed for the night. The first four days of the journey found us walking in beautiful pine forests, with fast flowing rivers, waterfalls, magnolia trees and the early blooming of some rhododendrons that gave a splash of red to the mountainsides.



Sherpa on a bridge

In parts, the journey takes your breath away ... not just by the physical challenge! Then we had a long day of descents and ascents until we arrived at the Sherpa capital, Namche Bazaar (3440m). Perched on the brink of a chasm, the town is surrounded by intricate terraces planted mainly with potatoes. This provides much of the staple diet for the people of the region. We had to spend two acclimatisation days in Namche - the last place where you could really feel you were still in touch with civilization. The next day, we rounded a bend and saw our first view of Everest's summit in the distance.



Plume in the morning - climbers' warning

The mountain had the tell tale white plume of the jetstream - not a day for climbing! There are few windows of opportunity for summitting Everest. These are usually in May and June just before the monsoon arrives, and at the end of the monsoon.

This was where we met our first real yaks. Below this point we were only seeing what are called jopkiyos (a

cross between a yak and cow). These are similar to yaks but with less hair. Yaks have much longer, thicker, hair. (Interestingly, yaks actually originated in Tibet and were brought into Nepal with the Sherpa migration into the region.)



Richard makes friends easily

Day Four saw us heading for Phortse (3810 m) a remote settlement off the usual tourist trail, where we spent the night in a very primitive tea house, (no running water and a very primitive toilet system. We realised then that things were going to be very basic from now on!) Day Five was even better - a very quiet 'off tourist' route, along the mountain edge, that was absolutely wonderful.



Magnolias

In the morning the visibility was perfect. Ama Dablam, (6856 m) one of the most spectacular mountains in the Himalayas was in view for the first part of the day. We also spotted beautiful white butterflies, Himalayan mountain goats, eagles, and vultures.



Bird of prey





But the wonderful vista ended when our party was engulfed in a 'white out' during the afternoon – low cloud and mist, with no visibility. This meant we had to stay close to ensure we got safely to Dingboche (4410 m) for the night. We were now in the area where the Japanese trekkers died, and where the majority of trekkers who fail to reach Base Camp get their altitude symptoms. A few kilometres behind us, in Pheriche (which we had bypassed on the ascent) a clinic has reduced the death rate to about one in fifty thousand, whereas before it had been much higher. Whilst in Dingboche, ... *Will they get there? To be continued in our June Gazelle. Report by Mike Lorrigan, photographs by Richard Dennis.*

## New & Rare Flowers

Last winter's rains, the best in eight or nine years, have provided the expected excitement for would-be local botanists throughout the late winter and spring. Many DNHG members visiting mountain front areas have photographed and commented on the attractive and extensive fields of flowers, from the bright yellow *Diplotaxis harra* to the lilac-coloured *Erucaria hispanica* (both four-petaled members of the Crucifer group) to the tall, dull-coloured spikes of *Reseda sp.* However, the rains have also provided some more arcane enjoyment for sophisticated plant-watchers.



*Bassia muricata*

In the Sharjah desert, the hairy Chenopod *Bassia muricata*, one of the larger desert annuals, was locally common in March and April, although inquiry to several knowledgeable observers confirmed that this species has heretofore been seen only very rarely.

At higher elevations in the Ru'us al-Jibal, two plants new to the region have been identified and at least a couple of others are pending identification. Barbara Couldrey reported the dark-centered *Adonis dentata*, a member of the buttercup family Ranunculaceae, near cultivation on the Fine Peak plateau and it was identified by Dr. Richard Hornby.



*Adonis dentata*

Gary Feulner encountered *Asperugo procumbens*, a borage, in a small, protected tree plot above upper Wadi Khabb Shamsi, and was able to identify it by reference to Collenette's Flowers of Saudi Arabia and Boulos' *Flora of Egypt*. Also found in two peri-agricultural areas was a borage (forget-me-not family) that has so far resisted even educated guesses. Plants such as these, found in agricultural or peri-agricultural settings might possibly have been introduced with seed, but it seems that some are sufficiently attractive to goats that they can survive only within protected fields.

Two other new species found in the Ru'us al-Jibal in recent years demonstrate both possibilities. The edible mint *Teucrium oliverianum* has been found only as a weed within protected fields (again on the Fine Peak plateau) and a single specimen of *Leontice leontopetalum*, known as field weed from the eastern Mediterranean to Iran, was found in the thick silt of an abandoned and eroding field near Jebel Harim. For identification of these latter two, we are indebted to Prof. Loutfy Boulos.

Other plants, from wilder areas of the Ru'us al-Jibal, appear to be new

records but are still pending identification. These include a daisy family member, suspected to be *Garhadiolus angulatus*, and an *Astragalus* resembling *A. schimperi*, but hairless.



*Leontice leontopetalum*

Report by Gary Feulner

## More on Muddy Molluscs

The April 2007 *Gazelle* commented (in the item on spoonworms) on the distinction between the two snails most commonly found on mudflats in the UAE, *Cerithidea cingulata* and *Potamides conicus* (nos. 184 and 185, respectively, in *Seashells of Eastern Arabia*, by Bosch et al.).



*Cerithidea cingulata*



*Potamides conicus*

As the names suggest, despite their apparent similarity (both are elongated, conical shells with a



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pattern of more or less axial rows of nodules and transverse colour banding) they were originally classified in separate groups: *C. cingulata* with the Ceriths and *P. conicus* with the Potamidids, as indicated in the April *Gazelle*. More recently, however, they have both been placed within the Potamidids, along with the much larger *Terebralia palustris* (below; see the classification in *SEA*). And more recently still (in fact, as yet unpublished), DNA studies by researchers at The Natural History Museum in London (formerly BMNH) have shown that the two species are very closely related indeed. It is gratifying to report that these latest results were based in part on UAE specimens provided by DNHG members. *Report by Gary Feulner*



### *Fastigiation*

Asked to comment on the photo below of an odd growth atop a plant (apparently, *Erucaria sp.*) in a Musandam field, Dr. Richard Hornby opined that it did not appear to be a gall, and that it was instead "a plant that must have gone fastigiate." That may have been easy for him to say, but we had to ask, "What does that mean?"



Dick explained as follows. "When a plant becomes fastigiate it is

affected by a form of growth that is abnormally great in one direction or plane. Below is a photo of a fastigiate *Anthemis tomentosa* in Greece that nicely illustrates the point. This one is clearly only affected to a minor degree but the effect is very obvious. Your photo suggests that the effect was much stronger. Some genera and families are much more prone than others to this tendency. I understand it is caused by a natural mutation, i.e. it is not a gall." *Report by Gary Feulner*



## Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

- June 03            Members' Night:
- David & Marion Marquand - Natural History of Kuwait
  - Mike Lorrigan - Trek to Everest Base Camp
  - David Bradford - Birding in Yemen (to be confirmed)
- Sep 16:            Dean Polley (Topic TBA)
- Oct 07:            John Burt (Topic TBA)

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

- 26 May            Falcon Hospital with Pradeep & Anindita Radhakrishna
- October           Bastakia Walk with Peter Jackson