

GAZELLE

Vol 23 no 11 November 2008



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Longtime DNHG member, **Judith Stafford**, recently wrote that she is leaving Dubai, and wishes to pass on her regards and goodbyes to the many DNHG members who know her, and her best wishes to the group. Memories of field trips and friendships will keep her warm in the UK!



Argonauta hians

Photograph from Sandy Fowler's
Rough Guide for Shellers'

Our roving reporter from RAK, **Barbara Couldrey**, visited Rams Beach in early November to see if there were any *Argonauta* egg cases washing ashore. **Beryl Comar**, for many years, kept a register of the dates, numbers and sizes of *Argonauta* found there, and mentioned recently that they sometimes appear in small numbers in late October or November. Larger numbers are usually found around March. Barbara found the Coast Guard end of beach, where she used to find

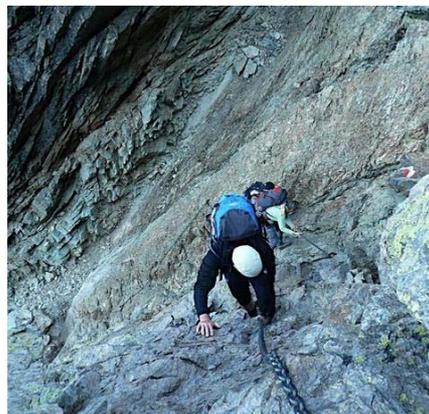
interesting shells and *Argonauta*, fenced off for a large new maritime complex. The remainder of the beach is as yet undeveloped but there were few shells, and none of the fragile *Argonauta*.



Argonauta argo

From Bosch et al, *Seashells of Eastern Arabia*

Barbara also wrote about her recent walk across Corsica. The photograph below suggests that 'walk' may have been a rather loose term!



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.) If you have not renewed before January 2008, your membership will lapse. (See p.7)

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:

Barbara Couldrey
Cécile Javelle
Karen Leschke
Gary Feulner
Roger Neal
ENHG

Photograph by
Roger Neal



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



Don't miss the ...

Glass Recycling Centre Friday 21 November

This trip to an EEG Glass Recycling centre starts with a talk on recycling and includes a tour of the facility. It is a half day trip and is limited to 15 persons. Details by email or contact a field trip coordinator (see p.7)

Sharjah Aquarium Saturday 22 November 10.00am onwards Meet at reception area at 09.45am

Sharjah Aquarium opened in June 2008 and hosts 250 species including seahorses, moray eels, rays and reef sharks. We hope to have someone from the aquarium give us a talk and answer any questions.

Where? A map accompanies other information on their website www.sharjahaquarium.ae/index.html

Parking is available.

Cost – Adults 20 AED

Child (6-15) 10AED

Child (5 years old & under) free

Family (2 adults, 3 children) 50 AED

Adult Groups (6 or more) 15 AED

Child Groups (6 or more) 5 AED

Numbers limited to 25 persons.

There is a cafeteria with tea, coffee, cool drinks and snacks available.

Email Anin to register.

Birding with David Bradford November: Date TBA

Dave is looking for suitable venues for birding after he went to UAQ to check a favourite spot and found it was gone and the coast is being destroyed. Pivot fields looks like the best place as of now. Exact date will be advised by Sandhya Prakash.

Sunderbans & Kolkata, India Eid al Adha 2008

We can plan a trip to the Sunderban mangrove reserve during the Eid break. We would need someone to lead this trip and to coordinate. Minimum of 10 people, but more would be better. Expressions of interest to Anin as soon as possible, please.

Desert Driving with Andrew Bean 9 / 10 January 2009

The aim of the course is to teach the principles of driving safely in sand, with due care for the environment you pass through. By the end of the course you should be able to explore the wilds of the UAE with care, safety and confidence. Note we don't train dune bashers! The latest date for enrolment is 17th December. This session consists of multiple levels and has a donation of 50 Dhs and limit of 10 cars. Contact Pradeep wgarnet@eim.ae or Anin anin@eim.ae to register your interest with numbers and whether adults or children (including ages) so we can work out the costs for our group.

Bastakiya walk with Peter Jackson

This is a ramble through the very old areas near the creek mouth, with architect and wind-tower authority Peter Jackson. Not to be missed but ... numbers limited! Watch this space.

Sharjah Museum / Weekend Family Workshop

Date & details to be finalised. Advice will be sent by email or will be included in December's *Gazelle*.

.....
•Dhow trips, snorkeling, shelling,
•the roses, the empty quarter, the
•neighbouring countries ... mem-
•bers are encouraged to propose
•and lead field trips, and if you
•would like to do so, you should
•contact the Field Trip Coordina-
•tors (p.7) with details / ideas.
•

•Don't wait for the Committee to
•suggest trips - tell us what you
•would like to do, and we will help
•you achieve it. Your experiences
•and interests are different, and
•will prove interesting to other
•members, so step up and share
•your hopes /ideas.
•

Our Next Speakers

Members' Night!

Dr. Richard Morris is a dentist and Specialist Orthodontist practicing at the American Dental Clinic in Jumeirah. Originally from California, he operated his own private clinic near Spokane, Washington State for more than 20 years before taking a "short" leave to the Middle East in 1993 that is still continuing. He spent 7 years in Saudi Arabia and was a member of the Natural History Society in Jeddah from where much of the Saudi information was derived. He lives in Jumeirah with his wife Cathy and son Scott who are at the American School of Dubai as student and teacher.

Sue Hunter grew up in England, Hong Kong, Malta, Scotland, and back in England where she loves to walk in her beloved Yorkshire. She came to Dubai for one year, twelve years ago, and has not managed to summon up the enthusiasm to return to cold Yorkshire winters. She loves to travel, believes firmly in 'leaving only footprints, and shooting only photos' and is enjoying discovering new places, and animals in their rightful habitat. A recent trip to the Sunderbans was a highlight to be long remembered, and she is eager to go back.

Angela Manthorpe has been an active member of the DNHG for many years and is currently the group's Speaker Co-ordinator. Her love of the outdoors has taken her tramping across many of the UAE's most inaccessible mountains but her number 1 hobby - scuba diving - takes priority in the warmer months. Having taken up caving at University in the UK more than 20 years ago, earlier this year she fulfilled a longstanding ambition to descend into the Majlis al Jinn, Oman.



Email your field reports and news to pvana@emirates.net.ae (Arial 10 justified). Please send your photographs as separate jpg files, or deliver them to Anne Millen for scanning.

Twinkle Twinkle

On Friday 17 October, the DNHG organised an astronomy field trip in the desert south east of Dubai on one of a series of camel farms beyond the Bawadi development. About 25 adults and children turned up and we had the chance to look through Lamjed's and Rachel's telescopes at Venus, Jupiter and later the moon.

Lamjed gave a very interesting introduction to the identification of the stars through the Greek myths and as it was getting dark and the moon was not up, he could point to the star collections in the myths such as Pegasus, Andromeda and the Milky Way. We also saw Cygnus and Aquila. For many of us this was our first opportunity to identify the stars.

But the high point of the evening for me was seeing Jupiter's rings and moons and later our moon with its craters and dark areas. To see these with the aid of the telescopes was awesome.

Lamjed was also very knowledgeable about the distance to the stars, our star/sun, planets and their orbits, their vast numbers and age and that the light we see could be thousands of years old, the nearest star being 4 light years away.

This was both an educational and entertaining evening and very well organised by Lamjed and Pradeep I was very pleased to have this opportunity and hope there will be more in the future. *Thanks to Mairead Porter for this report*

An evening at Al Ain Zoo

On arrival at the Al Ain Zoo complex at the foothills of Jebel Hafeet, DNHG members were welcomed by the curator who gave a short introduction. The zoo was

established some time ago but has just completed a major upgrade as part of an initiative towards Al Ain and the UAE having the largest zoo in the world.

On entering we found a flock of flamingos cooling themselves in a well landscaped pond setting.



Flamingos
Photograph by Cécile Javelle

Colour location maps showed where each of the areas of the zoo could be found.



You are here
Photograph by Karen Leschke

Paths and grassed areas lead the visitors through a well planned and beautifully landscaped zoo with plenty of areas for families to relax and have a picnic, see the animals in a natural habitat and enjoy the surroundings. Glassed walls, raised platforms and shelters allowed us to see the animals without fences and to take photographs.



Natural settings
Photograph by Karen Leschke

Animals exhibited included birds, reptiles, big cats, African animals (giraffe, zebra, wildebeest etc), Australian emus, monkeys, goats, deer, oryx, gazelle and more, all kept in environments similar to their own natural habitats.

The Bird Show attracted a large crowd where eagles, hawks, falcons, snakes etc wooed the crowd with their antics and obedience to their trainers. Children were delighted to see the animals up close and have their photos taken with the zoo staff.

This was a very memorable visit to what is already a very popular and well presented zoo. *Report by Karen Leschke*

Cécile Javelle and her family also enjoyed the trip. Cécile added: We were warned: the zoo is HUGE. Actually, I'm quite confident that the zoo could accommodate the whole Al Ain population (but the parking lot wouldn't). The weather was still a bit hot and sticky – nothing unusual for the season, but waiting a few more weeks might have been better.

We noticed that the flamingos were a light shade of pink, more "pink" anyway than the ones in Ras al Khor nature reserve in Dubai, which are nearly white. After the speech, everyone scattered and mixed with the other visitors. We made it first to the African mix, admiring gazelles and other delicate herbivores on the way.



Visitors can get close to wild creatures
Photograph by Roger Neal

With the mountains in the background, it was easy to forget we were not in Africa. Giraffes and Zebras were a pleasure to see and we all laughed at seeing a giraffe putting out its tongue.



There is no possible comparison between the crowded Dubai zoo and the spacious Al Ain one. The animals have space, and we enjoyed watching the wolves running and playing in their huge cage.



The wolves in action
Photograph by Cécile Javelle

We were told that the bird show (at 6:30 pm) was a "must see", but the children were determined to visit the reptile house. Snakes are indeed fascinating, especially the albino one, which looked as if it had been painted a sort of unnatural yellow colour.



Albino snake
Photograph by Cécile Javelle

It was pitch dark when we came out and the distance made it impossible to attend the bird show on time ... so we had a picnic on a really thick lawn, and the children had a great time playing on several contraptions.

We may have seen only half of the animals, but Al Ain zoo is much more than a zoo; it's a big park, a playground, a wonderful place for a weekend. To see it all we would have needed an extra hour. Thanks to Al Ain group for the invitation! Report by Cécile Javelle

Dragonfly Detectives

The latest *Tribulus* (Vol. 17, 2007) contains an updated checklist of the UAE's dragonflies and damselflies, with good quality photo-

graphs of all local species, including male and female forms, and occasional odd colour morphs. The new checklist adds six species to the original list published in 1998 (also in *Tribulus*, Vol. 8.2). Finding and identifying some of the new species was straightforward. In other cases, the process was more protracted.

What follows is the story of the observation, discussion and eventual identification of one species, *Orthetrum ransonneti* – a rare and poorly known species that is found in arid regions of North Africa and the Middle East, and that may be better represented in the UAE than in most other places in its range. Although the identity of *O. ransonneti* was only recently confirmed, it is not uncommon in the UAE and northern Oman and has been observed in mountain and mountain front habitats from at least the Dibba area to Mahdhah in Oman, as well as Jebel Hafit in the UAE. The account that follows is adapted from *Tribulus*.

An enigmatic blue *Orthetrum* (a genus of perching dragonflies) has been observed and photographed in mountain wadis in the UAE and northernmost Oman over a number of years and was suspected to represent an unrecognised resident species. In habits and habitat it resembles *Orthetrum chrysostigma*, but the blue male does not have the waisted abdomen of *O. chrysostigma*. At the same time it is distinctly larger and has a heavier abdomen than the lightly-built *O. taeniolatum*, with which it otherwise agrees in general form, eye color (upper eye brownish rather than blue-green as in *O. chrysostigma*) and wing venation (as depicted in Askew's *Dragonflies of Europe* and Dijkstra & Lewington's *Field Guide to the Dragonflies of Britain and Europe*). Older females of blue *Orthetrum* spp. may sometimes achieve the blue color characteristic of males (see Fig. 17c), which could give the false impression of a "blue" male with a thick abdomen, but photographs confirm that the blue specimens in question are in fact males.

Chris Drew, then with Abu Dhabi's Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency (now the Environment Agency–Abu Dhabi, EAD), had concluded as early as 2002 that the unknown blue male was probably *Orthetrum ransonneti*, based on expected occurrences and the brief distinguishing information available in *Dragonflies of Europe*, including keys to related species. However, available published keys did not include *O. ransonneti*; the species had not been encountered by Graham Giles, the author of the original checklist; no photographs or detailed descriptions of *O. ransonneti* were readily available; and at the time local amateurs were not yet in close communication with knowledgeable experts. As a result, an authoritative determination remained pending until the matter was reprised in connection with finalizing the updated checklist.



Orthetrum ransonneti
Specimen photographed in Wadi Deftah

Inquiries were made, accompanied by photographs, to three distinguished experts acquainted with the dragonflies of Europe, the Near East and Africa, and actively engaged in regional studies. The initial responses served to emphasise that *O. ransonneti* is an uncommon species that remains poorly known and seldom collected, despite having a widespread distribution in arid regions from North Africa to Afghanistan. Only one of the experts consulted had ever seen it in the wild. In Oman, it has been collected on only a few occasions, in the mountains south and west of Muscat and also in Dhofar. Thus while *O. ransonneti* was generally acknowledged as the presumptive choice, a positive identification remained elusive.

Observations and photographs



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

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Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi
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Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

Geology - Gary Feulner
res 306 5570
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Insects – Gary Feulner

Fossils - Valerie Chalmers
res 349 4816,
fax 340 0990
email: valeriechalmers@hotmail.com

Plants – Valerie Chalmers

Seashells - Recorder 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.



taken locally made it possible to associate the enigmatic blue male with a brownish female having a distinctive banded abdomen and thoracic markings, but even this information did not advance matters. The experts were uniform in expressing their interest in the distinctive female, but all professed to be unacquainted with any *Orthetrum* quite like it.



O. ransonneti
This female is apparently old and has begun to acquire the blue colouration characteristic of males.



O. ransonneti female

It was apparent that expert review of actual specimens would be required to resolve the mystery. A convenient opportunity presented itself almost immediately in the form of a visit to the UAE by Dr. Vincent Kalkman in February 2008, in connection with his responsibilities as chair of the Odonata Group of the IUCN. Bob Reimer of the Al Ain ENHG escorted Kalkman on a field trip to a mountain front site where they were successful in collecting a specimen of the suspected *O. ransonneti* male. Kalkman's positive verdict came in an e-mail from Holland a few days later, and was based upon examination of the secondary genitalia plus direct comparison with specimens of *O. ransonneti* in his care at the Netherlands National Museum of Natural History (three males from Egypt and Turkey and a female from Persia, two of them dating to

the 19th century). Preserved specimens of dragonflies lose most of their original color, but Kalkman noted that the single female specimen seemed to show the same banded triangles on the abdomen as seen in photos of UAE females. *Report and photographs by Gary Feulner*

A Love Affair with a giant Beetle

(*Gazelle* readers will remember Gary Feulner's September 2008 article entitled "Biggest Beetle Lava", which described his encounter with the lava of *Anthracentrus arabicus*. The story this time is courtesy of the ENHG.)

Late one night, Dr Michael Gillett ran into a friend's home carrying a glass oven dish. He raced into the living room and set it on the coffee table, around which eight scientists waited with anticipation. In the dish were two insects, known as *Anthracentrus arabicus*, or the giant longhorn beetle of the UAE desert, which he had trapped at the base of a tree. "If you disturb them they have an active defence posture," said Dr Gillett, a biochemist and the world's premier authority on the beetle. "They have these amazing jaws, or mandibles, and they can swivel to face their enemy. It can be quite frightening."

That night in the living room of Dr Gillett's friend, the group of scientists huddled on the couch to observe the tense captives. Of the 350,000 species in the world, these UAE giants are second only to species found in Brazil's rainforest. These nocturnal insects can measure up to 11cm in length, with sharp spines running down their shoulders for protection. And while males tend to be smaller than females, they are very aggressive when pitted against another of their sex. Dr Gillett had caught two males.

The scientists watched as the beetles spread their jaws, each agitated by the other's presence. Before long, the two insects lunged at



each other. Dr Gillett, in the interest of preserving his specimens, reached in to separate the duelling giants. "I was bitten on the finger and it bled," he said. "And it hurt. It really hurt." Dr Gillett's reaction to the bite sent the dish flying to the ground where it shattered.



Anthracocentrus arabicus

It was, in the end, just another episode in the history of the Emirates Natural History Group, a national organisation that boasts hundreds of members. With chapters in Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Al Ain, the group has held regular seminars, hosted guest speakers, planned field trips and conducted research since it was founded in 1977. Comprising both scientists and laymen, membership is open to anyone with an interest in the natural world. Each chapter publishes a monthly newsletter, and the Abu Dhabi group produces a reputable biannual scientific journal titled *Tribulus*, to which all members can contribute.

Most recently, Dr Gillett, who had previously worked at UAE University for more than 13 years, travelled to the Emirates from Birmingham, UK, to help classify and catalogue the thousands of insects currently in the Natural History Group's possession. Meanwhile, he held a series of lectures about the giant beetles. The son of a fly fisherman, Dr Gillett's interest began when he was just four years old. He recalls catching moths at night on the front porch, and keeping them in shoeboxes. He admired their intricate beauty, and has had trouble putting them down ever since. But giant beetles are now Dr Gillett's passion. Until recently these beetles were considered extremely rare. They came to Dr Gillett's attention in the 1990s when two specimens, both dead, were found in the desert near Al Ain. It was not until 2003 that the first live specimen was captured.

Dr Brigitte Howarth, an assistant professor in the Department of Natural Science and Public Health at Zayed University, was the scientist who made the discovery. "What is interesting is they are barely known in the UAE," she said. "They are a great rarity. But that is changing. We now know where and how to look for them." Research into the giant longhorn beetles has revealed the insect is exclusively associated with ghaf woodlands, desert trees common in the Emirates. These trees are known for their long roots, which stretch between 30 and 60 metres. It is here, underground, that the beetles grow as larvae for up to five years, feeding on the roots. When they emerge from the ground, the beetles are already full size. They never feed. Instead, the giants live off the fat and nutrients they built up underground. Males outnumber females by six to one, and live for about one month. Females live only a couple of days. But the short life span of the female, combined with the predominance of males, ensures efficient breeding. After the female is impregnated, it extends a 3cm tube from its abdomen and plants it in the ground. Through this tube it lays several eggs the size of a grain of rice. The giant beetles grow, live and die in the shade of a desert tree. To catch the beetle, Dr Gillett sets up wooden boards along the base of a ghaf tree. The insects love enclosures, and at night, they can often be found under them.

For years Dr Gillett and Dr Howarth have studied the intimate link between the giant longhorn beetle and ghaf trees. They have discovered these beetles are not only vital to the health and ecological balance of these desert woodlands, but artificially planted trees and those surrounded by building developments are barren of the insects. And as more trees are cut down or transplanted to make way for ceaseless development, scientists fear the bond between the giant beetle and ghaf trees will be broken. This disruption, scientists warn, could have a drastic effect on other animals. Ghaf woodlands are a hub of desert life. Moths, ants, spiders, owls,

scorpions, mice and gerbils are just a few of the animals who depend on the trees. "This habitat is under serious threat from development in the UAE,"

Dr Gillett said, "And the beetle could help us to establish the value and conservation potential of desert sites in Abu Dhabi and Dubai emirates and further afield." Dr Gillett's research on ghaf trees and the giant UAE beetle has been conducted in two phases. The first stage involved studying the beetle population at close range in the desert just outside Al Ain. During this time he has mapped out their behavioural patterns and relationship with the surrounding environment. The second phase, now underway, aims to widen the area of research to assess their environmental significance. Dr Gillett and Dr Howarth hope to prove the ecological importance of these beetle giants. To them, insects are animals that must be protected. "Most people think it is OK to step on an ant," Dr Howarth said. "But it is not." *Thanks to ENHG.*

Erratum:

Oasis Skimmer Dragonfly

The "dragonfly" depicted on page 4 of the previous *Gazelle* (October 2008) is NOT the Oasis Skimmer *Orhetrum sabina*. It is not even a dragonfly but a damselfly, *Ceragrion glabrum*, which has been called, in the vernacular, the "Olive Eyes Damselfly".

In an effort to illustrate the text, your humble editor lifted what seemed to be a suitable image from *The Emirates – A Natural History*, generally one of the more authoritative volumes available locally. However, everyone has an Achilles' heel, and we seem to have found this one unerringly, a case of captions listed in a different order from the photographs. A photo of the real Oasis Skimmer dragonfly accompanies this erratum.

The occasion presents itself, however, to make an easy layman's



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distinction between dragonflies and damselflies (which are closely related). Dragonflies perch with their two pairs of wings extended to either side, or perhaps slightly dipped; they cannot fold their wings together. Damselflies, on the other hand, are generally smaller, more delicate and less mobile, and when perched they fold their two pairs of wings together vertically over their backs. *Erratum by Anne Millen and Gary Feulner*



Oasis Skimmer - *Orthetrum sabina* (Photograph by Gary Feulner)

Letters to the Editor

Do you have some comment, suggestion or query on natural history that you would like our members to know about or answer? Just want to tickle things up a bit?



Please send your letter to any of the committee members listed, by fax or e-mail, or direct to *Gazelle* editor, Anne Millen, email: pvana@emirates.net.ae

Membership Reminder !

Please note that receipt of the *Gazelle* and entitlement to participate in field trip depends on current membership. If you have not renewed your membership by our

January meeting, we remove your name from the list of current members, removing these entitlements. Contact our membership secretary Anin, or Lena Linton (details for both above) to renew.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

14 December Members' Night:
Dr Richard Morris - An Expat's Recollection of Saudi Natural History
Sue Hunter - Sunderbans Mangrove Reserve, India
Angela Manthorpe - A Descent into Majlis al Jinn, Oman

Field Trips (Members only, please. Details inside, p.2)

21 November Glass Recycling Centre

22 November Sharjah Aquarium

TBA Birding

Eid al Adha Sunderbans Mangrove Reserve & Kolkata, India

Further field trips, details and any changes will be announced by e-mail circular.