

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Committee Changes

Sandhya Prakash, our very tech-savvy former Field Trip Coordinator on the DNHG Committee, is putting her IT skills to use for us as our new Website Coordinator. News of this will follow in our December issue. Replacing Sandhya as one of our Field Trip Coordinators is **Sonja Lavrenčić**, who has been well known to members as an enthusiastic field tripper and organiser for some time. Welcome to your new positions, Sandhya and Sonja!

Martina Fella reports that on a November boat ride near to 'Sheikh Hamdan Island' (also known as Jumeirah Island) she and her family came across a group of Pacific humpback dolphins. Martina wrote, "This was really surprising as we had not expected them so close to the public beach. We counted about five adults, one of which was really large, and three or four babies.



Photographs by Martina Fella

The babies were *very* small and appeared to have been born only very recently. The dolphins came very close to our boat, but the visibility in the water was not great. Also, it was very difficult to get a decent photograph of them as one never knew where they would come up next to breathe.



We observed them for nearly half an hour. They seemed very relaxed and not in a hurry to go. We only got a bit concerned about their well being when, a little later, a speedboat went right over the area where we saw these wonderful creatures.



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.) Subscriptions paid now are good through to August 2011.

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:

Tanya Healy, EMEG
Michael Jennings
Narayan Karki
Juliette Winser
Binish Roobas
Martina Fella
Gary Feulner
Jenny Hill



In the palm gardens
Photograph by Jenny Hill

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



Hajar Mountain Nature Hike 10 Dec

Gary Feulner will lead a full day nature hike in the Hajar mountains near Hatta. There will be mixed emphasis on plants, animals, insects, geology and archeology. This will be a walk, not a climb, but there are no trails, the ground is typically rough and uneven, and we will ascend and descend several slopes between the wadi bed and gravel terraces. In addition, we will cross one low pass with loose scree on the descent, requiring careful attention to footing. Total distance ~9km, total time 7-8 hours, slow pace. Suitable for regular hikers or fit and energetic novices. Bring boots or sturdy shoes, minimum 3 litres of water, lunch, hat, sun cream, camera, binoculars, etc. 4WD preferred. Leave Dubai ~7:00am, estimated return ~6:30pm. Limit 15 people. For sign-ups after Nov 30, while Gary is away, please contact Val Chalmers (valeriechalmers@hotmail.com) to get meeting place and time.

* * *

And Some More Members' News ...

Helga and Willy Meyer are now living in Vietnam, and have written several times to express their astonishment. "This place! So green, no dust but traffic from hell. You should see me trying to cross the street...ha ha, I need a guide! But I have seen eight butterflies already: white ones, yellow ones and one *black* one. What a beauty! He was dancing in the wind."

Willy added, "One thing you can't miss here is the dragonflies. Not sure which species, but there are thousands around and everywhere! And lots of silent bats, skimming the waters for insects. The biggest surprise, though, was a little rat we saw rummaging over the water lily leaves in the pond across the road. I have never seen anything like that. The little fellow even went 'snorkeling' occasionally!"

Members' Night: Our Speakers

Ajmal Hasan, the DNHG's Chief Engineer, is a keen wildlife enthusiast and natural history photographer who has lived in the UAE since 1998. He currently works as an Academic Coordinator - PG studies at Khalifa University's branch campus in Sharjah. Holding a Higher Diploma in Computer Engineering, he has quite opposite interests when it comes to his academic and extra-curricular pursuits. With a particular fascination for snakes and other creepy-crawly reptiles, he frequently takes the opportunity to be out and about in the natural environment of the UAE, its deserts, sabkhas, beaches and wadis. He also promotes eco-conservation and education, especially when he meets construction workers on his trips. Ajmal's love of nature began as a five year old when he was tossed about on a bull's horns but apart from that incident, he has had no other major issues and continues doing what he likes doing most - being out in the open learning about the flora and fauna of the region, and taking photographs

Beryl Comar has a long association with the DNHG. She is a past editor of *Gazelle*, and has served on the Committee in several capacities including Special Projects. Beryl has been a DNHG member since the early 1980s - the old Metropolitan Hotel meetings. She has always has a taste for adventure and before coming to Dubai, taught on voluntary service for four years in Tanzania, in Arusha. In the UAE, she has worked with HCT and Zayed University as well as the British Council in Dubai. Together with her late husband Dr Sandy Fowler, who wrote the "A Rough Sheller's Guide to the Northern Emirates" and who passed away in November 2009, she took a keen interest in UAE shells. The Members Evening was Beryl's suggestion and she spoke

at our first event on "Data Collection for Paper Nautilus in UAE". Beryl started recording finds, their location and time of year, many years ago.

Beryl can be seen regularly on Dubai TV on Tuesday evenings, answering questions on relationships in 'ASKONE'. She is owner of The Change Associates and a leading hypnotherapist and NLP trainer in the Middle East. But don't worry; she is just going to talk about nautilus and paper nautilus!

Binish Roobas was born in Kerala and grew up amongst the prolific and varied flora and fauna of South India. He graduated with first class honours in Zoology and mainly specialises in birds and butterflies. To that end, he has travelled a lot in Kerala. He worked as a naturalist for a back water resort called Coconut Lagoon at Kumarakom, Kerala for about one year. In June 2010, he was at Gharwal Himalayas for a bird rediscovery project, "Let's Rediscover the Himalayan Quail". He has been a member of several bird surveys in Kerala for the Forest Department of Kerala and the Kottayam Nature Society. He is best known to DNHG members for winning the Overall Best Photograph award in 2009 with his photograph named "Juveline Cobra" (below). Binish has lived in Dubai for the last five and a half years working in the hospitality industry. At present he is on the pre-opening staff of The Ritz-Carlton Dubai International Financial Centre as Room Reservations Agent, but he still manages to pursue his interest in zoology and natural history, and to enjoy nature photography.





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.

Some Pheasant News

In response to the recent report of pheasants in the Musandam (*Gazelle*, October 2010), Michael Jennings, the coordinator and editor of the ABBA project (Atlas of Breeding Birds of Arabia), wrote to add the following historical background: "A pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*) was shot in Wadi Hadramaut in 1934 and the specimen is in the natural history museum at Tring, Hertfordshire, UK. It was probably introduced by one of the western educated ruling families in the area at the time - presumably they got a taste for hunting, shooting and fishing early on. They were also introduced onto various UAE islands in the 1990s and several have turned up on the mainland. Your records of four in a small area is interesting."

Butterfly News: African Emigrant

Afoot near noon one morning in mid-September, I encountered some ten or more of the African emigrant butterfly (*Catopsila florella*) outside the north end of the Boulevard at Emirates Towers.



African emigrant butterfly
Catopsila florella

It is a relatively large, plain, yellow-white butterfly with a strong, high flight that is distinctive among UAE butterflies and makes it easy to identify, even from a distance. What puzzled me is that it is not a very common butterfly in the UAE

and, in the past, I had normally seen it only after recent rainfall.

In this instance, a couple of minutes of observation made it clear that the butterflies were gathering around several banks of large landscaped shrubs of a red-flowering Hibiscus (but not, apparently, *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*, a landscaping favorite with extremely large-petaled flowers, that was once depicted on a UAE stamp). The butterflies were feeding on the flowers but also sheltering among leeward leaves as the wind picked up. The individuals were well aware of each other, with repeated attention suggestive of courtship, so we can probably expect to see others in the future.
Report by Gary Feulner

The Marine Mammal Rescue Course

We were fortunate to have two prominent experts Stephen Marsh and Richard Iderton from the British Divers Marine Life Rescue visit the U.A.E. in October to train two groups of participants on a one day Marine Mammal Rescue course. British Divers Marine Life Rescue is an organisation established in 1988 dedicated to the rescue and well being of all marine animals in distress around the UK.



The models were heavy and surprisingly lifelike

The course that I was fortunate to attend was hosted at EMEG in Jebel Ali. The morning consisted of lectures familiarising us with the many different types of cetacean and the theory of rescue. In the afternoon we practiced the rescue

techniques at the shoreline using an inflatable dolphin and a larger 'cetacean' which looked like a whale. They were very life like and extremely heavy having been filled with water to replicate the type of weight we would be encountering in reality.



Our 'cetacean' afloat

During the morning we were introduced to the different species of cetacean looking at their physical characteristics which included the different lengths according to the species in question. A sperm whale could reach up to 20.5 metres in length and in contrast a common dolphin would be as little as 2.5 metres long. Each species would need to be handled in a different way due to the variation in size. Of the 85 different species of cetaceans, one third can be encountered in UAE waters.

We learned a little more about the mysterious dugong of the order Sirenia. It is the only marine herbivorous mammal in the world and feeds on sea grass in relatively shallow water. The UAE waters host the second largest population in the world, Australia having the largest population. They are slow to mature; the male matures between 4 - 7 years old and the female at 6 - 7 years old. The females calve only a few times in their 50 year life span and after a gestation period of



13 months, they invest considerable time in parental care.

In any rescue expedition, firstly we need to be careful not to put ourselves in danger. Noise should be kept to a bare minimum and the mammal needs to be placed upright which will assist their breathing. The breathing rates do vary depending on the size of the mammal. Small cetaceans like the common dolphin for example have a normal rate of 2-5 breaths per minute. If this dolphin was under severe stress it would increase to a rate of 10 or more breaths per minute. For medium cetaceans like the pilot whale, the average normal breathing rate is 1 breath per minute and for the sperm whale one breath every twenty minutes would be quite normal. It is therefore important to identify what you are working with so that you can assess the level of stress the mammal is experiencing and help reduce this stress as much as possible. This of course will increase the chances of a good rescue outcome.

It is also important to make sure that the blow hole is clear and does not get any water inside as the cetacean will drown. It was suggested that one person be appointed to protect the blow hole (by cupping a hand over the tail end of the blow hole) and to monitor the breathing all the time - that was my job for one of the exercises.



Protecting the blow hole

The mammal needs to be kept moist and cool at all times which could be quite challenging in this climate. We used a moist sheet which was placed over the body of

the inflatable dolphin or whale and continuously doused with water. An inflatable pontoon devised in New Zealand was an invaluable piece of equipment to assist in refloating the large mammals and we used this to refloat the 'whale'.

At the end of an amazing day we were all awarded a certificate of completion and a handbook with many pages of valuable information.



It was a wonderful day!

To follow on from the training we hope that we can start implementing our skills should a situation arise, and invest in a pontoon that would be very important in a rescue. If you are interested in reading more about the BDMLR you can visit their website which is www.bdmlr.org.uk. *Report by Juliette Winser, photographs by Tanya Healy, EMEG*

Jimi Oasis Walk

Back in April this year Brien Holmes led members of the Dubai and Al Ain groups on a walk around the Jimi Oasis. Described as the heart of Al Ain, the Jimi Oasis has been farmed for centuries and is one of the oases that formed the Buraimi Oasis complex.



In the palm gardens

Our walk took us through date gardens where we followed the falaj system and Brien filled us in on the different types of date palms, different varieties of dates and how they were harvested. Date palms are either male or female and it is the female trees that produce the fruit yield. Pollination is therefore a complicated process because if they depended on natural pollination half the trees would need to be male which makes date cultivation uneconomical. Pollination is carried out manually with pollen from the flowers of a single male tree being able to pollinate about 50 female trees meaning that only a couple of male trees are required in a date plantation. In addition to date palms we also saw some large native trees within the oases such as the sidr (*Zizyphus spinachristi*) and the ghaf (*Prosopis cineraria*) and some plants which are cultivated for their medicinal properties.



Falaj system

The date gardens are watered by flood irrigation, with the falaj system running throughout all the farm plots. However, where once the water came from wells throughout the oases, many of which we observed along the way (and almost fell into), today water is pumped in to irrigate the crops. Stones packed inside cloth are used to divert water from one area to another. One individual has the responsibility of distributing water within the oasis, the timing of which, in the past, was based on solar clocks in the day time and the movement of designated stars at night. Although not in evidence in Jimi Oasis, solar clocks are still found today in other oases, and markers on some of the walls indicate the time by the rising or setting of the star above or below the marker.



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 Antiquities Department has been restoring some of the oasis buildings dating from the early 18th century onwards, using the original materials where possible. When we first entered the oasis we came across a farmhouse and mosque built using mud fortified with straw. Towards the end of the walk, we passed the residence of Sheikh Ahmad Bin Hilal, who played the role of intermediary between the ruler in Abu Dhabi and the populace of Al Ain and northern Oman. The house, hidden behind the palms was a large rectangular fortified structure, dating from the mid-19th century and surrounded by a high wall with gun openings at regular intervals. The walk ended at another restoration, this time within which the use of square mud bricks was much more evident. These mud bricks, fortified with straw, are dried for several days before being stacked to form a wall up to a metre thick.



Restoration work

The trip lasted about two hours and made us feel we were miles from civilization despite being in the heart of a city of half a million people with traffic only a short walk away. Thanks go to Brien for taking us on such an informative and interesting walk! *Report and photographs by Jenny Hill.*

Mangroves by Kayak

An early start took 35 DNHG members up to Abu Dhabi in mid-October to explore mangrove swamps in kayaks, hosted by Noukhada Adventure Company. Donning our life jackets and clutching our paddles we set out towards the main water channel to reach the

start of the mangrove area. Our guide was well informed and briefed us on this delicate environment and the threats that these areas are encountering due to dredging, land development and coastal erosion caused by speed boats passing through to Yas Island's new marina.



Embarked and receiving instructions

Further along the canal we stopped to look at a sandy bank which is home to a large community of red foxes and where young cubs have been previously spotted. This area has unfortunately been subjected to a great deal of coastal erosion which continues to endanger the foxes' habitat. Noukhada are presently working on reducing the erosion by building a protective wall of sandbags to prevent the sand washing away. This project is underway and open to volunteers if anyone would like to help.



Fox hole in the eroding habitat

We paddled off the main canal and started really feeling the solitude of the mangroves. The tide was quite low so the roots protruded above the water line, taking in oxygen direct from the air. Many small black crabs could be seen dangling from the breathing roots patiently waiting for the next tasty morsel of food to drift by in the passing current.



There were very few birds around; we were told they would be more abundant during the early part of the year after the migrating birds return.

The mangroves are a vitally important area to preserve as they are host to the 90% of young fish that start their life cycles here. As I observed the shallow water, a carpet of tiny fish could be seen darting away from what they perceived to be a predator - but it was just my paddle.



The mangrove breeding grounds

Once back on dry land and quite hungry, we stopped in Khalifa Park to enjoy a picnic lunch under the shade of the date palms before returning to Dubai. *Report and photographs by Juliette Winser*

Dragonflies and Robberflies

In between Nepali holiday-making in the hills of Ramechhap (for Dosain) and the streets of Kathmandu (for Dipawli), Gary Feulner and Narayan Karki commenced a project to augment Nepal's existing token representation on the "asia-dragonfly" website. Observations in the course of hiking and touring resulted in photographic records of more than 50 species, including at least one not found in the latest published list (of 172 species). Keith Wilson, our June 2010 speaker and an Asian dragonfly specialist, has offered to help with identifications, and Gary and Narayan are in touch with Nepali specialists as well.

One unexpected observation was of dragonfly predation by a robberfly (Diptera: Mydidae). On a morning walk through rice fields along a tributary of the Tamakosi River, Gary had noticed a larger than normal robber-

fly - larger, anyway, than the several similar species found in various UAE environments (see *Tribulus*, vol. 16.2). A few hours later, along the main river, Narayan spied a tussle on the ground which turned out to be the large robberfly devouring a large female dragonfly. The robberfly was apparently unable to withdraw its proboscis despite manipulation (or perhaps because of it); it stayed engaged for photos and ultimately finished its meal *in vitro* following temporary collection, leaving behind a rather deflated-looking dragonfly carcass.



Robberfly devouring the insides of a dragonfly.



Robberflies are apparently formidable predators. Local records include at least one instance of a robberfly catching and devouring the local red and yellow hornet *Vespa orientalis*, a large insect which itself is capable of scattering all but the most intrepid picnickers. *Report by Gary Feulner and Narayan Karki*

Who's Watching the Birds?

Our fall birdwatching trip to the Dubai Pivot Fields and environs (on Sep 24) witnessed the unusual spectacle of fields full of ruffs, as a flock of

some 200 males, females and juveniles had landed just a couple of days before. Nevertheless, the 'Bird of the Day' was probably the scaly-breasted munia, of which several males were perched in the grove of young palms.



Scaly-breasted munia
Photograph from Wikipedia, by J. M. Garg, 2005, Kolkata, West Bengal, India



Juvenile scaly-breasted munia
Photograph from Wikipedia, by J. M. Garg, 2005, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

As we were preparing to leave, we encountered a lone, white-bearded man with binoculars, looking like a knowledgeable sort, and perhaps a regular twitcher or a member of one of the other natural history groups. Introductions were made and it turned out that the gentleman was an official of Dubai Airport, which regularly monitors local avian populations first hand, as part of its aviation safety program.

At nearby Al Warsen Lake, the purple herons appeared on cue, but there was much more action beside the lake, on the adjacent flooded road and roundabouts, where scores of ruffs, red-wattled plovers and black-tailed godwits were gathered. It appeared the flooding may have been due to overflow (or seepage) from the lake itself, at its low points along the southern margin.



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Finally, a brief stop outside Hide 3 at Ras al-Khor produced not only greater flamingos, but also a flock of about ten spoonbills clustered in the shade of a tree. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Second Marine Conservation Forum 2010

Emirates Wildlife Society in association with the World Wide Fund for nature, (EWS-WWF), in partnership with The PEW Environment Group, takes great pleasure in announcing the 2nd Marine Conservation Forum 2010, to be held in Abu Dhabi on December 14th, 15th and 16th at the Radisson Blu Hotel, Yas Island, United Arab Emirates.

In September 2006, EWS-WWF hosted its first Marine Conservation Forum in Abu Dhabi, UAE. It was at this Forum that delegates from across the region and abroad focused on collaborating efforts for the conservation of marine turtles and coral reefs.

It is now, with the Marine Conservation Forum 2010, that we will again bring together representatives from governments, private sector, NGO's, biologists and specialists to evaluate not only the state of our shared marine environment but to work towards common solutions for habitat and species conservation.



Pacific humpback dolphins close to the beach, Dubai
Photograph by Martina Fella

This aim of this event is to bring together individuals and groups working towards marine conservation in the Gulf and Middle East region, discuss local as well as global challenges and encourage the sharing of ideas and knowledge. For more information and to register please visit www.ewswwf.ae/mcf2010.

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 the editor, Anne Millen, email: pvana@emirates.net.ae. Any accompanying photographs should be sent as .jpg files.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

Sun Dec 12

Members' Night

Ajmal Hasan - Adventure Photography – its merits and its perils

Beryl Comar - The Nautilus and Paper Nautilus

Binish Roobas - An Introduction to Kerala Natural History

Sun Jan 9

Sabir Bin Muzaffar: Ecology and Conservation of Migratory Birds.

Field Trips (Members only, please.)

Dec 10

Mountain/Wadi Nature Hike

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