

GAZELLE

Vol 26 no 12 December 2011



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Unidentified Object

Walking on Rams beach (north of RAK) after an October storm, Barbara Couldrey, who has an eye for what is out-of-the-ordinary, found an accumulation of little black blebs, like miniature boxing gloves, attached to small pieces of coral and cemented sediment thrown up by the waves.



"Boxing glove" blebs attached to beach rock. Photo: Barbara Couldrey

They looked for all the world like the residue of an oil spill, complete with adhered sand grains. They even felt tarry, but they all had a similar size and shape, and did not actually coat the rock itself. Barbara and a friend cut one open and found "a slimy green mass" inside.

Can anyone identify this? Suggest-

tions can be sent to any member of the committee.

We hope to be able to give Barbara an answer in next month's *Gazelle*.

Two notices

Field Trips vary in both format and organization, 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 honor their commitments or to give timely notice otherwise, as a courtesy both to the trip leader and to other members who might like to have the chance to participate.

DNHG membership was due for annual renewal in September 2011, for membership through September 2012.

If you have not renewed your membership by our January meeting (on 8 Jan 2012) your name will be removed from our mailing list.

Please contact our Membership Secretary, Anindita on anin@emirates.net.ae in order to renew your membership.

DNHG Membership

DNHG Membership remains a bargain at Dh.100 for couples/families and Dh. 50 for singles. You can **join or renew at our meetings or by sending us your details and a cheque** made out to: Lloyds TSB Bank account no. 60600669933501. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.)

DNHG membership entitles you to participate in field trips. It also helps pay for our lecture hall, publication and distribution of our monthly newsletter, the *Gazelle*, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects.

This Month's Contributors

The Editor would like to thank the following for their reports and contributions:

Barbara Couldrey
Louisa Akerina
Gary Feulner
Brett Cavanagh
Binish Roobas

Mairead Porter
Anne Millen
Sonja Lavrenčič
Rowland Browne
Tamsin Carlisle



Kathmandu Photo by: Sonja Lavrenčič

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



Pre-Christmas picnic in the desert with Brien Holmes on Friday, 23th December 2011

For those staying in Dubai over Christmas the DNHG is organising a pre-Christmas picnic in the desert with Brian Holmes.

The trip will include the "Twin Peaks", two limestone outcrops near Mahadah water plant pumping, driving across "Wadi Rhum", some desert driving, a chance to explore a bat cave and a picnic under the ghaf trees.

The central part of the day will be an international picnic so please bring your favourite national (or other) dish or two to share.

It will be a full day trip (camping overnight is also an option). If interested contact **Sonja Lavrenčič** on sonja@publicisgraphi.cs.ae for more information.



Slovenian Potica cake

Nepal Hill Country, March 23-31, 2012

Experience the verdant scenery and village life of Nepal's hill country – traditional houses, mountain trails, terraced cultivation of rice, corn and millet, foot-bridges across rivers, water buffalo milk, temple ceremonies, traditional dancing, and more – including 4 days homestay and optional day hikes. Also birds, butterflies, etc. Sightseeing in unforgettable Kathmandu to start. Return via upper Sunkosi

River, with temple visit and hot springs resort.

We will be traveling in the Kathmandu Valley and in the upper Sunkosi River area, generally at elevations of 750-2500m (2500-8000ft). Our week-long visit will include a mix of touring by vehicle, day hikes, cultural interaction and natural history observation, plus a day's introduction to the colour and chaos of Kathmandu. In the hill country, at Makadum in Ramechhap District, our host will be Narayan Karki, a former DNHG member known for his energy and enthusiasm, who is a wealth of knowledge about village life and customs.

(NB: *This will be a customized visit.* The village area is part of the Indigenous Peoples Trail network, but that initiative has not yet been developed into standardized commercial offerings.) Limited to 10 participants. For more details and itinerary, contact Gary Feulner: grfeulner@gmail.com or 04-306-5570.



Nepal hill temple ceremony

And some trips to bear in mind pending details:

Astronomy Night with JP Berger, Fri 20 Jan 2012

InterEmirates Weekend 24 - 25 Feb 2012

The 2012 InterEmirates weekend will be hosted by the Dubai Natural History Group. Planning has already begun, and it is likely that it will be a first - held in Dubai itself! Usually it is a weekend

away for Dubai, so this will be an exciting weekend for us. Planning for trips, activities and events is afoot, but if you have ideas of what you'd like to do, think others might learn from or enjoy, please contact any of the Committee members and tell them your idea.

Our Next Speaker

Dr Sabir Bin Muzaffar is a wildlife biologist specialising in the ecology, migration and diseases of birds. He received his B.Sc., M.Sc. and Ph.D. degrees from Memorial University, St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada where he worked on the ecology, parasites and diseases of seabirds in eastern Canada.

His research examined host-parasite-pathogen interactions and was key in determining the geographic spread of helminths and diseases of puffins, murres, razor-bills and gulls (among others) and their associations with climatic anomalies in the Northwest Atlantic.

He then did his post doctoral research at the University of California, Davis, on the ecology and migration of waterfowl in Europe and Asia, with special reference to the role of migratory birds in the geographic spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 (bird flu). This work shed light on the migratory movement of ducks and gulls and was instrumental in dispelling myths about their involvement in large-scale, long-distance spread of bird flu.

Dr. Muzaffar has also worked on the ecology and conservation of a wide variety of wildlife in Bangladesh, where he was born, including the critically endangered Hoolock Gibbon, bears, and migratory birds. He has published extensively in peer-reviewed scientific journals and is currently an Assistant Professor at the Department of Biology, United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain. He is currently initiating a project on the ecology and conservation of the Socotra Cormorant on some of Abu Dhabi's islands.



Email your field reports and news to clare.ohare@gmail.com (Arial 10 justified). Please send your photographs as **separate .jpg files** (preferably compressed for documents) or deliver them to Editor Clare O'Hare for scanning.

Nepal Trekking 22 Sep-1 Oct, 2011

The pan-Emirates group consisting of Iman Odeh-Yabroudi, Sonja Lavrenčič and Rowland Browne, Tamsin Carlisle (Dubai) and Brett Cavanagh (Al Ain) started their memorable trip in Kathmandu before the mountain adventures began.



5 trekkers in Kathmandu, at the foot of

Some highlights of the Kathmandu sightseeing included visits to Bouddhanath Stupa (the largest Buddhist stupa in Nepal), Pashupatinath (Temple of the Living Beings), Nepal's oldest Hindu temple and crematory (and a UNESCO World Heritage site), on the Bagmati River, where the group saw a number of funerals and cremation ceremonies taking place.

After leaving Kathmandu the group had an adventurous trip to reach Syabrubesi, the gateway to treks into the Langtang Valley, which included walking through landslides, which may have been caused in part by a magnitude 6 earthquake. Despite the roadblocks the group started the trek the next morning, reaching Bamboo Village, 1900m (with a net elevation gain of 700 metres).

The next day saw part of the group stop at Langtang Village (3541 metres) with the rest continuing on to Kyanjing Gumpa (3900 metres).



Shaggy yaks, with Himalayas in back-

The return trek from Kyanjing Gumpa to Lama via Langtang has stunning vistas down the valley. To avoid the possibility of running into landslides on the way back to Syabrubesi the porter led the group on the high road back to Syabru.

Tamsin and Brett took the opportunity of a sunrise flight over Sagarmatha (Mount Everest – 8848m) and along the Himalaya escarpment before returning, like the rest of the group, to the UAE.

Some selected highlights from the group:

Brett: The culture shock of arrival at KTM airport and stressful drive through the city abruptly ended my reverie. The narrow streets, while charming and colourful, were chock-a-block with traffic, and it took me a full two days to acclimate to the choking smog. We were happy to have the day free to shop for trekking gear in the quaint streets around our hotel and to sample a traditional Nepali lunch of momos - delicious stuffed dumplings.



Momos

Friday 23 Sep – Kathmandu Sightseeing

Tamsin: The stupa is a massive whitewashed hemisphere topped with a high gilded plaster crown. Blue "eyes of Buddha" gaze out in each cardinal direction, putting me in mind of Big Brother.

The Hindu crematorium, bisected by the sacred Bagmati River, is another face of Nepali religious devotion. This is no sanitised Western-style disposal of mortal remains behind closed doors. On the right bank, funeral pyres smoulder in very public final offerings to the gods. On the left, families gather to remember their departed loved ones, laying out puja offerings of sticky rice and other treats savoured by deities. The atmosphere is far from solemn, with the smiling families posing for photos as if picnicking. A further note of levity is introduced by naughty monkeys (rhesus macaques, *Macaca mulatta*) stealing the puja offerings.

Sat 24 Sep, 2011: Kathmandu - Syabrubesi

Rowland: Next part of trip goes from bad to worse. Landslide requires us to abandon 4X4, walk past landslide in intermittent rain, and board a 100%+ overloaded bus. Road appalling: narrow, unkempt, boulder-ridden, sheer drop on the side. We fear becoming road-fatality statistics.

Mon 26 Sep 11: Bamboo – Ghora Tabela

Rowland: Some dangerous walking, crossing recent landslides with rocks still falling. Rock hits Kamal on leg as he helps team cross. Huge boulder rockets down sheer slope 10m from where I stand with Iman. Its hundred tonne weight bounces like Indian rubber ball.

Tamsin: The rain has sent the local wildlife under cover, so we satisfy our nature-lust by botanising in the mysterious, dripping forest, taking photo after photo of luxuriant plant life. At least that gives us an excuse for snail-like progress, and I have never seen so many waterfalls in my life.



Swollen river

Brett: The diversity of plants and stunning beauty in every direction makes it easy to pause just to take everything in, as well as to catch one's breath.

Tues 27 Sep 11 Ghora Tabela - Langtang - Kyanjing Gompa

Brett: The path ascends gradually with few rock steps, no mud and perfect conditions for photography. Leaving the altitude victims in the care of Kumar, our youngest porter, the rest of us proceed to Kyanjing Gompa at 3900m. The vegetation is now distinctly alpine, following a progression from dense forest through low scrub then heather and grasses.

The Langtang Valley runs west to east, so there is a pronounced between Gymnosperm forests (conifers) on the cool north-facing slope and Angiosperms (flowering plants) on the warm south-facing slopes.



Approaching Kyanjing Gompa at the edge of a ridge, one suddenly encounters a magnificent vista of the picturesque village, with shaggy yaks grazing peacefully among the houses, spread out against a dramatic backdrop of the towering Himalayas.

The highest peak in the area is Langtang Lirung, 7227m.



Temple on the River

Thurs 29 Sep: Lama - Syabrubesi

Rowland: A long trip back: To avoid landslides, we take another most amazing, scenic route through the mountains with steep climbs followed by a precipitous descent to Syabrubesi.

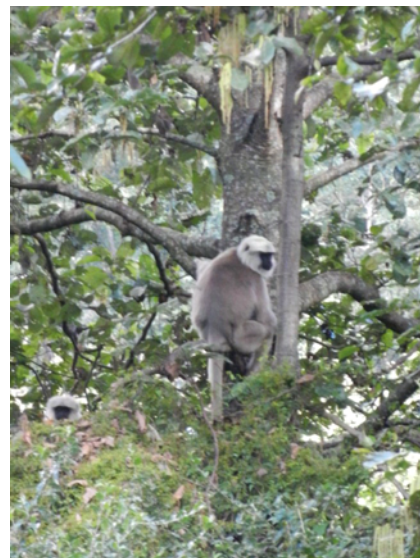


The group with porters and Sherpa

Tamsin: Tandi doesn't fancy re-running the landslide gauntlet, so leads us on the high road back to Syabrubesi. It's longer and he hasn't previously taken it, but his decision turns out to be inspired. I reckon this is our best day's trekking yet, affording gorgeous panoramas of densely wooded mountainsides and steep terraced valleys from a southwest-facing slope sparsely treed with pine and holly, interspersed with rhododendron bushes and open meadow.

We are finally getting wildlife sightings, mainly butterflies and agamid lizards. I later identify the lizards from photos as the Kashmir rock agama (*Laudakia tuberculata*) and the "large mountain lizard" (*Japalura major*), although the specimen I snapped was distinctly on the small side.

But further down, as oak and other broad-leaved deciduous trees start replacing the pines, we have our best wild-life sighting of the trip: a troop of black and white monkeys foraging in a broad-leaved tree. Their black faces surrounded by ruffs of pale fur mark them as Nepal grey langurs (*Semnopithecus schistaceus*), now recognised as a species distinct from the smaller Indian grey or hanuman langur (*S. entellus*).



Fri 30 Sep: Syabrubesi – Kathmandu

Tamsin: The journey back to Kathmandu is fraught with real danger. At one point, Rowland asks the driver of our 4X4 to slow down on an especially muddy, boulder-strewn section of road with plenty of S-bends, but he replies that he needs to get us past an active landslide as quickly as possible. We decide we'd better let our driver do his job!



Report by Tamsin Carlisle, Rowland Browne and Brett Cavanagh. Photos by Sonja Lavrenčič and Tamsin Carlisle.



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

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Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

Geology - Gary Feulner
res 306 5570
fax 330 3550

Insects - Gary Feulner

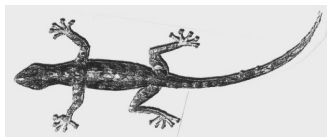
Fossils - Valerie Chalmers
res 349 4816,
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email: valeriechalmers@hotmail.com

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.



Kerala Trip - 4th to 12th November 2011

16 of us from the three UAE Natural History Groups went on this amazing trip. We flew into Trivandrum, came back from Cochin and covered 1700km in 9 days.

My favourite part was the sunset cruise in the Kerala houseboat on the Vembanad Lake where Binoy, our excellent guide, pointed out many birds - over the 9 days we saw 60 different species of birds. We visited Eravikulam National Park (altitude 2600m) where we took many photos of the famous Nilgiri Tahr and enjoyed an early morning trek in Chinnar's National Wildlife Sanctuary. We saw tea plantations, rubber and sandalwood groves and some of us had the ayurveda treatments for which Kerala is famous.

The spicy food of Kerala proved a challenge to some of the group. We appreciated all the hard work Binesh did to arrange this trip and there is a hope that he will repeat it early next year.

Report by Mairead Porter

Nest-building Division of Labour

A visit to Mushrif National Park, along the Khawanej Road, always results in a surprise or two. On an early December visit, we came upon a pair of Indian Silverbills building their nest. It was obvious that one bird was collecting nesting material - bits of feather, paper napkin and even a strip of bark.



Photo: Indian Silverbills at their nest in Mushrif Park (by Binish Roobas)

But it was only when we peered through the foliage with binoculars that we saw that they were employing a division of labor. A second adult bird was stationed within the nest, busily and fussily arranging the new materials to its liking.

They appeared to keep their respective roles throughout the quarter hour that we watched them. Dare we speculate which bird was which? *Report by Gary Feulner and Binish Roobas*

Cattle Egrets on SZR

Cattle Egrets are among the world's most widely distributed birds. They are named for their tendency to follow livestock around in grassy environments, feeding on insects flushed by the grazers. Dubai bird-watchers know that they also follow pivot irrigation systems and I have seen them follow human beings who were cutting rice in paddies. Although originating in the Old World, they are now found in Central and South America and have even been reported from South Georgia, on the edge of the Antarctic Ocean.



Cattle Egrets perched in a large tree

They are not strangers to urban environments, either. I have seen them roosting in large numbers in trees overhanging sidewalks in Cairo (where they tended to turn a slightly dingy grayish white colour). But it was not until UAE National Day 2011 that I saw them, three bright white ones, on the grassy landscaping along Sheikh Zayed Road opposite the Trade Centre area. With landscaping beneath the Dubai Metro now proceeding at last, could SZR become prime Cattle Egret real estate? Cattle Egrets



have bred in the UAE for a number of years although the breeding sites in private reserves were not generally known until more recently.

Report and photo by Gary Feulner

Yemen Arabian Leopard Captured

Members who contributed to the recent appeal by the Foundation for the Protection of the Arabian Leopard in Yemen (FPALY) will be pleased to know that the "challenge" appeal raised more than \$18,000.

Less happy news came to light shortly thereafter, with word of the posting on YouTube in May of a video of a small leopard captured in Abyan Province, on the south coast of Yemen, east of Aden. Abyan Province has been the site of armed insurgency since March 2011. The leopard video apparently did not attract much attention initially, although it appears that some early commentary in Arabic was critical. Other comments expressed surprise that leopards could still be found in Yemen.

David Stanton, Executive Director of FPALY, tells us that after learning of the video FPALY representatives spoke with the Director General of the district in question, who subsequently identified and contacted some of the men seen in the film. The DG is fully cooperative and has provided information regarding the origin of the animal, the approximate date of its capture, and its fate. It is said to have been sold for YR 700,000 (approximately US\$ 3,000) to an unknown party. The DG is continuing his investigation and follow-up will be provided in FPALY's newsletter.

Engineer Omer Baeshen, Director of the Endangered Species Unit at the Yemen EPA and CITES Coordinator for Yemen, was also contacted by e-mail by many FPALY supporters. He responded quickly, even during Eid Al-Adha. He thanked those who wrote, noted

that the current governmental instability makes it easier to conduct illegal action of this sort, but said that he was already in contact with the Chairman of Yemen's Environmental Protection Agency to investigate and take all necessary proceedings.

David Stanton made three very worthwhile points as footnotes to this specific incident: (1) the Yemeni hunters were doing what most rural peoples everywhere have done, until very recently. (2) FPALY itself has not included Abyan Province in its education efforts to date, because the Arabian leopard was believed to be already extinct there, so the incident adds both scientific knowledge and hope. (3) The greatest culprit remains the illegal trade in endangered wildlife, which provides a strong incentive to impoverished villagers. In Yemen, much of this trade involves neighbouring countries.

You can view the video in question at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6vFzGy1h3M&feature=related>

You can find additional information on the FPALY website, www.yemenileopard.org, including contact data for Engineer Omer Baeshen and others, in case you wish to offer thanks or encouragement.

Report by Gary Feulner

Insects - Dragonfly Migration

Sri Lanka, with 52 species of endemic dragonflies, experienced its yearly dragonfly migration, thought to be the longest insect migration, in mid-October.

A total of 117 species have been recorded in the country, many during the annual migration of dragonflies from India to Africa via Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Swarms were seen south of Colombo, and entomologists, birds and twitchers were very active.

Fairly heavy rain probably kept them out of the central highlands, but I did manage to photograph two sheltering in hotels.



Insects abound in lush tropical Sri Lanka, and near Adam's Peak, at Dalhouse, we spotted this tree festooned with nests or hives. Unfortunately, our guide did not know what they are. Does anyone?



At Kandalama, a marvelous praying mantis, soft green and highly theatrical, posed for photographs. Little did it know that there was a nice juicy dragonfly on a glass wall just round the corner. The mantis was alone, of course – they are carnivorous and will eat anything live, even each other.



Report and photos by Anne Millen.



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Review

Tribulus vol. 19: Flora of the Ru'us al-Jibal

Tribulus vol. 19 is a special issue principally devoted to a study of the flora of the Ru'us al-Jibal – the mountains of the Musandam peninsula – by DNHG Chairman Gary Feulner.

That study represents the product of efforts over many years and is illustrated by more than 200 photographs of Musandam flora and habitats, including more than four dozen photos of newly recorded species and other species not illustrated in available UAE or Oman references. The Ru'us al-Jibal is contrasted with the Hajar Mountains generally, and the Jebel Akhdar.

The *Tribulus* editors anticipate that this volume will "become a much-used handbook to the Ru'us al-Jibal and its flora for many years to come". Vol. 19 is double the normal length

(170 pages). It is available at DNHG meetings at Dh. 75 for soft-bound and Dh. for hardbound copies.

And news from Malaysia

Engineer Louisa Akerina, adventurous as ever, is now in Lumut in Malaysia, west of the Cameron Highlands and about three/four hours north of Kuala Lumpur.



Limestone caves. Photo: Louisa Akerina

She is working on a coastal engineering project, but has already

found time to visit some extensive limestone caves in the area.

As the site area is not as yet heavily urbanised, and there are beautiful offshore islands and reefs, Louisa anticipates that there will be plenty of natural history to explore.

Writers wanted!

Contributions to the *Gazelle* from old and new members alike are welcomed. Short pieces of 100-500 words are ideal as this allows publication of more pieces.



Praying Mill. Photo: Sonja Lavrenčič

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

Jan 8 Dr. Sabir Bin Muzzaffar: Ecology and Conservation of the Socotra Cormorant in the UAE: the case of Siniya Island

Field Trips (Members only, please)

Dec 23 Pre-Christmas Trip with Brien Holmes

Jan 20 Astronomy Night with JP Berger

Feb 24—25 InterEmirates Weekend

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