

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

DNHG members **Steve** and **Angela Manthorpe** arrived in Kazakhstan at the beginning of summer. Toiling up a dusty track on the way to the impressive mount Sherkala, their Lada taxi overheated, resulting in an impromptu walk across the steppe, and a look at wildlife that they had not expected.



Sherkala

The ground squirrels were too quick for photographs, but the Manthorpes were surprised to stumble across the local tortoises who were quite happy to pose.



Cooperative Kazakh tortoise

The Manthorpes have a grueling schedule through many of the central Asian states, and have promised to send news whenever they have the opportunity to email, which in some places will be unlikely. They will be back in the UAE briefly in July.

DNHG Committee are delighted to welcome a new office-bearer, **Christine Verreydt**, to their ranks as a Field Trip Coordinator. Christine has quite a bit of experience in hiking trips and trekking and has in the past given **Sonja Lavrenčič** valuable advice and help. Our busy (and somewhat more dramatic) field trip schedule has necessitated adding another coordinator to the present team. Full contact details for Christine will be published in our July/August issue of *Gazelle* - it will give her time to get her bearings.



Christine on the copper hike (right)

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.)

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:

Steve & Angela Manthorpe
Mohammed Arfan Asif
Valerie Chalmers & the photographers
Lamjed El-Kefi
Louisa Akerina
Martina Fella
Gary Feulner

The dark side of the moon

Photograph by
Lamjed El-Kefi



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



End-of Season Function

The annual End-of-Season Dinner and Photographic Competition was again held in the Utsav Restaurant at the India Club. We had the largest attendance to date – 73 people in all.



Delicious Indian food!

It had been decided to hold another 'Bring and Guess' session this year instead of a quiz as it proved so enjoyable and entertaining last year and once again it was very successful. Our panel of experts, Gary Feulner, Lamjed El-Kefi, Ada Natoli and Rob Whelan did an excellent job in trying to identify the interesting objects/curiosities.



The panel

It was not easy - there was a curious mix of objects, and after all, we *still* haven't identified the large white fibre-filled balls that Gary brought last year! The audience also had a go at trying to identify the objects beforehand and Anne Millen had the top score, winning a Dh100/-Magrudy's voucher.

It was pleasing to see that we had a large selection of photographs for the photographic competition. The audience voted for the ones

they thought best in each category and for an overall winner.

Martina Fella was the winner of the 'Life on Earth: Plants/Animals/Fossils' Section with her photograph of a toad-headed agama held in the hands of her daughter Amelie.



Amelie's little toad-headed agama

Jenny Hill won the prize in the 'Earth and Environment: Landscapes/Geology' section with her photograph of calcite pools. Jenny sent some further information about her photograph. "This photo was taken during a field trip, on the way to Donkey Fox Wadi. If you didn't know they were there, just off the road, you could easily just drive past the pools. They are formed in areas where the surface is ophiolite rock. Goundwater rising to the surface through the ophiolite becomes alkaline and calcium rich and, when it reaches the surface, reacts with the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to precipitate calcium carbonate.



Calcite pools, on the way to Donkey Fox Wadi

The winner of the 'Man and his Influence: Archaeology/Architecture/Culture/ (People)/Environment' was Lamjed El-Kefi with his photograph of an Omani woman.



In the driving seat

Lamjed's underwater photograph of a turtle and *Anthias* was voted the overall winner for 2011.



Turtle and *Anthias*

Lamjed received the cup and two Dh100/- Magrudy vouchers and both Martina and Jenny received Dh100 Magrudy vouchers.



Winners of the photographic competition, Jenny Hill, Martina Fella and Lamjed El-Kefi

Our thanks go to the India Club for once again hosting the event and for another excellent buffet. Also to Pradeep for doing the booking, liaising with the India Club and for choosing the menu and to Fran M'Caw and Trish Cox, in particular, for their hard work with the photographic competition on the night. We must also thank the four members of the panel of experts for valiantly taking part in the 'Bring and Guess' session. *Thanks to Valerie Charmers..*



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 Miller for scanning.

Changes at EMEG

Major Ali Saqar Sultan Al Suwaidi, EMEG's founder and CEO, was on hand to greet us personally on our last visit to Ghantoot reserve and added his insights to a video presentation about EMEG's activities. EMEG's preserve at Saih Shuaib has lost some land to the south-west to DEWA, but has been expanded to the north-east up to the actual construction for the Waterfront project.

EMEG's activities extend well beyond those physical boundaries, however. EMEG is currently involved as an advisor to environmental agencies in Abu Dhabi and Sharjah, and conducts monitoring on remote Sir Abu Nuair island, where Major Ali has lobbied successfully for greater protection for that environmentally sensitive but promising island. EMEG is also facilitating research by several academics, including at least one Ph.D. candidate.



EMEG beach with The Waterfront project in background

You can learn more at the EMEG website: www.emeg.ae. Report and photograph by Gary Feulner

Dolphins and Sea Snakes

In April, Martina Fella and her husband went for a morning walk on the Dubai Kite surfing beach. After a few days of very windy weather and rough sea the Arabian Gulf looked as calm as a millpond. Every small movement in the water could easily

be noticed. And what a surprise! Only about 100 metres from the beach we spotted a family of Pacific humpback dolphins splashing and playing in the calm shallow water.

We grabbed two rental canoes (Dhs 25 per hour for a single seater) and paddled out to the dolphins. It was a family of about six adults, two juveniles and one baby. One of the adults was much larger than the others and we thought that it might have been the same group of dolphins that we had spotted in this area before (*Gazelle* Nov. 2010). The dolphins were playfully swimming around us for about half an hour, showed no sign of fear and were even playing with each other lying on their bellies.



Dolphins often play close to Dubai beaches

As in our previous encounters with Pacific humpbacks, they kept 10 metres from our canoes, unlike the bottlenose dolphins that can also be spotted in coastal waters which will come eye to eye and allow us to snorkel or swim with them.

When we returned the canoes, the Sri Lankan man in charge of the canoe rentals told us that he sees the dolphins quite frequently. So if you want to spot dolphins you know now that you do not have to travel far or visit dolphin shows.

Later, we walked towards Burj Al Arab, but, after only a few hundred metres, we stumbled across a very weak but still alive yellow-bellied sea snake. The poor thing must have been washed up on the beach exhausted from days of rough seas. My husband carefully grabbed her by the tail and took her back into deeper water. As

sea snakes are not aggressive but very poisonous this is not to be recommended!



Cautiously taking the snake into the water

Back in the sea, the snake was still too weak to swim properly. Soon the waves brought her back again to shore where some people started throwing stones and sand on the poor creature. We went to the small beach office for a plastic bucket, shoveled the snake in and asked the small water-ski boat on the beach to drive the snake out into the open sea which they did. So hopefully the reptile found its strength and managed to survive.



Yellow-bellied sea snake

Sea snakes are beautiful and fascinating creatures that belong to the marine eco system as much as every other animal. Report and photographs by Martina Fella

Coastal Plants at Mushrif Park

In a morning visit to Dubai's Mushrif National Park, on the Khawaneej road, members learned how to confidently distinguish several of Dubai's mimosa family trees (the native ghaf *Prosopis cineraria*, the introduced and cultivated *Acacia nilotica* and the invasive mesquite *Prosopis juliflora*) by examining gross form, leaves, seed pods (alive or dead, under the tree) and thorns. Within a forested area, we also saw two common climbers, the blade-leaved milkweed *Pentstemon nivalis* and the leafless gymnosperm *Ephedra foliata*, as well as some



common shrubs (e.g., the yellow-green succulent *Zygophyllum qatarense*), common grasses (e.g., *Cenchrus ciliaris*) and common sedges (e.g., *Cyperus conglomeratus*).



Two common climbing plants: *Ephedra foliata* (left) and *Pentatropis nivalis* (right)

The showiest plant of the day was the desert specialist *Calligonum comosum*, with many plants displaying abundant large, fuzzy, pale yellow seed structures called lamps. Also in flower and seed was the spindly *Polygala eriop-tera*, whose seed wings resemble little pale pink ears.

We also kept an eye out for birds, with happy results, although birding at Mushrif can sometimes seem to be 75% collared doves. Rob Whelan spotted a lone large raptor very high overhead, gliding effortlessly from north to south - probably a migrating juvenile eastern imperial eagle, an uncommon sighting. A pair of ring-necked parakeets, perched in an uncharacteristically exposed site at the top of a barren tree, gave us good views as they nuzzled one another.



The pair of ring-necked parakeets

For several members, this was their first visit to Mushrif Park, and

most were impressed at the variety of environments, the relatively natural and undisturbed landscape, and the peace and quiet of the park on a Friday morning (apart from the hoo-hooing of the collared doves). This encourages us to scan and reproduce here a helpful sketch map of Mushrif Park that first appeared in 1990 in Colin Richardson's original *Birds of the United Arab Emirates. Report by Gary Feulner and Valerie Chalmers*



Sketch map of Mushrif National Park, from *Birds of the UAE* by Colin Richardson (1990)

Al-Ain Archaeology Conference

A conference on UAE archaeology held in Al Ain at the end of March, the latest in a nearly annual series of conferences since 2002, was a good opportunity for professional archaeologists working in the UAE to report on their latest findings and hear about the work of others. This year's conference was the first held under the auspices of ADACH, the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage. The conference included some 25 presentations over two days. Attendees from the DNHG included Dr. Elizabeth Rideout, Gary Feulner and visiting former member Dr. John Moreton, now resident in England. The following is a very selective report of just a few of the more noteworthy subjects addressed.

In the two months preceding the conference, the UAE had featured in archaeological news because of the publication of results which showed that Paleolithic stone tools found at a rock shelter site in inland Sharjah date to some 125,000 years BP, giving credibility to the hypothesis that southern Arabia

served as a route for early "modern" human beings from Africa to Asia, rather than a route via Egypt and the Levant. The principal authors of that paper were unable to attend, but the general subject was addressed by Dr. Julie Scott-Jackson, who had previously surveyed Paleolithic tools at surface sites in the UAE. Unfortunately, Dr. Scott-Jackson's principal site had been bulldozed, in her absence, for a pipeline route. How this occurred was discussed, along with the imperative for better communication among the responsible authorities.



Dr. Julie Scott-Jackson (at right) in the field with Sarah Milliken. Many UAE archaeological sites are threatened by roads and other development projects.

A much more welcome surprise was the discussion of an extremely prolific Iron Age site in inland Dubai, near the Abu Dhabi border. Photographs from this site, however, and from others in Al Ain, demonstrated the rapid weathering that afflicts exposed sites in the UAE climate. This means that it is extremely difficult to permit access to such sites until study has concluded and specific preservation or restoration measures have been taken. Nevertheless, it is gratifying to report that Dubai now has a worthy entrant among the UAE's major archaeological sites.

Several presenters emphasized the relationship between changes in the regional climate and human inhabitation of the area, and Adrian Parker is specifically attempting to develop a more refined chronology of climatic events, using a multidisciplinary approach. It is possible, however, that the role of climate was somewhat less immediate from the Iron Age on, when irrigation techniques may have allowed



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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.



man to better exploit the scarce water resources.

Vicissitudes of another sort may have been responsible for the abandonment of Iron Age Mleiha, NE of Jebel Fayah. The latest excavations led by Michel Mouton have indicated that the abandonment of the site in the 3rd century AD was sudden and there are hints that this may have been triggered by an enemy attack which burned at least one major building. More generally, the number of unexpected findings revealed at the conference by various researchers suggests that continuing excavations will yield additional surprises. The proceedings of the conference will be published in due course. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Hiding the Face of the Moon

The long expected and eagerly awaited total lunar eclipse was upon us on 15 June. It was even more significant as it was clearly viewed over the UAE and it delivered the longest totality since 2000, about 100 minutes of totality in the earth's umbra. That is because the centres of the three heavenly bodies, sun, earth and moon, happened to be on the same line of view this time. And once the moon is in the shade, earth and moon will journey in the same path for a while, hand in hand on the celestial dome, tracked by the sun's beam until they slowly part, uncovering the moon from the earth's shadow.

On Wednesday 15 June 2011, around 10:15 pm, earth's shadow started creeping onto the brilliant full moon. Before the moon slipped totally into the earth's shade, the scattered sun light was still reaching it through earth's polluted atmosphere, masking it in a magic warning copper-red hue. Totality was reached at 12:15 past midnight. Then the copper-red mask slowly receded and the moon shone in its full splendour again by 2:15 am. The total sequence gave us an ever-changing

and spectacular in-out eclipse for more than four hours with really excellent visibility throughout the event.



The magic moments

Lamjed's sequence of photographs had to be taken with his camera and telephoto lens, because it was too hot and humid for his telescope.

Unlike a solar eclipse, a lunar eclipse is not a rare event; you can see them if you are prepared to travel to certain places around



the globe to witness them. The next lunar eclipse this year will happen on 10 December, and will be visible from Asia.

This total lunar eclipse lasted long enough to be comfortably enjoyed, unlike a solar eclipse when you have fractions of minutes or just a few seconds to catch those magic moments. *Report and photographs by Lamjed El-Kefi*

Excellent Shell Finds Close-handly



Argonauta hians

Those who heard Beryl Comar's talk about nautilus shells at Members' Night 2010 will remember that she said March/April is the nautilus season – and that *Argonauta hians*, the egg-case of an epipelagic octopus, is not often found. In late April, Martina Fella found a beautiful and completely intact paper nautilus (*Argonauta hians*) while snorkeling along the north-west side of the island at the base of Palm Jumeirah .



The remarkable construction of *A. hians*

The shell was located between some rocks in about 1.5m depth, very close to the sandy beach. Of all paper nautilus shells that she has found, this is the largest intact specimen, measuring 8cm in length and 6cm in width. They can usually be found on beaches in UAQ and RAK and it is rather rare to come across one as far away from the Straits of Hormuz as Jumeirah.

On the east-facing beach of Palm Deira, Martina found a large and intact specimen of the fragile Venus comb (*Murex scalopax*). The creature was still inside but clearly dead and half decomposed. This was rather amazing as one would not have guessed that with all the dredging and construction work going on in recent years there was still a population of these wonderful gastropods left. The shell measures 13cm in length and almost 7cm in width. *Thanks to Martina Fella*



Murex scalopax

A Stranded Whale

Louisa Akerina currently works on the construction of a Fisheries Harbour about 10 km north of Colombo and last month saw this whale stranded on Watele Beach near her worksite.



The beached whale on Watele beach

The National Aquatic Research Agency came down to take measurements, took genetic samples and identified it as a Bryde's whale, and arranged an excavator for it to be buried two days later. Once the flesh has rotted off, they will dig up the skeleton for preservation.

Louisa noted that this is the second stranding of a Bryde's whale at Watele in the last year.



The whale appeared to have been injured; there was flesh hanging off it

The tourism board markets Sri Lanka as one of the best places on earth to watch Balaenoptera, such as pygmy blue whales and sperm whales. Whale watching spots are in the south off Mirissa, and in the east off Trincomalee. *Thanks to Louisa Akerina*

And Some More Members' News ...

Ours was not the only party at the India Club last week, and not the only one to feature photographic competitions. The next day, DNHG member **Mohammed Arfan Asif** filled the role of Moderator for the Shutter Bugs Creative Forum 1st Annual Day.



Mohammed Arfan Asif

They celebrated one year of successful clicking, and Mohammed Arfan presented awards. Mohammed Arfan has several times won



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our photographic competition and has presented a very well attended talk to the DNHG on nature photography.



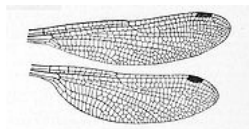
Gary Feulner and **Narayan Karki** trekked in May to Kanchenjunga base camp in north-easternmost Nepal. Their efforts there and in Karki's village area added an estimated 25 species to their growing photo collection of Nepal dragonflies and damselflies.

Karki brought a reminder of the DNHG with him on the trek in the form of his Chalmers Engineering baseball cap, shown here at about 4,700 metres (ca. 15,500 ft). In addition, within a kilometre of Karki's

home in Kathmandu they have now photographed more dragonfly species than are found in the whole of the UAE.



Narayan Karki in essential gear for an Himalayan trek, about 4,700 metres up



The pattern of venation of dragonfly and damselfly wings varies between species

Michelle Sinclair and **Martina Fella**, our Speaker Co-ordinators have been busy. They already have an interesting and varied programme of speakers organised for the start of the new season in September and the first of our monthly lectures will take place on Sunday 18 September. Make a note that it is so late in the month! **Maureen Steer** and **Liz Maley** will give a talk at the opening meeting in September on the DNHG trip to Socotra last December.



Socotra chameleon
Photography by Heidi Struiksmma

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

Sep 18 Maureen Steer and Liz Maley: The Ecology of Socotra

Field Trips (Members only, please.)

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