



# GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

**Inside this month:** page

Desert Spider Diversity	1
Announcements and Recorders	2
Spotlight!	3
New road to Khor Fakkan	4
Pollinators in your Photos!	5
Wild flowers in the Hajar Mountains	6
Wasit Wildlife Award	7
Lectures and field trips	8

**Contributors—**

Thanks to the following for their contributions this month:

Sonja Lavrenčič, Ulrike Andorff, Gary Feulner, Binish Roobas, Valerie Chalmers, Margaret Swan, Johannes Els and Ryan Ingram.

Send your contributions for inclusion in the next issue to: [gazelleeditor@gmail.com](mailto:gazelleeditor@gmail.com)

by 25th September, 2019



*Pterotricha* sp.: a dried specimen from DDCR with very long spinnerets (photo by Binish Roobas)

## Desert Spider Diversity

**Just landed, or taking off?**



Wherever you are, why not share your nature photos and experiences via the Gazelle.

A researcher at the University of Turku in Finland, Alireza Zamani, recently examined a large collection of desert spiders from the UAE and recognized six different spider species belonging to a single genus of ground spiders (Gnaphosidae) called *Pterotricha*, characterized by greatly elongated spinnerets (the silk-extruding organs). Four of those species are new to science. The results were published in *Evolutionary Systematics* in 2018.

This result was unexpected, emphasizing how much potentially interesting work remains to be done on UAE biodiversity -- as also demonstrated by the earlier work of Antonius van Harten and the UAE Insect Project (applying traditional taxonomy to UAE arthropods) and by Salvador Carranza of the Institute of Evolutionary Biology, Barcelona, Ted Papenfuss of the University of California, Berkeley, and others (applying molecular taxonomy and painstaking field work to UAE and Arabian reptiles).

It is of special theoretical interest that the six *Pterotricha* species are sympatric; that is,

(Continued on page 4)

# Announcements and Recorders

## Monthly Speaker - Sunday, 15th September, 2019

**Lecture Title:** "The Status and Conservation of Terrestrial Herpetofauna in the UAE" (see photos on page 7)

**Biography:** Johannes Els

Johannes Els is the Head of the Herpetology and Freshwater Fish department at the Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife/ Environment and Protected Area's Authority of Sharjah over the last 10 years where he is involved in various conservation projects both in situ and ex situ throughout the Arabian Peninsula. He authored and co-authored several peer reviewed scientific papers including the IUCN Red List on the conservation status and distribution of reptiles of the Arabian Peninsula.

Johannes is a member of the Middle East and North African IUCN/SSC viper specialist group, IUCN West Asia amphibian specialist group and the IUCN SSC/WI freshwater fish specialist group. He assisted with various nature documentaries such as Wild Arabia (BBC 2013), Arabian Inferno (Blink Films 2017), Wild Dubai (Plimsoll Productions 2018) and Dead by Dawn (National Geographic 2019).

### About the talk:

The United Arab Emirates contains a diversity of desert habitats with 62 species of terrestrial herpetofauna currently recorded, with three of these considered to be present in the UAE as a result of introduction. Among the 62 confirmed species and subspecies present within the UAE, one terrestrial species is now considered to be endemic to the UAE (*Asaccus caudivolvulus*), 13 species are endemic to the Hajar Mountain range (shared with Oman) and there are 20 species that are endemic to the Arabian Peninsula. Of the 59 species of terrestrial herpetofauna considered native to the UAE, three species are Critically Endangered, six species Vulnerable, one species Near Threatened, 45 species Least Concern, and four species Data Deficient. Habitat loss remains the overriding threat to terrestrial herpetofauna, particularly the conversion of land to urban areas.

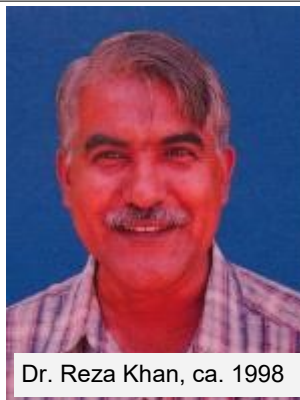
### Dr. Reza Khan Retires

The DNHG joins in extending best wishes to our long-time member and Reptiles Recorder, Dr. Reza Khan, upon his retirement from Dubai Municipality after more than 30 years in the UAE. Reza was previously the head of the Zoo Section and, latterly, a consultant to the Environment Department of Dubai Municipality.

Throughout, Reza has been an active field naturalist. In addition to dozens of scientific publications, he has published a number of books and articles intended to bring a better understanding of the natural world to a popular audience, both in the UAE and in his native Bangladesh. Among his UAE publications are *Wild Cats of the UAE* and *The Indigenous Trees of the UAE*, both published by Dubai Municipality, Public Parks and Horticulture Dept.

In Bangladesh, in 2010 he published *Wildlife of Bangladesh: From Amphibia to Mammalia*, an extensively illustrated checklist of Bangladesh wildlife. The dedication speaks volumes: "This little venture is wholeheartedly dedicated to the spirited youngsters, some of whom accompanied me in many of my fieldtrips, and those who are undertaking such studies on their own but always working to uphold the cause of the wildlife, nature or biodiversity of Bangladesh."

Those who know Reza expect that his "retirement" in Dubai will see him in the field more than ever, and we look forward to hearing about his continuing observations. *Contribution by Gary Feulner*



Dr. Reza Khan, ca. 1998



From an IEW in 1996  
(photo by Valerie Chalmers)

### From the Editor:

Welcome back to the start of a new season!

Those of you that managed to take a break over the summer, we would love to hear about any wildlife or nature-related explorations you encountered on your travels.

Also, if you have any ideas or would like to lead a trip at some point, please contact any of the committee members. Contact details are on the back page.

Enjoy your read!

## DNHG Recorders

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## Spotlight!

### Purple Sunbird Nest on a Terrace, by Sonja Lavrenčič



Returning from a recent trip, two bird nests were found on my terrace! One was the usual doves that always nest there. That nest still contained one chick and an egg, whilst the other is new to me. Elaborately made, it was now empty, but I was told that a tiny bird made it. One chick hatched, was nurtured and then flew away. I have since learned that this nest was constructed by a Purple Sunbird, one of the UAE's smallest, equally at home in suburban gardens and more wild sites.

What struck me was how much plastic and other man-made materials were built into that nest.

### Butterflies on Buddleia, by Margaret Swan



Taken during August in the UK, from left to right:

- 1) Red Admiral
- 2) Peacock (from above and another displaying the 'dead wood' underside)
- 3) Painted Lady



(Continued from page 1)

they share the same geographic range and broad habitats.

The Zamani study is also an excellent reminder that good work requires, as a *sine qua non*, knowledgeable and enthusiastic people and dedicated individual effort, and can be achieved without tenders, glossy proposals, prolonged negotiations, periodic reports, color graphics or computer programs that purport to tell everything from a baseline of nothing.

The background story is equally instructive, and emphasizes the role of communication and cooperation:

1. In the early 1990s, Dr. Barbara Tigar of the UAE's National Avian Research Centre made a large collection of spiders, mostly from the deserts of Abu Dhabi, which she deposited with the American Museum of Natural History in New York, one of the world's major institutions for spider taxonomy.

2. In the early 2000s, DNHG Chairman Gary Feulner re-confirmed the existence of that collection, but he was told that there were no plans to study it. Only much later, in 2017, did Gary arrange to visit AMNH personally, after completing basic UAE spider field work of his own (with Binish Roobas), which produced an introductory catalog of UAE spiders, published in *Tribulus* vol. 23 (2015).

3. Examining the collection at AMNH, Gary recognized that approximately 50% of the UAE specimens belonged to the *Pterotricha* genus, and that there appeared to be more than one kind.

4. Gary also knew that Zamani, a young and enthusiastic Iranian spider researcher who had provided assistance in identifying a number of UAE spiders, was about to commence an academic review of known *Pterotricha* spiders, using research facilities at the University of Turku, another major center of spider taxonomic research. So it was only natural to suggest that the AMNH scientists get in touch with Zamani, who, it turned out, was already known to them as a talented

researcher as well as the principal author of *The Checklist of the Spiders of Iran*, an online resource.

5. That connection allowed Zamani to include the UAE *Pterotricha* from the AMNH collection in his study, with results that enhance the value of his study and benefit all concerned -- including scientific knowledge generally.

*Contribution by Gary Feulner*



## New road to Khor Fakkan

Visiting Al Aqah in June, my husband and I decided to drive there via the recently-opened Khor Fakkan road. This new road was first reported by Ulrike Andorff in a previous issue of the *Gazelle*. We drove through five tunnels in all, the fourth one bringing us out close to the Oceanic hotel in Khor Fakkan.

Passing through the mountains I noticed a 'lake' on our left and made a mental note to call there on the way back the following day. We later learned from Gary Feulner that this lake (named the Al Rafisah Dam Rest Area) has been in existence for more than 20 years, at different levels.

The following day we stayed awhile at the dam, trying to spot wildlife but, at 2pm, it was the wrong time of day and the only activity that caught our attention was a man feeding ducks and geese. Square shapes under the water were presumably part of the 'submerged village' as seen earlier on signage. Small boats moored up can be rented at certain times of the day.

Walking around, we heard Purple Sunbirds calling each other and many were observed gathering nectar. It is the males that wear the familiar purple breeding colour, taking attention away from the females, whose colours blend in with the foliage.

Needing a cool drink, the café was open and, upon entering, a cricket match could be heard. Huddled around a propped up mobile 'phone, two members of staff were totally absorbed in the commentary from the then live broadcast of the Cricket World Cup. As they served us, we noticed that the café walls provided information on wildlife in the vicinity, many of which are nocturnal.

On this occasion we drove down to the lake edge but, on a later visit, this road was closed as men were still working at the site.

*Contribution by Margaret Swan*



***Pterotricha* sp.: a live specimen from DDCR with very long spinnerets (photo by Ryan Ingram)**



## Field Clips

### Pollinators in Your Photos?

Your UAE natural history photos could make a significant contribution to our knowledge of the biodiversity and ecology of the UAE. Neither professional researchers nor the UAE's many dedicated amateurs can be everywhere, all the time, so everyone's observations, and especially photographs, have the potential to fill in significant gaps in our knowledge.

This is emphasized by a recent inquiry from a Cambridge-based researcher who is studying the taxonomy and evolution of a small family of plants, the Neuradaceae, found in Africa and the Middle East. The sole UAE representative of this family is *Neurada procumbens*, a small, semi-prostrate plant probably noticed by few people but known to most by fruits – hard, flat, 1.5 cm discs with dozens of spikes on one side, which lodge firmly in the soles of boots, shoes and sandals and are carried that way into vehicles and homes. *N. procumbens* is found throughout the country on sand flats and compacted sand, even on the edge of the Rub' al-Khali, but it is only common locally.

*N. procumbens* is the smallest, and has by far the smallest flowers (tiny, white, five-petaled) of the three genera in its family. African Neuradaceae are pollinated primarily by three species of pollen-collecting bees. The Cambridge researcher wonders if the same is true in the UAE, and wishes to confirm this, and also to confirm whether, having much smaller flowers, *N. procumbens* is pollinated by much smaller bees or other species.

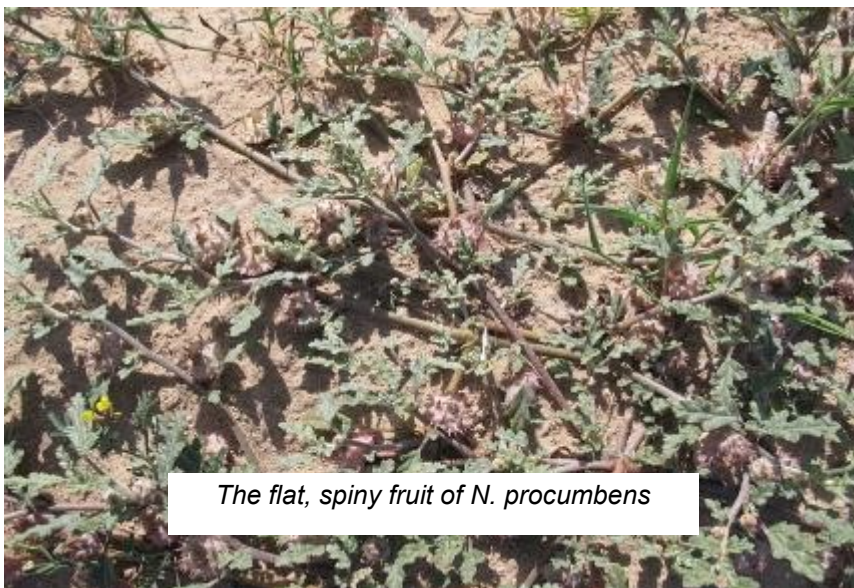
This account is therefore an appeal to DNHG members to be attentive to *N. procumbens* (see photos) and, if possible, to take note (and take photos) of its pollinators – likely to be small. In this instance, unless a dedicated effort is made, success may rely heavily on serendipity, since bees and wasps are notoriously difficult to photograph, being relatively ephemeral visitors to individual flowers and quick to fly if observers approach at close range.

Apart from 'wild' areas, the natural areas of Mushrif Park (especially on the right of the trunk road, not far beyond the main entrance) are good places to find *N. procumbens*. Chairman Gary Feulner will be happy to review and forward photos or other information in this regard.

*Contribution by Gary Feulner*



*Neurada procumbens*—a gross view



The flat, spiny fruit of *N. procumbens*



A "soleful" experience: dozens of dried fruits



## Field Clips

### Wild Flowers in the Hajar Mountains

The hot summer in the Emirates makes us longing for the cooler season with its pleasant temperatures and also rain.

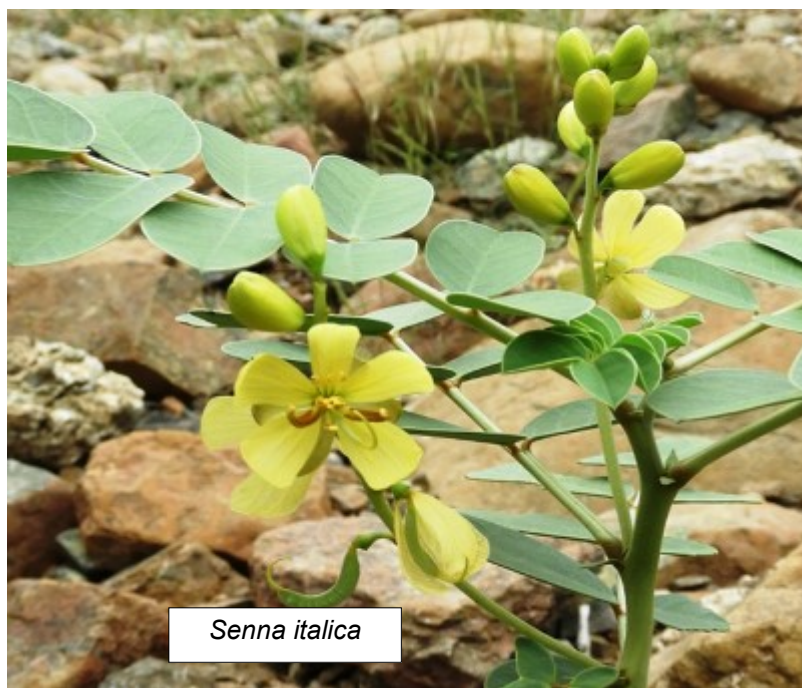
In spring 2019 the Northern Emirates experienced unusual frequent rain influencing the flora to bloom in its best colours. My trips into the Hajar Mountains amazed me with a good number of different plants in blossom. With the help of Marijcke Jongbloed's "Comprehensive Guide to the Wild Flowers of the UAE" I spent many hours on identification. At times Valerie Chalmers's expertise also stepped in.

Let me share with you some of the finest and most beautiful flora in the following photographs.

Contribution by Ulrike Andorff

**Editor's Note:** More photos will be presented next month.

Ulrike adds that "There is so much to see and to experience that you ought to take the chance as it occurs."



*Senna italica*



*Tecomella undulata*



*Salvia macrosiphon*



*Echinops*, favourite of *Vanessa Cardui* or "Painted Lady" butterflies



*Nerium oleander*



# Announcements

## Wasit Wetland Architecture Award

Sharjah's Wasit Wetland Centre is a 2019 winner of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. The award certificate reads, in part:

*"The Wasit Wetland Centre stands out as a remarkable, indeed unique, collaborative project combining architectural excellence with a deep commitment to ecological imperatives. . . . It also achieves highly commendable educational and recreational purposes. . . .*

*"Perhaps some of the most striking and exemplary aspects of the project are to be found in its most unconventional virtues. Architecturally speaking, it is intent on disappearing from sight. It merges into the natural environment in ways that respect the site's integrity – a wonderful way of reminding us that architectural merit resides more and more on a structure's capacity to blend into an environment rather than challenge it.*

*"Likewise, the project's major contribution to its urban environment is in its reclamation of close to 20 acres of former wasteland . . . . [T]he Project sets a powerful precedent that encourages low-impact and environmentally conscious development in a region known for its propensity to go in the opposite direction."*

The Aga Khan Award for Architecture's mandate is different from that of many other architecture prizes: it not only rewards architects, but also identifies municipalities, builders, clients, master artisans and engineers who have played important roles in the realization of a project.

Longtime residents will remember the Wasit area in several earlier incarnations under the Ramthah name, not always entirely savory or welcoming. The DNHG congratulates our members and friends in Sharjah, at EPAA, BCEAW and the Ruler's Office who have contributed to the success of Wasit Wetland Centre.



Contribution by Gary Feulner

### Editor's Note:

Readers may be interested to read two Wasit Wetland reviews from the 2015 Gazelle. One photo from this trip is reproduced above. More photos can also be seen with the reviews. [Click or tap here to view.](#)

### Next Speaker—Johannes Els

With regards to our next meeting on 15th September (see *information on page 2*), here are some photographs which will connect to the presentation.

*From top to bottom, left to right are:*

Arabian cat snake, Persian horned viper, Emirati leaf-toed gecko, Clifford's diadem snake and Leptien's spiny-tailed lizard.



## Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) Programme

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

- September 15:** Johannes Els will present an illustrated talk on  
"The Status & Conservation Of Terrestrial Herpetofauna in the UAE"
- October 6:** Marina Tsaliki will present an illustrated talk on  
"Vegetation mapping and plant species diversity in Ras Al Khaimah"

### Scheduled Field Trips (Members only)

- October 4—11:** DNHG Trip to Greece (fully subscribed)
- November 29 - December 6:** DNHG Trip to Northern Laos (fully subscribed)

*Field trip details will be circulated to members via e-mail*

## DNHG COMMITTEE 2019

When possible, please contact committee members outside office hours

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## DNHG Membership

Membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at Dh100 for families and Dh50 for singles. Membership is valid from September 2019 to September 2020. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to Emirates NBD account number 1012012013302. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG.)

Payment can also be made by cash deposit at a bank or ATM, using our IBAN number AE640260001012012013302. However, this process does not always identify the payer. So if you wish to pay by cash deposit, please also photograph or scan a copy of your payment confirmation and send via e-mail to the Membership Secretary, so we know whose money we have received.

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*, our post office box, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects.