



# GAZELLE

Vol 27 No 11 November 2012

مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

## A Latin Touch

The colourful bird in the photo is a Great Kiskadee (*Pitangus sulphuratus*), one of the largest of the so-called 'tyrant flycatchers' (up to 27 cm). It is native to Central and South America, where it is common in some urban areas, and it has a reputation as a conspicuous and aggressive bird.

How does it come to be in the *Gazelle*? Prof. Dr. Ulli Wernery of Dubai's Central Veterinary Research Laboratory tells us that one is currently in residence at the lab, and sits every afternoon in an Indian Almond tree, making noisy, weeping calls. Corina Berners-Schultheis, the head taxidermist at CVRL, sat in wait one afternoon to get this photo.

Corina says that the colours and call made the bird easy to identify, but she didn't say exactly how she narrowed the choice to an exotic Latin American species or how it



Great Kiskadee in Dubai (by C. Berners-Schultheis)

might have reached the UAE. I did not find the species in my copy of *Handbook of Cage and Aviary Birds*. Corina notes that the Great Kiskadee is an omnivore, hunting like a shrike for avian and insect prey, but also taking fruit, so this

individual should manage to survive in Dubai. But the CVRL scientists also revealed themselves as romantics; they hope that a mate can be found for this beautiful bird.

Report by Gary Feulner

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## Contributors

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

Gary Feulner	Tamsin Carlisle
Sonja Lavrenčič	Peter Dowley
Binish Roobas	Mairead Porter
Rowland Browne	Jackie Strick

## Upcoming Field Trips

### Kerala Natural History Tour

**Date:** 21 – 26 January 2013

**Length:** 6 days / 5 nights

**Availability:** Limited to 10 people.

**Contact:** Binish Roobas at [johanruphus@hotmail.com](mailto:johanruphus@hotmail.com)

T: 050 243 8737 for more details and itinerary

Binish Roobas will lead this excursion (6 days, 5 nights, Mon-Sat) to a sampling of Kerala's premier wildlife sites: houseboating on Lake Vembanad and birdwatching at Kumarakom in the backwaters of the coastal plain; birdwatching at Thettakad (featuring Ceylon Frogmouth and Black Baza) in the moist deciduous forest of the rolling central midlands; and light trekking in the highlands of the renowned Western Ghats at Eravikulam National Park (home to the Nilgiri Tahr), the thorny shrub forest of Chinnar National Wildlife Sanctuary (where elephants, gaur and grizzled squirrel may be seen) and the scenic waterfalls at Athirapally.



Binish took his degree in zoology and worked as a naturalist guide in Kerala before coming to work in the UAE. He continues to visit these areas regularly when he returns to Kerala privately.

Limit 10 participants. Accommodation will be in unpretentious hotels and lodges. Travel will be by minivan. Estimated basic cost: AED 2500 including accommodation, meals, road transportation and entrance fees, but excluding airfare and Indian visa.

For more details and itinerary, contact Binish Roobas: [johanruphus@hotmail.com](mailto:johanruphus@hotmail.com) or 050 243 8737

### Our Next Speaker

**For our Members Night on Sunday December 9, we will have three speakers on a wide variety of topics.**

**Linda and David Kingston** will give a presentation on the Deserts and Oases of Egypt.

**Lamjed El Kefi** will speak about Underwater Photography and **Sandhya Prakash** will give a talk entitled 'My experiments with Earth'.

### Christmas Picnic & Desert Camping

**Date:** 21-22 Dec

There will be a Christmas picnic and camping in the desert trip. The idea is that everyone brings a dish or two to share and we have a big Christmas picnic in the desert. Those who wish can stay camping overnight. More information will follow by email.

### Nepal Hill Country

**Date:** 29 Mar - 6 April 2013

**Length:** 9 days 8 nights.

**Availability:** Limited to 10 people.

**Contact:** Gary Feulner at [grfeulner@gmail.com](mailto:grfeulner@gmail.com) or 04 306 5570 for more details and itinerary

Experience the verdant scenery and village life of Nepal's hill country – traditional houses, mountain trails, terraced cultivation of rice, corn and millet, footbridges across rivers, water buffalo milk, temple ceremonies, traditional dancing, and more – including 4 days home-stay and optional day hikes. Also birds, butterflies, etc. Sightseeing in unforgettable Kathmandu to start. Return via highlands of the upper Sunkosi River, with temple visit and a detour to the Chinese border.

Our visit will include a mix of touring by vehicle, day hikes, cultural interaction and natural history observation. 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 has 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.)

Limit 10 participants. Approx. basic cost: AED 2300 plus airfare (est'd AED 1500) and Nepal visa (AED 150). For more details and itinerary, contact Gary Feulner: [grfeulner@gmail.com](mailto:grfeulner@gmail.com) or 04 306 5570

## Dubai-Abu Dhabi Desert

This field trip examined the ecology of the desert in the area of the Dubai-Abu Dhabi border. An incidental benefit was to introduce even many long-time residents to interesting and attractive areas of the UAE they had not previously visited. Our route followed the road west from Lisaili, through Endurance Village and the Bab Al-Shams Resort to the Al-Faya Truck Road, then back eastward via the Dubai-Abu Dhabi border road itself. Only in the area west of the Bab Al-Shams was there any hint of how remote this area had seemed only 20 years ago.



**Gazelle Rock (by Binish Roobas)**

The ridges of rolling white sands here are "intermediate" between the saline coastal sands and the yellow (and red) sand deserts further inland. The white colour of the sand reflects a significant proportion of calcium carbonate grains, contributed from coastal marine sediments, which are typically more flattened and irregular than the uniform, rounded quartz grains of the inland deserts.

The dune ridges in this area are dominated by the large, leafless milkweed *Leptadenia pyrotechnica*, and the intervening gravel plains by the shrubby *Acacia ehrenbergiana*. Some dune areas are host to large groves of *ghaf* trees *Prosopis cinerearia*, possibly aligned along subterranean drainage channels. All three of these species disappear to the south and west.

Our first stop was at a dune area near Endurance Village where camels have been excluded for at least a year or more and mountain gazelle *Gazella cora* have been allowed to run free. Here we parked beside an active *dhub* burrow and later saw the two most common desert lizards, the White-Spotted Fringe-Toed Lizard *Acanthodactylus schmidti* and the Yellow Toad-Headed Agama *Phrynocephalus arabicus*. Insect tracks appeared to tell many a tale, if we could only have read them all.

We saw several gazelle in the dunes and more on the plains, as well as the tracks, resting places and drop-



**Sunrise on the Dubai-Abu Dhabi Border (by Binish Roobas)**

pings of many, many more, along with tracks of Cape Hare and Brown-Necked Raven. The near-total absence of dune plant species other than *L. pyrotechnica* and desert knotweed grass *Pennisetum divisum* suggests that overgrazing by gazelle may have replaced overgrazing by camels as an environmental problem. Perhaps the gazelle are maintained at artificially high numbers by supplemental water resources.

Our stop along the Al-Faya Truck Road was among rolling, slightly yellow dunes dominated by the bright green succulent *Zygophyllum*, and under the watchful gaze of a tethered(?) zeppelin. There, we focused our efforts on trying to trace the tracks of a meandering monitor lizard *Varanus griseus*, which we did for at least an estimated 200m before it was time to leave. Among the *Zygophyllum* we found many White-Spotted Lizards Blue Spotted Arab butterflies.

The Dubai-Abu Dhabi border road is today characterized by extended fencing (opaque on the Abu Dhabi side) and livestock farms and bulldozing (on the Dubai side), and is uniformly overgrazed by camels. Nevertheless, a detour up into the yellow sands to the south of Ashush was for many a high point of the day, literally and figuratively. Notwithstanding the late afternoon hour, the group seemed to want to linger over the dramatic vistas from the high dunes – a pleasant way to cap the day before our return through Faqah to Dubai.

### Gary Feulner



**Yellow Toad-Headed Agama (by Binish Roobas)**

## Field Trip Report

### Georgia - Snapshots of the Republic

#### Biodiversity

The Republic of Georgia is one of the world's hot-spots for biodiversity. More than that, says Dr Zura Javakhishvili of the Institute of Ecology at Ilia State University: it is also distinguished by being the most high-latitude of all such biological sweet spots worldwide.

Not surprisingly, most regions of outstanding biodiversity are in the tropics. What sets Georgia apart within the temperate zone, allowing it to compete with the ecological richness of Africa, the Amazon basin and southern Asia, is its combination of geomorphological diversity, generally mild climate due to the Black Sea's influence, central location on major Eurasian migratory routes and isolated mountain valleys that encourage speciation.

During our October tour of Georgia, we explored one such valley during a spectacular hike to a 40-meter high waterfall in Lagodekhi National Reserve, the oldest of the country's protected areas. In addition to enjoying the rich seasonal show of autumn foliage characteristic of the Caucasus foothills, we were also fortunate to stumble on a localized population of an extremely unusual indigenous lizard, the parthenogenetic *Lacerta saxicola*.



Parthenogenetic lizard

Various unisexual subspecies of this small rock lizard exist contiguously with bisexual populations throughout the Caucasus region, usually in forested mountainous regions. Morphologically, the brown parthenogenetic females, which reproduce

without mating, cannot be distinguished from their bisexual female cousins.



Lagodekhi National Reserve

The bisexual *Lacerta* populations, however, are characterized by the presence of highly visible, pale blue territorial males. The absence of such males is not only notable in the mountain populations but also results in higher densities of females in the pockets of suitable habitat. What we found, within a localized area of rock-strewn stream bed, was a high density of small, brown lizards, with no larger blue individuals in evidence.

As natural historians, we were interested in what could account for the evolution of parthenogenesis – an unusual reproductive strategy in vertebrates – in these Caucasian lizards. Some investigators point to studies showing that artificially inseminated parthenogenetic females produce triploid embryos that perish early in development from physiological defects. They suggest that parthenogenesis evolved in response to infertile unions between males and females of different subspecies, as a barrier to prevent such unions from taking place.

But this may be putting the cart before the horse. According to Dr. Javakhishvili, it has also been shown that male *Lacerta* mate indiscriminately with sexual and

parthenogenetic *Lacerta* females, whereas, if infertile hybrid unions had been common enough to act as an evolutionary driver, they should have rejected the parthenogens.

Moreover, defective triploid embryos could only result from "superfertilization" of diploid eggs – i.e. the already developmentally viable eggs of parthenogenetic females.

This strongly suggests that parthenogenesis had evolved in isolated *Lacerta* populations prior to any re-encounters with sexual populations.

Many thanks to Dr Javakhishvili, son of our wonderful tour guide Marina Javakhishvili, for his informative lecture on the natural history of Georgia. **Tamsin Carlisle**

#### Museum & Gardens

Our visit included a visit to Tsinandali Museum and Gardens the home of Aleksandre Chavchavadze (1786-1846), a poet and important public figure of his time.

Aleksandre Chavchavadze was an excellent translator, introducing Georgians readers to European and Russian authors such as Aesop, Voltaire and Pushkin.

Despite the prominence and wealth of its former inhabitants, the period rooms convey a sense of the prosperous but modest world inhabited by the Chavchavadze family. Chavchavadze brought various pieces of furniture from Europe, including the first piano to be recorded in Georgia. One room has been set aside to display paintings by various artists.

The palace gardens were developed as an estate park with trees imported from all over the world. We enjoyed a short walk in the dark surrounded by tall trees with fallen leaves underfoot. **Jackie Strick**



Mother Georgia towering over Tbilisi

### Mother Georgia (Kartlis Deda)

A most intriguing aspect of Georgia is its reverence towards the omnipotent power of "Mother" (Deda). This is manifested by the immense (20m) aluminium statue of "Mother Georgia" (Kartlis Deda) that towers over Tbilisi from the Nariqala Fortress hillside, holding a sword in one hand, and cup in other.

A true representation of the Georgian nature: warmly welcoming guests (which we experienced all the time); passionately fighting off enemies, which they have done for centuries. **Rowland Browne**

### Wine & wine-making in Georgia

Georgia has the unique claim of being the oldest-known source of wine making.

Archaeologists announced in 2003 that they had found and tested wine residues on the inner surfaces of pottery storage jars from around 6000 BC. (The biochemical tests showed that they were using tree resin as a preservative, so it's believed that the wine may have tasted similar to a modern Greek retsina).



Qvevri - traditional earthenware for fermenting

The key element of Georgia's traditional winemaking method is the unique use of the Qvevri, which is an earthenware chamber that is used for fermenting and storing the wine. The qvevri is usually buried below ground level so that the temperature of the wine is maintained by the ground. A sealant of beeswax is generally used to prevent leaks or flavour. Smaller qvevri (e.g. 800 litres) can be cleaned by reaching in – for large qvevri (e.g. 3500 litres) someone needs to climb in! Our group visited two wineries in the Kakheti region that use qvevri to produce some of their wines; we were

also able to visit a farm that makes their own home-made wine in a qvevri, which is still a strong tradition in the country. One of the most interesting parts of visiting the two wineries was the wine tasting. The most prominent varieties that we tried were Saperavi (the best-known red grape variety in Georgia, which originates in Kakheti) and Mtsvane (a prominent white grape variety).

In each winery we were able to try Saperavi and Mtsvane wines that had been made in qvevri alongside wines that had been made using "European" methods. There were striking differences between the wines, however it wasn't possible to directly compare the differences from wines that had been fermented in traditional qvevri or stainless steel. Both wineries used good quality new oak for the qvevri-made wines and no oak at all for the "European" wines; this oak treatment is very appropriate for their premium brands and makes the resulting qvevri wines taste completely different from the quick-drinking light style of the "European" wines.

During the fermentation process, the full qvevri is covered with a lid and then sealed with wet clay until it is time to be opened. And instead of the modern filtration processes, the shape of the qvevri allows sediments to settle in the cone at the bottom while also pushing up a cap of floating solids (grape skins & stems) into the neck. It's great to see that a careful winemaker can use such natural and traditional methods to develop a very good quality wine.

Of course wine is made for drinking, and our host Marina helped us to learn and experience how to drink wine as part of a traditional Georgian *Supra* (feast). During our numerous large dinners she played the important role of the *Tamada*, who is the toastmaster and MC for the evening – helping to make sure that toasts are made and drunk to peace, our gathering, those who aren't with us, love and friendship, the people at the table, Georgia, women and children.

The toasts are more formal than many of us are used to, but are another part of the ancient wine traditions that are so much a part of the culture. **Peter Dowley**

## Field Trip Report

### Tbilisi

Tbilisi is not only capital, but perhaps the only real city (10 times bigger than any other) and the center of Georgia in every sense. Nested on a hill overlooking the river Mtkvari was the Narikala fortress. The impressive defense complex was started by Persians in the 4<sup>th</sup> century but most of the towers and walls were built in 8<sup>th</sup> century by Arab emirs to protect their palace located inside the fort. In the following centuries Georgians, Turks and again Persians, added parts to it.

The Museum of Georgia, houses an excellent collection of archaeological finds and exquisitely handcrafted golden ornaments dating back as far as 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC.

The museum also displays the most important archeological find of Georgia: the 1.75 million year old Dmanisi skulls which – being the oldest human remains found outside Africa – caused some revisions in the dates of human migration from Africa. Sonja Lavrenčič

### Rural Georgian life

In the village of Pshaveli, near Telavi, at foot of the Caucasus mountains, we visited a farmhouse and participated in making our own traditional Georgian family meal.

There were 3 other outside fires, one for boiling the Khinkalia, the cheese (or meat) dumplings, another for the churchkhelas (strings of walnuts dipped into thickened grape and flour juice and dried in the shape of a sausage) and lastly to BBQ the meat for our feast. But the high point of the evening (apart from the feast) was walking into the back room of the farmhouse and seeing kvevri (qvevri) – huge clay jars - buried in the floor with only their rims visible. While some were sealed, from the open one we could see and smell the grapes fermenting.

The discarded grape skins are also used – distilled into the famous ChaCha – a 50% proof liquor.



An open qvevri

We were impressed with the many activities this family were involved in: the wife taught English in the local school; the son was a mountain tour guide; but they were all involved in farming, both crops and animals, using both a horse/cart and tractor, as well as the wine making.

### Mairead Porter

## UAE Rock Art

One of the most significant resources on UAE rock art, a previously unpublished report, is now available on the world-wide web under the auspices of the Bradshaw Foundation. The Bradshaw Foundation is a non-profit, privately funded organization based in Geneva. Its primary objective is to discover, document and preserve ancient rock art around the world, and promote the study of early mankind's artistic achievements.

In the late 1990s Stephen Green, then a Dubai resident and an active amateur naturalist, undertook a study of rock art (or boulder art) in the mountains of the UAE, focusing in detail on the Wadi Hatta watershed. He produced, ultimately, a four-part, 252-page report consisting of an amalgam of photographs, diagrams, commentary, questions and hypotheses. The result is extremely informative (it may be the most extensive collection of colour images of rock art from the UAE) as well as thought provoking. The report was originally circulated privately to a small number of UAE-based archaeologists and naturalists. It has now been published in its original form, without any attempt to revise, edit or update it.

Steve was a 25-year resident of the Gulf states (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE) before returning in 2001 to the UK, where he remains a non-resident member of the DNHG. He has a broad interest in natural history and archeology and was, among other things, the author of *Seashells of Bahrain* and a co-author of the definitive studies of UAE freshwater and land snails, both of which he initiated.

Steve was also the author, in 1999, of one of the first written reports on Palaeolithic stone tools in the UAE (also now published on the Bradshaw website). **Gary Feulner**

[http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/uae/hajar\\_mountains/index.php](http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/uae/hajar_mountains/index.php)



## Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

Reptiles - Dr Reza Khan  
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Astronomy - Lamjed El-Kefi  
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Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

Geology - Gary Feulner  
res: 04 306 5570

Insects - Gary Feulner

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

Plants - Valerie Chalmers

### Archaeology, Seashells, Birds 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.

## Inter-Emirates Weekend

Inter-Emirates Weekend 2013 will be hosted by the Al Ain ENHG on **Thu-Sat, 21-23 February**. The program of planned field trips includes, inter alia, a lecture and tour of mosque architecture, an oasis walk, a souk tour, easy mountain walks, a plant workshop, a plant survey, mapping solar clocks and an introduction to curating techniques.

Details have been circulated and can also be found at the ENHG website, [www.enhg.org](http://www.enhg.org) and DNHG members are encouraged to reserve the dates.

The theme of the weekend will be "Origins of the ENHG". This will be reflected in the dinner program on Friday evening, and through opportunities on Friday and Saturday to work with and help organize

archival material that dates back to the origins of the group in 1980.

30 rooms have been reserved at the Danat Resort Hotel (formerly the Al-Ain Intercontinental) at preferred rates: AED 464 single/522 double for standard; AED 550 single/615 double for standard with breakfast; and AED 666 single/732 double deluxe with breakfast. **Bookings at these rates must be made before 30 November 2012.** Please contact the hotel directly to make your reservation (03-704-6000 ask for Reservations and quote ENHG).

**To reserve your place for the dinner on Friday night (22 Feb) in the Danat Resort Ballroom (Dhs 145 including taxes), please send an e-mail to [interemiratesweek-end@gmail.com](mailto:interemiratesweek-end@gmail.com) by 20 January 2013.**

Minie van de Weg's book *Focus on Fujairah, Through Minie's Lens 1964-2001* represents the author's incredible journey throughout the Sheikdom and the story of the Fujairah Maternity Hospital.

It reflects Fujairah's history and heritage, and its dramatic growth.

It is a collection of her favourite

images and memories that detail her vibrant history in the region.

The price of the book is AED150 and can be bought at the DNHG meetings or by calling Heidi Struik-sma on 055 8992222. The full proceeds will go towards the Fujairah Maternity Hospital to enable the purchase of much required equipment.

## Mohammed Arfan Asif Receives Photographic Award

It is a pleasure to recognize the achievement of our member, Mohammed Arfan Asif. The Photographic Society of America (PSA) recently awarded Arfan the Proficiency Distinction (PPSA) in recognition of his achievement record in PSA recognized international exhibitions. To qualify for the Proficiency Distinction, 288 or more acceptances are required. The award certificate was presented in September at the 2012 PSA International Conference in San Francisco. (PSA is a worldwide organization of both amateur and professional photographers. To learn more about PSA and its activities, visit the PSA web site at [www.psa-photo.org](http://www.psa-photo.org).)

Arfan is Head of Follow-Up Unit, Pharmacy Department, at Dubai Health Authority, where he has been based the past 18 years. He was inspired by the distinguished photo artists of Bangalore, India, where he grew up and received his Masters in Pharmacy. He has been participating seriously in photographic exhibitions since 1989. In addition to his PSA Distinction, he has been awarded Associateship of The Royal Photographic Society, UK (ARPS); Artiste distinction from International Federation of Photographic Art (AFIAP); Fellowship of Image Colleague Society International (FICS); and he has received many photographic awards spread over 29 countries.

# Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

Dec 9 Members' Night  
Linda & David Kingston - Deserts and Oases of Egypt  
Lamjed El Kefi - Underwater Photography  
Sandhya Prakash - My experiments with Earth

## Field Trips (Members only, please)

Dec 21-22 Christmas Picnic and Camping in the Desert  
Jan 8-12: Photography Workshop  
Jan 18: Camel Farm Visit  
Jan 21-26: Kerala National History Tour  
Feb 21-23: Inter-Emirates Week Al Ain  
Mar 26-Apr 6: Nepal Hill Country

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

## DNHG COMMITTEE 2012

When possible, please contact committee members outside office hours

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## Contributions

Do you have a field report, unusual finding, interesting news article, book review, amazing photograph, or community news to share?

If so, email your contributions to: [gazelleeditor@gmail.com](mailto:gazelleeditor@gmail.com)  
(Arial 10 justified).

## DNHG Membership

Membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at Dhs. 100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. Membership is valid from Sep 2012 to Sep 2013. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to Lloyds TSB Bank account no. 60600669933501. (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 AE650320060600669933501. However, this process does not identify you as the payer. If you wish to pay by cash, please also scan and e-mail a copy of your payment confirmation 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.