



# GAZELLE

[www.dnhg.org](http://www.dnhg.org)



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

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**Contributors—**

Thanks to the following for their contributions this month:

Charles Laubach, Kerstin Binoth, Monica Falini, Alexis Biller, Jose de Heer, Claudio G Garzarelli, Panos Azmanis, Kathleen Mrace, Gosia van Unen, Margaret Swan and Jose de Heer.

**Send in your contributions by 25th January, for the attention of the: [gazelleeditor@gmail.com](mailto:gazelleeditor@gmail.com)**

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**INSIDE THIS MONTH'S BUMPER ISSUE:**

Read about the DNHG field trip to Qeshm Island.

See more pictures like the one above from the Qeshm trip on the Spotlight page.



A desert locust, *Schistocerca gregaria* expertly camouflaged

© Kerstin N. Binoth

I remember visiting Al Wathba Wetlands back in the 1980s, when it was no more than an unfenced destination for twitchers known as Al Ghar Lake, just off the Mussafah-Al Ain Truck Road. Ground water that collected naturally was joined by water discharged from a nearby sewage treatment plant, making a swamp with varying water level and salinity that attracted birds in large numbers. You would just pull off the Truck Road and walk around, without the benefit of a visitor's centre, shade, benches or bird-blinds.

It is still there, although now renamed and boasting the aforementioned amenities, a protective fence, and designated footpaths, all to protect us from the environment and vice versa. The public may visit on Thursdays and Saturdays, but otherwise the site is undisturbed.

Protection was needed and welcome. The wetlands have long hosted brine shrimp, which in turn attract a population of Greater Flamingos. In the early 1990s, a small number of flamingos nested and laid eggs, a first in at least 50 years for our slice of the Gulf. But the eggs disappeared one night, apparently robbed by persons who were able simply to walk in, and there was a real fear that the flamingos would not nest there again. So the site was walled off and the Al Wathba Wetland Reserve was formally established in 1998. After some undisturbed years, the flamingos nested again, and they now have a well-established record of successfully hatching and raising their chicks. AWWR was named a Ramsar site – Abu Dhabi's first – in 2013.

This is an example – maybe a rare example – of



Black-winged Stilt

© Kerstin N. Binoth

(Continued on page 4)

## Announcements and Recordors

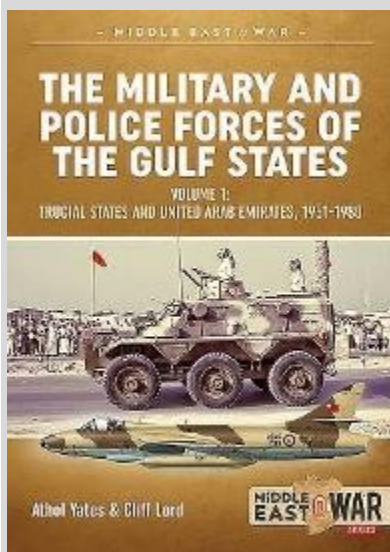
### Monthly Speaker - Sunday, 12th January, 2020

**Lecture Title—"The History of the Emirates Military and Police Forces  
1951—1980"**

**Speaker— Dr Athol Yates**

Dr Athol Yates teaches at the Institute for International and Civil Security, Khalifa University in Abu Dhabi, which offers a Masters Degree for Emirati security professionals. He teaches civil security, covering professional security practice, internal security and disaster management. His current research is on the security services of the UAE and former Trucial States

Athol Yates will talk on his new book - The Military and Police Forces of the Gulf States Volume 1: Trucial States and United Arab Emirates, 1951-1980. The United Arab Emirates today is one of the safest countries in the world, and it is acknowledged as a leading Arab military force with considerable recent combat experience. These are amazing achievements given that the Emirates' first military and police forces were established only in 1951 and 1956 respectively. These forces were established when the Emirates were known as the Trucial States, during which time they were British protected states. In 1971, Britain withdrew its protection and the seven Trucial States' Emirates federated to form the UAE. Before 1971, three Emirates had formed militaries while the British controlled another. After federation, two more Emirates formed militaries with the former British-controlled military becoming the first federally-controlled force. The six militaries were unified in 1976 to create the UAE Armed Forces. The country's history of police force dates to the 1950s when Dubai and Abu Dhabi established them. All the other Emirates established them by the late 1960s. During the 1970s, the police forces of the individual Emirates were increasingly federalised under the newly-established Ministry of Interior, although to a lesser degree than the militaries.



#### **DNHG Overnight Dhow Trip to the Musandam**

A team photo of participants who enjoyed observing the striking geology and wildlife of this part of Oman.

#### **From the Editor:**

There is just enough room to wish all of our members a "Happy New Year!"

A busy month for DNHG excursions—enjoy this bumper issue!

### **DNHG Recordors**

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#### **IMPORTANT REMINDER!**

#### **MEMBERSHIP**

DNHG membership was due for annual renewal in September 2019, for membership through to September 2020. Members who have not yet renewed by 15th January will be ...

Removed from the mailing list!

To renew your membership please contact our Membership Secretary Aubrey Baugh, by emailing

[aubaugh@gmail.com](mailto:aubaugh@gmail.com)

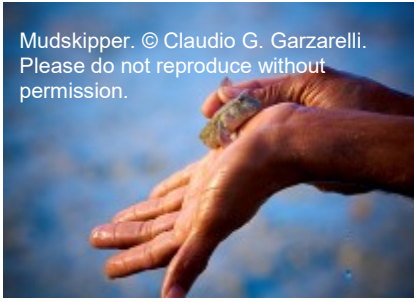
Memberships can also be renewed at the January lecture on 12th January, 2020.

Membership is still a bargain at only Dh50 for individuals and Dh100 for families. See the back page for bank details (if renewing by this method).

# Spotlight!

## DNHG Trip to Qeshm Island, by Claudio G. Garzarelli

Mudskipper. © Claudio G. Garzarelli. Please do not reproduce without permission.



Salt cave. © Claudio G. Garzarelli. Please do not reproduce without permission.



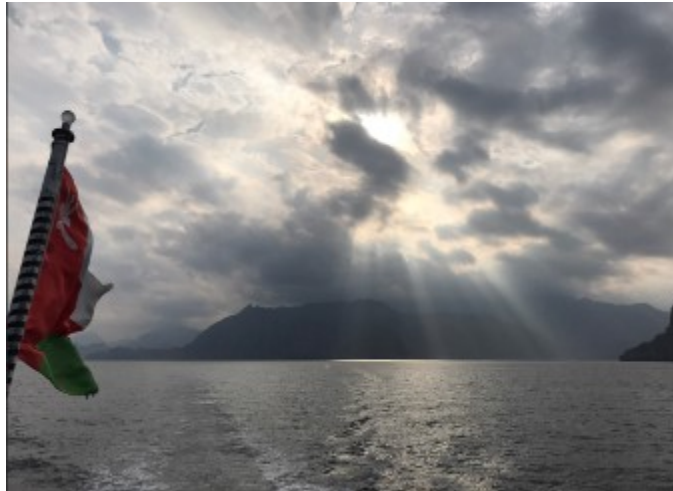
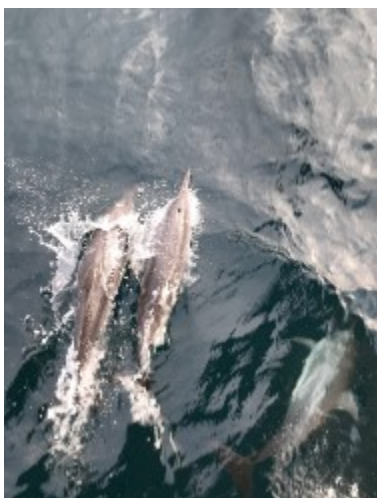
Stars Valley © Claudio G. Garzarelli. Please do not reproduce without permission.



DNHG visit to Al Dhafra Camel Festival, Abu Dhabi, by Kathleen Mracek



## DNHG Overnight in the Musandam, by Alexis Biller



## Field Trips

where change was actually an improvement. The site is protected, the birds are breeding successfully, and the visitor's centre, although modest, serves AWWR's visitors admirably. We were met and welcomed by Mustafa, a wildlife specialist who works at AWWR, who provided orientation and tips on what to watch for as we toured. He explained that **there** were two populations of flamingos at AWWR, one population that stays year round and another that passes through while migrating. I was surprised to learn that one of the migrating individuals had been tracked as far north as Siberia and as far south as eastern Africa. Mustafa also showed us videos taken by camera traps of some of AWWR's more secretive inhabitants such as fox, gerbil, hare, hedgehog, scorpion and dhub. While touring, we saw plenty of fox tracks, but little direct evidence of the other non-avian vertebrates. Mustafa also explained that foxes naturally feed on flamingos and the other species at AWWR, and that the only protection that he and his colleagues provided was to control the number of foxes, an ongoing task since they are also breeding successfully.

We were joined by Claudia Steuber, who along with Mustafa guided us around AWWR. Claudia, a member of our sister organization in Abu Dhabi, the ENHG, is a geologist and nature-wildlife enthusiast who visits AWWR frequently and often assists as a guide.

The trails are clearly marked, which is needed to prevent visitors from tromping everywhere in a relatively fragile environment. One trail goes 1.5 kms, and another goes 3 kms. The longer trail ends in a flamingo blind – well worth the extra distance, because you can see the birds feeding and the chicks running around. We went even farther to visit two more bird blinds that are normally not available to visitors. There are two shaded areas along the way. So nothing too strenuous.

And the effort is amply rewarded, especially with Mustafa and Claudia explaining what we were observing – the way the Rimth cements the sand beneath it to create tussocks in which burrowing animals could dig; the "fossil" dunes – areas of packed sand exposed at the end of the last Ice Age about 12,000 years ago, likewise providing habitat for burrowing animals; the miswakh bush that is used traditionally to clean teeth; and more. Valerie managed to arrange for perfect weather – sunny, no clouds, a breeze to keep things pleasant. We were there for 4 hours, but it honestly felt like 30 minutes.

And we saw, in addition to thousands of Greater Flamingo:

### Bird Life:

Black-winged Stilt  
Egyptian Goose  
Greylag Goose  
Kentish Plover  
Dunlin  
Little Stint  
Marsh Harrier  
Little Grebe  
Little Green Bee-Eater  
Sedge Warbler  
Rock Dove



### Invertebrates:

Blue-spotted Arab Butterfly (*Colotis phisadia*)  
Dragonflies – Oasis Skimmer (*Orthetrum sabina*) and Carmine Darter (*Crocothemis erythraea*)  
Spider (probably a Wolf Spider – *Wadicosa fidelis*)  
Desert Locust

Brine shrimp

### Vegetation:

Rimth (*Haloxyton salicornicum*)  
Zygophyllum or Bean Caper (*Tetraena qatarensis*)  
Sedge (*Cyperus conglomeratus*)  
Toothbrush Bush or Miswakh Bush (*Salvadora persica*)  
Tamarisk  
Reeds (*Phragmites australis*)

Thanks to Mustafa and Claudia for their guidance and to Valerie for organizing an excellent outing!

Contribution by Charles Laubach with photographs by Kirsten Binoth and Monica Falini



## Field Trips

DNHG members visited Qeshm Island earlier this month and write about their experiences over the next five pages: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avicenna](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avicenna)

### Key Attractions from the DNHG Trip to Qeshm Island

- Star Valley (Estala Kafta)
- Roof of Qeshm
- Harra (Mangrove) Protected Area
- Chahkough Gorge
- Salt Dome (Namakdan Cave)
- Village of Laft Port (old & new village areas, rainwater cistern, diversity of Wind Towers)
- Village of Guran (ship building)
- Art Center + Burke Khalaf (women's cooperative)
- Hengam Islands & Naz Islands
- Guest House for accommodation
- Guest Houses for local meals (shark at Captain's Guest House)

### Introduction

Qeshm Island, Iran, is the largest island of Iran, located in the Arabian Gulf within the Strait of Hormuz, and separated from the Iranian mainland by the Khuran Strait (Clarence Strait). It is located opposite the mainland port cities of Bandar Abbas and Bandar Khamir.

The island was formerly known as Kishm, and earlier as Keshm, Kish, and Tunb. Paleolithic stone tools have been found on the island, with historical records dating back to the pre-Islamic era.

Fishing and boat building have been historic important occupations practiced by the island's inhabitants, with sparse cultural activities that are mostly limited to dates and melons.

It is a designated UNESCO Global Geopark and a duty-free zone located in the heart of Arabian Gulf. Sonja kindly orchestrated a stunning cultural and geological tour that granted us sights of pre-Islamic natural attractions, together with more recent historical aspects of boat building and mangrove management.

- We accessed the "UNESCO GeoPark" protected areas of Star Valley, Harra Mangroves, Chahkough Valley, Salt Dome of Namakdan Cave, Laft Port Village, Basira Geosite, and Guran Village.

**Harra Mangroves Forest:** an early morning start granted us a stunning adventure through the mangroves - with sightings of multiple species of bird, including a Kingfisher, and Mudskippers (*Gobiiformes*). This area represents a substantial ecosystem of wildlife and an important habitat for diverse animals that are both resident and migratory. The "Hara Protected Area" on Qeshm is a biosphere reserve where commercial use is restricted to fishing (mainly shrimp), tourist boat trips, and limited mangrove cutting for animal feed. The hara tree, *Avicennia marina*, grows to heights of three to eight meters and has bright green leaves and twigs. The tree is a Halophyte, not only growing in salt-water, but also surviving being submerged at high tide. The generic scientific name honours Persian polymath and physician Ibn Sina (Persian: ابن سینا), who lived 980-1037, and who was known known in the west as **Avicenna**. For more information, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mangrove\\_forests\\_of\\_Qeshm](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mangrove_forests_of_Qeshm) and <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avicenna>.

- **Chahkough Gorge:** stunning formation carved by rain & wind erosion, where the layers of lime have been exposed. The name is derived from wells dug by local people to store water.
- **Star Valley (Estala Kafta):** Located near Borka Khalaf Village, offers another spectacular vista of wind and water erosion of limestone.
- **Laft Village:** both old and new can be observed, which are separated by a cunningly crafted water cistern. Architecture in the old town provides multiple examples of Wind Towers which naturally ventilate the interior of the buildings. This port town is known for having 365 water wells, one for each day of the year - and which were historically curated by the village women - with each having a specific name.
- **Salt Dome of Namakdan Cave:** the spring waters have brought the salty water to the surface leaving a white crust to the surrounding area, appearing somewhat like a dusting of snow over the arid landscape. Impressively, the salt caves of Qeshm extend for 130km.
- **Wildlife - Turtles:** The island serves as an ecological marvel of the Arabian Gulf. We observed dolphins and birds, yet there are also 7 species of turtles that visit the island: Leather Back, Green, Loggerhead, Hawksbill, Olive Ridley. In previous times the turtle eggs might have been consumed by the people. However, as a consequence of the community education, there are now concerted efforts to monitor & patrol the turtle nests, most notably by the residents of Shibderaz Village. This enhances the protected coastal zone of 25km length. In 2003 there were 27,201 eggs counted across 274 nests, from which emerged 21,063 baby turtles (of which more 16,000 are estimated to have waddled into the sea).
- **Wildlife - Birding:** We observed a diversity of birds for which there appear ample opportunities to determine detailed breeding activities and migratory patterns. Existing records indicate 230 migratory and native bird species across the different habitats of the island. These include Dalmatian Pelican, Crab Plover, various Herons, Eagle, Flamingo, together with coastal birds such as gulls and terns - and breeding pairs of Egyptian Vultures.
- **Hengam Islands:** We took a 2km boat ride between islands where the waters are patrolled by multiple pods of dolphins, and the land is patrolled by gazelle. We jumped ashore to explore the stalls of the island's beach market and savour freshly prepared food.
- **Nazz Islands:** A pair of island located on the southern edge of Qeshm Island where at low tide it is possible to walk to the first island on soft and wet gravel: a beautiful experience at sunset, with the option to upgrade to camel power for the short distance.
- Web links [www.qeshm.ir](http://www.qeshm.ir) <http://qeshmgeopark.ir/en>

Contribution by Alexis Biller



## Field Trips

### Chahkooh Canyon on Qeshm Island

**C**hahkooh Canyon (a.k.a. Chahkooh Valley or Chahkouh Canyon) is a UNESCO Geopark site located on the western side of Qeshm Island, just next to the very small and humble village of Chahoo Shargi. It is commonly considered one of the wonders of Qeshm. It's also an exemplary testimony of how the people of the island cleverly figured out how to increase their water reserves – a resource which is extremely scarce on the island.

The formation of the canyon is quite interesting, at least for the natural history novice which I am. As far as I understand, everything started with strong tectonic pressures, which fractured the area's ground in its weaker points and exposed the fractures to the natural elements.

The winds and rains gradually eroded and washed away layers of rock, widening the fractures and creating also pit holes. Mother Nature's unceasing action over millions of years caused the openings to become larger and deeper until they finally became the walls and the floor of the canyon that we can all admire and walk through today.

But that's not all of the story. The ground of Chahkooh Canyon is made of sedimentary rocks and for this reason it does not absorb much water. Therefore, the rains would mostly run over the canyon's walls and floor and disperse over the area's surface. Eventually though some of the water, along with stones carried by the same water, would find their way into the pit holes. The fall and the force from the running rains would make the stones roll and rub against the pit holes' walls and floor. This helped the holes become even deeper and wider until – *yes you guessed it!* – they turned out to be perfect natural wells at the disposal of shepherds for centuries. Isn't that amazing?

The system was so effective in collecting water that the locals figured out it could be improved to collect even more of it, thus increasing the area's reserves. They therefore dug a few additional wells about 10m deep. As of today, these man-made wells hold about 2m of water and can still be used. On our visit, the park's guide generously and proudly fetched some water for us from one of the wells, which we happily drank and poured over our heads and arms as a refreshment. For those that are curious, some of us defined the taste of the water as slightly salty, while others as slightly sweet. In any case, it was very good!

The abundance of wells, which are called "*chah*" in Persian (*spoiler alert!*), is actually what gave inspiration for the site's name: "*Chahkooh*" literally means "Mount Well".

But this description alone would not do justice to the incredible beauty of Chahkooh Canyon. An inevitable mix of marvel, awe and harmony strikes you as you walk through its paths. The pass way starts out relatively wide. Some bushes and small trees can be spotted along the way, providing valuable food and shelter to a few goats and local birds which live around the area. The tall walls are sinuous and marked by rims, fractures and recesses all throughout. They have a somewhat "organic" feel and provide a pleasant contrast against the more levelled floors and roofs.

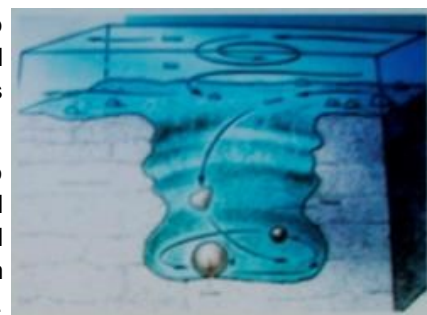
As you keep walking, the natural wells become more evident and the canyon becomes narrower. The walls become even more impressive and, in some points, they get so close to each other that you can literally touch both sides with a small stretch of the arms. They almost seem to want to protect you from the scorching sun (or to swallow you up, depending on your mood!). The sky becomes just a thin blue line between the rocks, amplifying the effect of the canyon's imposing proportions. At one point, the pass way intersects a second vertical canyon, forming a deep cross-like or a plus-like intersection.

It's hard not to look at Chahkooh Canyon and think of it as the deliberate masterpiece of maestro stoneworkers. It's an amazing natural history site and a natural wonder. A must-see for anyone traveling to Qeshm Island.

Contribution by Claudio Garzarelli



Location of Chahkooh Canyon on the western side of Qeshm Island (<https://www.lonelyplanet.com/iran/attractions/chahkooh-canyon/a/point-of-interest/1563599/361011>)



Action from the stones and running water causing the pit holes to become deeper.



One of the man-made wells in Chahkooh Canyon.



(© Claudio G. Garzarelli. Please do not reproduce without permission)

## Field Trips

### Wind towers in the Gulf region

During our trip to Qeshm Island, we stayed in a guest house with a working wind tower. I wondered what their history was, and how they work. In Persian, these structures are called *badgir*, which translates to “wind catcher”. They looked quite similar to the wind towers in the Al Fahidi Historical District of Dubai, where they are called *barjeel* in Arabic.

#### History of wind towers

As wind towers are the highest parts of buildings, they are also the most vulnerable. Therefore there is very little physical evidence of their existence in the distant past. However, frescoes and models of wind catchers were found in Egypt in the tomb of Nebamun, that date back to approximately 1350 BCE. The first historical evidence of a windcatcher in Persia was found at the site of Tappeh Chackmaq in the Alborz mountains,

*Looking up the the 4 shafts to the top of the wind tower in our guest house*

which goes back to 4000 BC and, in the 13th century, Marco Polo commented on wind catchers in Hormuz. Wherever they may originate from, they abound in arid areas from North Africa to Iran, serving as climate control devices. People have been able to endure the summer heat thanks to these ingenious yet simple structures.

In Dubai, the wind towers were introduced by immigrants from Persia. In the 19th century the Gulf was a major pearling area as well as a flourishing maritime trading route, with Bandar Abbas and Lingeh on the Persian coast as important distribution ports. The town of Bastak was situated along an inland trade road, which led many Bastakis to become successful merchants, moving toward the gulf coast. However, their success was challenged in the 1850s, when Sunni-Shia disturbances caused them to move to the other side of the Gulf and, when in 1899 the Persian customs imposed high taxes, many more left to settle in Bahrain, Kuwait and Dubai. Just as today, Dubai welcomed newcomers with low taxes and land to settle on. The area of Bastakiya (now part of Al Fahidi Historical District) got its name from the people of Bastak.

#### Building materials

Depending on the climatic, environmental and financial circumstances, different building materials were used in different areas. The first Bastakis who settled in Dubai made their houses of wooden poles and areesh (palm frond) walls with matting from canvas or burlap for the wind towers. These materials were cheap, but not fire proof and, after two fires, the municipality forbade areesh buildings. Masonry buildings were safer and had a better longevity. Their walls were built with coral stones from the sea, shell stone and calcareous sediment from the creek, gypsum from Jebel Ali, or sand-lime blocks. Plastering was done with lime from Ras al Khaimah and red silt clay from Iran mixed with hay and manure.

#### Types of wind towers

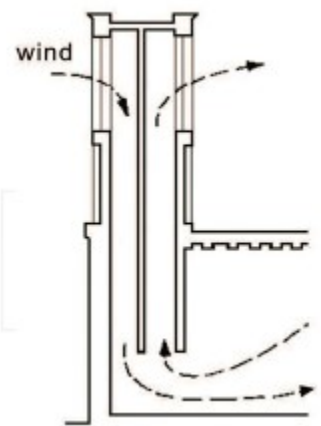
Wind towers were used to cool living quarters, but also in cisterns to cool water in order to prevent the growth of microorganisms and, in Egypt, wind towers may have been applied to grain storage buildings.

There are one-directional, two-directional, four-directional and eight-directional towers, and there is even a round one in Sharjah. The climate and the prevailing wind direction dictate the height and shape of the wind tower. The four-directional shape prevails in Dubai. In areas with low humidity, the towers are usually higher than in areas with high humidity.

The wind towers that I've seen on Qeshm and in Dubai simply catch the wind, let it circulate in the living quarters, and then let the wind escape again. In areas with low humidity, the wind is directed over a pond or a wet surface to have a greater cooling effect.

#### How the wind tower works

The most common shape of wind tower in the Gulf region is the square wind tower with four vents, separated by diagonal vanes and an average height of 12 meters. The higher the tower, the more effective it is. The higher wind is cooler, carries less dust, and has a higher speed. The top of the



Schematic wind tower:  
[http://  
 cdn.intechopen.com/  
 pdfs-wm/16338.pdf](http://cdn.intechopen.com/pdfs-wm/16338.pdf)

## Field Trips

tower has vertical openings that catch the wind. The base of the tower opens into a room below. The wind, coming in to one or two sides of the X-shaped structure, is channeled down into the room below, from which the hot air will be driven out up the other side of the wind tower. Indoor air speed directly below the tower can be up to 1.7 times greater than the outside speed at roof level. When all doors and windows of the room under the wind tower are closed, the air circulation immediately below the tower is strongest. However, with doors and windows open, a better distribution of air is achieved. The temperature of the air that comes down into the living room has been influenced by the temperature of the masonry of the shaft. This results in a 3-5 °C lower temperature in the morning, but a peak in temperature in the early afternoon, about two hours after the outside maximum. So the temperature in the wind tower living room is sometimes higher than the temperature of the outside air. It's the air movement that cools our skin and creates our comfort.

### Present and future

With the introduction and availability of air conditioners, many of the wind tower houses were abandoned and fell into disrepair. Luckily conservation efforts have saved many buildings, albeit with most towers closed off. In the meantime, due to the awareness of climate change and the need for sustainable solutions, people start seeing the value of these passive cooling systems, and appreciate the wisdom behind it. Researchers and architects learn from these old buildings and apply the principles in environmentally responsive architecture.

Recently, during the Dubai Design Week 2019, Turkish firm Miskavi Architecture Studio presented a wind tower structure made of aluminium and upcycled cardboard. In 2011, O14, a building in Dubai Business Bay known as the “Swiss Cheese Building”, opened its doors. This building has an exoskeleton with holes in it, resembling an Emmental cheese, hence its nickname, which encapsulates the main structure. This allows air to pass between the glass and the exoskeleton. The developer claims that this solution contributes 30% to cooling. Further afield, Zion National Park’s visitor center in the USA has two passive down-draft cool towers in which it’s energy management computer controls the size of the openings. In Abu Dhabi, Masdar City’s Wind Tower is another translation of the barjeel. At a height of 45 meters, the tower directs the wind to the square below. Sensors at the top of the tower operate louvres to open in the direction of prevailing winds.

All these initiatives give me hope that in the future, more buildings will be equipped with passive energy-saving climate control solutions.

### Sources:

Architectural Heritage of the Gulf by Shirley Kay and Dariush Zandi  
Cooling performance of Persian wind towers by M. Hejazi & B. Hejazi  
Land of the Emirates by Shirley Kay

Windtower by Anne Coles & Peter Jackson (main source)

<https://www.academia.edu/40138307/>

<https://www.constructionweekonline.com/article-11412-swiss-cheese-tower-opened-at-business-bay>

<https://masdar.ae/en/masdar-city/the-city/sustainability>

<https://smccudubai.wordpress.com/2014/08/12/the-wind-tower-an-early-feature-of-residential-life-in-dubai/>

<https://www.mas-arch.com/barjeel>

Contribution by Jose de Heer



Wind towers in the old village of Laft on Qeshm



Barjeel of up cycled cardboard by Miskavi Architecture Studio in Dubai Design District



# Field Trips

## Animal species observed in Qeshm island

28.11-2.12.2019

BIRDS (N= 49)

### Raptors

Egyptian vulture, Long-legged buzzard, Greater Spotted Eagle, Western Marsh harrier, Shikra.

### Waterbirds

Greater flamingo, Eurasian Curlew, Western reef heron (black and white morph), Kentish plover, Great cormorant, Indian pond heron, Common sandpiper, Common kingfisher, Crab plover, Whimbrel, Little stint, Common redshank, Common Greenshank, European Spoonbill, Dalmatian pelican, Mallard, Intermediate heron, Great Egret, Black tailed Godwit, Lesser sand plover.

### Gulls and terns

Caspian tern, Little tern, Gull-billed turn, great black-headed gull, slender-bill gull, Caspian gull, Heuglin's gull

### Other birds

Brown-necked raven, Pale craig martin, Little Green bee-eater, Hume's wheatear, Indian roller, Laughing dove, European collared dove, Common sparrow, White-eared bulbul, European turtle dove, Purple sunbird, Rock finch, Desert lark, Pied Wheatear (Hooded, Variable, Eastern Mouring) complex, Sand partridge, Rock pigeon, Rock thrush.

MAMMALS (N=3)

Arabian red fox, Arabian Sand gazelle, Bottlenose Dolphin (stray dogs and cats)

REPTILES/ AMPHIBIANS (N= 2)

1 Toad sp (species identification pending), 1 Lizard species (species identification pending)

Photo taken by R. Palomo and reproduced here, courtesy of the following website:

<https://www.4vultures.org/vultures/egyptian-vulture/>



## Egyptian vulture on Qeshm Island

The Egyptian vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) is the smallest Eurasian vulture species (1.65m wingspan) and is globally classified as Endangered by the IUCN red list and its population trend is constantly decreasing. In Europe once was common but nowadays is decreasing, almost extinct in Eastern Europe (Balkan Peninsula) and is stable in Western Europe (Iberian, Italian peninsula) after huge long-term conservation effort. The species has many "cultural" local names across its distribution like Pharaoh's chicken (Egypt), Milk maker/ Cuckoo's horse (Greece) and was beloved by shepherds. As vultures they feed solely on carrion and meat scraps, or sometimes they use tools to break ostrich eggs or break the shell of tortoises. They mature in 5 to 6 years and can lay up to 3 eggs. The juveniles will fledge in 3 months and together with the colony will concentrate in communal roosts to start their migratory journey to Africa.

The decrease of the species in Europe has led researchers to evaluate the population status in other continents. In Middle East, Socotra (Yemen) and Mazirah (Oman) islands have the densest population. The species still survives in low numbers in the UAE and KSA. In Iran it is widespread but there are no accurate population counts.

To my surprise the Egyptian vulture was the commonest raptor species to be observed on Qeshm island. "Dalmenj", which is its common Iranian name, was seen every day and I could count 12-20 individuals sitting on the electric poles, or flying low above the villages, even very close to the sea shore. On most occasions adult mature birds will be seen searching for food in pairs or small flocks of 4-8 individuals. Around our village there was a group of 20 individuals seen regularly and it was the first time that different age classes have been observed (2 juveniles, 1 second year, 1 third year, 1 Subadult). On a happy occasion we watched a pair's flirting behavior and a territorial aerial fight (chasing away the intruder) above the nest location. Our host and our local guide were both passionate birdwatchers so with their help I was able to collect valuable information for the species as well as train them quickly to locate the birds and identify their ages. As the total count of adult birds was around 40-60 individuals, we would expect at least 20-30 pairs to reside on the island. From a quick literature research there were no detailed population assessments done on the island. The population is resident all year round on the island (like in other Middle Eastern islands) while the population on mainland Iran is migratory or erratic. The vulture is well perceived by the locals and there are no obvious threats to the species as in other places (e.g poisoning, shooting, electrocution, trapping). I hope that, in the future, with the help of the local ornithologic community and official authorities, an accurate assessment could be performed on the island to identify the population size, the origin and flying pattern of the birds and the important areas for the conservation and protection of the species on the island.

Contribution by P. Azmanis

## Field Clips

### Saudi Arabia Re-visited

There has been lots of advertising about Saudi Arabia lately and some of you are probably thinking of travelling to the country that has been closed off for tourism for so long. Below some of my observations from a recent trip to Riyadh and a few informative links.

Despite numerous and highly publicized announcements that women don't need an abaya if they adhere to the modest dress code it is a good idea to wear one in the city if only to avoid people staring at you. I saw 2 western women wearing trousers and long-sleeved shirts but it was inside an office building and not in the streets. Personally, I find it more practical to wear an abaya rather than figuring out if I'm sufficiently covered as dress code is a undefined territory. Saudi ladies are just as covered up in public as before (abaya and niqab). It is in the work environment that the changes are more visible; open abaya, loose head scarf or even no scarf at all.

For female travellers, Saudi is very safe but it is always better to travel with another person. In the city you can explore on your own anywhere in town, go around town by Uber etc.

#### What to visit in Riyadh

Do not rely too much on website information. It is not being checked or updated regularly so prepare to fail on some attempts even if you visit top tourist attractions. I went to the historical **Diriyah** and due to an upcoming event everything was closed without any notice on the website. Most officials only speak Arabic but will go out of their way to find someone to help you. Patience is paramount. It is good to have plan B for all areas you go to. If you can't visit Diriyah, walk along Wadi Hanifah and absorb the atmosphere. **National Museum** is also a must see and has a great collection of artefacts very well researched and presented. Public hours start from 12 pm as mornings are reserved for schools. Depending on your gender you may join the children but if you travel in a mixed group it is not practical. There is a park outside the museum building and the **Masmak Palace** in the same area that are well worth the visit.

Other than historical places, Riyadh is a large modern city with plenty of shopping Malls, restaurants and cafes. Try Tahlia Street, the surroundings of Olaya and King Abdulaziz Rd. or The Zone for nice restaurants. You may still find Family Section or Singles Section but the majority of restaurants have open areas to sit in a mix gender setting, also outside (something that was not possible before). Most restaurants stay open during the prayer but will not take orders or serve food in this period so plan ahead. Also most shops still close for prayer even if it's not mandatory any more. You can download prayer time app for daily schedule. Try to avoid using bathroom space at this time as they tend to be quite busy. For those who go by car or rent a 4x4 there are plenty of places to go to in the surrounding desert, lots of old villages, and fabulous desert vistas all within 100km around Riyadh. As always in the desert,



be prepared and self-reliant, travel with more than one vehicle, bring spares, shovel, towing rope, and a compressor. Unlike in the UAE WIFI coverage outside the city is limited to areas along the road or close to towns.

Note: Mada'in Saleh re-opens in 2020 but you can still explore spectacular surrounding landscape. There will be season packages available for the spectacular Winter at Tantora Festival.

For those of you who would like to use local expert knowledge I attached a few links.

[Blueabaya.com](http://Blueabaya.com) (also via FB)

[Hayatour.com](http://Hayatour.com) and Haya tour (via FB)

The Saudi Arabia Tourism Guide (via FB)

Wishing you pleasant discoveries!

Contribution by By Gosia van Unen



## Field Clips

### Warsan and Ras al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary

The greenery at Warsan nurseries attract many birds and butterflies all year round. However, November sees crowds of people, eager to re-stock their balconies and gardens with seasonal floral colour.

This year the plant stalls appear to have developed quite significantly, with all manner of trees and garden-related products on display. Our usual route was packed with cars, randomly stopping on the dirt track, allowing the occupants a closer inspection before purchasing shrubs, bedding plants and herbs. As our vehicle also gradually filled up with purchases, we ventured further into the winding tracks, marvelling at various landscaping adornments on display. Where else can you buy life-size statues of horses, camels and even windmills all in one place?

On the way home, we passed by Ras al Khor. Despite it being around noon and not an ideal time for birdwatching, we decided to call in at one of the hides anyway.

We were pleasantly surprised to see much activity on the water. Resident and migratory flamingoes searched for food, whereas Spoonbills were taking it easy, side by side, expertly resting on one leg.

A Grey and a Striated heron perched precariously by the pumps, totally focused on the gushing water, rapidly flowing into the khor, whilst an Egret watched for fish from a safer distance.

A Common Greenshank could be seen patrolling the calmer water, whilst further out, families of Socotra Cormorants



In the photo above there is a lot to see. A pair of Black-winged Stilts can be seen in the background, surrounded by Greater Flamingoes, heads rummaging on the khor bed. A row of Spoonbills can be seen in the foreground, all balancing on one leg.

Zoom in on the photo to see a Grey heron in mid-flight, searching for a good fishing spot.



gathered. What a busy time in and around the water!

Although the purpose of our trip was to purchase plants and potting soil, the highlight was definitely stopping by the hide on the return home!

Contribution by Margaret Swan



An abundance of pots and even a windmill are for sale at Warsan (above and below)



## Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) Programme

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

**January 12:** Dr Athol Yates will present an illustrated talk on  
"The History of the Emirates Military and Police Forces 1951-1980"

### Scheduled Field Trips (Members only):

Field trip details will be circulated to members via e-mail. Field trips are led by volunteer members. Should you wish to lead a trip, or indeed if you have an idea for a trip that would interest other members, please contact Fieldtrip Co-Ordinator, Sonja Lavrenčič or any member of the committee (details below).

## DNHG COMMITTEE 2019

When possible, please contact committee members outside office hours

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Postal Address: DNHG, PO Box 9234, Dubai, UAE

## 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.