



GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

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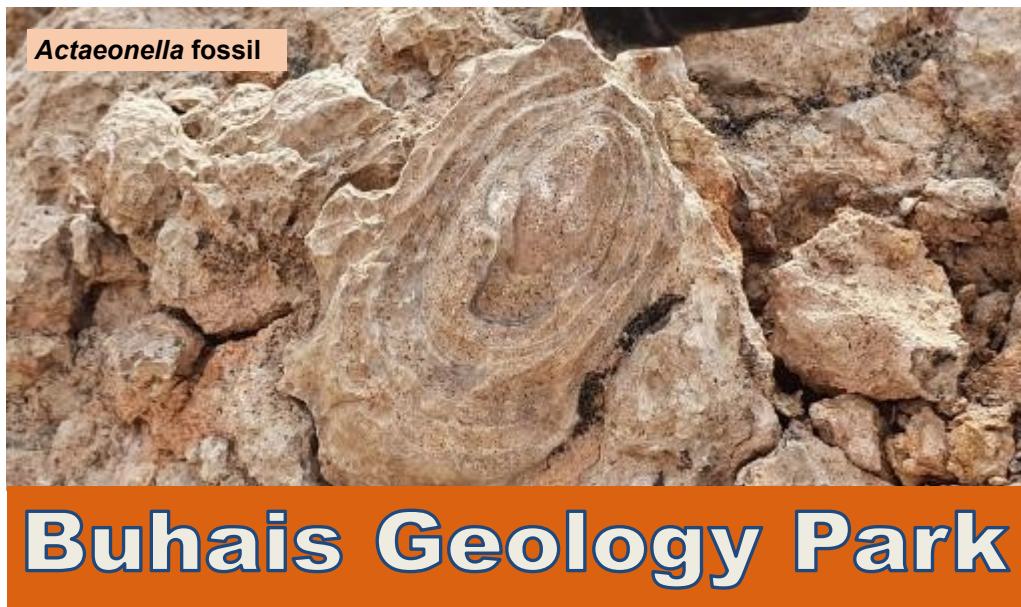
Contributors—

Thanks to the following for their contributions this month:

Gosia van Unen, Chandrashekhar Sardesai, Alexis Biller, Angela Manthorpe, Valerie Chalmers, Gary Feulner, Laura, Monica Falini and Kerstin Binoth

Send in your contributions by 25th April, for the attention of the:

gazelleeditor@gmail.com



Actaeonella fossil

Buhais Geology Park

Sharjah continues to invest in venues valuable educationally, environmentally but also aesthetically. One such place is the recently completed Buhais Geology Park by Hopkins Architects. It is located about 100 km from Dubai, alongside Jebel Buhais archaeological site on the edge of Al Madam plain. It occupies a space in a serene desert setting, with the Jebel providing a powerful backdrop. The design takes its form from the fossils of sea urchins and the center's main space is formed of a cluster of four interconnected circular pods, clad in bronze-colored steel. A bridge leads up to a reception space, from where visitors enter main exhibition halls contained in two of the circular pods. The center's inner spaces enable visitors to follow a journey through geological time and ultimately leads them to explore the Jebel itself. A cafe occupies a third pod, which has a terrace overlooking Jebel Buhais, while the fourth pod contains toilets and lockers. The buildings seem to hover above the fragile landscape, rich in remarkable fossils and prehistoric burial sites.

The buildings are certainly interesting but it is the content of the center that is of essence, together with the 600m walk along geological treasures of Jebel Buhais. I was lucky to join the tour led by our Chairman Gary Feulner, who contributed to this project by sharing his extensive knowledge of the region's geology to create scientific content and collecting well researched and documented rock samples exhibited in the center.

In the first exhibition hall we were introduced to the basics of plate tectonics and the sequence and structure of ophiolite suite of rocks that include oceanic crust rocks like pillow lava, sheeted dikes, layered and isotropic gabbro as well as the upper mantle rocks like harzburgite and dunite. We learnt that Jebel Buhais has a varied structure and contains conglomerate rock (from ophiolite eroded and rounded by rivers and seashores) and fossil bearing limestone, both laying on top of harzburgite, visible at the base of Jebel Buhais in the altered form of serpentinite.

Numerous fossils presented in the second hall included some from a collection donated by our Vice Chair Valerie Chalmers. The specimens included the largest fossil from her collection, a *Dictyoptychus* rudist, which was found not far from Jebel Buhais and others collected at the site itself several years ago. Resin replicas of some of them are a focal point of the interactive area enjoyed by young and old(er)

(Continued on page 4)

Feeling Blue?

Take exercise tips from the Hajar Rock Agama on page 5.

More photos from the February IEW weekend inside.



Announcements and Recorders

**Monthly Speaker -
Sunday, 12th April, 2020, 7.30pm for 8.00**

Lecture Title: "Some results of 20 years cave and karst exploration on Socotra island: from biodiversity, over cultural heritage, water management, towards regional greening projects."

Speaker: Dr Peter De Geest

Peter started his career as engineering geologist (UGent), coordinating and studying soil decontamination projects. His free-time passion for cave exploration resulted however in a Ph.D. study, reconstructing the Holocene Palaeoclimate of the Arabian sea area, based on isotopic and geochemical research on speleothems of the island of Socotra (Yemen). Providing sustainable fresh water potentials for local communities was a very satisfying aspect of his initiated Socotra Karst Project. Before obtaining his title he was hired as soil engineer in the UAE, where he worked as expat, building Saadiyat Island and the Palm Jebel Ali, before moving to Oman to assist developing Duqm Port. Currently he is managing a team of geologist conducting soil and site investigations worldwide, ensuring full geo-risks knowledge for DEME NV (Dredging,

From the Editor:

Photos and reports from the February IEW are inside.

Whilst self-isolating, why not share your photos or articles of wildlife from your gardens or balconies, either here or on our facebook page.

Enjoy your read!

DNHG Recorders

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Chairman's Message

Our April 12 lecture has been cancelled in compliance with UAE coronavirus precautions. Dr. Peter de Geest of the Netherlands was scheduled to speak about 20 years of research on Socotra Island. We look forward to hosting this visiting speaker at a later date.

Our scheduled speaker for May 3rd is Fadi Yaghmour, who plans to co-present an illustrated talk with Sandra Knutson, Fatin Samara and Isra Alam, on "The Sharjah Strandings response program: Insights on marine turtle threats and mortality factors".

We hope to be able to resume our scheduled lectures in May but that will depend on circumstances at the time.

In the meantime, we hope you will enjoy the reports and photos of natural history news, information and activities presented here in *Gazelle*, and that you will consider contributing information and photos of your own for our April 2020 edition.

Gary Feulner, DNHG Chairman

Tribulus vol. 27

Tribulus volume 27 was published in March. Copies will be available once the coronavirus precautions are eased. Vol. 27 features a diverse mix of articles about UAE and Oman natural history, including (among others):

- current status of the Egyptian Vulture
- distribution of the Sand Cat
- a Himalayan butterfly new to the UAE
- oral interviews about desert grazing practices & perspectives
- a video of wadi fish climbing a waterfall
- a rare daytime sighting of a rare owl
- a checklist of butterflies of Dhofar
- a new dragonfly for Oman
- wheat and barley breeds in the UAE
- an anti-locust campaign in the mid-1940s

Arabian Spotted Eagle Owl



DNHG contributors to vol. 27 include Vicky Dobson and Andrew Childs, Reza Khan, Sami Ullah Majeed and Binish Roobas.

Daytime photo of the Arabian Spotted Eagle Owl, from *Tribulus* vol. 27 (photo by Sami Ullah Majeed).

Annual General Meeting

The DNHG's AGM was held at the monthly lecture on March 7.

Chairman Gary Feulner reported that membership continues at levels consistent with our highest totals for the new millennium. He thanked the speakers and field trip leaders who have contributed to our unique program. Current Committee members were re-elected for the coming year.

Ideas for future field trips, activities and assistance in any way from the membership are always welcome.

[Editor's Note: Nothing is planned for the foreseeable future but keep your ideas coming].

Spotlight!

IEW Weekend 2020—Trek in Wadi Shawkah, by Chandrashekhar Sardesai
(photos from left to right) Hajar Rock Agama (female), newly-hatched spiderlings, (upper) Blue-tailed Oman Lizard (*Omanosaura cyanura*), (lower) discarded snakeskin.



DNHG visit on 6th March to Umm al Quwain Mangroves, by Alexis Biller



February IEW Weekend—Suwaidi Pearls Farm, Ras al Khaimah, by Alexis Biller



Field Trips and IEW Winning Photos

(Continued from page 1)

visitors alike. The collection includes rudists, bivalves, gastropods (sea snails), echinoids, coral species and more.

In the same exhibition hall the main rock types (igneous, metamorphic and sedimentary), all from the UAE, are being displayed. Apart from rock samples there is a section where the rock structure can be examined under the microscope. In yet another section sand samples from various environments can be seen and there were ample diagrams explaining dune formation processes as well as the physical laws that govern them.

From the panoramic windows in the second exhibition hall we could already see Jebel Buhais and once outside on the trail we followed its features travelling through time. The oldest rocks are 93 million years old ophiolite, once part of the oceanic plate that was forced over Arabia. Gary pointed out large black ophiolite boulders set in a red matrix of the Qahlah Formation, that showed evidence of uplift and erosion between 76 and 68 million years ago, forming conglomerates. The reasons for various rock coloration is due to their composition, origin and presence of various minerals like iron oxide, magnesium and chromium.

Color differences and the timelines of various levels of the Jebel, erosional impact and many other visible features were also pointed out. We saw effects of chemical weathering on the yellow limestone of the Simsima Formation that resulted in the formation of dripstone and physical weathering producing cracks and debris of fallen rocks. There were plenty of fossils to be seen, evidence of shallow seas between 74 and 66 million years ago, now all extinct, as well as mushroom rocks with algal nodules within their uppermost layers and older and finer limestone, evidence of the sea being much deeper.

From higher ground the ridges of Jebel Maleiha, Jebel Faya and Jebel Aqabah, that used to be the shores of former islands just like Jebel Buhais in the past, were visible in the distance.

At the beginning and at the end of the outside trail there were some man-made finds. The first one was a pre-Iron Age burial site from the Wadi Suq period (around 4000-3500 years ago), an oval-shaped tomb that contained arrowheads from the subsequent Iron Age. The second one was a much larger Wadi Suq tomb, a collective burial site of four chambers with human remains as well as pottery shards, beads and shells believed to be offerings. Other archaeological finds at nearby jebels place early human habitation in this area at 125,000 years (flint tools at Jebel Faya) and excavations at Jebel Buhais itself demonstrate the regular presence of nomadic peoples during wetter periods, for example between 7,500 and 6,500 years ago.

I'm sure that this exciting new facility will help visitors understand the way in which landscapes are formed and how Earth evolves over time. Geological timescales seen in the desert setting that to most of us feels eternal, bring just the right perspective for contemplation..

Contribution by Gosia van Unen (this report follows a DNHG Field Trip on 22nd February, 2020)



Pods forming Buhais Geology Visitors' Centre



Bronze Age burial site

Trail section with black ophiolite "cannon balls"



Pigeon coop

Winners of the photographic competition at this year's Inter-Emirates Weekend (IEW), hosted by Ras al Khaimah.

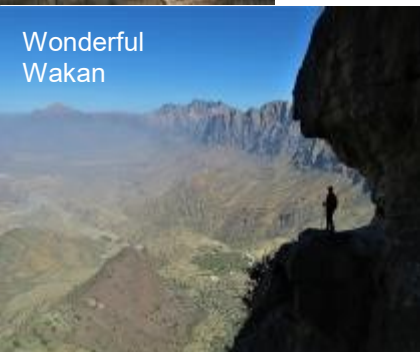
'A picture tells a thousand words,' so the saying goes, and each of these photographs on the right illustrate a rare and wonderful moment in the colourful world of nature. On the left, marvel at man's early designs to home pigeons and gaze in wonder at the huge expanse of the UAE mountains. Here are the winning photos from the weekend.

- A) **Plants and Animals**—"Choice", a Purple Sunbird, by Peter J Howarth.
- B) **Geology and Landscape**—"Wonderful Wakan", by Angela Manthorpe.
- C) **Culture**—"Master and the camel", by Marina Tsaliki.
- D) **Archaeology and Architecture**—"Pigeon Coop", by Angela Manthorpe.
- E) **Environmental Degradation**—"Ghost nets—silent killer", by Angela Manthorpe.

The overall winning photographs were:

- 1) "Choice", photo of Purple Sunbird by - Peter J Howarth.
- 2) "Pigeon Coop", by Angela Manthorpe.
- 3) "Hanging Around" (Underwater Turtle at Damaniyat Island), by Angela Manthorpe.

Contribution by Valerie Chalmers



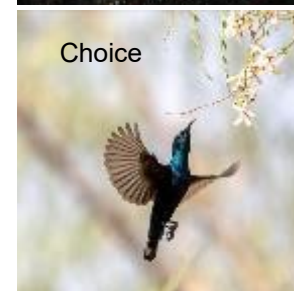
Wonderful Wakan



Hanging around



Ghost nets



Choice

Field Trips and Clips

Shawkah Wadi – Walk on the Wet Side

On Saturday afternoon at the Inter-Emirates Weekend (IEW), Roxanne Whelan led an intrepid group to the upper reaches of Wadi Shawkah to collect the contents of a malaise (insect) trap. We set off from the Emirates Adventure and Mountain Tourism Camp which is run by Salem Mattar, whose beekeeping farm we'd visited in the morning with Marina Tsaliki.

Just beyond the barrier which prevents cars from driving up the wadi the myriad flowers in bloom were of great interest to the oil or blister beetles and the local butterflies. I spotted Caper White in great numbers, Blue Pansy, Painted Lady, a solitary African Emigrant, a very fast-moving Swallowtail and numerous little blues that I haven't learned to recognize yet. Ulrike Andorff had an encounter with one of the hawkmoths, acting like a little hummingbird. Meandering up the centre of the wadi I spooked a Hajar Rock Agama* in beautiful red and blue livery and she waited patiently while the 'big camera brigade' snapped away. With the winter rains there were numerous pools, chock full of tadpoles, some of them seemingly sunbathing on the surface; beetles whirling in circles and a handful of dragonflies settling and flying and settling again. Avoiding a deep pool at one point we climbed up onto the side of the wadi and, on the edge, in the pink spray of a *Boerhavia elegans* bush, I spotted a tight knot of spiderlings* – which agitated in unison every time the wind blew through.

As the wadi widened and turned we came to the malaise trap, nestled amongst a grove of dwarf palms. The trap looks like a thin tent and at the apex was a plastic bottle filled with ethanol; this was our objective and you could see Roxanne's eager anticipation as she detached the bottle to see what was inside. With all the blooming vegetation around us it was no surprise to find it full of all manner of insects – butterflies floating on top and layers of limbs and abdomens poking out below. Collecting the bottle is the easy part though, as back in the lab, there's the painstaking task of sifting, sorting and recording the catch to see if there's anything unusual.

As the sun started its descent we turned around to begin a leisurely walk back to the cars. Continuing the rubbish collecting which started with Anelisa Lambert on Friday, we picked up the usual plastic bags and bottles, plus several piles of desiccated banana and orange skins which fellow hikers keep telling me 'will be eaten by the goats', but which just end up drying out and polluting the environment. On a near vertical rock face Peter Howarth spotted a Blue-tailed Oman lizard* (*Omanosaura cyanura*) on the hunt; it was fascinating to watch as the fast-moving lizard checked out all the crevices and overhangs in search of a meal. Nose to the ground I found my first *Hippocrepis constricta*, a member of the pea family with a distinctive pod, and a couple of *Viola cinerea*, the UAE's only violet, which Marina Tsaliki had pointed out in the morning. We wait expectantly to hear from Roxy if there was anything special in the pot..... **[Editor's note—next month, insect findings will be revealed!]**

Contribution by Angela Manthorpe (photos [left to right]—tadpoles bask in the sun, on the way back, [lower] *Viola cinerea*).

- For the female Hajar Rock Agama, spiderlings and Blue-tailed Oman lizard, see the first photo segment on the Spotlight page. The female Hajar Rock Agama is also featured in the article below.

Feeling blue?

With gyms closed, working from home, and social distancing measures in place, there's no better time to exercise to relieve stress and rejuvenate.

After a trip to Wadi Shawkah during the Inter- Emirates Weekend, a few of us decided to return to the area for some leisurely exploration. There are several marked hiking trails in place now and it was whilst following one of these that we spotted a couple of Hajar Rock Agamas (*Pseudotrapelus jensvindumi*). This is the reptile that we previously would have called the Sinai Agama (*Pseudotrapelus sinaitus*) but which was recognized as a distinct species in 2013. The Hajar Rock Agama is endemic to the Hajar Mountain range (shared with Oman and UAE).

What is noticeable first of all, is that it's not just the male that has blue colouring. I've seen two females recently with blue heads, distinct red shoulder patches with a brown-grey body as shown in the left photo. Johannes Els from Arabia's Wildlife Centre/ Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife has advised that, whilst "the blue head coloration changes throughout the season (due to factors such as breeding cycles, temperature and threat response), the red markings are visible on most adult females".

The males, on the other hand, when they display during breeding season turn spectacularly blue from head to toe, with varying tones of purple and lilac on the back and tail. One particularly patient



specimen treated us to an exercise routine that could easily be replicated at home – it went something like this:

- Do a short run, preferably up to a prominent spot.
- Knock out 2 – 3 push ups (straight legs, on your toes).
- Arch your back and hold position (think plank or cobra pose).
- Repeat.

This behaviour is exhibited by courting males. We couldn't see the female that he was showing off to, but suspected he was telling the blue-shirted human nearby to move on because this patch is already taken. So, don't languish around the house, keep healthy and do some exercise!

Contribution by Angela Manthorpe (with verification and edits from Gary Feulner and Johannes Els).

Field Clips and Trips

Local fossil confirms shorter days in Cretaceous

A University of Brussels team recently used an exceptionally well-preserved fossil of *Torreites sanchezi*, a Late Cretaceous rudist that lived in the UAE and Oman, to calculate with precision the length of days on earth 70 million years ago, not long before the Chicxulub meteorite wiped out Earth's non-avian dinosaurs and much other life besides.

Microscopic examination revealed daily growth rings in the shell wall of these more-or-less conical bivalve mollusks. Further analysis revealed a pattern of 372 days per year, corresponding to a day length of approximately 23.5 hours. The length of Earth's year (the time required for one revolution around the sun) has remained stable through geological time, but it has long been recognized that Earth's daily rotation around its own axis has been gradually slowing due to gravitational drag caused by the rotation of Earth's satellite, the moon, around the earth. This has slowly increased the length of an earth day.

A second finding was more unexpected. Analysis showed that much more shell growth occurred during daylight hours than at night. This led the researchers to propose that *Torreites'* metabolism was powered partly by a photosynthetic symbiont, in the same way that modern corals are host to photosynthetic algae.

Contribution by Gary Feulner

Photos:

(left) *Torreites sanchezi* from the Huqf area of Oman, a late Cretaceous rudist also found at Jebel Buhais and neighboring hills

(right) Cross-section of an embedded *Torreites sanchezi*, from Qarn Mulayh, west of Jebel Buhais, Sharjah



Desert Drive for Beginners

[Chairman's note: Sand driving was once an essential skill for exploring desert areas of the UAE. Since the late 1990s, construction of networks of roads and tracks has made many desert areas more accessible to visitors without special skills, although at the same time many other areas have been fenced and put off-limits for security and other reasons. As recently as 2011, Inter-Emirates Weekend was based in the Liwa oasis, from which we made a number of easy but instructive natural history forays. Still other desert areas have become dedicated, formally or informally, to recreational weekend sand driving for the UAE's burgeoning population.]

Over the years, the DNHG has hosted occasional lectures and workshops to introduce sand driving skills to our members in the hope that these will prove useful to them in responsible, small group exploration of the natural environment of the UAE. The following recent account captures well the combination of exhilaration and enlightenment that usually characterizes an initial day out in the sand.]

Brrm Brrm! Four nearly inexperienced 4WD drivers and their passengers met on Friday, March 13th at Al Qudra to be given instructions about tyre deflation, assigned convoy positions and CB radio communication. A daunting initiation, but thanks to Astrid and her two wonderful, experienced Dutch 4WD friends, Sven and Ronald, we set off on our grand desert adventure.

Thanks to the careful leadership of Sven we were able to feel like experienced 4WD drivers as he enthusiastically took us on tracks that to us novices would have been generally off-limits. Our 'Sweeper' Ronald, at the back of the convoy, allowed us to feel secure in our capabilities and Astrid, in the middle of the group, carefully controlled and gave instructions to those cars in the front of the queue and behind. The afternoon was full of emotions, feeling the cars slide along the sides of the dunes with the motors being on high revs. to compensate for the incline. We were then taught to go over the top of the vertiginous dunes almost blindly – being unable to see what was beyond until the last minute was a rush of adrenaline.

To go in convoy through these challenging dunes reminds you of the desert caravans and the dangers bedouins face, obviously in more dramatic situations. We breathtakingly meet some gazelles and their newborn. In the middle of the dunes we also

unexpectedly came across a cycling track in the middle of nowhere – long, perfect and infinite ... like the desert. And then after a few minutes under a hot Dubai sun two cyclists, in single file, pass by as if nothing is unusual ... then again only the silence.

Mid-way through our adventure we hear Sven on the CB radio: wait in your assigned positions, I need to check if this track is do-able. After several minutes we see the front of Sven's car. The car belly is blocked on the dune's peak. We then hear Sven's request for assistance from Ronald: I need a small tow. Ronald from his position of Sweeper at the end of the queue moves to assist his friend. Sven's car is pulled backwards for several metres and then both 4WDs re-enter into their assigned positions in the convoy. It is only then that you realise the importance of a group and above all its cohesion and natural reciprocal assistance – one of the qualities and learning points from going desert 4-wheel driving.

And as 'brave' 4WDs, drivers and accompanying passengers that evening we meet up with the others to form a large group – discussing and joking about our adventures around the campfire, fed by sausages and food cooked on the crackling embers that mesmerise our view, accompanied by two wonderful children that made us feel like a big united family.

Again thank you to Astrid for organising an amazing experience and the perfect organisation. Thank you also to Sven and Ronald to have led us on our convoy that allowed us to feel like real 4-wheel drivers for a day.

Contribution by Laura with photos from Monica Falini.



Field Clips



DNHG's nature walk in a well-vegetated tributary of Wadi Wurayah

The DNHG team, post-walk



© Kerstin N. Binoth

East Coast Nature Walk

Mid-February's East Coast nature walk explored a gentle, well-vegetated tributary of Wadi Wurayah where, only a week earlier, Binish Roobas (who co-led the trip with Chairman Gary Feulner) had discovered a Himalayan butterfly new to the UAE, and two new plant species were added to the Wadi Wurayah list.

Substantial rains in the area from October through January had allowed some annual plant species to grow so large and lush as to be almost unrecognizable. *Plantago afra* exceeded 30 cm and *Rumex vesicarius* reached knee-high. Most plants were in flower or bud, making this an excellent opportunity to learn to identify them. Insect life was abundant as well. Conspicuous on the wing among the flowers were many butterflies and two kinds of hawkmoths, the Striped Hawkmoth and the smaller Hummingbird Hawkmoth, both of which hover to sip nectar, rather than perching.

A scramble up a rocky side wadi featured a large hanging caper plant – a magnet for the Caper White butterfly. Caper Whites had been laying eggs there a week earlier, and early stage caterpillars were also seen. Now, we found the same plant full of mature caterpillars and pupae.

After lunch overlooking Wadi Wurayah waterfall, we ventured up the steep, gravel-sided gorge above the waterfall, now swept almost clean of its thick forest of reeds by the repeated winter rains. Surface water flows year-round in most of this area, attracting many species of dragonflies and damselflies. A final descent from the terrace above the waterfall gorge proved more challenging than expected due to rain damage, but gave the DNHG participants additional bragging rights.

Thanks to Wadi Wurayah management for this opportunity to build on previous research, and special thanks to WWNP Ranger Sami Ullah Majeed and WWNP biologist Nuri Asmita for their hospitality (including morning coffee!) and for their assistance in the field.

Contribution by Gary Feulner, photos by Kerstin Binoth (except as noted)



A green lynx spider, *Peucetia* sp., with her egg sac.

© Kerstin N. Binoth



In the waterfall gorge, now nearly devoid of reeds after repeated heavy rains.

© Kerstin Binoth



A huge *Plantago afra*, almost unrecognizable. (GRF)



Close-up of the tiny blue pimpernel *Anagallis arvensis*.

© Kerstin N. Binoth



Multiple pupae of the Caper White butterfly, on the European caper bush.

© Kerstin N. Binoth

Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) Programme

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

April 12: Peter de Geest will present an illustrated talk on "Some results of 20 years cave and karst exploration on Socotra island: From biodiversity, over cultural heritage, water management, towards regional greening projects."

[NB: Our April 12 lecture has been cancelled in compliance with UAE coronavirus precautions. We hope to host this visiting speaker at a future date.]

Scheduled Field Trips (Members only):

The DNHG field trip program has been temporarily suspended in compliance with UAE coronavirus precautions. For field trips previously booked, members should contact the appropriate field trip leader for more information.

DNHG COMMITTEE 2020

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.