



GAZELLE



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

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Contributors —

Thanks to the following members for their contributions this month:

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- Anelisa Lambert*
- Angela Manthorpe*
- Denis Anderson*
- Gary Feulner*
- Heidi Struiksma*
- Nirjhar Chakraborty*
- Sharon Eichinger*
- Sonja Lavrenčić*

Kalba nature reserve
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The monastery

Archaeological field trip to Siniya Island

On an early morning in February this year, a group of twelve DNHG members met at the Flamingo Hotel in Umm Al Quwain, to be taken by boat to Siniya Island, where recent excavations have uncovered a remarkable monastic complex that appears from the ceramics to date from c. 650-700AD. The size of the group able to attend the field trip was limited by the logistics involved - not just by the size of the boat but also by the number of vehicles available on the island to make the 15-minute journey over to the monastery itself.

Excavations carried out by Dr Timothy Power, Rania Khounoma and the UAQ team have uncovered a core cluster of buildings at Siniya, surrounded by monastic cells. In the core cluster, Meqdad showed us a church building with a large baptismal font, a refectory building with benches still lining its internal walls and a long, rectangular water cistern. The church sanctuary contained installations for an altar. During excavation, the glass stems of what appeared to be large communion goblets were found in the sanctuary, along with alkaline-glaze bowls for the mixing of communion wine. An oven with parallels to that at Al Qusur in Kuwait was also found – most likely for the baking of communion bread.

The second, smaller cluster of buildings – with parallels to those at Kharg Island – revealed what seem to be monastic cells, perhaps even an ‘Abbott’s residence’.

(Continued on page 4)

Announcements and Recorders



Monthly Lecture

Monday 6 March 2023 at 7.45pm

Speaker: Linda Krockenberger

Topic: "Cool Camels and Community"

What once was just a hobby is now a full-time business. The first camel riding school in the country has just turned two, a project led by Linda Krockenberger who is on a mission to reshape perceptions around camels and facilitate adventures with a positive human-animal connection at its core. Linda will take us on an unconventional journey showcasing how the ancient animal still fits into our lives in 2023, while connecting cultures and building a community.

Linda Krockenberger, 31, came to the UAE for a career in hospitality, and has worked for some of the largest hotels with more than one million visitors annually, such as the Atlantis and Theme Park Destinations. After discovering the desert with her Jeep, she was looking for a more slow and quiet mode of transportation and participated in a 650km camel trek with the Sheikh Hamdan Bin Mohammed Heritage Centre. This was a life changing experience which led Linda to explore the world of camels more, eventually opening a riding centre in 2021.

DNHG Recorders

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From the Editor:

Winter has arrived and Mother Nature is beckoning.

Please share with us through the email below your observations, stories, photos and captions of wildlife and nature in the UAE or abroad.

Email: gazelleeditor@gmail.com

Deadline: 21 March 2023. We look forward to hearing from you.

Spotlight! - What's in your larder - Part 2

In November's *Gazelle*, we learned about the digger wasp that had paralysed a grasshopper to provide food for its developing larvae. Within the order Hymenoptera there is tremendous specialisation and different wasps stock their larders with various prey, as I observed on a walk near Shawkah in November 2022.

I was exploring the edge of a dry but well-vegetated wadi when I spotted a smooth-skinned pale green caterpillar on the ground, next to a hole. I barely had a moment to register how exposed the caterpillar was when a wasp emerged from the hole, dragged its hapless victim inside and almost immediately proceeded to fill the opening. This was a small but elongated, grey, slender-waisted wasp which is quite common in the UAE – a digger wasp (family of Sphecidae), and probably one of several genera that specialise in smooth-skinned caterpillars (e.g. *Podalonia* or *Parapsammophila*. See *Insects of Eastern Arabia*, p.116).

I first spotted this species in Midriff, where it hunts amongst the *Salvadora persica* bushes (the "toothbrush bush") but this was the first time I had seen it with prey. The diligence with which this wasp covered its tracks was remarkable. Once the hole was filled the wasp selected leaf litter and twigs to drop on the ground to entirely disguise the location of the burrow.

Further along the same wadi I came to a stagnant pond where my attention was drawn to a small black wasp, which I can best describe as 'agitated'. The wasp was clearly in hunting mode, running over the silt, making short flights and twitching its body and antennae. I spotted a second wasp with prey in tow – a paralysed wolf spider – which it dragged across a slope and into a pre-prepared hole above the pond. These were 'spider-hunting' wasps – mostly members of the Pompilidae family and I had previously observed one in Wadi Qinan as well as in the Shawkah area. The twitching behaviour is characteristic.

On both occasions the wasps appear to have preyed on wolf spiders (Photos 4-6). Two kinds of wolf spiders are commonly encountered by day along the damp edges of wadi pools streams and dammed ponds. One (tentatively reckoned to belong to the large *Pardosa* genus) specialises in stony and gravel environments; the other (*Wadicosa fidelis*) favours silty margins. The females of the two species are difficult to differentiate. In the weeks or months after heavy rain both spiders can be extremely abundant in their localised environments making them an eminently suitable resource for a specialised wasp predator.

Contribution and photos by Angela Manthorpe with invaluable comments by Gary Feulner



1. Provisioning



2. Filling



3. Perfectly disguised



6. Wadi Qinan sighting



5. Prey in tow



4. Spider hunter

(Continued from page 1)

An expansion to the rear of the cluster, not yet fully excavated at the time of our visit, suggests a second phase of occupation.

Current work is focusing on a nearby settlement c. 300 x 100 m in size that may prove to be contemporary with the monastic complex.

The Siniya monastery has many parallels with complexes that have been excavated in other locations, such as at Hira (Iraq), Sir Baniyas Island (Abu Dhabi), Al Qusur (Falaika Island, Kuwait) and at Kharg Island (Iran), situated just off the Persian coastal town of Ardashir with its fifth century Nestorian bishopric. Mesopotamian Christians had brought Christianity to SE Arabia since the early third century. Along with an influx of Christian traders over time, this led to a sizeable Christian presence by the fourth century. Nestorian archives attest to a consistent Christian presence in between the fifth and seventh centuries. Arabic sources describe a number of tribes, all of which were Christian at the time of the rise of Islam, all under Lakhmid rule (only Al Azd was pagan).

With the Arab client kingdoms described above building churches, cathedrals and monasteries out of political expediency, Dr Power speculates on whether the Sassanian dissolution of the Lakhmid Kingdom in 602 AD may have led to a power grab amidst the local tribes of Eastern Arabia, each seeking to exert their own rule. One of the leaders may have built the Siniya monastery to establish his own legitimacy in the eyes of the Church. It is interesting that around the same time that the monastery complex on Siniya seems to have been abandoned (c.750 AD), the Abbasid invasion of Oman was occurring. The small mosque of Al Rafa just across the waterway also became established in the eighth century. Dr Power raised the possibility that we may be seeing a conversion model where the tribe decide to stay close to their ancestral homelands but move to worship in line with the new Islamic Caliphate, at the mosque of Al Rafa. It will be interesting to see what the continued excavations reveal this season.

We were very grateful to Meqdad for giving up one of his days off to show us the site and also the wider island which has beautiful mangroves, gazelles and a wide range of birds. We hope to take a second field trip to Siniya in the autumn, if the teams can accommodate us, in which case priority will be given to those members who were not able to join February's oversubscribed trip.

Contribution by Anelisa Lambert - Photos by Anelisa Lambert and Heidi Struiksma



Baptismal font



Refectory building and benches



Oven



Water well



Building waiting to be "revealed"



Listening intently to Meqdad



The mangroves



A curious gazelle

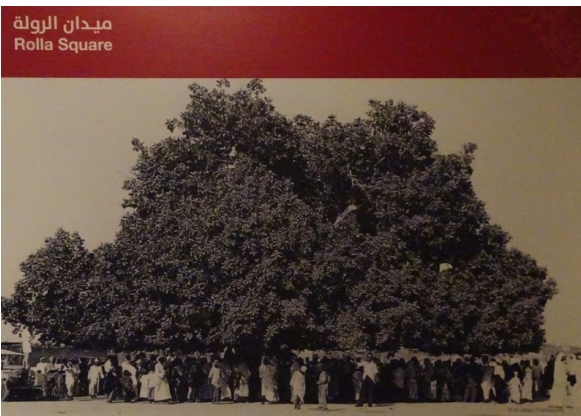
Sharjah Heritage Museum: Back to Basics

As part of the DNHG's November 2022 visit to the Sharjah Calligraphy Biennale exhibition, I detoured at the lunch hour to the adjacent Sharjah Heritage Museum, where I had not been before. I wished I had visited much sooner. The Museum gives an excellent introduction to many and diverse aspects of traditional local culture, which in the UAE has persisted until quite recently, especially in rural areas, and continues to influence local attitudes and customs today. One can argue that this ought to be part of any orientation for new residents.

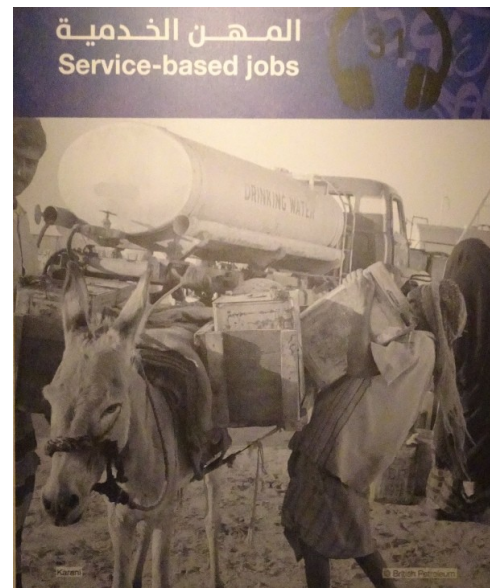
Among the many subjects I spent time with, were mountain people; traditional crafts; useful plants; personal greetings; traditional clothing; coffee; hospitality; taboos and etiquette; death; songs and dances; holiday customs; traditional food; marriage customs; henna; traditional livelihoods, including trading and service-based jobs; trade routes (the Emirates have always depended on international trade); payment methods; myths; and traditional knowledge, including astronomy, agriculture, and the ability to 'read' the sands, the seas and the weather.

Sharjah Heritage Museum is located within the Heart of Sharjah pedestrian area, just off Al Husn street (formerly Bank Street). The building is the renovated home of an 18th century pearl merchant. The museum interior is itself traditional, without the sound and light shows that seem to have become *de rigueur* in modern museums but that often distract from quiet contemplation. The atmosphere is intimate. Most of the exhibits are aligned along relatively narrow corridors, an excellent format for private visits although less so for large groups. Admission is a very modest AED 10, well worth it for the education.

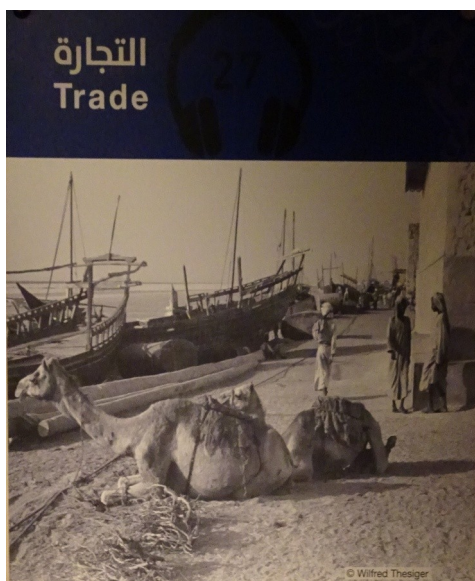
The Museum website can be found at: <https://www.sharjahmuseums.ae/en-US/Museums>.



A huge banyan tree at Rolla Square, Sharjah



Transporting supplies for the oil companies



Early trading vessels on the beach



A plate of harees, a traditional paste of meat and wheat

Al Qurm Nature Reserve - Khor Kalba and Al Hefaiya Mountain Conservation Centre

Well, well, well! Look at us, the brave beach cleaners! After days of non-stop rain, we finally got a beautiful morning to soak up some sun while picking up trash on Al Qurm Nature Reserve beach. We found everything from plastic bottles, caps and food wrappers to a discarded fishing net and even a porcupine quill! But, hey, this year was comparatively less than the previous year, so kudos to us for keeping the beach clean!



Collecting waste



.... and more waste



Dead fish

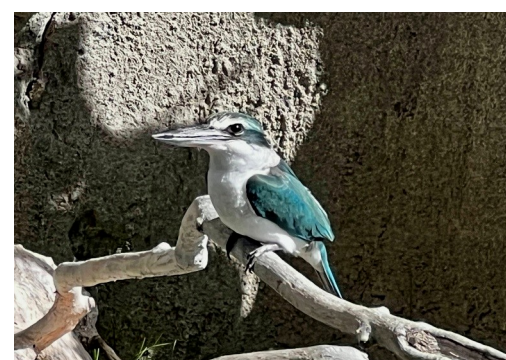
While we were at it, we even saved a weak little snake that was washed ashore. We took it to the veterinary breeding centre and it was like we saved the day! After our tea break, we ventured out to explore the Mangrove Centre, which was nothing short of magical. It was declared as a protected area in 2012 and in 2013 was recognised by The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar) as a suitable environment for endangered species. The total area is about four sq km. We saw towering mangrove trees and a massive algae concentration lake. The do-you-know placards made the visit even more exciting, and we learned that this place is a breeding ground for many rare birds like the Arabian Collared Kingfisher.



Kalba mangroves



Green turtle in inlet



Arabian collared kingfisher



Heron



Ghost crab



The saved snake

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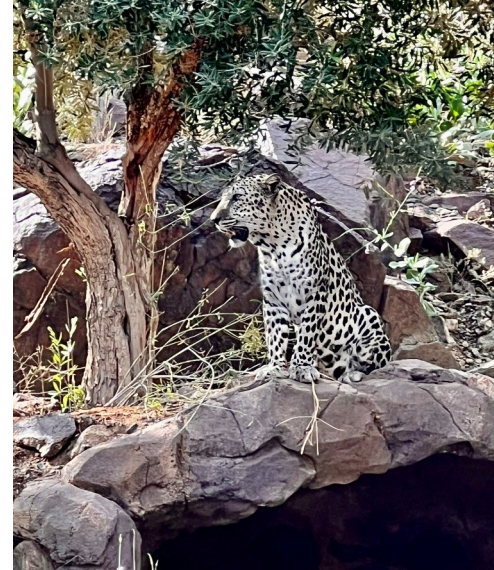
After a sumptuous lunch, we headed to the Al Hefaiyah Mountain Conservation Centre, where we saw over thirty different mountain species in their natural habitat. Located at the base of the Hajar Mountains outside of Kalba, the Centre is committed to protect both the delicate landscape and its vulnerable wildlife for future generations. The Centre offers unique viewing opportunities from within the Centre out across large landscaped enclosures and within indoor nocturnal habitats. The entrance and exit to the building is clad with copper signifying the history of copper mining in the region. Furthermore, it uses a reed bed sewerage system where 100% of the waste water is cleaned naturally and re-used for irrigation.



Mountain gazelle



Tahr



Arabian leopard (Nimr)



Demonstration of birds of prey in action



Then we moved on to the Kalba Bird of Prey Centre, where we were blown away by the power of birds of prey in the Arabian Peninsula. We saw live demonstration and displays of large variety of birds of prey like the Barn Owl, Short Toad Snake Eagle, Greater Spotted Eagle, and Lappet-faced Vulture. It was something unique and an unforgettable experience.

The day ended with a visit to the Al Ghayl Fort, a historic nineteenth-century surveillance tower that served as a sort of home security system. If there was a minor danger, the guards would throw a single stone to alert each other while four stones indicated a great danger. But as anyone will tell you, the old-fashioned alarm system is not as reliable as the modern ones – unless, of course, you are willing to risk having a bunch of stones bouncing around in your house.

It was fun. Hopefully we will do it again next year.

Information courtesy - EPPA website (<https://epaashj.ae/>)

Contribution by Nirjhar Chakraborty
Photos by Alexis Biller, Denis Anderson, Nirjhar Chakraborty, Sharon Eichinger and Sonja Lavrenčić



Al Ghayl fort

Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) Programme 2022/2023

DNHG Lectures 2023

6 March	“Cool Camels and Community” by Linda Krockenberger
3 April	“Archaeology in Afghanistan” - more details to follow soon
1 May	“The fauna of parasitic arthropods in the UAE” by Dr. Rolf Schuster

DNHG Field Trips 2023

19 - 23 April:	Tiger Safari in Ranthambore National Park, India (Trip Full)
20 - 28 May:	In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great, Greece

For more information and sign-up please contact:

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* Sonja Lavson at lavson@gmail.com for Greece

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DNHG Membership

DNHG membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at Dh100 for families and Dh50 for singles. Membership for the current year is valid from September 2022 to September 2023. As we have started hybrid meetings from September 2022, renewal fees can be paid at meetings or by the methods mentioned below.

New members can join by (i) sending to the Membership Secretary (see above) a completed one-page membership form, which can be downloaded from our website (www.dnhg.org) and (ii) making payment to our Emirates NBD account by cash deposit or transfer from your 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.