DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

Vol 40, No. 4, April 2025

GAZELLE

مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

Inside this month:

Contributors —

Thank you to the following members for their contributions this month:

**Gary Feulner*
**Hans Bekker*
**Iain Dodson*
**James Conder*
**Kartik Balasubramaniam*
**Kateryna Fomenko*
**Michelle Sinclair*
**Shamma Alteneiji*
**Sonja Lavrenčič*

Pied Wheatear - a winter/ spring visitor to the UAE mountains

Spotted by Kartik Balasubramaniam on the Yabbana landslide hike

The Yabbana landslide dam at bottom centre (Gary Feulner)

Yabbana Landslide Hike

In late March, Sonja Lavrenčič and Gary Feulner led a hiking visit to the Yabbana landslide dam, located in a short but steep tributary of Wadi Bih in the mountains of the Musandam peninsula. Before setting out on foot, and with temperatures already near 30° Celsius, Gary pointed out the most prominent geographical and geological features of the mountainsides around us, including the landslide itself. From downstream the dam looks like a wall of angular boulders across the wadi.

After ascending the steep downstream face of the dam by a modest trail through the rubble, we found ourselves overlooking a long, broad plain, dotted sparsely and almost exclusively by the dwarf shrub *Tephrosia apollinea*. The plain formed because the landslide acted like a dam, stopping, or at least slowing the flow of seasonal rainwater, which built up behind it and deposited finer sediment. *T. apollinea* is one of the commonest mountain plants, at home in wadi gravel and avoided by grazing quadrupeds. It is also drought tolerant, with many plants managing to produce at least a few flowers throughout the year, making it a dry season resource for butterflies and other flying insects.

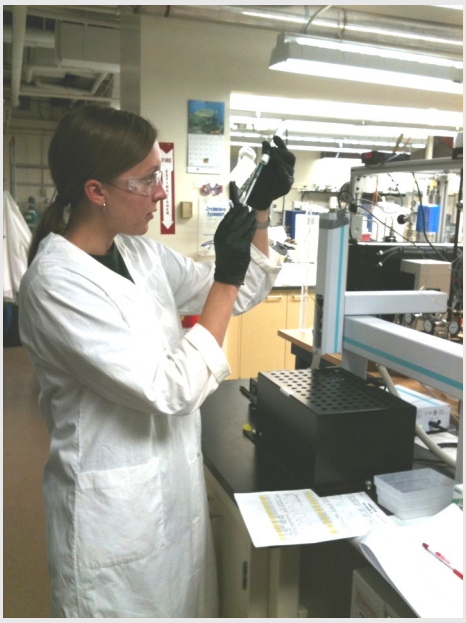
Several participants detoured into the thickest stands of *Tephrosia* to photograph a small spectrum of local arthropods active in the midday heat (see accompanying photos). Most common was the zebra-striped Mediterranean Pierrot butterfly, which breeds on the Christ's thorn tree (*Ziziphus spina-christi*) (Arabic: *sidr*).

The plains above the dam, with scattered Tephrosia apollinae shrubs (Iain Dodson)

Gary emphasised, however, that the condition of the plains area can vary greatly from one year to another. He has seen it pink with the spring annual *Erucaria hispanica*, and attracting uncommon butterflies with plant species normally found at higher elevations.

(continued on page 3)

Announcements and Recorders



Professor Dr. Lesley Gregoricka in Action!

Monthly Lecture

Monday 12 May 2025 starts at 7 pm at the
Central Veterinary Research Laboratory (CVRL)

Speaker: **Professor Dr. Lesley Gregoricka**

Topic: **Social Lives and Collective Death in Umm an-Nar Period**

Abstract:

The Umm an-Nar period (2700-2000 BCE) of the Early Bronze Age in southeastern Arabia represented an era of transformation characterised by increased sedentism, the construction of monumental architecture, and the development of interregional exchange networks across the Gulf. Mortuary practices during this time likewise underwent significant changes, sparking debate about how to interpret concurrent shifts in mobility, social organisation, and identity among Umm an-Nar communities. Here, archaeological observations of changing funerary traditions are coupled with biological and chemical evidence from human skeletal remains recovered from within these tombs to more holistically assess identity among the Umm an-Nar living and dead.

About the Speaker:

Bioarchaeologist Dr. Lesley Gregoricka is a Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work at the University of South Alabama in the United States. Her research focuses on prehistoric mortuary practices and the chemistry of ancient human teeth and bones to examine changing patterns of mobility and the evolution of social complexity in Arabia and the broader Middle East. She has published over 40 articles and recently co-edited two volumes entitled "*Mortuary and Bioarchaeological Perspectives on Bronze Age Arabia*" and "*Purposeful Pain: The Bioarchaeology of Intentional Suffering*".

She now directs the Bioarchaeology of Bronze Age Social Systems project in the UAE.

DNHG Recorders

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From the Editor:

2025 will bring many more interesting trips and lectures!

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

Email: ***gazelleeditor@gmail.com***

Deadline: ***20-May-2025***

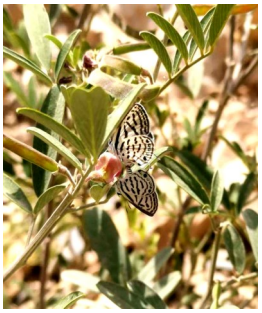
...for the May edition...

We look forward to hearing from you.

Your contributions bring the Gazelle newsletter to life and encourage continuous learning of our History and Nature!

(continued from page 1)

The age of the Yabbana landslide has not been determined, but probably pre-dates human cultivation, as there seems to be no historical memory of the event. The margins of the plain appear to have been cultivated in later Islamic times, at least, and cultivation continued into modern times. The main party gathered briefly beneath the branches of a large, isolated sidr tree and examined its edible, cherry-like fruit. From the protective covering around the trunk of the tree, it was clearly being nurtured and protected from the ravages of the feral goats who roam the plain and hillsides.



Mediterranean Pierrot on Tephrosia apollinae (Kateryna Fomenko)

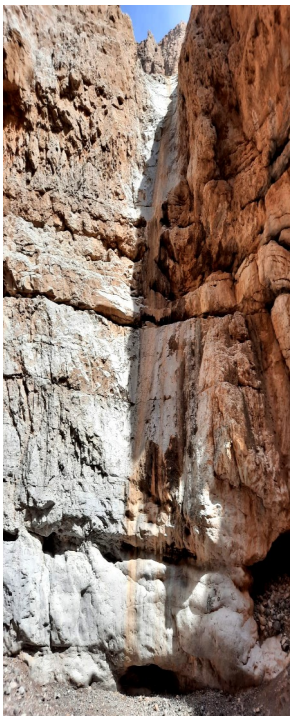
More evidence of human intervention was a modern (cemented) construction of two low walls, which both ran almost perpendicular to the wadi and, which Sonja explained, were a form of irrigation engineering to divert floodwaters towards where they would be of most use for local agriculture. Near the walls was a water storage cistern, also of modern construction, and a small cemetery. From there we headed out into the open gravel expanse above the top of the landslide. Pausing at the beginning of a stretch of long-abandoned terraced fields on the low bank, Sonja pointed out much older-looking low walls, which in the past may have been part of more complete structures. It is possible they may have formed part of human dwellings.

Bird's eye view of the landslide dam, from the area of origin. Downstream is to the right (Gary Feulner)

Boulders and Wadi Figs in the upper wadi (Gary Feulner)

At the head of the plain, the wadi bed quickly became narrower and filled with very large boulders. Among these the Wadi Fig *Ficus salicifolia* was common. The main hiking party followed a rising path along the side of the gorge, but soon the going got much tougher and required a fair amount of scrambling and clambering up and over boulders. At a bend where the gorge widened, extensive abandoned stone block structures built into the cliff ledges came into view (this reminded particularly the Celts among us, of the medieval 'beehive' monastic cells found off the west coast of Ireland). Such structures are not uncommon along cliff walls in the Musandam, but most are relatively small and seem to have been used as temporary animal pens. These, instead, were larger and looked to us as if they might have been used by humans. They included raised platforms and internal compartments separated by low walls. Their exact use(s), however, and the reason for their location, were not readily apparent – at least not to 21st century foreign visitors. Several participants have undertaken to try to get more information from local archaeological and cultural sources, and report back.

Stone shelters built into the sedimentary rock ledges (Michelle Sinclair)



The trailhead waterfall, dry (Sonja Lavrenčič)

Pressing on, the old trail was entirely erased in many places by last year's floods, requiring both faith and imagination, but Sonja promised those who still had the energy and the enthusiasm to continue, a glimpse of the site of a dry waterfall, hidden from view. As we reached the top we were rewarded with the singular sight of the bowl-like head of the wadi. With no recent rains of any amount, there was no sign of as much as a trickle of water, let alone the powerful and potentially dangerous torrent, which during rainstorms would cascade over the top of the falls and fill the wadi below. Nevertheless, there was enough moisture to support a fair amount of vegetation, including what looked like a type of moss, surviving in small patches on the shaded walls of the cliff-side. This was proving very attractive to a colony of Oriental Hornets (*Vespa orientalis*) and a few Arabian Paper Wasps (*Polistes wattii*), who seemed to be using the damp moss as a source of sustenance.

The waterfall team (Michelle Sinclair)

Retracing our steps, the late afternoon sun created a beautiful scene where the sheer sides of the rugged Hajar mountains opened out into the vast expanse of the broad gravel valley below – an example of the unspoiled natural landscapes that can be found just a couple of hours drive from metropolitan Dubai.

View downstream from the landslide (Gary Feulner)

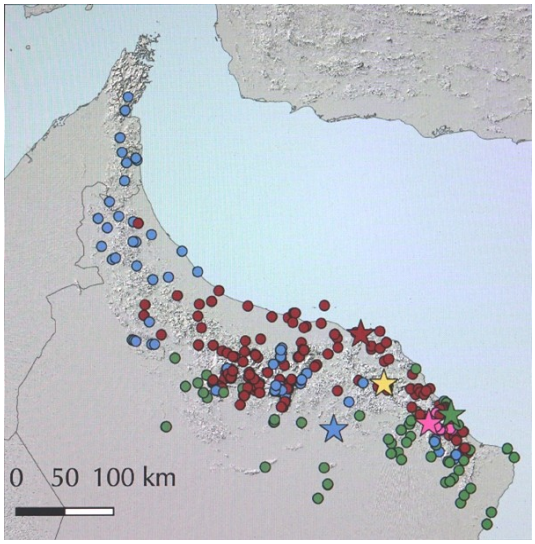
For more information about the Yabbana landslide and other landslides in the Musandam area, see: "Landslide Dams of the Ru'us al-Jibal" in: ***Tribulus vol. 14.2 (2004)****,which is available via the ENHG – Al Ain website: https://enhg.org/Portals/1/trib/V14N2/TribulusV14N2Searchable.pdf*

Contribution by Gary Feulner and Iain Dodson; photo credits under each image
Thanks to Kartik Balasubramaniam and Kateryna Fomenko for species identification

Hajar Mountain Biodiversity: More Rock Semaphore Geckos than we thought!

The Hajar Mountains are known today as a "hotspot" for reptile evolution. The iconic Jayakar's lizard *Omanosaura jayakari* and its cousin the Hajar Blue-Tailed Lizard *O. cyanura*, as well as the several Hajar species of Leaf-Toed Geckos (*Asaccus* spp.) have long been recognised as endemic. DNA studies over the past two decades have distinguished the rock agamas, fan-footed geckos, and carpet vipers of the Hajar Mountains from their counterparts in Dhofar and Western Arabia, with which they were once thought to be identical. This work has been done by researchers based in the USA, Spain, Russia, the Czech Republic, Sharjah and elsewhere.

On a finer scale, the *Asaccus* geckos have been further subdivided: genetic studies have distinguished multiple cryptic species – i.e. species which look so similar that they cannot confidently be distinguished by field or even laboratory observation alone. One of those (*Asaccus caudivolvulus*, found in near-coastal areas north of Khor Fakkan) has proven to be the only vertebrate strictly endemic to the UAE. (A similar study less than a decade ago distinguished five species among the *Garra* wadi fish of the Hajar Mountains; all had previously been treated as *Garra barreimiae)*.



Distribution of the five newly-recognised Pristurus species in the Hajar Mountains, formerly treated collectively as "P. rupestris"
The UAE's P. feulneri is shown in blue.
Taken from - Carranza et al. 2025, Cryptic species in arid mountains etc.

https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0315000

The latest reptile 'species' to receive the same treatment is the Rock Semaphore Gecko '*Pristurus rupestris*', a small, diurnal, tail-signalling gecko. For more than a century "*P. rupestris*' was considered a single species throughout Arabia, due to overall consistent morphology. DNA work on this 'species' was coordinated by researchers at the Institute of Evolutionary Biology in Barcelona. A first step, finalised a few years ago, was to establish the clear genetic separation of the populations in southern and western Arabia (as *P. guweirensis*) from the remaining "*P. rupestris* complex" of the Hajar Mountains and coastal Iran.

A colourful Pristurus feulneri male with a regrown tail-tip (Gary Feulner)

The next step, which depended on field work, sampling and laboratory analysis that stretched over more than a decade, was to ascertain the distribution and develop detailed anatomical descriptions of the five lineages within the *P. rupestris* complex that were identified as genetically distinct species.

The final result recognises three species with relatively broad ranges (discrete overall but partly overlapping): (1) *P. rupestris* (which keeps the original species name) occupies coastal Oman, including the Batinah coast and the northeast flank of the Hajar, as well as coastal Iran; (2) *P. omanensis*, which occupies the interior flank of the Central and Eastern Hajar, entirely within Oman; and (3) *P. feulneri*, which occupies the Western Hajar (north and west of the Jebel Akhdar) and is also found intermittently along the southern flank of the Eastern Hajar.

The fourth new species, (4) *P. ali*, has a modest range in the south-central part of the Eastern Hajar. The fifth species, (5) *P. assareen*, was found only at medium to high elevation within the Wadi As Sareen reserve south-east of Muscat, a protected area for the endangered Arabian Tahr.

All five new species are genuinely cryptic: it is extremely difficult to distinguish among them by observation alone, even for the researchers who have studied them. For UAE naturalists, however, identification is not a problem because *P. feulneri* (Feulner's Semaphore Gecko) is the only one of the former "*P. rupestris*" species that is found in the UAE, including introduced populations on artificial and offshore islands. In a gesture that can be taken as a tribute to all serious amateur naturalists, *P. feulneri* was named in honour of DNHG Chairman Gary Feulner, in recognition of contributions over many years to our understanding of the biodiversity and biogeography of the fauna and flora of the Hajar Mountains.

Another male Pristurus feulneri, signalling by tail curling (Hans Bekker)

Contribution by Gary Feulner; photos by Gary Feulner and Hans Bekker

Pallid Swifts in Musandam

Contribution and photo by James Conder

One of most memorable moments of the DNHG's recent trip to Musandam was waking up at Jazirat Hamra (Red Rock) to the sound of hundreds of screaming Pallid Swifts (*Apus pallidus*) nesting in the cliffs above. We were lucky to have them so close at hand, because normally these birds live an entirely aerial existence. Except for laying an egg and raising a chick, every part of a swift's lifestyle takes place in the air, from mating to feeding on aerial plankton - a microscopic soup of windborne biota containing as diverse elements as seeds, fungal spores, nematodes, spiderlings, aphids and flakes of my brother's dandruff.

Swifts can even fly while sleeping by switching off half of their brain. 'Not unlike my wife when she's driving' as commented by some wag on the dhow, shortly before he went overboard. In fact, this is a state known as unihemispheric slow-wave sleep, where half the brain's hemisphere (and its corresponding eye) shut down, allowing some rest while the remaining cognitive functions are put to work staying aloft. This is common to many birds which spend a lot of time on the wing, but swifts take it further by being able to enter deeper REM sleep (albeit in bursts of seconds). They achieve this by climbing more than two kilometres into the heavens as dusk falls, allowing for power naps as they gently glide back down to Earth.

References:

Attenborough, Amy 'How do birds manage to sleep on the wing and not crash?' https://blog.londolozi.com/2017/12/23/how-do-birds-manage-to-sleep-on-the-wing-and-not-crash/

Coghlan, Andy 2016 'Swifts break record by staying aloft for 10 months at a time' https://www.newscientist.com/article/2110650-swifts-break-record-by-staying-aloft-for-10-months-at-a-time/

'How can swifts sleep in flight?' https://gulbenkian.pt/jardim/en/read-watch-listen/how-can-swifts-sleep-in-flight/

Rattenborg, N. *et al* 2016 'Evidence that birds sleep in mid-flight' in *Nature Communications 7*
'Swifts are born to eat and sleep in the air' https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/03/190306110651.htm

Cistanche tubulosa: a fascinating holoparasite

Contribution and photos by Shamma Alteneiji

During a walk through the sand desert in late February 2024, I spotted a few tall, pyramid-shaped spikes and some with vibrant yellow flowers at the centre of a shrub in the Al Dhaid area. As I approached the spot, I noticed more than ten plants (big and small) of the same species growing both in the middle of the shrub and along its periphery - it was a small population of *Cistanche tubulosa*, commonly known as Desert Hyacinth, with *Haloxylon salicornicum*. The Desert Hyacinth is connected to their host by a thin root, which, as reported in the literature, can extend several meters from the other tuber. Since 2024, I have been closely observing this fascinating holoparasitic plant, and in February 2025 I observed that the population size of *C. tubulosa* had grown at the same site, though still not far from the host plant. While the habitat of this plant is typically saline sand in coastal or inland areas, the low sand dune habitat where it was growing seems to be non-saline.This population of Desert Hyacinth continues to thrive, supported by its host, adding colour to the desert landscape.

The sand desert - February 2024

Flowering C. tubulosa - February 2025

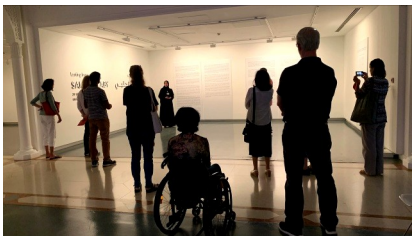
Report on the Annual General Meeting (AGM) and Elections for 2025

The DNHG's Annual General Meeting for 2025 was conducted at the 7 April 2025 lecture meeting. The following summarises the main points made by the chairman, Gary Feulner, in his oral report:

Now entering its 40th year, the DNHG is continuing to not only survive, but thrive, in a changing Dubai and UAE, and a changing world – a changing economic and social environment, changing demographics, changing physical environment, changing regulatory environment, and a changing technological environment. Most of these factors have been discussed in previous reports.

That said, ours is a modest, niche market. The DNHG is not organised or financed for broad public outreach. Our members are already environmentally conscious, and interested to learn more about the nuts and bolts of the natural world around us. We continue to be able to serve that market fairly well. Our greatest practical need is for more volunteers to lead local field trips. A current year initiative was to create a WhatsApp group for DNHG field trip notices, but the WhatsApp group is optional and we still send e-mails.

Financially, the DNHG is in sound shape for its limited needs, thanks to reserves built up slowly, mostly over the past twenty-five years. Our income is almost exclusively from our very modest membership fees. Our expenses are primarily for our lecture hall and facilities, speaker expenses, and occasional library purchases. At end-March 2025, we had nearly AED 22,000 in our current account, approximately AED 77,000 in a fixed deposit account, and somewhat more than AED 3,000 in petty cash, for a total of just over AED 100,000.



Paid memberships (single and family) total more than 200 this year, a record high, representing more than 250 individuals. Our membership of approximately 250 includes more than 35 different nationalities, as benefits the international character of modern Dubai.

Our 40th anniversary year will be marked, coincidentally, by a change in the meeting place for our monthly lecture meetings. Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management (EAHM), our home since 2002, will be closing its doors at its current location at the end of the academic year. We thank EAHM for their support and confidence over so many years, and we extend our best wishes to the EAHM technical, admin and library staff who have assisted us personally.

Faced with the need to find a new meeting place, we were overjoyed to be invited, and welcomed, by Dubai's Central Veterinary Research Laboratory, located in Za'abeel 2. This is a special pleasure because it takes us "back to our roots", so to speak: The DNHG was first established in the mid-1980s as an adjunct to the newly-created organisations that later became the Wildlife Protection Office and the CVRL. The Director General of CVRL, Dr. Ali Ridha Al-Hashimi, still recalls some of the individuals involved at that time. The CVRL's Scientific Director, Professor Dr. Ulrich Wernery, has been a DNHG member since 1987, and many CVRL scientific staff have also been DNHG members.

Our first meeting at CVRL will be on 12 May 2025. Notices and maps will be circulated by various media *(as well as being mentioned in this edition of Gazelle on pages 2 and 7)*.

Following the Chairman's report, the election of DNHG Committee members was conducted. The current slate of members was re-elected *(see page 8)*, including the recent additions of:

* Marios Mantzourogiannis as Speaker Coordinator;
* Ingrid van de Kamp as Librarian; and
* Iain Dodson as both Greeter and Bookseller.
* Former Speaker Coordinator Michelle Sinclair will remain on the Committee in an at-large capacity.

All photos are courtesy of our members - DNHG trips 2024/ 2025

Dubai Natural History Group End-of-Season Function
A celebration of DNHG 40th Anniversary

Our annual End-of-Season Function, which has not taken place for several years, is returning this year and will celebrate the 40th Anniversary of the founding of the DNHG.

It will be held on: **Tuesday 27th May 2025 at 7.30 for 8.00 pm at the Dubai Offshore Sailing Club (DOSC) in the "Tentola Thanda".**

DOSC has a long reputation for its casual and congenial ambience. The cost will be Dh125 per adult and Dh 60 per child (aged 4 to 12 years).

We are planning a light-hearted evening of interactive games, quizzes and other activities and memories of the 40 years of our group, with prizes for the winning teams!

Tickets will be available at the upcoming monthly meeting on Monday 12th May 2025.

So make a date in your diary. If you cannot make the meeting, please email **Valerie Chalmers** at Email: valeriechalmers@gmail.com at the **latest by Tuesday 20th May** in order to obtain your tickets by email as we need to confirm numbers with DOSC.

Parking is not available at the DOSC parking lot for those who are not members of DOSC. However, on-street public parking is available in the area around the DOSC entrance. Directions to DOSC will be sent to all those coming to the event.

A list of DNHG Members coming to the event will be given to security at the DOSC entrance. This list will need to be handed in at least two (2) days prior to the event. When DNHG members enter the gate their names will be ticked off the list.

Looking forward to seeing you here!

Direction to New DNHG Lecture Venue CVRL)

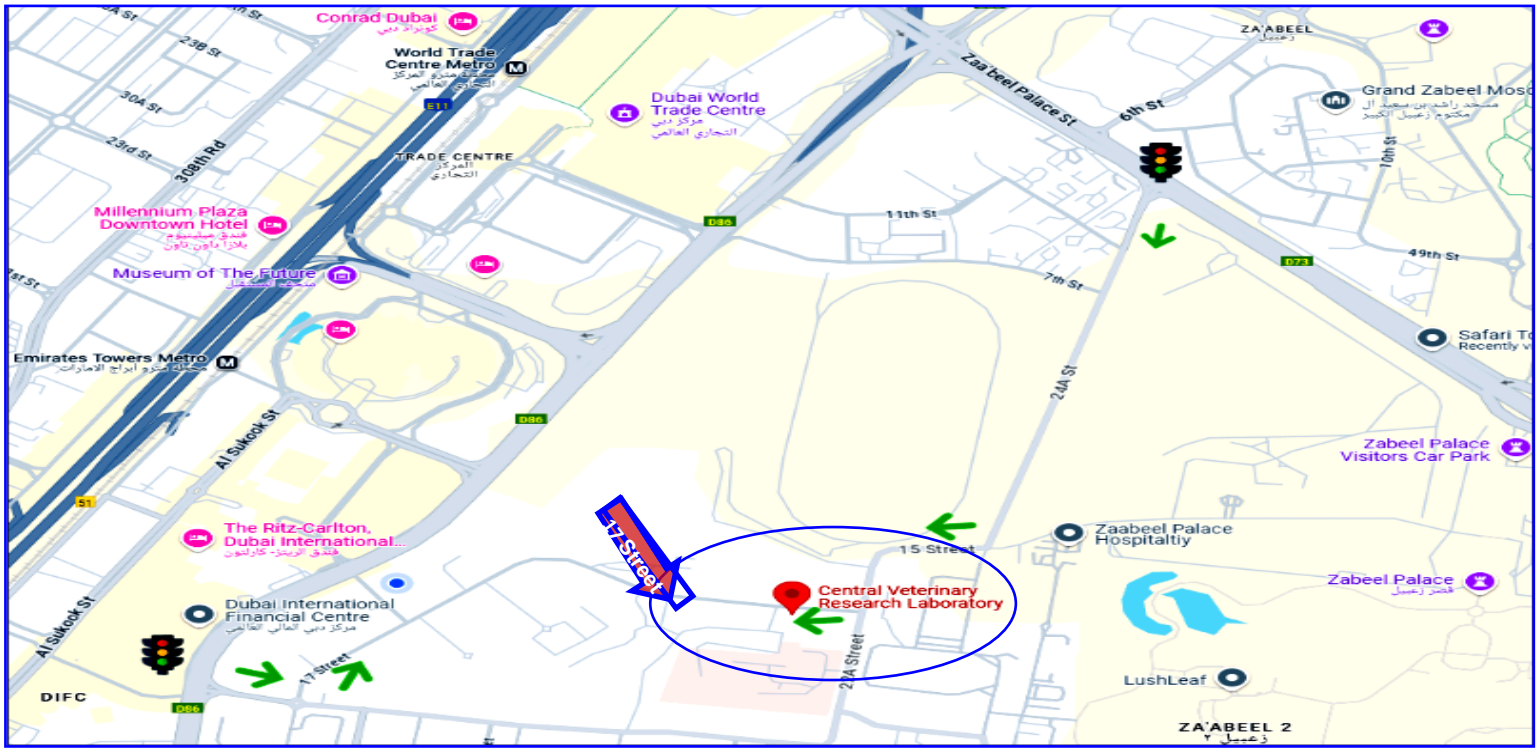
Building : Central Veterinary Research Laboratory

Location : 17 Street, Za'abeel 2, inland from Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC)

Effective : 12 May 2025

Google maps link for location:

https://goo.gl/maps/tqmPoow6tbXkn8Mf6



Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) Programme 2025

DNHG Lectures 2025

12 May Professor Dr. Lesley Gregoricka : Social Lives and Collective Death in Umm an-Nar Period

NB: ***Commencing 12 May 2025, DNHG lectures will no longer be held at EAHM. The new lecture venue will be Dubai's "Central Veterinary Laboratory" (CVRL). Please turn to page 7 for details and location map/ link.***

DNHG Field Trips 2025

03-10 May - The less known North East Greece - its nature and history
06-15 June - Volcanoes of Sicily - Eid al Adha *(we can accommodate two more people on a room-sharing basis)*
06-13 September - Makalali Game Reserve, South Africa *(Discover the African Bush)*

For more information on upcoming lectures, field trips and membership please refer to the DNHG website **www.dnhg.org**
To sign up for the field trips only, please contact: Sonja Lavrenčič at ***lavson@gmail.com***

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When possible, please contact committee members outside office hours

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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 2024 to September 2025.** Initial and renewal fees can be paid in cash at lecture meetings or remotely as described in (2) below.

New members can join in person at monthly lecture meetings or remotely. There are only two requirements:

(1) complete the one-page Membership Application available at meetings or by download from our website (www.dnhg.org) and hand or e-mail it to the Membership Secretary (see above);

(2) Pay the membership fee, either in cash at a lecture or remotely by cash deposit or bank transfer to our Emirates NBD account, using our IBAN number AE640260001012012013302.

Important: The banking process does not always identify the payer, so please include a note in the transfer stating the member(s) name(s) and send the Membership Secretary an e-mail with a reference number or photo of the payment slip, 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 (*Gazelle*), our post office box, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects.