



GAZELLE



مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

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Contributors—

Thanks to the following for their contributions this month:

Angela Manthorpe, Gary Feulner, Margaret Swan, Agnieszka Dolatowska and Sandi Ellis.



Honey collectors in RAK

I was in the vicinity of Yabbana shortly after the DNHG's recent trip and I read Charles Laubach's and Denis Anderson's article in last month's *Gazelle* with interest because of an encounter with some local honey collectors. As I explored the silt plain above the landslide, I met Sa'ad and his uncle walking back with a honeycomb and a box of fresh honey, which they invited me to sample. We've heard before that the tradition of collecting wild honey is alive and well in Ras Al Khaimah and, although I'd spotted the group exploring the rocky slopes, I didn't know what they were doing until they came over and Sa'ad explained that they were checking caves and other known sites for honey.

One of the photos shows the honeycomb hanging from the 2 stripped palm fronds which I'd observed in the traditional beehives in Wadi Sana (ref *Gazelle* "Wadi Sana – bees, peas and bee flies" January 2021). If you're keen to know more, we have a delightful, illustrated book in the DNHG library entitled, 'Honeybees in Oman'. Published in 1982 by the Office of the Adviser for Conservation of the Environment, Muscat, the



(Continued on page 4)

An unusual mushroom!

See page 7



Announcements and Recordors

Virtual Monthly Speaker

9th January, 2022 at 8pm (via Zoom)

Presenter: Dr Sanjay Gubbi

Lecture Title: "Tiger Conservation: The Art of the Possible."

Biography:

Dr Sanjay Gubbi is a leading wildlife biologist and conservationist from southern India with very notable contributions to the preservation of wildlife. Gubbi bridges a strong understanding of the socio-economic and political aspects of conservation with its scientific bases. With over 35 peer-reviewed scientific publications he relentlessly works with the Government, political leaders, social and religious leaders, local communities, media personnel and others to bring about crucial changes for wildlife conservation.

He writes extensively both in English and Kannada and is especially keen on popularising wildlife conservation in local languages. His latest book Leopard Diaries: The Rosette in India is based on his extensive work on leopards. His other books include Second Nature: Saving Tiger Landscapes in the Twenty-First Century, Land of the Honey Badger, Shaalege Banda Chirate Matthu Ithara Kathegalu, Vanyajeevigala Jaadu Hididu, and Vanyajeevigala Ramyaloka.

Gubbi was awarded the prestigious Whitley Award aka Green Oscar in 2017, The Co-existence Award in 2019, Carl Zeiss Conservation Award in 2011 and many others. He received the Chevening Gurukul Fellowship in 2020.

Additional Information:

- The Whitley Award 2017 bestowed upon Sanjay Gubbi -- brief video narrated by Sir David Attenborough: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MFzgzlqJH18> (3min video on YouTube)
- Sanjay's author profile <https://www.conservationindia.org/author/sanjaygubbi>



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From the Editor:

Happy New Year! It not only brings with it a weekend change in the UAE, but also provides new opportunities. Thanks to recent speakers who kindly gave permission to record their presentations. These are available for viewing on our website.

The new year also brought heavy rains which scuppered DNHG plans to visit Wadi Naqab on a geological field trip. However, the dunes around Buhais have probably exploded with plant life because of the rain. See the article on Buhais Geological Park on page 7.

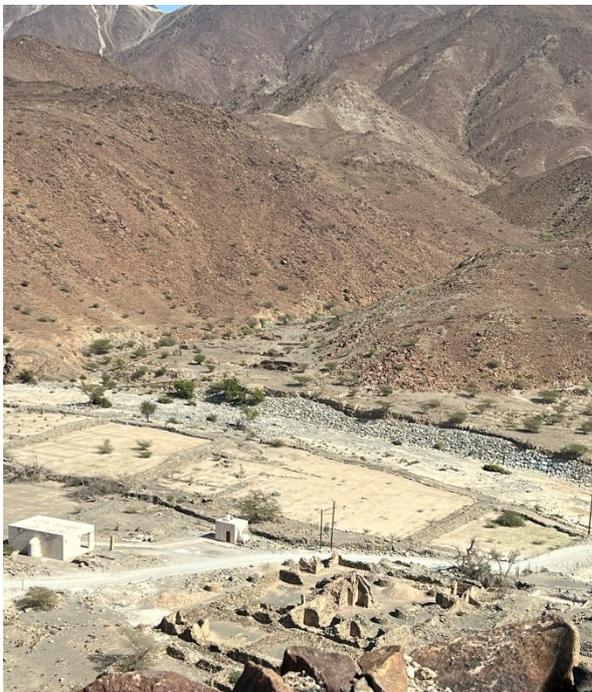
Enjoy your read!

Spotlight!

DNHG Desert Picnic and Overnight Camp, by Agnieszka Dolatowska



DNHG Field Trip to Wadi Helo, by Agnieszka Dolatowska



Excavations at Wadi Helo have revealed processes associated with ore extraction and copper production from as early as the end of the 4th millennium BC right up to the Iron Age - suggesting an interesting sustainability of practice.

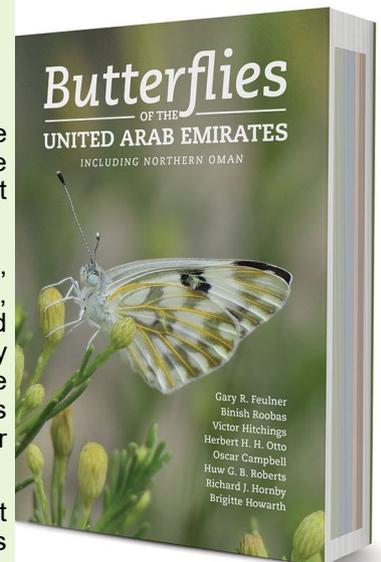
Book News!

Butterflies of the United Arab Emirates is the first comprehensive, illustrated account of the butterflies found in the UAE and adjacent areas of Northern Oman.

Featuring 58 species in the main Checklist, these include a mix of resident butterflies, regular migrants, occasional visitors and introduced species. Three species were newly recognised during fieldwork for this book. The book also discusses 11 additional species whose status in the UAE is exceptional or uncertain.

Individual species accounts highlight identifying characteristics for the butterflies and provide information about their distribution, habitat, flight periods, larval foodplants and behaviour. Each species account is complemented by numerous photographs, with many that illustrate eggs, larval and pupal stages. The book also contains a 'Beginner's Guide' section that can assist readers new to butterfly studies or the UAE. A separate chapter examines the diversity of the UAE butterfly fauna in biogeographical terms.

Priced at 150 dirhams, this book is a must-have guide for field observers and is available through online stores.



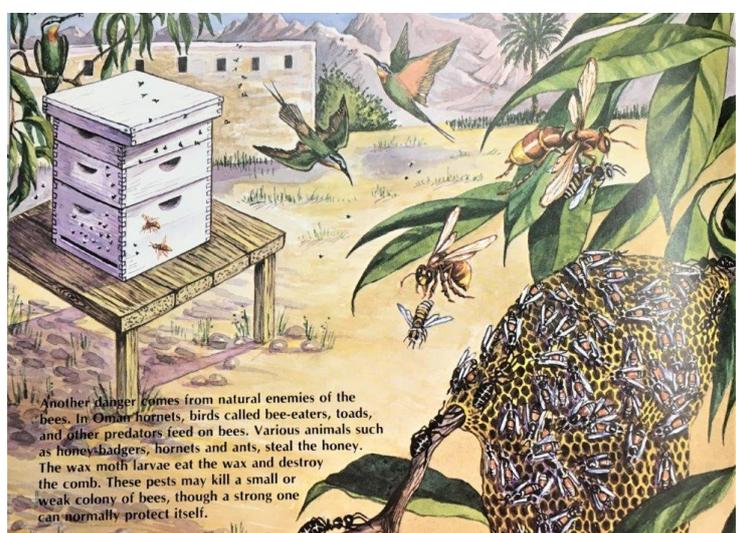
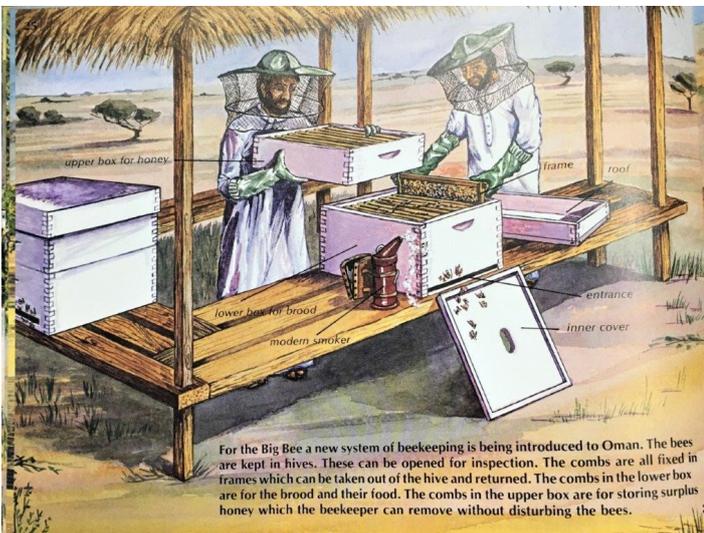
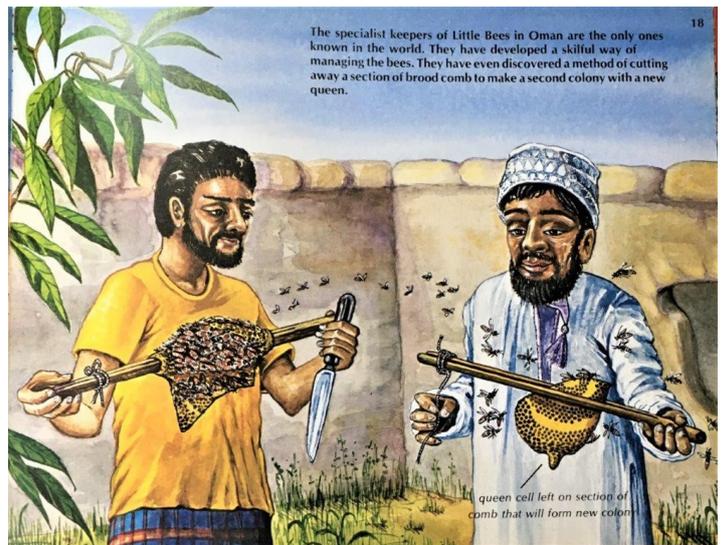
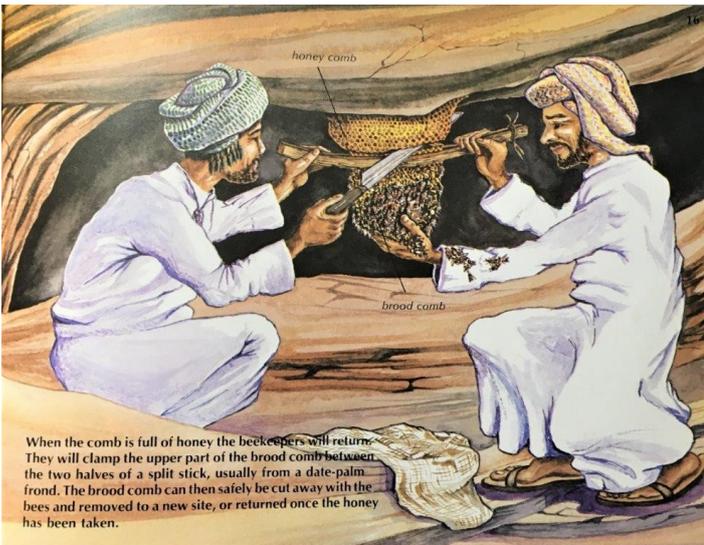
Field Clips

(Continued from page 1)

booklet is based on research by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries in collaboration with the University of Durham, UK and is designed to educate readers and encourage protection of bees. I've extracted a few pages below to illustrate several stages of the beekeeping process, including how the palm fronds are used as a clamp. It's notable that as the production of a new honeycomb uses a considerable amount of the worker bees' energy, the considerate beekeeper is encouraged to reuse the comb once the honey has been extracted.

When I discussed the encounter with Denis at the DNHG trip to Jazirat Al Hamra he showed me a video of Salem Mattar, (the local beekeeper whom some of us met on the Inter-Emirates weekend in Ras Al Khaimah, Feb 2020), resetting the honeycomb between the palm fronds once the honey has been harvested.

Contribution by Angela Manthorpe



Field Clips

Bizarre Bezoar Revisited

On the recent DNHG trip to Wadi Helo archaeological site Sandi Ellis found an unusual item – white on the outside, a flattened ball, not unlike a large steamed dumpling. The inside was packed with dense hairs and speculation was rife! Could it be a donkey dropping (bit large), or the stomach contents of a goat?

This is not the first time this particular item has left observers stumped! In the June 2012 edition of *Gazelle* Gary Feulner's article 'Bezoar or Bizarre – mother knows best' recounts the mystery object event at the End of Season Dinner in 2010, in which several of these "sub-rounded sandy balls, most of them slightly larger than tennis balls, light-weight and having a very firm surface of fine, pale grey-white sand/sediment" could not be identified. Cutting one open, "the crust was very thin and the inside was filled with short segments of packed brown fibre". These had been found at Saih Shuwaib, about 1km inland from the shore and Major Ali, Chairman of the Emirates Marine Environmental Group, which has a reserve in the area, was consulted. It was his mother who solved the mystery, telling him that "balls like this are formed in the stomachs of camels when they lick their own hair". When this was announced at the 2012 End of Season Dinner Renate Wernery of Dubai Central Veterinary Laboratory "pointed out that young camels whose diet is deficient in selenium and other trace minerals will often lick their own hair" and offered the name bezoar.



Wadi Helo bezoar (photo by Sandi Ellis)

A Google search on the term bezoar is very rewarding. Bezoar stones are masses of indigestible matter such as hair, fruit stones and vegetable fibres and can be found in the stomachs and intestines of both ruminants and humans. Are you partial to persimmons? Then a potential phytobezoar awaits. Prone to eating your own hair? Then a trichobezoar could be your fate. The word bezoar is derived from the Persian pad-zahr, meaning 'protect from poison' and from the 11th to 18th centuries it was believed that bezoar stones could neutralise poisons (particularly arsenic). Bezoars became the prized possessions of the wealthy, and many of the world's museums have fine examples of bezoars - decorated with gold, mounted on ornate stands, and incorporated in jewellery. Harry Potter enthusiasts may tell you that the boy wizard saves Ron Weasley from poisoned mead by giving him a bezoar.



The mysterious bezoar stones, camel hairballs, from Saih Shuwaib (photo by Gary Feulner)

Sadly, a more recent phenomenon found in camel post-mortems is the polybezoar – a term coined by researchers Marcus Eriksen, the DNHG's own Dr. Ulli Wernery (of Dubai Central Veterinary Research Laboratory) and others in a recent paper in the *Journal of Arid Environments*. Camels will often eat plastic waste and the polybezoar, a solid mass of plastic bags, rope and other litter, fills the stomach, resulting in complications such as blockages, sepsis and malnutrition. The team



10 cm
When camels eat plastic, it accumulates into enormous, stomach-clogging masses called polybezoars. Researchers found these polybezoars – the biggest of which weighs almost 64 kilograms – inside dead camels in the desert near Dubai.
M. ERIKSEN ET AL. / J. ARID ENVIRO. 2021

From the *Journal of Arid Environment*

estimate that 1% of camels in the UAE die due to the ingestion of plastic and I have observed a similar phenomenon when finding goat skeletons in the desert and wadis. Thanks to Gary Feulner whose article in *Gazelle* - June 2012 enabled me to identify the camel bezoar and which I have quoted at length above. It really serves as a reminder that there's a wealth of information buried in past editions of our newsletter. Diligent readers might want to look up:

Atlas Obscura: What is a bezoar? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33DZJT7XXpE>

February 2021 *Journal of Arid Environments*, Eriksen, Wernery and colleagues - The plight of camels eating plastic waste:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0140196320302731>

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince – JK Rowling

Contribution by Angela Manthorpe



(photo by Gary Feulner)

Field Clips

A Colorful Damsel Comes to Dubai

"Build it and they will come" has been a major element of Dubai's successful development philosophy since federation. An legendary early example was Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum's decision to site the port of Jebel Ali at what was then a remote coastal location. That success continues, in both intended and unintended ways.

The development of the Al Qudra Lakes area on the formerly barren sand and gravel flats east of Lisaili is designed more to create an attractive experience for human visitors than to try to preserve or restore the natural environment. And it has succeeded in its goal. People come in great numbers, to sightsee, camp, cycle, or simply enjoy being out-of-doors.

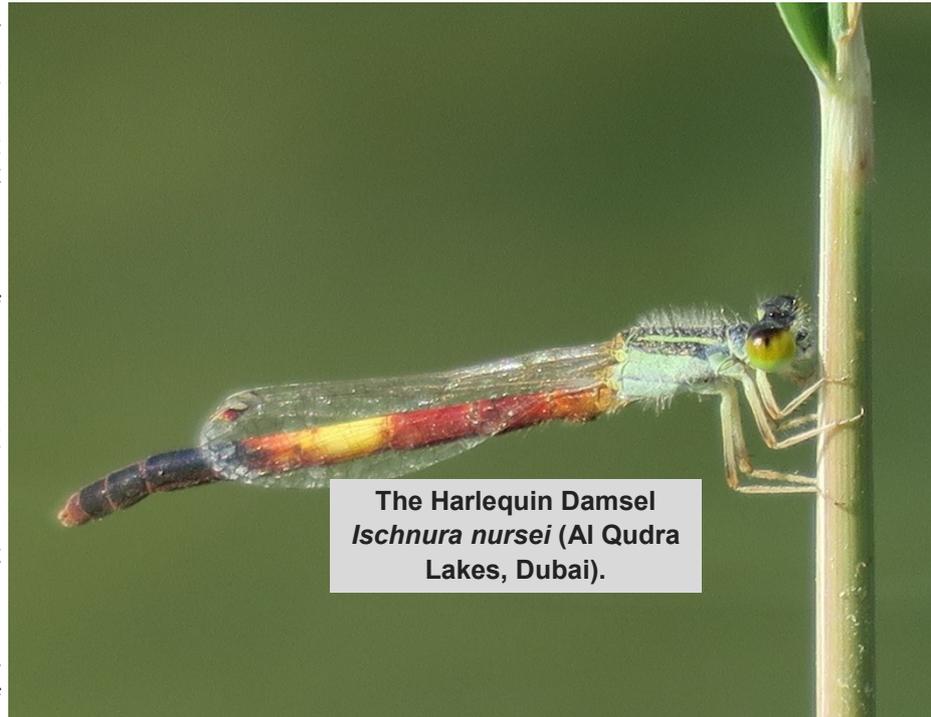
From the point of view of native wildlife, however, the area is less welcoming than it appears at first glance. The shallow lakes have artificial liners and are cleaned and sanitized on a regular basis. Tall reeds (the worldwide freshwater species *Phragmites australis*) are allowed to grow only exceptionally. The thousands (or tens of thousands) of non-native *Acacia farnesiana* trees are neatly aligned and the ground around them, as well as the lake shores, are cleared of unplanned saplings. Even where shoreline vegetation is allowed to propagate, it is cut back periodically, leaving any inhabitants homeless. One result is that the lakes and surrounding grounds are not very rich in native species.

But the creation of new habitats usually creates opportunity for a few species, even if we can't always anticipate who will exploit them. Occasionally the results can make us especially happy. For example, in recent years the UAE's only orchid, the helleborine *Epipactis veratrifolia*, found a limited home for itself on the otherwise inhospitable Jebel Hafeet, at a site where effluent from infrastructure at the summit created a stable film of water over the steep, rocky slopes – just the habitat our orchid favors in its more typical mountain and oasis environments. Humans have their own favorites, however, and several less endearing native species that also prospered in the newly damp environment (e.g., the shrub *Pluchea dioscoridis*) were greeted with considerably less enthusiasm.

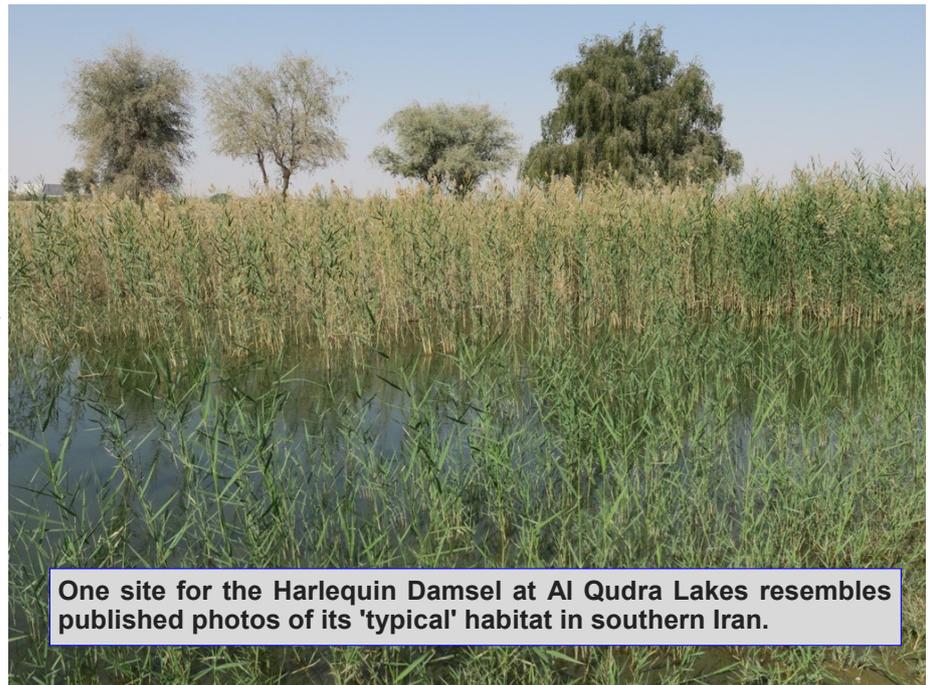
At Al Qudra Lakes, an unexpected but felicitous colonizer, observed in late December 2021 at multiple sites, is the UAE's most recently recorded damselfly – also its smallest and most colorful – the Harlequin Damsel *Ischnura nursei*, first recorded in the UAE at several dams in mountain environments in 2013. Its previously known range was from southern Iran and Pakistan across northern India to Orissa state. It was generally considered to be a recent arrival to the UAE, but a single, nearly forgotten Omani record dates from 2003.

Despite its striking colors, the Harlequin Damsel is low-flying and inconspicuous among the tangled, water's edge vegetation it inhabits, so it *could* simply have been overlooked for some time. Whatever the case, it has been sighted regularly in the UAE since 2013. The Al Qudra population, however, is distinctive for two reasons: it is a 'first' for Dubai and also the westernmost outpost currently known for the species globally.

Contribution by Gary Feulner and Binish Roobas



The Harlequin Damsel
Ischnura nursei (Al Qudra
Lakes, Dubai).



One site for the Harlequin Damsel at Al Qudra Lakes resembles published photos of its 'typical' habitat in southern Iran.

Field Clips

Al Buhais Geological Park

Dictionaries explain that a jebel (locally-known as jabal) is a hill or mountain and sure enough, there is a large example at Jebel Ali, which explains the first part of its name. Jebels are described as such in the Middle East and North Africa.

Last month, on a visit to Al Buhais Geological Park, two friends and I learned how jebels were formed through earth movement over millions of years. We were reminded of seismic activity two days after the visit, when tremors were reported by some UAE residents. The National Centre of Meteorology recorded an earthquake in the South of Iran, measuring 6.2 on the Richter scale.

On arrival, Emirati ladies welcomed and guided visitors around the exhibit pods answering any questions that arose. Exhibits included rock samples and fossils collected from the vicinity, with clear explanatory signage.

Following a short film outlining the evolution of how the UAE was formed, we were left with a panoramic still of a fossil-filled limestone cliff. The screen then slowly slid to the left to reveal the same view but this time through a window. The limestone cliff could be seen high up and lower down, a conglomerate of rocks and ophiolite.

Going outside, a path guided our 1km walk around this area where we saw many examples of fossils, some still embedded in boulders, some in what was described as 'mushroom rocks' where seasonal rains had washed sediments together to set in what now looks like dripping candle-wax. This is called dripstone, a sign explains, formed over thousands of years.



74—66 million-year-old limestone cut to reveal marine fossils within. At least 29 different types of rudists have been discovered in the area. The largest rudist found to date is the *Dichtyoptychus morgani*, which is more than 30 cm tall.

This area is quite unique and full of wonder. During our walk, the path led us to four Bronze Age tombs, an indication of early human settlement.

School visits are encouraged and I was particularly impressed with the interactive area for schoolchildren, where rubbings and quizzes would surely engage the young geopalaentologist.

We felt that one visit wasn't enough to take everything in and plan to go again, perhaps after rainfall to see what plant life appears.

Contribution by Margaret Swan



Embedded fossils lie in and around the park

Al Buhais Geological Park



'Mushroom' rocks (another example is on the front page)



On the way to Al Buhais we stopped to examine a small jebel, a few scattered plants and surrounding insect tracks. During our explorations, we were disappointed to see wandering camels eating their way through the contents of a plastic bag, which had been left on top of a sand dune.

(See also the 'Bizarre Bezoar Revisited' article on page 5)

Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) Programme 2021/2022

Monthly lectures are presently transmitted via Zoom, starting at 8.00pm

- 9 January: Dr Sanjay Gubbi will present an illustrated talk on "Tiger Conservation: The Art of the Possible."
- 6 February: Dr Koustubh Sharma will present an illustrated talk on "Snow Leopards: the ambassadors of the Mountains of Central & South Asia"

DNHG Field Trips

- 8 January: Geology trip to Wadi Naqab (*postponed due to rain*)
- 15 January: Petroglyphs in Wadi Ziqf
- 28 or 29 January: Wadi Qawr Copper Smelting
- 5 February: Al Hala village

Please note that field trips will only take place in accordance with current Dubai Government regulations. Participants will remain socially-distanced and capacities are limited. Proof of vaccination or proof of PCR test not older than 72 hours is required upon registration/arrival and masks should be worn at all times.

DNHG COMMITTEE 2020/2021

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 2020 to September 2021. In consideration of the restrictions on our lectures and field trips due to COVID-19, **all members who were paid up (or considered paid up) for 2020—2021 will be automatically renewed for 2021-2022**, without a renewal fee.

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.

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.