



GAZELLE

مجموعة دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

The Al Dhafra Festival

Celebrating the Authentic Bedouin Spirit

The Al Dhafra Festival, popularly known as the 'Camel Festival', held its 8th edition last year from Dec 20 to Jan 1 in Madinat Zayed town, on the road to Liwa. The festival, with different venues along the famous Million Street (apparently named after the value of the camels strutting along it), is an annual meeting of Bedouin from the entire Gulf area, who set up camps on the surrounding dunes for the duration of the festival.

The festival is held under the patronage of Sheikh Mohammad Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed forces, and he provides for the entire festival organization and hospitality, including the 55 million dirham prizes of 225 cars.



© Susan Offerdahl

Winners of the 2014 Al Dhafra Festival

The 8th festival added additional competitions and now features 15 different events, including: The Camel Mazayna Competition (camel beauty contest), Mahaleb Competition (camel milk competition), Heritage Camel Race, Arab Heritage Saluki Race, Falcon Hunting Competition, The Purebred Arabian Horse Race and The Date Competition.

Our first surprise when arriving at the Al Gharbia's festival area was the multitude of Bedouin camps extending in all directions on the usually empty sand dunes. Individual and impromptu sand roads (signposted and regularly watered to prevent dust) lead to each of the camps. The size of the entire festival camp site was especially impressive at night, with camps richly decorated with lights creating the impression of a mirage; a temporary city in the desert.

Individual camps were a mix of traditional Bedouin settings and modern amenities. At the centre of each camp was an open-sided

tent made of brown goat hair which served as the majilis, providing shade from the hot midday sun. The majilis usually had both traditional Bedouin floor seating and western style chairs and benches overlooking a carpet-covered yard with a fire pit in the middle, which provided warmth during the chilly desert evenings. This central yard was used for celebrations and traditional dance performances and was also the place where camel owners would display their trophies as well as along the back wall of the majilis tent. Kahva, chai and baskets of fresh fruit were constantly being served throughout the day in the majilis tent to welcome visitors.

Depending on the size of the camp, next to the majilis were dining tents, sometimes separated for men and women. Hidden behind those were kitchen tents and other amenities. Camps had running water (from cistern cars parked behind), electricity supply and impressive sound systems for traditional dancers and singers. Individual tents with all fa-

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Contributors

The Editor would like to thank the following for their reports and contributions:

Sonja Lavrencic, Charles Laubach, Angela Manthorpe, Andrew Childs, Stephen Green, John Burt, Susan Offerdahl, Alexis Biller, Khaled A. AlMansouri, Salua Daghay and Gary Feulner

Announcements

New Field Trip Coordinator

Angela Manthorpe has rejoined the DNHG Committee, teaming up with Sonja Lavrencic as a Field Trip Coordinator. Angela previously served as Speaker Coordinator in the early 2000s and, in 1993-94, as Acting Chairman (jointly with her husband Stephen).

Pradeep Radhakrishna and Jenny Hill have stepped down as Field Trip Coordinators after a number of years, in each case due to increasing personal responsibilities – in Pradeep's case in the office and in Jenny's case on the home front. Pradeep will continue on the Committee as a member-at-large. Anin Radhakrishna remains Membership Secretary.

These changes prompt an important reminder for DNHG field trips: **The DNHG's field trip program depends on members to volunteer to lead field trips.** Once the surface is scratched, we find that most of our members have talents, interests, knowledge and some favorite places worth sharing. You don't have to have professional expertise to lead a trip – just a willingness to explore and to share. One of the purposes of the DNHG is to allow members to learn from each other.

Our Field Trip Coordinators can help you with organizational tips and assistance.

Next Month's Speaker

The DNHG are delighted to welcome Dr. Julien Charbonnier who will be giving a talk titled:

“Rethinking the oasis development model: Case study at Masāfi (UAE)”

Julien Charbonnier is a postdoctoral researcher associated with the laboratory ARSCAN in Nanterre (France). His research focuses on pre-Islamic water systems in Southern Arabia and he has conducted fieldwork in the U.A.E., Oman and the Yemen.

As a member of the French Archaeological Mission in the U.A.E. (dir. Sophie Méry) he has been studying Iron Age hydraulic structures in Masāfi (Fujairah) since 2010. The main goal of this project – lead in partnership with Louise Purdue (CNRS, France) – is to understand the emergence and the development of this oasis from the Bronze Age to the present day.

Tribulus vol. 22



Tribulus vol. 22 was published at year-end 2014 and is now available for purchase at DNHG lectures (AED 60).

Volume 22 presents, as usual, a diverse array of original research about UAE natural history, including:

- the first published reports of tarantulas in the UAE.
- an account of a high elevation biodiversity hotspot and refuge in the Hajar Mountains.
- reports of two butterflies newly recorded in the UAE.
- reports on the behaviour and ecology of several other insect species.
- a record of Holocene climatic change (10,000 BC to present) based on studies at Mleiha.
- new flora records for Abu Dhabi and the UAE.
- an account of a most unusual seashell – the 'furbelowed watering pot'.
- a report on ancient Arabic inscriptions on rocks in the Hajar Mountains.

Inter-Emirates Weekend—Thursday to Saturday 19 to 21 Feb 2015

Inter-Emirates Weekend 2015 will be hosted by the Dubai Natural History Group and will be based in: **Ras Al Khaimah at the Golden Tulip Khatt Springs Hotel.**

Registration will commence on Thursday night, 19th of February and details of planned activities/trips and sign-up sheets will be circulated separately.

Programme for Friday Evening 20th February 2015

6.00 p.m. to 7.45 p.m. — Judging/voting the IEW 2015 Photographic Competition

7.30 p.m. to 8.30 p.m. — Gala Buffet Dinner: In the hotel restaurant

8.30 p.m. — Christian Velde talk 'The British Attacks of 1809 and 1819. A brief history and what remains today.'

This will be followed by the presentation of the Sheikh Mubarak and Bish Brown Awards and prizes for the winners of the Photographic Competition.



The snake! A carpet viper (*Echis coloratus*)

Welcome to Geocaching – *But watch out for snakes!*

A friend recently introduced me to *geocaching* – an activity in which you use a GPS device to locate a 'cache', typically a small container, hidden in an interesting location. Apparently there's a cache at Dhayah Fort in Ras Al Khaimah and as we'd camped nearby it seemed like an easy target. Using the GPS on my friend's smartphone we homed in on the cache and started checking the rocks below the fort. Now I know very well that there are venomous snakes in the UAE and I was checking the holes before diving in, so imagine my shock when I reached into one such hole, felt something strike me on my finger and withdrew to find blood and 2 little puncture marks.

My finger was throbbing, but not unbearable, so I took a few minutes (and a long stick) to gently coax the snake from its hole for identification purposes. From the triangular head and colouration the snake was clearly a carpet viper (*Echis coloratus*) and as I took a few photos the snake proceeded to rub its scales together making a rasping sound before it disappeared once again under cover. It seemed sensible not to use my hand too much so my friend drove my car and using Google Maps we located the nearest hospital and within an hour I was in A&E.



My swollen finger!
Note the black bite mark by the nail

During the course of the next hour the medical staff took a couple of blood samples, checked my blood pressure, pulse and temperature, looked at the photo of the snake, gave me a tetanus shot, put me in a wheelchair, and wheeled me up to a bed in the ward.

As I laid on the bed I could feel what's best described as an ache creeping up my arm; during the course of the next hour the ache crept slowly upwards towards my armpit. My finger and knuckles were quite swollen by this time. Doctors and nurses came and went, many of them wanted to look at the snake photo; it was explained to me that the venom of the snake (being haemotoxic) stops the blood clotting so I was put on an intravenous drip and asked to alert the staff if I felt any pain in my head or had bleeding from the nose or gums. Between 3 and 4 hours after being bitten I was given my first dose of anti-venom.

Over the next couple of days my right arm swelled up considerably, particularly around the elbow and became quite discoloured with shades of purple and yellow like a large bruise. My arm was hot to touch and tender, particularly when wrapped tightly for my twice daily blood tests and blood pressure checks – my left arm all the while had the IV needle for saline and anti-venom. The Doctors explained that until my blood returned to normal they could not discharge me – this took 2.5 days and 6 vials of anti-venom! I was eventually discharged in the afternoon with a prescription for antibiotics (in case the wound was infected) and instructions to rest my

arm until the swelling reduced. Although my finger was still tender to the touch and my elbow still slightly swollen I felt well enough to return to work on the Thursday after the bite, which occurred at midday on the previous Saturday.

Apparently snake bites in the UAE and Oman are rarely fatal, but organ failure and death can occur if the victim is not treated promptly. I was lucky to be close to a medical facility, I could show staff what had bitten me and I was treated quickly. An article in *Tribulus* Vol. 8.2 from 1998 recounts the case of a man who was bitten on the leg when stepping out of a pool in Al Ain. He walked 10 minutes to his car and was driven to a hospital where the doctor assured him that "there were only non-poisonous and semi-poisonous snakes in the area and, therefore there was no need to worry". The bite was not treated correctly and in the ensuing hours the casualty's leg swelled considerably, he suffered dizziness, vomiting, severe swelling and pain and was unable to walk for 16 days!

I'm certainly in favour of technology that gets people out and about and exploring, but maybe geocaching should come with a warning – please, watch out for the snakes!

Report and photos by
Angela Manthorpe

If you are bitten by a snake please seek immediate medical attention and remember:

- Don't panic!
- Try to remember the snake's shape, size and colour
- Immobilise the bitten area of the body to prevent the poison from spreading
- Remove any jewellery and watches that may cut into the skin if there is swelling
- Clean the wound, but do not drench in water, apply ice, heat or chemicals
- Do not try to suck or cut the venom out of the bite

More information can be found on the UK's NHS website: <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Bites-snake/Pages/Treatment.aspx>

Field Trips



© Alexis Biller

Members with scarab beetle

DNHG Field Trip: Geminid Meteor Shower

Eight carloads of DNHG members followed Jean-Paul Berger to a patch of dark sky just off the Dubai – Al-Ain Road on the afternoon of Saturday, 13 December 2014. Jean-Paul led us to an area near Faqa, on the border with Abu Dhabi Emirate and about 8 kilometers West of the highway where there was reasonably dark sky in every direction, especially the East. The smooth and level terrain was suitable for tripods.

Most of us were looking up instead of down. However, while Jean-Paul, Koenraad and Lamjed were preparing their equipment, we couldn't help but notice the Ghaf trees in the area with large exposed root systems. We were also momentarily distracted by a dung beetle rolling a dung ball across the sand before giving up and looking for a better ball of dung for its eggs.



© Salwa Daghay

The above photograph isn't detailed enough for precise identification, but you can see that the beetle was rolling the ball of dung backwards, with her head down and her two long back legs raised up to push and steer the dung ball.

Jean-Paul had an 11 inch Schmidt-Cassegrain scope with a computer controlled mount, which greatly facilitated locating objects in the sky. At a small fraction of the cost, Koenraad had purchased a second-hand 3 inch refractor telescope that he was using for the first time. In the meantime, Lamjed, along with Khaled and Ibrahim AlMansouri, set up several tripod-mounted cameras to photograph the expected meteor shower.

The first object to appear was Venus, very low in the western sky, glowing brilliantly through Koenraad's apparatus. Mars became visible shortly afterwards, well above the horizon in Capricorn. A few hours later, Jean-Paul was able to locate Uranus, which resolved to a blue-grey disc in contrast to the stars that were visible in the same field of view. Later in the evening, while the author was driving home, Jupiter rose brilliantly in the East. Just as it was beginning to get seriously dark (and cold) the Hubble Space Telescope made a 5-minute transit beginning in the West, heading up to the zenith, and then disappearing in the East. It was brighter than the stars at its peak, at magnitude -3.8.



© Alexis Biller

We then turned our attention to the stars and other deep sky objects, to put Jean-Paul's apparatus through its paces. We got very good views of the double stars Almach (Gamma Andromidae) and Polaris and the variable star Zeta Geminorum. There were excellent views through both telescopes of Sirius rising.

We trained both scopes on the Pleiades. Jean-Paul then moved on to other clusters, including NGC 1981 and M35. A highlight for me (as always) was an excel-

lent view of the Andromeda Galaxy (M31), almost directly overhead. Other highlights included the Orion Nebula (actually two nebulae, M42 and M43), gas clouds with ongoing star formation.



© Khaled A. AlMansouri

A meteor passing in front of Ursa Minor and Ursa Major

All of this would have been enough but we were also outdoors at the time of year for the Geminid meteor shower. From about 8:30 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. we were able to observe 6 or 7 meteorites of significant brightness, including one that was exceptionally long extending across almost a quarter of the sky. We were not making a scientific count, and there might have been many that we did not notice. Perhaps the brightest meteor of the night was a stray that we saw streaking through Aquarius, exactly opposite the radiant for the Geminids.

Significant preparation and patience are required when photographing meteors. They appear and disappear very quickly, and the only hope you have of capturing an image is to wish for a meteor to cross your field of view when the aperture is open. Bearing this in mind, Lamjed, Khaled and Ibrahim should be very pleased with their results. Khaled captured a meteor passing in front of Ursa Minor and Ursa Major, and Ibrahim managed to capture the terminal fireball of a large meteor.

Thanks to Sonja and Jean-Paul for organizing an excellent outing. Let us all hope that the dark skies of the U.A.E. do not retreat any farther from where we live.

Report by
Charles Laubach

Killifish Roadkill!

November's discussion on the Arabian Killifish reminded me that I'd come across them on a visit last April to Wadi Jizzi in Oman.

To avoid getting his feet wet a friend of mine drove across the wadi; when I followed on foot I came across several dead killifish in his tracks.

The photo shows the size and striking colouration of the fish, which I now understand to be a male.



Males can be distinguished by the vertical black bands on the tail, elongated dorsal and anal fin and blue-white spots on the body.

Contribution by
Angela Manthorpe

Black Seashells

Andrew Childs mentioned in last month's *Gazelle* that he had collected some "almost black" seashells (believed to be *Strombus persicus*) along the Oman coast. This prompted the following comment from overseas DNHG member Stephen Green, author of *Seashells of Bahrain* and a pioneer in the study of the freshwater and land molluscs of the UAE:

"Andrew's note takes me back to a visit to my great friend Frank Winsland just after we returned to the UK in 2001. Frank was a massive shell collector, especially cones and cowries. He had spent about 40 years in East Africa, the Seychelles and Oman/Bahrain, occasionally dynamiting the reef and also buying. When I visited him he took me to a private function at the house of the chairman of the British Shell collectors club. I saw a small section of his private collection held in his sheds - his UK freshwater pearl shells - illegal to take live. His wife had organised a garden party for like-minded private shell collectors. There were about 10-15 stalls set out for selling by members. I was gobsmacked by the prices!"

"Amongst the most expensive and sought after were black cowries and then black other species. They were selling for thousands and thousands of GBP. I spoke to the collectors (I did NOT buy!!) and

learned these were NOT considered melanistic (genetically darker) forms, but rather were thought to be environmentally influenced. The collectors and divers had a number of known collecting hot spots in East Africa and the islands of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It seems that where there were large, rusting submerged iron structures, pipes being the best, the resident cowries (especially) and some other shells took in and converted the rotting iron/rust. This turned them black. I do not know the truth of this or the chemical process. This is what I was told."

"[It would be interesting to know if Andrew's] "black" shells are widely dispersed OR if they have a limited locality. If limited, there may be an old wreck offshore, or a pipeline, which could account for the local colour variation. In Bahrain this would rarely be observed on the island of Hidd, near the Arab Ship Repair Yard (ASRY), but I did not know about the staining at the time, and the types of shells affected were extremely scarce in Bahrain."

Andrew confirms Stephen's expectation, saying: "The dark *Strombus persicus* were all found in the same location in December 2013, but we have not found similar since."

Thanks to Stephen Green and Andrew Childs for this discussion
Contribution by Gary Feulner

Acacia Trees

Ever wondered why Acacia trees in the UAE and northern Oman are oddly tilted?

Unlike other Umbrella Thorn Acacias of the pan-tropical range, the canopies of the UAE and northern Oman acacia have an unusual directional tilt, almost facing due south.

John Burt, a former DNHG member and speaker who is now a professor at the NYU – Abu Dhabi, writes in to inform us that one of his undergraduate students, Zach Ross, has found out why.

"The answer is not the wind (as most people think), nor the latitude. It's that these plants are "aiming" their canopies at the midday summer sun."

"This is quite surprising, since this maximizes their leaf exposure at the worst time of day during the hottest time of year (which is usually damaging in plants). But what this does, is that it shades the soil around the base of the plants. This keeps the soil in that area significantly cooler, lowering evaporation of the scarce water deposited there by the taproot system during the night."

"Great work for an undergrad who simply thought, "Well, that's odd... I wonder why that's going on?"

Contribution by John Burt



Field Clips

Al Dhafra Festival *cont.*

(Continued from page 1)

cilities were set up in a separate area for overnight guests.

The most famous part of the festival is the 'Camel Mazayna Competition' (the camel beauty contest), which, regardless of the occasional mockery it gets from expat visitors, is a serious multimillion dollar business. The price of an award winning camel can indeed reach a figure containing six zeros!

Beauty contestants are richly decorated with expensive, handmade decorations and are scored on a scale of 100 points, 25 of which are for the head only. Winning features include: big eyes, hanging lower lip, perky ears, and big noses with a strong curvature, size and position of the hump, straight legs, overall posture and the shiny quality of the fur. The smaller, docile and lighter coloured 'Asayel' camels are judged separately from the bigger, stronger and more aggressive black 'Al Majahin' camels.

The panel of judges deliberate all day and the results are announced late in the afternoon. The winning team throw their headgear high into the air and everyone descends into the camel yard, covering the winning camels with specially made covers and decorating them with giant cardboard keys of the cars they've just won. Owners tie their headgear around the camel's neck and pour an orange saffron liquid onto the camel's head. The winning procession start their victory parade of decorated camels, cheering owners, proud keepers and hooting cars along the sand tracks all the way to the owner's camp.

During the judging visitors can visit the yard and helpful volunteer guides give exhaustive explanations about the camels, the competition and about Bedouin life in general. We were lucky to meet our helpful guide Ali, who facilitated our visit to the festival way beyond his official duty, and he introduced us to the owner of the winning 'Asayel' camel, Bin Majid, who invited us all to celebrate in his camp.

We joined the winning procession in our cars, hooting and cheering all the way to Bin Majid's camp where we were seated on plush, gold decorated chairs in the open majilis and were served traditional kahva, chai and fruit, while observing the procession of tribe members and friends who came to congratulate the winner.

Two poets read their poems commissioned for the special occasion and all the prizes won were displayed on the table in the middle of the yard. A group of 20 musicians and male dancers performed traditional songs and dances, while celebrating family members joined in the dancing and singing. The Bedouin hospitality is proverbial, but when experienced firsthand it is just overwhelming. It was an unforgettable experience.

Later we stopped for some traditional food sampling with Ali's family, who run a shop in the downtown souk, and ended our day enjoying the cosy atmosphere of the international gathering around the camp fire of Faris Khalaf camp, a camp that for the last 4 years offers food and accommodation for the invitees from all over the world.

The next day we went to see the 'Mahaleb Competition' (the camel milk competition). Camels are brought into milking enclosures twice a day with their calves, as camels will not give milk if not stimulated by the young ones. Despite protests from the calves, they are milked with the milk yield dutifully weighed. Asayel camels give between 4-8kg of milk per milking, but apparently the Majahim camels produce even more.

After the milk has been weighed it is given to the hungry calves from a bottle or a bowl. Bowl feeding is entertaining to watch as the calves end up with white, foamy snouts and spray milk all over everyone present, including tourists! But there is enough milk left for all to taste—still warm, fresh camel milk. This milking process is repeated twice a day for three days and the camel that gives most milk wins.

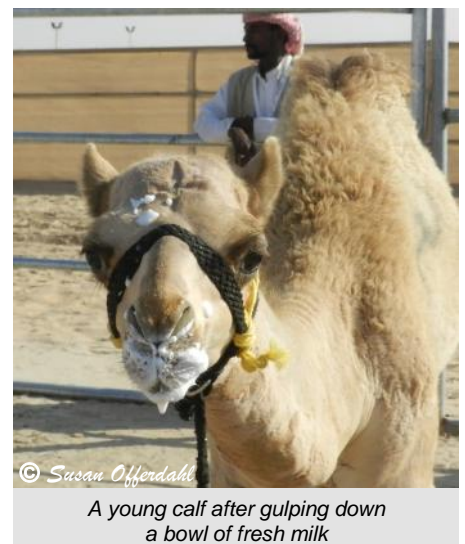
Every day during the festival the 'Date Competition' unfolds in the traditional souk. Each day one species of date from different producers is compared and judged. Visitors can freely sample the winning dates from previous days and the same venue also hosts the 'Sour Yogurt Competition'.

All the competitions are only attended by Bedouin men, but the souks are the places where Bedouin women rule. They manage the traditional souk of traditional handicrafts and the extensive Bedouin souk on the main road. In some ways the Bedouin souk is more interesting than the traditional one as it sells all kinds of camping gear and nomadic luxuries, from goat-hair majilis to richly-decorated fire pits to comfortable portable bathrooms and even portable solar power cells.

Ali and Saif's generous and skilful guiding provided us with an invaluable insight into the festival as well as the life of the modern Bedouin. Although they both assured us we would have been welcome to visit individual camps on our own, we probably wouldn't have dared!

Despite the awkward timing of the festival for expats (overlapping with the Christmas and New Year's holidays) the Al Dhafra Festival is definitely worth visiting for a few days to participate in Bedouin traditions and enjoy the still genuine hospitality before the festival gets lost in commercialism.

Report by Sonja Lavrencic



© Susan Offordahl

A young calf after gulping down a bowl of fresh milk

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DNHG Facebook

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<http://facebook.com/DNHG.UAE>

IEW Photographic Competition**Guidelines and Judging**

The Inter-Emirates Photographic Competition is open to amateur photographers who are members of the Abu Dhabi chapter of the ENHG, the Al Ain chapter of the ENHG, the Fujairah chapter of the ENHG and the Dubai Natural History Group.

Participants are invited to enter a **maximum of two (returnable) photographs**, which have been taken in either the UAE or Oman, on natural history subjects. There are five different categories:

1. Plants
2. Animals
3. Geology and Landscapes
4. Archaeology and Architecture
5. Culture

There will be a prize for each category.

Photographs should be a minimum size of **5 inches x 7 inches** (125mm x 180mm) and **should be mounted (cardboard mount but not a frame)** so that the photo can be displayed without damaging it. (Photos will be 'blutacked' to a wall.)

Each photographer is requested to write the following information on the back of each photograph:

- Photographer
- Title of photograph
- To specify where photograph was taken e.g. Dubai Creek and not UAE
- Approximately when the photograph was taken

The competition will be judged by everyone present. Each individual attending IEW 2015 will be given a voting form to vote for a winner in each of the five categories. The winners will be announced during the evening and then the prizes will be presented.

The photographers must be present at the function.

Photographs may be handed to IEW 2015 organisers any time from Thursday 19th February until **5 p.m.** on Friday 20th February and they will be on display in the corridor outside the restaurant. Judging/voting will take place between **6.00 p.m. and 7.45 p.m.**



Friday 6th of February at 2pm. R.S.V.P. yannicsmith@gmail.com

YOU'RE INVITED!
UAE ENVIRONMENT DAY

COME AND CELEBRATE UAE NATIONAL DAY WITH EMEG AT OUR JEBEL ALI SANCTUARY. LEARN ABOUT THE UAE'S MARINE LIFE, HELP OUR STAFF WITH IMPORTANT ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVITIES AND ENJOY A BBQ.

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

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

February 1: Dr. Julien Charbonnier: Rethinking the oasis development model: Case study at Masāfī

March 1: Dr. Herbert Otto: An introduction to butterflies of the U.A.E. and Oman

Field Trips (Members Only)

January 30: Wadi Walk near Shawkah Dam

February 7: Ad Dur and Tel Abraç archaeological sites in Umm Al Quwain

February 19-21: Inter-Emirates Weekend

Mar 29 - Apr 3: Andaman Islands Trip

April 3-11: Nepal Hill Country

June 5-13: Slovenia

Further field trips, details or changes to trips will be announced/confirmed by email circular

DNHG COMMITTEE 2014

When possible, please contact committee members outside office hours

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Contributions

Do you have a field report, unusual finding, interesting news article, book review, amazing photograph, or community news to share?

If so, email your contributions to: gazelleeditor@gmail.com

(Arial 10 justified).

DNHG Membership

Membership remains one of Dubai's best bargains at 100 Dhs. for families and 50 Dhs. for individuals. Membership is valid from Sep 2014 to Sep 2015. You can join or renew at meetings or by sending us a cheque made out to HSBC account no. 030100242001. (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 AE900200000030100242001. However, this process does not identify you as the payer. If you wish to pay by cash, please also scan and e-mail a copy of your payment confirmation 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.