



# GAZELLE

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مجموعتنا دبي للتاريخ والطبيعي

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**Contributors—**

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*Angela Manthorpe, Gosia van Unen and Gary Feulner.*

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**New membership secretary required—see page 2**

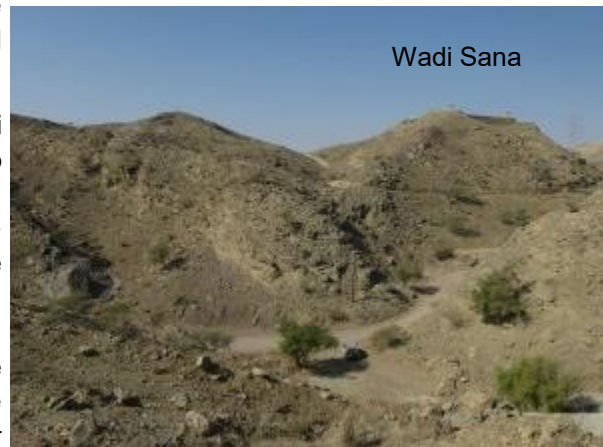


Freestanding beehive in Wadi Sana

**Wadi Sana – bees, peas and bee flies.**

In late October 2020 a departing friend left me with her copy of the UAE Off Road guide and the timing of the gift coincided nicely with a burning desire to take a break from work. Flicking through options in the book I happened upon a description of a route which starts near Al Ghail and continues from Wadi Sidr into Wadi Sana. The former is a lovely wide wadi with mature sidr trees and verdant farms. Wadi Sana in contrast, starts narrow and winding before you emerge onto a high plateau with great views over Dibba and the complex geology of the so-called Dibba Zone.

As I climbed up and out of Wadi Sana I stopped the car to photograph an unusual house, and as I looked around my eye was drawn to some curious stone structures in a shallow depression on the other side of the track. Some of the structures were free standing whilst others utilised the natural slope, boulders or



Wadi Sana



*Spider lurks by night — see page 5*

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## Announcements and Recorders

### Monthly Virtual Speaker Information

Sunday, 7th February, 2021, at 8pm via Zoom

**Presenter:** Ali El-Keblawy  
**Lecture Title:** "Plant diversity in the UAE: challenges and conservation"

**Biography -** Ali El-Keblawy is a Professor of Plant Ecology, Department of Applied Ecology, College of Science. He established Sharjah Seed Bank and Herbarium, where he collected much of the UAE's plant genetic resources. Prof El-Keblawy is a leading scientist in the field of the desert ecology. During his work in the UAE deserts in the last 22 years, Dr. El-Keblawy published around 200 papers about the ecology of native plants in international journals and proceedings of conferences. The work of Prof El-Keblawy covered several research areas, such as the biology and management of invasive plants, rangeland management, combating desertification, domesticating native plants for landscaping cities and highways, and as cash crops for the production as food, biofuel, and biochars. He is on the editorial board of several international journals, three of them with high impact factors. Most of the work of Prof. El-Keblawy is about studying the propagation of native plants.



*Senecio glaucus* (L.)



*Heliotropium* sp.

The above photos were taken by Gosia van Unen with thanks to Valerie Chalmers for confirming the identification.

### DNHG Recorders

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### Membership Secretary

An opportunity has arisen for a volunteer to take up the position of membership secretary.

The new secretary will not only help the DNHG but reply to inquiries and generally interact with the membership.

A knowledge of Excel is a requirement. Please contact Valerie Chalmers for more information. (contact details on page 6).

### From the Editor:

Thanks to those members that contribute to the Gazelle. Your observations are enjoyed by many that are unable to visit the UAE outdoors for one reason or another.

This month through our articles we visit farms, wadis and the desert. A wide scope of environments bursting with life during this season.

Flora presently abounds in all areas and whether nectaring, grazing or 'lurking in the shadows', wildlife is very busy at this time of year.

Enjoy your read!

# Spotlight!

## A range of beehives and other observations in Wadi Sana, by Angela Manthorpe



Opportunistic use



Using bedrock



Camouflaged



Giant pods



Flower



An overview of the beehive site

## Camping in the desert, by Angela Manthorpe



The wing mirrors on the car attracted the attention of the white-eared Bulbul, and so persistent was the attention that the mirror had to be covered with cloth.



During a Christmas camp in the desert we were visited by an inquisitive Desert Wheatear.



Did the bins blow over or were they pushed?

Regardless, it was disappointing to see the camels nosing through the trash and tussling over KFC buckets.

## Field Clips

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bedrock as walls. A handful were covered in branches. The photos show the different styles. From my high vantage point, I counted between 30 and 35 forms spaced at intervals of several meters across the area. Those on the opposite slope had open doorways that faced North, whilst those on the slope below me had openings that faced 160 degrees. Arming myself with a straight stick I made an estimate of the dimensions: externally most were around 80cm - 1m deep, 75 - 80cm wide and 80cm tall. The entrances were c. 23-25cm wide and 30cm high and, internally, the depth was c. 60cm from the door to the back wall. Clearly, they had been constructed with consistency and care. As I worked my way up and down the slope, I discovered that many of the structures contained a bare palm frond inside, in many cases loose but, every now and again, I found one placed front to back and secured at the doorway by a few rocks. By the time I'd finished my observations I'd come to the conclusion that I was standing in the middle of an abandoned apiary. Except it wasn't totally disused because, as I explored the far reaches of the area, I found one beehive, covered in branches and buzzing with life. Inside, I found a honeycomb hanging from the palm frond and covered in bees with a flat rock placed underneath to protect it from the dusty base.

Beekeeping is certainly popular in the UAE and, in the book 'People of Ras Al Khaimah' by Anna Zacharias and Jeff Topping, there's an interview with Sheikha, a wild honey collector. She relates how she would search the mountains for honeycombs, getting to know the shaded areas and caves, which are the preferred sites of our local honeybee, and marking her finds with a stone or branch to claim ownership.

*"I would cut the honeycomb, get the honey and put the eggs back in a crack so the nest can grow again and I can return". (Zacharias, A. and J. Topping. 'People of Ras Al Khaimah' 2018)*

After the sidr tree season in November and the samar tree season in May and June, Sheikha noted that *"in May, bees move deeper into caves. When the summer comes they go to dark places"*. (Zacharias, A. and J. Topping. 'People of Ras Al Khaimah' 2018)

It was interesting to come across these traditional hives, which perhaps sought to recreate the seclusion of mountain caves and knowing what to look for, I spotted at least another 20 as I continued up the hill.

On the plateau above Wadi Sana there's a maze of rough tracks but I parked up to explore on foot. Whilst toiling up a steep slope, I stumbled across a member of the Fabaceae family – *Chesneya parviflora*. This rare plant does not feature in Marijcke Jongbloed's Wildflowers of the UAE, but Gary Feulner pointed me to Tribulus Volume 19, 2011, which contains his annotated checklist of the Flora of the Ru'us al-Jibal, which notes: 'scattered specimens reported from the Dibba Zone but not recorded from the Hajar Mountains generally'; 'a single location in the SE Ru'us Al-Jibal'. I found several healthy plants in this location, notable for several reasons – the striking, straight pods, some of which were 5cm in length, a large pyramid shaped flower, mostly white, and distinctive furry leaves, soft to the touch and tapering inwards towards the stem (see photos on page 3.)

I had lunch on the mountain top and on the descent, while checking out the thorny shrub, *Lycium shawii*, a bee fly, *Anastoechus trisignatus*, stopped by for nectar. The bee flies are members of the Bombyliidae family (Order Diptera) and, as they are golden coloured and hairy, they can be mistaken for bees. They are important pollinators and have a long proboscis for probing.

With so many travel restrictions in place, it's great to delve deeper into areas of the UAE that you might not be familiar with. I found Wadi Sana really rewarding and will certainly be going back.

Contribution by Angela Manthorpe



**(above) A live hive**



**Bee fly**

## Field Clips

### A Sinister (But Misunderstood) Figure Lurks by Night

A specialist study (Magalhaes et al. (2020) in *Zootaxa*) recently confirmed the identity of a rather large and sinister-looking UAE spider -- one that is widespread but unobtrusive, found primarily in wild areas, although it has also been observed in suburban Dubai. *Sahastata nigra* (family Filistatidae) was first described by the prolific French arachnologist Eugène Simon from female specimens collected in Oman in the late 1800s. Seen by night, its appearance is decidedly melodramatic -- a shiny, midnight black creature with steeply arched legs, lurking in wait in the mouth of its silken burrow.

Filistatids have sometimes been called crevice weavers or hole spiders. They build a silken tube shelter in cracks or crevices, with a distinctive flared entrance of diffuse, fine silk, surrounded by radiating silk trip wires. *S. nigra* is nocturnal but the densely woven mouth of its web is easily recognizable by day. Burrows have been found (and spiders confirmed by night) in consolidated wadi gravel, including bulldozed material, as well as in holes in partly dead *sidr* trees (*Ziziphus spina-christi*), and occasionally in compacted silty soil.

A UAE newspaper report based on the Magalhaes study promoted *S. nigra* as a rare, cannibalistic species that had been discovered in the UAE for the first time, but that description is misleading on all counts. DNHG members will find the species prominently pictured and discussed in the introductory catalogue of UAE spiders, published in *Tribulus* in 2015 (available in pdf via the Resources section of the DNHG website). *S. nigra* had been tentatively identified for the catalogue's authors (the DNHG's Gary Feulner and Binish Roobas) from photographs sent to Russian arachnologist Yuri Marusik, a collaborating author of the latest study, and the species was not found to be especially rare.

Cannibalism was noted by the recent study primarily among spiderlings kept in captivity, although cannibalism is associated with courtship in a number of spider species. *S. nigra* is awkward if not helpless away from its web and, as the newspaper account confirms, it is not considered dangerous to humans.

A genuine "first" reported by the recent study is a description of the male *S. nigra*, which was previously unknown to science. Sexual dimorphism is common in spiders. In *S. nigra*, the male is pale-colored, with a substantially smaller body and longer legs than the female. Males are also evidently a great deal more elusive. The described male was collected recently in Muscat and only a single report of a male is known from the UAE. The recent study also reared *S. nigra* in captivity and found that males are less common (only 20-25%) among spiders reaching adulthood, and they live for only a few months -- just a fraction of the lifespan of females.

Contribution by Gary Feulner and Binish Roobas



*Sahastata nigra* by day, in captivity, showing a resemblance to tarantulas. [Photo: Gary Feulner]

Lurking in the mouth of its burrow by night, *S. nigra* gives a sinister impression. [Photo: Binish Roobas]



Gary Feulner excavating a burrow of *S. nigra*, found under a flat stone in the foothills north of Siji.

[Photo: Binish Roobas]



The characteristic flared burrow mouth of *S. nigra*, made of matted layers of fine, diffuse silk.

[Photo: Binish Roobas]

## Field Clips

Gazelle herd on a private farm



### Exploring Al Awir farms and Falaj Al Mualla.

Cooler temperatures are a blessing on the Arabian Peninsula. The season is short but prolific. Plants have to flower, be pollinated, bear fruit and disperse seeds quickly to propagate. Last year we drove from Al Awir to Falaj Al Mualla, an easy and rewarding trip among the Ghaf forests, low dunes and gravel plains.

Before going off-road we stopped briefly at a wild gazelle farm along the main street of Al Awir. It was on a private property but you could easily observe the animals over the fence. There were a few hundred different animals there. Unable to find out what was the purpose of the farm, we hoped that the animals were going to diversify existing populations of similar animals at the Dubai Safari Park or in nature reserves in the region.

There are plenty of other animal farms around Al Awir but, as

soon as you move off road and the time is right, green carpets of *Eremobium* (*Eremobium aegyptiacum*) cover the sand. Its flowers are mostly white but there are occasionally some pinkish flowers to be found. Perhaps not to the taste of camels, they grew profusely all over the area (photo on next page).

As we continued, initially scattered Ghaf trees (*Prosopis cineraria*) become denser and clustered on and around the low sand dunes. Their presence indicates the existence of a water table. It seems that their roots stabilize the sand at least for a while until the wind blows it away revealing long roots that can reach 30m. Most of the Ghaf in this area are neatly trimmed by the camels.

Ghaf trees



A bee visits the flowers of the Sodom's Apple.

There are many other plants in this area such as the Sodom's Apple (*Calotropis procera*) which is a flowering plant in the Milkweed family Asclepiadaceae. The Desert gourd (*Citrullus colocynthis*) is another example. Neither are very tasty, exuding

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## Field Clips

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either latex-like substance or are bitter and unpalatable. Like with most extreme environments there are always animals that eat them anyway if nothing better is around. We spotted Rose-ringed Parakeets (*Psittakula krameri*) eating the seeds of *Citrullus* (not even entirely dry yet). Also gerbils eat them regularly. *Calotropis* flowers provide nourishment to bees and ants and offers shelter for difficult to spot mantises. Despite the less tasty bits there is enough grass and other food to sustain feral donkeys (*Equus africanus*) which roam the area in large numbers. Other encountered plants include daisies (*Launaea* or *Senecio glaucus*), *Heliotropium*, sage and more.

Falaj Al Mualla is an oasis, has a picturesque recently restored fort (dating from 1825) and 3 watchtowers along the wide and fertile wadi bed. Irrigated by aquifers flowing from the Hajar Mountains, it sustained many families in the past who cultivated thousands of palm trees here.

Contribution by Gosia van Unen

*Desert Gourds (Citrullus colocynthis)*. Also known as *Desert Squash*, they expand their growth on the ground. Note the Sodom's Apple on the left. (Inset: close-up of tiny unripe gourds).



Rose-ringed parakeet (also known as the Ring-necked parakeet)



Falaj Al Mualla Fort



*Eremobium aegyptiacum* (meaning Desert Life) is much appreciated by butterflies



Feral donkeys on the move.

## Dubai Natural History Group (DNHG) Programme 2021

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

**7 February:** Ali El-Keblawy will present an illustrated talk on  
"Plant diversity in the UAE: challenges and conservation."

The DNHG field trip program has been temporarily suspended in compliance with UAE coronavirus precautions, which are still in force.

### 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 for 2019-2020 will be automatically renewed for 2020-2021**, 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](http://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.