SEASON 2023 - 2024
ISSUE 2

QATAR NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

CHAIRMAN'S MESSAGE

This year marks the 46th anniversary of the foundation of our group. Throughout these years, QNHG has been a cornerstone for nature enthusiasts and explorers in Qatar. We provide a platform to learn about Qatar's unique flora and fauna, its rich history and traditions, and the wonders of the desert environment.

Through our regular outings and observations, QNHG plays a vital role in furthering our understanding of the peninsula's biodiversity. We actively raise awareness about environmental issues like pollution and loss of biodiversity. We also educate our members on responsible exploration practices to ensure the preservation of these fragile ecosystems.

Beyond awareness, QNHG takes concrete action through regular clean-up drives and tree planting initiatives.

If you share our passion for enjoying the outdoors, discovering Qatar's natural heritage, I invite you to consider joining QNHG.

Together, we can make a real difference!

Thierry Lesales

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OUR SPEAKERS

We'd like to express our sincere gratitude to our esteemed speakers for their willingness to share their knowledge and passion with us

Our season-opening talk in October 2023 was given by Dr Robert Carter from Qatar Museums. He shared with us fascinating archeological discoveries uncovering archaeological sites in early Islamic and Christian Qatar

In November, we were treated to an interactive workshop with Leila Mroueh, public affairs manager, Sasol Middle East and India unlocking the future of Qatar E-Nature

In December, Dr Deema Almasri from Qatar Museums explored Earthna's water projects and its initiatives to tackle local and global water security challenges

Archaeologist Dr Ferhan Sakal kicked off 2024 with a talk in February on new discoveries, documentation and management of rock art sites in Qatar

In March, we were treated to Professor John MK Wong, Marine Environment Advisor to Ministry of Environment and Climate Change sharing with us the impact of global warming on Qatar's whale sharks and dugongs

In April, Sneha Parthasarathy, consulting architect, DMS Qatar brought us a beautiful look at the medieval stepwells of India, built to contain water for public use

In May, Dr Kuei-Chiu Chen from Weill Cornell Medicine-Qatar gave us a close-up look at the unusual tadpole shrimp as well as birds and lizards found in Qatar.

BIRDING ROUNDUP

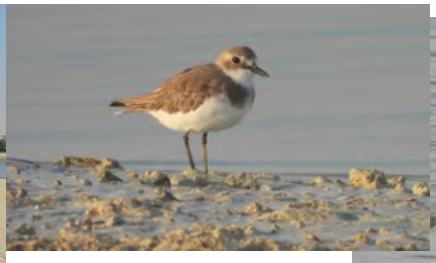
Our 2023-24 ramble season got off to a flying start! The time was right to observe World Migratory Bird Day on October 14th. We did three concurrent trips to celebrate Qatar's wide diversity of birdlife.

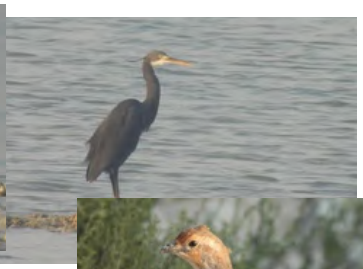
One group, led by Omer, headed west to Irkhaya Farm. Thick fog held them up for over an hour, but then the keen birders pressed on to find plenty of birds and dew-soaked plants.

Left to right: Nimaqua Doves, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, dew droplets, Red-backed Shrike. Photo credit: Sneha Parthasarathy

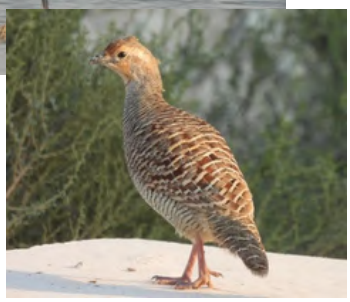
Clockwise from top left: Common Chiffchaff, Whimbrel, Red-backed Shrike
Photo credit: Thierry Lesales

The second group, led by Thierry, visited Al Ruwais in northern Qatar.





Clockwise from left: Sand Plover, Western Reef Heron, Grey Francolin
Photo credit: Uma Pandiyan



And the third group, led by Uma, went to Wakra Beach to find wading birds.

COMMUNITY EVENTS

On November 1st, we enjoyed an interactive workshop with Leila Mroueh looking at how to develop Qatar eNature, a key QNHG resource.

https://www.enature.qa

Photo credits: Aspa Chatziefthimiou; Narayanswamy; Omer Bin Abdul Aziz, Sneha Parthasarathy; Ada Vahtrik

In December, QNHG teamed up with the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change to plant mangroves near Al Ruwais. Seedlings began as seeds collected in October, grown in the ministry's land nursery for six months before being transplanted in this natural mangrove forest patch.

This is part of a wider campaign by the ministry to expand the mangrove forest coverage along Qatar's coastline. QNHG supports conservation and brings opportunities for our members to be a part of such efforts, so stay tuned...

Photo credits: Aspa Chatziefthimiou; Narayanswamy Ramaswamy; Omer Bin Abdul Aziz, Sneha Parthasarathy; Ada Vahtrik

LEONIDS CAMPING

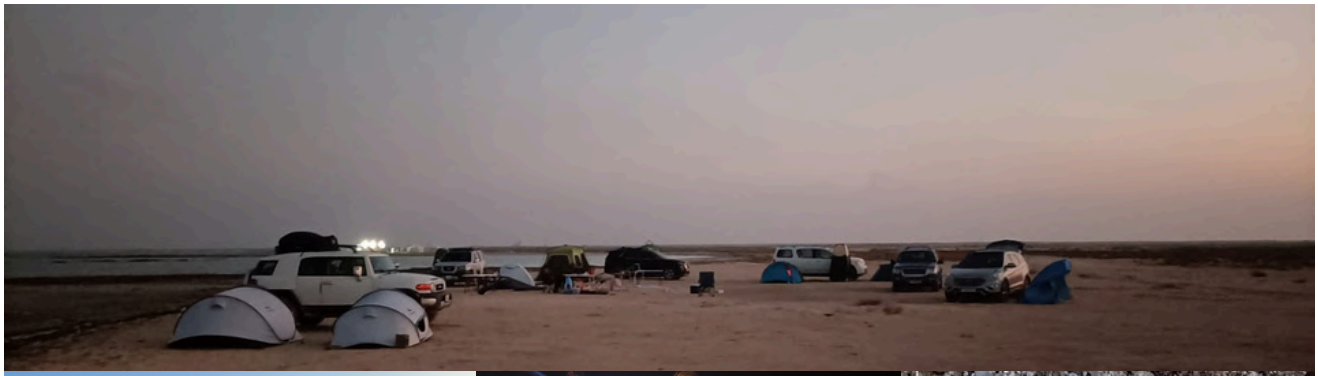
BY SAMUEL LESALES & NUH BIN TARMIZI

On November 14th, 2023, members of the Qatar Natural History Group (QNHG) headed to As Suwayhiliyah for an overnight stay in the desert. They arrived around 4 pm and quickly set up camp as the sun went down. After putting up their tents, they gathered around a campfire for dinner and warmth. Each person brought their own food to share with the group.

During dinner, they noticed Jupiter shining in the sky. As the night went on, they saw constellations like Orion, Cassiopeia, Cepheus, and Pisces. Some people went to bed early, while others stayed up until 3 am and were treated to seeing 13 shooting stars.

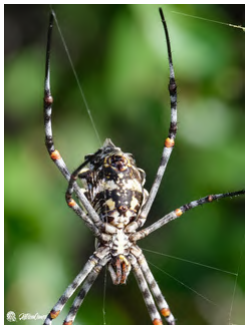
The next morning, everyone woke up early for breakfast and to pack up before high tide. Some campers had trouble folding their tents, but everyone helped out. On their way out, they came across a farm with gazelles and a few oryxes. One of the oryxes was pacing in its enclosure, catching their attention.

After this interesting encounter, they said their goodbyes and went their separate ways, ending another memorable outing for the QNHG.



RAWDA, NORTH QATAR

Exploring the rawda on January 12th was a very pleasant experience. It was amazing to find a patch of green surrounded by barren land. This was one of the most diverse rawdat we've explored this season. From the very outset we were greeted by a member of the *Arachnida* family – a mighty *Argiope lobata* female spider. The broad and lobed body was a treat to watch. We saw few more farther inside the rawda and were also lucky to see the egg sacs in one of the trees.



As we moved in, we could hear calls of the Grey Francolins. They were very shy and we were not lucky to see them. The rawda was experiencing an explosion of flowers. Bees and butterflies were taking full advantage of the flowers. We saw blue pansy, clouded yellow and perhaps one of the first sightings in Qatar of Plain Cupids *Chilades pandava*. One of our members saw a nice Chinese grasshopper as well.

Stephen Lansdown

Thierry Lesales

Shrikes and other birds were also flying around in the Rawdat.

We also saw some creepers. Few nice examples of *Convolvulus glomeratus* Choisy (morning glory). It had multi flowered inflorescence covered with hair. We also saw *Convolvulus philosellifolius Desc*. (Bindweed).

Other plants observed were flowers of *Salvia aegyptiaca L.* (small purple and white in color, somewhat like a dog flower) and *Zygophylum simplex L.* (*Tetraena simplex*). This is only a subset of the plants that we saw that day.

WAKRA BEACH

We gathered on a Saturday afternoon, January 20th, on a beach in Wakra. The time was carefully chosen, so we could benefit from the lower tides - perfect for finding wading birds and seashells.

The beach was adorned with oyster shells, *Bulla arabica Pirenella arabica* and *Umbonium vesitarium.* We also saw few samples of *Ancilla castanea*, *Lunella coronate* and *Trochus erithreus*.

We observed the following birds:

1. Slender-billed Gull
2. Bar-tailed Godwit
3. Spotted Redshank
4. Gray Plover
5. Western Reef Heron
6. Greenshank
7. Sand Plover
8. Kentis Plover
9. Terek Sandpiper
10. Black-headed Gull
11. Ruddy Turnstone
12. Cormorant
13. House Sparrow
14. Laughing Dove
15. Collared Dove
16. Common Myna

Photo credits: Alexendra Matrai; Estelle Butterworth; Omer bin Abdul Aziz; Celeste Bellina; Anne Nebel

ROCK RAMBLE
WITH TREENA BRON

At the outcrop!
Photo credit: Thierry Lesales

On an early morning in April after Eid, a group of Ramblers gathered in south central Qatar to learn about the rocky past of a piece of Qatar's landscape with geologist Dr Treena Bron.

Discussing rock types
Photo credit: Sneha Parthasarathy

Fossilised burrows in the limestone
Photo credit: Treena Bron

From the limestone rocks formed in ancient seas to the remnants of river sediments, we observed the clues to their origins, looked at the outcrops that remain, and talked about how the desert affects them.

We saw examples of how wind and water erodes them, as well as how desert creatures take advantage of the properties of the sedimentary rocks to find shelter.

Erosion undercutting resistant sedimentary layers provides habitat for desert fauna
Photo credit: Treena Bron

Pair of Black-Crowned Sparrow-Larks
Photo credit: Sneha Parthasarathy

Limestone actively eroding into windblown sand!
Photo credit: Treena Bron

AN ODE TO WATER

THE STEPWELLS OF INDIA, BY SNEHA PARTHASARATHY

Water, the raison d'etre of life on earth, has been something of an enigma that has long occupied the imaginations of the ancients and the scientific pursuits of modern man. The 'Panacea' has been the subject of both veneration and concern; veneration due to its near magical, life sustaining, regenerative qualities, and concern due to its capricious nature.

Primeval Waters. Source of all life. Modhera kund. Mehsana, Gujarat (2014)

The temporality of water has been a cause of concern, considering our existential dependence on it, as much as it is symbolic of omnipresent ephemerality in nature. Whereas this ephemerality was widely demystified only in the 16th century by Bernard Palissy (1580) who articulated the modern theory of the 'water cycle', the idea as a concept was intuitively explored through various mediums of expression, religious and artistic, by ancient societies. Creation myths of ancient civilizations thus abound in references to the primordial waters being the source of all life. These myths find resonance in iron age and early medieval religions that abound in rituals, stigmas and philosophical inquisitions related to water.

Despite its centrality to societies, rituals, and cosmologies, author Terje Tvedt[1] notes that water has not been given due importance in research on religion. He offers a possible explanation by noting that this could be

because of the importance given to texts and theological traditions over popular ‘folk’ rituals. He notes that 20th century scholars of religion seemed to have moved research further and further away from questions of geographical context and ecological experiences.

An architectural concept that exemplifies the interdependence of the water cycle, societal developments, ecological context, and folk rituals is that of the ‘Stepwell’. Intended primarily to collect, store and access freshwater, stepwells were:

1. Wells with steps to access water for bathing rituals.
2. Located along major trade routes, which ran across the Indian subcontinent, they were commissioned by philanthropes to serve the needs of tired travelers seeking refuge from the heat.
3. Others were built in private pleasure gardens of nobles and royals.

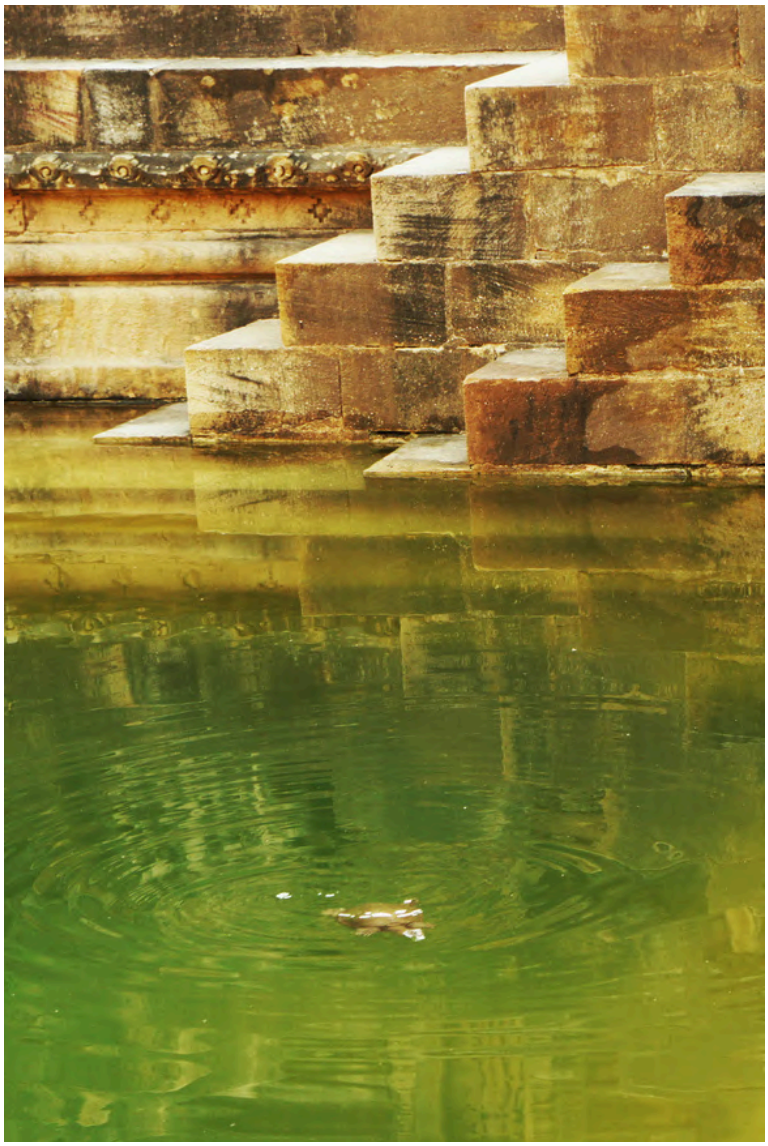
Rani ni Vav. Patan, Gujarat (2017)

4. Commissioned and built mostly by women.
5. Spaces of community gathering, pause, protection, refuge, rest, reflection, meditation, and intimacy.
6. One of the many types of stepped water structures found in South Asia. Its origins as an architectural type can be traced back to ‘The Great Bath’ at Mohenjo-Daro.

A stepped ground plane as a tool to modulate topography or to navigate terrain has been employed by builders, architects, landscape and urban designers consistently

across time and context making it historic and simultaneously modern at any point of the space-time continuum in the built environment of the world. It is almost the only morphological feature that is universally recognizable and immediately accepted on accord of its intrinsic association with a definitive use; that of establishing connection. This yearning for connection has also most often found creative expression through different forms of art while alluding to man's simultaneous desire and fear of the overarching and the underlying 'unknown'.

Irrespective of the type it took the form of, the mystic stairway has not found a more complex and enigmatic expression than in the ancient, stepped water structures of South Asia and India in particular. What makes them pertinent is their continuing relevance in the cultural and religious life of communities in India. They embody in their design, grammar and positioning the relationship of historic South Asian cultural practices with water[2].



The holy waters at Dharma Kund are open to everyone
Lunar, Maharashtra (2017)

[1] Tvedt, T. (2015). Water and Society: Changing Perceptions of Societal and Historical Development. United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing.

[1] Julia Hegewald notes that the role of water monuments in South Asian life and layout of settlements is of equal importance as that of squares and plazas in European cities. Hegewald, J. A. B. (1998). Water architecture in South Asia: A study of types, developments, and meanings. University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies (United Kingdom)

THE CRITTERS THAT THRIVE IN THE EPHEMERAL PONDS OF QATAR

BY KUEI-CHIU CHEN

Qatar is known for its arid climate and to be one of the few countries in the world with no permanent natural body of water. There is no river, nor lake on this small peninsula. Yet, nature has found its way to adapt, and surprisingly, freshwater crustaceans live and thrive in the Qatari desert.

Qatar's desert climate has a short rainy season from roughly mid-October to April. The start of this season in the Gulf is called *Al-Wasmi* (the spring of water and dew) and brings a refreshing change from the scorching summer heat. Rainfall averages around 80mm annually and usually peaks in March, with an 18mm average.

This year the rain in Qatar has been exceptionally abundant, with several episodes of intense rainfalls. The desert has been greening with vegetation and new sprouts.

Ephemeral pool in Al Shehaniya Photo credit: Thierry Lesales

In mid-February, the North of the country received more than 27mm of rain. March has also witnessed scattered rains. Then, April saw a sharp upper trough, moving into the region from the Mediterranean Sea. It produced heavy precipitation, accompanied by thunderstorms and strong gusts.

Madinat Al Shamal received 79.7 mm and Sealine 32.6mm of rain. And again, in May, two additional episodes of rain brought 30mm of rain in Al Ruwais, and 30.6 mm in Umm Aljamajim (south central Qatar).

This heavy rain flooded several areas in the desert, creating many ponds in the low lying areas. In these ephemeral pools, one could witness the burst of a new cycle of life.

Triops tadpole shrimp

Fairy shrimp

Clam shrimp

6 clam shrimp, 4 with algae on shells

Female tadpole shrimp burying her eggs

In the rare freshwater pools, seemingly coming out of nowhere, are a few types of crustaceans no more than a few centimeters long busily swimming around. These critters, including tadpole shrimp, fairy shrimp and clam shrimp, have newly emerged from the dormancy of their eggs laid in previous seasons withstanding drought, heat and UV radiation. The hardy eggs, also called cysts, not only help the animals survive in the harsh desert, they are also the means of dispersal that allows these species to spread to other parts of the world. After the dormancy of a year, decades, or even centuries, when the time is right and the place is moist with rainwater staying for at least a few days, they hatch into larvae in a few hours, molt a few times and mature in a matter of days.

It is believed they adopt this lifestyle to avoid the majority of aquatic predators, most notably fish.

Although they all have the word shrimp in their name, they are not shrimp at all. Real shrimp have ten legs while our freshwater crustaceans have many more. Their legs help their aquatic locomotion as well as obtain oxygen dissolved in the water. That's why these three crustaceans are classified in a group that's called branchiopods, or gill-footed, animals.

The largest among these branchiopods is the tadpole shrimp, a name acquired for its resemblance to the larva of a frog. Scientifically the tadpole shrimp are called by the name Triops, or three-eyed animal, because of their single-lens third eye located in between the two compound eyes.

While other Triops species may have different reproductive patterns such as virgin births without the need of a male, the local Triops follow the typical male and female reproductive pattern, and may reach sexual maturity in a week.

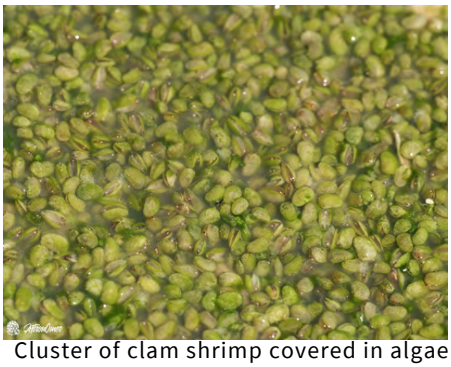
Standing at the edge of the ephemeral pool you may see males actively searching for mates. When the female's eggs are fertilized, she is often found near the edges of the pool burying them in the sediment.

Just like their name indicates, the fairy shrimp are elegant with a slender body and the undulating movement of their 14 legs pointing upward. Their nearly transparent body means you can see their entire digestive tract and the eggs carried by the female. We have at least two species of fairy shrimp; the more common of the two shows a brilliant iridescent blue egg sac. A well-known relative of our local species called brine shrimp, or sea monkey lives in very salty water and has been commercially raised as food for other aquatic animals.

Having the shell-like gear to protect the more vulnerable parts of its body, the clam shrimp may indeed be mistaken for a clam. But what's being covered by the protective shell, called the carapace, has all the trappings of a crustacean. They are perhaps the most abundant branchiopod in our ephemeral pools with dense clusters crowding at the edges. Because they often stay on the surface of the water, algae may settle on their carapace and make them look green. A big cluster of clam shrimp looks like a pile of green beans or a jar of capers.

Are the three species the only branchiopods in our ephemeral pools? Although they are the largest, they are by no means the only ones in our freshwater environment. Many of their distant relatives are microscopic, and there are hundreds if not thousands of species around. Next time when the major rainstorms come, wait for three to five days and pay a visit to see these wonderful creatures which have adapted remarkably to our desert environment.

Cluster of clam shrimp covered in algae



Cluster of clam shrimp covered in algae

Photo credits: Omer bin Abdul Aziz

THE STEERING COMMITTEE

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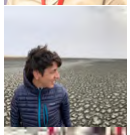

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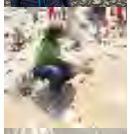

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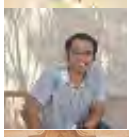

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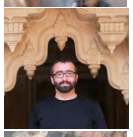

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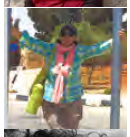

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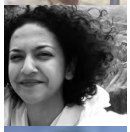

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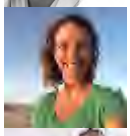

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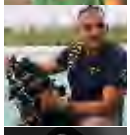

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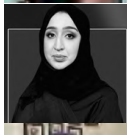

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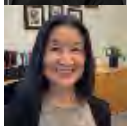

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COMING UP

June 5th Talk

Marcelo Terzano, Architect
The marvellous road trip from Qatar to Europe crossing 15 countries

QNHG talks are at 7pm at Doha English Speaking School (DESS)
We will have an end-of-season reception and food at 6pm

June 8 Ramble

Hamad Port Visitors' Centre, guided tour

HAVE A GOOD SUMMER!
SEE YOU NEXT SEASON

Photo credit: Ada Vahtrik