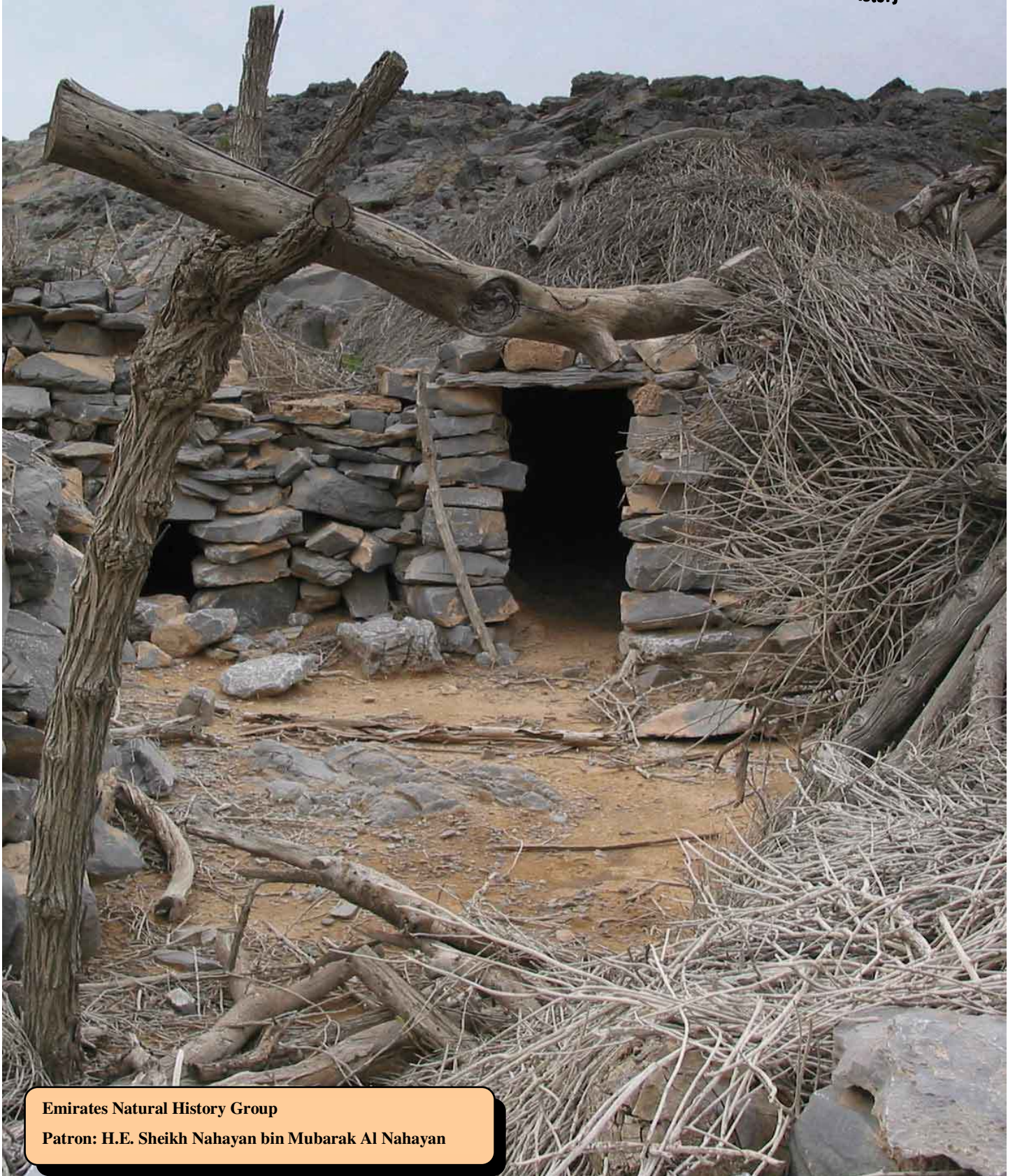


focus

Abu Dhabi, February 2005 - Vol 29 (2)



Emirates Natural History Group

Patron: H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan

EDITORIAL

It is a pleasure to present another issue of Focus, especially as our readership will be increased this month by those attending the Inter-Emirates Weekend at Mafraq. Plans for the Inter-Emirates Weekend are well in hand, thanks to the hard work of the IEW Subcommittee, and I urge as many of our members as possible to come along and enjoy this event. There is a great programme of trips and social events. Mafraq Hotel reports that lots of bookings have already been made, so book now if you haven't already done so (Tel 02 582 2666).

The ENHG has a long record in documenting important records, and Dick Hornby's observations last month on caracal lynx tracks and remains at Taweelah is a good example. As a group with so many well-informed members spending time in the desert, mountains and coastal regions of the UAE, we are in an almost unique position to collect and collate this information. In the lamentable absence of a Natural History Museum in Abu Dhabi Emirate, the ENHG needs to maintain its leading role in recording valuable field observations and even more importantly, in publishing such records in Focus and Tribulus. We can all contribute to this effort by keeping notes of natural history observations or archaeological discoveries made on the ENHG field trips or on other excursions. Committee members can ensure that these observations are passed on to the relevant experts and authorities.

The value of records is usually much enhanced by accurate locality data. This is now easy with GPS. GPS receivers are down in price and should be obtainable for about 500 dirhams for a basic model. And you need never get lost again! The standard datum used by ERWDA and ADIAS for geographical records is WGS84 and it is highly recommended that everyone uses this datum in their GPS receivers.

In view of these thoughts, I am very happy to say that Dr Gary Brown has joined the ENHG committee. Gary is a very experienced botanist with widely recognized expertise in the Arabian and UAE flora. We welcome Gary and look forward to his help in our botanical investigations, and especially just now with a tremendous crop of annual plants flowering after the recent rains. Gary has also agreed to organize the lecture programme.

Another change on the Committee is that, sadly, Ingrid has stood down due to pressure of other commitments. We thank her for all her work and enthusiasm over the years.

Drew Gardner

Field trip to Umm ul Zumul

Archaeology and Desert Ecology

February 10-11th, 2005

The group met at the usual place at 9am, and after some resorting and repacking of the equipment set out for Umm ul Zumul. The sky was overcast and it was very windy as we drove through Abu Dhabi and up the Al Ain Highway, to pick our road across the desert.

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FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Traditional farm dwellings on Jebel Yibir (nr. Tawiyah - Northern Emirates)
Photographer: Roy Richards

From the start I could feel that this was going to be a different kind of trip. The limit on the number of vehicles to eight meant that it was impossible to take everyone who wanted to come. However, the reason for the limit became clear as the weekend progressed - as you'll read later in the article. It was also an unusual trip in that we had a really wide age range of people which stretched from 10 - 84 - always good to have visiting parents with us! The final thing which made the trip special was the number of experts we had with us - 2 archaeologists, 1 botanist and 3 (yes three!) geologists. Now I always reckon you can never have too many geologists on an ENHG trip because you never know what you'll find in the desert. This proved to be true for reasons which you'll also read about later.

After a 30 minute stop at the metropolis of Al Quaa to refuel, rendezvous with our Dubai members, sample the local curry house cuisine and window shop among the boutiques and designer shops, we continued our journey to our camp site. The wind was still very strong as we set up camp among some small dunes, a good distance from the archaeological site we would be visiting. What was going to become one of the outstanding features of the trip - the amazing scenery and beauty, was already on show and quite breathtaking.

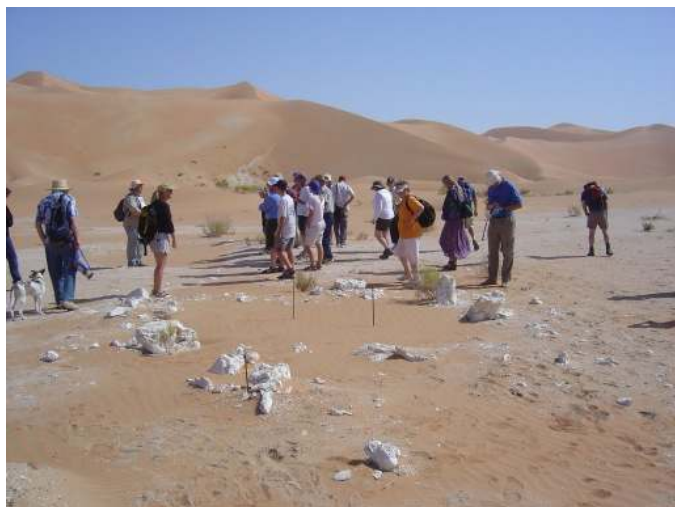
After a windswept attempt at lunch we were in the hands of Dr. Mark Beech, who would be our mentor and tour guide for the rest of trip. Right from the outset, everyone seemed keen to learn about what was here and how it got here. As the weekend progressed, Mark's enthusiasm rubbed off on all of us and many members became interested not only in the various sites and findings, but the archaeological process and the detail that goes into the mapping and recording of a site. To me it's like a giant 3D detective story, where the detectives - the archaeologists, use various methods to try to determine what happened, when it happened, what were the motives of the people, and why did it all

take place in such a place. Like any good detective story, if one of the pieces of puzzle is missing, the truth might never be known. The importance of the code of conduct, limiting the number of cars and the care needed when visiting archaeological sites of interest, was already becoming clear.

For our first activity, Mark gave a short presentation of the Khor Al Manahil site and its importance. The use of 3D maps and scatter points were truly fascinating and gave insights into how the area might have looked in the past and how the dune formations have moved. A visit to the site itself, which is surrounded by a huge sand dune, was very interesting, with lots of speculation about the mounds of burnt stones which are an unexplained feature of the site.

During our walk through some small dunes on the way to the site, one of our members was lucky enough to discover an artefact, which seemed to be a hand-held tool, or scraper. Mark was keen to demonstrate the detailed recording process that must accompany a find and already we were getting a sense of the importance of every little piece of the puzzle.

Also during our walk to the site and around the site itself, Allestree expertly pointed out the various plants and bushes. As expected in such a dry area, it didn't yield a great variety of plants and although it has generally been a good year for rain, little seemed to have fallen in this area.



Upon return to our camp, it was time to settle in and organise for the evening. Despite the spectacular sunset, the wind turned chilly as the sun went down. Everyone started putting on additional jumpers and was grateful for the large bonfire. As the evening wore on, many items of clothing were tied on heads, wrapped around backs or slung over shoulders to keep warm. We looked like a group of homeless refugees. People huddled closer to the fire and the atmosphere took on a sort of "last night on the Titanic" feel, with lots of jokes to keep up the spirits. Luckily the wind died down in the night and the morning brought clear skies and once again, stunning views.

After a not-so-early kids walk around the area to check out tracks left during the night, it was time to pack up and move to our next site some 20-30 km away. As we drove from the camp site to join the main track, we were lucky enough to see a herd of gazelles. As usual they

kept their distance and a watchful eye on us. We were lucky enough to see another, much larger gazelle as we approached a series of small dunes which were blocking our route to our next location. After some scouting, a fairly easy route through the dunes was discovered and the convoy proceeded to our next site. This was surrounded by even higher dunes and even more beautiful scenery.



Once again Mark did an excellent job of orientating us to the site and its importance. It was also made clear that the "pick up" (I've already got some of the jargon) on the site had not been done so it was very important not to tramp all over the site for fear of damaging artefacts (more jargon). Almost on cue, an example of what Mark was explaining presented itself in the form of two excellent examples of worked flint and arrowheads. Both of which were catalogued and recorded. Taking Mark's advice, everyone in the party (including some of the visiting parents) climbed the dunes behind the site to gain a better view of it and the valley in which it stood. This also enabled us to see the clear progression of the dunes and how their small fingers are spread across the plain by the wind.

After lunch, we continued with a short drive to see features on the other side of the plain, look for desert roses, and take further photographs of the area. Although we were disappointed with the desert roses and were probably in the wrong area, this was more than compensated by the find of a large meteorite. As I said earlier, it's always good to have a spare geologist or two on a trip and here was a good example why. They were able to examine the dark rock, which was as big as a football, but had a piece missing from it, and confirm it was what we thought it was. Again the location was recorded by Mark and the meteorite is now in the custody of the museum.

After a short break for a snack it was time to say thanks to Mark for a really different and very interesting trip. It was felt that this particular part of the UAE, which has its own wild beauty and so much to offer, should become a regular part of our trip program. Again we should ensure small numbers, and have the overall aim of introducing members to the processes of archaeology and the importance of preserving the detail of each site to enable the real detectives to solve the puzzle using all the evidence left behind, thousands of years ago.

CODE OF CONDUCT FOR OUR TRIP

It should be emphasized that the focus of the weekend will be educational archaeology and how group members can help the professionals by reporting finds and not disturbing sites of interest.

NO archaeological materials are to be collected or picked up.

The area and sites we are visiting are part of an ongoing detailed survey by the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey (ADIAS) and the Department of Antiquities and Tourism in Al Ain.

Alan McGee

Did-je-do-it, Did-je-do-it?

A couple of weeks ago, a party of diners leaving the Intercontinental Hotel's 'Fishmarket' restaurant near midnight were somewhat surprised, though not alarmed, by some rather remarkable cries coming from over the hedge adjoining the car-park. Repeated several times, they sounded something like "Did-je-do-it, Did-je-do-it".

Which permitted an immediate identification, of course - the cries were being made by red-wattled plovers, a noisy species of bird that gets particularly noisy in the breeding season. A peer through the hedge showed a couple of the birds on the grass lawn, with another still crying in the distance.

So what's unusual, one might ask?

Well, red-wattled plovers used to be confined more or less to the East Coast and the Northern Emirates. Large waders, they are actually found in and around wetlands, often where there is grass. In recent years, thanks to agricultural and other development, they've spread a lot, and have even been seen by pools in the far west of Abu Dhabi. Though they are common at Al Wathba Camel Track and the nearby Al Wathba Lake, they are rarely seen on Abu Dhabi Island.

Now, though, it looks as though a pair might have settled into the area by the 'Intercon', with breeding on the cards (unless vagrant feral pussy-cats get them, or their chicks, first).

So keep an eye out and an ear open for them, in the whole of the area from the 'Intercon' towards the Hilton and Spinney's (near where another bird - or one of the 'Intercon' ones was spotted the next day).

There are no prizes on offer for the first Group member to confirm a new breeding species for the island - but we WOULD like to hear about it.

Peter Hellyer

After the rains

Plant records from the UAE and Buraimi

After the recent rainfall (with more apparently still to come), we botanists (few in number) are having to work overtime to catch up with all the new records, especially of the short-lived annuals, which currently form quite dense carpets in many north-eastern and eastern parts

of the UAE.

It is clear that several annuals, described as rare in M. Jongbloed's "Wildflowers", are much more common and widespread. For instance, over the past weeks, we have found *Astragalus tribuloides*, which until recently had only been recorded once in the UAE from Dibba by Rob Western (the photograph in the "Wildflowers" book was taken by myself in Kuwait), in Hatta, Umm Al Quwain and various locations in Ras Al Khaimah. In the previous year, another higher distinctive annual *Astragalus*, namely *A. schimperi*, was discovered on Zirku Island. Both *Trigonella hamosa* and *T. stellata* appear to be locally common in somewhat disturbed sites near the coast in Ras Al Khaimah (for instance, in the old, now abandoned village of Al Jazeerah al Hamra), and probably elsewhere. After discovering *Polycarpha spicata* new for Abu Dhabi Emirate on Zirku last year, this species, which had previously only been recorded from a handful of sites in the UAE, has now been collected from Taweelah, and appears to be locally common just away from the immediate coastline north of Umm Al Quwain.

Rhanterium epapposum, a highly palatable, perennial dwarf shrub, has suffered considerably due to overgrazing, but a healthy population was shown to us by one of the local foresters in an enclosed plantation near Sweihan last year, and at the time of writing this article (mid-February) is in full flower on sand sheets there. Apart from being more widespread on sand sheets in Dubai Emirate, the species also occurs on rocky substrates on Jebel Hafit.

Last year, we found the chenopod *Halothamnus bottae* to be quite common on the gravel plains at the base of Jebel Hafit, extending up the mountain to about 600 m. The status of this species in the UAE, which at first sight closely resembles *Haloxylon salicornicum*, was initially unclear, being described as rare in M. Jongbloed's "Wildflowers".

A new grass species for myself is *Enneapogon desvauxii*, which at first sight is quite similar to *Rostraria pumila*. However, closer inspection of the florets (a good stereo-microscope helps here!) shows the distinctive awns of *Enneapogon*, and once one is more familiar with the two species, the fresh green shoots of *Rostraria* are quite distinctive from the more blue-green ones of *Enneapogon*. We first determined *Enneapogon* from dried up material which we had collected the year before from Jebel Hafit, but unfortunately, precise identification of the species came just hours too late to be included in the plant checklist in the new book "Jebel Hafit, A Natural History". Another new grass species for myself is *Tragus berteronianus*, a species we have also found on the plains at the base of Jebel Hafit and also in Buraimi. However, we need to confirm its identification, as it is apparently very similar to *T. racemosus*, a species which is apparently common in parts of the northern Emirates and which we have so far not encountered.

Now is the time to see *Hyocyamus muticus*, as it is currently in full flower in the mountains, for instance on cliffs next to the Dibba to Masafi road, at about 460 m a.s.l.

The differences between *Fagonia indica* and *F. ovalifolia* have long proved a headache for local botanists not familiar with the two species (such as myself). However, after glancing through *Shahina Ghazanfars* "Annotated Catalogue of the Vascular Plants of Oman", a key was found which nicely separates the two, and was put to the



Typical leaf shape of *Fagonia ovalifolia*

test. This key works surprisingly well. *Fagonia ovalifolia* is covered with minute sticky glands on all green parts of the plant, whereas *F. indica* is not. The leaf shape, long a source of confusion due to its variability in *F. indica*, is quite distinctive in *F. ovalifolia* (see photo). In addition, the leaves are on short stalks. Unfortunately, the photograph of *F. ovalifolia* in Jongbloed appears to show *Fagonia bruguieri*, a much more prostrate plant with at least some 3-foliate basal leaves.

And to round off, whereas most people stumble across the locally abundant *Caralluma arabica* in the Hajar mountains, the first wild growing *Caralluma* I found was the rare and local *C. flava*, and in full flower on Jebel



Flowers of *Caralluma flava* (Jebel Ghaweel).

Ghaweel (Buraimi). Beware of confusion with *C. arabica* when the flowers are not open, as the buds are the same red-brown color in both species.

Gary Brown

Floral Notes : The Year of the Eremobium



Nobody can fail to have noticed how this spring is different from last, and the year before, and the year before that. It's been cooler, cloudier, and above all, rainier than for the last seven years. Last autumn Dick Hornby predicted a wet year, and it looks as if he was right.



So, what's the result?

First and foremost, a rapid explosion of annuals that has covered the sands and the gravel plains of the UAE. I hope that if you haven't seen them yet you will get out and have a look. Anywhere around Al Ain/Buraimi is a good location, but even on the sands just outside Abu Dhabi the same phenomenon can be observed. At Two Trees, Al Wathba, and along the coast you will see a profusion of young annuals hoping to make it to maturity.

What in particular?

Most annuals come up in varying numbers most years, appearing where a substantial shower has penetrated the ground. There is one in particular that will only appear if the rain has really penetrated the sand: ***Eremobium aegyptiacum***. This diminutive member of the Mustard Family (*Brassicaceae*) has now appeared in many places, and at Al Hayer, beside the road, you can see small "fields" of it, dotting the landscape. It grows up to approx. 30 cms. The lower parts, if not in sand, may be covered with sand. The flower is white, or light mauve, and the leaves are greyish-green. It is a crucifer,

which means that the leaves (4 in number) are in the shape of a cross.



This flower features as the front cover of the "Living Desert" by Marijcke Jongbloed. Small wonder as it makes a great display against the background of a sand dune. Get out there and see some *Eremobium* before they disappear back into the sand!



Allestree Fisher

Inter-Emirates Weekend Sand Driving Course - 17/18 March

The aim of the course is to teach you the principles to help you to drive safely in sand, with due care for the environment you pass through. Basically we don't train dune bashers!

The instructors and I will take you from beginner level to advanced sand driving techniques in three sessions. You can enrol for any of the three sessions, or all three if you like. However, each session will build on the knowledge gained from the previous one and it's expected that you'll know the techniques practiced in the previous sessions, and be familiar with the handouts. Each session will end with a practical test aimed at using the skills learned. There will also be an end of course on-line test which you can take at your leisure.

Following a suggestion from a member who has joined the course, we will be asking people to make a 20 Dhs donation to cover the costs of printing the handouts. Any money remaining will be put towards an award for the best beginner.

Outline for the sessions:

Thursday 17th 9.00 - Gather in reception and leave for the training site.

Session 1 10.00 - 12.00

Tyre deflation, equipment, stopping, starting, and convoy driving.

How not to get stuck.

The three lifesavers.

The environment you travel through.

Practical test.

Lunch

Session 2 2.00 - 4.00

Understanding power, torque and the mechanics of 4WD's.

What to do if you do get stuck – digging, towing and gravity.

Controlled ascents and descents.

Practical test, which will probably involve getting unstuck or basic towing.

Friday 18th 9.30 - Assemble at the meeting point, close to the training site.

Session 3 10.00 - 12.00

Tyre deflation, recap on the previous day's session.

The essentials of off-track driving.

Contouring, cresting and path finding.

Major ascents and descents.

Advanced towing and recovery techniques.

Lunch

Off track practical test (optional) – medium difficulty, will probably involve some towing and recovery.

Sand driving training - If you're interested, you need to enrol immediately to be sure of a place. The numbers are strictly limited and you'll need copies of the course handouts, safety instructions and an equipment list. You'll also need your own 4x4.

For safety reason the final date for enrolment is – Tuesday 15th March

To enrol please email Alan at:

Alan.mcgee@zu.ac.ae

The Inter-Emirates Weekend, 16-18th March 2005

Planning for the inter-emirates weekend is in its final stages now – and it is looking good so we hope you can make it. One important correction the destination of the Friday dhow trip has been changed from Sadiyat Island to **Futaisi Island**. Two guided walks will be offered on the Island ("birds" and "plants") and participants will be able to use the resort's swimming pool and beach.

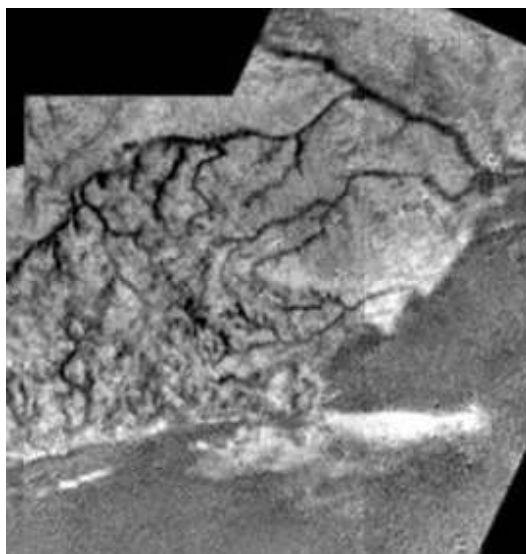
To the basics though ...the venue for the weekend is the Mafraq Hotel. For bookings contact tel: 02-7155856 / 02-5822666, or email: mafraq@emirates.net.ae - mention that you are an ENHG member when you book

to obtain a discounted rate. An ENHG registration desk will be set up at the hotel from 12:00 Wednesday 16th till 09:00 Friday 18th.

There are lots of trips/activities planned for the weekend -something for everyone! A list is provided with this issue but if you would like more details have a look at the summaries published in the last (January) edition of *Focus* – or email newsletter@chirri2000.com.

The Night Sky in March

The constellations of Orion, “the Hunter”, and Ursa Major, “the Great Bear” or “Big Dipper” or “Plough” are particularly visible in the early evening skies of March to the Southwest and Northeast, respectively. Jupiter rises in the East about 9pm and lies in the constellation of Virgo.



Mosaic of River Channel and Ridge Area

Saturn is located high in the sky near the constellations of Gemini (above and right of Orion’s shoulder). Saturn’s rings are almost in the vertical position when viewed through a telescope. Many new pictures of Saturn and its moons are currently being received from the Cassini-Huygens Space probes. Saturn’s atmosphere was thought to be yellow but true colour photographs from Cassini show it to be blue, just like Earth. The European Space Agency’s Huygens probe



**Boulders on
Titan’s
Surface**

detached from Cassini landed on Saturn’s moon Titan in January. Parachuted through humid clouds, it photographed river channels and beaches and things that look like islands. Finally, descending through swirling fog, Huygens landed in mud. To make a long story short, Titan is wet.

Titan’s “water” is liquid methane, CH₄, better known on Earth as natural gas. Regular Earth-water, H₂O, would be frozen solid on Titan where the surface temperature is 290o F below zero. Methane, on the other hand, is a flowing liquid. The boulders on Titan’s surface are rounded like river boulders on Earth suggesting deposition by liquid in methane rivers.

More information about the Cassini-Huygens probe can be found at the following site.

<http://saturn.jpl.nasa.gov/home/index.cfm>.

Alan Carruth

ITEMS ON SALE ON THE ENHG STALL

- **Abu Dhabi Bird checklist 10Dhs.**
(Free if you spend over 50Dhs!)
- **Birds of Europe and the Middle East 100Dhs.**
A bargain - covers most birds in this region.
- **Birdlife in Oman 120Dhs.**
Beautiful photographs by the Eriksens.
- **Bird watching Guide to Oman 95Dhs**
(Copies signed by Eriksens & Sargeants).
- **Bird watching Guide to UAE 50Dhs.**
Author: ex ENHG Chairman, Simon
Aspinall
(Get him to sign copies).
- **Breeding Birds of UAE SB 30Dhs / HB 60Dhs.**
Author: Simon – (Get him to sign copies).
- **Children’s Encyclopaedia 100Dhs.**
Facts about the region - aimed at the kids,
but full of useful info. for adults too. Great
gift.
- **Seashells 30Dhs.**
A useful little waterproof guide to the
region’s shells.
- **Sea Turtles 20Dhs.**
Find out about our local turtles.
- **Wild about Reptiles 60Dhs.**
- **Wild about Mammals 40Dhs.**
Marijcke Jongbloed, mammals of the UAE.
- **Plant Checklist 25Dhs.**
Marijcke Jongbloed - Know your local wild
plants.
- **Jebel Hafit – A Natural History 100Dhs.**
- **ENHG T-shirts/golf (polo) shirts/caps.**
25Dhs/35Dhs/10Dhs.
Buy any 2 – get 10Dhs off.

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Lectures

15 March 2005
Gary Brown
Vegetation of Dhofar

5 April 2005
Dr Heiko Kallweit
Archaeological studies in Umm al Zumul

19 April 2005
Dr Robert Whitcombe
Environmental assessments in the Middle East

3 May 2005
Brien Holmes
Topic TBA

17 May 2005
Sandy Fowler
Sea shells of the Arabian Gulf

7 June 2005
Brigitte Howarth
Insects of Wadi Tarabat

Field Trips

16-18 March 2005
IEW, Mafraq Hotel.

7-8 April 2005
Overnight camping – Jebel Dhanna/Sabkha Mutti.
Allestree Fisher

5-6 May 2005
Overnight camping - East coast. Swimming, flora, Fujeirah fort / museum.
Allestree Fisher

Members' Items for sale

Please send small ads to newsletter@chirri2000.com

Newsletter Details

Newsletter contributions to: newsletter@chirri2000.com

Corporate Sponsors of the ENHG - 2004

The following companies are supporting the ENHG's activities in the region. We hope you as ENHG members will in turn support these companies whenever you can.

Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operations

ADCO



Al Fahim Group

Al Nasser Holdings



British Petroleum

Kanoo Group



Al Masaood

Jashanmal National Company



METCO

Motivate Publishing

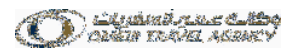
Nama Development



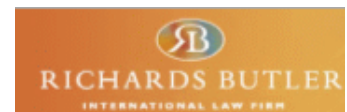
National Bank of Abu Dhabi



Omeir Travel Agency



Richards Butler



Rotana Beach Hotel



URS Dames & Moore



Dames & Moore

Intercontinental Hotels & Resorts



HSBC Bank Middle East Limited



Readymix Abu Dhabi

WESCO Abu Dhabi

Inter-Emirates Weekend Activities 16-18 March 2005

Wednesday 16th		
Perimeter walk	15:00+	Hotel grounds
GPS for Beginners	19:00- 20:00	Hotel conference room
Quiz night	21:00- 22:30	Hotel pool area
Natural history display	Hotel conference room	
Photography display	Hotel conference room	
Thursday 17th		
Bird watching	06:30- 10:00	Al Wathba
Natural history watch	08:30- 12:00	Al Wathba Wildlife Sanctuary
Perimeter walk	08:45- 10:30	Mafraq Hotel grounds
Sand driving for beginners ¹	09:00- 17:00	Ghaftain
Miocene elephant tracks & desert ecology	09:00- 18:00	2 ½ hrs drive from Hotel
Spoon worm walk	10:30- 16:30	Ras Hanjurah
Mammal trapping	16:00- 19:00	
Insect watch	evening	Mafraq Hotel grounds
Star watch	23:00- 01:00	20 min from Hotel
The formal dinner will be held at the Mafraq Hotel, from 19:30. During the evening the 2004 Sheikh Mubarak and Bish Brown awards will be presented, and the winners of the photography competition and floral walk announced.		
Friday 18th		
Bird watching	06:30- 10:00	Al Wathba
Spoon worm walk	10:30- 16:30	Ras Hanjurah (if numbers allow)
Mammal trapping	TBA	
Advanced Sand driving ¹	09:00- 12:00	
Island Dhow Trip ²	08:30- 16:00	Futaisi Island

1. Sand driving trips. You will need to pre-book for this trip (Email: Alan.McGee@zu.ac.ae). See the article in this edition of Focus for further details.
2. Island Dhow trip. You will need to pre-book for this trip (email: allestree.fisher@hct.ac.ae or tel. Allestree on 02-6775717) - and it will cost 60 Dhs/adult, 40 Dhs/child (not including lunch).

And one final reminder it is time to organise your entries for the photography competition! Participants (Junior and Senior) wishing to submit photographs should email newsletter@chirri2000.com or contact Hazim Chalabi (050-6145155, email: hchalabi@adco.ae) for further details. Closing date for entries will be Wednesday 16th March 2005.

See you there.