

# focus

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Emirates Natural History Group

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



## Trip report – Wadi Tarabat

Those ENHG members who signed up for the day trip to Wadi Tarabat and the Jebel Hafeet Tombs on 10<sup>th</sup> June, were in for an interesting excursion. Friday morning at 7:30 am, people were already gathered in groups at the usual place – chatting and sheltering in the shade of the trees. After sorting out cars and people, mobiles in hand and communication strategies arranged, fourteen cars formed a convoy as we took to the road.

After a quick stop to top off the gas tanks, Allestree led us to our first destination, the lower area of the Wadi Tarabat. A wadi is an occasional water course, and while there are wadis in other parts of the UAE, the Wadi Tarabat is the only mountain wadi in the Abu Dhabi Emirate (there are others running out into the sands). Allestree led us through the dry river bed and pointed out the many plants that managed to survive in the arid environment. When the wadi has water, the run-off area extends all the way to the nearby highway. It was hard to picture water flowing freely in this area as I stood in crusty sand with a blazing sun overhead. We re-boarded our vehicles and challenged the narrow road to the upper wadi which seemed to be comprised of large and small stones and massive dips and bumps. As we bounced along, it was understandable why 4WD cars were recommended for this trip!

The topmost area of the Wadi Tarabat has been fenced off to protect the plants there from the camel and goat populations which had previously found it to be a prime grazing area. The animals had overgrazed to the point where many plants were in danger of extinction. We walked through the dry gullies, looking at flowering plants, trees and shrubs. Allestree pointed out the *Iphiaon aucheri* which is very poisonous. Unfortunately, camels are attracted to these plants, and several years ago many died from eating them. Among others, we also spotted the *Desert Thorn shrub* and the broad leaved *Donkey Salad* plant. Acacia trees marched up the hill beside the wadi fence. It was truly amazing to see so many green plants flourishing in this dry area.

The talk by Brigette Howarth on the insects of the Wadi Tarabat the week before our outing had provided us with some interesting background information on the wadi.

Leaving the Wadi Tarabat, we went on to Al Ain and where some additional ENHG members joined our tour to the Jebel Hafeet Cairns. The excavation of these beehive shaped tombs was begun in 1961 by a Danish archaeological team who had been working at Umm al-Nar, close to Abu Dhabi island. They discovered about 200 tombs. Between 1961-2, five of the tombs were excavated and it was reported that two complete jars were found. This pottery was found to date to about 3,000 BC. Beads, pins and copper/bronze rivets and other ceramic vessels were also uncovered. Excavations continued until the 1970s. At present, the site is controlled by the Al Ain Department of Antiquities and Tourism.

Although they have largely been reconstructed, the tombs are fascinating to see. Dome shaped, they have south facing entries. The exterior walls are built in rings of rough stone. The tombs have a single chamber but

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## FRONT COVER PICTURE

*Photograph: Excellent Aerial Shot of Jebel Hafeet, looking South  
Photographer: Ian Conroy*

are large enough to accommodate collective burials. Several members of the group ventured inside the tombs – after first making sure that no snakes were lurking inside in the cool shade! After thoroughly inspecting the tombs, we climbed up to the cave area in the mountain behind the tomb site to have a picnic lunch. The roof of the cave has collapsed but there is still enough overhang to provide shade and enough rocks to provide seating. The lunch break was heartily welcomed as a chance to visit with each other, to rest, and to review the events of the day. And, what a relief to be out of the sun for a while!

Although we started with fourteen vehicles only a hardy group in four cars finished the tour. We ended the day with a visit to the *falaj* system in Al Ain. We uncovered a well and listened to ancient water running through the ground below.

The sites we visited were fascinating and the day was fun and full of adventure. Thanks to Allestree Fisher for a delightful trip and for putting another feather in the cap of the ENHG.

**Mary Boyd**

## Field trip excursion round up for 2004-2005

June is here again and with it the high temperatures, although not as high as last year.

Is it a result of the cooler spring and the rains that have made this spring so different from the previous few years? As an excursion leader I feel that we have had an exceptional year for natural history pursuits.

There has been a busy programme of activities this year. It started in the August heat in Wadi Sumayni. Now that the border fence is up we shall not be able to do this trip again from the UAE side. This is an area that has been used repeatedly by ENHG members over the years, so we are sorry to lose the possibility of crossing the wadi at Shwaib.

Our “reconnaissance” trip this year was to Wadi Ashwani. By the time this goes to press the wadi will have suffered a major intrusion in the form of a new road. We camped there again in May, and saw that the top end of the wadi had not been disturbed. Long may it continue in its (near-) pristine condition. Early in October we made a day trip to Thuqeibah for the newly

excavated falaj system and for fossils at Jebel Buhays led by Val Chalmers. Also in October, Drew Gardner, our Chairman, took us on an afternoon/evening excursion to see the Wonder Gecko (*Teratoscincus scincus*), now under very serious threat from the new airport at Jebel Ali. We were very lucky, seeing a number of these rare creatures plus some other reptiles.

The main camping season started with a weekend devoted to falaj systems, visiting Hili, Hili Oasis, Qarn Bint Saoud and the Sarouj falaj in Al Ain. The highlight of the trip was the underground ghail falaj in Wadi Dahir. The wadi there was also very rewarding with flora and fauna.

Our November plans had to be shelved on account of the passing of HH Sheikh Zayed (RIP). As a mark of respect to the late Ruler, no group trips were undertaken during the period of mourning.

Alan McGee was able to lead a Family Day to "Two Trees" (Ghaftain) in December at which a walk, a survey and some sand-driving took place. We are looking forward to more activities for members with young families in the coming year. Our camping trip in December included Fujeirah archaeologist, Dr Michele Ziolkowski, currently engaged in a countrywide survey of rock art. We did a tour of the petroglyphs in Wadi Hatta, camped in E-Valley, and had a walk in Wadi Sudiyah (near Juwaif).

Our highlight in January was the mountain expedition led by Roy Richards to Jebel Ghaweel. This is a beautiful area, and all participants were able to complete the climb.

We look forward to next year's climbing event. In February Alan McGee took a group to the Umm al Zumul area. The visit to the archaeological sites was organized and led by Dr Mark Beech (ADIAS). An Abu Dhabi Island floral walk also took place in February. One or two species not on the Island list were recorded. The group then drove out to "Two Trees" for lunch.

In March the theme for the camping weekend was "Spring Annuals". We were not disappointed. Wadi Safwan was covered with *Arnebia*, *Silene*, *Eremobium* and a host of other blooms that had sprung up after repeated showers in the area. A similar floral treasure trove greeted us in Wadi Aboul on the Friday morning.

This year it was the turn of the Abu Dhabi chapter to organize the Inter-Emirates Weekend. The Mafraq Hotel was selected after much deliberation, and a very enjoyable weekend was spent on a number of new excursions. Dick Hornby took two trips to see the Spoon Worms, and Drew Gardner took a day trip to the fossil elephant tracks. The main Friday excursion was a trip to Futaisi Island. This island has something for everyone, whatever aspect of natural history interests you. The resort is undergoing some changes, and we hope to visit it again next year.

April saw us in the Sharjah Wildlife Park and NH Museum, on our way to Wadi Lamhah area where we found more spring blooms. This part of UAQ emirate was our camping area. On Friday morning we were in the Dibba area for swimming, after an exhilarating ride through the dunes to the Jiri Plain. Finally in May, after a

wonderful visit to Wadi Daftah, which may soon be invaded by a new road, we camped (again!) in Wadi Ashwani. Fujeirah Fort was the object of our Friday visit. The restorer was on hand to show us around and answer questions. Unfortunately our swimming plans were thwarted on account of the very high winds. The last trip of the main season took us on a day trip to Wadi Tarabat, the Jebel Hafit tombs and the Sarouj falaj in Al Ain.

For those of you who are in town throughout the summer, don't forget that Roy Richards has some summer trips for members with 4-wheel drive vehicles to Musandam and elsewhere.

As usual, I ask members to submit suggestions for visits they would like to do next season, and to let us know in which ways we can improve natural history awareness on these excursions. I would like to thank all "volunteers" over the past year who have written up trips for inclusion in Focus. The newsletter is the voice of the membership, and the editorial team, Jenny and Roy, welcome all contributions.

**Allestree Fisher**

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- **Emirates Bird Report, 50Dhs.**
- **Birdlife in Oman 120Dhs.**  
Beautiful photographs by the Eriksens.
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