

focus

Abu Dhabi, November - December 2005
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Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

A very Happy New Year to one and all!

On 29th November, 'The Emirates – A Natural History' was at last launched. This is a major publication, edited by two ex-chairmen of our group, Peter Hellyer and Simon Aspinall. It is a beautifully illustrated, fully indexed hardback tome with contributions by 25 expert authors, 580 colour photos, 428 pages, and the most comprehensive bibliographies related to UAE natural history ever published. Over half of the authors are or have been members of one or other of the three ENHG chapters, and many others have visited us as speakers over the years. Following from our earlier book 'Jebel Hafit – a Natural History', 2005 has really been an important year for natural history publication and the ENHG has been at the forefront. Although the book has not yet hit the shops, it is on sale at our bookstall for AED 300. This may sound a lot, but when you see the book you will agree that it is cheap at the price (and 25% off the shop price).

Please read the request below for nominations for our two annual awards, the Sheikh Mubarak prize and the Bish Brown Award, and forward your nominations. These are prestigious awards (and in the case of the SM prize, financially very rewarding too).

You may have realized that you never received the promised invitation to join the ENHG Flickr photo-sharing site. Sadly, Etisalat banned Flickr.com shortly after I set up our group site. I don't think the two events were connected. The site is, of course, still out there and please feel free to visit it when outside the UAE. Just go to www.flickr.com, join for free, and search on keyword 'tags' for ENHG or Arabian Natural History. We are looking into other ways of hosting an ENHG photo-sharing site, and if anyone has any bright ideas, please let me know.

Lastly ... a reminder. You will find a membership renewal form attached to this Focus. Please fill it in and hand it to Carole or Mary our membership secretaries (or to any other committee member) along with your subscription of AED100. The best value in town!

Drew Gardner

Follow that Flamingo

Between 26th and 28th November 2005, for the first time in the Arabian Peninsula, greater flamingos were captured and ringed. Birds were captured using leg nooses spread around potential feeding sites. Two adults, two immatures and one juvenile were captured and ringed. We put white DARVIC (plastic) rings, each with an individual four letter code, on all five captured flamingos - four of them also being fitted with satellite transmitters.

All four satellite tagged flamingos had moved out to the coast by 5th December, However as of 11th December two of them were back again at Al Wathba, while were two still on the coast around Dhabbiya and Al Aryam.

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FRONT COVER PICTURE

*Photograph: Miocene cliffs at Jebel Barakah, Western Abu Dhabi
Photographer: Drew Gardner*

Please report any sightings of the marked birds, together with their four-letter code, to **Dr. Salim Javed** at EAD (formerly ERWDA).

Dr. Salim Javed

Sheikh Mubarak Prize and Bish Brown Award

Nominations are invited from paid up members of the ENHG (Abu Dhabi), ENHG (Al Ain) and the Dubai NHG for the two annual ENHG awards: the Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Prize for natural history and the Bish Brown Award.

The Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Prize for natural history is given to a person who has made a substantial, original contribution to knowledge of the history, natural history, culture, archaeology or palaeontology of the UAE, such contribution being reflected through means such as publications and lectures. The award was instituted by the ENHG Patron, HE Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan, and comprises an inscribed silver dhow and a cash prize.

The Bish Brown Award is given to a person who has made a significant contribution to promoting wider interest in the objectives of the UAE's three natural history groups, through means such as educational activities, raising public consciousness in the media, playing a leading role in NHG activities etc. The award was endowed by former Vice Chairman, Terry Adams and former Secretary, Caroline Adams, to commemorate the founder of the ENHG, J.N.B. 'Bish' Brown. The award comprises a silver mounted eagle, to be held for one year by the recipient.

Any individual, whether or not they are members of the Groups, can be nominated for either award, with the

exception of current committee members of the ENHG in Abu Dhabi.

In nominating a candidate, or candidates, please provide a brief summary (no more than 200 words) of justification for the nomination – ie an explanation of what the candidate(s) has achieved. Nominations can be sent either by post (to Drew Gardner, Chairman, ENHG, PO Box 45553, Abu Dhabi), by email (to any ENHG committee member) or hand delivered to any ENHG committee member. The closing date for nominations is **31 January 2006**, and winners will be selected by the ENHG (Abu Dhabi) committee during the February meeting. The Committee's decision is final.

Pre-Christmas flowering and fruiting

We don't have to wait for the spring to find desert plants in flower. Many of the perennials are bursting out into bloom in the autumn, as soon as the summer heat has gone. Abu Dhabi emirate is rich in salt bushes, which as the name suggests, are plants that are able to tolerate a limited level of salinity in the soil (halophytes). The western region of Abu Dhabi emirate in particular has a great display this time of year.



Haloxylon salicornicum in the western region of Abu Dhabi emirate (Photo: Allestree Fisher)

Haloxylon is one of the three commonest plant species in the UAE, and can be found throughout Abu Dhabi emirate. It is often the dominant plant species in the areas of limestone outcrops where there is a light covering of sand, and is also found in deeper sand. The related species, *Haloxylon persicum*, however, is only found in the Shanayl area (the so-called Dew Forest) just west and south of the capital, and is a good candidate for some measure of conservation in this unique habitat.

Seasonally we are subjected to nightly dew falls, and it is these that most of the salt bushes rely on for their survival.

Salt bushes change colour as the autumn wears on, and provide an amazing palette of colours in some areas. Two in particular are responsible for this: *Halopeplis perfoliata* and *Haloenium strobilaceum*. Jebel Ali beach is a good place to see these effects.

At first sight salt bushes do not provide splashes of colour, except in the autumn when so many of the *Chenopodiaceae* are flowering and fruiting.



Dewfall on a Haloxylon root (Photo: Allestree Fisher)

These bushes provide cover for hares, and suitable burrowing terrain for rodents, lizards and insects. They are a significant feature of the desert eco-system country-wide, and look their best in late autumn and early winter in the southern Gulf.



Haloxylon salicornicum (Photo: Allestree Fisher)

In the early autumn the *Salsola* and *Haloxylon* bushes were in flower. These blooms are minute and you need to be close to see them at all. Most of the flowers are yellow and can be seen as a yellowish haze when the whole plant is flowering. As I write most of these members of the *Chenopodiaceae* (Goosefoot or Glasswort Family) are in fruit.



Haloxylon salicornicum (Photo: Allestree Fisher)

The most spectacular of these are the winged fruit of the *Haloxylon salicornicum*. They can be in a variety of colours, but most commonly in white. You will find pink, dark brown and purple blooms, too. Most strikingly, the pink will attract your gaze, in a colony of this plant ("rimth"). The limestone outcrops of the "far west" are the best places to see this colourful show at the present time. In some areas the *Haloxylon* is the dominant plant, to the exclusion of all else in some areas. It can be frequently found with two other very common species: *Cyperus conglomeratus* and *Zygophyllum qatarense*.

This ubiquitous species is found in practically every habitat in the UAE.



Salsola drummondii (Photo: Allestree Fisher)

Nearer the coast the salsolas are well represented, in particular *Salsola drummondii*.

This little gem occurs on waste ground in Khalifa A City, and on a number of shorelines all the way to the Saudi border. The illustration above is a site west of Ruwais, and the plants in the foreground are salsolas. Their yellow flowers are found on terminal sprays, but the fruit is a light red colour and very attractive when found in large colonies.



Haloxylon salicornicum (Photo: Allestree Fisher)

But we are not limited to Chenopods! We have the Desert Hyacinth which is now coming up all over the country, not least along our undisturbed shorelines. Have you seen any yet? You can even see them at the Two Trees site!



These members of the Broomrape Family are parasites and need to feed on host plants in the vicinity, often a *Haloxylon* or a *Zygophyllum*. They are a brilliant yellow flower, sometimes as tall as 80cms in favoured locations. You'll find these as far south as Umm al Zumul and Liwa, wherever there are damp saline sand plains.



Bienertia cycloptera (Photo: Allestree Fisher)

Another salt bush, though not as common as those mentioned above, is *Bienertia cycloptera*. The Ruwais area is a good place to look for them. They too are in fruit, with their characteristic circular winged fruit.

I hope you will be motivated to go out and have a look at what coastal and inland Abu Dhabi emirate has to offer. This is a very good time of year, before the arrival of the spring annuals. You will need a good reference book for identification purposes. Can I recommend: *The Comprehensive Guide to the Wild Flowers of the UAE* by Marijcke Jongbloed (100 AED at the ENHG bookstall)?

Field Trips

Jabeeb Archaeology – 18 November 2005

The morning of November 18th started with a beautiful sunrise and it was an awesome start to a daytrip, with participants from both the Al Ain and Abu Dhabi groups of the ENHG, into the Arabian desert, led by Brien Holmes. The Abu Dhabi group, consisting of five cars, was organised by Allestree and Pam Fisher from the usual starting point behind Popeye's on Airport Road. After a brief stop at an ADNOC, to get fully prepared for our day's adventure, we all proceeded to a roadside point that had several desert plants that were just coming into flower now that the days are cooler. In particular, Allestree was checking to see whether there were any butterfly eggs under the leaves of the Sodom's Apple (*Calotropis procera*) bushes that were in full bloom and looking quite exquisite. Unfortunately there were no eggs to be found but there were several other flowering plants including Bean Caper (*Tribulus macropterus*), Indigo (*Indigofera intricata*) and Ra (*Aerva javonica*). Pam informed us that the fluffy Ra seed heads were used by the Bedu for stuffing cushions.

After the brief floral review we drove onward in convoy to the assigned meeting point with Brien and Brigitte with their Al Ain colleagues. They were already at the meeting point and welcomed us to their group. Brien gave us an outline of the proposed trip, including a viewing of the nearby camel race track and some archaeological sites. We proceeded in convoy and shortly afterwards were observing large numbers of camels being exercised on the race track. They were a most elegant sight and proved to be an excellent photo opportunity for all the photographers in the group. Those who were not taking photos were observing many other things including the Desert Squash (*Citrullus colocynthis*), animal tracks (made by beetles and gerbils) and birds.



Photo: Stefan Beck

The group then moved on to a quarry that displayed many layers of deposits, both water and windborne, and the exposed remains of ancient wells and falaj systems neither of which were more than a few feet below the

present ground surface level. Lying around on the sand above the quarry were many potsherds and some inconclusive evidence of copper smelters.



Photo: Stefan Beck

At the next stop, which was a site with pieces of green metal and potsherds lying on the sand, Brigitte produced a plastic box containing a chemical testing kit. Everyone's interest was alerted as a piece of the green metal was crushed using a pestle and mortar. Then the youngest members of the group, supervised by Brigitte, very carefully put some hydrochloric acid on the crushed metal fragments, followed by some ammonia. The previously colourless liquid became a brilliant blue, indicating the presence of copper. This was an exciting moment for everyone.



Photo: Stefan Beck

With the experiment complete someone noted the ever darkening sky and there was a discussion as to whether the clouds indicated a thunderstorm or a sandstorm. However before any conclusion was reached we were all enveloped by blowing sand and we had to make an immediate dash to the cars before we lost sight of them. Most people gratefully remained in the car for about half an hour as the wind and sand swirled around us.



Photo: Stefan Beck

After the storm the sky cleared and we went to another nearby archaeological site known as "The Women's Majlis". Brien showed the group a fascinating collection of items that had been found at the site including many belonging to women, including kohl applicators, beads, jewellery and some coins. With heads down the group then went about searching for artefacts and quite a few people found items of interest including some further kohl applicators and a coin. After Brien had reviewed the interesting artefacts it was time to say goodbye to the Al Ain group and thank them for arranging such an interesting trip for us to share with them.



Photo: Stefan Beck

The Abu Dhabi group then had a late but relaxing lunch in some shade under a tree before returning home.

Thank you to all the organisers of this fascinating trip.

Liz Thornington

Expedition to the Liwa Oases, 8-9 Dec 2005

The Expeditionary Force was brought up to its full complement of seven 4x4's when Abu Dhabi members were joined by Al Ain representatives at 8:30 AM at the designated ADNOC station (intersection of Al Ain truck rout and Highway 11).

Our first stop was the Shanayl Saxaul "Forest" where these lovely tree-bushes (perhaps a bit more widely spaced than in most forests we have known) are the main attraction of a surreal desert landscape of low dunes sheltering damp interdune flat areas. Although animal life seemed remarkably sparse, the several plant types present provide a feeling of balance that derives from the information that all are indigenous and are flourishing here on their own accord.

We drove on to an abandoned hilltop radio mast to gather firewood and thence to a short stop at the nearby beach to see the sandy tidal flats at low tide. Here we were treated to a lone flamingo.

Our lunch stop at an artificial forest took us past views of tiny gazelles behind elaborate fencing both arriving and on our way out.

Arriving at the elephant footprints (Mleisa, south of the Baynunah Forest Plantation) in late afternoon, we marvelled at these late Miocene (8 million year old) tracks leading across a mud-cracked surface. Soon after footprinting, this surface was cemented harder than the layers of sediment deposited over it because the latter have now been locally eroded away, except for a single remnant that stands like a giant muffin in the centre of the elephant playground.



In our minds the ghostly elephants plod along on their mysterious errands, but their place has lately been taken by the camels, who greeted us briefly upon arrival and whose tracks now decorate the modern surface.

After camping around a cheery bonfire, we awoke to a dewey-rosey dawn and explored in vain for early-rising animal life.



With the tents at last dry, we headed inland, now reduced to five vehicles. Now the planted road borders had ended and we drove among giant dunes with occasional camel herds, only one of which decided to greet us up close.



Finally we arrived at Umm Hisin and began our traverse of the great arc of the Liwa Oases. Stopping for lunch about half way, we made tiny forays into the Empty Quarter to enjoy yet another arid ecosystem of supreme austerity.

Stephen Ehrenberg

Guest speaker, 17 January 2006,

Ken Glennie

Ken Glennie, our speaker on the deserts of Southern Arabia, on Tuesday 17th January, is one of the top experts on the geology of south-eastern Arabia, and is making a short trip to the Emirates to go out and do a bit more field work, before also visiting Oman and Saudi Arabia.

He is giving another talk on Monday, 16th January, on the Geology of the Oman Mountains (i.e. the Hajar Mountains). This talk is being given to the Society of

ITEMS ON SALE

AT THE ENHG STALL

- **The Emirates – A Natural History, 300 Dhs**
The first complete referencing guide to the wildlife of the UAE. 580 colour photos.
- **Jebel Hafit – A Natural History, 100Dhs.**
- **Abu Dhabi Bird checklist 10Dhs.**
(Free if you spend over 50Dhs!)
- **Emirates Bird Report, 50Dhs.**
- **Birdlife in Oman, 120Dhs.**
Beautiful photographs by the Eriksens.
- **Bird watching Guide to Oman, 95Dhs**
(Copies signed by Eriksens & Sargeants).
- **Breeding Birds of UAE, 60Dhs.**
Author: Simon Aspinall
- **Seashells, 30Dhs.**
A useful little waterproof guide to the region's shells.
- **Wild about Reptiles, 60Dhs.**
- **Wild about Mammals, 40Dhs.**
Marijcke Jongbloed, mammals of the UAE.
- **Comprehensive Guide to the Flora of the UAE, 100 Dhs**
- **Plant Checklist, 25Dhs.**
Marijcke Jongbloed - Know your local wild plants.
- **Pests – Find out what's in and around your home**
- **Children's books: Yaw the Wildcat; Hayat the Leopard**
- **ENHG T-shirts/golf (polo) shirts/caps.**
25Dhs/35Dhs/10Dhs.
Buy any 2 – get 10Dhs off.

Geoscientists in the Emirates, SGE, and is being held at the Corniche Club, in the ADNOC Theatre (just at the side of the ADNOC building, next to the Hilton Hotel). The Social Hour begins at 6.30 pm, and the presentation, expected to last around an hour, begins at 7.30 pm. ENHG members are welcome to attend.

For anyone wishing to get a rapid basic training course on the geology of the UAE's deserts and mountains, **THIS** is your opportunity, if you attend both of the talks.

Peter Hellyer

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Lectures

3 January 2006

Trees of the UAE – a discussion and quiz.

Allestree Fisher

17 January 2006

The deserts of Southern Arabia
Ken Glennie

Field Trips

5/6 January 2006

Mountain climb,
Buraimi area
Roy Richards

9/10 February 2006

Natural History survey,
Jebel Emala, Sharjah emirate
Allestree Fisher

23/24 February 2006

Family weekend,
Venue TBA
Alan McGee

2/3 March 2006

Desert annuals,
Mahdah area
Allestree Fisher

16/17 March 2006

Inter-emirates weekend, venue TBA
Dubai NHG

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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.

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