

focus

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Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

At last... Focus, our newsletter, appears again after a long break! We are so grateful to Atie Vogler for volunteering to take over the editing of our newsletter, and also to Jenny and Roy for their excellent work on Focus over the last two years. As usual, an appeal! Please do consider writing up and accounts of interesting trips or observations that you have made .. or any natural history snippets you come across in the newspapers or internet and share them with our membership. Send your articles, notes or advertisements to Atie or any Committee member (email addresses are at the back of every Focus) – or to newsletter@chirri2000.com .

Brien Holmes, the Chairman of the Al Ain Chapter has been hard at work going through the truckload ENHG boxes of files and specimens collected in the 1980s and 1990s. These have been in storage for some years now, and last June we moved them up to Al Ain where they have been given space in the Al Ain Museum. Brien is working on the history of the ENHG, since its foundation 30 years ago, with a meeting on dugongs in November 1976. In the collections are shells, sand samples, skulls, minerals and fossils, insects, and mammals and reptiles in bottles. There are also the old Bulletins, correspondence, membership lists and other fascinating archive material. Who knows... maybe we can produce a book on the history and achievements of the ENHG!

Jens and Hanne Eriksen have produced their annual Arabian bird calendar for 2007 and it is of course as beautiful as ever. Better still, they have volunteered to take over the ENHG book stall, so please buy the calendars and books! Hazel is working hard on putting the lecture programme together for 2006/7, and we have a wide range of lectures planned. If you know of anyone who could give us an interesting talk or workshop, please let Hazel know.

As ever, anyone is most welcome to join the ENHG Committee, and we very much need new members. Please consider giving us some of your time. Committee meets on the first Tuesday of the month.

It looks as if we will have an active and vibrant year at the ENHG!

Drew Gardner

Just in a few wadis

Have you been to Masfut It's close to Hatta. There is a special delight in store in the spring months for the tree/plant spotter. And you don't need a 4-wheel drive to get there!

Here is a picture of the wadi at the top end of Masfut town. Together with a few trees. But which trees are they? (*all pictures by the author*)

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Wadi Masfut with Tecomella trees

We have probably all seen a bush with bright yellow blooms in sprays in the ornamental patches in the city. It's a very popular ornamental, used all over the UAE. You will find it beside the road, in the middle of the road, in among a floral massif, standing alone on a verge, or forming a hedge. You must have noticed it at some time, either as a bush or a small tree.



This is *Tecoma stans*, and is closely related to a local tree you might not have seen. It is used widely here because, unlike its native cousin, it blooms almost all year round. The native plant is unremarkable for about

nine months of the year There are two versions of the wild plant. One is used as an ornamental in the central reservation along some roads in Abu Dhabi emirate. Pam was impressed the way so many of these blooms grew directly out of the trunk. Probably, the most impressive display of these flowers is just off the Dubai-Al Ain road on the way to Shwaib.



Hili Fun City, near Al Ain is another place. This plant is trained into a small tree and has yellow and orange flowers some of which grow, characteristically, directly out of the trunk. The blooms are probably darker because of the regular irrigation. Over-irrigation can be a problem, particularly with acacias which tend to lose their traditional appearance.



The true native tecoma is called *Tecomella undulata*, which may refer to the wavy nature of the leaves, and is found in "just a few wadis".



This is part of a description given under "Distribution" in the *Comprehensive Guide to Wild Flowers of the UAE* (Marijcke Jongbloed) for what is arguably the most colourful native tree in the UAE and parts of Oman.

January to March are the best times to see the "Orange Tecoma" in English, ("ferfer" in Arabic). It is the only native plant from the Bignoniaceae family to be found in the UAE. This beautiful tree is in bloom from late December to March, and attracts birds and insects to the nectar found in its large multiple-leaved blooms.



Most of the native plants here in the UAE have either an African or Asian origin. The *Tecomella* is Asian, perhaps Makranian, being found in the Thar Desert in India, in Pakistan, and Baluchistan. Baluchistan is the closest point to the UAE, and it would appear to be limited to south-eastern Arabia (UAE and Oman).



Tecomella undulata in Wadi Masfut

The ferfer tree can be viewed best in the wadi and gardens of Masfut, in Wadi Ferfer (which is named after the tree), Wadi Hayl, Wadi al Qawr and Wadi Shis. You are too late for this year (this article was originally written in January). Next year you will have almost four months to view these amazing tropical-like flowers. Masfut is the nearest site to Abu Dhabi. Western suggests that the tree was cultivated by local farmers and gardeners in the past, but that as the older villages and settlements were abandoned in the recent past, these trees ran wild and prospered in areas that could naturally support them, in particular wadi banks. Please put the ferfer tree on your list of "things to see". You will not be disappointed.

Allestree E C Fisher

Hawksbill Turtle in Musandam

A highlight of a recent trip to Khasab (aside from dolphins) was a chance encounter with an adult female Hawksbill Turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) laying eggs on the beach. Our sighting occurred in late afternoon on Saturday, 25 March 2006.

The shell of the turtle was approximately 0.9 meters long, and we encountered her just as she had finished burying a nest of 1.5 meters diameter, at a row of rocks at (but not clearly above) the high water mark. The beach where we encountered her was an isolated beach in the vicinity of Khasab, inaccessible by road.

We descended noisily and completely unaware of the turtle's presence, which was brought to our attention by three fishermen in a boat about 50 feet offshore. Once we looked, the track from the water to the nest was clear, and the turtle was just beginning her trek back to the water when we gathered around. The Hawksbill Turtle moves by alternating its left and right flippers, and sure enough the track showed parallel, non-aligned flipper marks.



Her alarm at our approach prevented a closer look, although no tags were noticed. The nest was already covered when we arrived, and we elected not to disturb it.

On returning to Dubai, the second edition of Sea Turtles in the Sultanate of Oman by Rod and Susan Salm was consulted. This small booklet shows several known nesting sites for Hawksbill Turtles in Musandam, but none in the Musandam for other turtle species. The Hawksbill Turtle is distinguished from other marine turtles by the number of plates on its back, known as costal scutes. The Hawksbill Turtle and the Green Turtle have four, whereas other species have five or more. The Hawksbill is distinguished from the green turtle by having two pairs in lieu of one pair of plates between its eyes, and by its non-aligned flipper tracks (whereas the Green Turtle moves its flippers together and leaves aligned tracks).

Hawksbills are known to nest in low numbers spread over a wide area. Their nesting season begins in February, while the other main turtle species in Oman nest somewhat later in the year.

For all of us in the group, it was a first and quite unexpected sighting of a wild sea turtle nesting ashore.

Charles Laubach

Focus on - Yerbo



www.treknature.com/.../Jordan/photo8182.htm

Yerbo

"Jerboa" is from the Arabic word "yerbo," meaning "big thighs."

Location: North Africa, Arabia, central Asia.

Habitat: Terrestrial. Desert and steppe.

Description: Like the other members of this family, the overall appearance of the desert jerboa is like that of a kangaroo, mainly because of the very long hind legs. Its coat is cream or beige on the back, white underneath. The tail is long and has a tuft of white hairs at the tip, and it is used like a tiller or rudder when it jumps. This animal can grow over sixteen inches long, but ten of those are its tail. It weighs only about two and a half ounces.

Behaviour: This solitary nocturnal rodent starts moving about in search of food after sundown. It eats seeds, roots, and insects, from which it extracts the water required for its survival. It is agile and has highly developed senses of smell, sight, and hearing.

Reproduction: Gestation lasts about a month, after which the female usually gives birth to three young. There may be more than one litter a year. The young are independent after a few weeks.

<http://www.americazoo.com/goto/index/mammals/204.htm>

Frankincense in Abu Dhabi

If anyone is interested in seeing Frankincense trees (*Boswellia* sp.) in the flesh then all you have to do is visit the New Corniche, or Corniche Al Qurm of Abu Dhabi. The Municipality has very kindly planted at least ten specimens, all of which appear to be doing rather well. Two have fruited, while the others, both less than two metres tall, are very much leafier and look like little oak trees. All have characteristically peeling paper-like bark.

To find the trees you have to be on the inbound carriage-way heading into the city. The trees are found less than 100 m back from the respective car parks city-side of the traffic lights at the junctions with 25th and 23rd streets. Pull into either car park and walk back the way you have come checking the trees between the picnic shelters.

Please note you can keep any myrrh you might find but you must hand over any gold.

Signed TTWM

Birding in the UAE

Interested in finding out about birding in Abu Dhabi?

Have a look at Tommy Pedersen's website <http://www.tommypedersen.com>. It provides a good introduction for all birders visiting/living in the Emirates. Another good site is Twitchers' Guide : uaeinteract.com/nature/bird/twitch, which is a regular news feature in UAE Interact.

Nahyan presents prizes

Shortly before the summer break, our Patron, H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan, the Minister of Higher Education, presented our two annual awards, the Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Award for Natural History and the Bish Brown Award, to the two winners.

The Sheikh Mubarak Award, created by Sheikh Nahayan and named after his father, given to a person who is deemed to have made a major contribution through original research and publication on the country's natural history and archaeology, went to Fujairah-based Michele Ziolkowski.

The Bish Brown Award, named after the founder of the ENHG and donated by former Vice Chairman Terry Adams and his wife, Caroline, a former Secretary, is awarded to a person deemed to have made a major contribution to the promotion of the aims of the Group and to environmental awareness by means other than research and publication. This was won this year by Allestree Fisher.

Besides their Awards, Michele and Allestree also received cash prizes from Sheikh Nahayan.



Seen in our picture, from left to right, are Sheikh Abdullah bin Suhail Al Sharqi (Michele's husband), Michelle Ziolkowski, Sheikh Nahayan, Pam Fisher, Allestree Fisher and our Chairman, Drew Gardner.

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Lectures

10th October, 8pm:
'Climbing the highest mountain in the world'
Ali Bushnaq & Lance Turnbull

17th October
NO MEETING

7th Nov, 7:30 pm:
'Human impact on the coastline'
Graham Evans

21st Nov 7:30 pm:
'There's gold in them there dunes – or – oil and gas in Abu Dhabi'
Peter Roberts

Field Trips

20/21 November
O/night camping
Dhow trip, Musandam
Andrew Bean

17/18 November:
O/night (desert) camping trip,
destination to be confirmed

December (date to be confirmed)

Day trip
Allestree Fisher

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