

focus

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Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

November 2006

The cool weather seemed to arrive literally with a bang this year, with rain and thunder storms. Great weather for being outside. Anyone who would like to share a favourite locality for a weekend or day trip with the group is most welcome to come forward and either lead a trip themselves or see if we can arrange a trip through our coordinator Andrew Bean. Please see later in this issue for the trips that are already organised.

We are always most grateful for any material for Focus such as accounts of trips that you have made (they don't need to be official ENHG trips), observations that you have made or interesting snippets on natural history, you may have come across in the media. The Committee also is always on the lookout for potential speakers, so any ideas here are welcome. The same is true of the field programme.

The Al Ain group have suggested March 22 -24 for the annual Inter-Emirates Weekend (IEW). This is the weekend when the three chapters of the ENHG get together for a weekend of socializing, field trips, exhibitions and talks. It is hosted by the various chapters in turn (our turn again in 2008), and Al Ain have the baton for 2007. The dates haven't been confirmed yet, but please pencil it in, or if you think of something major that clashes with this weekend, please let me or Brien Holmes know as soon as possible.

There was remarkably little response to my plea for members to sign up for the ENHG photo group (precisely zero requests to date!). Please do have a look at Flickr.com and consider posting natural history photos for us all to share. Send me an email (drew.gardner@zu.ac.ae) and I'll send you an invitation to join the ENHG flickr group (it is a private group).

And finally, we would like to wish all our members a very happy Christmas, New Year and Eid al Adha season.

Drew Gardner

In this issue

- Page 1:** Editorial, A self-seeded ghaf
Page 2: A self-seeded ghaf, Umm al Zumul Field Trip
Page 3: Umm al Zumul Field Trip
Page 4: Umm al Zumul Field Trip
Page 5: Advance notice of excursions
Page 6: Committee members, Lecture, Field trips, ENHG Sponsors

FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Sinai agama

Photographer: Drew Gardner

A self-seeded ghaf ?

Recently, during the Eid break, we came across a very small bushy "ghaf" (*Prosopis cineraria*), which had probably only been growing a year or two at the most. On inspection it was clear there were no other ghaf trees growing in the immediate dunes that might have cloned this one through vegetative regeneration.



Photo by P.A.Fisher

The nearest trees were on the Shwaib plain about fifty metres below us and about 300-400 metres away. We assumed that this little bush had somehow managed to germinate from seed, and had either been

1 blown by the prevailing wind from the parent tree on the plain

2 excreted onto the dune by a passing camel

In either case it would have had to germinate in isolation from the parent tree.



Photo by P.A.Fisher

This, according to Brown (2004) is "extremely rare" in the present climatic conditions prevailing in the UAE. Only once every 10 or 20 years do conditions favour germination from seed, claims Brown. There are two possible explanations for this in my view, and I look forward to other readers' suggestions about this. They are:

- a) the proximity to the mountains of Oman with its increased rainfall might have produced these favourable conditions
- b) the relatively heavy rainfall in 2004 may have been sufficient to cause this to happen

2004 was the heaviest rain we have had for some years, so this might be the reason, but it still remains a very unusual occurrence. While we were inspecting the area around this camel-ravaged plant, we observed a small herd of dromedaries, one of whom actually plodded over to the young ghaf and ravaged it further. In common with other small ghafs struggling to survive in a hostile environment, this one was heavily armed with long spines similar to its brother acacias in an attempt to ward off herbivores.



Photo by P.A.Fisher

We had observed other struggling specimens at Ghaftain (Two Trees) just off the Razeen prison road, but always within range of the parent having a root system to support vegetative regeneration. I'm sure we shall return to the site to monitor the progress of this plant.

It has been suggested that to ensure the long-term survival of this species in what are arguably conditions of increasing aridity, seeds from healthy ghaf trees should be germinated artificially under cover and re-planted later in the wild. Whether there are currently any initiatives to implement this is uncertain. The financial aspects of even a nation-wide attempt to improve ghaf stock would make little difference to budgets. Although only found occurring naturally in the eastern parts of Abu Dhabi emirate, the ghaf as a keystone species for the UAE merits some attention.

Allestree E C Fisher

Umm al Zumul Field Trip

24-25 November 2006

Archaeology and Desert

Seven vehicles left Popeye's promptly at 12.20 for our trip to Umm al Zumul. For Donatella and for us it was a return visit having been there in February 2005 with Dr Mark Beech. For others, a first visit to this area.

We took the Al Ain road for approximately 60km then turned off onto the truck road and right on to the Razeen, Al Qua'a road south. Just past the Two Trees turn off, those of us at the rear of the convoy drove through a cloud of small insects. Later, when I picked one off the front of the car it seems we had unavoidably killed many small yellow butterflies. If there are any interested entomologists out there I have a small, battered sample. They were pale lemon yellow with black spots on both the upper and lower sides of the wings, with a wingspan of 4cm at the most. I have had a

quick look at some websites but couldn't identify it. Arriving at Gate 14 at around 3.30 we drove through to the campsite. It was exactly as we remembered. Eighteen months ago we arrived in the middle of a sandstorm that made setting up camp an interesting experience, this time, however, the weather was as near perfect as it can ever be. We chose our spots, set up camp, and then, led by Dick, went for a short walk through the small dunes to Khor Manahil an interesting archaeological site that Mark had taken us to on our last visit. The children enjoyed exploring the dunes and hunting for desert roses and artefacts. We searched in vain for perfect arrow heads and other signs of human occupation, but were rewarded only by twentieth century rusty nails. The stunning scenery is definitely worth a mention. As you drive south towards this area the landscape becomes more and more impressive, and Khor Manahil itself is surrounded by some particularly beautiful dunes. I had written on our last trip 'karimat Khor Manahil' which roughly translates (I think) as 'nice place bay of Manahil', I think the reference came from Mark. Our walk back to the campsite was straight towards the setting sun, spectacular as ever in the UAE.



Khor Manahil Photo: Stefan Beck

We spent a couple of relaxing hours by the campfire enjoying our evening meal and a chat. The wind came up for about an hour or so, and although it turned a little chilly it certainly wasn't anything like the wild and stormy night we endured on our previous visit. The telescope was set up to view the Pleiades, and many other stars; one of the joys of an evening out of town, the night sky was wonderfully clear.



Camp site Photo: Stefan Beck

The following morning, after a short stroll through the dunes to examine a few animal tracks which Andrew had found whilst some of us were still tucked up in our tents – we broke camp and set off for the next area. We speculated perhaps rather optimistically that we may have had Oryx visitors during the night, as the tracks were not typical of Gazelle, but appeared to have been made by a larger animal jumping or springing on all four legs at once. Or it could have been the Djinn. Stefan was rewarded with a lucky scorpion find, lucky because it was 'under' not 'in' his tent. Perhaps it's worth mentioning that the area is a protected zone and permission to enter is required. Arabian Oryx are being released into the wild here, and last time we were there we saw two herds of Gazelle and although we didn't see any this time, there were plenty of footprints.



Fenced site Umm al Zumul Photo: Stefan Beck

Back on the main road we drove further south to another gate. After some debate, a little scouting around, a few false turns; and one startled hare which shot out from under a bush when approached by a camera wielding enthusiast muttering 'I came here to escape the paparazzi!', we found our way through the small transverse dunes to the small groups of stones which we visited in February 2005. These have been fenced off since last we were there, which is essential to their preservation. The rectangular shapes in the ground comprised of white rock are only an indication of what lies beneath but, since several artefacts dating back to

the stone age have been found here, I look forward to perhaps one day learning what more is discovered.



Scorpion Photo: Dr. Andrew Bean



Second site Umm al Zumul Photo: Liza Green

Once again the beauty and grandeur of the dunes is what strikes me. Rising to around 800ft in places, they run parallel roughly north-east to south-west separated by valleys measuring roughly one kilometre wide. In the valleys smaller dunes are formed roughly at right angles to the large dunes across the valley bed. This dune formation stretches for a couple of hundred kilometres. It takes a lot of imagination to visualise this particular valley at one time being a fertile plain with perhaps a lake and/or a river, and rocky hills where there are now sand dunes, but Mark did a good job of convincing us on the last outing, and the amount of vegetation on the western side of the valley certainly indicates the presence of underground water.

Because it was midday and pretty hot, we reached a decision not to climb the large dunes as we had in 2005, so unfortunately those who hadn't been before didn't perhaps gain such a real sense of the formation of the dunes. We'll have to go back again!



Zygophyllum Umm al Zumul Photo: Liza Green

At this stage we said farewell to several group members who decided either to go back to Abu Dhabi, or try the road to Liwa. The five remaining hardy souls, in three 4WDs spent an hour or so exploring the foothills around the 'houses', but didn't find anything of interest archaeologically, perhaps it has all been picked up. We decided to go further into the valley keeping to the north side and found nearby another rectangular structure of the same white stone at ground level which bore a close resemblance to the first site. We then crossed to the south side where we found the Desert Rose Garden stopping to gather a few, before continuing on to a convenient Gazelle Watering Station with barasti roof providing the perfect breezy shaded lunch spot. As mentioned previously, parts of this side of the valley are very green and some areas are densely carpeted with light green or greenish-yellow bushes of the *Zygophyllum* genus.



Lunch at Umm al Zumul Photo: Liza Green

We left at around 3pm to head back to Abu Dhabi...or so we thought. Before we reached Al Qua'a we received a phone call from one of the group who had left earlier. They had driven a little way off the road, to watch some camels, and got stuck in the sand. Luckily they spotted our little convoy passing by and so we backtracked a few kms and rounded off the afternoon with that old traditional sport 'Digging out the 4 wheel-drive', before heading back to Abu Dhabi. The camels, by the way, were, by now, several kilometres further up the road hurrying towards their afternoon tea that had been nicely set out for them in a delightful picnic spot. Never mind the 4WD - Oh! For four squashy feet!



Camels at Umm al Zumul area Photo; Liza Green

And – yes – the road through to Liwa is firmly CLOSED.

Another thoroughly enjoyable excursion, and I hope that those of us who joined Mark on the last outing were able to convey a little of his enthusiastic and detailed explanation of the importance and value of these sites despite our lack of archaeological expertise.

Thanks to Andrew Bean for organising us all.

PS. Dick and I, were delighted that our GPS 'works'! and that we were able to find these places again. It's the first time we have really put it to the test. Encouragement, I hope, to those who are considering buying one.

Liza Green

Excursion

Advance notice of day-trip (2) planned for December 22nd (Flora & Archaeology)

The sign-up sheet for this trip will be available on December 19th.

We shall drive to Masfut, via Al Madam, to see the *Tecomella* trees in bloom. These are one of the showiest displays in the country. Not to be missed.

We shall have lunch in the Buhays area and visit an archaeological site.

8.00 am departure, returning at about 6.00 pm.

Allestree Fisher

Advance notice of Jebel Sumeini Ridge-Walk on the weekend of 12-13 January 2007

The sign-up sheet will be available on December 19th.

There is a wadi walk for Friday and a hike along a beautiful ridge near Jebel Sumeini for Saturday. The camp location is in Oman.

Leaving at 8.30am on Friday, back in Abu Dhabi the next day by 7.00pm.

Roy L. Richards

ITEMS ON SALE

AT THE ENHG STALL

- The Emirates – A Natural History, 350 Dhs
The first complete reference guide to the wildlife of the UAE. 580 colour photos.
- Sulphur, Camels and Gunpowder - The Sulphur Mines at Jebel Dhanna, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, 95 dhs
- Marine Atlas of Abu Dhabi, 280 dhs
- 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 Aspinnall
- 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
- 2007 bird calendar. Beautiful pictures from the Eriksons. A must for yourself ... and a perfect gift
- ENHG T-shirts/golf (polo) shirts/caps.
25Dhs/35Dhs/10Dhs.
Buy any 2 – get 10Dhs off.

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Lectures

5th December,
7.30 pm:
Houbara captive
breeding in Abu Dhabi

Ingrid Barcelo

19th December,
7.30 pm:
Soil survey in the UAE.

Bill Porter

2nd January
7.30 pm (provisional):

Marine ecosystems of
the Mediterranean

Catherine Vogler

Field Trip

22nd December
Day-trip to Masfut and
Buhays area (Flora &
Archaeology)

Allestree Fisher

Weekend
12-13 January 2007

Jebel Sumeini
Ridge -Walk

Roy Richards

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