

# focus



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Emirates Natural History Group

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

## EDITORIAL

Here's wishing all our members a very happy and successful 2007 from all the ENHG Committee. As the ENHG celebrates its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary it is great to see that we are still a thriving, active, and friendly group, hopefully living up to the aspirations of our founders. The Group means very different things to different members and we hope that there is something in it for everyone.

Clearly our most popular activities remain the lecture series and the field trips, and we will be working hard to ensure that these live up to their usual success in 2007. We do urge / beg / cajole you the membership to help out Hazel our lecture series organiser by suggesting potential speakers (residents or visitors) or topics which you would like to hear about. Similarly the field trips are organised by Andrew and Allestree, who would also be most grateful for any suggestions or volunteers to lead trips or undertake reconnaissance trips which could lead to group visits in the future. As we all know, sites can change fast in the UAE, and there is a constant loss of favourite camping sites and sites of natural history interest with the development of new roads, building sites or access restrictions.

Perhaps less widely appreciated is the ENHG's role as a scientific society and NGO. This too has been part of our remit since we were founded, and we continue to contribute actively in these roles. Of great importance is our scientific journal *Tribulus*, which publishes a wide range of papers in natural history and archaeology, and has an international distribution and readership. The ENHG has always been a mainly amateur body, but the discoveries, observations and records of our members have been instrumental in building up the scientific knowledge of the UAE environment. That role is even more important today with the accelerating development of the UAE and its rapidly changing environment.

All of us can contribute to this by recording observations on anything interesting you see while out and about. With GPS, digital cameras, flickr.com as well as the old fashioned notebook, it is easy to collect valuable data. It really doesn't matter whether what you observe is something common or rare, as all information helps to build up a picture of the UAE ecology, and may be of great importance. Putting pictures on our ENHG group at flickr.com (preferably with locality and data information) is an easy way to report observations (and for anyone of us with expertise to help you identify species), or pass records to myself (or other committee members), or pen a note for *Focus*. We will ensure that the information gets to the appropriate people or organisation such as EAD (Environment Agency Abu Dhabi), ADACH (Abu Dhabi Authority for Cultural Heritage), university research teams or elsewhere.

So here's to a successful 2007!

**Drew Gardner**

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### FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Corniche by full moon

Photographer: Maarten Verhage

### *Rhanterium epapposum* ('Arfaj') in the UAE

Today there are only a few places left where it is still possible to see this once common shrub growing wild in the UAE. Some herders still remember when the plant was common and sought after as livestock fodder throughout most of the UAE (personal communication). The reason for its popularity with the herds is the peppery taste of the leaves and stems. We can only assume that the combined forces of development and overgrazing have had their effect.

The plant can currently be seen on the Jebel Ali-Lahbab road, atop Jebel Hafit (near the hotel) and on Saih Al Salam (pictured below).



Saih Al Salam: *Rhanterium* & *Acacia ehrenbergiana* AEC Fisher

We visited this site recently and were encouraged by the obvious growth following the recent rains. There are some gazelle on these plains, but they don't seem to have been attracted to the *Rhanterium* yet. This area would qualify for the current move to declare national park areas, as it is home not only to the ungulates, but hosts the rarer acacia (*ehrenbergiana*) which although it occurs in the mountains and wadi areas, is confined to



about 4 colonies in Abu Dhabi and Dubai emirates. It has a lot of *Fagonia* and *Lycium shawii* (Desert Thorn) growing among the acacia, and there are a number of different lizards and rodents living under the trees. We recently saw fungus there as well probably brought on in association with the gazelle droppings. It is prime terrain for conservation, being an area of low sand dunes and sand sheets supporting a wide range of wildlife.



New growth on a *Rhanterium* bush

AEC Fisher

I recommend interested parties to return in April when the bushes should be in bloom, and are a bright yellow colour. In Kuwait this is the national plant, where they even have a large family named after the bush, the Al Arfaj. In northern Saudi Arabia and Kuwait it grows large and prolific in sandy areas overlaying a gravel plain. If you visit the arfaj which is near Lissaili, you will notice that while promoting the creation of small nebkhas (piles of wind-blown sand), the plant is using the gravel plain rather than the low sand dunes in which to grow. Also to be found in this area are the two common desert grasses *Panicum* and *Pennisetum*, which are favourite range plants. You will also see some *Haloxylon salicornicum*. Greener than the acacia is the Desert Thorn that is hosted by the acacia (see below). The rains promote green growth, but we have to wait until February until most of these plants flower, though there are some premature blooms. You will see some White Spotted Sand Lizards at home in the hard environment provided by the vegetation. And if you are there at the right time of day, you might even see a gazelle or two.

Jebel Hafit is also home to a colony of "arfaj", but here it's a rocky limestone habitat in the summit zone. There's no sand here unlike Saih Al Salam, and it has been said that the plant needs a limestone (calcareous) substrate to thrive. You could reasonably expect to find it on Qarn Nizwa and other local limestone outcrops. Its status is at least "at risk" in this part of Arabia. Arfaj can help to combat the increasing soil erosion, and in my view should be allowed to prosper here. Even in the desert areas disturbance and destruction of the environment occurs every time a vehicle of any kind drives over it. And that includes local youth training their houbaras. We hope that EAD or other competent authorities quickly mark out areas for conservation.



*Lycium shawii* among the *Acacia ehrenbergiana*

AEC Fisher

Also very common in the sand on this plain is another perennial: *Fagonia*. The rains have caused a lot of germination. If you look carefully at the leaf you can tell whether it is *ovalifolia*, *indica* or *brughieri*. The ones we have on this site are mostly *Fagonia ovalifolia*, associated with the coast, and are found even in the coastal waste ground in Abu Dhabi.



A young *Fagonia* plant

AEC Fisher

This area just east of the Abu Dhabi-Dubai route is well worth a detour if you are looking for desert landscapes still largely untouched by the developers. You need to turn off the main road at Saih Al Sidirah, and again for the Endurance Village. You will come out at Lissaili on the Dubai-Al Ain road.



Saih Al Salam: *Rhanterium* in the sand

AEC Fisher

Happy New Year!



Allestree E C Fisher

## The “Dew Forest” Revisited

A convoy of six vehicles departed from the Eid Prayer Ground on November 24<sup>th</sup> and made their way towards Shanayl on the road to Liwa.

This “Dew” forest, so-called because it was assumed the dew kept it alive, is unique in the UAE, although present in a number of sites in Oman and Saudi Arabia. It has colonized an area just south of Abu Dhabi, and the most easterly examples can be seen at Al Wathba. Calling it a forest is a stretch of the imagination, so perhaps we should call it a colony. Gary Brown (ex-ERWDA) said this was the eastern-most example of the species in Arabia. This plant is part of the UAE vegetation that originated in India/Pakistan/Iran and farther east. No conclusive work has yet been done on it. Let's hope it can survive the next few years.



The objective of our trip was to assess empirically what competition was tolerated by the *Haloxylon persicum*, which is the major component of the so-called Dew Forest, to note the vegetation that grew within it, and to find where the zone mutated into another on the road south.

Our first stop was at km 63, just before the ‘Cars Museum’ [sic]. At this point the land rises slightly above the surrounding sabkha in the form of low dunes made up of calcium-rich coastal sand.

After a rapid briefing the group dispersed in various directions looking for any form of large growth that might provide territorial competition for the saxaul/*Haloxylon* trees. The other vegetation present at this point recorded by members was as follows:

1. *Cyperus conglomeratus*
2. *Zygophyllum qatarense*
3. *Dipterygium glaucum*
4. *Agriophyllum minus* (remains of)
5. *Zygophyllum simplex* (remains of)
6. *Haloxylon salicornicum* (small bushes only)



The group would have probably recorded more species in the spring time when the annuals appear. On this occasion remnants only of the two recorded annuals were visible. All of the above plants are halophytic to some degree, and so can reasonably be expected to occur near the salt flat. No specimens of any large bush or tree were visible. Having noted that the trees were at least 15-20 metres apart, it was observed that a number of them were spawning new plants in their vicinity, either through seed dispersal or through underground rooting systems. It wasn't clear to the group which method of reproduction was occurring.

The second site chosen for investigation was about ten kilometres farther south along the main road, at a place where spring precipitation forms a lake in rainy years. Here the trees were apparently thriving and were bigger in girth and height than at the previous site. This may have been a result of their greater distance from the underlying sabkha. Even fewer plants provided the undergrowth, mostly just *Cyperus*.



The forest was seen to peter out at kilometre 88 and give way to large *Haloxylon salicornicum* bushes. The occasional saxaul was seen growing in an isolated position. Even at this point there was no other large competition for water and nutrients. It was noticeable that as soon as the trees lost their critical mass and thinned out, the ground cover increased perceptibly. A little farther south close to the tropic, we all observed the beginning of a new zone marked by the occasional “arta” [in Arabic] bush (*Calligonum* sp.). Some of these appeared completely lifeless, others were in full leaf on the dunes. We stopped for lunch on a plain covered with small barchan dunes where there was a small number of apparently dormant “arta”. By a strange coincidence, the

name of the adjoining settlement is named Bida Al Arti, as if to tell us this is where the "arta" zone begins. We stopped to observe a colony of these bushes, again with the dune-dwelling bushes in full leaf, the others in the lower sand dormant.

In sum, we would very tentatively suggest that the saxaul does not tolerate any other large plants nearby, perhaps achieved by allelopathy (the excretion of unfriendly toxins!). The colony is basically a monoculture which tolerates only insignificant undergrowth presenting negligible competition. Only in the fringe areas of the forest will anything grow of any size. This area of unique vegetation is likely to suffer developmental encroachment in the foreseeable future, so we hope that Sheikh Hamad and his nearby museum is not the only factor in its preservation.

**Allestree E C Fisher**

## Excursion & Talk

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

The annual hike for the New Year will be a circular ridge walk in the Jebel Sumeini area. This is the area just east of the village of Shwaib and about 65km north of Al-Ain.

There is a wadi walk for Friday and a hike along a beautiful ridge near Jebel Sumeini for Saturday.

The site is in Oman. A visa should not be necessary, but participants will need to bring their passports, and vehicles should have insurance cover for Oman.

Access to the camp requires a 4WD vehicle. Anyone wanting to sign up – or requiring a lift - can contact me (Roy Richards) at [newsletter@cirri2000.com](mailto:newsletter@cirri2000.com), and I'll be happy to put them on the list or in contact with the other participants.

Participants will leave at 8.30am on Friday, and be back in Abu Dhabi by 7.00pm on Saturday.

**Roy L. Richards**

### Next Talk: 7:30pm 16th January 2007: The title of "Wadi Wurayah Protected Area Project" Christophe Tourenq

In a joint project, the EWS-WWF and the Fujairah Municipality have been conducting a project to declare the Wadi Wurayah, Fujairah Emirates, as Protected Area.

Wadi Wurayah is of considerable ecological significance because of its permanent water resources with an exceptional quality of water, that supports a rich biodiversity of fauna and flora in an area of outstanding natural beauty which is already an established popular tourist attraction. When established, the Wadi Wurayah Protected Area will be the unique natural protected area in the mountains of UAE, and an example for other Emirates integrating tourism, local use and conservation of unique natural resources.

### ITEMS ON SALE

#### AT THE ENHG STALL

- The Emirates – A Natural History, 300 Dhs  
The first complete reference guide to the wildlife of the UAE. 580 colour photos.
- 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 & Sergeants).
- 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
- 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

16<sup>th</sup> January 2007,  
"Wadi Wurayah  
Protected Area Project"  
Christophe Tourenq

## Field Trip

Weekend 12-13  
January 2007

O'night camping  
Jebel Sumeini  
Ridge - Walk

Roy Richards

## Corporate Sponsors of the ENHG - 2006

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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## Yahoo Groups website

<http://uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/AUHENHG/>