

# focus



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Emirates Natural History Group

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

## EDITORIAL

While leafing through old photos on my computer, I came again on the photo shown here of my children Stephanie, Sandy, and their friend Alastair with a baby gazelle. Although it isn't a great photo technically, it is one of my favourites. The look of pure pleasure showing on all of their faces as the baby gazelle comes towards them on its wobbly legs tells its own story. There is something in genuine experience of wild nature that simply can't be matched by watching the fantastic images of nature on DVD or computer screens, or even seeing animals in zoos. E. O Wilson in his 1984 book 'Biophilia' observes "People can grow up with the outward appearance of normality in an environment largely stripped of plants and animals ... yet something vitally important would be missing, not merely the knowledge and pleasure that can be imagined and might have been, but a wide array of experiences that the human brain is particularly equipped to receive.... On earth no less than in space, lawn grass, potted plants, puppies and rubber snakes are not enough."



Yet the area where this baby gazelle picture was taken is now cleared and levelled as part of the Jebel Ali Airport City, and even as we watched the gazelle, there was a distant roar of the approaching bulldozers working through the night.

It has recently been announced that His Highness Shaikh Mohammad Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, has approved Dubai's environmental plan, and ordered Dubai Government to place environmental issues as top priority. One of these is that 'the government will turn unclassified land outside the

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### FRONT COVER PICTURE

*Photograph: Cricket in our garden, Al Bateen*

*Photographer: Laura Vogler*

structural plan of Dubai into sanctuaries to preserve natural and biologic diversity.' We can but hope that there will be careful and generous planning so that a sense of wilderness and genuine wild nature will survive the explosive infrastructure development. There may yet be space for baby gazelle and the experience of nature.

**Drew Gardner**

## A strange encounter: Cistanche?

22 February 2007

Two weeks ago Pam and I were on the Al Ain road, stopping at places of interest along the way. It was extremely windy and when we stopped to look around near the large sand dune near Al Saad we got covered in silica from the material being swept off the nearest dune and had to shout to make ourselves heard.



The *Calligonum* wasn't yet in flower, although the rain had greened everything growing, that is, everything except the *Cistanche* which was everywhere we looked, mostly within easy reach of its host plants, from which they steal sustenance. The plants at the time were either *Haloxylon* or *Zygophyllum*, both perennial shrubs. We came across a thriving colony of this member of the Broomrape family doing very well quite near the large

dune. There are no green parts on this plant that produces no chlorophyll, and lives off its hosts. If it doesn't find a host quickly it will just dry up. The plant, *Cistanche tubulosa*, is from the Orobanchaceae, and there are probably at least two more members

of this family in the UAE, mostly in the mountains. This is the common species, and is more widespread than Marijcke's book shows. I haven't seen it in the city of Abu Dhabi, but it does need a bit of peace and quiet and some saline sand.



We saw what looked like an old boot, but on closer inspection turned out to be what was thought was a mutated *Cistanche*. but it was such a strange shape, we weren't sure.



Has anyone seen a *Cistanche* looking like this before??? Dick Hornby has provided a technical adjective for this sort of phenomenon: fastigate. It may be a fastigate plant, undergoing some modification of the genetic make up of the plant. If you have any comments about this, or have seen something similar, please write in to [newsletter@chirri2000.com](mailto:newsletter@chirri2000.com)

**Allestree E C Fisher**

## Dhow Cruise and Diving Trip in Musandam

Two day/2 night Dhow Cruise and Diving Trip  
Musandam East Coast 28-30 December 2006.

Many readers will be familiar with this beautiful coastal area and the dive sites, but for those who aren't, I hope this will be of interest. We booked through Divers Down in Khor Fakkan, who rent the purpose-built dive dhow from Al Marsa. We were on the (bigger) Red Dhow, although we were told we would be on the Blue Dhow, which has slightly larger cabins. It seems that whichever boat you are allocated is entirely dependent upon how many passengers there are. The itinerary, which I believe is more or less the same on each trip, was as follows: Embark at Dibba Port (Oman) somewhere between 6 to 7.30 pm, having checked-in at the Al Marsa offices where you can select any dive equipment you wish to hire from them. Some of our party had their own, some hired wet suits, fins etc. They also provide the tanks and air for the trip.



You can drive your car to the dockside, unload all your gear (they bring the dive equipment from the office) and then take your car back to the car park before going aboard.

The Dhow sets sail around 8-8.30 pm, and once you have sorted out your cabin – which is a bit of a free for all – you can go on deck to watch all the usual interesting hustle and bustle which accompanies a night time sail, and to meet your fellow passengers. There are a couple of en suite cabins that are pre-bookable, otherwise its 2-berth cabins with a toilet and shower room between 2 cabins. Everything is very clean and well equipped. Towels, bedding and minimal toiletries provided.

Soon after we departed to cruise up the coast, dinner was served on the top deck. There was a good choice of food; in fact all the meals were excellent and plentiful with a complimentary beverage provided at dinner, and tea and coffee making facilities, and fresh fruit available at any time. There is no problem if you want to bring your own supplies on board and they will happily put things in the fridge for you.

We cruised until we reached Ras Musandam at around 2.30 am, by which time everyone was asleep, however the noise of the anchor chain and the change in sound of the engine seemed to wake most of us.



The first dive was at around 7.00 am when the divers were taken to a dive site out to sea past the headland, on the small high powered dive boat which we had towed behind us. When the divers returned at around 9.00 am, a very substantial breakfast was served.

There was a second dive before lunch, and a third dive in the afternoon in the bay, whilst non-divers snorkeled and swam. Non-divers have a choice between kayaking (there were 2 on the Dhow), snorkeling or lazing about on the sundeck enjoying the fabulous scenery of the Musandam peninsula. We saw a black tipped reef shark cruising in the area, and during the day most of us saw an eagle ray jump up from the surface, and a pair of kites circling above.

Following the third dive we cruised down the coast to another very sheltered bay – I believe it is called Ghubbat Ash Shabus – where we anchored for the night. Before dinner there was a night dive.

After dinner we relaxed and enjoyed the peaceful evening before heading off to bed early. No engine noise this time just the gentle lapping of the water. The first dive of the next day was again around 7.30 am at the quaintly named Mother of Mouse Rock (Umm al Fayyarin), followed by breakfast while we cruised to Limah Bay, the second dive was at Ras Morovi, then lunch, followed by the final dive of the day, at Limah Rock.

In the meantime the Dhow started the journey back to Dibba and the fast dive boat caught up with us on the way down the coast. We arrived back in Dibba at approximately 6.00 pm. There is plenty of help to unload the gear and we were on our way back to Abu Dhabi by 7.00 pm.



We were a party of nine, 4 of whom did most or all of the dives, and the remainder a fair amount of swimming, snorkeling and kayaking. There were 5 other passengers, including one couple from Dubai who told me they were 'regulars' on this trip. The divers enjoyed a huge diversity of fish, turtles, lobster, corals, etc, but sadly no whale sharks – which I understand are often sighted in this area. Whilst we snorkellers were rewarded with a huge variety of fish, cushion starfish, bi-valves on the rocky overhangs, and some truly lovely corals, including soft red, sea whips (gorgonian coral), bright green pyramids of coral, and colourful brain corals in hues of blue and mauve, Limah Bay had some fantastic corals near to our mooring site. (I deliberately have not listed the fish simply because it would read like the who's who of 'Reef Fish of Oman' or the 'Underwater Explorer' books. Suffice to say that they are all there.) And Limah itself deserves a mention, what a surprisingly large little town nestled way up there on that barren coast!



The scenery of course is wonderful, layers of jagged mountains falling down to the sea, constantly changing colour depending on the time of day, the little coves and beaches (many, sadly, swamped by litter), and the interesting rocky off-shore islands, some of them sprouting an amazing variety of vegetation. We saw Osprey, including a nest complete with a vociferous youngster peering at us from his high perch; brown necked ravens, and spent more than an hour in Limah

Bay watching an adult Osprey devouring a fish on a high ridge near to our mooring site. At one dive site where we had gone to snorkel we watched a heron patiently fishing, and a turtle which was covered in algae and apparently having difficulty staying submerged. On the way down the coast we saw a large school of dolphins (we thought probably 20+) that we followed for some time, as well as tuna, and seagulls and cormorants feeding on large shoals of fish.



We spent the best part of a day travelling up to Dibba, via the Sharjah-Kalba road and taking a detour to revisit and drive through Wadi Tayyibah between Masafi and Dibba. (4-wheel drive an absolute must for this wadi). We were thrilled to see such a diversity of plant life in what is usually a very arid part of the UAE. A fine covering of bright green grass is growing on the red sands bordering the Sharjah-Kalbah road, and there is water in the shallow wadis plus a variety of vegetation thriving on the Quarry road in the Siji-Shawka area. Wadi Tayyibah's small farms looked very healthy too. Our drive home was somewhat quicker – stopping only for shwarma in Masafi before the long drive back to Abu Dhabi.

The trip was very well organized and professionally run, and we would certainly recommend it, especially to those wishing to dive this area, but also for snorkelling, or as a treat for visitors who might be looking for something as an alternative to shopping in Dubai!

Please contact me if you want any more information, Divers Down also have a very good website at [www.diversdown.tk/](http://www.diversdown.tk/).

**Liza Green**

### **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.
- 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 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

**6<sup>th</sup> March, 7.30pm:**  
Mallee Catchment  
Management in  
Australia

*Dr. Richard Perry*

**20<sup>th</sup> March, 7.30pm:**

An Archaeological  
Perspective:  
Exploitation of  
Dugongs (Arabian  
Gulf)

*Dr. Mark Beech*

**3rd April, 7.30pm:**

Camel Milk

*Dr. Ulrich Wernery*

## Field Trips

**22, 23, 24 March:**

Inter-Emirates  
Weekend in Al Ain

**6/7 April:**

ENHG Family  
Weekend

## 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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