

# focus



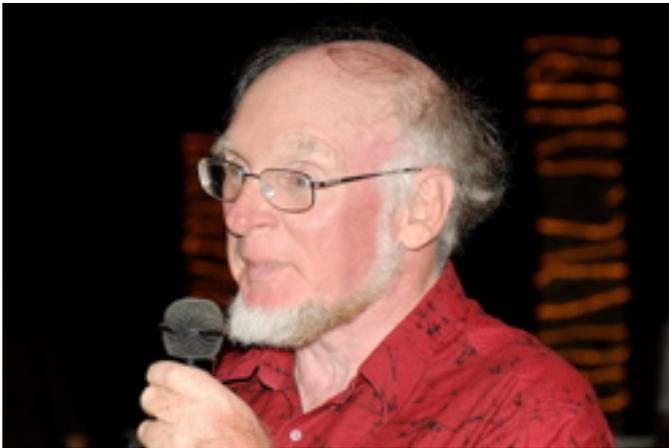
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Emirates Natural History Group

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

## EDITORIAL

The Inter Emirates Weekend, hosted by Al Ain, was by all accounts very successful. The wide choice of excursions on offer ensured that there were trips to suit all interests from oasis walks, forts and tombs, wadi and mountain hikes, star-gazing to dhab spotting. In Spring 2008 it will be Abu Dhabi's turn to host this event, and it is not too early to start putting together some ideas. For the last two Abu Dhabi inter-emirates weekends we have used the Mafrq Hotel. However we do feel it is time for a change. One suggestion is that we head out to the west. This is an area of considerable interest, which generally the Dubai and Al Ain members rarely venture into. The area boasts the Miocene fossil beds, fossil elephant trackways, miles of beaches, dugongs, the Marawah Marine Protected Area as well as vast areas of desert and sabkha. A centre could be the Mirfa Hotel. Any ideas about this area or other possible bases will be very gratefully received.



*Outgoing Bish Brown recipient Allestree Fisher has some words for Roy and Liz Photo: Bob Reimer*

At the Al Ain IEW, the annual awards were announced. The Sheikh Mubarak Award for 2006 went to Dr Brigitte Howarth of the Al Ain chapter. Brigitte (known to some as the bug lady!) has worked enthusiastically and tirelessly on the insects of the UAE, specializing in flies.



*Brigitte Howarth giving her acceptance speech, in which she thanked the Al Ain chapter for their inclusiveness and help. Photo: Bob Reimer*

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### FRONT COVER PICTURE

*Photograph: Wadi Bih Tower*

*Photographer: Drew Gardner*

She has organised regular mercury vapour light trapping sessions in the field and specimen curating sessions at home which the Al Ain membership have joined in with. Recently, assisted by ENHG members, has rescued the Abu Dhabi insect collection from destruction by humidity and museum beetles.

This collection dates back from the ENHG foundation, with specimens from Bish Brown. Many of the specimens have been identified by recognised experts, greatly adding to the scientific value of the collection. Brigitte has published articles and book chapters on UAE entomology, and we look forward to further work! Well done Brigitte!



*Roy and Liz receive the Bish Brown Award from Drew Gardner. Photo: Bob Reimer*

The Bish Brown award went to our very own Roy Richards and Liz Sowinska, with an honourable mention to Chirri. (If you don't know who Chirri is, you need to visit <http://www.chirri2000.com/home.htm>). This is the first joint award, and very well deserved. Roy and Liz are long standing members of the ENHG, and have always given generously of their experience and time. They organize an annual mountain hike, one of our most popular field trips, set up our Yahoo group site, and have edited Focus. Perhaps even more important is their

dedication to the ENHG, open friendship to all, good humour and good sense, all of which has helped shape our group. Congratulations Roy and Liz (and Chirri!).

A further presentation of the awards will be made by our patron Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan at his majlis.

*Drew Gardner*

## Hawk Moth Caterpillars

On 2<sup>nd</sup> February I photographed a hawk moth caterpillar near Masafi, on *Asphodelus tenuifolius*. Brigitte Howarth kindly confirmed for me that it was the Striped Hawk moth, *Hyles livornica*. This is the photograph:



On 23 February 2007 there were very large numbers of conspicuous, dark-colored hawk moth caterpillars on sand dunes near Taweelah. They were feeding on *Fagonia ovalifolia* and *Helianthemum lippii*.

They looked rather different from the Masafi individual, and I assumed we had a different species. The next photographs illustrate two of the larger individuals:



I e-mailed the photos to a few people that I thought could help, hoping to receive a positive identification, but they were only able to confirm that the caterpillars were of the genus *Hyles*. This is a large genus with several species ranging from West Africa to China. The only species of the genus known to occur in the UAE is the Striped Hawk moth, so I wondered if we had a new species for the country and started to research the matter on the Internet. One website in particular was very helpful: [tpittaway.tripod.com/sphinx](http://tpittaway.tripod.com/sphinx).

The caterpillars at Taweelah are fairly similar but certainly not identical to the illustrations of caterpillars of three of the subspecies of *Hyles euphorbiae*, the Spurge Hawk moth. The known food plants of this species are all spurges (*Euphorbia spp.*) but there were no spurges at Taweelah, so it seemed unlikely that this was our hawk moth.

The Taweelah caterpillars are also very similar to those of the Barbary Spurge Hawk moth *Hyles tythymali deserticola*, which is a very desert-adapted hawk moth that occurs across the northern Sahara, from Morocco to eastern Egypt. The adults are said to fly by day in the hottest time of the year. The habitat of this species is said to be desert steppe and stabilized sand dunes, which certainly fits with that at Taweelah. The pupae are said to be in diapause for several seasons and may be triggered to emerge by heavy rain.



*Hyles tythymali deserticola*

Another candidate is a subspecies of the Barbary Spurge Hawkmoth, *Hyles tythymali hymyarensis*, which is endemic to Yemen. Its larva (below) also has

similarities with those at Taweelah, but they are clearly not the same.



*Hyles tythymali hymyarensis*

The same website finally produced what I was looking for. It shows that the larvae of the Striped Hawk moth change greatly as they develop, as shown below:



There can be little doubt from this that the caterpillars at Taweelah were penultimate and final instar larvae of Striped Hawk moth. The earlier instars are much less brightly coloured than the later ones. The second photo above is clearly very similar to my photo taken at Masafi. This dramatic transformation is my excuse for believing that we might have found a species new to the Emirates.

One thing that this little investigation did reveal is that the reason for sudden mass appearances of *Hyles* hawkmoth caterpillars is that the pupae may remain in diapause for several years until stimulated to complete their metamorphosis by heavy rain. There has certainly been plenty of that over the last few months. Adults could have emerged at the same time from pupae which had been in diapause for different durations, up to several years, thus helping to synchronize the population.

This is clearly an adaptation with considerable selective advantage. Adults all emerge at about the same time after rain, thus facilitating mating. The eggs that are laid following those matings then become caterpillars that are able to take advantage of the flush of plant growth that follows the heavy rain. The present generation of caterpillars at Taweelah, are likely to produce many pupae which will remain in the sand until the bulldozers move in to create the new Khalifa Port Industrial City. Perhaps we should press for a mass translocation of pupae! Wouldn't it be a tragedy to lose several years worth of these beautiful creatures:



*Dick Hornby*  
*February 2007*

## The Spring Annuals Excursion

Five vehicles headed out of the Eid Prayer Ground on Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> March. The convoy made its first stop at kilometer 61 along the Al Ain highway, and took a look at the sandy environment near to the main road. The masses of *Eremobium* this year were still very much in evidence, although the first flush had already produced seed pods.

More impressive by virtue of their ability to disperse were the *Neurada*, dozens of which literally walked away with the group! The *Eremobium* has surprised us all, knowing that it only appears *en masse* after heavy rains, and formed fields of white bloom to the north-east of Al Ain. Spring 2007 will be a season to remember, unless the changing climate makes the continued rain a regular feature.



*Eremobium aegyptiacum*

The *Launaea* was too small in the main to identify with any certainty. It blooms in the second phase of the spring season, but in urban areas it can appear at any time. *Gisekia* is more plentiful this year, and was easily recognizable by its red and green basal leaves. Another annual that seems to be everywhere is *Zygophyllum simplex* characterised by its bright yellow flowers. On waste ground everywhere there are patches of yellow. In the autumn we see just dried out tufts of filigree work, which is all that remains of the current season's *Zygophyllum*.



*Zygophyllum simplex*

Up and down the wadi were large healthy shrubs of something the leaves of which resemble cabbage. This

is *Physorrinchus chamaerapistrum*, one of the most difficult names to remember but memorable for its gay light purple cruciform blooms, sometimes known to English speakers as Donkey Salad, for obvious reasons

We left K61 and went towards the Bare Mountain, into Wadi Tarabat where the annuals as well as the perennials were doing well, as all small holdings and livestock have disappeared from this area. This is one of the very few wadis worthy of the name in Abu Dhabi emirate, benefiting from the run-off from the mountain and the quieter environment. A plant in evidence here is *Rumex* easy to find throughout the length of the wadi. This is a type of sorrel, and a most colourful addition to wadi flora for about a month before it fades, droops and disappears. There are at least three species of *Rumex* in the UAE, but this one : *vesicarius*, is by far the most common. The most common grass in the wadi was a species of *Cenchrus* which had already produced seed by the time we got there. In the wadi there was a slight breeze making the grass a difficult subject for our cameras, but dancing very nicely in spite. We eventually settled down to lunch under a friendly *Acacia tortilis* providing some shade. These native trees produce white/off-white bloom later in the season April/May and are then the subject of attention of myriads of insects. In the shade provided, many little plantains were trying to make a go of it. We helped them with our supplies of water, and libated the tree for good measure. We left the wadi, went into Al Ain via the Qattarah Long Tomb to The Jimi Oasis.



*Rumex vesicarius*



*Arnebia hispidissima*

Along the way we came across some Desert Primulas: *Arnebia hispidissima*, a very attractive boragee, and characteristically very hairy.

At the same site next to the border fence in Al Ain, we found some rocket that tasted very nice, according to one member, who likes to sample everything, providing it's not poisonous! The more usual species, *Erucaria hispanica*, is abundant this year in all the sub-montane and montane habitats. This plant is a favourite not only of homo/femina sapiens but also of camels who make short shrift of this rocket, when they can find it.



*Eruca sativa*

The Jimi Oasis proved to be a veritable cornucopia of annuals, including the attractive Blue Pimpernel, *Anagallis arvensis*, and the diminutive Pink, *Dianthus cyri*. On the way back home we found numbers of *Centaurea* and *Silene villosa*, the Desert Campion. Unusually, there were a large number of these champions on the Sweihan road.



*Silene villosa*

These flowers are fully open only in the morning, and when the wind is blowing it is very difficult to get decent pictures, as the petals tend to fold up.

All in all, a very productive trip, which will give new members an insight into what to look for next year.

Should you come across an unusual plant that you cannot recognize, please let us know.

**Allestree E.C.Fisher**

**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.

## Committee Members

Dr Drew Gardner  
(Chairman)  
Mobile: 050-6675830  
[drew.gardner@zu.ac.ae](mailto:drew.gardner@zu.ac.ae)

Martin & Linda Betz  
(Treasurers)  
[bindaleviskabetz@yahoo.com](mailto:bindaleviskabetz@yahoo.com)

Jenny Mueller (Secretary)  
Mobile: 050-3110632  
[jennymuae@hotmail.com](mailto:jennymuae@hotmail.com)

Ms Hazel Spencer  
(Lecture Coordinator)  
Ph: 050-8150539  
[Hspencer@adma.ae](mailto:Hspencer@adma.ae)

Mary Boyd  
(Membership Secretary)  
Mobile: 02-6314004  
[mary.boyd@zu.ac.ae](mailto:mary.boyd@zu.ac.ae)

Dr. Andrew Bean  
(Excursion Secretary)  
Home: 02-6219984  
[rexabean@emirates.net.ae](mailto:rexabean@emirates.net.ae)

Peter Hellyer  
(Editor of Tribulus)  
Mobile: 050-6424357  
[peter@extinfo.gov.ae](mailto:peter@extinfo.gov.ae)

Atie Vogler  
(Focus Editor)  
Ph:02-6676676  
[atievogler02@hotmail.com](mailto:atievogler02@hotmail.com)

Ms Donatella Astratti  
(Corporate Sponsorship Secretary)  
[dastratti@slb.com](mailto:dastratti@slb.com)

Allestree Fisher  
Ph: 02-6775717  
[allestree.fisher@hct.ac.ae](mailto:allestree.fisher@hct.ac.ae)

Dick Hornby (Member)  
Ph: 02-6274049  
[dnahornby@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:dnahornby@yahoo.co.uk)

Dr Richard Perry (Member)  
Ph:  
[rperry@adco.ae](mailto:rperry@adco.ae)

## Lectures

**3<sup>rd</sup> April, 7.30pm:**  
Camel Milk: White gold in the desert

*Dr. Ulrich Wernery*

**17<sup>th</sup> April, 7.30pm:**  
The effects of the wet winter on vegetation in the UAE

*Dick Hornby*

## Field Trips

**6/7 April:**

ENHG Family Weekend,  
Jebel Ali beach

*Dr. Andrew Bean*

**20/21 April:**

Overnight East Coast Trip, Wadi Wurayah

*Dr. Andrew Bean*

**27<sup>th</sup> April:**

Day trip to Buraimi Tombs and Hanging Gardens

*Allestree Fisher*

**18<sup>th</sup> May:**

Day trip, Abu Dhabi

*Allestree Fisher*

## Corporate Sponsors of the ENHG - 2006

The following companies are supporting the ENHG activities in the region. We hope you as ENHG members will in turn support these companies whenever you can.

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