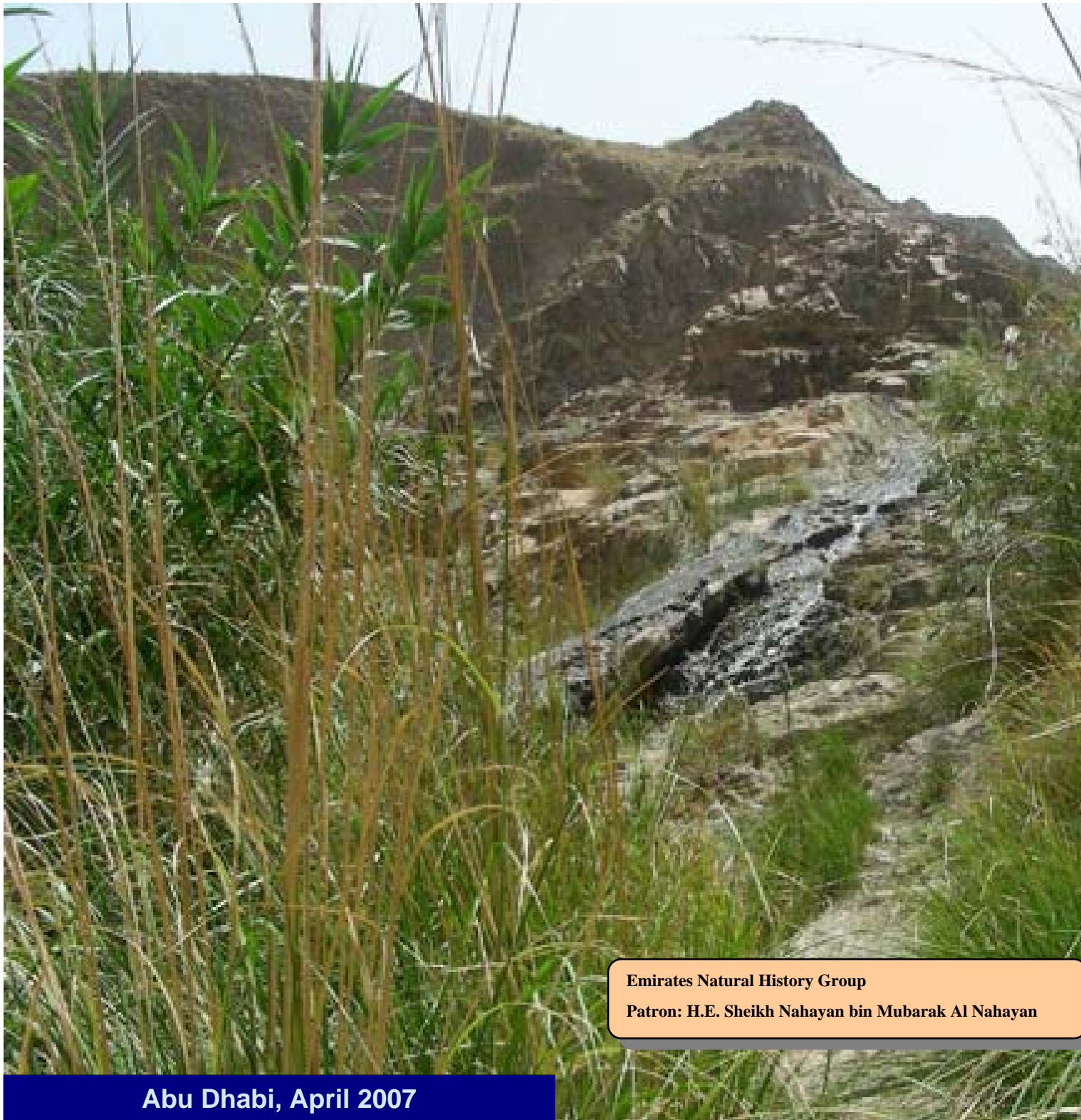


focus



Emirates Natural History Group

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

Abu Dhabi, April 2007

Vol 31 (4)

EDITORIAL

Short and sweet this month, so the space is dedicated to reports of a couple of most interesting field trips. The heat has arrived now and for many, the field season is drawing to a close. However, for many of the animals in the UAE, this is the season for activity! Due to the heat, most animals are active either at dawn and dusk, or are nocturnal. For many insects and reptiles, this is just about the best time. A two hour evening visit to a site in Dubailand last Saturday (12 May) turned up a saw scaled viper hunting Cheesman's gerbils, Arabian sand geckos, dune sand geckos and even a wonder gecko. ... not to mention a male gazelle! As long as you can avoid the heat of the day, it is still well worth getting out through the summer months!

Drew Gardner

Jebel Ali Beach Family Weekend at the EMEG

6-7 April 2007

Five cars departed the Eid Prayer Ground in Abu Dhabi shortly after 12 noon—a leisurely start to a memorable weekend at the Emirates Marine Environmental Group beach near Jebel Ali. One member brought visiting relatives along (in a hummer!) to have a quick look at our destination and then drove them off on a cross-Emirates tour. His vehicle was shortly thereafter replaced by another containing a slightly late-arriving contingent of our party. Enjoying this family weekend were a group of just nine individuals, comprising only one actual nuclear family—that of our trip leader Andrew Bean—along with a small collection of beach-loving adults.

Andrew directed us to the Saih Ash Sheib turning off of the Abu Dhabi-Dubai Road, just past the Dubai border, heading towards the seashore to a rendezvous point by a quite conspicuous square-topped “artificial mountain”. We were later informed that the latter was originally built as a platform for military radar, although the radar was instead installed on an offshore island in the end, leaving this pile of rocks as a rather startling but useful landmark. Andrew's contact Major Ali met us there and guided us via an unmarked track from a bend in the road to the EMEG beachfront property.

Above the beach as we arrived the arcs of several brightly coloured kite-surf sails floated on the breeze up and down the surf line; we were told those using these rigs were western expat beach goers enjoying their sport for the day with the permission of our host. We parked by a narrow lagoon in front of a collection of air-conditioned pre-fab buildings, faced in barasti matting—all currently bearing the dark blue commercial logo of the new Dubai Waterfront development project, though these signs are due to be replaced by EMEG banners soon. The Emirates Marine Environmental Group property consists of a 1-kilometre stretch of beach and lagoons ceded by Sheikh Mohammed Al Maktoum to his long time friend Major Ali from land belonging to the

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FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Wadi Wurayah

Photographer: P.K. Ashraf

Dubai Waterfront. Currently taking shape on the left side of the Jebel Ali Palm, the long Dubai Waterfront jetty can be seen stretching out to sea a couple of km to the right of the EMEG property.

On arrival, our group was invited into the principal building, where we sat in a room decorated by maritime charts, pictures, artifacts and memorabilia. There we got acquainted with Major Ali, a former military diver who fell in love with the sea and ended up founding the EMEG. He began by narrating a video that gave us an introduction to the programmes held at that facility. He briefed us on its main purpose: as an environmental and heritage education centre for UAE schoolchildren, who stay at the centre in groups (of both boys and girls) for several days at a time—mostly during the summer, but perhaps at other times of the year as well. They sleep dormitory-style in the beach huts and subsist on a diet of rice and barbecued fish. He said some of the kids come with a dislike for fish, but usually overcome that quickly enough, when they realize that's all that's available. He stressed more that his principal aim is to plant in these absorbent young minds information about the marine environment and seafaring traditions that they will never forget, informing their attitudes towards their country's environment as adults.

While at the EMEG, the local children learn how to row and sail small boats, which we saw floating in and pulled up alongside the lagoon. They sail a kid-sized traditional dhow out to some pearling beds, where Major Ali has seeded pearl oysters on logs on the seabed. There he teaches them how to dive for pearls like their ancestors, wearing a traditional nose plug and holding a stone to give them depth, attached to a rope their topside fellows use to pull them up for air. They also learn how to fish with hand-held nets, chanting an age-old fishing song as they work together as a team. They release the fish after studying and recording them. In addition they row a small raft across a narrow lagoon to plant mangrove seedlings on the seaward side. Finally, they participate in beach cleanup, overcoming the resistance to such 'demeaning' work that arises at times.

Major Ali tells the visiting kids stories about the tough life

of the fishing folk of their grandparents' and great grandparents' generations, and keeps alive some of the wisdom of the old-timers by passing it on to the youngsters. He told us about a star named Suhail (for us, Canopus—the second brightest star in the sky, due south, not far from the Southern Cross), the sighting of which showed coastal Emiratis the summer season was beginning—the time when the pearl fishing could commence. He also showed us a wall chart detailing annual cycles of weather changes in the Gulf, associated with cycles of visible constellations, which he implied has been used for ages in this area as a system of weather prediction. In fact, Major Ali told us about how he once ignored this system to his peril, and nearly perished in a vicious storm that had been predicted by the chart. That made a firm believer of him, and he is only too happy to pass this knowledge on to all who are open to it.

Major Ali also showed us a short video highlighting the Jebel Ali Airport Fauna Relocation project, which he and the EMEG are integrally involved in. With any volunteers—local ladies enjoy this helpful activity-- who come his way, Major Ali and his crew pay regular visits to the site of the new international airport in Jebel Ali, and catch as many dhubs (spiny-tailed lizards), as possible, using traditional methods (nets) to catch them, unharmed. He then brings them in bags to the EMEG for temporary storage, where they can "hang out" for a maximum of 2 days before he transfers them to one of Sheikh Mohammed's private reserves. They also catch and relocate snakes, and other animals, but sadly must leave the site's estimated one million gerbils to the bulldozers. (One supposes a Watership Down-type awakening on the part of these doomed rodents is a bit too much to hope for.)

Following that video, Major Ali returned to the subject of marine life and pointed out a wall chart with pictures of the region's dominant mammal, reptile, and fish species. He said the EMEG is doing all it can to study and preserve the diversity of species that call that stretch of beach home. Currently, he said there are a fairly small number of species of fish living in the reefs and in the EMEG lagoon. He spoke about the development of a system of restrictions on fishing on the reefs and directly off the beach (obviously not fully in place yet) that is designed to prevent species depletion in these waters.

Major Ali has also initiated an innovative project in which the eggs of the few turtles that venture out on this well-travelled stretch of beach are dug up soon after being laid and reburied at a suitable depth up on a safer part of the beach, out of range of marauding beach racing fools.

Throughout this talk and indeed through the rest of our visit Major Ali came across as an earnest man with a passion for environmental conservation and seafaring traditions and a drive to pass on his core values--especially to the younger generation of his fellow nationals.

After our orientation, we crossed the canal-like lagoon fronting the facility via a narrow causeway at the right end of the property and drove out to a beach gazebo. We then dove into the sea and found the water relatively calm, and still refreshingly cool, as is normal at this time

of year in the Gulf, but with hints of warmer currents circulating throughout. All of us bumped into rather large pale-coloured jellyfish. Though most of us didn't get stung, one of the girls did, requiring an application of vinegar to minimize the pain of the alkaline sting. And Andrew reported a number of welts on his arms, which only appeared the next day, apparently caused by brushing against the jellyfish.



Major Ali and Andrew; mangrove-sapling-fringed lagoon, and beach, in background Photo: P.K. Ashraf

Snorkelers found the waters too full of sediment to see much, but we were told that some still quite viable coral reefs exist 100 metres or so offshore. Perhaps on another visit we can get a boat ride out to the reef to try the snorkeling there, in the hope that it is not too badly interfered with by the Dubai Waterfront development. Beachcombers who ventured down to the right towards that development discovered large chunks of washed-up coral, bearing witness to the destruction that project is causing, as the waters are muddied by the dredging, and the corals are dying and washing up. We hope that Major Ali's goal of making his part of the reefs into a protected area can be accomplished realistically, with all the environmental degradation of the massive development project going on next door.



Beach gazebo campsite; EMEG buildings in the background Photo: P.K. Ashraf

While some of our number went beachcombing, others dried off in the sun or sat in the shade with books and sundowners, engaging in amiable conversation to the sound of the surf. As night fell, we prepared dinner by our gazebo campsite. Though some of us used a standard disposable barbecue, Ashraf showed us the much more environmentally friendly South Indian tradition of barbecuing with cast-off coconut shells, available for free from any market where coconut is grated. He set them alight on a bed of newspapers, and when they had burned down, he had a bed of quite long-lasting barbecue coals. In addition, he claimed the smoke gave the food a delicious seasoning (which, by the way a couple of us confirmed on the next beach camping trip two weeks later, when we joined him in a coconut-shell-ember barbecue—yum!)

After dinner, the kids lit a fire, and we had the usual rambling fireside chats and also viewed some of the more prominent stars and planets through the ENHG telescope. Due to a slight miscommunication, which he apologized for the next day, Major Ali didn't meet up with us for stargazing that night. Some of us would like to return, to have him to tell us the Arabic names for the stars and especially to pinpoint Suhail/Canopus—since it was apparently so culturally significant to the coastal Emiratis. As the fireside chats wound down, some chose to bunk down in the air conditioned beach huts, and others to sleep in our beachside SUVs.

Unfortunately, Major Ali had to confront one particularly obnoxious group of expat revelers who were blasting recorded music till 4 am, to the discomfort of everyone else attempting to sleep on the beach. Though most campers seem considerate enough, currently, anyone who wants to camp or spend the day there can apparently make his or her way to that beach, at least through a gap in the fence on one side of the EMEG property. We get the sense that as the centre develops, access is becoming more restricted and that at some point all campers will be by invitation only, which should ensure that they will respect their fellow campers, as well as the fragile aspects of the beach environment. On both days there was far more vehicular beach traffic than one would have liked—especially on a conservation beach. As the Major pointed out, all it takes is for one kid on one motorbike to ride up and back over a turtle nest to destroy it.

The next morning shortly after sunrise, following Major Ali's suggestion, some of us walked off down the beach to look for dolphins. We headed to the left towards a jetty by a three-story house formerly belonging to Sheikh Maktoum, the area where the Major said the dolphins live and feed regularly—apparently a comfortable enough distance from the Dubai Waterfront construction mess. Sadly, none of us spotted the dolphins this time. Nevertheless, we had a fun beach-combing ramble, and a few small bits and pieces of shell and coral treasure turned up along the way. We passed a number of mostly congenial European and Asian expat campers, some of whom had long fishing poles stuck in the sand, with lines trailing off to sea—apparently no restriction on beach fishing is in force along this stretch, anyway.



Major Ali showing us one of the rescued dhubs

Photo: P.K. Ashraf

We lingered over breakfast while Major Ali was on an emergency trip to the JA airport site to make sure the bulldozers didn't take out a population of unrescued dhubs that morning. We had a look at some of the previously rescued docile little guys suspended in their white canvas bags, awaiting relocation. And the girls had fun feeding the domestic bunny rabbits which hop about near the main building (it appears the bunnies, though having nothing to do with the natural environment there, help keep the visiting schoolchildren entertained).

Then, on his return, Major Ali led us away to the left side of the EMEG headquarters, where the saltwater canal opens out into a wider lagoon—the catch-and-release area. Two EMEG employees waded out in a broad curve, holding one end of a fishing net, with the top floating on the water and the bottom scraping the lagoon bottom, and finally returning to the shore as the rest of us pulled back on our end, pulling in time to a chant-like fishing song, which we belted out along with the Major. As we pulled, we trapped a few small fish in the “tail” of the net—a long sleeve sewn into the middle of the net, which fish are channeled into. We caught one sole (a flat fish with both eyes on the top of its head) a couple of tiny anchovies and one tiny shrimp. We were joined by an Iraqi-born marine biologist, educated in the UK, a specialist on flat fish of the North Sea, who is Major Ali's main partner in conservation and education. He has been systematically studying and cataloguing the fish species that turn up at the EMEG in these catches.



Readying the net, as Andrew stretches out the tail

Photo: P.K. Ashraf



Anchoring the near side as the far side is hauled in

Photo: P.K. Ashraf



Examining the catch

Photo: P. K. Ashraf

Just before our departure, we walked with Major Ali and the marine biologist down to the mudflat beyond the access road, on the extreme right side of the property, to view the small plantation of 30-40 mangrove trees, still only waist-high bushes, which Major Ali and associates

planted four years ago. The lines of aerial roots radiating out from these small bushy trees show they're well established now. However, there were fresh 4x4 tracks right through the clump of precious mangroves, where some free-wheeling morons had driven through quite recently—which disturbed all of us. Then, as we stood there, a western expat drove right up to the verge of the mudflat, contemplating whether or not to follow suit. The Major shouted sternly to him that that way was off limits, and directed him to the main beach access road. He then assured us that, in fact, a fence around that mangrove plantation area was set to start to go up the very next day.

Those ENHG members who missed this outing due to other commitments should take note that there is a real possibility of doing this again sometime. Major Ali told us as we departed that he welcomes return visits, and said he wants to work hand-in-hand with the ENHG in the future. He spoke glowingly of Brien Holmes, Drew Gardner and Simon Aspinall, all of whom have given assistance with the fauna relocation project—a project that is dear to his heart.



Presenting Major Ali with a token of our appreciation

Photo: P.K. Ashraf

Anyone interested in paying a visit to the EMEG beach at some future date can contact Andrew to make arrangements with Major Ali. Some ENHG members might like to try their hand at dolphin spotting, to do stargazing with Major Ali, or to learn more about the practical uses of the intriguing weather-prediction chart. Some might want to take a side-trip to the Jebel Ali airport site and try out traditional dhub-catching methods, in assisting Major Ali (and Brien Holmes, who's there spearheading the effort almost every weekend). And still others might want to try out pearl diving, for which we think we recall the Major issuing an open invitation. In any event, a visit to the EMEG would be a chance to spend a day or two at one of Dubai's fast-disappearing beaches, in the company of a truly remarkable local conservationist.

Keith Taylor

The East Coast: Wadi Wurayah, Dibba, Sandy Beach / Snoopy Island and Fujairah

20-21 April 2007

Totalling five individuals in three cars—comprising the same crew as the trip two weeks back, minus half the Bean family and two others—this probably qualifies as the second smallest group ever on an official ENHG camping trip. (Likewise, this trip report aspires to be one of the shortest on record in Focus, as well.) After an 8:15 am start from Abu Dhabi, travelling via the Hatta-Kalba road tunnel, we arrived at Wadi Wurayah at midday, and ascending past the graffiti-and-rubbish-befouled “public baths” at the falls, we had lunch in a meager patch of shade along the western-oriented wadi walls. Our intrepid junior trail blazer led us through the maze of reeds and boulder riffles in the pristine, green upper reaches of this future nature preserve, and a couple of soaks in wadi pools provided cooling refreshment despite the pesky nibbles of water beetles. Back at our vehicles, plans to camp further up the wadi melted in the 43C heat, so we headed to the cooler, mildly breezy environs of Dibba beach, Oman. Here conditions were just right for a late-season camp, with the possible exception of the noisy late-night beach drivers and the loud music from the new Golden Tulip Hotel, Dibba, which kept the lighter sleepers awake (c’est la vie—who said life is a beach, anyway?—or in this case, maybe it is!).



Lunch in the only shade we could find

Photo: P.K. Ashraf

Snorkelling the next day there and down the coast at Sandy Beach/Snoopy Island was marvellous. It offered an assortment of parrot fish with bright orange fins and other variegated reef fish darting amongst graceful fan corals distinctly unappetizing-looking sea slugs at the former, and an even more colourful assortment of about the tamest reef fish one can swim amongst—topped off by three non-threatening but impressively large reef sharks—at the latter. Rounding off our wadi/beach nature tour with a bit of culture, four of us paid a return visit to the newly restored Bidiya mosque and the “Butugalee” (Portuguese) towers behind it, taking in the architecture and ogling the neighbouring long tomb

through the battlements.



Wadi Wurayah Walk

Photo: P.K. Ashraf

We finished up with our first visit to the Fujairah Fort museum, which we highly recommend to all with an interest in the archaeology of this emirate rich in history, assuming they can find it open, as we managed to do this time. We reached home after dark, tired but well satisfied with what we assumed was probably the last ENHG camping trip of the 2006-2007 season, as summertime is fast a-comin’ in.



The Author

Photo: P.K. Ashraf

Keith Taylor

Spring Flowers

Here are some really beautiful flower pictures, which Karan Ragwa likes to share with us. He took them after the rains in February in Sweihan and in Wadi Tarabat, near Al Ain.

Editor



ITEMS ON SALE AT THE ENHG STALL

- The Emirates – A Natural History, 300 Dhs
The first complete referencing guide to the wild life 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.
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- Plant Checklist, 25Dhs.
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- Children's books: Yaw the Wildcat; Hayat the Leopard
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Lectures

1st of May:

Geomorphology of the UAE

Dr. Asmar Al Farraj Al Ketbi

15th May:

Al Ain Zoo

Mark Craig

5th June:

"Family"

Nick Cochrane - Dyet

19th June:

Orchids

Dr. Ana Hauser

Field Trips

18th May:

Half day botanical walk around Abu Dhabi

Allestree Fisher

18/19 May:

Overnight camping trip to the top of Wadi Bih, Julfar and Ras Al Khaimah Museum

Dr. Andrew Bean

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