

# focus



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Emirates Natural History Group

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

## EDITORIAL

Well finally! We have had our AGM on 19 June... I do again apologise to all our members that we have not been able to hold an AGM in 2005 and 2006. The reason for this relates to the succession of treasures that we have had over the last two years and difficulties in arranging transfer of the accounts. However all seems sorted now, and I would like to thank all the treasurers involved, Arun Kumar, Mary Boyd, Mona Chammah Itani, Arun (again!) and now Martin and Linda Betz. The accounts are healthy, and we are certainly in a position to consider making awards for worthy projects. Please do discuss ideas with myself or others on the committee, and consider putting in an application. Such awards may cover any aspect of the ENHG sphere of interest, including conservation, natural history or archaeological research, conservation education etc.

Our membership stands at just over 70 paid up subscriptions. This is down in recent years and I would be most grateful if everyone can make a real effort to recruit new members for the next session. Undoubtedly there are people out there who would be interested in joining us but have simply never heard of us, or who have not found out how to get in touch. We will circulate, by email, a small flyer that you can print out and fold... or email around which may help spread the word.

We have had an excellent lecture programme this year and I would particularly like to thank all those involved organizing or suggesting speakers, the speakers themselves and particularly Hazel Spencer for getting it all together. Similarly the field trips have been well attended and appreciated, and a big thanks to Allestree Fisher and Andrew Bean. We are keen to broaden the range of field trips next year and would request that if anyone out there has a good idea for a trip and would like to lead or just help, please get in contact with Andrew. It would be nice perhaps to arrange a 'foreign' weekend... perhaps to our sister group in Qatar?

A new issue of *Tribulus* has just come out (Vol 16.2). We are grateful to Peter Hellyer for all the work he does on editing *Tribulus*, which really is a unique journal in the region. The quality of the research and articles remains as high as ever. *Focus* too remains an excellent newsletter, and has been well supported by the members in terms of writing articles. Thanks to Jenny Mueller, Roy Richards and now Atie Vogler for all the hard work that goes into its production ... including reminding the Chairman for his editorial!

All in all, the Abu Dhabi ENHG remains a vibrant and successful group and lets look forward to a great new season....

*Drew Gardner*

## The Abu Dhabi Island List of Native Plants

At least two amateur naturalists have been interested in Abu Dhabi's island flora and have drawn up lists of what occurs naturally here. In the late seventies and eighties, Rob Western wrote articles for the ENHG some of which

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### FRONT COVER PICTURE

*Photograph: Wadi Bih*

*Photographer: Derek Campbell*

may still be consulted on the Al Ain website. They mention the changes occurring here with the effects on flora, of the development that is taking place and of disappearing species. More recently, in 2002 Keith Gibbins created another list that contained about 70 natives and gave clues as to where they might be found. He introduced me to a number of interesting sites within the city but left the country before he could complete the list. I have inherited that list, have added to it and arranged it into families. It is still incomplete and needs more ENHG members to go out and collect more records. Dick Hornby is already doing this.

On 18th May a group of intrepids braved the heat and assembled on the Ras Al Akhdhar Red Dune to see what the rains this year had created. Apart from the ubiquitous and omnipresent *Cyperus conglomeratus*:



*Cyperus conglomeratus*

The dune had more heliotrope than we had ever seen

before and more *Dipterygium*, which happened to be in flower. This plant is a member of the caper family:



*Dipterygium glaucum*



*Heliotropium digynum*

The grass on the summit was flourishing. This is the only island site I know for *Centropodia fragilis*. Another grass (Poaceae family) that you find all over the city is the small long spikes of *Sporobolus spicatus*, which we found on the edge of the beach. The seaside of the sand revealed a number of saltbushes including some flourishing *Salsola* bushes. In spite of all the toing and froing on the beach at this point these bushes seem to thrive and spread in this area. The local *Fagonia* can be seen here too, and also in bloom with its attractive purple displays:



*Fagonia ovalifolia*

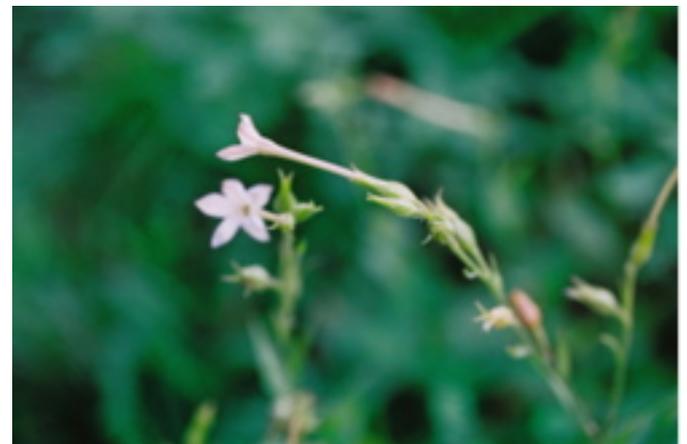


*Salsola imbricata*

After noting the *Salvadora* hedging and the small sedge, possibly *Cyperus arenarius*, we moved over the road to look at an imported acacia.

This plant has been used as a civic amenity in several places. It has yellow blooms, grows like a *Tortilis* but clearly isn't. We think it's a *Farnesiana*. Any comments?

The group then moved to the Spinney's car park to see some other residents that are doing well in an urban environment. First we found lots of the local tobacco plant (*Nicotiana plumbagifolia*) found only in Abu Dhabi. This attractive recognizably-tobacco plant has been spotted spreading into many urbanized parts that have irrigated borders, sometimes between two carriageways.



*Nicotiana plumbagifolia*

We saw masses of what Rob Western calls the dominant flower in May and June in an undeveloped corner. It's a member of the pea family and very spiky.



*Alhagi graecorum*

This pea-flower (*Alhagi graecorum*) is up and flowering strongly at this time of year. Please have a close look. It is sometimes called the "Manna Flower" because it drops a sugary excrement. The large spreading *Ipomaea* that was growing nearby was a picture of bloom, largely because it was undisturbed. This is sometimes called "Morning Glory" as it tends to close up later in the day if exposed to strong sunlight. We noted the *Sapote* trees with their ripening fruit (chicos) planted along the avenue leading to the Intercontinental Hotel.



*Ipomaea biloba*

Without detailing all the smaller plants we saw, we listed about twenty species on this walk, which is about a quarter of all native plants so far registered on the island. We intend to take another group stroll in the autumn when the saltbushes are in flower.

The group then split to go with Andrew to Wadi Bih just before eleven and some of us went shopping in Spinneys!!

PS If anyone needs to know the families of these plants, please consult either Marijcke Jongbloed or Google.

## Camping Trip to Wadi Bih and Ras Al Khaimah

A dozen people in five vehicles set off from the Eid Prayer Ground at 1 pm on 18 May, on the Abu Dhabi group's last camping trip of the season. Three of us were following on from Allestree's plant-spotting walk that morning, making a full weekend of it, heading from the intriguing flora of Abu Dhabi's Ras al Akhdar to the scenery and historical artefacts of Ras al Khaimah.

Following trip leader Andrew, we drove to RAK and thence up the Wadi Bih road, and through the Oman checkpoint to the summit, where we conferred with a local Emirati to confirm we were on the right track. Then we proceeded just over the other side to a cluster of old terraced agricultural fields. These flat, smooth, stonewalled surfaces made perfect camping areas, and there were enough of them for a group of our size to spread out and take our pick. With tents set up, the two youngest members of the group cooled down with a super-soaker water-gun fight. Then, as we had been led to believe would happen, Wadi Bih enjoyed a cool wind blowing that night, which made after-dinner conversation in shirtsleeves quite refreshing and sleeping very pleasant.



*A scenic viewpoint up above our campsite*

*Photo: Dr. Andrew Bean*

Our sleep was not totally undisturbed, however. A trio of over-familiar donkeys who had nosed around while we were setting up camp came back at night foraging. One of them, who made a loud racket by bumping against a water container in search of a drink, was caught in the act nicking a plastic hand water pump that had been left on top, but dropped it when chased away just in time. These wadi donkeys of the UAE, probably feral for many generations now, are haunting reminder of days gone by. Wary but bold, they seem to have strong memories of human contact, and like the still domesticated goats, come calling much more brazenly than true wildlife—like foxes and wildcats, for instance, which are much stealthier, so seldom seen.

*All the pictures are by the author*

**Allestree Fisher**



*One of the terraced fields, with palm trees indicating ground water*

*Photo: Dr. Andrew Bean*

The next morning we had a look around at the extensive network of terraces and the systems for channelling water via the adjoining wadis. It was here that the locals in centuries past grew wheat for the Julfar community on the coast, in nearby RAK many other things were grown, but humidity ruled out wheat production. Their harvested grain may have been carried down the mountain on the backs of donkeys, perhaps the distant ancestors of our nosey camp raiders. We also had a look at some old stone houses, one with even the timber roof still intact.



*One of the abandoned old houses in Wadi Bih*

*Photo: Dr. Andrew Bean*

Shortly before our departure, we had a visit by two local men who walked down from the road above our campsite. We exchanged greetings, and they said something about this being their "home", but that was about all our limited Arabic enabled us to pick up.



*Inside an old house with an intact roof*

*Photo: Dr. Andrew Bean*

They ambled off to investigate the several wild almond trees around our campsite. One was carrying a traditional Shiloh walking stick with a small bronze axe on top, and afterwards it looked like he was using it to harvest wild almonds.



*Our wild-almond harvesting visitors (or were they, in fact, our hosts?)*

*Photo: Dr. Andrew Bean*

After packing up, we headed down the sinuous Wadi Bih road, the way we'd come, back to the tarmac roads of RAK. Then following a Google-earth map that Mark Beech had given him, Andrew led us through RAK's village outskirts without much ado to a large earthen tell surrounded by a chain link fence--the archaeological site of Kush. The gate was open so we walked in and looked at the excavation, which has opened a deep hole in the centre, revealing several levels of mud-brick walls; however, we noticed it's starting to get washed away. A modern-day football lodged deep in the pit demonstrated the process of conglomeration which is still at work in the remains of this 4th century Sassanian tower, which has been built on and excavated on for successive eras, leaving a complicated mélange for the archaeologists to puzzle out.

Finding evidence of the old city of Julfar (Ras Al Khaimah's predecessor) was harder, as we got to the beach without any trouble, but we could not find any landmarks or any obvious signs of excavation, and the section to the south was fenced off, as they are busy constructing a major building development there. However, we had a quick dip in the somewhat scummy but refreshing lagoon and imagined we were swimming off Julfar, on a shore which several hundred years ago would have faced the open waters of the Gulf, from which Ahmad Bin Majid might have sailed to lead Vasco de Gama to India.



*Gillian's chance archaeological find near the Julfar site  
(For sizing purposes the shovel is 59 cm long)*

*Photograph by Gordon \_\_\_*

While some were swimming, Gillian went for a short walk along the lagoon beach and found several potshards and then a whole buried pot, sticking out of an embankment. She dug some of the pieces out of the sand, and then when the wall of the pot started to separate into shards she stopped and left it in situ. She said it appeared to be undecorated, and she speculated that it was a large water pot or storage pot.

Three of us finished the trip at the RAK museum, so we dropped off the two handles and a bit of the neck and the GPS of the location, asking for it to be brought to the attention of the two archaeologists Mark Beech had mentioned to Andrew. It was a serendipitous finish for us to make our own archaeological discovery (even if it turns out to be just a piece of Julfar ware or even just some RAK pottery from a later period

While we were in the museum we looked for artefacts of the sites we had been to. We found artefacts from Julfar, but found nothing relating to the mound of Kush, as the museum apparently hasn't received a write-up on it yet. We did see a photo of a similar-looking mound, which the caption said was built on the remains of an old Sassanian tower, but that's a different mound, referred to as Khatt, as it's near RAK's Khatt springs—something to check out on another trip, perhaps.

This was a good trip with something for everybody, and we'd recommend anyone planning a late-season camping trip to consider the cooler climate of Wadi Bih as a staging ground for exploring the multiple attractions of the Northern Emirates.

*Keith Taylor/Andrew Bean*

## The "Queen of Sheba's Castle"

Here are a few photographs taken in 2001 at the so-called "Queen of Sheba's Castle", overlooking the village of Shimal, just north of Ras Al Khaimah. The visible structures here were apparently in use until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but they were probably built on top of much older ones.



According to the Lonely Planet Guide to Arab Gulf States, these fortifications were not actually built by the Queen of Sheba, who is supposed to have lived in what is now Yemen. A more likely story is that it was visited by the Queen of Zenobia, based in Palmyra (modern Syria), in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. Perhaps that queen's visit occasioned the setting up of the tent on the hill that gave Ras al Khaimah its name.





*Keith Taylor*

*All the photographs by Derek Campbell*

## Pearling Field Trip

Those of you, who are still here in the second half of July, and interested in a Pearling Field Trip at Jebel Ali Beach with the Emirates Environmental Group (EMEG) headed by Major Ali Sakar Al Suwaidi (050 6255156), should contact Dr. Andrew Bean by e-mail:

rexabean@emirates.net.ae

This is pearling the way it used to be done: sailing on a wooden dhow and with a nose clip to dive, though Major Ali stays in a reach of 800 metres from the shore, where there are coral reefs at some 6 metres deep.

He also offered us to stay overnight in air-conditioned barasti huts and have a look at the stars, one of his hobbies. See the April Focus 2007 for more information about the EMEG.

Have a great summer!

*Atie Vogler*

### **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.
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- 2007 bird calendar. Beautiful pictures from the Eriksons. A must for yourself ... and a perfect gift
- ENHG T-shirts/golf (polo) shirts/caps.  
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Buy any 2 – get 10Dhs off.

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## Lectures

5<sup>th</sup> June:

Bhutan

*Dennis Dahl*

19<sup>th</sup> June:

Orchids for Beginners

*Dr. Ana Hauser*

**JULY & AUGUST:  
 Summer recess**

4<sup>th</sup> September:

Families

19<sup>th</sup> September:

Families

*Nick Cochrane-Dyett*

## Field Trips

18<sup>th</sup> 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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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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