

focus

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Emirates Natural History Group

Patron: H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin

EDITORIAL

Our season has got off to a flying start this year with record numbers attending the first two lectures, a full lecture programme till the end of the year, and a varied and exciting field programme. We will try to maintain the momentum!

Our new members may be a little surprised by the wide range of subjects that we address in our programme, many of which are not usually covered by the 'natural history' umbrella. However, we have always taken a very broad approach, and consider anything which is of interest in the great outdoors as valid. Hence we include archaeology, palaeontology, geology, astronomy, ethnology and probably many other 'ologies' too, as well as animals, plants and their ecology. Although the focus is always on the UAE, Oman and the Gulf, we do include other areas geographically if these seem of interest to the Group. If anyone feels they may be able to contribute a talk or activity for the group, we would be very pleased to consider it.

This year we will be hosting the Inter Emirates Weekend (IEW). This is an annual event, organised in turn by the three chapters of Natural History Group. Last year it was hosted by Al Ain, and now it is our turn. On the last two occasions we hosted the event, we used the Mafraq Hotel as a base. This year, we feel in need of a change and are planning on using the Mirfa Hotel. Mirfa is situated about 100 km SW of Abu Dhabi (as the proverbial crow flies), in the Western Region. This is an area little visited by most people, with plenty of open spaces, desert and sabkhas, fossils, coastline and relatively little development and construction. Despite the extra driving distance, it should be an interesting location. So keep February 28th to March 1st free in your diaries!

Lastly, an appeal. As always, we need more articles for Focus, and would also be very happy to welcome new members to the Committee. Please do consider it.

Drew Gardner

The Buraimi Tombs and the Hanging Gardens

Friday, April 27th, eleven people in six cars met at the Al Faya petrol station on the Abu Dhabi-Al Ain Road at 9:30 in the morning and then proceeded in an orderly fashion to Al Ain, following Allestree Fisher as emergency relief trip leader. After showing passports at the Al Hili checkpoint, we convened outside the Buraimi Hotel where we then met up with Brien Holmes and a few people from the Al Ain chapter of the Emirates Natural History Group.

Brien Holmes had somehow got word of our intended trip to the Buraimi Tombs, and had volunteered to come along as a guest trip leader. As he is the "man in the know" about these tombs, and had in fact presented an informative talk about them to the Abu Dhabi group a month or so back, his services were more than welcome! He led us on various dirt tracks from the Buraimi Hotel to Mahdah, from where we could see

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FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Whale Skeleton, Abu Dhabi Waters near Futaisi

Photographer: Peter Vogler

jagged clusters of piled rocks, the tombs, on a low ridge. We parked in a bowl at the base of this ridge and most of our group clambered up to the first of these tombs on the right, and then worked our way halfway along the ridge to the left.



The first of the tombs Brien showed us had been pulled apart. Brien explained that these tombs had been robbed repeatedly, and stones, bones, and less interesting artefacts had been thrown in a circle several metres in diameter around the tombs. Also, many of the stones forming the domed roof of this first tomb had simply fallen inside. Even with this damage, the oblong shape of the original foundation stones was visible. Brien told us that based on the dating of artefacts found outside these tombs, they can safely estimate that these tombs date back to the third millennium! We were looking at stone structures that had been built at the same time as some of the pyramids in Egypt! And yet most people in the Al Ain/Buraimi area are totally unaware of these historical marvels right in their own back yards.

Brien told us the Al Ain chapter of the ENHG have made real progress in getting this site named a heritage preserve, and the municipality has in fact put up a

couple of signs to that effect along the approach roads. Eventually, we understand, their intention is to fence the whole area off and grant access to archaeologists and to interested parties who will come here to view the historical artefacts. The Al Ain chapter of the ENHG has briefed the Al Ain museum staff about the tombs and has given them artefacts that were found scattered outside the tombs. Brien said that they have a strictly "hands-off" policy towards the tombs themselves, and although they have contemplated taking apart one tomb as an experimental research project, they will probably just leave excavation of the tombs to the professional archaeologists, whenever they actually take up this project. In the meantime, there is plenty up here to keep amateur archaeologists coming back on a regular basis.

Based on the large number of tombs found on these ridges and in the surrounding area, Brien conjectures that the Al Hili/Buraimi area had quite a large population, which was supported by agriculture made possible by a considerably wetter climate back then. Apparently, in addition to these hilltop tombs, other tombs were built right down on the flat plains nearer the villages, on both sides of the ridge. In fact, aerial photographs from years ago showed around twenty tombs down on the other side of this ridge. However, they were all levelled during the construction of the Buraimi Industrial Park, which is just below the ridge. Apparently, no hypothesis has yet been tested to explain why there are two quite different tomb locations. It seemed to make sense to our group that tombs would be constructed on hilltops where there was an abundance of building materials, where any disagreeable odours would be far removed from the villages, where these tombs would be less accessible to grave robbers, and where valuable agricultural land would not be tied up.



Up near the summit of this ridge, we came across a couple of tombs with oblong shaped domes that looked completely undisturbed. They were about a metre or so high, made entirely of unmortared flat stones. They were big enough to house just one corpse, with narrow, filled-in openings at one end. Amazingly, they appeared to have been untouched over all these many centuries. Brien pointed out a puzzling picked-apart tomb with very large flat stones that looked like they must have

been placed on edge, forming side panels, unlike the stonewall construction of the other tombs in this area. Truly, there are enough mysteries here to keep more than one team of archaeologists happily exploring and conjecturing for a long time

Two members of the group climbed in another direction to see the tallest of the tombs, at the far left end of the ridge. This large tomb was possibly a group tomb, shaped something like a fort tower. At present this tomb is over three metres in height, but had probably originally been perhaps a metre taller. Because of the heat (it was around 46 C) the larger group decided against continuing the walk along the ridge to the tower tomb. Instead, we gladly made our way back to air-conditioned vehicles.



We then drove a few kilometres down the Mahdah Road to the Hanging Gardens, where we parked and had lunch in the shade of a lovely tree and a few umbrellas, struggling to keep them upright in a rather stiff, but welcome, breeze.





After lunch we enjoyed a gentle stroll while continuing enjoyable conversations. We walked to the end of a level track and saw a pond which featured healthy wadi fig trees and a rather unusually located ghaf tree, wedged in the wall of the wadi.



Deciding that the rising beginning-of-summer heat was a bit too much, we turned back. On the return walk to the cars, Allestree and others pointed out some interesting and unusual plants and trees. It was a splendid day trip – and hopefully will be repeated when the weather is cooler.

Keith Taylor/Mary Boyd

All the photographs by Chris Jones

Inter Emirates Weekend Preview

On the weekend of the 29th of February till the 1st of March 2008, the Abu Dhabi Chapter of the Natural History Groups will be hosting the Inter Emirates Weekend (IEW).

The venue is the Mirfa Hotel in Mirfa, located some one and a half hours drive from Abu Dhabi on the way to Ruwais.

The program will be a most interesting and exciting one, with something for all interests including children. Therefore we would like you to block the dates already now and encourage you to make your hotel booking by the end of January 2008, in order to secure the maximum of hotel rooms for our groups from Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Al Ain.

The price will be especially for us 450 Dhs, that is for a double room, tax and breakfast included.

The Provisional Program:

Field Trips:

Birding – early morning or late evening

Shoreline walk – according to the tides

Exotic acacias – half day

Elephant tracks and desert ecology – full day

Liwa Dunes – full day, including a visit to the car museum, if possible.

Sand geology

Saltbushes and other flora, with professional botanist from Kew Gardens Dr Shahina Ghazanfar. Shahina is the author of the Flora of Oman Vols 1 and 2.

Sweihat island (geology and fossils) – full day

Star gazing – evening after dinner

Insects – light trapping in the evening

Workshops:

GPS workshop

Salt Bushes / Flora with Dr Shahina Ghazanfar

Work under the Microscope

Sandcastle building, (sand) painting, herbarium and photography for children.

Competitions:

Photo competitions for the young and the old.

Sandcastle building, painting / drawing for children.

The IEW Committee.

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.
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
- 2008 bird calendar. Beautiful pictures from the Eriksons. A must for yourself ... and a perfect gift, 30 Dhs
- ENHG T-shirts/golf (polo) shirts/caps.
25Dhs/35Dhs/10Dhs.
Buy any 2 – get 10Dhs off.

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Lectures

9th October 7.30PM:

Marine Life in the UAE and Oman

Gordon Kirkwood

23rd October 7.30PM

Families

Nick Cochrane-Dyett

13 November 7.30pm

Corals and the Man of War Starfish

Catherine Vogler

Field Trips

19/20th October:

Al Ain Night Zoo Trip, camping at Jebel Hafeet

Dr. Andrew Bean

26th October 7.45AM:

Half day Trip. Two Trees

Allestree Fisher

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