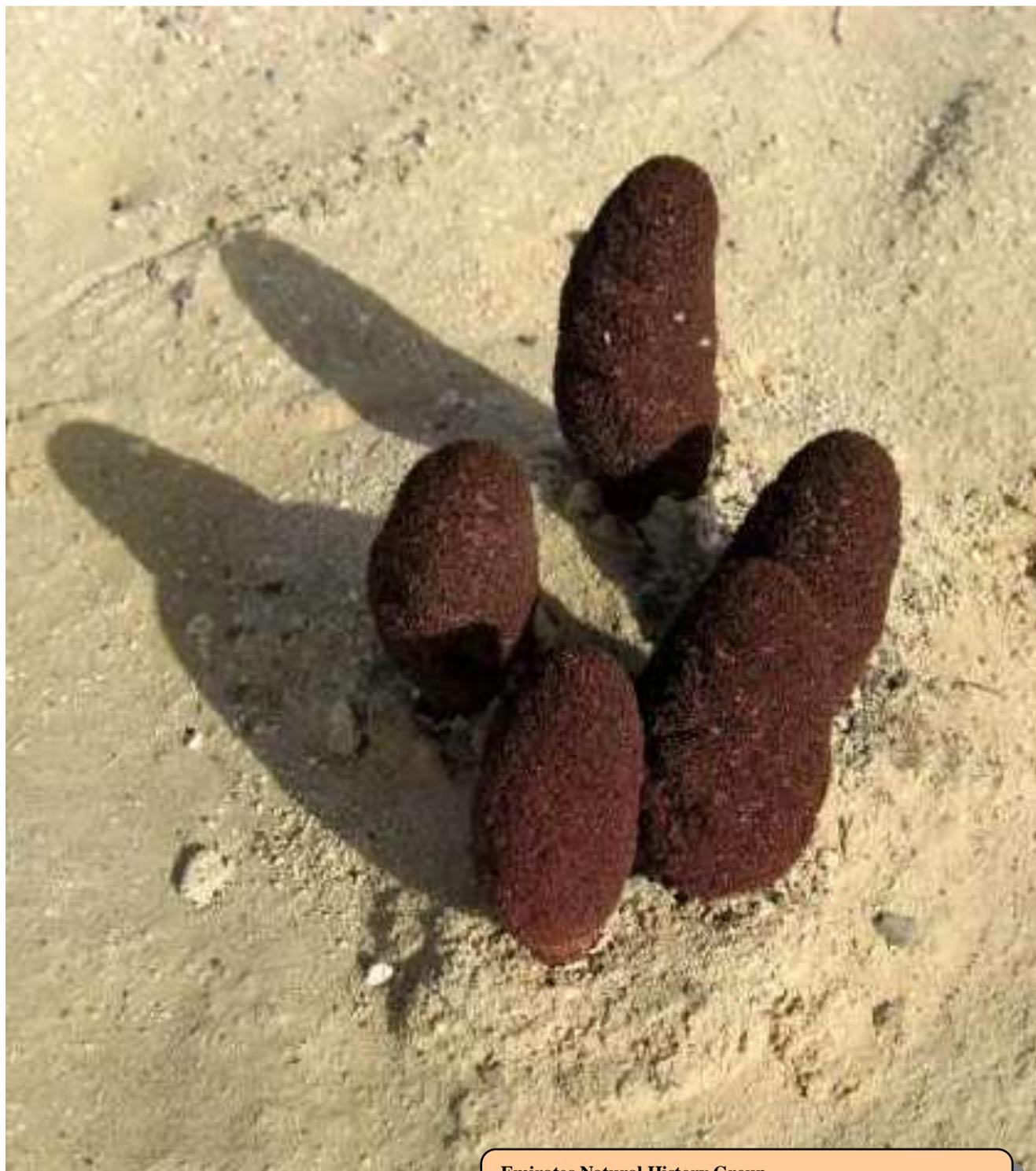


focus



Abu Dhabi, February 2008

Vol 32 (2)



Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

The highlight of the last month was undoubtedly the 'Inter Emirates Weekend' hosted this year by the Abu Dhabi group in the Mafraq Hotel. The hard work of many of the Committee members paid off, and the weekend was enjoyed by ENHG members from all three chapters, some even coming from Muscat. The Mafraq Hotel once again proved to be an excellent venue, allowing for a wide choice of activities and excursions. This year we were fortunate to be joined by the renowned Arabian plant botanist, Dr Shahina Ghazanfar from Kew Gardens, who accompanied field trips, gave a workshop on plant collection and identification and presented a fascinating lecture on botanical collection in 19th century Oman. Full day excursions were made to the dunes at Liwa and to the 8 million year old elephant trackways at Mleisa. Other activities included bird watching, star gazing (through the thick Abu Dhabi murk!), insect light trapping, sand driving, botanical walks, a photo competition, a natural history quiz, and perhaps most important of all, the opportunity to get together and enjoy the enthusiasm and friendship so prevalent in the ENHG. I would like to again thank all those who helped make the IEW such a success. In 2009, Dubai will be the hosts of the next IEW.

Also at Mafraq, the annual ENHG awards were announced. The Bish Brown Award was presented to Bob Reimer of the Al Ain group. Bob has been a keen member of the ENHG for many years, and has made outstanding contributions in putting *Tribulus* (including all back numbers) onto the web site, building databases and running trips. In the best tradition of the ENHG he has also developed expertise in dragonfly identification and behavior, which is now resulting in publications of new records and new observations. Many members will remember the talk Bob gave us on the little midge 'riders' on dragonfly wings. Well done, Bob.

The Sheikh Mubarak Award was presented to that genuine polymath Gary Feulner. It is hard to imagine a more deserving recipient. As Peter Hellyer said, it would have been hard to keep up the regular publication of *Tribulus* without the Gary's meticulously researched and fascinating papers that grace almost every issue. Subjects range from geomorphology to mud snails, wadi fish and toads to gecko behavior. Gary has tramped almost every wadi and mountain in the UAE, dictaphone in hand, recording plants and animals, archaeology and geology. Gary gave some moving and sobering acceptance words, printed in full in this Focus. A further presentation of the awards will be made by our patron Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan at his majlis.

The IEW photo competition was well supported, both in terms of entries and by the members voting. First prize for the lovely shot of a pair of little green bee-eaters went to Mohammed Arfan Asif of DNHG. Second, an amazing portrait of a whale shark in crystal blue water went to Angela Manthorpe of DNHG and third for a photo of Carter's semaphore gecko standing proudly on a stone was to Drew Gardner. The prizes for children's art work went to Paul Mueller, Imogen Bean and Mara Bean of Abu Dhabi. Congratulations to all the winners.

Drew Gardner

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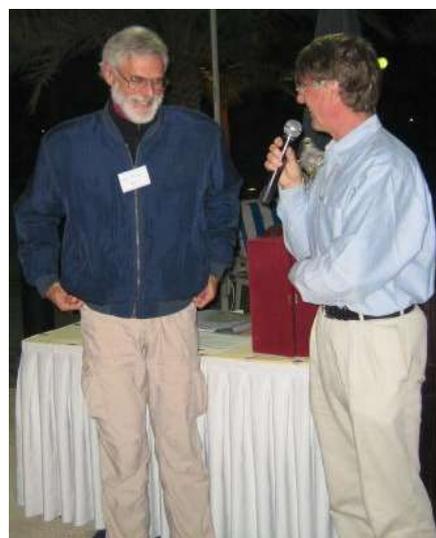
FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: 'Red Thumbs' from Mafraq Hotel Perimeter Walk

Photographer: Linda Betz



Bob Reimer receiving the Bish Brown Award



Drew Gardner presenting the Sheikh Mubarak Award to Gary Feulner



Prize-winners for children's artwork: Paul Mueller, Imogen Bean and Mara Bean

All photographs by Beverly G. Merrick

Reflections of an Amateur Naturalist

[DNHG Chairman Gary Feulner received the Sheikh Mubarak Award for 2007 at Inter-Emirates Weekend (Feb 29 - Mar 1), in recognition of his extensive record of original natural history research and publication. Gary's remarks on that occasion are re-printed here, at the suggestion of several members who were in attendance. – Ed.]

Thank you very much for the honor of the Sheikh Mubarak Award. I would like to take advantage of this occasion to share with you just a few brief thoughts based on my own experience as an amateur student of local natural history. Some are intended to encourage, others to counsel, and among this audience I am sure that many will resonate with your own experience. Each of the main points I would like to make can be summarized by a single word.

Enjoyment

I wish you all as much happiness and satisfaction as I have found in exploring and studying the wildlife and environments of the UAE over the past many years.

Opportunity

There are plenty of different kinds of plant and animal groups and natural phenomena to keep you busy. But because the environment is relatively harsh, total numbers of species in most groups are low and it is relatively easy to master them. In addition, because there has been relatively little detailed scientific study in the UAE, there remains an opportunity for amateurs to make a significant contribution.

Novelty

Even after all these years, I still never go out without seeing something new or different – as participants in recent DNHG field trips can attest.

Patience

If you don't know what you're seeing or can't explain certain phenomena, relax. But don't discard the information. Store it in memory, and sooner or later you'll see or hear of clues to a better understanding.

Care

Be conscientious, and be honest. If you're not really certain it was a striped hyena you saw at Liwa yesterday, don't go around saying it was. Wrong information, once circulated, is very, very hard to correct.

Context

The UAE is a very different sort of place for most of us, but it is not another planet. Most aspects of natural history here have been studied to some extent, and a reasonable amount is known. Seek out and consult what is known, before you spin theories out of the air. You are not required to accept the conventional wisdom, but you should at least be aware of it.

Sharing

The more information is disseminated, the smarter all of us will be. However, information exchange is a two-way street. Be prepared to give information, as well as receive it.

Sadness

It is extremely sad for me (and no doubt for many of you), after all these years:

- to see the high dunes flattened;
- to see the tranquil seashore "developed";
- to see the mangroves and the khors dredged or filled;
- to see the mountain front quarried without interruption;
- to see huge roads built like railways in places where nature was previously an arm's length away;
- to see roadsides "beautified" in a way that obscures the natural beauty of the landscape beyond;
- to see walls and fences absolutely everywhere, in a country one of whose great charms was its accessibility;
- to see unique sites destroyed without thought;
- and to see that almost no one seems to care about all of this.

But lest I end on too pessimistic a note, rest assured I have a least a few more research projects in the works, which I hope to complete before I leave one day.

Gary Feulner

IEW: Trips into the Western Region



The un-eroded central block at the elephant tracks field

Photo: Drew Gardner



Re-tracing the tracks of Miocene elephants at Mleisa

Photo: Drew Gardner



Getting driving advice before heading into the Liwa

Photo: Beverly G. Merrick

IEW: Sand Driving Course – Part 1

Andrew Bean kindly led nine cars and their intrepid drivers through the desert to Two Trees for an off-road sand dune driving course. Before we even reached two trees our very first car became stuck. At a quick info session sitting in the shade of the lovely ghaf trees



with a nosy camel in tow and a nestling crow, we were taught the basics: Most important of all, LET GRAVITY BE YOUR FRIEND; always come down hills in a forward, straight direction and travel at a safe distance--of at least 10 cars' length--behind any other car. Andrew had examples of all the equipment needed for safe off-roading, and after a quick introduction we were off. Getting stuck in sand is avoidable, but it happens.... Hazel learned the best of all of us how not to go up a hill



at an angle...Remember, straight, Hazel, straight and don't slow down!!! Once we had all mastered getting stuck and unstuck in the sand, we moved on to our graduation dune, where our Andrew led the way. After a fabulous ascent, he flew the car over the dune! Came down with a thud...breaking his wiper overfill bottle and dripping much needed water all over the dunes. A quick calculation of whether or not we were prepared to risk our own cars, made some rethink, or "chicken out" of graduation.



But for those who did go through with it, it was totally exhilarating. One man who shall remain nameless mentioned he hadn't been this nervous for ages, his tummy had butterflies, and it took a lot of courage to tackle the dune. (His wife refused to be in the car with him! It's one thing to go dunebashing with professionals, but totally different when it's your husband in your very own car.) Once we had all graduated, we all thanked Andrew for a totally fabulous afternoon, and we look forward to moving on to Parts 2 and 3 sometime in the future.

Gillian Kirkwood

All photographs by Gillian Kirkwood

Dr. Shahina Ghazanfar at the IEW!!

We had the good luck to have had the participation of Dr. Shahina Ghazanfar at the latest Inter-Emirates Weekend at the Mafraq Hotel. This botanist, currently at Kew Gardens, is one of the top specialists studying Arabian Flora and has written the latest and most comprehensive flora on Oman, where she lived for a number of years. On Saturday morning she first introduced us to the principles of floral collection; then in the Perimeter Walk area outside the hotel, she collected specimens for us to examine and identify with the aid of her key to coastal plants in Abu Dhabi.



Shahina began by explaining the role of herbarium species, relating to her work at Kew, and the role that we as ENHG members have in the process. She mentioned the subdivision of work that goes on in categorizing and storing the 30,000 plants they receive every year (!). For us, as collectors, the time of year is critical. Winter rains provoke the onset of annuals and perennials in most of the UAE except the mountains, where their appearance may be as late as May or June. Some perennials flower in the autumn to be ready with their fruit for the spring rains. Initially, a plastic laundry bag is a good collection receptacle. When the plants are brought back from the field, the labelling process begins. They must be pressed immediately on return to the car. A plant press is needed for this and can be made very simply with latticed wood, plyboard, or even paper. Jeweller's tags are used for labelling. Plants may be sprayed with insecticide if necessary. We must not forget to label adequately, to make sure we do not forget what we have

picked up. What we do need is permission to export samples to Kew or elsewhere, in order to avoid any political incidents that may occur from "illegally" obtained flora. Obtaining this permission to collect and export may prove problematical, and conservation agencies may store plants in their herbarium under "Extended Loan" to overcome some of these problems.

As much information as possible should accompany exhibits: Taxon, Family, Locality, Habitat, and short Description with any particular characteristics, as far as they are known to the collector. Then the scientific investigation begins at the conservation agency, where investigations follow for each specimen into:

- phylogeny : classification of plants
- palynology : study of pollen
- phenology : flowering and fruiting times
- conservation : examination of patterns of decline
- or expansion and identification of species at risk

The morphology of the species is also examined. Today's identification methods involving the various forms of DNA have revolutionized botany, involving a number of name changes; ie. our local *Haloxylon salicornicum* was changed from *Hammada elegans* a few years ago.



After a short walk outside to collect exhibits, we were given a key to Coastal Plants for this region, split into groups and began trying to categorize the various salt bushes, sedges, herbs, parasitic plants, grasses, shrubs that had been selected for the exercise. This generated a lot of useful discussion, and we all learnt something new. Thank you, Shahina!

Allestree E C Fisher

Both photographs by Linda Betz

A Traveller in 19th Century Oman

The latest talk on March 4th was by Dr Shahina Ghazanfar from Kew, our guest visitor at IEW this year, who had chosen to inform and divert us with the botanical journey of Pierre Rémi Martin Aucher-Eloy (1793-1838), a French botanist. He visited Oman in March and April 1838 and produced the first comprehensive plant collection for south-eastern Arabia. A few years later this extensive collection from Iran,

Syria, Egypt, Sinai and Oman was published in the 5-volume "*Flora orientalis*" by Edmond Boissier, in which the author attributed the species name to some of the plants found by Aucher-Eloy. (We in the UAE will have come across *Cornulaca aucheri*, *Iphiaea aucheri*, *Gaillonia aucheri*, *Tamarix aucheriana*, etc.)

This was a courageous and hazardous undertaking for the time. He had contracted malaria on a previous trip, suffered from attacks while on the Jebel Al Akhdhar, and sadly died of it on his return to Persia. He was buried in Isfahan.

In Oman he traveled on foot, on donkey and camel back, setting out from the capital area and traveling south-west towards Nakhl and the Ghubbrah Bowl. He climbed out of Wadi Mistal over a ridge of the Jebel Al Akhdhar to get to the Saiq plateau and went to the now deserted village of Bani Habib. He describes the Omanis as being welcoming and generous, and was given food by the mountain people. Illness and expense shortened his expedition, but he managed to collect 250 species, representing a very good selection for northern Oman, and adding considerably to scientific knowledge of the mountain areas. He found the climb quite difficult in places:

"(in translation) *We climbed the mountain for two hours following an extremely steep path and set up camp near the village of Oukend (Wakan). Palm trees had by then disappeared and temperate zone plants appeared. I climbed as high as I could, but I could not reach the top of the mountain. I kept coming across precipitous rocks which proved to be insurmountable obstacles*"

His notes were not extensive, but his descriptions were very good and accurate. He also commented on climate, cultivation and other aspects of natural history, including birds. It was not until the end of the century that his collection was added to by other European and Indian botanists.

Dick Hornby thanked our speaker, pointing out that we rarely have talks by a professional botanist and that this was a special occasion. Aucher-Eloy has not been the subject of a talk before, so this is a first, although Gary Feulner wrote a short piece about the botanist in *Gazelle* in 2001.

Sighting: Wildcat in Qatar

On 13th February I found myself near Dukhan in the far west of Qatar. I was actually looking for plants, but by far the most interesting discovery was a cat! I was alerted by a movement at the base of a mesquite bush in which there were some noisy sparrows. My first glimpse alerted me that this might not be a normal domestic or feral cat. I approached cautiously and saw that it was a very grey cat that seemed heavy in the neck and shoulder region. The cat was reluctant to give up on the sparrows and gave me the opportunity of taking two photographs. These show all the diagnostic features of a wildcat, *Felis silvestris*, namely the black rings and all black tip to the tail, little black ear tufts, some reddy brown on the back of the ear, a pale belly and even black soles to the feet.



Wildcat in Qatar Photo: Dick Hornby

I sent the best photo off to Fran Gillespie, author of *Discovering Qatar*, who promptly responded with great excitement, informing me that there were no previous records of wildcat in Qatar. We then sent the photos off to various experts who all confirmed that there would appear to be a lot of wildcat genes in the animal but it might not be 100% pure. Marjcke Jongbloed commented that it probably was a wildcat, but she didn't "quite like the...rather pronounced black spots on its body. The wildcats that I have had were practically spot-less, just hints of spots on the body."

Some further correspondence led us to David Harrison of the Harrison Institute at Sevenoaks in Kent, who is probably the foremost authority on Arabian mammals. His comments were as follows:

Thank you for sending the interesting pictures of the cat. I rather doubt whether this animal is a pure wildcat. The tabby pattern is far too distinct for *tristrami*. The general coloration of the back and tail banding look quite good for *gordoni*, however, but the throat and belly are not white enough and the ear backs not orange enough, although the tips are slightly tufted as they should be. I conclude it is probably a hybrid. I sometimes wonder whether any pure Arabian wildcats still exist! Probably they are now only to be found in remote desert areas. Shame. This one is as close to one as I have seen a picture of for some years. Please give my best wishes to your Natural History Group and encourage them to save any interesting specimens and keep us posted on interesting records.

So we will just have to be content that this was the first record of wildcat genes in Qatar!

Dick Hornby

Camping Trip & Hike: Jebel Sumeini

On the weekend of Feb 1-2, a group of new and returning ENHG members enjoyed a windy weekend in the Oman, exploring Jebel Sumeini and the surrounding area.

Friday afternoon, after a picnic lunch, we followed faithfully in Roy and Liz's leadership and their trusty sidekick Chirri, as we warmed up our legs for the following day's climb, exploring hills of fine 'green' shale, a depression where we climbed amongst the layers of time and enjoyed a temporary reprieve from the unrelenting wind. Later, braver souls dropped into a small cave which housed unique white, circular, unidentified bacterial life.

The evening's chill brought out items of clothing infrequently seen in Abu Dhabi; hats, mitts, and even full down jackets. Dinner, seasoned with savory sand, was early and short for most as the wind forced many a weary camper - even the hearty Canadians - to an early sleeping bag.

The crisp morning saw adventurous souls begin climbing at about 9:00 am. Both fitness and skill were tested for about 2.5 hours as we ascended, meandering through a wonderfully deep wadi, climbing steep abutments, and even through a chimney. The exposed summit was well worth the effort, revealing remarkable vistas in all directions. Keen individuals led the group for different parts of the descent, resulting in some new, and rather adventurous, routes.

It was a remarkable weekend, and we all thank Roy and Liz for their tremendous leadership and for sharing their extensive knowledge with us. We look forward to more adventures to come.

Meg Wallace

Al Wathba Bird List

[The following birds were observed on the IEW excursion led by Andrew Twyman of the ENHG on Friday morning, 29 Feb, 2008 –Ed.]

Al Wathba Camel Racetrack:

2 marsh harrier, 1 kestrel, 10 crested lark, 2 desert wheatear, 1 isabelline wheatear, 1 Menetries warbler.

Al Wathba Lake:

8 little grebe, c120 greater flamingo, 60 common teal, 2 marsh harrier, 15 moorhen,

75 black winged stilt, 25 avocet, 6 red-wattled lapwing, 4 white tailed lapwing,

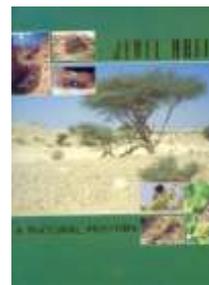
1 common ringed plover, 1 little ringed plover, 6 black-tailed godwit,

1 spotted redshank, 6 common redshank, 2 marsh sandpiper, 1 wood sandpiper,

12 little stint, 35 ruff, 2 whiskered tern, 30 slender billed gull, 10 barn swallow, 4 white wagtail, 1 bluethroat.

Andrew Twyman

Book for Donation to Schools



Copies of the book, Jebel Hafit – A Natural History, published by the ENHG, are available as donations to schools, colleges, and universities in the UAE. Please provide any committee member with contact information for any educational institutions you would like to furnish with a copy of this book. Parents of school children and school representatives are invited to attend an ENHG lecture and request a copy of this book from any committee member in attendance.

ITEMS ON SALE

AT THE ENHG STALL

- The Emirates – A Natural History, 350Dhs.
The first complete referencing guide to the wild life of the UAE. 580 colour photos.
- Jebel Hafit – A Natural History, 100Dhs.
An attractive, encyclopaedic presentation of the natural resources of a local landmark.
- Abu Dhabi Bird checklist 10Dhs.
(Free if you spend over 100Dhs!)
- Emirates Bird Report, 50Dhs.
- Breeding Birds of UAE, by Simon Aspinall, 50Dhs.
- Wild about Mammals, by Marijcke Jongbloed, 40Dhs. Guide to *mammals of the UAE*.
- Comprehensive Guide to the Flora of the UAE, 100Dhs.
- Plant Checklist, by Marijcke Jongbloed, 25Dhs.
Know your local wild plants.
- Pests, 35Dhs.
Find out what's in and around your home.
- Children's books: Yaw the Wildcat; Hayat the Leopard, 15Dhs.
- 2008 bird calendar, 30Dhs.
A must for yourself ... and a perfect gift.
- Reef Fishes of the UAE, 50Dhs.
- Feast of Dates, 100Dhs.
- Sir Bani Yas, 100Dhs.
- UAE in Focus, 100Dhs.
- Common Birds in Oman, 100Dhs.
A beginner's field guide—can be helpful in identifying birds in the UAE as well.
- Sulphur, camels, and gunpowder, 90Dhs.

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Lectures

5th February

Dugongs

Dr. Mark Beech

19th February

Marine Ecology in
Dubai: Natural and
Artificial Reef
Ecosystems

John Burt

4th March

Botanical exploration in
19th century Oman

**Dr. Shahina
Ghazanfar**

18th March 7:30 PM

Making Environment a
Shared Goal of the
UAE

Habiba al Marashi

Field Trips

1st – 2nd February

Camping trip / hike up
Jebel Sumeini

Roy Richards

7th – 8th March

Spring Annuals
Camping Trip

Allestree Fisher

21st – 22nd March

Family weekend at
Two Trees

Andrew Bean

4th – 5th April

Sand Driving Course /
Camping at Two Trees

Andrew Bean

Websites of General Interest

[Check out the February issues of the Dubai and Al Ain groups' newsletters on the first website below for additional reports on the Inter Emirates Weekend. -Ed]

Website of Natural History Group of Al Ain, featuring archives of Tribulus and all three NHGs' newsletters:
<http://www.enhg.org>

Photo Galleries of Abu Dhabi Mountaineer Roy Richards:
<http://www.pbase.com/chirri2000/mountains>

Website of UAE Bird Recorder Tommy Pedersen:
<http://www.tommypedersen.com>

Corporate Sponsors of the ENHG - 2008

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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Dome International



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