

focus

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Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

This issue of Focus is a 'bumper issue' when it comes to records and photographs of species on our doorstep in Abu Dhabi and across the border at Wadi Jazira: full of information and interest. I would particularly like to thank Keith Taylor for all his hard work in putting together this and the last few issues of Focus, and all the authors too for sharing their experiences and insights with the ENHG membership.

While on the subject of the ENHG committee, I would also like to thank Linda and Martin Betz for all their hard work, both as the joint ENHG treasurers and for willingly giving of their time and expertise, notably for the Inter Emirates Weekend. Molly McQuarrie has also enriched the ENHG committee and the Group in numerous ways with her enthusiasm for natural history and environmental education over many years. Abu Dhabi will never be the same again! I would like to wish all the best and *bon voyage* as they prepare to leave Abu Dhabi.

We do now have an urgent need for more members to help the ENHG by joining the committee. You certainly don't need to be an expert naturalist, but just be prepared to put in some time. Especially welcome will be anyone with a little accounting or book-keeping experience to take on the role of treasurer. PLEASE consider doing so!

We plan to hold the AGM at the meeting of 21 May, and this would be a good chance to step up to the committee, though if you cannot make that, just let any committee member know!

Drew Gardner

Wildlife on the Doorstep

With the rising temperatures it is very tempting to look near at hand for wildlife rather than spending hours in a car and toiling under a hot sun. Abu Dhabi may not look very promising from a natural history point of view, and some would say it is getting less promising, but there are in fact plenty of opportunities in the city for interesting little investigations and photography.

One convenient place to start is the grounds of the Cultural Foundation, which appear to be in the middle of some radical redesigning, but the area is currently enjoying a lull. An interesting range of indigenous plants can be found, but I would like to draw attention to a couple of insects I photographed there recently, the presence of which might not have been predicted. The first is a pretty butterfly known as the Pea Blue, or, at least in Europe, the Long-tailed Blue, *Lampides boeticus*. It has a very wide distribution through Europe, Africa, southern Asia and Australia. The caterpillars feed on a variety of leguminous plants (Fabaceae), but in the Cultural Foundation the foodplant is likely to be *Alhagi graecorum*, which is currently abundant there and should shortly come into flower. One wonders how large the Pea Blue population may be and how widespread the species is on Abu Dhabi Island.

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FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Orange Darter, *Trithemis kirbyi*, from Wadi Jazira

Photographer: Bob Reimer



Pea Blue, Lampides boeticus

The other insect that I would like to draw attention to in the Cultural Foundation grounds is the dragonfly *Crocothemis erythraea* which was known formerly as the Carmine Darter, although the more accepted name is now Broad Scarlet. Both common names describe its appearance very well. The much sought-after little book 'Insects of Eastern Arabia' describes its habitat as 'rocky watercourses, desert pools and barren irrigation channels, but avoiding oases'. Abu Dhabi may not be an oasis, but I suspect there must have been considerable adaptation to modern urban environments if the species is now resident in Abu Dhabi. I don't recall seeing Broad Scarlet in the city before, but how carefully have I been looking? It is believed to be common at Al Wathba Wetland Reserve, and it may well be present in some of the larger parks and gardens within the city, but many of these are inaccessible. Are there enough interested

people in Abu Dhabi to reveal its local distribution and habitat requirements?



Broad Scarlet, *Crocothemis erythraea*

I would be very interested to receive any information about these two species in Abu Dhabi. This note underlines the problem of there being no central repository of natural history information. With no official recording schemes, no museum or record centre in Abu Dhabi, and a rapid turnover of members of ENHG, we are losing huge amounts of potentially very interesting information. The Environment Agency receives a lot of biological information, but it tends to operate more as a black hole than an information service. As we stand at present, unless a record is published, there is no reliable way of ensuring that information will not be lost.

Incidentally, the species mentioned in this article are both likely to extend their European ranges northwards in response to global warming. Both have been recorded in southern England in recent years, and there are indications that such observations are becoming more frequent.

Dick Hornby

Both photographs by Dick Hornby

Locust & Grasshopper Sightings



Gregarious phase juvenile Desert Locust caught near Shahama, 20 April 2008. Its swarm was followed three days later by a swarm of brown grasshoppers. Have others noticed these critters swarming recently? -Ed

Photo: Keith Taylor

Wadi Jazira Camping Trip

On Friday, 25 April, not long after the quite civilized assembly time of 12 noon, 15 ENHG members in six vehicles left the Eid Prayer Grounds parking area behind Popeye's on the ostensibly "last" camping trip of the season*—heading to Wadi Jazira, in the Buraimi area of Oman. After the now obligatory stop at the Hili border post to have passports examined but not stamped, we convened at the Buraimi Hotel, where we met our guest guide for the afternoon, Al Ain NHG member and Wadi Jazira dragonfly aficionado, Bob Reimer.

Bob led our convoy past the Hanging Gardens and the town of Mahda to the main road towards Wadi Khutwah. But to get to Wadi Jazira, we actually took the road to Khabbayn, the next village to the south of Khutwah. The graded track clearly signposted to Wadi Jazira leads off to the right of this blacktop road. Bob told us the patriarch of the only family living there resisted having a road bulldozed through while he lived, but after his death, his sons, well tired of walking the 3 km out to the road, had the road put in.



Bob Reimer introducing our group to Wadi Jazira
Photo: Keith Taylor

We drove up past a weir and reservoir at the mouth of a narrow gorge, with the Wadi Jazira plantation on the opposite side, and onto a high terrace overlooking the open part of the wadi, where there were some fairly modern looking low stone shelters. Bob and Andrew then turned down a steep track to the wadi bed and up a rough boulder-strewn route to scout a possible approach to a more private camping area on a plateau on the opposite side. The rest of us obviously followed along. About a kilometer up, our leaders saw that the track had been eroded by the rains down to the bedrock, so we all turned back. After wobbling back over the boulders and then, shifting into 4WD Low, scrambling back up the steep, pebbly track, some of us wondered briefly if Andrew had decided to improvise a wadi-driving course on the spot! Back up on top, the wide, fairly level terrace proved to be a fine camping spot—and easy walking distance to a beckoning stretch of wadi pools below.

From the moment we set up camp to the moment we left, dragonflies and damselflies of various colours kept catching our attention. In the steep gorge section of the wadi, we mainly came across Gully Darters, *Trithemis*

arteriosa. We also saw Orange Darters, *Trithemis kirbyi*—more in the areas where the wadi opened up.



Female Orange Darter, plucked from a tree
Photo: Mai Yoke Taylor

Bob briefly saw a Blue Emperor, *Anax imperator*, as he was heading back. And in the gorge on Saturday, Mai Yoke photographed another blue dragonfly, the Epaulet Skimmer or Girdled Skimmer, *Orthetrum chrysostigma*—probably the fourth most likely species of dragonfly to be seen at Wadi Jazira, although it can be close to the most common dragonfly in some other areas. In fact, it was on one of these that Bob first noticed ride-along midges.



Epaulet Skimmer / Girdled Skimmer
Photo: Mai Yoke Taylor

The most prevalent damselfly was *Arabineura khalidi*, with no accepted vernacular name, although Gary Feulner is proposing Hajar Wadi Damsel. These have a brown abdomen and blend in well with the rock. They also happen to be the largest of the damselflies usually present at Jazira. Mike spotted a Powder Blue Damsel in a tree, and Bob snapped a shot of it in the act of taking flight, startled by his camera flash. Bob also saw a Blue-banded ischnura, *Ischnura evansi*, in the wadi. These are quite bright with a green thorax and a blue tail light. And they are also quite small, being actually just over an inch long.



Female "Hajar Wadi Damsel", *Arabineura khalidi*
Photo: Bob Reimer



Powder Blue Damsel, *Arabicnemis caerulea*
Photo: Bob Reimer



Male Blue-banded Ischnura, *Ischnura evansi*
Photo: Bob Reimer

Along the side of the open part of the wadi, Gillian's sharp eyes spotted an ant colony in the process of relocating; most of them carrying a white egg each—an intense little drama that we stumbled across quite serendipitously. They would have been all back underground had we happened by a few minutes later. Bob also found a trace of one other interesting insect—

the husk of a dead Water Scorpion. This is a true bug (Order Hemiptera) in the family Nepidae, which has a long tube from its rear that acts as a snorkel. It is a predator in the stream, and Bob has seen water scorpions eating dragonfly larvae, which themselves are predators.



Bob perfecting a new dragonfly-capturing technique?
Photo: Mai Yoke Taylor

Dark green with pink blooms, oleanders lined the wide open part of the wadi. We also saw a wide range of indigenous plants, including the pale flowers and seed pods of the popcorn plant and the convolvulus; the very common ground-hugging, spiky Eyelash plant, *Blepharis ciliaris*, with lavender blue flowers; and the spiny-leaved *Echinops* sp., with a spherical efflorescence, common in the rocky mountainous terrain of the wadis near Buraimi. In the wetter conditions of the gorge were spotted the wadi fig and the maidenhair fern. And of course the date palms in the plantation, along with other fruit trees such as mangos and even banana trees, provided cool shade above the opposite embankment of the wadi. A young and agile local man climbed up into a mango tree and threw down a small hard green fruit for us to sample. It had just a thin layer of yellow flesh under the green rind—slightly sweet, but hardly seemed worth all the effort!



Echinops sp. Photo: Keith Taylor



Maidenhair fern Photo: Keith Taylor



Eyelash plant Photo: Keith Taylor



Local man gathering mangos at Wadi Jazira plantation
Photo: Mai Yoke Taylor

On Friday afternoon, some of us cooled off in the wadi pools, some explored the plantation, and some spent time collecting specimens and taking photographs. The wadi's only amphibian—the toad, *Bufo arabicus*, as well as some small wadi fish—probably the indigenous *Gara barremiae*, provided a source of fascination for many.

In the evening, after dinner and a fireside chat, Andrew set up the ENHG's new telescope, a Celestron NexStar 5SE, and several members set to learning how to operate its electronic controls. After a bit of fiddling, they managed to train it on one of the brightest objects in the moonless sky, and found it to be Saturn, with clearly visible rings. This was a promising start, and Andrew and any other ENHG members who care to accompany him on future star-gazing occasions will continue to learn how to unlock the potential of this potentially quite sophisticated astronomical instrument. Turning in for the night, we found the temperature was pleasant enough—staying not much more than 20°C all night—no longer cool at the end of April, but something bearably close to room-temperature.

Before sunup the next morning, Andrew checked the humane rodent traps he'd set out the night before and found one occupied. Some of us accompanied Andrew down to check it out and found—no, not a gerbil, but a pointy-nosed dark brown little shrew-like mouse, which Gillian's research in her trusty copy of The Emirates – A Natural History later informed us was, in fact, an Egyptian Spiny Mouse. What made this individual, a male, unique, was that it had lost its tail, and didn't have so much as a stump of one in evidence. Also of particular interest were its flexible ears, which appeared to fold back alongside its head when at rest, much like an elephant's ears!



Tailless Egyptian Spiny Mouse
Photo: Mai Yoke Taylor

A few birds were spotted in the wadi, as well. The pair of black and white Hume's wheatears we saw on the acacia tree near our campsite represented a species we have come to expect on trips to these mountains. One member got a lucky glimpse of a kingfisher—species unconfirmed. Small birds, possibly desert warblers, were also spotted flitting about in the branches of wadi trees.

On Saturday, Gillian organized cleanup, with extra bags brought along for the purpose. On the way back from trips down to the pools, we filled up plastic bags with

litter, leaving this beautiful natural place in some small way improved by our visit. This would be a good activity to make time for on all of our field trips, as there is always a need for it, unfortunately.

On Saturday morning Andrew led a scramble along the deeper section of the gorge downstream from the plantation. The highlight: an Omani Carpet Viper he came across high up on the rocks of the gorge.

After our morning wadi swims and scrambles, we all left before noon for the drive home, to beat the mid-day heat. On the drive back, those Abu Dhabi residents who hadn't driven back to the UAE from the Buraimi area of Oman for a while quickly learned that the only re-entry route open now to non-locals involves making a right turn at the Buraimi Souk roundabout, and then following the road straight ahead to the Hili immigration point. The officials there want to know that you haven't been past the second border check, and telling them that you have been to Buraimi or Mahda is sufficient. Further explanation isn't necessary or desirable. One more word to the wise: even though passports aren't stamped and visas aren't issued to travel to this part of Oman, the customs officers on the way back are very much on the ball. They seem to be making a close inspection of all weekend campers, focusing in particular on the contents of cool boxes.

All in all, this trip was an excellent wrap-up of our season of ENHG camping outings.* From its rich natural history, to its history of human habitation, along with its scenic beauty and its value as a recreation spot, Wadi Jazira is a compact area, with lots to see and do—definitely a place worth making repeat visits to. For further information on the wealth of natural history and archaeology of Wadi Jazira—and lots of good photographs—check out the following links to field trip reports by the Al Ain Natural History Group in 2003 and 2004:

<http://www.enhg.org/field/jazira/jazira.htm>
<http://www.enhg.org/field/jazira/jaz2003/jaz2003.html>
<http://www.enhg.org/field/jazira/jazira2004/jazira2004.htm>

Keith Taylor / Bob Reimer

* The official last ENHG camping was the Bahraini Island trip on 9th-10th May—cf. Field Trips panel. -Ed

Ongoing Dragonfly Rider Research

Many ENHG members will remember the talk Bob Reimer gave to us in Oct. 2006, titled "Dragon Riders of Jazira: What's that little dot on the dragonfly's wing?" Well, the research continues on the parasitic midges he reported on then. At Wadi Jazira on 25 April, Bob filled four plastic specimen tubes with midge-carrying dragonflies to take to Zayed University where Dr. Brigitte Howarth had arranged for him to use a powerful microscope to inspect the midges, with the hope of sorting out whether they are one of two previously described species of dragonfly-dependent midges, or possibly a new species. In the latter case, they were going to send samples to an expert Brigitte knows, to have their identification confirmed and the species described.

On 6 May, however, Bob reported that their first go at the riders was inconclusive. He wrote, "We will need to dissect one to get a better look at the legs than we could *in situ* on the dragonfly wing. Of course that's tricky when you're working on an insect that's only 1 to 1.5 mm long." Watch this space for further updates!

For more information on dragonflies and damselflies in general, check out the article co-authored by Gary Feulner, Bob Reimer and Dick Hornby in the soon-to-be-published double issue of *Tribulus*, titled "An Updated Illustrated Checklist of Dragonflies and Damselflies of the UAE" (the original of which was published in *Tribulus* by Graham B. Giles in 1998). This checklist does not mention the riders, as they have not yet been sighted on dragonflies in the UAE—another bit of research on Bob's to-do list.



A Gully Darter with riders seen on the Jazira camping trip. There is one on top of the far rear wing and another on the bottom of the near rear wing. Photo: Bob Reimer

Keith Taylor

Nature's Sundials

The cover photo was taken on an earlier trip to Wadi Jazira. A *Trithemis kirbyi* (Orange Darter) male was perching on the weir. Orange Darters are often seen in the more open areas near gorges and running water. Gully Darters tend to be in the narrower gorges, while Purple-blush Darters (*Trithemis annulata*) tend to be in wide open areas. Occasionally, the three species are seen together, as at Aboul and Afrathe.

The Orange Darter is in obelisk position to minimize the heat it absorbs. You can see the shadow under the dragonfly is just barely the size of the thorax and head, so it isn't getting heated up on the abdomen. This behaviour is typical of the *Trithemis* genus, and because of this one of the vernacular names for these dragonflies in both English and German is the "Sundials."

Bob Reimer

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.

ITEMS ON SALE

AT THE ENHG STALL

- The Emirates – A Natural History, 350 dhs
The first complete referencing guide to the wildlife of the UAE. 580 colour photos.
- Jebel Hafit – A Natural History, 100 dhs
An attractive, encyclopaedic presentation of the natural resources of a local landmark.
- Breeding Birds of UAE, by Simon Aspinall, 50 dhs
- Abu Dhabi Bird checklist 10 dhs
(Free if you spend over 100Dhs!)
- Emirates Bird Report, 50 dhs
- Common Birds in Oman, 100 dhs
A beginner's field guide—can be helpful in identifying birds in the UAE as well.
- Bird watching guide to Oman, 2nd edition, 100 dhs. *Guide to bird watching spots in Oman.*
- The Birds of Al Jabal Al Akhdar, 50 dhs
- 2008 bird calendar, 30 dhs
A must for yourself ... and a perfect gift.
- Falconry, 60 dhs
- Wild about Mammals, by Marijcke Jongbloed, 40Dhs. *Guide to mammals of the UAE.*
- Snakes of Arabia, 50 dhs
- Pests, 35 dhs
Find out what's in and around your home.
- Reef Fishes of the UAE, 50 dhs
- Snorkeling and Diving in Oman, 50 dhs
- Comprehensive Guide to the Flora of the UAE, 100 dhs
- Plant Checklist, by Marijcke Jongbloed, 25 dhs.
Know your local wild plants.
- Feast of Dates, 100 dhs
- UAE in Focus, 100 dhs
- Sir Bani Yas, 100 dhs
- Musandam, 100 dhs
- On-Road in the UAE, 50 dhs
- Sulphur, camels, and gunpowder, 90 dhs
- Children's books: Yaw the Wildcat; Hayat the Leopard, 15 dhs

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Lectures

8th April
Video: Life of Birds
Episode 10: The Limits of Endurance, by David Attenborough

15th April
Windtower houses of the Bastakiya
Peter Jackson

14th May 7:30 PM
(Baynouna Thtr. 2nd Fl.)
Mangrove Ecosystem & Urban Development in the UAE

Dr. Tarek Yousef

21st May 7:30 PM
(Baynouna Thtr. 2nd Fl.)
Geckos of SE Arabia

Drew Gardner

3rd June 7:30 PM
(Baynouna Thtr. 2nd Fl.)
Slideshow: lecture title TBA

Hanne & Jens Eriksen

Field Trips

25th – 26th April
Wadi Jazira
Camping Trip

Andrew Bean

9th – 10th May
Bahraini Island Family Camping, Snorkelling Trip

Andrew Bean / Michael Creamer

30th – 31st May
Snorkelling Trip to Khor Fakkan via Sharjah Wildlife Park; overnight at ADSAC club villa, then via Bidia mosque to Sandy Beach/Snoopy Rock

Gillian & Gordon Kirkwood

Tentative Upcoming Activities

NB: May talks are on 14/5 & 21/5! (NOT 28/5)

10 June: Last Meeting of the season; topic TBA
Possible September lecture topic: Overview of Sharjah museums, esp. Natural History Museum

First trip in September (NOT in May, as previously suggested)—Hot weather trip: Visit two archaeological sites (Muweilah & Meleeha), the Wildlife Centre & the Sharjah Natural History Museum on Fri. followed by hotel stay; visit other museums on Sat. Daytrip option possible.

For future trip and lecture details, see AUENHG YahooGroup site.

Websites of General Interest

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

Website of the Emirates Environmental Group:
www.eeg-uae.org

Roy Richards' Photo Galleries:
<http://www.pbase.com/chirri2000/mountains>

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

Website with Information on Desert Locusts:
<http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/Study/Locusts/locusts3.html>

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