

# focus

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Emirates Natural History Group

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

## EDITORIAL

There have been rumours circulating for a while that the Cultural Foundation will soon close for major redevelopment, and indeed parts of the site are already boarded off. While we still don't know exactly when the main building will be closed, we have been looking for an alternative venue for our meetings. Thanks to Allestree Fisher, we have been given permission to use the main auditorium of the Abu Dhabi Men's College. This is sited on 19th street (Sa'ada Street) between Salaam St and 4th St. Although not quite as central as the present venue, the ADMC site is easy to get to, has plenty of parking and excellent facilities. We are planning on moving our operations there in February; more details will be given as things become clearer.

The Committee is in urgent need of help in organizing our lecture programme. Hazel has been doing a wonderful job, but other work commitments are swamping her. Please consider joining the committee and taking on this task, which mainly involves contacting potential speakers and slotting them into our programme. While on the subject ...if anyone has any suggestions for speakers, please do let any committee member know. We still have lots of empty slots in the programme!

The deadline for nominations for our annual Bish Brown and Sheikh Mubarak awards is approaching (28 Jan 2009). Nominations should be sent to myself or any committee member (email addresses on the last page).

I wish all our members a very happy holiday season and look forward to seeing you in the new year!

**Drew Gardner**

## EMEG Beach Cleanup in Dubai



Photo: Anonymous (Submitted by Feng Wen)

On Friday, 21 November., four ENHG members and six friends from Abu Dhabi joined about 80 like-minded folks from Dubai (and a couple of ENHG members from Al Ain)--cleaning up litter from the beach next to the Dubai Offshore Sailing Club. This was a 'Clean Up the World' event, spearheaded by Dubai Municipality and organised by the Emirates Marine Environmental Group.

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## FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Male Blue-spotted Arab, Colotis phisadia

Photographer: Dick Hornby

*EMEG was quite happy with the enthusiasm of the volunteers and the amount of litter collected.*

*EMEG representatives have agreed to help the ENHG organize a beach cleanup or other volunteer environmental project in Abu Dhabi next year, and ENHG member Cath Ware has volunteered to organize this as an Earth Day project in April of 2009. Possible ideas include a beach or dune cleanup (if we can find an area that needs it), a habitat restoration project, or a recycle drive. If you have any good ideas for such an event, you can send them in to Cath at [ware24now@gmail.com](mailto:ware24now@gmail.com) or mention them to any committee member at an ENHG meeting.*

*Hadia Nehme, EMEG Public Relations & Media Officer, [hadia@emege.ae](mailto:hadia@emege.ae), will gladly send you a free membership form to join EMEG. As a member, you can stay informed on upcoming events and actively volunteer for EMEG projects. —Ed.*

## Fossil Hunting Trip to Ibri Anticline

On Sunday, 7<sup>th</sup> December, the occupants of the three vehicles comprising the fossil hunting trip to the Ibri Anticline in Oman met up at 4.15pm in Ibri. We then drove in convoy south for 40kms to the Ibri anticline. (An anticline is a fold of rock layers that slope downwards from a common crest; they form when rocks are compressed by plate tectonic forces. The rock layers or beds fold to form a convex arch in which older rocks comprise the core). We finally located the right sand track off the main road and arrived at our camp site at 5.10pm.

It was pretty windy as we set up camp by an acacia tree,

but there was no sign of the thunderstorms that plagued Abu Dhabi early that morning. Three vultures circled overhead - they were probably eagles in reality - but never came close enough for us to get a proper look. Our campsite was organised just before dark. It was a beautifully clear night; Andrew set up his telescope, and through it we could see the planet Jupiter and 4 of its moons. Jupiter was easily identifiable just below Venus when the stars first appeared. The half moon provided a good light early in the evening, but was gone by 3am, and the stars were even clearer.



Ibri Anticline Campsite



Fossil Hunting

The next morning we set off for our first fossil hunting trip at 9am and found our first fossils as we walked towards the designated area. Our instructions said to look in the gorge with the rock shaped like the head of Nefertiti on the left. We found more fossils there, though not as many as expected, so we explored further along the main sand track. Our second fossil hunting expedition started at 3pm in the afternoon once it was a little cooler. We were now being choosier about which fossils we picked up. We stayed to the right of the main sand track this time and found more fossils attached to larger pieces of rock here. We located just over a hundred fossils between us, plus some interesting crystals. Our finds included coral, oysters, spiny oysters, gastropods including campanellids and naticids, and sand dollars and sea urchins—and Karen Hooper finally found the nautilus fossil she'd been looking for. Paul Hooper took close-up photos of the fossils to send away for further identification.



A Selection of Fossils

The gerbil traps that Andrew and his daughter Mara put out that night were all empty the next morning, although we'd seen lots of sand holes where gerbils might live. The area was comparatively green, with succulents, probably salt plants, and another type of plant from the pea family with brown pods containing 5 or 6 seeds and small pink flowers, most probably dhafras (*Tephrosia apollinea*), as well as acacia and ghaf trees spread out across the plain. Lynn Carter also spotted a pair of uniformly grey desert larks hopping across the rocks.

On the way home we stopped to look at some of the old houses in Ibri; unfortunately, the fort was closed for the Eid holiday. The fortified town of Selaif, however, was accessible. This old fortress built up the side of a hill was fascinating to explore, and we were pleased to see that attempts are now being made to preserve it. I'd be very pleased to hear from anyone who has more information on how old this fort is.

Many thanks to Andrew for leading a very enjoyable trip.

**Lynn Carter**

### A Love Affair With A Giant Beetle

The following article about Dr. Michael Gillett, who spoke to the ENHG in October, was originally published in **The National** on November 11, 2008. In the Nov 2008 issue of **Focus**, we had only enough space to provide a link to the copy that had been posted on the ENHG Al Ain chapter's website. We now publish it in its entirety, followed by responses by ENHG Founder Chairman John Stewart-Smith and senior ENHG committee member & former Group Chairman Peter Hellyer. - Ed.



Dr. Michael Gillett gets close up with a giant beetle.

Late one night, Dr. Michael Gillett ran into a friend's home carrying a glass oven dish. He raced into the living room and set it on the coffee table, around which eight scientists waited with anticipation.

In the dish were two insects, known as *Anthracocentrus arabicus*, or the giant longhorn beetle of the UAE desert, he had trapped at the base of a tree.

"If you disturb them they have an active defense posture," Dr. Gillett said, a biochemist and the world's premier authority on the beetle. "They have these amazing jaws, or mandibles, and they can swivel to face their enemy. It can be quite frightening."

That night in the living room of Dr. Gillett's friend, the group of scientists huddled on the couch to observe the tense captives. Of the 350,000 species in the world, these UAE giants are second only to species found in Brazil's rainforest. The nocturnal insects can measure up to 11cm in length, with sharp spines running down their shoulders for protection. And while males tend to be smaller than females, they are very aggressive when pitted against another of their sex.

Dr. Gillett had caught two males. The scientists watched as the beetles spread their jaws, each agitated by the other's presence. Before long the two insects lunged at each other. Dr. Gillett, in the interest of preserving his specimens, reached in to separate the duelling giants.

"I was bitten on the finger and it bled," he said. "And it hurt. It really hurt."



*Jaws wide open in self defense*

Dr. Gillett's reaction to the bite sent the dish flying to the ground where it promptly shattered. It was, in the end, just another episode in the history of the Emirates Natural History Group, a national organization that boasts hundreds of members. With chapters in Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Al Ain, the group has held regular seminars, hosted guest speakers, planned field trips and conducted research since it was founded in 1977. Comprising both scientists and laymen, membership is open to anyone with an interest in the natural world. Each chapter publishes a monthly newsletter, and the Abu Dhabi group produces a reputable biannual scientific journal titled *Tribulus*, to which all members can contribute.

Most recently, Dr. Gillett, who had previously worked at UAE University for more than 13 years, travelled to the Emirates from Birmingham, UK to help classify and catalogue the thousands of insects currently in the

Natural History Group's possession. Meanwhile, he held a series of lectures about the giant beetles.

The son of a fly fisherman, Dr. Gillett's interest began when he was just four years old. He recalls catching moths at night on the front porch, and keeping them in shoeboxes. He admired their intricate beauty, and has had trouble putting them down ever since. But giant beetles are now Dr. Gillett's passion.

Until recently these beetles were considered extremely rare. They came to Dr. Gillett's attention in the 1990s when two specimens, both dead, were found in the desert near Al Ain. It was not until 2003 that the first live specimen was captured.

Dr. Brigitte Howarth, an assistant professor in the Department of Natural Science and Public Health at Zayed University, was the scientist who made the discovery.

"What is interesting is they are barely known in the UAE," she said. "They are a great rarity. But that is changing. We now know where and how to look for them."

Research into the giant longhorn beetles has revealed the insect is exclusively associated with ghaf woodlands, or desert trees common in the Emirates. These trees are known for their long roots, which stretch between 30 and 60 meters. It is here, underground, that the beetles grow as larvae for up to five years, feeding on the roots. When they emerge from the ground, the beetles are already full size. They never feed. Instead, the giants live off the fat and nutrients they built up underground. Males outnumber females by six to one, and live for about one month. Females live only a couple of days. But the short life span of the female, combined with the predominance of males, ensures efficient breeding. After the female is impregnated, it extends a 3cm tube from its abdomen and plants it in the ground. Through this tube it lays several eggs the size of a grain of rice. The giant beetles grow, live and die in the shade of a desert tree.

To catch the beetle, Dr. Gillett sets up wooden boards along the base of a ghaf tree. The insects love enclosures, and at night, they can often be found under them.

For years Dr. Gillett and Dr. Howarth have studied the intimate link between the giant longhorn beetle and Ghaf trees. They have discovered these beetles are not only vital to the health and ecological balance of these desert woodlands, but artificially planted trees and those surrounded by building developments are barren of the insects. And as more trees are cut down or transplanted to make way for ceaseless development, scientists fear the bond between the giant beetle and ghaf trees will be broken. This disruption, scientists warn, could have a drastic effect on other animals.

Ghaf woodlands are a hub of desert life. Moths, ants, spiders, owls, scorpions, mice and gerbils are just a few of the animals who depend on the trees.

"This habitat is under serious threat from development in the UAE," Dr. Gillett said. "And the beetle could help us to evaluate the value and conservation potential for desert sites in Abu Dhabi and Dubai emirates and further afield."

Dr. Gillett's research on ghaf trees and the giant UAE beetle has been conducted in two phases. The first stage involved studying the beetle population at close range in the desert just outside Al Ain. During this time he has mapped out their behavioral patterns and relationship with the surrounding environment. The second phase, now underway, aims to widen the area of research to assess their environmental significance.

Dr. Gillett and Dr. Howarth hope to prove the ecological importance of these beetle giants. To them, insects are animals that must be protected.

"Most people think it is OK to step on an ant," Dr. Howarth said. "But it is not."

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**Submitted by ENHG Al Ain Chapter**

**Photographs by Brigitte Howarth**

## Comments

**John Stewart-Smith, the Founder-Chairman of the ENHG back in 1977, responded to the Al Ain Chapter's website on 10<sup>th</sup> November by commenting:**

"How I wish 'Bish' Brown was still alive to read this story. Who could have imagined that the first tentative steps of the ENHG on formation could lead to such a diversity of scientific discovery and promotion of the joy of nature? How wonderful that the tiny seed planted just over 30 years ago has bloomed so beautifully. Congratulations to every single member, past and present, of ENHG."

**Peter Hellyer, a member of the ENHG Committee since 1986 and a former Group Chairman, adds a bit of explanation:**

J.N.B. 'Bish' Brown was, of course, the prime mover in the formation of the ENHG, having taken the initiative to bring together other expatriates with an interest in natural history to form the Abu Dhabi Group. Formerly one of the founders of the Al Ahmadi Natural History Group in Kuwait, where he had worked for the Kuwait Oil Company, Bish was always keen not only on getting out and about into the desert and mountains but also on recording everything he saw, whether plants, birds, reptiles, mammals, insects and archaeological sites. Many 'first records' for the natural history of the Emirates were the result of Bish's work. He died in the early 1990s, shortly after he had retired after over 30 years in the Gulf. The annual 'Bish Brown Award', established by former ENHG Vice-Chairman Terry Adams and his wife, and former ENHG Secretary Caroline Adams, commemorates his contribution to UAE natural history.

But John Stewart-Smith deserves much credit, too, for his active involvement in the Group in its early years.

His comment, above, was, as always, modest about his own part in the story. Not only was he a prime mover in the establishment of the ENHG, along with Bish and Rob Western, (Bish and Rob coaxing him to become the Founder-Chairman), but he also contributed much to the early recording of the birds of the Emirates. In that, he was helped by his job as a pilot with the Abu Dhabi Defence Force, which allowed him to fly over much of

the country in a Hawker Hunter equipped for photo-reconnaissance.

A lot of the photographs, not surprisingly, were of breeding bird colonies on remote islands. The then-chief of staff of the Abu Dhabi Defence Force was apparently a remarkably tolerant employer! Some of John's other pictures provide an invaluable historical record of the Emirates prior to the development of the last three decades, and some of them, one day, would make a magnificent book. The photograph included with this article is one John took of a massive colony of breeding Socotra cormorants on Zirku island in 1972, before the development of today's oil terminal there had begun.



Breeding Socotra cormorants on the east side of Zirku Island in 1972 – the colonies are the areas of black dots on the hillsides.

*Photo: John Stewart-Smith*

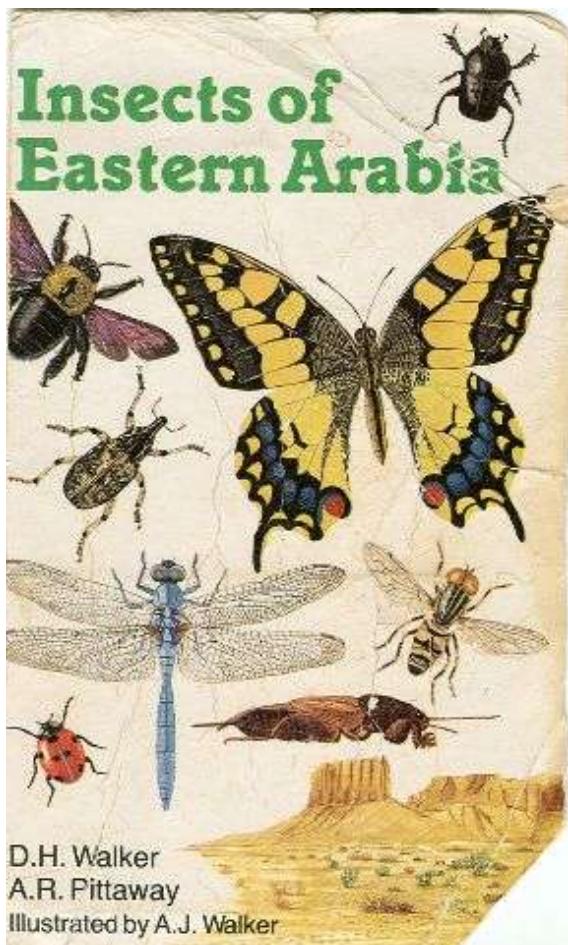
John called me recently to ask if I could get a copy of the book "The Emirates - A Natural History" to his son, Ross, who has recently arrived to work in Al Ain. Ross spent the first seven years of his life in the UAE, much of it out and about in the desert with his father - and is now back, still interested in UAE natural history. The second generation of ENHG members has arrived...

**All photographs by Doug and Lynn Carter**

## Insects of Eastern Arabia in PDF

Finding materials to identify common insects in the UAE and Oman is very difficult. We have some information that was published in *Tribulus*, some in *Fauna of Arabia*, and more in books like *The Emirates: A Natural History* and the recently released *Terrestrial Environment of Abu Dhabi Emirate*. While Tony Van Harten's new *Arthropods of UAE* series will address the entomologist's needs for keys, it is difficult for the layman to use due to the taxonomic detail provided and will take many volumes to complete. About the only accessible resource extant is *Insects of Eastern Arabia* authored by

D. H. Walker and A. R. Pittaway with copious illustrations by A. J. Walker. Walker and Pittaway did many studies in Arabia, publishing in many journals. Tony Pittaway is an expert on Hawkmoths. *Insects of Eastern Arabia* was published in 1987 by MacMillan. Unfortunately, when the book didn't sell well, Macmillan pulped the remainders without offering them to the authors. Now it is almost impossible to obtain a copy as those that were sold are ensconced in libraries and private collections. While it is 30 years old and scientific knowledge of insect species in Eastern Arabia has grown tremendously, this book still provides a useful introduction to our local insects. Fortunately, a copy was held in the Al Ain Chapter's library. As you can perhaps see from the scan of the front cover of this copy, it is well used.



As I got interested in insects, I photographed the pages and built a PDF copy of the book. Later I had occasion to contact Mr. Pittaway on another topic and asked him if it might be possible to make the PDF available to others. He consulted Mr. Walker's heirs and let me know that all were enthusiastic about having the resource available again. As copyright holders, they have granted permission for us to post this on the ENHG web site. They are also trying to see if there are other sources available to build a better quality PDF.

Apparently, some of the plates were presented to Prince Abdullah Bin Faisal Bin Turki who sponsored the publication. For now, we have the version using the Al Ain Chapter's copy available at:  
<http://www.enhg.org/resources/other/IOEA.htm>

To easily download this 14.2 MB file, open the webpage, right-click on the link provided, choose "Save Target As" and save the PDF, rather than just clicking on the link.

Tony Pittaway maintains three sites that might be of interest:

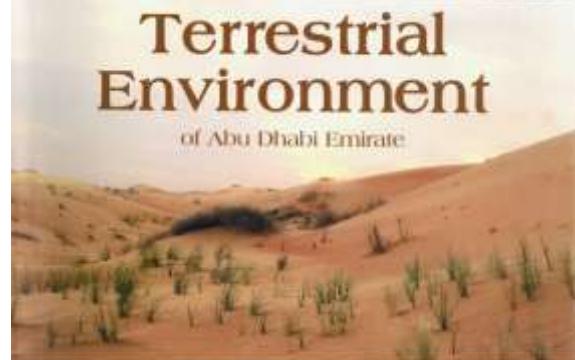
- Sphingidae of the Western Palaearctic (<http://tpittaway.tripod.com/sphinx/list.htm>), covering the hawkmoths of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East.
- Sphingidae of the Eastern Palaearctic (<http://tpittaway.tripod.com/china/china.htm>), covering the hawkmoths of Japan, Korea, China, Mongolia, Central Siberia and the Russian Far East.
- Saturniidae of Europe (<http://tpittaway.tripod.com/silk/satlist.htm>), covering the European members of the silkmoths, a family of large moths that includes the Luna Moth.

**Bob Reimer**

**Photograph by the author**

## Book Review

**Terrestrial Environment of Abu Dhabi Emirate.**  
Published by the Environment Agency Abu Dhabi.



This book has been a few years in gestation, but, finally, it is available and it is another very useful contribution to the growing literature on the ecology, flora and fauna of Abu Dhabi. It is a visually very impressive book with many excellent photographs, but, sadly, the book is disappointing in many ways. For example, most of the text was written several years ago and the authors were unable to update their chapters in the last year or two, so parts of their text are already out of date.

It is a large format book, lavishly illustrated and on high quality paper. It is the same size as the well known and well used book produced by Trident Press "The Emirates — A Natural History" and has more pages, so it is a weighty tome that few people would want to take into the field. "Terrestrial Environment" covers much of the same ground as the Trident Press book so one

would have expected it to go into a lot more detail, especially as it is meant to cover only Abu Dhabi rather than UAE. In fact the level of detail is not significantly greater, partly because the book does not confine itself to UAE. In many places there is confusion as to whether an author is referring to the Emirate or the country. It would appear that the authors were not given a clear remit to confine themselves to the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, and the editor did not attempt to restrict the scope of their contributions. As examples of the geographical ambiguity, the book contains fine pictures of Arabian Leopard, Caracal, Porcupine, White-collared Kingfisher, Spanish Sparrow and three geckoes that have never been recorded in Abu Dhabi. In fact, there are two photographs of Porcupine, a species which has never been recorded in UAE!

The book contains several double-page full-spread photographs and will serve as an attractive coffee table book. Most of the authors have done a splendid job and they present information that will be of general interest to the layman and considerable value to the specialist. Clearly, however, the layman will not be interested in a lot of the technical detail and the specialist does not need a lot of large, visually appealing photographs. He/she would, no doubt, have preferred a smaller, more portable, more focussed and more up-to-date book, which could be periodically revised. It would appear therefore, that the book rather "falls between two stools".

The chapters on geology, soils and climate are authoritative and well written but rather lacking in originality. The chapter on insects and other arthropods presents a welcome update and expansion of the existing knowledge, and the chapters on plants, mammals and reptiles are good accounts of the state of knowledge of these groups. Unfortunately the chapter on birds is not of the same quality, being strangely selective in the presentation of information, and out of date as far as modern nomenclature is concerned.

A major shortcoming of the book is that there is no index. Another is that many of the citations in the text are not in the bibliography. A further significant weakness is that there has been little attention to detail in dealing with captions for the photographs. Some have been transposed and others are simply wrong, such as the sedge *Cyperus arenarius* which is labelled as *Panicum arenarius*. There is also a lot of inconsistency in the names used in the captions — some have only common names, some have scientific, some have both, and many have no captions at all!

Overall, therefore, the book will be a major asset for those interested in flora and fauna of the region, but with more attention to detail it could have been a great deal better.

**Dick Hornby**

**Photograph by the author**

## This Month's Contributors

Doug Carter, Lyn Carter, ENHG Al Ain Chapter, Feng Wen, Peter Hellyer, Dick Hornby, Brigitte Howarth, Bob Reimer, John Stewart-Smith

### ITEMS ON SALE

#### AT THE ENHG STALL

(Book Stall will be closed 6 Jan; open 20 Jan.)

All prices are in dirhams.

- The Emirates – A Natural History, 350.  
*The first complete referencing guide to the wildlife of the UAE. 580 colour photos.*
- Jebel Hafit – A Natural History, 100.  
*An attractive, encyclopaedic presentation of the natural resources of this local landmark.*
- Terrestrial Environment of Abu Dhabi Emirate, 240. (See book review in this issue.)
- Marine Environment and Resources of Abu Dhabi, 140.
- Breeding Birds of UAE, by Simon Aspinall, 50.
- Abu Dhabi Bird checklist, 10.  
*(Free if you spend over 100!)*
- Emirates Bird Report, 50.
- Common Birds in Oman, 100.  
*A beginner's field guide—can be helpful in identifying birds in the UAE as well.*
- Bird watching guide to Oman, 2nd edition, 100. *Guide to bird watching spots in Oman.*
- The Birds of Al Jabal Al Akhdar, 50.
- 2008 bird calendar, 30.  
*A must for yourself ... and a perfect gift.*
- Falconry, 60.
- Wild about Mammals, by Marijcke Jongbloed, 40. *Guide to mammals of the UAE.*
- Snakes of Arabia, 50.
- Pests, 35. *Find out what's in and around your home.*
- Reef Fishes of the UAE, 50.
- Snorkeling and Diving in Oman, 50.
- Comprehensive Guide to the Flora of the UAE, 100.
- Plant Checklist, by Marijcke Jongbloed, 25.  
*Know your local wild plants.*
- Feast of Dates, 100.
- UAE in Focus, 100.
- Sir Bani Yas, 100.
- Musandam, 100.
- Sulphur, camels, and gunpowder, 90.
- On-Road in the UAE, 50.
- Children's books: Yaw the Wildcat; Hayat the Leopard, 15.

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## Lectures

16<sup>th</sup> Dec.  
The famous Abu Dhabi  
Sabkha  
*Dr. Christian  
Strohmenger,  
Geologist, ADCO*

6<sup>th</sup> Jan. 7:30 PM  
**Speaker & Topic TBA**  
(Watch your in-box!)

20<sup>th</sup> Jan. 7:30 PM  
Early ships, Trade, and  
Navigation Round the  
World

*Michael Creamer*

## Field Trips

21<sup>st</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> Nov.  
Sand Driving Course at  
Two Trees Campsite  
*Andrew Bean*

5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> Dec.  
Re-run Sand Driving  
Course at Two Trees  
Campsite  
*Andrew Bean*

7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> Dec.  
Camping Trip to Ibri  
Anticline, Oman  
*Andrew Bean*

19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Dec.  
Camping Trip to Jebel  
Rawdah  
*Allestree Fisher*

9<sup>th</sup> Jan.  
1/2 day trip to Sabkha  
sites: shoreline opp. Al  
Qanatir Island &  
Musaffah Channel  
*Andrew Bean*  
(Accompanied by  
ADNOC geologist)

30<sup>th</sup> Jan.  
½ day birdwatching trip  
to Al Wathba Lake  
*Andrew Bean*

(Accompanied by EAD  
Staff: Bird Monitoring &  
Conservation Sect. and  
Protected Area's Sect.)

## Inter-Emirates Weekend!

Mark your calendars for 27-29 March. IEW2009 will be Hosted by Dubai NHG at Oceanic Hotel, Khor Fakkan. Rates w / wo b'fast: Double 660/580, Single 540/500. Extra adult bed 120. Fri. buffet dinner 96. Must book via DNHG, by Feb 28. Email Lena Linton: [lena@mailme.ae](mailto:lena@mailme.ae). Full details in Jan Focus and on AUENHG Yahoo group.

## In the Local News Media

Our Sabkhas may look dull, but they're the salt of the earth (Comment by Peter Hellyer): <http://www.thenational.ae/article/20081223/OPINION/761403484>

Back to Nature (A new member's take on the ENHG): <http://www.thenational.ae/article/20081125/LIFE/298763198>

Bees: Hard Work, Little Play, End of Story:  
<http://thenational.ae/article/20081122/PAGETHREE/452492230/1119>

## Websites of General Interest

NHG Website, with newsletter & Tribulus archives:  
<http://www.enhg.org>

Wildlife Middle East News:  
<http://www.wmenews.com>

Tommy Pedersen's new UAE Birding Site:  
[www.uaebirding.com](http://www.uaebirding.com)

Hanne & Jens Eriksen's Birds Oman website:  
[www.BirdsOman.com](http://www.BirdsOman.com)

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Butler Holdings**



**BDO Patel**



**Dome International**



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**URS**

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**WESCO**

## Members' Items for sale

Please send small ads to [newsletter@chirri2000.com](mailto:newsletter@chirri2000.com)

## Postal Address

Emirates Natural History Group c/- Dr R. Andrew Bean  
Zayed University, PO Box 4783, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.

## Newsletter Details

Newsletter contributions to: [newsletter@chirri2000.com](mailto:newsletter@chirri2000.com)

## Yahoo Groups website

<http://uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/AUHENHG/>