

focus

Abu Dhabi, September 2009
Vol 33 (8)



Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

I would like to welcome everyone back after the summer break, and extend a particular welcome to all our new members. As I am sure you will agree, the ENHG is a friendly and dynamic group that is a lifeline to outdoor people trapped in the city! Please do spread the word and send copies of Focus to potential new members. We already have some very interesting talks and field trips lined up (see pg 8). Please note the first camping trip of the season to Hail Juwari during the Eid break. This is the best juniper woodland in the Jebel Al Akhdar mountains of northern Oman. It is a beautiful and peaceful place, and the weather up there at 2250 m above sea level should be perfect!

We are always very happy to have help on the Committee. At the moment we have a special need for someone to take over from Jenny as the Group Secretary. Committee meets once a month before the first lecture. We also would love it if any members would like to share their expertise or favourite places by volunteering to lead (or co-lead) field trips. Please do also consider writing short articles for Focus, and sending photos for the 'sightings' panel, which should continue, with members' input, from the October issue.

The ENHG does award occasional grants towards research projects or conservation initiatives. We are very pleased to announce that we are supporting the Yemen Leopard Recovery Programme, organized by David Stanton. David will be giving us a talk on 6 October, at which we will make the presentation. The grant will be used towards training Yemenis in identifying and recording leopard tracks and traces to attempt to gather vital information on the status of these rare and elusive creatures.

Drew Gardner

Lifetime Membership Certificate



Photo: Gordon Kirkwood

Following is the text of a letter presented to Pamela and Allestree Fisher in recognition of their years of contribution to the Emirates Natural History Group. The presentation took place at the ENHG's final lecture meeting of the season at the Abu Dhabi Men's College auditorium on Tuesday, 16 June 2009. -Ed.

The Committee and membership of the Emirates Natural History Group, Abu Dhabi, are pleased to present Allestree and Pamela Fisher with lifetime membership of

In this issue

- Page 1:** Front cover
- Page 2:** Editorial, Lifetime Membership Certificate
- Page 3:** Lifetime Membership Certificate, Natural History Awards Presentation, Ser Bu Nair Dhow Race
- Page 4:** Ser Bu Nair Dhow Race, May 2009 Visit to the East Coast
- Page 5:** May 2009 Visit to the East Coast, Changes in Bulbul Nomenclature, Mystery Burrow Revisited
- Page 6:** Mystery Burrow Revisited, Upcoming Speaker, Kelley's Kettle - Special Offer, ENHG Equipment for Members' Use
- Page 7:** In the Local News Media, Bookstall
- Page 8:** Committee Members, Lectures, Field Trips, Websites of General Interest, Corporate Sponsors

FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Crab Plover

Photographer: Hanne & Jens Eriksen

This month's contributors

Daniel Bardsley, Jane Budd, Michael Creamer, Chris Drew, Hanne & Jens Eriksen, Drew Gardner, Liza Green, Dick Hornby, Gordon Kirkwood, Keith Taylor, May Yoke Taylor, Keith Wilson

the Group, in recognition of their very generous contributions of time, enthusiasm and expertise over many years.

During their decade of residence in the UAE, Pam and Allestree have been pillars of the ENHG, leading innumerable day trips and camps, introducing so many of our members to interesting sites, both around the country and right under our noses on Abu Dhabi Island. These trips often involved multiple destinations, working in various features of note that the two of them had come across on their own frequent excursions around the Emirates. Their interest and knowledge of plants, archaeology, and other aspects of natural history were always freely shared, in Allestree's inimitable way.

Pam and Allestree are conscientious record-takers, and have increased our knowledge of plant distribution and phenology in the UAE and nearby Oman. They have developed lists of the species observed on trips to view the spring annual flowers that will continue to inform our explorations for years to come.

In addition to his long tenure as a proactive excursion leader, Allestree has long been a stalwart of our Committee, and his forthright opinions and ample common sense moved along debates on innumerable occasions. A regular contributor to the ENHG newsletter *Focus* and speaker at our lecture meetings, Allestree's presentations are invariably informative and entertaining. In 2005, Allestree was the well deserved recipient of the Bish Brown Award.

On behalf of the countless people whose lives you have enhanced, thank you, Pam and Allestree.

Drew Gardner, Chairman

NB: From 23 June to 20 August, 2009, Pam and Allestree Fisher drove their trusty Landrover Discovery, 'Dhahabiya', all the way home to England. Their trip is documented in their blog: <http://drop.io/pandatriphome>, which should remain posted for the next few months. To view the blog, enter the following password: aecpaf. Their new email address is aecpaf@hotmail.com.

Natural History Awards Presentation

On 22 June 2009, Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak, the Patron of the Emirates Natural History Group, presented the 2008 Natural History Awards at his majlis in Abu Dhabi. (NB: these awards are always presented for the preceding year, so the awards given a year ago were for 2007, not 2008, as reported in Focus, September 2008).

With permission from The National, we are re-publishing below the article on this event (but focusing on the Sheikh Mubarak award presentation) that ran in The National on 24 June, 2009. - Ed.

Pioneer who dug up UAE's past honoured

An Abu Dhabi British archaeologist has been honoured for his pioneering work uncovering some of the emirate's first settlements dating back 7,500 years.

Dr Mark Beech, cultural landscapes manager in the historic environment department at the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage (ADACH), has been on hand to discover an elephant tusk in Al Gharbia and a church and monastery on Sir Bani Yas Island. He also helped discover the first evidence of date consumption. This week Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, presented him with the Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Award for his achievements. The award, named after Sheikh Nahyan's father, was presented on behalf of the Emirates Natural History Group, of which Sheikh Nahyan is patron. Dr Beech has been in the UAE since 1994 and first worked for the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey before it was merged into ADACH.

His first project centred on excavations of a church and monastery on Sir Bani Yas Island. In 2004 he worked on Marawah Island, off the Abu Dhabi coast, as part of a team that studied the earliest settlements in Abu Dhabi emirate. DNA testing was used to date a skeleton to 7,500 years ago.

"We found one of the earliest necropolises and inside this we found the remains of the earliest known inhabitants of Abu Dhabi," said Dr Beech. On Delma Island his group found the first known houses in the UAE and used radiocarbon dating to discover that stones from dates people had eaten were from more than 7,000 years ago.

As well as being an archaeologist, Dr Beech is a palaeontologist and in November 2002 found a 2.54-metre long elephant tusk in Al Gharbia, while carrying out survey work. The fossil was between six million and eight million years old.

He said the Arab world was "very, very interesting" archaeologically because of its position as a cultural crossroads with interactions with ancient civilisations in other parts of the world, including Mesopotamia.

"Most archaeology has only been done in the last 50 years and especially in the last 20 years," said Dr Beech, an honorary visiting fellow at the University of York. Much of his work for ADACH centres on maintaining a database of fossil sites and archaeological sites and helping developers modify plans to ensure important sites are protected. He also teaches the archaeology of the UAE at Zayed University. He was presented the award at Sheikh Nahyan's majlis in the capital.

"I've been a member of Emirates Natural History Group since I first came to the Emirates and it's an important group that carries out important scientific work on natural history," Dr Beech said.

Also presented with an award by Sheikh Nahyan was Major Ali al Suweidi, president of the Emirates Marine Environmental Group. He was given the Bish Brown Award, named after John "Bish" Brown, founder of the Emirates Natural History Group, for protecting the country's marine heritage.

"We have many projects to protect marine life," Mr al Suweidi said. "We're also doing an education project for most of the kids of the emirate."

After receiving his award, Mr al Suweidi presented Sheikh Nahyan with several posters about marine life, including one on dugongs, the large marine mammals, and another that featured elasmobranchs, a subclass of fish that includes sharks and rays.

Keith Taylor, the Emirates Natural History Group Deputy Chairman, described Mr al Suweidi as "a dedicated educator" who had "given his time energetically" to promote marine environmental causes. "The Bish Brown Award commemorates one of our founders, and his boundless enthusiasm," Mr Taylor added.

Daniel Bardsley - dbardsley@thenational.ae

Ser Bu Nair Dhow Race

On 21-23 May 2009, a few naturalists and old salts accompanied EMEG Director Major Ali Al Suweidi on his research vessel to watch this year's dhow race to Dubai from the island of Ser Bu Nair (aka Sir Abu Nu'ayr, etc.). This island, about 65 km off the coast, is now maintained as a wildlife and heritage preserve, as well as a military base. This annual race commemorates the route traditionally taken by the dhows on their way home from this island--the last stop at the end of the pearling season. -Ed.



Forty-foot dhow, lightly built & strongly braced for racing
Photo: Michael Creamer



Bridled Terns settling down on Ser Bu Nair



Hoisting sail



A flock of graceful gulls on the water – the largest dhow fleet race in the world.

Five above photographs by Keith Wilson

And, in case you were wondering...



A broken spar! None killed. None injured. Alhamdulillah!

He was a pearl diver. On the last of his breath he caught just a glimpse as the bivalve closed. Huge! A pearl of great value! He tried with all his waning strength to wrest it from its rock. A blood vessel burst in his brain. Unconscious, he let go of his weight rope and flew to the surface. His messmates fished him out, and for three days he lay immobile on the deck, packed in salt.

When he woke, he began to bray like a donkey. Day and night he would assault the ears of all with his insistent honking. When the captain and crew could take no more, they put him ashore with a few dates and some water on Rendezvous Island, where the pearl fleet gathered before returning home. They thought he'd be dead in a week. But when the season ended, there he was: like some wild animal, honking as loudly as ever. And the next season; and the next. The island became known as Ser Bu Nair – 'High Island of the Man of Donkey Sound'.

(Adapted from oral history related by Aziz Abdullah, Head of Sharjah Environmental Agency, and Dr. Salah al Haj, Sharjah Municipal Director)

Michael Creamer

FYI: Article about last year's dhow race: http://www.minaseyahidubai.com/news_article.php?id=38#thumb



A lot of catching up to do!

May 2009 Visit to the East Coast

Having made a promise to take our friends' children snorkelling and armed with the knowledge that the 'Red Tide' had disappeared, we took a trip to Fujairah on 1 & 2 May 2009.

Our visit was confined to the Snoopy Rock area, where we snorkelled around the rock twice and took kayaks out in the late afternoon. The algae may have gone, but the sea had not yet returned to its former clarity, and we noted considerable damage to the corals and sea grass. We saw 3 or 4 very large cuttlefish, a few species of fish in the immediate vicinity of the rock and one or two small shoals, but the fish population appears to have been badly depleted following the 'red tide'. No blue and yellow Angel Fish, no turtles, no reef sharks. The bird life too seems quieter, but that may be because the nesting season is coming to an end, and it was disappointing to note that the beach wardens were not actively discouraging tourists to stay off the Rock.

On a brighter note, when we were at the ENHG weekend on the East Coast in March, we did see turtles both in the bay at the Oceanic Hotel in Khor Fakkan and at Khor Kalba.

There seems to be a large, ever increasing, colony of crows at Sandy Beach, and we were witness to the death of a mynah bird which the crows devoured. It's been several years since we spotted any Indian Rollers in the gardens at Sandy Beach. Perhaps a bird expert could explain whether their visits are seasonal or if the crows keep them away.

It would be nice to see future reports on this area, so that we can record the regeneration of underwater life on the East Coast.

Liza Green

Changes in Bulbul Nomenclature

Among the resident alien bird species found in Abu Dhabi's parks and gardens are two main types of bulbuls, and one much less common. All of them are originally from the Himalayan region, extending from Afghanistan to NE India. We'll give some of their distinguishing features and also mention recent changes in classification and nomenclature regarding these birds.

The Red-vented Bulbul, the species mentioned in the article about the fledgling in May 2009 Focus (see corrected online copy), is a fairly common breeding resident of Abu Dhabi. It has a red vent (rear end) and a completely black head, with a distinctively sharp crest.



Red-vented Bulbul

Photo: Dick Hornby

Even more common in parks and gardens in Abu Dhabi is the bird heretofore commonly called the White-cheeked Bulbul (aka Himalayan Bulbul, *Pycnonotus leucogenys*). It is easily recognized by the two large

white spots on either side of its face. However, over the last year or so, this locally occurring bulbul has actually become recognised as the White-eared Bulbul, *Pycnonotus leucotis*--a species that is much rarer in the Himalayan region than the White-cheeked Bulbul. It has a less prominent crest and a larger white patch.



White-eared (formerly White-cheeked) Bulbul

Photo: Dick Hornby

Yellow-vented Bulbuls nested near Mushref Park in the 1990s, but haven't since then in Abu Dhabi city. It is primarily a mountain bird, and it is very strange that it colonised the city for a while. Yellow-vented Bulbul has now become White-spectacled Bulbul (without a change of scientific name, i.e. *Pycnonotus xanthopygos*), though one wonders whether this new name will ever catch on. (In most of Africa it is called the Common Bulbul!)



White-spectacled (formerly Yellow-vented) Bulbul

Photo: Hanne & Jens Eriksen

See uaebirding.com for more information and photos.

Dick Hornby/Keith Taylor

Mystery Burrow Revisited

In June 2009 Focus, we ran the following photos on p. 4, showing a hare and a burrow found along a beach near Sila, where a hare had been sighted. Because hares normally don't excavate burrows, opinions were mixed about what might have originally made the burrow. To try to clear this up, we wrote to resident hare expert, Dr. Christopher Drew, Manager of the Sustainability Department at Masdar, and a former member of the ENHG. With his permission, we give his reply of 22 June 2009 below. -Ed.



Mystery burrow near Sila surrounded by what looks like nibbled-down Sea Lavender, *Limonium axillare*

Photo: May Yoke Taylor

The burrow looks about the right size to be from a desert hare, although the burrow is in open ground, whereas desert hares, which excavate small forms, rather than burrows, use larger shrubs or even clumps of grass for shelter. That said, any kind of sheltering habitat is prime real-estate in the desert, and so it could have had multiple occupants – quite possibly something larger like a jird may have excavated it in the first place. Hedgehogs do indeed burrow, and so possibly it was dug by a hedgehog; however, as with hares they tend to burrow within clumps of vegetation or at the base of trees.

Essentially, small mammals like jirds and gerbils will burrow anywhere, as they can dig down quite deep into the zone where the soil is cooler and then cover the burrow up and hide all day long. Mammals such as hares and hedgehogs that are not adapted to digging burrows (hares' bones are too weak and hedgehogs' legs are too short) tend to need something additional such as shade, so that the burrow doesn't have to be as deep, and they can sit in the entrance on the lookout for predators (in the case of hares) or cover the entrance with soil and vegetation, in the case of hedgehogs.

I imagine that hares would eat Sea Lavender, as there really isn't much that they won't tackle...I've never really studied coastal hares, so I don't know whether it is a preferred food for them.

Chris Drew

ENHG Equipment for Members' Use

The following ENHG equipment is available for members' use during field trips or on request:

- Birding Telescope
- GARMIN GPSMAP 60CSx
- Nikon Coolpix camera - 5 Megapixel, 4x opt zoom
- First-Aid Kit

(The club also has a good astronomical telescope, which is only used on official ENHG trips)

Please contact Andrew Bean, Excursion Secretary, at rexabean@emirates.net.ae to make enquiries. -Ed.

Upcoming Speaker



Arabian Leopards

Photo: Dr. Jane Budd, BCEAW

David B. Stanton is the founder and coordinator of the Yemen Leopard Recovery Program, the only organization consistently promoting the conservation of the Arabian Leopard in Yemen. An 18-year resident of Yemen, Mr. Stanton was until recently a full-time teacher at the Sana'a International School, where he involved his students in an annual fund-raising walk for nature conservation, which led to the development of the YLRP in 2007 and to the declaration of the Arabian Leopard as Yemen's national animal in 2008. In December 2008 he took a break from teaching to devote himself to the coordination of the YLRP on a full-time basis.

On 6 October David Stanton will be speaking to us about his project, currently underway, to recruit and train Yemenis biologists to independently conduct field research that should clarify the size of the population in Yemen of these elusive, understudied animals. In the process he hopes to raise the awareness in Yemen of the importance of Arabian Leopard conservation. The ENHG committee has agreed to help fund this project, and we are pleased to be able to invite him to the UAE to tell us all about it.

The Editor thanks the above speaker for providing autobiographical info. for Focus.

Kelly Kettle - Special Offer

The fuel-efficient Kelly Kettle, mentioned in June 2009 Focus, and shown in the photograph below, is now on offer to all paid-up members of all three Natural History Groups in the UAE at a 10% discount until 31 Oct. 2009. You can order this kettle from <http://www.kellykettle.com>. After registering, click on the online shopping link, choose a kettle, and add it to your shopping cart. On the order form, fill in this Coupon Code: 10%ENHG. -Ed



Kelly Kettle

Photo retrieved from <http://www.kellykettle.com>

In the Local News Media

Here is a sampling of news articles of relevance to the aims of the ENHG that have been spotted in the last few months - in case you missed them. -Ed.

Eternal emblem of Bedouin life:

<http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090607/NATIONAL/706069963/1342>

At the Festival of Falconry, a sport takes flight:

<http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090707/OPINION/707069938/1080/FOREIGN>

Helping hands and a good meal save exhausted bittern at city park:

<http://www.thenational.ae/section/NATIONAL?profile=1010>

UAE resident finds 167 insects new to science:

<http://www.gulfnews.com/nation/Environment/10320737.html>

UAE-based scientist finds new fish species in Oman:

<http://www.gulfnews.com/news/gulf/oman/10317556.html>

Google at sea:

<http://archive.gulfnews.com/articles/09/05/20/10315002.html>

Cheetah roaming freely in the UAE again:

<http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090606/NATIONAL/706059870/1139>

Centre helps traumatized big cats:

<http://archive.gulfnews.com/nation/Environment/10344273.html>

UAE to host Irena HQ:

<http://www.gulfnews.com/nation/Environment/10327093.html>

UAE climbs on recycling bandwagon:

<http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090612/NATIONAL/706119853/1010>

More schools join recycling drive:

<http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090730/NATIONAL/707299800>

Goodbye smells and scavengers:

<http://www.thenational.ae/section/NATIONAL?profile=1010>

Garden thrives on recycled bathwater:

<http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090901/NATIONAL/708319864/1010>

Water-saving devices to be installed:

<http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090621/NATIONAL/706209828/1022>

Shoppers presented with energy-saving light bulbs:

<http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090809/NATIONAL/708089854/1022/rss>

Desalination threat to the growing gulf:

<http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090831/NATIONAL/708309855/1001/FOREIGN>

ITEMS ON SALE

AT THE ENHG STALL

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.
(Free copies available to schools. Ask Chairman.)*
- Terrestrial Environment of Abu Dhabi Emirate, 240.
- Marine Environment and Resources of Abu Dhabi, 140.
- Seashells of Eastern Arabia, 120.
- Wild About Mammals, 40.
- Wild About Reptiles, 40.
- Snakes of Arabia, 50.
- On-road in the UAE, 50.
- Abu Dhabi Bird checklist, 10.
- Emirates Bird Report, 20.
- Oman Bird List, ed 6, 30.
- Birdwatching guide to Oman, 2nd edition, 100.
Guide to bird watching spots in Oman.
- The Birds of Al Jabal Al Akhdar, 50.
- Native Plants of Oman, 80.
- Comprehensive Guide to the Wildflowers of the UAE, 100.
- Trucial States, 150.
- Oman 1965, 150.
- Natural History of Oman, 50.
- Falconry, 60.
- Pests, 35. *Find out what's in and around your home.*
- Reef Fishes of the UAE, 50.
- Snorkeling and Diving in Oman, 50.
- Feast of Dates, 100.
- UAE in Focus, 100.
- Sir Bani Yas, 100.
- Musandam, 90.
- Abu Dhabi 8 million years ago, 15.
- Discovering Qatar, 120.

Committee Members

Drew Gardner
(Chairman)
Mobile: 050-6675830
drew.gardner@zu.ac.ae

Keith Taylor
(Deputy Chairman / Focus Editor)
Mobile: 050-820-4938
kjtaylor13@yahoo.com

Jenny Mueller
(Outgoing Secretary)
jennymuae@hotmail.com

Needed: Secretary to write committee agendas, take minutes, and do some email correspondence. Can you do it?

Eila Merriman
(Treasurer / Assistant Membership Secretary)
Mobile: 050-9081200
kubukabin@hotmail.com

Cath Ware
(Membership Secretary)
ware24now@gmail.com

Jeff Szuchman
(Lecture Coordinator)
Jeffrey.Szuchman@zu.ac.ae

Andrew Bean
(Excursion Secretary / Corporate Sponsorship Secretary)
Mobile: 050-3221327
rexabeen@emirates.net.ae

Peter Hellyer
(Editor of Tribulus)
Mobile: 050-6424357
peter@extinfo.gov.ae

Patricia MacLachlan
(Public Relations Secretary)
mp_maclachlanuk@yahoo.co.uk

Dick Hornby
(Member)
Home: 02-6274049
dnahornby@yahoo.co.uk

Martin & Linda Betz
(Members)
Home: 02-6272309
lindaleviskabetz@yahoo.com

Donatella Astratti
(Member)
sadalnashirah@gmail.com

Molly McQuarrie
(Member)
bonesetc@emirates.net.ae

Feng Wen
(Member)
feng.wen@adpc.ae

Barbara Smith
(Member)
barbbartonsmith@yahoo.com

Laura Wallace
(Member)
l_wallace@hotmail.com

Lectures

Venue: HCT/ADMC

Press CTRL+click [here](#) to view map/directions.

1st Sept.
Natural History of the UAE (Part 1)

Drew Gardner

15th Sept. 8:00 PM
Birds of Oman

Hanne & Jens Eriksen

6th Oct. 7:30 PM
Report on the Yemen Arabian Leopard Trust

David Stanton

13th Oct. 7:30 PM
Natural History of the UAE (Part 2)

Dick Hornby

NB: No talk on 20th Oct due to booking conflict

Field Trips

11th Sept.
Iftar Dinner / Camping at EMEG Reserve
Andrew Bean

12th Sept.
Pearl Diving at EMEG Reserve
Host: EMEG

18th/19th/20th Sept.
Camping trip to juniper woodlands in Hail Juwari, high atop Jebel al Akhdar in Oman. 4WD and passports are required. For further details, see email alert: *Update on Eid Al Fitr / Oman - Hail Juwari Trip + going to Salalah.*

Andrew Bean

Websites of General Interest

ENHG-AA Website (Archives: 3 newsletters, Tribulus):
<http://www.enhg.org>

Tommy Pedersen's UAE Birding / UAE Nature Forum:
www.uaebirding.com

Hanne & Jens Eriksen's Birds Oman website:
www.BirdsOman.com

Qatar NHG website:
<http://www.qnhg.org>

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

Arabian Wildlife:
<http://www.arabianwildlife.com/main.htm>

Archaeology website:
<http://www.adias-uae.com/>

Sharjah Museums sites (Check out the virtual tours!):
<http://www.sharjahmuseums.ae/>

Emirates Marine Environmental Group:
www.emeg.ae

Dubai Astronomy Group:
<http://www.dubaiastronomy.com>

Corporate Sponsors of the ENHG - 2009

These companies are supporting the ENHG activities in the region. We hope you as ENHG members will in turn support these companies whenever you can.

BDO Patel



British Petroleum



Dome International



International Bechtel Company, Ltd.



Nautica Environmental Associates



URS Corporation



Dames & Moore

Newsletter Details

Newsletter contributions to:
newsletter@chirri2000.com

Members' Items for sale

Please send small ads to:
newsletter@chirri2000.com

Postal Address

ENHG c/o Environment Agency -
Abu Dhabi, PO Box 45553, Abu Dhabi

Yahoo Groups website

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