

focus



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Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

Another season of enjoyable trips, lectures and social events is now drawing to a close, as many of us prepare for our 'annual migrations'. If you can, please join our last formal outing of the season, exploring one of Abu Dhabi's still undeveloped beaches by moonlight at the end of June.

Last week, we suddenly received reports of the appearance of a very young whale shark pup in the Bateen 'Fisherman's' Marina. We shared the concern of the environmental community in Abu Dhabi for the safety of this animal and were relieved to hear that it had found its way back to the waters of the Arabian Gulf, where it belongs. See the news link on p 7 for further details.

We are pleased to hear that the Arabian leopard conservation project in Yemen to which we have given our support is now finally on track (p 3). We are also honoured by ENHG's unexpected receipt of a Certificate of Appreciation from the Arab Towns Organization (p 7).

This issue of *Focus* is the last before September, as the editor takes a much-needed break. Thanks to all those who've enriched this newsletter with their contributions! Our first lecture meeting of the new season will be on Sept 21st. Wishing all an excellent summer and looking forward to welcoming you back in September!

Keith Taylor

Identified Plant from Oman



Barleria hochstetteri [Family Acanthaceae]
Photo: May Yoke Taylor

In May 2010 *Focus*, in our write-up of our trip to Misfat A'Abriyeen at the base of Jebel Shams in Oman, we ran the above photo of a plant spotted there, which none of our UAE-based contacts were able to positively identify. When we then sent it off to our contact at Kew Gardens, an expert on the flora of Oman, Dr. Shahina Ghazanfar, we received the following prompt response. -Ed.

The plant in the photo is *Barleria hochstetteri* [Family Acanthaceae]. It is fairly common in Oman at mid to high altitudes [800-1500 m] and is found both on the western and eastern Hajar Mountains and also in Dhofar. Elsewhere, it is found in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. The flowers bloom normally during the early hours and close by afternoon (unless it's cooler and not as sunny), and usually fall after a few days.

Shahina Ghazanfar

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FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Holding steady in the Al Gaffal dhow race

Photographer: Stefan Beck

This month's contributors

Stefan Beck, Shahina Ghazanfar, Peter Hellyer, David Hirsch, Christoph Herzog, Liz Sowinska, Keith Taylor, May Yoke Taylor

ENHG Membership Information

Annual membership in the Abu Dhabi chapter of the ENHG is 100 Dhs – for both individual and family membership. See Membership Sec. or Assistant at the next meeting for a membership form—also downloadable [here](#).

Members are entitled to join the group on all day trips and overnight camping trips. Each member is also entitled to a copy of the ENHG's more-or-less annual scientific journal, *Tribulus*. If you have not yet collected your copy of Volume 18, please take one from the book table at a meeting, and indicate on the list provided that you have done so.

NB: Lifetime ENHG Member Allestree Fisher wrote in on June 6th, after having received a copy of the above photo from this editor, that by amazing coincidence he then happened upon this very plant in the central Namib, where he and Pam have just spent 5 weeks exploring familiar and not-so familiar flora and fauna. -Ed.

A Note on Family Acanthaceae

The only plant in Family Acanthaceae occurring in the UAE that ENHG members are likely to be familiar with is *Blepharis ciliaris*, the 'eyelash plant', so-called because its roots are the source of kohl eye make-up, and its spines are used as kohl applicators.

According to Marijcke Jongbloed, in *The Comprehensive Guide to the Wild Flowers of the United Arab Emirates*, p. 107, plants in Family Acanthaceae are distinguished

by the superbly well-engineered way they disperse their seeds. After about ten minutes of wetting, the spring-loaded fruit capsule softens, breaks, and jettisons its two seeds in opposite directions, “up to 1 m from the mother plant.” Then the now-wet hairs on the seed swell up and force the seed into the correct angle for the root from the downward end of the seed to penetrate the soil. There’s even a mucus-like substance thrown in, keeping the seed in place while also keeping it moist.

Keith Taylor

Yemen Leopard Programme Update

On May 30th 2010, we received an update from David Stanton, Director of the ‘Yemeni Leopard Recovery Programme’ (now renamed the ‘Foundation for the Protection of the Arabian Leopard in Yemen’) – recipient of an ENHG-AD Research and Conservation Fund Grant, awarded in October 2010.

As readers of *Focus* will recall from the October 2009 issue, this grant was awarded to support the training of a team of Yemeni field researchers who will be undergoing a one-week course in Arabian Leopard field research skills at the Jebel Samhan Nature Reserve in Dhofar, Oman. These funds were earmarked to “contribute to transportation to and from Oman and accommodation & expenses over a two-week period”. Originally projected for January of 2010, this training course is now scheduled for November 1st – 7th, 2010 (delayed due to the time required for the official approval process).

David has copied to us an email sent to his team of seven highly-qualified Yemeni field researchers, informing them that the Yemeni authorities have now given their approval, and that their Omani visas are in process. He tells us that this course is expected to develop the capacity for Arabian leopard field research in Yemen and also to strengthen ties between Oman and Yemen on conservation-related matters.

We thank David for keeping us informed on these developments, and we look forward to a return visit from him during the 2010-2011 season to fill us in on the training course after it has been completed.

Keith Taylor

Off to the Al Gaffal Dhow Race!

On the weekend of May 28th / 29th a group of 11 ENHG-AD members joined Major Ali and some EMEG staff members on the island of Sir Abu Nu’air (common colloquial moniker ‘Sir Bu Na’air’). This island, belonging to Sharjah, about 65 miles off the coast of the UAE is now maintained as a wildlife and heritage preserve, as well as a military base. We joined a large crowd of mainly Emirati sailors and onlookers with the main aim of watching the start of the annual traditional dhow race, *Al Gaffal*, commemorating the route traditionally taken by the dhows on their way home to Dubai from this island—the last stop at the end of the pearling season.

After a five-hour ride on Major Ali’s large “slow” research vessel from Jebel Ali to the island, we saw an amazing collection of expensive modern yachts and traditional wooden dhows moored in the harbour. We anchored off the beach opposite EMEG’s shed and manama, and the

smaller “fast boat”, which had passed us on the way in carrying the Sharjah TV crew, ferried us across.



On the top deck of Major Ali’s “slow” boat
*Photo: Liz Sowinska



Drummers on a small ferry



Custom-built teak yacht

Friday mid-day some of us spent time cooling off and snorkelling in the harbour, where lots of clownfish and some barracuda and red snapper were sighted amongst some large flat-topped corals. Some took walks round the island (See Liz’s write-up below, pp 4-5).



Beach tug-of war

Later in the afternoon, Major Ali and the race’s sponsor, construction tycoon Mr. Khansaheb, presided over a number of ‘traditional’ beach games: rounds of tug-of-

war between teams of 9 men each, some swimming games, and a game in which a coin was extracted with the teeth from a bucket of flour. During the award ceremony that followed these games, the ENHG was honoured for its attendance and surprised with a pair of monetary awards, which the ENHG Committee was then pleased to pass on to our generous host on this occasion in the form of an in-kind donation from EMEG's wish list: a single-seater kayak for use in their education and marine conservation programmes. This kayak was presented to EMEG by ENHG-AD members Michael and Greta on June 5th, World Environment Day. A photo of this presentation will be run in the Sept. issue of *Focus*.

Most of us slept comfortably on the top deck of Major Ali's large boat, though Stefan spent the night under the manama on the beach. On Saturday morning, we collected our things and joined the TV crew on the "fast" boat for a close up view of the start of the race – the largest single-class sailing event in the world – and the weather, despite earlier reports, remained perfect for it.



Hoisting the sails

*Photo: Stefan Beck



The race is on!

After we got some spectacular shots (see this issue's cover), our boat whisked us back to the mainland, leaving Major Ali and crew behind in the "slow" boat to catch the full race. We learned later that the winner of this year's race was an Abu Dhabi boat belonging to General Sheikh Mohammad Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces.

Keith Taylor

All photos with two exceptions* by May Yoke Taylor

A Walk Round Sir Abu Nu'air Island

When we first arrived at the island EMEG Keith Wilson, Director of EMEG's Marine Programme, pointed out an area between the EMEG beach shed and the brick

airfield, where there is a well-established colony of dhub (Spiny-tailed Agama lizards). On a short walk with Richard I saw only one dhub (see photo below), though I saw many burrows.



I searched for a further 30 mins, but only saw crested larks (probably 10+). I also saw waders on the beach, but they did not settle for long, due to people walking along the beach. The only waders I could be sure of were a few Kentish plovers. I also photographed a clump of sedges by the airfield – quite possibly *Cyperus laevigatus* (re. p. 19 of Marijcke's Wildflowers book).

During the 3-4 hour walk I took with Stefan on Friday, we first saw a hollowed sand pit vacated by a nesting turtle on the beach heading to the east of the island. Heading inland, we were amazed by the amount of vegetation – largely salt-bushes – but quite verdant. There was definite evidence of recent rainfall, leaving run-off trails in the soil/gravel between the low rising hills. There were also many gazelle tracks (See photos below.)



As we walked we were impressed by the variety of colours of the rock formations. We could recognise ones which obviously contained iron compounds from their rich red colour; in fact, large areas had reddish coloured gravel underfoot. Elsewhere we found greenish (copper containing) rocks and also brilliant white lumps and boulders which I believe are manganese deposits. There

were various multicoloured strata...it was very reminiscent of what I have seen in the various wadis around Buraimi and Hatta. I don't recall seeing any substantial trees...mainly low bushes, and none of the typical acacia species we usually see on the mainland.



The author surrounded by multi-coloured rocks
*Photo: Stefan Beck

We came across probably 15-20 Sooty Gulls, which were flying around us screeching their alarm calls to divert us away from their nests. The gulls could be seen sitting on nests atop the small elevated ridges, and it was while observing them that we glimpsed, at quite a distance, at least three Arabian Mountain Gazelles, *Gazella gazella cora*—identifiable even in an indistinct photograph like the one below by the dark flank streak. The one shown here was being mobbed by Sooty Gulls.



On the far side of the island, we came across what looked like the remains of open-cast mines: large areas of reddish gravel with signs of digging, though we saw no signs of machinery or abandoned vehicles, etc.

At the most easterly point of our walk we could see the thousands of Bridled Terns, mostly as specks on the skyline. The noise was amazing, and would have been deafening if we had ventured closer. We turned back so as not to disturb the nesting birds.

I'm sure that I'm not the only one who would dearly like to re-visit Sir Abu Nu'air Island. It was really a privilege and a delight to be on the trip and with such a lovely group.

Liz Sowinska

All photographs with one exception* by the author

NB: We realize that it was at first stated that alternate transportation would allow even more members to join the trip to Sir Au Nu'air this year. As it turned out, more members expressed interest than the eleven Major Ali was able to accommodate, so Michael and Keith, whom

Andrew had appointed trip leader and co-leader in his unexpected absence, chose all nine additional participants in a blind draw from among those responding. Those unable to attend this time, however, should have a fair chance of doing so next year. – Ed.

A Visit to the Al Ain Night Zoo

On June 11th, Andrew organized an outing to the Night Zoo at the Al Ain Wildlife Park and Resort, attended by over 30 members from both the Abu Dhabi and Dubai NHGs. Entering at 6:30 pm, our group was first treated to a presentation at the Zayed Education Centre on coming attractions at the Al Ain Resort and Wildlife Park, highlighting themed safari excursions and the zoo's increasingly active role in species conservation. Following this, we attended the Birds of Prey show (preceded by a parrot training session) – an entertaining, informative programme. After the show, we scattered to enjoy picnic suppers and view the white lions and other attractions. Though the large Big Cats area was open all evening, those of us arriving at that facility apparently just after feeding time (a time we hadn't heard announced) found the well-fed cats sleeping it off, or in hiding. In fact, perhaps the most active 'animals' on display were the animatronic dinosaurs!

The night zoo still has some work to do to catch up with world-standard zoos like the San Diego or Singapore Zoos, but it is on its way. Return visits over the next few years to check out the developments are recommended. During the summer, till Sept. 30th, it is open till midnight, with last entry at 11 pm. Ramadan hours: till 2 am. For further information, see the website link on p 7.



Presenter with Imogen and kestrel – stars of the show!



Female white lion at the Night Zoo

Keith Taylor

Photographs by Christoph Herzog

ATO Certificate Awarded to ENHG

On May 30th, the ENHG received the following by post:



Arab Towns Organization Prize Foundation Certificate of Appreciation:

THE EMIRATES NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

The Arab Towns Organization Prize Foundation sends you its best wishes and regards and thanks you for your distinguished contribution to Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates' winning the Environmental Awareness Prize in this Tenth Season.

Wishing you much success,
M. Muhammad Ahmad Al-Sayyid
Chairman, Board of Directors of the Prize Foundation
Doha, May 11, 2010

Full translation by David Hirsch

Overview of Tribulus, Vol. 18

As ENHG members will know, the latest issue of our journal, *Tribulus*, has now been published. Volume 18, dated 2009, follows the new pattern of producing an annual volume, rather than one twice a year, but has succeeded in maintaining the policy of expanding the length to more than two of the old bi-annual issues, with a total of 88 pages. It should, of course, have been published earlier, and the year 2008 has been skipped, sadly, but that's due primarily to a lack of suitable papers coming in.

The latest volume, though, makes up for that. The first two papers break new ground with the first detailed geological descriptions of two of Abu Dhabi's offshore islands, Balghelam and Al Aryam, written by two top experts, Graham Evans and Tony Kirkham. Both of these are private property, and access is difficult, so these provide an interesting outline. These are followed by the usual collection of papers on natural history, including papers from regular contributors like Group Chairman Drew Gardner, Dubai Group Chairman Gary Feulner, former Abu Dhabi Chairman Dick Hornby, Bob Reimer, from the Al Ain ENHG, and former Al Ain Group member, Mike Gillett. It's good, though, to see new contributors, like Matthew Cock, a Switzerland-based moth specialist, and Oscar Campbell, a teacher at Al Khubairat who is best known for his enthusiasm for birds but turns his hand on this occasion to a report on butterfly migration.

Topics include two new geckos, one new snake and one new grass for the UAE, observations on a variety of moths, ladybirds and beetles, an updated list of the UAE's dragonflies and much more. There are plenty of new scientific discoveries still to be made in the UAE, as this list shows. There is also a lengthy section of reviews of new books about UAE natural history and a lengthy bibliography of recent publications.

Tribulus remains the only peer-reviewed academic journal in English devoted to the natural history, geology and archaeology of the UAE and, after nearly two decades of publication, is an increasingly important source of information on these topics. Thanks largely to the efforts by Bob Reimer to make all copies available on the Al Ain Group's website (www.enhg.org) it is also being quoted more widely in academic books and journals overseas.

Though designed to maintain a high academic standard, that doesn't mean that there isn't scope for less scientific members to contribute papers - the editorial team are always happy to provide advice on writing and editing papers and short notes.

The next issue, Volume 19, is now in preparation and will be devoted primarily to a full checklist of the flora of the Musandam peninsula, prepared by Gary Feulner, with help from some of the world's top specialists in the botany of Arabia.

Peter Hellyer

Upcoming Speaker



Rudi Azzato is the Marketing Director of Emirates Hydroponics Farms. He is originally from Australia, where he worked in this business for many years with A&B Hydroponics International Pty Ltd.

He will talk to us on June 15th about the advantages of hydroponics, various methods of hydroponics and different nutrients used from the seedling stage through to harvest.

Further information on Emirates Hydroponics Farms for Vegetables can be obtained from the following link: <http://emiratesfarms.com/>. Also, the following article on this business was run in The National on August 7, 2008: [Hydroponics: a little water goes a long way, and that makes sense for UAE.](#)

The Editor thanks the above speaker for providing autobiographical information & photo for Focus.

In the Local News Media

The National, April 8: [It's local, it's organic, it's perfect](#)

The National, April 29: [Island oasis of Al Sammaliah provides young Emiratis with a bridge to the past](#)

The National, April 30: [Major Ali al Suweidi, soldier fighting for nature](#)

Gulf News, May 12: [Wildlife experts draft conservation guidelines](#)

The National, May 18: [Sharjah's treasure trove of natural wonders](#)

The National, May 18: [Arabian wolf thrives in breeding centre](#)

Gulf News, May 22: [Turtles in distress get shelter](#)

Gulf News, May 22: [Al Ain Wildlife Park: A night at the Zoo](#)

The National, May 27: [Potential answer to scourge of red tide](#)

The National, June 2: [Two caracals from Yemen move to Al Ain zoo](#)

The National, June 9: [New solar power plant for Abu Dhabi](#)

Gulf News, June 10: [Whale shark makes short stopover in Abu Dhabi](#)

The National, June 11: [Arabian Oryx runs wild once more](#)

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

Al Ain Wildlife Park and Resort <http://www.awpr.ae/en/Pages/Home.aspx>

Prezi – the zooming presentation editor (used by Ada Natoli in her June 1st talk on dolphins) <http://prezi.com/>

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.
- Terrestrial Environment of Abu Dhabi Emirate, 240.
- Marine Environment and Resources of Abu Dhabi, 140.
- Arthropod Fauna of the UAE, Vol 1, 110.
- Arthropod Fauna of the UAE, Vol 2, 110.
- 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.
- 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 & around your home.
- Reef Fishes of the UAE, 50.
- Snorkeling and Diving in Oman, 50.
- Feast of Dates, 100.
- UAE in Focus, 100.
- Musandam, 90.
- Abu Dhabi 8 million years ago, 15.
- Discovering Qatar, 120.
- Checklist to the Flora of Qatar, 60.
- **NEW**: Breeding Birds of the United Arab Emirates, by former ENHG Chairman Simon Aspinall, 100.

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Starting in September 2010, a new Lecture Coordinator will be required – to arrange speakers for our twice-a-month lectures, with the help of the Committee. Can you do this?

Also required: An AV Assistant to control the lights and sound during some meetings, as part of a team (training will be provided). Can you help us?

Lectures

Venue: HCT / Abu Dhabi Men's College
Press CTRL+click [here](#) to view map/directions.

18th May
(ENHG AGM)
The Importance of Environmental Awareness

Dr. Anf Ziadat, with Mouhamed Taher

1st June
Conservation Genetics and Dolphins in the Mediterranean Sea
Dr. Ada Natoli

15th June **7:30 pm**
Emirates Hydroponics Farms for Vegetables
Rudi Azzato

Field Trips

27th to 29th May
Sailing with Major Ali to watch start of Sir Abu Nu'air dhow race
Michael Creamer/ Keith Taylor

11th June
Visit to Al Ain Night Zoo
Andrew Bean

25th June
Beach Moonwalk
Feng Wen

Social Event

8th June
End-of-season social gathering at the Blue Line Bar on the top of the Oryx Hotel, Khalidiya

ENHG-AD Research & Conservation Fund Grant Application Information

For background on this fund, see [Dec 2009 Focus](#), p5.
For research & grant application guidelines, click [here](#).
For grant application form, click [here](#).
For further enquiries, contact ENHG Chairman Drew Gardner, at drew.gardner@zu.ac.ae.

ENHG Equipment for Members' Use





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

- Birding Telescope
- GPS unit – GARMIN GPSMAP 60CSx
- Nikon Coolpix camera – 5 Megapixel, 4x opt zoom
- First-Aid Kit
- Sky Scout astronomical object locator/identifier
- Celestron NexStar telescope (on field trips only)

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

Corporate Sponsors of the ENHG - 2010

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.	
Mott MacDonald, Ltd.	
Nautica Environmental Associates	
URS Corporation	 Dames & Moore

Newsletter Details

Newsletter contributions to:
newsletter@chirri2000.com

Postal Address

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

Members' Items for sale

Please send small ads to:
newsletter@chirri2000.com

Yahoo Groups website

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