

focus



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Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

A timely survey of the endangered race of Collared Kingfishers in their main population centres in Khor Kalba, in support of which the ENHG has awarded a Research & Conservation Fund grant, is now underway: see Oscar Campbell's initial report on this project on page 3 and Ahmed Al Ali's striking photo on the cover.

David Stanton, Director of the Foundation for the Protection of the Arabian Leopard in Yemen, recipient of an ENHG R & C grant in 2009, has reported that the training session for Yemeni researchers in Oman has now been successfully completed. He sees this as a very significant step in leopard conservation in Yemen and in cooperative conservation between Yemen and Oman. A report on this session will appear in the Dec. issue of Wildlife Middle East News. We look forward to David's follow-up presentation on this project next year.

Finally, nominations for the Bish Brown and Sheikh Mubarak Awards are now open. The closing date is 31 January 2010, and the winners will be announced at the Inter Emirates Weekend annual dinner in February 2011. IEW 2011 is still in the planning stages. Watch for details in the next issue of Focus & email alerts in Dec.

Keith Taylor

Natural History Awards Presentation

On 9 November 2010 Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak, the Patron of the Emirates Natural History Group, officially presented the 2009 Natural History Awards. Dr. Christian Velde, Resident Archaeologist at the National Museum of Ras Al Khaimah, received the Sheikh Mubarak award for successfully re-organising that museum and for overseeing, contributing to and publishing on an important programme of excavation, restoration and conservation, leading to a number of important discoveries regarding the ancient port city of RAK/Julfar and its defences – about which he delivered a fascinating presentation to the ENHG directly following this award ceremony! Hanne & Jens Eriksen received the Bish Brown Award for promoting SE Arabian Natural History and especially birds through their extraordinary photography and publications and for service to the ENHG through informative lectures and management of the ENHG Book Stall over the last few years. –Ed.



Dr. Christian Velde receiving Sheikh Mubarak Award

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FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Collared Kingfisher, Khor Kalba

Photographer: Ahmed Al Ali

This month's contributors

Ahmed Al Ali, Oscar Campbell, Kevin Duell, ENHG-AI Ain, Rima Jabado, QNHG, Simon Strickland, 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. NB: 2010 membership is reduced to 50 Dhs from Oct - Dec. See Membership Sec. or Asst. at the next meeting for a membership form.

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 normally annual scientific journal, *Tribulus*. If you have not yet collected your copy of Volume 18, please contact Chairman; there are still copies in stock.



Hanne & Jens Eriksen receiving Bish Brown Award

Photographs by Keith Taylor

Collared Kingfisher Survey



Photo: Ahmed Al Ali

The Collared Kingfisher is surely one of the flagship bird species in the UAE. Strikingly coloured, approachable and highly specialised, it is limited to just one location in the country, the mangrove forests of Khor Kalba (Sharjah Emirate) in the southeast. Here it is apparently declining, possibly dramatically. This is presumably due to the radical habitat alteration that is obvious to anyone that has visited Khor Kalba down the years. Most seriously, this has included dredging during the recent construction of a new waterfront and corniche and the subsequent disruption of the site's tidal hydrology. The sub-species of Collared Kingfisher occurring at Kalba is the endemic and appropriately named *kalbaensis*. Further afield, the species occurs in mangroves in the Red Sea and, more widely, from southern India to Australia.

I use the word 'apparently' above because, at this stage, nobody can be absolutely certain that the perceived decline is real. The presumption is based on anecdotal observations and some partial surveying carried out in recent years. For example, 14 individuals were located by kayak in February 2009. This visit was not exhaustive, but, even so, compares most unfavourably to the estimated breeding population of 44-55 pairs recorded during the only previous full survey, in May 1995.

To try and remedy this lack of basic population size data, a project, which will run from October 2010 until May 2011, has been funded by ENHG. Ahmed Al Ali (Sharjah), Neil Tovey (Dubai) and Oscar Campbell (Abu Dhabi) have begun a thorough survey of the habitat remaining at Kalba in an attempt to ascertain, as precisely as possible, how many individual kingfishers are present. Fieldwork began in mid October 2010 and further visits are planned in December 2010, and March and May 2011. During the course of this, the entire area will be searched, and all sightings of Collared Kingfishers mapped. Searching will include wading the channels (at low tide! – as well as being the safest time to search for kingfishers, this is also the most productive as birds hunt crabs on the open mud), clambering through the densest areas of mangroves off the main channels and tape-luring birds to locate territories in spring. The May survey intends to replicate exactly the

methodology used in May 1995 and so provide as valid a comparison as possible. In addition to counting kingfishers, Ahmed will be building up a photographic portfolio of this magnificent species and its nationally important home. His stunning pictures will be used in publicity material to raise awareness of this endangered bird and its habitat.

On behalf of all participants, I would like to thank ENHG for their support with this project. Updates on progress will be forthcoming in *Focus* and, of course, the full results of the survey will be published in *Tribulus*.

Oscar Campbell

Late October Introductory Birding

On 30th October 2010, thirteen amateur ENHG birders, led by Andrew Bean, toured Abu Dhabi Island, honing skills with binoculars and field guides while surveying the birdlife. Here is a list of the birds positively identified:

Eastern Corniche mangroves and palm grove:

Western Reef Heron (white & dark plumage)
 Grey Heron
 Mute Swan
 Purple Sunbird – M eclipse colouration
 Greater Flamingo
 Collared Dove



Mute Swans (most likely palace residents)

Mushrif Palace Park palm grove:

Red-vented Bulbul
 House Crow
 White-eared Bulbul
 Common Kestrel*

*At first ID'd as a Saker Falcon, it was re-evaluated as a Common Kestrel due to its slight build and colouration.



Common Kestrel

Western Corniche Park lawns & beach:

Common Mynah
 Hoopoe Lark
 Eurasian Curlew (juv?)
 Crested Lark



Eurasian Curlew



Crested Lark

Old ADNOC residence by the Hilton Hotel:

Weaver nests were again spotted in the hidden tamarind tree, but no weaver birds were positively identified. Prevented by the security guard from going inside the building to view the nests up close this time, we had to peer up at them from ground level. A look through our records confirms that we also failed to spot weaver birds here on previous visits at this time of year. On the other hand, breeding pairs of three species of weavers (Village, Golden-backed and Black-masked) were spotted here last March. We may spot them again next March, if the building and tree haven't been pulled down by then—as we know they will be, all too soon.

Keith Taylor

All photographs by Kevin Duell

Noukhada Twitchers' Kayaking Tour

On the afternoon of 5th November, 26 ENHG members joined Noukhada co-owner Don Revis in kayaks launched from the far end of the Corniche Al Qurm, and paddled down several channels in a loop through the mangroves, enjoying the serenity of this landscape.



Though the fox family often spotted here wasn't at home, crabs, fish and the birds that feed on them were all in evidence. Here is a list of confirmed bird sightings:

Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo*
 Western Reef Heron, *Egretta gularis*
 Grey Heron, *Ardea cinerea*
 Black-winged Stilt, *Himantopus himantopus*
 Ringed Plover, *Charadrius hiaticula*
 Golden Plover, *Pluvialis fulva*
 Dunlin, *Calidris alpina*
 Common Snipe, *Gallinago gallinago*
 Whimbrel, *Numenius phaeopus*
 Curlew, *Numenius arquata*
 Redshank, *Tringa totanus*
 Collared Dove, *Streptopelia decaocto*
 Palm Dove, *Streptopelia senegalensis*
 White-cheeked Bulbul, *Pycnonotus leucogenys*
 Red-vented Bulbul, *Pycnonotus cafer*
 Chiffchaff, *Phylloscopus collybita*
 Purple Sunbird, *Nectarinia asiatica*
 Red-backed Shrike, *Lanius collurio*
 Common Mynah, *Acridotheres tristis*
 House Sparrow, *Passer domesticus*



Black-winged Stilts

Viviparous *Avicennia marina* seedling

On the bend of a dredge-widened channel, Don pointed out a large stand of completely dead mangrove trees that had been cut off from the tidal flow by a large mound of dredged earth—demonstrating the fragility of this ecosystem, but we also saw signs of new growth: viviparous mangrove seedlings waiting to take root.

And on our way out, as dusk was approaching, our guide pointed out—just audible under the raucous sound of roosting mynahs—the unusual sound of naturally rushing water—pouring back out of the mangrove stands into the main channel as the former high tide receded.

Keith Taylor / Simon Strickland

All photographs by May Yoke Taylor

Qatar NHG Website Review

A look through the website of the Qatar Natural History Group shows it's a group involved in many of the same sorts of activities as the three NHGs in the UAE; it has been going about the same length of time as the ENHG: over thirty years. www.qnhg.org is a good example of an effective NHG website; it's attractively designed and easy to navigate.

The Talks section includes an intriguing write-up of a talk on an ongoing study of Ethiopian Hedgehogs in Qatar, including the use of radio-tracking to study these fast-moving animals. Here's a link to an article about this research in the Gulf Times, Sept 14: [Qatari team studying the ecological role of hedgehogs](#). This study looks worth following up on – in fact, the principals could be approached to produce an article for a future issue of *Tribulus*. Other past and future talks have information of use to aficionados of dragonflies and nautical history. A glance at the list of Archived Talks shows past speakers have included our own Chairman Drew Gardner as well as Hanne and Jens Eriksen. Perhaps some of their speakers can be encouraged to reciprocate!

The Rambles section showcases a wide variety of cultural and natural history attractions in Qatar the group has run day-trips to. Under October 2010 Schedule, about halfway down that page the Rambles & Field Trips Coordinator's musings about the purposes and principles of the QNHG might resonate with some members of our NHGs as well. And the list of Rambling songs shows the spirit runs high in this group!

'Publications' includes links to the four long newsletters published per year – with some information overlapping that available on the website, but with a lot more besides, attractively presented. To view the September 2010 issue of the QNHG newsletter, click [here](#).

The section on Overseas Trips shows an additional dimension of this group's activities: an average of two week-long trips to destinations near and far, this year including Sharm al Sheikh and Cambodia & Vietnam. Some of us will remember similar adventures organized by the ENHG and DNHG in years past; perhaps someone would like to step forward to do this again.

The section on the Qatar Bird Club, a separate group that has strong ties to the QNHG, has information of interest to the twitchers amongst us, including links to archived issues of their excellent newsletter featuring high-quality bird photographs and good information about birds of Qatar – by-and-large the same birds found in the UAE. To have a look at the October 2010 issue of the Qatar Bird Club Newsletter, click [here](#).

The Resources tab on the upper right is also worth checking out – featuring links to websites not only about Qatar but about the region, including the UAE Birding site, also listed in *Focus*.

The *Focus* Editor appreciates the collaborative efforts of QNHG PR/Media & Talks Chair Fran Gillespie; we will continue to feature the QNHG website in our 'Websites of General Interest' panel in *Focus*.

Keith Taylor

BookReview: Common Birds of Qatar



Common Birds of Qatar, the first field and identification guide to the birds of this country, will be published in early November 2010. Featuring 215 species and over 400 photographs in colour, each page includes a text describing the bird, aimed at the general reader, plus a map of Qatar indicating its distribution, and a bar chart showing which months of the year the birds are likely to be encountered and whether the species is more common or less commonly seen.

Danish photographers Hanne and Jens Eriksen, who have lived in Oman and Abu Dhabi for 25 years, are famous for the superb quality of their photographs, which have appeared on bank notes and coins as well as on postage stamps. They are the authors of several books on the birds of the region, and spent two weeks in Qatar in 2009 taking photographs for this, their most recent book.

Author Frances Gillespie is a British writer and journalist, resident in Qatar for over 25 years. She is the author or co-author of a number of books on Qatar, and sales of her best-selling book *Discovering Qatar*, about the history, natural history and traditions of Qatar now number over 7500.

Next year Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing will publish, in English and in Arabic, her series of six books for children on the fauna and flora of Qatar, including one on birds.

Common Birds of Qatar will be available in book shops and other outlets within Qatar, price QR 120. Signed copies can be obtained from the author, email gillespi@qatar.net.qa

Publication of this book has been sponsored by Maersk Oil Qatar.

The Editor thanks the QNHG for submitting this review and accompanying photograph

ENHG Trip Convoy Guidelines

Once again, the prime field trip season is upon us, so it's a good time for all ENHG members, new and returning, to review basic convoy rules. Because convoys are something of a bothersome necessity on field trips, we offer this set of rules to make our journeys together as safe and hassle-free as possible. –Ed.

1 General Items

Arrive at the starting point in plenty of time for the briefing on the route and destination of the trip. Please be ready to start with a full fuel tank. If you are going to leave the group before the end of the trip, please notify the trip leader and others. Do not go faster than you feel comfortable driving. **Keep your headlights on in daylight to make it easier to ID convoy vehicles.**

2 Rules of the Road

Our line of cars should not dominate the road. If others are trying to pass the group, please let them do so. Whenever the group stops, if at all feasible, make sure you pull off the road completely. Always use your indicators in plenty of time to guide cars in the group, as well as other road users. **If you want the group to stop, flash your headlights.** If the car behind you flashes its headlights, flash yours until the group leader pulls over. When the group passes through a congested area, the leader should try to stop as soon as safely practicable to regroup.

3 Overtaking

Overtake only when it is permitted and safe to do so.

4 Speed

Always stay within the legal speed limit. If the traffic is flowing more slowly than the legal limit, go with the traffic flow. The lead car should establish a sensible pace for the group. It is the individual driver's responsibility to keep the vehicle behind in sight, insuring that the group stays together. **If the car behind slows down, please slow down with it.** If every car does this the convoy will stay together. NB: At night, it's virtually impossible to ID the car behind you, so it's essential to agree ahead of times on route turning points, where the convoy will regroup if a car falls behind; working phones help, too.

5 Tips for the trip leader

Have a short meeting of all drivers to explain the route and destinations. Assign a buddy to drivers who are unfamiliar with the route. Hand out route directions if possible. **Collect mobile phone numbers of all drivers, and make sure all drivers have your number.** If there is a large number of vehicles, it is advisable to break up into two groups with a lead car for each group.

6 Sweep

Lead car driver should designate someone to act as "sweep" (tail-end-Charlie) for the convoy. **The sweep should always stay at the rear, and should be on the lookout for unscheduled stops** (due, for example, to a red light, overheating, puncture, or other breakdown, or unscheduled petrol station or photograph-taking stop) and should alert the leader by phone, if necessary.

Adapted by ENHG from ENHG-AI Ain document

Upcoming Speakers

Hanne and Jens Eriksen are world-renowned bird photographers, and they are the 2009 winners of the ENHG Bish Brown Award (See photo and write-up on p. 2 of this issue of *Focus*). Hanne & Jens are very familiar to ENHG members as they have run the ENHG book table for several years, and they've given us regular entertaining and informative presentations. They are the authors of several books on bird-watching in the region, and they publish an annual bird calendar—all for sale at the ENHG book table.

On December 14th Hanne and Jens will give the ENHG a presentation based on a bird-watching tour of Iceland they made in 2009, titled **Iceland – birds and nature.**



Rima Jabado is a marine ecologist and holds a Masters of Applied Science in Natural Resource Management. She has over nine years of experience in marine research, wildlife monitoring and conservation projects from around the world focusing on behaviour, feeding ecology, migration patterns, habitat use, population genetics and rehabilitation of various species. She has been living in the UAE for three years with a goal of developing research programs focusing on the marine environment and its protection. Her PhD research on shark populations in the Arabian Gulf, conducted through the UAE University in Al Ain, is the first ever long term research project to be completed on elasmobranchs in the region.

This research is important because shark populations are rapidly declining around the world mainly due to the international trade in shark fins. The increase in catches in the UAE suggests that there exists an unsustainable shark fishery in the region. Furthermore, the UAE is serving as a hub for the trade in shark fins. Management initiatives for the conservation of sharks are scarce mainly due to the lack of scientific data on the species composition, abundance and distribution of sharks in the Arabian Gulf.

The title of Rima's presentation to the ENHG on Dec. 21st will be: **A fish story: sharks, fisheries and the unknown.** Rima will be presenting an overview of shark biology, ecology and threats to shark populations around the world before focusing on the situation in the Arabian Gulf region and specifically the UAE. She will discuss the challenges to their conservation and the information she is aiming to gather in the course of her PhD research.

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

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ITEMS ON SALE

AT THE ENHG BOOK 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.
- Wild about Reptiles, 40.
- Snakes of Arabia, 50.
- Arthropod Fauna of the UAE, Vol 1, 110.
- Arthropod Fauna of the UAE, Vol 2, 110.
- Breeding Birds of the United Arab Emirates, 100
- Abu Dhabi Bird checklist, 10.
- Emirates Bird Report, 20.
- Birdwatching guide to Oman, 2nd edition, 100. *Guide to bird watching spots in Oman.*
- Common Birds in Oman, 2nd ed, Dhs 120
- Comprehensive Guide to the Wildflowers of the UAE, 100.
- Butterflies of Saudi Arabia & its neighbours 90.
- Trucial States, 120.
- Oman 1965, 120.
- Natural History of Oman, 50.
- Feast of Dates, 100.
- On-road in the UAE, 50.
- UAE in Focus, 100.
- Sir Bani Yas, 100.
- Musandam, 90.
- Abu Dhabi 8 million years ago, 15.
- Discovering Qatar, 120.

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A new Lecture Coordinator is 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.

2nd Nov.
Deltas – the Fertile
Dustbins of the
Continents

Graham Evans

9th Nov.
Julfar – the old port city
of Ras Al Khaimah

Christian Velde

14th Dec. **7:30 PM**
Iceland - Birds and
Nature

Hanne&Jens Eriksen

21st Dec. **7:30 PM**
A Fish Story: Sharks,
Fisheries and the
Unknown

Rima Jabado

Field Trips

30th Oct.
Morning bird-watching
trip in Abu Dhabi

Andrew Bean

5th/6th Nov.
Family friendly
camping trip to Fujairah

John Burt

5th Nov.
Noukhada Kayaking
Twitcher's Tour

Andrew Bean

13th-19th Nov.
Camping trip to Jebel
Al Akhdar, Oman

Andrew Bean

10th-11th Dec.
Camping on Delma Isl.

Feng Wen

17th Dec.
Beach walk/BBQ

Feng Wen

Social Event

30th Nov. **7:30 PM**
Social gathering at
One-to-One Hotel

Websites of General Interest

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

Qatar Natural History Group: <http://www.qnhg.com>

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

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

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

Emirates Marine Environmental Group: www.emeg.ae

Emirates Diving Association:
<http://www.emiratesdiving.com/index.php>

Noukhada Adventure Company:
<http://noukhada.ae>

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

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

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

ARKive: Images of Life on Earth:
<http://www.arkive.org>

ZipcodeZoo: Comprehensive naturalists' resource
<http://zipcodezoo.com/default.asp>

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.

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.

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>
(Click Join button to sign up for ENHG info.)