

# focus



Abu Dhabi, March 2011

Vol 35 (3)



Emirates Natural History Group

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

## EDITORIAL

According to feedback we've received, IEW 2011, based at the Tilal Liwa, a choice hotel in the Western Region of Abu Dhabi, was an enjoyable get-together and a good chance to get to know this not-so-often-visited region of the UAE. The ENHG thank the WRDC for the dinner they sponsored and the useful Al Gharbia guides they provided. We are also grateful that our guest speaker, Mike Jennings, was able to share his research on the breeding birds of Arabia and to join us on our outings.

Thanks to many of you for sending in your IEW photos! We will be publishing more of them in the next issue, along with further commentary on some of the tours (more welcome!)—including a write-up of the arthropod workshops which were so popular with the children. The winning photos from the Adults' and Kids' photo competitions will be run in the summer issue of *Focus*.

As announced via email, we held our AGM at the start of our March 15<sup>th</sup> meeting. We are most grateful to Nick Bengé for auditing our accounts (for the 28<sup>th</sup> year in a row!), to outgoing Treasurer Eila Merriman for her clear report of the state of the ENHG's finances and to Ron Priestley for so promptly taking up the role of Treasurer.

While the weather holds out, we welcome members to come along on the next few camping trips, including the Family Weekend—actually open to all. We also invite you to join us at a social event on 29th March (See p 8).

**Keith Taylor**

## 2010 Sheikh Mubarak Award Winner

*The ENHG's two annual Natural History Awards are always announced at the mid-season Inter-Emirates Weekend, and then the official presentation of the prizes associated with these awards is arranged at the majlis of our Patron, HE Sheikh Nahayan, generally toward the end of the season. Directly below are details about and remarks by the two recent award winners.*

*The Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohamed Award for Natural History is the country's premier natural history award. It is intended to acknowledge the contributions made by an individual, primarily through original research and publication, to the scientific study of the archaeology, history and natural history of the UAE.*

*Antonius (Tony) van Harten, coordinator of the impressively comprehensive and ground-breaking UAE Arthropod Project, was awarded the Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohamed Award for 2010. Below are his remarks given to the ENHG at the Inter-Emirates Weekend buffet dinner at the Tilal Liwa Hotel on Friday, 18<sup>th</sup> February, 2011. -Ed.*

Dear Mister Vice-Chairman of the Emirates Natural History Group and naturalist colleagues,

I feel very honoured to be chosen to receive the Sheikh Mubarak Award for 2010. I want to thank you all for this recognition of my work.

When I came to Abu Dhabi in July of 2004, my only earlier experiences with the Emirates had been some stopovers at the Dubai and Sharjah Airports. My idea of

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## FRONT COVER PICTURE

*Photograph: Dwarf Palms, Nanorrhops ritchieana, Jebel Ghawil*

*Photographer: Dick Hornby*

## This month's contributors

*Stefan Beck, Dick Hornby, Angie Marles, Simon Strickland, Keith Taylor, Christophe Tourenq, Tony van Harten, Earl Wolf*

## ENHG Membership Information

Annual membership in the Abu Dhabi chapter of the ENHG is 100 Dhs – for both individual and family membership. A 2011 membership form may be obtained from the Membership Sec. or Asst. at the next meeting or by clicking [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 normally annual scientific journal, *Tribulus*. Volume 19 is coming soon—release date TBA.

the country was that of a big sandbox with many camels in it.

After having worked for ten years in Yemen, a country with a fabulous variety of habitats, I thought that three or four years would be sufficient to get to know the majority of the insects of the UAE. I have been proven completely wrong in that assumption.

Now, after six and a half years, three volumes of 'Arthropod fauna of the UAE' have been published, I am working on the fourth volume to be published this year and I still will need another three or four years to complete publishing the whole amount of information that has been gathered.

To do this, it has been necessary to request the assistance of some 250 specialists from more than 30 countries. Over 250 species new to science have been described so far and still many are to follow. Who had ever expected that the diversity of arthropods in this country would be that enormous?

To end, I want you to consider for a moment that this result has only been made possible by the sponsor, His Highness Sheikh Tahnoon Bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Not only did he finance the research work and the printing of the books, he actually was the person who took the initiative and searched for somebody to carry out this work. Without him the arthropod fauna of the UAE would still be known very incompletely. If there existed a worldwide award for the best sponsor of biodiversity projects, Sheikh Tahnoon surely should be the one to receive it.

Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you very much!

**Antonius (Tony) van Harten**

## 2010 Bish Brown Award Winner

*The Bish Brown Award, commemorating one of the Group's Founders, is given by the ENHG chapter to an individual who has promoted study and conservation of the UAE's environment, wildlife, history or heritage, in accordance with the main aims of the Group.*

*Dr. Christophe Tourenq of the Emirates Wildlife Society-WWF, a frequent lecturer to all three NHGs in the UAE and driving force behind the recent establishment of the UAE's first Mountain Protected Area in Wadi Wurayah in Fujairah, was the Bish Brown Award recipient for 2010. Dr. Tourenq was unable to attend the award announcement at the IEW, but he sent in the following acceptance speech which was read out on that occasion by ENHG Chairman Drew Gardner. -Ed*

Dear ENHG,

I wish I had been able to share this emotive and great honour with you in this part of UAE that I love and which is the reason why I came here 10 years ago.

Reading might be dangerous sometimes, indeed. If as a teenager, I had not read Thesiger's "Arabian Sands", I would not have dreamt about this sea of sand and red dunes of Liwa oasis where you are today.

Unfortunately, I'm afraid that due to my some two-weeks-old new parenthood commitments, my week-ends are now booked with Mr Pampers for a while!

This nomination came out as a complete surprise and shock as I don't feel I deserve it, and I am sure there are people more recommendable than me for this prestigious award!

Bish Brown: A heavy name and legacy to assume!

Even though I have never been an ENHG member, it has always been a pleasure to interact with the three ENHG chapters' fellows. As a staffer of the Emirates Wildlife Society associated with one of the most renowned NGO's in the world in nature conservation, the WWF, I could have faced defiant, mistrustful, haughty looks from ENHG peers seeing this sister NGO guy coming to play in their yard.

But never!

I have always found in the ENHG a constant and unconditional source of reliable information, advice and inspiration. I cannot count a week without my having harassed some reptile expert from Abu Dhabi,

snail/geology/dragonfly/everything-that-moves-or-produces-chlorophyll expert from Dubai, or falaj-digger from Al Ain, for some tips or identification clues.

I have always considered our actions complementary and have always seen the ENHG as a pioneer NGO in the country, paving the road for other organisations.

As an old, but respectable, UAE organisation supporting natural and cultural heritage conservation, you have witnessed the dramatic and quick-paced development of the country to the detriment, often, of the beautiful and unique environmental and cultural patrimony, some of it unfortunately gone forever.

And I have had sometimes quite animated discussions or "exchanges of different views" with some ENHG members who have expected more action or a more forceful position from "the local panda".

But this dialogue has always been held in a civilised and constructive way, also keeping in mind the peculiar socio-political context of this part of the world. And I will never forget however, that the ENHG was the first local NGO to react to and sign in our proposal draft of letter of concern to the press, about a female whale shark kept in captivity in an aquarium of some resort on some coastal development in the shape of a tree in some coastal city of the country. Something Bish Brown would have appreciated, as he was one of the first to document the species in the UAE in a volume of *Tribulus* in 1992.

The ENHG has always also been present to participate in the campaigns, forums, conferences or workshops we have organised.

The ENHG has been a pillar in the acquisition of information and data that finally led to the declaration of the first Mountain Protected Area and the second RAMSAR wetland site of international importance of the country: Wadi Wurayah.

I also shall not forget that the ENHG is, above all, entirely made of volunteers, people giving their free time (and money) to share the passion of UAE culture and nature with their co-citizens.

Therefore, I would like to dedicate this award to them in the first place, and secondly, to my colleagues who support me and my work in, sometimes, quite challenging contexts.

Many thanks again for this honour, and long life to ENHG.

**Christophe Tourenq**

## IEW 2011 Bird List No. 1

Here, in their order in *The Birds of the Middle East*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., are 55 bird species seen in the Western Region of AD, 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Feb., 2011. Most of these were seen near Mirfa (& a few of them in East Liwa). In April 2011 *Focus* we will run another list of birds seen during IEW—mainly around Sila'a, including 30 species not on the list below—which brings the IEW species total to over 85!

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*  
 Socotra Cormorant *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis*  
 Striated Heron *Butorides striatus*  
 Western Reef Heron *Egretta gularis*

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*  
 Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber*  
 Egyptian Goose *Alopochen aegyptiacus*  
 Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*  
 Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*  
 Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*  
 Grey Francolin *Francolinus pondicerianus*  
 Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*  
 Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*  
 Lesser Sand Plover *Charadrius mongolus*  
 Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*  
 Red-wattled Plover *Hoplopterus indicus*  
 Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris*  
 Little Stint *Calidris minuta*  
 Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*  
 Dunlin *Calidris alpina*  
 Broad-billed Sandpiper *Limicola falcinellus*  
 Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*  
 Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*  
 Curlew *Numenius arquata*  
 Redshank *Tringa tetanus*  
 Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*  
 Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*  
 Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*  
 Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*  
 Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei*  
 Caspian (yellow-legged) Gull *Larus cachinnans*  
 Great Black-headed Gull *Larus ichthyaetus*  
 Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia*  
 Little Tern *Sterna albifrons*  
 Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*  
 Palm Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*  
 Common Swift *Apus apus*  
 Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius (meridionalis) pallidirostris*  
 White-eared Bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys*  
 Greater Hoopoe-Lark *Alaemon alaudipes*  
 Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*  
 Skylark *Alauda arvensis*  
 Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*  
 House Martin *Delichon urbica*  
 White wagtail *Motacilla alba*  
 Asian Desert Warbler *Sylvia nana*  
 Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*  
 Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*  
 Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti*  
 Red-tailed Wheatear *Oenanthe xanthopyrmyna*  
 Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush *Monticola saxatilis*  
 Graceful Prinia *Prinia gracilis*  
 Ménétries's Warbler *Sylvia mystacea*  
 Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*  
 House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*



Male Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush

Photo: Angie Marles

Simon Strickland / Keith Taylor

## Selected IEW 2011 Group Photos



Afternoon birding at Al Harmia village, west of Mirfa

Photo: Stefan Beck



Surprise lunch at the home of Khalifa al Muhairy at Sila'a

Photo: Angie Marles



Examining the dunes in West Liwa

Photo: Earl Wolf

## Camping Trip / Hike up Jebel Ghawil

The tradition of winter mountain hiking / camping trips begun by ENHG stalwart Roy Richards (currently residing in the UK), was carried on this year by Graeme Hornby, who organised an overnight trip to Jebel Ghawil the weekend following the IEW—25<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> Feb.

A small group of seven hikers in three cars drove from Abu Dhabi to Jebel Ghawil—a mid-sized peak in the Hajar Mountain range, north of Mahada in Oman. We camped at the base of a wadi on the western flank and then decided to blaze an untested route up the western side of this peak with an altitude gain of about 500 m.



Graeme and company on the way up



The view from the summit of Jebel Ghawil

While Graeme led the gung-ho hikers up the rubble-strewn but negotiable path to an awe-inspiring view from the summit, about a third of the way up two of us headed back down to camp, taking in the natural surroundings at a more leisurely pace. As always on these mountain rambles, we came across flora and fauna of interest, starting with the knee-high Dwarf Palms pictured on the cover of this issue—*Nanorrhops ritchieana*—a rare species of palm found only in only a few isolated spots in the Hajar Mountains—which at one time was sought out as a source of high-quality fishing line fibre. Also seen were healthy specimens of *Ziziphus spina-christi*, known locally as Cidr trees, and some ghaf trees, *Prosopis cineraria*—some of the latter looking quite stressed. One happy discovery, awaiting the next rainfall in the middle of a bone-dry wadi, was a small clump of bright green and red *Forsskaolea tenacissimus*, dubbed the “Velcro plant”, as its hairy leaves will stick together!

Fauna seen included a gecko and a number of bird species, including several each of Lichtenstein’s Sandgrouse, Sand Partridge, Hume’s Wheatear & Scrub Warbler—the latter with distinctively up-thrust tails.

Rock Semaphore Gecko, *Pristurus rupestris*

Finally, the wildflowers pictured on the right show the marvellous splashes of colour in these monochrome mountains that are revealed to the careful observer.

*Caralluma arabica**Cucumis prophetarum**Tephrosia nubica*Henbane, *Hyoscyamus muticus*Egyptian sage, *Salvia aegyptiaca*

Keith Taylor

All Photographs by Dick Hornby

## Upcoming Speakers

ENHG Chairman **Dr. Andrew (Drew) Gardner** is a familiar face to all who have attended ENHG lecture meetings over the past several years. Besides chairing most of our meetings and introducing the speakers, he gives us a talk himself at least once a season—and sometimes twice (take this season, for example). Nevertheless, not all members are aware of the details of Drew's professional background.

The following bio was obtained from the April 2008 issue of *The Gazelle*, published prior to a talk he gave to the Dubai NHG about geckos—perhaps his favourite lecture topic, and indeed, the topic of his upcoming talk on March 15<sup>th</sup>. Drew is, in fact, fascinated by geckos, but his interests certainly do not end there. He has a BSc in Zoology from Edinburgh University (1<sup>st</sup> class honours), and a PhD from Aberdeen University. His thesis was on the evolutionary ecology of day geckos in the Seychelles. He followed this up with post-doctoral research on Arctic charr (a salmonid fish), based in University College, London. He worked for twelve years at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman, researching the reptiles and mountain ecology, and named three new species of gecko in genus *Asaccus* during this time. He has now been an associate professor at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi for nearly eight years; he is serving there as the Assistant Chair of Natural Science and Public Health in the College of Arts and Sciences.



Drew has now completed over fifty ecology surveys in Oman and the UAE, and published about forty research papers and book chapters on conservation, lizards, snakes, fish, insects, birds and juniper woodlands. If you want to know about the behavioural genetics of fruit flies, breeding habits of Trinidad petrels, geckos in French Polynesia, bats in the UAE or for that matter, the species identification of any reptile spotted in the UAE or Oman, ask Drew.



**Antonius (Tony) van Harten**, the 2010 winner of the Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohamed Award for Natural History (see p. 2), and Coordinator of the UAE Arthropod Project, will give us an overview of that project on April 5<sup>th</sup> in his talk, "Surveying the Arthropods of the Emirates".

Mr. van Harten began his career studying agriculture and plant protection in the Netherlands in the 1960s, and then spent successive chapters of his working life as an entomologist in Angola, back in the Netherlands, in Cape Verde, in Yemen, in Fiji and then back in Yemen. He has been working in the UAE since 2004. His main areas of specialisation during this long career have been plant virus epidemiology, integrated pest management, biological pest control and fauna inventory.

Besides being the Editor of Arthropod fauna of the UAE, the first three volumes of which have now been completed, with several more in the pipeline, Mr. van Harten is also a Member of the Advisory Board of 'Fauna of Arabia', author/co-author of 6 books and 143 scientific papers and author/co-author of 15 genera and 216 species of Arthropoda.

Most remarkably, perhaps, as Dr. Brigitte Howarth, ENHG-AI Ain Deputy Chair, and an accomplished entomologist in her own right, informed us in her introduction to his acceptance speech at the recent Inter Emirates Weekend dinner programme, Tony van Harten is one of the few people on the planet who can have a look at any insect and promptly identify it at least according to Family. This mastery of his discipline, combined with his many connections with entomologists world-wide, have been essential factors in the success of the seminal work he has done, bringing so much extremely important information to light about arthropods in the UAE.

**The Editor thanks the above speakers for providing photos and biographical information for Focus.**

## In the Local News Media

Gulf News, Jan. 32: [Wadi Wurayah enters Ramsar list](#)

Gulf News, Feb. 4: [Man-made wetland in Dubai defies odds](#)

Gulf News, Feb. 4: [Ecological system has huge benefits](#)

The National, Feb. 7: [Grants for groups to save sharks and reefs](#)

The National, Feb. 7: [Geneticists to reveal bird conservation progress](#)

The National, Feb. 8: [Thousands of mangroves planted, and more to come](#)

The National, Feb. 10: [The race is on to save a species](#)

The National, Feb. 14: [Eagle owlets in new release programme](#)

The National, Feb. 15: [Bustard breeding network takes wing](#)

The National, Feb. 16: [Divers lead hunt for sunken wrecks](#)

The National, Feb. 21: [Local birds pushed to brink of extinction](#)

The National, Feb. 23: [The new way to cool your home: power of the sun](#)

The National, Feb. 24: [Shark class requires knife and strong stomach](#)

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**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
- 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.
- Discovering Qatar, 120.

**NEW:** Field Guide to the Geology of Oman, 75.

**NEW:** Sandgrouse checklist of the birds of the United Arab Emirates, 15.

## Committee Members

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**Required: AV Assistant to help with lights & sound during meetings. Can you do this?**

## Lectures

**Venue: HCT / Abu Dhabi Men's College**

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

1<sup>st</sup> March  
World Bird Migration:  
Migratory Birds in Peril  
**Steve James**

15<sup>th</sup> March **7:30 PM**  
Annual General Mtg. /  
Geckos of the UAE  
**Drew Gardner**

5<sup>th</sup> April **7:30 PM**  
Surveying the  
Arthropods of the  
Emirates  
**Tony van Harten**

## Field Trips

25<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> Feb.  
Camping Trip / Hike up  
Jebel Ghawil, in Oman  
**Graeme Hornby**

12<sup>th</sup> March  
7am Birdwatching Trip  
on Abu Dhabi Island  
**Andrew Bean**

18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> March  
Camping Trip to Khor  
Kalba  
**Feng Wen**

15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> April  
Family Weekend  
Camping Trip to 'Two  
Trees' off AD-AI Ain Rd  
**Andrew Bean**

22<sup>nd</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> April  
Desert Camping Trip to  
Umm Al Zaamul  
**Andrew Bean**

## Social Event

29<sup>th</sup> March **7:30 PM**  
Social get-together at  
5<sup>th</sup>-floor poolside Mai  
Café in Aloft Hotel,  
next to ADNEC

## 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](http://www.BirdsOman.com)

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

Emirates Marine Environmental Group: [www.emeg.ae](http://www.emeg.ae)

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

Environment Agency Abu Dhabi (EAD):  
<http://www.ead.ae/en/>

Noukhada Adventure Company:  
<http://nouxhada.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>

## 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
  - First-Aid Kit
  - Sky Scout astronomical object locator/identifier
  - Celestron NexStar telescope (on field trips only)
  - Two satellite phones, taken on camping trips.
- Phone numbers: No. 1: 008821644400956  
No. 2: 008821644400965

Enquiries: Andrew Bean, [rexabeam@emirates.net.ae](mailto:rexabeam@emirates.net.ae)

## 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](mailto:drew.gardner@zu.ac.ae).

## Newsletter Details

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

## Members' Items for sale

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