

focus



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Emirates Natural History Group
Patron: H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan

EDITORIAL

The ENHG camping season is now well and truly underway, with a camping trip to Jebel Akhdar just completed (see write-up in this issue). Our day trip programme also continues apace, with a fascinating trip to the traditional dhow yard in RAK last month. Space constraints require us to defer the write-up of that trip till the December issue, where it is slated to join write-ups of several upcoming activities, as well.

Our next presenter, Rima Jabado, will be updating us on her pioneering shark research, revealing what's been discovered so far about shark species living in UAE waters. She will be speaking to us at our regular venue, but on 22nd Nov—one week later than previously announced. And on Dec 6th, Oscar Campbell and Ahmed Al Ali will give us a concluding update on the important survey of Collared Kingfishers at Khor Kalba.

Relating to Rima's talk on sharks, we would like to spread the word about an extremely encouraging development in worldwide conservation: the establishment of the world's largest shark sanctuary in the vast ocean territory of the Republic of the Marshall Islands in the Central Pacific (see 3rd News link on p 6). This is an important step toward the proper treatment of these apex predators, so vital to our marine ecosystem.

Finally, the natural history community in the UAE has just lost one of its best and brightest: Former ENHG Chairman Simon Aspinall. Plans are being made to hold a memorial service for Simon at the St Andrew's Community Centre in Abu Dhabi in early December. Exact details are forthcoming. Farewell, Simon!

Keith Taylor

In Remembrance: Simon Aspinall

Part of this Obituary is drawn from another tribute which appeared in The National on 4 Nov 2011. Permission to reproduce is gratefully acknowledged. –Ed.



Simon Aspinall doing a survey in Jebel Akhdar, Oman in 2005
Photo: Gary Brown

Simon Aspinall, one of the UAE's leading environmentalists, author of several books related to research on and protection of wildlife in the UAE and a former ENHG Chairman, died at his home in Norfolk,

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FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Arabian Toads in Jebel Akhdar wadi stream

Photographer: May Yoke Taylor

This month's contributors

Gary Brown, Peter Hellyer, Khaleej Times, Angie Marles, Crista Rayner, 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: 2011 membership is reduced to 50 Dhs from Sept - 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 peer-reviewed journal, *Tribulus*. Volume 19 will be available at meetings starting on 6th Dec. Volume 20 is projected for near the start of 2012.

England on October 31 after a valiant struggle against motor neurone disease. He was 53.

Simon first came to the UAE in 1993 to lead the Wildlife Management Unit of the National Avian Research Centre, now part of the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi (EAD) after working with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Nature Conservancy Council and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee on projects throughout the UK. He was recruited for the job by former ENHG Chairman Dick Hornby, who first arrived in Abu Dhabi a year or two before, to set up NARC.

Throwing himself into field research, he soon joined the Emirates Bird Records Committee, being chairman for many years. He quickly began publishing, and by late 1994 he had written or co-authored 10 papers and book chapters, including the UAE chapter in BirdLife International's *Important Bird Areas in the Middle East*, which established the Emirates on the map of regional ornithology. In 1996, his first book on the UAE was published, *Status & Conservation of the Breeding Birds of the United Arab Emirates*.

In 1997, he struck out on his own as an ecological consultant, supplementing this, until 1999, by being the part-time Heritage and Environment Editor of *Emirates News*, the predecessor of *The National*. He also led environmental studies for the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey, or ADIAS, until 2006, relying on his keen eye to identify many new archaeological and fossil sites.

As environmental surveys became increasingly a matter of standard practice in the UAE, Simon rapidly built up his consultancy business, often working with other former ENHG Chairmen Drew Gardner, Peter Hellyer, Dick Hornby and Steve James, and with Brigitte Howarth and Brien Holmes from the Al Ain ENHG. He also worked throughout the region, including Yemen, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain and Iraq, being closely associated with BirdLife International and UNESCO on plans for nature reserves and biosphere reserves in Yemen, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain and Iraq.

His primary interest remained birds. In the last two years alone, his books included a third edition of *Breeding Birds of the UAE*, and, with colleagues, the highly-acclaimed second edition of *Field Guide to the Birds of the Middle East*, the official *Checklist of the Birds of the United Arab Emirates*, *Birds of the UAE* and, released this month, the *Field Guide to the Birds of the United Arab Emirates*. All were sponsored by EAD.

Simon was a relentless observer, and recorder, of all that he saw. A major contributor to the Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia, ABBA, he was the first person to have recorded 400 bird species in the UAE, out of a current total of 448, and was the finder of first record for a remarkable 23 species.

Simon was never, however, interested only in birds. He was fascinated by terrestrial ecology and by palaeontology; he made several major Late Miocene fossil finds in Abu Dhabi's Western Region. He was also, for over a decade, the manager of the UAE's Marine Mammal Database. This led to more books. In 2004, he was co-editor of *Jebel Hafit – A Natural History*, jointly published by the ENHG-AD and ADCO, followed the next year by another joint production, *The Emirates: A Natural History*.

His books and more than 100 reports and papers, several of which were published in the ENHG journal, *Tribulus*, have done much to introduce the country's environment to an international audience.

In addition to his professional work, Simon also served on the ENHG Committee for several years, being Chairman from 2003 to 2004, volunteering his services to the Group. Members who attended his presentations and accompanied him on ENHG bird-watching trips were delighted by his natural good humour, his infectious enthusiasm and his deep fund of information. Simon's informal mentoring of anyone with an interest in learning more about his fields of expertise was warmly appreciated by all who came into contact with him. In 1997, just as his career in the UAE was getting under way, he was presented with the ENHG's Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Award for his contributions to knowledge of the country's natural history. As the years progressed, he earned it many times over.

As the disease, first diagnosed several years ago, continued, inexorably, to develop, Simon showed great dignity and courage, carrying on with fieldwork and writing. He last visited the UAE in November a year ago, but remained actively engaged, assisting with the editing of *Tribulus* Vol. 18 last winter, completing his *UAE Field Guide* in August and serving on the Emirates Bird Records Committee until September.

In her introduction to the *Field Guide to the Birds of the UAE*, the Secretary General of EAD, Razan Al Mubarak, pays this tribute: "I take particular pleasure in acknowledging the contribution made by Simon Aspinall over the last two decades to studies of the UAE's environment ... His books on the topic, including this one, provide the foundations on which others will be able to build for many, many years to come."

Other tributes have come from senior UAE officials, conservation organisations throughout the region, from bird watching friends and from those inspired by his books and his conservation efforts.

He never married and is survived by his parents, Jack and Sylvia, his brother, Richard, and his sister-in-law Marsailidh.

Peter Hellyer / Keith Taylor

Eid Camping Trip to Jebel Akhdar



Many from our group, on the spot where Simon stood
Photo: Angie Marles

A moment of remembrance: This is a group shot from the ENHG 2011 Eid trip to Jebel Akhdar, taken on the same spot Simon stood on in the photo shown above on p 2. This spot has been dubbed 'Diana's Point' by travel guides due to that royal celebrity's brief visit there in '86, even though her many noteworthy good works actually took place elsewhere. With no disrespect intended, we suggest a more fitting name for this iconic scenic spot on Oman's Green Mountain would be Simon's Point – in honour of this remarkable man who devoted nearly two decades of his life to the environmental stewardship of Southeastern Arabia. -Ed

The 4th-7th Nov 2011 Eid Al Adha trip to Jebel Akhdar, expertly planned and led by Ron and Angie, was an enjoyable kickoff to the camping season for about 35 ENHG members. The one thing that couldn't have been planned for was the apparent photo scanning equipment failure at the Omani border on Friday that resulted in a patience-trying wait of from four to five hours for those applying for visas at the Mezyad border on the 4th.

Despite staggered start timings, those going in convoy and those travelling independently all ran into each other amongst a large crowd of other UAE residents and tourists in the Omani immigration hall—transformed into a play-room for the children, a lunch-room for many, and the setting for an impromptu experiment in social psychology in which some struck up cordial conversations with their cheek-by-jowl queue mates and others did their best to control fraying tempers while articulating at times conflicting takes on queue etiquette. Al-in-all, most agreed it was a bonding experience.

The last batch of our large group, having arrived at the border at 11:00 am, finally made it through at 3:45 pm and set up camp long after dark. Handily, Ron's contact through ENHG-AI Ain, local resident Mohammed ('Moo'), had delivered firewood to our Sayq Plateau campsite, so we enjoyed a welcome fire as temperatures dropped to below 8°C, with constellations rising in a clear sky.



Trip leader Ron & guide Moo at the start of the Sat. hike
Photo: Keith Taylor

On Saturday, we met up at the new Hotel Sahab with several members who'd stayed there, and followed Moo on the first stage of hike W18b, from just below that hotel up and down hillsides, across wadi streams, along terraced fields and through narrow old village lanes to the large village of Sayq. Our guide pointed out the lush vegetation along the way: native plants like the pervasive bright green, poisonous Hop Bush *Dodonea viscosa* and the thorny büt trees *Monotheca buxifolia*, though the season for its sweet-tasting little purple berries had finished – and cultivated fruit trees including walnut and pomegranate.



Our group entering terraced plantation on Jebel Akhdar
Photo: May Yoke Taylor

After a brief visit to Moo's family home at Sayq and a look round terraced plantations, a driver shuttle was organized to reunite passengers and vehicles for the

drive back to the Sahab Hotel, where many enjoyed a tasty and professionally prepared buffet lunch on the beautiful terrace, with a spectacular view off the side of the second highest mountain in Oman.

We then drove to the abandoned village of Wadi Bani Habib, which Moo cautioned us might be unsafe to enter following the recent rains; a scenic stroll round the front of it and up through the still cultivated plantation brought us back to the car park where the sweetest pomegranates some of us had ever tasted were for sale. On Saturday evening, Andrew set up the Group's Celestron telescope for clear views of the Moon and Jupiter, visible between patchy clouds.

On Sunday, following the group photo shoot shown on the previous page, Moo directed Ron and Angie, leading our long convoy, in 4WD Low, down a fairly challenging series of dirt road switchbacks to the small remote village of Masirat ar Rawajih, away from which we parked a respectful distance. We then followed our guide down along a serene, pristine wadi stream, where some stopped to splash in the water at the first opportunity and the youngest children played with the plentiful Arabian Toads; the more intrepid hikers followed Moo further down to a series of waterfalls and good-sized pools.



Swimming in remote wadi pool, full after rain
Photo: Angie Marles

Just behind the sizeable acacia tree that some of us rested under near the start of the trail was a handsome stand of *Acridocarpus orientalis* (qafas in Arabic) with its pretty single-winged maple-tree-like seed pods. This plant, the sole food plant of the Giant Skipper butterfly (See [July-August 2009 Focus](#), p 2), often catches our eye on trips to the Hajar Mountains in Oman, where it is quite prevalent, being almost (but not completely) absent from UAE mountains.



Acridocarpus orientalis seed pod and leaf
Photo: Keith Taylor

On Sunday afternoon, trip participants returned to their campsites and hotel rooms for lunch, then enjoyed welcome free time in this beautiful setting; the children

made good use of play time at the campground, climbing on and swinging from one of the large juniper trees and exploring the vast open plain and surrounding hillsides. Later in the evening, campers & guide enjoyed affable conversation following earlier repasts with spicy barbecued ox and vegetables – “Oman’s finest”.



Kids swinging on juniper tree at our campsite

Photo: Crista Rayner

On Monday morning some headed home early, two stayed on for another night of camping and one family headed on to Masirah Island, but most of the campers drove in convoy down the mountain back on the Nizwa bypass to Bahla, for a half-hour walk around Bahla Fort, which is still under reconstruction, but affords some interesting views. Some partook of beef shish kebab, offered by some Omanis who were roasting it on skewers in an earthen-pit oven in an alley behind the fort. Our convoy then drove up Al Ayn, near Amla, to examine the beehive-shaped pre-Islamic tombs there, finding them in quite good condition. One carload of hotel stayers drove separately to both the Al Ayn and the Bat Tombs—the latter dating from the Umm al Nar Period (built roughly 5,000 years ago). It was reported that though many of these tombs are degraded, there are two reconstructed tombs definitely worth seeing.



Al Ayn tombs

Photo: Angie Marles

From the tombs, some campers headed to Muscat for extended holidays, and the rest headed back to Abu Dhabi—some by way of Wadi Dam, which seemed relatively polluted and uninviting by comparison with Jebel Akhdar wadis. At the border, we faced a car queue and a longer than usual wait in the UAE arrival hall, but at a maximum of a half hour, it was nothing to compare with the ordeal of the first day’s border crossing.

Keith Taylor

UAE Falconry Festival

From Khaleej Times, 22 August, 2011

The third International Festival of Falconry (IFF) will take place for the first time in the UAE, in Al Ain, between December 10th and 18th. The Emirates Falconers’ Club will welcome individual falconers and falconry clubs from about 50 countries. They will display their skills with traditional hunting birds.

The festival will be enriched with traditional music and folklore, arts and crafts, a culinary experience and plenty of falcons flying about, as well as a display of Emirati heritage, which will start with falconry and move on to other traditional forms of hunting, with saluki dogs and some nearly forgotten Bedouin-style techniques. All public activities will take place in and around Al Jahili Fort between December 15th and 18th, where an arena will be set for all kinds of falconry-related shows.

The festival will start with a three-day conference, where professional falconers will share knowledge of falconry and hawking. A desert camp will also be set some 40 minutes’ drive into the desert from Al Ain. Falconers will spend their time with their birds and with each other. Manning the falcons around campfires will be a pleasure and hence, spending the nights in the desert is highly recommended. Dozens of large tents and basic amenities will be provided for this purpose. Lady falconers will be welcome, too.

The desert camp will also include saluki training, as well as camel and horse rides, which will later be presented in Al Jahili arena shows.

A 13-category falconry photography competition will also take place during the festival. The same goes for the arts and crafts competition, which will include two and three dimensional fine arts, calligraphy, falconry equipment and falconry jewellery and costume.

Held once every two years, the IFF was the idea of a few English falconers, who wanted to offer a gathering of falconers a show with a difference. The first festival, in July 2007 in England, attracted the largest number of worldwide falconers in history, and the crowd only grew bigger during the second IFF, in 2009. After Abu Dhabi initiated the file to inscribe falconry on UNESCO’s list for safeguarding intangible heritage, 11 other nations joined and the effort proved successful. As a result, Abu Dhabi received the honour of hosting the third IFF.

Khaleej Times Staff Reporter

Recent Speakers

Dr Duncan Priestley, Associate Dean (Naval Sciences), CERT, holds a PhD in Acoustical Oceanography from the University of Hull in the UK. He taught for 20 years at the Royal Naval College in Dartmouth, UK and the University of Plymouth, specializing in oceanography and underwater acoustics. His research interests focus on littoral variability and associated sound propagation. He is a founding member of the Centre of Excellence in Naval Oceanographic Research and Education at the University of Plymouth. In September 1990 he took up the post of Associate Dean (Naval Sciences) at CERT in Abu Dhabi.

Major Ali al Mehrezi, UAE Navy, completed officer training at the Royal Naval College in the UK, and went on to gain BSc and MSc degrees from the University of Plymouth. He is a fully-trained professional meteorologist, specializing in the application of metocean information for naval operational purposes. He currently studying part-time towards a doctorate in meteorology and oceanography, focused on the southern Arabian Gulf.

Upcoming Speaker



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 22nd Nov. is self-explanatory: *UAE Shark Research Project: A year down the line*. Reminder: UAE shark research volunteers may apply to Rima at her email address: rimajabado@hotmail.com.

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

In the News Media

The National, Sept 23: [Archaeologist produces first definitive book on history of Gulf pearling](#)

Gulf News, Oct 4: [Visitors can plant date palms at Abu Dhabi festival](#)

Newsletter of The Pew Environment Group, Oct 6: [World's Largest Shark Sanctuary Declared in Central Pacific](#)

Gulf News, Oct 22: [Environmentalists return 35 Hawksbill turtles to sea](#)

Gulf News, Oct 26: [Education Centre at Al Ain Zoo offers winter camps for children](#)

The National, Oct 27: [Sharjah bids to become a world heritage site](#)

The National, Oct 28: [Act now ... or history is sunk](#)

The National, Oct 30: [Ancient Middle Eastern stone structures revealed by Google Earth](#)

Khaleej Times, Nov 08: [Sea turtles spotted in Fujairah](#)

Websites of General Interest

Emirates Natural History Group – Al Ain (Archives: newsletters of 3 NHGs, *Tribulus*): <http://www.enhg.org>

Dubai Natural History Group: <http://dnhg.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 website: www.BirdsOman.com

Wikispecies: <http://species.wikimedia.org/wiki>

Emirates Soc. of Geoscience: <http://www.esg-uae.org>

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

Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage <http://www.adach.ae/en>

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

Emirates Marine Environmental Group: www.emeg.ae

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

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

Sharjah Museums: <http://www.sharjahmuseums.ae>

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

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

Sharkwatch Arabia: <http://www.sharkwatcharabia.com>

Foundation for the Protection of the Arabian Leopard in Yemen: <http://www.yemenileopard.org>

Mohamed Bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund: <http://www.mbzspeciesconservation.org/>

EDGE: Evolutionarily Distinct and Globally Endangered: <http://www.edgeofexistence.org>

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

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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 for schools donations.)
- Wild about Mammals, 40
- Wild about Reptiles, 40
- Breeding Birds of the United Arab Emirates, 100
- Abu Dhabi Bird checklist, 10
- Sandgrouse checklist of the birds of the United Arab Emirates, 25
- Emirates Bird Report, 20
- Birdwatching guide to Oman, 2nd edition, 100
Guide to bird watching spots in Oman.
- Common Birds in Oman, 2nd ed, 120
- Butterflies of Saudi Arabia & its neighbours, 90
- UAE in Focus, 100
- Natural History of Oman, 50
- Field Guide to the Geology of Oman, 75
- Abu Dhabi 8 Million Years ago, 15
- Arabian Wildlife Encyclopedia, 120
- Sulphur, Camels and Gunpowder, 100
- Native Plants of Oman, 80
- Little O in Oman, 25
- Wild Flowers of the UAE, 110
- Marine Environment, Resource of the UAE, 140
- Flowering Plants of the UAE, 60
- Socotra Calendar – 2012, 35
- Wild Flower Cards (Pack of 5), 60

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Lectures

Venue: ADMC Aud.

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

1st Nov.
Oceanography of the
Southern Arabian Gulf
and Gulf of Oman

**Dr Duncan Priestley
Major Ali Al Mehrezi**

22nd Nov. **7:30 PM**
UAE Shark Research
Project: A year down
the line

Rima Jabado

6th Dec. **7:30 PM**
Findings of 2010-2011
Khor Kalba Kingfisher
Survey

**Oscar Campbell
& Ahmed Al Ali**

Social Event

29th Nov.
Informal get-together at
Aloft Hotel – top floor

Field Trips

4th-7th Nov.
Eid Al Adha mountain
camping trip to Jebel
Akhdar, Oman

**Angie Marles
& Ron Priestley**

11th Nov.
Day Trip to Hatta Pools

Feng Wen

12th Nov.
Snorkelling Trip with Al
Mahara Dive Center to
coral reef off Dhabiya

Andrew Bean

25th-26th Nov.
Camping Trip to Oryx
Preserve at Umm al
Zamool

Andrew Bean

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 Acting Chairman
Keith Taylor at kjtaylor13@yahoo.com.

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: rexabean@emirates.net.ae

Marine Life Rescue Contact Info.

In Abu Dhabi:

EAD Hotline for reporting environmental emergencies
including pollution and injured wildlife: 8009990. Email:
envirocomplaint@ead.ae

EAD Emergency response manager: Mr. Abdul
Rahman. Mob: 0506674171 (contactable 24 hours/day)

EAD contact for sea turtles, dugongs and dolphins: Dr
Himansu Das, Biodiversity Management Sector. Tel:
26934654; Mob: 0504465125; Email: hdsas@ead.ae

In Dubai:

Emirates Marine Environment Group (EMEG) (Tel:
043630581/Fax:043630460; Email: info@emeg.ae)

Dubai Municipality: Main number: 800900. Marine
Environment & Sanctuaries Unit (Tel: +9714 606 6818,
Fax +9714 703 3532), Email: marabdulla@dm.gov.ae.

Dubai Turtle Rehabilitation Centre at the Burj al Arab
Aquarium. Tel: 043017198. 24-hour email contact,
Attn. Mr Warren Baverstock, Manager of Operations,
BAA Aquarium: warren.baverstock@jumeirah.com
To post Facebook message triggering an after-hours
SMS alert: www.facebook.com/turtle.rehabilitation

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Newsletter contributions to:
newsletter@chirri2000.com

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Yahoo Groups website

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