focus



Abu Dhabi, February 2013 Vol 37 (2)



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

EDITORIAL

Editor's apologies for the unusual delay in getting out this more-or-less monthly publication this time around. This issue was made possible by Denis Cheng, whose pair of fine field trip write-ups appears within and whose inviting photo is on the cover. The next issue will feature a follow-up to the Wadi Hilo/Hiluw site visit as well as a write-up of the excellent Jan visit to Tel Abrag.

The Feb 2013 IEW in Al Ain was fantastic, with some great outings & activities, a chance to help curate the ENHG's valuable collection and a programme commemorating the Group's founders & honouring the new ENHG natural history award winners. Additional IEW 2013 write-ups for *Focus* would be most welcome!

The recent birding trip to Al Wathba Reserve led to some important sightings, including 2 rare Purple Gallinules. A follow-up trip in late April is now full, but we will do our best to offer even more opportunities for members to explore the rich diversity of birdlife here. There are also two more camping trips planned for this season: one this weekend to a tributary of Wadi Biah in RAK and another to Dalma Island on April 12th-13th.

In Committee news, we are in need of a new Chairman, with Andrew stepping down at our May 7th AGM. And if you feel like you might have the time to assist the ENHG in any way at all, talk with a Committee member about this at a mtg, as there are always things that need doing.

Please note that this is the last month to renew membership for 2013 without missing out on emailings. And we want to pass along some very welcome news: the website run by the Al Ain chapter, ENHG.org, with newsletter archives, etc., is up and running again!

Finally, do come along to this week's talk to find out how you can get involved in EAD's Baseline Survey Project.

Keith Taylor

ENHG Natural History Awards—2012

Oscar Campbell Wins Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Prize for Natural History Rima Jabado Receives Bish Brown Award



ENHG-Al Ain Chair Dr Brigitte Howarth, Bish Brown Award winner Rima Jabado, ENHG-AD Chair Dr Andrew Bean and Sheikh Mubarak Prize winner Oscar Campbell

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Photograph: Pool Trek on Jebel Qatar

Photographer: Denis Cheng

This month's contributors

Denis Cheng, Stephanie Dalley, ENHG Committee, Anil Kumar, May Yoke Taylor

ENHG Membership Information

Annual membership in the Abu Dhabi chapter of the ENHG is 100 Dhs per individual and now 150 Dhs per family membership. See Membership Sec. or Asst. at the next meeting for a membership form. Membership renewals for 2013 are due in January.

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 20 is now available at ENHG meetings.

Oscar Campbell, current chairman of the Emirates Bird Records Committee, has been selected by the Committee of the Emirates Natural History Group (Abu Dhabi) as the winner of the Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Annual Prize for Natural History for 2012. Oscar came to the UAE six years ago, and, with a lifelong interest in birds and ornithology, was rapidly coopted to membership of the Emirates Bird Records Committee, which, in collaboration with the Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi, maintains the official database of birds recorded in the UAE and also serves as the body for assessment of and acceptance of descriptions of rare birds reported in the country. He has been Chairman of the EBRC since 2010.Oscar Campbell fits neatly into the historic pattern of an extraordinarily energetic and active 'amateur' natural historian - a non-professional who is producing work of serious scientific value. In his nomination for the Prize, it was noted: Oscar embodies the essential spirit of the founding fathers and mothers of the natural sciences. Unlike those first luminaries, he is not a man of leisure with independent means and desire for travel. Neither a Humboldt nor a Darwin, he is

a full time teacher. Sustained neither by his private purse, patrons nor university grants, he is the impassioned 'Amateur' in the finest sense of the word. Oscar Campbell represents the qualities that gave us the discipline of natural history to begin with.

The Bish Brown Award is given to a person who has made a significant contribution to promoting wider interest in the objectives of groups through means such as educational activities, raising public consciousness in the media, playing a leading role in NHG activities etc. The award was endowed by former Vice Chairman, Terry Adams and former Secretary, Caroline Adams, to commemorate the founder of the ENHG.

While working on her seminal research on the status of little studied populations of sharks and other elasmobranchs in the waters of the UAE and Oman, PhD candidate **Rima Jabado** has energized the ENHG and the wider environmentally-aware community to action, calling for volunteers to assist in her regular fish market surveys and publicizing the cause of endangered shark species in numerous articles in the local media. In tandem with that effort, she has run a mark-recapture study to come up with fishery-independent catch data. Both of those initiatives were partially supported by ENHG Research & Conservation grants.

Because of her tireless efforts to publicise this key conservation issue, educating and involving the local community, from expatriate and local fishermen, through concerned expatriate environmentalists, up to Emirati government officials, while at the same time producing a wealth of data that will soon allow local policy makers to accurately assess the current but dwindling stock and distribution of shark species and effectively address their conservation, Rima Jabado is an especially deserving recipient of the Bish Brown Award.

ENHG Committee

Photograph by May Yoke Taylor

Jebel Qatar Hike on Feb 2, 2013

When I read the description of this hike and *climb* up Jebel Qatar (outside of Buraimi in Oman) provided by the event organizer and leader, Stefan Beck, as being fairly demanding and strenuous and definitely not recommended for beginners, I smacked my lips and rubbed my hands with glee! Finally, I thought to myself, a hike with some real "meat" that an experienced hiker and backpacker can really "sink his teeth into..." Well, It turned out not to be quite so demanding or strenuous, but it did give all of us participants our money's worth of "advanced level" hiking.

Specifically, the entire circuit was only 6.2 km, but it took nearly 5 hours to complete as the going was slow and halting. This was due to the fact that the terrain we had to traverse was quite rocky and rugged and there was a significant amount of steep elevation gain (total of approx. 245 m), some of which demanded some real rock climbing though no gear, e.g., harnesses, safety lines, etc. was required. Also, the weather forecast had predicted an 80% chance of rain, which would fall continuously throughout the day, so that, as much as I was looking forward to doing this hike, I almost decided the night before to withdraw. It was a good thing that I

didn't as the "rain" turned out to be nothing more than a few very light sprinkles lasting no more than a few minutes at odd times throughout the day. In fact, it was almost perfect weather for such a physically challenging outing – overcast, cool and breezy.



After parking our vehicles at what Stefan decided would be the "trailhead," we were accosted for handouts by a small group of young and not-very-timid camels – probably stragglers from a coral just down the gravel road on which we had come.



Except for these all-too-common "life-forms," we encountered almost no wildlife during the remainder of our trek except for one or two birds which were too far off to identify properly. Though there was frequent evidence of terrestrial wildlife, mainly in the form of droppings, none — no insects (e.g., ants, beetles), reptiles (e.g., lizards), amphibians (e.g., toads) or mammals (e.g., small rodents, medium sized foxes, large donkeys), were to be seen anywhere. This created a somewhat eerie and ominous feeling of stillness and sterility.

Relieving this uncomfortable feeling was the relatively "abundant" – thanks to the current time of year – vegetation we encountered instead. This took the form of low lying scrub brush and occasional squatting trees which dotted the rocky landscape and jammed the many cracks and crevasses lacerating the rugged terrain.

Thick "clouds" of algae also choked the many otherwise idyllic ponds we came across while meandering through the wadis. Very pleasant and welcome sights during these meanderings were patches of wild flowers including bright yellow *Tribulus terrestris*.



However, by far, the most striking natural features we encountered were the spectacular and frequently phantasmogoric rock formations — the result of thousands of years of tectonic upheaval (uplifting and folding) and weathering by wind, rain and frequent — and violent — flash flood runoffs. One particular rock formation bears the name of "Bart Simpson" for its striking resemblance to that globally-known television character, and I noticed another which I imagined could have been a copy of the profile of Abraham Lincoln's head from the Mt. Rushmore monument (in the Black Hills of South Dakota, U.S.A.).



I know I speak for everyone who participated in – and survived – this challenging but most rewarding hike when I say that we all look forward to Stefan's next, which we hope will be much sooner than another year away...

Denis Cheng

IEW Hike to the Hanging Gardens of Jebel Qatar

Having thoroughly enjoyed the hike/climb up Jebel Qatar led by Stefan Beck three weeks earlier, I made sure to sign up for the hike to the "hanging gardens" of Jebel Qatar, led by Bill Jones on Friday and Saturday, Feb. 22 and 23, during the IEW which took place in Al Ain over the weekend of Feb. 21-24, 2013. This is an account of the hike I joined on Friday, Feb. 22.



At first glance, the magnificent rocky landscape we were entering appeared to be utterly desolate, barren and even sterile. However, we had the rare honor and privilege of having along on the hike Mr. NHG, himself, Gary Feulner, who demonstrated the difference between a true naturalist and a mere "day tripper", which the rest of us were. He soon showed us that what appeared to be a desolate life-forsaken environment was actually well inhabited by various life forms. His primary method of doing this was to use the binoculars he had brought along with him not to look for large (nearly non-existent) living things far off in the distance. Instead, he trained them on what appeared to be small living things found right on or beside the trail. In this way he alerted us to much wildlife & plant life indigenous to this region which was too small to be readily noticed by the casual hiker.



Ground Mantis spotted at Jebel Buhays Dec 2007 (the same species as the one described below, but larger)

Photo: May Yoke Taylor

The first form of animal life to which Gary alerted us was a tiny Ground Mantis perched on a rock in the middle of

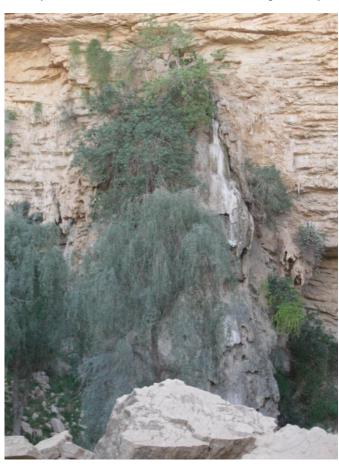
the trail that we had all just walked over... Not only was the insect extremely small, i.e. less than 2 cm long, but its dun colored body blended in so perfectly with the rocks around it that some of us still found it almost impossible to make it out even after we stared at its exact location, after it had been pointed out to us, for a good half minute or so! Later on, a tiny ant lion in its equally diminutive lair was pointed out and at yet another point, Gary focused his binoculars on a tiny patch of what appeared to be lichen on one of the rock formations just off the trail of which the rest of us had not taken any notice. However, this turned out to be a rare instance in which Gary had to admit being stumped in his attempts to identify it.

And all the while that Gary's sharp naturalist's eyes were scouring the minutiae of flora and fauna beneath our very foot falls, he was recording his thoughts and observations in a small audio recorder - it was a real inspiration and treat to watch this true "naturalist's naturalist" at work... At one point, someone did spot, and alert the rest of us to, a large bird circling high overhead which appeared to be a species of vulture, most likely Egyptian or Lappet-faced. But despite all this tiny, and even quite large in the case of the vulture, plant and animal life, the really striking highlight of the landscape through which we were trekking was the rock formations. Spectacular, wondrous, bizarre and even grotesque at times, they were a marvel to behold and to try to imagine the forces that sculpted and shaped such unusual and striking forms and textures. An interesting man-made "low-lying rock formation" we eventually stumbled across was a graveyard. In the typical Islamic tradition, all of the individual graves were undelineated and unmarked save for a simple un-worked headstone bearing no inscription.

The arrival at the "Hanging Gardens," itself, was an amazing experience - like entering a whole other world. It was nestled in a slight depression set into the base of the jebel's nearly vertical cliff face, which looks to the northwest. Thus, it resides in the cool shadow of the jebel, sheltered from the harsh sunlight that dries up and withers everything else outside of this protected area. And so, in stark contrast to all the rocky desolation we had just traversed, the enclosed micro-environment of the "Hanging Gardens" was quite lush and green, especially at this time of year. Even so, Bill and some of the others who were familiar with the jebel assured the rest of us that the greenery and relative coolness of this sheltered mountain oasis persisted even into the height of summer. The effect of a hanging garden is achieved by vines and shrubbery growing thickly and verdantly out of crevices running high up the cliff face to heights of 50 meters or more above the ground. The crevices serve as runoff for precipitation that falls upon the plateau that runs along nearly the entire length of the summit of the jebel. And so, the crevices serve as relatively plentiful supplies of water for the hanging vines and shrubs that "flow" down the crevices along with the water.

Bill bid us to set down and relax for a while with the admonition that people who did so were often very reluctant to get up again and depart... And so it was with our party... But many of us were now instilled with a resolution – and the GPS coordinates – to return once again to this wonderful mountain oasis "dream world."

Our thanks to Bill Jones for opening it up to us and to Gary Feulner for providing some running commentary on the tiny flora and fauna we encountered along the way.



Denis Cheng
All unaccredited photos above are by Denis Cheng

Upcoming Speakers

On March 19th 2013, a team from the Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi will provide the ENHG with a brief overview of the EAD's Abu Dhabi Baseline Survey Project. This presentation will be made by Anil Kumar T P, Director of the Environment Information Management Division for EAD and Pritpal Soorae, who is managing the field survey component of this project. They will present the main expected outcomes of the two phases of this project: 1) Remote sensing of land use / land cover and 2) Terrestrial biodiversity surveys. During this meeting the EAD team will explain how they see the ENHG might be able to assist EAD in this venture and describe the sorts of activities that they would like to invite ENHG members to become involved with. They would also like to explain the level of support in terms of equipment and training that EAD can provide to those who volunteer to participate.

Rather than being a detailed informational lecture, the main intent of this presentation will be to engage the ENHG and enlist the services of its members to assist in conducting baseline surveys of pre-determined locations. This will serve three purposes: It will give ENHG members a chance to get more actively involved in making and recording sightings of wildlife in and

around Abu Dhabi, carrying on in the footsteps of Bish Brown and other founders of the ENHG; it will get the wider community involved, contributing to greater environmental awareness; and it will also assist the EAD in terms of manpower. In turn, EAD will provide support to ENHG volunteers in terms of traps and training in survey methods as well as verification of findings.

EAD Executive Director – Environmental Information, Science and Outreach, Dr. Richard Perry, who is also an ENHG member of long standing, has initiated this project, and will be leading and supporting it in the coming months. He will be out of town on March 19th, so he has commissioned this EAD team to make this presentation in his stead. Dr. Perry sees this project as "a great opportunity to explore the feasibility of citizen science and demonstrate its usefulness in the local context".



On April 9th we will have the rare opportunity to hear from **Dr. Stephanie Dalley**, who is an Honorary Research Fellow at Sommerville College, University of Oxford. Her academic career has specialized in the study of ancient cuneiform texts, and she has worked on archaeological excavations in Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Jordan. Her presentation to the ENHG is titled: *The Mystery of the Hanging Garden of Babylon: An Elusive World Wonder Traced.*

The ancient Greeks had Babylon's Hanging Garden on their elite "must see" list, centuries after its supposed existence. But no trace could be found by excavation or in Babylonian inscriptions. So who made it? Where was it? Building on progress made by scholars over the last half century, Stephanie Dalley, a world expert on ancient Middle Eastern languages, deciphered a crucial Assyrian text. A sculpture and a drawing in the British Museum paved the way for a new line of enquiry. Her painstaking detective work has uncovered clues leading to its true location (not the Babylon we know) and its design, revealing the breath-taking technological achievements that made it possible. Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar, Alexander the Great, Archimedes, Herod and Nero, even the poet Milton, all have their place in this wonderful story.

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

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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.org

Historical Association of Oman: http://www.hao.org.om/

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

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

Roy & Liz's website: www.chirri2000.com

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

Emirates Marine Environmental Group: www.emeg.ae

Emirates Diving Association:

http://www.emiratesdiving.com/index.php

Emirates Wildlife Society – World Wildlife Fund: http://wwf.panda.org/who_we_are/wwf_offices/united_ar ab emirates/

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

UAE Environmental Atlas:

http://www.environmentalatlas.ae/

Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority

http://www.adach.ae/en/ (Still using ADACH website)

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

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

NYUAD Events Calendar:

http://nyuad.nyu.edu/news.events/events.ad.html

Khalifa University Events Calendar:

http://www.kustar.ac.ae/campus/dss/schedules/default.aspx

Dubai Astronomy Group:

http://www.dubaiastronomy.com

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

The Rock Art of the Hajar Mountains:

http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/uae/hajar_mountains/index.php

Arabian Wildlife: http://www.arabianwildlife.com

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

Zoology in the Middle East (Peer-reviewed ISI Journal): http://www.kasparek-verlag.de/ZME-allgem.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 En-

dangered: http://www.edgeofexistence.org

Protected Planet: IUCN & UNEP-WCMC Database: http://www.protectedplanet.net

Encyclopedia of Life: http://eol.org/

ARKive Images of Life on Earth: http://www.arkive.org Jewels of the UAE: http://www.arkive.org/uae/en/

NHBS Environment Bookstore: http://www.nhbs.com/

ITEMS ON SALE AT THE ENHG BOOK STALL

All prices are in dirhams.

- NEW: 2013 Calendar Birds of Oman, 30
- Jebel Hafit A Natural History, 100
 An attractive, encyclopaedic presentation of the natural resources of this national landmark.
 (Free copies available for schools donations.)
- Abu Dhabi 8 Million Years Ago, 15
- Birds of the UAE A guide to common and important species, 60
- Birds of the UAE Helm field guide, 70
- 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
- Exploring Oman, 120
- Native Plants of Oman, 80
- Natural History of Oman, 50
- Native Plants of Oman, 80
- Little O in Oman, 25
- Butterflies of Saudi Arabia & its neighbours, 90
- Sulphur, Camels and Gunpowder, 100
- Wild about mammals, 40
- *NEW:* Focus on Fujairah: Through Minie's lens 1964-2001, 150
- NEW: Field Guide: Wild Plants in Oman, 300
- Tribulus, our annual journal--see for details

In the News Media

The National, Feb 8: Eco-adventure around the Abu Dhabi mangroves

BBC News Online, Feb 23: Seafarer science: Sailors asked to help measure plankton

Gulf News, March 1: Tapping water from the sky

Gulf News, March 4: Sharjah Arabian tahr breeding scheme a success

The National, March 12: Push to protect Abu Dhabi's coastline from future development

The National, March 17: 'Shams 1 is a signal that the UAE is in the vanguard of renewable energy'

Gulf News, March 17: UAE plans to be world leader in biofuels from algae

The National, March 18: Eco-treasure hiding in Abu Dhabi mangroves

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Lectures

Meeting Venue: Abu Dhabi Women's College, City Campus **Emirates Hall**

Feb 5th A Journey across the Roof of the World

Feb 19th The Socotra Cormorant: Feared, Fragile and Fabulous

Rob Gubiani

Steve James

March 5th Antarctica: The Best Journey in the World? Oscar Campbell

March 19th 7:30 PM EAD Overview of Abu **Dhabi Baseline Survey** Project

> Anil Kumar & **Pritpal Soorae**

April 2nd NO LECTURE

April 9th 7:30 PM Mystery of the Hanging Garden of Babylon

Dr. Stephanie Dalley

Field Trips

Feb 2nd Jebel Qatar Mtn. Hike Stefan Beck

Feb 21st/22nd/23rd IEW 2013: ENHG-Al Ain

March 9th Al Wathba Lakes Birding lan Townson & Oscar Campbell

March 16th Musaffah Channel Birding & Snorkeling Boat Trip Ian Townson & Maarten Verhage

March 22nd/23rd Camping Trip / Ramble in Wadi Biah, RAK

> Keith Taylor & Ronnie Gallagher

ENHG-AD Research & Conservation Fund Grant Application Information

For background on this fund, see Dec 2009 Focus, p5.

For further enquiries and for grant application guidelines and application form, contact ENHG Chairman Andrew Bean at rexabean@ozemail.com.au

NB: These documents are posted in the Files section of the AUHENHG YahooGroup (see address below).

ENHG Equipment for Members' Use

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

- Starter camping set: 2 new sleeping bags & maps, medium-sized cool box, old Coleman '5-man' tent
- GPS unit GARMIN GPSMAP 60CSx
- First-Aid Kit
- Birding Telescope
- Two satellite phones, taken on camping trips. Phone numbers: No. 1: 008821644400956

No. 2: 008821644400965

Enquiries: Keith Taylor, kjtaylor13@yahoo.com

- Celestron NexStar telescope (on field trips only)
- Skv Scout astronomical object locator/identifier Enquiries: Denis Cheng, spacemandc@gmail.com.

Marine Life Rescue Contact Info.

In Abu Dhabi:

EAD Customer Service: 800555 (or) customerservice@ead.ae

EAD Emergency Response (pollution and wildlife) available 24 hours/day: Mob 050 6674171 (or) 050 6178218

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

Newsletter Details

Members' Items for sale

Yahoo Groups website

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