

focus

Abu Dhabi, September 2005 - Vol 29 (7)



Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

A browse through the pages of Focus shows the ENHG is very much alive and kicking! Members have been out in the wilds braving the heat, Tribulus Volume 15.1 is out with a wide variety of articles. The programme of lectures and field trips for the year is coming along well and we look forward to another active and exciting year.

It is with regret that we report the departure of Dr Gary Brown from the ENHG Committee and from the Environment Agency Abu Dhabi (formerly ERWDA). Gary is a well known authority on Arabian plants, and made good use of his expertise during his stay in the UAE. He gave us several excellent lectures and was responsible for arranging the lecture series last year. Our loss is Kuwait's gain.

I would like to draw the ENHG Conservation and Research Fund to the attention of our members. So long as the Group finances are healthy, we invite members to submit proposals for funding to the Committee. Projects that would be considered for funding might involve research into any aspect of natural history or archaeology of the UAE and adjacent areas, or aspects of conservation. While the funds are limited, in the past we have given grants of up to AED 5000. In return we would expect the results to be reported back to the ENHG through our usual means (Focus, Tribulus or the lecture series). There is no application form or closing date, but applicants should specify the scope and aims of the work, its feasibility and describe how the funds would be spent.

An exciting new venture coming in the near future is ENHG group on flickr.com. This is a photo sharing site run by Yahoo, which will allow members of the three ENHG chapters to share their digital photos, comment on each others pictures and participate in discussion threads. As well as encouraging photography, we hope that the site will be useful for members to have animals and plants in their photos identified by anyone with particular areas of expertise. The site is also an opportunity to document records of animals, plants and archaeological discoveries, provided GPS localities or good descriptions are given along with the photos. Hopefully this will add to our longstanding role in recording the natural environment of the UAE. Besides Flickr is good fun and quite addictive! So watch for an email invitation and get snapping!

Drew Gardner

Honey Badgers found near Ruwais

One of the most enduring mysteries about the UAE's wildlife was finally solved at the beginning of August, with the discovery of a small population of Honey Badgers, or Ratels (*Mellivora capensis*) near Ruwais - further proof, if any were needed, that there is still much to be discovered about our fauna and flora if people keep their eyes open.

The discovery was made thanks to the sharp eyes and initiative of Engineer Mubarak Saad, the Under

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FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Sundevalls jird
Photographer: Drew Gardner

Secretary of the Private Department of President H.H. Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed.

Wandering about not far from the Ruwais Housing Complex, he noticed some unfamiliar tracks in the desert, and arranged for traps to be put out. Lo and behold, a fully mature, and rather irate, honey badger was trapped. Further investigations resulted in the sighting of another, live animal, and a third, dead one, which had perhaps been poisoned.

Mubarak promptly reported the discovery to HH Sheikh Khalifa, who asked to see the animal, which was brought up to Abu Dhabi.

A few days later, the President decided that the honey badger had received enough curious visitors. He ordered that it should be released back where it had been trapped, and also issued orders that all trapping in the area was to cease, and that the species was to be afforded full protection. A magnificent decision!

The presence of Honey Badgers has long been suspected in the UAE. Back in the late 1940s, explorer Sir Wilfred Thesiger reported possible tracks between the Sabkhat Matti and Liwa, during one of his epic crossings of the Empty Quarter, while in 1991, further tracks, between Liwa and Umm az-Zamul, and in 1992, in Baynunah, not far from Ruwais, were also suspected to be of this species.

There are a couple of other carnivorous mammals whose presence in Abu Dhabi Emirate (and, indeed, in the UAE as a whole) has still to be confirmed - the Striped Hyaena and the Arabian Wolf. Both are known to have been present in the past, and there have been unconfirmed sightings and possible tracks of Striped Hyaenas not far from Al Ain.

So keep your eyes open and your cameras at the ready!

Peter Hellyer

Tribulus Vol. 15.1 published

The Spring/Summer issue of *Tribulus*, the Group's bi-annual scientific journal, was published at the beginning of July.

The lead paper, by Dick Hornby, is on the discovery of populations of a species of spoon worm north-east of Abu Dhabi. Spoon worms are a curious group, with a long prostomium (up to 21.5metres long) and rather like a thin, rounded segment of jelly, that they extend out over the inter-tidal flats at high water, and with a body buried deep in the substrate. (Dick has dug several holes to try to find a live animal, but has not, so far, been able to dig a hole deep enough before the sides collapse, leaving him holding only the prostomium!).

Other papers include a study of marine shells from two archaeological sites near Al Ain (Drew Gardner), a first record of Jerdon's Orphean Warbler for the UAE (by visitors Steve Votier, Helen & Tony Mainwood and Brydon Thomason and our own Simon Aspinall), more on World War Two plane crashes in the UAE (Jim Ward), and short notes on butterflies, a first breeding record of the Purple Gallinule and more.

Copies are available for members of the Group as part of their subscription, or can be purchased at Group meetings for Dh 15.

Non-members can also subscribe to *Tribulus* (Dh 50 per year), and a goodly collection of back numbers are available for those who want to work towards building up a set.

Peter Hellyer

Field Trips

A Walk in the Dunes

Eight intrepids from our group ventured out on Friday August 26th to a popular sandy location 75 kms from the city. The object of the exercise was to look at typical aspects of the sand ecology of the emirate.

Living in Abu Dhabi, we may be forgiven for thinking that the desert consists mostly of sand dunes, and that off-road driving means dune-bashing. However, as naturalists it is important to understand some of the basic aspects of sand desert ecology, as sand, in some form, covers a large part of the emirate.

The Arabian deserts are a continuation of the Sahara, and have a similar history, being formed by winds that came, and still come mainly, from the north and northwest. At times of maximum turbulence wind patterns are extremely complex, and the wind may blow from several directions simultaneously. Although the formation of sand dunes is still not fully understood, a number of different types of dune have been identified. The dunes in the area of Two Trees are of a complex nature, with at least two formation periods in evidence, but with the highest dunes conforming to the present wind patterns. These dunes are calcareous in origin, and

are, in part, the remains of sea creatures blown there by the wind patterns of the last glacial period, from what is presumed to be the sea bed of the present Arabian Gulf, most of which was dry land at that time. There was a moderate wind as we walked among the dunes, and as a result our walkers were showered with the lighter particles of sand that had become airborne. The heavier particles will only be carried in high winds. Dust storms that are fairly common around Abu Dhabi usually consist of clay, silt and the lightest particles of sand. In traditional sand storms, the larger particles of sand are blown violently eroding rocky surfaces and generally making life unpleasant for ENHG members who happen to get caught in them.



Zygochloa qatariensis

The sand provides a habitat for reptiles, rodents, insects, plants, and where there are trees and large shrubs, birds as well. On the edge of the Empty Quarter a limited number of plants can survive, even in the soft sand of the high dunes. Plants are able to gain a foothold, even in the slip face of some dunes. As we walked we noticed a few species of plants, all perennials, that had survived the summer heat, and appeared to be doing well.

The greenest of these were the *Zygochloa qatariensis* which we noticed were all growing at the base of the dunes, and mostly in a fairly hard substrate.



Cyperus conglomeratus

This was in contrast to the ubiquitous sedge *Cyperus conglomeratus*, clearly the dominant plant in the area, which had colonized all flat areas, the lower dunes, some of the slip faces, and even the soft sand at the top of dunes. This is possible thanks to their complex

underground system of rooting from one plant to the next. These plants can survive almost total deflation thanks to the support they get from the roots. This was seen in places where the rooting system projected out of the sand where it had been deflated by the wind. Two other shrubs were seen at intervals: *Dipterygium glaucum* with its yellow blooms, and *Limeum arabicum* with white blooms. The *Dipterygium* will flower at any time of the year, and here, was attracting butterflies. The *Limeum* is more seasonal, and the flowers had mostly gone. For amateur botanists trying to identify these two, it is helpful to know that while the *Dipterygium* tends to be erect and will grow in the high dunes, *Limeum* is usually prostrate and prefers flatter ground, and the lower dunes.

We recorded a number of toad-headed agamas, and some white-spotted sand lizards.



Prosopis cineraria "ghaf"

While we were having lunch under a friendly *ghaf* tree, a well-marked sand fish kindly showed itself, unaware that we were there. There were very few birds, perhaps due to the heat, and we were disappointed not to see the local eagle owl, usually in evidence at this site. We found what seemed to be a foxhole, with very recent tracks. We have spotted a fox in this area on previous occasions

We understand that the grazing laws have changed, or are about to change. This may account for the remarkably healthy-looking young *ghaf* bushes that we noticed in the area. Even the common dune grasses *Panicum* and *Pennisetum* were not as heavily chewed as we had come to expect. Had the camels simply missed an opportunity or were they not allowed out to graze freely?? In either event it is good news for the *ghaf* population, and for all annuals hoping to make a go of it after the next rains.

Over lunch we agreed that more information was needed about sand dune formation and about the various types in different locations. Perhaps this could be a focus for a camping weekend in the cooler weather.

Allestree Fisher

Early Birding

Early Friday morning, September 23, thirteen avid birders rolled out of their nests to go twitching with one of Abu Dhabi's experts, Andrew Twyman.



Photographer: Marc Dyer

Scouring the open spaces around Spinney's, the public beach near the InterContinental, Mushrif Palace Gardens and the Eastern Corniche for 4 hours, we soon had a list of 28 different birds (not including the usual suspects), 4 of which were migrants... see the list below.

- | | |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| Common Sandpiper | Collared Dove |
| Hoopoe | Tree Pipit – M |
| Purple Sunbird | Spotted Flycatcher – M |
| Rufous Bushchat | Curlew |
| Grey Francolin | Turnstone |
| Whimbrel – M | Pied Wheatear – M |
| Isabelline Wheatear | Red Whiskered Bulbul |
| White-cheeked Bulbul | Red-vented Bulbul |
| Redshank | Greenshank |
| Slender-billed | Gull Honey Buzzard |
| Cattle Egret | Black-winged Stilt |
| Cormorant | Western Reef Heron |
| Grey Plover | Little Green Heron |
| Lesser Sand Plover | Bar-tailed Godwit |

M=migrant

Andrew introduced us to many new sites that are easily accessible by car (or taxi!) and we soon realized that you don't have to travel far from your backyard or balcony to see a wide variety of species on Abu Dhabi Island.

Karen Cooper

Welcome, Jens and Hanne

Members will be familiar with the stunning calendars of Birds of Oman or Birds of the UAE that have been on sale at Group meetings - the 2006 Calendar is out shortly.

Even better news is that the photographers, Jens and Hanne Eriksen, have just moved to Abu Dhabi, after nearly two decades in Oman.

The Danish husband-and-wife team, winners of many awards, are quite simply, the best bird photographers working in Arabia today (and they take pretty remarkable shots of other fauna and flora too!).

We welcome them to Abu Dhabi - and look forward to the first of (one hopes!) many talks to the Group.

Peter Hellyer

ENHG Field Trip Policies

Members are informed that ENHG field trips, whether day trips, walks or overnight camping excursions, are cooperative ventures among the participants, for their mutual benefit and enjoyment. ENHG trip leaders are not normally professional naturalists or experts, but fellow members who have agreed to share their time and their knowledge with other participants, on a volunteer basis. The relationship of trip leaders and participants is that of co-venturers, not professional and client. For these reasons field trip participation is limited to paid-up ENHG members and their bona fide non-resident guests.

Various dangers are inherent in travel in and around the UAE and in the exploration of the natural environment, whether by car, boat or on foot. This applies equally to sand desert, mountains or at sea. Participating members accept these risks, and accept responsibility for their own safety and welfare. Field trip participants are normally expected to sign a waiver form to this effect. They should thus be adequately prepared with supplies, water, a first aid kit and basic equipment for desert driving. Without these understandings, the ENHG would be unable to sponsor field trips or to recruit volunteers to lead them.

Field trips vary in both format and organization, depending on the nature of the trip, the number of participants, and the preferences of the field trip leader. If a sign-up is required, and the numbers of participants are limited, members should make every effort to honour their commitment or give adequate notice otherwise, as a courtesy to the trip leader and to other members who might like the chance to participate. For details of convoy procedure, please consult the detailed instructions ENHG Yahoo! group website.

(Adapted from *Gazelle*)

ITEMS ON SALE

AT THE ENHG STALL

- **Abu Dhabi Bird checklist 10Dhs.**
(Free if you spend over 50Dhs!)
- **Emirates Bird Report, 50Dhs.**
- **Birdlife in Oman, 120Dhs.**
Beautiful photographs by the Eriksens.
- **Bird watching Guide to Oman, 95Dhs**
(Copies signed by Eriksens & Sargeants).
- **Breeding Birds of UAE, 60Dhs.**
Author: Simon Aspinall
- **Seashells, 30Dhs.**
A useful little waterproof guide to the region's shells.
- **Wild about Reptiles, 60Dhs.**
- **Wild about Mammals, 40Dhs.**
Marijcke Jongbloed, mammals of the UAE.
- **Comprehensive Guide to the Flora of the UAE, 100 Dhs**
- **Plant Checklist, 25Dhs.**
Marijcke Jongbloed - Know your local wild plants.
- **Jebel Hafit – A Natural History, 100Dhs.**
- **Pests – Find out what's in and around your home**
- **Children's books: Yaw the Wildcat; Hayat the Leopard**
- **ENHG T-shirts/golf (polo) shirts/caps.**
25Dhs/35Dhs/10Dhs.
Buy any 2 – get 10Dhs off.

Abu Dhabi Fianna Irish Sports Group:

Night navigation course

If you are interested in learning about day/night navigation techniques (without using a compass or GPS) and desert survival techniques then the overnight trip planned by Johnny Rea and his team on 20/21 October 2005 is for you!

A convoy will leave Abu Dhabi for a desert location (approximately 85 km away) on Thursday 20th October at 13:00 hours. Families are most welcome but bookings are essential as places are limited. There is a charge of 20 AED per person. BYO tents, food and vehicle (some car pooling may be possible if you don't have a 4X4).

For further information, and to register, contact Johnny Rea at john.rea@hct.ac.ae.

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Lectures

18 October 2005
The Life of the Date
Palm.

Geoff Sanderson

1 November 2005

NO LECTURE (Eid)

Field Trips

20/21 October 2005
Overnight camping trip.
Archaeology et al.
Allestree Fisher

18 November 2005
Day trip: Iron Age sites
Jabeeb archaeology.
Brien Holmes

24/25 November 2005
Camping near Mleisa
(Miocene site), Liwa
Allestree Fisher

8/9 December 2005
Family weekend
Alan McGee

16 December 2005
Day trip: Spoon worms
Ras Hanjurah shoreline
Dick Hornby

5/6 January 2006
Mountain climb,
Buraimi area
Roy Richards

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The following companies are supporting the ENHG's activities in the region. We hope you as ENHG members will in turn support these companies whenever you can.

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