

focus

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Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

News on the field trip programme. I do apologise that we have not been able to run many of the trips that we had hoped to over the last few months as our redoubtable field trip leader Allestree has been *hors de combat*. Fortunately we can now report that Allestree is back, and is planning to take on some field trips next season. Andrew Bean has agreed to organize and lead a programme of trips as well, so it looks as if we will be up and running with a good programme again next season. As you will undoubtedly have noticed, the hot weather has arrived again and so the field season for many is drawing to a close.

The warming of the weather also signals the end of the various professional archaeologists field season in the UAE. The results of some of the work conducted over the cool weather was reported at the Fourth Annual Symposium on Recent Archaeological Discoveries in the Emirates, held at the Mercure Hotel on Jebel Hafit on the 29 and 30 March. By all accounts this was a highly successful and entertaining meeting, with some very interesting results. Perhaps the most stunning was the report by Hans-Peter Uerpmann, Margarethe Uerpmann, Sabah A. Jasim, Marc Händel and Johannes Schmitt (Tubingen) of a flint tool horizon at Jebel Fayah provisionally dated to the Palaeolithic in the Upper Pleistocene. If this dating proves correct, this would push back the known human occupation of the UAE by perhaps 50,000 years.

A plea for help... we need a volunteer or volunteers to edit Focus. Jenny and Roy have been producing the excellent recent newsletters, but the time has come to seek new inspiration. Focus is produced monthly and reports on recent field trips, observations, reports and really anything that our membership finds interesting and is willing to commit to paper. The format template is set up and Jenny and Roy are happy to help in the transition to a new home! Please do consider volunteering. It may be that we can arrange for issues of Focus to be produced by different editors in alternate months ... or have a team working on it. But we need your help!

And finally do keep reports of interesting observations coming in. We can pass pictures or records to the appropriate experts for identification. This is the way that many new discoveries are made, and many such discoveries are made by amateurs. This has always been one of the strengths of the ENHG

Drew Gardner

Sir Bani Yas Island

If you want to go to Sir Bani Yas Island, a good place to base yourself would be the new hotel at Jebel Dhanna, the Danat. The hotel is offering weekend room rates of 580 dhs for two persons for one night, including breakfast, and 928 dhs for a two night stay. Weekday rates could presumably be negotiated downwards.

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FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Wadi
Photographer: Drew Gardner

The hotel has its own boat and is able to offer trips across to the island of Sir Bani Yas where you can see for yourself just what has been going on there. The island, as most will know, houses large numbers of Arabian and African ungulate (e.g. gazelles, oryx, eland, addax) as well as giraffes, ostriches and emus. No lions or other carnivores are there, so kids are safe enough.

The boat handlers routinely see dolphins on the crossing but on one recent tour westward around the mainland jebel, Jebel Dhanna, a herd of some 100 or so dugong was sighted. Now that would be worth seeing. Paul Paulose, recreation supervisor at the hotel, may have current information on whether the herd is still around, and you may be lucky. Landlubbers may want to get a game of golf on the next door Dhafra Beach hotel's testing 18 hole 'brown' course.

The hotel contact details are 02-8012222 and website address for the hotel chain (which also has the Mirfa, Raha beach and Liwa hotels): www.ncth.com

Feedback: Inter-emirates Weekend March 2006

We drove up to RAK on Wednesday evening. Despite the long delay caused by negotiating the nightmare that is the Dubai-Sharjah rush 'hour', we arrived at the RAK hotel in time for dinner and a chance to socialise before heading off to bed.

We chose Barbara Couldrey's Wadi Walk as our Thursday morning activity. At 8.15 we set off in convoy in the direction of Wad Bih, taking a left turn towards Wadi Haqil. We parked our cars at the entrance to Wadi Hafarah and walked the short distance to the foot of a dry waterfall. The walk took us past an interesting rock formation where the water has at some time in the past divided the wadi into two. We passed a magnificent old fig tree and tested the fruit; there were one or two ripe pieces, edible, if very tiny.

**Fig Tree**

Barbara pointed out the (empty!) waterfall and gave us very precise and helpful instructions on how to negotiate the rocks. This is when I completely got the wrong end of the stick thinking that this was the only climbing we had to do and, having made my way up to the first plateau, commented that 'it had been easy, I thought we had to go all the way up' – to which Barbara replied 'we do!' I looked up. Aaagh!

**Climbing the waterfall**

As it turned out the walking (and climbing) was easy enough for non-climbers like me and fun for the mountain goats among us.



The scenery was very impressive; it was a perfect and beautiful day for walking. Another climb brought us to a lovely area complete with photogenic caper bush cascading down the rock face.

**Caper bush**

Barbara told us that she had seen the bush in full bloom a week or so previously, and it was now beginning to fruit. Several bird species were sighted including an Egyptian Vulture – somewhat off-course I understand, and warblers; plus a blue headed lizard which Drew Gardner noted. We spent some time in an area where there is evidence of habitation, terracing for agriculture, and a graveyard; and made a short excursion further up the hill to view the new road being hacked from the hillside to pave the way for the proposed ski slope.

Our return was via a bedu 'stairway', which zigzagged down the hill. We attempted not to damage the many small plants which we found growing all along this part of the hillside. This route took us back to the place where we had started the waterfall climb. After stopping for a breather under the shade of a convenient tree, we headed back to the cars and drove the short distance to the site of the disused potteries in Wadi Haqil. There we saw the remains of the potters' homes, and several kilns, scattered along the hillside. We previously visited this site about two years ago on a weekend outing, it doesn't appear to have changed.

We arrived back at the hotel at midday in time for the next adventure – the Dhow trip around the mangroves. We embarked at the fish suq and spent a couple of hours cruising around the creek area in a small dhow. We saw a few herons, many seagulls and lots and lots of large blue jellyfish. Nice!

**On the dhow**

Thursday evening took the form of an alfresco dinner and a chance to view the photographic competition. The photographs covered everything from marine life to sunsets and were of a very high standard – it was hard to pick three favourites.

On Friday we were fortunate to take part in the Archaeology trip led by Christian Velde, who recently gave a very interesting and informative talk on Julfar to our group. We visited Dhayah Fort, where we spent a

fascinating couple of hours learning about the history of the Fort and the surrounding area, which has been occupied for at least 5000 years. The newly restored Fort is situated just off the main road leading out of Rams towards the Oman border, and the reward for the steep climb up to the Fort is the spectacular view over the Rams-Dhayah coastal plane. From this vantage point Christian was able to point out the site of several other watchtowers, suggest the general layout of the settlements and palm gardens, and describe how people might have lived.

The present Fort dates back to the early 19th Century, and is particularly important historically as it was the last point of resistance against the British attack in 1819. I have nothing but admiration for the generations of people who have battled this hostile environment, desert raiders, and pirates - not to mention the British heavy cannon – and survived. We met Mohammed Ali Al Mansour who is responsible for the landscaping of the area around the hill fort and owns the palm gardens nearby. He is building a hotel and restaurant next to the fort and we look forward to visiting when it has been completed.



Dhayah Fort



The Friday Morning Group

At the foot of the Fort we saw the remains of the lower fortress; an old summer house and, a short walk away,

several tombs dating back three to four thousand years. Our walk took us through an area littered with pottery shards, some recent, others many hundreds or thousands of years old – we were urged not to remove them from the site, but had fun trying to piece a number of them together. We also sighted areas further up the hillside where there is more evidence of human occupation and farming. Christian's in-depth knowledge of the history and archaeology brought the area to life.



Pottery shards

We finally succumbed to the increasingly strong wind and RAIN, and headed back to the hotel. Lunch, and then a blustery drive home through the sandstorm - in record time - through Sharjah in ten minutes - back to Abu Dhabi in two hours!

For lots more interesting information about RAK visit www.raktourism.com.

Our thanks go to Dubai for their hard work in putting this weekend together, and especially to Barbara and Christian whose knowledge and enthusiasm for this special part of the UAE made our weekend so pleasurable.

Liza Green

Pet Pest

Although I am reluctant to admit publicly that I share my flat with the odd cockroach now and again, just for once I didn't increase the surface area of one I saw scurrying away as I came into the kitchen early one morning. The reason why it got away unscathed was because it was an albino specimen. I reached for a camera but it disappeared into the bowels of my microwave and I haven't seen it since, although I have been on the alert.

We have probably all heard how cockroaches, along with scorpions and ants, are adjudged likely to be able to survive a thermo-nuclear winter, but living in a microwave out of choice?

Has anybody else had the dubious honour of encountering an albino cockroach in Abu Dhabi or elsewhere?

(Name and address withheld)

Snippets

A great white's long swim



It seems a long way to go to find a mate, but scientists believe that was the reason Nicole made her epic journey of 20,000 kilometres across the Indian Ocean from South Africa to Australia. The movements of the great

white shark – named after Nicole Kidman – were recorded by an international team of scientists led by Dr Raymon Bonfil after attaching a satellite tag to her dorsal fin. Their findings provide the first evidence of a direct link between the Australian and South African great white populations. During her swim, which took 99 days, Nicole dived to a staggering 980 metres, but 60% of the time she was just below the surface, leading scientists to speculate that she may have been navigating by the sun and the stars. Australia is apparently a particularly active 'dating area' for the species, but after her business was done Nicole then swam all the back across the ocean to give birth at home. It was the longest trip ever recorded for a shark – and the fastest.

October 2005

Monkey found on volcano

Conservationists have discovered a new species of monkey with elongated whiskers, a fine mohican and a distinctive honking bark, says *The Guardian* newspaper. The highland mangabey was spotted on the flanks of Mont Rungwe, a volcano in Tanzania's southern highlands, where it lives at altitudes of up to 8000 feet. It is brown, around three feet long, with thick fur that enables it to survive in the cold mountain air. It is also very rare: scientists estimate that there are no more than 1000 of the monkeys alive, and with loggers making inroads into their territory, the numbers could be declining. "This demonstrates how little we know about our closest living relative," said Russell Mittermeier of the IUCN-World Conservation Union. "A striking monkey in a country of considerable wildlife research has hidden under our noses."

June 2005

Fish heading north



Nearly two-thirds of fish species in the North Sea have either moved further north, or to greater depths, in search of cooler water. And as the cold-

water fish have moved on, so their old habitats have been colonised by exotic, warmer-water species from the south. Alison Perry, a marine biologist at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, estimates that if trends continue, Atlantic cod will have deserted North Sea waters by 2080, their habitat occupied by the

southerly bib. "This is not just a case of individual fish choosing to move into colder waters," she told *The Independent* newspaper. "It points towards an entire population of fish becoming less viable in response to warming." Between 1961 and 2001, average North Sea temperatures increased by 0.6C. In the past 25 years, Atlantic cod have moved an average of 73 miles north; haddock populations have moved north by 65 miles.

June 2005

ITEMS ON SALE

AT THE ENHG STALL

- **The Emirates – A Natural History, 300 Dhs**
The first complete referencing guide to the wildlife of the UAE. 580 colour photos.
- **Marine Atlas of Abu Dhabi, 280 dhs**
- **Jebel Hafit – A Natural History, 100Dhs.**
- **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.
- **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.

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Lectures

2nd May 2006

To be advised.

Field Trips

To be advised

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