

# focus



Abu Dhabi, June 2009

Vol 33 (6)



Emirates Natural History Group

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

## EDITORIAL

Another ENHG season is drawing to a close. However before the summer recess, we still have a few activities, including two interesting talks in June (Emma Thompson on life and death in the Stone Age settlement at Buhais, and Gordon Kirkwood on marine life). We also have a social evening on Tuesday 9 June at the Oryx Hotel.

Sadly, we also need to bid farewells to friends of the ENHG. Pam and Allestree Fisher have been pillars of the ENHG since before I joined, and have led innumerable day trips and camps which have introduced so many of our members to interesting sites around the country. Their interest in and knowledge of the archaeology, plants, stars and other aspects of natural history have always been freely shared in Allestree's inimitable way. We will miss them, and thank them for everything. Dick and Liza Green have just left (again!), and Jan and Wilma Fischer are heading back to Qatar. Bon Voyage to them too, and we hope they will keep in touch and look us up again when visiting Abu Dhabi.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank all those who have contributed to Focus over the year, and especially to Keith for so enthusiastically and effectively editing our newsletter.

*Drew Gardner*

## Erratum

*The fledgling in May2009 Focus, 'Wildlife in the Carpark' on p. 6, was actually a Red-vented Bulbul, not a Yellow-vented Bulbul. A short article on the bulbuls in the UAE, with photos and up-to-date information on their species classifications, will appear in Sept Focus. NB: Online-archived copies of May Focus have been corrected. -Ed.*

## Camping on the Red Gypsum Coast

On 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> April 2009, on the date originally set for the Family Camp Weekend, four of us, unable to make the trip on its rescheduled date, drove 350 km west of Abu Dhabi to Sila and took the gatch road out to the end of the first peninsula, in search of the beautiful, virtually unvisited beaches that Drew Gardner had assured us were out there. This trip turned into an informal recce for Andrew's trip the following week—probably a good thing, because finding this truly superb beach camping site took a bit of doing.

At the literal end of the road, on the spit of the peninsula, where we stopped for lunch, text messages welcomed us to Qatar's Q-Tel—and to Etisalat's roaming service. (We knew from the map we were still in the UAE, but perhaps UAE cell phone coverage doesn't reach that far, while Qatar's does.) Our lunch stop was at a quite exposed, not terribly inviting spot near black, apparently oil-soaked rocks, with no sand beaches whatsoever.

Entertaining us while we ate, however, was a small flock of swifts (perhaps four or five) doing pretty much what we were doing—having lunch, but dining on bugs on the wing. They circled back and forth, quite close overhead, giving us repeated views of their distinctive markings—white chins and white undersides, the rest being charcoal gray. Our copy of the *Field Guide to Birds of the Middle East* suggested that they could only be Alpine

## In this issue

- Page 1:** Front cover
- Page 2:** Editorial, Erratum, Camping on the Red Gypsum Coast
- Page 3:** Camping on the Red Gypsum Coast
- Page 4:** Camping on the Red Gypsum Coast
- Page 5:** Camping on the Red Gypsum Coast
- Page 6:** Family Camp at Diamond Beach, Eco-friendly Camping Cookers
- Page 7:** Eco-friendly Camping Cookers, Next Speakers, Bookstall
- Page 8:** Committee Members, Lectures, Social Event, Field Trips, In the Local News Media, Websites of General Interest, Corporate Sponsors

### FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Osprey, Ras As Sawadi, Oman, 20 October 2005

Photographer: Hanne & Jens Eriksen

## This month's contributors

PK Ashraf, Michael Creamer, Hanne & Jens Eriksen, Liza Green, Gary Feulner, Dick Hornby, Keith Taylor, May Yoke Taylor

Swifts—listed as 'infrequent passage migrants'. As far as we recall, they were still circling there when we moved off an hour later in search of a more salubrious campsite, and we didn't see them again.

Two weeks after our return, resident bird maven Steve James asserted, in reply to my enquiry, that this was in fact an extremely rare and valuable sighting. He passed the word on to Tommy Pedersen, the man behind the UAE Birding site, and he replied, equally excited. He said it fit in nicely with a sighting of one Alpine Swift passing the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve on 6 April, and he added that in his seven years of bird watching in the UAE, he has not yet seen one himself. Apparently these birds winter in southern Africa, breed in Melilla, on Morocco's Mediterranean coast, and take summer holidays in the Catalan Pyrenees. And once in a long while on their migratory journeys it seems a few of them take a wide detour through the Arabian Gulf. Though we didn't think to get a snapshot, the Eriksens have most helpfully sent one along from their files.



Alpine Swift, taken in Van Gölü, Turkey, 21 June 2002

Photo: Hanne & Jens Eriksen

Driving back down the eastern side of the peninsula towards intriguing looking bluffs in the distance, we were flummoxed by a large fenced off area near a tall radio mast. Giving up on that, and heading to the west of the road's end, we passed several derelict houses, and the only sandy beach was too close to the latter and strewn with ugly oil-soaked rocks and pieces of congealed tar.

Getting close to heading elsewhere, we gave one last try in the other direction, heading past the radio tower and along the fence over the highest point, finally coming to a corner where we turned seawards and then picked up a newly-graded track that headed straight for a blue-roofed house by the sea, in the fenced-off area.

(Coming from Sila you should look for a right-hand graded track in sight of the radio mast. But if that track ends at a jetty with a couple of houses on it, you'll know you've turned too soon, and you need to go back to the main track and take the next right-hand track.)

Then, just before the locked gate at the end of that track, we turned off to the right and picked up just a few tire tracks heading toward a weird and wonderful landscape of low sandstone walls and eroded, flat-topped pillars. Winding through them, we came to a flat spot, sheltered by these low eroded steps, on a high platform in view of the sea, perfect for camping.



Eroded flat-topped pillars and red gypsum wadi

*Photo: May Yoke Taylor*



Our campsite, protected on two sides by low walls, with the cars arranged to provide extra shelter from the wind

*Photo: Liza Green*

But besides the strangely eroded terraces, what really set this seacoast apart was that it was strewn with sparkling reddish, white, and transparent crystals. Our first, amateurish, assessment was that the reddish crystals shown below were "rose quartz" (not a proper geological term of course), but they didn't feel hard enough to be quartz. In fact, gypsum's hardness on the Mineral Scale is only 2—softer than a human fingernail.

According to Dick Hornby, who has visited this coast in the past, "The two photos of minerals [see below] both show different forms of gypsum. It is very widespread in the far western region—much of it in completely natural, undisturbed forms. Gypsum is calcium sulphate (as in Plaster of Paris), which is one of the first minerals to crystallize out from a saline solution. The different colours in the gypsum are attributable to trace quantities of different elements, especially metals that are incorporated into the gypsum crystals."

Gary Feulner writes of the flakes in the second photo below, that they're "a give-away [of gypsum crystals]. There's nothing to confuse them with, in our area. [They] can be very large (> 1 ft dimensions)." And Dick Hornby adds that they were formed at the water's edge when the sea level was higher, then buried, later exposed by deflation (wind erosion) during a period of low sea-level such as the present one, & finally "cleft by extreme temperature variation, often into parallel-sided flakes".



Finding a treasure trove of red gypsum crystals

*Photo: May Yoke Taylor*



Selenite - clear gypsum crystal cleavage flakes

*Photo: May Yoke Taylor*

Adding another splash of color on this coast, otherwise fairly barren of plant-life, came from stands of Sea Lavender, apparently once quite common in Dubai, but reduced to a rarity there by wholesale development. Here on this unspoiled coastline, this plant is found in exuberant abundance.



Sea Lavender, *Limonium axillare*

Photo: Liza Green



Osprey on its favorite perch

Photo: May Yoke Taylor

At this beach we saw several varieties of sea birds, most notably several osprey (including a mother and juvenile) perched on beachside rocks in the morning. See the striking photo of an osprey on this issue's cover, taken in Ras As Sawadi, Oman, (much clearer than the shots we managed to take!). We saw what we assumed to be Western Reef Heron in both dark and white phases, along with a couple of very fast-moving brownish waders racing to and fro on the tidal rocks. We also saw swifts darting through the air above the beach, but not white-bellied ones; these swifts were a nearly uniform dark color, and only their chins were white. I've been told by Steve James that these were Pallid Swifts, which "breed on the small sea cliffs, jebels & buildings out there." In addition, we snapped a male Redstart, taking a breather on the rocks during its annual migration.

The only mammal we spotted was a Cape Hare, which didn't stick around for a photo shoot, though we've been supplied with this shot taken in the area a month later.



Cape Hare, *Lepus capensis*

Photo: Dick Hornby

The burrow pictured below has stumped the experts. This hole is too small for a fox and not the right shape for a dhub. And unlike rabbits, hares generally don't excavate burrows; they may use them, but often take shelter like the one above. What do you think dug it? A hedgehog? Or a rare hare escaping summer heat?



Mystery burrow near our campsite

Photo: May Yoke Taylor

Donning a snorkel was a rather amusing experience. The water off this beach is crystal clear, but wading pool depth. Nonetheless, it would make for a good practice snorkelling experience for neophytes, with aquarium-scaled undersea gardens made up of five types of sea plants, a few different types of living shellfish, hermit crabs and other small crabs, and some very small fish.



One of the many small crabs--*Metapograpsis messor*

Photo: Liza Green



Rocky 'Iron Shore' near our campsite at low tide

*Photo: May Yoke Taylor*

The beach near our campsite was rocky, with patches of gravely sand, strewn with shells and crawling with crabs. Though the tidal rocks had a dark cast and there were a few small globs of tar among them, this became less pronounced the further right (southward) we worked our way along the beach. It looked to us as if a spill had hit the north-eastern tip of the peninsula, but the effects had tapered off over here. All along these beaches there's also plenty of sea-borne rubbish ready for a clean-up crew of eco-friendly campers armed with biodegradable rubbish bags. There's almost no other evidence of human presence between the houses in the distance on either side, with two notable exceptions. To the right of our campsite, at the ends of a couple of shallow wadis running beach-wards were two mounds of rank-smelling dead fish (luckily out of nose-range of our campsite). We assumed they had been dumped there by local fishermen who had caught a type of fish they wouldn't eat or couldn't sell. And greeting us on our arrival we'd seen evidence of territory-marking: somebody's name in Arabic, etched with a sharp object into a free-standing pillar—the thin one in the background on the right below—at the end of the entrance track.



More pillars, known to Quaternary geologists as 'zeuges'

*Photo: May Yoke Taylor*

None of the above unwelcome intrusions really affected our enjoyment of the beaches here however, as they yielded all sorts of sightings and beachcombing trophies. And though the beaches near the campsite require footwear as they are quite rocky, there is one stretch of sand beach. If you work your way round the highest point—to the right of our campsite—in the next photo...



*Photo: May Yoke Taylor*

...you come to this nice sand beach, easy on the toes, in the shot below. And beyond that is a house on a jetty with a speedboat or two at anchor.



*Photo: Keith Taylor*

Heading back to Abu Dhabi just past Ruwais, on both the right and left sides of the main highway, we saw fenced-in groves of trees—preserves of some sort—with gazelles in them—quite visible and waiting to have their pictures taken. And going in search of coffee in Jebel Dhanna, in the trees lining the approach to the Dhafra Beach Hotel, we saw a number of colorful European Bee-eaters, which Steve James tells us are common passage migrants in spring & autumn.



European Bee-eater

*Photo: May Yoke Taylor*

All in all, this was a fascinating trip to a peaceful, serene spot along the coast that the ENHG has never to our knowledge arranged an official visit to till now—well worth a visit, and even worth revisiting, despite the 3 ½ hour drive required to reach it.

**Keith Taylor**

## Family Camp at Diamond Beach



About as deep as it gets! (Note the offshore island.)

On 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> April 2009, guided by fearless Excursion Secretary Andrew Bean, a clutch of Natural Historians set out for the Sila coast. Following the trail blazed by previous ENHG explorers, they hit their target on the first try, encountering the magic sands and formations which the children christened “Diamond Beach”.

The variety of flora and fauna to be found in this beauty spot is surprising, as described in the preceding report. While the red and clear gypsum crystals are eye-catching, the most impressive revelation that this observer found was written in the geological record.

The entire area is punctuated with sand pillars capped with calcified rock, as is the shoreline at current sea level. This grey ragged rock forming both the caps and today's seabed is familiar to sailors in the Caribbean as ‘Iron Shore’. And indeed, it is quite hard and a fatal danger to any vessel that strikes it. Here near Sila, on the Saudi border, the substrate is softer, of compressed sand, varying in color from light beige to pink. Whether they're wind-driven accumulations or deposits from periods of river flooding is the question; the sharp peaks and valleys in the colored layers suggest the former.

The hard caps and their subsequent erosion expose not just one change of seabed, but three distinct levels, one on top of the other; each separated by two or more meters of compressed sand. Geologists tell us these layers of ancient seabed date back 5,000, 120,000 and 200,000 years. But what strikes this observer is that the globe has been warmed and drowned before; not once, but several times. And at Diamond Beach one can see, feel and sense it – a truly awe- inspiring experience.



Three ancient seabed levels at ‘Diamond Beach’

*Michael Creamer*

*Photographs by P.K. Ashraf*

## Eco-Friendly Camping Cookers

Earlier this year, a friend in the U.S. sent me a solar cooker, which works on the principle of collecting the sun's heat and focusing it on the food to be cooked. In this case, the solar reflectors are made of metallic-foil-covered cardboard and the cooking receptacle is a sturdy black enamel-coated iron pot with a tight-fitting lid, tightly wrapped in a large plastic bag.



*Photo: Keith Taylor*

On Saturday, 11<sup>th</sup> April, on the first camping trip to the beach described above, I had an opportunity to try this cooker out. After breakfast, at about 9 a.m., I put three frankfurters and two eggs (whole) into the pot, which I sealed up and placed in the center of the solar collector—aimed at the morning sun. We then carried on with our beach exploration. Upon returning to the campsite at about 12:30, I re-positioned the cooker towards the sun and went about other activities. Finally, at about 2 pm, taking care not to burn myself on the searingly hot pot, I removed the eggs and hot dogs. The latter were obviously well cooked, but not burned (the manual claims that food never burns in this cooker), and the eggs were well-baked and quite firm. Chopped into my instant noodles they made for a substantial lunch.

The obvious advantage of this cooker is that it requires no fuel whatsoever, and direct sunlight is such a readily available energy source here. Another is that you never have to worry about this cooker exploding dangerously! The main drawback is that you have to allow enough time—at least three hours in mid-day sun for a simple meal. And of course, you can't cook at night! Another problem: it needs to be well anchored in a strong wind.

This cooker comes with a cookbook with a wide range of recipes, which can be ordered from the following site: <http://www.spheralsolar.com/eleanorssolarcookbook.aspx>. For a helpful comparison of several solar cookers available online see this site: [http://www.solarcooker-at-cantinawest.com/solar\\_oven\\_comparisons.html](http://www.solarcooker-at-cantinawest.com/solar_oven_comparisons.html). Another nice site: <http://www.solarhaven.org/SolarCooking.htm>.

Also worth mentioning: on the 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> April Family Camp trip described above, Ashraf had along a Kelly Kettle, which, as long-time ENHG campers may recognize from the photo below, is the same kind of kettle that Allestree Fisher always used to bring along to brew his tea in. Ashraf has sent along this website link—<http://www.kellykettle.com>—from which you can order this fuel-efficient kettle, in which you can boil water with the heat of a few twigs stuffed inside.



Kelly Kettle

Photo retrieved from <http://www.kellykettle.com>

**Keith Taylor**

## Next Speakers



Skull of pearl-wearer found at Buhais 18

**Emma Thompson** is currently the Research and Projects manager at the Sharjah Archaeology Museum. She has been leading a major upgrade programme which included the installation of a new excavation showcasing the excavations at the Buhais 18 site. Emma began excavating in the UAE as an undergraduate student in 1995, and completed her doctorate at Sydney University in 2004. She was teaching archaeology at Sydney University and working as a consultant archaeologist in Sydney when she took a position at the Sharjah Archaeology Museum in 2007. On 2<sup>nd</sup> June she will shed some light on the lives—and deaths—of the residents of one stone-age site.

ENHG member **Dr. Gordon Kirkwood** is a keen diver and underwater photographer, as well as a Certified Scuba Diving Instructor. In his day job, he is a seconded by BP to ADMA-OPCO, where he is a Senior Advisor. In his lecture on 16<sup>th</sup> June—Marine Life of the UAE & Oman, Part III—continuing on from his last two presentations to our group, he will take the audience on an underwater journey, covering some of the most interesting fishes, reptiles, mammals and invertebrates that are encountered by divers in this region, which is particularly well-known for its bio-diversity.

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

## ITEMS ON SALE

### AT THE ENHG 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.
- Seashells of Eastern Arabia, 120.
- Abu Dhabi Bird checklist, 10.
- Emirates Bird Report, 50.
- Oman Bird List, ed 6, 30.
- Birdwatching guide to Oman, 2nd edition, 100.  
*Guide to bird watching spots in Oman.*
- The Birds of Al Jabal Al Akhdar, 50.
- Trucial States, 150.
- Falconry, 60.
- Native Plants of Oman, 80.
- Snakes of Arabia, 50.
- Pests, 35. *Find out what's in and around your home.*
- Reef Fishes of the UAE, 50.
- Snorkeling and Diving in Oman, 50.
- Comprehensive Guide to the Wildflowers of the UAE, 100.
- Feast of Dates, 100.
- UAE in Focus, 100.
- Sir Bani Yas, 100.
- Musandam, 100.
- On-road in the UAE, 50.
- Off-road in the UAE II, 50.
- Off-road in Oman, 50.
- Abu Dhabi 8 million years ago, 15.
- Natural History of Oman, 90.
- Discovering Qatar, 120.
- Arabian Sands, 90.

## Committee Members

Drew Gardner  
(Chairman)  
Mobile: 050-6675830  
[drew.gardner@zu.ac.ae](mailto:drew.gardner@zu.ac.ae)

Keith Taylor  
(Deputy Chairman / Focus Editor)  
Mobile: 050-820-4938  
[kjtaylor13@yahoo.com](mailto:kjtaylor13@yahoo.com)

Jenny Mueller  
(Secretary)  
Mobile: 050-3110632  
[jennymuae@hotmail.com](mailto:jennymuae@hotmail.com)

Eila Merriman  
(Treasurer)  
Mobile: 050-9081200  
[kubukabin@hotmail.com](mailto:kubukabin@hotmail.com)

Jeff Szuchman  
(Lecture Coordinator)  
[Jeffrey.Szuchman@zu.ac.ae](mailto:Jeffrey.Szuchman@zu.ac.ae)

Andrew Bean  
(Excursion Secretary /  
Corporate Sponsorship Secretary)  
Mobile: 050-3221327  
[rexabean@emirates.net.ae](mailto:rexabean@emirates.net.ae)

Allestree Fisher  
(Assistant Excursion Secretary)  
Mobile: 050-6672237  
[allestree.fisher@hct.ac.ae](mailto:allestree.fisher@hct.ac.ae)

Peter Hellyer  
(Editor of Tribulus)  
Mobile: 050-6424357  
[peter@extinfo.gov.ae](mailto:peter@extinfo.gov.ae)

Patricia MacLachlan  
(Public Relations Secretary)  
[mp\\_maclachlanuk@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:mp_maclachlanuk@yahoo.co.uk)

Dick Hornby  
(Member)  
Home: 02-6274049  
[dnahornby@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:dnahornby@yahoo.co.uk)

Martin & Linda Betz  
(Members)  
Home: 02-6272309  
[lindaleviskabetz@yahoo.com](mailto:lindaleviskabetz@yahoo.com)

Donatella Astratti  
(Member)  
[sadalnashirah@gmail.com](mailto:sadalnashirah@gmail.com)

Molly McQuarrie  
(Member)  
[bonesetc@emirates.net.ae](mailto:bonesetc@emirates.net.ae)

Feng Wen  
(Member)  
[feng.wen@adpc.ae](mailto:feng.wen@adpc.ae)

Cath Ware  
(Member)  
[ware24now@gmail.com](mailto:ware24now@gmail.com)

## Lectures

### Venue: HCT/ADMC

29<sup>th</sup> May

Extreme Northeast  
India

*Steve James*

2<sup>nd</sup> June 7:30 PM

Buhais 18: Life and  
Death in the Stone Age

*Emma Thompson*

16<sup>th</sup> June 7:30 PM

Marine Life of the UAE  
& Oman Part III

*Gordon Kirkwood*

## Social Event

9<sup>th</sup> June 7:30 PM

Social gathering at the  
rooftop bar at The Oryx  
Hotel, Khalidiya

## Field Trips

17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> April

Family Camp at beach  
near Sila

*Andrew Bean*

1<sup>st</sup> May

Turtle spotting at  
EMEG reserve

*Michael Creamer*

8<sup>th</sup> May

Afternoon/evening trip  
to Qarn Nizwa to spot  
bats and geckos, etc.

*Drew Gardner*

## In the Local News Media

Where you can walk back in time: [Sila]  
<http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090328/NATIONAL/459780516/1010/FRONTPAGE>

Environmental officials look for ways to stem red tide:  
<http://www.gulfnews.com/nation/Environment/10315185.html>

## Websites of General Interest

ENHG-AA Website (Archives: 3 newsletters, Tribulus):  
<http://www.enhg.org>

Tommy Pedersen's UAE Birding / UAE Nature Forum:  
[www.uaebirding.com](http://www.uaebirding.com)

Hanne & Jens Eriksen's Birds Oman website:  
[www.BirdsOman.com](http://www.BirdsOman.com)

Qatar NHG website:  
<http://www.qnhg.org>

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

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

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

Sharjah Museums sites (Check out the virtual tours!)  
<http://www.sharjahmuseums.ae/>

## Corporate Sponsors of the ENHG - 2009

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

BDO Patel

BDO

Dome International

Dome

International Bechtel  
Company, Ltd.

BECHTEL

Nautica Environmental  
Associates

NAUTICA  
Environmental Associates LLC

URS Corporation

URS

Dames & Moore

## 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

## Newsletter Details

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

## Yahoo Groups website

<http://uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/AUHENHG>