

# focus



Abu Dhabi, September/October 2010

Vol 34 (7)



Emirates Natural History Group

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

## EDITORIAL

Our activities for the new season are now well under way. As the weather cools down, we have a varied programme of field trips from beach walks and birding to mountain camping in Oman. Due to the Eid falling in the middle of November, we will have our lectures on the 2nd (On deltas by Graham Evans & Tony Kirkham – note that this talk will start at 8 pm due to a prior booking of the auditorium), followed by Dr Christian Velde talking on the 9<sup>th</sup> on the ancient city of Julfar in RAK.

A glance at pages 6-7 of this issue shows a very welcome development. The corporate sponsor list has expanded to 19 companies! I would like to thank Ann Pearson on behalf of the entire ENHG for the wonderful job she has done in recruiting so many generous sponsors. This sponsorship allows us to publish Tribulus and fund speakers' expenses, and of great importance, it provides a fund for conservation and research. I am very pleased to announce that the ENHG has approved funding for Oscar Campbell and Neil Tovey to survey of the mangroves in Khor Kalba. These hold vulnerable populations of the Collared Kingfisher and Sykes' Warbler. Information on these populations is critical to conservation planning. Oscar and Neil have already started the survey work which will continue until the spring. We have also approved a request from Graham Evans & Tony Kirkham to assist their important research on the sabkhas and landforms of the Abu Dhabi coast by providing them with a 4WD vehicle for a week.

Finally, many thanks to Gaby for stepping in as Secretary while Julie takes a break.

*Drew Gardner*

## In Sharjah, Score One for Nature!

*The following article is reprinted, with permission, from the National, where it appeared on Sept. 4, 2010. –Ed.*

Car tyres and power cables have given way to grey herons and palm trees after a half-decade of hard work by a team of naturalists pushing back against the downside of development. Vesela Todorova reports from inside Al Wasit Nature Reserve.



*Photo: Amy Leang*

It was only an hour after sunrise, and the neighbourhood and roads surrounding Al Wasit Nature Reserve were quiet. Inside, however, was a different story. There it was breakfast time, a hub of activity as birds went about finding food using their own individual methods. At one end great egrets plunged their long necks into the brownish pond water, re-emerging just as quickly, their beaks full. Grey herons stood motionless at the water's

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### FRONT COVER PICTURE

*Photograph: Hoopoe Lark at Liqbi, fanning wings to keep cool*

*Photographer: Drew Gardner*

## This month's contributors

EMEG, Drew Gardner, Peter Hellyer, Emmanuelle Landais (of Gulf News), Amy Leang & Vessela Todorova (of The National), Kurt Warren

## ENHG Membership Information

Annual membership in the Abu Dhabi chapter of the ENHG is 100 Dhs – for both individual and family membership. NB: 2010 membership is reduced to 50 Dhs from Oct - 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 scientific journal, *Tribulus*. If you have not yet collected your copy of Volume 18, please take one from the book table at a meeting, and indicate on the list provided that you have done so.

edge, waiting for an opportunity. Wading birds, such as the black-winged stilt, seemed less proud, their necks bent, beaks picking food from the muddy bottom. Five years ago, the place was a dump. "It was just a pile of rubbish, basically," said Peter Hellyer, the managing environmental/archaeological consultant on the project.

Mr Hellyer organised the team that first visited the site in 2005, a group of experts on insects, plants, mammals and birds, as well as a hydrologist, a landscape architect and an ecologist. They were given a special task by none other than the Ruler of Sharjah, Dr Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed, to assess whether Al Wasit, if restored, had the potential to become a nature reserve. The area had always been an important place for birds. Mr Hellyer remembered his first visits in the early 1980s when the



place was teeming with wildlife. However, as the city grew, it crept closer and closer to the wetland, destroying some of it and polluting the rest.

By 2005 the situation was critical. The wetland had been cut into two by the Sharjah Ring Road and was surrounded by houses on one side and power plants on another. And what remained was very polluted. "It was being used as a refuse dump for all manner of both solid and liquid waste from the city," said Roger Godwin, another expert who worked on the project. Pictures taken by the survey team reveal a landscape dotted with car tyres and construction debris. Plastic bottles, bags and other garbage floated in the water.

Yet after a study of the area the experts determined that it could be saved. The go-ahead was given to Gary Bartsch International, a South African landscaping and environmental services company, to start the restoration project. Returning the area to nature meant fencing off what remained of it to keep out people as well as stray cats and dogs. A manual clean-up followed, conducted carefully so as to not further disturb the area. Power cables that had been placed on a berm that dissected the main water body were re-routed. The area also had to be cleared of mesquite trees, an invasive species which stifles local plants.

Some luck – two years of higher-than-average rainfall – also helped, germinating seed banks of indigenous plants that had been dormant. "The re-emergence of plant colonies and insects associated with these resulted in a massive increase in food sources for the birds that flocked to the reserve from the sparser surrounding areas, as well as migrants who set up home and began breeding," Mr Godwin said.

Rashid Mahmood, site supervisor at Sharjah Municipality, has followed the site's progress for five years. Motioning towards the dense canopy of trees, shrubs and grasses now covering the reserve, he said: "In the beginning there was only white sand." Compared to the neat rows of palm trees and other plants of the landscaped buffer around the reserve, the stretches of reeds and salt-tolerant grasses appear chaotic, their green hue mixed with yellow after the long, dry summer. While the landscaped trees and grasses are watered by a team of 20, irrigation for the wild habitat is left up to nature.

However, the growth of native plants and the large stretches of shallow, muddy water banks are exactly what birds need to rest, feed and nest comfortably. Knowing this brings a greater appreciation of the area's harsh beauty.

Gary Bartsch International has drawn plans for a visitor centre, but they were put on hold after the economic downturn. The team still hopes the project will eventually get funding so the public can see the reserve and its inhabitants.

"Wasit," said Mr Hellyer, "has potential to be a natural reserve of regional importance." Not only for what it is, perhaps, but also for what it represents: the restoration of nature in a time of development.

**Vesela Todorova, Senior Reporter, The National**

## Al Wasit Reserve Background

The original baseline study of Al Wasit Reserve, carried out (ultimately) for the Ruler of Sharjah, involved fieldwork by a number of ENHG members, including former Abu Dhabi Chairman Peter Hellyer and Simon Aspinall, current Abu Dhabi Chairman Drew Gardner and Brigitte Howarth, a leading light for many years in the Al Ain ENHG.

This report, together with hydrological studies done by the Gary Bartsch International team, then led to the Ruler deciding to designate the area as a nature reserve. A jolly good one it is too - and we were all delighted that one of our consultancy studies actually led to some very positive results!

The photos below show Al Wasit at its nicest, before the restoration programme got under way. During the initial cleanup, over 4,000 cubic metres of rubbish was removed!



**Peter Hellyer**

**All photographs by the author**

## Rescue Course for Better Awareness of Threats to Marine Mammals

Busy shipping areas pose a serious threat to marine mammals such as dugongs, whales or dolphins. Knowing what to do if one ever washed up on shore after a collision could therefore be vital to saving what are fast becoming endangered animals.

Having the skills to save just one can make a difference, said Stephen Marsh, operations manager for the British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR), the primary marine animal rescue organisation in the UK. "Dugongs, for example, only reach sexual maturity at the age of 16 or 17 years, gestation takes over a year and they give birth to one calf every seven years. If an animal washes up on shore then it's most likely sick and if we can nurse it back to health and put it back in the water, it will definitely help the population," said Marsh.

On a short stay in the UAE, Marsh and his colleague Richard Ilderton, from BDMLR, were invited by the Emirates Natural History Group to give two workshops in Dubai and Abu Dhabi on marine mammal rescue last weekend. It was also the topic for a lecture held last Tuesday in Abu Dhabi, at one of the regular lecture meetings of the ENHG.



Hands-on experience: BDMLR trainer Stephen Marsh with participants on the marine mammal rescue course

*Photo: Kurt Warren*

The dugong population in the Arabian Gulf is believed to be the second largest in the world after Australia. For more than two decades, dugongs in UAE waters have been protected by a law which prohibits their exploitation. A ban on drift net fishing in the UAE waters has also helped to minimise dugong mortalities. No statistics were available from the Environment Agency — Abu Dhabi (EAD) on the number of known beached mammals in the emirate or reported beachings in the UAE of any marine mammals. However, EAD conducted aerial surveys of UAE waters of the Arabian Gulf during the summer of 2000 and winter of 2001 and estimated the population of dugongs to be 1,861.

Around 50 people took part in the marine mammal rescue course which was held in collaboration with the Emirates Diving Association and the Emirates Marine Environment Group.

"There is no infrastructure at the moment for marine mammal rescue in the UAE. Some of the marine organisations are interested in acquiring equipment which is vital when dealing with such large animals," said Marsh.

During the course, participants were taught handling, lifting and first-aid techniques using a life-like and life-sized water-filled model of a Common Dolphin, and they helped refloat a two-tonne life-sized model of a pilot whale. Those who attended the course were also taught how to handle an injured or stranded dugong.

*Emmanuelle Landais, Senior Reporter, Gulf News*

## Porpoise and Dolphin Washed up on Beach in Jebel Ali

Two marine mammals were found washed up on a Jebel Ali beach a day apart by the Emirates Marine Environment Group (EMEG) last Sunday (17 Oct, 2010).

A finless porpoise, classified as 'vulnerable' by International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List was found dead last Sunday at the Waterfront next to Palm Jebel Ali.

The next day, a male Indo-Pacific Humpback Dolphin was found in the same general location. This species is classified as 'Near Threatened' by IUCN Red List. According to EMEG, this dolphin, measuring 2.39 metres long, died following vessel strikes. Apparently due to these strikes, its caudal fin (tail) was missing, as well as the top of its dorsal fin. The dolphin appeared to have been healthy before suffering these fatal injuries.

*Emmanuelle Landais, Senior Reporter, Gulf News*

## Kayak Presented by ENHG to EMEG



*Photo: EMEG*

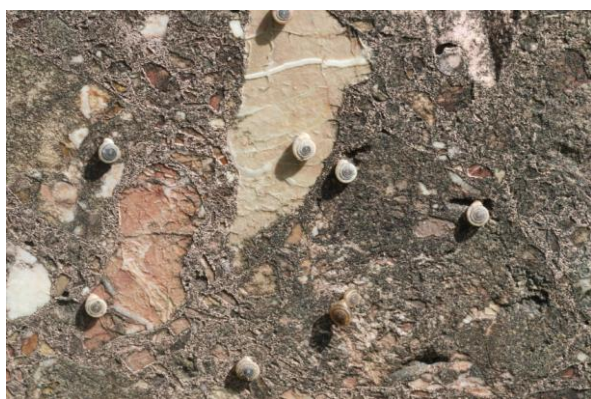
During an award ceremony that following games held before the Al Ghaffal traditional dhow race last May, the ENHG was surprised with a pair of monetary awards, which the ENHG Committee was then pleased to pass on to our generous host on that occasion in the form of



an in-kind donation from EMEG's wish list: a single-seater kayak for use in their education and marine conservation programmes. This kayak was presented to EMEG by ENHG-AD members Michael and Greta on June 5<sup>th</sup>, World Environment Day. EMEG staff have since been using this kayak in wildlife monitoring. –Ed

## Two Land Snails in Abu Dhabi

Interesting snippets of Natural History show themselves even in the most unlikely places! While walking around the fountain in the wooded and grassy central reservation of Al Sa'ada Street, I was surprised to see hundreds of small land snails clustered on one short section of the wall around the fountain. The snails were all inactive and presumably aestivating, it being June and very hot. The snails must be exposed to the sun, at least in the early morning, so have an amazing ability to survive hot and dry conditions.



The snails turn out to be the Southern Flatcoil *Polygyra cereolus* (Mühlfeld, 1816) in the family Polygyridae. This is an alien species in the UAE, being native to Florida. It has also been recorded in Qatar and Saudi Arabia as well as Hawaii. It was probably introduced here in imported soil and grass. This species has a flattened shell with a low conical spire. The surface of the coils is covered with regularly spaced ribs. Its clustered distribution has been noted elsewhere, where hundreds or thousands of snails may congregate on small sections of walls, while other areas are devoid of snails.



Southern Flatcoil *Polygyra cereolus*

Another common species in the grass of Al Sa'ada Street is the native species *Zooteca insularis* (Ehrenberg, 1831). This tiny snail is in the family Subulinidae and adults measure about 10-15 mm long, by 5-6mm across. The shell is nearly cylindrical before tapering rapidly to its apex, and has a distinctively square opening. It is widespread in the Saharo-Sindian region and is recorded from Oman, Qatar and Saudi

Arabia as well as the UAE. It may be abundant in lawns, but also occurs in silty soils in the northern mountains and in agricultural areas.



*Zooteca insularis*

There must be several other species of land snails in urban Abu Dhabi. Five species have recently been reported in Doha. See Al-Khayat JA (2010), First record of five terrestrial snails in the State of Qatar. Turkish Journal of Zoology 34: 1-7.

**Drew Gardner**

*All photographs by the author*

## Fourth International Date Festival

Location: Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre

Dates: 22-27 November 2010

Opening times:

Monday – Thursday: 12pm – 10pm

Friday & Saturday: 2pm – 10pm

Entry fee: 10 dirhams / person; family offer available

Activities:

Traditional performances, films, children's activities, cooking classes, cooking and photography competitions, displays of different date varieties, information on the cultural heritage of the date palm...and more!

More information: <http://www.datepalmfestival.ae/> -Ed.

## Recent Speakers



**Steve James** is a lifelong bird-watcher whose love for birds, birding and wild places is infectious to those around him. He has travelled extensively throughout the world, amassing a world list of over 4,600 species. He has been resident in the UAE since 1992, and his UAE bird list is above 400 species. He is a member of the

Emirates Bird Records Committee, and he is available as a bird-guide on trips throughout the UAE and into Oman. Between birding trips, Steve is the Senior Environmental Protection Officer for ADCO.

Steve is also a Bish Brown Award winner and past Chairman of the ENHG, who continues to entertain and inform the group with beautifully illustrated and humorously anecdotal talks from time to time. Last May Steve spoke to us about a recent trip to North-East India. His most recent talk, on October 5<sup>th</sup>, presented a window on a remote island off the coast of Eastern Australia, which most of us had never heard of: Lord Howe Island, listed as a World Heritage Site, mainly because of its unique endemic bird species. In that talk he explained the islanders' radical plan to eliminate the introduced species of rat that poses an ongoing threat of extinction to those bird species.

For a link to an article about a similar pest control project to protect endangered birds on even more remote Henderson Island, click [here](#).



**Stephen Marsh** has had a life-long passion for wildlife, and after closing the door on a career in the advertising industry, moved into the charity sector to work for a number of conservation organisations. Although a keen birder from a young age, in later life Stephen has become well known as a whale and dolphin enthusiast, having revitalised the education and survey charity ORCA over the last few years. He has worked for commercial whale-watching companies as a wildlife guide, run survey and rescue training courses and lectures regularly. Stephen sits on the UK's Joint Cetacean Group and Marine Animal Rescue Coalition.

Stephen has been a voluntary Advanced Marine Mammal Medic and trainer for British Divers Marine Life Rescue for many years and is now Operations Manager for this charity, which has over 2,500 trained volunteer medics in the UK ready to rescue stranded marine mammals. As an accredited WiSe (Wildlife Sensitive) Wildlife Tour Boat Operator, Stephen also advises and trains others how to safely handle boats in the vicinity of wildlife. On 19<sup>th</sup> Nov., Stephen gave the ENHG an illuminating presentation on marine mammal rescue in the UK, following a weekend of marine mammal medic training in the UAE (see write-up on page 4).

## Upcoming Speakers

**Dr. Graham Evans** is one of the world's top experts on the sabkhas of the coastline of Abu Dhabi, having first come to study them in the 1960s. Indeed, he has good claim to be called the 'Father of Sabkha Studies.' Formerly Professor of Geology at Imperial College, London, where he is now Professor Emeritus, he is now retired, but retains links with the Oceanography Department of Southampton University.

Together with a colleague, Dr Tony Kirkham, formerly of BP, ADCO and Schlumberger, Graham Evans is visiting Abu Dhabi to pursue on-going research on the deltas and sabkhas north-east and west of Abu Dhabi island, dating of old sea level changes - and much more. The ENHG Conservation and Research Fund is providing sponsorship for their research, by funding a 4WD vehicle for them during their stay.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> November, Graham will give a slideshow to the ENHG titled **DELTA – the fertile dustbins of the continents**. Graham Evans is an entertaining and informative speaker - this talk is NOT to be missed!

**Dr. Christian Velde**, winner of last year's Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Award, is Resident Archaeologist at the National Museum of Ras Al Khaimah, and has been working in the UAE for over twenty years. He will be well-known to those ENHG members who have gone on field trips to look at RAK archaeology and have benefited from his insights.

On 9<sup>th</sup> November, Christian will give a presentation to the ENHG titled **JULFAR – the old port city of Ras Al Khaimah**. His talk will report on the recent rescue excavations at Julfar, which have provided much new information on the extent of this ancient port-town, which was the most important in the UAE for over 1,000 years.

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

## Corporate Sponsors of the ENHG - 2010

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. Click on the links below for information about the sponsors.

<a href="#">Bin Moosa &amp; Daly</a>	
<a href="#">BDO Patel</a>	
<a href="#">British Petroleum</a>	
<a href="#">Dome International L.L.C.</a>	
<a href="#">Exova, Ltd.</a>	

ExxonMobil	
Fugro Survey (Middle East) Ltd.	
International Bechtel Company, Ltd.	
Kharafi National	
Al Masaood Group	
Mott MacDonald, Ltd.	
Nautica Environmental Associates L.L.C.	
Partex Oil and Gas	
Readymix Abu Dhabi Limited L.L.C.	
Shell	
Total ABK	
Ultra Dascam	
URS	
WSP Group	

## 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 to schools. Ask Chairman.)*
- Terrestrial Environment of Abu Dhabi Emirate, 240.
- Marine Environment and Resources of Abu Dhabi, 140.
- Arthropod Fauna of the UAE, Vol 1, 110.
- Arthropod Fauna of the UAE, Vol 2, 110.
- Wild about Mammals, 40.
- Wild about Reptiles, 40.
- Snakes of Arabia, 50.
- On-road in the UAE, 50.
- Abu Dhabi Bird checklist, 10.
- Emirates Bird Report, 20.
- 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.
- Comprehensive Guide to the Wildflowers of the UAE, 100.
- Butterflies of Saudi Arabia & its neighbours 90.
- Trucial States, 150.
- Oman 1965, 150.
- Natural History of Oman, 50.
- Falconry, 60.
- Pests, 35. *Find out what's in and around your home.*
- Reef Fishes of the UAE, 50.
- Snorkeling and Diving in Oman, 50.
- Feast of Dates, 100.
- UAE in Focus, 100.
- Sir Bani Yas, 100.
- Musandam, 90.
- Abu Dhabi 8 million years ago, 15.
- Discovering Qatar, 120.

For enquiries: Hanne & Jens Eriksen, [hjoman@eim.ae](mailto:hjoman@eim.ae)

## In the Local News Media

The National, Oct. 17: [Old wind towers the new cooling system](#)

The National: Oct. 19: [Lessons in whale rescue](#)

Gulf News: Oct. 18: [Whale sharks show up in Ghantoot and Deira](#)

Gulf News, Oct. 26: [Corals from Palm Jebel Ali to be relocated to Jumeirah](#)



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**A new Lecture Coordinator is required – to arrange speakers for our twice-a-month lectures, with the help of the Committee. Can you do this?**

**Also required: An AV Assistant to control the lights and sound during some meetings, as part of a team (training will be provided). Can you help us?**

## Lectures

**Venue: HCT / Abu Dhabi Men's College**

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

28<sup>th</sup> Sept.  
An Introduction to the Natural History of the UAE (Part 1)  
**Drew Gardner**

12<sup>th</sup> Oct.  
Lost in Paradise: Natural and unnatural history of Lord Howe Island  
**Steve James**

19<sup>th</sup> Oct.  
Marine Mammal Rescue in the UK  
**Stephen Marsh**

2<sup>nd</sup> Nov. **8:00 PM**  
Deltas – the Fertile Dustbins of the Continents  
**Graham Evans**

9<sup>th</sup> Nov. **7:30 PM**  
JULFAR – the old port city of Ras Al Khaimah  
**Christian Velde**

## Field Trips

17<sup>th</sup> Sept.  
AD eve. beach walk  
**Feng Wen**

30<sup>th</sup> Oct.  
Morning bird-watching trip in Abu Dhabi  
**Andrew Bean**

5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> Nov.  
Family friendly camping trip to Fujairah  
**John Burt**

5<sup>th</sup> Nov.  
Noukhada Kayaking Twitcher's Tour  
**Andrew Bean**

13<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Nov.  
Camping trip to Jebel Al Akhdar, Oman  
**Andrew Bean**

## 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)

ZipcodeZoo: Comprehensive natural history resource  
<http://zipcodezoo.com/default.asp>

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

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

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

Emirates Marine Environmental Group:  
[www.emeg.ae](http://www.emeg.ae)

Dubai Astronomy Group:  
<http://www.dubaiastronomy.com>

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

British Divers Marine Life Rescue  
<http://www.bdmlr.org.uk/>

## 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
- Nikon Coolpix camera – 5 Megapixel, 4x opt zoom
- First-Aid Kit
- Sky Scout astronomical object locator/identifier
- Celestron NexStar telescope (on field trips only)

Please contact Andrew Bean, Excursion Secretary, at [rexabeans@emirates.net.ae](mailto:rexabeans@emirates.net.ae) to make enquiries.

## 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 Chairman Drew Gardner, at [drew.gardner@zu.ac.ae](mailto:drew.gardner@zu.ac.ae).

## Newsletter Details

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

## Postal Address

ENHG c/o Environment Agency -  
Abu Dhabi, PO Box 45553, Abu Dhabi

## Members' Items for sale

Please send small ads to:  
[newsletter@chirri2000.com](mailto:newsletter@chirri2000.com)

## Yahoo Groups website

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