



# Emirates Natural History Group Al Ain Chapter Newsletter September 2008

## ENHG Al Ain Chapter Committee

Welcome to season 2008/ 2009 of the Emirates National History Group - Al Ain Chapter. We hope you can take part in our activities as often as possible and enjoy the history and environment of your current home.

We want to say many thanks to Margaret Lambert, who has passed the newsletter responsibility to Roland Ochmann. Margaret wants to develop her talent as an artist and capture her impressions of the Emirates on canvas.

### Committee members:

**Chair:** Brien Holmes; **Vice Chair** Brigitte Howarth; **Treasurer:** Simon Wall; **Secretary:** Marion Campey; **Membership:** Amer Abu Kuhail; **Photography:** Bob Reimer; **Newsletter:** Roland Ochmann; **Library:** Amer Abu Kuhail; **Flora:** Marion Campey and Martha Coetzee; **Fauna (Insects):** Brigitte Howarth; **Fauna (Birds):** vacant; **Environment:** Jodie Healy

Visit the webpage at <http://www.enhg.org/index.htm> or contact us at [enhg@yahoogroups.com](mailto:enhg@yahoogroups.com) (all Al Ain chapter members)

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## Upcoming Events

November: I. Zakhour Triple Crescent Events  
December: Christmas Eve in the desert

### Hikes

We have been enjoying weekend hikes and walks at nearby destinations, either in Oman or in the Emirates. Please watch out for the weekly mails for details.

Hint: Please read these mails carefully in order to be well prepared for the hikes (equipment, shoes, severity, etc.) also to get the right time and place to meet.

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## Haiku by George Kershaw

I wake in the night  
joyful, I hear summer rain:  
air-conditioning.

9/9/2008

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## Thuraya Satellite Phones

We have purchased a second Thuraya telephone. The numbers are **0088-216-2150- 2400** for Phone One and **0088-216-5552-1121** for Phone Two.

We recommend that you add these numbers to your mobile phones and lists of important phone numbers.

One or both phones will be taken on each field trip and will be turned on for the duration of each trip.

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### **General Meetings**

The general meetings are held on the second and fourth Tuesday at Al Ain InterContinental Resort hotel at 19:30.

Next dates: Tuesday October 14 and Tuesday October 28.

### **Committee**

Committee meetings are held on the first Tuesday of each month at the Al Ain English Speaking School. Everyone is welcome to participate! We are always looking for others to join our discussions and help deliver events.

The next Committee meeting will be Tuesday October 7 at 7:30 pm.

### **Photography Competition season 2008/2009**

For the past several years, Al Ain chapter has invited every member to participate in the annual photography competition. In the past, we have organized entries into eight categories including flora, fauna, archaeology/architecture, landscapes etc. Some of the winning photographs will be featured on the home page in coming months.

For a discussion of the competition last season, please visit <http://www.enhg.org/alain/photocomp.htm>.

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### **News The Library**



The Library has been moved to our room at the Palace museum. Thank you Amer for moving all the books, magazines and papers to their new home.

If you're looking for a publication, videotape or periodical, please contact Amer.

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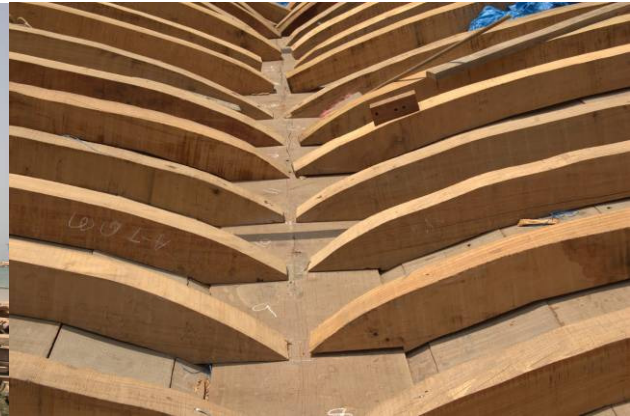
### **What Happened Last Month (Or: What Has Been Going On?) Or: What has happened in the last couple of months: Dhow shipyard in RAK**

One of the sites we visit regularly in RAK is the dhow building yards where sleek, modern racing dhows are built next door to huge shipping dhows -- booms -- that transport goods around the Gulf, and beyond.

We have been visiting the site each four or five weeks this year to document progress of the construction of what may be the last boom to be built in RAK. Some photos of the progress of the work are attached. The file name indicates when the photo was taken.



May 08



August 08

## Hikes

During the summer months we shifted mostly to late afternoon walks to avoid the greatest heat at noon time.

The participations were astonishingly numerous sometimes, even with guests from Dubai and Abu Dhabi traveling especially for these events to Al Ain.

Pictures of most of the hikes can be seen on Amer's blog.

Thanks to Jodie for discovering new connections between the wadis and oasis of nearby Oman, including secrets and beauties to be enjoyed by the hikers.

Some of the recent hikes:

**Friday 19/09** afternoon from Bwaitha to Ramtha to Khudrah, nice walk over 3 ridges to the wadi of Khudrah, where at Khudrah beach some took the advantage of having a refreshing dip in the pool.

**Saturday 20/09** afternoon at Jazira oasis. After a short walk over the plain and through the Oasis, the group welcomed the refreshments of the Jazira-pools and took the opportunity of a short wet-wadi-walk just until dusk.

**Friday 12/09** afternoon we visited a new location in the mountains behind Afrathe. It has been appropriately named 'Big Houses' as the structures consist of very large houses abandoned several years ago. The use of cement in the falaj construction suggests the site was occupied during the last 40 or 50 years; this is confirmed by the pottery sherds that litter the area. There is very little other debris to give a hint of the occupation period; even the terraces and terrace walls are in remarkably good condition.

**Saturday 13/09** afternoon a more relaxing walk as Amer returned to the Jimi Oasis for a look at the oasis now that the date harvest is almost complete.

**Friday 05/09** Subaitah is one of the few mountain oasis communities that is still farmed but has never had electricity or other services. There are a few pages on our website with photographs and summaries of our field trips to Subaitah. If you visit the page where many of our trips are recorded < <http://www.enhg.org/field/trips.htm> > you will find a few links for Subaitah including <<http://www.enhg.org/field/subait03b/subait03b.htm>> which includes some terrific photography by Jerry and Bob.

**Friday 29/08** We repeated one of the mountain walks enjoyed earlier this summer tracing the walking path between A'Dahir and I'lal, not far from Subaitah.

**Friday 22/08** a hike between two oases near Mahdah. Members are familiar with the oasis at Aboul but few have visited the oasis next door, an oasis we refer to as the falaj oasis owing to the attractive set of parallel falaj systems. This oasis also features a mosque and fortified building constructed of unique yellow mud.

**Saturday 23/08** Amer's Drive behind Jebel Qatara. The track begins near the Wadi Agran roundabout and crosses from sand to gravel plain behind Jebel Qatara.

**Thursday 14/08** moon walk, this time to Village One, in the mountains just beyond the old village of Khutwah.

**Friday 15/08** Rainbow Ridge was an enjoyable walk featuring an excellent collection of fossils, spectacular geology and some archaeology.

**Saturday 16/08** wet wadi walk or swim. As some of you are aware, there were heavy though isolated showers in the Buraimi District recently. The weir at Jazirah has been washed away again, for example. The good news is that the swimming pools at the bottom of the Jazirah oasis are back!

**Friday 01/08** a one-way route between Aboul (now signposted as Ubul) and Ramthah, just outside Khudrah

**Saturday 02/08** As the date harvest is well underway, we returned to Musah where the dates are dried on the numerous platforms around the oasis, providing memorable photographic opportunities.

**Saturday 26/07** at the fort. Axel had invited us to visit the Jahili Fort in downtown Al Ain to see firsthand some of the restoration work taking place.

**Friday 18/07** a walk in Al Ain's peaceful – and decidedly cooler -- oases.

**Friday 11/07** a return to A'Dahir to visit this picturesque oasis and its unique feature, the 'bat cave'.

**Friday 04/07** mountain walk tracing the walking path between A'Dahir and I'lal, not far from Subaitah.

**Saturday 05/07** leisurely walk at Musah, one of our favorite destinations.

**Friday 27/06** to Khutwah for a gorge walk with most of the trip taking place in the cool shadows of a wadi bed.

## Meetings

We had several meetings during the summer at Al Ain Intercontinental Resort hotel:

In June a movie of big caves of the world was shown.

In July there was a film about UAE in Sheik Zayed's period.

In August there was a nice presentation by Brien of the falaj-systems around Al Ain/Buraimi.

In September, Ulrich Wernery's presentation "Fatal Pollution", about the impact of plastic pollution in the UAE, was enjoyed by a large audience.

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## Crash of an RAF fighter on Jebel Akhdar – 50 years on

By Laurence Garey

As some of you know I am very interested in the aviation "archaeology" of this region. You will find some of what I have written on the subject in various places (see links at the end of this article).

Although no longer here on a regular basis, I was in Al Ain for a few weeks teaching in August and September 2008, and was particularly keen not to miss an important anniversary. Saturday 30 August marked 50 years since the crash of a British Royal Air Force Venom fighter-bomber on the Saiq plateau in the Jebel Akhdar range near Nizwa in Oman. I have written about the context of the Buraimi incident and Jebel Akhdar campaign of the 1950s (<http://l.garey2.googlepages.com/home>) but a brief summary may be helpful.

### The Buraimi Incident

In the 1950s conservative central Oman, with its Imam, was split politically from coastal Muscat with its Sultan. Things came to a head when in 1952 Saudi forces occupied Buraimi after the US-Saudi ARAMCO company decided there might be oil nearby and claimed it as Saudi territory. Sultan Said and Imam Mohammed joined forces at Sohar to take action, but the British and Saudi governments persuaded them not to retaliate. However, in 1955 the British changed their minds and "liberated" Buraimi. They installed a Wali in the fort, and terrorized the population with low-flying Lincoln bombers to prove they were serious (Figure 1).





(Figure 1 **A Lincoln bomber**)



(Figure 2 **A Shackleton bomber**)

The much-loved Imam Mohammed had died in 1954, and was succeeded by Imam Ghalib, supported by his brother Talib (Wali of Rustaq) and Suleiman ("Lord of Jebel Akhdar"). In 1955 the Sultan decided, with British support, to search for oil at Fahud, to the displeasure of Ghalib, who declared Oman independent from Muscat. So the Sultan took Ibri, Bahla and Nizwa from Ghalib, without resistance, and then Rustaq, where Talib put up a fight. Ghalib and Suleiman returned peacefully to their villages, but Talib fled to Saudi Arabia.

#### The Jebel Akhdar War

In June 1957 Talib came back with a Saudi-trained army, and joined brother Ghalib and friend Suleiman. Soon the area of Nizwa, including Jebel Akhdar, was in "rebel" hands. The Sultan asked for British help. They agreed: after all, they had an airfield at Masirah, and there was oil in the offing. They sent Shackleton bombers (Figure 2) from Aden, Bahrain, Masirah and Sharjah to drop 1000 pound bombs, in fact 1450 tons of bombs in 429 sorties. The pieces still litter the Jebel (Figure 3)



(Figure 3 **A fragment of a 1000 pound bomb that we found on the Saiq plateau**)



(Figure 4 **Venoms fly low over the desert (courtesy of 8 Sqd)**)

Next, Venom fighter-bombers (Figure 4) from Sharjah attacked Nizwa, but did little damage to the fort, nor indeed to the "rebels' " caves in the hills.

Ground forces retook Nizwa in August 1957, and Ghalib, Talib and Suleiman fled to the Saiq plateau 2000m up on the Jebel. Sharjah then became important as the arms supply route from Saudi Arabia to the Batinah coast and up to the Jebel! The war dragged on until in January 1959 the British and Sultan's forces drove the "rebels" out of the Saiq plateau and that was that, except that the 3 leaders escaped to Saudi Arabia.

#### Owen Watkinson's story

On 30 August 1958, a Venom of 8 Squadron RAF failed to return to its base at Sharjah. The Sultan's forces sent a woman, since women could not be stopped or searched by either side, to enquire about the pilot. She reported that the aircraft had crashed and that the pilot had died. In 2003 we (Jerry Buzzell and I and our wives) found the crash site (in fact it was Josette who spotted it first) on the Saiq plateau near the village of Sharaijah. It was Venom FB4, RAF serial WR552.

Colin Richardson, author of the excellent book Masirah, Tales from a Desert Island, was a former Venom pilot on 8 Squadron himself, and confirmed in a letter to me in December 2003 that the pilot was his friend Flight Lieutenant Owen Watkinson. It is said that he was strafing goats, and was not shot down, but misjudged the pull out from his attacking dive. However, Chris Yelland, a Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm observer, presently stationed in Muscat, told me in August 2008 that he had met the grandson of the

“leader” of the “rebels” who claimed that, indeed, Owen had fallen victim to rifle fire. We shall probably never know.

Parts of the wreck are still there (Figure 5) and alongside is a stone wall marking the grave of Owen Watkinson, who was buried under a cairn of rocks a little higher up the steep slope above the wreck immediately after the crash by local people, and later re-interred in the ledge behind the wall (Figure 6).



(Figure 5 **Owen's Venom still lies where it crashed**)



(Figure 6 **Owen's grave**)

A marble slab, that originally bore a cross, has been broken away and removed, which is not really surprising. After the Jebel Akhdar war an RAF padre conducted a formal burial service and the Bishop of Rochester later visited the grave. They planned to bring Owen's body down to the cemetery in Muscat, but the local people, no longer classified as rebels, insisted he stay with them. They regarded him, it is said, as a worthy and honorable soldier. So on the exact anniversary, 30 August 2008, we paid our



(Figure 7 **Our visit on 30 August 2008, 50 years after the crash**)

respects. We were 8 people, including Owen, we were thinking of 8 Sqd and it was 8/08! ENHG was (unofficially) represented by Jerry, Bob and Barb, and I. I had informed 8 Squadron, now based at Waddington, UK, of our plan and they were pleased at our gesture. Indeed, they were celebrating the squadron number by a barbeque on 8/8/08 and apparently referred to Owen and us on that occasion.

We had time to explore the area more widely and found the trail of wreckage extending about 500m back from the main site, including bits of aluminum and even lower engine casing parts.

Since my last visit to the Saiq Plateau in 2003, the very bad, narrow, partly ungraded road, 40 km from bottom to top, has been replaced by a three-lane highway with street lights all the way. This means that there are a lot more tourists now than then. In fact I would guess that as many people have been up there in the last couple of years than in the fifty previous years. Indeed, we saw groups poking around in the wreckage, and even jumping on it. Graffiti has reared its ugly head too. So I wonder how much longer this relic of the past, even if it is not a very glorious past in terms of modern thinking, will survive.

For more details and other pictures, see these links:

<http://l.garey2.googlepages.com/home>  
<http://www.adias-uae.com/publications/hellyergarey04.pdf>  
<http://l.garey.googlepages.com/additiontowwiicrashesintheuae>  
<http://l.garey.googlepages.com/rafsharjah,almahattamuseum>  
<http://www.enhg.org/resources/articles/venom/venom.htm>

### **Jahili Fort visits**

A word of thanks to Axel Huhn for his generous donation of time and expertise to lead two tours of the Jahili Fort in July. Restoration work and renovations are underway to provide a tourist information center and facilities for a comprehensive display of photographs from the Thesiger collection. Restoration work is underway in other parts of the city, notably the Qattara oasis



## Environment

### Enviromail

by Jodie Healy

*(Many of you will have received Jodie's Enviromail a few weeks ago. Below are some extracts from the newsletter.)*

This month I'm looking at place responsiveness and hope to set up workshops/projects for those who are interested in pursuing this. The article is based on the work of John Cameron, an Australian environmentalist and place educator.

#### Building a Place Responsive Society

"The best way to describe the relationship between place and experience...is not to talk of the experience of place as if place were one of a number of things that could be experienced, but that it is the complex structure of place itself that makes experience, any human experience, possible at all." (Malpas, cited in Cameron 2003, 110)

Place goes beyond a static snapshot of an area and instead consists of all the related systems that support and comprise that place as well as the social, cultural and political meanings attached to it. There are competing meanings and we engage with place on many levels; sensory, perceptual, spiritual and descriptive, to name a few.

In essence, it's not about claiming space or claiming knowledge of a place, there are many ways to know something and different ideas about what constitutes knowledge. It's more about making a connection that goes beyond the projection of your own needs from a place and incorporates an understanding of the interactions between the geology, flora, fauna, insects, people and spiritual elements of a place and your responses to these things. And crucially, bringing that experience back into your daily life.

#### Place Workshops

I'm hoping to set up 'place' workshops/projects (probably starting in October) which involve spending time in your chosen place (usually once a week) for 3-4 months. During this time, information is gathered and impressions, thoughts and connections are recorded. At the same time, a number of theoretical articles (anthropological, political and environmental) can be provided which broaden the experience and encourage the process of reflection. There are 'meeting points' throughout the projects where people can get together to share their experiences and hopefully, by documenting the process (in whatever format you choose), these experiences can be presented for other people to appreciate.

If you have any comments regarding this article or if you are interested in participating, please feel free to email me at [enviromailaa@gmail.com](mailto:enviromailaa@gmail.com)

Next Enviromail.... Rethinking 'Reduce, Reuse, Recycle': What does it mean for us in Al Ain?

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## National Tree

Peter Hellyer, a writer and consultant specializing in the UAE's heritage and environment, recommends the **Ghaf-tree** as "National Tree". He has also written extensively on the country's social, political and economic development.

Please refer to his article in The National:

<http://www.thenational.ae/article/20080915/OPINION/220458797>

More about the Ghaf tree:



## Pollution

### a. Plastic pollution

Dr. Ulrich Wernery (Director of the Central Veterinary Research Laboratory in Dubai) gave us in his impressive lecture at the general meeting on 10<sup>th</sup> September a terrible outlook about the plastic pollution throughout the world and the deadly impact to the Emirates' domestic animals and wildlife.

### b. Oil spills off the Fujairah coast

A new oil slick emerged on Fujairah's beaches on 15th September, producing a layer of pungent-smelling sludge extending for hundreds of meters offshore to the coastline. For the whole article please refer to

<http://www.thenational.ae/article/20080915/NATIONAL/903972784/1042&profile=1042>

## Marine life

There was an interesting article about saving the habitat of Dugongs or Sea-cows in Abu Dhabi waters recently. For the full article please refer to

<http://www.thenational.ae/article/20080918/FRONTIERS/50094519>

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## Bits 'n' Pieces

### Riddle

What is this?

- a) Omani lemon
- b) Frightened tennis ball
- c) Massage tool
- d) A plant

Answer: in the next newsletter



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## Geology with Ben Jordan (formerly UAEU)

### Rock Pencils, North-central Oman

Rock pencils form by the weathering and erosion of a metamorphic rock called "schist." As rocks are metamorphosed their structure and mineralogy change.

The new mineral grains tend to become lineated because of pressures deep within the Earth. Since rocks break along points of weakness, in the case of metamorphic rocks, they often break linearly.

In the case of these rock pencils the original rock was metamorphosed





under high heat and pressure, which lineated the mineral grains.

Later the rock was highly fractured and the fractures broke along the weak mineral surfaces forming linear cracks. Thus, as the rock is eroded, the pieces that are broken off are very long and linear.

### Fauna

Recently we found a skeleton near Subaitah. We are not sure what it is (fox, cat, dog other domestic animal), so take a look and if you can identify it please let us know.



Dates for your diary	Links
<b>September 08</b> 30 "5 <sup>th</sup> Tuesday": watch-out for ENHG mail	<b>Emirates Environment Group newsletter:</b>
<b>October 08</b> 07 Committee meeting 14 General meeting 21 Work shop 28 General meeting	<b>Dragonflies!!!!</b> <a href="#">IUCN Odonata Specialist Group</a>
<b>November 08</b> 04 Committee meeting 11 General meeting 18 Work shop 25 Annual General meeting	<b>Wildlife Middle East News:</b> <a href="http://www.wmenews.com">www.wmenews.com</a> >
<b>December 08</b> 02 Committee meeting 09 General meeting 16 Work shop 24 Desert Christmas Eve (Wednesday) 30 "5 <sup>th</sup> Tuesday" watch-out for ENHG mail	<b>Astronomy Picture Of the Day</b> has assembled what they consider the 12 best pics from 2007 on the one website. <a href="http://antwrp.gsfc.nasa.gov/apod/apoys2007.html">http://antwrp.gsfc.nasa.gov/apod/apoys2007.html</a>  <b>Desert oasis:</b> <a href="http://www.environmentalgraffiti.com/featured/desert-oasis/2257">http://www.environmentalgraffiti.com/featured/desert-oasis/2257</a>