

focus

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Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

The heat and humidity have finally lifted and the weather is perfect for the great outdoors. We have an excellent programme of field trips arranged for the season, thanks to our coordinator, Allestree. So sign up and get out there!

The lecture programme is developing too, though we are still in need of more speakers. If you would like to give a talk, or have an idea for someone who would, please do have a word with anyone on the ENHG Committee. Talking of your committee, we really do need some more members. If you feel you can spare some time and would like to contribute to the Group, again please have a word with any committee member. The committee meets once a month before the lecture.

As mentioned in the last Focus, we have set up an ENHG group on Flickr.com for sharing photos of UAE natural history. Please do have a look at it and feel free to add photos to the group pool. The site is at <http://www.flickr.com/groups/enhg/>. The shared photos are a great way of getting bugs, reptiles, plants identified, and if you give the locality (preferably GPS coordinates) the photo becomes a useful distribution record. Besides flickr.com is a lot of fun and there are some great photos to browse from people all over the world.

Drew Gardner

New Vistas, New Sites Reconnaissance Trip: September 30th

The prolonged summer heat this year has had an effect on the enthusiasm of ENHG members for excursions into the interior. This end-of-summer trip was no exception. Only four vehicles assembled at the Samha ADNOC station on the morning of Sept 30th.

Our first objective was the crossing of the sands between Tawi Nazwa and Wadi Faya.

This route was made well-known to UAE off-roaders years ago when the first "Off-road in the UAE" (Dariush Zandi) was published. The route is still as attractive as ever, offering views over the surrounding area, including Jebel Faya, Jebel Meleiha (Fossil Rock), and the large dunes abutting the mountains. This area boasts the largest colonies of *Calotropis procera* (Sodom Apple) in the UAE. We stopped on a gravel plain about half way to Wadi Faya. Kevin Breeze located a very suitable place for an overnight stop away from the main tracks. The vegetation was already trying to make a come-back after the summer heat. At the edge of the sands overlooking Wadi Faya we made another stop for photos and to admire the view, and to wonder at the forces in play where regular prehistoric flooding determined the limit of the high dunes. There are very occasional floods off the Madam Plain these days but the water is quickly engulfed by the sands, and does not run very far. This route is potentially rich in coffee and picnic stops, and will certainly feature somewhere in the forthcoming programme of excursions.

We drove on towards Jebel Buhays along a newly

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FRONT COVER PICTURES

Photograph: Hermit crab in a 'lighthouse'!
Photographer: Roy Richards

tarmacked stretch of road. We re-inflated and had lunch under some large *Acacia tortilis* near Qarn Al Himar. Here the crossing into Oman is still open to us, but I fear, not for long, as preparations for the border fence at this point are underway. We came out from Qarn al Himar north of Jebel Rowdha, checking a route back to the Qarn for future camping. This is an ideal spot, out of sight, and protected from the wind. John Newby spotted a fox there two years ago. There are probably several living round the Qarn.

We moved quickly along the Hatta road, turning off towards Mahdah. We investigated a small wadi area but finding ourselves in full view of a village at the foot of the mountains, we turned back on to the main road. A spot for a picnic perhaps. Next, we pulled in to the so-called Limestone Wadi. Very little water here, a couple of toads, but no sign as yet of any orchids (*Epipactis veratrifolia*). We continued towards Mahdah, turning off the main road into Wadi Sharm and followed the track down wadi to the old village and the *falaj*. Here a kindly Arab family gave each of us a freshly barbecued kebab of tandouried chicken! Alan and Cheryl at this point remembered they had camped in an attractive area beyond the wadi, so we followed them into the Safwan area. Here the sands meet the mountains and form attractive displays of colour close to the UAE border fence. This is another area we shall return to in due course.

Time was against us at this point, so we turned tail and made our way back via Wadi Kahl to Buraimi and Al Ain.
Allestree Fisher

Asian bird 'flu

As members may have noticed from the local media, active birdwatchers from the Group (and others) have been helping out in the current efforts to keep the UAE free from by keeping an eye open for any sick or dead

birds. The stalwarts, including former Chairmen Steve James & Peter Hellyer, former Committee member Andrew Twyman and former Group Bird Recorder Jenny Hollingworth, plus Colin Glendenning, Nick Moran and Alan Galbraith, have been among over twenty birders throughout the UAE who have been collecting records and supplying them to the Environmental Agency - Abu Dhabi, EAD.

EAD has also had people out, including Salim Javed and Shahid Khan, while birders in Al Ain and Dubai have also been taking part in the effort, which has covered sites in and around Abu Dhabi, Mirfa, Al Ain, the Dubai area and the East Coast.

Since 21st September, when the effort really got under way, only one dead bird has been found, a honey buzzard found by Andrew in Mushrif Palace gardens - and preliminary indications are that it died of a broken neck.

The effort has been co-ordinated in the name of the Emirates Bird Records Committee, which issued a statement in late October summarising results so far.

"Several weeks ago, EAD, approached the UAE's active birdwatchers to seek help in monitoring the health of the country's wild bird populations," the statement said. "These include both the resident species and migrant birds, which are now moving in great numbers southwards from Russia and Central Asia into the Emirates. Some pass through on their way further south, returning in the spring, while others stay in the UAE throughout the winter months."

"Through the Emirates Bird Records Committee, the country's birdwatchers are now keeping an eye out for any sick or dead birds, so that these can be reported to EAD," the statement added.

"Over 14,000 birds have been identified and counted since late September at sites throughout the country. These include shoreline and coastal sites at Mirfa, west of Abu Dhabi, around Abu Dhabi Island, at Ra's al-Khor, in Dubai, and at Dibba, Qurrayah, Fujairah and Kalba, all on the East Coast. A number of inland sites that are attractive to migrants have also been counted frequently, including sites in Al Ain, at the EAD-managed Al Wathba Lake, near Abu Dhabi, and at several sites in Dubai, including the Emirates Golf Course, the Al Warsen Lakes (better known to birders as the Wimpey Pits) and nearby fields and at several residential developments with artificial lakes in Dubai."

"At present, there does not seem to be any reason for concern about health hazards as far as the UAE's wild bird population is concerned. Asian Bird Flu is not a new disease, and outbreaks have been contained successfully in the past in several countries through the implementation of proper quarantine measures. These include measures to ensure that domestic poultry are not permitted to come into contact with wild birds," the statement said.

"The Emirates Bird Records Committee welcomes the measures being taken by the Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi, EAD, and other bodies to encourage the

public to keep their domestic poultry confined. Although Asian Bird Flu is a very serious disease, the chances of it being caught by members of the public are very small indeed and are primarily related to contact with domestic poultry, not to wild bird populations."

Concerns have been expressed that the current campaign against bird flu might lead to instructions that people could no longer keep pet birds in cages.

At a press conference on 26th October, however, the EAD Secretary-General, Majid Al Mansouri, made it clear that there was absolutely no intention of preventing people keeping pet birds.

"As long as they are kept away from contact with domestic poultry, we don't think there is any cause for concern," he said.

Any Group members who find sick or dead birds are asked to report them - there is a 24-hour emergency line open: 800-9990.

Peter Hellyer

New Culture and Heritage Authority established

In early October, President HH Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan issued an Abu Dhabi Law on the establishment of a new Culture and Heritage Agency for the whole of Abu Dhabi Emirate.

This will supervise all cultural activities as well as matters relating to heritage, including archaeology.

It will also absorb the Cultural Foundation and the Department of Antiquities and Tourism in Al Ain, as well as the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey, ADIAS.

At the time of writing, the board of the new Authority had not been finalised and it will take some time before the precise nature of the new structure becomes clear.

In the meantime, activities in the Cultural Foundation will continue as normal, including Group meetings, while the head of the new agency has indicated that he is happy for the Group to continue to make use of the Cultural Foundation's facilities.

Further information will be included in the next Newsletter, if available.

Peter Hellyer

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

ITEMS ON SALE ON 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.
- **Plant Checklist 25Dhs.**
Marijcke Jongbloed - Know your local wild plants.
- **The Comprehensive Guide to the Wild Flowers of the UAE - Marijcke Jongbloed– 100Dhs.**
- **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.

Committee Members

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

Mona Chammah Itani
(Treasurer)
Mobile: 050-8117505
mona@gec.ae

Jenny Mueller (Secretary)
Mobile: 050-3110632
mueller_jenny@yahoo.com.uk

Carole Tailford
(Membership Secretary)
Mobile: 050-4146185
c_tailford@hotmail.com

Mary Boyd (Asst. Membership Secretary)
Ph: 02-6314004
mary.boyd@zu.ac.ae

Allestree Fisher
(Excursion Secretary)
Ph: 02-6775717
allestree.fisher@hct.ac.ae

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

Dick Hornby (Member)
Ph: 02-6274049
dnahornby@yahoo.co.uk

Arun Rau (Member)
Mobile: 050-6150328
hampi@emirates.net.ae

Hazim al Chalabi
(Member)
Ph: 02-6654372
hchalabi@adco.ae

Lectures

29 November 2005

The environment of the Abu Dhabi International Airport Expansion Project.

Dr Chris Drew

Field Trips

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

9/10 February 2006

NH survey Overnight camping Jebel Emala. Survey of fauna, insects, birds, Plants. Sharjah Emirate.

Allestree Fisher

23/24 February 2006

Camping near Mleisa (Miocene site), Liwa

Allestree Fisher

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YAMAHA studio upright piano for sale.
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Postal Address

Emirates Natural History Group,
PO Box 45553,
Abu Dhabi,
United Arab Emirates.

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