

focus



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Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

As the winter rains and cool weather continue, the deserts of the UAE are at their most attractive and accessible. The firmer wet sand makes driving easier and the growth of flowering annual plants is spectacular. Indeed some plants which have not been seen in years are now growing from seeds stored in the 'seed bank' in the sand. Get out there and enjoy it before it all heats up and dries up!

May I take the opportunity to remind members that now is time to renew your membership. Our membership runs on a calendar year so 2007 is due. The fee is the same as it has been for a number of years now, at Dhs 100 (individual or family) and includes Focus (email) and Tribulus. Membership is most easily renewed at our fortnightly meetings in the Cultural Foundation (1st and 3rd Tuesdays of the month at 7.30 p.m.)

I would also like to draw your attention to the note on the Sheikh Mubarak and Bish Brown awards and urge you to think of making nominations. The competition is very open and all nominations will be carefully considered.

Drew Gardner

Sheikh Mubarak Prize and Bish Brown Award

Nominations are invited from paid up members of the ENHG (Abu Dhabi), ENHG (Al Ain) and the Dubai NHG for the two annual ENHG awards: the Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Prize for natural history and the Bish Brown Award.

The Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Prize for natural history is given to a person who has made a substantial, original contribution to knowledge of the history, natural history, culture, archaeology or palaeontology of the UAE, such contribution being reflected through means such as publications and lectures. The award was instituted by the ENHG Patron, HE Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan, and comprises an inscribed silver dhow and a cash prize.

The Bish Brown Award is given to a person who has made a significant contribution to promoting wider interest in the objectives of the UAE's three natural history groups, through means such as educational activities, raising public consciousness in the media, playing a leading role in NHG activities etc. The award was endowed by former Vice Chairman, Terry Adams and former Secretary, Caroline Adams, to commemorate the founder of the ENHG, J.N.B. 'Bish' Brown. The award comprises a silver mounted eagle, to be held for one year by the recipient.

Any individual, whether or not they are members of the Groups, can be nominated for either award, with the exception of current committee members of the ENHG in Abu Dhabi. In nominating a candidate, or candidates, please provide a brief summary (no more than 200 words) of justification for the nomination – ie an explanation of what the candidate(s) has achieved.

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FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Scops Owl near Ladies Beach, Ras al Akhdar

Photographer: Maarten Verhage

Nominations can be sent either by post (to Drew Gardner, Chairman, ENHG, PO Box 45553, Abu Dhabi), by email (to any ENHG committee member) or hand delivered to any ENHG committee member. The closing date for nominations is 28 February 2007, and winners will be selected by the ENHG (Abu Dhabi) committee during the March meeting. The Committee's decision is final.

Day trip on December, 22nd to the *Tecomella* trees

Allestree and Pam Fisher led a day trip to Thuqeiah and Masfut on Friday December 22nd. Our first stop was at Saih Al Salam, where we found *Acacia ehrenbergiana* (the eponymous 'salam') and the rare *Rhanterium epapposum* which was once commonplace and a source of fodder in the UAE. Overgrazing by camels and the human development of the piedmontane areas have decimated the plant population. The convoy proceeded via Al Madam to the village of Thuqueibah, the site of recent excavations by a Spanish archeological team. We examined the exposed wellheads used during the Iron Age II (circa 1000-600 BC) to access alluvial run-off water from the distant Hajar Mountains.



About a kilometre further from the mountains we inspected the remains of the ancient farm buildings that

were also exposed by the Spanish team's investigation. This water supply was sufficient for these nomadic people to settle at least part of the year and cultivate crops. Evidence indicates that 3,000 years ago these tribes may have been agriculturists as well as stock breeders and herders.



It was an overcast day, perfect for our picnic lunch midway between the farm excavation and a present-day farm. The adults in the group were treated to the excitement of discovery as the two children in our group offered us all a chance to look at the ants and flies they captured in their insect-jars. Curious camels offered photo opportunities.



We stopped at the town of Masfut and found that the recent rains had made a substantial lake above the dam. There were a few blossoms on the *Tecomella* trees along the wadi. The trees have yet to come fully into bloom but the ones we saw were impressive. Along the Shweihan highway en route back to Abu Dhabi we saw less impressive examples of the cultivated variety, *Tecoma* stands, which are often planted in urban locations.

Marilyn Letts

My First ENHG Trip – Jebel Sumeini

A convoy of thirteen 4WD vehicles divided into three subgroups departed from behind Popeye's on Airport Road around 8:50 on Friday, January 12, with Roy Richards as our expedition leader. We drove past Abu Dhabi Airport, later turned north and then east again, stopping to make sure all the vehicles were present before we crossed the border into Oman near Shwaib at 11:10. From here we followed a well-beaten but very sandy track, right along the fence at first. Last we drove onto more solid ground and arrived at an old air landing strip built in the '40s, which still has its original markers as well as the name SUMEINI in white stones on the side. The runway still appears to be serviceable for small planes though it's a deserted outpost at this point. We took a little break here for photos and examining plants. We saw:

- *Eremobium aegyptiacum* – small white flowers scattered on sandy/gravelly plain.
- *Tribulus terrestris* - not in flower but identified from appearance of foliage.
- *Calotropis procera* (Sodom's apple) not yet in flower on the plain and on road in the central reservation.



We then drove on to reach a paved road which we took for another 10 km to A'Shega. In that area, we turned left onto a track that led toward a wadi and followed along it till we crossed it. The final wadi crossing was a bit tricky as the wadi was deep, the sides steep, and there was a curve between large rocks in the track up the far side. However, experienced 4WD drivers guided vehicles up one by one, and all made it successfully. We then reached a box canyon, where we set up camp above the convergence of two wadis.

After having a late lunch, most of us hiked at least partway up one of the wadis. Early on, Jillian discovered a blue lizard, which was the only sign of fauna anyone saw. This was a Sinai agama (*Pseudotrapelus sinaitus*)



Some hikers made it all the way up the wadi and saw out over the ridge above it, but many of us turned back partway up, saving our energy for the next day. At just about dusk, we heard a piercing cry of an animal in pain close to the campground. It turned out to be Roy and Liz' dog Chirri, who had gotten one of his paws caught in an animal trap. Various people offered tools, and his paw was freed in a short time. Fortunately, he was not seriously injured, so he joined us at our campfire later in the evening and went on the hike the next day.

With the excitement over, we settled into a pleasant evening around the campfire, which everyone had brought wood for. People cooked and ate dinner at barbeques near their tents or next to the campfire, using coals from the fire.

The next morning people were ready to hike shortly after 8:30 a.m. Our GPS reading at the camp was N 24 degrees 43.838, E 055 degrees 54.939, with an elevation of 435 meters. We hiked up a different wadi from the day before. Our first stop after about half an hour was a spring, which was not so attractive since there was a poorly constructed fence around it. Then we climbed up a steep and rocky track to a valley below Chirri's Ridge (one of several in the Jebel Sumeini area), where we stopped for a photo opportunity before some families started back down. Here you can see the ridge we are going to climb behind us.



By the way, Liz Sowinska kept good track of all the flora we found in both hikes, and here's what we have from her notes.

- *Rumex vesicarius* (sorrel, bladder dock) - all over the wadi's sandy bed but only as fresh small shoots of leaves. The usual flowering season is Feb. to April.
- *Lycium shawii* (desert thorn) – in the first wadi. Small purple flowers seen.
- *Senna italica* - spotted in the first wadi. Yellow flowers seen.
- *Dyerophytum indicum* - dusty looking shrub in the first wadi. Not in flower
- *Haloxylon salicornum* (previously known as: *Hammada elegans*) - at our campsite, quite close to the ground. Its segmented branches had very flaky papery flowers/seeds.
- *Zizyphus spina-christi* (*sidr*) – a tree found in all the wadis. Small un-ripe green fruit ...size of large pea seen in the first wadi
- *Moringa peregrina* (wild drumstick tree) - trees seen on both walks, hugging the sides of the wadi.....usually at least a few meters from the wadi floor. The green wispy branches were seen, but no evidence of flowers and there were one or two seed pods on some trees.
- *Capparis* sp. Caper bush - seen hanging from the hillside in relatively shaded location .. not in flower
- *Rhazya stricta* - seen with white flowers on both walks. Lovely fragrance.
- *Euphorbia larica* in wadis and on upper slopes.
- *Crotalaria aegyptiaca* - on first walk. Small yellow flowers reminiscent of snap-dragons.
- "Donkey salad" *Physorrhynchus chamaerapistrum* - seen in many places in the wadis, a leafy perennial which is grazed by donkeys and goats. We saw it with some early pink-purplish 4-petalled flowers.
- *Forskalia tenacissima* (Velcro plant) on walks we often miss these plants because Chirri finds them first and EATS them!
- *Erucaria hispanica* (pink mustard) – one of the many green annuals sprouting in the wadi beds.



Rhazya Stricta

By this time, we were out of the wadis and ready to head up the ridge. Parts were steep, and those little stones always seemed to wobble under my feet. The higher we went, the better the view. We could see little tiny cars parked at our campsite down below and rows of mountains off in the distance. We finally reached the top of the ridge and could see orange desert off in the distance on the other side. By the way, the highest part of ridge is 810 meters. We stopped for lunch where we had a 360-degree view of all the countryside below.



Ridge walk

One thing I had noticed on both walks was that there were lots of rocks where animals appeared to have left a splat of rust-coloured diarrhoea, and it had dried up. I finally realized that this was quite impossible, especially since we'd seen so few animals. I asked one of the geologists about this, and all she could confirm was that it some kind of iron deposit.



From here we continued on across the ridge and ultimately looped down and back into the same wadi we started up in the morning. Along the way, there were some steep and slippery spots where some of us tread especially carefully. When everyone had finished the hike around 4 p.m., we broke camp and drove back to the border of Abu Dhabi by a different route on a paved road, entering just before the small town of El Madam. From there it was a pleasant drive back with the sun setting about the time we entered Abu Dhabi city.

For those interested in seeing plants, Allestree told Liz at the Jan. 16 meeting that it would be easier to recognize more plant species next month, which is why he has organized a day trip to look at the spring annuals on March 2.

Chris Jones

Soldier's Orchid (*Zeuxine strateumatica*)

For those interested in seeing Soldier's orchid, albeit diminutive and an introduced species here (see *Tribulus* 16.1), it has reappeared on the, still under preparation, golf course at the Al Maqam Equestrian Club on the outskirts of Al Ain. As you approach Al Ain from Abu Dhabi, take the signposted turning (Equestrian Club) to the right shortly after the Al Maqam Palace traffic lights and speed humps. Turn left through the archway a short way down on the left and head to the Grandstand. The best area is immediately across the racetrack on the tees overlooking the nearer lake. Remember they are at best only 2 or 3cm high.

Simon Aspinall

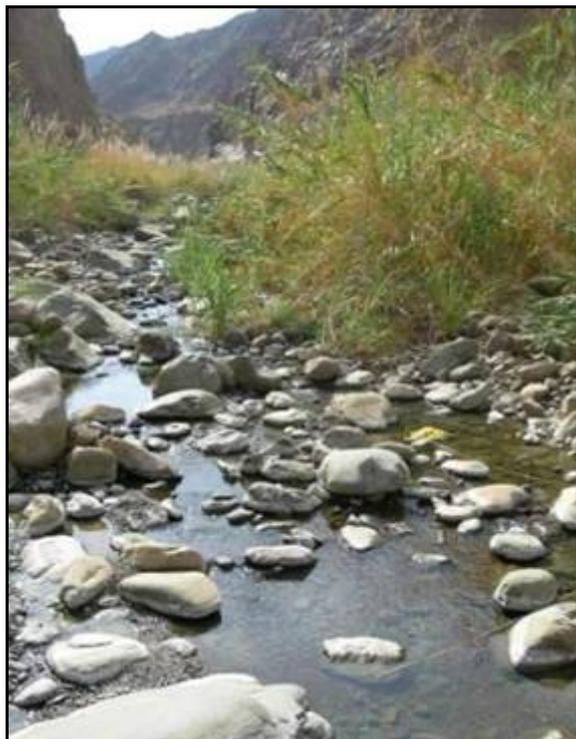
Excursion to Wadi Wurayah

After his most interesting talk on January 16, Christophe Tourenq wrote us:

"Please find enclosed 2 pictures from our place. I would be delighted to welcome all of you.



THE orchid (Epipactis veratrifolia) of the UAE Olivier Pinnau EWS/WWF



*Extensive boulder riffle in Wuraya Emma Smart
EMS/WWF*

Remember: the wadi will be protected, but for the time being, is free of access! No permit is required. The decree is under drafting. We plan thereafter to do a zoning: free access zone, accessible zone with rangers/guides, etc. like in other national parks.”

Christophe Tourenq

***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
- 2007 bird calendar. Beautiful pictures from the Eriksons. A must for yourself ... and a perfect gift
- ENHG T-shirts/golf (polo) shirts/caps.
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Lectures

6th February, 7.30pm:

'Buraimi Tombs'

Brien Holmes

20th February, 7.30pm:

'Coral Reefs'

Ade Lambo

Field Trips

16/17 February:

O/night Camping
H'meem, Liwa

Andrew Bean

2nd March:

Spring Annuals,
Day Trip

Allestree Fisher

22, 23, 24 March:

Inter-Emirates
Weekend in Al Ain

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

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