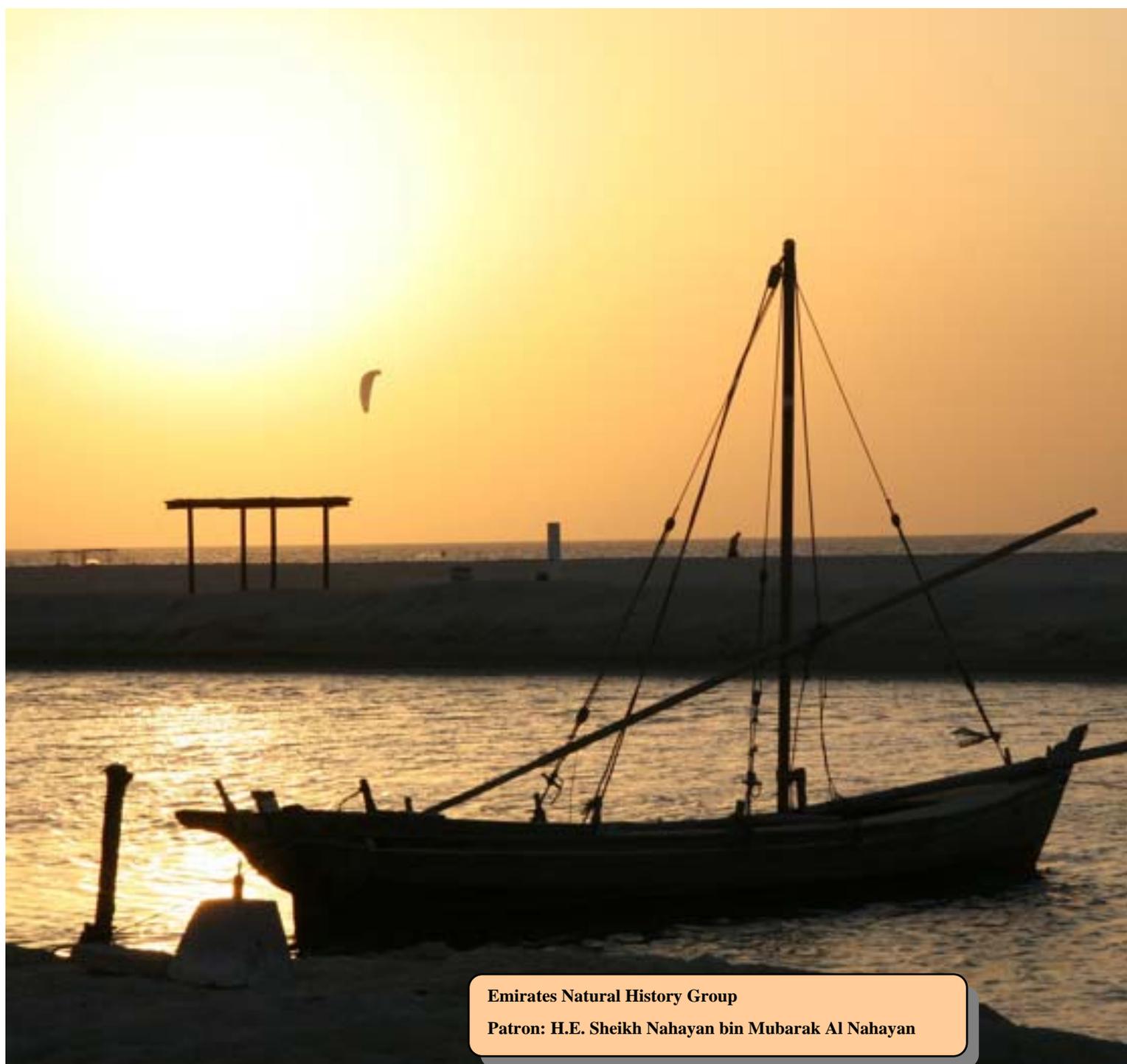


# focus



Abu Dhabi, October 2007

Vol 31 (7)



Emirates Natural History Group

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

## EDITORIAL

The ENHG has a long tradition of being at the forefront of natural history research and recording. Long before the establishment of governmental bodies such as ERWDA and its latest incarnation, the EAD (Environment Agency Abu Dhabi), members of the ENHG were collecting valuable information and data on the UAE environment. Most of this collection was by informed and interested amateurs. Indeed this tradition of natural history study by amateurs is found the world over. Journals such as our own 'Tribulus' document the results of such studies, and really provide much of the critical information on historical species ranges, biodiversity, new species and species records and biological observations. I would like to encourage our members to become more involved in such activities, which are actually more valuable now than ever before, given the rapid rate of "development" in the country, and global phenomena such as climate change, amphibian declines and increased pollution levels.

The ENHG Committee is considering ways that we can really encourage and assist members to collect records and other data. One way is by photographing animals and plants during field trips. Provided such photos (preferably digital) are accompanied by good locality data (such as GPS waypoints) and the date (which should be in the EXIF data with the digital photo), these can become extremely important records. The Committee can ensure that they are directed to the relevant experts who can identify the species and add data to a database. A record saying, for example that a toad-headed agama was at a particular locality on a certain date is important. Who knows, next year that locality may be under a shopping mall! Observations, such as records of flowering or breeding behaviour are even more important. We simply have so little information on when the breeding seasons of particular species are, and such information may be critical in making decisions in environmental management.

If any members have ideas how the Group can develop natural history recording, please let me or other committee members know. Let's keep up the noble tradition!

**Drew Gardner**

## Iftar on the Beach

*Editor's Note: On Friday, 5 October, over 110 ENHG members from all three chapters gathered at the Emirates Marine Environmental Group Reserve near Jebel Ali to enjoy a full traditional Ramadan dinner, at the hospitality of Major Ali and his assistants. Andrew Bean, excursion secretary of our Abu Dhabi chapter, set this up and invited members from the other chapters, at Major Ali's behest.*

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### FRONT COVER PICTURE

*Photograph: Pearling Dhow at Jebel Ali Beach, EMEG*

*Photographer: Peter Vogler*

As a newcomer to Abu Dhabi, I was intrigued to find an invitation in my email inbox to this Ramadan experience. As a marketing activity for AUENHG, it was a very effective way of signing up new members as we exchanged our AED50 club joining fee for a unique experience.

The overwhelming hospitality of the group left a lasting impression as lifts were volunteered in 4x4s from car park to beach. Major Ali is impressive because he has seen a need to conserve wildlife threatened by Dubai's expansion and has acted upon it. His modest and humanitarian speech touched a chord, and the children were enthralled to see and touch the dhubs he is saving. We all enjoyed the lavish meal at sunset in spellbinding surroundings.

What an introduction to AUEHNG! We will certainly be coming back for seconds.

**Patricia MacLachlan**



Iftar beach gathering photo: Val Chalmers

## Eid Break at Jebel Shams

We have just returned from a camping trip at Jebel Shams, which is the highest peak in Oman (3009m). We left on the Thursday (11<sup>th</sup> October) just before lunch and arrived at our camp site in the dark. We were travelling in a convoy, which took a little longer as convoys do. We left Abu Dhabi and headed to Al Ain. From Al Ain to the border it was approx 20 minutes and then almost an hour to get through the border. Once through, we were on our way, and for a little while there was not a lot of difference in the scenery. However, shortly afterwards, we were starting to get into rugged country. Along the way we spotted a few camels, and as we went further in, we saw more and more goats and some sheep.



Arriving at our campsite, we proceeded to put up our tent and set up. The place was very rocky, but we managed to find a cleared area. Once we had set up we then cooked our meal. After eating and cleaning up, we joined the group around the campfire.

After a good night's sleep and breakfast, which was accompanied by the local people trying to sell us small carpets, key rings and bracelets made from sheep wool, we were ready to go for our hike. Some of the people were taking a long hike (6 to 7 hours) to the top of the mountain where they were prepared to spend the night. We, on the other hand, followed them only part way up. It was a good slog, and Paul and I were amazed at how well we coped, considering our lack of exercise over the last 8 months.



Once we reached our trail junction, we then crossed the terrain to view what must be as awe-inspiring as the Grand Canyon in the USA. The formations were just

spectacular. Along the way, we were accompanied by goats that seemed to appear from nowhere. We also saw a lot of birds and lizards, while some lucky people managed to see a snake.

On our return to the campsite, we had a bite to eat. While we were doing this, we were constantly shooing away goats which were happy to raid anything they could get into. Someone pointed out a feral donkey, who looked quite a lovely specimen, passing by the camp.



Shortly after lunch, a group of us headed off to explore Wadi An Nakhur—walking down this small wadi from our campsite. For a long time, there was no water and we were walking in the bed. Eventually, we came to a man-made wall, which we presumed to be a dam wall. Climbing down from this and scrambling over some rocky crops, we came to some water, and as we looked along the river bed, we could see another man-made wall and beyond that, we saw the dammed water.



We sat on some of the rocky outcrops and watched a few goats which were climbing around on a terrain in which it looked impossible to remain vertical. It was a pleasant interlude, and then we headed back to camp where we cleaned up and prepared our dinner. That night the campfire was well attended. Thanks to Andrew and the ENHG's powerful telescope, which he had with him, we were able to view Jupiter and three of its four moons.

The next day gave us a truly amazing experience. After the usual formalities of the morning, we were ready for a new adventure. We all piled in our cars and drove for about 15 minutes further along the road, which took us several kilometres down the main wadi from the cliff tops over which we had gazed the day before. Once we

arrived there, we parked our cars. We were now in a small village, which we had to pass through to get to our destination. These people live on the edge of a cliff with the most wonderful views. They may have a very simple life, but they have views we would pay millions for.



Many of us began photographing the panoramic scenery. Unbelievable! Our adventure was beginning. As we climbed down the rocks to a small pathway, we began to wonder how people managed to live here. Yes, we were heading off to see a 'hidden village' which was called As Sab. Scrambling down some rocks, we were soon on a path which consisted of very narrow ledges with many rocky outcrops which had to be navigated with great care as the drop was about 900 feet. As we looked along the canyon, we wondered where the path was, since all that could be seen was a wall of cliff that seemed to be a sheer drop. Progressing along, still taking snapshots whenever possible, we had to stop from time to time as we needed to regularly drink water. When we started out, the temperature was a pleasant 20C, but as the day progressed, it got to 27C. After rounding a couple of bends, and winding our way down about 400 feet, we could see a terraced field which belonged to the hidden village. If we looked very carefully (and those of us with binoculars and cameras with zoom lenses could see more easily), we could see the cave-like structures which supported the hidden village. At a couple of points, we passed a flock of sheep, which kindly stepped off the path and chose a much rockier passage to bypass us.



Finally, we came to the hidden village, which is now abandoned. This village once supported 15 families. They had everything they needed, which included pens for their animals. Everything was built from large stones.

Some people managed to climb up above the hidden village and have a swim in the wadi which supplied water to the village (apparently flowing from the Wadi An Nakhur dam (now directly above us!))



It had been decided that we would lunch at the hidden village. Sitting there, looking out over the canyon, one could only wonder what life must have been like. Certainly much more simplistic than our lives! So hard to imagine that people would have to go to these ends to survive.

Time to move on! We retraced our footsteps, arriving at the small village at the top of the canyon again. The residents of this village were thin, wiry people. We were told the government had provided the land and housing for them here. I believe they are descendants of the residents of the 'hidden village'. As we departed, they tried to sell us their wares, just as the villagers who lived near our campsite had done the day before.



Back at the campsite, we made ourselves a cup of sweetened tea. While we were supping this, we noticed the overnight hikers returning from their camp-out. Apparently at the top it was a cool 4°C. We felt the cool of the night and were grateful for our lovely warm sleeping bags. There were some amusing stories told around the campfire that evening.

A good night's sleep saw us awake at 0600. We were on the road by 0700 and having our car refuelled and washed and a fabulous breakfast with a good cup of Omani coffee by 0830.

We have to say a really big thank-you to the team who put this trip together!

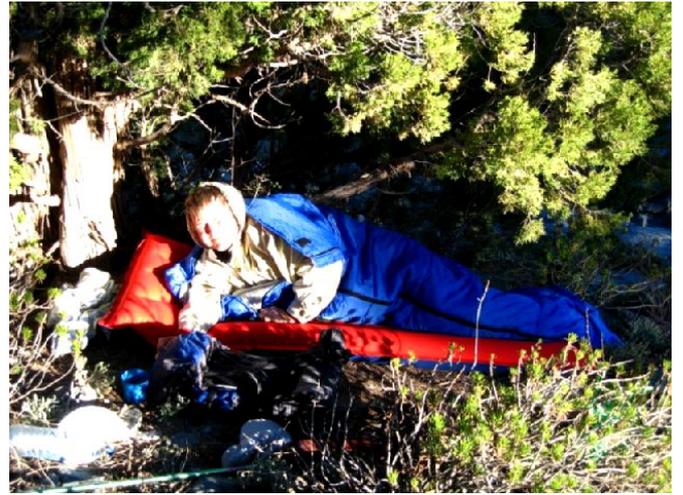
**Karen Hooper**

**All photographs by Karen Hooper**

**Photos: Hike to Jebel Shams Summit**



*Goat on precipice photo: Karl Cundiff*



*Tree dweller photo: Roy Richards*



*Summit ridge photo: Roy Richards*



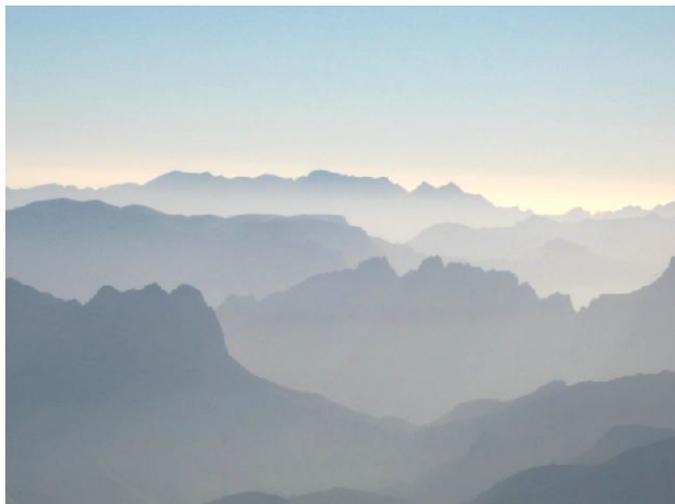
*On the summit photo: Roy Richards*



*Wolf trap photo: Roy Richards*



*Hill fort photo: Roy Richards*



*The Hajar photo: Roy Richards*

## Al Ain Night Zoo Excursion

On Friday, 19 October, as arranged by the Abu Dhabi ENHG excursion secretary, 80-100 members from all three chapters of the ENHG assembled at the Al Ain Zoo, to take it in during its new evening hours (along with all of the zoo's regular visitors). For those of us from the Abu Dhabi group, this was a follow-up to Director Mark Craig's inspiring talk to us last spring. We assembled just inside the front gates, under the soaring canvas tent-like shade structure, and in front of the centrepiece Arabian mixed-animal exhibit featuring Arabian oryxes and sand gazelles. The director welcomed us, handed out zoo maps, and pointed out the best general route for us to explore before the start of the evening bird show.

Chatting with old friends and making new ENHG acquaintances, we wandered past North African animals such as Nubian ibexes and African wild dogs, and circled on past the new African mixed animals ecosystem display, making use of the lookout points situated along the way, and taking in the quite readable informative signs. The tall open barn-like structure providing shade for the giraffes showed the care that's being taken with the animals now—a dramatic contrast to the grim dusty, nearly shadeless enclosures this observer remembers from trips to this zoo in years past. The animals seemed well-provided-for in nicely crafted outdoor environments, dotted with appropriate landscaping and natural-enough-seeming water features, against the magnificent backdrop of Jebel Hafeet and its foothills rising behind.

Set in the centre of our evening stroll were a clutch of rock-like enclosures dedicated to the gorilla, wolves, and cheetah, with the principals sheltered behind glass, but still up close and personal. And the lions, visible as well out in the open, behind a moat, were just beginning to stir and meet the night. Ducking into the Nocturnal House, we found a number of small and fascinating nocturnal critters—African bush babies, Arabian sand cats, and other surprises—made visible with subtle lighting, giving a moonlit effect, similar to the lighting that also came on around the park as night fell.

Those of us who followed Andrew's advice to bring our own food were glad we had, as the queues at the Oasis Restaurant were long, indeed. There were plenty of suitable locations—lawns, tables, and even benches in air conditioned “family rooms”—at which to consume our picnic suppers. However we thought a stand offering instant hot drinks might be a welcome addition to the food concessions in the centre of the park.



*Desert eagle owl photo: Cyrus Modavi*

At 8 pm we all made our way down past the zoo's Education Centre to the night-time Birds of Prey show in a newly created arena featuring a lush green lawn punctuated by a small rock pool. The main presenter and his assistants gave an entertaining and informative show starring a number of birds-of-prey species, including a huge-eyed desert eagle owl, a barn owl, a short-toed eagle, and other birds, and concluded his entertainment with a message of environmental conservation. A gerbil race along a rope fence provided comic relief. And at one point, several snakes, passed along for those in front to handle, caused quite a stir, as well. The crowd, both locals and expats, seemed hugely engaged by the proceedings.



*Snake handler in training photo: Andrew Bean*

A chat after the show with Gopi, the show's impresario, revealed that he used to work at Singapore's Jurong Bird Park, has now formed a zoo-consulting business, and is under negotiations with the director to stay longer and develop other events, including falconry demos.



Short-toed eagle photo: Cyrus Modavi

In the bird house behind the bird show arena, we found a wadi environment with a high-ceilinged room, in which houbaras and other desert birds were settling in for the night, and the revamped penguin exhibit next to that proved yet another welcome discovery. This zoo now has a lot more to offer than the still terribly cramped Dubai Zoo, and it shares some of the best features of the Arabia's Wildlife Centre in Sharjah—some animals behind glass, carefully crafted, natural seeming environments, the nocturnal display, and the mixed animal and bird exhibits. Overall, this was an enjoyable look at the new face of the Al Ain Zoo, speaking as one who's not been there in several years.



Barn owl photo: Cyrus Modavi

We heard from the director that the summer night zoo originally planned to end September 30 has been so successful that the extended evening hours—until 10 pm—may become a regular part of the Al Ain Zoo's schedule—which really puts this zoo on the map, as a night-time zoo is still a novelty in the industry. This scheduling showcases the animals when many of them are at their most alert, and it also seems to fit in well with the local culture. In fact, many local and resident expat families were in evidence this evening, enjoying the cooler temperatures and the chance to have a picnic and or a stroll in an attractive, entertaining setting; as we rambled round, the zebra-striped "zoo trains" kept passing us, chock full of satisfied zoo-goers.

This is a place we'll want to keep coming back to on future trips to Al Ain, both in the daytime and at night, to witness the ongoing transformation of the zoo terrain and to spend more time with the over 600 animal species on offer. The planned guided safaris with animals from several different regions are also something to look forward to. This gives those of us in

Abu Dhabi one more reason to envy those who live in Al Ain and can swing by this zoo any time they feel like it!

Some of us returned home after the zoo trip Friday evening, while some out-of-towners stayed at the Buraimi Hotel and then on Saturday went on outings round Al Ain led by Brien Holmes, chairman of the Al Ain group, the next day. These included a tour of the Al Ain Oasis, a lunch break at a local restaurant, and a visit to the Jebel Hafeet Tombs and the Mezyad Fort—a fascinating and informative additional excursion for those who attended.

**Keith Taylor**

### ITEMS ON SALE AT THE ENHG STALL

- The Emirates – A Natural History, 350Dhs  
The first complete referencing guide to the wild life of the UAE. 580 colour photos.
- Marine Atlas of Abu Dhabi, 280Dhs
- 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, 100Dhs
- 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
- 2008 bird calendar. Beautiful pictures from the Eriksons. A must for yourself ... and a perfect gift, 30 Dhs
- ENHG T-shirts/golf (polo) shirts/caps. 25Dhs/35Dhs/10Dhs. Buy any 2 – get 10Dhs off.

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## Lectures

9<sup>th</sup> October

Marine Life in the UAE and Oman

**Gordon Kirkwood**

23<sup>rd</sup> October

Family

**Nick Cochran-Dyett**

13<sup>th</sup> November

The Crown-of-Thorns Starfish, a coral predator on the move

**Catherine Vogler**

20<sup>th</sup> November 7:30PM

What to see in the Al Ain and Buraimi Area

**Amer Abu Kuhail**

## Field Trips

5<sup>th</sup> October:

Iftar at the EMEG  
Jebel Ali Beach

**Andrew Bean**

12/13/14<sup>th</sup> October:

Eid Break Camping Trip,  
Jebel Shams

**Drew Gardner &  
Andrew Bean**

19/20<sup>th</sup> October:

Al Ain Night Zoo Trip

**Andrew Bean**

26<sup>th</sup> October:

Half-day Trip to Two Trees

**Allestree Fisher**

9/10 November:

Musandam Camping &  
Snorkelling Trip

**Andrew Bean**

## Reminder: 2008 Inter-Emirates Weekend

- **Location:** Western Region of Abu Dhabi
- **Hotel:** To be announced
- **Dates:** 28 February – 01 March 2008
- **Schedule Preview:** See September Focus
- **Further Details:** Watch for November Focus

## Corporate Sponsors of the ENHG - 2007

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

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## Yahoo Groups website

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