

focus



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Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

The 'Inter-Emirates Weekend' is almost upon us (28 /29 Feb, 1 March 2008) ! This is always a wonderful event, both as a social to make and meet up again with friends in Dubai and Al Ain, and for the exciting range of field trips. Please do consider coming for all or part of the weekend. For details please see page 8.

It was truly great to see so many new faces at the dugong lecture. The health of the ENHG of course depends on you the members, and we hope that we offer an interesting and relevant programme. We are an open organisation and are always grateful for membership participation. This may be in the form of new committee members (volunteer at any time!), help with field trips, lectures, writing for Focus and Tribulus, spreading the word about ENHG activities and so on. Please do consider becoming actively involved if you can spare some time. You will be most welcome.

Enjoy the cool weather while it lasts and get out there !

Drew Gardner

Annual Awards Nominations

Nominations are invited from Group members for the annual awards made by the Emirates Natural History Group, the Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Annual Award for Natural History and the Bish Brown Award.

The Sheikh Mubarak Award was created by our Patron, H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan, in honour of his father, former Minister of Interior Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed, and is presented to a nominee who, in the opinion of the ENHG Committee, has made a major contribution to knowledge of the country's natural history, archaeology or history, through the carrying out of original research, supported by extensive publication.

The Bish Brown Award was established by two former officers of the ENHG, Terry Adams and Caroline Adams, in memory of the Group's founder, the late J.N.B. 'Bish' Brown, and is presented to a person who, in the opinion of the ENHG Committee, has made a major contribution to promoting awareness about the country's natural history, archaeology or history, through increasing public involvement and participation.

The Awards are open to any individual, whether or not they are members of the ENHG, or of the al Ain Chapter of the ENHG and the Dubai Natural History Group, with the exception of serving officers of the ENHG (i.e. Chairman, Vice Chairman, Treasurer and Secretary) and nominations may be made by any member of the three Groups.

The closing date for nominations to these two awards will be 18 February, 2008. Awards recipients will be announced at the Inter Emirates Weekend dinner—Friday, 1 March, 2008.

In this issue

- Page 1:** Front cover
- Page 2:** Editorial, Annual Awards Nominations, Flamingo Watching at Ras Al Khor
- Page 3:** Flamingo Watching, A Two-Trees Sojourn
- Page 4:** A Two-Trees Sojourn, Three Sightings at Two-Trees, Lime Butterfly Metamorphosis
- Page 5:** Lime Butterfly Metamorphosis
- Page 6:** Lime Butterfly Metamorphosis, Caterpillar Osmeterium, Caterpillars in My Life
- Page 7:** Caterpillars in My Life, Websites of Interest, Lecture Review: History of Abu Dhabi
- Page 8:** Updated IEW Schedule, Book for Donation to Schools, Bookstall
- Page 9:** Committee Members, Lectures, Field Trips, ENHG Sponsors

FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Liwa Dunes

Photographers: Hanne & Jens Eriksen

Flamingo Watching At Ras Al Khor



photo: Andrew Bunney

Editor's Note: Kay Bunney, the Chairman of Abu Dhabi Ladies, who has been regularly promoting ENHG activities at ADL meetings and in their newsletter, has sent along the following report of her personal investigation of how one goes about doing a spot of bird watching at the hides visible from the main highway alongside Ras Al Khor in Dubai.

"Yesterday [a Saturday] we managed to navigate the massive building site which is Dubai and reach Ras Al Khor! In fact we made two visits, because at lunchtime the flamingoes were all asleep. On our way home we went past the Reserve on the opposite carriageway and could see that there were lots more flamingoes and they had their heads up. We did a convoluted U turn and

sneaked back in just before closing time at 4pm. The warden feeds the flamingoes after the Reserve has been closed. There are up to 3,500 flamingoes there in January and at the last count there were 150 grey herons resident – there were lots flying in and landing on the far side of some trees and out of our view.

The hide is open to the public [from 9 am to 4 pm most days] and is well worth a visit for 10 or 15 minutes, but to enter the rest of the Reserve and follow the trails you need a permit. The warden gave me the Dubai phone number to obtain such a permit: Call 04 206 4240/206 4260 and ask for Mohammad Ali. Unfortunately, there is nowhere in Abu Dhabi to obtain a permit.”

Kay Bunney

A Two-Trees Sojourn

All photographs below by Cyrus Modavi



It is still a harrowing experience to drive on the Abu Dhabi-Al Ain Truck Road, although there have been improvements in the road's surface and a few kilometres at the Abu Dhabi end are dual carriageway. One gets badly spoiled by the quality of the main roads in the UAE. In any event, the road was not so heavily trafficked on Fri. Oct. 26th when Allestree led a convoy of about 14 vehicles out to a favoured spot of his in the desert southwest of AD City.

We all were about to view a unique grove of *Prosopis cineraria*, the endemic ghaf tree. Allestree informed us that these trees were the furthest south examples of this salt tolerant, highly edible, extensively exploited, evergreen species. The Bedu used the tree for fodder, building purposes, fuel, food for people, and in severe famines even the bark was eaten. [Reza Khan, *The Indigenous Trees of the UAE*, 1999]. Allestree calls this particular site “Two Trees”, and, of course, there are 3 trees there.

The seed pods of the Ghaf are 95% parasitized by beetles and much desired as food by goats and probably camels, as well. They have a sweet smell, and the green pods look edible although I have not tried them.

The closely related *Prosopis juliflora* is a New World species, and the branches and seed pods are not at all favoured by camels [in my personal observation]. However, they can be ground up and made into a palatable and nutritious fodder for domestic animals, so the species is not a completely noxious introduction to

the UAE.

The weather was still quite warm, so the group divided into those with lots of energy in the heat and those without. The energetic group followed a desert track over a dune to a small oasis and saw a grove of trees, but I didn't eavesdrop on the discussion so have no idea what was seen.

The more sedate group wandered over to tree 3 and had a good sit in its shade where the cares of the world drifted away in quiet contemplation of the bones of the many rodents and lizards eaten by a putative eagle owl and regurgitated in owl pellets. The pellets were quite old and many had decomposed completely, leaving behind the bones of at least 2 species of lizards and 2 species of rodents plus the lower jaw and vertebrae of a hare. The bones were numerous, suggesting a prolonged residence by the eagle owl, whose nest had been seen on a previous visit by Allestree.

When the active group returned, all repaired to the shade of the Two Trees for lunch and cogitation of the finer things of the desert: beetles, skinks and camels. Each tree had a small ring of tree debris at its foot and this yielded 1 dead *Pimelia arabica* (Arabian Darkling Beetle) and 3 living *Tentyrina palmeri* (Rack Beetles) plus lots of hard-to-catch unidentified micromoths and a few tiny white larvae. The children found a live *Pimelia arabica* beetle as well.



Two or three sand fish [*Scincus mitranus*] came out to investigate what was going on: two adults—or the same adult twice, and a baby less than a week old. The baby had been bitten on the side, and the tail was shortened. This often happens to babies. My theory is that the adults think they are prey as they are moving about in the sand and attack. The babies get quite fast, possibly as a consequence! These skinks were wary, but curiosity definitely overcame caution. Cameras clicked away madly while they took a short stroll quite close by and then sank back into the sand. Earlier a sand lizard, probably one of the fringe toed lizards [*Acanthodactylus*] had scuttled by on the dune while we were examining some *Dipterygium glaucum*, [“sawrawi” in Arabic] which was in flower and attracting the Blue Spotted Arab butterflies migrating through the area. Allestree's plant checklist handout was quite useful for identifying the vegetation. It will be interesting to visit this spot in about a month from now to see what has happened after the January rains.

A herd of camels and a herder passed by; the camels were very excited to top the dune behind us and discover a group of people to sniff and check out. Their curiosity was unbounded.

Next Allestree led us west cross-country to an example of Aeolian sandstone outcroppings. The area was bounded by goat and camel farms in the most inhospitable surroundings. It defied imagination why anyone would want to set up such farms in the area because the soil was obviously very saline, the vegetation virtually nil, and there was obviously no water available.

The sandstone formations were quite fantastic, but the location had all the appearance of a moonscape. Not much living was to be found. A large locust was flying about, and the flies found us quite useful for a drink of sweat.

A little excitement was had on the sand road after leaving Two Trees because those of us in 2 wheel drives did manage to get stuck, but it didn't take long to get out and be on our way.

It was a lovely trip out of the city and into relative wilderness with the attendant relaxation of tension occasioned by city living.

Molly McQuarrie

Three Sightings at Two-Trees

Editor's Note: In each issue of Focus we invite all members to submit documentation of observations of flora and fauna in the UAE, preferably with captions including dates and locality information, and with or without a short write-up of the circumstances surrounding the observations. Here, one of the ENHG's most inveterate nature observers—collector of 'bones, bugs, bits and bobs'—after setting the stage with the above trip narrative demonstrating her observational style, zooms the focus in further, sharing a naturalist's process of discovery in the next series of articles.



This is a young 'praying mantis', actually a Lappet Mantis, *Empusa hedenborgi*. Close inspection shows, it does, in fact, have wings, indicating it's now in its adult phase, having recently emerged from the 3rd stage metamorphosis for this non-pupating insect, [cf. p. 26 of Walker/Pittaway, Insects of Eastern Arabia, 1987].



Here the above mantis is eating a Blue Spotted Arab butterfly, *Colotis phisadia* [cf. p. 82 of Walker, Pittaway], identified by a specimen captured by 2 kids just as we got out of the cars. I brought the specimen back because it was injured, and I still have it. These butterflies are moderate migrators and were in migration that day.

There is also another similar migratory species in the UAE, which Walker identifies as the Topaz Arab, *Colotis calais*, that can be seen here from time to time, but in much smaller numbers—only something like 10% of those for the Blue Spotted Arab. Torben Larsen, on the other hand, identifies this less common species as the Small Salmon Arab, *Colotis calais amatus*, and indicates that both species often travel together [cf. p 35, p 88, Larsen, Butterflies of Saudi Arabia and Its Neighbours, 1984].

This mantis was resting in a type of 'salt bush'—a species of *Zygophyllum*. On this trip Allestree identified the bushes in the area as *Zygophyllum qatarense*, ("harm" in Arabic) or "bean caper". According to the FreeDictionary.com, the term 'bean caper' applies to perennial shrubs of the genus *Zygophyllum*, "having ... flower buds that are used as capers".

Molly McQuarrie

Lime Butterfly Metamorphosis

The specimens of *Papilio demoleus* displayed here were collected in Abu Dhabi in 2 locations: on a tiny tree in the Karama St. area in Nov. and on several trees near the Intercontinental Hotel roundabout in Dec. 2007.



20 Dec. 2007: Showing egg, bird-dirt, & just-turning-green stages of growth of the lime butterfly caterpillar.



24 Nov. 2007: Quite young, probably 2nd instar, “bird-dirt” phase.



24 Dec. 2007: Formidable teeth of the “eating machine”, legs and prolegs. The structure of the prolegs is fascinating. The digital image allows zooming in on these structures to see more detail.



24 Nov. 2007: The “eating machine” in action, tiny black gnashers working away on both sides of the citrus leaf edge.



12 Nov. 2007: Green phase, laying silk.

15 Jan. 2008: Just after midnight darkening noticed. Note the strand of silk that holds the chrysalis in place. It is incredibly strong and consists of several strands. The bottom of the chrysalis is even more firmly anchored. It is vital that the chrysalis maintain a relatively vertical position. Otherwise, I believe, deformities result.

Torben Larsen: “The old larval skin slowly moves back towards the rear end of the larva and is discarded after the pupa has secured itself to the silken pad spun in advance...this feat has been compared to a man hanging from a branch in one gloved hand who has to remove the glove with the same hand without falling!” [Butterflies of Saudi Arabia and its Neighbours, 1984]



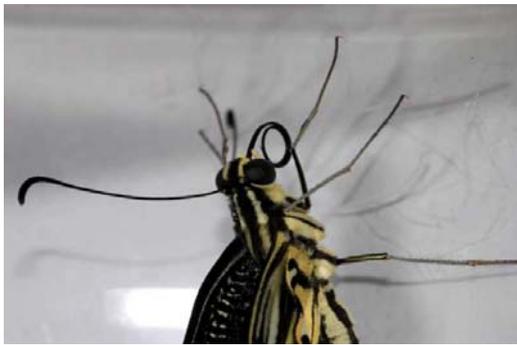
31 Nov. 2007: Resting. Notice the black marks on the shoulder. These are often not visible because they are folded under. Note the spiracles – also fascinating when zoomed in digitally on the computer.



16 Jan. 2008: Early morning. A close watch was set up.



16 Jan. 2008: About 2:30 pm. Note the antenna being straightened from lying straight between the legs. The proboscis also lies in the same plane and must be coiled and the 2 sides joined after emerging.



16 Jan. 2008: Proboscis is now coiled. Often the adult does this 2 or 3 times until both sides of the tube coil properly. It appears to be "learning" just as a toad needs to "learn" good aim when it first is catching prey after emerging from its watery tadpole stage.



16 Jan. 2008: Free! The antennae are in place. Tongue is coiled. Just waiting for the wings to be pumped full of haemolymph, stiffen and dry. Note the amount of fluid still left in the chrysalis. Wings here are still not fully extended. Often they appear to need to rest before flight but temperature plays a big part in readiness as well. This process takes a couple of hours on average. Larsen states that it must be 35 to 40 °C even in cool climates, to be able to function.

Molly McQuarrie

Caterpillar Osmeterium



The Swallowtail family [Papilionidae] have a fleshy, orange organ, technically known as the osmeterium, found just behind the head. It is completely hidden and folded away and extended in the most shocking way when one first encounters it. Larsen indicates that a "pungent smell, clearly concentrated from components of the food plant" accompanies the extending behaviour. Since the swallowtail eats a very smelly plant in the wild [Haplophyllum tuberculatum] and the Lime Butterfly eats citrus leaves, this is quite possible. In the field the smell might be difficult to isolate from the nearby food plants. "The exact function of the organ is not understood but it is almost certainly defensive." In my case it worked. I dropped the caterpillar the first time I saw that behaviour!

It is a very difficult behaviour to photograph and Cyrus has exceeded Larsen's example with this photograph, taken on 24 November, 2007. The caterpillar habituates to being prodded so quickly that one must get the photograph on the first try and because the caterpillar often rears up or jerks away it is almost impossible to get a photograph of the full extension of the osmeterium. This is an excellent effort indeed.

Molly McQuarrie

Caterpillars in My Life

Every year I try to raise caterpillars so that students can experience the amazing transformation from a 2mm egg to a 15 cm butterfly. The joy and wonder they express and their delight when the butterflies are released gives them a memory they never forget.

One year a student quietly watched the emergence of a Plain Tiger [*Danaus chrysippus*] all through my English lesson. When the butterfly was obviously ready to fly off, we opened the window, which was behind a typical Islamic patterned cement screen. She flew and a mynah bird promptly swooped down and caught her.

An Emirati woman I showed a newly emerged Oleander Hawkmoth to was visibly moved by the beauty and the wonder of the creature, offering a prayer of thanks to Allah. A Death's-head Hawkmoth carefully tended by an Emirati student of mine emerged with wrinkled wings. Often a small repair job with thinly sliced sticky label on

imperfect wings gives them a fighting chance to find a mate and complete the cycle. Only once have I had a failed pupa – it turned black and failed to emerge, although I have had parasitized pupae. Once a swallowtail went 5 or 6 months in the pupal stage before it emerged and I came home after work to find it fluttering around the kitchen. The caterpillar had escaped months earlier and I had searched high and low for it without success.

Another year there were about 6 pupas in jars being passed around the classroom and 2 of them emerged right in front of the students' eyes as they were passing the jars. That same year one quiescent caterpillar shed its final instar skin and the pupal skin emerged in front of student eyes.

About 1999, I collected numerous Caper Whites [*Anaphaeis aurota*] on Jebel Hafeet in Al Ain. I had to make 2 food-gathering trips to Al Ain before that communal-clustering species was ready to pupate. One evening just as we were leaving the mountain and the sun was going down, we discovered dozens of caper white adults hanging from bushes – sleeping for the night! Again communally but NOT on caper plants – they were on a different bush.

Larsen again: "Sometimes butterfly larvae start dying seemingly without any cause. They become sluggish ... this is nearly always caused by a bacterial or viral infection, often very contagious. Many ... large laboratory populations have (been) wiped out in a few days." This year's disaster seemed to be an instance of that. When we examined the photographed osmeterium of one victim on the computer it appeared to have been eaten away by something like a fungus.

So when you see me standing in front of a bush or tree peering closely at the leaves, I am caterpillar hunting, to bring the excitement of unfolding life to nature-starved children in my classroom.

Molly McQuarrie

All photographs on p. 3 – 6 by Cyrus Modavi

Websites of General Interest

ADACH website link to Cultural Foundation activities:

<http://www.cultural.org.ae/e/>

Website of Natural History Group of Al Ain, featuring archives of Tribulus and all three NHGs' newsletters:

www.enhg.org

Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey:

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

Website of UAE Bird Recorder Tommy Pedersen:

<http://www.tommypedersen.com>

Blog of Al Ain Amateur Photographer Amer Abu Kuhail:

www.someone1986.blogspot.com

Comprehensive US-Based Species Locator:

<http://zipcodezoo.com/default.asp>

Photo Galleries of Abu Dhabi Mountaineer Roy Richards

<http://www.pbase.com/chirri2000/mountains>

The History of Abu Dhabi

(Review of ENHG Talk given by Peter Hellyer 15-01-08)

Peter Hellyer is a long-established UAE expatriate, the editor of *Tribulus*, an ex-officio member of the ENHG committee, one-time chairman of Abu Dhabi Chapter, a committed naturalist and historian, having known all the founder members of the ENHG, and occasionally regaling members of the Abu Dhabi Chapter with his impressive layman's- level discourse on the prehistory and recorded history of Abu Dhabi emirate. He performed once more for us last Tuesday, with an updated and more inclusive version of his talk.

New information becomes available every year, as Andrew Hill stated in the previous talk to members, and as Peter pointed out, he was just "filling in the blanks" (which incidentally is the title of one of his books on the subject!), as far as he is currently able.

He started with a rapid sketch of what we know of the Palaeolithic, the Neolithic, then slid to a stop with fourth millennium Bronze Age at the Hafit horizon. Then fairly quickly he passed over the salient facts of the Umm Al Nar civilisation, when the most important activity was the exporting of copper and the maritime links with Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley. Next came the Iron Ages and the pre-Islamic period with its Nestorian diocese based on Sir Bani Yas.

The twin-routed incursions from Arabia Felix, bringing in the Nahayan (Al Bu Falah) family to this area, were next recounted.

Peter then explained that his talk was based on 4 men, 4 groups and 4 areas around which the important developments had taken place since the coming of the Arabic-speaking peoples. The four critical men were from the current ruling family: Shakhbut bin Diab, Zayed bin Khalifa, Shakhbut bin Zayed and Zayed bin Sultan (1st President of the UAE). The four groups were the Bani Yas, the Manasir, the Dhawaher and the Awamir, all prominent in Abu Dhabi emirate. The four important areas critical in the development of the emirate were: Abu Dhabi and surrounding islands, the Al Ain area, Liwa and adjacent territory, and the Western Islands.

The major part of the talk was an account of how the ruling family had succeeded in holding the newly formed territory together, consolidated alliances from the late 18th century and governed the largest portion of what was to become the UAE, throughout the British Mandate. He explained his choice of the four men/rulers in this process, and amazed us with his impressive grip on the details of the chronology of the ruling family.

His view was from Abu Dhabi clearly, and almost certainly, the Qawasim or the tribes of the East Coast who have been settled longer than the Bani Yas would have a slightly different optic. We look forward to welcoming Peter back for the next version of the talk, and to giving yet another focus to the periods covered.

Allestree Fisher

Inter-Emirates Weekend Update

Dates: 28 February – 01 March 2008

Venue: Mafraq Hotel – Tel: 02-582-2666

- NB: minimum cancellation notice = 2 weeks in advance of occupancy (i.e. by 15 Feb.)
- Pls. make reservations by 12 Feb., as rooms will only be held at the special rate (below) until this date.
- Rate per night (incl. breakfast, not dinner):
 Single Room: 580 Dhs
 Double Room: 638 Dhs

Buffet Dinner Friday Evening: (AED115)

If not staying at the hotel, but coming to Friday's dinner let Molly McQuarrie know as she will book for the group. (bonesetc@emirates.net.ae);

IEW Events Program (to be confirmed by 20 Feb)

Thursday 28 February

- 5.00 pm onwards: Open for IEW trip sign-ups
- 5.00 pm onwards: Open for on-site submissions of entries to photo competition

Evening Activities (To be confirmed)

- *Natural History Quiz*

Friday 29 February

- 8.00 am onwards: IEW Trip Sign-ups
- 12.00 midday: Photo-submission closes

All-day and Half-day Trips, in order of starting times:

- 7:30 am – 11.00 am: Birding—Al Wathba Lake (Andrew Twyman)
- 8:15 am – 6:00 pm: Liwa Dunes tour (Andrew Bean, Dick Hornby)
- 8:00 am – 6:00 pm: Elephant tracks / Miocene Fossil Sites (Mark Beech, Drew Gardner)
- 9:00 am – midday: Sand ecology of the Dew Forest on the Hameem Rd. (Allestree Fisher)

Dinner: 7:00 pm – 9:00 pm

- Ground Floor, Buffet dinner
- After Dinner Activities:
 - Announcement of Bish Brown and Sheikh Mubarak Award Winners
 - Announcement of Photo Competition Winners
 - Insect-trapping
 - 10:00pm Star-gazing

Saturday 1 March

- 8:00 am – 11.00: Short walk near hotel to examine saltbushes and workshop (Dr. Shahina Ghazanfar)
- 1:00 pm – 5.00: Sand driving workshop at Two Trees site, off the Al Ain-Abu Dhabi Rd. (Andrew Bean)

Other Activities (Not yet confirmed)

- Half day geology field trip
- GPS Workshop
- Plant identification/ work under the microscope
- Herbarium workshop for children
- Workshops for children

Book for Donation to Schools

Copies of the book, Jebel Hafit – A Natural History, published by the ENHG, are available as donations to schools, colleges, and universities in the UAE. Please provide any committee member with contact information for any educational institutions you would like to furnish with a copy of this book. Parents of school children and school representatives are invited to attend an ENHG lecture and request a copy of this book from any committee member in attendance.

ITEMS ON SALE

AT THE ENHG STALL

- The Emirates – A Natural History, 350Dhs.
The first complete referencing guide to the wildlife of the UAE. 580 colour photos.
- Jebel Hafit – A Natural History, 100Dhs.
An attractive, encyclopaedic presentation of the natural & human treasures of a local landmark.
- Abu Dhabi Bird checklist 10Dhs.
(Free if you spend over 100Dhs!)
- Emirates Bird Report, 50Dhs.
- Breeding Birds of UAE, by Simon Aspinall, 50Dhs.
- Wild about Mammals, by Marijcke Jongbloed, 40Dhs. Guide to *mammals of the UAE*.
- Comprehensive Guide to the Flora of the UAE, 100Dhs.
- Plant Checklist, by Marijcke Jongbloed, 25Dhs.
Know your local wild plants.
- Pests, 35Dhs.
Find out what's in and around your home.
- Children's books: Hayat the Leopard, 15Dhs.
- 2008 bird calendar, 30Dhs.
A must for yourself ... and a perfect gift.
- Reef Fishes of the UAE, 50Dhs.
- Feast of Dates, 100Dhs.
- Sir Bani Yas, 100Dhs.
- UAE in Focus, 100Dhs.
- Common Birds in Oman, 100Dhs.
A beginner's field guide—includes all the common birds in the UAE as well.
- Sulphur, camels, and gunpowder, 90Dhs.
- Snakes of Arabia, 60 Dhs.
- Cuttlefish of UAE, 30 Dhs
- Abu Dhabi 8 Million Years Ago, 15 Dhs.
- Tribulus, 15 Dhs (*Free for members*)

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Lectures

8th January

New Fossil Discoveries
in Abu Dhabi's Western
Region

Dr. Andrew Hill

15th January

An Introduction to the
History of the UAE

Peter Hellyer

5th February 7:30 PM

Dugongs

Dr. Mark Beech

19th February 7:30 PM

Marine Ecology in
Dubai: Natural and
Artificial Reef
Ecosystems

John Burt

4th March 7:30 PM

Botanical exploration in
19th century Oman

**Dr. Shahina
Ghazanfar**

Field Trips

1st – 2nd February

Camping trip / hike up
Jebel Sumeini.

Roy Richards

28th Feb – 1st March

Day trips to various
places during the Inter-
Emirates Weekend
(See IEW Schedule p8)

Corporate Sponsors of the ENHG - 2008

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.

Al Masaood



Al Nasser Holdings



Al Sayegh Richards
Butler Holdings



RICHARDS BUTLER

BDO Patel



Dome International



Kanoo Group



مجموعة كانوو
The Kanoo Group

National Bank of Abu
Dhabi



Readymix Abu Dhabi



URS Corporation



Dames & Moore

WESCO Abu Dhabi



Members' Items for sale

Please send small ads to newsletter@chirri2000.com

Newsletter Details

Newsletter contributions to: newsletter@chirri2000.com

Postal Address

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P.O. Box 32590, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.

Yahoo Groups website

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