

focus



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Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

The 5th Annual Symposium on Recent Archaeological Discoveries in the United Arab Emirates was held at the Mercure Hotel on Jebel Hafeet on 3rd to 4th April, and was the largest and best attended yet. The programme, as usual, was wide ranging and demonstrates that archaeological research in the UAE is very much alive and well. While it is hard to select highlights, Hans-Peter Uerpmann's talk on the Stone Age Sequence of Jebel Faya intriguingly lends evidence to the routes used by the early human spread out of Africa. Olivier Brunet spoke on the techniques of carnelian bead production in the 2nd and 3rd centuries BC, indicating that some production was local. Peter Magee's lucid presentation on the development of Muweilah was of great interest. Other talks ranged from the Stone Age through to late Islamic times. Congratulations to Dr Hassan Naboodah and Peter Hellyer with the Zayed Centre for History and Heritage and Emirates Heritage Club for arranging such a successful and fascinating symposium.

Gray's racer snake, *Platyceps ventromaculatus* has recently been relocated in the UAE! This harmless species was first recorded by Bish Brown on Sir Bani Yas in 1989, but was not reported since until Simon Aspinall found one, again on Sir Bani Yas, last year. The third UAE record was on Dalma island, by myself on 5th April this year. This snake was in the rocky interior of the island away from cultivation, suggestion that the species is indeed native rather than a recent introduction. The species does not appear to occur on the UAE mainland, and the next closest records are from Doha.

Drew Gardner

A First for Abu Dhabi?

All ENHG members are invited to submit documentation of observations of flora and fauna in the UAE, preferably with captions, including locality information & dates. This submission is a further response to this invitation. –Ed.

Recently (March, 2008) I have found some *Senecio glaucus* near my place of work on Abu Dhabi Island (near the intersection of Al Saada and Al Salam streets). As far as I am aware, this composite species has not been recorded here before by either Rob Western or Marijcke Jongbloed. Western limits it to the northern emirates in his distribution list, and Jongbloed brings it closer to Abu Dhabi Island but not quite here. Has anybody seen any? If so, where? This species is confined to coastal sandy substrates, waste ground and sandy cultivated areas. Dick Hornby and I have separately recorded some in Dubai emirate this year. I enclose two pictures:

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FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Popcorn Plant, *Pseudogaillonia hymenostephana*

Photographer: Allestree E C Fisher



Senecio glaucus



Senecio glaucus in situ

Comments, please! Additionally, *Senecio glaucus* does not figure on the Abu Dhabi Island List as drawn up by Keith Gibbins. It is certainly one of the most attractive spring ephemerals alongside *Anthemis deserti* which is rare, and which I spotted near the ADNOC station at Al Faya this year.



Anthemis deserti

Don't forget to admire the Pink Trumpet Flower Tree, which is blooming prolifically in the city at the moment:



Tabebuia sp.

These trees can be found along Salam Street/Eastern Corniche, near where the new development is, and on the way there. They can also be seen on 32nd Street, on the way to Spinneys, and even in the central reservation of some streets.

Allestree E C Fisher

All photographs by Allestree EC Fisher

Spring Annuals Trip Findings

On 7–8 March, a group of 15 ENHG members, led by Allestree Fisher, camped in the Buraimi area of Oman, where they viewed many of the spring annuals brought on by this winter's fairly substantial rains, and visited a couple of Long Tombs along the way. A few photographs of their botanical findings are included below, concluding with a brief commentary on the rarest of these—*Maerua crassifolia*. In addition, Allestree's photograph of one of the UAE's more distinctive-looking flowers—the popcorn plant, taken on that trip—graces this issue's cover. –Ed.



Amebia



Anvillea garcinii



Maerua crassifolia, at Hanging Gardens, 8 March, 2008



Maerua crassifolia close-up

Maerua crassifolia is fairly common in mountainous parts of Oman. It is a member of the caper family, and is very common in Sahelian Africa, where it is heavily browsed by livestock. *Maerua* is very rare in the UAE-- only found in RAK and in the Hanging Gardens (Oman) near Buraimi. It could possibly be found on Jebel Hafit. I have found one specimen, near the top of the mountain, but this has not yet been corroborated by any other naturalist, to my knowledge.

Allestree E C Fisher

All photographs by Allestree EC Fisher

Arabian Nights

Family Weekend Campout at Two Trees, 21-22 March

It is incredible! Less than an hour and a half from the modern metropolis of Abu Dhabi the desert is nearly the same as it was a hundred years ago. The loom of city lights disappears; the background sound is a profound silence, interspersed with campfire conversation, guitar and harmonica.



Andrew inspecting gerbil trap



Andrew displaying gerbil in plastic bag



Released gerbil outside newly dug burrow



Kids playing on the dunes

The kids loved it! Rolling over and over, down and down the red-brown dunes. Sand in your shoes. No shoes. Roasting your own marshmallows for 'S'mores' over the fire. Setting traps with Andrew in the afternoon. Checking them at the crack of dawn so the gerbils don't get toasted. Following tracks in the sand... feral cat, camel, lizard (most likely the toad-headed agama) and Reynard (the red) fox! Barbara thought she saw one loping off in the early morning light.



Fox tracks and human footprints

Andrew's carefully prepared plant cuttings for identification - sprigs of saltbush and small, white *Eremobium aegyptiacum* – plentiful now after the unusually heavy winter rains, didn't excite the kids as much as the absolute freedom – free from traffic and fear.



Eremobium aegyptiacum and lizard tracks

According to Keith Taylor, ghaf Tree No. Two is home to two distinct bird families – a couple of ubiquitous house sparrows and a pair of Ravens with their young.



Ravens' nest in ghaf tree
(As of 4-4-08 the chicks had apparently fledged –Ed).

How many hundreds of years have their tribe been nesting there? The Two Trees campsite is supposed to be an ancient stop on the camel caravan route from Buraimi Oasis to the sea, which follows the course of an underground river marked at intervals by pairs or solitary ghaf trees. The nearby natural aquifer-fed reservoir pond is roughly 20 x 80 feet and now supplies water to a local bedu village - a miracle amid the parched sands.

Fearless Leader Andrew Bean arranged much of the educational diversion for the new AUHENHG members. New members are important – both the adults of the species and the immature... Marise Scarfo and Eric Breton recently joined our group and brought Victor and Masha on their first camping trip – away from the concrete and glass towers of their daily lives. Marise admits to not being much of a camper but thought the experience most definitely worth waiting forty-five minutes for coffee after a night of sandy half sleep. Next time, we'll make a ring of upturned camp chairs round

the fire to warn the unwary sleep walker and let it burn through the night. In the morning, the chairs will be dry and dew free, the embers ready for coffee, done in 10 minutes and sticky buns wrapped in aluminum foil in five.

Alejandro from Spain and his beautiful wife, who speaks Spanish, Polish and English with equal facility, are presently unburdened by sprogs and therefore endowed with the surplus energy to dig a 1m x 1m fire pit – helpful on a windy night that saw us go through three bundles of firewood. Keith informs us that the temperature went as low as 9 degrees C!

The Creamer-Shoreys supplied Quetzal to the boy's brigade, completed by Josh and Sam Nesbit who generously allowed their father Howard to tag along. They were true to mammalian type in undertaking unnecessary risks (mortality is definitely higher amongst male lion cubs and elephant calves). Masha, Imogen and Mara were not far behind, and sometimes ahead, but Andrew and Barbra didn't seem overly concerned – they've seen this all before.

The wisdom that fresh air, exercise and the outdoors is a natural tonic to the appetite goes double for boys. The 'proper English sausages' imported into the desert at great trouble and expense from *Spinneys*, would have been considered burnt beyond recognition at home, but here round the campfire at Two Trees they were judged 'smashing good barbecue'!

Failure by the Fire Marshall (me) to distinguish between Toys and Tools probably cost the loss of a collapsible shovel. Next time the difference will be explained in greater detail and the person (of whatever age) be made to feel more responsible for the borrowed object.

But was it fun? Would you do it again? Unanimous in the Affirmative!

The Next Time: You'll have your chance to join us on the last official desert campout of the season over the weekend of April 25th – 26th. Sign up with our Intrepid Expedition leader Andrew at: <rexabean@eim.ae>.

Michael Creamer

All photographs by Keith Taylor

Sand Driving Course Part 2

On 4-5 April 2008, NHG members from Abu Dhabi and Dubai (5 carloads from each) joined a two-day sand driving course led by Andrew Bean at Two Trees. Friday afternoon was a reprise of the IEW course, with information on basic equipment and procedures and practice driving over dunes correctly as well as towing stuck vehicles. The second day included practice ascending and descending more challenging dunes, and safe cresting, along with useful impromptu practice with multiple tows during an exploratory drive into the dunes.

In addition, those of us on this campout enjoyed the flora and fauna at Two Trees, reminding us of why we are interested in sand driving in the first place. At night, just downhill from the campsite, Gary Feulner showed us a scorpion that glowed yellow under his portable black light. During the day, we encountered Arabian toad-

headed agamas, *Phrynocephalus arabicus*, wagging their black-tipped tails as we approached, along with a rare daytime sighting of the normally nocturnal Desert Sand Gecko. For a bit of early morning mammal-spotting, Andrew again set the gerbil traps on this trip, this time catching, recording, and releasing 4—all females (at least we reckon so). Gillian led the group to the nearby reservoir, where growths of the parasitic desert hyacinths and red thumbs were found, along with evidence of thriving flora and fauna underwater. Tracks observed leading to the watering hole appeared to include those of both fox and sand cat.

NB: Andrew is planning to run the next ENHG sand driving course in October of 2008, so stay tuned for sign-up sheets next season if you are interested.



Gerbil looking out of newly-dug hole



Andrew teaching the sand driving course



Desert hyacinths by the Two Trees reservoir

Keith Taylor

All photographs by Jan Fisher



Towing stuck vehicles off the top of a dune

Recent Bird Sightings in Oman

The ENHG's Jens and Hanne Eriksen have just sent in a few photographs from a bird-watching excursion they took to southern Oman during the first week of April, 2008. These photos were all taken in Wadi Aydam and the tiny two-family village of Tudho, near the Oman-Yemen border. The Eriksens were on the trail of the Nile Valley sunbird, which had been reported there, and they were particularly pleased to find it, along with several other handsome bird specimens (males all) shown below. —Ed



Dune Sand Gecko, *Stenodactylus doriae*



Nile Valley Sunbird



Sand Partridge



Lichtenstein's Sand Grouse



Spotted Sand Grouse



Trumpeter Finches

All photographs by Hanne and Jens Eriksen

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.

ITEMS ON SALE

AT THE ENHG STALL

- The Emirates – A Natural History, 350 dhs
The first complete referencing guide to the wildlife of the UAE. 580 colour photos.
- Jebel Hafit – A Natural History, 100 dhs
An attractive, encyclopaedic presentation of the natural resources of a local landmark.
- Breeding Birds of UAE, by Simon Aspinall, 50 dhs
- Abu Dhabi Bird checklist 10 dhs
(Free if you spend over 100Dhs!)
- Emirates Bird Report, 50 dhs
- Common Birds in Oman, 100 dhs
A beginner's field guide—can be helpful in identifying birds in the UAE as well.
- Bird watching guide to Oman, 2nd edition, 100 dhs. *Guide to bird watching spots in Oman.*
- The Birds of Al Jabal Al Akhdar, 50 dhs
- 2008 bird calendar, 30 dhs
A must for yourself ... and a perfect gift.
- Falconry, 60 dhs
- Wild about Mammals, by Marijcke Jongbloed, 40Dhs. *Guide to mammals of the UAE.*
- Snakes of Arabia, 50 dhs
- Pests, 35 dhs
Find out what's in and around your home.
- Reef Fishes of the UAE, 50 dhs
- Snorkeling and Diving in Oman, 50 dhs
- Comprehensive Guide to the Flora of the UAE, 100 dhs
- Plant Checklist, by Marijcke Jongbloed, 25 dhs.
Know your local wild plants.
- Feast of Dates, 100 dhs
- UAE in Focus, 100 dhs
- Sir Bani Yas, 100 dhs
- Musandam, 100 dhs
- Sulphur, camels, and gunpowder, 90 dhs
- On-Road in the UAE, 50 dhs
- Children's books: Yaw the Wildcat; Hayat the Leopard, 15 dhs

Committee Members

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

Jenny Mueller
(Secretary)
Mobile: 050-3110632
jennymuae@hotmail.com

Martin & Linda Betz
(Treasurers)
Home: 02-6272309
lindaleviskabetz@yahoo.com

Linda Betz
(Corporate Sponsorship Secretary)

Ms Hazel Spencer
(Lecture Coordinator)
Mobile: 050-8150539
Hspencer@adma.ae

Dr. Andrew Bean
(Excursion Secretary)
Mobile: 050-3221327
rexabean@emirates.net.ae

Allestree Fisher
(Assistant Excursion Secretary)
Mobile: 050-6672237
allestree.fisher@hct.ac.ae

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

Keith Taylor
(Focus Editor)
Mobile: 050-820-4938
kjtaylor13@yahoo.com

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

Dr Richard Perry
(Member)
Mobile: 050-7805602
rperry@adco.ae

Ms Donatella Astratti
(Member)
dastratti@slb.com

Molly McQuarrie
(Member)
bonesetc@emirates.net.ae

Lectures

4th March
Botanical Exploration in
19th Century Oman

Dr. Shahina Ghazanfar

18th March
Making Environment a
Shared Goal of the UAE

Habiba al Marashi

8th April
Video: Life of Birds
Episode 10: The Limits of
Endurance, by David
Attenborough

15th April
Windtower houses of the
Bastakiya

Peter Jackson

14th May 7:30 PM
Mangrove Ecosystem
& Urban Development
in the UAE

Dr. Tarek Yousef

Field Trips

7th – 8th March
Spring Annuals Camping
Trip

Allestree Fisher

21st – 22nd March
Family weekend at Two
Trees

Andrew Bean

4th – 5th April
Sand Driving Course /
Camping at Two Trees

Andrew Bean

25th – 26th April
Wadi Jazeera
Camping Trip
(Passports needed)
Link for More Info:
<http://www.enhg.org/fiel/d/jazira/jazira.htm>

Andrew Bean

Tentative Activities for May & June

NB: May talks will be on Wednesdays: 14/5 & 28/5.

- (For Confirmed 14 May talk, see Lecture panel.)
- 28 May talk: Probably an overview of Sharjah's museums, followed by a presentation on the Sharjah Natural History Museum.
 - End of May--Hot weather trip: Visit 2 archaeological sites, the Wildlife Centre & the Sharjah Natural History Museum on Fri. followed by hotel stay; visit other museums on Sat. Daytrip option possible.
 - Final talk Tuesday 3rd June: A slideshow by the Eriksens, title TBA.

For future details, see YahooGroup site & April *focus*.

Websites of General Interest

Website of Natural History Group of Al Ain, featuring archives of Tribulus and all three NHGs' newsletters:
<http://www.enhg.org>

Website of the Emirates Environmental Group:
www.eeg-uae.org
For info on recycling centres in the UAE, contact the EEG's Habiba Marashi at eeg@emirates.net.ae

Website of UAE Bird Recorder Tommy Pedersen:
<http://www.tommypedersen.com>

Roy Richards' Photo Galleries:
<http://www.pbase.com/chirri2000/mountains>

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