

focus



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Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

I am sure by now, everyone must be aware of the ongoing saga of 'Sammy' the wild-caught whale shark in the aquarium at the Atlantis Hotel, Palm Jumeirah, Dubai. I am sure that I speak for the vast majority of the Group in deploring the capture of this magnificent plankton feeder; the world's largest fish species. The IUCN red list gives the whale shark's status as 'vulnerable' and a population trend of 'decreasing'. The species is highly migratory, and so the animal cannot really be described as belonging to the UAE, or any other country. Indeed all range countries have an obligation to help conserve this species. For a hotel to capture such an animal as a tourist attraction, in the cynical guise of rescuing it and researching its swimming patterns, is disgraceful. We also should not forget that the same hotel imported 28 wild-caught bottlenose dolphins last year, to the consternation of environmentalists worldwide.

On a more cheerful note, Dr Brigitte Howarth (Vice Chair of the ENHG Al Ain and Sheikh Mubarak prize winner) will be presenting a paper at the First International Congress on 'Documenting, analyzing and managing biodiversity in the Middle East', on the importance of private insect collections for the study of biodiversity. She and Dr Mike Gillett have been busy over the last month working on the insect collections of the ENHG amongst others, including that from Abu Dhabi. I will be presenting a paper on 'Mapping the reptile fauna of the UAE and Oman', including a number of valuable records made by ENHG members. Documenting such records are a valuable on-going effort, and any identifiable reptile (or other species) photo accompanied by locality data (especially GPS) adds to our knowledge. Please do consider collecting such data and sending them to me!

Drew Gardner

In Memoriam: Demise of a Saxaul



A Saxaul Tree (*Haloxylon persicum*), Al Wathba, 2007

Photo: Allestree Fisher

The UAE has lost one of its iconic trees! The lonely saxaul that used to grace the central reservation just outside Musaffah has been destroyed by an earthmover in an attempt to develop a flowery central section between the two carriageways. It was quite happy there

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FRONT COVER PICTURE

Pencil Sketch: Arabian Oryx

Artist: Feng Wen

Image Digitising Photographer: Keith Taylor

before the summer. Who allowed this vandalism? Do they have no ecological advisers??

The dew forest, composed entirely of saxaul trees (*Haloxylon persicum*) situated just to the south and west of Musaffah is unique in the UAE. No-one can reliably explain why the trees chose to colonise this region of Abu Dhabi. Whether you read the notes provided by Brown, Hellyer or Aspinall, you find no enlightenment on that score. If it were purely due to matitudinal dew, they would extend much further afield. The lone specimen had been allowed to thrive in the road ever since the road was dualled a few years back.

There is no earthly reason why this tree had to be taken out. We shall see its site taken by ground cover such as *Wedelia* or *Alternanthera* in a few months. There's loads of that everywhere, but no saxaul, except in this one area from Al Wathba to Shanayl. So if you have spotted this tree in the past, you will look for it vain now. R.I.P.

Allestree Fisher

EMEG Beach Iftar Dinner 2008

Iftar shared with one hundred fellow natural history enthusiasts from Al Ain, Dubai and Abu Dhabi under the hospitality of Emirate Marine Environmental Group founder and environmentalist, Major Ali. What better way to spend a Friday night during Ramadan!

The convoy left Abu Dhabi at 4, arriving at the EMEG Marine Reserve about 5:30, just in time for a refreshing swim before Iftar. Our host generously prepared mountains of traditional Arab food from the sea, rice,

king fish, lamb and fruit. We ate under the stars on the shores of the lagoon separating the reserve site from the beach, with the lucky few who could fit sitting on cushions in the open-sided barasti shelter in traditional comfort.

Major Ali then introduced us to a traditional form of after-lftar entertainment – Ramadan games. We all joined in the fun as participants or audience for the tag games and the tug of war. It was not evident who actually won; however, it seems the point was in the entertainment, and there was certainly plenty of that.

About a dozen of us stayed overnight in the thousand-star barasti shelter and camping accommodation. Major Ali shared stories of his work and his hopes for the Marine Reserve future and showed a video of recent projects, including the work volunteers undertook relocating reptiles and small animals from development sites to safe areas, relocating threatened corals, and cleaning dumped waste from the seabed, as well as the extensive education programme in place for schools and other groups, in which children are trained in traditional skills such as pearl diving and fishing with hand-nets.

One programme which particularly attracted our interest was his mangrove forest planting. Seeds need to be cared for until they become established as seedlings large enough to be planted on the Marine Reserve. Major Ali and his team distribute the seeds to children and interested groups to care for and then to bring to the reserve and plant. Each seedling has the name of the person who nurtured the seeds attached when it is planted, and this fosters ownership and awareness of the importance of mangrove forests in the marine ecosystem.

Major Ali would welcome the support of The Abu Dhabi Natural History Group for this programme. There was enthusiasm amongst those present to assist in raising the seedlings and to combine the seedling planting with another overnight stay in one of the most beautiful, peaceful and educational environments in the region. Perhaps Major Ali would be able to visit our group and show the video sometime. It certainly is inspiring!

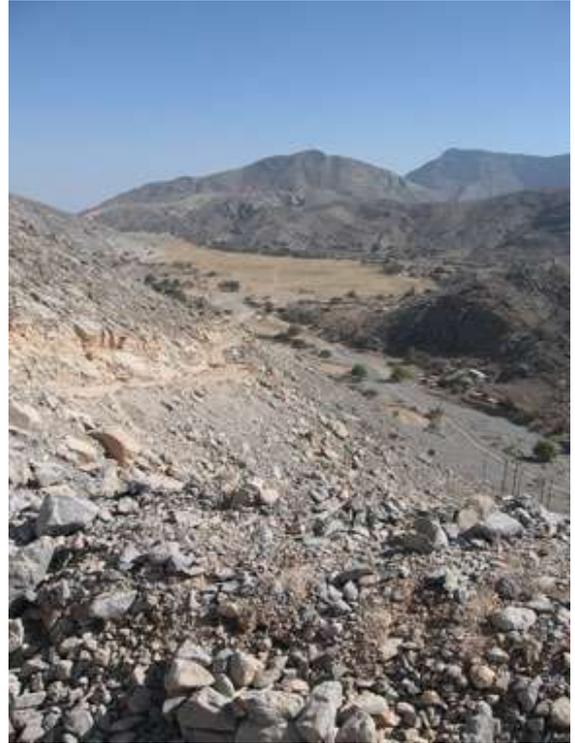
Cath Ware

Musandam Adventure

On Tuesday, September 30, the beginning of Eid Al Fitr in UAE, many people met at 9 a.m. at Popeye's. Andrew Bean sent 5 cars off in the lead caravan to reach our destination earlier than the rest and thus to find a good campsite. He divided the rest of us up into two more caravans, so about 15 cars set off in all. There was a lot of traffic, so it was good to be in smaller groups. After a couple of service station stops along the way, the 2nd and 3rd groups arrived at the border at Sha'am around 1 or 1:30. As Eid didn't start till the following day in Oman, Andrew had advised us to eat our lunch before crossing. The border crossing went amazingly smoothly and quickly considering the size of our group.

We enjoyed the coastal drive north from the border and up over a mountain spur to a great view of the Arabian Gulf and Khasab before descending down and around a

finger of the Gulf into Khasab itself. From there we drove up and up a windy, steep, dusty gravel road on Jebel As Saye to reach our campsite about 45 minutes later. The views along the way were superb in spite of the dust!



High mountain farmland at As Saye Village

We arrived in camp around 4:30 p.m. and were happy to find that the advance group had done a great job of securing a large area with plenty of space for everyone to put up their tents. Wild almond trees provided shade here and there, and most of us set up near one of those spots. As we were finishing up, Gillian Kirkwood came around with biodegradable garbage bags, so we filled them up with lots of plastic bottles and other trash, leaving our camp a cleaner place than we'd found it. Meanwhile the kids gathered firewood and had their own fire after dinner while the adults joined one of the group campfires.



Our campsite on Jebel As Saye

On Wednesday, October 1, we were up early and set off at 8:00 in one long convoy down the mountain to Khasab. As we drove through Khasab, it was interesting to see many Omanis setting off to visit friends for the first day of Eid. The men were in new sparkling white dishdashas and the young girls in colorful new dresses.

It took a while for all of us to pay for our boat trip and get to the harbor. Then there wasn't enough snorkelling gear available on board for everyone, so that had to be

acquired. It was nearly 11 a.m. before we set off up the coast. Our group of over 50 people was on a modern white yacht with three toilets that included showers. Initially, everyone was seated on chairs, benches, or carpeting, but then Humpback Dolphins were sighted off the port side of the boat, and everyone stood up and converged there to take photos. We saw up to six dolphins at one time, and they eventually circled around the yacht and came up below the surface near the front of the boat.

We headed through Khor Ash Sham and went snorkelling at Telegraph Island. We saw a number of different types of coral and several species of fish, including lots of black-and-yellow-striped Sergeant Major Fish, Parrot Fish, Yellowbar Angelfish, and Goby Fish—the latter in close association with shrimp who were actively maintaining their hidey-holes in the sandy bottom. Shrimp were quite plentiful, but well camouflaged. Gordon reported he did not come across any Schooling Bannerfish or Arabian Butterfly Fish at this location, though he spotted them there in Nov. 2008.

The morning's snorkelling was followed by a tasty lunch of fish, rice, 2 kinds of vegetable curry, bread like pancakes, and hummus. Cold drinks, water, and fruit were available throughout the trip, and sweetened tea was served after lunch.

We went further through the khor and snorkelled again. The water was shallower there, and there weren't as many varieties of fish or coral. But there were just as many spiny sea urchins to watch out for! Afterwards, we went directly back to the harbor in Khasab arriving about 4 p.m. It was a quieter evening in camp as most people were tired from the day's adventures.



Getting off the yacht at low tide

We got off to a later start on Thursday, October 2, at 9 a.m. First we drove up a narrow dirt road and then walked over to a view of the Staircase to Heaven as well as the Gulf down below. It was so hazy that you couldn't tell where the sky and sea met as the two blues blended together.

We then drove partway down the mountain to a village, turned left, and drove to the edge of it. Here's Andrew giving us directions and showing us that the almonds are

edible. Unfortunately, as Andrew discovered, you might also want a nutcracker to remove the shell.



Andrew sampling wild almonds

Then we hiked up a wadi for the better part of two hours. Although we were in direct sunlight most of the time, there was a constant breeze. The wadi was rocky and steep in places, and a short section near the top had a steep drop-off from the trail down into the wadi. When the wadi levelled off at the top, we walked past a village and fields with a few sheep to the top of a cliff. This was the top of the Stairway to Heaven. You could make out the top of the stairway coming up an incredibly steep cliff side from a valley far below. After taking photos, we headed back down the wadi and ultimately to our campsite, lunch, and an afternoon break.

At 4 p.m. about half of the group set off once again by car first to the ridge not too far above the campsite, where we saw some rock art and a view of the incredible road to Dibba. Here's a shell fossil we saw there:



Shell fossil

The road curves along a rock face with a steep drop on one side and then goes out onto the top of a narrow ridge. We drove a short ways down it to see small fossils of sea animals, where an ancient sea bed had literally been turned on its side to form one of the walls of the mountain just above the road. By chance, a tour guide with two tourists came along and showed us a starfish fossil in the wall.



Fossilized starfish?

Back up and over the ridge we drove to an abandoned stone village on the top of another ridge. There were many rundown buildings, and it was hard to tell which ones might have been houses and which ones were used for storage, etc. There were three wells, one of which had water in it. There were also graves clearly visible a little way below the village.



One of the wells

We passed another cool and pleasant evening in camp enjoying campfires with the last of the wood we'd brought along.

Friday, October 3, various carloads set off individually, at a time of their own choice. Roger and Maggie Jepson and Chris went off the main track down the mountain for a side trip to beautiful Khor Najd on the Gulf of Oman and also to the natural acacia forest. Then they headed back to Abu Dhabi, passing a few of the other members of our group who had stopped to sightsee or swim on their way out of Oman.



Overlooking Khor Najd

Chris Jones

Photographs by the author

Snorkelling/Camping near Khasab

On Thursday morning, 2 October, two carloads—the Kirkwood and Taylor parties—took our leave of the main group at the mountain campsite and returned to sea level for another day of snorkelling. We used the public steps alongside the Golden Tulip Hotel to access the sea for some snorkelling, along with lunch and relaxation with a sea view. From the rocks, we saw a devil ray make a couple of spectacular leaps out of the water, as Gillian explained, to rid itself of parasites. Later on, Gordon managed to spot and swim close to a large (unidentified) turtle.

The fish were a bit more plentiful and variegated than those spotted on the yacht trip. They included many of the species spotted the day before, as well as bright yellow Arabian Butterfly Fish, an unconfirmed species of Surgeonfish (dark purple with orange fins and tail) hiding among the rocks, and black and white Cleaner Wrasse in association with some more nondescript fish, among others.

In mid afternoon, when the sea became too rough, we called it a day and headed to our campsite on the newly expanded public beach just past the Golden Tulip in the direction of Khasab. The beach was thronging with locals on this, the second day of Eid (in Oman), but we had managed to lay claim to one beach gazebo by setting up tents underneath it. One welcome feature of this beach now, by the way, is the relatively decent public toilet down at one end. Our dinners—some prepared on site and some procured from town—were enlivened by live entertainment provided by a local band playing some sort of Arabic pop music, in synch with a recording, directly opposite our campsite. Fortunately, that finished up before midnight, and despite the warm temperature (31°C), we all got a good enough night's sleep. That bodes well for beach camping in the near future now that the weather is just starting to break.

Keith Taylor

Recycling Venue Update No. 2

Profile of an AD School Recycling Program:

The American Community School (Khalidiyah) recycles paper, aluminum and plastic, but the service is available only to faculty, students & parents (which is true of all AD school recycling programs, as a rule). All the work is done by students & teachers, and the program is almost a victim of its own success: "The challenge is getting people to do the physical labor," says community service teacher Anne Russell. "It's not fun; it's hot."

Additional Info. about Recycling in the UAE:

The EEG has told Anne that Zenath is the only real recycler in Abu Dhabi. Zenath (not Zenith) is a waste management company (See www.zenath.com). All recycling goes to Musaffa to be sorted. Plastic is smushed into large cubes for transport to a plant in RAK, where it is recycled into plastic bags & children's toys. Paper is bound up & shipped out on returning cargo ships to Thailand, Pakistan & India, where it is sold to plants that recycle it. Paper, plastic & aluminum are recycled in Abu Dhabi; glass is recycled only in Sharjah & Dubai, though it could be sent there. Steel cans aren't recycled in the UAE, despite the label on a Spinneys bin.

Info. on How to Set up Recycling at Your Workplace:

- Teresa at Zenath is the contact for info on how to get them to pick up recyclables from your school/workplace: teresa@etisalat.blackberry.com.
- Habiba al Marashi of the EEG (eeg@emirates.net.ae) can provide info. on setting up a recycling program.
- Go Green Offices recycles ink cartridges from printers & photocopiers, and will make a small donation to MSF (Médecins sans Frontières) if you recycle with them. You can register to set up a workplace collection center at the following site: <http://www.gogreen.ae/cartridge-recycling.php>.

AD Recycling Venues Accessible to the Public:

- ADCO – behind green metal sliding gate in ADCO car park on Khaleej Al Arabi near Corniche St: newspapers & aluminum cans
- ADMA-OPCO – Bins behind the ADMA-OPCO tower on the corner of 6th (Al Najda) & Old Corniche Rd: newspapers, aluminum cans, & plastic bottles
- There are several mobile phone recycling boxes in AD. For locations, see: <http://www.envirofone.ae>.

Questionable Venue in AD – Spinneys (Khalidiyah):

Spinneys' carpark has a Coke-can-shaped barrel for aluminum cans, & bins for paper, plastic, glass*, and 'cans'* (*See above info. about glass & steel). But concrete info. is needed about whether Spinneys has an actual recycling contract with Zenath, as doubts persist.

Members-only Recycling Venue in AD:

'The Club': newspapers, aluminum, plastic & glass*

Recycling Venues Elsewhere in the UAE:

- Dubai: Sites for recycling old computers: <http://www.dm.gov.ae/DMEGOV/precycle/pr-location-donate.html>.
- Dibba, Sharjah: Recycling bins on the main street: newspaper, aluminum & plastic bottles (for those on East Coast diving or camping trips)

Jocelyn Wiley/Keith Taylor/Gillian Kirkwood

Recent Speakers

After 19 years in Muscat, Oman, **Hanne & Jens Eriksen** arrived in Abu Dhabi August 2005 for Jens to take up a job as Associate Professor of Chemistry at the Petroleum Institute.

They started wildlife photography back in 1988 and got off to a good start as Hanne won the British Bird's Bird Photograph of the year competition with a picture taken only eight weeks into this new hobby. In the following years they went on to win this competition a further four times between them.

Today their library holds over 61,000 images from around the world; more than 3,000 can be seen on their website: www.BirdsOman.com. The Middle East is their stronghold, but they enjoy travelling and have visited all seven continents.

They are the authors and/or co-authors of 13 books, some of which are indeed relevant to bird-watching in the UAE, since Common Birds in Oman covers all common birds in UAE as well. This and their 2009 Bird Calendar, the 10th in the series, are on sale at the ENHG book stall during meetings.

At the ENHG lecture on 16 Sept., H&J gave a talk on Socotra Island and were happy to see a packed audience. The talk was based on a splendid visit they made to this unique island in January 2006. Having been isolated for millions of years, Socotra is home to many species living nowhere else including nine species of birds (two of them pictured below), as well as 30% of all plants and 90% of the reptiles. The people were very friendly and everywhere was perfectly safe. In brief, Socotra is a highly recommended travel destination!



Socotra Sunbird



Socotra Bunting



Friendly Faces of Socotra

Photographs by Hanne & Jens Eriksen

Dr. Michael Gillett is a life-long naturalist with a main interest in insects, especially beetles. He has worked as a biochemist/university professor in massive Brazil and in tiny Saba (Netherlands Antilles) as well as in the UK and the UAE, and he maintains strong links with the Al Ain chapter of the ENHG. Mr. Gillett was the recipient of the Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed award in 1998 for his major contributions to the study of insects in the UAE, and of the Bish Brown award in 2000 for maintaining one of the largest collections of the UAE and northern Oman, as well as for promoting the study of beetles in the UAE. He has been a regular contributor to *Tribulus*; most recently publishing four articles on moths found in the UAE and the region—in *Tribulus* Vol. 17.

If you enjoyed his talk on 7 Oct. on BEETLE GIANTS OF THE UAE DESERT, you might also want to catch his talk to the Al Ain NHG on 28 Oct., entitled RAINBOW SCARABS. This talk will fill in gaps in the distributional range of the Phanaeini tribe of dung beetles, highlighting Mr. Gillett's recent work in S. America.

Next Speaker

Dr Frank Gordon Kirkwood obtained his doctorate in Chemical Physics from the University of Kent at Canterbury in 1979 and has been working for BP ever since, in the Petroleum Engineering and Commercial fields. He has worked in the United Arab Emirates for over three years, where he has been seconded by BP to ADMA-OPCO (the Abu Dhabi Marine Areas Operating Company) as a Senior Advisor.

In addition to this career, for more than 16 years he has been a keen scuba diver and underwater photographer. He is now also a certified Scuba Diving Instructor and he spends most of his time at weekend teaching students to dive among the sharks, rays and turtles at Dibba Rock.

Gordon's presentation on the 'Marine Life on the UAE and Oman, Part II' takes the audience on an underwater journey, covering some of the most interesting fishes, reptiles, mammals and invertebrates that are encountered by divers in this region, which is particularly good for its bio-diversity. Part I was given to the ENHG in October 2007, but attendance at last year's talk is certainly not a prerequisite for benefiting from Part II.

The Editor thanks the above speakers for providing autobiographical information for Focus.

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.
NB: Copies of this book are available as donations to schools. See a committee member
- Breeding Birds of UAE, 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
- 2009 bird calendar, 30 dhs
A must for yourself ... and a perfect gift.
- Falconry, 60 dhs
- 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, 25 dhs.
- Wildflowers of the UAE, 100 dhs
- Feast of Dates, 100 dhs
- UAE in Focus, 100 dhs
- UAE Yearbook 2008, 50 dhs
- Wind towers, 225 dhs
- Sir Bani Yas, 100 dhs
- On-Road in the UAE, 50 dhs
- Trucial States, 150 dhs
- Oman, 150 dhs
- Omani Folk Tales, 70 dhs

This Month's Contributors

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Lectures

7th Oct.
Beetle Giants of the
UAE Desert
Mike Gillett

21st Oct. 7:30 PM
Marine life of the UAE
& Oman Part II
Gordon Kirkwood

4th Nov. 7:30 PM
The Philippine Eagle:
What do we know after
100 years?
Donald Afan

18th Nov. 7:30 PM
Arabian Gulf Coral
Reef Study
Speaker TBA

Social Event

11th Nov. 7:30 PM
Gathering at the Oryx
Hotel bar – Khalidiyah

Field Trips

30th Sept. – 3rd Oct.
Eid Musandam
Snorkelling & Mountain
Camping

Andrew Bean

10th – 11th Oct.
Sharjah Museums Visit
Andrew Bean

17th Oct.
Day Trip to Hajr al
Qurm to view 'inverted'
quaternary topography,
sabkha, flora & fauna

Allestree Fisher

24th Oct.
Al Ain Night Zoo
Andrew Bean

21st – 22nd Nov.
Sand Driving Course at
Two Trees Campsite
Andrew Bean

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>

Wildlife Middle East News:
<http://www.wmenews.com>

Tommy Pedersen's new UAE Birding Site:
www.uaebirding.com

Website of the Emirates Environmental Group:
www.eeg-uae.org

Hanne & Jens Eriksen's Birds Oman website:
www.BirdsOman.com

Photo Blog of Al Ain NHG member Amer Abu Kuhail:
<http://someone1986.blogspot.com/>

Zip Code Zoo: a comprehensive naturalists' resource
<http://zipcodezoo.com/>

Mission Green Earth (Sponsored by Princess Haya) -
full of good tips for sustainable living in the UAE:
<http://missiongreeneearth.ae/>

Committee Position Opening

The ENHG Committee is looking for a Corporate
Sponsorship Secretary. This position involves
talking on the phone and in person with company
representatives to interest them in securing
ongoing publicity while supporting a good cause.

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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WESCO

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Postal Address

Emirates Natural History Group c/- Dr R. Andrew Bean
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Newsletter contributions to: newsletter@chirri2000.com

Yahoo Groups website

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