

focus



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Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

First I would like to wish all our readers a very happy and successful 2009. Our ENHG activities got off to an excellent start with the inspiring talk by Karan Raghwa on a safari to Tanzania, illustrated with some superb photographs. One of these graces our front cover. Karan is also a contributor to the ENHG Flickr photo sharing site, rather forgotten since Flickr was blocked in the UAE. However the site is still active and can be viewed outside the UAE or by those with proxy access that circumvents the block, such as at Zayed University. The URL is given along with other links on page 8.

I would like to thank Hazel Spencer for her excellent work in organizing our lecture series over the last few years. Unfortunately Hazel is now submerged in work, and we are most grateful to Jeff Szuchman for agreeing to join the committee and take on this important and challenging role. If anyone would like to volunteer a talk themselves, or provide some suggestions for talks, please do get in touch with Jeff.

The Inter Emirates Weekend is fast coming up at the end of March (page 7). Please do consider going as it promises to be an excellent weekend. However hotel places are limited so get your booking in early! At the IEW, we will be presenting the annual ENHG awards (the Bish Brown award and the Sheikh Mubarak). The Committee will be considering the nominations at our meeting on Feb 3rd, so if you would like to nominate a candidate, that is the deadline. Details of the awards and past winners are given at <http://www.enhg.org/enhg/awards.htm>.

Drew Gardner

In Response to the December Cover

We print below an instantaneous response we received last month to the Dec2008 Focus cover image: Dick Hornby's nice shot of the Blue Spotted Arab (which, strangely enough, never has any blue spots on it!) –Ed.

Blue Spotted Arab = *Colotis phisadia*, Family Pieridae is an Afrotropical species which is a moderate migrator and does not go south of the equator. Moderate migrants "are known from time to time to undertake long-distance directional movements, but for whom migration does not appear to be an essential component of their life cycle." [p 88 and plate 4 Butterflies of Saudi Arabia and its Neighbours, Torben B. Larsen, 1984] These often are seen migrating with Small Salmon Arabs = *Colotis calais*. In 1997 or 1998 Keith Gibbins calculated that he saw about 1 million of these migrants roosting in a tree in Jebel Dhanna. The Blue Spotted Arab breeds and feeds on the toothbrush [miswak] plant + *Salvadora persica*. It is a gregarious breeder and feeder. It is migrating weakly at present in the UAE.

Molly McQuarrie

The December cover photo also brought to mind a message received from the afore-mentioned Dr. Torben Larsen, regarding the article titled "A Butterfly Migration: Blue-spotted Arabs at Jebel Barakah, Western Abu

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FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Waterbuck, in Tanzania

Photographer: Karan Raghwa

Dhabi", by Drs. Drew Gardner and Brigitte Howarth, in Tribulus Vol. 17 – 2007. This message highlights the far-reaching contributions which the ongoing recording of natural history by the ENHG can make. -Ed.

Dear Brigitte and Drew,
I read your succinct paper on the migration of *Colotis phisadia* with interest and pleasure. It is the most precise description I have seen. It is a pity you could not camp or do further counts, but that is so often the case. I can easily visualize the scene on the beach. It is also a reminder how little we know about the genesis and termination of migrations, despite the large number of similar observations. The answer that I have always pushed for is that anyone seeing a migration should have immediate access to a helicopter, but the idea has not found much favour!

I have spent the past 15 years mainly in rainforests so it is a long time since I saw a migration myself ... I still find every one as exciting as I did when I saw massive migrations as a kid in South India. An Iranian colleague has found that the rather different Indian subspecies of *C. phisadia* meet the African one on the Iran coast somewhere between Hormuz and Baluchistan. Migration? Could they be distinct species? We hope to do a DNA study. A couple of UAE *C. phisadia* in any condition would be fine. They can just be put into an ordinary air mail envelope - only the DNA is needed and a wing as voucher.

Should you come across supporting information for this event, do let me know.

Dr Torben B. Larsen, London. 17 July 2008

Submitted by Drew Gardner

Thorn Trees

We can probably all recognise an *Acacia* and a ghaf (*Prosopis cineraria*), but how confident are we about distinguishing all the different local species of thorn tree? Indeed how many species are we likely to encounter in this region? I sensed some general uncertainty about such matters, so thought it might be useful to produce a little guide. There are actually seven species of thorn tree in the family Mimosaceae, that can be encountered in UAE — four species of *Acacia* and three of *Prosopis*. All are readily distinguished by their foliage, flowers, fruits, thorns and general shape. Flowers and fruit are probably the most useful, but, of course, they are not always present.

Let's get *Prosopis* out of the way first. This genus has flowers in long spikes of small yellow/golden flowers, whereas the local species of *Acacia* all have their flowers in little round "pompoms". *Prosopis farcta* is small and rare, and we will not consider it any further here. The native ghaf, *Prosopis cineraria*, has bean-like pods that are generally circular in cross-section, whereas those of the introduced Mesquite, *Prosopis juliflora*, has very flattened pods.



Pods of *Prosopis cineraria*



Pods of *Prosopis juliflora*

The general shape and colour of the trees should prevent any confusion between these two. Ghaf is generally tall and single-stemmed, with rather pendulous grey-green foliage. Mesquite is usually multiple-

stemmed, roundish in outline and with darker, brighter green foliage. The thorns on ghaf are short and broad while those on mesquite are thin and of medium length.

Acacias may need a little more effort, but each has its useful distinguishing characteristics. Once mastered, they can be confidently identified at forty paces, or more! Three species, *A. nilotica*, *ehrenbergiana* and *farnesiana*, all have yellow flowers, whereas the fourth species, *A. tortilis*, has white flowers. All the species are generally multiple-stemmed, but the latter has a distinctive flat-topped appearance, hence the term Umbrella Thorn in Africa, where it can be a very big tree. Its thorns are of medium length and its pods are very twisted, or tortuous, hence the *tortilis*.



Acacia *tortilis* — whole trees, flower and pods
Of the yellow-flowered Acacias, *nilotica* is generally the

largest tree but it has the smallest thorns. *A. ehrenbergiana* is the thorniest, usually with a mass of long pale spines near the base. *A. farnesiana* is generally smaller, without conspicuous thorns, and its flowers are smaller, tighter, and darker yellow, i.e. more golden, in colour. The flowers of *A. nilotica* are larger, looser and lemon-yellow, and the pods are distinctive, being flattened and strongly constricted between the seeds. The pods of *A. ehrenbergiana* are persistent, very dark-brown, sausage-like objects, perhaps reminiscent of a fox dropping.



Thorns of *A. ehrenbergiana*



Flowers of *A. farnesiana*



Pod of *A. farnesiana*



Foliage: *A. ehrenbergiana* (left), *A. farnesiana* (rt)

Flowers and pod of *Acacia nilotica* *Acacia ehrenbergiana* — whole tree

That is often enough to identify all you may find, but it is useful, too, to be able to distinguish the foliage. All, of course, have compound (pinnate) leaves, but those of *A. tortilis* are short and concentrated near the stems. The leaves of *A. nilotica* and *A. farnesiana* are fairly similar, with many pairs of narrow, tightly-spaced, pointed leaflets. Those of *A. ehrenbergiana* have fewer leaflets and they are more rounded and wider apart, as is apparent from the photo.

So as long as you don't encounter any of the other 1300 or so species of *Acacia*, you shouldn't have any problems!

Dick Hornby

Response to AD Sabkhas Lecture

NB: The following article, written by former ENHG Group Chairman Peter and "consultant specialising in the UAE's heritage and the environment", appeared on the Comments page of The National on 23 12 2008. Although it is informed by the author's long familiarity with the subject, this article also provides an apt summary of the key points in Dr. Christian Strohmenger's ENHG lecture given on 16 December, 2008, and also presents a persuasive response. It is reprinted here with the author's permission. – Ed.

"Our sabkhas may look dull, but they're the salt of the earth"

It is, I suppose, an aspiration of every country to have something about it that is unique and that is of real international significance. These features may be man-made, such as the Pyramids, or Big Ben, or the Statue of Liberty; they may be natural, such as the River Amazon, or Mount Vesuvius in Italy, or Uluru (Ayers Rock) in Australia. We have them too in the Emirates and I would like to draw attention to an aspect of the UAE's natural environment that is both unique and of international importance: the sabkhas (salt flats) that stretch along the coastline of Abu Dhabi from the northeast to the far west.

They're boring to look at, at least for the casual passer-by: an apparently featureless, flat landscape stretching back from the shoreline, sometimes for 20 or more kilometres inland. And they are indeed flat: it has been suggested that they are actually 10 times flatter than a pancake. No trees grow here naturally (though some have been planted along the highway) and they lack plant life. After rainfall they are highly treacherous: many a vehicle and many a camel has become bogged down in them. They look, to be honest, of very little importance.

Abu Dhabi's sabkhas are, in geological terms, "carbonate-evaporite depositional environments" formed by the interaction between the highly saline water table just beneath the surface and the grains of sand. They appear to have begun to form around 6,000 years ago as a result of a gradual decline in sea level from a high point about two metres higher than at present, and have gradually extended outwards, linking up with offshore islands such as those that form the outer core of the Dabb'iya peninsula. They have extended inland, too, as

the surface sand is blown away down to the wet zone just above the water table. It is a complex and a fascinating process (to geologists anyway).

Geologists who have been studying our sabkhas tell me that they are one of the few places in the world where the interplay between two different processes of sedimentation – carbonate and evaporate sedimentation – can be studied. Indeed, our sabkhas are actually the best place in the world to study this geological process. They are, quite simply, unique.

As a result, geologists from all over the world come to Abu Dhabi, many on trips organised by leading oil companies, since our sabkhas also provide important insights into how oil and gas reservoirs were formed millions of years ago.

Two particular areas are of enormous scientific interest. One is west of Abu Dhabi, opposite the island of Al Qanatir, just beyond the Dabb'iya peninsula. Here geologists can study the gradual transformation of the surface for over a kilometre stretching inland from the shoreline, and if they dig down they can look at the processes by which crystals of gypsum and layers of a white, sticky mineral known as anhydrite are formed.

The other area of special importance is at the inner end of the Musaffah Channel, cut from the sea into the sabkha 20 or so years ago. Here a vertical sequence is displayed that shows the structure of the sabkha sediments deposited during the last major sea level rise and the subsequent fall, around 6,000 to 5,000 years ago. Studies by geologists from ADNOC, ADCO and ZADCO have provided clearly defined evidence of how they were created.

In this sabkha exposure in the Musaffah Channel there is something else of importance: a complete whale skeleton, around 16 metres long. The animal was washed up around 5,000 years ago and its skeleton is the only known one dating from that period anywhere in the Gulf. It was discovered by geologists from ADNOC and an excavation was undertaken early this year by the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi (EAD), with sponsorship from ADNOC and support from the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage.

These two sites are a perfect training ground for young UAE geo-scientists and petroleum engineers, helping them to understand and analyse the much older sediments deep beneath the surface in which the giant oil and gas fields of Abu Dhabi are found. Their unique importance to scientists all over the world and their educational value locally make the sabkhas a national treasure. Petroleum geologists have long argued for a long time that they should be afforded some kind of long-term protection – a proposal which I wholeheartedly endorse.

But the wheels of the decision-making process appear to be grinding rather slowly, and although the Al Qanatir sabkhas are safe for the moment, since they lie within an oilfield area, the inner end of the Musaffah Channel is at risk from development activity: rubble has already been dumped on top of part of the exposed vertical section, although not yet, fortunately, on top of the whale skeleton, which has not been fully excavated.

I hope that EAD, the Urban Planning Council and other relevant bodies will move quickly to give the site the protection it deserves. We have here something that is of international scientific importance and which, at the same time, provides insights into the way in which the coastline of Abu Dhabi was formed and has been affected by sea-level change, something we need to understand for the years ahead.

They may not be much to look at, but the importance of these two bits of sabkha is real. In terms of the country's natural heritage, it would be almost criminal to let them be lost.

Peter Hellyer

Natural History Book Fair

mmmm

Motivate Publishing hosted a book fair at the last ENHG general meeting, bringing dozens of titles to Al Ain for sale to members at significantly discounted prices. As Harvey noted at the meeting, Motivate is pleased to extend this offer to all Natural History Group members.

How can you take advantage of this offer? To purchase books from the website, you must create an account (a valid email address and password); otherwise, you can only browse the Motivate catalogue. When you have created an account, follow these steps:

First, go the Motivate Publishing website at www.booksarabia.com. Use the search function if you know the title(s) of the book(s) you are looking for, or use the menu system to find books you'd like to order.

Use the 'add to shopping cart' function to reserve a copy of the book(s) you wish to purchase. Proceed to the 'check out' page. When completing the page, enter the code "ENHG" in the box marked promotions to earn the 25% discount. All books you order are delivered free of charge in the UAE.

Brien Holmes

Letter of Appreciation from ADWC

The following letter of appreciation was addressed to the Abu Dhabi Chapter of the ENHG on Nov. 09, 2008. –Ed.

The Abu Dhabi Women's College would like to thank you very much for your kind donation of the beautiful and informative book, 'Jebel Hafit: A Natural History', edited by Simon Aspinall and Peter Hellyer. This will be placed in our collection for the benefit of students and staff of the College. I am sure this book will be of great interest to our library patrons who are interested in learning more about the region's biological and historical diversity.

Thank you once again.

Kind regards,

Kathy Kelly
Supervisor, Library and Learning Centre
ADWC, HCT

Submitted by Jenny Mueller

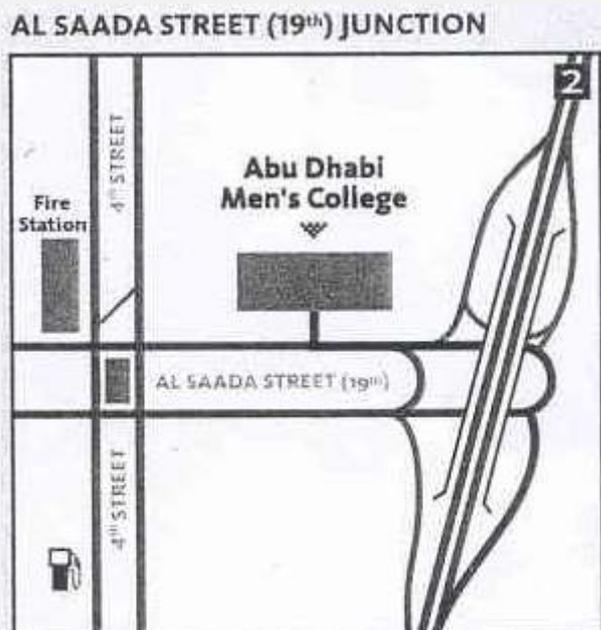
Map to New Venue as of 17 Feb.

Starting on **17 Feb 2009**, all ENHG lecture meetings will be held at the HCT, Abu Dhabi Men's College (at the usual time of 7:30 pm). Here's a map for your reference:

Abu Dhabi Men's College is on Al Sa'ada St.: inset 2
(Inset 1--the Maqta Bridge approach--has been cut out.)



The exact location of ADMC is shown in detail on inset #2 below:



NOTES

On the Eastern Ring Road (which becomes Al Salam Street), follow signs for Al Sa'ada Street. Exit on the sliproad before the flyover and turn left beneath the bridge onto Al Sa'ada. ADMC is located 200 m on the right and is signposted.

Submitted by Allestree Fisher

Inter-Emirates Weekend

Thursday/Friday /Saturday 26/27th/28th March 2009

Each year in March/April the UAE's three Natural History Groups – Emirates Natural History Group Abu Dhabi, Emirates Natural History Group Al Ain and the Dubai Natural History Group – get together for an educational yet social weekend involving a dinner and various activities and trips. It is a chance to meet up with people/old friends from the other groups. The event is organised annually by one of the groups in rotation. This year it is the turn of the Dubai Natural History Group.

IEW 2009 will be based at the Oceanic Hotel, Khor Fakkan and the programme will begin on Friday morning, 27th March. The hotel has made a block booking of rooms for the Thursday and Friday nights on a first-come first-served basis. However, in view of the increased tourism in Khor Fakkan and the peak season date of IEW, **it will be necessary to confirm and guarantee your booking by the end of February 2009.**

Hotel rates (per night) are:

Double Bed/Twin-Bedded Room – **Dh 660** (inclusive of breakfast & tax)

Single Room – **Dh 540** (inclusive of breakfast & tax)

Children below 12 years may stay free in their parents' rooms with meals 50% of cost.

Without breakfast, room rates are **Dh 580** for Double Bed/Twin-Bedded Room and **Dh 500** for Single Room

Cost of an extra bed in a room for an adult **Dh 120**

A suite can be booked but you need to ask the hotel.

On Friday evening there will be a buffet dinner (**Dh 96** per person).

Packed lunches will be available for Friday and Saturday – please arrange these directly with the hotel once you have been supplied with your booking reference.

It has been arranged with the hotel that all reservations should be made through the DNHG. To make a reservation, please email Lena Linton on linton@mailme.ae with your requirements as regards rooms and buffet dinner. Lena will email you the booking reference and then your credit card information will need to be sent to the hotel. If unable to use credit card, then to send a cheque to given address.

On the evening of Friday 27th we will be holding the Inter-Emirates photographic competition.

Further information as regards activities for the Friday and Saturday will follow in due course.

DNHG Committee

This Month's Contributors

DNHG, Allestree Fisher, Drew Gardner, Peter Hellyer, Dick Hornby, Brien Holmes, Molly McQuarrie, Jenny Mueller

ITEMS ON SALE

AT THE ENHG STALL

All prices are in dirhams.

- The Emirates – A Natural History, 350.
The first complete referencing guide to the wildlife of the UAE. 580 colour photos.
- Jebel Hafit – A Natural History, 100.
*An attractive, encyclopaedic presentation of the natural resources of this local landmark.
(Free copy available to schools. Ask Chairman.)*
- Terrestrial Environment of Abu Dhabi Emirate, 240.
- Marine Environment and Resources of Abu Dhabi, 140.
- Breeding Birds of UAE, by Simon Aspinall, 50.
- Abu Dhabi Bird checklist, 10.
(Free if you spend over 100!)
- Emirates Bird Report, 50.
- Common Birds in Oman, 100.
A beginner's field guide—can be helpful in identifying birds in the UAE as well.
- Bird watching guide to Oman, 2nd edition, 100. *Guide to bird watching spots in Oman.*
- The Birds of Al Jabal Al Akhdar, 50.
- 2009 bird calendar, 30.
A must for yourself ... and a perfect gift.
- Falconry, 60.
- Wild about Mammals, by Marijcke Jongbloed, 40. *Guide to mammals of the UAE.*
- Snakes of Arabia, 50.
- Pests, 35. *Find out what's in and around your home.*
- Reef Fishes of the UAE, 50.
- Snorkeling and Diving in Oman, 50.
- Comprehensive Guide to the Flora of the UAE, 100.
- Plant Checklist, by Marijcke Jongbloed, 25.
Know your local wild plants.
- Feast of Dates, 100.
- UAE in Focus, 100.
- Sir Bani Yas, 100.
- Musandam, 100.
- Sulphur, camels, and gunpowder, 90.
- On-Road in the UAE, 50.
- Children's books: Yaw the Wildcat; Hayat the Leopard, 15.

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Lectures

16th Dec.
The famous Abu Dhabi
Sabkha

**Dr. Christian
Strohmeier,
Geologist, ADCO**

6th Jan.
Photographs from a
Tanzanian Safari

Karan Raghwa

In Cult. F. lecture hall:

20th Jan. 7:30 PM
Early ships, Trade, and
Navigation Round the
World

Michael Creamer

3rd Feb. 7:30 PM
Speaker / Topic TBA

**Venue starting 17-02:
ADMC auditorium
(See map on p. 5)**

17th Feb. 7:30 PM
Introduction to Flora of
Abu Dhabi

Allestree Fisher

Field Trips

19th–20th Dec.
Camping Trip to Jebel
Rawdah

Allestree Fisher

17th Jan.
½-Day trip to Al Qanatir
Island / Musaffa Chan.:
Sabkhas (see pp 5-6)

**Donatella Astratti /
Abdulla Al Mansoori
Senior Geologist,
ADCO-ND/EUFR**

31st Jan.
½-Day birdwatching
trip to Al Wathba Lake

**Andrew Bean / EAD
Officials from Bird
Monitoring/Conservation
Section & Protected
Area's Section**

In the Local News Media

An article on fossil sites in Abu Dhabi's Western region, in collaboration between ADACH and the Peabody Museum of Natural History at Yale University, led by Prof. Andrew Hill and Faysal Bibi, who spoke about their work at the Cultural Foundation on 8 Feb:

Scientists hurry to save nation's past:
<http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090105/NATIONAL/536062422/-1/NEWS>

Websites of General Interest

NHG Website, with newsletter & Tribulus archives:
<http://www.enhg.org>

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

Arabian Wildlife:
<http://www.arabianwildlife.com/main.htm>

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

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

Dubai Astronomy Group:
<http://www.dubaiastronomy.com>

ENHG Flickr Photo-Sharing Site (*but blocked in UAE*)
<http://www.flickr.com/groups/enhg>

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

Emirates Natural History Group c/- Dr R. Andrew Bean
Zayed University, PO Box 4783, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.

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Newsletter contributions to: newsletter@chirri2000.com

Postal Address

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