

focus



Abu Dhabi, February 2009

Vol 33 (2)



Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

The annual 'Inter-Emirates Weekend' is fast approaching. This is the weekend when the three natural history groups in Al Ain, Dubai and Abu Dhabi get together for a programme of field trips, the annual dinner and photo competition and a chance to meet up with like-minded people. It is always a fun and interesting weekend. This year Dubai NHG are organizing the weekend, based at the Oceanic Hotel, Khor Fakkan on 26-28 March 2009. The arrangements and programme details are given on page 6. Please do consider coming for all, or part, of the weekend. Note that hotel bookings may be limited, so don't delay!

The other interesting forthcoming event is the International Conference on the Archaeology of the UAE, being held at the Officers Club, Abu Dhabi between 1st and 4th March. This event celebrates the 50th anniversary of the Umm al Nar excavations in 1959, and 30 presentations from a wide range of speakers will ensure a fascinating meeting. Details are on page 5.

A final reminder: Subscriptions to the ENHG run for the calendar year and so were due on Jan 1st. Please do fill in the subscription form, available at ENHG meetings, or from Jenny or myself, if you haven't already done so.

Drew Gardner

Camping Trip to Qarn al Himar

On Friday, 19 December 2008, 11 ENHG members set off on a camping trip to Qarn al Himar, just to the north of Jebel Rawdah, along the Dubai-Hatta Road. This multi-stop field trip highlighted a cross-section of the flora of the region, included a look at traces of an Iron Age falaj system at Al Thuqeiba, focused on a botanical survey of Qarn al Himar, and concluded with the return of a snake to its home in a wadi south of Jebel Rawdah.

Starting with saltbushes near Sweihan, we moved on to view the increased biodiversity near Al Hayer, including *Calotropis procera* and Schmidt's fringe-toed lizard, then took in the imported exotic *Tecomela alata* tree with reddish-orange-blooms in the central road divider, (cf. photo in Dec07 Focus), and puzzled over a very small (approx. 50 cm tall) ghaf tree near Shwaib that appeared to have propagated unusually from seed, rather than as a root clone—perhaps made possible by sub-surface water from the nearby Hajar mountains.

Behind the camel farms of Al Thuqeiba village, off the start of the Fujairah road just past the Madam roundabout, we located the covered entry to the ancient falaj system that brought water from the mountains to farms in the region. This falaj system was a fascinating and amazing accomplishment, considering the tools available at the time. A peek inside revealed that it was damp, but had no water flowing through it. The channel was about 2 meters deep and quite narrow, and it must have been a daunting chore to build and maintain. The passage was narrower than shoulder-width, and it must have been prone to collapse while being worked on.

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FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Morning Sun in Wadi Wiqa

Photographer: Drew Gardner

This month's contributors

P.K. Ashraf, Will Bevington, DNHG Committee, Drew Gardner, Peter Hellyer, Allestree Fisher, Pamela Fisher, Molly McQuarrie, Keith Taylor



Examining the flora at Qarn al Himar
(*Euphorbia larica*, beginning to bloom)

Photo: Pam Fisher



ENHG campers at Qarn al Himar

Photo: P.K. Ashraf

After a pleasant camp-out at Qarn al Himar Fri. eve, a Sat. morning walk turned up the following plant species:

- *Euphorbia larica* aka 'the latex plant' (large bush with long green twiggy branches with little green flowers; traditional roofing material; dies out after 7-8 years)
- *Gaillonia aucheri* (small woody plant with tiny green leaves and whitish stems; see photo above right)
- *Pulicaria glutinosa* (see photo on the right)
- *Rhazya stricta* (shrub with thick long dark leaves, with medicinal properties; also the food plant for the oleander hawkmoth caterpillar; see photo on the right)
- *Fagonia bruguieri* (the dominant plant here—low-lying, with spines longer than leaves)
- *Fagonia indica* (small ground-hugger; spines directly opposite leaves; and woody roots hold firmly in floods)
- *Seetzenia lanata* (another ground-hugger, with clover-shaped leaves and a 4-part segmented seed pod)
- *Indigofera* sp. (small prickly greenish/purplish plants with purple flowers; following a strategy of mass propagation, only a few find enough water to survive)
- *Blepharis ciliaris*, Eyelash plant, (flowers used for kohl)
- *Tephrosia nubica* (sub-montane plant indicating a presence of water as it grows only in watercourses)
- *Tephrosia apollinea*, aka Dhafra (cf. Dec08 Focus p3)
- *Asteriscus hierochunticus*, in a very dry seed bearing state, seemingly dead. (very abundant, widespread annual; opens when doused with water)
- *Tribulus terrestris* (5-petaled yellow flower, burred fruit)
- *Stipagrostis plumosa* (grass with white seed plumes)
- *Chrozophora* sp (small shrub with thick broad leaves)
- *Acacia tortilis* (the only tree in this area)



Studying the guidebooks

Photo: Pam Fisher



Termite nests on *Gaillonia aucheri* (ground-level view)



Grasshopper on *Pulicaria glutinosa* flower



Rhazya Stricta flower



Excavation by the nearby quarry of the gravel plain east of Qarn al Himar leaves the acacias high and dry!

Four flora photos above: Will Bevington

At the assembly point at the start of this camping trip, when asked whether she had brought anybody along with her, Molly said, "Yes, a snake!" That's the sort of reply one comes to expect of Molly McQuarrie.

On the previous weekend, while poking around an old camping haunt just off the Mahdah road near Jebel Rawdah, and cleaning up litter, as is her wont, Molly had tapped out an aluminium can prior to crushing it, and heard something thumping around inside. Close inspection revealed a coiled up snake. *Snakes of Arabia* verified that it was an Afro Asian Sand Snake, *Psammodphis schokari*, approx. 1 m in length.



Afro-Asian sand snake close-up



The snake making herself at home on a campsite table

Two snake photos above: Molly McQuarrie

Molly took the snake home to meet her primary school students in Abu Dhabi (naturally), and kept 'her' in a glass terrarium fitted out with a desert mini-landscape. The snake appeared to appreciate Molly's attention, to the extent that at the end of the trip, back at the very spot where 'she' had been found, the snake didn't seem to want to leave her portable home. But then after letting her warm up and get ready for action in the sun for a while, Molly picked her up and released her at the base of a dead shrub, which the snake shot into and coiled up inside, rendering herself nearly invisible. By the way, when asked about her determination of the animal's sex, Molly said that in her view all critters are female until proven otherwise!

Molly was satisfied that there were some small lizards in this wadi—the snake's favorite food, so she was happy to release her there. To a first-time visitor the wadi ecology seemed to be thriving, with flora such as endemic *Euphorbia larica* and introduced Desert Squash, *Citrullus colocynthis*, growing behind stone dams that former ENHG member Keith Gibbins had erected between 1997 and 2002 to catch silt and

promote plant growth. The more effective among these have slowed the water run-off enough to accumulate up to 3 cm of silt behind them. This ecological experiment was begun in response to the drought that started in 1998 and continued until 2005-6. Since 2005 there has been some rainfall in the area; unfortunately, the variety of plants and animals has not recovered to anywhere near the level of biodiversity that was found here during the years of high rainfall from 1993 to 1997. In fact, many of the species recorded in 1996 to 1998 have since virtually disappeared: Pseudoscorpions, several plant species, and small lizards and birds are all far fewer.

However, two caterpillar food plant species are holding on: the *Crotalaria aegyptiaca*—the food plant for the Crimson speckled footman day-flying moth—and the *Haplophyllum tuberculatum*, (aka stinky plant because of its distinctive smell when crushed)—the food plant for swallowtail butterflies. NB: No caterpillars were present in December.



Returning the snake to her rightful home

Photo: Pam Fisher

Keith Taylor / Molly McQuarrie

Archaeology Conference

Half a century ago, in early 1959, the first archaeological excavations in the UAE, then the Trucial States, took place on the island of Umm al-Nar, adjacent to Abu Dhabi, discovering what then an unknown civilisation from the Bronze Age, just over 4,000 years ago. Appropriately, the civilisation, now known to extend throughout the UAE and deep into Oman, was named the Umm al-Nar civilisation.

At the beginning of March, to commemorate the 50th anniversary, the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Community Development is organising the 2nd

International Conference on the Archaeology of the UAE.

Being held in The Officers' Club, just off the Western Corniche near the Zayed Mosque, the conference will commence in the evening of Sunday 1st March and will conclude around lunchtime on Wednesday 4th March, with sessions both in the morning and in the afternoon/early evening.

Over 30 papers are expected to be presented by a wide range of speakers, both from within the UAE and overseas, many of whom have spoken on one or more occasions to the ENHG over the last twenty years.

Papers will cover the full chronological range of Man's presence in the UAE, from the Paleolithic period, up to 200,000 years ago, onwards to the early 20th Century AD and will look at individual sites, whole periods, international trading relations, human health, domestication of the camel and other animals and a variety of other topics. A particular highlight, during the opening session, is expected to be film-clips, never previously shown, of the first excavations at Umm al-Nar.

The event will provide an excellent overview of both the archaeology of the UAE and of the history of archaeological excavations here.

Although intended primarily for academics and others active in the field of UAE archaeology, the Conference is also open to a limited number of other participants.

Group members interested in attending any of the sessions should contact me (Conference Organiser) as soon as possible.

Peter Hellyer
peter@extinfo.gov.ae

The Musaffah Whale – Part Two



Part of the Musaffah whale jaw, exposed during the 2008 excavation season

Photo: Peter Hellyer

As Group members who attended the recent talk by ADCO's Christian Strohmenger on the Sabkhas of Abu Dhabi will know, the skeleton of a whale from the early Holocene (around 6,000 years ago) is buried in the sabkha at the inner end of the Musaffah Channel. First discovered by geologists from ADNOC and ADCO, the

skeleton was the subject of a first phase of excavation early last year, organised by the Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi, EAD, with sponsorship from ADNOC and with support from the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage, ADACH. A jaw bone and several rib-bones were excavated and removed.

Whales are big animals, though, so a second phase of excavation is beginning in early March and will last until early April. Organised once again by EAD, the excavation will be undertaken by a team of specialists from Britain while it is hoped that geology students from the Petroleum Institute may also be taking part.

Although details have yet to be finalised, it is possible that there may be a chance for some Group members to lend a hand by volunteering to help. Previous experience is not necessary, although strong arms, for shovelling, and some common sense would be helpful. Group members interested in helping out should contact me as soon as possible, and I will then pass their names on to the excavation co-ordinator.

Peter Hellyer
peter@extinfo.gov.ae

Recent Speakers



ENHG member **Michael A. Creamer** is a well-travelled, well-versed aficionado of all things maritime. In his career he has played a variety of roles, including ship's carpenter and crew member on several historic sailing vessels, model ship collection curator, sailing ship restoration director (on the barque ELISSA), US Coast Guard Captain, marine consultant & surveyor (esp. on Mexico's most modern marina, Puerto Isla Mujeres), nautical archaeologist (see his work on the Tulum below), and writer of several articles on maritime topics, with his work featured in three documentary films. He is currently focusing on his role as a devoted family man and is working happily on a long-planned book.

Michael delivered a wide-ranging talk to the ENHG on the development of ship building and sailing techniques in various regions of the world, presenting an interesting theory of a possible early migration from North Africa to Central America, and showing photographic evidence of still-extant traditional ship-building designs.

The highlight of his talk was a DVD of an episode of Arthur C. Clarke's Mysterious Universe, showing a younger Mr. Creamer's persuasive interpretation of the function of the Tulum—a Mayan lighthouse from the year 1,000 AD. In it, he tested the hypothesis that two sets of windows in a pre-Columbian Mexican coastal fort were precisely engineered to guide sailors in to shore, both in daylight and a night, through a narrow break in a treacherous coral reef. Thanks to Michael for an engaging talk!



ENHG member **Dr Richard Perry** first came to the UAE 10 years ago to help establish the Environment Agency as Head of their Environmental Services, which included establishing the environmental permitting division, protected areas network and GIS database for the agency. Whilst he was there, Dr. Perry helped to establish Al Wathba wetlands reserve.

He left the Agency in 2004 to go and work as biodiversity manager in the Mallee outback in Australia for two years before being called back to Abu Dhabi to work for ADCO as their environmental and sustainability advisor. He worked for ADCO until recently being asked to join CH2M HILL as sustainability and environment manager on the Masdar City project here in Abu Dhabi.

On Tues. 10 Feb. he followed up ENHG's recent visit to Al Wathba Lake Reserve with an enlightening talk on the formation of that reserve and its close dependency on the nearby Al Mafrag sewerage works, focusing on his experience getting industry and nature to co-exist.

Al Wathba Lake was created when excess water from Al Mafrag sewage treatment works was released into an area of low lying Sabkha. The water remained in hollows, and the building up of the nearby truck road helped to pond the water into the present lakes. The newly created lakes soon attracted wildlife, and very soon the area had become a haven for many bird species. The wetlands were afforded full protection in July 1998, and the area was fenced off and regularly patrolled, resulting in one of the most important sites for breeding and migrant birds in the UAE. To date, over 200 species of birds have been recorded at the site.

The artificially created lakes next to Al Mafrag sewage works form a welcome refuge for many birds, including the Greater Flamingo. Conditions at the lakes were such that in 1998/99, for the first time in over 70 years on the Arabian Peninsula, the Greater Flamingo built nest mounds and bred successfully.

Check your in-box for upcoming trips to Al Wathba! –Ed.



Greater Flamingos at Al Wathba Lake

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

Inter-Emirates Weekend Update

The IEW 2009, **26/27th/28th March 2009**, will be hosted by the Dubai NHG at the Oceanic Hotel in Khor Fakkan. The programme will begin Friday morning 27th March.

Hotel rates (per night):

With breakfast = Double or Twin **660**; Single **540**

Without breakfast = Double or Twin **580**; Single **500**

One extra adult bed = **120**.

(A suite can be booked, but in that case ask the hotel.)

Friday buffet dinner = **96**.

Reminder: You must confirm and guarantee your booking by the end of February 2009. 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 send a cheque to given address.

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

Confirmed activities:

- Half Day Dhow Trip – Friday March 27th.

As part of the IEW there will be a half-day Musandam Dhow Trip to Haffa. This trip needs to be confirmed in advance with Al Marsa. If you wish to attend the trip please email Valerie on valeriechalmers@hotmail.com to register your interest. 130dhs will be required as a non refundable deposit on booking.

Timings: 10:00 am to 4:00 pm

Meeting Pt: Dibba Port (Al Mina) Oman, Al Marsa office

Cost: Dh 260 per person.

Inclusions: lunch, tea break, coffee, water & soft drinks.

Restrictions: Minimum 20 people, maximum 35.

Children policy: From 0 age to 5 years old free of charge; 6 -10 years old 50% of the adult rate; above 10 years the adult rate.

There will be an opportunity for snorkelling. Bring hat, sun block and swim gear.

No visas required, but bring passports.

- Two ½-day trips to Wadi Wurrayah: 27th & 28th March
- Specially-arranged viewing of Dibba Fort: 27th March
- IEW photographic competition Fri. eve. 27th March: Max 2 photos, taken in UAE/Oman; categories: plants, animals, geology/landscapes, culture, or archaeology/architecture. Min. size: 120 x 185mm; must be mounted & labelled: name, title, place & date taken. Submissions: from 26th March up to 5 pm 27th March

Still tentative activities:

- Possible trip of archaeological interest in Fujairah
- A shelling trip
- Other trips TBA

Further details of the programme will follow in March.

DNHG Committee

Map to New Venue as of 17 Feb

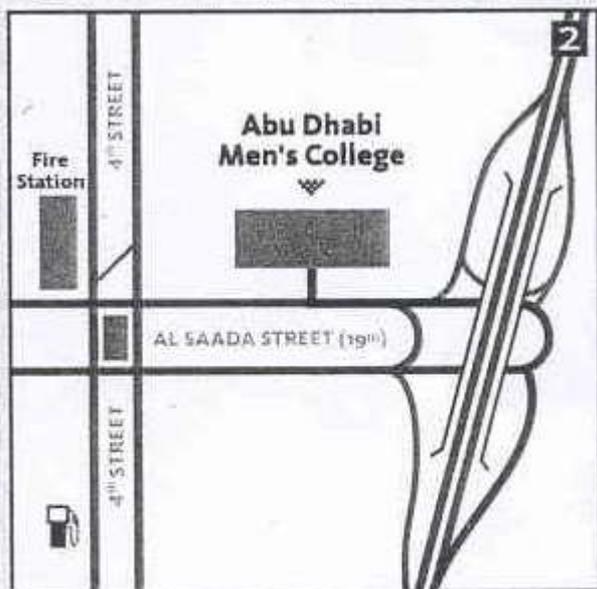
Starting on **17 Feb 2009**, all ENHG lecture meetings will be held at the HCT, Abu Dhabi Men's College (at the usual time of 7:30 pm). Here's a map for your reference:

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:

AL SAADA STREET (19th) JUNCTION



NOTES

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

Submitted by Allestree Fisher

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 copies available for schools donations.)
- Terrestrial Environment of Abu Dhabi Emirate, 240. (See review: Dec2008 Focus.)
- Marine Environment and Resources of Abu Dhabi, 140.
- Breeding Birds of UAE, by Simon Aspinall, 50.
- Abu Dhabi Bird checklist, 10.
- Emirates Bird Report, 50.
- Birdwatching guide to Oman, 2nd edition, 100. *Guide to birdwatching spots in Oman.*
- The Birds of Al Jabal Al Akhdar, 50.
- Oman Bird List, 6th edition, 30.
- 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.
- Wildflowers 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.
- Sulphur, camels, and gunpowder, 90.
- On-Road in the UAE, 50.
- Windtowers, 225.
- Trucial States, 150. *Many old photographs.*
- Oman, 150. *Many old photographs.*
- Abu Dhabi 8 million years ago. 15.
- Children's books: Yaw the Wildcat; Hayat the Leopard, 15.

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Lectures

6th Jan.
Photographs from a
Tanzanian Safari
Karan Raghwa

20th Jan.
Early ships, Trade, and
Navigation Round the
World
Michael Creamer

10th Feb.
Industry and Nature - the
case of Al Wathba Lake
Dr. Richard Perry

**Venue starting 17-02:
ADMC (See map - p.7)**

17th Feb. 7:30 PM
An Introduction to the
Flora of Abu Dhabi
Allestree Fisher

Field Trips

17th Jan.
½-Day trip to Al Qanatir
Island / Musaffa Chan.:
Sabkhas
Donatella Astratti

31st Jan.
½-Day bird-watching trip
to Al Wathba Lake
Andrew Bean

21st /22nd Feb.
Overnight hike to mtn.
village in RAK (must be
fit; have boots, pack)
Stefan Beck

27th Feb.
Day hike up Jebel Hafit
(no children under 12)
Drew Gardner

7th March
Bird-watching at Al
Wathba Reserve; two
trips: 1 dawn, 1 dusk
Andrew Bean

13th /14th March
Camping Trip to Wadi
Tarabat & Hanging
Gardens to view flora
Allestree Fisher

In the Local News Media

An article on the hunt for microfossils in Al Gharbia:
When the Desert was Green and Fertile
<http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090124/NATIONAL/567573368/1010/rss>

An article promoting Steve James' bird-watching tours:
Go birdwatching
<http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090117/MAGAZINE/411584051/1297/rss>

Insect discoveries create a buzz [in Wadi Wuraya]:
<http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090208/PAGETHREE/157667366/1119>

Websites of General Interest

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

Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi Geoportal:
<http://www.geoportal.ae/Portal/>

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>

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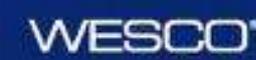

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Yahoo Groups website

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