

focus



Abu Dhabi, March 2009

Vol 33 (3)



Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

Last chance for hotel bookings for the Inter Emirates Weekend! The Dubai group have informed us that bookings at the special rates will be closed on 19 March. Please see the schedule and notes on the IEW on p. 7. Of course you will still be able to make your own arrangements to attend the programme, and find accommodation or even camp, but please do let Lena know if you wish to attend the Friday dinner.

At the IEW dinner, we will be presenting the annual ENHG awards. This year the Sheikh Mubarak award will very deservedly go to Dr Mark Beech. Mark has been an enthusiastic supporter of the ENHG for many years and has given us many fascinating talks on the latest archaeological and fossil finds in Abu Dhabi. He has published his research finds widely and presented at the annual Seminar for Arabian Studies in London amongst many other conferences. Congratulations to Mark. The Bish Brown Award will go to Major Ali Saqar al Suweidi for his dedicated involvement in environmental and conservation awareness through the Emirates Marine Environment Group. Major Ali has also hosted the various ENHG chapters on many occasions at the EMEG reserve north of Ghantoot. The ENHG has recently become a corporate member of EMEG, and we hope to work with EMEG in their programme of activities, including field work to mark Earth Day on April 24th. It is hard to imagine more deserving recipients for our awards.

Although the temperatures are rising (it reached 37° C on our recent Jebel Hafit hike), there are still many field trips and activities in the offing, such as the annual family camp near Sila on 10 – 11 April.

Drew Gardner

A Sighting on the Jebel Hafit Hike



Drew and Stefan pointing the way on the 5-km hike up Jebel Hafit, starting in Wadi Nahayan, behind Green Mubazzarah, on, 27 Feb, 2009.

Photo: Liza Green

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FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Desert Hyacinth, Cistanche tubulosa

Photographer: May Yoke Taylor

This month's contributors

Donatella Astratti, Stefan Beck, Valerie Chalmers, Bill Davis, Liza Green, May Yoke Taylor, Christian Strohmenger, Cath Ware



This male Sinai Agama Lizard, *Pseudotrapelus sinaitus*, sighted on the steep upper part of the Jebel Hafit hike, is showing breeding colors and perching on the rocks to guard his territory. (Also see the classic shot by Drew Gardner in Tribulus Vol. 17-2007.) Earlier on the same hike we saw the females of his species, showing a brown coloration that blended in well with the rocks.

Photo: May Yoke Taylor

Wildlife in the Al Khatim Desert

On 20-21 Feb, a quick and informal camping trip with a few friends to the nearby desert, south of the Abu Dhabi-Al Ain Road along the Al Khatim-Al Razeen Road, revealed a thriving, surprisingly bio-diverse community.

We camped a fair distance south of the popular Two Trees site. As Keith was told by an Emirati student that 'Al Khatim' was originally the name for the whole expanse from Al Ain to Abu Dhabi, we give the general location as 'Al Khatim Desert'.

Our campsite was in an area of inland sabkha flats and low sand dunes dotted with saltbushes and sedges—but no ghaf trees. The first thing we saw when we arrived was a beautiful yellow Desert hyacinth parasitizing one of the saltbushes — photo on this issue's cover page.



Saltbushes: *Zygophyllum qatarense*

Shortly after the tents had gone up and while we were relaxing with our drinks, a Schmidt's fringe-toed lizard got my attention. It was moving swiftly in my direction, busily chasing after a little green caterpillar which was blown down by the wind from one of the nearby saltbushes. I watched as the lizard caught the caterpillar and slowly devoured it.



Very-pregnant-looking Schmidt's fringe-toed lizard, *Acanthodactylus schmidti*

On close inspection, I noticed that this lizard had an oddly broken tail, with the regenerated tip and the old one obviously still attached. Also clearly visible were the little white hairs on its toes which we've been told give it better traction on soft sand (fringes visible in this photo). Annoyed with my attention, the lizard skittered off to a nearby saltbush where it escaped into a little hole.

Looking around our camp site later, we came across some snake tracks near a saltbush. Curious, we looked inside and to our alarm found a very well camouflaged Arabian sand viper hidden inside the bush. After a photo session, it too got fed up with us, and it quickly slithered to safety into the big hole you can see in the photo below. The thought of a poisonous snake as our neighbour didn't give us any comfort, but seeing it was still the highlight of the whole trip!



Arabian sand viper, *Cerastes gasperetti*, with its head visible under the bottom left branch

On our evening walk we were amazed at the large variety of tracks we found, left there by insects, lizards, gerbils, birds, snakes and foxes. Although scorpions had been seen at this site, a search with a UV light failed to turn up any. However, dung beetles were very active that night. All-in-all, we found evidence of a unique ecosystem in what might appear to some people to be a nearly empty expanse of desert.

May Yoke Taylor

Photographs by the author

Camping Trip/Hike to Wadi Khabb and the Mountain Village of Difan

On 20 Feb. we drove from Popeyes in Abu Dhabi to the RAK area via the Emirates Road. Then turning right at Junction 119 towards Al Tawain (Al Tawayeen), we took the road which cuts through the red sand dunes (just now pleasantly green with *Calotropis*, Ghaf trees, grass and other desert plants in abundance). We collected a couple more cars at a rendezvous along the way (including our 2 RAK half marathon runners) and then drove through Al Tawain to Wadi Khabb, climbing up through newly graded roads to our camp site.

This has been a favourite camp site, but we arrived to find that the road grading craze is in full swing, so it may soon be comparable to camping next to the Sheikh Zayed Road. Having set up camp, we walked up onto a nearby range of hills which we explored for a couple of hours. There were surprisingly few birds but lots of plants including *Indigofera*, which is very prolific in this area, and a flowering *Caralluma arabica*. Back at the campsite we spent a pleasant evening around the fire.

*Caralluma arabica**Photo: Liza Green*

The melodious hum of the road grading machines and the fragrant aroma of diesel fumes accompanied our breakfast, so we set off promptly at 8 am the following morning driving down into Wadi Khabb, where we parked our cars near a small farm. After walking for about 30 minutes through this beautiful wadi, we arrived at a 'junction' where a right turn leads to a lower village about an hour's walk away; however, we continued straight along the main wadi to reach the point where the track climbs up to the village of Difan.



Traversing the rock face

Photo: Stefan Beck

The track is not immediately obvious, but Stefan has explored several options without success and believes it is the only way to reach Difan. Although (for me) a fairly challenging uphill hike of about 500 metres, rugged and steep in places, it's well marked and easy to navigate; parts of the path have been concreted into place, and at one point it crosses a terraced rock face, a few trees offer shady rest areas, and we passed some water storage tanks in a sheltered valley. The views are spectacular. There is a sign at the summit which reads Al hum du 'illah – after a climb of 1½ hours.....my sentiments exactly.

Our receptionist was the resident donkey, who I assume makes this journey several times a week, fully laden and far more elegantly than I. He is also very fond of apples. We found a delightful grassy picnic area in the peaceful

shade of the date palms and finally tore ourselves away to explore the village. There are a number of small circular buildings which are, I believe, storage places, some small modern homes as well as older houses which have fallen into disrepair; it's a surprising place—a well maintained, remote working farm area.



Difan Village

Photo: Liza Green

Bird sightings included a pair of Southern Grey Shrikes in the trees near our lunch spot and on our walk through the village a pair of Trumpeter Finches.



Trumpeter Finch

Photo: Bill Davis

Some of us walked a little further to find the UAE-Oman Border marker, whilst others began the hike down the mountain, and one member of the group who had elected not to walk to the very top spent a couple of hours exploring the lower village which has 2 springs and is, he says, very picturesque. By 4.30 everyone was back at the cars and we set off home to Abu Dhabi.

Many thanks to Stefan Beck for sharing this beautiful little corner of the UAE with us.

We are left with the following mysteries:

- How did Stefan ever find the path in the first place?
- Where do the people of Difan get their water?
- How many trips does the donkey make each week?
- How do you get a cement mixer half-way up a mountain?
- Where was the man with half a house on his back going when we were leaving Wadi Khabb?

Postscript: We revisited the above area the weekend of 6th/7th March and were lucky enough to meet several local Arabs, who were most friendly and helpful. They pointed the way to the next village of Maserayn, which we explored, walking up through a wadi where we found almond trees, sorrel and many other plants, and saw more shrikes and sunbirds. There was yet another village in the distance. All of the places we saw are inhabited and cultivated with crops and some date and fig trees. One of the men we met told us 'we have 21 villages here', so there is a lot more to see in this area!

Liza Green



Grey heron and young mangrove trees in the preserve

Photo: May Yoke Taylor

We came away with a renewed determination to support the planting of mangroves and were able to gather valuable information to prepare for our own future mangrove planting day. The best time to plant mangroves is towards November/December, so with this target in mind, the committee will continue to plan for it and will keep you informed.

Cath Ware

UAE Environment Day Celebrations

On Friday 6 Feb, seven of us set off from Abu Dhabi (met by three more later) to join the mangrove planting and beach cleanup day planned for the Emirates Marine Environment Group beach site, just past Ghantoot.



Photo: Anonymous; submitted by Cath Ware

The day was very educational, with all participants having an opportunity to join in and plant a mangrove seedling, participate in the cleanup of the area, discuss the hamour breeding programme with the EMEG experts, and view various other displays including one showing the importance of keeping rubbish out of the desert areas for the welfare of the wildlife and plant life. We also had the opportunity to view the video showing the extensive work Major Ali and his group are continuing to undertake to protect this part of the fragile desert and coastline. The ongoing dedication of the group and the education of the expat and Emirati communities is admirable and worthy of our support.



A freshly-planted mangrove, *Avicennia marina*

Photo: May Yoke Taylor

Abu Dhabi Sabkha Viewing Trip



ENHG Group on 17 Jan. Abu Dhabi Sabkha Trip

Photo: Christian Strohmenger

Participants rave about how interesting the dull-looking sabkha (shown here behind the enthusiastic team) became under the expert interpretation of Christian Strohmenger, Abdulla al Mansouri and Ali Al-Shamry, the ADCO Senior Geologists who led this trip.

First of all, you might wonder what "sabkha" is. "**Sabkha** is a transliteration of the Arabic word for a salt flat. Sabkhas are supratidal, forming along arid coastlines, and are characterized by evaporite-carbonate deposits with some siliciclastics..." (I won't bother you further with the details, but if you really want to know more, follow this link—<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabkha>—and keep on reading.) Practically the entire flat coastline west of Abu Dhabi consists of sabkhas! It does not look like it, but it is full of surprises if you know what to look for.

We set off in the morning towards Musaffah. At the end of the Musaffah Industrial Channel, among dead fish, broken bottles and disposed bricks, lies one of the premier sites in the world to study the present day deposition of sabkha. Looking at a vertical section of it, you can appreciate how the environment has changed in the past 7,000 years. At a certain point the sea level was a maximum of 3 metres higher than now, but it has been fluctuating all the time.

After that, we travelled further west, past Al Dabbiya, opposite Al-Qanatir Island. Here you can walk over the same environments found in the Musaffah Channels juxtaposed with deposits of halite, anhydrite and gypsum, moving from the upper to the lower sabkha (i.e. moving seawards). Then the microbial mat starts. It is fundamental for hydrocarbon formation (though we'll have to wait for a few years). It can only survive in a narrow spatial window—it needs to stay wet, not too dry, but when it gets too deep, gastropods eat it. That makes it a good indicator of the changes of the water level, which has been slightly rising (a few cm) in the past few years. However, the trend can reverse at any time, as the sediments in the Musaffah Channels teach us.

ADNOC is trying to preserve these sites against industrialization for future studies since they represent an analog of some of the reservoirs currently under production in the Arabia Peninsula; therefore, they will be fenced off soon, making visits there more difficult.

Anyway, if you missed this trip and would like to know more, zoom in on the above group photo, find someone you know, and ask that person to tell you all about it! And you might also want to take a look at Peter Hellyer's article on the subject in Jan.2009 Focus, pp 5-6.

Donatella Astratti

Recent Speaker

Jason Herrmann, a PhD candidate in the Environmental Dynamics program at the University of Arkansas, gave us a talk on 3 March on recent findings of the Dubai Desert Survey. We were fortunate that he was willing, for the benefit of ENHG members, to expand on the talk he had given that same morning at the International Archaeology Conference in Abu Dhabi. A review of his lecture will follow in April 2009 Focus.



Jason Herrmann on site in Dubai

Next Speaker

EMHG Chairman **Drew Gardner** is familiar to all who have attended our lecture meetings or read Focus editorials over the past several years. Besides chairing most of our meetings and introducing the speakers, he gives us a talk himself at least once a year—and sometimes twice. Nevertheless, not all members are aware of the details of Drew's professional background.

The following bio was obtained from the April 2008 issue of *The Gazelle*, published prior to a talk he gave to the Dubai NHG about geckos—perhaps his favourite lecture topic. Drew is, in fact, fascinated by geckos, but his interests certainly do not end there. He has a BSc in Zoology from Edinburgh University (1st class honours), and a PhD from Aberdeen University. His thesis was on the evolutionary ecology of day geckos in the Seychelles. He followed this up with post-doctoral research on Arctic charr (a salmonid fish), based in University College, London. He worked for twelve years at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman, researching the reptiles and mountain ecology, and named three new species of gecko in genus *Asaccus* during this time. He has now been an associate professor at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi for nearly eight years; he is serving there as the Assistant Chair of Natural Science and Public Health in the College of Arts and Sciences.

Drew has now completed over fifty ecology surveys in Oman and the UAE, and published about forty research papers and book chapters on conservation, lizards, snakes, fish, insects, birds and juniper woodlands. If you want to know about the behavioural genetics of fruit flies, breeding habits of Trinidad petrels, geckos in French Polynesia, or for that matter, the species identification of any reptile spotted in the UAE or Oman, ask Drew.

However, you won't hear about any of the above topics at the forthcoming meeting. Instead, he will speak about his most recent subject of enquiry: the bats of Oman and UAE, about which very little has heretofore been studied by anyone. What Drew Gardner has unearthed about these denizens of the dark from bat caves around the region should be enlightening for all of us.



This Muscat mouse-tailed bat, *Rhinopoma muscatellum*, was sighted at Jebel Hafit on 21 March, 2008

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

Inter-Emirates Weekend Schedule

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 bookings have been extended but will be closed as of 19th March. Some ENHG members are planning to camp near the hotel on the Thursday and Friday eves. If you are interested in joining them, contact Feng Wen at this email address: feng.wen@adpc.ae. – Ed.

Have a look at the trips below & email Valerie with your choices at valeriechalmers@hotmail.com by 19th March.

Friday Trips

- Half-day Musandam Dhow trip 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. (trip now full – 35 people maximum)
- Half-day trip (2 to 3 hours) to Wadi Wurayyah, starting at 9.0 -9.30 a.m. (25 people maximum) to be led by Christophe Tourenq.
- Half-day Shelling Trip starting at 9.00 – 9.30 a.m. to be led by Clare O' Hare. Possible areas include near where the storm drain runs into the sea back towards the Oceanic Hotel and Graffiti Beach (2 to 3 hours).
- Brigitte Howarth to do an Insects workshop plus search for insects around perimeter of hotel – Friday morning.
- Afternoon trip to the newly restored Dibba Fort to be led by Jenny Hill, starting at 2 p.m. Dibba Fort is being opened specially for us, and we need 15+ people for the trip to go ahead. Numbers are needed by 19th March so that trip can be confirmed. Could be followed by bull pushing at Fujairah/visit to Bidya Mosque.
- A full-day trip to be led by Gary Feulner – An introduction to the geology of the Hajjar Mountains, starting about 9 a.m.

Saturday Trips

- Half-day trip (2 to 3 hours) to Wadi Wurayyah Trip to be led by Christophe Tourenq starting at 9.00 – 9.30 a.m. (20 people maximum).
- 3 Forts trip – to Forts Bithna, Hayl and Awhala to be led by Mr Amrik Singh Plaha, the restorer of the forts, starting around 10 a.m. (maximum 30 people).
- Trip to Fujairah Museum, Fujairah Fort (specially opened for us) and Heritage Village to be led by Val Chalmers, starting at 10 a.m.
- Afternoon trip to Khor Kalba to be led by Gary Feulner, starting at 2 p.m.

Other Activities

- Star-gazing session from the roof of the hotel, led by Lamjed El-Kefi - Thurs. eve. 26th 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: 120x185mm; must be mounted & labelled: photographer's name, title, place & date taken. Submissions: 26 March up to 5 p.m. 27 March.

PS: Please remember to register with Lena at linton@mailme.ae if you wish to attend the Friday dinner and have not already registered. Please pay Lena directly for the dinner at the hotel - she will be available late on the Thursday night and also Friday morning.

Valerie Chalmers, Vice-Chairman, DNHG

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

Venue: HCT/ADMC
(See map: Feb Focus)

17th Feb.
An Introduction to the
Flora of Abu Dhabi

Allestree Fisher

3rd March
Archaeological
Investigations in
Dubai's Interior by the
University of Arkansas

Jason Herrmann

17th March 7:30 PM
Bats of the UAE and
Oman

Drew Gardner

Field Trips

21st /22nd Feb.
Overnight hike to mtn.
village in RAK

Stefan Beck

27th Feb.
Day hike up Jebel Hafit

Drew Gardner

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

Allestree Fisher

20th/21st March
Camp near Sharjah
archaeological sites
Friday / Visit Sharjah
museums Saturday

Andrew Bean

26th/27th/28th March
Inter-Emirates
Weekend – see update
on p. 7 of this issue

Host: DNHG

10th/11th April
Family Beach Camping
Weekend near Sila

Andrew Bean

In the Local News Media

Ministry battles tenacious 'red tide':
<http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090226/NATIONAL/735618136/1133>

The UAE's ancient heritage grows richer every year:
(The conference is over, but the info. may be useful)
<http://thenational.newspaperdirect.com/epaper/viewer.aspx>

Salt Surge puts crops in peril:
<http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090311/FOREIGN/347448773/1010/rss>

Websites of General Interest

ENHG-AA Website; Archives: 3 newsletters, Tribulus
<http://www.enhg.org>

Qatar NHG website:
<http://www.qnhg.org>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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