

focus



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Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

The Inter-Emirates Weekend at the end of February is coming up fast. Please note that the deadline for booking the Fri. night dinner is not far away: **20 Jan!** The Al Ain ENHG have put together a very varied programme of trips and workshops (see page 6), so there are bound to be things of interest for everyone. The area around Al Ain and the adjacent parts of Oman have lots to offer in terms of landscape, fauna and flora, as well as their rich cultural and archaeological interest. With the good winter rain, the flowers and vegetation should be at their best. Please do consider coming to the IEW for the whole weekend, or even just for a day. There are lots of options for accommodation in and around Al Ain, including camping!

The ENHG was formerly an NGO member of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), but for various reasons membership was discontinued. The IUCN is one of the most influential environmental organizations with the largest community of environmental experts. It maintains the 'red lists' of endangered species. We have now decided to re-apply for membership. We feel that this will give the ENHG more credibility as a UAE environmental NGO and allow our membership to have more of a say in building a sustainable future for the UAE. We already have links local bodies such as the Environment Agency and Urban Planning Council and would like to strengthen these.

Also please note the closing date for nominations for the ENHG's two awards (cf. Dec 2009 *Focus*): **31 Jan 2010**.

Drew Gardner

Swans in Abu Dhabi

The write-up in December 2009 *Focus* titled *November Birding* listed one bird species that might have come as a surprise to alert readers: Mute Swan. In fact, several species of swans are resident in Abu Dhabi, but we suspect they must receive a little assistance from a sympathetic human hand.

Genuine wild swans are very rare in UAE but the Emirates Bird Records Committee has accepted records of three species: Mute Swan, Whooper Swan and Bewick's Swan. These species are thus all on the official UAE List of Bird Species Present in an Apparent Wild State, but the records are considered to represent vagrants, i.e. individuals that for some unknown reason strayed much further south than their normal wintering range.

Unexpectedly, one doesn't have to wait for one of these freak events to see swans around Abu Dhabi. Mute Swans can be found on the sea off the Eastern Corniche and around Reem Island. The area where they are seen most regularly is to the south of Reem Island and between Reem Island and the Sea Palace. Several people have seen them in the very early morning from the bridge over to Reem Island. On 1st February 2009 I was surprised to see a flock of 19 Mute Swans swimming sedately, in line, westwards around the southern tip of Reem Island. Three of them appear below, with flamingos in the background:

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FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Dugong

Photographer: Yusuf Thakur

This month's contributors

Munir El-Kadi, ENHG-Al Ain, Feng Wen, Jennifer Hasenknopf, Peter Hellyer, Dick Hornby, Yusuf Thakur, Cate Ware



Mute Swans

On the same day I was amazed to see three Black-necked Swans in the same general area. These very distinctive birds are native to Argentina and are not doing too well in the wild, but they are fairly common as pinioned birds in captivity.

I haven't seen the Black-necked Swans again, but that doesn't mean they are no longer around. There are many creeks and channels that are very hard to access.

I have never seen swans flying around Abu Dhabi, and this leads to suspicion that the birds around Reem Island are pinioned, i.e. the end wing bones, that support the main flight feathers, have been surgically removed. Both species are primarily herbivorous and they must be able to feed on the seagrass beds to the south and east of Reem Island, but it is doubtful that they could survive the harsh summer on this alone. We strongly suspect that someone is providing them with supplementary food and

shade, and the most likely place for this to happen would be within the very private grounds of the Nahyan Sea Palace. That is probably their home turf, but they must be free to swim off to the seagrass beds to supplement the usual diet and get a bit of exercise. The next question must be: are they breeding? We have seen no evidence that they are, but if they can survive well here, they should be able to do so. We suggest that members keep a good eye open for swans, and cygnets, and we look forward to news of such observations in *Focus*.



Black-necked Swans

*Dick Hornby**Photographs by the author*

Fossil Valley Day Trip

On 19 December 2009 a small group of ENHG members visited Fossil Valley. It had rained heavily the week before, causing flooding in Al Ain, so we were eager to check out the site condition after the rain. The ENHG archive contains a detailed report of Fossil Valley based on a field trip that took place almost 30 years ago: 19-20 Feb 1980. (http://www.enhg.org/bulletin/b14/14_09.htm). Roy Richards, a member of this early expedition, joined us on this trip, and pointed out features that made a lasting impression on him. This was, in fact, his first return visit after all these years.

Fossil Valley is a horseshoe-shaped watershed with low hills on east, south and west sides. The watershed measures approximately 3.5 km from north to south, and 2.5 km from east to west. Jebel Qatar rises on the east. Jebel Huwayah is just hidden behind the western hills. We started by climbing up the hills on the southeast and walked our way along the ridge line to the mid point of the western rim. One of the changes over the last three decades is the presence of waste tips; one located below the hills on the northeast and consisting of only used tires; another just east of the valley, combining a disposal site for construction debris and a wastewater treatment plant.

Numerous ephemeral streams meander down the steep hillside and drain into the broad and flat valley floor. The low point is on the west side of the valley, where the ground was dark and soft from the recent rain. Intrepid drivers had woven fresh tracks on damp soil among acacias. On the dry stream bed we found three goat skeletons and two incomplete camel skeletons, possibly brought there by storm water runoff.

From the top of the hills one could see the entire valley and beyond. On this day the weather was cool at 23°C

and wind gusts approached 19 knots on the ridge. Sands were blown over the western rim, cascading down the hill slope, and the sky was overcast. Occasionally sunlight poked through the clouds and cast bright spots on the valley floor. As the wind drove the clouds in a south-easterly direction, these bright spots raced across the valley at an amazing speed. We enjoyed this light show from the hill top, as did a group of seven to eight locals sipping coffee under a rock overhang. They certainly had the most comfortable seats in the house. Roy still had a vivid memory of nomads camped in the valley with their tents and tin huts nearly 30 years ago. However, we did not see any herdsmen or domestic animals on this trip.

Fossils are particularly plentiful on the western rim. When we stopped for lunch near a rock monolith, Roy casually pointed out a specimen of gastropod fossil (see below). Looking around we realized that there were fossils all around us. We had stumbled on a spot chosen for a careful investigation on the early expedition. No doubt, these fossils had generated great excitement then. We can only hope that they continue to inspire generations of visitors with awe.



Fossil bed



Gastropod fossil

*Feng Wen**Photographs by the author*

Camping under Moonlight in Liwa

On 1st/2nd January, 2010, a total of 18 ENHG campers in five vehicles welcomed the New Year amongst the Liwa dunes. (Btw, another Liwa camping trip is planned for mid February.) -Ed.

Initially, the three cars of the group, led by Feng Wen, met near the ADNOC station 1.5 km east of the

Mussafah Bridge on the road to Mussafah at 12 noon. Here, a group of German youngsters, Wayne, Feng and El Kadi-Hasenknopf family met. The group drove through the Abu Dhabi - Humaim road with a brief stop at the Emirates National Auto Museum, to see Sheikh Hamad's amazing private collection of cars. The group then continued south to Humaim, where they visited the wonderful dunes around the new Qasr Al-Sarab Resort.



Dunes near the Qasr Al-Sarab Resort

The group continued to the second rendezvous point nearby the Liwa Hotel in Muzeira'a, passing through wonderful views of desert dunes, separated by palm tree plantations and green areas across several Mahdars (towns). There, they met Stefan's family (ENHG – Abu Dhabi) and Salmeen's family (ENHG – Al Ain). After a short break, the caravan of five cars drove south to Tal Moreeb (the tallest sand dune in the UAE), where locals from the area were doing some crazy desert duning (car acrobatics). Not far from there, but in an area relatively undisturbed by the local dune bashers, was the campsite, which we reached just before sunset. This campsite is adjacent to an interesting patch of sabkha; however, it is accessible via a hard-packed dirt track, so it is suitable for regular saloon cars, as well as 4-wheel drives.



Approaching the Moreeb Dune camping area

The scenery of the sunset at the camp site was awesome, with a fresh evening breeze that was just right. We struggled between setting our tents, setting our camp fire and enjoying that awesome sunset. The sky was clear except for a few scattered clouds.

At night, we were lucky with a wonderful breeze and an almost full moon. The moonlight was enough for us to see our way through and was covered initially with some clouds. It was a great night. We really enjoyed each

other's company and the children had an awesome blast, chasing each other up and down the dunes. The young lads from Germany had their tent nearby, and from their jumping and dancing we can say they had a wonderful time too. The evening ended with some tea and chit chat at Salmeen's tent. Stefan and Munir were also testing out some night (moonlight) photography of the desert with different shutter speeds and aperture settings. We were also joined by Hairy (a small curious and cute white Gerbil). The problem with Hairy was that he was photo shy. However, his curiosity did not vanish even as Munir used the flash in one shot; he kept on coming back next to Salmeen's tent.



Moonlit sky over Liwa

Sunrise was another opportunity for photography; the moon was still in the sky as the sun was rising. The sun also gave us a chance to investigate the footprints of some curious visitors next to our tent. It might have been Hairy's family spying on their new neighbors ... or other nocturnal creatures. Whatever they were, they appeared to be enjoying the warmth next to our tent, as they teased our feet from outside the tent during the night.



Tracks of night visitors—the gerbil 'Hairy', perhaps?

The first to leave was the Salmeen family, while Stefan went and investigated the area further, and the others prepared for a group photograph. The young lads helped with writing 'ENHG' on the sand. Budding geologist Aadil was too busy digging a small hole in the sand, discovering an amazingly hard layer of sand close to the surface—no wonder our tent pegs had managed to stick as well as they did! This relatively firm and compacted sand layer was about 5 cm thick, overlying soft and loose sand below. The hard sand crust was prevalent on the windward slope of the dunes. Although it could support the weight of an adult without crumbling, vehicles would certainly destroy this protective armour layer, accelerating the erosion of the sand below.



ENHG New Year's Liwa Trip group photo



Possibly fossilized mangrove tree root system?



Tribulus omanense in flower
(Namesake of the ENHG's annual journal—below right)

Then the lads left us. We left about half an hour later with Wayne and Feng, leaving Stefan, Martine and their two children, and drove to Madinat Zayed, some 50 kilometers away. After a fuel/snack break at Madinat Zayed ADNOC, we headed towards the Abu Dhabi-Ruwais road (E11), turning right to Abu Dhabi.

Around 15 km towards Abu Dhabi on E11, we made one last stop to investigate a sandstone outcropping, featuring some apparent fossils.



Coastal sandstone outcropping

The most obvious-looking fossil showed a root structure—possibly of a mangrove tree; Aadil found the first of several small pieces of ostrich shells lying about. After that, we investigated the sabkha next to the sandstone rock. Finally we all headed home to Abu Dhabi...



Sabkha with sandstone outcropping in background

Jennifer Hasenknopf / Munir El-Kadi / Feng Wen

All photographs by Munir El-Kadi, except for animal tracks photo, by Jennifer Hasenknopf

Tribulus

After considerable delay, caused largely by delays in receiving contributions from authors, the latest issue of *Tribulus*, Volume 18, (2008/2009) should be published by the time of the mid-February meeting. Another lengthy issue, it will contain a wide variety of papers, including descriptions of the geology of two of Abu Dhabi's offshore islands, Balghelam and Al Aryam, several contributions on insects, reports of new gecko and snake species for the Emirates and a lengthy section of reviews on recently published books about the UAE's natural history.

Work is due to commence shortly on Volume 19 (2010), which will be devoted to the first detailed description of the flora of Musandam, produced by the chairman of the Dubai Natural History Group, Gary Feulner. This should be published by the autumn. Volume 20 (2011) is tentatively scheduled to appear in early 2011, depending on the amount of material submitted.

Copies of *Tribulus* are available free to paid-up members of the ENHG and will also be on sale for non-members, at Dh 50 dirhams per copy. Back copies of most issues of *Tribulus* when it was a slimmer, bi-annual journal (Volumes 1.1 to 16.2) are also available, on application, at Dh 20, for members who would like to complete a full run of the publication.

Peter Hellyer

IEW 2010 Programme Information

The Inter Emirates Weekend, hosted by the Al Ain chapter of the ENHG, will be held from Thurs 25th – Sat 27th February, and is open to paid-up members of all three chapters. The discounted rate on rooms at the Hotel Intercontinental in Al Ain has now expired.

Reservations for dinner on Friday night, 26th Feb, @ Dhs 135 ea. may still be made by forwarding an email to interemiratesweekend@gmail.com. Deadline: 20th Jan.

IEW Programme: (Press CTRL + click [here](#) for details.)

Thursday afternoon/evening:

Reptile moonwalk / Moonwalk

Light trap session

Big Structures

Khutwah Village 1

Friday morning:

Birding field trip

Al Ain Souk / Al Ain Oasis

Workshop – Insect Orders in the UAE

Al Dhaher Oasis

Wadi plants – Field trip

Flint knapping

Workshop – Fossils

Friday afternoon:

Sand dune walk

Al Dhaher to Al Ilal hike

Wadi Nahyan – Plants, insects & birds

Fossil Valley – Geology

Khail to Sharm drive

Mezyad Fort

Friday evening:

Buffet Dinner / Awards Presentations

Saturday morning:

Hanging Gardens hike

Medicinal plants in the field / Medicinal plant shops

Wadi Madbah

Workshop: Using keys to identify reptiles

Workshop: IDing jewel beetles etc in BB insect collection

Workshop: Dragonflies

Saturday afternoon:

Recording data - houses

Insect/Reptile/Plant observations and recording

Also see new IEW 2010 tab under the first tab (ENHG) on the ENHG website (www.enhg.org) for further details.

ENHG-Al Ain

Review: May 5th Masdar City Talk

The talk titled *Multi-Layered Transportation System in Masdar City*, given to the ENHG on 5 May, 2009, was enlightening for us all. Chris Novack clearly defined the profile of the development and the energy savings that are anticipated from it.

Masdar city is a 7 sq km walled compound, with light industry outside the perimeter wall. It is adjacent to the Abu Dhabi International Airport and close to Capital City developments and Yas Island.

70,000 work places have been created and residential dwellings to house an anticipated 40,000 to 50,000 with a further 40,000 commuters daily entering the city.

80% of water will be recycled. The East West alignment of the streets and the residential and business complexes will maximise the benefits of heat reduction and wind cooling from the prevailing winds around Masdar City. The city is being developed so that it produces 0% carbon emissions. Solar and wind energy will provide 70% of energy demands, and all waste will be managed with zero energy.

The transport infrastructure is a multilayer design, with 4 layers dividing transport from pedestrian activities:

- Sub metro rail
- Undercroft - in which the personal rapid transit system will be located
- Podium level - a pedestrian level incorporating a bicycle track and some light transport mediums (7 metres high)
- Light rail above the podium level

The initial development of the Personal Rapid Transit (PRT) will incorporate 1700 metres of track, with 2 passenger and 2 freight stations. This will be opened and will form the basis of the Masdar Institute research for the further development of the PRT network.

Mr. Novack told us that September 2009 would see the opening of the Masdar Institute, as has come to pass. He also held open the possibility of a visit to that institute for our group.

Cate Ware

NB: Watch for an ENHG field trip to Masdar City probably in February or March 2010, by which time the first of the recently-acquired PRT vehicles should be up and running. -Ed.

Upcoming Speaker



Dr. John Burt, a marine biologist, is an Assistant Professor of Biology at New York University in Abu Dhabi. Dr. Burt's research focuses on the ecological and management implications of marine coastal developments in coastal urban areas. His recent work has focused on the coastline of Dubai, and he has publishing extensively on the city's coral and breakwater reefs. Burt received his Ph.D. in Biological Sciences from the University of Windsor, Ontario, Canada and was the recent recipient of a United Nations University fellowship. His research has been presented at a variety of international conferences and in a number of peer-reviewed journals. He is a member of the ENHG.

The Editor thanks the above speaker for providing autobiographical information & photo for Focus.

In the Local News Media

The UAE, climate change, and the challenge we face:
<http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20091214/OPINION/712139946/1022>

Record rainfall hits UAE:
<http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20091214/NATIONAL/912139973/1022>

New nationwide climate change campaign targets schoolchildren:
<http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20091215/NATIONAL/712149837/1022>

Older buildings can still go green, experts say:
<http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20091216/NATIONAL/712159872/1022>

'Octopus's garden' planned for The World:
<http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20091221/NATIONAL/712209909/1022>

Half a million mangroves planted on Saadiyat:
<http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20091227/NATIONAL/712269848/1022>

Club helps pupils get back to nature:
<http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20091230/NATIONAL/712299868/1022>

Tower block development threatens RAK mangroves:
<http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20091231/NATIONAL/712309903/1022>

Fish supply must be better protected, officials say:
<http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100107/NATIONAL/100109786/1010>

Websites of General Interest

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

Tommy Pedersen's UAE Birding / UAE Nature Forum:
www.uaebirding.com

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

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

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

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

Archaeology website:
<http://www.adias-uae.com/>

Sharjah Museums sites (Check out the virtual tours!):
<http://www.sharjahmuseums.ae/>

Emirates Marine Environmental Group:
www.emeg.ae

EMEG Ecologist Keith Wilson's Public Gallery:
<http://picasaweb.google.co.uk/KDPWilson>

Blog from the Great Barrier Reef expedition:
<http://www.deepdownunder.de/>

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 to schools. Ask Chairman.)
- Terrestrial Environment of Abu Dhabi Emirate, 240.
- Marine Environment and Resources of Abu Dhabi, 140.
- Seashells of Eastern Arabia, 120.
- Wild About Mammals, 40.
- Wild About Reptiles, 40.
- Snakes of Arabia, 50.
- On-road in the UAE, 50.
- Abu Dhabi Bird checklist, 10.
- Emirates Bird Report, 20.
- Oman Bird List, ed 6, 30.
- Birdwatching guide to Oman, 2nd edition, 100.
Guide to bird watching spots in Oman.
- The Birds of Al Jabal Al Akhdar, 50.
- Native Plants of Oman, 80.
- Comprehensive Guide to the Wildflowers of the UAE, 100.
- Trucial States, 150.
- Oman 1965, 150.
- Natural History of Oman, 50.
- Falconry, 60.
- Pests, 35. *Find out what's in and around your home.*
- Reef Fishes of the UAE, 50.
- Snorkeling and Diving in Oman, 50.
- Feast of Dates, 100.
- UAE in Focus, 100.
- Sir Bani Yas, 100.
- Musandam, 90.
- Abu Dhabi 8 million years ago, 15.
- Discovering Qatar, 120.

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Required: a Corporate Sponsorship Secretary, who will personally approach corporate representatives to invite them to assist with ENHG's support of natural history research and conservation projects in the role of corporate sponsor. Can you do this?

Required: An AV Assistant to control the lights and sound during meetings. (Training will be provided.) Can you do this?

Lectures

Venue: HCT / Abu Dhabi Men's College
Press CTRL+click [here](#) to view map/directions.

22nd Dec.
Status of Dugongs in the UAE
Himansu Das

5th Jan.
Film: Abu Dhabi—Home of the Legendary Mermaids
Yusuf Thakur

19th Jan. 7:30 PM
Coral Reefs in the Arabian Gulf: Past, Present, and Future
John Burt

2nd Feb. 7:30 PM
Lecture Topic TBA
Speaker TBA

Field Trips

19th Dec.
Fossil Valley day trip
Feng Wen

1st/2nd Jan.
Camping Trip to Liwa
Feng Wen

22nd/23rd Jan.
Mountain climbing trip: Jebel Sumeini, Oman
Roy Richards

12th / 13th Feb.
Camping Trip to Liwa
Andrew Bean

IEW

25th / 27th Feb.
Inter Emirates Weekend (See IEW Programme on p.6)

Host: ENHG-AI Ain

ENHG Membership Renewal

See Membership Sec. or Assistant at the next meeting for a 2010 renewal form—also downloadable [here](#).

ENHG Research and Conservation Fund: Grant Application Information

For instructions on how to apply for a grant, contact Chairman Drew Gardner at drew.gardner@zu.ac.ae. (See Dec 2009 *Focus* for background information.)

Equipment for Members' Use

The following ENHG equipment is available for members' use during field trips or on request:

- Birding Telescope
- GPS unit: GARMIN GPSMAP 60CSx
- Nikon Coolpix camera: 5 Megapixel, 4x opt zoom
- First-Aid Kit
- Sky Scout astronomical object locator/identifier

(The club also has a Celestron telescope, which is only used on official ENHG trips. Training sessions on the use of the telescope and Sky Scout can be arranged for small groups of interested members.)

Please contact Andrew Bean, Excursion Secretary, at rexabean@emirates.net.ae to make enquiries. -Ed.

ENHG Corporate Sponsors 2010

These companies are supporting the ENHG activities in the region. We hope you as ENHG members will in turn support these companies whenever you can.

BDO Patel	
British Petroleum	
Dome International	
International Bechtel Company, Ltd.	
Nautica Environmental Associates	
URS Corporation	 Dames & Moore

Newsletter Details

Newsletter contributions to:
newsletter@chirri2000.com

Postal Address

ENHG c/o Environment Agency -
Abu Dhabi, PO Box 45553, Abu Dhabi

Members' Items for sale

Please send small ads to:
newsletter@chirri2000.com

Yahoo Groups website

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