

focus



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Vol 36 (4)



Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

This issue features several IEW write-ups from *The Gazelle* (March 2012), the newsletter of the Dubai NHG, reprinted with permission. Further IEW write-ups will follow in the next issue of *Focus*.

The importance of the efforts of dedicated amateur as well as professional naturalists to the observation, documentation & conservation of the region's wildlife is highlighted by *The National's* article reprinted on p. 5 on the most unexpected recent sighting of a mudskipper in mangrove habitat in the northern Emirates – made by members of the Dubai Natural History Group – after it had long been thought to be extinct in the region.

We would like to remind our readers that the ENHG is open to applications for Research and Conservation grants. Enquiries can be sent to the ENHG Chairman (Details on p. 8). The annual dues of individual & family members and Corporate Sponsors (see current CS list on p. 6) all contribute to funding for these vital projects.

We would also like to repeat our appeal for new volunteers on the Committee for the coming season: ENHG Treasurer and Excursion Secretary and/or Assistant. Special thanks are due to Feng Wen, who has now stepped down from the Committee, for organising an excellent programme of day trips, and some camping trips as well, over the past few seasons.

Finally, the ENHG Annual General Meeting 2011 is now scheduled for the May 1st meeting, at 7:30 PM, directly preceding a presentation of nature photography by Alberto Gonzalez. All are encouraged to attend!

Keith Taylor

Culling of Introduced Bird Species



EAD crew removing birds from the culling net

Photo: May Yoke Taylor

On Jan 2nd 2012, while we were driving down Abu Dhabi's Eastern Corniche toward a favourite bird-watching spot, we spotted a large vertical net with birds in it so doubled back to take a look. We found four fellows removing birds from the net, asked them what this was all about and were told they were working for EAD (Environment Agency of Abu Dhabi). They said they were charged with culling Common Mynahs, so they set up nets for this purpose for a few hours each time in this and several other sites around AD island, coming back to each site every fifteen days on average.

In this issue

- Page 1:** Front cover
- Page 2:** Editorial, Culling of Introduced Bird Species
- Page 3:** IEW Field Trip: Intermediate Desert in Dubai's Hinterland, The Mystery of the Solitary Spheres
- Page 4:** Graveyard of the 10,000
- Page 5:** Rare Fish Found After 35-year Absence
- Page 6:** Recent Speaker, Upcoming Speaker, Corporate Sponsors, In the News Media
- Page 7:** ENHG Bookstall, Websites of General Interest
- Page 8:** Committee Members, Lectures, Field Trips, Research & Conservation Fund, Equipment for Members' Use, Marine Life Rescue Contact Info., Newsletter Details

FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Striated Heron, Eastern Corniche

Photographer: May Yoke Taylor

This month's contributors

Gary Feulner, Binish Roobas, Keith Taylor, May Yoke Taylor, Vesela Todorova of *The National*

ENHG Membership Information

Annual membership in the Abu Dhabi chapter of the ENHG is 100 Dhs – for both individual and family membership. See Membership Sec. or Asst. at the next meeting for a membership form.

Members are entitled to join the group on all day trips and overnight camping trips. Each member is also entitled to a copy of the ENHG's normally annual peer-reviewed journal, *Tribulus*. Volume 19 is now available at meetings. Work on Volume 20 is currently under way.

They put all the released mynahs into a bag, saying they'd be putting them down with gas when they were done. But as White-Eared Bulbuls weren't on their cull list for this site, and a lot of them had got tangled up in this strategically placed net, they painstakingly removed them from the tight loops and released them. When we enquired, they told us they were all from Peru, where they had been employed in the same profession.

Though we are in the habit leaving wildlife as we find it, we do understand that some introduced species have adapted so well to man-made environments that they've become pests – to people and to native fauna as well. We would like to learn more about the EAD policy toward the management of introduced bird species – something we would be open to an official EAD presentation on. Readers who have any information on this policy or who have observed similar bird culls here are encouraged to contact the newsletter Editor.

Keith Taylor

IEW Field Trip: Intermediate Desert in Dubai's Hinterland

The IEW trip to Dubai's hinterland traversed the area inland of the Jebel Ali to Hatta Road and along the border with Abu Dhabi -- an area once called the Southern Loop, that is today much modified and has therefore been much neglected from the point of view of plant and animal life. It is difficult to appreciate that only 20 years ago it was genuinely remote, without even good graded roads.



Tracks of Brown-Necked Raven

Photo: Gary Feulner

Following the Lisailli road, we stopped at a still relatively wild area in sight of Endurance Village, dotted with scattered ghaf trees, *Leptadenia pyrotechnica* and *Pennisetum divisum*. No sooner had we opened the car doors than we encountered the tracks of a Monitor Lizard (*Varanus griseus*), which we followed to reveal the beast's meanderings among the shrubs that dotted the low dunes. Tracks and droppings of gazelle were also common, and it appears they may receive supplemental food and water, but it also appears that camels have been kept away from the area for some time. Tracks of Brown-Necked Ravens (see photo) were common. Tracks of Desert Hares and Hoopoe Larks were also seen but were not common.



Black-Crowned Finch Lark

Photo: May Yoke Taylor

New to several participants was the Black-Crowned Finch (or Sparrow) Lark, a distinctive looking bird that nevertheless blends into oblivion on the sandy gravel plains of the area. Another highlight was a sighting of the uncommon Striped Fringe-Toed Lizard (*Acanthodactylus gongrorhynchatus*), a relative of the more common White Spotted Fringe-Toed Lizard (*A. schmidtii*).



Striped Fringe-Toed Lizard

Photo: Gary Feulner

The group also stopped west of Endurance Village for a brief visit to 'Gazelle Rock', a prominent mesa of cross-bedded sandstone, where they discussed whether the sands had been deposited as dune sands or as river deposits.

The final stop was at low, rolling dunes along the Truck Road from Saih Shuaib to Al-Faya, covered by succulent *Zygophyllum* (now *Tetraena*) sp. Here, tracks close to the road told the story of a still thriving community of lizards, rodents and arthropods, and their sometimes confusing interactions, despite the rumble and din of the many huge trucks.

On this trip also, we were introduced to the mystery of solitary sand spheres, similar to those also encountered on the IEW Coastal Lagoons trip, as reported in *The Gazelle*, p. 3. See photograph and explanation directly below.

Gary Feulner

The Mystery of the Solitary Spheres

On a dune ridge in a 'wild' area of the Dubai hinterland near Endurance Village, Keith Taylor of Abu Dhabi, visiting with the IEW trip, turned up the hollow hemisphere in the photo below – about 1-inch in diameter, made of fine sandy material like a small, thick eggshell, but very hard and rock-like in texture, as if the sand grains had been glued tightly together, and having the texture and appearance of rough, fired clay.



A hollow hemisphere of brittle, sandy material

Photo: Keith Taylor

Speculation as to its origin was inconclusive, but Dom Antonucci, also of Abu Dhabi, revived the discussion later in the day with his discovery of an intact 1-inch diameter ball of similar material -- very hard, although lighter than a stone of the same size, with two small holes apparent on one side.

Speculation focused immediately on the spherical dung balls rolled by some scarab beetles (called Dung Beetles and represented in southern Arabia by the large and abundant *Scarabaeus cristatus*), which are buried in the sand before the beetle lays its eggs in them. That hypothesis was encouraged by the outside texture of the ball, which under magnification appears to be dimpled on a fine scale, as if by the tiny feet of the beetle rolling it.

But . . . dung beetle balls are not hollow originally, or brittle. They are packed with animal droppings and rolled in loose sand. Might they become hollow as the newly-hatched larva eats through its larder? Could the outside of the ball become crusted and brittle due to interaction of the sand coating with the moisture and organic substances present in the original dung of the interior? Or does the beetle itself somehow cement the outer surface? If so, how and at what stage of the process?

And how, then, does the beetle larva emerge from such a hard "shell"? Does an intact ball represent a failed breeding attempt, unearthed prematurely (or much later) by the shifting sands? Finally, what accounts for the two tiny holes. Are these where the female beetle inserted her ovipositor? Or is the answer more sinister? Has something else (a predator or parasite?) entered or exited? If the latter, does that explain the "failure" of this particular ball?



An intact sphere, showing the tiny holes

Photo: Gary Feulner

Readers who can identify these balls and unravel any of these mysteries are invited to contact the Editors of either *The Gazelle* or *Focus*.

Gary Feulner

Graveyard of the 10,000

The "Where in UAE is it?" quiz at IEW contained the following photo of the "Graveyard of the 10,000" near the coast at Dibba, Oman. This elicited a number of requests for background information about the site. The basic story is thus:



The Quick and the Dead

At the time of the coming of Islam, coastal Oman (Muscat, the Batinah Coast and Dibba) was under occupation by the Sassanian Persians. The interior of Oman was ruled by the Julanda' tribe, based in Nizwa, who were the uneasy viceroys of the Persians. When in 630 an emissary from the Prophet invited the Julanda' and their subjects to take up Islam, they did so. They also, with religion as an added impetus, rose up and ousted the Persians from Oman some years later.

Following the death of the Prophet (peace be upon him), internal political rivalries re-surfaced in Oman, and religion was caught up in these. Rebels, led by Dhu'l-Taj Lakit bin Malik al-Azdi of Dibba, rejected Islam and challenged the rule of the Julanda', initially driving the Julanda' princes into hiding. The latter alerted the Caliph Abu Bakr, who sent three armies via 'Tuwwam' (Buraimi) and Wadi Jizzi, which joined with Julanda' forces at Sohar, from where they marched north to engage rebel forces massed at Dibba, then a thriving port and market town. Accounts indicate a closely fought battle, some reporting 10,000 dead and 4,000 captured. The fallen combatants are buried in the graveyard. Many of the prisoners were taken to the Hijaz, and Dibba was sacked and burned, a blow from which it never recovered.

Forces from Muslim Bahrain reportedly joined the battle, by one account as decisive reinforcements. It is interesting to note that the Bahrainis are said to have arrived by a route that would today strike us as rather indirect. They skirted west of the Sabkha Matti and thence eastward across the desert to Buraimi.

Additional colourful details and historical context can be found in *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates* (Frauke Heard-Bey, 1982) and *The Coming of Islam and the Islamic Period* (Geoffrey King, 2001) in *United Arab Emirates: A New Perspective* (Al Abed & Hellyer, eds., 2001) and the sources cited in each. Shorter accounts are given in *Fujeirah, An Arabian Jewel* (Peter Hellyer, 1998) and *Hidden Riches: An Archeological Introduction to the UAE* (Peter Hellyer, 1998).

Gary Feulner

Photograph by the author

Rare fish found after 35-year absence

We re-print, with permission, the following article that was originally published in The National on March 16, 2012. This is one of the most important and unexpected wildlife sightings in the UAE this season – made by members of the Dubai Natural History Group. - Ed.



Photo: Binish Roobas

A fish that walks on land has been spotted in the UAE for the first time in 35 years, according to two Dubai naturalists.

The Walton's mudskipper, known to experts as *Periophthalmus waltoni*, lives on mudflats in the intertidal zone of coastal lagoons.

It spends most of its time out of the water, propelling itself through the mud using its fins, or hiding in burrows in the mud.

The fish grows to about 15 centimetres and feeds on snails and insects on the damp surface when the tide is low.

The sighting was made by Dubai-based naturalists Binish Roobas and Gary Feulner.

"The mudskipper's reappearance is a rare bit of good environmental news against a background of continuing habitat loss in the UAE's coastal regions," said Mr Feulner, a long-time resident and naturalist who is a frequent visitor to the country's coastal lagoons.

Periophthalmus waltoni is found in the Northern Arabian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz and as far away as Pakistan. But in the UAE, the last sighting recorded by scientific observers was in the mid-1970s.

This is why Mr Roobas was so surprised when he spotted the fish. The naturalists would not reveal where they saw the creature because they want to protect the species.

"We were walking across a patch of muddy ground when Binish asked me curiously, 'Do we have mudskippers here?'," said Mr Feulner. "He had surprised some animal that made a short dash into a burrow. It was not a crab.

"Binish is an excellent observer and when he described a six-inch fish, I knew there could be only one possibility. He had to be right."

The pair left the area for a few minutes to let the fish's fear subside. They returned, slowly and quietly, a few minutes later, and saw a mudskipper in full view beside its burrow.

"We soon saw others and watched one gulp a fly. They are unmistakable," said Mr Roobas, who has a degree in zoology from his native India but who works in Dubai in the hotel industry.

An ungainly but endearing creature, the mudskipper was easy to identify from pictures and descriptions in scientific literature.

Its two bulbous eyes, set on top of its head, give it a peculiar appearance but a nearly 360-degree view of its environment.

Periophthalmus is a compound name from the Greek 'peri' (around) and 'ophthalmôn' (eye), which refers to the wide visual field of the species.

They are ambush predators and can pounce with great speed, grabbing small crabs or insects. They can also flee rapidly to their burrows when surprised and can leap into the air.

"I always wanted to see mudskippers but I thought I would have to go to the tropics to do it," said Mr Roobas. "It is a very interesting fish and I hope we can help it to survive here. The population is small but we hope to be able to find others."

The discovery raises a number of questions that the naturalists hope to answer.

One is whether mudskippers could be found at other UAE sites.

Another is whether the mudskipper has really been gone all this time, or if the small remaining populations have simply gone unnoticed.

"It is difficult to imagine that the presence of such a creature could be missed by the legions of professional consultants and amateur naturalists who have scoured the UAE's coastlines since the 1970s," said Mr Feulner. "But it is even more surprising if it has re-appeared recently, because its habitat, the intertidal periphery of coastal lagoons, has been a prime target for dredging or 'reclamation' by development projects.

"What factors could have allowed or encouraged the mudskipper to return under these conditions?"

Whatever the answer, the discovery once again highlights the importance of preserving coastal mudflats, which are ignored in most conservation efforts. The mudskipper site is within what is considered a protected area, but it has been subjected to disruption by infrastructure projects.

Nearby, additional commercial development is planned.

"From a human perspective, these areas are seen as waste ground," said Mr Feulner. "But from a biological perspective, they are an integral part of the rich, interconnected ecosystem of the coastal lagoons, mangrove forests and adjacent seas."

Recent Speaker

Steve James is a lifelong naturalist and bird-watcher whose love for birds, mammals and wild places is infectious to those around him. He has travelled extensively throughout the world, amassing a world list of close to 6,000 bird species and at least 800 mammal species. He has been resident in the UAE since 1992, and his UAE bird list is above 400 species. He is a member of the Emirates Bird Records Committee, and he is available as a bird-guide on trips throughout the UAE and into Oman. Between birding trips, Steve is the Senior Environmental Protection Officer for ADCO.

Steve is also a past Chairman of the ENHG and Bish Brown Award winner, who continues to entertain and inform the Group with beautifully illustrated talks from time to time. In his talk on April 17th, Steve gave us a fascinating presentation on the natural history of Rwanda. Following an introduction to its orderly post-catastrophe society, he gave us a close-up look at the iconic and lesser known species of birds and mammals now under systematic conservation and concluded by urging us to plan a trip to Rwanda and its undervisited national parks to encourage the well-deserving efforts to preserve its vital montane forest and papyrus swamp ecosystems and the fantastic creatures living there.

Upcoming Speaker

ENHG member **Alberto Gonzalez** first travelled to the UK at the age of 22 to realize his dream of working with birds of prey in the British Falcon Center of Derek Stotton. This was the beginning of more than 17 years of experience with the handling, training, socialization, rehabilitation and conservation of these animals.

Later he moved to Canada to work with Dr. Mike Person, a member of the team that recovered and reintroduced the peregrine falcon into Canada. Alberto then returned to Spain to continue working and putting into practice all of his acquired experience. He continued working with birds of prey and helping in their rehabilitation and conservation while employed by the Horus Gyrfalcon Breeding Center in Spain.














In 2005 Alberto began to work for the Falcon Research Center in Al Ain, where he also resides. He dedicates a lot of his free time to the rehabilitation and recuperation of birds of prey that come from illegal commerce in order to later set them free. A passionate diver, he loves reading and travels extensively in order to develop one of his many passions for photography. Alberto is a member of the Ornithology Spanish Association, International Avian Trainers Association and Spanish Wildlife Photography Association.

On May 1st, 2012, Alberto will show us his portfolio of photography with nature as the main theme. These pictures have been taken of fauna in the UAE and Oman. He will highlight and explain the main characteristics of each picture as well as comment on its realization and composition. NB: a good example of Alberto's work can be found in [May 2011 Focus](#), p. 4.

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

Corporate Sponsors of the ENHG - 2012

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. Click on the links below for information about the sponsors.

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Shell	
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Wave Craft, Ltd. (Auditor Nick Benges Co.)	
WSP Group	

In the News Media

The National, March 26: [A nation born, and they were there](#)

The National, March 26: [New solar energy plant rising from the desert](#)

The National, April 4: [Camels 'can help clean up unwanted mangroves'](#)

Gulf News, April 10: [UAE biodiversity study looks at protection](#)

7 Days in...Dubai, April 11: [Diving into UAE history](#)
(Enter title in 7 Days search bar)

In the News Media, Cont'd.

Gulf News, April 12: [Discovery of three dead dolphins on coastline alarms ecologists](#)

The National, April 12: [Dolphin deaths 'were not caused by humans'](#)

Khaleej Times, April 15: [Jebel Hafeet to be monitored by EAD](#)

The National, April 15: [Flamingos in the pink at Ras Al Khor](#)

The National, April 16: [Pollution from quarries raises RAK villagers' cancer risk](#)

The National, April 18: [Sharks can only be saved 'through a united front'](#)

The National, April 18: [Dubai Creek being considered as world heritage site](#)

ITEMS ON SALE AT THE ENHG BOOK 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.)
- Wild about Mammals, 40
- Breeding Birds of the United Arab Emirates, 100
- Sandgrouse checklist of the birds of the United Arab Emirates, 25
- Emirates Bird Report, 20
- Birdwatching guide to Oman, 2nd edition, 100
Guide to bird watching spots in Oman.
- Common Birds in Oman, 2nd ed, 120
- Butterflies of Saudi Arabia & its neighbours, 90
- UAE in Focus, 100
- Natural History of Oman, 50
- Field Guide to the Geology of Oman, 75
- Abu Dhabi 8 Million Years ago, 15
- Arabian Wildlife Encyclopedia, 120
- Sulphur, Camels and Gunpowder, 100
- Native Plants of Oman, 80
- Little O in Oman, 25
- Marine Environment, Resource of the UAE, 140
- Flowering Plants of the UAE, 60
- Socotra Calendar – 2012, 35

Websites of General Interest

Emirates Natural History Group – Al Ain (Archives: newsletters of 3 NHGs, *Tribulus*): <http://www.enhg.org>

Dubai Natural History Group: <http://dnhg.org>

Qatar Natural History Group: <http://www.qnhg.org>

Historical Association of Oman: <http://www.hao.org.om/>

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

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

Emirates Soc. of Geoscience: <http://www.esg-uae.org>

Emirates Marine Environmental Group: www.emeg.ae

Emirates Diving Association:
<http://www.emiratesdiving.com/index.php>

Emirates Wildlife Society – World Wildlife Fund:
http://www.panda.org/who_we_are/wwf_offices/united_arab_emirates/

Environment Agency Abu Dhabi: <http://www.ead.ae/en>

UAE Environmental Atlas (Sign up for notice of release):
<http://www.environmentalatlas.ae/>

Abu Dhabi Culture and Heritage Authority
<http://www.adach.ae/en/>

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

Noukhada Adventure Co.: <http://noukhada.ae>

NYUAD Events Calendar:
<http://nyuad.nyu.edu/news.events/events.ad.html>

Khalifa University Events Calendar:
<http://www.kustar.ac.ae/campus/dss/schedules/default.aspx>

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

Sharjah Museums: <http://www.sharjahmuseums.ae>

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

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

Zoology in the Middle East (Peer-reviewed ISI Journal):
<http://www.kasperek-verlag.de/ZME-allgem.htm>

Sharkwatch Arabia: <http://www.sharkwatcharabia.com>

Foundation for the Protection of the Arabian Leopard in Yemen: <http://www.yemenileopard.org>

Mohamed Bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund:
<http://www.mbzspeciesconservation.org/>

EDGE: Evolutionarily Distinct and Globally Endangered: <http://www.edgeofexistence.org>

Protected Planet: IUCN & UNEP-WCMC Database:
<http://www.protectedplanet.net>

Wikispecies: <http://species.wikimedia.org/wiki>

Encyclopedia of Life: <http://eol.org/>
Midas Fly page: <http://eol.org/pages/713241/overview>

ARKive Images of Life on Earth: <http://www.arkive.org>

Sand Atlas: <http://sandatlas.org>

NHBS Environment Bookstore: <http://www.nhbs.com/>

Committee Members

Andrew Bean
(Chairman / Outgoing Excursion Secretary)
Mobile: 050-322-1327
rabean@eim.ae

Keith Taylor
(Deputy Chairman / Focus Editor)
Mobile: 050-820-4938
kjtaylor13@yahoo.com

Julie Bird (Secretary)
Mobile: 050-615-4757
julieinad@yahoo.com

Ron Priestley
(Outgoing Treasurer)
Mobile: 050-315-9908
ronprst@gmail.com

Barbara Barton Smith
(Membership Secretary)
Mobile: 050-761-6880
barbartonsmith@yahoo.com

Avra Theophanous
(Corporate Sponsorship Secretary & Asst. Membership Secretary)
avra.theophanous@gmail.com

Claudia Gehre
(Public Relations Secretary)
Mobile: 050-526-3026
ccgehre@gmail.com

Kiya Murman
(Outgoing Lecture Coordinator)
Mobile: 050-392-8973
kmurman@ecae.ac.ae

Peter Hellyer
(Editor of *Tribulus* / Librarian)
Mobile: 050-642-4357
peter@extinfo.gov.ae

Dick Hornby (Member)
Mobile: 050-662-4501
dnahornby@yahoo.co.uk

Alexander (Zander) Rupp
(Member)
Mobile: 050 129 7302
ruppaw@eckerd.edu

Stephanie Baldwin
(Member)
stephanie.baldwin@mottmac.com

Required: Treasurer to keep track of the Group's finances next season. Can you do this?

Required: Excursion Secretary to organise and lead field trips next season. Can you do this?

Assistants

Simon Strickland
(Book Stall Coordinator)
056-601-3931

Zander Rupp
(A/V Assistant & Lecture Recorder)

Lectures

Venue: HCT / Abu Dhabi Men's College

Press CTRL+click [here](#) to view map/directions.

April 3rd
Ages of Sail - Stone to Copper to Bronze

Michael Creamer

April 17th
The Natural History of Rwanda

Steve James

May 1st **7:30 PM**
Annual General Mtg.
8:00 PM

Nature Photographs from the UAE & Oman

Alberto Gonzalez

May 15th **7:30 PM**
Plant Diversity Hotspots – Status of Plant Conservation in the Sultanate of Oman

Dr. Annette Patzelt

Field Trips

April 28th
Boat Trip to see the Mussafah Flamingo colony (Max: 12)

Andrew Bean

May 4th/5th
Camping/Snorkelling Trip to Delma Island

Andrew Bean

May 25th/26th
Possible trip to Sir Bu Nair Island to watch the annual Al Ghaffal traditional dhow race - Details TBA

Andrew Bean

ENHG-AD Research & Conservation Fund Grant Application Information

For background on this fund, see [Dec 2009 Focus](#), p5.

For research & grant application guidelines, click [here](#).

For grant application form, click [here](#).

(Yahoo log-in may be required to open 2 above links.)

For further enquiries, contact ENHG Chairman Andrew Bean at rabean@eim.ae.

ENHG 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
- First-Aid Kit
- Sky Scout astronomical object locator/identifier
- Celestron NexStar telescope (on field trips only)
- Two satellite phones, taken on camping trips.

Phone numbers: No. 1: 008821644400956

No. 2: 008821644400965

Enquiries: Andrew Bean, rexabean@emirates.net.ae

Marine Life Rescue Contact Info.

In Abu Dhabi:

EAD Hotline for reporting environmental emergencies including pollution and injured wildlife: 8009990. Email: envirocomplaint@ead.ae

EAD Emergency response manager: Mr. Abdul Rahman. Mob: 0506674171 (contactable 24 hours/day)

EAD contact for sea turtles, dugongs and dolphins: Dr. Himansu Das, Biodiversity Management Sector. Tel: 26934654; Mob: 0504465125; Email: hdsas@ead.ae

In Dubai:

Emirates Marine Environment Group (EMEG) (Tel: 043630581/Fax:043630460; Email: info@emeg.ae)

Dubai Municipality: Main number: 800900. Marine Environment & Sanctuaries Unit (Tel: +9714 606 6818, Fax +9714 703 3532), Email: marabdulla@dm.gov.ae.

Dubai Turtle Rehabilitation Centre at the Burj al Arab Aquarium. Tel: 043017198. 24-hour email contact, Attn. Mr Warren Baverstock, Manager of Operations, BAA Aquarium: warren.baverstock@jumeirah.com
To post Facebook message triggering an after-hours SMS alert: www.facebook.com/turtle.rehabilitation

Newsletter Details

Newsletter contributions to:
newsletter@chirri2000.com

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Postal Address

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