

focus



Abu Dhabi, May 2012
Vol 36 (5)



Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

It has been an active month for the Group with some great talks and well attended field trips. We owe particular thanks to Captain Maarten Verhage for running several flamingo trips out to the Mussafah colony. This has also produced many other bird sightings, including our logo birds, the Crab Plover (sightings list to be published in June *Focus*).

In the next couple of weeks activities will be drawing to a close as the heat of summer increases. We still have at least one more lecture on 5th June, which will also be our AGM—finally. Ser Bu Nair island and the Al Ghaffal race should be a once-in-a-lifetime event at the end of May, weather permitting, so if you are interested please get in contact. We may have found an extra boat to help increase the numbers that can go. Then there are plans afoot to do full-moon kayaking followed by a mid-June snorkelling trip, and maybe even a tern spotting trip, using a boat to get to some of the barrier islands.

We are very grateful to Dr Maggie Case for volunteering to take over as Treasurer from Ron Priestley who deserves our thanks for a sterling job during the past year. And we are now planning on assembling a team of four to five Field Trip Coordinators to lead two to three field trips a year each (day trips and/or camping trips), which should enable us to reach our goals for the coming season. Interest in this role has already been expressed, but more volunteers are still needed. I have plenty of advice and tips to pass on to potential Field Trip Coordinators. It's a great opportunity to see new parts of the UAE/Oman as well as make friendships along the way.

Finally we are still open to applications for Research Grants (up to 10,000 dh) to study any aspect of Natural History of the UAE/GCC. Grant applications can be considered at our 5th June Committee meeting. ENHG has a wonderful record for seeding small projects, which once successful then attract larger funding from bigger organisations to continue their success.

Andrew Bean

January Hike to Difan Village in RAK

A Google Earth view of the mountainous regions of the northern Emirates Ras Al Khaimah and Fujairah reveals literally hundreds of remote villages: level spaces with remains of stone buildings and evidence of fields cleared for agriculture. Most of these are now abandoned, but some, like the high-ridge-top village of Difan, are being actively maintained by the families that own the land.

Before wrapping up this season, we'd like to backtrack a few months to include a write-up of our latest mountain hike—continuing the ENHG-AD tradition started by Roy & Liz (& Chirri!) a few years ago and led in the last few years by Graeme Hornby and Stefan Beck. This Jan. 21st Stefan led seven of us up a mountain trail in RAK to Difan village, where he had led our Group and also the DNHG back in 2009 (See report in [March2009Focus](#)).

Difan is accessible only by foot via a trail out of Wadi Khabb, behind the modern village of Al Tawain in Fujairah. Despite the strong rains that scared some participants off that weekend, we enjoyed cool but dry

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FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Common Kestrel, Int'l Falconry Festival in Al Ain

Photographer: May Yoke Taylor

This month's contributors

Martina Fella, Gary Feulner, The Gazelle, Sonia Lavrencic, Molly McQuarrie, Keith Taylor, May Yoke Taylor

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.

weather, with patches of blue sky and puffy white clouds—what Stefan called “a Bavarian sky”. It took us over three hours to walk up the wadi and then hike up a long steep trail—the entrance to which Stefan couldn't find on his first trip, till he ran into some workers like the fellow below, who doubled our pace, carrying building supplies, trotting up & down in thin, cheap shoes.



We didn't encounter any of the exotic specimens of flora & fauna reported on previous trips—no Caralluma or Trumpeter Finch—but had a good sighting of the common Desert Lark and happily found the trail decorated by the ground-hugging *Tephrosia apollinea*, showing pretty purple blooms, much of the way up.



At the village on top, Stefan showed us the cisterns, like the modernized one shown above, built on the downslope corner of a rainfall collecting surface—the water source for both Difan's ancient residents and their contemporary weekend-visitor descendants.

While at Difan, we came up with working answers to the questions posed by Liza Green in her 2009 write-up:

- Q: How did Stefan ever find the path in the first place?
A: Google Earth images showing new construction.
- Q: Where do the people of Difan get their water?
A: Cisterns like the one above.
- Q: How many trips does the donkey make each week?
A: Quite likely one every working day.
- Q: How do you get a cement mixer half-way up a mountain?
A: We missed it, but reckon it was dragged there by a donkey—to help with the trail improvement projects (notably shoring-up the tricky rock face traverse).
- Q: Where was the man with half a house on his back going when we were leaving Wadi Khabb?
A: To Difan Village—for the reconstruction work!

We had an invigorating, eye-opening trip up Wadi Khabb & recommend more trips like this one in future.

Keith Taylor

Photographs by May Yoke Taylor

IEW: Dubai Creek

Dubai Creek is now accessible by Metro, and we started this trip at the Al Ghubaibah station on the Green Line, near Carrefour, only 100 metres from the waterfront. From there we walked through the busy material souk, now more or less a tourist souvenir district. The narrow lanes led us to the first Indian Temple, surrounded by tiny Indian temple shops filled with incense smoke and Indian music. It was as if we had stepped into another world! We passed by a second, even larger, Indian Temple before the lane brought Al Fahidi Fort, home of the Dubai Museum, into view. Walking past the Ruler's Court, we then entered the tranquil area of the Bastakia

where we were able to enjoy strolling through the quiet lanes and admire old trees & wind towers and peek onto some of the nicely renovated and restored yards.



We then followed the creek further inland. On the side of the creek where normally all the dhows transformed into floating restaurants are towed, we discovered, to our great surprise, the burned remains of two huge dhows, presumably moved in order not to block the busy dhow harbour on the other side.

The dhows had been fully loaded with goods (including cars) when one of them suddenly caught fire because of a faulty diesel generator. As this had happened only days before our tour, the smell of burned wood, chemicals and rubber was still in the air along with the burned and completely melted remains of the cargo.

A short ride on a RTA Waterbus took us to from Al Seef to Al Sabkha Station just next to the Dhow harbor. Walking along the many beautifully decorated wooden ships it was fascinating to see the 'Floating Life' of the Dubai Creek.

There were piles of cargo everywhere on the pavement with men from all over the Gulf region sitting on the boats or on the cargo drinking tea and waiting for the ship to set off for another trip across the Gulf.

Finally, we reached the Spice Souk, then entered the ever busy Gold Souk and after that reached the Deira Central Bus Terminal.

From here one could already smell the nearby fish market! Our first impression when we reached there was shocking! As it was now nearly 5 p.m. the first lorries had started to unload their gruesome cargo... countless huge sharks of all kinds, including hammerheads! The biggest of them was around 3 meters in length, the smallest maybe 20 cm!



The sight was really shocking and many of our group members were seeing this for the first time. However, those who visit the Dubai Fish market on a regular basis will know that this is very common. There seem to be few, if any, restrictions regarding the protection of endangered species in force there. It seemed the only purpose of these sharks was to have their fins cut off to be traded to (mainly) far eastern countries where shark fin soup is still a widely consumed delicacy.

Passing through the main area of the fish market, we all noticed the many baby hamour fish that were sold there. The vendors praised their goods by remarking that the fish was from Dubai waters and not from other regions of the Gulf. One can only imagine what effects this will have on the hamour population in UAE waters.

From the Fish Market we headed towards the largely unknown pedestrian tunnel, which took us again to the Bur Dubai side of the Creek. We once more noticed that the pace of life in this part of the town is far more laid back than in modern Dubai.



We then walked towards the heritage village, passing the Diving village and the old Ruler's houses before reaching Al Ghubaibah Metro station again. According to Anne Millen's pedometer, we walked about nine kilometers. Hopefully all participants spotted some interesting new things and want to go back to find out more by themselves. Happy exploring!

Martina Fella

Photographs by Martina Fella

IEW: Coastal Lagoons

This trip visited three different types of lagoon environments: (1) the mangrove khor and mudflats at Khor Zawrah, Ajman; (2) the hard fasht (fatoush or beachrock) coast at Rafa'ah, Umm al-Quwain; and (3) the estuary of Khor Madfaq, on the UAQ/RAK border, an episodic river mouth.

At Khor Zawrah, the mangroves along the lone remaining 'wild' khor have thrived over the past decade, notwithstanding the obliteration of a large adjacent mudflat and much of the seaward mangroves where DNHG trips visited in earlier years (and home to two still unidentified small gastropods). The lush growth made it difficult for the group to penetrate into the mangrove

forest, and at one point necessitated a lengthy retreat from the "Heart of Darkness" against the rising tide – an especially challenging exit for our youngest and smallest participant, Liam Downey.



Wading on a beachrock platform near Rafa'ah

Sonia Lavrencic

Some faunal changes at Khor Zawrah from earlier years, noted by trip leader Gary Feulner, included: the increasing abundance of the gastropod *Turbo coronatus* (syn. *Lunella coronata*), absent a decade ago, in both the channel and mangrove forest environments; the abundance of the colonial tube worm *Pomatoleios kraussi* in the upper channels; an evident decline in the number of common mud creepers *Cerithidiopsis cingulata* (syn. *Cerithidea cingulata*); an impressionistic decline in the abundance of mangrove tree snails (*Littoraria intermedia*); and the absence of fiddler crabs (*Uca annulipes* et al.).



Turbo coronatus, now an abundant colonizer at Khor Zawrah (the pale green, turban-like shell)

[Would-be visitors to Khor Zawrah should note that access to the khor can be problematic. The khor is now under a new regime of protection by the Ajman Municipality and Planning Department's Environmental Protection Section. Signs warn against a variety of prohibited activities, but in practice enforcement is interpreted by the frequent patrols to mean that one should have permission to be there.]



The beachrock coast of Khor al Beidhah near Rafa'a is also now more difficult to access, but is rewarding. It is best known as a modern analogue for the Sufouh-2 archaeological site in Dubai Media City, where wild-caught camels were butchered nearly 4,000 years ago, evidently on a clean, flat cement-like platform at the water's edge. Our visit was at a spring tide, and the high water surmounted the platform as we watched, refreshing the thousands of tiny winkles *Echinolittorina arabica* burrowing into the rock surface to feed on endolithic algae.

Khor Madfaq is the mouth of a watershed that, after the heaviest rains, drains the mountain and gravel plains from Masafi to Mleiha. This estuary was once home to mudskippers and spoon worms but is today better known for kite surfers (and in our case for air-rifle target practice) and its views of the modern-day Aztec city rising at nearby Jazirat al-Hamra. This site also added another "What is it?" challenge in the form of the mystery "donuts" found there (see photo below).



Mystery "donuts" at Khor Madfaq

A potentially more ominous mystery was the absence of fiddler crabs (*Uca annulipes* et al.) at all three sites. Although a scattering of claws were present, we saw no live fiddlers at all. Were we simply visiting at the wrong state of the tide (late on a rising tide)? A scouting trip a week before, on a falling tide, had found nearly the same absence, with only a few fiddlers at Khor Madfaq. Was it perhaps too cold? The local fiddlers are not known to sit out the winter season. Or is something else happening

to discourage the propagation of fiddlers along the Northern Emirates coast?

The day's most photographed species was the plucky, compact Violet Crab, *Eurycarcinus orientalis*, which will be the subject of a separate account.

Gary Feulner

All photographs but the first by the author

Mystery of the Solitary Spheres: The Answer

In April Focus, we reprinted "The Mystery of the Solitary Spheres" from *The March Gazelle*. We now reprint the article from *The April Gazelle* that addresses that mystery as well as the "What is it" challenge of the mystery "donuts" posed in the article directly above.—Ed.

The *March Gazelle* posed questions about a 1-inch diameter, hard, sandy ball thought to have been rolled by the large local dung beetle *Scarabeus cristatus*. Walker & Pittaway, in *Insects of Eastern Arabia* (1987), have this to say about the parenting habits of a closely related species, the Sacred Scarab Beetle *Scarabeus sacer* of northern and central Arabia: "In Arabia, swarms [of the Sacred Scarab] often follow herds of camels and sheep in the desert. They pounce on any fresh droppings, making them into balls which are then rolled to an area of relatively soft ground. Here the insect excavates a hole into which the ball is rolled. The female lays an egg in the ball which is then coated with a cement to delay dehydration and finally covered with earth. By this process the larvae, when hatched, have a ready source of nourishment sufficient for complete development."

Gary Feulner adds: "Walker & Pittaway do not address the occasional failure of the dung ball project, or the two pinholes, so a more active investigative approach was required. I sliced the ball in the photo in half, using a serrated kitchen knife, cutting so as to leave the two small holes in one hemisphere. This revealed an outer 'shell' of very hard, cemented mud, varying from 4-6 mm thick, surrounding a core of only slightly less hard material having the appearance of soil."



The interior of a dissected, desiccated dung ball

Photo: Gary Feulner

"The whole was very dry and there was no sign of an egg or of any larva having developed. The only observable life was a small cluster of some nearly

microscopic mushroom-like structures, resembling the fruiting bodies of a tiny fungus. So it seems that this dung ball represents an unsuccessful reproductive effort, perhaps because it was unearthed prematurely. Only one of the two tiny holes penetrated the shell. Presumably this was the site of oviposition. However, it remains somewhat difficult to imagine how the grub-like, C-shaped larva can emerge from such a seemingly impregnable capsule."

Editor of The Gazelle

Upcoming Speaker



Dr. Reza Khan, currently serving as Specialist in Wildlife and Zoo Management for the Dubai Municipality, has a career spanning zoology, biology and natural history stretching over some 40 years. A graduate in Zoology from Dhaka University, Bangladesh, he went on to complete his Ph.D. at Bombay University. He worked as a lecturer, assistant and associate professor in Bangladesh from 1971 to 1983 before taking up a post as Curator of Birds and Animals at Al Ain Zoo in 1983. He was in charge of Dubai Zoo from 1989 to 1991, and then head of Dubai Municipality's Zoo Section up to 2009.

In addition to the above, Dr. Khan has also written over 50 scientific publications on the wildlife and environment of Bangladesh and the UAE. He is a member of numerous groups, including the Species Survival Commission of IUCN and the World Commission on Parks and Protected Areas.

He has authored *Birds of Dubai – a pictorial Guide*, *Indigenous Trees of the UAE* and *Wild Cats of the UAE*. He received the Sheikh Mubarak Bin Mohammed Award for Natural History in 2000 for his work with UAE Natural History and was also awarded the National Bangabandhu Award for Wildlife Conservation by the Bangladesh Government in 2011.















Dr Khan is also a longstanding member of the Dubai Natural History Group, serving as the Group's Reptiles Recorder. He last spoke to our Group in 2007 on "The Sundarbans – Mangroves of Bangladesh", preparatory to a memorable Inter-Group field trip to that region that was held shortly thereafter. We welcome him back to speak to us on "Wildlife Around Dubai – An Overview of Terrestrial Animals" at our season-ending lecture on June 5th, 2012.

The Editor thanks the above speaker for providing autobiographical information and photo 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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WSP Group	

Flight of the Eagle Owl

ENHG member Molly McQuarrie (leaving the UAE next month) sent in this link - <http://www.dogwork.com/owfo8/> with the following comment: "Owl coming right at a Raytheon security camera: **FANTASTIC!!** A hypnotic piece of film, slowed for your pleasure. The last two or three seconds are phenomenal." -Ed.

In the News Media

The National, April 29: [Divers give Abu Dhabi's ports a deep clean](#)

The National, May 2: [Sea turtles tracked while swimming to cooler waters](#)

Gulf News, May 3: [Out of this world, under the sea](#)

The National, May 4: [New shark species found in RAK](#)

The National, May 5: [Something in green perhaps, sir?](#)

The National, May 12: [10-metre whale washes up near Fujairah port](#)

Gulf News, May 14: [Dubai Safari to cover 400 hectares](#)

The National, May 14: [How do Gulf corals beat the heat?](#)

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

Book Stall Coordinator: Simon Strickland: 056-601-3931

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://wwf.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/>

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Required: Field Trip Coordinators to serve on a team of 4 or 5, planning and leading 2-3 field trips each during the coming season. Can you do this? Assistance will gladly be provided by the Committee.

Lectures

Venue: HCT / Abu Dhabi Men's College

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

8th May
Wildlife Photography in the UAE and Oman
Alberto Gonzalez

15th May
NO LECTURE due to unexpected complications with Dr Patzelt's travel arrangements (We may try again next season.)

5th June **7:30 PM**
Annual General Mtg.

8:00 PM
Wildlife Around Dubai:
An Overview of Terrestrial Animals
Dr Reza Khan

Social Event

29th May **6 PM-10 PM**
Informal get-together at the Aloft Hotel (ADNEC), top floor

Field Trips

4th – 5th May
Camping Trip to Delma Island
Andrew Bean

10th May
EMEG Turtle Release
Host: EMEG

11th May
Flamingo-watching, Snorkelling Boat Trip
Andrew Bean

25th-26th May
Trip to Ser Bu Nair to watch the Al Ghaffal Annual Traditional Dhow Race
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, rexabeen@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:
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Postal Address

ENHG c/o Environment Agency -
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Members' Items for sale

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