

focus

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Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

The Abu Dhabi International Airport is about to be extended. Indeed the 'extension' is so big that it will in effect be a new airport. This is great news for us travellers, but not so good for the very large and healthy population of dhabs (spiny-tailed lizards), which currently live there!

The dhab colonies on the site are some of the densest and best most of us have ever seen. Fortunately the authorities are taking environmental responsibilities seriously, and a project is in progress to rescue as many of the dhabs as possible. The long term plan is to move the dhabs to new locations in the desert where they can live safely. Thanks to the many members who have braved the summer heat to help in this enterprise. There are likely to be further opportunities for volunteers as the project progresses.



Other news: His Excellency Sheikh Nahayan, our patron, has presented the Sheikh Mubarak award to Peter Hellyer and the Bish Brown Award to Dr Sandy Fowler. Congratulations to both. Sandy has also donated his extensive shell collection to ERWDA, where it will be curated and available for consultation by amateur and professional conchologists.

And a particular thanks to Roy Richards, for setting up the AUHENHG forum (see below). This promises to be an exciting and useful addition to our group – lets use it!

Drew Gardner

Emirates Natural History Group now on the Web!!

We have added an exciting new facility for ENHG members, in the shape of an internet-based forum, hosted by Yahoo Groups. Some of you may already know about this, and indeed many members have already signed up in response to the initial invitation, which we sent out earlier in May.

This new AUHENHG group will enable us all to keep in touch, and will help the committee and field trip organisers to keep you up to date with the latest information about our activities. The calendar facility should also serve as a quick reference for details about upcoming lectures, field trips, or other events. Direct

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FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Falcon trap, East of Ruwais
Photographer: Terri Everest

internet access to the latest issue of Focus will also be available. Extra facilities offered by using Yahoo Groups will be developed as we go along.

The AUHENHG group will increase its usefulness as more members sign up, so if you haven't already joined, then please spend a few minutes to sign up. It's free, it's simple to use, and doesn't take long to register as a member. Below are various ways to join.

1 By Email

Send a blank email to AUHENHG-subscribe@yahoogroups.co.uk. You should then receive an email with instructions on how to join up. You will be given the option to "Join the Group" or "Join the Mailing List". Please note that if you don't have a Yahoo ID you can create one. If you don't want to create a Yahoo ID then you can choose "Join the Mailing List" and just receive the emails, but in that case you'd be unable access the group facilities such as the calendar and the online version of Focus. The emails, in this latter case will be sent directly to the address you sent the blank email to.

2 Via the Web

Use your web browser to go to <http://uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/AUHENHG/>. From there you can click on the "Join this Group" button. Using this method you will need to sign up to create a Yahoo ID, if you don't already have one.

If you have any problems with the above please email newsletter@chirri2000.com describing your problem, and we'll do our best to sort it out for you.

Looking forward to seeing you at AUHENHG!

Roy L Richards

Field Trips

Outing to Sharjah, Wadi Lamha, Dibba ...and more

My first overnight desert trip in four years with ENHG turned out to be a wonderfully varied experience, filled with pleasures for the senses – visual and tactile.

As our convoy of six 4-wheelers rolled along the Emirates Road, just short of arriving in Dubai Emirate, our leader, Allestree, pulled over and we all tumbled on foot for about 50 yards into the fairly pristine sands – or so they appeared from the road. Up close were lots of interesting natural things to look at and discuss. Significant finds after the unusual number of rains over the winter were clumps of grasses and sedges and truly prolific spreads of *eremobium* with its small white flowers (almost into seed). They were a remarkable presence, according to Allestree and others knowledgeable about flora, since they hadn't been much seen in previous drier years.

Lots of lizard, beetle and possible sand boa tracks were also in evidence. Bird tracks followed them around – in hot pursuit of a plentiful meal perhaps?

On we rolled to the Desert Museum at Sharjah – a terrific experience for newcomers and ever-interesting for those, like myself, who have been there several times. We had plenty of time to study natural history, geology, archeology and live desert animals – and to grab some lunch as we watched the herds of oryx and gazelles grazing outside the cafeteria windows.

After leaving the Museum complex, we headed along the Al Dhaid road and turned off into the desert towards Wadi Lamha at Biyatah (somewhere after Falaj Al Mualla). As a follower in the convoy, I'm a bit hazy about the directions! About 2 kms into this desert road our eyes feasted on more spring annuals, well nourished by the recent rains – most spectacular was a field of yellow primulas – *arnebias*. Soon thereafter, the leaders called a halt at a fine camping spot under a high dune. We discovered a little later that it was also somewhat at the juncture of two fairly well frequented sand roads which resulted in a couple of inquisitive but very polite national visitors checking us out. But the presence of the big dune meant we were actually quite undisturbed for most of our stay there.

Through the evening we enjoyed fun, laughter, swapping tales of desert adventures, and stargazing between the clouds.

My memory of the next morning, as I trudged up the dune for an "ablutions" visit, is of a herd (is this the word?) of camels thundering over the edge of the dune, sand flying up in clouds around them, and proceeding speedily towards a farm some 1km off. And there was also lots of green stuff all around for them to graze on when they did decide to stop.

As we took off again through the sands towards Al Dhaid and then on to Dibba, we stopped for a visit in the little town of Hamriya amidst the Jiri Plain. The real, big, Czech Jiri who was with us, was surrounded by the

group for a special photo with him – Pasha Jiri of the Plain.

Through the town of Dibba, heading hot and hard for the coast, we stopped quickly for lollies and ices and filled up the cars. No time was wasted in finding a suitable spot on Dibba beach – cars were parked, beach umbrellas rolled out, bodies were bared (somewhat), packed lunches appeared and we lay in the sun. The natural world here revolved mainly around what could be seen in the waters, either by snorkeling around Snoopy Rock, or paddling close to the edge, though some jellyfish were visitors we could have lived without. By the edge of the beach, though, some of us spotted clumps of mountain lavender – *Lavandula subnuda*.

The pleasant hours on the beach were a sociable end to a nicely varied trip. As some took off straight back to Abu Dhabi via Dibba, others took the longer coastal route back via Fujairah and Al Kalba – it had been a great weekend, a wealth of natural wonders!

Mary Gillis

(Neophyte naturalist)

Camping on the East Coast

During the Natural History Group's last camping trip of the season, we explored parts of the East Coast. Our nine-vehicle convoy took us out of Abu Dhabi, and eastwards through a sandy desert with low hills and small camel ranches. Our first stop featured an acacia tree, blooming with dainty yellow pompom-like mimosa flowers. The main attraction here, however, was not the mimosa, nor the dusty farm-field growing fodder off the highway, but a colony of jewel beetles that inhabited the thorny branches of the tree. It was the month of May, the time of year this type of beetle colonizes the acacia tree. The beetles were all clad in a delicate dusting of yellow spots on their jet black carapaces.

We left the beetles behind and continued onward to Al Madam to rendezvous with some members from Dubai. Then, after passing through that town, we turned off the highway, past a small farm, a herd of goats and a few straggly trees along a sandy path that led to Thuqeibah, the site of an iron-age farm. Part of the ancient walls had been cemented over and some green netting had been laid to protect the site. Further off lay the three-meter deep well that would have provided these ancestral farmers with water. But, no water lay in that ancient well. It was empty save for a lone Hooded Malpolon (*Malpolon moilensis*), which lay trapped at the bottom. As we lifted the lid covering the well, the snake promptly coiled its long, striped, black and tan body, trying to hide from the curious human eyes above.



Although it remained a prisoner to the well, the snake was healthy, and therefore must have had a regular food source, perhaps from insects that strayed too close to its darkened lair.

We left the plains

behind, and drove through the dark, gravelly Hajar Mountains, austere monuments to the timeless winds that blow through the Arabian Gulf. We parked our cars at our lunch spot at Wadi Daftah and walked along a falaj to a grove of date palms where we relished their cool shade and cloud-flecked sky. On both sides of the wadi rose vertical, rocky cliffs which harboured tufts of shrubby, green vegetation. Further along the wadi, we stopped at a natural art gallery to ponder the origins of an assemblage of petroglyphs that had been etched along some rocks lying on the wadi-floor. These ancient drawings depicted some human forms interacting with goat-like creatures. We saw a camel etched on a rock, as well as a man who seemed to possess the head of a horned animal. There was space from our collective imagination for the ideas that emerged as to the meaning and origins of these etchings, but no certain answers.

Next, we drove up the mountains to a secluded area where we spent the night in the relative freshness of the early-May mountain air. Some stars peeked through the milky night-sky, but mainly remained hidden by the wandering clouds. Some time during the night, we awakened to the soft patter of raindrops falling on the tents, and a gusty wind pulling at the pegs.



Wolf Spider – a guest under Roy's tent

By the following morning, the sky had cleared and we awoke to a vista of charcoal-hued hills reaching skywards. We broke camp and headed for Fujairah Fort, which was still being renovated. The fort was originally built by Shaikh Mohammed bin Matter Al Sharqi around 1670 AD, but had, over the years, fallen into disrepair after having been bombarded in the 20th century by the British. The renovation project includes a plan to rebuild the old town beside the fort as a model of an ancient Emirati village. We strolled around the squat, square fort, and darted in and out of chambers, halls and narrow stairwells that led to observatory posts overlooking the low-rise buildings of the town below.

The wind picked up again and by late morning had developed into a strong, gusty gale, which lifted particles of sand and slashed them at our faces, driving us away from our intended swim at Khor Kalba. Instead, we picnicked at the foot of the Hajar Mountains before starting the homebound trek to Abu Dhabi. Beyond the mountains, our drive took us westwards across low sand dunes, then flat, gravelly plains to our adopted island home where we arrived tired, but refreshed, by the

mountain scenery of the UAE.

Miriam Sciala

Meeting the Restorer at Fujairah Fort

A group of 29 members of the Abu Dhabi Natural History Group had a unique opportunity of meeting the restorer of Fujairah Fort on Friday, May 6th, as part of the last camping weekend of the current season.

The group had been camping at the very top of the water collecting areas of Wadi Ashwani. It had been a relatively cool night. This changed as the group moved into Wadi Ham and down to Fujairah where the temperature was considerably higher and there was a high wind.

Our visit to the fort had been arranged with the help of local archaeologist, Dr Michele Ziolkowski. Mr Salah Ali Hassan, the Museum Director in Fujairah, had kindly agreed to open the fort to group members. The fort is not normally open to members of the public. In the event, he was unavoidably called away, but had thoughtfully asked the Restorer of the fort to welcome us in his stead. **Mr Amrik Singh Plaha**, was there to give us a guided tour of the premises and to tell us something about the techniques involved in restoring a building of the size and specifications of the fort. Mr Singh has been working in Fujairah since 1997, and has had a successful and rewarding career in Oman, restoring such impressive monuments as Jabrin, and other buildings in Muscat and Buraimi. His latest piece of restoration is the late Islamic tower in Wahala (near Ain al Ghamour).



Roof top views

The restoration team was lucky in having an old photograph, provided by the Ruler, of the front elevation of the fort. This enabled them to rebuild most of the outer walls as they had been over fifty years ago.

Mr Singh explained the composition of *sarouj*, the cementing compound used in many of the Batinah forts and sheikhly houses. Obtaining the necessary clay had posed a problem until he realized that the local dams contained large quantities of silt: precisely what was needed to make the clay! The *sarouj* and the chalk and water paste plasters have been used traditionally in the coastal areas on account of their low thermal conductivity.



Mr Singh has an experienced team of masons, carpenters and metal workers who do not sub-contract. All the restoration work is completed by the on-site team. As Michele Ziolkowski explains in her paper (see reference) on the fort, the configuration of the outer walls derives from the shape of the rocky outcrop on which the fort is built. The towers are made up of living rooms, majlis and storage areas. Although the fort has a distinct "Batinah" feel about it, the overall style is reminiscent of vernacular architecture all over southern Arabia. These living areas would have had occasional use only, notably in times of war and unrest. From within the fort presents a very pleasing aspect with the inner courtyard and rounded crenellations on the turrets. The restoration has created the impression of an old building in good condition, rather than a theme park in a traditional idiom. The prototypical Arabian fort has become a leit-motif for some government buildings in the UAE, with varying degrees of success.



Around the fort is a collection of traditional houses, some of which have been restored to their original dimensions. When complete, this ensemble will present Old Fujairah as it must have looked in the middle of the last century, just before the oil era. The restoration work is to continue for a further two years, after which the site may be opened to the public.

The Abu Dhabi branch would like to thank Mr Singh for giving up his time, and wishes him a speedy completion of the work.

Reference:

Ziolkowski MC & Al-Sharqi AS: *Fujairah Fort and Associated Settlement: A study based on historical, archaeological and ethnographic information*. (To be published in the forthcoming *Emirates Archaeology, Volume 2*).

Allestree Fisher

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Terri Everest

June Day Trip

A day-trip is planned for June 10th: to visit Wadi Tarabat and the Jebel Hafit Tombs.

Wadi Tarabat offers a typical wadi ecosystem in terms of fauna and flora. A number of third millenium BC tombs, on the east side of Jebel Hafit, have been restored, and many others remain in their unrestored state. We shall stop at the tombs for lunch. Time permitting, we may visit some of the wellheads of the Saruj falaj.

Participants will assemble behind Popeyes (Eid Prayer Ground) at 7.45 for an 8.00am departure. Packed lunches and walking shoes required. 4-wheel drives preferred. ETA in Abu Dhabi: 18.30hrs. If interested, email Allestree Fisher at allestree.fisher@hct.ac.ae.

Snippets

16,000 species at risk,

Dec 2004



Man is taking over the world and bleeding it dry for most other species. That was the conclusion many experts drew from a new report by the World Conservation Union, which showed

that almost 16,000 species of flora and fauna are at risk of extinction, largely because of human activity. They range from previously robust species, including sharks and tigers, to rare and exotic creatures such as Sri Lanka's tree-climbing loris. The snow leopard, which lives in the mountains of central Asia, has been on the endangered list for three decades; yet numbers continue to fall, in the face of habitat destruction, warfare and hunting. Species once familiar in Britain such as the slender-billed curlew and the sociable lapwing are also on the critically endangered list. In total, according to the report, over 12% of birds, 23% of mammals, 32% of

amphibians and more than 40% of all turtles and tortoises are under threat.

The myth of the forgetful fish

October 2004



Got a memory like a fish? Lucky you. Far from being gormless creatures who forget everything in three seconds, fish can think laterally and retain complicated information for

months, said *The Sunday Telegraph*. Dr Culum Brown of the University of Edinburgh studied Australian crimson-spotted rainbowfish. They learned how to escape from a net in their tank, and then repeated the same trick 11 months later, without practising. "This is equivalent to a human recalling a lesson learnt 40 years ago." The finding has been welcomed by fish-lovers as proof that their pets are sophisticated creatures. "We know from our readers that fish can recognise their owners, and some will sulk if someone else tries to feed them," says Karen Youngs, editor of *Practical Fishkeeping*. The discovery has also re-ignited the debate over the cruelty of hooking fish, although anglers remain sanguine. "Their intelligence just adds to the interest," said Rodney Coldron of the National Federation of Anglers. "I think it might attract more people to fishing, by showing it's more of an even contest."

Hong Kong: fish off the menu?

October 2004



The voracious appetite of Hong Kong diners is threatening the extinction of a rare reef-dwelling fish, says *The Independent*. Caught on a Pacific reef, and transported live to restaurant tanks, the

humphead wrasse is considered such a delicacy in the city that its flesh can cost up to £100 per kilo. With demand soaring, and huge profits to be made, populations of the humphead are in freefall. The fish can actually grow to a hefty eight feet in length, but discerning diners want 'plate-sized' fish. This means that fishermen concentrate on catching immature specimens, which have not yet had a chance to reproduce, so hastening the population decline. To make matters worse, the method used to catch the fish is extremely harmful to the ecology of the coral reefs. Most humphead fishermen use cyanide; this only stuns the humphead, but it kills smaller fish as well as coral. This month Britain backed a call for the fish to be listed on the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites). The Irrawaddy dolphin – a freshwater species known for its acrobatic mating ritual – is also under consideration.

ITEMS ON SALE

AT THE ENHG STALL

- Abu Dhabi Bird checklist 10Dhs.
(Free if you spend over 50Dhs!)
- Emirates Bird Report, 50Dhs.
- Birdlife in Oman, 120Dhs.
Beautiful photographs by the Eriksens.
- Bird watching Guide to Oman, 95Dhs
(Copies signed by Eriksens & Sargeants).
- Breeding Birds of UAE, 60Dhs.
Author: Simon Aspinall
- Seashells, 30Dhs.
A useful little waterproof guide to the region's shells.
- Wild about Reptiles, 60Dhs.
- Wild about Mammals, 40Dhs.
Marijcke Jongbloed, mammals of the UAE.
- Plant Checklist, 25Dhs.
Marijcke Jongbloed - Know your local wild plants.
- Jebel Hafit – A Natural History, 100Dhs.
- Pests – Find out what's in and around your home
- Children's books: Yaw the Wildcat; Hayat the Leopard
- ENHG T-shirts/golf (polo) shirts/caps.
25Dhs/35Dhs/10Dhs.
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Lectures

7 June 2005
Insects of Wadi
Tarabat
Brigitte Haworth

21 June 2005
The UAE – Past &
Present
Frauke Heard

Summer Recess

(NO LECTURES
SCHEDULED FOR
JULY AND AUGUST)

Field Trips

10 June 2005
Day trip – Wadi
Tarabat & Jebel Hafit
tombs
Allestree Fisher

SUMMER Trips

23/24 June 2005
O'night camping trip –
Aqabat Oso, Wadi Bih,
Wadi Khabb Shamsi
Roy Richards

14/15 July 2005
O'night camping trip –
Oman-Musandam,
Jebel Harim, dhow trip
from Khasab
Roy Richards

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