

EMIRATES NATURAL HISTORY GROUP (ABU DHABI)

NEWSLETTER

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I. PROGRAMME

- 5th. September - Film night.
- 3rd. October - 'Overland to India' - Part I, by Jack Webb.
- 17th. October - 'Overland to India' - Part II, by Jack Webb.
- 7th. November - 'Views of the Emirates' - various contributors.
- 21st. November - 'A Miscellany of British Archaeology', by Dave Rowlands.
- 5th. December - 'Modern Islamic Architecture', by Dr. Makhlouf.
- 19th. December - Geology in the UAE.

There will be no programme on 19th. September because of a probable clash with the Eed Holiday.

- 29th. August - Workroom, 6.30 p.m. Roger Brown, Marine Recorder, will be conducting a workshop on identifying Arabian Gulf fish.

If any members are willing to give a 10 - 15 minute slide show or talk on a Monday evening, will they please contact the Committee. We would like to involve members more and perhaps half a dozen of you could put on a joint show covering different aspects of natural history, geography, travel etc. Don't be shy. There's nothing to it.

II. "The Natural History of the Arabian Gulf"

This series of books, published by George Allen and Unwin, has gone down well with members. Titles so far are Birds, Mammals, Seashells and Inshore Fishes. Any member who has not yet taken advantage of the Group's offer to purchase these at UK prices will have a final chance at the next meeting (September 5th) when Terry Donohue will be taking cash with orders. Price : DH 50 per title, which is a considerable saving over local bookshop prices.

- III. The recent Accession Day holiday coincided with a weekend and the extra day enabled some members to go further afield than the normal Friday permits. A group of us in three 4W drives tried out the 'road' from Dibba to Ras al Khaimah via the Wadis Dhabb and Bih. Although the total route is less than 90 kms., the graded track is deeply rutted in the pebbles and gravels of the Wadi Bih, and the journey takes several hours even in dry summer conditions. After several misleading starts in Dibba (trackless gravel plains and cul de sac plantations) we eventually found the entrance to Wadi Khabb and from there it was plain sailing as far as navigation went - after all, it's difficult to lose one's way in the local equivalent of Cheddar Gorge.

The middle section between the heads of the two wadi systems takes in some of the most spectacular scenery in this corner of Arabia, with dramatic gorges on all sides and cloud-topped peaks. This is the area of the Shihuh people, who keep flocks of goats and seasonally tend tiny terraced fields high up on the ridges, but the population is small and very scattered. The track only passes through one village worthy of the name, and that is at the highest point, up in the clouds at this time of year. These hills are mostly treeless except for small Acacias, Ziziphus and Figs in the steep wadis, and hence nearly all buildings are of dry stone construction. In view of the winds we experienced we were not surprised. We camped high up on a plateau and were subjected to strong easterly winds driving misty squalls in from the coast. Both wadis are littered with dry stone storage rooms built at strategic points such as caves and fissures. These structures are of indeterminate age but some are still apparently used, probably in winter when people move down from the highlands. A few hamlets in Wadi Bih were occupied.

Wildlife was scarce, as expected in the height of summer. Neither of the main wadis nor their tributaries held any surface water during our visit, but it was clear that Spring had been late on the hills because of the large variety of fruiting annual plants. Lizards and birds (bulbuls, wheatears, grouse) were much in evidence, but there was not a sign of any leopards, which are reputed to exist still, though they must be close to extinction. One hedgehog skin (the new Mammal Recorder's first major observation) was found in a seasonal hamlet in Wadi Bih and we inferred that the creature had been cooked and eaten. The Group's Bee and Wasp Recorder enthusiastically bemoaned the lack of flying insects and even the numerous flowering caper bushes (to a layman teeming with Hymenoptera) failed to arouse him from a lethargy resulting from two days' poor hunting.

Definitely a trip worth making but make sure there are at least two vehicles. Petrol is available at Dibba and Nakheel (Ras al Khaimah). The road is for the most part empty and is little used, although much of it was wide and excellently graded. A route map is available from Ian Hamer.

Rob Western

#### IV. Reptiles

The identification of reptiles is very difficult unless you can observe them at close range or can examine them in the hand. The colouring of many is so similar that it is necessary to count scales, check for fringes on toes and take measurements to establish precise identities. There remains a great deal of work to be done in the UAE, some of which could be carried out by our Group. If you are at all interested please contact me at the first October meeting, on my return from leave.

Some recent recordings may prove interesting for a start. An 18 inch viper, *ECHIS CARINATUS*, was encountered during a camping trip near Huwailat (Hatta) one night in early July. On the walls of an overhanging rock several eggs of a gecko species were found but there was no sign of what must have been large owners.

West of Jebel Dhanna in late June we discovered a toad-headed agamid, *PHRYNOCEPHALUS MACULATUS*, in daylight and a gecko, *STENODACTYLUS SLEVINII*, after dark.

An 18 inch young desert monitor, *VARANUS GRICEUS*, was found run over on the road near Shwaib one morning in July. This was my first sighting of the species in UAE but it has been reported by Peter Dickinson (Al Ain Zoo Curator) around Al Ain. In Arabic it is known as "wirral".

Several young spiny-tailed agamids, *URAMASTIX MICROLEPIS*, were seen one afternoon in July in the Siji area. The largest, over 16 inches long, was unfortunately run over. Its Arabic name is "dhub",

An unidentified very thin brown mottled snake about 20 inches long was seen briefly in freshwater pools in a wadi near Ghayl during the last Eed.

In the Wadi Uyaynah, near Dibba, last week we encountered a large (18 inches from snout to tail) specimen of LACERTA JAYAKARI, and just afterwards another, smaller one. We have only recorded this species previously near Mahdah and at Hatta.

We received some very good photographs of URAMASTIX MICROLEPIS taken by M. Turpin on Futaisi Island.

Bish Brown

#### V. THE OIL SLICK

We hear and read very little reliable news on the current situation regarding the oil spillage in the northern Gulf. Whatever the situation, it can only get worse, as the leaks continue. Quite naturally the emphasis is on the protection of power stations, water distillation plants and ports, which support the human population. Wildlife is rarely a priority for most authorities, except when it is the fishing industry that is directly threatened.

Within the next few weeks the main north to south bird migration will commence and many birds will be flying down or across the Gulf and resting on its shores to feed. Large numbers or even a few dead birds may indicate the effects of oil pollution and the toxicity within the area. The oil and sticky tar balls may not pose the main threat, which could be the result of chemical reactions between the oil, contaminants and warm sea water. Fish-eating species such as ospreys, cormorants, herons, terns and gulls will be most affected, but waders, flamingoes and other shore birds will be hit by coastal pollution.

If you find any form of dead marine life please let us know so that we can investigate the cause or causes. Ask your friends to keep you informed if they see or hear anything, particularly those flying out or working on offshore islands. We have no direct contact with the authorities, but one of our members is actively involved in the environmental protection business and will have contacts.

Remember, your help as an individual is most important.

Bish Brown

Three dolphins were spotted off the Abu Dhabi Hilton breakwater on 6th August. A final frolic before the oil creeps in?