

EMIRATES NATURAL HISTORY GROUP (ABU DHABI)

NEWSLETTER

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PROGRAMME

- October 3rd - Overland to India Part 1 by Jack Webb
- October 17th - Overland to India Part 2
- A fascinating slide and sound account of a journey from Britain to India via the Gulf.
- November 7th - Views of the Emirates by various contributors
- Slides of specific areas or themes, including Liwa, mountains, coasts, wadis, water and waterfalls.
- November 21st - A Miscellany of British Archaeology by Dave Rowlands
- A personal view of some famous British sites, including prehistoric, Roman and urban rescue excavations.

The meeting on November 7th is one of the very few where a number of contributors participate and is designed partly to show that giving a short presentation of perhaps 15 minutes or so is not as difficult as it sounds. We would like to hear from any member who feels that he could speak on a natural history topic, with or without slides. There must be many of you who have lived elsewhere in the Middle East or beyond and who may like to share your experiences. If so, contact any Committee member.

WORKROOM

Our thanks to Roger Brown, our Marine Recorder, for his workshop on marine fish identification on August 29th. The response was such that Roger is expanding on this theme with a followup workshop on September 26th in the Workroom at 6.30. He would welcome any samples of (preferably frozen) fish on the evening. Please don't post in advance. Don't forget, all you budding sea anglers, that Bulletin 20 (July 1983) has identification forms which should be completed and returned to Roger.

During several nocturnal visits to the desert during Ramadan many gerbils were seen whilst driving along both blacktop road and desert track. Those on the road tended to stop in the middle of the carriageway, presumably mesmerised by the car headlights so that one passed over the top of them. One brave thing kept running across the road. Once onto the sand they were noted at intervals of one to four kilometres, usually within a few hundred metres of a municipality plantation. Three were seen to jump several inches into the air when the headlights illuminated them, once back on the ground they scuttled off in another direction.

The opportunity was taken at the bottom of the large dune at Bujair to study the antics of a very brave gerbil who did not eventually run away until the Land cruiser wheel was a mere twelve inches from it.

Previously the three inch bodied animal with a tail of about 5 inches length had been scratching into the sand round the base of a *Indigofera argentea* plant, and feeding off either seeds or grubs found just below the surface. Several times this entertaining animal hopped between the branches of the plant and bobbed back into view to check on the great white lights shining down onto it. Throughout it remained seemingly unconcerned by ones presence. Once one plant had been exhausted it scuttled across to another plant. It did not appear to frequent the sedge nearby, but ran away at great speed once the vehicle was set in motion. This observation was made at 3.20 am on 29th June, but other sightings were made between 10.30 pm and 12.30 am, with a lull in activity until 3.00 am. At first I thought this may indicate a digestion period between an early eating period before midnight and a second eating period before dawn. However this theory was disproved by mid July when repeated sightings at all hours of the night were made. A total of twelve mice were seen in any one period or section of the desert.

A cat was seen at Bujair on 2nd July prowling round close to where the gerbil had been observed three days earlier. Another cat was seen some eight kilometres closer to Madina Zaid its eyes reflecting the car headlight making it an obvious subject for investigation. Unfortunately it did not wait round to see what was coming, but ran off at the same moment that it had been identified. Several small moths were seen flying round the floodlights at the work site, and one or two grasshoppers were still active at that time of night.

During early daylight hours on 26th June many dung beetles were observed going about their business, and one or two adult locusts were seen hopping round Habshan.

Once Eid has passed and more sociable working hours have returned the temptation lingers to have a another night drive into the desert, to see if foxes or rabbits may be observed.

P.S. A rabbit was in fact observed on 9th July close to a rethered herd of camels some 12 kilometres south of Madina Zaid.

THE SUMMER OF '83

I have been very fortunate this June, July and August in seeing many parts of the Emirates during the course of weekend camps with various members of the ENHG. The memories come crowding in. Coming face to face with a Cape Hare (*Lepus capensis*) loping round a corner in an eroded gully near Jebel Dhanna, his long ears erect, and the surprised look on his face before he turned and fled with a flash of white tail, leaving me with the ridiculous impression that I was Brer Fox. The same weekend sighting two Red Foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) in prime condition, and finding turtle shells outside their lair.

Another weekend in a flowing wadi near Hatta, with all the ingredients - full moonlight, scorpions and a two-foot viper. A long walk down the Wadi Fayd, with the stream at times a foot deep and several metres wide, full of fish and toads. From a cleft in the cliff appeared a wizened old man on a mule, as surprised to see us at dawn as we were him.

The Eed al Fitr saw us in Ras al Khaimah, where I had my first glimpse of Indian Rollers with their vivid turquoise markings, along the beach at Al Rifaa. That same trip took us into the Wadi Bih behind Al Nakheel. Here was a vastly different world of square stone storage huts, terraced fields and high ridges, one of which we climbed - not as easy as it seemed with its narrow ridges and vertical drops. That evening a villager informed us of a route up the highest cliff in the distance. Studying the scarp through binoculars I was dubious, but in the cool light of dawn we decided to give it a go. Setting off up a steep boulder-choked ravine the route was mysterious in the half-light. Near the top we were amazed to see a slightly-built young man in 'dishdash' and flipflops, carrying what seemed to be his worldly possessions on a stick over his shoulder. He indicated a route to the summit and we followed it while he did a vanishing trick into what seemed a featureless cliff. The summit plateau, with its views north into Musandam and south over Ras al Khaimah and beyond, remain strong memories. Looking down over our miniscule camp below it was easy to imagine ourselves in Nepal. We eventually arrived back at base dehydrated and exhausted after a tricky descent in intense heat. Anybody trying this sort of caper in the middle of July is recommended to be off the hills by 9.30 a.m.

One weekend found us visiting the Al Ain Museum, where flint artefacts found by members of the Group are among others on display in a recently-revamped Prehistoric Section. This was followed by inspection tours of the nearby Hili and Qarn bint Saud archaeological sites. Another archaeological visit was to the Hellenistic and, later, Persian site at Ad-Door in Umm al Qawain where we found pottery fragments and rivets which we assumed to be part of a ceramic belt of perhaps the seventeenth century.

The highlight of the summer, however, was undoubtedly the long trip from Dibba to Ras al Khaimah via the Wadis Dhabb and Bih. The track twisted through a narrow gorge and then in a series of zig-zags onto the mountains proper, where clouds rolled over the ridges and the night wind was strong, bringing squalls of mist. At one point my camping blanket was torn off, to be retrieved with difficulty. In the Wadi Bih dwellings of dry stone blocks under overhanging rocks were evidence of occupation by the Shihuh people. The last trip of the summer was to an old favourite - Fossil Canyon, near Buraimi, again with high winds at night but an absolute calm dawn following, with clear visibility and silence.

These, then, are some of my memories of the summer of '83. Exploring wadis and mountains previously unheard of by myself, wild figs and oleanders in flower, lizards and butterflies in abundance, and strange birds. Archaeological sites and remote villages and peoples, camp fires and starlight. All have combined to make this summer instructive, memorable and fun.

DAVE ROWLANDS

#### MAMMALS

During September there was a report of a Cape Hare (*Lepus capensis*) at Zibara and the Llewellyn family reported sighting two pairs of dolphins, one inside the Corniche breakwater and the other in the Sadiyat channel.

Please let me have reports/recordings of any mammals you spot. Especially interesting are sea mammals in the light of recent Gulf pollution. A herd of 30 dugong, including 4 calves, was recently observed between Bahrain and Saudi Arabia near the site of the new breakwater. The construction company are using DDT as a cement stabiliser below the surface, which is a bad sign, but the effects are apparently being monitored by a Wildlife team from Switzerland. One cannot but feel, however, that the decision to use DDT in the first place is a sure sign that the breakwater takes priority over damage to the local environment.

On 10th September there was a report and a photograph in the 'Emirates News' of a strange beast cornered and temporarily captured in a school in Ras al Khaimah. This has now been identified as a Caracal Lynx (*Caracal caracal*) by Dr. Chris W. Furley, Veterinarian at Al Ain Zoo. The creature escaped and presumably has returned to its mountain fastnesses. The most recent previously confirmed report of a Lynx in the Emirates was in 1968 when David Harrison, a highly-respected authority on Arabian fauna, recorded one in sand dunes at Tawi Sueyhan, about 65 kilometres east of the new Abu Dhabi Airport. That was identified as *Caracal caracal schmitzi*.

DAVE ROWLANDS

BIRDS

The autumn migration will be getting into full swing in October and already the flamingoes are returning in force. The continued plantings and maintenance of parks in Abu Dhabi will make these areas prime recording localities for the keen birdwatcher over the next couple of months. The demise of the old Sewage Farm makes that area less interesting than formerly but nevertheless with mudflats, creeks and a substantial amount of dense vegetation, it remains one of the best spots in town for recording purposes, as far as waders are concerned. Elsewhere in the country there will be an increase in numbers observed, so get out your recording forms and let's have some observations written down and sent in to the bird recorder.

PLANTS

Excursions to various parts of the UAE over the past few weeks have enabled the plant recorder to follow up species of summer-flowering plants. These include the yellow-flowered *Rhynchosia nemnonia*, a bushy member of the Leguminosae Family which is more abundant than previously thought. It is common around the Dubai Road just south of Jebel Ali and also along the Jebel Ali to Hatta Road. *Abutilon pannosum*, a tall (up to two metres) member of the Malvaceae Family, was fairly common on hillsides overlooking the East Coast around Khor Fakkan in August, with its numerous orange-yellow flowers and distinctive fruits. Another flowering species is *Hibiscus cf. micranthus*, recorded on wadi banks in the Hatta hills and also inland from Kalba. This plant is unusual in bearing yellow flowers here; elsewhere it is not recorded as being yellow. The nearest equivalent is *Hibiscus scindicus*, endemic to Baluchistan and Sind in Pakistan, which has white to yellow flowers but which has slightly spiny branches, which our species does not have. On a trip to the Rus al Jibal, between Dibba and Ras al Khaimah over the last Eed, a colony of wild pink-tinged carnations (*Dianthus cf. crinitus*) was recorded on the higher slopes of Jebel Qiwi. One specimen was still in flower, all others in fruit. The Group's only previous recording for this species was a small clump in the hills above Khatt, flowering in May 1982.

ROB WESTERN

*Flamingo*  
*26/10/82*