

focus

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Emirates Natural History Group

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

EDITORIAL

This month it has fallen to me to write an editorial for *Focus*. Sad to say, Simon is no longer with us and Drew is currently away.

In this edition you will find out how the climbers fared on Jebel Ghaweel, what Jenny and her group did at the Falcon Hospital, and what life is like on that outpost of empire: Ascension Island (Part 2). Immediately below this editorial, Dick Hornby tells us of the joys and frustrations of a naturalist observing nature at Taweelah.

This month we need to prepare participants for the Inter-Emirates Weekend, which is to be held March 16/18. It is only two months away, and, as usual, will be the most significant social event of the year. This is a time for meeting new members, meeting members from the other chapters, sharing news and discoveries, and for having a great time socially. Mafrq Hotel is the chosen venue, being conveniently situated for most people at the intersection of the east-west road with the Al Ain-Abu Dhabi road.

If you are going to attend the IEW weekend, book your room now by contacting the hotel directly. There is a special rate, the details of which you will find on Page 2. There will be a variety of activities and excursions to join, and on Thursday evening there will be a Dinner at which two annual awards will be presented. They are a) The Bish Brown Award, which is given to an amateur naturalist who has made a significant contribution to natural history in the UAE, and b) The Sheikh Mubarak Award, for a scientific contribution to local knowledge, usually, but not always, awarded to a professional naturalist working in the UAE. Last year's laureates were Mohamed Al Bawardi of ERWDA (Sheikh Mubarak) and Val Chalmers (Bish Brown). Both had made outstanding efforts over a long period, and continue to do so.

January is a time for renewal not only because it heralds a new year, but also because it brings new growth as a result of rain. This year we have already seen more rain than in the last few years, and so we can look forward to more flora and fauna than last year. Even Abu Dhabi, usually the last place to get rain, has seen some significant rainfall recently. It promises to be a good spring with, we hope, more annuals to decorate the deserts and mountains of the UAE.

It is also a time to renew your annual subscription to the ENHG. If you have not already done so, please see either Hazm or Carole, who are our Membership Team. At one hundred dirhams per year, our membership must be the best value for money in the country.

I would like to wish you all every success in the coming year and one that is filled with new and exciting discoveries in natural history. Wa shukran.

Allestree Fisher

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FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Black-winged Stilts, Abu Dhabi Golf Club
Photographer: Dick Hornby

Adversity and Diversity

In December I spent a few days surveying the flora and fauna of an area immediately adjacent to the Al Taweelah power and desalination complex. At first site this is a very unpromising spot, with dredged outfall channels, mounds of bulldozed material, roads, fences and evidence of uncontrolled off-road driving. Interestingly, however, it proved to be nice example of just how resilient some of nature can be in the face of adversity.

There were about twenty species of plants, including the two parasites *Cistanche tubulosa* and *Cynomorium coccineum*, and quite a lot of *Sphaerocoma aucheri* and *Crotalaria persica*. Both of the two latter are right on the western edge of their limited ranges in the UAE. In fact the coastal habitats change at about this point, from the high energy sand beaches and dunes stretching from Taweelah to Dubai, to sabkha and very flat intertidal zones and shallow bays protected by barrier islands, from Taweelah to Abu Dhabi. Lack of suitable habitat may, therefore, be the explanation for the absence of these rather coastal species to the south-west of this point. Another plant I was pleased to see was *Echiochilon jugatum* (apparently known to some as "Stoneseed"). This is a very thinly spread species, and I could only find a single specimen at Taweelah, but it was a magnificent one, as the attached photo confirms.

It was the mammals, however, which proved to be of greatest interest. There were plenty of tracks or other evidence of House Mouse, Cheeseman's Gerbil, Ethiopian Hedgehog, Arabian Hare, Red Fox, and—believe it or not—Caracal Lynx. We had found tracks of a fairly large cat, which I would not normally get too excited about, but we also found a dead cat with all-brown fur. The tracks had clearly been made after the demise of the latter, so if they were the same species, we were looking at two individuals. The animal had been dead for long enough for the skull to be almost clean, and this was collected and taken to the Arabian Wildlife

Centre at Sharjah for expert examination. They were positive that it was a young cat, because it still had milk teeth, so the final size of the adult would have been somewhat bigger. This and the all-brown unstreaked fur confirmed the identification as Caracal.

So what were two young Caracals doing at Taweelah, in very unsuitable habitat, fairly close to human habitation and in a generally rather disturbed area? Were they adventurous wanderers from the resident population in the mountains and foothills? Had they taken to the area because they had learned to exploit the convenient food resource of some rather lazy feral Egyptian Geese? We will probably never know, but the most convincing theory may be the sad one that they were trapped as young wild animals in their native range, kept in captivity then released near Taweelah when they proved to be rather unsatisfactory as pets.

If anyone can throw any more light on this, or has any other theories, I would be delighted to hear from them.

Dick Hornby

The Inter-Emirates Weekend, 16-18th March 2005

Every year the Al Ain, Dubai or Abu Dhabi Natural History Group organises a weekend of activities to which all members throughout the UAE are invited. Organised activities include exhibitions, quizzes, excursions, family activities, a communal dinner, and the opportunity to meet members from other chapters who share similar interests. This year the Inter-emirates Weekend (IEW) is being hosted by Abu Dhabi at the Mafraq Hotel. The event will also provide an opportunity for Abu Dhabi Chapter to present the Sheikh Mubarak and Bish Brown Awards for 2004, and this will take place at the formal dinner on the Thursday evening.

HOW WILL IT HAPPEN?

Wednesday 16th March

Our weekend will begin with the opening, at midday Wednesday 16th March, of an ENHG Registration Desk, which will be located close to the Mafraq Hotel Reception area.

Sign-up sheets for most of the excursions will be available at the ENHG Registration Desk. It is recommended that participants book in to the hotel, and confirm their accommodation and meal requirements (which may mean thinking forward to packed lunches on Thursday/Friday) after registration. **The Registration Desk will be staffed permanently until approximately 10am on Friday morning to allow arriving participants to register.**

In the afternoon there will be a flora and fauna competition (Perimeter Walk) in the grounds of the hotel. There will be a slide show near the Registration Desk to help participants with their identification. This activity will be repeated on Thursday morning. There will be a Natural History Display on the first floor of the hotel, with quizzes attached. A display of members' photographs will be mounted and judged by participants and a

selection of the winning photographs will be used to produce an ENHG calendar for 2006. Participants (Junior and Senior) wishing to submit photographs should email newsletter@chirri2000.com or contact Hazim Chalabi (050-6145155, email: hchalabi@adco.ae) for further details. Closing date for entries in the Photography Competition will be Saturday 26th February 2005.

In the evening (7:30-8:30pm), Alan McGee give a talk on the basics of GPS navigation (sign-up sheet at Registration Desk) and at approximately 9pm, after dinner, there will be a quiz on a variety of natural history topics.

The emphasis on Wednesday will be on 'in-hotel' activities, socialising and meeting other members and their families.

All excursions will start in the lobby of the Hotel. For some excursions numbers will be limited (allocated on a 'first come first served' basis) and other trips (ie, sand driving & dhow) will need to be pre-booked. Please take the time to look at the brief descriptions below so that you have the chance to plan your time and book if need be.

Thursday 17th March

6:30am – approximately 10am: Bird Watching with Andrew Twyman. No limit on numbers.

Andrew is a regular visitor to the fodder fields in Al Wathba, where, arguably, the best bird watching in Abu Dhabi emirate is possible. Saloon cars may participate. A sign-up sheet for this activity will be available at the ENHG Registration Desk.

8:30am – midday: Al Wathba Wildlife Sanctuary with John Newby.

John will lead a group to this nearby sanctuary, which has many reptiles, aquatic birds, mammals and a variety of plants. A 4WD vehicle is NOT required. A sign-up sheet for this activity will be available at the ENHG Registration Desk.

8:45am –10:30am: Mafraq Perimeter Walk. No limit on numbers.

This will be a repeat of Wednesday's flora and fauna walk, guided by at least one local expert. There will be a checklist and younger members will be able to draw their answers in order to enter for the competition. This activity can take place at any time during the day. There will be a slide show at the ENHG Registration Desk to familiarise participants with some of the plants they will encounter. A sign-up sheet for this activity will be available at the ENHG Registration Desk.

9am – 5pm: Sand Driving for Beginners with Alan McGee.

Alan McGee will set off at 9.00am for a nearby location ("Ghaftain") with a group wishing to master basic sand driving skills. They will start with a talk and demonstration followed by lunch. In the afternoon newly taught techniques will be tried and tested on location. Packed lunch needed.

For safety reasons, places for this activity are limited and **advance booking** is needed. Email Alan.McGee@zu.ac.ae to book.

9am – 6pm: Miocene Elephant Tracks and Desert Ecology with Drew Gardner.

Drew Gardner will lead a trip to the elephant tracks, and cover aspects of desert ecology on this whole day trip. The site is approximately 90 min from the hotel by car. A 4WD, and a packed lunch, is needed.

A sign-up sheet for this activity will be available at the ENHG Registration Desk.

11:30 am – 4:30pm: Spoon Worm Walk (Ras Hanjurah), with Dick Hornby. Four vehicles maximum.

Dick Hornby will lead a limited group of vehicles to a coastal area near Taweelah, about 45 minutes from the hotel to look for an extraordinary creature: the Spoon Worm. There will be a stop for birds. The mangrove habitat requires wetsuit boots or sandals, sunblock and hats. Packed lunch required.

A sign-up sheet for this activity will be available at the ENHG Registration Desk.

4pm - 7pm: Mammal Trapping with Chris Drew.

This activity will take place in two parts - Thurs pm and Fri am. Chris Drew will lead a group to a location where desert mammals can be found. Chris will explain techniques to participants who will help to set traps and then return to the hotel. Four wheel drive vehicles only. A sign-up sheet for this activity will be available at the ENHG Registration Desk.

During the evening on Thursday, Brigitte Howarth (Al Ain Chapter) will set up an insect trapping station – it will provide an excellent chance for IEW participants to find about what type of insects are flying around in the Hotel grounds. Please take the opportunity to have a look (but watch where you step!).

11pm – 1am: Star Gazing with Alan Carruth.

After the IEW dinner Alan Carruth will lead a group to a nearby dark location (approximately 20min drive from the Hotel), where the group will spend some time looking at the heavens above.

A sign-up sheet for this activity will be available at the ENHG Registration Desk.

Friday 18th March

Two of Thursday's excursions are repeated on Friday: Bird Watching (**6:30 am onwards**) and (if there is sufficient demand) the Spoon Worm Walk (**11:30am – 4:30pm**) and the mammal traps set on Thursday evening will be checked on Friday morning (time TBA).

Two other trips are available on Friday:-

9 am – 12 noon: Sand Driving for Advanced Learners with Alan McGee.

Alan McGee will conduct a three-hour activity for drivers who already have sand driving skills and who wish to

improve. Either packed lunch or return.

For safety reasons, places for this activity are limited and **advance booking** is needed. Email Alan.McGee@zu.ac.ae to book.

9am – 4:00pm: Island Dhow Trip. Large group activity (maximum: 40 people).

Cost: approximately 65 AED per person

Participants will leave check out from the hotel by 9am and drive to the Tourist Club area of Abu Dhabi. The dhow will allow the group to visit a mangrove site, tour Sadiyat Island, and have lunch. There is a possibility that there will be some opportunity for swimming. Some natural history walks will take place after lunch: birds/plants/insects/reptiles. The dhow will return to Abu Dhabi at 4.00pm.

Advance booking is needed for this trip. Email address for booking: allestree.fisher@hct.ac.ae or tel. 02-6775717.

THURSDAY NIGHT DINNER

The dinner on Thursday night will be held around the pool area of the Hotel. During the evening the winners of the Sheikh Mubarak and Bish Brown awards will be announced, as well the winners of the photography competition and floral walk.

MAFRAQ HOTEL DETAILS

The Mafraq Hotel is conveniently situated at the intersection of the east-west highway and the Al Ain road, only 35 kms from Abu Dhabi. A special Group Rate has been negotiated, and it is recommended that intending participants make their own reservation as soon as possible. The rates are as follows:

Mafraq Hotel Rates (inclusive of 16% service charge):

- Deluxe Single Room with half board (breakfast + Barbecue Dinner) AED 350/- net per night
- Deluxe Double Room with half board (breakfast + Barbecue Dinner) AED 350/- net per night
- Deluxe Single Room with breakfast AED 230/- net per night
- Deluxe Double Room with breakfast AED 270/- net per night

(Room accommodation is free for children under 12).

For bookings tel: 02-7155856 / 02-5822666, email: mafraq@emirates.net.ae. Members are asked to book directly to the Hotel Bookings service, as above.

Directions to the Mafraq Hotel can be supplied to you on request. Please email newsletter@chirri2000.com if you would like directions to be sent to you.

All in all the weekend promises to be informative as well as entertaining. We are looking forward to seeing you there!

Field Trip Reports

Climbing Mount Ghawil

If you needed the exercise to burn off all those extra calories accumulated during the festive season, the 1st ENHG field trip of 2005 to Jebel Ghawil (AKA: Al Ain Alps, Swiss Mountain or Grey Mountain) was the one for you. Situated in the Omani Mountains about 50kms northeast of Al Ain the route passes through Buraimi and the village of Mahda towards Sumaini.

Lead by Roy and Liz we set off from the city in two groups. After a brief stop at Al Faya petrol station for coffee and donuts it was Oman here we come. We arrived in the foothills of Jebel Ghawil before noon and with Roy as our guide we went for a 'wadi walk'. It never ceases to amaze us that despite how many wadis one visits there always seems to be something new to see. This occasion proved no exception. Roy pointed out an animal trap made of stones that was most probably used to catch foxes. We are pleased to report it is no longer in use. There wasn't much evidence of the recent rains with only one small pool of water hidden under a clump of dwarf palms at the abandoned animal farm. Allestree, suitably fitted out with new boots courtesy of Fantastic Fashions on Hamdan Street, was on hand to provide expert advice on all things flora and fauna. It wasn't too long before he was called into action to identify a rare specimen. A small delicate plant with little blue trumpet flowers called *Anticharis glandulosa*, only recorded in the UAE in the mountains on the way to the Musandam Peninsula.



If the Thursday afternoon stroll was the starter, the Friday morning climb was the aperitif, main course and sweet combined. As our caravan of ENHG members snaked up the slope, it was the children accompanied by Roy and Chirri (our doggy pathfinder) on point duty who reached the rest stop first, the aptly named 'Bat Cave'. By the time those of us in the rear had managed to catch up, most of the bats could be seen flying off to neighbouring Jebels for a bit of peace and quiet. Anyway it was pleasing to see there were a lot more of them than when we first visited the cave at the end of September.



We all reached the summit (N24° 33.916' E056° 01.716') in 'dribs and drabs' some two and a half-hours after setting out. The air was fresh and the visibility excellent, perfect conditions for the now customary team photo.



Roy pointed out several landmarks including the typical dome-shaped summit of Jebel Sumaini and Jebel Hatta with its telecommunications mast to the north. During the well-deserved rest and picnic there was a lot of discussion as to the height of Jebel Ghawil, the various GPS devices on hand each giving a different reading. But seeing as we are the ones writing this report our measurement of 1084m is the one that is going into print!

Under Roy, Liz and Chirri's watchful eyes we all returned safely to base camp at around 14.30hrs. The only real casualty, and we are afraid to say it did look rather terminal, were the aforementioned boots. Unfortunately it looks like the next outing will be to the slightly less adventurous 'Fantastic Fashions' for a refund.

Kate Doherty and Bill Davies

Visit to Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital

On the 17th January 2005, 13 people were treated to a tour of the Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital and the neighbouring Arabian Saluki Centre.

We started at the Falcon Hospital at about 10.00am. Our tour was conducted by one of the specialist vets who explained the aims of the Hospital and some of the services it provides. We learnt that every falcon must have a passport which looks remarkably like a human passport – minus the picture. We toured the various laboratories and saw falcon malaria under the microscope. We also toured the wards and learnt about the most common diseases and problems that necessitate falcons being admitted to the Hospital.



We saw an endoscopy being performed and a number of falcons in different stages of treatment, including a falcon waking from an anaesthetic after a wing operation.

After the Falcon Hospital we drove “out the back” to the Arabian Saluki Centre. Most of us knew even less about Salukis than we did Falcons, however we are much better informed now. We were shown through the Saluki Centre and were able to touch the Salukis who were very excited. We learnt about the different types of Salukis and the various training methods, including swimming.



After touring both facilities we ventured back to the Falcon Hospital where we were treated to a wonderful, Arabian-style lunch. The attention and hospitality we received over the whole morning was excellent. Our thanks must go to the staff of both the Falcon Hospital and Saluki Centre for such an informative and enjoyable morning.

Karen von Einem

Snippets

Seabirds are eating each other



A seabird so aggressive that it will dive-bomb anyone who comes near its nest is now threatening puffin populations, says the *Daily Telegraph*. Great skuas, which hunt for food in the North Sea, have been forced to turn their attentions to their avian brethren because of a dire shortage of fish. The

voracious predators used to rely on small fish thrown back into the sea by trawlermen, but because of the dwindling stocks, fewer fish are now discarded. As a result, the skuas are picking off smaller birds including puffins, kittiwakes and guillemots instead. Glasgow University's Dr Stephen Votier revealed the change in diet in his study of the contents of skua pellets.

Probe's tragic end



It wasn't quite the dramatic finale Nasa had planned, said The Daily Mail. The £150m Genesis probe, which had for three years been gathering particles blown off the sun, was supposed to be “caught” in mid-air by Hollywood stunt pilots when it travelled back into the Earth's atmosphere this week. The helicopter pilots –

fresh from the set of *Batman Five* – had been instructed to execute a complicated manoeuvre in which they would grab the probe using a 6-metre-long hook, and carry it gently down to earth. But in the event, the probe's parachute, which would have slowed it down, failed to open, the stuntmen hadn't a hope, and the machine crashed into the desert at 100mph. The cannister broke up on impact, and there are fears that the stardust, collected in space on delicate wafers, may have been lost or contaminated.

Ascension Island (Part 2)

Below is the second half of Fraser and Jane Robinson's write-up of a trip to Ascension Island. Part 1 can be found in the December 2004 edition of focus.

The Ascension Turtles

Every year the green turtles come to Ascension Island. They do not live around the island but come here only to lay their eggs. How they manage to find a place so small and remote again after swimming away newly hatched from the egg 20 years previously is a mystery. In fact, calling it a mystery is a considerable understatement. We found tracks one morning but missed seeing mother-to-be turtle who had struggled up during the night at high tide to lay her eggs.



We saw some baby turtles which had hatched during the night and which had wandered to a nearby streetlamp instead of heading off to the sea. They were released the following night to give them the best chance of survival. To release them during daylight hours would simply provide a snack for the ever-patrolling seabirds.

One of the now disused turtle ponds where green turtles were held prior to being loaded onto visiting ships as a supply of fresh meat and, no doubt, turtle soup.



The People who live on Ascension Island

The people of Ascension Island - about 1000 - are mainly employees of the US Air Force, the Royal Air Force, the BBC World Service and the St Helena Government.



Isobel and David Gill

No account of Ascension Island would be complete without a mention of the redoubtable Mrs Gill. Isobel was the wife of David, an astronomer who needed to make observations of Mars which would allow a more accurate calculation of the distance of the earth from the sun, and thus to the rest of the solar system and beyond because the Earth - Mars distance is the key which unlocks the rest.

In 1877 they set up their 20 tons of observational equipment, which they had brought by sailing ship from Greenwich via St Helena. Excitement mounted - Mars was going to be the closest in living memory to the earth during the next month. Perfect for the painstaking observations that were needed.

All the equipment had survived the journey, was set up and was working well. They soon discovered there was a big problem, however. For the first time that anyone could remember, Green Mountain began to trail a large white cloud - exactly in line with the telescope and the red planet - every night.

Mars opposition was rapidly approaching and the entire mission was in peril, so Isobel - making what we would now call an executive decision - set off in the dead of night, despite her husband's remonstrations and with only the dim glow of a bull's-eye lantern to find a better site. Stumbling around the hostile volcanic landscape she was scared half to death when footsteps and strange noises began to follow her. She was very relieved when she discovered that the source of these turned out to be only an inquisitive feral donkey and not some previously undiscovered demented South Atlantic creature craving human blood.

Bit of a joke really - there are no buses on Ascension. The shelter was built mid 19th century so walkers could rest out of the sun. Isobel Gill may well have sheltered here.

The astronomical world is indebted to her perseverance because she discovered an ideal new site. All the equipment was dismantled, carried to the new site and reassembled, and the rest is history. The measurement which the Gills made was accepted as accurate and used by astronomers for almost 100 years - in fact, well into the space age. She probably could not have realised that the terrain they were camping in bore an uncanny resemblance to that of the planet they were so closely observing.



Looking out towards South-East Bay from the old NASA site. This was where one of the ground control stations for the Apollo missions was situated. The big dish has gone.

Although Apollo has long gone and the “It’s one small step for a man” and “Houston, we have a problem” are only distant memories, Ascension is still heavily involved with space and communications today with via the ESA and NASA.



The European Space Agency Ariane tracking station on Ascension.



Bibliography and Picture Credits:

Six Months in Ascension – An Unscientific Account of a Scientific Expedition *Isobel Gill*

ZD8SIX on Ascension *Chris Gare*

Ascension Island Administrator’s Office

Fraser and Jane Robinson

The ENHG Book Table

Abu Dhabi Bird Checklist <i>(Ask for a free copy if you spend over 50dhs)</i>	10 Dhs	Birdlife in Oman	120 Dhs
Breeding Birds of the UAE SB 30 Dhs / HB 60 Dhs		Beautiful photos of birds of our region by award-winning photographers Hanne and Jens Eriksen.	
Birdwatching Guide to Oman	95 Dhs	Emirates Bird Report (new)	60 Dhs
Invaluable for camping trips to Oman Copies signed by the authors.		Comprehensive Guide to the Flora of the UAE	
Field Guide to the Seashore of East Africa	180Dhs	THE plant book – a must-have.	100 Dhs
Wild about Reptiles	60 Dhs	Seashells	30 Dhs
Children’s Encyclopedia of Arabia	100 Dhs	Covers all the sealife around our shores too. Useful little waterproof guide to the region’s shells.	
Fascinating, and not just for kids!		Wild about Mammals	40 Dhs
Pests	35 Dhs	Satellite map of the UAE	35 Dhs
Everything you should know about what’s in and around your house!		Jebel Hafit	100 Dhs

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Members' Noticeboard

Please send small ads to
newsletter@chirri2000.com

Newsletter Details

Newsletter contributions to:
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Lectures

1st February 2005
Virtual Birds, *Simon Aspinall*

15th February 2005

Diving in the UAE, *Kathleen & Vance Stephens*

1st March 2005

To be advised

15th March 2005

Dhofar & Salalah, *Gary Brown*

Field Trips

Thurs/Friday 10-11th February

Overnight camping -
Archaeology and desert
ecology Umm al Zamul area.
Alan McGee

Friday 18th February

Floral walk on Abu Dhabi,
Island (western lagoon area)
followed by a picnic lunch.

Allestree Fisher

Thurs/Friday 3 & 4 March

Overnight camping, Jebel
Hafit, Wadi Tarabat, near
Wadi Kahl.

Alan McGee

Wed/Thurs/Fri 16, 17 & 18 March

Inter Emirates Weekend,
hosted by the Abu Dhabi
Chapter. Mafraq Hotel.

Thurs/Friday 7 & 8th April

Overnight camping - Jebel
Dhanna / Sabkha Mutti,

or Jebel Shams (Oman)
Allestree Fisher

Thurs/Friday 5 & 6th May

Overnight camping - East
Coast. Swimming, flora,

Fujeirah Fort/Museum.
Allestree Fisher

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