

## **matt jones**

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### **Flight reservation**

*Matt Jones heads to Abu Dhabi to check out the exotic arrivals at a landing strip with a difference.*

So many foreign visitors land at Al Wathba each year for rest or refueling that you'd be forgiven for thinking it's a little known UAE airport. Located 40 kilometres southeast of Abu Dhabi, towards the Al Ain trunk road, it would certainly be a convenient arrival point for the federal capital. But unlike tourists and globe-trotting business types, Al Wathba's visitors are experienced navigators who fly themselves here. It's only natural, when you're a bird.

You may not have heard of it, but Al Wathba is one of nature's beautiful paradoxes: in this most arid of countries it is an internationally-acclaimed wetland reserve that annually hosts thousands of migrant waders, and flora and fauna that thrive in its combination of natural and man-made, fresh and salt water lakes. Al Wathba is such a model of biodiversity and sustainable development that it has attracted attention from conservationists overseas who, from time to time, migrate here themselves to strut among the reeds, comment and advise.

On one such visit in 2002, British conservationist and television personality Professor David Bellamy told a local newspaper, "Al Wathba is a fantastic example of sustainable development". In particular, Bellamy highlighted how old technology – reeds, to purify the water by leeching heavy metals and provide habitat for birds – was being combined with new technology, recycled water from nearby sewage water treatment plants, to create an ecosystem in the middle of the desert. He looked forward to Al Wathba's development as an educational centre, but warned that visitor numbers should be carefully managed to ensure its star attractions aren't scared away.

Two years on, Bellamy's advice is being acted on by the UAE's Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency (ERWDA, pronounced "Airooda"), the Abu-Dhabi-based organisation that has managed Al Wathba since its establishment in 1998 by order of His Highness the President, Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan.

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ERWDA has prepared a five year management plan for developing and maintaining the reserve, which includes the construction of a visitor centre with interpretative and educational facilities, bird hides to encourage bird watching and a programme of outdoor and interactive educational activities for students.

Due to lack of funds, the construction of infrastructure and facilities is currently on hold. But while ERWDA is in discussion with potential donors, school children and students can nevertheless look forward to the forthcoming season of educational field trips.

“Our Environmental Education and Awareness Division plays a very important role in promoting the wetland and its importance through well organised field trips for students and schools,” explains ERWDA’s Khaldoun Kiwan. “Every year from October to April many schools visit the wetland as part of their environmental education programmes. In the field, students gain knowledge through interaction with nature. They collect, examine and analyse water samples, identify different plant species and conduct comparisons between arid land and wetlands in term of biodiversity richness.”

According to Kiwan, “Biodiversity richness is the most remarkable thing about Al Wathba Wetland. The reserve hosts about 250 species of birds, 30 species of plants, 10 species of reptiles and 10 species of mammals. All this richness can be found within a very small area of five square kilometres. Also, the amazing thing about the lakes is that you can see fresh water and hyper saline lakes. Both are very important for many species of birds.

“Al Wathba acts as an oasis in the middle of the desert for many migratory bird species. Many of these birds stop for resting or refueling, or for breeding in the lake as part of their life’s journey.”

One of Al Wathba’s prime roles is to provide breeding habitat for the Greater Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*). During the winter of 1998/99, flamingos actually hatched in the Al Wathba Reserve for the first time. It was, says Kiwan, the first time in 75 years that the Greater Flamingo had bred on the Arabian Peninsula.

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Because the reserve is still in its development stage, casual visitors and day trippers cannot simply turn up and expect entry. Kiwan admits that for the moment “due to lack of proper infrastructure facilities” requests from tour operators and tourism companies for organised tours have been turned down. Strictly speaking, the site is not open to the public. But, he adds, “Interested people can contact ERWDA and arrange special visits. The best time to visit is between October and April, either early morning or late afternoon.”

For students and those who arrange private visits, what are the dos and don'ts on a wetland reserve?

“Visitors are encouraged to bring their binoculars and telescopes to enjoy bird watching,” says Kiwan. “People should respect all the elements and components of the wetland. They should be aware that they are visiting a very important and sensitive area, that even minimum noise can disturb birds and other wildlife, such as lizards, foxes and hares. Visitors should keep to the marked trails and should not walk or drive over sand or vegetation cover. Also they should be aware that the removal of any elements, such as rocks and stones, or the picking of plants, would harmfully affect life forms that, though we cannot notice them, do exist.”

For a more practical, hands-on experience of the wetland, members of the public might consider becoming wetland volunteers. “The general public has a very important role to play in biodiversity conservation in general and in wetlands conservation specifically,” says Kiwan. “Members of the public can contribute to the conservation of Al Wathba Wetland as volunteers, helping in reed cutting and cleaning campaigns. Or they can support the wetland staff in their work with school groups, or volunteer as site guides.”

Alternatively, he says, they can initiate fund-raising activities. No doubt these would help ensure the completion of on-site visitor facilities in time for next season's exotic arrivals at the UAE's most unusual hub for international air travel.

*To arrange a visit to Abu Dhabi's Al Wathba Wetland Reserve, contact Khaldoun Kiwan on 02 681 7171 extension 525, or email [kkiwan@erwda.gov.ae](mailto:kkiwan@erwda.gov.ae).*

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