Egypt – Birds & History

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Cairo & overnight
Day 2	Cairo & Fayoum
Day 3/4	Fayoum area
Day 5	Fayoum, transfer Cairo
Day 6/8	Aswan
Day 9/11	Lake Nasser & the Nile
Day 12/13	Luxor area
Day 14	Cairo & depart

Departs

November - April

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code EGY01)

Grading

Mostly easy walks, with longer – but fairly gentle – day walks in some areas. Grade A/B

Focus

Birds and archaeology

Highlights

- Visit the Egyptian Museum Cairo, the Pyramids at Giza and the Sphinx.
- Explore the Valley of the Kings (& Queens).
- Visit the Temples of Karnak, Luxor & Abu Simbel.
- Enjoy great birdwatching at Fayoum & along the Nile Valley.
- Relax on a boat journey down the Nile.
- Learn from our expert guides.







Images from top: Greater Hoopoe Lark, Great Pyramids at Giza & Nile Valley Sunbird (courtesy of Shutterstock)

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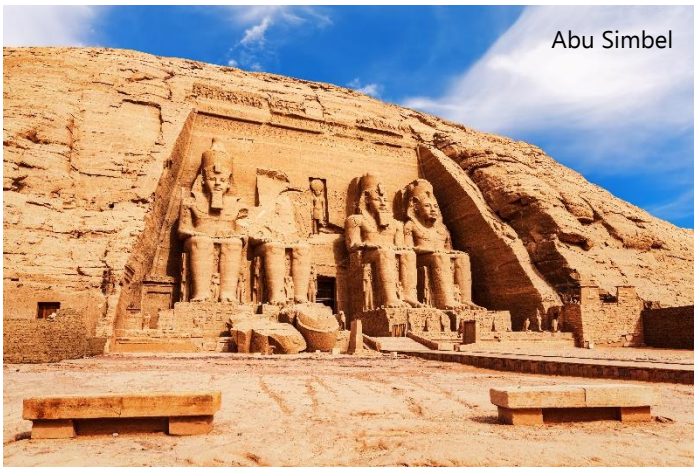
Introduction

Due to its strategic situation at the junction between Eurasia and Africa, Egypt has a rich and varied avifauna with over 470 different species recorded. This 14-day tour, which combines the best of birds and history, will coincide with the start of spring migration, when resident species are augmented by large numbers of passage and winter visitors. We will visit a wide range of habitats (agriculture, wetlands and desert) each with its own unique birds. We will go in search of species found nowhere else in the Western Palearctic including Nile Valley Sunbird, African Pied Wagtail, and Senegal Thick-knee, to name but a few. While we hope to chance upon some migration movement, the highlight will undoubtedly be the antiquities from Egypt's glorious past, which are among the most spectacular monuments in the world! These will include the Great Pyramids at Giza, the Sphinx, the Temples at Luxor, Karnak and Abu Simbel, as well as the Valley of the Kings. As with all Naturetrek tours, we will not pass up the opportunity to see any other wildlife we come across during our travels.


Abu Simbel

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1 Depart London, arrive Cairo

We will depart on a scheduled flight from London, arriving into Cairo this evening and will then transfer to our nearby hotel.

Meals: Dinner

Day 2 Cairo & Fayoum

We will start today by visiting the new Grand Egyptian Museum, which houses many antiquities relating to fascinating Egyptian history, including statues, sarcophagi, mummies and Tutankhamun's famous mask. With around 100,000 artefacts, there is plenty for everyone to appreciate. This is located near the Pyramids, which we'll return to visit in a few days' time.

In the afternoon, we will leave the bustle of Cairo behind as we head for Fayoum, an oasis city to the south-west. The area comprises wetlands, farmland and desert, so we will be looking for a rich diversity of birdlife in this area from our base in the village of Tunis.

Meals: Breakfast & lunch and dinner

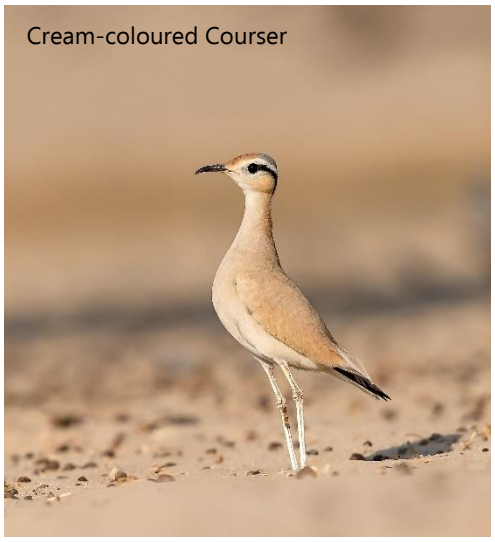
Days 3 – 4 Fayoum area

This morning will start with an excursion to the east bank of Qarun Lake Protected Area. This is a permanent inland saline lake and one of the oldest lakes in Egypt. It's an important breeding location, particularly the islands, and a sheltered place for a variety of desert animals. Here, we'll watch for waders, ducks, gulls and herons. Among the species that we hope to see are Black-winged Stilt, Slender-billed Gull, Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint, Black-crowned Night Heron and Pied Kingfisher. From here, we will transfer to the nearby fish ponds, where waders and waterbirds, such as Senegal Thick-knee, White-tailed Lapwing, Ruff, White-headed Duck, Pintail and Slender-billed Gull can be found.


Black-winged Kite

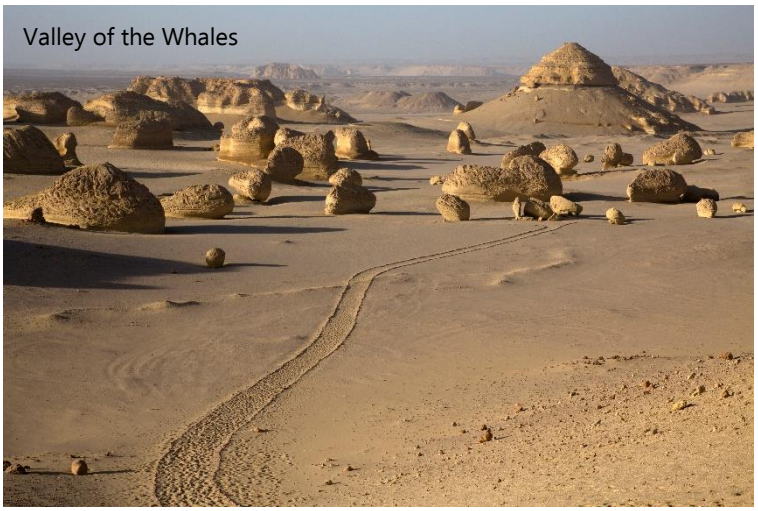
Tunis village and the north-western bank of Fayoum Oasis will provide some further opportunities to search for waterbirds, including Greater Flamingo, but also some land-based species such as Red Avadavat, Crested Lark and Black-winged Kite. During lunch in the village, we'll keep an eye on the nearby gardens for Nile Valley Sunbird and bee-eaters. For those who wish, there will be an opportunity to visit the pottery shops and explore the village.

Tunis was made famous when Swiss potter, Evelyn Porret, set up her workshop there in the 1980s. The village offers wonderful views across the lake and surrounding desert, making it a great place to watch the sunrise from. On one day, time permitting, we'll take a walk through the fields around Tunis in search of birds such as Eastern Bonelli's Warbler, Senegal Coucal, Wryneck, Zitting Cisticola and Sedge Warbler. During the afternoon in Tunis, there will be an option to go birdwatching from horseback, on a trek around the village and by the lake to enjoy the sunset.


Cream-coloured Courser

Another morning we will take a 4WD journey into the desert, to Valley of the Whales in Wadi Hitan National Park. This is where whales of the suborder Archaeoceti were found millions of years ago and this site is an internationally important location for fossils of these ancient creatures, with UNESCO World Heritage status. The species is considered to be a key link between land-based mammals and modern-day whales returning to be water- dwelling creatures, with some fossils demonstrating reduced hind limbs. We'll also take time to visit the Climate Change Museum before journeying through the sand dunes in search of Kosur Al Rab, known for its Arabian Palace mountain that has been naturally sculpted by the passage of time.

For lunch we will stop at Wadi Al Rayan, to visit the waterfalls and there will be an opportunity to swim in the lakes for those who wish. We'll then head to the west of the lakes, where we will concentrate our efforts around the fish farms and desert edges, where we could find Cream-coloured Courser, Greater Hoopoe-Lark, Egyptian Nightjar and a selection of waders and waterbirds.


Valley of the Whales

In the evenings, there will be an option to look for Little Owls around the village.

Meals: Breakfast, lunch & dinner

Day 5 Fayoum & Cairo

Today we'll begin with some early morning birdwatching around the fish ponds on the eastern shore of Lake Qaran. We will then bid farewell to Fayoum, before making our way to Giza, to visit the Pyramids and Sphinx.

At Giza, there is almost a sense of disbelief to be viewing a scene that is at once so familiar yet veiled in mystery, and it is impossible not to marvel, like millions of visitors before us, at the ingenuity of the people involved in their construction. These pyramids date back to around 2,700 BC, to the time of Khufu, and are modelled on the Red Pyramid of his father, Sneferu, which is thought to demonstrate the first time that a true pyramid was successfully built. The Giza site consists of three main pyramids, with the largest being referred to as the Great Pyramid. They were designed as burial sites and were originally connected to mortuary temples by covered causeways. The smooth limestone coverings that once encased them have long since disappeared and also lowered the height of the structures. Despite this, they are still an impressive size. The second pyramid, as well as the Sphinx, were constructed by Khufu's son, Khafre. The enigmatic Sphinx is a representation of the sun god, Ra-Harakhte, but the face is modelled on Khafre himself. Sadly, the Sphinx has become damaged over time, with the nose having been destroyed by Napoleon's soldiers as target practice! The final pyramid was built by


Sphinx & Pyramid

Khafre's son, Menkaura, but on a much more modest scale than those of Khufu and Khafre, standing at just 70m (228ft) in height.

We will then make our way to the main station in Ramses Square, where we'll board our overnight train, and find our cabins, for the journey to Aswan.

Meals: Breakfast, lunch & dinner

Days 6 – 8 Aswan

On arrival in Aswan, we will explore Philae Temple, which sits in the shadow of Aswan High Dam, a large structure across the Nile that is used to hold water for irrigation and hydroelectricity. The intricately carved temple is situated on an island in the middle of the river, between the old and new dams, and is dedicated to the goddess Isis; it is considered to be one of Egypt's most beautiful


Philae Temple

temples. We'll learn about aspects of Egyptian myth and spirituality. Near the temple, we could find African Pied Wagtail or, potentially, Greater Painted Snipe. It may also be possible to spot migrating Egyptian Vulture and White Stork as the Philae area is a stopping off point on their migration route. The afternoon will be spent visiting a nearby Nubian island, where we'll learn about their culture and also find out more about the local birds from the knowledgeable locals. We will stay overnight at a hotel on the west bank of the Nile.


White-throated Kingfisher

At sunrise the following day, we'll start with some birding around the Aswan Nile islands. This morning, we will also visit Aswan Botanical Gardens and the Saloga & Gazal Protected Areas. Between these sites we'll be looking for African Swamp-Hen, Purple Heron, Ferruginous Duck, Pallas's Gull, Wood Sandpiper and White-throated Kingfisher. Much of the day will be spent in the Nubian area, which is rich in culture and incorporates Egyptian heritage. It is also an excellent landscape for wildlife, with both resident and migrant

birds being found along the river, plus Red Fox and Nile Monitor can be seen. Aswan is the heron capital of Egypt with over seven different species recorded, including Striated, Squacco, Purple and Black-crowned Night Heron.


Black-crowned Night Heron

After a final night near Aswan, we'll head further south, to the magnificent temple of Ramses II and his beautiful wife, Nefertiti, at Abu Simbel. The temple was taken apart block by block and moved to higher ground to save it from flooding caused by the dam. A guided tour of the site will give us an insight into the history of this impressive complex. Our hotel is located nearby, so there will be the option this evening of attending the Sound and Light show at the temple, and there may also be the possibility of finding Egyptian Nightjar nearby.

Meals: Breakfast & dinner

Days 9 – 11 Lake Nasser & the Nile

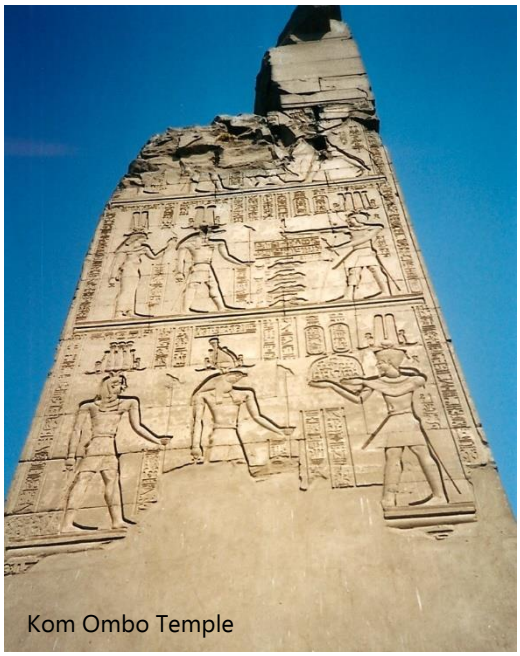
We'll start the day with a boat trip on Lake Nasser, where wetlands meet rocky shoreline and desert environments. This is one of the world's largest man-made reservoirs and a boat ride on this immense wetland should allow us to obtain closer views of waterbirds as we search the islands and khors. If lucky, we might catch a glimpse of a Nile Crocodile or Monitor basking on the lake shores. We'll be looking out for Yellow-billed Stork, Kittlitz's and Three-banded Plovers, African Collared Dove and Yellow-billed Kite. We can also expect the unexpected as anything can turn up at this prime locality for African wanderers!

Please note that the boat trip is subject to availability.


Yellow-billed Kite

The following morning, we return to Aswan where we'll board another type of vessel– a Dahabiya. These charming boats are in the style of 19th century cruise vessels and will be both our accommodation and mode of transport for the journey towards Luxor.

During the journey, we can watch the riverbanks, islands and skies for birdlife. Later in the day, we'll have a stop at Kom Ombo to explore the temple here. This temple is fairly unique in Egypt as it is dedicated to two different gods – the crocodile-headed Sobek and Horus, with his falcon head. There will also be an opportunity to visit the Crocodile Museum to see the mummified crocodiles and find out about the ancient Egyptians' relationship with these large reptiles, before we continue to Esna where we'll anchor for the night.


Kom Ombo Temple

In the morning we'll explore the Temple of Esna, built in tribute to the god Khnum. This colourful construction is a real testament to the architectural creativity of the time.

Back aboard our Dahabiya, we'll continue on towards Luxor, which we anticipate reaching in the evening. While we travel, we will again be watching for wildlife as we go.

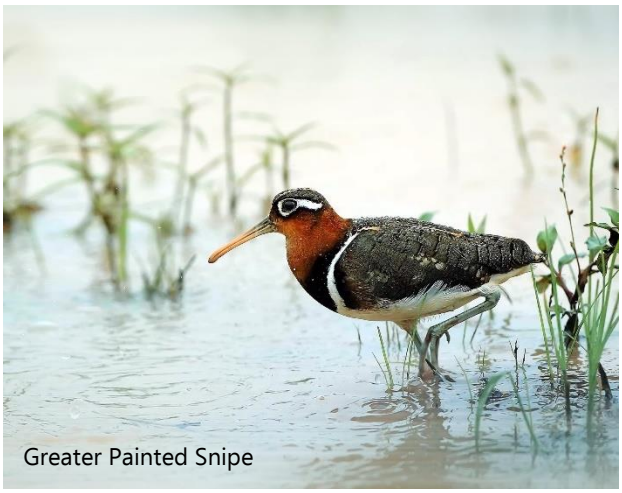
Meals: Breakfast & Dinner on day 9 then breakfast, lunch & dinner on days 10 & 11

Days 12 - 13 Luxor area

After breakfast, our destination for the morning will be the famous Valley of the Kings, as well as the Temple of Queen Hatshepsut, located in the desert on the western bank. This site was the chosen royal burial ground for the Pharaohs between around 1550 – 1070 BC and holds 63 tombs, including that of Tutankhamun. Many of the treasures that were once buried here have been removed from the site; however, the burial chambers and general layout of the area can still be seen. In the desert fringe we could find Trumpeter Finch, White-crowned Black Wheatear, Desert Lark, Blue Rock Thrush and Pallid Swift. In the cultivation Black-shouldered Kite, Little Green Bee-eater, Fan-tailed Warbler and Crested Lark are usually found.


Valley of the Kings

Having checked into our hotel on Crocodile Island, we will then explore Crocodile Island (or Jazira Al Awamiyyah) to see what birds are around the hotel and grounds, where it's possible to see, and hear, Nile Valley Sunbird, Clamorous Reed Warbler and occasionally the elusive Greater Painted Snipe. The island has lush vegetation surrounded by the river, which provides a diverse range of habitats for a variety of species. For those who prefer a more relaxed afternoon, you are welcome to enjoy the hotel facilities.


Greater Painted Snipe

On our second day in Luxor, we will have a relaxed morning around the island before we set out to explore the temples of Luxor and Karnak. Karnak, with its impressive hall of colossal stone pillars, is surely one of the highlights of any tour to Egypt! We may also take a walking tour of the old market in Luxor before returning to the hotel.

There will, of course, be the option of some additional time in Luxor for anyone who wishes to explore further.

Meals: Breakfast & lunch on day 12 and breakfast on day 13

Day 14 London

Today we must take a flight back to Cairo ahead of our return flight to the UK, leaving with memories of the wonderful landscapes, rich history and superb birdlife of this fascinating country.

Meals: Breakfast

Images courtesy of Shutterstock & Alison Steel

Tour Grading

Grade A/B. We are not anticipating any particularly strenuous walks during this tour; however, some of the sites cover large areas, so distances of several miles are not unexpected, and temperatures can be very warm in the desert areas. We will also be doing a reasonable amount of walking in some of the town or city areas, so you should feel comfortable walking a number of miles and being on your feet for much of the day. In the desert, we will probably move slowly and ensure we make a thorough exploration of the areas that we cover.

Focus

This tour is focused on birds and other wildlife, as well as the history and culture of Egypt, so is therefore suitable for those who are interested in both natural history and historical aspects.

Weather

During the first few months of the year, temperatures in Egypt are typically a little cooler, with daytime highs between approximately 20 – 30°C, with the south of the country being warmer than the north. Evenings and early mornings can be cooler, at around 10 – 15°C, and some morning in the desert can feel very cold. Days may be overcast for up to 20% of the time, but rain is minimal and of a small amount. Late November and December also have similar temperatures.

Food & Accommodation

All accommodation is included in the price of the tour on a B&B basis. Single rooms may be available at a supplementary cost. We will be using a mix of comfortable tourist hotels, traditional guesthouses and a Dahabiya for two nights, all with private facilities. Some of the guesthouses are community run and the rooms may be very simple in nature.

Lunches are included on seven days and dinners on eleven evenings as detailed above.

Extra Expenses

You will need to arrange a tourist visa for visiting Egypt. This can be done online and the cost for this is currently US$25.00 per person (subject to change). You will also need to budget the other lunches and dinners, plus drinks and any souvenirs that you may wish to purchase. There is a strong culture of tipping in Egypt, and you will need to allow for this. During the tour, your leader will set up a tipping kitty so that you don't need to individually tip in every situation.

Extensions

There are no set extensions for this tour, however we would be happy to discuss options for anyone who would be interested in extending their time in Egypt.

Departures from Regional Airports

The main group flights will be direct flights departing from Heathrow, however we are happy to arrange connecting flights, or alternative flights, from any UK airport, although please be aware that these would need to fit in with the group flight times. Departures from regional airports may incur an additional charge, so please call the Naturetrek office for more information and prices.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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