

# Egypt - Birds & History

Naturetrek Tour Report

11 - 21 November 2005

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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 was our first visit to Egypt .Birding was combined with sightseeing and we visited the most important tombs and temples of Ancient Egypt .

The pyramids, the Sphinx, St. Katherine's monastery, Luxor and Karnak temples, the tombs in the Valley of the Kings, Edfu, Kom Ombo, Philae, and Abu Simbel did not fail to arouse a sense of wonder and awe.

Despite all the development and the increasing number of tourists , the selection of birds was still amazing and provided some spectacular sightings .

The hotel grounds held a succession of migrants: Bluethroats and a variety of warblers , the deserts yielded Spotted and Crowned Sandgrouse, Hooded and Desert Wheatears, Sharm el Sheikh gave us Black Stork , Lichtensteins Sandgrouse and an assortment of waders , nearby Ras Mohammed NP had Greater Sand Plover , a very close Red-footed Falcon and several Long-legged Buzzard low overhead

Other highlights : the White-eyed Gulls at first light at Hurgada ,a Striated Heron and Little Bittern along the riverbanks during our private felucca trip on the Nile , the near endemic Sinai Rosefinch and Tristram's Grackle at St. Katherine's etc .

## Day 1

Friday 11th November

### Cairo

We departed from London on a scheduled service flight to Cairo. Arriving in early evening we then transferred to our hotel near the Pyramids.

## Day 2

Saturday 12th November

### Cairo

Pre-breakfast birding in the hotel gardens provided an introduction to characteristic Egyptian birds, such as Palm Dove, Common Bulbul and Hoopoe.

Following breakfast we embarked on a day of sightseeing with primary objectives the Pyramids and Sphinx. 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.

From the viewpoint we also saw our first Long-legged Buzzard in the company of several Black Kites.

After a short stop at a Papyrus shop/factory and lunch we paid an afternoon visit to the Egyptian Museum which houses an impressive collection of artefacts from Egypt's glorious past, including the treasures of Tutankhamun.

## Day3

Sunday 13th November

### Sharm-El-Sheik/Stcatherine

Leaving Cairo behind, we caught a morning flight to Sharm El Sheik. From here we drove for about two hours to St Catherine. This National Park occupies much of the central part of the South Sinai.

It is a mountainous region that includes Egypt's highest peaks, intersected by a complex network of deeply cut wadis. A relatively high precipitation gives rise to a rich diversity of plant and animal life.

Upon arrival we were greeted in the gardens of our hotel by our first of many iridescent Palestine Sunbirds, Laughing Doves, a Redstart and several White-crowned Black Wheatears.

After lunch we paid a visit to the monastery gardens. Chiffchaffs and Laughing Doves were common and a group of endemic Tristrams Grackles perched on the monastery dome.

We walked back to the hotel and soon one of the hoped for birds appeared on the path ahead of us. A couple of Sinai Rosefinches allowed excellent scope views to all, the male showing of its brilliant pink colours. A Bonelli's Eagle flew overhead concluding a productive afternoon.

After dinner we went out for a short owl quest but had no response, we only glimpsed a Cairo Spiny Mouse in the spotlight.

## Day 4

Monday 14th November

St. Catherine/Sharm el Sheik

We left early morning to climb Mt Sinai. We were alone almost all the time as the crowds had all left just after midnight to see the sunrise from the top.

It was just getting light as we ascended slowly along a zig-zag path and we soon found our first birds such as White-crowned Wheatear, mixed Chukar and Sand Partridge groups and loads of Rock Doves.

We stopped for breakfast at a small shop with a great view over the valley. Here at high elevation we soon had several endemic Sinai Rosefinches and Tristram's Grackles only meters away.

Most of our attention however went to a small mouse that was quickly moving between the rock walls before finally showing itself well to the group. A Golden Spiny Mouse, another Sinai Endemic!

The last part of the climb was fairly strenuous but we all made it to the top at 2200 m, the very spot where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, and were rewarded with stunning 360 degree views of the splendid Sinai landscape.

Brown-necked Ravens were soaring overhead.

Although it was late in the season the flora was also well represented with several of the Sinai endemics found.

Back down we paid a short visit to the oldest active monastery in the world which has been attracting pilgrims since the year 330AD. It was very crowded inside with loads of day tourists coming over from Sharm, still we managed to see the icons and the well that the monastery is famous for.

After a late lunch we drove back to Sharm-el Sheik arriving just in time for a short evening visit to the sewage ponds. We remained here until dusk and were rewarded by the arrival of Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse secretly flying in from the surrounding desert to drink.

## Day 5

Tuesday 15th November

Ras Mohammed

Early morning saw us back at the sewage pools looking out for two other species of Sandgrouse that come in to drink. We had to wait for a while but then out of nowhere they arrived. Several groups of Spotted and Crowned Sandgrouse gave great views, both on the ground and in flight.

The smart little Sooty Falcon was hunting Red-throated Pipits over the pools closely watched by a group of White Storks, several Cranes and a variety of waders and ducks.

From Sharm El Sheik we continued south to Ras Mohammed National Park. Although primarily a marine park, its boundaries encompass a considerable diversity of desert habitats. Large numbers of birds pass through and regularly stop to feed and rest for a short while before continuing their journeys.

During our first stop near the entrance we checked the tidal mudflats and soon found some of our target birds , the Greater Sand Plover and Slender-billed gull.

At the headland at the southern most tip of the Sinai we found a Red-footed Falcon perched on the ground only 20 m away , while a Great White Egret was fishing in the mangrove channel .

During the Bedouin style lunch on the beach the wind had picked up so that we had to cancel the snorkelling session .We decided to go for a swim in the lake instead but first stopped in the surrounding coastal habitats where we found a nice Red-rumped Wheatear while many Long-legged Buzzard drifted low overhead .

For those who wished we made another visit to the sewage pools. This time the Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse landed nearly at our feet and allowed even scope views .A fantastic end to another great day.

## Day 6

Wednesday 16th November

Sharm El Sheik-Hurgada

Because of the high winds of yesterday the ferry was cancelled so we had to drive to Hurgada.

After looking at a nice male White-spotted Bluethroat in the garden we were on our way.

Our first stop was just beyond the Suez Canal for lunch .We thus left Asia and arrived in Africa!

In the town we found our only House Crows of the trip.

During a short stop near Ain Sukhna we found a group of Crested Terns and Caspian Terns on a small rocky island .

It was dark when we arrived in the busy town of Hurgada . This fast growing beach resort is a popular destination for international holiday makers, offering great beaches, diving and snorkeling.

## Day 7

Thursday 17th November

Luxor

As we arrived after dark last night our plan was to get to the marina at first light to look for White-eyed Gulls .The timeframe was small as we had to leave the hotel already at 615 am to get the convoy to Luxor .It was still very dark when we got together in the lobby at 530 am and walked the half mile to the marina .Fortunately the dawn came up like thunder across the Red Sea and soon we had several groups of these smart gulls flying by and some even decided to land on a nearby boat .As the sun rose above the horizon a Reef Egret flew by and it was time for us to leave ,smiles on our faces !!!

We the drove across the Eastern Desert to Luxor in the Nile Valley. During a short stop half way we found our first Nile Valley Sunbird and a single Willow Warbler .

After settling into our hotel and lunch we drove to Crocodile Island, one of Upper Egypt's top birding sites.

Here we spend the afternoon birding the gardens, farmlands and reed-beds of the island where we soon found a dozen Night herons roosting in the trees near the entrance , several Senegal Thick-knee were calling constantly and gave excellent scope views , the reed beds held a variety of warblers and Prinias .

In the garden we found a flowering tree that attracted several young male Nile Valley Sunbirds (even showing of there de curved beaks for those with Swarowski El's).

In the dry areas we had several species of Wagtail and beautiful Red-throated Pipits and best of all small groups of smart Little Green Bee-eaters.

A family of Red Avadavat rounded of a fantastic birding afternoon!

Late afternoon we transferred to the Luxor Temple which looked truly magical when lit at night . Just as we arrived a Barbary Falcon flew by and caught a Swallow in mid air! Whoowwwwww !

## Day 8

Friday 18th November

Luxor

This morning we visited the West Bank sites .The Coloss of Memnon, Temple of Queen Hatshepsut and the beautifully painted tombs of the Valleys of the Kings.

In the desert fringe we saw White-crowned Black Wheatear, Rock Martin, Pallid Swift.and Northern Raven .In areas of cultivation we found many egrets , Kestrels several Black-shouldered Kite, Little Green Bee-eater on the wires .

We had lunch at an Egyptian restaurant on the banks of the Nile, followed by a guided tour of the Temple of Karnak, with its impressive hall of colossal stone pillars.

A nice blue Rock Thrush was found near the entrance and some glimpsed a Red Fox.

## Day 9

Saturday 19th November

Aswan

In the morning we drove south along the Nile Valley passing scenic villages and countryside to Aswan.

We stopped several times during our drive to visit the Edfu Horus Tempel, the largest completely preserved Ptolemaic, Greek-styled temple in Egypt .and the Kom Ombo Tempel, dedicated to the two God's. Sobek, the Crocodile-headed God, and Horus, the Falcon-headed sky God.

Upon arrival in Aswan we went to look at the High Dam, 3,6km wide and 111m high and completed in 1971 after 11 years of hard work.

After a late picnic lunch we took a motorboat to the enchanting Temple of Philae ,situated on an island between the Old and New Dams.

This temple is considered one of the most beautiful in Egypt and is also a good birding site .During our trip accros and on from the site we found a good selection of waterbirds.

Several Purple Swamphen were feeding on the lake edge, small groups of rare Ferruginous Ducks and Black-necked Grebes were floating on the lake while on the small islands large numbers of Cormorants and several species of egrets and herons were seen.

Late afternoon we took a felucca, a traditional Egyptian sailboat on the Nile and tour the First Cataract Islands. Aswan is the heron Capital of Egypt with over seven different species recorded, and we were not going to be disappointed .We soon found good numbers of Egyptian Goose, Ruff and Purple Swamphen feeding on the rivers edge , a single fishing Striated Heron well camouflaged in a low bush , a tree full of Cattle Egrets and a nice male Little Bittern jumping in the reeds giving excellent looks.

Other herons included several Squacco, flyby Purple and Night Herons.

As the sun was setting we watched 1000 s of Cormorants migrating along the river. A fitting end to another fantastic day and the highlight for some!

## Day 10

Sunday 20th November

### Abu Simbel

Very, very early morning we drove south through the hyper-arid Western Desert to Abu Simbel on the shores of Lake Nasser .

Upon arrival we visited the magnificent Temple of Abu Simbel built in honour of Ramses II and his beautiful wife, Nefertari. The temple was taken apart block by block and moved to higher ground to save it from flooding caused by the dam.

Our local guide was interrupted several times because birds would appear nearby. An African Pied Wagtail showed briefly on the lake edge and Chiffchafs seemed to occupy each bush.

We then drove the short distance to a small wetland and bay near the airport.

Here we watched a Bluethroat skulking in the tamarisks .Birding from the lake edge we found a pair of Pied Wheatear , several Little Stints , 2 flocks of White Pelicans using the thermals and 2 distant Yellow-billed Storks .

Lunch was very special today as we were invited into a typical Nubia house .The owners had prepared an extraordinaire meal local style .

Sitting on the balcony with a great view over lake Nasser we all agreed that it was a grand climax to a truly magical trip .!!!

Unfortunately we had to wolf the great food down as we had a plane to catch back to Cairo .

## Day 11

Monday 21st November

London

After an early breakfast we transferred to the airport and caught our return flight to London Heathrow.

HAT-SEP-SUT!