

Egypt - Birds & History

Naturetrek Tour Report

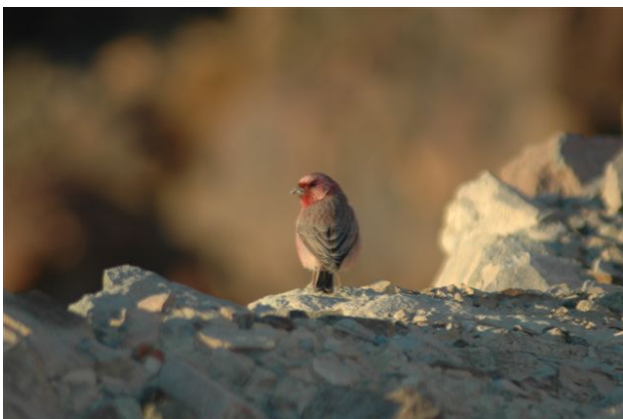
9 - 19 November 2007



Sphinx - Pyr



White-crowned Black Wheatear



Sinai Rosefinch



Fish and corals

Report and photos compiled by Gerald Broddelez



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Introduction

Due to its strategic situation at the junction between Eurasia and Africa, Egypt has a rich and varied fauna and flora. This was our third 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. Catherine's monastery, Luxor and Karnak temples, the tombs in the Valley of the Kings, 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 and animals 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 Crowned Sandgrouse, Sharm el Sheikh gave us Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse and an assortment of waders, nearby Ras Mohammed NP had Greater Sand Plover, Crested Tern and the most fantastic snorkelling in the world, while our trip on the Red Sea provided us with fantastic sightings of a pod of Risso's Dolphins at close range!

Other highlights: Senegal Thick-knee calling and displaying on the roof of our hotel in Cairo, the birding on Crocodile Island with excellent views of the Nile Valley Sunbird and rare White-tailed Plover, a good variety of egrets and herons during our private felucca trip on the Nile, the near endemic Hume's Tawny Owl, Sinai Rosefinch, Tristram's Grackle, Ruppell's Sand Fox and Arabian Horseshoe Bats at St. Catherine's etc .

Day 1

Friday 9th November

Cairo

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

Day 2

Saturday 10th 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.

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 Tutankhamen.

During the night we heard the Senegal Thick-knee which breeds on the roof of the hotel calling constantly!

Day 3

Sunday 11th November

Cairo/St. Catherine

Leaving Cairo behind in the rush hour we drove for about two hours before passing under the Suez Canal on our way St Catherine. We made a short stop at Moses Springs where we found a tree full of Chiffchaffs but not much else. It was already late afternoon when we arrived at 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

Before checking into our hotel we paid a short visit to the monastery gardens. As it was getting dark we did not see much but still we were impressed by the beautiful scenery and looked forward to our walk tomorrow.

In the evening we did some bat watching at the pool of the hotel and were rewarded with great sightings of the rare Arabian Horseshoe Bat.

Day 4

Monday 12th 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 left just after midnight to see the sunrise from the top. We had just got out of the bus and ready to start walking as a Hume's Owl flew by at close range with a "rat" in its claws!

Whawwww what a start of the day!!

It was just getting light as we ascended slowly along a zigzag path with another surprise waiting for us. Not one but three rarely seen Ruppell's Sand Foxes were running and playing between the big boulders allowing fantastic views to all for the next 15 minutes! We also picked up our first birds such as White-crowned Wheatear, mixed Chukar and Sand Partridge groups and loads of "true" Rock Doves.

About halfway to the top the group split into two with half the group going to the top and the other half having breakfast before slowly making their way back down. Both groups were very successful, seeing several endemic Sinai Rosefinches (including some splendid males), Tristram's Grackles and Streaked Scrub-warbler only meters away.

For the "Toppers", the last part of the climb was fairly strenuous but 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 degrees views of the splendid Sinai landscape with Brown-necked Ravens soaring overhead.

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, seeing a good selection of waders, a Bluethroat and Red-throated Pipit and were rewarded by the arrival of Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse flying in from the surrounding desert to drink at close range. A great end to a fantastic day!

Day 5

Tuesday 13th November

Ras Mohammed

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 in the company of Caspian and Great-crested Tern and a single Osprey.

Before going to our Bedouin style lunch we made a few more stops along the mangrove channel (with its attendant Osprey and our first Western Reef Egret) and at some shallow lagoons were we had great looks at a Common Kingfisher, a Caspian Tern and "fishing" Osprey.

After lunch we went for our snorkelling session and the spot was fabulous. We only had to swim for about 30 feet to "the Wall". Here at more than 300 feet drop we found a gathering of some of the most colourful corals and fishes in the world.

Several species of Parrotfish, Angelfish, Butterfly fish, Sergeant Major and corals as Strawberry and Brain coral were all trying to get our attention and unlike many other parts of the world, were not shy at all! Just brilliant!!

On our way back to the hotel we made a last short stop near the harbour where we found several White-eyed Gulls and a pair of Common Shelduck.

Day 6

Wednesday 14th November

Sharm El Sheik

Early morning saw us back at the sewage pools looking out for Sandgrouse that come here to drink. We did not have to wait long before several groups of Crowned Sandgrouse flew close overhead and landed on the opposite bank allowing great scope views.

A group of White Storks was resting on the desert sand waiting for the thermals while overhead we had several Black Kites, Long-legged Buzzard and a Marsh Harrier.

We then drove to the harbour where the boat that was going to take us to Tiran Island for the day was waiting for us. We sailed along the north coast for an hour before stopping for our first snorkelling session. Like yesterday it was just brilliant with an enormous variety of colourful fish against the backdrop of the coral laden wall. We added many new species to the list, most spectacular were probably the enormous Napoleon Fish, numerous species of brightly coloured Butterfly fish, the long-nosed Bird Wrasse and the long-tailed Orange-spine Unicornfish.

The many species of coral also got much of our attention. Reddish Finger Coral, Brain Coral, Giant Seafan and the blue-green Giant Clam stood out.

A short boat ride then took us to our next stop, Woodhouse Reef. Here the current meant that we drifted quite fast along the "wall" covered totally in coral. As we left our snorkelling spot a pod of rare Risso's Dolphins surfaced right in front of the boat and we spend the next half an hour admiring these pale, melon headed Dolphins at very close range, just superb!!

Lunch was taken in the lee of Tiran Island, a large crescent shaped Island situated at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba. We were interrupted several times as both Sooty and White-eyed Gulls flew by and decided to land on the beach or on one of the buoys. After this there was some time to relax or swim before returning to our luxurious base at Sharm-el Sheik.

Day 7

Thursday 15th November

Luxor

A short flight took us directly to Luxor this morning. 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.

We soon found a dozen Night Herons roosting in the trees near the entrance. We then walked along the banks of the river and the reed beds held Graceful Prinia and a variety of herons and egrets including Striated, Squacco and Grey Herons and a single Bittern.

In the garden we found a flowering tree that attracted several of the localised Nile Valley Sunbirds and Lesser Whitethroat. The dry areas held several sub-species species of Yellow Wagtail (including the Pygmae race known as Egyptian Wagtail), Spur-winged Plover, smart Black-shouldered Kites and a group of Senegal Thick-knee.

Several rat like Nile Kusu and Lang's Short-tailed Blue butterfly were other good finds.

Along the wet margins we found a good selection of waders including Wood and Marsh Sandpiper, Black-tailed Godwit and many Ruff. A large group of smart Little Green Bee-eaters was sitting on the trail bathing in the evening sunlight a sight that will not easily be forgotten. Finally a group of White Pelican flying away in the sunset rounded of a fantastic birding afternoon!

We then transferred to the Luxor Temple for a guided visit and it looked truly magical when lit at night.

Day 8

Friday 16th November

Luxor

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

In the Valley of the Kings, while visiting different Tombs, we located a small party of Trumpeter Finches and overhead had a few Common Raven and more surprisingly several very large flocks of White Pelican and a single Spotted Eagle.

In areas of cultivation we found many Egrets, Kestrels several Black-shouldered Kite and Little Green Bee-eater on the wires.

We had lunch back in town, followed by a guided tour of the Temple of Karnak, with its impressive hall of colossal stone pillars.

Late afternoon found many of us enjoying a drink on the balcony of the hotel overlooking the Nile, admiring a fantastic sunset!

Day 9

Saturday 17th November

Aswan

In the morning we flew south to Aswan. After checking into our hotel we drove to the New Dam for a short visit, seeing our first Gull-billed Terns and White-crowned Wheatear.

We then 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 across and on the site we found a good selection of waterbirds. Several Black and White-winged Terns were feeding on the lake edge, a large group of rare Ferruginous Ducks and Black-necked Grebes were floating on the lake while on the small islands large numbers of Cormorants, our first Egyptian Goose and several species of egrets and herons were seen.

Late afternoon we took a felucca, a traditional Egyptian sailboat on the Nile and toured Elephantine Island. Aswan is the heron Capital of Egypt with over seven different species recorded, and we were not going to be disappointed. We soon found large groups of Egyptian Goose, Senegal Thick-knee, Little Bittern, Striated and Squacco Herons, Black-winged Stilts and a single Clamorous Reed Warbler feeding at the rivers edge.

The sun was setting slowly behind the Island ending another fantastic day!

Day 10

Sunday 18th November

Abu Simbal

Another short flight this morning took us south over 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.

Birds were thin on the ground with only Crested Lark, Whitethroat and White-crowned Wheatear showing. We did however find a nice Lesser Rat-tailed Bat hanging on the wall in Ramses Temple and outside we found several Desert Babul Blues flitting in the acacia trees.

To soon however it was time to say goodbye and fly back to Cairo via Aswan, and all agreed that it was a grand climax to a truly magical trip!! .

Day 11

Monday 19th November

London

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

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Species Lists

Birds

Black-necked Grebe <i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	Black-winged Stilt <i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
Great White Pelican <i>Pelecanus onocrotalus</i>	Senegal Thick-knee <i>Burhinus senegalensis</i>
Great Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	Spur-winged Lapwing <i>Vanellus spinosus</i>
Grey Heron <i>Ardea cinerea</i>	White-tailed Lapwing <i>Vanellus leucurus</i>
Great Egret <i>Ardea alba</i>	Grey Plover <i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
Little Egret <i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Ringed Plover <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
Western Reef Egret <i>Egretta gularis</i>	Little Plover <i>Charadrius dubius</i>
Cattle Egret <i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	Kentish Plover <i>Charadrius alexandrinus alexandrinus</i>
Squacco Heron <i>Ardeola ralloides</i>	Greater Sand Plover <i>Charadrius leschenaultii</i>
Striated Heron <i>Butorides striata</i>	Common Snipe <i>Gallinago gallinago gallinago</i>
Black-crowned Night Heron <i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	Black-tailed Godwit <i>Limosa limosa</i>
Little Bittern <i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>	Whimbrel <i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
Great Bittern <i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	Eurasian Curlew <i>Numenius arquata</i>
Eurasian White Stork <i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	Spotted Redshank <i>Tringa erythropus</i>
Glossy Ibis <i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	Common Redshank <i>Tringa totanus</i>
Egyptian Goose <i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>	Marsh Sandpiper <i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>
Common Shelduck <i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	Common Greenshank <i>Tringa nebularia</i>
Eurasian Wigeon <i>Anas penelope</i>	Green Sandpiper <i>Tringa ochropus</i>
Eurasian Teal <i>Anas crecca crecca</i>	Wood Sandpiper <i>Tringa glareola</i>
Mallard <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Common Sandpiper <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
Northern Pintail <i>Anas acuta</i>	Little Stint <i>Calidris minuta</i>
Garganey <i>Anas querquedula</i>	Dunlin <i>Calidris alpina</i>
Northern Shoveler <i>Anas clypeata</i>	Ruff <i>Philomachus pugnax</i>
Common Pochard <i>Aythya ferina</i>	White-eyed Gull <i>Larus leucophthalmus</i>
Ferruginous Duck <i>Aythya nyroca</i>	Sooty Gull <i>Larus hemprichii</i>
Tufted Duck <i>Aythya fuligula</i>	Gull-billed Tern <i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>
Osprey <i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	Caspian Tern <i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>
Black-shouldered Kite <i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	Great Crested Tern <i>Sterna bergii</i>
Black Kite <i>Milvus migrans</i>	Whiskered Tern <i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>
Eurasian Marsh Harrier <i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	White-winged Tern <i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk <i>Accipiter nisus</i>	Black Tern <i>Chlidonias niger</i>
Western Steppe Buzzard <i>Buteo buteo vulpinus</i>	Crowned Sandgrouse <i>Pterocles coronatus</i>
Long-legged Buzzard <i>Buteo rufinus</i>	Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse <i>Pterocles lichtensteinii</i>
Greater Spotted Eagle <i>Aquila clanga</i>	Rock Dove <i>Columba livia</i>
Common Kestrel <i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Feral Pigeon <i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>
Chukar <i>Alectoris chukar</i>	Eurasian Collared Dove <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Sand Partridge <i>Ammoperdix heyi</i>	Laughing Dove <i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>
Common Crane <i>Grus grus</i>	Hume's Owl <i>Strix butleri</i>
African Swamphen <i>Porphyrio porphyrio madagascariensis</i>	Little Owl <i>Athene noctua</i>
Common Moorhen <i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	Pallid Swift <i>Apus pallidus</i>
Common Coot <i>Fulica atra</i>	White-throated Kingfisher <i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>
Eurasian Oystercatcher <i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	Common Kingfisher <i>Alcedo atthis</i>
	Pied Kingfisher <i>Ceryle rudis</i>

Little Green Bee-eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>	White-crowned Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i>
Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
Desert Lark	<i>Ammomanes deserti</i>	Isabelline Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	Graceful Prinia	<i>Prinia gracilis</i>
Collared Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>
European Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica rustica</i>	Streaked Scrub Warbler	<i>Scotocerca inquieta</i>
Egyptian Swallow	<i>Hirundo savignii</i>	Clamorous Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus stentoreus</i>
Rock Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne fuligina</i>	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
Northern House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>
Red-throated Pipit	<i>Anthus cervinus</i>	Nile Valley Sunbird	<i>Hedydipna metallicus</i>
Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>	Palestine Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris oseus</i>
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	Masked Shrike	<i>Lanius nubicus</i>
Blue-headed Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava flava</i>	House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>
Egyptian Wagtail	<i>Montacilla Pygmae</i>	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>
Common Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>	Brown-necked Raven	<i>Corvus ruficollis</i>
White-eyed Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus xanthopygos</i>	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	Tristram's Starling	<i>Onychognathus tristramii</i>
Red-spotted Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica svecica</i>	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	Pale Rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus synoicus</i>
Common Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquatus</i>	Trumpeter Finch	<i>Bucanetes githagineus</i>
Blackstart	<i>Cercomela melanura</i>		

Mammals

Geoffroy's Horseshoe Bat	<i>Rhinolophus clivosus</i>	Small numbers at St Katherine}
Lesser Horseshoe Bat	<i>Rhinolophus hipposideros</i>	Singles at St Katherine
Lesser Mouse-tailed Bat	<i>Rhinopoma hardwickii</i>	1 hanging against the wall at the Ramses Temple at Abu simbel
Naked-rumped Tomb Bat	<i>Taphozous nudiventris</i>	Luxor temple
Eastern Barbastelle	<i>Barbastella leucomelas</i>	Heard at St Katherine
Grey Long-eared Bat	<i>Plecotus austriacus</i>	Several at Aswan seen well near Hotel
Bodenheim's Pipistrelle	<i>Hypsugo bodenheimeri</i>	Several in the Sinai
Rüppell's Fox	<i>Vulpes ruppellii</i>	Seen very well playing between the boulders at St Katherine!
Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>	Fantastic sighting of 5 animals at very close range in the Red Sea!
African Arvicanthis	<i>Arvicanthis niloticus</i>	Nile Kusu Several seen well on Croc Island
Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>	

Butterflies

Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	
Small White	<i>Artogeia rapae</i>	
Orange Migrant	<i>Catopsilia florella fausta</i>	
Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>	Seen well on Croc Island
Desert Babul Blue	<i>Azanus ubaldus</i>	Singles at Abu simbel
Plain Tiger	<i>Danaus chrysippus</i>	Seen at most places
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>	

Others

Hummingbird hawk-moth	Wall Lizard sp
"Rosy's" Locust	

Fish and corals

Pearl Toby	Bicoulered Parrotfish
Bird Wrasse	Blue Sailfin Tang
Bluefin Trevally	Sohal Surgeonfish
Arabian Picassofish	Scissortail Sergeant
Half and half Chromis	White-edged Soldierfish
Scholling Bannerfish	Arabian Angelfish
Crown Butterflyfish	Striped Butterflyfish
Lined Butterflyfish	Great Barracuda
Emperor Angelfish	Rusty Parrotfish
Sulphur Damsel	Exquisite Butterflyfish
Masked Butterflyfish	Royal Angelfish
Halfmoon Angel	Red Sea Fusillier
Goat Fish	Pale Damsel
Napoleon	Black Parrotfish
Yellow-margin Triggerfish	Orangespine Unicornfish
Masked Puffer	Brown marbled Grouper
Red Sea Anemonefish	Sergeant Major
Coral Grouper	Common Giant Clam
Finger Coral	Brain Coral
Honeycomb Coral	