

Egypt - Birds & History

Naturetrek Tour report

24 October - 3 November 2008



Luxor Temple



Sinai Rosefinch



Pyramid & sphinx



Felucca ride

Report and images compiled by Gerald Broddez



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Summary

Due to its strategic situation at the junction between Eurasia and Africa, Egypt has a rich and varied fauna and flora. This was our fourth 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, 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 a good selection of birds of prey, Sharm el Sheikh gave us Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse and an assortment of waders, nearby Ras Mohammed NP had Greater Sand Plover, Pied Wheatear and the most fantastic snorkelling in the world!

Other highlights: A Bonelli's Eagle on and over the Pyramids, the birding on Crocodile Island with excellent views of the Nile Valley Sunbird and Senegal Thick-knee, a good variety of Egrets and Herons during our private felucca trip on the Nile, the near endemic Sinai Rosefinch, Tristram's Grackle and Rüppell's Sand Fox at St. Katherine's etc.

Day 1

Friday 24th October

Cairo

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

Day 2

Saturday 25th October

Cairo

Pre-breakfast birding in the hotel gardens along the Nile, provided an introduction to characteristic Egyptian birds such as Palm Dove, Common Bulbul and Pied Kingfisher. Following breakfast we embarked on a day of sightseeing starting with a visit to the Egyptian Museum which houses an impressive collection of artefacts from Egypt's glorious past, including the treasures of Tutankhamen. After a short stop at a Papyrus shop/factory and lunch we drove to 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. Birds are usually scarce here but we had good views off an adult Bonelli's Eagle, even perching on the Pyramids on one occasion.

Day 3

Sunday 26th October

Cairo/St Catherine

Leaving Cairo before 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, Spanish Sparrow and several Western steppe Buzzards and Steppe Eagle overhead.

After a picnic lunch en route we arrived at St Katherine mid afternoon in time for a first exploration of the area. 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

After checking into our hotel we paid a short visit to the monastery gardens. Here we found a good selection of both resident and migrant birds. Spotted Flycatcher, European Bee-eater, Rock Martin, Streaked Scrub-warbler and the near endemic Tristram's Grackle on top of the monastery! As it is the oldest active monastery in the world and has been attracting pilgrims since 565AD

Day 4

Monday 27th October

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. It was just getting light as we ascended slowly along a zigzag path with another surprise waiting for us. Two rarely seen Rüppell'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, Chukar and loads of "true" Rock Doves. A Lanner Falcon perched nicely in the scope and our first of many endemic Sinai Rosefinches appeared.

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, a single Fan-tailed Raven and a male Goshawk!

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 finally found a group of rare Sand Partridges and a single Red-backed Shrike on a camel! We then 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 secretly flying in from the surrounding desert to drink at close range. A great end to a fantastic day!

Day 5

Tuesday 28th October

Ras Mohammed

We started the day with a pre-breakfast visit to the sewage farm and were dully rewarded with some excellent sightings of several birds of prey and witnessing the migration of 100s even 1000s of storks just overhead. We spend the next two hours looking at a young Black Stork a White Pelican, and a stream of birds of prey that included some real toppers like Steppe, Lesser-spotted and Booted Eagle, Levant Sparrowhawk, Western Steppe and Long-legged Buzzard and both sub-species of Black Kite! A fantastic start to the day!

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 distant Slender-billed Gull in the company of Curlew.

Before going to our Bedouin style lunch we made a few more stops along the mangrove channel and at some shallow lagoons. Most of us also had a go at snorkelling but because of the wind the conditions were not very good so we decided to give it another go this afternoon. After lunch we went for our second snorkelling session and the spot was fabulous. We only had to swim for about 30 feet to “the Wall”. Here at the more then 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!! The non swimmers found a Pied Wheatear nearby and just as we left a Sooty Falcon swept by!

Day 6

Wednesday 29th October

Sharm El Sheik

After breakfast we walked 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, the most spectacular were numerous species of brightly coloured Butterfly fish, the long-nosed Bird Wrasse and the long-tailed Orange-spine Unicorn Fish. The many species of coral also got much of our attention. Reddish Finger Coral, Brain Coral, Giant Sea-fan 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. Here we had fantastic views of a pair of the magnificent Lion Fish at close range. Lunch was taken in the lee of Tiran Island, a large crescent shaped Island situated at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba. After this there we returned to our luxurious base at Sharm-el Sheik. En route we found a small group of White-eyed Gulls perched on one of the boys and upon arrival at the harbour had another Sooty Falcon flying by.

Day 7

Thursday 30th October

Lexor

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 several 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 as Squacco, Purple and Grey Heron. In the garden we found a flowering tree that attracted several localized Nile Valley Sunbirds and Green Bee-eaters. The dry areas held several sub-species of Yellow Wagtail (including the *pygmaea* race known as Egyptian Wagtail), Spur-winged Plover, smart Black-shouldered Kites and a group of Senegal Thick-knee. Many rat-like Nile Kusu were found in the burned areas. 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 male Little Bittern climbing in the reeds in the sunset rounded off 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 31st October

Luxor

This morning we visited the West Bank sites; the beautifully painted tombs of the Valleys of the Kings, the Colossi of Memnon and the Temple of Queen Hatshepsut. In the Valley of the Kings, while visiting different Tombs, we located Common Raven and Rock Martin. In areas of cultivation we found many egrets, our first group of Glossy Ibis, 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. Early evening we all went back to Karnak to enjoy the sound and light show. Several large Egyptian Fruit Bats distracted us a few times.

Day 9

Saturday 1st November

Aswan

In the morning we had planned to fly south to Aswan but a technical problem with the plane meant that we had to re-arrange our plans.

After a few telephone calls, a bus was organised and before anybody realised what was going on we joined the “convoy” to Aswan (which saved the day as the plane finally left Luxor at 2030!!). Upon arrival 3 hours later 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 Whiskered Terns were feeding on the lake edge; a small group of rare Ferruginous Ducks were floating on the lake while on the small islands large numbers of Cormorants, our first Egyptian Goose, seven Eurasian Spoonbills 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. The sun was setting slowly behind the Island ending another fantastic day!

Day 10

Sunday 2nd November

Abu Simbel

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 Ramesses 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 and White-crowned Wheatear showing. We did however find two “nice “Lesser Rat-tailed Bat hanging on the wall in Ramses Temple and outside we found several Whitethroat 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 3rd 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

1	Great White Pelican	<i>Pelecanus onocrotalus</i>	62	White-eyed Gull	<i>Larus leucophthalmus</i>
2	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	63	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
3	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	64	Slender-billed Gull	<i>Larus genei</i>
4	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	65	Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>
5	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	66	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>
6	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	67	Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>
7	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	68	Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles lichtensteinii</i>
8	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>	69	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
9	Striated Heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>	70	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>
10	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	71	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
11	Little Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>	72	Laughing Dove	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>
12	Eurasian White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	73	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>
13	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia Nigra</i>	74	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
14	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	75	Pied Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>
15	Eur Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucocoa</i>	76	Little Green Bee-eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>
16	Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>	77	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>
17	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca crecca</i>	78	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>
18	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	79	Desert Lark	<i>Ammomanes deserti</i>
19	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	80	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>
20	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas chrypeata</i>	81	Collared Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>
21	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	82	European Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica rustica</i>
22	Ferruginous Duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>	83	Egyptian swallow	<i>Hirundo savignii</i>
23	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	84	Rock Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne fuligula</i>
24	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	85	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>
25	Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	86	Northern House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>
26	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	87	Red-throated Pipit	<i>Anthus cervinus</i>
27	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Cicetus gallicus</i>	88	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
28	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	89	Blue-headed Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava flava</i>
29	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	90	Egyptian Wagtail	<i>Montacilla Pygmae</i>
30	Levant Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter brevipes</i>	91	Grey Wagtail	<i>Montacilla cinerea</i>
31	Western Steppe Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo vulpinus</i>	92	Common Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>
32	Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>	93	Blue Rock thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>
33	Lesser Spotted Eagle	<i>Aquila pomarina</i>	94	Red-spotted Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica svecica</i>
34	Steppe Eagle	<i>Aquila nipalensis</i>	95	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ocburnus</i>
35	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Hieriaetus fasciatus</i>	96	Common redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>
36	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieriaetus pennatus</i>	97	Common Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquatus</i>
37	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	98	White-crowned Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i>
38	Lanner Falcon	<i>Falco biarmicus</i>	99	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
39	Sooty Falcon	<i>Falco concolor</i>	100	Isabelline Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>
40	Chukar	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>	101	Pied Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe pleschanka</i>
41	Sand Partridge	<i>Ammoperdix heyi</i>	102	Graceful Prinia	<i>Prinia gracilis</i>
42	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	103	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>
43	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	104	Streaked Scrub Warbler	<i>Scotocerca inquieta</i>
44	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	105	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
45	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	106	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>
46	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	107	Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>
47	Senegal Thick-knee	<i>Burbinus senegalensis</i>	108	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>
48	Spur-winged Lapwing	<i>Vanellus spinosus</i>	109	Nile Valley Sunbird	<i>Hedydipna metallicus</i>
49	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	110	Palestine Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris oseus</i>
50	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	111	Masked Shrike	<i>Lanius nubicus</i>
51	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	112	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>

52	Greater Sand Plover	<i>Charadrius leschenaultii</i>	113	House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>
53	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	114	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>
54	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	115	Brown-necked Raven	<i>Corvus ruficollis</i>
55	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	116	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
56	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	117	Fan-tailed Raven	<i>Corvus rhipidurus</i>
57	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	118	Tristram's Starling	<i>Onychognathus tristramii</i>
58	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	119	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
59	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	120	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>
60	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	121	Pale Rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus synoicus</i>
61	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	122	Trumpeter Finch	<i>Bucanetes githagineus</i>

Mammals

Lesser Mouse-tailed Bat	<i>Rhinopoma hardwickii</i>
2 hanging against the wall at the Ramses Temple at Abu simbel	
Naked-rumped Tomb Bat	<i>Taphozous nudiventris</i>
Luxor temple	
Bodenheim's Pipistrelle	<i>Hypsugo bodenheimeri</i>
Several in the Sinai	
Egyptian Fruit Bat	<i>Rousettus aegyptiacus</i>
Common in Luxor area	
Rüppell's Fox	<i>Vulpes ruppellii</i>
Seen very well playing between the boulders at St Katherine!	
African Arvicanthis	<i>Arvicanthis niloticus</i>
Nile Kusu Several seen well on Croc Island	

Butterflies

Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	Plain Tiger	<i>Danaus chrysippus</i>
Small White	<i>Artogeia rapae</i>	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>
Orange Migrant	<i>Catopsilia florella fausta</i>		

Other fauna

Wall Lizard sp	Snake sp
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List of Fish and Corals seen during snorkelling sessions

Pearl Toby	Bicoloured 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	Emperor Angelfish
Rusty Parrotfish	Sulphur Damsel
Exquisite Butterflyfish	Masked Butterflyfish
Royal Angelfish	Halfmoon Angel
Red Sea Fusillier	Goat Fish
Pale Damsel	Black Parrotfish
Yellow-margin Triggerfish	Orangespine Unicornfish
Masked Puffer	Brown marbled Grouper
Red Sea Anemonefish (Nemo)	Sergeant Major
Coral Grouper	Lionfish
Common Giant Clam	Finger Coral
Brain Coral	Honeycomb Coral