

Winter trip to Nile Valley, Egypt, 23 February-3 March 2008, John Bowler

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We spent 10 days in Egypt on a typical sight-seeing tour of the ancient sites, taking in the Pyramids at Giza, a 4 night cruise down the Nile between Luxor and Aswan visiting Karnak and the Valley of the Kings etc plus 3 nights in Aswan, with a visit to Abu Simbel. There are an infinite variety of packages and itineraries available at a range of prices but most trips seem to take in the same key sites. I was keen to explore the birding opportunities on such an organised package and was very pleasantly surprised - particularly by the opportunities for birding the Nile Valley wetlands from the cruise-ship as the river is rather narrow and both banks are easily covered at the slow pace of the ships. We stayed at the Movenpick resort in Giza, cruised the Nile on the RA11 and stayed at the New Cataract Hotel in Aswan. There was no need to rent cars etc as all excursions were laid on, but I also managed to sneak an afternoon's birding in at Crocodile Island by taking a taxi from our mooring in Luxor (cost = £1.50 each way).

We saw 121 species and had great views of most target species: **Nile Valley Sunbird, Senegal Coucal, Senegal Thick-knee, Cream-coloured Courser, Egyptian Nightjar, African Rock Martin, Little Green Bee-eater, Red Avadavat, Hooded Wheatear, Mourning Wheatear, White-crowned Black Wheatear, Hoopoe Lark, Desert Lark, and Spotted Sandgrouse**, plus bonus **Striated Heron, Desert Eagle Owl, African Skimmer, Indian Silverbill and White-tailed Plover**. Scarcer migrant species seen included: **Crag Martin, Eastern Bonelli's Warbler, Sedge Warbler and Masked Shrike**.

Itinerary

- 22 Feb: arrival at Cairo airport and transfer to Movenpick, Giza
- 23 Feb: dawn birding around the grounds of the Movenpick resort, morning trip to Giza Plateau for Pyramids and Sphinx, afternoon to Memphis and Saqarra, late afternoon at Movenpick resort
- 24 Feb: early morning at Movenpick Giza, then to Cairo museum and back to Movenpick for the afternoon
- 25 Feb: flew to Luxor (early am), transfer to RA11 at mooring on the southern edge of Luxor, birded mooring area a.m., taxi to Crocodile Island for afternoon birding
- 26 Feb: early morning birding cruising the Nile north to Qena, visit to Dendera temple then afternoon birding cruising the Nile south back towards Luxor
- 27 Feb: early morning visit to west bank of Luxor visiting the Colossi of Memnon, Valley of the Kings and Queen Hatsetshup's temple, afternoon visits to Karnak and Luxor temples
- 28 Feb: Early morning cruising to Edfu from south of Esna (went through the locks at night), visit to Edfu temple, then cruised south to Aswan
- 29 Feb: Morning visits to the High Dam, Philae Island and Kitchener Island, transfer to the New Cataract Hotel, Aswan
- 1 Mar: Pre-dawn drive by min-bus to Abu Simbel temple for early morning visit, then back to Aswan for afternoon by the pool
- 2 Mar: morning boat trip around the Aswan cataract islands and visit to Kitchener Island, afternoon at leisure in the Cataract Hotel
- 3 Mar: pre-dawn departure for Aswan airport and flight back to London via Cairo

Principal sites

The main birding sites we birded are listed below.

1) Giza area:

a) The leafy oasis of the grounds of the Movenpick hotel proved to be surprisingly good for birds. The dense tall hedges along the back of the property were full of warblers, **Nile Valley Sunbirds** both **House** and **Spanish Sparrows** as well as bonus **Senegal Coucals**, whilst a pair of **Indian Silverbills** was nesting outside Chalet row 14. In amongst large numbers of **Chiffchaffs**, **Lesser Whitethroats** and several **Graceful Prinias**, we picked up our only **Sardinian Warblers** of the trip here plus presumably wintering (?) **Blackcaps**, **Garden Warbler** and an **Eastern Bonelli's Warbler**. **Little Green Bee-eaters** (*cleopatra* race) were regular at the back of the tennis courts, whilst other common birds included **Hoopoe**, **Common Bulbul**, **Blackbird** and **Laughing Dove**. The roof-top bar at dusk was good for watching hundreds of **White Wagtails** streaming into a roost, plus attendant **Sparrowhawk** and **Kestrel** and several large pale bats.

b) Giza plateau: the desert area immediately around the Pyramids is meant to be a wintering site for **Red-tailed Wheatear** but we found the area to be very busy, with lots of tourist hassle and rather bird-less, other than for widespread species. We saw our first **Yellow-billed Kites** and **Egyptian Swallows** (*savigni* race) here (which both proved to be common where-ever we went).

c) Memphis and Saqarra – this afternoon excursion by bus lead out of the suburbs of Cairo and into more agricultural settings. We saw our first **Pallid Swifts**, **Spur-winged Plovers** and **Crested Larks**, plus more **Little Green Bee-eaters** on this trip. Best birds were a bonus adult **Striated Heron** along the main irrigation canal near Saqarra, plus roosting **Desert Eagle Owl** on the Step Pyramid at Saqarra (was quite deep in a crack near the top of the east face and could only be seen rather distantly from the car park – it was lost from sight on a closer approach by protruding stonework).

d) Cairo town – a bus trip to the Cairo Museum provided a few new birds, including the only **Ring-necked Parakeets** of the trip and a couple of **Great White Egrets**, plus big numbers of **Black-headed Gulls** and **Pallid Swifts**.

2) Luxor:

a) The RAIL uses the private Eastmar mooring just south of town. A small garden area at the dock held a few common birds such as **Graceful Prinia**, **Common Bulbul** and **Lesser Whitethroat** whilst an island and reedbed across the river held typical Nile Valley birds including **Marsh Harrier**, **Pied Kingfisher**, **Purple Heron**, **Spur-winged Plover** and **Black Tern**, plus clouds of **Pallid Swifts** and **Sand Martins**, as well as a bonus **Lanner**. A flock of 220 **Glossy Ibis** flew north down river towards dusk as well as some 250 **Night Herons** coming out of their day-time roost. Clouds of **Black-headed Gulls** on the Nile included at least one **Slender-billed Gull**.

b) Crocodile Island. This well-known site is just a couple of miles south of Luxor and offers relaxed almost hassle-free birding in the gardens, fields and river-side marshes. I took a taxi for an afternoon's birding and saw a wealth of birds. The only species I saw here and nowhere else on the trip were **Red Avadavat** and **Stonechat**, the former was easily found (flock of 15) amongst reeds in the fields to the south of the bridge (turn left after crossing the bridge to the island). However, the area is well worth visiting for the wide of birds that can be seen and photographed at close quarters including: **Nile Valley Sunbird**, **Red-throated Pipit**, **Yellow Wagtail** (*pygmaea* race), **Black-headed Wagtail**, **Bluethroat**, **Little Green Bee-eater**, **Graceful Prinia**, **Zitting Cisticola**, **Olivaceous Warbler**, **Clamorous Reed-warbler**, **Spanish Sparrow**, **Squacco Heron**, **Purple Heron** and **Black-winged Kite**. A flooded marshy area held a good selection of waders such as **Black-winged Stilt**, **Wood**

Sandpiper, Snipe, Common Sandpiper and some **30 Marsh Sandpipers**, plus the ubiquitous **Spur-winged Plover**. **Painted Snipe** is possible here.

c) West bank. The west bank excursions typically visit the Valley of the Kings, Queen Hatshepsut's temple, plus alabaster works-shops in the villages. There were **Nile Valley Sunbirds** in Bougainvillea by the road-side just over the bridge plus our first **Southern Grey Shrike** and a roadside Nile Monitor Lizard. A quick stop at the Colossi of Memnon produced **Masked Shrike, Zitting Cisticola, Meadow Pipit** and a group of **Short-toed Larks** in a dusty ploughed field. The rough desert around the alabaster workshops held 2 **Desert Lark**, whilst the Valley of the Kings had showy **Trumpeter Finches**, a **Blue Rock-thrush**, several **African Rock Martins** and 2 **Brown-necked Ravens**. The temple of Hatshepsut is very nice, but the cliffs above are well worth scanning – we saw a desert Red Fox sharing a carcass with 3 **Brown-necked Raven** (also an active nest of the latter), several **African Rock Martin**, a **White-crowned Black Wheatear** and best of all a **Hooded Wheatear**. The rocky desert cliffs can be better explored by risking the paths between this site and the Valley of the Kings (although expect lots of hassle!).

d) Karnak. This is not a prime birding site but the extensive ruins held **African Rock Martin, Graceful Prinia, Hoopoe, Kestrel etc** plus another desert Red Fox.

e) Desert edge. The desert edge can be reached near Luxor. This is best done using guides based at Crocodile Island. We did not do this, but birds such as **Namaqua Dove, Isabelline Wheatear, Rock Thrush** and **Tawny Pipit** were seen here in early March 2008 (Jim Dickson pers comm.).

3) River Nile north to Dendera

a) We cruised north overnight down the Nile and dawn found us still south of Dendera with extensive wetlands and islands dotted along either side of the river. We also had more prolonged viewing of the Nile in the afternoon as we headed back south towards Luxor. There were large numbers of wildfowl including big flocks of **Coot, Shoveler and Wigeon** with smaller numbers of **Teal, Pintail, Tufted Duck** and **Pochard**. Other waterbirds included hundreds of **Cattle Egrets, Squacco Herons, Little Egrets, Glossy Ibis, Cormorant** plus smaller numbers of **Purple Heron, Night Heron, Black Tern, White-winged Black Tern** and around **60 Purple Gallinules**. Groups of waders were dominated by **Ruff** but we also saw **Ringed Plover, Snipe, Black-tailed Godwit, Green, Common, Wood and Marsh Sandpipers, Greenshank** and **Black-winged Stilt**. **Senegal Thick-knees (ca 25)** were most easily seen towards dusk as they came out of bushy cover on the sandbanks. Raptors included at least **15 Marsh Harrier, 8 Black-shouldered Kite**, several **Kestrel** and **Yellow-billed Kite** plus excellent views of a **Barbary Falcon** as well as other more distant large falcons. Smaller birds such as **Clamorous Reed Warbler, Linnet, Zitting Cisticola** etc could also be made out along the river banks as these were never too distant.

b) Dendera. The ruins at Dendera and adjacent fields produced **2 Goldfinch**, plus **African Rock Martin, Little Green Bee-eater, Red-throated Pipit, Yellow Wagtail, Zitting Cisticola, Graceful Prinia** etc.

4) River Nile south to Edfu and Aswan

a) Most cruises travel after dark south from Luxor to pass through the locks at Esna during the night. Dawn found us cruising south towards Edfu. The river had a slightly different character here with more walled banks and therefore fewer marshes, but there were also some excellent mid-river islands. The bird-list was similar to the northern cruise but there was a subtly different composition to the wildfowl here with some big flocks of **Ferruginous**

Ducks (ca 200), plus large numbers of **Pochard**, as well as our first **Gadwalls** in amongst the flocks of **Shoveler**, **Teal** and **Wigeon**. A muddy mid-river island held the only **Spoonbill** of the trip as well as 3 **African Skimmers** – the latter rather further north than expected. Closer approach to some of the muddy islands allowed identification of our first **Little Stints**, **Kentish Plovers** and **Spotted Redshanks** in the wader flocks, plus 3 **Sedge Warblers** in the reeds and a flyover **Common Buzzard** plus more **Marsh Harriers** and **Black-shouldered Kites**. Marsh terns included bigger numbers of **White-winged Blacks** and **Whiskered Terns**, with only a few **Black Terns**.

b) Edfu. We had to run the gauntlet of touts to get to the ruins, which produced the now familiar “temple species” i.e. **African Rock Martin**, **Little Green Bee-eater**, **Hoopoe** etc

c) The cruise south from Edfu towards Aswan saw further changes as the river continued to narrow and the desert edge approached the river in places, going through a number of rocky gorges, although still interspersed with marshes and interesting islands. We started seeing our first **Gull-billed Terns** here along with even bigger numbers of **Whiskered** and **White-winged Black Terns**. The typical selection of egrets, herons, waders (including more **Little Stints**, **Spotted Redshanks** and **Senegal Thick-knees**) and gallinules were all present and correct but we also saw one **Great White Egret** in a roost of **Grey Herons** in a gorge. New raptors included **Osprey** and **Long-legged Buzzard**, but best bird was a lone **White-tailed Plover** on a grazed river-edge marsh with lots of cows. There were still plenty of the usual dabbling ducks on this stretch but no diving ducks. We picked up at least 1 **Crag Martin**, which flew over the boat near one of the gorges, where **African Rock Martins**, **Sand Martins** and **Pallid Swifts** were common, plus 2 regular **Barn Swallows** in amongst the hordes of **Egyptian Swallows**. Better still were 1-2 **Egyptian Nightjars** hawking along the river banks after dusk, one of which circled over the ferry!

5) Aswan:

a) We stayed in the New Cataract Hotel overlooking Elephantine Island. Excellent birdwatching could be had from the balcony watching typical Nile birds using the river and islands below (including **Green Sandpiper**, **Little Green Bee-eater**, another **Crag Martin** and **Gull-billed Tern**), as well hundreds of **Black-headed Gulls** and **Cormorants**, plus smaller numbers of **Glossy Ibis** and **Night-heron** streaming past at dusk. Raptors included a **Lesser Kestrel** as well as regular **Sparrowhawks** and **Common Kestrels**. The flower-filled grounds also provided feeding for **Nile Valley Sunbird** plus commoner warblers, bulbuls, doves etc.

b) Kitchener's Island. An attractive, shady botanical garden reached by a short boat ride (easily arranged) with relatively little hassle. A photogenic flock of 65 **Ferruginous Ducks** fed just offshore, whilst the cruise to and from the island produced **Osprey**, as well as a spiralling flock of raptors, which included migrant **Black Kites**, **Marsh Harriers** and two more distant eagles (probably Lesser Spotted). Our second visit (2 March) produced a flock of over 1,000 **White Storks** drifting over NW at midday. The island itself was good for confiding **Nile Valley Sunbirds**, **Olivaceous Warblers**, **Bluethroats** and a **Masked Shrike** in amongst hordes of **Chiffchaffs**, **Graceful Prinias**, **Lesser Whitethroats** and **Common Bulbuls**.

c) High and low dam. An organised trip to the Aswan dams produced our first 2 **Egyptian Geese** between the two dams plus a few other common species such as **Tufted Duck** etc

d) Philae Island. The attractive ruins on this island are well worth a visit in their own right, which is visited by small boat. There was a **Blue Rock-thrush** close to the jetty, a **Great-crested Grebe** in with **Tufted Ducks** near the shore, whilst rocky islands nearby held

migrating groups of **White Stork** and **Black Kite**. The bushy island itself held **Nile Valley Sunbird**, **Bluethroat** and **Olivaceous Warbler** in amongst the usual common species.

e) Abu Simbel. The 2.5 hour trip south to Abu Simbel is a must to see several African species not usually present at Aswan. Flying is also an option but van/car also raises the chance of seeing some real desert birds on the return trip. Convoys of min-vans leave Aswan in the dark to drive south across the desert to reach the Abu Simbel ruins by dawn in a crazy dash akin to the "Wacky Races". First light gave spectacular views of the barren Western desert, 40 minutes north of Abu Simbel, with flyover **Egyptian Geese** and 2 **Stone-Curlews** the first birds seen.

The ruins are spectacular and overlook Lake Nasser, which provided 1 **Pink-backed Pelican** – one of the hoped-for specialities. **African Pied Wagtail**, **Goliath Heron** and **Pink-headed (African Collared) Dove** can also occur here but are perhaps more regular in the summer months. Birds easily seen around the ruins included **White-crowned Black Wheatear**, **Brown-necked Raven**, **Olivaceous Warbler**, **Graceful Prinia** and a **Masked Shrike**, plus the only **House Martins** of the trip and **Egyptian Geese** on Lake Nasser. Obvious passage included **Black Kites** and **Barn Swallows**. Other birds seen at a brief stop on the edge of town included **Mourning Wheatear**, **Kestrel** and **Southern Grey Shrike**.

f) Western Desert. Birding from the fast-moving van was not easy and hampered by the apparent absence of birds for most of the journey! I made sure to sit on the left (west-facing side) of the van to cut down glare and focussed on a narrow strip of land close to the edge of the road. There were no birds at all in the first hour but at around 65 mins out from Abu Simbel (1005 hrs) we hit an area of sand desert with very small sandy mounds alongside the road. Here, I saw 3 **Spotted Sandgrouse** right next to the road including one in flight, quickly followed by 2 **Cream-coloured Coursers** standing about 500m apart in the lee of small sand mounds, and then four single **Hoopoe Larks** – three in the same sandy mound habitat and the last at 1105 hrs. Beyond this, the only other birds seen were small groups of migrating **Barn Swallows**, until **60 Black Kites** appeared in a thermal almost on the edge of Aswan town.