

4/1/2022

Egypt and Jordan- Birds and Antiquities



Ken Logan

WWW.BIRDPHOTOGRAPHY-KENLOGAN.CO.ZA

Egypt and Jordan- Birding and Antiquities

This was the first trip Rockjumper had run to Egypt since 2012. It was called “Egypt- Birding and Antiquities” (and shopping) with a three day extension to Jordan- which was far too short- the birding in Jordan (just one day) was much better than in Egypt. Our guides were good old Dave Hoddinott who we know well and a new guide- Mark Beavers from the UK who we did not know at all. We “did” all the Antiquity sites and despite having done a Nile cruise 20 years ago, it was great to revisit the places we had seen and visit a couple of new sites - The Island of Philae and Abu Simbel as well. Our time was split roughly 50/50 birding and Antiquities and while the Egyptian birding for me was a little disappointing (ignore that comment about our Red Sea cruise which was great), It turned out to be a real holiday – with hot air balloon rides over the Nile Valley and a super Sound and Light show at Abu Simbel. There was time for Stephanie to explore the Papyrus, Carpet, Oils and essences, and Alabaster shops and bargain with the merchants in the markets. We bought a carpet which we shipped home- It arrived yesterday- and we found some clothes in the markets which were very reasonably priced.



We arrived in Cairo where we spent 3 nights -our hotel was right on the Nile and the discos on the cruise boats docked alongside the river kept us awake until 2.00 in the morning. We birded a small park next door and found Alexandrine Parakeets and lots of Hooded Crows. They seem to have replaced the House Crows in some areas and along the Nile is the only place you can find Hooded Crows in Africa.



We then had a morning at the Giza Pyramids (we did find White-crowned Wheatear at Giza) and an afternoon visit to Saqqara where we had poor views of our first African Green Bee-eater, followed by one of our many shopping trips to a Carpet school.

The following day our birding started in earnest at the Abassa Fish Ponds some 120 kilometers north east of Cairo. Our party was 17 strong including 2 bird guides and a local guide- called Horus (from the Falcon God not the Swift). Horus made the trip. His knowledge was encyclopedic and he was the supreme

Mr fixit man. We travelled on a large coach and always had a security guard on the bus with us. The “Tourism Police” a new department set up to look after tourists were always informed of our itinerary and half way to Abassa, they joined us and we had a blue light brigade up front with a bakkie with 4 armed policemen behind us. We were escorted like this on many days especially around Suez where security was particularly tight. Horus said we were VIP’s- Egypt could not afford to lose its tourist trade if Americans were killed while holidaying in Egypt. (No mention of South Africans!!)

We spent a full morning at Abassa. I quickly found a new bird for me -Graceful Prinia but nothing else new. We did however get great views of Clamorous Reed Warbler and Greater Painted Snipe. The ponds held the usual collection of waders, herons, egrets, many Spur-winged Lapwings, Senegal Thick-knees, and a glimpse of a Senegal Coucal. Of interest there were no ducks. In the afternoon we visited the Cairo Museum.





resort town called Ain Sokhana. We were supposed to do some desert birding at Wadi Hugul en route but many new roads had been built on the last 10 years and we could not find the spot we were looking for. The next day we drove south along the Red sea coastline. We were heading for St Paul's Monastery where in addition to the tour round the monastery we were going to spend a few hours watching the migration.

We were in Egypt towards the end of the migration period and unfortunately had already missed most of the sylvia warblers (or babblers as they are now known) which migrate a little earlier. Lesser Whitethroat was the only common sylvia we found. The migration was fairly light and the only birds we saw in serious numbers were White Storks – two flocks containing several hundred birds came over. We saw all the raptors we could expect to see, including Eastern Imperial, Greater Spotted, Steppe, Short-toed Snake and Booted eagles, Black and Yellow-billed Kites, Common Buzzards, Western Marsh Harriers, European Honey Buzzards, and two species of Sparrowhawk- Eurasian and a wonderful surprise for me – Levant Sparrowhawk. The monastery was an interesting place. It has survived for over 700 years because of a mountain spring which provides its water and which has never stopped flowing in all those years. We had one attempt at desert birding on leaving the monastery and spent an hour looking for African Scrub Warbler without success. We did find however Eastern black-eared Wheatear.

In the afternoon we headed back north along the coast towards Suez. Security was very tight and we were not allowed to leave the bus to explore the shoreline for some of the gulls and terns we needed.

The next day was a travel day. We had an hour's birding around the hotel's gardens spotting our first White-eyed Gull sitting by the swimming pool. The lawns held three Eurasian Hoopoes. These were extremely common birds in Egypt and we saw them on every day of our stay in Egypt. Then we were off to Sharm el Sheik.



So we headed back towards Suez for a third time, crossed under the canal via a road tunnel, leaving Africa and emerging in Asia. Now we had a two hundred kilometer ride along the east side of the Red sea down to Sharm el Sheik. We stopped for lunch at Ras Sudr but the Saunder's Tern colony we were supposed to visit seemed to have disappeared. Managed shots of Little Tern instead. Our Hotel Resort at Sharm was massive- hundreds of rooms and all you could eat and drink (alcohol included) and many Eastern European tourists were there-(even some of the signs around the hotel were in Russian). It reminded me of the Cuban resorts at Cayo Coca where they fly in thousands of Canadian and Eastern European tourists, who just want to eat, drink, and turn lobster red in the sun.



Our first day there we visited the Ras Mohamed National Park. The birding there was disappointing with Kentish Plovers, Lesser Black-backed (the sub-species fuscus known as Baltic Gull) and Slender billed Gulls and a solitary Western Reef Heron being the most interesting birds seen, but it is a renowned diving spot and most of the group went snorkeling.



At Sharm we spent two mornings and one afternoon at the local sewage works, and while there was the usual collection of waders, herons, egrets, lapwings and stilts, we did turn up a few interesting birds.

In the late afternoon the Pallid Swifts would come down to drink and we found some Pale Crag Martins (a new bird for me)- we even managed to find a couple of ducks. A nice Garganey in breeding plumage and a Eurasian Teal which had difficulty flying. We thought it had probably been shot at and had damaged primaries. In the early morning the sandgrouse would arrive – big flocks of Spotted but only a couple of Crowned. Lichtenstein's

(the one I wanted) we never found. They would land in the desert alongside the Brown-necked Ravens and then cautiously make their way to the ponds moving down the concrete slopes to drink. We still had the odd raptor overhead and White Storks around the ponds and Western Marsh Harriers would scare off the waders- Temminck's Stints and Curlew Sandpipers would fly off in small flocks before landing once more. As the morning warmed the storks would take off circling on the thermals and gaining height but then landed again- conditions obviously not quite right for their next move back to Europe. We found Eastern Olivaceous Warblers in the reed beds and several Red-throated Pipits. There were Ringed Plovers foraging round the ponds and we even found a Pectoral Sandpiper- only the 4th record for Egypt.

We had a final couple of hours at the sewage works before moving on to the airport and our flight back across the Red sea to Hurghada another resort town popular with German tourists. We stayed a few kilometers north at a large resort called El Gouna. We birded the golf course in the early morning finding Northern Wheatear, Lesser Whitethroat, Whinchat and more Tree and Red-throated Pipits. We had more Harriers- a couple of Montagu's and a possible distant Pallid, and another small group of Western Marsh Harriers.



Today was hopefully going to me a big day for me- we had our Red sea boat trip out to the Hurghada islands. We had barely left the quay when we starting throwing out some morsels for the White-eyed Gulls and they came round the boat in their dozens. After an hour I went down to the loo and missed my White-cheeked Tern but fortunately found another among the many Common Terns an hour later.

There was more snorkeling on offer and when we started feeding some of our lunch to the White-eyed Gulls, they were joined by a couple of Sooty Gulls who joined the melee. Our trip back passed the islands where the White-eyed Gulls breed on very inhospitable ground. A Collared Pratincole looked lonely on a rocky outcrop and we passed a small group of Sooty Shearwaters on our way back to the harbour.



Leaving Hurghada we headed back out into the desert on our way to the Nile Valley and Luxor. Nothing much seen en-route but I was looking forward to our one-night stay on Crocodile Island in the middle of the Nile River. The Island holds two hotels and the walk all the way round the island takes a couple of hours. Here we found a couple of introduced species- Red



Avadavit and Indian Silverbill, and got close up views of Nile Valley Sunbird and African Green Bee-eater. This ended our birding until we joined our boat after lunch on the next day to start our Nile cruise.

Leaving our hotel we visited Karnack temple, lunched at a local restaurant and visited the oil and perfume essences shop and Luxor temple in the afternoon. We then joined our boat for our 4 day River Nile cruise. We remained moored overnight and the next day we were up early for our hot air balloon ride over the Nile Valley. Each basket under each balloon can take 32 people- 16 on each side of the burner in 4 separate compartments. We counted 24 balloons in the air once we were up, meaning there were at least 768 people in the air all at the same time. It required a fleet of 80 10 seater taxis to get them to the launch site and they formed a queue a kilometer long- a major logistical exercise which went with military precision. The trip was fantastic with great views over the Valley of the Kings and views of Queen Hatshepsut's temple and well worth the \$80 we paid when you consider you can spend \$500 to balloon over the Serengeti. The rest of morning we spent visiting the Valley of the Queens and Kings. The boat departed that afternoon.

Birding down the Nile from the boat is not exciting. We saw just the river birds you would expect to see- the biggest excitement was a couple of Ferruginous Ducks and some Gull-billed Terns. We visited Edfu temple being driven there in a horse and carriage. Had to walk part of the way as the wheel on the carriage was about to fall off! Then it was on to Kom Ombo temple before arriving in Aswan. We disembarked and visited the Isis temple on the island of Philae- another temple rebuilt on higher ground to save it from the flooding of the dam.

In the afternoon we boarded a motorized felucca for yet another Nile cruise round Elephantine Island. We found Senegal Thick-knees, Little Bittern, and a rock on which was perched Gull-billed, Whiskered and White-winged Terns alongside a couple of Slender-billed Gulls.



We left the Nile the following morning heading for Abu Simbel. We stopped off at Aswan Fish ponds but saw nothing new- got a couple of shots of a Masked Shrike. We reached Abu Simbel after lunch and visited the temple at 1.00pm. As you can imagine we were the only people there in the heat of the day. This temple was also rescued from the rising waters of Lake Nasser and the size of the statues has to be seen to be believed- a truly remarkable place with an incredible Sound and Light show in the evening made even better by an Egyptian Nightjar flying over the temple just as the show finished!

Our final day in Egypt we spent on Lake Nasser. We saw many of the same old water birds, but Yellowed-billed Stork and Greater Flamingo were new and everyone got very excited about an African Pied Wagtail- Lake Nasser is apparently the only place in Egypt you can find it.

I had a list of 45 birds for Egypt and found only seven. Jordan could only be better. We left at 3.00am for the two hour drive back to Aswan, caught the flight to Cairo, and then on to Amman on Jordan Air, arriving early afternoon.



Our extension to Jordan was just three days (far too rushed) and on our arrival on day one we did not see a bird. Day two however changed all of that. Petra lies over 200 kilometers to the south and we birded our way down to Petra. We visited Wadi el Seer just outside Amman. Here the birds were mainly palearctic and not African. We found White-spectacled Bulbul, Eurasian Jay, Linnet,

European Greenfinch, and White-throated Kingfisher in quick succession. Moving along to a small stream we had Thrush Nightingale, Garden, Marsh and Upcher's Warblers, Graceful Prinia, Palestine Sunbird, but none of the three Buntings I was hoping for- again they are early migrants.

We drove along the Jordan shore of the Dead Sea- looked for Dead Sea Sparrow but did not find it- had to do with Barred Warbler, Eurasian Stone Curlew, Eurasian Blackcap and Arabian green Bee-eater instead. We reached the village of Dana in time for lunch seeing Blackstart, Fan-tailed Ravens and Tristram's Starling along the way. After lunch we headed into the Dana Nature Reserve where we found the very special range restricted Syrian Serin and our first Mourning Wheatear along the way before pulling into Petra late in the afternoon.

Petra had been on our hit list for many a year and was one of the main reasons we did this trip. Our hotel was just 50 meters from the main entrance and on the 2 kilometer walk down to the Siq (canyon) we picked up more Blackstarts and Mourning Wheatears. We were pestered by the usual bunch selling horse and donkey rides down to the treasury but entered the canyon on foot around 6.30 in the morning, but not before finding a Sinai Rosefinch drinking from a small water container. The canyon was spectacular- the walls are sandstone so many of the carvings above the tomb entrances had been obliterated by time and the sand. The treasury was closed for repairs when we reached it and the entire gorge was filled with Merchant's stalls. I felt vaguely disappointed – I had expected something more impressive.

The canyon widened out and led down to a temple and a monastery a further two kilometers on. We did not have time for the monastery- we had to leave at 11.am to drive back to Amman then on to Cairo to catch our flight back to Johannesburg. I hung around hoping for a shot of the Rosefinch but it was not to be and we climbed aboard our coach to start the long trip home.



I had found another seven birds in Jordan making 14 in total. Not as good as I had hoped but I was pleased with the Levant Sparrowhawk and the Red Sea birds- White-eyed Gull and White-cheeked Tern and the Serin and Rosefinch were special birds to finish the trip.

