

EGYPT – CAIRO, LUXOR AND THE RED SEA COAST, 18th – 26th MARCH 2006

By [Richard Bonser](#)

Trip Participants: Douglas Barr, Richard Bonser, Andy Clifton and Angus Murray

Introduction

Having visited the country with my girlfriend in July 2005, and experiencing the area around Sharm el Sheikh, it was obvious that the country had a lot more to offer in terms of its birdlife. It was not too difficult to drum up enthusiasm for an early spring trip and, as such, four of us set out to visit the area around Cairo, the Nile Valley around Luxor and the Red Sea coast as far south as the administrative border with Sudan.

With only a week to play with, or a maximum of ten days at a push, it was decided that due to the time of year it would be better to visit the area around Abu Simbel on another trip and at a more productive time of year – although the ‘African specialities’ (Pink-backed Pelican, African Pied Wagtail, African Skimmer and Yellow-billed Stork) may be present in late March, the period of from May to September appears to be far more productive for these species upon collation of historical data.

Logistics and General Information

As we wanted to have a total of 7 full days birding, it was essential that we booked schedule flights for our departure (charter flights to tourist resorts such as Hurghada or Sharm el Sheikh would only allow 6 days of full birding) and hence we booked our flights through [British Airways](#). We flew from London Heathrow on Saturday 18th March and arrived in Cairo late that same evening. We returned the London Heathrow on an early morning flight on Sunday 26th March.

Car hire was booked through the [Holiday Autos](#) website with [Hertz](#) as our ground agent for a total of circa £320 with a local charge for an additional driver. During our trip we managed to hit a rather large rock in the middle of the road on a convoy from Safaga to Luxor but, with the help of a local mechanic in Hurghada, we were able to change the tyre and unbuckle the wheel and return the vehicle in the state that we received it.

Overnight accommodation was found on arrival at each destination with the exception of our first two nights in Cairo where we booked into the [Novotel Cairo Airport](#). The price of accommodation each night varied enormously with our hotel in Safaga costing UK£4 per night in comparison to the [Movenpick on Crocodile Island](#) at UK£40 per night – as would be expected, the quality of the accommodation was reflected in the price. After the previously mentioned first two nights, we stayed at the following hotels: -

20th March - Nile Valley Hotel in Safaga (UK£4 per person per night – basic)

21st March - [Red Sea Diving Safari](#) at Wadi Lahami (UK£30 per person per night for a chalet or UK£20 per person per night for a Bedouin tent with dinner, breakfast and lunch included in these prices – excellent with birding on your doorstep)

22nd March – Sea Garden Resort in Hurghada (UK£17 per person per night – good with the nearby port area and sea worthwhile for birding)

23rd March - [Movenpick on Crocodile Island](#), Luxor (UK£40 per person per night – superb with excellent breakfast buffet and birding within the grounds)

24th March – [Dome Marina Best Western](#) at Ain Sukhna (UK£22 per person per night – good with the hotel grounds attractive for migrants)

25th March – night in the car en-route to Cairo Airport from Sinai

From previous experience and talking to many people who had been to Egypt, the country is not exactly known for its safe food. In fact, many people seem to shrug their shoulders and see upset stomachs as something that is inevitable with a trip to Egypt. With this in mind, the only local produce we purchased during the whole of our trip were bread, bananas and crisps despite the fact some of the hotels we stayed at included dinner and breakfast within the price. We brought an ample supply of food from the UK including tuna, corned beef etc to supplement our rather carbohydrate-based local produce diet.

Driving in Egypt is rather unpredictable, with the quality of roads being of extremely good quality although debris can encroach onto the asphalt without any warning – hence our previously mentioned experience on the convoy between Safaga and Luxor. Driving in Cairo is not for the feint hearted and is a rather big game of ‘chicken’ and, added to this, the signposting in Africa’s largest city is poor to non-existent for those non-Arabic speakers. On a much more positive note, Egypt is exceptionally cheap petrol wise with filling our Hyundai up from empty costing no more than UK£5! We covered approximately 5000km by road during our 8 day visit.

Probably the most frustrating part of a trip to Egypt for anybody will be the unnecessary bureaucracy that can include convoys and contradictory information depending upon which official you speak to. To illustrate this, on 22nd March, we wanted to explore the coast to the north of El Gouna and at the checkpoint at this resort we were stopped and told that foreign nationals must be escorted north along the Red Sea to either Ain Sukhna or Suez in convoys leaving at 11.30am or 6pm. Realising we were not going to get through on this occasion, despite stating that we drove from Cairo to Safaga on our own a couple of nights previously, we turned back to Hurghada and then attempted to drive north the following evening through the same checkpoint and had absolutely no problem whatsoever.

It was only a few years ago that travel to the southern Red Sea coast was prohibited but we experienced absolutely no problems whatsoever. Be aware that you will go through a fair number of checkpoints, and you may be asked to produce your passports, but we were never asked more than the standard questions in pigeon English ‘where you go’ and ‘what nation’. I would offer the advice to hide your binoculars (and not have them dangling around your neck) when you go through each checkpoint (and also when you are in the town of Shalatein). Wherever we stopped we were always mindful to scan for military before we started birding as, with reference to one trip report, once you are politely arrested it can be a time consuming and rather infuriating procedure to prove that all you were wanting to do is search for birds!

Convoys

Following the Luxor Massacre in 1997 where 58 tourists were killed, Egypt has quite rightly become rather protective of its foreign tourists. This however necessitates rather painful bureaucracy for those who are more independently minded. Getting to and from the Red Sea coast to the Nile Valley is extremely difficult, and potentially not possible, without going in a convoy. We used two convoys – both between Safaga and Luxor (in both directions) – and please be aware that these can be rather fast paced with coaches attempting to overtake you at 120kph. In March 2006, as a foreign national, it was still not possible to reach Luxor from the towns of Marsa Alam or El Qesir and it seemed that all traffic to/from Luxor was going via Safaga. At the time of our visit, convoys were leaving Safaga at 7am and 6pm and leaving Luxor at 8am, 2pm and 6pm but please be advised that these times may vary and that it is best to approach the checkpoints in good time and ascertain the latest convoy information.

Literature

Egypt is a relatively large country with popular birding areas confined to only a small proportion of the country – Cairo and The Nile Delta, The Nile Valley around Luxor, Sinai (Sharm el Sheikh and its surroundings), The Red Sea Coast (Ain Sukhna south to the Egyptian administrative border at Shalatein) and Abu Simbel. '*Finding Birds in Egypt*' by Dave Gosney, was the only 'site guide' that we brought with us and this can be purchased from [Birdguides](#). Please note that, as a regular user of his guides, this is by far the most outdated and many of the sites documented in this publication have either been destroyed or indeed superseded by more recently discovered areas – in fact, the only areas I found this guidebook to be any use at all were on Crocodile Island, Luxor and the area around Ain Sukhna and Suez.

On a more general note, the [Lonely Planet](#) guide to Egypt proved useful and I obtained two maps of the country – Insight Flexi Map 1:930,000 and the Insight Travel Map 1:800,000 – both purchased from [Stanfords](#). Please note that these maps were functional but lacking in detail and the latter did not actually cover the Red Sea to the south of Hurghada.

I have made detailed sketch maps of all of the sites that we visited and where we located certain species, so if you wish to have a copy of these please email me on richbonser8181@hotmail.com.

Websites and Acknowledgements

Information on birding in Egypt is relatively easy to get hold of on the web, and is certainly the best source of information for anybody considering a birding trip to this country. One good starting point for any proposed trip, to any country, is [Travelling Birder](#) where trip reports from a number of different sources (such as [Birdtours](#), [Surfbirds](#), [OSME](#) and [Netfugl](#)) are collated into one very useful and accessible list.

Particularly useful reports that I would recommend are those by [Joakim and Elisabeth Djerf](#), [Hugues Dufourny](#), [Mans Grundsten](#), [Michael Mosebo Jensen](#) and [Staffan Rodebrand](#). Additionally, [African Birding Resources](#), [Middle East Birdnet](#), [WestPalBirds](#) were useful sources of information in providing details of sightings in Egypt over the last couple of years. Most notably, the forum [Egypt Bird Group](#) has

just been inaugurated and will provide useful information for anybody looking to go birding in Egypt in the future.

It must be noted that contacting Mindy Baha El Din (the lady who previously held the key for much of Egypt's birding information) seems impossible despite the fact that the website [Birding Egypt](#) has recently been reactivated. Many birders, including myself, have tried several e-mail addresses for Mindy and gained no response. Upon speaking with a local birder and guide [Ahmed Riad](#), it appears that Mindy is now a mother and has given up her duties of providing visiting birders with information on finding certain Egyptian specialities. Her husband, Sherif Baha El Din, has apparently moved away from birding and concentrates his time nowadays on reptiles.

I am extremely grateful to the following people in providing detailed information on certain species and particular sites that, without which, would have had a severe effect on the success of our trip – John Barclay, Pierre-Andre Crochet, Kris De Rouck, Hugues Dufourny, Dave Farrow, Justin Jansen, Dominic Mitchell, Andreas Noeske, Ken Shaw and Uwe Streese-Browa.

Itinerary

A brief outline of our trip is detailed below: -

Saturday 18th March arrived at Cairo airport late evening (already dark) and drove the short distance to the Novotel near the airport.

Sunday 19th March the morning and early afternoon spent at Abassa then spent the afternoon driving to Sinai for an evening visit to a Hume's Owl site. Drove back to Cairo and the night (or what was left of it!) at the Novotel near Cairo airport.

Monday 20th March morning at Wadi El Natrum to the NW of Cairo, then the afternoon spent at Abassa. A 6 hour drive south after dark to Safaga with accommodation at the Nile Valley Hotel, Safaga.

Tuesday 21st March morning drive down the Red Sea from Safaga with birding stops made when appropriate (including Shams Alam resort), early afternoon at Hamata mangroves and the remainder of the day spent at Wadi Lahami. Overnight at Wadi Lahami Red Sea Diving Safari.

Wednesday 22nd March early morning birding at Wadi Lahami, then 1 ½ hour drive south to Shalatein and return northwards to Safaga (via birding stops at Wadi Gimal and Shams Alam) for 6pm convoy to Luxor. Unsuccessful attempt at convoy due to puncture and overnight at Sea Garden Resort, Hurghada.

Thursday 23rd March morning til early afternoon birding around Hurghada and El Gouna, then birding at mangroves to the south of Safaga til late afternoon. Convoy at 6pm from Safaga with arrival at Luxor 9.30pm. Night at Movenpick Hotel, Crocodile Island.

Friday 24th March morning birding around Crocodile Island. Convoy at 2pm from Luxor to Safaga and then a 4 hour drive to Ain Sukhna. Overnight at the Dome Marina Best Western, Ain Sukhna.

Saturday 25th March early morning birding around the Dome Marina Best Western, mid morning to early afternoon spent around Ain Sukhna and Suez Bay then drove to Sinai for dusk to visit Hume's Owl site. 5 hour drive back to Cairo airport with night spent in the car.

Sunday 26th March early morning flight back to London Heathrow and arrival in Britain early afternoon.

Report Format

I have aimed to write this report considering two distinctly different types of birder. Firstly the 'target species seen' and 'target species not seen' sections will be of use to those individuals who are considering a similar trip to ourselves and have a distinct interest in the locations of specific species. Secondly, the daily sightings section will hopefully cater for those birders who are more interested in the avian diversity that is offered at each site or are largely confined to a specific geographic area due to, for example, a family holiday. Both sections should be used in conjunction with each other although most detail on individual sites will be contained within the 'target species seen' section. If you would like any information that you cannot find on this report, please feel free to [e-mail me](#).

TARGET BIRDS SEEN

I have made detailed sketch maps of all of the sites that we visited, particularly with focus on target species, so if you feel that you would like further details on any of the species listed below, please feel free to [email me](#).

Striated Heron

This species is regularly seen in the mangrove areas on the southern Red Sea coast, and indeed we located one in the mangroves to the north of the beached ship at Wadi Lahami on the morning of the 22nd March. It seems that other observers, in general, have more observations of this species than we did and another favoured site appears to be the mangroves at Hamata. Most notably, whilst birding in the Nile Delta at Abassa, we discovered a pair of birds by the weir on a tributary stream off the main Ismailiya canal just to the east of Abassa town on the road to Zagazig. Another bird was also seen at Crocodile Island on 24th March.

Western Reef Heron

This species is a common sight along the southern Red Sea coast with many individuals, of both colour morphs, located at mangrove areas and the adjacent coastline from Safaga south to Wadi Lahami.

Goliath Heron

Once a mythical bird to locate within the Western Palearctic and with the uncertainty of this species continued presence in Iraq due to obvious reasons, a visit to the now accessible southern Red Sea coast is imperative in order to locate this species. Knowing that this species had been sighted at two localities (Wadi Lahami and Marsa Hemira Mangroves (40km north of Shalatein)) in early February 2006 (per Uwe Streese-Browa), we began our search in earnest on the afternoon of the 21st March at the mangrove areas at Hamata and Wadi Lahami but without success. The following morning at 6.05 a.m., whilst scanning the mangrove area to the north of the restaurant and reception area at the [Red Sea Diving Safari](#) at Wadi Lahami, I picked up an adult Goliath Heron as it flew in strongly from the north and subsequently settled, and showed exceptionally well, in the main channel a couple of hundred of yards to the north of the beached ship within the mangrove area. [Mans Grundsten](#)'s report details his observations of this species at Hamata, Wadi Lahami and Kira 'el Hiriwai in December 2004 and our sighting appears to concur with his suggestion that individuals commute between the various mangrove areas (in particular between Wadi Lahami and Hamata). Prior to leaving the UK, I compiled data with regard to the status of this species in Egypt since 1990 (from a variety of sources) and please find this tabulated below for reference: -

Location	No.	Date
Aswan High Dam	1	11th April 1992
Abu Mingar, off Hurghada	1	31st December 1993
Abu Simbel	1	2nd April 1994
Mangroves 36km south of Safaga	1	6th May 1994
Abu Mingar, off Hurghada	1	2nd September 1995
Mangroves 10km south of Safaga	1	25th September 1995
5km south of Qesir	1	25th September 1995
Lake Nasser	1	30th September 1995
8km north of Aswan	1	13th December 1995

Hamata Mangroves	2	21st-22nd September 1999
Hamata Mangroves	1+	22nd-23rd April 2000
Lake Nasser	1	29th January 2001
Hamata	1	14th April 2001
River Nile near Edfu	1	19th June 2002
Hamata Mangroves	1	10th December 2003
Hamata Mangroves	1	19th August 2004
Hamata Mangroves & Wadi Lahami	1+	4th December 2004
Kira 'el Hiriwai	1	5th December 2004
Wadi Lahami	1	6th November 2005
Wadi Lahami	1	7th February 2006
Marsa Hemira, 40km north of Shalatein	1	7th February 2006

Although the above undoubtedly does not list all records of this species, it certainly seems to favour the mangrove areas around Wadi Lahami and Hamata in recent years. Additionally, a couple of other (smaller) mangrove areas south of Wadi Lahami have produced records of this species recently: -

1. ***Kira 'el Hiriwai*** – accessed east of the military checkpoint a few km south of Wadi Lahami on the road to Ras Banas peninsular (before heading through the mountains in the direction of Berenice). Grundsten *et al* located a Goliath Heron to the west of the mangroves by an obvious wrecked ship within this huge bay in December 2004.
2. ***Marsa Hemira Mangroves*** – located 40km north of Shalatein and noticeable from the main road between Berenice and Shalatein. An asphalt road leads off the main road to some buildings at the coast and when you reach the coast, drive north a short way to view the small lagoon and adjacent mangrove area. Please note that this site is sensitive and, at least on a couple of occasions recently, birders have been noticed by militaries and asked to leave the area – by politely explaining what you're up to, at least one group of birders were allowed to stay. Streese-Browa *et al* managed to locate a Goliath Heron in the mangrove area here in February 2006.

Black Kite

The non-migratory Egyptian form '*aegyptius*' was frequently seen in Cairo and the Nile Delta where the yellow bill (present on adults) and the more rufous tail and underparts distinguished from nominate birds seen on migration at Ain Sukhna and Suez on 25th March.

Lappet-faced Vulture

With the extirpation of this species from Israel within the last 15 years, the area around the frontier town of Shalatein (on the administrative border with Sudan) has become the best place to observe this species in the Western Palearctic. With upwards of 50 birds often present, this species is all but guaranteed in this area. Our first observation of this species, however, was to the north of the 'usual' area and was sat in the desert by the 'Baranis 5km' (Berenice 5km) sign if approaching from the north i.e. 21km south of Wadi Lahami. Due to the lack of carcasses around the camel market at Shalatein, our haul of at least 2 birds in this area was one of the disappointments of the trip. The strategy to locate this species at Shalatein is simple – make sure your optics are not on view as you head through the checkpoint at the west end of the town and then search from there (both in the sky as well as the adjacent acacia scrub). The camel market can be found by driving east towards the coast from

the checkpoint and Co-op garage and turning right (south) into the town itself at any available opportunity.

Lesser Spotted Eagle

This species is a regular spring migrant in good numbers, as it is slightly further north-east at Eilat, and we witnessed a good passage of at least 235 birds on the morning of the 25th March in the Ain Sukhna/Suez area. As with the next species, it is very much trial and error in terms of finding the best spot to view migrating raptors. We found that the best site was 60km south of Suez near Ain Sukhna at the 'El Sokhna resthouse' on the west side of the main road leading up along the Red Sea to Suez – looking south-west, the birds closely hugged the mountain range just inland as they headed north on their migration. Another spot, mentioned in Gosney, at the quarries to the west of Suez town (reached from the Suez bypass) produced fewer birds and more distant views.

Steppe Eagle

As with Lesser Spotted Eagle, this species was seen on 25th March in the Suez area albeit in much smaller numbers – c.25 were seen in total. Once again, the El Sokhna resthouse was the best place to observe this species along with other eagles, buzzards, kites and vultures.

Purple Swamphen

The 'green-backed' form of this species, *madagascariensis*, is resident along the Nile becoming more common the further south you go. As such, we did not locate this species in The Nile Delta area around Abassa but 2 birds showed themselves in the reeds viewable from the bridge to Crocodile Island, Luxor on 24th March.

Painted Snipe

We located five individuals of this species (3 males and 2 females) at Abassa on 19th March. If coming from Cairo, you will reach the town of Bilbeis and then take the road to El Abassa that runs parallel with the canal – please note that the km checks are from this junction. The following three sites are where we noted this sought after species: -

1. After 12.8km you will notice a Shell garage on the left hand side of the road and then 0.2km beyond this is a pull in that overlooks a marshy area and some small fishponds. We flushed a male Painted Snipe (as well as 2 Jack Snipe and at least 20 Common Snipe) in the marshy fields directly below where you park the car.
2. Driving a further 4.5km along the road to Abassa (so 17.5km from the junction), you will see a network of large fishponds on the left hand side of the road (which held 28 Senegal Thick-knees during our visit) and immediately after this, there is a track off the main road that allows access – it initially takes you into a small copse with a couple of houses (if you reach a pale green warehouse you've gone too far). Follow this track straight ahead, keeping the fishponds on your left and a rather dry canal on your right, and scan the canal banks for Painted Snipe. We located three birds (2 females and a male) immediately north of the first bridge and were lucky to have crippling views of this species as it fed out in the open at point blank range.
3. When you reach the small (and dusty) town of Abassa from the main road, head across the canal on the road bridge and take the 1st left into the town itself on the dirt track. Once through the town, you'll go through some arable land and over a small canal. After this you'll reach the large network of fishponds and, by driving along the

network of tracks, we were fortunate to encounter a male Painted Snipe in one of the reed-fringed ditches.

Senegal Thick-knee

Despite being an Egyptian speciality within the Western Palearctic, this species is relatively common where it is present. Our first sightings were on the morning of the 19th March at Abassa where 28 were noted on the dry banks of the fishponds 17.5km from the junction in Bilbeis along the road running parallel with the canal (see site 2 under Painted Snipe). Additionally, whilst driving back to Cairo the same day, 2 birds were seen in flight over the main canal itself near Bilbeis. The next day when we revisited the Abassa area, 2 birds were noted on the small fishponds near the Shell garage (see site 1 under Painted Snipe for more detailed directions). This species is not present on the Red Sea coast so our next, and final, sighting was of a pair at Crocodile Island, Luxor on 24th March where they were seen roosting at close range by the track just south of the bridge over to the island.

Kittlitz's Plover

At least fifteen individuals of this rather attractive sand plover were noted at Wadi El Natrum, to the north-west of Cairo, on 20th March. This site is the most reliable spot for this species in Northern Egypt (it is commonly recorded around Abu Simbel) and, although sporadically recorded in the Abassa and Ismailiya area, my advice would be to spend a morning travelling to El Natrum in order to guarantee observing this species. Once you've turned off the main Cairo – Alexandria road to 'El Natrum', you'll almost immediately enter the village and after a short while will need to turn left in the centre of this village by the statue. The road will open out after leaving the village with the lake viewable to your right and there is an obvious right turn that allows you to drive (on asphalt) to the muddy margins at the northern end of the lake where this species was present in amongst large gatherings of Kentish Plovers and Little Stints.

Sooty Gull

Considerably scarcer than the next species, and with a more southerly distribution in the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf, one should still expect to locate a few Sooty Gulls on any visit to the southern Red Sea. The area around Hurghada is traditionally as good a bet as any and 2 adults favoured the small harbour to the north of the 'main strip' during our visit whilst additionally we saw 3 birds in the bay at Wadi Lahami on the morning of 22nd March.

White-eyed Gull

Good numbers of this species were seen around Hurghada port and harbour (located at the north end of this holiday resort) on 23rd March, with at least 50 birds seen. Other than at this locality, its absence was rather surprising.

Crested Tern

From various trip reports that I had researched prior to our visit, this species seems relatively nomadic in its habits but the large majority of observers seem to connect with it. As such, we headed along the southern part of the Red Sea on 21st March in the hope that we would locate this species but failed at sites such as Marsa Alam, Hamata and Wadi Lahami. It was not until we had reached further north on 23rd March that we located 2 birds just to the north of Hurghada town as they perched

close inshore on posts by Moussa Shrimps and Fish farm. This site is located on the Hurghada to Cairo road c.3km north of the Esso garage on the northern outskirts of Hurghada and just south of the 'Cairo 450km' sign – pull into the area of half-built buildings and view the bay from here.

Crowned Sandgrouse

This species is apparently the most common sandgrouse along the southern Red Sea coast. All of our sightings were chance encounters as we were driving. At least 30 birds showed exceptionally well 70km south of Safaga mid morning on 21st March – there seemed to be a small pool (puddle of water) in the desert here and a lot of activity was noted at c.9am in the morning. Our other, and final, sightings came on the 22nd March as we were driving south from Wadi Lahami to Shalatein – 3 birds 20km south of Wadi Lahami (and 6km north of Berenice) and a flock of 20 flew over the road 27km south of Wadi Lahami at the junction of Bernice airport and the road block.

African Collared Dove

This is most definitely a speciality of the southern Red Sea with records largely confined the coastline to the south of Safaga. Our sightings were very much by chance in that we located 2 doves by the roadside 23km to the north of Marsa Alam. After stopping the car, we obtained excellent views of a pair of displaying African Collared Doves on the wall of the Hotel 'Calimera, Balboa Hotel and Resort' – located immediately south of a sharp right hand bend at the most northerly end of a string of development to the north of Marsa Alam town. We did not specifically search further for this species and did not note any other individuals. However, a favoured spot has been the large acacia scrub area to the south of the Co-op garage at Shalatein and other records have come from Shams Alam resort, Wadi Gimal and Hamata mangroves. Additionally, a couple of weeks prior to our visit 3 birds were seen in the mangrove area 18km south of Safaga.

Senegal Coucal

Within Egypt, this superb species is primarily confined to the Nile Delta area around Cairo. Since the demise of Gebel Asfar, and although the species does still occur at this site, most observers have found this species in the Abassa area. Unlike some species, there is no 'regular spot' but by birding the area and listening for their distinctive call, you would be unlucky not to find this species. One showed extremely well in the trees at the entrance to the track to site 2 (see directions under Painted Snipe) on 19th March and, on 20th March, another was noted in the arable area to the south of Abassa village (and to the north of the small canal bridge) along the track to the large area of fishponds ('site 3' under Painted Snipe). Additionally, we heard one calling distantly at Wadi El Natrum on 20th March.

Hume's Tawny Owl

As this species is no longer regularly recorded by visiting birders to Israel with the demise of Hadoram Shirihai's 'military-like' operations, the dry wadis of Sinai may represent the best chance to observe this species in the Western Palearctic. On two visits, one on the 19th and the other on the evening of the 25th, we successfully managed to observe this species in a dry wadi in southern Sinai. Due to the fact that publishing sites for this species is likely to render disturbance, I have refrained from giving the details of the exact locality of where we saw this species.

Little Green Bee-eater

The 'green-throated' Egyptian race *cleopatra* was easily observed at Abassa, where it was common in the arable area immediately to the south of Abassa village along the track to Abassa ponds. Additionally, several of this species were seen on Crocodile Island, Luxor in the dry area to the south of the track to the Movenpick hotel and immediately south-west of the bridge. Similar to other Egyptian races of species (such as *savignii* Swallows and *pygmaea* Yellow Wagtails), *cleopatra* Little Green Bee-eaters are confined to the interior of the country around The Nile and are absent from the Red Sea (or at least in our experience they are).

Barn Swallow

The race *savignii*, or 'Egyptian Swallow', was frequently encountered around Cairo at sites such as Abassa and also further down The Nile at Crocodile Island, Luxor. The nominate race was a common sight along the Red Sea coast.

Yellow Wagtail

The endemic, non-migratory race *pygmaea* was observed on a couple of occasions during our trip. Our first observations were at least 3 birds around the 'Kittlitz's Plover site' at Wadi el Natrum where birds could be seen feeding on the muddy margins and singing from the adjacent juncus clumps. A further male was located the same day, 20th March, in the damp meadows and agriculture near the Shell garage at Abassa (see Painted Snipe for more detailed directions). 'Black-headed Wagtail' was a common bird in suitable habitat along the Red Sea coast.

Clamorous Reed Warbler

After targeting this species on a recent visit to Israel, it was a nice surprise to find how common and obliging this species is within Egypt, or certainly within the environs of The Nile. This species was common, and often showed very well, in the Abassa area and at least half a dozen birds were observed in suitable habitat at Crocodile Island, Luxor.

Nile Valley Sunbird

Restricted to the Nile Valley (as its name suggests), the only site we saw this species was in the grounds of the Movenpick Hotel on Crocodile Island. At least ten birds were seen, including a few males in full attire, and they are pretty much guaranteed around the gardens of this decent hotel.

House Crow

This species is a very common resident in the town of Suez. Otherwise our only sightings involved a handful of individuals near the port of Safaga early morning on 21st March.

Red Avadavat

This introduced species can be found, according to previous trip reports, in varying numbers at Crocodile Island, Luxor. Additionally, there is an additional population of this species in Egypt around Cairo in the Nile Delta. Our sightings came from the former site where, after a fair amount of searching, up to 3 birds were located on 24th March. After walking over the bridge to Crocodile Island from 'the mainland', turn immediately left (south) onto the track that runs alongside the reed fringed bank (with

an area of fields on your right) and, after a few hundred yards, the track will bend right by an area of dry reeds immediately in front of you. This is where we located our birds and at least one bird was singing from within these reeds. Additionally, the fields adjacent to the security hut just on the 'mainland' side of the bridge appear to be the most reliable spot in this area judging from the information I gathered prior to my trip.

TARGET BIRDS MISSED

This section details the species that have occurred and been seen by other observers at the sites we visited during our trip. It should be noted that many of the species mentioned in the section weren't exactly 'missed' by ourselves due to the fact that they are summer visitors and we knew that our trip was too early to see them. In essence, the only species that we expected to see but did not in reality was Streaked Weaver. The other Egyptian specialities – Pink-backed Pelican, Yellow-billed Stork, African Skimmer and African Pied Wagtail – do not occur on the Red Sea coast or Cairo area, and a trip to Abu Simbel is essential to see these species within the Western Palearctic.

Brown Booby

This pelagic species occurs regularly within the Red Sea region. Most records come from boat trips to the islands off Hurghada although seawatching anywhere along the Red Sea may allow a chance encounter with this species.

Red-billed Tropicbird

A rare bird in Egypt with only sporadic records of this quality species along Egypt's southern Red Sea. A couple of weeks prior to our visit, one was noted off Hurghada but there are no reliable sites that can be recommended in order to see this species.

Verreaux's Eagle

An extremely rare bird in the Western Palearctic, and indeed in Egypt. However, with the species not being regularly recorded in Israel or Jordan, Egypt may well become the place that birders go to in order to see this species within the Western Palearctic region. Records at Gebel Elba (south of Shalatein) in November 2000, one in Sinai at the Nabq Protectorate in April 2002 and one on the southern Red Sea coast at Wadi Gimal in October 2003 prove that this species occurs at least sporadically in Egypt.

Sooty Falcon

Like several other species listed below, we did not expect to see this species due to the time of year of our visit. During the summer months, regular sightings of this species have come from Hurghada, Shams Alam and the area around Hamata.

Crab Plover

One of the most attractive and unique of the world's shorebirds, Crab Plover is regular in the Hamata mangroves area from at least June until September with three figure counts by no means unheard of (see [Hugues Dufourny's](#) report for more details).

White-cheeked Tern

We were too early for this species as it does not return to its Egyptian summer range until at least mid April. It is a common species though when it is present and you should expect to encounter this species along the coast from Hurghada southwards during this period.

Bridled Tern

Present in the southern Red Sea in small numbers, and a visit to the Hamata area in September would be the best bet to connect with this species. For example, 17 were seen off Hamata in September 2003 (see [Hugues Dufourny's](#) report for more details).

Egyptian Nightjar

Although by far the best place to see this species in Egypt is around the temple at Abu Simbel, it has been noted around floodlit areas in Hurghada previously. Additionally, it is apparently widespread around open ground within the Nile Delta although I was unaware of current sites for this species here.

Black-crowned Finch Lark

There have been sporadic records of this relatively nomadic species around the town of Shalatein. However, our itinerary did not allow us to search the area as well as you may need to find this species (if it is there at all on a regular basis).

Black Bush Robin

Occurring regularly to the south of Shalatein at Gebel Elba (currently it is not possible for Westerners to travel here without gaining prior written permission), this species should occur in the extensive acacia scrub around the town of Shalatein.

Streaked Weaver

Despite extensively searching areas that had previously attracted this species in the Abassa area, our searching proved fruitless. It is known to be a nomadic species and the information that we used was that found in [Michael Mosebo Jensen](#)'s trip report. Subsequent to returning from our trip, and knowing that I will need to go via Cairo to reach Abu Simbel in the future, I have gained further sites for this species within the Abassa area so please [email me](#) if you require further details. Otherwise, Richard Hoath reports he has noted this species several times in the area around the Nile Barrages – they breed on the east bank of the western branch of the river just north of the road bridge that crosses the river.

DAILY SIGHTINGS

This section aims to detail my observations on a day-to-day basis and can be used as a narrative in conjunction with the previous sections. Although some detail is undoubtedly contained below, if you are looking for more specific information on certain species then I would certainly have a look at the ‘target species found’ section.

Saturday 18th March

We arrived at Cairo International airport late evening and, after eventually sorting out the car, we headed off the short distance to the Novotel close to the airport to gain some well deserved sleep.

Sunday 19th March

Rising shortly before first light and taking a load of bread and croissants from the breakfast buffet, we headed off through the Cairo suburbs in a north-easterly direction towards our first birding area, Abassa. **Laughing Doves** and **Hooded Crows** were the common roadside species, as they were to be throughout the majority of the trip, with other birds noted on the drive to Bilbeis being a handful of **Black Kites** (of the form *aegyptius*), a few **Hoopoes** and lots of **Cattle Egrets**.

In the town of Bilbeis, we took the turn to ‘El Abassa’ and this road lead us directly parallel with the Ismailiya canal where lots of **Pied Kingfishers** and a couple of **White-breasted Kingfishers** were seen by the roadside. The birding sites are located on the left hand side of the road if coming from Bilbeis and the first place (for full directions see site 1 under Painted Snipe in the ‘Target Species Found’ section) that we stopped was...

13km east of Bilbeis (and 0.2km beyond the Shell garage) on the road to Abassa

We parked our car a couple of hundred metres beyond the Shell garage and walked down to the fields immediately in front of us (a small fishpond area is located just beyond and to the left). Before we had even started birding, I managed to sink my only pair of shoes in some rather smelly mud providing a rather unpleasant smell for everybody else for the rest of the day. Anyway, by walking across the matrix of paths across the damp field, a male **Painted Snipe** was flushed but only seen by one member of the team – despite further searching we couldn’t relocate this bird although a pleasant surprise were 2 **Jack Snipes** flushed along with the larger numbers of **Common Snipe**. **Spur-winged Plovers** and **Graceful Prinias** were everywhere, and vocal with their presence, and a couple of savignii race **Swallows** flew over exhibiting their reddish underparts. A **Bluethroat** showed well rummaging around a vegetated area whilst a male **Northern Wheatear** was presumably a migrant making use of the ample food supply. After giving up on our Painted Snipe hunt, we walked a few yards to the adjacent fishpond area where, as predicted, birds were plentiful – a **Clamorous Reed Warbler** and a **Sedge Warbler**, lots of **Pied Kingfishers** and **White-breasted Kingfishers** (as well as a **Common Kingfisher** that was not so common) as well as a couple of **Little Egrets** and ten **Squacco Herons** amongst the extremely common **Cattle Egrets**.

Having exhausted this site, we got back in the car and headed for a further 4.5km along the main road, in the direction of Abassa, to an area of large fishponds (see site 2 under Painted Snipe in the ‘Target Species Found’ section for full directions).

Fishponds and dried up canal 17.5km east of Bilbeis on the road to Abassa

We turned off the main road onto a track by a blue house and as soon as we got out of the car looked to the fishponds to our left and found 28 **Senegal Thick-knees** roosting on the dry banks of the nearest fishpond. Whilst admiring this species, **Common Bulbuls** and a handful of **Clamorous Reed Warblers** were vocal in the trees and bushes beside us whilst other species seen on this pond included a **Little Ringed Plover**, many **Spur-winged Plovers** and **Little Egrets** as well as a **Grey Heron**, a **Green Sandpiper** and a couple of **Common Sandpipers**. Once finished here we drove up the track for a few hundred metres, with the fishpond to our left and a fairly dry irrigation canal to our right, and at the first bridge over this canal we stopped the car and scanned. Immediately, in my true fashion, I got rather excited as I pulled my binoculars up to my eyes and located a superb female **Painted Snipe** sitting no more than 20 yards away! We carefully got out of the car, set our scopes up and truly regretted the fact that none of us were digiscopers... and then, a further two male **Painted Snipes** came out of the reeds and joined the female – absolutely superb stuff. Along with a **Black-shouldered Kite** in the distance, the odd **Crested Lark** here and there, this experience was certain to be the highlight of our first day birding in Egypt. Fully satisfied, we retraced our steps back to the entrance area and the surrounding trees when, whilst driving, the distinctive call of **Senegal Coucal** could be heard close by. After very little time at all, this red eyed monster of a bird was found crawling amongst the tree tops and provided us with excellent views – and to cap things off, a **Little Bittern** was seen in the adjacent reed fringed channel.

We then headed along the main road, passing a rubbish dump area that gave off a rather foul stench but hundreds of **Cattle Egrets** seemed to like it nonetheless, and turned right over the main canal towards Abassa town and then took the first left through this dusty, deprived town and into the area of arable land and fishponds just beyond the town itself (site 3 under Painted Snipe provides more detailed access directions).

Abassa fishponds

Having driven south along the dirt track through the small town of Abassa, we soon reached a rewarding area of farmland located to the north of a bridge over a small reed-fringed canal. Four **Little Bee-eaters** (of the race *cleopatra*) sallied from wires, a **Southern Grey Shrike** (of the race *elegans*) here was our only one of the trip whilst **Clamorous Reed Warblers**, **Bluethroats** and a superb group of 6 **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters** were also present. Heading over the bridge, we shortly reached a large network of fishponds where the ubiquitous **Cattle Egrets** dominated along with smaller numbers of **Squacco Herons** – ‘typical’ fishpond birding was had here with a **Glossy Ibis**, 2 **White Storks**, 10 **Coot**, a handful of **Little Grebes**, a **Whiskered Tern**, a couple of **Night Herons**, a **Temminck’s Stint**, an **Osprey** and a **Wood Sandpiper** noted. Typical fishpond birding that is until we encountered a male **Painted Snipe** on the track ahead of us on the eastern section of these ponds.

By now it was early afternoon and we headed back along the main road to a small area of reeds near to a green warehouse (and a couple of hundred yards to the east of the site where we located Senegal Thick-knee, Painted Snipe and Senegal Coucal). Having held Streaked Weaver in previous years, our search was unsuccessful largely due to the strong winds and, although we located 3 **Ruff** and a few **Night Herons**

here, we really had to think about what we should do for the afternoon as we felt the wind would severely hamper our search for Streaked Weaver. And on this note, we took the typically rational spur of the moment decision to drive 4 ½ hours to southern Sinai so that we would get to the Hume's Owl site just before dusk.

Southern Sinai

It's not often that you visit 3 continents within 24 hours but, by virtue of driving through the tunnel under the Suez Canal, that's exactly what we'd done as we'd only arrived from the UK within the last 24 hours. Anyway, enough with this rather pointless fact... the drive proved rather uneventful (which is always a good thing in Egypt) with a scattering of **Brown-necked Ravens** throughout the journey and a couple of **Eastern Mourning Wheatears** in southern Sinai. We arrived at the site just before dusk and within a few minutes a **Hume's Owl** flew from the dramatically shaped wadi cliffs before it disappointingly headed off over the plateau. Despite searching for a further couple of hours after dark (with the use of a high powered light) there was no further sign... but our activities predictably attracted the interest from the local Bedouins who proved to be a mild annoyance.

After the drive all the way back to Cairo, we eventually reached the Novotel at Cairo airport where we were to spend a second and final night. Three and a half hours later, we were up again, somewhat tired, but pumped up for our final day in the field around Cairo.

Monday 20th March

Setting off early again, we didn't get too embroiled in the traffic around Cairo as we headed north-west from the city itself along the main road to Alexandria. Gaining a view of the Giza Pyramids, literally just beyond the Cairo sprawl, was undoubtedly the highlight of the drive – it's not every day that you take in one of The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World whilst en-route to a birding site.

Wadi El Natrum

We took the clearly signposted junction 'El Natrum' off the main Cairo to Alexandria road and followed this road into the bustling village itself. In the village centre, we branched off to the left by a statue and followed this road out to where the lake could be visible in the distance to our right. Before you reach a mosque, take an asphalt road to the right and this will bring you to the shallow margins of the lake where we located at least 15 **Kittlitz's Plovers** upon arrival. Views of waders at this site are excellent and we were once again ruing the fact that none of us were photographers – other shorebirds here included at least 50 **Kentish Plovers**, a couple of hundred **Little Stints**, many **Spur-winged Plovers** and one each of **Dunlin**, **Temminck's Stint** and **Little Ringed Plover** respectively. The adjacent juncus and reed clumps provided us with our first opportunity to study the endemic, non-migratory *pygmaea* race of **Yellow Wagtail** where we located three individuals in the end. A **Senegal Coucal** was heard in the distance whilst **Fan-tailed Warblers** could be heard constantly, and a couple of small groups of **Short-toed Larks** flew north calling.

The fact that we failed to see Streaked Weaver in the Abassa area the previous day necessitated us to return to this area and, with this in mind, we successfully navigated ourselves through Cairo and its environs and back out heading in a north-easterly

direction. A large congregation of *aegyptius* **Black Kites** were noted en-route along with several *savignii* race **Swallows**, **Hoopoes**, **Laughing Doves** and **Hooded Crows**.

13km east of Bilbeis (and 0.2km beyond the Shell garage) on the road to Abassa

Like yesterday, we visited the fields and small fishpond area just beyond the Shell garage in the hope that we would locate Streaked Weaver. However, this ultimately proved unsuccessful but in beautiful sunshine and with plentiful bird activity, we had a pleasant hour or two birding this site. The bubbling call of Bee-eaters drew our eyes skywards to reveal a flock of a dozen **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters** circling overhead whilst birds in the fields included a **Lesser Whitethroat**, a **Yellow Wagtail** of the race *pygmaea*, several **Hoopoes**, **Chiffchaffs** and **Bluethroats** as well as 3 **Linnets** and a **Stonechat**. Walking the short distance to the fishponds proved fruitful as, among the many **Cattle Egrets**, 5 **Night Herons** and a few **Squaccos** graced the banks, whilst a male **Little Bittern** flew a couple of times from the small reedbed here. **White-breasted Kingfishers** and **Pied Kingfishers** were once again common here as was **Graceful Prinia**, but the highlight of our second visit to this site were 2 **Senegal Thick-knees** showing well as they roosted on the dry bank.

Small canal just north of Abassa town (on the road to Zagazig)

We then headed east, parallel with the main canal, and instead of turning right over the canal bridge into Abassa town continued on a further few hundred yards along the road to Zagazig and took the first turning to the right. After 50yards, there is a cross-road near a bus stop and turning left or right here will allow you to explore this small canal and the adjacent farmland. It was here that we recorded probably our most important observation of the whole of our trip – a pair of **Striated Herons** perching on a small weir (accessed along a pebbly track to the right of the asphalt c.500metres after turning left at the cross-road). This species is virtually unheard of in The Nile Delta, being largely confined to the Red Sea coast, and a pair of birds in early Spring could be a good indication of potential future breeding in the area. 10+ **Night Herons**, 50+ **Spanish Sparrows**, a **Green Sandpiper** and a **Common Sandpiper** were also seen here.

Still with no sign of any Streaked Weavers, we headed back the short distance to Abassa town crossing over the main canal and taking the dirt track through the town itself and into the arable land near the large expanse of fishponds that we visited the previous day.

Abassa fishponds

Making the most of a lovely late afternoon and evening weather wise, and knowing that Streaked Weaver had previously been seen in the reed fringed channel just to the north of the fishponds and to the south of Abassa town, we birded this area of arable land fairly intensely. A **Senegal Coucal** showed well to a couple of us (although to cover more ground we split up) a couple of hundred yards to the north-east of the bridge over the reed-fringed channel whilst a **Black-shouldered Kite**, a couple of **Black-headed Wagtails**, a **Woodchat**, 3 **Goldfinches**, a **Blackbird** and a **Song Thrush** further entertained us. This was an exceptional area for birdlife – **Little Bee-eaters** (of the race *cleopatra*) sallied from the wires, **Bluethroats** ‘tacked’ from every damp thicket and **Clamorous Reed Warblers** and **Sedge Warblers** were both vocal and showy in the lush green reeds. Walking over the bridge and past a warehouse on the left, we came to the first fishpond and I can honestly say I’ve never seen so many

Night Herons in one spot – at least 100 birds on one small bank! Plenty of **Cattle Egrets** were making use of the adjacent trees, 20 **Cormorants** flew over whilst **Graceful Prinias** and **Fan-tailed Warblers** made their presence noticeable by their vocals, and a **Whiskered Tern** patrolled one of the more distant fishponds. Despite the high level of bird activity, we never did manage to find any Streaked Weavers here and headed back to Cairo empty handed in this respect.

By the time we had sorted our stuff out back at the Novotel near Cairo airport, it was 7pm and we had a long journey ahead of us. With a bit of grit and determination, the 6 hour drive from here to Safaga was relatively painless and uneventful – though this was to be our first experience of checkpoints in Egypt. The guards obviously follow a script closely with the same 3 questions being fired at us at every encounter along the Red Sea coast – ‘what nation?’, ‘all 4 British?’ and ‘where you go?’ We eventually reached Safaga and just needing a bed plummeted for the budget Hotel Nile in the port area – perfectly acceptable though shabby by Western standards but for UK£4 per night we weren’t complaining.

Tuesday 21st March

Safaga town

Whilst collecting our supplies of water, bread and bananas from a store in the town centre, we noted a handful of **House Crows** as they rummaged around in the half light.

Safaga to Marsa Alam

The morning was largely taken up by the 220km drive south from Safaga to the southern Red Sea region with a variety of stops made when we saw things of interest from the car. It must be noted that although a lot of the drive runs directly beside the coast, there are actually very few birds present. Anyway, we spotted a **Caspian Tern** 16km to the south of Safaga and **Brown-necked Ravens** and **Short-toed Larks** were plentiful throughout the journey. The first real reason to stop though was when a superb **Barbary Falcon** showed well in a desert area 41km south of Safaga and then flew off into the mountain range. A further 29km to the south, we encountered a flock of at least 30 **Crowned Sandgrouse** drinking by the roadside at point blank range – these superb birds were making use of a small ‘puddle’ in an otherwise dry, arid landscape. After watching a **Marsh Harrier** south of El Qesir at Mangrove Bay, it was not until 23km north of Marsa Alam that we anything else of note. It was here that, after noting a couple of doves on the roadside, we stopped and were rather excited to find a pair of displaying **African Collared Doves** on the wall of the Calimera, Balboa Hotel and Resort. Whilst watching these ‘pink-headed doves’ and noting their salient identification features, a **Masked Shrike** popped into view and further enlivened proceedings.

Shams Alam Beach Resort (c.50km south of Marsa Alam)

A popular place with birders, this isolated area of greenery is obviously attractive to Red Sea migrants and, after purchasing a drink from the bar, we were able to walk around the grounds freely. This type of ‘relaxed birding’ was really enjoyable as birds were plentiful – lots of **Lesser Whitethroats**, **Chiffchaffs**, **Bluethroats**, **Hoopoes**, **Swallows**, **Black-headed Wagtails** and **White Wagtails** provided a sense of the exotic whilst 3 **Wrynecks**, 2 **Tree Pipits**, a pair of **Eastern Black-eared Wheatear**

and a **Woodchat** were all appreciated alongside the highlight of our visit here, a male **Stonechat** of the race *variegata*.

Hamata Mangroves (c.55km south of Shams Alam)

Just to the north of Hamata village, we took a sandy track off the main coast road and accessed this extensive area of mangroves from its southern extremity. Be warned to take things easily here – difficult terrain (sand and mud) or driver incompetence meant that half an hour of our visit was spent finding wood and pushing the car out of a rather deep rut! Although we were of course ‘out of season’ for Crab Plover, this area of mangroves flanked by turquoise water was pleasant nonetheless. A flock of 8 **Purple Herons** and 2 **Grey Herons** were disturbed from the mangroves whilst a few **Western Reef Herons** (of both colour morphs) patrolled the lagoons. **Ospreys** were a common sight here, with other birds seen including a **Slender-billed Gull**, 4 **Caspian Terns**, 5 **Redshanks**, c.20 **Black-winged Stilts**, a **Whimbrel**, c.10 **Curlew**, 2 **Ringed Plover** and 5 **Kentish Plovers**. This was the first site we had visited that has a history of attracting the Goliath Heron but predictably, we realised it wasn’t going to be that easy...

Wadi Lahami

Located a few kilometres to the south of Hamata, the mangroves immediately north of the Red Sea Diving and Ecolodge have in the last two years been the most reliable site in the Western Palearctic to find Goliath Heron. With this in mind, we checked in here for the night and after having a couple of drinks in this beautiful setting headed off on foot to the mangrove area. Taking our shoes off and leaving them by the wrecked boat in the mangroves, we waded through the warm water keeping an eye out in the mangroves for our target bird but also taking note of birds on the shore – 3 **Greater Sand Plovers** (of the race *columbinus*), 8 **Kentish Plovers**, 2 **Greenshank**, a **Grey Plover**, 3 **Caspian Terns**, a few **Curlews** and a dozen or so **Western Reef Herons**. The mangroves themselves held at least a handful of vocal **Ospreys**, a couple of **Pied Kingfishers** and a **Common Sandpiper** whilst there was an obvious movement of hirundines (mainly **Swallows**) heading north. Disappointingly, there was no sign of that large heron that we were most keen on seeing and for our troubles, a couple of us got our feet cut on the coral as we waded through the water. The evening was spent in relative civilisation with some of us risking a bit of the food whereas others, such as me, stuck to the good old diet of bread supplemented by a tin of tuna. A good night’s sleep in the comfortable accommodation at the Ecolodge was had, ready for the next day where we would once again try for Goliath Heron and then journey south to Shalatein.

Wednesday 22nd March

Wadi Lahami

Up at first light, we walked from our chalet to the restaurant and reception area at the Ecolodge and put our scopes up and scanned the bay. A couple of distant gulls looked promising and after deciding whether we should wait or walk towards them, the birds themselves did us a favour and landed directly in front of us – 3 **Sooty Gulls**. After viewing these birds (all sub-adults), and fairly pleased with the start to the day, we walked a couple of hundred yards to the north to the beached ship in the mangroves and put our scopes up. After a little bit of scanning, I picked up a rather large bird a couple of kilometres off to the north and not really being able to make much out on it,

kept tracking it. As it got closer, I could see it was a heron and hence told the others to get on it – after a tense few moments, it banked and in better light there it was – our target bird, a **Goliath Heron**. Pumped with adrenalin, and wanting some views on the deck, we scrambled our scopes and headed into mangroves to where we thought the bird had landed. After a few minutes, there it was c.50 yards in front of us – a superb adult **Goliath Heron** feeding in the main channel and seemingly oblivious to our presence. A **Reed Warbler** sang from the same area, and a **Greater Sand Plover** was spotted along with a **Kentish Plover**, whilst a **Striated Heron** also made a brief appearance. A couple of **Pied Kingfishers**, 3 **Caspian Terns**, a **Grey Plover**, a couple of **Greenshanks**, a handful of **Western Reef Herons** and a **Cormorant** also were present on this rather special morning. Over the moon with our early morning birding, we headed back to the restaurant and indulged in a celebratory breakfast consisting of bread and cheese slices. Once we had finished, we packed up and started the two hour drive to Shalatein.

Wadi Lahami to Shalatein

Now in the extreme south, and south of any tourist resorts, we got the sense that we should be a little bit more discreet with our birding activity. Anyway, after passing through the checkpoint a few kilometres south of Wadi Lahami, we headed through a mountain range and then back down to the desert where, 20km south of Wadi Lahami and 6km north of Berenice, we noted 3 **Crowned Sandgrouse**. It was only after a further kilometre (by the 'Baranis 5km' sign) that, standing in the desert less than 100 yards from the road, was a big dark bird. Before raising our bins, we all knew what it was though – and indeed it was a superb adult **Lappet-faced Vulture** and north of the regular area around the town of Shalatein. Still wanting to experience more of this globally threatened species, we headed to Shalatein noting lots of **Short-toed Larks** and **Brown-necked Ravens** on the drive as well as a flock of 20 **Crowned Sandgrouse** over the road near Berenice airport. As we entered through the checkpoint at the west end of Shalatein town, we stopped to get some fuel at the Co-op garage and noticed a **Lappet-faced Vulture** circling overhead. Disappointingly though, we drove around the town and the camel market looking for carcasses but couldn't find any – this probably accounted for our rather paltry total of 2+ **Lappet-faced Vultures** here. Four **Egyptian Vultures** were noted around the town, as was a **Hoopoe Lark** and a **Northern Wheatear** amongst the numerous **Brown-necked Ravens** and **Short-toed Larks**. The harbour area seemed birdless at a glance and when we stepped out of the car, we were noticed by security and just thought it best to drive off instead of getting involved in annoying, meaningless conversation.

After getting a bit of hassle from someone (we couldn't work out whether he was authority or not) near the camel market with regard to what exactly we were doing in the area without an Egyptian guide, we decided that it was time to call it a day in Shalatein and headed off north.

Wadi Gimal

Located only a couple of kilometres to the south of Shams Alam Beach Resort, this natural area of greenery is clearly signposted on the main coast road and we parked in the area near the palm trees and walked in a seaward direction from here. Two male *variegata* **Stonechats** perched on the streamside vegetation whilst a male **Desert Wheatear** here was the only one of our trip. Other migrants seen in this area of scattered bushes adjacent to a small, reed fringed pool included c.10 **Chiffchaffs**, a

Green Sandpiper, a couple of **Little Stints** and half a dozen **Black-headed Wagtails**.

After a brief stop at The Shams Alam Resort to confirm convoy times and accessibility to The Nile Valley, where a **Woodchat** and a couple of **Hoopoes** were noted during our brief stop, we headed north during the afternoon to get the convoy at 6pm from Safaga to Luxor. With plenty of time to kill at the convoy entry area, we chilled out and ate some more bread, tuna and bananas. The convoy left on time but with only 20km gone, we hit a rock and completely knackered the front left wheel of the car and its engine system! The tourist police firstly told us to carry on but, realising this was not possible and after unsuccessfully trying to start the car after we'd changed the wheel, flagged an Egyptian down to tow us back. We arrived in Hurghada (the nearest Hertz rental office to Safaga) at 11pm and, after a simple press of a button from the mechanic, our car was back in action and all that was left of this disaster was the need to change the tyre in the morning.

With the kind help (without payment!) from one of the Hertz employees, we spent the night at the Sea Garden Resort in Hurghada – ideally situated at the north end of 'the strip' and directly to the south of the port. This was the first time during the trip we'd been in a truly tourist resort and we found the many scantily clad Scandinavian, German and Russian women to be a pleasant distraction whilst driving through this rather noisy town.

Thursday 23rd March

Sea Garden Resort beach, Hurghada

Seawatching from the beach early morning proved fruitful but do be warned that all early morning seawatching on the Red Sea is in atrocious light conditions as you are looking due east (and there are rarely any clouds in the sky). Anyway, we could just about make out 17 **Crested Terns** as they headed north (a rather unsatisfactory first view of this species), 12 **Common Terns** again heading north whilst being close to the port had the added attraction of lingering gulls close offshore – a near adult **Great Black-headed Gull** being the highlight amongst at least 2 **Caspian Gulls**, c.20 **Armenian Gulls** whilst in the harbour itself 2 adult **Sooty Gulls** (that unfortunately included a badly oiled individual) were present amongst upwards of fifty **White-eyed Gulls**.

After a quick breakfast, we packed our stuff and headed to the north of the town – firstly to change the tyre from the previous evening and secondly to hopefully locate some Crested Terns in better light and at closer range. We were successful on both counts relatively quickly...

Moussa Shrimps and Fish Farm, just north of Hurghada town

After changing our tyre at the Esso garage on the northern outskirts of the town, we started driving northwards along the main road to Cairo. Just south of the Cairo '450km' sign and 3km from the Esso garage, I noticed some terns perched on posts just offshore. We parked the car near some half-built buildings by the sign to 'Moussa Shrimps and Fish Farm' and immediately gained excellent views of 2 **Crested Terns** alongside a couple of **Caspian Terns**. A couple of us decided to wade into the water

to obtain even closer views, whilst other birds seen here included a handful of **Oystercatchers**, 4 **Turnstones** and a couple of **Kentish Plovers**.

El Gouna Golf Course

Located about 20km to the north of Hurghada, this more upmarket resort appeared to be centred upon a large golf course. After following signs to the golf course and parking in the golf clubhouse, we spent an enjoyable couple of hours during the heat of the day walking around this landscaped green area enjoying the many migrants that it harboured. The highlight was a **Richard's Pipit** that we picked up amongst the 25+ **Tawny Pipits** present whilst the commonest birds were 120+ **Short-toed Larks** and 50+ **Northern Wheatears**. Large numbers of other migrants included 20+ **Hoopoes**, c.15 **Lesser Whitethroats**, 20+ **Black-headed Wagtails** (as well as 3 **Yellow Wagtails** of the race *flava*) and c.20 **Tree Pipits** with other migrants including a male **Subalpine Warbler** (of the race *albistrata*), a **Chiffchaff**, 4 **Bluethroats**, 2 **Red-throated Pipits**, a male **Eastern Black-eared Wheatear** as well as many **Swallows** and **House Martins** moving north. A couple of **Stone Curlews**, a **Cattle Egret** and a **Spur-winged Plover** were also present.

After heading north we got stopped at the checkpoint to the north of El Gouna to be told that tourists had to travel in convoy along the Red Sea coast. Knowing that this was complete rubbish, I lost my rag a little bit with the guard and told him that he 'was talking s**t'. Realising that we had to be at Safaga for the 6pm convoy to Luxor, we only wanted to explore the coast so it was not a major concern, just a mild irritant that was the norm with Egyptian bureaucracy. Anyway, we headed to Safaga and explored the mangrove area 18km south of the town.

Mangroves 18km south of Safaga

A small area of mangroves in the bay to the south of Safaga is viewable from the main coast road, with access just south of a military hut and to the south of a small, isolated hotel through a high green gate. A superb gathering of at least 31 **Crested Terns** were present off on the rocks just offshore, along with a couple of **Caspian Terns**, whilst birds in the bay included 2 **Slender-billed Gulls**, at least ten **Oystercatchers**, an **Osprey**, a dozen **Western Reef Herons** and a couple of **Curlews**. A **Wryneck** near the small hotel was obviously a migrant as were the many **Swallows** that were also present in the area.

With time ticking on, we headed back to Safaga town and reached the convoy area in plenty of time for our 6pm departure. This time it was to be a successful convoy to Luxor, via Qena, and we arrived at the Movenpick Hotel on Crocodile Island at 9.30pm. Realising that this was the area that we needed to bird in the morning, combined with the fact we were all pretty shattered and in need of a good night's sleep, we splashed the cash and stayed in this rather luxurious location.

Friday 24th March

Crocodile Island, Luxor

Rising from our chalets shortly after first light, we wandered through the grounds and the many flowering trees and soon found our first **Nile Valley Sunbird** – typically a rather subdued male. Our unimpressed state was relatively short lived as, within a few minutes, a superb male in pristine plumage was found and we were able to admire it

at close range. A further dozen or so of this species were eventually located during the morning's birding as they favoured the trees and flowers around the hotel gardens. A handful of **Masked Shrikes**, four **Turtle Doves** and a **Woodchat** added even more colour whilst **Common Bulbuls** chattered from all around with other common birds here being **Laughing Dove**, **Swallow** (of the race *savignii*) **Crested Lark**, **Hoopoe**, **Spur-winged Plover**, **Cattle Egret**, **Little Egret**, **Graceful Prinia**, **Fan-tailed Warbler**, **Lesser Whitethroat** and **Pied Kingfisher**. We walked towards the main birding area – the bridge between 'the mainland' and the island – and set our scopes up and scanned the reeds. **Clamorous Reed Warblers** sang beneath us, whilst the odd **Night Heron** and **Squacco** made an appearance and a couple of **Purple Herons** and a **Peregrine** flew over, but then a movement in the reeds to our right (whilst looking south) materialised into an excellent female **Little Crake**. Among the **Moorhens**, after a further few minutes, our target bird was located – a couple of **Purple Swampheens** of the 'green-backed' race *madagascariensis*. We then walked over to the fields near the security hut on 'the mainland' and despite searching we were unable to locate any Red Avadavats here though a few **Red-throated Pipits** in summer plumage were pleasing nonetheless. Walking back onto the island and left (south) after the bridge and along the river bank, a couple of **Senegal Thick-knees** were found roosting and then watched at close range whilst a little further on half a dozen **Little Bee-eaters** (of the race *cleopatra*) showed well on the arable land as did a **Bluethroat**. Near a couple of huts (and rather annoying local kids who would not shut up), 3 **Black-shouldered Kites** showed superbly in a small coppice whilst retracing our steps back to a small area of dry reeds adjacent to the river bank produced a total of 3 **Red Avadavats**, including a singing bird. After a breakfast feast, consisting of all sorts of bread and croissants as well as humus and cheese, some of us chose to chill out for a bit and take in a bit more **Nile Valley Sunbird** action whilst those that ventured back to the bridge located a **Striated Heron** and a **Wood Sandpiper**.

After packing our bags and reluctantly leaving this luxurious and bird-filled location, we headed off in our car across the bridge and a couple of kilometres north to the convoy area in Luxor with plenty of time to get our 2pm departure back to Safaga. During this 'wacky racer' style event, where coaches continually feel the need to overtake each other at 120km per hour and often on bends, the only birds noted were a handful of **Black-shouldered Kites** and lots of **Cattle Egrets** in the Nile Valley whilst back in the desert terrain **Brown-necked Ravens** were common. We arrived back at Safaga at 5.20pm and endeavoured to drive north as far as we felt necessary to reach the Ain Sukhna area in the Gulf of Suez for raptor watching in the morning. As it was, despite a sandstorm, we reached the Dome Village Marina Best Western Hotel at Ain Sukhna at a decent hour – there was even enough time for a couple of team members to have some dinner in the restaurant here (soup and bread of course!).

Saturday 25th March

Dome Marina Hotel

After a bit of a lie in (until just before 8am), we awoke on the last morning of our trip to a rather windy but bright day. As I opened the curtains and stood on the balcony, it was obvious that the hotel grounds were worthy of a look for migrants – a male **Eastern Black-eared Wheatear**, a couple of **Black-headed Wagtails** and a few **Tree Pipits** were all quickly noted just from the balcony. As the others went down for

breakfast, I stayed on the balcony munching on some bread and a tin of tuna as per usual and a male **Redstart** flashed into view and then 3 stunning **Cream-coloured Coursers** appeared on the grass in front of me out of nowhere. With this, it was time for me to head down to the restaurant and inform the others and fairly hastily we were all watching these marvellous birds. Walking around the grounds, several **Short-toed Larks** were noted, as were 10+ **Tree Pipits** and **Chiffchaffs**, whilst other migrants included 3 **Wrynecks** and a couple of **Hoopoes**. With time getting on a little, we packed up and headed north a few kilometres ready for some raptor action... with a **White-crowned Black Wheatear** by the roadside being a bit of a bonus.

60km south of Suez at the El Sokhna resthouse, Ain Sukhna

Standing in the car park, adjacent to the main road, we looked south towards the mountain range and the results were immediate. With 50 Broad-winged Hawks drifting over a mountain range in Costa Rica a few years ago as close to raptor migration as I've ever been, the mid morning period here for me was spectacular – 12 **Steppe Eagles**, 125+ **Lesser Spotted Eagles**, 400+ **Steppe Buzzards**, c.50 **Short-toed Eagles**, 1 **Red Kite**, 200 **Black Kites**, 1 **Long-legged Buzzard** and 50 **Egyptian Vultures**. All birds came in from the south and hugged the mountain range until directly above us before gaining height and moving either directly north or heading north-east over the Gulf of Suez. 2 **Red-rumped Swallows** and a **Pallid Swift** also headed north here. Having stumbled across this location by chance as we were driving north, we wondered whether there would be further sites such as this closer to Suez, but were we being too greedy... a flock of 18 **Glossy Ibis** migrating north along the coast were noted just to the north of this site whilst driving.

Suez Quarries

The quarries directly to the west of Suez town, and accessed off the Suez bypass, proved to be rather frustrating with fewer raptors present and more distant views through a heat haze. Nevertheless, in a half hour period late morning, we recorded a **Booted Eagle**, a **Steppe Eagle**, 50+ **Lesser Spotted Eagles**, 20+ **Steppe Buzzards** and about 30 **Black Kites**. Slightly annoyed that we hadn't stuck at the El Sokhna resthouse, we returned south...

60km south of Suez at the El Sokhna resthouse, Ain Sukhna

It was obvious on arrival that raptor passage had slowed considerably since the mid morning period but we still managed to see 60 **Lesser Spotted Eagles**, 10 **Steppe Eagles**, 30 **Steppe Buzzards** and a **Long-legged Buzzard** in under an hour. A noticeable passage of *flava* wagtails and **Tree Pipits** was also noted.

Suez Bay

Heading into Suez town itself from the south, the bay is readily apparent on your right. When we found a congregation of birds, we located a suitable place to cross the railway line and scanned. 6 adult *fuscus* **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** and an **Armenian Gull** were present in amongst larger numbers of **Slender-billed Gulls** and **Black-headed Gulls** whilst a sandbank provided ample roosting opportunities for 50 **Common Terns** and 40 **Little Terns**. Waders present were a handful of **Little Stints**, a couple of **Grey Plovers**, a **Greenshank** and 3 **Dunlin** whilst **House Crows** were abundant. What was distressing though were the number of birds at this site that were oiled, with Slender-billed Gulls seemingly most affected.

Southern Sinai

With relatively poor views the previous Sunday evening, we revisited the Hume's Owl site in southern Sinai hopefully to obtain better views. Arriving slightly early, birds seen in the wadi in daylight included 4 **White-crowned Black Wheatears**, a handful of **African Rock Martins** and a **Kestrel**. As dusk approached, we assembled ourselves and shortly afterwards, a **Hume's Owl** came out and perched in front of us on the cliff face. Its orange eyes were piercing and, when it eventually departed up onto the plateau, its distinctive dark carpal notch on an otherwise pallid underwing was noted.

Thoroughly satisfied and over the moon with this experience, and indeed the trip as a whole, we drove the 5 or so hours back to Cairo to get our early morning flight back to London. The night, or what was left of it, was spent sleeping in the car.

Sunday 26th March

Our early morning flight back to London went on time and, having said goodbyes to the Scottish lads, I was back home by mid afternoon.

Egypt March 2006 – Trip List

Little Grebe, <i>Tachybaptus ruficollis capensis</i>
Great Cormorant, <i>Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis</i>
Little Bittern, <i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>
Black-crowned Night Heron, <i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>
Striated Heron, <i>Butorides striatus</i>
Squacco Heron, <i>Ardeola ralloides</i>
Cattle Egret, <i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
Western Reef Heron, <i>Egretta gularis schistacea</i>
Little Egret, <i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Grey Heron, <i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Purple Heron, <i>Ardea purpurea</i>
Goliath Heron, <i>Ardea goliath</i>
White Stork, <i>Ciconia ciconia</i>
Glossy Ibis, <i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>
Black Kite, <i>Milvus migrans aegyptius</i> & <i>M. m. migrans</i>
Red Kite, <i>Milvus Milvus</i>
Egyptian Vulture, <i>Neophron percnopterus</i>
Lappet-faced Vulture, <i>Torgos tracheliotus nubicus</i>
Short-toed Eagle, <i>Circaetus gallicus</i>
Marsh Harrier, <i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Sparrowhawk, <i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Common Buzzard, <i>Buteo buteo vulpinus</i>
Long-legged Buzzard, <i>Buteo rufinus</i>
Lesser Spotted Eagle, <i>Aquila pomarina</i>
Steppe Eagle, <i>Aquila nipalensis orientalis</i>
Booted Eagle, <i>Hieraetus pennatus</i>
Osprey, <i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
Common Kestrel, <i>Falco tinnunculus rupicolaeformis</i>
Peregrine, <i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Barbary Falcon, <i>Falco pelegrinoides</i>
Little Crake, <i>Porzana parva</i>
Moorhen, <i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Purple Swamphen, <i>Porphyrio porphyrio madagascariensis</i>
Coot, <i>Fulica atra</i>
Painted Snipe, <i>Rostratula benghalensis</i>
Oystercatcher, <i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
Black-winged Stilt, <i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
Stone Curlew, <i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>
Senegal Thick-knee, <i>Burhinus senegalensis</i>
Cream-coloured Courser, <i>Cursorius cursor</i>
Little Ringed Plover, <i>Charadrius dubius curonicus</i>
Ringed Plover, <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
Kittlitz's Plover, <i>Charadrius pecuarius</i>
Kentish Plover, <i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
Greater Sand Plover, <i>Charadrius leschenaultii columbinus</i>
Grey Plover, <i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
Spur-winged Plover, <i>Vanellus spinosus</i>
Little Stint, <i>Calidris minuta</i>
Temminck's Stint, <i>Calidris temminckii</i>
Dunlin, <i>Calidris alpina</i>
Ruff, <i>Philomachus pugnax</i>

Jack Snipe, <i>Lymnocyptes minimus</i>
Common Snipe, <i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Whimbrel, <i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
Eurasian Curlew, <i>Numenius arquata orientalis</i>
Common Redshank, <i>Tringa totanus</i>
Greenshank, <i>Tringa nebularia</i>
Green Sandpiper, <i>Tringa ochropus</i>
Wood Sandpiper, <i>Tringa glareola</i>
Common Sandpiper, <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
Ruddy Turnstone, <i>Arenaria interpres</i>
Sooty Gull, <i>Larus hemprichii</i>
White-eyed Gull, <i>Larus leucophthalmus</i>
Great Black-headed Gull, <i>Larus ichthyaetus</i>
Black-headed Gull, <i>Larus ridibundus</i>
Slender-billed Gull, <i>Larus genei</i>
Lesser Black-backed Gull, <i>Larus fuscus fuscus</i>
Caspian Gull, <i>Larus cachinnans</i>
Armenian Gull, <i>Larus armenicus</i>
Caspian Tern, <i>Sterna caspia</i>
Crested Tern, <i>Sterna bergii velox</i>
Common Tern, <i>Sterna Hirundo</i>
Little Tern, <i>Sterna albifrons</i>
Whiskered Tern, <i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>
Crowned Sandgrouse, <i>Pterocles coronatus</i>
African Collared Dove, <i>Streptopelia roseogrisea arabica</i>
Collared Dove, <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Turtle Dove, <i>Streptopelia turtur</i>
Laughing Dove, <i>Streptopelia senegalensis aegyptiaca</i>
Senegal Coucal, <i>Centropus senegalensis</i>
Hume's Tawny Owl, <i>Strix butleri</i>
Pallid Swift, <i>Apus pallidus</i>
White-throated Kingfisher, <i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>
Common Kingfisher, <i>Alcedo atthis</i>
Pied Kingfisher, <i>Ceryle rudis</i>
Little Green Bee-eater, <i>Merops orientalis Cleopatra</i>
Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, <i>Merops persicus</i>
Hoopoe, <i>Upupa epops</i>
Wryneck, <i>Jynx torquilla</i>
Hoopoe Lark, <i>Alaemon alaudipes</i>
Greater Short-toed Lark, <i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>
Crested Lark, <i>Galerida cristata</i>
Sand Martin, <i>Riparia riparia</i>
African Rock Martin, <i>Ptyonoprogne fuligula</i>
Barn Swallow, <i>Hirundo r. rustica</i> & <i>H. r. savignii</i>
Red-rumped Swallow, <i>Hirundo daurica</i>
House Martin, <i>Delichon urbicum</i>
Richard's Pipit, <i>Anthus richardi</i>
Tawny Pipit, <i>Anthus campestris</i>
Tree Pipit, <i>Anthus trivialis</i>
Red-throated Pipit, <i>Anthus cervinus</i>
Yellow Wagtail, <i>Motacilla f. flava</i> & <i>M. f. pygmaea</i>
Black-headed Wagtail, <i>Motacilla feldegg</i>

White Wagtail, <i>Motacilla alba</i>
Common Bulbul, <i>Pycnonotus barbatus arsine</i>
Bluethroat, <i>Luscinia svecica</i>
Common Redstart, <i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>
Stonechat, <i>Saxicola torquata variegata</i>
Northern Wheatear, <i>Oenanthe Oenanthe</i>
Black-eared Wheatear, <i>Oenanthe hispanica melanoleuca</i>
Desert Wheatear, <i>Oenanthe deserti</i>
Mourning Wheatear, <i>Oenanthe lugens</i>
White-crowned Black Wheatear, <i>Oenanthe leucopyga ernesti</i>
Blackbird, <i>Turdus merula</i>
Song Thrush, <i>Turdus philomelos</i>
Fan-tailed Warbler, <i>Cisticola juncidis</i>
Graceful Warbler, <i>Prinia gracilis</i>
Sedge Warbler, <i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>
Reed Warbler, <i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>
Clamorous Reed Warbler, <i>Acrocephalus stentoreus</i>
Subalpine Warbler, <i>Sylvia cantillans albistriata</i>
Lesser Whitethroat, <i>Sylvia curruca</i>
Common Chiffchaff, <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
Nile Valley Sunbird, <i>Anthreptes metallicus</i>
Southern Grey Shrike, <i>Lanius meridionalis elegans</i>
Woodchat Shrike, <i>Lanius senator</i>
Masked Shrike, <i>Lanius nubicus</i>
House Crow, <i>Corvus splendens</i>
Hooded Crow, <i>Corvus cornix sardonius</i>
Brown-necked Raven, <i>Corvus ruficollis</i>
House Sparrow, <i>Passer domesticus niloticus</i>
Spanish Sparrow, <i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>
Red Avadavat, <i>Amandava amandava</i>
Goldfinch, <i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
Linnet, <i>Carduelis cannabina</i>