

Egypt

16–29 September 2011

Participants

Bill Bailey
John Boulcott
Robert Carr
Alan Gibson
Richard Rafe
Bob Swann
Grahame Walshe



Leaders Vaughan and Svetlana Ashby

African Skimmer

Day 1 We had a smooth and punctual flight from London Heathrow to Cairo where we met our guide Abdullah, followed by a transfer to our hotel on the west bank of the Nile. The only birds seen during the journey were Black-crowned Night-herons, Cattle Egrets, Common Kestrels, two Spur-winged Lapwings, numerous Laughing Doves, six Eurasian Hoopoes and many Hooded Crows and House Sparrows.

Day 2 We were up early to head out of the city to Lake Natrum. Unfortunately we did not have a good start as the radiator of the bus was leaking and we had to keep filling up with water! This didn't affect our birding however and the ground agents were quick to order a spare bus that followed us until the end of the day! Once at the lake we enjoyed several hours of excellent birding, which included 10 of our target bird, the highly sought-after Kittlitz's Plovers. Other birds seen included Squacco Heron, six Garganeys, Black-winged Kite, many Kentish Plovers and Little Stints, two Temminck's Stint, a single Broad-billed Sandpiper, four Marsh Sandpipers, our first Pied Kingfisher, four each of Little Green Bee-eater and Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, many Barn Swallows of the Egyptian race, Common Bulbuls, Zitting Cisticola, Graceful Prinia and Red-backed Shrike. With our target bird in the bag, we returned to Cairo and enjoyed lunch in the heat of the day in a nice restaurant. In the afternoon, we participated in our first cultural part of the tour when we visited the Great Pyramids and Sphinx. Because of the recent troubles in Egypt both sites were remarkably crowd free and pleasant. We returned to the hotel in the early evening for our second night.

Day 3 We made an early start to be out of the city before the traffic became too heavy and headed north to Abassa accompanied by a police guard. This became the feature everywhere in Egypt with tourist security being taken very seriously by the authorities. Arriving in Abassa, we started to walk to the cultivations when two Senegal Thick-knees flew up in front of us, an excellent start. Continuing on to the cultivations, it wasn't long before the familiar call of a Senegal Coucal was heard in the distance. Coucals can be very difficult to see in the non-breeding season so we were prepared to work hard but astonishingly the bird responded to playback and came straight in. Not one but three birds came in and gave good views. In fact, one bird excelled itself and landed on an open branch within only 25 metres from us. Two speciality birds seen and we had only been there 30 minutes! White-breasted Kingfishers were very easy to see here but

there was no sign of the introduced Streaked Weaver. On our way back to the bus a Collared Pratincole was seen flying over, the only one of the trip, whilst both Spotted Flycatcher and Zitting Cisticola were seen well. Continuing on to Abassa Fishponds, we parked up and walked around the tracks separating them. Fortunately, it didn't take us long to find our main target bird here, Greater Painted-snipe, with a male and female both being seen well. As we left our telescopes to look along the ditch for the painted-snipers again, it was interesting to see that our security stood by them to look after them for us! The ponds were very birdy with many Little Bitterns, two Striated Herons, a Glossy Ibis flying over, (African) Purple Swamphen and Whiskered Terns present. There were also a number of warblers and we got to grips with Sedge Warbler and both Eurasian and Clamorous Reed-warblers. One of the speciality birds here is the introduced Red Avadavat and we were finding that although there were quite a few about, getting good views of them was very difficult. We ate our packed lunches in the comfort of the bus before trying for better views of the Red Avadavats but whilst we enjoyed superb views of two more Senegal Thick-knees, we had to settle for flight views of the avadavats. As the previous site held more promise for the weavers, we headed back to them and remarkably, in our absence, one of the field had been harvested and a Streaked Weaver was feeding on the chaff. During a short walk we encountered three more birds to end our birding for the day. We then headed for the airport for our internal flight to Luxor followed by a short drive to our new hotel for the night.

Day 4 Immediately after breakfast we headed south to the famous Crocodile Island where we were met by Abdul our local guide. Birding in the fields and on the bridge as we entered the hotel grounds we added Purple Heron, Rock Martin and Red-rumped Swallow to our lists. Two Senegal Thick-knees showed remarkably well in the grounds before we started to encounter our main target species, Nile Valley Sunbird. It was surprising how abundant they were in the grounds and, after an initial 'panic', how easy to see they were. They were all unfortunately in non breeding plumage but it was entertaining to watch the way they interacted with each other. After this early success, we walked along the river bank seeing two European Turtle-doves. A Little Green Bee-eater of the African race performed very well for the cameras as did a Black-shouldered Kite. Best of all however, a female Greater Painted-snipe was 'scoped in the reeds and whilst watching this fabulous bird, a male Red Avadavat flew in right in front of it! An excellent morning's birding so we headed off to lunch in the hotel, which turned out to be a rather protracted affair. In the afternoon, we returned to Luxor and spent an hour admiring the Temple of Karnak before heading south towards Aswan. The journey south took rather a long time as traffic conditions (and the standard of driving) were very poor so we didn't have time to check out the camel market to look for Namaqua Doves, arriving in Aswan after dark. With the limited number of tourists visiting the country, hotels were falling over themselves to get business so we stayed at the luxurious Iberotel.

Day 5 We woke up to a stunning view over the Nile and birding from our balcony windows! After breakfast we checked out the banks of the river seeing for many our first wild Egyptian Geese together with good numbers of Glossy Ibis, a Purple Swamphen, Black-winged Stilts, Little and Temminck's Stints, Ruff, Black-tailed Godwits, Slender-billed Gulls and Gull-billed Terns. The news was not good about visiting the fishponds below the dam to look for Three-banded Plover. Although we had permits from official sources, the manager was playing difficult and demanding additional permits. As we would be returning in two days however, we decided to leave this to our ground agents and do it on the way back. We therefore returned north to the camel market again to look for Namaqua Doves only to find a huge cattle auction going on and absolute chaos on the surrounding roads. We had to admit defeat and returned to Aswan to join the 10.00 convoy from Aswan to Abu Simbel (permits needed in advance) and three hours later without any stop were in Abu Simbel. After checking into our hotel and taking lunch, we waiting for the heat to subside before heading out. During this time, two White Storks were seen together with White-tailed Wheatears, Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, Masked Shrikes and best of all, two Sooty Falcons flying over. We then drove the short distance to where a pair of African Mourning Doves had been found at the beginning of the year and it didn't take us long to find one of the birds. It called several times and was seen well perched before we moved on for our second target bird together with our first Tree Pipit. As we drove down to the jetty on Lake Nasser, it didn't take us long to find several African Pied Wagtails, it really was going very well! So on to airport bay where we spent a long time scanning the

lake. A Common Cuckoo caused some excitement followed by a Southern Grey Shrike. We were watching lots of waders scattered around the lake plus two Tawny Pipits on the shore and our first Brown-necked Ravens when one of the group said "I think I've got some African Skimmers"! They were a long way off but there was no doubt what they were a large flock of African Skimmers, wow, what a find! By now the sun was setting so rather than head back to the hotel we decided to try for nightjars. After a couple of brief views of an Egyptian Nightjar at the first site we headed back towards town. As we entered the outskirts under the streetlights another nightjar suddenly flew by. We quickly got out of the bus to track it down and were able to get outstanding views of the bird settled on the ground in the torchlight, a fantastic end to a great day.

Day 6 Today was our boat trip day but on the way we checked out the African Morning Dove again; still just one bird. Boarding our boat, we sailed off into the lake and we were soon seeing a good selection of common waders. In one of the bays however, we could see five storks on the shore so headed in for a closer look. Good move, they were a group of five highly sought-after Yellow-billed Storks, one and adult and four immatures, fantastic views. Moving on, we were scanning all the time for pelicans. Lots of terns of three species, Gull-billed, White-winged and Whiskered, plenty more waders including another Kittlitz's Plover and several Senegal Thick-knees but no pelicans. Heading into airport bay to try to get a closer view of the African Skimmers we were not disappointed. They were in exactly the same place and we were able to approach quite closely. Getting stuck in the mud we accidentally flushed them as we were trying to get out but they gave us a fantastic display flying very close to us several times before settling down again. Continuing, we saw a distant group of large white birds and landed to check them out. Sadly they were Eurasian Spoonbills, nice birds but not what we were looking for. More good views of Spur-winged Lapwings and Senegal Thick-knees when a distant flock of pelicans were picked up flushed from the water by a boat. After long and careful scrutiny, it was obvious that they were not Pink-backed Pelicans but Great White Pelicans. Back to the boat to check other parts of the lake but try as we did, it was obvious that there were no Pink-backed Pelicans present with an immature Heuglin's Gull being scant reward for the return trip. Back on land, we enjoyed views of both Cyprus and Isabelline Wheatears before heading back to the hotel for lunch. After the heat of the day had passed, we headed out again this time to another bay where Three-banded Plovers had bred in the spring. Viewing was difficult because of the sun and an alternative site was inadvisable as it was close to the police station! We headed around the other side of the bay and walked down to the shore of the bay to check it out. We carefully checked the whole bay but until a superb Barbary Falcon flew over, our only reward was a Curlew Sandpiper. We rechecked the first bay just in case any pelicans had flown in but it wasn't to be so we headed back to the hotel.

Day 7 With there being no Pink-backed Pelicans on the lake, we decided to have a packed breakfast and arrange a private convoy back to Aswan early to arrive there shortly after first light. The convoy was actually only one vehicle, ours! We arrived in Aswan on time and arrived at the fishpond gates only to be refused entry despite having the correct permits. Apparently, private birders had trespassed onto the site recently causing problems with security and embarrassment for the manager. It was obvious that no amount of pleading was going to get us in and we had to accept that for the time being until the matter was taken up to a very high governmental level no-one was going to get in. Sadly, not all birders go through the correct procedures, which cause problems for those that do. We tried to view the ponds from other positions but were limited by security at the dam, only seeing a Ferruginous Duck as consolation. We also tried the first viewing point downstream but it appears that the birds are faithful to their chosen habitat and don't move far. After a brief stop at the Iberotel again and some riverside birding, we heading to the camel market to look for Namaqua Doves again. This time, we were successful in our search for the doves although it did take us a little time! Eventually a number of birds were seen flying over and one co-operative bird watching walking on the ground. Continuing north we passed a Black Stork in flight before reaching Idfu where we headed east towards the Red Sea. The 220km drive to Marsa Alam on the coast was uneventful and we made just one comfort break at a rather deserted tourist restaurant. After filling up with fuel at Marsa Alam, we headed south the 100km to our new base south of Shams Alam. En-route, we saw our first Western Reef-heron together with many White-eyed Gulls.

Day 8 Our resort for the next four nights was pleasantly modest with just scuba divers for company and no noise. At first light we headed to the mangroves to start our quest for the notoriously elusive Goliath Heron. There were quite a few Grey Herons about together with a couple of Purple Herons but despite several of us wading through the mangroves towards the reef, no sign of any Goliath Herons. We did however, enjoy excellent views of a pair of Crab Plovers together with a begging juvenile plus good number of Greater Sandplovers, a couple of Eurasian Whimbrels and several Sooty Gulls and Caspian Terns flying over. Three European Rollers and several Common Quails were also found in the mangroves although all the collared-doves seen seemed to be Eurasian Collared-doves. After breakfast we headed south to Shelatin very close to the Sudanese border for a special bird. With our customary police guard on board and picking up another local policeman on the edge of the town, we started scouring the usual spots for Lappet-faced Vultures. There are regular camel markets here which attract good numbers of vultures but unfortunately, there hadn't been one for two weeks so there were no carcasses left for the birds to feed on. We nevertheless kept up our search but were seriously hampered by the sheer numbers of black plastic bags blowing from the acacia trees and masquerading as vultures! Eventually however, a Lappet-faced Vulture was picked up at distance and had the good grace to fly over us giving many a much-wanted Western Palearctic tick. Continuing to check every area around the village, amassed another four sightings of this magnificent raptor, some even closer, together with six Egyptian Vultures. Our search for African Collared-doves was less successful so we had to leave this bird for another day. Returning to our resort for a late lunch, we took a short break before heading to the next door resort to look at our first White-cheeked Terns gathered on a sandspit.

Day 9 As would be the case every day here, up at dawn for a pre-breakfast walk to the nearby mangroves with a couple of lucky souls seeing a Corn Crake in the half light. Once again, plenty of Grey Herons and six Purple Herons but still no sign of any Goliath Herons. The Crab Plovers were still present whilst Montagu's and Pallid Harriers quartered the nearby scrubby areas and a European Nightjar was flushed from the mangroves. After breakfast we headed north to Hamata to cruise out to the Hamata Islands on a large cabin cruiser. At the dock were plenty of White-eyed Gulls together with five Crab Plovers on a small area of mud and several Western Reef-egrets. The boat journey out was smooth and uneventful with an escort of good numbers of White-eyed Gulls, smaller numbers of Sooty Gulls and numerous White-cheeked Terns. As we arrived at our first island we were pleased to see a few Bridled and Lesser Crested Terns but nothing was to prepare us for our landing on the white powder sand beach by Zodiac where we were greeted by hundreds of White-cheeked Terns and dozens of Bridled Terns all giving spectacular views. There were many fledged young around as well as quite a few smaller young so we made sure that we kept our distance. Moving on to the next island we didn't think that things could get any better but it did as on this island we enjoyed amazing views of a pair of Sooty Falcons. In total, we had six Sooty Falcons during the day. With no sign of any Crested Terns (not normally seen here anyway), we headed back to shore and visited the nearby Hamata Mangroves to continue our search for Goliath Herons. There were several Grey Herons here but again, no sign of our target species. A nice Cretzschmar's Bunting was found together with a couple of Common Nightingales and a Woodchat Shrike whilst a flock of ducks flying over contained Common Teal and Northern Pintail. Probably the star bird here however, was a Lanner Falcon seen both perched and hunting. Returning to our resort, we once again checked out the mangroves but still no sign of any Goliath Herons although a Eurasian Spoonbill flew in.

Day 10 Another early morning foray into the mangroves with the same result. After breakfast, we drove north to Marsa Alam, then west towards Idfu before heading south. This is the ornithologically unexplored road of Sheik Shazly with fabulous scenery and lots of potential. We made several stops but because we had over 100km to cover we had to restrict them. At one stop we found a small flock of Short-toed Larks, several Tawny Pipits and a Black Redstart. Eventually arriving in Sheik Shazly, we just started to look at the collared-doves when we were approached by a couple of locals suspicious of our motives. Apparently, a TV crew had visited recently and their programme had portrayed the town in a bad light and they thought that we were filming. When they understood what we were doing, the village chief was called and welcomed us to his town. We enjoyed excellent views of good numbers of African

Collared-doves after which we were invited into the town hall to eat our lunch in comfort. Not only that, but we were also given drinks, a wonderful welcome. After lunch, we decided to head back by the shorter route even though as tourists we technically weren't allowed! The road was marked as just a track on the map (presumably to confuse tourists!) but in the event turned out to be of a good quality. The scenery was spectacular and the journey about 100km shorter. We made only two stops, one for scenery and the other to look at three Red-footed Falcons perched in bushes. Arriving back at our resort late afternoon, we once again visited the mangroves and spent the rest of the daylight searching for the mythical Goliath Heron!

Day 11 Our last early morning foray into the mangroves and again without success. I say without success as several members of the group had a brief view of a heron that may have been Goliath disappearing into a thick area of mangroves. Bob Swann valiantly waded into to find a hidden but treacherous lagoon, thick with mud with steep sides. Fortunately he got out quickly, I say fortunately because later at breakfast the owner of the lodge warned us about this lagoon! The usual birds were still present but we had to admit defeat and return to breakfast. Packing up and heading north, we first stopped and Hamata Mangroves again to thoroughly search them. The usual common waders were present but the highlight was up to 50 Crab Plovers spread distantly along the beach. Once again, no sign of any Goliath Herons at this secondary site so we continued our journey north. We were unfortunately battling against a northerly wind and some engine problems, and progress was slow. We arrived at a superb hotel for lunch and took a break whilst the driver got the bus checked out by a mechanic. It didn't seem any better after lunch as we continued to 'battle' north and it was nearly dusk by the time we arrived at El Gouna for a two-night stay. We just had time to dash across the road to the golf course to check things out. With the fairways neatly manicured but almost birdless, we decided to call it a day and check into the hotel.

Day 12 We headed out to the sewerage ponds before breakfast. Unfortunately, we initially entered the wrong site so by the time we arrived at the correct site there was little time left. The site was quite active with several species of common waders and ducks. Just as we were about to leave two each of European Honey-buzzard and Levant Sparrowhawk flew over together with a few Steppe Buzzards justifying the early morning visit. After returning to the hotel for breakfast, we drove to Hurghada where we boarded a boat for our second pelagic. It had to be said that this was a fabulous day out with numerous White-checked Terns and White-eyed Gulls, smaller numbers of Bridled and Caspian Terns and several Sooty Falcons but our hoped-for Crested Terns never materialised. Some went snorkelling whilst others enjoyed the excellent food on board. Back to shore and we returned to the sewerage works to check out if there had been much in the way of new arrivals. With little change evident, we returned to the hotel for the night.

Day 13 After an early morning check of the golf course and breakfast, we drove to the sewerage ponds again. This time at Bob Swann's suggestion we also checked out the new larger ponds which were being built around 1km away and were pleased to find them full of birds. There were plenty of common terns and ducks we had seen before but we added two new species of the waders to the trip list: Spotted Redshank and Red-necked Phalarope, the latter being a lifer for Abdullah, and Mallard. We heard sandgrouse calling distantly, then saw some distantly and finally were rewarded with good flybys of several Spotted Sandgrouse. Returning to the bus, we enjoyed an excellent Barbary Falcon flying over before setting off north. Once again with a northerly wind and reoccurring engine problems our progress was slow. Our only remaining target species was Crested Tern so kept our eyes peeled. We needn't have worried however; spotting a flock of terns on the beach (close to where Abdullah said that we might see them) we were delighted to see that they were mostly Crested Terns with just a few Caspian Terns interspersed. Over the course of the next half hour we enjoyed excellent views and even the security guards at the local electricity sub-station who came to investigate us were content to let us watch them. Mission accomplished, we continued our journey northwards seeing progressively more ships heading in and out of the Suez Canal until we reached Suez itself when we turned westwards back towards Cairo. Suddenly the bus was going faster with no headwind and progress from now on was much more rapid. Reaching the outskirts of the city we kept ourselves amused watching the total lack of awareness of others shown of some of the drivers and the preposterous loads on some of the vehicles. Pride of place went to a

guy asleep on top of a particularly high load on a lorry however! Eventually we arrived back at our original hotel for our last night in Egypt.

Day 14 Our last day and having seen all the speciality birds of the area we didn't have to get up so early! After a leisurely breakfast we headed to a local park where in short time we managed to have great views of the introduced Alexandrine Parakeets. Although not countable at present, they are breeding freely in the city and it surely won't be long before they are added to the Egyptian list as a category C species. A banker for the future! With time on our hands (but not enough to get out of the city to do real birding), the group split and some went to a traditional Egyptian coffee house whilst others decided to go to the Egyptian museum. The highlight of the museum was, of course, Tutankhamen's golden mask, as well as numerous other ancient artefacts. Meeting up again, we drove to the airport where we lunched before saying goodbye to our excellent guide Abdullah and catching our flight home at the end of a remarkably successful tour.

Of the speciality birds in Egypt, we had managed to see almost all of them. There were no Pink-backed Pelicans on Lake Nasser so we didn't really miss them, politics and the military situation cost us Three-banded Plover and Goliath Heron was almost certainly not present. In fact many more birders miss Goliath Heron than see them. On the plus side we saw the recently-located African Mourning Dove, had fabulous views of the very erratic African Skimmers and despite the time of year, enjoyed good views of Senegal Coucal and Streaked Weavers. Additionally, we enjoyed excellent views of all the other speciality birds including up close and personal views of Egyptian Nightjar.

Vaughan Ashby
Birdfinders