

Egypt

14–27 September 2018

Participants

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Three-banded Plover

Leaders Peter Lansdown, Abdullah Aly, Mena Kamel, Watter Al Bahrey

Day 1 Four different international flights brought birders from Austria, Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Norway and Wales to Cairo International Airport, where we were all met by our Egyptian hosts and transferred to a hotel in El Giza. From our joint northern European perspective, many good birds were seen during the tour including Little Bittern, Black-crowned Night-heron, Striated and Squacco Herons, Cattle Egret, Western Reef-heron, Purple Heron, Glossy Ibis, Egyptian Goose, Ferruginous Duck, Black-shouldered and Black Kites, African Swampphen, Black-winged Stilt, Senegal Thick-knee, Spur-winged Lapwing, Slender-billed and White-eyed Gulls, Gull-billed, Caspian, Whiskered, White-winged, Crested and Lesser Crested Terns, Laughing Dove, White-breasted and Pied Kingfishers, Green and European Bee-eaters, Eurasian Hoopoe, Greater Short-toed and Crested Larks, Rock Martin, Barn (Egyptian) Swallow, Common Bulbul, White-tailed Wheatear, Zitting Cisticola, Graceful Prinia, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Red-backed, Great Grey and Masked Shrikes and Brown-necked Raven. Each of these was seen on at least four days and so is not included further in this report. A full bird-checklist can be viewed on the website.

Day 2 The tour began with a quick look at the grounds of our hotel in El Giza, during which Indian Silverbill was seen, followed by a drive to the south following the River Nile. We stopped at an area of semi-desert and agricultural fields near Sandafa el Far to search for Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse. This species, previously thought to be extinct in the Western Palearctic, had recently been discovered here. Despite spreading out and covering a large area on foot well into the heat of the day, we did not find any sandgrouse. Our only consolation, in addition to seeing Tawny Pipit, was that we would have

the opportunity to try again the next day. We continued to follow the River Nile to the south to a hotel in El Minya.

Day 3 We left our hotel early, returned north to the same area near Sandafa el Far and set out again on our quest for Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse. With time beginning to run out, and with only Eurasian Crag-martin and Tawny Pipit to show for all our efforts, some extremely distant sandgrouse were spotted in flight and apparently coming down. As we marched towards the place where we thought the birds had landed further small parties of sandgrouse were seen in flight well ahead of us. We slowed down and approached the area cautiously. Suddenly, twenty-one Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse were in the air and they treated us all to two or three fly-pasts at quite close range before heading away. We soon discovered that some individuals were still on the ground and we enjoyed telescope views until these, which turned out to be a further nine birds, also flew off. We returned to our coach feeling tired but extremely happy. We travelled north, almost back to El Giza, before turning east, leaving the Nile Valley behind. After a further long drive we reached the Gulf of Suez and headed south to a hotel in Ain Sukhna, seeing House Crow on our approach and Lesser Black-backed (Baltic) Gull from the hotel grounds.

Day 4 This would be our day for visiting the Sinai Peninsula in search of the very difficult Saunders's Tern. Following early-morning birding in the hotel grounds, which produced Citrine Wagtail, we headed north to beyond Suez, then east through a tunnel under the Suez Canal and then south along the eastern coast of the Gulf of Suez to a hotel complex near Ras Subr. After gaining permission to enter the complex we were faced with a very long wooden jetty that stretched out in front of us across the beach and that we needed to negotiate. We were offered a ride along the jetty in a tourist train but places were limited. Those left to walk overtook the ever-slowng train, however, which soon stopped working and we all became pedestrians and had to proceed carefully to avoid the holes in the planks. At the end of the jetty we quickly spotted a large, but distant, group of gulls and terns so we descended to the beach, took off our boots and socks and waded across a broad inlet to get closer to the birds. Now we could use our telescopes. Among the many gulls and terns were Lesser Black-backed (Baltic and Heuglin's) Gulls but our focus was on the terns. Some of the group saw a small juvenile tern at rest which subsequently gave us all a closer flight view which confirmed it as a Saunders's Tern while further flight views of juvenile Saunders's Terns were also obtained. These were intermittent views so it was impossible to say how many birds were present but there were clearly very few indeed. We soon discovered that the tide had come in somewhat since we had waded out and the wade back to the end of the jetty was far more difficult. Only one person actually fell in, however, which was quite surprising as were battling against the incoming tide. After seeing Greater Sand-plover we accessed the jetty again. During the long walk to our coach we saw Kentish Plover and, bizarrely, on the jetty itself, we had multiple views of a Savi's Warbler. We returned to our hotel in Ain Sukhna via Suez itself, seeing Common Myna and vast numbers of House Crows on the journey.

Day 5 Today was always destined to include very little birding as we needed to drive all the way from Ain Sukhna to Lahami Bay. The journey took us south-east as we travelled next to firstly the Gulf of Suez and secondly the Red Sea, seeing Common (Steppe) Buzzard, House Crow and Semicollared Flycatcher on the way, the latter at a stop for fuel. Our lunch stop at Quseir produced White-tailed Lapwing and Lesser Black-backed (Baltic) Gull. We reached our destination at Lahami Bay as it was beginning to get dark.

Day 6 Before we even left the extensive hotel grounds at the edge of the Red Sea we saw Crab-plover and Kentish Plover, Sooty Gull, Citrine Wagtail, Eurasian Golden Oriole, Cretzschmar's Bunting and, most unexpectedly, a Chestnut-shouldered Petronia. After leaving the hotel and immediately before returning to it we visited two different areas of mangroves to the north seeing Great Egret, Common

Quail, Crab and Kentish Plovers, Greater Sand-plover, European Roller and Isabelline Wheatear. Most of the day, however, was spent on a boat-trip out of Hamata, where we saw Sooty Gull in the harbour, to the Qulan Islands. This trip included wading ashore onto one of the islands and anchoring close to another island and produced hundreds of Bridled and White-cheeked Terns and the day's main target species, Sooty Falcon. Several Sooty Falcons were seen and we enjoyed views of birds hunting in rapid, twisting flight over the sea and of a pair chasing off a lone bird from an island. We spent a second night in Lahami Bay.

Day 7 Early-morning birding in the hotel grounds gave us Common Quail, Eurasian Nightjar, Ortolan Bunting and the Chestnut-shouldered Petronia again, while early and late visits to the two mangrove areas produced Great Egret, European Honey-buzzard, Sooty Falcon, Common Quail, Crab-plover, Sooty Gull, European Roller and Eurasian Golden Oriole. A visit to Shalatein to the south was, however, the main excursion of the day. Despite the strong wind here we recorded Lappet-faced and Egyptian Vultures, Lanner Falcon, Namaqua Dove and Black-eared Wheatear. Crowned Sandgrouse were seen from the coach on our drive back to Lahami Bay, where we spent a third night.

Day 8 Pallid and Montagu's Harriers, Corn Crake and Ortolan Bunting were all seen before we left the hotel on the long journey heading north-west, then west and then south along the Nile Valley to Aswan. We made a final visit to one of the areas of mangroves, recording Crab-plover and Kentish Plover, Greater Sand-plover, Sooty Gull, European Roller, Black-eared Wheatear and Eurasian Golden Oriole, while a Red-footed Falcon was seen during a stop at Ras Bagdadi and a Woodchat Shrike was spotted from the coach during the drive. We ended the day with a boat-trip on the River Nile at Aswan before retiring to a hotel in the town.

Day 9 A fish-farm in Aswan itself was the first birding stop of the day. It didn't take long to find our target species, Three-banded Plover, and we also saw Pallid Harrier and Temminck's Stint there. We then travelled south-west to Abu Simbel, where the grounds of our hotel gave us Black (Yellow-billed) Kite and Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin. Late-afternoon we visited Lake Nasser's Airport Bay, where we recorded Yellow-billed and White Storks, Black (Yellow-billed) Kite, Egyptian Nightjar, African Pied Wagtail, Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin and Desert Wheatear.

Day 10 Although we took a boat-trip on Lake Nasser, the lake was not as productive as we had hoped due to the high water level, which resulted in the sandbanks and beaches being under water. However, we did see White Pelican. Yellow-billed and White Storks, Greater Flamingo, Temminck's Stint and Marsh Sandpiper. A lunch-stop next to an arm of the lake produced European Honey-buzzard, Little Crake and Clamorous Reed Warbler while back at the hotel we saw Common Myna. We visited the spectacular temple of Ramses II before venturing out again to Airport Bay, where we saw Black (Yellow-billed) Kite, African Pied Wagtail and Savi's Warbler. We spent a second night in Abu Simbel.

Day 11 Another long drive, during which a Desert Wheatear was seen from the coach, took us north-east to Aswan. Next we enjoyed a second boat-trip on the River Nile at Aswan, seeing Temminck's Stint and Marsh Sandpiper, before continuing the drive north along the Nile Valley all the way to Luxor. A Montagu's Harrier was spotted from the coach during this part of the day's journey. We spent the night in a hotel on Crocodile Island, Luxor.

Day 12 All morning was spent on foot in the grounds of the hotel on Crocodile Island. One of our target species, Nile Valley Sunbird, was seen straight away while another, the elusive Greater Painted-snipe, was prioritised yet dodged us all day. Further species seen during the morning and at lunchtime were Lesser Spotted Eagle, Pallid Swift, Red-rumped Swallow and Red Avadavat. The group split after lunch: those choosing to visit the Karnak temple were rewarded with views of European Honey-

buzzard, Short-toed Snake-eagle, Levant Sparrowhawk, Common (Steppe) Buzzard and Lanner Falcon, while those selecting to stay on Crocodile Island were rewarded with views of Great Spotted Cuckoo, Eurasian Wryneck, Clamorous Reed Warbler, Nile Valley Sunbird and Indian Silverbill. The whole group searched the island again in the late afternoon, when Montagu's Harrier, Little Crake, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Clamorous Reed Warbler and Nile Valley Sunbird were recorded. A second night was spent on Crocodile Island.

Day 13 An early start was required to catch an internal flight to Cairo, where we boarded a coach and set off to the fish-ponds at Abassa. Here we recorded Marsh Sandpiper, Clamorous Reed Warbler, Common Myna and Red Avadavat as well as a major target species: the very secretive Greater Painted-snipe. After lunch in Cairo we visited Zamalek Island on the River Nile, where we saw Eurasian Spoonbill and Rose-ringed and Alexandrine Parakeets. We spent the night back at our first hotel in El Giza.

Day 14 As on the first morning of the tour, the hotel grounds produced Indian Silverbill. Some of the group left early to catch their international flights while the others had time to pay a visit to the nearby pyramids and sphinx before heading to Cairo International Airport to catch their flights home.

Throughout the tour the group experienced very good quality hotels and food, while Abdy, Mena, Watter and various drivers took great care of us everywhere we went. Birdfinders will be repeating the tour in September 2019.

Peter Lansdown