

# Egypt

21.4. – 1.5.2010

## Temples and Birds

by Rupert HAFNER



Tour members:

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After reading the trip reports from Egypt we decided that we should try to do a trip by our own to Egypt. But besides watching birds it was also a big wish from all of us to get a taste of the ancient culture. All in all it was a great trip and it was much easier to drive by ourselves than we expected. So altogether we drove 3.200 km by ourselves, having seen some of the famous temples/pyramids or tombs and have been lucky to see some of the big bird specialities of the Westpaleartic. The only bad thing was the ash cloud that arrived exactly at the day we wanted to take off from Austria, so we lost 5 days and had to cut down our stay in Egypt. On the other hand it was a big surprise that we had to go by convoy only from Aswan to Abu Simbel (and back). To all other parts (especially Marsa Alam – Edfu) could we drive without any problem.



As on many other trips before our main source of information on Egypt was Gosney's "Finding Birds in Egypt" (1993!! still works). For latest information we consulted many trip reports (e.g. Bonser 2006, Richard & Erica Klim 2006, Streese-Browa 2007 and Rami Mizrachi 11.-21.9.2009 with very good Google earth map). Further we had a daily look at the new web site [WWW.BIRDINGINEGYT.COM](http://WWW.BIRDINGINEGYT.COM). Additionally; a big help was the book "Pharaoh's Birds – A guide to ancient and present-day birds in Egypt" by John Miles (1998).



Crowned Sandgrouse near Marsa Alam

Costs have been in total about 1.200,-- Euro per person (flight, rental car, accommodation, food and entrance fee)

## Accommodation:

Cairo/Airport	Hotel NOVOTEL	150,-- € for 2 incl.breakfast
Quesir	Hotel Sea Princess	7,-- € for 2 ( 50E£/2 hotel very basic)
near Berenice	Lahami bay beach res.	35,-- € tentperson incl. 3 meals
Aswan	Nuba Nile	34,-- € for 3 incl. breakfast(250E£/3)
Abu Simbel	Club of Applicatores	48,-- € for 3 (350 E£/3)
Luxor	El Fayrouz	22,-- € for 2 incl. breakfast (160E£/2) <a href="http://www.elfayrouz.com">www.elfayrouz.com</a>
Ain Sukhna	Stella di Mare ****	128,-- € for 2 ind. 3 meals (very good value!!) <a href="http://www.stelladimare.com/">http://www.stelladimare.com/</a>
Cairo	Dahab	12,-- € for 2 (85E£ /2) <a href="http://WWW.DAHABHOSTEL.com">WWW.DAHABHOSTEL.com</a>

## Car:

We drove with two KIA Cerato (automatic!).

Km 3.200: Cairo Airport - Abbasa - Suez – Ismailiya – Rea Sea road to Lahami – Marsa Alam – Edfu – Aswan – Abu Simbel – Aswan – Luxor – Safaga – Red Sea road to Ain Sukhna – Abbasa – Cairo Airport → for 3.200 km we spent about 56,-- € or 414 E£ for 220 litre gasoline each car.

We used print outs of Google Maps (<http://maps.google.com/> ) with Arabic names (very useful if you want to ask locals about the direction!!) and Google Earth maps (especially for the area of Abu Simbel).

Like this Google Map:



Osprey at mangroves/ Lahami Bay Beach Resort

## Day 1 21.4.2010

Originally we wanted to go 5 days earlier but the ash cloud arrived exactly the day we wanted to take off. After some days of hope it looked good for our adventure and we left the still very crowded airport in Austria at 16:00 and arrived Cairo at approximately 19:00. We got our visa without any problems and found out that our agency for the rental car was at another terminal. So we took a bus to this terminal and after a very long time we finally got the cars and found out that the Hotel Novotel was just outside the airport area. Meanwhile it was already about 22:00 at night. But still it was enough time for the first Stella beer at the bar ...

## Day 2 22.4.2010

We started our breakfast at 5:00 in the morning and tried our best to get out of Cairo. After a little confusion we found the main road to Ismailia and after about 50 kilometres the road north to Bilbais. And YES we were on the road again in Egypt. Leaving Cairo worked much better than we expected. And just before Bilbais we crossed the big canal and drove to Abbasa. But what a mess! There was heavy road work in progress and it was hard to find the way down to the ponds. But once we parked the car and walked around we forgot all the traffic and road work that was going on just few metres away. So we stayed watching in this little heaven for egrets, from 8:15 – 10:30.



At the beginning there was not much water in the ponds and it took us some time to find the first Painted Snipes ♂♀ and later again one ♂. They were flying by and landing in the big canal that flowed through the area (see picture above). But we could not manage to find Senegal Coucal ☹. Even the locals tried to help us finding the Coucals. But without luck. In this short time there was a lot to see/watch and it was very good for any kind of egrets, White-throated and Pied Kingfishers, Blue-Cheeked Bee-Eaters. But we had to move on because this day we wanted to go the biggest part of our trip! So we went to Ismailia, Suez and Ain Sukhna where we noticed 1 Short-Toed Eagle, about 50 Black kites and 20+ buzzard's circling in the air. The roads were in a very good condition and so we could go all the way down to Quesir via Hurghada on this day where we stayed in the middle of the town in the very basic, but extremely cheap hotel Sea Princess (it was too late to look around for a better hotel). [→ sunset at about 18:10 / light to see until about 18:45]

## Day 3 23.4.2010

At the next morning we started with a great Turkish coffee in a café just over the road from our hotel and moved on further south in direction to Marsa Alam. On the way down a Pallid Harrier ♂ crossed the road. When we reached Marsa Alam we went directly to the police to ask when the convoy will leave from Marsa Alam to Edfu at the next day. But what a surprise when they told us that we can go by ourselves if we go between 6:00 and 18:00. That were really good news!!!



Now we went further south and checked all the mangroves on the way but no special guest was there. But I have to say that all the way on the Red Sea there was a heavy wind coming from the sea and watching with the scope was not very easy. At the little town of Hamata we had great views of Sooty and White-eyed gulls, two Hoopoes. They came to a little place with rubbish from the kitchen behind a little café next to the main road. Near the end of the day we reached the Lahami Resort and checked also the mangroves there. Here we found less wind and good views of several Ospreys and different waders like Little Stint and Greenshank, Spotted and Common Redshank, Wood and Common Sandpiper. Very unusual was a Kingfisher on the rocky beach and in the mangroves. Just before dinner we could watch a group of 15 Collared Pratincole near the hotel. They took off when a Sooty Falcon tried to get his own dinner. We spent a great night in the tent.

## Day 4 24.4.2010

The day started with a Great Crested Tern at the beach next to the breakfast area. What a start for a day. After breakfast at about 7:00 am we left Lahami and drove north to Marsa Alam where just before the town we had three Crowned Sandgrouse ♂♂♀ just next to the road. The formalities at the check post took just a few minutes and then we could go on to Edfu and further where we visited the temple of Kom Ombo ( 🏛 entrance fee 30 E£/4€).



From Edfu to Aswan there was a lot of traffic and it took us a while to reach Aswan. The great shock came in the hotel in Aswan when they told us that it is not allowed to go to Abu Simbel by private car. So we were quite confused what we should do if they would not allow us to go by our own to Abu Simbel. We decided to ask at the tourist police. Just near the tourist police we asked in a travel agency and they arranged the permit for us ( 🚗 each car 60 E£/8€). We left the little office very happy. But the meeting point changed and was now at the Unfinished Obelisk at 3:30 am. We decided to get up at 2:00 am to have enough time to find the meeting point in the morning. So a very short night with nearly no sleep was waiting for us ....

## Day 5 25.4.2010

In the morning it was much easier than we expected because there was a bus with the same tour and we could follow it from our hotel to the meeting point at the Unfinished Obelisk. With the help of the bus driver we reached the meeting point easily and had a lot of time until 4:00 am until all cars started at the same time in full speed to Abu Simbel. A strange convoy! All cars went as fast as they could to Abu Simbel. It took a little bit more than three hours easy driving through the desert to reach the big parking area in front of the temple of Abu Simbel. The bus driver showed us a new very nice hotel where we stayed for one night. After a mini break we went to the legendary “airport bay”. One of the first birds we saw just on the other side of the bay was a Yellow Billed Stork. Just shortly after, Gerd found 3 Pink Backed Pelicans on one of the sand banks nearby and 6 Egyptian Goose were flying by and some others were sitting on the sand bank. But we could not manage to find African pied wagtail. We asked the fishermen to take us out with the boat but they refused and explained to us with arms and legs that they will get problems with the police! We wondered how others managed to take a boat. So we left the place and returned to the hotel for a short break on the beautiful roof of the hotel. With nice coffee we watched from the roof another Yellow Billed Stork flying over the hotel. One more Yellow Billed Stork together with 2 Black storks were circling just over the little park in the centre of the town. The afternoon we spent alone in the great Abu Simbel Temple ( 🏛 entrance fee 90 E£/12€). This was also a good place for watching birds like White-crowned Wheatear and numerous Olivaceous Warblers. During the sound & light show ( 🏛 entrance fee 75 E£/10€) we did not see or hear any nightjars.



## Day 6 26.4.2010

This morning we wanted to have a second chance for African pied wagtail. But when we left the hotel at 5:00 am we heard just on the other side of the road the calls of the Senegal Stone Curlew. Suddenly we were fully awoken! As this was also a new species for all of us we started to find the birds. It took us not very long to locate 6 of them down by the water. It's always nice if you start a day with a new species! We decided to return to the hotel for breakfast and went again to the temples to have them in perfect morning light before the big crowd was arriving from Aswan ( 🏛 entrance fee 90 E£/12€). The amazing temples in the morning light were very special for all of us and we could enjoy the beauty for a

Centre of Abu Simbel



while. Soon the big crowd came and we left for a coffee before the convoy returned at 9:00 am back to Aswan. As others had African Pied Wagtail in the little harbour we also wanted to see them. But some officials didn't allow us to come closer to this area. So we missed the African Pied Wagtail at Abu Simbel ☹️. It was a good drive and after returning to Aswan we went to see the famous Philae temple (🎫 entrance fee 50 E£/7€). On the way to the temple (🚣 boat per person 10 E£/1€) we saw the only two ducks of the trip: 2 Ferruginous ducks ( see also Sandgrouse 📖 Vol 32(2)/2010 "A new breeding species for Egypt .."). This is a nice and relaxing place and perfect for a short day break. We left Aswan at 2:30 pm and reached our hotel Fayrouz in the west side of Luxor just after dawn. We had dinner and some beers in the beautiful garden of the hotel. We were very happy that everything went very well so far ... 😊

## Day 7 27.4.2010

From the window of the hotel we could watch Nile Valley Sunbird on the top of a huge tree in the garden of the hotel before we went for breakfast. We spent the morning on the west side by visiting the Valley of the Kings (🎫 entrance fee 80E£/11€☹️ **No cameras are allowed any more!**☹️), Temple of Hatshepsut (🎫 entrance fee 30E£/4€), Rameseum (🎫 entrance fee 30E£/4€) and Medinet Habu (🎫 entrance fee 30E£/4€). We hired a little boat (🚣 boat for 6 persons 120E£/16€) that brought us directly to the Temple of Karnak (🎫 entrance fee 65E£/9€) and from there we went directly with the same boat to the Crocodile Island (Mövenpick hotel). It was a nice ride on the Nile but we arrived late at the island. The target bird for us was Red Avadavat. First without luck. But we showed a painting in the guide book to one of the locals and he explained us that the birds will come after sunset. So we were waiting for the sunset at a place he showed us and we could not believe when just a few moments later the birds arrived! Something like magic. We also watched Little Bittern ♂, Night and Squacco Heron, Blue-cheeked and Little Green Bee-eater and singing Clamorous Reed Warbler on the island. Very late we went back with a taxi to Luxor and crossed the Nile to our hotel which was near the ferry pier.



## Day 8 28.4.2010

On this day we tried to go as far north as we could. Finally we managed to go as far north as Ain Sukhna without any problems (about 650 km). We made a short break at the St. Paul's monastery and hoped to watch some raptors. But a Sparrowhawk ♀ was the only raptor we saw. At the end of the day we ended up in the great hotel "Stella di Mare" with an incredible buffet for dinner.

## Day 9 29.4.2010

Very early in the morning (4:15 am) we started again to Abbasa by taking the highway to Cairo and took again the road north to Bilbais and further on to Abbasa. This time we knew already where to go and so we reached Abbasa in good time (arrived at about 7:15 am). First we took the wrong "foot"-bridge (it was one bridge before) and by luck we saw an unexpected Striated heron flying into a tree. Just a short time later we saw one walking along a small canal. Again we tried to watch/hear Senegal Coucal as our target bird today. But again without luck ☹️. Like last time, we had nice help from the locals. But all the searching was fruitless and this time we found only one Painted snipe again in the big canal. A big surprise were 4 Senegal Thick-knee very near on the edge of a pond. After midday we returned to the airport to return our hired cars and waited for our hotel pickup. It took only 40



minutes (!! ) from the airport with heavy traffic to the hotel right in the centre of Cairo. What was left of the day we spent at the hotel Dahab and with a perfect meal at a restaurant nearby.

## Day 10 30.4.2010

The hotel offered tours (☑ mini bus with driver for one day for 6 persons 1140E£/155€) to the pyramids and to the oasis Fayum. We switched Fayum to Natrun without any problems. So we went very early in the morning at 5:40 am to Wadi el Natrun. But on the whole Cairo-Alexandria road was a lot of road work in progress and it was hard for the driver to find the way to the lake(s). He asked locals many times and suddenly we reached one of the lakes. We didn't know which of the described lakes we reached but after finding the shore line we managed to watch another target bird: Kitzlitz's Plover (♂♀+2juv & ♂♀+1juv). What a morning! But we could watch them only through our telescopes. The next stops were the famous Pyramids of Giza ( ₤ entrance fee 60E£/8€ + museum with boat 50E£/7€ ) and the Pyramids of Sakkara ( ₤ entrance fee 60E£/8€). At Sakkara we hoped to find the Pharaoh's Eagle Owl but the whole building was under restoration and heavy work on site. We asked again the locals and they told us that the birds left because of this disturbance ☹. We all were overwhelmed by impressions and so we decided to return to the nice hotel Dahab which was located on the roof of a building. Spending the rest of the day relaxing on the roof and watching Pallid Swifts flying around in good numbers.



Searching for the Kitzlitz's Plover at Wadi Natrun

## Day 11 1.5.2010

We spent the morning in the famous Egyptian Museum in Cairo. The Museum was only just a few walking minutes away from our hotel. After these great viewings of works of ancient art, it took us only 25 minutes from our hotel to the airport. We flew back to Austria at 4:00 pm with a lot of unforgettable days and impressions in our luggage ...



Klaus, Gerd, Rupert, Josef, Assunta, Ingrid



Pied Kingfisher at the temple of Karnak/Luxor



Clamorous reed warbler at Abbasa

		common (esp. Abbasa ..)	Cairo - Abbasa	Abbasa - Suez - Quseir	Quesir - Marsa Alam	Marsa Alam - Hamata - Wadi Lahami	Wadi Lahami (evening)	Wadi Lahami (morning)	Wadi Lahami - Marsa Alam	Marsa Alam - Edftu - Kom Ombo - Aswan	Abu Simbel	Abu Simbel	Aswan / Philae	Luxor and Crocodile Island	Luxor - Ain Sukhna	Abbasa	Wadi Natrun	Total
		•	22.4.	22.4.	23.4.	23.4.	23.4.	24.4.	24.4.	24.4.	25.4.	26.4.	26.4.	27.4.	28.4.	29.4.	30.4.	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	•	2															2
Pink-backed Pelican	<i>Pelecanus rufescens</i>	•									8							8
Little Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>	•												1		1		2
(Black-crowned) Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	•												✓		1		1
Green-backed Heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>	•														5		5
Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>	✓	•													•		0
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	•											•		•		0
Western Reef Heron	<i>Egretta gularis</i>	•			4	10	1											15
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓																0
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	•			1	1					3							5
Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	•				2								1				3
Yellow-billed Stork	<i>Mycteria ibis</i>	•									3							3
Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	•									2							2
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	•	1	1										1				3
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	•	2											6		45		53
Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	•				2												2
(Greater) Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	•									3							3



