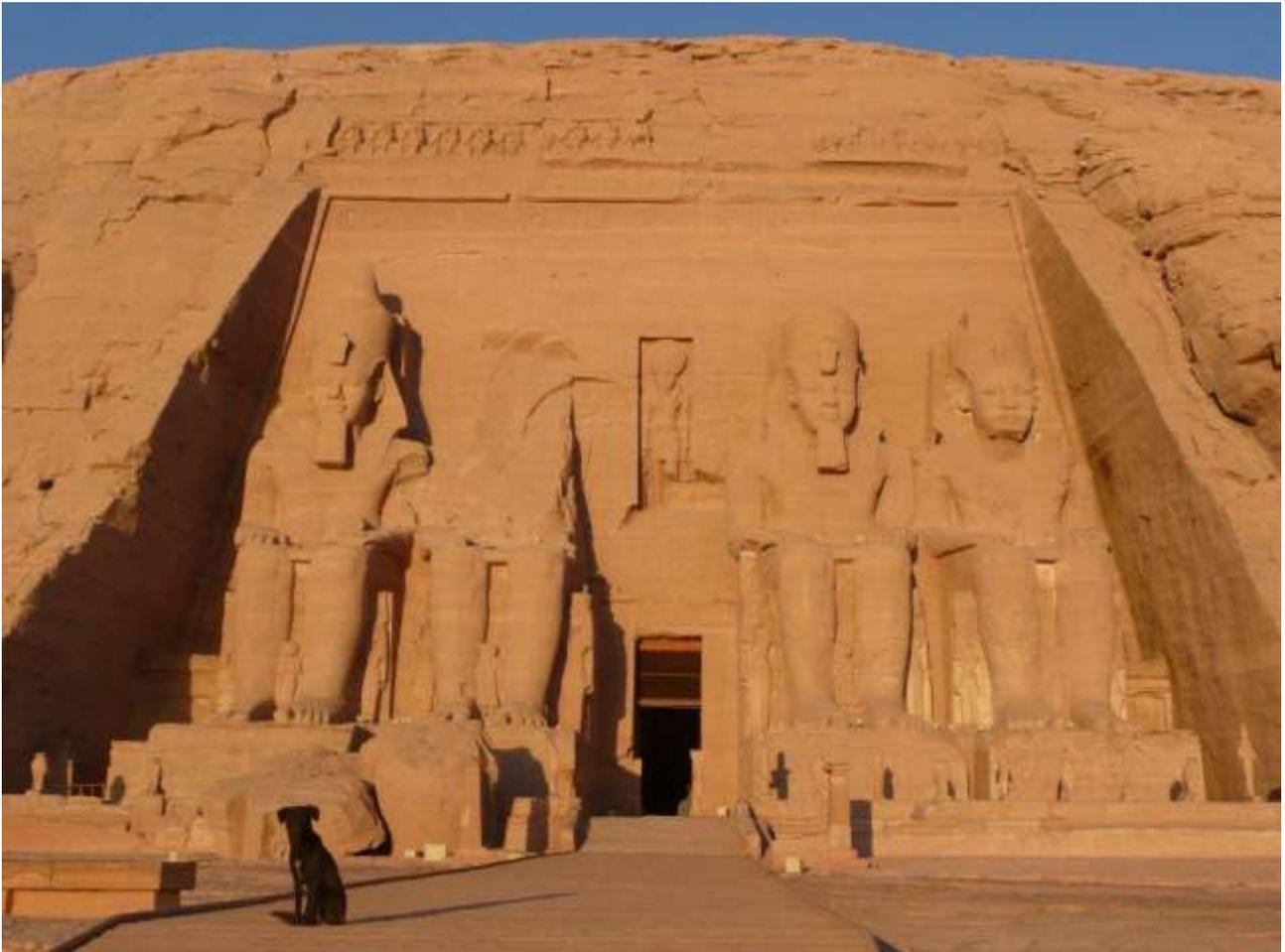


**ORNITHOLIDAYS TOUR TO EGYPT**  
*Birds & History*

**09 – 20 November 2012**



**Leader: Mike Witherick**

## ORNITHOLIDAYS TOUR TO EGYPT

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### A Personal Diary

#### **Friday, 09 November**

The party assembled in Heathrow's splendid Terminal 5 for a late afternoon flight to Cairo. Our Boeing 777 was full: mainly it seemed because of large numbers of Egyptians returning home after a festive holiday (Islamic New Year) in the UK. Our flight touched down just before midnight. Happily, immigration and baggage recovery did not take too long, and soon we met up with Abdulla, our courier for the tour. It was good to see him again – it was sobering to think that we had last met seven years ago.

#### **Saturday, 10 November**

Due to the lateness (or should it be, earliness) of the hour, there was little traffic on the roads into Cairo and we made good progress to our splendid hotel, located on a large island in the middle of the Nile in the centre of this the largest city in Africa. Soon we were checked in and our luggage delivered to our rooms, followed by what should have been a light snack. Such was our tiredness that few had much of an appetite to do anything more than toy with it. The need and the wish to sleep were paramount.

We gathered at 7.30 am in the restaurant for a most welcome buffet breakfast. There was much choice – perhaps too much. An hour later, we boarded our minibus, driven by Khaled, and met our cultural guide for the tour, Mohammed. Today's itinerary was very much about Egypt's amazing cultural history. It started on the east bank of the Nile at the famous Step Pyramid at Sakkara – the earliest known pyramid. We were all impressed by this awesome piece of civil engineering dating from nearly 5,000 years ago. How did they manage to construct this, given the primitive technology of the time? And why all this human endeavour just to bury a king and provide for his afterlife?

In the same area, we visited the tomb of a 'middle-class' person, the walls etched with amazing portrayals of wildlife on the land, in the air and in the waters of the Nile. Bird species were clearly recognisable from Egyptian Goose to Egyptian Vulture, from Short-eared Owl to Glossy Ibis. In some parts of the tomb, the original colourings of these wall decorations (frescos) were quite well preserved. We rounded off our visit to this area with a little 'pyramid experience' which involved descending down a low-ceilinged ramp into a burial chamber in the heart of the small and somewhat eroded pyramid. Here the tomb decorations were indented into the stone rather than in relief.

We then drove back into the centre of Cairo for lunch, but on the way made a short stop at a papyrus shop where we watched a demonstration of how parchment was made from papyrus. Lunch was taken in a delightful garden restaurant. In the event, we did justice to the three-course meal. The starter course with its freshly-baked bread and mix of so-called salad dishes was particularly interesting. The spit-roasted chicken that followed was tender and full of flavour. The large orange that rounded off the meal was something of a challenge in terms of trying to eat it in a seemly manner. Eileen set the pace. Taking a break from our orange grappling, we were able to appreciate the distinctive deep red bodies of the local, non-migratory Egyptian Swallows – when will they be 'split' from Barn Swallow, I wonder?

After lunch, we drove to Giza and spent the remaining daylight at the world-famous pyramids – three immense pyramids built for three successive pharaohs. Having admired these structures, we then spent some time marvelling at Cheops's Solar Boat which was discovered, virtually intact, in the 1950s. It is now housed in a specially built museum, located just above where the boat was found. From there, we descended a short distance to look at the Sphinx at fairly close hand just as the site was being closed for the day.

We reached the hotel around 5.30 pm which gave us a couple of hours of R & R before meeting up for a good buffet evening meal. We were impressed how much our fellow diners were able to pile on their plates and how quickly the 'mountains' disappeared. We did the checklist at the table; plans for tomorrow were outlined and we then hastened to our rooms with the thought of a 6 am breakfast very much in our minds.

It should be reported that we did manage to do some bird watching during the day. Early on, a quick visit to the Tower Garden produced our first sightings of Common Bulbul, Laughing Dove and Ringed-necked Parakeet. We had hoped to find Alexandrine Parakeet there – a recent addition to the Egyptian bird list, but we were out of luck. A Sardinian Warbler was spotted by Jill. Later, driving along one of the canals leading to and from the Nile, we saw many Cattle and Little Egrets and a few Squacco Herons. Pied Kingfishers perched on poles and wires; some of the party glimpsed a White-breasted Kingfisher. At the Step Pyramid, there were plenty of Hooded Crows and ‘dodgy doves’ and a Desert Lark showed briefly. A distant kite was assumed to be Yellow-billed Kite, but we needed closer and better views of the bird to be sure that it was not a Black Kite. On the way back into the city, we stopped overlooking a small oasis where we enjoyed good views of a pair of Little Green Bee-eaters and a Eurasian Hoopoe.

### **Sunday, 11 November**

We had an especially early breakfast at 6 am, and in terms of the wide range of dishes normally on offer we were only deprived of scrambled egg. We left the hotel at 6.45 am and our progress to Lake Quarun was a speedy one, save for a stretch when Khaled, in order to avoid a closure on the motorway, improvised a way round the pinch-point by literally driving under the raised section of motorway along a sort of dirt track. Once back on the motorway, it did not seem to take us long to cross the stretch of desert separating the green of the Nile Valley from the green of the watered area around Lake Qarun. The lake lies in a tectonic depression (part of the African Rift Valley system) and in fact now lies below sea level. The cultivated areas short of the valley shore gave us the first sighting of Spur-winged Lapwing. We also gained much better views than yesterday of White-breasted Kingfishers. Two slightly flooded fields allowed us to compare Little and Temminck’s Stints; also present were Wood Sandpiper and Common and Spotted Redshanks.

At the lake shore, we found more waders. Common Greenshank and Marsh Sandpiper were observed literally side-by-side – how thoughtful of the birds! We also watched Black-winged Stilts, Ruff, Green Sandpiper, Common Ringed and Kentish Plovers. Graceful Prinias gave fleeting views. We struggled a little with some immature pipits, but in the end were happy that they were Water Pipits. Barbara spotted an ‘odd one out’ in amongst the Egyptian Swallows skimming the water surface. This turned out to be a Common Sand Martin! Out in the lake a few Grey Herons roosted on a reef of rocks. Slender-billed Gulls were flying close to the rather choppy water in search of food. A small flock of Black-crowned Night-Herons flew over.

We then drove to an extensive network of fishponds. We had hoped to find ponds that had recently been drained. We were not in luck as all of them were full of water, but we did see plenty of Little Egrets and Squacco Herons. We decided to turn round and to spend the remainder of the morning birdwatching back at the earlier lake shore location. In the event, we were rewarded by the sighting of some male Egyptian Wagtails, as well as other ‘yellow’ wagtails. A marsh tern perched obligingly on a post so that we could check out its details and see why this bird, in non-breeding plumage, was a Whiskered and not Black or White-winged. Common Moorhen was seen for the first time.

It being midday, our thoughts turned to lunch (breakfast had been hours ago) and we drove to the Helnan Auberge beautifully located on the lake shore. This hotel started life as a hunting lodge built in 1937 for the benefit of King Farouk. Today we lunched in style in a beautiful, lake-view dining room. We were the only guests, but this did not deter us from enjoying an excellent three-course meal. The main dish was grilled fish (Boo) from the lake – we were served with one large one each! Afterwards, we were treated to a private tour of the late King’s private apartment. From the bedroom, there was a wonderful view out across the lake and to the distant desert beyond the far shore. On the lawns immediately in front, we saw no less than four Eurasian Hoopoe keeping company with a number of Spur-winged Lapwing.

We then made our way speedily back to Cairo, as the focus of the afternoon was to be cultural rather than ornithological. On the last leg of the drive, Khaled displayed his consummate driving skills as he wove the minibus through the congested and crawling traffic. We reached the Egyptian Museum just after 3 pm and met up with Mohammed who, during the next two hours, gave us a very informative tour round this amazing collection of artefacts from the country’s rich prehistoric heritage. I was most struck how uncrowded the museum was compared with my visit seven years ago. Indeed, we had the small side gallery containing the most famous of Tutankhamen’s gold relics to ourselves! Although foreign visitors may have been thin on the

ground, it was heartening to see Egyptian students being made aware of their country's mind-blowing heritage.

We left the museum as it closed at 5.30 pm. Ten minutes later, we were back at the hotel with some time for relaxing and perhaps some packing in advance of tomorrow's very early departure. We reconvened at 7.30 pm for another very acceptable buffet evening meal. This was followed by the checklist and confirmation of the arrangements for tomorrow's transit to Abu Simbel.

### **Monday, 12 November**

We left the hotel at 5.45 am and made good speed along the almost deserted motorway leading out to Cairo Airport. We checked in at a splendid new terminal building for our flight to Abu Simbel. The check-in was speedy and we had plenty of time to consume our boxed breakfasts in reasonable comfort, before boarding the 8 am flight. We made a brief stop at Aswan to both drop and collect passengers. Both legs of the journey took us over some magnificent stretches of desert. It was interesting to see the now dry and defunct complex drainage network cut at a time when this part of the world experienced a pluvial climate. The ex-geographers Barbara and Margaret were in their element.

As soon as we entered the Abu Simbel terminal building we were reunited with our baggage – what speedy service! We were met by our ground agent's local representative and by not one, but two minibus drivers – apparently over the next few days, we will need a relief driver! It was only a short drive to our beautifully located hotel overlooking an arm of Lake Nasser, and we were soon shown to our comfortable rooms with a view. With something like 45 minutes to 'kill' before our early lunch at midday, we did some birding in the hotel grounds. A flowering mimosa bush was host to a number of very actively feeding warblers – perhaps feeding up after a long migration leg. Olivaceous Warblers predominated, but there were also Common Chiffchaff and Lesser Whitethroat. A Rock Martin kept swooping over the swimming pool.

Lunch turned out to be a substantial four-course affair. It would not be overstating the situation to say that we were overwhelmed! At 1 pm we boarded the minibus which took us down to the shore where we clambered aboard a covered boat which was to take us on a three and a half hour cruise along a stretch of the western shore of Lake Nasser with its wonderful backdrop of rocky pyramidal hills separated by sandy hollows. No sooner had we cast off and we were enjoying good views of a pair of African Wagtails – what a smart species! Highlights of the cruise included a large flock of White Pelicans keeping company with an amazing number of Great Cormorants. The White Pelicans were clearly enjoying a migration stop-down as they were being joined by more fellow migrants that literally tumbled out of the sky. A large number of immature Great Flamingos were busily feeding in some shallows; nearby there was a small party of Eurasian Spoonbills. We saw our first Egyptian Geese; other ducks included Eurasian Teal, Northern Shoveler and Common Pochard. Grey Herons seemed to be everywhere; so too both Black and Yellow-billed Kites. We saw Gull-billed Terns for the first time and a female Western Marsh Harrier.

We made a landing on a small island and were rewarded by a number of good sightings, notably of Desert and Isabelline Wheatears, Graceful Prinias, Willow Warblers and Chiffchaffs. There were waders to be seen but the only new species for the tour was Little Ringed Plover. A Red-throated Pipit nervously took off before everyone had a chance to see it on the ground.

Once back at Abu Simbel, we drove into town and found a recent (2010) addition to the Egyptian bird list – a handsome African Mourning Dove. Happily, this meant a new addition to my Western Palaearctic list! At the hotel, we were allowed a 10-minute break in which to freshen up before attending the Son et Lumiere show involving the two relocated temples – the Great Temple of Abu Simbel and the Temple of Hathor. The show lasted 40 minutes and was well worth the watching. On the walk back to the car park, Maggie spotted a sizeable scorpion! Unperturbed, we carried on back to the hotel for dinner – another overwhelming meal – and this was followed by log call.

### **Tuesday, 13 November**

We left the hotel at 5.30 am and made all speed down to the temples to watch the sunrise. Apart from two other tourists, it was marvellous to have this renowned archaeological site to ourselves. As the Sun peaked over the horizon, its rays penetrated the central hallway of Ramses' temple. The scale of this temple with its gigantic statues was awesome; so too the fact that it was raised and rebuilt at a higher level to escape the

rising waters of the newly-created Lake Nasser. The immense task was completed in four years! We marvelled at the pristine quality of the carvings both in this temple and the one dedicated to Nefertiti. We returned to the hotel two hours later for a most welcome breakfast.

Afterwards, and with packing completed, we gathered in the garden for some bird watching. Attention focused initially on the mimosa tree that yesterday had held good numbers of Olivaceous Warblers. Today, there were none – they had been replaced by Common Chiffchaffs. But our best observation was of an Isabelline Shrike which posed well for us and we were able to watch it grab a breakfast in the form of a hapless Chiffchaff. At 9.30 am we loaded up the minibus and drove the short distance to the mustering point for the guarded transit to Aswan. We were impressed by the number of tourists who had come down here to visit the temples, having left Aswan at 4 am, and who were now returning to that city after a three-hour visit. As we waited for the 10 am start, we watched huge skeins of Cormorants moving up the lake.

The 280 km drive to Aswan took us through some impressive desert landscapes – pyramidal peaks and buttes separated by stretches of sand. After three hours of driving, we reached the outskirts of Aswan. Here we met with the manager of the local protected areas who took us into a complex of partially disused fishponds. These have become home to possibly two pairs of Three-banded Plovers – another recent addition to the Egyptian bird list. Whilst Hosny and I tried to locate the species, the rest of the party enjoyed their first sightings of Senegal Thick-knee. They also saw an immature Purple Heron and a Clamorous Reed Warbler before we eventually located a single Three-banded Plover in a partially dried out fishpond. Happily, we were all able to enjoy scope views of this delightful wader. As a further bonus, a ring-tailed Hen Harrier flew close by.

From there, we crossed the old Aswan Dam to the east bank of the Nile and found our base for the next four nights – the MS *Sonesta Moon Goddess*. Given the lateness of the time, we went straight to the dining room and enjoyed a splendid buffet lunch. If this is going to be the taste of things to come during the next three days, then let it happen! After the meal, we scarcely had time to find our rooms before we were off again – this time for a two and a half river cruise in another covered boat. We had only motored a few hundred yards when we came to a mudbank which was host to all manner of aquatic birds. White-winged Terns were most numerous, but amongst them there were Gull-billed and Whiskered Terns. New species for the tour included Glossy Ibis, Northern Pintail, Garganey and Bar-tailed Godwit. We then crossed to the other side of the river and followed the west bank upstream. Here we had good views of Striated and Purple Herons, Black-crowned Night-Herons, Purple Swamphen (adults and offspring), Common Kingfisher, Western Marsh Harriers and more Senegal Thick-knees. To round off this excellent cruise, we were treated to a wonderful sunset – camera shutters were working overtime. We arrived back at the *Moon Goddess* just in time for a cuppa and cake on the Upper Deck.

Dinner was preceded by 30 minutes of entertainment in the bar – this took the form of Nubian dancing. The music was loud but the meal that followed was an altogether more tranquil affair – four courses with waiter service. For the first time in the tour, we were able to have a glass of wine – what a relief! Afterwards we found a quiet corner in the reception area where we completed the log call.

### **Wednesday, 14 November**

We left the boat at 7.30 am having started the day with a good buffet breakfast. The Temple of Philae, a Greco-Roman construction, was our first stop. Mohammed explained that was originally located on an island in the Nile and that the island and temple became almost completely submerged following the construction of the Aswan dam at the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the 1970s, the temple was dismantled and relocated on a higher island. Visiting it, therefore, required a short boat trip, during which we saw three Black Storks perched on a granitic rock outcrop. We also passed through a flock of Ferruginous Ducks settled on the water. For the first time this tour, we became aware of tourist numbers, but this did not detract from our appreciation and understanding of this temple dedicated to Isis that took 200 years to build. It was particularly interesting to learn that the Greeks continued to perpetuate the Ancient Egyptian beliefs, if only as a relatively easy way of controlling the people. The Romans followed suit. During the visit, an Osprey was seen briefly.

On returning to the east bank, we drove across the Aswan Dam and then headed north to the Aswan High Dam, which was completed in 1971 and largely with the help of Soviet capital, technology and labour. This

is roughly twice the height of the Aswan Dam and has been responsible for the creation of Lake Nasser which now fills some 500 km of the upper Nile valley.

We returned to the *Moon Goddess* and at 11.30 am set off downstream. Within a matter of minutes, we were passing the mud banks that had been host to so many birds yesterday. Today, there was a good variety of birds, from terns to gulls, ducks to waders, but we were unable to spot any new species. We spent a little time sorting out the best way to distinguish White-winged from Whiskered Terns when they are not in their breeding plumages. We continued to bird watch from the Upper Deck both before and after another highly acceptable buffet lunch. The only 'new' species seen was Mallard.

At 2.30 pm, we moored at Kom Ombo, adjacent to another Greco-roman temple. This one was probably never completed, but it was unusual in that it was dedicated to two gods – Horus and Sobek (the crocodile god). Prior to the completion of the dams, the temple was regularly flooded and gradually it became buried beneath silt and then blown sand. The intricate carvings were amazing and here and there were reminders that they had once been painted in most attractive colours. Adjacent to the temple, we visited a recently opened museum which contains a collection of mummified crocodiles (some of them quite huge) which were recently discovered in a sealed room beneath part of the temple.

We returned to the boat in time for tea served on the Upper Deck. For a while, we did some bird watching and then Abdulla insisted on continuing with his campaign to enlighten us about the Egyptian language and calligraphy. Tonight's main event on board was the Cocktail Party. Given the instruction associated with the event, namely the need for 'elegant attire', we all retired to our rooms in good time to ensure that we met with this requirement. The party transpired as a fairly low-key affair. It was followed by dinner, log call, some chat and then to bed.

#### **Thursday, 15 November**

We enjoyed the luxury of a slightly later breakfast and left the *Moon Goddess* at 8 am for a two-hour visit to the Temple of Horus, the falcon god. We were transported from the quayside to the Temple in three horse-drawn carriages. Mohammed gave us a very enlightening tour around this the second largest temple in Egypt which was built in a little over 150 years, starting around 280 BC. It is also one of the most complete and best preserved of the temples because of its location well away from the river (even so it did not completely escape flooding) and because it became almost completely buried by and preserved in sand. Here and there we could appreciate the fact that all the rock carvings were originally coloured. The quality of the decorative work on the masonry was truly impressive.

We set sail a little after 10 am and spent the next seven hours continuing our cruise down the Nile. We did do some bird watching whenever we came close to one of the banks or passed by some particularly shallow water. Certainly, there were great numbers of birds to be seen, but only three new species were added to the tour list – Eurasian Wigeon, Little Grebe and Eurasian Coot. Nonetheless, there was much to occupy our time. At times, the extreme narrowness of the green belt on either side of the river came as a surprise to most of all. At times, the desert fringe was only a matter of metres from the river bank. A visit to the bridge proved most interesting. We learnt that all the Nile captains driving these huge floating hotels come from a handful of families. The simplicity of the instrumentation was also a surprise – no depth gauge, no GPS, just three handles, one for each of the three engines!

Lunch today was an excellent barbeque meal served on the Upper Deck. Shortly afterwards, we passed through the locks at Esna to drop down some nine metres to reach the level of water in the lowest stretch of the Nile. Local traders on the lock sides tried to drum up some trade in a somewhat unusual and hair-raising manner. Sometime was also spent seeking out costumes for tonight's 'galabeya'. After tea, Mohammed talked interestingly about Egypt's recent history. It was sad to hear of his disappointment about the recent revolution – i.e. that it had brought about little of the much-needed change.

We met in the bar for a pre-dinner drink and for photos to be taken of us in our 'galabeya' gear. Tonight's evening meal was another buffet one and suited us well. Afterwards we called the log in the reception area and then hastened off to bed.

## **Friday, 16 November**

We went ashore at 7.15 am fortified by yet another excellent buffet breakfast. We drove a little way down the east bank of the river and then crossed onto Crocodile Island (recently renamed King's Island so as not to put off the tourists). The island has changed much since I was last here. The small hotel has developed into a large complex of chalets, and many of the farmers who tilled the fertile silts have sold up and moved on. Even so, led by local guide Abdul, we walked across many small fields still under cultivation. It was here that we eventually gained reasonable views of Red-throated Pipits and Red Avadavats. Zitting Cisticolas seemed to be everywhere; so too Laughing Doves. A splendid Black-winged Kite perched obligingly on top of a nearby tree. We spent some time watching a small reed-fringed creek, as a Painted Snipe had been seen here two days ago. We were out of luck, but found considerable compensation in a Red-spotted Bluethroat – the first of three that we were to see during the course of the morning. Several Black Kites flew sufficiently close that we could see the dark tip to their bills; Western Marsh Harriers were seen overflying the reed beds. A small flock of Pallid Swifts flew over just as Barbara keeled over on a patch of mud.

Having reached the southern end of the island, we returned to the hotel complex on the east side of the island. Eventually, we came across a species we were hoping to see, namely Nile Valley Sunbird. Sadly, all four of the birds we encountered were in non-breeding plumage. Flushed with this success, we thought we might try our luck again at the Painted Snipe location. Alas, our run of luck was short lived. By now the weather had become distinctly hot so we returned to the hotel reception area and chilled out for a while.

We returned to the *Moon Goddess* for a good buffet lunch and afterwards drove north to Karnak and the Temple of Amun. This is the biggest temple complex in Egypt. It was started in circa 1500 BC. Altogether it was a truly remarkable set of archaeological remains, but perhaps most impressive were the 134 giant columns of the Great Hypostyle Hall. Like many of the other temples, this one suffered from flooding and was eventually completely buried under sand. It was 'rediscovered' and excavated in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

Having been overawed by this temple, we drove the short distance to Luxor Temple. This much smaller temple was linked to its much larger neighbour by a three km long avenue flanked on both sides by large sphinxes. Again, Mohammed focused our attention on particularly interesting 'strips' of wall carvings, each one narrating an important event in the history of the gods and early kings. We rounded off our afternoon excursion with a visit to a bookshop. The selection and prices of the books in stock were good, but there was some disappointment with the offering of post cards. However, this deficiency was soon rectified by a visit to one of the booths back at the spot where the *Moon Goddess* was berthed.

Dinner this evening was preceded by 30 minutes of entertainment – first, by a belly dancer and then by a whirling dervish. The latter was quite remarkable, the former much less so! After dinner, we did the log call, settled our cabin accounts and then disappeared to our cabins to pack and prepare for tomorrow's early rising.

## **Saturday, 17 November**

Cases were outside our cabin doors by 6.30 am and 30 minutes later we were saying farewell to MS *Solesta Moon Goddess* and its friendly crew. We crossed the Nile by the new bridge and then drove north along the west bank to the Valley of the Kings. This is possibly THE tourist honeypot of Egypt. Even at this early hour, there were many tourists of all manner of nationalities. The rocky desert scenery was spectacular. A transparent three-dimensional model in the entrance hall showed the positions and galleries of all known tombs – currently, the number stands at 62.

During our time in the valley we visited three tombs all constructed at different times during the Ramses Dynasty. The first impressed us with its size, the other two by the freshness of their coloured wall decorations. We actually found a new species for the tour – Blue Rock Thrush. Perched close by on the same rocky outcrop was a wheatear which just too distant for us to identify – was it a Mourning or a Hooded Wheatear? Abdulla thought that the habitat favoured the latter identification, as Hooded Wheatear prefer high rocky areas.

From the Valley of the Kings we drove to the neighbouring Valleys of the Queens, which was no less spectacular in terms of scenery, but was almost bereft of tourists. As we were about to enter the valley, a

wheatear was spotted. We left the minibus and approached closer to the bird, which turned out to be a Mourning Wheatear. In the vicinity of the gated entrance to the valley we came across a small flock of Trumpeter Finches. We entered two tombs. Again, as with all of the 300 or so here and those in the Valley of the Kings, these were built in the time of the New Kingdom between 1570 and 1090 BC. The tombs here are smaller, and in fact the two we entered had contained the bodies of princes (princes were buried with their mothers). They may have been smaller, but their state of preservation was even better than that of the kings' tombs. We could not believe the brilliance of the colours and how intact the wall and ceiling decorations were.

From the Valley of the Queens we drove to the short distance to the large temple at Hapu. This does not seem to be on the tourist trail and yet it is one of the most complete. It is here that one can best appreciate how the walls, columns and ceilings of temples were decorated in bright colours. Finally, we stopped briefly to admire the recently re-erected colossi at Memnon. From there we drove to the shores of the river where Mohammed left us to take the ferry across to Luxor and there to catch his train for a day's leave with his family. From there we drove back up to the bridge, crossed the river and returned to Crocodile Island for lunch and a spell of R and R. Before going to the poolside restaurant, Margaret was able to report the loss of a credit card and to check, much to her relief, that no one had raided her bank account!

As we left the restaurant, feeling more than replete, we passed a tree that seemed to be attracting quite a number of Nile Valley Sunbird. Amongst them we spotted a number of males in breeding plumage. The tree was also being used by Little Green Bee-eaters as a launch pad for their insect catching forays. Back in the cool of the reception hall, most if not all of us succumbed to a little shut-eye. This ended at 3.45 pm when Abdulla said that we should be heading for the airport. This we duly did and enjoyed a really speedy check-in for our 18.20 flight to Cairo. The flight was very much on time both in terms of departure and arrival. In Cairo the roads were relatively quiet because our arrival coincided with the start of a big football match, between a Tunisian and an Egyptian team – the final of the African League Cup. As we drove through the downtown area, the pavements were packed with people sitting on chairs and watching bar TVs. We also passed by the renowned Tahrir Square, where the recent revolution was acted out.

At the hotel, the demand for an evening meal was variable – some opted for one course, whilst others went for all three. During the meal, loud cheers from the lounge area announced each goal scored by the Egyptian team and then its victory at full time – the home ground of this team being located close to the hotel. Crowds on the street and the hooting of vehicle horns were heard to celebrate the victory well into the night.

### **Sunday, 18 November**

Although we were promised breakfast at 6 am, but it was well after that before we could really start the meal. Nonetheless, this only delayed our departure for the desert and the Gulf of Suez by a few minutes. Once clear of Cairo, we took the splendid motorway to Soukhna recently built by the Egyptian army. Eventually, we turned off and took the so-called 'cement road' that took us down the side of the rift valley and through some splendid rocky scenery. Our first stop was occasioned when Barbara spotted a few small birds by the roadside. These turned out to be Bar-tailed Larks. In the same vicinity, we found the both Mourning and White-crowned Wheatears. We were to see more of both species as we made our way down towards the Gulf of Suez. We came across our first Stonechats – sadly they were not Siberian! Our route through Wadi Hagul took us through a rather different type of desert. At one stop, we heard and some of us glimpsed in flight a Greater Hoopoe Lark. In the same locality, we came across a lone Greater Short-toed Lark. A little further on, we had good views of Desert Lark. By now it was becoming distinctly hot, so we decided to make all speed for Suez where we were greeted by large numbers of House Crows. Indeed, this immigrant species from India has been so successful here that they have largely displaced the native Hooded Crow.

We had a leisurely lunch at the Red Sea Hotel overlooking the southern entrance to the Suez Canal. During the meal, we watched a convoy of large ships (most of them carrying containers) come down the Canal and into the Gulf of Suez. The tide was up so there was little foreshore exposed – we had hoped to see gulls and terns. On the opposite shore, however, we did manage to distinguish Caspian Terns, Armenian and Heuglin's Gulls. Grilled tuna was the main course of our lunch and was much appreciated – it had been a long time since breakfast.

After our late lunch, the final stop of the day was on a beach to the south of Suez. Unfortunately, the tide was still high and we had not been there very long when we were ushered off by some soldiers – they were suspicious that we were involved in some smuggling operation! However, we did obtain quite good views, first of a passing Sandwich Tern and then a Caspian Tern. There were lots of gulls out on the water, but they were mainly Slender-billed Gulls mixed with a small number of Black-headed Gulls.

We left there just before 4 pm and returned to Cairo via Soukhna. Unfortunately, our return to the capital coincided with the rush hour. This was an experience in itself and it was to last until we finally made it to our hotel at 6.30 pm. Since not many hours had passed since our lunch, some opted out of another meal. The remainder managed to negotiate a much lighter meal than the proposed set menu. Instead we enjoyed cheese omelettes and chips, followed by ice cream. Afterwards we did a two-day log call and then retired to our rooms.

### **Monday, 19 November**

We breakfasted at 6.30 am and left the hotel 45 minutes later. We made a brief stop at the nearby Tower Gardens in the hope of seeing Alexandrine Parakeet. We were out of luck and had to content ourselves with a number of Ringed-necked Parakeets. In rather murky atmospheric conditions, we then drove north out of Cairo in the direction of the Nile delta, an altogether greener part of Egypt. We divided our time between two locations. The first involved a mix of ponds and intensive cultivations. We had hoped to find Senegal Coucal here, but the nearest we could manage was Senegal Thick-knee. We did, however, add two new species to the tour list – Little Bittern and Reed Warbler – and saw all three kingfishers (Common, Pied and White-breasted). Other noteworthy sightings included Bluethroat, Striated Heron and Stonechat. The second location was an active set of fishponds. Sadly for us, the ponds were being prepared for the next harvest with much clearance of vegetation and digging out of ditches going on. In fact, we were unable to explore the whole complex because the main track had been deliberately blocked. At one small overgrown pond, three Painted Snipe flew off, followed a little later by several Common Snipe.

It was around midday when we started the return drive to Cairo. On reaching the outskirts, we stopped at the airport and enjoyed an excellent buffet lunch at the Novotel. The fresh mango juice was a beverage to die for! From the airport we drove to the Citadel (created in the 12<sup>th</sup> century by Saladin) and were joined by Mohammed for some more ‘culture’. First of all, we enjoyed the panoramic view of Cairo. Despite the pollution pall, we could just about make out the pyramids on the other side of the city. Mohammed then told us about the hugely impressive Mohammed Ali mosque built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We then went inside. Whilst there, we sat on the carpet in an attentive ring and Mohammed told us about religion and society in modern Egypt – most enlightening.

The final stop in the tour’s itinerary was at the vast Bazaar. Whilst Mohammed led the ladies on a spell of retail therapy, Abdulla and I put the world to rights over a cup of Turkish coffee at a pavement bar. On the way back to the hotel, we met one of Abdulla’s assistants who had checked us in for tomorrow’s flight. Back at the hotel, we said goodbye to Mohammed and we thanked him for all that he had done during the tour to open our eyes to Egypt’s culture and heritage.

A little before a last evening meal together, we were invited to Eileen and Maggie’s room for a most welcome G & T. The meal itself was very much of our choosing and enjoyed. We did the bird list at the table and hurried to our rooms to pack – bearing in mind, tomorrow’s early start.

### **Tuesday, 20 November**

We left the hotel at 5.45 am and, given the relative emptiness of the roads at this hour, we made it to the airport in record time. It was here that we had to say goodbye to Abdulla and driver Khaled. Once we had completed the bag drop and passed through passport control, we had plenty of time in which to relax over a coffee and look round the duty-free shops.

Our British Airways flight left Cairo a little ahead of schedule and reached the air space around Heathrow nearly an hour early. As a result, we were ‘stacked’ for 10 minutes. Once on the ground, we made our way to the baggage reclaim where, sadly, the party disbanded.

## Acknowledgements

Special thanks should go to Abdulla (our charming and efficient courier), to Mohammed (our highly informative cultural guide), to Khaled (our amazingly skilful driver in Cairo) and to the lovely crew of the *MS Solesta Moon Goddess*. One wonders what the Egyptian perception was of this old man and his five lady travelling companions! Certainly, they would not have been aware of the good company that those ladies provided, and what a pleasure it was to be leading such a group. So, many thanks to you all! My hope is that we might meet up again on another Ornitholiday. Many thanks to Barbara for the photos.

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December 2012

## Itinerary and Weather

Friday, 9 November	London Heathrow > Cairo
Saturday, 10 November	am Tower Gardens > Saqqara Step Pyramid, pm Giza Sunny 23°C
Sunday, 11 November	am Lake Quarun, pm Cairo – Egyptian Museum Some cloud; NW breeze 22°C
Monday, 12 November	am Cairo > Aswan > Abu Simbel, pm Lake Nasser cruise Sunny 26°C
Tuesday, 13 November	am Abu Simbel temples > Aswan (fishponds) > boarded boat, pm boat cruise Sunny with some cloud 26°C
Wednesday, 14 November	am Philae Temple > Aswan dams, pm > Kom Ombo Temple > Edfu Sunny 30°C
Thursday, 15 November	am Edfu Temple, pm > Esna > Luxor Sunny 28°C
Friday, 16 November	am Crocodile (King's) Island, pm Karnak Temple > Luxor Temple Sunny 31°C
Saturday, 17 November	am Valley of Kings > Valley of Queens > Hapu Temple, pm Crocodile Island > Luxor > Cairo Sunny 30°C
Sunday, 18 November	Soukhna motorway > Cement Road > Wadi Hagul > Suez > Soukhna Sunny; some high cloud 28°C
Monday, 19 November	am Abbassa (delta), pm Citadel & Mohammed Ali Mosque > Bazaar Sunny but slightly foggy 26°C
Tuesday, 20 November	Cairo > London Heathrow

## CHECKLIST OF BIRDS SEEN DURING TOUR

No of days recorded	Locations	Abundance Scale
1 2h means seen on 1 day and heard on 2 other days. Max 11 days.	C = Cairo & Lake Qarun A = Abu Simbel & Lake Nasser N = Nile cruise and temple sites S = Nile Delta and Suez	maximum for any one day 1 = 1 – 4 2 = 5 – 9 3 = 10 – 100 4 = 100 – 1000 5 = > 1000

SPECIES	No of days recorded	Locations	Abundance Scale	Scientific Name
Egyptian Goose	4	A N	4	<i>Alopochen aegyptiacus</i>
Mallard	1	N	1	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Northern Pintail	2	N	1	<i>Anas acuta</i>
Northern Shoveler	4	A N	3	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Eurasian Wigeon	1	N	2	<i>Anas penelope</i>
Eurasian Teal	1	A	3	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Garganey	2	N	1	<i>Anas querquedula</i>
Common Pochard	3	A N	2	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
Ferruginous Pochard	1	N	3	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>
Little Grebe	1	N	2	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
White Pelican	1	A	4	<i>Pelecanus onocrotalus</i>
Great Cormorant	9	C A N S	5	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Little Bittern	1	S	1	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>
Black-crowned Night-Heron	4	C N S	1	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>
Striated Heron	4	A N S	1	<i>Butorides striatus</i>
Cattle Egret	9	C A N S	4	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
Squacco Heron	7	C A N	3	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>
Little Egret	10	C A N S	4	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Great Egret	1	N	1	<i>Ardea alba</i>
Grey Heron	9	C A N S	4	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Purple Heron	4	N	3	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>
White Stork	1	A	1	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>
Black Stork	1	N	1	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>
Glossy Ibis	3	N	3	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>
Eurasian Spoonbill	2	A N	1	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
Greater Flamingo	3	A S	4	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>
Osprey	1	N	1	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
Yellow-billed Kite	3	C A N	2	<i>Milvus aegyptius</i>
Black Kite	5	A N S	3	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
Western Marsh Harrier	5	A N S	2	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Hen Harrier	1	N	1	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
Black-winged Kite	1	N	1	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>
Common Kestrel	6	C A N	1	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Common Moorhen	7	C N S	3	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Eurasian Coot	2	N	4	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Purple Swamphen	5	N	1	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>
Black-winged Stilt	4	C A N	3	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
Senegal Thick-knee	2	N S	1	<i>Burhinus senegalensis</i>
Little Ringed Plover	3	A N	1	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>
Common Ringed Plover	1	C	1	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
Kentish Plover	1	C	1	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
Three-banded Plover	1	N	1	<i>Charadrius tricollaris</i>
Spur-winged Lapwing	8	C A N S	3	<i>Vanellus spinosus</i>
Temminck's Stint	1	C	1	<i>Calidris temminckii</i>
Little Stint	4	C A N	3	<i>Calidris minuta</i>

Wood Sandpiper	2	C	N	1	<i>Tringa glareola</i>
Green Sandpiper	3	C		1	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
Common Sandpiper	3	C	N	1	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
Common Redshank	2	C	S	1	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
Spotted Redshank	1	C		1	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>
Common Greenshank	6	C	A N	1	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
Marsh Sandpiper	3	C	A N	1	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>
Bar-tailed Godwit	3		N	2	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>
Common Snipe	3	C	S	1	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Ruff	4	C	N	3	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>
Painted Snipe	1		S	1	<i>Rostratula benghalensis</i>
Black-headed Gull	6	C	A N S	4	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
Slender-billed Gull	3	C	A S	4	<i>Larus genei</i>
Armenian Gull	1		S	1	<i>Larus armenicus</i>
Heuglin's Gull	1		S	1	<i>Larus heuglini</i>
Sandwich Tern	1		S	1	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>
Gull-billed Tern	4		A N	3	<i>Sterna nilotica</i>
Caspian Tern	1		S	2	<i>Sterna caspia</i>
White-winged Tern	4		A N S	3	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>
Whiskered Tern	5	C	A N	3	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>
Rock Dove	10	C	A N S	3	<i>Columba livia</i>
Mourning Dove	1		A	1	<i>Streptopelia decipiens</i>
Laughing Dove	10	C	A N S	3	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>
Rose-ringed Parakeet	2	C		2	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>
Pallid Swift	1		N	1	<i>Apus pallidus</i>
Eurasian Hoopoe	4	C	A N	1	<i>Upupa epops</i>
Common Kingfisher	2		N S	1	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
White-throated Kingfisher	4	C	S	1	<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>
Pied Kingfisher	8	C	A N S	3	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>
European Bee-eater	1		A	1	<i>Merops apiaster</i>
Little Green Bee-eater	4	C	N	1	<i>Merops orientalis</i>
Crested Lark	3		A N	2	<i>Galerida cristata</i>
Greater Short-toed Lark	1		S	1	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>
Desert Lark	2	C	S	1	<i>Ammomanes deserti</i>
Bar-tailed Lark	1		S	1	<i>Ammomanes cincturus</i>
Greater Hoopoe Lark	1		S	1	<i>Alaemon alaudipes</i>
Common Sand Martin	1	C		1	<i>Riparia riparia</i>
Rock Martin	6		A N	3	<i>Ptyonoprogne fuligula</i>
Barn Swallow	9	C	A N S	3	<i>Hirundo rustica savignii</i>
Water Pipit	1	C		1	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>
Red-throated Pipit	2		A N	2	<i>Anthus cervinus</i>
White Wagtail	10	C	A N S	3	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
African Pied Wagtail	1		A	1	<i>Motacilla aguimp</i>
Yellow Wagtail	2	C	N	1	<i>Motacilla flava</i>
Egyptian Wagtail	2	C	N	1	<i>Motacilla pygmaea</i>
Bluethroat	2		N S	1	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>
Isabelline Wheatear	1		A	1	<i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>
Mourning Wheatear	2		N S	1	<i>Oenanthe lugens</i>
White-crowned Wheatear	1		S	1	<i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i>
Desert Wheatear	1		A	1	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>
Common Stonechat	2		S	1	<i>Saxicola torquatus</i>
Blue Rock Thrush	1		N	1	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>
Graceful Prinia	6	C	A N S	2	<i>Prinia gracilis</i>
Lesser Whitethroat	4		A N	2	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>
Sardinian Warbler	1	C		1	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>
Zitting Cisticola	2		N S	3	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>
Common Reed Warbler	1		S	1	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>

Clamorous Reed-Warbler	1	N	1	<i>Acrocephalus stentoreus</i>
Olivaceous Warbler	2	A	2	<i>Iduna pallida</i>
Willow Warbler	1	A	1	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>
Common Chiffchaff	5	A N S	3	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
Isabelline Shrike	1	A	1	<i>Lanius isabellinus</i>
Common Bulbul	6	C N S	2	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>
Nile Valley Sunbird	2	N	2	<i>Hedydipna metallica</i>
Hooded Crow	9	C N S	4	<i>Corvus cornix</i>
House Crow	1	S	3	<i>Corvus splendens</i>
Brown-necked Raven	5	A N S	2	<i>Corvus ruficollis</i>
House Sparrow	10	C A N S	4	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Trumpeter Finch	1	N	2	<i>Rhodopechys githaginea</i>
Red Avadavat	1	N	2	<i>Amandava amandava</i>

This list represents those birds and other animals seen by party members of this tour.

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**Senegal Thick-knee**



**Spice Stall**



**Ram-headed Sphinxes, Karnak**



**Relief Carving at Philae, Aswan**



**Cheops' funerary solar boat**

**Front cover: Temple at Abu Simbel**

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