

EGYPT NILE VALLEY, LUXOR TO ASWAN, AND ABU SIMBEL.

MAY 1ST – 8TH 2006

MIKE AND ELEANOR MARTIN

INTRODUCTION

This was a holiday which we had been trying to build into our work schedules since January, but had been too busy to manage. May is probably getting towards the limit of uncomfortable temperature at some of the historical sites, and I think we were probably a little late in the season for many of the migrants. Nonetheless I would be happy to recommend it as a good holiday experience all round. The time when the boat is berthed is pretty busy with arranged trips, and there is little opportunity to build in time to develop your own schedule, and this proved a bit exasperating with regard to catching up on some of the smaller birds...larger species were easy enough from the boat, which travels at a jogging rate of about 10 km per hour.

Our boat had 40 double cabins (The Ibis); there were 16 of us on the trip! Numbers perhaps low because of a terrorist bombing incident on the Red Sea, about 10 days earlier. Our view was that it is probably safest to be here in the aftermath of a terrorist incident, as security is at its highest. The presence of armed guards on shore outside the boat, occasionally on the boat, with fast police launches on the river at Luxor, and a convoy of armed protection on the coach trip to Abu Simbel never felt oppressive. The accommodation is described as 5 star; it isn't, but it was very comfortable and perfectly adequate for our needs. The food is magnificent, and provided in ridiculous quantities. Bar, cabin and restaurant staff are terrific, and really good fun; Egyptian folk seem to have a great sense of humour. Given choice of boats, I would recommend going for the smaller 80 passenger than larger 120; by and large the latter seemed to move faster, at least we were regularly overtaken by, but rarely overtook such craft. Since we moved more slowly, I think the opportunities for birding effectively were greater.

Stepping off the boat and at any of the tourist sites does expose you to a constant barrage of sales patter...very persistent though not aggressive. I found the easiest way of handling this is simply to blank folk and totally ignore them, though this is difficult to do if you are normally polite, and inclined to make eye contact, smile at or respond to people who speak to you!

ITINERARY

01/05/06 Arriving in Luxor late afternoon from Gatwick, the trip from airport to boat took about 30 minutes. First bird seen at the airport was a Palm Dove, a new species for me and an auspicious start. Cattle and Little Egret, swallows, House Sparrow and Hooded Crow were all numerous from the bus, and on arrival at the boat. Dusk was falling as we boarded, and no other new species were added, although as we set sail I could hear some unknown wader species (on return home I played the calls of Stonecurlew and Senegal Thick Knee and was able to state clearly that the bird I heard call several times after dark as we got ready to sail was the latter species), and various heron species at nest or roost sites.

02/05/06 Sailing over night upstream to the South, awoke at dawn at about 5.45am, and enjoyed birding from room and on deck until we passed through the lock at Esna at 09.00am. Herons of various species were clearly going to be a major feature of the trip. A single kestrel made me wonder if BOPs were going to feature less than I had expected. Spur winged plover promised well for waders, and Pied Kingfishers were proving ubiquitous. Passerines it was already obvious were going to be a challenge, as the boat moved from bank to bank, across river varying in width between a third of a mile and a full mile. Many birds were heard calling or singing, and some seemed pretty common, but getting to grips with them on the move was difficult...I regretted not having listened to tapes of some of the commoner birds before setting off, as some of the calls and songs are memorable. As it was it took me several days to identify some of the commoner birds. Clamorous Reed Warbler I did manage early on as I saw large warblers and was already familiar with Great Reed song...infact both species occurred, although the former was commoner.

Passing through the lock at Esna, we then had the whole of the rest of the day sailing South to Edfu, where we docked over night. New Herons for me included Green, Goliath and Squacco; several purple Gallinules were as bright as portrayed in the books; Whiskered and White-winged Black Terns proved common; Bee-eaters were difficult to separate, but both European and Blue Cheeked were sorted out, and a distant but definite White-breasted Kingfisher was a treat.

03/05/06 A short bus drive from our boat to the temple at Edfu produced no new birds, but the temple itself had several African Rock Martins, which were to prove a feature of most of the historical sites. These were fairly easily separated from Crag Martin, looking altogether less bulky. A single male Lesser Kestrel was the only one of the trip. Also, first view of Little Green Bee-eater, which performed nicely, hawking for insects from a fixed perch in a rather fly-catcher like manner.

Sailing on South at 11.00am (early morning visits to historical sites was to prove the norm, as a way of handling the heat), spent the rest of the daylight hours on deck, birding from one side of the deck to the other trying to take in as much as possible of the nearer bank. Infact the Captain was very obliging, tending to take us within 100 metres of the shore, and rarely staying in mid-stream. New birds of prey included several Black Kites, from now on seen regularly, and a female Montagu's Harrier. Waders were proving difficult, and several smaller sandpipers went unidentified, although Spur Winged Plover and Black Winged Stilt were seen regularly. All 3 bee-eaters appeared, and colonies of the 2 larger species were seen, along with many Pied Kingfisher nests. Larks were seen at several places, and although Crested was the only one identified during the trip, it may well have been the only one present.

04/05/06 We berthed during the night at Aswan, the furthest up stream of what may well have been 100 tourist boats. An early morning trip to the Temple of Philae produced the only 2 White Pelicans of the week, and at last managed to pick up Common Babbler near the High Dam, although suspect that I had been hearing them call all of the way up the river.

An afternoon boat trip around the islands at Aswan and through the first cataract was well worth while, as many of the birds proved amazingly tame. Stone Curlew and Nile Valley Sunbird were added to my life list.

05/05/06 A 04.00am start to a 3 hour trip across the desert to Abu Simbel. Desert trip worthwhile as an experience, but proved almost totally birdless; a single new species, Brown Necked Raven, was added on the edge of Abu Simbel as we left. Abu Simbel itself deserved longer than the 2 ½ hours we had there; at last I managed to get good views of Graceful Warbler, again confirming that I had been hearing them all the way up river, and the same with Olivaceous Warbler

We set sail back up stream at 15.00hrs, and I dozed and bird-watched on deck until dusk, adding Greenshank to the list, and calling it in towards the boat, also several flocks into double figures of Whiskered Tern. An evening atop off at Kom Ombo for the temple didn't add to the species list, although berthing alongside a lit up temple 3,000 years old is memorable.

06/05/06 Awoke as we approached the lock at Esna, and breakfasted on deck, thereafter spending most of the day watching the Nile go by. Two new species for the trip were a pair of Shoveler and a flock of Black-headed Gulls, the only ducks and gulls seen! We arrived at Luxor at 4.30pm, and were treated to an amazing display by Black Kites as they came within a few feet of the boat, and picked up bits and pieces from the river beneath us.

07/05/06 An early start for a trip to the Valley of the Queen and Valley of the Kings. At the former a Lanner Falcon performed very nicely, passing over at cliff top height, trying to put up Feral Pigeons immediately over the Temple. Although was disappointed not to have seen Trumpeter Finch here, this was more than made up for in the Valley of the Kings, where was able to watch several small parties, and ultimately a flock of about 40 birds. They were being fed and watered at one of the tombs (Rameses III) which was being worked on, and where the birds along with House sparrows kept flying down into the tomb entrance to where the workers were eating a meal. On return to Luxor, a Black-winged Kite was seen on telegraph wires, within the boundary of the city.

08/05/06 Another early morning rise, this time for a balloon flight over the Valley of the Kings, or very close to it. No new species added, but good views in particular of Crested Lark, which was feeding young near where we landed the balloon.

Trip from boat to airport provided a nice farewell, with views of both Black-winged Kite and Nile Valley Sunbird, only the second of the trip for each. A large reptile was seen as we drove past one of the drainage ditches on the edge of town, at least 4 feet in length...perhaps a Nile Monitor Lizard. Also the 4th butterfly of the trip (number of individuals not species!), all were white.

CONCLUSION

A most enjoyable holiday, and cruising certainly is a very relaxed way of letting the birds come to you. There is very little opportunity to go off and do your own thing, particularly if, as we did, you sign up for the various additional trips. Infact such trips

added significantly to the species list, and in any case it would take some preparation and organisation to take best advantage of any extra time to organise your own itinerary.

We saw a total of 57 species, of which 23 were lifers for me. Passerines and waders were a bit of a disappointment, but a total of 11 species of heron, several new to me, was great. I had expected more waders and terns, and suspect that early May is just a bit too late. Am sure we will return in a few years, but perhaps doing it as the winter trip we had originally intended.

SPECIES LIST

Number in brackets after the species name indicate the number of days the bird was seen.

WHITE PELICAN (1) an adult and a juvenile on Lake Nasser at Temple of Philae on Lake Nasser, 4th May.

LITTLE BITTERN (1) a single bird in reeds towards dusk, as we sailed toward Edfu on 2nd May

NIGHT HERON (3) a single in reeds at dusk on the 2nd, 4 at the Aswan Nature Reserve islands on the 4th, and 3 birds during the Esna to Luxor cruise on the 6th May.

GREEN HERON (5) excellent views of a bird seen at the riverside where we berthed at Edfu on 2nd, thereafter fairly regular, although probably under recorded as not the easiest to distinguish at a distance.

SQUACCO HERON (4) very common in some parts, with groups well into double figures, yet missing in other areas.

CATTLE EGRET (8) seen everywhere, from boat and on coach trips, largest flock was of about 30 on edge of Luxor as we headed for the plane on the 8th.

LITTLE EGRET (8) as for Cattle Egret, in some of the rice fields could be very numerous, though didn't attempt a maximum count.

GREY HERON (5) most in a day was 11, largely individuals, though 3 were seen together in flight approaching Luxor on 6th May.

PURPLE HERON (4) largely single bird days though 9 in total were seen on 5th May.

GOILATH HERON (2) a treat as this was not a species I had anticipate picking up. I learned subsequently that this has been a good season for them on the Nile. Birds I saw (could possibly have been same individual) on outward and homebound journeys, were easy to identify, although do look very similar to Purple Heron. On the second occasion, I saw a Grey Heron a few feet away for comparison. Both birds were standing very tall, with neck fully out-stretched.

WHITE STORK (1) a single bird in a field on West bank at Luxor on 7th.

SHOVELER (1) a pair from the boat on the 6th May were the only ducks on the trip.

BLACK WINGED KITE (2) identified late in the trip on 7th and 8th, both at Luxor, although one was almost definitely seen on telegraph wires during cruising phase on 3rd May.

BLACK KITE (5) slow to pick up, until first on the 3rd, close into boat South of Edfu, but thereafter regular, including great riverside views from berth at Luxor on 6th and 7th May.

MONTAGUS HARRIER (1) excellent views of a ringtail as she quartered fields staying alongside the boat for about 5 minutes, late afternoon of the 3rd May.

LESSER KESTREL (1) a single male was seen well and appeared to be nesting at Edfu Temple on 2nd May, although my guide book only lists as a passage bird in Egypt.

KESTREL (3) no more than 2 birds on any one day.

LANNER FALCON (1) single bird seen well above the temple at the Valley of the Queen on 7th May.

MOORHEN (7) everywhere and often in big numbers, several dozen in view at any one time.

PURPLE GALLINULE (5) never in big numbers, but very easy to spot from boat, most in a day 10, included bird carrying nesting material on 2nd May.

BLACK-WINGED STILT (2) although only recorded on 2 days, there were good numbers, 31 in total including a group of 13 together in one field.

STONE CURLEW (3) after the 2 at the nature reserve at Aswan on 4th, a group together at waters edge on 5th and a single on 6th May provided good opportunities for observing a new species for me.

SENEGAL THIN KNEE (2) Birds heard calling first and last night was tracked down on CD on return home, and were clearly of this species. The call is very distinctive...piping similar to Oystercatcher, and then slowing and deepening for last few notes.

SPUR-WINGED PLOVER (5) usually in pairs, including one bird on eggs or chicks, the most seen together on one bar was 8.

GREENSHANK (1) single bird heard calling from boat at dusk, and called in towards us.

COMMON SANDPIPER (4) not one bird seen, all by call.

BLACK-HEADED GULL (1) party of 12 birds, in varying plumage, but none in full breeding; only gulls of the trip.

WHISKERED TERN (4) many ones and twos seen on 2nd and 3rd, and then over 100 on 5th, including a flock of about 40, only a single after this on the 8th of May. Feeling of birds very much passing through.

WHITE-WINGED BLACK TERN (5) in the early part of the week were much more numerous than Whiskered, including a flock of 25 on 2nd, later in week less common, and last bird seen on 6th of May.

ROCK DOVE (8) seen daily in small numbers both around towns and in village fields. A remarkable flock of over 80 in a banana plantation, just South of Defu on 3rd of May.

TURTLE DOVE (1) one bird only seen on the trip, on 2nd of May.

PALM DOVE (8) first bird seen on the trip, and then very commonly thereafter, largest numbers around Awan.

CUCKOO (1) single bird for the trip on 2nd of May.

SWIFT (3) several seen on first full day, very few after, would not appear to be breeding as not seen at any of the human habitations.

PALLID SWIFT (1) seen only on first full day, when several seen feeding over the river.

WHITE-BREASTED KINGFISHER (1) single bird seen on the long trip South from Edfu.

PIED KINGFISHER (7) one of the commonest birds of the week, always seeming to be present as we sailed, frequently in groups of up to 4. Birds seen entering burrows at several points along the river. Their nests are easy to tell from Bee-eaters, as they have a lot of droppings.

LITTLE GREEN BEE-EATER (3) probably rather more common than my records indicate, as should be the commonest bee-eater, and many of those which were not determined to species may have been of this species.

BLUE-CHEEKED BEE-EATER (3) although only recorded on 3 days, there were many unidentified bee-eater sp, some at least of which are likely to be of this species. The flock of 40 on the 3rd were at a nest site.

EUROPEAN BEE-EATER (5) what should have been the rarest of the species was seen most often, perhaps because of size and colour making for easier identification. Birds at nest site on at least one occasion.

HOOPOE (4) typically seen in agricultural areas, most together were 2.

CRESTED LARK (4) this was the only species of lark identified, and perhaps the only one seen. Larks were noted at various places along the river where there was some open ground. Here I could pick up the calls and song. On West bank at Luxor, I watched birds carrying food.

SAND MARTIN (3) seen on 3 days at beginning of trip, but not on the return journey, so may have been passing through.

AFRICAN ROCK MARTIN (4) seen at historical monuments on each occasion, clearly a species that appreciates old temples. Never seen in large numbers, probably less than 10 at any one site.

SWALLOW (8) although seen daily numbers were very varied; many tens of birds early in the week, and rather fewer later, perhaps indicating late birds passing through. Both races were present, with savignii much the commoner.

HOUSE MARTIN (2) 3 seen together on the 3rd, thereafter 30+ around Abu Simbel on 5th of May.

COMMON BULBUL (4) didn't actually prove that common! Though I suspect that I was missing them all the way down the Nile, and never did connect with the call or song.

FAN-TAILED WARBLER (3) although only recorded on 2 days, I suspect that they were much more common, and that I may have forgotten to note some of them in passing. No birds were seen, although this is a bird I know well by song.

GRACEFUL WARBLER (3) when finally made contact at Abu Simbel, my suspicions that this was something I had been hearing all the way down the Nile were confirmed. It was probably one of the commonest birds of the trip!

CLAMOROUS REED WARBLER (3) this and the next species were probably under recorded. I recognised Clamorous quite quickly, as different from the Great with which I am familiar from elsewhere. Suspect that I omitted to note quite a few.

GREAT REED WARBLER (2) as above, probably under recorded.

OLIVACEOUS WARBLER (1) although one was seen very well alongside the Graceful Warbler at Abu Simbel, this was probably a relatively common bird on the trip, but because I am unfamiliar with the song it wasn't noted elsewhere.

NILE VALLEY SUNBIRD (2) a single stunning male was seen alongside a Little Green Bee-eater during the afternoon boat trip to the nature reserve at Aswan on 4th May, and another was seen in flight as we were picking up folk to catch the flight back to Luxor. We were told that the botanics both at Luxor and Aswan are particularly good places to see them.

HOODED CROW (8) ubiquitous!

BROWN-NECKED RAVEN (1) a bird I had anticipated seeing in the desert near Abu Simbel, of which I saw but a single individual on the edge of the town, as we were departing.

HOUSE SPARROW (8) common both in towns and in the countryside. Flocks of several tens of birds were seen from the boat towards evening on at least 2 occasions; on the morning of the 8th of May at Luxor, as we boarded a small boat to cross to the West bank at 05.30am, there was a roost which by the sound of it must have contained several hundred birds, in trees at the waterside.

TRUMPETER FINCH (1) after disappointment in the Valley of the Queen, a flock of about 40 birds was seen in the Valley of the Kings, mixing with House Sparrows, and benefiting from food and water left for them by workers at the tomb of Rameses the III. Very tame and confiding.

LUXOR-ASSWAM-LUXOR NILE CRUISE BIRD LIST AND NUMBERS

<u>SPECIES</u>	<u>1/5</u>	<u>2/5</u>	<u>3/5</u>	<u>4/5</u>	<u>5/5</u>	<u>6/5</u>	<u>7/5</u>	<u>8/5</u>
1. WHITE PELICAN				2				
2. LITTLE BITTERN		1						
3. NIGHT HERON		1		4		3		
4. GREEN HERON		2	1	5	8	5		
5. SQUACCO HERON		*	*		1	2		
6. CATTLE EGRET	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	(30)
7. LITTLE EGRET	1	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
8. GREY HERON		11	6	3	4	10		
9. PURPLE HERON		1		1	9	1		
10. GOLIATH HERON		1				1		
11. WHITE STORK							1	
12. SHOVELER						2		
13. BLACK-WINGED KITE							1	1
14. BLACK KITE			4		2	4	3	1
15. MONTAGU'S HARRIER			1					
16. LESSER KESTREL			1					
17. KESTREL		1		2			2	
18. LANNER FALCON							1	
19. MOORHEN		*	*	*	*	*	*	*
20. PURPLE GALLINULE		10	2	1	3	4		
21. BLACK-WINGED STILT			6			25(13)		
22. STONE CURLEW				2	(5)	1		
23. SENEGAL THICK KNEE	1						1	
24. SPUR-WINGED PLOVER		4	11	2		17(8)	2	
25. GREENSHANK					1			
26. COMMON SANDPIPER		2	1		1	1		
27. BLACK-HEADED GULL						(12)		
28. WHISKERED TERN		*	*		100(40)			1
29. WHITE-WINGED		(25)	*	*	*	1	*	

BLACK TERN									
30. ROCK DOVE			(80)						
31. TURTLE DOVE		1							
32. PALM DOVE	2	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	
33. CUCKOO		1							
34. SWIFT		*				1	2		
35. PALLID SWIFT		*							
36. WHITE BREASTED KINGFISHER		1							
37. PIED KINGFISHER		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	
38. LITTLE GREEN BEE-EATER			3	1			3		
		<u>1/5</u>	<u>2/5</u>	<u>3/5</u>	<u>4/5</u>	<u>5/5</u>	<u>6/5</u>	<u>7/5</u>	<u>8/5</u>
39. BLUE-CHEEKED BEE-EATER		1	(40)			1			
40. BEE-EATER		1	7	22		1		7	
41. HOOPOE		1		2		5	2		
42. CRESTED LARK		2	5			1		6	
43. SAND MARTIN		*	*	*					
44. AFRICAN ROCK MARTIN			*	*		2	2		
45. SWALLOW	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	
46. HOUSE MARTIN			3		(30)				
47. COMMON BULBUL				2		2	1	1	
48. FAN-TAILED WARBLER		3						3	
49. GRACEFUL WARBLER					3		2	3	
50. CLAMOROUS REED WARBLER		*			*	*			
51. GREAT REED WARBLER					*	*			
52. OLIVACEOUS WARBLER					1				
53. NILE VALLEY SUNBIRD				1				1	
54. HOODED CROW	*	*	*	*	*	(26)	*	*	
55. BROWN-NECKED RAVEN					1				
56. HOUSE SPARROW	*	(40)	*	*	*	*	*	*	
57. TRUMPETER FINCH							(40)		

KEY

- Seen but not counted
- () Maximum flock size

Mike Martin

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