Egypt: 11th – 18th May 2016
A bird trip report by Bob Swann

This was a trip organised by myself with Bill Bailey and Daniel Mauras. We had all been on trips to Egypt before so this was a targeted trip to try and see three species that had been discovered breeding in the country since our last visit in 2013. Bill and I booked flights with Easyjet from Gatwick to Hurghada, whilst Daniel used Air Egypt, via Cairo, from Paris. Having had a poor experience with Europcar on our previous trip I decided to use a local firm – Maneuver Car Hire (info@maneuver-rentacar.com) who proved to be very helpful, reliable and were located very close to the airport. We arranged most accommodation in advance and by contacting the hotels direct we usually managed to get much better deals than those shown on their websites. We were very grateful to Chris Bell, who provided a report of his May 2014 trip report and to Ernie Davis and Gordon Beck who provided details of what they had seen at Wadi Lahami in early May 2016. Key to the success of the trip was contacting Mohamed Habib. Mohamed is based in Hurghada and organised the first three days of birding. He also did most of the driving – which was a great relief to us! Mohamed can be contacted via mohydro35@hotmail.com or on his mobile +201001365142 or via his facebook page. He was an excellent guide and very knowledgeable of all things Egypt!

11th May. Arrived Hurghada at 1635 local time (BST + 1 hour). Got our visas (£20) from the small booths in the arrivals hall, prior to going through passport control. We eventually found a taxi – most folk appear to have pre booked onward transport- and were severely ripped off by the taxi driver (always haggle before you get in!). We were taken to Golden Rose Hotel, which I had pre-booked via Booking.com. It was fairly basic, but clean and good food. The light was already going by the time we settled in so we just birded from the balcony watching streams of White-eyed Gulls heading north, feeding Barn Swallows and Red-rumped Swallows and the local Laughing Doves and Hooded Crows coming in to roost.

12th May. Up for 0700 breakfast and met up with Daniel, to be informed he had left his binoculars behind in a taxi. At 0730 Mohamed arrived and we began packing our gear into his car. Daniel then got a call to say the taxi driver had been in touch and we waited till he came and reunited a very pleased Daniel with his very expensive binoculars. He was rewarded with a large tip!

We then started our long journey heading north up the Red Sea coast road to Ras Gharbh. Enroute a couple of Steppe Buzzards, Black Kite and a group of 16 migrating Great White Pelicans. At Ras Garbh turned west to cross the desert. Very birdless apart from occasional Brown-necked Ravens and a single Hoopoe Lark. We eventually arrived in the Nile Valley near Beni Mazar and started seeing lots of birds. We crossed the Nile over a new bridge at Beni Mazar and on the west side stopped at a roadside ‘café’ for some lunch. In the adjacent canal a single bush contained a large colony of Cattle Egret, with a few Little Egret. Along the canal – Moorhen, White-Breasted Kingfisher, Hoopoe, lots of House Sparrows, whilst Common Kestrel hunted over the adjacent fields.

We continued west till we hit the Western Desert road at Sandafa. We then started checking out the agricultural areas just south of the junction. Mohamed negotiated entrance into some farms. In the fields many Crested Larks and a few Spur-winged Plovers. In the bushes and scrub Southern Grey Shrikes, Common Bulbul, Little Green Bee-eater and Graceful Prinia. It was very hot and no sign of sandgrouse. A flock of c20 Common Swift migrated north. We sat for a while just scanning the sky looking for flying sandgrouse. Eventually I spotted one in the distance flying north close to the Western Desert road. We moved on to a small hill within one of the farms to get more of an all-round view. I then located another one flying north close to the main road. The all black underwing confirmed it was a Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse. We decided to relocate to the Western Desert Road, just south of the Beni Mazar junction. Here we had good close views of a pair of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse flying out west into the desert. Delighted by this success we drove south to El Minya. Being a Thursday night the town was very busy. We had a nice meal in a local restaurant before checking in to Hotel Cleopatra.

13th May. Up for 0600 breakfast in the rooftop restaurant. Nice views of a Senegal Thick-knee on an adjacent building and had a Spoonbill fly over. Then began return trip to Sandafa. As we re-crossed the Nile Valley good views of migrating European Bee-eaters, a group of local Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters and many Little Green Bee-eaters. Close views of a pair of Little Owl on roadside wires. Other birds included a few Black-shouldered Kites, a yellow-billed Black Kite and lots of the local savignii Barn Swallows. After a 90 minute drive we were back on the Western Desert road just south of the Beni Mazar junction. Started scanning the fields and soon picked up some flying Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse. Some were dropping down into an open area on east side of road. We walked towards this area and flushed a group of seven from a drinking area around 28°31’8.41”N; 30°35’41.12”E, getting great views of a pair that flew towards us. We later had another three singles fly by. A singing Rufous-tailed Bush Robin was nice. It quickly quietened down so we decided to move on as we had a long journey ahead of us.
We retraced our steps heading east to the Beni Mazar bridge, where as we crossed the Nile a Glossy Ibis flew over. It was then back across the desert road to Ras Garbh and north up the Red Sea coast road to Suez. At El Sakhna we had a group of c30 migrating White Storks and at Suez a Booted Eagle. Huge numbers of House Crows in the Suez area. Got through security for the Suez tunnel with only minimal delays, then it was south to Ras Sudr. Checked in to Hotel Ceceil and then out for a nice meal. The British FCO advises against all but essential travel to this part of Sinai. We found the resort to be busy with Egyptians many holidaying with young families. Everyone was very friendly and we felt perfectly safe.

14th May. After an early 0630 breakfast we drove 13km south to Island Beach Resort – which appeared to be closed. Just before the entrance we found a Mourning Wheatear. Mohamed did some fine negotiating with the security guards to let us drive through the resort to the shore. We then had a long walk out on a wooded walkway over the shallow lagoon to the end of a sand spit. Not many birds on the lagoon – a Grey Heron, a few Curlew and Grey Plover, 3 Lesser Black-backed Gulls, 3 Slender-billed Gulls and a Caspian Tern. Walked north on the lagoon side of the spit. Several pairs of Kentish Plovers, a Dunlin and then very good, close views of two pairs of Saunders’s Tern. These birds were doing a bit of display. Further out at the end of the lagoon was a group of 65 Saunders’s Tern, a White-cheeked Tern and six displaying Lesser Crested Tern. Cut across to the seaward side of the spit and on a point had 20 Greater Crested Tern and 12 Lesser Crested Tern. Having had great views of the terns we returned to the walkway and headed back to the car. On a sand bar south of the boardwalk was a large group of terns, comprising about 50 Greater Crested Tern (some copulating) and c80 Lesser Crested Tern.

We then began the long 7 hour drive back to Hurghada. Nice views of feeding groups of Bottle-nosed Dolphins north of El Sakhna. Only bird sighting of note was a male Hooded Wheatear at a filling station where we stopped from some grub at 29° 29’937”N; 32° 26’530E near El Sakhna. Got in to Hughada at 1730 and picked up the hire car without any delay from Maneuver Car Hire near the airport. Said goodbye to Mohamed and then began the long five hour drive down to Wadi Lahami. Had a short stop for some food at El Quesar, which although tasty was perhaps responsible for some dodgy stomachs the next day – especially poor Bill. We had originally booked in to the dive centre complex next to the mangroves, but this had temporarily closed due to lack of business, so we ended up at the pleasant Wadi Lahamy Azur Resort just north of the mangroves.

15th May. After all the travelling of the previous day had a bit of a lie in and a late breakfast. We were now on Marsal Alam time; BST+2hours. First we checked out the hotel grounds. Many migrants – on the lawns Red-
throated Pipit, Tree Pipit, a White Wagtail, Yellow Wagtail (mostly flava, but one thunbergii), Northern Wheatear and lots of Cattle Egret. In the bushes Masked Shrike, Spotted Flycatcher, a Garden Warbler and a Willow Warbler. Overhead masses of Barn Swallow, with a few House Martin, Sand Martin and a Common Swift. A pair of Osprey were constantly present, along with a Common Kestrel and perched in the desert just to the north of the resort we had an adult Lanner.

Then drove down to Wadi Lahami to the mangroves and managed to negotiate access. On the shore Western Reef Herons, Striated Herons, a Squacco Heron and a Common Sandpiper. Offshore White-eyed Gulls, Sooty Gulls and three Caspian Terns. In the mangroves lots of Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, another Masked Shrike, a Golden Oriole and a couple of European Bee-eaters. Only waders were two Curlew and four Redshank. We returned to the hotel for a bit of a siesta. At 1700 went back to Wadi Lahami. In the bushes round the chalets had two Lesser Whitethroat and a Marsh Warbler.

Walked down to the edge of the lagoon in the mangroves and waited till well after sunset to see if we could see a yellow bittern. We heard a distant call, but no other sign or sound of the birds. A Marsh Harrier hunted over the mangroves.

15th May. Up very early at 0430 to get back to the mangroves for first light. As sun rose lots of singing Collared Doves and one African Collared Dove with its distinctive cooo-coorrrrrr song. No sign though of the bitterns. In the driveway bushes on the way back two Common Whitethroat and another Garden Warbler.

After breakfast we decided to go up to the mangroves at Hamata. The tide did not drop off very much, so most of the reef remained covered in water. Many Western Reef Herons, a few Striated Herons, one Grey Heron and a Purple Heron. Heard another singing African Collared Dove. Migrants were scarce – a nice male Woodchat Shrike, a Turtle Dove and a Willow Warbler. It was very hot 43C+.

On the way back we stopped to look at the shore near the Hamata Marina. Lots of White-eyed Gulls, a few Sooty Gulls, an immature Caspian Gull. On the rocks 4 Ringed Plover and a pair of Kentish Plover. Around the town many Brown-necked Ravens.

Went back to the hotel for a late lunch and a siesta. At 1700 returned back to Wadi Lahami. Just around sunset (1930) we heard two singing Yellow Bitterns. One of these birds flew north to south across the entire length of the lagoon giving us reasonable views in the failing light. Everyone was delighted!!

16th May. Up for a final early visit to the mangroves. On arrival just before sunrise heard a Yellow Bittern singing. Eventually this bird flew low from east to west across the lagoon. We also had a Purple Heron fly in to the lagoon.

Returned for breakfast, packed and began the journey back north to Hurghada. A stop at Sham Salam resort revealed Golden Oriole and Woodchat Shrike. At Bralye Bay we had another Golden Oriole and a Rufous-tailed Bush Robin. Checked several vegetated wadis, all were birdless, bar one where we found a female Blackcap. At Port Gharib a Whiskered Tern was feeding over a large area of irrigated grassland. Final stop was at the Movenpick Hotel just north of El Quesar. In the roadside bushes lots of Garden Warblers, a Sedge Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher, Golden Oriole and Masked Shrike.

We continued north to Hurghada and checked in to the Palm Beach Resort just north of the town and got a very good all-inclusive deal.
17th May. After breakfast we made our way to the Hurghada sewage works on the west side of the middle ring road. We probably got there a little too late. As we arrived had nice close views of a perched Honey Buzzard and a group of 50 high overhead. A flock of 12 Spotted Sandgrouse flew low over the site giving good views. The old reedy pools were fairly quiet with only a Moorhen and a Squacco Heron. We then entered the new part of the sewage works where we had 2 Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters and a few European Bee-eaters. We walked towards the eastern edge of the complex. Many pools were dry. On those with water there were Whiskered Terns and a single immature White-winged Black Tern, also an immature Black Headed Gull. On the most eastern pools small flocks of Spotted Sandgrouse were coming into drink and we probably had about 75 in total, getting good views as they sat on the lagoon walls. Waders were fairly scarce, some breeding Spur-winged Plovers and a small group of Little Stint, with 4 Ruff. Overhead a few Steppe Buzzard, Marsh Harrier and a single White Stork. Mohamed arrived to see how we were getting on. Eventually it was getting very windy and with no further raptor movement we decided to head back to the hotel to sort thing out and have lunch.

Returned car to Maneuver and checked in for our 1710 Easyjet flight back to Gatwick. Strong winds whipping up sand delayed its arrival but eventually we were on our way after a very successful trip. There was a lot of travelling involved – we covered 2665km in six days and although we only saw 92 different species we did get all three key target species.

Bob Swann