

Egypt, December 2-9 – 2004

The Red Sea Coast (Hurghada to Bir Shalatayn) & The Nile Valley (Crocodile Island)

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Lappet-faced Vulture, Bir Shalatayn, 2004-12-04. Copyright: Måns Grundsten

Introduction

In early December prices on charter flights usually drops to almost ridiculously low levels to different popular tourist destinations. Among them Hurghada is off course interesting for birdwatchers wanting to come in contact with Egyptian birdlife. A week before departure we booked our tickets (1000 SEK/person). We had planned the trip months earlier, though. We hoped to cover the Red Sea Coast south to Bir Shalatayn. A few days before we went, we also decided to make a shorter trip to the Nile Valley to get some variety of birds for our trip. We had great help from Hans Bister, Stockholm while planning the trip.

Car Rental

Instead of getting in touch with Avis or Hertz from Sweden and sort out everything in advance and just pick up the car at the airport we hoped to solve this matters in Hurghada and thereby get a better prize. In Hurghada we found United Limousine Car Rental on Sheraton Road opposite McDonald's. We got a four-door Daewoo seven days including 2000 km (We drove 1981 km!) for 2300 LE plus 800 LE insurance which we recovered after returning the car. There are surely a lot of other car rental companies in Hurghada and we didn't check any other. So we're not sure if we got a good prize or not. But compared to Avis and Hertz I think this was cheaper. We had some hazzle when we returned the car but otherwise we were quite satisfied with everything. When it comes to driving Egypt was quite easy, the traffic is not so hard and roads are really good. Petrol cost between 1-1.40 LE /liter!! It's still not possible to travel from the Red Sea Coast to the Nile Valley by yourself. Both the roads from Marsa Alam and Al Quesir to the Nile are closed. At Safaga there is one convoy leaving at 7 am sharp. From Luxor to Safaga there is three convoys every day (we took the one which left Luxor at 6 pm), ask at the Tourist Police Office at Sharia al-Karnak close to Luxor Temple for exact times of departure.

Accommodation

- We stayed at El Kods Hotel (40 LE/double) in Safaga (2nd, 6th and 8th). It was ok, nothing unexpected.
- At Wadi Lahami we stayed at marvellous Red Sea Diving Safari Ecolodge. They have some high-standard tents at the shore, just adjacent to some nice mangroves. The price is 240 LE/person/night including three meals and free soft drinks and water. The food was really good, and the atmosphere on this camp was just great. We truly recommend birders go to this place instead of plain touristy resorts along the coast. We stayed here from 3rd until 5th. Mail: redseasaf@hotmail.com, www.redsea-divingsafari.com.
- At Luxor we stayed at Lonely Planet recommended Happy Land Hotel (60 LE/double).

Literature

Collins Bird Guide, Lars Svensson, Killian Mullarney et al. (1999)

Birds of Kenya and Northern Tanzania, Dale A Zimmerman, Donald A Turner et al. (1996)

Lonely Planet Guide Egypt (2002)

Lonely Planet Travel Atlas Egypt (1996)

And different travel reports from the internet (best search engine is www.eurobirding.com) including:

Hugues Dufourny, September 2003 (???)

Per Forsberg, January 2002 (Club300.se)

Kjetil Jensen, January 2001 (Club300.se)

Tomas Haraldsson (Club300.se)



Crested and Caspian Tern, White-eyed Gull, Wadi Lahami 2004-12-06. Copyright: Måns Grundsten

Itinerary at a glance

- 2.12: Hurghada
- 3.12: Mangrove S of Safaga
Cataract Resort
Shams Alam Resort
Wadi Gimal
Hamata Mangrove
Wadi Lahami
- 4.12: Wadi Lahami
Bir Shalatayn
Mangrove approx 40 km N of BS
Hamata Mangrove
- 5.12: Wadi Lahami
Kira' el Hiriwai
Hamata Mangrove
- 6.12: Hamata Mangrove
Wadi Gimal
Shams Alam Resort
Sherm Forest Resort
Ras Abu Soma Golf Course
- 7.12: Mudflats, S of Crocodile Island
Crocodile Island
Small Pond at CI entrance
- 8.12: Mudflats, S of CI
Crocodile Island
Semi-desert site E of Luxor
- 9.12: Hurghada harbour – Sea Garden Hotel Beach
El Gouna Resort

Site comments (in chronological order)

Mangrove S of Safaga (MSS)

A small piece of mangrove forest just south of Safaga. The road runs parallel to the mangroves, so it's easy to park the car and just scope the areas from the road.

Cataract Resort (CS)

Just south of the resort there was some undergoing construction with some small grassy spots that attracted a few sparrows, pipits and wheatears. We had our only Linnets, only Skylark and only White-crowned Black Wheatear of the trip here. At the entrance to the resort there were a few palm trees which we didn't search through.

Shams Alam Resort (SAR)

Well known resort for birdwatchers. We parked our car outside and went into the hotel area bought a few soft drinks and slowly walked around in the area. The birds inside the resort are very approachable and easy to photograph. At the entrance there is also some good palm trees and smaller bushes.



Little Green Bee-eater (ssp cleopatra), Crocodile Island 2004-12-07. Copyright:: Måns Grundsten

Wadi Gimal (WG)

A great area of scattered bushes and a few higher palm trees. During migration times I can imagine there can be huge amounts of resting passerines in this area. It's a large area located just some km south of Shams Alam Resort, and it took us almost two-three hours to search properly on the 6th. Best birds were off course the two African Collared Doves as well as the wheatears. We had five species on 6th including singles of Hooded, Pied and Isabelline. There is one pond at the southern parts of the area on the west side of the road and one small pond just south of a military post in the northern part of the area.

Hamata Mangrove (HM)

The largest mangrove area along the coast from Hurghada to Bir Shalatayn. There is a smaller track running north parallel to the shore from the southernmost point of the mangroves. At this point the main road runs quite close to shoreline. We found most birds at the southern parts of the mangrove. This area attracted a lot of shorebirds and gulls. The Goliath Heron were found further north. There was a great difference in bird activity according to low or high tide. Low tide seemed more interesting. During our stay low tide peaked during night-time, unfortunately. A few km north of the southernmost point of the mangroves there were some flat desert areas along the main area. Here we found several Desert and Hoopoe Larks.

Wadi Lahami (WL)

At the Ecolodge there is some good mangrove. This also turned out to be the best sea-watching place that we tried. Best light condition was off course at evening but the bird activity was highest at morning. A large flock of Crested Terns and White-eyed Gulls came in close to shore every morning.

Bir Shalatayn (BS)

The key-species Lappet-faced Vulture should be impossible to miss here. We had at least 10 birds. The acacias mentioned earlier for African Collared Dove had been taken away so we didn't find any doves... The harbour in Bir Shalatayn seemed very interesting. When we got there, though, we met two "officers" who didn't want us to go around with binoculars or cameras. But visiting the harbour just watching seemed to be ok. There were a lot of Sooty Gulls and shorebirds here. This place probably has good potential. When we went back north I stopped at the military post and asked if it would be possible to go further south to Gabel Elba, but that seems still impossible...

Mangrove, approx 40 km N of BS (MNBS)

The road from Wadi Lahami to BS goes mostly in desert, but at one point approx. 40 km N of BS, the road comes quite close to shore and here there is a small mangrove area. There is a road leading down to the shore. And here there is a few houses around these we had a few passerines. At the mangroves we were quickly noticed by some "militaries" who wanted us to leave the area. But putting away my camera we convinced them to let us stay with only our bins for half an hour to search the lagoon at the mangrove area. We had one Purple Heron and a few shorebirds here. It might be a potentially good spot, for future visiting birders.

Kira' el Hiriwai (KH)

At the military post a few km S of Wadi Lahami before you go through the mountains there is a smaller road going east to the Ras Banas peninsular. This area looks very interesting on the map. According to the people on Wadi Lahami Ecolodge it should not be possible to drive this road. When we got to the military post there was no one there however so we quickly decided to drive the road east and see what would happen. After a few km there is a huge bay called Kira' el Hiriwai where there were some mangroves so we took a dirt track running down to these mangroves. It was quite windy this day making birdwatching a bit difficult but we did find one Goliath Heron just west of the mangroves by a wrecked ship. We didn't follow the road to the tip of peninsula so we do not know how good this area is further out. I think the mangroves at both Wadi Lahami and Hamata are far more interesting than the mangroves at Kira' el Hiriwai. But it felt good to probably being the first western birders going there...

Sherm Forest Resort (SFR)

South of Al Quesir, approx 10 km S of Cinderella Beach and Akaccia Swiss Resort, there is some palm trees just next to the main road. If you go into this small forest of palms and bushes there is a smaller road going to a newly built Sherm Forest Resort. This small forest was really interesting and we found a lot of good species. Eastern Black-eared Wheatear and Red-tailed Wheatear being the best birds. It was quite difficult to bird the area properly and you need at least a few hours to get it done properly. Altogether this new site seems at least as attractive as Shams Alam Resort.

Ras Abu Soma Golf Course (RAS)

A few km north of Safaga along the main road to Hurgahada there is a large sign leading down to Ras Abu Soma. We only got one hour of birdwatching at evening. The golf course covers a large area. We did find one Tawny Pipit. It could be a potentially good place.

Crocodile Island (incl mudflats) (CI, CIMF)

Well-known site on the east bank of river Nile. There is a small road leading out on the island to Mövenpick Hotel. When you turn off the main road to this smaller road there is a few reed-ponds on both sides of the road. These ponds were very good for Little Bittern as well as Striated Heron. You could easily spend days at this area as new birds seem to turn up all the time. During migration time this must be a fantastic place. Especially the mudflats south of CI seemed fantastic for waders and shorebirds. There were a few places along the main road south of Mövenpick/CI where you could park the car and watch over the river and the mudflats. The big miss was Painted Snipe.

Semi-desert site E of Luxor (EL)

Some twenty minutes from Luxor this semi-desert stake-out for Namaqua Dove was shown to us by local guide Abdul (phone: 012-239546). Actually he was one of the best guides I've been with. He really worked through the wetlands of Crocodile Island trying to flush the sought-after Painted Snipes. Both Clamorous Reed Warblers and the Isabelline Shrike seen there were thanks to him. The Namaqua Doves winter in this area and we saw at least four birds. Other interesting birds here include Trumpeter Finch, Tawny Pipit and Isabelline Wheatear.

List of bird-species observed in Egypt December 2-9 2004

Total: 134 species

Egyptian Goose	2 flew south at CIMF, 8.12.
Eurasian Wigeon	Totally 760 migr along the Red Sea Coast 3-6.12, 3 at CIMF.
Common Teal	2 at a small pond WG 3 & 6.12, 30-50 at CIMF.
Northern Pintail	2 migr MSS, 3 migr WL, 1 at KH, 1 at a small pond WG 6.12
Garganey	2 at CIMF
Northern Shoveler	1 at a small pond WG 6.12, 8 at CIMF
Tufted Duck	3 migr WL 4.12, 5-7 at CIMF
Great Cormorant	Daily with low numbers along the Red Sea Coast and higher numbers along the Nile
Great White Pelican	One subadult bird flew S at CIMF early morning 8.12. An incredible flock of approx 300 migrating birds at the semi-desert site E of Luxor, around mid-day, 8.12. A fantastic sight of this quite rare European breeder
Great Bittern	A bird swiftly flew over and landed not to be seen again at the mangrove at WL. A quite rare sighting I suppose.
Little Bittern	At least 3 males in the pond on your right-hand side after you've turned into the way to CI, and another male in the pond on the left-hand side, a female was seen in a small reedarea in the canal separating CI from Luxor.
Black-crowned Night Heron	2 flew north at CIMF late at evening 7.12.
Striated Heron	2 at the small pond on the right-hand side, CI, 7.12.
Cattle Egret	Single birds on the Red Sea Coast, 1000s in the Nile Valley, an impressive sight watching egrets at evening going for night roost in palm trees next to the Nile at CIMF
Squacco Heron	100s around the Nile. Often sole birds.
Western Reef-Heron	Very common at Hamata Mangrove, and at other places along the coast. A few beautiful "dark phases" were also seen.
Little Egret	100s-1000s, very numerous on the CIMFs.
Grey Heron	Singles both along the coast and at the Nile
Purple Heron	1 at MNBS 4.12, 1 at WL Mangroves 5.12, around 10 birds in the CI area 7-8.12.
Goliath Heron	Of this Western Palearctic super-species we had three observations! The first at the mangrove at Wadi Lahami 4.12, another one was at the middle parts of the Hamata mangrove 4.12, and the last one was at a shipwreck just to the west of KH, 5.12. It could not be ruled out that at least two of the three observations were on the same individual.
Glossy Ibis	Approx 150 at the CIMF 7-8.12.
Eurasian Spoonbill	1 flew over Hurghada city 2.12, 2 at MSS 3.12, 2 at MNBS 4.12, 1 at WL 4.12,
Black-shouldered Kite	Quite easy to find roadside in the Luxor-Nile area, at least 10-15 birds were seen 7-8.12.
Black Kite	5 at CI area 7.12, and 10 in the CI area 8.12.
Egyptian Vulture	1 approx 20 km N of BS and approx 25 in BS 4.12.
Lappet-faced Vulture	Approx 10 birds were present in the BS area. The first one was seen soaring as we entered the city, just outside the northern city border we found around 5 Lappet-faced and 20 Egyptian Vultures on the ground.
Eurasian Marsh Harrier	5-7 birds were seen in the CI area.
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	2 birds migr CI 8.12.
Steppe Eagle	1 subadult bird was migr SW at CIMF 7.12.
Osprey	Numerous all along the Red Sea Coast.
Eurasian Kestrel	A few single observations along the coast, mostly around villages, more common in the Nile Valley
Lanner	1 young bird at CIMF 8.12.
Barbary Falcon	An adult bird were hunting over the CIMF, 8.12
Falco sp.	Larger unidentified falcons were seen along the coast S of Marsa Alam 3.12 and at Wadi Gimal 6.12.
Common Moorhen	Very common in the CI area
Purple Gallinule	20-30 birds were seen in the CI area 7-8.12.
Eurasian Coot	One at Wadi Gimal 3.12 and three birds at the same spot 6.12, 2 birds at Wadi Lahami 4.12. Around 200 birds were seen at CIMF 7-8.12.
Common Crane	A flock of 29 birds migrated south off Wadi Lahami 5.12.

Eurasian Oystercatcher	2 birds at Hamata 3-6.12.
Black-winged Stilt	10 birds at CI area 7.12 and approx 30 birds 8.12.
Senegal Thick-knee	6 were seen at the CIMF 7.12.
Common Ringed Plover	Common both along the coast and at CIMF.
Kentish Plover	Common along the coast, 3 birds were seen at CIMF 8.12.
Lesser Sand Plover	1 at Hamata Mangrove 3.12.
Greater Sand Plover	Common all along the coast. E.g., 30 Hamata 3.12, and tot. 60 birds 5.12.
Grey Plover	Single birds along the coast.
Spur-winged Plover	Approx 50 birds both 7 & 8.12, both in the CI area and along the water channels.
White-tailed Plover	Max 5 at CIMF 7-8.12.
Sanderling	1 at Bir Shalatayn harbour 4.12.
Little Stint	1 at Bir Shalatayn harbour 4.12, 1 at KH 5.12, 100s at CIMF 7-8.12.
Temminck's Stint	3 at CI 7.12.
Dunlin	Singles or smaller flocks along the coast, singles at CIMF.
Ruff	100s to 1000s at the CIMF. Impressive.
Jack Snipe	2 different birds were flushed at CI during our extensive search for Painted Snipe.
Common Snipe	1 flushed at HM 3.12, 2 at HM 4.12, max 35 at CI 7-8.12.
Black-tailed Godwit	8 at CIMF 7-8.12.
Whimbrel	Singles along the coast.
Eurasian Curlew	Common along the coast.
Common Redshank	Singles along the coast and at CIMF.



Goliath Heron, Wadi Lahami, 2004-12-04. Copyright: Måns Grundsten

Marsh Sandpiper	4-8 at CIMF 7-8.12.
Common Greenshank	Singles along the coast and at CIMF.
Wood Sandpiper	Max 25 at CI area 7-8.12.
Green Sandpiper	1 at CI 7 & 8.12
Terek Sandpiper	Max 4 at Hamata Mangroves 3-5.12.
Common Sandpiper	Singles along the coast and at CI area.
Ruddy Turnstone	Common along the coast. E.g. 25 at Bir Shalatayn harbour 4.12.
Sooty Gull	30 Hamata 3.12, 5 Wadi Lahami 4.12, 20 Bir Shalatayn harbour 4.12, 1 Wadi Lahami 5.12, 10 Hamata 6.12, 20 Hurghada harbour 9.12
White-eyed Gull	Max. 55 Wadi Lahami 4-5.12, 3 Bir Shalatayn harbour 4.12, 4 Hurghada harbour 9.12
Great Black-headed Gull	1 ad summer plumage + 1 1y Hamata 4.12 Hamata, 1 ad winter plumage + 1 1y Wadi Lahami 5.12, 1 ad winter plumage Hamata 6.12
Black-headed Gull	Max. 25 were seen along the Nile 7-8.12.
Slender-billed Gull	5 at the Mangrove S of Safaga 3.12, and 8 at Hamata 3.12, a few unidentified Black-headed/Slender-billed Gulls were seen at distance at Hurghada harbour

	9.12.
Yellow-legged Gull	(sp. <i>michaellis</i>) 1 ad at Hurghada harbour 9.12
Armenian Gull	(sp. <i>armenicus</i>) 2 ad at Hurghada harbour 9.12, a few unidentified larger gulls were seen at Hurghada harbour as well. 1 ly bird could have been an <i>armenicus</i> .
Gull-billed Tern	2 at the CIMF 7.12, and 1 at same place 8.12.
Caspian Tern	Common along the coast.
Crested Tern	A flock of approx 25 birds were seen each morning fishing outside Wadi Lahami.
Whiskered Tern	25 at CIMF 8.12.
White-winged Tern	50 along the Nile 7.12, 40 at CIMF 8.12.
Rock Dove (domest.)	Common
African Collared Dove	2 birds were unexpectedly found at Wadi Gimal 6.12 where there are a few higher palm trees. The birds could be studied in the scope at close range for a while before they took off. Short tail, and a little more stouter appearance, as well as more brownish on the coverts. We also briefly saw two unidentified collared doves at the Mangrove south of Safaga 3.12
Turtle Dove	1 ad bird at CI 7.12.
Laughing Dove	Common



Asian Desert Warbler, Hamata, 2004-12-05. Copyright: Måns Grundsten

Namaqua Dove	At least one male and three females at the semi.desert spot just east of Luxor 8.12.
Pallid Swift	100s to 1000s were seen soaring above the Nile 7-8.12.
Common Kingfisher	Common along the coast, especially at mangrove areas. One bird was seen flying past the small ponds outside CI 7.12 at sunset.
Pied Kingfisher	1 at Hamata 5.12, and 100s in the Nile and along the channels 7-8.12.
Little Green Bee-eater	(ssp. <i>cleopatra</i>) Approx. 40 in the Nile Valley both 7 & 8.12.
Hoopoe	Common in the along the Nile.
Bar-tailed Desert Lark	2 birds were seen 4.12. One just at the northern outskirts of Bir Shalatayn and one approx. 20 km N of BS. A few unidentified Bar-tailed/Desert Larks were seen during the return drive to Wadi Lahami.
Desert Lark	6 were seen 2-4 km N of Hamata 5.12, and 5 at the same spot 6.12.
Hoopoe Lark	1 N of Shams Alam 3.12, 1 N of Bir Shalatayn 4.12, 1 2 km N of Hamata 5.12, 2 N of Hamata 6.12.
Crested Lark	7 east of Luxor 8.12, and 2 at the CI 8.12.
Skylark	1 S of Cataract Resort 3.12.
Sand Martin	3 were seen both 7 & 8.12 around CI.
Rock Martin	Most widespread swallow. Seen both along the coast and at the CI.
Barn Swallow	1 at Wadi Lahami 6.12, 1000s around CI 7-8.12 (mostly <i>savignii</i> but a few

	<i>rustica</i> as well).
Tawny Pipit	1 at Ras Abu Soma Golf Course 6.12, 1 E of Luxor 8.12.
Red-throated Pipit	4 S of Cataract Resort 3 & 6.12, 2 at Shams Alam Resort 3 & 6.12, 1 at Hamata 3.12, 1 at Wadi Gimal 6.12, 4 at CIMF 7.12 and approx 75 birds seen in the CI area 8.12.
Water Pipit	(ssp. <i>coutellii</i>) 1 at Shams Alam Resort 3 & 6.12. (ssp. <i>spinoletta</i>) 20 in the CI area 8.12. One Water Pipit were seen flying south at Wadi Lahami 4.12.
Yellow Wagtail	100s seen at the Nile 7-8.12. (ssp. <i>flava</i> , <i>thunbergii</i> and <i>feldegg</i>)
Grey Wagtail	1 y at Wadi Lahami 4 & 5.12.
Pied Wagtail	Common
Common Bulbul	20-30 seen along the Nile 7-8.12.
Bluethroat	Singles seen both at resorts along the coast as well as in the CI area.
Black Redstart	1 y bird at Wadi Lahami 5.12.
Stonechat	(ssp. <i>maurus</i>) 1 f/1y at Shams Alam Resort 3.12. (ssp. <i>rubicola</i>) 1 pair at Shams Alam Resort 3.12, 1 f/1y at the mangrove N of BS 4.12, 2 m + 1 f/1y Shams Alam Resort 6.12, 1 m Sherm Forest Resort 6.12, 1 m + f/1y at Ras Abu Soma Golf Course 6.12, 1 m at El Gouna 9.12.
Isabelline Wheatear	1 at Shams Alam Resort 3 & 6.12, 1 at Wadi Gimal 6.12, 1 E of Luxor 8.12.
Pied Wheatear	1 f/1y at Wadi Gimal 6.12.
Eastern Black-eared Wheatear	1 f/1y at Sherm Forest Resort 6.12.
Desert Wheatear	Singles along the coast, 2 birds seen E of Luxor 8.12. Only males seen, but one female at Wadi Gimal.
Kurdish Wheatear	1 winter male at Sherm Forest Resort 6.12.
Mourning Wheatear	Singles along the coast. Only males seen!
Hooded Wheatear	1 y-male at Wadi Gimal 3 & 6.12.
White-crowned Black Wheatear	1 ad S of Cataract Resort 3.12.
Song Thrush	1 at Sherm Forest Resort 6.12.



Cattle Egret, Crocodile Island, 2004-12-08. Copyright: Måns Grundsten

Zitting Cisticola	Common in the CI area.
Graceful Prinia	Common along the Nile.
Sedge Warbler	5 in the CI area 8.12.
Clamorous Reed Warbler	2 at CI 8.12.
Sardinian Warbler	Common.
Asian Desert Warbler	1 bird seen in low juniper-like bushes just at the edge of the mangroves at the southern parts of Hamata 3 & 5.12.
Lesser Whitethroat	1 at Sherm Forest Resort 6.12. Common in the CI area 7-8.12, a few seen at El Gouna 9.12.
Chiffchaff	Common.
Nile Valley Sunbird	20 at CI 7-8.12.

Isabelline Shrike	1 1y bird was flushed out of a small reed-bed at the SE parts of CI 8.12.
Red-backed Shrike	2 1y birds were seen in palm trees at the Shams Alam Resort entrance, 3.12.
Southern Grey Shrike	1 S of Marsa Alam 3.12, 1 ad + 1 1y at Wadi Gimal 6.12, 1 E of Luxor 8.12.
House Crow	8 at Safaga 6.12, 1 at Safaga 7.12.
Hooded Crow	Common.
Brown-necked Raven	Common along the coast.
House Sparrow	Common. Extreme numbers in palm trees at Luxor east bank at sunset.
Spanish Sparrow	40 Shams Alam Resort 3 & 6.12, 2 at Sherm Forest Resort 6.12, 2 at Cataract Resort 6.12, 1 m at CI 8.12.
[Red-billed Avadavat]	20 at the small ponds outside CI 7.12, 10 seen on CI 8.12.
Common Linnet	4 S of Cataract Resort 3.12.
Trumpeter Finch	1 pair E of Luxor 8.12.
Corn Bunting	1 at Shams Alam Resort 3.12, 5 at the mangrove N of BS 4.12, 7 at a military post between Wadi Lahami and BS 4.12, 2 at Wadi Lahami 5.12.

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Namaqua Dove, East of Luxor, 2004-12-08. Copyright: Måns Grundsten