

Life on the Nile: A Cruise from Luxor to Aswan and back.

4th-11th June 2007

by Howard Vaughan

bird images courtesy of Richard Bonser

My wife and I have recently returned from a River Nile Cruise from Luxor in the north to Aswan in the south and back again and it would be apparent that almost all of the breeding Nile Valley specialities are available with no extra effort outside of the historical excursions already included in the holiday.

By going in June I had, in theory, missed out on migrant passage up the valley but there was some evidence of either late individuals or summering outside of the normal range. I suspect that by visiting anytime between mid-March and mid-May you would have a far greater migration spectacle and the temperature would be somewhat cooler. Everyday was over 110^of and on the last full day it topped 124^of. This just too hot for anything other than morning and evening activities.

The following account tracks our progress south, taking into account the various visits to tombs, temples and the like and would seem to be the typical itinerary for the multitude of ships or 'boatels', as they are known, that ply the Nile.



The Nile Valley from the plane

Day One: Luxor to Edfu

The land around Luxor as you approach your boat from the airport is lush and well cultivated and immediately gives you a taste of what is to come with countless **Cattle Egrets**, **Palm Doves** and **Hooded Crows**. Ghostly **Black-winged Kites** hunt from the telegraph wires and brick red Nile Valley race **Swallows** flick across the fields. It very quickly becomes apparent that the commonest small bird is our declining **House Sparrow**. They certainly do not have a population problem in Egypt.

Our first evening on the boat added other herons including Squacco and Night along with many Little and Cattle Egrets. Six European Bee-eaters should certainly have been further north by now. However, it was my first Pied Kingfishers that stole the show. Right at the top of my want list, they were to become a daily feature of the cruise with parties of up to 12 birds seen. They even occasionally hitched a lift on the stern of the boatel, using a flag pole as a look out point.

Day Two: Edfu to Aswan with visits to the temples at Edfu and Kom-ombo.

This first journey took us through the night and the very narrow Esna Lock, so we awoke berthed alongside a fabulous piece of marsh at Edfu. Fortunately, we were moored on the outside of the stack of boatels so I had an uninterrupted view. This is not always the case.



The mid-river marsh at Edfu

Hérons were everywhere. Squaccos by the dozen hunted on the floating surface weed, now in the company of several Purple Herons and huge green backed Purple Gallinules could be seen crashing around. The height the boat gives you is a real asset as you can look down into the reed clumps. Similarly, this is the only way that I got to see Clamorous Reed Warblers. They are indeed noisy but tend to stay well hidden within the five metre high reeds. Just like Great Reed Warbler the sound travels easily and you can easily hear them way out across the river. I subsequently heard this species along the whole length of the trip. Pygmy race Yellow Wagtails buzzed from reedbed song posts but it took me till day three to work out that the peculiar repetitive buzzing coming from the river banks was from singing Graceful Prinias and not from a cicada as I suspected.



Clamorous Reed Warbler

Edfu temple was dedicated to Horus and is quite spectacular and was home to **Common Kestrels**, Sparrows, Doves and my first **Common Bulbuls** of the trip.



The pylons of Edfu Temple

However it was the two pair of nesting **Little Green Bee-eaters** that caught my eye as they took out huge multi-coloured hornets from the temple walls and surrounding wires. This is the race *cleopatra* with an all green throat and very long central tail streamers and it really is a small, looking no more than sparrow-sized minus the tail!



Edfu to Kom-ombo

The next section on the river took us to the temples of Sobek and Haroeris at Kom-ombo passing a wealth of lush riverbank, fields and marshes en-route. I gave up counting the 'normal' herons at this point but did add several **Grey Herons** and four **Little Bitterns** to the list and much to my surprise, three separate **Striated Herons**. They seemed quite happy perching on small boats moored to the bank rather than lurking in the vegetation. **Spur-winged Plovers** were nesting on sandbanks and seeing off the **Hooded Crows** while flocks of **Whiskered Terns** in very plumage imaginable were encountered along with several stunning **White-winged Blacks** and five **Gull-billed Terns**. I do not believe any of these tern species breed in Egypt but the Whiskered Terns certainly appeared to be taking food back into an area of floating reed. More **Gallinules** were seen (including youngsters) and **Hoopoes**, **Bulbuls** and even **Crested Larks** could be picked out when we were especially close to shore. Wire checking resulted in a couple more **Little Green Bee-eaters** (LGB) and four stunning **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters** were also seen. Even greener than the LGBs! Two **Black Kites** of the recently split Yellow-billed form cruised overhead.



Spur-winged Plover

Kom-ombo is quite magical being right on the edge of the river and was the first site we visited with some colour still on the reliefs and home to several mummified crocodiles. The wires around the temple held at least three pair of **LGB** while a couple of male **Olivaceous Warblers** sang heartily from the trees around the riverside cafés. Another, melodious, thrush like song may well have been a **Rufous Bush-chat** but the venders were particularly persistent once you were outside the temple grounds and we headed back for the boatel. The vantage point afforded views over the village before departing and a couple of **Black-winged Kites** hunted from the powerlines while Bulbuls played tag in some mango trees. Four **Pallid Swifts** hawked around the palms and ten **House Martins** were nesting around some taller buildings. This is another species that I can't find as a known breeder in Egypt.



Kom-ombo

Final leg for the day into Aswan before dusk. Was able to look right down into an egretry and find eight juvenile and four adult **Night Herons** amongst the 'white' ones. A fine male **Little Bittern** flew past under our noses. The only additional species was a flock of six **Glossy Ibises** heading south.



This stunning darter (*Trithemis kirbyi*) hitched a lift for several hours

Day three: Aswan, The Dams and Philae.

Up early and off to the High Dam holding back Lake Nasser. A big view of a lot of water but ornithologically quiet although silvery **Rock Martins** were new for me and a **Turtle Dove** was purring from the gardens.



Lake Nasser from the High Dam



The cataract below the Old Dam

On to the Temple of Philae next. This temple is largely dedicated to Isis and Hathor and was one of many archaeological sites raised from the valley floor after the original flooding caused by the Old Dam. It was taken apart and rebuilt less than one kilometre from where it originally stood and you would never know otherwise! The placid lake between the two dams hosted many **Pied Kingfishers** and a few **Whiskered Terns** while the temple grounds and big acacia trees allowed me at long last to discover that the strange buzzing call was **Graceful Prinia**. Two birds showed very well and sang comfortably out in the open.



Graceful Prinia

House Sparrows and Olivaceous Warblers occupied most trees and two Bulbuls seemed to be waiting for scraps. This was the site where I caught up with my other 'big want' for the trip. There above me was a pair of Nile Valley Sunbirds. Simply stunning with funny little calls. Even had the male displaying!



The Temple of Philae



The Temple of Philae

In the afternoon we headed out on the river off Aswan in a small motor boat to have a look around Elephantine and Kitchener's Islands. Crystal-clear waters and lots of birds (along with our first camels and the Cataract Hotel where Agatha Christie wrote *Death on the Nile*). All the herons were seen at close range including a cracking adult **Striated**. The bright orange legs really stand out on such a dark bird. Plenty of Kingfisher activity and **Graceful Prinias** and **Clamorous Reed Warblers** were in song. Found an acacia with what looked like weaver nests in it only to discover that they were made by **House Sparrows**.



Cataract Hotel and Fallucca

After having a snack of bread, sesame and molasses with the local Nubians (and their pet crocodile!) we aimed for Kitchener's Island which hosts the Botanical Gardens and is well worth a visit. Eight more **Sunbirds** were seen here along with tame **Hoopoes**, **Bulbuls**, **Olivaceous Warblers** and you were literally stepping over recently fledged **Little** and **Cattle Egrets** from the colonies above you. Two **Honey Buzzards** drifted slowly north and two **Yellow-billed Kites** cruised the river edge. The small rock and sand islets mid channel held several **Night Herons** and three smart **Senegal Thick-knees** looking like bigger billed less stripy Stone Curlews.



Senegal Thick-knee



Crystal clear waters.....

The evening was spent back at Philae for the light show which was actually very good and not overly busy. No bird additions this time but several bat species.

Day Four: The long trek to Abu Simbel

Up at stupid-o'clock and on the road in a huge coach convoy complete with armed guard for our southerly dash through the desert. Not one bird from the coach either on the way there or back! Built to honour Ramses II it was de-constructed and moved 90m higher to allow for the flooding of Lake Nasser in 1971.

Abu Simbel has a reputation as the African outpost in the Western Palearctic but a standard visit with a tour company as part of your package does not really allow you to visit the bird rich areas nearby. It is worth visiting simply for the astonishing facade of the temple and it was not birdless, with **Rock Martins** and non-white-crowned **White Crowned Black Wheatears** always on view and **Yellow-billed Kites** and **Brown-necked Raven** looking for scraps. Several Gull-billed Terns passed over and Palm and Turtle Doves were common. I was delighted to find a male **Namaqua Dove** in the grounds. They really are as tiny as the books suggest. Reckon that I will have to do a description for the Egyptian rarities committee for that one! **Crested Larks** were to be found in the huge coach park.



The Temple at Abu Simbel

After a pleasant fallucca ride to relax us in the afternoon we set off back down river from Aswan through the evening and overnight to Edfu. All the usual suspects were seen along with another **Senegal Thick-knee** just north of Kom-ombo and 20 **Pallid Swifts** and a **Black-winged Kite** nearby. Two **Collared type Doves** were seen from the boatel but I could see nothing to say if they were anything rarer although they were still out of range whichever species they were. Several **Yellow-billed Kites** were picked up nearing dusk and one was watched plucking dates from a palm tree in flight and then eating them on the wing.



Sunset heading north

Day Five: Edfu to Luxor

We were back on the move by first light and the first leg of the journey up to the Locks at Esna produced a couple of new species for the trip with at least 20 **Black-winged Stilts** and three immature **Spoonbills**. Five **Little Bitterns** added interest amongst the 'common' herons and four more **White-winged Black Terns** were found with over 40 **Whiskeredes**.



Esna Lock

Once through the locks the marshy areas became fewer and we were often close to the bank allowing me to find **Little Green** and **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters** at three spots each along with two more **Striated Herons**, calling **Prinias** and **Clamorous Reed Warblers**. **Kestrels** became common and an

intermediate **Long-legged Buzzard** was a surprise addition. **Black-winged Kites** hovered close by and one was mobbed by **Pied Kingfishers**! A single huge **White Stork** was seen catching frogs.

We arrived early-afternoon at our Luxor berth where would stay moored for the rest of the trip and after lunch headed straight for the Temple of Karnack. Very impressive but quiet bird wise with a couple of **Little Green Bee-eaters**, **Graceful Prinias**, **Bulbuls** and **Kestrels**. The evening light show was too crowded for my liking with several hundred camera flash hungry Brits doing their best to spoil the atmosphere. I would stick with the one at Philae. No birds but lots of bats including some monsters that I thought were Scops Owls to start with!



The Temple at Karnack (no sign of Jaws or James Bond though!)

Luxor Temple is equally grand and on all itineraries. **Yellow-billed Kites** and a couple of **Sunbirds** were found.

Day Six: Valleys of the Kings and Queens, West Bank

Another early rise to get in and out of the valleys before the heat and the crowds. Quite a bit to see in the farmland from the coach there and back including two **Yellow-billed** and five **Black-winged Kites**, a **Lanner** on a pylon, two more **White Storks**, six **Little Green Bee-eaters** and three **Hoopoes**.



Black-winged Kite

The Valley of the Kings was devoid of any vegetation but even so there were still **House Sparrows** around the information shelter. Two **Brown-necked Raven** gave close views and higher up an immature **Egyptian Vulture** was a welcome sight.

Some of the tombs are quite amazing and the colour allows you to identify some of the species on the walls including a fine drake Pintail! There is no point in paying extra to go into the tomb of Tut –Anhk-Amon as there is nothing to see and the friezes are mouldering and incomplete due to the haste at which the site was finished upon his untimely death. The various Ramses tombs are very impressive but I would recommend for the more energetic a climb up to the Tutmes II tomb (no:34). Well worth the effort. A single **Desert Lark** was the only bird I saw in the nearby Valley of the Queens.



Valley of the Kings – West Bank

Back at berth, a pair of **Sunbirds** fed in the gardens opposite and two **Glossy Ibis** flew over. Needless to say, herons all around.

Day Seven: Luxor Berth

There were options for additional excursions on this day but we opted for a lazy day on the boat. The foreshore gardens hosted the Sunbirds again along with several Hoopoes, Little Green Bee-eaters, Swallows, Prinias, Bulbuls and heaps of Sparrows, Hoodies and Doves. Several Turtle Doves were seen and Striated Heron number eight. The local noisy Pied Kingfishers were around all day and were often to be seen fishing and even plunge bathing from the mooring ropes.

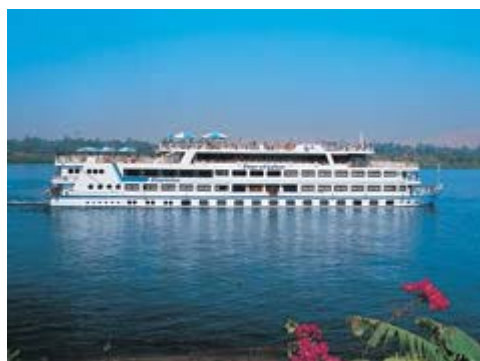


Luxor Berth

Day Eight:

Another lazy morning before heading for home after lunch but managed to see all of yesterday's garden birds one last time before departing. Thankfully, House Sparrow managed not to be my last Egyptian bird (as it seems to be everywhere else I go abroad!) but a fine rusty red Nile Valley Swallow gliding over the runway as we taxied out.

We went with the African Safari Club and our ship was called the MS Star of Luxor. The boat itself was clean and comfortable with all rooms being air conditioned and en-suite. It is worth paying the small supplement to upgrade to the third deck as you are further away from the engines and are afforded a higher and therefore better view of the magnificent Nile.



The food was excellent, well cooked and certainly multi-cultural but not overly spicy for the English pallet! Drinks are an extra but to be honest the

temperature put you off anything but water which can be purchased at all time. While others were running up bar bills, we spent under £20 in the week and all by one coffee was on water! A good opportunity for a detox! No one was seriously ill with digestive problems (despite what we had been warned) and biting insects whilst on the river seemed non-existent.

All in all a fabulous week of culture, scenery, history and good birding.

www.africansafariclub.com/egypt

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Contact me at howardebs@blueyonder.co.uk for more details

Trip List:

Cormorant	Palm Dove
Cattle Egret	Feral Pigeon
Little Egret	Namaqua Dove
Squacco Heron	Turtle Dove
Grey Heron	Pallid Swift
Purple Heron	Hoopoe
Striated Heron	Pied Kingfisher
Night Heron	Little Green Bee-eater race <i>cleopatra</i>
Little Bittern	Blue-cheeked Bee-eater
Spoonbill	European Bee-eater
White Stork	Crested Lark
Egyptian vulture	Desert Lark
Long-legged Buzzard	Sand Martin
Honey Buzzard	Swallow race <i>savignii</i>
Yellow-billed Kite	House Martin
Kestrel	Rock Martin
Lanner	Yellow Wagtail race <i>pygmaea</i>
Black-winged Kite	Common Bulbul
Black-winged Stilt	White-crowned Black Wheatear
Senegal Thick-knee	Clamorous Reed Warbler
Spur-winged Plover	Olivaceous Warbler
Moorhen	Graceful Prinia
Coot	Nile Valley Sunbird
Purple Gallinule	Brown-necked Raven
White-Winged Black Tern	House Sparrow
Whiskered Tern	Red Avadavat
Gull-billed Tern	
Collared Dove	54 species and 14 lifers