

## SOUTH EGYPT BIRDING 13.-20.1.2013

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On January 13-20 we did with Hannu, Keijo and Ilkka birding trip to southern Egypt. We had certain target species to see and pretty well we did. This first part of the trip covers the Nile Valley from Luxor to Abu Simbel and the latter part covers then Red Sea part of the trip.

We took well discounted flights of a package tour (340€ return) to Hurghada and rented a car for a week. On 13th we drove from Hurghada to Luxor. Next day we first drove to King's Island (ex-Crocodile Island) where we walked one hour. Four female plumage **Red Avadavats** near the bridge was nice finding though not a tick to anyone. A good number of species we added to our trip list. Best observation was probably a green-colored warbler which had a clear wingbar. The bird size was clearly larger than Chiffchaff which was in the same tree. Bird's overall greenish upperside, narrow buffy wingbar on the edge of greater coverts, darker upper mandible and yellowish lower mandible, grayish flanks and relatively large size of a green warbler brought me an impression of **Arctic Warbler** though Greenish Warbler could be possible. The bird was so actively moving in trees southern side of the road just 100m after the bridge that we did not manage to get any photos. Two of us saw the bird and its narrow wingbar and relative size. We met a moment later local birdguide **Abdo Yousef Taha** whom we told about the bird to. He replied that Arctic Warbler has been on those trees earlier this winter. It probably holds its winter territory on the site.

After my trip I noticed from the list of "Egypt Passerine" that the species has not been seen in Egypt. See the link: <http://www.birdinginegypt.com/#Checklist>

Although we did not get photos until the bird disappeared after 2 minutes watch and we had to continue our trip, certain characters of the bird very strongly points to Arctic Warbler. Also Abdo's comment supports it.

Our target for the day was to search African Skimmer from the Nile between Luxor and Aswan. We did many stops but did not see the species. Neither any birder has seen it this winter there.

The day was very interesting and we enjoyed watching hundreds of ducks, waders, egret, terns, etc by the river. One wader near Kom Ombo caused some extra heart bumps when it looked very much like **Wilson's Phalarope**. The bird was swimming near a vegetated riverbank and it had very narrow and long bill. However, after more detailed look at the bird it revealed to be a winter plumage **Marsh Sandpiper** which had abnormal long bill. When it flew off, it showed its white upper rump reaching to lower back. Also the tail was rather uniform. Maybe the same bird was seen earlier this winter because I had read about such case prior to our trip.

Worth to mention was also 5km south of King's Island on a sandbank on Nile two **Kittlitz's Plovers** among 20 Ringed Plovers and one Little Ringed Plover.

On 15th after a short sleep in a hotel in Aswan we had to join 4am convoy to Abu Simbel. Previous evening we had registered to tourist police for the convoy. After three hours' drive we arrived Abu Simbel.

We drove immediately to the side which was known to be a place for a pair of **African Mourning Doves**. In few minutes we heard a dove calling which was different than the other ones. We found our target species which was well showing itself in the morning light.





It was time to move to the Tree-banded Plover site (between airport road and Aswan road the marshy area). We searched the area almost 2 hours and saw good number of nice species.



Few Desert Wheatears were very cooperative.



15 Pelican opposite of the marsh has pinkish color...



...but when an approaching dog chased them up, they were clearly **White Pelicans**.



With a Spoonbill was another bird which was very much smaller, slim-legged, etc.



When they took off, it was just normal juvenile Spoonbill but small in size.





In flight wingspan of both was around the same but the body of the smaller one was clearly small.



A male **Painted Snipe** allowed take some photos until it went inside vegetation.



An adult **Purple Heron** is always a majestic bird.

We saw also a female **Citrine Wagtail** at the site but it was too far away to get any photos.

We decided to go for a morning coffee after 2 hours search and were returning towards our car. However, I wanted to check one muddy pool near the road/bridge. Suddenly a strange call from a flying wader revealed

our second target species: **Tree-banded Plover.**



The bird clearly did not want to leave the pool and after few minutes photographing we left the site without searching possible its pair. This was ringed bird as it was reported already a year ago.

Very satisfied we went for a morning coffee though a soup break was a better idea which a local restaurant owner proposed. After it we went for the rest of the day to the airport bay and eastern side shores to search possible Skimmer over Lake Nasser but in vain.

At airport bay harbor we saw an **African Wagtail.**



Yellow-billed Kite was common.



Several Black-crowned Night Herons were waiting for fish remainings by the shoreline from the local fishers. A sad observation was that two second-winter Night Herons swallowed a fish trap with a hook. Some kind floating long-wired fishing traps got interest of herons and they took the food and swallowed it. A young boy was carrying one Heron with a wire to their house.



This first-winter bird did not take the trap, fortunately. It tried to carry it to the land but the wire prevented it.

Tree more **African Wagtails** were on the site of the eastern side of the airport by the shores where Nubian people were living.

At dusk I went to the hotel for a rest when I had been driving in morning convoy while others were sleeping. Tree others of our group went to the northeastern side of the airport to search **Desert/Pharaoh Eagle Owl**. Immediately when they opened the car door they heard an owl calling. Just 1km east of the local village was the owl's territory on a small hill. They saw the owl on top of the hill calling. It was very good ending of an excellent day though it had been very long one.

It's worth to mention that 1km north on Aswan road was a price/quality wise very good hotel which we recommend. We did not see any name but it was opposite of an empty slot between an administrative building and mini buss parking area.

On 16th we did bird until 9am and then decided to join morning convoy to Aswan leaving 10am. The morning did not provide anything worth to mention but both Mourning Doves were seen. On the Mourning Dove site we investigated closer all warblers in hope to find something interesting. A Lesser Whitethroat did give a sign of ssp *halimodendri* (Desert Lesser Whitethroat) and was calling Blue Tit type call as well. It was so well hiding that we did not get photos to confirm its id for surely. The call, very weak mask and upperside color resembled the birds I have seen in Kazakhstan.

On our return to Aswan by the road we saw several groups of **Spotted Sandgrouses**, altogether 80 birds. Our stops between Aswan and Edfu did not bring anything special to mention.

We stayed the night in Edfu prior to driving east to Marsa Alam. Edfu was very lively town with interesting local shops, lots of people in the street, showing how the local life would be. It was nice to be in a place where usually tourists do not come.

Early morning on 17th we continued our drive towards Marsa Alam. The road was following a valley towards east 30-40km with green vegetation. It could be interesting to explore the area closer. It had number of birds in agricultural fields. One of them was an **Isabelline Shrike** sitting on a tree.



Isabelline Shrike by the Edfu - Marsa Alam road 30km east of Edfu. Photo: Ilkka Sahi.

When last green spots ended, rocky and dry desert started. The closer Marsa Alam we drove, the more Mourning Wheatears we saw. Several Desert and White-crowned Wheatears were by the road as well.

From Marsa Alam we turned south and drove until Shams Alam Resort where we got decent priced rooms for two nights. After a lunch break we drove further down to Hamata and Lahami. At the latter site we tried to search **Goliath Heron** which was missing in Keijo's WP list. 10+ Collared Doves were flying and calling on the mangrove site. One dove created our attention due to its plumage contrast. It had pinkish tone in its head, neck and belly until feet. Lower belly and vent was whitish. Uppertail and uppertail coverts were darker than back. It was calling few times higher toned call compared to Collared Doves. To me those criterias point to **African Collared Dove**.



Dove's uppertail was clearly darker than its back. Also upper rump has contrast to the back. Note also whitish vent and lower belly behind feet which is contrasting to the underside in front of feet.



Uppertail color is almost the same as primaries.



Dove's color details were distinct already further away. It differed clearly from the other Collared Doves at the site.



Note here Collared Dove photographed at Shams Alam Resort. The bird has uniform upperside (uppertail has similar color as dove's back) and no contrast on underside. Primaries differ clearly from tails upper side color. At least 10 doves arrived from south (diving center?) to the resort trees in the morning of Jan 18th when this was photographed.

We found one Swift Tern and 50 Sooty Gulls in Hamata harbor as well as one Greater Sand Plover. Two Striated Herons were good species in Lahami and one bird we saw during the day near our resort at diving center peer. Five Greater Sand Plovers were good finding on Lahami. Their strong bill and long feet were distinct as well as



greater size as well.

Goliath Heron we could not find though we knew that it's on the site. Swedish group 3-4 days earlier had seen it after their fourth attempt.

We had relaxing evening in our hotel after long day's drive. Only 20+ people were in the hotel. The personnel told us that the amount of guests is only 25% from the normal level few years back. Also last winter had been rather bad in customer wise.

On 18th we decided to drive to Sheikh Shazly which lies western side of the coast mountains. 40km Edfu road and then 110km south driving partially mountainous, partially sandy desert environment until we arrived Sheikh Shazly. The site is known about good amount of African Collared Doves. Prior to the village we saw nice **Bonelli's Eagle** pair flying very close the road near a Nubian camp.

In Sheikh Shazly we found min 6 **African Collared Doves** but we did not see any Collared Doves. Those doves were on acacias between two roads just before the village center. Below are few photos of those Sheikh Shazly ACDs.



After 20 minutes photographing we left the village and returned Marsa Alam and further down to our resort. Several Desert Larks, Mourning, Desert and White-crowned Wheatears were by the road. 30km W of Marsa Alam we saw 6 Steppe Eagles flying over the road. It was probably the same group we saw day earlier a bit further away from the road on the same place.



Over the road flew these subad and ad Steppe Eagles.



At Marsa Alam harbor we saw 2cy Striated Heron sitting on the boat.

On 19th we tried again find Goliath Heron at Lahami mangroves without any result. The same ACD was calling its distinct call though we did not see the bird. Eight small billed **Greater/Lesser Sand Plovers** was now at the site on high tide with one Kentish Plover. Large billed Greater Sand Plovers we saw two days ago could not be found in a quick look. We thought that those small billed birds were Lesser Sand Plovers but after the trip realized the possibility of small billed Greater ones (ssp columbianus). We did not take any photos to confirm identification, unfortunately.

We started our drive north. From Abu Ghosoum we drove 30km west until abandoned mine. The road was just and just drivable with a salon car. After it road went so bad that we had to return to the coast road. Further

drive SW from the mine should lead to a high mountain area which should be good for raptors based on Wadi Gemal ranger. Lammergeier for example is possible to see there. The area is only 10-15km east of Sheikh Shazly.

Around 60km north of Marsa Alam was a place where we had read from a report to be a Pharaoh Eagle Owl site. Only 1km from the coastal road was very promising looking site and bingo! There was **Pharaoh Eagle Owl** sitting on a cliff. Nearby was calling also "**Desert**" **Great Grey Shrike** (*ssp pallidirostris*).



This Pharaoh Eagle Owl had found splendid place to nest.

Further north driving and 32km north of Quseir was good number of waders very close to the coastal road. We counted 20 small billed **Greater/Lesser Sand Plovers** among them without taking any photos. They looked very much the same species as seen earlier in the morning in Lahami shores.

At dark we arrived Hurghada. The last morning (Jan 20th) we wanted to spend in El Gouna. We walked 3 hours and best to mention were 15+**Swift Terns**, 8 **White-eyed Gulls** and 2 **Nile Valley Sunbirds**.



This male Nile Valley Sunbird surprised us at the parking area of El Gouna golf course. Another transition plumage male was also nearby. Both birds revealed them based on their nasty calls. Based on Egypt Birding web pages the species is rare on the Red Sea coast. Photo: Ilkka Sahi.

Very good trip with 127 trip species, 2792km driving and convenient weather with sunshine was the week's outcome. Still few WP species were left for the next trip to catch. In overall birding is very rewarding in Egypt in winter. People were friendly and helpful, for example when we almost ran out of gasoline. Certainly it's worth to mention that several our observations need EORC acceptance. Those with photos should be clear but unfortunately we did not get photos from few interesting sightings.

Diesel had finished in many gasoline stations but 90 and 92 octane gasoline was available. The price was only

around 25cent per liter, so driving was cheap compared to European price level. Huge amount of high bumps on the road were certainly scratching and maybe even damaging the bottom of our car, also when very slowly driving over. They were just too high for a salon car with 4 people inside.