

EGYPT 22-29 May 2019 – searching selected WP ticks

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Already for several years Egypt and few WP ticks were waiting me. Finally this May I made the trip with Mikko Järvinen and Jorma Tenovuo. It was long time open if Mohamed Habib can guide us as agreed in July 2018 but in the end he managed to do it. We left Helsinki May 22 in the evening and had night flight to Hurghada via Istanbul with Turkish Airlines. I and Jorma got flight tickets a bit over 400€ but Mikko managed to find an offer of 299€ in return!

We arrived (May 23) in Hurghada airport 3am and took a hotel for few hours to have some rest prior Mohamed came to pick up us 7am. He lives in Hurghada. It was nice to meet first time Mohamed face to face. Then Mohamed proposed that we drive first north because currently was extremely hot weather and the temperature would be too high in south. The first target was near Ras Sudr in Sinai west coast around 50km south of Suez canal tunnel.

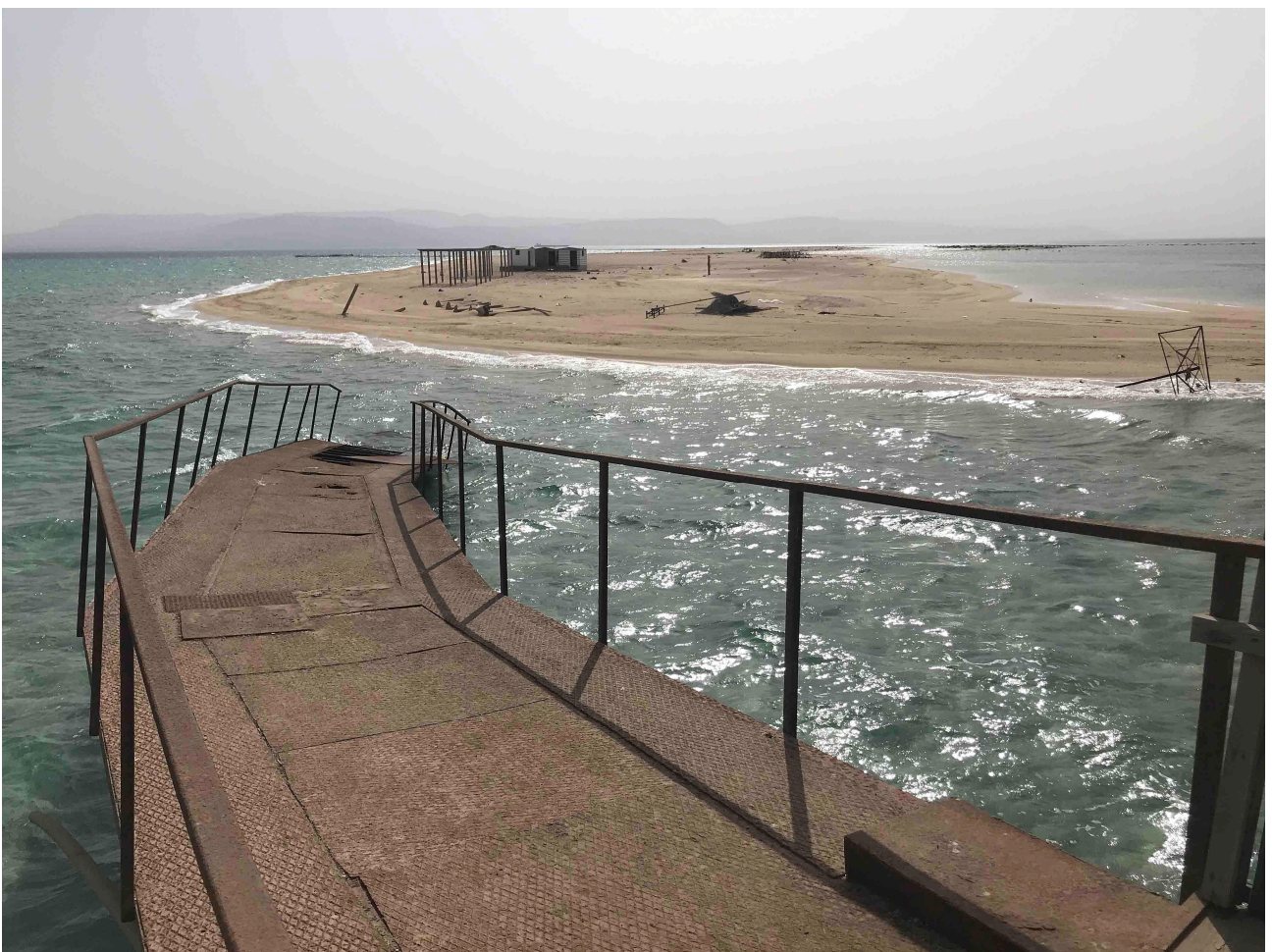
We arrived to the target place later in the afternoon after a long drive without seeing anything special. Few checking points were in Suez prior the tunnel and another one on a way to south in Sinai side. The birding site was near holiday resorts and the guard did not allow us to enter in the area. After some discussion and phonecalls Mohamed finally managed to agree that he pays some money to the guard (300EGP) that we were allowed to drive to the shores from where we had almost 2km long walk on the bridge to the end reaching the sandy islands. However, the last part of the bridge to the sandy island was broken and water level was unusually high according to Mohamed. Thus, we looked our target bird, **Saunders's Terns**, from the bridge end with Mikko's scope. One pair was breeding not so far away and at least 15 Saunders's/Little Tern size birds were flying at the western end of the sandy island. According to Mohamed they all should be Saunders's Terns.



Tens of **Lesser Crested Terns** were flying forth and back near our watching point. We found 2 **Greater Crested Terns** sitting on an island closer to the resorts and Sinai shores.



A group of **White-cheeked Terns** passed our watching point as well. 15+ **White-eyed Gulls** were flying near the sandy island.



*After a long walk we finally reached the western end of the bridge but unfortunately we could not walk to the island to see closer **Saunders's Terns**, not get any photos. At least we did not disturb their breeding. In the heat of over +40C was nice to be in the shadow of the bridge end.*

For the night we went to Ras Sudr where we ate our dinner. Mohamed waited until sun had gone down because it was Ramadan time. He did not even drink any water during the whole day. It did not apply to us. We stayed the night in Ras Sudr and left early next morning (May 24) back to Suez.

We drove on the west side of Suez channel up to the city of Ismailia. From there we then continued toward west. Our next site was Al Abbassa area with fish ponds and farms.



*More than ten **Common Myna** pairs were breeding on the electricity poles by the Suez channel. The species is in cat C in Egypt.*

Our road followed a channel towards Al Abbassa area. We counted tens of Pied Kingfishers by the channel. Around 11am we arrived in the site where our main target was **Senegal Coucal**. I missed the species in my first Egypt trip in spring 2008. The area is huge and number of birds was something else compared to Sinai sand and dust.

Mohamed knew one site where we searched Coucal. It took almost 4 hours until Jorma finally noticed the bird sitting on a wire near the electricity pole by the road when we were already thinking to leave the area. Local people told to Mohamed that they had seen the bird earlier in the morning. It is not an easy bird as it can hide long times inside reedbeds.



Senegal Coucal sitting on a wire until it flew off to the reedbed nearby and disappeared.

What a relief when the target bird was finally seen. We photographed number of other good species in the area.



Three **Senegal Thickknees** were hiding by a fishpool in the day heat.



Clamorous Reed Warblers were common in the area...



...as well were Zitting Cisticolas.



Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters were catching frequently bees.



Few Little Bitterns were hiding in those numerous reedbeds.



Few Whiskered Terns were flying over the pools as well.



Local breeding Barn Swallows, ssp savignii, have fully redbrown belly.



Few Bank Swallows were among them as well.



Several Little Grebes were breeding on the pools.



Spur-winged Lapwings are common species in any wetland or marshy areas.



Black-crowned Night-Heron was rather common in the area as well. Around ten of young ones were already in flight. This individual we were wondering for a while until we realized that it is 2cy bird. I have never seen such plumage before.

Stew Hinley had made Egypt trip just 1-2 weeks earlier and he gave us a hint of a **Streaked Weaver** nest site coordinates. We found it and the nest of a pair (photo below). Birds were rather elusive and we did not get any photos. Anyhow, breeding was confirmed. Thanks Stew for sharing the site coordinates. Mikko and Jorma got their target species, I have seen it in spring 2008.

Major change in 11 years was rather strong construction in the area and the habitat is gradually decreasing.



Then we had several hours drive to Wadi El-Natron. We reached Cairo northern edges and finally drove new motorway northwest from Cairo to El-Natron to a nice eco-lodge for a night.

The day of May 25 we began prior to the breakfast by walking SW shores of El-Natron Lake and found immediately a pair of **Kitlitz Plover**, target bird to Mikko and Jorma. We drove further north few kilometers and found there 4 breeding pairs of Kitlitz Plovers. At least Mohamed was happy to see more birds than he saw previous year at the site. Only negative sign was the tracks which show that people are driving with their 4 wheel cars on the breeding area of the plovers.

After the breakfast we had long drive to southern side of Cairo. It was amazing to see how far west and south Cairo has expanded. Even Giza pyramids were already partially surrounded by new houses. Driving Cairo ringroad was quite fast but then desert motorway south had a speed limit of 100km/h.

In the afternoon we arrived in the area near Sandafa where our target was **Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse**. The species was expected to gone extinct until 2012/2013 a flock of sandgrouses were seen by a western researcher who soon confirmed that they are Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouses. When the news came out, WP twitchers have since then visited the area.

We saw soon two sandgrouses flying rather high over and landing further east. According to Mohamed only Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouses are in the area. We were searching usual sites to find drinking pool but failed to locate it. Few nice species we saw anyhow.



*We found three pairs of **Cream-colored Cursors** on the fields with small chicks.*

When we did not find any drinking pools, Mohamed proposed that we return near the motorway to scan the flying sandgrouses. He said that usually birds come from the west and fly over the road to the east. The place was good to see 360 degree.

Mikko just proposed that lets have a coffee which he had in his hot bottle. Just when I had taken the cup in my hand, I saw two sandgrouses flying from north towards us and already so close that I did not have time to take my camera. I just looked them with my bins to id birds. Jorma did not hear my shouting until I said another time to him that sandgrouses are just flying over us. He managed to take few shots when the birds had already gone over us. Very nice pair of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouses were well seen but photographing chances were gone. Our target bird was seen well, however.



Here was our watching point just few hundred meters south from the junction to Sandafa.

As satisfied we drove towards El-Minya where we were staying the next night. Our target species was well seen by all. By the road we counted around 10 **Black-shouldered Kites** sitting on the wires in the evening light. It was already dark when we arrived in El-Minya which is a busy Nile valley city of 1,5 million inhabitants. We ate very nice dinner nearby our hotel in a restaurant which was full of families eating their meals after sunset.



May 26 we left our hotel after breakfast. We were surprised that a police escort was leading us out from the city. Actually it was not only out of city but they escorted us out of El-Minya district when I was asking it from Mohamed. According to him such escort driving will create more attention than if we would drive alone. It was some kind a security procedure if western tourists are driving to the city of El-Minya district.



Morning view from our hotel Cleopatra top floor restaurant to south where you can see River Nile.

We were also joking that we have a president in our car when we had such a police escort out of the city. We immediately agreed that Jorma was our president when he was sitting on the back seat. Since then he was called "our president" during the rest of the trip.

We had two hours drive from the outskirts of El-Minya to Ras Gherb on the new motorway. During that drive we saw only few other cars!



***Hoopoe Lark** was walking straight on the white line by the motorway.*



By the motorway was even a camel laughing that who are those whites here in the middle of desert.

From Ras Gherb we drove south, passed Hurghada and had quick lunch stop in El Quseir. Further south we saw few birds on the sea when the road was following the sea.



This 2cy Common Crane was spending the summer together with Western Reef Herons a bit south of El Quseir.



Both dark and white morph birds were at the site, further south were few more Western Reef Herons.

When we photographed these birds, Mohamed was sleeping 30 minutes. It was very long driving day, almost 800km when we were driving south to Wadi Lahami. We arrived there in the darkness although Mohamed wanted to have a rule that we are before darkness in our next hotel. Driving in the darkness has always a risk in these countries because you never know what might be on the road. Even cars can be sometimes driving without any lights, or to wrong direction. Next two nights we anyhow would stay in Lahami diving eco-lodge. Our main targets were **Yellow Bittern**, **Sooty Gull** and **Sooty Falcon**. Only Bittern was my target bird.

Early morning May 27 we walked first to Wadi Lahami mangroves. The wind was rather strong and from north. We tried to hear Yellow Bittern. Mikko, Jorma and Mohamed heard it calling few times but I missed it. Due to wind I did not separate its call.

After breakfast we decided to make a half day trip to Bir Shaletin. Our target was to see and photograph **Lapped-face Vulture**. Just a bit south of Wadi Lahami was a military checkpoint where they needed a photocopy of our passport. We had to return our resort to get those copies until we could go on. Altogether it took more than two hours to drive there with all the hassles. Note that you cannot cross the checkpoint before 9am.

We were luckily in time in Bir Shaletin when we were searching vultures. We found first ones on the eastern side of this world end dirty camel market village. We found 4 different Lapped-face Vultures and 5 Egyptian Vultures in different ages.









The village had also a large flock of 200 Brown-necked Ravens, few tens of Laughing and Collared Doves but hardly anything else. Except camels!



We noticed a flock of **Crowned Sandgrouses** (6 males, 2 females) in the shadow of an acacia tree on our return by the main road towards north.

After returning our resort in Wadi Lahami we had some rest until 4.30pm we were again in the mangroves to try to hear (and possible see) **Yellow Bittern**. I heard once a call after 5pm. Mikko and Jorma heard a bit later another call which I missed when I was watching Green Heron behind our watching point. We did not hear any other calls in spite of playing tape.



We were waiting by the mangrove lagoon to hear/see Yellow Bittern in the evening light.



Purple Heron was flying and sitting nearby us giving a large size impression in the beginning. Certainly Goliath Heron was in our hope to see.



Few Brown-necked Ravens were near our resort buildings.



*A single adult **Sooty Gull** was among tens of **White-eyed Gulls** by the diving resort shores.*

A nice **Barbary Falcon** made an evening hunting over the lagoon causing horror among doves in the mangrove area.

In our last morning (May 28) we went again very early to the lagoon and spent there 3 hours without hearing any sign of Yellow Bittern. We were then photographing local birds and enjoying our last morning in the area.



A local "Mangrove" Olivaceous Warbler (*ssp aluensis*) has a distinct song. At least 5 birds were singing near our watching area.



A single 2cy **Striated Heron** was flying across the lagoon few times and sitting for a while on a rock.





A flock of around 50 Swifts suddenly came to fly over the lagoon area. Most of them were Pallid Swifts (upper) but at least 5 Common Swifts (lower) we could find among them.



*An adult **Sooty Gull** was flying by the shores of the diving resort.*



We stayed in Wadi Lahami diving resort in these nice buildings which were very convenient and cool inside in spite of hot temperature outside.



Wadi Lahami diving resort common facilities have nice covered area and on the back is their restaurant. At least fish meals both evenings were excellent. In overall we had full 3 meal package included in the accommodation price.



As the name says, it is a diving resort and most customers are divers. Here the group is just leaving to their next dive tour to the sea and nearby coral reefs.

In the last morning after our breakfast we visited also Hamata mangroves a bit north of Wadi Lahami, photo below. It is a larger mangrove area with small islands and open areas.



There we saw two pairs of **Sooty Falcons** which were flying a bit far away in their territories. One of them made a short visit quite near. Below is a documentary shot of the falcon.





*When watching **Sooty Falcons** hunting we noticed a group of 5 **Crab Plovers** feeding and moving to closer of us. They allowed us to photograph for a while until they noticed us and took off.*

From Hamata we returned our Wadi Lahami resort, packed our luckages, paid our bills and we were ready to drive back to Hurghada airport. The drive took around 5 hours, plus few short stops.

We made quick stop when we noticed two young **Lanners** by the road south of Marsa Alam.



*Two young **Lanners** were posing very well to us until they took off and flew towards inland.*



The same site had also a male Masked Shrike sitting nicely on a dead tree.

We arrived 7.30pm in Hurghada airport. We thanked Mohamed for his excellent driving, guiding and all arrangements he had made for us. We can highly recommend him if you plan to make a birding trip to Egypt. Additionally we had very nice discussions about Egypt history and culture during our long drives. Our trip succeeded well though it would have been good to have additional 1-2 days for such a trip. Especially our long drive May 26 would have been better to cut in two parts and spend the night in Hurghada.

We have again night flight via Istanbul to Helsinki where we arrived around noon on May 29.

During the trip we saw altogether 97 species. I got my 4 target WP species, Jorma got 9 new WP species and Mikko few more. This trip was mainly dedicated to get those target species which we were missing on those areas. Thus, Nile valley south of Luxor was excluded.

In Jorma Tenovuo blog (May 2019) the trip is written in Finnish. His photo gallery shows well nice set of photos.