

Sharm El Sheikh (Sharks Bay) 3rd to 17th August 2009

A family holiday with a bit of birding thrown in, a report by Colin Manville

In keeping with the family desire not to have to dry oneself after getting out of a swimming pool, Sharm was chosen as our summer holiday destination due to its ridiculously high summer temperatures. Well actually Ras Nusrani (marketed as Sharks Bay) as it is very nice situated 10km north of Na'ama, adjacent to the airport. We stayed at the Baron Palms. I tell you this not to be flash, location is important, and I lucked in with location. Having selected our destination, my target birds were determined, but I seriously doubted I would achieve the full list.

As this was a human holiday, birding was not a priority. I made do with the lightweight "I am not going birding – honest!" kit. Therefore I took my Leica binos, pocket swaro binos (for Cairo), pocket scope and a Pentax Lumix point and snap for record shots.

I researched every trip report I could find, most are no longer useful, particularly at this time of year. However Richard Bonser's report was helpful in setting expectations as was the report at <http://www.wolfstad.com/2007/10/storks-falling-from-the-sky-at-sharm-el-sheikh-sewage-ponds-in-egypt/> This report was particularly useful the author has provided an annotated satellite image of the sewage works northwest of Na'ama.

Essentially my plan was to hire a car in the second week, go to the sewage works as many times as necessary morning and evening, St Katherine's Monastery once, and a boat trip round Tiran Island and Ras Mohammed for seabirds. Well, that was the plan. As it turned out, the Baron Palms is located on the beach and you can throw a medium sized child at Tiran Island and have a good chance of hitting it. Sea birds would not be an issue. However the car hire was! The reps for the big UK tour companies were unhelpful with regard to hiring a car preferring you to use their own tours. The hotel concierge came up with a quote which would have made a day trip to St Katharine's £180. As an alternative they offered a hotel limo for £60 for the sewage works and St K's an eye watering £250. After checking on line with Avis who had no cars available in Sharm I tried my luck at the Hotel Coral Sea taxi rank which was next door.

First taxi driver on the rank claimed to know the "dirty water place into the desert from the Marriot" and would take me there, wait for two hours and bring me back. It would cost about £10, I was so pleased I couldn't be arsed to haggle. Mohamed gave me his card and we arranged a time. We met at the agreed date and time and off we went as far as the Marriot in Na'ama. At this point he looked confused and pointed at every building in turn. Fortunately I had the aforementioned map and he accepted me to giving him directions. We arrived at the track to the sewage works by the police checkpoint at the plantation end. He would not actually drive up the track, which I could understand with dusk approaching. The birding was decent with both Spotted and Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse being observed. I was particularly pleased with my decision to base myself at the plantation end of the works because as darkness fell, a spotlight on the admin/pump building lit up the nearest pools and the Lichtenstein's nicely. I was also pleased I took a small torch for the walk back to the checkpoint and the taxi. Not to help me find my way, but to make me visible to the hundreds of quad bikers who use the same track for their desert adventure.

Fresh from my success, we agreed he would pick me up at six the following morning for another visit. He didn't turn up. Aargh! I couldn't believe he didn't want my business. I was after all paying his price. On a hunch I checked the Arabic word for morning "sop" and went to the taxi rank in the evening. Sure enough there was Mo. After some mock grumpiness and repeating "morning" and "sop" many times, we agreed to go at six tomorrow "sop". Bingo, we both arrived at six the following morning. Now Mo actually knew where to go, we took the express route from the airport and got there in 15 mins. This time he drove right up to the embankment of the settlement



tanks which was a result as I wanted to get back for breakfast with the family. Generally the same species of birds as in the evening visit were present plus the target Crowned Sandgrouse. I had read in a couple of trip reports that the Sandgrouse fly in at 7:30. I didn't realise that you could set your watch by them. They landed on the embankment reasonably near me and I managed some really rubbish record shots. They then flew down to the desert floor but although I got fairly close, I concentrated on looking rather than taking pictures. Job done, back for breakfast.

I used Mo for general taxi duties with the family as he drove uncharacteristically carefully. So I asked him how much to St K's Monastery. \$100US was the answer. Yep, I accepted his price as by now I trusted him and his almost new car. We agreed to meet at six "after tomorrow sop". I didn't want to get there too early. He drove at the speed of light and we were there by just past eight having travelled 250kms. Fortunately I had taken the trouble to find out the Arabic word for stop "o-af" to ensure that in a birding crisis we both knew what to do. I tested him on a Kestrel near the airport. He stopped, I made a show with my binos and showed him a picture in my "Collins". (I took a copy of "Birds of the Middle East and North Africa" for distribution maps and text, but for ID I prefer the Collins). He now understood what I was doing, so that when we came across a couple of Sooty Falcons in a mountain pass, Mo got me into a decent position so that I could get brilliant views.

St K's worked out much better than I anticipated. I mooched around the outside of the gardens from



8:15 to about 9:15 netting Scrub Warbler, Tristram's Starling, Rock Martin, White crowned Wheatear, Black Wheatear and a couple of really dodgy Orphean like Warblers that I was really unhappy with the views and frankly, the ID. However, I really needed to push on up the track for Sinai Rosefinch and Desert Lark before it got too hot as it was already in the mid 30's. All of the pilgrims had long since gone and I had the mountain to myself - and a few Bedouins. I had brilliant close views of both of the desired species before I had covered 200 meters. I pushed on up the mountain until the larks and finches ran out. The silence was disturbingly profound, so at about 10:30 I turned round and made my

descent. Birding on the way down, I reached the Monastery at 11:00 ish, there was no one about and I got excellent views of all of the previously mentioned birds. Having plenty of time on my hands and with the locals not bothering me I clinched the ID of the two dodgy Warblers as Arabian Warblers, closely followed by a pair of Spectacled Bulbuls. Walking round the monastery garden wall at the northern (car park) where the bushes are at eye level afforded me perfect views of a second pair of Arabian Warblers. This seemed a good time to leave as the temperature was now over 40c. I even managed to tick Mourning Wheatear and Hooded Wheatear en route back to my hotel.

Monastery Garden ↑

Sinai Rosefinch (F) →





As I had previously mentioned, the Baron Palms hotel is located on a private beach with its own coral reef opposite Tiran Island which was massively important. Early on in our two week stay low tide was in the afternoon. This meant that there was good passage along the Gulf of Aqaba of White eyed Gulls, Tern species and Brown Booby in the morning with a decent roost of gulls on the dead coral at low tide in the afternoon. At the very end of our stay, low tide was at 7:00 in the morning affording brilliant views of roosting gulls and terns right outside the hotel. This was particularly satisfying as my sea watching had been curtailed due to me leaving my tiny "Hawke" spotting scope in the afternoon sun.

The glue retaining the zoom lens eyepiece melted and the lens collapsed into the eyepiece when I attempted to clean it. That is not to say it is a poor device. It had cost virtually nothing and it had been a veteran of many hot campaigns. I should have been more careful but I had been left scopeless! Fortunately it turned out I pretty much didn't need it other than for the water treatment works which I had already completed.

There are very few birds around the local hotels and apart from the abundant Sparrows, Laughing Doves and the odd Kestrel. The only relief was provided by Bee-Eaters and a juvenile Rose-coloured Starling which hung around for at least two days. So I persuaded the family to take a boat trip to Ras Mohammed ostensibly for the snorkelling, which frankly wasn't as good as the reef outside the hotel. Sharm harbour had only one White eyed Gull in residence and an Osprey on the harbour outer marker. The days cruise provided only four Lesser Crested Terns and a pair of White eyed Gulls. The only real highlight was the sight of approx 800 White Stork wheeling in the air as we passed the water treatment works on the way to the harbour. And if I had a working scope I may have identified 30 white blobs roosting on the beach in a bay by the mangroves at Ras Mohammed. We also flew to Cairo to tick a pyramid, sphinx and the museum. What a shite hole, but it did net me the local race of Barn Swallow (Savignii) and a few heron/egret species on the Nile.

In conclusion I was very pleased with the birding. Prior to the holiday I had become very concerned after reading trip reports implying it was too hot for birding, the birds were elusive during the day etc. However I ticked all of my target species getting excellent views into the bargain without any real difficulty and without annoying my family. Admittedly my task was made easier with the seabirds coming to me. All in all I would thoroughly recommend this area even in August for a holiday with a bit of birding thrown in, as long as you are happy with the temperature at 40c.

A species list follows, but if you need any specific information on Sinai in August, contact me at cmanville@fsmail.net and I will try to help.

Sharks Bay (Baron Palms)

House Sparrow (Common)
 Laughing Dove (Common)
 Common Kestrel (Common)
 Feral Pigeon (Common)
 European Bee-eater (4 on 4th, 6 on 5th, 2 on 9th, 1 on 11th)
 Rose-coloured Starling (1 juv 8th and 9th)
 Rock Martin (2 on 8th)
 White eyed Gull (Common everyday with 155 roosting on the exposed coral on 5th)
 Sooty Gull (1 on 15th)
 Caspian Tern (1 on 8th)
 Greater Crested Tern (1 on 4th, 1 on 6th, 1 on 7th)



Lesser Crested Tern (3 on 6th, 7 on 7th, 6 on 12th, 24 on 15th)
Bridled Tern (2 on 4th, 1 on 9th)
White Cheeked Tern (10 on 4th, 11 on 6th, 1 on 7th, 12 on 12th, 2 on 15th, 2 on 16th)
Reef Heron – White (1 on 4th, 2 on 15th, 1 on 16th)
Striated Heron (2 on 5th, 1 on 6th, 1 on 8th, 1 on 9th, 1 on 15th, 2 on 16th)
Brown Booby (1 on 4th, 2 on 7th, 1 on 9th)
Kingfisher (2 on 12th)

Water Treatment Works NW of Na'ama

Mallard (1 fem) (1 on 7th, 1 on 9th)
Little Egret (4 on 7th)
Western Reef Heron (1 on 7th, 1 on 9th)
Grey Heron (1 on 7th)
White Stork (53 on 7th, 80 on 9th, 800 on 9th)
Glossy Ibis (1 on 7th)
Kestrel (1 on 9th)
Black winged Stilt (1 on 7th, 1 on 9th)
Spur-winged Plover (20+ on 7th)
Dunlin (1 on 7th)
Common Sandpiper (5 on 7th, 6 on 9th)
Wood Sandpiper (1 on 7th, 1 on 9th)
Marsh Sandpiper (1 on 7th, 1 on 9th)
Temminck's Stint (6 on 9th)
Spotted Sandgrouse (4 on 7th at 7pm)
Crowned Sandgrouse (11 on 9th at 7:30 am)
Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse (2 on 7th at 8pm)
Collard Dove (5 on 7th, 1 on 9th)
Brown Necked Raven (1 on 7th, 80 on 9th)
Hooded Crow (1 on 9th)

Cairo- 10th August

House Sparrow, Laughing Dove, Squacco Heron, Little Egret, Cattle Egret all very common
Night Heron 1, Pied Kingfisher 2, Barn Swallow 2

St Katherine's Monastery- 13th August

Sooty Falcon (2 approx 35km NE of St K's)
Hooded Wheatear (1 at military checkpoint, 1 at monastery)
White-Crowned Black Wheatear (c6)
Black Wheatear 2
Mourning Wheatear (1 taking shade 5km NE of monastery)
Laughing Dove (Common)
Rock Dove (Common)
Rock Martin (3+)
Tristram's Starling (3 in monastery garden)
Arabian Warbler (4 in monastery garden)
Spectacled Bulbul (2 in monastery garden)
Scrub Warbler (2 adjacent to monastery garden)
Desert Lark (9)
Sinai Rosefinch (c14)

Sharm El Sheikh Harbour- & sea cruise to Ras Mohammed 14th August

Rock Martin 2
Brown Necked Raven 2
Osprey 1
White Eyed Gull 1 (plus 2 from boat)
Lesser Crested Tern (4 from boat)

Nabq Protectorate (to mangroves) 15th August

Brown Necked Raven 10

Osprey 1

Kestrel 6

Collard Dove 3

Reef Egret, 2 sub adult.