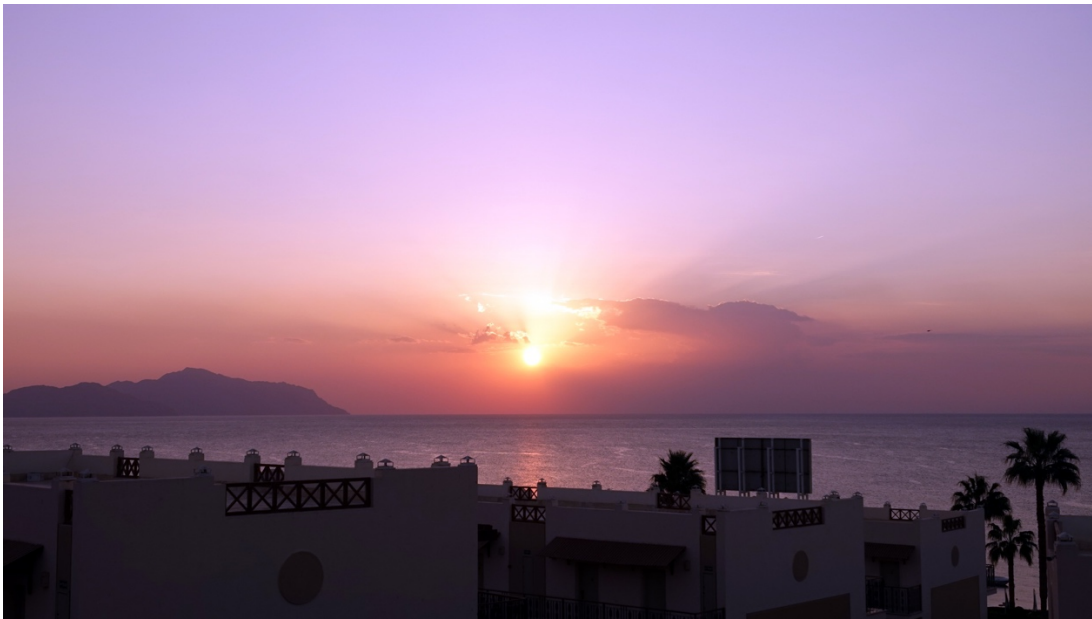


Sharm El Sheik revisited December 2024

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Sharm El Sheikh Sunset

We took a 5-day trip to Sharm El Sheikh with our younger son and his girlfriend. The focus was birds, not snorkelling, to make up for not making it to Ras Mohamed when I was last there in April 1980 (I got turned back by the Israelis at the outskirts of Sharm as we attempted to visit Ras Mohamed where terns of species I had not seen were said to abound). I made it back 44 years later! A Bluethroat greeted us under a hedge as we exited the runway for the terminal building. However, this good start took a quick downturn.



Gates of Allah – Ras Mohamed

Our first hurdle was Customs Officers who were adamant that I couldn't bring in my optical equipment (a non-published rule!). They said they would look after it and return it when we left. This was never going to happen! I told the tour rep to sort it, or we would go home and that all that we have paid must be refunded because no notice of this issue was in their publicity. In fact, it mentions that bird watching is encouraged. Work to do there then! Thankfully, after a prolonged discussion Customs relented, but made it clear that I was to keep away from military areas, which I happily agreed to do.

A review of the internet did not reveal any recent travels or hints on guides, so we had to leave that until we checked in at the hotel. Sand buggy birdwatching trips are run but not in winter. Not sure I wanted sand all over my optics anyway, but the opportunity didn't exist.

E-bird was short of records for 2024, so we were left to find the birds ourselves.



Spanish Sparrows

Suspecting that on, or close to, military areas was where I wanted to go, we searched the internet and sought help from Falcon Adventure Excursions <https://falconadventure.com/> who were truly helpful at short notice and gained us permits to the Water Treatment Plant (2 hour trip £40), Ras Mohamed and Nabq Nature Reserve (each £100 per 8 hour day). Their driver Islam spoke good English, was cheerful, accommodating, even pointing out birds and helped us navigate the many check points (i.e. when our optics and cameras should disappear - not in the boot which was always checked, but within the car) and he always drove safely. A result!

18 December – a quick morning walk around our hotel the Concorde EL Salam Hotel, Sharm El Sheikh produced Bluethroat 2, Hoopoe 5, Laughing Doves, Black-shouldered Kite nonchalantly sat in a bush and the next day was on a chimney pot in front of our hotel room!



Black-shouldered Kite

The ubiquitous Cattle Egret on the short, watered grass. House crows are well established and duck into the restaurant through gaps in the netting to stop them to raid unattended tables! Hooded Crows are a little less bold and look great in the sun rather than the murk of Scotland. Pale Crag Martins were nest inspecting and often directly overhead. White wagtails strut about looking strangely large. Chiffchaff the only warbler. Common Myna around the market just outside the hotel.

Sharm El Sheik Water Treatment plant (situated west and slightly north of the airport): 11.30-13.30

Not the two pools up to which you could drive in 1980, but now totally concreted and behind a high fence with many large rectangular pools with the need to pass through a Police check point. It proudly displays Watch Point, Migratory Bird protection area, but entry today not possible. We parked at the highest point on the road by the fence and peered through.

There were a lot of White Storks somewhere between 500 and 2000. E-bird thinks that's high but through a fence with birds distant on undulating ground falling out of sight is my best estimate. Eagles were plentiful with up to 20 in the air near and far and sat in trees and on the ground. There were certainly Steppe Eagles. Many spot backed juveniles but also much older birds. I needed Dick Forsman! Also, juvenile Eastern Imperials with streaked chest and darker tertials. I suspected one bird to be a young Greater Spotted Eagle. And the one Buteo a Long-legged Buzzard. It's not easy on your own and jet lagged to boot, but great fun. The air was full of Pale Crag Martins, low and high over the crags. Amongst them parties of Pallid Swifts chasing each other. 3 Brown-necked Ravens put in a show. Just for fun the White Storks would rise and

join the mele in parties of 50 or more and then return to the roost. I suspect feeding areas are beyond the very small area we covered in the time we were in Sharm.



Eastern Imperial Eagle

Looking out over the pools was challenging through the fence but a large blob of Coot also contained Green-winged Teal. Black-winged Stilts with this year's young and Spur-winged Plovers maybe 20 of each were sat on the banks, along with Common Sandpiper, Grey Wagtail and Pied Wagtails.

Back at the hotel the Black-winged Kite was now sat on a chimney pot in front of our apartment!

19 December - a long wait fulfilled!

First a quick pre-breakfast walk around the gardens with now the usual suspects of Cattle Egret, Bluethroat and Hoopoe. A small flock of House Sparrows in a flower bed now contained Spanish Sparrows as well.

At 08.00 we were picked up at the gate by Islam our driver for the next two days. Clearly punctual he spoke good English and was keen to try to fulfil my ambition. A half an hour drive to the Ras Mohamed Nature Reserve. 3 check points to go through then down to the sea, but where to watch? When you get there it's always bigger and less than obvious.

Roadside Wheatears included 1 Hooded, 3 Mourning and the more common White-crowned 10. 2 Brown-necked Ravens, 2 Desert Lark, 2 Ospreys and a Kestrel whetted our appetite.

We went right but other than a distant flock of 27 Shelduck this didn't get us to the shore. So, left it was to the Gates of Allah, built after the 1973 incursion by Israel.

Here sat Police guards keeping an eye on the tour groups that appear every 20 minutes. Clearly a money spinner for the tour companies! We drove a kilometre further down the road and then watched from behind the car so as not to attract unwelcome attention.

Here we spotted the first small mangroves and on two of the three sticks sticking out of the water nearby sat the elusive Greater-crested Terns. So, it was still true! Mission accomplished and the rest of the day to go. On a small nearby sand bar sat an adult Caspian Tern and a small flock of Slender-billed gulls. Waders included 20 or so Dunlin, 2 Grey Plover, 5 Curlew, 2 Ringed Plover, 6 Kentish Plover. More terns were very distant feeding out to sea.

A drive further down the single road to Parque do Extremo Sul produced crystal clear waters. A fleet of dive boats out at sea. Along the way both light and dark phase Western Reef Egrets and Grey Heron and at the end our second target of an adult White-eyed Gull. Rock Martins a common companion at this time of year.



White-eyed Gull

It was hot and we were back at the hotel by 12.30. As we took lunch on the sea front a White-eyed Gull came in circled around the pool area and then left.

20 December - a pre-breakfast stroll produced similar birds including the BW Kite but with a Turtle Dove dashing through and 4 Common Myna's by the gate.

At 08.00 Islam was punctually waiting for us at the gate armed with our permits to visit Nabq Protected Area which lies to the east where, in 1980, I dodged land mines but managed to see a Terek Sandpiper. We were eager.

The desert is flat with distant ragged arid mountains. There are many tracks and, in some places, we had to leave the coast to avoid wet areas, but most of the way the sea is your neighbour and here and there are mangroves and sandy beaches with familiar waders. 10 species in all.



Greater Sandplover

Commonest are the Greater Sandplovers and Kentish Plovers. I'm pretty certain there were Tibetan Sandplovers amongst them, they are seen on the other side of the gulf but none of the photos I took are conclusive. I needed more time. Sadly, no herons were close, however we saw Grey, Western Reef in both phases and one Striated. Two Ospreys were close along with a Caspian Tern, Slender-billed Gull and a hovering Eurasian Kingfisher.

A male Black-crowned Finchlark flew low past, but was not seen to land. Larks seemed limited to Desert and the commoner wheatear today was Desert with a few White-crowned and Mourning.



Mourning Wheatear

Warblers other than Chiffchaff were frustrating amongst the sand filled scrub.

As we returned to Sharm, and just as we left the park, another BW Kite was sat in low bushes in the middle of the road.

55 species seen, none were new to me, but most were seen well and we did get time to have a massage, although no snorkelling!