

***CHARLES  
WHYMPER***



***EGYPTIAN  
BIRDS***

**Charles Whympers**

# **Egyptian Birds**

**For the most part seen in the Nile Valley**

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# FOREWORD

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THE question is so often asked, "What is the name of that bird?" that the author has tried in plainest fashion to answer such questions. The scientific man will find little that is new in these pages; they are not meant for him—they are alone meant for the wayfaring man who, travelling this ancient Egypt, wishes to learn something of the birds he sees.

C. W.

HOUGHTON, HUNTINGDONSHIRE,  
1909.

# EGYPTIAN BIRDS

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PLINY declares that it was by watching the flight of birds in general, and of the Kite in particular, that men first conceived the idea of steering their boats and ships with a tail or rudder, for, says he, "these birds by the turning and steering by their tails showed in the air what was needful to be done in the deep." Nowhere can the aerial movements of birds be better studied than on the Nile, and as one's eye becomes trained it is just by the varying individual methods of flight that one is often able to identify the particular species of birds. This is to the most casual observer self-evident in those birds that fly close, near, or over one's head; but it is astonishing how, as the eye gets trained, even a faint speck high up in mid-air can be absolutely identified by some peculiarity of shape and movement. On Plate 2 are some half-dozen different birds depicted as in flight, to assist the reader to identify the birds he will frequently see.

No. 1 is the ordinary Kite of Egypt. Seen as soon as one lands at Alexandria or Port Said: it is with us everywhere. Its most distinctive characteristics are the forked shape of its tail, and its familiarity with man, the latter leading it to have no sort of fear of flying near one, so near that its yellow beak and ever-restless eye, as it turns its head this way or that, can easily be seen, whilst its tail, moving in sympathy, sweeps it round to right or left.

No. 2 is the Kestrel, or Windhover of England. As this hawk is not a devourer of carrion, but feeds on mice, lizards, beetles, and other living things, it does not usually come so near the habitations of men, and is rarely seen in the centre of cities, but on the outskirts of towns and up the country it is common enough. When seen hovering with

its body hanging in mid-air, with its wings rapidly beating above its head as shown, there should be no difficulty in recognising it. Again, when flying low its rich brown-red plumage and sharp-pointed wings should be noted, and if seen dashing into some cleft of ruined masonry or rocky cliff-side it can often be identified by the incessant, penetrating, squeaky call of the young in the nest, for by the time most visitors are in the country, *i.e.* March and April, it has its young nearly fully fledged.

No. 3 is a Peregrine Falcon. In general shape this is typical of all the falcons, and gives a characteristic attitude in its rushing downward swoop. The head is blunt and sunk into the shoulders, the wings are stiff, rigid, pointed and powerful, the tail straight and firm.

Nos. 4 and 5 are Vultures shown flying farther away from the spectator's eye, and consequently on a smaller scale. The black and white of the adult Egyptian Vulture, No. 4, is such a distinctive characteristic that recognition is easy, but in the case of the young bird the plumage is dirty brown and grey with faint dark streaks on it, and at that stage might be confused with Griffon Vultures, if it were not for its smaller size. In flying, the way it tucks its head in so that only its bill seems visible, and the very small tail in proportion to the wing area, are the outstanding peculiarities of this, and indeed all Vultures.

No. 5 shows a distant group of Griffons, purposely placed at a distance, as on the small space of a page, if they were brought as near the eye as the other birds, they would completely cover the whole space, for they have an enormous span of wing. Note how small the tail is, and how the head is practically invisible.

Nos. 6 and 7 are of different orders of birds altogether, one being a Stork, the other the Heron. The Storks fly with outstretched neck, whilst all of the great family of Herons

fly with their neck doubled up and the head rather tucked back towards the shoulders.

If these seven characteristic diagrammatic pictures of birds are once really learnt, it will enable the most ordinary observer not only to know those particular six birds, but the whole families, meaning many scores of birds of which these are chosen as representatives. The eyesight of some may need help in the form of a good field-glass. What is a good field-glass each individual must discover for him or herself, since the good glass is the one that really suits the sight of its owner. Some of the most noted glasses of to-day are not, anyhow to myself, of as much use as an old-fashioned one that I have had for years, and with which I am able *at once* to "get on" to the object I wish to observe. This is a most important detail, because birds are rarely still or quiet for long. When flying, this is particularly the case, and the simpler the glass and its mechanism the quicker you are on the object—and this when, perhaps, you have only a matter of seconds for your observation is of first importance. As I do not wish either to embark on a libel action on the one side, or act as an advertiser of any maker, not even of the maker of my own glass, I praise or blame none, but suggest with all earnestness to every one who desires to really enjoy the study of bird life on the Nile or in their own country, without fail to get a glass that suits them, and which they can handle with lightning speed. I dwell on this because I have met so many having most expensive modern glasses who say they cannot find any pleasure in using them on birds, and I generally find that it is owing to the small field that their glasses cover. Sometimes these glasses are of quite extraordinary power, so that I have heard a man declare he could see a fly crawling over a carved face on the tip-top of some far-away temple, but that type of glass is not what is wanted for rough and ready quick field work, and it is of no more use

than the three-feet long telescope still beloved by the Scotch stalkers. Birds rarely if ever allow time for one to lie down on one's back, and with help of stout stick and the top of knee make a firm stand on which to place the glass and get the range. Over twenty-five years ago I wrote on "Nature through a Field-glass,"<sup>[1]</sup> and although since then one has had to alter one's views on so many different points, I do not think I would wish to alter one single word in the claim made for the value of this aid to Nature study. So many birds are such small objects, that ten or fifteen paces away they are mere spots, and very difficult to recognise, as the detail of their plumage at that distance is lost, and all you can say is, that it is some small bird, but with a glass you can have it brought up to your very eye, you can see the arrangement of the masses of the feathers, and note even the ever lifting and falling of its little crest, as it goes creeping and stealthily gliding through the twigs and bushes after its insect food.

[1] In *The Art Journal*.

Egypt certainly is singularly fortunate in that birds here are far tamer than we find them at home, and so admit of a closer inspection; but even so, I should have been, times without number, utterly at a loss to exactly identify certain birds if it were not for my trusty glasses. There are some occasions where, owing to the extraordinary tameness of birds, no glasses are needed, and I recommend to all bird enthusiasts the ground within the areas under the control of the Antiquities Department. No guns are allowed there, as they are up and down the Nile, and the birds know it. One of my favourite places of observation was at the Sacred Lake at Karnac. By the courtesy of Mr. Weigall, Chief Inspector of Antiquities, Upper Egypt, I was allowed to sleep in a disused building by the water-side, and by that means enjoyed opportunities, which fall to the lot of few, of studying bird life from midnight to early morning, and it is astonishing the number of birds that foregather to that quiet spot. Practically all night through there were sounds of birds coming or going at intervals. The calling of Coots one to another were the commonest sounds during the darkest hours; but at about 3 A.M., when I thought I could discern a little light, I would distinctly hear the "scarpe scarpe" cry of Snipe. A little later the hooting of the Eagle Owl, whom I knew had his nest up on the top of one of the end columns of the great hall, and then gradually from this side, then from that, came an ever-increasing series of calls and pipings, and one could make out flocks of Duck disappearing over the ridge of sand and broken-up masses of masonry. Later, shadowy forms of Greenshank or Plover showed as they went paddling by some faintly lighted-up pool, till at last the sun was up, and crested Larks were running round the banks fearlessly, and blue-throated warblers were hopping about the few bushes at the edge,

and ever and anon flitting down to the ground and back again to the leafy shelter.

The question is asked and asked, but no very distinct answer comes, why are the birds so tame in Egypt? I am at a loss to know myself, for the land teems with foxes, jackals, kites, vultures, eagles, falcons, and hawks without end, all with an eye to business, ever circling round ready to devour any unprotected thing they can lay claws upon, and yet this seemingly utter fearlessness of all these mild-natured, defenceless little birds. Further, here in Egypt are perhaps more "demon boys" than are to be found elsewhere, and I hold firmly with the ancient sage, who said "that of all savage beasts the boy is the worst," so that the tameness of some of Egypt's birds is one more mystery of this land of mysteries.

In the following pages I have almost entirely spoken of the particular birds pictured in the illustrations. I am quite prepared for the question, however, "But why did you not include such and such a bird?" and my defence can only be the old one of the difficulty of settling various person's ideas of what should be considered the best representative list of anything—whether it be birds, books, or pretty women. It must also be remembered that Egypt proper—the area alone treated upon in these pages—begins at Alexandria and ends at Assuan, a stretch of country of about 525 miles, whilst the breadth may be anything from fifty miles to less than one. From that area our selection has had to be mainly confined, and it has meant excluding a certain number of very beautiful and interesting forms.

Bird lovers should remember that when the, at first, seemingly rather extortionate demand of 120 piastres is made, before they are given the card which admits them to the temples, tombs, and areas under the control of the Antiquities Department, they are, in a very important way, really helping on the preservation of birds, for, as already

has been said, on no ground under the control of the Department are birds allowed to be shot, and as these spots are the very ones in all Egypt most visited, it is very necessary, as amongst the thousands of tourists that are made familiar with the fact that wild duck, snipe, and waders were very tame at these places, there would always be some unsportsmanlike guns, who would seize the opportunity of going to those very places. Then no longer would the hooting of owls be heard in the ruins, no swallows nesting in the rock-hewn tombs, and no coot and wildfowl would ever be seen on the small sheets of water or sacred lakes that adjoin the temples. That all these birds are there means a very great added interest to these places to every one, and to some of us bird enthusiasts the living interest is greater than that which we can whip up for those heavy, severe, architectural achievements, or wild chaotic masses of ruined masonry.

Elsewhere the point of the scarcity of bird life in the hot summer months has been spoken of, but it is also curious to note that there are just about three to five weeks of mid-winter during which there is no migratory wave seemingly going on at all, up or down the Nile valley. No bands, great or small, of birds heading due north or due south are ever to be seen, and the remark is often made on the paucity of bird life, some persons even declaring that it is "a birdless land." That the native birds are very small in number is true, but the total number of birds, and varieties of birds, that come for a time and pass on is very great. Those that live in temperate climates do, however, have the best of the deal, as it must ever be a greater



**A VIEW ON THE NILE NEAR MINIEH**

possession to have the birds nesting around one than merely passing by in migrating flights, be those flights as amazing as they may. Birds, from whatever reason is not certainly known, do not love the excessively hot or cold areas as breeding-places, but do seem to love the more moderate temperate climes. In Great Britain the number of birds that will and do breed within a very small tract of ground is amazing, and Mr. Kearton tells of a small copse in Hertfordshire in which were the nests, with eggs or young, of nine different species of birds, all within fifty yards of one another; and in another case, within a space of ten yards, were a tit's, a flycatcher's, and a wood wren's nest. In Egypt, the number of birds breeding is not large, and excepting some of the great lakes with their margins of shallow water and swampy reeds, there are few places that offer any attractions for birds to nest in any numbers. In the groves of palms you do get many doves building in close proximity with kites and crows, and along certain stretches of the Nile banks large colonies of sand-martins build, but with these exceptions the fact remains that this country has not a large list of birds breeding in any numbers. In the great lakes of Lower Egypt and the Fayoum there are, however, enormous areas of some of the best feeding-grounds imaginable for water-fowl, and the

fowl know it; nowhere can be seen more variety of duck, and herons, and waders, and shore birds, than at Lake Menzaleh. Elsewhere, I have already referred to my visit in March and April to this little known part of Egypt, and I wish that those who say this is "a birdless land," would only go and stay a few days at Kantara, Matariya, Damietta or Port Said, and then see if they could still call it "birdless." The extreme north and east side of the lake is separated only from the Mediterranean by a narrow bank of sand. Its waters are brackish, the Nile contributes but little to its bulk, and the opinion is largely held that if it could be made to contribute more, the food supply for the fish in it would be considerably increased, to the very great benefit of the fish supply of the country. Every village and town on the lake has many fishermen with boats out night and day. They catch a very large quantity, but it is said every year the size of the fish caught is steadily decreasing, and to increase the food-supply for the fish is now the aim of the authorities. This matter does not immediately affect the birds, as they love the small fry, but if Lake Menzaleh were to once lose its value as a supplier of profitable fish food, it might come to pass that some future engineer would turn his attention to this great area of waste water, and turn it into profitable cultivated ground, and then the birds would be driven away here as completely as they were in England when our fens and meres were drained to make good corn land. Therefore, this proposal to let in more Nile water is of much importance to Menzaleh remaining the great stronghold of bird life in Egypt. At present the spectacle it presents of its crowds of birds seen under the almost constant blue sky, is one that all would be very sorry to lose. The Flamingo come as its crowning glory, but the list of birds is long, and Mr. M. J. Nicoll tells how in only one week's stay, at Gheit-el-Nassara, on the north-west side of the lake, he met with no less than eighty-seven species. The ordinary visitor to Egypt hurries away from Alexandria or

Port Said, but any who love Nature ought to leave a few days for places other than the Nile, if they are to obtain anything at all like a complete knowledge of Egyptian Birds.

# THE GRIFFON VULTURE<sup>[2]</sup>, *Gyps fulvus*

Arabic, *Rakham*.

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Head and neck bare of fine feathers, but covered with short white down. Lower part of the neck surrounded by a ruff of long, thin, lance-shaped feathers, generally but not always white; sometimes it is buffish, sometimes rich rufous; wings at shoulders are light greyish brown, getting darker to nearly black on the large flight feathers. Breast and flanks grey, brown under tail-coverts a brighter burnt-sienna tone. Legs dull grey; base of beak yellow. Young birds are generally duller and lighter coloured than adults.

Length, 48 inches, but individuals vary greatly.

THIS is the Vulture so constantly depicted on the monuments of Egypt, and I do not think that any one has ever raised the slightest doubt of its identity; but the same can hardly be said of all the birds thereon figured.

[2]

### EAGLES, VULTURES, HAWKS

Many different arrangements have been made of the order in which birds should be placed, some placing one, others, another family first, and the wise men are even yet not all agreed, so that the old-time method has been adopted of beginning with the birds of prey, since it is probably the order with which the ordinary reader is most familiar.

Eagles are not common, and though in the complete list of Egyptian birds the names of four are given, it is hardly likely to be a bird seen, whilst Vultures and Kites, and certain Hawks, most certainly will be.



**GRIFFON VULTURE**

Mr. Howard Carter, whose long connection with the work of the Antiquities of Egypt gives him the right to speak with authority, is now preparing for publication a book on this whole subject of the portrayal of animal life by Egyptian art, which is awaited with great interest, as he has given years of study to this one branch; and though I may venture to say something now and again of the present-day birds, and their pictured presentments in temples or tombs, the reader will do well to wait till Mr. Carter's book is published before coming to too positive a conclusion on a rather vexed subject. Of the Vulture there is no doubt, but of which of the existing hawks was the model of the Hawk almost as frequently depicted as the Vulture few are agreed, and personally I can arrive at no very satisfactory conclusion.



**Fig. 1.**  
**GYPS FULVUS—GRIFFON VULTURE.**  
**From a monument of Nectanebo in the Louvre.**

The Griffon Vulture is common now, and probably always has been. Its usefulness is undeniable, and it practically does no harm. It takes no toll of lambs or kids, and I never have heard of it snatching up the smallest of chickens. Its food is entirely carrion with the addition, possibly, of an occasional lizard or small snake. Vultures and Kites together are the very best of workmen, for the work they undertake they do absolutely thoroughly. No one has to go after them and clear up what they leave half-done, for they never leave anything half-done, be it a dead camel, or ten dead donkeys, or a mass of putrid offal from the shambles. They come; they see; they swallow; and not one speck or scrap of flesh or sinew will be left to-morrow on all those snow-white bones, and not the slightest sign of anything that can putrefy will even stain the ground; all is cleared away, and all corrupting danger gone by the time they have flown. They will remain all night through and the next day, if the job is a big one, and never dream of charging overtime! It is doubtless this that makes the natives of Eastern countries so unspeakably careless, as we think, of all sanitary precautions. They know that they need take no trouble; in a matter of hours, days at most, these winged scavengers will come, save them all bother and trouble, and clear the mess away. It is also this, one is disposed to think, and this alone, that is at the bottom of what to us seems an amazing fact, that they never destroy birds, so that even birds whose travels take them out of Egypt for a

season, returning, know that here anyhow they will not be molested, and show themselves familiarly where in other countries they would exhibit the very opposite tendency.

Of late years a change has undoubtedly taken place in some birds owing to the ever-increasing number of visitors, many of whom come with guns determined to get specimens. Birds are not fools, and the great Griffon in particular seems to have learnt that it behoves him to have a care, and distrust the too near approach of the white man who may desire to possess his great wings to mount as trophies: and one has heard of its becoming quite a difficult matter to get within range of these grand birds. Grand birds they are indeed when seen on the wing fairly near. When far up in mid-air they strike your imagination as mysterious, marvellous masters of the air, but see them close enough to make out their very feathers, and then no other word comes to your lips but, "What grand birds!" All the sleepy, dull, heavy look that they have when clumsily walking, half hopping, on the ground, or when sitting huddled up, at once disappears, and you acclaim the Griffon the king of flying things. A sea-gull, a swallow, an eagle, and many another, are all splendid in their graceful mastery over, and use of, the air we live in, but for sheer majesty of dominion I know no equal to the great Griffon Vulture.

One has often seen it on the sand-banks by the river's side, sitting perhaps, either dozing after a gorge or waiting for the late lamented to reach just that nice point which means dinner-time. Sometimes they mildly squabble amongst themselves; sometimes they advance open-mouthed on some late arrival who comes swooping down with feet and legs stretched out well in front of him. But on the whole, I think, after its flight, its one outstanding virtue is its sociability. We none of us quite like that person who shuns his fellows, and was never known to have any

gathering of friends even in simplest social fashion, and with birds there are some of those selfish kinds who prefer to live alone and feed alone, and absolutely resent any attempted sociability. But the Vulture, in spite of his rather forbidding face, is a downright sociable creature. On many a time one has seen Egyptian Vultures feeding with a dozen of their bigger cousins, who, when themselves well fed, have allowed even the despised crows to have some pickings from the feast.

Being tied up to a bank for two or three days during the Hamseen wind, which was blowing a perfect gale right in our teeth, I saw a curious sight of Vultures turning themselves into a sort of coroner's jury on a dead buffalo. In the centre of a little sheltered bay was the "dear departed," who was being closely examined and overhauled by a gaunt, sandy-coloured native dog. There he sat like a coroner growling out his observations, whilst the twelve—there were just a dozen Vultures—sat placidly waiting their turn for a closer study of the remains. They sat so long and patiently that one was surprised they did not end the matter in force, drive away the presiding officer, and get to real business, but we left them still waiting and seemingly discussing what was to be the verdict.

Whenever one has been taken to see a Vulture in captivity, either in hotel or other gardens, it has usually been this, the Griffon Vulture, that has been the unhappy captive.

# THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE

## Neophron percnopterus

*Racham*, Arabic

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White all over body, wings black, a curious fringe of long feathers round the head; these sometimes get stained a more or less strong yellow; bare parts round eye and beak, yellow. Legs pinky, eyes carmine red, but Shelley says they do not get the full red eye till their fourth year.

Entire length, 27 inches.

THIS vulture, as shown by the above description, is markedly different from the great Griffon Vulture, and there can be no possible mistake in recognising it. From the tail-piece, which is taken from a painting of one on the inside of a wooden outside coffin casing, one can easily see the peculiarities of this bird; and at Deir-el-Bahari there are many painted examples showing the bird more or less in its natural colours, the bright yellow of the bill is shown, and the dark wings are rendered in a dull green. Why they should render one colour by another seems strange, but here again we must wait till Mr. Howard Carter gives us his explanation of this and the many other points he is still patiently working out. The wonderful way in