

Israel

Migration Spectacle

Wednesday 09 March – Wednesday 16 March 2011

Leaders: Jonathan Meyrav and Nigel Jones

2011 Cost **£1,899** single room supplement **£200**



For such a small country, Israel possesses some of the most exciting birdwatching in the world. Forty years ago students of migration gathered at the Bosphorus in Turkey to watch tens, and occasionally hundreds, of storks and birds of prey passing overhead. Now Israel is the focus for migration watching, and it is possible to witness literally thousands of Steppe Buzzards and storks thermalling overhead as they head north to their breeding grounds. Also migrant waders and passerines abound near the salt-pans, date palms and alfalfa fields. Any time during the spring is worth visiting, but March is probably the most impressive in terms of both the quality of species present and the sheer number of birds. Resident species are also a great attraction, with healthy populations of Arabian Warbler, Sinai Rosefinch, Little Green Bee-eater, Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse and Tristram's Starling. Israel's attitude to conservation is the most enlightened in the Middle East, and consequently many birds are very tame, allowing good opportunities for photography.

Our tour is centred mainly around the head of the Red Sea, at Eilat, where the main migration is most evident. Our hotel is only a few minutes' walk from prime birding sites like the north beach, the southern salt pans and the Shulamit Gardens. We shall also have two nights at a hotel in the desert which gives us the chance to see some of the specialities such as Houbara (Macqueen's) Bustard and Cream-coloured Courser.

Throughout the tour we have the guidance of one of Israel's premier birders, Jonathan Meyrav, who will not only show us the birds of his country but also endeavour to explain the history and culture of this fascinating land. He is also one of the few guides permitted to take night-time forays to look for Hume's Tawny Owl and both Nubian and Egyptian Nightjars. Journey with us on our 14th tour, and see why this is a country that you will want to visit more than once.

ITINERARY

Days 1 to 5

We leave London Luton on a direct flight to Tel Aviv where we meet our local guide and transfer to our hotel. Next morning we head out to get our first taste of Israeli birds such as Laughing Dove, Spectacled Bulbul, Palestine Sunbird, House Crow, Tristram's Starling and Eurasian Hoopoe. The lawns and gardens near the hotel hold good numbers of migrant passerines. Chiffchaff and Eastern Bonelli's Warbler, Lesser and Common Whitethroats, Redstart (*sammimicus*), Wryneck, Yellow Wagtails, Masked Shrike and Rüppell's Warbler should all add a dash of colour. We spend the rest of the day exploring areas near Eilat and getting

acquainted with the more common species and sites. Depending on the weather we can head up to the Eilat Mountains targeting some scarce raptor migration. We should expect many birds of prey with the majority being Steppe Buzzards, with smaller numbers of Steppe Eagles, Black Kites, Egyptian Vultures, Osprey and Black Storks. During the morning in the mountains we should encounter some scarce residents of the desert like Trumpeter Finch, Sand Partridge, White-crowned Wheatear and Barbary Falcon. After lunch and a break during the heat of the day, we set out to the famous K19 and K20 pools. The variety and numbers of waders, ducks and gulls here can be astonishing and mid March has produced countless vagrants and rarities over the years.

We can scrutinize every bird as the chances of finding a real rarity here are high. Eilat's North Beach can add some Red Sea specialities like White-eyed Gull, Pied Kingfisher and Striated and Western Reef Herons to our list.

One morning we set out early to explore the open desert in search of sandgrouse and larks. Lark migration peaks during March, but numbers vary from year to year depending on rainfall. With the help of some local knowledge we should expect some five to six lark species including Greater Hoopoe Lark, Temminck's and Bar-tailed Desert Lark. Although sporadic, rare larks like Thick-billed, Dunn's plus Black-crowned Sparrow-lark are recorded every year but require both luck and timing. Besides larks,



Little Green Bee-eater



Trumpeter Finch

the open desert sites host migrant wheatears, pipits and buntings and with some luck we may find some scarcer migrants like Hill Sparrow or Cinereous Bunting. In the afternoon we will visit some local spots for species such as Sinai Rosefinch, Namaqua Dove, Little Green Bee-eater, migrant passerines and we can hopefully wrap up the day with a star bird, Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse as small flock come to slake their thirst at a favoured drinking site.

On another day we head north towards the Dead Sea. We stop at a special wadi along the way to search for the enigmatic Arabian Warbler and travel to an amazing raptor watch point, one of the best in the Western Palearctic, overlooking the Dead Sea. If we are lucky we may witness some tremendous northwards passage of eagles, buzzards and kestrels. We carry on looking for species which include Fan-tailed and Common Ravens, Dead Sea Sparrow and Smyrna Kingfisher. During the heat of the day we make time to relax and take a dip in the Dead Sea which is a real experience. In the evening we visit a special site for the enigmatic Nubian Nightjar. One of the rarest birds of the Western Palearctic region, these small nightjars are impossible to see without the help of a local guide and luckily Jonathan is one of only three guides with permits to show the birds.

Following the previous night's endeavours we have a relaxed morning and after breakfast at the hotel we travel to some more sites in the southern Arava Valley. We visit some lesser known migrant hotspots and catch up with scarcer migrants like Rüppell's, Eastern Orphean and Cyprus Warblers. After lunch and a break we carry on birding until the end of the day hopefully adding more species to our tally.

During the week we hope to be able to take a night tour in search of the rare Hume's Tawny

Owl. We leave before dusk and drive to a secluded wadi where there is a good chance of seeing this local rarity.

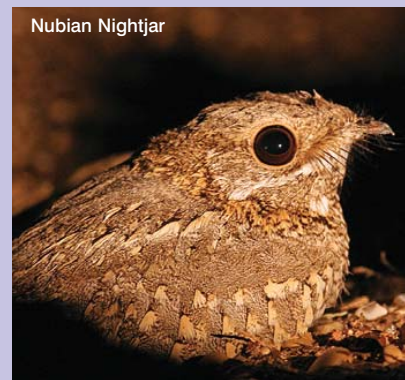
Days 6 & 7

We begin our two day sojourn to the Negev Desert today and leave our hotel in Eilat. We spend some of the day visiting special areas of the southern Negev plateau and higher reaches of the Negev. We pass through the famous Ramon Crater and besides the wealth of birds, the scenery here is breathtaking. This desert is very different and as such hosts specialities as Scrub Warbler, Arabian Babbler, Mourning and Desert Wheatears, Spotted Sandgrouse and more. We will visit a dramatic ravine that holds breeding Bonelli's Eagles, Egyptian and Griffon Vultures and check out some migrant hotspots where on previous tours we have found River, Yellow-browed and Hume's Warblers, Citrine Wagtail and Semi-collared Flycatcher.

We set out before sunrise in order to reach the Nizzana wilderness at first light. This is essential in order to find the enigmatic Houbara (Macqueen's) Bustard and Cream-coloured Courser before a heat haze makes birding difficult. The remainder of the morning is devoted to sandgrouse and with luck we should find Black-bellied, Crowned and Spotted, maybe in impressive numbers. The area is wild and interesting and we should also expect Little Owl (of the pale form liliith), Spectacled Warbler, many Chukar and more. The Western Negev area is the main flyway for White Stork and Lesser Spotted Eagles and we can hope for favourable conditions while we are here.

Day 8

We spend the final morning of our tour in the desert catching up on any species we might have missed. Later we head for the airport and catch our flight to London Luton, which arrives there later the same day.



Nubian Nightjar

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly to Tel Aviv and transfer to Eilat
Days 2-5	Eilat
Days 6-7	Negev
Day 8	Depart Tel Aviv

Party Size

Maximum of 12 clients (two leaders with more than six clients).

Accommodation

Comfortable accommodation in twin-bedded and single rooms, with private facilities.

Transport

By minibuses driven by the leaders.


Includes

All flights, meals, accommodation, transport, entry fees, services of the leaders, airport taxes and tips.


Gradings

 Good

 150

 Warm to Hot

 Low

 Special

 Moderate

 Good

 Easy

 Scheduled



Palestine Sunbird