

ORNITHOLIDAYS' TOUR TO ISRAEL
Migration Spectacle

09 – 16 March 2010



Black Bush-robin

© Chris Hewitt

Leaders: Jonathan Meyrav and Roger Lawrence

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A Personal Diary

Tuesday 09 March

On a very cold late-winter morning our group assembled at Heathrow's Terminal 5 for our BA flight to Israel. The group check-in was smooth and calm and we took off just a few minutes behind our scheduled time. With a tail wind we landed at Ben Gurion International Airport in Tel Aviv five minutes early.

Several flights had arrived simultaneously and the arrival hall was heaving with people but immigration was surprisingly swift and Jonathan was awaiting our arrival together with a colleague, Dan Alon from the Israel Ornithological Centre, who had welcoming gifts for us all – a colourful T-shirt (limited Edition), a birdlist, postcards and several bits of ornithological literature.

A large coach meant that our four and a half hour drive to Eilat was very comfortable. The weather was murky, the southerly wind stirring up a bit of a sandstorm so visibility was rather poor as we set off with just enough daylight left to see our first birds as we sped south. Hooded Crows, a party of newly arrived migrant White Storks in a roadside field, Collared and Laughing Doves and Spur-winged Lapwings got the list off to a start. In a cutting for the relatively new Be'er Shiva by-pass we saw a couple of Lesser Kestrels. Jonathan told us they were part of a small breeding colony, the most southerly for this species in the world.

By 18.00 it was dark and we were all having difficulty in keeping awake. It had been a long day for all of us. Eventually we arrived in Eilat with the lights of adjacent Aquaba over the border in Jordan bright on the horizon. This city and Eilat had probably almost doubled in size since I first visited almost 20 years ago.

Having settled briefly into our comfortable rooms in the large new hotel we met in the bar for a meal. The hotel restaurant had finished serving by the time we arrived but special arrangements had been made for us. With the exciting prospect of our first birding before breakfast we retired to our rooms for some much-needed sleep.

Wednesday 10 March

We met at 06.00 and found that our new vehicle was rather smaller than the 53-seater coach that had brought us from Tel Aviv, much more convenient to get us to our birding sites but still with plenty of room for comfort.

It was just a five-minute drive to our first destination, the Shulamit Gardens right in the city's centre. Although it was a very small park there were still plenty of birds to see. There were Spectacled Bulbuls, Lesser Whitethroats, an Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, several White Wagtails and three exotics, all from the Indian subcontinent – House Crow, Rose-ringed Parakeet and Common Myna (Penny thought that she had seen one of these last night as we drove here from Tel Aviv). By Israel standards this was a very slow start so we made a quick visit to the North Beach just a few minutes further on. Pied and Common Kingfishers, Crested Larks and a flock of distant gulls out in the Gulf of Aquaba, or the Gulf of Eilat as it is called here(!), whetted our appetites. We went back to our hotel at 07.30 for breakfast.

We left again at 08.30 and drove just a very short distance to an area of semi-arid scrub called Holland Park on the outskirts of Eilat. It was already getting very hot and a single Stone Curlew was sitting in the shade of an acacia bush allowing us to approach quite close. Palestine Sunbirds, a pair, the male glistening in the bright sunshine, and a Blackstart, unfortunately not seen by everyone moved about in the shrubs. A Lesser Whitethroat, a common spring migrant here and an Eastern Orphean Warbler, rather like a larger version of the former, flitted between the bushes.

The Eilat Mountains, rising abruptly behind the town, were our next destination. The weather was not conducive to raptor or stork migration. They need a northerly wind to give them lift to cross the mountain barrier, so there was no migration of larger birds today in this part of Israel. However we still managed to see some good species. Eileen was delighted to find her own 'lifer' – a Sand Partridge that eventually appeared on a ridge above the road for everyone to see. A Blackstart also gave those who had missed one earlier to catch up. Also on the steep slope above the road a very pregnant female Nubian Ibex stood watching us with vague interest.

We descended again to the floor of the Arava Valley, a graben or rift valley that dominates southern Israel. The bird research and ringing station close to the town on the Southern Salt pans was our next stop. There were plenty of waders on the bunds to scan through here but some passerines. A Bluethroat in a ditch was the best of them but there were Spanish Sparrows and other small birds too. Black-winged Stilts, Ruff, Little Stints and Common Redshank were the most numerous, but there was a Marsh Sandpiper and a couple of Ringed Plovers feeding round the salt pans' margins. However it was a small group of six Oystercatchers that interested Jonathan most, apparently scarce migrants on the Red Sea coast of Israel, especially as many as this. Those that do appear are usually seen only on the Mediterranean coast and then usually just single birds.

By now it was lunchtime and Jonathan took us to a typical Eilat street eatery, a falafel bar right next to the local airport runway. Here we were plied with pitta bread filled with fried couscous, pickled cucumber, salad and cheese and other filling but delicious food with plates of humus dips, far more food than we could really cope with.

After this enormous meal we returned to our hotel for a welcome short break as the temperature was in the 30's Celsius and went out again at 15.30. We drove north up the Arava Valley to Yotvata where the birding picked up considerably. In the scrub, dominated by acacias, there was a very flighty Namaqua Dove. In adjacent cereal fields several Tawny and Red-throated Pipits, a splendid male Siberian Stonechat and Crested Larks flew about and a male Western Marsh Harrier flew over. Unquestionably however, the highlight was two superb male Pallid Harriers flying leisurely up and down, one landing on a huge irrigation derrick.

For supper we were transported half mile by cab to an adjacent hotel but opted to walk back afterwards. The dining room was huge and the choice of food was considerable with 'free' beer or wine on tap. After visiting a 24-hour supermarket on the way back to buy bottled water we returned to our own, rather quieter hotel and retired for the night. Although there was no migration of large birds today, we had seen some good species and had got our list off to a sound start.

Thursday 11 March

It was another early start this morning and we were all ready to go by 05.30. We drove north for about 45 minutes to kilometre marker 76 (many Israeli locations are just known by distance markers). The area was flat and stony and, although to our eyes it seemed quite arid, Jonathan described it as unusually 'green'. There had been good rainfall in December and February, an event only occurring every five years or so. In fact there were just ribbons of low green vegetation in the depressions in the ground surface but these attracted lots of passerines.

As we arrived at K76 we pulled off the main highway onto a small side road and immediately began birding. We parked the bus in the shade of an acacia bush. Spanish Sparrows and a beautiful male Cretzschmar's Bunting got us off to a good start, but the surrounding semi-desert was crawling with larks and wheatears. The majority, probably well over a thousand, were Greater Short-toed Larks, truly a most amazing sight. There were also a few Crested Larks, a single Bar-tailed Desert Lark and four species of wheatears – Northern, Black-eared, Desert and Isabelline, dozens of them running about all over the ground. Among them were Tawny Pipits standing tall and who knows what else. The memory of this spectacle will stay with me for a very long time. Searching for a rarer lark or pipit amidst the throng we were rewarded only by a small group of Spotted Sandgrouse flying low over our heads calling.

Back at our small bus there were now three or four Common Chiffchaffs fly catching in the acacia together with a skulking Lesser Whitethroat. On our way back for breakfast we drove into Kibbutz Yahel. This was but a brief stop as there was little to be seen so we hastened back to Eilat to recharge our batteries.

Our next foray began at 10.30. Again, taking the same road north (there is but one!) we had a shorter drive as far as a block of date palms called The Elifaz Plantation. The shade provided by the trees, and no doubt the invertebrates on the ground too, attracted many White Wagtails, a single Bluethroat, a couple of Eurasian Hoopoes and, nearby a female Namaqua Dove posing for the photographers in the group. A Short-toed Eagle was perched on a high fence post but still no raptor movement as the wind stayed obstinately in the south.

Our next destination, north of Yotvata, was Kibbutz Lotan, a real oasis in desiccated surrounding lowland. In the lush green grounds several Red-throated Pipits fed on the lawns beneath the shade of the trees, some in winter or sub-adult streaky plumage and some showing their brick-red throats and upper breasts. There was also a Common Redstart and a Black Redstart and several splendid Black-headed Wagtails, considered by some taxonomists as a full species, while others treat it as a sub-species *Motacilla flava feldegg*.

We ate a buffet-style lunch at the kibbutz restaurant together with several girls who were volunteer workers here from various foreign countries, but most by their accents were from the United States. All the delicious salad vegetables had been produced on the kibbutz so could not have been fresher. We returned to Eilat and our hotel for a brief rest as the temperature had now soared to 37°C and was the hottest day so far this year in Israel, so an hour in an air-conditioned room was most welcome.

At 16.00 we went out again, this time to the saltpans at K20, where we added several new, but rather mundane species to our growing list. The nearby sewage treatment lake at K19 held a lot of ducks – Common Shelduck, Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail and a few Eurasian Wigeon and Common Teal. There were also waders – Little Ringed Plover, Common Greenshank, a Common Snipe, two Pied Avocets and many stilts, Little Stints and Ruff. Most numerous at K20 were nearly 200 Greater Flamingos.

Black-headed and Slender-billed Gulls were on the water and larger gulls on the embankments were Heuglin's (Siberian) and Armenian Gulls the former considerably larger with deep chests while the distinctive bill pattern of the latter could clearly be seen through our scopes. There was also a couple of Lesser Black-backed Gulls of the nominate race *Larus fuscus fuscus*, often now called Baltic Gull.

As the sun began to set we decided to have a quick dash to the North Beach in the hope of a White-eyed Gull. However, by the time we arrived it was too late and gulls had all gone to roost but en route we did see two Little Green Bee-eaters on a fence. Israeli birds have vivid blue faces (not Green like Indian and African birds) and are the race *Merops orientalis cyanophrys*.

With the arrival of more guests the buffet dinner tonight was at our hotel. There are no children here so we ate in a quieter and calmer environment this evening although there was no free alcohol on tap! Could that be a factor in the relative tranquillity I wondered?

Friday 12 March

The plan today was to leave Eilat at 05.30 again, but this time taking a picnic breakfast with us as we had a much longer drive to the southern part of the Negev Desert. This we did and drove to a huge plain called the Meischar on the Southern Negev Plateau.

First however we stopped at some extensive acacia scrub close to Yotvata. We had hoped to find the now scarce Arabian Warbler here, as Jonathan knew this to be a breeding territory. We were to be disappointed but at least everyone got excellent views of Blackstarts and I found a superb male Rüppell's Warbler that the whole group saw well. There was also a small family party of Arabian Babblers, the sentinel male perching prominently on top of a bush to keep a look out for predators while the rest fed on the ground and in the bushes. Eastern Orphean and Sardinian Warblers and Lesser Whitethroat added interest and variety. There was also a fenced area where the very rare subspecies of Mountain Gazelles, called Acacia Gazelles were being protected. The fence was only on the road side of the area and was there to stop the animals from being killed by passing traffic. Only some of the group managed to get a glimpse of them.

Our bus climbed out of the Arava Rift Valley where we had done all of our birding so far. Green ribbons of low vegetation in the depressions testified to the rains of this winter. Two of Jonathan's birding friends were already out on the plain and phoned him on his mobile to say that they had found a lark with a lot of white in its wings among a large flock of Bimaculated Larks. Excited by the prospect of a first for Israel, he set off only to see it fly up with the big larks and it was immediately obvious that it was a leucistic Bimaculated lark, not a White-winged Lark as he had hoped. However, the vast numbers of Greater Short-toed Larks was as spectacular as yesterday's experience and Jonathan also found a couple of Lesser Short-toed Larks by way of compensation. We had wonderful views of all these lark species on the ground as well as in flight and there were many wheatears and Tawny Pipits as well and splendid Black-eared and Desert Wheatears posing for perfect scoped viewing. Five migrating Egyptian Vultures flew high overhead but a real treat was a Barbary Falcon chasing, but not catching, a Lesser Short-toed Lark close to where we were birding. We paused again on the far side of the Meischar where a fine male Woodchat Shrike was added to our list. So too was Cream-coloured Courser, seen well both on the ground and in flight.

We left this very productive area at 11.30 hoping to return again on another day. It was 95 kilometres back to Eilat where we had arranged to 'swap' dinner at our hotel for lunch instead (we were on a half board arrangement) as we wanted to go looking for night birds later today. When we got back to the hotel we were given vouchers for a three-course meal which we ate out on the terrace.

We left again at 15.00. Our third new Mercedes bus, each one newer and more luxurious than its predecessor, and third driver, took us on the long drive north again to the southern end of the Dead Sea Basin.

We stopped once to stretch our legs and do a bit of birding. A fine Masked Shrike, the first that Jonathan had seen this spring, sat atop a small bush and there were also plenty of wheatears, especially Isabelline and a nice male Siberian Stonechat. As we proceeded we were dropping in elevation all the time and before long were almost 250 metres below sea-level. Intensive irrigated market gardening in many hectares of elaborate poly-tunnels make this one of the most valuable farming areas in the country. Here the cherry tomato, many varieties of capsicum and many other salad vegetables have been developed in the past few years. The landscape had become a labyrinth of dry river courses, or wadis, and the Dead Sea clays were the nesting sites for nearly a thousand pairs of Pallid Swifts.

Eventually, as the sun began to set, we arrived at Moshav Ne'ot Hakikar, a co-operative village and centre of more intensive market gardening. The bird that we had come all this way to see requires a very special type of habitat, saltmarsh vegetation much of which has been destroyed in the name of agricultural 'progress' and the drive by big money. However, here at Ne'ot Hakikar some of the right habitat still survives between the serried ranks of polythene thanks mainly to the fact that the areas still contains unexploded mines from the Six Day War. Indeed much of this territory, including the road, has been claimed from Jordan since the 1970's.

Jonathan has special permission to enter this area, closed to the general public. We drove slowly along the banks of an almost dry canal, once a reliable site for the rare Nubian Nightjar but there were no tell-tale red eyed reflecting the bus lights of Jonathan's powerful torch, plugged into the bus's cigarette lighter socket. Colin had a powerful torch too and allowed us more mobility as Jonathan's torch had to be used close to the bus, of course.

Melon fields adjacent to the canal were probably going to be more productive and indeed so they turned out to be. Two birds were located on the dusty tracks separating the fields. As we approached them they flew up briefly only to drop onto the ground again quickly. With stealth we got close to one bird that eventually flew right past us very close and we all had excellent views of this species now probably numbering no more than 40 individuals in this very restricted area. This must be one of the rarest breeding birds in the Western Palearctic. We hardly noticed the mosquitoes that were at large.

Well-pleased and much relieved by our success, we set off back south towards Eilat stopping at a roadside filling station with a small shop where we bought a late snack. We also stopped north of Yotvata in the hope of another nightjar species, Egyptian Nightjar but we were not successful although we did see a couple of

Golden Jackals and a Cape (Desert) Hare in the vehicles headlights. Thoroughly exhausted, we did not get back to our hotel until after 22.00 by which time bed was our only priority.

Saturday 13 March

After such a long and tiring day yesterday we had, what for us, was a late start and left our hotel at 07.30. The drive into the Eilat Mountains took only a few minutes where we were hoping for some raptor migration. Unfortunately the wind continued to blow from the south and had strengthened considerably and there was no sign of any migration here of any birds at all. However, we did manage excellent views of a fine White-crowned Black Wheatear by the roadside. Blackstarts, the ubiquitous Collared and Laughing Doves and a Brown-necked Raven were the only birds we could find so we drove down to the North Beach to see whether there was any migration there but this was equally disappointing.

Eileen had opted for a more leisurely start and we joined her for breakfast in the hotel before leaving again at 10.45 to drive to several sites north of Yotvata. On a kibbutz we watched a group of Greater Short-toed Larks feeding on spilled grain. In the stockyard penned dairy cattle in roofed enclosures looked on forlornly.

As we drove towards Yotvata for lunch, Jonathan received a call from some of his birding friends to say that they had found a Thick-billed Lark, a scarce migrant not seen in Israel every year. The bird was quickly located in a small gully where we saw it well. However, when we attempted to approach closer the bird disappeared and we could not relocate it, although we were certain that it had not flown off.

After a very adequate lunch at the filling station restaurant at Yotvata we began the drive back south, stopping to enter a superb wadi called the Amram Pillars, a known site for Hooded Wheatear and Sinai Rosefinch, but we could not find either, just Eastern Orphean Warblers in the scanty bushes.

We continued to the North Beach where a single White-eyed Gull was flying past as we got out of the bus, but not everyone was lucky enough to see it and no others appeared. With no sign of migration here either, Jonathan decided to try to show us Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse coming in to drink at dusk just north of the town. We all sat quietly on an embankment overlooking the water as swifts flew overhead. As darkness fell they disappeared and the first sandgrouse landed near to us. Even in the poor light we could see the diagnostic double breast band on this fine male. Two more appeared landing even closer.

So, a day that had started rather quietly ended on a high and spirits were raised at dinner. The restaurant was much quieter this evening, the weekend visitors having returned north, Sunday, of course, being a normal working day. With the prospect of a long day tomorrow we settled in our corner of the bar to call the log for two days, then retired to our beds.

Sunday 14 March

Yet again we assembled in the hotel lobby and left carrying a picnic breakfast with us at 05.30. We were going for a birding session in the Judean Desert on the western side of the Dead Sea. En route at Yotvata Jonathan thought that the northern fields were worth checking and this paid off handsomely. The wind was awful; gusting almost to gale force at times and it was stirring up a sandstorm as we got out of the bus. Simultaneously Steve and I noticed a shrike fly into the back of a bush close to where we were birding. It was a red-tailed type or Isabelline Shrike and the sub-species known as Daurian Shrike, an unusual migrant here. Formerly *Lanius isabellinus speculigerus* the most recent taxonomy reviews of the species has re-classified it as *L.i.isabellinus*. It flew off and in searching to relocate it Jonathan suddenly noticed a Black Bush-robin beneath a lone acacia. This is another very scarce migrant and the amazing thing was that a few minutes before two birders had been standing by their car right next to the bush but they had not seen it. In the strong wind most birds were not moving from cover. The bush-robin hopped about on the ground deep beneath the overhanging branches of a large *Suaeda* bush but we all got superb views of this lovely rarity. Despite the wind there were still Greater Short-toed Larks, Tawny Pipits and wheatears hugging the ground. As we eventually drove away a huge Egyptian Spiny-tailed Lizard 60 to 70 centimetres long was sitting outside its burrow and, from the comfort of our bus, we were able to watch it through the windows at our leisure.

We continued north stopping again at the Shezaf Nature Reserve. This was to be another unsuccessful attempt to find an Arabian Warbler, but we did see a Desert Lark and our first proper raptor migration of the

tour. Several Short-toed Eagles were attempting to find a thermal in order to gain height and these were followed by a couple of Steppe Eagles, Egyptian Vulture and Steppe Buzzards, big birds moving at last. Continuing north we passed Ne'ot Hakikar where we had seen the nightjars as a flock of 38 Common Cranes migrated high above the desert.

We turned west and our bus climbed steeply up the fault scarp overlooking the Dead Sea. Raptors were moving along the scarp so we found a spot where we could set up our telescopes to watch them. This was at Metzoke Dragot and we watched the raptors and Black Storks gathering to try to get sufficient lift to rise above the scarp. A flock of about 180 White Storks had been more successful and were already high in the sky but the Steppe Buzzards and Steppe Eagles plus a few Long-legged Buzzards were having a much tougher time. A lone Osprey flew past but then migration slowed right down so we decided that lunch was a priority and we descended to the basin floor. At Ein Gedi a restaurant, packed with a couple of coach-loads of pilgrims at first, soon emptied and we were provided with a most welcome buffet lunch. Salads in Israel really are excellent.

Once replete we drove across the road to look at several endearing Cape Hyrax that were sprawled out on the rocks relaxing in the shelter of a belt of trees. A Blackbird here was rather a surprise. Further on two fine male Nubian Ibex surveyed their surroundings from a rocky pinnacle high above the road.

We were heading back south for the 240 kilometre drive to Eilat. At some fresh water pools we added Ferruginous Duck and Gadwall to our tally and further on we had distant views of Clamorous Reed Warbler and several Graceful Prinias. There were several bulky nests of Dead Sea Sparrows in bushes by the water and although Pat thought she might have seen one of the birds we were far from certain. The southerly gale was now even stronger and blowing sand made birding most unpleasant. We made one last stop in a wadi as the sun began to set, in the hope of seeing a Scrub Warbler, but conditions were against us so we drove straight back to our hotel to discover that we were to eat in the King Solomon again tonight.

After dinner we returned to our own hotel to call the log and reflect upon a long and difficult day, though with much to be pleased with.

Monday 15 March

We were packed and ready to leave Eilat and our hotel for our night in the Negev by 06.30 but first we had a short pre-breakfast birding session. The North Beach held little of interest so we headed for K20 and the Southern Saltpans. Among the usual waders there was a Red-necked Phalarope swimming out on the water and a Greater Sand Plover on one of the dividing bunds.

We joined Eileen, who had not come out with us this morning, at breakfast and left the hotel for the last time at 09.45. The northern fields at Yotvata were our first stop en route for the Negev. Jonathan had received a call to say that a probable Ménétries' Warbler had been seen in the same *Suaeda* Bush as the Black Bush-robin, which was still there. In the continuing strong wind with the bush blowing about wildly, we did not see it at first but, sure enough, the bush-robin was still hopping about on the ground beneath it. We circled the lone shrub and eventually, low in the branches, saw a Lesser Whitethroat and the bird we sought. With a little patience, we eventually had excellent close views of this scarce *Sylvia*. Although superficially similar to a Sardinian Warbler, the dull, sooty black cap, yellowish eye ring, yellowish lower mandible and pink flush on the throat and upper breast clinched the identification. It was a bird of the sub-species *Sylvia mystacea mystacea* that breeds in the Caucasus Mountains and the north east of Turkey. The strong wind and blowing sand actually worked in our favour here since birds were reluctant to move out of cover. This was a really good bird to see. Only Colin and Jo managed to spot the Mountain Gazelles behind the fencing as we drove away. However, we did all get good views of two more Egyptian Spiny-tailed Lizards from the bus.

We continued north then headed west towards the 20 kilometre-wide Ramon Crater visiting several wadis en route, Wadi Grofit, Ne'ot Samadar Kibbutz and Wadi Zihor, but the strong wind prevented birds from flying around and calling so the best we could do were a couple of Eastern Orphean Warblers.

In the early afternoon we arrived on the Southern Negev Plateau and the Meischar where we had been on Friday. There were still plenty of Greater Short-toed Larks crouching on the ground and a close, very colourful male Desert Wheatear. A Wryneck appeared on the ground close to the road. Our bus climbed up

the crater rim and arrived at Mitzpe Ramon where we had a very late lunch stop and a snack in yet another petrol filling station. The greener landscape and the temperature up here were very different to what we had become used to in the Arava Rift Valley. The wind had abated somewhat but the temperature had dropped by about ten degrees and it actually felt chilly enough to need a sweater or fleece when we took a short walk. Another Wryneck, European Greenfinches, a couple of Eurasian Hoopoes, Northern Wheatears and Crested Larks gave a much more familiar western European flavour to the birding.

When we got back we found Tamir trying to extract a large rock that had somehow become wedged between the tyres of the double back wheels of the bus. All efforts by three of us could not budge it so we drove very slowly back to try to get assistance, worried that one of the tyres might blow. We called first at a military post but there was no one there to help so we continued on and back to the filling station. We checked-in to our new hotel leaving Tamir and Jonathan to try to get the problem solved. Even at dinner an hour or so later they had not managed it. As we were hoping to depart at 05.00 to drive back to Tel Aviv for our flight home tomorrow, we retired to bed and I felt a little apprehensive. Any new vehicle would either have to come from Tel Aviv or from Eilat, both a considerable distance from a rather isolated Mitzpe Ramon.

Tuesday 16 March

I need not have worried. At the arranged time, Jonathan said that all was well and that, with help from another bus driver, they had removed one of the bus's wheels last night to release the offending object which was now adopted as a souvenir for the remainder of the tour.

We now had plenty of time to have a full morning's birding in the Nitzana (Nizzana) Fort area of the semi desert and the wind had finally died away too. We set off on time carrying a packet breakfast with us. This part of the Western Negev is an ecotone (a transitional area between two adjacent ecosystems) between true desert and the Mediterranean vegetation. This is the only remaining reliable site for Macqueen's Bustard in this part of the Middle East. After an hour's drive we arrived at our birding destination just as dawn was breaking.

Our first good sighting here was of the pale desert race of Little Owl, *Athene noctua lilith* that was sitting on a rock pile beneath the castle. This ruin, close to an ancient Nabataean city, is what remains of the German-Turkish hospital. It was built in the first two decades of the C20th on the site of the ruins of a Byzantine Fort serving pilgrims travelling to Sinai and Central Egypt on the ancient incense route.

Soon, however, we spotted our first bustard. It was a male displaying like a moving powder puff on a distant low ridge, presumably to hidden females. Macqueen's is now 'split' from Houbara Bustard of North Africa and there are probably no more than a hundred birds in this region. Shortly afterwards, while we were watching a group of seven Cream-coloured Coursers, two more Macqueen's Bustards trotted into view across the stony waste and they were very much closer to us. These large birds are great walkers and perform most of their migration on foot.

There were plenty of Short-toed Larks, birds that had been a prominent feature of migration throughout the tour and wheatears too; especially Isabelline Wheatears but the second blob of icing on the ornithological cake were the Crowned Sandgrouse. This is probably the trickiest of Israel's *Pteroclididae* species to see well but we were in luck. We saw two groups totalling eleven birds in all, both groups very close to the road, so they could be seen perfectly from our bus and we did not disturb them. A Wryneck flew in to perch on top of a bush where we were watching a female Woodchat Shrike and nearby there were two Southern Grey Shrikes for good measure.

We did all our birding close to the road that followed the line of the Turkish railway. Before the First World War this area was where the Ottoman Empire met the British Empire. Almost as a gesture of defiance, the railway had been built early in the C20th to connect Byzantium (modern Istanbul) to Cairo. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, it fell into disuse and is now just an embankment running across the semi-desert but is a useful vantage point for scanning the surrounding flat ground.

We ate our picnic breakfast in a hundred year-old *Tamarisk* plantation. Along the road we had seen both Chukar and Sand Partridges and as we arrived there was a female Blue Rock Thrush sitting on the corner of a building. The plantation held a lot of birds - Blackcaps, a Song Thrush, Lesser Whitethroats, Chiffchaffs

and three Eastern Bonelli's Warblers busy catching insects and allowing us to get very good views. This had been an excellent morning's birding and, well satisfied; we set off for the two-hour drive to Tel Aviv and Ben Gurion International Airport. As we passed Be'er Shiva we saw the Lesser Kestrels in the by-pass cutting again.

Having thanked Jonathan for showing us so many memorable birds and said goodbye to Tamir, our driver, we were subjected to very rigorous security checks before finally checking-in for our return flight to Heathrow where we landed just a couple of minutes behind schedule. Our bags were rapidly retrieved and, after saying our own farewells, we set off for the last leg of our journeys home. Although the adverse wind direction had, at times, made birding difficult, we had seen more than our fair share of very scarce species and had a most productive and enjoyable tour.

Acknowledgements

My grateful thanks to everyone who helped to make this a successful and enjoyable tour. I would like especially to thank Jonathan for his field skills and intimate knowledge of Israel and its birdlife. Without him we would not have seen half the things that we did. Our several drivers and especially Tamir, did a wonderful job and had some very long and tiring drives. However, it is to you, our loyal clients to whom I am most grateful. Your amazing punctuality, keenness and very good humour made this a most memorable tour. I am most grateful to Chris for allowing me to use his picture in this report and to Sue and Steve for sorting out the butterflies and other insects for us. Thank you all. I look forward to the opportunity to travel with you again soon.

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April 2010

Itinerary and Weather

- Tuesday 09 March** Fly London (Heathrow) to Ben Gurion Airport, Tel Aviv. Transfer by coach to Eilat arriving at 20.30.
Hazy, hot & humid. 20°C
- Wednesday 10 March** Pre-breakfast birding in the Shulamit Gardens and North Beach in Eilat. am Holland Park, Eilat Mountains IBRCE Park and Southern Saltpans.
pm Yotvata.
Very hot & sunny. 32/34°C
- Thursday 11 March** K76 and Kibbutz Yahel. Late breakfast in hotel then to Elifaz Date Plantation, Kibbutz Lotan (lunch here) then back to Eilat.
K20 Saltpans, K19 Sewage pond and brief visit to North Beach
Very hot 37°C. Hottest day of the year so far.
- Friday 12 March** Yotvata scrub then Meishar on Southern Negev Plateau. Back for lunch. pm Southern Dead Sea Basin, K103 and Moshav Ne'ot Hakikar for dusk.
Back at 22.10.
Sunny, but slightly cooler. 31°C
- Saturday 13 March** Later start. Eilat Mountains and North Beach before breakfast.
Yotvata and its north fields Lunch at Yotvata. Back to Eilat via Amram Pillars.
North Beach and K19 sewage pond.
Hot & sunny but strong southerly wind. 33°C
- Sunday 14 March** Yotvata fields then Shezaf Nature Reserve. North to Dead Sea and Metzoke Dragot on the fault scarp. Ein Gedi for lunch. Back to Eilat.
Hot with sand storm. 32°C.
- Monday 15 March** North Beach and Southern Saltpans at K20. Back to hotel for breakfast.
Yotvata north fields, Wadi Grofit, Kibbutz Ne'ot Samadar, Wadi Zihor, Meishar flats and eventually Mitzpe Ramon on Ramon Crater rim.
Very much cooler here. Strong to gale force southerly wind & sand storm.
16°C compared with 25°C in Arava Valley.
- Tuesday 16 March** Left hotel at 15.00 and drove to Nitzana Castle and old Turkish railway line.
Birding until midday. Drive to Tel Aviv for early evening flight back to London.
Hot and sunny. 26°C.

CHECKLIST OF BIRDS SEEN DURING TOUR

No of days recorded	Locations	Abundance Scale
1 2h means seen on 1 day and heard on 2 other days	E= Area in southern Israel from Eilat, north to Yotvat and Kibbutz Lotan. The southern Arava Rift Valley.	1 = 1 – 4 2 = 5 - 9
	D= Dead Sea area including Ne'ot Hakikar and Ein Gedi.	3 = 10 - 100
	N= Southern Negev Plateau (Meischar) and Negev Desert around Nitzana Fort.	4 = 100 – 1000 5 = > 1000
	T= Transit between areas.	

SPECIES	No of days recorded	Locations	Abundance Scale	SCIENTIFIC NAME
Little Grebe	3	E D N	1	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Great Cormorant	4	E N	3	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Western Cattle Egret	1	E	1	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
Little Egret	4	E	2	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Grey Heron	4	E	3	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Purple Heron	1	E	1	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>
Black Stork	1	D	3	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>
White Stork	2	T D	4	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>
Greater Flamingo	2	E	4	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>
Common Shelduck	2	E	2	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Gadwall	1	D	1	<i>Anas strepera</i>
Northern Pintail	2	E	3	<i>Anas acuta</i>
Northern Shoveler	3	E D	4	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Eurasian Wigeon	1	E	1	<i>Anas penelope</i>
Common Teal	1	E	1	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Garganey	1	E	1	<i>Anas querquedula</i>
Ferruginous Duck	1	D	1	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>
Egyptian Vulture	2	E D	2	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>
Osprey	1	D	1	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
Steppe Eagle	1	D	2	<i>Aquila nipalensis</i>
Short-toed Eagle	2	E D	3	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>
Black Kite	4	E E N	1	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
Western Marsh Harrier	4	E D	1	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Hen Harrier	2	E D	1	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
Pallid Harrier	3	E D	1	<i>Circus macrourus</i>
Steppe Buzzard	1	D	3	<i>Buteo (buteo) vulpinus</i>
Long-legged Buzzard	1	D	1	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	2	E N	1	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Common Kestrel	2	E	1	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Lesser Kestrel	2	T	1	<i>Falco naumanni</i>
Barbary Falcon	1	E	1	<i>Falco pelegrinoides</i>
Chukar	2	E N	1	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>
Sand Partridge	2	E N	1	<i>Ammoperdix heyi</i>
Common Quail	1 1h	E N	1	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>
Common Moorhen	2	E	2	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Eurasian Coot	3	E D	1	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Common Crane	1	D	3	<i>Grus grus</i>
Macqueen's (Houbara) Bustard	1	N	1	<i>Chlamydotis (undulata) macqueenii</i>
Eurasian Oystercatcher	1	E	2	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
Black-winged Stilt	5	E N	3	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
Pied Avocet	1	E	1	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>
Stone-curlew	2	E	1	<i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>
Cream-coloured Courser	2	E N	2	<i>Cursorius cursor</i>
Little Ringed Plover	2	E	1	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>
Common Ringed Plover	4	E	1	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
Kentish Plover	2	E	1	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
Greater Sand Plover	1	E	1	<i>Charadrius leschenaultii</i>
Grey Plover	4	E	1	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
Spur-winged Lapwing	6	E D N	3	<i>Vanellus spinosus</i>

Ruddy Turnstone	1	E			1	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
Dunlin	1	E			1	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Little Stint	4	E			4	<i>Calidris minuta</i>
Common Redshank	4	E			2	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
Marsh Sandpiper	2	E			1	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>
Common Greenshank	3	E			1	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
Green Sandpiper	3	E			1	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
Common Sandpiper	1	E			1	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
Eurasian Curlew	1	E			1	<i>Numenius arquata orientalis</i>
Ruff	4	E			3	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>
Common Snipe	1	E			1	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Red-necked Phalarope	1	E			1	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>
White-eyed Gull	1	E			1	<i>Larus leucophthalmus</i>
Black-headed Gull	4	E			4	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
Slender-billed Gull	4	E			4	<i>Larus genei</i>
Baltic (Lesser Black-backed) Gull	3	E			1	<i>Larus fuscus fuscus</i>
Siberian (Heuglin's) Gull	2	E			2	<i>Larus heuglini</i>
Armenian Gull	2	E			1	<i>Larus armenicus</i>
Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse	1	E			1	<i>Pterocles lichtensteinii</i>
Crowned Sandgrouse	1			N	3	<i>Pterocles coronatus</i>
Spotted Sandgrouse	1	E			2	<i>Pterocles senegallus</i>
Rock Dove	5	E	D	N	3	<i>Columba livia</i>
Collared Dove	8	E	D	N	3	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Laughing Dove	8	E	D	N	3	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>
Namaqua Dove	2	E			1	<i>Oena capensis</i>
'Desert' Little Owl	1			N	1	<i>Athene noctua lilith</i>
Nubian Nightjar	1		D		1	<i>Caprimulgus nubicus</i>
Common Swift	3	E			3	<i>Apus apus</i>
Pallid Swift	4	E	D		3	<i>Apus pallidus</i>
Eurasian Hoopoe	6	E	D	N	1	<i>Upupa epops</i>
Common Kingfisher	1	E			1	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
Pied Kingfisher	4	E			1	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>
Little Green Bee-eater	5	E			2	<i>Merops orientalis cyanophrys</i>
Rose-ringed Parakeet	1	E			1	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>
Wryneck	2			N	1	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>
Crested Lark	7	E	D	N	3	<i>Galerida cristata</i>
Greater Short-toed Lark	7	E	D	N	5	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>
Lesser Short-toed Lark	1			N	1	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>
Bar-tailed (Desert) Lark	1	E			1	<i>Ammomanes cincturus</i>
Desert Lark	2		D		1	<i>Ammomanes deserti</i>
Bimaculated Lark	2			N	3	<i>Melanocorypha bimaculata</i>
Thick-billed Lark	1	E			1	<i>Ramphocoris clotbey</i>
Temminck's (Horned) Lark	1			N	1	<i>Eremophila bilofa</i>
Sand Martin	3			N	2	<i>Riparia riparia</i>
Pale Crag Martin	5	E	D		2	<i>Ptyonoprogne obsoleta</i>
Barn Swallow	7	E	D	N	3	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Red-rumped Swallow	1	E			1	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>
Common House Martin	1	E			2	<i>Delichon urbica</i>
Tawny Pipit	7	E	D	N	3	<i>Anthus campestris</i>
Red-throated Pipit	3	E			2	<i>Anthus cervinus</i>
Water Pipit	3	E			1	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>
Yellow Wagtail	6	E		N	3	<i>Motacilla flava</i>
White Wagtail	7	E			3	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
Spectacled (Yellow-vented) Bulbul	7	E	D		3	<i>Pycnonotus xanthopygos</i>
Black Bush-robin	2	E			1	<i>Cercotrichas podobe</i>
Bluethroat	3	E			1	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>
Black Redstart	1	E			1	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
Common Redstart	2	E			1	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>
Blackstart	5	E			2	<i>Cercomela melanura</i>
Isabelline Wheatear	6	E	D	N	3	<i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>
Northern Wheatear	6	E	D	N	3	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
Mourning Wheatear	1			N	1	<i>Oenanthe lugens</i>
Black-eared Wheatear	5	E	D	N	2	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>

Desert Wheatear	6	E	D	N	2	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>
White-crowned Black Wheatear	1	E			1	<i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i>
Common (Caspian) Stonechat	1	E			1	<i>Saxicola torquata variagata</i>
Siberian Stonechat	5	E		N	1	<i>Saxicola maura</i>
Blue Rock Thrush	1			N	1	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>
Song Thrush	1			N	1	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
Common Blackbird	1		D		1	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Graceful Prinia	3	E			1	<i>Prinia gracilis</i>
Scrub Warbler	1		T		1	<i>Scotocerca inquieta</i>
Sedge Warbler	1	E			1	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>
Savi's Warbler	1h			N	1	<i>Locustella luscinioides</i>
Clamorous Reed Warbler	1		D		1	<i>Acrocephalus stentoreus</i>
Eastern Olivaceous Warbler	1	E			1	<i>Hippolais pallida</i>
Sardinian Warbler	2	E			1	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>
Ménétries' Warbler	1	E			1	<i>Sylvia mystacea</i>
Rüppell's Warbler	1	E			1	<i>Sylvia rueppellii</i>
Eastern Orphean Warbler	4	E			1	<i>Sylvia crassirostris</i>
Lesser Whitethroat	6	E		N	2	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>
Blackcap	1			N	1	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
Eastern Bonelli's (Balkan) Warbler	1			N	1	<i>Phylloscopus orientalis</i>
Chiffchaff	6	E		N	2	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
Southern Grey Shrike	2		D	N	1	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>
Isabelline (Daurian) Shrike	1	E			1	<i>Lanius isabellinus speculigerus</i>
Woodchat Shrike	3	E		N	1	<i>Lanius senator</i>
Masked Shrike	1	E			1	<i>Lanius nubicus</i>
Palestine Sunbird	4	E	D		1	<i>Nectarinia osea</i>
Arabian Babbler	1	E			2	<i>Turdoides squamiceps</i>
House Crow	5	E			3	<i>Corvus splendens</i>
Brown-necked Raven	6	E		N	2	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Fan-tailed Raven	1		D		1	<i>Corvus rhipidurus</i>
Hooded Crow	3		T		2	<i>Corvus cornix</i>
Tristram's Starling	1		D		2	<i>Onychognathus tristramii</i>
Common Myna	1	E			1	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>
House Sparrow	6	E	D		4	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Spanish Sparrow	6	E	D		4	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>
European Greenfinch	2			N	1	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>
Desert Finch	1	E			1	<i>Rhodospiza obsoleta</i>
Cretzschmar's Bunting	1	E			1	<i>Emberiza caesia</i>
Corn Bunting	2			N	3	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>

MAMMALS

Cape Hyrax	1		D		2	<i>Procavia capensis</i>
Cape Hare	1	E			1	<i>Lepus capensis</i>
Golden Jackal	1	E			1	<i>Canis aureus</i>
Dorca Gazelle	2	E		N	1	<i>Gazella dorcas</i>
Mountain (Acacia) Gazelle	2	E			1	<i>Gazella gazella</i>
Nubian Ibex	2	E	D		1	<i>Capra nubiana</i>

REPTILES

Egyptian Spinet-tailed Lizard	2		D	N	1	<i>Uromastyx aegyptius</i>
Fan-footed Gecko	3	E			1	<i>Ptyodactylus hasselquisti</i>

BUTTERFLIES

Caper White
Small White
Eastern Bath/Dappled White
Green Striped White
Cleopatra
Monarch (Plain Tiger)
Painted Lady
African Babul Blue
Blue-spotted Arab

Belenois aurota
Artogeia rapae
Pontia edusa/Uuchloe ausonia
Euchloe belemia
Gonepteryx cleoparta
Danaus chrtsippus
Vanessa cardui
Azanus jesous
Colotis phisadia

DRAGONFLIES

Vagrant Emperor
Red-veined Darter

Anax ephippiger
Sympetrum fonscolombii

This list represents those birds and other animals seen by party members of this tour.