

ISRAEL, 15-29th March 2008

Trip participants: José Ardaiz (JA), Óscar Gutierrez (OG), Guillermo Rodríguez (GR), Joan Ferré (JF), Fernando Arce (FA), Daniel L. Velasco (DLV)

Introduction

After having read so much about the quality of spring migration in Israel, a team of Spanish birders decided to visit the country in March 2008.

As for the timing, mid- to late March is probably the best time of the year in terms of diversity, as you get the last wintering species, nearly all of the breeders and residents, and lots of migrants.

The trip was divided in two parts. From the 15th to the 23rd, JA,OG,GR,JF and DLV birded all over the country, with the first few days in Eilat trying to see some of the remaining wintering birds such as the Oriental Honey Buzzard, then some days were spent in the north, travelling via Nizzana, visiting Kfar Ruppin, Ma'agan Mikhael, Hula valley, Mt Gilboa, etc. and later in the South, via the Dead Sea, spending a night looking for the Nubian Nightjar at Neot Hakikar, ending up in Eilat again, where we spent the last 2 days looking for migrants.

From the 23rd to the 29th, GR and DLV stayed in Eilat and were joined by FA. That week was mainly spent birding, ringing and snorkelling around Eilat, not going further than Yotvata. It was a good decision, as we saw many species not seen in the previous week as well as impressive raptor migration, and, above all, we were the lucky ones that found the heavily twitched **Black Bush Robin**, probably the bird of the trip!

The trip was a great success with a total of 245 species seen, including all the expected species, except for Cyprus Warbler and Eastern Imperial Eagle, plus several rarities, some of them self-found, such as Black Bush Robin, Crested Honey Buzzard, Cyprus Pied Wheatear, Ménétries's Warbler, Daurian Shrike, Olive-backed Pipit, Demoiselle Crane, Greater Crested Tern, White-tailed Lapwing, and Caspian Plover, as well as mega views of Hume's Tawny Owl. Apart from that, we spent a lot of time studying several difficult to ID species and therefore gained much experience with them, which hopefully will help us in the future.

Literature

We used *A Guide to the Birding Hot-spots of Northern Israel: Vol 1* by Shirahai, Smith, Kirwan & Alon, *A Guide to the Birding Hot-spots of Southern Israel: Vol 2* by Shirahai, Smith, Kirwan & Alon, and *Birdwatching Sites in Israel* by Dave Gosney

Many reports published on the internet were very helpful, too, specially those written by Richard Bonser, Hugues Dufourny, Jens Soegaard Hansen *et al.*, and Stefan Ettestam *et al.*

Acknowledgments

Without the help of many people this trip wouldn't have been possible.

Avner Cohen, from [israbirding](http://www.israbirding.com/)

<http://www.israbirding.com/>

kindly provided us with plenty of information before our arrival. During our stay, he informed us of the latest sightings, too, and also spent some time birding with us. We are extremely grateful to him.

Noam Weiss, from the Eilat International Birding & Research Centre

<http://www.birdsofeilat.com/>

also gave us much information, and, above all, kindly allowed us to help him ringing at the station. A great person; we enjoyed much the time spent with him and we all learned much from his expert comments. Apart from ringing, Noam also guides birders to see Hume's Tawny Owl (He's researching them) and both Egyptian and Nubian Nightjars.

His address is

nbayda@yahoo.com

Barak Granit sent us invaluable gen on many species before our trip, and he also guided us 2 nights and one day. He is a very skilled, highly recommended, professional birder, and a member of the Israel Rare Birds Committee. The trip with him was extremely successful, as we had once in a lifetime views of a pair of Hume's Owls and Nubian Nightjar.

You can contact him at

barakgranit@yahoo.com

James P. Smith also provided us with important information before and during our trip, as he was guiding a tour at the same time. It was good to finally meet him there.

We were lucky to meet Yoav Perlman (top expert on Nubian Nightjar amongst other things), Jonathan Meyrav from Lotan

<http://www.birdingisrael.com/>

Amir Ben Dov, Rami Mizrachi, Itai Shanni and Tomer Landsberger in the field, all top Israeli birders, and they were kind enough to answer all our questions about locations, species, identification, etc...

Mikolay Moss, a birder from Poland working at the Eilat Ringing Station, birded with us during our last week in Eilat.

We also met and birded together with the excellent photographer Thomas Krumenacher, who was a very good source of information, as well as great company.

Our friends Pablo Fernández García and Clemente A. Usategui, who did the same trip 2 springs ago, suggested us many things to make the trip as successful as possible. Special thanks to both of them.

We had the pleasure of meeting Dick Forsman in Eilat. He was extremely friendly and we talked much with him about several raptor subjects.

Expert opinion of Killian Mullarney, Hadoram Shirihai and Klaus Malling Olsen on the much debated Ménétrie's warbler was much appreciated.

(See details at

http://www.israbirding.com/israelbirdsforum/forum_entry.php?id=515

http://www.israbirding.com/israelbirdsforum/forum_entry.php?id=587&page=9&category=0&order=time

Eli Van Audenhove, Lee G. R. Evans, Richard Bonser, Klaus Malling Olsen, Rafa Armada, Jose Luis Copete, Ferran López and several birding groups we met there helped us in various ways too. We want to thank them all for their help

Our friends Stephen Menzie and Avner Cohen improved the English of the report.

Itinerary

15th March 2008

We arrived at Tel Aviv airport at 3:45 am. We quickly got into the van, and headed towards Eilat, aprox. 350 km to the south.

On the way, we started seeing typical local birds such as White-crowned Black Wheatears, Chukars, Blackstarts, and Yellow-vented Bulbuls.

Our first major stop was at the "Meishar", a small area with green grass in the middle of the desert, located at the 60 km sign along highway 40. We had been told that this place was one of the best ones for wintering Asian Desert Warblers. After some time, we eventually found one bird, which gave good views near the roadside. Other good birds seen here included 11 Bimaculated Larks, plenty of Isabelline and Desert Wheatears, Cretschmar's Buntings, Quail, a group of Trumpeter Finches, Bar-tailed Desert Larks, and a huge group of migrating White Storks. We also met there local birder Jonathan Meyrav, who gave us some information on the latest sightings around the country, including bad news, as he said no one had seen the wintering Olive-backed Pipits nor the Oriental Honey Buzzard in Eilat they day before.

It was getting hot, so we decided to keep travelling south. On the intersection between highway 13 and highway 40 we found a small wadi called "Zihor Wadi", which was good for migrants. We noted Rüppell's Warbler, many Lesser Whitethroats, a pair of Pale Crag Martins, Scrub Warblers, Eastern Black-eared Wheatears, Blackstarts, etc.

We didn't stop again until we reached Yotvata. On the sewage pools we located 2 nice White-tailed Lapwings, which had been found a few days before. Other interesting birds included a Whiskered Tern and several beautiful Little Green Bee-eaters, the first ones of the trip.

On k50 we searched for Arabian Warbler, without any luck. It seems that the species is declining extremely fast in the country and is now on the verge of extinction.

Our next stop was the famous Eilat International Birding & Research Centre . The place was full of birds, the best ones being Citrine Wagtail, Graceful Prinia, Marsh Sandpiper, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler and Eastern (pr. *variegata/armenica*) Stonechat. From there, we went to the nearby Eilat's Northern Date Plantation, located very close to the ringing centre. If you head north, the plantation is aprox. 1 km. from the centre, just to the right of the road. It's divided into 3 parts, and the access is free. We searched in vain for the pipits and the wintering Crested Honey Buzzard.

When darkness fell, we went back to Eilat, where we slept at the Arava Hostel, our home for the rest of the days we stayed in Eilat. The price was 50 nis/night. To reach it, once you enter Eilat, take a street to your right, just where the Police Station is. Follow that street for a few hundred metres, and the hostel is to the left.

16th March 2008

We headed straight to Eilat North Beach first thing in the morning. The best periods to bird there are early morning and late afternoon, and at those hours the place becomes a meeting point for all birders in the area, giving the opportunity to get information on the latest sightings.

We saw several interesting species at the beach, including Western Reef Heron, Pied Kingfisher, House Crow, White-eyed Gull and, best of all, a nice 2nd summer Great Black-headed Gull migrating north. We couldn't find any Striated Herons on the platforms off the beach, though

After that, it was time to head towards the mountains to see some raptor migration. On the way up, we saw some birders on the side of the road. Jonathan was there, and he told us they were watching an interesting warbler, which turned to be, after much discussion, a nice male Ménétries's Warbler of the subspecies *rubescens*, a very scarce species in the country. Also there, a pair of Palestine Sunbirds delighted us with very close views, though we didn't find the reported Steppe Grey Shrike. Happy with the observations, we kept going up the mountains, until we reached a small parking area (not at the summit) just to the right of the road, with 2 black arrows painted on a big rock in the middle of the vantage point. We were soon joined by other birders, including Jonathan, and enjoyed an impressive movement of raptors passing extremely low over our heads, including 1 Western Marsh Harrier, 1 Osprey, 1 Booted Eagle, 5 Long-legged Buzzards, 50 Black Kites, 45 Steppe Eagles, 500 Black Storks and several thousand Steppe Buzzards!

Once the raptors were passing too high, we followed the same road up the mountains until we found a small road to the right which says Mt Yehoram/Mt Shlomo. The place is good for Sinai Rosefinch (especially around the only tree there) and Hooded Wheatear, though we found none.

From there, we decided to visit the famous k20 salt pans. Many shorebirds were present, including 1 Greater Sand Plover, many Ruffs, Little Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Little Stints, Marsh Sandpipers and Yellow Wagtails of various subspecies (*flava*, *feldegg*, *superciliaris*...).

Our next target species was Sand Partridge. We had been told that Eilat Cemetery was good for the species, so we gave it a try. Just as we arrived, we came across a pair of Sand Partridges, which gave incredible views.

On the way back to the main road, we were lucky to find a Cyprus Pied Wheatear, a rare species in Israel and the first bird of a small influx to the country this spring.

It was getting dark, so we headed north towards Yotvata, as the place is probably the best one to look for Egyptian Nightjars in spring. The tracks around the Circular Fields seem to be the most productive ones, and after some driving, we managed to see 2 birds in one of the tracks. No luck with the local Pharaoh Eagle Owl though. After a great day of birding we headed back to the hotel for a well deserved rest.

17th March 2008

We visited the mountains again in the morning, hoping to connect with Hooded Wheatear and Sinai Rosefinch. The location we chose was Netafim, a spring in the middle of a deserted canyon, which can be found by following a track to the right of the road from the summit. There's a signpost with the name "Netafim" on it.

It takes about 15 minutes of walking to reach the place. Every bird in the area uses the water of the spring, but patience is needed. The landscape here is impressive. We stayed for 3 hours, and saw 1 Sinai Rosefinch (seems to be much commoner in winter than in spring) Scrub Warbler, Rock Dove, Tristram's Starling, Sand Partridge and Blackstart. It was time to head down to the valley, and on the way, we stopped again at the raptor spot, which produced, as yesterday, thousands of Steppe Buzzards and plenty of Steppe Eagles and Black Storks, amongst others.

Once in Eilat, we decided to do some snorkelling. It was a great experience, and it's probably the best thing to do in the middle of the day, when temperature is raising. We were told that the best days for snorkelling are those with north winds, as the water is much clearer than in the days with southerlies. On the road from Eilat to Taba (Egypt), you will find the famous and crowded Coral beach, with several places for hiring snorkelling equipment, as well as other facilities. We had been advised that there was a better place, just 1 km to the south of Coral beach. We arrived there, parked to the right of the road on a parking lot, and hired all our equipment in the small diving office. The coral reef is just off the beach, and we spent several unforgettable hours snorkelling at a place that could be compared to heaven! Undoubtedly one of the highlights of the trip. We saw many species, including a variety of Butterflyfish, Angelfish, Parrotfish, Triggerfish (including the beautiful Arabian Picasso Triggerfish), Clownfish, Surgeonfish, Morays, Lionfish, Wrasses, etc...

After a few hours, we decided to move on, and headed again towards the North Date Plantation. Just as we entered the northern portion (the plantation is divided in 3 areas), we flushed a dark raptor from one of the palm trees. JA and I got very brief views, but we shouted "the Oriental Honey Buzzard"!! Everyone ran to the place where we thought it had landed, but the bird couldn't be found. After some minutes, GR flushed a dark raptor from the same area. He got good views, and was confident that the bird was a dark Steppe Buzzard. We were puzzled as we were quite sure we had seen a honey buzzard, but given the bad views and that there was a dark Steppe Buzzard for sure in the plantation, we decided to leave the bird as unidentified (for now)... We kept looking, and this time we came across a group of Tree Pipits. We hadn't seen that group on our previous visit, so immediately thought that the Olive-backed Pipits could be mixed in. After some searching, I found a nice OBP which flew to a palm and perched in the open for some time, allowing us to take many pictures and compare it with the nearby Tree Pipits. A lifer for everyone and one of our most wanted species (that's the problem of living in Spain and having only a couple of records ever of O-b

Pipit). Also in the area, a group of Indian Silverbills and our first White-throated Kingfisher of the trip.

Our next destination was k19 Sewage Pools, the new drinking place of the Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse. To reach it, we drove to k20 Saltpans and from the southernmost pan, took a road to the south. After 800 metres, there's a place with plenty of space to park on the left, with a small hill that surrounds the sewage pool (the pool itself can't be seen from the road). We jumped over the fence, which is broken, and settled in the northwest corner of the pool. Eight Lichtenstein's Sandgrouses flew in to this corner to drink a few minutes before complete darkness, so the views weren't too good. A great bird anyway! We were told that they usually come quite late, so one must be lucky for having good views before the light is too poor. With smiles on our faces after such a productive day, we returned back to our hotel.

18th March 2008

A very long day. We woke up at 2:30 am in order to be in Nizzana by first light. We tried at the following spot for McQueen's Bustard:

Coming from the N-40 road, we took the road 211 towards Nizzana, then towards Ezzuz, and, when we passed a ruined castle to the left, we kept going straight (not taking the right that takes to the village) towards the prison. Once past the prison, we kept going straight. We arrived at a track junction, and kept going straight on. We stopped when we saw a small hill to the left, with some white, big, mushroom-shaped deposits near it. The spot is exactly 7 km from the beginning of the non-paved track.

Here, we saw two displaying male McQueen's Bustards, as well as several Cream-coloured Coursers, Chukars, a pair of Namaqua Doves near the prison, Arabian Babblers and 2 Jackals.

After 2 hours here, we went to the nearby sewage pools where the sandgrouse come to drink. The best time for them is between 8:00- 10:00 am

To get to the pools, take the same road from Ezzuz to the prison, and, just before the prison, take a left. Keep going on this track (the prison being to the right all the time), until the end where you will see some ponds. The best one, named 4B, is the biggest one. In one hour, from 8.15 am to 9.15 am, we saw no less than 250 Spotted Sandgrouse coming to drink, as well as smaller numbers of Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. No Crowned Sandgrouse were seen here though. The sandgrouse came to drink at the furthest side of the pond, in the left corner. You can get to the exact spot by car, and use it as a hide. Other birds seen here included Ferruginous Duck, Black-tailed Godwit, Egyptian Goose (Cat E) and Bluethroat (*svecica*).

Afterwards, we continued towards Ezzuz and stopped at a wooded area where we saw a nice male Masked Shrike, Eastern race Common Redstarts, Palestine Sunbirds, and other migrants.

Our next destination was Mizpe Ramon, the best place for wintering Syrian Serins. We tried first at the field school, but found none, the only birds of note being several Desert Larks and Scrub Warblers. Then, we searched at the small park located near the soccer field. We soon found a nice pair of Syrian Serins, feeding both in the ground and in some pines. They gave great views here. Apart from them, OG was lucky to see a Desert Finch, though it flew away before the rest saw it.

We kept going north, and after a few hours, we arrived at Ma'agan Mikhael, just before dusk. To get there, take the road 2, and 30 km before Haifa, take the exit after "Pardes Khana-karkur", which will take you north on highway 4. 300 metres after the "Zikhron Ya'akov" road junction, take the first road to the left. This track takes you to the ponds

and the beach. We had less than half an hour of light, and in that time we saw many Pied and White-throated Kingfishers, Common Mynas, hundreds of Armenian Gulls and Night Herons, etc... Also there were many Egyptian Mongooses and a Chameleon. We slept at Tiberias, in the Hotel Aviv (75 nis/night)

19th March 2008

One of the best days of the trip. We departed Tiberias early in the morning and headed North towards the Hula-Agmon Nature Reserve. When we arrived, the gates were closed (opens at 9 am, except for Fridays and Saturdays, opening then at 6:30 am).

We decided to check some nearby fishponds until they opened, and these ponds proved to be very productive hosting hundreds of herons, Glossy Ibises, Pied and WT Kingfishers, Pygmy Cormorants, several Greater Spotted Eagles, Moustached Warbler, etc..

The entrance to the reserve is free. We decided to rent a small electric vehicle in order to visit the entire area, which is quite big. The vehicle cost 235 nis, and it was worth it.

We spent all day birding in the reserve, as the place was full of birds. At least 10,000 Common Cranes were present, being the most important resting and feeding place in the country for them. Amongst the Common Cranes, we were lucky to find a stunning Demoiselle Crane, first picked up by GR. We saw it in 2 areas, and the best views were from the main observatory. Many raptors use the extensive fields of the reserve, and we saw 1 White-tailed Eagle, 3 Pallid Harriers and 5 Greater Spotted Eagles. The last wintering Eastern Imperial Eagle was seen a few days before, but we didn't connect with it. We had also good numbers of migrating Lesser Spotted Eagles above us, with approx. 150 birds seen heading North, with some Greater mixed in too.

We were lucky to meet local birder Itai Shanni, who told us about his latest sightings on the reserve, as well as tips on where to find some of our target species.

In the reeds of the lagoons, we saw 6 Spotted and 6 Little Crakes. Many waders were seen too, including 2 early Broad-billed Sandpipers, 5 Marsh Sandpipers and several Temminck's Stints. Other interesting birds included several White Pelicans, a pair of Syrian Woodpeckers in the small forest in the middle of the fields, 1 male Black Francolin, the only one of the trip, flushed from the track, 2 Citrine Wagtails, 2 Clamorous Reed Warblers and 3 Moustached Warblers.

It got dark, and we went back to Tiberias, to spend the night at the same hotel from yesterday.

20th March 2008

Our first target species of the day was Long-billed Pipit. We headed south on road 90. South of Belt Shean, we took a small road west towards Nit David. From this road, numbered 669, we took another one, where the sign "Ma'ale Gilboa" is, numbered 6666.

Exactly 2.8 km from the beginning, there's a large bend to the left. We stopped here, and looked to the rocks and bushes to the left of the road. We soon located 2 singing Long-billed Pipits.

Later, we continued towards Kfar Ruppim, to the east of Belt Shean.

We birded there for a couple of hours. Highlights included several showy Clamorous Reed Warblers, a group of 28 Great Black-headed Gulls, 25 Ruddy Shelducks, 2 Greater Spotted Eagles, several *atricapillus* Jays, many Armenian Gulls, and a couple of Pygmy Cormorants

It was time to travel south, towards the Dead Sea, via the West Bank, which is absolutely safe. Barak Granit had given us very interesting info on the best place for the now very scarce Mountain Bunting, called Wadi Salvadora. When we got to the Dead Sea, we stopped at what we thought was the correct place, just to find out later that it was a different spot! Anyway, we had great views of a pair of Mountain Buntings there! To reach this place, we stopped at the 250 km sign on road 90, just by a small sign with the name "Quedem" on it. There's a nice canyon to the right of the road, and we walked up through the middle of it for 40 mins. Near the end of the canyon, in a deserted rocky zone a few hundred metres before a big cliff face, we came across a pair of Mountain Buntings. Also in the area, we noted Fan-tailed Raven, Pale Rock Martin, Egyptian Vulture, Sand Partridge and Tristram's Starling. The "real" Wadi Salvadora is apparently located between 250 km and 251 km signs.

Afterwards, we stopped at Ein-Gedi, where there were good numbers of Tristram's Grackles, and had a bath in the Dead Sea (incredible feeling!), before travelled south until we reached Neot Hakikar at dusk. This was the meeting point with our guide, Barak Granit. We made a quick search for Dead Sea Sparrow, with no luck.

So now it was time to look for the extremely localized Nubian Nightjar, nowadays a very rare species in the country, with just a few pairs left. After hearing the nightjar and spending some time scanning the areas where it usually rests, Barak found one bird sitting on the track, which gave fabulous view, and JA took several excellent photos of it.

The next target species of the night was the mythical Hume's Tawny Owl, a poorly known desert species. We stopped at various places, trying to tape the bird, with no avail, until we arrived at a cliff face where 2 Hume's quickly responded! They called several times and got closer to us, but unfortunately we couldn't spot them, and, after some time, they went silent. Still, a very successful night.

21st March 2008

With no time to sleep, we immediately headed with Barak towards k152 on road 90, where Sheizaf Nature Reserve is, now the only reliable spot for Arabian Warbler in the country. From road 90, we took a small road to the left (when coming from the north), and, after aprox. 1 km, we stopped the car. We split up, and searched the Acacia trees to the sides of the road. After some time I found the local pair in the northern wooded area, and they gave very good views. Also in the area, a group of very tame Arabian Babblers, Palestine Sunbirds and fly over Desert Finches.

Our next destination was k76, as Barak said it was a good spot for Crowned Sandgrouse, one of the very few target species we hadn't seen yet. We searched the plains to the left of the road, and found no sandgrouse, though a couple of groups of Temminck's Horned Larks were nice, as well as several migrating Steppe Eagles.

Nearby, we saw 2 Mourning Wheatears.

Next stop was at Neot Smadar, on road 40, 10 km to the north of the junction between roads 40 and 90. Many migrants were seen, including a nice Isabelline Shrike (*isabellinus*)

Back to Eilat, we stopped at various roadside places, seeing several interesting things, the top one being a Cyprus Pied Wheatear, and also Masked Shrike, Great Spotted Cuckoo and a few Eastern Olivaceous Warblers.

Once in Eilat, we visited k20 salt pans again. Highlights here included lots of Slender-billed Gulls, 8 Greater Sand Plovers and another (!) Cyprus Pied Wheatear, on the fence between Jordan and Israel.

It was time now to visit another place for Hume's Tawny Owl. We arrived at the spot chosen by Barak with plenty of time before sunset. It was a good decision, as a Hume's Tawny Owl flew over our heads towards the cliff just as we arrived!

As it got dark, the bird started calling, and was soon joined by the female. They came really close, and with our flashlight we got absolutely stunning, once in a life, views of the pair just 50 metres from us, with the male offering a lizard to the female, and then copulating. JA was able to take very good pictures, considering the difficult conditions. Barak told us they had been probably the best views he had ever had of the species! Knowing how lucky we had been, we returned to Eilat, extremely happy with the incredible observation of this mythical and poorly known species.

Our friend and birding pal Fernando Arce had arrived at Eilat in the evening, so we met him there for dinner. He would stay with GR and me (DLV) for the entire week.

22nd March 2008

We visited Eilat North Beach early in the morning. This time we finally saw a couple of Striated Herons on the fish cages off the beach. Unfortunately, these fish cages have been removed this autumn, so it will probably become more difficult to find the herons in the future.

We still hadn't seen Hooded Wheatear, so we decided to head again to Eilat Mountains for another try. Some of us went to Mt Shlomo, and others to Netafim. Both groups had good views of the same male Hooded Wheatear, a bird with a very long and slightly deformed bill. Some of us saw the bird perched on some rocks at Mt Shlomo, close to the only tree in the area. After some time, the bird flew off. The other group saw the bird drinking in the spring at Netafim, just after we had seen it flying away.

It was getting hot, so we went snorkelling again near Eilat. This time the water was not as clear as the other day, as the winds blew from the south.

Eilat Birding Centre was our next destination. Noam Weiss, the birder in charge, met us there, as FA had been ringing with him for a month last summer. Noam showed us the station, and amongst other things, we saw a couple of Dead Sea Sparrows, a male Rüppell's Warbler and several Eastern Bonelli's Warblers.

At dusk, we decided to go to the Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse drinking spot, and were rewarded by great views of several birds, still with very good light, and JA managed to take very good pictures of the birds.

23rd March 2008

A great day. We still hadn't seen Crowned Sandgrouse, so, thanks to the advice of Thomas Krümenacher, we tried at a small and little known pool 6 kms to the north of Shizzafon/Neot Smadar. The small pool is to the right of the road, and you can get to one of the sides with the car. Opposite to the pool, to the left of the road, there's a military settlement.

Between 7.30 and 8 am, several groups of Crowned and Spotted Sandgrouse came to drink, and gave very good views.

A quick stop at Neot Smadar produced many migrants, although nothing rare.

We went back to Eilat North Date Plantation, to try to obtain better views of the Oriental Honey Buzzard. After some searching, we eventually found the bird, and, at last, we had great views of it perched on a palm! We also searched the Tree Pipit flock, and were rewarded with 3 obliging Olive-backed Pipits mixed in!

While watching them, I got a phone call from Avner, reporting that a flock of 5 Caspian Plovers had just been found at Yotvata. Bearing in mind that this was one of our most wanted species of the trip, it's easy to understand that we ran to the car and headed straight to Yotvata Pivot Fields. There were many birders present when we arrived there, and we were soon enjoying great views of the very tired flock of plovers, consisting of 2 males and 3 females.

We had lunch at Yotvata Service Station, and later, part of the group (JA, OG and JF) planned to start going north towards Tel Aviv, as their plane left the following morning. However, plans changed (you have to get used to it in Eilat!), as James Smith reported a male Semi-collared Flycatcher at the Eilat North Date Plantation. We all went south again, and after some time, we found the male Semi-collared Flycatcher, another lifer for everyone, and the last one for the trip participants that had to leave. So now it was time for the goodbyes, and afterwards, FA, GR and I (DLV) stayed until dusk in the plantation, where we saw a few more migrants.

24th March 2008

A very slow day, with few birds around. We checked an area near the salt pans which was supposed to be good for Asian Desert Warbler, but the only birds of note were 4 Temminck's Horned Larks and 2 Eastern race Common Redstarts.

The afternoon was spent snorkelling due to the lack of birds.

25th March 2008

Numbers of migrants clearly increased compared to yesterday, and we stayed for a couple of hours at the Ringing Station, studying in detail species such as *fuscus* Reed and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers (these 2 species are sometimes much harder to separate than usually thought), many Isabelline Wheatears in comparison with Northern Wheatears, Eastern Bonelli's Warblers, lots of Lesser Whitethroats, *icterops* Common Whitethroats, etc..

A quick visit to some of Eilat's parks produced 3 Pallid Harriers overhead, 1 Robin, many Tree Pipits and 1 Wryneck.

K20 Salt pans hosted good numbers of Yellow Wagtails of various subspecies, including *thunbergii*, *feldegg*, *beema* and '*superciliaris*', but no *lutea*. Apart from that, 1 Marsh Sandpiper, a flock of 20 Little Ringed Plovers and 2 very interesting Kentish Plovers with head patterns recalling those of the newly described "White-faced Plover" from SE Asia were seen.

We checked the North Date Plantation again, where we found a dead Barn Owl, and 2 Olive-backed Pipits mixed with the Tree Pipits.

After a quick lunch, we headed towards Neot Smadar, where we saw a big flock of 500+ Yellow Wagtails, as well as 15 Red-throated Pipits, 8 *coutellii* Water Pipits, a flock of Linnets, 1 Eastern Stonechat (pr. *variegata/armenica*) and several Eastern Black-eared Wheatears, including an interesting female which was very similar to a Pied Wheatear.

We arrived just before dusk at the North Beach, where the most interesting sightings were 1 Arctic Skua, 1 Common and 2 Sandwich Terns. We talked with Jonathan for some time, asking him about the best places and ways for finding a Black Bush-Robin, a species that has become quite rare lately, at least compared to the 80s-early 90s, probably because of the lower numbers of visiting birders in the last 5 years. Hopefully, thanks to several Israeli birding webpages, as well as the Eilat Spring Migration

Festival, and, above all, thanks to the quality of the birding, birders will start to travel to the country in the same numbers as they did several years ago.

26th March 2008

Our first destination of the morning was Yotvata, where we saw some good birds, including a nice pair of Namaqua Doves, a species that was very difficult to connect with in the spring of 2008, 1 Eastern Stonechat (pr. *maura*), 1 female Citrine Wagtail, 2 Trumpeter Finches, 2 Sardinian Warblers, several Eastern Bonelli's Warblers, 1 Pallid Harrier, 1 Masked Shrike, 1 Woodchat Shrike and 1 Eastern Olivaceous Warbler.

At K40 there was a group of 25 Black Storks, and a male Merlin.

We checked a small area at k38, just before Samar, on the way south, which produced 3 fly over Desert Finches, 2 Little Green Bee-eaters, 1 Sardinian Warbler and 1 Common Whitethroat.

At the North Date Plantation we had good views of the Oriental Honey Buzzard perched, at least 3 Olive-backed Pipits, 25 Tree Pipits, 2 Grey Wagtails, 2 Indian Silverbills and several Hoopoes.

On the way to the North Beach we stopped at the Southern Fields, where we found 1 Richard's Pipit, 1 2nd cy Pallid Harrier and 2 Bimaculated Larks. Once on the beach, which was crowded with birders attending the festival, we saw several Ospreys, a large group of Garganey, 1 Arctic Skua, 1 Common and 5 Caspian Terns and a couple of Western Reef Herons including the always present 1st summer dark phase bird.

27th March 2008

We spent much of the day at the Eilat Ringing Station, both ringing and birding. Highlights included several raptors migrating north: 3 Steppe, 3 Booted and 1 Short-toed Eagles 4 Lesser Kestrels, 3 Collared Pratincoles, 2 Namaqua Doves, 1 *beema* Yellow Wagtail, 1 Dead Sea Sparrow, 1 Eastern Orphean Warbler, 1 *svecica* Bluethroat, 1 Quail, several *fuscus* Reed Warblers, 4 Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, 2 Common Whitethroats, 15 Eastern Bonelli's Warblers, 4 Isabelline Wheatears, 1 Great Spotted Cuckoo, 2 Indian Silverbills, 2 Cretzschmar's Buntings, 2 Eastern Black-eared Wheatears, etc..

On our way to the North Beach in the evening we stopped again at the Southern Fields, where we saw the Richard's Pipit again, as well as several Tawny Pipits, 3 Quails and many Isabelline Wheatears

From the beach, 4 Arctic Skuas, 1 Sooty Shearwater, 3 Sandwich Terns and 1 Collared Pratincole were noted.

28th March 2008

Probably the most exciting day of the trip began, as usual, at the Ringing Station, where bird activity was rather poor, the only birds of note being a Little Swift and a Great Spotted Cuckoo.

For that reason, we decided to head towards the mountains. We hadn't even passed through the gate of the Ringing Centre, when I saw very, very briefly some kind of "black" bird flying from a bush to the ground. If we had been in a place where any

species of birds with mainly black plumage occurred (blackbirds, for example), I would have let it go, but this wasn't the case at Eilat, so a certain species crossed my mind. After shouting to stop the car, I jumped out and ran to the place where I thought the bird had landed, leaving FA and GR in the car, probably thinking I was crazy! I soon arrived at the spot, and there it was... A stunning male Black Bush Robin, sitting on the ground and bobbing its tail up and down! Many hours spent searching for this very rare species, and we find it from the car...unbelievable!

I called Fer and Guille, shouting "black bush robin, black bush robin", and in a few seconds they joined me watching this fabulous bird. We ran to the station and told Noam and the rest of birders present about the bird, and I soon phoned some other birders: Avner, Barak, etc... Within the next hour, many birders arrived at the place, and eventually everyone had great views. This fine male was present for several weeks and was later joined by a female, both enjoyed by lots of birders during their stay.

A big movement of raptors, mainly Steppe Buzzards, was taking place overhead, so, once we took some good pictures of the Robin, we decided to go to the mountains.

A terrible decision, as just 10 minutes later we got a phone call from Avner, reporting a Bateleur flying north over the Ringing Station. Our first reaction was to go back to the station as fast as possible, but we soon realized the bird was already gone, and, very frustrated, we tried to forget about it, thinking at least we had found the Black Bush Robin...

Several thousand Steppe Buzzards were flying north over the mountains, and we also spotted a flock of 50 Black Storks and 10 Steppe Eagles. In the evening, we decided to check the Saltpans. An impressive stream of migrating Steppe Buzzards covered the whole valley, with tens of thousands passing by in a few hours. An incredible and unforgettable spectacle. With them, many hundred Black Kites, and several Ospreys, Booted, Steppe and Short-toed Eagles, 3 Alpine Swifts and a flock of 70 Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters.

We were running out of light, so we went back to the North Beach, where we were told that a small, black and white, "Little-type" Shearwater had been seen by many birders from a boat, and later from the beach. Absolutely crazy, 2 megas missed in one day!! We searched in vain for it until it was too dark to see anything. Anyway, it had been a really good day after all...

29th March 2008

It was our last day on the country, so we decided to spend all our time left at the North Beach, hoping that the shearwater would appear again.

We arrived at 5:30 am, and, at 6:15, we found a 1st winter White-cheeked Tern, quite an early record.

In the following 2 hours we recorded several species, including 15 Arctic and 2 Pomarine Skuas, 50 Tufted Ducks, 100 Shoveler, 200 Common Teals, 1 Sooty Shearwater, 2 Striated Herons, 1 Little Tern, 3 Little/Saunders's Terns, too far out to identify, 1 Little Stint, 1 Heuglin's Gull, 1 Great Black-headed Gull, 50 Baltic Gulls, etc..

Then, at 9 am, the black and white shearwater reappeared, being spotted first by some Finnish birders, and eventually seen by us. It was quite far away, and therefore we couldn't make out any important ID features, although the bird didn't look as small as we had expected. Luckily, once we got back home, the pictures were posted on the internet, and it soon became clear that the bird was not a Little-type (Tropical/Persian)

Shearwater, but a Yelkouan Shearwater: the 2^o record for the Red Sea, but not the mega everyone wanted...

In the next 2 hours we had a couple more distant sightings of the shearwater, and at 10:15 am I spotted a nice 1st winter Greater Crested Tern, a rarity in Israel, flying towards the beach. Guille, Fer, and Tomer, another local Israeli birdwatcher, soon located it and we had good views of the bird until we lost it from view far out off the beach. We were told that the bird was photographed from a boat a few days after our sightings.

After that, we decided to go back to the Ringing Station, to say goodbye to Noam and the other birders present, and to see the Bush Robin for the last time. We did both things, and then we started heading north towards Tel Aviv, as our plane left that night.

On our way up, we stopped at a place which hosted quite a few migrants. On road 171, at k.108, we took a track with a sign "Arod Ascent Loz Cisterna" on the beginning, which ends in an area with bushes and some vineyards.

In the bushes, we saw 2 Semi-collared Flycatchers, 2 Eastern race Common Redstarts, 1 Wryneck, 2 Common Snipe, 1 Serin, 2 Green Sandpipers, many Eastern Bonelli's Warblers, etc... 3 Steppe Eagles were seen overhead. On the vineyards there were at least 6 Desert Finches, which - finally - gave good views, as well as an Ortolan Bunting. Our last stop was at the Meishar, where there were still 2 Bimaculated Larks and several Red-throated Pipits.

At k127, 4 Crowned Sandgrouse flew over the road, as well as 1 male Pallid Harrier, and on the journey to Tel Aviv we recorded 2 more Pallid Harriers, as well as 1 male Hen and 2 Marsh Harriers.

It was the end of a fantastic trip to the best country, in my opinion, for birding in the WP. I certainly can't wait to go back again!

Target Species Seen

Chukar

First seen on our first day, from the road on the way to Eilat. Also seen around Nizzana, with several birds calling near the road on the 18th of March. Singles from the road north of Mitzpe Ramon on the same day, too.

Sand Partridge

Common at suitable habitat (Dry wadis in the south), specially around Eilat Mountains. Our first sighting was at Eilat Cemetery on the 16th.

Some video footage of a feeding male can be seen here:

http://surfbirds.com/video2/view_video.php?viewkey=96320eb3afdd4df6e1f6

Black Francolin

Only one bird, a male, seen at the Hula Reserve on the 19th, despite being told it was quite common there. Males tend to call early in the morning and late in the evening. None were seen at Kfar Ruppin, where it's usually seen on the tracks.

White Pelican

Five birds at Hula on the 19th

Pygmy Cormorant

Several birds seen at Hula on the 19th and Kfar Ruppin on the 20th

Striated Heron

Two to three birds seen roosting on the fish platforms off Eilat North Beach. These fish cages, the traditional spot for seeing the herons, have been removed this summer (2008), so the species may become harder to see now.

Western Reef Heron

Several birds seen on the North Beach itself and on the offshore fish platforms.

Oriental Honey Buzzard

The first-winter female found by Noam Weiss and Micolay Moss wintering at the North Date Plantation, for the first time in the WP, was seen briefly and not identified with confidence on the 17th, but luckily we had great views of it on the 23rd and the 26th.

The bird was very wary and difficult to locate, always flying away before anyone had found it perched, and it took us many hours before we finally saw it settled on a date palm. The bird favoured the 3 sections of the plantation.

The same bird has wintered at the same spot this winter (2008-2009) so the place may be worth checking for it in the future.

Barbary Falcon

One seen from the North Beach on the 17th

Pallid Harrier

Several sightings, including 1 ad male and 2 females at Hula on the 19th, 3 males over Eilat on the 25th, 1 2^ocy at the Southern Fields on the 26th and 3 males on the road to Tel Aviv on the 29th

A video of a male here:

http://surfbirds.com/video2/view_video.php?viewkey=be6ec9b852b0a542e2f3

Steppe Eagle

Quite common in the south, with birds seen nearly always we did some raptor watching in the Eilat Mountains or the Arava Valley. Maximum count of 45 in a couple hours on the 16th from the car park on the way up the Eilat Mountains.

Lesser Spotted Eagle

The species is quite rare in spring migration over Eilat, but much commoner to the north. We saw approx. 150 birds heading north in one hour over the Hula Reserve on the 19th.

Greater Spotted Eagle

Eight wintering birds and 5 migrating North at Hula on the 19th, and 2 wintering birds at Kfar Ruppim on the 20th.

Demoiselle Crane

A very nice adult was seen amongst a big group of Common Cranes at Hula on the 19th. This is probably the best spot in the country to look for the species.

A video of the bird can be seen here:

http://surfbirds.com/video2/view_video.php?viewkey=ec2cb9e8885b54ff744d

McQueen's Bustard

Two displaying males were seen at Nizzana on the 18th. Coming from the N-40 road, take the road 211 towards Nizzana, then towards Ezzuz, and when you pass a ruined castle to the left; keep going straight (not taking the right that takes to the village), towards the prison. Once you pass the prison, keep going straight. When you arrive at a track junction, keep going straight on. Stop when you see a small hill to the left, with some white, big, mushroom-shaped deposits near it. This spot is exactly 7 km from the beginning of the non-paved track.

Greater Sand Plover

Several birds seen at k20 Saltpans, with maximum of 8 birds on the 21st

Caspian Plover

One of the highlights of the trip. A nice group of 5 birds (2 males and 3 females) was seen at Yotvata Pivot Fields on the 23rd, thanks to the phone call of Avner. This group was enjoyed by many birders during its 2 days stay.

Caspian Plovers are usually seen in Israel (especially in the area between Eilat and Yotvata, both in fields or near the water) every year, the best time being the last week of March and the first half of April, but no one can guarantee their observation in a short trip, even on those dates. Considering that, we were really happy with this sighting.

White-tailed Lapwing

A rare species in Israel, with only a few sightings per year. We were lucky to see 2 birds at Yotvata Sewage Pools on the 16th. They had been located a few days before our arrival.

Spur-winged Plover

Very common.

Broad-billed Sandpiper

Two early birds at Hula on the 19th.

White-eyed Gull

Seen daily on the North Beach.

Great Black-headed Gull

A couple of birds seen on the North Beach, and a nice group of 10 birds, including some adults in summer plumage, at Kfar Ruppim on the 20th.

Armenian Gull

Common at Ma'agan Mikhael, Hula and Kfar Ruppim.

White-cheeked Tern

We were lucky to see an early 1st winter bird off the North Beach on the 29th. The species becomes common there from late spring onwards.

Greater Crested Tern

A rarity in Israel. We found a 1st winter off the North Beach on the 29th, when nearly all the other birders present looking for the shearwater had left. It was photographed from a boat a few days after our sighting.

Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse

This species no longer uses the famous spot by the pumping station. However, they now come to drink to another very reliable spot, located near k19.

On the k19 post on route 90, take the sandy track to the east that takes you between the cow sheds and the northern side of the modern sewage works until an obvious parking area.

Another way of reaching it is, once on the k20 Saltpans, from the southernmost pan, take the road to the south. After 800 metres, there's a place with plenty of space to park on the left, with a small hill that surrounds the sewage pool (the pool itself can't be seen from the track) Park and then go through the fence and up the bank to view the pool.

The sandgrouse visit the spot at dark (usually 5-10 minutes before it's completely dark, though on one of our visits they came a little earlier and provided great views) so make sure you are already in the place half an hour before dark to avoid disturbance. The birds usually call before setting down, and that's the best way to first locate them. They usually drink on the northern part of the sewage pool. The best spot for viewing them is near the NW corner, and the birds sometimes drink just right there, so everyone must remain silent.

Spotted Sandgrouse

No less than 250 birds came to drink to the sewage pools at Nizzana on the 18th. The best time for viewing them is between 8:00- 10:00 am

To get to the pools, take the same road from Ezzuz to the prison, and, just before the prison, take a left. Keep going on this track (the prison being to the right all the time) until the end, where you will see some ponds. The best one, named 4B, is the biggest one.

We also saw a couple of groups, totalling about 50 birds, at a poorly known pool 6 kms to the north of Shizzafon / Neot Smadar on the 23rd. The small pool is to the right of the road, and you can get to one of the sides with the car. Opposite to the pool, to the left of the main road, there's a military settlement.

The birds came to drink between 7.30 and 8 am.

A video can be seen here:

http://surfbirds.com/video2/view_video.php?viewkey=6830d62765ffad772174

Crowned Sandgrouse

We failed to locate any at Nizzana nor at k76, so we thought we were going to miss the species until Thomas told us about a poorly known and very reliable pool for the species, 6 kms to the North of Shizzafon / Neot Smadar. The small pool is to the right of the road, and you can get to one of the sides with the car. Opposite to the pool, to the left of the main road, there's a military settlement

A group of 25 birds came to drink between 7:30 and 8 am on the 23rd

Namaqua Dove

The spring of 2008 was really bad for the species, with very few sightings reported. We saw a pair briefly near Nizzana prison on the 18th, and another pair which showed extremely well at Yotvata on the 26th.

Hume's Tawny Owl

One of the highlights of the trip was having mega views of a pair of this mythical species, with the male offering a lizard to the female and then copulating and calling all the time, deep in the Eilat Mountains on the 23rd, guided by Barak. We had already heard them with him the day before near the Dead Sea, but couldn't get any views of them that night.

Egyptian Nightjar

Two birds sitting on a track on the Yotvata Circular Fields on the 16th. This is probably the most reliable place for seeing the species in spring.

Nubian Nightjar

Great views of a bird at Neot Hakikar, on the night of the 20th, thanks to a lot of effort by Barak. The species is declining very fast in the country, and it's now on the verge of extinction. No one should try to look for it by themselves, as the place is a military zone, and a guide (Yoav, Noam, Barak, Jonathan...) is absolutely necessary.

Little Swift

One bird flew over Eilat Ringing Station on the 28th.

White-throated Kingfisher

Common in suitable habitat. Our first sighting was at the Eilat North Date Plantation, with many birds seen later around Hula, Ma'agan Mikhael and Kfar Ruppin.

Pied Kingfisher

Common at suitable habitat, especially around Hula, Magan Michael and Kfar Ruppin.

A video of one of the birds seen here:

http://surfbirds.com/video2/view_video.php?viewkey=e6fe298e607fe7cc0e1a

Little Green Bee-eater

Relatively common around Eilat-Yotvata area

Blue-cheeked Bee-eater

A group of 70 seen migrating North over the k20 Saltpans on the 28th

Syrian Woodpecker

A pair was seen well on the small wooded area inside Hula Reserve.

Temminck's Horned Lark

A couple of small groups at k76 on the 21st, and 4 birds near k20 Saltpans on the 24th.

Bimaculated Lark

A flock of 11 birds at the Meishar on the 15th, with at least 2 still there on the 29th. The "Meishar" is a small area with green grass in the middle of the desert, located on the km 60 of the road 40, and it's a very good spot for migrants.

Two birds were also seen at the Southern Fields on the 26th.

Pale Crag Martin

Widespread. Our first sighting, on the 15th, was a pair at “Zihor Wadi”, on the intersection between roads 13 and 40.

Long-billed Pipit

Two singing birds at the usual spot in Mt Gilboa. South of Belt Shean, take a small road to the west that goes to Nit David. From this road, numbered 669, take another one, where the sign “Ma’ale Gilboa” is, numbered 6666.

Exactly 2.8 km from the beginning, there’s a large bend to the left. We stopped there, and looked to the rocks and bushes to the left of the road, where we soon located 2 singing Long-billed Pipits.

Olive-backed Pipit

We weren’t sure if the wintering birds found by Noam and Mikolay on the North Date Plantation would linger until our stay, so we were happy to see 1 of them in a flock of Tree Pipits at that spot on the 17th, then 3 birds at the same place on the 23rd and 2 on the 26th.

Citrine Wagtail

Several birds seen at Eilat, Hula and Yotvata.

Isabelline Wheatear

Very common.

Cyprus Pied Wheatear

A great spring for this scarce species. We found the first one at Eilat Cemetery on the 16th, and then we saw another bird, found by other birders, near Samar on the 21st, and found another one at k20 Saltpans on the same day.

Blackstart

Common.

Hooded Wheatear

One of the hardest species to see of the trip. We saw a female on the Eilat Mts, on our way to the Hume’s Tawny Owl spot on the 21st, and after several tries, we finally saw a male at Mt Shlomo and Netafim on the 22nd.

Mourning Wheatear

Two birds near k76.

Graceful Prinia

Common at suitable habitat.

Black Bush Robin

Probably the bird of the trip. We found a nice male inside the Eilat Bird Sanctuary on the 28th. This fabulous bird spent several weeks there and was later joined by a female, to the delight of many foreign and local birders.

Black Bush Robin has become a very rare bird in the country in the last couple of years. It used to be regularly seen in the 90s, due to the number of observers covering the area, so if birders start to visit the country in good numbers again, the bird will hopefully start to be recorded with increasing frequency.

A video of the bird can be seen here:

http://surfbirds.com/video2/view_video.php?viewkey=67c9251d3e7c7161c83a

Eastern Stonechat (*variegata/maura/armenica*)

Several birds, mainly males, probably of both *armenica/variegata* (with white on the base of the outer tail feathers) and *maura* (with no white) subspecies were seen in the Eilat/Yotvata/Nizzana area. The identification criteria for separating these subspecies is still not well established, and further research is needed.

Scrub Warbler

Common at suitable habitat (mainly dry wadis)

Moustached Warbler

Several birds seen at the Hula Reserve on the 19th

Clamorous Reed Warbler

Seen briefly at Hula on the 19th and much better views of several birds were obtained on Kfar Ruppim on the 20th

A video of a singing bird can be viewed here:

http://surfbirds.com/video2/view_video.php?viewkey=02c0a159f6436d01e9eb

Eastern Olivaceous Warbler

Common around Eilat/Yotvata, especially on the last week of March

Arabian Warbler

A very rare species nowadays in Israel, with just a few pairs left. The most reliable spot is Shezal Nature Reserve. From road 90, take a small road to the left (if coming from the north) at k152, and park the car after approx. 1 km. The birds favour that wooded area, either to the north or to the south of the place where you stopped the car.

We found the local pair of warblers in the northern wooded area, and they gave very good views.

Asian Desert Warbler

We were just in time to see one of the last wintering birds at the Meishar on the 15th, on the small bushes near the edge of the road. This is one of the better places for seeing this scarce species in winter and early spring.

Ménétries's Warbler

A much discussed individual, with some birders first arguing it was a male *momus* Sardinian until some of JA's pictures were published, when everyone agreed then it was a male *rubescens*, was seen in the morning of the 16th near Eilat having been found earlier by other birders.

Rüppell's Warbler

Several birds seen in the Eilat-Yotvata area. Our first sighting was of a male on the 15th at Zihor Wadi.

Eastern Bonelli's Warbler.

Common in the Eilat-Yotvata area

Eastern Orphean Warbler

Just a couple of birds seen around the Eilat Ringing Centre.

Semicollared Flycatcher

One male, found by James P. Smith, at the North Date Plantation on the 23rd and 2 other birds (male and female) on the "green area" at k.108 on road 171, on the 29th.

Arabian Babbler

Widespread at suitable habitat on the South, with several birds seen at Nizzana on the 18th and a group of very tame and showy birds at Shezal Nature Reserve on the 21st

Palestine Sunbird

Common at suitable habitat.

Isabelline (Daurian) Shrike

We found a bird at Neot Smadar on the 21st. A regular species though in very small numbers, in Israel.

Masked Shrike

Our first sighting was of a male near Nizzana on the 21st. From that day onwards we recorded several other birds in the Eilat-Yotvata area.

House Crow

Good numbers present in Eilat town.

Fan-tailed Raven

Common around the Dead Sea, with several birds seen near Ein Gedi and Wadi Salvadora on the 20th.

Tristram's Starling

Good numbers around Ein Gedi on the 20th, and several in the Eilat Mts on various dates, including a pair at Netafim

Common Myna (Cat C)

10 birds seen flying over Ma'agan Mikhael on the 18th, and a pair near Eilat on the 26th

Yellow-vented Bulbul

Common.

Dead Sea Sparrow

We failed to see any at Neot Hakikar, but eventually recorded a few small groups inside the Eilat Bird Sanctuary.

Indian Silverbill

Several groups in the edges of the Northern Date Plantation, the first birds seen on the 17th. Also 2 birds at the Eilat Ringing Centre

Syrian Serin

The species breeds at Mt Hermon, where we weren't going due to lack of time, and winters at a couple of known spots further south. These birds start leaving their wintering quarters by March, so we weren't sure if there would be any left by the time we would arrive. We tried at 2 places in Mitzpe Ramon on the 18th. First, near the field school, where we found none. Then at the small park near the soccer field, where we were rewarded with great views of 2 birds.

Sinai Rosefinch

Despite many hours at Mt Sholomo, in the Eilat Mts, we failed to see any at the usual place near the only tree of the area. However, we finally saw one bird, briefly, at Netafim on the 17th.

We were told later that Wadi Salvadora, in the Dead Sea, is now a very reliable spot for seeing it.

Mountain/Striated/Asian House Bunting

The species doesn't regularly occur in the Eilat area anymore, so the most reliable area now to find this species is The Dead Sea. We were told by Barak about a very good place called Wadi Salvadora.

When we got to the Dead Sea, we stopped at what we thought was the correct place, just to find out later that it was a different spot. Anyway, we had great views of a pair of Mountain Buntings. To reach this place, we stopped on the k250 mark of the road 90, just near a small sign with the name "Quedem" on it. There's a nice canyon to the right of the road, and we walked up through the middle of it for 40 mins. Near the end of the canyon, in a deserted rocky zone a few hundred metres before a big cliff face, we came across a pair of Mountain Buntings.

The "true" wadi Salvadora is apparently much easier to reach. These are the directions from Richard Bonser's excellent report: "To the north of Ein Gedi on Route 90, park in the small gravel pull in between km250 and km251 at N31 ° 31'01", E35 ° 23'34" just before a left hand bend if you're travelling north. From here follow the path with the white and blue painted rocks up to the spring area (it is steep and times and you may need to scramble a little) and a male Mountain Bunting was singing in the 'bowl' (along with a couple of Sinai Rosefinches) from where I was standing just beyond the obvious pinnacle rock"

Cretzschmar's Bunting

We recorded several birds in the Eilat-Yotvata area, with the first 2 seen at the Meishar on the 15th

Desert Finch

Either we were unlucky or the species was much harder to see than what we had expected. OG saw briefly a bird at Mitzpe Ramon on the 18th, but it wasn't seen by the rest of the team. A couple of birds were seen flying over Shezal Reserve on the 21st and k38 on the 26th. It wasn't until our last evening when we got very good views of 6 birds perched in the vineyards located at the end of a small track with the sign "Arod Ascent Loz Cisterna" at the beginning, that starts at k.108 of the road 171.

Target Species Missed

Eastern Imperial Eagle

We arrived a few weeks late to see the wintering birds at Urim, where the species is nearly guaranteed during the winter months. The last wintering bird at Hula was seen a few days before we were there, but we couldn't find it, and we failed to see any while

watching migrating raptors at Eilat, though a couple birders reported one or two birds at the Eilat Mountains during our stay.

Cyprus Warbler

Cyprus Warblers mainly winter in Israel, especially around the Dead Sea area. We knew we were a little bit late, but anyway we checked a few supposed to be good wadis on the way to the Eilat Mts, without luck.

All photos taken by José Ardaiz

<http://www.avesnavarra.blogspot.com/>

except those of the Black Bush Robin and Caspian Plover, taken by Daniel L. Velasco, and the one showing both Isabelline and Northern Wheatears in the hand, taken by Fernando Arce.