

# ISRAEL 14 – 28 March 2009

## A birdwatching trip report by Owain Gabb<sup>1</sup> and Tim Sykes<sup>2</sup>

### Purpose of this report

This is a summary of a fortnight of birding in Israel. During our trip we travelled from Northern to Southern Israel, beginning at Ma'agan Mikhael on the Mediterranean coast, then moving to Mount Hermon on the Syrian Border, before working our way gradually down through Hula, the Golan Heights and the Dead Sea Region for an extended stay in the Eilat area. We found the Israeli people to be very friendly, and despite the recent escalation of hostilities in and around Gaza, there was very little evidence of a country at war<sup>3</sup>. We saw many of the species we had hoped to, a few we did not expect, experienced fantastic scenery and stayed in some reasonably priced and very relaxing accommodation.

Israel is a very dynamic country in birding terms, and we saw much evidence of environmental change and sanitisation during our stay<sup>4</sup>, with the result that some well known sites have now declined significantly in terms of interest. We hope that the following account, which includes detailed information on birds, sites and accommodation, provides other birders planning an Israel trip a good basis from which to develop an itinerary.

### Getting around

We booked two return tickets from London Heathrow to Tel Aviv (Ben Gurion airport) with British Airways. The total cost per person was £273.30. For anyone planning a trip to Southern Israel only, it is probably worth looking into flying into Jordan, taking a bus across the border and hiring a car in Eilat. Ovda is reportedly taking relatively limited commercial traffic at present, and flights to Jordan are apparently (generally) more reasonably priced than flights to Israel. Note that due to strict security when leaving Israel, you should leave at least two and a half hours to get from hire car return to your departure gate.

A trawl of rental car websites prior to the trip identified that Budget were by far the cheapest option, with cars available for pickup at Tel Aviv airport. The total cost quoted on-line was in the region of £107 for 14 days. Upon arrival, however, we were told that because we did not have an American registered credit card, we would have to pay an additional insurance premium resulting in an overall cost of £293 for the duration. Nevertheless, Budget remained the cheapest option. We had both got ourselves International Drivers Licences, but these were not requested when booking the car.

The car provided was a basic model (5-door) Hyundai, which proved more than capable of driving around everywhere we attempted other than Yotvata (which is very sandy in places). We drove approximately 3,500km during the trip, and found all road surfaces and the majority of sign posting to be very good. The cost of fuel was cheaper, although not dramatically so, than current prices in the UK<sup>5</sup>.

### Sources of Information

We found the following site guides to be particularly useful:

- Shirihai, H., Smith, J.P., Kirwan, G.M. & Alon, D. (2000) A guide to the birding hotspots of Northern Israel. SPNI & The Israel Ornithology Centre.

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<sup>3</sup> There are occasional military road blocks on many of the major roads. Mostly, as clear foreign nationals, you are waved through, and only on the bypass around Jerusalem were we required to present our passports.

<sup>4</sup> This sanitisation most typically took the form of the filling in / redevelopment of sewage ponds due to apparent local mosquito problems attributed to them (such as those at Neot Smadar).

<sup>5</sup> At the time of our trip 1 UK Pound was equivalent to 6 Israeli New Shekels (INS).

- Shirihai, H., Smith, J.P., Kirwan, G.M. & Alon, D. (2000) A guide to the birding hotspots of Southern Israel. SPNI & The Israel Ornithology Centre.
- Gosney, D. (1996). Finding birds in Israel. Gostours Guides.

All three are dated, with some sites having declined significantly in terms of ornithological interest since publication. Nevertheless, the majority of information remains very useful. Where we found sites to have deteriorated this is stated in the text of this report.

In addition, for identification purposes we took the field guide to Birds of the Middle East (by Porter *et al*), the standard Collins Guide and Forsman's raptors of Europe and the Middle East. This latter is particularly important given the number of eagle species (and plumages) you are likely to encounter during your trip. In retrospect a mammal guide would also have been a valuable addition (there is one available through Subbuteo and NHBS), as we saw a good number of mammal species.

There are a good number of trip reports available on line. Many of these are only of use for general context, with the most recent exception we found being Richard Bonser's report (Spring 2008), which you can get from the Travelling Birder website and probably elsewhere. The IsraBirding website (<http://www.israbirding.com>) provides up to date information on sightings, and you can arrange to make a temporary subscription to a text messaging service giving rare bird information.

We took a number of maps, but in the event relied heavily on only one of these during the trip, the World Mapping Project 1:250,000 map of Israel. This is both rip and water proof, with Northern Israel on one side and Southern Israel on the other when folded out. We marked the locations of all the sites mentioned in the publications by Shirihai *et al* and Gosney onto the map, and started our planning from that point. This map, and others, is available through Stanfords of London.

## Daily Summary

We had 13 full days of birding during the trip. This amount of time proved ample to visit the vast majority of the habitats and sites we had wanted to go to, although we worked hard to achieve this, leaving our overnight accommodation prior to dawn each day, and not returning before dusk. In retrospect, the only real omission to our trip was a visit to Mount Gilboa (primarily for long-billed pipit), while 2 days rather than 1 at Nizzana might have resulted in more sandgrouse species being recorded.

In the following day-by-day account a summary of the itinerary and background information is set out in italics followed by a detailed description of what was seen. The species list for the trip is included in **Appendix 1** and photographs of some of the species recorded in **Appendix 2**.

### **Day 1. Tel Aviv Airport to Ma'agan Mikhael (14/03/09)**

*We left Tel Aviv Airport at 15:30, having collected our hire car. After orientating ourselves and picking up some food and water we drove directly to Ma'agan Mikhael (Shirihai page 62, Gosney page 24), which was not difficult to find by following Route 2 towards Haifa. By the time we arrived, however, we only had approximately 20 minutes of birding left prior to dusk (which was around 17:30). The light changes very quickly in Israel in comparison to Northern Europe, and you only have a 10 or 15 minute period between dusk and almost complete darkness.*

Birds recorded from the road included spur-winged plover, which is fairly ubiquitous in Israel, and is present in variable numbers in most semi-natural habitats, as well as around sewage and fish ponds in lowland areas. We also recorded a couple of naturalised species, common myna and ring-necked parakeet: the former we found to be common along the Mediterranean coast, while the latter we subsequently recorded in a number of areas including Eilat.

In 20 minutes of birding around Nasholim we recorded numerous night herons and little egrets, and a few cattle egret. Graceful warbler (or prinia), which is a vocal species favouring dense, scrubby vegetation, was present in areas of tamarisk and around the edges of arable fields: we found it to be widespread in Israel and became relatively familiar with its calls by the end of our stay.

## Day 2. Ma'agan Mikhael & Hula (15/03/09)

We spent about three hours birding around Ma'agan Mikhael before returning to Nahsholim for breakfast. Following this, we spent a few hours travelling across to the Sea of Galilee, and onto the Hula Valley, where we visited the Gume Junction fish ponds (Shirihai north page 39) and then the Hula Nature Reserve (Shirihai north page 50). At this latter site we hired a buggy<sup>6</sup> to drive around the reserve (we only had a couple of hours of daylight left) at a cost of 130 Israeli New Shekels (ISN) – approximately £21.50. The fee to enter the reserve was equivalent to an additional few pounds.

Having seen a hoopoe and both pied and white-breasted (Smyrna) kingfisher within a few hundred metres of our accommodation, we pressed on to Ma'agan Mikhael just after dawn. This provided an excellent start to the trip. With reference to the maps in Gosney and Shirihai we were able to drive straight to the fish ponds. The first pool we visited was probably the best: 30 pied kingfishers sitting together on the beam of a net<sup>7</sup>, a group of seven black storks, a number of small flocks of glossy ibis flying over (in total maybe 100 birds - the only records of the trip), and numerous great white egrets and night herons were present. A larger, more open pool nearby had a large gull flock: this comprised mainly black-headed gulls, among which were many Armenian and a few slender-billed gulls.

Passerine and wader interest was more limited: the water levels in the pools were not generally favourable for waders, and we recorded a single marsh sandpiper and a few spotted redshank among the more common ruff, green and common sandpipers, black-winged stilt, greenshank and common redshank. There were numerous wagtails around the pools: among the yellow wagtails races present were *feldegg* (common) and *beema* (one individual). A male citrine wagtail was the passerine highlight for us. A red-throated pipit, a few water pipits and bluethroats (we recorded both white and red spotted races with regularity during the trip) and a couple of reed warblers were also present, and an Egyptian mongoose was seen working its way through the edge of the reedbed.

A short spell of sea-watching produced little other than a Sandwich tern, a flock of ringed plover and a sickly looking lesser black-backed gull, probably of the race *heuglini* rather than the more common *fuscus* which we saw elsewhere. A ringtail harrier working the edge of the dune vegetation was seen too briefly to be confidently assigned to species, but had the proportions and colouration of a hen harrier.

As we travelled across to Hula we noted our first sightings of several common species: white stork, black kite, (steppe) buzzard and sparrowhawk. Corn buntings were singing from overhead lines, and a group of 30+ (probable) lesser kestrels were foraging over a field to the south of Route 70. Unfortunately we were unable to stop to confirm the identification, and a single bird later in the trip at Eilat was our only definite record of the species.

The Gume Junction fish ponds were initially a little disappointing, as they did not have the numbers of birds that had been present at Ma'agan Mikhael. As we started to work the area to the north of the road, however, we saw our first (mutual) new species, Palestine sunbird<sup>8</sup>, a flock of 18 marbled duck, a group of black-tailed godwit and some marsh sandpiper (among commoner waders). The ponds to the south of the road are now heavily overgrown with ruderal and scrubby vegetation. Here we recorded a group of penduline tits, reed warbler and numerous lesser whitethroats.

The reserve at Hula comprises a range of habitats, but is dominated by flat, open arable land with large reed fringed pools. Cranes are particularly numerous here, and we also had a range of wildfowl including common European species such as shelduck, wigeon and shoveler on the pools, although a couple of ruddy shelduck in the arable

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<sup>6</sup> This was an electric contraption similar to a golf buggy. There is a tarmac track that runs through the reserve at Hula, and this is a good mode of transport for getting around. Alternatives are hiring bikes (at similar cost) or walking.

<sup>7</sup> The fish ponds at Ma'agan Mikhael are netted. This is assumedly to prevent herons and other piscivorous birds feeding easily. These nets are often in a poor state of repair, however, and the birds can clearly access the water in many places. The number of birds that had become tangled in these nets (mostly herons of various species and occasionally gulls), and which had subsequently died, is not a pleasant site.

<sup>8</sup> Palestine sunbird is common around villages and kibbutzes. We recorded the species more occasionally in well vegetated desert wadis, e.g. Wadi Mishmar.

fields were possibly more unusual. In flight over the area we recorded a number of species including lesser spotted eagle, osprey and a small group of white pelicans. Passerines included small groups of serin, a couple of singing Eastern olivaceous warbler and a woodchat shrike. We also saw our second mammal species of the trip: coypu were common here.

On the way to our overnight accommodation we saw a large number of black kites (c.800) circling in the hills over the minor road to Amuk (west of the Junction of Routes 90 and 91 at Mahanayim). We drove up the road, and found that these birds were in fact wheeling over a rubbish dump. Several hundred more black kites were settled on the floor of the dump, together with white storks, buzzards, a second calendar year greater spotted eagle and several lesser spotted eagles of mixed age. The light was fading, however, so we resolved to return for a longer visit within the next couple of days.

### **Day 3. Lahavot Habashan, Golan Heights, Neve Ativ, Mount Hermon & Ha Goshrim (16/03/09)**

*We started off at Lahavot Habashan fish ponds (Shirihai north page 41), which proved an excellent and easily workable site, birding this area for approximately three hours. We then took Route 959 through the picturesque Golan Heights before travelling north to Neve Ativ (Shirihai north page 53) and on to Mount Hermon (Shirihai north page 55, Gosney page 28). Mount Hermon, despite the continued high military profile, has become a major local tourist attraction, and there were large and very noisy school groups as well as a lot of young families using the shops, ski slopes and lifts during our visit. In retrospect we should have gone earlier in the day, although the military only open the mountain road around 08:00, so a dawn start is not possible. Additionally, the snow may not be as extensive in mid March in some years which would result in the area being much quieter. Returning from Hermon we stopped at fish ponds at Ha Goshrim (which we accessed through a hole in the fence). These did not prove particularly productive.*

The fish ponds at Lahavot Habashan are generally relatively small and are surrounded by mature linear stands and small blocks of reed. Some of the pools, including the one nearest the road, had been drained at the time of our visit, and a water rail was foraging on the open mud. Of greater interest, however, were the passerines: clamorous reed warbler, moustached warbler and Savi's warbler were all present, and there was a supporting cast of reed warbler, penduline tit and water pipit. A number of clamorous reed warbler (3+) were singing among the reeds around the pools. The song travels quite some distance, but we soon managed to get good views of a bird singing from various positions among the tops of the reeds. Another highlight was several moustached warbler chasing and singing on the fringe of one of the pools, while at least two Savi's warblers were reeling from the arable field margin adjoining the fish ponds. One of these birds moved into the reeds, providing good views. Waterfowl were limited to a few common duck and heron species, a snipe and a flyover pygmy cormorant. This was one of a few sites where we recorded common kingfisher. We found white-breasted kingfisher to be relatively common in northern Israel, favouring a range of wetland habitats, while pied kingfisher occurs in wetland areas throughout the country.

Travelling on Route 959 through the Golan Heights we decided to stop for a few minutes in an open flower rich area. The commonest bird here was calandra lark, several of which were recorded in aerial song flights with further birds on the ground. We also recorded black-eared and isabelline wheatear, linnet, rock hyrax and mountain gazelle. A flock of mixed finches moving through some scrub comprised chaffinch, goldfinch and greenfinch, with a Syrian woodpecker tagging along: we were to get far better views at Kfar Ruppin, however, and the bird was identified on the basis of call and distribution rather than clear views.

Neve Ativ is a great area to work for an hour or so. Here we recorded a nice range of species including rock thrush, black redstart, blue rock thrush, Cretzschmar's bunting, chukar, short-toed eagle and long-legged buzzard. Mount Hermon, in contrast, was very hard work, and after getting to the top on the ski lift, the deep snow cover combined with the scores of people made the area seem instantly unpromising. A fly-over shore lark provided some hope, and we then walked off down the road a little to see if there was anything calling or hopping around in the less disturbed areas nearby. As there was a lack of signs saying not to do so, we then continued to walk down the road, which obviously looped back down towards the car park below. By the time we were stopped by the army about 45 minutes later, we had not seen or heard another bird. We were told that we were off limits, but given the distance we had come we could carry on. Having got most of the way back to the car park, we encountered our first birds in over an hour: a few rock buntings associating with a large group of chaffinch. We could also hear a

rock nuthatch calling, and flushed a couple of sand partridge from a scree slope.

Having worked all of these high altitude areas, we found that the best area was actually around the car park behind the toll booths near the start of the mountain road. Here we had two sombre tit foraging and calling in open scrub, as well as flocks of goldfinch and chaffinch, a robin, a wren, a chiffchaff and several chukar.

During the return journey and at Ha Goshrim we saw nothing worthy of mention.

**Day 4. Route 918, Ha-Khula Reserve, Southern Golan Heights/Jordanian Border (including Gamla), rubbish dump on road to Amuk (near Mahanayim) (17/03/09)**

*We started before dawn, birding the fields on Route 918 approximately 2-4 km from the junction with Route 91 for about an hour, before taking a track running along the east side of the Ha-Khula Reserve. After working this area for a further couple of hours, we moved south to the Jordanian Border (south-west of Meitsar) to look for migrant raptors before travelling to the Gamla Nature Reserve (Shirihai north page 62, Gosney page 34). The fee to enter Gamla was 25 NIS per person, equivalent to about £4.20. The reserve is excellent for various species, particularly griffon vulture, but at the time of our visit there were a number of noisy school groups, which made seeing passerines difficult. With an hour and a half of daylight left, we then returned to the rubbish dump on the Amuk road armed with cameras and a copy of Forsman.*

The ploughed arable fields on route 918 proved an excellent area for black francolin. A number of male birds were calling territorially around the edges of the fields. By selecting a number of locations on the edge of the road, and scanning the field edges (hay bales, pipes and other local vantage-points that the francolins call from) we obtained good views of several birds. A quail was calling close by, and we got our first views of the distinctive *atricapillus* race of jay in a eucalyptus.

The track running along the east side of the Ha Kula Reserve was initially quiet, although we soon stumbled across a group of 20-30 Dead Sea sparrows in a field margin, and saw our only female black francolin of the trip. Migrants such as red-rumped swallow and blackcap, and a small group of Cretzschmar's bunting were also present, and flash pools had a range of common wader species.

On the way through the southern Golan Heights we saw a southern grey shrike on roadside wires, but until we arrived at our vantage-point overlooking the Jordanian border we did not record anything further of note. We found a rough (tarmac) track leading east from the 98 towards the Jordanian border (somewhere south of Meitsar), and by scanning over the deep valley we saw a few species moving through, including Egyptian vulture, steppe buzzards and an alpine swift. A quail was flushed from the edge of the track, and common passerine migrants included lesser and common whitethroat.

The gorge at Gamla is spectacular, and we soon picked up a griffon vulture among other birds of prey soaring high above it. There are at least two griffon territories in the gorge, and we watched an incubating bird on the far cliff face and a different pair dropping into a nest site close to the observation hut. Other species noted were little swift (which was numerous) and short-toed eagle, while we got spectacular views of Egyptian vulture drifting past the observation area at eye level. A search of nearby open scrub resulted in our first record of Eastern orphean warbler, a blue rock thrush and numerous graceful warblers.

Our final stop of the day was the dump on the road to Amuk. Approximately 600 black kite and a similar number of white stork were loafing on the floor of the dump, along with a few steppe buzzards, cattle egrets and hooded crows. There is clearly considerable turn over of raptors at the site, however, and there were far less eagles present than during our previous visit (when we recorded a minimum of 13 different individuals). The first to appear were two second calendar year imperial eagles. These birds were quite distinctive, showing a white trailing edge to the wings and tail, a two-tone underwing (with pale streaky coverts and darker remiges), a light streaky belly and pale head. There was also a clear pale panel in the inner primaries, and as they circled low over head, Tim was able to get a number of photos. The only other eagle present was a second calendar year lesser spotted eagle. This bird circled the dump before perching on the edge of adjacent woodland, and we were able to cross-check all key features, including the small buzzard-like bill.

By the time we left the site at dusk both the lesser spotted eagle and one of the imperial eagles had flown into the

woodland edge to roost. As such, we would recommend carefully scanning the surroundings of the dump if you visit this site. It may also be worth trying a range of early morning, afternoon and dusk visits to maximise your chances of recording a good range of species.

#### **Day 5. Kfar Ruppin & Neve Eitan fish ponds (Bet Shean), Dead Sea (18/03/09)**

*We left Mahanayim very early, with the idea of reaching Kfar Ruppin (Shirihai north page 82) within an hour of dawn. We found Route 90 to be an excellent road during the trip, but the slowest stretch of it is directly to the north and along the west side of the Sea of Galilee, so it took us a couple of hours to make the trip, and we arrived at around 06:30. After birding the kibbutz grounds (and failing to find the football pitch – which appears to have been taken over by ruderal vegetation) we moved on to the nearby large fish pond, the ringing station, and then the extensive network of pools at Neve Eitan (Shirihai north page 84). These are easy to access around in a car, as driveable tracks run around the perimeter of most of them. We eventually located two reed fringed pools at the north-western corner of the complex of ponds, with a great deal of exposed mud. We left the area at around 14:00, heading directly down the 90 past the Dead Sea. We stopped en route a couple of times to look at desert birds, before reaching Neot Hakkikar and our accommodation at dusk.*

Working the grounds of the kibbutz at Kfar Ruppin did not produce the Dead Sea sparrows or Indian silverbills that sometimes occur here<sup>9</sup>, although we did see a great spotted cuckoo on the approach road. We recorded the first of many Eastern Bonelli's warblers (the species was numerous in the southern part of the country by the time we arrived there), there were good numbers of Syrian woodpeckers (many of which were clearly becoming territorial as there was a lot of chasing and calling going on) and we spent some time watching a singing red-spotted bluethroat, which proved very confiding. Having found a way to drive to the reservoir visible from the kibbutz grounds, we worked the area, but found it to be rather limited, with a number of common duck species and a few black storks present around the fringes. A small number of common waders using an adjacent area of open mud included little ringed plover and little stint.

A trip to the ringing station was uneventful, although there is a heronry (dominated by night herons) and we did see a sedge warbler and a large group of Spanish sparrows.

Neve Eitan proved excellent. As we arrived we picked up a group of 11 white pelicans as well as a flock of several hundred white storks riding the thermals, while the first large pool we looked at had a flock of 15 great black-headed (Pallas's) gulls. The gulls were of mixed age, but a couple of pristine adults were present, and additional birds were seen with regularity around the pools. Ospreys were particularly numerous, we noted a couple of clamorous reed warblers in thin reedy ditches, and a small group of Dead Sea sparrows on the northern fringe of the pools. Other passerines included red-throated and water pipits.

Having worked the pools for a couple of hours we were almost ready to move on when we discovered a couple of reed-fringed pools at the extreme western end (not directly accessible by car from the main network of pools). We were first drawn to these having seen a party of spoonbill flying in, as this species is often drawn to shallow water for foraging. The extensive mud, the network of small pools and channels and the tall dense fringing stands of reed looked ideal for crakes and waders, and this proved to be the case. Waders present included spotted redshank, wood and marsh sandpipers, while by scanning the edges of the reeds with a telescope, we first picked out a spotted crake and several water rail (among the numerous moorhens), and then a small crake species. This bird proved very difficult to see well, although after 20 minutes of watching it skulking around the bases of the reeds and making occasional forays onto the mud, we had seen enough features to confirm it was a male little crake. Further scanning of the edges eventually produced a second bird. In total we probably spent around an hour at the pool.

As we travelled south down Route 90 past the Dead Sea, we made several stops in response to seeing birds flying over the road. In this way we added Tristram's grackle, blackstart, desert lark, white-crowned black wheatear and little green bee-eater to the trip list, and got our first good views of sand partridge. All of these species proved common in Southern Israel. More localised species were African rock martin (pale crag martin) and fan-tailed raven. We only recorded the latter species around the Dead Sea during our trip, although found rock martin at

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<sup>9</sup> There is a birdwatching centre in the kibbutz. We were told here that the silverbills were still around, but had not been recorded within the past week or so.

other sites including desert around Neot Hakkikar and at Mitzpe Ramon.

As we approached our lodging for the night at Neot Hakikkar, we stopped to scan some salt pans for waterfowl. Although there were a lot of birds present, most were black-winged stilt and teal. Of greater interest was a wheeling flock of pallid swift. These birds were flying low over the road calling, and in the evening light it was possible to pick up some of the key plumage features.

#### **Day 6. Neot Hakkikar, Iddan, El Hazeva and Yotvata (19/03/09)**

*We left our accommodation prior to dawn, with the intention of working the fish ponds at Neot Hakkikar (Shirihai south page 123). The directions to these pools seem outdated (there is now no obvious sign for Dead Sea fish) and access is not possible 1.5km from the junction, unless we failed to follow the map and instructions properly. In general we found the area rather limited and moved on quickly after returning to our accommodation for breakfast. After a couple of unplanned stops on the route south (in response to seeing birds flying over the road), we visited first Iddan (where the most notable occurrence was Tim wandering into possibly the most clearly signposted minefield in Israel) and then the Shizaf Nature Reserve (Shirihai south page 110) to look for (and find) Arabian warbler. Following this we travelled on, aware of the distance we had to travel to our overnight accommodation in Eilat. We nevertheless managed to stop for a couple of hours at Yotvata, spending the second hour digging and then towing the car out of some unexpectedly deep sand with the help of one of the farmers. We arrived at Eilat around 17:30, in time to catch up with some Israeli birders and ringing station volunteers on the North Beach and get a bit of news about what was in the local area.*

Working the tamarisk scrub and date palms to the north of the road to Neot Hakkikar proved difficult due to the dense cover. Numerous lesser whitethroats were present, and we came across a party of Arabian babbler (we recorded this species on most days in the south of the country) and a blue rock thrush in the nearby desert. We also stopped at a large open wadi on the edge of town (near the gated checkpoint), where we recorded more little green bee-eater, sand partridge, desert lark and our first trumpeter finches. Several Eastern olivaceous warblers, one of which was clearly holding territory, were present in the grounds of the camp lodge.

We then travelled south on Route 90, making a couple of stops to look for birds we had seen flying over the road, and making one very unsuccessful trip into the desert along a rough track. The stops added mourning wheatear, spectacled warbler, and brown-necked raven to the tally. The mourning wheatear (a male) was very confiding, and we were able to work through all the features separating it from the relatively similar hooded wheatear. Finding a spectacled warbler in the same area was a bonus, as we got excellent views and it proved to be the only one of the trip. Brown-necked raven, in contrast, was subsequently recorded in many desert areas in the south of the country, sometimes in groups of ten to twenty.

During the stop at Iddan, the only species of note was little green bee-eater, which was breeding in a low bank near the bridge. Having made our way to the Shizaf Nature Reserve, we parked up in the small car park and walked about 100 metres east through the acacia scrub before turning roughly north along a second line of acacias leading to a high fence. During the first ten minutes we only saw one bird, a male Palestine sunbird, but just as our enthusiasm was starting to wane, we flushed a medium sized *Sylvia* warbler with a black head from an Acacia ahead of us. This bird, turned out to be an Arabian warbler, and we soon located a second, although it took us a while to confirm that they appeared to be a pair and to obtain good views.

We made a couple of further stops on Route 90 as we continued south, but the only additional species noted was a tawny pipit (which proved common around Eilat and at Yotvata during the second week of the trip). We then stopped at Yotvata, birding what are generally regarded as the least promising fields (several rectangular fields clearly visible from the road towards the northern end of the farmed area). Here we recorded a cuckoo, several short-toed larks, a Palestine sunbird and a party of Arabian babblers. We then spent a frustrating hour with the car trapped in the sand - before one of the local farmers took pity on us and dragged us out.

We finished the day at Eilat. A quick scan across the salt pans resulted in greater flamingo and gull-billed tern, but we hurried on to North Beach without giving the area a proper grilling. At North Beach we recorded a peak count of 24 white-eyed gulls loafing on an offshore wooden platform, a few commuting Caspian terns and a Baltic gull, and a number of pintail on the sea. We also bumped into some Israeli birders who told us what had been seen

locally over the past few days. The list included black bush robins, Kittlitz's and Caspian plovers.

**Day 7. Km 20 Fishponds & Km 19 Sewage Works, International Birdwatching Centre & Holland Park (Eilat), Amram's Pillars (20/03/09)**

*The Km 20 fishponds (Shirihai south page 49) draw in numerous birders, primarily due to the diversity of wader species present, their ease of accessibility and extent. You can drive around the perimeter of the site and between some of the pools, obtaining good views across them<sup>10</sup>, and it is also possible to drive to the nearby Km 19 sewage pools (Shirihai south page 53), which are good for wagtails, pipits and waders, without returning to Route 90. The Km 20 area is best visited in the early morning or evening to avoid heat haze: during the hotter parts of the day we found that the haze made small waders using some of the less accessible central bunds difficult to identify.*

*Following our early morning visit to Km 20 and then the Km 19 sewage pools, we returned to Eilat and met Noam Weiss and the ringing team at the International Birdwatching Centre (signposted as 'Birdwatching?' on Route 90 and (more conventionally) from the North Beach). Having picked up a bit of information, we decided to go to Holland Park, where a black bush robin had taken up temporary residence. This is an excellent site for migrants. Travelling into Eilat on Route 90, take a right onto the ring road at the first roundabout you come to (there is a petrol station on your right), and Holland Park is about 200m up the hill on the right hand side. The site has been designed for amenity use, has been planted up with a range of shrubs and is artificially irrigated. During our stay it held considerable numbers of Sylvia warblers and other migrants, as well as desert species. Having worked the park for a couple of hours, we moved onto Amram's Pillars (Shirihai south page 47, Gosney page 10) to search for Sinai rosefinch, before returning before dusk to Km 19 to wait for the Lichtenstein's sand grouse to come in to drink.*

We arrived at Km 20 before dawn, and had to wait for the light to improve before starting working our way through the waders. We therefore worked the scrub and open ground around the adjacent 'greenhouses,' and soon found a pair of namaqua doves. A purple heron, the only one we recorded during the trip, flew into a nearby date palm plantation, perching on the top of one of the palms before moving on. As the light improved we added a few common wader species to our tally and worked on our female wheatear identification.

The Kittlitz's plover had been previously reported from the northern end of the pools. Having located a flock of distant kentish plovers, we settled down to work our way through them, and soon picked out the bird. At a range of a couple of hundred metres it was only the head pattern that initially distinguished it, but as the plovers moved slightly closer we could see additional features such as colouration of the breast and the long-legged appearance. The plovers then moved to the other side of the bund, and as we got into the car to drive round to gain a better view, we got an unexpected bonus. A bimaculated lark, which had probably stopped at the pool to drink, flushed from the bank to the track, providing excellent (albeit brief) views. We subsequently failed to get better views of the Kittlitz's plover on the other side of the bund, although did record a second calendar year white-winged black tern and a curlew of the race *orientalis*.

We then moved to the sewage pools at Km 19. The pools have large numbers of wagtails and pipits, but we recorded only relatively common species. A number of alarm calling lesser whitethroats hopping around actively in a small bush seemed to indicate that a predator might be present, but we could only find a quail. Birds moving through or over the site included a pale morph booted eagle, a squacco heron, a steppe eagle, two (calling) short-toed eagles and a party of little green bee-eaters.

We had a brief chat with the ringing team at the International Birdwatching Centre, and arranged a nocturnal trip for the following night with Noam Weiss. Following this, we moved on to Holland Park, where we failed to locate the black bush robin, although it had been recorded the previous day, and we possibly did not concentrate our effort in quite the right area. The best bird for us was a male Ruppell's warbler, while Eastern Bonelli's warbler, lesser whitethroat and yellow-vented bulbul were all very common. Desert species included sand partridge and blackstart.

At Amram's Pillars we found two female Sinai rosefinch approximately 50m along the track from the camping

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<sup>10</sup> Please do not walk out along the central bunds, as it moves the birds around and irritates the locals.



carpark (on the left hand side). A photographer had been baiting the rocks with seed, and the birds (as well as two desert lark) proved very confiding. We then went to the top car park, where we briefly saw a male rosefinch. There were a number of people present in the car park, and the resulting noise probably prevented the bird from being more confiding. Birders are in the habit of leaving fruit in the area, which probably proves attractive to the rosefinch - it certainly attracts sand partridge. The only other bird in the area was a white-crowned black wheatear.

We returned to Km 19 for dusk. We recorded two Lichtenstein's sandgrouse towards the black pipe on the north-western edge of the north-east pool. The birds came in at approximately 18:15, although the views we got were brief and relatively poor, as it was just getting to the point where use of optics was impractical.

#### **Day 8. Holland Park, North Beach Date Palm Plantation, Eilat Mountains (including Wadi Netaphim), nocturnal trip with Noam Weiss (21/03/09)**

*Following a dawn visit to Holland Park, we spent a few hours in the Eilat Mountains watching a steady raptor passage. We then drove from the Eilat ring road along rough tracks in the direction of Wadi Netaphim, but this proved a relatively unsuccessful excursion, and after a few hours we returned to Eilat and spent some time working the North Beach date palm plantation. After this we spent the remaining daylight hours birding the reserve at the International Bird Watching Centre, part of the sewage canal and some adjacent arable fields. We then headed back to the SPNI Centre (where we were staying) to meet Noam Weiss for a nocturnal trip aimed at finding Egyptian nightjar, eagle owl and Hume's tawny owl. Noam also organises trips to the Dead Sea area to search for Nubian nightjar. He can be contacted through the International Birdwatching Centre ([www.BirdsofEilat.com](http://www.BirdsofEilat.com))<sup>11</sup>.*

There had been turnover of birds at Holland Park since the previous day. We recorded red-throated pipit, our first ortolan (which we subsequently noted with regularity), a quail and six Ruppells's warblers. Again, there was no sign of the black bush robin, and we worked the area pretty hard.

The wind was pushing raptors through the eastern part of the Eilat Mountains, and unfortunately at well-above the desired elevation. We recorded numerous steppe buzzards, good numbers of steppe eagle together with small numbers (or single) short-toed and booted eagles, osprey, Egyptian vulture and black stork. The Mount Yoash road was closed, so once raptor passage had died down, we attempted to access the spring at Wadi Netaphim from tracks leading from the Eilat bypass. Working these tracks proved unproductive, and we never actually reached a water feature, despite following signs (we drove for at least five kilometres) and walking a wadi for about an hour. The only new species recorded was masked shrike, which was to become relatively common over the subsequent days.

Returning to the North Beach area, we decided to spend a few hours working the North Beach date palm plantation, the salt pans and the agricultural fields towards the ringing station. We failed to record our target species, Indian silverbill, but did add thrush nightingale and redstart to the trip list. A red-necked phalarope was on the salt pans, and we also recorded squacco heron, spoonbills, ruff and a flock of Spanish sparrows. Of most interest, however, was a large flock of 50-60 desert finches in a field close to the ringing station. These birds were present in this area during the remainder of our stay, but had apparently not been recorded in these numbers or at this location for over a month (a winter flock had previously been present).

The evening trip with Noam Weiss was very interesting. We, and three Belgian birders, crammed into Noam's 4x4 and headed first to the Yotvata area to look for Egyptian nightjar and desert eagle owl, and then along some steep-sided rocky wadis to search for Hume's tawny owl. Noam had first given us a presentation focussing on the ecology of the Hume's owl, discussing displacement of birds by eagle owls and conservation problems for the

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to see these species (particularly the Nubian nightjar and Hume's tawny owl) with a suitable guide such as Noam. Irresponsible parties (including tour groups) have been implicated in the desertion of some owl territories as a result of repeated disturbance (and there are still very few territories known despite considerable research): Noam has studied the ecology of Hume's tawny owl, and visits territories on rotation, limiting the time spent watching the owls to limit intrusion. Nubian nightjar is also the subject of dedicated research having declined to the point where it is extremely rare at national level and has a very restricted range. The areas in which it persists are both remote and very close to the Jordanian border, so it is irresponsible to try to visit them alone or in small unregistered parties. In 2009, Noam charged 250 NIS per person (equivalent to approximately £41.50) for a five hour trip aimed at seeing the initial three species. The proceeds generated by the excursions support the valuable work done at the ringing station. We did not attempt Nubian nightjar during our visit.

species going forward. He then handed out lamps, and we drove around a network of fields searching for the first two of our target species.

Despite considerable effort we failed to see the Egyptian nightjars at Yotvata: several birds had been present early in the month, and further birds were reported to have arrived in the area after our excursion. We also drew a blank with eagle owl: there is a pair that regularly forages in the Yotvata area, but they have massive territories. Also, during the likely incubation period there is obviously only one bird active, limiting your chances of a sighting. After a good run of encounters the week previously, Noam had entered a period of limited success, and had not recorded an owl for a number of evenings. Species we did encounter during the couple of hours we spent searching included stone curlew, Ethiopian hedgehog<sup>12</sup>, fox, jackal and Dorca's gazelle.

The best was saved until last, however. We drove along a very rough track, only just navigable by 4x4 in places. We had gone to an old Hume's owl territory that Noam wanted to check out. Suddenly, picked out by one of the torches, we saw an owl on a high rock ledge. Far from being disturbed by the light, the bird swooped a few feet down the cliff-face where it picked off an unfortunate wheatear (probably a white-crowned black) before returning to the ledge. It called once, and we relocated it quickly. We then spent a few minutes looking at the bird, noting the open facial disc and other key features, before leaving the wadi to minimise disturbance.

#### **Day 9. Km 103-104, Mitzpe Ramon, Neot Smadar (Shizzafon), Km 20 and Yotvata (22/03/09)**

*Rain is a rare occurrence in Israel, with many desert areas only getting a few millimetres each year. It is also very localised, such that some areas of desert and some wadis receive far more rain than others, sometimes resulting in standing water or flash flooding during winter, while only a few kilometres away there is very little rain at all. Areas that have been inundated within the past few years can be clearly seen as you pass through the desert, and are characterised by lines or patches of short bushy vegetation and large numbers of Acacias. These areas can be very productive for both migrants and desert species. With this in mind, we targeted the area around Km 103 and 104 on Route 90, where there was considerable green vegetation present in two long 'lines,' spending several hours there early on Day 9<sup>13</sup>. Following this, we paid a visit to Mitzpe Ramon, aiming to see the Syrian serin flock that had been present in the area, before moving on to Neot Smadar (formerly known as Shizzafon) to work some of the plantation. During the last few hours of daylight we made a brief visit to Km 20 and then the circular fields at Yotvata.*

*Although still well worth a visit, Neot Smadar (Shizzafon) may not be the site it once was. Some of the sewage pools mentioned in Gosney (page 12) and Shirihai (south page 87) have been filled in due to the mosquito problem they were apparently creating, and an ornamental garden has been developed. There is still water locally (in both the sewage pond area and directly east of it), but according to Noam Weiss, this is no longer a reliable site to observe crowned sandgrouse.*

The lines of vegetation at Km markers 103 and 104 proved excellent in terms of numbers of birds present, but we recorded nothing new. Species recorded included a range of migrant and desert birds: several masked shrikes, numerous lesser whitethroats, a few Eastern orphee warblers, 40-50 short-toed larks, a scattering of tawny pipits and desert larks, and a loose flock of over 200 trumpeter finches was also present. We worked the area for several hours before heading on towards Mitzpe Ramon.

From Route 90 we took Route 13 towards Mitzpe Ramon, and after a short distance flushed a black and white wheatear from beside the road. Following better views, we were able to confirm our first hooded wheatear. The exact location was approximately 500m to the east of the Km 2 marker, with the bird initially seen to the north of the road, but then crossing to perch on a sign saying 'Danger. Firing Area. Entrance forbidden.' It proved very confiding, which allowed a number of photographs to be taken.

The football pitch at Mitzpe Ramon is easily found by taking a right hand turn at the round-about on the edge of

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<sup>12</sup> Ethiopian hedgehogs occur in the grounds at Kibbutz Lotan. We saw an animal twice while sitting outside our chalet having a beer in the evening.

<sup>13</sup> Note that Km 33, formerly an excellent site for desert species, has not had any rain for a number of years, and the breeding bird community in the area is currently very limited.

town. The pitch is small and enclosed, and stands adjacent to a small wooded park where people tend to camp. This is an excellent little area for birding irrespective of whether Syrian serins are present. We had red-throated pipit, white-crowned black, mourning, black-eared and northern wheatears on the pitch, with both Egyptian and griffon vulture among the soaring steppe buzzards. The serins proved a little elusive, disappearing into the long grass and flushing into the nearby trees for long periods, but we both eventually got good views of 4-5 birds perched on the goal posts. Migrants in the nearby scrubby woodland included a redstart of the *samamasicus* race.

After a quick lunch in Mitzpe Ramon, we moved on to Neot Smadar (Shizzafon), where we worked part of the plantation within the kibbutz grounds. A good number of common migrants were present, including redstarts, wheatears, *Sylvia* warblers and tree pipit, but there was no sign of the Cyprus wheatear that had been reported during previous weeks. After a couple of hours of birding we left and headed for the Km 20 salt pans. Here we recorded our first European bee-eaters, some avocets (which we may have previously overlooked), and in the small plantation just as you leave Route 90 to get to the pools, a semi-collared flycatcher. Finishing the day at the south circular field at Yotvata, we saw a Caspian plover among the assembled pipits and wagtails.

#### **Day 10. Nizzana and Yotvata (23/03/09)**

*We set out early (about 03:10) to get to the Nizzana area by dawn (which is around 06:00 in mid March), to search for the various desert species for which the area has become well known. To travel between Lotan and the Km 7 marker on the road to Azzuz (e.g. Shirihai south page 127) took approximately 2 hours 20 minutes driving steadily, and will take at least half an hour longer from Eilat. After locating the displaying bustards, and watching them for some time, we then walked a few kilometres of the Azzuz road looking for desert species. Following this we moved on to the Queziot sewage ponds (Shirihai south page 129). We did not visit the ponds referred to in Shirihai as 4B, as there were a number of people walking and working around them. Another group, which visited the ponds at 4C reported no sandgrouse, but we, and other groups of birders did record sandgrouse at 4A<sup>14</sup>. After driving the length of the road to Azzuz (at little more than walking pace) and checking a couple of sites in the Ashalim area, we then headed back to the circular fields at Yotvata for the last hour of daylight.*

We arrived at Nizzana a little early, and dozed in the car for about half an hour before the light became good enough to scan the open desert for McQueen's bustard. We scoped the area to the east of the road from separate locations near the Km 7 post. Within 5 minutes we had both located different bustards: these birds displayed intermittently for the next hour. Tim later found a third bustard to the west of the road, as well as small parties of cream-coloured courser. After putting a few arriving birders onto the bustards, which could be quite difficult to see when still, we walked off down the road to the south to look for other desert species. During approximately 45 minutes of birding we recorded a female desert wheatear, several scrub warbler territories (in very low thorny vegetation directly next to the road), and a few bar-tailed desert lark. We then drove the track as far as Azzuz, picking up a little owl on top of a pile of roadside rocks on the outskirts of the village.

As we walked from the road to the Queziot sewage pools (Site 4A), we watched a bird dropping in to the waters edge. This turned out to be a black-bellied sandgrouse. Unfortunately we were to have no other sandgrouse here<sup>15</sup>, and having wasted a little time orientating ourselves, it was now getting late in the morning. We then tried birding the large open reservoirs (there are two, one of which is not visible from the road) to the north of the Nizzana Project. These proved good for waders and wildfowl, but we did not record sandgrouse<sup>16</sup>. There must be a chance of doing so, however, as the sides are gently shelving and the water-bodies have a better field of view than the sewage pools. After checking a few of the other sites mentioned in Shirihai with no joy, we headed back towards Lotan, with the aim of reaching Yotvata for a couple of hours of birding before dusk.

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<sup>14</sup> The petrol station shown on the map in Shirihai (south page 128) is closed and overgrown, and is not therefore such an obvious land mark for orientating yourself.

<sup>15</sup> Rather than walking the road to Azzuz, we should probably have headed straight to 4a. Birders who did this recorded larger numbers of black-bellied and some spotted sandgrouse.

<sup>16</sup> Some areas that have formerly been regularly used by foraging sandgrouse had been ploughed at the time of our visit. Picking up some local knowledge of recent sandgrouse hotspots would be advantageous prior to any future visits to the area.

At Yotvata we worked our way through the crop marks in the south circular field, eventually locating the bird we had been looking for, small skylark. Although we did not get perfect views of a bird on the ground, several birds were present, and we did manage to get enough on them as they flitted around the area to make a confident identification<sup>17</sup>. Other birds present included good numbers of red-throated and a very confiding tawny pipit, but despite reports of both pallid and Montagu's harriers from the area, the only harriers we could find were marsh and hen.

#### **Day 11. Eilat Date Palm Plantations, North Beach, Holland Park, Km 26 & Km 20 (24/03/09)**

*We started the day by searching the date palm plantation to the north of the International Birdwatching Centre for migrant passerines and the returning oriental honey buzzard. We then moved to the North Beach to catch up on what had been seen locally, missing a brown booby by around 15 minutes. The fish cages have been removed from the North Beach, and there is no current plan to re-deploy them, which makes seeing species such as striated heron and western reef egret more difficult, and limits the chances of interesting roosting or loafing species on offshore infrastructure. We made another visit to Holland Park, working the area for an hour or two, before visiting the date plantation at North Beach and then the International Birdwatching Centre. We then moved onto a couple of small plantations close to the 90, the most productive being at Km 26, before finishing the day at the Km 20 fishponds.*

There were workers already in the middle and southern part of the date plantation at dawn, so we targeted the northern end. Birds roosting in the palms included steppe buzzards and night heron, while we also recorded a range of common migrants. Birding the plantation is difficult, however, as the trees stop you getting good views of large birds that flush, while any bird that sits tight may or may not be seen due to the angle of view that you get. Having worked the plantation for an hour or so (which was nowhere near enough) we decided to move on to Holland Park<sup>18</sup>. The best bird we had seen was a male lesser kestrel which was perched on a pylon between the plantation and the Jordanian Border. This proved to be the only confirmed sighting of the species during the trip.

On the way to Holland Park we stopped at North Beach, where we learned we had missed a brown booby by a few minutes, but did get views of a ferruginous duck that was tagging along with a flock of garganey, a km or so out to sea. While some birders decided to hang around to see if the booby reappeared, or drove towards the port / Egyptian border to see if they could re-find it, we chose to continue with our day's itinerary. There had again been turnover of birds at Holland Park, and we found our first wryneck, as well as good numbers of Ruppell's warbler, ortolan and Eastern orphee warbler. We stayed for a couple of hours, but did not locate the black bush robin or anything else new in.

The most fortuitous sighting of the day (and possibly the trip) was when we popped in to the International Birdwatching Centre late morning to see if we could pick up any news. As we arrived at the car park, someone in Chris Batty's party had just seen the oriental honey buzzard over the nearby date palm plantation. By driving to the edge of the plantation we were able to get excellent views as the bird soared higher before eventually being lost to sight over the Jordanian Border<sup>19</sup>. Another trip around the agricultural fields near the ringing station and then the North Beach date plantation failed to result in any Indian silverbill, although we did relocate the large flocks of desert finches and Spanish sparrows that we had seen on Day 8. We were also now starting to see masked shrike on a regular basis, indicating that there had been an influx of this species.

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<sup>17</sup> At the time of our stay there were 3-4 small skylarks in the south circular field. The call is distinctive, being unlike Eurasian skylark or the pipit species that were present. The shape of the wings and their buffish trailing edge were also good features in the field.

<sup>18</sup> We thought that the workers in the date palm might have already resulted in the bird moving out to one of the numerous palms within the wider area or to a different plantation. In addition, Tim had already seen the species on numerous occasions in the far east.

<sup>19</sup> It may be a better idea to select a vantage-point from which to watch the plantation during mid and late morning than to try and see the bird in the date palms. Noam Weiss and others reported that the bird was most regularly seen soaring with other raptors, and that it then often seemed to drift off over the Jordanian Border. This certainly reflected our experience, although we did not see any interactions with other birds of prey.

We then decided to try a couple of spots we had identified as having potential during the week, notably some small plantations at Km 26. The northerly of the two proved the better: we had a rufous bush robin, a subalpine warbler, and a nightingale, all of which were new birds for the trip, plus a *samamasicus* redstart. The final site of the day was Km 20, where we saw several whiskered tern, and a second calendar year little gull, the latter species being reasonably scarce in Israel.

#### **Day 12. Yotvata, Hai-Bar, Km 20, North Beach Date Plantation, Red Sea (boat trip) and Km 19 Sewage Pools (25/03/09)**

*A dawn visit was made to the Jordanian Border adjacent to the Yotvata North Circular field. This is an area of gently rolling mobile sand dune, and during our stay there was at least one pair of hoopoe lark holding territory there. It is probably best to visit the area on foot rather than by car, as we were eventually escorted from the border road by the Israeli army (although on the previous day some Finnish birders had been left to their own devices there).*

*Having heard some news about a black bush robin at Hai-bar, we made a quick visit to a private compound at Km 48, where we viewed from the perimeter fence as the bird showed well in a private yard adjacent to a property. We then moved onto Km 20 and the North Beach date plantation, before taking a glass bottomed boat around the bay. This was less expensive than might have been expected, at about £9 per head, and on a more interesting day offshore this might have been good value for money. The boat did pass close to the offshore infrastructure around the port, which is potentially good for loafing and roosting birds, but the viewing-time over the reef was limited to less than 10 minutes.*

*We finished the day with a short visit to a farmyard near Queziot<sup>20</sup> (looking for pipits and buntings on the manure piles) and a second trip to Km 19 at dusk for Lichtenstein's sandgrouse. We sat at the northern end of the north-eastern pool, having seen the sandgrouse come in near the black pipe on a previous visit. We were in place in good time, but some birders were still coming in at 18:15 (when the sandgrouse were present and it was already becoming too dark to see them clearly), standing on the banks and casting shadows across the pool. Getting some local knowledge and arriving in good time is essential to ensuring the birds are not disturbed.*

Arriving on site at Yotvata at first light we checked the border track around Km markers 560 and 562 for hoopoe lark. One (mobile) or possibly two birds were present, as we regularly heard the birds singing, and the source of the noise seemed to get closer as we worked our way north. Eventually we saw a bird flying away from us along the border fence. Unfortunately this was about the same time as we saw the Israeli army coming towards us and we were escorted from the border.

As we headed south, we stopped at a compound at Km 48 (Route 90) where a black bush robin had been reported. We were lucky, and the bird was confiding, hopping around in the yard in front of a small party of UK birders. We stayed for around 20 minutes, and Tim was able to get some photos. Heading on to Km 20, we stopped to watch a mixed flock of European and blue-cheeked bee-eaters on the wires above the greenhouses. There were a lot of birders present, most of whom were gathered around a Caspian plover. Despite this bird being so confiding that it would run alongside and between the cars without any apparent concern, a photographer still had to flush it! A greater sand plover was also on the northern section of the pools.

We then headed to Eilat, where we had a couple of targets, the Indian silverbills and striated heron. We visited the North Beach date plantation yet again to search for the former, concentrating on the small patches of long grass around the palms that the donkeys had not yet grazed to the ground and the small pools created by the irrigation pipes. Slowly working the edge produced first a pair of namaqua doves, then a couple of nightingale and a rufous bush robin, and finally, at long last a few silverbills. These were seen briefly sat on one of the perimeter fences before moving into the plantation to forage unobtrusively.

We then tried a few known spots for the striated heron: the mooring rope of the Royal Spa Bar (moored in the marina) and all the infrastructure around the approach to the marina. Partly by way of a break, partly out of curiosity and partly with an outside chance of seeing the brown booby, we then booked on to a glass bottomed boat

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<sup>20</sup> The Queziot near Yotvata rather than the Queziot at Nizzana.

ride around the inshore waters. In a couple of hours on the water we saw a few white-eyed gulls, got a distant view of a striated heron sitting on one of the wharfs at the port and got some limited and brief views of the reef.

We then made a short visit to Queziot. There are good numbers of wagtails, pipits and larks generally present in the farmyard, but there was no sign of a cinereous bunting which had been reported the day before, but not subsequently re-found. For the end of the day we returned to the Km 19 sewage pools. While waiting for darkness we saw a stone curlew, and watched a collared pratincole hawking over the pool surface amongst the assembled Hirundines. Having seen the Lichtenstein's sandgrouse come in near the black pipe previously, we settled down in front of the reeds at the northern end of the pool. As previously, the (2) sandgrouse arrived at 18:15 or thereabouts, but this time landed virtually in front of us. This resulted in excellent views, but did make us feel slightly uncomfortable. We kept very still, and as a result they went to the water's edge to drink, and did not appear to be disturbed by our presence.

### **Day 13. Yotvata, Neot Smadar (Shizaffon) and Lotan (26/03/09)**

*A relatively quiet day, as the early starts and late finishes were catching up with us a bit. We started at the circular fields at Yotvata. These proved excellent during our stay, as they were being regularly watered using long irrigation booms, with the wet topsoil and small pools of standing water attracting large numbers of pipits, wagtails and larks. Tim took a walk towards the border to listen for hoopoe lark, and we worked the fields for a couple of hours before heading down to Eilat to look at raptor passage over the mountains. This passage proved to be short-lived and relatively weak, so we took a trip down Wadi Shlomo (Shirihai south page 43) from the Ovda Road, driving the entire extent of the wadi until we reached the coast road. During the afternoon we birded Neot Smadar (Shizaffon), Lotan, the small sewage farm near Queziot, and the south circular field at Yotvata, returning rather earlier to the kibbutz than on previous nights.*

Yotvata was relatively quiet in the early morning. Tim heard a distant hoopoe lark on the Jordanian Border, there were two female hen harriers over the south circular field, a party of Arabian babblers in the nearby scrub, and the lesser whitethroats in the tamarisks seemed even more numerous than usual. Pipits and wagtails were largely absent, and there was no sign of the Caspian plover that had been frequenting the open ploughed area.

Raptor passage over the Eilat Mountains proved short-lived: a pulse of steppe buzzards and a few steppe eagles, no more than fifty or sixty birds in total before the passage dried up. Wadi Schlomo was relatively devoid of birds, with only a few common migrants present. It had little vegetation at the time of our visit, although given its position could be excellent during a spring following winter rain. At present it seems unlikely to remain a good site for Cyprus warbler (as stated in Shirihai's guide).

In the afternoon we visited the sewage pond area at Neot Smadar, much of which has been landscaped so that is now quite an attractive garden. The denser vegetation, the pond and what remains of the sewage pools continue to draw birds in, despite the fact that the value of the site must now be much reduced. We recorded a group of approximately 50 Dead Sea sparrows, a Savi's warbler (in the sedges around the pool) and a quail, as well as commoner migrants. At Lotan we also had a range of common migrants and a Palestine sunbird in the organic garden. Ending the day's birding at Yotvata, we again failed to pick up any additional harrier species, although the Caspian plover was again present, and as darkness fell a garganey came in to a small puddle beneath the boom.

### **Day 14. Km 126 & Wadi Mishmar (27/03/09)**

*Our final day of birding. We headed initially to Km 126, an unnamed wadi, where there was significant dwarf shrub and acacia cover. We followed the wadi up for a few kilometres until it terminated at a cliff, checking all acacias carefully for owls<sup>21</sup>. After a few hours we moved on to Wadi Mishmar on the Dead Sea (Shirihai south page 121), an excellent site where we saw both passage migrants and desert species. Our final break was at the Ein Gedi rest stop, where we had some of the best food of the trip and watched the gangs of Tristrams's grackles*

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<sup>21</sup> A probable striated scops owl had been reported from this area the previous day - but had been repeatedly flushed by photographers / birdwatchers. Following discussion with some local Israeli birders we decided not to work the area on the 26<sup>th</sup>, as we did not want to disturb the bird further. There was also some speculation that the bird was not in prime health, as it was both lingering very late (striated scops owl has generally left by early March) and had a possible eye infection.

*hanging around in the car park.*

The birding at Km 126 was interesting, with a range of migrants present, but no sign of an owl in any of the acacias between the road and the end of the wadi. We unexpectedly came across an Arabian warbler (probably a pair), which took an age to pin down, but there was nothing else of real note.

We then started the gradual journey back towards Tel Aviv, and our flight home on the 28<sup>th</sup> (the following day). Our only really notable and productive stop en route was at Wadi Mishmar, which proved excellent. We first managed to drive up to a car park at the top of a rough track. From here we worked the first kilometre of the wadi. Mountain bunting proved common, with several birds observed foraging on the wadi floor and chasing other passerines territorially. These passerines included a pair of Sinai rosefinch, which were clearly also breeding locally as the male was seen with nesting material. Also present was a superb male Cyprus warbler, which was actively foraging in the low bushes, and proved confiding, allowing Tim to take a number of photos. Other birds in the wadi included wryneck, masked shrike, Tristram's grackle and Eastern orphean warbler, while small numbers of fan-tailed raven were wheeling overhead.

## Accommodation

Accommodation in Israel proved slightly cheaper than in the UK – but without the low-budget options of YHAs, for example. Prior to our arrival we managed to book places to stay for all but the first and the last nights. This proved a good move, as it took a lot of the stress out of the trip. In all the places we stayed (other than Shkedi's Camp Lodge where we got a communal shack with lots of mattresses in it), we booked a twin room. We targetted budget accommodation, supporting Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI) hostels or staying in kibbutzes where there was a suitable and available opportunity. We very rarely had a sit down breakfast, although were provided with packed lunches on a number of occasions.

### **Night 1 (14/03/09). Nasholim Hotel ([www.nasholim.co.il](http://www.nasholim.co.il))**

**Directions:** From Route 2 north towards Haifa take Route 70 a few kilometres after you reach the first of the pools at Ma'agan Mikhael. At the cross roads on Route 70 (after about 1km) head north (left) on Route 4 through the outskirts of Fureidis, taking the first left towards the coast some 1-2 km along this road. Follow the minor road to the end where you will see the accommodation.

**Atmosphere:** The accommodation consists of a series of chalets. During our stay the place was largely empty, and as such it lacked any atmosphere.

**Location:** The accommodation is about 5-10 minutes drive from the best of the pools at Ma'agan Mikhael.

**Room & Shower:** The room was very basic, and fairly clean. Two beds, a small television, a fridge (with nothing in it) and a couple of cupboards. There was an en suite, and the shower was good.

**Meals:** It should be possible to get an evening meal if there are parties booked in, but the food hall had closed by the time we arrived. We found a number of places that sold excellent take away food in Fureidis (but no beer<sup>22</sup>). This was the only place that we had breakfast during the trip. It was very good (and also mainly healthy) consisting of fruit, bread, salad, tuna (with spring onions and seasoning), cheeses, coffee etc.

**Cost:** \$180 US for the night, equating to approximately £66 per person

**Value for Money:** The breakfast was good, but overall value for money was poor.

### **Nights 2-4 (15-17/03/09) Kibbutz Country Lodging, Mahanayim<sup>23</sup>**

**Directions:** From Route 90 approximately 20km north of Lake Galilee, take Route 91 (east). Mahanayim is on your right hand side a few kilometres along. Turn into the settlement, then a few hundred yards beyond the entrance turn right. The accommodation is a few hundred yards up this road on your left hand side. It is poorly sign posted, and it is wise to take their telephone number with you in case you need to ask for directions.

**Atmosphere:** Very quiet and relaxed. There are tables outside the chalets, and we finished each day sitting around our table with a couple of beers. Zevi, who we booked our stay with and met at the site, was very friendly.

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<sup>22</sup> You can buy beer at the petrol stations on Route 2.

<sup>23</sup> You can search the website <http://www.zimmer.co.il> for a link to the kibbutz at Mahanayim or email [orchan@mahanayim.co.il](mailto:orchan@mahanayim.co.il)



**Location:** Good for Hula, the Golan Heights and Galilee

**Room & Shower:** Basic but clean with a fridge and television. The electric heater was appreciated. There was an en suite bathroom, and the shower worked well.

**Meals:** Self catering, although there was food left in our fridge each morning (boiled eggs, bread, salad etc). Coffee and a kettle are provided as well as plates, cups and cutlery.

**Cost:** 175.5 Euros for the three nights. This would have been a bargain if the pound was stronger against the Euro at the time of our visit. As the pound was weak, this worked out to about £50 a night (£25 each).

**Value for Money:** Pretty good. A very pleasant and peaceful place to stay.

#### **Night 5. Shkedi's Camp Lodge, Neot Hakikkar (18/03/09)<sup>24</sup>**

**Directions:** Travelling south on Route 90, past the Dead Sea, take a left just beyond the southern salt pans to Neot Hakikkar. Once past the checkpoint take (from memory) the second left and look for a rush-walled compound, about 50 yards down on your left hand side.

**Atmosphere:** If you enjoy open, friendly, slightly alternative communities you will love it. The site feels very quiet, although they play 70's rock (Neil Young, Eric Clapton etc) in the evenings and classical music in the mornings. You can sit or lie on couches in the bar area, around communal tables outside the bar or more privately outside your own lodgings. The on-site bar is very relaxed, and they serve you their own herbal tea at any opportunity.

**Location:** Obviously good for Neot Hakikkar, but also for the southern Dead Sea. A good strategic location at which to break our journey to Eilat.

**Room & Shower:** The showers and toilets are in little blocks next to the kitchen, and are very good. The communal room comprises a very well built shack (including electric lights) with mattresses. You can hire a sleeping bag at minimal cost, and sheets are provided.

**Meals:** Self catering. You are allocated a large space in the fridge. There are pots and pans, cutlery and crockery available. A small supermarket in the village is open until 19:00.

**Cost:** 160 NIS for the night, equating to around £26.50 in total (so less than £14 each)

**Value for Money:** Perhaps not the best value in comparison to some other places we stayed, but a really good experience.

#### **Nights 6-8 SPNI Eilat (19-21/03/09)<sup>25</sup> (email: [eilat@spni.org.il](mailto:eilat@spni.org.il))**

**Directions:** Head south on Route 90, hugging the Red Sea coast for a few kilometres after leaving Eilat. The road takes you past the port on your left hand side, and shortly after this you will see the SPNI Centre on the right. It is just over a 5 minute drive south of the town.

**Atmosphere:** We did not really experience it, as we basically arrived to sleep, leaving before dawn. However the centre does have large school groups staying, so is unlikely to be quiet.

**Location:** Good for all the sites around Eilat.

**Room & Shower:** Basic but clean, with a fridge, television, chest of drawers etc. En suite bathroom with a good shower.

**Meals:** Self catering. We ate in Eilat, where there are numerous options.

**Cost:** 800 NIS for three nights (£133), so about £43 a night (£21.50 per person)

**Value for Money:** Pretty good for Eilat, where prices are relatively high.

#### **Night 9-13 Kibbutz Lotan, Eilat (22-26/03/09) ([www.kibbutzlotan.il](http://www.kibbutzlotan.il))**

**Directions:** Clearly signposted from Route 90, 51 Km north of Eilat. Close to (just to the south of) the Junction with Route 40

**Atmosphere:** Quite a vibrant kibbutz, with a lot of workers, volunteers and birders staying. A pleasant community

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<sup>24</sup> You can find the site easily via a Google search. There are reviews / further information at various websites including [www.hostels.com](http://www.hostels.com) [www.gomio.com](http://www.gomio.com) and on the Real Adventures website.

<sup>25</sup> A quick google search will give you a list of SPNI Field Centres. There are a number of great locations in which to stay including Ein Geddi on the Dead Sea, Hazeva in the Northern Arava, Har Ha'Negev at Mitzpe Ramon and Hermon in Upper Galilee. The field school at Eilat can also be contacted on 00972 8 637-1127.



feel. The bird sightings boards are no longer regularly updated / updated at all.

**Location:** Excellent for Yotvata and Neot Smadar, and a better location for commuting to Mitzpe Ramon and Nizzana than Eilat. Also a good birding spot within its own right – many birders have a day or two working the immediate area on foot.

**Room & Shower:** Clean and basic, with the usual fridge etc. En suite bathroom, with a good shower.

**Meals:** We were provided with a packed breakfast each day – you have to let reception know that you want this before 14:00 on the preceding day. The evening meal is very basic. It is vegetarian, and while filling, is not of a high standard. You pay about £4.50 extra per person per night for this.

**Cost:** 340 NIS per night on weekdays and 420 NIS per night at weekends (equating to approximately £56 / £70 per night respectively or £28 / £35 per person).

**Value for Money:** The most expensive place we stayed, although still relatively cheap in comparison with a UK equivalent.

**Night 14. Hotel Miami, Ashdod (27/03/09).**

NIS 350 for the night (£58 equating to £26 per person). No atmosphere, surroundings and town run down. Not recommended, although a good local bar on the sea front and a very good breakfast.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to the many people who made our stay more enjoyable, and who shared information with us. In particular Frank Moffat (who we met at Lotan and spent a pleasant evening with), Noam Weiss and the volunteers of the International Birdwatching Centre in Eilat, local Israeli birders (many of whom we did not get the names of, but including Shasha, and Jonathan at Lotan), who were very friendly and open, and (most of) the travelling UK and other European birders that we met.

# APPENDIX 1

## List of Bird Species Recorded.

Species No.	English Name	Latin Name	Notes
1	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	Not recorded in south. Numerous at Hula and Ma'agan Mikhael
2	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	Common
3	Pygmy cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pygmeus</i>	Recorded at Hula and Bet Shean
4	Great white pelican	<i>Pelecanus oncorotalus</i>	Recorded at Hula and Bet Shean
5	Night heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	Regularly recorded at wetland sites. Particularly numerous at Ma'agan Mikhael
6	Striated heron	<i>Butorides striatus</i>	One on a pier (part of Eilat port) during an offshore trip on a glass bottomed boat. During our stay birds were reported roosting / loafing on a mooring rope in the marina (the ship being the Royal Spa Bar) and on the Sushi restaurant on the edge of the Red Sea (a short way from the marina)
7	Squacco heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>	Recorded in small numbers at most of the wetland sites in the south of the country during our stay
8	Cattle egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	Common in areas where livestock present. Also associated with rubbish dumps
9	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Common
10	Great white egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>	Common, particularly in Northern Israel
11	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Common
12	Purple heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	One record. A bird was seen in the Km 20 area on 20/03
13	Black stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	Only encountered in numbers at Ma'agan Mikhael. Frequent elsewhere, including soaring birds (on passage) over the Eilat Mountains
14	White stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	Common to abundant throughout
15	Glossy ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	Only recorded at Ma'agan Mikhael during our visit
16	Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	Relatively infrequently recorded. Noted at Neve Eitan and at the salt pans at the International Birdwatching Centre
17	Greater flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus rubra</i>	Present at Eilat and on the Km 20 salt pans
18	Ruddy shelduck	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>	Two birds in arable fields at Hula on 15/03
19	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	Recorded at Hula
20	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	Recorded at Hula
21	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	Frequently recorded
22	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	Common
23	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Common
24	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	Common on the southern salt pans and offshore at Eilat
25	Garganey	<i>Anas querquedula</i>	Initially recorded on the northern pools at Km 20, but also seen on the sea at Eilat, and more bizarrely a male was recorded coming into a small puddle at the Yotvata south circular field after dark on 26/03/09.
26	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	Common
27	Marbled duck	<i>Marmaronetta angustirostris</i>	Eighteen birds in one flock at Gume Junction Fish Ponds on 15/03
28	Ferruginous duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>	One with garganey off the North Beach at Eilat on 24/03
29	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	One on the large water body visible from the kibbutz at Kfar Ruppin
30	Oriental honey buzzard	<i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i>	Seen on 24/03 over the date palm plantation to the north of the International Bird Watching Centre. See daily log for details
31	Black kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	Common throughout. Abundant in the north

32	Egyptian vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	Initially recorded in the southern Golan Heights adjacent to the Jordanian border, then spectacular views in the gorge at Gamla and several birds soaring over the Eilat Mountains
33	Griffon vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	Two pairs on territory at Gamla on 17/03. An additional bird recorded soaring at Bet Shean
34	Short-toed eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	Regularly recorded throughout (in small numbers), including two low flying calling birds over the Km 19 sewage farm
35	Marsh harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	Common
36	Hen harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	Regularly recorded
37	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	Relatively common in the south during our stay
38	Common (Steppe) buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	Very common, particularly on passage in the Eilat Mountains
39	Long-legged buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>	Numerous in the north of the county (e.g. Golan Heights), with small numbers moving over Eilat Mountains with far commoner steppe buzzards
40	Lesser spotted eagle	<i>Aquila pomarina</i>	Commonest in the Hula area
41	Greater spotted eagle	<i>Aquila clanga</i>	A second year bird was around the rubbish dump on the road to Amuk on 15/03
42	Steppe eagle	<i>Aquila nipalensis</i>	Recorded in small numbers on all days in the Eilat area. Steady passage over the Eilat Mountains during our visit
43	Imperial eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>	Two second calendar year birds around the rubbish dump at Amuk (near Mahanayim, Hula area) on 17/03
44	Booted eagle	<i>Hieraetus pennatus</i>	Infrequently recorded in the south. The best sighting was a pale morph bird low over the Km19 sewage pools
45	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	Particularly common at Bet Shean where there were numerous birds present. Regular at other fish ponds and sewage farms throughout
46	Lesser kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	30-40 kestrels seen foraging over a field adjacent to Route 70 were probably this species, but it was impossible to stop to verify this. The same applies to 25 kestrels seen from the motorway just to the west of Jerusalem. A male was seen on an overhead line while looking for the oriental honey buzzard in the northern date palm plantation on 24/03
47	Common kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Common
48	Peregrine falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	One hunting at Hula
49	Chukar	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>	Common
50	Sand partridge	<i>Ammoperdix heyi</i>	First recorded on Mount Hermon. Common in dry wadis throughout. Seen well on numerous occasions e.g. Wadi Mishmar, Amram's Pillars, Holland Park.
51	Black francolin	<i>Francolinus francolinus</i>	Frequent in arable fields in the Hula area. We had good views of several territorial males 3-4km up the 918 from the junction with Route 91. Also heard calling at Bet Shean. Particularly vocal around dawn
52	Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>	Common passage migrant
53	Water rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	Relatively common in suitable habitat at Bet Shean and Hula
54	Spotted crane	<i>Porzana porzana</i>	One at Neve Eitan (Bet Shean) on 18/03
55	Little crane	<i>Porzana parva</i>	Two birds, including a well watched male at Neve Eitan (Bet Shean) on 18/03
56	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	Common
57	Coot	<i>Fulicula atra</i>	Common
58	Common crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	Numerous in Hula
59	Macqueen's bustard	<i>Chlamydotis macqueenii</i>	Three male birds displaying at Nizzana on 23/03. No attendant females were seen
60	Black-winged stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	Numerous in most wetland areas
61	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	Several birds at the Km 20 salt pans
62	Stone curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>	First heard calling over Mahanayim. Further birds seen during a nocturnal search for Egyptian nightjar in the Yotvata area and at the Km 19 sewage pools.
63	Cream-coloured courser	<i>Cursorius cursor</i>	Relatively numerous at Nizzana
64	Collared pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>	A bird at the Km19 sewage ponds
65	Little ringed plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>	Common

66	Ringed plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	Common
67	Kittlitz's plover	<i>Charadrius pecuarius</i>	One at the Km 20 salt pans on 20/03/09
68	Kentish plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	Common on the southern salt pans
69	Greater sand plover	<i>Charadrius leschenaultii</i>	One on the Km 20 salt pans on 25/03.
70	Caspian plover	<i>Charadrius asiaticus</i>	Seen several times at the Yotvata south circular field. Also recorded at Km 20 salt pans where either one (very mobile) or two birds were present
71	Spur-winged plover	<i>Hoplopterus spinosus</i>	Common throughout
72	Little stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	Common throughout
73	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	Small numbers at Km 20 salt pans
74	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>	Common throughout
75	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	Frequent
76	Black-tailed godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	Recorded at the Gume Junction Fish Ponds (Hula) on 15/03
77	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	A bird of the race <i>orientalis</i> at Km 20 on 20/03.
78	Spotted redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>	Frequently recorded
79	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	Very common
80	Marsh sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>	Frequently recorded: present in all extensive areas of salt pan / sewage farm / reedbed visited
81	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nubularia</i>	Frequently recorded
82	Green sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	Common in all wetland habitats
83	Wood sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	Frequently recorded at e.g. Neve Eitan and Km 19 Sewage Ponds
84	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	Common in the north, slightly less frequent in the south during our trip
85	Red-necked phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>	One on the salt pans at the International Bird Watching Centre on 21/03
86	White-eyed gull	<i>Larus leucophthalmus</i>	Our highest count was 24 birds off North Beach on 19/03
87	Pallas's gull	<i>Larus ichthyaetus</i>	A flock of 15 birds at Neve Eitan on 18/03. The commonest gull species on the fish pond complex here.
88	Little gull	<i>Larus minutus</i>	One at the Km 20 salt pans on 24/03
89	Black-headed gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	Common
90	Slender-billed gull	<i>Larus genei</i>	Common at salt pans throughout
91	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus fuscus</i> & <i>Larus fuscus heuglini</i>	A sickly bird of the race <i>heuglini</i> at Ma'agan Mikhael. The race <i>fuscus</i> proved relatively common at Eilat
92	Armenian gull	<i>Larus armenicus</i>	Recorded in largest numbers at Ma'agan Mikhael and Bet Shean (where flocks of birds were present)
93	Gull-billed tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>	Smaller numbers seen offshore at Eilat
94	Caspian tern	<i>Sterna caspia</i>	Relatively regularly recorded in the Eilat area towards the end of our stay
95	Sandwich tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>	Two or three birds regularly recorded at Eilat North Beach
96	Common tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	Birds recorded offshore at Ma'agan Mikhael and at Eilat
97	Whiskered tern	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>	A single at Eilat North Beach
98	White-winged black tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>	Several birds recorded towards the end of our stay. All in the Eilat area
99	Lichtenstein's sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles lichtensteinii</i>	A second calendar year bird at the Km 20 sewage pools
100	Black-bellied sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>	Two birds on 2 occasions at Km 19 sewage pools. The birds were coming into the north-western corner of the north-eastern pool. During our visit they were arriving at around 18:15
101	Feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	A male recorded at Nizzana Sewage Pond 4a was the only bird of the trip. Flocks of spotted and black-bellied sandgrouse were recorded using this pool during the same day
102	Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	Common
103	Laughing dove	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>	Abundant
104	Namaqua dove	<i>Oena capensis</i>	Abundant
			Recorded amongst the green houses at Km 20 and in the North Beach date palm plantation

105	Ring-necked parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>	Common
106	Great spotted cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>	One flushed from a field margin at Bet Shean
107	Common cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	One flushed from a field boundary in the northern fields at Yotvata.
108	Little owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	One at Nizzana
109	Hume's tawny owl	<i>Strix butleri</i>	A bird was recorded during a nocturnal visit to a territory with Noam Weiss of the International Bird Watching Centre Eilat
110	Alpine swift	<i>Apus melba</i>	Singletons recorded among several flocks of swifts
111	Common swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	Common
112	Pallid swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	Particularly common in Dead Sea area (e.g. Neot Hakikkar)
113	Little swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>	Numerous at Gamla
114	White-breasted (Smyrna) kingfisher	<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>	Common at wetland sites in Northern Israel. Not recorded south of Bet Shean
115	Common kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	Several records in the Hula area
116	Pied kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>	Particularly common at Ma'agan Mikhael, where 30 birds were recorded loafing together on fishing nets Common and widespread in the north, but seemingly less frequent (although present) in the south
117	Little green bee-eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>	Common in desert areas. Breeding noted at Km 20 and at Iddan
118	Blue-cheeked bee-eater	<i>Merops superciliosus</i>	Seven birds in with European bee-eaters at the Km 20 salt pans on 25/03
119	European bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	First recorded on 22/03 at Km 20 salt pans
120	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	Common
121	Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>	Migrants at Holland Park, in scrub at Km 20 and in Wadi Mishmar
122	Syrian woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>	Recorded in the Golan Heights and at Kfar Ruppin, where common
123	Bar-tailed desert lark	<i>Ammomanes cincturus</i>	Several birds at Nizzana
124	Desert lark	<i>Ammomanes deserti</i>	Common in most desert areas
125	Hoopoe lark	<i>Alaemon alaudipes</i>	Recorded on the Jordanian Border on Days 12 & 13. For details see the text of the report
126	Calandra lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>	Recorded on territory at several locations in the Golan Heights
127	Bimaculated lark	<i>Melanocorypha bimaculata</i>	One at the Km 20 salt pans on 20/03/09.
128	Short-toed lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>	Common in arable fields and around farm yards
129	Crested lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	Common
130	Small skylark	<i>Alauda gulgula</i>	Several birds in the south circular field at Yotvata
131	Shore lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>	A single over the summit of Mount Hermon
132	Sand martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	Common on passage in the Eilat area
133	Rock martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne fuligula</i>	Common around Neot Hakikkar, Dead Sea, Mitzpe Ramon
134	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Common on passage in the Eilat area
135	Red-rumped swallow	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>	Common throughout
136	House martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	Common on passage in the Eilat area
137	Tawny pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>	Common in arable areas and date palm plantations
138	Tree pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>	A few migrants during the latter part of the trip
139	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	Singles at Hula and in Yotvata
140	Red-throated pipit	<i>Anthus cervinus</i>	First recorded at Ma'agan Mikhael. Small numbers at Bet Shean. Particularly frequent in the circular fields at Yotvata
141	Water pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>	Recorded around salt pans, sewage farms and in wet areas of date plantations
142	Yellow wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	Various races recorded: some, including feldegg common, beema (recorded at Ma'agan Mikhael) appeared considerably less so - although we spent limited time scrutinising yellow wagtail races
143	Citrine wagtail	<i>Motacilla citreola</i>	A single among a flock of yellow and white wagtails at Ma'agan Mikhael
144	White wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	Common
145	Yellow-vented bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus leucogenys</i>	Common in most habitats visited

146	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	One in song at Mount Hermon
147	Rufous bush robin	<i>Cercotrichus galactotes</i>	Birds were recorded at the plantation at Km 26 and in the North Beach date palm plantation towards the end of our stay
148	Black bush robin	<i>Cercotrichus podobe</i>	One at Km 48 in a compound within the Hai Bar Nature Reserve
149	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	One seen in scrub in the foothills of Mount Hermon, and several singing birds heard prior to dawn at the kibbutz at Mahanayim
150	Thrush nightingale	<i>Luscinia luscinia</i>	One in the North Beach date palm plantation
151	Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>	Became increasingly common in the date plantations and around tamarisks towards the end of our trip
152	Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>	Both red and white spotted races were regularly encountered, particularly around the edges of wetland areas
153	Black redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	Frequently encountered throughout the country
154	Common redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>	Common during the final few days of our stay. Birds of the race <i>samamiscus</i> frequent
155	Blackstart	<i>Cercomela melanura</i>	Common in all desert and semi-desert habitats visited
156	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	Frequently recorded
157	Isabelline wheatear	<i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>	Relatively commonly recorded. Displaying birds recorded on Route 40
158	Northern wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	Common
159	Black-eared wheatear	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>	The commonest wheatear species during our stay. Recorded in most habitats visited
160	Desert wheatear	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>	A female at Nizzana
161	Mourning wheatear	<i>Oenanthe lugens</i>	Several recorded, including one on the football pitch at Mitzpe Ramon, and another on an unplanned stop as we travelled south from the Dead Sea towards Eilat
162	Hooded wheatear	<i>Oenanthe monacha</i>	One on Route 13 on Day 9. See detailed account for location
163	White-crowned black wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i>	Relatively common in rocky desert wadis
164	Rock thrush	<i>Monticola saxatilis</i>	We saw several at Neve Ativ. A migrant was reported from Holland Park during our stay
165	Blue rock thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>	Several birds recorded: Neve Ativ, Gamla Neot Hakikkar
166	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	Common
167	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	Several birds in the northern part of the country
168	Cetti's warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	Common in suitable wetland edge habitat
169	Graceful prinia	<i>Prinia gracilis</i>	Common, particularly in dense tamarisk. Vocal
170	Scrub warbler	<i>Scotocerca inquieta</i>	Several birds in low scrub adjacent to the road to Azzuz (Nizzana). Another in a dry wadi at Neot Hakikkar
171	Savi's warbler	<i>Locustella luscinioides</i>	At least two birds reeling from the edge of reedbed / adjacent arable fields at Habashan, with a further reeling bird in fields at Mahanayim and a migrant in short reedy vegetation at the largely defunct sewage pools at Neot Smadar (Shizzafon)
172	Moustached warbler	<i>Acrocephalus melanopogon</i>	Several birds at Habashan
173	Sedge warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>	A bird at Bet Shean and a second at Neot Smadar (Shizzafon)
174	Reed warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	Commonest in reed bed habitats in the north of the country
175	Clamorous reed warbler	<i>Acrocephalus stentoreus</i>	Recorded at Habashan, Ha Goshrim & Bet Shean
176	Eastern olivaceous warbler	<i>Acrocephalus pallidus</i>	Singing birds in the Hula Reserve, at Neot Hakikkar and Holland Park. Occasional migrants elsewhere
177	Spectacled warbler	<i>Sylvia conspicillata</i>	A male on 19/03 at an unplanned stop off Route 90
178	Subalpine warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>	A single bird in the plantation at Km 26 on 24/03/09
179	Sardinian warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	Common
180	Cyprus warbler	<i>Sylvia melanothora</i>	A male at Wadi Mishmar on 27/03/09
181	Ruppell's warbler	<i>Sylvia ruppellii</i>	6-7 recorded on two occasions at Holland Park. Relatively infrequent elsewhere
182	Arabian warbler	<i>Sylvia leucomelaena</i>	A pair at El Hazeva on 18/03/09. A further bird, possibly two, at Km 126 on 27/03/09
183	Eastern orphee	<i>Sylvia crassirostris</i>	Common migrant

	warbler		
184	Lesser whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>	Abundant migrant
185	Common whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	Frequently recorded
186	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	Common
187	Eastern Bonelli's warbler	<i>Phylloscopus orientalis</i>	Very common in the south of the country.
188	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	Common
189	Willow warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	A few recorded during the week including a bird at Holland Park.
190	Semi-collared flycatcher	<i>Ficedula semitorquata</i>	One in a small patch of tamarisk at Km 20 on 22/03/09.
191	Arabian babbler	<i>Turdoides squamiceps</i>	First recorded at Neot Hakikkar. Subsequently at numerous desert locations, including Yotvata, Km 126 etc.
192	Sombre tit	<i>Parus lugubris</i>	An apparent pair were located on the lower slopes of Mount Hermon (in scrub adjacent to the car park behind the toll booths).
193	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>	Present in suitable habitat in Northern Israel
194	Western rock nuthatch	<i>Sitta neumayer</i>	Several in the Mount Hermon area
195	Penduline tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>	Only recorded around Hula, where relatively numerous in mature stands of reed
196	Palestine sunbird	<i>Nectarinia osea</i>	Recorded on most days. Often in kibbutz grounds, but also in desert wadis and open arable areas
197	Southern grey shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	A few records, including one in the Golan Heights and one at Nizzana
198	Woodchat shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>	The commonest shrike species during our stay: regularly recorded in both the north and the south
199	Masked shrike	<i>Lanius nubicus</i>	First recorded on 21/03 in the Eilat Mountains, becoming relatively common towards the end of our stay.
200	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	Common in woodland in northern Israel
201	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	Common in Tel Aviv and Ashdod areas
202	House crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>	Common in and around Eilat
203	Hooded crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	Common
204	Brown-necked raven	<i>Corvus ruficollis</i>	The more widespread raven species. A flock of over 20 birds at Km 104 (Route 90)
205	Fan-tailed raven	<i>Corvus rhipidurus</i>	Recorded commonly in the Dead Sea area
206	Tristram's grackle	<i>Onychognathus tristramii</i>	Recorded in numerous desert and mountain areas including at Km 104 (Route 90), the Eilat Mountains, Wadi Mishmar and most numerous at the Ein Gedi Spa (car park) on the Dead Sea.
207	Common myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	Recorded in Tel Aviv, Ashdod and around settlements close to Ma'agan Mikhael
208	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Abundant
209	Spanish sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>	Large flocks in many areas of lowland farmland and around the fringes of reedbeds.
210	Dead Sea sparrow	<i>Passer moabiticus</i>	First recorded in Hula at Yesud ha-Ma'ala, where 30-40 were present in a field margin. Following this, flocks at Bet Shean, around the North Beach date palm plantation at Eilat and at the sewage pools at Neot Smadar (Shizzafon)
211	Indian silverbill	<i>Euodice malabarica</i>	Searched for unsuccessfully at Kfar Ruppin and on several occasions in the plantations around Eilat. Birds were reported from the International Birdwatching Centre Ringing Station and adjacent arable fields (where we found a large flock of desert finches) during our stay. We eventually caught up with them at the North Beach date palm plantation
212	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	Frequent in suitable habitat in the north
213	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	Common in the Hula Valley, where foraging flocks and singing birds were recorded
214	Syrian serin	<i>Serinus syriacus</i>	We searched for them unsuccessfully at Mount Hermon (where there was still substantial snow on the ground). A flock was present on the football field at Mitzpe Ramon. We saw only small numbers of birds here (5-6), but one party reported seeing up to 24 individuals



215	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	Common
216	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	Common
217	Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	Common
218	Desert finch	<i>Rhodospiza obsoleta</i>	50-60 birds in the arable fields near the ringing station
219	Trumpeter finch	<i>Bucanetes githagineus</i>	Common in most desert areas. Large numbers at Kms 103/104 and at Wadi Mishmar
220	Sinai rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus synoicus</i>	Recorded at Amram's Pillars (2 females at the camping car park on two dates), with a male briefly at the upper car park. We finally got good views of a male bird at Wadi Mishmar, where a pair were holding territory (gathering nesting material)
221	Rock bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>	Several birds on the lower slopes of Mount Hermon
222	Mountain bunting	<i>Emberiza striolata</i>	Several birds at Wadi Mishmar. Territorial behaviour included chasing of Sinai rosefinch and trumpeter finch
223	Ortolan bunting	<i>Emberiza hortulana</i>	Increasingly common during the trip, suggesting immigration
224	Cretzschmar's bunting	<i>Emberiza caesia</i>	First recorded in the Golan Heights. Relatively common in a range of habitats (around salt pans, arable land etc)
225	Corn bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	Common in agricultural areas in the north of the country. Scarce in the south

## Species Missed

Our trip was clearly too early for us to stand a good chance of seeing species such as European honey buzzard. Levant sparrowhawk or sooty falcon, while passerine migrants such as golden oriole, flycatchers (other than the semi-collared that we recorded), lesser grey and red-backed shrikes<sup>26</sup>, and black-headed bunting had similarly not appeared. Conversely, we were too late to stand a good chance of seeing striated scops owl (see main text of report), and both the wintering Cyprus pied wheatear at Neot Smadar and the Kurdish (Persian) wheatear at Wadi Mishmar appeared to have moved on by the time of our visit. Not recording these species did not result in disappointment, however, as we did not go into the trip with realistic expectations of seeing them.

Those species that we failed to record during the week but that were reported by other birders included the brown booby off North Beach, a sociable plover briefly at Km 20 and the spotted sandgrouse at Nizzana. We could have worked harder for Egyptian nightjar, and we failed to find a reported cinereous bunting at Queziot, while pallid and Montagu's harriers also eluded us (despite reports of both species from virtually every birder that we met!). Perhaps the most frustrating omission however was pale rock sparrow: we met Jonathan from Lotan at the circular fields at Yotvata, and he told us that a small flock was present at the northern end of the irrigation boom. Unfortunately, as we were walking towards the area a sparrowhawk flashed through, resulting in most of the passerines in the field flying off to the north.

Temminck's horned lark was only seen by one birder during our stay (as far as we heard), and this was a flyover. We did not find desert warbler, and did not hear of any reports of the species from other birders. Clearly an element of luck or a lot of hard work is required to be in with a good chance of these species. Finally, we did not attempt to track down those naturalised species with a limited range, such as vineous-breasted starling (see Richard Bonser's 2008 report for site details). While we were undoubtedly lucky with some of our sightings, therefore, 230+ species is clearly an achievable target for a 2-week trip.

<sup>26</sup> One or two of the latter were reported during the final days of our trip.

## APPENDIX 2. PHOTOGRAPHS



Black francolin – Ha Kula area



Black Bush Robin at Hi Bar



Hooded Wheatear on Route 13



Sand Partridge feeding on fruit at Amram's Pillars



Caspian Plover at Km 19



Short-toed Lark was common in the south





Little green bee-eaters at the Km 19 salt pans



Sinai Rosefinch at Wadi Mishmar



Imperial Eagle over the dump on the road to Amuk



Red-rumped swallows were common throughout the country