

## **Israel 24<sup>th</sup> – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019**

### **Introduction**

Another year and another spring birding trip, this time to Israel. A classic location to observe spring migration as well as offering the chance of finding scarce desert species.

As with previous years this was an independent trip and although I saw a significant number of my target species there were a number that eluded me; many of which are easier to find in the winter, required a bit more time for searching or are easier to connect with using local knowledge. This included Syrian serin, thick-billed lark, Oriental skylark, Temminck's horned lark, striolated bunting, Sinai rosefinch, Cyprus pied wheatear, Arabian warbler and desert warbler. Having said that 51 'lifers' was a good effort!

It was hard to pick out a highlight although the afternoon spent watching 1000's of Steppe Buzzard heading north was memorable, especially with the supporting cast of eagles, harriers and kites. However, I think the prize has to go to the Pharaoh eagle owl spotlighted in a pumpkin field at Yotvata, quite unexpected and one of the best views I've had of any owl species. The diversity of wheatears was special too, including Persian, Finsch's, white-crowned, mourning, desert and hooded. Along with the birds the country has some spectacular landscapes, especially within the wilder desert regions (**Figure 1**).



**Figure 1:** Negev Desert March 2019

### **Literature**

I made use of several independent trip reports already posted on Cloud Birder ([www.cloudbirders.com](http://www.cloudbirders.com)) and the following books:

Gosney, D. (1996) *Finding Birds in Israel*. A Gostour Guide. Available from [www.easybirder.co.uk](http://www.easybirder.co.uk)

Shirihai, H. et al. (2000) *A Guide to the Birding Hot-spots of Southern Israel*.

Records from Observations.org were useful in providing accurate locations for many of the hard to find species, especially around Eilat where there number of birders is higher. Particular mention should also be made of Steve Arlow's trip reports (available on Cloud Birder) which are extremely detailed and contain many useful GPS co-ordinates.

## Maps and Navigation

The business plan on my phone allows roaming in Israel for £5 a day, which I made use of for navigation. The only issue I came across was the phone switching to the Jordanian phone network (which has a far higher cost), mainly when in the foothills of the Negev on the western side of the Arava Valley. I quickly turned off data in these instances to prevent significant bills. On some occasions, especially in the Negev there was no phone signal, in these instances I used pre-downloaded and offline accessible aerial photographs downloaded to the Viewranger App on an iPhone (<http://www.viewranger.com/en-GB>, also available on Android). Viewranger uses GPS to pinpoint your location without the use of a phone signal and is extremely useful abroad.

## Logistics

Flights were with BA from Heathrow to Tel Aviv. It's worth mentioning the extremely slow security process when flying out of Tel Aviv. There is a four step process comprising; 1. A queue for pre-security security, 2. a queue for bag drop, 3. a queue for security 4. a queue for passport control. The whole process took around 2.5 hours.

Car hire was a Suzuki Baleno from Hertz which was perfectly acceptable for the roads in Israel. The only issue with the car was the security device which meant a code had to be entered for the engine to start. This combined with the vagaries of the key fob start system meant for a relatively frustrating start process.

Accommodation comprised AirBNBs which allowed flexibility and the ability to reduce costs by hiring places with kitchens.

### Day 1 – 24<sup>th</sup> March (London – Tel Aviv – Mount Amasa – Dead Sea – Ne'ot HaKikar)

My flight left on time at 20:55 on 23<sup>rd</sup> March and landed at 03:45 on 24<sup>th</sup> March. I got through passport control and picked up my bags without any issues. The car had a few scratches and a large dent which I spent some time documenting. A couple of **common myna** flew over in the first light of dawn and I was on the road at 04:45 with the first stop being Mount Amasa. The weather was overcast and cold and I only noted a small number of birds on the way comprising **hoopoe**, **spur-winged plover**, **jackdaw**, **hooded crow**, **kestrel** and **cattle egret**. I arrived at Mount Amasa at 06:30 and immediately heard a song which I didn't recognise which turned out to be a confiding **long-billed pipit** my first new bird of the trip (**Figure 2**, 31.352755, 35.112634). The area consisted of a valley with short scrub interspersed with an impressive variety of flowers (**Figure 3**). Other species recorded here included **scrub warbler**, **eastern black-eared wheatear**, **whitethroat**, **subalpine warbler** and a single **masked shrike**.



**Figure 2:** Long-billed pipit, Mt. Amasa 24<sup>th</sup> March 2019

I moved down the valley towards an area of ruins located east of the road. The area held **crested lark**, a couple of **pale crag martin**, two beautiful **rock thrush**, **corn bunting** and a single **rock sparrow**. A number of birds with a strange wheezing song turned out to be **pale rock sparrow**, which were relatively

common in this area. Walking further east along a series dry streams there were many **northern wheatear**, displaying **isabelline wheatear** and two splendid **Cretzschmar's bunting**, there were lots of **lesser whitethroat** in the ditches along with a few **blackcap**. Two **long-legged buzzard** began thermally nearby and a group of 40 **white stork** flew north up the valley. A three-legged **golden jackal** limped past me whilst I watching two **hoopoe** feeding, shortly followed by an **osprey** powering north. The only other birds of note here were three **meadow pipit**, which turned out to be the only ones of the trip.



**Figure 3:** Wild poppies at Mt Amasa

I crossed the road working my way along the track that runs toward the foothills of the nearby crags, the clouds were looking a bit ominous and it started to drizzle, fortunately it was only a short shower. There were many **eastern black-eared wheatear** (**Figure 4**) in this area and also a two male **Finsch's wheatear**, further up the slope I refound the **Persian wheatear** which had was first recorded here in 2017 (see <https://twitter.com/YosefKiat/status/1133735231201140736> for details of the DNA analysis which confirmed the identification). The wheatear was feeding around an open sided cave with associated bushes, and closer inspection of these revealed warblers, first a few **lesser whitethroat** and **blackcap**, but then male **eastern subalpine warbler** and two **Rüppell's warbler**, both amazing birds.



**Figure 4:** Eastern black eared wheatear

With a long way still to drive I drove east towards the Dead Sea. The landscape quickly became more arid as the Negev Desert opened up in front of me. A short stop produced a couple of **mourning wheatear**, with the white markings on their primaries flashing as they dashed around a dry river bed. A little further along I stopped at a viewpoint overlooking the Dead Sea (far below!), a noisy flock of **Tristram's starling** were present in the area and a **short-toed eagle** slowly drifted through the valley below.



It was early afternoon by the time I passed Ein Gedi heading towards Wadi Salvadori, which I located without any problems (**Figure 5**). After a short rest, I began to walk up the narrow wadi where **pale crag martin** and **fan-tailed raven** were flying around the cliffs. I also picked up the first **blackstart**, **Palestine sunbird**, **chukar**, **yellow-vented bulbul** and **sand partridge** of the trip. Further up the wadi the valley opened out towards the high cliffs to the west. A pair of **desert lark** were in this area and a singing **white-crowned wheatear**. A flock of 30 **black stork** drifted along the cliffs using the thermals to head north. Unfortunately, there wasn't a sniff of Sinai rosefinch or striolated bunting.



**Figure 5:** View from the top of Wadi Salvadori, looking towards the Dead Sea

My accommodation was at the southern end of the Dead Sea, therefore I drove south stopping briefly at Ein Gedi for a short walk. The area was on the edge of Ein Gedi kibbutz where I saw **laughing dove**, a **little green bee-eater**, and a further **Cretzschmar's bunting**.

I was running out of daylight so I pressed back south, stopping briefly to look at a **common raven** and an **osprey**. The pools at the southern edge of the Dead Sea were the next stop, in this area there were many hirundines including lots of **red-rumped swallow**. **Clamorous reed warbler** were singing in the nearby reedbed and a **dead sea sparrow** colony was present in the area across the road (31.142824, 35.383451). With a bit of patience, I got a great view of one of the male **dead sea sparrow**. Other new species for the trip in this location included **black-headed wagtail**, **white wagtail** and **redshank**. In the distance hundreds of **pallid swift** were hawking around a well-known breeding colony for the species (31.076015, 35.383262).

A second stop at some pools further toward Neot HaKikar was productive for a variety of wildfowl including two **purple gallinule**, c.20 **ferruginous duck** amongst other species such as **mallard**, **teal**, **shoveler**, **little grebe**, **coot** and **moorhen** (31.002269, 35.355829).

Arriving at Ne'ot HaKikar I had to call a number on the Kibbutz gate to gain access, before checking into the AirBnB and having dinner. As dusk arrived I drove out to the farmland on the Jordanian border to have a quick look for Nubian nightjar. It was quiet in the area which I parked up, after a while I drove up the road past a group of Israeli soldiers with a large bonfire. I stopped further on and immediately heard the distinctive call of a **Nubian nightjar** on the Jordanian side of the border. Unfortunately the Israeli army came over and asked me to return to civilisation. I retreated back to Ne'ot HaKikar coming across a **wild boar** on the roadside on the way back, it quickly ran off through the razor wire into Jordan. A **sand partridge** was the only other sighting of note, an individual sat on the road frozen in the headlights. Back at the apartment I was glad to get some sleep.

## **Day 2 – 25<sup>th</sup> March** (Ne-ot HaKikar – Nitzana - Ezuz)

Forgetting that I was in a locked Kibbutz I drove to the gates at 04:00, finding them firmly closed and had the sinking feeling that I would be there until someone woke up and let me out. I tried the number on the gate just in case but no one picked up, then thankfully the gates opened. I began the two hour journey to Ezuz on the Egyptian border. I hadn't gone far when extremely heavy rain started, and I started to drive through some small sections of flooded road. Luckily nothing too bad and the rain eased.

At around 05:00 I pulled into a small town where I stopped for petrol, which was far from easy. The first two stations I stopped at were unmanned and the pay machines were in Hebrew only. No matter what I tried I couldn't get the pump to start working. Thankfully the third station had an attendant who plugged in a long code which allowed me to fill up and I was back on the road.

My first stop was at the side of the road just outside of Nitzana (30.899996, 34.436583). Fields in this area held a large flock of **lesser kestrel** which were hawking for insects and lots of **white stork** and **black kite**. There was also a group of passerines on the roadside which included 250+ **black-headed wagtail**, 200+ **short-toad lark** and two **ashy-headed wagtail**. I pressed on towards Ezuz stopping at the McQueen's bustard hide located in an old railway carriage along a disused railway line (**Figure 6**). A scan across the sparsely vegetated landscape revealed six **cream-coloured courser**. A flash of white caught my eye which turned out to be a displaying **McQueen's bustard**. It was quite distant but impressive all the same, after a minute the bird stopped displaying and became remarkably difficult to pick out. A British couple arrived and told me about a sandgrouse viewing area at a goat farm in Ezuz. It sounded great but I was concerned that the overnight rain might have meant there wasn't any need for the sandgrouse to visit an artificial water hole to drink.



**Figure 6:** Bustard viewing hide north of Ezuz

At Ezuz I found the goat farm and the lady who ran a viewing hide for sandgrouse. She wasn't confident that the sandgrouse would appear and said I could watch the watering hole for free. It was around 9am by this point and after an hour I hadn't had a sniff of a sandgrouse. However, I was picking up raptors moving north up the valley to the east of Ezuz, including an **Egyptian vulture** and **lesser spotted eagle** amongst the commoner **black kite** and a small number of **steppe buzzard**. The raptors were at a distance and I decided to head back towards my initial stop on the road where I hoped to get a closer view of the raptor passage. On exiting the car two **lesser spotted eagle** were circling overhead and **short-toad eagles** drifted past regularly, day totals of these species eventually totalled 27 **short-toed eagle** and 23 **lesser spotted eagle**. Other raptor species moving north included 300+ **black kite** and three **booted eagle**, 15 **steppe buzzard** and two **sparrowhawk**. The passage appears to be occurring across a broad front and I must have missed many raptors.

It was late morning and I drove east along the road north of Nitzana to explore the wadis along this road. Between heavy showers I recorded **wryneck**, **tree pipit**, two **subalpine warbler**, **orphan warbler**, two **song thrush**, **eastern Bonelli's warbler** and **chiffchaff** amongst the commoner warblers. The majority of these birds were in the Wadi south of the road at 30.915285, 34.544828.

Driving back towards Nitzana I turned left onto a smaller road where a low cliff area held **blue rock thrush** and the first **brown-necked raven** of the trip (30.935471, 34.609361). The heavens opened and rather than heading out for a walk in the rain I drove back to Ezuz to check into my AirBnB. On the way back I popped into the Nitzana sewage works to see if any migrants were present, species here included **glossy ibis**, **mallard**, **little grebe**, **moorhen**, **coot**, two **wood sandpiper** and large group of **ruff**. There weren't many passerines evident in the bushes and building works appeared to have filled in some of the pool and ripped up lots of tamarisk.



**Figure 7:** Ruins in the ancient Byzantine City of Nitzana

After checking into the AirBnB and having dinner I searched the olive grove and adjacent wadi just outside Ezuz (30.802256, 34.473598). It was quiet apart from a group of **Arabian babbler** and a **woodchat shrike**. Back at the bustard hide a single **McQueen's bustard** was viewable at long range and a group of seven **Dorcas gazelle** were lovely to watch grazing. I moved on to the area south of Nitzana which comprises ruins and a hilltop fortress which are part of an ancient Byzantine City (**Figure 7**). The sun was setting and bird activity was minimal, although a few wheatears were buzzing around the ruins. As darkness fell I did a bit of spotlighting in the desert which was relatively unsuccessful, although a **Cape hare** which ran across the road was of interest.

**Day 3 – 26<sup>th</sup> March** (Ezuz- Sde Boker – Ben Gurion's Memorial Park - Wadi Along Route 40 - Eilat)

I was up and out of the door at 04:00, arriving a Sde Boker in the high Negev at 06:00. First stop was at around the agricultural land north of the town where bird activity was low. I carried on to Ben Gurion's Memorial Park and dropped down in the river valley beyond on the edge of Ein Adavat National Park (30.843422, 34.779149). There were a few birds around in this area including a purring **turtle dove**, singing **desert lark**, **Palestine sunbird**, **blackstart**, **scrub warbler** and an **Egyptian vulture** moving up the valley. This area also held a variety of desert flowers in including a large species of broomrape *Cistanche tubulosa* (**Figure 8**).



**Figure 8:** *Cistanche tubulosa* a species of desert broomrape

I then explored the Ben Gurion Memorial Park where a number of teams from the 'Champions of the Flyways' bird race had arrived. There was good selection of birds in the bushes, many of which were



new for the trip, including; five **nightingale**, **robin**, four **olivaceous warbler**, three **redstart**, **greenfinch** and best of all a cracking **great spotted cuckoo**.

I moved onto Mitzpe Ramon Park and playing field where there wasn't much activity apart from a few **lesser whitethroat** and **blackcap**. On the edge of town another stop provided an amazing view over the huge valley which borders Mitzpe Ramon. There was a small group of **Nubian ibex** here, which unfortunately were being fed by tourists (**Figure 9**). I dropped down into the valley and stopped at a dry river bed to look for trumpeter finch and Sinai rosefinch which had been recorded in this area previously (30.567877, 34.904188). The bushes in this area held lots of birds include **Rüppell's warbler**, **pale rock sparrow**, **wood warbler**, **sedge warbler** and **subalpine warbler**. A side valley held more of the same birds and a flock of six **trumpeter finch** feeding on grass seed heads. They were extremely tame and I spent a while enjoying the flock before being distracted by a massive flock of **white stork** migrating north at height.



**Figure 9:** Nubian ibex just outside Mitzpe Ramon

Further down Route 40 I stopped on the Hemishmar Plains which was covered in lush green vegetation with a carpet of flowers. There were lots of birds in this area, including flocks of **pale rock sparrow**, 100+ **short-toed lark**, calling **quail**, 30+ **black-headed wagtail**. In the distance there was 50+ **lesser kestrel** with masses of feeding **white stork**. It was early afternoon and the heat haze meant birding was difficult, an early morning visit here would have been amazing. I moved on Eilat seeing **mourning wheatear** on the way.

First stop in the Eilat area was the KM20 salt pans where many of the Champions of the Flyways teams had gathered. New species for the trip included a **black-tailed godwit**, 12 **pintail**, a **black-necked grebe**, 150+ **greater flamingo**, **ringed plover**, **little ringed plover**, **Kentish plover**, **green sandpiper**, **marsh sandpiper**, **greenshank**, **little stint**, **dunlin** and **slender-billed gull**. A flock of 20 **Baltic gull** flew north at height and a **peregrine** was terrorising the local **feral pigeons**.

I moved onto the KM19 pool where Lichtenstein's sandgrouse come to drink in the evenings. On arrival there was an Israeli birder present who said that the sandgrouse had become irregular visitors and hadn't been seen for some time. An English birder who arrived shortly afterwards had not seen the sandgrouse the night before either. To compound matters around 20 young Israeli birders arrived all wearing white t-shirts, talking loudly and sitting close to the area where the sandgrouse drink. Amazing though it was to see so many young birders, it took a while to get them to sit down and be quiet!

There were a few other birds on the pool including a foraging **whiskered tern**, **grey heron**, many **squacco heron** in the reeds and a reeling **Savi's warbler**. A group of ten **black-crowned night heron** flew over, and three **purple heron** and three **great white egret** flew north up the valley. Then all of a sudden two **Lichtenstein's sandgrouse** dropped in and shuffled down the side of the reservoir to drink. They stayed at the water edge for around 2-3 minutes and then were off – what a wonderful experience of such an evocative species. A fitting end to a long day.

**Day 4 – 27<sup>th</sup> March** (North Beach - KM 76-77 - KM82 - Kibbutz Samar - KM50 - Yotvata)

An early morning trip to North Beach produced some new birds amongst the commoner waders along the ditches, including **snipe**, three **common sandpiper** and best of all a group of eight **greater sand plover** which briefly landed on the beach. A **small harrier** headed north at height along with 15 **glossy ibis**. A **white-eyed gull** offshore was also new, as was the **house crow** which are common in this area.

I drove north to KM76-77 to look for hoopoe lark in the Arava Valley (30.098439, 35.148444). A couple of pairs of **southern grey shrike** were the first birds, including one pair with a nest. A walk around the local area flushes a group of three **desert finch** from the scrub. Two **desert lark** were also singing in the area but there was no sign of any hoopoe lark. A first-summer year **steppe eagle** suddenly appeared above me, and it was great to get an excellent view of this species.

Further up Route 90 at KM92 I searched a sparsely vegetated river bed for larks and sandgrouse (30.186786, 35.136566). It was late morning by now and the temperature was increasing steadily. This area held limited bird activity apart from a few **northern wheatear** and common warbler species. Walking back to the car I picked up a lark running through the bushes, I got it in the scope and it was **bar-tailed lark**, a rather unremarkable species but still great to see. As I reached the car a flock of sandgrouse flew over, the stripes along their bellies gave them away as **spotted sandgrouse**. Finally, two **tawny pipit** flew over north calling loudly.

I drove south, stopping at the wadi at KM82 which held a few common species of warbler but not much else (30.143368, 35.133909). After lunch I drove south again, turning of Route 90 into the Ovda Valley. My plan was to search for thick-billed lark which had been present in the area a few days before, near a location identified by the 'black mountain' which is a distinctive landmark in this area (29.992215, 34.971990). A walk around the desert areas for a couple of hours produced five **Cretzschmar's bunting**, a large flock of **short-toad lark**, **pale rock sparrow**, three **Rüppell's warbler** but no thick-billed lark. A couple of English birders who I met hadn't seen much either.

Next stop was Kibbutz Samar where a pair of black bush robin was breeding in a patch of trees (29.830609, 35.023481). I walked around the trees for a while seeing a few **nightingale** with no sign of the robin. Then a couple of birders appeared from nowhere and informed me that you had to walk through a small gap in the trees and sit in the deck chair in the clearing. I did that and hey presto a **black bush robin** appeared on the ground in front of me. They are quite different from other Western Palearctic species and would look more at home in a Asian forest setting!

I pressed on to KM50 which is a good place for Arabian warbler but by March they are on nests and difficult to locate (29.884298, 35.048769). I pulled off the main road and spent an hour or so searching for the elusive warbler. There were a few other birds in the area including two **nightingale**, **little green bee-eater**, **Palestine sunbird**, **Tristram's starling**, **eastern Bonelli's warbler**, **olivaceous warbler**, **Arabian babbler** and **graceful warbler**. But no sign of an Arabian warbler.

It was late afternoon and I moved onto the fields at Yotvata, a farmed area and migrant hotspot. The north circular field was being patrolled by a number of harriers including two **Montagu's harrier**, two **hen harrier** and a few **marsh harrier**. There was also a few **wood sandpiper** on the path through the field, plus **water pipit**, **black-headed wagtail**, and a calling **quail**. I drove around the northern edge of the north circular field and flushed a **Namaqua dove** from the path and two **hoopoe**. I parked up around the pumpkin field where there seemed to be a lot of birds, including a flock of 15 **red-throated pipit**, 20+ **desert finch** and **whinchat**. The English birders I had met earlier were photographing something in the fields, on joining them it turned out there were two **pin-tailed sandgrouse** feeding in the weeds. We had some great views of these stunning birds for the next half hour as the light began to fade. It was wonderful with the sandgrouse coupled with multiple harriers floating around the area.

I ate some dinner and waited for the sun to go down before heading into the sand dunes to search for Egyptian nightjar. The best I could muster was a cute Middle Eastern short-fingered gecko (**Figure 10**). I spent a while driving around the fields spotlighting without any luck. I took one last visit to the pumpkin field and caught sight of some large eye shine in the distance, pulling closer I came face to face with a **Pharaoh eagle owl** sat on a pumpkin! What a bird!





**Figure 10:** Middle Eastern short-fingered gecko

**Day 5 – 28<sup>th</sup> March** (Dolphin Reef - IBRC wetlands - Amram's Pillars - Coral Beach (snorkelling) - raptor watchpoint - North Beach)

I was up before dawn making my way over to Dolphin Reef where I quickly picked up a **striated heron** on the booms in the water. A bottlenose dolphin was in the enclosure, apparently a tourist attraction stocked by animals brought from the Black Sea. There were lots of **white-eyed gull** in the area, a species which is unusual given its long bill and dark plumage.

Next stop was Central Park where a Hume's warbler had been reported for around a week. On arrival it was still early and warbler activity was low, however there were numerous **eastern Bonelli's warbler** foraging in the trees and it was long before long the **Hume's warbler** appeared. I watched it foraging in the trees taking in the cold plumage tones compared to the yellow-browed warblers I have seen in the UK.

I spent the rest of the morning at the International Birding and Ringing Centre (IBRC) which contained numerous species which I had not seen elsewhere including **bittern**, **little bittern**, at least three **bluethroat**, **water rail**, **little crane**, two **spotted redshank**, six **red-necked phalarope**, **black-headed gull**, **gull-billed tern**, **Caspian tern**, **curlew sandpiper** and singing **reed warbler**. The salt pans were teeming with waders and the bushes held a few warblers including another two male **Rüppell's warbler**. A scruffy looking raptor flying over IBRC turned out to one of the **crested honey buzzard** that has been recorded wintering in the area. For an extremely rare Western Palearctic bird my sighting of this species was slightly underwhelming!

I moved on to look for hooded wheatear at Amram's Pillars, after a false start along a valley with a partially washed away road I managed to find the car park for the pillars (**Figure 11**). It was quiet in the apart from a few **pale crag martin**. Whilst viewing the martins I noticed a flock of **steppe buzzard** flying north at a significant height. It was early afternoon by this point and I decided to head back to Eilat and see if any raptors were moving at the raptor watch point. Driving back towards the main road the only birds of note were occasional singing **white-crowned wheatear**. Before driving up into the mountains I did some snorkelling at Coral Beach enjoying the many colourful fish that were on the reef.



Figure 11: Amram's Pillars

It was around 4pm before I arrived at the upper raptor viewpoint in the mountains behind Eilat where a Danish birding group had also just arrived. Looking south along the Red Sea there were large kettles of raptors circling up and passing over the viewpoint (**Figure 12**). Over the next few hours totals included 5000+ **steppe buzzard**, 400+ **black kite**, 26 **steppe eagle**, 3 **lesser spotted eagle**, two **booted eagle**, two **pallid harrier**, two **long-legged buzzard**, two **black stork**, one **imperial eagle** and one **marsh harrier**. Throughout this incredible spectacle a **hooded wheatear** appeared a few times on a nearby post and a **desert lark** foraged for a while just behind the watchpoint (**Figure 13**).



Figure 12: Kettling steppe buzzard



Figure 13: Hooded wheatear

As dusk was approaching the passage began to reduce so I dropped down to North Beach. There was a group of c.75 **garganey** offshore and a single **gull-billed tern** on the buoys with numerous **white-eyed gull**. The final birds of the day were 20 **Baltic gull** which flew north high over the beach.

**Day 6 – 29<sup>th</sup> March** (Yotvata - KM67- Ovda Valley - IBRC - North Fields - raptor watchpoint - North Beach)

Another early start found me at Yotvata spotlighting for Egyptian nightjar without any joy, although a couple of **Cape hare** were lurking in the sand dunes.

I pressed on to KM67 and walked out towards the Jordanian border in the hope of seeing Hoopoe lark in the vicinity of a water storage facility (30.024666, 35.104808). Early on there were few birds around in the sparse sandy vegetation and the temperature was quite low. However, as the temperature warmed up five **tawny pipit** went over calling, and a few common warblers were hopping around in the bushes. I had been wandering around for at least an hour before suddenly, on the Jordanian side of the border were two **hoopoe lark**! I had good views of them in the telescope before they disappeared into the surrounding desert. Walking back to the car I pushed a **bluethroat** from a patch of reeds and a couple of **blackstart** were in the area.

I headed south towards the Ovda Valley gaining height as I left the Arava Valley along Route 40. The drive was punctuated by a stop for a **steppe eagle** perched on a hillside. On arrival near the 'black mountain' there was a couple of **southern grey shrike** in the bushes and two **Cretzschmar's bunting** were on the side of the road. I could hear sandgrouse calling but could not locate the birds, suddenly a male and female **spotted sandgrouse** landed in on the stony ground to the north of the road (**Figure 14**). They were perfectly camouflaged and would have been impossible to locate with having seen them land. A wheatear singing from nearby rocks turned out to be a 1<sup>st</sup> summer **white-crowned wheatear** without a black head. Basalt wheatear crossed my mind but unfortunately it was definitely a white-crowned wheatear. There were relatively few other birds around and no sign of the hoped for thick-billed lark, which I decided to try for again tomorrow.



**Figure 14:** Record shot of spotted sandgrouse

A stop at the IBRC revealed similar birds to my previous visit, although a point-blank range **Baillon's crane** was wonderful to see. A quick look around the fields to the north of IBRC didn't reveal many migrants, however two **Indian silverbill** were new for the trip. I decided to have another look for raptors at the watchpoint. Passage had dropped since the day before, but nevertheless there were 2000+ **steppe buzzard**, 100 **black kite**, four **steppe eagle** and one **short-toad eagle**. I finished the day at North Beach (**Figure 15**) where two dark phase **Arctic skua** flew north.



**Figure 15:** North Beach sunset



**Day 7 – 30<sup>th</sup> March** (Eilat - Ovda Valley - Neot Smadar Kibbutz - Neot Semadar / Shizzafon Sewage Works - Yotvata - KM20 - Holland Park - IBRC)

I was in the Ovda Valley early in the morning where a **desert wheatear** was the only new bird for the trip. Again no thick-billed lark which was disappointing but an **Egyptian vulture** and ten **pale rock sparrow** were a consolation. I moved on to Neot Smadar Kibbutz there were lots of common warblers in the bushes, the bulk of which were **lesser whitethroat**. A stunning **Siberian stonechat** was present in the scrappy farmland near the centre of the Kibbutz. Next stop was the sewage treatment works to the east of the kibbutz. There was little water or vegetation present but what there was held three **bluethroat** including both red and white spotted subspecies.

A quick stop at Yotvata in the middle of the day was predictably quiet with three **water pipit** and two **linnet** the only birds of real note. I briefly stopped at KM20 on the way back south, where a single extremely long billed **curlew** and a **Syke's wagtail** were interesting, and new for the trip.

A trip to Holland Park was next, with a lovely **Eastern orphean warbler** the highlight amongst a small selection of other warblers. A **stone-curlew** near the northern end of the park was the first of the trip. I spent much of the remainder of the afternoon birding the saltpans and pools around the IBRC. There were a lot of waders tucked up away from the strong wind on the leeseide of the saltpan banks including two **collared pratincole**, 150+ **little stint**, 100+ **ringed plover** and four **red-necked phalarope**.

**Day 8 – 31<sup>st</sup> March** (Eilat-Tel Aviv- Yarkon Gardens - Secret Beach -London)

I was up at 02:30 and began the journey back to Tel Aviv, stopping briefly at the Ben Gurion memorial garden to listen for long-eared owl. It was windy and cold and I had no luck.

I made it back to Tel Aviv by 06:00 and battled through the traffic to a coastal area near the centre. The weather was poor and there was a strong onshore wind. Birds of interest included two **Scopoli's shearwater** offshore and a **greater sand plover** on the beach. A few **Armenian gulls** were gliding up and down the beach front, along with some **Baltic gulls**.

I moved on to the Yarkon Park (Figure 16, parking at 32.104309, 34.811350). Over the next few hours I had enjoyable walk around the different environs of the park which include a river, ponds, olive groves, botanical gardens and blocks of woodland. Having not birded this far north in Israel before there were numerous new birds for the trip including **goldfinch**, **white-breasted kingfisher**, **blackbird**, **jay**, **Cetti's warbler**, **great tit**, and the non-native species **Egyptian goose**, **monk parakeet** and **vinous-breasted starling**. The jays were of the particularly strikingly pale faced Middle-eastern race *Garrulus garrulus atricapillus*. Other species of interest included singing **Savi's warbler**, **black-crowned night heron**, **common kingfisher**, two **masked shrike**, a **stone-curlew**, **pied kingfisher**, 17 **glossy ibis**, 50+ **cattle egret**, three **hoopoe**, **eastern black-eared wheatear**, four **nightingale**, a **sparrowhawk** and five **eastern Bonelli's warbler**. **Golden jackal** were particularly conspicuous with around 25 viewable simultaneously at one point. I presume they forage on rubbish in the surrounding residential area, much like foxes in the UK.



**Figure 8:** Yurkon Park with at least seven golden jackal

It was soon time to leave, I took the car back to the airport and was baffled by the four stage check-in process. The flight left on time and I was home in the late evening.

Simon Boswell

[Sa.boswell@btinternet.com](mailto:Sa.boswell@btinternet.com)

No.	Species	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31
1	Chukar	4	1						
2	Sand Partridge	3						2	
3	Quail			1 (h)	1 (h)			1 (h)	
4	Egyptian Goose								12
5	Shoveler	✓		✓	✓		25		
6	Mallard	✓	✓	✓		2	3	3	4
7	Pintail			12			5	12	
8	Garganey					75	200		
9	Teal	✓		✓	□	35	✓		
10	Ferruginous Duck	20							
11	Black-necked Grebe			1					
12	Little Grebe	✓	✓	✓					
13	Greater Flamingo			150+	✓	✓	✓	✓	
14	Black Stork	30	10			2		8	
15	White Stork	40	150+	1000+		3	3		
16	Glossy Ibis		1		15			6	17
17	Little Bittern					2	2		
18	Bittern					1			
19	Striated Heron					1			
20	Squacco Heron			20			1	1	
21	Cattle Egret	3		10+	✓			✓	50+
22	Little Egret	1		✓	✓		3	✓	5
23	Great White Egret			3					
24	Purple Heron			3		8		17	
25	Grey Heron			1	✓		✓	✓	
26	Black-crowned Night Heron			10+		10		1	4
27	Cormorant					2	3	14	1
28	Osprey	3				1	1		
29	Black Kite	50+	300+	20+	10	400+	100	1	
30	Egyptian Vulture		1	1				1	
31	Short-toed Eagle	1	20+				1		
32	Marsh Harrier	1		1	3	1		1	
33	Pallid Harrier					2			
34	Montagu's Harrier				2				
35	Hen Harrier				2			1	
36	Sparrowhawk		2	1	2		1	1	1
37	Steppe Buzzard	5+	15	10+		5000+	2000+	3	
38	Long-legged Buzzard	2				2			
39	Crested Honey Buzzard					1			
40	Lesser Spotted Eagle		20+			3			
41	Steppe Eagle				1	26	4		
42	Eastern Imperial Eagle					1			
43	Booted Eagle		3			2		1	
44	Lesser Kestrel		50+	50+	✓				
45	Kestrel	✓			✓	✓		✓	
46	Peregrine			1					
47	McQueen's Bustard		2						
48	Water Rail					1			
49	Little Crake					1		1	
50	Baillon's Crake						1		
51	Moorhen	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
52	Coot	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Purple Gallinule	2							
54	Stone Curlew							1	1
55	Spur-winged Lapwing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
56	Ringed Plover			10+	✓	✓	✓	100+	
57	Little Ringed Plover			2	2	✓		1	



No.	Species	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31
58	Kentish Plover			5		✓		5	
59	Greater Sand Plover				8				1
60	Snipe				1				
61	Black-tailed Godwit			1					
62	Curlew							1	
63	Spotted Redshank					2	4	1	
64	Redshank	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
65	Greenshank			2	✓	✓	✓	✓	
66	Marsh Sandpiper			1	✓	3	15	10+	
67	Green Sandpiper			2	✓				
68	Wood Sandpiper		2	3	✓	2		2	
69	Common Sandpiper				3	1	2		
70	Little Stint			20		10+	15	150+	
71	Temminck's Stint					1			
72	Dunlin			2					
73	Curlew Sandpiper					1	1	1	
74	Red-necked Phalarope					6	1	4	
75	Collared Pratincole							2	
76	Ruff		25+	20+	10	✓	✓	✓	
77	Arctic Skua						2		
78	White-eyed Gull				1	30+	30+		
79	Black-headed Gull					1	2		
80	Slender-billed Gull			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
81	Armenian Gull								5
82	Heuglin's Gull						1		
83	Baltic Gull			20	✓	20	2		15
84	Gull-billed Tern					1	4	12	
85	Caspian Tern					1			
86	Sandwich Tern						6		
87	Common Tern					3	1	1	
88	Whiskered Tern			1				1	
89	Scopoli's Shearwater								2
90	Spotted Sandgrouse						2		
91	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse				2				
92	Crowned Sandgrouse				15				
93	Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse			2					
94	Nubian Nightjar	1 (h)							
95	Pharaoh Eagle Owl				1				
96	Rock Dove	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
97	Turtle Dove			1					
98	Collared Dove	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
99	Laughing Dove	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
100	Namaqua Dove				1				
101	Ring-necked Parakeet				10	5	2	1	2
102	Monk Parakeet								15+
103	Great Spotted Cuckoo			1					
104	Common Cuckoo	1							
105	Common Swift		3	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
106	Pallid Swift	100+			✓				
107	Hoopoe	5		1	2	1			3
108	White-throated Kingfisher								2
109	Pied Kingfisher			1	2	1			2
110	Common Kingfisher								2
111	Little Green Bee-eater	1		2	1	3	2	2	
112	Wryneck		1	1			1		
113	Syrian Woodpecker								1
114	Woodchat Shrike	4	1	1	1		2		

No.	Species	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31
115	Masked Shrike	1							2
116	Southern Grey Shrike				5		3	2	
117	Arabian Babbler		5	✓	2				
118	Jay								4
119	Jackdaw	✓							✓
120	House Crow				15	✓	✓	✓	
121	Hooded Crow	✓				□	□	□	
122	Brown-necked Raven		5	1	3		10	25	
123	Fan-tailed Raven	5							
124	Raven	1							
125	Yellow-vented Bulbul	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
126	Great Tit								10
127	Hoopoe Lark						2		
128	Crested Lark	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
129	Short-toed Lark		200+	100+	20			20	
130	Desert Lark	2		1	2	2			
131	Bar-tailed Lark				1				
132	Pale Crag Martin	10+	2	5+	2	3		2	
133	Crag Martin			1				1	
134	Sand Martin			1					
135	House Martin	15							
136	Swallow	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
137	Red-rumped Swallow	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5
138	Graceful Warbler	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	5
139	Scrub Warbler	✓	✓	✓					
140	Cetti's Warbler								3
141	Savi's Warbler			1					1
142	Clamorous Reed Warbler	1 (h)							
143	Reed Warbler					✓	✓	✓	1
144	Sedge Warbler			1					
145	Eastern Olivaceous Warbler			4	3	3		1	
146	Eastern Bonelli's Warbler		1		2		2	10	5
147	Wood Warbler			1					
148	Chiffchaff		1	1				1	
149	Hume's Warbler					1			
150	Blackcap	✓	✓	50+	10	30+	✓	50+	2
151	Lesser Whitethroat	✓	✓	50+	5	✓	✓	15+	10+
152	Eastern Orphean Warbler		1					1	
153	Whitethroat	1							
154	Subalpine Warbler	3+	2	1		1			
155	Rüppell's Warbler	2		1	3	2			
156	Common Myna	✓		✓	✓				✓
157	Tristram's Starling	5		2	4		✓		
158	Vinous Breasted Starling								2
159	Blackbird								4
160	Song Thrush		2	1					1
161	Blue Rock Thrush		1						
162	Rock Thrush	2							
163	Robin			1					
164	Bluethroat					3	1	3	
165	Black Bush Robin				1				
166	Nightingale			5	2			4	4
167	Redstart			3	2		1	1	
168	Blackstart	5		2	5	1	2	2	
169	Siberian Stonechat							1	
170	Whinchat				1				
171	Isabelline Wheatear	5+					1		

No.	Species	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31
172	Northern Wheatear	10+	✓	✓	15+		✓	✓	
173	Desert Wheatear							1	
174	Eastern Black-eared Wheatear	✓	1	2	1			1	1
175	Mourning Wheatear	2		1			1		
176	Hooded Wheatear					1			
177	White-crowned Wheatear	2				2	1		
178	Persian Wheatear	1							
179	Finsch's Wheatear	2							
180	Palestine Sunbird	✓	2	✓	2			2	5
181	Pale Rock Sparrow	10		50+	4	10	10	25	
182	Rock Sparrow	2							
183	House Sparrow	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
184	Spanish Sparrow	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
185	Dead Sea Sparrow	5							
186	White Wagtail	✓	50+	10	✓	✓	✓	✓	25+
187	Black-headed Wagtail	2	100+	30	✓	✓	✓	✓	
188	Syke's Wagtail							1	
189	Ashy-headed Wagtail		2	3					
190	Tawny Pipit				2		5	3	
191	Long-billed Pipit	2							
192	Meadow Pipit	3							
193	Tree Pipit		1						
194	Red-throated Pipit				15+		1	1	
195	Water Pipit				1			3	
196	Indian Silverbill						2		
197	Greenfinch	✓		✓	1				2
198	Goldfinch								1
199	Linnet	✓						2	
200	Desert Finch				22				
201	Trumpeter Finch			6					
202	Cretzschmar's Bunting	3			5		2		
203	Corn Bunting	5							

Other Species	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31
Wild Boar	1							
Cape Hare		1				2		
Red Fox	1							
Red Fox 'desert form'						2		
Bottlenose Dolphin					1			
Golden Jackal	1							25+
Dorcas Gazelle		7	1			3		
Middle Eastern Short-fingered Gecko				1				