

Trip report: Birding and Mammal Watching in Jordan, December 2018

With notes how to see more species in spring, during migration and suggestions for a combination with a visit to Israel

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Contents:

- Abstract
- Introduction
- How to use this report
- Target species
- Itinerary and preparation
- Chronological report
- How to see more: birds
- How to see more: mammals
- Literature
- Appendix 1: total species list of birds
- Appendix 2: total list of all other species that we identified

Abstract

Trip report about birding and mammal watching in December 2018 in Jordan. We visited the country for 10 days and covered all major hotspots. Due to winter season we missed a lot of species that can potentially be found in Jordan. To make this report as relevant as possible, tables, lists and texts are provided with information about these species in spring or during migration time. Comparisons with the – amongst birders – more popular destination of Israel are also given. Jordan is a wonderful country to observe birds and mammals and we can recommend it to any fanatic birder or mammal watcher, either as a winter break or as a hotspot for migration watching! Best species amongst others: Blanford's Fox, Striped Hyena, Basalt Wheatear, Crested Honey-Buzzard, Nubian Nightjar, Sinai Rosefinch, Syrian Serin, Dead-Sea Sparrow.

Photos by Daan Drukker (DD) and Jurriën van Deijk (JvD), front page:

- Basalt Wheatear (DD), between Azraq and Safawi
- Blanford's Fox (JvD), Mujib reserve

Introduction

Jurriën van Deijk, Ruben Vermeer and I decided to escape the Dutch winter from 5 to 16 December 2018. Since we visited Morocco before, we wanted to bird the South Eastern side of the WP as well. Israel is in that case the obvious choice, but we wanted to do a little bit more pioneering type of birding and mammal watching, so the cheap tickets from Brussels to Amman were a good trigger to go to the adjacent Jordan. We certainly do not regret this choice, if only because of the amazing landscapes and wonderful people.

Our target list contained numerous East Mediterranean and Arabian specialties (see table 1) from various species groups. Birds had our main focus, followed by mammals and then fish, aquatic insects and Lepidoptera. To cover such a wide variety of species, we brought a lot of gear which was in general no problem for the customs at the airport and the local police. Our telescopes were an exception though. They caused us about an hour of delay at a local customs station between Aqaba and Wadi Arabah. We recommend to cover optics as much as possible to prevent these problems. At other local customs stations the optics were no problem.

List of gear:

- 2 telescopes
- Bins and cameras with tele lenses
- Go pro and underwater camera for snorkling
- 2 Nitecore p30 torches
- 2 adapters made by Jurriën and his dad to attach the torches to our telelenses so we could photograph nocturnal animals (see fig 1)
- Walkie talkies
-



Figure 1: telelens with torch attached

How to use this report

In this report I will give a short chronological overview of our journey, as well as several lists, tables and links to observation.org. We recorded almost every animal we saw, resulting in more than 1100 observations on jordan.observation.org. Remarkable observations are usually accompanied with photographic evidence or sound recording. Questions or comments on observations can be mailed to me or my friends. A map of our observations plotted in 1x1 km squares can be found in figure 2.

The best way to use this report is to make your own target list based on our target list and total observed species list prior to departure. For your own target species, you can make a spreadsheet and copy the GPS-coordinates that can be found in our observations on jordan.observation.org. For many **target species we even included GPS-coordinates in the list** in this report and these are complemented with coordinates in the chronological report of places where we searched, but could not find the species. These can be directly used offline as well.

Our total species list can be found in appendix 1 and 2 and also in the [following link to jordan.observation.org](http://jordan.observation.org), where you can click further to any species and any observation accompanied with exact GPS coordinates, date and time, making it possible to check

everything we saw and/or what we have written in this report. You can also plot the GPS-coordinates of our observations in apps like MAPS.ME or OsmAnd+ to navigate to the sites.

The photos of our trip so far can be found [here](#), with all background data attached (more might be added after publication of this report).

All photos from Jordan (including those of Marcel Klootwijk in September 2018) can be found [here](#), while [this link refers to only the bird photos](#)

Target species

Here several tables can be found regarding interesting species that – in theory – can be found in Jordan, both birds and mammals. In table 1a. an overview is given of interesting bird species. "Interesting" is loosely defined by me as species that are either new to one of us, complemented either with species that are typical for the region or with desert species that we already saw in Morocco. In **red** the species are noted that we have not seen. The reason could be the time of year, the absence of recent observations in Jordan, or simply because we could not find them (only the case in Desert Owl and Long-Billed Pipit). In the note section, tips are given on how to find them anyway. In **green** interesting species are given that we did see. **Dark green** indicates that the species was new to at least one of us.

Table 1b. is a similar table for the mammals, but in this case it is split up in a section with the species that we saw (in **dark green**) and a list of larger mammals that should be possible to find but not seen by us (in **red**). Note that many species that we missed are easier to find in Israel. The species in **dark grey** were not seen alive (only as burrow or loose spines).

In total we saw 133 + 5 exotic bird species. For taxonomy we followed IOC (birds) and IUCN (mammals). For some taxa however we decided to treat them as full species following Shirihai & Larsson (2018) for the sake of giving them attention. This concerns the nominate of Scrub Warbler (*Scotocerca inquieta*), Arabian Dunn's Lark (*Eremalauda eremodites*), Eastern Mourning Wheatear (*Oenanthe lugens*) and Basalt Wheatear (*Oenanthe warriae*). This affects us because we saw the Saharan Scrub Warbler (*S. saharae*), African Dunn's Lark (*E. dunni*) and Maghreb Wheatear (*O. halophila*) in North Africa making Scrub Warbler, Eastern Mourning Wheatear and Basalt Wheatear potential new species for us and making Arabian Dunn's Lark a dip.

Other taxonomic issues are relevant as well, concerning chiffchaffs (*Phylloscopus collybita*-group), gulls (*Larus cachinnans*, *barabensis*, *heuglini*, *armenicus* and possibilities for *michahelis*, *fuscus*), black redstarts (*Phoenicurus ochruros/phoenicuroides/semirufus*) and wildcats (*Felis lybica* or *F. sylvestris lybica*). The chiffchaffs we observed in Jordan were mainly calling like *tristis*, which appears to happen a lot in the middle east. Only a small percentage called like *collybita*. Their plumage ranged from European style olive green to brownish capped with white eyebrow like *lorenzii*. See Svensson et al. (2010) and Pettersson et al. (2011). Of the large white-headed gulls we saw *armenicus*, *barabensis*, *heuglini*, *cachinnans* and possibly intergrades, but the other taxa can be expected too, especially during migration. We mainly saw Western Black Redstarts wintering, but at Wadi Rum we also had a red bellied *semirufus*-type.

Table 1: Target species that occur in Jordan. See text for legend.

| 1a. COMMON NAME | SCIENTIFIC NAME | SEASON | LOCATION | NOTES ON SPECIES WE COULD NOT FIND |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------|---|---|
| Lesser White fronted goose | <i>Anser erythropus</i> | Vagrant | | vagrant at ABO apparantly left the site to Israel |
| Chukar Partridge | <i>Alectoris chukar</i> | AY | common | |
| Sand Partridge | <i>Ammoperdix heyi</i> | AY | Dana; Petra; Mujib | |
| Black Francolin | <i>Francolinus francolinus</i> | AY | Baptism Site, 31.838, 35.568 | |
| Striated heron | <i>Butorides straita</i> | AY | | should be possible by checking more suitable places around Aqaba |
| Western Reef Heron | <i>Egretta gularis</i> | AY | Aqaba | |
| Brown Booby | <i>Sula leucogaster</i> | M | | more chance during migration |
| Crested Honey Buzzard | <i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i> | W | Aqaba, 29.573, 34.988 | 4 individuals together around Aqaba bird reserve |
| Steppe Eagle | <i>Aquila nipalensis</i> | W + M | Wadi Rum; Southern deserts | |
| Verreaux's Eagle | <i>Aquila verreauxii</i> | AY | | Last observation in Wadi Rum. Maybe with more time? |
| Bonelli's Eagle | <i>Aquila fasciata</i> | AY | Dana | |
| Macqueen's Bustard | <i>Chlamydotis macqueenii</i> | AY | | probably extinct in the wild in Jordan |
| Spur-winged Lapwing | <i>Vanellus spinosus</i> | AY | common | |
| White-eyed Gull | <i>Ichthyaelus leucophthalmus</i> | AY | Aqaba | |
| Pallas's Gull | <i>Ichthyaelus melanocephalus</i> | M | | more chance during migration |
| Sooty Gull | <i>Ichthyaelus hemprichii</i> | M | | more chance during migration, also in Israel very rare |
| Armenian Gull | <i>Larus armenicus</i> | AY | | Several individuals at the South Beach of Aqaba |
| White-cheeked Tern | <i>Sterna repressa</i> | M | | more chance during migration |
| Bridled Tern | <i>Onychoprion anaethetus</i> | M | | more chance during migration |
| Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse | <i>Pterocles lichtensteinii</i> | AY | | only recently seen for the first time at Aqaba Bird Observatory |
| Pin-tailed Sandgrouse | <i>Pterocles orientalis</i> | AY | | should be possible around Azraq |
| Desert Owl | <i>Strix hadorami</i> | AY | | all known sites from this century not successful. Check more wadis or prepare with locals |
| Pallid Scops Owl | <i>Otus brucei</i> | AY | | should be possible in winter in acacia's of Wadi Arabah judging from the Israeli observations |
| Nubian Nightjar | <i>Caprimulgus nubicus</i> | AY | Fifa (exact location only accessible with army and RSCN permission) | more and more active in spring |
| White-throated Kingfisher | <i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i> | AY | Jordan Rift Valley; Aqaba | |
| Pied Kingfisher | <i>Ceryle rudis</i> | AY | North; Aqaba | |
| Green Bee-eater | <i>Merops orientalis</i> | AY | common from Dead Sea Southward | |
| Sooty Falcon | <i>Falco concolor</i> | M + S | | present from March to beginning of November in Wadi Rum |
| Masked Shrike | <i>Lanius nubicus</i> | M + S | | more chance during migration |
| Fan-tailed Raven | <i>Corvus rhipidurus</i> | AY | Dead Sea; Petra | |
| Greater Hoopoe-Lark | <i>Alaemon alaudipes</i> | AY | Eastern deserts | |
| Desert Lark | <i>Ammomanes deserti</i> | AY | Eastern deserts | |
| Bar-tailed Lark | <i>Ammomanes cinctura</i> | AY | Eastern deserts | |
| Oriental Skylark | <i>Aldaia gulgula</i> | ? | | observations in Israel, but not yet known from Jordan |

| 1a. COMMON NAME | SCIENTIFIC NAME | SEASON | LOCATION | NOTES ON SPECIES WE COULD NOT FIND |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------|---|--|
| Bimaculated Lark | <i>Melanocorypha bimaculata</i> | AY | | look for more suitable habitat and perhaps more chance during migration |
| Dunn's Lark | <i>Eremalauda dunni</i> | AY | | nomadic, could not find any |
| Temminck's Lark | <i>Eremophila bilopha</i> | AY | Eastern deserts | |
| White-spectacled Bulbul | <i>Pycnonotus xanthopygos</i> | AY | common | |
| Pale Crag Martin | <i>Ptyonoprogne obsoleta</i> | AY | common from Dead Sea Southward | |
| Streaked Scrub Warbler | <i>Scotocerca inquieta</i> | AY | common from Dead Sea Southward | |
| Graceful Prinia | <i>Prinia gracilis</i> | AY | common | |
| Clamorous Reed Warbler | <i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i> | AY | | breeds very close to Palestine border. Should be easier in spring. We heard some calls but could not completely rule out other reed warblers |
| Eastern Olivaceous Warbler | <i>Iduna pallida</i> | M + S | | more chance during migration |
| Upcher's Warbler | <i>Hippolais languida</i> | M + S | | more chance during migration |
| Arabian Babbler | <i>Turdoides squamiceps</i> | | Dana, 30.676, 35.593 | |
| Arabian Warbler | <i>Sylvia leucomelaena</i> | | Aqaba, 29.478, 35.071 | Should also be possible in Wadi Arabah |
| Asian Desert Warbler | <i>Sylvia nana</i> | | Shaumari | |
| Menetries's Warbler | <i>Sylvia mystacea</i> | M + S | | more chance during migration |
| Rüppell's Warbler | <i>Sylvia ruppeli</i> | M + S | | more chance during migration |
| Cyprus Warbler | <i>Sylvia melanothorax</i> | M + S | | more chance during migration |
| Tristram's Starling | <i>Onychognathus tristramii</i> | | common from Dead Sea Southward | |
| Black Scrub Robin | <i>Cercotrichas podobe</i> | Vagrant | | often wintering individuals around Aqaba, but we could not find any |
| White Throated Robin | <i>Irania guttularis</i> | M | | more chance during migration |
| Isabelline Wheatear | <i>Oenanthe isabellina</i> | | Wadi Arabah | |
| Hooded Wheatear | <i>Oenanthe monacha</i> | | Aqaba, 29.425, 34.974 | |
| Desert Wheatear | <i>Oenanthe deserti</i> | | Eastern deserts | |
| Blackstart | <i>Oenanthe melanura</i> | | common from Dead Sea Southward | |
| Cyprus Wheatear | <i>Oenanthe cyprica</i> | M | | more chance during migration |
| White-crowned Wheatear | <i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i> | | widespread | |
| Finsch's Wheatear | <i>Oenanthe finschii</i> | | widespread in North and Eastern deserts | |
| Basalt Wheatear | <i>Oenanthe warriae</i> | | Basalt desert, 32.099, 37.026 | Only seen one |
| Mourning Wheatear | <i>Oenanthe lugens</i> | | common from Dead Sea Southward | |
| Palestine Sunbird | <i>Cinnyris osea</i> | | common | |
| Dead Sea Sparrow | <i>Passer moabiticus</i> | | Fifa, 31.004, 35.460 | |
| Rock Sparrow | <i>Petronia petronia</i> | | Rift highlands | |
| Pale Rockfinch | <i>Carpospiza brachydactyla</i> | M + S | | look for singing males in spring |
| Long-billed Pipit | <i>Anthus similis</i> | AY | | should be present around Mujib and further North, but we could not find this species |
| Water Pipit | <i>Anthus spinoletta coutelli</i> | | common | |

| 1a. COMMON NAME | SCIENTIFIC NAME | SEASON | LOCATION | NOTES ON SPECIES WE COULD NOT FIND |
|--------------------|----------------------------|--------|---|------------------------------------|
| Sinai Rosefinch | <i>Carpodacus synoicus</i> | | Petra, 30.336, 35.437; Wadi Rum, 29.562, 35.425 | |
| Desert Finch | <i>Rhodospiza obsoleta</i> | | Aqaba, various beaches in the morning | |
| Syrian Serin | <i>Serinus syriacus</i> | | Dana, 30.674, 35.590 | |
| Striolated Bunting | <i>Emberiza striolata</i> | | Dead Sea, e.g. 31.538, 35.559 | |

| 1b. COMMON NAME | SCIENTIFIC NAME | NOTES ON MAMMALS |
|------------------------|------------------------------|---|
| Lesser Egyptian Jerboa | <i>Jaculus jaculus</i> | At night in Eastern Deserts, near Shaumari, or further East e.g. 31.712, 37.139 |
| Lesser Blind Mole Rat | <i>Spalax leucodon</i> | only burrows |
| Crested Porcupine | <i>Hystrix cristata</i> | twice only a spine, apparantly easier in Israel |
| Cape Hare | <i>Lepus capensis</i> | only seen in Fifa: 30.931, 35.425 |
| African Wildcat | <i>Felis lybica</i> | seen at daytime in Shaumari |
| Striped hyena | <i>Hyaena hyaena</i> | spotlighted at Mujib: 31.603, 35.606 |
| Golden Jackal | <i>Canis aureus</i> | only auditive observations around Rasun near Ajloun (32.400, 35.734) |
| Blanford's's Fox | <i>Vulpes cana</i> | spotlighted at Mujib: 31.605, 35.571 |
| Red Fox | <i>Vulpes vulpes</i> | common |
| Onager | <i>Equus hemionus onager</i> | Reintroduction at Shaumari |
| Arabian Sand Gazelle | <i>Gazella marica</i> | Reintroduction at Shaumari |
| Arabian Oryx | <i>Oryx leucoryx</i> | Reintroduction at Shaumari |
| LARGER MAMMALS | POSSIBLE BUT NOT SEEN | |
| Egyptian Fruit Bat | <i>Rousettus aegyptiacus</i> | should be possible around Aqaba |
| Wolf | <i>Canis lupus</i> | hunted, known stakeouts in Israel |
| Sand Fox | <i>Vulpes rueppellii</i> | should be possible in sand and basalt deserts |
| Caracal | <i>Caracal caracal</i> | should be possible on various locations around Jordan. Recent observations come from the Petra region and Shaumari e.g. |
| Jungle Cat | <i>Felis chaus</i> | known from the North, known stakeouts in Israel |
| Sand Cat | <i>Felis margarita</i> | probably rare, south side of Jordan |
| Egyptian Mongoose | <i>Herpestes ichneumon</i> | should be possible in Jordan, check vicinity of chicken farms |
| Honey Badger | <i>Mellivora capensis</i> | should be possible in Jordan |
| Marbled Polecat | <i>Vormela peregusna</i> | apparantly getting more common at the beginning of the century |
| Hyrax | <i>Procavia capensis</i> | despite intensive searching in Yarmuk and Wadi Rum not found. Known stakeouts in Israel |
| Nubian Ibex | <i>Ibex nubiana</i> | not found at Mujib, Dana and Wadi Rum, where they should occur. Check with locals or go to stakeouts in Israel |
| Dorcas Gazelle | <i>Gazella dorcas</i> | hunted, known stakeouts in Israel |
| Mountain Gazelle | <i>Gazella gazella</i> | hunted, known stakeouts in Israel |

Itinerary and preparation



Our route can be found on the map in fig. 2 and the main birding hotspots in fig. 4. Jordan is a very relaxed country and travelling was generally no problem. We mainly stayed in hotels. Price ranges differed quite a lot (range between 35 and 120 JD for three persons per night). With some preparation one should be able to find fairly cheap hotels almost everywhere, though at some places the more expensive option can be more convenient for birding. We travelled with a rental car (Chervolet Cruze). A four-wheel drive would have had several advantages (e.g. in Wadi Rum or during spotlighting), but most of the time we were able to manage with this sedan.

Figure 2: observations (red 1x1 km squares) and route (yellow line)



Figure 3: Palestine Sunbird (JvD), Mujib reserve



Figure 4: hotspot areas in Jordan

Chronological report

December 5: northern Jordan (Ajloun forest)

Our trip had a slow start in terms of birds as we took off in the densely populated North. At the Ajloun forest reserve we had some good species for the trip list, the best being **Syrian Woodpecker** and the Levant subspecies of **Jay** (ssp. *atricapilla*). At night we had nothing of real interest in the light of our torches, but we did hear our only **Golden Jackals** of the trip on two occasions, including at our campsite of Rasun.

December 6: Northern Jordan (Yarmuk and Northern Jordan valley)

On our first full day, our first lifers were found, such as **Graceful Prinia** (common) and the two kingfisher species (**Pied** and **White throated**) in the green North close to the Golan and Syrian border at the Yarmuk reserve. Due to the rain we could

not find a colony of hyraxes that was supposed to be at Al Adassiyah (Amr et al., 2000). Engine failure delayed us even more, so at the end of the day we drove towards the Dead Sea to stay at the Mujib chalets, without having been able to explore the North any further.

December 7: Northern Dead Sea

Now we really got started. The rain had disappeared at the negative altitudes of the Dead Sea and the temperature was pleasant. **Tristrams Starlings**, **Fan-tailed Ravens**, **Green Bee-eaters** and **Palestine Sunbirds** started our day. It was a surprise to find quite some **Striolated Buntings** in the wadis and bushes while we were looking for Dead Sea sparrows. The latter species is becoming quite rare on the Jordan side of its range, so we had to step up our game. A good spot from the past in the northeast had turned into a huge hotel complex (31.755, 35.591), so the only options in the North we were left with, were the options of the Baptism site and the wadi upstream. Where the wadi crossed the road (31.828, 35.586) we did not find dead sea sparrows, but the birding was good with **Namaqua Doves**, **Spur-winged Lapwings**, **Red throated Pipits** and **couteilli Water Pipits**. We read that the only place where Royle (2011) had seen the dead sea sparrows was at a guided tour at the Baptism site. However, we did not feel like doing that as we could not bird on our own. We challenged our luck by going to the site anyway without tickets for the guided tour and that turned out to be very productive! You can drive on the access road until almost at the end and there are several good spots to do birding. We found a spine of a Crested Porcupine but the best surprise was a **Black Francolin** we flushed! A species that is very rarely recorded in Jordan. At the end of the road we were sent back to the ticket office, so we were

still without Dead Sea Sparrows. We had to save those for the next day. In the last light we searched in vain for Long Billed Pipits near the hot springs of Ma'in (e.g. 31.631, 35.621). The day was far from over though, because we had found a nice road on the map into the Mujib mountains. After dinner we started spotlighting. The first eyes we saw were on a steep slope and belonged to a fox. With the naked eye a large tail with black tip was visible! With racing heartbeats I raised my binoculars and we saw a most wanted **Blanford's Fox**! Jurriën even managed to get decent photographs. During the rest of the spotlighting we mainly saw **Red Foxes**, but near the end we had **Striped Hyena** as well! Two of our most wanted mammal predators in one trip.



Figure 5 and 6: Striped Hyena (DD) and Blanford Fox (JvD), Mujib reserve

December 8: Southern Dead Sea and Ghor

In the evening of the 8th, we had arranged to meet with [Abdullah Al-Oshoush](#) of the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) to look for Nubian Nightjar at the Fifa reserve. First we decided to look for Dead Sea Sparrows at the buffer zone of the park. This was in vain, but In spring, this should be the place to be, as 1200 nests have been counted in the vicinity (30.997, 35.456). We did see them finally in the afternoon a little further with the guys of the RSCN. After tea they took us in their four-wheel drive to the buffer zone of the reserve, where we were finally able to find **Dead Sea Sparrows** in a mixed flock of **Silverbills** and **Spanish Sparrows**. Other observations included a handsome **White-throated Kingfisher**. After this we really experienced the Jordan hospitality, as we went to buy two fresh chickens for dinner, had tea with the manager of Fifa reserve and his family at the campfire and then took off to search for **Nubian Nightjar**! Despite a search of two hours, we only had brief observations of a calling bird (which I managed to record badly), but the species was in the pocket. Apparently in April as much as 20 individuals can be recorded in this reserve, so it is recommended to visit the area in spring. After a good search we finished with a delicious meal of roasted chicken and vegetables on a self-made barbecue with Abdullah, the manager of Fifa Ibrahim and the colleagues of the RSCN. A very cool experience.



Figure 7: Dead Sea Sparrow (and Spanish Sparrow) (DD), Fifa reserve



Figure 8: Bonelli's Eagle with Chukar (DD), Dana

December 9: Dana

Dana is the place to look for **Syrian Serin** in Jordan, so that is what we did. First we went down the steep path into wadi Dana. In the valley the Serins were hard to find. We only had brief views of several birds flying by. Other observations included our only **Arabian Babbler**, **Sand Partridges**, some cooperative **Eastern Mourning Wheatears** and cool lizards and invertebrates. Most spectacular was a **Bonelli's Eagle** that caught a **Chukar**

right in front of us! The climb back up brought two of us a sunstroke, so we recommend to first search in the Barra forest (30.651, 35.609) where the serins are also regularly seen, though we could not find them there in the afternoon. Another option is to walk down the Wadi Dana and arrange that you can be picked up by car at the end. Check with local tourism sites in Dana village. In the evening we tried for Desert Owl that used to breed here, at least in the nineties (Andrews, 1995). We could not hear any owls and spotlighting was not successful either. We searched the higher parts of wadi Dana, so one might be more successful further down (but prepare to go on a steep climb back up).

December 10: Wadi Rum and Aqaba

Being sick of the cold air, we decided to go South and save Petra for the way back. We first made a stop at the famous Wadi Rum, but this turned out to be a deception, except for the **Steppe Eagles** along the road to Wadi Rum. Tourists were few, so it seemed that all the Bedouins focussed on us, which was really pushy and annoying. We could not find hyraxes, Nubian ibexes or hooded wheatear, let alone the enigmatic Verreaux Eagle (last seen here a long time ago). The only cool birds were a **semirufus Black Restart** and our first, but distant, **Sinai Rosefinch**. We recommend to prepare Wadi Rum in advance, maybe to arrange a four-wheel drive for a night drive as the list of interesting mammal species is exciting (Amr et al., 2000). We soon left for Aqaba which was a lot more pleasant. However, we forgot to pay a visit to the Disi pools, which could be interesting especially during migration. At sunset we saw our first **White-eyed Gulls** and a lot of other interesting gulls that need some study before they can be identified.

December 11: Aqaba

We started our day at the Aqaba Bird Observatory (ABO), a quite recent site consisting of water treatment ponds. This site has proven to be a magnet for rare birds in the past. It is very close to the Israeli border, so you have to submit your passport to the military control, which they keep in exchange for a card. The entrance fee at the visitor centre a little further at the start of the observatory is 8 JD per person. Well worth it, because we found a lot of winter migrants, including scarcities such as **Citrine Wagtail** and **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters**. The biggest surprise however, was when we arrived in the morning and saw several larger raptors in the trees. One individual flew a short distance and the tail bands were noted: **Crested Honeybuzzards!** The birds proved to be quite cooperative and we could have excellent views of the various plumages, before they took off towards a date plantation in Israel. After this excellent start of the day we wanted to go to Wadi Arabah to look for Arabian Warbler and Hooded Wheatear, maybe stumbling upon a Pallid Scops Owl. However, in Jordan some things are not as straight forward as one might expect, because when we had to open our trunk at a routine control leaving



Figure 9: Crested Honeybuzzard (JvD), ABO

Aqaba northward, our telescopes were noted and the military police thought they were very strange. After a whole hour of talking and discussing they came to the conclusion that we were not a threat to the National security and we could finally continue. We were aware that the military is a bit jumpy with birders birding on the west side of the road, so we neatly checked all wheatears on the east side until we found decent looking acacias for Arabian Warbler. We turned around to check an **Isabelline Wheatear** first, but when we wanted to continue a military vehicle stopped us to check what we were doing. At that point we were fed up with all the trouble and the soldier did not speak a word of English, so we just went back to Aqaba. The Jordanians are the friendliest people I ever encountered, but the military is a bit too much hassle. On the way back we were even escorted by the armed military vehicle, while every control tower followed our every move. It was time to snorkel in the Red Sea. While we were walking from the hotel to the beach we, suddenly saw a **Hooded Wheatear**! The beach is apparently a good spot for this species, as Marcel Klootwijk was able to take good photos at the same spot in September 2018. One of the two missed species of wadi Arabah was in the pocket, tomorrow had to be the day for Arabian Warbler. But first snorkelling, which was yet another amazing experience, which we recommend to every nature observer visiting Jordan. The number of species is astonishing and the colours and forms of the fish as well. They are well identifiable using De koraalriffengids voor de Rode Zee/ Coral Reef Guide Red Sea (Lieske & Myers, 2012).

December 12: Aqaba

Figure 10: Fan-tailed Raven (DD), Petra

We spent quite some time at sea hoping for Arabian tern and maybe Brown Booby and other Indian Ocean goodies. However, the combination of December and northerly winds brought a quite empty sea. That is why our plan was to look for **Arabian Warbler** in the morning and snorkeling in the afternoon. For the warbler we went to the Aqaba Backroad where Van Houtum et al. (2011) had discovered several individuals in March. We indeed found one individual in the first Acacia we checked on that location.

December 13: Aqaba and Petra

In the morning of our last day in Aqaba we checked the shores of the Red Sea to add some waders to our trip list, also hoping for a last chance of a rare seabird. Luckily, we were surprised to find several flocks of **Desert Finches**! It is important to check the shores in the early morning, because most birds disappear when the beaches get crowded (even though the number of tourists was still relatively small). After breakfast it was time to visit the most touristic hotspot of Jordan and one of the seven modern world wonders: Petra, a city carved in stone by the Nabateans in ancient times. Very impressive, though our main interests were elsewhere: good views of **Sinai Rosefinch** and Desert Owl. We had some slightly better views of the finch than in Wadi Rum, but we knew that the owl could be more difficult, as it was not heard by anyone in the recent years. A tactic that has proven to be successful is to stay in Petra after closing time when it is getting dark. This is beautifully written down by The Sound Approach (2015) and Van Houtum et al., (2011). Staying in Petra after curfew went well, but we did not manage to hear the owls. The "Petra by night" preparations that are held every Thursday did not make



things easier, so two hours after sunset we had to leave the area. It could be that the owls at Petra are no longer doable, but if you try, make sure to have a lot of patience and make sure it is not on a Thursday! We should have looked for another suitable wadi, such as Stratford (2010), but it was that we realised too late that he did not see them in Petra itself but 10 km further north.

December 14: Azraq and Shaumari

In the morning we took the eastern highway via Ma'an towards the Azraq oasis. This is formed by a depression in the large basalt desert that catches all the water flows, nicely visible on the satellite images (fig 4). We started in the afternoon at the Azraq wetland reserve, which was quite dull at this time of year, but did provide some new trip species. After that we decided to drive around the Shaumari reserve, which needs some introduction. In this reserve a number of threatened ungulates have been reintroduced and live there in almost wild conditions. The most important being the **Arabian Oryx**, which could not be found in the wild until recently. Others include **Arabian Sand Gazelle**, **Onager** and perhaps also Ostrich. The area is fenced, but passage ways for medium sized predators have been made, and species up to the size of Wolf and Caracal have been observed in the enclosure. When you see the vegetation in the park, you realise that the fence actually serves more as an exclosure to keep out the herds of goat, sheep and dromedary! It is saddening to realise the extreme damage that the livestock make to the desert, as within the enclosure a lush steppe is visible. We did not feel like going on the mandatory jeep excursion where we could not decide for ourselves where and when to stop. That is why we drove around the fence with our rental car and tried to observe the animals from the outside. This went remarkably well even without a 4 wheel drive on the gravelly and sandy road and it had the extra advantage that it felt much more wild and exciting, because the animals were not guaranteed. In the end we were able to observe all three ungulates, including amazing views of the **Arabian Oryxes** at sunset. A very nice bonus was an **African Wildcat** that sneaked through the steppe. Several **Pallid Harriers** were noted as well. That night it was finally time to spotlight again. We had found a road on the map eastward to a small oil field. It was bumpy and tarmac was rare, but it went straight through the desert. One of the first eyes that popped up gave only a weak reflection and turned out to be of a **Pharaoh Eagle Owl**! This was



Figure 11: Arabian Oryx (DD), Shaumari

surely an unexpected species, as no *Bubo* was ever encountered in this part of the Middle East. The rest of the session was hard work with few animals (4 **Red Foxes**), but as the night went on we were treated with **Lesser Egyptian Jerboas**, one of which was so confused by our lights, we could almost touch it.

December 15: Basalt

"It is restricted to the localised dark basalt lava patches of the Syrian deserts, and was formerly also found in Jordan in similar habitats, but recently has become very rare or extinct from there". These are the not so encouraging words given by Shirihi & Svensson (2018) in their recent Handbook of the Birds of the Western Palearctic regarding the Basalt Wheatear, which they elevated to species status in that same work. We are not easily giving up though, and so we tried our luck taking the parallel roads of the main road from Azraq to Safawi. As soon as the desert turned black we were startled by an all-black wheatear that turned out to be a **White Crowned**. This species formerly did not occur here and we found out later that Basalt Wheatear might be becoming rare in Jordan partially due to competition with this species (Hadoram Shirihi in litt.). We continued our way and were pleasantly surprised by the number of wheatears and larks all over the place. Stratford (2010) only saw birds once every 10 km, but we had much more luck with lots of **White crowned**, **Finsch'** and **Desert Wheatears**. The dark morph of **Desert Lark (*annae*)** was abundant and one light morph. Some **Bar-tailed** and **Hoopoo Larks** were also seen. Despite our very thorough checks of every dark crowned **White-crowned Wheatear**, we were not able to find one with an all dark tail band or magpie-like wing pattern. Until 10 km South of Safawi that is, because at that point we checked a non-shiny black wheatear. Suddenly it took off and when it landed it spread its tail. Bingo! We were able to observe one of the first recorded **Basalt Wheatears** in Jordan this century! (?). Whether this is a wintering individual from Syria or a local bird we cannot say of course, but the exact location can – as always – be found in our observations on observation.org, so if anyone wants to check if it's still there this spring, please do and let us know. Apparently one was also seen in winter 2017 somewhere in the Jordan basalt desert (see [youtube](#)). In the afternoon we birded around Shaumari again which provided **Bar-tailed** and **Hoopoo Larks**. Very cool was the observation of a male **Finsch' Wheatear** that was obviously "followed" by our only **Asian Desert Warbler** of the trip. The behaviour is known and well-illustrated for Desert Wheatear by the famous Collins field guide e.g., but to our knowledge it was not known for other species of wheatear.



Figure 12 and 13: Pharaoh Eagle Owl (JvD), Eastern Deserts and Basalt Wheatear (DD), South of Safawi

December 16: back home

Nothing seen of interest during the washing of the car or the check-in at the airport. (text continues below)

How to see more than us: birds

Step 1: go in March/April

Step 2: combine with Israel (apparently possible (Bram ter Keurs in litt), but not with our rental car)

Step 3: take more time looking for suitable habitat for owls and do more reading and preparation.

See table 1a. where the best time of year is given for the target species. In cases we did not see a target species, tips are given for the future, or an indication for the possibility in Israel.

How to see more than us: mammals

Whereas step 1 for birds is going in spring, the winter seems to be fine for seeing cool mammal species. Our advice is therefore: do more and ignore birds if you want to see more mammals (unless your body is able to go without sleep). Jordan is extremely suitable for spotlighting as nobody minds that you do it, while it is illegal in Israel. However, there are still a lot of reasons to combine a trip to Jordan with Israel, or go on separate trips, as many other species are very rare in Jordan due to excessive hunting. See table 1b. for comparison of Jordan and Israel. If you really want to step up your game, make sure to take life traps with you and look up places where caves are, checking preferably with local nature associations such as RSCN.

Literature

For preparation we used the observations on jordan.observation.org, tripreports of ROyle (2011), Stratford (2010) and Van Houtum et al. (2011), and some scans we received from Andrews (1995). The details can be found in the list below. Mind that many of these publications are old and that

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Appendix 1: species list birds (IOC)

133 species in total excluding 5 exotics: Ring-necked Parakeet, Silverbill, House Crow, Common Myna, White-eared Bulbul. See also [here for updated list](#)

| SCIENTIFIC NAME | COMMON NAME |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <i>Spatula querquedula</i> | Garganey |
| <i>Spatula clypeata</i> | Northern Shoveler |
| <i>Mareca strepera</i> | Gadwall |
| <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> | Mallard |
| <i>Anas acuta</i> | Northern Pintail |
| <i>Anas crecca</i> | Eurasian Teal |
| <i>Aythya nyroca</i> | Ferruginous Duck |
| <i>Alectoris chukar</i> | Chukar Partridge |
| <i>Ammoperdix heyi</i> | Sand Partridge |
| <i>Francolinus francolinus</i> | Black Francolin |
| <i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i> | Little Grebe |
| <i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i> | Greater Flamingo |
| <i>Ciconia nigra</i> | Black Stork |
| <i>Plegadis falcinellus</i> | Glossy Ibis |
| <i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i> | Black-crowned Night Heron |
| <i>Bubulcus ibis</i> | Western Cattle Egret |
| <i>Ardea cinerea</i> | Grey Heron |
| <i>Ardea alba</i> | Great Egret |
| <i>Egretta garzetta</i> | Little Egret |
| <i>Egretta gularis</i> | Western Reef Heron |
| <i>Microcarbo pygmeus</i> | Pygmy Cormorant |
| <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> | Great Cormorant |
| <i>Pandion haliaetus</i> | Western Osprey |
| <i>Elanus caeruleus</i> | Black-winged Kite |
| <i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i> | Crested Honey Buzzard |
| <i>Aquila nipalensis</i> | Steppe Eagle |
| <i>Aquila fasciata</i> | Bonelli's Eagle |
| <i>Accipiter nisus</i> | Eurasian Sparrowhawk |
| <i>Circus aeruginosus</i> | Western Marsh Harrier |
| <i>Circus cyaneus</i> | Hen Harrier |
| <i>Circus macrourus</i> | Pallid Harrier |
| <i>Milvus migrans</i> | Black Kite |
| <i>Buteo rufinus</i> | Long-legged Buzzard |
| <i>Buteo buteo</i> | Common Buzzard |
| <i>Gallinula chloropus</i> | Common Moorhen |
| <i>Fulica atra</i> | Eurasian Coot |
| <i>Himantopus himantopus</i> | Black-winged Stilt |
| <i>Vanellus vanellus</i> | Northern Lapwing |
| <i>Vanellus spinosus</i> | Spur-winged Lapwing |
| <i>Pluvialis squatarola</i> | Grey Plover |
| <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i> | Common Ringed Plover |
| <i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i> | Kentish Plover |
| <i>Limosa limosa</i> | Black-tailed Godwit |
| <i>Calidris pugnax</i> | Ruff |
| <i>Calidris minuta</i> | Little Stint |
| <i>Gallinago gallinago</i> | Common Snipe |
| <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i> | Common Sandpiper |
| <i>Tringa ochropus</i> | Green Sandpiper |
| <i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i> | Black-headed Gull |
| <i>Ichthyophaga leucophthalmus</i> | White-eyed Gull |
| <i>Larus cachinnans</i> | Caspian Gull |

| SCIENTIFIC NAME | COMMON NAME |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>Larus michahellis</i> | Yellow-legged Gull |
| <i>Larus armenicus</i> | Armenian Gull |
| <i>Larus fuscus</i> | Lesser Black-backed Gull |
| <i>Hydroprogne caspia</i> | Caspian Tern |
| <i>Columba livia</i> | Rock Dove |
| <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i> | Eurasian Collared Dove |
| <i>Spilopelia senegalensis</i> | Laughing Dove |
| <i>Oena capensis</i> | Namaqua Dove |
| <i>Bubo ascalaphus</i> | Pharaoh Eagle-Owl |
| <i>Athene noctua</i> | Little Owl |
| <i>Caprimulgus nubicus</i> | Nubian Nightjar |
| <i>Apus pallidus</i> | Pallid Swift |
| <i>Apus affinis</i> | Little Swift |
| <i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i> | White-throated Kingfisher |
| <i>Alcedo atthis</i> | Common Kingfisher |
| <i>Ceryle rudis</i> | Pied Kingfisher |
| <i>Merops orientalis</i> | Green Bee-eater |
| <i>Merops persicus</i> | Blue-cheeked Bee-eater |
| <i>Upupa epops</i> | Eurasian Hoopoe |
| <i>Falco tinnunculus</i> | Common Kestrel |
| <i>Lanius excubitor</i> | Great Grey Shrike |
| <i>Garrulus glandarius</i> | Eurasian Jay |
| <i>Corvus cornix</i> | Hooded Crow |
| <i>Corvus ruficollis</i> | Brown-necked Raven |
| <i>Corvus rhpidurus</i> | Fan-tailed Raven |
| <i>Parus major</i> | Great Tit |
| <i>Alaemon alaudipes</i> | Greater Hoopoe-Lark |
| <i>Ammomanes deserti</i> | Desert Lark |
| <i>Ammomanes cinctura</i> | Bar-tailed Lark |
| <i>Lullula arborea</i> | Woodlark |
| <i>Galerida cristata</i> | Crested Lark |
| <i>Eremophila bilopha</i> | Temminck's Lark |
| <i>Pycnonotus leucotis</i> | White-eared Bulbul |
| <i>Hirundo rustica</i> | Barn Swallow |
| <i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i> | Eurasian Crag Martin |
| <i>Ptyonoprogne obsoleta</i> | Pale Crag Martin |
| <i>Scotocerca inquieta</i> | Streaked Scrub Warbler |
| <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i> | Common Chiffchaff |
| <i>Prinia gracilis</i> | Graceful Prinia |
| <i>Turdoides squamiceps</i> | Arabian Babbler |
| <i>Sylvia leucomelaena</i> | Arabian Warbler |
| <i>Sylvia nana</i> | Asian Desert Warbler |
| <i>Sylvia conspicillata</i> | Spectacled Warbler |
| <i>Sylvia melanocephala</i> | Sardinian Warbler |
| <i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i> | Eurasian Wren |
| <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i> | Common Starling |
| <i>Onychognathus tristramii</i> | Tristram's Starling |
| <i>Turdus merula</i> | Common Blackbird |
| <i>Turdus philomelos</i> | Song Thrush |
| <i>Erithacus rubecula</i> | European Robin |
| <i>Luscinia svecica</i> | Bluethroat |
| <i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i> | Black Redstart |

| SCIENTIFIC NAME | COMMON NAME |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i> | Common Redstart |
| <i>Monticola solitarius</i> | Blue Rock Thrush |
| <i>Saxicola rubicola</i> | European Stonechat |
| <i>Oenanthe isabellina</i> | Isabelline Wheatear |
| <i>Oenanthe monacha</i> | Hooded Wheatear |
| <i>Oenanthe deserti</i> | Desert Wheatear |
| <i>Oenanthe melanura</i> | Blackstart |
| <i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i> | White-crowned Wheatear |
| <i>Oenanthe finschii</i> | Finsch's Wheatear |
| <i>Oenanthe lugens</i> | Mourning Wheatear |
| <i>Cinnyris osea</i> | Palestine Sunbird |
| <i>Passer domesticus</i> | House Sparrow |
| <i>Passer hispaniolensis</i> | Spanish Sparrow |
| <i>Passer moabiticus</i> | Dead Sea Sparrow |
| <i>Petronia petronia</i> | Rock Sparrow |
| <i>Motacilla citreola</i> | Citrine Wagtail |
| <i>Motacilla alba</i> | White Wagtail |
| <i>Anthus pratensis</i> | Meadow Pipit |
| <i>Anthus cervinus</i> | Red-throated Pipit |
| <i>Anthus spinoletta</i> | Water Pipit |
| <i>Fringilla coelebs</i> | Common Chaffinch |
| | |
| <i>Carpodacus synoicus</i> | Sinai Rosefinch |

| SCIENTIFIC NAME | COMMON NAME |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| <i>Chloris chloris</i> | European Greenfinch |
| <i>Rhodospiza obsoleta</i> | Desert Finch |
| <i>Linaria cannabina</i> | Common Linnet |
| <i>Serinus syriacus</i> | Syrian Serin |
| <i>Emberiza calandra</i> | Corn Bunting |
| <i>Emberiza striolata</i> | Striolated Bunting |
| <i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i> | Common Reed Bunting |

Subspecies of interest:

| | |
|---|-------------------------------|
| <i>Buteo buteo vulpinus</i> | Steppe Buzzard |
| <i>Larus fuscus heuglini</i> | Heuglin's Gull |
| <i>Larus fuscus barabensis</i> | Steppe Gull |
| <i>Lanius excubitor aucheri</i> | Levant Grey Shrike |
| <i>Garrulus glandarius atricapillus</i> | Eurasian Jay ssp atricapillus |
| <i>Ammomanes deserti isabellina</i> | Desert Lark ssp isabellina |
| <i>Ammomanes deserti annae</i> | Desert Lark ssp annae |
| <i>Phoenicurus ochruros semirufus</i> | Levant Black Redstart |
| <i>Oenanthe lugens lugens</i> | Mourning Wheatear ssp lugens |
| <i>Oenanthe lugens warriae</i> | Mourning Wheatear ssp warriae |
| <i>Anthus spinoletta coutellii</i> | Water Pipit ssp coutellii |
| <i>Felis silvestris lybica</i> | African Wildcat |



Figure 3: Steppe Eagle (DD), Wadi Rum

Appendix 2: all other species

Many species are still to be named and are added later. For an up-to-date list, see here for [mammals](#), [herps](#), [butterflies](#), [dragonflies](#) and [fish](#).

| SCIENTIFIC NAME | COMMON NAME |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Jaculus jaculus</i> | Lesser Egyptian Jerboa |
| <i>Spalax leucodon</i> | Lesser Blind Mole Rat |
| <i>Hystrix cristata</i> | Crested Porcupine |
| <i>Lepus capensis</i> | Cape Hare |
| <i>Felis silvestris</i> | Wild Cat |
| <i>Hyaena hyaena</i> | Striped hyena |
| <i>Canis aureus</i> | Golden Jackal |
| <i>Vulpes cana</i> | Blanford's Fox |
| <i>Vulpes vulpes</i> | Red Fox |
| <i>Gazella marica</i> | Arabian Sand Gazelle |
| <i>Oryx leucoryx</i> | Arabian Oryx |
| <i>Tropicolotes nattereri</i> | Natterer's Gecko |
| <i>Colotis phisadia</i> | Variable Colotis |
| <i>Pontia glaucanome</i> | Desert White |
| <i>Euchloe charlonia</i> | Greenish Black-tip |
| <i>Lampides boeticus</i> | Long-tailed Blue |
| <i>Azanus ubaldus</i> | Desert Babul Blue |
| <i>Vanessa atalanta</i> | Red Admiral |
| <i>Vanessa cardui</i> | Painted Lady |
| <i>Anax imperator</i> | Blue Emperor |
| <i>Orthetrum chrysostigma</i> | Epaulet Skimmer |
| <i>Trithemis annulata</i> | Violet Dropwing |
| <i>Trithemis arteriosa</i> | Red-veined Dropwing |
| <i>Cloeon dipterum</i> | |
| | Humming-bird Hawk |
| <i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i> | Moth |
| <i>Utetheisa pulchella</i> | Crimson Speckled |
| <i>Gymnothorax griseus</i> | Geometric moray |
| <i>Synodus dermatogenys</i> | Sand lizardfish |
| <i>Synodus variegatus</i> | Variiegated lizardfish |
| <i>Myripristis murdjan</i> | Pinecone soldierfish |
| <i>Sargocentron diadema</i> | Crowned Squirrelfish |
| <i>Fistularia commersonii</i> | Bluespotted cornetfish |

| SCIENTIFIC NAME | COMMON NAME |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Ostracion cubicus</i> | Yellow boxfish |
| <i>Arothron diadematus</i> | Masked puffer |
| <i>Arothron stellatus</i> | Starry toadfish |
| <i>Pterois radiata</i> | Radial firefish |
| <i>Caesio suevica</i> | Suez fusilier |
| <i>Chaetodon austriacus</i> | Blacktail butterflyfish |
| <i>Chaetodon fasciatus</i> | Diagonal butterflyfish |
| <i>Chaetodon paucifasciatus</i> | Eritrean butterflyfish |
| <i>Heniochus intermedius</i> | Red Sea bannerfish |
| <i>Parupeneus forsskali</i> | Red Sea goatfish |
| <i>Pseudochromis fridmani</i> | Orchid dottyback |
| <i>Pseudanthias squamipinnis</i> | Sea goldie |
| <i>Gomphosus caeruleus</i> | Green birdmouth wrasse |
| <i>Thalassoma rueppellii</i> | Klunzinger's wrasse |
| <i>Abudefduf sexfasciatus</i> | Scissortail Sergeant |
| <i>Abudefduf vaigiensis</i> | Indo-Pacific sergeant |
| <i>Amblyglyphidodon indicus</i> | Maldives damselfish |
| <i>Amphiprion bicinctus</i> | Twoband anemonefish |
| <i>Dascyllus aruanus</i> | Whitetail dascyllus |
| <i>Neoglyphidodon melas</i> | Black damselfish |
| <i>Plectroglyphidodon lacrymatus</i> | Jewel Damselfish |
| <i>Pomacentrus sulfureus</i> | Sulphur damsel |
| <i>Pomacentrus trichourus</i> | Yellowtail damsel |
| <i>Chlorurus sordidus</i> | Daisy parrotfish |
| <i>Parapercis hexophthalma</i> | Speckled sandperch |
| <i>Ctenochaetus striatus</i> | Lined Bristletooth |
| <i>Zebrosoma xanthurum</i> | Yellowtail tang |
| <i>Adiantum capillus-veneris</i> | Maidenhair Fern |
| <i>Pinus halepensis</i> | Aleppo pine |
| <i>Ziziphus spina-christi</i> | Syrian Christ-thorn |
| <i>Heterocentrotus mamillatus</i> | Slate Pencil Urchin |

