

## Israel: 26 January-1 February 2020

This trip report details a week-long trip to Israel, focusing on the classic resident and wintering species – within a Western Palearctic context – found in the country.

Well-known for its epic migration, Israel is somewhat less visited by birders during winter, despite arguably being the finest midwinter destination in the WP. A huge range of species spend the winter months in Israel, and we tallied 179 species during our stay. A number of specialities can be located at this time, as well as all of the resident species.

As Israel is well-known, with various websites, many trip reports and several books on the country. As a result, this report will only briefly touch on logistics. The bulk of the text will be dedicated to locating key species (a loose term based on stuff either fully or largely restricted to Israel within the WP, as well as other popular species) during the winter months, though much of the information will be applicable year-round. Quite a few common species in Israel that are of interest to visiting birders, such as Palestine Sunbird and Blackstart, are not mentioned due to their frequency.

A thanks must go to the exceptionally helpful Israeli birders who provided invaluable information during our time there, especially Meidad Goren, Yoav Perlman, Tuvia Kahn, Itamar Donitza and the guys at Eilat Birding Centre.

Photographs are on my blog: [godalmingareabirds.blogspot.com](http://godalmingareabirds.blogspot.com).

### Transport, accommodation and general information

We booked a hire car with Budget – not particularly budget and they also forgot our booking, leading to a small delay at Ben Gurion Airport. Our route was mainly in the south, going from Eilat and the Southern Arava north through the Negev, over to the Northern Arava before visiting the Dead Sea. We ended in the Beit She'an Valley in the north.

As a result of this itinerary most accommodation was booked on the day, depending where we were. AirBnB worked out marginally cheaper than hotels (via Booking.com), but both were expensive. Indeed, Israel in general is an expensive place – petrol, food and other costs all being higher than in the UK.

### Literature and gen

Weirdly there are no modern guides to birding in Israel, which is odd given its popularity. The two *A guide to the birding hot-spots series of Israel* are dated, having been published in 2000. The vast number of trip reports are a treasure trove, as is eBird, which is clearly popular in Israel.

Best of all though is gen on the ground from local birders – it's well worth engaging with birders in the field and dropping into the Eilat Birding Centre. The Israeli Birding Portal website is very useful too. In all, it's worth genning up on local sightings before a trip – we scored several non-traditional winterers on the back of this, such as Basalt Wheatear, Kurdish Wheatear and Lesser White-fronted Goose.

### Key species notes

**Sand Partridge**

A relatively straightforward species to see in suitable rocky areas in the Negev, Northern Arava and Dead Sea. We had four at Idan (Northern Arava) and six or more Wadi Mishmar in the Dead Sea.

**Striated Heron**

One of few species missed, Striated Heron is no longer regular at Eilat following the removal of the offshore fish farms (Brown Booby is also no longer regular in winter). However, the species is present further north, especially along the coast (and is spreading north and west, with a 2019 record from Crete). We dipped at regular sites in Tel-Aviv, namely Rosh Tzipor reserve and along the River Yarkon.

**Western Reef Heron**

Unlike Striated, Western Reef Heron is still readily found at Eilat. South of the International Birding and Research Centre Eilat (IBRCE), we had two on the sewage canal dyke and salt ponds on 26th, viewed from the bank at 29.560618, 34.972437.

**Crested Honey Buzzard**

This highly desired WP species has wintered around Eilat during the last couple of years, and this winter no fewer than six were in the area. We eventually had two (an adult and juvenile) on 27th by scanning from some raised ground just east of the IBRCE at 29.572326, 34.973306. During the day the birds range widely so this vantage, which offers a near-360 view, is handy, though a bit of time is required.

**Eastern Imperial Eagle**

The vast area of flat farmland south of Urim is a well-known wintering site for the species, and we duly enjoyed a perched adult on one of the big pylons during our second visit on 31st. We also had a subadult over Yotvata on 26th.

**Greater Spotted Eagle**

The Beit She'an Valley must be one of the best places in the WP for good views of this rare eagle. During our two days here on 31st and 1st, most scans of the landscape yielded a bird or two. On 31st, we had at least eight during late afternoon at Nir David fishponds (32.504041, 35.470074), including our best views of the species.

**Steppe Eagle**

During deepest winter this species is unlikely to be seen, but as the migration period for this *aquila* was just commencing, we had at least two from our Crested Honey Buzzard watchpoint on 27th.

**Macqueen's Bustard**

One of the easiest Israeli targets to connect with is Macqueen's Bustard. The road between Nitzana and Ezuz is super reliable and, generally, the old railway coach (on the east side of the road, about halfway to Ezuz) delivers. We had two males early morning on 29th, one of which was performing its comedic display.

**African Swamphen**

Following the first record for Israel in October 2015, African Swamphen has colonised at a rate of knots and can be found at many wetland sites. Perhaps the best, though, is Ashalim Reservoir in the Dead Sea, where a new viewing platform allows good scope views of a wonderful area stuffed with wildfowl. We had one here at dusk in a brief check on 30th, though as many as 10 pairs breed. The obvious concrete platform, just east of Route 90, is at roughly 31.00474, 35.35067.

### **Sociable Lapwing**

Even though it occurs fairly regularly as a vagrant in Western Europe, this Critically Endangered lapwing was high on the priority list for us. The only remaining regular wintering site in Israel is the Urim farmland, which offers perfect replacement steppe habitat. However, the flock of no more than 12 birds this winter were both elusive and mobile. It's a huge area and we covered no fewer than 39 km on 29th without seeing any. Several tour groups had also missed them, but we jammed into five on a return visit on 30th – they were in a ploughed field at 31.282641, 34.565875. Generally, the fields and tracks east of Route 234 (south of Urim) are best, but note this is a huge area and looking for them – at least without recent gen – is a needle in a haystack job.

### **White-eyed Gull**

This striking Red Sea endemic is routine off Eilat. Both Dolphin Beach car park (29.526019, 34.934982) and North Beach (29.546105, 34.971037) will almost certainly produce a handful of birds.

### **Sandgrouse species**

Winter is not the best time to look for sandgrouse, but normally they are achievable – ultimately we didn't dedicate enough time to them. Both Hameishar Plain and Uvda Valley were holding Crowned and Spotted this winter, but despite visits to both (including two lengthy ones to the latter) we only had distant views of 50+ Spotted at Hameishar on 28th. The regular Nitzana pools site were largely drained when we checked there the following morning.

In winter, the drinking pools at Idan are a very regular spot, and parking at roughly 30.804017, 35.312524 from c.08:15 until 09:15 should produce at least Spotted – we had 14 circle several times and briefly land. Crowned are rarer but do still drop in here, but we had none.

Probably the disappointment of the trip was the lack of Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse visiting the famous KM19 sewage pond north of Eilat – there had been no reports since October 2019. For such a nomadic bird, this was probably just unfortunate timing, though given the extensive vegetation growing around the pool and lack of other regular sites for the species in Israel (or indeed anywhere in the WP), perhaps this could become a very hard bird to see. Hopefully they reappear soon.

### **Namaqua Dove**

Much harder than expected, we chose to twitch a renowned site and, given we saw no others, it proved a good decision. A cattle farm north of Yotvata kibbutz attracts literally thousands of Collared, Feral Rock and Laughing Doves. Among them are a few Namaqua – we eventually scored three feeding on the ground on the north side of the road north of the main cow sheds. The best place to view from is the rough ground at 29.900493, 35.062325.

### **Desert Tawny Owl**

The stunning recent discovery of this species only added to the secrecy levels which were already high for what was once Hume's Owl. Deep wadis in the Dead Sea are the places to go, but generally

a guide is needed as it's illegal to enter said wadis. We lucked in when visiting a suitable area on our first night. It's best to contact someone like Yoav Perlman for current information, though equally sensible (and legal) scrutiny of any wadi between Ein Gedi and Neve Zohar could produce.

### **Pallid Scops Owl**

A hard species to find, with the small wintering population in the south the best bet, as oppose to the newly discovered breeding population around the Dead Sea. Local and recent news is probably the most efficient way to start a search – we tried two sites where birds had been seen day roosting this year. At the second, Nahal Grofit, we discovered one remarkably well hidden in an acacia at roughly 29.995640, 35.056868.

### **Pharaoh Eagle-owl**

Another species that can be made easier by asking for recent news or checking eBird. We dipped at an old traditional site of Idan, looking south from the road into the wadi at 30.806801, 35.286149 (though Sam thought he had one briefly in spotlight) and also at Yotvata fields, where a pair come down from the cliffs to hunt at night. We did see one at the Nubian Nightjar site.

### **Nubian Nightjar**

This iconic Israeli species can only be seen with a guide, due to the permission required by the army in order to search the old saltmarsh south of the Dead Sea at night. We had booked Yoav Perlman, but sadly he was unwell, so Oded Keyman guided us on 30th. Between the two of us it was costly for a three-and-a-half hour session (plus petrol) – it probably isn't impossible to score this species in the area during summer before sundown, with birds perhaps more vocal and active then, though as soon as darkness falls the army would not be impressed to find you there. So, for now, a guide is best. We heard at least three birds but, after a cold winter, it was hard work and unsatisfactory. Bonuses came via the aforementioned Pharaoh Eagle-owl and, best of all, a Striped Hyena.

### **Saker Falcon**

Urim farmland is the best place to look for this powerful falcon. We had a juvenile in fields on the west side of the road. Scanning for perched birds on the big pylons is probably best, but careful driving of the area and regular scanning should produce.

### **Vinous-breasted Starling**

A species for the more dedicated WP birder, this category C delight is readily found in Yarkon Park, Tel-Aviv. Indeed, we had five right by the Rosh Tzipor car park in a fenced off scrubby area at 32.094968, 34.807599.

### **Fan-tailed Raven**

Pretty straightforward in the Dead Sea, where birds should be encountered flying over the area. We had two over Wadi Mishmar on 30th.

### **House Crow**

Easy in Eilat, especially around the beaches, where they are common.

### **Oriental Skylark**

Israel and Kuwait are the only countries in which this species is available regularly in the WP. The famous Yotvata fields are well-known as a good spot, but we didn't see any here on two visits (nor

many larks in general). However, the Beit She'an Valley is probably a better site anyway, and the alfalfa fields south of Kfar Ruppin hold a handful each winter. The circular field at 32.441172, 35.546401 is a particularly good spot, and we had nice views of a vocal bird there on 1st.

### **Wheatear species**

We were lucky that our visit coincided with the wintering of both Basalt and Kurdish Wheatears in the Uvda Valley – we saw both. Both Hooded and Mourning Wheatears are readily encountered at this site too, with Mourning more numerous in Upper Wadi Hayun and Hooded on the higher plateau. Finsch's Wheatear were very easy to locate at Mount Amassa, a site which is detailed under Long-billed Pipit.

### **Black Bush Robin**

This striking species now breeds in southern Israel, with the Hai Bar reintroduction reserve the most famous site. One can view from the gate at 29.846402, 35.029202, but we dipped on 26th. Another pair breed in Samar kibbutz just over the road and we located a/the pair on 27th. They are often seen around the large cattle sheds at 29.829664, 35.023831, and we had them just over the road in some scrub at 29.831665, 35.022887.

### **Asian Desert Warbler**

Pleasingly this was a rather straightforward species to find. A small wadi, which held one showy bird and possibly another, was right next to the road in the Uvda Valley at 29.986331, 34.976695.

### **Clamorous Reed Warbler**

January isn't ideal for this species but a bit of tape unveiled one bird at Kfar Ruppin fishponds. Any reeds in the Beit She'an Valley should yield some, though Ashalim Reservoir in the Dead Sea (see African Swamphen) is another good site.

### **Arabian Warbler**

Sheizaf Reserve, east of KM152 on route 90 south of Hazeva, is the historic site for this desirable species. The track into the reserve is not obvious – it's at 30.743713, 35.227437. Follow it east until you reach the wadi. We had a singing male at roughly 30.745583, 35.250543.

### **Long-billed Pipit**

Mount Amassa is a good spot for Long-billed Pipit and we enjoyed prolonged views of a singing male on the slopes at 31.345255, 35.115749. A track east from Route 80, at 31.344641, 35.120932, can be taken to reach this beautiful site, which also held as many as seven Finsch's Wheatears and a few Chukar.

### **Dead Sea Sparrow**

Relatively easy to find, especially at the north end of KM19 sewage pools and in the Beit She'an Valley, where flocks can either be found close to reedbeds or pretty much anywhere else, sometimes tucked in with House and Spanish Sparrows.

### **Desert Finch**

We ended up seeing Desert Finch flocks at four sites: a flock of some 25 was at Yotvata fields on 26th and 28th (approach from the road south of the factory at 29.897653, 35.068666 until you reach the two circular fields; the birds preferred the smaller fields north of the north circular field), three

at Idan (by the road at 30.802683, 35.300632), 15+ at Sde Boker Fields (30.867088, 34.784129) and 10+ at Kfar Ruppin Fishponds.

### **Sinai Rosefinch**

This species can be hit and miss from winter to winter, but pleasingly at least 20 were showing wonderfully well at Amram's Pillars. Follow the track east from Route 90 at 29.626742, 34.987550 (turn right at the fork) – we had a few by the road once we got into the rocky and steep wadi, then exquisite views at some obvious drinking pools (where seed had been put down).

### **Syrian Serin**

Already hard enough in winter, 2019/2020 seemed to be particularly difficult for this enigmatic WP species. Ben Gurion Memorial Park is usually a good site but was suffering a poor winter and we dipped here. We also failed to locate any at Sde Boker Fields (see Desert Finch) nor at an occasional roost site in Midreshet Ben-Gurion kibbutz. However, thanks to Meidad Goren, we enjoyed a wonderfully intimate experience with some 57 roosting birds at a site near Sde Boker. The best advice would be to contact Meidad, who may be happy to take you to the site, which is understandably kept quiet.

### **Striolated Bunting**

The Dead Sea is the place to go for this hard to pick up species. Wadi Salvadori and Wadi Mishmar are the two renowned spots, and we scored one flyover at the latter on 30th, with the time of day and year perhaps hindering more birds and better views.