

# ISRAEL



14–24 April 2018



*Sinai Rosefinch, male, Mizpe  
Ramon. Cover: Corn Crane, Ofira  
Park, Eilat (Mike Watson).*

Returning to Israel for the first time in almost 30 years was an exciting prospect. It was once my favourite destination and was one of the first places I birded outside the UK back in the 1980s. The bird-show is as good as it ever was and in some ways even better with more information available and new sites discovered or created in this period. We had a great time on a short itinerary, which visited the north, including Ma'agan Mikael, Bet She'an Valley, Hula, Mount Hermon and the Golan Heights before heading south via the Dead Sea to Eilat and then completing a circle back to Tel Aviv via the Negev Desert. We recorded 230 species, including many regional specialities among a total of 46 Birdquest 'diamond' birds and main highlights were Nubian Nightjars in a remote corner of the Dead Sea region (this subspecies, 'Tamarisk Nightjar', is one of the rarest breeding birds in the Western Palearctic), a Desert Owl spot-lit in a Judean Desert wadi, Macqueen's Bustards turning themselves inside-out during their display and Crowned and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse at point blank range at a drinking pool in the Negev Desert, the male Hooded Wheatear, which investigated us, on a desolate wash in the Eilat Mountains, the male Arabian Warbler that finally gave up after a game of hide and

seek in one of the last acacia-filled wadis in the Arava Valley, rose pink male Sinai Rosefinches drinking at a spring on the Dead Sea escarpment, smart Desert Finches around our vehicle at Sde Boker and Syrian Serins song-flighting over us on Mount Hermon.

Numerous other notable encounters included Marbled Teals seen by golf cart at Lake Agamon in the Hula Valley, lots of Chukar and Sand Partridges, Pygmy Cormorants common at Ma'agan Mikael, the endangered Egyptian Vulture, Levant Sparrowhawks on migration, great views of both Little and Spotted Crakes, at least 28 White-eyed Gulls from Eilat's famous north beach, hundreds of Armenian Gulls in northern Israel, the Syrian Woodpecker drumming outside our rooms in the Hula Valley, a strong passage of smart Masked Shrikes, Sombre Tits, also on Mount Hermon, Bar-tailed Larks singing in the Negev, Balkan Warblers on migration in the Arava Valley, the male Collared Flycatcher in a tiny clump of trees in the Eilat Mountains, a very showy adult Barred Warbler and plenty of Blackstarts and White-crowned Wheatears from the Dead Sea to the Negev, where they were joined by equally smart Mourning Wheatears.

Mike Watson April 2018

*Crowned Sandgrouse, Ezuz  
(Mike Watson)*





*Crested Honey Buzzard, male,  
Eilat (Mike Watson).*

Migration was one of the main themes and it was the spectacle of numbers that impressed. We started with flocks of Black Storks in the Bet She'an Valley and continued with a huge morning flight of Great White Pelicans in the Hula Valley. The passage of Steppe Buzzards along the Dead Sea escarpment was also noteworthy and included some dark morphs. A swarm of Yellow Wagtails at Eilat's km20 salt pans was another amazing experience. Vagrants in the form of the long-staying Lesser Flamingo also at km20 and a male Crested Honey Buzzard over the IBRCE were also much appreciated. However, for me the star of the whole show was the Ofira Park Corn Crane in Eilat, parading around on the short turf of the tiny park surrounded by hotels and so tame it walked right up to us. I was happy to hear that it was still alive several days later! Almost twenty years had passed since Birdquest's last visit and in that time a lot has happened in Israel. Probably the most significant ornithological event is the colonization by Common Myna. Believe it or not this was a 'write-in' on this tour and was the first and last bird I saw in the country. They are almost everywhere now, even in the remote

desert at Ezuz. We were also impressed by the warm welcome we received in most places, particularly the north. In the Golan Heights that amazing Druze Restaurant lunch stop will live long in the memory and our delightful accommodation in pretty She-ar Yashuv is also worth a mention. There are not too many places you can see a Great Spotted Cuckoo while having breakfast.

Starting at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport, we headed north on the almost empty route six toll road but the start of our birding adventures was delayed by fog. We paused for some tasty pastries and coffee at a roadside services before the sun finally broke through and so began another sunny day in the Med. Our first birds of note were the dark-capped Eurasian Jays in the car park. We started our exploration of the massive fishpond complex Ma'agan Mikael towards the northern end but were disappointed to find the beach devoid of any birds, maybe owing to the ravers camped there? Back inland a little we started to see some interesting species. One of the highlights of our visit was the Pygmy Cormorants, which are obviously doing very well here, they were a constant sight, perched next to a fish-



*Great Reed Warbler, Ma'agan Mikael  
(Mike Watson).*

pond, fishing in one or flying from one feeding spot to another. Despite their small size, the hyper distinctive long-tailed profile does not pass in a crowd. Other notable species here included excellent views of both Great Reed Warbler and Cetti's Warbler. The latter is normally much more skulking and allowed a very nice look. The only lingering waterfowl were Northern Shoveler and Mallard but there were lots of herons and their relatives. Glossy Ibis was common alongside Black-crowned Night Heron, Squacco and Purple Herons. Our first of very many Spur-winged Lapwings were also noted. Gulls included the sought after Armenian, mostly second calendar year birds but some near adults showed the characteristic four-coloured bill. A young Caspian Gull allowed a good comparison and we also saw a classic adult Yellow-legged Gull and several black-backed adult Baltic Gulls. A Common Kingfisher was outnumbered by its Pied cousins and the first of at least one million White-spectacled Bulbuls appeared. Sedge and Eurasian Reed Warblers sang from the reeds between the ponds, where Graceful Prinias joined them. Single Northern Wheatear,

Lesser Whitethroat and Black-headed Wagtail hinted at migration and our first Eastern Black-eared Wheatear and Palestine Sunbird as well as the much less welcome Common Myna were noted. Our first significant mammals included an Egyptian Mongoose and the introduced Coypu. We also saw our first Roughtail Rock Agamas *Laudakia stellio* sunning themselves on an old stone bridge.

As the heat turned up we moved on inland, where we saw our first Eurasian Hobby, Short-toed Snake Eagle and Red-rumped Swallows. Off the beaten track, we made a stop at a small, gated settlement where there was a small Lesser Kestrel colony. The kestrels put on a great show, the males returned with offerings of grasshoppers and small lizards, welcomed by their screaming partners. Fantastic stuff!

We searched for a late lingering Pallas's Gull at Ma'agan Mikael to no avail but there had been some in the Bet She'an Valley a few days before so we diverted there on our way north to Galilee. Driving numerous back roads and access tracks we checked a lot of fishponds and reservoirs between the village of Emek Harod

and Bet She'an itself. Again to no avail but we did see a lot of large gulls, mostly Armenian and Caspian plus our first Eurasian Spoonbill, Great Egret, Western Osprey, Black-winged Stilt, Little Ringed Plover, Black-tailed Godwit, Ruff, Common Snipe, Marsh Sandpiper, Common Greenshank, Wood Sandpiper and White-throated Kingfisher. We also got our first real taste of migration on the flyway here in the form of the flock of Black Kites, which had put down to drink, about 250 in all. There were also at least 20 Black Storks in this area, including some smart adults but the biggest 'wow!' was reserved for a flight of 85 Great White Pelicans that flew in as we were leaving. We made one more birding stop today, at Hagome Junction in the Hula Valley. However, there was no sign of the hoped-for but scarce Marbled Teal. The dykes surrounding the ponds had been recently scraped clear of vegetation and did not look like the kind of place I usually see this reedy-pool-loving duck. Eurasian Coot, Green Sandpiper and European Turtle Dove were new here.

Eventually we reached Upper Galilee in the evening sunshine and checked into our delightful guesthouse accommodation at She'ar Yashuv, which means '*what remains*'. The Moshav here was established in 1940 by Zi-

onist workers but was abandoned during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war when it fell within range of artillery fire from the nearby Golan Heights, then part of Syria. In 1949 it was resettled by WW2 holocaust survivors, mostly from Hungary. For decades later it came under fire periodically until Israel occupied the Golan Heights in 1967. The Moshav is now a picture of tranquility with pretty orchards by the Banias stream, one of the tributaries of the River Jordan. Red-rumped Swallows flew around our chalets each morning and while having our tasty basket breakfasts of local produce, a Great Spotted Cuckoo flew over and landed in the orchard behind the guesthouse. Without doubt the nicest place we stayed on the tour. The following day was our big day in the Golan Heights. The last time I saw this place (and I didn't see much of it) the whole region was shrouded in mist. At least today we would have wall-to-wall sunshine. We were met by our excellent local guide Nadav Israeli of the Society of the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI). Nadav is an expert in all things Upper Galilee and it was a privilege to spend time

*Lesser Kestrel, male*  
(Mike Watson).







*Black Stork, immature*  
(Mike Watson).

with him on his local patch. Gaining height, the impressive hilltop Nimrod Fortress came into view. It was built in 1229 by Al-Aziz Uthman, the younger son of Saladin, to protect the road to Damascus but was captured by the Mongols in 1260. It changed hands several times afterwards but was destroyed by an earthquake in the 18th century.

Our birding started by a cemetery on the edge of another small, gated settlement on the lower slopes of Mount Hermon. Serins and Common Whitethroats were in full song alongside other familiar European birds like wren, blackbird and linnet. Both Lesser Whitethroat and Sardinian Warbler also showed nicely here. The surrounding oak woods were full of Eurasian Jays. Couple of Eurasian Sparrowhawks was noted here as well as Common Cuckoo. We heard a Sombre Tit here as well but it soon fell silent and remained out of sight.

The Mount Hermon reserve begins above the Druze town of Majdal Shams (population 10,800) and our first stop overlooking the town produced a lovely pair of Woodchat Shrikes, a Blue Rock Thrush and several Eastern Black-

eared Wheatears. The next stop was an unplanned one, for roadside Syrian Serin. Get in! A pair of these lovely little green and gold finches was around a cattle pen before flying off. A little further we stopped again for more serins, a pair of Western Rock Nuthatches and some gorgeous Eastern Festoon butterflies in wonderful uplifted limestone pavement surroundings. The serins were song fighting just above us, an outstanding experience! A small passage of Black Kites and Short-toed Snake Eagles was also noted here. Majdal Shams ('*Tower of Sun*') was formerly a Syrian town but was occupied following the 1967 six days war. It is known as the Druze capital of the Golan Heights and featured in the 2004 film '*The Syrian Bride*'. Many dark-haired girls here have striking blue eyes, a DNA relic suggesting a more northwestern origin. '*I got them from my mum*' said a girl at the petrol station. Higher up at the Mount Hermon chairlift a pair of Long-legged Buzzards had a nest within sight of the lower station, a smart male Black Redstart was in the car park and European Bee-eaters perched on the cable wires of the



*Syrian Serin, Majdal Shams (Mike Watson).*

chair lift. Sadly we were not permitted access to the wider summit area, previously granted by the Israeli military but now withdrawn a couple of days before our visit following increased tensions, owing to hawkish comments on social media about the US intention to bomb Syrian government targets. A very disappointing outcome, which effectively put the desired high altitude Asian Crimson-winged Finch and Horned lark out of our reach. However, our journey to the top of Israel was not completely spoilt. We added Common Rock Thrush to our list and another excellent fox-red Long-legged Buzzard was sky-dancing high over the valley to the east of the ski slopes, a large bowl between the peak of Mount Hermon itself (2814m and now in Syria) and the highest peak in Israel (2236m). It was chased briefly by a crimson-winged finch but so far away as to be untickable for those needing it. This remote valley is host to a number of mega rare Israeli summer breeding birds like White-throated Robin and Common Chiffchaff. The view from the top was magnificent, even if it was dominated by hilltop IDF defences, the

cool breeze was a relief from the heat lower down and we even got to stand in some snow. There was a memorial to Israeli paratroopers killed on Mount Hermon in the Yom Kippur war of 1973, when the IDF routed the Arab coalition led by Egypt and Syria. Other birds here included Northern Wheatears and after some time spent scanning the distant slopes, a large group of Wild Boar was spotted, mothers and piglets trotting across the hillside. A pair of Northern Ravens flew over calling as we took the chair lift back down the mountain. Several Rock Buntings were seen on the descent and we caught up with one of these smart birds singing not far from the lower station, which allowed nice scope views for all. A Woodlark also put on a good show feeding by a chair lift pylon. Roughtail Rock Agama lizards were also much in evidence today, seemingly everywhere on the limestone pavement. We continued our exploration of this fascinating region, crossing from the limestone to the basalt rock area and stopping for lunch at Mas'ade (population 3,500), another of the four Druze towns of the Golan. I wouldn't nor-

mally mention meals but this one was very special. We were served a wonderful array of delicious vegetarian dishes covering our tables and with homemade lemonade this went down as one of the best lunches I ever had on a tour. Mas'ade's inhabitants are officially Syrian but have permanent residency in Israel. Thankfully they have been spared the troubles on the other side of the border in the Syrian Quneitra district, whose governate they still fall under. A little further we visited a viewpoint from where tourists can look out over the town of Quneitra itself and beyond the wire fence stands, or rather lies, a heap of smashed up buildings, some a result of historic conflicts but many destroyed more recently when government forces recaptured the town and its border crossing point from rebels. Birding in this area was very good and produced European Roller, European Bee-eater, Eurasian Hoopoe and many Corn Buntings singing from rolling grassy hillsides, alongside migrant Ortolan Buntings.

The Golan Heights was formerly home to a healthy population of griffon vultures. This has recently collapsed and only clings on thanks to an intensive conservation effort. We found a roadside cow carcass with seven griffons in attendance. Nadav reported it and said that someone would be along soon to check the carcass for poison as well as other unwelcome substances. Single Egyptian Vulture, Lesser Spotted Eagle and Black Stork flew over while we were in this area. We also visited a Collared Pratincole colony, where at least 19 birds were present in agricultural fields along with good numbers of a turtle doves and a second calendar year Pallid Harrier. Our final location

was a pretty rocky hillside, which soon produced the hoped-for Long-billed Pipit, singing from an outcrop before it flew down to feed in a nearby flowery patch. We also had some nice views of Little Owl here as well as lots more Ortolan Buntings, both Woodchat and Southern Grey Shrikes and our first Blackstarts. Our day in the Golan was not quite finished yet, a smart female Masked Shrike was spotted on roadside wires as we began our journey back to She'ar Yashuv. It even stayed long enough for a U-turn and posed nicely for photos. What a great way to end the day! Our route back to our accommodation took us along tall eucalypt-lined back roads, the trees planted pre-1973, to conceal traffic from Syrian snipers on the Golan Heights above. We enjoyed another terrific evening meal at the best restaurant of the tour as well!

We were due to travel south next morning, however, there was still a major gap in our wish list. We had inexplicably managed to miss Sombre Tit the previous day on Mount Hermon but we quickly put this right with a nice pair at the same place we saw the nuthatches and some of the serins the day before, easily located as they scolded a jay on the slope just below us. We could now descend to the Hula Valley far below and visit the impressive Lake Agamon reserve. Another new(ish) development since my last visit in the 1980s. This is an eco-friendly nature reserve and access to its long circular driveway is either on foot or by electric golf cart! We only had time for the latter but had a lot of fun birding from them and stopping here and there where vantage points over the large reed-fringed lake allowed. Nadav had reported that a large flock of Great

*Mount Hermon's snow-capped summit on the left. Next page: Golan Heights clockwise from top left - snow drifts on Mount Hermon, view from the chair lift on the way down, Eastern Festoon butterfly at Majdal Shams, rolling grasslands looking towards Quneitra in Syria and Short-toed Snake-Eagle (Mike Watson).*







*Great White Pelicans migrating in the Hula Valley (Mike Watson).*

White Pelicans (the second in two days) had roosted overnight at the Hula Nature Reserve to the south and would probably depart around 9am. Bang on the money, as soon as we were off on our golf cart jaunt we could see the huge squadron of around 1000 pelicans on its way towards us. Pedals to the metal (much less impressive in reality than it sounds as they are limited to about 10kmph) on our carts we just managed to intercept them flying overhead towards the mountain wall of Hermon to the north, at which point they split into three groups and started to spiral upwards, aiming for their usual route via the valleys of southern Lebanon. A fabulous sight indeed! The fields surrounding Lake Agamon were full of other migrants like Black Kites and White Storks, pausing here on their northbound journeys. However, a lone immature Common Crane had been left behind for some reason by the huge wintering population, which had already departed. Our main target at Hula, Marbled Teal, was located fairly quickly, on the main lagoon where we also added Common Shelduck, Gadwall, Northern Pintail, Eurasian

Teal, Greater Flamingo, Pied Avocet and Spotted Redshank to our growing list... and then began '*Operation Black Francolin*'. This was also successful with scope views of the impressive chicken calling away on the edge of a recently cut hay field. At least a useful WP lifer for some! European Bee-eaters were also a constant feature at Agamon and could be seen at eye level from the golf carts as we tootled along at a snail's pace.

We had one more birding session in the Hula Valley, at a small fishponds complex near Lahavot Habashan. This was very productive and resulted in some great scope views of a Spotted Crake, out in the open most of the time and behaving more like a shorebird than a skulking crake. Also around the reed-fringed partly dried fishponds were both Temminck's and Little Stints among a throng of other shorebirds. We also got some reasonable views of one of the giant Clamorous Reed Warblers singing by the ponds. It is sad to know that these ponds will soon likely be victims of the severe water shortage in Northern Israel. The River Jordan flowed at 40% of



*Sinai Rosefinch, male, Wadi  
Salvadora (Mike Watson).*

its normal level last year and permits for water diversion will probably be limited in future. An ice cream stop at Hagome Junction followed (reputed to be one of Israel's best and it did not disappoint) and then it was time to head much further south. Skirting the Sea of Galilee via the city of Tiberias we entered the West Bank. This territory, home to more than 2.5 million Palestinians, came under Israeli military control in 1967 and its occupation is still regarded as illegal by many countries under international law, although Israel disputes this. The long-term history of the West Bank is even more complicated. For four hundred years until 1917 it was part of the Ottoman Empire and after this period it fell under British custody before being occupied and annexed by Jordan in 1948. Most of the Dead Sea's western shore lies within the West Bank but apart from the checkpoint at Metzoke Dragot you would never know. The journey was unremarkable apart from a migrating Western Osprey and some Blackstarts. We arrived at our accommodation in time for some birding in the nearby desert in the last of the evening sunshine and quickly

added some interesting species in the form of Sand Partridge, Green Bee-eater, Fan-tailed Ravens, Desert Larks, Arabian Babblers and Eastern Orphean Warblers. We also saw our first real evidence of the massive migration of Blackcaps underway, which would stay with us for the rest of the tour. A Desert Fox and some Mountain Gazelles were added to our mammal list.

Next came our Dead Sea big day with its most sought after regional specialities in prospect. It started with the cry of '*wild animal*' from a half-awake David. A Golden Jackal was stood by the roadside, very nice! First up was the delightful Wadi Salvadora, where we picked our way along a boulder-strewn trail that led to a tiny spring hidden by a large overhanging bush. We added Striolated Bunting and Trumpeter Finch on the way up but we needn't have bothered to try so hard to get good looks at them as everything came to us to drink at the spring eventually anyway. We even managed to stay in the shade for most of the time here, a good idea with the temperature around 38 degrees and sitting in an oven-like

surrounding amphitheatre below the massive cliffs of the escarpment above us. Our main hoped for bird was the range-restricted Sinai Rosefinch and it was a special moment when Andre called the first rose-pink male to come in to the spring. Several others followed and we enjoyed some lovely views from our shady spot as they perched on nearby rocks at eye level before and after visiting the spring. Other interesting birds visiting the spring included numerous Ortolan Buntings, our first Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, White-crowned Wheatears, Tristram's Starlings and our only Streaked Scrub Warblers of the tour.

Another exciting aspect of our birding session at Wadi Salvadora was the passage of raptors along the escarpment. Being perched up so high, most of them were much closer to us than the usual distant dots. The majority were Steppe Buzzards, including several lovely dark morph birds and Achim tallied more than 600 before he stopped counting. A good number went through after this and our total was closer to 700. Not a massive number by Eilat standards but impressive nevertheless. The buzzards were occasionally accompanied by other raptors like Booted and Steppe Eagles, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Egyptian Vultures and Black Kites. A couple of Black Storks was

also spotted before we left the wadi. The local Fan-tailed Ravens must have had a nervous breakdown, harassing all of these predators as they continued on their way north along the cliffs. The Dead Sea is well known as the hottest place in Israel and it lived up to its fearsome reputation again today. We were all very glad to reach the shade of Ein Gedi and its iced coffee stand. Retracing our steps north we made a brief detour to the awesome Metzoke Dragot canyon viewpoint, no birds to speak of except for a couple of brief Pallid Swifts and another osprey but the view over the immense canyon and across the Dead Sea far below was worth the effort alone.

The late afternoon saw the start of part 2 of our Dead Sea big day. Pausing at some pools we added Ferruginous Duck and Purple Swamphen for some and with hardly any time there was unfortunately no sign of the hoped for and supposedly easy Dead Sea Sparrow here, except for many disused old nests in the tamarisks below us. This bird is a potential banana skin if you do not have a recent stakeout for it as they are shy and retiring when breeding. Luckily we had a '*phone a friend*' card to play and we were soon speeding back up the

*Steppe Buzzard, dark morph and next page: the impressive canyon at Metzoke Dragot (Mike Watson).*







*Masked Shrike, near Hazeva  
(Mike Watson).*

road a few km to another site, which, after a little chasing around, came up trumps with some nice scope views of a singing male of this smart little sparrow in a tamarisk. Phew, that was a close one. We could have tried again the following morning of course but we would have bigger fish to fry then.

Jonathan Meyrav had kindly agreed to help us with some night birds, which require an Israeli guide as escort either owing to the restricted access to border areas and/or the protected status of the birds to ensure disturbance is kept to a minimum. The first of these was Nubian Nightjar, here of the restricted range form tamaricis or '*Tamarisk Nightjar*', which is already one of the WP's rarest breeding taxa. When we started visiting Israel in the early 80s you could easily see them in the tamarisk scrub behind Eilat's North Beach, however, they are now confined to a tiny area of desert wash near the border village of Neot Hakkikar at the southern end of the Dead Sea. Without giving away too many secrets we enjoyed some very nice views of this tiny nightjar hunting low across the agricultural fields, flashing

its distinctive white wing and tail patches, as well as sat on the sandy ground of a dividing track. A magical experience!

The second of our 'escorted-viewing-only' birds was Desert Owl (formerly Hume's Tawny Owl of course) and again we had some great views of this one too in a remote wadi in the Judean Desert. The female calling first, an insistent call urging the male to do something about the intruders to her territory and then the male himself who turned up to send us packing. He was very obliging and sat on the edge of the smooth canyon rim for ages allowing some lovely scope views, showing his diagnostic barred underparts. We tried to follow this up with a third night bird, Pallid Scops Owl but by then the wind had picked up and we cashed in our chips and called it a night. It had already been a very special day.

Our departure next morning was delayed a little by the late night-birding finish but we still reached our next destination in the Arava valley before it was too hot next morning. A brief stop to admire some of the many Pallid Swifts breeding in the silt cliffs at the southern end of



*Red-throated Pipit, Yotvata (above, Mike Watson) and 'that' Arabian Warbler flight shot (below, Achim Zedler).*

the Dead Sea also delayed us a little longer. We had made our way to a broad acacia-filled wadi, one of the last places in Israel the scarce Arabian Warbler can be found. Such a shame as I recall seeing it far to the south near Yotvata in the 80s. A very showy Masked Shrike greeted us and before too long we spotted a stealthy black-headed Sylvia warbler trying to slip by us. Amazingly Achim got a pretty good flight shot of it showing its diagnostic black upper tail very nicely and we set off after it. It soon gave us the slip again though. If you take your eyes off them for a moment and do not keep up with their next move they can be acacias away in no time. So we systematically checked every bush in the direction it went and eventually David spotted it lurking deep inside one of the many thorny bushes. Everyone enjoyed a good scope view of this tricky and eminently missable bird, wagging its tail at us as if in disdain.

Our lucky streak ran out at our next stop, the horrible entrance to the Hai-Bar reserve in the southern Arava Valley. A Black Scrub-Robin had been reported here several times up to

a week before our visit but not since and not by us either. It was very frustrating not to be allowed access and we had to watch from a perimeter fence or from beside the toilet block. Nice! We did see Balkan Warbler and Thrush Nightingale here though so we felt sure that if the scrub-robin was still around we might have a chance of seeing it but no luck.



Our next stop was Yotvata's north fields, which have pretty much taken over from the famous Eilat fields of the same name in terms of being the best migrant hotspot in the southern Arava. We eventually figured out the best fields, where some melons had been grown and another section that was being irrigated. A Hen Harrier was hunting in this area spreading panic among the many Ortolan Buntings, Greater Short-toed Larks and Red-throated Pipits. A female Namaqua Dove and a couple of Lesser Short-toed Larks were our first of the tour but otherwise there was nothing else new. We ended the day at another famous site, Eilat's North Beach. The 70th anniversary Independence Day celebrations had ensured that the tent city on the beach was four deep (massive tents too!) but there was still a little room left to put up a scope and tripod and watch the birds out in the Bay of Aqaba. The main attraction for us was White-eyed Gull, another range-restricted regional speciality and we were delighted to tally 28 of these, mostly on buoys just across the border into Jordan but a few flying over Israeli waters. A few night herons were also standing on a jetty in Jordan and a flock of 19 Northern Shovelers was flying around deciding what to do now they had reached the end of the Red Sea, as was

a flock of six whimbrels. Other gulls included around 15 Heuglin's (or Siberian) Gulls. Four Little Terns were also new for our trip list and a pale morph Parasitic Jaeger (or Arctic Skua) chased White-eyed Gulls offshore. We were now in House Crow country as well (I was excited to see my first here in the 80s, what the hell was I thinking of?).

Way back in the 80s golden era, my daily routine in Eilat would involve taking my binos to a nightclub and walking out at dawn along to the north beach. In those days there were no hotels on the north beach at all, just lovely tamarisk scrub, which extended all the way to the salt pans from where a lone date palm plantation gave way to the south and then north fields of Eilat. How the landscape has changed since my last visit almost 30 years ago! The north beach is now dominated by glitzy hotels, full of Russian winter sun-seekers, a marina is full of swanky motor yachts and date palm plantations stretch along the Arava Valley and into the distance. The salt pans remain, as part of the International Bird Research Center of Eilat and there is now an excellent complex of salt pans at km20, which is even better than the original. Over the Jordanian border the development of Aqaba has crept along the foothills of the mountains and

*Crowned Sandgrouse, Ovda  
Plain (Mike Watson).*





*Hooded Wheatear, male,  
Ovda Plain (Mike Watson).*

lights twinkle at night way to the north of where they once did. However, it was nice to stay in a hotel this time and not rough it in Max's Hostel or simply sleep on the north beach!

We did not have long in Eilat with only a three nights stay and there is much to see here. Next morning we headed into the Eilat Mountains in search of true desert nomads. Ovda Plains had been producing plenty of our desired species well into March and competitors in the Champions of the Flyway event scored heavily here. We started well with Mourning Wheatear and a small party of Crowned Sandgrouse watched foraging in the sparse desert vegetation. A petite Bar-tailed Lark allowed a very nice view as it passed by. A few Steppe Buzzards were migrating through the mountains here and a couple of European Honey Buzzards were the only ones of the tour, I guess the northerly winds stopped them in their tracks? A small party of Spotted Sandgrouse flew over calling, this is usually the easiest sandgrouse to see here! Flocks of migrating Ortolan Buntings adorned the desert bushes, sometimes 20 to a single bush! Best of all though was the fine male Hooded Wheatear, which seemed to fly in to check us out and afforded some great views, perched

precariously on unfeasibly tiny bushes on the vast desert wash. It really has got a long bill! I do love wheatears and this one was simply breathtaking! I have often found them more approachable in this situation rather than in rocky/mountainous habitat, where they seem to fly miles from one spot to another. To end with, a pair of Cream-coloured Coursers showed very well as we left the area. A clump of isolated trees and bushes nearby produced a nice male Collared Flycatcher as well as more familiar Blackcaps, Eastern Olivaceous Warblers and Lesser Whitethroats, which were the common migrants passing through the desert at this time.

Our next port of call was Neot Samadar, or rather its sewage works. It would be rude not to include a nice smelly sewage works after all. This was a very birdy spot and produced Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin, with several birds holding territory here, singing and song-flight-ing, spreading their attractive white-spotted, rufous tails. Garden Warbler and Spotted Flycatcher were also new for the tour and other species of particular note here included Green Sandpiper, Namaqua Dove (a male this time), Eurasian Hoopoe and Masked Shrike.

From here we descended to the Arava Valley again and made our way to Yotvata once more, which also makes a good lunch stop at its busy service station. There appeared to have been an influx of Northern Wheatears to the north fields and we added Tree Pipit to everyone's lists as well as a fin male Lesser Grey Shrike, which was actually a write-in for the tour (which used to operate earlier in the spring previously).

Further south in the Arava Valley we called in at the km20 salt pans (km0 is the Egyptian border so this spot is actually much closer to the hotels in Eilat than you might think). These salt pans were very birdy and added something new on every visit. Highlights this time were hundreds of Greater Flamingos, 11 Eurasian Spoonbills, c.100 Marsh Sandpipers (one of the commonest shorebirds today and much commoner than greenshank, which was a novelty!), Gull-billed and White-winged Terns, a swarm of Yellow Wagtails, which included at least four forms—*flava*, *feldegg*, *thunbergi* and *dombrowskii* (and maybe a fifth *superciliaris*—the intergrades are a headache!) and finally a couple of unassuming Water Pipits of the Caucasian form *coutelli*. I had to admit that I had also been looking for the long-staying Lesser Flamingo, without any luck until I

figured out it was white and not pink-bodied. Another round and bam! There it was, a cute little thing surrounded by monstrous Greater Flamingos. At least we can tick this one off our WP lists as well without any concern. Unfortunately we ended a great day's birding with a dip on Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse at km19, where they seem to have stopped drinking regularly. Although a dip that involved a Caspian Tern and watching a young Pallid Harrier hunting Yellow Wagtails at their roost can't be such a bad thing. Two Egyptian Geese here as well was something of a surprise.

Another classic day in the Eilat area followed. Holland Park, an irrigated desert wadi on the north end of town (that appears to serve as a pet dog toilet unfortunately) started slowly with only Sand Partridge, Arabian Babbler, Common Chiffchaff and Eastern Bonelli's (or Balkan) Warbler of note. We bumped into some gleeful Israeli birders who asked why we were out so early and said we ought to be having breakfast or drinking coffee (presumably like them). They also showed us some cracking photos from the previous day taken at our next destination, Ofira Park in downtown Eilat. Thankfully it was still there, Corn Crake! Not just any Corn Crake but easily my most obliging ever, walking around on the short turf of

Corn Crake, Ofira Park  
(Mike Watson).





*Greater Sandplover, km20 Eilat  
(Mike Watson).*

the park without a care and even walking right up to our feet! They can do this sometimes on migration, like the UK's Hartlepool Headland bird of May 1985 but this extreme tame behavior is still very rare. Also in the tiny park surrounded by hotels were Eurasian Hoopoe, Tree Pipit and Ortolan Bunting.

We had breakfast in the mountains at the upper hawkwatch station but had to make do with a few Steppe Buzzards, White-crowned Wheatears and Blackstarts as there was not much going on up there this morning. Down in the valley the IBRCE was very birdy indeed adding Little Bittern (5), Little Crake, Broad-billed Sandpiper and Red-necked Phalarope (17) to our list from its various hides. The crake and bitterns were sometimes in the same scope field as a Thrush Nightingale sharing their reed bed! Yet another showy Masked Shrike was much appreciated and a female Namaqua Dove sat up for the photographers. After lunch we headed back out to KM20, where a smart female Greater Sandplover was new for our lists. A much less impressive addition here was a humble Dunlin. Two Red-necked Phalaropes had also found their way here and many of the shorebirds from the previous day continued.

We spent the rest of the afternoon back at the

IBRCE where a superb adult male Crested Honey Buzzard soaring over the Jordan Border Crossing greeted us, its distinctive profile obvious even to the naked eye. We enjoyed watching a Caspian Tern fishing from the Anita hide as well as better looks at the Broad-billed Sandpiper once the heat haze had died down and finally we also saw a Levant Sparrowhawk. Nightbirding produced a couple of Short-eared Owls, Eurasian Thick-knee and poor views of Egyptian Nightjar at Yotvata plus lots of dust!

Next morning we had a final attempt at Black Scrub-Robin at Hai-Bar seeing only a Barred Warbler briefly this time and then another try for Temminck's Lark at Ovda again to no avail before we headed north into the Negev and the crater rim town of Mizpe Ramon. It was Sabbath again today and after waiting for the world's slowest restaurant service to finally grind into action (should really not have bothered!) at last we could go birding again. A nearby wadi proved very birdy and although there was nothing new, notable sightings included a pair of Hooded Wheatears, Mourning Wheatear, Sand Partridge, Trumpeter Finch and another lovely male Sinai Rosefinch, feeding a begging and recently fledged juvenile. Migration was very much in evidence here



*Desert Finch, Sde Boker (Mike Watson).*

deep in the Negev desert with Blackcaps everywhere still and smaller numbers of Lesser Whitethroats, Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, Spotted Flycatchers and Masked Shrikes.

This year's itinerary had provision for two full days in the Negev. The first was spent in the vicinity of Sde Boker, where we started with a visit to Midreshet Ben Gurion, where the tomb of Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion (1886–1973) lies, alongside his wife. The gardens here were also very birdy with singing Eastern Olivaceous Warblers alongside more familiar greenfinches. We continued to the fields of the Sde Boker kibbutz adding Black-bellied Sandgrouse and Red-backed Shrike to our list and after some considerable searching, the gorgeous little Desert Finch. Although it took a lot of working out the best place and tactic to see them we finally cracked it. The kibbutz itself produced our best views of Spanish Sparrow so far as well as some more crazy overhead Short-toed Snake-Eagles. The skies looked quite dark now and what's this? Heavy rain!!! This was not forecast but it was now time to make a sharp exit from the rough tracks before we got the van stuck. We sat out the rain shower at the gas station and chatted to a group of Finnish birders on their way south. The sewage works at Sde Boker added

Whiskered Tern and after the rain subsided we tried the nearby Ein Avdat upper viewpoint where we also added a pair of the hoped-for and ever rarer Bonelli's Eagle loitering around the tiny griffon vulture colony (only two pairs!). Alpine Swifts zoomed past us over the beautiful limestone gorge and we were delighted to share our scopes with some interested Israeli tourists. A couple of stops for migrants on our way back to Mizpe Ramon produced Thrush Nightingale and Masked Shrike at the Avdat National Park visitor center and a female Collared Flycatcher and a very showy hoopoe at the KKL Grove at Mizpe Ramon itself.

The second of our two big Negev days started at dawn at Nizzana, where from the famous 7km Turkish railway wagon viewpoint we quickly spotted Macqueen's Bustard. A male had its neck feathers fluffed up ready for its crazy erratic running display. As the sun rose, it shone through the bird's feathers creating a lovely halo effect, doing the same to the dried grass around it, a wonderful sight. We spotted another two birds a little further away as well as a small group of Cream-coloured Coursers. Time ticked away as we watched the bustards from a safe distance until it was time to go. As we were leaving we noticed a 50 strong army patrol on foot and heading straight for the bus-

tards, we had been just in time! The railway line, which stretched to Sinai was only in operation for a couple of years after 1915 before it was destroyed by the British during WW1. Our next stop just along the road was one of the most enjoyable of the whole tour, Celia Poulton Friede's 'by appointment only' sandgrouse drinking pool at Ezuz. With a choice of either a veranda overlooking the pool or a sunken photo hide right next to it we were soon installed and waiting for her sandgrouse to arrive. Seeing them from a distance is nice but from point blank range instead at eye level is something else. They kept us waiting for a while, during which time Trumpeter Finches and at least one million Ortolan Buntings entertained us. Sand Partridge and turtle doves also put in appearances as did Black-headed Wagtail, Lesser Whitethroat and Spanish Sparrow. However, the sandgrouse were top of the bill. First of all there were Crowned Sandgrouse of all ages and then a couple of small parties of the even more beautiful Pin-tailed came in to drink. Nervous at first but then gaining confidence they scuttled in to the pools only a few metres away. Fab-u-lous! We spent the rest of the morning birding the many back roads in the military-infested Nizzana area but did not come up with much apart from three Little

Owls and a smart male Montagu's Harrier. We also found some time to have a look around the UNESCO World Heritage site at Shivta. Long considered to be a Nabataean town on the ancient spice route, the ruined settlement is now thought to have been a later Byzantine colony on the route to Saint Catherine's Monastery in Sinai. There were a few Arabian Babbler and Palestine Sunbirds here but nothing else. In the afternoon we made our way back towards Mitzpe Ramon stopping at Sde Boker, where we connected with both Black-bellied Sandgrouse and Desert Finch very nicely again. Just outside Ramon prison a neat little farm produced a couple of excellent sightings in the form of an adult Barred Warbler found by David, the best views most of us had of one so far as well as a Northern Goshawk in the orchard. I should mention that we could easily have twitched two Caspian Plovers at Yotvata this afternoon, only two hours away but the majority of our folks decided against this gamble and were rewarded with the Barred Warbler.

Our final morning in Israel started again at a remote desert wash, where a Macqueen's Bustard was the star, appearing out of nowhere in front of the van before strutting off across the hamada to square up to a fox! Bar-tailed Larks

*Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, male,  
Ezuz (Mike Watson).*



were singing their '*rusty gate*' song here and a Common Redstart was a very late addition to our list. Again there was no sign of Temminck's Lark, it will just have to wait until next time... or Morocco. We then drove north for the last time, stopping at Mount Amasa on the southern edge of the West Bank, from where we could see the sprawling town of Hebron in the distance. Birding here was rather curtailed but we did manage to see some very nice Rock Sparrows as well as a Long-legged Buzzard and yet more Short-toed Snake-Eagles. The afternoon saw us making quick progress back on the route six toll road to Tel Aviv where the tour ended as the sun went down.

It was about time we went back to Israel and putting politics to one side (which we all ought to do) we are looking forward to returning soon! Finally I would like to thank our enthusiastic group for helping make the tour a success and also particularly our friends in Israel who did so much to help from the planning stages onwards—Meidad Goran, Nadav Israeli, Jonathan Meyrav and Yoav Perlman, without whose expert knowledge we would certainly not have seen so many birds. We will be back!

**Bird of the Trip** (as voted for by participants)

1. Desert Owl
2. Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
3. Desert Finch
4. Sinai Rosefinch
5. Syrian Serin

*A Trumpeter Finch with migrant Ortolan Buntings at Ezuz (Mike Watson).*





*Macqueen's Bustard, near Mizpe Ramon (Mike Watson).*

## SYSTEMATIC LIST OF BIRD SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

The species names and taxonomy used in the report mostly follows Gill, F & D Donsker (Eds). **IOC World Bird Names**. This list is updated several times annually and is available at <http://www.worldbirdnames.org>.

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Species which were only recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (LO).

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g. it is only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; it is difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species).

Conservation threat categories and information are taken from Threatened Birds of the World, BirdLife International's magnificent book on the sad status of the rarest 10% of the world's avifauna, and updates on the BirdLife website: <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/home> E = Endangered, V = Vulnerable, NT = Near Threatened, DD = Data Deficient.

**Egyptian Goose** *Alopochen aegyptiaca* A pair at km19 Eilat

**Common Shelduck** *Tadorna tadorna* First noted at Lake Agamon Hula, then at Navit Pools and km20 Eilat.

**Garganey** *Spatula querquedula* First noted at Navit Pools then small numbers thereafter.

**Northern Shoveler** *Spatula clypeata* First noted at Ma'agan Mikael then small numbers thereafter.

**Gadwall** *Mareca strepera* Noted at Lake Agamon, Hula and Navit Pools.

**Eurasian Wigeon** *Mareca penelope* A female at Navit Pools was followed by two for Achim only at km20 Eilat.

**Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos* Small numbers noted throughout.

**Northern Pintail** *Anas acuta* Males at Lake Agamon, Hula and Navit Pools then c20 at km20, Eilat.

**Eurasian Teal** *Anas crecca* Noted only at Lake Agamon, Hula, Lahavot Habashan and Navit Pools.

**Marbled Duck** ◊ *Marmaronetta angustirostris* Six at Lake Agamon, Hula. **V**

**Ferruginous Duck** *Aythya nyroca* c15 at Navit Pools. **NT**

**Tufted Duck** *Aythya fuligula* A female for Achim only at Navit Pools was the only record. (NL)

**Chukar Partridge** ◊ *Alectoris chukar* Common in the Golan and at Nizzana and Mount Amasa. Ssp *sinaica*

**Sand Partridge** ◊ *Ammoperdix heyi* The first was near Og Reservoir, a total of 15 logged.



Little Bittern, IBRCE (Achim Zedler)

**Black Francolin** *Francolinus francolinus* One seen and another heard at Lake Agamon, Hula.

**Little Grebe** *Tachybaptus ruficollis* A scatter of two after the first two at Ma'agan Mikael.

**Black-necked Grebe (Eared G)** *Podiceps nigricollis* One at km20 Eilat was the only record.

**Lesser Flamingo** *Phoenicopterus minor* The long-stayer was still at km20 Eilat.

**Greater Flamingo** *Phoenicopterus roseus* 13 at Lake Agamon, Hula and c400 at km20 Eilat.

**Black Stork** *Ciconia nigra* c20 Bet She'an, one Golan Heights, two Wadi Salvadora and one km19 Eilat.

**White Stork** *Ciconia ciconia* Small numbers noted throughout.

**Glossy Ibis** *Plegadis falcinellus* Common in the north, maximum c200 at Lake Agamon, Hula.

**Eurasian Spoonbill** *Platalea leucorodia* c10 at Bet She'an, one at Lake Agamon, Hula and 11 at km20 Eilat.

**Little Bittern** *Ixobrychus minutus* Five at IBRCE, Eilat.

**Black-crowned Night Heron** *Nycticorax nycticorax* Small numbers throughout after the first at Ma'agan Mikael.

**Squacco Heron** *Ardeola ralloides* Five at Ma'agan Mikael, two in the Hula Valley and 17 logged around Eilat.

**Western Cattle Egret** *Bubulcus ibis* Common in the north and small numbers in the south.

**Grey Heron** *Ardea cinerea* Common in the north and a couple noted around Eilat.

**Purple Heron** *Ardea purpurea* Maximum 5 at Ma'agan Mikael. A total of 15 logged.

**Great Egret** *Ardea alba* Maximum c15 Bet She'an Valley plus another c25 elsewhere.

**Little Egret** *Egretta garzetta* Maximum c10 Ma'agan Mikael plus another c30 elsewhere.

**Great White Pelican** *Pelecanus onocrotalus* 85 Bet She'an Valley and c1000 north over Lake Agamon, Hula.

**Pygmy Cormorant** ♦ *Microcarbo pygmeus* Maximum c80 at Hagome plus another c40 elsewhere.

**Great Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo* Four at Ma'agan Mikael, two at Hagome and one at IBRCE Eilat. Ssp *sinensis*

**Western Osprey** *Pandion haliaetus* One Bet She'an Valley and two in the Dead Sea region.

**Egyptian Vulture** ♦ *Neophron percnopterus* Singles Golan Heights and Hai Bar, 4 Dead Sea and seven Ein Avdat. **EN**

**European Honey Buzzard** *Pernis apivorus* Two at Ovda was the only record, most arrived a week later.

**Crested Honey Buzzard** *Pernis ptilorhynchus* A superb male over IBRCE on 20 April. Ssp *orientalis*

**Griffon Vulture** *Gyps fulvus* Seven Golan Heights, 12 incl. 2 pairs plus 2 young at Ein Avdat in the Sde Boker area.

**Short-toed Snake Eagle** *Circaetus gallicus* First noted Mount Hermon, a total of 19 logged.

**Lesser Spotted Eagle** *Clanga pomarina* One in the Golan Heights and another two for Achim at Wadi Salvadora.

**Booted Eagle** *Hieraaetus pennatus* Two at Wadi Salvadora and Sde Boker.

**Steppe Eagle** *Aquila nipalensis* Singles at Wadi Salvadora, Eilat and Ein Avdat. Most have gone north by mid April. **EN**

**Bonelli's Eagle** *Aquila fasciata* A pair at Ein Avdat.



Spur-winged Lapwing, IBRCE (Mike Watson)

**Levant Sparrowhawk** ♦ *Accipiter brevipes* Singles at IBRCE and Sde Boker, unlucky not to connect with a flock.  
**Eurasian Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter nisus* Two at Neve Ativ were the first, a total of seven logged.  
**Northern Goshawk** *Accipiter gentilis* One near Ramon Prison in the Negev.  
**Western Marsh Harrier (Eurasian M H)** *Circus aeruginosus* Small numbers after the first at Ma'agan Mikael.  
**Hen Harrier** *Circus cyaneus* One in the Golan Heights and another at Yotvata.  
**Pallid Harrier** *Circus macrourus* Five positively identified and another two unidentified ringtails. **NT**  
**Montagu's Harrier** *Circus pygargus* A young bird in the Bet She'an Valley and an adult male at Nizzana.  
**Black Kite** *Milvus migrans* Maximum c250 Bet She'an and c50 at Lake Agamon. Smaller numbers elsewhere.  
**Long-legged Buzzard** *Buteo rufinus* A pair and another single at Mount Hermon and an adult at Mount Amasa.  
**Common Buzzard** *Buteo buteo* Maximum c700 north at Wadi Salvadora and smaller numbers further south.  
**Macqueen's Bustard** ♦ *Chlamydotis macqueenii* Three males at Nizzana and another near Mizpe Ramon. **V**  
**Corn Crane** *Crex crex* One in Ofira Park, downtown Eilat.  
**Little Crane** ♦ *Porzana parva* Nice views of one at IBRCE Eilat.  
**Spotted Crane** ♦ *Porzana porzana* Nice views of one at Lahavot Habashan in the Hula Valley.  
**Grey-headed Swamphen** *Porphyrio poliocephalus* One at Navit Pools for some. (NL)  
**Common Moorhen** *Gallinula chloropus* First noted at Ma'agan Mikael. Commonly seen thereafter.  
**Eurasian Coot (Common C)** *Fulica atra* Small numbers in the north after the first at Hagome.  
**Common Crane** *Grus grus* Singles at Lake Agamon, Hula and Nizzana.  
**Eurasian Stone-curlew** *Burhinus oedicnemus* One heard Neot Hakkikar and another spot-lit at Yotvata. Ssp *saharae*  
**Black-winged Stilt** *Himantopus himantopus* Small numbers throughout after the first at Bet She'an.  
**Pied Avocet** *Recurvirostra avosetta* c100 Lake Agamon, Hula and a single at km20 Eilat.  
**Spur-winged Lapwing (S-w Plover)** *Vanellus spinosus* Common throughout after the first at Ma'agan Mikael.  
**Common Ringed Plover** *Charadrius hiaticula* One at Lahavot Habashan, Hula and c50 in the Eilat area. Ssp *tundrae*  
**Little Ringed Plover** *Charadrius dubius* First noted at Bet She'an.  
**Kentish Plover** *Charadrius alexandrinus* c15 at km20 Eilat.  
**Greater Sand Plover** *Charadrius leschenaultii* A female at km20 Eilat on 20 April. Ssp *columbinus*  
**Whimbrel (Eurasian W)** *Numenius [phaeopus] phaeopus* Six in off the sea at North Beach Eilat.  
**Black-tailed Godwit** *Limosa limosa* Two Bet She'an were the first of c25 tallied. **NT**  
**Ruff** *Calidris pugnax* Common in wetland areas, maximum c200 at km20 Eilat.  
**Broad-billed Sandpiper** *Calidris falcinellus* One at IBRCE Eilat on 20 April.



Marsh Sandpiper, km20 Eilat (Mike Watson).

**Temminck's Stint** *Calidris temminckii* Four Lahavot Habashan and up to six in the Eilat area.

**Dunlin** *Calidris alpina* Singles at IBRCE and km20 Eilat.

**Little Stint** *Calidris minuta* Three at Lahavot Habashan were followed by c80 in the Eilat area.

**Common Snipe** *Gallinago gallinago* One at Bet She'an was the first followed by another 13 elsewhere.

**Red-necked Phalarope** *Phalaropus lobatus* Up to 17 at IBRCE and two km20 Eilat.

**Common Sandpiper** *Actitis hypoleucos* Six at Ma'agan Mikael were followed by another c40 elsewhere.

**Green Sandpiper** *Tringa ochropus* Singles at Hagome, Eilat and Neot Samadar.

**Common Redshank** *Tringa totanus* One at Eilat for Achim and Andre. (NL)

**Marsh Sandpiper** *Tringa stagnatilis* First noted at Bet She'an, maximum c100 km20 Eilat.

**Wood Sandpiper** *Tringa glareola* First noted Bet She'an, two Lahavot Habashan and one km20 and one Mizpe Ramon.

**Spotted Redshank** *Tringa erythropus* c10 Lake Agamon, Hula and up to four km20 Eilat.

**Common Greenshank** *Tringa nebularia* The first heard at Ma'agan Mikael, two at Bet She'an and c40 Eilat area.

**Cream-colored Courser** *Cursorius cursor* Up to four Ovda and four Nizzana.

**Collared Pratincole** *Glareola pratincola* 19 at a colony in the Golan Heights.

**Slender-billed Gull** *Chroicocephalus genei* First noted at Ma'agan Mikael, common thereafter.

**Black-headed Gull** *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* Noted Ma'agan Mikael and Bet She'an Valley only, where common.

**White-eyed Gull** ♦ *Ichthyaetus leucophthalmus* A minimum of 28 at north beach Eilat. **NT**

**Caspian Gull** *Larus cachinnans* Noted at Ma'agan Mikael, Bet She'an Valley and Eilat.

**Yellow-legged Gull** *Larus michahellis* A ringed adult at Ma'agan Mikael was the only record.

**Armenian Gull** ♦ *Larus armenicus* Common at Ma'agan Mikael and Bet She'an. **NT**

**Lesser Black-backed Gull (Baltic G)** *Larus [fuscus] fuscus* Two adults at Ma'agan Mikael and 5 at Eilat.

**Lesser Black-backed Gull** ♦ (Heuglin's G) *Larus [fuscus] heuglini* Up to 15 at Eilat.

**Gull-billed Tern** *Gelochelidon nilotica* Up to 3 at Eilat km19-20.

**Caspian Tern** *Hydroprogne caspia* Three noted at Eilat.

**Sandwich Tern** *Thalasseus sandvicensis* Three off north beach Eilat.

**Little Tern** *Sternula albifrons* Four off north beach and one km19 Eilat.

**Common Tern** *Sterna hirundo* c20 Ma'agan Mikael and Eilat.

**Whiskered Tern** *Chlidonias hybrida* An adult at Sde Boker after the heavy shower was the only record.

**White-winged Tern (W-w Black T)** *Chlidonias leucopterus* Two at km20 Eilat.

**Parasitic Jaeger (Arctic Skua)** *Stercorarius parasiticus* One pale morph north Eilat chasing a White-eyed Gull.



Namaqua Dove, IBRCE (Mike Watson)

**Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** ♦ *Pterocles alchata* Six at Ezuz. Ssp *caudacutus*  
**Spotted Sandgrouse** ♦ *Pterocles senegallus* Four in flight at Ovda and one at Ezuz were the only records.  
**Black-bellied Sandgrouse** *Pterocles orientalis* Up to five at Sde Boker on two dates.  
**Crowned Sandgrouse** ♦ *Pterocles coronatus* Up to nine at Ovda on two dates and c40 at Ezuz. Ssp *vastitas*  
**Rock Dove** *Columba livia* Common. Var. *domestica*  
**European Turtle Dove** *Streptopelia turtur* Small numbers throughout, maximum c30 Golan Heights. V  
**Eurasian Collared Dove** *Streptopelia decaocto* Common throughout.  
**Laughing Dove** *Spilopelia senegalensis* Common throughout. ssp *aegyptica*  
**Namaqua Dove** *Oena capensis* Females at Yotvata and IBRCE and a male at Neot Samadar.  
**Great Spotted Cuckoo** *Clamator glandarius* One at She'ar Yashuv was the only record.  
**Common Cuckoo** *Cuculus canorus* Two at Neve Ativ, Mount Hermon.  
**Desert Owl** ♦ *Strix hadorami* A pair heard at Sho'wadi wadi in the Judean Desert, the male seen.  
**Little Owl** *Athene noctua* One at Susita and three in the Nizzana area. Ssp *lilith*  
**Short-eared Owl** *Asio flammeus* Two spot-lit at Yotvata.  
**Egyptian Nightjar** ♦ *Caprimulgus aegyptius* Rather poor views of one in the spotlight at Yotvata.  
**Nubian Nightjar** ♦ *Caprimulgus nubicus* Great views of two at Neot Hakkikar.  
**Alpine Swift** *Tachymarptis melba* Up to three at Ein Avdat.  
**Common Swift** *Apus apus* Common.  
**Pallid Swift** *Apus pallidus* Abundant in the Dead Sea area and small numbers at Eilat.  
**European Roller** *Coracias garrulus* Five at a colony in the Golan Heights.  
**White-throated Kingfisher (W-breasted K)** *Halcyon smyrnensis* One Bet She'an, 4 Lake Agamon and 2 Navit.  
**Common Kingfisher** *Alcedo atthis* One Ma'agan Mikael and another at Lake Agamon, Hula.  
**Pied Kingfisher** *Ceryle rudis* Up to five at Ma'agan Mikael, two Bet She'an and one Eilat. Ssp *syriacus*  
**Green Bee-eater (Little G B-e)** *Merops orientalis* 2 nr Kalya were the first, followed by another seven. Ssp *cyanophrys*  
**European Bee-eater** *Merops apiaster* c80 noted in the north and commonly seen thereafter.  
**Eurasian Hoopoe** *Upupa epops* One Golan Heights was followed by another c10.  
**Syrian Woodpecker** ♦ *Dendrocopos syriacus* Three noted in the north, the first at She'ar Yashuv.  
**Lesser Kestrel** *Falco naumanni* c10 at a colony on private land in the north and at least two at Yotvata.  
**Common Kestrel** *Falco tinnunculus* Small numbers noted throughout.  
**Eurasian Hobby** *Falco subbuteo* Two near Ma'agan Mikael and another at Sde Boker.



Masked Shrike, male, Avdat (Mike Watson)

**Barbary Falcon** ♦ *Falco pelegrinoides* One at Yotvata.  
**Rose-ringed Parakeet (introduced) (Ring-necked P)** *Psittacula krameri* Common in the north.  
**Red-backed Shrike** *Lanius collurio* Three males at Sde Boker.  
**Lesser Grey Shrike** *Lanius minor* One at Yotvata was a write-in for this tour.  
**Southern Grey Shrike** *Lanius meridionalis* Three Susita, one at km20 Eilat and another two in the Negev. Ssp *aucheri*  
**Woodchat Shrike** *Lanius senator* Seven in the north and another two sightings at Yotvata. Ssp *niloticus*  
**Masked Shrike** ♦ *Lanius nubicus* The first was in the Golan followed by another 15. A very good showing.  
**Eurasian Jay** *Garrulus glandarius* Common in the north and two at Mount Amasa. Ssp *atricapillus*  
**Western Jackdaw** *Coloeus monedula* Several roadside sightings in the north. Ssp *soemmeringii*  
**House Crow** *Corvus splendens* Common at Eilat.  
**Hooded Crow** *Corvus cornix* Very common in the north.  
**Brown-necked Raven** ♦ *Corvus ruficollis* Common in the south.  
**Northern Raven** *Corvus corax* A pair at Mount Hermon. Ssp *laurencei*  
**Fan-tailed Raven** ♦ *Corvus rhipidurus* Common in the Dead Sea region, first noted near Kalya. Ssp *stanleyi*  
**Sombre Tit** ♦ *Poecile lugubris* A pair on Mount Hermon near Majdal Shams. Ssp *anatoliae*  
**Great Tit** *Parus major* A total of eight sightings in the north. Ssp *terraesanctae*  
**Desert Lark** ♦ *Ammomanes deserti* Common from the Dead Sea region southwards. Ssp *isabellina*  
**Bar-tailed Lark** ♦ *Ammomanes cinctura* Two at Ovda and two plus two heard near Mizpe Ramon. Ssp *arenicolor*  
**Woodlark** *Lullula arborea* One seen and another two heard only Mount Hermon. Ssp *pallida*  
**Crested Lark** *Galerida cristata* Common throughout. Ssp *zion*  
**Greater Short-toed Lark** *Calandrella brachydactyla* One in the Golan Heights and c40 noted in the south.  
**Lesser Short-toed Lark** *Alaudala rufescens* Two at Yotvata. Ssp *minor*  
**White-spectacled Bulbul** ♦ *Pycnonotus xanthopygos* Common throughout.  
**Sand Martin** *Riparia riparia* A small scatter of sightings after the first for all at Navit Pools.  
**Barn Swallow** *Hirundo rustica* Common throughout even migrating through the most remote desert regions.  
**Pale Crag Martin** ♦ *Ptyonoprogne obsoleta* The first were near Metzoke Dragot, common south of there.  
**Common House Martin** *Delichon urbicum* A small number of sightings after two at Majdal Shams.  
**Red-rumped Swallow** *Cecropis daurica* A small number of sightings after the first at She'ar Yashuv. Ssp *rufula*  
**Cetti's Warbler** *Cettia cetti* One seen and another heard only at Ma'agan Mikael. Ssp *orientalis*  
**Streaked Scrub Warbler** ♦ *Scotocerca inquieta* Four at Wadi Salvadora was the only record.



Arabian Babbler, Holland Park, Eilat (Mike Watson)

**Common Chiffchaff** *Phylloscopus collybita* Six sightings in the Eilat area and Negev. Ssp *abietinus*  
**Eastern Bonelli's Warbler** ♦ *Phylloscopus orientalis* One at Hai Bar and another at Holland Park, Eilat.  
**Great Reed Warbler** *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* One seen and another heard Ma'agan Mikael.  
**Clamorous Reed Warbler** *Acrocephalus stentoreus* One seen at Lavahot Habashan, heard at L Agamon and Navit.  
**Sedge Warbler** *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* c10 at Ma'agan Mikael and two at Lavahot Habashan.  
**Eurasian Reed Warbler (Caspian R W)** *Acrocephalus [scirpaceus] fuscus* Common at Ma'gan Mikael and Hula.  
**Eastern Olivaceous Warbler** *Iduna pallida* Common from Wadi Salvadora onwards. Ssp *elaieca*  
**Zitting Cisticola** *Cisticola juncidis* Heard only in the Golan Heights. (H)  
**Graceful Prinia** *Prinia gracilis* Very common throughout, especially in the north. Ssp *palestinae*  
**Arabian Babbler** ♦ *Turdoides squamiceps* The first were three near Kalya, another c30 seen thereafter.  
**Eurasian Blackcap** *Sylvia atricapilla* Very common!  
**Garden Warbler** *Sylvia borin* One at Neot Samadar. Ssp *woodwardi*  
**Barred Warbler** *Sylvia nisoria* One at Hai Bar and another near Ramon Prison.  
**Lesser Whitethroat** *Sylvia curruca* Common.  
**Eastern Orphean Warbler** ♦ *Sylvia crassirostris* Two near Kalya, one near En Hazeva, one Eilat and one Negev.  
**Arabian Warbler** ♦ *Sylvia leucomelaena* A male near En Hazeva. Ssp *negevensis*  
**Common Whitethroat** *Sylvia communis* c10 noted on Mount Hermon. Ssp *volgensis*  
**Sardinian Warbler** *Sylvia melanocephala* Common in the north. Ssp *momus*  
**Eurasian Wren** *Troglodytes troglodytes* Four heard Mount Hermon. (H)  
**Western Rock Nuthatch** ♦ *Sitta neumayer* A pair near Majdal Shams, Mount Hermon.  
**Common Myna** *Acridotheres tristis* Abundant, even noted in the desert at Ezuz, unfortunately.  
**Tristram's Starling** ♦ *Onychognathus tristramii* Common and tame in the Dead Sea region.  
**Common Blackbird** *Turdus merula* 12 noted in the north. Ssp *syriacus*  
**Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin** *Cercotrichas galactotes* Heard Neot Hakkikar, 4 Neot Samadar and 1 Sde Boker.  
**Spotted Flycatcher** *Muscicapa striata* A total of eleven sightings of this late migrant.  
**Thrush Nightingale** *Luscinia luscinia* A total of eight sightings, the first at Hai Bar.  
**Collared Flycatcher** ♦ *Ficedula albicollis* A male at Ovda and a female at KKL grove Mizpe Ramon.  
**Black Redstart** *Phoenicurus ochruros* Six at Mount Hermon. Ssp *semirufus*  
**Common Redstart** *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* A male near Mizpe Ramon for some (NL).  
**Common Rock Thrush** *Monticola saxatilis* A male from the Mount Hermon upper chair lift station.



*White-crowned Wheatear, Wadi Shlomo (Mike Watson)*

- Blue Rock Thrush** *Monticola solitarius* A male at Majdal Shams and another at Ein Avdat for Achim only.
- Northern Wheatear** *Oenanthe oenanthe* A scatter of sightings from Ma'agan Mikael onwards.
- Hooded Wheatear** ♦ *Oenanthe monacha* Males at Ovda and Yotvata and three near Mizpe Ramon.
- Black-eared Wheatear** ♦ (Eastern B-e W) *Oenanthe [hispanica] melanoleuca* First noted at Ma'agan Mikael.
- Blackstart** ♦ *Oenanthe melanura* The first were at Susita, common thereafter.
- White-crowned Wheatear** ♦ (W-c Black W) *Oenanthe leucopyga* Four at Wadi Salvadora then a total of 20. Ssp *ernesti*
- Mourning Wheatear** ♦ *Oenanthe lugens* Four at Ovda then another four thereafter.
- Palestine Sunbird** ♦ (Orange-tufted S) *Cinnyris osea* A scatter of sightings after the first at Ma'agan Mikael.
- House Sparrow** *Passer domesticus* Common. Ssp *biblicus* north/*indicus* south
- Spanish Sparrow** *Passer hispaniolensis* First noted Golan but seen well at Sde Boker and Nizzana. Ssp *transcaspicus*
- Dead Sea Sparrow** ♦ *Passer moabiticus* Four in the Dead Sea region.
- Rock Sparrow** *Petronia petronia* Four seen at Mount Amasa. Ssp *puteicola*
- Western Yellow Wagtail (Blue-headed W)** *Motacilla [flava] flava* Several seen at km20 Eilat.
- Western Yellow Wagtail (Black-headed W)** *Motacilla [flava] feldegg* Maximum six km20 Eilat.
- Western Yellow Wagtail\* (Grey-headed W)** *Motacilla [flava] thunbergi* Maximum c20 km20 Eilat.
- Western Yellow Wagtail\* (Dombrowskii's W)** *Motacilla [flava] dombrowskii* Up to four males km20 Eilat.
- Citrine Wagtail** *Motacilla citreola* A male briefly for some at IBRCE (NL).
- White Wagtail** *Motacilla [alba] alba* A scatter of sightings after Ma'agan Mikael.
- Tawny Pipit** *Anthus campestris* Two at Yotvata.
- Long-billed Pipit** *Anthus similis* One singing in the Golan Heights. Ssp *captus*
- Tree Pipit** *Anthus trivialis* One at Yotvata on two dates were the only records.
- Red-throated Pipit** *Anthus cervinus* Up to 15 at Yotvata and c20 km20 Eilat.
- Water Pipit** *Anthus spinoletta* Two km20 Eilat. Ssp *coutelli*.
- Common Chaffinch** *Fringilla coelebs* One in the Golan Heights. Ssp *syriaca*
- Trumpeter Finch** *Bucanetes githagineus* Four Wadi Salvadora, eight near Mizpe Ramon and c10 Ezuz.
- Sinai Rosefinch** ♦ *Carpodacus synoicus* 4-5 incl. 1 female Wadi Salvadora and a male and juv. nr Mizpe Ramon.
- European Greenfinch** *Chloris chloris* c15 sightings in the north. Ssp *chlorotica*
- Desert Finch** ♦ *Rhodospiza obsoleta* Up to 12 Sde Boker.
- Common Linnet** *Linaria cannabina* c25 seen in the north. Ssp *bella*
- European Goldfinch** *Carduelis carduelis* c15 seen in the north.



Syrian Serin, Majdal Shams (Mike Watson)

**European Serin** *Serinus serinus* Three noted in the north.

**Syrian Serin** ♦ *Serinus syriacus* Up to 35 noted on Mount Hermon, where there were still small flocks. **VU**

**Corn Bunting** *Emberiza calandra* c20 in the north and one singing at Ezuz. Ssp *buturlini*

**Rock Bunting** *Emberiza cia* Up to four seen at Mount Hermon. Ssp *hordei*

**Ortolan Bunting** *Emberiza hortulana* Common throughout, maximum c35 Ovda.

**Striolated Bunting** *Emberiza striolata* c10 Wadi Salvadora.

## Mammals

**Rock Hyrax** *Procavia capensis* Two Mount Hermon.

**Cape Hare** *Lepus capensis* Five sightings from Neot Hakkikar southwards.

**Coypu (introduced)** *Myocastor coypus* Noted at Ma'agan Mikael, Hagome and Lake Agamon, Hula.

**Golden Spiny Mouse** *Acomys russatus* Several noted at Wadi Salvadora.

**Egyptian Mongoose** *Herpestes ichneumon* Noted at Ma'agan Mikael, Golan Heights and Lavahot Habashan.

**Golden Jackal (Common J)** *Canis aureus* One Dead Sea region.

**Red Fox** *Vulpes vulpes* Noted at Kalya, Yotvata and near Mizpe Ramon.

**Wild Boar** *Sus scrofa* c20 Mount Hermon and one Neot Hakkikar.

**Asiatic Wild Ass (Onager, reintroduced)** *Equus hemionus* One Ovda and four Nizzana.

**Nubian Ibex** *Capra nubiana* Common Dead Sea region, Mizpe Ramon and Sde Boker.

**Dorcas Gazelle** *Gazella dorcas* c25 noted in the Arava.

**Mountain Gazelle** *Gazella gazella* Three near Kalya in the Judean Desert region.

**Indian Crested Porcupine** *Hystrix indica* One dead on the road near Ein Gedi.