



## ISRAEL TOUR REPORT 2023

13 - 23 April 2023

BY MIKE WATSON

Israel remains the most exciting country for migration in the world, 'The Flyway' as it is now widely known among birders serves up a variety of migrants from waterbirds and raptors to passerines, there is always something happening whatever the weather. Northerly winds hold them up and bring them down and southerlies send them pouring overhead. Add to this a great selection of Middle Eastern specialities and you have the ingredients for a fabulous feast of birding. The actual food in Israel is also excellent in many places, particularly in the north, and it was wonderful to see our friends who have survived the pandemic. We did not see any evidence of troubles either, everything proceeded peacefully throughout, even in Tel Aviv and the Golan. We love Israel! However long you have here never feels like it is enough, there will always be more migrants either before or after your snapshot of the flyway, right through to late May.

The species total this year was a little down on my previous visit in 2018, with some regular birds strangely absent, however, with a little effort, the diamond birds total was up and included the most sought after Syrian Serin, which we inexplicably missed in 2022. This is the regional endemic with the most restricted range on the itinerary and is not available of any of our other tours. The winner of the 'Bird of the Tour' vote was Desert Owl again, thanks to a fantastic encounter, in my top three with this enigmatic species, expertly guided by our friend 'Mr Flyway' himself, Jonathan Meyrav. The other most popular highlights were: point-blank Crowned Sandgrouse from Celia's photo hide at Ezuz in the Negev Desert; the non-stop ecstatic dancing display of Macqueen's Bustard; the rose-pink Sinai Rosefinch at a remote spring on the Dead Sea escarpment and a flock of migrant Levant Sparrowhawks gyrating overhead at Eilat. Other species that wowed our Birdquest group this year were: that Corn Crake, which walked right up to us by the Dead Sea; a Griffon Vulture tenderly rolling an egg in its nest on the cliffs of Ein Avdat; a Great Spotted Cuckoo calling overhead in Galilee; European Rollers breeding in the Golan Heights; gaudy Arabian Green and Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters; Greater Hoopoe Lark's display flight in the Arava Valley; ultra-smart Hooded and Mourning Wheatears; the male Collared Flycatcher we chanced upon in a Negev Desert migrant trap and the Black Scrub Robin family at hippy chic Kibbutz Samar. Given a few more voting choices I am sure that other wonderful sightings like the Eastern Steppe Festoon butterflies on the flowery grasslands of the Golan Heights would have featured, or the scarce migrant White-tailed Lapwing at Yotvata, Yellow-billed Stork and Black-winged Pratincole at Ma'ale Gilboa; Broad-billed Sandpiper and Greater Sand Plovers at km20 Flamingo Pools or the incredibly obliging singing Pale Rockfinch at Mount Amasa.

As the tour began, a significant storm system was crossing the country from the west to the east, flash floods in the desert had closed route 90 to Eilat and a couple of people had been drowned. The downpours looked to be worst along the Mediterranean coast, so I opted to go inland and spend the morning at fishponds in the Beit She'an Valley. Black-winged Kite made an appearance by route 6. There were only five Israeli records before 1989, I didn't see it last time and this year we tallied nine! Another 'welcome to Israel's new breeding avifauna' experience. Stopping for breakfast at a gas station a Eurasian Thick-knee was in a roadside field and several soggy Black Kites were draped over pivot gantries. The first-for-the-tour and ubiquitous Spur-winged Lapwing (my first had been while taxiing at Ben Gurion Airport) was also here. As we neared our first birding destination a squadron of 23 Great White Pelicans was spotted, taking to the air after the rain has eased. There was a WP mega to look for at Ma'ale Gilboa Fishponds – a Yellow-billed Stork, in the company of at least 132 Black Storks. The stork was easily located, albeit a rather dull, yellowish-billed immature and while we were waiting a Black-winged Pratincole dropped in, between the heavy rain showers. Reduced to seeking insects from the ground on the same large, ploughed field as the stork, the furrows of which were slowly filling with water.

Hirundines of various species were hawking low over the fishponds, including gorgeous Red-rumped Swallows, which could be seen covering from the cold rain beside our van from time to time. Splashes of colour were added by Yellow Wagtails – Black-headed and Blue-headed, Ospreys helped themselves to fish from the heavily managed ponds and at least one Marsh Harrier got in on the act, I've not seen them catching fish before! We added our first Garganey, Common Greenshank, Pygmy Cormorant, Squacco and Purple Herons, White-throated and Pied Kingfishers, Turtle Dove, Pallid Swift, Great Reed Warbler and Lesser Whitethroats. Mammals were represented by a couple of damp Golden Jackals and a Mountain Gazelle in the stork field. In the early afternoon the gaps between the downpours lengthened and gradually leaden clouds gave way to blue sky and sunshine. We continued north to Galilee, stopping at a couple of places on the way to our accommodation for the night.

Gome Junction held a big flock of c250 Glossy Ibis, crowded on the dividing banks of the fishponds. We added Black-crowned Night Heron, Ruff, Temminck's Stint and Northern Wheatear, although, like last time, there was no sign of the Marbled Ducks reported on eBird. The fishponds at Lahavot Habashan had been attracting some good birds lately but they were closed at the time of our visit. Not quite a total waste of time as we still managed to see the only Great Spotted Cuckoo of the tour here, a calling bird overhead on its way somewhere. At least nine Short-toed Snake Eagles hung in the wind over the Golan escarpment to the east.

We reached pretty She'ar Yashuv in the early evening, our base for the next two nights. She'ar Yashuv means 'what remains' and the Moshav here was established in 1940 by Zionist but it was abandoned in 1948 during the Arab-Israeli war when it fell within of artillery fire from the Golan Heights, then part of Syria. It was resettled in 1949 mostly by WW2 Holocaust survivors from Hungary, hence 'what remains'. It came under fire periodically until Israel occupied the Golan Heights in 1967. The pretty Moshav is now a picture of tranquillity by the Banias Stream, one of the tributaries of the River Jordan. I love to come here, it's one of my favourite places that I get to stay at around the world. An Eastern Olivaceous Warbler was singing in the garden, Palestine Sunbirds foraged in the flowering trees and the familiar song of Eurasian Blackbird could be heard, the same as from the TV aerial on my home in East Lancashire! Several Pygmy Cormorants and Western Cattle Egrets passed by on their way to their roosting spots at dusk and after dark the maniacal calls of Eurasian Thick-knee and the howling of jackals rang out, the lights of the Druze settlements on the Golan Heights twinkled above us. We renewed our acquaintance with the best restaurant on the tour again this evening, still terrific after the pandemic!

She'ar Yashuv also has the best breakfasts of the tour, a veritable banquet of local food that set us up for the day perfectly. My favourite was the Shakshuka, a large dish of eggs poached in a sauce of tomatoes, chili peppers, onions, spiced with cumin. It is believed to have a Tunisian origin and was introduced to Israel by Sephardic Jews from the west and it is delicious! While we enjoyed the breakfast banquet Syrian Woodpecker and Eurasian Hoopoe were added to our trip list. Pretty soon it was time to head uphill, the sky was clear, and the sun was shining, another beautiful spring day in the Levant. Gaining height, the impressive, restored hilltop Nimrod castle came into view. Built in 1229 by Al-Aziz Uthman, the younger son of Saladin it was captured in 1260 by the Mongols. It changed hands several times thereafter and was largely destroyed by an earthquake in the 18th century. We had to fill some time before the gate to the Mount Hermon ski resort road at Majdal Shams was opened at 8 o'clock so we birded the lower slopes around the gated community of Neve Ativ. Eurasian Wren was a great lifer for our Aussie and South African group members, and we also had some nice looks at European Serin and Greenfinch as well as the distinctive atricapillus subspecies of Eurasian Jay (one of 34 races of this bird – surely a candidate for a carve-up? There have been many less distinctive splits). The gate opened and the day-trippers poured in, this time the mountain still had some snow, in fact the snowline lay lower than the chairlift car park at around 1600m ASL! Cable cars were operating instead of the chair lift. Majdal Shams ('Tower of Sun'), population 10,800, known as the Druze capital centre of the Golan Heights was formerly a Syrian town but was occupied in 1967. Its occupants are now quite happy to be part of Israel and free from persecution and they even serve in the IDF (Israeli Defence Force). It featured in the 2004 film 'The Syrian Bride' and many of the girls here have dark hair and blue eyes, a DNS relic indicating a more north-western origin.

Migration was happening up on the mountain. Overhead we spotted Black and White Storks, Lesser Spotted and Steppe Eagles as well as Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Lesser Kestrel, and a few Steppe Buzzards. The calls of bee-eaters could be heard high in the blue sky, their makers remained unseen. We added some nice passerines too, top of the list was the lovely Syrian Serin, a pair by the roadside first and then a threesome by our picnic lunch stop. They took some hours of

searching though, their numbers probably reduced owing to the cold spring. More would move uphill in the coming weeks. In fact, the only eBird sighting before us this year was of one downslope at Neve Ativ in March! Finding this bird was a major relief, if the sightings reported are complete then it looks like they migrate from their wintering grounds in Southern Israel in March (into Outer Space it seems?) and reappear on the upland breeding grounds in mid-April, with nothing reported in between. Other welcome additions on the lower slopes of Mount Hermon included Thrush Nightingale, singing Eastern Orphean Warbler (a nightingale wannabe), Eastern Black-eared Wheatear, Sardinian Warbler, Woodchat Shrike, Common Linnet, and Rock Bunting. The next trickiest-to-find bird after the super-serin was Sombre Tit. We were delighted to find a nest along one of the side trails from the road, located in a crevice in the limestone pavement. We could watch the parents zooming back and forth at will. Some spring butterflies – unidentified festoons (probably Eastern Steppe though) and Queen of Spain Fritillaries skipped around between the patches of melting snow. What a fabulous morning's birding ended with a delicious al fresco picnic lunch.

On a glorious afternoon we toured the Golan Heights to the east of Mas'ada, where rolling flowery grasslands overlooking Syria are dotted with fortified military positions and minefield signs. Owing to a general lack of human activity this area is a haven for wildlife. The grasslands were alive with the songs of Corn Buntings, Woodchat Shrikes perched here and there. A male Red-backed Shrike was on a roadside wire south of El Rom. Overlooking the smashed up Syrian town of Quneitra, several gorgeous male Eastern Steppe Festoon butterflies patrolled the flowery grassland, looking for females in the shadows of tanks, left as reminder of the Arab-Israeli conflict here. Quneitra was destroyed by the Israelis after the 1973 Yom Kippur war and has never been rebuilt, resettlement having been discouraged by the Syrian government. Imagine a thousand Syrian tanks on the skyline, ultimately pushed back by the napalm of the Israeli air force's Phantom jets. There was a resurgence of violence during the Syrian Civil War, until the town was retaken by government forces in 2018 and thankfully it is now peaceful again, overlooked by a large UN base. Elsewhere on our tour of the Golan we saw both Cinereous (a sinister, dark immature bird) and Eurasian Griffon Vultures at Gamla, hanging around the vulture feeding station. Ortolan Buntings were on the move here, the grassland was full of them, up to five on the same weed stem at one point. A couple of Mountain Gazelles and five Short-toed Snake Eagles completed the picture. Close to the Syrian border at another point a surreal scene was an old keep-fit guy out jogging towards the border fence, while a Hummer full of IDF soldiers roared by. Burly Calandra Larks sang in the distance and we managed some nice scope views of them chasing and perching on a pivot gantry. Spanish Sparrows were also common here. Back at She'ar Yashuv a pair of Red-rumped Swallows was on the wires outside the farm and the hoopoe was back. What a day that was.

After another epic breakfast experience, we were off again, and while driving through Kiryat Shmona our first of 11 Masked Shrikes on the tour caused us to stop and take a closer look. As a bonus we also scored an adult Barred Warbler in the same bush along a barbed wire fence. Then followed our novelty excursion to the massive Agmon Hula reserve to the south. Once we had registered our driving licenses, we boarded our electric golf carts and set off around the perimeter of the large lake/reedbed. We were treated to cracking views of a series of great birds, the two main targets acquired – Marbled Duck (eight on the main lagoon) and an excellent Black Francolin calling from a tall post by one of the bee-eater colonies. Also of note on our cart trip were: Black-winged Kite perched nearby; European Bee-eaters by their mad-made earth bank colonies; Common Cranes (up to 66 together, some of them dancing); hundreds of White Storks, some 'kettling' up towards the mountains; Pygmy Cormorants drying their wings; seven Purple Herons; White-throated Kingfishers; a smart male Woodchat Shrike and a couple of Clamorous Reed Warblers, one of which showed very nicely.

On our way south we detoured back onto the Golan Heights for a bird we did not have time for the previous afternoon. On a pretty escarpment overlooking the Sea of Galilee, and with a little help from our friend Tuvia Kahn, we got by with some nice looks at Long-billed Pipit. Blackstart and Little Owl were also new here. Continuing into the West Bank, green grass turned brown and the landscape transformed into the Judean Desert. It is worth remembering that the West Bank was formerly part of the Ottoman Empire for 400 years(!), until 1917 when it came under British control. It was annexed by Jordan in 1948 and then by Israel in 1967. We eventually descended to Kalya Kibbutz, our overnight stop and more than 300m below sea level! All its facilities were closed for the sabbath, we had to look elsewhere for supplies and something to eat. We ended up having a great pizza this evening in a little gem of a restaurant run by a guy who used to live in Golders Green, London. The extensive palms in this area have recently been invaded by Pallid Scops Owls and we had some luck in seeing a couple of them out hunting after dark, one of which perched on a post by the van. Understandably, they did not respond to playback, obviously with other things on their minds at this time of year.

This morning saw us hiking, plus a little scrambling, up to a remote spring on the Dead Sea escarpment, a well-known site for another of our main target birds of the tour, the lovely Sinai Rosefinch. Tristram's Starlings greeted us, used to finding food near humans at parking areas! They are stupidly tame here, even perching on my scope. We also added our first Fan-tailed Ravens and White-crowned Wheatears here and up near the spring, a puddle leftover from the rainstorms attracted Blackstart, Desert Lark and our only Striolated Bunting of the tour. A male Sand Partridge gave its whiplash call not far away and showed briefly. While we waited in the shade of a large boulder, we could see a few raptors heading north along the cliffs, mostly Steppe Buzzards (but a mere 10% of the number we saw here in 2018) plus six Black Storks, a male Montagu's Harrier and a smart young Steppe Eagle. After some time, we heard the distinctive call of the rosefinch and eventually we got some nice views of a rose-pink male, his rather uniform grey-brown female was also nearby. Terrific stuff. Ice creams at Ein Gedi followed as the temperature hit 36 degrees Celsius before 10am. It is always stinking hot in the Dead Sea region, so we had a siesta today.

The second half of our epic Dead Sea day began at Ashalim Reservoir, at the southern end of the sea, past the cliff-breeding colonies of Pallid Swifts and the extensive salt works, churning out tonnes of magnesium chloride. The reservoir is now simply a reed-fringed pool by the road, but it is crammed full of birds. Notably Ferruginous Ducks – we estimated around 20, they are always coming and going from hidden reedy channels. They were also lots of Little Grebes and Eurasian Coots. Eventually we spotted our main target on the edge of the reeds at the back of the main pool, African Swamphen, another vagrant to Israel. Its fragmented breeding range in Africa extends as far north as the Nile Delta in Egypt. Bruce saw a Little Bittern in flight and there were a few Arabian Bee-eaters and Clamorous Reed Warblers. Our next stop was Heimar Reservoir, where we discovered the usual track to the Dead Sea Sparrow colony was under several feet of water! This reservoir had also filled up during the storm. We skirted around the edge and were delighted to find a Corn Crane doing the same thing. Another stupidly tame bird, just like the one on my last visit to Israel in 2018, it walked right up to us! Twice-in-a-lifetime views of this usual skulker then. Despite much searching there was no sign of the sparrows but we did see some nice migrants here in the form of Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin and Masked Shrike. As dusk approached the Pallid Swifts zooming around got lower and lower, affording some very nice views in the evening sun and looking a very straightforward ID task for a change!

We met our friend Jonathan Meyrav for the evening's night birding excursion in the Dead Sea region. The special bird we were looking for, Desert Owl, requires a permit in an effort to reduce disturbance from birders so you really do need a local guide for this one. We started off in a very picturesque desert canyon, where a pair of the owls was in residence. Jonathan explained about the background of the owls, how they know of around only 25 occupied territories in Israel and how they have disappeared from the Eilat mountains, thought to be owing to the recent increase in Pharaoh Eagle Owls, in the agricultural areas in the Arava Valley. As a gentle desert breeze blew, we waited for the birds to start calling... and waited and waited but no reply. An hour later Jonathan gave up and decided to switch locations to another territory. He knew that someone else had seen the owls here the previous week so maybe they were not keen on being disturbed again? I am sure these smart birds get wise to our artificial attempts to see them. We drove on into the night, winding our way along a desert track. Reaching our destination Jonathan said 'The male of this pair is an old friend of mine'. He wasn't wrong! Within no time at all he started calling and crossed the canyon from his breeding cliff to say hello to his old pal. After circling us he settled on the top of the cliff, where we were able to have a nice look at him. This was apparently the same male our group saw in 2018, but not nearly as close as this time. Fab-u-lous! Desert Owl is the cover star of the Hebrew version of the Collins Bird Guide (back to front of course) and 'It is burnt into our souls' said one of the volunteers from the IBRCE (International Birding and Research Centre Eilat), who had accompanied us for the evening. Then followed an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to see Nubian Nightjar on the sad remaining fragments of Tamarisk saltmarsh south of the Dead Sea. We could hear one calling well enough but it refused to co-operate and our time ran out, with another busy day ahead. Although our luck ran out here it had still been another day to remember!

A little later start than usual after our night-birding over-run saw us back at Heimar Reservoir. There was again no sign of Dead Sea Sparrow, a smart Red-backed Shrike at close range from the van was the best sighting this morning. Five lovely Squacco Herons in a tamarisk was also noteworthy. Our next stop was for another single-site bird, the rapidly declining Arabian Warbler. I used to see this bird around Yotvata at the southern end of the Arava Valley in the 1980s but following the conversion of so much of the lovely old acacia 'forest' to agriculture (date palms and melon fields) the warbler has disappeared from much of its former range. We arrived at our chosen spot way later than I had planned and it was already starting to get quite hot, however, after some ultra-fast spotting by Martin and Judy right where I had been recommended to try for them, there it was in the canopy of an ancient acacia tree, tail-dipping, dark hood with a subdued white eye-ring, dark upper tail, BINGO! Arabian Warbler. I don't think I've seen this one so quickly in Israel before. We enjoyed prolonged views and soon figured out there were more than one, an adult feeding a fledged juvenile in fact. Also in the same area were more Masked Shrikes, Desert Larks, Palestine Sunbird and Blackstart.

Yom HaShoah is Israel's Holocaust memorial day and this year it was today. Not to be confused with International Holocaust Remembrance Day, which was in January. Just before 10am cars pulled over at the 101 service station on route 90. Occupants got out and stood by their cars, not together but each by their own door, for two minutes silence. It was a solemn moment remembering the victims of one of humanity's worst crimes. We were heading south with a purpose now, towards Eilat and the Red Sea. During the recent 'Champions of the Flyway' event, a nest of Black Scrub Robin had been discovered in the pretty, hippy commune of Kibbutz Samar. I had a waypoint for it and even a photo of the palm it was in and with some sightings reported on eBird in recent days I was confident we would see this excellent bird. Black Scrub Robin is a Sahel bird, whose range extends from Senegal to Arabia. It was first seen in Israel in April 1981 at Yotvata and is now a regular breeder, following the colonisation of Namaqua Dove in the 1970s. We simply rolled up and there it was, the efficiency of modern birding at its best (or worst – there's not as much surprise element anymore, I'd seen numerous photos and videos of the male scrub robin online and he looked just how I was expecting he would, waving his tail, legs covered in ring bling). It was still a great, if somewhat surreal experience to see the scrub robin family like this, among the palms and attractively decorated kibbutz homes. I wouldn't mind to 'turn on, tune in and drop out' here myself! The Timothy Leary spirit of 1967 lives on in Samar. There is also a Gaudi theme going on with some lovely mosaic-covered sculptures, as well as some more bizarre installations, like an arrangement of old TVs!?? We enjoyed the shady walkways and saw a few migrants including a Siberian Chiffchaff and Spotted Flycatcher. Indian Silverbill was another addition to the bird list (I was excited to see some of the first of these introduced colonists at Eilat in 1989!) and the male scrub robin was singing by his nesting palm as we left.

Shifting back north slightly, we dropped in at Yotvata. The sewage works is the place to be now at Yotvata and we were delighted to find another lifer for most of our folks was still here – White-tailed Lapwing. It was quite skittish though, getting a lot of unwanted attention from the breeding Spur-winged Lapwings but big leggy found some respite around the reed-fringed pool at the southern end of the complex. After tiptoeing around the turd-filled water we got some excrement views in the haze of this now rare migrant, gasping for air in the heat of midday.

We completed our journey at Eilat's famous North Beach, the Red Sea lapping at our feet. Fortunately, the Passover crowds had dispersed (you cannot see the beach for tents during the holiday) and we added some useful birds here, notably the Red Sea endemic White-eyed Gull sitting on buoys, probably in Jordanian waters. A distant Brown Booby, also on a buoy, is a three stars bird on this itinerary and a good WP tick. The sea was calm and there were a few folks out swimming in it, with a huge cargo ship laden with new cars from east Asia beyond them. House Crows and Common Mynas now frequent the North Beach, welcome to the new avifauna! It was almost time to check-in to our Eilat hotel so we detoured along the canal (another of my former stomping grounds) to the IBRCE. Marsh Sandpiper was new for our list, among the other commoner shorebirds and lots of Slender-billed Gulls. A smart Whiskered Tern in breeding plumage added some more excitement. The salt pans at IBRCE added Caspian Tern, Red-necked Phalarope (at least 22 bobbing around on the water in various stages of plumage, some near full breeding) and dark mantled brute of a Heuglin's Gull (the Siberian form of Lesser Black-backed). With Yom HaShoah shut-downs everywhere we were delighted to find a restaurant open and it turned out to be another gem. We had to be finished by 8pm but they were very kind to take pity on us.

One of our number was surprised to discover there is a 5 o'clock in the morning as well as the one in the afternoon! A standard start time for Birdquest to get out into the field and it was wonderful to be arrive at our desert destination as the sun rose above the mountains of Jordan across the valley. A distant Dorcas's Gazelle trotted away from us and faced with a right or left choice we headed right. This turned out to be the wrong way. The Temminck's Larks were just to the left today, as we discovered later, when they showed briefly on the ground and then promptly flew off and over the border fence into Jordan. There were some other nice birds on our 7km+ hike across the desert plain, following the green (!!!) vegetation of the watercourses. Sadly, the breeding events that were occurring here with more than a dozen Temminck's Larks the previous weeks had been abruptly ended by the huge storm. The shallow wadi had obviously turned to a river and washed their nests out, recently sculpted sand banks were evidence of this. We still had some nice birds here, including some point-blank views of Great Grey Shrike (of the dark Arabian aucheri subspecies here, formerly split as part of Southern Grey Shrike, but now lumped in Great Grey again with all the other 11 races!). Also, of note here were some Tawny Pipits and Greater Short-toed Larks, a Common Cuckoo and a male Montagu's Harrier heading north.

Another welcome stop at 101 followed, rapidly becoming one of our favourite places with its ice cream and fresh orange juice (the latter strangely uncommon in Israel despite a surfeit of oranges). It was still early enough for another desert hike and shortly into this one the plaintive, haunting whistle of Greater Hoopoe Lark could be heard in the distance. We quickly located it and had some great looks as it ran around across the ground like a mini-courser and sang from small bushes, before we decided it was getting to hot now and time to return to the refuge of the van's AC.

We stopped off at Yotvata. OMG. WTF happened here? The once hotspot fields were virtually devoid of birds. I wonder if they are spraying something on the crops? There was almost no irrigation happening either, most crops seemed to be over already. Israel migration addict Frank Moffat wrote 'this was one of the hotspots in the Arava Valley...once I'd dried my tears'. I felt the same, I've seen some great birds here. Just as the north fields at Eilat once ruled, the places to look for migrants have shifted again. There was literally nothing of any note, so we continued down route 90 to the km20 Salt Pans, err Flamingo Pools, sorry! A quick look in the junction acacia grove and the nearby date palms did not reveal any of the hoped-for Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse (yet again it wasn't present at its COTF sites, probably having been booted out of here by birders unwilling to scour the grove from their vehicles?). The flamingo pools themselves were very productive as always. Topping the bill here was a Broad-billed Sandpiper, which gave some great views along the shore not far from the van. Other species of note included Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, Greater Flamingo (c200), Pied Avocet, Common Ringed Plover, Curlew Sandpiper (three), Temminck's Stint (c50), Dunlin (a bird with a truly massive bill, presumably of one of the Siberian races, but which one?), two Gull-billed Terns and c60 Glossy Ibises. Just down the road at km19 the sewage works tank held a whopping 48 Purple Herons but still no small crakes or bitterns. We did find the rarest bird of the tour here though, an immature/female Red-breasted Merganser, a proper Eilat rarity that caused the local twitchers to start their engines! They are regular enough on the Med coast but no longer down by the Red Sea. There was still no sign of Dead Sea Sparrow though.

It is easy to rack up a big bird list without leaving the vicinity of Eilat. A much-appreciated lie in until the 6am start, was followed by stocking up on tasty pastries at one of Eilat's many coffee shop/supermarkets and we were off. This time just up the road to Amram's Columns. This geological feature used to be the go-to site for Hooded Wheatear back in the 80s and it is great to see that it remains so today. After ticking off the much commoner White-crowned Wheatear, Sand Partridge and Streaked Scrub Warbler, all in the most beautiful of desert canyon surroundings, carefully sculpted over the millennia by flash floods, Bruce struck gold with a male Hooded Wheatear, the 'king of the wheatears'. What an incredible beast it is, like an elongated and upgraded Mourning Wheatear (which we still hadn't seen yet I hasten to add!), one moment it was on the canyon floor and the next its super long wings had taken it effortlessly to the top of the cliffs, from where it kept an eye on us. We love great birds in great places!

Dropping back down to the valley bottom the km20 acacia grove was empty again so we continued to km19 and its sewage works and another try for that sparrow. The stars of the show, however, was the gyrating flock of Levant Sparrowhawks directly overhead, the males were hyper distinctive with bright white underparts and smoky wingtips. Fantastic stuff. We could count them from photos and a couple of small flocks brought the total to 110. One Eurasian Sparrowhawk was seriously outnumbered this morning! Eventually, after sifting through the very many House Sparrows, we finally came across a Dead Sea Sparrow, albeit a diddy little female with a tiny bill in comparison with the beefy cousins next to it. We ended the morning at Holland Park in the hope of an Arabian Babbler but no luck, just common birds like Namaqua Dove, Arabian Green Bee-eater, an increase in numbers of Lesser Whitethroat, Blackstart, Palestine Sunbird and another Indian Silverbill for some.

The afternoon session started at the km20 Flamingo Pools, with two new plovers for the tour, Grey (or Black-bellied) Plover in non-breeding plumage and two Greater Sand Plovers in rusty partial breeding plumage. A Kentish Plover had two tiny fluffy chicks in tow and a White Wagtail was the first for a while. Wagtails were in very short supply this year. We continued to the IBRCE and North Beach but there was not much new of note, Caspian Gull was added to the list at the salt pans and a Common Tern was on the buoys off the beach. A pair of Tristram's Starlings was also here, they get everywhere, from the remotest desert wadis to the beach! An after-hours nightbirding session at Yotvata was a waste of time, producing only Desert Hedgehog of note.

There are plenty of excellent birding spots to the northwest of Eilat, in the Moon Mountains, towards Ovda Airport. After our early morning pastry run, we skirted the Egyptian border fence this time, a new one for us on this tour. A tiny grove of trees not far from the airport held a couple of Black-crowned Night Herons of note. We also hiked out onto the plains in the Ovda Valley, towards the 'Black Hills', usually a very productive area but all we managed here, among the at least one million Crested Larks, were Short-toed Snake Eagle, marsh harrier, bee-eater, Lesser Kestrel and Great Grey Shrike, but a very strong southerly wind made birding difficult. The signs of the recent storm were also evident and many nests must have been lost during the ensuing flash floods. Another grove beyond Ovda produced a few new birds including Eastern Bonelli's Warbler (strangely the only one of the tour!), lots of blackcaps and Lesser Whitethroats, a Whinchat and a Marsh Warbler. The Neot Samadar sewage works is another migrant trap and held 14 Glossy Ibises and a Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin (they breed here) but not much else. Returning to the Arava Valley we revisited Yotvata Sewage Works, following up a sighting of Blue-cheeked Bee-eater from the previous day and we were delighted to find three on wires by the nearby date palm plantation. A little exploring soon had us parked under them, affording some great views as they hawked for locusts from the wires, terrific stuff! Also on the wires were half a dozen turtle doves and Namaqua Doves and as we watched the bee-eaters a lone Arabian Babbler pitched into a nearby tree. It took some time to see one this year! The afternoon session included the km19 and km20 hotspots as well as the IBRCE. The only significant new development was that the Gull-billed Terns at km20 had increased to 10 and our first Little Ringed Plover made an appearance. We enjoyed a lovely seafood meal tonight by the sea, after which a little seawatching produced nine Parasitic Jaegers heading north offshore towards the head of the gulf.

Another early start saw us back out in a lovely natural wadi in the Arava Valley, where we were serenaded by Greater Hoopoe and Bar-tailed Larks, both lovely singers in their own ways. There was a crazy number of Dorcas's Gazelles here, taking advantage of the green vegetation, over 30 of them. We also finally caught up with a pair of Desert Wheatears, a super-smart Mourning Wheatear and an adult Egyptian Vulture, but alas none of the rare larks were around anymore. Probably washed away by the floods, which looked to have been dramatic here. We hiked over 7km this morning, stopping and listening carefully. Ah well, next time, or Saudi then? As we walked away, at last a sandgrouse! Seventeen Spotted Sandgrouse to be precise. They were out of sight quickly and but were able to relocate them for those who needed a little better view, albeit rather distantly. It has never taken this long to see a sandgrouse on this tour. No doubt also thanks to the storm leaving one million drinking pools for them all over the place. They are thinly scattered and difficult to see when they do not need to fly. 101 was a very welcome sight and after recharging our batteries we headed northwest into the Negev Desert towards Mitzpe Ramon, our next overnight stop. Wadi Nekarot is always a good stop and allowed some of us to catch up with scrub warbler before our picnic lunch in a pine grove up on the crater rim. We ought to earn our lunch and a lovely Desert Finch was payment in full. After lunch we had some great views of Arabian Babbler in the pines.

In the afternoon we visited the lovely Ben Gurion Memorial Garden at Sde Boker. In gorgeous surroundings, a female Syrian Woodpecker was surprisingly far south and another odd resident was a blackbird pair, feeding a juvenile. We had a quick look at the rather austere tombs of David Ben Gurion (1886 - 1973), founder of the state of Israel and its first Prime Minister, and his wife, Paula. Migrants included another Masked Shrike, a lovely Wood Warbler, some Eastern Olivaceous Warblers and a pair of gaudy Eurasian Golden Orioles but could we find the female type Collared Flycatcher here? No. To add insult to injury, the cliff viewpoint at Ein Avdat was closed by the time we got there. So, on our way back to Mitzpe Ramon we stopped off at another great migrant trap, the Avdat gas station and almost immediately BAM! MALE COLLARED FLYCATCHER! Also here were Egyptian Vulture, two adults over, a hoopoe and a ridiculously obliging Arabian Green Bee-eater. We got asked to leave here too as the shop here was closing/well already closed. We ended the day gazing out over the impressive Ramon Crater, neither volcanic nor a result of a meteorite strike, it is an erosion crater. The rocks at the bottom of the 500m deep crater are around 200 million years old.

Our earliest start of the tour saw us arriving at a remote spot near the Egyptian border before sunrise, where we boarded the stationery Turkish railway carriage at the famous 7km Ezuz Road site. The extra height of this public viewpoint

allowed to get some nice views of a couple of displaying Macqueen's Bustards to the east, these crazy birds fluff up their neck feathers to the extent that they cover their face and then proceed to run around in a comical fashion like they can't see where they're going! Exactly where I first saw them 34 years ago. It is nice to see that some things have not changed. As we watched them a small flock of Cream-coloured Coursers landed next to one of them. That was very convenient! A scope-full of two classic desert birds! Our only hobby of the tour was perched on a roadside pole as we left for Ezuz, just a stone's throw along the road. The railway line was built by the Turks and stretched all the way to Sinai but was destroyed by the British in 1913 during WWI. Our next stop was British ex-pat Celia Poulton-Friede's 'by appointment only' sandgrouse pool. It was awesome to see it still in operation and in fact the photo hide section has been expanded and could easily accommodate all our group, although a couple stayed up on the veranda, rather than be entombed in the concrete bunker, in the hope of a pintail, which do not always land by the pool. That turned out to be a good plan but for anyone taking photos there is no substitute for eye-level views at a drinking pool! We could hear and see small groups of Crowned Sandgrouse gathering in the hinterland not long after our visit and eventually they came to drink. Such wonderful birds, full of character, burbling to each other as they approached the small drinking pool. It was also an opportunity to improve images of several other species. Although variety was a little down on our last visit, we could still take some very nice photos of Hooded Crow, Namaqua and Turtle Doves, Crested Lark, and Spanish Sparrow among others. Celia's goat cheese farm is looking great now, and she is building her herd before resuming production. However, she had the whole herd stolen three times since she moved here 30 years ago! We could watch them returning from their morning grazing, floppy ears swinging and their kids calling excitedly to their mums who would soon be delivering their breakfast. Another comical sight.

I do not usually write about industrial things on bird tours but both today and yesterday we had seen a strange bright light in the sky, like an 'eye of Sauron' or something. Well today we got a close look at it, we drove right past the 260m tall Ashalim B Solar Power Tower. The tower uses 50,600 computer-controlled heliostats to concentrate the rays of the sun on the top section of the tower where molten salts are heated and used to boil water and drive turbines. This construction allows power to be stored longer and generated when the sun is not shining. This tower can produce enough energy to power 120,000 homes! An extraordinary glimpse into the future! We stopped off at Sde Boker kibbutz fields and added Common Redstart here. The Ein Avdat viewpoint was open today and we enjoyed some time here, watching the griffon vulture on its nest, occasionally gently turning its egg. A couple more griffons were further along the cliff and among the many Pallid Swifts we noted a couple of Alpines. Unfortunately, there was no sign of Bonelli's Eagle or Blue Rock Thrush this year but we did see a Mourning Wheatear and the weird-looking Fat Sand Rat! An evening spin around the KKL Grove and Marom Farm back at Mitzpe Ramon produced: another Masked Shrike; 15 European Bee-eaters, which were spooked by a male Levant Sparrowhawk; a Woodchat and two Whinchats. Migration was still happening, a nice end to our day in the Negev.

On our last day we drove north out of the Negev and to the edge of the Judean Desert, on the southern edge of the West Bank. The hills turned green again, with cereal crops and we finally arrived at this morning's birding destination Mount Amasa. What a gem this place is. The rolling, rocky hills are covered with scrub and are full of life of all forms. We were mostly here for a very special bird, Pale Rockfinch. There seemed to be a breeding event occurring here this year and it wasn't long before we heard its insect-like wheeze. They are very confiding and we had some wonderful close views as it sang on nearby rocks. Describing it as 'a rather featureless and dull sandy bunting - or lark like bird' in Helm's Finches & Sparrows was most unkind. What it lacks in colours in certainly makes up for in subtle beauty and character. It has some bold wing bars for a start. I probably have a soft spot for it having witnessed the 1988 influx to Eilat, when around 600 were estimated in the mountains there. Small numbers breed from Mount Hermon northwards to southeast Turkey, but it is much more common to the northeast, in Iran/Baluchistan. Its northern counterpart, Rock Sparrow also breeds on Mount Amasa, it was curious to see them side by side here. Other delights were Eurasian Thick-knee, Eastern Black-eared Wheatear, Masked Shrike, Spectacled Warbler, Long-billed Pipit, Streaked Scrub Warbler and Ortolan Bunting and non-avian highlights included the lovely little Mallow Skipper butterfly, Speckled Crimson moth, Greek Tortoise and European Mantis.

We had time for one last stop before the end of the tour, so we made for Tel Aviv and somewhere within easy reach of the airport. The Rosh Tzipor Birdwatching Centre is an amazing little urban nature reserve/educational facility slap bang in the middle of the city. It was surprising to see what was lurking in this tiny little patch of wetland. A Striated Heron showed very nicely. 'Yeah, common here' said Jonathan - they used to be a Red Sea-only speciality. First recorded in Israel in the 1970s, I recall seeing my life bird at Eilat in 1989, straight out of the night club at 5am and down to the marina, where one could be seen fishing from mooring ropes of the boats. Fast forward 30 years and they are on the Med Coast! Other interesting birds at RTBC included a couple of write-ins, both introduced but now thriving in metropolitan Tel Aviv - Vinous-breasted Myna and Monk Parakeet. Welcome to the new avifauna again! Oh, and we saw at least eight Golden Jackals today, including in urban Tel Aviv! They are taking over as well. So, another action-packed tour of the Flyway ended, and we made our way to Ben Gurion Airport. Thanks to our enthusiastic group and our Israeli friends Jonathan Meyrav and Yoav Perlman for their help as always, you guys are awesome!

## **BIRD OF THE TOUR**

### **1<sup>st</sup> Desert Owl**

2<sup>nd</sup> Crowned Sandgrouse

3<sup>rd</sup> MacQueen's Bustard

4<sup>th</sup> Sinai Rosefinch & Levant Sparrowhawk

#### SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED

##### BIRDS

**Egyptian Goose** *Alopochen aegyptiaca* Pair with three goslings Yotvata SW

**Garganey** *Spatula querquedula* Only five noted, a poor showing

**Northern Shoveler** *Spatula clypeata* The first was a male at Agamon Hula

**Gadwall** *Mareca strepera* Four at Agamon Hula

**Eurasian Wigeon** *Mareca penelope* Female at Agamon Hula

**Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos* Common

**Northern Pintail** *Anas acuta* Up to six males at Eilat

**Eurasian Teal** *Anas crecca* c50 Agamon Hula

**Marbled Duck** ♦ *Marmaronetta angustirostris* Eight Agamon Hula

**Ferruginous Duck** *Aythya nyroca* Max. c20 at Ashalim Res.

**Red-breasted Merganser** *Mergus serrator* Fem./imm. km19 SW, Eilat 18 April

**Black Francolin** *Francolinus francolinus* One seen Agamon Hula plus several heard

**Sand Partridge** ♦ *Ammoperdix heyi* First seen at Wadi Salvadora, Dead Sea

**Common Quail** *Coturnix coturnix* One in the Golan Heights

**Chukar Partridge** ♦ *Alectoris chukar* First noted Neve Ativ

**Nubian Nightjar** ♦ *Caprimulgus nubicus* Heard only Neot Hakkikar

**Alpine Swift** *Tachymarptis melba* Noted at Ein Avdat and Mount Amasa

**Common Swift** *Apus apus* First seen at Ma'ale Gilboa Fishponds

**Pallid Swift** *Apus pallidus* Max. c300 Dead Sea

**Macqueen's Bustard** ♦ *Chlamydotis macqueenii* Two males at km7 Ezuz

**Great Spotted Cuckoo** *Clamator glandarius* One at Lavahot HaBashan Fishponds

**Common Cuckoo** *Cuculus canorus* First seen at km84, Arava Valley

**Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** ♦ *Pterocles alchata* One at Ezuz

**Spotted Sandgrouse** ♦ *Pterocles senegallus* 17 at km94, Arava Valley

**Crowned Sandgrouse** ♦ *Pterocles coronatus* c40 Ezuz

**Rock Dove** *Columba livia* Common

**European Turtle Dove** *Streptopelia turtur* First seen at Ma'ale Gilboa Fishponds

**Eurasian Collared Dove** *Streptopelia decaocto* Common

**Laughing Dove (introduced)** *Spilopelia senegalensis* Common

**Namaqua Dove** *Oena capensis* First seen at Yotvata SW

**Corn Crane** ♦ *Crex crex* A tame bird at Heimar Res.



**Common Moorhen** *Gallinula chloropus* First seen at Ma'ale Gilboa Fishponds

**Eurasian Coot** *Fulica atra* First seen at Ma'ale Gilboa Fishponds

**African Swampphen** *Porphyrio madagascariensis* One at Ashalim Res.

**Common Crane** *Grus grus* 66 counted at Agamon Hula

**Little Grebe** *Tachybaptus ruficollis* Max. c30 Ashalim Res.

**Greater Flamingo** *Phoenicopterus roseus* Max. c200 km<sup>2</sup> Flamingo Pools, Eilat

**Eurasian Stone-curlew** *Burhinus oedipnemus* First noted near Afula

**Black-winged Stilt** *Himantopus himantopus* First noted Gome Junction Fishponds

**Pied Avocet** *Recurvirostra avosetta* One km<sup>2</sup> Flamingo Pools, Eilat

**Spur-winged Lapwing (S-w Plover)** *Vanellus spinosus* Common

**White-tailed Lapwing (W-t Plover)** *Vanellus leucurus* A single vagrant at Yotvata SW

**Grey Plover (Black-bellied P)** *Pluvialis squatarola* One km<sup>2</sup> Flamingo Pools, Eilat

**Common Ringed Plover** *Charadrius hiaticula* First noted IBRCE

**Little Ringed Plover** *Charadrius dubius* One km<sup>2</sup> Flamingo Pools, Eilat

**Kentish Plover** *Charadrius alexandrinus* First noted IBRCE

**Greater Sand Plover** *Charadrius leschenaulti* Two km<sup>2</sup> Flamingo Pools, Eilat

**Ruff** *Calidris pugnax* First noted Ma'ale Gilboa Fishponds

**Broad-billed Sandpiper** *Calidris falcinellus* One km<sup>2</sup> Flamingo Pools, Eilat

**Curlew Sandpiper** *Calidris ferruginea* Three km<sup>2</sup> Flamingo Pools, Eilat

**Temminck's Stint** *Calidris temminckii* Six at Gome Junction Fishponds were the first

**Dunlin** *Calidris alpina* Two km<sup>2</sup> Flamingo Pools, Eilat

**Little Stint** *Calidris minuta* First noted IBRCE

**Common Snipe** *Gallinago gallinago* First noted IBRCE

**Red-necked Phalarope** *Phalaropus lobatus* 22 IBRCE

**Common Sandpiper** *Actitis hypoleucos* First noted Heimar Res.

**Green Sandpiper** *Tringa ochropus* First noted Ma'ale Gilboa Fishponds

**Common Redshank** *Tringa tetanus* First noted IBRCE

**Marsh Sandpiper** *Tringa stagnatilis* First noted IBRCE

**Wood Sandpiper** *Tringa glareola* First noted IBRCE

**Common Greenshank** *Tringa nebularia* First noted Ma'ale Gilboa Fishponds

**Cream-colored Courser** *Cursorius cursor* 12 in the Ezuz area

**Collared Pratincole** *Glareola pratincole* Six noted, the first Ma'ale Gilboa Fishponds

**Black-winged Pratincole** *Glareola nordmanni* One Ma'ale Gilboa Fishponds

**Slender-billed Gull** *Chroicocephalus genei* First noted IBRCE

**White-eyed Gull** ♦ *Ichthyaeetus leucophthalmus* Up to two Eilat North Beach

**Caspian Gull** *Larus cachinnans* Two IBRCE

**Yellow-legged Gull** *Larus michahellis* One adult Rosh Tzippor Birdwatching Centre

**Armenian Gull** ♦ *Larus armenicus* c50 Ma'ale Gilboa Fishponds

Lesser Black-backed Gull (Baltic G) *Larus [fuscus] fuscus* Four Ma'ale Gilboa FP

Lesser Black-backed Gull ◊ (Heuglin's G) *Larus [fuscus] heuglini* One IBRCE

Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica* Up to 10 km<sup>20</sup> Flamingo Pools, Eilat

Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia* Three IBRCE

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* One Eilat North Beach plus c80 probables in the Gulf

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida* Adult IBRCE

Parasitic Jaeger (Arctic Skua) *Stercorarius parasiticus* Nine Eilat

Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* Max. 132 Ma'ale Gilboa FP

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* Thousands in the north

Yellow-billed Stork *Mycteria ibis* The continuing immature Ma'ale Gilboa FP

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* One Eilat North Beach

Pygmy Cormorant ◊ *Microcarbo pygmaeus* First noted Ma'ale Gilboa FP

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* One Tel Aviv from route 6

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* max c. 300 Gome Junction FP

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* Two Agamon Hula

Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus* One Ashalim Res.

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* First noted Gome Junction FP

Striated Heron (Green-backed H) *Butorides striata* One Rosh Tzippor BC

Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides* First noted Ma'ale Gilboa FP

Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* First noted Ma'ale Gilboa FP

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* First noted Ma'ale Gilboa FP

Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* Max. 48 km<sup>19</sup> Sewage Works, Eilat

Great Egret *Ardea alba* First noted Afula

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* First noted Ma'ale Gilboa FP

Great White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus* Max. c100 Ma'ale Gilboa FP

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* Three Ma'ale Gilboa FP

Black-winged Kite *Elanus caeruleus* Nine sightings of this increasing species

Egyptian Vulture ◊ *Neophron percnopterus* Four adults, the first km<sup>94</sup>, Arava Valley

Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus* Two Gamla and three Ein Avdat including one on a nest

Cinereous Vulture (Eurasian Black V) *Aegypius monachus* Immature at Gamla

Short-toed Snake Eagle *Circaetus gallicus* 27 tallied, the first at Lavahot Habashan

Lesser Spotted Eagle *Clanga pomarina* Three Mount Hermon

Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis* Singles Mount Hermon and Wadi Salvadora

Levant Sparrowhawk ◊ *Accipiter brevipes* 110 km<sup>19</sup> and a male Mitzpe Ramon

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* 6-7 sightings

Western Marsh Harrier (Eurasian M H) *Circus aeruginosus* Total 27 tallied

Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* Males at Wadi Salvadora and km<sup>84</sup>

Black Kite *Milvus migrans* First noted Ma'ale Gilboa Fishponds, total c530 tallied

**Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*** Seen daily in small numbers, total c75 only tallied

**Little Owl *Athene noctua*** One Susita, Galilee

**Pallid Scops Owl ♦ *Otus brucei*** Two seen Kalya Palm Plantations

**Tawny Owl *Strix aluco*** Heard only at She'ar Yashuv

**Desert Owl\* ♦ *Strix hadorami*** One at Showadi wadi, Dead Sea

**Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops*** Total 10, under pressure from Common Myna!

**European Roller *Coracias garrulus*** First noted at breeding colony Golan Heights

**White-throated Kingfisher (W-breasted K) *Halcyon smyrnensis*** First Ma'ale Gilboa

**Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*** One at Heimar Res.

**Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis*** First noted Ma'ale Gilboa Fishponds

**Arabian Green Bee-eater ♦ *Merops cyanophrys*** First noted in the Dead Sea Region

**Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops persicus*** Three at Yotava SW

**European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*** Max. c100 Agamon Hula breeding colonies

**Syrian Woodpecker ♦ *Dendrocopos syriacus*** First noted She'ar Yashuv

**Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*** Single males Mount Hermon and Uvda Valley

**Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*** Common in the desert

**Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*** One km7 Ezuz

**Rose-ringed Parakeet (introduced) *Psittacula kramera*** Common in the north

**Monk Parakeet (introduced) *Myiopsitta monachus*** Two at Rosh Tzipor BC, Tel Aviv

**Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*** Males in the Golan and at Heimar Res.

**Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*** Total five sightings ssp. *aucheri*

**Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator*** First noted Mount Hermon

**Masked Shrike ♦ *Lanius nubicus*** Eleven was an average total

**Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*** Pair Ben Gurion Memorial Gdn, Sde Boker

**Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*** Several seen in the north and at Mount Amasa

**Western Jackdaw *Coloeus monedula*** First noted Ma'ale Gilboa Fishponds

**House Crow (introduced) *Corvus splendens*** Now common around Eilat

**Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*** Common in the north

**Brown-necked Raven ♦ *Corvus ruficollis*** Nine sightings in the south

**Northern Raven *Corvus corax*** Noted at Mount Hermon and at Ein Avdat

**Fan-tailed Raven ♦ *Corvus rhipidurus*** c10 Dead Sea region

**Sombre Tit ♦ *Poecile lugubris*** Three including a pair at the nest Mount Hermon

**Great Tit *Parus major*** First noted Mount Hermon

**Greater Hoopoe-Lark *Alaemon alaudipes*** Up to five the Arava Valley

**Desert Lark ♦ *Ammomanes deserti*** First noted Wadi Salvador

**Bar-tailed Lark ♦ *Ammomanes cinctura*** c10 Arava Valley

**Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*** Common

**Temminck's Lark ♦ *Eremophila bilopha*** Two km84 Arava Valley

Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla* Two km84 Arava Valley

Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra* Six Golan Heights

White-spectacled Bulbul ♦ *Pycnonotus xanthopygos* Common

Sand Martin *Riparia riparia* First noted Ma'ale Gilboa Fishponds

Pale Crag Martin ♦ *Ptyonoprogne obsoleta* First noted Wadi Salvador

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* First Ma'ale Gilboa FP, one ssp *savignii*

Common House Martin *Delichon urbicum* First noted Ma'ale Gilboa FP

Red-rumped Swallow *Cecropis daurica* First noted Ma'ale Gilboa FP

Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti* Heard Lahavot HaBashan FP and Agamon Hula

Streaked Scrub Warbler ♦ *Scotocerca inquieta* First noted at Amram's Columns

Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix* One Ben Gurion Memorial Gdn, Sde Boker

Eastern Bonelli's Warbler ♦ *Phylloscopus orientalis* One Ovda Valley

Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* First noted Mount Hermon

Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* Ma'ale Gilboa & Agamon Hula

Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus* One seen well at Agamon Hula

Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* Heard Ma'ale Gilboa, seen Agamon

Common Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus [scirpaceus] fuscus* First Ma'ale Gilboa FP

Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris* One migrant Uvda Valley

Eastern Olivaceous Warbler *Iduna pallida* First noted She'ar Yashuv

Graceful Prinia *Prinia gracilis* Common in the north, first Ma'ale Gilboa FP

Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* First noted Ma'ale Gilboa FP

Barred Warbler *Curruca nisoria* One Kiryat Shmona

Lesser Whitethroat *Curruca curruca* First noted Ma'ale Gilboa FP

Arabian Warbler ♦ *Curruca leucomelaena* Adult feeding a juvenile Arava Valley

Eastern Orphean Warbler ♦ *Curruca crassirostris* Two singing Mount Hermon

Sardinian Warbler *Curruca melanocephala* Two seen plus two heard Mt Hermon

Spectacled Warbler *Curruca conspicillata* Eight Mount Amasa

Arabian Babbler ♦ *Argya squamiceps* First seen Yotvata SW

Eurasian Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* Nice views at Neve Ativ

Western Rock Nuthatch ♦ *Sitta neumayer* Two seen Mount Hermon

Common Myna (introduced) *Acridotheres tristis* Common

Vinous-breasted Myna (introduced) *Acridotheres leucocephalus* 2 Rosh Tzipor BC

Tristram's Starling ♦ *Onychognathus tristramii* First noted Wadi Salvador

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula* Singing She'ar Yashuv, breeding at Sde Boker

Black Scrub Robin ♦ (B Bush Chat) *Cercotrichas podobe* Two Kibbutz Samar

Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin (R Bush R) *Cercotrichas galactotes* First Heimar Res.

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* Six seen, first in Galilee

Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia* One Mount Hermon

Collared Flycatcher ◊ *Ficedula albicollis* 2cy male Avdat gas station

Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* One Sde Boker SW

Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra* One Uvda Valley and two Mitzpe Ramon

European Stonechat (Common S) *Saxicola rubicola* One Mount Hermon

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* Noted at Gome Junction FP and km94

Hooded Wheatear ◊ *Oenanthe monacha* Male at Amram's Columns, Eilat

Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti* Pair km94, Arava Valley

Eastern Black-eared Wheatear ◊ *Oenanthe melanoleuca* Common Mount Hermon

Blackstart ◊ *Oenanthe melanura* First noted at Susita, Galilee

White-crowned Wheatear ◊ (W-c Black W) *Oenanthe leucopyga* First Dead Sea

Mourning Wheatear ◊ *Oenanthe lugens* Singles km94 and Ein Avdat

Palestine Sunbird ◊ (Orange-tufted S) *Cinnyris osea* First noted She'ar Yashuv

Pale Rockfinch ◊ (P Rock Sparrow) *Carpospiza brachydactyla* Two Mount Amasa

Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia* Five Mount Amasa

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis* First noted Ma'ale Gilboa Fishponds

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* Common

Dead Sea Sparrow ◊ *Passer moabiticus* One km19 Eilat

Indian Silverbill (introduced) *Euodice malabarica* Singles Samar & Holland Park

Western Yellow Wagtail (form unknown) *Motacilla flava* Total c30 was a low number

Western Yellow Wagtail (Blue-headed W) *Motacilla [flava] flava* Ma'ale Gilboa

Western Yellow Wagtail (Sykes's W) *Motacilla [flava] beema* Ma'ale Gilboa

Western Yellow Wagtail (Black-headed W) *Motacilla [flava] feldegg* Ma'ale Gilboa

Western Yellow Wagtail (Grey-headed W) *Motacilla [flava] thunbergi* Two km20

White Wagtail *Motacilla [alba] alba* First noted Ma'ale Gilboa Fishponds

Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris* Four at km84, Arava Valley was the first of 14

Long-billed Pipit *Anthus similis* Five Susita and three Mount Amasa

Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus* Heard Uvda Valley and nice views at IBRCE

Sinai Rosefinch ◊ *Carpodacus synoicus* Pair Wadi Salvadora

European Greenfinch *Chloris chloris* Common Mount Hermon

Desert Finch ◊ *Rhodospiza obsoleta* One at Mitzpe Ramon

Common Linnet *Linaria cannabina* c10 Mount Hermon

European Serin *Serinus serinus* Five Neve Ativ

Syrian Serin ◊ *Serinus syriacus* Five Mount Hermon lower slopes

Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra* Common Golan Heights

Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia* Six Mount Hermon

Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana* 13 at Gamla were the first

Striolated Bunting *Emberiza striolata* One Wadi Salvadora

## MAMMALS

**Desert Hedgehog** *Paraechinus aethiopicus* One Yotvata and two km94, Arava Valley

**Egyptian Mongoose** *Herpestes ichneumon* Two in the north

**Golden Jackal (Common J)** *Canis aureus* Total 12 sightings

**Red Fox** *Vulpes vulpes* One Neot Hakkikar

**Nubian Ibex** *Capra nubiana* Noted En Gedi and Mitzpe Ramon

**Dorcas Gazelle** *Gazella dorcas* Max c30 km94, Arava Valley

**Mountain Gazelle** *Gazella gazella* First noted Ma'ale Gilboa Fishponds

**Cape Hare** *Lepus capensis* First noted Neot Hakkikar

**Coypu (introduced)** *Myocastor coypus* Common Agamon Hula

**Arabian Golden Spiny Mouse** *Acomys russatus* One at Wadi Salvadora

**Fat Sand-rat** *Psammomys obesus* Two Ein Avdat



*Yellow-billed Stork (image by Mike Watson)*



*White-tailed Lapwing (image by Mike Watson)*



*Wadi Salvadora (image by Mike Watson)*



*Syrian Serin (image by Mike Watson)*



*Susita, Galilee (image by Mike Watson)*





*Striated Heron (image by Mike Watson)*



*Spanish Sparrow (image by Mike Watson)*



*Drinking pool for sandgrouse at Ezuz (image by Mike Watson)*



*Sinai Rosefinch (image by Mike Watson)*



*Kentish Plover (image by Mike Watson)*



*Hooded Wheatear (image by Mike Watson)*



*Eastern Steppe Festoon (image by Mike Watson)*



*Black Scrub Robin (image by Mike Watson)*



*Black-winged Kite (image by Mike Watson)*



*European Bee-eater (image by Mike Watson)*



*Kibbutz Samar (image by Mike Watson)*



*European Roller (image by Mike Watson)*



*Blue-cheeked Bee-eater (image by Mike Watson)*



*Broad-billed Sandpiper (image by Mike Watson)*



*European Turtle Dove (image by Mike Watson)*



*Levant Sparrowhawk (image by Mike Watson)*





*Mount Amasa (image by Mike Watson)*



*Golden Jackal (image by Mike Watson)*



*Collared Flycatcher (image by Mike Watson)*



*Corn Crake (image by Mike Watson)*



*Great Grey Shrike (image by Mike Watson)*



*Mourning Wheatear (image by Mike Watson)*



*Great White Pelicans (image by Mike Watson)*



*Nubian Ibex (image by Mike Watson)*



*Pale Rockfinch (image by Mike Watson)*



*Queen-of-Spain Fritillary (image by Mike Watson)*



*Hooded Wheatear (image by Mike Watson)*



*Greater Hoopoe-Lark (image by Mike Watson)*



*Desert Lark (image by Mike Watson)*



*Crowned Sandgrouse (image by Mike Watson)*



*Desert Owl (image by Mike Watson)*



*Birding at Wadi Salvadora (image by Mike Watson)*





*Arabian Warbler (image by Mike Watson)*



*Arabian Green Bee-eater (image by Mike Watson)*



*Arabian Babbler (image by Mike Watson)*