

LANIUS BIRD TOURS



ISRAEL

SPRING MIGRATION & DESERT SPECIALITIES
11th – 18th MARCH 2012



Leaders Dave Read & Andy Shooter

Participants Dickie & Doreen Bird
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INTRODUCTION

This proved to be another extremely successful tour with far too many highlights to list them all. Starting in the Western Negev we were treated to good views of Arabian Babbler, Brown Necked Raven, Cream-coloured Courser and displaying Macqueen's Bustard. As well as a few of the commoner targets such as Laughing Dove, Palestine Sunbird, Spectacled Bulbul, Rock Martin, Blackstart, Graceful Prinia and Tristram's Starling.

Further south in the Eilat area highlights included Reef Egret, Steppe Eagle, White-eyed Gull, Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse, Sand Partridge, Pied Kingfisher, Little Green Bee-eater, House Crow, Sinai Rosefinch, Desert Finch and Syrian Serin. A number of rarities were also found including Brown Booby and Pallid Scops Owl. Add to these nine species of wheatear and eight species of lark including the stunning Thick-billed, not to mention a long list of migrating passerines and you can understand what make Eilat such a popular birding destination.

Moving north to the Dead Sea we added Cyprus, Scrub and Clamorous Reed Warblers, Fan-tailed Raven, Lanner and Dead Sea Sparrow amongst others. We were also joined here by the renowned Israeli birder and excellent guide Barak Granit whose knowledge of the regions nocturnal species provided us with Nubian Nightjar and Pharaoh Eagle Owl as well as good views of the much sought after Hume's Owl.



White Storks at Nizzana

Front cover	Little Green Bee-eater	Dave Read
Back cover	Thick-billed Lark	Ian Cowgill

Day 1 (11/03/12)

The tour started with a trouble free direct flight from Luton to Tel-Aviv, landing just as the sun was setting at around 6.00pm. With this in mind there was no chance of any birding today, so we left the airport and started on our journey south to the Kibbutz Mashabei Sade, our base for the night. On the way we made stop at a roadside café for a snack and coffee before continuing to the Kibbutz, where with an early start planned for the following day we went straight to bed.

Day 2 (12/03/12)

Still dark, we met at the minibus at 5.15am ready to search for some of the most sought after specialties of the Western Negev. We started with a 40 minutes drive west, to an area of stony desert between the towns of Nizzana and Ezuz, close to the Egyptian border. Here the first birds of note were some very showy Arabian Babblers. Our next target, MacQueens Bustard was quickly found followed by 2 Cream-coloured Courser and several Brown-necked Ravens. Next we visited the Kmehin sewage pools where along with a selection of wildfowl and waders we found Black-bellied Sandgrouse coming to drink. Perhaps the most memorable record here was the sight of c1000 migrating White Storks circling on thermals directly overhead.

Returning back to the kibbutz we had a little time for a coffee while birding in the extensive gardens, adding a variety of commoner targets such as Laughing Dove, Spectacled Bulbul and this male Palestine Sunbird.



We then started on our journey south to Eilat, stopping first at the beautiful Ein Avdat; (below) where on arrival Barbary Falcon and Egyptian Vulture were both quickly added. Moving further down the valley added Mourning Wheatear and our first Desert Larks. Once at the gorge Tristram's Starlings, Blackstart and Rock Martins were all very obvious while a few Griffon Vultures and eventually a pair of Bonelli's Eagle gave good flight views.



Next we moved to Mitzpe Ramon where a small football field on the edge of town provided our next target Syrian Serin. We then dropped down into the Ramon Crater before visiting the Hameyshar Plains to look for larks, however despite a thorough search none could be found.

Continuing to Eilat, we checked into the Vista Hotel which was to be our base for the next five nights.



Day 3 (13/03/12)

After yesterday's long day in the field we had a bit of a lay-in and a late breakfast, after which we started by checking Ofira Park. The highlight here was without doubt a very nice male Syrian Serin, with other notable birds including House Crow, Rüppell's Warbler, Masked Shrike and Cretzschmar's Bunting, including this showy male.

We then moved to the North Beach where we immediately found our next target, a striking blue phase Reef Egret. Pied Kingfisher was also noted and our first Little Green Bee-eater

flew over. A few slender-billed Gulls were loafing about offshore but apart from those the sea was quiet so we decided to move the short distance to the IBRCE Park (International Birding & Research Centre Eilat) where we completed the nature trail. It was by now midday and not the best time to be birding but we still managed to add Marsh Sandpiper, Caspian Tern and our first Siberian Stonechat.

After lunch we headed north out of Eilat to the KM20 Res one of southern Israel's premier birding sites. Large numbers of birds were immediately evident including Greater Flamingo, Spur-winged Plover, Black-winged Stilt, Little Stint and Shelduck, while further searching of the area produced Kentish Plover, Avocet, Wood Sandpiper and Water Pipit. Moving slightly south next we visited KM19 sewage pools where highlights included Squacco Heron, Steppe Eagle, our first Red-throated Pipit and surprisingly our only Citrine Wagtail. We then waited until dark for Lichtenstein Sandgrouse but unfortunately none came to drink.

Day 4 (14/03/12)

A pre-breakfast visit to Amram's Pillars saw us find our target Sinai Rosefinch and also provided our first Sand Partridge and White-crowned Wheatear. Returning to Eilat we quickly checked the Marina area for Striated Heron but couldn't find any.

After breakfast we headed to the Kibbutz settlement of Yotvata c40 km north of Eilat. This is a large settlement with a mix of habitats that acts as an oasis for migrating birds as well as a haven for rare breeders, and because of this we spent much of the day here. We started by driving to the northern circular field where we almost immediately found this nice male Hooded Wheatear, followed by a rather poorly marked female Cyprus Wheatear near the compost heaps. Other highlights included Isabelline Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush, Eastern Bonelli's Warbler and Indian Silverbill. We had hoped to find Namaqua Dove here but as we didn't we moved a few kilometres further north to the cattle sheds at Ktura, which is always a reliable site. Sure enough as we arrived a male flew across the road in front of us with presumably the same bird later seen flying back towards the cattle sheds.



We then returned to Eilat for an evening at the north beach, but couldn't resist a quick look at KM19, with this site regularly attracting unusual migrants. As usual it didn't disappoint with stunning close up views of a pair of Little Green Bee-eaters (see photo on front cover) and a small flock of five Bimaculated Larks. Once at the North Beach, White eyed Gull was quickly located and while watching these Andy found a distant Brown Booby, with a second bird found nearby. Other highlights included Pied Kingfisher and Reef Egret.

With the birding over, or so we thought we returned to the hotel to freshen up before heading out for our evening meal. However as we turned the first corner from the hotel Dave spotted a bird in flight which turned out to be a Pallid Scops Owl, our second rarity of the day.

Day 5 (15/03/11)

Another pre-breakfast outing this morning saw us head north to the Uvda Valley in search of larks, arriving at the favoured site at about 6:00am, just a little after first light. We hadn't been there long when a male Hen Harrier drifted through putting up a large flock of larks which appeared all to be Short-toed. Further searching of the area however eventually paid off when Doreen spotted some distant birds feeding which turned out to be Bar-tailed Larks, with six Temminck's Larks close by including this bird. While watching these, a flock of c25 Thick-billed Larks flew in and landed behind them, where despite being further away, they still gave reasonable scope views. Six Trumpeter Finches were also noted here. On the way back, a quick look at Ktura cattle sheds produced the hoped for Namaqua Dove by way of a male feeding on the ground with sparrows.



After breakfast we quickly visited Ofira Park where there were still many Cretzschmar's Buntings and a few Rüppell's Warblers amongst the commoner migrants and our first Eastern Olivaceous Warbler was added to the list, albeit on fairly poor views. We then headed up towards Holland Park where an incredible number of Sylvia warblers were present; mostly Lesser Whitethroat but careful searching also produced Blackcap, Sardinian, two Eastern Orphean and yet more Rüppell's. Non Sylvia warblers included Eastern Bonelli's and a much more accommodating Eastern Olivaceous. Other highlights included good views of up to a dozen Sand Partridge, a very close Short-toed Eagle and a Bluethroat.

After lunch we again tried our luck at the KM19 sewage pools, not the most attractive of sites but the birding is excellent with Barbary Falcon and up to a dozen Desert Finches amongst the highlights. We spent most of the remaining time at KM20 res, where despite no new birds being added we enjoyed the easy birding and wealth of waders and wildfowl all the same.

With just a little daylight left we returned to KM19 for another attempt at the Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse, this time positioning ourselves well down the bank in order not to disturb. Almost immediately Stephen found distant group of large birds way off in the distance, but it was some time before they eventually came close enough to be identified as Common Cranes. Watching these come in and fly very low overhead we almost missed a pair of Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse which hurtled past us and dropped on to the western bank of the res. Luckily a third bird appeared and gave good views in the fading light.

Day 6 (16/03/12)

After a couple of early starts, today the group didn't meet until breakfast although a few did their own thing before hand with Tony checking Ofira Park and Huw receiving good views of Striated Heron at the marina. For the rest of us the Eilat Mountains were our first destination, where we positioned ourselves at the middle viewpoint to watch the raptor migration. Although no large movements were noted we still clocked up a reasonable tally with c100 Steppe Buzzards, 10 Long-legged Buzzards, 4 Steppe Eagles, 1 Short-toed Eagle, 1 Barbary Falcon and a few Black Kites. As well as raptors there was also a passage of Black Storks, with a total of c130 birds passing over.

Descending back down to Eilat we called into the IBRCE Park, where amongst the regular species we enjoyed good views of Bluethroat and Siberian Stonechat. Most of the group also managed to see Quail but sadly only Stephen and Dave saw the male Little Crake. We then headed for lunch, after which some of the group headed back to the hotel for a short break from the heat.

Those who carried on birding spent some time at the North beach, where only the usual birds were found, but when they include Brown Booby, Reef Egret, White-eyed Gull and Pied Kingfisher (see below) its not bad going. We then visited the Eilat cemetery, which like the parks in the city; act as a magnet for migrating passerines. Here we added our only Wryneck to the list, while other species of note included White-crowned Wheatear, Cretzschmar's Bunting, Rüppell's Warbler and Hoopoe.



We then reunited with the rest of the group and headed to Yotvata for the last few hours of daylight before our night tour began. The main interest here was with out doubt the huge Short-toed Lark flock estimated at c600, with probably as many as 30 Bimaculated Larks amongst it. The larks were under near constant attack from a host of would be predators including up to 3 Hen Harriers, Marsh Harrier, Barbary Falcon, Kestrel and a Sparrowhawk.

We then met with Barak Granit, a prominent Israeli birder and excellent guide who would take us around the maze of tracks at Yotvata looking for nocturnal species, namely Egyptian Nightjar and Pharaoh Eagle Owl. However, before the tour even began he warned us that it would be a difficult task to find the birds due to the unusual cold and windy conditions on the night. Two hours later and this warning came true as we had seen nothing other than a Desert Hedgehog and a few Cape Hares. Admitting defeat we returned to Eilat.

Day 7 (17/03/11)

We started with another pre-breakfast outing, this time into the desert at KM33 looking for Hoopoe Lark, though unfortunately we were unable to find any. After breakfast we made a start north towards the Dead Sea, stopping first at a site 1km south of Yotvata where we hoped for the rare and elusive Arabian Warbler. As with the larks this morning none were found, though we still enjoyed our time here with many interesting migrants found including Cyprus Warbler.



Furth north another stop was made at the Shezaf reserve, where once again we were to search for Arabian Warbler. Unfortunately this was not to be as once again we could not locate our target, though we did get good views of Arabian Babbler and Scrub Warbler.

We then continued to Ein Bokek on the shores of the Dead Sea, where at 412m below sea level we reached the lowest point on the planet. Here we checked into the Royal Rimonin Hotel and had some time to freshen up before heading out for the first of our nocturnal targets. This saw us drive a short distance to Neot Hakikar on the Jordanian Border where after a short wait for darkness to fall we enjoyed reasonable flight views of Nubian Nightjar. We then returned to the hotel for dinner before heading out for the second of our targets, the much sought after Hume's Owl, which after checking a few sites without success we eventually found with excellent views enjoyed by all. Many Thanks Barak.

Day 8 (18/03/11)

Our last day started with another pre-breakfast outing, this time to try and locate Striolated Bunting, an increasingly difficult species to find nowadays in Israel. We drove about 40 minutes north to Metzokey Dragot, a steep and very deep sided Canyon, where after much searching we didn't manage to find this shy bunting, though Fan-tailed Raven showed well as did a pair of Bonelli's Eagle. After breakfast we visited the Lot Reservoir also known as Heimar Reservoir where Clamorous Reed Warbler was heard singing, but sadly remained out of sight though luckily the Dead Sea Sparrows showed much better.

Leaving the Dead Sea behind, we started on the journey back to Tel Aviv with a stop at Mount Amsa on the way. As we drove along the approach road a hunting Lanner was an unexpected but welcome bonus. Once there we quickly added Finsch's Wheatear, though the search for our main target, Long-billed Pipit was made impossible by exceptionally strong winds that were blasting up the rocky slopes which the birds prefer.

We continued to Tel Aviv and returned the minibus, making our final addition to the list in the form of Common Myna in the car park. This concluded what had been a truly amazing and memorable tour.

We recorded a very respectable total of 169 species of birds and 6 species of mammals. Both Andy and I thoroughly enjoyed the tour and we would like to thank everyone not only for joining us on it, but also for their excellent company.



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