

Israel

Autumn

8–15 November 2010

Participants

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Led by James P. Smith and Nigel Warren

Black-crowned Sparrow-lark

Although Birdfinders visit Israel annually in spring, this year's November tour was a brand new venture and keenly anticipated by participants and leaders alike. Once again, this well-known birding hotspot provided us with many outstanding moments. An impressive list of 173 species included a fine haul of Western Palearctic specialties: Brown Booby, Western Reef-heron, Striated Heron, Black-shouldered Kite, Pallid Harrier, Eastern Imperial Eagle, Lanner and Barbary Falcons, Macqueen's Bustard, White-eyed Gull, Lichtenstein's, Crowned, Spotted, Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouses, Namaqua Dove, Striated Scops-owl, Hume's Owl, White-breasted and Pied Kingfishers, Little Green Bee-eater, eleven species of larks including Black-crowned Sparrow-lark, Rock Martin, Long-billed Pipit, Common Myna, Finsch's and Hooded Wheatears, Clamorous Reed-warbler, Arabian and Yellow-browed Warblers, Arabian Babbler, Fan-tailed Raven, Tristram's Grackle, Sinai Rosefinch, and House (Striolated) Bunting. It ended up being a three-centre tour with two nights at Kibbutz Gevulot in the Western Negev, three nights at a hotel in Eilat and two nights at Ein Bokek by the Dead Sea. The weather was surprisingly hot for November, and dry, sunny and nearly windless throughout the tour. Lifers were had by everyone in the group, including the leaders!

Day 1: The group arrived on time in Tel-Aviv at the new terminal in Ben Gurion airport. After a relatively smooth transition through Israeli immigration and customs the leaders disappeared to collect the rental vehicles. Most of our party took advantage of the time to stock up on beverages and snacks in preparation for the two-hour drive to Kibbutz Gevulot in the Western Negev. Reception at the Kibbutz was typically laid back but welcoming and most folks retired to their comfortable guest rooms in preparation for an early start the next day. Even so, at least some of our party managed to find a pub on the Kibbutz, and heard and saw Barn Owl on the way!

Day 2: We met at 06.00 for pre-breakfast birding in keeping with tradition on the first morning of an Israel tour. Indeed, some of our party had already been out finding Syrian Woodpecker well before sunrise. As it turned out, Syrian Woodpeckers would prove to be plentiful in the Kibbutz grounds with at least three pairs being found before breakfast. Further exploration of the Kibbutz pathways would produce a rapid succession of quality birds including Spur-winged Lapwing, Eurasian Thick-knee, White-breasted Kingfisher, Palestine Sunbird and Graceful Prinia, along with more familiar species such as Merlin, Black and Common Redstarts, Common Stonechat, Eurasian Hoopoe, Sardinian Warbler, Great Tit, Eurasian Blackbird, European Greenfinch, European Goldfinch and Common Chaffinch. Major surprises came in the form of nine Common Mynas (a fully established exotic), and no less than 10 Long-eared Owls emerging from just one pine tree! We later found at least one other Long-eared Owl close to the Kibbutz swimming pool but the big discovery here was a Yellow-browed Warbler, first found by Bob. It was typically fast moving and refused to settle but most of the group managed to see it before it lost itself in the mature pines of the Kibbutz. It was also heard to call twice placing the identification beyond doubt and removing any possibility of confusion with Hume's Warbler, which would also be a strong candidate at this time of year. Yellow-browed Warbler is rare in Israel, with less than five records in a typical year.

Having worked up a good appetite with a fabulous start to the tour, breakfast was taken in the Kibbutz dining hall. We received a warm reception and a wonderful 'all-you-can-eat' buffet breakfast, after which we pressed on to the Southern Judean Hills. Black Kites, Hooded Crows, Eurasian Hoopoes and a Eurasian Jay (*Garrulus glandarius atricapillus*) punctuated the journey as we sped through the parched landscape. It was obvious that the country was in dire need of the winter rains having had a prolonged spell of extreme heat since August. Heat would actually be a factor throughout the tour and really started to hit home when we reached our pipit site in the Hills above Beer Sheva. As mercenary as it may sound, we really had only one species in mind, Long-billed Pipit, a bird with a very limited distribution in the West Palearctic region. Our good friend Eyal Shochat volunteered to help in the search was already on site when we arrived. Eyal quickly found several Finsch's Wheatears and Spectacled Warblers, both species proving to be plentiful in the dry scrub on the boulder-strewn hillsides. Finding Long-billed Pipit, however, required much more effort but eventually, with Eyal's help, we were rewarded with good views of two individual birds much to everyone's delight. By noon it was also undisputedly hot and, having found the bird we most wanted to see, we headed for a well-earned break at a local gas station and coffee bar.

Soon the giant fields of Urim beckoned and our time here got off to a great start with three Eastern Imperial Eagles on the roadside pylons. On entering the fields we found thousands of larks, most of them Eurasian Skylarks, but there were also some Calandra Larks and a handful of Greater Short-toed. Crested Larks stayed closer to the tracks, a species that would be encountered on a daily basis throughout the trip. A full and thorough exploration of the Urim fields ultimately proved to be difficult as the sandy tracks were dangerously deep in places limiting our access to several spots that would have been worthy of checking. Moreover, an inexplicable mishap with the starting system on one of the rental vehicles cost us about forty-five minutes though we used the time well having several stunning male Pallid Harriers, Long-legged Buzzards, Merlins, Peregrines, and even a Northern Lapwing! Though distant, an impressive swirling flock of migrating White Pelicans drifted southwest across the fields. There was, however, no sign of the terrestrial shorebirds (Sociable Lapwing, Cream-coloured Courser and Eurasian Dotterel) that we'd hoped to encounter in the fields. Having managed to get our vehicle going again we returned to the Kibbutz to freshen up and ate supper at a quaint Café inside a local Moshav. The service would best be described as unique, and the Bedouin style décor had a charm all of its own, and boy was the pizza good! It was a fine end to the day.

Day 3: An early start was greeted by a pair of Barn Owls screeching outside the guest rooms. The vehicles were quickly loaded for the day and we headed straight for Nizzana, even avoiding stopping for the occasional Little Owl perched amongst the roadside boulders. It was vital that we found our birds before heat-haze became a hindrance. Nizzana got off to a terrific start with several Southern Grey Shrikes, Eastern Mourning and Isabelline Wheatears being found straight away. It wasn't too long before Steve skillfully picked up a Macqueen's Bustard strolling through the desert scrub. In fact, two birds were

present affording excellent scope views in beautiful morning light. Our plan to get there early was entirely justified. As we watched the bustards several noisy parties of Spotted Sandgrouse flew overhead indicating that it was time to move to our next spot, a fine set of sewage pools neatly tucked away behind rank vegetation. Our arrival was greeted by large flocks of dabbling ducks including Mallard, Eurasian Teal, Eurasian Wigeon and Northern Pintail. Miraculously, a long-staying first-winter Black-shouldered Kite suddenly appeared, perching near the perimeter fence of the sewage pools. This bird was thought by the locals to be of the African race though the majority of Israeli records refer to the Asian form. Either way, Black-shouldered Kite is a national rarity and the first time that we'd ever encountered this species on a Birdfinders trip to Israel. Even this beauty couldn't tear us away from the main focus and it was no time at all before parties of calling sandgrouse began to fly into drink. During the next two hours sandgrouse were in view almost constantly and we had exquisite views of all four target species: Spotted, Crowned, Pin-tailed and Black-bellied, with the latter being the most abundant. Passerines distracted us at times and we were kept entertained with White and Yellow Wagtails, Tawny, Water and Red-throated Pipits, Bluethroats, a late Whinchat, Common Chiffchaffs, and best of all, Oriental Skylark and Lesser Short-toed Lark. The pools also held a nice selection of shorebirds and although we scrutinized every snipe (a Pintail Snipe had been seen elsewhere in Israel) we couldn't find anything other than Common. With heat setting in for the day, we quickly trudged through some parched alfalfa fields and again our patience was rewarded with four Richard's Pipits and the only Zitting Cisticola of the trip.

The general area of Ezuz provided our last birding stop of the morning and we scanned the desert thoroughly for Cream-coloured Courser. By mid-morning the heat-haze was considerable and made the bird finding difficult to say the least. The coursers remained elusive but we did have excellent views of Chucker, Little Green Bee-eater, Desert Wheatear, Desert Lark, and Scrub Warbler in the process, and we even stumbled across two more Macqueen's Bustards, one of them in flight close to the road. With the exception of missing the courser, our morning in Nizzana really couldn't have been better and we began to head south with thoughts turning to coffee, refreshment and lunch. The lunch stop did produce a few birds including the first Tristram's Grackles and a mysterious falcon, which may have been a Sooty though we'll never know for sure.

A small cluster of Tamarisks near a sewage pool at Mizpe Ramon provided the next planned birding stop. It was a pity to find the area very dry compared to previous visits but it still seemed to hold plenty of migrants composed mostly of Common Chiffchaffs and Common Redstarts, with some Black Redstarts, Common Stonechats and a fine Siberian Stonechat. The undoubted highlight however, was a pair of Lanner Falcons soaring overhead for several minutes, whilst the most unexpected bird, spotted by Steve as we drove in, was a Little Grebe on the sewage pool itself. To visit Mizpe Ramon without stopping to view the magnificent Ramon Crater wasn't really an option for us, a visit made especially sweet by some extra-ordinarily tame birds including our first White-crowned Wheatear and Blackstart, as well as Desert Lark and Scrub Warbler. A family of Nubian Ibex was no less shy and seemed to be drawn to titbits and scraps left behind by tourists.

As we drove across the stark beauty of the Negev the final birding stop of the day was made at the military firing zone of Ha'Meishar. Naturally we birded only from the road but despite much searching, we couldn't find the Thick-billed Larks reported by two Finnish birders only hours before. However, it wasn't a fruitless stop and careful scanning produced Isabelline, Eastern Mourning and Desert Wheatears and the only Bar-tailed Larks (3) of the trip, the latter superbly found by Keith. We pressed on through the encroaching darkness and drove parallel with the Egyptian border until we reached our hotel in Eilat in good time for dinner.

Day 4: The early morning crew had seen Common Chiffchaffs, Common Stonechats, Common Redstarts and a couple of Ring-necked Parakeets in Central Park just across the road from the hotel. Peter and Tony also found a Northern Lapwing here, actually quite a rare bird in Eilat. However, the buzz at breakfast was all about a bird that everyone wanted to see. North of Eilat, a Black-crowned Sparrow-lark had been found a week earlier and was still being reported. The bird was a potential lifer for just about everyone on the trip and, quite naturally, it had to be our first port of call. Yotvata, a Kibbutz famed for its dairy produce but now gathering a reputation amongst birders as the 'new Eilat', was the place to go. A huge circular field had been attracting hundreds of larks and the sparrow-lark was just one of a number of

quality species hopefully waiting for us. On arrival the situation looked a little over-whelming. A fairly thick carpet of parched vegetation covered at least half of the favoured field..., and it wasn't a small field! Moreover, the field was full of birds, especially larks and wheatears and finding a tiny lark amongst them was not going to be easy. As we approached a small lark with black markings on the face and chest lifted up and flew off the west – it was a Temminck's Lark but unfortunately was missed by all but a handful of the group. A cautious approach ensued and slowly we sifted through small groups of larks finding Eurasian and Oriental Skylarks, Crested, Lesser Short-toed and Greater Short-toed Larks. It wasn't long before the initial sense of anticipation fizzled to bewilderment as we seemed to be staring endlessly into a stubble field without finding our quarry. Suddenly Steve's sharp eyes found a strong contender. The bird was hugging the ground and the belly couldn't be seen well but the combination of conical bill, white cheek and black crown proved unmistakable – just like the Collin's guide said it would be! The bird was quickly confirmed and we approached the bird gently to ensure everyone had good views. As if that wasn't enough a party of 12 Thick-billed Larks flew straight in front of us and away over the dunes into Jordan! Amidst the distraction, the Black-crowned Sparrow-lark was lost altogether but we'd all enjoyed excellent views and the photographers seemed satisfied too. After seeing the sparrow-lark, we changed our focus to the nearby dunes and began looking for Asian Desert Warblers, which proved elusive. We did, however, find three Greater Hoopoe-larks instead! The dunes actually gave some elevation overlooking the fields and by scanning we found excellent raptors including several Steppe Eagles, a juvenile Barbary Falcon, Marsh and Hen Harriers, and absolutely remarkably, another Black-shouldered Kite! This bird clearly had black undersides to the secondaries and must have been a strong candidate for the Asian sub-species. We continued birding in the Yotvata fields checking an equally large circular field to the south. While James went off to check the Acacias for owls, a Common Crane dropped into the field right in front of the group! It later transpired that a pale, dark-billed finch had been seen on the irrigation pipes but wasn't formerly identified. However, from the description it sounded like an unambiguous Desert Finch, a species that never made the overall group list. We also battled for a good 30 minutes trying to see an elusive singing *Sylvia* warbler. The views of the bird didn't really match the voice but it was certainly a Lesser Whitethroat and the constant, quiet scratchy warble probably indicated it was one of the Central Asian/Siberian forms. We closed a stellar morning at Yovata with lunch at the Kibbutz's café and then headed north.

Climbing onto the Negev plateau, we made a short stop to check an Acacia wadi for Striated Scops-owl with no luck. The effort wasn't totally fruitless as we had nice views of Sand Partridge, Scrub Warbler and Sardinian Warbler. The remainder of the drive unveiled staggering views overlooking the Arava Valley and Jordan to the East. Shizzafon sewage pools was packed with birds, albeit fairly common species: White Wagtails, Common Stonechats, Common Redstarts and Common Chiffchaffs. An Eastern Mourning Wheatear was present though there was no sign of the Hooded Wheatear we'd been hoping for. Despite the small size of the pools shorebirds included Black-winged Stilts, Green Sandpipers, two Dunlins and a Little Stint. However, it was nothing short of remarkable to find a Striated Heron (aka Mangrove Heron) perched in a mesquite bush just outside the perimeter fence! What on earth was it finding to eat here? It was certainly the first time we'd come across this species away from the Red Sea on any of our Israel tours. A female Namaqua Dove was another good bird and for those interested in sub-species, a nice male Armenian Stonechat showed well.

Feeling the pull of the sea, we headed back south to spend the remainder of the afternoon at Eilat's North Beach. Conditions were not especially ideal on arrival but it was calm and we found White-eyed Gulls and Pied Kingfishers immediately, with Baltic and Caspian Gulls and Caspian Terns being found a little later. The pre-roost gathering of White-eyed Gulls was impressive, the best we've seen for several years with over 50 birds in the area. On the beach, a flock of seven Dunlins was notable and on the 'canal' a Common Sandpiper was the first of the tour. With dusk closing in fast we made a spontaneous dash to a site for Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse and had superb prolonged views of three birds (two males) at close range. The same site also gave us Great White Pelicans, Black-crowned Night-herons and the only Eurasian Spoonbills of the tour. It had been a fantastic day and we celebrated accordingly with a wonderful meal at Eddie's Hideaway, arguably the best restaurant in Eilat!

Day 5: Much of the morning was devoted to scouring a couple of desert wadis close to Eilat. We hoped to find Striated Scops-owl, Cyprus Warbler and perhaps Sinai Rosefinch but came up empty on all three counts. Low species diversity was to be expected in the wadis, but even so by lunchtime we'd only a handful of species to show for our effort, namely White-crowned Wheatear, Blackstart, Palestine Sunbird, Rock Martin and Sardinian Warbler amongst others. Plans to improve on diversity were stumped by a police roadblock in Eilat as the weekend coincided with the annual International Triathlon and most of the roads around Eilat were closed. Feeling a bit deflated we headed for the hills once more and decided to take our chances on the Negev plateau. It began with an excellent lunch at a rustic café at Shizzafon junction. From here it was an easy walk across the road into the fields and orchards of Neot Semadar. In the heat of the afternoon, migrants seemed few and far between but we found some respite in the shade overlooking a beautifully landscaped lake. Such a lush micro-habitat was a real escape from the stark heat of the surrounding desert, and we rustled up some excellent water birds including Little Bittern, Water Rail and Common Kingfisher, the former and the latter posing for extended periods for everyone to enjoy and photograph. Other birds included Little Grebe, Great Cormorant, Common Moorhen and Eurasian Coot and a smattering of Common Chiffchaffs and Bluethroats. We headed south approaching Eilat from the north and succeeded in gaining access to the northern salt pans. The approach road was graced by numerous Little Green Bee-eaters, and everyone a gem! The salt pans were covered with waterbirds. Very quickly we assembled an impressive list, the most obvious species being Greater Flamingos but also Black-winged Stilts, Common Ringed and Kentish Plovers. Numerous Black-headed Gulls were loafing on the ponds, but in contrast to our spring visits, Slender-billed Gulls were actually tough to come by with only two or three amongst the Black-headed Gulls. By sifting and sorting through the commoner species we found new birds to boost to the group list: Common Shelduck, Pied Avocet, Greater Sandplover, Curlew Sandpiper, Marsh Sandpiper, and Common Greenshank.

The salt pans had been productive but a hint of a southerly breeze had James on edge and thinking about a return visit to the North Beach. Past experience had shown that the wind needn't be gale force from the south to produce good seabirds in Eilat. In fact, a gentle southerly could at times be more beneficial. On arrival at the North Beach we were immediately greeted by dark-morph Western Reef-heron, which gave immaculate views and photo opportunities. A sustained sea-watch ensued and within five minutes we were enjoying prolonged views of a first-winter Brown Booby! This bird arrived from the Jordanian side of the border and clumsily attempted to alight on the offshore rafts with a handful of White-eyed Gulls. It even spent time foraging around a military boat as Israeli marines 'chummed' throwing scraps of food overboard drawing in tens of White-eyed Gulls in the process! To add a touch of the bizarre, an immature Greater Flamingo swam along the shore from Aquaba toward Eilat looking totally lost and out of place. The bird was clearly exhausted and presumably didn't have the energy to make to the salt pans just 8 kilometres up the road. After 30 minutes or so, the booby flew back out to sea towards the Sinai Peninsula. Our luck seemed to be up for the day and we headed back to the hotel for supper and an early night in preparation for a pre-dawn start the next day.

Day 6: We departed the hotel at 06.00 with an itinerary change. Effectively this would be our last morning in the Arava Valley. First stop was a return visit to Wadi Quetura which produced more or less the same results as the first visit – no Striated Scops-owls but a nice selection of desert regulars included White-crowned Wheatear, Blackstart and Sand Partridge. It was however, a nice spot for a picnic breakfast and with warm air thermals developing, a couple of immaculate Long-legged Buzzards soared overhead, not exactly what we were looking for but not too shabby either. Next stop was Yahel Sewage farm which, true to form, was hopping with birds mainly White Wagtails but also Bluethroats, Common and Siberian Stonechats, Blackstart, Common Redstart and a mind-boggling Common Kingfisher! Desert and sewage water hardly seems like good kingfisher habitat but the bird looked to be in good shape and we could only imagine what it was finding to eat! The real highlight, and our main target bird, was a fine winter-plumaged male Hooded Wheatear hawking for insects from the sewage farm fence. Having dipped yet again on Striated Scops-owl, the Hooded Wheatear gave a much-needed moral boost and we decided to try just one last wadi before giving up entirely on the owl. The 'hunt' involved a methodical hike through a rather picturesque open-sided wadi filled with mature Acacia trees deep inside a military firing zone. It's actually perfectly legal and safe to enter some select military firing zones on the Sabbath and

being a Saturday we had a green light. Our group should be commended in their patient search for this tiny owl – a rare winterer from central Asia. Each and every Acacia tree was thoroughly examined, but after a mile and who knows how many Acacia trees we still had no owl to show for our effort. Enthusiasm started to wane and hit a low point when folks started walking back to the vehicles. One of the leaders isolated three more trees that he considered worth checking before calling it quits. Unbelievably, the very last tree he checked produced an owl! It was a clear, unambiguous Striated Scops-owl! The bird was allowed to settle and eventually gave immaculate views, all the key features being well studied. The stragglers, already back at the vehicles, were quickly collected and everyone got to see the bird. It was a fine reward for a good deal of effort and a life bird for many on the tour. The owl wasn't the only bird in this wadi. We enjoyed multiple Arabian Babblers and Sardinian Warblers and became completely baffled when hundreds of calling Spotted Sandgrouse flew over, clearly audible to everyone but invisible as well! Not one person in the group managed to see a Spotted Sandgrouse as their calls rang out ventriloquist-style across the desert – it was just amazing. Something of a tough morning closed with lunch at the intriguing 101 rest stop out the middle of nowhere!

Fifty kilometres up the road at Hazeva, we would begin our quest for Arabian Warbler. Most of the group had some shut-eye on the drive, which included a very bumpy final two kilometres off-road! Amazingly, Arabian Warblers appeared immediately. Most of our bleary-eyed participants missed the first sighting, but after some work, the birds appeared again giving exquisite views. It was a pair with the birds moving around together and probably getting ready for the breeding season as breeding comes early to some desert residents, Arabian Warbler included. This beautiful warbler, endemic to the Red Sea region and entirely restricted to Acacia-forest habitat, has such a distinctive character that it was hard to imagine how it could be confused with any other dark-headed *Sylvia*. The views couldn't have been better and Arabian Warbler quickly found a place amongst the best birds of the trip. The next port of call also involved a warbler, this time Clamorous Reed-warbler at a low-lying subsistence area south of the Dead Sea works. On arrival, several birds could clearly be heard calling from the reeds and finally one was coaxed into view giving some of the best views we've had of this species on recent tours. In addition, the wetland held a typical selection of water birds including Mallard, Eurasian Teal, Eurasian Coot, Common Moorhen, Black-winged Stilts and Green Sandpiper. The tamarisks were dotted with the magpie-like nests of Dead Sea Sparrows though the builders of the nests, sadly, did not appear. Overhead, foraging martins included Rock and Sand Martins, highlighted by excellent looks at two Eurasian Crag Martins – a scarce migrant in Southern Israel. An aloof female Red-backed Shrike in the tamarisks proved to be the only one of the tour.

As the afternoon sun began to get lower we pressed on North before breaking for refreshment and meeting our Israeli guide for the evening, Barak Granit who's known as an expert on Hume's Owl and Nubian Nightjar. We settled down as he attempted to coax in the owls using his own vocal imitation of the call. The evening was incredibly bright with the moon illuminating most of the desert. In fact, it was so bright that torches and headlamps were barely switched on. The brightness of the evening may have affected the behaviour of the owls and after 40 minutes we still hadn't heard or seen one. As the leaders chatted through an alternative strategy, a single gruff note could be heard from lower down the wadi, a sound which Barak quickly recognized as the call of a female Hume's Owl! All of us mobilized quickly and efficiently to settle down in a spot not too far the parking area. No more calls were heard but remarkably within a few minutes Barak had a Hume's Owl perched and spotlighted in an Acacia tree. It was extremely co-operative and remained in the spotlight long enough for all to have 'scope views before Barak turned off the light to avoid dazzling the bird. It had been a wonderful success and was especially sweet for some in our group who'd tried unsuccessfully for the owl on previous visits to Israel. By way of celebration, we decided to stop for dinner at our new hotel at Ein Bokek, and check-in to our rooms in the process. Barak joined us for dinner and we were then off for the final destination of the day – Neot Hakikkar and its nightjars. On arrival, cold air hung in the atmosphere which didn't feel too promising. It was the coldest we'd experienced on the entire tour. In addition, the near absence of moths and other flying insects only compounded the feeling that this may not be our night after all. Two hours later we finally gave up. Barak had seen a nightjar but the observation was so brief that Tony, who riding shotgun in Barak's car, didn't claim anything, mentioning that he only saw eye-shine and a shape taking off but nothing he could count. Still, it had been a fantastic day and we could hardly feel disappointed with

Hooded Wheatear, Striated Scops-owl, Arabian Warbler, Clamorous Reed-warbler and Hume's Owl. We retired to our distinctly plush new surroundings for a good night's rest.

Day 7: After a classic Israeli buffet-breakfast we began the day by heading north to Wadi Mishmar overlooking the Dead Sea, but the journey was quickly halted by a couple of Fan-tailed Ravens checking out a garbage dumpster. It wasn't the most glamorous way to get a new bird but they all count, and the same spot produced Tristram's Grackles and White-crowned Wheatear. Meanwhile, Wadi Mishmar had the potential for a number of key birds still missing from our list, most notably Sinai Rosefinch, House (Striolated) Bunting and Cyprus Warbler but the wadi yielded surprisingly few birds. Most interesting for us were a couple of notables for the trip including two Golden Eagles and several Common Ravens (actually the scarcest of the three ravens in Southern Israel). There was also a curiously soiled Southern Grey Shrike which gave the impression that it was something much rarer than it actually was. We briefly entertained thoughts of Long-tailed Shrike.....but settled, quite sensibly on Southern Grey of the race *aucheri*. We pressed onto Ein Gedi. Much of the last two hours of the morning was spent around the entrance to Wadi David. Reports of a Kurdish Wheatear several days earlier had us scouring the wadi high and low. Despite every effort, there was no wheatear to be found. However, the birding wasn't entirely disappointing as we saw plenty of Fan-tailed Ravens, Tristram's Grackles, Blackstarts, Palestine Sunbirds and Rock Martins, and had excellent views of Graceful Prinia. The biggest surprise in relative terms, and one of the best finds of the trip, was a Yellowhammer, which perched up for several minutes above Ein Gedi Youth Hostel. Yellowhammers are exceptional in the southern desert with less than ten documented in *The Birds of Israel* and no records from Ein Gedi. Relatively speaking, it was actually a better bird than the Kurdish Wheatear! Despite its rarity value, the Yellowhammer did relatively little to raise spirits and after lunch it was decided that we should tackle the unknown. Our Israeli guide had given a tip on where to see Sinai Rosefinch and House (Striolated) Bunting but it wasn't going to be easy. The 'hike' would involve walking a trail of about one kilometre in length up to a tiny spring where finches and buntings could be found drinking. The place sounded idyllic but the description of the access trail was not. However, a carefully-paced hike up the beautiful, steep-sided wadi was worth every ounce of energy. Once on site, a steady stream of Sinai Rosefinches (including many handsome males), House (Striolated) Buntings, Trumpeter Finches, Tristram's Grackles and Desert Larks came into drink for the next ninety minutes. There was even a Barbary Falcon perched on the cliffs above. Even better, we had the entire place to ourselves, enhancing the experience as a whole. The descent wasn't easy but we all made it back to the vehicles safe and sound.

Giddy with success we tried nearby Nahal Darga for raptors. Other than a few Fan-tailed Ravens, the place seemed tranquil and quiet, but some concentrated scanning produced yet another great find in the form of two adult Bonelli's Eagles settling down to roost on the side of the cliffs. To the east we enjoyed unrivalled views of the Dead Sea and Jordan. Being late in the day, we saw few other raptors and decided to try once more for the Ein Gedi Kurdish Wheatear on the way back to the hotel. The wheatear eluded us again as we watched the sun go down over the mountains with Rock Martins hawking for insects around us. We headed back to our five star hotel for a good meal, the all important bird list and the end to another very satisfying day.

Day 8: Pre-breakfast birding began with an outing to Zohar Pools specifically to look for Dead Sea Sparrow, a species that had been surprisingly elusive throughout the tour. As we departed Ein Bokek we had unexpectedly brilliant views of a male Hooded Wheatear perched on the guardrail by the road. On arrival at Zohar Pools, it was sobering to find our planned sparrow site bulldozed and now nothing more than a pile of dried mud! We lingered by a stagnant pool that had produced sparrows in the past but on this occasion all we found was House and Spanish Sparrows. But it wasn't all gloom as a Water Rail ran across the main road and then swam across the pool in full view! We also managed to coax a distant White-breasted Kingfisher closer to us, a bird gratefully received for those who'd missed the 'fly-through' on the very first morning of the tour. Despite our best efforts, Dead Sea Sparrow couldn't even be found at the Clamorous Reed-warbler hotspot and with thoughts turning toward to the flight home, we decided to call it a morning and headed back to the hotel for breakfast. And so began the journey back to Tel-Aviv. We left Ein Bokek with enough time to check one last site on the way to the airport. Mount

Amasa had produced Syrian Serin on recent tours and although a long shot, there seemed to be little to lose by trying. Like many other places we'd seen on our tour, the hills looked desperately parched though still held plenty of Finsch's Wheatears and Spectacled Warblers, Scrub Warbler and a nice Blue Rock-thrush, the latter being the only one of the tour. A covey of Chuckars took some shade under the cover of an isolated bush... but unfortunately there was no sign of any serins. The tour was drawing to a close. Heading north towards Tel-Aviv, Peter kept a keen eye on the fields for coursers as he had done throughout the trip. He was also awake (many were sleeping) when two juvenile Eastern Imperial Eagles appeared close to Route 6 just south of Modim. There was also a scatter of Black Kites and Common Kestrels by the road, with Eurasian Jackdaws closer to Tel Aviv. The last bird of the tour was a Cattle Egret on a lawn by Ben Gurion airport's Terminal Two where we arrived in good time for our respective flights home and an excellent tour concluded.

Good birding,

James P. Smith