

# Israel

## Autumn

**22–29 November 2011**

### **Participants**

Linda Griffiths

Ray O'Reilly

Richard Patient

Graham Richardson

Janet Wheelahan

Keith and Lynn Youngs



**Pallid Scops-owl**

### **Leader James P. Smith**

The popularity of this new autumn tour looks set to rival the spring trip that Birdfinders have run annually since 1995. This particular tour report documents the second trip of the autumn, though the preceding week had been full of drama. On the first tour our super-keen group found 183 species including the second national record of Red-flanked Bluetail! The second tour also excelled, finding most of the key birds and seeing a slew of stellar rarities including a rather unprecedented Hypocolius. With most other bird tour companies targeting spring, it felt like we had southern Israel to ourselves most of the time.

**Day 1** The direct flight from Luton to Tel-Aviv was relatively smooth and landed ahead of schedule. In the arrivals hall at Ben Gurion airport we met up with Graham who'd been a 'tourist' for a few days, visiting the sites in Jerusalem. With our party fully assembled and our rental vehicle already on site, we had a speedy departure from Tel-Aviv and embarked on the long drive south to Eilat. The journey would take place in darkness but once out of the built up areas, we remained vigilant for possible mammals close to the road though we didn't see any! A light supper and comfort break were welcomed about half way into the journey before the 'Vegas-like' skyline of Eilat appeared about two hours later. The hotel check-in was swift and we were all settled into our rooms by 22.45 hours for a good night's rest.

**Day 2** In view of the previous night's late finish, there was no plan for a pre-breakfast bird walk but a few hardy members of our party did venture out around the pool seeing House Crow, Laughing Dove and White-spectacled Bulbul, familiar species that would become daily fare around Eilat. Our more than adequate hotel provided a 'classic' Israeli buffet breakfast and set us up for the first full morning in Eilat. First stop had to be Eilat Cemetery, site of the previous week's mega – a Red-flanked Bluetail. It was going to be a long shot as the bluetail hadn't been reported for two days. In fact, the cemetery held surprisingly few birds and the bluetail was certainly not amongst them. Common Chiffchaff, Black Redstart and White-spectacled Bulbul were noted and Richard spotted a distant perched Steppe Eagle on one of the low hills to the northwest. As we loaded up the vehicle, a Blackstart caught our attention, the first of many to come. We moved on to a quaint 'desert garden', neatly tucked away on the fringe of the Eilat mountains. The site owner (and his dog) gave us a surprisingly warm welcome. Immediately we started to find interesting birds starting off with a fine Long-legged Buzzard migrating low over the mountains. This spot offered shelter with palms, olives and other fruit bearing shrubs beautifully laid out in terrace style landscape providing some respite from a stiff northerly wind for birders and birds alike. It wasn't long before we found some

nice migrants in the form of Common Redstart, Sardinian Warbler, Common Chiffchaff, Blackcap and even a Common Quail! A resplendent male Palestine Sunbird took first prize and sparked most of the interest. Arguably better, and certainly rarer, was a fine male Hooded Wheatear showing nicely on the slopes above the garden along with a Trumpeter Finch close by. More Common Chiffchaffs and Sardinian Warblers, and good views of a European Robin (scarce in Eilat) rounded off our walk before we drove to check a local wadi for our first attempt at seeing Pallid Scops-owl. On arrival, the wadi looked parched and barren, and clearly hadn't seen rain in a long time, maybe years. Formerly a traditional spot for Pallid Scops-owl, it still supported some promising looking acacia trees but, despite a thorough check of all thirty-plus acacia trees in the wadi, no owls of any species were found. Keith and Jan did have nice views of a Sand Partridge, whilst the rest of us enjoyed another Blackstart and a male Hooded Wheatear. By mid-morning several species of interest, including a Syrian Serin and a possible Dark-throated Thrush, had been reported north of Eilat at Kibbutz Samar, and we didn't need too much persuasion to start driving north! Arrival at Samar was greeted by a small flock of Tristram's Grackles and a couple of low flying Black Kites. Once inside the Kibbutz, we began to search in earnest finding Rock Martins cruising over head, Common Chiffchaffs in the locust trees, Bluethroats in the organic gardens and White Wagtails everywhere. However, there was nary a sniff of a thrush or serin. Samar's sewage pools seemed like a better bet for the serin, and in a matter of minutes we were there enjoying Little Green Bee-eaters, Crested Larks and yet more Hooded Wheatears! The pools themselves held quite a few shorebirds including some handsome Spur-winged Plovers amongst more familiar species such as Ruff, Ringed Plover, Little Stint and Common Redshank. Around the fringes of the pool Eurasian Linnets, Bluethroats (including a fine red-spotted male) and scads of White Wagtails foraged quite unconcerned as we approached. A brief Southern Grey Shrike appeared in the acacias but eluded some of our group. As we searched, the calls of Common Cranes could be heard overhead materialising into a fine flock of exactly 50 birds migrating south and a reminder that there's nothing quite as evocative as seeing migration over the desert! The cranes provided a convenient cue for a lunch break at Yotvata's café, a spot that has become something of a birder's refuge over the years (not too surprising as it hosts great food and coffee, and superb on-site birding).

Feeling fully recharged, we headed east to the southernmost of Yotvata's massive agricultural fields. The circular field was neatly divided in half, one being dry and sandy, and the other half with the remnants of a maize crop providing cover and food for migrants as well as some desert residents. Birds seem to be everywhere as soon as we arrived. A large flock of Indian Silverbills and a couple of Namaqua Doves grabbed our attention straight away. Walking along the dirt track dividing the field, quality birds came thick and fast. Caucasian and Armenian Stonechats flicked along the track, often beautifully perched on the irrigation features and in the corn. Curiously, we didn't see any Siberian Stonechats (*S. t. maurus*) where the previous week there had been several. Moreover, the views and numbers of Namaqua Doves just got better and better, and at one point we had ten birds in view ranging from scaly juveniles to adult males. Joining them, a fine male Hooded Wheatear, and more 'eastern' stonechats. The open, sandy portion of the field got more interesting the farther east we walked and we were almost at the dunes when we found two foraging Greater Hoopoe-larks. As always, they were highly mobile and somewhat reminiscent of mini-courers. By simply standing still, we allowed these beautiful larks to walk right up to us. The same section of the field held numerous Desert, Isabelline and Northern Wheatears, a Lesser Short-toed Lark, and best of all, a small flock of Desert Finches feeding with Eurasian Linnets! With the sun already dropping towards the mountains in the west, we elected to move back towards the vehicle via the maize portion of the field and hadn't got too far when we started to flush pipits. The first birds were Tawny Pipits, several of which ultimately gave superb views but there were other species as well including several 'schreeping' Richard's Pipits, not particularly easy to see well but with patience we all had good views. As we moved back towards the vehicle another large pipit lifted up giving a slightly different but noticeably raspy flight call, not quite right for Richard's. In flight it also looked smaller and shorter tailed than Richard's, but unlike those, which we'd seen hovering before landing, this bird dropped into the maize like a missile. Not wanting to take any chances, we thought it wise to return to the vehicle and listen to some sound recordings of large pipits. The recording of Blyth's Pipit was a very close match to the bird we'd heard. With just four accepted national records of Blyth's Pipit for Israel, we decide to go back and relocate our bird, not an easy task as the field was huge and full of distraction. No sooner had we started to walk than Richard found a Little Bunting perched atop the acacias right by our vehicle. It was loosely associating with the Indian Silverbills but flicked across to the irrigation pipes affording superb views (and photos). Little Bunting is a significant rarity in Israel. Our focus returned to pipits and it wasn't too long before we located three large pipits offering reasonable views. We again found the smaller bird and fortunately had it teed up on a low grass pile for a while, gratefully taking the opportunity to grab as much photo documentation as possible. Keith also managed to get some excellent video footage. In essence, we came away with the feeling that the bird was indeed a Blyth's Pipit, but for such a difficult identification, confirmation was perhaps best left to the Israel Rare Birds committee – the jury's still out from our perspective. In the diminishing light, raptor activity increased with quartering Eurasian Marsh-harriers and Hen Harriers, and a Eurasian Sparrowhawk over the fields. We rounded off

the day by watching Little Green Bee-eaters in a pre-roost gathering in the tamarisks and then gently coasted back to Eilat for a superb buffet supper and the evening bird list. The first full day in southern Israel had been superb with more riches to come over the following days.

**Day 3** After an early breakfast we headed straight down to Eilat's North Beach finding a superb pair of Pied Kingfishers perched above the drainage canal before we'd even got to the beach. The canal itself was busy with birds including Grey Herons, Little Egrets and several shorebirds, one of which was a surprise, Black-tailed Godwit. Upon arrival at the North Beach we immediately found a Greater Sandplover and a number of White-eyed Gulls, the latter very much a target for the morning. The sandplover was unfortunately flushed by a walker but soon re-settled, and we later had excellent views of this bird alongside a Kentish Plover. Other gulls included small flocks of Black-headed with one or two Slender-billed Gulls in the mix. As is so often the case in Eilat, we 'wrestled' with the larger immature large gulls finding Caspian, Steppe, Baltic and Armenian though a nice adult Caspian Gull was rather more satisfying! The beach had been good to us so we headed north, perusing a melon field along the way. It was full of birds, mostly Eurasian Collared-doves and Feral Pigeons. Amongst the passerines were quite good numbers of Desert Finches with several bright European Greenfinches and a few Water Pipits of the race '*coutelli*'. No other doves of interest appeared to be in the field so we moved onto Eilat's northern date plantation. Initially, all seemed quiet though a nice dark-morph Booted Eagle and a Steppe Buzzard gave us brief but close views. As we walked south through the perfectly aligned date trees the birding began to get more interesting with Common Chiffchaffs, Bluethroats, Black Redstart, and several Stonechats. Jan also had good views of a Graceful Prinia. However, the real focus was on pipits and we were keen to relocate three Olive-backed Pipits initially found by Barak Granit over the previous weekend. What we didn't know was that two young Israeli ringers from the IBRCE (complete with mist-nets) had the same idea! The Israelis knew where the birds were and graciously helped to locate them for our group. In fact, four Olive-backed Pipits were present moving around the base of the palm trees, along with a single Tree Pipit offering great comparative views. Moreover, the Israelis were happy to share two captures from the morning – a Bluethroat and an 'eastern' Stonechat, most likely of the form *armenicus*. The morning had been superb but there was still time to squeeze in one more spot before lunch. Heading north we stopped for a couple of Desert Larks by the road before finding our way to the 'Hidden Valley'. A recent sighting of Sinai Rosefinch was enough to draw us to this site and, as soon as we arrived, a superb White-tailed Wheatear greeted us. This bird did everything it could to show off, 'playing' around the vehicle and drinking water from the cooling dripping beneath our car. A Sinai Rosefinch called briefly bringing hope and false expectation that we might get lucky. The call of a fly-by bird was about as close as we would get for the time being. However, it was still a magical place full of atmosphere, especially when a pair of Brown-necked Ravens began calling and sparring with each other on the rising thermals.

Lunch was taken at Yotvata café once more before we continued north to Nahal Ketura, a beautiful national nature reserve north of Kibbutz Lotan. The reserve is actually a wide river-bed full of Acacias trees and desert vegetation. Our plan was to hike, thoroughly checking every acacia as this was the prime winter habitat of Pallid Scops-owl. After missing out the previous day, we were still keen and determined to find an owl. The underfoot terrain was boulder strewn requiring some caution but as we entered the core area more birds of interest began to appear: Sand Partridge, Hooded Wheatear, Streaked Scrub-warbler, Sardinian Warbler, Blackstart and Common Chiffchaff were all noted. The owl, however, proved much more difficult to find, as we thought it might. The species is a maestro of camouflage, passing the winter days delicately hidden amongst acacia branches, usually no more than two meters above the ground. Moreover, the winter population in Southern Israel is very small with probably no more than thirty individual birds residing in publicly accessible spots throughout the southern Arava Valley. As we progressed, our team diligently searched each and every tree, but with no result enthusiasm began to wane. Putting a limit on the number of remaining trees to be searched seemed timely. Remarkably, the very last tree to be checked held a beautifully cryptic Pallid Scops-owl! Fortunately, the bird didn't flush and allowed a close approach for viewers and photographers alike. The hike had been a great success and the owl a life bird for many on the tour. The walk back to the vehicle went quickly as we found easier walking terrain, along with the natural bouncy stride that comes from having just seen a new bird. Along the way, yet another extrovert male Hooded Wheatear showed off all its best features and, as we reached the car, a fine adult Imperial Eagle drifted south. Much of our afternoon had vaporised with the owl-quest and with daylight diminishing we sped down to Yotvata's northern fields with the hope of finding a few more key species before the sun went down. As soon as we arrived, Ray spotted a shrike well hidden in a tamarisk by the road. We stayed in the vehicle but with some skilful manoeuvring, the views proved it to be an immaculate first-winter 'Steppe' Grey Shrike. Our final bird of the day was found without too many problems despite the fading light. An Oriental Skyark, first located by voice, ultimately gave fantastic views on the ground. The presence of Sky Larks in the field at the same time was a little confusing, but once heard, the Oriental's voice was unmistakable and relatively easy to pin down. We finished the day with a very interesting, dusky-looking Mourning Wheatear, a bird that proved to be of the rare, partially migratory sub-species *persica*.

Another exhilarating day in the Arava Valley was coming to an end, finished off in the best possible manner with another wonderful Israeli buffet dinner and the evening bird list.

**Day 4** An early start saw us up and on the road by 05:30hrs. It was still dark but not dark enough to miss out House Crow for the day list! It was also dull and overcast with a touch of rain in the air, quite rare in Eilat and not usually a good sign for conditions further north. But in this case, the skies cleared the further north we went and by the time we reached our planned breakfast stop some 100 kilometres north of Eilat; we were in the midst of another beautiful morning in the desert. The Dead Sea region was our main goal of the day, but not before attempting to pick up several key birds along the way. The first of these was Arabian Warbler, a low-density resident of prime Acacia forest and endemic to the Red Sea basin and southwest Arabia. We reached our site in excellent time, greeted by the unique odour of fresh desert rainfall filling the air. Our chosen acacia wadi was full of post-rain activity – Mourning Wheatear, Blackstart, Eurasian Hoopoes, Rock Martins, Black Redstart, Streaked Scrub-warbler, Common Chiffchaff, more Desert Finches and several rather active Palestine Sunbirds. We hadn't been in the acacias for too long before we heard the high-pitched whistles of Arabian Babblers, but rather than chase them we let them come to us – quite literally. A small party of three absurdly tame babblers entertained us, seemingly being just as interested in us as we were in them. Keith was hoping for video footage but I don't think he expected the birds right at his feet! Although the babblers were a much needed bird on the trip, they were so confiding they provided a minor distraction from the real goal of the morning. We needn't have worried. Within minutes we were watching two dark-headed *Sylvia* warblers alongside each other, one smaller and shorter tailed than the other. The larger bird also had a distinctive tail wagging habit, highly characteristic of our quarry. It was a perfect comparison, a male Sardinian Warbler alongside a male Arabian Warbler feeding openly in a completely leafless acacia! In fact, the Arabian Warbler really obliged us by feeding almost entirely in small, lightly-foliated Acacias. We couldn't have wished for better views. Heady with success, we continued north stopping at Hazeva for a comfort break, before our northbound journey saw us reach the Dead Sea region in mid-morning, having passed some huge evaporation tanks along the way. We arrived at Wadi Mishmar to be greeted once more by spectacular scenery and birds on site with Blackstart, White-tailed Wheatear and Desert Lark around the parking lot. Overhead, a couple of Fan-tailed Ravens put on a fantastic display, calling and wheeling over us as if to show that bird finding in Israel could be a little too easy at times. Close by, a Southern Grey Shrike patrolled from the tops of the acacias offering much more satisfactory views than the bird seen briefly at Samar earlier in the trip. As we began our hike down into the wadi, Sand Partridges scattered about everywhere but we had our minds on smaller fare, namely finches. Hiking deeper into the wadi we ultimately came across five Sinai Rosefinches including three cracking males. A cautious approach seemed unwarranted in the end as these birds proved to be incredibly confiding, and were clearly used to noisy parties of Israeli hikers. We stayed with the birds for a while sharing the joy of the moment with Ray, as the rosefinch was a much needed nemesis bird for him. Our remaining time was spent watching Eurasian Griffons wheeling high over the escarpments, with Little Green Bee-eaters, Trumpeter Finches, Long-legged Buzzard and Rock Martin all seen by the time we arrived back at the vehicle, the walk being peppered by Sand Partridge sightings throughout. The walk also produced a couple of interesting mammals with Rock Hyrax and a Golden Spiny Mouse along the way. In keeping with tradition for our Dead Sea day, we took a lunch break at Ein Gedi but didn't have too many takers for a dip in the sea itself! The parking lot did hold more Fan-tailed Ravens, Tristram's Grackles and Laughing Doves but with a decent amount of daylight remaining we headed north once more to an incredible viewpoint overlooking the Dead Sea named Metzuke Deragot. From here we had unique views over the Dead Sea into Jordan, whilst to the west we admired the rolling hills of the Judean Desert, and down below, the spectacular gorge of Wadi Darga. Birds seemed few and far between at first, but after a little time the scene became lively. Parties of south bound Common Cranes totalled over 100 birds, whilst Fan-tailed, Brown-necked and Common Ravens sparred together over the edge of the escarpment. Richard was on form once again, finding two great raptors – a pair of Black (Cinereous) Vultures drifting south, and a high passing but local Bonelli's Eagle. In particular, the vultures were an important find and only the second time Birdfinders had recorded this species on a Southern tour – spring or autumn. The mammal theme continued too with some very approachable, young Nubian Ibex. And with that it was time to head south for our meeting with guide Barak Granit, a specialist in Hume's Owl and Nubian Nightjar. Arriving at our first site before dusk proved to be a good strategy and as the light faded, Golden Jackals began howling close to us creating a unique atmosphere. Then, we were all caught a little off guard when Barak started spotlighting and suddenly announced "oh....nightjar!" The bird offered good spotlight views as we looked across a ditch into the base of some tamarisk scrub, but it was flighty, jumping up to catch moths and landing in a different place each time making it difficult for Barak to follow. Eventually it was lost in the darkness when we found out that some of our party hadn't seen it, or not seen it well enough. We pressed on, driving the dirt roads and again Barak, very skillfully spotted another nightjar resting below some reeds. Again, this bird lifted off soon after being spotlighted and proved to be our last nightjar observation of the evening. We left Neot Hakikkar with mix feelings as some had seen the nightjar very well, whilst other didn't feel as though they'd seen enough for a life bird. After a short break for snacks and coffee, we

entered an impressive canyon with steep sandstone walls, perfect habitat for Hume's Owl. We stood quietly for a while until Barak was ready to try and elicit a response from an owl. After a few attempts, several of us were sure that we could hear an owl responding whilst others thought that the sound may have come from an echo. Either way, we didn't have a definitive response and certainly didn't have a visual of the owl. After a while it became clear that we weren't going to get lucky in this particular canyon and Barak took us to several more sites, again without success before we decided to throw in the towel and head for home. The two-hour journey back to Eilat was enlivened by reflections of another superb day, and the often mixed fortunes of night birding. Despite dipping on Hume's Owl and having only mixed success with Nubian Nightjar, we all agreed that it was better to have the opportunity to try rather than not attempt to see them at all.

**Day 5** In view of the previous night's late finish, we began the day in casual manner, meeting after a leisurely breakfast with prospects for a solid morning in the vicinity of Eilat. What we hadn't bargained for was a strong, cold northern wind whipping straight down the Arava Valley. We began, in any event, with a brief stop for Greater Flamingos at Eilat's southern salt pools before heading over to the north sewage pools, the largest of which is closer to a lake in size and well stocked with fish. Fortunately for us, it was also full of birds! Most were Great Cormorants (2,000+) but there were also two White Pelicans, Grey Herons, Great White, Little and Cattle Egrets and a very late Purple Heron. Some nice rafts of waterfowl included Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, Eurasian Teal, Eurasian Wigeon, Gadwall, Mallard, Tufted and Ferruginous Ducks. A couple of large raptors had us intrigued for a while until we realized we were looking at two different age classes of Greater Spotted Eagle, a juvenile and a second-year bird. Equally intriguing was a pale 'reed warbler' working the *phragmites* in the corner of the lake. We concluded it was just that – a pale Eurasian Reed-warbler, most likely of the *fuscus* race sometimes known as 'Caspian' Reed-warbler. As we left the site, a couple of us had a brief sighting of a White-throated Kingfisher which disappeared into the neighbouring sewage plant but couldn't be coaxed out, not even with a tape. Next stop was Eilat Bird Park, a well known ringing and research site. Several Dead Sea Sparrows had recently been ringed there, and this bird was high on the wish list for many in the group. On finding very few sparrows of any kind, the salt pools looked more intriguing with shorebirds in good numbers relatively close to us including Little Stints, Ruffs, Common Redshanks, Black-winged Stilts and our first Marsh Sandpipers of the trip. The bird park itself had been a little on the quiet side but around the entrance we found Little Green Bee-eater, Common Stonechat, Desert Finch, Graceful Prinia and the ever-present White-spectacled Bulbuls. The real highlight however, was an immaculate Barbary Falcon perched on one of the power poles, a bird that posed beautifully for photos. The morning had gone quickly and thoughts of a change in venue saw us heading north to the desert east of Timna Park. Here we hoped to find an Asian Desert Warbler seen on the previous tour but got distracted by a smart male Desert Wheatear along with a Mourning Wheatear and two Greater Hoopoe-larks. We lingered for a while but, alas, couldn't come up with an Asian Desert Warbler.

Yotvata provided a convenient lunch stop as it had done throughout the tour. Wandering around the bustling grounds produced a fair assortment of species with Tristram's Grackle, Eurasian Hoopoe, Common Chiffchaff, Bluethroat and Palestine Sunbird being notched up during the lunch hour. Afterwards, we tried Yotvata sewage pools, still with Dead Sea Sparrow in mind. Hopes were certainly raised when we found several large flocks of Spanish Sparrows, but despite careful scanning, no Dead Sea Sparrows were found. However, this proved to be a lively birding spot, no more evident than in the ever-charming Little Green Bee-eaters, which kept our photographers entertained. Other species included Cattle Egret, Spur-winged Lapwing, Common and Green Sandpipers, Common Snipe, a lone Ferruginous Duck, good views of Water Pipit and brief looks at a Water Rail. Since we were in Yotvata we decided to take another look at the huge circular field that had given us so much excitement on the first full day. Ironically, one of the first birds to appear was the very same Little Bunting, a bird that had been searched for, but not seen, by numbers of Israeli birders since our first sighting – the bunting just seemed to like us! We also searched for our putative Blyth's Pipit but had no luck, though we did find several Richard's Pipits and a single Oriental Lark. Otherwise we had no complaints with close views of Hen Harriers, Western Marsh-harriers, Northern Lapwings, Crested Larks, Namaqua Doves, and Indian Silverbills forming an intriguing mix of species. The day was far from over as we sped back towards Eilat with an appointment to keep. As dusk approached we positioned ourselves at drinking spot for Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse. A few nerve-racking moments ensued as a couple of Israeli nature-lovers sat down close to our chosen spot quite unaware of our quarry. However, we needn't have worried. A handsome pair of Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse came into to drink right on cue. As is so often the case with this species, it was almost dark when they arrived but there was enough ambient light to see the features reasonably well, especially the ochre breast band of the male. With the hotel only minutes away, we headed back for a shower and another fabulous buffet supper.

**Day 6** It was with some sadness that we met for an early breakfast, fully aware that it was our last morning in Eilat. We had a fairly tight agenda, squeezing in several sites along the 300 kilometre drive to the Western Negev. But we

weren't quite done with Eilat, not by any means. Acting on a tip-off, we first tried the North Beach finding two rare herons, and both giving exquisite views – Western Reef-heron and Striated Heron. An obliging adult Caspian Gull also perched just offshore as did a White-eyed Gull. Just north of the beach, the Eilat marina held a Great Crested Grebe something of a scarcity in Eilat and a species only very rarely recorded on Birdfinders trips, spring or autumn. The morning was gradually disappearing and with a significant drive ahead, we began to head north. We'd barely left the city limits when the phone rang. It was Barak Granit who casually announced "James, I'm sure you will be happy to know that I just found a male Hypocolius in Eilat Birdwatching Park". A U-turn was quickly followed by a hectic scorch down the 'old' Arava highway and we arrived on site within five minutes. The bird itself was mobile and a few anxious moments followed before Barak and Rami pointed out the bush it was favouring. Curiously, the Hypocolius was quite easily detected by watching the mobbing bulbuls that just wouldn't leave it alone. Once settled this stunning bird remained on view for about thirty minutes. It was the first time in a decade or so that even the most seasoned Israeli birders had seen a Hypocolius in the country. Moreover, it was a handsome male. The whole event seemed quite ironic because had we left Eilat as early as planned, we would certainly have missed the Hypocolius. By mid-morning it really was time to hit the road but even so, it was difficult to get away. Aside from the Hypocolius, the small date plantation next to the bird park was full of interesting birds with 3–4 Song Thrushes (scarce in Eilat), several Bluethroats, a fly-over Olive-backed Pipit and a Redwing, the latter quite rare so far south, and the only one of the tour. By the time we reached our next site the wind had dropped altogether and it had certainly warmed up to be a bit more in keeping with typical temperatures in southern Israel. The Ovda Valley looked parched and barren and it was difficult to imagine how any larks could be scratching out a living from such lacklustre habitat. But first impressions can be deceptive especially in the desert, and the place proved to be full birds. By gently working through flocks of Crested Larks and Trumpeter Finches we found some exciting species with about a dozen Bar-tailed Larks, staggering views of up to 25 Temminck's Larks, and a rather out of place Oriental Skylark. As we walked back towards the van, a flock of 12 Crowned Sandgrouse called as they flew over the hills though didn't settle to oblige us with views on the ground. From Ovda we had a fairly solid drive across the Central Negev, passing through Ha'Meishar plains and then climbing the spectacular escarpment of the Ramon Crater. Topping the crater we entered the town of Mizpe Ramon, bustling with tourists and locals alike, a slightly surreal scene having driven through so much uninhabited desert. Lunch was taken picnic-style in the town park where we began to focus on finding Syrian Serin, a rather rare finch and endemic to the region. The search for them produced plenty of birds including our first Chukars and Hooded Crows, plus White-tailed Wheatear, Black Redstart, Crested Larks, and Palestine Sunbird but with no flocks of finches. An alternative site found a pair of Golden Eagles roosting on a pylon, especially nice being once of the scarcer breeding raptors in Israel. Below the eagles was an extensive area of orchards at Nafha spring. The area was full birds and could easily have claimed to be the Chukar capital of Israel – there must have been over 200 of them! We also had super views of Southern Grey Shrike and Mourning Wheatear, and wrestled with a couple of skulking *Sylvia* warblers, one of which was certainly Sardinian whilst the other may well have been a Cyprus Warbler but eluded confirmation. Finches were few, though we did have several bright European Greenfinches but couldn't find anything resembling a serin. Our final birding stop of the day was another orchard grove behind the gas station at Sde Boker with hopes, once more, of finding the ever-elusive Syrian Serin but opportunities faded quickly with the light and we came away with only Black Kite, Southern Grey Shrike and European Robin to show for our efforts. Arrival at Kibbutz Gevulot was in darkness, but greeted by a calling Barn Owl as we unloaded the luggage before entering our comfortable guest rooms. Dinner was taken at the local grille in Urim, a little different to the buffet suppers that we'd become so accustomed to, but extremely enjoyable all the same.

**Day 7** Our last full day began early as we wanted to reach Nizzana as close to first light as possible. With no planned stops along the way it was going to take a very good bird to force us into a roadside stop, but a 'black-and-white' wheatear at the roadside near Nizzana was intriguing enough to bring us to a halt. It turned out to be a fine male Finsch's Wheatear, our first of the tour. Arrival at the 'steppe-like' terrain at Nizzana was greeted by bitterly cold temperatures and rather few birds, but there was another Finsch's Wheatear, this time a female, and we did rather well with Spectacled Warblers getting fine views of two rival males, and again found Arabian Babblers. Several small groups of Dorcas Gazelle could be seen grazing in the harsh terrain, but there was no sign of our main quarry – Macqueen's Bustard. Time was pressing, and not wanting miss out on sandgrouse, we reluctantly left the site with the option of returning later. But as luck would have it, not more than a kilometre up the road, we found a party of three Macqueen's Bustards right next to the road. Moreover, they were quite confiding and simply walked (rather than flew) away giving superb views. Arrival at the local sewage pools was greeted by great flights of ducks in the air, mostly Eurasian Teal, Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, and a single Common Shelduck. Impressive numbers of Little Grebes were also concentrated on the pools - fascinating to think of these small grebes migrating in numbers over the desert. But our main goal here was sandgrouse and we settled down with our packed breakfasts and simply waited. It wasn't long before the bubbling calls of Black-bellied Sandgrouse were heard and several groups flew into drink, some offering very good views on the ground. Other species drawn

down to the water included more familiar 'northern' species such as Northern Lapwing and Reed Bunting. As the day warmed up, raptor activity increased. Western Marsh-harrier and Long-legged Buzzard appeared and might have been expected, but a late Short-toed Eagle was not, a bird that gave fantastic views soaring over the sewage pools. A Red-rumped Swallow flew over, but intrigued us by its appearance. It was no ordinary Red-rumped, with distinct streaking on the throat and across the upper breast extending down on to the belly and flanks. We watched it for a while, unable to draw any firm conclusions but it may have been an 'Eastern' Red-rumped Swallow, as yet undocumented in Israel. The sandgrouse, however, had not appeared in the variety and numbers that we'd hoped though a party of about 13 Crowned Sandgrouse did land distantly in the desert, seemingly uninterested in coming into drink. Not wanting to give up completely on Syrian Serin, we returned to the Sde Boker area with a welcome coffee break turning up Little Green Bee-eaters at the local gas station. We then moved onto Ben Gurion's grave where the adjacent park held lots of birds including several Song Thrushes, Eurasian Blackbirds, European Robins, Black Redstarts and Common Chiffchaffs. Small flocks of European Greenfinches inspired thoughts of Syrian Serin once more, but our best efforts couldn't muster up these elusive little finches. By way of compromise, we enjoyed staggering views of the Zin Valley where were found incredibly confiding Mourning Wheatears, Blackstarts and Desert Larks. Careful scanning of the valley produced several Eurasian Griffons, soaring and roosting on the cliffs. With time pressing, we headed north-west to the vast agricultural fields of Urim where we hoped to find a number of species not yet record on the tour. Arrival at Urim got off to a very good start with two large falcons sparring with each other, one Lanner, one Saker – not too shabby for starters! Common Kestrels and quartering Black Kites seemed to be plentiful as we drove deeper into the fields also finding Long-legged Buzzard on the way. Careful scanning of the sandy fields for coursers and plovers produced many Eurasian Skylarks, thousands of them in fact. It was easy to see why so many raptors would be attracted to the area with such an ample food supply at hand. Despite much scanning, our first attempts failed to yield any Cream-coloured Coursers though we did find some nice flocks of Northern Lapwings and looked for possible Sociable Lapwings amongst them. We did, however, find a nice flock of around a dozen or so feeding Spotted Sandgrouse. Raptors were abundant throughout the fields with Hen Harriers, Black Kites, Peregrine, Long-legged Buzzards and a fine male Merlin which looked rather pallid to most of us. Even better, we had fantastic views of a fine adult Imperial Eagle plus a couple of other distant birds, one adult, one immature. Moreover, our persistence with waders really paid off with the find of 13 European Golden-plovers and a fine, close Cream-coloured Courser. In the same area, we searched in vane for the Calandra Larks that had been present the previous week. To the north of Urim we found an enormous flock of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, easily over 1500 birds and watched the bizarre sight of a flock of gargantuan White Pelicans coming down to land in the very same field! It seemed like they simply gave up on the idea of reaching a reservoir for roosting, and settled for a field instead. In the same area we had find views of quartering Pallid Harriers (male and immature) and found another pair of perched Imperial Eagles. With daylight beginning to fade, we tried the Urim fields once more, hoping for Sociable Lapwings. The lapwing eluded us but we did finish the day with an exciting dog-fight between a Saker and a Merlin, and watched in awe as a ghostly male Pallid Harrier quartered the field right in front of us. In the evening, we ate once more at the Grille Restaurant at Urim, narrowly avoiding a collision with a Barn Owl en route! The food was great again and Graham entertained us with lively banter as he had done throughout the tour.

**Day 8** The morning began with a pre-breakfast walk in the grounds of the Kibbutz. Staying in such a beautiful place has many advantages, primarily access to the many excellent species residing within the Kibbutz itself. It didn't take us long to find a couple of very confiding Syrian Woodpeckers, perhaps the main target of the morning. As we strolled around the maize of tracks between the dwellings, species more typical of a northern climate popped into view with Eurasian Blackbird, Song Thrush, European Robin, European Greenfinch, European Goldfinch and Common Chaffinch, with warblers including many Common Chiffchaffs and a few Blackcaps. Closer to the perimeter of the Kibbutz we discovered a fairly large flock of Eurasian Thick-knees beautifully hidden amongst the pomegranate trees where a male Palestine Sunbird did its best to distract us. The highlight of the walk came right at the end, when hopes of finding a Long-eared Owl were realised with not one, but four birds all roosting in the same pine! Breakfast in the Kibbutz dining room was typically fine and filling, and very well received after a fine morning bird walk around the grounds. At Wadi Habasor we were greeted by cold temperatures and a blustery wind, hardly ideal for what we had in mind. But, with a little patience, we began to find some good species including Water Rail, Cetti's Warbler and Eurasian Penduline-tit. We had to settle however, for 'heard-only' Clamorous Reed-warblers that had shown so well on the previous tour in the same spot. However, there was some compensation with superb views of a White-throated Kingfisher a little deeper into the wadi. We also had a brief adrenalin rush when an all dark, short-tailed raptor showed a strong, but superficial resemblance to a Bataleur. Richard's composure brought us back down to earth when he pointed out that the bird was a tailless Western Marsh-harrier! It turned out to be a good learning experience for all, especially the leader! Time was running out, we had to be at the airport by late afternoon, and still planned to have lunch and pack at the Kibbutz. We decided to devote the remainder of our time to finding the Sociable Lapwings that we knew had to be in the area. On leaving

the wadi we did comes across a very late Red-backed Shrike, yet another new bird for the tour. Once more, the large fields of Urim proved disappointing for Sociable Lapwings, though we did find the previous day's flock of European Golden-plovers and a large, but distant flock of Common Cranes. Then, by some great stroke of fortune, we bumped in Eyal Shochat, a good friend and well establish member of the Israeli birding scene. Recognizing our quest, and our limited time frame, Eyal quickly organized a hectic scorch across to Kibbutz Nir Oz where ex-pat Dominic Standing had found two Sociable Lapwings earlier in the autumn. Our vehicle became the third in a convoy as we traversed an intricate network of tracks through the fields of Nir Oz before Dominic ultimately brought us to the right place. We would have had no chance of finding this spot without him and were extremely grateful when a flock of Northern Lapwings lifted up containing not two, but four Sociable Lapwings for us to enjoy! Dominic was also thrilled to find four Sociable Lapwings on his local patch, and Eyal, as always, had been only too happy to help out. Several soaring Steppe Buzzards and two more Imperial Eagles brought our morning to an end. We returned to the Kibbutz for lunch and then finished off our packing for the journey home. As we headed north towards Tel-Aviv, we began to see small flocks of Eurasian Jackdaws by the road, and these, together with several Rose-ringed Parakeets at Ben Gurion airport would prove to be our last new birds of the trip. It had been a wonderful tour, and the culmination of two excellent weeks in Israel for Birdfinders and I'm very grateful for the excellent group participation on both tours.

**James P. Smith**  
**Gill, MA, USA.**