

# Israel

## Autumn

15–22 November 2012

### Participants

Mark Andrews  
John Brannan  
John Fraser  
Brian Gregory  
Brian Heasman  
Roger Howell  
Ronald Kinrade  
Julian and Shane Long  
Barry and Chris Shaw  
John Williamson  
David Woodhouse



**Spotted Sandgrouse** (Mark Andrews)

**Leaders** James Smith and Martyn Kenefick

This year's tour was set against the backdrop of a serious military escalation in the Israel/Gaza situation. The day before we set off, Israel assassinated a Hamas military leader and the resultant tension became headline news throughout the world for the duration of our stay. We demonstrated however, that a carefully planned itinerary means a safe and untroubled birdwatching tour where, yet again, we found a host of amazing species. November is always much-anticipated by Israeli birders as being synonymous with high levels of migration and the finding of rare Western Palearctic wanderers. It was admitted by everyone that from a migration standpoint, this week was exceptionally quiet. We also recognise that resident breeding birds are no longer holding territory and are thus less reliable. However when your tour checklist includes Brown Booby, Western Reef-heron, Pallid Harrier, Great Black-headed Gull, Namaqua Dove, Spotted Sandgrouse, Striated Scops-owl, Hume's Owl, Oriental Skylark, (Asian) Buff-bellied Pipit, Red Sea Warbler, Sinai Rosefinch and Syrian Serin, it is deemed a real success, thanks in no small part to James' excellent leadership.

**Day 1:** Arrival in Tel Aviv was a staggered affair with two groups of participants flying in from Manchester and Luton respectively whilst James had taken an overnight flight from Philadelphia. Immigration, baggage reclaim and customs procedures were perfectly straightforward; we acquired our two rental vehicles and by 21.00 and were on the road south. Some two hours later, we arrived at Kibbutz Gevulot situated in the north-western Negev, our base for the first two nights of the tour. Rooms were quickly allocated and whilst some listened to Barn Owls screeching; most slept soundly.

**Day 2:** The day dawned distinctly chilly but with clear skies and a stiff easterly breeze. As the day got warmer – probably around +24°C – the wind picked up. A pre-breakfast stroll around the Kibbutz grounds produced several highlights. A total of five day-roosting Long-eared Owls, including two birds sat out in the open took no notice of us

whatsoever. Our only Syrian Woodpeckers of the tour were both vocal and very visible as was a superb White-breasted Kingfisher. Everyday Israeli birds such as Laughing Dove, White-spectacled Bulbul, Crested Lark, Eurasian Hoopoe and Graceful Prinia found their way onto the checklists whilst exotics in the form of Common Mynas flew over. Perhaps of more serious interest were our first Common Cranes and a flyover Hawfinch. A buffet breakfast was taken in the kibbutz dining room followed by an 08.30 departure north into the Judean foothills. As the sun increased the heat we started to see Black Kites in their tens; then in their hundreds. Much of the morning was spent scouring the arid boulder-strewn dry scrub slopes of Lahav Nature Reserve trying to entice Long-billed Pipit into view. Sadly, despite knowing that perhaps four pairs inhabited the area, either the strengthening wind or the seemingly ever present Common Kestrels ensured any pipit kept its head down. All was not lost however with excellent views of as many as eight Finch's Wheatears, several Long-legged Buzzards, distant views of both Spectacled and Sardinian Warblers and an intriguing "ring-tailed" harrier. It had both the bulk and prominent white rump of a Hen Harrier but with a warm buff unstreaked breast and uniform chocolate brown upper-parts more akin to a Pallid. There are recent records of such hybrids originating from Sweden – could this be one of those? Shortly before leaving a graceful Mountain Gazelle, identified by its striking black and white flanks stripe, ambled over a nearby ridge. Following a lunch stop, we spent most of the afternoon slowly driving across the myriad of tracks within the fields of Urim. To be frank, the results were disappointing with few quality raptors and even fewer plovers. Birds were also extremely skittish. Pride of place probably goes to an adult Imperial Eagle sat in an open bare field which absolutely dwarfed a Hooded Crow alongside. Two adult Peregrines perched upon electricity pylons showed extensive white in the face and were likely of one of the northern races. Several Merlins were found, the males being extremely pale above and were undoubtedly *pallidus*, sometimes known as Steppe Merlin of Central Asian origin. We also found a completely normal and unambiguous ring-tail Hen Harrier. The best of the rest included two rather photogenic Isabelline Wheatears, several Spur-winged Lapwings and a particularly skittish group of 68 Common Cranes. Just as we were leaving, the highlight of the day for many was an exquisite adult male Pallid Harrier that quartered the fields right beside the track for several minutes. In fading light we made our final stop over looking the reeds and rushes of Wadi Habasor where Cetti's Warblers were calling but were tucked well in. However the stop was by no means wasted as trotting along on the opposite bank of the reedbed was a Golden Jackal; ever alert and with ears cocked it briefly allowed us to find a second animal, presumably its mate, hiding in the grasses. By 17.30 it was pitch dark, just time for the 15-minute drive back to our kibbutz.

**Day 3:** A very long, hard and in part frustrating day. Whilst we saw a number of quality species, despite strenuous effort we came up blank on a number of our targets – but every cloud has a silver lining! And it all started so well. We covered a lot of territory in pleasant but never hot temperatures. An early start saw us driving south towards Nizzana, right up against the Egyptian border. This is open desert with shallow wadis and dry thorn scrub. Before we had even come to a halt, we had found roadside (Eastern) Mourning and Desert Wheatears shortly to be followed by a perched up but rather distant *elegans* Southern Grey Shrike. Despite off-road driving out to view shallow depressions not evident from the roadside, our two principal targets, Macqueen's Bustard and Cream-coloured Courser were conspicuous by their absence. Regrettably, post-breeding dispersal makes these birds nowhere as easy to see as in the spring. Small consolation was had by adding Sand Partridge and exquisite Green Bee-eaters to the list. We also came across Dorcas Gazelle, separable from their Mountain cousins by a dark brown, less distinctive flank stripe. We had bought our packed breakfasts with us and so retreated to sit out on the banks of some small sewage lagoons to watch birds come into drink. Sandgrouse were high on our priority list and we had exceptional views of at least 150 Spotted and perhaps 100 Black-bellied. Other notable highlights were an exceptionally late adult Whiskered Tern still retaining much of its breeding plumage and a fine male Pallid Harrier. Quality back up was in the shape of Bluethroat, Long-legged Buzzard and Desert Lark. Frustratingly a heard-only Syrian Serin and a silhouetted flying Desert Finch were the best of the rest. In truth, we had spent far longer at Nizzana than we should have. The bottom line was that we had an appointment at the southern end of the Dead Sea at 16.30. This was just over two hours solid drive away and the quandary was how best to spend the remaining time. We decided to make another attempt in finding birds of the Judean hills and drove to Mt Amasa at slightly higher elevation than Lahav. Again the hoped for Long-billed Pipit failed to materialise. We did however, find around 20 Finch's Wheatears, a couple of Blue Rock-thrushes and a pair of Common Ravens, the least common of the three raven species in

Southern Israel. Driving steadily east now, we scanned huge flocks of Sky Larks (10,000 birds was a conservative estimate) in fields close to Arad. Some of us saw several Calandra Larks intermixed and we found a Barbary Falcon sat amid one field and an approachable Common Crane in another. As we descended into the Dead Sea valley, our first White-tailed Wheatear perched up and it was then a quick drive to Neot Hakikkar to meet Barak Granit, our "night-birding" guide. Our targets were two extremely rare, range-restricted residents and we knew in advance that our chances of seeing them in late autumn were far slimmer than in spring, but if you don't try... . The first, Nubian Nightjar, occurs in agricultural land right against the Jordanian border and, in addition to getting access permission from the kibbutz, we also had to persuade the army to let us wander so close to the border at night. Life was made even more difficult with a new officer in charge who seemed to take an age in finally allowing us access, by which time we had missed the birds leaving their daytime roost. Two of our party glimpsed one bird right at the start of our stay but, despite driving back and forth along a maze of tracks, the only bird seen by the rest of us was a Eurasian Thick-knee. But perseverance always pays off in the end. We drove in convoy north before turning into a steep-sided wadi up against the Dead Sea cliffs and everyone enjoyed a moment of magic with a Hume's Owl. This is such a rare and vulnerable species in the region that both access and viewing conditions are tightly controlled. Obviously it is necessary to use both tape lure and flashlight, however such usage is kept to an absolute minimum and once everyone has seen the bird, the light is switched off and the bird left in peace. Over 200 km later at about 23.00, we were in Eilat, checking into a hotel which was to be our base for the remainder of the tour.

**Day 4:** Weather-wise, a day of two distinct halves. The day dawned clear, bright and very warm. Indeed temperatures probably reached 30°C by late morning. Then the cumulus cloud built up, the sky turned black and the thunder, lightning and rain squalls struck – an exceptionally rare event in southern Israel, even rarer in November. So heavy was the downpour that the main north/south highway was blocked by flood water just north of Eilat leaving cars and their occupants stranded for several hours. Whilst a few hardy Birdfinders participants ventured out into Central Park before breakfast finding their first House Crows and Ring-necked Parakeets, for most of us, birding started at Eilat north beach around 08.30. Here we quickly found two of Eilat's specialities, White-eyed Gull and Western Reef-heron. The former were, as expected, perched on off-shore buoys, the latter was unusually a dark-morph bird. We quickly added Slender-billed Gull and, surprisingly, our only Pied Kingfisher of the tour, before driving inland to view the melon fields at Eilat. Here, feeding right beside the track, was a lively party of Desert Finches together with our first good views of Red-throated Pipit and a couple of Isabelline Wheatears. Our next port of call was the large sewage lake at KM19, which was heaving with waterbirds. Most numerous were Great Cormorant, Grey Heron, Great White Egret, Northern Pintail and Northern Shoveler. However much more attention was paid to our first family parties of Great White Pelicans and Black Storks and our first Caspian Tern. Perhaps the highlight, in species distribution terms, was a Bonelli's Eagle found by Dave initially perched just inside the Jordan border. After a while it slowly glided north, never in Israeli airspace – but who cares? Looking in the other direction, our second adult Imperial Eagle of the tour slowly drifted by – this time definitely an Israeli bird. Of smaller stature, an adult Citrine Wagtail, still retaining a fair amount of yellow on the face, flitted around the cattle pens but sadly our views of two Namaqua Doves were brief and distant to say the least. Acting on a tip-off that a Dunn's Lark had been found several days earlier, we drove north to Elifaz and spent some while looking out over a huge flat dirt field but not a lark to be found, just a Cape Hare hurtling between the small dunes and a fresh corpse of a Common Quail that had obviously flown into the overhead power lines. And so it was on to Yotvata, for the first of several lunchtime stops of the tour. Yotvata circular fields are often a haven for large numbers of pipits and larks. The weather by now, however, was deteriorating rapidly. We did find an immaculate adult male Hen Harrier being tossed around in the wind. However we were now forced to watch from the vehicles. After just a very short while, the state of the tracks were becoming both extremely muddy and waterlogged and so we took the decision to drive north and then west heading up out of the Arava valley where the sky looked clearer, finding a particularly late migrant Short-toed Eagle en route. The mid afternoon was spent walking the ponds and bushes at Shizzafon. This Kibbutz has a reputation for starting ambitious beautification projects but never completing them. These are basically sewage ponds but an attempt has been initiated to create an ornamental garden alongside. At first there was little to be seen but then about a dozen Trumpeter Finches flew into drink whilst several Blackstarts perched out in the open. A second Imperial Eagle for the day, our first Western Marsh-harrier for the tour flew through and several Bluethroats crept from bush to bush.

The final hour or so of daylight was spent walking across the Ovda plain. Sadly few larks were to be found but we did have exceptional views of Isabelline, (Eastern) Mourning, Desert and surprisingly Finsch's Wheatears to round off a pretty successful days birding despite the best efforts of the weather to dampen our spirits.

**Day 5:** Back to normal today. Dry, hot and sunny all day, temperatures closing in on 32°C. Those that had ventured into Central Park first thing were rewarded with a late Red-backed Shrike. Immediately after an early breakfast, we drove north, past Yotvata and then off-road into Wadi Qetura. Whilst this dry wadi holds a number of interesting birding possibilities, our focus was on just one species: Striated Scops-owl. These winter visitors start to arrive in southern Israel during mid November. Whilst still no doubt extremely rare, census work in recent years has determined them to be present in significantly larger numbers than thought just 15 years ago. This is yet another very dry, boulder-strewn wadi with scattered Acacia trees. The species appears to have no particular preference for bare or foliated trees and can roost at almost any height off the ground. To make matters more interesting, their general plumage colour matches almost exactly the colour of Acacia bark and our final challenge was that there are a lot of trees to individually scrutinise. Whilst the group worked the northern rim of the wadi, James made a bee-line for the far western end and within an hour or so he radioed that he had an owl in his sights. Striated Scops-owls have a reputation of “sitting tight”, relying on their cryptically camouflaged plumage as their best defence. Fortunately, this individual played ball and we all enjoyed extended views. Also seen in the area were soaring Short-toed Eagle and a couple of Corn Buntings, which seemed totally out of place. With smiling faces, we made a leisurely return to the vehicles and headed south before turning east once more to work the Yotvata northern circular field. First bird of note was an *aucheri* Southern Grey Shrike, notably greyer on the underparts than the *elegans* birds found at Nizzana. Other highlights included a party of nine Common Cranes feeding in an adjacent field, a number of Red-throated Pipits, some still in breeding dress, a low flying Pallid Swift and perhaps the same adult male Hen Harrier seen yesterday. It had been a hot morning and the ice-cream bar inside the restaurant did a roaring trade. Most of the afternoon was spent working the southern circular field. A male Northern Wheatear was quite a late migrant but stragglers do pass through well into November. The Eurasian Wryneck sat beside it however, was quite unexpected at this time of year. We also managed to find two far more approachable Namaqua Doves to keep the photographers amongst us content. Other notable birds included several Bluethroats and Sardinian Warblers. We had almost reached the vehicles when a group of a dozen tiny passerines leapt out of a suda bush and flew into some dry reeds - typically skittish, these were Dead Sea Sparrows and we spent some time ensuring that everyone in the group had good views. With less than an hour of daylight left we opted to walk out into the desert at KM35. Whilst none of the desert-type larks were found in the short time available, the choice was well made with good telescope views of a 3<sup>rd</sup>-year Greater Spotted Eagle – a real brute of a bird, looking absolutely enormous compared to a nearby Black Kite. The last sighting of the day was another Golden Jackal trotting with real purpose on the lookout for dinner.

**Day 6:** Our chosen itinerary today meant all our time would be spent in several stony wadis. We had two principal targets in mind plus a number of quality back up birds and we did exceptionally well. We left Eilat around sunrise with packed breakfasts and drove for about 140km into the Hatzava area in search of one of the regions real specialities: Arabian (or Red Sea) Warbler. En route, fly-overs across our path included a Long-legged Buzzard and a group of 25 Common Cranes. The final part of the journey involved a lengthy off-road excursion. Our chosen patch of stone desert, indistinguishable from any other, holds several pairs of this most localised warbler, the Hatzeva area supporting a significant percentage of the country's population. Not only did we have prolonged views of a pair of warblers, we also had the privilege of watching them nest build, most unusual in mid November. Also in the general area were several small groups of Sand Partridge, numerous Blackstarts and Green Bee-eaters, several Sardinian Warblers and a photogenic pair of busy Scrub Warblers. Perhaps least expected of the back-up birds was a fly-over Wood Lark – rare indeed in the deserts of southern Israel. Having tasted success without undue difficulty, we made a speedy drive north for a further hour or so along the western edge of the Dead Sea cliffs before another off-road drive towards the entrance of Wadi Mishmar, which is normally reliable site for target species number two, Sinai Rosefinch. These birds require wadis with steep sided cliffs. We had hiked in for about 20 minutes when an immaculate Barbary Falcon circled overhead. Tristram's Grackles were calling all around us and Fan-tailed Ravens soared too and fro. These rosefinches make a sparrow like chirrup, which quickly alerted us to a superb adult male

sitting on the lip of a small hole in the cliff face. It then flew down into the wadi floor, accompanied by two birds in female-type plumage before alighting on the seed heads of some tall grasses. Sadly, the hoped for Cyprus Warbler and Striolated Bunting failed to appear despite an extensive search. We did however find another five Trumpeter Finches pecking at seeds and taking no notice of our presence together with a healthy total of Sand Partridges and Desert Larks, a very vocal White-tailed Wheatear and an elusive unstreaked *Acrocephalus* warbler that was in all likelihood a very late migrant Eurasian Reed-warbler. Time for lunch and, for a hardy few, the opportunity to play tourists and take a dip in the Dead Sea at Ein Gedi. There was little birding light left by the time we departed from Ein Gedi and so we journeyed only a little south before parking up to explore the stony slopes of Wadi Hever in the hope of buntings or rare *Sylvia* warblers but without success. All was not lost however as many of the group managed to find an immature male Hooded Wheatear foraging along the canyon wall. For the next three hours we drove south back to Eilat just in time for a late dinner.

**Day 7:** Our last day in the south with a bit of a change in the weather once more. High cloud persisted for much of the day. Together with a stiffening northerly wind, temperatures barely exceeded 21°C. From a birding perspective things started quietly, gradually picking up pace with some truly quality birds during the late morning and afternoon. Our first port of call was to check the vegetation surrounding Eilat cemetery, which was home to a Red-flanked Bluetail found by Birdfinders in November 2011. The best we could find this morning was a Common Chiffchaff! Then on to Eilat date plantation where five Bluethroats were the highlight together with an aberrant male Common Stonechat showing extensive white in the scapulars. Its rump streaking and tail pattern however flew in the face of what we would expect from Siberian, Caspian or Armenian birds. We then made our only visit of the week to the saltpools at KM20. The residual flooding from last Sunday's storm made access more complicated and the usually hard packed mud tracks had to be negotiated with extreme care. The resident flock of around 400 Greater Flamingos included one strange dark smoky-grey bird. We found our first swimming Pied Avocets, large numbers of Black-winged Stilts and Kentish Plovers, larger still numbers of Little Stints and two extremely late and very dainty Marsh Sandpipers. We spent a considerable amount of time scrutinising one particular wader. It immediately stood out from accompanying Dunlins and Little Stints due to its attenuated profile with wing tips reaching beyond the tip of the tail, but it was never close. It was proportionately smaller than the Dunlins with a medium length but just slightly decurved bill. Thoughts were of either White-rumped or indeed Baird's Sandpiper. In fact, on bill shape alone, we were leaning towards White-rumped when it flew clearly showing a black central rump and tail stripe! Was this just a particularly small race of Dunlin or could some hybridisation be involved? Leaving shorebirds to one side, we spent the rest of the morning analysing and comparing profile shapes and size of swimming large, white-headed gulls. But not before our star birds of the morning: two 2<sup>nd</sup>-winter-plumaged Great Black-headed Gulls were found. These birds are always pretty scarce in southern Israel and even more so at this exceptionally early date. They may even represent the earliest Eilat date recorded. Over the course of the next hour or so, we pieced together the salient features enabling us to identify individual immature Baltic, Yellow-legged and Caspian Gulls together with adult Steppe, Heuglin's and Armenian Gulls. Even so, a number of birds in first winter plumage amongst the flock remained unidentified. There followed a final visit to Yotvata's ice cream bar to fortify us for what was to become a hectic and exciting afternoon. We chose to work the northern circular field of cattle fodder and immediately realised that the species diversity dynamics had changed. Flocks of 40 or so Red-throated and Water Pipits were still present but these were now augmented initially by an adult Tawny Pipit and, more distantly, by two Richard's Pipits flying off towards Jordan. Shortly thereafter, a handsome (Asian) Buff-bellied Pipit, characteristically showing almost unstreaked upperparts, clear cut white wing bars, conspicuous white orbital and a fine gorget of black upper breast streaks, perched up on the water sprinkler system. Not to be outdone, we flushed an Oriental Skylark from the long grass. More like a Wood Lark in flight silhouette lacking both white trailing edge and white sides to the tail. We followed this individual through several short flights but only a few of the party managed to glimpse the bird on the ground. We did, however, managed to hear the diagnostic flight calls given on several occasions as it flushed. With time running out on us a speedy drive took us back to Eilat north beach. We were rewarded with two Brown Boobies perched on a buoy in Jordanian waters, a total of 42 White-eyed Gulls spread out on various floating perches, a high soaring Barbary Falcon and the same dark-morph Western Reef-heron present last Sunday. The light was now fading but there was still time to race out to the roosting birds on KM19 sewage ponds. En route we passed skein after skein

of Great Cormorants flying south down the valley presumably to roost off-shore. Any hopes of Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse had, realistically, been thwarted by the rainstorm earlier in the week but our finale for the day included 25 Black-crowned Night-herons, four each of Black Stork and Great White Pelican plus the two Squacco Herons seen at our previous visit. We stayed until all light had failed and left to the various croaks, squawks and grunts that are the roosting noise of herons and egrets for the short drive back to Eilat.

**Day 8:** Our primary goal today was the five-hour drive north to Tel Aviv and our evening return flights to the UK. However with Syrian Serin still very much on the most wanted list we took an itinerary via Mitzpe Ramon, a known wintering site for the species in the hope that the first birds would have arrived. Our journey crossed the Ramon crater some 40 km long and 10km wide before rising to the cliff top settlement. The drive was uneventful save for a perched Long-legged Buzzard beside the road. The preferred feeding ground for the serin is the local football pitch, now completely overgrown. Upon arrival little was on view save for Black Redstarts and a particularly pallid Northern Wheatear. Finally our target bird put in the briefest of appearance. One bird flew in calling and was about to land on the boundary wall when it was chased off by an aggressive White Wagtail. Whilst the call was very distinctive and one or two of the party saw "a bit of yellow around the head", views were hardly impressive. It eventually flew out of sight, and with it, realistically, our last chance. We checked a small copse of trees a few kilometers down the road finding more Black Redstarts and a particularly photogenic (Eastern) Mourning Wheatear and in a last ditch attempt worked the parkland at Ben Gurion's burial site. There, some consolation was found with a juvenile Masked Shrike, a couple of Eurasian Hoopoes and a handful of Blackstarts together with a number of extremely approachable Nubian Ibex. From here we had a two-hour drive to the airport. Security procedures were understandably a little more thorough than usual, albeit still straightforward and courteous. Having boarded our flight to Luton on schedule, the rain came thundering down so much so that the airport was temporarily closed to both incoming and outgoing flights. Nevertheless, some 40 minutes later we began our return journey arriving just before midnight, again in driving rain. Our thanks go to all the participants especially for their patience and understanding surrounding the somewhat tense start to the tour and, once again, to James for his tireless efforts and his unique identification skills

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