

Israel

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Participants:

Bob & Enid Mercer

Keith & Ann Powrie

Ken Palmer

Leader:

Vaughan Ashby



Picture:

White-tailed Plover

Israel is one of my favourite destinations which never lets you down and this tour was no exception with 175 species seen during the week.

Day 1: Spent travelling to Gatwick then Eilat, arriving late evening to be welcomed by an evening meal saved for us as it was past normal meal times. The food in this comfortable holiday was excellent at all times with substantial buffet breakfast & dinner. On 3 occasions packed breakfasts were supplied for early starts.

Day 2: Before breakfast a quick look in the park adjacent to the hotel provided a taster of things to come with Laughing Dove, Yellow-vented Bulbul, numerous Lesser Whitethroat, Olivaceous Warbler & (Eastern) Bonelli's Warbler. After breakfast setting off for the salt pans, we were soon adding many more species including Little Green Bee-Eater, Spur-winged Plover, Black-necked Grebe & Green Sandpiper. Meanwhile overhead Black Kites & Steppe Buzzards started to appear and rather a surprise were 3 Lesser Pied Kingfishers flying over. Moving on to the new border crossing with Jordan, large numbers of birds were feeding around the straw bales. Most were Cretzschmar's Buntings & Short Toed Larks with a few Ortolan Buntings & Blue-headed Wagtails. Our next stop was a sewerage pond which attracted numerous birds including Buff-bellied & Water Pipits, Bluethroat, White-tailed Plover, Ruff, Little Stint, Little Ringed Plover, Rock Martin, Barn & Red-rumped Swallows. Feeling that this was going to be a good day (understatement!) we drove further up the Arava Valley to some new large reservoirs. Before reaching there however, we were forced to stop to watch Namaqua Doves, Dead Sea Sparrows & Quail all at very close range by the greenhouses. At the reservoirs Greater Flamingo were rather conspicuous together with several Greater Sand Plover, Redshank & Dunlin of the northern long billed race. On to Amran's Pillars where the first bird we saw was a fine male Hooded Wheatear. Sand Partridge were also seen well & the Blackstart in the car park was a real exhibitionist! The real reason for the visit here however, were Sinai Rosefinch which winter here in small numbers & usually depart in late March. We were not disappointed with 4 or 5 different birds seen. With an evening appointment with Sandgrouse to keep, we returned to Eilat first stopping at a picnic site in the hills above the town to see a superb male Tistram's Serin. Just along the road at the cemetery we had a brief look around seeing White-crowned Black Wheatear. Arriving at the Sandgrouse site with plenty of time to spare, we were entertained firstly by a Trumpeter Finch then by the desert race of Fox. Finally, just as the light was failing, we were rewarded by about 40 Liechtenstein's Sandgrouse coming in to drink despite disturbance from a dog walker. A superb end to an excellent first day.

Day 3: After breakfast we headed into the desert & although arriving a little late were not disappointed. We saw Desert, Black-eared, Northern & Isabelline Wheatears easily with the Desert Wheatear being followed by a Desert Warbler. Hoopoe Lark displayed beautifully & we were also fortunate to see 2 Dunn's Larks as well as the common Bar-tailed Larks. The real find however, was a female Red-tailed Wheatear which move across the Arava Valley from the west and carried on across the border into Jordan. The ensuing huddle around field guides caused much mirth! With a date to keep at Yotvata and a cold chocolate milkshake however, we had to make a move! Despite a considerable amount of effort, we were unable to find the Arabian

Warblers but were amply rewarded with Pallid & Marsh Harriers, Eurasian Sparrowhawk and Jack Snipe. Little Green Bee-Eater, Graceful Warbler & Hoopoe were all very obliging. Whilst having a snack at the café we were also able to watch Tristram's Grackles. With a late night planned, we returned to town for a rest. Setting off again for the drive into the remoter desert of the Negev, we rendezvoused with Hadoram Shirihai for a rather interesting off road drive! Arriving at the site well before dusk however, we had time to get superb views of both Scrub Warbler and Mourning Wheatear. As we stood patiently at dusk, the only noise to break the silence was the "kwok kwok" of a Black-crowned Night Heron flying over. The stars and a comet kept us entertained for some time but our patience was eventually rewarded with good views by torch light of an almost mythical bird, Hume's Tawny Owl. What an end to the day. On the way home we had fleeting views of what could only have been an Egyptian Nightjar.

Day 4: After last night's exertions, we had a slightly more leisurely day firstly visiting the raptor watch point at Mount Yoash. The conditions were rather cold & very windy however, so after a few Steppe Eagles & Buzzards, we drove back down to Netifim Spring. The minibus was not suited to the track however and we met people returning with the news that there was a party going on at the bottom we decided not to proceed. We were rewarded with excellent views of a Desert Lark on the path however. Driving back down from the mountains, we stopped at Wadi with scattered bushes which was alive with birds. After a short period we were able to find our target species, an immaculate male Cyprus Warbler. A strange Bunting type bird seen briefly several times eventually turned out to be a Pale Rock Sparrow whilst Desert Lark, Little Green Bee-eater & Ruppell's Warbler all added to the variety. Returning to town we were greeted with the news that there was a Scops Owl in the park. It didn't take us long before we were watching a very obliging bird at roost. The supporting cast in the park was equally good with a male Citrine Wagtail and a Savi's Warbler together with numerous other birds such as Reed, Ruppell's & Bonelli's Warblers and Black-headed Wagtail. Moving on to the Date Palms, we spend a very profitable couple of hours checking through the migrants. Redstarts of the eastern race, Sedge Warbler, Bluethroat & Masked Shrike all showed well but the best bird was an immaculate male Collared Flycatcher. With our evening meal now beckoning, we had one last stop to make, the North Beach, a regular evening meeting place for birders. The attraction here is White-eyed Gull and we were not disappointed with about 13 birds seen, some of them at quite close range.

Day 5: An early start with a packed breakfast for the long drive into the Negev. The weather, unusually for Israel was rather cold & windy and we drove through some heavy rain in the desert! Nevertheless, not long after dawn we were at Nizzana looking at Desert Finches. Driving past an old military airfield we stopped to scan for the main target species, Houbara Bustard, other than large flocks of Lesser Short-toed Larks however, there was initially no sign. By driving down a track however, we soon located a magnificent male strutting away from us. Now a minor problem, the minibus was getting stuck in the mud in the desert! Carefully it was extricated & we drove back towards Nizzana sewerage pools, stopping to look at a group of Chukar on the way. We arrived a little late to see the main flight of Sandgrouse at the pools but we still saw all four species, Pin-tailed, Black-bellied, Crowned & Spotted. Also on the pools were Garganey, Teal, Black-winged Stilt & Spur-winged Plover. Turning around & heading back towards the old airfield we were pleased to see a male Merlin sitting on some rocks. Also present were the Sinai race of Rock Dove without the white rump. As we drove along the perimeter fence, a Wheatear species kept giving brief views and with perseverance we got excellent views of a fine male Finsch's Wheatear. Back at the site where we had previously seen the Houbara Bustard we started to scan the area again and it wasn't long before 4 Cream-coloured Courser were located. Interest was in the sky as well however, as there were a variety of Harriers around including male Pallid & Montagu's & Hen. With all of our target species seen well, we started our return journey home at a more leisurely pace. It was at this time however, that the heavens decided to open & we were treated to the spectacular sight of water cascading off the plateaux into canyons & Wadi. It was our intention to visit a canyon for Desert Eagle Owl but the reserve was closed due to flooding. Not to be beaten however, we decided to walk in & whilst not seeing the Owl, it was certainly worthwhile. As the weather cleared we found a male Orphean Warbler feeding in bushes whilst overhead both Egyptian Vulture & Short-toed Eagle gave good displays. Returning to the minibus it was interesting to see that in our absence the water at the ford had risen then fallen again by about a metre. Continuing our return journey, we stopped off at the viewpoint over the Ramon Crater for the spectacular view, to say it was windy however is an understatement! Finally, on our way back we saw a number of Marsh Harriers migrating through the desert meaning that we had seen all 4 Western Palearctic Harriers in a day.

Day 6: Although having a packed breakfast again, we had a more leisurely day, enhanced by eating it in the desert listening to Hoopoe Lark singing. New species were obviously going to become more difficult to find now but it was nice watching Desert, Isabelline, Northern & Black-eared Wheatear again. Hoopoe & Bar-tailed Lark also performed well. Moving on towards Yotvata for another appointment with a chocolate milkshake, we stopped at another Kibbutz for a look around a dung heap! It's funny how the best birds occur in the most unlikely places & this was no exception. At the first stop whilst scanning through the Cretzschmar's Buntings we were somewhat taken aback by a stunning male Rock Thrush which hopped out in front of us! In with the numerous Cretzschmar's Buntings were a few Ortolan & the star prize, a pair of Cinereous Buntings. The area was absolutely alive with birds & we also found Red-throated & Tawny Pipits, Black-headed Wagtail & Short Toed & Crested Larks. One of the Larks however, looked obviously different & we were soon watching a Bimaculated Lark to add to our lists. This diversion caused us to arrive somewhat later than planned at Yotvata but as we tucked in to a meal at the café we were entertained by Arabian Babblers. A bird hopping in & out of the bushes caused a few meals to be left when it turned out to be a Thrush Nightingale. Resuming our search for the Arabian Warbler, our persistence paid off with good views of a fine male & during our search we also saw Sardinian Warbler & Brown-necked Ravens. Returning towards Eilat, we again dropped in to the reservoirs. Wader diversity seemed to have increased with Ruff, Little & Temminck's Stint, Dunlin, Greenshank, Curlew &

Avocet. Gulls were also more in evidence & in with the Black-headed were several Slender-billed. We were also fortunate to be present when a second winter Great Black-headed Gull flew in. The greenhouses supported Namaqua Doves, Dead Sea Sparrow & Quail, all showing exceptionally well. Deciding to have another look for the male Sinai Rosefinch at Amran's Pillars, it was not to be but once again seeing several Females/immatures was ample compensation. Returning to the North Beach we saw a number of Little Gulls out on the fish farm nets together with Sandwich & Common Terns. A lone Caspian Tern was present. Rumours were rife of a Grey-headed Gull so we ended the day with a search close to our hotel but all we saw was a Black-crowned Night Heron.

Day 7: Another packed breakfast & drive to the Dead Sea along the Arava Valley. It is always a good idea to keep a look out on the roadside pylons when driving & we were rewarded for our efforts with good views of an immature Lanner Falcon. Arriving at the marshes at the southern end of the dead sea it didn't take us long to hear a singing Clamorous Reed Warbler. Hearing it was one thing but seeing it was another until we realised that instead of skulking in the Papyrus, it was singing from a dead tree! Whilst searching the area we also found a Squacco Heron, Crag Martin & Shoveler. Continuing the journey north, we had good views of Fan-tailed Ravens by the roadside before arriving at En Gedi. Before it got too hot we walked up the spectacular gorge in the nature reserve where Leopard still breed. The sight of thousands of White Stork migrating overhead with just one Black, was pretty spectacular whilst joining them were a few Steppe Buzzards & Eagles. Griffon Vultures breed in the gorge & we were able to watch birds both on their ledges & in the air. Alpine Swifts added to the Ariel feast. In the bushes in the gorge another Thrush Nightingale was found whilst Palestine Sunbird & Tristram's Grackle were both quite common whilst Rock Hyrax was a change of interest from birds for a while. Returning to the beach at En Gedi for a stop for lunch, we were entertained by more Fan-tailed Raven & Tristram's Grackles but nobody was brave enough to go in for a float! With all of our target species seen and having had a pleasant rest, we stopped off briefly at the base of Massada for a look before returning to Eilat via another try for Desert Eagle Owl at a different site. At this one however, we were prevented by a minefield!

Day 8: With a fairly late departure, we were able to have a leisurely day split into two so that a visit could be made to the Coral Beach Underwater Observatory. Close to the hotel we saw up to 3 Striated Herons fishing from a pier. Visits were made to the park where Bluethroat, Wryneck, Tree Pipit, Masked Shrike, House Crow & plenty of common warblers were seen and the Date Palms which were rather quite with the usual Redstarts plus Green & Wood Sandpiper in the irrigation pools. Indian Silverbills were seen again & we stumbled across a Steppe Buzzard caught in a ringing trap. In the afternoon we revisited the cemetery to look for House Bunting but despite considerable effort could only locate Wryneck, White-crowned Black Wheatear, Palestine Sunbird, Quail, Ruppell's Warbler, Sand Partridge, Desert Lark & Trumpeter Finch. Just as we were about to give up however, a pair were found & gave everyone excellent views. In the late afternoon we returned to the airport for our evening flight home.