

Israel Spring

14–21 March 2011

Participants

Tim Cowley

Simon Cross

Mark Easterbrook

Bob and Sue Ennis

June Kalman

Bill Plum

Lynn Rubinstein

Bernie and Elissa Rubinstein

Peter and Molly Ross

Wesley Weld-Moore

Neil Westwater



Thick-billed Lark

Led by James P. Smith and Martyn Kenefick

The only way to describe this particular tour was “a great success and fun to be on”. We had a top line target of five key range-restricted species and we found all five. Add this to all five species of available sand-grouse, eleven species of lark including well over 100 “Thick-billeds”, three sumptuous breeding plumaged Caspian Plovers, eight species of wheatear and much more. In James we had both an excellent and analytical birder with an unrivalled knowledge of Israeli birds built up over more than 20 years experience in the country and a well-placed ear to the local grapevine. Southern Israel in the migration season can be a series of surprises – almost anything can occur anywhere, at any time and may not stay long. We were fortunate in having a number of extremely sharp-eyed and knowledgeable birders on the tour. In a similar vein, some tour members possessed an extensive knowledge of Israeli and Jewish history and culture, which made the tour even more rewarding. Our accommodations were excellent and we enjoyed extremely pleasant weather conditions. The pattern for the week would be cool early mornings and late afternoons with hot sunshine for the six or so hours in between. Some of the distances driven were long, but the road conditions were excellent.

Day 1 The international composition of tour participants meant both staggered arrivals and personal introductions. Most of the American and Canadian contingent were already in southern Israel; Lynn was to meet us in Tel Aviv whilst James was flying in direct from Philadelphia. So it was just the six “Brits” (I include Wesley in that category despite his passionate outburst when Ireland beat England at rugby!) who met me at Luton Airport. It was a clear, bright morning and freezing cold. Historically airport departures to Israel have encountered (albeit necessary) intensive security checks and questioning. To be frank, whilst I’m sure that security levels were covertly suitably enhanced, the process felt just like any other international departure. Much is also said of EasyJet, our carrier for the tour and not always complimentary. In their defence, all of our flights were punctual, the seating/leg room was better than on many scheduled airlines, the cabin crew were friendly and the flight smooth. The only difference was the absence of complimentary refreshments – so most brought their own. At Ben Gurion airport, passport control, baggage reclaim and customs clearance were both smooth and painless; James and Lynn were waiting in the Arrivals Hall to meet us; we collected our two minibuses and began the 340km transfer to Eilat. Whilst the journey took over 4 hours inclusive of

a coffee/sandwich break, the road infrastructure was excellent and the traffic light. So it was around 23.15 when we checked into the plush Dan Panorama hotel, our base for most of the tour. One thing was on our minds: a good night's sleep.

Day 2 It was birding light shortly before 06.00; clear, bright and decidedly chilly with a fairly brisk northerly wind - definitely "fleece wearing" conditions. Directly opposite the hotel is Shulamit Park, fairly small with watered lawns and a variety of trees and hedgerows. This was to be the pre-breakfast birding site for most of the tour. Those who couldn't sleep returned to the hotel for breakfast with stories of a male Citrine Wagtail, Common Redstart and Eurasian Hoopoe with flyover Tristram's Grackles amongst the more expected Lesser Whitethroats and Common Chiffchaffs. Whilst several of the species found during the day were seemingly early, it was evident that passerine migration was only just starting. However, for our first morning, the birding was of excellent quality, if not quantity. Our first destination as a group was close by at Eilat North Beach. Slender-billed Gulls tagged onto parties of Black-headed Gulls and a fine adult Baltic Gull flew over – so far the identifications were easy. The first-summer gull perched on a distant buoy was far more challenging, but jizz suggested a Caspian Gull. A fine flock of around 30 Garganeys was a new species for some of the American contingent whilst a very confiding dark-morph Western Reef-heron was a "lifer" for most. At the mouth of the canal we found our first Marsh, Green and Common Sandpipers, whilst many of the overhead hirundines were Red-rumped Swallows. We then drove up into the Eilat Mountains which fringe the western edge of town hoping for visible raptor migration in favourable winds. In fairness we were a bit late in the day, but on a first morning you can't be everywhere at once! We managed a couple of 'kettles' of Steppe Buzzards together with single Steppe Eagle and Black Kite but this was not to be a big 'raptor day'. Following rather distant views of our first White-tailed Wheatears, we retraced our steps downhill and spent the remainder of the morning in Holland Park, an area of stone desert, native shrubs and scattered acacia. Here, with patience and perseverance we eventually managed superb views of Rüppell's, Sardinian and Subalpine Warblers and an energetic male Palestine Sunbird 'fly-catching'. Harder to pin down, but eventually seen by most, were single Arabian Babbler and Bluethroat whilst just one or two looked up in time to watch Pale Crag Martins flit across.

The middle of the day is usually the quietest in terms of bird activity. This coupled with inevitable tiredness following a day of international travel allowed us to return to the hotel for a couple of hours break in the heat of the afternoon.

We set off once more at 15.00, driving north to look over the sewage ponds at kilometer post 19 where one of the more unusual sights, upon arrival, was an obviously heavy passage of Migrant Hawker dragonflies. The one large pool held good numbers of common ducks such as Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail and Common Teal. Slightly more unusual were male Eurasian Wigeon and Tufted Duck and decidedly rare, a rather tatty-plumaged Ruddy Shelduck. Small groups of Ruffs were dotted around the water's edge, all still in non-breeding dress, whilst out in the middle swam a splendid summer-plumaged Black-necked Grebe. The northwest corner of the lake contained a small patch of reeds and was, without question, home for "bird of the day", an unusually confiding adult male Little Crake. Other new species for the tour included a migrating fly-over flock of 16 Little Ringed Plovers, breeding dress Water Pipit and a couple of Sedge Warblers. Only one other pool held water and small clumps of vegetation, the rest having been drained. Here, whilst there was a continual passage of Pale Crag-martins overhead, we found not only Black-headed (*feldegg*) Yellow Wagtails but also a couple of the rather similar race *superciliaris*, presumed to be a hybrid between Black headed (*feldegg*) and Blue headed (*flava*) Yellow Wagtails. At the opposite end of the pool, a male white-spotted Bluethroat emerged right out in the open. Our final port of call for the day was just slightly further north where we slowly drove the bund roads, which criss-cross the Kilometer Post 20 salt pans. Here we found approximately 400 resident Greater Flamingoes, well over 100 Black-winged Stilts and a smattering of Pied Avocets. A couple of Kentish Plovers and a Marsh Sandpiper worked the edges whilst in the adjacent acacia scrub, we found an immaculate black-throated *melanoleuca* Black-eared Wheatear, a showy Isabelline Wheatear and our first viewable Spanish Sparrows. By 17.45, the light was fading fast. It had been an excellent introduction to birding southern Israel where the group had accumulated an impressive 93 species and recordable sub-species. All that remained was the short drive back to the hotel followed by the first of a series of excellent buffet dinners and the traditional evening log.

Day 3 In a warmer dawn (fleeces optional) common *Sylvia* warblers were much in evidence inside Shulamit Park. Numbers of Lesser Whitethroats and Blackcaps were 'new-in' feeding frantically and having to dodge the aggressive behaviour of several Rüppell's and Sardinian Warblers whilst a male *samamisticus* Common Redstart, replete with white wing patch, showed periodically. Eilat is home to several invasive exotic species. Both Common Myna and Ring-necked Parakeets flew over calling whilst the gradual spread of House Crows from neighbouring Aquaba, southern Jordan, was both visible and vocal. Immediately after breakfast we drove around 40 km north to Yotvata, an area of both acacia scrub and cultivated fields with which we were to become extremely familiar over the course of the week. Several Eurasian Hoopoes flicked around the parking lot and the first Black Stork of the tour drifted lazily up the valley. We initially worked the northern circular field finding several Greater Short-toed Larks, Red-throated Pipits still in winter dress, Common Stonechats, Isabelline and both dark and pale-throated Black-eared Wheatears. An intermediate 'rufous morph' Booted Eagle glided low overhead and Tim managed to entice a party of at least five Eurasian Thick-knees into a spectacular fly past. In the acacia scrub close to the gas station we found single Eastern Orphean and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, several hyperactive Eastern Bonelli's Warblers, our first Little Green Bee-eaters and, for a few, a Lesser Kestrel. One of the ancilliary benefits of Yotvata is its shop/cafeteria facilities – most certainly the ice-cream stand did a roaring trade today.

After the caffeine and sugar fix, we drove north and then west to climb up onto the Ovda Valley and the Southern Negev plateau. Our target species here was Thick-billed Lark, and they took a lot of finding despite the fact that many hundreds of this prolific nomadic lark had been seen in southern Israel during the last year. The problem is that there's a lot of area to cover and the flocks wander widely. The plateau is a wide expanse of stone desert, with scattered areas of dry grass and stunted acacia and the plan was to spread out and slowly walk through any areas with "a tinge of green". Initially it was very slow going with just single Rüppell's and Eastern Orphean Warblers for our trouble. Then close to the road, we found our first flock of Trumpeter Finches. Several kilometres further on, a small flock of passerines flew across the road, some of them showing dark underwings and "redshank-like" white trailing edges, landing maybe 30 metres ahead in the dead grass. Over the course of the next 20 minutes or so we had excellent views of at least 40 (and maybe as many as 60) Thick-billed Larks in the loose company of both more Trumpeter Finches and Spanish Sparrows. A snack lunch was taken in the small but charming cafe garden at Neot Semadar – a local kibbutz venture. We then took the short drive to Shizzafon to look over the sewage ponds. This relatively small area is an enigma – a combination of smelly sewage ponds and what appears to be an ornamental garden. Initially the birding was slow going, however with patience we built up an impressive list of species including an immaculate adult male Citrine Wagtail. We had our best views to-date of Eastern Orphean Warbler. Interestingly, and initially confusingly, all of the birds seen today had a dark, not whitish iris as depicted in most field guides. A Eurasian Crag-martin, so much darker than its pallid cousins seen earlier, hawked over the surface of the water and in the southeastern corner of the site, a female Black Redstart perched up. Perhaps the strangest find was a large Egyptian Dab (or Spiny-tailed) Lizard sunning itself in the surrounding desert. Nearly one meter long and with a head shape reminiscent of a turtle, it looked totally out of place.

By 16.00, the heat had gone out of the day and we decided upon a concerted effort to find our final target bird, Arabian Warbler and met with mixed success. The distribution range for this species is restricted to a few areas in southern Israel and neighbouring Jordan; it is resident within its range; there are probably no more than 60 pairs in all Israel and they are exclusively confined to acacia forest. We drove back beyond Yotvata to explore a suitable area west of the highway. Mark was the only person to find one, albeit extremely briefly, but for the rest of us consolation could be had in the form of an adult male Namaqua Dove and two confiding adult Great-spotted Cuckoos. We stayed until dusk, on the off chance of hearing a territorial Pharaoh Eagle-owl but to no avail, returning to the hotel around 19.00pm with another successful day under the belt.

Day 4 An early start saw us driving north and then west a short way out of Eilat on gravel tracks to reach Amram's Pillars in the foothills of the Eilat Mountains. This is a well-known site for our target species in the area, Sinai Rosefinch, but we already knew that they were particularly hard to find this year. Sadly, not a finch was to be found but some consolation was had in finding two pairs of Sand Partridges, always slowly

walking away from us but reluctant to fly plus three very photogenic Desert Larks right beside the track and a couple of exquisite White-tailed Wheatears.

By mid morning, we decided to cut our losses and return to Yotvata where we were to spend much of the remainder of the day working both the southern and northern circular fields. In reality this means striding across open fields with numerous shallow furrows and expansive areas of stubble. Highlights were many: our first Short-toed Eagle soaring over; up to 25 Common Quails hiding in the ridiculously short grass and flying up literally from under our feet and a Lesser Short-toed Lark, never easy on this itinerary. Thanks to Sue's sharp eyes, a descending lark, which hovered just before alighting, turned out to be one of the few wintering Oriental Skylarks in the area. However the star species of the day, and for some "bird of the tour" was a delightful trio of magnificent Caspian Plovers; two males and a female, running around a bare, "snooker table flat" dirt field like tiny tip up trucks. If we add to the mix at least 15 Bluethroats including one of the distinctive "blue spotted" race *magna*; hundreds of *feldegg* Yellow Wagtails with *flava*, *superciliaris* and *dombrowski* races admixed; both Tawny and Red-throated Pipits; our first young male Hen Harrier; splendid Cretzschmar's Buntings and two immaculate Siberian Stonechats of the race *variegata* commonly known as 'Caspian Stonechats', then this was a brilliant, if extremely hot, few hours birding. Late afternoon saw a speedy drive back to Eilat in order to spend some quality time with White-eyed Gulls. We probably saw about a dozen, mostly close inshore. Also present were our first Armenian Gull and only Pied Kingfisher of the tour whilst a number of Pallid Swifts shot through inland. With the light beginning to fade, we made a dash to some local sewage lagoons in time for Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse to come into drink. We duly placed ourselves quietly on a shingle bank and waited. Our first Squacco Herons were all but ignored, and then, in the deepening gloom of dusk, three sandgrouse flew in and slowly crept down to the water's edge, much to the annoyance of a particularly aggressive Spur-winged Plover who had no intention of leaving them in peace. With the gloom giving way to almost total darkness, and with sandgrouse still occasionally calling nearby, we called it a day.

Day 5 Pre-breakfast birding in the park failed to turn up any new species for the tour, however it was evident that Lesser Whitethroat numbers were well up. Friday is the beginning of Sabbath and the first day of the Jewish weekend. In birding terms this means being allowed access to the extensive military firing zones consuming vast areas of the southern desert. Shallow wadis (dry river beds) in some years contain flowering vegetation and 2011 was considered to be quite a "green year" and with some knee-high shrubs, heavy with tiny purple and yellow flowers. Our strategy was initially to take advantage of any raised bunds or hillocks to scour the plains ahead of us and then to walk in wide sweeping arcs across the landscape. The birding was so successful that, apart from a brief lunch break, we were to spend the entire day in this habitat. Our first destination was to be the extensive Hiyyon Plain. Here we initially enticed a particularly inquisitive Bar-tailed Lark into the open and then Tim picked out a rather distant party of Spotted Sandgrouse feeding quietly amongst the short dead grasses. Moving further into the valley, a raised plateau enabled us distant views of our first, and only, Hooded Wheatears. They were two territorial males sparring with each other. Closer were single adult Egyptian Vulture and Long-legged Buzzard – both new for the tour. Late morning found us spread out across the vast plains knowing that our target was much more likely to run away than fly off. Finally we tied it down, not one but two pairs of exquisite Greater Hoopoe-larks, rushing between one area of stunted cover and another. We also played hide and seek with a particularly skittish Streaked Scrub-warbler. If anything, our afternoon's birding was even better and more successful.

We drove for some distance inland before turning off into the Ha'meishar Plains, en route finally adding eastern Mourning Wheatear to our lists. This plateau was similar to the Hiyyon in appearance with patches of sand, stone and dead grass interspersed with stunted acacia. Whilst the heat never matched yesterday's temperatures, the sun felt really fierce beating down onto the hard ground and we walked...and walked...and walked. The highlight for our efforts was Crowned Sandgrouse, usually the most difficult of its family to find in southern Israel. Not only did we find them, we found a massive 85 – an unprecedented total (and a record which stood only until the next tour!). Hot on the heels for our attention were at least five superb Temminck's Larks, looking so much cleaner and paler than Shore Larks of the north, feeding in loose company with both Greater Short-toed Larks and Isabelline Wheatears. Two immaculate male Desert Wheatears were a popular find but the last hour of daylight was all about one bird – Bimaculated Lark.

This trio of flighty larks led us on a merry chase backwards and forwards across the plain. Finally one was tracked down to a shallow depression just before sunset, having a final evening snack amongst tiny yellow flowers. Add to the mix probably 25 Thick-billed Larks, many seen at much closer range than on Wednesday together with not only our first sighting of Dorcas Gazelle but also two much rarer Asian Wild Ass, it was truly a memorable day. The drive back to Eilat took about 75 minutes with a harsh piece of braking to avoid a fly past Barn Owl and a brief stop to look at roadside Nubian Ibex in the headlights. We dined late tonight, but with big smiles on our faces.

Day 6 This was to be our “longest day” as the bulk of our birding was in the Dead Sea region some 200 km to the north. However some grapevine news from yesterday had us back in the Hiyyon plains, well north of Eilat. Our quarry was Dunn’s Lark, a rare irruptive visitor to Israel from the east which, acknowledging our good fortune in this habitat recently, we felt we stood a good chance of finding. As it happened we drew a blank. However our walk out into a lightly vegetated, broad and shallow wadi was rewarded with excellent views of a most inquisitive Asian Desert Warbler. Close by, a Streaked Scrub-warbler was seen briefly, in typical fashion posing for a moment atop a small bush then flying back to land in the bottom of another. Our attention was then drawn skywards as 10 Steppe Eagles lazily drifted over accompanied by a Short-toed Eagle and 30 or so Steppe Buzzards, including one very interesting black morph.

From here, we continued north for another 60 km before branching “off road” near the settlement of Hazeva. Here our focus was Arabian Warbler and the general area held more pairs than anywhere else in the country. This time we succeeded beyond expectation as one male flew from tree to tree, perched on the tops right out in the open. With much of the journey still to complete we drove on steadily north with Egyptian Vultures and Eurasian Griffons soaring over en route. We spent some time looking over an area of phragmites reeds, tamarisk trees and shallow water hearing the raucous calls of Clamorous Reed-warblers, but the strong wind put paid to any posing out on the reed tops. A couple of Little Green Bee-eaters hawked insects over the pool and everyone had exceptionally close views of Arabian Babbler. Further on, we came into Fan-tailed Raven territory early at Zohar, and by the time we reached Ein Gedi, Tristram’s Grackles were calling from every tree. A traditionally extended lunchtime break was granted to allow those who wished to paddle, if not float/swim in the Dead Sea.

By mid afternoon we had begun the steep, rugged (and optional!) climb up to Ein Salvador at the base of the Dead Sea cliffs. Here a natural spring set into a small cave attracts drinking birds during the heat of the day. We had two targets here: House ‘Striolated’ Bunting and Sinai Rosefinch but, surprisingly, neither showed. The reasons were probably mixed. It was a public holiday and there had been a number of hikers in the area and of course, after a wet winter there will be a number of alternative (and probably quieter) sources of water elsewhere in the desert. We did, however, enjoy a series of fly-pasts by a pair of Barbary Falcons – our only sighting for the tour. Rather irritatingly, just as the last remaining members reached the car park, Mark and James saw and then heard a House ‘Striolated’ Bunting singing after it flew across the track in front of them near the parking lot. Sadly, in the fading light, it never returned for the group.

Then it was all about night birds. We met our appointed local guide from the Israel Ornithological Centre who escorted us to a National Nature Reserve, south of Ein Gedi. We entered a steep walled canyon and within 10 minutes of our arrival, heard our first Hume’s Owl. Within 20 minutes, we had all enjoyed excellent ‘scope views of a very territorial, inquisitive male. There are certain rules to obey with such a rare bird, not least of which is an extremely expensive permit fee, much of which goes directly towards its conservation. With such an early success under the belt, it was time to drive further south to Neot Hakikkar, a settlement close to the Jordanian border. The adjacent agricultural fields is the only known site in the country for Nubian Nightjar and again restrictions and high fees are a pre-requisite of watching these diminutive creatures. We slowly drove the dirt tracks that bisect the fields seeing a couple of birds in flight replete with extensive white wing flashes before finding one very approachable individual sat on the road in front of us. There it stayed for all to enjoy for several minutes. It had been a fantastic evening, none of which would have been possible without our permitted guide from the IOC – thanks to him, two key Western Palearctic night birds had been found with a minimum of fuss. Moreover, during course of the day, we had found three of our “five most wanted species” for the tour. After a snack supper at Hazeva, it was just a 90-minute

drive back to Eilat, arriving at the hotel shortly before midnight actually much earlier than we'd achieved on previous tours!

Day 7 Following the late return last night, it was an orderly and relaxed early morning session of breakfast, packing bags and checking out of the Dan Panorama for our transfer to the western Negev. Some of the group birded Shulamit Park before breakfast and it was obvious that some migratory change had occurred. 'New-in' were single Eurasian Wryneck and Bluethroat and there were more *feldegg* wagtails than on previous days. On leaving Eilat we quickly checked out the saltponds at kilometer post 20. In addition to the usual flamingos, ducks and waders, we found a party of seven Eurasian Spoonbills and a Glossy Ibis. Some time was spent scrutinizing the "large, white-headed gulls" that were passing through and we definitively identified *fuscus* (Baltic), *heuglini* (Siberian) and *barabensis* (Steppe) within the flock. It was now time to put some miles behind us as we drove past Yotvata before turning north-west via Mitzpe Ramon, Sde Boker and Tse'elim arriving at Kibbutz Gevulot, fairly close to the Gaza border around dusk. En route, there was a sporadic raptor passage during the morning including Lesser Kestrels near Lotan, building up to a crescendo around 16.00. This included a steady trickle of Black Kites and Steppe Buzzards throughout the day. Of greater interest were a party of 25 Lesser Spotted Eagles, 5 or 6 Short-toed Eagles and a Long-legged Buzzard. Also enjoying the thermals were four Black Storks and impressive flocks numbering in excess of 1,000 White Storks.

The drive to Mitzpe Ramon passed through canyons and wide expanses of stone desert. Being a Sunday, normal practice resumes in the firing zones and we saw a number of tanks lined up. We drove across the Ramon crater before steeply climbing the northern rim to a height of 850 metres. Whilst Mitzpe is not a particularly aesthetic settlement, it is an oasis to tired migrants and winter visitors alike. On the local football pitch we were fortunate to find the remnants of a wintering flock of Tristram's Serins with 14 birds in total, including several bright adult males. This species has a truly tiny world distribution with small breeding populations in northern Israel, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon and was species number four on our "five most wanted". Of equal attraction to most of the group was a wintering female Cyprus Pied Wheatear. Additionally there was a strange *alba* wagtail seen intermittently. It had an exceptionally long tail and very grey face recalling Masked Wagtail. However, it lacked the distinctive white wing patch of the adult male, and would have to have been in its first summer – maybe photographs taken at the scene can retrospectively solve the puzzle. In a nearby park at least 35 Common Chiffchaffs flitted through the trees together with three Black Redstarts and a Eurasian Hoopoe, whilst out on the cliff edge, single eastern Mourning and White-crowned Wheatears were seen. A lunch break at Sde Boker also added Chukar to the trip list before a twenty-minute drive to Yerukham Lake, perhaps the only reliable site in the country for Purple Swamphen – and they didn't disappoint. Along the muddy fringes, Marsh, Wood and Green Sandpipers competed with Black-winged Stilts whilst a Citrine Wagtail was being harried by its black-headed cousin.

Our final birding stop was at Wadi Habasor, but not before James had us stop by the road for a perched falcon. It was a Lanner, the only one of the tour, and the same stop also yielded several Southern Grey Shrikes. On reaching the wadi, a number of Cetti's Warblers were uttering their explosive calls from hidden perches, but at least two showed reasonably well. Both Eurasian Wryneck and Eurasian Reed-warblers fed in the margins but the star bird was an exceptionally early Marsh Warbler. The final stretch to Kibbutz Gevulot, our base for the last night of the tour took just 15 minutes. Having dined at a small restaurant at Urim junction, we went through our checklists in the kibbutz grounds to the background noise of Eurasian Thick-knees and hungry Long-eared and Barn Owl chicks.

Day 8 From Gevulot, it's a 50-minute drive to Nizzana, close to the Egyptian border, and the focus of our early morning's birding. It's imperative to be on site well before the heat haze starts. The key species here is Macqueen's Bustard. There are perhaps just 300 birds in the Negev and 275 of them are found within an off-limits military base. Nizzana is the most reliable, accessible site for the remainder. We arrived around 06.30 and quickly found a displaying male, replete with puffed out white pom-poms dancing backwards and forwards. The pressure was relaxing as this was number five of our "five most wanted"! From a group perspective, the second most important species was Cream-coloured Courser and we found a total of five throughout the early morning. Several flocks of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse flew over, one of which, numbering

around 20 birds, landed just beyond a shingle bank. We approached the ridge with caution but really need not have bothered. When standing right out in the open on top of the berm, the birds remained nonchalantly feeding around 200 metres away. A second bustard was found, this one more distant and the first White Storks of the morning were foraging around the vegetated banks. Another major highlight in the area were at least three posing Southern Grey Shrikes hunting from exposed bush tops. We had brought our packed breakfasts with us but where to eat them – Nizzana sewage lagoons of course! We spent a delightful hour sat atop one of the lagoon banks. A party of seven Crowned Sandgrouse flew into drink, quickly followed by a single Spotted Sandgrouse, whilst just two of their Black-bellied cousins flew over. The number of hirundines quartering the pools drew the attention of several raptors. First a female Pallid Harrier swooped over, followed by a pair of Hen Harriers. A while later the male Hen Harrier landed beside the water's edge right in front of us staring intently at a party of Little Grebes swimming just out of reach. Around the muddy edges, up to 50 Black-winged Stilts were quick to warn of approaching danger whilst a full breeding plumaged Little Egret took no notice whatsoever. Several Little Ringed Plovers, Ruffs, Green Sandpipers and our only Spotted Redshank of the tour made up the balance of species on view.

By mid morning we decided to drive northeast to the Southern Judean Hills for Long-billed Pipit. We left Nizzana and quickly stopped once more. Ah, the age of technology! Simon had a birding friend who, unbeknown to us, was also at Nizzana and recognizing our party in the distance, texted a message to the effect that he was watching a Black-shouldered Kite – a major Israeli rarity. We were in luck, an adult was quickly spotted, amazingly carrying nesting material, which, if successful, would be a first breeding record for the country. With a rash of over a dozen records in as many months, the status of this delightful raptor looks set to change in Israel, at least for the short term.

The drive to the Judean Hills was characterized by a continual raptor passage, mainly Black Kites but also including Short-toed Eagle and the first thermal of White Storks (we were to see at least 2,000 during the day). On reaching a series of grassy hills with scattered boulders, two different Long-billed Pipits were calling from their territories; one was seen well, but in song-flight only. However these brief views were compensated by exceptionally confiding Spectacled Warblers nesting nearby. More storks poured over, along with the only party of Common Cranes seen during the week. The tour was drawing to a close. Having returned to the kibbutz for final packing, we made our way back to Ben Gurion airport, a drive of about two hours – but the birds still had the last word. Close to Tel Aviv, as we said our good-byes to Lynn, a 'thermal' of at least 1,500 Great White Pelicans flew north, and we notched-up our last new bird of the tour in the form of a handsome White-breasted Kingfisher perched on some utility wires just twenty minutes from Ben Gurion airport. Not only had this been an incredibly successful tour in terms of species seen as we totalled 190 species between us, but the camaraderie within the group meant it was also great fun. As Wesley put it "it can't get better than that"

Martyn Kenefick, Birdfinders

Martynkenefick@hotmail.com