

Israel

12–19 March 2019

Participants

Mike Boote
Raymond Cruise
Bob East
Hamish Fletcher
Tony Herbert
Larry Hurst
Phil Jones
Holger Kissel
Willi Kwek
Dennis Morrison
Nick Pomiankowski
Jennifer Rogers
Andy Stirrat
Richard Rafe



Desert Owl (Phil Jones)

Leaders James Smith and Peter Lansdown

Day 1 All bar three of the fourteen flew from Luton to Ben Gurion Airport, near Tel Aviv, on the EasyJet flight that departed at 07.15 hours and landed on time at 14.15 hours local time, Israel being two hours ahead of UK time. We had a smooth passage through the airport including meeting up with James Smith and Holger Kissel. We then had a frustrating wait, however, as there had been a problem with one of the mini-buses, which meant a later departure than had been anticipated. On the long journey to Eilat we picked up Willi Kwek, who had arrived the previous day. Birds seen before night fell included Cattle Egret, Common Kestrel, Spur-winged Lapwing, Rock Dove, Eurasian Collared-dove, Laughing Dove, Rose-ringed Parakeet, Crested Lark, Eurasian and Red-rumped Swallows, White Wagtail, White-spectacled Bulbul, Sardinian Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat and House Sparrow (these were amongst the commonest birds, seen on several or all of the days of the tour, and will not be mentioned subsequently), Great Egret, White Stork, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Common Swift, Common Myna, Eurasian Blackbird, Eurasian Jay, Western Jackdaw, Hooded Crow and European Goldfinch.

Day 2 Before breakfast most of the group went for a walk, taking in a football pitch near the hotel, an artificial lake and the Eilat Canal, which appeared to have been recently dredged and was free-flowing. House Crow, Red-throated Pipit and (Black-headed) Western Yellow Wagtail were the initial species seen on the football pitch, followed by a Western Reef-heron at the artificial lake and a host of waders in the canal, the commonest of which were Ruff and Common Redshank; Marsh, Green and Common Sandpipers and Little Stint were present too and Water Pipit was also noted. Following breakfast, Tristram's Grackle was seen outside the hotel before we drove north along the canal seeing Great Cormorant, Squacco, Purple and Grey Herons, Common and Little Ringed Plovers, Spotted Redshank, Wood Sandpiper, Common Snipe, Slender-billed Gull, Pied Kingfisher, Little Green Bee-eater, Pale Crag-martin (Rock Martin), Bluethroat and Graceful Prinia. A Common Whitethroat was identified – a much drabber bird than we are used to seeing in the UK. As we pulled into our next destination, the International Birdwatching Centre of

Eilat (IBCE), excitement rose as a raptor was spotted; it soon disappeared behind some palms. Was it an Oriental Honey-buzzard or a juvenile Bonelli's Eagle? Dennis had been able to obtain good flight photographs, which conclusively identified the bird as an Oriental Honey-buzzard. We then walked around the centre, with individuals variously favouring the open ponds, the scrub, bushes and trees and the smaller ponds with dense cover. The open ponds produced an array of waders, including Temminck's Stint, Red-necked Phalarope, Northern Lapwing and Dunlin. In addition, Eurasian Spoonbill, Osprey, Black-headed, Lesser Black-backed (Baltic) and Slender-billed Gulls were seen along with Gull-billed (well spotted Mike!) and Sandwich Terns, an Osprey and a Black Stork. Birds seen in the Acacia trees and scrub near the entrance included European Robin, Bluethroat, Eastern Bonelli's Warbler and Common Chiffchaff *abietinus*, but the best birds were probably those in the smaller ponds which produced Little Crakes at less than five metres range - giving the photographers a field day! A Pygmy Cormorant was seen by some, as were a flyover Citrine Wagtail and some Eurasian Penduline-tits. Further birds noted here were Sedge Warbler and Little Grebe. Morning activities were concluded by a visit to North Beach, where the best birds were a Black-legged Kittiwake, Caspian Gull and Caspian Tern. Our next stop was Yotvata but, by now, birding had become harder as the wind had increased markedly. A stop by a farm complex produced a male Namaqua Dove - bravo Nick - and we then went to a large field where onions had recently been harvested. A superb male Hen Harrier was watched quartering the field and Common (Steppe) Buzzards were also seen hunting. A Tawny Pipit was identified, as were Northern and Isabelline Wheatears, but the best birds were three Desert Finches that landed nearby. The day concluded with a visit to the North Sewage Ponds at km 19. James was not hopeful of seeing Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse, as none had yet been reported here this year and he was to be proved right. However, Squacco Heron, Black-crowned Night-heron, Green-winged Teal, Mallard, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler and Ferruginous Duck were seen, together with Eurasian Moorhen, Eurasian Coot, Eurasian Sparrowhawk and Eurasian Reed Warbler, while Pallid and Little Swifts were identified overhead. Before the list compilation that evening for the first two days, we were informed that provided two individuals had seen a bird, and agreed what it was, then that species would be entered in the log. However, despite several of the group having seen Northern Lapwing (a common UK bird, with which we are all familiar) it bizarrely appeared that different rules applied to this species! Notwithstanding this, the tour had got off to a good start.

Day 3 The majority opted for another pre-breakfast walk, which produced the same species as yesterday, bar no Western Reef-heron but a new species: Eurasian Hoopoe. The first official stop of the morning was at North Beach, which proved to be more productive than yesterday. A Western Reef-heron soon disappeared over a fence but a large flock of Slender-billed Gulls was seen close inshore. Black-headed, White-eyed and Lesser Black-backed (Baltic) Gulls were also seen. Terns included Caspian, Gull-billed, Sandwich and Common. Finally, a photogenic Pied Kingfisher obliged those with cameras. The next port of call was the IBCE where the same comprehensive wader species list as yesterday (including the dreaded Northern Lapwing) was noted, plus Kentish Plover. Sand Martin and Little Bittern were also recorded here and some *superciliaris* (Iranian) Western Yellow Wagtails were seen with the *feldeggs*. Sporadic raptor migration was noted, which included Steppe Eagle, Black Kite, Western Marsh-harrier and Common (Steppe) Buzzard. The tour then moved into the mountains west of Eilat, with a stop in Wadi Sholmo producing Blackstart, White-tailed Wheatear and Palestine Sunbird. A group of migrating Black Storks was seen before our next stop - the Se'efim Plains. This also proved productive with Desert Lark and Hooded, Black-eared, Mourning and Isabelline Wheatears. After a lunch break at Neot Smadar, the last stop of the day was in the upper part of Wadi Barak and very productive it proved to be. The wadi was well-vegetated and held many migrants. An unidentified species of nightjar was flushed, Common Quails were both heard and seen, and both *samamiscus* and *phoenicurus* Common Redstarts were recorded, as were Tree Pipit and European and Siberian Stonechats *varigata*. In addition to those warblers previously encountered, both Subalpine and Rüppell's Warblers and Blackcap were seen. Also, a family party of Arabian Babblers was found, as were both Woodchat and Masked Shrikes and Brown-necked Ravens. The highlight for many was the presence of Pale Rockfinches - an unexpected bonus. In addition to the birds, Dorcas Gazelles had also been seen by some of the group. It had been a long day, but a successful one.

Day 4 Today was a “big day” as it was hoped to see some of the key species, starting with Red Sea (Arabian) Warbler. Before reaching the first location on our long drive north, both buses stopped when a Long-legged Buzzard was seen perched on a hillock by the roadside. The first location proper was in Acacia forest (define forest!) near Zofar Gas Station. Despite an exhaustive search through Shezaf Nature Reserve, the hoped-for bird was not seen. All was not lost, however, as two Short-toed Snake-eagles flew low over our heads, an obliging Sand Partridge perched in a dead tree and was seen well and Little Green Bee-eaters were on show - always a pleasure - along with Great Grey Shrike, European Greenfinch, Black Redstart, Eastern Olivaceous, Eastern Orphee and Scrub Warblers, accompanied by commoner warblers, Blackstarts, Palestine Sunbirds and Arabian Babblers. Our second stop was in similar terrain, but the acacias were in a wadi with cliffs on one side: Iddan Wadi. The passerines encountered were similar, including Scrub and Eastern Orphee Warblers, but, sadly, no Arabian Warblers. Some Rock Hyraxes were watched on the cliffs and on the way out a pair of Eurasian Thick-knees added to our growing trip list. The next stop was by some Dead Sea pools, where we were again a little frustrated. The target species were Clamorous Reed Warbler and Dead Sea Sparrow. The warblers were singing away but glimpsed only infrequently, while a number of sparrows’ nests were seen but not the birds! However, the area was rich in other birdlife with Little Grebe, Squacco and Grey Herons and Eurasian Spoonbill, along with a multitude of ducks: Eurasian Wigeon, Gadwall, Green-winged Teal, Mallard, Northern Pintail, Garganey, Northern Shoveler and Ferruginous Duck. An African Swamphe was seen swimming with a youngster, there were many Eurasian Coots and Eurasian Moorhens nearby and a distant White-throated Kingfisher perched on some reeds while Black Kites and Western Marsh-harriers patrolled overhead. Moving north along the west side of the Dead Sea, our next stop was Wadi Mor. No Fan-tailed Ravens were seen but an Egyptian Vulture was watched overhead. Upon returning to the vehicles, we initially heard, then saw, a Striolated Bunting. With dusk fast approaching, and a Common Raven having been seen en route, we pulled into a kibbutz at Mizpe Shalem. In the parking lot, the Barbary race of Peregrine Falcon was watched overhead. As darkness fell, a Desert Owl was heard calling in a nearby wadi and we all had excellent views. This was the bird of the tour for many. There was still another bird to locate – Nubian Nightjar. A drive around a reservoir proved unsuccessful but the required nightjar was found on one of the dirt tracks at the Neot Hakikkar kibbutz. This obliging bird gave us all excellent views down to a few metres, in the headlights of the first vehicle. A second nightjar was also seen. A great end to the day – well done Barak!

Day 5 After yesterday’s late night there was to be no early morning walk! The first activity, post breakfast, was a foray into Holland Park. It is an unprepossessing place as it is clearly used as a latrine by many of the dogs in Eilat but the plants therein are watered, hence its attractiveness to birds. The star birds of the morning were two Oriental Honey-buzzards flying overhead. In addition, a few Sand Partridges were seen along with Little Green Bee-eaters, Eurasian Wryneck, Bluethroat and warblers, particularly Rüppell’s Warblers, which were seen feeding in a bush with red flowers. We then moved on to km 19, where James had heard that there was a mixed flock of Spanish and Dead Sea Sparrows. While both were seen, it took a little time to find a male Dead Sea Sparrow but persistence paid off. An Eastern Subalpine Warbler was also seen here. The next stop was at the salt pools at km 20. In addition to the herons, ducks and waders previously seen elsewhere, the most notable species seen here were Common Shelduck and Armenian Gull. The flock of Greater Flamingos included a melanistic individual. A drive to Yotvata followed and, after lunch, the northern fields were searched. There was some visible migration with several kettles of White Storks and one of Black Storks plus a few Black Kites and Western Marsh-harriers and a Booted Eagle. On the deck, Nick quickly located one of the Oriental Skylarks that we had been told were here. This was an impressive feat as finding it was akin to looking for a needle in a haystack. Tawny and Red-throated Pipits were also seen, along with Black-eared, Northern and Isabelline Wheatears. A few Desert Finches were also noted. Finally, a stop in more acacia woodland near Yotvata was made to try and locate Arabian (Red Rea) Warbler, but without success. However, full marks to James for really trying to find us this species.

Day 6 After five nights based in Eilat, we were moving to a kibbutz far to the north-west: Kibbutz Gevulot. The first stop on our journey was at Kibbutz Samar, where there happened to be two obliging Black Scrub-robins - an excellent start to the day and bird of the trip for some. Next up was the Ovda Valley, where we encountered a number of Spotted Sandgrouse flocks, Isabelline, Hooded and White-tailed Wheatears, large

numbers of Greater Short-toed Larks, fewer Desert and Bar-tailed Larks and at least two Pale Rockfinches, while Peter found a single Bimaculated Lark. We lunched for the second time at Neot Smadar and then drove to Ha'meyshar. When we stopped at the side of the main road Mike quickly spotted two Dorcas Gazelles but there were few notable birds except for Lesser Kestrel and a party of Common Cranes high overhead. We then drove to a nearby, well-vegetated wadi, Wadi Nekarot, and explored it. The star bird here was a nice male Sinai Rosefinch and we also saw Trumpeter Finches; they were among a lesser cast of the (by now) familiar warblers and Blackstarts. Passing through Mitzpe Ramon produced some close-ups of Mountain Ibex. After dinner at the kibbutz, a Long-eared Owl was heard.

Day 7 The day began with a quick walk in the kibbutz, the highlights being a pair of Eurasian Thick-knees, Great Tit and Eurasian Blackbird plus an indolent Hooded Crow who watched us motionless from his perch not two metres away! Our first stop in the Nizzana area was at a bird hide fashioned out of old rolling stock from a railway built in that area by the Turks during the First World War. Persistent scanning produced three Macqueen's Bustards; although the views were not close, one bird was conveniently (and unusually) skylined, making observation easier. We moved away from the hide but stayed in the general area seeing good birds. A Little Owl *lilith* gave those in the second bus some fine views while all had close views of Chukar. Sand Partridge was also seen along with four Cream-coloured Coursers. All except for Willi, who engaged in his customary walkabout, then sat down on a knoll eating our packed breakfast and seeing Desert Wheatear, Woodchat Shrike, flying Pin-tailed Sandgrouse and another Macqueen's Bustard. On the mammal front, Fat Sand Rat and Cape Hare were seen. A move to some local saline sewage pools produced Mallard, Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, Gadwall and Slender-billed Gull plus a few of the commoner waders including Little Stint. Lunch was taken at a petrol station near Sde Boker. While eating more of our packed breakfast and watching Arabian Babblers nearby, Andy spotted a Great-spotted Cuckoo in some bushes. Overhead, migration was in evidence with Pallid and Alpine Swifts and Lesser Kestrels, Lesser Spotted Eagles, Short-toed Snake-eagles, Hen Harrier, Western Marsh-harriers and an Egyptian Vulture. A walk around some agricultural fields at Sde Boker produced Black-bellied Sandgrouse and a Eurasian Wryneck. A drive into the southern Judean hills was next on the agenda, specifically to a valley in the Mount Hamasa area and this proved to be an outstanding spot. Despite only receiving average rainfall of 15 centimetres a year, this region was considerably greener than previous areas which we had birded. Chukar were heard and then seen. Sky Lark and Common Cuckoo were heard and a Little Owl flew across the valley with its dipping flight; Eurasian Hoopoe, Bluethroat, both Common Redstart races and European Stonechat were all spotted but the best was yet to come! Cretzschmar's Buntings were seen, perched on rocks and bushes: on the wheatear front, Northern and Isabelline were standard fare but eclipsing these were a number of fine male Finsch's Wheatears plus a Red-tailed (Persian *chrysopygia*) Wheatear, which had been found last winter and had returned again in 2018-19. Spectacled Warbler, Eurasian Linnet, Desert Finch, European Greenfinch, Blue Rock-thrush and Rock Sparrow were also observed and finally a Long-billed Pipit was seen flying overhead following playback of its song. On the way back to the buses, a Golden Jackal was heard. Back at Kibbutz Gevulot that evening a few members went for an evening stroll, hearing Barn Owl and hearing and seeing Long-eared Owl.

Day 8 Early morning was misty as we drove to the nearby Wadi Ha'Basor. While viewing conditions were initially not good, scanning the water, reeds and banks produced Little Grebe, Eurasian Moorhen, Bluethroat and Cetti's, Eurasian Reed and Sedge Warblers, plus a heard Savi's Warbler and, finally, after the earlier frustrations of failing to obtain good sightings of this species, excellent views were had of Clamorous Reed Warblers once the suspension bridge across the wadi had been crossed. On the return journey, a Syrian Woodpecker was seen at the top of a telegraph pole with another nearby; Great-spotted Cuckoos were also noted along with Eurasian Jay, Cretzschmar's Bunting and European Goldfinch. Following breakfast, we took a walk through the grounds which, in addition to the more familiar birds, produced Yellow-browed Warbler and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers. Having packed all the bags away, we proceeded to the airport via a stop in some agricultural fields, which produced little of interest. At the airport, plenty of Rose-ringed Parakeets were around and a number of other smaller parakeets, identified as Nanday Parakeets, were seen at a distance.

Summary This proved to be another very successful tour by **Birdfinders** with a total of 196 species seen and/or heard. Although we had missed three hoped-for species: Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse, Arabian (Red Sea) Warbler and Syrian Serin, this had been more than compensated for by excellent views of Nubian Nightjar and Desert Owl. Macqueen's Bustard had been seen well and there had been a plenty of bonus birds such as Pygmy Cormorant, Oriental Honey-buzzard, Oriental Skylark, Black Scrub-robin, Finsch's and Persian Wheatears, Rock and Pale Rock Sparrows and Sinai Rosefinch. While there might be a natural desire to seek out the rarer species, this Israel trip also provided an opportunity to see a number of common, but colourful species, such as Western Yellow Wagtail *feldegg*, Little Green Bee-eater, Palestine Sunbird and Eurasian Hoopoe and it provided some spectacular photographic opportunities, among which the close-up views of Little Crake would be hard to beat. All this had been made possible by a well-thought through itinerary, the unparalleled birding skills of James Smith, the good-natured co-leadership of Peter Lansdown and the positive atmosphere engendered by the group. Roll on the next trip!

Hamish Fletcher