

Israel, 15th – 24th March 2013



Participants: Ashley Howe, Josh Jones, Dan Pointon and Will Soar

Introduction

Following a memorable trip coinciding with an exceptional spring migration during late March 2012, Dan had vowed to return to Israel in 2013 for his second visit to the country – primarily to experience migration once more, but also to clean up on a few of the more difficult species he had missed the previous year. I had also visited Israel once previously, but this was as long ago as 2000 on a family holiday with a bit of birding thrown in for good measure and thus my own target species list was in to the twenties. It was to be Will and Ash's first visit to the country and, although Will had previously completed an exhaustive tour of Turkey and seen a considerable number of eastern specialities, Ash had never previously been on a purely birding trip in the Western Palearctic and hence came prepared to be blown away by the sheer number of new birds!

Prior to the trip, our plan was to tour around various sites around the West Bank, Dead Sea and the Negev in order to observe a long list of Israel's speciality species before spending the final five days of the trip relaxing in Eilat and hopefully encountering some productive migration. As it turned out, these plans soon went out the window with the discovery of both Black Bush Robin and Caspian Plover in the south during our trip. Naturally, this incurred bouts of twitching and thus our schedule was altered considerably on several occasions during our ten days.

Logistics

We flew from London Luton to Tel Aviv with EasyJet at a cost of £205 each. The reason for our early visit was primarily to secure cheap flights; return tickets a week later were considerably more

expensive (£350+) and were presumably due popularity stemming as a result of the early dates of both Passover and Easter in 2013.

Will had booked the hire car through Europcar: an automatic Hyundai i30 for ten days (with Dan insured as a second driver) came to a total cost of £298.64. As is often the case with petrol automatics, the car proved frustratingly uneconomical and we spent a lot of time filling up – particularly as our two drivers tended to drive on the faster side of average – while the extortionate price of fuel in Israel further exacerbated the problem. Driving around Israel is otherwise not a problem – the roads are excellent and, Tel Aviv aside, generally quiet.

Dan had proved most efficient prior to our trip and had booked accommodation in advance for the majority of nights of our trip. In Eilat, we stayed in the quaint Motel Aviv at a cost of around £18 per person per night – this proved more than adequate for our (basic) needs of a bed and a shower. Otherwise, nights were spent either on the road or in cheap accommodation (£15-20) as and where we could find it.

We had no issues with travelling to and from the West Bank during our trip, although our car and bags were searched on one occasion at the main checkpoint on the Route 60 to the northeast of Be'er Sheva. If visiting either Har Amasa or the Dead Sea, avoid this checkpoint and the greatest inconvenience you should suffer would be a few questions. Further information on any of the birds, sites and logistics discussed in this trip report can be sought by contacting [Josh Jones](#).

Resources & Acknowledgements

Having visited in 2012, we were fortunate that Dan knew almost all of the sites we visited and so directions rarely proved an issue. Furthermore, Dan had also accumulated a fair wedge of knowledge on many of the country's more difficult species, with this gen proving invaluable on many occasions.

Big thanks must go to Yoav Perlman who was particularly patient with multiple requests for information on certain sites and species, Paul French for sharing information both prior to and during our trip and also to Chris Bell, Dan Brown, Paul Chapman, Jonathan Meyrav, Richard Moores and several others who helped us out with information while we were over in Israel.

Though we had a pretty clear schedule in terms of both target species and sites, Dave Gosney's *Finding Birds in Israel* and Hadoram Shirihai's *A Guide to the Birding Hotspots of Southern Israel* were excellent back-ups and, though published in 1996 and 2000 respectively, are still recommended to anyone visiting the region. Richard Bonser was also on hand to provide us with an Israeli road map, while his excellent trip reports from [December 2005](#) and [March 2008](#) are still some of the most intricate available online.

Itinerary

Perhaps it is youthful enthusiasm, but our trip proved a quite frenetic affair – Israel isn't exactly a large country, yet we still managed to travel 3,940km during our ten days there. Our schedule involved an exhaustive tour of the southern half of the country plus a couple of twitches back to the

Eilat area from further north (Black Bush Robin and Caspian Plover), hence the distance covered is so high. Many birders simply spend a week based in Eilat when visiting southern Israel and thus distance and time travelled (and resultant costs!) is generally considerably lower than ours.

Friday 15th March mid-morning flight from Luton to Tel Aviv, arriving early evening. Drive north to Mikhmoret via food stop in Herzliya. Overnight in Mikhmoret.

Saturday 16th March dawn to mid-morning spent at Pardes Hanna-Kharkur. Brief visit to Ma'agan Mikhael fishponds before driving southeast to the Dead Sea via Jerusalem. Afternoon spent birding sites around the Dead Sea before an evening spent searching for Nubian Nightjar and Hume's Owl with Barak Granit. Overnight drive south to Yotvata.

Sunday 17th March early hours spent driving around fields at Yotvata before retiring to the car for brief sleep at Ne'ot Smadar. Dawn birding at Ne'ot Smadar before driving north to KM76-77 for mid-morning. Late morning birding at Shezaf Nature Reserve, Hazeva before driving back north to the Dead Sea, ending the day at Har Amasa. Evening drive west to Nizzana, where night spent.

Monday 18th March early morning birding in the Nizzana area before driving southeast to Sde Boker. Birding around the Negev, Ovda Valley and Ne'ot Smadar during the heat of the day before returning to KM76-77 late afternoon. Post-sunset drive around Yotvata fields. Overnight in Eilat.

Tuesday 19th March dawn at North Beach before day spent around various sites in the Arava Valley to the north of Eilat. Afternoon drive north to the Dead Sea with evening birding at Lot Reservoir before visiting a wadi to search for Hume's Owl. Overnight in Eilat.

Wednesday 20th March early morning around Eilat before raptor-watching in the Eilat Mountains mid-morning. Rest of day spent either around the KM19-20 area or snorkelling in the Red Sea. Overnight in Eilat.

Thursday 21st March day spent birding sites in the Arava Valley between Eilat and KM76-77. Overnight in Eilat.

Friday 22nd March dawn birding at Yotvata before driving north to the Dead Sea. Two raptor-watching stints at Metsoke Dragot broken up by an afternoon visit to Wadi Salvadori. Drive west to Be'er Sheva before news broke of a Caspian Plover at KM20. Night drive back south to Eilat, where night spent.

Saturday 23rd March dawn birding at KM20 saltpans and mid-morning at Yotvata before driving north through the Negev to Sde Boker. Late morning and early afternoon spent birding sites north to Lahav, before finishing the day on the plains at Urim.

Sunday 24th March dawn at Sde Boker vulture feeding station before driving north to Lahav and then to Pardes Hanna-Kharkur for late morning. Early afternoon spent at Ma'agan Mikhael fishponds before leisurely drive back to the airport for late afternoon in time for an evening flight back to Luton.

DAILY DIARY

15th March

Following a slight delay in leaving London Luton it was early evening by the time we landed in Tel Aviv, and the light was already beginning to fail. A relatively tedious battle through Israeli customs more or less put any hopes of first-day birding to bed although, while waiting for a taxi to the hire car centre, we were able to enjoy our first **Common Mynas** of the trip alongside a few **Hooded Crows** and a deafening chorus of **Spanish** and **House Sparrows** in adjacent bushes as they came in to roost. After a tiring day of travel, a pair of unnecessarily raucous **Spur-winged Lapwings** at the car hire centre proved as much a chore as they did a pleasure but we were soon on our way north through Tel Aviv.

Stopping off in Herzliya for in order to find some food before it became too late, we chanced upon several **Egyptian Fruit Bats** feeding on fruiting trees in a car park at N32°09'48", E34°48'34". After scoring a schnitzel in a nearby restaurant, we returned to the car park to find the bats still present and started to photograph them with the aid of a torch and flash. This actually rated among some of our highlights of the trip; the bats often performed ludicrously well and we ended up spending at least an hour here – Dan usually in control of the torch as Will, Ash and I blasted off shots. As such, it was past 22:30 by the time we reached our hotel in Mikhmoret, quite exhausted.



Egyptian Fruit Bat licking its lips after a particularly tasty morsel

16th March

Rising early, we were in the centre of Pardes Hanna-Kharkur by sunrise and were instantly greeted by good numbers of noisy **Ring-necked Parakeets** flying around. However, we could not locate any Nanday Parakeets either along Ha'Dkhalim Street or in the adjacent area despite extensive searching over the following three hours. That said, the birding around the town was actually quite productive: a pair of **White-breasted Kingfishers** was the highlight, with **Palestine Sunbirds**, **Syrian Woodpeckers**, *atricapilla* **Jays**, abundant **Common Mynas**, **Graceful Prinias** and **Yellow-vented Bulbuls** all providing a fine introduction to birding in this corner of Israel. Migrants noted included a **Great Spotted Cuckoo** and a flyover male **Pallid Harrier**, with **Blackcaps** and **Lesser Whitethroats** common in the bushes and a flyover **Siskin** a surprise.

Giving up on the parakeets at around 09:00, we headed northeast to Ma'agan Mikhael fishponds. We soon scored at least five **Pallas's Gulls** among the commoner **Armenian**, **Slender-billed** and **Black-headed Gulls** as a flock of **Baltic Gulls** purposefully headed northwards. **Pied Kingfishers** were absolutely everywhere as were **Great White Egrets**, with other species present including 30 **Night Herons**, 15 **Black Storks**, **Glossy Ibis**, **Water Pipit** and a **Peregrine** over.

Heading back south towards Tel Aviv, our next destination was HaYarkon Park for another dose of Category C action. Being a weekend, the park was extremely busy with locals but that did not affect our plight to see **Vinous-breasted Starlings** – at least four birds were easily located as they fed on the grassy bank in the fenced-off area just west of the waterslide at the east end of the park, with a further pair seen in vegetation a few hundred metres west of there. **Monk Parakeet** was our other primary target here, again proving straightforward to find around the palm tree grove and 'Tropical Garden' just to the south of the main car park. To complete the exotica, there were also plenty of **Ring-necked Parakeets** and **Common Mynas** around the park while native species included a few **White-breasted Kingfishers** and a single **Masked Shrike**.

Pleasant though it is, HaYarkon Park has an almost zoo-like quality to it and, with plenty left on our itinerary for the day, we were keen to press on towards the Dead Sea in order to enjoy some more indigenous birdlife. It was ironic, then, that one of the highlights of our stop at Og Reservoir (at the northwestern tip of the Dead Sea) was at least ten **Indian Silverbills**. A new bird for three of us, I was struck by how similar their high-pitched 'tsip' call is to several species of Nearctic wood-warbler – I'm just glad this species hasn't been introduced to the Azores! Here we also encountered our first **Fan-tailed Ravens**, **Little Green Bee-eaters** and **Rock Martins** of the trip, with Dan also managing a small party of **Dead Sea Sparrows** that proved frightfully elusive in the heat of the day.

Moving on to Metsoke Dragot – an impressive gorge climbing westwards from the Dead Sea coast – we soon encountered our first **Tristram's Grackles** of the trip, although at least a dozen **Nubian Ibis** stole the show as they performed extremely well by the roadside. It soon became clear that both **Fan-tailed** and **Brown-necked Ravens** were common roadside birds in the Dead Sea, but the **White-crowned Black Wheatear** seen proved one of surprisingly few seen during the trip. Thanks to their distinctive and far-carrying song, a walk up the nearby Wadi Salvadori produced **Mountain Bunting** with relative ease – at least five were located towards the top of the wadi. A pair of **Sand Partridges** gave us the run-around and our first **Desert Larks** of the trip were seen while overhead, a few raptors were making the most of the thermals – a single **Booted** and a couple of **Short-toed Eagles** were sifted out from the numerous **Steppe Buzzards**, and a ringtail **Pallid Harrier** flew through.

Evening was soon upon us but we still had an hour or so to kill before we were due to meet Barak Granit, and thus we decided to spend some time at Lot Reservoir near Neve Zohar (N31°08'32", E35°22'47"). Several **Clamorous Reed Warblers** were singing although proved invisible in the brisk evening breeze; waders were primarily **Black-winged Stilts** although there were a handful each of **Wood** and **Green Sandpipers** present. A few **Rock Martins** were seen over the site as were large numbers of **Pallid Swifts**, while around a dozen **Yellow Wagtails** (primarily *feldegg*) were feeding in the margins. It was here that we received news that a couple of Black Bush Robins – one of our main target species – had been found at Ne'ot Smadar. Our plans were quickly altered so that, after our nightjar trip, we would drive south to be on site for dawn.

Meeting Barak at the entrance to Ne'ot HaKikar at sunset, we made our way down towards the Jordanian border in time for dusk. Perhaps it was the breeze, but we were unfortunate that it proved one of those evenings that the **Nubian Nightjars** simply did not show well – over the next couple of hours, we obtained a series of brief and distant views (both in flight and on the deck) of up to three birds around the area. To make matters worse, our luck was not in with **Hume's Owl** – we heard one bird briefly responding to tape at one site, although searches at two further sites proved fruitless and there was genuine sense of despondency as we began the long drive south in the early hours.

17th March

As if to compound the exhaustion and disappointment of the evening previous, we spent a fruitless hour driving around Yotvata fields between 03:00 and 04:00 searching for Egyptian Nightjars before finally giving up and settling down for an hour's sleep at Ne'ot Smadar. By 05:15 the light was birdable, and it did not take long for us to locate a **Black Bush Robin** in the large acacia at the east end of the pools – quite a scruffy individual, with worn remiges suggesting it to be a first-summer. Though elusive at times, the bird would often show well and eventually gave us excellent photographic opportunities. The area was otherwise quiet, with the handful of migrants including **Bluethroat** and **Eastern Bonelli's Warbler**.



First-summer **Black Bush Robin**, Shizzafon sewage works

If Shizzafon had been poor, the situation at KM76-77 (explored on foot from the road at N30°05'54", E35°08'50") proved quite the opposite. The wadi here was particularly green and, with a food source consisting of large numbers of Painted Ladies, Desert Locusts and various caterpillars, there were plenty of migrants about. At least 20 **Hill Sparrows** routinely fooled us with their Bee-eater-like flight calls while wheatears (**Isabelline**, **Northern** and **Black-eared**), **Cretzschmar's Buntings** (40+), **Tawny Pipits** (50+) and **Short-toed Larks** (250+) proved most numerous. Goodies included a couple of **Asian Desert Warblers** as well as male **Ruppell's** and **Eastern Orphean Warblers**, a couple of *samamisicus* **Redstarts**, a male **Trumpeter Finch** and eight **Black Storks** over.

Continuing north to KM152, we reached Shezaf Nature Reserve late morning. Despite the heat, a walk north along the wadi for a mile or so produced two **Arabian Warblers** including a male in sub-song. At least five *inquieta* **Scrub Warblers** were well-spread along the wadi and a noisy family party of **Arabian Babblers** were located on our walk back to the car – other birds included **White-crowned Black Wheatear** and **Eastern Olivaceous Warblers**.

A quick food stop at Neve Zohar saw us revisit Lot Reservoir where, in addition to the species noted the previous day, we registered at least five **Dead Sea Sparrows**, a female **Citrine Wagtail**, several **Bluethroats** and a stunning male **Caspian Stonechat**. Continuing westwards, it was quite remarkable how quickly the temperature cooled and the vegetation became lusher to the northwest of Arad. With a strong northerly wind blowing, it actually felt quite chilly as we began to search the foothills at Har Amasa late afternoon. No doubt the unpleasant conditions were to blame for the lack of Long-billed Pipit activity, but **Chukar** (20+) were conspicuous and other birds included **Scrub Warbler**, **Black-eared Wheatears**, **Spectacled Warblers**, **Redstart** and a male **Blue Rock Thrush**. At least three sightings of **Golden Jackal** were a nice bonus. But, with the wind strengthening and the temperature dropping as evening approached, we decided to call off our search for the pipits and began the drive east to Nizzana. A slightly tedious checkpoint on the Route 60 was our only delay (15 minutes of bag and car searching), although we did stop for a pleasant plate of food at a restaurant called Pepe's on the east side of Be'er Sheva. This comes recommended if you're in this part of the world, with a host of other restaurants to choose from in the vicinity – co-ordinates N31°14'50", E34°48'42"!

18th March

Another early start saw us flushing a surprise **Long-eared Owl** from trees outside our room at the Nizzana Project Kibbutz at dawn. It did not take long to locate displaying **Macqueen's Bustards** along the road to Ezuz, with at least six seen either side of the road as the sun began to rise. A harsh call betrayed the presence of a mobile flock of at least 12 **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse**, which eventually gave good views on the ground. The chattering of **Arabian Babblers** also rung out around the main wadi, with at least 15 seen in addition to a few **Southern Grey Shrikes**, two flyover **Cream-coloured Coursers**, a male **Merlin** and several **Pallid Harriers** while Dan also had two **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** fly through. Reflecting the impressive influx to southern Israel this spring, we also had several small parties of **Hill Sparrows** fly over, still regularly flummoxing us with their fluty flight calls!

Continuing south towards Ezuz, we stopped at a green area by the road at N30°48'07", E34°28'16" where Dan had seen Lilith Owl the year previous. No owl this time, but a decent scattering of migrants that included an impressive flock of 47 **Hill Sparrows** flying over, two each of **Masked Shrike**, **Wryneck** and **Eastern Orphean Warbler** plus **Woodchat**, **Eastern Bonelli's Warbler**, a singing **Savi's Warbler** and 15+ **Cretzschmar's Buntings**.

A brief stop at the traditional sandgrouse drinking pools near Nizzana proved a waste of time due to on-going construction work in the vicinity, though a singing **Hill Sparrow** was noted along with **Sand Partridge**, **Chukar** and a few **Ruff**. Driving east towards Sde Boker, the only birds of note along Route

211 were 150+ **Black Kites** and a couple of **White Storks** waiting for the thermals in roadside trees near at Ashalim.

Arriving at the Ben Gurion Memorial south of Sde Boker mid-morning, it didn't take us long to find at least ten **Syrian Serins** around the pine and olive trees near the small drinking pool. Unfortunately, the site was proving popular with visiting groups of offensively loud schoolchildren and the serins consequently proved quite nervous and mobile. Despite bouts of screaming and unruly behaviour, we actually found the area quite birdy – a female **Hawfinch** was our only individual of the trip, while migrants included **Redstart**, **Eastern Bonelli's Warbler** and a few **Hoopoes** and **Wrynecks**. Overhead, a **Long-legged Buzzard** passed through with a flock of **Steppe Buzzards**, as did three **Lesser Spotted Eagles**.

Our drive through the Negev was largely uneventful, although a pair of **Eastern Mourning Wheatears** was noted by the Ein Avdat Gorge turning off Route 40 and a **White-crowned Black Wheatear** was by the spectacular vista just south of Mitzpe Ramon. A further roadside pair of **Mourning Wheatears** was noted by Route 40 and a **Booted Eagle** drifted over Hameishar Plain before we eventually arrived at the Ovda Valley during the early afternoon. In 2012, Dan had seen large numbers of larks here as well as a pair of Hooded Wheatears, but there was no such luck this time around. A couple of **Hill Sparrows** were the highlight of a long walk around the plains, with **Quail** and a handful of **Cretzschmar's Buntings** and **Bluethroats** the best of the migrants.

A walk through the alfalfa fields at Ne'ot Smadar proved similarly quiet with little more than **Bluethroat**, **Wryneck** and a few **Red-throated Pipits**, so we headed back to Shizzafon sewage works for second helpings of the Black Bush Robin. This time, the individual we saw was a clearly smarter beast, with a much neater undertail and overall glossier black plumage with neater remiges – so there were two on site after all! A **Spotted Redshank** was a slight surprise here as was a **Grey Wagtail**, but it was otherwise lean pickings migrant-wise.

At KM76-77 late afternoon, a similar selection of migrants to the previous day was noted although Ash was in for a treat with two new birds: a couple of **Temminck's Larks** were picked up among the large Short-toed Lark flock while there were also half-a-dozen **Spotted Sandgrouse** blogging about. Best of the migrants were a few **Hill Sparrows** and two northbound **Hen Harriers** – a male and a female. By the time we'd completed a circuit of the area evening was upon us, so we headed down to Yotvata for dusk. Though an incredibly showy **Quail** had entertained us for a few minutes, we were thrilled to eventually located our target – an **Egyptian Nightjar** – materialize in the car headlights on the first track north of the northern pivot field, perhaps an hour after darkness had fallen. Though never allowing a close approach, we nonetheless enjoyed excellent views for the next half hour as the bird alternated between resting on the track and hunting – a superb way to end what had been a great day in the field!



Quail in the headlights at Yotvata

19th March

Following a reasonably early night at our motel in Eilat, we were back out at dawn and heading for North Beach. This area has changed dramatically since my visit in 2000, with so much more infrastructure and a skyline now dominated by high-rise hotels. Indeed, the place seemed a shell of its former self – in 2000, I remember seeing multiple Western Reef and Striated Herons as well as a plethora of migrants around the lagoon here. But, in 2013, the greenery and offshore platforms had gone and save a few **White-eyed Gulls** and one apiece of **Caspian** and **Gull-billed Terns** blogging about, the area had very little to offer. In the distance, 41 **Black Storks** were attempting to use the first thermals of the day to traverse the Eilat Mountains, and both an **Osprey** and a female **Pallid Harrier** flew through.

The North Beach experience was underwhelming at best and I suggested we quickly move on to Amram's Pillars. Here, it didn't take long to locate a pair of **Hooded Wheatears** bombing around slopes adjacent to the far car park. We had been tipped off about these birds the previous day (thanks Paul!) and eventually enjoyed good views despite the testosterone-charged male restlessly chasing the female to the top of the mountain and back down again, interspersing this behaviour with bouts of singing and passionate love-making. Overhead, **Black Kites** and **Steppe Buzzards** were drifting over the hills but we didn't see anything more interesting among them save a few **Black Storks**.

Over at KM19 reservoirs, three **Egyptian Geese** were a surprise (presumably these are the real deal?) and a **Collared Pratincole** flew through, with **Snipe** and **Wigeon** new for the trip list. With little else doing, we drove north to KM20 saltpans where we chanced upon two northbound **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters** on arrival. The saltpans were littered with a typical variety of saline lagoon species: Ash was thrilled with his first **Flamingos** and was also the only one of us to see the **White-tailed Lapwing**. Best of the waders on the lagoons were at least five **Marsh Sandpipers**. A couple of **Citrine Wagtails**, a **Spotted Crake** and up to three **Little Crakes** were noted in the ditch running

south towards KM19, although the highlight of the visit was Dan's attempt to emulate a trademark defensive block by his cricketer hero Jonathan Trott only to end up slipping over in the mud in front of a group of slightly bewildered onlookers.

Our next stop was Yotvata which, although quiet, did provide us with our first **Namaqua Doves** of the trip – three birds, including a fine male. A female **Bluethroat** entertained by suddenly emerging from inside a pumpkin that we had happened to be staring at, but birdlife was otherwise limited to a scattering of **Isabelline Wheatears**. Further north, the KM76-77 area again proved productive with at least two **Bimaculated Larks**, two **Asian Desert Warblers**, 10+ **Hill Sparrows** and a male **Ruppell's Warbler** the pick of the migrants, with 28 bonus **Spotted Sandgrouse** seen flying over.

With a second try for Hume's Owl top of the agenda, we headed north to the Dead Sea and Lot Reservoir in time for evening. Here, the usual species noted on previous visits were again seen – **Dead Sea Sparrows**, **Clamorous Reed Warblers** (still heard only!) and a **Spotted Crake** being the best of the bunch. Meeting up with the Eilat Bird Festival party, we headed in to a wadi along the Dead Sea coast just after dark and were rewarded with two calling and interacting **Hume's Owls** on what was a calm, clear and warm night in the desert – just superb! Leaving the festival party to head to Ne'ot HaKikar for the nightjars, we headed back south to Eilat and arrived in time to enjoy a late evening meal in the Italian restaurant near our motel.

20th March

After a frenetic opening four days to the trip, we were all in need of a more relaxed day around Eilat. That didn't stop us making the customary unproductive visit to North Beach at dawn, with the nearby IRBCE also producing very little in the way of migrants save a pair of **Garganey**. Holland Park proved a little better, with a handful of **Eastern Bonelli's Warblers** and an **Eastern Orphean Warbler** among the commoner **Lesser Whitethroats** plus good views of **Sand Partridge**. With the heat beginning to intensify we headed up in to the Eilat mountains for 08:00 but, after a promising initial pulse of **Black Kites**, **Steppe Buzzards** and **Steppe Eagles**, passage soon died mid-morning – singles of **Long-legged Buzzard** and **Lesser Spotted Eagle** the highlights.

An extended visit to KM20 for the rest of the morning produced a similar range of species to that seen the previous day, although the **White-tailed Lapwing** showed extremely well on the south side and there were a few **Caspian Gulls** and **Curlew Sandpipers**. A **Water Rail** had joined the **Spotted** and three **Little Crakes** in the KM19 ditch, with Will and Dan also scoring a brief male **Baillon's Crake** to complete the set!



White-tailed Lapwing, KM20 salt pans

Following a much-needed nap back at the hotel, we decided to spend the rest of the afternoon chilling out on the beach in Eilat and partaking in some snorkelling – Eilat may not be the most pleasant of places, but the sea life is superb. Countless brightly-coloured species of fish were hugging the reefs while Dan became utterly infatuated by an octopus that was doing a fine job of impersonating a rock.

With the late afternoon and evening left to play with, we decided to return to KM20 where again the **White-tailed Lapwing** performed well, though we spent most of the evening enjoying good views of the crakes in the ditch running south to KM19. Though a prominent Buckinghamshire birder confidently assured us that there was “no point” in trying as they had “only been seen once this year”, we decided to position ourselves overlooking the reservoirs at KM19 with dusk approaching. And, just a few minutes after arriving at 18:15, two **Lichtenstein’s Sandgrouse** – including a superb male – flew in to drink and gave magnificent views in the twilight. This in itself was a cause for celebration, and we enjoyed a relaxed evening meal before retiring for an early night’s sleep.

21st March

A pre-dawn start saw us arriving early at Yotvata, stopping only for a group of roadside **Dorcas Gazelles** en-route. Though there were no Caspian Plovers in the onion fields, a decent selection of migrants in the adjacent scrub included a pair of **Eastern Subalpine Warblers**, **Savi’s Warbler** and a handful of **Bluethroats** and **Wrynecks** among the innumerable **Lesser Whitethroats**, while two male **Hen Harriers** floated northwards.

A short drive north to KM76/77 once again asserted the area as the place in the Arava Valley for migrants in 2013. Highlight of the morning was a first-summer female **Cyprus Wheatear** c.1km south



Cyprus Wheatear, KM76

of the road, which proved mobile and difficult to photograph despite Dan’s excellent off-road driving efforts that allowed us to use the car as a hide. Also seen were a smart **Rufous Bush Chat** on the Jordanian border (another new bird for Ash), an **Asian Desert Warbler**, 5 **Hill Sparrows** and a dozen **Spotted Sandgrouse** flying over in addition to the usual migrants.

For the rest of the day, we visited KM20 either side of a couple of hours chilling out either at North Beach (Dan and I) or in the hotel room (Will and Ash). KM20 revealed the usual selection of species (including the **White-tailed Lapwing**), although a **Purple Heron** and a couple of **Red-necked Phalaropes** dropped in during the evening. While mooching around half-heartedly searching for

Desert Finches, a text from Chris Bell alerted us that they had just found a couple of Oriental Skylarks in fields at Yotvata. Time was pressing and we were initially resigned to defeat, but a quick mental maths exercise suggested we could make it with at least fifteen minutes of light left to search the

area. So, off we bombed (often at quite ridiculous speeds with Dan behind the wheel!) towards Yotvata although, to cut a long story short, we failed to find the larks in time for dusk – at least that was the following morning sorted!

22nd March

Dawn saw us back at Yotvata where an extensive search saw both Will and I connect with the two **Oriental Skylarks** in flight, calling regularly, for a couple of minutes before they dropped in to distant fields. Despite extensive searching, the birds could not be relocated by mid-morning though some respectable raptor passage saw us rewarded with excellent views of **Short-toed** and **Booted Eagles** while **Yellow Wagtails**, **Red-throated Pipits** and **Short-toed Larks** were streaming over in good numbers. With a strong southerly breeze kicking up and a sandstorm looking inevitable by mid-morning, we reluctantly headed northwards.

We arrived in the Dead Sea late morning and, after a brief food stop at Neve Zohar, made our way to the top of Metsoke Dragot for midday. On the drive northwards it was clear that birds of prey were making the most of the strong southerly breeze and so we set up overlooking the gorge for an hour until the sandstorm we left behind in the Arava Valley caught up with us. **Black Storks** were the pick of the bunch, with 104 (including flocks of 47 and 38) moving through. Five **Egyptian Vultures** were new for Ash; a displaying **Bonelli's Eagle** also entertained over the gorge with 3 **Lesser Spotted** and 8 **Steppe Eagles**, 3 **Ospreys** and a lone **White Stork** the highlights among the migrating **Steppe Buzzards** and **Black Kites**.

With our primary Dead Sea target still to see and the sandstorm worsening visibility further, we headed back south to Wadi Salvadori for the afternoon. Positioning ourselves overlooking the small spring at the top of the wadi, a 90-minute wait was finally rewarded when a female **Sinai Rosefinch** came in to drink for all of a minute or two before flying off up the slopes once more. Though there was a sense of relief that we'd seen the rosefinch, we all wanted to see a male and were left unsatisfied! In the meantime, we were entertained by a singing male **Sand Partridge** and as many as ten **Mountain Buntings** in the vicinity, with a **Lanner** overhead in addition to migrating flocks of **Black Stork** (44 and 20), **White Stork** (25) and the usual raptors. Giving up on the spring after a further half-hour's wait, our walk down the wadi made the afternoon all the more worthwhile as Will, who had been a couple of hundred metres behind us, located a pair of **Sinai Rosefinches** by the path – finally, in the late afternoon light, we were able to enjoy point blank views of a stunning, rosy male!



Male Sinai Rosefinch, Wadi Salvadori

With the storm clearing as evening arrived, the final couple of hours of light were spent back at Metsoke Dragot. Though it was near enough blowing a gale, plenty of raptors were making the most of the final thermals of the day at this jaw-dropping location. With the sun setting out to the west, the sight of up to three territorial **Bonelli's Eagles** harassing the migrant **Lesser Spotted** and **Steppe Eagles** as they traversed the valley provided one of the most spectacular moments of the trip. Indeed, **Lesser Spotted Eagle** passage had picked up with at least twenty seen, and there were also singles of **Egyptian Vulture** and **Marsh Harrier** as the sun sank towards the horizon, ending an exhilarating afternoon's birding around the Dead Sea.

That evening, while hunting down a suitable place to eat in Be'er Sheva (everywhere closed due to Passover!), news came through of a male Caspian Plover at KM20 pans – along with the bush robin, one of our most hoped-for species. Plans were quickly altered once more and we soon on the long drive back south to Eilat, arriving there at around 23:00 and checking back in to the Motel Aviv.

23rd March

Suffice to say that, despite arriving at dawn and searching the area extensively on foot, there was no sign of the previous evening's Caspian Plover at KM20. Scant consolation for the overnight drive and a long search was provided by a couple of **Pallas's Gulls** flying north, a flock of 13 **Garganey**, male **Desert Wheatear** (seemingly scarce this year), **Eastern Orphean Warbler** and 3 **Dorcas Gazelles**, although the Nighthawk Road show's tour leader clutching an unfortunate, exhausted **Red-rumped Swallow** was nevertheless memorable.

Though the temperature was rapidly rising, we decided to stop in at Yotvata to try again for the Oriental Skylarks. Rather predictably there was no sign, although three northbound **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters** were a welcome sight, and **Namaqua Dove** and **Quail** were both seen again. Resigning ourselves to defeat, we decided to press on back north and re-join our planned route. Along Route 40, a pair of **Mourning Wheatears** was observed feeding young in a roadside bank – crippling views could be obtained without getting out the car!

The rest of the morning and early afternoon was spent travelling north to Lahav. A couple of brief stops along the way had revealed single **Egyptian** and at least ten **Griffon Vultures** at the feeding station near Sde Boker and a **Ruff** at Yeroham Lake. Lahav itself was pretty windy, although we eventually obtained distant views of a **Long-billed Pipit** c.200m beyond the split along the track. Though seen pretty distantly on the ground, we found the bird surprisingly uncooperative and vowed to return the following morning. A male **Sardinian Warbler** singing was our first of the trip, and we also enjoyed good views of a couple of **Short-toed Eagles**.

With a few hours of daylight left to play with, we decided to head over to the plains at Urim on spec. Evidently it was too late for Saker, but we nevertheless chalked up a couple of male **Merlins**, a **Peregrine** and several singing **Quail**; **Skylark** was also new for the trip list and a couple of showy

Isabelline Wheatears whiled away some time as we took it in turns to hide behind farm machinery and pop out to photograph them!

The day ended with an impressive 'fall' of **Black Kites** and **White Storks** dropping in to trees along Route 25 back to Be'er Sheva. With our favourite retail park back open on the east side of the town, we settled down to enjoy an excellent gourmet burger in one of the many restaurants before eventually finding cheap accommodation at the Negev Camel Ranch, just east of Dimona – more than adequate considering it was going to be a very early start the following morning.

24th March

We had left the camel ranch a short while after 04:00 and arrived at Sde Boker just as dawn was breaking; negotiating the rather hairy approach track to the vulture feeding station without headlights brought out the best of my driving ability but we were soon in position overlooking the hillside prior to sunrise. At around 05:40, Dan calmly announced that he could see "a hyena's head" poking over the crest of the hill and, after frantic scurrying from the rest of us, we watched a stunning **Striped Hyena** bumble over the hill, make a pass through the feeding station site before disappearing behind the crest once more a couple of minutes later! Dan, not overly fussed about his mammals, seemed fairly unimpressed by the experience although the rest of us were utterly elated despite not seeing any Wolves! A **Red Fox** sniffed its way around the rancid carcasses littering the hillside and the **Egyptian Vultures** were up early – at least eight were already around by sunrise.



Striped Hyena at dawn, Sde Boker vulture feeding station

On returning to the road, we lucked upon four **Desert Finches** by the small reservoir while an adult **Great Spotted Cuckoo** made a brief appearance before bombing off north.

After grabbing a bit of breakfast, we headed north back to Lahav for another crack at **Long-billed Pipit**. Though still surprisingly elusive, up to three birds were heard singing and also showed reasonably well at times on the slopes. A **Long-legged Buzzard** gave fantastic views as it drifted over while the previous day's **Short-toed Eagle** and **Sardinian Warbler** were again noted.

With the rest of the morning and early afternoon to play with, we decided to head north towards Tel Aviv, stopping off at Kfar Menakhem Reservoir where Paul Chapman et al. had seen White-headed Duck a few days previously. No sign of the duck, but we were genuinely surprised to see a very large raptor materialize in to a second calendar-year **Black Vulture**, dwarfing the large numbers of **Black Kites** (200+) and **White Storks** (50+) that clearly found the stench of the adjacent rubbish dump considerably more appealing than we did.

Though the traffic heading north through Tel Aviv was heavy, we had arrived in Pardes Hanna-Kharkur by late morning. Unlike on our first visit, the town centre was extremely busy and considerably lacked in parakeet action – we saw just a handful of **Ring-necked Parakeets** in the two hours we spent wandering around the town, although both **White-breasted Kingfisher** and **Syrian Woodpecker** gave great views and a small party of **Siskins** flew over. On leaving the site early afternoon, we were all left wondering why the Nanday Parakeet population here has ever been considered viable for inclusion on Category C – though we are not ruling out that one or two individuals may still survive in the area and appreciate that they can be difficult to locate, our searches left us thinking that there may not be any left here at all. Keen Western Palearctic listers would be better off heading either to Tenerife or Barcelona where the species is considerably more numerous...

Our final birding of the trip was at Ma'agan Mikhael Fishponds, where a similar array of species was present to our previous visit. A couple of **Pallas's Gulls** showed well on the pools and a first-summer **Caspian Gull** was identified among the **Armenian Gulls**. At least 100 **Little Stints** were noted though the highlight came in the form of at least two **Egyptian Mongooses** that showed very well along the margins of the ponds.

After battling through customs, our action-packed and largely successful ten-day tour of Israel was rounded off eating fast food in Ben Gurion airport. Due to snowy conditions back in London, our evening flight back was delayed by a couple of hours and also proved to be one of the most offensive I've ever been on – disobedient passengers and screaming children summing just two of the irritants encountered. That said, we managed to make it back alive and I was home in London by the early hours on Monday morning.

SELECTED SPECIES NOTES

Sand Partridge: a reasonably easy-to-see species in dry wadi habitat; our first sighting was of a pair at Wadi Salvadori on 16th with further birds seen at Shezaf NR on 17th, Nizzana ponds on 18th, Holland Park on 20th and again at Wadi Salvadori on 22nd, when we enjoyed prolonged views of a singing male.

Macqueen's Bustard: at least six, possibly eight birds were easily located along the Nizzana-Ezuz road during the early morning of 18th, as viewed from the roadside at N30°49'37", E34°28'08". A visit to this area early in the day will almost certainly produce sightings.

Pallas's Gull: immatures were noted at Ma'agan Mikhael Fishponds on 16th (5+) and 24th (2), while two immatures flew north over KM20 salt pans early morning on 23rd.

Long-billed Pipit: an extensive search at Har Amasa during windy conditions on 17th failed to produce any pipits, but visits to Lahav revealed a single, mobile bird during the afternoon of 23rd with at least three seen well there the following morning. The site is located to the northwest of Lahav village, and can be reached by taking the small track north off the road at N31°23'17", E34°51'25". Drive north along the track for almost 500m until it forks; park here and explore the hill

slopes. We saw birds in the valley surrounding the eastern track, although the birds were mobile and the habitat consistent, suggesting that they might be encountered anywhere around here.

Black Bush Robin: 2013 has proved to be a very good year for this species in Israel, with as many as thirteen birds recorded by the time of writing. We were fortunate to be in Israel when the first two of these turned up at Shizzafon sewage works near Ne'ot Smadar. We saw both birds over visits on 17th and 18th March. It is perhaps no coincidence that these birds are often found during the [Eilat Bird Festival](#) week when coverage tends to be at its most intense around the Arava Valley.

Eastern Mourning Wheatear: seen only along Route 40 between Sde Boker and the Ovda Valley, where it appears a reasonably common roadside bird. A pair was located just north of the Ein Avdat gorge turn off at N30°49'07", E34°45'17" on 18th with a further pair south of Mitzpe Ramon at N30°32'25", E34°55'09" later that morning. On 23rd, we located a pair feeding young in a nest in the roadside embankment a few kilometres south of there in addition to the above pair still present.

Hooded Wheatear: a pair was seen by the far car park at Amram's Pillars on 19th.

Asian Desert Warbler: following an excellent winter for the species in the Negev, it was perhaps not surprising that small numbers could still be found in southern Israel in the second half of March. Though we only saw them in the wadi at KM76-77, at least two birds were seen (often trailing migrant wheatears) there on 17th, 19th and 21st without too much effort.

Arabian Warbler: we encountered at least two birds in the wadi at Shezaf Nature Reserve late morning on 17th. To reach the wadi, turn off Route 90 at the KM152 marker and follow the track east towards the low hills. Note that the track is set back from the road and is not obvious – coordinates for the turning are N30°44'37", E35°13'38". Additionally, Dan saw a single bird in acacia just west of Route 90 and south of Yotvata that evening; the bird was c.200m south of the northern perimeter of the Hai-Bar Reserve fence at approx. N29°53'01", E35°02'48".

Arabian Babbler: a relatively common and widespread species in dry wadi habitats in the south; we saw noisy family parties at Shezaf Nature Reserve, Nizzana and Holland Park, Eilat. Several of the birds at the former site were colour-ringed.

Vinous-breasted Starling: an easy enough species to find at the east end of HaYarkon Park, we located at least four birds feeding unobtrusively on the ground near the red umbrellas in the fenced-off enclosure just southwest of the large waterslide at N32°06'06", E34°49'09" on 16th. Another pair was later seen by the main path c.300m west of here at N32°05'59", E34°48'57". Directions to this area are in Bonser's [2008 report](#).

Hill Sparrow: we were fortunate in that our trip coincided with a major invasion of the species to southern Israel. Birds were seen at or flying over at a handful of sites, with perhaps as many as 100 (including a single flock of 47!) seen in the Nizzana area on 18th. Up to 20 or more were regularly at KM76-77 throughout the week with further birds also seen in the Ovda Valley.

Indian Silverbill: seen at only one site on our trip, at least ten could be found in scrub adjacent to the large date palm plantation at Og Reservoir on 16th. Take the signposted track west off Route 90 at N31°47'06", E35°30'02" and park by track junction after c.100m. From here, walk WSW along the drainage channel towards the date plantation to view the scrub. There is a leaking tap by the small

wooden hut just beyond the main patch of scrub and on the edge of the palm plantation where birds were also coming to drink.

Syrian Serin: a group of ten mobile birds were seen around the olive and pine trees at Ben Gurion Memorial, south of Sde Boker, during the morning of 19th. From the main car park at N30°50'56", E34°46'45", take the path westwards towards the memorial until a grassy area opens up on the left. The birds were coming to drink at a leaking tap under the olive trees but were otherwise favouring the tall pine trees along the perimeter fence.

Sinai Rosefinch: seemingly very difficult to see in Israel in 2013 with our team one of a very few to connect. None had been seen at Amram's Pillars during the festival and so we concentrated our efforts at Wadi Salvadori where, on 22nd, a female was observed drinking from the spring by the large bush at the top of the wadi (N31°31'10", E35°23'10") and a pair was later located on the scree slopes c.200m below there.

TRIP LIST

1. Shelduck
2. Egyptian Goose
3. Mallard
4. Gadwall
5. Pintail
6. Shoveler
7. Wigeon
8. Teal
9. Garganey
10. Little Grebe
11. Cormorant
12. Night Heron
13. Cattle Egret
14. Squacco Heron
15. Little Egret
16. Great White Egret
17. Grey Heron
18. Purple Heron
19. White Stork
20. Black Stork
21. Glossy Ibis
22. Spoonbill
23. Greater Flamingo
24. Griffon Vulture
25. Black Vulture
26. Egyptian Vulture
27. Osprey
28. Lesser Spotted Eagle
29. Steppe Eagle
30. Short-toed Eagle
31. Booted Eagle

32. Bonelli's Eagle
33. Black Kite
34. Marsh Harrier
35. Hen Harrier
36. Pallid Harrier
37. Long-legged Buzzard
38. Steppe Buzzard
39. Sparrowhawk
40. Kestrel
41. Lesser Kestrel
42. Peregrine
43. Merlin
44. Lanner
45. Chukar
46. Sand Partridge
47. Quail
48. Water Rail
49. Spotted Crake
50. Baillon's Crake
51. Little Crake
52. Moorhen
53. Coot
54. Crane
55. Macqueen's Bustard
56. Oystercatcher
57. Avocet
58. Black-winged Stilt
59. Stone Curlew
60. Cream-coloured Courser
61. Collared Pratincole
62. Little Ringed Plover
63. Ringed Plover
64. Grey Plover
65. Spur-winged Lapwing
66. White-tailed Lapwing
67. Dunlin
68. Curlew Sandpiper
69. Little Stint
70. Wood Sandpiper
71. Green Sandpiper
72. Common Sandpiper
73. Redshank
74. Spotted Redshank
75. Greenshank
76. Marsh Sandpiper
77. Black-tailed Godwit
78. Curlew
79. Snipe
80. Red-necked Phalarope
81. Ruff
82. Black-headed Gull

83. Slender-billed Gull
84. Armenian Gull
85. Caspian Gull
86. Baltic Gull
87. Pallas's Gull
88. White-eyed Gull
89. Little Tern
90. Sandwich Tern
91. Gull-billed Tern
92. Common Tern
93. Caspian Tern
94. Black-bellied Sandgrouse
95. Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
96. Spotted Sandgrouse
97. Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse
98. Rock Dove
99. Collared Dove
100. Turtle Dove
101. Laughing Dove
102. Namaqua Dove
103. Great Spotted Cuckoo
104. Long-eared Owl
105. Hume's Owl
106. Nubian Nightjar
107. Egyptian Nightjar
108. Swift
109. Pallid Swift
110. Hoopoe
111. White-throated Kingfisher
112. Pied Kingfisher
113. Bee-eater
114. Blue-cheeked Bee-eater
115. Little-green Bee-eater
116. Ring-necked Parakeet
117. Monk Parakeet
118. Syrian Woodpecker
119. Wryneck
120. Skylark
121. Oriental Skylark
122. Crested Lark
123. Woodlark
124. Lesser Short-toed Lark
125. Short-toed Lark
126. Desert Lark
127. Bimaculated Lark
128. Temminck's Lark
129. Sand Martin
130. Rock Martin
131. Swallow
132. Red-rumped Swallow
133. House Martin

134. Tawny Pipit
135. Long-billed Pipit
136. Water Pipit
137. Meadow Pipit
138. Tree Pipit
139. Red-throated Pipit
140. White Wagtail
141. Yellow Wagtail
142. Citrine Wagtail
143. Grey Wagtail
144. Spectacled Bulbul
145. Robin
146. Nightingale
147. Rufous Bush Robin
148. Black Bush Robin
149. Bluethroat
150. Redstart
151. Wheatear
152. Isabelline Wheatear
153. Desert Wheatear
154. Blackstart
155. Black-eared Wheatear
156. Cyprus Wheatear
157. Mourning Wheatear
158. Hooded Wheatear
159. White-crowned Black Wheatear
160. Black Bush Robin
161. Siberian Stonechat
162. Blue Rock Thrush
163. Song Thrush
164. Blackbird
165. Blackcap
166. Orphean Warbler
167. Arabian Warbler
168. Lesser Whitethroat
169. Sardinian Warbler
170. Ruppell's Warbler
171. Whitethroat
172. Spectacled Warbler
173. Subalpine Warbler
174. Asian Desert Warbler
175. Scrub Warbler
176. Graceful Prinia
177. Sedge Warbler
178. Savi's Warbler
179. Cetti's Warbler
180. Reed Warbler
181. Clamorous Reed Warbler
182. Eastern Olivaceous Warbler
183. Willow Warbler
184. Chiffchaff

185. Balkan Warbler
186. Great Tit
187. Woodchat Shrike
188. Masked Shrike
189. Southern Grey Shrike
190. Palestine Sunbird
191. Arabian Babbler
192. Jay
193. Jackdaw
194. Hooded Crow
195. Brown-necked Raven
196. Fan-tailed Raven
197. House Crow
198. Tristram's Grackle
199. Starling
200. Common Myna
201. Vinous-breasted Starling
202. House Sparrow
203. Spanish Sparrow
204. Dead Sea Sparrow
205. Rock Sparrow
206. Hill Sparrow
207. Indian Silverbill
208. Chaffinch
209. Linnet
210. Goldfinch
211. Greenfinch
212. Siskin
213. Syrian Serin
214. Hawfinch
215. Sinai Rosefinch
216. Trumpeter Finch
217. Desert Finch
218. Cretzschmar's Bunting
219. Corn Bunting
220. Mountain Bunting