



Field Guides Tour Report

ISRAEL MIGRATION MAGIC 2019

Mar 13, 2019 to Mar 24, 2019

Doug Gochfeld & local guide

For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, [please VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE.](#)



One of the most memorable avian experiences of the tour was watching three different male MacQueen's Bustards dancing their hearts out to try and impress nearby females in the Negev Desert. Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

Our second running of Field Guides' Israel tour was yet another success. This spring came on the heels of a very rainy winter, which had transformed the oft-barren desert landscapes to green wonderlands of life, and this had a strong influence on a few of our experiences. First of all, much of our time in these greened-up desert landscapes were characterized by vibrant shows of life, especially of bugs and birds. Perhaps the most noticeable rain-tied event that we witnessed was the Painted Lady butterfly extravaganza. We witnessed tens of thousands migrating on a couple of days as we travelled around the Arava Valley, and found uncountable numbers of their caterpillars feeding on the ephemeral greenery in the usually brown plains (we even found a couple that were in chrysalises!). The green desert also meant a re-distribution of migrant birds from where they normally are. We encountered greater numbers (and perhaps slightly greater diversity) than usual in the desert habitats, but it also meant that some of the classic migrant traps around Eilat weren't as attractive to migrants as they are in many years, since many birds weren't in dire need of their oasis effects. Some miscellaneous numbers to show the diversity of forms that this tiny nugget of land can provide: We did exceptionally well on Sylvia warblers, with TEN species of this skulking genus (including great views of most), Wheatears were represented with seven species (counting Blackstart), and we had eleven taxa of wagtails and pipits (three of which were various yellow wagtail taxa).

This year we started off by heading east to the Dead Sea, this time via the Jerusalem Bird Observatory, smack dab in the middle of Jerusalem. This 1.3 acre postage stamp of land is a great haven for migrants, though we were treated (subjected?) to rain for our morning, and so we didn't see many migrants (though Lesser Whitethroats in the hand were educational!). That said, the White-throated Kingfisher, close European Greenfinches, Chaffinch, and point-blank Eurasian Jay were a good way to get our birding started in this part of the world. We continued to the Dead Sea, and an afternoon outing at Kalya was already going well (including Sand Partridge) before we started seeing the storks arriving. We watched several thousand storks come out of the mountains to the south, and head north over our heads. Whether they were in big wheeling masses kettling to try and catch the final thermals from the evening sun, or the sky high battalions that had already attained sufficient altitude, this event was legitimately awe-inspiring. This passage was overwhelmingly comprised of White Storks, but there were indeed some Black Storks mixed in as well.

Before our trip south to the main event, we had another day and a half to explore the Dead Sea region. The myriad of highlights included a couple of desert wadi excursions which produced a showy Striolated Bunting, a vocal Barbary Falcon flying around overhead, and a spectacular visual and audiological experience with Cyprus Warbler. Wetlands produced the locally scarce African Swamphen, a dozen Ferruginous Ducks, and the range restricted and smart-looking Dead Sea Sparrow alongside Clamorous Reed-Warblers. We also had some more migration fun, most notably several hundred Common Cranes flying over us at one point.

We then went to the very south of Israel, and spent the next several days based in Eilat, at the northern tip of the Red Sea's Gulf of Aqaba. We used our well-provisioned and positioned hotel as the launching pad for our exploration of the Arava Valley, investigating its wide array of habitats from lush deserts, wadis, and kibbutzim, to its mountains, parks, and waterfront. Good Steppe Buzzard and Steppe Eagle migration events in the mountains blew our minds, while seemingly everywhere we ran into wagtails and wheatears stopping briefly on their northern journeys. Eye-popping Arabian Green Bee-eaters and Palestine Sunbirds were our resident companions at many stops, and Holland Park provided the very social Arabian Babbler, as well as scarcer migrants like Subalpine Warbler and Rueppell's Warbler. The International Birding and Research Center gave us a regionally rare Pygmy

Cormorant, unconscionably easy to see Little Crakes, Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, Bluethroats hopping around at our feet, and more. Seawatches at North Beach, though early in the season, gave us Parasitic Jaeger, many migrant ducks, Greater Sand-Plover, and the very range restricted White-eyed Gull. The nearby canals provided Temminck's Stint, Spotted Redshank, and a very unseasonal White-winged Tern, as well as a glut of the more common migrants. Scrub Warbler, Desert Finch, Pale Rockfinch, Egyptian Vultures, Masked Shrike, and Eurasian Wryneck were also targets that we saw quite well in the south. As is often the case, we even had a couple of rarities, with two each of Richard's Pipit and Black Scrub-Robin!

After a work week length sojourn in Eilat, it was time to head north again, this time deeper into the Negev Desert. Once north of the magnificent Ramon Crater, we started picking up species that are absent or more difficult to see in the south, such as Syrian Woodpecker, Great Spotted Cuckoo, and Great Tit. Hundreds of Greater Short-toed Larks were flying over the verdant Meishar Plains, and Ben Gurion's tomb and the Ovdar Gorge provided Griffon Vultures soaring over and Alpine Swifts careening around the canyon.

The Negev and the Nitzana area provided us with some real desert highlights, the most memorable of which may have been the displaying MacQueen's Bustards dancing away the morning while we watched all a-giggle. The bustards weren't all the desert had to offer though, as we saw hundreds of Spotted Sandgrouse flying around and landing at a watering hole, where they were joined briefly by a few Black-bellied Sandgrouse. That very same morning we were also treated to a pair of Cream-colored Coursers, the unique long-legged desert-specialist shorebird that can blend into its habitat seamlessly. Our final morning was spent tracking down the special desert subspecies (Lilith Owl) of Little Owl before our last birding of the trip at Har Amasa, which provided us a splendid ending to our tour, with Blue Rock Thrushes, Cretzschmar's Bunting, Rock Sparrow, singing Spectacled Warblers, Lesser Kestrel, Long-legged Buzzard, Finsch's Wheatears, and a glut of other non-avian critters against a perfect semi-desert backdrop.

From the rich Judean Hills to the barren Dead Sea canyons, all the way down to the stark but ephemerally lush deserts of the Arava Valley, the migrant traps of Eilat, and the spectacular scenery of the Ramon Crater and Negev Desert, our trip had an unparalleled mix of awe-inspiring scenery, fun camaraderie, and of course, great birds. Eran and I wish to thank you all for your companionship on this delightful voyage, and we hope to see you in the field again!

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*) – Only one lingerer at K20 by the time we arrived. The species tends to winter here in good numbers but then depart through March, and are typically gone by the end of the month. This year they seemed to depart a bit early.

GARGANEY (*Spatula querquedula*) – Marshy ponds around the Dead Sea and K19 produced good views of this smart-looking duck, and North Beach gave us a window into their migration, as we saw some distant flocks flying around over the Gulf of Aqaba trying to figure out what to do next on their long northbound flight.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Spatula clypeata*) – Fairly common on fresh water in the south,

EURASIAN WIGEON (*Mareca penelope*) – Some mixed into a migrating duck flock at North Beach.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – Dead Sea, K19, and Nitzana.

NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*) – Dead Sea, North Beach, and other spots in the south.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN) (*Anas crecca crecca*) – A few of these scattered around water bodies in the south, and migrating off North Beach.

COMMON POCHARD (*Aythya ferina*) – We only connected with these in the Dead Sea region.

FERRUGINOUS DUCK (*Aythya nyroca*) – We found several of these around the Dead Sea, at one of the strongholds for this species' Israeli population.

TUFTED DUCK (*Aythya fuligula*) – Another *Aythya* that we only encountered near the Dead Sea.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

SAND PARTRIDGE (*Ammoperdix heyi heyi*) – We had this charismatic regional endemic near Kalya, and then at Shezaf and Holland Park. [E]

COMMON QUAIL (*Coturnix coturnix*) – A couple of these as we walked around the incredible lush HaMeishar Plains.

CHUKAR (*Alectoris chukar*) – Wadi Kalya, then again on the final day of the tour when we were back in the north.

Phoenicopteridae (Flamingos)

GREATER FLAMINGO (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) – These were common around Eilat, with the vast majority being at K20, but seen transiting to and from there and on the southern salt pannes and in the southern canals as well. Another really fun observation was a few of them apparently arriving on migration as they came in over the Gulf while we were on North Beach on our final day in Eilat.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

LITTLE GREBE (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) – Several spots, including a pair that could well have been breeding at the Qetura sewage.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Yup. Some of these in the desert cliffs seem quite like wild types, in appearance, behavior, and habitat, but given the large feral population in the region, it is impossible to eliminate the possibility of some feral ancestry in any Rock Pigeon you see here.

EUROPEAN TURTLE-DOVE (*Streptopelia turtur*) – We had one fly by at Yotvata, which was the first northbound migrant encountered in the country this season. They are a common (though dramatically declining because of a population crash) migrant, but this is on the early side for them.

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE (*Streptopelia decaocto*) – Abundant.

LAUGHING DOVE (*Streptopelia senegalensis*) – Maybe even more abundant (especially around settled areas and kibbutzim).

NAMAQUA DOVE (*Oena capensis*) – Female and immature at Samar.

Pteroclididae (Sandgrouse)

PIN-TAILED SANDGROUSE (*Pterocles alchata*) – We heard these near the Nitzana-Ezuz road, and then again at the Nitzana sewage ponds. A couple of folks saw them flying over the road at the bustard spot as well.

SPOTTED SANDGROUSE (*Pterocles senegallus*) – Some at Ha Meishar Plains, ~120 or more at the Nitzana sewage, and some flyovers on our final morning.

BLACK-BELLIED SANDGROUSE (*Pterocles orientalis*) – Nice views of a small group that landed (while making their very cool and distinctive call!) at the Nitzana sewage.

Otididae (Bustards)

MACQUEEN'S BUSTARD (*Chlamydotis macqueenii*) – What an awesome show these birds put on around Nitzana!! Watching the males make their absurd display was one of the best experiences of the tour for many folks.

Cuculidae (Cuckoos)

GREAT SPOTTED CUCKOO (*Clamator glandarius*) – One of these was very vocal and flying around at Sde Boker, though it didn't spend any time perched out in the open. It's an impressive beast in flight.

Apodidae (Swifts)

ALPINE SWIFT (*Apus melba*) – Excellent visual and auditory experience with these super-sized swifts around the breeding cliffs in the southern Negev.

COMMON SWIFT (*Apus apus apus*) – Scattered throughout.

PALLID SWIFT (*Apus pallidus*) – Our first were at the IBRCE, and then we had them scattered here and there around the desert, including near some nesting sites.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

WATER RAIL (*Rallus aquaticus*) – We heard this very well near the southern end of the Dead Sea.

EURASIAN MOORHEN (*Gallinula chloropus*) – Common in appropriate habitat.

EURASIAN COOT (*Fulica atra*) – Still a few around in wetlands, though they had started to depart the region for the north.

AFRICAN SWAMPHEN (*Porphyrio madagascariensis*) – A couple of these were in a marsh adjacent to the Dead Sea, and we all eventually got scope views of this large rallid. They are scarce in Israel, though they do breed in appropriate habitat. Their secretiveness (unlike swamphens in many other parts of the world) compounds the difficulty with which they're seen.

LITTLE CRAKE (*Zapornia parva*) – Navit Pools and the IBRCE. Excellent close views.

Gruidae (Cranes)

COMMON CRANE (*Grus grus*) – We pulled off to view a couple of migrating flocks of these adjacent to the legendary ruins of Masada, and then had another flock of 39 circling over the valley at Har Amasa.

Burhinidae (Thick-knees)

EURASIAN THICK-KNEE (*Burhinus oedicnemus*) – We heard these at Almog after dark. [*]

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets)

BLACK-WINGED STILT (*Himantopus himantopus*) – Plenty around appropriate shorebird habitats.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

SPUR-WINGED LAPWING (*Vanellus spinosus*) – Truly abundant, and very bold. Called sick-sacks locally because of their insistent vocalizations when one gets near them or their nests (or just whenever they feel like it).

GREATER SAND-POLOVER (*Charadrius leschenaultii*) – Really nice views of a perched adult in perfectly sharp breeding plumage at North Beach.

KENTISH PLOVER (KENTISH) (*Charadrius alexandrinus alexandrinus*) – K20, IBRCE, North Beach. Good views of this species, which breeds at the salt ponds at K20.

COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula*) – Reasonably well-represented in appropriate habitat.

LITTLE RINGED PLOVER (CURONICUS) (*Charadrius dubius curonicus*) – They were at a couple of places around Eilat, but our best views came at the Neot Smadar sewage facility.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

RUFF (*Calidris pugnax*) – Very common.

TEMMINCK'S STINT (*Calidris temminckii*) – Nice views in the canal on two days in a row. We found these and they were the only two Temminck's Stints being seen in Eilat during our week or so in the area.

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*) – The salt pannes at the IBRCE were the most reliable location for these, and most of the ones we saw were fully in basic/winter plumage.

LITTLE STINT (*Calidris minuta*) – The common small calidrid (peep) in this neck of the woods.

COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago*) – Grofit Sewage gave us one that gave us some good flight views, and we were able to take note of the differences between this species and our native-to-the-Americas Wilson's Snipe. Seeing these in flight is more instructive than seeing them perched if you are looking to identify them.

RED-NECKED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus lobatus*) – A couple swimming circles at IBRCE.

COMMON SANDPIPER (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – The analog of the New World's Spotted Sandpiper, these were appropriately common in the south, where there were quite a few birds which were arriving on migration, as well as what were potentially lingering winterers.

GREEN SANDPIPER (*Tringa ochropus*) – Scattered around muddy habitat in the Eilat area, including in the canals.

SPOTTED REDSHANK (*Tringa erythropus*) – A nice one on our first visit to the canal north of North Beach. This is a fairly early date for this low density migrant.

COMMON GREENSHANK (*Tringa nebularia*) – Widespread, though not numerous, in the Eilat area.

MARSH SANDPIPER (*Tringa stagnatilis*) – Wetlands throughout the south.

WOOD SANDPIPER (*Tringa glareola*) – Dead Sea and Neot Smadar. We somehow managed to miss it completely in the immediate Eilat area.

COMMON REDSHANK (*Tringa totanus*) – One of the most widespread shorebirds in our travels- we had them all around the south as well as in the Dead Sea region.

Glareolidae (Pratincoles and Coursers)

CREAM-COLORED COURSER (*Cursorius cursor*) – Nice views of this elegant "shorebird" close to the van along Mandatory Road. The glariolidae are one of the more distinctive families of shorebirds, with their odd proportions, and entertaining flight styles. These are one of my favorite species of the southern desert, and seeing them is always a delight.

Stercorariidae (Skuas and Jaegers)

PARASITIC JAEGER (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) – These very distant birds were found sitting on the water way off shore at North Beach on our final day in Eilat, and they eventually flew around a bit and chased some birds before settling in again.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

SLENDER-BILLED GULL (*Chroicocephalus genei*) – Common in the south. Also a couple at the reservoir near Kalya, where it is less common.

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – Common and widespread.

WHITE-EYED GULL (*Ichthyaeetus leucophthalmus*) – We saw these well on a couple of successive evenings at North Beach, including a youngish bird that was perched on the beach wall that allowed for very close approach. [E]

YELLOW-LEGGED GULL (*Larus michahellis*) – A couple of adults around Tel Aviv.

CASPIAN GULL (*Larus cachinnans*) – IBRCE.

ARMENIAN GULL (*Larus armenicus*) – Two adults flew by at Yotvata, migrating north between Yotvata and the mountains, right over the desert.

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL (FUSCUS) (*Larus fuscus fuscus*) – The most numerous *Larus* species during our time in Eilat, since they migrate through in large numbers. The stark black mantles of the adults, and long slender wings allowed us to identify these more quickly than some of the other large gulls we encountered in the field, which aren't as distinctive.

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL (HEUGLIN'S) (*Larus fuscus heuglini*) – An adult at a distance migrating over Eilat, and then a young bird at North Beach the very next day. Fewer than typical.

GULL-BILLED TERN (*Gelochelidon nilotica*) – Between North Beach and the IBRCE. One appeared to be the same individual that wintered in the area, and was still in messy immature/winter plumage. We also had a couple of migrants in spic and span spring plumage.

CASPIAN TERN (*Hydroprogne caspia*) – At least one individual hanging around the IBRCE.

WHITE-WINGED TERN (*Chlidonias leucopterus*) – A winter-plumaged bird just north of North Beach was a big surprise and a treat two days in a row. This species typically migrates much later, not showing up until mid-April, and peaking in late April, so we hadn't been expecting to see any.

Ciconiidae (Storks)

BLACK STORK (*Ciconia nigra*) – Dozens mixed into the migration of the White Storks throughout the Dead Sea region, and then more in the Eilat Mountains in the south.

WHITE STORK (*Ciconia ciconia*) – WOW!! We had a truly fantastic experience with battalions of migrating White Storks over the Kalya fields. Ribbons of them stretched over us, and the ribbons would periodically agglomerate and turn into a kettle of these graceful animals as they soared around in the perfect late afternoon sunlight against a background of dark gray clouds. What an experience with this mind-bending spectacle!

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

PYGMY CORMORANT (*Microcarbo pygmeus*) – We had the long-staying bird at the IBRCE in Eilat, on perhaps its final day in the south. We watched it circle and then disappear, and it wasn't reported again during our stay. This was the first Eilat record of this species, and a real nice welcome-to-Eilat gift.

GREAT CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) – Widespread, but dwindling through the tour as the species was starting to move north out of Eilat by the end of the tour. Much different than our taxon of Great Cormorant, these winter in bulk in warm climes, and are often found on freshwater, neither of which is true of the Great Cormorants off Northeastern North America.

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GRAY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*) – At a great many sites on our journey, and we even saw several good-sized flocks of newly arriving migrants dropping into appropriate stopovers.

PURPLE HERON (*Ardea purpurea*) – Seen at the IBRCE a couple of times.

GREAT EGRET (*Ardea alba*) – Only one or two around Eilat.

LITTLE EGRET (*Egretta garzetta*) – Plenty spread around appropriate habitats.

CATTLE EGRET (*Bubulcus ibis*) – Lots scattered throughout different habitat types.

SQUACCO HERON (*Ardeola ralloides*) – Wetlands around Eilat, and Neot Smadar sewage as well.

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) – An immature at K19 and an adult at the IBRCE.

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

GLOSSY IBIS (*Plegadis falcinellus*) – Flybys at the IBRCE and then the next morning at Holland Park.

EURASIAN SPOONBILL (*Platalea leucorodia*) – We saw these unique birds at the IBRCE, Dead Sea, and K19 among other locales. A nice showing from them this year, as they were in several locations.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

EGYPTIAN VULTURE (*Neophron percnopterus*) – A few migrants. The first was over the gorgeous landscape at Metsoke Dragot, a couple were at the also-gorgeous landscape of the Eilat Mountains, and there was a very high migrant heading north over the desert at Qetura sewage.

EURASIAN GRIFFON (*Gyps fulvus*) – The Ovdar Gorge is the epicenter of the species' breeding in Israel, and we did quite well with at least seven individuals here.

SHORT-TOED SNAKE-EAGLE (*Circus gallicus*) – A great bird, we had this species in several places, including Shezaf at the beginning of the tour, Har Amasa at the end of the tour, and over the Eilat Mountains and Yotvata in between.

LESSER SPOTTED EAGLE (*Clanga pomarina*) – At least ten individuals migrating over Har Amasa.

BOOTED EAGLE (*Hieraaetus pennatus*) – Just a couple of us were able to get on this one well as it glided overhead amidst the big raptor passage we were watching near Grofit.

STEPPE EAGLE (*Aquila nipalensis*) – Migrants seen in several places, including a very nice haul in the Eilat Mountains.

EURASIAN MARSH-HARRIER (*Circus aeruginosus*) – Scattered throughout good habitat, and also several migrating through less optimal harrier habitat here and there.

HEN HARRIER (*Circus cyaneus*) – We had it on day one, but our best experience with the species was with the two males that were hanging out at Yotvata.

EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK (*Accipiter nisus*) – Several on migration, including at the Eilat Mountains, and in Yotvata.

BLACK KITE (*Milvus migrans*) – Many many many. Good studies of these in all lights and at all angles and all distances.

COMMON BUZZARD (WESTERN) (*Buteo buteo buteo*) – The nominate taxon of Common Buzzard, we had one of these during our final birding excursion at Har Amasa. They winter in small numbers in the north of the country, but are easy to confuse with the next species.

COMMON BUZZARD (STEPPE) (*Buteo buteo vulpinus*) – Seen almost every day, with a very nice passage of them through the Eilat Mountains one day, and over Grofit on another day. This is the dominant migrant raptor species at this time of year. The range of variation from dark to light and red to black to keep you busy for a lifetime.

LONG-LEGGED BUZZARD (*Buteo rufinus*) – Brief views at Wadi Kalya and in the Eilat Mountains, but we had real good views at Har Amasa.

Strigidae (Owls)

LITTLE OWL (LILITH) (*Athene noctua lilith*) – A great experience with this at Nitzana on our very final morning of the tour after we had repeatedly struck out on the species in several attempts over our prior two days in the northern Negev. [E]

Upupidae (Hoopoes)

EURASIAN HOOPOE (*Upupa epops*) – Widespread, though not in large numbers. We saw it in both the south and the center of the country. The National Bird of Israel, after an election by the people just a few years ago. They can be seen as breeders in many urban settings, but we also got see a handful of migrants as they made their way through the desert-scape.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

WHITE-THROATED KINGFISHER (*Halcyon smyrnensis smyrnensis*) – Great views at the JBO on day one.

PIED KINGFISHER (*Ceryle rudis rudis*) – IBRCE, North Beach, and more.

Meropidae (Bee-eaters)

GREEN BEE-EATER (ARABIAN) (*Merops orientalis cyanophrys*) – One of the gorgeous resident species here, and these charismatic and confiding birds were a most welcome splash of obscenely bright color in the desert. Great birds. [E]

BLUE-CHEEKED BEE-EATER (*Merops persicus*) – This trip was on the early side of their migration window, and so it was a non-guaranteed treat when Eran spotted five of these flying over us at the IBRCE. They slowly made their way north over our heads. Very cool.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

EURASIAN WRYNECK (*Jynx torquilla torquilla*) – We had these at Shezaf and in the desert at Ovda and HaMeishar, but our best experience was far and away at Ofira Park, where we got to see them hopping around at close range, and even got to see a couple bickering with each other as they vied for the best piece of sidewalk to slurp up ants from.

SYRIAN WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos syriacus*) – Nice views in some conifers at Sde Boker!

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

LESSER KESTREL (*Falco naumanni*) – Several spots, including Yotvata and HaMeishar. Excellent studies of several age/sex combinations, and we even saw the pale toenails that are diagnostic field marks when separating it from the very similar Eurasian Kestrel.

EURASIAN KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*) – Quite few scattered throughout.

PEREGRINE FALCON (BARBARY) (*Falco peregrinus pelegrinoides*) – Great view at Wadi Kalya and Holland Park. This was recently lumped back into a subspecies of Peregrine Falcon by Clements/eBird, but some authorities still consider it its own species: Barbary Falcon.

Psittaculidae (Old World Parrots)

ROSE-RINGED PARAKEET (*Psittacula krameri*) – Seen almost every day of the tour. [I]

Laniidae (Shrikes)

GREAT GRAY SHRIKE (ARABIAN) (*Lanius excubitor aucheri*) – Some nice views over the first couple of days, then seen in the north on one day.

MASKED SHRIKE (*Lanius nubicus*) – Good views of this striking species at Ofira Park. This is one that comes through Israel in very large numbers later in the spring, and they seemed a bit later than usual to get going this year, not really hitting hard until April.

WOODCHAT SHRIKE (*Lanius senator*) – Several of these good looking shrikes, scattered between Massada, Yotvata, Qetura, and Har Amasa.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

EURASIAN JAY (*Garrulus glandarius*) – Stellar point blank views at the blind at the JBOP.

EURASIAN JACKDAW (*Corvus monedula*) – Lots around the Kalya fields.

HOUSE CROW (*Corvus splendens*) – Abundant in Eilat, where they are an introduced nuisance (almost assuredly via ships going into either Aqaba or Eilat) that has now grown beyond man's ability to control them. [I]

HOODED CROW (*Corvus cornix*) – The common crow in most of the north.

BROWN-NECKED RAVEN (*Corvus ruficollis*) – The expected raven through most of the country.

FAN-TAILED RAVEN (*Corvus rhipidurus*) – What a bizarrely shaped corvid! This short-tailed, broad-winged raven is, in Israel, only regularly found in the mountains adjacent to the Dead Sea, where we had some good experiences, including a couple aggressively chasing around Common and Brown-necked Ravens at Wadi Kalya.

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax laurencei*) – A pair flew by us at Wadi Kalya, which was a surprise. They are VERY sparsely distributed through the country as breeders, though the difficulty inherent in differentiating them from Brown-necked Raven probably occludes the abundance of wanderers.

Alaudidae (Larks)

DESERT LARK (*Ammomanes deserti*) – Several places, including good views in the Eilat Mountains.

GREATER SHORT-TOED LARK (*Calandrella brachydactyla*) – Yotvata, Nitzana, and a huge flock (more than 400) at the verdant HaMeishar Plains.
BIMACULATED LARK (*Melanocorypha bimaculata*) – A flock of around ten of these distinctive short-tailed, bulky larks flew calling by us at HaMeishar, though they put down a quarter mile away and we never saw them again.
ORIENTAL SKYLARK (*Alauda gulgula*) – We heard one of these flying around as we walked the fields at Yotvata looking for larks (including this species) and pipits, but we never did lay eyes on it for sure. [∗]
CRESTED LARK (*Galerida cristata*) – Every day. These songsters have a truly impressive vocal array, and more than once threw us for a loop by performing very convincing renditions of other species. They also look pretty darn cool- not a bad bird to have around you most of the time.

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

BANK SWALLOW (*Riparia riparia*) – K19 and Grofit.

ROCK MARTIN (PALE CRAG-MARTIN) (*Ptyonoprogne fuligula obsoleta*) – Fairly common breeder in rocky terrain.

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*) – We saw these abundant migrants every day except the last.

RED-RUMPED SWALLOW (*Cecropis daurica*) – These big swallows may seem similar to Barn Swallows, but they are very large in comparison, legitimately dwarfing their smaller congener.

COMMON HOUSE-MARTIN (*Delichon urbicum*) – Another common migrant, we even saw these migrating through the Eilat Mountains.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

GREAT TIT (GREAT) (*Parus major terraesanctae*) – Cracking views at the feeders at the JBO.

Remizidae (Penduline-Tits)

EURASIAN PENDULINE-TIT (*Remiz pendulinus*) – We heard these at a reed-bed near the Dead Sea, and got some fleeting glimpses, and then saw three of them at Holland Park a couple of days later, though they also played a bit of hard to get here as well.

Pycnonotidae (Bulbuls)

WHITE-SPECTACLED BULBUL (*Pycnonotus xanthopygos*) – Another every day bird, and perhaps the most widespread, as it could be found in almost every single habitat. Charismatic, confiding, and sometimes even annoying. They often sound the alarm warning all the other local birds of approaching potential danger. [E]

Scotocercidae (Bush Warblers and Allies)

SCRUB WARBLER (*Scotocerca inquieta*) – A skulker at Ovda was seen by most, and heard by all, from fairly close range, and it was also heard at Shezaf and Har Amasa.

Phylloscopidae (Leaf Warblers)

EASTERN BONELLI'S WARBLER (*Phylloscopus orientalis*) – This gray and green *Phylloscopus* with yellow wing edgings was very familiar to us by the end of the tour.

COMMON CHIFFCHAFF (*Phylloscopus collybita*) – Abundant, and found anywhere there was a live leaf.

Acrocephalidae (Reed Warblers and Allies)

EASTERN OLIVACEOUS WARBLER (*Iduna pallida*) – We finally connected with this usually common species in some tamarisks along the stream at Ovdar Gorge. They were another late arriver this year.

SEDGE WARBLER (*Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*) – Good dusk views of several individuals at K19 was our best experience.

EURASIAN REED WARBLER (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) – K19 and Yotvata provided our best views.

CLAMOROUS REED WARBLER (CLAMOROUS) (*Acrocephalus stentoreus levantinus*) – These are found from central Israel and north, and we had a great experience with a very vocal and conspicuous individual or two around the Dead Sea.

Locustellidae (Grassbirds and Allies)

SAVIT'S WARBLER (*Locustella luscinioides*) – Walking around the ground in the palm plantation near K20, and also walking around the ground under the reeds at K19. We also had a lot of them, including several giving that bizarre insect-like song of theirs in the wheat field at Yotvata.

Cisticolidae (Cisticolas and Allies)

GRACEFUL PRINIA (*Prinia gracilis*) – Ever-present in a wide array of habitats.

Sylviidae (Sylviid Warblers)

EURASIAN BLACKCAP (*Sylvia atricapilla*) – This big, distinctive, *Sylvia* warbler was common throughout.

LESSER WHITETHROAT (*Sylvia curruca*) – The most common *Sylvia* warbler of the tour by far, they move through southern Israel in very large numbers. We also got to see a couple being banded at the JBO on our first morning.

ARABIAN WARBLER (*Sylvia leucomelaena*) – A male was seen briefly at Shezaf, before it then defaulted to the typical behavior of the species of vanishing into thin air. [E]

EASTERN ORPHEAN WARBLER (*Sylvia crassirostris*) – A female at Shezaf and then also at Har Amasa.

CYPRUS WARBLER (*Sylvia melanothorax*) – An incredible experience with this usually shy species in Wadi Kalya. We got great views of a male in the tullyweed as it "sang" its head off. The song is really a jumble of chatters, as with most *Sylvia* species. It was also chipping with its metallic call note frequently, which is what initially drew our attention to it. A great experience with this one.

RUEPPELL'S WARBLER (*Sylvia ruppeli*) – A good spring for them, and we had several excursions where we encountered multiple individuals, often with a few in a single flowering bush. The striking face pattern of the males makes them perhaps the most distinctive of the *Sylvia* warblers, and also one of the most desired.

SUBALPINE WARBLER (*Sylvia cantillans*) – A great year for these in the Arava Valley, and we connected with at least three males at three different locations. Our most satisfying looks were at the red-flowering *Retama* Caper bush at Holland Park, a classic host plant for the species in the region, though a very threatened (at one point thought extinct) one.

SARDINIAN WARBLER (*Sylvia melanocephala*) – Wadi Kalya and Shezaf produced our best views of the species.

GREATER WHITETHROAT (*Sylvia communis*) – Good views on day one (including in the hand) were our only encounter with this species.

SPECTACLED WARBLER (*Sylvia conspicillata*) – A good experience with these singing on territory at Har Amasa.

Leiothrichidae (Laughingthrushes and Allies)

ARABIAN BABBLER (*Turdoides squamiceps squamiceps*) – Holland Park, Ovdar Gorge, and Nitzana all produced good experiences with this species. Their social structure and curiosity makes them fascinating and delightful birds to observe. [E]

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

BLACK SCRUB-ROBIN (*Cercotrichas podobe*) – A great surprise was a pair of these at Samar. They used to be very highly sought after and dreamt of for Western Palearctic listers visiting Israel. While still highly desired, they have become less of a mythical bird over the last couple of years, as there has been an uptick in their occurrence in southern Israel, but we still counted ourselves quite fortunate to run into this unique species!

EUROPEAN ROBIN (*Erithacus rubecula*) – We had at least three encounters with these iconic European migrants. Our best were on day one at the IBRCE, and then at a desert Acacia grove north of Eilat.

COMMON NIGHTINGALE (*Luscinia megarhynchos*) – Excellent point-blank views of a very contrasty individual near K20.

BLUETHROAT (*Luscinia svecica*) – We saw these every day we were in the Eilat area, including lingering wintering birds at the IBRCE, and several migrants in the Yotvata northern wheat field.

COMMON REDSTART (COMMON) (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus phoenicurus*) – Ovdar gorge.

COMMON REDSTART (EHRENBERG'S) (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus samamensis*) – We encountered this subspecies of Common Redstart more than the nominate, and had it on four days, in locations ranging from the Dead Sea, to the desert north of Eilat, to Har Amasa.

BLACK REDSTART (EASTERN) (*Phoenicurus ochruros semirufus*) – Dead Sea and Har Amasa.

BLUE ROCK-THRUSH (*Monticola solitarius*) – We missed these in the desert, but got great views of both males and females in their rocky breeding habitat at Har Amasa.

EUROPEAN STONECHAT (*Saxicola rubicola rubicola*) – A lingering one was at the Neot Smadar fields, and then we also had them in the Negev around Nitzana.

SIBERIAN STONECHAT (CASPIAN) (*Saxicola maurus hemprichii*) – A beautiful male at the Neot Smadar fields.

BLACKSTART (*Cercomela melanura*) – This confiding and common species is one of the signature species of the hard habitats in this part of the world. We heard its distinctively scratchy song and saw its tail flaring antics on the majority of our days in country.

WHITE-CROWNED WHEATEAR (*Oenanthe leucopyga ernesti*) – These monochrome wheatears (also called White-tailed Wheatear, perhaps a better name for the species) have plumage that is as stark as the remote and unforgiving habitats where they are resident. We had them at both Wadi Salvador and Wadi Shaharut.

NORTHERN WHEATEAR (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) – We had migrants in many places, including over 25 in the northern fields at Yotvata.

FINSCH'S WHEATEAR (*Oenanthe finschii finschii*) – We had a female at Kfar Adumim, but then enjoyed several males at Har Amasa.

BLACK-EARED WHEATEAR (*Oenanthe hispanica*) – We saw this migrant species well at Grofit and at Har Amasa.

DESERT WHEATEAR (*Oenanthe deserti*) – It was a tough year for them in the deserts around Eilat, perhaps because of the widespread greening from the winter rains, so we gratefully welcomed into our lives a migrant male who stopped to rest on a dike at the IBRCE salt pannes- a very atypical place to see the species.

ISABELLINE WHEATEAR (*Oenanthe isabellina*) – Common in appropriate habitat, though we encountered few of them around the immediate Eilat area. We had prolonged, good, and instructive views at Kalya in the Dead Sea, at Yotvata, and then in the Nitzana area.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

SONG THRUSH (*Turdus philomelos*) – One of these was hiding deep in an Acacia tree at Kfar Adumim. It was difficult to see even when it was taking up much of the scope field.

EURASIAN BLACKBIRD (*Turdus merula*) – Several of these at the JBO.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

COMMON MYNA (*Acridotheres tristis*) – Introduced to the region, and common in the north (but still decidedly rare south of Ramon Crater). [I]

TRISTRAM'S STARLING (*Onychognathus tristramii*) – Very common in the Dead Sea region, including some obscenely obliging individuals. [E]

Nectariniidae (Sunbirds and Spiderhunters)

PALESTINE SUNBIRD (PALESTINE) (*Cinnyris osea osea*) – Seen almost every day of the tour. The males are really eye-popping when the sun hits them just so. [E]

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

WESTERN YELLOW WAGTAIL (*Motacilla flava*) – There were a couple of days when one or more of the Yellow Wagtails we encountered couldn't be identified to subspecies.

WESTERN YELLOW WAGTAIL (THUNBERGI) (*Motacilla flava thunbergi*) – Really nice views of a male on the dike at K19 during our evening there.

WESTERN YELLOW WAGTAIL (FLAVA) (*Motacilla flava flava*) – Several days, including the aforementioned evening at K19, and in the large flock of wagtails at Ovda.

WESTERN YELLOW WAGTAIL (FELDEGG) (*Motacilla flava feldegg*) – This smart-looking, black-headed taxon is the most common of the Western Yellow Wagtails that pass through southern Israel.

CITRINE WAGTAIL (*Motacilla citreola*) – A nice male during our evening at K19.

WHITE WAGTAIL (WHITE-FACED) (*Motacilla alba alba/dukhunensis*) – Abundant and widespread.

RICHARD'S PIPIT (*Anthus richardi*) – Two of these huge, harsh-voiced, pipits were an unexpected surprise at the Neot Smadar fields. We could even see their very long hind toes through the scope when they flew up and perched in the Acacias.

TAWNY PIPIT (*Anthus campestris*) – Our first were halfway through the tour at Yotvata, but then we encountered the species every day for the rest of the tour.

MEADOW PIPIT (*Anthus pratensis*) – We had these flying around and calling at both Yotvata and Neot Smadar, though we never got good on-the-ground views.

TREE PIPIT (*Anthus trivialis*) – Surprisingly, Neot Smadar was the only place we saw this species, which is usually a common migrant in the Arava at this time of year.

RED-THROATED PIPIT (*Anthus cervinus*) – Kalya Fields, Yotvata, and Neot Smadar. Often the most common pipit encountered, as they both winter and pass through in large numbers.

WATER PIPIT (*Anthus spinoletta*) – We first saw one between North Beach and the IBRCE, and then we had more prolonged views at Yotvata.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

COMMON CHAFFINCH (*Fringilla coelebs*) – Two females were around the pond at the JBO.

TRUMPETER FINCH (*Bucanetes githagineus*) – Wadi Kalya was the only spot we encountered the species. A pair landed on the rocks near us and we got to ogle them for a while before they continued on their way. What a bill and face on the male!

DESERT FINCH (*Rhodospiza obsoleta*) – Anything with "desert" in the name is sought after, but these would be cool even with a different name. We had these at both Yotvata and near Grofit.

EUROPEAN GREENFINCH (*Chloris chloris*) – On at least five days, though the best views were certainly at the JBO feeders and pond.

Emberizidae (Old World Buntings)

CORN BUNTING (*Emberiza calandra*) – Yotvata and Neot Smadar.

CRETZSCHMAR'S BUNTING (*Emberiza caesia*) – Great views at Kfar Adumim, Ofira Park, and Har Amasa.

STRIOLATED BUNTING (*Emberiza striolata striolata*) – This was the reason for hike up Wadi Salvadora, and it was a great success! Formerly considered conspecific with the North African resident House Bunting, Striolated Bunting is only found in rocky habitats from East Africa through the Arabian Peninsula and the Middle East (almost to western India).

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus hufufae*) – Common in the expected places.

SPANISH SPARROW (*Passer hispaniolensis*) – Abundant and widespread, including a large flock of migrants swirling all around at Yotvata.

DEAD SEA SPARROW (DEAD SEA) (*Passer moabiticus moabiticus*) – Excellent studies of a male around some nest sites in the southern Dead Sea.

[E]

ROCK SPARROW (*Petronia petronia puteicola*) – Nice scope views of a couple of calling individuals at Har Amasa.

PALE ROCKFINCH (*Carpospiza brachydactyla*) – We had to walk a little ways, but we did eventually get good scope views for all of these desert-dwellers in the Ovda Valley.

Estrildidae (Waxbills and Allies)

INDIAN SILVERBILL (*Euodice malabarica*) – We had a small flock of these introduced estrildids around K20. [I]

MAMMALS

CAPE HARE (*Lepus capensis*) – Holland Park, and Shaharut.

GOLDEN SPINY MOUSE (*Acomys russatus*) – Wendy pointed out one of these as we were driving in the southern Dead Sea, and a couple of other folks were able to get on it as well.

RED FOX (*Vulpes vulpes*) – One of these was traipsing through the Ovda Valley.

SYRIAN JACKAL (*Canis aureus syriacus*) – Excellent views of a couple of them along the edge of the impoundment (seemingly hunting moorhens) at K19. We also had a wonderful auditory experience with them as darkness fell a bit later on.

DORCAS GAZELLE (*Gazella dorcas*) – On each of the final three days of the tour. On Mandatory Road in Nitzana they were really bouncing as they galloped away from us. Pogo sticks have nothing on these beasts!

MOUNTAIN GAZELLE (*Gazella gazella*) – We had these northern counterparts to the prior species grazing at Kfar Adumim and then bounding along through the fields at Kalya.

NUBIAN IBEX (*Capra ibex nubiana*) – Our best views of these globally threatened montane goats were in the Eilat Mountains. They've got some horns on them indeed.

Herps

ROUGH-TAIL ROCK AGAMA (*Laudakia stellio*) – Ezuz and Har Amasa.

SNAKE-EYED LIZARD (*Ophisops elegans*) – Scampering through the low green grass at Har Amasa. They seemed to be especially interested in the little green dot.

SPUR-THIGHED (GREEK) TORTOISE (*Testudo graeca*) – Another great herp at Har Amasa.

Other Creatures of Interest

DEATHSTALKER SCORPION (*Leiurus quinquestratus*) – For the second year in a row we encountered one of these at Har Amasa.

DWARF FAT-TAILED SCORPION (*Orthochirus scrobiculosus negebensis*) – One of these well-named scorpions was a very cool pick-up on our final morning in Nitzana.

PAINTED LADY (*Vanessa cardui*) – An incredible irruption of them in the region this year, due to the strong rains that led to a mind-boggling desert bloom. We had thousands or tens of thousands of them moving north on a couple of days, and our day in HaMeishar Plains was memorable for the number of caterpillars and chrysalises we found as well. It was yet another really magical migration experience, even if it wasn't avian!

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Other species of interest seen but not included on the above checklist were:

Baluch Rock Gecko (Shezaf Nature Reserve)

Desert Mantis (3+ of these cryptic insects at Holland Park)

Lionfish (Taking shelter in some seaweed just off shore at North Beach- no immersion necessary for us!)

Vagrant Emperor (The common dragonfly we saw all over)

Egyptian Gobi (The amorous grasshoppers stacked on each other in the Acacia grove on our Ovda Valley day)

Jumping-Spider sp. (At Har Amasa, a stunning individual which so far has defied identification by us)

Totals for the tour: 195 bird taxa and 7 mammal taxa