

Weekend in Israel, February 2018

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A month or so earlier, my younger travelling companion, now at the grand age of nine, announced a list of five places in the world she wanted to visit – Hawaii, Death Valley, the Grand Canyon, the Eiffel Tower and the Dead Sea. With just a weekend to spare, the western side of America seemed a little extravagant and I really didn't have any real desire to visit Paris, so there it was, a trip to Israel on the cards. With just 2.5 days in the country, the basic idea of this mini trip, beyond obviously a short swim in the Dead Sea for the little one, was just to have an excellent weekend's birding, my only real targets being Black Bush Robin and a male Dead Sea Sparrow, the first of which I last saw in Sudan many years ago, the latter of which two dozen years since last encountering a male.

In the event, an excellent weekend it turned out to be, a total of 97 species seen, including both the targets, plus an excellent range of other birds, including a Brown Booby, an Eastern Imperial Eagle, a Saker, a couple of Hooded Wheatears, several dozen Sinai Rosefinches and a couple of Desert Finches. Also three new species of butterfly for me, a bonus indeed. 16 February. Eilat & Southern Arava Valley.

Having arrived in Eilat well after dark the evening before, so was up at dawn to begin the explorations. A couple of hours before the car rental opened, so started the day with a stroll down to Eilat seafront (North Beach). A couple of Tristram's Starlings flying over, plus a mix of House Crows, Laughing Doves, Ring-necked Parakeets and Spectacled Bulbuls around the palms. On the sea and beach, things were even better – a nice bunch of White-eyed Gulls lounging about on buoys, at least 35 sitting just off the beach, plus one Western Reef Heron near the Jordanian border, one Pied Kingfisher where a drainage canal enters the sea and, best of the lot, one Brown Booby that flew in from Jordanian waters, circled round a few times, did a plunge dive, then flew out into the Gulf of Aqaba to disappear beyond tankers offshore. Picked the car up at 8.00 a.m., then barely 15 minutes later was arriving at the spectacular desertscapes surrounding Amram's Pillars. White-crowned Black Wheatears and Desert Larks almost immediately, then a couple of Sand Partridge scuttling up a rocky slope. Three hundred metres short of the end of the road, I did a double take – in a small wadi where wild camping is permitted, a small flock of passerines hopping about at the base of a low cliff. Sat myself down in the sand, the flock almost at my feet, more birds soon flitting down from the sides of the wadi. What a glorious treat, two dozen Sinai Rosefinches hopping all over the place, deep red males fortunately in no short supply. In amongst, several dainty Blackstarts, occasional Desert Larks coming in and out, plus a couple of White-crowned Black Wheatears too. Half an hour with these, a few Sand Partridge also trooping through, then decided to explore the upper wadi – nice sandstone formations, contorted reds, but bar a few Rock Martins and a Steppe Eagle hugging a higher peak, little was happening. Checked the flat stone desert on route out, a couple more White-crowned Black Wheatears, then a bit of a purple patch in a shallow wadi – not only a most fine Hooded Wheatear perching up, but also a couple of Asian Desert Warblers in loose association. Proving to be a good day so far, I then decided to drive the 40 km or so to Hai Bar Nature Reserve, location of my main target of the trip. Hanging out in clumps of acacia scrub behind the visitor centre, the bird in question was Black Bush Robin, a species that is primarily a spring vagrant to Israel, but with the odd pair lingering – one to two birds have been at Hai Bar for a couple of years now, even breeding last season. At the visitor centre, they pointed out the favoured bushes and then I began to wait, the actual bushes off limits to wandering birders. Palestine Sunbirds zipping about, dozens of Spectacled Bulbuls, hordes of House Sparrows and Laughing Doves too. And I waited, scrutinizing every movement in the bushes, House Sparrows usually responsible. Three Blue-spotted Arabs flitting in the warm sunshine, a new species of butterfly for me. After quite some time, Arabian Babblers appeared, a flock of six active in the undergrowth. And then, just as I began to wonder whether I needed to return at dawn next day, a long-tailed black shape flew from the acacia clump to an isolated acacia tree just adjacent. And there it was, Black Bush Robin in all its glory, not on the ground as I was expecting, but working through the tree a metre or so up. Then it flew to an even denser area of vegetation, settled on the edge for a short while before vanishing inside. Didn't reappear, but I was not complaining!

Decided on spec to head to the nearby Yotvata pivot fields. Southern area pretty arid, found a large flock of Crested Larks and one Skylark, saw a few Spur-winged Lapwings, had a female Hen Harrier drift over, then found two smart Desert Finches, but not that productive overall. Northern areas far greener, a lot of agribusiness underway – still didn't see that much however, tried in vain to find wintering Dead Sea Sparrows, probably mid-afternoon not the best time for these anyhow. Did find another Hen Harrier, a male this time, plus two Isabelline Wheatears, one Lesser Whitethroat, a couple of Siberian Stonechats, several Rock Martins and a flock of nine White Storks drifting north. Stopped in a few random areas of desert thereafter – a couple more Asian Desert Warblers, a Southern Grey Shrike, a couple of Little Green Bee-eaters et al – but then decided to call it a day, heading back to Eilat. Didn't bother trying for the Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse at their traditional site north of Eilat, but did stop at the lagoons at km 19 – a contrast to the desert landscapes of the day, Greater Flamingoes mingling with ducks, Spur-winged Lapwings and other waders. A flock of 60 Slender-billed Gulls made for a good end to the day. Did plan to eat in town, but everything seemed closed for the Sabbath, got some junky food in a supermarket and headed for the hotel. Day one over, Dead Sea planned for next day. 17 February. Northern Arava Valley & Dead Sea.

Pretty long trip from Eilat to the Dead Sea, even longer when excursions into the desert are added. Left at 6.30 a.m., got to the legendary desert hotspots at km 94 about an hour later. A shallow wadi extended either side of the road, low stunted vegetation looking almost lush in comparison to the otherwise arid stone deserts all around.

A Red-rumped Wheatear was wintering in this area this year, but search as I did for a couple of hours, not a sign of it did I see – did manage a Spectacled Warbler and two Asian Desert Warblers though, plus a couple of passing Brown-necked Ravens, a pair of Southern Grey Shrikes, several Desert Wheatears, another Isabelline Wheatear and a scatter of Desert Larks. Also saw Fat Sand Rat here. plus many of their burrows. Better still, my second new butterfly of the trip too, a Desert Bath White. The Dead Sea was calling, so onward we went. Two punctuations for pretty spectacular fly-overs – first a low-flying Saker, then for an even more dramatic Eastern Imperial Eagle, a sub-adult circling low over a hillside. Bit cloudy as we approached the Dead Sea, standing water at the road's edge a sure sign of very recent rain. More Brown-necked Ravens welcoming us as the first salty bays of the Dead Sea appeared below, my travelling companion was positively bubbling as she finally realised what we were approaching, I had not actually mentioned the Dead Sea or why we were in Israel! Plans to visit the northern parts of the Dead Sea however, where I had hoped to connect with Dead Sea Sparrow, were soon about to come to a grinding halt - we encountered a police barricade blocking off the road! Turned out that heavy rain in the Judean mountains had resulted in flash floods that had washed out several sections of road, blocking much of the rest with boulders and debris. Fortunately for the Little One, we could access the Dead Sea beach at Hamme Zohar. Tristram's Starlings, Hooded Crows and Spectacled Bulbuls around the gardens of the resort, one happy traveller floating in the saline waters. No chance of further progress north, birding at Ein Gedi and nearby sites for Dead Sea Sparrow off the agenda. Eventually meandered south again, stopping again at km 94/95 for another quick look round. Quite windy now, so less success, but a random stop some kilometres further south proved better – in a very well-vegetated wadi, found not only a very out-of-place looking Eurasian Robin, but also a Cyprus Warbler, a pair of Little Green Bee-eaters and a flock of Arabian Babblers. Back in Eilat, spend the last hour of the day on North Beach – streams of Black-headed Gulls arriving, plus at least 40 White-eyed Gulls coming to roost on the buoys. Hoped to get to grips with the large gulls, but viewing is directly into the sun in the evening, so soon gave up on that! Still, a very nice sunset over the distant Sinai Peninsula.

18 February. Eilat & Southern Arava Valley.

A final half day, and in many ways the most spectacular few hours of birding on this whole mini-trip. Started with a quick walk round the Israel Bird Ringing Centre – Bluethroat, White-throated Kingfisher, Caspian Stonechat, all pleasant enough, but I was more interested in trying to track down any wintering Dead Sea Sparrows that might be in the area. Spoke to one guy who said there were none on the reserve, but a small flock could sometimes be found along the drainage canals separating the saltpans from the adjacent palm groves. I had already checked these, but decided for another look. Marsh Sandpipers in the shallows, a few Ringed Plovers et al, a few Graceful Warblers in tamarisk. And then a flock of nine small birds flew in, plunging into a thick clump of tamarisk and reed ...looked good. After a few moments, birds shuffling around in the reeds, up popped a small female sparrow with clear supercilium, a female Dead Sea Sparrow! A few moments more, more shuffling in the reeds, up popped another few Dead Sea Sparrows, three or four classic males in their midst, superb. Stayed mostly in the depths of the reeds, but good views nevertheless. And then the flock took to the air, flew overhead and disappeared in the palm groves, end of the sparrows. With success on the Dead Sea Sparrows, my next port of call was back to Amram's Pillars - armed with a small bag of grain, my plan to photograph the Sinai Rosefinches and various other birds. And successful it was, another Hooded Wheatear as I approached the wadi, several Dorcas Gazelles too, then at the wadi itself a pretty amazing spectacle as I scattered a little grain - within moments, as many as 40 Sinai Rosefinches squabbling about, White-crowned Black-Wheatears and Blackstarts in their midst, a half dozen Desert Larks too. With glorious sunshine, the following half hour or so was a pleasure indeed, a Sinai Rosefinch even perching on my foot at one stage! Then, presumably as appetites satisfied, off the birds began to drift, just a few Sinai Rosefinches left by 9.00 a.m. Still some time to spare though, so popped into the pools at km 19 - excellent array again, a hundred of so Greater Flamingoes, several hundred Shovelers and other ducks, a dozen species of wader, highlights being a cracking Greater Sand Plover, quite a few Marsh Sandpipers and a dozen or so Spur-winged Lapwings. Also three Water Pipits and, at the edge of the nearby palms, a pair of Little Green Bee-eaters. And that was that, time was running out. Had a quick potter around Eilat seafront, one Western Reef Heron on the adjacent drainage canal, a few White-eyed Gulls still lingering. Picked up stuff from the hotel and headed out of town. Stopped briefly at the Israel Bird Ringing Centre again, adding four species of butterfly - one Painted Lady, one Large Salmon Arab, five Blue-spotted Arabs and one Desert Bath White, then returned the rental car and headed for the airport. Trip over, White-crowned Black Wheatear the last bird of the trip near the airport. LIST OF SPECIESBIRDS Shelduck. 40+ at IBRC, upward of 60 on saltworks at km 19. Pintail. Six at IBRC, 40+ on the freshwater pool at km 19. Shoveler. 250+ on the freshwater pool at km 19. Teal. 30+ on the freshwater pool at km 19. Common Pochard. 35+ on a freshwater pool south of the Dead Sea. Sand Partridge. A total of 21 seen in the Amram's Pillar area (one pair, three coveys of 5-7 individuals). Little Grebe. 15+ at IBRC, 10+ on the freshwater pool at km 19, eight near the Dead Sea. Great Crested Grebe. One off North Beach, Eilat. Brown Booby. One off North Beach, Eilat. Great Cormorant. About 15 off North Beach, 25+ at IBRC, 60+ on the freshwater pool at km 19. Little Egret. One+ at IBRC, four on the freshwater pool at km 19. Western Reef Heron. One on North Beach, Eilat.

Great White Egret. A total of five on the freshwater pool at km 19. Grey Heron. Two at Eilat, several at IBRC, 10+ on the freshwater pool at km 19. White Stork. Nine migrating north at Yotvata. Greater Flamingo. 45+ at IBRC, 180+ on saltworks at km 19. Osprey. One near Yotvata. Eastern Imperial Eagle. One over the road somewhere near km 120. Steppe Eagle. One at Amram's Pillars.

Marsh Harrier. Two on the freshwater pool at km 19, at least three around a pool at the south of the Dead Sea. Hen Harrier. Two at Yotvata.

Long-legged Buzzard. A pair near Amram's Pillars.

Steppe Buzzard. One at Amram's Pillars, a pair near km 19.

Sparrowhawk. One at km 19.

Common Kestrel. One at Yotvata, one at km 95, one near the Dead Sea. Saker. One over the road somewhere near km 110. Moorhen. Two at IBRC.

Coot. Abundant on freshwater pools near the Dead Sea, 40+ at IBRC, 100+ on the freshwater pool at km 19.

Black-winged Stilt. 80+ at IBRC and nearby channels, 70+ on saltworks at km 19. Ringed Plover. 25+ at IBRC and nearby channels, 20+ on saltworks at km 19. Greater Sand Plover. One on saltworks at km 19. Spur-winged Lapwing. 20+ at IBRC and nearby channels, 25+ on saltworks at km 19, six at Yotvata.

Dunlin. Five on saltworks at km 19. Little Stint. Three on saltworks at km 19. Green Sandpiper. Four at IBRC and nearby channels, three on saltworks at km 19. Common Sandpiper. one on North Beach, one at IBRC. Common Redshank. 60+ at IBRC and nearby channels, 35+ on saltworks at km 19. Spotted Redshank. One at IBRC. Greenshank. Six on saltworks at km 19. Marsh Sandpiper. Three at IBRC, five on saltworks at km 19. Ruff. 60+ at IBRC and nearby channels, 35+ on saltworks at km 19. Black-headed Gull. 50+ North Beach (evening), 150+ at IBRC, 120+ on saltworks at km 19. Slender-billed Gull. 60+ at IBRC and nearby channels, 10+ on saltworks at km 19. Baltic Gull. Three on North Beach. Caspian Gull. One on North Beach. White-eyed Gull. From 25-40 daily on North Beach. Rock Dove. Abundant. Collared Dove. Widespread in cultivated areas, especially near km 19 cowsheds.

Laughing Dove. Common in the Eilat area and other cultivated areas. Pallid Swift. 25+ near Amram's Pillars. Hoopoe. One in Eilat city, one IBRC, one Yotvata. White-throated Kingfisher. One IBRC. Pied Kingfisher. One on North Beach, Eilat. Little Green Bee-eater. Two km 19, two km 70, two km 90. Ring-necked Parakeet. Quite common along the seafront in Eilat. Skylark. One Yotvata. Crested Lark. 35+ Yotvata, six km 94. Desert Lark. A total of 16 Amram's Pillars, two km 70, four km 93. Rock Martin. Two Eilat, five Amram's Pillars, two km 70, four km 93, five at the Dead Sea. House Martin. One IBRC. Barn Swallow. Up to 45 at IBRC. Tawny Pipit. One km 94. Water Pipit. One in channels near IBRC, four on saltworks at km 19. White Wagtail. Common in Eilat city, 30+ at IBRC, 25+ around pools at km 19. Black Bush Robin. One Hai Bar. Eurasian Robin. One km 90. Bluethroat. One IBRC, one km 70. Black Redstart. One Hai Bar. Isabelline Wheatear. Two Yotvata, one km 94. Hooded Wheatear. Two near Amram's Pillars (one at bottom of the wadi, one on the open flat plains). White-crowned Black Wheatear. A total of 11 around Amram's Pillars, two in the Eilat Mountains. Desert Wheatear. Three km 94. Blackstart. At least 11 at Amram's Pillars, one at km 70, two at km 95, one at the Dead Sea. Siberian Stonechat. One at km 19, two at Yotvata. Caspian Stonechat. One at IBRC. Scrub Warbler. One at Amram's Pillars. Graceful Prinia. Several in scrubby areas near Eilat, five at IBRC, six at Yotvata, two at km 70, two at the Dead Sea. Lesser Whitethroat. One at Yotvata. Sardinian Warbler. Two at the IBRC, one at Yotvata. Cyprus Warbler. One at km 90.

Spectacled Warbler. One at km 94.

Asian Desert Warbler. Two near Amram's Pillars, four at km 94.

Clamorous Reed Warbler. Common in reeds around a freshwater pool just south of the Dead Sea.

Chiffchaff. Common in Eilat city, at the IBRC, at Hai Bar and at Yotvata. Southern Grey Shrike. One Amram's Pillars, one km 70, two km 93, two km 94. Spectacled Bulbul. Common in Eilat city, at the IBRC, at Hai Bar, at Yotvata and around resorts by the Dead Sea. Palestine Sunbird. Three at Hai Bar.

Arabian Babbler. Six at Hai Bar, five at km 90.

Hooded Crow. Several around resorts by the Dead Sea. Brown-necked Raven. Two km 93, four km 95, two by the Dead Sea. House Crow. Abundant in Eilat.

Tristram's Starling. 20+ in Eilat city, two at the IBRC, 35+ around resorts by the Dead Sea. House Sparrow. Abundant in many inhabited/cultivated area, including Eilat, the IBRC, Yotvata and the Dead Sea. Spanish Sparrow. 40+ at IBRC. Dead Sea Sparrow. Nine along a channel near the IBRC.

Sinai Rosefinch. 25 and 40+ on the two visits to Amram's Pillars. Desert Finch. Two at Yotvata. MAMMALS Dorcas Gazelle. Six at Amram's Pillars, three near km 70. Fat Sand Rat. One at km 93, many more burrows seen. BUTTERFLIES Painted Lady. One at IBRC.

Large Salmon Arab. One at IBRC.

Blue-spotted Arab. Six at IBRC, two at Hai Bar.

Desert Bath White. One at IBRC, one at km 94.