

Israel

22 December – 4 January 2010

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Introduction

Due to the 25th wedding anniversary of our parents, a family holiday was planned during the Christmas school break. Together with our parents (of course), my sister and her boyfriend and the two of us, we visited Israel for two weeks, while driving around in our hired car through the country. An itinerary is given below. Since we are both fanatic birdwatchers, we hoped to get the chance do some birdwatching, but we also had to deal with the wants of the others. Although it was not a birding trip, we cannot complain about the amount of birds and species we found. We left Israel with several target birds unseen, but we're satisfied with the birds we have found during this family trip. And we kept enough 'want-to-see' species in Israel to visit it an other time, which we will definitely do in the future. The birds we did not find are a good reason to go back one day! Our main disappointment was the small amount of desert species we found, like larks and sandgrouses. Winter is not the best time for those birds, and the fact that it had rained the days before our visit did not contribute to a convenient search for those birds. Reliable spots are normally located near a drinking pool, but due to the rain those spots were not necessary for the birds we were looking for. We tried to do our best, but the weather is still one of the uncontrolled factors during a holiday. The good thing is that we had wonderful warm and sunny days when we were there.

Loads of birds we just saw along the road, while travelling, but some of the visited sites are worth mentioning, so below the main visited sites are briefly described. After that our birdlist, consisting of 155 species, is given with a brief description of the location.

For our preparation we used the trip reports from www.travellingbirder.com and we bought "Finding Birds in Israel" by Dave Gosney. Although this booklet from 1996 is quite often outdated, and the maps are not always reliable anymore, it gave us a good overview of interesting birding places to visit. We took "Birds of the Middle East" from Porter *et al.* with us, but the Collins bird guide (which we also took with us) ought to be sufficient.

We added several pictures in this report. More can be found on our website http://www.pbase.com/ruben_jorrit/israel_20102011. For more detailed information you can always contact us at rubenvlot@gmail.com.

Itinerary

22-12	Arrival in Tel Aviv, travel to Jerusalem.
23-12	Cultural visits in Old City Centre, Jerusalem
24-12	Cultural visits in modern Jerusalem.
25-12	Cultural visits in Old City Centre and Mountain of Olives, Jerusalem.
26-12	Travel from Jerusalem to Mashabei Sade kibbutz, via Urim and Yeroham Lake
27-12	Travel from Mashabei Sade kibbutz to kibbutz Eilat, via Ein Avedat NP.
28-12	Visiting the Eilat Mountains the saltpans around Eilat and snorkeling in the Red Sea.
29-12	Visiting the saltpans north of Eilat, Amram's pillars and Timba Park.
30-12	Travel from Eilat to Sea of Galilee, via Massade, the Dead Sea and Ein Gedi.
31-12	Visiting Nazareth and several villages around Sea of Galilee.
01-01	Driving around at Golan Heights and visiting Tel Dan NP and Hula NP.
02-01	Visiting Safed and southern Golan Heights.
03-01	Travel from Sea of Galilee to Tel Aviv, via Ma'agan Mikhael and Caesarea.
04-01	Travel from Tel Aviv to Amsterdam.

Visited Places

Jerusalem

A cultural must-visit when travelling to Israel, but for birds it is not the best location of course. Still the parks can give you a good first birding experience of Israel. Palestine Sunbirds, Syrian Woodpeckers, White-spectacled Bulbuls, etc... all birds which you can also find a lot somewhere else, but which are still worth looking for during the first days.

Urim

About 35km west of Be'er Sheva, the fields around Urim should be a good place to see raptors in winter according to Gosney. We were a bit disappointed, but still we had good numbers of Black Kites and several nice views of Imperial Eagles. Because of the warmth the fields were difficult to scan for Sandgrouses and Steppe Lapwings, so an early morning visit is recommended.

Yeroham Lake

A site which we did not find often in trip reports. A Dutch birdwatcher noticed it, and it definitely was worth a visit. This lake in a very dry area, along route 225 (south east of Be'er Sheva) attracts many birds. Our main target here was the Purple Swamphen *madagascariensis*, which we easily found at the east side of the lake. It was also good for adding some wildfowl to our Israel birding list. Back home we found out that we had our rarest sighting of the trip here, with three passing Pallid Swifts. We didn't know the rare appearance of this species in Israel in winter at that moment.

Ein Avedat

Not only good for the birds, but also for its natural beauty a must-visit. Along the road downwards we found our first desert species like Blackstart, Desert Lark, Scrub Warbler, Mourning Wheatear. The gorge at the end of the road (take the northern entrance of the National Park) is beautiful, and gives the opportunity to for a short walk. Highlight was the show of two Bonelli's Eagles which gave splendid views flying in the gorge.

Eilat Mountains

The main place we visited in the mountains is En Netaphim, which is described by Gosney as a good spot for Sinai Rosefinch. Unfortunately we had total silence during our visit. A passing Desert Finch and the common Tristram's Starlings were the only birds we found in this desolate area. The day after we tried to find Sinai Rosefinch near Amram's Pillars, just north of Eilat along route 90, but again we failed. We could add Hooded Wheatear to our list though.

Further north, Timna Park is a nice National Park, located along route 90 north of Eilat. The rock formations are

amazing, but for birds it is rather quite. Several Wheatears (Mourning and White-crowned) and confiding Desert Larks were found.

Salt pans near Eilat airport Those salt pans are located north of North Beach. Good spot for waders. The birdwatching park at the northside looks promising and during the migration peak it is most probably like heaven for birdwatchers with all kinds of passerines. In winter it seemed to be very quiet.

Flamingo viewpoint Along route 90, near K19/K20, a nice observation shed is built to have a good overview over the salt pans which are filled with Flamingoes. To reach it, just follow the signs to the Jordan border, en turn left just in front of a date palm plant. Follow this stony road for several kms and you will find the flamingo viewpoint. Both sides of this road looks quite promising for larks and other desert species, but again it seemed to be quiet.

North Beach, Eilat During the day it is very busy with 'normal' tourists, so an early morning visit is recommended. We easily found Wit-eyed Gull and Western Reef Egret (both morphs) up there which both gave excellent views. It took a while to find a Striated Heron, but it is probably the most reliable spot to find one, and finally we did. We visited it also at the end of the afternoon. We found the first two species again, but they did not give very good views by that time.

Ein Gedi Scan the fences along the road from Eilat to the northern part of the Dead Sea. It resulted in our only Little Green Bee-eaters (besides a very quick sighting from the driving car just west of Eilat by one of us). We found several birds along the route, and there are quiet a lot possibilities to park the car at the side of the road to have a better look. It's worth it, those birds are amazing! Ein Gedi itself was overcrowded with people, mostly students. Don't know whether this is normal, if so, an early morning visit could be recommended. Some Fan-tailed Ravens were seen, but they're more numerous around Massada, which is about 10km south of Ein Gedi. The first White-breasted Kingfishers were found here while driving north, but later they seemed very easy in northern Israel.

Sea of Galilee Not special for birds, although we did found here our only Pygmy Cormorants and Silverbills. Definite highlights here were the few Pallas' Gulls flying along the shoreline. We had several birds, but all just flying along. We scanned all groups of gulls on the beach, but never a Pallas' Gull was with them unfortunately. Just scan all gulls, and you will immediately see it when a Pallas' Gull is passing your bino view.

Golan Heights

This mountain plateau, bordering with Syria as well as Lebanon, often looks quite deteriorated, with all the signs for landmines, abandoned villages and military vehicles. But birds don't mind those circumstances, so it is worth a visit. Unfortunately we visited it on a very misty day, so we did not find any birds besides a pair of Black Francolins. The plan was to visit Mt. Hermon, but due to the thick mist layer we decided not to do so because we couldn't see a thing and the entrance fee is quite high. During a short stop along the road we were lucky to find a Sombre Tit, Rock Nuthatch and Rock Bunting though.

The day after we drove around at the southern parts of the Golan Heights, which resulted in a Griffon Vulture, Little Swifts, lots of Long-legged Buzzard and two Oriental Skylarks. We hoped to visit Mt. Hermon this day, but the rest of the family had other plans, so we had to deal with that. Better next time.

Hula NP

Just south of Qiryat Shemona, and north of the Sea of Galilee. A must-visit in winter, just because of the huge amount of Cranes wintering in the fields, making their wonderful noise! Amazing views of thousands of Cranes flying over and just foraging in the fields at very close range. In addition all three kingfishers are common here, Clamorous Reed Warbler was easily found and Red-throated Pipits, White Pelicans and Spotted Eagles gave good views. A Lanner Falcon completed our afternoon visit in Hula NP.

Ma'agan Mikhael

Some good fishponds for birding are located along route 2 (but be aware that you can only access them by the parallel road, route 4). All three kingfishers were present and especially Pied Kingfishers are everywhere. In addition pelicans and gulls, including Pallas' Gull could be found near the fishponds and along the beach.

Caesarea

During our visit it seemed to be a very good spot for Pallas' Gull. At least 4 birds gave wonderful views along the coast near the ancient aqueduct.

Bird list

Common Shelduck	Several birds in the salt pans near the Flamingo viewpoint north of Eilat along route 90 (K19/K20).
Mallard	Common at lakes, fishponds, etc.
Gadwall	Several birds in Hula NP.
Pintail north	A few birds in the salt pans near the Flamingo viewpoint of Eilat along route 90 (K19/K20).
Shoveler	Quite common on lakes, fishponds, etc.
Teal	Common at Yeroham lake, Hula NP and Sea of Galilee.
Tufted Duck	Common at the Sea of Galilee.
Black Francolin	One pair at the Golan Heights along route 98.
Chukar	Quite common in southern Israel, often in small flocks.
Sand Partridge	One bird along route 40 near Mizpe Ramon, and several birds in Timna Park, just north of Eilat.



Black-necked Grebe	Several birds on the Sea of Galilee.
Little Grebe	Quite common at lakes, fishponds, etc.
Great Crested Grebe	One bird at Yeroham lake, and two at the Sea of Galilee.

White Pelican flock	A flock of about 50 birds flying south over Urim, a small at the fishponds of Ma'agan Mikhael and several birds in Hula NP.
Cormorant	Common.
Pygmy Cormorant	A few birds at the Sea of Galilee and several birds in the Jordan River near Yardenit.
Night Heron	Several birds at Yeroham lake, >30 birds at roosting place close to Mashabei Sade kibbutz and common at the fishponds of Ma'akan Mikhael.
Striated Heron	One bird on the docks at North Beach, Eilat.
Cattle Egret	Common, especially in northern Israel.
Little Egret	Quite common near fishponds, lakes, etc.
Western Reef Egret	Some birds of both morphs along North Beach, Eilat.



Great White Egret	Several birds in Hula NP and one bird on the Golan Heights.
Grey Heron	Quite common at lakes, fishponds, etc.
Black Stork	Two birds flying over Tel Dan NP.
Glossy Ibis	Several flocks in Hula NP.
Spoonbill	One bird at the saltpans near the Flamingo viewpoint along route 90 (K19/K20) and several birds in Hula NP.

Flamingo	Quite many birds at the salt pans near Flamingo viewpoint (K19/K20).
Osprey	One bird flying north over North Beach, Eilat and two birds near Coral Beach, just south of Eilat.
Imperial Eagle two	At least 4 birds at the pilons near Urim (see Gosney) and birds flying over Yeroham lake.
Spotted Eagle	One bird at K19/K20 (route 90), Eilat. Several birds in Hula NP.
Bonelli's Eagle	A breeding pair gave excellent views in the gorge of En Avedat NP.



Black Kite	Many birds near Urim, quite common in northern Israel.
Marsh Harrier	Several birds around Eilat and some around the Sea of Galilee. Most birds were seen near Ma'agan Mikhael.
Hen Harrier	Two birds at the Golan Heights.
Long-legged Buzzard	Several birds throughout Israel. Obviously common at the Golan Heights.
Steppe Buzzard	A few birds in northern Israel near the Sea of Galilee.
Sparrowhawk	Several birds throughout Israel.
Kestrel	Common.
Lesser Kestrel	Several birds in Jerusalem, Old City Centre.

Peregrine Falcon	One bird with prey at Hula NP.
Lanner Falcon	<i>ssp. tanypterus</i> . Brief views of a bird at Hula NP.
Griffon Vulture	One single bird flying over the car above route 98 near Ramat Magshimim.
Moorhen	Common at lakes, fishponds, etc.
Common Coot	Common at lakes, fishponds, etc.
African Swamphen	<i>madagascariensis</i> . One bird gave good views along the eastern edge of Yeroham lake, from the fishing deck up there.
Crane	Amazing amount of birds in Hula NP! Thousands Cranes foraging on the fields near Hula information Centre. The two sightings of several birds on the Golan Heights paled into insignificance by this tremendous event.



Oystercatcher	Few birds along North Beach, Eilat.
Avocet	One flock of about 50 birds at Hula NP.
Black-winged Stilt	Quite common at lakes, fishponds, etc.
Ringed Plover	Several birds at saltpans around Eilat, and a single bird along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Ein Gev.
Kentish Plover	A few birds at K19/K20 (route 90), Eilat and one bird on the beach in Caesarea.

Grey Plover	One bird in saltpans east of Eilat Airport.
Curlew	One bird on the beach in Caesarea.
Lapwing	Some birds near Urim and Hula NP.
Spur-winged Lapwing	Quite common.
Sanderling	A few birds in the saltpans just north of North Beach, Eilat.
Turnstone	One bird at North Beach, Eilat, and one on the beach in Caesarea.
Dunlin	Common in saltpans around Eilat.
Little Stint	Common in saltpans around Eilat and a few along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Ein Gev.
Green Sandpiper	Several birds throughout Israel.
Common Sandpiper	Several birds around Eilat, the Sea of Galilee and Ma'agan Mikhael.
Redshank	Several birds around Eilat, the Sea of Galilee and Ma'agan Mikhael.
Greenshank birds	A few birds in the saltpans east of Eilat Airport, and two along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee.
Marsh Sandpiper	Three birds at saltpans east of Eilat Airport.
Black-tailed Godwit	Quite a lot in Hula NP.
Common Snipe	Two birds at Yeroham lake.
Ruff	A few birds around Eilat and in Hula NP.
Black-headed Gull	Quite common near lakes, fishponds, etc.
Armenian Gull	Rather common in northern Israel.
Pallas' Gull	One bird flying along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee near Capernaum. Moulting to winter plumage, but rather black head. Later some other distant birds were seen along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilea.

In Ma'agan Mikhael we found one distant bird on the beach. The ancient aqueduct in Caesarea a few km southwards proved to be better for this species. At least 4 birds were seen between the Cormorants on one of the islands along

the coast. Later two adult birds gave splendid views, flying very close to the coastline. Great birds!



White-eyed Gull

Several birds gave good views along the eastern part of North Beach, close to the Jordan border. Especially the early morning visit resulted in some good sights.



Rock Dove

Common in mountainous areas.

(Feral Pigeon)

Far too common...

Wood Pigeon

Several birds in northern Israel

Collared Dove

Common

Laughing Dove

Common

Long-eared Owl

One bird flying around at dusk on Mashabei Sade kibbutz.

Barn Owl

One bird after sunset in a park just next to the Old City Centre Wall in Jerusalem.

Pallid Swift

Three birds at Yeroham lake. Back home we noticed via www.israbirding.com that this species is a very rare winter visitor in Israel.



Little Swift

Surprisingly two Little Swifts flew along while watching the Griffon Vulture at route 98, at the Golan Heights.

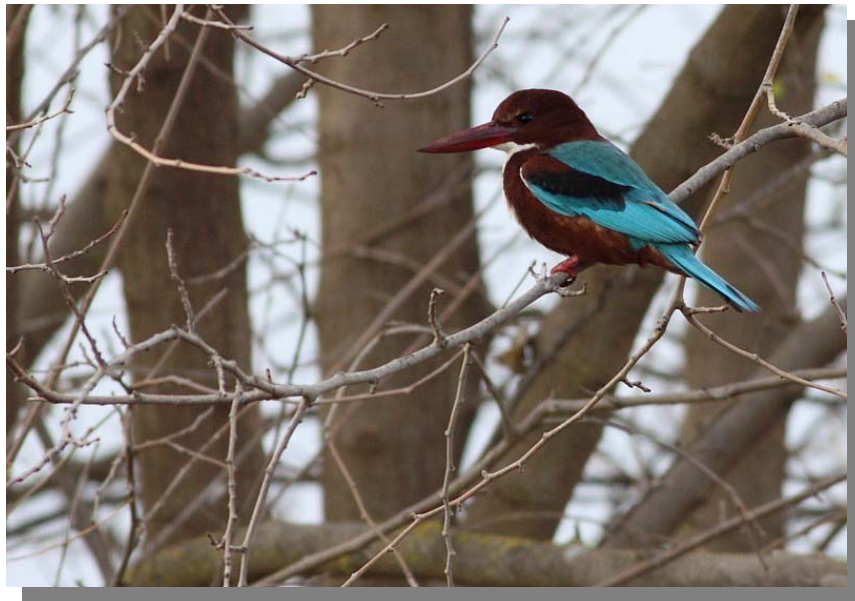
Hoopoe

Several birds throughout Israel.

Kingfisher

Common in northern Israel.

White-throated Kingfisher The first two birds while traveling northwards were found near Ein Gedi. Further north it becomes rather common, but this bird is always a pleasure to see!



Pied Kingfisher

Quite common near lakes, fishponds, etc.

Little Green Bee-eater

excellent

A very brief view (seen from a driving car) just west of Eilat along route 12. Fortunately, later on two birds gave views along route 90, just north of the Dead Sea during our trip northwards.



Syrian Woodpecker

Quite common in parks in Jerusalem.

Skylark

Common in agricultural areas.

Oriental Skylark

A typical call paid our attention during watching the Griffon Vulture. Two larks passed the car, which immediately made us conspicuous by their buzzing calls, which did not fit to the 'common' larks in the region. Oriental Skylark was immediately suggested by one of us, and after listening the mp3-sample on the IPod it was even more clear. At least one bird, and most probably two Oriental Skylarks just flew over. Unfortunately we could not relocate the birds.

Crested Lark

Quite common in agricultural areas.

Wood Lark

Several birds in Hula NP.

Desert Lark

Quite common in desert areas.



Calandra Lark

Several flocks around Urim.

Rock Martin

First birds at lake Yeroham. More sightings in southern Israel.

Crag Martin

Several birds near Ein Gedi.

Barn Swallow

Common in northern Israel, just a few birds near Eilat.

Tawny Pipit

One bird flying over the saltpans east of Eilat Airport.

Water Pipit

Several birds throughout Israel.

Meadow Pipit

Several birds throughout Israel.

Red-throated Pipit

One bird flying over Kibbutz Eilat, north of Eilat. In Hula NP several birds gave nice views in the fields along the path.

White Wagtail	Very common.
Grey Wagtail	Several birds throughout Israel.
Dunnock	A few birds in Jerusalem.
Robin	Common.
Bluethroat	Several birds around lake Yeroham (at least one of ssp. <i>svecica</i>). Also found around Eilat and Hula NP.
Black Redstart	Quite common.
Redstart	One female at Ein Gedi.
Mourning Wheatear	Quite common in desert areas.



Hooded Wheatear near	First winter male at K19/K20, route 90 and one female Avram Pillars, north of Eilat.
White-crowned Wheatear park,	One bird at Maktesh Ramon and several birds in Timna north of Eilat.



Blackstart

Very confiding birds! Common in desert areas.



Stonechat

Quite common.

Siberian Stonechat

One female at Hula NP.

Blackbird

Common.

Blue Rock Thrush

A few birds on the walls of the Old City Centre, Jerusalem.
One female in Ein Avedat NP.

Scrub Warbler

Several birds which showed themselves very well in Ein Avedat NP. More birds found in desert areas around Eilat.



Graceful Prinia	Quite common.
Blackcap	Several birds throughout Israel.
Lesser Whitethroat	One bird in Jerusalem, and one at Ein Gev kibbutz.
Sardinian Warbler	Quite common.
Cetti's Warbler Hula	One singing male near Capernaum, and several birds in NP and Tel Dan NP.
Clamorous Reed Warbler	At least three birds in a small reedbed in Hula NP.
Willow Warbler	One bird at Yeroham lake.
Chiffchaff	Very common, especially ssp. <i>abietinus</i> .
<i>Siberian Chiffchaff</i>	At least one bird in a park in Jerusalem, probably more.
Wren	Several birds
Great Tit	Common.
Sombre Tit	One bird near Mt. Hermon, which we unluckily did not visit because of the thick mist.
Penduline Tit	One bird east of Eilat Airport, in birdwatching park.
Rock Nuthatch	One bird near Mt. Hermon.
Great Grey Shrike	ssp. <i>aucheri</i> . Several birds throughout Israel.



White-spectacled Bulbul Very common.

Palestine Sunbird Common, which we did not expect beforehand.



Arabian Babbler A group of six birds near Ben Gurion's house in Negev desert, and five birds on the parking area of Ein Gedi.



Jay *ssp. atricapillis*. Quite common.

Jackdaw Quite common.

Rook Several birds near Qiryat Shermona, north of the Sea of Galilee.

Hooded Crow Very common.

Raven	Several throughout Israel.
Brown-necked Raven	Quite common in desert areas.
Fan-tailed Raven	>50 birds near Massada and a few near Ein Gedi.
House Crow	Common in Eilat town.
Tristram's Starling	Quite common in the south.
Starling	Quite common.
House Sparrow	Very common.
Spanish Sparrow	Several flocks in southern Israel.
Chaffinch	Common.
Linnet	Several flocks throughout Israel.
Goldfinch	Common.
Greenfinch	Quite common.
Serin	A flock over >50 birds near Tabgha, on the north side of the Sea of Galilee.
Desert Finch	One bird flying over En Nethapim, Eilat Mountains.
Yellowhammer	A flock of 20 birds near Tabgha, on the north side of the Sea of Galilee.
Reed Bunting	One bird in Hula NP.
Corn Bunting	One bird near Mizpa Ramon, and several birds at the Golan Heights.
Rock Bunting	One male near Mt. Hermon.
Silverbill	Five birds along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Ein Gev.

