

Israel: Birds, Nature & Culture

With Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures



November 8 – 21, 2021

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**NATURALIST
JOURNEYS**





For many years Israel has been well known as the bird migration Capital of the Old World. Due to its strategic location, juxtaposed between the continents of Europe, Asia and Africa, the narrow land mass of Israel forms a major migration 'bottleneck' for hundreds of bird species twice a year.

Israel's geographical position also means that many African, Eurasian and Mediterranean species can be found at the limit of their range but still within the country's borders. Despite its small size (only slightly bigger than the state of New Jersey) Israel is blessed with amazing landscapes, pristine deserts, abundant wildlife and natural beauty. Above all Israel is a modern, comfortable and safe country to visit offering fantastic tourist infrastructure and accommodation allowing for some exceptionally fruitful days in the field.

Our tour coincides with the final pulse of autumn migration as large numbers of birds arrive every day and many species from further north settle into winter territories. This tour covers most of the country and all the major birding sites. Beginning in Tel Aviv we will work our way south-east through the Negev Desert to Eilat, then head north along the Syrian-African Rift Valley via the Dead Sea, passing through the amazing Bet Shean and Hula Valleys, and ultimately cruising all the way up to the Golan Heights and Mount Hermon. Birds and wildlife be the primary focus of the tour, but we also intend to incorporate several famous cultural and historical sites for which Israel is justly renowned.

Tour Highlights

- Fly direct from select airports in the eastern US to the dynamic, vibrant city of Tel-Aviv.
- Stay on a working Kibbutz in the Western Negev where some of the best birds of the tour will be right outside your chalet.
- Watch raptors, storks, and pelicans migrate over the dramatic, breathtaking scenery of the great Syrian-African Rift.
- Witness remarkable concentrations of raptors in the Hula Valley and Western Negev desert.
- Experience the thrill of finding rare larks and wheatears in the vast, scantily vegetated deserts of the Negev and Southern Arava.
- Enjoy the never-to-be-forgotten wonder of thousands of Common Cranes departing from overnight roosts in the Hula Valley—pure magic!
- Indulge in the healthy, varied culinary riches typical of the Middle East and Mediterranean Regions.
- Spend two nights in the ancient city of Jerusalem including a tour of the Old City given by a fully qualified guide.

Tour Summary

14-Day / 13-Night Israel Birding & Nature Tour w/
Expert Local Guide & James P. Smith
\$5995, from Tel Aviv
Airport is Ben-Gurion International Airport (TLV)



Itinerary

Mon., Nov. 8 Arrivals in Tel Aviv, Israel

Birdlife Israel will arrange the main transfer of guests from Ben Gurion airport to the Hotel in Tel Aviv. Travelers unable to make the main transfer can take a taxi to the hotel at their leisure for about \$40. Our group will assemble in the hotel lobby at 6 p.m., where we will meet our local guide, enjoy a welcome drink and have a briefing. After meeting we'll head out for dinner at a local, authentic restaurant in the Yemenite quarter of Tel Aviv.

Accommodations at the Isrotel Royal Beach Hotel, (D)

Tues., Nov. 9 Judean Plains

Today the tour starts in earnest. A typically excellent Israeli breakfast will include freshly chopped salads, hummus, baba ghanoush, pita bread, delicious bourekas, fresh fruit juices and much more, all served buffet style. Afterwards we meet at 8:00 a.m., followed by check out and departure. As we leave urban Tel-Aviv our first birding stop will be in the Judean plains where we will check some reservoirs and rolling agricultural areas.

This area hosts large numbers of wintering ducks and birds of prey. We'll put in time to see the endangered White-headed Duck as well as Ferruginous Duck and many other commoner ducks and waterfowl. After lunch we continue south toward the Negev desert watching the landscape gradually change from agricultural fields to arid, stony desert regions. En route, we will visit a landfill that hosts many thousands of Black Kites. Yes, it's a landfill but the kites provide a truly amazing spectacle!

Towards evening we arrive at the charming Kibbutz Gvulot situated in the far Western Negev, and nestled amid palms, pines and citrus groves. This lovely spot will be our base for the next two nights.

Accommodations in Kibbutz Gvulot, Negev (B,L,D)

Wed., Nov. 10 Kibbutz | Western Negev

We start the day with an optional pre-breakfast stroll around the Kibbutz. The lush, beautifully manicured gardens surrounding the guest rooms hold a wonderful variety of birds such as Syrian Woodpecker, Eurasian Hoopoe, Palestine Sunbird, Graceful Prinia, Great Tit, White-spectacled Bulbul, Common Myna and many more. If we're lucky we might even find roosting Long-eared and Barn Owls.



Following a buffet breakfast, we head out to the vast fields and loess plains of the Western Negev. This area combines agriculture with semi-desert native habitats and happens to be a very important area for a number of wintering species. We'll get our first taste for desert species and search for several rare birds that spend the winter here such as Eastern Imperial Eagle, Saker Falcon and the endangered Sociable Lapwing. Besides the three mentioned species, the Western Negev is a spectacular place for other birds of prey as well as great concentrations of larks, wheatears and other passerines. After lunch and a short rest at Kibbutz Gvulot we then continue exploring the remainder of the area.

Accommodations in Kibbutz Gvulot, Negev (B,L,D)

Thurs., Nov 11 Nizzana | Sde Boker

We leave the Kibbutz early (with packed breakfasts) to the vast steppe-like wilderness of Nizzana. This area is very close to the Egyptian border, so close in fact that we'll clearly see the border fence during our visit. Moreover, this area is Israel's last publicly accessible refuge for the endangered Macqueen's Bustard. We'll search hard for this beautiful creature while the surrounding terrain hosts many other species including up to four species of sandgrouse, larks, 'Desert' Little Owl, Chuckar, Arabian Babbler, and with a bit of luck, Cream-colored Courser. A wide variety of mammals such as Dorcas Gazelle, Golden Jackal, Arabian Wolf and even Striped Hyena can be found though most are crepuscular, and none are guaranteed.

In the afternoon we visit the area of Sde Boker and the adjacent Zin Valley. The overlook from David Ben-Gurion's Tomb is a national Park and without doubt one of the most scenic viewpoints in the country. Nearby, Ein Avdat canyon hosts good numbers of Eurasian Griffon Vultures as well as rare Lanner and Barbary Falcons. We will check a roost site for the regionally endemic Syrian Serin before arriving at the small town of Mizpe Ramon nestled at the edge of the mighty Ramon Crater where we'll spend the night at the recently built Ramon Inn.

Accommodations at the Ramon Inn, Mitzpe Ramon (B,L,D)

Fri., Nov. 12 Crater Rim | Southern Negev Plateau

We begin the day with an optional pre-breakfast visit to the spectacular crater rim area where we should find a mix of resident desert species and winterers such as White Crowned and Eastern Mourning Wheatears, Rock Martin, wagtails, pipits, Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart and more. Brown-necked Ravens are always present and, if we're lucky, can be seen sparring with Lanner Falcons along the impressive cliffs.



Following breakfast, we visit the Ramon Crater visitor center which includes a great exhibition about the Crater itself as well as the Israeli space program (based around the story of Israel's first astronaut Ilan Ramon).

Afterwards we start driving towards Eilat (passing through the Ramon crater) via the southern Negev plateau. We will bird a few excellent desert sites along the southern Negev plateau and search for specialties such as larks, wheatears, sandgrouse, Asian Desert Warbler and more. We arrive in the surprisingly large resort/port town of Eilat in late afternoon and could perhaps squeeze in a visit to the famous Eilat North Beach at the head of the Red Sea.

An evening at the beach could produce specialties such as White-eyed Gull and Western Reef Heron, as well as Caspian and Sandwich Terns, Black-headed and Slender-billed Gulls. The first of three nights at the delightful Agamim hotel, a favorite among birders and hosts of the annual 'Champions of the Flyways' bird race and fund-raising event.

Accommodations at the Isrotel Agamim, Eilat (B,L,D)

Sat., & Sun., Nov. 13 & 14 Two Full Days Exploring Eilat & Arava Valley

Eilat is well established as one of the most exciting places in the old world for bird watching, with a rich (and well documented) history of massive bird migrations involving raptors, amazing fallouts of songbirds, and an enviable collection of annual rarities. European birders flock to Eilat every year such is its reputation and, being a mere four hours flying time from Europe, it's no surprise that Eilat has a magnetic draw for birding folk.

Eilat, combined with the southern Arava Valley is a fabulous place to visit even during late autumn and winter and during our time here we will visit the famous K20 salt pools and the K19 reservoirs which support impressive numbers of Greater Flamingoes, waterfowl and shorebirds, as well as raptors. The Eilat Birdwatching Park and Ringing Center is a haven for migrant passerines and, remarkably, Oriental Honey Buzzards followed swarms of migrating bees to the region and have become a regular feature in recent years. A visit to the barren yet strikingly beautiful Eilat Mountains should produce highly specialized desert residents such as Sinai Rosefinch,



Hooded Wheatear, Sand Partridge, Streaked Scrub Warbler, Trumpeter Finch and we'll closely scrutinize the Acacia trees as we search for the enigmatic Pallid Scops Owl, a master of camouflage that can hide in the scantest of trees in the desert.

All of these species are capable of surviving in an environment that, on average, receives only one inch of rain per year! The views overlooking the Red Sea are not to be ignored, and from certain vantage points one can see the countries of Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt (Sinai) all from one spot. The open expanses of desert near Eilat should hold some of the rarer larks and wheatears found in the region and here we search for Temminck's, Greater Hoopoe and Bar-tailed Larks, as well as Basalt and Desert Wheatears, Asian Desert Warbler and more.

Further north, the agricultural elements of the Arava Valley surrounding the settlement of Yotvata could produce Black Scrub-Robin and Namaqua Dove. We might just stay here after dusk to search for mercurial, crepuscular species such as Pharaoh Eagle Owl and Egyptian Nightjar. A delicious buffet supper and another night awaits us at the well-appointed Agamim hotel.

Accommodations at the Isrotel Agamim, Eilat (B,L,D)

Mon., Nov. 15 Arava Highway | Dead Sea region

We leave Eilat after an excellent and varied Israeli buffet breakfast and start working our way north along the Arava Highway. We should have time to check some local wadis (a 'wadi' being a natural valley or water course) where we may find a few Cyprus Warblers, an endemic breeder on Cyprus but regular on passage/winter in Israel.

Mid-morning we plan to visit a desert nature reserve where we will search for the range restricted Red Sea Warbler (formerly Arabian Warbler). The reserve is the last major stronghold of this charismatic species in Israel though quite a few pairs frequent the Acacia 'park-forest' here and it is present throughout the year.

In the early afternoon we arrive at the southern Dead Sea region. We visit some flood pools that hold water year-round with Gray-headed Swampphen as well as regional specialties such as Dead Sea Sparrow and Clamorous Reed Warbler being found here with patience. After checking in to our hotel in late afternoon we'll opt for an early dinner and head out for a night safari targeting two of the rarest birds in the West Palearctic region—Desert Tawny Owl and Nubian Nightjar. Visitation of both enigmatic species requires the presence of a permit holding guide and together we'll put in a major effort to find them.



Alternatively, some may prefer to opt out of the night safari in preference for a relaxed evening at the hotel in Ein Bokek along the shores of the southern Dead Sea.

Accommodations at the Isrotel Dead Sea Hotel, Ein Bokek (B,L,D)

Tues., Nov. 16 Judean Desert | Masada | Qumran National Park

Following another sumptuous Israeli breakfast, we head north to the dramatic escarpment that forms the eastern edge of the Judean Desert. Here steep sided cliffs tower over the western shore of the Dead Sea offering mile after mile of spectacular views. Our first port of call will be Masada, one of the most famous and iconic sites in Jewish history. The site was a hilltop home to a small Jewish community that held off Roman assault for three years before falling in a very morbid and historic manner. Over 900 people stood firm against the Roman siege and, rather than surrendering to the Romans, committed mass suicide in one of the most dramatic of all biblical events. After the Romans conquered the site, Herod the Great took over the Table Mountain and built impressive castles, water systems and more. In the modern era, the area has become a National Park and is home to a handful of specialty bird species such as Fan tailed Raven and Tristram's Starling.

From Masada we head north along the Rift Valley to the equally famous Qumran National Park, home to the site of the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls. Our tour of the site might just produce Striolated Bunting and Eastern Mourning Wheatear too! After visiting Qumran, we will start the long drive north through the Jordan Valley skirting around Jericho and watching the landscape turn gradually yet dramatically 'green' as we leave the pure desert regions behind. If time allows, we will perhaps enjoy a glorious sunset over the Sea of Galilee, yet another site steeped in Biblical History.

In the evening we arrive at our hotel in the Hula Valley, our base for the next three nights.

Accommodations in the Hula Valley (B,L,D)

Wed., Nov. 17 Golan Heights | Mount Hermon | Druze Village

By way of complete contrast to the Dead Sea and Judean Desert, we head north up to the Golan Heights and Mount Hermon. The Hermon is Israel's highest mountain peaking at 2,814 meters and the only place in the country where 'Alpine' fauna and flora exist. Locally iconic species such as Rock Nuthatch, Sombre Tit, Rock Bunting and others should be found with a little patience.

After the Hermon we will visit a Druze Village for a delicious traditional Druze lunch and then drive south through the Golan Heights to Gamla Nature Reserve, formerly home to one of the biggest colonies of Eurasian Griffon Vultures in the Middle East. Sadly, the vulture population has crashed in recent years and only a handful of pairs remain. However, the rather dramatic gorge is still an amazing place to visit and a stroll through the



reserve to the canyon lookout should produce 'upland' species such as Woodlark, Alpine and Little Swifts, Bonelli's Eagle and Cinereous Vulture and more. Rock Hyrax and Mountain Gazelle are common in the area and should be among the mammals seen.

Accommodations in the Hula Valley (B,L,D)

Thurs., Nov. 18 Agamon Hula Park

A full day in the magical Agamon Hula Park. The park evolved as a result of an interesting story that dates to Israel's early days when the first government of the young developing country decided to drain the historic Hula Lake. Following several projects over recent years, the park as it stands with its impressive body of water, is now managed by the Jewish National Fund and is built around the birds and nature with public viewing and education very much in mind.

An early departure is required for our 'sunrise date' with tens of thousands of wintering Common Cranes. We will start with the 'famous' mobile hide tour which will bring us up close and personal with the cranes as they leave the roost. We'll then spend most of the day in the park where we will enjoy personalized access with our own minibus to all areas of the park. The cultivated fields, creeks and flooded areas host a huge diversity of birds and wildlife. This is a raptor-lover's paradise with impressive numbers of Great Spotted Eagles and other eagles, Steppe and Long-legged Buzzards, up to four species of harrier, Black Kites by the hundred and several species of falcon should also be present. Shorebirds and ducks are concentrated in numbers and the ever-present bugling of tens of thousands of Common Cranes creates a magical atmosphere for the whole day. The park is also very good for mammals ranging from the introduced Nutria (or Coypu) to Egyptian Mongoose, Wild Boar, Golden Jackal and the majestic yet mysterious Jungle Cat.

Accommodations in the Hula Valley (B,L,D)

Fri., Nov. 19 Arbel Cliff | Jordan River Valley Reserve

This morning we check out from our hotel and return south along the Sea of Galilee to the Arbel Cliff. Mount Arbel is a beautiful natural escarpment towering over the city of Tiberius. It is one of the most scenic parks in Israel and is home to a nice range of bird species. Here we search for the range restricted Long-billed Pipit and perhaps Wallcreeper which been found wintering here in recent years. The latter is rare and solitary but is also unmistakable and with patience we might just get lucky!

Continuing south to the Bet Shean Valley we enter a low-lying area dominated by agriculture, fishponds and the Jordan River Valley Reserve. The area is one of the best birding spots in the country and boasts huge numbers of gulls (including Armenian and Pallas's Gulls) Great and Pygmy Cormorants, Great White Pelicans, and numerous



herons and raptors. The alfalfa fields often host rarer 'eastern' passerines such as Oriental Skylark, Richard's Pipit, Siberian Stonechats and more.

Finally, the Bet Shean Valley is often the best place in Israel to find Dead Sea Sparrow and Desert Finch. We will spend the whole afternoon here and then drive south to Jerusalem for two nights at the spectacular Mount Zion hotel.

Accommodations at Mount Zion Boutique Hotel, Jerusalem (B,L,D)

Sat., Nov. 20 Jerusalem Bird Observatory | Old City

Following an early breakfast, we will head to the Jerusalem Bird Observatory for a banding session and some up close and personal interactions with some of Israel's wintering species. The Observatory is the only birding center in the world present on parliament grounds. It is located next to the Knesset and is an important center for urban nature study in the middle of the busy metropolis of Jerusalem.

We will also spend some time in the adjacent Rose Garden, which is an excellent site for Syrian Woodpecker, Hawfinch, thrushes and more.

After the birding we will meet with a tour guide specializing in Jerusalem who will escort us on a tour of the main sites of the Old City of Jerusalem. This amazing ancient city normally requires a few days to explore but our tour will include the major holy sites as well as some of the gates, the 'walls promenade' and the markets where we will also have some time for shopping and a light lunch. The guided tour will end in the early afternoon with free time until the end of the day.

Accommodations at Mount Zion Boutique Hotel, Jerusalem (B,L,D)

Sun., Nov. 21 Departures

This morning we should have time to re-visit the Jerusalem Birding Observatory and bird the grounds of the observatory before returning to the Mount Zion Hotel where the tour will conclude around 12 noon.

Transfers can be arranged for those traveling home the same day via Ben Gurion International Airport. Other guests may prefer to stay on in Jerusalem and explore more of the city, or simply stay for longer and explore much more of Israel! (B)

Guide James P. Smith



James brings some twenty-five years of guiding experience to Naturalist Journeys. Originally from Sheffield in the United Kingdom, he discovered a love for guiding in Israel in 1995 where he helped establish the Kibbutz Lotan Center for Birdwatching in the Southern Arava Valley. Since then, he's led hundreds of tours throughout the Northern Hemisphere for a number of UK-based tour companies. His trips to Israel and North America are especially close to his heart but he's also led or co-led tours to Mexico (Veracruz), The Gambia, Kenya, Iceland, Scottish Highlands, Spanish Pyrenees, Central/Southern France, Greece (Lesvos), and India (Goa). An accomplished illustrator,

James placed runner-up in the British Birds "Bird Illustrator of the Year" competition in 1992 and went on to have his work published in numerous birding magazines and journals. He also co-authored the two-volume set *A Guide to the Birding Hotspots of Israel* (Published in 2000 by the Israel Ornithological Center and the S.P.N.I.). He returns to Israel every year to lead trips and remains an active member of the Israel Rarities and Distribution Committee. When not leading tours he can be found at home in Western Massachusetts with his wife Susannah and their young son Matan

Cost of the Journey

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. Their website will show a grid of tour cost and your age category for you to make selections. As of January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Travel Information

Please plan to arrive at Ben-Gurion International Airport at your leisure on November 8. Please note that flights will usually depart from the United States on November 7. Please plan departures from Ben-Gurion at after Noon on November 21. Please note, some flights do depart in the evening from Tel Aviv, resulting in arrival in U.S. on November 22. Our travel agent can assist with flight arrangements.

Cost of the Journey

Cost of the Journey is \$5995 DBL / \$6995 SGL, based on double occupancy, per person.

The tour price includes airport transfers, 13 nights' accommodations, all meals from dinner Day One through breakfast Day 14, professional guide services, park and preserve entrance fees, and miscellaneous program expenses.

Cost of the journey does not include airfare from your home to Tel Aviv, Israel or items of a personal nature, such as drinks from the bar, telephone, and local guide gratuities (at your discretion, we will give some guidelines).

Photo Credits

Common Cranes, Jonathan Meyrav (JM); Wadi Mor Dead Sea Region, James P. Smith (JS); Hooded Wheatear, JS; Macqueen's Bustard displaying, JM; Semi-collared Flycatcher, JS; Little Green Bee-eater, JS; Ramon Crater, JS; Namaqua Dove, JM; Kibbutz Gvulot, JS; Spur-winged Lapwing, JM; Nizzana, JS; Spotted Sandgrouse, JS; Eilat North Beach, JS; Eilat Mountains, JS; Southern Dead Sea Pools, JS; Syrian Woodpecker, JS; Rock Hyrax, JM; Nubian Nightjar, JS; White Pelican, JM; Golan Heights, JS; Golden Jackal, JM; Palestine Sunbird, JM; Sinai Rosefinch, JM.

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