

# Israel: Birds, Nature, & Culture | Trip Report | Nov. 7 – 20, 2022 | by Gerard Gorman



**With Naturalist Journeys guide Gerard Gorman, local guide Eran Banker, and participants: Bill, Daniel, Denise, Irene, John, Jonathan, Les, Lori, Pat, Sid, and Woody.**



This first Naturalist Journey's trip to Israel was a fabulous adventure. We visited sites all over the country, taking in birding and cultural locations from Eilat in the very south, along the Gaza Strip in the west, the Dead Sea and West Bank in the east, the Golan Heights in the very north and the ancient city of Jerusalem. That may seem like a lot of travelling, but Israel is a small country that covers just 22,145 sq.km (8,630 sq. miles). Consider this... the USA is almost five hundred times bigger than Israel! The country is bordered by four others - to the north Lebanon, to the southwest Egypt, to the northeast Syria and to the east Jordan. The Mediterranean Sea lies to the west.

There were so many highlights – birds, mammals, reptiles, insects, habitats, historical locations, cuisine, people – that it may seem futile to attempt to summarize them, but here goes, I will try anyway. Birds included a wealth



of wheatears, warblers, chats and larks, feeding flocks of pink Greater Flamingos, thousands of Common Cranes, a magnificent Eurasian Eagle Owl, several endearing Little Owls, a daytime roost of fifteen Long-eared Owls, numerous raptors (especially the enormous numbers of Black Kites), impressive White-throated and Pied Kingfishers, and outrageously plumaged European Hoopoes. Excellent mammal sightings included an Egyptian Mongoose, Golden Jackals, Mountain and Dorcas Gazelles, Nubian Ibex and Rock Hyrax up-close, and a roost of Lesser Mouse-tailed Bats. Butterflies included the beautiful Common Yellow Swallowtail *Papilio machaon* (aka Old World Swallowtail) and some smaller species with intriguing names such as Blue Spotted Arab *Colotis phisadia* and Large Salmon Arab *Colotis fausta*. Sincere thanks are due to everyone involved, particularly our diligent local guide and conscientious driver, for making the trip so successful.

Gerard Gorman

## **Mon., Nov. 7                      Arrivals | Opening Dinner**

We met at 6pm in the hotel bar, but unfortunately Pat and John were not present having been delayed owing to flight issues from the USA to Europe. Our local guide Eran arrived, and after a welcome drink and introductions we took a pleasant stroll for ten minutes to a local restaurant in a quaint, colorful district with narrow streets. Urban birds seen included Laughing Doves, Common Mynas and Rose-ringed and Monk Parakeets – the last three being introduced species. Our first dinner together was in a place specializing in Yemenite cuisine, where we were served authentic, tasty and plentiful food, a sign of things to come! Back at the hotel before we retired for the night, we got the exceptionally good news that our two friends had finally arrived. So, we were all set for tomorrow when we'd hit the road and the tour proper would begin.

## **Tues., Nov. 8                      Latrun Area | Matash Ayalon | Timorin | Dudayim**

It had rained heavily during the night but by the morning it was easing off and the odd shower today did not really hinder us. We checked out and were on our way as planned at 8am. We met our driver Na'im, who proved to be a great asset, always punctual, patient and careful. We picked up Eran at a gas-station an hour outside Tel Aviv and watched a few 'urban' birds here such as Laughing Dove, Crested Lark, Rose-ringed Parakeet, Common Myna (these were in every town and village we visited), Brown-necked Raven and Hooded Crow. Our first White-spectacled Bulbuls were here, too – this proved to be a common bird which we would see every day. We headed on across the Judean Plains, passing by farmlands and fruit and nut groves. We stopped at some





reservoirs near Matash Ayalon and at once started to see a good variety of wetland birds. Wildfowl included Eurasian Wigeon, Common Pochard, Ferruginous Duck, Tufted Duck, White-headed Duck and Egyptian Goose, the latter is actually a non-native species. In addition, there were Little and Eared Grebes, Eurasian Coot, Gray Heron, Little Egret and White-throated Kingfisher. Great Gray Shrike, White Wagtail and Spur-winged Lapwings were often at the roadside. Passerines included our first glimpses of Graceful Prinias, European Stonechats (widespread birds at this time of year), Corn Buntings and a Bluethroat that sat obliging in the clear on a fence. A Short-toed Snake Eagle showed exceptionally well, soaring for a prolonged period above us. We also glimpsed a Levant Sparrowhawk, a late individual, most having already moved through on their migration southwards. Further on, at the Timorim ponds we saw Kentish and Common Ringed Plovers, Black-winged Stilts, Pied Avocets and our first Imperial Eagle. Finally, the landscape began to change, becoming less agricultural but stonier and more arid, as we entered the Negev desert. They say that no birding trip is complete without a visit to a trash-dump and today we got our first in, at Kiryat Gat. It was not pretty, but it was spectacular. There were thousands (no exaggeration at all) of Black Kites here, on the ground, on fences and pylons, flying overhead, high, low, everywhere. In addition, there were White Storks and two Eurasian Thick-knees, too. We also witnessed the spectacle of one of the huge trucks that were going back and forth getting stuck in mud - quite why the driver went off the road to turn in that obvious quagmire puzzled us. We arrived at our accommodation at the Gevulot Guesthouse, a traditional kibbutz where we would spend two nights, in the late afternoon. After dinner in the kibbutz's cafeteria-like restaurant, we ran through our sightings and announced our plans for the following day.

## **Wed., Nov. 9                      Kibbitz Garden | Urim Powerline Fields | Urim Junction**

This morning most of us walked the grounds of the kibbutz, our main target being Long-eared Owl. Several birds were said to have a winter roost here, but we could not find them. We did see, however, a Barn Owl in palm tree. Rose-ringed and Monk Parakeets often flew over and were finally seen perched in trees. A Greek Tortoise (aka Spur-thighed Tortoise), burying into the sandy ground, was the first reptile of our trip. After breakfast at 7.30am, we explored a vast area of flat farmlands through which the Zeelim-Urim powerlines ran. Our first Eurasian Hoopoes, marvelous-looking birds, delighted everyone. The high electricity towers here are noted for hosting the birds-of-prey that hunt here, and we soon found Long-legged and Common Buzzards and later two



Imperial Eagles. A Eurasian Sparrowhawk and then a Merlin zoomed by, and a male Pallid Harrier was a great find. Passerines included many Crested Larks, Red-throated Pipit and Isabelline Wheatear. There were also a few thousand Common Cranes feeding in the spillage of grain and crop fields and some Northern Lapwings flew by. Spur-winged Lapwings seemed to be wherever we stopped. We returned for lunch at the kibbutz and then went out again in the afternoon. Before we set off, three Syrian Woodpeckers (the only resident picid in the country) performed for us by the parking lot. We had received a tip from a kind local birding couple that another kibbutz, close to the border with Gaza Strip, had a Long-eared Owl roost. So, we headed in that direction. It did not take long to find these special birds sitting and snoozing in a clump of trees in a small park. In the end, we counted a total of fifteen. Wonderful. Next up was a drive around more of the adjacent agricultural area. Our driver saved us many long walks by driving the farm tracks. There were more larks, wheatears and then another highlight. A big flock (we estimated at least 1500) of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse flew back and forth. They were not close, but it was still an impressive sight. Before we got back for dinner, we stopped to watch a roadside Little Owl. As we assembled to go into the restaurant a party of Alpine Swifts were spotted overhead. We ran through our checklist of the day's sightings in the kibbutz bar, which was full of young Israeli soldiers, boys and girls, no doubt enjoying a night off from their duties.

**Thurs., Nov. 10**

### **Nizzana | Ezuz Road | Mifrasit Sewage Farm | Ben Gurion Park | Sde Boker Fields**

We were on the road early today, taking a packed breakfast, as we were going to search the Nizzana (aka Nessana) area for MacQueen's Bustard, an endangered bird which is high on the list of all birders that visit Israel. It rained a little, on and off, but not enough to deter us nor the birds. Our first stop was in an area of semi-desert that looked like many others we had driven through, it looked barren, but that was an illusion, it was actually full of life. Parties of Dorcas Gazelles were spotted, and various wheatears and larks flitted about. Our local guide assured us this spot, the Ezuz Road, was a key place for the iconic species we sought. We scanned the area, close to the Egyptian border, and were soon watching a Mourning Wheatear. Suddenly Eran got excited (it is always a good sign when a local guide gets excited) and sure enough, there was a bustard. It was very well camouflaged amongst the sand, stones and scrub, but we soon had it in the telescopes and watched it walking around. A little way on, a group of Arabian Babblers showed in a bush at the roadside. Another area nearby had a patch of water, fed from a leaking drain at the Mifrasit water treatment plant, and hence was excellent for birds which





came to drink. We had good views of both Black-bellied and Spotted Sandgrouse, two typical desert-dwelling species, in flight and on the ground. Incredibly, another MacQueen's Bustard came out into the open here, and later another walked by the road as we drove out. Fantastic! By the end of the morning, we had seen four of these exceptional birds. We stopped for lunch at a take-away falafel eatery, a simple but genuine place, full of locals. It was ideal for us because with huge choices at breakfasts and dinner we did not need substantial portions of food during the day. There were many Rock Martins and we got close up views of Tristram's Starlings (subtly beautiful birds formerly called Tristram's Grackle) right here. From the David Ben-Gurion Memorial Park (the tombs of the country's first prime minister and his wife Paula are here together) there were tremendous scenic views over the mighty Tsin-Ein Avdat canyon and the Negev beyond. A male Nubian Ibex with curved and ridged horns, was on the rocky slope below and close enough for us to get photos. Later, one of these big and bold mountain goats walked right across the parking lot. In the distance Eurasian Griffon Vultures soared. Closer up were a few Chukars, a Blue Rock Thrush and a remarkably confiding Blackstart, a ridiculously photogenic individual which even perched on Woody's scope. We strolled through the park here, which thronged with young people, seeing Common Chiffchaff and Palestine Sunbird in the bushes. Later in the afternoon we visited the Sde Boker fields and saw more wheatears and larks as well as our main target species there, Desert Finch, by a puddle. Our first Green Bee-eaters (aka Asian Green Bee-eater) perched on wires. As the sun went down at around 5pm, a drop in temperature was noticeable.

**Fri., Nov. 11**

**Mitzpe Ramon Visitor Center | Makhtesh Ramon |  
Hameishar Plains | Negev Desert | Yotvata Kibbutz |  
Eilat North Beach**

It was clear and warm this morning as we disembarked at our first stop in the Makhtesh Ramon Nature Reserve, the INPA's Visitor Center. As we arrived, a White-crowned Wheatear and a Desert Lark greeted us, both of which hopped around near the entrance area. Roughtail Rock Agamas were here, and we also saw a Desert Agama today. The center sits on the top of a cliff from where there are panoramic views. Inside, there is an exhibition detailing the geology, zoology and archeology of the area and a souvenir shop where some loitered. In a modern theater we watched a moving short film about Ilan Ramon, an Israeli pilot and then astronaut who lost his life on the fatal Columbia space-shuttle mission along with six others. Later we drove through the breathtaking crater-like landscape (although a *makhtesh* is often referred to as a crater it is actually something else, an 'erosion cirque.'). Whatever, it is the largest such feature in the Negev Desert and Hameishar Plains. We stopped from



time to time when someone spotted a raptor or gazelle. Continuing southwards through the southern Negev, following the Arabah Valley, we paused to have lunch in the Yotvata Kibbutz just off the Arabah Road, an old trading route. This prosperous kibbutz, famed for its dairy products, was buzzing with visitors many of whom, like us, sampled the superb ice-cream. Moving on, with both the Jordanian and Egyptian borders never far away, we arrived in Eilat, the southernmost city in Israel, right on the northernmost tip of the Red Sea. Eilat is an especially important stopover place for migratory birds as it is situated on a kind of land bridge, a bottleneck, between Europe, Asia and Africa. So before checking into our hotel, we walked on the North Beach. From this spot we could see three other countries, Jordan just across the Gulf of Aqaba, Egypt just to the west, and in the distance the mountains of Saudi Arabia. An incredible location! We met some other birders on the beach, the first we'd come across, and exchanged information. Scanning the sea we added a selection of new birds to our growing list – Slender-billed, Black-headed and White-eyed Gulls and White-cheeked Tern. Both dark and white morph Western Reef-Herons were present, too. We checked into our extremely comfortable hotel where we had another fine buffet dinner.

**Sat., Nov. 12**

### **Eilat | Udva Valley | K20 and K19 Saltpans | Eilat Sewage Farm**

We had breakfast at 7.30am and then drove out of town, the road running right along the border with Sinai in Egypt. So close, in fact, that we were not sure if the first Steppe Eagle we spotted was in Israel or Egypt. We walked out into the stony desert and searched for birds. It was a now familiar scenario, we walked out from the road across apparently lifeless, dry, stony and scrubby habitat, but then began to see birds and the occasional reptile. Passerines included Temminck's Larks, Bar-tailed and Desert Larks and Trumpeter Finches. Parties of Spotted and Crowned Sandgrouse, both shy birds, rose up and flew rapidly back and forth, usually far away but occasionally quite close. Weatherwise, it had turned into a very pleasant, sunny day. We returned to Eilat for a light lunch in an Arab eatery and then, after dropping off those who wished to take a time out at the hotel, went to the nearby saltpans (salt works). There were many Greater Flamingos here, sifting through the saline water for food, Squacco Herons and lots of shorebirds. We also got closer and better views than previously of Green Bee-eaters, always popular birds, sitting on a fence. Next up was the sewage farm where African Swamphens, various ducks, herons, egrets, Eurasian Marsh-Harriers and a Black-winged Kite all showed well. We also saw an iconic mammal today, a lone Onager (aka Asiatic Wild Ass) slowly moving through the arid landscape. We'd seen their droppings in several places, but this was the only actual animal we encountered. These fascinating equines





were once extirpated but have been reintroduced. Back at the hotel we freshened up, and then ran through our day's sightings as we sipped pre-dinner drinks. Israel is a wonderful place for wheatears and when doing our list, we realized that we had had a tremendous day with these birds, with six species seen - Isabelline, Hooded, Desert, White-crowned, Mourning and Blackstart. Amazing! We announced our plans for the next day and then partook in yet another splendid buffet dinner, the choice almost as exciting as the wheatears!

**Sun., Nov. 13**

### **Eilat Birding Center | Amram's Pillars | Kibbitz Samar | Yotvata Fields**

After breakfast we visited the famous bird reserve and banding site just north of Eilat. It lies close to the Yitzhak Rabin border crossing with Jordan and as we passed by that we saw many Jordanians who work in the city each day coming through. The full name of this reserve is grand - the International Birding and Research Centre (IBRCE) – and besides simply banding, some outstanding conservation and educational work is carried out here. The reserve is a key 'refueling site' for all kinds of birds that migrate from Europe and Asia to Africa and back. We saw egrets, herons and kingfishers very well from a well-placed blind and also a rarity, a female Common Rosefinch which was caught and banded. We then visited a series of disused military 'bunkers' by the border with Jordan. Inside there were Yellow Fan-fingered Geckos on the walls and Lesser Mouse-tailed Bats hanging from the ceiling. It was dark but by using a flashlight we were able to get photographs – we did not stay long and did not unduly disturb these creatures. Once again, local knowledge had turned up special things. We then drove into the Arava Desert, visiting an area that was reminiscent of the landscapes in old Wild West films, with scrub, canyons and rocky outcrops, one site called Amram's Pillars. On the way, a huge raptor soaring in the distance turned out to be a Cinereous Vulture. Soon after arrival in a very rocky area, we added two new birds to our already impressive list, a female Sinai Rosefinch and a Sand Partridge, although we only glimpsed the partridge before it scurried off. As we departed, about six Dorcas Gazelles were spied trotting across a hillside. We stopped in Eilat to get a *shwarma* lunch. This Middle Eastern dish of thinly sliced meat was served with salad and bread, is a common 'street food' here and these days elsewhere in the world. In the afternoon we explored the so-called 'Northern Circular Fields' near Yotvata. The farmland here is green, irrigated by a sparkler system



and many passerines – wagtails, larks, sparrows - are attracted to the water and damp crop fields. We saw several European Stonechats but also a single Siberian Stonechat, along with larks, sparrows, finches and several raptors which had come in to try to get a songbird snack. After another sunny and fruitful day, we returned to the hotel, freshened up and met to run through our checklist, before having dinner at 7.30.

## **Mon., Nov. 14                      KM 94 | Mosahv-Ashalin Reservoir**

Today we left Eilat and the Red Sea and headed back north again, but towards the Dead Sea often following close to the Jordanian border. It was a fine, warm morning. A stop in another area of desert, where it was hotter but not at all unbearable, proved very productive. A major target was the Great Hoopoe-Lark and we soon found one of these splendid birds. Scrub Warbler and a real specialty, Arabian Warbler, were both seen, too. A couple of scurrying reptiles that were hard to see as they were sandy colored and hence well-camouflaged, turned out to be Sinai Fan-fingered Geckos, a localized species that none of us had ever seen before. We stopped for lunch in a sandwich bar at around 1.30pm before continuing northwards. After miles of desert, time at the Mosahv-Ashalin Reservoir allowed us to add numerous wetland birds to the day's sightings, including some new ones for the trip – Gadwall, Northern Pintail, Eurasian Teal, Ferruginous Duck, more Greater Flamingos, African Swamphen, White-throated and Pied Kingfishers, and both Great Reed and Clamorous Reed Warblers. A Common Kingfisher which speeded by several times finally sat in view on a branch over the water. We also heard a Little Bittern calling in the reeds, but it would not show. We checked into our hotel in Ein Bokek, a resort right by the Dead Sea, where Palestine Sunbirds were feeding in the flowery bushes. We had a slightly earlier dinner this evening as we planned to out on an optional 'night drive' afterwards. As ever, our driver was more than willing to take us. We left at around 8pm and did not have to go far out of town to start finding wildlife. We soon came upon two Golden Jackals, and later a Red Fox that at first was sitting but





then crept around on the cliffs. We also heard a Desert Owl call from a wadi, but it did not reveal itself. We were back at base in Ein Bokek at 10.30 and retired after yet another excellent day.

## **Tues., Nov. 15                      Judean Desert | Masada National Park | Qumran National Park | Galilee Valley**

Today we had a relatively late breakfast, which allowed time for some to bathe, or rather float, in the Dead Sea beforehand. We then continued northwards following the road, an ancient trade route, through the West Bank. On our route, we'd see road signs for such renowned places as Hebron, Bethlehem, Jericho and Nazareth. We stopped at Masada, a National Park and UNESCO World Heritage site. Situated high on a plateau some 450m above the dead Sea at the edge of the Judean Desert between Sodom and En Gedi. Masada was a fortress built by King Herod during the 'Second Temple' period and one of the final bastions of Jewish resistance against the Romans. Today, the ruins of the dwellings of the people who held out there, and those of the Romans who laid siege, are still evident (the story of the gruesome fall of the settlement is well worth looking up). We reached the top of the plateau via a new cable car (photogenic Tristram's Starlings hopped around the entrance area in the hope of being fed) and had panoramic views of the surrounding plain and desert. We also stopped briefly at Qumran, the place where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, but this was packed with tourists, so we used the restrooms and continued on our way. It was a day of moving on, driving to the Golan Heights far to the north, but we still saw some new trip birds – an exquisite Namaqua Dove and some Fan-tailed Ravens. As we drove along Jonathan took the microphone and told us about a book that he'd recently read on the Dead Sea scrolls. Interesting stuff indeed. Lunch was later than usual, in a nice café, where they made fresh sandwiches. As we went along Mountain Gazelles were spotted and the odd raptor, usually a Black Kite, called out. We arrived at our very pleasant hotel in the Golan Heights. It was set in leafy grounds, on the site of a former palace, with the legendary Jordan River actually flowing through it (although it is a mere stream here). We checked in, rested, went through our checklist together and then experienced another wonderful buffet dinner. The choices of tasty dishes were extraordinary, and no one was losing weight!



**Wed., Nov. 16**

**Gamla Nature Reserve | Golan Volcanic Park | Lunch in Druze town | Mount Hermon**

It had rained in the night and was a little overcast in the morning but cleared up during the day. We had a 7am breakfast and then went to the Gamla Nature Reserve which lies at the heart of the Golan Heights just off road 808 near Daliyot. On the way, we came upon flocks of thousands of Common Cranes in roadside fields. At our first stop out of the bus we saw Mountain Gazelles and a new bird for the trip, a Finch's Wheatear, the only one we would see. There were also some Eurasian Griffon Vultures in an aviary here, the birds being habituated to the area before being released as part of a reintroduction project – we would see some free-flying, wild, individuals later. The centre pieces of Gamla are an impressive canyon and the highest waterfall in the country, at 51m. The creek that runs through the canyon eventually ends up in the Sea of Galilee. There are also, as ever in Israel, cultural, especially archaeological, sites. We walked to the canyon on an easy, paved, trail, to a lookout blind called the Vulture Lookout. On the way we looked at a stone olive press from the Byzantine era. At the canyon, the views were striking and there we were soon watching two Bonelli's Eagles. On the return walk we glimpsed two Rock Hyraxes resting on ledges. Moving on, our local guide's knowledge once again turned up something special for us - a Eurasian Eagle Owl roosting, and snoozing, on a ledge in a stone quarry at a place called the Golan Volcanic Park. It was magnificent, another avian highlight. Lunch was in a nice little restaurant in a small Druze town. The Druze are a fascinating people who follow a religion that is not closely related to those of the Jews, Muslims and Christians around them, although they have assimilated elements from all in order to co-exist. We then drove up Mount Hermon, the highest peak in the whole country. The off-season ski-resort here was, to be honest, rather bleak. It was chilly and rainy, and the birds were keeping their heads down, so we cut the visit short. Nevertheless, as we left, we got our best view of the trip of a Golden Jackal, a confident that specimen trotted across the road and loitered on a parking lot for a while. Back down the mountain we stopped to watch a field full of corvids – Rooks, Eurasian Jackdaws and Hooded Crows. As the weather had been challenging at times today, and because we planned an after dinner walk, we returned to the hotel earlier than usual, at 4pm. Those of us we went out into the grounds of the hotel after our latest evening gourmet challenge, were rewarded with views of a Tawny Owl. Mediterranean House Geckos (aka Turkish Gecko) that were clinging to every building, often near lights, were also active and Levant Water Frogs croaked from a pool.

**Thurs., Nov. 17**

**Hula Valley | Agamon-Hula Reserve | Lehavot HaBashan Fishponds | Tel Kedesh Park | Ha'Ela Park**

Today we needed an early start in order to experience an incredibly special event. Seven of us (some decided to lie in) set-off before dawn at 4.30am to the Agamon-Hula Reserve where we would take their 'tractor-trailer'





excursion. Years ago, it was realized that the big flocks of Common Cranes, and indeed other birds, which congregate here each autumn were tolerant of farm machinery and did not flee when tractors and the like approach. So, ingeniously, the rangers and tourist department decided to take visitors to watch the cranes fly out of their wetland roost at dawn in a 'moving blind,' a partly enclosed trailer with seats towed by a tractor. We grabbed a coffee and snacks then climbed into the vehicle. Daybreak slowly crept in, the mist lifting. It was very atmospheric as we trundled along. The excursion worked wonderfully well, we were able to watch many birds – not only the cranes but 100s of Glossy Ibis, Flamingos, Eurasian Spoonbills, Ruff, Green Sandpiper, Black-tailed Godwits and other shorebirds - up close and those with cameras got some super photographic opportunities. Those who came along agreed that it was one of the top highlights of our whole trip in Israel. We had coffee and then went back to the hotel. Arriving at 8am, we caught up with the 'late risers!' We visited a fishpond system seeing lots of Pygmy Cormorants and more ducks and shorebirds. But the star bird here was arguably Marbled Teal, a delightful little duck which is endangered across most of its range. Migration was clearly going on. A stand of pines in parkland held Common Wood-Pigeons and three Syrian Woodpeckers. Another stop at a small, neglected park which had a grove of old pistachio trees, hosted small flocks of European Goldfinches, Common Chaffinches and Bramblings. It had been a busy morning, so we went for lunch in a café. In the afternoon we returned to the Agamos-Hula reserve. We looked around its huge, modern, visitor center (a lot of money had clearly been poured into the place) and some bought souvenirs. Then it was back to the wildlife. It was an easy drive with us getting out as the birds demanded. It was particularly good for raptors with a couple of Greater Spotted Eagles, a pale morph Booted Eagle, a Black-winged Kite and around six Eurasian Marsh-Harriers, all showing nicely. There were more Common Cranes, too, grazing in fields, gliding in lines overhead, making their bugling calls, and hordes of ducks. We headed back at 4pm, did our checklist at 6.30 and had dinner at 7. Later, some went out into the hotel gardens and grounds to look for the Tawny Owl which had been seen the night before. That proved a success. It had been yet another enjoyable day.

## **Fri., Nov. 18                      Mount Arbel | Kfar Ruppin Fishponds | Jerusalem**

We checked out, loaded up the bus, and were away and on the road at 8am. Our final destination was to be the fabled, legendary, historical city of Jerusalem. But we would not drive direct, we had places to visit, and birds and other things to search for, as we went. At the Arbel Nature Reserve we walked on an easy trail to the impressive cliffs. The panorama was dramatic. In the distance we could see the Sea of Galilee. We had close views of Rock Hyraxes and Roughtail Rock Agamas here – some of us got decent photographs. Birds watched



included Rock Martin, Sardinian Warbler, Meadow Pipit, Blue Rock Thrush and Black Redstart. Stunning Common Yellow Swallowtail butterflies were on the wing over grassy areas. Coffee and lunch were taken in another traditional humus place in a small town – such places had served us well. An hour further on, we visited the fish-farm at Kfar Ruppin where there were ponds of all sizes, big and small, some with water, some drained and with exposed mud. One of the first things we saw here was an Egyptian Mongoose (aka Ichneumon). This was our sole sighting of a not uncommon but often hard to see predator, and it showed well as it ran about looking for food. Amongst other birdy delights was a party of Temminck's Stints on a mostly drained pond. They were close enough to allow us to see their pale legs and so compare them with the dark ones of the adjacent Little Stints. Northern Lapwings were finally seen on the ground and couple of Ospreys appeared, in flight and then one perched. Black Stork and Armenian Gull were new for the trip. We then drove close to the Jordanian border again, right by the frontier fence it in fact, before heading westwards towards Jerusalem. There was lots to see as we went along – the occasional kibbutz, minarets indicating Palestinian settlements, colorful roadside stores, stands and eateries, and people going about their business. We arrived in Jerusalem in the late afternoon and checked into our hotel on a hilltop in a leafy suburb.

**Sat., Nov. 19**

## **Jerusalem Bird Observatory | Rose Garden | Jerusalem Old Town**

Today was a day that combined both natural and cultural history. Our first stop was the Jerusalem Bird Observatory, an urban birding and bird banding centre. It lies in a unique location, in the heart of Jerusalem right by the Knesset, the Israeli National Assembly building, and the Supreme Court. No one was actually banding today, and the nearby Wohl Rose Garden Park was clearly being re-designed, but we still picked up some new birds: Blackcap and Lesser Whitethroat. We also got some more views of Syrian Woodpecker, four different birds in fact. We then set off to see the old town in Jerusalem with an expert guide who told us many facts, figures and anecdotes (often quite amusing) about the history, culture and people of this legendary city. We visited the important historical and religious sites and walked through the busy, winding streets of the market. Lunch was an *al fresco* one of authentic humus and salad as shoppers, sightseers and traders, and people on motorbikes, squeezed by in the alley. Our final stop was at the Western Wall (often called in Europe and the USA the Wailing Wall and in the Islamic world the Buraq Wall). In the evening, before tucking into our own 'last supper' we discussed the highlights of our trip. We tried to choose a favorite bird, a favorite other animal and a cultural thing. Jonathan picked the wheatears, the Egyptian Mongoose and, on the 'cultural front' the buffet meals. John's choices were the Eurasian Eagle Owl, also the Egyptian Mongoose and the Masada National Park. Denise settled on the Long-eared Owls, the Red Fox at night and the experience of bathing (*floating* as she





pithily put it) in the Dead Sea. Bill picked the Temminck's Lark, the Egyptian Mongoose and liked how the Israeli people were so proud of their country and showed their love for it. Irene chose the Little Owls, the Red Fox and the visit to the Hula Valley. Daniel's favorite bird was the Greater Spotted Eagle, his 'other critter' the Nubian Ibex and his favorite cultural thing were the ruins at Masada. Les chose the Eurasian Eagle Owl, the Red Fox and the cuisine. Lori most like the White-throated Kingfishers, Dorcas Gazelles and walking in Jerusalem's old city for the first time. Woody's ultimate picks were the Desert Wheatear, Rock Hyrax and the experience of birding in the former war zone of the Golan Heights.

## **Sun., Nov. 20                      Departure Day**

Today most of us left for home, flying from Tel Aviv airport just an hour away. Others stayed on in Israel for a few days. I would like to thank everyone involved for making this tour so successful and enjoyable. Gerard.

*Long-eared Owl (Gerard Gorman - GG), Roughtail Rock Agama (GG), Nubian Ibex (NJ Stock), Jerusalem City Scape (NJ Stock), Hoopoe (NJ Stock), Group Photo (Woody Wheeler - WW), Black Kites (GG), Blackstart (WW), Little Egret & Glossy Ibis (GG), Sid by Mosaic (WW), Smiling under the rainbow (WW), Ben-Gurion's Tomb scenic (Lori Cohen - LC), Great White Pelican (GG), MacQueen's Bustard (GG), Bill in Ngev Desert (GG), Blue Rock Thrush (GG), White-crowned Wheatear (GG), Desert Lark (GG), Common Yellow Swallowtail (GG), Birding in the Ngev Desert (WW), Lesser Mouse-tailed Bat (GG), Levant Fan-tailed Gecko (GG), Yellow Fan-fingered Gecko (GG), Laughing Doves (WW), Woody & Bill (LC), Tristram's Starling (GG), Eran surveying pond (WW), Skipping Rocks in the Sea of Galilee (LC), Common Cranes (GG), Rock Hyrax (GG), Palestine Sunbird (WW), Irene and the Sea of Galilee (WW), Nubian Ibex (GG), Old Jerusalem x4 (WW)*