

Israel

22–29 March 2004

Participants:

Ray and Linda Berry

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Steve Cawthrey

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David Goate

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Blue-cheeked Bee-eater

Leaders: James P. Smith and Susannah B. Lerman

Birdfinders' 2004 tour to Israel was highly successful, especially in terms of the diversity of species recorded. A total of 200 species were seen during the week, though three of these were 'leader only' sightings, slightly reducing our official group total to 197 species. However, the fifteen guests on this year's tour all greatly contributed to a much higher trip total than the previous Birdfinders' tour record of 185 species. Indeed, such is the level of interest in this superb country for birding that some of the participants on this year's tour had been to Israel as many as eight times! It has to be said that Israel remains a consistently affordable, safe and accessible country in which to experience some truly spectacular birding in a diverse array of habitats. Birdfinders was also the only British bird tour company to send a tour to Israel this March and it came as no real surprise to find that this year's tour was almost completely full. The birding, despite being a generally slower week for migration than might have been hoped for, was excellent. We had good views of almost all the regional specialities including memorable evenings with Hume's Owl and Nubian Nightjar, both of which gave fabulous views. Many of the speciality species were found including Striated Heron, Eastern Imperial Eagle, Steppe Eagle, Barbary Falcon, Macqueen's Bustard, Greater Sandplover, White-eyed Gull, Lichtenstein's and Spotted Sandgrouse, Namaqua Dove, Hoopoe Lark, Rock Martin, Scrub Warbler, Clamorous Reed Warbler, Asian Desert Warbler, Arabian Warbler, Eastern Bonelli's Warbler, Arabian Babbler, Palestine Sunbird, Fan-tailed Raven, Tristram's Grackle, Dead Sea Sparrow, Desert Finch, Trumpeter Finch, House Bunting and Indian Silverbill.

Day 1: This year two groups arrived on separate flights at different times. The first group arrived at the hotel late afternoon and quickly organised a pre-dinner jaunt down to the North Beach, finding some good species including Western Reef Egret, White-eyed Gull and Great Black-headed Gull. The second group arrived considerably later but still in time for dinner. The food at our comfortable hotel was good at all times with substantial buffet breakfasts and dinners. Finding a cool beer was a bit trickier, but some of the guys managed it at the next hotel down the road!

Day 2: We elected to take the traditional pre-breakfast stroll in Shulamit Park about half a mile from the hotel. Laughing Dove, Yellow-vented Bulbul, numerous Lesser Whitethroats and Common Chiffchaffs, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Cretzschmar's Bunting and Tristram's Grackle were all safely in the bag before breakfast. After breakfast, it became clear to the leaders who'd been in Southern Israel all spring that this first full day of the tour was also going to be the hottest of the year to date. By 10am it was already scorching with temperatures in the low thirties! Setting off for the Northern Salt pans, we were soon adding many more species en-route and a stop by the fields and acacia scrub at Km19 was most productive with Spur-winged Plover, Isabelline, Eastern Black-eared and Desert Wheatears, Crested Lark, Red-throated Pipit, Greater Short-toed Lark, Little Green Bee-eater and a light-morph Booted Eagle. Birding at the Northern Salt pans (or Km20 as it's also called) was typically excellent and full of many wetland species including over 400 Greater Flamingos, Common Shelduck, Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Little Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Little Stint, Black-tailed Godwit, Eurasian Curlew of the form '*orientalis*', Marsh Sandpiper, Common Greenshank and many others, while gulls included over 100 Slender-billed and two first-summer Little Gulls, which are notable for Eilat. Meanwhile, as the heat of the day really developed, a flurry of raptors included Short-toed Eagle, Steppe Eagle and a superb Eastern Imperial Eagle, a target bird for several in our party. Black Kites and Steppe Buzzards were also numerous and a little later we discovered a rare Greater Spotted Eagle that was seen several more times during the course of the morning. Moving south along the border with Jordan, our next stop was Eilat's North sewage pools which held plenty of birds including Great Cormorant, Great White Pelican, Water Pipit, Bluethroat, several forms of Yellow Wagtail, a couple of Citrine Wagtails, Eurasian and Red-rumped Swallows, Sand Martin, Sedge Warbler and Eurasian Reed-warbler. By this time the heat was beginning to tell and we retired to the hotel for a welcome lunch break and an afternoon rest. With the focus for the evening being night birding at a tributary to Wadi Paran, we had time for just one birding site en-route, but it turned out to be one of the best spots in the Arava Valley for migrants. An open shallow wadi near Kibbutz Yahel had become exceptionally green after heavy winter rainfall and had a magnetic attraction for passerine migrants. Here we notched up some exciting species including Rüppell's Warbler, Asian Desert Warbler, Eastern Orphean Warbler, many Cretzschmar's Buntings, Trumpeter Finch and two of the localised Arabian Babblers. Eastern Black-eared Wheatears were plentiful and we had at least three Siberian Stonechats of the forms '*maura*' and '*variegata*', not to mention a lovely male Common Redstart of the form '*samamisticus*'. Moving onto our location for night birding, we were rewarded with wonderful views and vocalisations of one of Israel's rarest desert residents, the Hume's (Tawny) Owl. Our group behaved impeccably at this enchanting and remote desert wadi, which only served to enhance our observation of this very sensitive species. It was a perfect finale to the day.

Day 3: After an early breakfast, we headed north to the famous lark site at Km33. This former great birding spot has been severely affected by encroaching agriculture and the great concentrations of larks no longer occur there. It is however, still worth a visit as almost anything can drop in and one or two larks can sometimes be found. This particular morning, we were rewarded with superb views of a pair of Bar-tailed Larks. Rather more frustrating was a Cyprus Wheatear in active migration, which only alighted briefly before continuing its journey north. Likewise, we moved north as well, calling at the acacia park-forest just south of Yotvata. Our key bird here was Arabian Warbler and we were not disappointed as all of our party eventually had great views. There were other good birds to be found here including a male Hooded Wheatear nicely captured in a digital image by Linda and a pair of Scrub Warblers at the nest. Numerous Hoopoes, Blackstarts, Little Green Bee-eaters and Palestine Sunbirds were also to be found here whilst Brown-necked Ravens cruised along the escarpments. The much improved Yotvata cafe was a welcome stop for lunch and refreshment but we were soon back into birding mode at the former Ye'elim Holiday Village with plenty of Tristram's Grackles but surprisingly few migrants (save for a Eurasian Crag-martin). Some of our group split up and returned with reports of Green Sandpiper, Namaqua Dove and Citrine Wagtail at a leaking sewer pipe. The fields east of Ye'elim were more productive with over a thousand Spanish Sparrows forming dense swarms over the fields, and Common and Pallid Swifts and Red-rumped Swallows much in evidence. A farmer cropping his field flushed at least a dozen Common Quail, which we would certainly have missed had he not been working there. As Yotvata wasn't quite as good as it can be, we headed back south first trying the southern salt pans of Eilat, and then Eilat's north beach. The latter gave us some good species including three Purple Herons, Osprey, Caspian Gull, Gull-billed, Caspian, Sandwich and Common

Terns. We later spent the rest of the evening at a high vantagepoint overlooking the southern salt pans. This turned out to be a highly-productive spot with evening flights of Black Storks, Eurasian Spoonbill and Baltic Gulls, as well as many shorebirds present on the salt pans. A hunting Barbary Falcon was more difficult to follow but eventually all of our group had reasonable views of this desert phantom!

Day 4: Our early start (about 4am!!) was slightly hindered when an electrical fault affected the coding system of the safe in David's and Barry's room, both pairs of their binoculars being locked inside! With no opportunity to get it fixed until later in the day we departed and Susannah kindly loaned David her binoculars for much of the day. Barry on the other hand, had luckily brought a spare pair of bins, which he apparently does wherever he goes in the world, and was well prepared for our day in the Negev. Armed with a packed breakfast for the long drive, we first called in at Mizpe Ramon hoping for Syrian Serin around the small local football field. Sadly, because the wintering flock seemed to have moved on but we did see a normal Mourning Wheatear and a long staying 'Persian' Mourning Wheatear that had been discovered wintering there about month earlier. Other birds present included Woodchat Shrike and a couple of Cretzschmar's Buntings. Continuing on to Nizzana, our main target was Macqueen's Bustard and it wasn't too long before we were enjoying views of a fine displaying male. A little later we also had a number of Cream-coloured Coursers in view together with several Southern Grey Shrikes. A Lesser Short-toed Lark flew over giving its distinctive flight call but unfortunately didn't give good views on the ground. We remained in the Nizzana area for much of the morning and enjoyed a pleasant picnic breakfast. Other highlights included two Lesser Spotted Eagles on migration, plenty of Chukars, the desert form of Little Owl, good views of two singing male Spectacled Warblers, and terrific views of two Eastern Bonelli's Warblers. Sandgrouse were however, notable by their absence at all the locations that we visited. It had been a very wet spring and with many pools of standing water in the desert, the sandgrouse had no reason to fly into their traditional sewage pools. Making our way to the beautiful grounds of Kibbutz Gevulot in the western Negev (a new site for the Birdfinders' tour), the change of habitat was enough give the tour a real boost to species numbers. A most productive lunch 'hour' gave us roosting Barn and Long-eared Owls, Syrian Woodpecker and Great Spotted Cuckoo as well as more familiar European birds such as Common Blackbird, European Robin and Great Tit all aided by the superb hospitality of Sarale and friends at the Kibbutz. The afternoon found us at Wadi Habasor following up a report of Purple Swamphen. Unfortunately, it didn't show but we did see a female Little Crake, heard several Clamorous Reed Warblers singing and saw a pair of free-flying Egyptian Geese, a species that appears to becoming established as a feral breeder in parts of Israel. The highlight however, was a magnificent flock of over 5000 White Storks migrating directly overhead. Before embarking on the long journey back to Eilat we called in at another group of Kibbutz fields and found about a dozen Spotted Sandgrouse, whilst one of our party picked out a stunning male Pallid Harrier quartering in the distance. That turned out to be the last major sighting of the day and we settled down for the three-hour drive back to supper in Eilat.

Day 5 : A welcome change to cooler conditions and northerly winds suggested that the Eilat mountains would be the place to be so we drove up to a viewpoint under Mount Yoash to enjoy what turned out to be a close and varied passage of raptors. Birds were passing us at a steady rate and most of our group found the key species with little trouble enjoying over 1000 Steppe Buzzards, almost 70 Black Kites, 10 Steppe Eagles and over 220 Black Storks. Slightly less expected were three Ospreys, a Booted Eagle and a Long-legged Buzzard. It was good to experience a real raptor passage at close quarters and feeling satisfied we moved on towards Amram's Pillars where again we found more raptor passing, although slightly higher and more distant this time. The Amram's Pillars area itself was rather quiet with no sign of the hoped for wintering Sinai Rosefinches. Although they aren't normally recorded there after mid-February, sometimes they do stay until mid-March. The best birds were a migrant Lesser Kestrel, two Eastern Bonelli's Warbler and good views of three Sand Partridges found by Steve as they walked up a scree slope. The afternoon was spent in the date plantations of Kibbutz Samar where migrants other than Lesser Whitethroats and Common Chiffchaffs once again were decidedly few and far between though a large flock of 60 Cattle Egrets were resting amongst the trees. Late winterers here included Black Redstart and Sardinian Warbler and we enjoyed good views of our target bird in the form of three Indian Silverbills. Most intriguing of all however, was a smallish dove in the turf fields. With a bright white vent and undertail coverts and rather bright-looking plumage for Eurasian Collared-dove, there is a very good possibility that this bird was actually an

African Collared-dove, which has been recorded in Israel about eight times. With that, we headed down towards Eilat sewage pools with just enough light left to watch 32 resting Garganey, calling and displaying. Our final destination of the day was the traditional Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse drinking site. We were not disappointed as 15 birds came into drink at this atmospheric spot before we headed back to the hotel for another wholesome buffet supper!

Day 6: Another early start with a packed breakfast in preparation for the long day out to the Dead Sea, we elected to break up the journey however, with a search for larks inside a military firing area! Although this sounds crazy, being a weekend we could be sure that no firing would be taking place at this particular spot and it was safe to proceed. Unfortunately, it was very quiet, with very few larks singing and the best birds of the morning, seven Thick-billed Larks, were seen in flight only by just one person. An extensive search to refind them wasn't successful but this is typical for Thick-billed Lark, with very few of them actually seen on the ground in Israel. Most of them just fly through, low over the desert. We eventually hear one or two Hoopoe Larks singing and several of our group had brief views of them displaying. Bar-tailed Desert Larks were calling here as well but with time pressing on and still a long drive in front of us, we headed north towards the lowest sea on earth. A couple more productive stops en-route included watching a Lesser Kestrel perched at Ein Yahav and good views of Dead Sea Sparrows (appropriately enough) at the nest at Zohar Pools. Reaching Ein Gedi at noon, the group enjoyed an hour doing their own things. Some went for a dip in the Dead Sea, others had lunch, whilst others just sipped cool drinks in the shade watching Tristram's Grackles in the palms and a few raptors (including Egyptian Vultures and Eurasian Griffon-vultures) along the magnificent cliffs of Ein Gedi. For the best views of Fan-tailed Raven, and perhaps of the Dead Sea itself, we went a little further north to Metzukei Deragot, which must be one of the most impressive desert canyons anywhere in Israel. The Fan-tailed Ravens were superb here, and a singing male House Bunting was a really nice bonus. Hooded and White-crowned Black Wheatears also put on great displays, especially for those who'd missed the first Hooded Wheatears in the early days of the trip. Later, we retraced our steps south to an oasis at the southern end of the Dead Sea called Neot Hakikkar. The birding here is always great and before too long we were enjoying Water Rails, Little Crakes, Little Bittern and what turned out to be our only Eurasian Coots of the entire tour! Even better was a superb male Pallid Harrier flying low overhead. We also met up with our guide for the evening, our good friend and excellent local birder, Arnon. He grew up in Neot Hakikkar and no one in Israel understands more about Nubian Nightjars than Arnon. After finding a singing Clamorous Reed Warbler and a huge cloud of Red-throated Pipits, Arnon found not one, but three Nubian Nightjars and every member of the group enjoyed views of this exceptionally-rare Western Palearctic nightjar. Without Arnon's assistance, no one is allowed access into this very sensitive site and Birdfinders are very grateful to him for giving us an evening to savour. The drive back to Eilat was a long after a hot day bird-filled day, but a break for refreshments at Yotvata and memories of the Nubian Nightjar made it bearable.

Day 7: In view of the late finish the previous evening, there was no early start this morning. Heading across to the north beach, we found several Striated Herons and Western Reef Herons, the latter always a challenge to pick out from the assembled Little Egrets. Rob also had a Cory's Shearwater here but we fared better in getting most people onto two Little Terns. Migrants were again in short supply in Eilat's date plantation but just as we were planning to leave, a sudden passage of Pallid Swifts overhead included not only an Alpine Swift but, more surprisingly, a wonderful Little Swift. As we drove towards the international border crossing just north of Eilat, we also found a small group of eight Desert Finches, which gave great views in a tamarisk grove. A little later, Steve's sharp eyes picked out a Eurasian Thick-knee (Stone Curlew) roosting under the shade of an Acacia tree at Km19, our first sighting of the trip. With just enough time before lunch to check one of the saltpans at Km20, we were thrilled to find a couple of Greater Sandplovers nearly in full-breeding plumage. There were plenty of other shorebirds there too, including over 20 Kentish Plovers. Also of interest was an adult male Yellow Wagtail of the form '*dombrowski*' which would be heading for Eastern Europe. Another rewarding morning was followed by lunch and a rest back at the hotel but, Namaqua Dove was still very much needed by most folks on the tour and their absence around Eilat had been the major surprise of the week. With that in mind, we headed north to Kibbutz Lotan, where small numbers of Namaquas are usually present around the diary barn. On a hot afternoon there was little to be found there, especially in the way of Namaqua Doves and we drove a couple miles south to Ketura's experimental

gardens which yielded two surprise birds, European Robin and Song Thrush, plus several Eastern Olivaceous Warblers. There was still however, no sign of Namaqua Doves so we decided to finish off the day at a very 'birdy' green desert spot near Kibutz Yahel. There was a good decision as we enjoyed a good selection of species here including lots of wheatears (Isabelline, Eastern Black-eared, Northern and Desert), several Bluethroats, Common Quail, Eurasian Wrynecks, a fine male Rüppell's Warbler, several Masked and Woodchat Shrikes, plenty of Cretzschmar's Buntings, good views of Tawny Pipits and Greater Short-toed Larks and our very first Willow Warbler of the tour.

Day 8 : Members of the group chose what to do on their final morning in Eilat. Some decided to stay close to the hotel, sleep in a little and then relax. The majority however, were up early for a final push which began at the North Beach where it was without doubt our best seawatching session of the entire week with plenty of action! Cory's Shearwater, White-eyed Gull, Arctic and Pomarine Skuas, Pied Kingfisher, and Baltic Gulls were all found. A magnificent Siberian (Heuglin's) Gull also came in off the sea as did a superb flock of 13 Greater Sandplovers and six Western Marsh-harriers. The contrast between this and the previous day was amazing but typical of Eilat in spring! Feeling pleased with our success, we headed inland and found six stunning Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters near Eilat's border with Jordan. Shortly afterwards, we were politely asked to move on by border security! Five minutes later we were back at Eilat's north sewage pools which offered a new selection of species including two Black-crowned Night-herons, Purple Heron, over 20 Dead Sea Sparrows and a pair of Namaqua Doves, at long last! We had great difficulty tearing ourselves away from this spot as the sky was full of migrating birds such as Steppe and Booted Eagles and a large party of European and Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, just a tantalising reminder of how good migration can really be in Eilat. A female Semi-collared Flycatcher found by the 'tireless' Barry in Shulamit Park was the last new bird to be entered into the log and we finished on a fantastic total of 197 species for the group tour list. This was twelve more than the previous highest tour total of 185 and testament to the very high level of effort contributed by everyone. Had there been a few more migrants around in this unusually slow week, we may well have achieved a group total of 200 species. The spring migration in Southern Israel is always fascinating and changes not only from week to week, but also from year to year. No two springs are alike and we expect that March 2005 will offer yet another amazing selection of highly sought after species.

James Smith