

Israel Spring

21–28 March 2011

Participants

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Arabian Babbler

Led by James P. Smith and Martyn Kenefick

Southern Israel in spring is synonymous with exciting bird migration. But there is so much more. During the week, we enjoyed visible raptor passage and close studies of many different migrant warblers. There are “the big five”; birds with extremely limited breeding distribution in the Western Palearctic, and we found them all. We enjoyed incredible success in the various desert areas worked, finding literally hundreds of larks, 20 species of raptor and all five species of sandgrouse. Most important of all, with very few exceptions, we saw all 191 species extremely well. With just one cold and windy exception, the weather was glorious, the accommodation excellent and the entire experience hassle free, all the essential ingredients of a successful tour.

Day 1 EasyJet obviously maintained its punctuality standards with the inbound Luton flight arriving in Tel Aviv on time. With straightforward and painless immigration, baggage reclaim and customs formalities out of the way, 14 tired faces met James and I at Ben Gurion airport early evening. Our two-hour drive to Kibbutz Gevulot ran pretty smoothly once we had shrugged off the remnants of Tel Aviv commuter traffic and from a birding perspective, the tour could not have got off to a better start. Beside the entrance road to the kibbutz, a Long-eared Owl (not seen properly on the previous tour) perched right out in the open and repeatedly dropped out of sight, emerging from a nearby ditch with a sizable rodent in its talons – not too shabby for starters! With a clear sky and full moon, it was decidedly chilly at 21.30. All that remained was room allocation and a good night's sleep. Little did we know that Dennis and Maurice would lead those who could not sleep into finding up to five Barn Owls within the grounds of the Kibbutz – all before midnight.

Day 2 It was a whirlwind start to the tour. Not only did we find a number of key, and in some cases, totally unexpected species during the day but we also covered a heck of a lot of ground. One of the main obstacles to watching birds in the desert is heat haze. Obviously best results are to be had in the early morning and so we assembled shortly after 05.30 watching Syrian Woodpeckers whilst loading up the vehicles. The drive to the public access area of desert at Nizzana takes around 50 minutes. This is an area of undulating stone desert ‘steppe’ with scattered tamarisk and acacia alongside the Egyptian border. Our principal tar-

get here is Macqueen's Bustard – one of the “five most wanted” and we enjoyed lengthy, if a little distant, views of two males strutting around the desert, back and forth, sometimes round and round in circles with white plumes waving in the air. Several Cream-coloured Coursers were darting too and fro and parties of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse flew over calling. For the second tour running we scored with the same major Israel rarity: the previous Birdfinders tour had seen a Black-shouldered Kite in the area; this morning we had two, frequently hovering “kestrel-esque” over the desert. The supporting cast included male Merlin, Southern Grey Shrike and an early spiral of White Storks. Close by, at Nizzana sewage lagoons, we ate our packed breakfasts whilst watching a delightful party of Black-bellied Sandgrouse repeatedly coming into drink and an absolutely stunning adult male Pallid Harrier quartering the fields nearby. Other noticeable highlights during the hour or so we were sat there included a close fly past Spotted Sandgrouse and a couple of Hen Harriers, whilst overhead the White Stork count was approaching 2,000. We had a long way to travel today, but before leaving the area James decided to try walking through some old alfalfa fields close by. This really paid dividends with two quality sightings: a late Oriental Skylark (very rare this far west) and a Zitting Cisticola (the only one to be seen on either tour). Overhead, our first Lesser Spotted and Short-toed Eagles drifted over, shortly followed by a Common Crane.

It was difficult to leave but we had a lot of ground to cover. We drove east then turned south through a barren, brown landscape, finally reaching Mitzpe Ramon on the edge of the magnificent Ramon crater. “Birding Ramon” revolves mainly around watching over a weedy, overgrown football pitch and the star attraction is the wintering population of Tristram's Serins. With a tiny breeding distribution embracing just northern Israel, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon it is justifiably one of our “five most wanted”. We managed to find the rearguard three birds still present (there had been 14 just a few days ago) and I'm sure all would have flown north before the week was out. We were also fortunate to re-find the lingering female Cyprus Wheatear still favouring the northern goal post crossbar as its chosen perch, but also no doubt nearing the end of its stay. Out towards the cliffs, eastern Mourning and *melanoleuca* Black-eared Wheatears were added to the tour list as was a female Blue Rock-thrush. It was now mid-afternoon and there were still good birds to be found. Much of the stone desert area south east of Mitzpe is a military firing zone hence there is absolutely no public access during week days. Nevertheless, a roadside vigil at the Ha'Meishar plains produced three stunning male Desert Wheatears. By late afternoon we had reached Shizzafon and diverted eastwards to the Ovda Valley. At first glance it looked just like any other empty piece of stone desert but we quickly realized it was absolutely heaving with larks. The two “star species” were in parties totalling 130 Thick-billed Larks and 60 Bimaculated Larks all feeding on dead or dying short grasses. But these were just part of the flock. In and around them were at least 320 Greater Short-toed Larks and probably 40 Trumpeter Finches. As the sun neared the horizon, we completed our journey through the Eilat Mountains to the hotel Dan Panorama, our base for the remainder of the tour.

Day 3 The real problem for James and I was how to live up to the expectations created by yesterday's phenomenal successes. Directly opposite the Dan Panorama lies Shulamit Park – a magnet for migrants. It is small but well vegetated with well-watered lawns. The most numerous migrants were Lesser Whitethroats and Common Chiffchaffs together with a sprinkling of Blackcaps. Of more interest however, were single Eurasian Wryneck, Eastern Olivaceous and Sardinian Warblers. After breakfast, we made the short transfer to Holland Park on the western slope of Eilat. This is an area of scattered acacia, planted native shrubs and dense tamarisks on stony ground. There was little evidence of passerine migration save for excellent views of hyperactive Eastern Bonelli's Warblers. We found our first Sand Partridge and an Arabian Babbler whilst a light-morph Booted Eagle soared over. We then crossed town to the Eilat Birdwatching Centre. This is a well-appointed nature reserve replete with freshwater lakes, public footpaths and hides with stands of tamarisk, suseda and acacia. Extensive mist net and heligoland trapping takes place daily during the season and amongst the many visitors are school parties and of course participants at the Eilat Bird Festival, which was in full swing. We found our first Purple and Squacco Herons but arrived too late to witness the capture and banding of a Ménétries's Warbler mentioned in passing as we chatted to one of the Israeli staff ringers.

With fewer migrants than we'd hoped for, we drove north to check out the saltpans at kilometre post 20. There had obviously been a large arrival of Slender-billed Gulls and Kentish Plovers together with smaller numbers of Little Stints. On the pools, Greater Flamingos fed alongside Black-winged Stilts and Pied

Avocets, whilst a delightful little flock of eight Garganeys remained in the middle of the water. About 50 km north of Eilat lies Yotvata, an area of cultivated fields, amidst dunes and acacia scrub – a site that we were to visit regularly during the week. There is also a well-stocked shop/café/sandwich bar that serves extremely strong coffee and many flavours of ice-cream and sorbet – another strong point in its favour! During the middle of the day, we worked the recently cut hay fields and birds were plentiful. In abundance were Greater Short-toed Larks, certainly there were more than 100 running like mice in the furrows. Of more interest were another 30 Bimaculated Larks, 10 Water Pipits many of which were in the pinks and greys of summer plumage and a lone Tawny Pipit and Common Quails were regularly flying up from under our feet. Overhead we heard the first Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters of the spring, clearly in the air for some time but they seemed to be too high for a visual. Slightly south of Yotvata lies Kibbutz Eliphaz and on the eastern side of the highway are some small sewage ponds, a few of which were fringed with reeds. Here we found flocks of White Wagtails with single Citrine and Grey cousins admixed. We first heard, and then saw the first European Bee-eaters of the spring flying purposefully north without even pausing. Several Bluethroats flicked around the reedy margins and we played hide and seek with an unidentified rail species – the rail won, but the overwhelming sense was that it was probably Little Crake. More definitive was the identification of a Common Snipe, checked carefully for Great Snipe, which has been recorded at this time of year.

With the heat having gone out of the afternoon sun, we drove down to the Gulf of Aquaba and watched from Eilat North Beach. Here a small group of six White-eyed Gulls lazed around offshore as did single Siberian, Caspian and Armenian Gulls, all perched on floating buoys whilst two delightful flocks of migrating Slender-billed Gulls, most with rosy breasts, flew over. Our final new species for the day were Eilat specials – Pied Kingfisher and Western Reef-heron, both showing extremely well. Whilst we had not found the volume of migrants that we hoped for, the quality and species spread proved it to be yet another extremely successful day.

Day 4 There was an obvious feeling of newly arrived migrants in the park first thing. Blackcaps were the dominant species, with females showing for the first time. In one corner, half a dozen Eurasian Reed-warblers were “tchacking away” obviously new in. However, both single Eurasian Wryneck and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers were likely hangers on from yesterday. But not all of the group was in the park – controversy reigned from the yachting marina on the other side of the hotel with differing opinions of a small heron which eventually proved to be a Striated Heron, here at its most northerly distribution point in the Western Palearctic and visible from the balcony of at least some of the rooms in our hotel! After breakfast we drove north to kilometre post 33, a site famed until the late nineties for its larks, and being an incursion year for Dunn’s Lark, certainly worth a look. As it happened, all we saw were Desert Larks and one tiny-billed, and round-headed Bar-tailed Lark, plus migrant Short-toed Eagle and Woodchat Shrike. We also inadvertently flushed an extremely long and floppy-eared Cape Hare. Our next quest was to find the third of the “five most wanted”: Arabian Warbler. This species has a tiny distribution – it is completely sedentary within its range and one well-known site is in acacia forest close to Yotvata. As is so often the case, finding one took a while but it eventually showed extremely well to all. Also in the area were several Eastern Bonelli’s Warblers hovering in front of flowering branches and a flighty pair of Sand Partridges, whilst single Black Stork and intermediate-morph Booted Eagle glided over. Our final stop before lunch was at Yotvata sewage ponds. On the main lagoons we found several Squacco Herons and a Citrine Wagtail. Beyond the main body of ‘water’, a seep feeds into another marshy area bordered by phragmites and sedge. Here, amongst a party of Spanish Sparrows, we found four diminutive Dead Sea Sparrows, a bird we had searched long and hard for the previous week without success. Also present were several Bluethroats and our first European Turtle-dove singing from the tamarisks. John H, not being quite satisfied with his views of female Dead Sea Sparrows, lingered at the site during the lunch break was justly rewarded with fine views of several more, including a male.

Having sated our thirst and cooled our throats with combinations such as scoops of mango and lemon sorbet in the Yotvata refreshment facilities, we used the heat of the midday period to divert up the western cliffs and look over Shizzafon sewage pools. Being several hundred feet higher in elevation, there was a definite cooling breeze. This area is an enigma. On the one hand there are several definite and rather smelly sewage ponds but the remainder of the site seems to be converted into an ornamental garden – all against a bleak

desert landscape. Here we found another Citrine Wagtail, a rather lethargic, possibly sickly White Stork, our first Eurasian Linnets, and both Black-eared and Isabelline Wheatears. With none of the 'hoped-for' Hooded Wheatears at Shizzafon, it was back to work the Yotvata southern circular field. It was plainly obvious that many birds had dropped in during the day and this made for an exciting late afternoons birding. Amongst the hundreds of White Wagtails and Greater Short-toed Larks were a sprinkling of Red-throated and Water Pipits, both showing vestiges of breeding dress, and yet more Bimaculated Larks, a bird that only just made it onto last week's tour list. Several Cretzschmar's and our first Ortolan Bunting perched atop bales of straw, an immaculate Masked Shrike posed low down in a tamarisk and several Woodchats were equally obvious, Black-eared Wheatears shared furrows with Desert Wheatears and Yellow Wagtails abounded with *flava*, *superciliaris* and *dombrowski* races amongst the abundant *feldeggs*. For sheer dramatic plumage, little could match the stunning male Caspian and Armenian races of Siberian Stonechat on view. At last we had found the quantity to match the quality of the last few days.

Day 5 What a difference a day makes. We set off shortly after 06.00 to cover the first rain-spattered 100km or so of our journey and arrive at the extensive Hiyyon plains before any heat haze set in. Entry is strictly prohibited in these firing zones during the working week, but permissible on the Israeli weekend. I should have looked into James rucksack before leaving the hotel. We parked up, opened the doors to begin scouring the plains and I saw James kitted out in woolly hat and gloves. The wind wasn't cold, it was absolutely freezing and there was a heavy horizontal drizzle blowing into our faces – not quite what you'd expect from Israel in the spring. Not surprisingly the first hour produced very little save for a ghostly-pale adult male Pallid Harrier skimming the dunes as it passed and a couple of Desert Larks scurrying between stunted bushes. The wind then dropped a fraction and the sun briefly appeared. All of a sudden a couple of Desert Wheatears appeared, a Streaked Scrub-warbler briefly showed cocking its tail atop a bush and we tracked down one of our chief target birds of the day, a beautiful and confiding Temminck's Lark – much appreciated by the photographers amongst us. But try as we might, we just couldn't locate the pair of Greater Hoopoe-larks that showed so well here the week before. As the day thankfully warmed up, our boxed breakfasts were duly devoured and it was time to drive a further 100km to the southern end of the Dead Sea. Here a roadside pool fringed with sueda, tamarisk and phragmites is a fairly reliable site for Clamorous Reed-warbler, provided it's not too windy. We quickly had excellent views of a most inquisitive male who repeatedly perched out in the open showing an extremely long and thin bill, so unlike the Great Reed-warblers which would be passing through in days to come. Otherwise, the only other birds on view were several Little Green Bee-eaters, hawking insects from fence post perches, Arabian Babblers and Pale Crag Martins.

We then completed our planned northward journey to the resort of Ein Gedi. Time was made available for some to sample swimming or at least floating in the Dead Sea, whilst others birded a local wadi and date palm plantation. Whilst participants returned with stories of White-breasted Kingfisher in the date palms, James and I had noticed a small but consistent migration in full swing over the western cliffs. We decided to drive a further 10km north, before climbing the zig-zag road to the top of the cliffs at Metzukei Deragot. Here, atop the cliffs overlooking the Dead Sea, with local Bedouin brewing tea and playing football all around us, we spent the next hour or so looking skywards. Parties totalling 530 Common Cranes soared over in tight circling bunches. More direct and right overhead came a lazy procession of nine Black Storks whilst pairs of Egyptian Vultures and Eurasian Griffons were continually being harassed by the local ravens, of all three species. The Dead Sea is a prime site for Fan-tailed and the widespread Brown-necked is still pretty regular but Common Raven is decidedly scarce. All the while, Lynne was doing her bit for international relations and was offered sweet Bedouin tea for her troubles. On the steep slopes of the gorge opposite, Adrian picked out a fine male Sand Partridge that stood on sentry duty while its more cryptically-coloured mate foraged nearby and at last our photographers had the opportunity to catch up with posing White-tailed Wheatears.

And so we came to our evening with night birds. Having met our local IOC guide, we were taken into a high-sided wadi, actually a National Nature Reserve. A particularly aggressive and inquisitive territorial male Hume's Owl quickly came into peer at us from the top of a tall sandstone cliff. There are understandable laws governing the use of spotlights on this species and our permitted guide observed these to the letter, but even so, almost all enjoyed excellent telescope views of one of the most difficult owls in the

Western Palearctic. It was then time to drive south, beyond the Dead Sea to Neot Hakikkar, now the only known breeding site for Nubian Nightjars in the whole country, and perhaps the entire WP region. Our guide informed us of the truly fragile status of this distinctive sub-species (*tamariskii*) which may yet be recognized as a species in its own right. In short, to say the views gained were excellent both in flight and on the ground is a gross understatement – at one point we had a resting Nubian Nightjar just two metres away inside the fence bordering a mine field, just about as safe a place as it could be and perhaps the only reason this species hangs on by such a tenuous thread in Israel. The “five most wanted” had all now been seen. All that remained was the long drive back to Eilat with a caffeine and sandwich stop en route. We arrived back at our hotel well before midnight, a much-improved situation on previous years.

Day 6 Being a Saturday, this was our last chance to bird the firing zones; we still had several important desert species to try and find, and more importantly the weather was back to normal. However, we began the birding day straight after breakfast at sewage pools around kilometre post 19. There had been reported a controversial Oriental Turtle-dove hanging around some cattle pens. This species is a major rarity in Israel. All our search turned up was a perfectly normal looking European Turtle-dove sat on the border fence. In the dry ditches, several Dead Sea Sparrows flitted around, a fine male Black-eared Wheatear sat on the fence of the dairy building and an immaculate male Namaqua Dove fed out in the open. Meanwhile, Dennis had seen a possible candidate for the Oriental Turtle-dove but despite a concerted effort, it wasn't seen by anyone else in our party. We vowed to have another try later in the tour. The brisk northerly wind certainly encouraged diurnal migration. There was a strong movement of literally thousands of Barn Swallows throughout our stay and parties of White Storks trying desperately to gain height totalled around 340. A trickle of Steppe Buzzards and Black Kites also passed through. On the pools themselves, there was a fine selection of ducks. Northern Shoveler was the most numerous but we also found Eurasian Wigeon, Common Teal, Northern Pintail, Common Pochard and Tufted Duck – all new for the tour. However, the star birds were two Spotted Eagles, one of which perched on the banks of the pool before drifting off slowly into Jordan. Sadly, James and I were the only ones able to get onto a fast-flying Barbary Falcon.

Just one kilometre north at the salt pools, it was much the same as Wednesday. However numbers were well up with perhaps 200 Slender-billed Gulls present and at least 25 Ruffs, some starting to show their unique summer headdresses. One wader caused concern. Unfortunately it was never close and always on the edge of the heat haze. By a process of elimination it had to be a dark and dowdy Wood Sandpiper. In the late morning we drove north to lunch once more at Yotvata before a much longer drive northwest took us to the Ha'Meishar plains. A systematic walk in a wide arc across the stone and sand desert covered much of the area. As expected, larks were plentiful. Again Greater Short-toed predominated with at least 120 birds on view. 80 Thick-billed Larks mysteriously disappeared soon after being seen and we found five more Bimaculated Larks. The prize and main target here is Crowned Sandgrouse, normally the most difficult of its family to find in Israel. We found a strung out flock quietly feeding amongst stunted yellowed grasses. An accurate count was difficult given the terrain but there were certainly at least 140 birds spread out across the wadi. In all the years of spring visits to Israel, Birdfinders have never encountered such numbers of this charismatic sandgrouse, a truly unprecedented event for the leaders. With several desert species still required and just the late afternoon remaining, we diverted east to look over a different side of the Hiyyon plains. Much to Adrian's delight we quickly came across a delightful party of Bar-tailed Larks. Further from the road, we came across up to 12 Spotted Sandgrouse which were initially very wary but after time fed right out in the open. Sadly neither Greater Hoopoe-lark nor Dunn's Larks or Asian Desert Warbler could be found despite a big effort. The sun was just setting as we commenced the steady drive back to Eilat, arriving in good time for another fine buffet supper.

Day 7 It was quite chilly first thing - exacerbated by a stiff northerly wind. New arrivals in Shulamit Park included our first Willow Warblers and Common Nightingales. Both Blackcap and Common Chiffchaff numbers were slowly declining but there were half a dozen Sedge Warblers, at least three Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, two Eurasian Wrynecks and a *maura* Siberian Stonechat in their place. With the wind in the north, there is something special about witnessing visible migration and there was every chance of a good raptor passage. We quickly made our way up to Wadi Shlomo in the Eilat Mountains and were not to be disappointed. Between 08.15 and 09.30 we enjoyed a continual passage of some 535 Steppe Buzzards,

20 Black Kites, our first of 15 Steppe Eagles, an unexpectedly impressive total of five Booted Eagles, a Long-legged Buzzard and an Osprey. But it was not just birds of prey passing through. Common Swifts were absolutely pouring by with a few Alpine Swifts admixed. Wadi Shlomo is only at an intermediate elevation in the mountains. Whilst we would likely have seen a larger number of birds higher up, we would most certainly not have seen them so close. Next stop, another visit to Holland Park and the acacia scrub. We had received word that one particular flowering bush, in the north-west corner of the park had been extremely “busy” with warblers over the previous few days. Over the course of an hour or so we identified seven different species of *Sylvia* warblers in it. Most numerous, and certainly most aggressive were Rüppell’s Warblers, including at least three full adult males. Hot on their heels in terms of popularity was a particularly confiding adult male *albistriata* Subalpine Warbler. Of much rarer fare, but sadly only seen briefly by a lucky few, was a female Ménétries’s Warbler. Two Eastern Orphean Warblers showed all too briefly before strongly flying down the wadi and the set was completed by Blackcap, Lesser Whitethroat and Common Whitethroat of the form *icterops*. Elsewhere in the park Eastern Bonelli’s Warbler, Eurasian Wryneck, Arabian Babbler and several Eurasian Hoopoes were found.

After an hour-long vigil by the “magic sylvia bush”, and with time running we headed north to Yotvata and lunch once again. It was already extremely hot and the sorbet store took a hammering! With only an afternoon’s birding left on the tour and time a premium, the group split in two. Some stood vigil over the sandy fields adjacent to the north circular field hoping for Caspian Plover. The remainder, acting on information received, gazed across the sand dunes that straddle the Jordanian border fence for Greater Hoopoe-larks. We found two, much to the amusement of two Jordanian border security guards atop a watchtower. But sadly there were no Caspian Plovers for the field crew. We then quickly drove south and again split in two groups. James led one in a further search for the ‘then’ presumed Oriental Turtle-dove at km19 whilst the remainder came with me to look over the salt pools at kilometre post 20. The next half an hour was an absolute farce. To minimize our embarrassment, the subject of our scrutiny turned out to be a Grey Plover – but a whole lot of names were suggested before it lifted its wing up and displayed its arm pits! However, it was a new bird for the tour, in fact the first in our two weeks in Israel, so all was not lost. With the clock running against us, a mad dash to the northern end of the lagoons produced a distant summer-plumaged Greater Sandplover. As for the Oriental Turtle-dove, well the bird in question was seen but didn’t look strikingly different from a large, darkish European Turtle-dove, examples of which are fairly common in migration through Eilat. It later transpired that the bird had been seen and photographed by some of Israel’s elite and identified quite correctly as a European Turtle-dove. For James it was a cautionary tale of the many erroneous reports that can emerge from Eilat during the peak of spring migration – during the same week, a claim of Kittlitz’s Plover was proven to be an oiled Kentish, and another claim concerning a photographed Dunn’s Lark clearly showed a rufous Greater Short-toed Lark. The final evening’s timetable revolved around being in position at dusk for the hoped for arrival of Lichtenstein’s Sandgrouse coming into drink. The warm up artists (who turned out to be the stars of the show) were a delightful pair of Little Crakes walking right out in the open, no more than 15 meters from us. Yes the sandgrouse appeared, five of them. But they chose to land on the opposite bank in fast fading light and it was fair to say that the views were disappointing, at best. Nevertheless it had been a magnificent penultimate days birding as we returned for a final night stay at Dan Panorama.

Day 8 The bulk of the day was taken up with the 350km drive from Eilat to Tel Aviv. However, there was still an opportunity for birding. Shulamit Park was a little disappointing, apart from the long-staying Eurasian Wryneck and Siberian Stonechat, there was a real reduction in numbers. We had received reports of a Hooded Wheatear being seen southwest of Eilat in lower Wadi Shlomo, close to Camel Ranch. Sadly all we could find were White-tailed Wheatears, but our only Common Cuckoo of the tour, several Blackstarts, an Eastern Bonelli’s Warbler and an exceptionally pale Short-toed Eagle made the brief visit worthwhile.

We checked out of Dan Panorama around 10.00 and drove steadily north and then northwest. As we climbed out of the Dead Sea basin, it was almost as if a green paintbrush had been taken to the ground. All of a sudden there were grassy fields and roadside flowers. Eventually we reached our site, a nature reserve in the Southern Judean Hills composed of a series of rolling grassy hills, with scattered boulders and flowering bushes – a beautiful place. A foraging White Stork had obviously used up its fat reserves on the northbound

journey and only managed to fly short distances out of our way before searching for food once more. There was a steady passage of Common Swifts with both Pallid and Alpines amongst them and a Short-toed Eagle hovered over our heads. Our joint quarryies were Long-billed Pipit and Spectacled Warbler. Both were eventually seen, with good views of the former song-fighting and on the ground. Despite careful scanning, all the kestrels seen turned out to be Common with no Lessers seen on this particular tour, but a nice close fly past Long-legged Buzzard provided some compensation. As we were driving out of the area, Western Jackdaw became the final new species for the tour list, a species that would accompany us all the way to Ben Gurion airport.

The journey to the airport took a further hour or so. Adrian managed to catch up with White-breasted Kingfisher whilst Ian and Les finally tracked down Common Mynas right outside the departures building! We bade farewell to James who was leaving from a different terminal and then settled down for the typically enhanced security procedures for leaving Israel, notably more intense than upon arrival. Nevertheless, our flight was punctual once again and actually arrived early just before midnight at a cold, breezy Luton airport. Much of our success is due to the James' field experience and local knowledge. Not only his quick eyes, and even more acute hearing but also his careful attention to plumage detail minimizing any possible identification pitfalls. The entire tour party were very companionable and my only regret is that I didn't possess an English–Irish dictionary at times! On any tour, there is always an incident or two that remains in the memory. For me, the look on John B's face when he finally caught up with his nemesis Thick-billed Lark said it all.

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