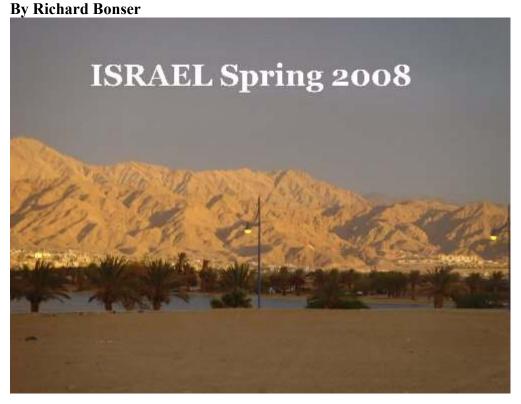
ISRAEL March-April 2008



Introduction

I first visited Israel in December 2005 and, since then, had promised myself that I would return in spring to have a look at its famed migration. This was also to be my 'non-birding holiday' of the year with my girlfriend so although birding was done and I saw all the target species I had expected, the intensity of birding wasn't quite as much as you would expect at times. So, you'll find that reading through this, there may be several species you'll be surprised I didn't see despite being in the immediate area.

With flights from the UK to Ovda (the airport near Eilat) in short supply these days due to the downturn in Israeli tourism, we flew to Tel Aviv from Luton with Thomson Fly. We spent the first night in Tel Aviv, the second on The Dead Sea and then five nights in Eilat. Unfortunately our return flight to the UK was delayed by 2 days(!) and therefore a couple of impromptu nights were spent near Tel Aviv waiting for the plane to be fixed and our pilot to fly.

The aim of this report is to update, to an extent, my report from <u>December 2005</u> with hopefully a fair amount of new information and to document how enjoyable a relaxed spring visit to Israel can be. My visit to Eilat was the week after the Bird Festival week and therefore numbers of birders I encountered were in the 10s as opposed to the 100s.

Literature

A lot of sites visited were either given to me by birders via email or they were sites that I'd been to in 2005. 'A Guide to the Birding Hot-spots of Southern Israel' by Hadoram Shirihai, James Smith, Guy Kirwan and Dan Alon was useful in The Dead Sea and Eilat area, providing me with a refresher course in how to access some sites.

To navigate around, I used a 1:150,000 Israel: The New Road Atlas (published by Mapa Publishers). Bird reference books I used during my visit included The Collins Bird Guide (Mullarney, Svensson, Zetterstrom and Grant), The Raptors of Europe and The Middle East (Forsman) and the Field Guide to the Birds of The Middle East (Porter, Christensen and Schiermacker-Hansen).

Websites and acknowledgements

A lot of the information that was used I got off the 'usual suspects' so thanks once again to Chris Batty, Chris Bell, Alan Clewes, Andy Clifton, Lee Gregory and Andy Holden. Thanks to Alan who's allowed me to use a couple of his photos from his visit the week prior to mine. Other birders that either helped with information either prior or during the trip included Yaron Charka, Sean Huggins, Graham Langley, Yoav Perlman and Noam Weiss. Finally an eternal thanks to Shaun Robson and his crew who miraculously found my GPS and returned it to me safely – I still owe you those beers lads!

The <u>IsraBirding</u> website has up-to-date information and trip reports with the forum section having recent news and comments from Israeli birders.

Other information

Driving through the West Bank is perfectly fine and from Tel Aviv we used this route, via Jerusalem, to travel to The Dead Sea. Driving on the whole is stress free and easy – the only hazard you need to be aware of are the huge numbers of police cars that line route 90 between Eilat and Yotvata on a daily basis. The speed limit out of towns is 90 km per hour and on motorways the limit is 110 km per hour.

Israel is not a cheap country and I found that prices of everyday goods, food etc were on a par with UK prices and fuel was only slightly cheaper than the extortionate amount we pay back home. Food was excellent throughout and the accommodation we stayed in was of a high standard, making an excellent combination for a holiday of relaxation and birding. Unlike some of its neighbouring countries, a holiday in Israel lacks any local hassle.

Daily Diary

30th March 2008

We flew from Luton airport with Thomson Fly early afternoon to Tel Aviv, landing on time just before eight o'clock in the evening. After collecting our hire car (a Hyundai Getz through <u>Budget</u>) we headed the short distance to Tel Aviv where we stayed on its northern outskirts at the Hotel Tal for the evening.

31st March 2008

As the saying goes, I was determined to save the best until last. Therefore the target for my first full morning was to 'clear up' on what you may term those dreaded Category C species. So I was up at dawn, sensibly leaving Karen to explore Tel Aviv on her own, while I headed 30miles north to the small town of Pardes Khana-Karkur.

Pardes Khana-Karkur (north-east of Hadera)

I arrived and parked my car in a small car park off Hadekalim Street and commenced my search for **Black-hooded Parakeet**, a species which maintains a 'sustainable

(though not expanding) population' in the area (IRDC bulletin 6:01). Knowing that a couple of mates had seen the species the day before I headed to where they'd seen a single bird after an hour or so of searching. Alas there was nothing unsurprisingly although large numbers of squawking **Ring-necked Parakeets** flew around the area as offensively as they do in London. Rather nicer was the **Cattle Egret** and **Glossy Ibis** colony that was present in the town park that served as a reminder I was a fair way from home.

Wandering around the area for a couple of hours I managed to chalk up some interesting species — Syrian Woodpecker, Palestine Sunbird, Graceful Prinia, White-breasted Kingfisher, Jay (of the race atricapillus), Red-rumped Swallow, Laughing Dove, Lesser Whitethroat as well as some more exotica in the form of Common Myna. After a couple of hours searching and the rain had passed, I eventually found a pair of Black-hooded Parakeets in trees at N32°28'18", E34°58'30". So, after admiring the birds for what they were worth, I headed off back to Tel Aviv conscious of the time (it was now mid morning) and my heart set on the next Cat C extravaganza — Vinous-breasted Starling.

Hayarkon Park, Tel Aviv

By now it was late morning and it had turned into a decent day weather wise as I pulled into the eastern parking lot at Hayarkon Park. I walked to the area by the waterslide and immediately found the **Vinous-breasted Starlings** – three in total at N32°06'06", E34°49'15". After having my fill of this introduced Asian species I realised I had a bit of time to play with before meeting Karen back at the hotel so set about exploring the area.

A quality **Masked Shrike** in the area of scrub by the river near the starlings was a good start and, walking through the park area, it was evident that a fall of wagtails had occurred – at least 100 **White Wagtails** along with **Yellow Wagtails** of the races *flava* and *feldegg* (Black-headed Wagtail). **Jackdaws** and **Hooded Crows** were numerous, as were **Spur-winged Plovers** and **Yellow-vented Bulbuls**, while smaller numbers of **Cattle Egret**, **Glossy Ibis** and **Hoopoe** were seen. A **Steppe Buzzard** soared over and three **White-breasted Kingfishers** posed well at various points on my walk while other exotica other than the starlings included **Monk** and **Ring-necked Parakeets** and hundreds of **Common Mynas**. An adult **Night Heron** over the road as I headed back to Tel Aviv reminded me that I was actually on the Mediterranean as opposed to the Indian subcontinent.

Having picked Karen up after her morning seeing the sights of Tel Aviv, we headed off east through Jerusalem and The West Bank to Ein Gedi midway along The Dead Sea where we were to spend the night at the rather chilled out and tranquil setting of Ein Gedi Kibbutz.

Kibbutz Ein Gedi

While unloading our stuff in this well-vegetated area overlooking Ein Gedi and the popular birding site of Wadi Arugot, the first **Fan-tailed Ravens** and **Rock Martins** of the trip soared above us. A walk around the gardens in the last hour or so of light produced a **Red-rumped Swallow** and a **Wryneck** amongst the commoner species with pride of place going to a flock of c.50 **European Bee-eaters** that were looking to pitch down for the night.

1st April 2008

I awoke early and decided to have a walk around the kibbutz gardens before breakfast. Things were rather noisy so I knew the grackles were in town...

Kibbutz Ein Gedi

They weren't around yesterday evening but they were here with a vengeance this morning – a flock of c.50 noisy **Tristram's Grackles** were moving through the gardens making their presence known to all and sundry. Walking to the northern perimeter of the complex to have a look over Wadi Arugot, I disturbed an active party of three **Arabian Babblers** that showed well and appeared unperturbed by my close approach. The **Wryneck** was still present in the bushes with **Lesser Whitethroat**, **Palestine Sunbird** and **Blackcap** also seen. A fair number of **Fan-tailed Ravens**, **Rock Martins** and **Red-rumped Swallows** flew overhead. A lone male **Yellow Wagtail** on the lawn was of the race *thunbergi*.

After breakfast we headed down to Ein Gedi spa where guests of the kibbutz get free access to the facilities. I wasn't too keen on the mud bath and the mineral treatments, but I was persuaded to have a swim in The Dead Sea – Karen couldn't believe I'd visited the area previously and not even had a paddle! After an hour or so I departed the spa, leaving Karen there, and headed to the north of Ein Gedi to Ein Salvadori with Mountain Bunting and other dry wadi species in mind.

Ein Salvadori

Just a couple of miles north of Ein Gedi, I pulled off route 90 and parked my car then followed the path marked by the blue and white rocks to N31 ° 31'12", E35 ° 23'10" (for directions see Mountain Bunting in species notes). The walk up to Ein Salvadori produced a handful of **Blackstarts** and numerous **Tristram's Grackles** while a dozen or so **Ortolans** were presumably migrating through the area. Upon reaching the vegetation after scrambling up the path, I flushed a pair of **Sand Partridges** that settled on nearby rocks and gave good views. After a bit of scanning around, I found the target bird **Mountain Bunting** singing though it proved remarkably difficult to locate due to the echo in the 'bowl' created by the rocks. The scrub in the wadi held a few **Lesser Whitethroats** and an **Eastern Orphean Warbler** while **Rock Martins** and **Fan-tailed Ravens** appeared overhead in small numbers. A big bonus were a pair of **Sinai Rosefinches** – the male looking pristine – and a **Trumpeter Finch** that came down to investigate the area presumably drawn by the small amount of water in an otherwise barren landscape.

I couldn't get back to the spa quick enough believe it or not. If ever you swim in The Dead Sea, make sure you have a shower afterwards as the chaffing I experienced while climbing the path at Ein Salvadori was one of the most excruciatingly painful moments I've experienced to date. And it was then time for the drive to Eilat - my nerves had been severely tested as I'd received a text the previous evening telling me that the Black Bush Robin (found on 28th March) was still at the bird sanctuary.

Eilat

I wish I could say the drive was uneventful... it did take only 2 ½ hours but I'd forgotten how rife with police route 90 is between Yotvata and Eilat! So we got pulled over and a stern looking Israeli police officer asked me the usual questions –

presumably me deliberately acting like the stupid tourist and Karen smiling sweetly did the trick and we got a warning not to do it again.

I had a brief look around the bird sanctuary late afternoon but unfortunately the gate was closed so, rather frustrated, I had to do without the Black Bush Robin for today with numerous **European Bee-eaters** being little compensation. I returned to the car and found Karen with a police car – while I'd been away she'd taken a couple of photos of the Yitzhak Rabin border crossing that had presumably alerted their attention. Once they had a look at our passports and established we'd once again been naïve tourists, we were on our way to North Beach. As we headed into Eilat, a superb male **Pallid Harrier** drifted north along the airfield providing excellent views.

North Beach was quiet but it was good to see species like **White-eyed Gull** and **Western Reef Egret** again. A few **Lesser Black-backed** and **Armenian Gulls** drifted and **Caspian Terns**, **Slender-billed Gulls** and a couple of **Sandwich Terns** were offshore. It was here I met Israeli birder Yaron Charka who was extremely helpful and managed to sort out access for us the next day to access the bird sanctuary – his help and texts the next day were very much appreciated. Once the plan had been hatched Karen and I departed for our first of five nights and the rather nice, but rather expensive, Hilton Queen of Sheba Hotel.

2nd April 2008

I awoke early, bumped into Shaun Robson and his team as I was leaving the hotel, and met Yaron at North Beach as it was getting light – we then headed to the bird sanctuary where we met Noam Weiss.

Eilat Bird Sanctuary

Located just to the north of the town, to get here turn right off route 90 (if you're going north) to the Yitzhak Rabin border crossing - just after the garage on the northern edge of town. Follow this road around past the border crossing and then you'll pick up 'birdwatching' signs and you can park by the gate at N29°34'20", E34°58'21". Noam let us in (well, he let Yaron in and I accompanied him) and we quickly headed to the spot along the main track just beyond the small ringing hut. And, then, if by magic there it was – a gorgeous **Black Bush Robin** showing well in the path side scrub just as the sun was beginning to come up. What a quality bird – cocking its tail and flicking its wings presumably displaying and interesting to find out from Noam that despite the brown primaries they're unsafe to age.

Loads of hirundines flew overhead including lots of Red-rumped Swallows, while Chiffchaffs, Blackcaps and Lesser Whitethroats were present in good numbers. Back at the ringing hut we were shown a Wood Warbler and Eastern Bonelli's Warbler and a scan of the scrapes produced Wood and Green Sandpipers and several Little Stints. A very nice start to the day and it was only quarter to eight!

Northern Date Palms, Eilat

And so the slog started. Yaron and I walked through the gate at N29°34'57", E34°58'30" and commenced the search for the wintering **Crested Honey Buzzard**. Needing to be back at the hotel for breakfast a quick wander around proved fruitless. But, after spending five hours at varying points in the day, and seeing countless **Steppe Buzzards** in the process it was not until late afternoon that the target bird was

found – particularly nervous and when eyeball contact was made, it moved on through the plantation. A really good bird to see and the first winter record of this species anywhere in the Western Palearctic. Searching the area through the day did produce some good birds though with two Olive-backed Pipits being the undoubted highlights while other birds noted included Redstart, Black-eared Wheatear, Northern Wheatear, Tawny Pipit, Red-throated Pipit and Hoopoe with European Bee-eaters, Red-rumped Swallows and an Osprey overhead.

Hilton Queen of Sheba Hotel, Eilat

While chilling out mid morning (in between Crested Honey Buzzard searches) a small movement of raptors flew over the hotel complex – 1 Steppe Eagle and 150 or so Steppe Buzzards – several of which struggling to gain height over our towering hotel as they came in quite low from the Gulf of Aqaba. Three **Tristram's Grackles** were present in the hotel grounds most of the morning.

Ofira Park, Eilat

I remember being quite impressed with the small parks in Eilat town during my winter visit so, with Karen, we had a quick walk from our hotel and ended up in Ofira Park. Though it was the heat of the day a couple of **Masked Shrikes** were present along with **Hoopoes**, **Lesser Whitethroats** and large numbers of **House Crows**.

Elifaz (km38)

Having just seen the Crested Honey Buzzard at the northern date palms late afternoon, I received the text I'd been waiting for – Yaron had been birding between Eilat and Yotvata and had stumbled on a male **Caspian Plover**. Being a fan of waders and a new bird for me, this was one of the bird's I'd most wanted to see anywhere in the world. So you can imagine my reaction when I clapped eyes on this pristine individual as it fed on an isolated patch of dung piles in the early evening sun – what a cracking bird and I watched it for the next hour or so with the crowds. The area was teeming with birds and **Short-toed Larks**, **Northern Wheatears**, **Red-throated Pipits** and **Yellow Wagtails** made use of the habitat. Thoroughly satisfied I headed back to Eilat for the evening.

3rd April 2008

Another early morning leaving Karen in bed while I headed out on foot to search for migrants in Ofira Park before breakfast.

Ofira Park

The lack of sprinklers and water meant that birds were few and far between. Nonetheless I enjoyed the hour or so in this small park recording a female Ruppell's Warbler uncharacteristically hopping around on the grass, an Eastern Bonelli's Warbler and a couple of confiding Ortolans. Several Tree Pipits and Chiffchaff were present along with Lesser Whitethroat, Blackcap, Hoopoe and a Sedge Warbler.

Km20 saltpans

After another quality breakfast Karen and I headed out for a few hours. Visits to the Eilat Mountains and Amran's Pillars were birdless so my side of the bargain was a visit to the saltpans at Km20. The first bird I saw bar the ubiquitous **Spur-winged Plovers** was a cracking adult **Marsh Sandpiper** and, upon reaching the eastern

lagoon, noticed a bird 'spinning' close by on the water that was inevitably a winter plumaged Red-necked Phalarope — very nice indeed. Carrying on around the saltpans a good variety of waders were found in small numbers with Little Stint and Kentish Plovers the commonest and Wood Sandpiper, Green Sandpiper, Greenshank, Ruff, Redshank, Black-winged Stilt and Dunlin all present. Careful scrutiny of the calidrids produced a single adult Broad-billed Sandpiper and hundreds of Greater Flamingos added a bit of colour.

Elifaz (km38)

After relaxing at the hotel for a bit, I headed out on my own late afternoon to have another look at the **Caspian Plover**. With reduced crowds, the proved exceptionally confiding and in the end I was provided with pant wetting views – the highlight of my trip. A couple of **Desert Finches** were found on the nearby arable land, welcome indeed as it was a species I'd not seen for a few years. Similar to yesterday large numbers of larks, pipits and wagtails were buzzing around the dung piles with the

Yellow Wagtails looking particularly vivid in the bright light.



North Beach

In tune with a couple of nights ago North Beach was once again quiet – the resident **White-eyed Gull** population always provides something to look at while small numbers of **Western Reef Egrets**, **Caspian Terns** and an **Osprey** were other birds noted. And by this time Karen had walked along the beach from our hotel and I was ready to call it quits for the day.

4th April 2008

Ofira and Central Parks, Eilat

Another early morning visit and, after bumping into Sean Huggins the previous morning who recommended Central Park as being better than Ofira, I decided to do them both. There had been a fall of **Ortolans** with about a dozen seen and, in amongst these, I recorded my only **Cretzschmar's Bunting** of the trip. The parks weren't

dripping with migrants but a group of five **Squaccos** that I inadvertently flushed from some trees in Central Park were on obviously migrants. A male **Whinchat** hopped around the lawn of Central Park with good numbers of **White** and **Yellow Wagtails**, **Tree Pipits** and **Northern Wheatears**. Two **Masked Shrikes** were seen and a couple of **Common Mynas** were the first I'd seen since leaving Tel Aviv.

Km20 saltpans

After spending the morning relaxing in the hotel, I headed out at midday to the saltpans to see what birds were present. The **Red-necked Phalarope** was again present on the eastern lagoon while much the same selection of birds as yesterday were seen though the Broad-billed Sandpiper was absent. Large numbers of **Slender-billed Gulls** fed over the pools with smaller numbers of **Black-headed Gulls** mixed in.

Km19 – area by cowsheds just north of the reservoirs (near N29°36'34", E34°59'28")

After a Pine Bunting had been reported here yesterday and a male Pied Wheatear this morning, it was rude not to check the site out. However I had no luck with either species although at least ten **Ortolans** were feeding on grain within the dairy while large numbers of **White Wagtails** and **Red-throated Pipits** were present. Prolonged views of a falcon over the area provided me with good views of an adult **Barbary Falcon**, a species I'm often rather sceptical of reports of due to the confusion with the various races of Peregrine. Driving back towards route 90 a **Subalpine Warbler** showed well in an isolated acacia bush.

Elifaz (km38)

Karen and I headed out early evening and, predictably, revisited the male Caspian Plover that was still showing well. In amongst the numerous Short-toed Larks, Yellow and White Wagtails a male Woodchat looked rather out of place and two Bimaculated Larks were an excellent bonus. The lack of wind meant an abundance of flies so Karen was rather keen to leave and as we left I noticed a flock of fifteen or so Desert Finches in the nearby arable field.

Yotvata

Heading north along route 90 I had to swerve the car as to my surprise, walking around on the hard shoulder of this busy road was a **Short-toed Eagle**. Turning the car around and fearing the worst as I presumed it had been a road casualty, the bird thankfully flew a short distance where we watched it for the next ten minutes or so along with two other cars of birders. When we arrived at the circular fields at Yotvata the wind had got up, the light was fading and very little was around. So we headed back to Eilat, again very satisfied with the day.

5th April 2008

This was to be my final full day in Eilat and I decided to spend the first three hours of light up in the Eilat Mountains seeing whether or not any raptors were passing.

Mount Yoash

I hooked up with a group of four Belgian birders on the track on the right of route 12 just before you get to the brow of the road by Mount Yoash. There was a decent movement of **Steppe Buzzards** with 400 or so drifting over and kettling along with

about 250 Black Kites, a lone Marsh Harrier and a frustratingly brief view of a Sparrowhawk sp. Other aerial birds included a couple of distant Alpine Swifts and numerous Red-rumped Swallows. The highlight of the morning, however, was a male Hooded Wheatear that appeared on rocks close to where we were standing before our close approach meant that it flew to the other side of the nearby gorge.

Hilton Queen of Sheba Hotel, Eilat

Back at the hotel after breakfast, I chilled out for the rest of the morning and early afternoon watching about forty **Steppe Buzzards** drift over along with a group of 7 **Armenian Gulls**. A couple of **Tristram's Grackles** were vocal in the hotel grounds and a handful of **Rock Martins** flew over.

Eilat Bird Sanctuary

The gate was open so I walked in and had a look around. Unfortunately a quick search for the Black Bush Robin mid afternoon drew a blank but it was evidently still around. I flushed a **Quail** from beside the path, a confiding male **Black-eared Wheatear** showed well by the parking area and a **Masked Shrike** sheltered from the heat in a small area of trees. Hundreds of **Red-rumped Swallows** were passing through, several stopping at the pools to drink along with a dozen or so **Yellow Wagtails** (including a couple of *feldegg*) and a **Wood Sandpiper**.

Elifaz (km38)

The Caspian Plover had unfortunately gone but there were still large numbers of birds on the dung piles. A mini influx of **Isabelline Wheatears** was apparent while a male **Black-eared Wheatear** was a new bird from yesterday. Poor views of one **Bimaculated Lark** were obtained in amongst the commoner **Short-toed Larks**, **Tawny Pipits**, **Yellow** and **White Wagtails**.

Sewage ponds and reeds near Samar (km39)

This area can be found off the rough track on the east side of route 90 opposite the turn off to Samar. A small area of reeds has developed thanks to the outflow from the small sewage works. During the week both Baillon's and Little Crakes had been reported but on my brief visit I couldn't find any crakes. Five **Stone Curlews** in the adjacent sand dunes were presumably migrants while the sewage ponds held a **Squacco** and several **Spur-winged Plovers** and **Green Sandpipers**. I located an **Eastern Olivaceous Warbler** in the adjacent scrub and a couple of **Sedge Warblers** could be found in the reeds. With time pushing on, I headed back to the hotel in Eilat to pick Karen up for the evening's entertainment.

Km19 modern sewage works (at dusk)

We arrived at 7pm as we'd been advised this was a sensible time by other birders, only to find an obnoxious photographer telling us to hurry up and be seated as the target bird would be arriving any minute. Knowing how late **Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse** come in to drink when I've seen them previously I just thought what a twat the bloke was (I didn't say anything as Karen specifically instructed me not to kick off and create a scene) and we sat down on the bank at N29°36'34", E34°59'28". And so it was that a full fifteen minutes later in the gathering darkness I located a pair of Sandgrouse as they came into drink on the northern bank of the reservoir. Views weren't tremendous but the people sitting near me seemed appreciative – and to make things more enjoyable, the twat photographer who at one point switched on a rather

bright beam, didn't see them. Mind you I have heard a photographer say 'I'd rather not see a bird than see it poorly' so perhaps he was happy he missed the birds.

6th April 2008

I woke up just before breakfast, foregoing any early morning birding, and we then sadly left Eilat and headed north during the day ready for our mid evening flight back to the UK. That was the theory anyway – in reality our flight didn't leave for another two days due to a combination of firstly technical problems and the part being in the UK and secondly lack of pilot hours once the part had been fixed. All I can say is our airline was Thomson Fly.

Birding on the way up was pretty steady. A quick stop at the viewpoint at Mitspe Ramon to view the crater produced a **Desert Lark** and a **Griffon Vulture** just north of the town while a walk around the area at Ben Gurion's grave, Sde Boker produced another **Griffon Vulture** and a **Masked Shrike**. The highlight of the day however, under darkening skies and poorer weather, was as we were driving along route 40 just south of Be'er Sheva a spectacular flock of in excess of 3,000 **White Storks** circled – presumably thinking of ditching down in the inclement conditions.

As mentioned previously, after getting to Tel Aviv airport in ample time, we were due for an extended stay in Israel spending the next couple of nights on The Mediterranean coast at Ashkelon.

7th April 2008

After the carve up of the night before, we didn't actually get to bed until gone 4.30am in the morning so it was a rather late start as you can imagine. A walk along the sea front/scrub from The Holiday Inn in Ashkelon produced a few birds of note – a **Hoopoe**, a **Northern Wheatear**, a pair of **Sardinian Warblers**, a **Graceful Prinia** and a couple of **Common Mynas**. The rest of the day was spent in transit to and from the airport, in the airport and generally becoming increasingly frustrated with the lack of the flight back to Luton. This culminated another late night in Ashkelon.

8th April 2008

Another day of hanging around in Ashkelon with a few birds noted while waiting at the hotel to be transported to the airport, the best of which being a couple of **European Bee-eaters**, a **Palestine Sunbird** and a pair of **Sardinian Warblers**. After the shenanigans of the last couple of days, it was a relief to board a plane early evening returning and we returned to Luton late evening.

Species notes

Western Reef Heron

Appeared to be relatively common at Eilat where birds of all colours were seen either on the beach in front of us or on the offshore fish platforms with Little Egrets.

Pallid Harrier

A superb male on active migration was seen flying north late afternoon over the airfield in Eilat town on 1st April.

Crested Honey Buzzard

Small numbers of this species are now seen annually with migrating Honey Buzzards over the Eilat area. However, my visit luckily coincided with the presence of the first wintering individual of this species for Israel and the Western Palearctic. It was to be found in the Northern Date Plantation – though was extremely difficult to locate and required perseverance (it took me five hours to find it), with as many people not seeing it as seeing it during the week I was in Eilat. Access to the area was by walking through the gate at N29°34'57", E34°58'30" and then checking the three sections of the plantation.

Barbary Falcon

An adult was seen well over the cowsheds at Km19 for a prolonged period during the afternoon of 4th April.

Sand Partridge

A pair was seen at Ein Salvadori, north of Ein Gedi on 1st April. This was a chance encounter while searching for Mountain Bunting and observations from my 2005 trip suggest this is a common species in the dry wadis of the southern half of the country.

Caspian Plover

This species occurs in small numbers each spring in the Eilat area and, from research, can turn up anywhere in suitable habitat from Eilat town to north of Yotvata normally either the last week of March or the first week of April. I was lucky to see a superb confiding male at Elifaz (km38) on $2^{nd} - 4^{th}$ April that favoured a small area of dung piles that were a magnet to birds (mainly larks, pipits and wheatears) – N29°46'52", E35°01'12". Prior to my visit, a flock of 5 birds were at Yotvata North Circular Field for several days during the last week of March at N29°54'15", E35°04'18".

Broad-billed Sandpiper

An adult showed well at Km20 saltpans on 3rd April in amongst Little Stints and Dunlins. Up to two had been present in the days prior to my sighting.

Red-necked Phalarope

A winter plumaged individual was a surprise at the Km20 saltpans on 3rd April, being present again the next day.

Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse

The formerly reliable spot by the pumping station on the western fringes of Eilat town is now defunct. Fortunately, these small sandgrouse have found an alternative dusk drinking site at Km19 with at least two birds reliably coming in to drink five to ten minutes before dark. Turn east by the Km19 post on route 90 onto the sandy track that

takes you between the dairy/cow sheds and the northern side of the modern sewage works. Once parked go through the fence and up the bank to view from N29°36'34", E34°59'28". The birds come in at dark so ensure you are in place a good 15-20 minutes before to avoid disturbance – on my visit views of the two birds were quite distant in the gloom but I've been assured that some evenings they can appear in the north-west corner of the reservoir close to where you'll be sitting.

Bimaculated Lark



A species I have not encountered that regularly so it was good to see two individuals that showed well at times on the dung piles at Elifaz (N29°46'52", E35°01'12") in amongst large numbers of Short-toed Larks and Red-throated Pipits.

Olive-backed Pipit

Several individuals of this species remained from the winter at the Northern Date Plantation, Eilat and while searching for the Crested Honey Buzzard on 2nd April, I recorded two individuals in the middle section of the plantation. Access to the area was by walking through the gate at N29°34'57", E34°58'30".

Black Bush Robin

This species occurs sporadically in the Eilat area in spring and it was fortunate that a male was found a couple of days before I arrived in Israel and lingered throughout my stay at the Eilat Bird Sanctuary. Evidently this individual will be long gone by the time the reader arrives in Israel but it was perhaps no coincidence this was found during the Eilat Bird Festival week. Hopefully with an increase once again in birders to the area in late March, this species may once again become recorded with increasing frequency like it was in the halcyon years of the 90s.

Hooded Wheatear

A male was encountered rather fortuitously while looking for raptors at Mount Yoash on 5th April. A male had been seen at nearby Ein Netafin a couple of weeks prior to my visit – it is not inconceivable that this was the same bird.

Arabian Babbler

Three showed very well at Ein Gedi Kibbutz early morning on 1st April. It is a relatively common and vocal species in wadi and dry scrub areas in the southern half of the country.

Tristram's Grackle

Present in good numbers and some decent sized flocks at Ein Gedi Kibbutz and Ein Salvadori on 1st April. At least three birds also frequented the Hilton Queen of Sheba Hotel, Eilat during our stay.

Fan-tailed Raven

Seen relatively regularly in the day or so that I spent around Ein Gedi with sightings at both the Kibbutz and Ein Salvadori.

Desert Finch

A flock of about fifteen birds were seen in the arable field immediately adjacent to the dung piles at Elifaz (N29°46'52", E35°01'12") on 4th April (two being present the previous day).

Sinai Rosefinch

A male and female were seen on 1st April at Ein Salvadori, north of Ein Gedi (see directions under Mountain Bunting).

Mountain Bunting

Asian House Bunting, Striated Bunting or Mountain Bunting – whatever you want to call it – no longer occurs regularly in the Eilat area and to find this species these days the best bet is The Dead Sea. A small area of greenery formed by a spring at Ein Salvadori, north of Ein Gedi has become the best site recently to find this species in Israel. To the north of Ein Gedi on Route 90, park in the small gravel pull in between km250 and km251 at N31 ° 31'01", E35 ° 23'34" just before a left hand bend if you're travelling north. From here follow the path with the white and blue painted rocks up to the spring area (it is steep and times and you may need to scramble a little) and a male Mountain Bunting was singing in the 'bowl' (along with a couple of Sinai Rosefinches) from where I was standing just beyond the obvious pinnacle rock at N31 ° 31'12", E35 ° 23'10".

Category C Species

The IRDC (Israeli Rarities and Distribution Committee) in 2007 accepted four species of 'established exotic bird' onto Category C of the Israeli list – see here for more details. Two of these – Monk Parakeet and Common Myna – were easily seen with the former common in Hayarkon Park and the latter seen routinely in the Tel Aviv area and in small numbers in the Eilat parks. In a Western Palearctic context Blackhooded Parakeet and Vinous-breasted Starling can be found as Category C species only in Israel so more details are provided below on how to find them.

Black-hooded Parakeet

A small population of this species can be found to the north of Tel Aviv in the town of Pardes Hanna (on some maps 'Pardes Khana-Karkur'). It seems that birders looking for this species recently have only been seeing either singles or a couple of birds in amongst the large numbers of Ring-necked Parakeets. Coming from Tel Aviv turn off the main road (route 2 or route 4) onto route 65 signed towards Nazareth and Afula. You will pass a McDonalds on your left and shortly after this turn left (north) at the Alon junction to the centre of Pardes Hanna. Just before you reach the shops, after a series of roundabouts, there are a number of roadside palm trees and well-vegetated gardens on Hadekalim Street. Walk around this area - from the car park on your left just before the shops to the roundabout at the top of the street – until you see the species. It took me a couple of hours early morning on 31st March but I eventually found two birds in trees at N32°28'18", E34°58'30". Other GPS points where birders have seen this species recently are N32°28'26", E34°58'20" and N32°28'33", E34°58'09".

Vinous-breasted Starling



This introduced species is relatively easy to find in certain areas of Hayarkon Park, Tel Aviv. It seems that most recent observations have come from the eastern end of the park to the east of the Rokach interchange on route 20 in an area to the north-west of the stadium in an area with a waterslide and ice-cream stands! To access this area, I drove east for 1-2km from the interchange and then parked my car in a parking bay near a garage/car wash immediately adjacent to the park lawns (you can see the waterslide distantly from here). Three birds were easily found at N32°06'06", E34°49'15" and other birders have found this species in the same general area recently at N32°05'59", E34°48'50" and N32°06'08", E34°49'10". Local birders have also seen this species in the western areas of the park, west of the Rokach interchange in reeds and riverside bushes near the power station.

Species List

Little Grebe Tachybaptus ruficollis

Great Cormorant Phalacrocorax carbo

Little Egret Egretta garzetta

Western Reef Heron Egretta gularis

Grey Heron Ardea cinerea

Cattle Egret Bubulcus ibis

Squacco Heron Ardeola ralloides

Night Heron Nycticorax nycticorax

White Stork Ciconia ciconia

Glossy Ibis Plegadis falcinellus

Greater Flamingo Phoenicopterus ruber

Common Shelduck Tadorna tadorna

Common Teal Anas crecca

Mallard Anas platyrhynchos

Crested Honey Buzzard Pernis ptilorhyncus

Black Kite Milvus migrans

Griffon Vulture Gyps fulvus

Short-toed Eagle Circaetus gallicus

Marsh Harrier Circus aeruginosus

Pallid Harrier Circus macrourus

Eurasian Sparrowhawk Accipiter nisus

Steppe Buzzard Buteo buteo vulpinus

Steppe Eagle Aquila nipalensis

Osprey Pandion haliaetus

Common Kestrel Falco tinnunculus

Barbary Falcon Falco pelegrinoides

Sand Partridge Ammoperdix heyi

Quail Coturnix coturnix

Moorhen Gallinula chloropus

Coot Fulica atra

Oystercatcher Haematopus ostralegus

Black-winged Stilt Himantopus himantopus

Avocet Recurvirostra avosetta

Stone Curlew Burhinus oedicnemus

Grey Plover Pluvialis squatarola

Ringed Plover Charadrius hiaticula

Kentish Plover Charadrius alexandrinus

Caspian Plover Charadrius asiaticus

Spur-winged Plover Vanellus spinosus

Common Redshank Tringa totanus

Marsh Sandpiper Tringa stagnatilis

Common Greenshank Tringa nebularia

Green Sandpiper Tringa ochropus

Wood Sandpiper Tringa glareola

Common Sandpiper Tringa hypoleucos

Little Stint Calidris minuta

Dunlin Calidris alpina

Broad-billed Sandpiper Limicola falcinellus

Ruff Philomachus pugnax

Red-necked Phalarope Phalaropus lobatus

White-eyed Gull Larus leucophthalmus

Armenian Gull Larus armenicus

Lesser Black-backed Gull Larus fuscus fuscus

Black-headed Gull Larus ridibundus

Slender-billed Gull Larus genei

Caspian Tern Sterna caspia

Sandwich Tern Sterna sandvicensis

Common Tern Sterna hirundo

Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse Pterocles lichtensteinii

Rock Dove Columba livia

Laughing Dove Streptopelia senegalensis

Collared Dove Streptopelia decaocto

Rose-ringed Parakeet Psittacula krameri

Black-hooded Parakeet Nandayus nenday

Monk Parakeet Myiopsitta monachus

Common Swift Apus apus

Pallid Swift Apus pallidus

Alpine Swift Apus melba

White-breasted Kingfisher Halcyon smyrnensis

Little Green Bee-eater Merops orientalis

European Bee-eater Merops apiaster

Eurasian Hoopoe Upupa epops

Eurasian Wryneck Jynx torquilla

Syrian Woodpecker Dendrocopos syriacus

Desert Lark Ammomanes deserti

Bimaculated Lark Melanocorypha bimaculata

Short-toed Lark Calandrella brachydactyla

Crested Lark Galerida cristata

Sand Martin Riparia riparia

Rock Martin Hirundo obsoleta fuligula

Barn Swallow Hirundo rustica

Red-rumped Swallow Hirundo daurica

House Martin Delichon urbica

Tawny Pipit Anthus campestris

Tree Pipit Anthus trivialis

Olive-backed Pipit Anthus hodgsoni

Red-throated Pipit Anthus cervinus

Water Pipit Anthus spinoletta

White Wagtail Motacilla alba

Yellow Wagtail Motacilla flava

Black-headed Wagtail Motacilla feldegg

Grey Wagtail Motacilla cinerea

Yellow-vented Bulbul Pycnonotus xanthopygos

Black Bush Robin Cercotrichas podobe

Bluethroat Luscinia svecica

Common Redstart Phoenicurus phoenicurus

Blackstart Cercomela melanura

White-crowned Black Wheatear Oenanthe leucopyga

Hooded Wheatear Oenanthe monacha

Northern Wheatear Oenanthe oenanthe

Eastern Mourning Wheatear Oenanthe lugens

Black-eared Wheatear Oenanthe hispanica

Isabelline Wheatear Oenanthe isabellina

Eurasian Blackbird Turdus merula

Cetti's Warbler Cettia cetti

Graceful Prinia Prinia gracilis

Sedge Warbler Acrocephalus schoenobaenus

Eastern Olivaceous Warbler Hippolais pallida elaeica

Blackcap Sylvia atricapilla

Subalpine Warbler Sylvia cantillans

Lesser Whitethroat Sylvia curruca

Eastern Orphean Warbler Sylvia crassirostris

Rüppell's Warbler Sylvia rueppelli

Sardinian Warbler Sylvia melanocephala

Common Chiffchaff Phylloscopus collybita

Eastern Bonelli's Warbler Phylloscopus orientalis

Wood Warbler Phylloscopus sibilatrix

Arabian Babbler Turdoides squamiceps

Great Tit Parus major

Palestine Sunbird Nectarinia osea

Woodchat Shrike Lanius senator

Masked Shrike Lanius nubicus

Eurasian Jay Garrulus glandarius

House Crow Corvus splendens

Hooded Crow Corvus cornix

Brown-necked Raven Corvus ruficollis

Fan-tailed Raven Corvus rhipidurus

Tristram's Grackle Onychognathus tristramii

Vinous-breasted Starling Sturnus burmannicus

Common Myna Acridotheres tristis

House Sparrow Passer domesticus

Spanish Sparrow Passer hispaniolensis
European Goldfinch Carduelis carduelis
Trumpeter Finch Rhodopechys githagineus
Sinai Rosefinch Carpodacus synoicus
Desert Finch Rhodopechys obsoleta
Ortolan Emberiza hortulana
Cretzschmar's Bunting Emberiza caesia
Mountain Bunting Emberiza striolata