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This trip report is a summary of sightings in Jordan whilst on a family holiday. Traveling with a 2 year old and a 4 year old, birding was squeezed in as much as possible. Sightings are somewhere between incidental and proper birding.



Eurasian Marsh Harriers (*Circus aeruginosus*). Aqaba Bird Observatory, 29th October 2017. ©James Hogg

The records of all sightings were uploaded to eBird, which was then used to generate the species lists for each site, hence they may occasionally deviate from OSME taxonomy.

Day 1.

Land very late in Amman, pick up the hire car, which was very easy and drive to the hotel. We got a bit lost, but made it in the end.

Day 2.

A bit of a late start followed by a trip to the ruins at Jerash. Jerash is one of the best preserved Roman provincial towns in the world and the ruins are very spectacular. The theatres (which have been restored somewhat) are amazing and the kids had fun testing the acoustics, whispering and dropping coins, and I'm glad to say they worked very well. No birding though.

Day 3.

Fairly early start and a drive to Azraq. We arrived in time for lunch at Azraq Lodge run by the Jordanian Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN). After lunch, we had a trip to Azraq Wetlands and the first bit of proper birding of the trip, we got great views of an Osprey hunting over the pools, 18 species but not much of note, though it wasn't the best time of day. The children liked watching the fish, frogs, crabs, they found a Kingfisher and there was the obligatory playing in the dirt.

Birds: Northern Shoveler (*Spatula clypeata*), Eurasian Teal (*Anas crecca*), Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*), Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*), Common Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*), Eurasian Coot (*Fulica atra*), Laughing Dove (*Streptopelia senegalensis*), Common Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*), Crested Lark (*Galerida cristata*), Sand Martin (*Riparia riparia*), Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*), White-eared Bulbul (*Pycnonotus leucotis*), Common Chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus collybita*), Eurasian Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*), Graceful Prinia (*Prinia gracilis*), European Stonechat (*Saxicola rubicola*), House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) and Spanish Sparrow (*Passer hispaniolensis*).

After Azraq we headed into the basalt desert towards the town of Safawi to look for wheatears and larks. We didn't get as far as the town. The dark form (*annae*) of Desert Lark (*Ammomanes deserti*) was the first lifer of the trip and we did think we had found a Basalt Wheatear till we flushed it to reveal the white outer tail feathers of a White-Crowned Wheatear (*Oenanthe leucopyga*), which was a bit disappointing but still a lifer.

Day 4.

Early start from Azraq Lodge and a drive to Shaumari Wildlife reserve which was reopened around 9 months ago. We had a drive round in a safari vehicle to see Arabian Gazelle, Arabian Oryx and Wild Asiatic Onager. You can also get excellent close up views of the animals and some captive Houbara Bustards from the visitor centre. Notable birds included, Greater Hoopoe Lark, Marsh Harrier and a few migrant shrikes and Stonechats. We enjoyed the visit and the chance to see some very rare mammals. There were also two Peregrine Falcons that had been confiscated from traders and that were being prepared for release.

Birds: Western Marsh Harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*), Red-backed Shrike (*Lanius collurio*), Greater Hoopoe-Lark (*Alaemon alaudipes*), Crested Lark (*Galerida cristata*), Common Redstart (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*), European Stonechat (*Saxicola rubicola*), and Spanish Sparrow (*Passer hispaniolensis*).

After a picnic lunch, we drove to the Dead Sea for a couple of nights.

Day 5.

The hotel garden, whilst being plagued by cats had some interesting species, Tristram's Grackle were very common as were Pale Crag Martins and Palestine Sunbirds. The highlight for me though was a White-throated Kingfisher calling loudly as it flew past.

Birds: Laughing Dove (*Streptopelia senegalensis*), White-throated Kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*), Pale Crag Martin, (*Ptyonoprogne fuligula obsoleta*), White-spectacled Bulbul (*Pycnonotus xanthopygos*), Tristram's Starling (*Onychognathus tristramii*), and Palestine Sunbird (*Cinnyris osea*).

The Dead Sea shore itself is very dramatic and I had a plan to drive along the road to look for patches of vegetation and running water. The children however had other ideas and were not in the mood for birding, much to my frustration. Anyway, I did manage to do a little bit of birding along a 10km stretch of road south of the resorts at the north end of the Dead Sea. I failed to find any Dead Sea Sparrows, but I was probably looking in the wrong places.

Birds: Eurasian Hoopoe (*Upupa epops*), Green Bee-eater (*Merops orientalis*), Fan-tailed Raven (*Corvus rhipidurus*), Desert Lark (*Ammomanes deserti*), Graceful Prinia (*Prinia gracilis*), Blackstart (*Cercomela melanura*), Finsch's Wheatear (*Oenanthe finschii*), Tristram's Starling (*Onychognathus tristramii*), Palestine Sunbird (*Cinnyris osea*), White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*), Spanish Sparrow (*Passer hispaniolensis*), and Indian Silverbill (*Euodice malabarica*).

The afternoon was spent floating in the Dead Sea and playing in the pool. The Dead Sea is a novel experience, but does tend to sting cuts and scratches.

Day 6.

The day started with a trip to the doctors. Loaded up with medicines we then set off for Feynan Eco-lodge which located on the south side of the Dana Biosphere Reserve. This was a lovely place to spend a couple of nights and I got the feeling that at the right time of year with a few days to spare the area could be very productive.

It was also a great place to take kids. Lots of dirt to play in, a short walk each night to watch the sunset, the staff were very nice to the children. There was also a telescope was set up on the roof and you could clearly see Saturn with its rings.

We had a nice walk up Wadi Ghwayr, which had running water some good birds. The most productive area for me was near trees at the Wadi mouth where leaking irrigation pipes had created a few puddles. There were several Grey Shrikes, the taxonomy of which I find quite confusing, I identified them as *Lanius excubitor aucheri* which using the Osme common names would make them Arabian Grey Shrike. The definite highlight though was a Red-breasted Flycatcher.

Birds: Sand Partridge (*Ammoperdix heyi*), Chukar (*Alectoris chukar*), Eurasian Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*), Long-legged Buzzard (*Buteo rufinus*), Collared Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*), Green Bee-eater (*Merops orientalis*), Common Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*), Red-backed Shrike (*Lanius collurio*), Arabian Grey Shrike (*Lanius excubitor aucheri*), Desert Lark (*Ammomanes deserti*), Crested Lark (*Galerida cristata*), Pale Crag Martin, (*Ptyonoprogne fuligula obsoleta*), White-spectacled Bulbul (*Pycnonotus xanthopygos*), Common Chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus collybita*), Red-breasted Flycatcher (*Ficedula parva*), Blackstart (*Cercomela melanura*), White-crowned Wheatear (*Oenanthe leucopyga*), Pied Wheatear (*Oenanthe pleschanka*).

Day 7.

You can't really visit Jordan without going to Petra. From Feynan there is a road over the mountains that passes by Little Petra. Large yellow signs would suggest that the road is closed, but we were told at the lodge that it is open. The road was mostly new and in good condition and it only took around an hour from Feynan to Petra. The scenery was superb and with more time there should have some good birding here and there around patches of vegetation.

Petra is quite an experience especially on a busy day, though at least it wasn't that hot. The site is huge and you really need quite a lot of time to explore it. We managed to get a little past the Treasury building. From there many people turn back. But you can explore further into the basin or climb around 1000 steps to get to the high ground that overlooks the valley. For some reason, it looked a lot less crowded up the steps and we (maybe foolishly) opted to climb to the top, carrying the children most of the way.

Once at the top the views were stunning. There is a track that leads back to the entrance from here, which supposedly requires a guide. But, it was easy enough to find the way with a little scouting ahead. The highlight of the day for our 4 year old was when she found a tiny Common Chameleon in a bush. To her this was much more impressive than the ruins.

The walk back was a little rough in places, but worth it to be away from the crowds. There were a few bonus birds in the form of Sinai Rosefinches. I found a male and it flew off leading me to a small flock clinging onto a cliff face.

Birds: Common Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*), Fan-tailed Raven (*Corvus rhipidurus*), Sinai Rosefinch (*Carpodacus synoicus*), and House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*).

After a long day at Petra we drove further south to Aqaba.

Day 8.

Rest day in Aqaba around the pool. By this point the other team members were getting a bit fed up of driving every day to either try and find birds or look at monuments. I had to concede that a day of doing very little was a good idea.

Day 9.

I had by this point complained a lot about there being a lot of birds that I needed to see and not enough time. The family allowed me a morning to myself to go to Aqaba Bird Observatory (ABO).

I had read that tickets need to be purchased in advance. I telephoned ahead and was informed this was not the case. The ABO is on the road that leads to Israel and is less than 1km from that country. The first checkpoint is for the Jordanian Army, I explained I was going bird watching, I left my passport with the soldiers and was given a visitor pass. I bought the entry ticket at the ABO.

By late October the main migration has peaked, however I still managed to have a good morning and recorded 45 species. It is a very good venue spoiled only by a couple of feral dogs and with more time on a good day should be very productive.

Birds: Egyptian Goose (*Alopochen aegyptiaca*), Garganey (*Spatula querquedula*), Northern Shoveler (*Spatula clypeata*), Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*), Eurasian Teal (*Anas crecca*), Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*), Black-necked Grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*), Greater Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus roseus*), Great Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*), Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*), Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*), Greater Spotted Eagle (*Clanga clanga*), Booted Eagle (*Hieraaetus pennatus*), Western Marsh Harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*), Eurasian Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*), Eurasian

Coot (*Fulica atra*), Black-winged Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*), Spur-winged Lapwing (*Vanellus spinosus*), Common Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*), Ruff (*Calidris pugnax*), Little Stint (*Calidris minuta*), Common Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*), Common Sandpiper (*Actitis hypoleucos*), Black-headed Gull (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*), Gull-billed Tern (*Gelochelidon nilotica*), Collared Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*), Laughing Dove (*Streptopelia senegalensis*), Green Bee-eater (*Merops orientalis*), Common Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*), Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*), White-spectacled Bulbul (*Pycnonotus xanthopygos*), Common Chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus collybita*), Graceful Prinia (*Prinia gracilis*), Eurasian Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*), Lesser Whitethroat (*Sylvia curruca*), Spotted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa striata*), Bluethroat (*Luscinia svecica*), Common Redstart (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*), Palestine Sunbird (*Cinnyris osea*), Western Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla flava*), Grey Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*), White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*), Water Pipit (*Anthus spinoletta*), House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), and Spanish Sparrow (*Passer hispaniolensis*).

The afternoon was spent driving back to Amman.

Day 10.

Fly home.

Thoughts.

Jordan was a very nice and easy place to visit. People were generally friendly and very kind to the children, which was nice. The roads are mostly in good condition and self-driving is certainly possible, though if you haven't driven much outside the UK you may find it quite interesting at times.

Birding was rewarding and if we had been a month earlier the migration should have been superb. Lots of the country is still wild and I got the impression with more time and being able to stop regularly at likely looking spots that you could find some of the more elusive birds.

We missed quite a lot of birds and many parts of the country that would be interesting to see, such as the wider desert and salt pans around Azraq, the core reserve at Dana and Wadi Rum. So hopefully we will be back there soon.

A few tips.

If you are self-driving take some decent maps and if possible a GPS. The sign posts are not always clear and there were a few places where we could have taken much quicker routes if we hadn't missed turns. There were also a lot of roadworks and diversions, it is worth asking at your accommodation about the route you plan to take the following day.

If you plan on visiting Petra and other sites I would recommend getting a Jordan Pass <https://www.jordanpass.jo>. This is a pre-paid entry Visa that also includes entry to Petra and numerous other historical sites and museums and saves you quite a lot of money.

Common sense, but always have some water and keep the petrol tank fairly full. Though shops and petrol stations are fairly regular there are a few long stretches of road that are quite barren.