



## Introduction

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Mike Richardson, John Sadler and I flew from Luton to Tel Aviv with easy jet, it was rather uneventful and we cleared immigration and tried to collect our hire car from Thrifty / Dollar who tried to substitute our Nissan Qasquai with a Renault Kangoo insisting it was an upgrade. We wasted some time sorting this out but eventually got the Nissan Qasquai but the staff were less than helpful. Returning the hire car was also just as traumatic they were unhappy with the carpets and considering they did not have proper car mats in the car the carpets were clearly going to get dirty particularly with the heavy rain on a couple of days again they were very unhelpful. This was in contrast to almost everyone else we encountered in Israel who were very helpful and friendly.

Leaving Israel was much harder than arrival, Mike, John and I have been to Morocco in 2014 and it was quickly picked up by the officials and Mike and I were put in the special lane where our bags were deconstructed and everything inspected and swabbed, Mike even got searched and my scope was taken from my hand luggage and placed in the hold, with some lame excuse about the x-ray machine not being able to see inside it, at Luton I could clearly see inside the scope using the x-ray machine there.

Accommodation was booked in advance and a rough plan was sketched out. We had two guides booked in advance Haim from [Negev Jeep Tours](#) and [Barak Granit](#) and we had arranged to meet local fellow mammal watcher Tomer in Jerusalem, who kindly paid our parking ticket as foreign credit cards don't work on their site.

Temperatures were varied from a couple of degrees in the Negev desert to upper 20's in the Dead Sea area and high teens elsewhere. Heavy rain on a couple of days hampered our efforts on a couple of days in the Negev. Mike's report has some more specific site information.

The photos are hyperlinked to larger versions.

# Diary

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## 20<sup>th</sup> February 2016

After finally getting our hire car we headed off and took a wrong turn in Tel Aviv, but encountered some large swarms of **Egyptian fruit bats**. We re oriented ourselves managed a quick snack before heading to Mitzpe ramon where we were staying for a few days with nothing of note on the trip. Our accommodation was in the middle of nowhere and had no electricity but was in a great spot highlighted by the fact that some nearby **jackals** howled through the night, our tent offering poor soundproofing we could not locate them despite a few attempts.

## 21<sup>st</sup> February 2016

We were up early and headed for a morning drive on the 171 road, we quickly encountered some of the common bird species **Arabian babblers**, **several wheatears**, **chukars**, **brown necked ravens** etc. but no sign of the Onagers which were our targets. We popped back into the accommodation to check in and have a quick shower. The accommodation was a little weird but we hardly spent any time there. We headed off to the Sde Boker area where we explored the desert areas in the vicinity and the spectacular Zin valley. Here we located some cracking **Nubian ibex**. In the desert we located some flighty **crowned sandgrouse** and some obliging **spur winged plovers**. After something to eat in a well know burger establishment and working out how to fill the car with fuel we had a look round Ben Gurion's tomb, a rather confiding **blackstart** was stunning. At the tomb there was a stunning view down the valley with a selection of **swifts** flying over. Here we were meeting Haim from Negev Jeep tours for a nigh drive. We climbed into an aged land rover but it performed well on a couple of serious off road tracks but most tracks were fine. We spent hours searching the desert areas for hyena but could only muster a **red fox**, 4 **dorcas gazelle** and two **porcupines**. We encountered a few drops of rain as we headed back but took a detour down the road 171 and we spotlight the road until we found a suitable trapping site to put the traps down. The return trip produced an **Onager** feeding some distance away and a **gerbil sp** crossed the road as we headed for some sleep unaware of the heavy rain on its way.



Speckled Bulbul



Blackstart



Dorcas Gazelle



Stunning View



Spur winged Plover



Chukar



**22<sup>nd</sup> February 2016**

Torrential rain through the night and we had an extra half hour in bed as our morning Onager search would be hampered. We headed to the traps, where we had two **Wagner's gerbils** and a **house mouse**. The heavy rain had blocked the road in several places and we headed back to our accommodation removing a water logged **little owl** from the road on the way. Around lunch time the rain cleared and after some food shopping we headed into the crater which was very spectacular. We spotted a vulture lookout and decided to investigate later. A drive round the crater did not produce much, a few common birds but some spectacular scenery.

We returned to the vulture lookout and spotted a dead cow put out for the vultures, no vultures but a few ravens. Next minute a wolf/jackal/wolf/jackal we could not decide but we eventually confirmed it was a **wolf** feeding on the cow. We decide this would be good to spotlight later. We set the traps then spotlighted the backroads but saw only a **stone curlew** before heading back to the vulture lookout to eat our food. We spotlighted the cow and there were some **jackals** or **wolves** feeding on the cow, but then a **striped hyena** arrived scaring them away. We watched the hyena for some time before calling it a day.



Flooding



Wolf



Hooded Wheatear



**23<sup>rd</sup> February 2016**

We awoke very early and drove just over an hour to the Nitsana area to look for **Mac Queen's bustard**. It was cool and it took a bit of finding but we found a couple, which showed well, also **Montagu's harrier** and **little owl** of note. By this time we were short of fuel so we stopped at an army Hummer near the Egyptian border, the soldiers inside were all asleep and my tapping on the bulletproof glass did not rouse them. The sat nav had a fuel station nearby but it had been closed for some time but we made it to one just in time. A couple of **common myna's** the first non-natives of the trip. We went to check the traps set near our accommodation we had a **Wagners gerbil** and a rather nice **golden spiny mouse**. We headed down to Ellat for a day of birding, the scenery on the trip was impressive and the temperature finally increased as we headed further south.

We reached Eilat and headed for some food and got a parking ticket in the process. We headed for the beach to search for rare gulls but there were hardly any, a **slender billed gull** and a couple of **black headed** was all we could locate. A distant **brown booby** (actually in Jordan) was worth the effort though. Next stop was the Bird Observatory which although quite small held plenty of birds and we got some cracking views of **Caspian tern**, **pied kingfisher**, **house crow**, **citrine wagtail**, **eastern black redstart**, **little green bee-eater** and plenty of the more common species as well. We checked into our hotel and then headed out to find a suitable trapping area and to visit the sewage works for dusk. The sewage works held a large number of **wildfowl**, **herons and egrets** and a couple of **marsh harriers**. We waited as dusk fell and then they flew in, at least a dozen **Lichtenstein's sandgrouse** came within 5 metres to drink. They had their fill and left and that was our cue to leave as well.

We drove to Yovatta and found a very good service station run by the Kibbutz which had lots of locally made food and we ate our fill, finished off with a rather large ice cream. We drove the Yovatta fields spotlighting but only found a couple of **nightjars**, a **red fox** and a **golden jackal**. We headed back to Eilat taking a detour to Amram's pillars. Our efforts here were quite good we had 5 **dorcas gazelle** and a cape hare before calling it a night, well as best we could do with all the noise from the floor above (bloody drunken tourists!)



Mac Queen's Bustard



Golden Spiny Mouse



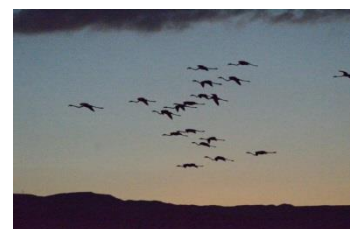
Little Green Bee-eater



Caspian Tern



Pied Kingfisher



Greater Flamingos

**24<sup>th</sup> February 2016**

The traps held two **Eastern spiny mice**, very different from the golden spiny caught the previous day. We hit both the beaches for gulls without success but a couple of **terns** were present. We then headed to Holland park. Our first **sunbirds** of the trip were found here with some nice **sand partridges** along with flyover **monk** and **ring necked parakeets** and plenty of common birds were present, it was a great little site well worth a visit. As the heat started to build up we returned to the birdwatching centre for another look round, the site held a similar set of birds as the previous day but **marsh sandpiper**, **snipe** and **western reef heron** were both new and we had an enjoyable wander round in a rather warm morning. A couple of blinged up but confiding bluethearts were the stars

We headed off to Amram's pillars but half a dozen school parties had beaten us to it and we were never going to see anything with all the disturbance, so we headed off to Yovatta for gazelles. We returned to the service station / visitor centre for another good meal and a well-earned cold drink on the way. We found the nearby gazelle site, after eventually working out how to get to it. We quickly found several **Dorcas gazelle's** but the **acacia gazelles** were a little harder to locate and to separate from **Dorcas**. But eventually we got our eye in and found some classic **acacia's** with the distinctive nose spot and dark flank stripe and could eventually separate them at a distance.

With time moving on we headed north along the Dead Sea and found our accommodation in the hillside town of Arad. It was a nice apartment but during our check in it seemed to be surrounded by screeching cats and barking dogs but fortunately this has ceased when we returned for some sleep. After checking in we headed out to set some traps, a local wood looked promising but we decided against putting little silver boxes in a wood in which the Israeli army was carrying out an exercise and we retreated.

So no trapping was possible but we took a night drive along the Masada road for some spotlighting however it only produced two **red foxes** and a **cape hare** and a calling **owl** that we could not locate before calling it a night and some well-earned rest.



Eastern Spiny Mouse



Sand Partridge



Bluetheart



Acacia gazelle



Dorcas Gazelle



Graceful Prinia

**25<sup>th</sup> February 2016**

We made a couple of touristy view stops finding a pair of **Tristram's starlings** at one of the stops. We got to Ein Gedi early only one coach tour was present. Our target **rock hyrax** was present in the first tree, we walked up to the "waterfall" (I have seen more water flowing in a urinal) a **Nubian ibex** was present and we had several flyover **fan tailed ravens**. **Arabian babblers** were quite confident and a pair of **sunbirds** showed very well. The reserve was excellent but dozens of coaches had arrived so we headed for the exit and an ice cream to counter the heat. We headed into the West bank to scout out some gen on Blandford's fox on a mountain road had no traffic perfect. We made several stops for scenery and some wildlife. The top had a viewpoint and we stopped here for a bit and we were pleased we did. There were lots of **butterflies** about a **swallowtail** was particularly nice and a couple of lizards were captured by the camera for ID. We spotted a flock of **black storks** as we were about to leave and a few raptors were spotted eventually this worked it way in to double figures of **black kites** and **steppe eagles**. Lunch was taken in the glorious weather as we watched the raptors. We then headed into the reserve locating some good areas for spotlighting later and encountering a small flock of **trumpeter finches**.

We headed back to the dead sea shores and stopped at a few sites before an early meal then found a suitable site for our traps. We headed down to the Ne'ot Hakikar area and had a quick look at a wetland area but no new birds. Then we headed off to meet our guide for the evening Barack, while we waited we noticed dozens of **white storks** on every electricity pylon roosting for the evening during their migration. Barack took us to the border area in amongst the cultivated fields and in a short time we had found several **Nubian nightjar's** but I was too slow for a photo. There were a few small bats around and I recorded them on the bat detector for later ID which confirmed them as **Kuhl's pipistrelles**. We then went north to a Hume's owl site but could not locate one, two other sites and 5 hours later with no success we gave up, although we had two large **bats** flyover. We tried the Blandford's fox site but it was being resurfaced and attempting any spotlighting with the work going on would have been a waste of time. We checked the traps on the way back and had trouble locating two of them but eventually we found them all and had two **eastern spiny mice** for our efforts.



Rock Hyrax



Fan Tailed Raven



Dead Sea



Tristram's Starling



Lowest Place On Earth



Arabian babbler





Indian Crested Porcupine

**26<sup>th</sup> February 2016**

We left Arad and headed towards Jerusalem stopping at the Britannia park on way, here we encountered some woodland wildlife but the serenity was broken by ATV's zooming over the place so we continued into Jerusalem. We parked close to the old centre and wandered round the famous sites for a few hours and then enjoyed a traditional lunch of kebabs and falafel. We left the hustle and bustle of the city centre and headed for the Gazelle valley an oasis park. Here a small population of **mountain gazelles** still live and it also hold a nice range of birds including the distinctive **jay** subspecies. Here we met Tomer who joined us watching the Gazelles then we went to the Bird Observatory, a tiny park with a hide. Here birds came to drink from the pool and have a free feed at the bird feeders. A **white breasted kingfisher** the star bird but it was busy with commoner species. I spotted a **white speedwell sp** and a **white rabbit** which we presumed was an escape. We waited for the main event and as dusk fell a **porcupine** visited to Hoover up the spilt seed, another joined in and they had a little exchange with one dominating the food. We watched it for a while then headed north to the Hula Valley for the next two nights.



Western Wall



Mountain Gazelle



White breasted Kingfisher

**27<sup>th</sup> February 2016**

We were up early and made it to the Hula Valley reserve as it opened, the reserve is massive, bikes and golf carts were available for hire. We declined and walked to the first hide encountering plenty of birds along the way and a sleeping **Jackal** along with several **coypu** in the channels. The highlight was the **cranes** well over 20,000 were present and the first hide we got great views of them. A **jackal** walked through them but the **cranes** only moved out of the way. The area was rich in birdlife with **pygmy cormorants**, **white pelicans**, a selection of **ducks**, **egrets**, **storks** and plenty of **raptors** passing over. A large raptor perched on a tree near the track was of interest and turned out to be a **greater spotted eagle** and it showed very nicely as did a **black shouldered kite**. By this time it was getting busy with the public so we headed back to the visitor centre. We enquired about the night tours to look for jungle cat but these only run in the summer so we were out of luck. Plan B was to search for some areas along the river to do some night driving and we spent a few hours investigating and located a nice looking area with good access and planned to put some traps down as well.

Mid-afternoon we returned to the Hula valley reserve, it was packed and total bedlam and thoughts of finding a jungle cat soon evaporated. We camped out at the first hide watching the **cranes**; I stayed outside watching the fields Mike and John stayed inside keeping an eye on the pools and the crane field. I had a family of **cranes** land nearby but some idiot walked through the no entry signs to take a photo with his phone and they of course flew off. I remonstrated with him and he and his rather embarrassed girlfriend left, the rest of the people there looked rather shocked at my outburst. I had a shout of cat from the hide and joined Mike and John who had spotted a **Jungle cat**, the locals had not seen it and we got them onto it including a volunteer with a scope, it stayed a couple of minutes before wandering off. A lady asked me for help with her camera which had stopped working and I got it working and John lent binoculars to a mother and child to see the cranes, rebuilding Anglo / Israeli relations. We went and set the traps and encountered a couple of **bats** recorded and later ID's as probably a **Grey Long eared Bat**. We did some night driving had several **brown hares**, a **jackal** and a probable **jungle cat** but only briefly before heading for a night's sleep.



Great Spotted Eagle



Jackal and Cranes



Mountain Gazelle



Jungle cat



Coypu





African Softshell Turtle

**28<sup>th</sup> February 2016**

We checked the traps a couple of **house mice** were trapped but nothing else, however a couple of traps had been used by rats, one had even escaped by pushing the back of the trap off. We packed up and sorted things out back at the accommodation, a pair of **Syrian woodpeckers** of note as we packed up. We headed south to Kfar Vitkin, here we were looking for the **African softshell turtle** viewing area but somewhere we took a wrong turn and ended up at the wrong place. We took a walk down the river anyway, here we saw **common kingfisher** to complete the kingfisher set for the trip and a nice **spur thighed tortoise** but not the turtles. We eventually found the correct site and easily found the about a dozen of the rather large **African softshell turtles** and a **red eared slider**. We had some lunch nearby and headed to Tel Aviv. We found a large park but could not find any roosting bats anywhere. We did find a few **feral geese**, **Muscovy ducks**, **Egyptian geese** and a **hoopoe** on our walk but with time getting on we headed to the airport, battled with the car hire company, battled with Israeli security and then battled with the mayhem on the plane, none of the locals were happy with their seats and would not sit down and we took off well over 30 mins late just due to this.



Spur Thighed Tortoise



Rock Agama



Hoopoe



## Mammals - 25

Mountain Gazelle	Acacia Gazelle	Dorcas Gazelle
Indian Crested porcupine	Striped Hyena	Wolf
Golden Jackal	Onager	Nubian Ibex
Rock Hyrax	Red Fox	Cape Hare
Brown Hare	Coypu	Wagner's gerbil
Golden Spiny Mouse	Eastern Spiny Mouse	House Mouse
Egyptian Mongoose	Egyptian Fruit Bat	Kuhl's Pipistrelle
Grey long Eared Bat	Jungle Cat	Large Bat sp
Fat Sand Rat		
Water Buffalo*	Camel**	Arabian Oryx***

\* Reintroduced, \*\* Domestic, \*\*\* Captive

## Herps – 9

Rough Tailed Rock Agama	Levant Green Frog	Western Caspian Turtle
African Softshell Turtle	Red Eared Slider	Spur Thighed Tortoise
Bosk's Fringe-fingered Lizard	Lebanon Lizard	Sinai Fan-fingered Gecko



## Birds - 137

Little Grebe	Brown Booby	White Pelican
Cormorant	Pygmy Cormorant	Night Heron
Cattle Egret	Little Egret	Western Reef Egret
Great White Egret	Grey Heron	Purple Heron
White Stork	Black Stork	Glossy Ibis
Greater Flamingo	Shelduck	Egyptian Goose
Mallard	Pintail	Shoveller
Wigeon	Teal	Tufted Duck
Greater Spotted Eagle	Steppe Eagle	Black Kite
Marsh Harrier	Black Winged Kite	Montagu's Harrier
Long Legged Buzzard	Buzzard ( <i>ssp vulpinus</i> )	Sparrowhawk
Chukar	Sand Partridge	Moorhen
Coot	Common Crane	McQueens Bustard
Avocet	Black winged stilt	Stone curlew
Ringed plover	Spur winged plover	Wood Sandpiper
Green Sandpiper	Common Sandpiper	Redshank
Greenshank	Marsh Sandpiper	Snipe
Ruff	Black headed Gull	Slender Billed Gull
Yellow Legged Gull	Armenian Gull	Gull Billed Tern
Sandwich Tern	Caspian Tern	Spotted Sandgrouse
Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse	Rock Dove	Collared Dove
Laughing Dove	Little Owl	Nightjar
Nubian Nightjar	Swift	Alpine Swift
Hoopoe	Kingfisher	White Throated Kingfisher
Pied Kingfisher	Little Green Bee-eater	Ring Necked Parakeet
Monk Parakeet	Syrian Woodpecker	Skylark
Crested Lark	Desert Lark	Sand Martin
Crag Martin	Rock Martin	Barn Swallow
Red Rumped Swallow	House Martin	White Wagtail
Grey Wagtail	Citrine Wagtail	Spectacled Bulbul
Bluethroat	Black redstart ( <i>ssp semirufus</i> )	Wheatear
Blackstart	Eastern Mourning Wheatear	Hooded Wheatear
Stonechat	Song thrush	Blackbird
Blackcap	Eastern Orphean Warbler	Sardinian Warbler
Graceful Prinia	Cetti's Warbler	Clamorous Reed Warbler
Willow Warbler	Chiff Chaff	Great Tit
Great Grey Shrike ( <i>ssp aucheri</i> )	Kestrel	Palestine Sunbird
Arabian Babbler	Jay ( <i>ssp atricapillus</i> )	Jackdaw
Hooded Crow	Raven	Brown Necked raven
Fan Tailed Raven	House Crow	Tristram's Starling
House Sparrow	Spanish Sparrow	Chaffinch
Linnet	Goldfinch	Greenfinch
Trumpeter Finch	Mountain Bunting	Spoonbill
Barn Owl	Scops Owl	Common Myna
Bonelli's Eagle	Northern Goshawk	Stock Dove

Lesser Grey Shrike	Lesser Whitethroat	
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## Insects – 8

Painted Lady	Swallowtail	Scarce Green-striped White
Blue-Spotted Arab	Orange Tip	Clouded Yellow
Cleopatra	Vagrant Emperor	

## Notes

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Night driving and spotlighting down the back roads was easy, we were careful doing this and avoided built up areas. Trapping was done away from reserves and very discreetly and we did not encounter any problems.

Israel is westernised and food was easy to find and good prices slightly higher than in the UK, people were friendly and helpful and we did not feel unsafe at any time apart from encountering Israeli driving!

The major issue we encountered was getting Petrol, there are lots of petrol stations but actually purchasing it with a foreign credit card is particularly challenging, pay at pump is only in Hebrew and requires car registration and or passport number and was limited to 200 shekels at a time approx.  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a tank. It was easier prepaying inside the kiosk where available but was limited in amount you can purchase, but the staff and other customers were helpful and helped us.

Prices for food and fuel in general are similar to UK prices if not a little higher.



Palestinian Sunbird