



24-31st March 2008

Festival Summary



Scoping the Black Bush Robin

(Amir Ben-Dov)

Compiled by Jonathan Meyrav

General

The second international spring migration festival was a great success. This years' program offered a free guided shuttle tour service, specialty tours, world class lectures by some experts in their fields and more. As one would expect from this time of year, the real stars were the birds.

The festival participants enjoyed some great all-around birding and were lucky enough to catch up with some exciting vagrants and WP rarities. Birds like **Black Bush Robin, White-tailed and Caspian Plovers, Turkestan Shrike, Crested Honey Buzzard, Olive-backed Pipit, and Thick-billed Lark** were enjoyed by many of our guests. Besides connecting with all the expected target species, there were some added bonuses along the way, and due to our guides' experience and quick thinking many people were able to connect with unbelievable birds in amazing places. The night tours were a big success with both **Hume's Owl** and **Nubian Nightjars** seen on most attempts.

We are happy to present you with a summary of the 2008 festival highlights as compiled by the guides themselves. The species tally for the 2nd Eilat festival was a mind boggling 237 bird species!

The full checklist of species will be available to download shortly.

We are happy to say that the number of participants doubled from last year and that much interest has already been shown for the 2009 festival and some of the world's foremost birdwatchers have promised to be around for the event.



Caspian Plover

(Thomas Krumenacker)

Festival tours highlights

Guided coach (Shuttle) tours:

The guided coach tours were a big success. Festival visitors were welcome to join these free tours that were led by the best guides in the country. Every morning at 06:00 dozens of birders were lined up by the coaches and ready to go. We set out to cover some of the best birding sites in the southern Arava. These morning tours were very productive and gave the festival visitors both a very rewarding birding session and were a great "melting pot" for birders from various countries to connect.

With so many birders running around in the field the wealth of birds found was remarkable. A typical tour was the one led by myself on the morning of March 28th:

*We headed north of Eilat to the productive Yotvata fields. I was thrilled to find 1 lingering **Caspian Plover** that was a great life bird for many. Plenty of other birds were present. **Marsh, Hen and Pallid Harriers** skirted the fields and each time they passed they flushed impressive flocks of Short-toed larks, Pipits and Wagtails. We had good views of **Bimaculated Larks** and some **Lesser Short-toed Larks**. Several Quail were flushed from the ground, and **Chretzschmar's Buntings** allowed nice and close views. **Namaqua Doves** and **Little Green Bee-eaters** were seen regularly near the fields. The sewage ponds of Yotvata held large numbers of Yellow Wagtails of several subspecies, and we had there also a handsome **Siberian Stonechat** that was very obliging. The gardens of Lotan were as exciting as always. The swimming pool complex held large numbers of wagtails, pipits, wheatears and shrikes. Beautiful male **Woodchat** and **Masked Shrikes** were nice to see and several **Wrynecks** were jumping on the lawn.*

*The date palms of Samar and Elifaz were productive too. We had another **Siberian Stonechat**, a few Namaqua Doves, many Tree Pipits, several **Desert Finches, Indian Silverbill** and others birds. At the southern end of the pools we found a **White-tailed Plover**. Raptor migration was evident as large streams of **Steppe Buzzards**, Kites and 3 species of eagles passed the plantations.*



Siberian Stonechat

(Jonathan Meyrav)

*We were getting on the bus when I got a call about a **Black-Bush Robin** that was found near Eilat. Of course we raced down to the IBRCE Park and got close up and personal with this rare African visitor. It was an excellent tour and a good example of just how good and surprising the region is at this time of year.*

Specialty tours:

The Dead Sea and more: The Dead Sea is world famous for its landscape and special wildlife. Several highly specialized species of birds call this region home and are hardly seen away from the Dead Sea and the Judean Desert.

Yours truly

(Jonathan Meyrav) led the Dead Sea tour on the 29th and it was a memorable tour indeed.

*We set out early and were on the road by 05:30. We drove up to the Shezaf nature reserve and spent some time looking for the endemic race of **Arabian Warbler**. Although the conditions were good we failed to get decent views of Arabian Warbler but did find some **Spotted Sandgrouse** and a beautiful **Cyprus Warbler**. We had a packed breakfast in the field and were approached by some inquisitive Blackstart.*

*As we started heading north the skies were slowly filling with thousands of Raptors on the move. The numerous Steppe Buzzards were dotted with single **Steppe** and **Lesser Spotted Eagles**. We enjoyed these without stopping and headed up to Metzukei Dragot, an awesome watch point over*

the Dead Sea and one of the best Migration lookouts in the world. We spent over 2 hours by the café. The low palm trees nearby held many **Fan-tailed Ravens** and **Tristram's Grackles** that gave memorable views, but it was the raptors that stole the show. We were enjoying an ice cream as more and more raptors passed overhead, some very low and some just east of us at eye level or lower. There is no better place to practice raptor identification and I pointed out species after species and the group logged 18 species of raptors. Besides the 4000 or so Steppe Buzzards we had excellent views of **E. Imperial, Steppe, Lesser Spotted, Booted and Short-toed Eagles, Egyptian Vultures, Ospreys, kites, harriers, Black and White Storks**, and a very early male **Honey Buzzard**. It was truly a memorable session and the group was overwhelmed by the migration and the spot. The cliffs around hosted several **Sand Partridge, White Crowned Wheatears** and several **Nubian Ibex**.



Black Storks

(Yoav Perlman)

We descended down to the Ein Gedi area where we got close up and personal with more Fan-tailed Ravens and also saw a **Common Raven** and 3 **Mountain Buntings**. As we started heading back south we stopped at Neot Hakikar where we added a few **Dead Sea Sparrows** and the noisy **Clamorous Reed Warbler**. Thousands of **Pallid Swifts** filled the sky and a Purple Heron was flushed from the reeds. We tried again for the Arabian Warblers at Shezaf, but a sandstorm was kicking in and the strong winds drove us back to the vehicles. The way back to Eilat went smoothly and we

were back in time for Dick Forsman's lecture on raptor ID, which was an excellent way to wrap up a raptor day.

Nizzana and the Negev: Nizzana is well known for its remarkable birds and scenery, therefore it was no surprise that these tours were booked solid quickly, and we ended up opening more Nizzana tours to suit the demand. With the big six - **Maqueen's Bustards**, **Cream-colored Courser** and four **Sandgrouse** species in mind, our brave birders showed up at 04:30 am to set out across the desert, arriving in Nizzana at first light. It was essential to leave this early, since bustards can be very hard to find once the sun is up and the heat haze kicks in.

We held four Nizzana tours during the week; a very successful tour on the 28th was rewarded with some real rarities as well as the specialties of the region, as compiled by Yoav Perlman who guided the tour:



Black-bellied Sandgrouse (Yoav Perlman)

We reached Nizzana at first light and managed to link up with the main target species in almost no time: a dancing male **Maqueen's Bustard** performed beautifully, as it scrambled across the grassy steppes, **Cream-colored Coursers** were found in good numbers, migrants were present in large numbers, including many Greater Short-toed Larks, **Tawny Pipits** and several **Rueppell's Warblers**. We then moved on to the Sandgrouse drinking spot, and soon all four species showed in numbers: **Spotted and Black-bellied** were the commonest, with **Pin-tailed** and **Crowned** arriving in smaller numbers. The group had excellent scope views of all four species. The ponds

held a good selection of shorebirds and waterfowl. A noisy pair of Egyptian Geese added more color to the ponds. We had great views of **Dorcas Gazelles** and Fat Sand Rats. On the way out we had nice views of **Bar-tailed Larks**, singing over the stony plains.

Our next stop was at the Ben Gurion Park at Sdeh Boker. The lush gardens hosted many migrants, including Redstarts and Masked Shrikes. Over the scenic Zin gorge we had impressive views of **Eurasian Griffons** and **Egyptian Vultures**. As the temperatures raised raptor migration became more evident, with **Lesser Spotted** and **Steppe Eagles** adding interest among the numerous Steppe Buzzards. Our guests from the US and Canada had the chance to link up with some common local Eurasian birds, that Sdeh Boker is their southern limit, such as Blackbird, Great Tit and Greenfinch. Our next stop was the Meishar plateau in the southern Negev, an open plain which received exceptional rainfall this winter and as a result developed a nice seasonal plant cover which attracted massive numbers of migrants. We saw about **50 Bimaculated Larks**, plenty of wheatears, pipits, larks, warblers and others. Other star birds were **Desert Wheatears, Trumpeter Finches** and **Siberian Stonechat**.

We got an excited phone call from Dick Forsman, who was scanning the southern side of the Meishar - he was watching a **Thick-billed Lark** at close range! We rushed back to our vehicles and linked up with the impressive bird quickly. Soon we found a second bird, and this pair was apparently collecting nesting material! This highly nomadic lark exploits productive patches in the desert, and it is very possible that they bred nearby. As we left Meishar, we crossed a MASSIVE raptor migration stream, and watched with awe the huge thermals of buzzards circling and pushing forward towards Eurasia. As we drove south towards Eilat, we noticed that the wind was blowing from the south. We decided to give North Beach a go, and a good decision it was. The gulf was alive with birds, with plenty of **White-eyed, Baltic, Pallas's and Slender-billed Gulls, several Arctic Skuas, Caspian, Little and Common Terns**, and one rare **White-cheeked Tern**. The large group of birders present at the beach was excited by an interesting shearwater that was identified as a **Yelkouan Shearwater** - only the second record for Eilat!



Thick-billed Lark

(Yoav Perlman)

Specialty species night tours:

During the week we offered two attractive night tours to target 2 of the rarest and most enigmatic species in the WP, Hume's Tawny Owl and Nubian Nightjar. These tours proved to have great demand as the species are extremely difficult to see without the help of a local guide. We set out nightly during the week and the tours were all successful.

*The **Nubian Nightjar** tours began at Shezaf NR, in the northern Arava valley, which is always productive for local desert species including Arabian and Scrub Warblers, Sand Partridge, Little Green Bee-eater and others. We then continued to the Nubian Nightjar site south of the Dead Sea, near Neot Hakikar.*



Nubian nightjar

(Yoav Perlman)

*All tours were successful in locating the nightjars. All our groups had at least reasonable views, with some guests enjoying excellent views on the deck and in flight of this enigmatic and endangered beautiful nightjar. This area of the southern Dead Sea is very rich in wildlife and mammal encounters are common, usually Jackals or Foxes, but one group had good views of a **Caracal!** Other mammals seen were Asian Hare and several species of bats, including European Free-tailed Bat, the very rare Bodenheimer's Pipistrelle, and Lesser Rat-tailed Bat.*

The **Hume's Owl** tours were mostly led by Noam Weiss of the IBRCE. Due to the sensitivity of the species we can only say that these tours were incredible and offered a late night drive in a remote desert canyon to a rendezvous with one of the regions' most mysterious birds. *All tours saw and heard the owls, again, some more lucky groups getting amazing spotlight scope views. Besides the Hume's Owl main event, we also searched for **Pharaoh's Eagle Owl** and various mammals; one night tour encountered a **Striped Hyena!** one of the most impressive mammals in the country.*

Evening activities and presentations:

The evening assemblies at the Agamim Hotel in Eilat were a welcome treat for many at the days end. The participants and staff enjoyed a drink while listening to interesting lectures and reflecting on the days' birding highlights. It was nice to see how birders from Israel, Canada, the US and 7 European nationalities came together to share their personal birding highlights and experiences.

The following activities took place during the week:

Opening Banquet – the festival opening ceremony involved an excellent cocktail dinner and drinks poolside on the beautiful Agamim Hotel deck. Visitors were free to mingle whilst enjoying excellent food and local wines. Following the cocktail dinner, guests were invited to the conference hall where

we enjoyed a beautiful short film about Israel's special birds, wildlife and scenery, made especially for the event by film-maker and naturalist Eyal Bartov. The following celebrity speakers each gave an elaborate talk about their expertise.

Dr. Yossi Leshem – Yossi gave an interesting and entertaining presentation as always, about birds and Birdwatching in Israel and on a global aspect.

Dr. Reuven Yosef – Reuven shared with us the knowledge accumulated through many years of bird ringing and research of birds in the hand in Eilat. We learned about the important role Eilat plays for northbound migrants and the great challenges that passerines face on their epic journey.

Per Alström – joined us for the first time and gave a very interesting talk about pipit and wagtail identification. We were presented with advances in identification and species status of these challenging families. Together with Per we dove into the gene pool of these elaborate families, and later implemented the knowledge in the field.

David Cottridge – Joining us for the first time at the festival, world renowned nature photographer David Cottridge gave a very informative and colorful presentation, in which he shared some tips and techniques for bird photography, presented some of his prize images and focused on the artistic side of bird photography, as well as the technical side of things.

Dick Forsman – Dick joined us in Eilat for a second time and was friendly and helpful as usual. Besides the excellent presentation Dick gave, he also joined us in the field for some tours and gave festival visitors pointers in the field. There is nothing like being with a world class raptor specialist under a stream of thousands of raptors in the Eilat Mountains.

The 3rd Eilat migration Festival

23-30 March 2009

We are already taking bookings for the 2009 festival. The 2009 event will be the 3rd festival and will take place once again during the busiest week of the spring migration in Israel. We were happy to use your informative feedback forms to further fine tune the program to help you get the most out of the festival week. As in the previous festivals, I will be joined by Israel's best birders and guides, who have an intimate knowledge of the region's fauna and flora – Itai Shani, Noam Weiss and Yoav Perlman.

Please feel free to contact us with any questions you might have. All the festival information, booking forms and details can be found on the special festival website www.eilatbirdsfestival.com

Our ground agents in Europe are British based company "WildWings"

Who will be glad to help with all travel and ground arrangements
(www.wildwings.co.uk)

We are looking forward to seeing you in the field.

Jonathan Meyrav /// Israeli Ornithological center

On behalf of the festival staff