



**23-30 March 2009**

**Festival summary**



*Sinai Rosefinch*

*Thomas Krumenacker*

**Compiled by Jonathan Meyrav**

## General

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Eilat festival was a great success. The open coach tours drew a serious crowd and the **Specialty tours** filled fast and were excellent. Over **220** birders from Israel as well as 10 other nationalities took part in the festival activities, lectures and tours.

Besides the usual wealth of migrants that were present during this peak week in spring migration, the festival participants enjoyed some excellent rarities. Birds like **the returning Crested Honey Buzzard, Black Bush Robin, Caspian Plover, Bimaculated Lark, Asian Buff Bellied Pipit, Asian Desert Warbler, Hill Sparrow, Daurian Shrike, Blue checked Bee-eater, Cinereous Buntings** and many other quality species were seen on the festival tours.



**The returning female Crested Honey Buzzard**

On a local point of view, The **Macqueen's Bustards** at Nizzana performed well all week, migration was excellent at the Dead Sea watch points and the night tours were a great success with both **Hume's Owl** and **Nubian Nightjars** showing very well at close range.

The festival drew a great crowd this year and besides the great mixture of people from around the world, the general birding level was high this year as was the motivation of our great guests, even at 4:00 in the morning...



**Birding Eilat North beach during the festival**

**Roni Livne**

We are happy to present you with an elaborate summary of the festival highlights, as compiled by the guides themselves. The tally for this year was an amazing **221** species seen during the week, keeping the bar very high. The full 2009 checklist is available to download on the festival homepage.

A special festival gallery section will be available on the festival website very soon. On this section we will upload galleries from previous year's festivals. You are welcome to send us images you took while in Israel, to add to the great memories from this world class birding event.

## **Festival tour highlights**

All the festival tours were productive and were rated very high by the festival visitors. Not only the specialty tours were successful but many of the week's best birds were found on the guided morning shuttle tours.

### ***Southern Arava tour 24/3/09 – Leader Jonathan Meyrav***

"All pumped up and ready we met at the minibus at first light. I decided to gamble and start with a remote desert canyon targeting **Sinai Rosefinch**. We quickly found a flock **of 8 Rosefinches** and the birds showed very well at close range. We enjoyed a nice selection of other desert species like **White Crowned Wheatear, Desert Larks, Barbary Falcon** and more. At Yotvata many raptors were dropping down to drink rather early. As we entered the fields we noticed several Eagles on the ground. We enjoyed a group **of 3 Steppe and an E. Imperial Eagle** drinking and taking off. I quickly located the fine male **Caspian Plover** that has been hanging around for a few days, but unfortunately it took off rather quickly and only some of the group got good views on the deck. A quick scramble through the field produced reasonable views of **Oriental Skylark** and a **Buff bellied Pipit** flew by calling. From Yotvata we headed north to have breakfast at Lotan. We sat on the football pitch and enjoyed a host of colorful migrants with our meal. **Yellow Wagtails, Red throated Pipits, Redstarts, Masked Shrikes, Hoopoes and Wrynecks, Black eared and Northern Wheatears, Chretzschmar's and Ortolan Bunting** all fed around us on the lawns. Local gems included **Little Green Bee-eaters** and the returning **Rufous Bush Robin** pair nearby



**Caspian Plover Yotvata**

**Thomas Krumenacker**

After breakfast we slowly made our way back south after enjoying local herbal tea at Lotan's tea house, logging **Stone Curlew, Desert Finch and Pallid Harrier** along the way".

***IBRCE and Eilat Mts. Tour 24/3/09– Leader Yoav Perlman***

"We began our tour with a visit to the IBRCE. Being hosted by the IBRCE staff is always rewarding - Prof. Reuven Josef gave us an interesting insight into bird migration and conservation, and Noam Weiss showed us a selection of the best birds ringed at the ringing station that morning. Such a close-up encounter with exciting is a great experience - for both professional and amateur birders. Birds we met were **Subalpine** and **Rueppells Warblers, Wryneck, Quail** and **Masked Shrike** and many more common species. The IBRCE Park was alive with birds - the trees were full of **Balkan Warblers and Lesser Whitethroats, Bluethroats** ran along the waters' edge, and the ponds held a great variety of shorebirds, including exciting species such as **Red-necked Phalarope** and **Terek Sandpiper**.



**Rueppell's Warbler**

**Jonathan Meyrav**

We headed towards our next stop, the majestic Eilat Mts for raptor migration. We didn't even have to leave the city - a huge stream of thousands of birds made us stop the bus, and enjoy the awesome experience of true migration at its best. The stream of **Steppe Buzzards** didn't seem to end - we saw several thousands in tight flocks, thermaling and drifting north. Among them we located other gems - **Steppe, Lesser Spotted, Booted** and **Short-toed Eagles, Marsh Harriers, Egyptian Vultures** and others. We also encountered some common desert species, and .enjoyed a splendid male **Blue Rock Thrush** sat just by the road.

On the way down from the mountains back to the valley, we made a quick stop near the scenic Amram's Pillars. This is a good site for desert species, with the jewel of the crown being **Sinai Rosefinch**. We enjoyed close-up views of several females and stunning males.

We ended our tour with a visit to the KM 20 salt pans. Among the many common species, we had scarcer birds such as **Greater Sand Plover, Gull-billed and Whiskered Terns, Little Gull, and Blue cheeked Bee-eaters.**



**Greater Sandplover K20**

**Jonathan Meyrav**

***Southern Arava tour 25/3/09– Leader Yoav Perlman***

"Our first stop was at the Hai Bar reserve, south of Yotvata. A confiding **Black Bush Robin** had been hanging around for a few days, and indeed it showed very well inside the fenced compound when we arrived. The local ranger let us in, and we .enjoyed great views of this exciting species

Our next stop was at KM 76, which has nice desert habitat. We found species typical of open country - **Greater Short-toed Larks, Tawny Pipits**, One **Temminck's Lark** flew by north (the only bird of the festival), and a male **lesser Kestrel** flew .north

The gardens of Lotan were our main destination of the morning. Roaming the lush gardens of this unique community is a special experience, watching hundreds of migrants on the lawns between the gardens. The best birds we had were **Rueppells Warbler, Tree Pipit, Chretzschmar's and Ortolan Bunting**, and a cracking male '**sammimicus**' Redstart among the hundreds of Lesser Whitethroats and Blackcaps.

Our last stop of the morning was the fields and sewage ponds of Yotvata. We failed to locate the Caspian Plover hanging around, but saw other quality birds such as **Subalpine Warbler, Rufous Bush Robin, Siberian Stonechat** and others. The agricultural fields held large numbers of Quail, and were impressed by a hunting attempt made by a bold **Booted Eagle**, which dived out of the sky and tried to catch a quail 20 meters away from us. The **quail** survived to tell the tale. It was a great morning and it was difficult for us to leave these great birding sites and return to Eilat."

### **Neot Hakikar - in search of the endangered Nubian Nightjar – Leader Yoav Perlman**

*Yoav led all the Nubian Nightjar tours during the week. All tours scored nicely with these enigmatic birds and follows is an account of an especially successful evening.*

"Our main aim of the tour was to study and watch one of Israel's most endangered breeding species, the **Nubian Nightjar**. We broke the long drive to the nightjar site with birding stops at several sites. The first was at KM 103 on the Arava highway, where local rain and a flash flood several weeks earlier had created a productive green patch in the desert. It was alive with migrants, with many **Eastern Orphee and Balkan Warblers, Ortolan Buntings, Woodchat Shrikes** and others.

Our next stop was the beautiful Shezaf reserve, where we searched for, and found, another critically endangered species. We had good views of a pair of **Arabian Warblers**, and enjoyed great views of other tame desert species - **Desert Lark, Blackstart, Sand Partridge and Streaked Scrub Warbler**.



**Arabian Warbler Northern Arava**

**Asaf Mayrose**

We arrived at Neot Hakikar on time to learn about the biology and conservation of the beautiful **Nubian Nightjar**. It was not long before we first heard a calling nightjar, and then minutes later enjoyed views of a bird sitting in the middle of a dirt track only three meters away from us.



**Nubian Nightjar Neot Hakikar**

**Yoav Perlman**

***The magical Dead Sea – 27/3/09 – Leader Jonathan Meyrav***

**All the Dead Sea tours had excellent looks at all the target species of the region and scored with excellent soaring bird migration from the watch**

**point of Metzukei Dragot. A highly successful tour was the one I led on the 27<sup>th</sup> March.**

"We set out in the dark for the long haul up to the Northern Arava valley. Our first bird of the day was a superb adult **Egyptian Vulture** perched in a tree not far from the road near Zofar. We stopped at the Shezaf nature reserve where we had a quick search for the resident **Arabian Warblers**. A quick Espresso stop and we were back on the road. A nice **Mourning Wheatear** turned out to be our only one of the day. We continued north and climbed the winding road up to Metzukei Dragot. This is one of the most dramatic watch points in the WP. Although positioned on a sheer 300 m' cliff, weirdly enough the spot is still well below sea level. As a result of the topography soaring birds do not climb very high above this spot and many birds pass very close and often below us and at eye level. We timed it just right and as raptors started to accumulate we enjoyed close up views of many Fan-tailed Ravens and the inquisitive Tristram's Grackles. And then the raptors came. For the following 2 hours or so we had amazing looks at over **2000 Steppe Buzzards, 2-3 Long legged Buzzards, 15 Lesser Spotted and 10 Steppe Eagles, 10 Egyptian Vultures and a single Griffon, 2-3 Pallid and Marsh Harriers, several Black Kites, a nice party of Common Cranes, Black Storks** and more. When we left Metzukei the raptors were still pouring in good numbers so it was hard to tear away.



**Steppe Eagle – Dead Sea**

**Jonathan Meyrav**

We headed south to Wadi Mishmar. This wonderful desert canyon is home to many local specialties. We enjoyed a very productive stroll in the Wadi with the highlight

being 15 or so **Mountain Buntings**, several **Streaked Scrub Warblers** and many attractive Rock Hyraxes.

The next stop was the Heimar reservoir where we scored with a very confiding **Smyrna Kingfisher** and a nice colony of breeding **Dead-sea Sparrows**. No less than 6 species of Hirundines could be seen hawking over the water. We set out towards Eilat going over the highlights of a memorable day."



**Mountain Bunting Wadi Mishmar**

**Lee Gregory**

The Nizzana trips were a success with the highlights being the enigmatic **Macqueen's Bustards** that performed well, and many **Cream colored Coursers**.



**Cream colored Courser**

**Yoav Perlman**

All the trips caught up with displaying Macqueen's Bustards and despite the vast development around the drinking pools some searching was rewarded with good views of Spotted and Black-bellied Sandgrouse on the ground and in flight. The high reaches of the Negev produced great views of **Mourning Wheatears**, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures and Long legged Buzzards. Mitzpe Ramon football pitch held up to 15 (!) **Syrian Serins** till late march. The vast Meishar plateau also produced nicely with many **Bar-tailed Larks** a few **Desert Wheatears** and an inquisitive, late **Asian Desert Warbler** on the festival's last afternoon.

## **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, the UK, Canada, the US and 7 European nationalities came together to share their personal birding highlights and experiences.



**Evening presentation at Agamim**

**Yoav Perlman**

The following activities took place during the week:

**Opening Banquet and presentation** – 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 good food and local wines. Following the cocktail dinner, guests were invited to the conference hall where we enjoyed a beautiful presentation about Israel's birds as portrayed by **Thomas Krumenacker**. Thomas has spent many months in Israel photographing birds and getting to know the country and its people and his images are both beautiful and reflect on the country well.

Other interesting presentations were given during the week:

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

**Bill Clark** – Bill has always had a passion for raptors in Israel, having being one of the pioneers of raptor ringing in the country 25 years ago. We were happy to have him along for the festival week. Bill opened our eyes to the beauty of Eagles and other birds of prey in his nice presentation in which he covered some of the studies and projects he is involved in around the world.

**Noam Weiss** of the IBRCE gave an interesting talk about the Eilat Center's activities and projects and about advances in research of several interesting species of local birds. Noam also led the Hume's Owl trips during the festival and focused on this beautiful and mysterious Owl in his presentation.



**Hume's Tawny Owl on a festival tour**

**Lee Gregory**

**Amir Balaban** of the Israeli Ornithological center gave an entertaining presentation about Israel's fascinating birds and wildlife. Amir does a lot of nature filming and he presented some of his lesser known materials.

### **Towards The 4<sup>th</sup> Eilat migration festival**



**Eilat mountains**

**Yoav Perlman**

The **2010** spring festival program is already being fine tuned. We will once again be hosted by the Agamim hotel in Eilat and it promises to be a great week of birds and birding.

**The 4<sup>th</sup> festival is scheduled for the 18-24<sup>th</sup> March 2010** and we will begin taking bookings soon. 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 to help you get the most out of your vacation.

Keep an eye on our website for more details and info that will be posted towards the next festival. Also you are welcome to visit the Israeli Ornithological Center stand at the British Birdwatching fair in England, taking place in late August. As in recent years, there will be a festival representative present to help with info or anything you might need. 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](http://www.wildwings.co.uk)).

## **Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank the following for their great efforts in making this festival what it is.

First we thank Dan Alon, head of the IOC which embraced the festival as a personal project and put in days and nights. Thanks to the Festival guides, Yoav Perlman, Itai Shanni and Noam Weiss who together with yours truly, put in 25 hours a day and provided visitors with world class guiding services and much more. Thanks to the IRBCE Staff Tzadok, Liat, Eran and the volunteers for the time they put in. A special thank goes to Dr. Reuven Yosef and Noam Weiss for their great effort in making everyone feel welcome. Thanks Richard Melzack for his promotion work in the UK. We would not have reached this far without Richards prolonged support and valuable help in the UK. Special thanks go to Laya Libi for her great work, tolerance and patience at the information stand. It was not an easy task operating the computers while fending off eager birdwatchers. Thanks to our speakers Bill Clark, Dr Yossi Leshem, Amir Balaban and especially Thomas Krumenacker for his continuing support of the festival, Israel and its birding projects.

Thanks to John Brodie Good and his team at WILDWINGS for their help in marketing the festival and giving us proper stage to promote the event worldwide. Many of our UK and other birders came through wildwings and this is worthy of special thanks. We would like to thank the Isrotel Agamim Staff for catering to our crazy birder requests, and for making us feel welcome at Agamim again. A final word of thanks has to go to our visitors, Israeli and especially from overseas. Your continuing support of Israel despite various political distractions and your taking part in Israeli Birdwatching events is the best testament to the projects value.

We are looking forward to seeing you in the field in the upcoming years.

**Jonathan Meyrav /// Festival coordinator**

**Israeli Ornithological center**

**On behalf of the festival staff**