

ISRAEL

SPRING MIGRATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST



Bimaculated Lark
(Al McNee)

Saturday March 24th – Sunday April 1st 2012

Leader: Simon Papps

Group size: 8

Birds: 180-200

Israel is a modern country with a good infrastructure located on a major migration route from Africa and into Asia and Europe. Mid March to early April is the optimum time for a birding tour as many sought after species pass through the country and a few lingering winter birds are present. Our main base is in the south of the country at the holiday resort of Eilat which offers us good access to the major birding sites of Southern Israel. The last two days of the tour are spent near Nizzana which is one of the entry points into the Negev Desert. This nine-day tour to Israel should produce several scarce European migrants and specialities of the region.

Day 1: Fly to Tel Aviv in Israel. From the airport, we travel south to the coastal resort of Eilat for a six-night stay. Eilat is handily placed for our week, with easy access to all the major birding areas.

Day 2: We start the day with some initial birding around Eilat. Common species within the city include Laughing Dove, House Crow and Yellow-vented Bulbul, whilst commoner migrants may include White and Black-headed Wagtails, Bluethroat, Eurasian Wryneck, Tree Pipit, Masked and Woodchat Shrikes and Rüppell's, Eastern Olivaceous and Eastern Bonelli's Warblers. Late March is an optimum time for migrating raptors and we may encounter mixed groups of Black Kite, Steppe Buzzard, Eastern Imperial, Booted, Short-toed and perhaps Greater Spotted Eagles. To the north of Eilat, we visit an area of date palms which is a traditional resting spot for migrants. On past visits we have found birds typical of Eastern Europe including Collared and Semi-collared Flycatchers, (Eastern) Common Redstart and Eurasian Hoopoe. Other species which are relatively common in this area include Green Bee-eater and Spur-winged Lapwing. Shorebirds are relatively scarce here although the overflow of agricultural water attracts Little Ringed Plover, Wood Sandpiper and a range of herons. As dusk starts to fall, we make our way to a pumping station for close views of Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse, Trumpeter Finch, Striolated Bunting and, on occasions, Sand Partridge.

Day 3: This morning we travel north out of Eilat to explore the extensive desert area which has stands of acacia trees and a few bushes. This rather inhospitable habitat is a reliable site for desert species including Cream-coloured Courser and an extensive range of larks and wheatears: Bar-tailed, Greater Short-toed, Thick-billed, Temminck's and Crested Larks, Desert, Northern, Isabelline and Black-eared Wheatears and, perhaps, a lingering Cyprus Wheatear. Rarer species observed in the past have included the beautiful Caspian Plover. We also visit the settlement of Yotvata. The habitat around Yotvata is a known site for the localised Red Sea Warbler, Blackstart, Tristram's Grackle, Sardinian and Rüppell's Warblers and Brown-necked Raven. We should also be on the lookout for rarer migrants such as Pallid Harrier, Rufous-backed and Black Scrub Robins and Hume's Warbler. As we retrace our journey back to Eilat, we check another area of date palms for thrushes, larks and buntings whilst Tawny and Red-throated Pipits also pass through on migration. A series of salt pans is worth checking for migrating waders and ducks with likely sightings of Ruddy Shelduck, Kentish Plover, Greater Sandplover, Ruff and scarcer shorebirds including Broad-billed, Marsh and Curlew Sandpipers.

Day 4: We start the day by driving to Amran's Pillars, an area of stunning scenery. The 'pillars' are reliable for Sinai Rosefinch in the winter months and we may be fortunate to find some late birds.

Sand Partridge and Blackstart are also present. The mountains around Eilat often have migrating raptors flying at low-level. If conditions are good we can expect a wide range of species. In the mountain habitat, we may find White-tailed Wheatear, Trumpeter Finch and Palestine Sunbird. The water treatment works at Eilat attract many birds during spring including Great White Pelican, Little Crane, White-tailed Lapwing, Pallid and Alpine Swifts, Citrine Wagtail, Red-rumped Swallow and Rock Martin. Our final birding area for the day is North Beach which is a reliable place to find



Bluethroat (Martin Scott)



Blackstart (Al McNee)

Striated Heron, Western Reef Egret, Great Black-headed, Armenian and White-eyed Gulls and Pied Kingfisher.

Days 5-6: Revisiting areas mentioned in Days 2-4, keeping an eye on the visible migration which changes on a daily basis at this time of the year.

Day 7: Today we say our goodbyes to Eilat and travel north to Ein Gedi on the shores of the Dead Sea. Our journey takes us through the desert where we may see Egyptian Vultures, Bonelli's Eagle and Lanner Falcon. Areas of cliffs and desert with stunted bushes often harbour Mourning Wheatear, Scrub Warbler, and Arabian Babbler. The vegetated wadis of Ein Gedi are attractive to migrants and resident birds including

White-breasted Kingfisher, Fan-tailed Raven and Striolated Bunting. We also check a marshy area at the southern end of the Dead Sea, a reliable site for crakes, Clamorous Reed Warbler and Dead Sea Sparrow. We also have a chance of late wintering birds such as Cyprus Warbler and Syrian Serin. Other birds of interest in the area include Brown-necked Raven, Palestine Sunbird, Long-billed Pipit and Little Swift. At sunset, we meet up with a local guide to look for Nubian Nightjar and Hume's Owl, a species preferring undisturbed desert cliffs. Transfer to a Kibbutz for a two-night stay.

Day 8: An early start to visit Nizzana, one of the few accessible areas of the Middle East where the rare and declining Macqueen's Bustard occurs. Other species usually

present include the desert race of Little Owl, Black-bellied, Spotted and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Southern Grey Shrike, Scrub and Spectacled Warblers and Desert Wheatear. Late morning we return to the Kibbutz and concentrate birding around the extensive grounds. Eurasian Thick-knees and Syrian Woodpeckers are joined by Bluethroat, Common Chiffchaff and migrants including Blue Rock Thrush, Thrush Nightingale and Eastern Orphean Warbler. Later in the day, a visit to a nearby wadi may reveal an assortment of rails, crakes, Clamorous Reed and Moustached Warblers and Pied and White-breasted Kingfishers.

Day 9: After breakfast, we travel back to Tel Aviv for a flight back to London where the tour concludes.

Ground Price: £1505

*Air Fare: £490

Total tour price: £1995

Tour Price Tel Aviv/Tel Aviv: £1505

Single room: £160

Deposit: £200

*please refer to our terms and conditions relating to flights on pages 5 and 71

This tour is fully inclusive of flights, accommodation, meals, transport, park entrance fees and permits, guidance, tips and taxes.

Not included: drinks, insurance, and items of a personal nature, air passenger duty taxes and fuel surcharges.

Please note: a visa is issued on entry to Israel.