



# INTERNATIONAL SPRING MIGRATION FESTIVAL **EILAT 2007**

Festival Report **18-24 March 2007**

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## **Introduction:**

Organized by the Israel Ornithological Center, The IBRCE (International Birding and Research Center Eilat) and Kibbutz Lotan Center for Birdwatching, the Spring Migration Festival brought together birders from all around the world for an unforgettable event during the peak migration period in Southern Israel.

## **Birding highlights.**

The first International Spring Migration Festival was a great success. The tours were excellent, the lectures were interesting and very instructive and the event exceeded expectations. Of course, as expected, the real stars were the birds. The Festival participants enjoyed some great birding and, due to some unexpected weather patterns, some impressive falls of migrants. There were also some added bonuses along the way as well, and due to the guides experience and quick thinking, many people saw some unbelievable birds in amazing places.

We are happy to present you with a summary of the Festival highlights, including a full checklist (a mind boggling 219 species) seen during the week, and specific day by day summaries as compiled by the guides themselves.

Further, we are happy to say that much interest has already been shown for next year's Festival and some of the world's foremost birdwatchers have promised to be around for the event.

## **Birding tours summary:**

19/3/07

The first morning started off well with both short tours fully subscribed and an additional full day Southern Arava birding tour was added due to popular demand.

Yoav Perlman guided the Eilat mountains morning tour. The group enjoyed good views of migration over the mountains, with several Steppe Eagles and Lesser Spotted Eagles and good sightings of common desert birds - White crowned Wheatear, Desert lark etc.

Late morning at K19, 2 Greater Spotted Eagles, good selection of ducks, several more Steppe Eagles, 15-20 Eurasian Crag Martins, Alpine swifts, Balkan Warblers, and in the afternoon at the North beach with Klaus Olsen, 4 Arctic( Parasitic) Skuas , Siberian, Yellow legged, Baltic White eyed gulls, Striated Herons.



**White-crowned Black Wheatear**

The two full day tours, one led by Itai Shanni and the other by Jonathan Meyrav faired very well with highlights being:

Good numbers of raptors with several species of Eagles, Black Kites and an Osprey en route to K76, where a pair of Barbary Falcons gave nice shows and few Bar-tailed larks along with 13 Crowned Sandgrouse and a beautiful male Pallid Harrier. Up at Neot Smadar; White-crowned, Hooded and Isabelline Wheatears and few Tawny Pipits. On the way down Orphean and Ruppell's Warbler and a single Blue Rock Thrush. Down at Yotvata; a single male Little Crake at the sewage and many Greater Short-toed Larks together with 4 species of Harriers and a Eurasian Sparrowhawk. Further the group led by Jonathan also enjoyed superb views of Arabian Warbler, Namaqua Dove and Sand Partridge at Yotvata and a late White-breasted Kingfisher at the Neot Smadar date plantation.



**Steppe Eagle**

20/03/07

The Nizzana tour was led by Itai Shanni. The group had a very early start, a long drive but a very fruitful day with the highlights being a dancing male Macqueen's Bustard and few Cream-coloured Coursers. Also seen Woodchat Shrikes, Sardinian, Orphean and Ruppell's Warblers, Greater Short-toed Larks and the desert form of Little Owl while Greater & Lesser Spotted and Short-toed Eagles were soaring overhead. On the way back at the Meishar a pair of Desert Wheatears and 9 Spotted Sandgrouse and both Desert and Bar-tailed Larks.



### **Macqueen's Bustard**

Yoav held a morning ringing session at Lotan with the highlights being, 1 male Subalpine Warbler, 1 *sammisicus* Redstart, 3 Bluethroat, 1 Cretzschmar's Bunting among many Lesser Whitethroats, Blackcaps and Chiffchaffs.

Jonathan led the Eilat mountains tour. Israel's first Bean Goose was present and gave good views and then it was up to the mountains. Migration took some time to develop but once the birds showed up the group got great views of hundreds of Steppe Buzzards, some Steppe Eagles and good views of common desert birds including White crowned Wheatear, Desert lark, Sand Partridge etc.

Late morning at K19 two Greater Spotted Eagles performed well, there was a good selection of ducks and migrating raptors overhead. At the southernmost date plantations Rose-ringed Parakeets and Little Green Bee-eaters were seen, and we enjoyed views of a nice feeding flock of Indian Silverbills.

The afternoon & evening were devoted to the southern Dead Sea with the target species being Nubian Nightjar. En route at Shezaf nature reserve 1 Arabian Warbler gave good views, 1 male Cyprus Warbler, Arabian Babblers, Blackstarts etc. and at Neot Hakikar, Great Egret, 2 Whiskered Terns, 1000's of Pallid swifts, 5 calling Penduline Tits, several singing Clamorous Reed Warblers and Dead Sea Sparrow. 3

Nubian Nightjars gave great views while foraging over the agricultural fields with their light butterfly like flight, giving the group a chance to get all the ID features.



**Birding the Dead Sea area**

21/3/07

The half day morning tour was led by Itai who was joined at the mountains by Dick Forsman, the species seen included Steppe Eagles and Steppe Buzzards, a few Black Kites and Marsh Harriers.

Down at Km19 both Greater and Lesser Spotted Eagles and a single Short-toed Eagle were seen and also a group of Eurasian Crag Martins and a single Citrine Wagtail, some Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters at K20. En route back to Lotan a short stop at Yotvata produced a few Bimaculated Larks .

The southern Arava birding tour was led by Yoav. At the Eilat Football pitch the Bean Goose showed well. At K76, 16 Crowned & 30 Spotted Sandgrouse, 1 male Pallid Harrier, 1 adult Great spotted Cuckoo, 2 Ruppell's & 1 Subalpine Warblers, 1 brief Bar-tailed lark.

Neot Smadar - packed with birds, 2 male Ruppell's warblers, many Tawny and Red-throated Pipits, Yellow Wagtails and 2 Linnets that were an excellent northerly surprise.

In the afternoon at Yotvata, dark morph Marsh Harrier with 3-4 Hen Harriers and 1 juvenile Pallid Harrier, 4-5 Bimaculated Larks among 1000 Greater Short-Toed Larks, but no sign of the Pale Rock Sparrow seen earlier by Jonathan.



**Israel's first Bean Goose**

That night two groups set out for a taste of the night wildlife in the valley. It was a great night to be in the fields and 2-3 Egyptian nightjars showed well, both foraging and on the ground. The resident Pharaoh Eagle Owl gave amazing views as it hunted a rodent and ate it on a dry acacia tree. What a night to remember it was, many people commented that being out there in the desert with Jackals howling and the Owl performing was something unforgettable.

22/3/07

Jonathan Meyrav led the Eilat Mountains tour. The first stop was again the Eilat football pitch where the Bean Goose ever loyal gave superb views. Up at the mountains good numbers of Steppe Buzzards, several Steppe Eagles, Marsh Harriers, Black Kites and Egyptian Vulture. On the way down a nice pair of Rock Thrush, 1 Citrine Wagtail at K19 and all the birds seen previously.

Yoav Perlman led the Dead Sea tour. On the way, at the beautiful Shezaf Nature Reserve, great views of a pair of Arabian Warblers, pair of Desert Finch nest building and amazing views of 2 Long Legged Buzzard sat next to the Arava road.

There was also good migration along the rift valley, with 100's of Steppe Buzzards, several Black Kites and Steppe Eagles and an Osprey.

At the Hemar reservoir there were tens of singing Dead Sea Sparrows, and a White-breasted Kingfisher was heard.

At Ein Gedi - good views of all desert species – Tristram's Grackles, Fan tailed Ravens, 2 Common Ravens, several Short-toed Eagles, and finally stunning views of White breasted Kingfisher. The group of course enjoyed the traditional dip in the sea...



©Thomas Krumenacker  
White breasted (Smyrna) Kingfisher

On the way back at the ponds south of Dead Sea works - 3 Spoonbills, 1 Greater Flamingo, 2 Pochard and several Garganey.

Itai Shanni spent the morning ringing at the IBRCE. Balkan and Ruppell's Warblers among the many Lesser Whitethroats were caught and Masked Shrike and both Redstart and Black Redstart were present (though not ringed).

The afternoon K20 and North Beach tour produced several Yellow legged & Baltic Gulls, a group of 600 Garganey flying north and a very close Caspian and Sandwich Terns.

23/3/07

Itai once again led the long haul Nizzana tour but the group was rewarded with a great trip.

Itai summarizes:

The 'Old Faithful' dancing male Macqueen's Bustard was still performing, huge numbers of Greater Short-toed Larks, few Tawny Pipits and a nice Pallid Harrier. A very distinct Spectacled Warbler gave good views as it called from its bush next to the empty Sandgrouse pond.

At Sde-boker big numbers of Griffon Vultures and a pair of Egyptian Vultures together with the many migrant Steppe Buzzards. Down at the Meishar, a single Desert Wheatear and a few Desert Larks, small group of Spotted Sandgrouse were seen at last.

Yoav started the day ringing at Lotan with the highlights being 1 retrap Subalpine Warbler, Northern Wheatear, many Red Throated Pipit's including a retrap from March 2006, 1 Red-rumped Swallow and many Lesser whitethroats and Blackcaps.



**Subalpine Warbler**

The Nightjar tour enjoyed a nice session at Neot Hakikar with 1 spotted crane and singing Clamorous Reed Warblers. Nubian Nightjars required some work but eventually two nightjars gave brief but good flight views.

24/4/07

The weather deteriorated quickly on the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> and by 09:00 it was raining on and off and the windy conditions held no promise... but the weather turned out to be a good thing as classic "fall" conditions had developed and migrants were dropping out of the skies.

Yoav led the Eilat Mountains tour and he summarizes: Rain, no migration, 1 Hooded Wheatear, 2 Sand Partridge and 1 Blue rock Thrush. On the way down from the mountains 1 male Rock Thrush at the entrance roundabout to Eilat.

Jonathan was leading a large group and met up with Yoav at Ofira park where there were several wrynecks, many Cretzschmar's Buntings, Common and Lesser Whitethroats, Tree pipits, 1 bright summer plumage Grey Wagtail and another handsome male Rock Thrush. It was then that we received the message of a, rare for Israel, Dunn's Lark at K76. Yoav and his group set out there and besides succeeding in finding the Dunn's Lark, they saw 4 Bar tailed Larks, 3 Desert Wheatears and witnessed an amazing fall of Northern & Black eared Wheatears.



**Dunn's Lark K76**



©Yoav Perlman

### **Dunn's Lark twitch**

In the afternoon there was an Eilat North Beach session with Klaus Olsen. This provided some great action and was one of the best seawatching sessions for a long time. Klaus picked out a Saunder's Tern, a rare Red Sea visitor, in a flock of Little Terns. Also at the beach, 1 White-cheeked Tern, 150 Common Terns, 1 Siberian gull and 6 Pallas's gulls.



© Klaus M. Olsen

### **White-eyed Gull North beach**

## **Evening activities.**

The evening assemblies at the Agamim Hotel in Eilat were a welcome treat to many at the days end. The participants and staff enjoyed a cold drink while listening to interesting lectures and just reflecting on the days' birding.

The following activities took place:

18/3/07

The festival officially started with an excellent opening banquet at the Agamim hotel in Eilat. The food and drinks were tasty and well arranged, and over 120 people attended the banquet. After we all ate and drank we gathered for some opening words and a short film by Eyal Bar-tov, after which we enjoyed a beautiful presentation of bird images, courtesy of Rony Livne.



19/3/07

We all gathered to hear the charismatic Dr. Yossi Leshem talk about migration from a regional and global aspect. Yossi gave his unique perspective on migration and was very entertaining and interesting.

20/3/07

The much anticipated lecture by Dick Forsman on birds of prey was a great success.

We all learned a lot from the informative slides and were once again in awe at Dick's extensive knowledge of every plumage detail, down to the feather. Dick also co-guided some of the tours at the Eilat Mountains and was very friendly and helpful.



**Dick Forsman in Action**

21/3/07

Free evening. Due to the hectic pace of things a much needed rest and a relaxed evening were welcome by many.

22/3/07

Dr. Reuven Yosef gave a thrilling presentation about the importance of Eilat for migrants, through years of hands-on experience at the IBRCE.



23/3/07

The world renowned seabird specialist Klaus Malling Olsen gave us a glimpse into the world of gulls, terns and other seabirds. Klaus with his informative and kind guidance also played an important and helpful role with coguiding some of the tours.

24/3/07

The closing evening of the festival was a friendly way to wrap things up. We all had a drink and shared the week's endeavors, and compiled a checklist of the birds seen during the festival week (a whopping 219 species!).

### **Acknowledgments:**

We would like to express our thanks to the lecturers; Mr. Rony Livne, Dr. Yossi Leshem, Mr Dick Forsman, Dr. Reuven Yosef and Mr. Klaus M. Olsen for taking part in the event, and hope to see them again in the following years Festivals.

Also we would like to express our thanks for the management and staff of hotel Agamim- Isrotel, Eilat, who generously hosted the evening events and contributed in many other ways to the success of the Festival.

**For more details or bookings for the  
'International Spring Festival, Eilat 2008'  
23-29/03/2008**

**Please contact one of the followings:**

- **Richard Melzack at RM Tours** [info@rmtours.co.uk](mailto:info@rmtours.co.uk)
- **Dan Alon at Israel Ornithological Centre** [ioc@netvision.net.il](mailto:ioc@netvision.net.il)



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**Little Green Bee-eater**



### **Checklist 18-24 March**

The following species were seen during the festival week. All the species were seen on the festival tours and workshops. The significant species are highlighted.

Little Grebe  
Great Cormorant  
Little Bittern  
Night Heron  
Mangrove (Striated) Heron  
Cattle Egret

Squacco Heron  
Little Egret  
Western Reef Heron  
Great Egret  
Grey Heron  
Purple Heron  
White Stork  
Black Stork  
Glossy Ibis  
Eurasian Spoonbill  
Greater Flamingo  
**Bean Goose (1<sup>st</sup> for Israel)**  
Common Shelduck  
Mallard  
Northern Pintail  
Northern Shoveler  
Eurasian Wigeon  
Garganey  
Teal  
Common Pochard  
Griffon Vulture  
Egyptian Vulture  
Osprey  
Eastern Imperial Eagle  
Lesser Spotted Eagle  
Greater-spotted Eagle  
Steppe Eagle  
Booted Eagle  
Black Kite  
Marsh Harrier  
**Pallid Harrier**  
Hen Harrier  
Long-legged Buzzard  
Eurasian Sparrowhawk  
**Goshawk**  
Steppe Buzzard  
Common Kestrel  
Lesser Kestrel  
Peregrine  
Barbary Falcon  
Chukar  
Sand Partridge  
Quail  
Water Rail  
Little Crake  
Spotted Crake  
Moorhen  
Coot  
Common Crane  
Macqueen's Bustard

### **Oystercatcher**

Avocet  
Black winged Stilt  
Stone Curlew  
Cream-colored Courser  
Collared Pratincole  
Little Ringed Plover  
Ringed Plover  
Kentish Plover

### **Greater Sand Plover**

Spur-winged Plover  
Dunlin  
Little Stint  
Curlew Sandpiper  
Green Sandpiper  
Wood Sandpiper  
Common Sandpiper  
Marsh Sandpiper  
Redshank  
Greenshank  
Spotted Redshank  
Black-tailed Godwit  
Common Snipe  
Ruff  
Curlew

Arctic Skua  
Black-headed Gull  
Slender-billed Gull

### **Mediterranean Gull**

Little Gull

### **Pallas's Gull**

Armenian Gull  
Baltic Gull  
Caspian Gull  
Siberian Gull  
Yellow-legged Gull  
White-eyed Gull

Little Tern  
Common Tern

### **Saunders's Tern**

### **White-cheeked Tern**

Gull-billed Tern  
Sandwich Tern  
Whiskered Tern  
Caspian Tern  
Black-bellied Sandgrouse  
Spotted Sandgrouse  
Crowned Sandgrouse

### **Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse**

### **Namaqua Dove**

Turtle Dove  
Collared Dove  
Laughing Dove  
Rock Dove  
Great Spotted Cuckoo  
Eurasian Cuckoo  
**(Pharoah) Eagle Owl**  
**Hume's Tawny Owl**  
**Egyptian Nightjar**  
**Nubian Nightjar**  
Common Swift  
Pallid Swift  
Alpine Swift  
Hoopoe  
Common Kingfisher  
Smyrna Kingfisher  
Pied Kingfisher  
Common Bee-eater  
**Blue-cheeked Bee-eater**  
Little Green Bee-eater  
Roller  
Rose-ringed Parakeet  
Wryneck  
**Oriental Skylark**  
Crested lark  
Greater Short-toed Lark  
Lesser Short-toed Lark  
Desert Lark  
**Bar-tailed Lark**  
**Dunn's Lark**  
**Bimaculated Lark**  
**Temminck's Lark**  
Sand Martin  
Crag Martin  
Rock (pale Crag) Martin  
House Martin  
Barn Swallow  
Red-rumped Swallow  
Tawny Pipit  
Water Pipit  
Red-throated Pipit  
Meadow Pipit  
Tree Pipit  
White Wagtail  
Grey Wagtail  
Yellow Wagtail  
**Citrine Wagtail**  
Spectacled Bulbul  
Common Nightingale  
Bluethroat

Common Redstart  
Black Redstart  
Northern Wheatear  
Isabelline Wheatear  
Desert Wheatear  
Eastern Black-eared Wheatear  
Blackstart  
Hooded Wheatear  
Mourning Wheatear  
White-crowned Wheatear  
Stonechat  
Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush  
Blue Rock Thrush  
Song Thrush  
Blackbird  
Blackcap  
Eastern Orphean Warbler  
Lesser Whitethroat  
Common Whitethroat  
**Arabian Warbler**  
**Subalpine Warbler**  
**Cyprus Warbler**  
Sardinian Warbler  
Spectacled Warbler  
Ruppell's Warbler  
Graceful Prinia  
Scrub Warbler  
Sedge Warbler  
Reed Warbler  
Savi's Warbler  
Cetti's Warbler  
Marsh Warbler  
Clamorous Reed Warbler  
Wood Warbler  
E. Olivaceous Warbler  
Balkan (E. Bonneli's Warbler)  
Chiffchaff  
Willow Warbler  
Penduline Tit  
Woodchat Shrike  
Masked Shrike  
Southern Grey Shrike  
Palestine Sunbird  
Arabian Babbler  
**Common Raven**  
Brown-necked Raven  
Fan-tailed Raven  
Hooded Crow  
Indian House Crow  
Tristram's Grackle

Starling  
House Sparrow  
Spanish Sparrow  
Dead-sea Sparrow  
**Pale Rock Sparrow**  
Linnet  
Greenfinch  
Desert Finch  
Trumpeter Finch  
**Sinai Rosefinch**  
Ortolan Bunting  
Cretzschmar's Bunting  
Corn Bunting  
Indian Silverbill

**Total Species: 219**