

WildWings

2016 Hula Valley Bird Festival – Summary

15th-22nd November 2016

By Jonathan Meyrav

The 6th Hula Valley Bird Festival was a fantastic week of birds, wildlife and scenery. A group of devoted birders spent a whole week exploring the magical Hula Valley, the Hula reserve, the Galilee, Golan and finished with a venture south for a weekend of birding in the Negev.

The first two days of the festival are spent as an introduction to the Hula Valley, the jewel of the crown of Northern Israel birding. The Valley is incredible this time of year, the transition between fall migration and winter is clear with many migrants still moving through but most winterers already present. One of the iconic sights (and sounds) of the Hula are the massive numbers of Common Cranes. Around 40,000 Cranes were present at the Hula and the sunrise mobile hide tour left everyone in the Festival group in awe. Besides the obvious Crane spectacle we also had nice encounters with a Jungle Cat, Jackals and wild Boar. The Hula is a real treat for any raptor enthusiast and good numbers of wintering Eagles, Kites, Harriers, Buzzards and Falcons are present and not difficult to see. Rare species such as Greater Spotted and Eastern Imperial Eagle, Pallid Harrier and even several White-tailed Eagles put on a show.

Following two great days in the Hula the festival groups set out further afield to explore the Hermon and Northern Golan Heights. The Hermon day is always awesome and we started right up at the highest point. We slowly birded the road on the high mountain, well above the clouds. It was quite cold and not too much bird activity was noticed, we did find 8 Crimson Winged Finch and smaller numbers of Woodlark, Pipits and some common Finches. At the lower reaches of the mountain we had brief views of Sombre Tits and Western Rock Nuthatch. On the way down we stopped for the traditional lunch at the Druze village of Buquata. After an excellent meal of Falafel Humus and about 15 kinds of salads we headed for the Golan. We managed a quick stop at the Valley of tears where we had Finsch's Wheatear and several nice Mountain Gazelles.

The following day we headed south to the Bet Shean Valley, via the Sea of Galilee. We started at the Te'enim lookout in the Eastern Galilee where we stumbled upon a true raptor fest. Hundreds of Black Kites were obvious and within minutes we added both Greater and Lesser Spotted Eagles, a superb adult Eastern Imperial Eagle and even a late Steppe Eagle, what a spot! We stopped at the Susita ruins in the Southern Golan where we quickly scored with Long-billed Pipits, Finsch's Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush and several Blackstart, which are common in the desert and here is as far north as they venture. The Bet Shean Valley was incredible as usual, boasting amazing numbers of Pelicans, Black Storks, Gulls, Pygmy Cormorants and more. We visited a drinking pool where we had a few desert Finch, Siberian Stonecats, Richards Pipit and more.

Following the success of the year before, the last few days of the Festival were devoted to the Negev. We migrated south through the West Negev where we had several Pallid Harriers,

Golden Plovers and huge numbers of Skylarks on the first evening. We had to cut the session short since we had a date with Syrian Serins at a roost in the Negev. We arrived on site only to hear about Serins from the other group that had a few birds drop in minutes before we arrived, oh well.

It was back to the West Negev in the morning to search for some specialties. We drove along the famous Urim powerline and had several Peregrines, Buzzards and Eagles. The star of the show was a cracking adult Saker that dwarfed the Peregrine nearby, what a beast! We also had several Merlin, including a nice male "Steppe" Merlin, pallidus from the steppes of Kazakhstan. As we were enjoying the Falcons we noticed a large flock of Northern Lapwings flying nearby. I scanned the flock and sure enough, 7 Sociable Plovers!

The following morning started well before first light as we ventured to the Nizzana wilderness. This magical area never fails and within minutes we had several Macqueen's Bustards in the scopes. We birded the area adding common species such as Mourning Wheatear, Little Green Bee-eaters, Arabian Babblers and more. For breakfast we chose a remote drinking pool near Ezuz where we enjoyed breakfast with a few Crowned Sandgrouse! What a magical spot.

From Nizzana we headed to the Avdat Canyon. This beautiful ravine is home to several breeding pairs of Griffon Vultures. We saw at least 5 pairs of Vultures, as well as Long-legged and Common Buzzards, Brown Necked Ravens and nice herds of Nubian Ibex. Just as we were leaving a pair of Barbary Falcons swooped in and gave the local Rock Doves a scare and a real treat for us.

The last morning was spent birding the Mizpe Ramon area, adding some last minute desert species. On the way back to the airport the group made a stop in the Judean Plains where we managed to find a few White-headed Ducks, a rare duck and a great last bird for the trip!

It was a fantastic festival week full of great birds, wildlife and scenery and with a great group from several countries. I would like to thank the festival leaders, Nadav Israeli, Meidad Goren, Noam Weiss and Yuval Dax for their patience and exceptional leading skills.

Join us for the next Hula Bird Festival that will take place on the 19th-26th November 2017.

See you in the field!

Jonathan Meyrav /// Festival coordinator

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