

# *WildWings*

## *Eilat Birds Festival 2017 summary*

*19th-26th March 2017*

*By Jonathan Meyrav*

### **Day 1**

After pickup at the airport the group headed down to the Dead Sea. The dramatic landscape is always a great start to the festival and it wasn't long before migration kicked into gear. The Northern Dead Sea provided our first flocks of Black Storks, hundreds of Steppe Buzzards, Long-legged Buzzards, Lesser Spotted Eagles and more! On the ground the group was thrilled with our first Little Green Bee-eaters, Arabian Babblers, Lesser Whitethroats, Shrikes and more common migrants. Right near the raptor watchpoint we were treated to point blank views of a male Cyprus Warbler. It was down to Eilat then, with the mandatory Falafel stop along the way.

After checking in the group headed out to the K20 Salt pools north of Eilat. The pools did not disappoint with a great collection of Waders, including several Marsh Sandpipers, Black-tailed Godwits and Greater Sandplovers amongst the more common birds. The scrub nearby produced our first Ruppell's and Balkan Warblers, a fantastic start to the festival!

### **Day 2**

First stop of the day was the Eilat Birdwatching Park. Festival visitors enjoyed a great range of species in the hand including rare Sylvia warblers such as Eastern Subalpine and Ruppell's. The pools nearby held good numbers of waders and even a skulking Little Crake made an appearance. Following the park we headed up to the Eilat Mountains. Conditions were good and we enjoyed a steady stream of Steppe Buzzards, Steppe Eagles, Kites and smaller numbers of Short-toed, Lesser Spotted and Booted Eagles, Black Storks and even a couple of Pallid Harriers.

After a short midday break the group explored "Holland Park". This beautiful Wadi was buzzing with Warblers and it was clear that a massive wave of Sylvia warblers was moving through. We saw over 30(!) Ruppell's Warblers, more Eastern Subalpine, large numbers of Common and Lesser Whitethroats and a couple of Eastern Orpheans. In the park we saw both Chretzmars and Ortolan Buntings, Common Nightingale and Wrynecks, a fantastic afternoon session! In the evening the festival groups enjoyed a great talk by Meidad Goren about the region and the birds of Nizzana.

### **Day 3**

A very early start today as we travelled the long haul to Nizzana in the west Negev. The first stop of the day was devoted to the magical Macqueen's Bustards, which we saw no less than 6 birds! Also in the area were a few Cream colored Coursers. Overhead were small numbers of Pin-tailed, Spotted and Crowned Sandgrouse. Soaring bird migration was fantastic with good numbers of Lesser Spotted Eagles and a massive flock of over 1000 White Storks! In the area were also good numbers of migrant Wheatears and the resident Mourning and Desert Wheatears. On the way south to Eilat we had good looks at Griffon and Egyptian Vultures, many resident desert species and a steady trickle of migrant warblers everywhere we

stopped, spring migration at its best. In the evening Noam Weiss presented the Eilat Birdwatching center, projects and more.

#### **Day 4**

This morning we headed up to the Uvda Valley, a magical desert plain that still held some vegetation from the winter. As we were getting off the minibuses Sandgrouse could be heard calling overhead, always a good sign. Small parties of Crowned and Spotted Sandgrouse were moving back and forth and we managed to connect with small numbers on the deck as well. The plains were alive with migrants. Northern, Isabelline and Black Eared Wheatears, Pipits, Wagtails and more. It was not long before we found some of the more interesting desert Larks. 2 Pairs of Greater Hoopoe Lark were fantastic and allowed for great views, with them were small flocks of Bar-tailed Larks. 3 Thick-billed Larks flew overhead, some of the group managed to see them. Finally a group of 10 Temminck's Horned Larks also landed near the group, what a fantastic morning of desert birding. Following breakfast at the famous Neot-Smadar Café we birded the nearby fields adding more migrants to the ever-growing festival list.

In the afternoon we visited K20 pools again. Great numbers of birds had arrived and the pools were teeming with waders and the banks with Swallows and Yellow Wagtails. We added Broad-billed Sandpipers and Red-necked Phalaropes and enjoyed decent movement of Eurasian Bee-eaters. As the sun was setting we headed to a nearby reservoir and sat quietly in anticipation for the enigmatic Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse. The birds did not disappoint and 6 birds dropped in at our feet to drink at last light, always an amazing way to finish the day!

#### **Day 5**

After a relaxed morning that included breakfast at the hotel, festival groups headed up for another taste of raptor migration in the mountains. The conditions were fantastic and it was a huge migration day! Thousands of raptors passed low overhead giving stonking views! Steppe Buzzards and kites dominated but we also had hundreds of Black Storks and Swifts, around 50 Steppe Eagles, 40 Booted Eagles, no less than 5 Pallid Harriers(!) and the first Levant Sparrowhawk of the spring, amazing!

In the early afternoon the groups headed North towards the Judean desert for our "stars on the night tour". A quick stop at the southern Dead sea produced Dead-sea Sparrows and Clamorous Reed Warblers and then it was time for the main event. We usually have a ver high success rate with Desert Tawny Owl but this time conditions were difficult... a strong howling wind caused the group to struggle in hearing the Owl, and views were very brief and only for a lucky few. Luckily we had much better luck with Nubian Nightjar, 2 birds flew around us and gave good views on the deck as well. It was a long ride back to Eilat but overall a fantastic day.

#### **Day 6**

This morning we did a little bit of twitching as we headed to Evrona and had good views of the Black Bush Robin that has been showing well. The area was very good for "vismig" ,visual songbird migration with great numbers of Swifts of 3 species, flocks of Yellow Wagtails, Short-toed Larks and even Temminck's Larks moving over the beautiful desert.

Following the twitch we visited some urban parks around Eilat. These man made oases are great for migrants and we found good species such as Shrikes, Buntings, Wryneck, Quail and even Rock Thrush. Migration was once again evident with Warblers even in the middle of the city. In the afternoon we re-visited the salt pans, enjoyed good numbers of waders including Marsh Sandpipers, Temminck's and little Stints and finished the day with a pair of hunting Barbary Falcons. In the evening Jonathan Meyrav presented the amazing "Champions of the Flyway" project.

### **Day 7**

Another visit to the Eilat Birdwatching Park was very good with species such as Scops Owl and Collared Flycatcher, small groups of Eurasian and Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, Water Rail and Little Crake. Another site in the Eilat Mountains provided great looks at Hooded and White-crowned Black Wheatears and desert larks. Raptor migration was slower than previous visits but our groups were already spoiled for migration this week ;) In the afternoon we spent some time at North Beach and finally got good views of White-eyed Gull, Western Reef Heron (both morphs) Pied Kingfisher and massive numbers of ducks flying over the bay of Eilat.

In the evening festival groups were invited to take part in a wonderful evening held in conjunction with the Artists for Nature Foundation. A group of 15 artists from all over the world including Israel, Palestine, Jordan and the world presented us with some of their sketches and Grammy award winner Paul Winter played some live music for us. It was an amazing way to end a busy and bird filled festival week and everyone was truly inspired.

The following morning festival groups did a short session before breakfast and headed north to Tel Aviv and the Eilat airport for the flights home.

**Join us for the next Eilat Birds Festival that will take place on the 15th-22nd March 2018, don't fight the migration instinct and migrate to Eilat next spring!**

**A separate species list is also available.**

[www.wildwings.co.uk](http://www.wildwings.co.uk)