

# Winter birds of the Holy Land

Israel is situated at the extreme eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea and has mild winters attracting many wintering birds from further north and east. Israel is a relatively small and compact country with a wide range of habitats within its boundaries, ranging from the Negev Desert to the Dead Sea. Our tour has three bases, the first being in the tourist resort of Eilat at the southernmost point and the second at a kibbutz in Central Israel. The tour finale is the Hula Valley, probably one of the best wintering sites for birds in the Western Palearctic region. We expect to locate many interesting birds during the week including winter visitors and lingering migrants. Of particular interest are Striated Scops Owl, Macqueen's Bustard, several species of sandgrouse, Arabian (Red Sea) Warbler, Arabian Babbler and Sinai Rosefinch.

**Day 1:** Fly to Tel Aviv, the main city of Israel. On arrival we travel south to the tourist resort of Eilat.

**Days 2-3:** Our main interest is exploring Eilat and the Southern Arava Valley in addition to the well known birding spots of the North Beach, Eilat Fields, Yotvata and Mountains and "kilometre post twenty pools". Species of interest at this time of the year within the Arava Valley include Bluethroat, Tristram's Starling, Arabian and Cyprus Warblers, Dead Sea Sparrow and Sinai Rosefinch. The desert habitats of southern Israel also hold a wide range of resident and wintering species – Sand Partridge, Cream-coloured Courser, Namaqua Dove, White-tailed and Desert Wheatears, Blackstart, Streaked Scrub and Asian Desert Warblers, Bar-tailed, Desert, Hoopoe, Bimaculated and Lesser Short-toed Larks. In Eilat and surrounding habitats we have a chance of locating resident birds including Striated Heron, Western Reef Egret, Barbary Falcon, White-eyed Gull, Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse, Hooded Wheatear, Graceful Prinia, Arabian Babbler, Palestine Sunbird, Trumpeter and Desert Finches. If the winter has been hard further north, an influx of finches is possible.

**Day 4:** Today we head in a northerly direction to visit the vast Negev Desert. We have excellent chances of seeing the desert race of Little Owl, Macqueen's Bustard, Black-

## Dates

Saturday January 21st - Sunday  
January 29th 2017

Leader: Simon Papps

Group size: 8

Birds: 150-180

bellied, Crowned and Spotted Sandgrouse, Mourning Wheatear and Trumpeter Finch. Large areas of the Negev are used for agricultural production, particularly around the settlement of Urim. Interesting raptors using the fields in winter include Black Kite, Pallid Harrier, Steppe and Eastern Imperial Eagles and Lanner, Saker and Barbary Falcons. Also of interest are Chukar, Common Crane, Eurasian Dotterel, Spur-winged and, in some years, Sociable Lapwings, Eurasian Thick-knee, Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse and Finsch's Wheatear. December sees large concentrations of larks and we may encounter Calandra, Bimaculated and Oriental Skylarks among the Eurasian Skylark flocks. In the evening, we transfer to a kibbutz for a two-night stay. The grounds here hold Barn and Long-eared Owls, the latter forming a sizeable roost.

**Day 5:** 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. During



**Bluethroat** Photo: Birdwatching Breaks

December they often form small flocks. Other species usually present include Little Owl, Southern Grey Shrike, Scrub and Spectacled Warblers and Desert Wheatear. In the late morning, we return to the Kibbutz and concentrate on birding around the extensive grounds. Eurasian Thick-knees and Syrian Woodpeckers are joined by wintering Bluethroat, Common Chiffchaff and finch flocks which in some years include Hawfinch and Brambling. Later in the day, a visit to a nearby wadi may reveal an assortment of rails, crakes, Clamorous Reed and Moustached Warblers and Common, Pied and White-breasted Kingfishers.

**Day 6:** Today we head east towards Ein Gedi and the Dead Sea. Ein Gedi has a series of vegetated wadis attracting wintering Cyprus Warbler, Syrian Serin and, in some years, Wallcreeper. Other birds of interest in the area include Brown-necked and Fan-tailed Ravens, Palestine Sunbird, Blackstart, Dead Sea Sparrow, Arabian Babbler and Striolated Bunting. In the afternoon, we head north towards the Hula Valley, an extremely important area for wintering birds. En route, the fishponds at Bet She'an often hold high numbers of Black Stork, Armenian and Great Black-headed Gulls, Glossy Ibis and wildfowl. Three-night stay in the Hula Valley area.

**Days 7-8:** Northern Israel is quite different to the arid south with habitats ranging from orchards, to fishponds and lakes. On Day 7 we concentrate on the Jezreel Valley and two reservoirs - Tishlovit and Kefar Baruch. These two areas attract a wide range of

birds in winter, amongst which are Black-necked Grebe, Great Egret, Glossy Ibis, Ruddy Shelduck, White-headed and Marbled Ducks, Water Rail, Spotted and Baillon's Crakes, Pied Avocet, Spur-winged Lapwing, Little and Temminck's Stints, Ruff, Jack Snipe and Green and Common Sandpipers. Hula is situated north of the Sea of Galilee and covers one of Israel's prime wetland reserves. Interesting species which over-winter at Hula include Pygmy Cormorant, White Pelican, Common Crane, Black and White Storks, Eurasian Spoonbill, White-headed, Ferruginous and Marbled Ducks, Black-shouldered Kite, Hen and Pallid Harriers, Greater Spotted and Eastern Imperial Eagles, Black-tailed Godwit, Great Black-headed and Armenian Gulls, Red-throated and Water Pipits, Black Redstart, Common Stonechat and European Serin. Away from the wetland habitat, a thorough exploration of fields and tracks may reveal Black Francolin and wintering Sociable Lapwing. On Day 8 we visit the Golan Heights and Mount Hermon where we may find wintering Radde's Accentor, Syrian Serin and, in the wooded areas of Mount Hermon, Sombre Tit and Rock Nuthatch.

**Day 9:** Today we head back to Tel Aviv and take our flight to the UK.

## Prices

Ground Price: £1,749  
Single room: £170  
Deposit: £200  
\*Air Fare: £270

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

**Not included:** drinks, insurance, items of a personal nature, air passenger duty taxes and fuel surcharges. Please note: a visa is issued on entry to Israel. Your passport, ideally, should not contain any Arab stamps or visas.

*\*Please refer to our terms and conditions relating to flights*