

Birding in Israel 25.11-4.12.1991

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Route

25.11 Eilat
26.11 En Gedi - Tirat Zevi
27.11 Hula - Mount Hermon
28.11 Hula - Ma'agan Mikhael
29.11 Urim
30.11 Yotvata - Eilat
01.12 Eilat
02.12 Eilat
03.12 Eilat - Uvda - Yotvata - Eilat

General

We wanted to try for the 8 species we knew would be 'possible' at this time of the year, which we hadn't seen before. We also wanted to get some photographs and see some other difficult and interesting species.

We drove altogether 2080 km in nine days, from Eilat to Mount Hermon, from the eastern border to the western shore. We recorded 185 species + Rose-ringed Parakeet, which in Israel has the same status as in Europe. The flight cost 1990 FIM (\$ 452), bought from NET (Near East Tours), on an El Al carrier.

Accommodation

Accommodation at Youth Hostels cost between \$8-\$18.5 per person in a private room. Paying in dollars is usually clearly cheaper, but they may not be able to accept dollars after office hours.

Food

Pita with sallad and omelette cost about NIS 5, so we mostly lived on those. Meat is expensive.

Transport

We paid \$61.5//day (incl insurance, there is no tax) for the car, a Peugeot 309 (D-class) from Avis. Petrol cost 1.71 NIS//litre in the north, 1.48 in Eilat.

Taxi in Elat cost about 4-7 NIS for trips inside the town. But going further sure was expensive.

Roads

Eilat - En Gedi Very good and quite fast, very little traffic.

Yericho - Hula More traffic but still quite good.

Hula - Mount Hermon Some roads smaller with potholes, others better.

Tiberias - Ma'agan Mikhael Quite good, not too much traffic.

Ma'agan Mikhael - Tel Aviv Lots of traffic, long queues at the traffic lights during rush-hour, even highways slow.

Tel Aviv - Be'er Sheva Highway slow, motorway a little better, but still heavy traffic. Better and better towards the south. Motorway now almost all the way to Be'er Sheva.

Be'er Sheva - Mizpe Ramon Road quite good, little traffic.

Mizpe Ramon - Yotvata The middle part is still unrepaired, the north part has been repaired. The middle part was therefore pretty bad and slow. Hopefully they will complete the repairs during the next years. The southern part was quite good.

Weather

Birding time was about 5.45-16.45, ie. dawn was 5.45-6.15 and dusk 16.30 - 17.00. It was very rainy and cloudy, consequently it was also cold. The wind was icy even in Eilat. So we seldom used shorts. The coldest place was without doubt Mount Hermon. Gloves may be in order.

Finance

In general Israel was very expensive, almost up to the Finnish 'standard'. /\$1 = NIS 2.35 (NIS 1 = FIM 2). Youth Hostels were generally cheaper to pay in dollars. Most gas-stations also accepted dollars, taxis gave lower rates. Exchange in the street (dollars) was cheaper than at banks (we were told banks charge NIS 9) and at better rates, quite safe.

Police and Military

Although they were still around as before, they never questioned us at the check-points, we just drove through. They felt more relaxed otherwise too.

Literature

The main guide is of course 'Birds of the Middle East and North Africa' by Hollom, Porter, Christensen. The new 'Rare Birds of Britain and Europe' by Alström, Colston and Lewington was also very useful. We also had Bruun, Singer, Delin & Svensson: The Birds of Britain and Europe.

We had the following tripreports:

Israel by ? 090183-060283 8 pp 20 maps

Israel by Erik Hirschfeld 261185-101285 5 pp

Israel by Erik Hirschfeld 271086-101186 9 pp

Israel by Dirk / Irene de Moes 150387-070487 13 pp

Israel by A Forsten 041187-111187 11 pp & 8 maps

Israel 88 by B Brown 170388-310388 23 pp 17 maps

Israel by T Tuomenoja 161188-301188 19 pp 3 maps

Israel by Alan Whatley 211188-041288 12 pp 6 maps

Bird Observations in Israel by TJC Luijendijk 190389-050489 60 pp 3 maps

Birding in Israel (with a supplement on Egypt) by K van Dijken 230889-010590 40 pp & 15 maps

Maps

We had four maps, one of which we bought at the end of the trip at a bookstore just above the parkinglot which is on the opposite side of the street from the Birdwatching Center in Elat. This map was large scale and cheap, NIS 9. We did not have time to find out how accurate it was.

The one we mostly used was the Nature Reserve Map, 1:400.000. We also had a smallscale map from Avis and then another which had some maps of the larger cities.

Some Update Site Notes

Eilat

Since they stopped growing alfalfa in the northern fields, these have not been so good. The ringing station is located near the Palmwood, but they do not catch such a variety of birds as before. There are a few new ponds, but these are not yet very good for birds. If I understood correctly, one of them was made for the birds.

North of the northern fields, at km 19, there are some ponds inside a fence and a locked gate. These ponds are probably rather empty, but just north of these there is a broad ditch with reeds and scrub which are quite good for birds. We had Purple Heron, Pallid Harrier, Dead Sea Sparrow, ducks, warblers, etc here. It was a bit like a miniature world, with most of the important habitats.

At the 39 km pole there are three ponds, we saw White-tailed Plover and Hooded Wheatear at this site. The gates were not locked so it was possible to drive around the ponds which are situated just south of a small 'wood'.

The best site for Arabian Warbler we were told was around the roofless hut, 1.5 km south of Yotvata on the western side of the road. This is an about 1 km long area of acacia and scrub, also good for other birds, like Scrub Warbler.

There were also some ponds at Gerofit, about 5 km north of Yotvata. We had a Barbary Falcon there.

Tirat Zevi

We found a lot of new ponds, a local girl said she thought they'd been built about two years ago. They seemed to be making more new ones, so the good area will likely spread. The Pygmy Cormorant roost was quite near the road, in this new area. The birds were spread out over most of the ponds, so it is necessary to drive around them all. This new pond area starts 5.5 km south of the crossing (from the main road).

Hula

We again did not visit the reserve, but managed to see one of the ponds (the westernmost one, with just some water), by climbing up a * which seemed to have been left there for the purpose.

For raptors we checked the next road to the north which leads into the fields, it took us right into the middle of the area.

Arbel Mountain

7km north of Tiberias turn off towards Maghar, Migdal. After 1.1 km there's a road to the left signed Hamam. Drive 200 m along this road (just past the houses) and stop. Here a footpath starts, going up to the mountain. It is, however, quite a steep climb up the hill and if it has rained, it could be quite slippery. To avoid this, drive another 700 m on and take the track to the left. Stop at the graveyard and walk up. You'll still have to climb some, but it isn't as steep and you will have driven part of the way. The Long-billed Pipits seemed to like the slope, halfway between the 'mountain' and the very steep side. The Wallcreepers and Alpine Accentor are probably on the cliff-side which necessitates a walk all the way up.

Ma'agar Bet Netofa

Some large ponds. Worth stopping at if you're driving past. Wildfowl, waders. Situated 30 km west of Tiberias.

Itinerary

Monday, 25th November

322.2 km Eilat - En Gedi

Got to the airport by bus at 00.40. Flight due to leave at 03.05. The security check took about 20 minutes, of course it takes longer when they hear that we'll drive around, we've been there before, we've visited Arabic countries, we won't stay at a hotel, etc.

We landed at Eilat airport 8.30 and went straight to the Avis office which is only 50 metres away. The manager said he didn't mind if we asked around, he'd give us the same price as the lowest one offered. His offer to us was a D-car at C-car price - 10%. I did a quick check at Europcar (where the list prices were about the same) and at Budget and Hertz (prices about double). I seemed Avis and Europcar both had species winter prices. In Israel there aren't many big cars around, consequently it wasn't really possible to fit into the back-seat of a B-car and as we wanted a car from which I could

photograph from the back-seat we had to take a D-car. We also had a lot of luggage which would only just fit into a B-car. (We didn't see any C-cars around.) We decided to accept the offer in order to save time checking the others properly.

We visited the Birdwatching Center, but did not hear any special news. Had a quick pita and drove to En Netafim. Found the spring in the wadi and soon after we had about 10 Sinai Rosefinches coming in to drink. Also some Trumpeter Finches, Desert Larks and White-crowned Wheatears. It was quite warm, but not enough to get burnt by the sun. It was also the last warm day of the trip.

There had been a Black Eagle around for 1-2 months, but the last record we knew of was about 2 weeks earlier. So at 12.50 we gave up and drove to the saltponds. Just as we left a Steppe Eagle flew over.

Not such a lot of birds about, just ordinary shorebirds. One Flamingo, 2 Greater Sand Plovers, 1 Moustached Warbler and then 3 White-eyed Gulls on the shore. Met a local birder who told us the Black Eagle had been present about a week earlier. He also told us exactly where it was usually seen. So we drove back to En Netafim and stayed there till dark. No Eagle.

Had dinner in Eilat after which we drove to En Gedi by the Dead Sea. Arrived there at 8 pm and started to look for the Hume's Tawny Owl. At 20.45 we decided we had to get accommodation before it got too late and tried the Field school. While searching for someone in charge Tapani suddenly heard the Owl hoot and we rushed back to the amphitheatre and there it was. We just had time to see it before it flew off. It continued to hoot for another 15 minutes, then the moon went behind some clouds and it stopped. (It had started about the time the moon first started to shine).

No free rooms at the field school, so we went to the Youth Hostel. The office was closed but we found the manager at home and got beds in a dormitory with two other couples. Went through the day's records and fell asleep at 23.20.

Tuesday, 26th November

330.4 km En Gedi - Rosh Pinna

Woke up at 6.30 (we had to stay till 7, since we had to pay during office hours). Had breakfast (incl. yoghurt, bread, jam, egg, tea/coffee, salad).

Paid for the night and drove north, towards Jerusalem where we arrived at 9. Couldn't find ourselves on the map as it only showed the centre and asked around several times, till somebody managed to show us where we were. After that the Long-billed Pipit site was easy to find. We had heard that it was no longer reliable and it certainly seemed as if it isn't going to be there for much longer. The hill nearby and the valley between are being built up, and a lot of trees had been planted on the pipit hill. We searched for nearly two hours anyway, but saw only some Woodlarks, Rock Buntings and Great Tits. Just as we were about to leave a flock of Buntings landed nearby, with brown rumps and Yellowhammer like call. The guides say this is a good site for Pine Bunting, but we heard afterwards that no Pine Buntings have been recorded for two years and Yellowhammers are getting quite common.

Finding our way out of the city was no problem and we drove north through the West Bank which the Avis manager had warned us about, but other people told us it would be ok. We just drove through along the main road without stopping (except for photographing a Blackstart) and neither saw nor had any trouble. Just south of Bet Shean we visited Tirat Zevi, where there are lots of fish-ponds near a kibbutz. The number of fish-ponds had increased many times over since our last visit in 1987 and it took us the rest of the day to check them (13.45-17.00). So we had no time to visit the fish-ponds at Bet Shean. We found 40 Pygmy Cormorants at a new pond in a new pond area. 4 Jack Snipes flew up from one pond, but we found one on the ground and managed to photograph it (the first ever on the ground for me). Lots of Egrets (300 Great White, 100 Little), 300 Grey Herons, 2 Ruddy Shelduck, 20 Spoonbills, 300 Cormorants, 11 White Pelicans, 100 Night Herons at dusk, 1 Squacco Heron, 150 Black Storks, 80 White, one female White-eyed Duck, 12 Ferruginous Ducks, 6 Chukars, 45 Avocets, 3 Marsh Sandpipers, one moulting Mediterranean Gull, and intermediate (in race) Lesser Black-backed, 20 Whiskered Terns, 400 Collared Dove, 15 White-breasted Kingfishers, 20 Pied, 5 Water Pipits, 5 Cetti's Warblers, a Clamorous Reed Warbler gave great views.

The birds were pretty shy so we didn't get any photographs. At dusk we met a local birding party, consisting of a youngish male leader, some kids and a few elderly ladies, all from the kibbutz. It is very nice to know that there are some Israeli birdwatchers outside Eilat as well.

When it got dark we drove to Rosh Pinna (Hula) and got a room at the Youth Hostel. Asleep at 22.

Wednesday, 27th November

176.2 km Hula - Mount Hermon

Woke up at 5 which proved to be much too early, it didn't start to get light until 5.45. We had heard that there was a cafe which served breakfast early so we went there and had two falafels and bought some water bottles. After stuffing ourselves we drove to the gates of the reserve at Hula, which we reached at 7 and even though it wasn't supposed to open until 8 they would have left us in, but we didn't want to waste time as we'd heard that the fish-ponds in general are better than the reserve. So we checked the fish-ponds and there was quite a lot of birds in them, 100 Little Egrets, 500 Great Egrets, 250 Grey Herons, 500 Teal, one Garganey, 2000 Shoveler, 200 Marbled Teal, 300 Pochard, 2 pairs of Ferruginous Duck. We also managed to see some of the birds in the reserve, namely 3000 Cormorants, 20 Night Herons, 10 Glossy Ibis, 70 Avocet and 60 Black-tailed Godwits.

There were some songbirds about, but fewer than in 1987 and we couldn't find any Clamorous Reed Warblers at all. We had 5 Cetti's Warblers singing, 2 calling Penduline Tits and just as we were about to leave, a female Citrine Wagtail. We also estimated 10 White-breasted Kingfishers and 15 Pied.

Next we drove into the fields a little further north where we saw 10 Spotted and 5 Imperial Eagles. Some of them gave good views, but unfortunately they didn't come

close enough for good photos. We also had a Booted Eagle, 3 Griffon Vultures, 2 Common Buzzards, one Long-legged Buzzard, 2 Marsh Harriers, 5 Hen Harriers, an Osprey and an adult Peregrine. There were a lot of Cranes around, we counted at least 1200.

Our main target species for the day was Syrian Serin, so at midday we drove up to Mount Hermon. We soon reached the bus-wrecks where the Syrian Serins are supposed to be easy to find, but we couldn't find any. We did see Goldfinches, Linnets, ordinary Serins and a Rock Nuthatch and an interesting looking Wheatear, most likely a Pied or Black-eared. Of course it was in the sort of plumage in which they are at their most difficult to separate.

Then it started to rain. We drove north, up the mountain, but soon we drove into the clouds, where visibility was so low it was no longer any use to go on. So we drove back down below the clouds and searched for the stupid birds the whole afternoon until it got dark. But the rain made it very difficult so we weren't surprised when we didn't find any.

We had falafels and tea at a restaurant to warm us up, we hadn't taken nearly enough clothes with us, it was really very cold (and wet) and the wind was icy. On the way back to Rosh Pinna we visited a fish-pond and saw some Night Herons flying around.

At the Hostel we discussed our plans for the next day and decided to go back for another try at the Serin.

Thursday, 28th November

350.4 km Rosh Pinna - Ma'agan Mikhael

When we went to bed the sky had been clear, but when we woke up it was again raining. We waited for a while but no change occurred, so we got up and drove south, after having falafels for breakfast. They had promised rain for the entire day and we could see the mountains were covered with clouds so there didn't seem to be any reason for staying on.

On the way to the Sea of Galilee we had one flock of Finches, including Serins, but no Syrian ones. By mistake we drove past two Long-billed Pipit sites we had intended to visit and when we noticed we drove back to the second. The rain had abated when we started to climb up to Arbel Mountain, an interesting looking cliff where one could see Wallcreeper and Alpine Accentor. We did not, because almost as soon as we got up a pipit flew past, calling like a Long-billed. It flew downwards and we followed. Unfortunately we lost it, but some time later I found another pipit on the ground which turned out to be a Long-billed. And soon there were two of them foraging among the 'grass' on the slope. We watched them for a while until they flew off. The bill was a dead give-away, really very much different from Tawny Pipit, which it otherwise resembles. I thought the birds in general were much more reddishbrown than Tawnys, both upper- and underside.

Since we had accomplished what we came for, we left the site and drove towards the west coast. It started raining again. On the way we checked a reservoir with some ducks. When we reached Ma'agan Mikhael, a collection of fish-ponds on the coast, the weather was still bad, but we spent the rest of the afternoon driving around the ponds. Quite a lot of birds present, but of the less interesting sort. 3 White Pelicans, 300 Little Egret, 100 Great Egret, 300 Grey Heron, 50 White Storks, one Glossy Ibis, 25 Spoonbills, 2 pairs of Ferruginous Duck, 7 Marsh Sandpipers and 3 Cetti's Warblers.

One hour before dusk we drove south to a large ditch near Hadera, where we had heard that Painted Snipe had been recorded. We had a report which said that the species should be regular in winter. We heard afterwards that there had possibly been only a few records ten years earlier. A Purple Heron flew up from the ditch as we arrived. We took our torch and walked along the ditch on both sides. Halfway through it started to rain again and there were flashes of lightning and thunder as well. To get back to the car we had to cross the ditch using a fallen tree which was wet with rain and mud. Luckily we both made it across and got back to the car dripping wet and plastered with mud (from the wet fields).

We had a long drive ahead of us to Be'er Sheva, so when we arrived there we had more or less dried up. The shoes took some time to clean though. We had falafels and slept at the Youth Hostel.

Friday, 29th November

247.0 km Urim - Mizpe Ramon

Because they hadn't been able to give us change in the evening we again had to wait for the office to open before we could leave. So we had breakfast as well. At 8 am we arrived at Urim, a vast area of fields, most of them dry, but a few green plots also. The day was spent driving around, checking the pylons and the fields and photographing anything that came close enough. We got some shots of an immature Imperial Eagle, feeding with some crows. And one Sociable Plover was rather tame until it decided to join the flock. Just before dusk we found a flock of Cream-coloured Coursers, and as it started to rain again we got some shots of a nice bird which stayed put in the rain. Unfortunately we lost sight of the big Falcons we had been tracking, which could have been Sakers, but now had to be left unidentified. We did see at least three Sakers (one adult), but there might have been several more around. We also had at least 12 Imperial Eagles, juveniles, immatures and adults, but no 3-4 years. Other records: Black Kite 300, Long-legged Buzzard 10, Spotted Eagle 1, Lanner 2, Chukar 6, Crane 200, Greater Sand Plover 2, Dotterel 67, Sociable Plover 13, Spotted Sandgrouse 300, Skylark estimated 10.000, Tawny Pipit 3, Corn Bunting 70.

Left at 17.05 having driven 87 km in the area. Went back to Be'er Sheva where we tried to find an open restaurant, but that turned out to be difficult since it was Friday evening. Finally two locals got into the car and gave us directions to an Hungarian restaurant in the old town which was open. We had dinner there and afterwards we drove to Mizpe Ramon Youth Hostel, which proved to be quite a luxurious one, way above the others, almost like a good hotel really. With restaurant, discotheque, shop

and even a shelter. And it wasn't even expensive. We went through our records in the lobby and I had a lot of fun watching a group of Americans roaming about.

Saturday, 30th November

238.7 km Mizpe Ramon - Eilat

Got up at 4.30 and were even given some tea and a few slices of bread before we left at 5.30. On the way south we had 20 Chukars on the road. The road from Mizpe Ramon to Yotvata was being repaired, but it wasn't too slow. We saw a few wadis on the way, but since it was still rather dark we decided not to bird them. Reached the Yotvata site for Arabian Warbler at 7 am. It was a nice morning and soon we found a lot of birds moving about. No Arabian Warblers though, but some very nice Scrub Warblers singing their characteristic song. There were also lots of Sunbirds, 2 Lanners, Blackstarts, etc around.

After searching for an hour, I suddenly saw a candidate in a dead tree and we were soon able to confirm it. It was a male which allowed us nice views, it wasn't at all as shy as I thought it would be. We watched it for some time and then checked the other sites around Yotvata, but they were rather empty. I ate an ice-cream at the service-station (my stomach soon showed signs that it didn't quite agree with me) and then we continued south. Passing Hai-bar (the park where they keep animals from the times of the Bible), Tapani spotted a few Ostriches from the car.

Our next stop was at km 39 where there are three ponds. We were a bit surprised to find both a male Hooded Wheatear and a White-tailed Plover there! We got some nice shots of both. Driving south towards Elat, we took the old road (which goes right through the scrub just about 100 metres from the main road). At km 37 we had 4 Bar-tailed Desert Larks which however flew off at once.

We checked Be'er Ora, because we'd been told it was a good site for Hooded Wheatear, but it seemed rather empty and we only had some other Wheatears there.

Just north of the north fields (km 19) we found some reeds, a pond (which was unreachable due to a fence) and some nice scrub and a ditch just by the border. We had a Dead Sea Sparrow female here before we drove on.

Next we drove straight to En Netafim to try for the Black Eagle again. We had an adult Barbary Falcon, 3 Sinai Rosefinches and 9 Chukars but no eagles. Since it was Friday there were lots of hikers about, they came along in groups and scared the birds away from the spring every time. A pity they can't put up signs forbidding close approach to the spring.

At dusk we went down to the bay where I found a lifer for Tapani, a Brown Booby sitting quite calmly on a bouy. The three White-eyed Gulls were still present as well. Just before 5 pm we went up to the pumpstation where a couple was already waiting. As it was getting darker a tourist couple came up to us and asked if it was allowed to walk up the track. And foolishly I said yes, not realizing that if they went up they'd have to come down. So when the Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse finally came in to drink I knew they'd probably be disturbed before they had had enough time and sure enough,

the tourists returned at the worst moment and I cursed as I couldn't think of any way to warn them. Well, the birds flew off and didn't return anymore that evening.

After founding out that the youth hostel was full, we managed to find a nice apartment room in another hostel. It was run-down but seemed rather clean and it was pretty cheap with even a handshower and a doublebed. We ate some pizzaslices at a nearby take-out which was so popular that it took some time before we were able to pay. But we got our notes written.

Sunday, 1st December

108.1 km Eilat

Left early so as to be present at the ringing station at 6 am. Which we were, but no ringers were present. We proceeded to bird the saltponds, but nothing spectacular turned up except for a bussload of local birdwatchers. They were quite excited when we let them look at the Flamingo through our scopes. 3 Black-tailed Godwits had turned up and two White-eyed Gulls had disappeared, otherwise numbers were more or less the same as a week earlier.

We stopped at the pumpstation and had a Peregrine which swooped by, some Trumpeter Finches and 6 Sand Partridges. Drove to Wadi Shlomo where we had a look at the Ostrichs they raise. They had all nipped off most of the feathers on their backs and rumps, not a nice sight. The wadi was dry and rather empty, but at some old disused stables we found plenty of Desert Larks around and decided to try a trick to get some photos.

We dug a small hole in the ground, put a plastic bag on the bottom, covered it with sand, filled the hole with water and sat down and waited six metres away. Some tourist signs said that there was no water available in the wadi, so we thought some birds might be interested.

Fifteen minutes passed. There were some White-crowned Black Wheatears some distance away, we hoped they would be curious. But then suddenly a Blackstart swooshed in and sat on a branch only one metre from our heads. Much too close for photography of course. It watched us for a while and then it flew down to the water hole and drank. During the next minutes it and its partner returned several times. And then, fifteen minutes after the first Blackstart's approach, a W-C B Wheatear flew in. It proceeded at once to drive away the Blackstarts, drank a bit and then had a good wash, managing to empty the hole in the process. It was really amusing to watch. We filled the hole again and soon there were two Wheatears around. The larks finally started to approach, but were scared off and things quietened down and we left after having first filled the hole again. I guess birds in a dry place like that learn to make good use of whatever sources might be available.

We tried En Netafim again, but it was so cold we didn't stay many minutes. Revisited the nice area just north of the North Fields. We soon had three Purple Herons. One of them kept reappearing and although it wasn't all that close we took some pictures. A juvenile Pallid Harrier flew around a little, but a lot less then the other Harriers,

because it had lost most of its secondaries on the right wing (shot of in Libanon?). We got some shots of it. We were surprised to find 15 White-fronted Goose among the reeds and there were quite a number of ducks present too, including (again) two pairs of Ferruginous Duck. After all the pond in the reeds was pretty small. We also had a male Dead Sea Sparrow, Penduline Tits and a Quail.

At dusk we were again at the pumpstation and this time the Sandgrouse were not disturbed and we had nice views. The same number of birds appeared as the day before (14). Because it was cloudy they came in 10 minutes earlier than the previous evening.

We packed our bags and had pizzas after which we returned the car and walked to the airport. At the check-in they told me to contact El AL:s office. I wondered some but then the woman in the office told me that the flight was from Uvda, 60 km north of Eilat. I couldn't understand that as we had asked about this when buying our tickets, but she told us to get a taxi quickly which we did. By now it was one hour left to the scheduled take-off and the taxidriver drove 140 km/h and got to Uvda in half an hour. As we arrived an official came up and asked us what we wanted as the airport had closed down already. We asked for our flight and he told us it had left half an hour earlier. Well that was nice! So we went back to Elat and the taxidriver tried to charge us nearly twice the normal price. But the El Al agent helped us out. It cost us \$80 anyway which was stinking much we thought.

There was nothing to be done that night, so we went back to the hostel (a very nice Itas agent gave us a lift).

Monday, 2nd December

115.4 km Eilat

Woke up late as we didn't have a car and wanted to get the flight problem cleared up before going birding. We knew that there was an EL AL flight to Helsinki on Wednesday, 4th and we wanted to be on it. We had some trouble in locating the touragency office (NET), only the 5th person we asked had the correct adress. It was closed of course, with the board still showing the false take-off time for the previous day. We met some friends who helped us find the agents. When we finally got to talk to the headagent we weren't too happy because she wasn't very helpful, only saying that we'd no chance of getting any compensation for hotel or such. She said she'd fax Finland for info on tickets.

So we went back to Avis, where they offered to charge us only one day hire (Tuesday), so we got Monday free, since we had brought in the car half a day too early. The Peugeot was out though, so we had to make due with a Subaru Justy (B-class) which was pretty cramped, but it didn't matter much because we didn't have to take our luggage along.

We first checked En Netafim again but still no eagles. Then we drove north to try for desert species. We had nothing new though, in fact we only got one more species out of the extra two days, a Black-cap. We checked the saltponds, but they hadn't changed. At four we went back to NET and were told that there was no reason for

NET to pay when we had messed up, but they would give us a nice offer of 1000 FIM for a return ticket. As this was half of what we'd paid for the whole trip, we didn't think it was very generous. Also we were treated with an indifference I didn't relish much. They weren't to blame at all, even though they'd given us the wrong airport, the wrong time and no instructions as to check-in time or confirmations. We were shown that on the back of the ticket there was a small passage (in minimal letters) saying that passengers without a hotel were entirely responsible for confirming with the guide and being at the airport in time. On the other hand we were told that since we'd only paid for the flight, we didn't have any rights to services of the guides. So how could we then confirm with them? And they hadn't given us any address or phonenumber at which to confirm. In fact it took us nearly half a day to reach them.

Of course I realize that legally we were responsible, but morally... They sure could have been a lot nicer about it. We should have known enough to confirm, on the other hand we would still probably have had the wrong info (I believe the flight just left early, it probably wasn't even rescheduled), and we asked in two places for info on check-in time and were twice given the same wrong answer. But we would have been in the right legally. I feel that NET has a lot more to lose by making their passengers unhappy than by paying for the odd ticket. The agent told us quite clearly that it wasn't their business to inform their passengers about these things. So I ask, whose is it then? She said things like this had happened before and I'm sure not surprised if that's the stand they take. They probably make a profit on the poor bastards who miss their flights. The planes are hardly ever full anyway, so it's just plus. She told us that we could sue, but that we would have no chance of winning. And I believe that.

So we went to EL AL instead, who throughout had been most helpful and nice, including contacting our families and explaining the situation on the previous evening. And EL AL promised to see what they could do and told us to come back the next morning.

We went to the telegraph to make some calls, including one to Hadoram, who told us that a Buff-bellied Pipit had been seen that afternoon at the saltponds. A phonecall to Finland cost about NIS 5 a minute, not bad at all. We checked the marina for any stray Green-backed Herons but couldn't find any. Then we had pizza and went to bed.

Tuesday, 3rd December

193.5 km Eilat - Uvda - Yotvata - Eilat

In the morning we went straight to the Pipit site but it was very dry and empty. We looked around the rest of the ponds, but found nothing new. Some ordinary Water Pipits though, but no funny-looking ones. The Shelduck number had risen to 155. At 8.30 we went to the EL AL office where we were told that they would give us a free flight and that they had made the reservations. Boy, were we relieved. Thumbs up for EL AL. It was with some pleasure that we went to NET and told them they could stuff their offer (well, we were quite polite about it actually).

We didn't quite know what to do next as we'd gone through all the sites several times. So we decided to drive around to En Netafim, then Uvda and back to Eilat via Yotvata. We were at En Netafim 10.10-11.30 and had three eagles, none of which

were Black. One was probably a Lesser Spotted, the other were too far away for us to say more than *Aquila* sp. Drove north along the Egyptian border. Hardly any birds about in this dry area. We checked several wadis but things were really quiet. At Shizzafon we visited a sewage pond where we had a Green Sandpiper and a Water Pipit. At Gerofit, just north of Yotvata, we were given nice views of a Barbary Falcon which was hunting Rock Pigeons. While looking at it we also found some ponds with some waders, including an Avocet and 3 Spur-winged Plovers.

I again risked eating some icecream at Yotvata and we also had some soup which was pretty spicy.

While it was getting darker we drove south but didn't see anything new. When we took our gear back to the hostel a Canadian couple had moved in in the other bedroom. They told us that it had still been raining in Tel Aviv and the worst floods since 1954 were a fact. Lots of roads blocked, etc. Well, we'd managed to avoid that at least.

We again had pizza and then we took the car back and walked up to the hostel.

Wednesday, 4th December

Got a taxi without trouble and were at the airport at 4.45, as the first passengers, which was nice since we didn't have to queue for the security check. It took about 25 minutes, this time they interrogated Tapani and me separately and then crosschecked our stories. But of course it is good that the security is so strict, I prefer that to being blown up. While we waited for the boarding, we wrote some postcards. The flight left at 7.50, only ten minutes early this time.

List of Species:

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*

Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* 3 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Pygmy Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*

White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*

Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*

Squacco Heron *Ardeola Ralloides*

Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*

Western Reef Heron *Egretta gularis* 10 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

Great White Egret *Egretta alba*

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* 15 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*

Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* Juvenile at Eilat on 25th Nov.

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*

Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*

Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber* Juvenile at Eilat on 25th Nov.

White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*

Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*

Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* 110 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Wigeon *Anas penelope* 1 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Teal *Anas crecca* 1 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Pintail *Anas acuta*

Garganey *Anas querquedula*

Shoveler *Anas clypeata*

Marbled Duck *Marmaronetta angustirostris*

Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina*

Pochard *Aythya ferina*

Ferrugineous Duck *Aythya nyroca*

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*

Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*

White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala*

Black Kite *Milvus migrans*

Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*

Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*

Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*

Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* 1 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*

Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina*

Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga*

Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis* 1 at En Netafim on 25th Nov.

Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca*

Booted Eagle *Hieraetus pennatus*

Large Raptor 1 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* 1 at Eilat on 25th Nov. 1 at En Netafim on 25th Nov.

Merlin *Falco columbarius*

Lanner *Falco biarmicus*

Saker *Falco cherrug*

Peregrine *Falco peregrinus*

Barbary Falcon *Falco pelegrinoides*

Chukar *Alectoris chukar*

Sand Partridge *Ammoperdix heyi*

Quail *Coturnix coturnix*

Water Rai *Rallus aquaticus* 1 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* 10 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Coot *Fulica atra*

Crane *Grus grus*

Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* 1 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*

Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* 30 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*

Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii* 2 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*

Spur-winged Plover *Hoplopterus spinosus*

Sociable Plover *Chettusia gregaria*

White-tailed Plover *Chettusia leucura*

Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

Sanderling *Calidris alba*

Little Stint *Calidris minuta* 500 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii*

Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*

Dunling *Calidris alpina* 50 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* Male at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Jack Snipe *Lymnocryptes minimus*

Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*

Redshank *Tringa totanus* 100 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis* 1 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* 10 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus* 1 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

White-eyed Gull *Larus leucophthalmus* 2 adult at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Mediterranean Gull *Larus melanocephalus*

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* 2 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* 2 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus cachinnans*

Armenian Gull *Larus armenicus* 2 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Large Gull *Larus sp.* 25 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia* 3 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybridus*

Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii*

Spotted Sandgrouse *Pterocles senegallus*

Rock Dove *Columba livia*

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* 10 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Palm Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis* 30 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri* 12 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Rosy-faced Lovebird *Agapornis roseocollis* 1 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Hume's Tawny Owl *Strix butleri* 1 at En Gedi. It appeared and started to sing when the moon came out of the clouds at 20.55. It disappeared again at 21.10 when the clouds once again covered the moon. The moon was almost full.

Swift *Apus apus* 3 probable at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus*

Little Swift *Apus affinis*

White-breasted Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*

Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*

Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis*

Little Green Bee-eater *Merops orientalis* 5 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

Syrian Woodpecker *Dendrocopus syriacus*

Bar-tailed Desert Lark *Ammomanes cincturus*

Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti* 2 at Eilat, 3 at En Netafim, 2 En Netafim - Eilat on 25th Nov.

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* 2 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Wood Lark *Lullula arborea*

Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

Pale Crag Martin *Hirundo fuligula* 10 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Crag Martin *Hirundo rupestris*

Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*

Long-billed Pipit *Anthus similis*

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*

Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus*

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta* 2 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*

Pied Wagtail *Motacilla alba* 1 at En Netafim on 25th Nov.

Yellow-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus xanthopygos*

Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* Male at En Netafim on 25th Nov.

Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*

Stonechat *Saxicola torquata* One pair at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Blackstart *Cercomela melanura* 1, 3 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*

Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica*

Finsch's Wheatear *Oenanthe finschii*

Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens*

Hooded Wheatear *Oenanthe monacha*

White-crowned Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga* 1, 1 at Eilat, 3 at En Netafim on 25th Nov.

Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*

Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*

Graceful Prinia *Prinia gracilis* 5 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Scrub Warbler *Scotocerca inquieta*

Moustached Warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon* 1 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus*

Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata*

Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala*

Arabian Warbler *Sylvia leucomelaena*

Black-cap *Sylvia atricapilla*

Warbler *Sylvia sp.*

Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* 3 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*

Brown Babbler *Turdoides squamiceps* 2 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Great Tit *Parus major*

Rock Nuthatch *Sitta neumayer*

Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus*

Orange-tufted Sunbird *Nectarinia osea* 1 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*

Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*

Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*

Indian House Crow *Corvus splendens* 25 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*

Carrion Crow *Corvus corone* 1 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis* 2 at Eilat, 2 at En Netafim on 25th Nov.

Raven *Corvus corax*

Fan-tailed Raven *Corvus rhipidurus*

Tristram's Grackle *Onychognathus tristramii* 150 at Eilat, 2 at En Netafim on 25th Nov.

Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis* Male at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Dead Sea Sparrow *Passer moabiticus*

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Serin *Serinus serinus*

Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*

Desert Finch *Rhodospiza obsoleta*

Trumpeter Finch *Bucanetes githagineus* 10 at En Netafim, 30 at Eilat on 25th Nov.

Sinai Rosefinch *Carpodacus synoicus* 3 males and 7 female plumaged at En Netafim on 25th Nov.

Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*

Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia*

House Bunting *Emberiza striolata*

Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra*