

SPATIA WILDLIFE

Jordan Birds and Culture

5 April – 14 April 2013

Trip report by Dimitar Petrakiev



Mourning wheatear

Day 1 - 5th April

The group arrived as scheduled at the brand new Queen Alya International airport Terminal 2 and after meeting our local guide Mohammed and our driver Shakeeb we headed to the hotel for short refreshment before our first dinner in the famous Al Hawa Restaurant.

Day 2 - 6th April

Jerash

After breakfast we headed to Zarqa River. We didn't need to wait long before our first White-breasted kingfisher announced its presence with loud calls. Soon it perched on the nearby wire, giving excellent view. Great and Blue tits were also present in the area and the East Mediterranean race of Jay soon came into view. Our next stop further downstream produced excellent young Long-legged buzzard and two Levant sparrowhawks. On the way to King Talil Dam a flock of Steppe Buzzards gave proof of the first signs of raptor migration. At the dam we saw Sardinian warbler and Palestine sunbird.



“atricapillus” Jay

After these pleasant birding stops it was time for culture and Mohammed gave us an excellent tour of the ancient Jerash. Black-eared wheatears gave good views at the site

and Blue rock thrushes were singing from the capitols, a lot of White-spectacled bulbuls and a female Lesser Kestrel was hunting in the nearby gardens.

After the traditional lunch in a nearby Lebanese restaurant we went further north to see Ajlun castle and then drove down into the picturesque Jordan valley for some afternoon birding at Shu'ayb and Kerhan reservoirs, where we saw many Spur-winged plovers, Cattle egret, Wood and Green sandpiper, Little stints and Black winged stilts and our first Southern Grey shrikes. Dinner was at the hotel.



Jerash



Black-eared wheatear

Day 3 - 7 April

Amman – Azraq

It was time to leave Amman and head to the Eastern desert. At our first stop - Qasr Kharana we saw two Black kites and several Steppe buzzards. Our second stop - Quasr Amra produced good number of migrants - 10 Wrynecks, Rufous bush chat, Scrub warbler, Semi-collared flycatcher, Red and Black redstart, Tawny pipit, Masked and Woodchat shrikes, Willow warbler and Chiffchaffs were all on the move. Two Levant sparrowhawks were patrolling the wadi. We visited the desert castle with the most intriguing wall paintings and then headed to Azraq. The staff at the Eco lodge were waiting for us and after check in and refreshment we went down to check out the once famous Azraq Wetland. There were White-cheeked bulbuls at the visitor's center, Olivaceous warblers were singing from almost every bush. A male Marsh harrier was hunting over the reeds and Namaqua dove was perched in the trees behind. At the end of the day, we stopped by Shaumari reserve and quickly found several Temminck's larks, Hoopoe larks and Desert wheatears. Two Pallid harriers were seen in the reserve. After this excellent desert birding, we returned happy to the Eco lodge for dinner.



Desert birding



Desert Wheatear

Day 4 – 8th April

Azraq

After breakfast we headed to the small reservoir near Shaumari and that proved very good move – a small flock of Short-toed larks, followed by the dark form of Desert lark. Sandwich, Gull-billed terns and Slender-billed gulls over the water. A big flock of Steppe buzzards, several Black kites and two Short-toed eagles over the other bank. Nice male Palid harrier was drinking at the next bay along with a good selection of waders. 11 Black-winged pratincoles were also nearby and the highlights – 3 Greater Sand Plovers and unexpected Caspian plover in the far end of the water.

Wind came out in the afternoon and we decide to make a move towards the fringes of the Basalt Desert to try our luck for Basalt wheatear. Despite some hints from a local Bedouin guide, our search was in vein, although some first year White-crowned wheatear got us excited for a moment. The strong wind was turning into a sand storm, so we listened to the advice of the local people and returned to the Rest house for a short Siesta, hoping that the wind would stop later. Well – it didn't, so we decided to make one more stop at the Azraq wetland. With deteriorating conditions, our best bet was to find shelter in one of the hides and wait. Grey heron, Marsh harrier, Black kite, Moorhens and Sedge warbler was the only birds we could see from the hide. It was time for dinner at the Rest house.



Hoopoe lark

Day 5 – 9th April

Azraq – Dead Sea

We decided to go to Shaumari before breakfast. The things were still a bit dusty after yesterday's storm, so not much was moving around, although we had brief view of Desert finches that perched for a moment on a wire. The regular Pallid harrier was patrolling the reserve.

After breakfast we said goodbye to the Eastern desert and headed to the Dead Sea. No birding tour is complete without a sewage work visit, so we decided to stop at As Samra. This was a good break from the long drive to the Dead sea and it kept us busy with some Wood and Green and Common sandpipers, a single Bar-tailed godwit, several Ruffs, Greenshank and Redshank, Little stints, Black-winged stilts and numerous Spur-winged plovers.

After picnic on route where we had Pallid swifts and very obliging Masked Shrike, we stopped at Mount Nebo – the place where Moses had the first view of the Promised Land after 40 years in the desert. Mohammed gave us a brief tour and we enjoyed the Dead Sea panorama. On the way down we stopped to see our first Mourning Wheatear and had excellent views of Desert larks.

Finally we checked in at Holliday Inn and some of us went for a dip in the Dead sea and others enjoyed Palestine sunbirds, Yellow-vented bulbuls and Thrush nightingales in the hotel's garden.



Dead Sea



Green Bee-eater

Day 6 – 10th April

Dead Sea – Dana

The pre-breakfast walk around the hotel was rather disappointing, seeing most of the Tamarisk bushes cleared for new development (Dead sea sparrows gone with them), but for consolation, Peter spotted a couple of Stone curlews.

After breakfast we checked the wadis around Dead Sea panorama for Sand partridges. As we were watching two displaying from small rocks, Bonelli's eagle made a brief appearance. Rock martins and White-crowned wheatears were also seen in the wadi.

At Wadi Mujib we had Rock martins drinking in the river, Little Green Bee-eater and several Blackstarts. None of the sparrows flying around turned into Striolated bunting so we headed to Karak castle for lunch and sightseeing. This crusaders castle is dramatically perched on a rock overlooking the surrounding valleys. Two rock sparrows were nesting near the top of the castle and the usual Black-eared wheatears and Blue rock thrushes were present.

In the afternoon we arrived at Dana, but because of the strong wind no or very few raptors were flying around, so we've checked in Dana Tower hotel to enjoy the view from the terrace with a cup of nice mint tea.



Wadi Dana

Day 7 – 11th April

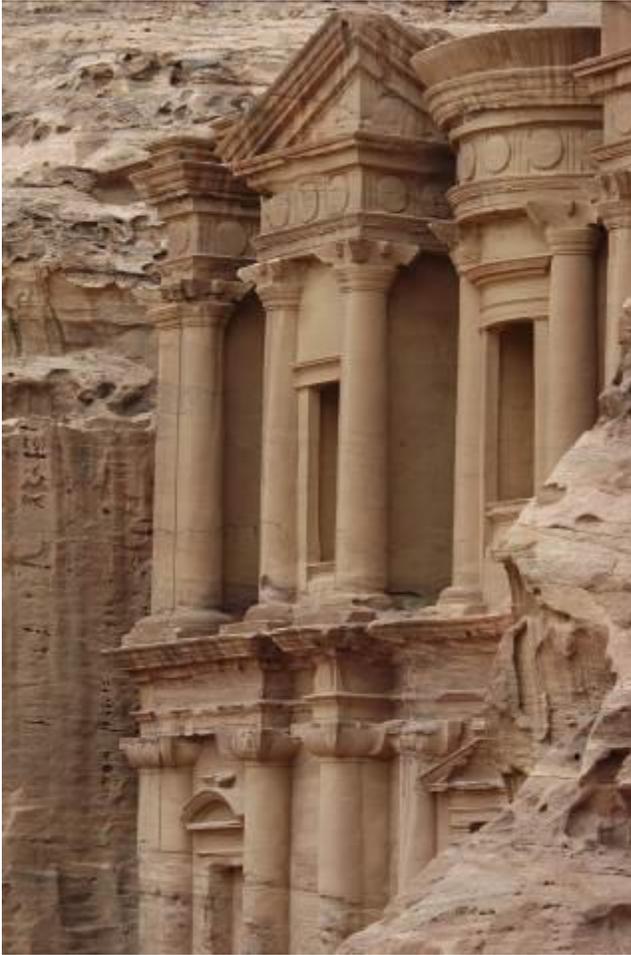
Dana – Petra

It was cultural day today as we were heading towards Petra – one of the most amazing cities of the ancient world. Before we left Dana, we stopped at Barra forest to see the local Syrian serins. Not long after we arrived we were rewarded with great views of around five birds constantly perching in the trees around. Just before the main road we stopped to photograph small area with Black irises – the national flower of Jordan, when Cretzchmars bunting called from a nearby rock and we all had a good view of it.



Black iris

At Petra Mohammed gave us a very good tour. One of his lectures was interrupted by a nice adult Steppe eagle flying overhead, followed by young Short-toed eagle and dozens of Steppe buzzards. Brown-necked ravens, Rock martins, Black-eared wheatears and Blue rock thrushes were abundant. After lunch in the Basin, some of us took the trail to the Monastery and were rewarded not only with excellent view of Wadi Araba and the surrounding mountains and very good Buzzard migration, but also with nice views of Sinai rosefinches at the Monastery. A good end of a good day.



Petra

Day 8 – 12th April

Petra – Wadi rum

After leaving Petra behind, we headed towards Wadi rum. On the way Charles spotted nice male Rock thrush from the bus and on the descent to the Rum desert, we had Isabelline Wheatear and Ortolan Bunting.

At Wadi rum we went for a jeep tour in the desert, exploring different canyons and rocks. The targeted Hooded Wheatear proved to be elusive this time, but we had Sinai rosefinches at several places and two very obliging Trumpeter finches.

After a delicious lunch, prepared by our Bedouin guides, we headed back to Rum village. A short stop after the village provided Collared Flycatcher, Desert and Bar-tailed larks, White-crowned wheatears and many gerbils. In the late afternoon we arrived in Aqaba to check in for two nights.



Wadi Rum



Sinai Rosefinch

Day 9 – 13th April

Aqaba

Our pre-breakfast walk took us to the sea front where, the local allotments were providing good shelter for migrants – several Thrush nightingales, Wryneck, Red-throated and Tree pipits, dozens of Blackcaps, Yellow wagtails of both “*flava*” and “*feldeg*” subs. Common terns were flying around the yacht harbor.

After breakfast we headed to Aqaba bird observatory. This little spot is one of the birding jewels of Jordan. It didn't disappoint us this time either. A noisy family of Arabian babblers were seen right after we came of the bus, followed by Graceful prinias and Scrub Warbler. While I was sorting out entry tickets, an excitement arose outside the visitors center – a Sooty falcon had paraded in front of the whole group.

At the pools – the usual selection of waders – Common, Green and Wood sandpipers, Green shank and Spur-winged plovers. In the far end of the next pool a big group of gulls was looking promising, so we have approached them carefully. Along with the Lesser black-backed gulls, Slender-billed gulls, Black-headed gulls, Gull-billed terns, there was one immature Greater Black-headed Gull.

Intensive raptor migration was taking place overhead – hundreds of Steppe buzzards were on the move, Black kites, Honey buzzards, two big flocks of White storks, Short-toed eagles, Levant sparrowhawks. Further exploration of the site revealed Snipe and nice Pied kingfisher, spotted by Sally. Grey and Purple herons, as well as Cattle egrets. Small

flock of Blue-cheeked bee-eaters flew past. In the next pool along with other waders were one Temminck's stint and a Spotted redshank.

The afternoon at the south coast and Aqaba back road did not produce anything new, although some of the group managed to see briefly a pair of Arabian warblers.



Tristram's Starlings

Day 10 – 14th April

Aqaba-Amman airport

The drive along wadi Araba was quite scenic, especially at a small spot with crops where hundreds of Steppe buzzards and Black kites were resting on the ground, Lesser kestrels were making long lines on the wires and Levant sparrowhawks were flying over.

In the afternoon we arrived at the airport for departure with the scheduled BA flight back home.

A good tour with 156 species seen in total.