

## The Wildlife of Israel

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Try, if you can, to forget the associations that comes to mind when you hear "Israel". Attempt the impossible and erase all knowledge you have of the politics, religion and history encapsulated in that name and think instead of a geographical space in the south east of the Mediterranean Basin. Think of a meeting of Africa, Europe and Asia. Israel is about a whole lot more than culture and how people have conducted their affairs over time. It is about a variety of wildlife, resident and itinerant, that can be matched by few other areas outside of the tropics.

In Spring 2004, I was the guest foreign speaker at the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel's annual photo competition. After this well-supported event, my hosts, Yossi Eshbol, Israel's premier nature photographer, and his wife Shuli, opened my eyes to the region's rich biological diversity. Many species I thought of as typically African such as brown hyena, jackal, caracal and rock hyrax are present while those more familiar in northern Europe such as crane, black stork and marsh sandpiper are in evidence too.

For an introduction to desert wildlife, we traveled down to Judea to the oasis of Ein Gedi, close to the dwindling Dead Sea. Oases, naturally, concentrate an area's wildlife and in spite of over-extraction of water by the neighbouring kibbutz, Ein Gedi remains an important haven for species such as ibex, Tristram's grackle, blackstart and, occasionally, leopard. We arrived shortly after dawn and by prior arrangement with the nature reserve, set off up the steep rocky path into the ravine of Wadi David. Within ten minutes we found a curious rock hyrax warming itself in the early morning sun. An evolutionary anomaly whose closest relative is the African elephant, the hyrax superficially acts and looks more like a large rodent than a pachyderm. This particular one fixed me with an intense stare as I edged close enough to use the 500 mm lens but once it sneezed a warning to others in the colony, I withdrew and left it to enjoy the sun in peace. Wadi David, with its combination of bird song, humidity, splashing water and lush vegetation, particular close to the main waterfall, gives the visitor, particularly one from northern Europe, the sensation of being in a botanical garden. Startling flashes of iridescent green as Smyrna kingfishers fly by heighten the sense of the exotic.

The best opportunities for bird photography, however, came at the neighbouring Wadi Arugot where a steady supply of crumbs from visitors and dripping tap attracts many birds. Shortly after dawn on the second day we were watched by a tribe of 15 male ibex from an arid ridge above the car park. Yossi has successfully photographed ibex on many occasions, but this particular group wasn't so tolerant. In contrast, the starling-like Tristram's grackle, whose sad, mellifluous song is strangely at odds with its swaggering behaviour, came boldly to bait hidden on the top of a stone wall, even although I sat in the open just six meters away. By this time the light was rather brighter and flatter than I normally work in so I made use of what colour there was by getting low and portraying the birds against the upper part of a rich blue northern sky. Just as confiding was another species characteristic of rocky desert country - the elegant, tail-flicking blackstart. One pair was building a nest in a low wall near the picnic area and continued to bring in nesting material and small stones to decorate the entrance while we lay on the ground seven meters away.

After the shirtsleeve comfort of the desert in March, a return visit to the Hula Valley in January 2005 offered much more familiar conditions with pewter skies, indecisive rain and single figure temperatures. Yossi had invited me to photograph some of the 20 to 25 thousand European cranes that now winter in the area and I was keen to learn too about an unusual co-operation between farmers and conservationists, centered on these birds.

The valley, close to the borders with Syria and Lebanon, is an important flyway for migratory birds and the Hula Lake and surrounding wetlands historically hosted large number of resident and migrant species. In the mid 1940s, however, a huge reclamation project drained Hula Lake and many of the adjacent marshes (leading to the extinction in 1956 of the endemic Palestinian painted



frog) in a bid to eradicate malarial mosquitoes and to provide 15,000 acres of fertile farmland. By the 1990s, however, problems associated with long-term intensive agriculture, such as the loss of structure and subsequent erosion of the peaty soils, and nitrate and phosphate run-off into the Sea of Galilee, were so acute that in 1994 the Hula Project was initiated in an attempt to remedy the situation. Central to the strategy was a desire to assist farming with the introduction of irrigation systems, not only for economic and social reasons but for ecological ones too. Flooding the land periodically helps to prevent the peat from drying out (at which point it is very hard to moisten again), reducing erosion, underground fires and run-off pollution.



The new irrigation systems allowed a shift from cotton (seriously under attack from spiny bollworm) to maize (corn), wheat and peanut production. These new food sources, in addition to restored wetlands and the newly excavated 250 acre Lake Agmon - a safe night-time roost - transformed the area from stop-over to wintering grounds for a large percentage of the 30,000 plus European cranes routing through the valley. During the first 5 years, local farmers lost in the order of \$500,000 worth of crops as the cranes feasted on this new bonanza. A solution was reached when local farmers, green NGO's and the agency responsible for the original drainage, then restoration programs, the KKL-JNF, agreed to set aside a 175 acre field for the cranes, luring them from surrounding crops with 2 tons of maize and nuts each day from December to March. Access to the field is normally prohibited to visitors and locals alike so that the cranes are not forced to disperse back on to crop lands. The farmers, who provide about 50% of the finance for this scheme, each contribute around \$15 annually for every acre they farm.



Owing to the position of the hide, I needed to enter it well before dawn and the arrival of the first cranes from nearby Lake Agmon. Departure couldn't come until darkness had fallen again, eleven and a half hours later. Yet I've rarely found time pass so quickly in a hide, not least because of the constant activity throughout the day and the fascinating, absorbing symphonics of the cranes. This bore no resemblance to the brassy, atonal duets I have often heard from the depths of an Estonian bog; it was an altogether more bewildering cacophony at close range. So diverse was the range of sounds, that at different times I was sure I could hear bitterns, guillemot chicks and a didgeridoo. Mostly, though, it was a goose with its neck stuck in a long plastic drainpipe.



The soft, slightly cool lighting was sympathetic to these northern birds, making it easier to record detail in the pale grey parts of their plumage. I used the Nikon F6's spot meter to read from the tail which, so long as it was turned towards the light, provided a reliable reading. Uprated Velvia 50 shines in these low contrast conditions and I changed to Provia only when the clouds thinned and the light became stronger. In contrast to the extreme caution displayed on their breeding grounds the cranes showed little concern about the hide or the lens moving slowly backwards and forwards six inches above the ground.

The tractor and fertiliser spinner that spreads the food came round twice, sometimes three times a day and by prior arrangement with the driver, the maize and nuts could be placed at an optimal photographic distance from the hide.

This particular region of the Mediterranean Basin - Israel - in spite of population pressure and the adverse affects of intensive - productive farming, retains more of its biota than most of the neighbouring areas. It is a particularly rich and diverse heritage and one that can act as a focus of pride for all the people who live in that region, irrespective of cultural or religious affiliations.

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**Niall Benvie**, who runs [Images from the Edge](#), is the UK's most prolific writer on natural history photography, publishing almost 70 articles and a book (amounting to over 135,000 words) between 2000-2002 alone. But the scope of his writing extends much wider into issues of land management and the polarisation of nature and culture as well as travelogues and commentaries on subjects as diverse as species re-establishment programmes and eco-tourism.

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