

Israel Mammal Report: 20 to 28 February 2016

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Negev Desert – ©Mike Richardson

Introduction

Despite its small size Israel, is an exciting destination for the Western Palearctic mammal enthusiast. With a remarkably varied topography, the country is home to approximately 100 mammals including several non-native species and a couple of successful reintroductions. The majority of these species are well protected by a series of nature reserves and national parks which cover 30% (6,400 km²) of the country. With a little effort it is still possible to observe animals such as Striped Hyena, Jungle cat and Indian Crested Porcupine which are much more difficult to find in other parts of the region.

In late February 2016, I joined Mark Hows and John Sadler on a mixed birding and mammal watching trip designed to sample Israel's wildlife hotspots. Although a little early in the year for bats, and despite heavy rain and flooding in the Negev, we managed to find some interesting mammal species including most of our targets. We also accrued a decent bird list and enjoyed several interesting reptile sightings.

Travel details

We flew London Luton to Tel Aviv with Easyjet at a cost of £218 per person (including an item of hold luggage each). Our hire car came from Dollar Thrifty and was a Nissan Qashqai SUV (£323 basic cost). This proved to be an ideal vehicle for three large adults with the high ground clearance coming in very useful on the many dirt tracks we explored. Unfortunately the service from Dollar Thrifty was poor both when collecting and returning the car. Not only did they try to supply a vehicle several categories below the one we had paid for (and refused to swap it until we stood our ground), they also charged us an expensive cleaning fee on return because the carpets in the foot wells were dirty!

Driving around Israel is easy with accommodation and food outlets for all budgets plentiful. Security is unsurprisingly tight, especially along the borders, although we didn't have any problems with the Israeli Defence Force or law enforcement at any point during our trip. The rules concerning national parks and nature reserves in Israel are strictly enforced and it is forbidden to enter them after dark which is when they're of most interest to mammal watchers. Spotlighting is not permitted anywhere as it's associated with hunting although with discretion it is possible in the more remote areas.



Flash flood in Negev Desert – ©Mike Richardson

The Negev Desert: 20 to 23 February, 2016

We spent the first three nights of the trip in Mitzpe Ramon at the Silent Arrow Campsite (only recommended for those wanting extremely basic accommodation). Situated on the edge of the Ramon Crater in the heart of the Negev Desert this proved to be an ideal location from which to explore the local area.

On our first morning we headed straight for the 171, a side road that cuts through the Har Hanegev reserve en route to the Egyptian border. This is the best place to look for the Onager (Asiatic Wild Ass) which has been successfully reintroduced to the region. We drove as far west as we were permitted, paying particular attention to the area inside the reserve. Despite a thorough search the closest we came to seeing an Onager was fresh droppings on the road. More exciting was a couple of **Fat Sand Rats**, a mammal I particularly wanted to see after somehow missing them in northern Africa.

Moving on to Sde Boker we drove the maze of dirt tracks that lead to the Zin Valley where a bachelor herd of **Nubian Ibex** posed for photographs.



Nubian Ibex (*Capra nubiana*) – ©Mike Richardson

At dusk we met up with Haim Berger from Negev Jeep Tours (www.negevjeep.co.il/) for a long night drive in search of nocturnal mammals. Haim is an expert on carnivores and has studied Striped Hyenas and Wolves in the Negev. He put considerable effort into finding us some mammals while happily sharing his limitless knowledge on Israeli wildlife. We spent most of our time spotlighting a series of dirt tracks that crossed plantations, crop fields and farms where most of the mammals congregate in search of food. After a slow start we found a herd of **Dorcas Gazelle**, two **Indian Crested Porcupine** and several **Red Foxes**. Knowing we particularly wanted to see a Striped Hyena, Haim took us to several picnic areas that are often frequented by hyenas searching for food leftovers. Unfortunately luck was not on our side and we ended the night without a hyena. I wouldn't hesitate to use Negev Jeep Tours again in the future and I would highly recommend requesting Haim himself if you're particularly interested in seeing the larger carnivores.

Before returning to our accommodation we drove a section of the 171 and found an **Onager** in the spotlight not too far from the road. Otherwise things were very quiet in the desert probably due to a near full moon and an ice cold wind.

Some time in the night it started to rain and by morning everywhere was flooded. Our thoughts quickly turned to the Sherman traps we had placed in a nearby wadi. Fortunately they were still intact containing a **House Mouse** and two excellent **Wagner's Gerbils**.

In search of a daytime Onager sighting we headed west along the 171 but had to turn back after a couple of miles as the road was severely flooded. With continuous rain it wasn't long before the main highway north was also impassable so instead we spent our time exploring the Ramon Crater. It was here that we had an immense stroke of luck.

Heading south on highway 40 from Mitzpe Ramon there is a vulture feeding station on the left side of the road (approximately one mile after the descent into the crater signposted 'to vulture lookout' directly opposite 'Stone, Wind and Water' site). While scanning from the lay-by we noticed a very fresh cow carcass at the feeding station. By this time it was almost 14:00 so we didn't expect to see anything but ravens and perhaps the occasional raptor feeding from the carcass. However, closer inspection through binoculars revealed a young **Wolf** scavenging from the cow. Initially I misidentified it as a large Golden Jackal but closer scrutiny (and later verification from several experts) confirmed its true identity. Extremely cautious the wolf spent only minutes feeding before disappearing over a ridge and out of sight.



Wolf (*Canis lupus*) – ©John Sadler

We returned to the lay-by a couple of hours before sunset in the hope that the wolf or another predator would return to the carcass. It wasn't until nightfall that we picked up a couple of doglike shapes in our telescopes aided by the light from a full moon. We eventually worked out that three wolves were feeding from the cow.

After a long and fruitless night drive around the bottom of the crater we returned to the feeding station one last time. Using our spotlight we could briefly illuminate the area around the carcass and pick up any animals in our telescopes. A quick flash of the light revealed at least one wolf was still present but not feeding, while another was keeping its distance below the small ridge. The timid behaviour of both wolves was puzzling until closer scrutiny of the carcass revealed a **Striped Hyena** was sat on top of it. The hyena continued to feed unfazed by the wolves, although it occasionally snapped in their direction when they edged too close. Naturally we were delighted by our good fortune well aware that fresh carcasses are not put out each day. We watched the hyena and wolves for several minutes, shining the light when no cars were passing. As tempting as it was to continue, we left the animals in peace returning the next morning to find only bones and skin left at the feeding station.

The previous evening we had placed our traps in a well drained wadi close to our accommodation. The next morning they contained a **Wagner's Gerbil** and a fantastic **Golden Spiny Mouse**.



Golden Spiny Mouse (*Acomys russatus*) – ©John Sadler

Eilat: 23 to 24 February, 2016

Leaving the rain and the Negev behind we headed south to Eilat where we spent one night at Motel Aviv (recommended). This section of the trip was mainly for birding and we could have easily spent a full week exploring the local area. With time at a premium we had to leave a potential Blanford's Fox site in the Eilat Mountains for another time. Instead we focused on places adjacent to the Jordanian border including the Arava region.

Spotlighting the circular fields east of Yotvata revealed both **Golden Jackal** and **Red Fox** while the entrance track to the Amram's Pillars produced several **Dorcas Gazelles** and a single **Cape Hare**.

The next morning we flushed another **Cape Hare** while birding Holland Park. Our traps set in a nearby area of wasteland bordering a palm plantation produced our first two **Eastern Spiny Mice** of the trip.



Eastern Spiny Mouse (*Acomys dimidiatus*) – ©Mike Richardson

En route to the Dead Sea we stopped at the Acacia Gazelle reserve located just south of Yotvata. Formally a subspecies of Mountain Gazelle, this extremely rare animal only exists within a 6 km² area that was fenced off in 2004 to protect the increasingly fragile population from predators. Over 60 individuals now share the reserve with good numbers of Dorcas Gazelles which presumably were also living in the area when it was fenced. We spent a lot of time studying various distant animals before being confident of separating the two species. We finally left the area having scored much closer views of both **Acacia** and **Dorcas Gazelles**.

The Acacia Gazelle reserve is located west of highway 90 on the opposite side of the road to the Hai Bar nature reserve. It can be accessed by dirt track running parallel to the highway leading from Yotvata (west).

Dead Sea: 24-26 February, 2016

Our base in the Dead Sea area was the town of Arad where we stayed for two nights in the Zimmer Mor apartments (recommended). Arriving early evening we decided to spotlight the 3199, a relatively minor road leading to the west entrance of Masada National Park. Not only is Wolf and Striped Hyena possible on this road but I thought the cliffs nearer Masada might be suitable for Blanford's Fox. Despite the late hour we found the road surprisingly busy with taxis ferrying people to and from the restaurant/campsite located approximately halfway between Arad and the entrance gate to the park. A thorough search of the steep, rocky slopes bordering the road only produced a couple of **Red Foxes** perhaps suggesting it was not the optimal habitat for Blanford's after all.

The next morning we headed to Ein Gedi arriving at Wadi David before the hordes of tourists and school children. As expected **Rock Hyraxes** were easy to find in the trees around the visitor centre while a lone pregnant **Nubian Ibex** was resting by one of the waterfalls.



Rock Hyrax (*Procavia capensis*) - © Mike Richardson

Once the crowds became unbearable we drove further north crossing over into the West Bank. Immediately after the security checkpoint we made a sharp left turn and drove up a deserted mountain road leading to the 'tourist village' of Metzoke Daragot. From here a dirt track (high clearance vehicles only) enters a national park and leads to a watch point overlooking a gorge (approximately 2km south-west of village). The habitat below the watch point looks ideal for Blanford's Fox although unfortunately any spotlighting activity would almost certainly be noticed from Metzoke Daragot.

A family herd of **Nubian Ibex** crossed the road as we drove back down to the coast. From here we headed back south to Ne'ot Kakikar where we met Barak Granit (barak.granit@gmail.com), our guide for the evening. Although we were looking for Nubian Nightjar and Hume's Tawny Owl specifically, Barak also knew a lot about Israeli mammals. When I quizzed him about seeing Blanford's Fox he confirmed the only realistic chance of seeing one in the Dead Sea area would be to enter a nature reserve at night which is not permitted. Barak himself has only ever seen one while surveying owls with a special permit.

While watching the nightjar in the marshes along the Jordanian border we noticed a couple of **Kuhl's Pipistrelles** hunting along the canals. Barak has also seen Caracals a couple of times in the area. The next four hours were spent searching for Hume's Tawny Owls at several sites around Ein Gedi. The moon was especially bright this evening and strangely enough we didn't come across any other mammals apart from a large, pale bat which remains unidentified.

After our search for owls we had hoped to spotlight the road up to Metsoke Dragot as some of the cliffs looked promising for Blanford's Fox, while the general area is good for wolf and hyena. Despite the very late hour we found a police car blocking the beginning of the road. To our dismay

we were told night time road repairs were in progress and we could go no further. Heading back to Arad we collected our traps from an area of roadside scrub to find they contained a couple of **Eastern Spiny Mice**.

Jerusalem: 26 February, 2016

The next day we drove north to Jerusalem, calling briefly at Britannia Park in the Judean Lowlands which is home to Mountain Gazelle, Striped Hyena and possibly Caracal. Unfortunately it was the weekend and the park was full of cyclists and noisy, inconsiderate dirt bike riders. Quickly moving on to Jerusalem we spent several hours exploring the tourist sites of the Old City before visiting the Valley of the Gazelles. This former urban wasteland is home to a small population of **Mountain Gazelle** and has now been transformed into a plush park with landscaping, ponds and a visitor centre. The gazelles are free to roam the whole reserve but also have access to an area out of bounds to the public where they can still be watched through binoculars. In all honesty the whole thing felt a bit like a zoo although technically the gazelles are no less wild than the Acacia Gazelles in Yotvata.

Late afternoon we met up with fellow mammal watcher Tomer Ben-Yehuda who had been extremely generous with tips and advice when I planned the trip. We followed Tomer's car to the Jerusalem Bird Observatory where we sat in the hide watching a variety of birds until dusk. Once it was dark the first **Indian Crested Porcupine** appeared from the bushes to the right of the hide. A second soon followed, although both were timid and didn't hang around the feeding station for long. By now it was pretty cold and there was no sign of any bats or of the White-breasted Hedgehogs that turn up occasionally. With a three hour drive ahead of us we bid farewell to Tomer and made our way north to our last destination of the trip.

Detailed directions for Valley of the Gazelles and the Jerusalem Bird Observatory can be found in Charles Hood's Jerusalem report on mammalwatching.com



Indian Crested Porcupine (*Hystrix indica*) – ©John Sadler

Hula Valley: 26-28 February, 2016

For our last couple of nights we stayed at Lavender in the Mountains (recommended). Perhaps not the most macho sounding hotel for hardcore mammal watchers, our accommodation was located in Ramot Naftali, a fenced kibbutz built on a hillside overlooking the Hula Valley.

Early the next morning we stopped at the service station in Merkaz Kar for some coffee. I was told that gazelles are common on the surrounding hillsides and a quick scan of the slopes opposite revealed a small group of **Mountain Gazelles** feeding. If only all mammal watching was this easy! We then drove the short distance to the Agamon Hula Reserve which thankfully opened at 06:30 as it was the weekend (it opens at 09:00 on weekdays). At the visitor centre we enquired about booking a night tour only to be told they don't run in winter. Suddenly our quest to find a Jungle Cat became more difficult.

Apart from a few bird watchers and photographers we pretty much had the reserve to ourselves for the first couple of hours. 30,000 Common Cranes proved to be an awesome spectacle while countless other species of birds kept Mark and John busy. Several **Golden Jackals** were observed walking among the cranes and feral **Coypu** were common in the canals and main lake. All the time we kept an eye out for Jungle Cats along the fringes of the reed beds. By around 09:00 the reserve became overrun with noisy families, the majority riding bikes, go-carts and golf buggies (all of which could be hired from reception). The sensible wildlife disappeared and we quickly followed, deciding to return in the late afternoon for another search for Jungle Cat.



Common Cranes, Hula Valley - © Mike Richardson

For the next few hours we explored the rest of the valley looking for potential spotlighting areas. Along the banks of the Jordan River we found a series of tracks (accessed from the 977) that looked promising for a night drive. Our only live **Egyptian Mongoose** of the trip was seen at the roadside as we headed back to the main highway to find some lunch.

With some apprehension we returned to the Agamon Hula a couple of hours before dusk to find it almost as busy as before. We fought our way to the first hide (going clockwise around the lake) and wrestled for a position at the window. For the next hour we scanned the edges of the crane flock paying particular attention to the reed beds. At least four **Golden Jackals** were noted including one asleep among the cranes. Suddenly John noticed some movement in the reeds near the front of the hide and out popped a **Jungle Cat**. Before long our excitement had attracted a large group of noisy spectators who tried to film the cat on their phones. With a bemused look the cat quickly disappeared back into the reeds never to be seen again.



Jungle Cat (*Felis chaus*) – ©Mark Hows

With the pressure off we spent the evening spotlighting some of the dirt tracks that follow the Jordan River. The riparian vegetation was quite dense making it difficult to find anything close to the water but the adjacent crop fields held a group of **Brown Hares** and good numbers of **Golden Jackals**. A couple of **House Mice** were also noted along with some probable **Grey Long-eared Bats**. Just as we were about to leave we spotted eyeshine on the opposite bank and had a quick glimpse of a large **Jungle Cat** as it disappeared into the thick vegetation.

The next morning we checked our traps but disappointingly they only contained **House Mice**. It was then time to head back to Tel Aviv, stopping on the way to see the African Softshell Turtles on the Alexander River (near Kfar Vitkin). Once in Tel Aviv we made a final stop at HaYarkon Park to search for Vinous-breasted Starlings. With time at a premium we dipped the birds but spotted a **Coypu** swimming in the river and a **Golden Jackal**. All too soon we were making the arduous drive to the airport for an argument with the car rental people and an exhaustively comprehensive security examination.

Species seen

1.	Egyptian Fruit Bat <i>Rousettus aegyptiacus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several seen flying around tree-lined side streets while exiting Tel Aviv on our first night.
-	Grey Long-eared Bat <i>Plecotus austriacus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • According to sonogram this species is most likely candidate for medium sized bat species seen in Hula Valley. However, results were not conclusive.
2.	Kuhl's Pipistrelle <i>Pipistrellus kuhlii</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least two seen early evening near Ne'ot Kakikar, Dead Sea. Identified using bat detector.
3.	Golden Jackal <i>Canis aureus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One seen at night in Yotvata circular fields while spotlighting. • Common in Hula Valley both day and night. • One observed early afternoon along river bank in HaYarkon Park, Tel Aviv.
4.	Wolf <i>Canis lupus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young animal seen feeding from cow carcass mid-afternoon at vulture feeding station, Ramon Crater, Negev Desert. • Three Wolves seen feeding from same carcass immediately after sunset. • Two individuals still hanging around carcass an hour later although prevented from feeding by Striped Hyena.
5.	Red Fox <i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two seen while spotlighting near Sde Boker, Negev Desert. • At least one observed at night in Yovata circular fields. • Two seen on rocky slopes near Masada west gate while spotlighting.
6.	Egyptian Mongoose <i>Herpestes ichneumon</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One seen near highway underpass in Hula Valley.
7.	Striped Hyena <i>Hyaena hyaena</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distant but prolonged views of animal feeding on cow carcass at night in Ramon Crater, Negev Desert. Observed interacting with two Wolves .
8.	Jungle Cat <i>Felis chaus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent views of individual from hide at dusk in Agamon Hula, Hula Valley. • Brief view of second cat while spotlighting Jordan River, Hula Valley.

9.	Rock Hyrax <i>Procavia capensis</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common at Wadi David, Ein Gedi, especially around the visitor centre.
10.	Mountain Gazelle <i>Gazella gazella</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least three in Valley of Gazelles, Jerusalem. • Small group seen early morning on hillside opposite Merkaz Kar, Hula Valley.
11.	Acacia Gazelle <i>Gazella acacia</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Double figures seen at Yotvata inside Acacia Gazelle reserve.
12.	Dorcas Gazelle <i>Gazella dorcas</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small group seen while spotlighting near Sde Boker, Negev Desert. • Five seen after dark on entrance track to Amram's Pillars, Eilat. • Several identified at Yotvata inside Acacia Gazelle reserve.
13.	Nubian Ibex <i>Capra nubiana</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bachelor herd observed in Zin Valley, Negev Desert. • Single female seen at Wadi David, Ein Gedi. • Family group at roadside near Metzoke Daragot, Dead Sea.
14.	Onager <i>Equus hemionus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One seen at night while spotlighting 171 road, Negev Desert.
15.	Cape Hare <i>Lepus capensis</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One seen at night on entrance track to Amram's Pillars, Eilat. • One flushed early morning at Holland Park, Eilat. • Single animal seen at night between Arad and Masada west entrance.
16.	European Hare <i>Lepus europaeus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several seen while spotlighting farmland adjacent to Jordan River, Hula Valley.
17.	Wagner's Gerbil <i>Gerbillus dasyurus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three trapped in wadi near Mitzpe Ramon, Negev Desert. • Probable seen crossing 171 late at night, Negev Desert.
18.	Fat Sand Rat <i>Psammomys obesus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two seen mid-morning at side of 171, Negev Desert.

19.	House Mouse <i>Mus musculus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One trapped in wadi near Mitzpe Ramon, Negev Desert. • A couple seen on night drive in Hula Valley. • Three trapped along Jordan River in Hula Valley.
20.	Eastern Spiny Mouse <i>Acomys dimidiatus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two trapped near date plantation on outskirts of Eilat. • Two trapped near Neve Zohar, Dead Sea.
21.	Golden Spiny Mouse <i>Acomys russatus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One trapped in wadi near Mitzpe Ramon, Negev Desert.
22.	Indian Crested Porcupine <i>Hystrix indica</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two separate sightings while spotlighting near Sde Boker, Negev Desert • A pair seen from Jerusalem Bird Observatory at dusk.
23.	Coypu <i>Myocastor coypus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common in Agamon Hula in the Hula Valley. • One observed early afternoon in river bordering HaYarkon Park, Tel Aviv.

Conclusion

In total we managed to find and identify 23 mammal species including key targets such as Striped Hyena, Indian Crested Porcupine and Jungle Cat. It was a little early in the year to see good numbers of bats, especially in the desert where the temperature quickly plummeted at night. Heavy rain and floods in the Negev combined with a full moon may also have negatively affected mammal watching but to what extent it's impossible to say.

The main target we missed was Blanford's Fox but for one reason or another we didn't really get the chance to search for it in suitable habitat. They prefer extremely steep cliffs allowing easy escape from Red Foxes and in the Dead Sea region at least, all such areas are inside reserves where night time access is prohibited. It should be possible to find suitable habitat well away from roads or settlements but we didn't have time to look for any on this trip.

I would like to return to Israel for a more comprehensive search for Blanford's Fox. However, I'll be sure to visit slightly later in the year when all the bats and reptiles are active. Any future trip will also have to include time in the sand dunes west of Be're Sheva where a high diversity of rodents including the endemic Buxton's Jird can be found.