

Israel Mammal Report: 31 March to 10 April 2017

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Eastern Spiny Mouse (*Acomys dimidiatus*)

Introduction

I first visited Israel in February 2016 on a mixed birding and mammal watching trip with John Sadler and Mark Hows. We were quite successful and saw most of our targets including Striped Hyena, Wolf and Jungle Cat. This visit was a much more relaxed affair, mainly because I was accompanied by Sarah who requires decent accommodation and meals that don't consist exclusively of Pringles, ice cream and Laughing Cow cheese! Saying that we did manage to spend a good amount of time searching for mammals but spotlighting sessions were considerably shorter than my usual efforts and I only set traps over three nights.

Nevertheless we still managed to identify 17 mammal species, two of which were new for me. I also dedicated a little time searching for potential Blanford's Fox sites, but, as with my first visit, I failed to find any suitable habitat that I could access at night.

Travel details

Largely thanks to the poor exchange rate (GBP to ILS) following Brexit, the cost of this trip was significantly more expensive than my previous visit to Israel. We flew from London Luton to Tel Aviv with easyJet with few problems. Despite previous bad experiences with Dollar Thrifty car rental, against my better judgement we used them again as they were much cheaper than their competitors. They partly redeemed themselves by upgrading us to a Hyundai Tucson but when we returned the car at the end of our trip, they tried to blame us for denting the tailgate. Fortunately Sarah had filmed all the previous damage on her phone so they quickly apologised.

Mammal watching in Israel

Conservation is taken seriously in Israel and over 30% (6,400 km²) of the country is protected by a series of nature reserves and national parks. While no doubt great for the wildlife, strictly enforced rules pose many problems for mammal watchers. For example, it is prohibited to enter any reserves after dark, even on foot. National Forests appear to be an exception to this (at least the two I visited) as I saw no signs restricting entry at night.

Spotlighting is not permitted anywhere as it's associated with poaching. With caution it is possible to use a spotlight away from reserves, settlements and military bases, although finding a quiet road that cuts through decent habitat is very difficult.

I have spoken to several Israelis about small mammal trapping and opinions differ about what is actually permitted. It is certainly illegal to trap inside any national park or nature reserve and within urban areas. It is also unwise to place traps on military firing ranges, near army bases, or in close proximity to country borders. With extreme discretion it is possible to set traps in wasteland, roadside scrub, and along the edges of (but not inside) agricultural areas. The downside to this is captives are usually restricted to a couple of common generalist species.

There's no doubt that mammal watching in Israel can be challenging. However, with some perseverance it can also be very rewarding.



White-breasted Hedgehog (*Erinaceus concolor*)

Central Israel: 31 March to 3 April 2017

For the first three nights we stayed in Ashdod, a strange mix of holiday resort and industrial port. The Sur La Mer Boutique Hotel (recommended) proved a good base for exploring central Israel and was reasonably close to the Ashdod Nitzanim Sand Dune Park, which I was especially looking forward to visiting.

Ashdod Nitzanim Sand Dune Park

This protected area can be entered from the seafront south of Ashdod, but it is probably best accessed from the 3631 road (Nitzan turn off from highway 4). Home to some interesting mammals such as Buxton's Jird and Anderson's Gerbil, the area is the largest area of remnant sand dune left in Israel.

We made our first visit to the park on a busy weekend to find the delicate dune ecosystem over run with off-road trucks and dirt bikes. On reading the park rules I was disappointed to learn that night-time hikes are strictly prohibited, yet wanton destruction of the park by off-road vehicles during daylight hours seemed to be permitted. South of the road (3631) turned out to be a military area and is off limits to the public. As we were heading back towards the highway, a terrified **Mountain Gazelle** crossed the road in front of our car.

I returned the next night and walked some of the off-road tracks that ran adjacent to the main road. The army were carrying out noisy night exercises close by, and while I doubt this would have had a negative effect on small mammal activity, I failed to find any rodents. The only mammal of note was a **Eurasian Badger**. Needless to say, a longer walk combined with trapping would be a more productive way to find rodents.

Jerusalem Bird Observatory

(Parking: 31°46'46.0"N 35°12'20.6")

Arriving at this tiny urban reserve shortly before dusk we watched the resident White-throated Kingfisher catch Levant Green Frogs and freshwater crabs. Once the sun had set we were entertained by at least three **White-breasted Hedgehogs** and an **Indian Crested Porcupine** that arrived to eat spilled seed from the bird feeders.

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



Indian Crested Porcupine (*Hystrix indica*)

Shoham Forest Park

(32°00'16.0"N 34°57'43.4"E)

Located very close to Ben Gurion Airport near Tel Aviv, this nice area of forest is reputed as a good place to see Striped Hyena. We first visited the park on a Saturday afternoon to find it extremely busy with picnickers, mountain bikers and hikers. Returning later that night, conditions seemed perfect for a night drive. However, in more than hour of spotlighting we failed to see a single wild mammal, which was especially surprising considering how much food waste was littered around the place.

The park should at least have a good population of Indian Crested Porcupine going by a fresh road kill on the nearby highway and the amount of quills scattered in picnic areas. I guess we were just unlucky, not to see even one Red Fox or Golden Jackal.

Britannia Park

(31°42'16.9"N 34°55'43.8"E)

Another popular forest park best visited on a week day to avoid the crowds. We spent an hour or so spotlighting around the many dirt roads late one evening. After a quiet start we eventually saw **Cape Hare**, **Red Fox**, **House Mouse** and a confiding **Golden Jackal**. Mountain Gazelle are also supposedly common although we failed to see any. Striped Hyena and Caracal are also present.

I placed some traps outside the park boundary along the edge of a field, but only captured a couple of **House Mice**.

Observation tower site

(31°38'20.2"N 34°49'37.7"E)

A well known site for observing birds of prey, this small former military observation post is located in the middle of agricultural land to the west of Britannia Park. Also a popular fly-tipping site I thought it would be a good place to set some traps. Only one trap was tripped the next morning but it contained a fantastic Tristram's Jird which is a new mammal for me.

I didn't have much time to spend on the observation deck, but Nick Littlewood has recently seen Mountain Gazelle and African Wildcat from the tower while scanning for raptors.

Eilat: 3 April to 7 April 2017

Just north of Eilat lies some fantastic mountain and desert habitat, although the majority is out of bounds at a night when the interesting stuff is most active. Despite this we spent four nights on the edge of town (at the Almog Eilat) and managed to find a handful of common species.

Note: I've only included the sites where I recorded seeing at least one wild mammal species. Countless areas of more pristine habitat occur around Eilat but they are either inside protected areas or near to military outposts.

Date plantation track

Heading roughly north and sandwiched between highway 90 and the Jordanian border, a dirt track can be reached by turning off the 109 between the marine agricultural farm and the Yitzhak Rabin Border Crossing (29°34'47.8"N 34°58'25.4"E). Although short, and passing by date plantations and sewage farms, this track proved to be a good place to find some interesting wildlife.

Driving the road early morning we saw four **Dorcas Gazelle** in the adjacent scrub albeit they were extremely nervous. A night-time visit produced more gazelles, along with several **Scrub Hares** and a **Desert Hedgehog**. Trapping overnight in some wasteland near the salt pans gave us the first of many **Eastern Spiny Mice**.

Red Fox and Golden Jackals are also reasonably common in the area going by the amount of fresh tracks we saw.



Dorcas Gazelle (*Gazella dorcas*)

Yotvata

Located approximately 50km north of Eilat along highway 90, this area is another good place to look for mammals. The service station is also well known for selling delicious, locally produced ice cream that we consumed at every opportunity.

The agricultural area around Yotvata is popular with birders and a night time spotlighting session around the field perimeters can produce Golden Jackal, Red Fox, Scrub Hare, Desert Hedgehog and the occasional Striped Hyena. On this trip I didn't visit the fields at night but I saw a **Golden Jackal** at dawn while checking some traps. **Eastern Spiny Mice** were my only captures.

Just south of Yotvata lies the Hai-Bar Nature Reserve where several rare ungulate species are bred for release by the Israeli Nature Reserves and National Parks Authority. Unfortunately the centre has closed the nocturnal mammal exhibit where previously a captive Blanford's Fox and Sand Cat could be seen. You can still self drive through the large animal enclosures for a small fee.

The Acacia Gazelle reserve is located at the other side of the highway and is home to the only known extant population of this critically endangered antelope. Formally considered a subspecies of Mountain Gazelle, this animal now only exists within a 6km² area that was fenced off in 2004 to protect the increasingly fragile population from predators. Over 60 individuals share the reserve with good numbers of Dorcas Gazelles that were presumably also living in the area when it was fenced. It is only possible to watch the gazelles through the fence and views can be distant. The Acacia Gazelles can be separated from the Dorcas by a conspicuous black nose spot and darker flank stripe.



Acacia Gazelle (*Gazella acacia*)

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).

Ein Gedi: 7 April to 10 April 2017

The last part of the trip was spent at the nice but expensive Ein Gedi Kibbutz Hotel overlooking the Dead Sea (recommended). It was here that mammal watching took a back seat to various forms of relaxation and regular tourist activities. That said, **Rock Hyrax** and **Nubian Ibex** could be spotted inside the spacious grounds of the hotel, while **Red Fox** was easily seen in the surrounding desert.



Rock Hyrax (Procavia capensis)

At dusk I observed **Kuhl's Pipistrelle** hunting around the street lights in the kibbutz. A much larger, very pale bat was also spotted flying alongside the perimeter fence that overlooks Ein Gedi National Park. From species known to occur in the area **Hemprich's Long-eared Bat** is the closest match, although my identification remains tentative.

Recently wolves have also been entering the kibbutz at night and predated the domestic cats. Although I heard rumours of this at the time of my visit, it wasn't until I returned back to the UK that I saw photographic evidence of a wolf with a cat in its mouth, taken very close to the hotel. Interestingly, Israel's last known Leopard also developed a taste for the pets of Ein Gedi kibbutz.

A brief night drive up to Metzoke Daragot in the West Bank (31°35'25.8"N 35°23'34.4"E) failed to produce anything other than a **Cape Hare**, although Wolf and Striped Hyena are often seen in the area. The steep cliffs south-west from the village are also home to Blanford's Fox but they are too far away to spotlight from the main road.

Other potential Blanford's Fox habitat is easy to find in the Dead Sea area, with many steep canyons accessible along highway 90. No doubt a couple of hours spotlighting in any of these areas has a good chance of producing the fox, unfortunately most (if not all) are nature reserves where entry after dark is strictly prohibited.

Southern Negev: 9 April 2017

On our last evening we drove from Ein Gedi to Sde Boker (Southern Negev) and back again via roads that I hoped would pass through some decent habitat for wildlife. Increasingly frustrated by heavy traffic, countless military bases and sprawling Bedouin settlements, we ended up near Mitzpe Ramon where we spotlighted part of the 171. I knew from my previous trip that this road was mostly traffic free and had potential to produce some interesting mammals.



Cape Hare (*Lepus capensis*)

Within a couple of hours we had spotted several groups of **Onager**. These animals have been successfully reintroduced back into the area following a captive breeding programme at the Hai-Bar Nature Reserve in Yotvata. Two **Red Fox** were also seen, along with at least five **Cape Hare**. The most interesting sighting of the evening was of, what I'm almost certain was, an **African Wildcat**. It annoyingly remained on the edge of spotlight beam some distance from the road.

Unfortunately the bulb on my spotlight blew forcing us to abort the night drive early. A couple of **Red Fox** and a **Golden Jackal** were seen in the car headlights en route back to Ein Gedi.



Onager (*Equus hemionus*)

West Bank: 10 April 2017

On our way to the airport on the last day we decided to take highway 1 through the West Bank. Near Almog we spotted a group of four gazelle crossing a sand dune moments before they were flushed by an off-road motorbike. From my brief view I believe they were **Mountain Gazelle**, which according to various range maps are present in the area.

Species list

1.	White-breasted Hedgehog <i>Erinaceus concolor</i>	At least three observed from Jerusalem Bird Hide at dusk.
2.	Desert Hedgehog <i>Paraechinus aethiopicus</i>	One seen on dirt track adjacent to the date plantations east of Eilat.
3.	Kuhl's Pipistrelle <i>Pipistrellus kuhlii</i>	Several seen hunting around street lights after dark in Kibbutz Ein Gedi.
-	Hemprich's Long-eared Bat <i>Otonycteris hemprichii</i>	Brief views of a large, very pale bat hawking over the kibbutz perimeter fence, overlooking Ein Gedi Reserve. Considering all the bat species known to occur in the area, Hemprich's Long-eared Bat is a good candidate but ID is far from certain.
4.	Golden Jackal <i>Canis aureus</i>	Good views of individual while spotlighting around Britannia Park. One seen early morning in agricultural area near Yotvata. Animal seen crossing road (route 258) late at night.
5.	Red Fox <i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	One seen while spotlighting around Britannia Park. Common around Ein Gedi area and often seen crossing roads at night. A couple seen at night in Southern Negev around Sde Boker.
6.	Eurasian Badger <i>Meles meles</i>	One observed after dark in Ashdod Nitzanim Sand Dune Park, south of Ashdod.
-	African Wildcat <i>Felis lybica</i>	Probable seen in Southern Negev while spotlighting road 171. Road-killed specimen seen while crossing Ramon Crater (Southern Negev) en route to Eilat.
7.	Rock Hyrax <i>Procavia capensis</i>	Several seen inside Kibbutz Ein Gedi including some very young individuals.

8.	Mountain Gazelle <i>Gazella gazella</i>	One crossed the 3631 road that cuts through Ashdod Nitzanim Sand Dune Park, late afternoon. Four gazelles seen from highway 1 (near Almog) in West Bank were most likely this species. Unfortunately flushed by an off-road motorbike before better view gained.
9.	Acacia Gazelle <i>Gazella acacia</i>	Several easily seen at Yotvata inside Acacia Gazelle reserve.
10.	Dorcas Gazelle <i>Gazella dorcas</i>	Four seen early morning from dirt track that runs adjacent to the date plantations east of Eilat. Several individuals and small groups seen while spotlighting same track after dark. Several seen inside Acacia Gazelle Reserve at Yotvata.
11.	Nubian Ibex <i>Capra nubiana</i>	Several small groups seen in and around Ein Gedi including a trio of males feeding inside the Kibbutz.
12.	Onager <i>Equus hemionus</i>	Good numbers seen at night while spotlighting 171 road, Negev Desert.
13.	Cape Hare <i>Lepus capensis</i>	One seen while spotlighting Britannia Park. Several seen while spotlighting 171 road, Negev Desert. Common in scrub around Eilat. Single animal outside Metzoke Daragot perimeter fence after dark.
14.	Tristram's Jird <i>Meriones tristrami</i>	One trapped in small area of wasteland surrounded by agricultural land close to the settlement of Kiryat Gat.
15.	House Mouse <i>Mus musculus</i>	Two trapped in agricultural land near to Britannia Park. One seen while spotlighting around Britannia Park.
16.	Eastern Spiny Mouse <i>Acomys dimidiatus</i>	Common and easily trapped in scrub around Eilat and Yotvata. A total of 10 mice of this species captured in total.
17.	Indian Crested Porcupine <i>Hystrix indica</i>	At least one observed from Jerusalem Bird Observatory at dusk. Animal was very nervous and disappeared every time Sarah attempted a photograph. I'm assuming it was the same individual that reappeared every time and not different animals.