

Jordan, Israel, and Palestine

March 2018

Aidan Place



Starting in early March of 2018, I spent 3 weeks travelling and birding in the Middle East (Israel, Jordan, and Palestine). Being a very bird focused trip, and since I was without a flashlight for most of the trip and without small mammal traps altogether, the total list of mammals was lacking. However, some good species were found regardless. Highlights included **Desert Hedgehog**, **Striped Hyena**, **Indian Crested Porcupine**, and **Asiatic Wild Ass (Onager)**. The total at trip's end was 12 species.

Israel in particular is an excellent country for mammal watching. With diverse habitats and good infrastructure, it provides world class opportunities to see a broad swathe of species. I very much look forward to returning to the region next year, when I will hopefully be better prepared to see mammals.

Itinerary-

I flew into Tel Aviv from Larnaca, Cyprus. From there I took a bus to Eilat on the Red Sea coast before crossing to Aqaba, Jordan. In Jordan I worked north, stopping at Wadi Rum, Petra, and Amman, before returning to Aqaba to cross back to Israel. I spent the next week or so around Eilat to participate in the [Champions of the Flyway](#) bird race. I then headed to Jerusalem for a few days. From there I went to Bethlehem in the West Bank, and then back to Tel Aviv where I departed the country.

Report-

Jordan- The first mammals I encountered during the trip were a number of **Egyptian Fruit Bats** outside my hostel in Aqaba. These large, distinctive bats are fairly common in the region (I have been told).

After Aqaba I stayed overnight in a camp at the famous Wadi Rum. I was hoping to see at least some sort of mammal and was not disappointed as a **Desert Hedgehog** was spotted. The Bedouin insisted on picking it up, placing it inside a tent, and watching it for

a few minutes before releasing it again. They reassured me that they do this fairly frequently. I'll have to take their word for it.

The desert surrounding my camp was also swarming with tracks, particularly of small rodents.

Besides this, I unfortunately had no mammals during my time in Jordan.



Southern Israel- It was dark by the time I walked across the Wadi Araba border crossing to Eilat. As I waited for my ride to pick me up, I was serenaded by a group of **Golden Jackals** calling in the palm plantation to the north.

The following night we had a “**Desert**” **Red Fox** cross Route 90 north of Eilat as we returned from some nocturnal birding.

During a dinner outdoors at the International Bird Research Center Eilat (IBRCE), I spotted a **Balochistan Gerbil** and heard more **Golden Jackals** (somewhat ubiquitous throughout the trip).

The next day while birding along Route 12 in the Eilat Mountains we encountered a very confiding family group of **Nubian Ibex** including kids. Further down the road we came face to face with a stunning male.



Male Nubian Ibex

We regularly encountered **Dorcas Gazelles** in the deserts along Route 90 north of Eilat. They were particularly common in the area north of KM20, where we would frequently see them taking shade under acacias.

In the plains alongside Route 40 between Shitim and Mitzpe Ramon we were happy to come across two **Asiatic Wild Ass** just after dawn. They may be a reintroduction, but they're extremely cool to see regardless. Later that day we encountered a couple of gazelles in the area of Nitzana. I believe the gazelles in these northern deserts are **Mountain Gazelles**, but am far from 100% sure that is correct. On our way back to Eilat, we saw another group of **Nubian Ibex** at the lip of the Mitzpe Ramon Crater. Unfortunately, they were being fed by people and seemed extremely acclimated-- something that can't bode well given their proximity to a major road.



Dorcas Gazelle

Perhaps the most exciting mammal watching moment of the trip came during race day for Champions of the Flyway. While searching for owls and nightjars at the Yotvata agricultural fields just past midnight, we had a single **Striped Hyena** lope across the road at the edge of our headlights. It was far from good looks, but any hyena is amazing to see. This was my most wanted mammal in the Middle East and I was extremely pleased to encounter it. We also had two **Cape Hares**. On our way past Mitzpe Ramon (still before dawn), we made a quick stop at the vulture feeding station. Some carcasses had just been put out the day before and we were hopeful for hyena or wolf. While we could not locate anything, a couple days later some other birders found an **Arabian Wolf** feeding off the carcasses in the middle of the day! This spot is definitely not to be missed if a carcass has been placed down. Past Mitzpe Ramon at Kibbutz Sde Boker we got good looks at a **Golden Jackal** (only the second individual we had actually *seen*).

The Mitzpe Ramon Crater area seems to have some of the best potential for mammal watching in Southern Israel. It is the best area for large carnivores like wolves and hyenas, is where the onagers are, and has a number of wadis and dirt roads which look excellent for night drives or small mammal trapping. When I am in Israel next year, I plan on camping for a couple days in this area to see what I can turn up.

Central Israel- The last bit of mammal watching I did was at the Jerusalem Bird Observatory where **Indian Crested Porcupine** is dependable at the bird feeders at

dusk. Sure enough, over the course of an hour or so I got to watch at least two of these massive porcupines come and go and they ambled around foraging.

Palestine (West Bank)- Unfortunately I had no mammals during my time in the West Bank.

Mammal List-

| Common name | Scientific name |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Canidae - 2 / 40 | |
| Golden Jackal | <i>Canis aureus</i> |
| Red Fox | <i>Vulpes vulpes</i> |
| Hyaenidae - 1 / 4 | |
| Striped Hyaena | <i>Hyaena hyaena</i> |
| Bovidae - 3 / 147 | |
| Nubian Ibex | <i>Capra nubiana</i> |
| Dorcas Gazelle | <i>Gazella dorcas</i> |
| Mountain Gazelle | <i>Gazella gazella</i> |
| Pteropodidae - 1 / 187 | |
| Egyptian Fruit Bat | <i>Rousettus aegyptiacus</i> |
| Erinaceidae - 1 / 24 | |
| Desert Hedgehog | <i>Paraechinus aethiopicus</i> |
| Leporidae - 1 / 62 | |
| Cape Hare | <i>Lepus capensis</i> |
| Equidae - 1 / 9 | |
| Asiatic Wild Ass | <i>Equus hemionus</i> |
| Hystricidae - 1 / 11 | |
| Indian Crested Porcupine | <i>Hystrix indica</i> |
| Muridae - 1 / 728 | |
| Dwarf Gerbil | <i>Gerbillus nanus</i> |
| Total Species: 12 | |