

Israel Mammal Report: 17 to 25 February 2018

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Rock Hyrax (*Procavia capensis*)

Introduction

On this, my third visit to Israel, I was accompanied by Mark Hows and John Sadler, for a mixed birding and mammal watching trip. Our primary mammal target was Persian Fallow deer and we allocated several days to finding this potentially difficult species. We also hoped to see as many new small mammals as possible. In addition, Mark and John planned to look for a number of birds they had missed on earlier visits.

Although challenging at times, the trip was pretty successful, and in just over a week we positively identified 24 wild mammal species, four of which were new for me.

Travel details

We flew with eastJet from London Luton to Tel Aviv with few problems, although the landing was a little rough in the stormy conditions.

After previous bad service in Israel from Dollar Thrifty (see earlier reports), I opted to use Cal Auto for our rental vehicle. This proved to be a costly mistake as they failed to provide us with an SUV despite me having pre-ordered one several months earlier. Our only option was to accept a saloon (sedan) with pitifully low ground clearance as none of the other rental companies had anything suitable at such short notice.

The car's front bumper was so low that I damaged it the first time we left the tarmac. The car was totally inadequate for our needs and we were severely restricted as to where we could drive. We became accustomed to refitting the bumper every time we parked up!

At the time of writing, I am still in dispute with Holiday Autos (the agent I booked the car through) over this with a view to getting compensation and would advise others to avoid Cal Auto despite the inexplicable positive feedback they receive online.

We had better luck with our accommodation, thanks to Mark, who booked some very nice places at reasonable cost through Booking.com and Airbnb.

Chicken Schnitzel sandwiches and ice-cream (especially from the service station in Yotvata) kept us fed throughout the trip.



Nubian Ibex (*Capra nubiana*)

Mammal watching in Israel

Conservation is taken extremely seriously in Israel and over 30 per cent (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.

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.

On this trip we asked permission to trap on private land in the Upper Galilee and in agricultural areas near Yotvata. This was granted with no problems.

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

Tel Aviv to Eilat: 17 February 2018

Immediately after collecting our hire car we headed south in torrential rain. An **Egyptian Fruit Bat** flew over the highway as we left Tel Aviv and it wasn't until we arrived at Sde Boker that the rain completely stopped. By now it was nearing 12 midnight and two **Golden Jackals** were seen as they dashed across the road on the edge of town.

Just north of Mitzpe Ramon we turned west along the 171 hoping to see more nocturnal wildlife. Things were very quiet, and there was no sign of the Onagers that I had found fairly easily in the past. Eventually we saw more Golden Jackals and a fantastic **Sundervall's Jird** that sat in the spotlight for a couple of seconds.

Back on the main road south we descended into the Ramon Crater, where there were additional jackals, plus a **Cape Hare** and several **Dorcas Gazelles**. The final excitement of the night came an hour or so later when a **Lesser Egyptian Jerboa** almost ended up under the wheels of the car. Fortunately I was able to take a good look at the tail brush pattern to rule out the similar *Jaculus hirtipes* that also occurs in the area.

After a couple of hours sleep in the car, we awoke at first light and headed a short distance to a roadside wadi (30.245673, 35.129959) where a Red-rumped Wheatear was wintering. Several Dorcas Gazelles were disturbed as we explored the area and John spotted a **Fat Sand Rat** before it disappeared into a hole. Going by the number of fresh diggings and droppings the wadi is home to a large population of rats although, despite a lengthy search, we couldn't find any others.

Eilat: 17 and 18 February 2018

While in the Eilat area, we spent most of our time birding, mainly around the rather nice bird watching centre (eilatbirds.com/en/). We also visited several sites in the surrounding desert where a number of migrant birds were alleged to be hanging out. The only mammals noted were Dorcas Gazelles, which we saw from the entrance track to Amram Pillars late afternoon. As I've mentioned in previous Israel reports, the best habitat around Eilat is protected by a system of national parks and entry after dark is completely forbidden. This makes it impossible to look for mammals such as Striped Hyena, Blanford's Fox and Bushy-tailed Jird without breaking the law.

Yotvata

The agricultural area around Yotvata (40km north of Eilat) is very popular with birders and as a result local farmers are used to unfamiliar vehicles driving around the fields. To a lesser extent bird watchers visit the site at night looking for owls and nightjars, so with a little discretion it is possible to spotlight for mammals from the same tracks. An Israel Defence Force (IDF) base is close by so it is wise to keep away from the Jordanian border, otherwise you'll quickly be asked to leave the area.

We spent an hour spotlighting from the field edges, easily finding **Cape Hare**, **Red Fox** and **Golden Jackal**. A couple of **Kuhl's Pipistrelles** were seen hunting along the drainage ditches, while the highlight was a **Desert Hedgehog** spotted on a track that cut through a large patch of scrub.



Desert Hedgehog (*Paraechinus aethiopicus*) – © M. Hows

Unfortunately we failed to find the Striped Hyena or Arabian Wolf that are occasionally reported by birders, although having seen them both in Israel before, we didn't dedicate too much time or effort to our search.

Earlier in the day we asked a friendly farm worker for permission to set some traps around the field edges. The next day they contained a **House Mouse** and an **Eastern Spiny Mouse**.

We also called by the Acacia Gazelle reserve (see details in my previous reports) and several **Acacia Gazelles** could be easily spotted resting under the trees. Four **Dorcas Gazelles** were seen outside the fence, along with several individuals inside.

Dead Sea: 19 February 2018

Our original plan was to dedicate several nights to searching for Blanford's Fox, an elusive animal that reportedly occurs at relatively high densities in the Dead Sea area. However, the vast majority, if not all, of its habitat occurs inside of national parks and on my previous visits to Israel, I never found any suitable areas to spotlight - a problem several other mammal watchers have also noted.

A week before this trip, I heard that Dominique Brugiére had found a Blanford's Fox in Oman at a site where spotlighting does not appear to be illegal. Jon Hall quickly followed in Dominique's footsteps and found his own fox. This news confirmed what I already suspected, if there's a location to see every mammal, Israel is *not* the place to search for Blanford's Fox.

So despite a change of plan, we decided to still spend a night in Metsoke Dragot, located high above the Dead Sea. En route we stopped at Wadi David at Ein Gedi to photograph the **Rock Hyraxes** and found the hordes of obnoxious tourists to be almost as entertaining. They obviously don't teach much about mammals in bible school with many people believing the tame hyraxes were either desert monkeys or carnivorous ground hogs!

Early evening we half-heartedly searched for any accessible Blanford's Fox habitat along route 90. Just south of Ein Gedi we noticed that one canyon did not have the usual Israel Nature and Parks Authority (INPA) notice board restricting entry after dark. We parked up to take a closer look, quickly concluding that the steep rocky walls looked great for the fox. Soon we were distracted by a largish bat that briefly hung from a small opening on the nearby cliff. Based on size, shape and a tail that extended past the interfemoral membrane, **Naked-rumped Tomb Bat** was our best guess. However, I'm not completely sure that we could rule out one of the two *Rinopoma* species that also occur in the area.

It was here that we came face to face with an angry ranger who had pulled up next to our car in his INPA pick-up and demanded to know what we were doing. At first he accused us of heading into the canyon to look for Hume's Tawny Owl, however once we explained that we were only interested in mammals his rage slightly diminished. Nevertheless after a long chat we were left in no doubt that all the potential Blanford's Fox habitat in the Dead Sea (and the whole of Israel for that matter) is strictly out of bounds at night without permission from the INPA. It seems obtaining permission is near impossible unless you're a researcher or you happen to know someone high up in the organisation.

Relieved that we had narrowly avoided a heavy fine, we returned to our accommodation early for a few beers. A **Red Fox** and several unidentified bats were the only additional mammals we enjoyed that night.

The next morning we headed to our next destination spotting several groups of **Nubian Ibex** before we left the Dead Sea area.

Tirat Zvi fish ponds (32.420094, 35.531638)

Located just north of the West Bank, and adjacent to the Jordanian border, we visited the Tirat Zvi fish ponds to see Pallas's Gulls and other water birds. It also happened to be a fantastic place to see **Egyptian Mongoose**. We saw at least eight individuals, if not more, in just over an hour.



Egyptian Mongoose (*Herpestes ichneumon*) – © M. Hows

Nahal Kziv – Upper Galilee: 20 to 23 February 2018

Once native to Israel, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and parts of Turkey, the Persian or Mesopotamian Fallow Deer (*Dama mesopotamica*) was declared extinct in the early 1950s. Fortunately in 1956 a small population was rediscovered in south-western Iran and a number of individuals were brought to the Opel Zoo in Germany to start a captive breeding project.

Since then there have been a few successful reintroductions, most notably in Iran and Israel. The main breeding nucleus in Israel was founded in 1976 from three animals from the Opel Zoo and four from the Dasht-e-Naz Wildlife Refuge in Iran. Until recently it was widely believed that some of these deer were *Dama dama* hybrids but genetic tests have since proven that the Israel population, at least, is pure.

In Israel the majority of deer were released into the Nahal Kziv reserve in Upper Galilee where they have successfully multiplied since 1996. It is estimated that now 300 individuals live in and around the reserve.

We arrived at our accommodation in Manot late afternoon and talked about our interest in wildlife with our host. He mentioned that in the dry summer months, the deer can occasionally be seen in the gardens looking for food and water. Otherwise they are rarely seen, if at all. On the plus side, he gave us permission to place traps in the overgrown garden, and also on nearby land owned by his friend. At dusk we set some traps in the garden before driving the network of small roads surrounding the reserve.

As we arrived at the kibbutz of Avdon, we immediately noticed many IDF troops and countless military vehicles parked at the roadside. As luck would have it the army was carrying out an enormous live fire exercise which would go on late into the night! Undeterred we turned down a side track and several minutes later a very pale **Persian Fallow Deer** doe crossed right in front of our car. Unfortunately it was nervous, no doubt from the noisy military manoeuvres that were taking close by, and disappeared before we had time to take a photograph. Very happy with our sighting, we headed to a nearby Arabic restaurant for some much needed food. There was very little point continuing our night drive with so many soldiers in the area.

After finding our traps empty the next morning, we headed straight to the Nahal Kziv reserve to walk the trails in search of more deer. Although only a couple of kilometres wide, the reserve follows the stream for 20 kilometres enclosed at both sides by cliffs. The riparian woodland is dense in many places, providing plenty of cover for the deer.

We walked the trail all morning finding plenty of fresh Wild Boar sign and some porcupine quills. A **Golden Jackal** was seen briefly and we discovered a dead Lesser White-toothed Shrew by the stream. We failed to find any deer, most likely because they were sheltering from the sun in areas of the canyon that were inaccessible to us. By lunch time it was very hot and the trails had got busy with noisy hikers so we decided to give up our quest.

That afternoon we explored more of the reserve's surrounding side roads and spotted **Rock Hyrax** and an **Egyptian Mongoose**.

The next couple of evenings were dedicated to driving the local roads where we saw plenty of **Golden Jackals** and **Wild Boars**. A small number of **Red Foxes** were also noted, together with a single **Indian Crested Porcupine** and a fantastic **Persian Badger**.

While driving through Avdon a **White-breasted Hedgehog** was seen dashing into the driveway of a house. Trying not to look suspicious, we stopped to take a couple of pictures.



White-breasted Hedgehog (*Erinaceus concolor*) – © J. Sadler

We set our traps on some private land close to the reserve boundary. Over two nights we were pleased to catch three **Balkan Short-tailed Mice**. These can be separated from the near identical House Mouse by their relatively shorter tails (the difference can be very subtle and accurate measurements are required). Interestingly, the Balkan Short-tailed Mice also seemed to lack the strong musty smell that is associated with House Mice.



Balkan Short-tailed Mouse (*Mus macedonicus*) – © M. Hows

We also captured two **Eastern Spiny Mice**. These seem to be reasonably common in a wide variety of habitats throughout most of Israel.

Despite many hours spent in and around the reserve we failed to find another Persian Fallow Deer, perhaps suggesting we were lucky to see our first one so quickly.

Agamon Hula and Golan Heights

On our second full day in Manot we made the short drive east to the Hula Valley where we spent the morning at Agamon Hula. Non-native **Coypu** are very easy to see in the canals and main lake. Golden Jackal and Jungle Cat are also possible here, especially at dusk (refer to my 2016 Israel report on mammalwatching.com), but with time at a premium we headed to the Golan Heights in search of Mountain Gazelle.

At the Gamla Reserve (touristisrael.com/gamla-nature-reserve/833/) we walked to the watch points spotting **Rock Hyrax** and a distant sounder of **Wild Boar**. We eventually found a small herd of **Mountain Gazelle** on a hillside while descending the Golan Heights on our way back to Manot.



Mountain Gazelle (*Gazella gazella*) – © J. Sadler

Northern Negev: 25 -25 February 2018

For our last leg of the trip we used Airbnb to rent an apartment in a small kibbutz between Be'er Sheva and the Gaza Strip. It was the first time on our travels that we've been shown the bomb shelter before the bathroom facilities!

We were relatively close to the sand dunes of the northern Negev where we hoped to find a few localised rodent species. This huge area is a military training zone and on weekdays it is off-limit to members of the public. However, on Fridays and Saturdays the desert resembles a scene from *Mad Max*, with a whole range of modified dirt bikes, dune buggies and 4x4s trashing the delicate ecosystem. The fact we didn't have an SUV greatly limited our potential for exploring the area and we were restricted to the few tar roads that transect the dunes.

On the first night we spent a good number of hours driving these roads, often frustrated by the surprisingly heavy traffic. **Cape Hare**, **Red Fox** and **Golden Jackal** kept our interest up, but in the end a thick fog made spotlighting impossible.

Early the next morning we were on our way to check some traps when our sat-nav took us precariously close to the Egyptian border fence. Incidentally this area was great for wildlife and we saw several **Dorcas Gazelles** and a **Red Fox** in quick succession. Realising our mistake, I turned the car around but several minutes later we were pulled over by a couple of armoured IDF Land Rovers. We were very politely asked what we were doing, and once I explained our error we were allowed on our way. However, they *insisted* on escorting us to the main road which was pretty embarrassing!

Our traps were set in a roadside wadi littered with artillery shell boxes. Only one trap was tripped but it contained a fantastic **Anderson's Gerbil**, one of our target rodents.



Anderson's Gerbil (*Gerbillus andersoni*) – © M. Hows

We spent the last evening at Shoham Forest Park near Tel Aviv (32.004702, 34.962213) in a futile attempt to see Striped Hyena. Despite the overflowing waste disposal bins after a busy weekend, all we saw for our trouble was a **Red Fox**. It seems the best area for hyena is not the forest park itself, but the hills to the east of Highway 6 that are part of a military training zone. Some traps placed in a nearby wasteland contained a couple of **Eastern Spiny Mice** the next morning.

Species list

1.	White-breasted Hedgehog <i>Erinaceus concolor</i>	Single seen late evening in centre of Avdon, Upper Galilee.
2.	Desert Hedgehog <i>Paraechinus aethiopicus</i>	One in Yotvata circular fields an hour after dusk.
-	Lesser White-toothed Shrew <i>Crocidura suaveolens</i>	One found dead along riverbank at Nahal Kziv Reserve, Upper Galilee.
3.	Egyptian Fruit Bat <i>Rousettus aegyptiacus</i>	Just one seen flying over highway as we left Tel Aviv on first night.

4.	Kuhl's Pipistrelle <i>Pipistrellus kuhlii</i>	Several observed hunting around Yotvata circular fields after dark.
-	Naked-rumped Tomb Bat <i>Taphozous nudiventris</i>	A large, stocky bat seen briefly night roosting in a cave entrance near Ein Gedi was probably this species.
5.	Golden Jackal <i>Canis aureus</i>	Very common and seen regularly on night drives throughout the country.
6.	Red Fox <i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Common and seen on the majority of night drives. Also seen during the day.
7.	Persian Badger <i>Meles meles canescens</i>	One individual seen on night drive near Avdon, Upper Galilee. This subspecies is a potential split.
8.	Egyptian Mongoose <i>Herpestes ichneumon</i>	At least eight individuals seen at Tirat Zvi fish ponds. One seen near Manot, Upper Galilee.
9.	Rock Hyrax <i>Procavia capensis</i>	Common at Wadi David, Ein Gedi including some very young individuals. Several seen living in waste dump on edge of Avdon, Upper Galilee. A couple seen from the watch point at Gamla Reserve, Golan Heights.
10.	Wild Boar <i>Sus scrofa</i>	Common at night in area around the Nahal Kziv reserve, especially on the road between Manot and Mi'ilya. Distant sounder seen from the watch point at Gamla Reserve, Golan Heights.
11.	Persian Fallow Deer <i>Dama mesopotamica</i>	A doe seen crossing track early evening, near Avdon, Upper Gaililee.
12.	Mountain Gazelle <i>Gazella gazella</i>	Small group seen on hillside (from route 869), Golan Heights.
13.	Acacia Gazelle <i>Gazella acacia</i>	Several easily seen at Yotvata inside Acacia Gazelle Reserve.
14.	Dorcas Gazelle <i>Gazella dorcas</i>	Common throughout southern Israel, especially in the Negev. Several seen inside Acacia Gazelle Reserve at Yotvata, along with four individuals outside the fence.

15.	Nubian Ibex <i>Capra nubiana</i>	Several small groups seen early morning in the vicinity of Metzoke Daragot, Dead Sea.
16.	Cape Hare <i>Lepus capensis</i>	Several seen on night drives in northern Negev. One seen late night in Ramon Crater. At least one seen while spotlighting Yotvata circular fields.
17.	Lesser Egyptian Jerboa <i>Jaculus jaculus</i>	Single animal seen on road late at night in southern Negev.
18.	Anderson's Gerbil <i>Gerbillus andersoni</i>	One trapped in wadi, northern Negev.
19.	Sundervall's Jird <i>Meriones crassus</i>	A single animal seen well for several seconds near Mitzpe Ramon.
20.	House Mouse <i>Mus musculus</i>	One trapped in reeds close to water pump, Yotvata circular fields.
21.	Balkan Short-tailed Mouse <i>Mus macedonicus</i>	Three captured on private land near Manot, Upper Galilee.
22.	Eastern Spiny Mouse <i>Acomys dimidiatus</i>	Common and easily trapped throughout most of Israel.
23.	Indian Crested Porcupine <i>Hystrix indica</i>	Single animal observed after dark north of Avdon, Upper Galilee.
24.	Coypu <i>Myocastor coypus</i>	Common at Agamon Hula, Hula Valley.