

Israel, 28 February to 8 March 2017

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This was my fourth trip to Israel since 2010 and was a combined birding, mammal watching, general natural history trip. I had seen some mammals on previous trips though I spent more time specifically seeking out mammals this time. The whole trip was spent south of Tel Aviv, primarily in the Negev and the Arava Valley.

I hired a car, picked up at the airport at Tel Aviv, and apart from the first night spent at a friend's place at Nir Oz (NW Negev), I camped. The second and eighth nights were spent at the free permitted camping area at Borot Lotz, south of Mitzpe Ramon. This is basically an unstaffed picnic site with a basic toilet block at 30.5135, 34.6086. It is a km or so from route 171 along an easily driveable gravel track. The third to seventh nights were spent at the campsite at the entrance to the Yotvata Hai-Bar animal park, in the Arava valley . This is a staffed location with toilets, showers and a basic camp kitchen. The area is locked at night but campers are given a key in return for a deposit.

This report is just a brief account of the mammals encountered during the trip along also with some notes on mammals (and one reptile!) seen on earlier trips. Site co-ordinates are taken from online aerial photos rather than recorded in the field and the degree of precision quoted reflects the degree of precision of my recollections of location.

Golden Spiny Mouse



In 2010, one photographed coming out into view repeatedly on rocks up Salvadori Wadi, north of Ein Gedi (at approx. 31.513, 35.385).

Jird sp.

On 1 March, my first night at Borot Lots campsite (30.5135, 34.6086), several rodents appeared from the stone wall shelter alongside my. On my second night there (7 March) I came prepared with some cake. Again, the rodents appeared and ran around close by and under the tent flysheet. The peak of activity was in the hour or so after dark with fewer seen thereafter. They were attracted to cake crumbs and I obtained a few photos. They seem to be a good match for illustrations of Libyan Jird in Aulagnier et al. though I am not sure how safe it is to identify the species in this way.



Cape Hare

One seen briefly when torchlighting up the track from Borot Lotz campsite on night of 1 March (30.511, 34.608). Previously, I had seen the species when torchlighting the fields at Yotvata (29.90, 35.07).

Rock Hyrax

Four were seen well on the crags above the spring at En Netafim (29.5958, 34.8810), in the Eilat Mountains, at dusk on 5 March.

On previous trips, I had seen several tame Hyrax in the grounds of the SPNI field school at Ein Gedi (31.469, 35.394) and also in the adjacent youth hostel grounds (31.467, 35.396), and one behaving more naturally in crags above the spring at Wadi Salvadori, N of Ein Gedi.



Desert Hedgehog

I spent an hour or two with a torch (Fenix TK40) around the Yotvata South Circular Field after dusk on 3 March. Eventually, I found a Desert Hedgehog along the edge of scrub at the western entrance to this field (29.8924, 35.0715).



Also, one noted dead on route 90, between Eilat and Yotvata on 5 March.

In 2010, I saw one after dark, first noted in the car headlights, along the back road from KM19 pool to the Israel/Jordan border crossing at Eilat (29.59, 34.98) and, in 2014, I saw one being held at Yotvata Hai-Bar that had been captured in the shop at Yotvata service station the previous night. This is the same animal referred to in Dominique Brugiere's trip report from that year.

Palestine Mole-rat?

There were "molehills" on the nature reserve at Lahav, near Be'er Sheva (31.390, 34.859) on 1 March. Aulagnier et al. do not map any mole species for this area so, presumably, these were the work of this species?



African Wildcat

This was a real highlight at around midday on 8 March, at my last stop before heading back to the airport for my departure. From a high vantage point up inside an old watchtower, alarming Chuckars alerted me to a male cat walking through scrub that immediately looked “interesting”. I rattled off a series of photos and subsequent well-informed feedback suggests that it is a good match for African Wildcat of the local race, *tristrami*. Impossible to rule out any hybridised heritage, of course, but the animal did not, at least, show any obviously anomalous features for African Wildcat.

The location is close to the city of Kiryat Gat, around 40 km or so south of Tel Aviv and a short way off the route 4 motorway. From route 4, exit at the Kiryat Gat junction and head NW on route 35 for c.5 km, towards and then past Kiryat Gat to route 40. Head N on route 40 for c. 3 km, then turn right onto route 353, around a couple of corners, past Gat and back under route 6. About a km after passing under route 6, at 31.6283, 34.8290, turn up a narrow concrete track to the old tower at (31.6389, 34.8268). The watchtower was not locked and is, apparently, frequently used as a vantage point by birders. A couple of farm vehicles passed when I was there and no-one reacted to my presence.



Fox

After dark on 1 March, I walked back up the entrance track from Borot Lotz campground with the Fenix TK40 torch and saw a Fox just a short way from camp (30.511, 34.608). I set a camera trap close by, on which a (the) Fox appeared overnight. Three Foxes seen in torchlight along the west side of the Yotvata South Circular Field after dark on 3 March. Previously, I had seen a couple of Foxes at Yotvata, including one distinctly pale desert form, and one at Lahav nature reserve, near Be'er Shreva. Also one appeared on a camera trap in a date palm plantation at Ein Gedi in 2012.



Golden Jackal

None seen in 2017 but several seen and heard on previous trips, including at Yotvata North Fields by torchlight (29.90, 35.07), between Eilat and km19 pools in car headlights (29.59, 34.97) and in the Nir Oz area in the NW Negev, where one was seen running across the road and several were heard at night. However, the best views by far were in March 2014, at Hayarkon Park in Tel Aviv. I arrived at dawn that time (straight from the airport) and there were around five tame Jackals in the western end of the park, alongside the path at 32.0970, 34.8084. They loafed about close the paths at times, with early joggers passing within a few metres. An hour or two later in the morning, they retreated through the scrub to the river bank and could be watched looking back N from the footbridge at 32.0966, 34.8087.



Egyptian Mongoose

In December 2012, one seen briefly running across the track leading up to the reservoir at Ha-Bsor, near Tse'elim in the NW Negev (31.224, 34.514).

Nubian Ibex

These animals are easy to see and are very tame at several sites where they are habituated to people. On this trip, I noted 8 within the university grounds at Sde Boker on 1 March (close to the shop and café at 30.8505, 34.7837), 10 at Mitzpe Ramon, alongside the petrol station just SE of the main town centre roundabout (30.6119, 34.8047) the same day, one at the lookout over Maktesh Ramon (30.6096, 34.8079) on 2 March and one at the car park opposite Mount Yoash in the Eilat Mountains on 5 March (29.5852, 34.8881). Also, on 1 March, there was a group of c.20 in a more "wild" situation on the hillside on the east side of road 171 from Mitzpe Ramon to Borot Lotz (approx. 30.58, 34.71).

On previous trips, as well as at some of these sites, I had also seen several Nubian Ibex at Ein Gedi, alongside the Dead Sea, especially in and around the SNPI field school, and on crags above Wadi Salvadori.



Dorcas Gazelle

Two groups each of c.10 animals along route 171, south-west of Mitzpe Ramon, during afternoon/evening on 1 March. One seen by looking north from the north end of KM20 pools, N of Eilat, on 6 March. Eight scattered around the fields from watchtower at Gal'on, on 8 March, were perhaps, on location, more likely to have been Mountain Gazelles.



Onager

Having tried, but failed, to see Onager in 2014, I was keen to give it more time. I looked carefully along route 171 leading south-west from Mitzpe Ramon towards Borot Lotz near the Israel/Egypt border on the afternoon/evening of 1 March and more briefly the following morning, but without success. Finally, returning to the area on 7 March, I located a very distant animal on the skyline to the south of the road. Initially this was seen from opposite the start of a track on the NW side of the road marked as “Wadi Aqrav” which was 3 to 5 km north of the Borot Lotz turn-off (precise distance not noted but very approx. at 30.54, 34.64). I got closer a km or so further SW along the road, and saw then that there were eight animals, which were still a few hundred metres away but showed nicely through the telescope for half an hour or so before walking over a hill away from the road.



Egyptian Uromastyx

Okay, so not a mammal, but a damned impressive beast, nonetheless. One was watched alongside the track from the main route 90 that runs 1 km or so east to the shallow wadi within Shezaf Nature Reserve. The track is indistinct at the start but easily driveable and starts close to km 152 on route 90. The start of the track appears to be at 30.7436, 35.2272 (but I wouldn't guarantee this).

