

Incredible Israel

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Pre-trip:

Since experiencing her first wild mammals in California, my 8-month-old daughter Ava was begging to travel abroad. At least that was my best guess at baby translating. After initially considering Thailand, my wife Ann and I chose a destination featuring a shorter flight and good friends awaiting our arrival. Israel is a country Ann and I always wanted to visit and it happened to be in a part of the world where I had never before looked for wild mammals.

Thanks to this website, Tomer has become a close friend of mine. From first meeting in Uganda, to guesting on the Podcast together, to meeting up in NY- a visit to Israel would bring my friendship with Tomer full circle. I was thrilled for our families to meet, especially at a time when Tomer was in baby planning mode. It couldn't hurt to sneak in a little mammal-watching too, forcing Tomer to actually care about the mammals in his home country.

Everyone warned us about taking a big trip with a baby, but we had faith in our little one. Jon Hall gave helpful advice to request a bassinet through the airline. We were warned by American Airlines that each plane only carries one bassinet, which is given on a first come basis. Luckily, Ava was the only baby on board, so we managed to procure it with little issue allowing her to masterfully sleep most of the flight.

The flight and car rental couldn't have gone smoother, but our hotel check-in was anything but. We arrived to a dark building with a bustling restaurant on the ground floor. When I asked where to check in, a waitress made a phone call and handed me the phone. The man on the line confirmed my reservation, only to tell me the hotel was under renovation and another had been booked for us in the meantime. Scavenger-hunt like instructions led us inside the next hotel, which was fortunately just down the road and even closer to the beach. With goldilocks-level proficiency we inspected three rooms for a working fridge/freezer (necessary for baby formula). The first didn't work at all, the second had no freezer, and the third had a freezer jammed full with ice. Ann had the solution: unplug the third and pour hot water inside until the blockage was melted away.

Now for the good part...

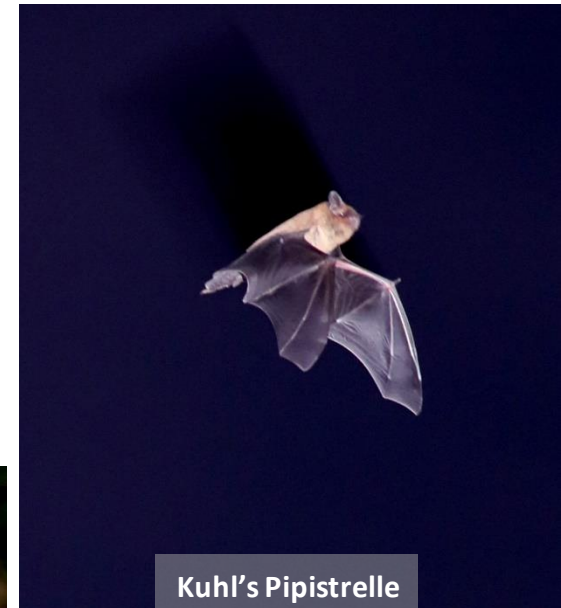


Tel Aviv:

I had been assured I could see Fruit Bats and Hedgehogs throughout Tel Aviv. A quick check of iNaturalist showed Independence Park as a reliable spot for both. It turned out to be rife with Ava-approved entertainment as well, including a fantastic jungle gym and oversized kid instruments. We arrived at dusk and immediately spotted small bats fluttering around a clearing. My photos revealed white fringe on the wings, diagnostic of **Kuhl's Pipistrelle** (Thank you Nils Bouillard). Deeper into the park I decided to bust out the thermal in hopes of a Hedgy. Thirty seconds later I had a hit! A blinded **Southern White-breasted Hedgehog**, likely the same individual featured on iNat. Ann and Ava reveled in the presence of this unique creature. More photogenic ones were seen at the bush's edge living amongst stray cats- a comical combination on thermal for sure.



Southern White-breasted Hedgehog



Kuhl's Pipistrelle



Egyptian Fruit Bats swooped by along the path, monstrous compared to the pipistrelles. We had better views of these in the trees outside El Vacino, where we met Tomer for a lovely dinner.

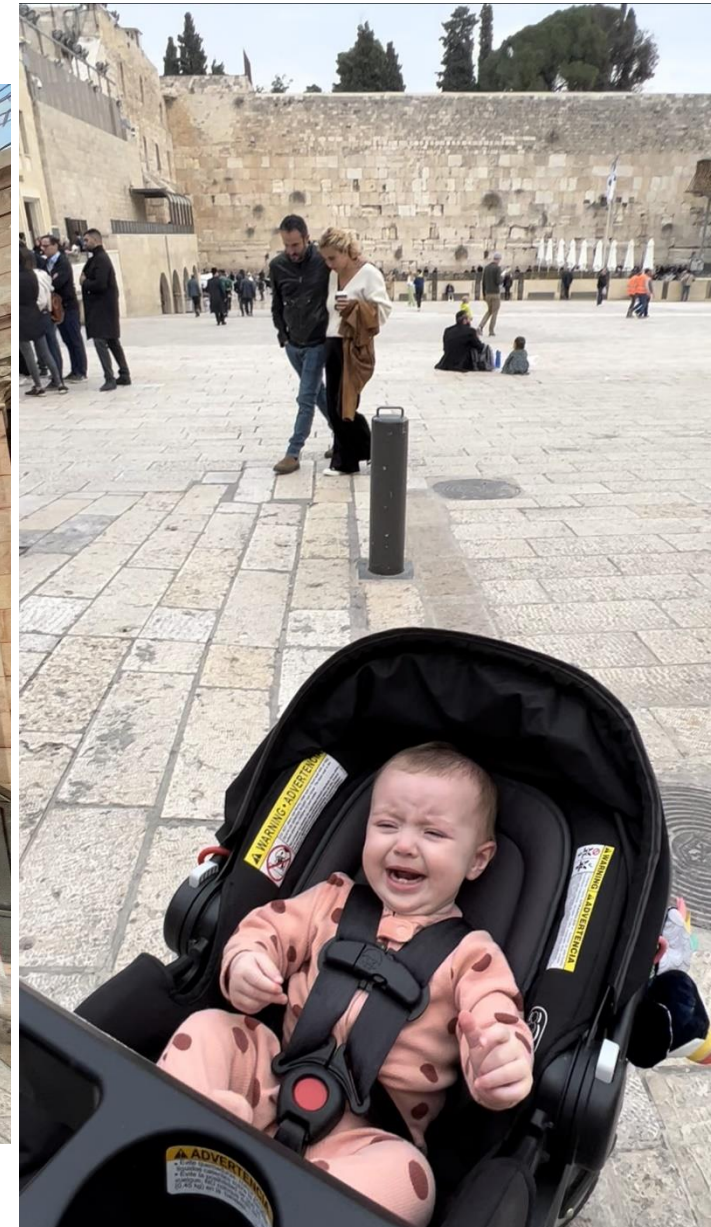


Egyptian Fruit Bat



Jerusalem:

Jerusalem was the next stop and after spending the day touring the historical religious sites (Ava took the name “Wailing Wall” a bit too literally), we hit Jerusalem Bird Observatory just after dark in search of another spikey treasure. Numerous visits to the Observatory itself proved fruitless, but as we rounded the nearest trail for Sacher Park we were rewarded with the unmistakable thermal outline of an **Indian Crested Porcupine**. It quickly sunk deeper into thick shrubbery.



Early next morning I snuck off to Gazelle Valley, a sliver of nature carved out from the city of Jerusalem, for fantastic views of a herd of **Mountain Gazelle**. A large male watched me inquisitively before sounding an alarm call and galloping away. Birds filled the air with their morning songs.



Mountain Gazelle





Mountain Gazelle

The Dead Sea:

A ninety-minute drive brought us to Ein Gedi Reserve. With Ava strapped in for her first hike, Ann and I embarked on the David Waterfall trail. Along the way, families of **Northeastern Rock Hyrax** played among the boulders and a group of **Nubian Ibex** bid us farewell on our way out.





After a mind-blowing float in the Dead Sea at Ein Bokek, we rendezvoused with Tomer and proceeded to explore Ein Shahak for possible reintroduced **Arabian Oryx**. These real-life unicorns remained elusive, but we did spot distant **Arabian Hare** and **Isabelline Dorcas Gazelles**.



Yotvata/Eilat:

Making our way south, Tomer and I stopped at Kibbutz Lotan with the goal of landing a **Desert Hedgehog**. While Ann and Ava tapped into their inner carnivore at a great Brazilian Steakhouse (Casa do Brasil, down in Eilat), Tomer and I remained quite famished. Members of the Kibbutz were in the middle of enjoying a communal dinner and graciously offered for us to join while we regaled them with tales of mammal watching. Just outside dinner, we had a hotly debated sighting accompanied by poor photos that teased **Striped Hyena** but ended up being **Arabian Red Fox**. An important lesson that looks can be deceiving. We rounded out the evening driving in the Yotvata area, finding **Golden Jackal**, more Fox, and an unidentified rodent before meeting up with the girls in Eilat.



We spent the morning enjoying brunch at Branja Restaurant and the nearby beach. By mid-afternoon Tomer and I set out to investigate a tip for **Lesser Mouse-tailed Bats**. Nils Bouillard had kindly shared that an abandoned fort on the Jordanian border (29.5777, 34.9775) was known to have bats roosting inside. We entered the fort through one of three narrow corridors. Sunlight gradually faded around us until we were encased in total darkness, remedied only by headlamps. Conditions were cramped and eerie, having an almost submarine-like feel. Ceiling geckos scattered like cockroaches from our light beams. We stepped across mounds of bat guano, searching every corner but finding no bats. Discussing this with Nils after, the most likely theory was they had migrated for winter. Alas, this wild family lifer would need to wait for another day.





Next, we toured the nearby International Birding and Research Center, just ahead of dusk and tried to locate where the **Caracal** bird buffet may take place. On our way out, as night fell, we got a nice surprise of a skittish **Desert Hedgehog**. It scurried away, systematically checking for shelter until it found safety under a building. Great to find one after missing out the night before!



Desert Hedgehog



Following one of the most delicious seafood dinners I have ever had (grilled Bream at Les Sardines) Tomer and I ventured back out. Since it's strictly forbidden to drive in the national parks at night, he brought me outside Timna Park, 25 minutes north of Eilat (email us for exact directions). We found a desolate and therefore excellent road for wildlife. Heat signatures of **Isabelline Dorcas Gazelle** peppered our thermal view finders, along with an occasional **Arabian Hare**. A small rodent-sized heat dot caught my eye, localized in a large bush. We pulled over, and got out to inspect closer. Nearly an hour of patience while lying on the ground at rodent eye-level paid off with outstanding views: A **Lesser Egyptian Gerbil**. We practically habituated it by the end of our stay. I even managed a photo showing its hairy-soled feet while jumping back into the bush.





Lesser Egyptian Gerbil

On the opposite side of the car, Tomer thermalized another rodent, this time in a small tree. We scampered back out of the car and circled the tree, trying to find an angle through the leaves. Amid this, Tomer's mind wondered what may be watching us as he turned around and thermal scanned the horizon. "Alex! What's that!?" He whispered excitedly. He provided a spotlight as I went full zoom with my camera. I hurriedly zoomed in again, now on the freshly taken photo on my digital screen. "A FUCKING **STRIPED HYENA!**" (Tomer doesn't hold back.) His second most wanted Israeli species after Caracal. We cautiously approached it on foot, staying with the animal for over five minutes. What a gorgeous beast- easily the prettiest of the Hyenids! The tree rodent awaited our return and posed between branches well enough to determine it was an **Arabian Spiny Mouse**.



Syrian Striped Hyena



Syrian Striped Hyena



Arabian Spiny Mouse



Arabian Spiny Mouse



Arabian Red Fox

Our drive back resulted in **Arabian Red Fox**, while a creepy revisit to the abandoned fort resulted only in nightmares. A return to the Birding Center yielded a possible **Sundevall's Jird**, but no Caracals.

An early morning meant a quick turn around from our 3am attempt at sleep. But this was my family's last day in Israel so we had to make it count. We began in search of the exceedingly rare **Acacia Gazelle**. This near-endemic has a small population fenced off on the other side of the highway from Hai-Bar Biblical Wildlife Preserve & Safari. As described in other reports, a dirt road runs along the fence and remains the best chance to find the species. Eagle-eye Tomer spotted one from the highway, and any additional gazelles seen from the dirt road proved only to be **Isabelline Dorcas Gazelles**.



Ramon Crater:

We made our way back to Tel Aviv airport, this time taking the Western route through the epic Ramon Crater. **Isabelline Dorcas Gazelles** were a common sight along the highway. Unfortunately, the Vulture Feeding Station, sometimes frequented by mammalian carnivores, proved barren. For lunch we took in delicious food and breathtaking views at the Zarqa Restaurant. **Nubian Ibex** once again bid us farewell before heading to our next locale. Racing a setting sun and approaching the Egyptian border (southwest on 171), Tomer attempted to find me one last mammal. His last visit to this area paid off with **Fat Sand Rat** and many **Onagers**. (Sergey Chichagov later informed me these reintroduced equines are a hybrid of Turkmenian Kulan and Persian Onager.) Time flew by and I was starting to doubt our luck as it was time to turn around. "Let's just go to the top of that hill," Tomer reasoned. Sure enough, a minute more of driving and there glowed two magical wild horse silhouettes against the pink horizon. We ended up seeing several more during the closing moments of golden hour. A truly superb finish to a truly superb trip.



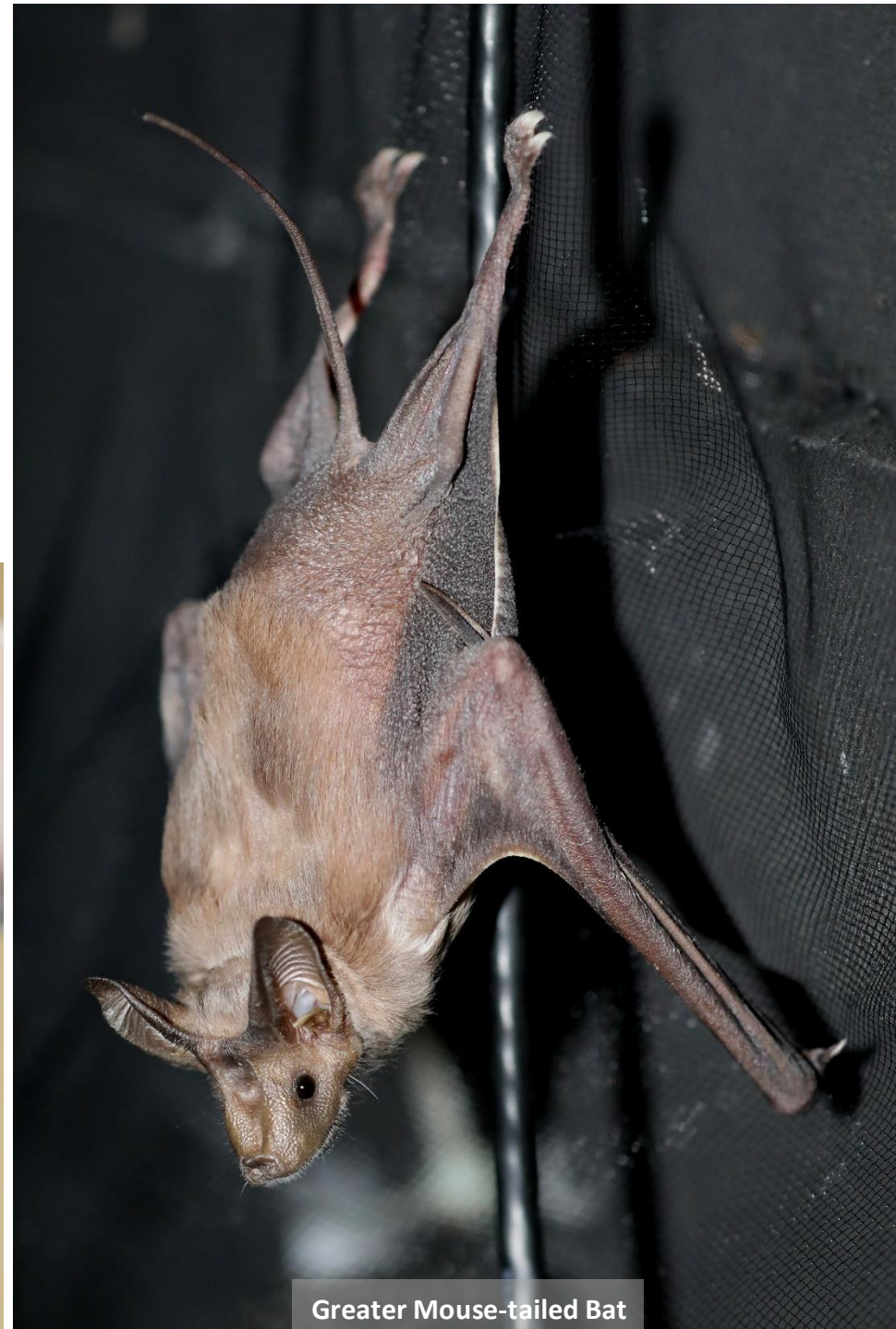




As always, I visited some captive collections. I had the utmost pleasure of finally meeting Alex Kantorovich, creator of the impressive ZooInstitutes.Org website. We visited a private collection named Meier Segals Garden for Zoological Research where I was able to secure an insurance family lifer in a **Greater Mouse-tailed Bat** as well as a detailed view of a tiny **Kuhl's Pipistrelle**. Next, I drove directly to the Weizmann Institute of Science, featuring a brief traffic stop by highway patrol (don't worry, I talked my way out of the ticket). Here I had made a last-minute arrangement to photograph their **Middle East Blind Mole-rats**. Humorously, after all that, I unexpectedly ended up seeing the same species at the Tisch Family Zoological Gardens in Jerusalem a couple days later. I would highly recommend Tisch. This sprawling modern zoo boasts large, immersive exhibits and showcases many Israeli species.



Kuhl's Pipistrelle



Greater Mouse-tailed Bat



Middle East Blind Mole-rat



Arabian Oryx



Nubian Ibex



Persian Fallow Deer

List of Mammal Species Seen

(wild species lifers in bold) :

	Common Name	Scientific name	Tel Aviv	Jerusalem	Dead Sea	Yotvata	Eilat	Ramon Crater
1	Northeastern Rock Hyrax	<i>Procavia capensis habessinicus</i>			X			
2	Indian Crested Porcupine	<i>Hystrix indica</i>		X				
3	Arabian Spiny Mouse	<i>Acomys dimidiatus</i>					X	
4	Lesser Egyptian Gerbil	<i>Gerbillus gerbillus</i>					X	
5	Sundevall's Jird?	<i>Meriones crassus</i>					X	
6	Arabian Hare	<i>Lepus capensis arabicus</i>				X	X	
7	Southern White-breasted Hedgehog	<i>Erinaceus concolor</i>	X					
8	Desert Hedgehog	<i>Paraechinus aethiopicus</i>					X	
9	Egyptian Fruit Bat	<i>Rousettus aegyptiacus</i>	X					
10	Kuhl's Pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus kuhlii</i>	X					
11	Syrian Striped Hyena	<i>Hyaena hyaena syriaca</i>					X	
12	Syrian Jackal	<i>Canis aureus syriacus</i>	h			X		
13	Arabian Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes arabica</i>				X	X	
14	Onager	<i>Equus hemionus</i>						X
15	Acacia Gazelle	<i>Gazella arabica acaciae</i>					X	
16	Isabelline Dorcas Gazelle	<i>Gazella dorcas isabella</i>				X	X	X
17	Mountain Gazelle	<i>Gazella gazella</i>		X				
18	Nubian Ibex	<i>Capra nubiana</i>			X			X

h = heard only

18 Species, 14 Lifers

Special Thanks: To Tomer for being such an enthusiastic, well-informed and most of all fun guide for us in Southern Israel. Plus, it was about time you got Striped Hyena!

