



Golden Jackal in Tel Aviv from my cellphone

Five trips to Israel with a little bit of Jordan

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https://www.inaturalist.org/observations?d2=2023-01-04&nelat=33.8&nelng=39.6&swlat=28.7&swlng=32.2&taxon_id=40151&user_id=opisska

We have visited Israel already on five trips. The first two, around the holidays of 2013/2014 and 2014/2015 included (or even focused on) Jordan, but they, as well as the next trip only to southern Israel in March 2016, pre-date our interest in mammalwatching. On the last two trips – around the holidays of 2018/2019 and 2022/2023, we mammalwatched much more (even though we still put a part of the focus on birding) – in 2018/2019 we tried spotlight a bit and in 2022/2023 we brought a thermal camera.

Israel is a very easy country to visit, as it's modern and safe, even if a bit expensive – things like buses, car rental or even food in supermarkets are expensive even for western Europe standards. On the flip side, there are many free campsites in nature reserves (many of them can be straight up driven to in a normal car) and we never had problems even with wild camping, so accommodation turns out to be very cheap. The main issue is then the variety of issues that make access to nature (especially at night) difficult:

- The occupied Palestinian territories are in principle accessible to tourists, but even according to locals, safety is questionable in some areas; more importantly, a rental car is not allowed to be driven in the “A” areas under full Palestinian control. Most of Palestine (that is not an IDF military area) is heavily inhabited anyway.
- An absurdly large part of the country, including almost all of the Negev desert (as well as the Judean desert, despite it being in Palestine), is covered by IDF military areas. To make the situation worse, those are often poorly marked in the field and the markings do not really correspond to the extent of the areas shown on maps. Some of these have military bases, some of them are “firing zones” and some can be visited on days when there is no firing, typically Fridays and Saturdays, but for a foreigner this is nigh impossible to navigate without local help.



Rock Hyrax, Ein Gedi

- Most of Negev outside of IDF zones as well as almost any non-agricultural area in the arable parts of the country is nature reserves, to which night access is prohibited. There are two kinds of nature reserves – “nature amusement parks” with visitor centers, entrance fees, rangers and parking lots overflowing with school buses (such as Ein Gedi) and remote pieces of desert with just a sign. Visiting the first kind at night is out of the question – in the second kind, the risk of being stopped is minimal; however recently in the Eilat Mountains, really large signs have prohibiting nighttime entry have been installed in front of every feasible entrance and so claiming ignorance would no longer work.

- The area along the Jordan border is reportedly out of bounds at night. It’s not clear how much of this area is affected and how strict this is – in 2014, we walked from km20 to the Eilat border crossing along the border fence: yes, we got spotlighted a couple times by the guards, but upon reaching the guardpost at the crossing, they had no comments for us.

- The parts of Negev that are neither an IDF zone nor a nature reserve are mostly large open mines for cement or something and thus yet again not accessible.

Overall, the offer of accessible sites is a bit limited, but there is still ample amount of nature to be explored, especially with a 4x4 (which are surprisingly allowed even in some natural reserves) or on foot, but the room for spotlighting/thermal imaging from a normal car is quite limited.

Jordan was an almost equally easy (and much cheaper) country to visit back then. Then we had to remove it from our itinerary in 2016 because they stopped giving visa on the Eilat/Aqaba crossing (which I



*Nubian Ibex in their natural habitat - on an acacia tree!
Wadi Atek*



Red Fox, Hatzeva



Mountain Gazelles, road 6666 in the Galilee



Golden Spiny Mouse, Ein Gedi



Fat Sand Rat, Yotvata



Libyan Jird, NE Jordan

think has been changed back since). Furthermore, there are now multiple reports (including from our friends) that people get their cameras and scopes confiscated by Jordan customs, which, at least to me, significantly hurts the attraction of the country. We were able to walk freely around Wadi Rum and Little Petra (including wild camping), as well as to drive through the deserts wherever we could pass with our rental Logan (which was quite a lot of places despite the rough tracks or even lack thereof), but there are many reserves that are off-limits if not accompanied by a very expensive guide.

In 2018/2019 I was quite excited by the amount of animals seen: 13 species from a 12-day trip was pretty good for our then-standards, so my expectations for the most recent visit, where we even had a thermal scope, were high, but we ended up with just 13 species (in a week) again. I was particularly surprised by how empty the desert landscapes were in IR – we would walk or drive for hours only to find maybe some Dorcas Gazelles or Golden Jackals, but mostly nothing at all. It is possible that the nicely cold season (which we like to chose for visiting because of how pleasant it is) is actually too cold for the animals, or even that a better strategy than walking/driving through random areas is needed in such an environment. Still, there are some fun animals to see.

Overall we have seen 22 species in Israel and Jordan, most of them on the later mammal-focused trips. The only contributions of the earlier trips (on which we basically ignored the nighttime parts) were daytime sightings of:



Dorcas Gazelle, km20, Eilat

- **Golden Spiny Mouse** in Ein Gedi while hiking Nahal Arughot in 2013/2014
- **Fat Sand Rat** in Yotvata at the edge of a field in 2016
- **Libyan Jird** in the very NE of Jordan driving off-road through a desert (in a Dacia Logan!) in 2014/2015 while trying to find a way to reach Qasr Burqu – this is also the only contribution of Jordan, where we actually have no record of seeing any other mammal at all.

On these old trips we have also seen **Rock Hyrax, Nubian Ibex, Wild Boar, Red Fox, Cape Hare** and **Mountain Gazelle** as those species are pretty hard to overlook in Israel once you are in the nature; we also got one *Dorcas Gazelle* (which are slightly harder) in 2016. Both Hyraxes and Ibexes can be seen next to the entrance to the Ein Gedi reserves as well as at various sites in the desert, we also saw Hyraxes in the north near Sea of Galilee; Ibexes sometimes simply roam the streets of Mitzpe Ramon; Mountain Gazelles are seemingly quite common around Jerusalem and in the north. Interestingly we never saw Golden Jackals on those old trips even though we now know that they are extremely easy to find.



Indian Humpback Dolphin, Eilat

Sites and species from 2018/2019 and 2022/2023

Eilat: While looking for seabirds at the North Beach next to the Jordan border we have saw an **Indian Humpback Dolphin** surprisingly close to the shore. I had the feeling there must have been at least two individuals, but Ivana thinks it could have been just one – the presence of one dolphin was well known in the area. In IBRCE there was a small rodent behind the feeder in front of the “feeder hide” but it was shy from any kind of light so we never saw it properly. The area around salt pans at km20 had **Dorcas Gazelles**.

Ovda Valley: Ovda is the most significant easily accessible area in the very south – the military airport and sounds and flashes of fire sometimes from all directions make it seem weird, but there is a lot of non-military terrain there. At night we found an **Onager** from the re-introduced (but now wild) population, some **Dorcas Gazelles**, **Red Foxes** and a glimpse of a rodent in IR that was not relocated; further down the road near Sharahut there were several **Golden Jackals**.

Wadi Atek: We visited this large valley complex for birding reasons but we also looked around for mammals both in the day and at night: we got **Dorcas Gazelles** and **Nubian Ibex** in the lower reaches around (and in the case of the Ibexes also in) the campground and **Hyrax** higher where the valley turns into a narrow canyon.

Arava: Arava is good for **Dorcas Gazelle** and **Cape Hare**, which we saw at several spots. A good area for the gazelles seems to be the reserve south of Hazeva, we also got some walking at night in the Barak valley (which we explored extensively at night but found nothing else).

Negev: We drove some back roads in the Negev many times during day and at night with a spotlight and with IR, but never found anything beyond **Red Foxes** (and the Ibexes in Mitzpe Ramon) – this area remains completely enigmatic to me: there must be a lot of wildlife but it probably stays far enough from the roads and deep in the IDF zones that it's impossible to see.

Dead Sea Mountains: We have spend many hours walking various canyons both south and north of Ein Gedi (but not the two in Ein Gedi) at night looking for Desert Owl. During this we saw only Red Foxes (and one distant fox that could maybe have been something else, but we didn't have a strong enough light back then) and **Ibexes**.



Onager, Ovda



Cape Hare, Yotvata



Palestine Molerat, Arad



Eastern Broad-toothed Mouse, Britannia Park



Myotis hovei, Britannia Park

the display, but no molerat arrived. At some point, Ivana walked around and opened two more holes; when she checked them after a while, one was filled with dirt, clearly indicating molerat activity, so we moved the camera to it and soon we got a part of the animal on video. During this activity, many local people stopped by to ask what's happening – even though we were still in Israel proper, they were all Arab and very friendly, the biggest issue was to resist all of the invitations for hot coffee – after they understood what we were doing, they had no problems with us being there.

Britannia Park: Considering how crowded central Israel is, the existence of this large forested area is almost surprising. There aren't many tracks to drive in the park proper with a normal car, but just from the small road to the lookout we found *Eastern Broad-toothed Mouse*. However the area right across the road (to the East) offers a lot of easily driveable tracks all the way to the Palestine border – we only got *Jackals*, *Mountain Gazelles* and *Cape Hare*, but the area looks promising. A bit south along road 38 is a cluster of small artificial caves in one of which we found a single *Myotis hovei*; another cave had – quite deep inside! – another Apodemus sp. There were also many (and I mean many) molerat mounds around the caves, but the area is a nature reserve, so I am not sure how welcome any digging attempts would be there.

Nitzanim Dunes: This reserve is the last significant piece of nature left along the coast here. In the typical Israeli manner, the southern half is taken by the IDF, but the northern part is accessible – here again nighttime access is technically forbidden, but we encountered no issue. I was once again surprised how difficult it is to see rodents even in such an open terrain. Eventually we found some animals hiding in the bushes and those turned out to be an *Anderson's Gerbil* and two *Buxton's Jirds*; walking the dunes during the day first and saving coordinates of fresh-looking

Arad: When driving around north of Arad we excitedly noticed some “molehills”, which here can mean only one thing: *Palestine Molerat*! Soon we realized that those are anything but rare in the area – the “fields”, which, at the beginning of January, looked more like slightly combed areas of desert than arable land, were full of those, so we picked some easily accessible mounds a bit further from any main road, tried to open some fresh-looking ones until we found a tunnel entrance and waited for an hour. It was really cold and windy, so we just put a camera next to the hole and hid in the car, watching



Anderson's Gerbil, Nitzanim Dunes



Buxton's Jird, Nitzanim Dunes



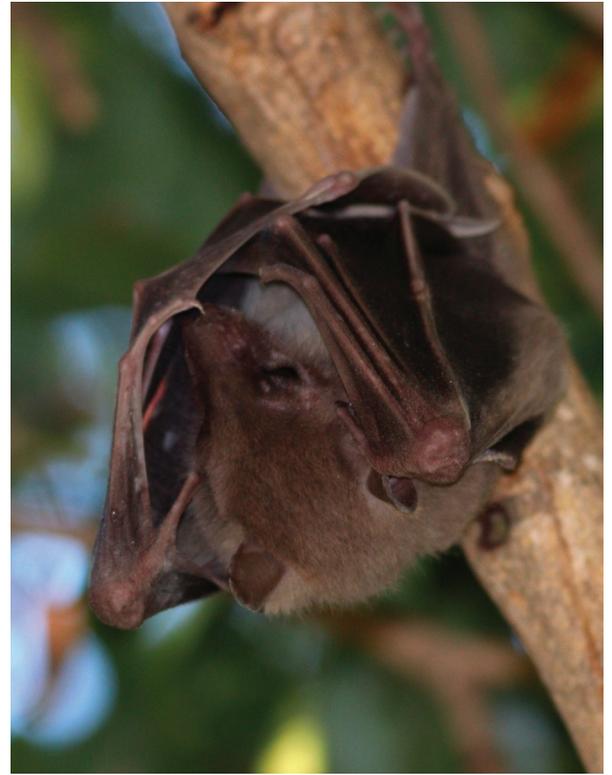
Wild Boar, Metula

burrows was helpful. The dunes also had *Jackals* and *Mountain Gazelle*.

Jerusalem Bird Observatory: The bird hide slap in the middle of the city is famous for the *Indian Crested Porcupine* that comes to the pond in front of it in evenings; we got it easily on our first attempt.

HaYarkon park in Tel Aviv: Probably the easiest place to watch *Golden Jackals* anywhere – there is a lot of those and they are not shy. One morning (with Sun well up) we found a lone *Egyptian Rousette* flying into a tree, where we then found it roosting.

Hula valley: Agamon HaHula is a reserve famous for huge flock of Common Cranes, among which *Wild Boar* and, somewhat absurdly, *Coypu* can be seen. The reserve is not accessible at night, but the agricultural area on across the Jordan river is – there we saw at least two *Jungle Cats* along the road that follows the eastern bank of the river. *Jackals* and *Mountain Gazelles* abound in this area, as well as anywhere in the Galilee.



Egyptian Rousette, Tel Aviv

Trip lists

2018/2019:

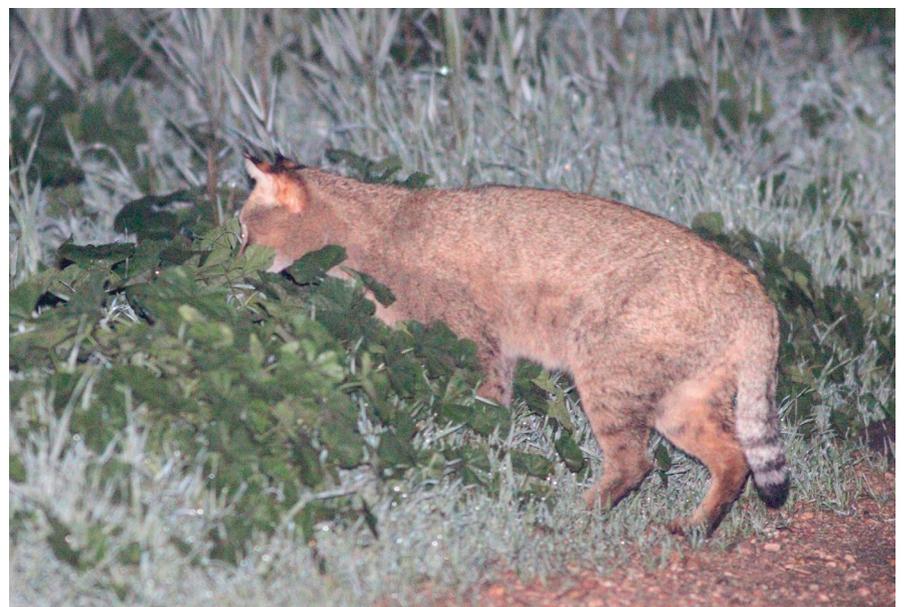
Mountain Gazelle
Dorcas Gazelles
Nubian Ibex
Onager
Wild Boar
Rock Hyrax
Golden Jackal
Red Fox
Jungle Cat
Indian Crested Porcupine
Cape Hare
Coypu
Egyptian Rousette

2022/2023:

Mountain Gazelle
Dorcas Gazelles
Nubian Ibex
Rock Hyrax
Indian Humpback Dolphin
Golden Jackal
Red Fox
Cape Hare
Buxton's Jird
Anderson's Gerbil
Eastern Broad-toothed Mouse
Palestine Molerat
Myotis hovei



Indian Crested Porcupine, Jerusalem



Jungle Cat, Hula