

ISRAEL BIG DAY

About five years ago, after competing in several birding competitions, I started looking for a new challenge. Although I hadn't yet heard of the mammal watching community, I had this idea in mind - to try to find the highest number of mammal species in 24 hours within the Israeli wilderness. When I later discovered that this was a recognized challenge undertaken in various parts of the world, I decided I wanted to be the first to attempt it in Israel.

The journey was delayed by the coronavirus pandemic and then by the war, but eventually the right moment arrived - a hot summer Friday, when mammals are most active and human presence is minimal.

Preparation and Strategy -

Israel presents both advantages and challenges for such a challenge. The biggest advantage is the country's small size paired with diverse habitats- - you can begin the day in the arid Negev Desert and finish in the lush, green Hula Valley. The main challenge is that Israel is densely populated, and most unpopulated areas become inaccessible at night. We developed a clear strategy: search during the nights and rest during the days. The first long night was dedicated to southern Israel, and the second to northern Israel. Our plan was detailed with a tight schedule, yet we kept flexible by maintaining target species lists and a map of known mammal locations to guide our decisions.

Because of conservation concerns, detailed information about mammal locations in Israel is difficult to find, so I won't be sharing exact spots here. However, if you're interested in visiting Israel for mammal watching, feel free to contact me at klilzait@gmail.com - I'd be happy to help you plan your trip and advise you on the best sites.



First night – At midnight, my brother Assaf, my father Avner, and I began in the western Negev dunes, targeting rodents. We quickly spotted both the lesser Egyptian jerboa and the greater Egyptian gerbil. Next, we explored some isolated paved roads in the area, where there was plenty of activity: we saw numerous Dorcas gazelles, onagers, red foxes, golden jackals, and one Cape hare. After a foot search in a wide wadi, we were lucky to catch a distant but stunning Arabian wolf.



On our way toward Sde Boker, we stopped by the roadside to check out a fox cub. While scanning the area, I was surprised to spot a cute southern white-breasted hedgehog right in the middle of the desert, along with a couple more onagers. What a great start to the night with nine species by 01:30 am!

Continuing to the Sde Boker area, we added a porcupine and encountered many jackals and foxes. We then drove to Yeruham hoping to find hyenas but had no luck. The lake was also closed for some reason, so we decided to head toward the Dead Sea. As temperatures



dropped, animal activity slowed down, and we found almost nothing in the next three hours. On the way to Neot Hakikar, a porcupine tried to jump on our wheels, but thankfully Assaf managed to avoid it. The only new species added in that stretch were a few sleeping Nubian ibexes near Neve Zohar and some half-asleep mountain gazelles near Kalya. We finally got back home around 6:30 am for a few hours of sleep.



Afternoon – We arrived around 5 pm at the Beit She'an Valley, hoping to spot some species active during the day. Our first stop was an area with basalt rock formations, where we quickly found a rock hyrax. Next, we headed to the fishponds of Kfar Rupin and Tirat Tzvi. We've visited this spot many times and often see Egyptian mongooses here, but today they

seemed to have vanished. After nearly two hours of searching, we reluctantly decided to move on. Since we spent so much time here, we didn't have enough daylight left to look for coypu, so we hoped to find it after dark in the hula valley.

Second Night – After a rather unlucky afternoon, we drove up to the Golan Heights, hopeful to find some new species - but it wasn't going to be easy. We started in the southern Golan, spotting plenty of familiar animals - mountain gazelles, foxes, jackals, hares, and porcupines - but no new additions. After about an hour, concern crept in about whether we'd manage to find new species.

Heading north, the turning point finally came. On a very remote road, we spotted a beautiful African wildcat hunting among the tall grass. We then moved toward Merom Golan, where luck improved: a house mouse and an Egyptian fruit bat crossed our path, followed by a beech marten lounging in the branches of a large oak tree. Shortly after, a wild boar was spotted hiding behind a bush.



With 18 species under our belt, we aimed to hit 20. We drove to the Hula Valley, hoping to see coypu, badgers, or social voles. On the way near Gonen, a large family of wild boars crossed the road. We searched the northern fields of the valley but found nothing new for nearly an hour.



While stepping out to pee near some agricultural waste, a rodent scurried by my feet and disappeared into a pipe—it was a Tristram's jird, species number 19! Later, it peeked out, allowing us to snap some photos.

Only one species left for the coveted 20, but it wouldn't be easy. The Hula Agamon was closed at night, so we tried a nearby area for coypus, but after 20 minutes of searching, none appeared. Just as we were about to leave, I caught a glimmer of an eye between the reeds and yelled for Assaf to stop. Suddenly, a cat's head emerged from the tall grass, it was a small, juvenile jungle cat!



It was the first time my brother saw this species, and the perfect way to reach our goal: species number 20 for the big day. What a moment!

Full list – rock hyrax, cape hare, southern white-breasted hedgehog, house mouse, Tristram's jird, lesser Egyptian jerboa, greater Egyptian gerbil,

Indian porcupine, Egyptian fruit bat, mountain gazelle, Dorcas gazelle, onager, Nubian ibex, wild boar, beech marten, African wild cat, jungle cat, red fox, golden jackal, Arabian wolf

So that's it, I hope it inspired you to go out to the field because sometimes incredible wildlife is closer than you think. Israel is a unique and diverse country with lots of wildlife; there are a few organizations that work hard to preserve the fast-disappearing nature, and we will be happy to welcome some nature loving tourists to keep promoting nature conservation. Obviously, war might not be the best timing but hopefully things will change soon, and it is generally safe to travel here. I will be happy to help you if you are interested, there is lots of other wildlife as well (the two pictures below were taken during the big day).

