Jordan in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

22nd March - 5th April 2023



Arabian Green Bee-eaters



Palestine Sunbird



Semi-collared Flycatcher



Arabian Red Fox

Tour report and images by Ian Andrews



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Summary

The aim of this trip was to sample Jordan's varied habitats, birdlife (both resident and migratory), archaeology and, in this case, also geology. Early spring in Jordan is a transitional season weatherwise and we certainly witnessed some variation in temperature as well as a rare flash flood. Jordan is not a large country – it is about the same area as Portugal – but its altitude varies from -436 metres in the Rift Valley to 1,700 metres in the Sharra Mountains behind Petra. Plenty of scope for hosting birds of a Mediterranean to Arabian feel.

Day 1

Wednesday 22nd March

Heathrow-Amman, Madaba

The BA flight from Heathrow to Amman was a little delayed. In Amman, our "Mr Fix It" saw us through immigration, and we met our local guide Mohammad and driver (Mr Zyoub) before being taken to our first hotel in nearby Madaba. Although we were late, a light meal awaited us.

Day 2

Thursday 23rd March

Dead Sea, Shua'yb Dam

The Dead Sea Panorama was our first stop, and a bright, iridescent Palestine Sunbird stole the show. Although the Tristram's Starlings (Grackles) came a close second. A new road took us down to the Dead Sea and we stopped at the bridge over Wadi Mujib and at so-called Lot's Wife pinnacle where we saw Fan-tailed Ravens and Blackstarts. The level of the Dead Sea is now at -436 metres and dropping up one metre a year due to water extraction upstream. While some of the group were floating in the hypersaline waters, others watched a Common Sandpiper – the lowest possible water bird in the world! The dam and lake at the bottom of Wadi Shu'ayb held some waterbirds including egrets and Pied Kingfishers, and our only Great Grey Shrike of the trip. After this we drove back to Madaba where we visited the Byzantine church of Saint George with its famous mosaic map of the Holy Land.

Day 3

Friday 24th March

Zarqa River, Dibbin Forest, Jerash

Heading north of Amman in the morning, we explored the Zarqa River, King Talal Dam and finally Dibbin Forest. At the latter, we were successful in finding the local speciality - Blue Tit! Equally interesting were Eastern Bonelli's Warblers, the local subspecies of Jay and a Mediterranean Chameleon. The group then spent the afternoon at the ruins of the Greco-Roman Decapolis city of Jerash. Birds around the extensive site included a very showy Quail, plus Blue Rock Thrush, Eastern Black-eared Wheatear and Corn Bunting. And we found a Tortoise!

Day 4

Saturday 25th March

Desert Castles, Shaumari

After visiting the two Desert Castles in the morning (the Qasr Harana caravanserai and Qasr al Amra "palace"), we had time to walk up Wadi al Butm in search of migrants (the Butm trees are Atlantic Pistachios). In the afternoon, a jeep safari at Shaumari started with great promise with sightings of several wheatear species and a couple of Pallid Harriers. But it was curtailed by a dust storm, thunder and lightning and a torrential flash flood. Drenched, we had to abort and head back to our accommodation.

Day 5

Sunday 26th March

Azraq Wetland, Basalt Desert, Azraq Castle, Shaumari

We managed to negotiate an early morning visit to the Azraq Wetland Reserve, but the previous day's flood meant that parts of it were just a little muddy under foot! Highlights included several Squacco Herons and two Little Crakes. Our next destination was the Basalt Desert on the road to Iraq. Hopes of seeing the Basalt Wheatear weren't high (and indeed we didn't see one of these increasingly rare wheatears), but we did have views of Isabelline Wheatears, White-crowned Black Wheatears, 'dark' Desert Lark, Temminck's Larks and a group of Black-headed Wagtails. The basalt-built Azraq Castle (used by T.E. Lawrence in 1917/18) was visited on our return for lunch.

A return visit to Shaumari was almost thwarted completely (it was officially closed due to the rains) but even when we did gain access, it closed early due to Ramadan! Unfortunately, the Pharoah Eagle Owl was not on its perch, but numerous large pellets littered the ground. A fine Bluethroat was a new bird for the trip.

Day 6

Monday 27th March

Karak Castle, Dana

The journey from Azraq to Dana took us via Karak Castle. A nesting Rock Sparrow offered a brief diversion from the superbly preserved crusader castle. A quick roadside stop in some high basalt terrain at 1500 metres, immediately produced some singing Calandra Larks. We then arrived at the Rummana Camp mid-afternoon giving us time for a scenic walk from the camp to overlook the dramatic sandstone cliffs and gorges topped by white sandstones domes. Cuckoos, Chukars, Little Owl were added to our list.

After a fascinating astronomy talk by Mohammad under a clear, dark sky, we prepared for a very cold night in our tents. Most of any inconvenience was compensated for by the unique location.

Day 7

Tuesday 28th March

Dana, Barra Forest

The early risers were treated to a fine sunrise as we explored a different area close to the camp. Woodlarks, Cuckoos and Woodchat Shrike sang. A lucky sighting of a Rock Hyrax was unexpected. Later, we visited the nearby Barra

Forest before returning to Rummana Camp. The afternoon walk again produced the same Hyrax! Other highlights were Eastern Orphean Warblers, Arabian Babblers, Short-toed Eagles. It was a second cold night camping!

Day 8

Wednesday 29th March

Dana, Shaubak, Little Petra

We soaked up the atmosphere at Dana before we had to take the shuttle bus back up to meet our coach once more. Our first stop was at Dana village and a view down the length of Wadi Dana towards Wadi Araba. We then visited Shaubak Castle (with its new visitor centre), and a Mourning Wheatear revealed its nest to us. Finally, we toured Little Petra (where some saw their first Sinai Rosefinches) and the nearby Stone Age settlement of Al Bayda.

Day 9

Thursday 30th March

Petra

A full day in Petra. Despite being decidedly cold, we were suitably dressed and thoroughly enjoyed our tour of the main part of this huge site. Mohammad said that there were as many theories about the Nabateans at Petra as there were archaeologists (due to the lack of written history), but he chose to explain the site in terms of archaeo-astronomy – so many structures had specific alignments to the sun on days of solstices and equinoxes. Other theories are available! We visited a local seller of frankincense and myrrh and had an amusing discussion with another about a tray of 'local' rocks – a few, like the dendritic manganese, were indeed from Petra!

The afternoon saw us explore the Royal Tombs – although it is not known whether they were tombs or not. Here, we also saw some splendid examples of Liesegang rings (or banding) which result from a rare geological process deep underground by which bands of different-coloured iron and manganese compounds precipitate out of the groundwaters. The Nabateans certainly knew how to show off this amazing natural phenomenon.

Day 10

Friday 31st March

Sharra Mountains, Wadi Rum, Jebel Khazali

As we left our Wadi Musa hotel, the views opened up over the Petra mountains as we reached 1,700 metres, but we soon realised that the white material by the road side was not blown sand but snow. Venturing out of the bus confirmed it was indeed cold enough for snow!

At Rum village we transferred to our jeeps and headed off south into the stunning high mountain and dune desert. Our campsite was at the southern end of Jebel Khazali and we had Striolated Buntings, Sinai Rosefinches, Pale Crag Martins (aka Rock Martins) and Tristram's Starlings were there to entertain us. Nearby we also saw a pair of Trumpeter Finches. An afternoon jeep trip took us round various sites (including the Um Frouth rock arch and Lawrence's House) and finished with some freshly made tea below a huge amphitheatre-like cliff. An excellent Bedouin zarb in the evening was slow cooked in an underground pit and quickly voted as the best meal of the trip. Another cold night in tents awaited us!

Day 11

Saturday 1st April

Wadi Rum, Aqaba

The early risers were out at dawn making the most of our remote location. After breakfast, it was back in the jeeps to meet the bus at Rum village and to begin the descent into Aqaba where the temperature felt agreeably warm! In the late afternoon, we made our first of several visits to the local 'allotments'. Smart-looking Masked Shrikes were one of the commonest migrants along with a male Semi-collared Flycatcher, Sykes's Yellow Wagtail, Hoopoe, Nightingale and a Bluethroat.

Day 12

Sunday 2nd April

Aqaba

The Semi-collared Flycatcher was still in the same area before breakfast. The early visit to Aqaba Bird Observatory and adjacent sewage works proved very productive with migration in full swing. It wasn't long before we had seen Arabian Green Bee-eaters and a fine male Collared Flycatcher. An Arabian Red Fox was a surprise. Crested Honey-buzzard is a recent addition to the Jordanian avifauna and Aqaba is THE place in the region to see them – we saw five individuals over the two days. A Wood Warbler joined the Eastern Bonelli's Warblers, and a male Citrine Wagtail was much appreciated.

We drove down to the South Beach in the afternoon and then back to the allotments to see what might have arrived.

Day 13

Monday 3rd April

Agaba

The early risers were again out birding at the allotments and the nearby beach produced a White-eyed Gull. Our second visit to Aqaba Bird Observatory was as good as the first – but different as migration changes every day. The spirals of raptors (mainly Steppe Buzzards) were impressive, and we had distant views of a large flock of Marsh Sandpipers. Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin (Rufous Bush Chat in older terminology). Brief Greater Spotted and Steppe Eagles would have been nice to see closer and for longer.

Mohammad arranged to have our lunch brought in for us. Then, in the late afternoon, it was back to the allotments for those who wanted to continue birding or photographing.

Day 14

Tuesday 4th April

Agaba, Wadi Araba, Fidan, Airport

As luck would have it, our drive up Wadi Araba (potentially the hottest area on our whole itinerary) coincided with a bit of a heat wave. The walk across the Fidan desert was scorching and produced nothing. However, a Hoopoe Lark seen initially from the bus but then seen singing and displaying saved the day!

Due to the heat, a rapid rearrangement was made to drive up to Mount Nebo to a cooler temperature for our picnic lunch, and a visit to the Byzantine church and mosaics at Mount Nebo proved a good option. Finally, we arrived at our last hotel and said goodbye to Mohammad and our driver.

Day 15

Wednesday 5th April

Home

The BA morning flight back to Heathrow left exactly on time and we flew over the Dead Sea and Jerusalem before the main part of our journey. In London, the group said their farewells and headed off home in various directions.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

N=Nea	March - April 2023													
Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
Garganey	Spatula querquedula				√							√	√	
Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata				√							√	√	
Gadwall	Mareca strepera												√	
Eurasian Wigeon	Mareca penelope											√		
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos				√							√	√	
Northern Pintail	Anas acuta				√									
Eurasian Teal	Anas crecca											√	√	
Common Quail	Coturnix coturnix		√											
Chukar Partridge	Alectoris chukar					√	√	√						
Alpine Swift	Tachymarptis melba	✓		√										√
Common Swift	Apus apus	✓	√			√						√	√	
Pallid Swift	Apus pallidus						√	√				√		
Common Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus		√			√	√	√						
Rock Dove	Columba livia	✓		√			√							
Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	✓	✓	√	√	✓	√	√		√	√	√	√	√
Laughing Dove	Spilopelia senegalensis	✓	√		√									
Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus	✓			√							√	√	
Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra	✓										√	√	
Little Crake	Zapornia parva				√									
Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis	✓			√							√	√	
Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus											√	√	√
Spur-winged Lapwing	Vanellus spinosus	√		√	√							√	√	
Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula											√	√	
Little Ringed Plover	Charadrius dubius												√	
Ruff	Calidris pugnax											√	√	√
Little Stint	Calidris minuta											√	√	
Common Snipe	Gallinago gallinago				√							√		
Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos	✓										√	√	
Green Sandpiper	Tringa ochropus		√									√	√	

N=Near-endemic I=Introduced			March - April 2023												
Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	
Common Redshank	Tringa totanus											√	✓		
Marsh Sandpiper	Tringa stagnatilis												√		
Wood Sandpiper	Tringa glareola											√	✓		
Common Greenshank	Tringa nebularia											✓			
Slender-billed Gull	Chroicocephalus genei											✓	✓		
Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus											✓	✓		
White-eyed Gull	Ichthyaetus leucophthalmus												✓		
Caspian Gull	Larus cachinnans											✓			
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus											√			
Common Tern	Sterna hirundo											√			
Arctic Skua	Stercorarius parasiticus											√	√		
Greater Flamingo	Phoenicopterus roseus											√	√		
White Stork	Ciconia ciconia											√	✓	√	
Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	√	✓												
Pygmy Cormorant	Microcarbo pygmaeus												√		
Black-crowned Night Heron	Nycticorax nycticorax				√										
Squacco Heron	Ardeola ralloides				√							√	✓		
Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	√													
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	√			√							√	✓		
Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea		✓									✓	✓		
Great White Egret	Ardea alba	√			✓										
Little Egret	Egretta garzetta	√	✓			✓						√	✓		
Egyptian Vulture	Neophron percnopterus													√	
Short-toed Snake Eagle	Circaetus gallicus					✓	✓	✓		✓					
Booted Eagle	Hieraaetus pennatus											√	✓		
Greater Spotted Eagle	Clanga clanga												✓		
Steppe Eagle	Aquila nipalensis												✓		
Bonelli's Eagle	Aquila fasciata					√									
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus		√		√	√				√		√	√		
Pallid Harrier	Circus macrourus			√											
Black Kite	Milvus migrans	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		√	√	√	√		
Crested Honey-buzzard	Pernis ptilorhynchus											√	√		

N=Near	March - April 2023													
Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
Long-legged Buzzard	Buteo rufinus										√			
Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo	✓	√	√	√	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√
Little Owl	Athene noctua					√		√						
Eurasian Scops Owl	Otus scops					√								
Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops	✓		√		✓	√	✓			√	√	√	√
White-throated Kingfisher	Halcyon smyrnensis	✓	√		√									
Common Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis				√									
Pied Kingfisher	Ceryle rudis	✓	√									√		
Arabian Green Bee-eater	Merops cyanophrys											√	√	
European Bee-eater	Merops apiaster				√		√					√	√	
Lesser Kestrel	Falco naumanni						√							
Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	✓	√		√									
Rose-ringed Parakeet - I	Psittacula krameri										√	√	√	
Red-backed Shrike	Lanius collurio			√										
Great Grey Shrike	Lanius excubitor	✓												
Woodchat Shrike	Lanius senator						√					√		
Masked Shrike	Lanius nubicus		√				√				√	√	√	
Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius		√	√		√								
House Crow - I	Corvus splendens										√	√	√	√
Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix		√		√	√						√		
Brown-necked Raven	Corvus ruficollis				√	√	√	√		√	√			
Fan-tailed Raven	Corvus rhipidurus	✓							✓	√				√
Jackdaw	Corvus monedula	✓	√	√										
Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus		√											
Great Tit	Parus major		√			√	√	✓						
Greater Hoopoe-Lark	Alaemon alaudipes													√
Desert Lark	Ammomanes deserti				√			✓	✓	√	√			
Woodlark	Lullula arborea					√	√	√						
Crested Lark	Galerida cristata	✓	√	√	√	√	√	√					√	
Temminck's Lark	Eremophila bilopha				√									
Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra					√								
White-eared Bulbul - I	Pycnonotus leucotis				√	√								

N=Near-endemic I=Introduced			March - April 2023												
Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	
White-spectacled Bulbul	Pycnonotus xanthopygos	√	√	√		√	√	√	√			√	√	√	
Sand Martin	Riparia riparia											√	√		
Pale Crag Martin	Ptyonoprogne obsoleta	√		√		√	√	√	√	√	√				
Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	✓	√		√	√		√		√	√	√	√	√	
Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum				✓		✓					✓	✓		
Red-rumped Swallow	Cecropis daurica	✓	√		√						√	✓	✓		
Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti	✓	✓												
Streaked Scrub Warbler	Scotocerca inquieta					✓	√			√					
Wood Warbler	Phylloscopus sibilatrix											√	√		
Eastern Bonelli's Warbler	Phylloscopus orientalis		√	√	√	✓						√	√		
Common Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita	√	√	√	√	√	√		√				√		
Sedge Warbler	Acrocephalus schoenobaenus												√		
Common Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus scirpaceus				✓						✓	✓	√		
Eastern Olivaceous Warbler	Iduna pallida		√								√				
Graceful Prinia	Prinia gracilis	√	√		✓						✓	✓	√		
Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla	✓										√	√		
Lesser Whitethroat	Curruca curruca	√	√	√	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	√	√	
Eastern Orphean Warbler	Curruca crassirostris						✓								
Sardinian Warbler	Curruca melanocephala		✓												
Eastern Subalpine Warbler	Curruca cantillans			✓											
Common Whitethroat	Curruca communis			√				✓				✓			
Arabian Babbler	Argya squamiceps					✓	✓	✓				✓			
Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes		√												
Tristram's Starling	Onychognathus tristramii	√				✓	✓	✓	√	√	✓		√		
Common Myna - I	cridotheres tristis	✓	✓											√	
Common Blackbird	Turdus merula		√		√	√								√	
Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin	Cercotrichas galactotes												√		
Bluethroat	Luscinia svecica				√		√				√				
Thrush Nightingale	Luscinia luscinia										√	√	√		
Common Nightingale	Luscinia megarhynchos										√	√	√		
Semicollared Flycatcher	Ficedula semitorquata										√	√			
Collared Flycatcher	Ficedula albicollis											√			

N=Near-er	March - April 2023													
Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros			✓						✓				
Common Redstart	Phoenicurus phoenicurus			√		√	√	√				√	√	
Common Rock Thrush	Monticola saxatilis						√							
Blue Rock Thrush	Monticola solitarius		√		√	√			√					
European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola						✓							
Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe				√									
Isabelline Wheatear	Oenanthe isabellina				√	√				✓				
Desert Wheatear	Oenanthe deserti			√										
Eastern Black-eared Wheatear	Oenanthe melanoleuca		√	√	√	√	√	√						
Cyprus Wheatear	Oenanthe cypriaca			✓										
Blackstart	Oenanthe melanura	✓									√			
White-crowned Wheatear	Oenanthe leucopyga				√				√	√	√			
Mourning Wheatear	Oenanthe lugens							√		√				
Palestine Sunbird	Cinnyris osea	✓				√	√	√	√					
Rock Sparrow	Petronia petronia					√		√						
Spanish Sparrow	Passer hispaniolensis			√	√									√
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	✓	√		√									
Western Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla flava				√						√	✓	√	
Citrine Wagtail	Motacilla citreola											✓		
White Wagtail	Motacilla alba	✓	√							✓	√	✓	√	
Tree Pipit	Anthus trivialis										√		√	
Red-throated Pipit	Anthus cervinus			✓										
Trumpeter Finch	Bucanetes githagineus									√				
Sinai Rosefinch	Carpodacus synoicus							√		√	√			
European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris		√			√	√	√	√					√
Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina		√				√	√						
European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis						√							
Syrian Serin	Serinus syriacus						√	√						
Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra		√											
Striolated Bunting	Emberiza striolata									√	√			

Others

Common name		March – April 2023													
	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	
Sinai Agama	Pseudotrapelus sinaitus														
Rough-tailed Rock Agama	Laudakia stellio		√											√	
Mediterranean Chameleon	Chamaeleo chamaeleon		✓												
Ocellated Skink	Chalcides ocellatus		✓												
Greek Tortoise	Testudo graeca		✓												
Small White	Pieris rapae		✓												
Orange-tip	Anthocharis cardamines		✓				√	√							
Clouded Yellow	Colias crocea														
African Grass Blue	Zizeeria knysna														
Painted Lady	Vanessa cardui		✓	√	√	√	√	√		√				✓	
Southern Comma	Polygonia egea														
Spotted Fritillary	Melitaea didyma						✓	√							
Large White			√												
red darter sp.			✓												
hawker sp.			√												
termite sp.				✓	✓										
Pitted (Scarab) Beetle	Adesmia cancellata			✓	✓	✓	✓								
lizard sp.					✓	✓									
Rock Hyrax	Procavia capensis						√								
caterpillar sp.								√							
Violet Dropwing	Trithemis annulata											√	√		
Arabian Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes arabica											√ ·		/	
swallowtail sp.												-		\ \ \ \	