

## **Jordan - the tail end of a business trip**

### **19 June - 23 June 2007**

A business trip to Amman, Jordan was planned for 19, 20 and the morning of 21 June 2007. Always open to an opportunity, I decided to stay on for my weekend and visit the Dead Sea, Petra and surrounding areas.

I flew Royal Jordanian from Dubai International on the morning of 19 June. The flight time was around 3 hours and my Visit Visa was obtained on arrival (this is a simple enough process, at least with a UK passport), at a cost of 5 JD.

Given all the trouble in bordering countries (Israel, Lebanon and Iraq) I was not surprised to encounter security at an extremely high level. So much so that my scope was retained at customs and I was told it would only be returned on departure! Thankfully they let me keep my bins but any hope of digiscoping had gone out the window.

Security was apparent throughout the trip. Metal detectors were found at all shopping malls and hotels and there were a number of security checkpoints in and around the Dead Sea. I always made sure my bins were well hidden as I approached these.

### **Guide book and Field Guides**

The birds of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan by Ian J Andrews is essential for birding in Jordan, with site maps and species breakdowns providing useful info.

I used Collins as a field guide.

### **Maps**

These are not easy to come by. After much searching in Dubai I managed to locate a 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 1:730 000 scale map by Geo Projects.

### **Car hire and driving**

My client kindly arranged for car hire at a rate of 30 JD per day including insurance. It was a 1.6L automatic Hyundai saloon and despite being just a year old, possessed numerous dents and bumps! I was soon to realize why; the standard of driving in Amman left a lot to be desired. It very much reminded me of driving in large cities in Turkey. While not the breakneck, 6 lane 'Mad Max' experience that is Dubai, it was still a challenge.

Thankfully once outside Amman, the volume and erratic driving eased. In general the standards of roads are good, although sections of the Desert Highway were rough in places.

Fuel was double the price of the UAE, but still half the price of the UK.

## Sites

|                                      |                 |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Amman                                | 19, 20, 21 June |
| Amman - Dead Sea                     | 21 June         |
| Dead Sea - Movenpick Wadi            | 21 June         |
| Dead Sea - steep drive out to Madaba | 21 June         |
| Journey to Petra                     | 21 June         |
| Petra                                | 22 June         |
| Petra to Wadi Dana                   | 23 June         |
| Wadi Dana                            | 23 June         |
| Journey back to Amman                | 23 June         |
| Amman National Park                  | 23 June         |

## 19 June

Meetings galore meant I did not check into my hotel, the Holiday Inn (decent & priced at 68 JD per night), until 6pm, by which time I was extremely tired. However a quick stroll around the grounds and adjacent 'fields' revealed **Crested Lark, Linnet, Hooded Crow, House Sparrow, Laughing Dove** and best of all, a pair of **Sooty Falcon** that alighted on the roof of the hotel, presumably to roost for the evening.

## 20 - 21 June

No birding at all, too much business!

## 21 June PM

After checking out of the Holiday Inn, I picked up the hire car and headed south out of the city towards the airport on the Desert Highway (**route 15**). The Dead Sea is clearly signposted off this highway as you turn onto **route 40**. You reach the village/town of Suweima after about an hour. During this drive the only **Short Toed Eagle** of the trip was seen and also several **Red Rumped Swallow** and **Southern Grey Shrike**.

I then came alongside the Dead Sea to my left and followed the road (**route 65**), passing several checkpoints, before I came across a series of hotels on the right. At the Movenpick look across the road to your left and you will see an obvious wadi running at 90 degrees to the road. At the time of my visit it had a reasonably large stream running into the Dead Sea. I spent an hour working this area, trekking about 1km into the wadi. Here I had my first **Fan Tailed Raven, Tristrams Grackle, Blackstart, Orange Tufted Sunbird**, plus a supporting cast including nesting **Little Green Bee Eater, Lesser Kestrel, Desert Lark, Rock Dove** and the only wader of the trip, **Little Ringed Plover**.

Pleased with 4 lifers at one site I then did the tourist thing and had a quick dip in the Dead Sea. Further down the road (**route 65**) I took a road to the left signposted Panoramic View and Madaba. This road provided fantastic views and I stopped at various points along the way. This is where I first started seeing **Mourning Wheatear**, plus more **Blackstart, Tristrams Grackle, Sand Partridge** and **Rock Martin**. At the top of the climb the land becomes flat, rolling steppe with some coniferous tress. This is when **Woodchat Shrike** became common and I had my first **Little Swift** of the trip.

Passing through the slightly chaotic Madaba I rejoined the Desert Highway (**route 15**) and continued south towards Petra. After about an hour I pulled off the highway somewhere in the location of Jurf ad Darawish and scanned the fields' 1km inland. After about 15 mins I came across a family of **Temmincks Horned Lark** just 5 feet from the car; another lifer in the bag! I suspect that if you work the desert either side of the Highway in this area you should come across these birds. Be aware the juveniles look suspiciously like Bar Tailed Desert Lark at first sight.

Continuing on my way I then followed signs off the Desert Highway for Petra. As I climbed into the mountains the scenery again changed to upland steppes. **Woodchat** again became common, and sightings of **Greenfinch**, **Lesser Kestrel** began to occur. A quick stop to check a wheatear unveiled the first **Isabelline** of the trip.

On entering Petra I was staggered at the sheer number of hotels within the area. I drove as far as the entrance to the site and checked availability at the Crowne Plaza. A twin room was 70 JD per night incl buffet breakfast (roughly 49 GBP/ 360 AED), which seemed reasonable for the quality of the hotel, so I booked myself in.

After a mid afternoon snooze I headed off for food. Instead of paying typical hotel prices I opted for one of the local restaurants. While the cost of food was more than Amman (Petra being a typical tourist trap) it was decent enough fare at an ok price.

I learned that there was a nighttime walk into Petra planned that evening so bought myself a ticket. I was hoping this would be a good chance for Hume's Tawny Owl, aware that the tourist police did not allow people to loiter within Petra after dark on any normal day.

In any event I heard one owl but couldn't visually locate the bird. However it was an enjoyable experience walking through those fantastic ruins at night.

Bed by 10.30pm, given I planned to be up and running at 5am the next day.

## **22 June**

I was at the entrance gate to Petra at 6am (JD20 for a single day ticket, JD26 for a two day ticket). Overhead I saw a **Sooty Falcon** on an early morning hunt and the trees near the visitor centre contained **Linnet**, **Greenfinch** and many **Yellow Vented Bulbul**. I saw a small yellow/ green finch high in one of the conifers. I immediately thought **Eurasian Serin** but something wasn't right - it appeared duller than the Eurasian Serin, a bird I had seen many times. It then flew off high before I could get any closer. I am 95% certain this was a **Syrian Serin** (it certainly wasn't a Greenfinch). I believe they have been recorded at Petra once or twice in the past.

On entering the main gate I began the 1.5km walk towards the Siq and started seeing **Blue Rock Thrush** and **Scrub Warbler**, both of which were quite common. The surrounding hills were also busy with distant **Mourning** and **Isabelline Wheatears** and the day's first **Lesser Kestrel** began appearing.

After passing through the staggeringly beautiful narrow canyon that is the Siq, I came upon the Treasury and was blown away by the sheer scale of the ruin. A number of **Blue Rock Thrush** were found around the ruin, but despite an intense scanning I could find no roosting owl.

Amazed to find I was one of just a handful of tourists at this time of the day, I spent sometime soaking in the awe-inspiring atmosphere of the place.

Having passed the Royal Tombs and seen more **Fan Tailed Raven, Lesser Kestrel** plus a **White Crowned Black Wheatear**; I approached the mountain climb to the Monastery with some trepidation. Over 900 steps and a temp of 25 degrees at 7am did not appeal greatly to me so I opted for a donkey ride to the top, with stop offs along the way. At the first stop I immediately came across my first **Sinai Rosefinch**, a female bird.

The Monastery itself was quite spectacular, itself being bigger than the Treasury. **Mourning Wheatear, Scrub Warbler** and **Desert Lark** were common here and I decided not to walk back down the steps. Instead I climbed down the rear side of the mountain. Be warned is not as easy route and there were several 'rock climbing' moments, including a fall down a sheer cliff face. However I did see in excess of 20 **Sinai Rosefinch**, lots more of the common species and some quite spectacular scenery.

I finally worked my way to the bottom of the mountain and proceeded back towards the main tourist area, following the only spring still flowing at Petra. Several more **Sinai Rosefinch**, plus **Goldfinch, Greenfinch** and the ubiquitous **House Sparrow** were seen coming to drink at the spring.

I worked my way out of the now 'packed to the rafters' Petra by Noon, thoroughly pleased that I'd managed to enjoy Petra before the thousands upon thousands of tourists descended on the site.

I slept through the heat of the day and rested my aching limbs, with a plan to enter Petra before dusk and sit at the Siq, apparently the best location for the Hume's Tawny Owl.

I arrived at the Siq at 6pm and settled in for a long vigil. (However as I entered the site at 5pm I had a lot of trouble from the Tourist Police. They don't like people being in there after dark even though sunset was 3 hours away! In any event, I blagged my way in).

Unfortunately after hanging round until about 6.30pm I was told in no uncertain terms that I was to make my way out of the site. No Hume's Tawny Owl again. It seems that unless you are lucky enough to find a roosting owl in the daytime, you will struggle to gain access to Petra after dark. I did see **Lanner, Barbary Falcon, Sooty Falcon**, lots of **Lesser Kestrel** and a **Long Legged Buzzard** however.

There is another possibility. I met a local Bedouin Guide as I was about to leave Petra the next morning, who was adamant the Owl roosted in the Royal Tombs during the day and could be seen leaving to hunt at night (he even claimed to know

the exact cave in which the bird roosted). There is no way you can access this site during the night by normal means but he offered to take me via a secret route in his 4x4. I couldn't go with him as I was leaving but he may be worth contacting. His name Ahmed and his mobile is +962 796580538.

## 23 June

I set off from Petra quite early in the morning and headed out of town towards Dana.

A few miles outside Petra, just past the village of Shaubak, at the turnoff towards Dana (**route 35, the Kings Highway**), I came across a small pool set back from the road. There were many finches and sparrows coming and going from the pool, so I parked the car up. Many **Linnet**, **Goldfinch**, **Greenfinch**, **House Sparrow**, along with a handful of **Spanish Sparrow** were drinking and leaving, then returning several minutes later. I spotted a **Cinereous Bunting** that flew in and left just as quickly. Beyond the Bunting, however, I noticed several pale finches. The excitement rose when better views revealed 3-4 **Desert Finch**, including 1 cracking male. This was a much-awaited lifer, having failed to see them in Turkey several years previously. I remained here for another 15 minutes, in which time I also noted **Turtle Dove**, **Isabelline Wheatear**, **Woodchat** and, of course, more **Lesser Kestrel**.

The road to Dana was accessed across rolling plains and steppes. As usual, **Lesser Kestrel** was abundant, as was **Linnet** and I saw more **Desert Finch** on roadside barbed wire. Near Dana I saw my only **European Bee Eater** of the trip.

Wadi Dana is truly spectacular. It is a huge, deep wadi and opens out at Wadi Araba, with views of a distant Israel in the background. I really wished I'd had more time here. It's worth at least a full two day exploration; such is its size. I first stopped near the village of Dana, with good variety of habitat nearby. A road running in the opposite direction to the village is a good spot. It ends at a viewpoint with a sheer cliff face at one side, and the descending wadi, complete with Olive groves, on the other.

The cliff face held many **Tristrams Grackle**, several **Rock Sparrow**, **Black Eared Wheatear**, Rock Martin and several pairs of nesting **Lesser Kestrel**. A fly by **Bonelli's Eagle** also livened things up. I also saw a number of flyover Serins, which could well have been Syrian Serin.

The olive groves held **Woodchat**, breeding **Spotted Flycatcher**, **Great Tit**, Eurasian **Blackbird** and **European Serin**. A great find was a male **Great Spotted Cuckoo**, apparently a scarce passage migrant here. Why it was there in late June, long past migration time? A group of **Chukar** was a nice surprise and Fan **Tailed Raven** were easily seen.

Given time restraints I had to leave far earlier than I would have liked but this great site gave me one more highlight. Just outside the village, on the descending road, I spotted two Serins. They alighted on the road I was overjoyed to see they were **Syrian Serin**, a male and a female! Another lifer in the bag. I really thought I'd missed my opportunity with this species, given the suspected sighting at Petra and possible flyovers a few hours earlier.

A few kms along **route 35**, towards Kerak, I saw the sign for Dana RSCN (Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature). I drove to the Visitors Centre and was delighted to find an Information Centre. The staff were very welcoming and I was impressed to realise Dana was a Biosphere Reserve. They have a campsite and Rest house in which you can stay. I'd allowed myself an hour here but a puncture put paid to my plans. I would recommend staying here. Visit [www.rscn.org](http://www.rscn.org) to find out more.

I then departed for Kerak and then the Desert Highway, aware that I had flight to make and then I had used my spare tyre so would not be able to risk exploring anymore 'tracks'.

As a result I arrived at the airport far earlier than I had planned. Given I had several hours to kill I decided to visit Amman National Park. It was a huge disappointment, but given the time of day, and year, I was not surprised. In effect, it's just a recreational park and litter abounded to depressing levels. **Blackbird, Eurasian Jay** and several **Woodchat** were the sum of one hour's birding. I'm sure at the right time of year (migration), and day, it would be a good site.

I checked into the airport in plenty of time to regain my scope and boarded my flight. After an aborted landing in Dubai, I descended into my bed at 4am, conscious of the fact I had to be in work at 9am!

I truly enjoyed my time in Jordan. It's a great country, only spoiled by the political turmoil that is ongoing in surrounding countries. The people are friendly and the infrastructure is generally sound. The Dead Sea is a highlight but Petra and Wadi Dana are something else.

The birding has huge potential and I'm sure the country would be high on the visit list of many birders if an improving political situation were to make it more birder friendly.

## Species List

1. Short-toed Snake Eagle 1 seen on journey to Dead Sea on 21 June
2. Long-legged Buzzard 3 seen at Petra, 1 at Wadi Dana
3. Bonelli's Eagle 1 at Wadi Dana
4. Lesser Kestrel Common at Petra, Dana
5. Common Kestrel Several seen around Dead Sea, Petra
6. Sooty Falcon 2 Holiday Inn, Amman & 1 Petra
7. Lanner Falcon Several birds around Petra
8. Barbary Falcon 1 bird seen at Petra
9. Chukar Partridge 4-6 birds seen at Wadi Dana
10. Sand Partridge 2 Movenpick Wadi, several at Petra
11. Little Ringed Plover 1 bird with young on spring Movenpick Wadi
12. Rock Dove Several birds at Movenpick Wadi
13. European Turtle Dove Common at Wadi Dana on 23 June
14. Eurasian Collared Dove Common at many sites
15. Laughing Dove Common at many sites
16. Great Spotted Cuckoo 1 male seen at Wadi Dana.
17. Humes Tawny Owl Heard only at Petra
18. Common Swift Several birds at numerous locations
19. Pallid Swift Several birds at numerous locations
20. Little Swift 1 over Petra, 1 near Madaba
21. Little Green Bee-eater A nesting pair at Movenpick Wadi
22. European Bee-eater A single bird seen at Wadi Dana
23. Eurasian Hoopoe Common throughout
24. Desert Lark Common at Movenpick Wadi, Petra
25. Greater Short-toed Lark 1 bird at Wadi Dana
26. Crested Lark Common throughout
27. Temminck's Lark A family party of birds seen 1km inland of the  
Desert Highway in the region of Jurf ad Darawish
28. Barn Swallow 1 bird seen near Amman National Park
29. Pale Crag Martin Common in mountainous areas
30. Red-rumped Swallow Common in mountainous areas
31. Long-billed Pipit 1 at Wadi Dana
32. White-spectacled Bulbul Common at many sites
33. Eurasian Blackbird Several birds at Wadi Dana
34. Blue Rock Thrush Common at Petra
35. White-crowned Wheatear 1 at Petra
36. Hooded Wheatear 1 in mountains near Dead Sea Rift area
37. Mourning Wheatear Several birds in mountains near Dead Sea Rift  
area and Petra
38. Black-eared Wheatear 1 bird seen at Wadi Dana
39. Isabelline Wheatear Several birds seen on high ground above Petra  
and on journey from Petra to Dana
40. Scrub Warbler Common at Petra
41. Spotted Flycatcher Family party at Wadi Dana
42. Orange Tufted Sunbird Common in many areas
43. Southern Grey Shrike Common in many areas
44. Woodchat Shrike Common on high ground above Dead Sea, Petra  
and on journey from Petra to Dana

|                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| 45. Eurasian Jay        | Near Amman and at Amman National Park   |
| 46. House Crow          | 2 birds in Amman  |
| 47. Hooded Crow         | Common around Amman   |
| 48. Brown-necked Raven  | 2 birds Amman   |
| 49. Fan-tailed Raven    | Common in Dead Sea region and at Petra  |
| 50. Tristrams Grackle   | Common in Dead Sea region and at Petra  |
| 51. Common Myna         | Several birds around Amman  |
| 52. House Sparrow       | Common throughout   |
| 53. Spanish Sparrow     | Several birds at Wadi Dana  |
| 54. Eurasian Greenfinch | Several birds at Petra and Wadi Dana  |
| 55. European Goldfinch  | Several birds at Wadi Dana  |
| 56. Common Linnet       | Common on high ground above Dead Sea, Petra<br>and on journey from Petra to Dana  |
| 57. Cinereous Bunting   | 1 at roadside pools with other finches (incl desert<br>finch) on journey from Petra to Wadi Dana  |
| 58. Sinai Rosefinch     | 25 birds (mainly females) seen around Petra   |
| 59. Sardinian Warbler   | 2 birds at Wadi Dana  |
| 60. Great Tit           | Several family parties at Wadi Dana   |
| 61. Rock Sparrow        | Several birds at Wadi Dana  |
| 62. Eurasian Serin      | 2 birds at Wadi Dana  |
| 63. Syrian Serin        | 1 probable bird at Petra, several Wadi Dana   |
| 64. Desert Finch        | 3 at roadside pools with other finches and<br>Cinereous Bunting on journey from Petra to Wadi Dana. Several others seen<br>by roadside before Wadi Dana |