

A Bird's Eye View of the Holy Land

Newsletter From Israel | No. 5 | Winter 2006

Photo by: Yossi Eshkol



Migrating cranes in the Hula, with snowy Mount Hermon on Israel's northern border in the background. In 2005 the number of migrating cranes passing through the Hula Valley reached its all-time peak, with 32,000 cranes arriving from northwest Russia.

Dear Friends,

This newsletter describes just a few of the activities of the action-packed past year of the Israel Ornithological Center (IOC) and the International Center for the Study of Bird Migration (ICSBM).

The hordes of visitors streaming in and out of SPNI birding centers speak volumes about the increased interest in ornithology. For the past three years, 250,000 people have visited the Hula site annually. We hope that 2006 will see the Hula Valley declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

At present we are putting the finishing touches on a plan to establish a national network of 13 ornithology centers around the country, which will include: research, education, heritage and preservation of birds and their habitat, flight safety, birds as disease carriers and marketing eco-tourism and networking with international ornithology centers.

We hope to see you birding in Israel and request your assistance if the subject is as close to your hearts as it is to ours. Even a small gift can make a world of difference. We would be pleased to answer any questions personally.

Warmly,

Dan Alon, Director
The Israel Ornithological Center

Dr. Yossi Leshem, Director
The International Center for the Study of
Bird Migration at Latrun



Visit our website: www.birds.org.il



Israel Ornithological Center



International Center
for the Study of Bird
Migration, Latrun



Tel Aviv University
Department of Zoology



JBO's Special Volunteers

Since the establishment of the Jerusalem Bird Observatory (JBO) the influx of people with special needs has steadily increased. The bird blind and observatory, with the help of the Nyman family, were accordingly designed and built to be wheelchair accessible and to accommodate people with special needs.

Project Visionary

Four years ago, Roi Simon came to the JBO, with a background in special education. Roi saw a natural connection between urban wildlife and special education, because urban wildlife is accessible and these groups generally can't go for overnight outings. He developed a community-based system, designating a specific day to each group, the tasks according to the ability/disability, and provides them training in wildlife surveying and management and working with the public. Once they undergo training, they become qualified urban wildlife rangers.

One-day visits

One day trips involve observing gazelles or migratory birds, while planting or watering trees, and generally improving the area. Participants interact with wildlife and are aware that they are improving the natural habitat. These outings are in constant demand.

The JBO's Special Needs Program makes house calls. In 2003 Roi organized a bird project in the kids unit at Sha'are Tsedek. Children made birdfeeders while they were connected to dialysis machines. These birdfeeders are sold at the JBO and one was presented to Jimmy Carter during his January '04 visit.



A senior volunteer planting a tree at the JBO

Building a Special Volunteer Team

As participants' skills and knowledge improve, they are given more complicated tasks, even learning to handle the birds the JBO catches in nets and to assist researchers in jotting down information on each bird as it's banded. "It's a slow learning process," according to Roi Simon, "but eventually they become as knowledgeable as some of the staff, known by all JBO regulars – and all their hard work pays off. In other situations people with special needs work for pay in monotonous, routine jobs like factory assembly work, but rarely do they get the opportunity to do something truly meaningful – and that matters to them. While we haven't had the funding for it in the past, our goal is to pay them for their valuable work, fully integrating them as members of our team."

Residents of Shikum Noar learn about the history of the place, about the nature and wildlife, which they monitor by keeping track of the gazelle population, and about external threats to wildlife preserves, as all the sites the Special Needs Project work to preserve face some sort of threat, with

the sole exception of the JBO. Living adjacent to the Gazelle Valley, Shikum Noar residents have taken much responsibility for the site for three years now. They serve a critical purpose, in this regard, as the Gazelle Valley is not sufficiently protected from the surrounding roads nor from incoming recreational traffic. Since it's not an officially sanctioned wildlife refuge, the gate is easily opened and people use it as an off-roading site for 3-wheeling ATV's and the like. These vehicles scare the gazelles out of the valley, where they are invariably hit by passing cars on the road.

Helping Others, Helping Yourself

Amir Balaban and Roi Simon have seen tremendous progress in some of the volunteers as they acclimatize to the work. 'David', 20 years old, lives in a group home in Mvasseret, and volunteers twice a week, once at the JBO and once at the Gazelle Valley. A troublemaker, David requires a personal attendant near him at all times. Yet when he knows it's wildlife volunteering day, he's gentle and amenable as a lamb. Carefully preparing drinks for the birds, making peanut necklaces and setting out food for the birds and animals, clearing away litter and brush, and even working the compost, David is calm and efficient. He also creates temporary signs warning visitors to respect the wildlife; these must be made frequently, as there aren't funds for permanent signage. David professes that he loves coming to work with us, to be amongst wildlife in nature and often attends public events to view the wildlife.

Simon and Balaban agree that David's case is just one example of how combining urban wildlife and special needs is a natural recipe for success.



A Shikum Noar resident and a local senior citizen affix new signage to a tree in the Gazelle Valley

Impressive Achievements in the Palestine Wildlife Society

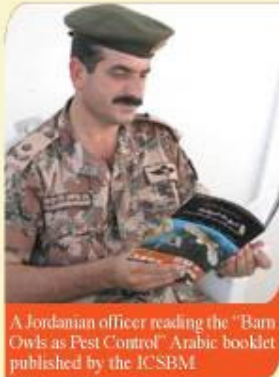
A birding observatory in Jericho, complete with bird blind, was established in 2005 by the Palestine Wildlife Society thanks to USAID MERC and EU donations. This site attracted some 6,500 Palestinian students in 2005 alone. Students had the opportunity to observe migrating birds and bird banding. For most of them, this was their first ever opportunity to bird watch. Former President Carter, who visited the Jerusalem Bird Observation (JBO) near the Knesset in January 2005, was very impressed with our joint work and with the cooperation with the ICSBM and the IOC, who have been working with the Palestine Wildlife Society, directed by Imad Atrash, for six years.



Imad Atrash, Director of the Palestine Wildlife Society, with a group of Palestinian students in Jericho

Barn Owls and Kestrels – Biological Pest Control

In loving memory of Peggy Sporn, Arthur Sporn supported ICSBM in producing thousands of posters called 'the kestrel, welcome guest' and 'the barn owl, man's best friend'.



A Jordanian officer reading the "Barn Owls as Pest Control" Arabic booklet published by the ICSBM

The Tel Aviv Municipality has begun using kestrels and barn owls for biological pest control, exterminating rats and mice in urban courtyards. Eight local schools joined in the education efforts to promote this project.

Jordanian and Palestinian farmers have decided to join our project. In January 2006, the Cleveland Federation helped us fulfill this vision – funding research and conservation activities with Jordanian farmers and 20 nesting boxes for barn owls and kestrels, on the eastern shores of the Jordan River, across the river from the Bet She'an Valley.



Israeli farmer, Shaul Aviel and Jordanian farmer, Maged Sha'ar, content after installing their new nesting boxes

"Migrating Birds Know No Boundaries" - Update

ICSBM's educational internet project, "Migrating Birds Know No Boundaries" is being studied in 300 schools in Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Russia and the U.S. This school year, students are hosted in Israeli Air Force bases, where they learn about other methods of preventing collisions with migrating birds. The website won 9 prizes in the last 6 years.

Website won prizes in 2005

- 🏆 World Summit Award: the best in e-contest and creativity for the conference on the digitalization of cultural heritage
- 🏆 Recanati-Chais-Rashi Award: Mr. Pini Peled for the Entrepreneur teacher in September 2005, for expanding geographic facets of the educational program
- 🏆 16 Khuring Prize: to Yossi Leshem, for solving the conflict between birds and aircraft on a global level. The prize is awarded by the International Bird Strike Committee (IBSC)



Dr. Yossi Leshem's 16 Khuring Prize

A Lesson Plan – The Birds That Surround Us

The International Center for the Study of Bird Migration at Latrun joined forces with the Israel Ornithological Center, the Jerusalem Bird Observatory, the Ministry of the Environment, the Tel Aviv Municipality and The Center for Adoption of Wild Birds in the Backyard and developed a new study kit: "The Urban Nature Trail – The Birds That Surround Us". This April IOC and the ICSBM will introduce the kit first to the Israeli education system, then to the general public.

The kit was produced in 5,000 copies, including a colorful poster drawn by artist Tuvia Kurtz. The poster features drawings of the 33 most frequent bird species nesting in domestic gardens, commonly viewed mammals, amphibians, invertebrates and bird-attracting vegetation. The kit also includes a booklet and a PowerPoint presentation on CD-ROM, with lesson plans and instructions for the educator. The main purpose of the kit is to inspire teachers, students and their parents to invest in backyard gardens by planting bird-attracting, native Israeli vegetation, thus increasing their appreciation and knowledge of birds and conservation.



The new poster by Tuvia Kurtz, "The Urban Trail - The Birds That Surround Us" is available in Hebrew through the ICSBM and the IOC for \$20 including shipping.



ICSBM, in cooperation with the Israeli Air Force, published a calendar with drawings by Tuvia Kurtz of birds and airplanes.

Discovering connections between Judaism, Birds and Music

In November 2005, Yossi Leshem and Dan Alon hosted a donor who has been involved with ongoing SPNI programs that incorporate Jewish and environmental concepts. With her support, a new program will expand on these concepts and explore the relationship and significance of birds, music and Judaism. In March 2006, 5,000 students will participate in outdoor events to learn about this relationship. In May 2006, the ICSBM and the IOC will conduct a seminar in the Galilee on the topic. In November a festival in the Hula Valley is planned, where participants will enjoy lectures and sessions led by the top authorities on the subject of birds, Judaism and music. Participants who so choose will also have the rare opportunity to say morning prayers (Shaharit) accompanied by the calls of 30,000 cranes as they leave their roosts at dawn.

SPNI's new Army Prep Course at Ma'agan Michael Field School

High school graduates of all social backgrounds postpone their military service for a year and spend that time volunteering and participating in Mechina Kdam Zvait (literally meaning army prep course). They volunteer and study leadership issues, Israeli heritage, social issues and strengthening the tenuous bond between the religious and the secular. This unique framework, which trains 1,600 youths religious and non religious annually, helps Israel develop its future military and civil leadership.



1976: Muki Betzer, right, then Deputy Commander of the Entebbe Rescue Operation, preparing the Mercedes

SPNI launched its first Mechina at the Ma'agan Michael field school, a world renowned birding site at the foothills of Mount Carmel, along the Mediterranean coastline. SPNI's Mechina focuses on birding and environmental studies and volunteer work with the underprivileged in the near-by development town of Or Akiva. The Mechina was a joint initiative of Dr. Yossi Leshem and Muki Betzer, Mechina Director, who was Yoni Netanyahu's Deputy Commander in the Entebbe Operation. Ret. Colonel Muki Betzer, a famous war hero and highly successful entrepreneur, chose to leave the business world and devote himself to educational and social activism.

Mark Gelfand donated a substantial part of the necessary initial funding, enabling SPNI to initiate the program in September, 2005 with 17 participants.



Muki Betzer, at Maagan Michael Mechina



Falcon Rescue Society

While writing her MSc thesis on the ecology of the Lesser Kestrel, Ifat Liven concluded that the solution to preserving the species lay in reaching out to residents, as the birds nest mainly in residential areas. Thus she came to SPNI's IOC in 1998, where she began to realize her dream of a Falcon Rescue Society, powered by the people.

Falcon Rescue Society HOTLINE - *The Red Line for the Lesser Kestrel*

A hotline for nestlings (baby birds) that fall off roofs has proven immensely successful. Resident awareness of the Red Line is tremendous and the Rescue Society has managed to rescue hundreds of nestlings and birds. Rescued birds are banded, so we can check if they come back the following year. Ifat Liven comments emotionally, "The people do this - I couldn't do it without them."

IOC Birding Education

Students, learning to use binoculars and bird guides, were so enthused by the program that they chose to spend their afternoons watching nests near their homes and handing out information sheets to passers-by, with instructions and a hotline number to call in case of an injured bird. The program frequently includes field trips, such as a visit to a Natural History Museum, a bird ringing station or watching vultures at the Gamla Reserve.

☺ In Alona, youth go door-to-door asking residents if there are lesser kestrels nesting on their roofs. The kids are actually performing valuable survey and public awareness work. Yet they not only enjoy this work, it really brings their academic study of ornithology alive. Alona was the first region to begin lesser kestrel conservation work on a grassroots level, when the Alona Regional Planning Council put up nesting boxes with SPNI. Throughout her struggle with cancer, Tirtza Keren, an avid bird lover in Alona, initiated an educational program in the primary schools in '97 together with the SPNI and the Alona region Council. She ran the program until Jan '05, when she passed away, yet SPNI and the Alona region council continue her work, continue to be inspired by her. All year long this school's regular uniform is a birding shirt. Every May 1,000 people come for a free tour of the neighborhood's lesser kestrels - there is a photo exhibit, a temporary bird ringing station and the kids run various activity booths.

☺ Ramot Menashe's program works just like Alona's - Israel's Electric company generously sponsors Bet Sefer Hatikva and Bet Sefer Omarim during the school year.

☺ The Gezer Region, between Ramle and Latrun, will have an IOC birding education program in the Bet Sefer Ayalon starting March 2006.

☺ In Jerusalem, the Musrara neighborhood community center hosted the program, which was sponsored by the Jerusalem Foundation, but the project is halted due to lack of funds. March through June there was a free weekly tour of the neighborhood's lesser kestrels, run by the Musrara program guide, a local trained by IOC. Late May/early June each year, the neighborhood-wide tour of the kestrels was a highlight of Musrara community activities.

☺ Safed, a favorite of Kabbalists and also of our beloved Lesser Kestrel, joined our education initiative in September '04 with the kind help of the Gimprich Foundation, but we've run out of funds and the program has sadly come to a halt.

Reintroduction

Endangered birds have been re-released the wild in Ramat Hanadiv and Nahal Mearot. Typically all eggs hatch, but in the Jerusalem colony several nestlings die from starvation and only 1-2 nestlings fledge from the nest. The Falcon Rescue Society takes a couple of eggs from the Jerusalem nests to reduce competition over food in the nest to save all the nestlings; the Jerusalem Zoo incubates and later releases them. This critical work was part of Dr. Adiv Gal's doctoral research. A friend and colleague of Ifat Liven, Dr. Gal took over the birding education program in Alona after completing his doctorate in 2005.



The Lesser Kestrel, *Falco naumanni*, is a migratory globally threatened species. The brownish-red colorful male is the flag species for the program; the goal is to protect all endangered bird species. (Photo by: Yossi Eshbol)

Jerusalem

1998: 80-90 pairs of lesser kestrels

2004: 40 pairs of lesser kestrels

Israel

1953: thousands of lesser kestrels

2000: 550 lesser kestrels



A high percentage of nestlings starve or fall from their nests mere days prior to fledging. (Photo by: Yossi Eshbol)

Grand Opening of the Education Center at Latrun!

Gratifying several years of intense efforts by the Armor Memorial Association and SPNI's ICSBM, the educational center commenced operations on May 1st, 2005. Located in eastern Latrun, overlooking the Ayalon Valley, the education center includes 44 rooms, with a capacity for 244 people, including a complex of 4 study rooms; one of these is the bird migration computerized online classroom and another will be used for a new organization, educating the IDF to conserve and protect the environment.



IDF Chief of Staff General Dan Halutz, visiting the new ICSBM computerized classroom with host Dr. Yossi Leshem

IDF Chief of Staff, General Dan Halutz visited the complex, and was highly impressed with the cooperation between the SPNI, the Armor Association and the IDF. On January 23, 2006, an exciting ceremony in the educational center was held, with Lockheed Martin's Senior Vice President, Dr. Robert Trice, Lockheed Martin's regional president of the Middle East, Turkey and Africa, Retired General Jim Jamerson, and Lockheed Martin's Vice President Israel, Retired General Joshua Shani (the pilot who led the Entebbe Operation), in attendance. Lockheed Martin donated a significant sum to the educational center and honored us with an all-star turnout at the opening ceremony. We wish to express our deepest thanks to them for their dedication to our work.



Grand Opening Ceremony of the education center January 23, 2006 with the Lockheed Martin Board, in the computerized online classroom. From right to left: SPNI founder Professor Amotz Zahavi, General Jameson, Dr. Trice and General Shani

SPNI's Honored Guest - Frances Cairncross

Frances Cairncross, Managing Editor of the *Economist* until 2004, now Rector of Exeter College in Oxford, has published several books on the topic of conservation. Her latest book, *The Death of Distance*, published by Harvard Business School Press, became a best seller. She met Yossi Leshem several years ago at the UNESCO



Frances Cairncross reading SPNI's Birding Newsletter while floating in the Dead Sea, the lowest place on earth

World Heritage Conference in Venice, Italy, where she was a keynote speaker. At his invitation, she came to Israel in September 2005 and toured Israel for a week with Yossi and Dan, to learn about the economic power of birds in Israel. The trip highlight was gliding with the birds; she flew along with a flock of 500 migrating storks along the Great Rift Valley. She met Mr. Shimon Peres, Professor Itamar Rabinovich, President of Tel Aviv University, and Professor Avishai Braverman, President of Ben Gurion University, and gave a lecture at Fisher Institute - Air Force Association in Hertzeliya. In January 2006, Cairncross wrote a cover story called "Connecting Flights" about bird activities in Israel for *Conservation Practice*.

www.conservationpractice.org

Birthright Israel and SPNI

US Youth 18-26 years old will participate in SPNI's Birthright Israel Program, featuring a closer look at the Israel's natural wonders, hiking, sleeping in tents and visiting places regular tourists never see. For more information, visit

www.israelnature.org



Wind Energy versus Bird Migration



A private wind turbine at Mount Gilboa, where 23 more turbines are planned (Photo by Zev Labinger)

Since Israel signed the Kyoto Treaty, energy companies have been looking to develop alternative energy – a move one would imagine rather welcome to environmentalists. Yet when the National Planning Committee (NPC) approved plans to build a wind turbine farm directly on the path of a major migration flyway, SPNI came out in opposition. “Almost the entire Palearctic breeding population of White Pelican, Levant Sparrowhawk and Lesser Spotted Eagle pass through Israel each year,” says Dan Alon. “The importance of this flyway to these species cannot be over-emphasized.” We estimate that over 500 million birds of some 300 species migrate across Israel twice a year.

The Israel Electric Company is planning to build 63 wind turbines along the northern Jordan Valley: 23 turbines at Mount Gilboa and another 40 turbines at Ramat Serin, about 15 km to the north. The

IOC has been conducting its annual soaring bird migration surveys for the past 20 years within the Beit Shean Valley that lies between these two sites. The NPC, heeding SPNI’s warning, required the electricity company to carry out bird surveys a year in advance of any turbine construction, and for a year after their completion. The NPC contracted the IOC to carry out this work. “Of the 90,000 birds migrating over, the flight path of roughly 15,000 passed directly through the air space where the wind turbines are planned. Obviously these birds would have been in great danger of collision with the blades,” says Alon. “During the spring of 2005, observers counted over 300,000 birds, mostly White Storks of which a minimum of 15,000 crossed over the proposed turbine farm within the range of the blades. Thus about 30,000 minimum for both migration seasons were within the highest risk zone,” says Zev Labinger, project coordinator.

Working toward a Solution

“The birds we count are just those we can see during daylight hours; many more migrants fly over at night, including millions of passerines. If these turbines are going to be built, there has to be adequate mitigation measures incorporated within their operating procedures”, says Alon. “Perhaps the whole issue of whether the turbines should be built at all needs investigating. Israel is not a particularly windy country, and between them the two sites would generate less than 1% of the country’s electricity needs. Is it really worth spoiling the landscape and threatening the annual bird migration phenomenon for this? Even if all the proposed windfarms in Israel are built, they would still only supply 5% of our electricity needs. Surely there is potential for reducing our power needs by this figure and developing alternative sources of energy that would be less harmful to the environment?”

New Study with Satellite Tracking Systems: Wintering Greater Spotted Eagle in the Hula Valley Summering Short Toed Eagles in the Judean Desert

Last autumn two new MSc students began their research with Professor Uzi Motro, from the Hebrew University, in a joint project with the Dr. Yossi Leshem of the ICSBM and Dan Alon of the IOC.

Hawkwatch, an American conservation and research NGO, supported this project by donating transmitters; they intend to become active collaborators with our educational on-line activities, bringing worldwide students together.

Student Ron Milgater will research the wintering population of the Greater-spotted Eagle in the Hula valley. This site is of international importance to this species, which was declared a globally endangered species. Student Sameh Darawshi an Arab Israeli from the Galilee, will research the Short-toed Eagle which nests in the Judean hills during the summer. This species feeds mainly on snakes, but was also observed in agricultural lands, hunting field mice.



Sameh Darawshi banding a Short Toed Eagle



Ron Milgater banding a Lesser Spotted Eagle

Hula Valley International Bird Festival

November 5th – 11th, 2006

During the peak birding season in the Hula Valley, when the migration season is at its height and the wintering species have arrived, a great variety of lectures, guided tours and identification workshops will be given in the field by some of the best international experts:

- 📍 Gull identification on the Mediterranean Seashore – Klaus M. Olsen
- 📍 Raptor identification in the field – Dick Forsman
- 📍 Bird photography in the field – David Cotteridge
- 📍 International nature artist will paint, teach and exhibit

Attractions include:

- 📍 Flying alongside migrating flocks in a motorized glider
- 📍 Birdwatching from a mobile hide
- 📍 Bird ringing demonstration
- 📍 Tours to the best birding sites in Northern Israel: Maagan Michael, Bet Shean Valley, Gamla, Mount Hermon and the Hula Valley

Come enjoy the amazing sight of tens of thousands of Cranes, thousands of Pelicans, a huge variety of raptors, waders, ducks and song birds!!

For details and reservations, please contact:
www.hula-birding.com



Witness the awe-inspiring crane migration!



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Special Offer for Our Readers

We are publishing a new series of ten postcards with outstanding photos of birds mentioned in the Bible, taken in contemporary Israel, with relevant Biblical quotes in Hebrew and English. For \$20 you get all ten postcards, including airmail shipping. Please send a check to SPNI, including your name and address, to the ICSBM or to the IOC at the addresses below.



For further information, please contact:
ICSBM : yleshem@post.tau.ac.il or the IOC: ioc@netvision.net.il

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