

A Bird's Eye View of the Holy Land

Newsletter From Israel | No. 6 | Spring 2007



Dozens of Griffon Vultures gather in the feeding stations in Sde Boker, Negev. We intend to build a similar feeding station in the Marom Galil area, near the Lebanon border, in 2007, in memory of fallen pilots Colonel Tsvika Luft and Captain Tom Farkash. Photo by Yoram Shpirer.

Dear Friends,

This past year, 2006, was difficult for Israel, its people, wildlife and nature. The unexpected war resulted in many families losing their loved ones in part of a seemingly endless conflict. Missiles landed in northern Israel, causing damage not just to people, but to wildlife and their habitat. We would like to share a touching story related to the recent war with Lebanon and a bird species that appears 28 times in the Bible – the Griffon Vulture. A *Longbow*, the most advanced military chopper, crashed 5 kilometers south of the Lebanese border and both pilots died: Colonel Tsvika Luft and Captain Tom Farkash. The crash zone was adjacent to an area where a new joint SPNI, Israel Electric Corp. (IEC) and Israel Nature and Parks Authority project is being developed under the leadership of the Marom HaGalil Regional Council: the establishment of a feeding station for vultures that once nested in the wild cliffs of the Galilee but have almost disappeared completely from the landscape.

According to the descriptions from Baptist Priest Henry Baker Tristram, a famous priest who hiked the area from 1863-1864, the Amud Wadi was a focal point for hundreds of nesting Griffon, Egyptian and Bearded vultures, Great Spotted and Bonelli Eagles. Nowadays, only several pairs of Griffon Vultures and one pair of Egyptian Vultures nest on the cliffs. The other species have become extirpated. (continued on page 2)

Yours truly,

Dan Alon, Director
Israel Ornithological Center (IOC)

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



Visit our website: www.birds.org.il

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Israel Ornithological Center



International Center
for the Study of Bird
Migration, Latrun



Tel Aviv University
Department of Zoology



Griffon Vulture Protection Project Dedicated to Fallen Pilots (cont'd from cover)



Captain Tom Farkash

7/18/73 - 7/24/06

Captain Tom Farkash made aliyah with his parents, Anat and Doron, at a young age and eventually joined the Air Force. Although he was a gifted musician and pilot, he remained a modest, sensitive and loyal friend. Tom admired his sisters, Amit and Ori, and was loved by Reut, his family in Israel and Canada and his many friends.



Colonel Tzvika Luft

5/27/64 - 7/24/06

Colonel Tzvika Luft, first-born son of Talma and Eli, husband of Orna, father of Aya, Mika and Yuli, and brother of Uri, Peleg and Hagai, grew up in Kibbutz Rosh HaNikra. Tzvika joined the IDF in 1983 and served valiantly as a career soldier, in various commanding roles, including the famed Apache Squadron, until his tragic death. Modest, charming and funny, Tzvika was highly regarded by his soldiers, fellow commanders and many friends.

On February 8, 2007 IOC and ICSBM organized a tour in the vulture feeding station, where we met with Dr. Ofer Bahat, founder of the project, Marom Hagalil Mayor Shlomo Levi, the board, local residents, Tom Farkash's parents, Anat and Doron, as well as with Tzvika Luft's wife, Orna, and parents, Telma and Eli. We jointly decided to promote the establishment of the vulture feeding station and to name it after these pilots, who lost their lives defending Israel. The station will also include an observation point, which will have remote control cameras for observing vultures in their nests. ICSBM and IOC plan to develop educational programs, to enable students, local settlers and tourists to visit the station. **Any assistance for the promotion of this project will be greatly appreciated.**



The Israel - Sudan Connection

In our last newsletter we published an article about MSc student Sameh Darawshi, who is researching a fascinating phenomenon occurring in the Judean Plains - the gathering of huge flocks of Short-toed Eagles (sometimes as many as 85 eagles), for the purpose of hunting rodents in agricultural fields. This is a rare occurrence since the species feeds mainly on snakes.

During the 2006 nesting season, Darawshi managed to capture 125 Short-toed Eagles and mark them for identification with special color-coded rings. Satellite transmitters, obtained by Dr. Jeff Smith, chief scientist of the American conservation and research NGO- Hawkwatch, were attached to four of these Eagles. For the very first time we have learned where the "Israeli" Short toed Eagles choose to spend their winter season. As shown on the map, all four Eagles wintered in Sudan, reinforcing ICSBM's slogan - *Migrating Birds Know No Boundaries*.



All four (Israeli) Short-toed Eagles wintered in Africa. At the end of February 2007, they typically return to nest in Israel.

27th Annual Ornithology Study Day's Stirring Events



Dr. Yossi Leshem and Dan Alon (not shown) hand the certificate and framed photo of cranes near Mount Hermon to author Meir Shalev. Seen from right to left in the background: Zoology Department Director Professor Avraham Hefetz, Environmental Protection Minister Gidon Ezra and SPNI Executive Director Gershon Peleg

The annual Ornithology Study Day, the joint project of IOC and ICSBM at Tel Aviv University, takes place on Hannukah. More than 700 people attended the 27th annual study day on December 4, 2006. Environmental Protection Minister Gidon Ezra gave the opening speech, in a ceremony in which four prizes were given in memory of fallen soldiers and officers who were active birdwatchers. An unique prize was given to author Meir Shalev for his book *Pigeon and a Boy*, which rapidly became a bestseller in 2006, selling 120,000 copies in the first three months. The story of a guide who specializes in ornithology trips in Israel, *Pigeon and a Boy* deals with the Independence War and the use of carrier pigeons. Shalev joined SPNI birding experts for several days in the field, to observe birds close up and to acquaint himself with the subject. Shalev received this special prize for promoting ornithology in Israel in a new light.

Starlings' Return

All through the 70's and 80's Starlings symbolized Israel's winter land- and skylines. Flocks of millions of Starlings were regularly observed in different parts of Israel. But in the late 80's Israel saw a drastic decrease in the number of Starlings. Possible reasons for this include damage to their nesting areas in Russia, the Chernobyl disaster and a change in their wintering grounds.

According to Dan Alon, director of SPNI's Israel Ornithological Center, the spectacle of large flocks of Starlings has once again graced the backdrop of the Israeli winter scene: *"During the last few years the large flocks of Starlings have returned to Israel and this year their numbers reached a record high."* In many places throughout Israel there are reports of flocks of tens of thousands of Starlings performing amazing aerodynamic maneuvers and complex aviation stunts, much to the pleasure of the spectators.

Starlings are medium-sized passerines with strong feet. Their flight is strong and direct, and they are very gregarious. Their preferred habitat is fairly open country, and they eat insects and fruit. Starlings have diverse and complex vocalizations, and have been known to mimic sounds from their surroundings, including car alarms, and human speech patterns. The birds can recognize particular individuals by their calls, and in this way share information regarding the location of food sources.



A flock of Starlings maneuvering over the Hula Agamon.
Photo by Barak Granit.

Nyman Pond's Ripple Effect

A year after its creation, Nyman Pond at the Jerusalem Bird Observatory (JBO) appears – to humans and wildlife alike – more like a natural pond, as native plants establish themselves and wintering birds passing through Captol Hill, Sacher and Rose Parks make their first discovery of this new habitat. The beautiful Song Thrush stops by to drink before he flies off to roost somewhere in the Jerusalem Hills. Dozens of finches are feeding on seeds around the pool and then flitting off to some chosen spot on the bank to drink and bathe in the pool. The Smyrna Kingfisher, one of Jerusalem's most colorful birds, has become a regular visitor to the pond - it starts its day hunting frogs and fish around the pool and returns at the end of the day to bathe in its unique way - flying and dipping in the water. Some of Jerusalem's rarest birds appear in the afternoon on the pool's bank, the Hawfinch, a rare winter visitor from Europe that feeds on olive pits, joined by Bramblings, have a communal bath and drink at the Nyman Pond.

Not only birds flock to the pond, but schoolchildren from all over the city, retirees, bird watchers and photographers are making good use of the pond and Dr. Kay Gore's bird hide. Everyone wants to watch the birds in the pond. Although already quite popular, numbers of visitors to the JBO are steadily increasing. JBO co-founders and directors Amir Balaban and Dr. Gidon Perlman are seeing one of their goals fulfilled, *"More people are learning to enjoy wildlife in the city."* Even, apparently, the media, as Nyman Pond has recently received much local and international press.

According to Amir Balaban, the pond has had a ripple effect on every aspect of JBO work, *"the pond has also increased our banding capacity, enabling us to monitor many more birds and mitigate intensive development on Capitol Hill, as new roads and new buildings take over nature's haunts."*

JBO Sets its Roots Deeper

Just a hop, skip and a jump from Israel's Parliament, the Knesset, the JBO is still looking for an Endowment Fund, to preserve the sanctuary as an urban wildlife refuge for all time, with ongoing educational activities. In the process of establishing it as a more permanent fixture on Knesset grounds, Balaban and Perlman are in the process of obtaining building permits for the new visitor center, as most of the funds have been secured. Ariel Zussman's family has sponsored the refurbishing of the research cabin in his memory. Bird banding is performed here and observations recorded – this important research is utilized by ornithologists from Europe to Africa - and the necessary renovations are



Photo by Amir Balaban

Barn Owl Brings Good Luck to the Middle East

The joint Israeli-Jordanian program, using Barn Owls and Kestrels as biological pest control, is progressing impressively. The project is a joint venture of ICSBM director Dr. Yossi Leshem, PhD students Motti Charter and Yoav Motro, and Bet She'an Valley farmers, coordinated by Shaul Aviel and is funded by the Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland, led by Oren Baratz and CERC. The project was hugely successful with Jordanian farmers and is continuing to progress successfully in 2007. In Jordan, the program is being coordinated by General (Ret.) Mansur Abu Rashed, once a senior Jordanian intelligence Officer in the Jordanian Army and one of the leaders of the Israel-Jordan peace process; General Abu Rashed is currently the chairman of the Amman Center for Peace and Development (ACPD).



Retired General Mansour Abu Rashed, Jordanian ACPD Chairman, proudly displays an (Israeli) Barn Owl from the Bet She'an Valley as a symbol of good luck.

In the Muslim tradition, Barn Owls symbolize bad luck. Thus, many of the Jordanian farmers were hesitant

to cooperate at first. Yet after a few farmers used Barn Owls instead of chemical pesticides with tremendous success, the others were quick to follow suit. The project's eventual success and accomplishments have brought us to the conclusion that in the Middle East it will not be the dove that will bring peace, but the Barn Owl, as a symbol of collaboration and good luck. Both Jordanian and Israeli farmers are proud, knowing that their innovative use of Barn Owls over chemicals is preserving the quality of their soil, water as well as their own health.



1994 - Signing of the Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty in the Arava, north of Eilat, by President Bill Clinton and Yitzhak Rabin. From left to right standing: King Hussein, President Weitzman, and in uniform Retired General Mansour Abu Rashed, and to his right his Israeli partner Gen. Baruch Spiegel.

Counting Birds in Times of War



More than 500 million migrating birds make Israel's skies second to none globally for tracking, researching and studying the phenomenon of bird migration. However, the intense concentration of soaring birds in the limited air space over Israel poses a severe flight safety risk to Israel Air Force (IAF) pilots.

In response, the IOC has developed a network of ground observers to protect pilots' lives. Professional ornithologists and bird loving volunteers come from Israel and around the world to help count. As amazing as the sea of birds in the sky, so is the sea of volunteer observers, lying on the ground, counting birds, for hours and hours, and days and days. This network of dedicated volunteers has been recording birds across northern Israel, from the Mediterranean Sea in the west to the Great Rift Valley in the east, every autumn since 1983.

Likely the oldest and longest-running survey of its kind in the world, every year as many as 300,000 storks and 500,000 birds of prey (including 300,000 Honey Buzzards, 100,000 Lesser Spotted Eagles, 60,000 Levant Sparrow Hawk and 30,000 pelicans) are counted and observed.

When the time came to rally the volunteers in 2006, war had devastated Israel's northern region and many volunteers cancelled. Nevertheless, the IOC carried out the survey with those courageous bird lovers who showed up in spite of everything - and the numbers of birds counted were surprisingly similar to the perennial averages. This year we hope to see the volunteers return to contribute to this important endeavor.



Migrating White Pelicans being counted. Photo by Hadoram Shirihai.

Lurking Dangers on a Stork's Migration Path

Researchers from SPNI's Israel Ornithological Center (IOC) were surprised to discover a stork flying with an African hunting spear stuck in her body, which had managed to survive and fly the whole distance from Africa to Israel's Hula Valley.

A rare and amazing spectacle was revealed this past summer by Yoav Perlman, a researcher from the IOC - a stork with an African spear stuck in her body. The stork was wounded by an African hunter while wintering in Africa. According to Perlman, "the spear sliced through the wing's base, but apparently did not harm any vital organ or tissue, enabling the tough stork to continue her migration route." However it was clear that the stork was encountering flight problems and appeared to have stopped her regular migration route up north. Perlman decided it would be best to leave the stork alone, since chasing her for the purpose of saving her would lead to her exhaustion and since her chances of surviving a medical operation were very low in any case.



Stork flying with an African spear piercing the base of her wing

Every year Africans hunt the massive white stork for food. In poverty-stricken areas of Africa, migrating birds are an essential source of food. Primitive hunting tools, such as spears and bows and arrows are still being used.

According to Yoav Perlman, storks encounter hazards in Israel as well. Fish farms in the north of the country are the culprits here, with birds facing dangers such as poisoning and entangling in fishing nets, some resulting in injury and death. Since Israel is located in the pathway of the migration route for millions of birds, it must act with extreme caution to enable the continuation of this amazing bird migration phenomenon without causing unnecessary damage to birds.

Israel's unique location, at the junction between the storks' wintering locations in Africa and their nesting locations in Europe and Asia, makes it a fantastic site for witnessing an extraordinary phenomenon: More than 500,000 white storks, almost their entire worldwide population, migrate through its skies every year. In the spring, most of the storks hurry back to their hatching nests and the migration season ends in April. Only a few hundred old, young, ill and wounded storks, which have missed the nesting season, stay in Israel through the spring and the summer. Some of them will migrate back to Africa in the autumn.

Tracking Cranes from Israel to Ethiopia

Always innovating, IOC is embarking upon a new project - tracking and monitoring cranes on their migration route between Israel and Africa using satellite transmitters. Thanks to Lufthansa's support, SPNI's Israel Ornithological Center will conduct this cutting-edge research. This project will assess the biological and social causes of conflicts between farmers and cranes on their staging and wintering grounds. IOC Director Dan Alon elaborates: *"In the Hula Valley we developed proactive measures for reducing land-use conflicts between farmers and cranes by working together with affected landowners to address their needs and aspirations, conducting research on specific habitat requirements for staging and wintering cranes, and launching educational and awareness campaigns to promote crane and habitat conservation."*

Research has enabled IOC ornithologists to understand the cranes' migration route from Israel to Europe, and with Lufthansa's aid, we are hoping to learn about the cranes' southern migration route to Ethiopia. Understanding the cranes' migration route is critical to ensuring the safety of their wintering grounds from hunting and poisoning. In addition, the information gathered will enable environmental organizations to confront conflicts between farmers and cranes on other staging and wintering grounds.

IOC representative Itay Shanni recently returned from Ethiopia, after joining a delegation of international crane researchers. The delegation published a survey revealing their findings, including the observation of 50,000 wintering cranes in Ethiopia, many of which had migrated there from Israel. This is the first time that such a survey has been carried out.

Lufthansa is a veteran partner in IOC's Hula Valley project, a site which has since become one of the country's main tourist attractions. In Israel, Lufthansa's Executive Director Ofer Kisch said: *"We are proud to once again support one of the most important projects in northern Israel. This project is highly significant to Israel's environment and eco-tourism."* The crane is Lufthansa's original trademark.



Dedicated to a Fallen Soldier

Mark Gelfand of Boston, one of ICSB-Latrun's major donors, frequently visits Israel. During Gelfand's 2004 trip to ICSBM-Latrun, we discovered the name Yehuda Gelfand on the memorial wall at the site and decided to investigate. Yehuda Gelfand fell on June 8, 1948 in the battle with Egypt at Nitzanim. In November 2006, Mark and Barbara Gelfand visited the site of the Nitzanim battle to learn about one of the most famous battles of the Independence War, in which 37 soldiers, including 3 female soldiers and Yehuda Gelfand, were killed and 105 soldiers surrendered to the Egyptians. Before this visit, Colonel Benny Michaelson assisted us in finding Yehuda Gelfand's personal file in the IDF archives. We found out that Gelfand's mother, Shoshana, had written to his commander to request his release from the frontlines, since he was an only child. After she received no reply, she wrote a personal letter to then PM Ben Gurion, but this letter reached Ben Gurion after Gelfand had already fallen. When Ben Gurion responded to her that her son had fallen, she committed suicide.

Mark and Barbara were moved by the poignant tale and although Mark Gelfand has no known family connection with Yehuda Gelfand, he decided to name the planned bird museum at Latrun after Yehuda Gelfand, a decision that has touched everyone deeply.



Mark Gelfand, indicating Yehuda Gelfand's name at the memorial site at Latrun.

Two days later we drove to Ma'agan Michael Field School for a ceremony honoring Mark and Barbara for their support of SPNI's pre-army prep-course. The field school is directed by Retired Colonel Muki Betzer and focuses on leadership, environment and ornithology. After meeting 28 students, the plaque was unveiled in the Gail Robin house (Robin is a photographer who was killed by terrorists while shooting bird pictures in the Ma'agan Michael fish pools). Pilot and celebrity linguist Dan Hamitzer arrived for the special occasion. Hamitzer's father fell in the same battle as Yehuda Gelfand in Nitzanim. In 1993, Hamitzer discovered a documentary made by Egypt, documenting the corpses of the Israeli soldiers who fell in that battle. Hamitzer identified his father's body 55 years after he was killed. We sent Hamitzer the picture of Yehuda Gelfand from the IDF archive and Hamitzer identified Yehuda Gelfand's body in the documentary.



Mark Gelfand (left), speaking with Dan Hamitzer (center) and Barbara (right). Above Gelfand is the statue of Hamitzer's grandfather, Job. Hamitzer's father was a talented painter and Hamitzer published a book in his memory, *Panta Rhei*.

"Zipor Hanefesh" (Bird of the Soul)

Thanks to an anonymous donation, SPNI initiated a number of unique programs in the last year which integrate ornithology, Judaism, music and nature. The programs' intent is to introduce the public and school children to the field of ornithology and to present its connection to Judaism through the use of Biblical sources and music. Last spring, 4,000 school children participated in five events that took place in five different areas throughout Israel. In addition, three seminars were conducted at Kfar Blum in the Galilee, which attracted large numbers of participants and drew a great amount of public and media interest. In the framework of our activities, we jointly produced with Raz Winery a kit of six liquors in various flavors; each flavor was named after a bird species which nests in Israel. Contributions from the liquor sales were given to Israeli bird conservation.



Meeting of the Princesses

Fourteen years ago, satellite transmitters were attached to 120 White Storks, as part of ICSBM's joint project with the German Max Planck Institute. One stork, named Princess, has been transmitting signals for 13 years, while migrating from Germany to Cape Town and back via Israel. The German television network, ZDF, produced a 90 minute film and a book called *The Princess' Migration Voyages*. Recently, Dr Yossi Leshem spent three months as a visiting Lecturer in Japan, where he met with her Imperial Highness, Princess Takamado of Japan. Princess Takamado is President of BirdLife International, the largest birding organization globally. As a fitting gesture, Yossi presented Princess Takamado with the movie and book detailing the life of the "bird princess," which died last December in South Africa.



Joint Research with the Navy

Due to the tremendous success of the joint research with the Israeli Air Force, ICSBM had a recent opportunity to cooperate with the Israeli Navy, initiating new research in the Fall and Spring of 2006. With the use of the Navy's coastal radar system, ICSBM was able to track nocturnal migration of birds that cross the Mediterranean. In recent years, ELTA Systems Ltd. developed a next generation radar system called *EL/M-2226*, which is now stationed throughout Israel's coastline; the new radar system allows ornithologists to track migrating birds that cross the Mediterranean at night. The goal of this research is to reduce the number of false alarms of a terrorist boat when it is actually due to migrating birds. False alarms happen when migrating birds pass in the direction of suspected trespassing ships.



Illustration of the *EL/M-2226* coastal radar.



A Pelican landing for a rest stop on the prow of a Navy Wasp ("Dabur" in Hebrew) patrol boat during a routine patrol in the Mediterranean.

ICSBM-Latrun's New Classroom

On December 4th 2006, ICSBM-Latrun, Yad La'Shiryon (the Armored Memorial Association), and the IDF jointly inaugurated a new classroom, adjacent to the birding classroom in the educational campus in Latrun. The classroom has been fully equipped with computers and audio-visual equipment and decorated with stunning photographs taken by Michael Una. Una, an IDF tank commander, and his fiancé, Horaya Hager, were killed in a car accident on the very day they became engaged. Una's parents, Yael and Yachin Una, and Hager's parents, Ronit and Moshe Hager, donated all the classroom equipment for the purpose of promoting positive ways of dealing with conflict between the military and the environment.

Finding Common Ground between the IDF and the Environment

More than 240 soldiers study at the educational campus every week. These soldiers come away with an understanding of environmental conflicts and ways of dealing with them. ICSBM plans to produce guidance kits for commanders, to enable them to expose the IDF to the significance of environmental preservation. SPNI, ICSBM and Yad La'Shiryon would like to thank and recognize the Una and Hager families for their generous contributions.

Popular New Birding Curriculum

In December 2006, ICSBM published "Spreading Wings Over Birds of Prey" – a new educational kit for both student and teachers - in a joint venture with the Israel Electric Company. The kit includes four interactive CDs and dozens of educational lesson plans and informative maps. The kit is designed to facilitate teaching youth about birds of prey which nest in Israel and the actions taken to preserve them. The curriculum includes tours to vulture nesting sites and has already been implemented in 40 schools throughout Israel.

Gildor Family Project

As many as 70 schools participated in a contest for inventing a device for repelling birds from civil and military airports and from agricultural fields. The program was studied by 9th graders for a whole year and included field trips, scientific literature and inventing innovations. Ten schools reached the final stage of the competition and on December 2006 the award ceremony took place.



The new Spreading Wings Over Birds of Prey educational kit, produced jointly with Israel Electric Company.



The Gildor Family Projects and Inventions are joint projects of the ICSBM, the Society for Excellence through Education and the Israeli Air Force.

The Vision: A National Network of Ornithological Centers

The popularity of ornithology worldwide has increased tremendously over the past two decades. The Economist estimates that there are 90 million bird lovers globally. Concurrently, the world has begun to recognize Israel's unique potential as an "ornithology superpower". While IOC's Dan Alon and ICSBM's Dr. Yossi Leshem have long dreamed of establishing a national network of ornithology centers, now the time is ripe for it. The network will strengthen the IOC's and ICSBM's ornithology connections in the Middle East and around the world, and will promote interregional and international collaboration in the fields of research, education and conservation.

There are currently 7 active birding centers in Israel – in Eilat, Lotan, Hatzeva, Jerusalem, Latrun, Kfar Ruppin and the Hula Valley. These centers mostly work independently, lacking a coordinating system to connect them and synchronize their activities. Our goal is to complete the establishment of a network of 13 birding centers across the country, to be run jointly by IOC and ICSBM and managed from ICSBM-Latrun. This venture will connect the individual centers on an interdisciplinary level, and their research through a central computerized database.



Children enjoying watching the ringing of a male Oriole as part of our educational programs.

The additional six centers, to be established by 2010, will be located in Ein Gedi, Sde Boker, Tze'elim, Ma'agan Michael, Ein Afek and the Merom HaGalil Municipality. The network's main objective is to standardize research, preservation of nature and the environment, marketing strategies, tourism and connections with international academic research institutes, all of which are currently carried out by each individual center independently.

We aim to develop the national network with the support of the Israeli government, which has expressed interest in the project, and in conjunction with environmentally oriented organizations such as the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, Nature and Parks Authority, Jewish National Fund- Israel, Mekorot, the Fund for Quarry Restoration and local municipalities. The total cost for establishing the national network of 13 ornithological centers is \$6 million.

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

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