Best known perhaps for its luminous history, Israel happens to be one of the premier places in the world for experiencing the magic of bird migration. Strategically positioned at the crossroads of three continents, and serving as the land bridge between them east of the Mediterranean Sea, Israel is a crucial stopover site for millions of birds on migration. Over 200 species pass through Israel each year as they travel from their wintering grounds in Africa to their Eurasian breeding grounds.
Spring is an amazing time for birding here. Migration is evident everywhere, and almost any green space or area with water in southern Israel will hold migrants. The skies fill with mind-boggling flocks of raptors and other soaring birds, and there is a constant trickle of shorebirds and passerines that includes sandpipers, bee-eaters, swallows, warblers, flycatchers, shrikes, buntings, and more. The variety of birds is incredible, with many wintering species still around, resident birds on territory, and wave after wave of migrants arriving daily as the season progresses.

Israel is worth visiting anytime during the spring, but late March is probably the most impressive in terms of the quality of species present and the sheer number of birds around. In addition to migrants, Israel is blessed with many wonderful Near-eastern specialty species including the last viable populations of Macqueen’s Bustard, Desert Owl, Pharaoh Eagle-Owl, Nubian Nightjar, several species of sandgrouse, and a multitude of wheatears, larks, pipits, and more.

Our tour visits all the key sites for migrants and rare residents including the Negev Desert, the Dead Sea and Judean Desert, and, of course, the migration mecca that is Eilat. Birds will be the main fare on the trip, but we will also make a point of seeking rare mammals such as Asian Wild Ass, Striped Hyena, and Arabian Wolf. For a finale, the tour includes a touch of culture with visits to two of Israel’s most historically important sites, Masada and the Old City of Jerusalem.

Co-leading this tour are VENT tour leader Andrew Whittaker and a local expert from the Israel Ornithological Center (IOC). The IOC is Israel’s largest environmental non-profit organization and the official BirdLife International partner in Israel. Serving as our ground operator, the IOC will use the proceeds from this tour to support bird conservation projects in Israel, which means that you will be protecting the very birds that you came to see!

March 21-22, Days 1-2: Departure to Tel Aviv; arrival and evening welcome. Flights from the United States to Tel Aviv, Israel depart on March 21 and arrive in Europe on March 22, with connections to Tel Aviv arriving throughout the day. Upon arrival at Ben Gurion International Airport
(airport code TLV) you will be met outside the baggage claim by a representative of our ground agent and transferred to the Isrotel Royal Beach hotel where a room will be reserved in your name.

After we check-in, you will have the remainder of the afternoon to yourself, where options include relaxing in the privacy of your room or exploring the adjacent beach area for a variety of common birds. The hotel is located very near a beach on the Mediterranean coast, and a walk to the water’s edge could produce an assortment of birds. Among the possibilities are Great Cormorant, Little Egret, Spur-winged Lapwing, Armenian Gull, and Sandwich Tern. Ornamental plantings decorate the hotel grounds and nearby parks and attract common species such as Laughing Dove, Hooded Crow, White Wagtail, Common Myna, and the regionally endemic White-spectacled Bulbul.

We will gather as a group in the hotel lobby on March 22 (Day 2) at 6:00 p.m. for a trip introduction and welcome, followed by dinner.

**NIGHT, March 21: Aboard Aircraft**

**NIGHT, March 22: Isrotel Royal Beach, Tel Aviv**

**March 23, Day 3: From Tel Aviv to the Negev Desert via Timorim Lake and Dudaim Landfill.** This morning we will depart Tel Aviv and begin the journey south toward the famed Negev Desert. Our route will take us through a region known as the Judean Plain, an expansive area of semi-desert, agriculture, and reservoirs situated between the Israel coastal plain and the outskirts of the desert. Our first stop will be at the Timorim reservoir where we should expect good numbers of waders as well as an interesting collection of raptors & wildfowl; including hopefully Little Grebe, Egyptian Goose and White-headed and Ferruginous ducks, gulls and reed bed birds such as Bluetroat, Wablers and more.

After Lunch we will continue south and enter the Negev desert. We will stop near a large landfill called Dudaim where we should expect large numbers of Black Kites, migrant White Storks wagtails, Hoopoe and more. We will depart Dudaim and head south to our hotel in Mitzpe Ramon.

**The iconic Hoopoe © Andrew Whittaker**

We will arrive at Mitzpe Ramon in the late afternoon with time to check in and get settled in our rooms before reconvening for dinner.

**NIGHT: Ramon Inn Hotel, Mitzpe Ramon**

**March 24, Day 4: Negev Desert: Zin Valley, Sde Boker, and Mitzpe Ramon.** We will spend the next week exploring the famed Negev Desert which occupies most of Israel’s Southern District. This morning we’ll visit Avdat Canyon in the Zin Valley and the desert kibbutz of Sde Boker before returning to Mitzpe Ramon for an afternoon break prior to an evening outing.

Occupying the entire southern half of the country, the Negev Desert is perhaps Israel’s most conspicuous landform. Stretching from the Mediterranean Coast across to the Dead Sea and down to the Gulf of Aqaba on the Red Sea, the Negev is a vast and varied region of sandy soils, towering dunes, rocky plateaus, rugged wadis, and
makhtesh (unique crater-like geologic formations). It is the hottest and driest part of Israel and its least populous region, although tourism and government-driven development are burgeoning.

The Negev is divided into five ecological zones of which we will visit three in the days ahead: the Central and Western Negev and the Arava Valley. Our travels will provide exposure to multitudinous landscapes ranging from relatively gentle to austere as we seek the special birds and birding spectacles characteristic of the region, especially at this season.

After breakfast we will head to Avdat Canyon in En-Avdat National Park for an easy birding and nature hike. The canyon is located in a region of badlands known as the Zin Valley and is home to a range of rare birds and mammals. Really a wadi (dry riverbed), Avdat is the largest wadi in the Negev Desert and presents scenes of striking panoramic beauty. From the rimrock above, the visitor is treated to expansive vistas in all directions, the landscape dotted with vistas and outcrops, while the steep gorge lies directly below and winds away to the north. Within the canyon are towing walls of layered sedimentary rock pockmarked from the erosive forces of wind and water. Unlike most of the gorge, it is here in the southern end where running water occurs year-round (due to an elaborate spring system).

Avdat Canyon is one of the most important sites for breeding raptors in Israel and we will watch closely for rare birds of prey including Egyptian Vulture, Bonelli’s Eagle, and Barberry and Lanner falcons. All of these birds nest at this site in low numbers and will require some luck to see. However, our efforts to find these birds will undoubtedly also turn up other desirable species such as Eurasian Griffon (the best place in Israel for this species) and loads of Tristram’s Starlings. An easy loop walk of a mile and a half in the depths of the canyon will undoubtedly turn up other species as well. Among the possibilities are Common, Pallid, Alpine and Little swifts; Rock Martin; Scrub Warbler; Blackstart; Mourning Wheatear; and an array of migrant passerines.

Later in the morning we’ll make the short drive to the kibbutz of Sde Boker and the nearby memorial park of David Ben-Gurion, interment site of Israel’s first prime minister. The park sits at the edge of the Zin Wilderness and is among the most scenic locations in the country, characterized especially by rolling badlands and mesas. Here well spend the remainder of the morning seeking resident specialty birds such as White-crowned Wheatear, Scrub Warbler, Blackstart, Black Redstart, Arabian Babbler, and Desert Lark, among many other birds. At this season the park frequently holds loads of migrant birds, a time when almost anything is possible. A representation of what we could see includes Masked Shrike; Common Redstart; Collared Flycatcher; White, and Western Yellow wagtails; and Lesser Whitethroat. Although rare, Syrian Serin occurs here from time to time as well. This site is also a very good place to see Nubian Ibex, a spectacular native member of the goat family.

After lunch, we’ll return to the hotel in Mitzpe Ramon for an afternoon break.

In addition to birds, this program emphasizes observation of some of Israel’s rarer mammals. To that end, this evening around sundown we will descend into the desert below the town where we hope to encounter Arabian Wolves. Israel is one of the last places in the Middle East with healthy populations of wolves, and the Ramon Crater, the vast desert region below Mitzpe Ramon, has a fair number of them. The Israel Nature and Parks Authority (NPA) operates several “feeding stations” around the country where carcasses are left for scavengers. We will visit the vicinity of a nearby station. To be clear, these stations are not baited for the purpose of attracting animals for the pleasure of tourists, but rather to ensure a stable population of wolves. These sites are not directly accessible, for the well-being of the animals, and we will watch the site from a distance of several hundred yards.
The animals that visit the station are completely wild and irregular in appearance, so good views will require some luck.

**March 25, Day 5: Negev Desert: Nitzana & the western Negev.** Today we’ll penetrate farther into the Negev Desert with an early morning trip west to the Nitzana region on the Sinai border. In the afternoon we’ll return to Mitzpe Ramon for a break and possibly a late-day excursion to the Ramon Crater, an amazing geologic feature unique to southern Israel.

The desert country to the west of Mitzpe Ramon is home to a range of special birds and mammals, and to give ourselves the best chance of success in finding them, we’ll need to be in the region at first light. We’ll depart the hotel well before sunrise bound for the Nitzana wilderness area. En route we will visit another feeding station near Sde Boker where our chances are good for observing Striped Hyena, Israel’s largest canid. Israel is the westernmost edge of the Asian population of Striped Hyena. These animals are solitary and very hard to see anywhere else, which makes this opportunity extra special.

The country around Nitzana is home to beautiful steppe-like terrain and vast expanses of uninhabited badlands, hillocks, and open desert. It also happens to be a remote wilderness environment that serves as a last refuge in the Middle East for the enigmatic Macqueen’s Bustard while providing habitat for a range of other localized species. Although the bustards are not always easy to find, they are such majestic birds that a search for them is well worth the time. Besides bustards, we will visit a drinking site for both Crowned and Spotted sandgrouse and even possibly Pin-tailed. We will also search for the Cream-colored Courser, Arabian Babbler, Southern Gray Shrike, and the handsome desert race of Little Owl. For an added treat, we should also see Dorcas Gazelle, a small antelope that ranges into southern Israel. We’ll also watch for another special mammal, the Asiatic Wild Ass, or Onager, which inhabits the sparse desert here as well but that can be hard to locate.
After lunch we’ll return to the hotel for an extended break, possibly taking off the rest of the day. A possible activity option is a late-day excursion to the rim of the Ramon Crater.

The small town of Mitzpe Ramon is perched on the edge of a phenomenal geologic feature known as the Ramon Crater (Makhtesh Ramon). Ramon Crater is not a crater in the classic sense, such as one that results either from meteor impact or volcanic eruption, but one formed from a series of unique geologic events.

Hundreds of millions of years ago, the area of the present-day Negev was covered by an ocean. When the area around Mitzpe Ramon emptied out, what remained was a giant hill-like structure of soil and rock. The hill flattened over time due to the processes of nature. Around five million years ago, the great Arava Rift Valley (the southern end of the Jordan Rift Valley) opened, diverting the courses of rivers, which led to intense erosion and the formation of the crater as softer rock was stripped away and harder rock remained. As erosion continued over millions of years, the bottom of the crater deepened, the surrounding walls gained height, and the landscape was transformed into a fantastical wonderland of geologic features that includes high cliffs, stratified tablelands, rock columns, mazelike wadis, and other channels. In Hebrew, the word for this type of crater is *makhtesh*, a landform unique to the Negev Desert of southern Israel. There are three such makhtesh, with Makhtesh Ramon being the largest.

Makhtesh Ramon is the core of the nature reserve of the same name that encompasses the greater area. Among the attractions of a visit to the crater are marvelous panoramic scenery and hills of clay renowned for their vibrant red and yellow coloration. Our visit to the edge of the crater will yield an awesome vista. We’ll also watch for a variety of birds from the rim including Long-legged Buzzard, Eurasian Kestrel, and White-crowned Wheatear. Less numerous but also possible are Striolated Bunting, Trumpeter Finch, and Sinai Rosefinch.

**NIGHT: Ramon Inn Hotel, Mitzpe Ramon**

March 26, Day 6: From Mitzpe Ramon to the famous migration hotspot Eilat via Meishar & Yotvata. Today is one of excitement and high-quality birding as we transition from the central Negev Desert region south to the community of Eilat at the tip of Israel on the shores of the Red Sea. Our route will take us back through the Ramon Crater to the kibbutz of Yotvata for birding and lunch before continuing on to Eilat.

Departing the hotel immediately after breakfast, we’ll descend to the floor of the crater en route to the southern Negev plateau.
The drive will take a couple of hours but will be broken up with a couple of stops for birding. Places we may choose to visit include Yelek Springs and the Meishar Plateau. Yelek Springs is a lovely setting within the Ramon Crater featuring a pool of spring-fed water at the base of an impressive rock pour-off and surrounded by smooth-sided canyon walls. Desert birds come to drink here, with Brown-necked Raven, Sinai Rosefinch and Trumpeter Finch all possible. South of Yelek Springs, the Meishar Plateau is a region of flat scrublands with taller bushes and grass. A stop here may produce sightings of Spotted Sandgrouse, Desert and Bar-tailed Larks, and Desert Wheatear. Even the lovely Temminck’s Lark is possible.

The Yotvata area includes a mix of agricultural fields and pockets of native acacia scrub. We will spend the midday and early afternoon here enjoying lunch and birding. Yotvata is a bird-rich area where large numbers of passerines can be found in the company of range-restricted specialty birds. A couple of hours of birding here might produce sightings of Namaqua Dove; “Arabian” Green Bee-eater; Western Yellow wagtails; Water, Red-throated, and Tree pipits; Greater Short-toed Lark; Bimaculated Lark (rarer but possible); and Cretzschmar’s and Ortolan buntings. The field here always hold large numbers of swifts and swallows while raptors are often seen overhead.

At this time of migration, “Steppe” Common Buzzard can be numerous.

We’ll conclude the journey to Eilat in the mid-afternoon. At some point we will drop from the southern Negev plateau into the Arava Valley, the rift zone region home to Eilat. Birding late afternoon at the famous K20 salt ponds which will be a hive of activity with loads to enjoy.

NIGHT: Isrotel Agamim Hotel, Eilat

March 27-30, Days 7-10: Eilat. Situated on the shore of the Red Sea in the extreme south of Israel and bordered by Jordan to the East and Egypt to the south and west, Eilat is considered by many the single greatest place in the world to experience bird migration. Owing to peculiarities of geography, this area is a natural “bottleneck,” or concentration point, for birds making their way north from their wintering grounds in Africa to their breeding grounds in Europe and Asia. Millions of birds consisting of over two-hundred species migrate through Eilat and the southern Arava Valley each spring. Late March is the peak of spring migration in the area and the volume of birds—on any given day and over the course of the season—can be overwhelming. During this period, the skies fill with a pageant of storks, vultures, eagles, hawks, swifts, and swallows, while every bush, puddle, and field holds migrants. Always the chance of a mega rarity too on our 2019 trip we had both a superb Hume’s Leaf Warbler & Yellow-browed Warbler!

With four and a half days in Eilat, we will visit all the key locations in the area including the famed raptor watching sites in the beautiful Eilat Mountains, where thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, of raptors of over a dozen species pass daily. We will make several visits to the famous K20 salt pans north of the city that host thousands of waterfowl, wading birds, shorebirds, gulls, terns, and other migrants. One morning will be devoted to the Eilat Birdwatching Center (IBRCE), an important sanctuary of restored salt marsh habitat that is a haven for birds.
During our visit we will meet with the park staff and get up close and personal with many migrants at the banding station. In 2019 we had Savi’s Warbler and Little Bittern in hand.

We will explore beautiful wadis and other landscapes in search of scarcer residents such as the incredible Greater Hoopoe Lark, another chance for Bustards, Sand Partridge, Hooded Wheatear, Temminck’s Lark, and the cryptic and poorly known Lichtenstein’s Sandgrouse.

We will of course spend some time on the shores of the Gulf of Eilat where we will search for the rare White-eyed Gull (a Red Sea endemic) and other Red Sea specialties such as Western Reef-Heron and Striated Heron.

We will also make time for a snorkeling excursion at the Coral Beach Nature Reserve for those interested, and a night excursion to Yotvata where we will search for migrant Egyptian Nightjars and the rare and local Pharaoh Eagle-Owl.

Overall, Eilat is an incredible place and our time here will produce a long list of birds. In addition to the species mentioned above, a representation of all that is possible follows. The purpose of this listing is not to overwhelm you with a long run of bird names, but rather to demonstrate the extraordinary diversity of birdlife found in the Eilat region in the spring. Among the great many possibilities are Great White Pelican; hundreds of Greater Flamingo; flocks of Garganey; Eurasian Spoonbill; Purple Heron; Black and White storks; assortment of Crake including Little and Baillon’s; Booted Eagle; Eurasian Marsh-Harrier; Pallid Harrier; “Steppe” Common Buzzard; Slender-billed and Pallas’s gull; Pied Avocet; Eurasian Stone-Curlew; Collared Pratincole; Little ringed plovers; Curlew Sandpiper; Temminck’s and Little stints; Marsh, Wood and Green sandpipers; Common and Spotted redshanks; Black-tailed Godwit; Eurasian Curlew; Ruff; Red-necked Phalarope; White-winged and Whiskered terns; Eurasian Hoopoe; White-throated and Pied kingfisher; European and “Arabian” Green bee-eaters; European Roller; Desert and Bar-tailed larks; Red-rumped Swallow; Tawny Pipit; Tree and Red-throated pipits; Citrine Wagtail; Rüppell’s Warbler; Bluethroat; Common Redstart; Northern, Isabelline, Mourning and Hooded wheatears; plus a range of warblers and buntings.
March 31, Day 11: From Eilat to the Dead Sea. This morning we will check out of the hotel and bid farewell to Eilat. At this point we will begin working our way back north, and our route will take us on Highway 90 all the way to the Dead Sea with some birding on route, a distance of approximately 145 miles. Our travels will bring exposure to a swath of country and landscapes we’ve not previously seen, almost all of which lies in close proximity to the Jordanian border.

Departing Eilat, we’ll make a couple of stops as we travel along the Arava Rift Valley. One of our main target birds for the day is Arabian Warbler, one of the rarest and most range-restricted of Israel’s breeding birds. This species favors acacia stands in desert environments and we will spend some time in the beautiful Shezaf Nature Reserve where several pairs breed. The reserve holds one of the best-preserved acacia “forests” remaining in the Arava Valley, in addition to highly scenic wadis where exist animals such as Dorcas Gazelle and the amazing Egyptian Uromastyx (Spiny-tailed Lizard), a hulking and spectacular reptile that can reach three feet in length. Shezaf Reserve is also a very important research site where the late evolutionary biologist Amotz Zahavi (1928–2017) studied Arabian Babblers for over forty years! Zahavi’s research was one of the key factors in the development of the famous Handicap Principle, a fascinating biological hypothesis concerning “honest” signaling among animals that plays down an individual’s greater fitness, as in sexual selection, to actually reveal its superiority. Zahavi’s hypothesis was not warmly received when he proposed it in 1975, but his ideas gained broader recognition in ensuing decades, and now with widespread agreement in the scientific community that the principle explains some animal behavior. Some of Zahavi’s babbler families are still around (supporting color rings) and are very tame, sometimes landing on visitors’ heads.

Our time here could produce an array of other resident breeders and passage migrants, such as Sand Partridge, Chukar, Pallid Swift, Long-legged Buzzard, Brown-necked Raven, Masked Shrike, Rock Martin, Scrub Warbler, and Arabian Babbler.

Closer to the Dead Sea, we’ll also visit Zohar Reservoir where are few pairs of Dead Sea Sparrows breed as well as being a good wet lands for the colorful African Swamphen and local declining Ferruginous Duck.
The day’s final destination is En-Gedi, a community on the western shore of the Dead Sea, site of our hotel for the next two nights which geography is the lowest point on our planet! Often many interesting migrants can be found around our hotel and the trees in the square. Time will be allowed to explore the amazing beach along this mega saline lake that is the Dead Sea.

NIGHT: Isrotel Ganim Dead Sea, En-Gedi

**April 1, Day 12: Masada and the Dead Sea.** The Dead Sea is another of Israel’s famous and historically important areas. The sea is itself a source of considerable interest to first-time visitors, as one might expect, but the entire area has much to offer including the stark landscapes of the Judean Desert, iconic ruins of Masada, and specialty birds. Our day will begin with a visit to Masada for a bit of history and birding, followed by an afternoon visit to the Dead Sea for those who would like to take a dip in the famous waters.

Situated on top of an isolated rock plateau overlooking the Dead Sea, Masada is one of Israel’s most important (and most popular) historic sites and a place near and dear to the hearts of the Jewish people. The emotional attachment that many Jews feel for Masada stems from the site’s ancient past, when in the time of the First Jewish-Roman War (73 C.E.), 960 Jews of the Sciarrii sect committed mass suicide, instead of surrendering, following a prolonged siege by the Roman legion. We will hear about the site’s history during our visit. Of birding interest, Masada is a good place to see Tristram’s Starling and the range-restricted Fan-tailed Raven.
After lunch and an afternoon break, we’ll move the short distance to the shore of the Dead Sea for a visit to a public beach opposite our hotel with the opportunity to dip our toes in the famous waters. If the weather is warm, those who wish are welcome to take a swim in the sea—an easy process as the beach includes facilities for changing clothes. Note that this activity is entirely optional.

The Dead Sea is a large salt-lake in the Jordan Rift Valley that straddles the border of the Kingdom of Jordan, the West Bank, and Israel proper. The Dead Sea is remarkable for a number of reasons, among which: at 1,407 feet below sea level, it is the planet’s lowest elevation on land; at 34% salinity, it is 9.6 times as salty as the ocean; and with nearly one thousand feet of water is the deepest hypersaline lake in the world.

As with most locations in Israel, the region around the Dead Sea has been inhabited for thousands of years. From ancient times to the present, the sea has attracted visitors from across the Levant for therapeutic, chemical, and construction purposes, principally for the salts and minerals that abound here. The Dead Sea is today a major tourist attraction and a site of enduring historical interest.

In the evening we will make a special excursion into the desert in pursuit of two rare and rarely seen night birds, Nubian Nightjar and Desert Owl. The nightjars, formerly more numerous, are restricted to the salt marshes of the southern Dead Sea where a tiny population remains. The Desert Owl (formerly known as Hume's Owl) is one of the rarest and most enigmatic owls in the world. A few pairs breed in deep canyons in the Judean Desert and special permits are needed to visit the nature reserves where they occur. We will visit a few territories and hopefully connect with these mysterious birds.

**NIGHT: Isrotel Ganim Dead Sea, En-Gedi**

### April 2, Day 13: From the Dead Sea to Jerusalem.

Today will be an easy day as we transition to Jerusalem. We will not be in a hurry and thus can take a bit more time to go about our business. We may defer the optional dip in the Dead Sea until this morning if we were unable to make time for the activity on the previous day, and/or we may head to the nearby En-Gedi Nature Reserve. The drive to Jerusalem will take us north along the west shore of the sea through the arid country of the Judean Desert before turning west, away from the Jordanian border, toward Jerusalem.
A short distance from the hotel is the famous En-Gedi Nature Reserve, a unique natural area home to desert specialty birds, mammals, and complex topography. Situated about one-third up the length of the Dead Sea’s western shore (from the south), En-Gedi is Israel’s largest oasis, containing two year-round streams, waterfalls, springs, and relatively lush vegetative cover. The landscape here is wonderfully varied, where cascading streams flow through rockfalls and narrow gorges while above exists a desert plateau-land ornamented with great boulders of dolomite. We may spend a couple of hours here and experience some of the reserve on foot. In areas of rough, dry terrain we will watch for two mammals of special interest: Nubian Ibex and Rock Hyrax. Both of these arid country species occur only locally in Israel. Although we may not encounter any birds that are new for the trip, we may touch base with some old friends and familiar faces such as Fan-tailed and Brown-necked ravens, Rock Martin, “Arabian” Green Bee-eater, Blackstart, Palestine Sunbird, White-crowned Wheatear, Arabian Babbler, Tristram’s Starling, and more migrants of course.

Working our way north from En-Gedi, we’ll make a point (if visibility is good) of visiting a lookout that offers fantastic views of both the Dead Sea and a remarkably sculpted canyon in the heart of the Judean Desert below.

In the mid-twentieth century, hundreds of religious documents dating from the first century B.C.E. and first century C.E. were found not far from the sea’s northwestern shore. It these documents that attained renown as the “Dead Sea Scrolls.” In fact, our schedule will allow for a brief stop and a quick look at the caves (from a parking area) where the scrolls were found.

We will arrive in Jerusalem in the mid-afternoon with time to check in to our hotel and relax before reconvening for dinner.

**NIGHT: Mt. Zion Hotel, Jerusalem**

**April 3, Day 14: day in Jerusalem.** For a grand finale, we offer a day of history and culture in the holy city of Jerusalem. Following an early breakfast, we will first get our birding hit of the day with a visit to the Jerusalem Bird Observatory, a migration hotspot. Here we can enjoy great birds in the hand and a ringing demonstration of many exciting migrants. An amazing 10-15,000 are ringed annually in the town, plus an excellent blind offers birding at the wetland and a spring which is a favorite haunt for the attractive White-throated Kingfisher. We will be joined by a licensed guide for a walking tour of the Old City and a lovely local lunch.

With roots that stretch back 5,000 years, Jerusalem is one of the world’s oldest cities and certainly one of its holiest. All three of the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—place Jerusalem at or near the core of its religious center. In the Jewish faith (and in the
national identity of the Jewish people), Jerusalem’s importance dates to the time of King David who, according to the Hebrew Bible, conquered the city in the first century B.C.E. and established it as the capital of the United Kingdom of Israel. In Christianity, the city is the site of Christ’s crucifixion, as recorded in the New Testament, while in Islam (Sunni), the prophet Muhammad traveled to Jerusalem in the 7th century C.E. and from there ascended to heaven to speak to God, as described in the Quran (Koran).

While there is much to see here, our walking tour will include visits to many of the Old City’s most important historical sites. Among the likely places we’ll see are the Temple Mount (Al-Aqsa Mosque, Dome of the Rock, and Dome of the Chain), Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Western Wall (Wailing Wall), David’s Tomb, Via Dolorosa, Cardo, and Jaffa Gate. Along the way we’ll have lunch at a traditional restaurant.

We will return to the hotel in the mid-afternoon for a welcomed break. At this point we will have the remainder of the day to relax in the confines of our lovely, or for those who wish to see more of Jerusalem, spend additional time in the city. Jerusalem offers so much, and our time here is more of a “highlights” style tour of the city. Those who seek a more in-depth Jerusalem experience should consider extending their stay in Israel following the tour.

NIGHT: Mt. Zion Hotel, Jerusalem

April 4, Day 15: Departure for home. We will organize transfers to the Tel Aviv airport this morning, although participants are free to depart Jerusalem at any time.
JORDAN VALLEY PRE-TRIP  
BIRD BONANZA, FROM CRANES TO EAGLES!  
MARCH 16-23, 2020  

Israel, despite its small size, is an extraordinary destination for birding and natural history. Perched at the crossroads of three continents—Europe, Asia, and Africa—Israel is perfectly positioned to receive the avian influences of all three continents. In 2019 we debuted VENT’s first-ever tour to Southern Israel, but as we found, no one trip can visit all of the top birding sites. Indeed, in the center of the country are some remarkable areas brimming with millions of birds that we simply could not include in our itinerary.

In 2020, we are thrilled to present our new Jordan Valley Pre-trip, which can be combined with our Southern Israel: A Spring Migration Spectacular tour. This multi-dimensional trip visits many of the country’s most important bird migration hotspots, the fabled Negev Desert, the unique Dead Sea, and, for a touch of culture, two famous historical attractions. The addition of this exciting pre-trip provides an opportunity for an enhanced Israel experience, with more landscapes and many, many more birds to enjoy.
Our tour takes advantage of the abundant concentrations of waterbirds in Israel’s two famous wetland areas situated in the Great Rift Valley, the renowned Hula Nature Reserve and fabulous Jordan Valley, until recently a hidden jewel. We have timed our visit for the onset of spring migration, when many of the wintering waterbirds are still present. Superb and easy birding is virtually guaranteed. Along the coast we will also visit Ma’agan Michael fish ponds, which are simply alive with a spectacular seasonal gathering of Common Cranes, storks, pelicans, and an amazing variety of birds of prey including Imperial, White-tailed, and Lesser and Greater Spotted eagles; Short-Toed Snake-Eagle; kites; buzzards; and harriers. In addition, a variety of exciting regional birds may include Black Francolin; White-headed, Ferruginous, and Marbled ducks; Black Stork; Eurasian Spoonbill; Great White Pelican; bitterns; Pygmy Cormorant; the sought-after Pallas’s Gull; colorful Common, Pied, and White-throated kingfishers; Syrian Woodpecker; Eurasian Penduline-Tit; Eurasian Hoopoe; Eurasian Scops-Owl; and more.

March 16-17, Days 1-2: Departure to Tel Aviv; arrival and evening welcome. Flights from the United States to Tel Aviv, Israel depart on March 16 and arrive in Europe on March 17, with connections to Tel Aviv arriving throughout the day. Upon arrival at Ben Gurion International Airport (airport code TLV) you will be met outside the baggage claim by a representative of our ground agent and transferred to the Isrotel Royal Beach hotel where a room will be reserved in your name. After check-in you will have the remainder of the afternoon to yourself, where options include relaxing in the privacy of your room or exploring the adjacent beach area for a variety of common birds.

The hotel is located very near a beach on the Mediterranean coast, and a walk to the water’s edge could produce an assortment of birds. Among the possibilities are Great Cormorant, Little Egret, Spur-winged Lapwing, Armenian Gull, and Sandwich Tern. Ornamental plantings decorate the hotel grounds and nearby parks, and attract common species such as Laughing Dove, Hooded Crow, White Wagtail, Common Myna, and the regionally endemic White-spectacled Bulbul.

We will gather as a group in the hotel lobby on March 17 (Day 2) at 6:00 p.m. for a trip introduction and welcome, followed by dinner at a locally famous family-run restaurant.

NIGHT, March 16: Aboard Aircraft
NIGHT, March 17: Isrotel Royal Beach, Tel Aviv

March 18, Day 3: North to Ma’agan Michael and on to the Hula Valley. This morning our tour being in earnest. Following an early breakfast, we will head north along the Mediterranean Coast toward the region of Ma’agan Michael where we will spend the first half of the day before continuing on to the Hula Valley.

Situated about an hour north of Tel Aviv, on the Israeli coastal plain between Haifa and Hadera, Ma’agan Michael is Israel’s largest kibbutz, an important economic center as well as an excellent site-choice for an introduction to birding in Israel. In the traditional sense in Israel, a kibbutz is a collective community based on agriculture.
Established in 1949, Ma’agan Michael, meaning Michael’s Anchorage (Ma’agan translates to “anchorage”), was founded as a settlement whose inhabitants would make their living from the nearby sea. Ultimately, Ma’agan Michael emerged as a major center of agricultural production with extensive output of field crops, orchards, bananas, an array of exotic fruits, and cotton. Over the years, the kibbutz has diversified its economy to include significant livestock farming endeavors and a large plastics factory.

Upon arrival in Ma’agan Michael we will spend the duration of the morning exploring the area and acquainting ourselves with the large diversity of bird species expected here. The prime birding and natural areas here are actually vestiges of the great Kabarra swampland that was largely drained in the 1920s, but reclaimed in part for commercial fish farming and as a nature reserve. Between the beach and inland agricultural lands, the area is dominated in part by MADAN, the aquaculture fish farming arm of the kibbutz. It is here where we will spend the majority of our time, visiting a number of wetland habitats that exist as a result of the farming operations. Many species of birds are possible here, a representation of which includes Great White Pelican; Black and White storks; Eurasian Spoonbill; Great and Little egrets; Glossy Ibis; Pallas’s, Slender-billed, and Armenian gulls; Common Redshank; Little Stint, Common and Green sandpipers; and Ruff. A nice diversity of raptors is also likely, and it probably won’t be long before we sight our first Common Buzzards, Eurasian Marsh-Harriers, and Black-shouldered Kites. On the passerine front, this area could reveal a host of resident and migrant birds alike including three species of kingfishers (Common, Pied, and White-throated), Bluethroat, Penduline Tit, Sardinian Warbler, White and possibly Citrine wagtails, and more!

Of historical interest, our route to Ma’agan Michael will take us past Caesarea, a coastal town whose roots date to antiquity when it was founded as a port city by Herod the Great, Roman client-king of Judea. Vestiges of an ancient Roman aqueduct are visible from the highway.

In the early afternoon, we will drive northeast to the Hula Valley, arriving in time to see the remarkable evening raptor roosts in the Hula Nature Reserve. This area attracts birds of prey by the hundreds, and each day, late in the
afternoon, roosts of harrier’s form with over one hundred birds possible in a single roost. The gatherings consist mostly of Eurasian Marsh-Harriers with lesser numbers of Hen Harriers and a scattering of other birds of prey.

**NIGHT: Pastoral Hotel, Kfar Blum**

**Great White Pelican is a common sight at Ma'agan Michael © Jonathan Meyrav**

**March 19, Day 4: Hula Valley.** We have allotted the entire day for exploring the Hula Valley, in particular, the “reflooded” area that forms the Agamon Hula Park. Observing the impressive concentrations of birds of prey that are found here will be of high importance, but the opportunity to seeing thousands of Common Cranes at close range will be our tour highlight! The reserve has several comfortable well positioned hides (blinds) affording great birding while sitting overlooking incredibly bird rich wetlands with lakes, reed beds, grassy pools where we can enjoy hopefully several different Eagle species and Harrier fighting over crane carcasses.

Lying within the north end of the Syrian-African Rift Valley, north of the Sea of Galilee, the Hula Valley is a large agricultural region that serves as a major bread basket of Israel, and thankfully, as host to an ecosystem of global importance. Until the early 1950s, the Hula Valley existed as a large wetland complex with an expansive shallow lake as a centerpiece. Owing to regular malaria outbreaks (it was claimed), the Jewish National Fund (JNF) launched a successful operation to drain the lake and convert the dried-out lands to agricultural use. The plan was achieved through a series of plumbing operations that diverted water from the Jordan River, the lake’s source, away from the valley.

The project was completed in 1958, but the effects of the conversion were decidedly mixed. While agricultural production soared, the environmental costs were severe. An entire ecosystem was extirpated. Among the casualties were two species of fish, now extinct; the Sea of Galilee, which saw a steep increase in pollution from agricultural runoff; and the area’s rich soil which, when exposed to the elements, quickly eroded away. Thanks to a union of forward-thinking scientists, conservationists, and nature enthusiasts, a small portion of the valley was reflooded, an effort that led to the establishment of the Hula Nature Reserve. Inaugurated in 1964, the Hula Nature Reserve not only is Israel’s first nature reserve, but a Wetland of International Importance as listed by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

The Hula Valley lies squarely in the middle of one of the world’s great migratory flyways. Each year, millions of birds pass through the valley in the spring and fall as they travel back and forth between breeding sites in Europe and Asia and wintering grounds in Africa. From an ecological standpoint, the valley is a shadow of its former self,
yet the Hula Nature Reserve is undeniably a refuge of critical importance for tens of thousands of water birds, marsh birds, and birds of prey. The valley is of international importance for wintering cranes, where up to 40,000 Eurasian Cranes winter each year. Seeing large concentrations of these resplendent birds provides a magical spectacle.

We will spend the day exploring the vast fields, fish ponds and canals for a variety of species including Black Stork; Spur-winged and Northern lapwings; Southern Gray Shrike; Eurasian Skylark; Crested Lark; Clamerous Reed and Cetti’s warblers; European and Siberian stonechats; Meadow, Water, and Red-throated pipits; and more. At this time of the year, the area is a haven for raptors, as evidenced by the presence of Greater Spotted, Imperial, and White-tailed eagles, Eurasian and Long-legged buzzards, Hen and Pallid harriers, Eurasian Marsh-Harrier and the lovely Black-shoulder Kite.

Additionally, the valley supports incredible concentrations of Black Kites, with evening roosts containing hundreds, even thousands of birds.
March 20, Day 5: South to Susita Hills to Bet-She’an Valley and Jordan valley birding Center. Driving south through the rich agricultural countryside we will enjoy birding Susita hills for the Long-legged Buzzard, localized Long-billed Pipit and Finsch's Wheatear as well as a great assortment of early spring migrants including Black-eared Wheatear and Chretzchmar's Bunting. The Lovely hills should be full of colorful spring flowers and are a strong hold for the lovely Mountain Gazelle. Continuing south we will pass the famous Sea of Galilee before arriving at our forested base, the Jordan Valley Bird Center. Specially equipped for birding groups with delightful hosts and excellent homemade food, and birds right outside our doorsteps! This afternoon we will bird the nearby rich fish ponds, marshes and the forested grounds for localized Black Francolin, Dead Sea Sparrow, Eurasian Bee-eater, Syrian Woodpecker, Eurasian Sparrowhawk and more. This evening we can try for the breeding Eurasian Scops Owls and we may be lucky and see the large Egyptian Fruit Bat.

NIGHT: Jordan Valley Center, Kfar Rupin
March 21, Day 6: Bet She’an and Jordan Valley. Located where the Jezreel Valley and Jordan River Valley converge, Bet She’an Valley takes its name from the geographically important city of the same name. Inhabited by humans since time immemorial, the Bet She’an region has persisted as a significant center of commerce and agriculture, as evidenced by the fact that its control was vigorously sought by some of history’s greatest civilizations including the Egyptians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, and Ottomans (not to mention the modern Israeli state). Today, Bet She’an is a city of about 17,500 people, almost all of whom are ethnically Jewish.

Surrounding the city, the Bet She’an Valley is a low-lying arid land dominated by agricultural fields and commercial fishponds. The birding here can be incredible and we should expect encounters with a variety of familiar feathered friends and new faces, waterbirds and landbirds alike. Garganey, “Common” Teal, European Golden-Plover, Great White Pelican, numbers of Great and Pygmy cormorants, Great Bittern, Black Stork, Purple and Squacco Herons, Pallas’s Gull, Northern Lapwing are all possible here, as is an interesting assortment of desert specialty birds such as Black Francolin, and Desert Finch. As we move around the valley, we’ll likely note huge concentrations of Black Kites, always an impressive spectacle, while tallying a collection of other landbirds that includes Eurasian Jay, Eurasian Skylark; Meadow, Water, and Red-throated pipits; Isabelline Wheatear; Spanish Sparrow; and more eagles. Greater Spotted is the most common eagle but we have legitimate chances to see Booted, Lesser Spotted, Steppe, and even Bonelli’s eagles, all of which are seen from time to time.

NIGHT: Jordan Valley Center, Kfar Rupin

March 22, Day 7: morning birding the Bet Shean valley and returning south to Tel Aviv. After a breakfast we will bird the rich wetlands and farmlands nearby followed by an early at our lodge before we drive back west towards the coast and the capital, Tel Aviv returning to our hotel, arriving in time to relax prior to gathering in the evening and meeting the arriving main tour participants followed by dinner at a nearby restaurant.

NIGHT: Isrotel Royal Beach, Tel Aviv

March 23, Day 8: Departure for home. For those not on the main tour, we will organize transfers to the Tel Aviv airport this morning, although participants are free to depart at any time.

EXTRA ARRANGEMENTS: Should you wish to make arrangements to arrive early or extend your stay, please contact the VENT office at least two months prior to your departure date. We can very easily make hotel arrangements and often at our group rate, if we receive your request with enough advance time.

TOUR SIZE: This tour will be limited to 14 participants.
TOUR LEADERS: Andrew Whittaker and a local guide

Andrew Whittaker, a senior member of the VENT staff, has led tours since 1993 throughout Brazil, Peru, Chile, Bolivia, Colombia, Argentina, Costa Rica, Panama, Europe, Israel, and Antarctica. An avid birder from an early age (thanks to his father), he became a licensed bander/ringer at age 17. Andy is an all-round naturalist who immensely enjoys sharing his fascination and deep knowledge of birds, animals, orchids, and all aspects of nature in a really fun way. Since 1982 Andy’s fascination with migration has seen him working around the world at bird observatories in Eilat, Israel; Sabah, Borneo; Long Point, Canada; and at two in Britain including the top UK bird observatory on Fair Isle, Scotland. Andy was born in England; however, he considers himself Brazilian having lived more than 30 years in this mega biodiverse country, first working for the Smithsonian Institution, studying Amazonian rainforest birds in Manaus. Andy is best known for his passionate and intimate knowledge of bird vocalizations and taxonomy, which has enabled him to discover several new species (such as the Cryptic Forest-Falcon in 2003) and rediscover others thought to be extinct. He loves nothing better than finding and showing rare and challenging skulkers to groups. In 2010 Andy, along with colleagues, produced a DVD-ROM of Brazilian bird songs, calls, and photos of 1,250 species. Andy was a consultant for the prestigious Life of Birds series by Sir David Attenborough and is considered an authority on Amazonian birds, having authored numerous technical publications on the region’s avifauna. At present Andy is working with Kevin Zimmer on a comprehensive field guide to the birds of Brazil to be published by Princeton University Press. Andy is a member of the Brazilian Records Committee, an associate researcher at the Museum Goeldi, and an active conservationist and orchid lover living with his partner in life, Jaqueline, in Porto Alegre, southern Brazil.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for the main tour is $7595 per person in double occupancy from Tel Aviv. This includes all meals from dinner on Day 2 to breakfast on Day 14, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation during the tour, gratuities, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. It does not include airfare from your home to Tel Aviv and return, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature. Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration, a small-party supplement may have to be charged.

The fee for the Jordan Valley Pre-trip is $3495 per person in double occupancy from Tel Aviv. This includes all meals from dinner on Day 2 to breakfast on Day 7, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation during the tour, gratuities, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. It does not include airfare from your home to Tel Aviv and return, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature. Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration, a small-party supplement may have to be charged.

The single supplement for the main tour is $875; and the single supplement for the Jordan Valley Pre-trip is $725. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT: To register, please contact the VENT office. The deposit is $1,000 per person for the main tour, and an additional $1000 per person of the Jordan Valley Pre-trip. If you would like to pay your deposit using a credit card, the deposit must be made with MasterCard, Visa, or American Express at the time of registration. If you would like to pay your deposit by check, money order, or bank transfer, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. The VENT registration form (available from the VENT office or by download at www.ventbird.com) should be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office.

PAYMENTS: All tour payments may be made by credit card (MasterCard, Visa, American Express), check, money order, or bank transfer (contact the VENT office for bank transfer information). These include initial
deposits, second deposits, interim payments, final balances, special arrangements, etc. Full payment of the tour fee is due 150 days (October 18, 2019) prior to the tour departure date.

**EXCHANGE RATE SURCHARGES:** In the erratic global financial markets of today, it is difficult to predict foreign currency exchange rates over the long term or at the time of operation of a tour or cruise departure. Tour prices are based upon the rate of exchange at the time of itinerary publication. If exchange rates change drastically, it may be necessary to implement a surcharge. If a surcharge is necessary, every effort will be made to minimize the amount. In many cases, these additional foreign exchange rate surcharges are passed to VENT by its vendors and suppliers.

**FUEL AND FUEL SURCHARGES:** In the uncertain, often volatile oil market of late, it is difficult – if not impossible – to predict fuel costs over the long term, and more specifically, at the time of operation of this departure. Our prices are based upon the prevailing fuel rates at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, if the fuel rates increase significantly, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

**CANCELLATION & REFUNDS:** Refunds are made according to the following schedule: If cancellation is made 180 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of $500 per person per tour will be charged unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be $100 per person. If cancellation is made between 179 and 151 days before departure date, the deposit is not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 150 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also apply to pre- and post-tour extensions. **For your protection, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance that covers trip cancellation/interruption.**

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*Unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be $100 per person. To qualify, cancellation must occur 180 days or more before departure date; deposit transfers must be made at the time of cancellation; and one transfer per deposit.

Upon cancellation of the transportation or travel services, where you, the customer, are not at fault and have not cancelled in violation of the terms and conditions of any of the contract for transportation or travel services, all sums paid to VENT for services not received by you will be promptly refunded by VENT to you unless you otherwise advise VENT in writing.

**Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of $50,000. CST #2014998-50.**

**TRAVEL INSURANCE:** To safeguard against losses due to illness, accident, or other unforeseen circumstances, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance as soon as possible after making a deposit. VENT has partnered with Redpoint Resolutions as our preferred travel insurance provider. Through Redpoint, we recommend **Ripcord Rescue Travel Insurance™.** Designed for all types of travelers, Ripcord is among the most highly regarded travel insurance programs available.

Critical benefits of **Ripcord Rescue Travel Insurance** include a completely integrated program with a single contact for emergency services, travel assistance, and insurance claims; **medical evacuation and rescue services**
from your point of injury or illness to your hospital of choice; comprehensive travel insurance for trip cancellation/interruption, primary medical expense coverage, and much more. Waiver for pre-existing conditions is available but must be purchased within 14 days of tour deposit. Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as security evacuation coverage in case of a natural disaster or other security events, and a “Cancel for Any Reason” clause (must be purchased within 14 days of tour deposit). Ripcord is available to U.S. and non-U.S. residents.

For a price quote, or to purchase travel insurance, please visit: ripcordrescuetravelinsurance.com/ventbird; or click the Ripcord Rescue Travel InsuranceTM logo on our website (click Help and Trip Insurance); or call +1-415-481-0600. Pricing is based on age, trip cost, trip length, and level of coverage.

AIR INFORMATION: Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any domestic or international air travel arrangements from your home and return. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements. Please be sure to check with the VENT office prior to purchasing your air ticket to confirm that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate. VENT cannot be responsible for any air ticket penalties.

BAGGAGE: The airlines now strictly enforce baggage regulations. Excess baggage charges, which can be substantial, are the personal responsibility of each participant. Please consult your airline to find out specific weight restrictions. Due to ever-changing circumstances in the government’s attempts to improve airport security we recommend that you check the website of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) for the most updated information: http://www.tsa.gov/.

CLOTHING: This program is structured as casual; a birding and natural history trip with light infusions of historical and cultural highlights. We suggest you bring primarily field-type clothing, which will be appropriate for most if not all occasions; however, a nicer “smart-casual” attire for evenings may be the preferred style of dress for some. The following items are recommended:

- **Pants:** A couple pairs of pants are essential. Many people prefer lightweight pants made of cotton or other material, but denim, though not as comfortable, is certainly acceptable.
- **Field Clothing:** Outdoor stores such as Cabela’s and REI carry field clothing that many birders find appealing. Pants and shirts made of lightweight yet durable materials with multiple pockets and ventilated seams are popular.
- **Shirts:** Several t-shirts, (long and short-sleeved), in addition to other comfortable styles suitable for warm weather.
- **Hat:** A hat for protection from the sun is essential.
- **Smart-Casual Attire (not essential, but may be preferred by some for evenings):** For women this includes casual dresses or skirts/slacks. For men this includes khakis/slacks and open-collared shirts.
- **Sweaters and Coats:** Cool to warm weather is anticipated on this trip, and a sweater, fleece, or light coat will definitely be useful for mornings and evenings. You should also bring a warmer water-repellent jacket in the event we encounter a wet cold front.
- **Bathing suit:** There will be a chance to take a swim or snorkel in the Red Sea while at Eilat, and take a dip in the Dead Sea while at En-Gedi.

FOOTWEAR: For footwear, we recommend a good trail-walking shoe or light hiking boot when in the field. Athletic shoes are acceptable but will not keep your feet dry and can become soiled from muddy conditions. A good walking shoe (such as an athletic shoe), may be preferred when not in the field and for our day in Jerusalem.

LAUNDRY SERVICE: Laundry service will be available for an extra charge at most of the hotels where we stay. Please be aware that while laundry service is good, it can be expensive.
**EQUIPMENT:** One of the most important aspects of having an enjoyable travel experience is being prepared with proper equipment. The following items will come in handy during your trip to Israel:

- **Backpack** – good for carrying extra clothing, field guides, supplies, and optical equipment during all land excursions.
- **Notebooks and pens**
- **Travel alarm clock**
- **Polarized sunglasses with good UV protection**
- **Sunscreen, lip balm, skin lotions**
- **Personal toiletries**
- **Cameras, lenses, memory cards, and extra batteries**
- **Collapsible walking stick** – a highly recommended item for those who have trouble walking
- **Folding stool** – a recommended item for those who have trouble standing for more than 10 or 15 minutes at a time. The typical folding stool is small, lightweight and portable, consisting of three aluminum legs connected by a central bolt, with a sturdy but pliable material seat.
- **Tissue packs**

**BINOCULARS & SPOTTING SCOPES:**

**Binoculars** – We strongly recommend good binoculars of at least 7x35, 8x42, 10x40, or 10x42 magnification. We recommend that you do NOT bring mini-binoculars of any kind. Some people like “minis” because they are small and lightweight, but they have an extremely small field of view and very poor light-gathering power. Trying to find a bird in your binoculars using minis is like trying to read a book through a keyhole. You will be very frustrated, and even if you do manage to get the bird in your binoculars before it flies, you will have a poor view. You will find that 7x35 or 8x42 binoculars are compact and light enough.

**Spotting Scopes** – Your tour leaders will have scopes available for group use throughout the trip, but if you have one and wish to bring it, please feel free to do so.

**CLIMATE & WEATHER:** With a mostly Mediterranean climate, Israel experiences long, hot and dry summers and short, mild winters. Average annual temperatures and precipitation levels vary from year to year and between regions of the country, but in general, Israel is cooler and wetter in the upland areas of the center and north, such as at Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, and progressively warmer and drier farther south, closer to the Negev Desert region. Annual rainfall amounts range from 44 inches in the north to less than 4 inches in the south.

Late March and early April typically is a nice time to be in Israel. We should expect mild to warm days and cool to cold nights and mornings. Temperatures around Tel Aviv and the coastal plain average in the upper 60s and low 70s (°F) by day, dropping into the 50s at night. The average temperatures around Jerusalem are usually several degrees cooler due to the city’s higher elevation. Our time in the Negev and Judean deserts will bring exposure to the warmest temperatures of the trip, particularly in the far south at Eilat. Here, we expect temperatures to reach the upper 70s, possibly into the low 80s. In the event of early season heat (definitely possible) we could experience temperatures all the way up to the low 90s.

Israel does not receive large amounts of rain, but March is a transition month between winter and spring when rain is indeed possible. Should we experience rain, it would most likely be in the Jerusalem area, in which case participants should be prepared for rain, overcast, and chilly-to-cold temperatures. Otherwise, dry and mild to warm conditions are expected, especially the farther south we go.

**CONDITIONS:** Other companies offer spring birding trips to southern Israel, focusing mainly on the Eilat and the Dead Sea regions, but the VENT tour differs in that in addition to these places it also includes birding in more areas of the Negev Desert, an emphasis on finding some of the special mammals of Israel, and doses of history and culture. Most days will be dedicated to “serious” birding, which is important given how amazing the birding can be in Israel in the spring, but on at least two occasions we will be out early or after dark in an effort to see
special mammals such as Arabian Wolf and Striped Hyena. Additionally, a couple of our nighttime outings will be dedicated to finding special nightbirds. This program also brings plenty of exposure to the remarkable and varied landscapes of Israel.

This trip was designed to include a couple of important historical and cultural sites, but in a way that does not detract from the birding. For that reason, these types of excursions come toward the end of the trip. These include a chance to swim in the Dead Sea, a visit to the ancient site of Masada, and a walking tour of the Old City of Jerusalem.

Accommodations will range from good to outstanding. The food will be very good to excellent everywhere. Physical demands will be of light to moderate throughout the trip.

In Avdat Canyon we will walk in the bottom of the canyon for a moderate distance. The excursion itself is not long—about a mile and a half—and will be done at a leisurely pace. We will not engage in any activities requiring strenuous activity. It will be a relaxed and bird-filled experience. For the city tour we will be joined by a licensed local guide who will provide expert interpretation. This outing in the Old City of Jerusalem will involve a lot of walking and standing. All walking will be done at a slow pace.

There will be opportunities to snorkel and swim at the Red Sea in Eilat, and swim at the Dead Sea in En-Gedi.

Most days will begin early, with breakfast available at 7 or 7:30 a.m.; however, we have scheduled early starts on several days. On these days we will depart the hotels by 5:00–5:30 a.m. so as to arrive at important birding areas around sunrise. We will have afternoon breaks at the hotel when possible, although we should not expect these opportunities on every day of the trip.

Special Note: This tour provides exposure to the natural history and a few of the cultural riches of Israel, one of the world’s most evocative and historic regions. Participants with an interest in enjoying more of Jerusalem or other parts of the country should come early or stay after the tour ends.

DOCUMENTS: A passport valid for at least six months beyond your planned departure is required. Please make sure that you have at least three blank pages in your passport for entry stamps.

Visas are not required for entry by United States and Canadian citizens for stays under 90 days. Rules and regulations pertaining to citizens of other countries may vary; please check with your local consulate or embassy.

CURRENCY & MONEY MATTERS: Your trip to Israel includes most necessary expenses. You will want to bring enough cash to cover personal expenses not included in the program, such as taxi rides, gifts, laundry, gratuities, meals on your own, and personal items. It is best to carry small denominations of cash as any places we visit may be unable to provide change for large bills. While U.S. dollars may be accepted in more populous areas, it is always convenient to have a supply of local currency for such items. It is best to acquire local currency before leaving home, or at the airport or a bank upon arrival in Tel Aviv.

Should you extend your vacation beyond what is offered in the program, you’ll want to obtain local currency. Please check with your bank and credit card issuer for more information regarding banking and the use of ATM and credit cards overseas.

The official currency of Israel is the Israeli Shekel (ILS). You can check the latest currency conversion rate by visiting “XE-The World’s Favorite Currency Site” at: http://www.xe.com/.

ELECTRICITY: The electrical current in Israel is 220V (110-120V in the U.S.). Electrical outlets are primarily of the “Type H” socket, a type unique to Israel, featuring three ungrounded 4mm pins assembled in a triangular formation. This socket also accommodates the “Type C” European plug with two round pins. You will need to bring a “Type H” plug adapter in order to plug in your device or appliance.
Since 1995, most small appliances (cell phones, laptop computers, camera battery chargers) are dual-designed to operate on North American (110V) and European (220V) electrical voltages; therefore it is not essential to bring a transformer to convert the higher voltage to lower voltage. Even if you prefer to bring a transformer, an important point to consider is that the level of Hertz (cycles per second that the current runs; abbreviated as Hz) is 50 Hz in Israel, as opposed to 60 Hz in the U.S., which means that the transformer only converts voltage and not Hertz. Most small appliances have a built-in power pack that converts AC current to DC, which removes the problem of different Hertz levels. If there is any question about the ability of your electrical device or appliance to handle the higher voltage and lower Hertz cycle of Israeli electrical current, we recommend a special transformer or power pack that can accommodate these unique conditions.

INTERNET: WiFi is available at all hotels.

LANGUAGE: The main languages spoken in Israel are Modern Hebrew and Arabic, although English is used widely as well.

TIME: Israel is on Israel Standard Time (IST) until March 29 and is 6 hours ahead of Eastern Daylight Time (EDT). On March 29, Israel converts to Israel Daylight Time (IDT) and is 7 hours ahead of EDT.

HEALTH: At the time of publication, no major shots or inoculations are required for entry into Israel. As standard travel precautions, you should always be up to date with the “routine vaccines,” including influenza, chickenpox (varicella), polio, measles/mumps/rubella (MMR), and diphtheria/pertussis/tetanus (DPT). Additionally, some health care professionals consider inoculations against hepatitis types A and B as standard. If you are taking personal medication, prescription or over-the-counter, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the trip safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

Those who are not fit for light to moderate physical activity, including those with physical disabilities that affect mobility and balance, heart or immune deficiencies, or other conditions associated with poor health, are advised not to join the trip.

Sun Exposure – The sun’s ultraviolet rays are damaging to the eyes and skin with prolonged exposure. Anytime you are outdoors you will want to protect your skin, including your lips, eyes, nose, and ears. Severe sunburn is potentially very painful and will affect your level of enjoyment. Always protect yourself when outdoors and be sure to bring an ample supply of high SPF sunscreen and lip balm. We strongly recommend the use of ultra-violet blocking, polarized sunglasses.

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta Georgia. The CDC operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers’ Information Line at 800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636), or you can check their website at www.cdc.gov/travel. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new_e.html (click on travel health).

SUGGESTED READING: A number of traditional booksellers and online stores list excellent inventories of field guides and other natural history resources that will help prepare you for this tour. We recommend www.amazon.com which has a wide selection; www.buteobooks.com and www.nhbs.com which specialize in ornithology and natural history books; and www.abebooks.com for out-of-print and hard-to-find titles.

Birds:
Southern Israel, Page 27

**Mammals:**

**Butterflies:**

**History & Politics:**

In this historical page-turner, *New Yorker* journalist, Lawrence Wright, delivers a gripping account of the 1978 Camp David Peace Accords. Then, as now, the late 1970s was a time of deep mistrust between Israel and its neighboring states. From the time he took office, peace in the Middle East was a chief foreign policy goal of President Jimmy Carter, and he understood that for peace to have a chance would require the region’s two greatest powers, Israel and Egypt, to serve as the Lynch pins. Against the recommendations of many, Carter hosted Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel and President Anwar Sadat of Egypt at Camp David for thirteen grueling days of talks. From the outset, success was unlikely, and as the negotiations dragged on, proved fraught with ancient mistrusts, immense pressure, and bouts of extreme anger. Improbably, an 11th-hour agreement was reached and a peace deal was forged that would prove a rare triumph of American foreign policy in the Middle East, and the highwater mark of the Carter presidency. The book is further enhanced through Wright’s masterful interweaving through the narrative the history of the modern Israeli state and the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Thoroughly engaging, balanced, and suspenseful, *Thirteen Days in September* again demonstrates Wright’s skill as a pre-eminent journalist. Along with *The Looming Tower*, Wright’s Pulitzer Prize-winning account of the rise of Al Qaeda, these two works are essential reading for anyone who desires an understanding of the world’s most geo-politically complex region.

**Literature:**

A master of the historical fiction genre, James A. Michener’s *The Source* tells the tale of an American archaeology team that comes to Israel to perform a partial excavation of an ancient “tel” or village. As the team starts digging, an array of artefacts are found, each from a successive depth, each representing a preceding settlement from the ancient past. Beginning with the oldest object and working forward, Michener builds a story around each item that conveys a unique period in history. In the process, we learn not only of the story of Israel, from ancient times to modern, but on a broader level we are exposed to the grand sweep of the history of religion. This book is long, but for those who enjoy a lengthy book, especially fans of Michener, what awaits is a fascinating, engaging, and brilliantly told tale.

**TIPPING:** Tipping (restaurant staff, porters, drivers, local guides) is included on VENT tours. However, if you feel one or both of your VENT leaders or any local guides have given you exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that tips are not expected and are entirely optional. Tips should be given directly to your tour leader; they should not be sent to the VENT office.

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Schedules. The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure, in which case full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. The right is reserved to substitute leaders on any tour. Where this is necessary, notification will be given to tour members. No refund will be made for any unused portion of the tour unless arrangements are made in sufficient time to avoid penalties. The prices of the tours are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on July 29, 2019 and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change therein. The right is reserved to decline to accept or to retain any person as a member of any tour. Baggage is at owner's risk entirely. The airlines concerned and their agents and affiliates are not to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time passengers are not on board their aircraft. The passenger ticket in use by said airlines, when issued, shall constitute the sole contract between the airlines and the purchaser of these tickets and/or passenger. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for these tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airline Reporting Corporation.

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