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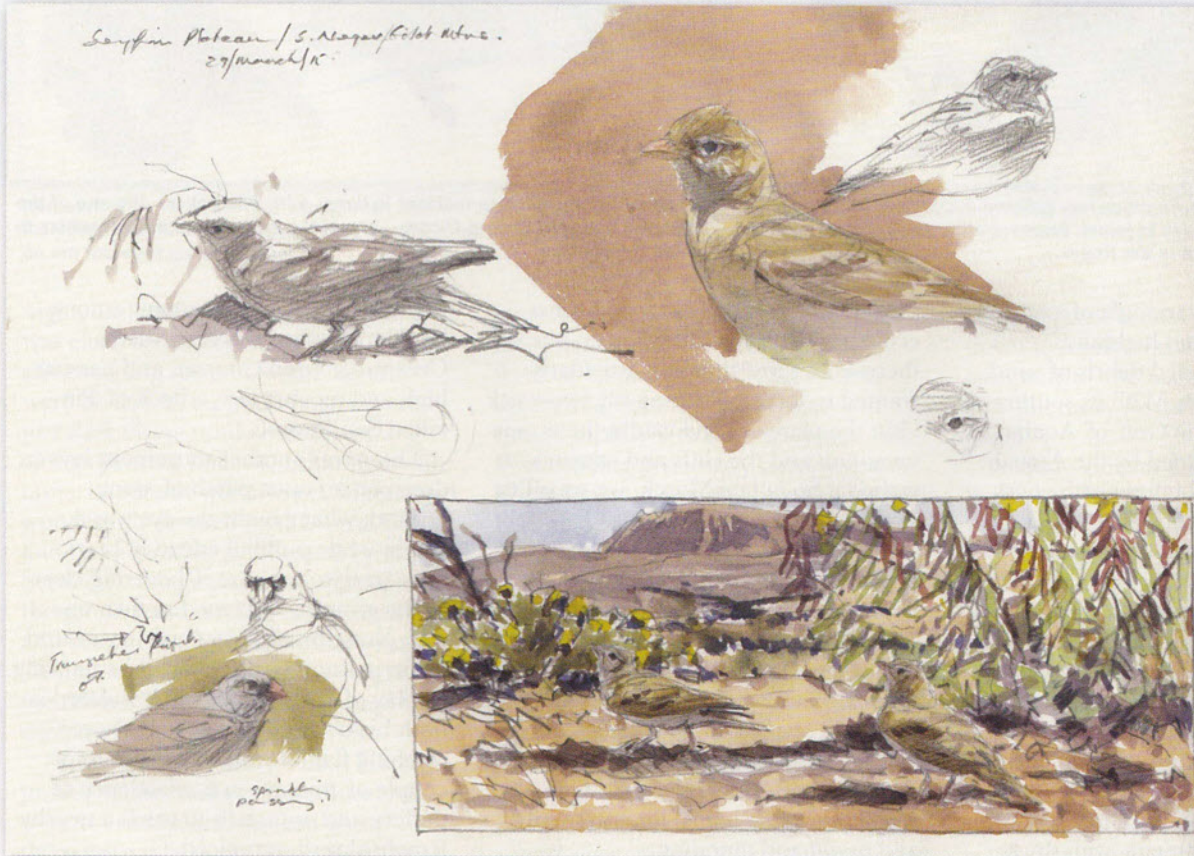
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Painted desert



Outwardly barren, the Negev in Israel supports a surprising amount of wildlife yet is under threat from development. Artist **Bruce Pearson** visited the area to understand the conservation issues facing its wildlife.



A project to demonstrate the importance of protecting the special birds and landscapes of the Negev Desert took wildlife artist Bruce Pearson to Israel in spring this year. His evocative sketches of the experience, including this Bar-tailed Lark in watercolour and pencil, bring to life a wilderness and its birds under threat.



Since sharing so many spectacular and dramatic experiences together on a longline fishing vessel off the coast of South Africa five years ago, Meidad Goren and I have kept in close contact. At the time he was a BirdLife International observer for the Albatross Task Force, while I was pursuing an art and conservation project

in support of BirdLife and the Global Seabird Programme.

Since then I've continued working on seabirds and the Southern Ocean, as well as pursuing other art projects. Meanwhile, Meidad returned to Israel to work for the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI) as manager of the Ramat HaNegev

Birding Centre at Sde Boker in the Negev desert. It wasn't long before he was insisting that I visit Israel, as he had an idea for an equally interesting and important conservation story that we might work on together. The best time to visit, he said, would be late March and early April.

The Negev covers more than half of



This female Bonelli's Eagle on the nest remained static for an hour or more as she was watched and sketched.



Six lark species breed in southern Israel, including Greater Hoopoe-Lark, pictured here searching for food.

ALL ILLUSTRATIONS: BRUCE PEARSON



As with many vultures, Egyptian has suffered declines across its range, with a 50-75 per cent fall in Israel, demonstrating the importance of conserving the species in the Negev.



Lanner Falcon is a rare resident in Israel, with Sde Boker – the site of the Ramat HaNegev Birding Centre – one of the best places in the country to see the species.

Israel; an irregular triangle of crumpled plateaus and uplifted highlands encrusted with eroded debris of sand, stones and boulders. With its southern point at Eilat on the Gulf of Aqaba, its eastern edge is formed by the Arava valley running 112 miles north-south from the Dead Sea to Eilat, and its western edge is contiguous with the Sinai desert.

Three vast box-craters and associated sharp-edged gullies, or *makhteshim*, cut through the desert landscape – Makhtesh Ramon, Makhtesh Gadol and Makhtesh Katan are unique to the region. Rainfall, mostly through the winter months, is unpredictable and variable. Vegetation is sparse, spreading mainly along catchments with thicker strands of acacias, tamarisk and shrubs, as well as a wealth of flowering plants filling the deeper sand rivers and channels cut by winter's run-off waters.

Meidad explained the five distinct ecological regions of the Negev, but there were three that he particularly wanted to focus on during my two-week visit: the plateaux and wadis, the acacia savannah and the cliffs and canyons, or *makhtesh*. So in late March, we set off to explore them.

Desert in bloom

The winter had been particularly wet and cold, and there had been snow for a while in early February. Now, though, the undulating stony plateau around Nizzana – typical of the plateaux and wadis – was a lush patchwork of grasses, shrubby tamarisks and a multitude of wildflowers spilt across long stony ribs and bouldered outcrops.

In the early morning, there were Crested Larks about and a few Dorcas Gazelles grazing, while occasional Montagu's Harriers floated across

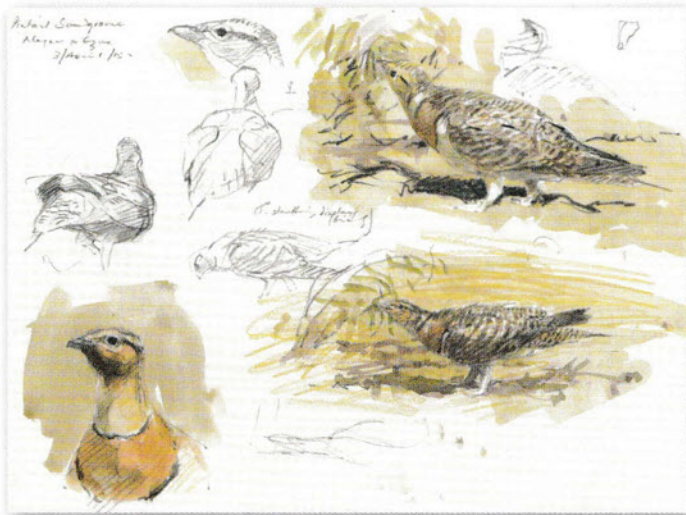
the cold breeze. A movement among boulders further away revealed a Cream-coloured Courser, and passing high and moving fast, a flock of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse.

There was another movement low down on an open patch of stony ground; what caught the eye was a bright white puffball edged in black appearing to move as if hovering close to the ground. It seemed to turn one way, pause briefly, then bounce around again in another direction. The dancing display of male Macqueen's Bustard is both bizarre and beautiful – its eye-catching flamboyance ending after a couple of minutes in a subsidence of puffery and approach towards a nearby female almost unnoticed.

Further south we drove up into the hills to the west of Eilat and followed tracks down into a shallow wadi basin at Netafim. There had been rain in the



ALL ILLUSTRATIONS: BRUCE PEARSON



Numbers of three of the four sandgrouse species found in the Negev – including Pin-tailed Sandgrouse – are declining, as the habitats they rely on are increasingly developed.



Nizzana produced a Cream-coloured Courser. An uncommon summer visitor mainly to south and east parts of Israel, the species is best looked for in the Negev Desert.

night, and in the early morning the air was clear beneath a thin film of cloud still shedding spots of water. There were no rainwater pools or streams, just dark damp sand rivulets running along the wadi hollows, brimming with tamarisk, desert wormwood, broom and wonderfully scented wildflowers. Here and there Northern Wheatears moved between vantage points, dropping to the ground and feeding in between, and crowning a low shrub was a male Temminck's Lark singing – a bright melodious jingling cutting through the early morning chill and greyness.

As the day warmed, a Pallid Harrier passed up the wadi, Steppe Buzzards were overhead, and stacked above them were infrequent waves of White Storks drifting northwards. There were other larks too: small numbers of Bar-tailed Larks and a Greater Hoopoe-Lark picking and probing beneath

large stones and desert debris. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, a trilling flock of 10 or 12 Thick-billed Larks descended onto the desert floor and spread rapidly into the vegetation. Like a marauding army, they darted mouse-like, tugging at seed heads, snipping buds and breaking off to challenge each other.

Hard land

The acacia savannah of the low-lying Aravah Valley is a harsh landscape of compacted sand dunes and ridges, with open stony ground and shallow dry river courses sparsely vegetated with acacias and Jujube trees.

Near Hazeva we set out from where a sand river spills onto flatter ground, and walked 'upstream' along a wide gully flanked by rich red ochre walls as high as a house. The light was intense, illuminating the bright colours of two Green Bee-eaters flying sorties from an acacia top.

There were Desert Finches, as well as parties of Sand Partridges, a Masked Shrike and glimpses of an Arabian Warbler in company with Lesser Whitethroats and Common Chiffchaffs popping up into view now and then. And all the while was the passage of migrants overhead – Black Kites, more Steppe Buzzards, a Lesser Spotted Eagle and 'drifts' of White Storks.

Another dawn, this time on the western edge of Makhtesh Ramon with the far rim deep in shadow and on our side everything bathed in bright early morning light. Pale Crag Martins swung around the cliff-face in a light warm breeze, a few Alpine Swifts passed quickly, a male Mourning Wheatear fed along the edge, and circling high above the crater was the distinctive form of a Lanner Falcon. We watched as she turned suddenly and made for a couple of passing Brown-necked Ravens,

chasing them off before dropping back down to a pillar on the cliff and the company of the male bird perched on a promontory further along the canyon edge.

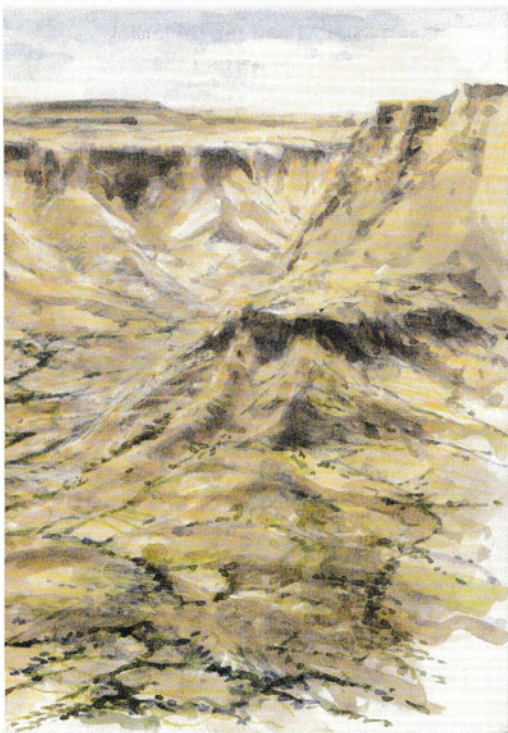
Another canyon and another raptor, this time a female Bonelli's Eagle on the nest. The sprawling mat of twigs and sticks she sat on filled the floor of a shallow cave hollowed out in a vertical rock face. Constantly fidgeting and shuffling, one moment her head was cocked and alert, when crows drifted close in the updraught. When there was a rattling of stones displaced by a Nubian Ibex on the ledges below, she stayed flat but stretched forward to look further out.

Just in sight further along the canon wall was a small colony of Griffon Vultures, but there was only one bird in residence. We watched for a while until the light fell and the moon rose over Makhtesh Gadol.

Unfortunately, however, these last birding experiences in the Negev were tarnished by some very bad news Meidad had the day before: two breeding adult vultures had been found poisoned at their nests. This important colony is the biggest in Israel and one poisoning incident could mean a huge blow for the critically endangered population.

Change for the worse

Over the past 100 years or so, the land of Israel has been transformed by dramatic development, with habitats and wildlife coming under extreme pressure and species disappearing. Until fairly recently the Negev has managed to remain relatively untouched, the harsh desert environment being more challenging to development and seen as hostile to many people. However, in recent years this has changed; the army now controls more than 50 per cent of the land to train its air force and



exercise its tanks, artillery and infantry. Agriculture and mining have developed rapidly and tourism has grown fast, encouraged by increasing wealth and ease of access to 4x4 vehicles and modern navigation systems for off-road leisure pursuits. Conflict between nature and people is intense.

Although the Negev has some of the biggest nature reserves in the country, the importance of habitats such as the plateaux and wide river beds was not fully understood when they were created, so consequently most are unprotected. Gone with the habitats are species such as Greater Hoopoe-Lark, Macqueen's Bustard, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse and even the magnificent Lappet-faced Vulture.

Meidad explained that although conservation is mainly about protecting habitats, the issue of shepherds still throwing down poisoned bait to kill feral dogs (there are still wolves in the Negev) is an extremely difficult one to deal with.

Working together

"It means we have to be very creative in our conservation effort," he said. "It's all about co-operation. Once people understand the beauty of nature and the importance of conserving nature and birds they will engage and co-operate. That was why the Ramat HaNegev Birding Centre was founded right in the middle of the Negev, funded by the local municipality, Nature and Parks Authority and SPNI."

The centre tries to build bridges between people and birds. "We work with young schoolkids and take the local community out to see birds. We try to let them understand what a treasure they have right on their doorstep. It's



Arabian Warbler is one of Israel's rarest breeding birds. Hazeva is now the most important stronghold for this declining species. Also pictured lower down is Green Bee-eater.

amazing to see how people quickly warm to birds. I get phone calls almost every day from local people telling me about sightings – a big flock of pelicans passing a village, an injured falcon caught on a tree, it can be almost anything."

Another initiative is SPNI and others working with the army on the Nature Defence Force project where soldiers are actively encouraged to take responsibility for nature on the vast tracts of land managed by the army. "More than 60 per cent of Israel's Macqueen's Bustards spend the summer on a single air force base in the northern Negev. We work with the cadets to improve the habitat – Macqueen's Bustard is bit of a celebrity on the base," explained Meidad.

"Three of the four species of sandgrouse found in the Negev are going through a very worrying decline. One reason is the water they drink, which

is mostly sewage. We put together a management plan to ensure sustainable and high-quality water sources.

"The army is co-operating by building proper treatment ponds inside an army base where hundreds of sandgrouse of all four species come to drink everyday – up until now the only water available to the birds was near-poisonous sewage waste."

On our way back to the birding centre we passed a towering cliff that Meidad pointed out as his main site for Sooty Falcon. "They'll not be back for another couple of weeks yet; you'll have to come back in early October." I certainly will, and hope to learn more of the steady improvement in the future prospects for the Negev and its spectacular wildlife. ■

Acknowledgements

With thanks to SPNI and the Go Israel office in London for supporting the visit. For more information about Israel, please visit www.thinkisrael.com.



Macqueen's Bustard's mating display is quite spectacular. This species has been hunted to near-extinction in many parts of the Middle East and remains very rare in Israel. It is classified as Vulnerable.



Despite being numerous within its limited range, according to BirdLife International, Masked Shrike has suffered a large decline in Israel, thought to be due to use of pesticides.

ALL ILLUSTRATIONS: BRUCE PEARSON