



# A Bird's Eye View of the Holy Land

Newsletter no. 16 Spring 2016

*White-throated Kingfisher in flight resembles an unreal artwork (Photo: Aharon Shimshon)*

## Dear friends,

In this newsletter, we will update you on our varied activities, which continue to broaden in scope and increase in volume from year to year, with the subject of birding significantly expanding its impact and presence among the Israeli public.

As this newsletter is coming off the printing press, the third Champion of the Flyways competition is being held in Eilat with the participation of many enthusiastic teams from Israel and abroad. We will report its accomplishments in our next newsletter.

The participation of our team together with the Jordanians and the American musician Paul Winter at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2016 was a great success, and you can read about this in the next article.

In 2016 BirdLife Cyprus joined our Barn Owls and Swifts projects, and we are proud that the two projects have spread wings to Cyprus.

Yossi Leshem will be on his last sabbatical from June 1<sup>st</sup> 2016 at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland, as the guest of Prof. Alexandre Roulin who is an exceptional partner in many of our projects. With joint forces Yossi and Alex plan to use the four months of the sabbatical to promote projects in Europe, with the hope that it is still possible to stop the rapid deterioration in the populations of four vulture species. In Israel two are already extinct and the remaining two in danger of extinction.

The success of the reintroduction of the Bearded Vultures to the Alps and Massif Central in France is a worthy model that we would like to replicate in the Middle East as well, after solving the issue of bird poisonings.

**We wish you enjoyable reading, and invite you to support us in promoting our projects in nature conservation, education and bird research in Israel.**

Yours,

**Prof. Yossi Leshem**

Director of the International Center for the Study  
of Bird Migration and Secretary of the Hoopoe Foundation

**Dan Alon**

Director of the Israel Ornithological Center, SPNI

For the most updated birding news  
from Israel visit: [www.birds.org.il](http://www.birds.org.il)





# The national and regional Barn Owls project arrives at the prestigious World Economic Forum at Davos, January 2016



The Barn Owl has replaced the "dove of peace" as the symbol of cooperation in the Middle East

On January 22<sup>nd</sup> 2016, we organized a 90-minute event "Birds Know No Boundaries - Cross-border Environmental Projects in the Middle East for People and Nature" within the framework of the World Economic Forum at Davos which is attended by 3,000 world leaders and leading economic experts. Six projects were presented at the event,

one of which was the use of Barn Owls as biological pest control agents in agriculture, a highly successful regional project running in partnership with government, academic and public agencies. The event was enthusiastically received by the audience, and the exposure of our projects in this prestigious forum will no doubt significantly help the furthering of our vision.

### We invite you to view the following links:

- a presentation of the Davos event: <http://bit.ly/23Dcq1H>; • a movie of the Davos event: <https://youtu.be/HJPhCuNidpw>
- the event booklet: <http://bit.ly/1RYB9rM> (with details of all six projects, for readers interested in contributing towards the projects);
- a presentation of the meeting with Mr. Shimon Peres at the Peres Center for Peace to report on the Davos event: <http://bit.ly/1Pnuntj>



Israel's 9<sup>th</sup> President, the Honorable Shimon Peres, was meant to present the opening lecture at our event, but due to a mild heart attack he was replaced by his son Chemi Peres, Managing General Partner & Co-Founder of Pitango Venture Capital, the leading venture capital company in Israel, and Chairman of the Peres Center for Peace (Photo: Yossi Leshem)



Event presenters, from left to right: Prof. Alexandre Roulin (University of Lausanne, Switzerland), General (Ret.) Mansour Abu Rashid (Chairman of the Amman Center for Peace and Development, Jordan), Prof. Yossi Leshem (Tel Aviv University and the SPNI, Israel), Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Baruch Spiegel (ECF, Israel) (Photo: Yossi Leshem)



Composer and musician Paul Winter, seven-time Grammy Award winner, opened and closed our event, playing excerpts from his new composition "Flyways" which celebrates bird migration and the music of the countries through which they fly along the Great Rift Valley (Photo: Kay Winter)



February 10<sup>th</sup> 2016: Meeting with Mr. Shimon Peres after the Davos event at the Peres Center for Peace in Tel Aviv-Jaffa; Prof. Roulin presents Mr. Shimon Peres with the painting of the Bearded Vulture ("Peres" in Hebrew) flying above the Alps, painted especially for him by the Swiss artist Laurent Willenegger (Photo: Yosef Avi Yair Engel (Jucha))







## Nature Conservation Building Bridges of Peace

**Noam Weiss** | Director International Birding Research Center Eilat

A spark of hope can be found in the **Partnership for Peace** program in which the **Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel** and the **Palestinian Wildlife Society** participated. The project's vision was for Israeli and Palestinian experts to collaborate together to build better Palestinian capabilities for conservation. The main goals of the actions were to improve the capabilities of Palestinian wildlife experts in identifying wildlife, nature surveying, and creating nature reserves.

The most inspiring activities were perhaps the joint wildlife taxonomy and eco-tourism courses. 50 Israelis and 90 Palestinians participated in a series of six intensive courses learning how to identify and survey wildlife and how to transfer their love of nature to the wider communities, as well as get to know fellow nature lovers from across the border. Israeli experts happily shared their experience and knowledge with their fellow researchers from Palestine who perhaps knew less, but without doubt matched the Israelis' enthusiasm for nature and for learning. It was exciting to see the same passion that we ourselves had many years ago, when we started discovering the diversity of nature for the first time, filling us with a feeling of doing something really important.

The course has already had an impact with signs and brochures made for three nature parks in the West Bank (Wadi Quf, near Hebron, Beit-Ilu, west of Ramallah and Um a-Tut, near Jenin). These helped show the local population that nature conservation creates real opportunities for them through eco-tourism among other ideas. In



Israelis and Palestinians learning about birds together (Photo: Hamutal Friedman)



The Long-legged Buzzard breeds in the scrubland areas of the Palestinian Authority and Israel. You are invited to view a nest at: <http://www.birds.org.il/he/tracking-methods.aspx?camId=21> (Photo: Guilad Friedemann)

addition Israelis and Palestinians joined together to build an online web portal in Arabic for teachers, students, and the public to enjoy.

The future of cross border cooperation is mainly up to us. We have learned to "use" the conflict to raise money for our shared nature, and to spend it wisely to promote conservation and build real expertise. Some people might think that we are not connected to reality here, but we see it very differently. We might be the only ones to see through the dark glasses of the conflict and at least see the environmental problems as they are, and offer solutions. We have been wise enough not to let politics stop us from doing, and we have reinforced our actions with personal friendships by working together daily. We are lucky to have practical and wise partners whom with we can promote wildlife conservation with, despite the turmoil around us.

**This project was supported by the Hanns Seidel Foundation and the European Union's Partnership for Peace program.**

### Upcoming Events

#### Champions of the Flyway: Racing for Conservation Keynote lecture at the Biggest Week in American Birding

Presented by **Jonathan Meyrav**

**Date:** Sunday, May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 16:00 - 17:00

**Venue:** Maumee Bay Lodge & Conference Center, 1750 Park Rd 2, Oregon, OH 43616

**Fee:** \$12 • Registration required.

#### Birding and the Environment in Israel and Beyond

Presented by **Dan Alon**

**Date:** Tuesday, May 10<sup>th</sup> 2016, 19:00

**Venue:** Prosserman Jewish Community Centre, Room 211, 4588 Bathurst St. (north of Sheppard Ave.) Toronto, Ontario  
Call Avi at 1-647-346-0619 for more details and to reserve your place.

#### Lecture: Birds and Conservation in Israel and Beyond

Presented by **Dan Alon** and **Jonathan Meyrav** of SPNI's Israel Ornithological Center

**Date:** Wednesday, May 11<sup>th</sup>, 18:30

**Venue:** 830 5<sup>th</sup> Ave, New York, NY 10065

Please call our office to reserve your place.

#### Second Annual ASPNI Bird Walk, Central Park

Dan and Jonathan will give a guided birdwatching tour in Central Park.

**Date:** Thursday, May 12<sup>th</sup>, 7 am. Tour will last for approximately 2 hours.

**Venue:** Leaving from the Boat House. E 72<sup>nd</sup> St, New York, NY 10021  
Places are limited so please book early to avoid disappointment.

**Prof. Yossi Leshem** has been invited to be the keynote speaker at the **50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Annual Raptor Research Foundation (RRF)** from October 16<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> 2016 at Cape May, New Jersey. Cape May is a paradise for migrating birds, and the conference will take place at the peak of the migration season. Following this conference, Yossi will lecture at the **40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Cape May Hawkwatch and Cape May Bird Observatory**, and will then continue for a lecture series in New York and the West Coast during November.



## The Honorable Mr. Shimon Peres, Israel's 9<sup>th</sup> President, sets off the runners in the 5<sup>th</sup> Crane Race, November 27<sup>th</sup> 2015

The fifth annual Crane Race was held at the Agamon in the Hula Valley in north Israel on November 27<sup>th</sup> 2015 with over 2,500 runners, including a Jordanian deputation, five generals, hundreds of soldiers, students from Muki Betser's pre-army preparatory course "Swifter than Vultures" and many runners in the half marathon, 10 km and 5 km races.

The fifth race was honored by the presence of Israel's 9<sup>th</sup> President, Mr. Shimon Peres, who set the runners off and then went bird watching among the 35,000 Eurasian Cranes that winter in the Hula Valley. The experience of running right next to thousands of cranes

warmed by the winter sun in the presence of a former president was a perfect recipe for an uplifting and exhilarating race, sponsored by Ernst & Young.

The evening before the race, Mr. Peres was a guest at the famous and high class Mizpe Hayamim Hotel (<http://www.mizpe-hayamim.com/>) overlooking the Hula Valley, as part of the birding events held there every year and lasting for one month, a tradition already for the last 15 years! Mr. Peres attended the evening event - a lecture by Prof. Yossi Leshem on regional cooperation and the IDF project "Nature Defense Forces - Commanders take responsibility for their environment".



December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2015: Israel's 9<sup>th</sup> President, Mr. Shimon Peres, sets the runners off in the 5<sup>th</sup> Crane Race at the Agamon in the Hula Valley (Photo: JINI Photo Agency, Ancho Gosh (KKL))



Every year a delegation of Jordanian runners participates in the Crane Race running together with the Israelis (Photo: JINI Photo Agency, Ancho Gosh (KKL))

## Tightening Israel's links with Taiwan

In October 2015, Yossi Leshem was invited as a guest of the Taiwanese Animal Health Research Institute (AHRI) in order to present a lecture to the staff on the problem of Avian Influenza (AI) in Israel, which causes havoc on poultry farms. During the visit to Taiwan, Yossi was hosted by President Ma Ying-Jeou at his presidential palace, together with the senior officials from the Taiwanese Ministries of Agriculture and Foreign Affairs. President Ma completed his two terms of office in February 2016. He is a close friend of Yossi's who asked him to assist Israel in the future by promoting projects involving regional collaboration between countries in the Middle East.

Following Yossi's visit in Taiwan, a deputation of Taiwanese scientists from the AHRI visited Israel to make in-depth acquaintance with the subject of AI, and met with the management of the Ministry of Agriculture's Veterinary Services, and even veterinarians from the Gaza Strip where the poultry farmers are also battling with AI. The seminar concluded with the participants' agreement to examine the option for carrying out a joint applied research on AI.



President Ma Ying-Jeou together with Prof. Yossi Leshem and his wife Rivka in a memorable photo of a unique friendship (Photo: President's Office, Taiwan)





## The project "Nature Defense Forces – Commanders Take Responsibility for their Environment" spreads its wings

A male Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, one of the four species breeding in the Negev (Photo: Roni Livne)



June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015: The Chief of Staff releases a swift back to the wild at the event launching the project for installing nesting boxes for swifts at the IDF Rabin Headquarters in Tel Aviv (Photo: IDF Spokesperson's Unit)

This project began three years ago following the significant donation of \$250,000 per year for ten years by Racheli and Moshe Yanai, as well as additional donations by the Gelfand Family Foundation, an anonymous donor and the Israel Electric Corporation.

The project which is under the personal leadership of the IDF Chief of General Staff, Lieut. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot and Head of the Technological and Logistics Directorate, Maj. Gen. Kobi Barak, was launched in 2013 with two pilot projects. In 2014 the projects proposed by eight army units were launched, with every commander leading a nature conservation project awarded \$25,000 to carry out his unit's initiative. In 2015 the number of projects was doubled to 16 projects, and in January 2016 the public judging committee approved an additional eight projects, making a grand total of 24 projects.

We have chosen to present in this newsletter one of the 24 projects, run by the commander at the School of Field Artillery in Shivta and

aimed at helping to save and protect the four species of sandgrouse found in the Negev in south Israel.

### Sandgrouse Salvation

Four species of sandgrouse breed in the northern and central Negev. Over the last 20 years their population has decreased by as much as 90%. One of the main causes has been the loss of clean water sources forcing them to drink sewage.

Through the SPNI's Nature Defense Forces project (a national initiative to encourage the IDF to take responsibility for nature on the vast tracts of land they manage) the School of Field Artillery, located in the heart of 'sandgrouse country' is planning to build a new safe drinking pond for the birds in the base's outskirts a few hundred meters from their current polluted sources. Hopefully, the sandgrouse will quickly learn to use this new pond. In addition soldiers are building a hide, little spring and new paths so base personnel can enjoy watching the sandgrouse when they are off duty.

Together Ramat HaNegev Birding Center, the Israel Nature and Parks Authority and Ramat HaNegev Regional Council have put together a plan to provide high-quality water sources for the sandgrouse. This plan will help reverse the sandgrouses' decline and attract birding tourists eager to tick these regional specialties off their life lists.



The soldiers at Shivta digging a new pond for the sandgrouse (Photo: Guy Saly)



## The Barn Owl and Common Swift projects spread wings in Cyprus

In partnership with BirdLife Cyprus, led by Executive Director Dr. Claire Papazoglou, a delegation from Cyprus visited Israel at the end of May 2015 to learn about our activities on the subject of using Barn Owls and Common Kestrels as biological pest control agents in agriculture.

An Israeli delegation visited Cyprus in June 2015 for a workshop on the subject of biological pest control that included field trips aimed at expanding our regional collaboration with Jordan and the Palestinian Authority to our neighbor Cyprus, a country struggling with severe problems of wildlife poisonings and illegal hunting.

An additional subject for collaboration is protecting swifts as an urban species.



The municipality in the town of Aradippou, Cyprus, has already had nesting boxes for swifts placed on the front of its building following consultation with Amnon Hahn from Israel (the red arrow points to the nests); hundreds of Israeli couples are married in a civil ceremony in this municipality building (Photo: Elena Markitani)

## If a Pallid Scops Owl Falls from a Tree in a Plantation ...

### Barak Granit

On June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015, Melvin Blau, a local farmer, discovered a mysterious wounded owl fledgling in a date plantation he worked in near Kibbutz Mitzpe Shalem, near the Dead Sea. The owl was taken to the Israeli Wildlife Hospital, who cared for it and sent photos to birdwatchers to help identify it. The first opinions were that it was a Desert Tawny Owl (*Strix hadorami*) but SPNI experts Amir Ben Dov and the author, correctly identified it as a fledgling Pallid Scops Owl, after seeing some previously in Turkey. This identification caused shockwaves among Israel's ornithologists as this was the first evidence of Pallid Scops Owls breeding in Israel in over a century.

Over the last 40 years the Pallid Scops Owl was spotted in Israel only between November and February, leading experts to believe that the birds breed in eastern Turkey and Iran and only wintered here.



Pallid Scops Owl (Photo: Jonathan Meyrav)

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, very few biologists and zoologists were active in what was then called Palestine. Israel Aharoni was one of the most active zoologists of the time. 105 years ago, in 1911, Aharoni found the first ever nest of Pallid Scops Owls, in the Jordan Valley. This was also the last nest of this species to be found in the region for 104 years! The wounded owl changed this.

On June 4<sup>th</sup>, two nights later, Amir Ben Dov, Yosef Kiat and Cochav Levi arrived at the date plantation and were astounded to find three territories of Pallid Scops Owl including one adult that was already ringed. They were also amazed to find the Pallid Scops Owls nesting in proximity to European Scops Owls that lived there too. During the day these plantations showed literally no signs of birding life, but during the night it appears they are a bit of a birding hotspot.

Over the next nights, teams surveyed similar date plantations along the northern Dead Sea and along the Jordan Valley. To our astonishment, we found some 40 territories, 20 of them in one large plantation complex around Kalya. Later the survey was extended to almost the whole Israeli section of the Rift Valley, from Kfar Rupin in the north to Samar and Elifaz in the southern Arava.

No Pallid Scops Owls were found in the extreme north or south, but from about 30 km north of Jericho to almost Ein Gedi in every date plantation we checked Pallid Scops Owls were found! Within the busiest plantation we heard owls hooting every 150-200 meters. If we extrapolate this density to all suitable habitats in the region, we may be looking at hundreds of domestic breeding pairs as well as the need to rewrite the textbooks.

In hindsight it is easy to understand how come such a big population remained undiscovered for so many years. These date plantations are one of the worst birding habitats that exist. It took only 104 years and one injured fledgling to remind us again that there is much we don't know about the natural world.





## Spreading Our Wings

Griffon Vulture attacking a Golden Jackal in the Golan Heights (Photo: Yoram Shpirer)

This year marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the joint Spreading Wings Project of SPNI, the Israel Electric Corporation and the Israel Nature and Parks Authority.

Launched in 1996, Spreading Wings aims to reverse the decline of vultures and other endangered raptors in Israel through creating a network of feeding stations, breeding vultures in captivity, protecting nesting sites and monitoring species' progress. We also made electric pylons safer for soaring birds and educated members of the public about these endangered species.

In 2011 a workshop of international experts, organized as part of this

project, recommended that for the project to progress we needed to increase the number of vultures released into the wild either by breeding more in captivity and/or releasing adult vultures.

In 2015, 40 vultures were brought to Israel from Cyprus, Spain and Armenia. In December 2015 eight were released into the wild in the Negev and the Golan Heights. Over the next months more will be carefully released along with Israeli vultures bred in captivity.

**We want to thank Keren Hayesod, the Segré Foundation, Arkia and the Biblical Zoo for supporting our efforts to bring 40 new vultures to Israel.**



Prof. Yossi Leshem gave a lecture in Hanukah last year to the incoming Israeli Police Chief, Police Commissioner Roni Alsheich, with his staff of Major Generals and their wives, about 20 couples in all, at the first festive dinner of the senior officers in the Israel Police. The lecture presented our birding activities with emphasis on the high importance of increasing the enforcement and fines for poisonings of vultures and other wildlife (Photo: Police Spokesperson Department)



Maj. Gen. Meni Yitzhaki, Head of the Police's Investigations and Intelligence Department (left), and his wife also attended the lecture for the senior police staff. Yossi discovered that Meni is a very enthusiastic nature lover and in the past guided SPNI youth groups at Har Gilo Field Study Center when Yossi was the Director there. Meni has already met with the SPNI and Israel Nature and Parks Authority in order to make progress with law enforcement in response to illegal hunting and poisonings (Photo: Police Spokesperson Department)





**Links to movies screened at the 36<sup>th</sup> Annual Birding Lecture Day in 2015 and elsewhere for your enjoyment:**

- The White-tailed Eagles return to the Hula to breed in 2015, filmed by Dror Galili: <https://youtu.be/hlheT0qU4gk>
- The Tawny Desert Owl, filmed by Yuval Dax and Eyal Bartov: <https://youtu.be/9xW05XZ3IGE>
- Biological diversity in birds, filmed by Eyal Bartov: <https://youtu.be/Gyry1eWBNA4>
- Black Kites and Starlings at the Dudaim Garbage Dump, filmed by Yuval Dax: <https://youtu.be/JVze1GkKf7M>

**For fascinating views from online cameras in birds' nests around Israel, see the following links:**

- Long-legged Buzzard: <http://www.birds.org.il/he/tracking-methods.aspx?camId=21>
- Common Swift (Schiff House, Tel Aviv): <http://www.birds.org.il/he/tracking-methods.aspx?camId=16>
- Common Swift (Givatayim, near Tel Aviv): <http://www.birds.org.il/he/tracking-methods.aspx?camId=9>



On March 7<sup>th</sup> 2016 a new exhibition was inaugurated at the Ben Gurion international airport presenting 60 Israeli discoveries and developments that have influenced the world, including Israeli Nobel Prize laureates. Prof. Yossi Leshem's research with the Israeli Air Force, SPNI, Tel Aviv University and Ministry of Science was selected. In the photo Yossi with Yisrael Katz, Minister of Transportation, Road Safety and Intelligence (middle) and Ofir Akunis, Minister of Science, Technology and Space (right) learning about the research that has saved pilots' lives and saved the national budget over a billion dollars. If you will be at Ben Gurion Airport in the coming year - take a look (see all the exhibits at <http://ex.most.gov.il/en/>, and click on the pictures to learn more about the scientists).

**For further information, please contact:  
Hoopoe Foundation: [yleshem@post.tau.ac.il](mailto:yleshem@post.tau.ac.il) or IOC: [ioc@inter.net.il](mailto:ioc@inter.net.il)**

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2. Please send check payable to ASPNI, SPNI UK or CSPNI and be sure to designate it for Birding Activities and mail to:

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