

“Going to weigh a Pelican”

Lynette Mitchell, UK

Every time I go as a volunteer to the International Birding and Research Centre in Eilat, Israel (two migrations a year for 8 years) it is different and so unlike my life at home in England.

Photo: Lynette with a Linnet, spring 2005.



It is hot and sunny; mainly desert rather than green fields, flowers and in autumn golden trees; walking on rough, stony ground with the possibility of snakes, odd bits of wire or netting from the on-going remaking of our big Helgoland traps; driving on the ‘wrong’ side of the road – concentration needed when turning left at a T junction; the serenity of sunrise and the purple Jordanian mountains in the late afternoon; the delight of holding birds in the hand and marveling at the beauty of their plumage; the fun of driving down the flash-flood culverts with Jill’s eight year old daughter going “weeee” on reaching the top at the other side; my first Sparrowhawk of the season; a 2.30am start for Jerusalem to buy wire material for my longed-for new wader traps and helping to design and construct them; groups of red-shirted Japanese tourists in the Old City; stopping on the way back on the edge of the Dead Sea to visit a friend of Noam’s where fresh water bubbles up and bushes screen the basic habitations; this followed by driving back in the dark, then approaching Eilat’s galaxy of lights from their huge seaside hotels, I was glad there was no trouble at the army check point.



Photo: Lynette with Long-eared Owl

This may seem a very mixed up existence to the reader but it is great for the one experiencing it all. To continue – a lunch in the Eilat mountain dunes with children and adults sliding and running down the dunes, the windblown sand soon obliterating our human traces; snorkeling at the Coral Reserve and feeling one’s age as the small waves nearly knock me over in the buoyant salty water but worth it for the unbelievable colours and shapes of the fish; selling T-shirts to raise much-needed funds; the body language at a local school where birds were an outdoor lesson and a rehab Buzzard was

released (I have no Hebrew); photographing a tractor digging the trench for the electricity for the new ringing station; walking across the dried mosaic of caked silt (up to 60cm deep) of

our lagoon which was inundated by a flash flood from Saudi Arabia across the borders and through Jordan (only now eleven months later has it been excavated); sitting at the ringing station and listening to three scientists (men) discussing whether parasites affected the size of the testicles of male migrating birds and therefore their chances of desirable females at the breeding grounds; checking for litter before a visiting tourist group; watching a heavily oiled Short-toed Eagle from one of our 'flight' cages being daily cleansed and photographing its droppings which were collected weekly to determine when it could be released; much laughter at the ringing station with strong black coffee brewed on a small gas stove (I never drink this at home!); feeling such admiration for the hard-working and loyal IBRCE staff - Tzadok, Jill, our new member Noam and of course Reuven, a great team; it is fascinating to watch Noam as he quickly and expertly examines each bird in the hand for identification of species, age, and sex; also I helped expand the experience of a small group of 10-12 year old boys from up north with their handling of birds at the mist nets and closing these nets down when it got too hot, quite a lot of spoken English among them thank goodness.



Photo: August 2004, British Birdwatching Fair, Rutland Waters. From R to L – Lynette Mitchell, Dalit Yosef, Roz Parks.

And all the time one is handling the birds – from the small very active resident Prinia through many species of warblers, doves, shrikes and, with luck, raptors. The diversity at this ringing station is perhaps unique for the numbers of birds ringed. Tourist groups can be

sure to see many different birds in the hand while hearing a knowledgeable and inspiring explanation of bird migration, it's intricacies, fears and hopes for the future and the amazing science being carried out around the world. I watched the care given to a sick Pelican. Its huge pouch, which folds back against its agile neck, is amazing - yellow, rubbery, elastic, wrinkled, strong, alive.

I wonder at this very different life for myself and all in three short weeks. At one point if I had been asked "where was I going?" I would have replied, "to weigh a pelican". This phrase will continue to pass through my mind when this question is asked in ordinary English life! What fun and what a privilege.
