**Dear friends,**

**Birding News – In Honor of Earth Day, 22.4.2021**

**1. Israeli Air Force Magazine cover story on bird migration and collisions with planes**

Spring is coming to an end. The spring migration is still in full force, and right now the entire global population of the Levant sparrowhawk (about 88,000 birds) is passing over Israel. Over 90% of the population of this species traverses Israel’s skies within ten days, from April 20th to 30th. Later on, more than one million European honey buzzards will traverse our skies during two weeks in May, mostly over the Eilat Mountains. As part of a joint study with the Israeli Air Force (IAF), we have successfully reduced accidents with birds by 76%. The last accident in which a fighter plane crashed occurred 24 years ago (!!) in September 1997 (previously, 10 other planes had crashed after striking birds). Consequently, the newest issue of the IAF magazine, which has just been published, includes an 11-page cover story about the two pilots who experienced the irreparably damaged plane due to a collision with a European honey buzzard that crashed into the plane’s canopy above the Ramon Crater. As far as we know, this is the first time that the front cover of the IAF magazine, whose publication began 73 years ago in May 1948, has displayed a photograph of birds.

Here is the link to the article (in Hebrew): <https://bit.ly/2OHnltG>

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| The front page of the IAF Magazine, issue 257 (Photograph of migrating pelicans: Thomas Kromanker) |

**2. Barn owls star on the birding website, Raptors on Nestcam**

As we have already shared, following COVID-19 in 2020, there were 13 million visits to our live Nestcam website (Israel Raptor Nestcam Project), double the number of visits in 2019. This year we are monitoring the breeding of the long-legged buzzard, which is successfully rearing three chicks, the griffon vulture, which is rearing a single chick, the Eurasian eagle-owl, which is rearing two chicks, and the Egyptian vulture, which is still incubating. The short-toed snake eagle laid an egg that was abandoned after a young male killed the older male, a misfortune that put a stop to breeding. The egg was no longer incubated after the tumult and was devoured by a beech marten that entered the nest at night.

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| The Egyptian vulture sits on its egg, as documented by the cameras. | 1.4.2021 The marten that was photographed invading the nest and eating the snake eagle’s egg. |

We thank the talented Dr. Gilad Friedman who manages the camera project, along with The Duchifat Foundation, the Society for Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI), Israel Nature and Parks Authority (INPA), and the Ministry of Jerusalem and Heritage. Special thanks are also extended to the commander of the Efrayim Brigade, Colonel Yiftah Norkin, and the company commander of the Duchifat Battalion, Major Lidor Amar, who made significant efforts within the Nature Defense Force (NDF) to ensure that no raptor nest would be harmed by attempted camera theft.

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| 20.4.2021 Dr. Gilad Friedman lecturing the Duchifat Battalion at the end of their operations. |

This year, two new cameras joined the Nestcam project – they were installed in the breeding box of a pair of barn owls, who are breeding “somewhere” on the grounds of Mekorot, Israel’s National Water Company, which is collaborating with us in installing and operating the cameras. One camera was installed inside the box and a second camera was installed outside it. Six more cameras were installed with the help of Mekorot.

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| The female barn owl and her five chicks in the breeding box. | The barn owls outside of their breeding box. |

The female laid eight eggs and successfully reared five chicks. The aim of the cameras in the barn owl nest is to give farmers the opportunity to observe, in real time, the barn owls’ ability to devour 2,000–6,000 rodents per year.

In the photograph below, a pair of common kestrels are watching the nest in an attempt to “steal” a chick from the breeding box.



Here is the link to the breeding cameras for the buzzard, griffon vulture, barn owl, and Egyptian vulture:

<https://www.birds.org.il/he/cameras>

Special thanks are extended to Peter and Naomi Neudstadter, Larry Kornhauser, Karen and Alan Bookstein, the Ministry of Regional Cooperation, and Mekorot Israel Water Co., who are a tremendous assistance in operating the cameras and running this unique project.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic hindered our close collaboration with the Jordanians and Palestinians during 2020; we hope that our collaborations will be restored in 2021 as in the past, and that we will be able to once again hold joint seminars.

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| A unique photograph by Rachel Aloni – a barn owl inverting its head due to its flexible neck. |

**3. For the first time in Israel, a Chinese pond heron**

See the article by Shachar Hizkiya at BirdLife Israel:

The truth is that the Chinese pond heron found in the Jerusalem Botanical Garden has been there for at least a week. A number of birders passed through and saw it, and also noticed that it looks like a strange Squacco heron, perhaps dirty or simply wet.

On Monday 12.4, Daniel Katz posted an identification request with an unclear photograph of the same heron, but even in this photograph it was evident that it was a bit different from a Squacco heron. The following Monday, Yoav Perlman asked me to go and check out this heron, and make sure it was just an “old” heron. The truth is that I wasn’t particularly optimistic, and just by chance I had time to visit before sunset. The fact that I was really close to the botanical garden, and that the pond is quite small and exposed with no hiding places, convinced me to venture out, and it was just as well.

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| Chinese pond heron in the Jerusalem Botanical Garden – 13.4.2021; Photograph: Shachar Hizkiya |

I arrived forty minutes before sunset, and began searching for it in the pond of the botanical garden. This is a smallish, ornamental pool with no bank and with few reeds to hide in. There is a fence and a walking trail around the pool, and an active restaurant at a distance of about rwo meters. That evening there were relatively few people because it was the eve of Memorial Day, but on any other day there would probably have been dozens of people around the pond already, although it appears that their presence wouldn’t have really bothered the heron.

After a quick glance without binoculars, I found it, eating by the edge of the pond. I pulled out my camera, took a few photos and sent them to Yoav for identification; he confirmed that it really was a Chinese pond heron! I was very excited, having never before seen a bird arriving for the first time in Israel, and I had come without any expectations at all…

It stayed for half an hour and let me take a few photos, then it flew to up to sleep on one of the trees in the garden, just a few minutes before the first birders came to see it. The next morning it returned to the pond, where many birders and photographers were waiting to see this unusual heron visiting our country for the first time.

The Chinese pond heron (*Ardeola bacchus*) is a very rare visitor in our region (the Western Palearctic).

The first observation of a Chinese pond heron was documented in 1973 in Norway. There are also observations from Finland, Denmark, and Hungary. But in all those cases, the observations belong to “Category D”, that is, there is strong suspicion that these birds escaped captivity. The only two “Category A” observations of a Chinese pond heron (authentic observations – the bird arrived by itself) are from England, Norfolk County (November 2004) and Kent County (March 2014). In these two cases the observations were during the migration season, a fact that may strengthen the assumption that this is a bird of natural origin and went off course, since the Chinese pond heron is a migrating species…

And what about our heron? The time is right, the young age of the heron also supports the assumption that it is a “natural” bird, and there is no documentation of this species in zoos… in short, it certainly looks like it is the first Chinese pond heron in Israel and the third in the Western Palearctic.

No less impressive than the pleasant appearance of this Asian heron was the great number of birders who came to watch this special bird that came from a distance of thousands of kilometers. On Friday, I (Yossi Leshem) met birders from Rosh Pina and Be’er Sheva, who made special trips in order to document this wonderful, unique bird from a distance of only 10–20 meters, while it devoured *gambusia* and frogs in the botanical garden pool.

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| Photograph: Amir Ben Dov | Photograph: Amir Ben Dov |

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| The heron with the Israeli flag on Memorial Day | Photography: Amir Ben Dov |

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| Some of the dozens of birders who came to document the Chinese pond heron. In front – Amir Balaban (photography: Yossi Leshem). |

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| The Chinese pond heron distribution map. Yellow – breeding regions; blue – wintering grounds; green – regions with a stable population. |

**4. Rina Levinson, the most senior female pilot in the IAF, passed away at 93**

(From “Ha’aretz” newspaper – Obituaries, Ofer Aderet 16.4.2021)

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| Rina Levinson piloted, among others, the motorized glider made by “Ayit,” in Sde Teiman for at least ten days, in an IAF-funded study led by Yossi Leshem to reduce accidents with birds. Rina impressed me greatly with her unbounded energy and passionate love of flying. Since she was short, she always came to bird flights with a large pillow that she brought from home, so that she would be able to reach the pedals required for flying the motorized glider. |

**The most senior female pilot**

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| Rina Levinson made history as the most senior female Israeli pilot. Levinson, who held a Mandatory pilot’s license, served as a pilot in the Air Force and continued gliding until the age of 85. “I love to fly among the flocks of storks and cranes, it’s worth living just for that,” she said. |

Levinson was born in Tel Aviv in 1908. In her youth she joined the “Flying Club” that trained youth in aeronautics and gliding. “During WWII, I was 14. We, the children of Tel Aviv, sat on the beach and watched the British planes passing over the water. I joined the flight club, we began building model airplanes,” she related.



Rina Levinson, one of the first female IAF pilots, 1928–2021

She received a scholarship from the Tel Aviv municipality to learn to fly with “Aviron”, the first Jewish flight company in the Land of Israel. In 1946 she received a British pilot’s license, and later went to the USA to obtain a commercial pilot’s license. In 1965 she joined the sixth IAF Flight Academy pilots’ course, but was dismissed before it ended. Thanks to her civil training as a pilot, she served as a pilot in reconnaissance and communications aircraft. In 1956 Levinson participated in Operation Kadesh and piloted the commander of the French Air Force who was visiting Israel. She served in the Air Force for four more years, and another quarter of a century as a reserve soldier. Most of the time she served in the 100th squadron, where she piloted a Piper. Like many other women in the Air Force during that period, she suffered from discrimination. Two years ago, in an interview, she told Avi-Moshe Segal, curator of the Air Force Museum and researcher of the history of Hebrew Flight: “I had thousands of hours in the Piper. I flew throughout the entire country. I passed all the training exercises. But when it was time to set out into the field, when there was something interesting to do, an operational activity, I was told, ‘You’re a woman – you’re not going out.’ That bothered me terribly all those years. I was just as good as everyone else, not better, not worse, but they never took me because I’m a woman.”

In 1958 she began working as a pilot at “Arkia” but was laid off due to staff reductions. Subsequently, male pilots were re-employed, but not her. When she complained about this to the Female Workers Council, she was told, as she relates, by MK Santa Yoseftal: “I would also feel unsafe inside a plane if I knew there was a woman at the helm.” When she approached El Al in search of a job, she was told, as she relates, that employment of female pilots would harm the company’s image. “The advertising department opposed the idea due to the concern that their competitors would exploit the fact that female pilots work in the young Israeli company,” she said, as documented by Dr. Sharon Geva in her book, “What Does the Woman Say?”. Subsequently, Levinson became a journalist and businesswoman, and among other things, established an agency for importing Cessna planes. “No-one believed that a woman could sell planes,” she said. “My entire family ridiculed me but I had a wonderful father who helped me with all my craziness. I sold about 70 Cessna planes, even to the IAF.” In addition, she established and managed an air-taxi company.

Rina Levinson was not the first female pilot in the Land of Israel, but in recent years, until her death, she was the most senior of them. She was preceded by Rachel Markovsky-Landau, who completed the “Aviron” course in 1940, and during the War of Independence brought supplies to isolated settlements. She was followed by Datya Perach, who served in the flight platoon of the Palmach, and participated in escort missions and photographic analysis. Zohara Levitov joined the IAF Flight Academy pilots’ course in 1948, which took place in California, and served as a transport pilot. She was killed in August in a plane crash. Yael Rom was the first female pilot to complete the entire IAF Flight Academy pilots’ course. She finished the pilots’ course in 1951 and served as a transport pilot.

Subsequently, the IAF blocked women from participating in the course. Thus, until the Alice Miller Supreme Court case in 1995, which paved the way for women to return to service as pilots, Levinson, who performed reserve duty in the IAF, was the only female pilot in the Air Force. “I am proud of today’s female pilots; I couldn’t compete with them, they should continue this way. Anything that a man can do a woman can also do,” she said.

Levinson died this week at the age of 93.

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| Rina Levinson (second from right) with the Commander of the Israeli Air Force, General Amikam Norkin (to her left), in a photo for the main interview for the Independence Day supplement of Yediot Ahronot. A few days after the interview Rina passed away. At the right is General (res.) Dan Tolkovsky (who turned 100 in January 2021), and from the left is Colonel Dani Shapiro, an IAF experimental pilot, Harold Smokey Simon (age 102), a foreign volunteer from South Africa who enlisted during the War of Independence, and Major Gerson.  Photography: Tal Shachar, courtesy of Yediot Ahronot |

**5. Israel Police following in the footsteps of the Nature Defense Force, with commanders taking responsibility for their environment**

In the last year, we have encouraged activity in the Israel Police with the aim of getting the police to assist in nature and landscape conservation, through enforcement and educational activities, with the help of policemen and officers. The project began as a joint initiative of Prof. Yossi Leshem and Major General (ret.) Meni Itzhak, who was head of the Investigations Branch of the Police, and during the mid-1970s was a hiking group instructor at the Har Gilo Field School of the SPNI, before he enlisted in the Israel Police. The previous Attorney General, Yehuda Weinstein, also joined the initiative, and the Deputy President of the Court (ret.) Prof. Elyakim Rubinstein volunteered to promote enforcement, law, and education for nature conservation in Israel. The initiative will operate in the Israel Police along the same lines as NDF, in close collaboration with INPA, SPNI, and the Antiquities Authority. In the first stage, it was decided that the National Police Academy in Beit Shemesh will begin instructional activity in courses for non-commissioned officers, officers, and policemen at the Academy, led by Brigadier General Koresh Bar-Nur, Commander of the Academy, and Chief Superintendent Matan Glatt at the Academy. Subsequently, there will be a joint, expanded activity program for the police and for environmental agencies. After the program was approved by the Police Commissioner and other senior bodies.

We view this activity as a win-win partnership, both for the positive image of the Israel Police in the community and for defining enforcement of nature conservation issues in Israel as a national target.

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| 14.3.2021: Judge (ret.) Prof. Elyakim Rubinstein meets with members of INPA and SPNI and Meni Yitzhaki to work on promoting legislation (Photography: Yossi Leshem). | June 2016: Preliminary meeting between the Director of INPA, Shaul Goldstein, Major General Meni Itzhaki (prior to ending his role), Yehuda Weinstein, Attorney General (ret.), who holds a confiscated snake eagle chick, and Ronny Malka, Head of the Enforcement Division (ret.) at INPA (Photography: Yossi Leshem). |
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| 20.4.2021: Superintendent Nurit Cohen from the National Police Academy and Amir Balaban release a lesser whitethroat, to continue its migration, at the Jerusalem Bird Observatory in Jerusalem. | 6.4.2021: The first lecture at the National Police Academy in the detective course (Photography: Yossi Leshem). |

**Enjoy reading!**

**Prof. Yossi Leshem**