

# The Spur-Winged Plover

By Ehud Neor

We live on the northern edge of a small town in southern Israel, not far from the coast. On the other side of our back yard fence is an eastern extension of the coastal dunes that make up the permanent nature reserve between Ashkelon and Ashdod. The particular area behind our rented home is slated to become a "skate park," for the youngsters, and adjacent to our fence will be a walking path to encircle the entire town. Since moving here exactly one year ago my wife and I have enjoyed sitting in our back yard and enjoying the view, even more so since finding out that it will be gone within a year or so, replaced by scraping skate boards and the shouts of the young, though that is not such a bad thing to live next to, unless you have thin walls and want to take a nap.



The author's back yard. Courtesy: The Author

The tree-bush front and center is an Acacia, not native to Israel and is considered invasive. It was brought to Israel from Australia (there called "Orange Wattle") because it grew on its own on sand dunes. One root deep, searching for the water level, and a mass of horizontal roots, absorbing dew and rainwater before it could disappear into the dunes, and themselves sprouting new trees every few meters or so. The idea was to keep the sand drifts from drifting, and they succeeded in doing that. It is particularly comforting to us as it made up a large part of our surroundings when we lived in Gush Katif in the Gaza Strip. Here, at retirement age, it serves as a sort of monument to the nineteen years we spent there.

Hidden behind the clump of acacia is a pile of construction debris, and in that pile lives a family of mongooses. We did

not see much of them this summer. They may have temporarily moved to a summer hole with more water, but last week the founding couple showed up again with a pup in tow. Two houses down from us is a family that has a chicken coop in their back yard. It is fenced in, but without a roof. When we manage to spy the mongooses in action, they are either on their way to the coop or on their way back to their home. They are not eating the chickens. Evidently, they are afraid of the rooster. Maybe they are eating the grub that the family feeds to the chickens. Though they hunt, we do not see that. We see scavenging, and we see funny interaction with the local cat population. They are formally stand-offish, but the cats get frisky and when the mongoose turns to continue on its way the cat will paw at the mongoose's tail, and the latter will back up and the cat will back off and things settle down again. I've noticed that a mongoose's sense of smell is better than a cat's, because if someone throws out scraps in a wide arc, the cats will eventually get most of it, but they can miss a few bits, even if it is obvious that they can smell it and keep searching until finally giving up. Later, a mongoose will come by, stop and raise its nose tasting the air, and methodically home-in on any remaining morsel. Right to it.

A hedgehog rambled by the other day, as did a mole about half a year ago, leaving a line of small, loosened earth mounds. If I'm sitting out late, between the hours of 2-4 am, I sometimes see a jackal flitting like a ghost from behind the acacia following that fence going towards the right and later retracing its steps.

But for me, always, the birds steal the show.

We start with the invasive species, because, beside the crows, they make the most noise in addition to having an interesting story behind them. The myna bird was brought in by the government nature society of the time in the fifties, from India, to "add variety" to the local species. Smart, quick and powerful, they entrenched themselves smack dab into what used

to be the exclusive realm of the crows: the towers holding local power distribution lines, or street-light poles if they can find a perch. The crows have abandoned that particular niche almost completely as if saying "Ah, that's not our best place anyway. You can have it." The mynas have made the best of this conquest, and do not seem to be pushing farther into crow territory. So, if you want to see (and hear) a myna in Israel, go to any street and look up. The crows maintain their kingdom in the high places in the trees, as it has always been. In our back yard tableau, there is a perennial crow family atop the flat-topped pine at the top right of the picture. That might be a crow's head sticking up right in the middle. The mynas visit this area only in passing. Sometimes they perch on the top of our building or the neighbor's, and let their presence be known, but if I feel their absence, I just need to stroll around to the front of the house to watch an entire colony at work all up and down our street.

The second invasive species is the parakeet. It is said that the owner of some pet store got sick of their squawking and just let them loose. The rest is history. If you go by the decibel level, they are the happiest of immigrants. In our back yard, they are even happier. That tree in the background grows some sort of fruit with a hard shell. The parakeets cannot break it until it is almost rotting on the tree, whose green leaves are replaced by yellow flowers. That is the sign for them to arrive. For a whole month—this year it was mid-November to mid-December—a huge rowdy flock arrives and just throws a giant party. That's the way I see it anyway. One of the neighbors told me that they become intoxicated when they eat the rotting fruit. I sit out there watching and listening and am reminded of English laborers stopping by the pub after work. I imagine the discussion when they get back to their roost.

"Where you been, Cheepy?"

"Oh, I stopped by the Neor tree with a bunch of the lads for a

few.”

“A few? You smell like a bunch of fermented feathers! Into the shower with you!”

There is a small white owl that makes a pass now and then. He's not a frequent visitor. In the morning the first to work are the turtledoves. They seem like dumb birds, but they have no competition for whatever it is they are pecking at in the sand. They are out there just before sun-up and eat for about an hour, maybe a little more. If they are returning food to their mouth every time they peck at the sand, then they are the best fed of our birds. It seems that their nourishment is found in a thin layer on the surface. I've seen myna birds pecking like them now and then, but they soon abandon the effort. The return is evidently not worth the peck for them. Now and then a Hoopoe (Israel's national bird) will swoop down and go over the same ground, but with its long-pointed beak it is searching a deeper layer than the turtle doves. When it sees me spying on him, he spreads his prehistoric dinosaur-like head fan and flies away.

During the summer months, like a prelude to the parakeets of the Fall in color and noise, a kingfisher will stop by in the late afternoon for a few minutes at the most. I don't know why. He spent the summer somewhere in the middle of our town. My guess is that someone has a fishpond. You can hear him for miles around with their unmistakable shrill tremolo call.

Sitting on my back porch, that is my wide-screen TV, with its color and audio and interesting sub-plots of small mammals and birds. Late at night it is a black and white TV, and that allows for different fauna and fewer sounds. It is an altogether different range of moods, suitable for a scotch in hand and some smooth jazz in the headphones. However, very seldom do I succumb to the temptation of listening to music when I am sitting there.

There are more: sparrows, pigeons, crested larks and the sunbirds with their arrested tweets. As if that were not enough, the neighbor off to the right of the picture has a large outdoor birdcage with exotic songbirds. They were meant to be therapy for one of his sons, but quickly enough fell under his auspices when his son lost interest. He works in sales, and when I see him taking care of them, I see that their care is therapeutic for him in a large way, and in an indirect way surely trickles down to his son. The sparrows have their morning get-together in the pomegranate tree next to the song-bird cage as if commiserating with them about their incarceration or maybe heartlessly flaunting in their faces their own freedom before beginning their day's foraging with an air-cutting whoosh.

When I sit on my porch at any time from early evening until early morning I am listening for two friendly, familiar voices. Both come from the direction of the nature reserve off to the left of my wide screen. The one voice can be heard any time of the night if it is disturbed. That is the Stone-Curlew. It has a shriek that can be heard for miles around. When you hear this shriek, you can imagine it as a bird that descended from the dinosaurs. It is aggressive, as if saying: "Here I am! Let's fight!"

The other bird, the Spur-winged Lapwing (a fancy name for our local plover), is the one closest to my heart. They are totally nuts. They lay their eggs in a slight depression in the sand and spend the next few months screaming at the world to stay away. I watch them, and listen to them, and cannot help but think: "My friend, talk to your cousins and learn how to nest in trees. Your stress levels will definitely go down." But I feel close to them mostly because I have a shared history with them.

When I was a young boy growing up on Martha's Vineyard, one of my earliest encounters with nature conservation/preservation occurred when there was a well-advertised project to protect

the nesting Piping Plover (Note to Israeli Plover: this is not the cousin with whom you want to consult). They were nesting on State Beach, the sandy, gently sloped beach of calm waters on the east side of the island. Parallel to and between the road and the beach was a narrow strip of dry sand making very minor dunes that were held together by some strands of tall grass and some low-spread vegetation. Though not as safe as a tree, there was protection, as we youngsters would not wander into those areas because one seldom did so and return without a thorn or some painful slices from the grass to show for it. Regardless, they were somehow endangered, so up went the warning signs and flimsy plastic net fencing.

It would be twenty years before I gave a plover a second thought. When we first moved to the levelled-out sand dune that was Gan Or in 1986, there was no vegetation on our public lands. If there were a tree here or there, it was there because of private initiative, planted by a resident in his own yard. We arrived to Gan Or about a month before the Jewish New Year. The coming year was a Sabbatical Year, which meant that if we wanted to get started with public landscaping, it had to be accomplished beforehand. After some last-minute decision-making the saplings were trucked in, and we got them into the sand just in time. Those saplings grew and it turned out that that manic effort to bring some greenery into our lives succeeded. Until those trees grew, though, Gan Or was a sandy outpost with a sandy horizon in all directions. So for the few years before the significant greenery appeared bringing with it the songbirds, all we had as an avian presence were those two night screechers.

Thinking back now, it seems to me that that my familiarity with those birds, especially the plover, would not have come about had it not been for the fact that Gan Or was situated in the Gaza Strip, between Khan Yunis and the sea. Since it was, we spent two nights a month on guard duty, driving around in our security jeep with our M-16s, "making our presence known."

For most of the years, before the army itself took over those patrols, our presence was being made known for the most part to plovers who were trying to get some sleep before another day of stressing over their exposed eggs. One would screech and wake up his neighbor, who would screech and wake up his neighbor further on down. They were much better guards than we were. When something or someone else stirred them up, we would increase our vigilance.

I once had a chance to get close up and personal with a plover. I was in uniform, doing my yearly reserve duty as part of the unit tasked specifically with the security of Gush Katif. This time I was a driver for the unit that provided security for the school buses. One armored jeep in front of the armored bus, and one armored jeep behind the bus. The idea was to prevent suicide bombers in their vehicles from pulling up to the buses and exploding. This made for a few hours of intense activity in the mornings when the children went to school and in the early afternoon when they returned home. Outside of those convoy duties the rest of our eight-hour shifts were uneventful. We would patrol between the settlements, stopping here and there to park and stretch our legs. Now and then we would be some rock throwing to respond to, but this stint of reserve duty happened during a lull between the first and second intifadas, and things were quiet.

Early, before dawn, we might be parked on the security road—military-only-use—between Khan Yunis and Gush Katif. I would park the jeep facing East towards Khan Yunis. Behind us, a few meters from the unpaved but hardened road, was the security fence separating Gush Katif and Khan Yunis. Our view in front was to the East towards Khan Yunis. Where we were parked this particular morning, there was a flat sandy plain in front of us that stretched for almost one kilometer to the southeastern edge of Kha Yunis. The thinking was that it would be impossible for a threat to draw near to us without being discovered. That worked, as long as the crew was able to



maintain an appropriate level of alertness.

The bane of the conscript: on-duty sleep. The corporal in command of the jeep sitting next to me was nineteen years old. The private in back was eighteen. The Bedouin tracker was about twenty-five. I was old enough to be their father. This made for some hilarious interplay, something that helped the long, dry hours in between convoys pass. I felt so much the wise elder, the one they could turn to with worldly questions. Think along the lines of a self-referenced and self-compiled Wikipedia. In other words, a know-it-all. Mostly, these young soldiers had a built-in respect for me, their elder, and I enjoyed seeing the world through their youthful eyes. A know-it-all armchair anthropologist, that's what I was. In addition, I had managed to develop a good name amongst these young soldiers, in that when we would find ourselves parked on that security road during the hour before dawn, I would volunteer for the first shift of guard duty while the others slept and not wake anyone for their shift, letting them sleep through.

On this morning, as soon as I opened the door of the jeep to stand guard, I heard the screech of a plover close by. I stood by the hood of the jeep and made a close scan of the area in front of us. There was enough moonlight so that I could see all the way to the first houses in Khan Yunis. I was immediately distracted by the plover's wild flapping about five meters off to my left and five meters in the air. Approximately. Because he was moving so manically, I could see flashes of him in the moonlight, but I could not get a good take on him because he was jerking right and left, up and down. I realized that the distracting was the point. I was totally focused on him. While watching him dance around it came to me: I must be very close to his nest. The moment that came into my mind, the plover landed and quietly looked at me.

Standing on the solid pressed-gravel bed of the road, I knew that the nest must be off the side of the road, just in front

of me. I set up watch. I looked right down in front of my legs and kept looking for the next half-hour while the sun slowly rose. In my mind I sketched out a search pattern and my eyes crisscrossed the flat area in front of me. I did not see a thing. At first this was understandable, because of the darkness. However, as it grew light, I became frustrated because I could see every rock and pebble on that sandy plain, but not an egg was to be found amongst them. The plover had moved farther away with the dawn but was still concentrated on me. The bird seemed less stressed, perhaps confident that I would not discover its nest. In a reversal of roles, I was now the stressed one. How can it be that I am not seeing the eggs, I thought. I redoubled my efforts and narrowed the search pattern. I scanned every object, pausing to describe to myself what I was seeing before continuing to the next object, confident that this time I would be successful.

Half-way through the search pattern I noticed movement in my peripheral vision. Without looking I knew that it was the lieutenant sneaking up on us to see if we were sleeping. Though he saw me standing guard, he knew that the rest of the crew might be sleeping, when at most only one is allowed. I did not want my boys to lose any leave they might have coming up, but if the lieutenant saw me open the driver's door in his eyes it would be proof that everyone inside had been sleeping. My right hand was hidden from the lieutenant so I used it to knock on the side of the jeep. I heard voices from within, so I refocused on my search. I did not turn to meet the lieutenant. He was intruding upon my important task. I did lift my eyes here and there to the horizon so as to appear properly on guard. Only when I heard his steps did I look towards him nonchalantly and say "Good morning, lieutenant." He found our jeep full of life and without much of a delay he strode back to his jeep.

The sun was up, the plover was sitting a little way off looking at me, and just like that I was looking at the eggs,

not more than a meter in front of me, plain as day, looking like the eggs that they were, just sitting there on a spot that I had searched at least twenty times over the past hour. I was fascinated. I looked away and then back to see if they would magically disappear, but they did not. As in so many things in life, once exposed, those eggs could not be concealed again. The magic of it all, this magician-bird, amazed me. With its slight-of-wing, and the perfect camouflage of its eggs, I was the perfect dupe. I was thinking that a young proto magician, seeing this display in nature, might think to himself: "I can do that!"

In nature, this sleight of hand can seem nefarious. Those creatures of the deep that angle a little fluorescent light in front of their needle-teethed mouths to lure prey come to mind. That's just it. You are lulled into following the magician's lead hand—the plover, flying up and off to the left—and you miss the point. The plover's activity is defensive; it is protecting its offspring. That see-through fish of the depths? It wants to eat you.

So it came to pass, on Oct. 7, 2023, that the laws of nature were twisted and manipulated to the extent that even a godless soul must cry foul. For almost twenty years the sleight of hand was flight of rocket, and the genius of the Jewish mind followed those trajectories and measured them and out-of-the-boxed them until the once thought impossible was achieved, a missile defense. But when it comes to the safety of her citizens, Israel does not leave well enough alone. Since each of our interceptor rockets cost hundreds of times more than the projectiles shooting out of Gaza, we fine-tuned the Iron Dome system until only those missiles on course to landing in populated areas were marked for destruction, and further development refined the system and integrated it with an early-warning system that would alert inhabitants of one neighborhood, while allowing the inhabitants of nearby neighborhoods to go about their businesses. One almost felt

sorry for the poor terrorists shooting their rockets. No great power in history had been able to develop such an effective defense against rocket fire. How could the lowly sons-of-monkeys Jews achieve such a thing? This emasculation of their phallic weapon should have been humiliating for the Arabs of Gaza. Somehow, it wasn't. They continued to launch their increasingly accurate 1,000 dollar rockets that Israel intercepted with 100,000-dollar rockets. After the launch, Israel would attack the now empty 50-dollar hand-welded launch apparatus with expensive-to-operate attack helicopters firing expensive airborne munitions. This relentless and exclusive focus on a threat that had been rendered harmless was how a highly trained and experienced military became nothing more than a group of birdwatchers, as I had been some twenty years earlier.

The Arabs of Gaza knew their enemy, and they played to our strength. They could not compete with our Iron Dome algorithms, but they could keep us occupied.

Thus, we became a grounded plover, mesmerized by a now harmless fireworks display, but more so by the fact that it continued regardless. The powers of deception had been reversed. We interpreted the Arabs' continuing rocket attacks as a pitiful, because ineffective, act of defiance. We should have been asking: "What the hell are they up to?"

The Arabs of Gaza had their eyes on the prize: The uncamouflaged and unguarded plover eggs that were the families living in the Israeli communities just a few hundred meters beyond a flimsy barbed-wire fence. It was the Israeli side that had been emasculated. Fathers were bound and forced to watch their wives, and daughters, and sons, raped and murdered, before being tortured to death themselves. No witnesses. Except. Except. The perpetrators themselves in their bloodied-hands waving ecstasy, live-streamed and uploaded the slaughter to the world at large, and with an added evil touch, live-streamed to the family members and

relatives of the victims, using the victims' own phones. This first-hand and undeniable evidence was promptly denied by Antisemites and Antizionists—take your pick—the world over.

Evidence being denied even before being presented, the pertinent question was never asked: What led these admittedly low-life Jew-hating terrorists to commit such unfathomable atrocities? It turns out that they were high on drugs. They were captivated by Captigon, the amphetamine of choice for wild-eyed Arab murderers the middle east over.

Therein we find the Divine intervention that saved the Jewish people from a horror many magnitudes greater than the one experienced on October 7. If the terrorists had acted as soldiers and not as bloodthirsty savages, they would have overrun five military airbases that stood undefended, three in the south and two in the center of the country. One terrorist can disable a 200 million dollar fighter jet with a burst from his Kalashnikov. By then the Hizballah would have joined the battle and attacked the single surviving airbase in the north. It would then have been a cat and mouse battle with tens of thousands of heavily armed and highly trained Arab terrorists in the towns and cities of Israel. The Arabs of Judea and Samaria would have joined in, as would have many Israeli Arabs. At that point it would not be surprising had the Egyptian air force and armored corps attacked from the south.

In other words, Israel faced extinction, and was saved by a fistful of uppers. This is the unspoken truth of Oct.7. That rag-tag Arab army with their Toyota fighting vehicles and endless supply of RPG's could have won the war. That is why the final battle is upon us. All of Israel's enemies must be completely destroyed with no quarter given. Now the spur in the plover's wing will be unsheathed.