As a naturalist, but particularly a birdwatcher, who has travelled extensively in the Middle East, I cannot recollect an area like The Dana Wildlands Reserve where in the course of about a 15 km stretch one can find such a representative selection of truly Middle Eastern birds, from mountain to desert species. And what is more, in healthy populations living in near-natural habitats.

At 1500 metres, the roof of Dana, you look out over the mountain ridges that fall away to the west. In the foreground are domed beehive-like rock formations as though made from dough, which, after kneading was dumped in clusters. On the upper slopes the dominant vegetation is the juniper which gently undulates with stony, silty and sandy dunes, scattered stands of acacias and occasional smallholdings bringing bright expanses of green to the desert. Three species of sandgrouse can be found gathering in the early morning at the few isolated waterholes sprinkled throughout the desert. Larks are well represented by Hoopoe, Bar-tailed Desert and Dunn’s Lark, and in the more remote, wild and barren wadi systems another of the region’s specialities, the Hooded Wheatear can be seen making high aerial sallies for insects, like a large black and white flycatcher, whilst Great Grey Shrikes stand like sentinels on isolated trees. In the foothills mostly in the early mornings - and on the desert plains of Wadi Araba small groups of gazelles may be fleetingly observed. But it is after dark that the predators come into their own - caracals, badgers, wild cats, Blandford and Ruppell’s foxes, wolves and hyaenas. Only their footprints in the sandy wadis and around waterholes provide evidence of their presence. Unlike the more visible birds, we shall probably never know their true populations.

Griffon Vultures sail overhead in the early morning, venturing forth from their breeding crags to survey the deserts of Wadi Araba in search of animal carcases. The dawn air is often punctured with the shrill cries of Short-toed and Bonelli’s eagles, both of which breed, whilst Lesser Kestrels, Barbary Falcons and even Sooty Falcons can all be easily seen.

And if you’re lucky, perhaps a wandering Verreaux’s Eagle will ride the thermal air currents, wings held in a shallow ‘V’, spiralling upwards with rarely, if ever, a wing beat. Owls are firmly in evidence at Dana. Although occasionally seen during the day, Eagle Owls, Hume’s Tawny Owls and Scop’s Owls frequently pierce the night air with their calls.

Wadi Dana, from which the reserve takes its name, cuts a deep gash in the Sharrah Mountains and, following a precipitous path from Dana village, you are quickly into the lush, sub-tropical vegetation of the wadi beds, with tamarisk, phragmites and large stands of oleander. Palestine Sunbirds start to appear at this level, as do Sand Partridges on the neighbouring steep arid slopes, often congregating to dust bathe in sandy hollows, which will then become criss-crossed with their footprints and masked with impressions of their bodies and outstretched wings. White-crowned Black Wheatears, Blackstarts and Mourning Wheatears (‘the veiled one’ is the translation of the local Arabic name) are all common along the wadi edge, together with noisy, bold and inquisitive Arabian Babblers, especially where there is any patch of vegetation.

Soon you are down to below sea level, as the mouth of Wadi Dana fans out into the wide expanse of Wadi Araba some 40 km south of the Dead Sea. Here the landscape gently undulates with stony, silty and sandy dunes, scattered stands of acacias and occasional smallholdings bringing bright expanses of green to the desert. Three species of sandgrouse can be found gathering in the early morning at the few isolated waterholes sprinkled throughout the desert. Larks are well represented by Hoopoe, Bar-tailed Desert and Dunn’s Lark, and in the more remote, wild and barren wadi systems another of the region’s specialities, the Hooded Wheatear can be seen making high aerial sallies for insects, like a large black and white flycatcher, whilst Great Grey Shrikes stand like sentinels on isolated trees. In autumn large flocks of buzzards, and smaller numbers of mixed eagles can be seen migrating south, rising in the thermals high above the hill and ridge.

Ibex are occasionally sighted in the foothills - mostly in the early mornings - and on the desert plains of Wadi Araba small groups of gazelles may be fleetingly observed. But it is after dark that the predators come into their own - caracals, badgers, wild cats, Blandford and Ruppell’s foxes, wolves and hyaenas. Only their footprints in the sandy wadis and around waterholes provide evidence of their presence. Unlike the more visible birds, we shall probably never know their true populations.

Richard Porter

Dana is about a 2 hours drive south of Amman (on the Desert Highway is best) close to the small towns of Qadisayya and Buseirah. The entrance fee is 2 Jordanian Dinars, and there is a small charge per night for hiring tents and blankets. The campsite is open from March to November, and it is best to book with RSCN in Amman beforehand.