

THE NATURAL SIDE OF ISRAEL



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Doron Nissim / NPA

"See My works, how beautiful and perfect they are, and all I created I created for you. Beware lest you spoil and destroy My world, for if you will spoil it, there is no one to repair it after you."

Ecclesiastes Rabba 7

As a region on the spectacular seam of three continents – Africa, Asia and Europe – Israel prides itself on its rare and inspiring variety of natural landscapes and unspoiled scenery. In a modest area smaller than the American state of Massachusetts are snowy heights and pristine deserts, evergreen forests and inlet-studded beaches, broad plains and enchanting streams.

Thanks to its unique characteristics of geography and climate, Israel is considered very significant in protecting biodiversity of both flora and fauna. Israel also has many endemic species and marvelous habitats.

A number of sites in Israel have been declared UNESCO World Heritage Sites, among them the biblical tells, the incense route, the prehistoric caves on Mt. Carmel and others.

The Israel Nature and Parks Authority is the guardian whose task it is to protect the functioning of natural habitats with their ecosystems and diversity of plants and animals in Israel's nature reserves, national parks and open spaces.

As protectors of nature it is our privilege to work in this spectacular area. We treat nature with reverence; of course, it belongs not only to the present generation, but has been given to us to protect for those to come as well.

As an organization that considers sustainability and protection of Israel's rich biodiversity its top priorities, we work to return to the wild animal species that populated our country in biblical times. We strengthen populations of endangered animals, wildflowers and plants. We build and rehabilitate wetland habitats struggling against invasive species and we promote awareness of the damage of light pollution. Our great respect for the fact that Israel is one of the world's most important bird migration routes spurs us to work hard to prevent conflicts between human beings and wild animals. All of this we do out of our love for the land, connection to its history – and daily wonder at the beauty of creation.

Director General **Shaul Goldstein**
Israel Nature and Parks Authority

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THE NATURAL SIDE OF ISRAEL

Stop Extinction

Biodiversity in Israel was once very rich. But bears, cheetahs, ostriches and many other species have disappeared from Israel's landscapes, mainly due to reduction and damage to habitats, as well as to hunting and poisoning. The Israel Nature and Parks Authority – the government body responsible for protecting nature, landscape and heritage in Israel – has over the past five decades of its existence greatly changed that trend. Hunting laws are enforced, as is a sweeping ban on the poisoning of wildlife. Reconstruction of lost habitats has also proven itself. In the Hula Nature Reserve, a remnant of the great swamplands of Israel, the Hula painted frog was discovered in 2011, an amphibian species that had been officially declared extinct. The Nubian ibex, which was on the verge of extinction, was also saved at the very last minute, and the Palestine mountain gazelle continues to flourish.

Israel's plant world is also richly varied. Little Israel is home to more than 2,300 species of plants, about 150 of which are endemic and some 400 of which are endangered. The Israel Nature and Parks Authority conducts surveys to monitor endangered endemic species and cultivates them in protected gardens to give nature a "backup."

The Authority also conducts a wide range of educational and public relations activities to involve the community in protecting these important natural assets.



TZACHI YAFFE

On a stormy day, in the Odem Forest in the northern part of Israel, a wolf stopped in the midst of its flee and looked straight into the lens of the camera. It was a spectacular full-grown wolf, with a thick winter fur.

The wolves living in this part of the country are bigger and darker than the wolves who live in other parts of Israel. Some consider them a subspecies of the grey wolf and call them the Golan wolf.



GAL BISMUTH / NPA

A female dorcas gazelle with a young fawn in the midst of the dust storm, which befell Israel in September. The fawn and its mother appeared from behind the dune besides me. The fawn ignored me, but its mother looked straight at me, aware of my presence in the vehicle - calm, yet vigilant.

A few seconds after I took the picture, the two turned around and calmly continued to walk into the large cloud of dust.



IRIT DROB

A young golden jackal - a member of a family of jackals that I have been photographing over the last two and a half years - ambushing a hoopoe. The encounter between the two had a happy end - at least for the hoopoe.

The hoopoe, which has been honored with the title of "the national bird of Israel", is common throughout the country, mainly in populated areas. It frequents irrigated lawns, where it finds its food - worms, insects and sometimes even small reptiles. The tuft of feathers on its head makes it easy to identify.

Reintroduction to the Wild

Deforestation and over-hunting during the late 19th century brought about the local extinction of four ungulates in the Middle East: the Persian fallow deer, the Arabian oryx, the Asiatic wild ass, and the roe deer. Of these, the former two are listed by the IUCN as endangered. In the mid-1960s the Israel Nature and Parks Authority decided to reintroduce the species in a program entitled "Returning the Animals of the Bible to the Land of the Bible." Two captive breeding facilities were established for this purpose – at the Hai-Bar Carmel Nature Reserve and the Hai-Bar Yotvata Nature Reserve. In the 1980s and 1990s reintroductions began based on repeated multiple releases drawing animals from the breeding facilities. Currently there are over 250 Persian fallow deer in the wild (the largest self-sustaining wild population in the world), over 250 Asiatic wild asses, approximately 100 Arabian oryx and an estimated several dozen roe deer.



RON GAFNI

While flying early one morning over Nahal Karkom in the Negev I saw a large herd of Asian wild ass (the photograph shows about half of the individuals in the herd). In the past the wild ass had become extinct in the Negev, but in recent years they are being reintroduced after they are bred and raised under controlled conditions in the Yotvata Hai Bar Nature Reserve. Today the wild asses roam from Nahal Zin in the north to Bikat Sayarim in the south.



ALEX GEIFMAN

As part of a follow-up I conducted over the past summer of a family of red fox in the Ben Shemen forest region, not far from Moshav Gimzo, I noticed four to five month old fox cubs climbing up a tree in the evening. It was the first time I saw two cubs climbing together while playing. Before I used to see them climbing one by one. Before I had time to photograph the two, one of them was hanging on a branch, trying to save itself from falling. I was very excited and took several pictures from the vehicle that also served as my hide. One of the cubs fell to the ground, but was uninjured.



OREN AUSTER

While walking through the sands of Nitzna, looking for snake traces, I noticed a Sahara sand viper crawling on the ground, preparing to entrench in the sand. It was deep into the night, and because of the heavy darkness I used a flashlight.

The Sahara sand viper is a venomous snake. The photograph beautifully shows its tongue with its forked tip, typical of snakes. The snake uses its tongue to collect smell molecules and transfer them to a special olfactory sense organ, called the Jacobson's organ, located above the upper palate.



DANNY HADAS

A cattle egret against the background of a rock on the bank of the Eshet reservoir near Moshav Faran in the Arava. I photographed the egret in the early morning on a partly cloudy spring day, as part of an ongoing study of bird migration at the Eshet reservoir near my home. The reservoir gets its water from flood waters that drain into the basin of Nahal Hayun, as well as streams that flow down the slopes of the Edom Mountains in Jordan. In the winter of 2012-2013 there were quite a few floods, and the reservoir filled up, reaching dimensions that had not been seen in previous years. The large amount of water attracted water birds, some of which even nested on the site.



Nature's Right to Water

Israel's wetland habitats have suffered for decades from overuse of natural water sources, development for agriculture and construction and from pollution. The Israel Nature and Parks Authority, together with the Ministry of Environmental Protection, formulated a document in 2003 entitled "Nature's Right to Water". This document, for the first time, determined the quantities of water needed to protect and restore Israel's wetland habitats.

The Israel Nature and Parks Authority has applied the document in recent years, revolutionizing the rehabilitation and resulting conditions in Israel's wetlands. Consequently, slowly but surely, greater quantities of water are being released in streams, and are capped for human use only downstream, after they have fulfilled their role in nature. This action makes possible the rehabilitation of wetland habitats and their world of flora and fauna.

DAVID MONSONEGO

A marsh frog as part of the still landscape, in an early morning hour. The water reflect the color of the sky and etch a line around the frog and the stones. The photograph was taken while I was observing the frogs, out of my love for nature in general and frogs in particular.

The marsh frog is the biggest and most common of amphibian in Israel. It spends most of its time in the water, where it also hunts its prey, which include other amphibians.



AMIR STERN

A symbiosis exists between the bubble coral shrimp, whose size is approximately 1 centimeter long, and the green bubble coral, which is the size of the palm of a hand. The shrimp cleans the coral of dirt swept in by water, and the coral gives the shrimp a place to live and shelter from predators. The shrimp - that does not swim - spends its life on the coral and feeds on plankton - microscopic creatures that float in water.

I met this pair while diving one morning in the coral nature reserve in the Red Sea.



ERAN GISSIS

In an hour it will be midnight. The insects are drawn to the illuminated windows, and after them come the hungry geckoes. On the other side of the window - the silhouette of a Mediterranean house gecko waiting for its prey. The yellowish light in the background are lights from an organic disposal treatment plant in Emek Hefer, and the purple light is from my cellular phone.



AMIT HAAS

Sunrise on a spring day, blue skies over the sea and over carpets of flowers, among them crown daisy and cut-leaf sea lavender, which are prominent in their vibrant colors against the background of green vegetation. They cover the ruins of Tel Shikmona on the Haifa shoreline. In the sky, the uniquely shaped Cumulonimbus clouds are colored in the reddish colors of sunrise, and in the field several poppies are noticeable.

Let There Be Darkness

God differentiated light from darkness, but humans have blurred that distinction, creating too much light in the night skies. This is ecological pollution in every sense of the term, disrupting the lives of animals and plants.

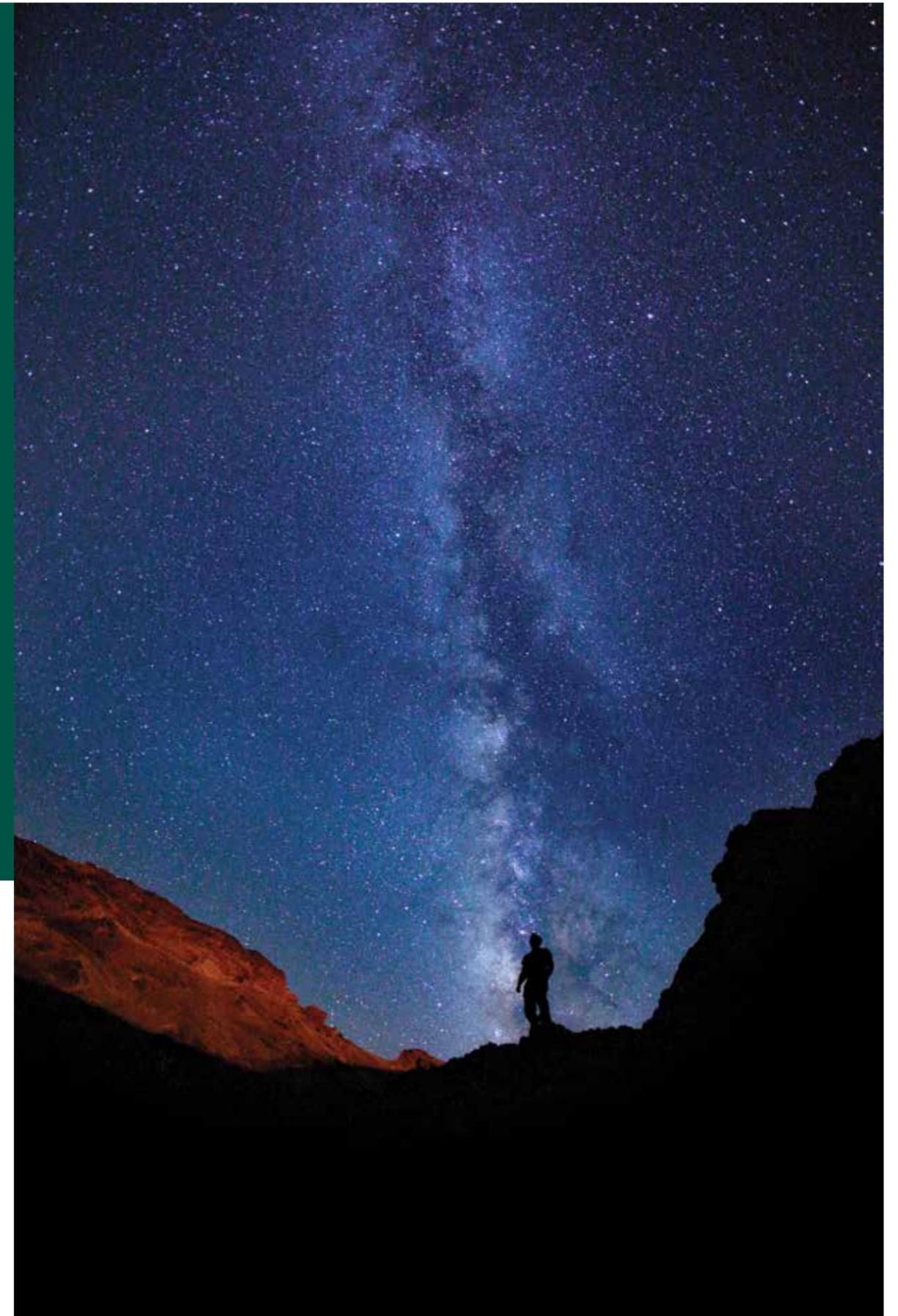
Light pollution is particularly prominent in settled areas, but its impact spreads to open areas and nature reserves. Most outdoor lighting is not efficient because it provides more light than needed and often is not always required. This light and the energy it takes to make it are wasted. The spread of such light has major negative impacts on wild animals.

In Israel, a small, very densely populated country, the problem is especially serious. The Israel Nature and Parks Authority is working to plan proper lighting around nature reserves to prevent the damage of light pollution.

ILIA SHALAMAEV

Makhtesh Ramon – starlight reserve

Starry night skies that are not affected from light pollution are an important resource that has to be preserved, not just because of the ecological aspect but also for the human experience. It is our responsibility to assure the preservation of the night skies by proper planning, like declaring of "starlight reserves" at nature reserves.





DANIEL WINTER

Facing east. A pair of maritime squill (*Drimia maritima*) in the midst of their bloom, as if greeting the sun.

The maritime squill is common throughout almost all parts of Israel. It blossoms at the end of the summer, while its tall inflorescence stand out and herald the coming of fall. Each inflorescence stem can grow to up to two meters long and has up to 250 nectar flowing flowers, which gradually open from bottom to the top - as the life span of each of them is only 24 hours.



Protecting the Landscape

The constant need for development has reduced remaining open spaces in Israel and has truncated habitats, some of which are of great ecological significance. The Israel Nature and Parks Authority is working with infrastructure agencies in Israel to lessen damage to the landscape. In the Ramon Park, the Israel Electric Corporation was persuaded to bury a high-tension line underground, despite the high cost. On main roads under construction, safe animal passages are being built, and in 2015, the Israel Nature and Parks Authority even bought out the contract for quarrying rights in rare dunes to prevent further damage to landscape in that area.

The Israel Nature and Parks Authority has been working for many years to locate and document Israel's cultural landscapes – landscapes that are the combined creation of humans and nature. One such cultural landscape – the Elah Valley, scene of the famed battle between David and Goliath – was saved after plans for development were cancelled.

ARI BALTINESTER

Sunrise above and between thickets near Bat Shlomo on a particularly misty morning. In order to photograph this beautiful sight I went off the road leading north to an agricultural track.

Help for the King of Birds

According to scholarly descriptions of the 19th and 20th centuries, there were once thousands of vultures in the skies of Israel. But by the 1970s, their population had greatly declined due to the poisoning of animals, unrestricted hunting in the Middle East and electrocution on high-tension pylons.

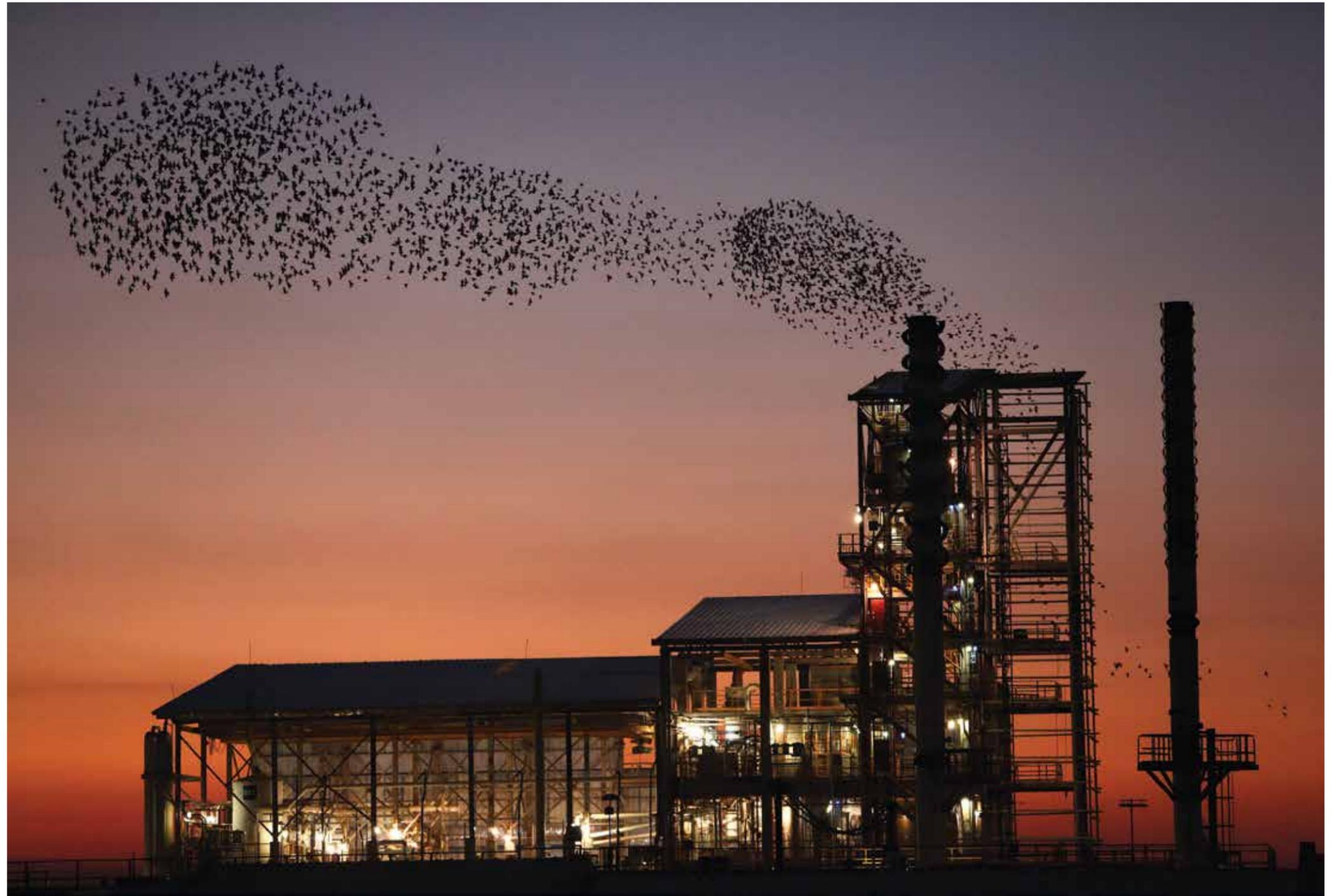
Since 1996, a project has been underway in Israel to revive the vulture population. As part of this work, more than 120 vultures, hatched in the captive breeding facility at the Hai-Bar Carmel Nature Reserve, have been reintroduced to the wild and dozens of supplementary feeding and recycling sites have been established throughout the country to provide vultures with chemical-free food. At the same time, the Israel Nature and Parks Authority undertakes research to support conservation efforts and the Israel Electric Corporation is insulating dangerous high-tension pylons to prevent further electrocutions. Vultures are once again nesting in the Carmel after 50 years of extinction.



DANIELLA KARNI-HAREL

A Griffon vulture recovering from an injury in the wildlife hospital. The hospital belongs to the safari and Israel's Nature and Park Authority, and is run in cooperation with the Israeli Association for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife. Its goal is to provide proper veterinarian care to wounded animals, and, if possible, return them to nature. The vulture in the photograph recovered and was released back to nature.

The vulture population in Israel has greatly diminished, due to electrocutions, poisonings, and the reduction of their habitat. Today only few dozen vultures live in the Israeli nature.



ARIEL LESHINSKY

A flock of common starlings numbering hundreds of members looks like a pillar of smoke rising from the factory's chimney. The starling flocks fly in perfect harmony, as they spin in the air, gather and disperse, and conduct aerial formations.

The starling shows were once a common sight throughout Israel. However, today, because of their diminished numbers in the country, one needs to travel to the Galilee or the Northern Negev to see them.



DANIEL DANILOV

Young mantises on a purple leaf of a bougainvillea.



KEREN EISENBERGER

A close up of a Western honey bee in a poppy anemone. The Western honey bee is one of the species of insects that pollinate the anemone. The anemone's bright red color is not visible to the honey bee's eyes. It is possible that the bees are attracted, rather, to the ultra-violet light reflected from the bright ring at the heart of the flower.



Migrating Birds' Highway

Israel is situated on the junction of Africa, Europe and Asia, and between the Syrian-African Rift and the Mediterranean coast. Thanks to Israel's unique geographical location, more than 500 million migrating birds cross its skies every year – making it one of the largest bird migration routes in the world.

Israel is also outstanding in its wealth and variety of habitats. In no time nature lovers can travel from green Mediterranean forests to fishponds in the north, oases at the Dead Sea, steppe lands in the northern Negev and the Eilat Mountains desert. The variety of habitats and geographical location are the main factors accounting for the great wealth of bird species in Israel relative to its size – more than 540 different species.

AHARON SHIMSHON

A close look of the common cranes, in a misty morning hour, collecting seeds and roots from the ground. The photograph was taken from within the hiding crate, which is harnessed to the tractor and enables the visitors to observe the cranes from up close at the Hula Valley.

In some cultures, both in Europe and in the Far East, the common crane symbolizes purity, nobility and long relations. And indeed, the cranes enjoy a long lasting pair bond, and they maintain it with a ceremonious courtship dance, which includes jumping, gesturing, and calling.



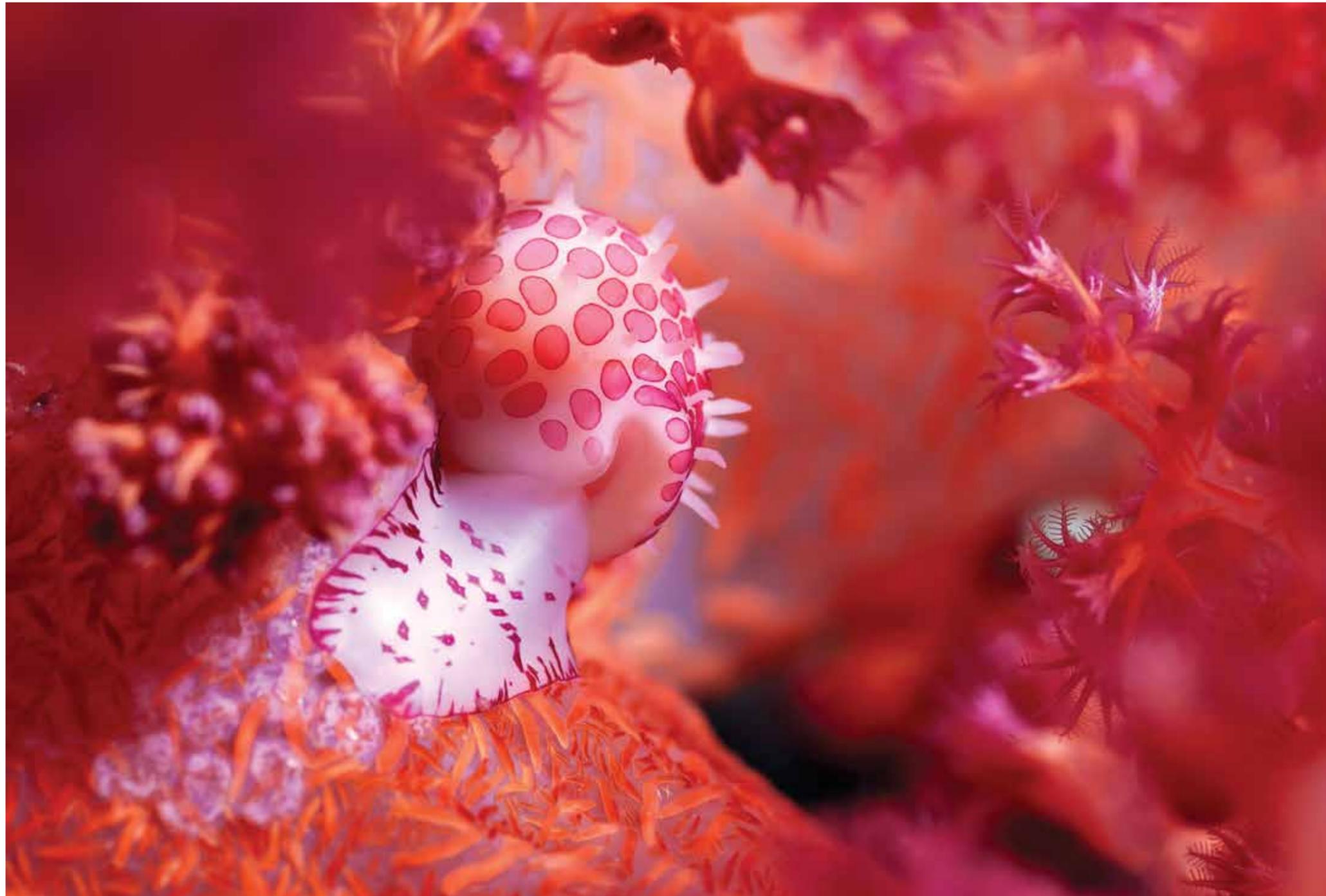
DORON NISSIM / NPA

Two female gazelles in a defensive position. I met them one cold cloudy wintry afternoon near the Wadi Uja creek, not far from Moshav Naama in the Jordan Valley. The photograph is part of my Israeli Landscape project.



SHY COHEN

While taking an early morning stroll in the Ben Shemen forest near Tel Hadid, I noticed a robber fly (*Asilidae* family) holding its prey on a stalk of straw. A second robber fly, bigger but from the same species, moved closer, circled for several seconds around the first fly, and then flew away.



Coral Beaches on the Red Sea

The Gulf of Eilat is the northern extension of the Red Sea and the northernmost distribution of tropical, typical Indian Ocean coral reefs. Only about 11 kilometers of the gulf's beaches are in Israeli territory and of these, 3 kilometers touch upon marine nature reserves. These are the only reserves in Israel that protect the marvelous world of coral reefs, where hundreds of species of fish, corals and invertebrates form the basis of a complex, interwoven ecosystem. The Israel Nature and Parks Authority monitors the reserves, conducts careful management, regulates access to the core and sensitive areas and educates the public to prevent damage to the coral reefs.

YARON HALEVY

A pink egg cowrie is laying its eggs on a soft coral of the genus *Dendronephthya*. I photographed the pink egg cowrie in the Red Sea opposite the lighthouse on the south coast of Eilat at night, when numerous nocturnal creatures, among them snails, become active.



Noam Kortler

A "ball" of thousands of Red Sea dwarf sweepers, also called "glass fish" for their transparent body. During the months of April-May, when the sea is affluent with food, the sweepers come to the area *en masse*.

The sweepers come to the Satil Wreck Site every year, but not every year is the sunken ship covered with fish, thereby creating a rare and unforgettable natural phenomenon.

Nature Conservation in the Mediterranean Sea

In recent years the Israel Nature and Parks Authority has formulated a policy that regards the Mediterranean beaches and its waters as a single unit. Thanks to this policy, the Authority has been able to declare two major marine reserves, some 15 kilometers from the beach. Declaration of another large marine reserve is expected in the near future.

This policy has made it possible to declare many marine animals as protected species, including all marine mammals, particularly dolphins, and all cartilaginous fish, among them sharks and rays.

The Israel Nature and Parks Authority has recently conducted a survey by means of a remote-controlled robot, which documented in photographs the deep-sea living world in Israel's marine nature reserves.



DORON NISSIM / NPA

First touches of light on the golden lagoons on the sea side of Achziv national park.



ILIA SHALAMAEV

Tristram's starlings on top of a rock, on a cliff overlooking the Dead Sea. The Tristram's starlings are not afraid of people, so I was able to move closer to them and take pictures from a short distance.

The Tristram's starlings are very social birds with diverse and pleasant calls. They eat the fruits of desert plants and parasites, which they pick from the fur of Nubian ibexes, donkeys and camels. In the past several years, the Tristram's starlings have learned to reach the parking lots at Ein Gedi and Masada in order to pick the insects, which are trapped in the front 'grille' of the parking vehicles.



ILIA SHALAMAEV

A glimpse of the Dead Sea from a small cave, which was formed by the crystallizing salt throughout the receding shoreline.

From the second half of the 20th century, the water levels of the Dead Sea have been in constant decline, mainly as a result of utilizing the waters that run into it and pumping its waters for the evaporation ponds. During the last decade, the annual rate of decline is approximately one meter per year.



International Activities

The Israel Nature and Parks Authority represents the State of Israel, which is a signatory to CITES, a treaty to ensure that international trade in wild animals and plants is not detrimental to the survival of species in the wild. In the summer of 2015, the Israel Nature and Parks Authority hosted the international meeting of the CITES Animals Committee, dealing with protection of wild fauna.

In 2016, Israel, through the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, was selected as a representative of Europe in CITES' Standing Committee for the next six years. The Israel Nature and Parks Authority also represents Israel in Interpol's working groups on wildlife and forestry crimes.

The prohibition in Israel against the possession of captive wild animals is one of the strictest in the world.

GILAD MASS

The outlines of a spring groundsel (*Senecio vernalis*) blossom, photographed against the background of the rising sun, brilliantly reflect the order and chaos existing in nature.

The spring groundsel is of the first annual plants to blossom in winter. Despite its petite size, its yellow blossom stands out in the Israeli landscape.



GERARDO COLALEO

Since I began photographing birds I have been drawn to take pictures of their reflection in the water in a way that connects nature photography to an artistic style of pastoral nature. To this end I built in the yard of my home in Kiryat Yam a bird bath that invites all the birds in the neighborhood. One after another the birds came and stood at the edge of the bird bath, and I photographed them from a hide.



MIRIAM TSACHI

Ein Gev. Noon on a rainy winter's day. The nets were taken out of the water into the fishing boat, and the seagulls fearlessly pounce on them and pulled out the fish caught in the net's holes.

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