

The images of Israel that appear in America are usually of a political or military sort – politicians making speeches, protestors waving signs, soldiers, tanks and fighter jets. I suppose it's difficult to come to a place like Israel for the first time *without* a head full of misconceptions. Certainly, before receiving an invitation to join the **ANF Hula Valley Project**, I had not given the natural history of Israel much thought.

On the web I learned that the Hula marshes are a reclaimed wetland formed from the headwaters of the Jordan River, and are widely recognized as an important migratory stop-over for birds. Studying a bird list for the area confirmed this, but it still gave me no mental image of the landscape I was to visit.

To my delight, the Hula Valley exceeded all of my expectations. I found a place rich in human history but also graced with a variety of natural habitats, abounding in wildlife and with an amazingly diverse flora. Majestic mountains rise on all sides of the valley, their folds dotted with settlements and kibbutzes, the snow-capped summit of Mt Hermon providing a gleaming backdrop. Here and there one finds archeological digs, ruins of ancient crusader castles and caves with ancient carved stone portals. The sense of antiquity is palpable. Yet despite eons of human settlement and intensive land use, the more ancient natural cycles of plants and animals remain vital.

Awaking my first morning at the Hermon Field School, I was greeted with a chorus of unfamiliar birdsong drifting in the open window. Passerine migration was underway, and it became my habit to take a pre-breakfast stroll around the grounds. The wooded hillside above the cabins teemed with resident birds – jays, bulbuls, laughing doves, sunbirds, Sardinian warblers and others. These were joined by a variety of thrushes and warblers in passage. That first morning I noted that a pair of Palestine sunbirds frequented a gaudy flowering Judas tree outside our cabin – a scene I recorded in watercolor later in the week.

The marshes of the Hula Agamon Lake Reserve were the focus of our project, and most of our days were spent there. During our visit the fields and marshes were host to huge numbers of Common Cranes. To me, working at a secluded spot deep in the reserve, with

the trumpeting calls of the cranes the only sound, the marsh felt like an ancient, timeless place. It was easy to forget that the area had been reclaimed from farmland only a decade ago. A better example of nature's capacity to heal would be difficult to find. Not to say that nature has not had some help from humans in this process. We learned how the water flow had been restored, the native vegetation re-established. I learned that the oversize birdhouses mounted on poles along the reserve paths were put there by volunteers in an effort to attract barn owls – an ally needed to control the exploding population of mice that threatened to consume the newly planted vegetation. On our third day, I painted a watercolor of one of the owl houses, adding a tiny stonechat to underscore the peculiar scale of the box.

So many subjects vied for our attentions at Agamon – crested larks courting along the tracks, pied and white-fronted kingfishers perched over every promising pool, spur-winged plovers noisily jousting for territory, graceful warblers hissing from the tangles, kestrels and harriers on the hunt, jackals and eagles wrestling over a crane carcass, and so much more. It took a few days to settle down, focus and look more deeply.

The best bird show at Agamon was at dawn. One morning we were allowed into the park before open hours, and watched as thousands of birds gathered and took flight to resume their northward migration. The sky was filled with birds – countless wavering lines of cranes punctuated with wheeling flocks of storks and pelicans rising upward on the warm thermals. It was a bird spectacle! Many artists turned their eyes upward, attracted by the shifting patterns in the sky, but there was plenty to see on the ground, too. In the surrounding fields, legions of storks and cranes fed, preened and dozed. Here and there a jackal loped along at a leisurely pace, patrolling the edges of the flocks in hopes of finding an easy meal! I set to work painting a flock of storks that formed a frieze of contrast against the soft greens and mauves of the landscape. A morning mist over the fields suffused the scene with a pearly light. After the excitement of the morning bird show, I found a quiet, grassy spot in a grove of trees and settled down to develop a watercolor of a female stonechat perched on a lichen-encrusted branch. With work like this to do, the day passed swiftly.

Daytimes were spent working alone or in small groups, since art is by nature a solitary pursuit, but our evenings were for coming together. Over dinner we swapped stories of the day, shared ideas and insights or discovered common interests. The Israeli artists who joined our group supplied not only warmth and laughter, but an insider's perspective on the country and culture. One evening, Maureen Fain showed the basics (and peculiarities) of the Hebrew alphabet and wrote each of our names in Hebrew on the paper table cover. After dinner, show-and-tell sessions gave us a chance to admire each others creations, peruse sketchbooks and "talk shop". The evenings ended with impromptu jams featuring the lucky among us with musical skills. It was a special treat when our muse and minstrel, David Grimes, serenaded us with his trickster lyrics and percussive guitar!

Though we could have happily spent all our time in the valley, other landscapes beckoned. The Golan Heights was a place name I knew well, but how much richer are my associations with that name, now! The area favored by the artists was a deep gorge cut into the flanks of the heights. We hiked up along the edge, spying hyrax and lizards on the rocks below, or gazed back east, where the sweep of the Hula valley spread out below us. Woodchat shrikes, with their plush brown caps and snow white bellies hunted from small thorn trees on the lower slopes. I sketched the males and females, taking special note of their handsome facial patterns, then set to work on a watercolor. Afterwards, heading up the slope to join Dave Daly, I spied a dainty mountain gazelle picking its way downhill in our direction. It passed close by and we admired its colors, patterns and the big dark eyes which give it such an appealing expression.

For me, perhaps the most unexpected feature of the landscape in northern Israel was the wildflowers. I was totally besotted by their beauty, diversity, and abundance. Here on the Golan slopes, amid the lichen encrusted rocks, they shone like jewels. The real stars of the show were the lipstick red common anemones. They grew everywhere in the landscape, turning some fields into broad swatches of scarlet. More typically, they occurred as single blooms dotted here and there, or in small clusters of intense color. I put my watercolors to work on a particularly fine group of blossoms growing just at the

edge of the gorge. Perched on my pack stool a few feet from the sheer precipice I tried to keep my eyes focused on the flowers, for if I glanced up and into the vast gaping void of the gorge, my head would spin with vertigo. Later in the week, I painted the anemones again, this time in a tiny meadow tucked in the woods behind the field school. Here, they were accompanied by field grasses, clover and a tall yellow mustard. Interestingly, not all the anemones were red – some were delicate shades of pink and lavender.

Paul Henery and I spent another morning at the fish ponds near Qiryat Shemona. Tilapias are raised in the ponds for human consumption, but the fish also attract a host of egrets and herons. As soon as Paul and I got out of the van, the birds took flight – an indication that they are harassed or shot by the pond owners. We were doing them a favor by scaring them off. Hanging from the nets strung across the ponds were dozens of bird carcasses in various stages of decomposition. Out in the center of the pond, where a section of the net drooped into the water, an egret was entangled in the mesh and struggling to free itself. Realizing there was no way we could help the bird, we resolved to record its plight. I got to work with my watercolors while Paul started a large drawing further down the shore. Painting the bird was a dreary chore. At first its struggles were vigorous, and it occasionally lunged after a fish just out of reach. As the day warmed, however, its movements became feebler and its bill hung into the water. Its demise was near.

All too soon, our days in the valley ended, and we started the drive south to Jerusalem where we would tour the ancient city before heading home. Putting Mt Hermon behind us we followed the great rift valley of the Jordan southward, making a number of stops along the way. The upper stretches of the river flow through a picturesque, steep-walled valley. We stopped at a crumbling concrete bridge to watch the river – swollen to a milky torrent from snowmelt and spring rains. Among the stones on the bank were tiny multi-colored snail and mollusk shells, some with intricate zigzag stripes. At the Sea of Galilee we gazed across the water to the ancient city of Tiberius, and in the hills to the north our guides pointed out Zefat – where the *cabala*, a sacred text of Judaism originated.

Crossing into the West Bank through a heavily guarded checkpoint, we took note of the contrast between the green foothills to the west (in Israel) and the brown eroded landscape across the river in Jordan. We stopped at a reserve where magnificent wildflower meadows reach into the foothills, and our guide Amir led us on a hike, pointing out birds, plants and insects with his encyclopedic knowledge. Another stop at a large dry canyon near Jericho provided some last minute exploring and sketching. Blackstarts, fan-tailed ravens and little green bee-eaters demanded our attention, but time was short.

Our final stop is an overlook above Jerusalem, with a commanding view of the old city. Amir's timing is impeccable – the Golden Dome catches the last rays of the setting sun. A chill wind blows from the west – it is the coldest I've felt since arriving in Israel. Amir points out where the earliest settlement stood and traces the outer walls of the old city, built by the Turks. Clustered outside the gates are graves purchased by the devout so as to have easy access to the Holy City on Judgment Day. He points out the quadrants of the old city – each devoted to a different religion.

We are all *ears*, but Denis Clavreul, perched on the edge of the overlook, is all *eyes*. He is braced against the cold wind, tin water cup teetering on the corner of his makeshift drawing board, a squirrel hair brush moving rapidly over a flapping sheet of watercolor paper. With admiration, I watch as he floats in the sunset with a few broad strokes, picks out the gleaming golden dome, then lays in some broad halftone washes in the foreground. A few deft touches become shadowy streets and dark groves of cypress.

Watching him, I wonder at this strange compulsion we artists share – the urge to record, interpret; *to see, to feel, and then to make something our own*. It's an impulse older than the crumbling city walls below, but at the same time thoroughly modern – very much in the present, but also timeless. I am grateful to be among the afflicted.

Barry W. Van Dusen
Princeton, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

April, 2009