

Palestinian 'birdman' watches out over West Bank

November 1 2018



Black kites, pictured here with starlings, are among the birds seen in the West Bank

As the sun rises over the mountains behind the Dead Sea, Anton Khalilieh squints into a telescope and scans the skies.

A Palestinian farmer with a quizzical look wanders by with his sheep while the area is periodically patrolled by the Israeli army.

Khalilieh is the executive director of Nature Palestine Society, a new small NGO seeking to document all the [birds](#) in the occupied West Bank and eventually establish observatory stations for foreign and Palestinian twitchers.

While the native species are interesting, it is the twice-yearly migration season that he thinks has global appeal.

Around 500 million birds migrate through Israel and the Palestinian territories each year, according to Israeli figures.

"I want to help people who are interested in coming to the West Bank and seeing the magnificence of the soaring bird migration from Europe to Africa," he says.

Among those to be seen are eagles, white storks, buzzards and [black kites](#).

Birdwatching is commonplace inside Israel and even in some settlements in the West Bank, but Khalilieh says there is less interest among Palestinians.

He finished his studies at an Israeli university.



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"Bird watching is considered a luxurious hobby," he says.

Standing on a hill with binoculars can also raise suspicions in a territory better known for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than ornithology.

Twice during the day Palestinians come from nearby villages to ask him questions.

"This area used to be a training zone for the Israeli army," Khalilieh explains.

"People come asking me what we are doing. They are afraid there would be some activities here they are not aware of."

Like others, he has been hit by US President Donald Trump cutting \$500 million in aid to Palestinians—he had submitted proposals for US-funded grants.



Gray cranes fly over the Palestinian West Bank during their migration to Africa from Europe

A couple of hours after sunrise, Khalilieh lets out a quick "oh my god."

Imperceptible at first, around 100 black specs gradually come into view,

passing over his head perhaps 150 metres away.

The majority are honey buzzards, he explains, but there are also black kites and short-toed eagles.

During migration season, they travel between 200 and 500 kilometres a day, he adds.

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