

Spain's Coto Donana & Extremadura

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Seville and transfer to El Rocio

Day 2/4 Coto Doñana & environs

Day 5/8 Monfragüe/Trujillo/steppes

Day 9 Fly Madrid to London

Departs

April/May (see website)

Focus

Birds

Grading

A. A traditional birding tour with limited amounts of easy walking

Dates & Prices

See website (tour code ESP11) or brochure

Highlights

- Witness the 'foam bath' display of Great Bustards
- Sandgrouse, Roller, Hoopoe, Golden Oriole & Iberian Magpie
- White-headed Duck & Purple Gallinule near Sanlucar de Barrameda
- Spoonbill, Little Bittern & Spanish Imperial Eagle at Coto Doñana
- Fine food & wine in a beautiful former stately home in Extremadura!
- Explore medieval Trujillo, birthplace of Francisco Pizarro (conqueror of Peru)



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NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Fly Seville, Transfer to El Rocio

We depart today from London on a flight to Seville. On arrival at Seville airport we will drive south-west for a couple of hours to El Rocío, passing through the fertile farmland and orange groves that lie to the west of the great Guadalquivir river.

The remarkable village of El Rocío lies at the western edge of the Parque Nacional de Coto de Doñana. It has been described as a living relic, a step back to the days when the whole of this area was accessible only by horse. Even today its unmetalled sandy streets, lined with wooden hitching rails for horses and elegant white-washed buildings (that include a magnificent church) give more the impression of the American Wild West than southern Spain. Indeed, one instantly has the feeling of having stumbled across the set of a Spaghetti Western! Further, the village is also the site of a famous and spectacular pilgrimage fair, the Romeria del Rocío, which draws up to a million people each year!



Greater Flamingo

In the spring El Rocío overlooks the adjacent 'Madre de las Marismas', a magnificent lagoon laden with Greater Flamingoes, waders and numerous other waterbirds, and a river and marshlands that lie within the Coto Doñana National Park, one of the finest wetlands in Europe. The village makes the perfect base for four nights as we spend time enjoying the wealth of birds and other wildlife that this unique national park has to offer.

We will aim to arrive in El Rocío by late afternoon and in time for a couple of hours birdwatching before dinner. The Coto Doñana holds a remarkable variety of wetland and Mediterranean woodland birds, and



Naturetrek picnic lunch

to see 100 species a day is not unusual. In spring the marshes and ponds adjacent to El Rocío can hold an amazing variety of wetland birds, including Greater Flamingos, Squacco Heron, Whiskered and Gull-billed Terns, Spoonbills, Black-winged Stilts and occasionally rare waders such as Marsh Sandpiper. Overhead Red Kites mingle with the ever-present Black Kites and Booted Eagles, while both Short-toed Eagles and Griffon Vultures are regular. If time permits we will cross over the road in the evening and visit the La Rocina

Marshes in search of Savi's Warbler. This is one of the most reliable sites within the park for this elusive species and they can often be seen well in the early evening when they climb the reed-stems to sing.

We settle in to our comfortable hotel, situated on the edge of the village and overlooking the bird-filled marshes. This is our base for 4 nights.

Days 2-4

El Rocío & Coto Doñana

We have three full days to explore the wealth of habitats within a short driving distance.

We will begin one morning with a pre-breakfast walk around the Palacio de Acebron, a short drive south from our base. The deciduous woodland and reed fringed ponds around the palace hold a wide variety of bird species. Cirl Buntings and Tree Sparrows breed in the area and Nightingales sing from nearly every bush, indeed this species is so common here that the early morning air is often filled with a chorus of competing birds. After breakfast we will return to the La Rocina Marshes and explore the 2.5 kilometre nature trail, which winds its way through a series of marshes, reed beds and pine woodlands. Four hides overlook the marshy 'Charco de la Boca', a slow flowing stream that empties into the Madre de las Marismas, from which Whiskered Tern, Squacco Heron and Little Bittern can all be seen. Melodious Warbler, Great Reed Warbler, Iberian Magpie, Short-toed Treecreeper, Crested Tit and Golden Oriole are all common in the surrounding woodland and scrub and with a certain degree of luck it is possible to find Bonelli's Warbler and perhaps even Wryneck. La Rocina is also one of the best places in the park to look for the elusive Purple Gallinule. After lunch we will drive the short distance to the small wetland reserve of Acebuche, a reed fringed lagoon overlooked by a series of hides and adjacent to the park's main information centre. Ferruginous Duck and Great Spotted Cuckoo are regular at the site and will be looked for amongst the commoner species such as Azure-winged Magpie, Dartford Warbler, Bee-eater and Red-crested Pochard. In the evening we will return to Acebuche to listen and look for another of those birds whose European range is limited to this wonderful country, the Red-necked Nightjar.



A highlight of our stay in Donana will be a 4x4 excursion into the National Park. We will make another early start in order to spend the morning exploring the mixture of marshes and woodland on the northern edge of the reserve known as the Coto del Rey. The sandy track to the east of El Rocío has been getting progressively more rutted and uneven over the years and the area is now only really accessible by Landrover. The track leads east through Stonepine Woodland before turning south into the marismas and entering the park at its northern

boundary. This area holds the densest populations of raptors in the Coto Doñana. Both species of kite are common as are Booted Eagles and Buzzard. The flocks of Griffon Vultures circling up on the rising thermals are often joined by Short-toed Eagles, Marsh Harriers and Goshawks and if we are fortunate we may even find one of the few pairs of the Spanish Imperial Eagles which breed in the Coto del Rey area. The Stone Pine woodlands are home to roving flocks of Azure-winged Magpies plus Hoopoes, Bonelli's Warblers and Great Spotted Cuckoos. We will also search for the diminutive Spectacled and Subalpine Warblers both of which breed in the low trackside scrub and the Lesser Short-toed Lark which favour the more open areas. We have even seen a Lynx here on odd occasions since 2000! Once out of the woodland and into the marismas the track passes alongside numerous marshes, ponds and flooded channels many full of Flamingos, Spoonbills, Black-winged Stilts and the occasional Glossy Ibis and eventually arrives at the Cerrada Garrido Visitor Centre. This is one of the best places in the park to look for the beautiful Marbled Teal, one of Spain's rarest and without doubt most beautiful waterbirds.

On another day, after an early breakfast, we will drive out for a full day on the other side of the Guadalquivir and spend time at the salt pans at Bonanza. Whilst not the most scenic spot in Andalucia, these extensive salt flats often hold large numbers of Greater Flamingos, as well as Caspian and Gull-billed Terns. A wide variety of migrant waders use the lagoons to 'refuel' on their way north and these should include such species as Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Sanderling, Spotted Redshank and Avocet or perhaps a Temminck's Stint or Marsh Sandpiper. Bonanza is also one of the best sites in southern Spain for the beautiful Slender-billed Gull which often gather here in quite large numbers.

Nearby is the Laguna del Tarelo, a noted site for the rare and local White-headed Duck. It is also a most pleasant location for our picnic!

In the early afternoon we may head inland to a series of small lakes close to the town of Jerez de la Frontera. Exactly which of the many sites we visit will depend on the current conditions of the 'lagunas' and their birdlife. Sites such as Laguna Medina and the less well known Laguna de Cadiz often hold rare Andalusian specialities, such as Crested Coot and White-headed Duck along with many commoner species including Black-necked Grebe, Red-crested Pochard, Black Tern, Great Reed Warbler and Melodious Warbler. We will make every effort to find these rare and common breeding birds before heading back to our hotel for a final night in El Rocio.



Day 5

Trujillo

We have a long drive north today and we will aim to be away from El Rocio by mid-morning having bought our provisions for the day. Stopping for lunch next to a scenic river on the border of Extremadura and Andalucia we have a chance of Short-toed Treecreeper, Wryneck and Melodious Warbler as we stretch our legs. We continue north, pushing on deep into the high tablelands/steppes of Extremadura, arriving at our beautifully appointed accommodation a few miles outside Trujillo, in the late afternoon. En route, we

will enjoy our first taste of these far-reaching vistas, noting some of the raptors, larks and other steppe species for which this corner of Europe is so well known in birding circles.

Days 6-8

Extremadura/steppes

We have three full days to enjoy the Extremaduran steppes from our superb base.

After an early breakfast on day 6 we will likely leave the hotel and drive to the gently undulating plains that surround Trujillo in search of the displaying Great and Little Bustards that are present here in good numbers. Rough tracks criss-cross the steppes and by driving slowly along these we should have little difficulty in locating the displaying groups. The sight of a male Great Bustard in full display has to be one of the most spectacular avian sights Europe has to offer....one moment a turkey sized bird then, after an outstanding piece of contortion, a ball of white feathers on legs – the “foam bath” display! There will also be ample opportunities to watch some of the raptors and other species that make this area such an exiting destination, such as Montagu’s Harrier, Short-toed Eagle, Calandra Lark, Roller, Spanish Sparrow, Rock Sparrow, Stone Curlew, both Black and Black-eared Wheatear and, with luck and careful searching, Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. Black Vultures are often seen soaring around the nearby hills and Spanish Imperial Eagles are occasionally seen drifting past.

At some stage we will set aside a couple of hours to wander around the maze of narrow streets in the medieval quarter of town and watch both the Lesser Kestrels and White Storks which breed on the rooftops. The statues of the Pizarro brothers – the Inca Conquerors – are in the central plaza and the town has a wonderful historic feeling about it. The atmosphere is best sampled while sipping a coffee or – better – a *vino tinto* in one of the street-side cafes!

After breakfast on another day, we will drive to Monfragüe National Park, roughly 50 kilometres to the north of Trujillo. Monfragüe is both an incredibly beautiful area and wonderful place in which to bird. Our first stop will be at the sheer rock face of Peñafalcón, home to numerous pairs of Griffon Vultures. The small car park opposite affords wonderful views of these impressive birds on their nests along with dozens of others soaring on the thermals above. Black Vultures frequently join these patrolling flocks and it is not uncommon to see the occasional Chough, Peregrine or Egyptian Vulture drift overhead. With luck we should be able to find one or two of the Black Storks which use this area to breed; indeed one very obliging pair has regularly built a nest close to the base of the rockface in recent years and, assuming they return next year, we should have excellent views of this rare bird on its nest. Black Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush and Rock Bunting all inhabit the rocky slopes around the base of Peñafalcón and in the cork oak



woodlands Short-toed Treecreeper, Hawfinch, Cirl Bunting and Golden Oriole all breed.

After lunch we will continue our exploration of Monfragüe by driving to the many vantage points scattered around the park. Here we will watch for the huge numbers of birds of prey that inhabit the area. In addition to the species already mentioned, there is a good chance of finding Short-toed Eagle, Booted Eagle, Bonelli's Eagle, Golden Eagle, Red and Black Kites, Hobby and, with luck, maybe a roosting Eagle Owl or one of Monfragüe's most sought after and well known inhabitants, the Spanish Imperial Eagle. We will also take a series of short walks off into the scrub and woodland in search of warblers, such as Subalpine, Dartford and Orphean, and spend time at the main bridge over the reservoir watching the flocks of screaming Alpine Swifts.

Late in the afternoon, depending on the weather and what we have seen so far, we may decide to walk to the top of the castle for an eye to eye view of soaring vultures and storks. From this high vantage point you can see over the whole park and are often treated to incredibly close views of a variety of raptor species as they slowly drift past on the wind, a truly breathtaking sight.

This pattern is repeated during every day in the steppes. A full day out in the fresh air with a picnic lunch, followed by an early evening return to our hotel, arriving in time to enjoy our evening meal and complete the daily checklist.

Day 9

Fly London

This morning (depending on the time of our flight) we should have time for a final look around some of the nearby habitats before we have to leave for the drive back to Madrid in time for our flight back to London.



Tour Grading

Grade A. This is a traditional birding tour with no strenuous walking involved although it does involve a few early starts. Suitable for all ages and for all degrees of fitness.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday.

Optional extensions

For those of you wishing to see the spectacular cities of Madrid or Seville we will be happy to arrange a couple of nights accommodation and a change of flight date. Accommodation can be hard to find in Seville at this time of year however so the earlier you book the better chance we have of finding space. Note however that most of the city's historical sites seem to shut on Mondays! Alternatively feel free to find your own accommodation and advise us on what dates you want your flights booked.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.



Our hotel in El Rocio (left) and Extremadura (right)