

The Canaries – Whales, Dolphins & Other Wildlife of La Palma

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Santa Cruz, La Palma.

Day 2/7 Daily whale-watching/ wildlife excursions from Los Cancajos.

Day 8 Fly UK.

Departs

September

Focus

Whales and dolphins, plus the island's birds, insects, flora and other natural history.

Grading

Grade A with gentle wildlife walks and whale-watching boat trips

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ESP31) or brochure

Highlights

- Bryde's Whale & Blainville's Beaked Whale found in La Palma's waters
- Atlantic Spotted Dolphin & Rough-toothed Dolphins seen regularly
- Look for Berthelot's Pipit, Bolle's Pigeon, Stone Curlew & Atlantic Canary
- Canary Blue, African Grass Blue & Canary Speckled Wood butterflies in hotel surrounds
- Enjoy autumn sunshine & gentle daily wildlife excursions



Blainville's Beaked Whale



Monarch



Rough-toothed Dolphin



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Introduction

The Canaries, a Spanish archipelago, lie just over 60 miles off the coast of north-west Africa and about 680 miles south-west of mainland Spain. At their western extremity stands the beautiful and unspoilt island of La Palma. About half the size of Greater London, it is one of the lesser known Canary Islands, mostly visited by those on walking holidays in search of tranquillity. La Palma boasts a remarkable variety of habitats in a relatively small area and a rich accompanying flora and fauna that has been relatively little explored by visiting naturalists. Like the other Canary Islands it is entirely of volcanic origin, resulting in the waters dropping off rapidly to depths of more than 1,000 metres within a few miles of land, and this attracts a wealth of marine-life, including cetaceans. On this new 8-day holiday we will explore the special land and marine-life of La Palma, making leisurely day walks, and boat trips, in search of dolphins, whales, birds, butterflies, wild flowers and other wildlife, against a backdrop of dramatic volcanic scenery and deep blue Canary Island seas.

Our holiday begins with a direct flight to La Palma. We will base ourselves in Los Cancajos, a small and relaxed holiday resort on the island's sunny east coast that comprises a long, black sandy beach dotted with palm trees and bordered by a restaurant-lined boulevard. Our hotel in Los Cancajos will provide a base from which to explore the mixture of endemic, European and North African species that characterise the island's fauna. Species we hope to encounter around the hotel and on our excursions include Plain Swift, Berthelot's Pipit, Canary Island Chiffchaff and Atlantic Canary, whilst Cory's Shearwater, Bottlenose Dolphin and Short-finned Pilot Whale are regularly seen offshore around the island. We also hope to be able to see a range of butterflies too, with Canary Blue, African Grass Blue, Canary Speckled Wood, African Monarch and Monarch all possible.

During our stay on La Palma we will aim to make boat excursions on alternate days, weather permitting, from the nearby port of Tazacorte in search of whales and dolphins. By basing ourselves on the relatively remote and undeveloped island of La Palma, we will avoid the large-scale, largely unregulated scrum of whale watching operators that is, sadly, now a feature on some of the other Canary Islands. The deep, food-rich and unpolluted North Atlantic waters that envelope La Palma support Bottlenose Dolphins and Short-finned Pilot Whales, as well as such charismatic species as



Bryde's Whale from the glass bottom of the boat

the petite and playful Atlantic Spotted Dolphin. Rough-toothed Dolphins are found in the waters around La Palma throughout the year, while during the summer months Bryde's Whales visit the islands. Blainville's and Cuvier's Beaked Whales are also regularly seen around the island and we have had superb views of both of these, difficult to see species on multiple tours.

On land, La Palma is home to more than 870 native plant species, as well as a wealth of other endemic and Macaronesian endemic species and subspecies amongst its flora and fauna! We will explore its semi-desert, lava flows, scrub, wetlands and native pine woodland in search of such gems as: La Palma Cleopatra and La Palma Grayling, and birds including La Palma Blue Tit, Bolle's



Canary Islands Chiffchaff

Pigeon, Stone Curlew, Barbary Falcon an endemic subspecies of Chaffinch and at least eight other Macaronesian endemics. There are many areas of the island largely unexplored and the La Palma Giant Lizard was only rediscovered in 2007 having been considered extinct for some 500 years! As La Palma is the most north-westerly of the Canary Islands it can provide first landfall in the autumn for migrating birds from North America displaced across the North Atlantic; rare species turn up annually, especially waders and gulls. European wetland birds are well represented too, with a wide variety of species occurring, including Curlew and Wood Sandpiper. Las Salinas, in the northeast, is a good area for Barbary Falcon and Spectacled Warbler, whilst Lesser Short-toed Lark can occur in the surrounding volcanic landscape and the sea watching is good here, too.

This is a Canary Island getaway that offers peace, tranquility and some of Europe's best whale-watching, combined with an enjoyment of the island's other rich flora and fauna, in the islands' famed warm and pleasant early autumn sunshine. The volcanic landscape and wonderful deep blue of the sea add to La Palma's wildlife attractions and should make this a most enjoyable holiday.

Itinerary

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

Travel to Los Cancajos

We depart today on an early morning flight from Gatwick bound for La Palma's airport near the capital Santa Cruz de la Palma. We are due to arrive in the late morning and having collected our luggage will drive the short distance to our hotel, to the region of Los Cancajos on the Eastern side of the island. Here, we will check into our comfortable hotel on the shores of Atlantic where we will

be staying for the duration of the tour. An afternoon excursion to explore our surroundings or a sea watch from the hotel may be activities for this first day.

Day 2 Laurel forest then reservoir or Dragon trees

For those early risers in the group there will be a pre-breakfast optional foray to search for the local bird and insect inhabitants with access from the hotel to the rocky shoreline. To get us in the mood for our sea trips we will spend a little time seawatching for target species such as Cory's Shearwater, Atlantic Yellow-legged Gull, Short-finned Pilot Whale and Bottlenose Dolphin.

La Palma is home to some of the most biologically important laurel forests in the world, supporting for example the largest population of Laurel Pigeons of all the Canary Islands with around 600 pairs. After breakfast we will travel to the north-eastern part of the island to visit prime laurel forest habitat. We will walk the trail to Cubo de la Galga, a heavily forested gorge. The trail goes through beautiful laurel forest and is an excellent locality for specialist forest birds including the endemics La Palma Blue Tit *Cyanistes teneriffae palmensis* and a Chaffinch sub-species *Fringillae coelebs palmensis*. Several other Macronesian endemics occur such as Canary Islands Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* ssp. *ellenthalerae*, Bolle's Pigeon and of course Laurel Pigeon. Other species we may see include endemic/highly range restricted races of familiar birds such as Common Buzzard, Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, Blackbird and Blackcap. The gorge is good for butterflies too and we may encounter Canary Speckled Wood, Canary Blue and Cleopatra amongst others.

In the afternoon, we will have a number of options including to search further areas of laurel forest for target endemics we may have missed, or to make a visit further north to the Laguna de Barlovento which can hold wildfowl, gulls and waders or to track down special endemic plants such as Chain Fern and the iconic Dragon Tree. For the latter, La Palma is a stronghold of these ancient trees of Macronesia, which can live for 600 years or more. Although these spectacular trees grow anything up to 12 metres tall, taxonomically, Dragon Trees aren't trees, but are classified in the same order (Asparagales) as garlic and asparagus, although they look nothing like each other.



Bryde's Whale by Tom Mabbett

Day 3 Whale-watching boat trip and Las Martlelas ponds

This morning we will head west to the Puerto de Tazacorte, the only port on the west coast of the island. The port comprises a modern marina but this belies the antiquity of the place and its rich history. The Spanish Conquistadors landed here in the 15th Century and built the island's first church San Miguel Arcángel, which is just inland in the Villa de Tazacorte. Weather permitting, we will embark from the marina on our first organised cetacean watching trip out into the crystal clear

Atlantic waters. The trip will last some four to four and half hours giving plenty of time to track down a number of the specialities of the area. At this time of year we will stand a good chance of seeing Short-beaked Common Dolphin, Common Bottlenose Dolphin, Rough-toothed Dolphin and Bryde's Whale, whilst a range of other species are possible including Atlantic Spotted Dolphin, Short-finned Pilot Whale, Sperm Whale and Blainville's Beaked Whale. We will also expect to see Loggerhead Turtles and Cory's Shearwaters which are common in the area. By using a relatively small vessel, we should be able to get some close encounters if the animals co-operate. We will take lunch onboard the vessel and should get good views of the rugged coastline and of the volcanoes that made this very beautiful island. You should not be put off by the somewhat touristy nature of the trip, the skipper and his guides are first class observers and passionate about conservation and sensitive to avoid disturbing animals, whilst dolphins often can be seen bow-riding the banana boat if it is deployed! There is a really excellent glass bottom on the boat that we use and I have added some recent photos taken by our leader Tom Brereton on recent tours. Some with his phone!

After our boat trip we will head a short distance south-east to make our first of several visits to Las Martelas, an area of freshwater storage ponds south of Los Llanos de Aridane. The ponds have varied water levels and represent one of the best habitats on the island for wetland birds. Species which may be encountered include a variety of herons, egrets, ducks, grebes and a good variety of waders, with



American species turning up most years. Black-crowned Night Heron, Squacco Heron, Spotted Crake, White-rumped Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Lesser Yellowlegs, American Golden Plover and Red-throated Pipit are amongst the rarities that have been found in recent years.

Day 4 Salt-pans, volcanoes and possible sunset cruise

This morning we will drive to the Fuencaliente salt-pans located at the southern tip of the island. Here, there a series of shallow, man-made pools established in the late 1960s where sea salt is still produced in the traditional way. Water levels are artificially regulated as part of the salt production process creating a variety of differing water levels. An excellent variety of waders occur each autumn. Unusual sightings in recent years have included Flamingo, Spoonbill and several species of American wader. The lighthouse area nearby can be good for sea watching with passing whales, dolphins, shearwaters and other seabirds.

After lunch we will make an excursion to two spectacular volcanoes; 'Volcan San Antonio' and 'Los Volcanes de Teneguía', the latter of which erupted as recently as 1971! Birds are thin on the ground in the surrounding sparsely vegetated landscape, but specialities include Barbary Falcon and

Spectacled Warbler, whilst Trumpeter Finch and Lesser Short-toed Lark have been recorded in the past.

Depending on how often we are able to get out for the full cetacean watching trip we may go out on a sunset cruise to look for dolphins and hopefully see one of the amazing sunsets which characterise the western side of the island. When the sun is over the horizon, we sail into the "Cueva Bonita", where we may admire the games of lights and colours on the cavern walls. The Pirate's cove is also very inviting at twilight especially when dolphins are in the vicinity.



Day 5 Whale-watching boat trip and Las Martlelas ponds

Today will be somewhat of a repeat of day 3, and we will hope to pick up more of the target whale, dolphin and seabird species we may have missed on our first trip, whilst late afternoon we will pay a further visit to the Las Martelas checking out more of the irrigation ponds for wetland birds and dragonflies.

Day 6 Llano de las Cuevas farmland then Juniper forests

In the morning we will visit Llano de las Cuevas situated in centre of the island in the high part of El Paso, about 10km east of Tazacorte. In this locality the pine forest is largely replaced by traditional farming activities resulting in a mosaic landscape. Large meadows surrounded by stone-walls are interspersed with areas or edges of natural vegetation composed mainly of Canary Island Pine, Bird's-foot Trefoil, *Micromeria herpyllomorpha* (a Labiatae) and Thatching Grass. Cultivated species present in this area include Prickly Pear, Fig and Almond. It is also a classic location for specialist farmland birds including the residents Red-billed Chough, Barbary Partridge, Stone-Curlew and the endemic race of Common Kestrel. The area has attracted a number of interesting migratory birds in recent years including Short-eared Owl, Montagu's Harrier, Northern Lapwing and Red-footed Falcon. The area is good for farmland butterflies with Small Copper, Common Blue, Brown Argus, Dappled White, Small White, Clouded Yellow, Meadow Brown and Cardinal present.

In the afternoon if time allows, we may visit another site such as the Juan Mayor Site of Scientific Interest located in the foothills above Santa Cruz de la Palma. This 30 hectare reserve is one of the last remnants of Macronesian juniper woodland on La Palma, supporting Canary Island Ebony, Juniper, Dragon Tree and 75 species of plant endemic to the Canaries, including 17 endemic to La Palma. Butterflies which may be present include several species of Canary Island endemics: the endangered Canary Islands Large White, Canary Brimstone, Canary Blue, Canary Red Admiral, Canary Skipper, Canary Speckled Wood; and migrants such as Queen of Spain Fritillary and Danaid Eggfly. On one evening and it may be today we will aim to have an evening outing to sea to search for cetaceans once more as the sun is setting.

Day 7 Flexible – whale-watching boat trip or Laurel forest/heath mosaic

This day will need to be kept flexible, depending on how the last few days have panned out in terms of sightings and weather wise. We may head out to sea once again in search of marine animals or visit another important nature reserve such as the Barranco del Agua (San Andrés y Sauces). This barranco is located in the north east part of the island and comprises a steep ravine composed



Loggerhead Turtle

of a mosaic of endemic Macaronesian heath and laurel forest. The barranco is excellent for endemic birds, plants and insects. Amongst a good variety of butterflies, the endemic La Palma Grayling occurs in sparsely vegetated areas. La Palma is one of the three most important astronomical observatories in the world and a further possibility is to visit the astronomical observatory at the Roque de los Muchachos. The observatory sits at the highest point of La Palma and from there the views of La Caldera de Taburiente National Park and La Palma are fantastic, whilst Spectacled Warbler and Raven occur in the vicinity.

Day 8

Flexible, fly London

Depending on flight times, we may have a chance this morning to spend some more time wildlife watching before our late morning flight home to London.

Tour Grading

This tour is graded A, with gentle wildlife walks and whale-watching boat trips. The focus of this holiday is whales and dolphins, plus the island's birds, insects, flora and a wealth of other natural history, including a healthy percentage of endemic species and subspecies. Please note that each day we shall return to the hotel in good time and there is ample opportunity each day to use the hotel swimming pool or if you would prefer, continue seawatching from the hotel grounds.

Weather & Clothing

Temperatures are likely to be warm with very little rain. Please inspect the separate clothing list, sent to you on booking, thoroughly. Shorts and T-shirts are likely to be the order of the day, with a sunhat and plenty of sunscreen. Please remember your swimming costumes for the hotel and also while on the dolphin and whale watching trips.

Food & Accommodation included in the price

All accommodation and meals are included. We will stay at a comfortable 4-star hotel in Los Cancajos, La Palma. All rooms are en suite. The hotel has a swimming pool so please bring your swim wear! The hotel is large as small family run hotels are hard to come by on La Palma.

Flights to La Palma

London Gatwick is used for the group flights. A flight option from Manchester may also be possible and we have found historically that the Manchester flight times work very well with the group flights. Please let us know at the time of booking should you wish to use Manchester flights.

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 flights, at the time of booking.

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Photos from the glass bottom boat





Atlantic Spotted Dolphins



Bottlenose Dolphins



Rough Toothed Dolphin



Bryde's Whale