

# Spain & Morocco: Birding on Two Continents

## Naturetrek Itinerary

### Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Malaga or Gibraltar, transfer Tarifa
- Day 2** Birding around Tarifa.
- Day 3** Ferry to Morocco and Merdja Zerga wetlands
- Day 4** Loukkos wetlands, Bouhachem Forest
- Day 5** Chefchouen and Talassamtane national Park, ferry to Spain
- Day 6/7** Birding and cetacean watching around Tarifa area
- Day 8** Transfer airport and fly home

### Departs

October

### Focus

Birds

### Grading

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

### Dates & Prices

See website (tour code ESP38)

### Highlights

- Shearwaters, petrels, dolphins & pilot whales all possible on boat excursion in the Straits
- Migration watching from Europe & African sides of the Straits.
- See Moroccan Marsh Owls leaving their wetland roost
- Red-knobbed Coots, Marbled Duck & Bald Ibis



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)



## Introduction

The Strait of Gibraltar is 14 kilometres wide at its narrowest point, but it represents a significant barrier for migrating birds crossing from Europe to Africa, or vice versa, each year. On this tour we will have chances to view this spectacular migration from both Spain and Morocco.

We begin on the Spanish side of the Straits and, from our comfortable eco-lodge base, we'll look for huge concentrations of Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Griffon Vultures, White and Black Storks and a host of other soaring birds as they leave for Africa.

Next we make our own crossing by ferry to Morocco, where we begin by visiting key wetland sites which support an ever-changing array of migratory and resident wading birds, gulls and terns, as well as autumn roosts of the stunning Moroccan Marsh Owl. After travelling up through the mystical forests of Bouhachem, where we hope to see wild Barbary macaques and Levillant's Green Woodpecker, we finish our Moroccan stay with a night high in the Rif Mountains. Here we explore Talessamtane National park for elusive mountaineers like Moussier's Redstart, Black Wheatear and Bonelli's Eagle, and explore the legendary blue streets and souks of Chefchoeun, Morocco's 'Blue Pearl'.

On our return to Spain, a variety of wetland, woodland and mountain sites still await our exploration, which should bring us more exciting species such as Northern Bald Ibis, Firecrest, Crested Tit, and with luck, Spanish Imperial Eagle. We will also head out onto the water ourselves to look for local cetaceans, such as Common, Striped and Bottle-nosed Dolphins, and Long-finned Pilot Whales. The Autumn seabird passage will also be underway, and we hope for views of Cory's and Balearic Shearwaters and European Storm-petrel.

**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 Malaga or Gibraltar and transfer to Tarifa

We depart from around the UK on a flight to Malaga or Gibraltar (contact us for regional flight options upon booking). On arrival we will drive to the west, to Tarifa, and our eco-lodge base for two nights. After checking in, we will explore the grounds where we will find a mixture of Cork Oak, Wild Olive and Stone Pines hosting



Short-toed Eagle

both resident passerine species and migratory species on their way south. Almost anything can be found amongst the resident regulars of Firecrest, Crested Tit, Hawfinch and Short-toed Treecreeper. Some days this beautiful valley can be full of Pied Flycatchers, Chiffchaffs, Common Redstarts and others on their way south to winter.

Given the right weather, any day can witness spectacular raptor movements and this is a particularly good time of year for birds heading to Africa. Within sight of our lodging

at Huerta Grande, the migration of raptors can be witnessed from one of the nearby raptor watchpoints as a variety of species congregate over the coastal mountains of Europe awaiting their opportunity to cross the Strait to Africa. Thousands of birds can cross in one day, and huge spiralling groups of raptors and storks is one of the special events to witness in this important migratory flyway; indeed it is one of the best migration spectacles that Europe has to offer.

At this time of year the skies are peppered with Short-toed and Booted Eagles and Griffon Vultures. Several other species of raptor are regular and include Lesser Kestrels, Eurasian Sparrowhawks and Western Osprey. When witnessing migration in the right conditions the species become less important than the sheer majesty of the spectacle.

Of course, for those in the group preferring a spot of sun-bathing or relaxing at the delightful and friendly Huerta Grande, the option will be available to you!

## Day 2

## Tarifa



Today we will take some time to familiarise ourselves with the local area, visiting the cliffs and caves above Bolonia, offering breath-taking views across the Strait. Home to a colony of Griffon Vultures, we should be able to enjoy them soaring low over our heads and perched on pinnacles. Blue Rock Thrush and Iberian Green Woodpecker also occur here. With luck we may even see Rüppell's Griffon Vulture. This vulture is a species that occurs throughout Central Africa in the Sahelian region, but since 1992 has occurred as a vagrant in the Straits with

annual records since 1997.

Looking down from the high cliffs we can also see the roman ruins just to the west of Bolonia. These ruins of the Roman town of Baelo Claudia are located near the beach, considered to be the most complete Roman town ruins yet uncovered in Spain.

From here we will head to one of several different raptor watch points, chosen according to local wind conditions, to experience the best of the day's migration.

## Day 3

## Ferry to Morocco and Merdja Zerga wetlands

We'll take the early ferry this morning from Tarifa to Tangiers, from where we take a leisurely drive through the sweeping landscapes, traditional agriculture and picturesque traditional villages of Morocco's North Atlantic coastal countryside.

Arriving at Moulay Bousselam, we'll take mint tea overlooking the legendary Merdja Zerga lagoon, the last known wintering ground for the now probably extinct Slender-billed Curlew. From our vantage point we can start to enjoy some local speciality birds such as House Bunting, Laughing Dove and Common Bulbul.

Next we'll take a trip out onto the lagoon in a small boat, and enjoy in-depth the superb array of wetland birds this site has to offer. Here, in October, we can expect an amazing array of gulls and terns – Audouin's



White-headed Duck

and Slender-billed Gulls are numerous here, while Little, Black, Whiskered, Gull-billed, Lesser Crested and Caspian are all regulars. Waders probe the mud in their thousands, amongst them Sanderling, Dunlin, Greenshank, Spotted Redshank, Whimbrel, Grey Plovers and Avocets, competing with the local shellfish collectors for the shoreline's rich pickings.

After lunch we will head to some nearby scrub and marshland, where we hope to encounter roosting and hunting Moroccan Marsh Owls.

A quick pre-dinner visit to the main square near our hotel in Larache will provide us with views of the charming Little Swift colony.

## Day 4

## Loukkos wetlands, Bouhachem Forest

Our morning visit to the freshwater wetlands of Loukkos should bring us further wetland birds such as Western Swampheens, Eurasian Spoonbills and Greater Flamingoes, as well as Plain Martins and dozens of hunting Marsh Harriers as far as the eye can see. We will also check out some of the area's quiet backwaters where elusive Red-knobbed Coots and Marbled Ducks may be found. Moustached Warbler is a skulking inhabitant to watch out for here, and we will be looking out for Purple and Squacco Herons, Penduline Tits and early wintering Bluethroats.

From here we head up through the mystical Portuguese Oak-covered landscape of the Forest of Bouhachem, the last stronghold of wild Barbary Macaques in Morocco. The Barbary Macaque lives mainly in mountain ranges in north-west Africa and is the only species of macaque found outside Asia. As we hope for an encounter, we'll also be on the lookout for other forest residents such as Levaillant's Green Woodpecker, Atlas Pied Flycatcher, African Chaffinch and African Blue Tit.

Whether we stay in a tradition riad in the central old town of Chefchouen, or in a beautiful converted water mill on its outskirts, we will make time to explore the soukhs and narrow, winding blue-washed streets of this pretty mountain medina, known as Morocco's "Blue Pearl".

## Day 5

## Chefchouen and Talassamtane National Park, ferry to Spain

This morning we'll explore the high-altitude splendour of the Talassamtane National Park in the Rif Mountains, which offers accessible montane birding and breath-taking views out across Chefchouen



hundreds of metres below. Arriving high in the mountains by way of 4x4 vehicles, we'll hopefully enjoy views of several species of raptor such as Atlas Long-legged Buzzard, Peregrine Falcon and Bonelli's Eagle. Smaller but equally splendid jewels can be found in the form of the stunning Moussier's Redstart and Black Wheatear whilst Blue Rock Thrushes are frequently encountered.

After lunch we make the journey back to Tangiers where we'll catch our ferry back to Spain in time to enjoy dinner in Europe!

## Day 6

## Tarifa



Depending on tidal conditions we will head to the intertidal habitat of Los Lances to look for a variety of gulls, terns and wader species. The adjacent fields harbour Crested and Short-toed Larks, Tawny Pipits, Corn Buntings, and migrating Yellow Wagtails and Northern and Black-eared Wheatears.

Weather permitting, we will take our boat trip into the Strait itself in search of cetaceans and seabirds. Striped, Common and Bottlenose Dolphins can all be seen with some ease and there is also a population of around 200 Long-finned Pilot

Whales in the area. By choosing to cruise in a relatively small vessel, we should be able to get some close encounters if the animals co-operate.

The Straits is also an excellent area for other marine wildlife. Ocean Sunfish are regularly seen here, and can often be observed waving their paddle-like pectoral fins in the air as they 'sunbathe' on the surface of the water, and numerous seabirds use the Straits as a flyway between the Mediterranean Sea and Atlantic Ocean. There are often feeding groups of Cory's, Scopoli's and Balearic Shearwaters with Northern Gannets, whilst the occasional Great Skua and European and Wilson's Storm-petrel also put in an appearance.

In the afternoon, we will hopefully once again have the opportunity to encounter the wealth of migratory raptors the area hosts at this time of year.

## Day 7

## Tarifa

Today we'll make the most of the varied birding sites nearby. We will visit the vast natural basin of La Janda where fragments of wetland still remain of what was once a hugely important wetland for wildlife. Pools here often contain groups of Wood Sandpipers, Ruff, Black-winged Stilts, Glossy Ibis and nearby resting hordes of White Storks. Additionally the area can boast Black-shouldered Kite, Bonelli's Eagle and Spanish Imperial Eagle.

We will also visit some of the favoured feeding area of the local population of Northern Bald Ibis. Their occurrence here follows a successful reintroduction project, initially involving the release of nearly 30 birds

on Ministry of Defence land. The birds have been breeding in the wild since 2008 and the area offers a fantastic opportunity to experience one of the world's rarest – and most characterful – birds.

## Day 8

## Fly London

After a week's exciting birding it will be time to leave this avian highway bottleneck and make our own flight home, with memories of the spectacular flow of birdlife over the Strait and some special species from both Spain and Morocco fresh in our mind.

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## 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. Hotels in Morocco are comfortable and clean, offering en suite facilities. Huerta Grande in Tarifa is a charming ecolodge in a delightful setting. Although not a luxury hotel, the hospitality is excellent and the rooms en suite.

## 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](http://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.