

Spain & Morocco: Birding on Two Continents

Naturetrek Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Gibraltar, transfer Tarifa
Day 2	Birding and cetacean-watching, Tarifa area
Day 3	Ferry to Morocco and Merdja Zerga wetlands
Day 4	Bouhachem Forest, travel to Rif Mountains
Day 5	Talassamtane National Park, Chefchouen
Day 6	Return ferry to Spain
Day 7	Birding around Tarifa area
Day 8	Transfer airport and fly home

Departs

October

Focus

Birds

Grading

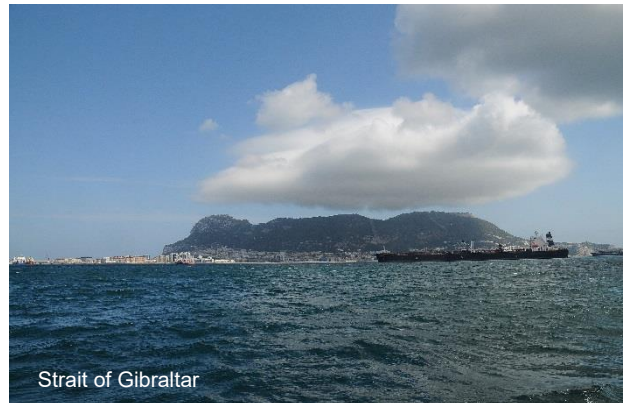
A. A traditional birding tour with limited amounts of easy walking

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



Strait of Gibraltar



Marbled Duck



Moussier's Redstart



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

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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. Weather permitting, we will also head out on a boat trip 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 Wilson's Storm-petrel.

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 Levallant's Green Woodpecker, we stay 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-painted streets and soukhs of Chefchouen, Morocco's 'Blue Pearl'.

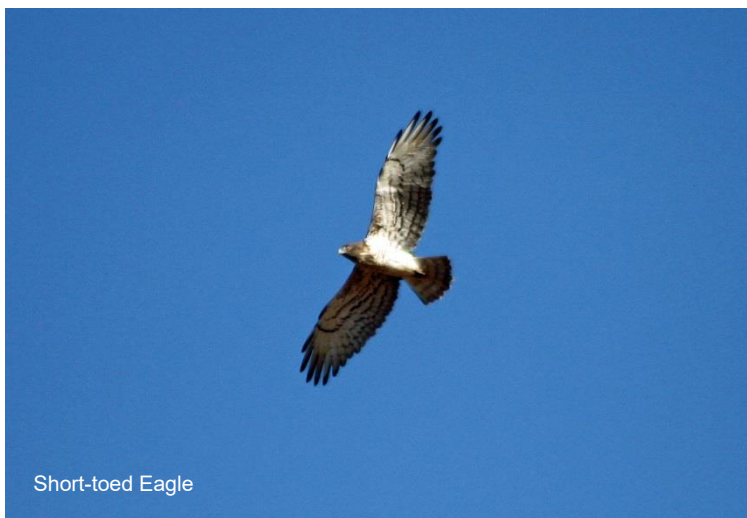
On our return to Spain, a variety of wetland, woodland and mountain sites still await our exploration, which should bring us more exciting species such as Northern Bald Ibis, Firecrest, Crested Tit, and with luck, Spanish Imperial Eagle.

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and 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 Gibraltar and transfer to Tarifa

We depart from around the UK on a flight to Gibraltar. 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 both resident passerine species and migratory species on their way south. Amongst the resident regulars of Firecrest, Crested Tit, Hawfinch and Short-toed Treecreeper, some days this beautiful valley can be full of Pied Flycatchers, Common Redstarts and others on their way south to winter.



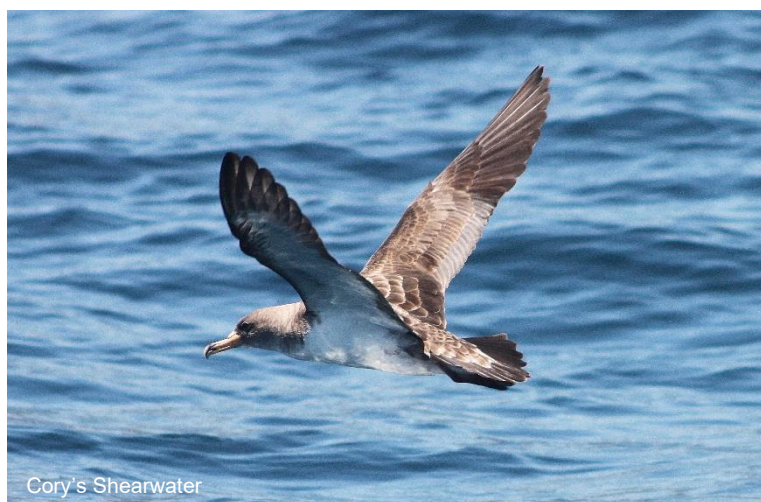
Given the right weather, any day can witness spectacular raptor movements and this is a good time of year for birds heading to Africa. Within sight of our lodging at Huerta Grande, the migration of raptors can be witnessed from one of the nearby raptor watchpoints as a variety of species congregate over 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, 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. After picnic lunch we will take some time to familiarise ourselves with the local area, perhaps 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.

Day 3

Ferry to Morocco and Merdja Zerga Lagoon

We'll take the early ferry this morning from Tarifa to Tangiers. After completing border formalities, we'll drive through the sweeping landscapes, traditional agriculture and picturesque traditional villages of Morocco's North Atlantic coastal countryside. While waiting for our "Second Breakfast" at the hamlet of Oued Marsa, we'll be able to look back across the Strait and hopefully catch the morning wave of arriving raptors, as well as searching the scrub for African Chaffinch, African Blue Tit, Black-crowned Tchagra and migrant passerines such as Subalpine Warbler.

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 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 our hotel in Larache to check in and rest before a potential dusk visit to nearby scrub and marshland, where we hope to encounter roosting and hunting Moroccan Marsh Owls.



White-headed Duck

Day 4

Bouhachem Forest

Today after a superb Moroccan breakfast and a visit to the resident Little Swift colony in the main square, we'll leave Larache and head towards our second base. We will be on the road most of the day, but with some fantastic birding on the way!

If the year has not been too dry, we may stop at the freshwater wetlands of Loukkos to search for further wetland birds such as Western Swampheens, Eurasian Spoonbills and Greater Flamingoes, as well as Plain Martins. We will also check out some of the area's quiet backwaters where elusive Red-knobbed Coots and Marbled Ducks may be found, and we will be looking out for Purple and Squacco Herons and Algerian Grey Shrike.

From here we head up through the mystical 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 and Atlas Pied Flycatcher.

We then arrive at our second base, a beautiful converted water mill in the village of Dardara, in the heart of the Rif Mountains.

Day 5

Talassamtane National Park, Chefchouen

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 the blue town of 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 and Rock Buntings are frequently encountered.

After picnic lunch in this stunning spot, we'll head down to Chefchouen itself, an unmissable destination known as Morocco's "Blue Pearl". Here we'll make time to explore the riverside pathways, *soukhs* and narrow, winding blue-washed streets full of spicy smells and vibrant colours!

Day 6

Return Ferry to Spain, Transfer to Tarifa

A pre-breakfast walk around the fields scrub and riverbed adjacent to our hotel is always worthwhile, getting further views of the local resident birds and hopefully encountering Black-crowned Tchagra, Golden Oriole, Levaillant's Green Woodpecker and with luck a resident Maghreb Wood Owl before it heads back to bed! After breakfast we'll begin our journey back to the coast to catch our ferry to Spain. As before we'll be travelling for most of the day, but with birding stops on the way. With luck and a following wind, we should be back at Huerta Grande in time to relax with a celebratory beverage before our welcome home dinner!

Day 7

Tarifa

Today we'll make the most of the varied birding sites nearby, choosing the best sites to visit for the day's weather conditions. We may 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 areas 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.

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, 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.