

Spain - Ronda & The Strait of Gibraltar

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

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| Day 1 | Arrive Málaga and travel to Júzcar |
| Day 2 | Explore Júzcar and Sierras |
| Day 3 | Explore Ronda area. Transfer to The Straits of Gibraltar |
| Day 4 | Vulture and seabird migration |
| Day 5 | Marismas de Barbate |
| Day 6 | La Janda and La Zarga |
| Day 7 | Depart Gibraltar |

Departs

November

Focus

Birds, in particular the autumn migration

Grading

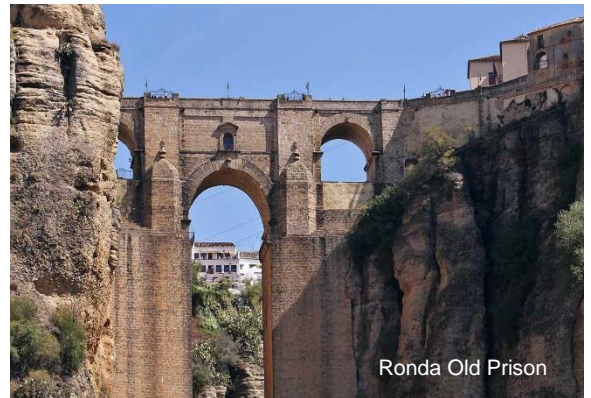
Easy day walks only

Dates and Prices

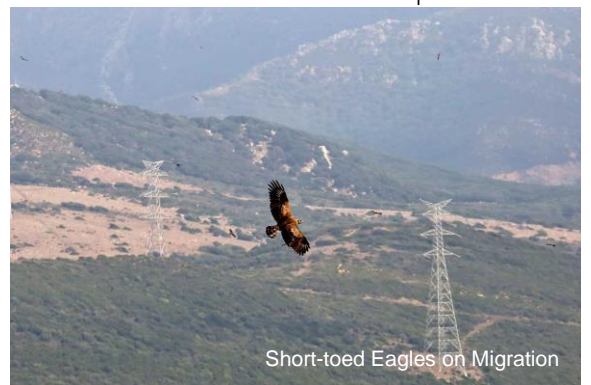
Visit <http://www.naturetrek.co.uk> (tour code ESP43).

Highlights

- Spectacular mountain landscapes, scenery and wildlife
- A stay at a delightful mountain village hotel in Júzcar with award-winning food and great wildlife
- Witness the phenomenal Griffon Vulture migration across the Straits of Gibraltar
- Balearic, Cory's & Scopoli's Shearwaters on the sea



Ronda Old Prison



Short-toed Eagles on Migration



White Storks at La Janda.



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Introduction

For the first leg of our trip, our accommodation nestles in the hills between two Natural Parks - the Sierra de las Nieves and the Sierra de Grazalema. These mountain ranges are designated UNESCO Biosphere Reserves and are home to some of the densest raptor populations in Europe.

Griffon and Egyptian Vultures are present around Ronda, and the four species of eagle that breed in the area can also be encountered at this time of the year: Bonelli's, Short-toed, Booted and Golden. During late autumn, the resident raptors are briefly joined by a variety of other birds passing south between the sierras, *en route* to The Strait of Gibraltar. We will explore the region's imposing limestone crags in search of Black Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush and Rock Bunting, whilst woodland habitats should yield Crested Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper, Hawfinch and Firecrest. During our stay we will also find time to explore the city of Ronda itself, and see where its three bridges – one Roman, one Moorish and one 18th century - straddle the Tajo Gorge in spectacular fashion.



The Strait of Gibraltar, just 14 kilometres wide at its narrowest point, is the focus, twice-yearly, for one of the world's most impressive bird migrations. Every year, millions of birds make the journey across The Strait between Europe and Africa, making use of uplifts and thermals which form along the area's rocky coastline. Although we hope to see a wide variety of species during our time here, our visit is timed to coincide with the peak of the Griffon Vulture passage when as many as 2,300 birds have been recorded crossing during a one-hour period!

Our second base will be a delightful traditional farmhouse near Vejer de la Frontera. Our accommodation is ideally situated for excursions to watch the migration in the hills above the Strait of Gibraltar.

The imposing silhouette of the Moroccan coast may be seen in the distance and we should witness a wide variety of migratory birds making the journey south to Africa across The Strait, including Egyptian Vultures, Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Black Kites and White and Black Storks. The vulture migration is particularly spectacular, and we will visit several of the key raptor watchpoints situated along the coast. With up to 4,000 Griffon Vultures making the crossing in a single day, this represents the Western Palearctic's largest congregation of this species, a world-class natural wonder only possible over The Strait of Gibraltar!

Migrating seabirds are also at peak numbers at this time of year. We'll visit Tarifa Island, the point at which mainland Europe and Africa are at their closest, from where we should witness many hundreds of Balearic, Cory's and Scopoli's Shearwaters moving between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean.

We will also explore the outstanding wetlands, coastal and intertidal habitats in the area, in search of the wintering and passage waders such as Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint, Stone Curlew and Kentish Plover, and terns and gulls including Caspian and Sandwich Tern and Audouin's Gull. The critically endangered Northern Bald Ibis has now increased in numbers due to a very successful reintroduction programme and we will look out for this charismatic bird feeding on nearby pastureland – and maybe even visiting our accommodation!

Itinerary

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 Málaga, transfer to Júzcar

We will arrive into the international airport of Málaga and then drive to the Sierra de las Nieves area. Apart from a few villages forming a rural mountain community, this isolated area is largely uninhabited, and has seen very little human influence or activity. For this reason, it has an unusually rich variety of wildlife including Iberian Ibex and Mouflon. *En route* to Júzcar, we will immediately begin searching in the varied habitats for mountain species. Many species can be encountered wintering or resident here at this time of the year including Ring Ouzel, Thekla Lark, Woodlark and Black Redstart. Raptor species we are likely to encounter include Griffon Vulture, Egyptian Vulture and the four species of eagles in the area: Bonelli's, Short-toed, Booted and Golden Eagle.



From here we will make our short journey to the charming, blue-painted mountain village of Júzcar and our hotel for the next two nights. The nearby woodland and scrub regularly yield Cirl Bunting, Firecrest and Crested Tit and Hawfinch.

Day 2

Júzcar & Ronda Area



We will explore Júzcar's nearby mountain ranges such as the area of Los Riscos. Here, Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting, Black Wheatear and Eurasian Crag Martin are regular whilst Alpine Accentor is also possible, and several species of eagles and vultures may be encountered.

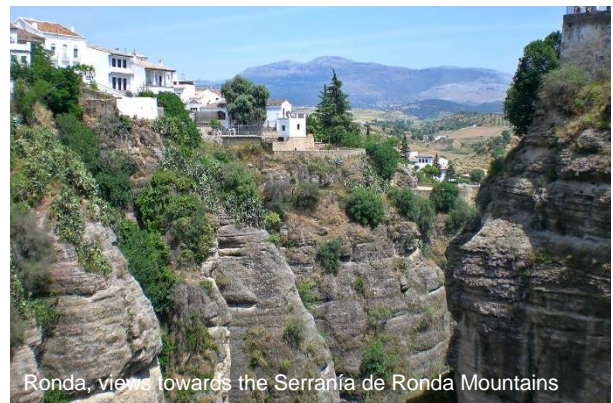
We will then move to the Cueva del Gato. This awe-inspiring beauty spot - whose streams and pools are

frequented by Black-bellied Dipper and Grey Wagtail - forms the downstream end of the vast Hundidero/Gato cave system. The other end of the system lies at the base of a spectacular mountain gorge, a staggering 8 km upstream, and this will be our next location for the day. From our viewpoint at Montejaque dam we will hope to observe Red-billed Chough, Rock Petronia, Hawfinch, Black Wheatear and several species of raptors including Bonelli's Eagle and Griffon Vultures.

Day 3

Historic Ronda, transfer to Straits of Gibraltar

We will spend the morning exploring the picturesque old town of Ronda. It is famous worldwide for its dramatic escarpments and views, and for the deep El Tajo gorge that carries the Rio Guadalevín through its centre. From the 18th century Puente Nuevo ('new' bridge), which straddles the 100m chasm below, we will gain unparalleled views out over the Serranía de Ronda mountains as well as encountering more wildlife specialities of the area.



Following a delightful mountain-side picnic we will head to the Straits of Gibraltar. Our beautifully located accommodation is at the rural hotel of Cortijo el Indiviso. It is set amongst extensive grounds and horse-paddocks.

Day 4

Tarifa Island, Seabird and Vulture migration

This morning we will go to the very tip of Tarifa Island, the point at which mainland Europe is at its closest to Africa, and at which the Strait is at its narrowest. Seabird migration is at its autumn peak in these days, and we can hope to see hundreds of Balearic, Cory's and Scopoli's Shearwaters moving between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, as well as Northern Gannets, Great Skuas and possibly Wilson's and European Storm Petrels. From our promontory in the sea, we may even be lucky enough to spy a pod of Common or Striped Dolphins, or the blow of a passing Sperm or Fin Whale.

As the air warms, we will move to one of several key raptor watchpoints situated along the coast. Here we will hope to observe the spectacular vulture migration. In recent years 3-4,000 young Griffon Vultures have passed in a single day as they migrate to Africa to “come of age”. This spectacle represents probably the biggest concentration of Griffon Vultures ever recorded in the Western Palearctic, a world class natural wonder only possible in the Strait of Gibraltar.

Day 5

Marismas de Barbate and Vejer area

Today, alongside more raptor-watching at sites with stunning views across The Straits to North Africa, we will make a visit to a nearby nature reserve created on the site of disused salt pans. This area offers a



Northern Bald Ibis reintroduction programme

fantastic selection of waders which change every day, but we will especially hope for encounters with Kentish Plovers, Eurasian Stone-curlews, Curlew Sandpipers and Little Stint. We will also look out for eye-catchers like Eurasian Spoonbill, Greater Flamingo and Western Osprey.

Also close by is the town of Vejer de la Frontera, where a successful reintroduction programme of the Critically Endangered Northern Bald Ibis took place in 2004. The local population now numbers around 80, and we should be able to see these engaging and quirky birds at their nesting colony or grazing on surrounding farmland.

Day 6

La Janda and La Zarga

The wetland and farmland of La Janda was once one of the biggest lakes and wetlands in Europe with a surface area of 3,700 hectares. Sadly, this wetland paradise - once on a par with Coto Doñana in terms of ecological importance - was largely destroyed by a process of drainage started in the mid-19th century and completed in the late 1960s. However, today's agricultural landscape still hints at its former glory. It is home to thousands of wintering Common Cranes and White Storks, and during our visit we'll also enjoy looking for passage waders amongst the large flocks of Glossy Ibis and Cattle Egrets. We may also see Purple Swamphens and Black-crowned Night Herons along its reed-fringed drainage canals, and we'll be on the look-out for resident Spanish Imperial Eagle.

For our picnic we'll head to a permit-only site that hosts the area's largest Griffon Vulture colony. Residents number some 150 pairs, but at this time of year their numbers are bolstered by young passage birds on their way south – much squabbling for ledge space ensues! It

is a truly magical place as these huge birds swish overhead and make prehistorical noises to one another.



Rüppell's Griffon Vulture, Straits of Gibraltar
© Simon Tonkin

At this lofty mountain crag, we should also see Egyptian Vulture and Peregrine Falcon. We will also have chance of seeing the Rüppell's Griffon Vulture. Although a rarity in Europe there are annual records particularly in this area since 1997, giving us a good chance of encountering this African vagrant.

Day 7

Transfer Gibraltar, Fly UK

Today we say goodbye to the amazing wildlife of The Straits and make our way home.

Flights and Regional Airports

For this holiday we will fly into Malaga but return from Gibraltar. There may be the option to fly from a regional airport for this holiday so please state on booking if you would like us to explore this possibility for you.

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.