

# The Canaries - La Palma in Spring

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

### Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Santa Cruz, La Palma.
- Day 2/7** Wildlife/botany excursions and whale-watching tours from Los Cancajos.
- Day 8** Fly UK.

### Departs

March

### Focus

Whales and dolphins, flora, birds, insects, and other natural history.

### Grading

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

### Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ESP54) 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
- Many endemic plant species including *Echium webbii* and *Aeonium nobile*
- Canary Blue, African Grass Blue, Monarch & Canary Speckled Wood butterflies
- Enjoy spring sunshine & gentle daily wildlife excursions



From top, Rough-toothed Dolphins, Atlantic Canary, West Canaries Lizard



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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



Beautiful volcanic valley at Caldera de Taburiente

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 Migrant and Monarch all possible.

During our stay on La Palma we will aim to make boat excursions on at least two 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 the petite and playful Atlantic Spotted Dolphin. Rough-toothed Dolphins are found in the waters around La Palma throughout the year. 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 sub-species 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 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 (*Gallotia auaritae*) was only rediscovered in 2007 having been considered extinct for some 500 years! Las Salinas, in the south, is a good area for waders, 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.



Canary Bellflower with Brimstone Butterfly inside

This is a Canary Island getaway that offers peace, tranquillity 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 Dragon trees or reservoir

For those early risers in the group there will 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 sea watching 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* subsp. *palmensis* and a Chaffinch sub-species *Fringillae coelebs* subsp. *palmensis*. Several other Macronesian endemics occur such as Canary Islands Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* subsp. *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. The chief tree here is Stinkwood (*Ocotea foetens*) with Azores Laurel (*Laurus novocanariensis*); ferns such as Chain Fern (*Woodwardia radicans*), Kidney-leaved Fern (*Adiantum reniforme*) and Mule's Fern (*Asplenium hermionitis*) grow lushly, and *Aeonium canariense* var. *palmense*, *Cryptotaenia elegans* and the pink 'daisy' *Pericallis papyracea* occur. We will also look for the beautiful Canary Bellflower (*Canarina canariensis*).



Dragon Trees

In the afternoon, we will have a chance to visit another area of laurel forest at Los Tilos, for target endemics we may have missed. We then drive further north to La Tosca, where there is a native population of the iconic Dragon Tree, some several centuries old. La Palma is a stronghold of these ancient trees of Macaronesia, 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. If time permits, we may also visit the Laguna de Barlovento which can hold wildfowl, gulls and waders.

## 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-a-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.



Blainville's Beaked Whale

After our boat trip we will head a short distance south-east to visit 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

## Fuencaliente: Volcanoes and Salt-pans

This morning 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. We will visit the local Bodegas Teneguia winery, which offers guided tours and the opportunity to taste their products.

Afterwards, 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. A variety of waders occur here each spring. The lighthouse area nearby can be good for sea watching with passing whales, dolphins, shearwaters and other seabirds. Plants here include two different species both known as Canary Samphire: *Schizogyne sericea* and *Astydamia latifolia*, the white *Echium breviflorum*, and the strange stick-like plant *Ceropegia dichotoma*. La Palma Lizards (*Gallotia gallotia* subsp. *palmae*) are frequent.

## Day 5

## Roque de los Muchachos

La Palma is one of the three most important astronomical observatories in the world and today we will visit the area of the astronomical observatory at the Roque de los Muchachos.

The observatory sits, along with several others, at the highest point of La Palma. We will travel from the coastal African vegetation belt of succulent and drought-resistant shrubs, including Canary Island Spurge (*Euphorbia canariensis*) through the Mediterranean zone, with Canary Palms (*Phoenix canariensis*), then



Roque de los Muchachos

the Laurisilva, the cloud forest. This gives way to the Temperate zone of Canary Pines (*Pinus canariensis*) and we finally reach the summit scrub, dominated by Sticky Broom (*Adenocarpus viscosus*). We will be too early in the year to see this area in its flowering glory, but plants here include La Palma Violet (*Viola palmensis*) and the dramatic La Palma Bugloss (*Echium wildpretii* subsp. *trichosyphon*), with flowering spikes of over two metres tall. From the summit the views of La Caldera de Taburiente National Park and La Palma are fantastic, whilst Spectacled Warbler and Raven occur in the vicinity.

We may have the opportunity one evening, to do some star-gazing from the centre of the island; however, this is not possible if a full moon falls during the week. After dinner, we will meet our guide and enjoy, hopefully, the clear dark skies for which La Palma is famed.

## Day 6

## Llano de las Cuevas farmland; Juniper forests; sunset cruise

In the morning we will visit Llano de las Cuevas situated in centre of the island in the high part of El Paso. 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 (*Pinus canariensis*), a Bird's-foot Trefoil *Lotus hillebrandii*, the fragrant-leaved *Micromeria herpyllomorpha* and Thatching Grass (*Hyparrhenia hirta*). 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 Macaronesian Juniper woodland on La Palma, supporting Canary Island Ebony (*Persea*



All accommodation and meals are included. We will stay at a comfortable 3-star hotel in Los Cancajos, La Palma. All rooms are en suite and have a sea view. The hotel is large complex, it is difficult to find the small family run hotels on La Palma Naturetrek like to use, though this means use of the hotel facilities which includes a heated swimming pool so please bring your swimwear!

## 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](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 flights, at the time of booking.

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Rough-toothed Dolphin



Monarch Butterfly