

Spain's Costa Blanca

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	<u>Fly Alicante and transfer to Santa Pola</u>
Days 2/4	<u>Salt flats and marshes around Santa Pola, plus Tabarca Island</u>
Days 5/7	<u>Sierra de Mariola and Yecla steppe</u>
Day 8	<u>Fly London</u>

Departs

March and November

Focus

Birds

Grading

A. Day walks only.

Dates & Prices

See website (tour code ESP70) or brochure

Highlights

- White-headed Duck, Marbled Duck, Red-knobbed Coot & other wetland birds
- Eagles in the mountains plus Black Wheatear, Rock Bunting & Rock Sparrow
- Look for Great & Little Bustards and Pin-tailed & Black-bellied Sandgrouse on the steppe
- Led by expert naturalists



From top to bottom: White-headed Duck, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Greater Flamingoes



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Introduction

The Costa Blanca is often overlooked as a natural history destination, yet this part of mainland Spain, better known for its beach resorts, is home to an abundance of wildlife, and birds in particular. This beautiful length of coastline offers a rewarding blend of wetlands, coastal habitats, sierras and open steppe, each supporting a distinct community of birds that changes subtly with the seasons. This 2-centre holiday explores these contrasting habitats at a time of year when it is pleasantly warm, escaping the cold,



Red-crested Pochard

wet and dark days in the UK. Together, they provide an excellent overview of Mediterranean birdlife, including some of the most iconic of Spanish species and some of the finest winter and spring birdwatching in eastern Spain.

The wetlands of El Hondo and the nearby salt pans of Santa Pola form one of the most important refuges for aquatic birds in the Iberian Peninsula. Their mixture of freshwater pools, saline lagoons and extensive reedbeds attracts a wealth of

species. In March, the air is filled with the display calls of Purple Swamphens and the trumpeting of Greater Flamingoes, while migrating waders pause on their way north. By November, the scene changes as wintering wildfowl arrive in large numbers, joining year-round residents, White-headed Duck, Red-crested Pochard and Marbled Duck among them, and raptors such as Marsh Harrier and Booted Eagle patrol the reed fringes.

A short boat crossing takes us to Tabarca Island, a low, rocky outcrop surrounded by clear Mediterranean waters and home to colonies of Yellow-legged Gulls, Shags and Audouin's Gulls. Offshore passage in spring can bring migrating terns and shearwaters, while in autumn the island serves as a brief resting point for southbound migrants.

Inland, the Spanish steppes reveal a different landscape of open cereal fields and dry plains. Here, species such as Great and Little Bustards, Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse and Calandra Lark evoke a wilder, older Spain — a timeless counterpart to the life-filled marshes nearer the coast.

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 Alicante, transfer to Santa Pola

We will begin this tour with a direct flight from London to Alicante and make the short drive south to Santa Pola. Our hotel is located right next to the eastern edge of the salt flats, and after checking in we will make our first explorations of this important and bird-rich habitat. We stay here for four nights.

Day 2

El Hondo & El Clot de Galvaney

This morning we will head over the vast expanse of El Hondo Nature Reserve, one of Spain's most important wetland sites. In March, the reserve is alive with movement as spring migrants arrive and resident species begin to breed. Purple Swamphens can be seen striding through the reedbeds, while Moustached Warblers deliver their harsh, rhythmic songs from deep cover. Glossy Ibis feed alongside Little and Cattle Egrets in the shallows, and Black-winged Stilts and Avocets settle to nest on the exposed mud. Marsh Harriers quarter the reeds, and Little Bitterns and Black-crowned Night Herons pause on their way north. Early in the season, Booted Eagles may also pass through, following the coastal migration routes, whilst Great Spotted Eagle winter in small numbers.

By November, the atmosphere is quieter but equally rewarding. The lagoons hold large flocks of Red-crested Pochard, Shoveler, Teal and Gadwall, and Greater Flamingoes feed in elegant groups across the deeper pools. The reed margins attract Bluethroats, Chiffchaffs and Penduline Tits, while Crag Martins and the last Swallows sweep over the water on mild days. In both seasons, the chance of finding White-headed Duck remains one of the highlights, its small numbers carefully protected here. It is a diving duck with a long tail, often held cocked, and males have a striking white face and black crown that contrasts with their large blue bill and chestnut body, meaning that they stand out. It is also a very good location to see another Iberian speciality, Red-knobbed Coot, distinguished by the two small red horns on breeding adults.



Red-knobbed Coot

In the afternoon we will venture over to the coast at El Clot de Galvaney, to the north of Santa Pola, where there is a compact reserve of dunes, pools and scrub that supports a good range of birds in both spring and winter. In March, Sardinian Warblers are common in the low scrub, their sharp calls carrying through the tamarisks, while Serins and Greenfinches sing from the pines. Iberian Grey Shrikes hunt over the open areas, and Thekla's Larks can be heard giving their rippling songs from stony ground. Both Black-necked and Little Grebes can be found around the pools and good numbers of White-headed Duck should be present.

By November, the reserve becomes quieter but remains productive. Black Redstarts and Stonechats are widespread, often joined by small flocks of Linnets and Meadow Pipits. Hoopoes probe the soil between the paths, and Water Pipits feed along the wetter edges.

Day 3

Tabarca

Today we will take a boat over to Tabarca, the smallest permanently inhabited island off the mainland coast of Spain. Strategically important for several centuries, with fortifications built at one end, it lies 5 nautical miles away and is just over a mile in length and much narrower. Much of it is undeveloped and as well as being an important marine reserve, the first designated in Spain, it is also an outpost for several



Glossy Ibis

bird species that are less likely to be found on the mainland. We will spend the day here, wandering the island at a leisurely pace, enjoying the mix of seabird, coastal and scrub species.

In March, the island is alive with spring passage migrants. European Shags can be seen perched on the rocky shores or diving for fish, while Audouin's Gulls patrol the coast, along with Scopoli's and Balearic Shearwaters. Corn Buntings and Cetti's Warblers sing

from the low coastal scrub, and Sardinian Warblers are commonly seen here. Common Buzzards drift lazily overhead, and there is an outside chance of Eleonora's or Peregrine Falcon speeding overhead.

By November, Tabarca attracts a range of wintering species. White Wagtails, Rock and Meadow Pipits feed along the shoreline, while Black Redstarts and Chiffchaffs move through the scrub. Cattle Egrets and Glossy Ibises visit the shallow inshore pools, often joined by Turnstone, Sanderling and Ringed Plover. Kestrels remain common, hovering over the island in search of small lizards and insects, and Spotless Starlings are often found in groups on the ground.

Day 4

Santa Pola & El Pinet

We will spend most of the day exploring the vast salt flats and marshes to the south-west of Santa Pola, which support a wide variety of birdlife throughout the year. We will already have explored a small section on pre-breakfast walks from our hotel, but there are many parts of this huge complex to investigate.

In March, the salinas begin to stir with breeding activity. Greater Flamingoes gather in large, noisy groups, their pink plumage reflected in the shallow water, while Slender-billed and Mediterranean Gulls settle on the drier islands to nest. Iberian specialities such as Iberian Green Woodpecker, Black Wheatear and Dartford Warbler can all be found around the reserve, the latter active in the coastal scrub. Around the open margins, Shelduck, Avocet and Black-winged Stilt feed in the shallow pools, and Crested Larks sing from the sandy tracks. White Storks and Black Kites are strangely absent from the Costa Blanca, both not breeding here and preferring to migrate due north through central Spain. However, both could still be encountered but not in the numbers associated with most parts of Spain.



Black Wheatear

By November, the atmosphere is quieter but still rich in life. Flamingoes remain in good numbers, joined by wintering Black-necked Grebes, Dunlin and Marsh, Wood and Curlew Sandpipers feeding in the shallows. Sardinian Warblers and Iberian Grey Shrikes are active along the edges, while Crag Martins and White Wagtails move overhead.

The very southern part of the flats is known as El Pinet, and as well as several hides overlooking the wetlands here, there is also a section of dunes forming a barrier to the sea. Bird numbers are more concentrated here and some of the more specialist species that can be found here or anywhere across the vast network of pools include Collared Pratincole, Woodchat Shrike, Western Subalpine Warbler, Great Spotted Cuckoo, and Booted Eagle or Osprey sailing overhead. The pools of Santa Pola are a stronghold in Spain for Marbled Duck all year round, and we should get good views of this elegant bird.

Day 5

Serra del Sit

Today we will head north into the hills of Serra del Sit, making a couple of stops en route. The first will be at a barranc or dry river bed where Thekla's Lark and Black Wheatear can be spotted on the rocky slopes, along with Blue Rock Thrush, for which this is prime territory. Overhead, Red-rumped Swallow, Crag Martin and



Short-toed Eagle

House Martin feed on insects, while Hoopoes call from nearby orchards, where Blackcap and Common Redstarts also flit between the trees. Griffon Vultures and Short-toed Eagles might glide overhead, circling over the cliffs in the rising thermals, and there might be a chance of finding a roosting Eurasian Eagle Owl.

After this we will continue north to Xorret de Catí, a rugged upland area of limestone ridges and pine forest, which are populated with Firecrest, Coal and Crested Tits, Short-toed Treecreeper and Siskin making their way through the trees, whilst Rock Sparrow, Corn Bunting and Rock Buntings are found in small flocks feeding on the ground. Red-billed Choughs reside in the cliffs here, whilst Red Crossbills feed in the pines and raptors such as Bonelli's and Booted Eagles sail across the peaks.

We continue to our next accommodation in a rural setting outside the small town of Biar, where we will stay for the next three nights.

Day 6

Barranc del Cint & Albufera de Gaianes

Barranc del Cint is an area of steep cliffs, terraces and scrub on the eastern side of the Sierra de Mariola, with a trail that follows the Cint River. In March, the rocky slopes and open terraces are alive with activity, as Griffon Vultures and Bonelli's Eagles soar over the cliffs, while Kestrels hover along the valley edges. Ravens call from the higher crags, and Rock Sparrows forage among the stones. Crested Tits and Firecrests move through the pines and tamarisks, and Goldfinches and Linnets feed along the scrubby tracks. Black

Redstart and Dartford Warbler call from the scrub, Red-legged Partridges are visible on the lower terraces, and Crag Martins hawk for insects along the escarpments.

By November, the valley retains a quieter, wintering bird community. Black Redstarts and Stonechats remain on the scrub, while Meadow Pipits and Corn Buntings move through the open areas. Sardinian Warblers are still present, and Rock Pipits frequent the watercourses. Peregrines patrol the cliffs, and small flocks of Chaffinches and Greenfinches move along the valley edges. Grey Wagtails feed along the streams and the occasional Merlin passes overhead. This is also a prime location for Alpine Accentor, a resident here in the winter and early spring, plus Rock Bunting can also be found here, as well as Golden and Short-toed Snake Eagles.



Rock Bunting

In the afternoon we will head to Albufera de Gaianes, a small reed-fringed lake surrounded by farmland and scrub. Black-crowned Night and Purple Herons wait patiently on the water's edge, waiting for the right opportunity to strike, whilst sandpipers and shanks also patrol the margins. Iberian Green Woodpecker and Wryneck can be found in the surroundings, whilst various warblers, Bluethroat and Penduline Tit are in the reeds. In the winter months the lake is populated with waterfowl with Shoveler, Teal, Pochard and Red-crested Pochard enjoying this oasis.

Day 7

Steppe at Yecla & Moratillas

Today we will head westwards, and onto the steppe, to find some of the specialist Iberian species here, including Great and Little Bustards, Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse and Spanish Imperial Eagle.

Our first location will be the area north of Yecla, a vast section of dry steppe and low scrub, which we will scan looking for small groups of Great and Little Bustards. March is breeding season for Great Bustards, and the males will be performing their infamous 'foam bath' display, with the aim of attracting a mate. We can hope to witness this elaborate courtship and observe the wider behaviour of this magnificent bird. They reassemble into small flocks in the autumn, spending the winter together, making them easier to find in November.



Great Bustards

This habitat is also ideal for Spanish Sparrow and larks, and although Dupont's Lark will be too hard to find, we should have a good chance of seeing Crested, Calandra, Greater Short-toed, Thekla and Wood Larks either on the ground or in flight. This area is also particularly good for raptors and we will keep a keen eye on the sky for Lesser Kestrel, Golden Eagle and the truly regal Spanish Imperial Eagle.

We will then move to another area called Las Moratillas, continuing our search for species such as Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse. Both species are well adapted to arid conditions, feeding mainly on seeds in small flocks and flying long distances to drink at dawn and dusk. With bolder colours and more intricate feather patterns, the Pin-tailed is arguably the more attractive of the two species, but both are well camouflaged for the environment and are only found in Iberia and northern Africa.

Day 8

Fly London

We will make our way back to Alicante Airport, making one last birding stop en route, before boarding our flight back to London.

Grading

Grade A. Most of the walking will be on the flat, although there will be a couple of occasions where we will be in hilly terrain. All will be on paths or tracks and we expect to walk up to 4-5 miles a day.

Weather

At this time of year we can expect fine weather and we hope for sunny days, with temperatures in the low teens to mid-20s°C. At altitude, however, cloud and rain can bring a dramatic drop in temperatures, and waterproofs and a warm jacket should generally be carried during the second half of the tour.

Food & Accommodation

All included in the price. This is a 2-centre tour, with the first half on the coast and the second up in the hills. As is well known, there is significant development along stretches of the Costa Blanca, with many hotels dating back to the 70s and 80s or modern family-orientated resorts. The hotel we stay at is a small, simple tourist one, but it is right next to the eastern end of the Santa Pola salt lakes, meaning that pre-breakfast birding walks are possible. Our second accommodation is a converted 18th-century farmhouse with a small number of rooms, in the foothills of the Sierra de Mariola, outside the small town of Biar. Both accommodations are modest but comfortable with en-suite facilities in all rooms.

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.