

Gibraltar & Tarifa: Whales, Dolphins & Autumn Migration

Naturetrek Tour Report

20 - 24 September 2005



Striped Dolphins



*'The Rock' from
Europa Point*

Images by Paul Marshall



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Tuesday 20 September

El Algorrobo and Tarifa

The group arrived in Gibraltar on time and met Paul. Without any delay we crossed the border and headed west to our first stop of the holiday. The weather was warm, sunny, with limited cloud cover and light easterly winds. The watchpoint at El Algorrobo provided the perfect destination to sit and watch for migrating raptors whilst enjoying a picnic lunch.

Booted and Short-toed Eagles were the most numerous species allowing plenty of chance for everybody to watch both species at various ranges. The local Griffon Vultures drifted in and out of view during the afternoon, their huge size impressing everybody. In addition to this were several Honey Buzzards, two Black Storks and a single Black Kite.

With everybody having had an early start, a hearty lunch and some excellent views of migrating raptors we made our way to our hotel situated just outside the town of Tarifa. After checking in and a few hours rest we headed to Tarifa beach for a couple of hours birding before dinner.

The easterly wind had picked up and searching for passerines was hard work but with a little effort Crested Larks and a single Short-toed Lark showed well. Sheltering from the wind in the dunes were a small flock of Ringed Plover, Sanderling and Kentish Plover. Scanning the beach with a telescope revealed a large flock of gulls near Tarifa so we headed back to the minibus and drove to the eastern end of the beach. This proved to be a good move as this corner was more sheltered.

Amongst the hundred Yellow-legged Gulls were a minimum of thirty Audouin's Gulls. Through telescopes we had excellent views of this beautiful bird; one of the world's rarest gulls. Eight Sandwich Terns preened on the beach and a single Little Tern fished the shoreline. Behind the gulls and terns several Gannets passed offshore along with some more distant Cory's Shearwaters.

Turning our attention to the dunes, a flash of bright blue revealed itself as an immature Roller which sat on fence posts and flew to the ground to feed on insects. Whilst enjoying the Roller a bird call sounding like a cross between a Yellow Wagtail and a House Sparrow announced the presence of two Tawny Pipits. After locating the birds on the ground we had good views of this surprisingly attractive species.

We slowly made our way across the dunes enjoying Sanderling, Bar-tailed Godwits and Kentish Plovers on one side and the Roller, Tawny Pipits, Crested Larks and Corn Buntings on the other. Viewing some agricultural fields we found several Wheatears, a Turtle Dove and a very impressive flock of three hundred Calandra Larks. The striking black underwing and white trailing edge being very obvious as the birds took flight before returning to the fields to feed.

After a productive few hours birding we returned to our charming hotel for an excellent Spanish meal and a good nights sleep.

Wednesday 21 September

Bolonia, Algeciras Bay, El Algorrobo and Tarifa

The option of a pre breakfast visit to Bolonia, west along the coast from the hotel, was taken up by the whole group. As the sun rose over hills to the west we were enjoying fantastic views of Griffon Vultures perched on a rocky outcrop. Telescope-filling views of a Griffon Vulture in perfect morning light is a sight to remember.

Several Blue Rock Thrushes flitted around the rockface and eventually gave good views as a male sang from prominent perches. A male Marsh Harrier and three Sparrowhawks fighting with the local Kestrels signified the start of the day's raptor movements. Making our way down the road towards the beach we stopped at a small watercourse and found the area to be alive with small birds. Unfortunately dense cover made seeing many of them very difficult. We did however manage brief views of Redstart, Pied Flycatcher, several Chiffchaffs and a Serin.

On the beach were six Audouin's Gulls and two Turnstones as well as many of the waders we had seen the previous evening. Offshore at least thirty Gannets cruised up and down occasionally plummeting into the sea after prey. Around the freshwater pool was a single Common Sandpiper and several Yellow Wagtails of the race *iberiae*. Some nearby vegetation held a Willow Warbler and a nice surprise in the form of a Melodious Warbler. The direct comparison between the two species allowed the sloping forehead, large bill and open faced expression characteristic of the latter species to be appreciated.

We returned to our hotel for breakfast and checked the conditions for our first whale watching trip into the Straits of Gibraltar. Despite the relatively calm conditions there was still too much swell in the Straits to go out but instead we headed to Algeciras Bay where the seas were much calmer.

Following a short talk on the cetaceans found in the area and the threats which they face we headed into the bay. It wasn't long before our first dolphins were spotted. A mixed pod of thirty Striped and several Common Dolphins gave superb views as they swam around the boat. More than one Striped Dolphin decided to show off and give us superb views as they leapt clear of the water. The only birds of note were a single Black-headed Gull and small numbers of Black Terns.

Returning to dry land we then headed to the watchpoint at El Algorrobo for our picnic lunch. By now the conditions were clear, hot and sunny and as a result raptor migration was relatively slow. However the events that interrupted lunch show you can never take your eyes off the sky!

Small numbers of Booted Eagles and the resident Griffon Vultures provided some nice views but the shout of Spanish Imperial Eagle had everybody jumping up and grabbing telescopes and binoculars. Frantic scanning of the skies ensued and the bird, a juvenile, was picked out heading towards us. As it made its way directly overhead it gave superb views, the reddish brown underparts and brilliant white trailing edge to the wing against blue skies was appreciated by everybody.

There was only a short time to relax before a Golden Eagle appeared but then unfortunately disappeared behind one of the hills just as quickly. In addition to the raptors, two migrating Black Storks and three White Storks showed well, a party of three Red-rumped Swallows zipped past and a juvenile Woodchat Shrike showed well in the crown of a nearby tree.

After a chance to freshen up at the hotel there was the option to either visit Tarifa town or beach. Penny and Ian opted for the beach whilst the rest of us headed into Tarifa for the opportunity to enjoy the old town, shops and cafes. We enjoyed another Spanish meal and more wine at the hotel and celebrated a good day – particularly that eagle!

Thursday 22 September

La Janda and Cazalla

Given the continued windy weather the group decided to concentrate on looking for birds rather than another whale watching trip. We headed west from the hotel to La Janda, a former extensive shallow lake that had been drained to make way for agriculture. Despite this the area is still a magnet for birds particularly on migration.

White Storks were much in evidence as we headed along the gravel access track. Several hundred birds fed in the fields and on more than one occasion all rose at once to fill the sky. Two Common Buzzards sat hunched on power pylons and a minimum of ten Marsh Harriers quartered the fields. The drainage channels are largely unsuitable for birds but one provided a good comparison of Green and Common Sandpipers.

Once the excitement of so many birds had begun to die down we began to pick out some of the scarcer species in the area. A juvenile Montagu's Harrier quartered nearby fields before landing and giving superb views. At least four others were seen during the morning. Amongst the storks we located two Black Storks, probably grounded by the strong winds. In the distance a flock of thirty Glossy Ibis were seen occasionally in flight as they were disturbed from feeding in the rice fields. Three distant flying white blobs turned out to be Spoonbills and they flew over the fields in front of us before being joined by four more and landing out of view. One can only imagine the quality of the birding before the lake was drained!

With time getting on we made our way further down the track, past flocks of Spanish Sparrows in the reeds fringing the drainage canals. Ploughed fields with hundreds of feeding Cattle Egrets also produced at least fifty kestrels and closer inspection of several adult male birds revealed that they were indeed Lesser Kestrels. Amongst them was at least one Black-shouldered Kite, a species which is slowly expanding its range in Spain but is never easy to see. Although relatively distant the unmistakable pale grey plumage and distinctive black shoulders could clearly be seen.

Whilst watching the Black-shouldered Kite a Red Kite was seen heading towards the minibus and gave very close views as it passed with a few hundred yards of us. Shortly after that four Black Kites slowly made their way over one of the nearby ridges. Three kite species in the space of fifteen minutes anywhere in Europe is an impressive achievement.

With lunch beckoning we reluctantly made our way back towards Tarifa stopping at the hotel to freshen ourselves up. Today we headed to another watchpoint in the hills above Tarifa. The now very strong wind made lunch and bird watching tricky. Careful scanning of the skies revealed an almost constant stream of eagles. Over lunch a hundred and fifty Short-toed Eagles were counted heading south. A return to the hotel and a rest from the Levanter wind was welcomed by all.

Late afternoon and the wind had eased slightly so we headed back to La Janda, this time viewing the area from the northern access track. Crossing much drier agricultural habitat we were rewarded with Red-legged Partridges, flocks of Spanish Sparrows, a close Short-toed Eagle and a very obliging Little Owl.

Arriving at a wetter area we stopped the minibus and set up our telescopes. As is often the case the area seemed relatively devoid of life at first glance but this was not the case. Fourteen Spoonbills stood on the edge of a drainage ditch with some Little Egrets. All were juvenile birds and many were preening allowing us to see their amazing bills. The Glossy Ibis flock seen earlier in the day was seen in flight several times and ten Black-winged Stilts flew around before settling out of view.

Twenty Black Storks circled over a distant hillside as we turned our attention to scanning the numerous harriers using the area. The majority were Marsh Harriers but amongst them were several immature Montagu's Harriers and a single male Hen Harrier. This provided a rare opportunity to compare the shape and flight actions of these three harrier species. Before leaving the small flock of Calandra Larks that had been present in front of us flew into an adjacent field and joined a flock of over a thousand birds. The sight of so many passerines feeding, flying and moving in one flock was a very impressive and fitting end to the day.

We returned to the hotel to enjoy our last evening meal in Spain and reflected on the quality of the wildlife watching so far. Over the three days we had seen a remarkable eighteen species of raptor.

Friday 23 September

Gibraltar

A prompt departure following breakfast and a short wait in the queue to cross the border saw us arriving on Gibraltar mid morning. We dropped our luggage at the hotel and prepared a picnic lunch whilst checking over the Rock. A flock of Booted Eagles contained one much larger eagle but the views were too poor to clinch identification. As the sun burnt away some early morning cloud we arrived at the cable car station and made our way to the top of the Rock.

The view from the top was breathtaking and as we scanned the skies the local Barbary Macaques kept a watchful eye on us hoping for the opportunity of some free food. Migrating Sparrowhawks were in evidence and a Honey Buzzard passed close by. An adult Hobby low overhead was a welcome addition to the list of raptors we had

seen, the streaky underparts and red trousers obvious. After taking the views we headed off along the path to O'Harra's Battery and lunch.

The clear, calm conditions meant migration was slow but the continued presence of Sparrowhawks and a Montagu's Harrier were appreciated. A beautiful Swallowtail butterfly allowed close approach as we ate our picnic lunch. Slowly making our way down the Rock produced Sardinian Warbler, Blackcap and several Two-tailed Pasha butterflies. An Osprey carrying a fish high over the Rock was an unexpected sight. In the botanical gardens the welcome shade gave us chance to rest and search the trees. Spotted Flycatcher and Chiffchaffs were the only birds of note but several more Two-tailed Pashas showed well.

We returned to the hotel and whilst getting out of the minibus Penny was quick to spot two buzzards against the Rock. The good views of one individual allowed us to confirm the identity as a Long-legged Buzzard, an African species rarely seen in Spain. We took the opportunity to enjoy this species and freshen up before taking an early evening visit to Europa Point.

Scanning the sea offshore revealed small numbers of Cory's Shearwaters passing. Everybody managed good views through a telescope and could appreciate the difference from the numerous gulls and Gannets. Several Common/Striped Dolphins were also seen jumping clear of the water but were rather distant.

Our final evening meal was taken at an Italian restaurant at our hotel where everybody relived the highlights of the holiday and in particular the twenty one species of raptor we had seen.

Saturday 24 September

Gibraltar

The option of an early morning visit to the ringing station was taken up the majority of the group so we headed out after a quick breakfast. Before joining the local ringers we had time to scan the rocky slopes. After several minutes patient scanning we were rewarded with excellent telescope views of four Barbary Partridge, one of the Rock's more elusive residents. The subtle plumage characteristics separating this species from Red-legged Partridge could be clearly seen. Whilst watching the partridges the Long-legged Buzzard put in a brief appearance.

At Jew's Gate we were greeted by volunteers manning the ringing station and given a talk on the research work that takes place. Despite the unproductive conditions for migration we were fortunate enough to see Garden Warbler, Pied Flycatcher, Blackcap, Wren and Blackbird in the hand. The fascination of seeing just how small these species really are and the information that can be learnt from ringing was a real bonus to the holiday.

As some of the group were catching the early flight to Gatwick, Paul left the others to enjoy another ringing session whilst he transferred those departing to the airport. Check-in and departure went without a problem and Paul returned to the rest of the group with a picnic lunch.

Lunch was taken at a quiet spot near Europa Point. Three Blue Rock Thrushes chased each other noisily around the cliffs as we arrived and then showed on and off for the next hour. Over lunch Sparrowhawks continued to pass over the Rock with a minimum of ten being counted as well as a Red Kite. Three Shags passed just offshore

but other than that things were relatively quiet. After lunch several people visited the town of Gibraltar whilst Penny, Ian and Paul checked the botanical gardens. A mix of passerines included Pied and Spotted Flycatcher, Chiffchaff and our only Grey Wagtail, Robin, Reed Warbler and Great Tit of the trip.

All that was left now was for the remainder of the group to return to the hotel and collect our luggage before heading to the airport and catching the flight home. All was going smoothly until a security alert caused the airport to be closed for several hours. However the authorities handled the situation superbly and we took off only two hours late arriving at Heathrow where the tour concluded.

Birds

H = heard only (not included in the totals)

	Common Name	Scientific Name	TL	September				
				20	21	22	23	24
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	ü			ü		
2	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>	ü	12			c30	
3	Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>	ü	6	c30		ü	
4	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	ü				3	
5	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü	
6	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	ü			8		
7	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	ü			5		
8	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	ü	2	2	20		
9	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	ü		c200	3		
10	Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	ü			14		
11	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	ü			30		
12	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	ü			8		
13	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	ü			1		
14	Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	ü			1+		
15	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	ü	1		4		
16	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	ü			1		1
17	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	ü	3				
18	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		
19	Hen Harrier	<i>Cygnus cyaneus</i>	ü			1		
20	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>	ü			3+	1	
21	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	ü		1	15+		
22	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü
23	Long-legged Buzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>	ü				1	1
24	Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	ü	8	ü	ü	ü	
25	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	ü		2	2		
26	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	ü		1			
27	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca (adalberti)</i>	ü		1			
28	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	ü	c40	c30	ü	1	
29	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	ü	c20		c150		
30	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	ü				1	
31	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü
32	Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	ü				1	
33	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	ü			50+		
34	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	ü		1	1		1
35	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	ü	2		25		
36	Barbary Partridge	<i>Alectoris barbara</i>	ü					4
37	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	ü			10		
38	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		
39	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		
40	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	ü		ü	ü		
41	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	ü	ü	ü			
42	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		
43	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	ü	ü	ü			
44	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	ü		1	1		
45	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	ü			4		
46	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	ü			3		
47	Audouin's Gull	<i>Larus audouinii</i>	ü	c30	6			
48	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	ü		ü	ü	ü	ü
49	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü
50	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	ü	2	1			
51	Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>	ü	8	ü			
52	Little Tern	<i>Sterna albifrons</i>	ü	1				

	Common Name	Scientific Name	TL	September				
				20	21	22	23	24
53	Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>	ü		18			
54	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	ü			ü		
55	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü	
56	Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>	ü	1		6		
57	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>			H			
58	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	ü			1		
59	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	ü			ü		
60	Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	ü	ü		H		
61	European Roller	<i>Caracias garrulus</i>	ü	1	1			
62	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	ü		1	1		
63	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		
64	Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>	ü	1				
65	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>	ü	c300		c1000		
66	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	ü		ü			
67	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	ü		ü	ü		
68	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>	ü		3			
69	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü
70	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		
71	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>	ü	2	2			
72	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	ü			1		
73	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	ü					1
74	Yellow (Iberian) Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava (iberiae)</i>	ü		3	ü	ü	ü
75	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	ü		H		ü	ü
76	Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>	ü		1			
77	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>	ü			1		
78	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		
79	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	ü	3		1		
80	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>	ü		2		1	3
81	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	ü		ü	ü	ü	ü
82	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	ü	ü		ü		
83	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			H	H		
84	Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	ü					1
85	Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>	ü		1			
86	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	ü				ü	
87	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	ü	ü	ü		ü	
88	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	ü		ü			
89	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	ü		ü		ü	ü
90	Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>	ü		ü			ü
91	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	ü				ü	
92	Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü
93	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	ü					ü
94	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	ü				ü	
95	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>	ü		1	1		
96	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		ü
97	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü
98	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>	ü			c50		
99	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	ü		1			
100	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	ü		ü	ü		ü
101	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		
102	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>	ü		ü	ü		
103	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		
	Daily total			42	56	63	27	22
	Grand total		101					

Cetaceans

	TL	September				
		20	21	22	23	24
Common Dolphin	ü		c30			
Striped Dolphin	ü		2+		3+	
Bottlenose Dolphin						
Long-finned Pilot Whale						
Sperm Whale						
Fin Whale						
Killer Whale						

Other

Other

Swallowtail

Gatekeeper

Large White

Two-tailed Pasha

Wall

Hummingbird Hawkmoth

Moorish Gecko

Iberian Wall Lizard

Barbary Macaque