

Gibraltar & Tarifa: Whales, Dolphins & Autumn Migration

Naturetrek Tour Report

15-19 September 2006

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Day1

Friday 15 September

Gibraltar – El Algarrobo – Punta Sur Hotel – Playa de los Lances

After an early start and punctual flight we arrived in Gibraltar to be greeted by clear blue skies and warm sunshine. Whilst Phil sorted a picnic lunch for the group the rest of us had coffee overlooking the rock. We were then soon heading west along the Spanish coast.

Our first stop was El Algarrobo raptor watchpoint. The fine conditions meant raptor migration was taking place at a great height but we enjoyed views of Griffon Vultures, Booted Eagles and Short-toed Eagles. Raptor watching is a game of patience and whilst waiting we enjoyed our first Spanish picnic lunch. Occasional patches of cloud forced birds to move lower and as a result we had good views of a Black Stork, several Honey Buzzards and Egyptian Vultures.

Mid afternoon and we made our way west to Tarifa and our home for the next three nights – the excellent Punta Sur Hotel. A few hours rest was welcomed by everybody but before dinner most of the group headed to the nearby beach of Playa de los Lances. The dunes behind the beach produced common species such as Crested Lark, Whinchat, Red-legged Partridge, Cattle Egret and Fan-tailed Warbler.

On the beach we made our way to the flock of roosting gulls and in superb evening light enjoyed watching Audouin's Gulls, one of the world's rarest gulls. Around the gulls we watched Sandwich Terns and Sanderling, Ringed and Kentish Plovers scurrying across the sand. The rivers which flow out into the sea over the sand act as a magnet to migrating birds and we found immature Greater Flamingo and Collared Pratincole resting on the beach.

All too soon it was time to return to the minibuses, but the return walk gave us stunning views of a Kingfisher, two brief Short-toed Larks and a flock of migrating Yellow Wagtails. Back at the hotel we enjoyed an excellent Spanish meal with plenty of wine and then retired for the night for some much needed sleep.

Day 2

Saturday 16 September

Straits of Gibraltar – Cazalla – Punta Sur Hotel – La Janda

Our second day of the holiday dawned bright, clear and most importantly almost windless. These conditions were perfect for our first boat trip into the Straits of Gibraltar. In Tarifa harbour we were given an introductory talk on the whales and dolphins using the area, why they were there and the threats they face.

As our boat left Tarifa harbour a lone Greenshank flew over and a little further out the first of several Cory's Shearwaters glided past. We made our way towards the African coastline and it wasn't long before the first fins were seen breaking the water. It was a pod of Long-finned Pilot Whales. Our skipper maneuvered the boat into position and we were soon alongside over thirty animals which gave excellent views.

They were however overshadowed by the antics of the group of forty Bottlenose Dolphins which appeared shortly after. These animals were, as ever, in a playful mood and we spent a very enjoyable hour with them. Animals of all ages took the chance to bow-ride, breach, spy hop and generally show off giving us breathtaking views.

Heading back to the harbour we glanced up to see small flocks of migrating Black Storks against deep blue skies passing overhead. From the harbour we were fortunate enough to see a flock of 21 Greater Flamingos migrating along the coast. 'Whales, dolphins & raptor migration' all in the space of two hours . . .

From Tarifa we drove east a short way to the raptor watchpoint at Cazalla. As yesterday, the perfect weather made raptor watching a little tricky but more Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures, Black Storks and a lone Black Kite were seen whilst we were having lunch. On the ground several Sardinian Warblers and a lone Pied Flycatcher provided closer range entertainment.

After lunch we returned to the hotel for a rest before heading to La Janda in the early evening. This drained wetland still has some wetter areas and is a superb area for seeing a good selection of birds. White Storks were obvious with an estimated 200 birds in the fields surrounding our first stop. Several Marsh Harriers showed well quartering the fields and Griffon Vultures feeding on a dead cow gave us good views of this species.

Birding from the raised tracks gave us the opportunity to scan the surrounding fields. In the flooded rice fields we found a flock of Glossy Ibis, several Black-winged Stilts and Green Sandpipers, whilst the drier ploughed fields produced stunning views of a hunting Black-shouldered Kite, around 20 Lesser Kestrels and both female Montagu's and Hen Harriers. The return journey to the main road was enlivened by a Hoopoe and several Spanish Sparrows amongst a large House Sparrow flock.

The evening meal was as excellent as ever and we were able to reflect on what had been a most enjoyable and complete day.

Day 3

Sunday 17 September

Bolonia – Straits of Gibraltar – Cazalla – Punta Sur Hotel – La Janda

An early start for most of the group saw us heading to the coastal town of Bolonia at dawn. Above the town we watched the sun rise as had 'scope filling views of roosting Griffon Vultures. The crystal clear day and morning light really showing off every single feather and everybody agreed they actually looked quite handsome! The rocky outcrop which the vultures sat on was home to several Blue Rock Thrushes and three Crag Martins were hunting insects overhead.

As we descended to check the beach the second bus was fortunate enough to see a juvenile Woodchat Shrike and Black-eared Wheatear. The little pool behind the beach provided views of Fan-tailed Warblers and Sardinian Warblers but the highlight was three Red-rumped Swallows perched on overhead wires and flying overhead.

Any hint of 'wind' there was yesterday had today completely disappeared which, considering the areas' reputation for windy September days, was quite remarkable. After breakfast we headed once again to Tarifa and boarded the boat for another whale watching trip. As we left the harbour we were accompanied by a migrating Marsh Harrier flapping low over the water. Several Gannets, some close Cory's Shearwaters and two juvenile Black Terns were seen as we headed towards Morocco.

In contrast to yesterday it was the Long-finned Pilot Whales that stole the show today. The majority of our trip was spent in the company of these animals and at times they surrounded the boat. We were treated to young animals playing under the boat, one breaching eight times in succession and another swimming on his back and waving it's flippers in the air. It is fair to say we couldn't ever hope to see this species any better. Several Ocean Sunfish passed close by the boat and a distant Arctic Skua was picked out by Phil.

Back on dry land and it was time to head to Cazalla for lunch and more raptor watching. Something was causing the birds to pass a little lower today and a flock of migrating White Storks, several Black Storks, Short-toed and Booted Eagles all showed well. Unfortunately the flock of a hundred Bee-eaters never came close enough to allow us to appreciate them properly. The highlight though was a Long-legged Buzzard, a North African species which flew low over the watchpoint.

In the evening we returned to La Janda and this time explored some of the drier surrounding agricultural fields in the hope of finding Little Bustards. We failed to find any but did have great views of perched Short-toed Eagle and Lesser Kestrel, a Little Owl and Tawny Pipit.

Day 4

Monday 18 September

El Algarobbo – Caleta Hotel (Gibraltar) – Europa Point

After a leisurely start to the day we checked out of the Punta Sur Hotel and drove east towards Gibraltar. Mid morning we stopped at El Algarobbo raptor watchpoint (first visited on day one) and spent several hours here watching for raptors and eating lunch.

This proved to be a good move as raptor migration was the most spectacular we had seen. In the space of a few hours we had seen over 500 Honey Buzzards, many passing low over the watchpoint and circling in flocks

overhead. A single Osprey and two flocks of Black Storks, totaling 14, looked equally as impressive against the azure skies. It was also evident that swifts were on the move with hundreds of Pallid, over 50 Alpine and several Common Swifts noted during the same period.

After lunch we left and continued east. We crossed the border with relative ease and checked into the Caleta Hotel on Gibraltar by mid afternoon. During a couple of hours some of the group took the opportunity to relax on the beach and even swim (the water temperature off Gibraltar is more similar to the Atlantic than the Mediterranean!).

Before dinner we drove to Europa Point, the southern tip of Gibraltar, to look for seabirds and dolphins. By the time we arrived a fresh wind had picked up making looking for dolphins practically impossible. We were however treated to close views of many Cory's Shearwaters giving us a demonstration of their aerial capabilities. We also noted several Sandwich Terns and Audouin's Gulls before returning to the hotel and our final evening meal of the holiday.

Day 5

Tuesday 19 September

Jew's Gate – Rock of Gibraltar and Alameda Botanical Gardens – Caleta Hotel

Yesterday's wind had dropped but the top of the rock was covered in low cloud. This however proved to be beneficial for our first stop of the day. After an early breakfast we made our way to the ringing station at Jew's Gate.

Here migrating passerines are caught and ringed by volunteer ringers throughout the autumn migration. Whilst waiting for them to check the mist nets we had brief views of four Barbary Partridge, a Common Redstart and a male Subalpine Warbler. The latter two species gave a good indication there had been some migration that night.

The group assembled (very quietly) in the ringing room, watching with great anticipation as the first birds were extracted from the line of cloth bags hanging on the wall. The ringers were very accommodating and talked at length about the importance of bird ringing and the detail and subtleties of the species in the hand. We watched birds being aged, measured, weighed, ringed, fat and moult-scored and finally released – many on their way to Africa. Species seen were Nightingale, Redstart, Willow Warbler, Melodious Warbler (a rare catch), Blackbird, Robin, Garden Warbler, Blackcap, Wheatear (also rarely caught), Sardinian Warbler, Pied Flycatcher and Whitethroat. Many members of the group were given the chance to briefly hold and release a bird – a magical moment. The station had its best day in weeks, both in terms of numbers of birds and range of species caught – we struck lucky.

By mid morning the cloud had burnt away and we made our way to the cable car station at the bottom of the rock. The entire group made their way to the top and after enjoying the stunning views and antics of the resident Barbary Macaques, many decided to spend a few hours on their own. Some walked part way down before catching the cable car down, others visited the town whilst others spent a few hours enjoying the botanical gardens. Those in the botanical gardens found plenty of Blackcaps and Garden Warblers, a few Pied Flycatchers and a lone Reed Warbler. The highlight however was eventually getting stunning views of several Two-tailed Pasha butterflies.

The group reassembled mid afternoon and we returned to the Caleta Hotel. Here we had the chance to freshen up and change as well as have a sumptuous afternoon tea before heading to the airport. After a short delay we departed Gibraltar and landed in London where a very enjoyable tour ended.

Species lists

Birds

	Common Name	Scientific Name	September				
			15	16	17	18	19
1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>		12	6	c50	
2	Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>		6	3	2	
3	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>				2	
4	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	c50	c500	c300	c100	
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		10			
6	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		4	2		
7	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	1	c30	5	14	
8	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	c50	c200	c300	c100	
9	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		c40	c40		
10	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>	1	21			
11	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		18	1		
12	Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>		1			
13	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>		2	3	2	
14	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	4	2	16	1	
15	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	c50	c50	12	c50	
16	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		1	1		
17	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>		1	1		
18	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		12	1		
19	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	8	6	6	5	2
20	Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>			1		
21	Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	4		2	c500	
22	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			1	1	
23	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	c40	c15	c50	c10	
24	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	c20	c10	c50	6	
25	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>				1	
26	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		2	2		1
27	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>		c20	6		
28	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>					
29	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	12	6	4		
30	Barbary Partridge	<i>Alectoris barbara</i>					4
31	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		✓			
32	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			1		
33	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		6			
34	Collared Pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>	1				
35	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	c60			2	
36	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	c20		1		
37	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		1			
38	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	c100			3	
39	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	c15				
40	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		1			
41	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	1				
42	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		8	1		
43	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		2			
44	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>			1		
45	Audouin's Gull	<i>Larus audouinii</i>	c60		1	3	
46	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	5	4		10	

	Common Name	Scientific Name	September				
			15	16	17	18	19
47	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
48	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	2		4		
49	Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>	8	4	1	2	
50	Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>			2		
51	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>			✓		
52	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>			2		
54	Alpine Swift	<i>Apus melba</i>	5		c30	c50	
55	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>		3		c300	5
56	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>				12	
57	Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>			c100		
58	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		2	1		
59	Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>				H	
60	(Iberian) Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis sharpei</i>			2		
61	Great-spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopus major</i>			H		
62	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
63	Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>	2				
64	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>			3		
65	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		2			
66	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>			3	1	
67	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>		4	2		
70	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			1		
71	Yellow (Iberian) Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>	c20	c100	c20		
72	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			H		
73	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>					1
74	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
75	Black-eared Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>			1		
76	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			2		1
77	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	3	6	4		
79	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		H	1		
80	Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>					1
81	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>	1				
82	Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>					1
83	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>					c10
84	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>					c50
85	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
86	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>			✓		✓
87	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			✓		✓
88	Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		1	1	1	3
89	Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
90	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>					✓
91	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>			1		
92	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
93	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		4	2		2
94	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
95	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>		10			
96	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		✓	✓		

	Common Name	Scientific Name	September				
			15	16	17	18	19
97	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
98	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>	✓	✓	✓		
99	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>		c50	c300	c10	

Cetaceans

	Common name	Scientific name	September				
			15	16	17	18	19
	Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		c40	c20		
	Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>		c30	c60		

Other wildlife

(Spanish) Meadow Brown

Swallowtail

Clouded Yellow

Red Admiral

Large White

Long-tailed Blue

Two-tailed Pasha

Hummingbird Hawkmoth

Moorish Gecko

Iberian Wall Lizard

Ocean Sunfish