

# Gibraltar & Tarifa

Naturetrek Tour Report

14 - 18 September 2007

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Report compiled by Phil Shepherd and Rob Mileto



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## Day 1

Friday 14th September

### Gibraltar– La Codorniz Hotel – Straits of Gibraltar

Our British Airways flight from London Gatwick to Gibraltar airport's tiny runway in the shadow of The Rock was on time, delivering us into a warm sunny Mediterranean climate. We crossed the border into Spain and drove through La Linea de la Concepción and the port of Algeciras on our way to our hotel for the next three nights – La Codorniz (Spanish for 'quail') just outside Tarifa, near the beach. After an excellent Andalusian lunch at the hotel, and a short rest, we headed for Tarifa harbour. The windy weather forecast for the coming weekend meant that the scheduled whale-watching trips would be unlikely, so today's itinerary was adjusted to allow a boat trip into the Straits of Gibraltar this evening.

The boat company representative gave us an introductory talk on the identification and ecology of the whale and dolphin species we were likely to encounter, explaining why the area is so important for them and what threats these animals face. Leaving the Spanish coast behind, we headed out into the straits towards Morocco, whose skyline is dominated by rugged hills mirroring Gibraltar and the lower Spanish sierras. Cory's Shearwaters and a few fishing Gannets were seen from the boat before the engine suddenly slowed, indicating the captain had spotted something of underwater interest. A pod of over 40 Striped Dolphin was soon surrounding us, breaching, diving under the boat and generally laying on a fine display of how wonderfully playful these creatures can be.

Within minutes of leaving the dolphins behind, the first dorsal fins of the resident Long-finned Pilot Whales were seen. This charismatic species of toothed whale occupied us for the best part of the next hour, giving excellent opportunities for photography. Like the dolphins, these superb glossy black whales came right up to the boat, providing fantastic views of adult males and females, calves and even an occasional blast from their blowholes. A few Bottlenose Dolphins were associating with the whales, giving us a chance to see both species close together for comparison. A lone European Storm Petrel, Great Skua, an Ocean Sunfish and some Balearic Shearwaters were seen on the return trip to the harbour – the southernmost point of mainland Europe. Our evening dinner was taken at La Codorniz's excellent and very traditional Andalusian restaurant – a fitting end to a long but rewarding day.

## Day 2

Saturday 15th September

Playa de los Lances – Cazalla – Santuario – La Codorniz Hotel – La Janda

Our first event of the day was to take a short walk on Playa de los Lances beach – a spectacular and wild place, much loved by surfers of several genres, whose golden sands stretch for 10km northwest from Tarifa. The beach is backed by two main habitats – umbrella pines to the north and short dune scrub to the south, and receives the outpouring from two rivers and one seasonal stream, giving it the capacity to attract a wide range of bird species. We noted Cory's and Balearic Shearwaters passing offshore, plus some plunge-diving Gannets; Kentish Plover and migrant Sanderling on the beach and some small groups of migrating Yellow Wagtails following the line of the coast heading south. What caught our eye above all else was the number of raptors in the sky, mainly Black Kites, even at a relatively early hour of the day, so we drove east a short way to the raptor watchpoint at Cazalla.

Within a short space of time, we were watching Booted and Short-toed Eagles, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures, Black Storks, Black Kites, Honey Buzzards and Sparrowhawks, starting to learn the subtle differences, at distance, in their shapes and sizes. Raptor movement slowed around lunch time, and we headed away from the busy watchpoint to a quieter spot – a lesser-known watchpoint called Santuario, not far from our hotel, for our picnic lunch. Raptor passage here was lighter, but the setting was a peaceful one and scenic in the main, until we discovered a nearby charnel, or outdoor animal disposal site, explaining the particularly high density of Griffon Vultures! A walk through the surrounding area yielded good close-up views of a juvenile Woodchat Shrike, catalyzing a chance to look through the guide books to separate it from the very similar Red-backed.

After a rest period back at the Codorniz Hotel, we set out for an evening's birding at what was once one of Europe's finest wetlands - La Janda. This natural bowl, surrounded by low rolling hills, was drained some decades ago, drastically reducing its wildlife value, but through a combination of rice-growing and re-raising water levels in some areas, some of that former glory is returning. Cereals, rice and sunflowers are the main crops and this super-abundance of seeds plays host to vast numbers of granivorous birds, primarily House and Spanish Sparrows, Corn Buntings and flocks of finches and larks. Lesser Kestrels hunt over the ploughed fields for insects, and Marsh and Montague's Harriers hunt the passerines.

The wet areas are dominated by hundreds of White Storks, plus a range of heron species, waders, duck, Glossy Ibis and Spoonbill. Common Cranes also winter here. A relatively recent colonist is the very beautiful Black-shouldered Kite, slowly expanding its range in Spain. Just a few individuals live here and often associate with the groups of Lesser Kestrels. Tonight, though, our search for this bird was fruitless. Three juvenile Night Herons flew past the vans on our way out of the area, and a lone Squacco Heron was spotted in a ditch very close to the road. La Janda perhaps represents a microcosm of modern rural Spain. One photograph here can encompass wind farms, intensive agriculture, traditional pueblo blanco villages and great wildlife.

## Day 3

Sunday 16th September

Bolonia – El Algorrobo – La Peña – Playa de los Lances - La Codorniz Hotel – La Janda

An early start saw us heading to the coastal town of Bolonia at dawn. Above the town, amongst the rocky outcrops of the Sierra de la Plata, we watched the sun rise as we had 'scope-filling views of roosting Griffon Vultures. We were close enough to these birds to hear some of their strange, primitive guttural calls and hisses.

Whilst following their wake-up routines, Black Kites, Honey Buzzards and Sparrowhawks were flying around the rocky mountainside.

A short stop on the very pretty Bolonia beach produced excellent close-up views of around a dozen Audouin's Gulls (a globally rare species), with Yellow-legged Gulls, plus a few Sandwich Terns perched on buoys offshore.

After breakfast back at the hotel, we went to El Algorrobo raptor watchpoint, in the Sierra de Cabrito, east of Tarifa. This one of the best-known and most popular watchpoints, and is one of the regular counting sites for the Fundacion Migres staff and volunteers who closely monitor bird migration through the region every passage season. Low cloud had settled on the hills locally, causing some birds to pass a little lower today, giving good views. At times the birds came thick and fast; we logged hundreds each of Booted Eagle, Honey Buzzard and Black Kite, plus many Short-toed Eagles, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures. During a lull in the proceedings, we decided to follow yesterday's model and head off to a quiet location for our picnic lunch. This time we tried a place called La Peña, just west of our hotel, and were rewarded with a very scenic spot with great views out over the beach, and behind along some hills and ridges. Raptor movement was less intensive, but we were treated to particularly close-up views of Ospreys, Honey Buzzards, Black Kites and Black Storks. Rob produced another of his fine picnics as we spent a very pleasant and leisurely hour soaking it all in.

These last two days witnessed, at times, the spectacle of raptor migration in this part of the world in full flood. Thousands of birds passed through the region in a short space of time, illustrating just how important this area is to the long-term study of the raptor populations of Western Europe.

We squeezed in another short walk on Playa de los Lances during the afternoon, near the point where one of the rivers flows on to the beach. A range of coastal waders was present including Bar-tailed Godwit and Knot.

In the evening we returned to La Janda with the hope of locating some of the species we didn't find the previous day. Black-winged Stilt and a flock of around 90 Glossy Ibis were soon located, and after some intensive searching, a Black-shouldered Kite was found perched on a distant irrigation boom. A second bird appeared soon after and we enjoyed a good half an hour watching these exquisite birds hovering and hunting over the fields in the late evening sunshine.

## Day 4

Monday 17th September

La Codorniz Hotel – Caleta Hotel (Gibraltar) – Rock of Gibraltar – Alameda Gardens – Europa Point

Today, we left Spain behind and headed back across the border into Gibraltar. After checking in to the Caleta Hotel, we made our way to the cable car station in the heart of town for the short, but extraordinarily steep, ascent to the top of the Rock. The view from the terrace atop the Upper Rock really is spectacular. The Spanish sierras tapering away towards Tarifa were clearly visible, and the whole of Gibraltar town was laid out beneath. The Upper Rock nature reserve covers a substantial proportion of Gibraltar territory and its thick vegetation is a magnet for migrating passerines. Raptor movement today was minimal, but nevertheless, viewing passing Sparrowhawks and a lone Honey Buzzard from above gave us an unusual perspective.

After absorbing the stunning views, and watching the antics of the incredibly tame Barbary Macaques, we made our way leisurely back down the Rock. We reconvened in the beautifully laid out Alameda Botanical Gardens near the cable car station and spent some time enjoying, in particular, the simply superb Two-tailed Pasha butterflies.

Before dinner we drove to Europa Point, at the southern tip of Gibraltar, to look for seabirds. Just a couple of distant Cory's Shearwaters put in an appearance, but an Audouin's Gull flew by at close range. From here we returned to the hotel for our final evening meal of the holiday.

## Day 5

Tuesday 18th September

### Jew's Gate – Airport

After an early breakfast we made our way to the ringing station at Jew's Gate. Here migrating birds, especially passerines, are caught and ringed by volunteer ringers throughout the autumn and spring migration periods. Whilst waiting for the mist nets to be checked, we had good views of six Barbary Partridge – the local and elusive speciality species.

Conditions overnight had been perfect for migration, meaning very few birds had stayed around the Rock. Only two birds had been caught, but we assembled (very quietly) in the small ringing room, to witness the process of bird ringing. The first bird was a Sardinian Warbler – a resident species, the second a Sub-alpine Warbler – a sub-Saharan migrant. The chief ringer was very accommodating and talked us through the detail and subtleties of the species in the hand. The birds were aged, measured, weighed, ringed, fat and moult-scored and finally released. The clear difference between the two birds was the amount of visible fat the sub-Saharan migrant had laid down within its body to fuel its onward journey. After wishing the 11 gramme bundle of feathers a safe trip, we took off in the opposite direction; destination Gatwick.

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## Species lists

### Birds

	Common Name	Scientific Name	September 2007				
			14	15	16	17	18
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		1	2		
2	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>	19	6	✓	✓	
3	Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus yelkouan</i>	5	10			
4	European Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>	1				
5	Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>	1	12	✓	✓	
6	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	1				
7	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>				1	
8	Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>		3			
9	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	c50	c200	c200	c100	
10	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>		1			
11	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	1	6	4		
12	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	2	6	6		
13	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>		c30	c150		
14	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	c40	c200	c100		
15	Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		6	6		
16	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>			90		
17	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		c100	c50		
18	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		60	✓		
19	Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>			2		
20	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	✓	c100	c100	✓	
21	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>		10	6		
22	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	10	c30	c50		
23	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				1	
24	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>		6	4		
25	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		15	15		
26	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		5	12	12	
27	Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>		20	c100	5	1
28	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	2	40	c200	✓	
29	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		25	c50	✓	
30	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>		1	3		
31	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	2	3	1	
32	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>		25	40	1	
33	Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>		1	1		
34	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			2		1
35	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		7	4		
36	Barbary Partridge	<i>Alectoris barbara</i>					6
37	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		3	1		
38	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		3	2		
39	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		60	60		
40	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>			3		
41	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			12		
42	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>		6	20		
43	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>			3		
44	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	7		1		
45	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		2	20		
46	Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>			17		

	Common Name	Scientific Name	September 2007				
			14	15	16	17	18
47	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			✓		
48	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>			21		
49	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			1		
50	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		1	2		
51	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		1			
52	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		10	10		
53	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>	1				
54	Audouin's Gull	<i>Larus audouinii</i>			122	1	
55	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>		3	10		
56	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	2				
58	Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>	3		14		
59	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
60	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
61	Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>		9	✓		
62	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	2				
63	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	2	1			
64	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			1		
65	Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>		H	H		
66	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		✓	✓	✓	
67	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	1		1		
68	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		✓	1		
69	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>	1	1	1		
70	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
71	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>		✓			
72	Yellow (Iberian) Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava (iberiae)</i>		✓	H		
73	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	H	1	1	1	
74	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			H	1	
75	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>				1	
76	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>			2		
77	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	3	8	10	1	
78	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			3		
79	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		2	1	3	✓
80	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		5	6		
81	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		H	H	2	
82	Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>				1	
83	Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>			1	2	
84	Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>			1		✓
85	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>				1	
86	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			2	4	
87	Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>		1			
88	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	1	1	6	✓	✓
89	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>				3	
90	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>				1	
91	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	1	1			
92	Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>			2	2	
93	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>				1	
94	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	4	2		1	
95	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>	1	3			
96	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	

	Common Name	Scientific Name	September 2007				
			14	15	16	17	18
97	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>				2	
98	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	c500	✓	✓	✓
99	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>		✓	✓		
100	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			8	✓	
101	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		✓	✓		
102	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
103	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>		✓	✓		
104	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>		✓	✓		
105	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>		2			

### Cetaceans

	Common name	Scientific name	September				
			14	15	16	17	18
	Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	6				
	Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>	45				
	Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>	30				

### Other wildlife

(Spanish) Meadow Brown  
 Clouded Yellow  
 Large White  
 Two-tailed Pasha  
 Small Heath  
 Spanish Festoon  
 Moorish Gecko  
 Ocean Sunfish  
 Hummingbird Hawkmoth

Swallowtail  
 Red Admiral  
 Long-tailed Blue  
 Speckled Wood  
 African Migrant  
 Banded Groundling  
 Iberian Wall Lizard  
 Praying Mantis