

Gibraltar & Tarifa - Whales, Dolphins and Autumn Migration

Naturetrek Tour Report

14 - 18 September 2008



Bolonia – Tarifa by Byron Palacios



Griffon Vulture by Lee Morgan



Striped Dolphin by Lee Morgan



Pilot Whale by Lee Morgan

Images and report compiled by Byron Palacios and Lee Morgan



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Day 1

Friday 12th September

Gibraltar – Tarifa

The flight arrives from London on time to a beautiful afternoon in Gibraltar. 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 La Codorniz just outside Tarifa, near the seafront. The landscape during the journey was superb and gave us marvellous views of the coast line. Many raptors were soaring across the sky, and we had our first sight of Short-toed Eagles, Kestrels and Buzzards. We arrived to the hotel and, after checking in, we had enough time to do some birding around the nearby maquis scrub where Sardinian Warblers and Stonechats were seen. After that a typical Andalucian supper was waiting for us on our first night.

Day 2

Saturday 13th September

El Cabrito – Bolonia – La Janda

Early in the morning, we gathered together and drove up to La Cruz hill, right above the hotel, in order to try for Red-necked Nightjar or Scops Owl. Unfortunately we didn't find either but a short walk through the tussocky garrigue vegetation along the hill got us some great views of Sardinian and a single Spectacled Warbler and numerous Crested Larks. As the sun started to illuminate the rocky crags on the hillside above us, it wasn't long before we had our first Griffon Vultures of the day. Two Short-toed Eagles joined the group of vultures flying just above our heads, giving us fantastic views of both species. Our activities in the area had also attracted the attention of a friendly family of free-range black Iberian pigs, but their curiosity in us didn't stop the group from also finding Hoopoe, Green (Iberian) Woodpecker, Blackcap and a fantastic Monarch Butterfly all in this one small area. And all of this before breakfast!

We drove back to our hotel to have breakfast. Despite the bright sunny weather we had that morning, the strong offshore wind made it unsuitable for our first planned boat trip. Although we were already advised by the boat company about this, we optimistically decided to drive by the harbour in case things improved.

En route to Tarifa, a huge flock of migratory Black Storks, several hundred birds at least, made us pull over to watch this incredible spectacle. After this, we arrived to the harbour and the answer was the same...due to the strong winds 'no smaller boats were allowed to leave the harbour!' Remaining optimistic about the day ahead, we carried on to Alto El Cabrito, one of the raptor observatories outside Tarifa, where the strong winds meant we had fantastic views of Egyptian Vultures, Griffon Vultures Booted, Bonelli's and Short-toed Eagles. Turtle Doves were constantly flying over the hill too.

Later on, after a quick break at the hotel, we headed up to Bolonia where we set up a picnic lunch. The beach is spectacular and well known by surfers, and its golden sands stretch for 10km northwest from Tarifa. The beach is backed by two main habitats, short, stabilized dune scrub and a dense woodland of umbrella pines. The area 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 Shearwaters passing offshore, plus some plunge-diving Gannets; Kentish Plover and migrant Sanderling on the beach. The passage of large raptors was very noticeable with large numbers of Black Kites, Bonelli's and Booted Eagles flying literally right over our heads. Within a short space of time, the movement of larger birds increased and we were watching good numbers of Booted and Short-toed Eagles, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures, Black Storks, Black Kites, Sparrowhawks and the odd Honey Buzzard, giving everyone the chance to learn the subtle differences, at a distance, of the shapes and sizes of these species.

We spent the rest of the afternoon birding around La Janda, about a 30 minutes drive from our hotel. The place comprises mainly of flooded pastures and channels all adjacent to the Rio Almodovar. Across a bridge over the river the terrain becomes more barren and rocky. With care, the tracks around the flooded pastures are easily driven on, and the car made for a good hide! The hot sunny conditions meant that the birding was fairly slow giving us plenty of time to enjoy the nice views of Fantailed Warbler, Common Snipe, Cattle and Little Egrets and we watched White Storks feeding amidst the rice fields while Alpine, Common and Pallid Swifts fed overhead. The hot conditions also meant that the group had a chance to get close views of the numerous small dragonflies that were sunning themselves on the sides of the stony tracks. Red-Veined Darters and Banded Groundlings were by far the most numerous dragonflies in this area.

Day 3

Sunday 14th September

La Janda – Barbate - Bolonia

Another beautiful sunny day but the strong wind was not suitable to go offshore yet. After another early start we headed west to check the La Janda area once again. The high winds meant that the birding in this area had been completely transformed from the day before. Large numbers of birds, struggling against the strong head winds, were dropping into the sheltered La Janda plain to rest and feed and every field was teeming with activity. Our first stop on the gravel track and we were privileged to see several hundred Glossy Ibis dropping into the fields in front of us while Marsh Harrier, Montagu's Harrier, Short-Toed Eagle, Griffon Vulture, Red and Black Kites passed overhead. Small flocks of Collared Pratincoles dropped into the fields in front of us and we watched as Squacco Herons flew low over the ditches just a few metres away. A small flock of Bee-eaters was perched on the power lines in the distance and as everyone watched a small group of Sand and House Martins fly past, we were all privileged with great views of a White-rumped Swift as it made its way low over the fields in front of us.

A little further down the track and we stopped to admire the sights and sounds of a huge mixed flock of hundreds if not thousands of Corn Buntings, Tree, House and Rock Sparrows as they sheltered in the trees alongside the road. A truly terrific site! A stop at the end of the track found our selves at the head of a deep drainage ditch. From this vantage point we had great views of a Kingfisher perched in the sun and Byrons' keen eyes found a beautiful Black-shouldered Kite perched on some irrigation pipes in the field beyond. We were also awarded with some fantastic views of Vagrant Emperor Dragonflies chasing around the bridge beneath our feet.

After a very busy morning at La Janda, we came back to the hotel for a break. The sun and temperature were hot, and some of us decided to go to the beach for a quick dip. We set up our picnic lunch in a pleasant picnic area under the shade of the pines alongside the beach.

After lunch, we headed up to the coastal town of Barbate to drive along its coast. We made a few stops en route to watch a Black Vulture flying low over some fields adjacent to the road before stopping at some areas of saltmarsh adjacent to the main estuary. Here we watched Kentish Plovers, Ringed Plover, Grey Plover, Sanderling, Whimbrel, Greater Black-backed and Yellow-legged Gulls, Common Snipe, and a solitary Slender-billed Gull and listened to Great Reed Warblers singing, before moving out onto the quayside to sit and watch the locals fishing for seabass and enjoy the view of Gannets, Corys Shearwaters, Gull-billed and Sandwich Terns pass by the mouth of the estuary.

We finished the day around the Bolonia area. Above the town, amongst the rocky outcrops of the Sierra de la Plata, we watched for cetaceans in the tide off the distant headland and enjoyed 'scope-filling views of Griffon Vultures as they came in to roost on the rocky crags just above our heads. We were close enough to these birds to hear some of their strange, primitive guttural calls and hisses and it provided a great opportunity to get some frame-filling photos of these magnificent birds. 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 arrived back at our hotel to relax and have supper after which some of gathered together to watch Kuhl's Pipistrelles foraging around the lights outside the hotel.

Day 4

Monday 15th September

Tarifa – Gibraltar

After three days of bad weather conditions for our boat trip, this morning was finally a good one! After an early birding morning and breakfast, we checked out from La Codorniz and drove into Tarifa. Once at the harbour, 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 Africa, having a great view of the lower Spanish sierras and villages by the sea. Yellow-legged and Greater Black-backed Gulls, 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 interest.

A pod of over 40 Striped Dolphins were surrounding us, breaching, diving under the boat and generally laying on a fine display of how wonderfully playful these creatures can be! After watching these fantastic creatures, we continued navigating towards Morocco. Massive transatlantic ships and tankers were constantly passing us. More Cory's Shearwaters were around us and a solitary European Storm-Petrel was also seen. At the same time, the crew spotted a group of Long-finned Pilot Whales heading east. We stopped right where they were, giving us the chance to see them up close, a very stunning moment indeed! We were all very excited with the results of our tour and the weather could not have been better!

Our next stop was not that far from the town of Tarifa. We went to the southern face of Cerro El Cabrito in order to have lunch and continue our search for more birds. Many Blackcaps and Melodius Warblers were actively moving within a big old fig tree, eating the very ripe fruits. For a short time a few Kestrels, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures were soaring around us but raptor movement today was minimal compared to what we had been seeing! Nevertheless, the regular fly-bys of hunting Sparrowhawks and a few Bonelli's Eagles kept us entertained but it was a group of about 60 Bee-eaters flying low over the hill that really stole the show. After a delicious picnic lunch, we set off towards Gibraltar.

We arrived at our hotel, and after a speedy check in we quickly hit the road to catch the cable car that would take us to the top of Gibraltar Rock. The view from here is spectacular. The Spanish sierras tapering away towards Tarifa were clearly visible, and the whole of Gibraltar town was laid out beneath. After absorbing the stunning views, and watching birds such as Blue Rock Thrush, Eleonora's Falcon, Olivaceous Warbler, as well as the antics of the incredibly tame Barbary Macaques, we all made our way leisurely back to the cable car to catch the last car down from the rock. From here we returned to the hotel for our final evening meal of the holiday.

Day 5

Tuesday 16th September

Gibraltar - London

After a relaxing and early breakfast we made our way to the airport, watching some active Sardinian Warblers and a single Subalpine Warbler in the hill side opposite the hotel's entrance. We loaded our vans with our belongings and headed for some last minute bird and butterfly watching around the beautiful Alameda Botanical Gardens before our short journey back to the airport in order to catch our early flight to Gatwick, and home, on time...

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Species lists

Birds

	Common Name	Scientific Name	September 2007				
			12	13	14	15	16
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		X	X		
2	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>		X	X	X	
3	Leach's Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma leucorhoa</i>				X	
4	Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>		X	X	X	
5	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	X	X	X	X	
6	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>				X	
7	Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>		X			
8	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	X	X	X	X	
9	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>		X	X		
10	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	X	X	X	X	
11	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		X	X		
12	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>		X	X	X	
13	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		X	X		
14	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>			X		
15	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		X	X		
16	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		X	X		
17	Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>			X		
18	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	X	X	X	X	
19	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>		X	X	X	
20	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	X	X	X	X	X
21	Black Vulture	<i>Coragyps atratus</i>			X		
22	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>			X	X	
23	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>		X	X	X	
24	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		X	X		
25	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	X	X	X	X	
26	Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>		X			
27	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>		X	X	X	
28	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	X	X	X	X	
29	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	X	X	X	X	
30	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		X	X		
31	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>			X		
32	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>			X		
33	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>			X		
34	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				X	
35	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>			X		
36	Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>			X		
37	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		X			
38	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			X		
39	Audouin's Gull	<i>Larus audouinii</i>			X		
40	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>		X	X	X	X
41	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		X		X	X
42	Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>			X		
43	Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>			X		
44	Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>		X	X		
45	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>		X			
46	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>		X			

	Common Name	Scientific Name	September 2007				
			12	13	14	15	16
47	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			X		
48	Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>		X	X		
49	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		X			
50	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>			X		
51	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>		X			
52	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		X			
53	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>		X			
54	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	X	X	X		
55	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>		X	X		
56	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		X			
57	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		X	X	X	
58	Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>		X	X		
59	Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>			X		
60	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		X			
61	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>			X		
62	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		X	X	X	
63	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>		X			
64	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		X			
65	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>		X			
66	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		X			
67	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		X			
68	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>			X		

Cetaceans

Common name	Scientific name	September				
		12	13	14	15	16
Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		X		X	
Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>		X		X	
Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>				X	

Butterflies

Spanish Meadow Brown
Red Admiral
Two-tailed Pasha
Plain Tiger

Swallowtail
Large White
Speckled Wood
Spanish Swallowtail

Monarch
Long-tailed Blue
Greyling

Dragonflies

Vagrant Emperor
Yellow-winged Darter
Migrant Hawker

Common Emperor
Red-veined Darter
Banded Groundling

Lesser Emperor
Southern Hawker

Other Wildlife

Moorish Gecko
Turkish Gecko
Iberian Rock Lizard

Iberian Wall Lizard
Kuhl's Pippistrelle Bat
Red Deer

Field Cricket
Praying Mantis