

Gibraltar & Tarifa - Whales, Dolphins and Autumn Migration

Naturetrek Tour Report

20 - 24 September 2012



Northern Bald Ibis

Report and image compiled by Simon Tonkin



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Day 1

Thursday 20th September

Malaga - El Algarrobo Watch point – Huerte Grande

Arriving on various flights from the UK I met with yourselves and David at Malaga airport whilst the remaining members of the group who had already arrived early were at the hotel. I gave a brief introduction to the plan for the day before collecting our vehicles. Driving out of Malaga on the toll roads we could see the extent of damage that the recent Malaga province fires had caused and the extent of Mediterranean scrub that had been lost to the fires. Moving through the countryside and crossing some dry river beds we briefly saw Red-rumped Swallow and Black Kite. As we drove through the outskirts of Algeciras we could see our first White Storks like sentries perched on top of the roadside lights watching the traffic go by.

Once we had passed through Algeciras we immediately noticed raptors...lots of them! Whilst several of the group craned to see them the best views of raptors was yet to come... We drove up a hidden side road to the Algarrobo Watch point we disembarked and viewed from the purposefully built observatory. Here we immediately got to grips with over 90 Short-toed Eagles and 40 Booted Eagles and both David and I went through the salient identification features. Griffon Vultures passed very low over head as 53 European Bee-eaters 'quipped' through into the valley below. At least 30 Crag Martins were evident over the nearby mountainside and we could observe and discuss their dark underwing coverts and other identification features whilst a stunning male Common Redstart gave extremely close scope views.

Fully 'raptored-up' we headed to our hotel at Huerte Grande to meet the delightful host Katrina and her staff and to take a late lunch. Here we were welcome by a children's band playing the drums to announce our presence! After lunch and after the drums had subsided we got settled into our rooms and convened for the log ahead of our evening meal over head by reception at least four Firecrest called and put in an appearance for all to see a superb way to end the day.

Day 2

Friday 21st September

Huerte Grande –Los Lances- La Pena – Straits of Gibraltar

We were greeted this morning by the distinctive early morning mists of the area especially prevalent when the wind blows out of the Mediterranean as a 'levante' wind. This clearly had brought some migrants to the Huerte Grande Valley with several Pied Flycatchers evident here. We also had three Hawfinch, more Firecrest, three Short-toed Treecreepers and three Crested Tits all before breakfast.

Following our breakfast we headed to the intertidal habitat just to the west of Tarifa, this magnificent 3km-long beach, the Playa de los Lances, 226ha of which is protected. The fine white sands are backed by a low ridge of dunes and the marshlands of the Jara and Vega Rivers. These rivers run parallel to the beach and have created two lagoons, the Jeli and Montellano. Here we observed several fine Audouin's Gulls, over 800 Yellow-legged Gulls and 3 Caspian Terns put in an appearance. Waders included Kentish Plovers, Ringed Plovers, Sanderling and Dunlin. Offshore there were up to 70 Cory's Shearwater feeding along with several Sandwich Terns.

Moving on we headed to the La Pena Bird Observatory of the Colectivo Ornitológico Cigüeña Negra where we were able to use the facilities and look at the exhibition, even though the site had not officially opened yet. Looking over the nearby mountainside we spotted a Blue Rock Thrush and we able to obtain scope views as more raptors moved over head mostly Griffon Vultures but a few Honey Buzzards as well.

Time to move on we went up a little known road into the Rio Jara Valley - we hoped to see larks and pipits here as many of the fields are left fallow on rotation and can provide excellent feeding opportunities for such species. Spanish Yellow Wagtails (*Motacilla flava iberiae*) were evident as well as Northern Wheatear and several Corn Buntings. A Booted Eagle gave fantastic overhead views and as the heat of the day was upon us, and clearly we had earned our lunch, we headed to the raptor watchpoint at Cazalla.

At Cazalla we delighted in a group of 63 Black Storks coming up the valley giving superb views. By this time numbers of Eagles stacking up at the coast were very evident and birds were starting to make their crossing into Africa. We delighted as over 575 Short-toed Eagles and 250 Booted Eagles a breathtaking view with eagles all around us.

Once we packed up for lunch we had to meet up with the staff at FIRMM who would take us on the boat out into the strait to observe some of the spectacular wildlife here. A Short-toed Eagle came very low over the harbour heading north as we received the introductory talk, this bird clearly had just bottled making the crossing perhaps it had got so far out and decided it wasn't a good idea? We could see the bird visibly gullating and clearly exhausted as it headed back over Tarifa.

Heading out of the harbour we saw hundreds of Yellow-legged Gulls perched on the harbour wall and it wasn't long before we had our Balearic Shearwaters past the boat and Cory's Shearwater checking the latter species carefully for Scopoli's Shearwater that also occurs here. The clear cut dark area on the primaries indicated that these were Cory's rather than Scopoli's, however one bird caught David's eye and he managed to get a photo. Further out into the Strait we encountered several large pods of both Common and Striped Dolphin with a calf probably only six months old coming very close to the boat with an adult. We also saw Mediterranean flying-fish and Ocean Sun-fish close by. After we had observed the dolphins fairly close to the Moroccan side we began to turn the boat and head west, here we saw a pod of c.20 Long-finned Pilot Whales or Calderón Negro in Spanish, this highly social cetacean, like the orca, is really a dolphin. One inquisitive male approached the boat very close and we watched as he came right along side giving breathtaking views.

Once we disembarked thanking Nina and the crew we headed back to the vehicles and onto Huerte Grande to relax before the log and evening meal. Just before the log David and I went through some photos especially grilling the shearwaters and were able to confirm at least one Scopoli's Shearwater had been seen today.

Day 3

Saturday 22nd September

Huerte Grande –La Linea- Gibraltar (Jews Gate, the Rock, Alameda Gardens and Europa Point)

As we loaded up the vans with Firecrest and Short-toed Tree-creeper calling we headed to the British colony of Gibraltar. As we passed the White Stork sentinels near Algeciras we could already see raptors soaring with Honey Buzzard and Booted Eagle over the vehicles. We entered into Gibraltar noting several dog-laden cars for the annual dog show in Gibraltar and on the beach at La Linea we noted Yellow-legged Gulls. Straight away we headed for the rock, Gibraltar's imposing monolith, and to the bird observatory at Jews Gate, I had made previous arrangements with the GONHS and ringers staying on the site so we could watch some ringing. Sardinian Warbler in the hand amongst other species was a nice addition and a different way of seeing many of the resident and migratory species we had encountered over the last few days. Also here we noted Peregrine and Lesser Kestrel both of which do breed on the rock but numbers have been poor in the last few years.

We had a pleasant walk down the hill noting a large number of Booted Eagles soaring and literally booting it out off a thermal making the crossing. We then noted a very obliging Two-tailed Pasha (Europe's largest butterfly) we happily had its photo taken innumerable times! We then headed to the Alameda gardens, these gardens were founded in 1816 at the initiative of the Governor, General George Don in order to provide an area for recreation for the residents of Gibraltar. After falling into disrepair they were restored in 1991. Now they not only provide a delight for gardeners, leisurely strollers and weddings (all of which we encountered!) but also migrant birds and we encountered some of them Pied Flycatcher, Iberian Chiff-chaff, Blackcap and Common Redstart. At the bottom of the Heathfield Steps near a pleasant water feature we took lunch and delighted as Geranium Bronze butterflies nectared on the plants around us together with Lang's Short-tailed Blue.

After a hearty lunch we strolled across to the cable car and headed to the summit of the rock we noted the obligatory Barbary Macaques including some robbery of biscuits (by a rather irresponsible tourist). From the top of the rock you can get an amazing view of the landscape and the two continents but also of passing raptors.

Booted Eagles and Honey Buzzard passed at eye level along with Red-rumped Swallows - AAAAmazing views! More Two-tailed Pashas were gaining nutrients from the rock – it was one of those moments when you aren't overly sure what to look at first!

We headed down after quipping Bee-eaters went over head we went back down in the cable car and loaded the vans. We headed to the southerly most point at Europa point which can give good views of seabirds. Cory's Shearwater and Balearic Shearwater were evident and in good numbers too and two Ravens croaked overhead and two Adult Audouin's Gulls passed close by along with a 1st winter bird.

A good day was had by all and so we settled down on returning to Huerte Grande and regaled our highlights to the ever friendly and interested Katrin.

Day 4

Sunday 23rd September

Huerte Grande – Cazalla – Montemedio – La Janda

At breakfast a Grey Wagtail went over and yet more Pied Flycatchers, Firecrest and Serin were observed. It looked possibly like it might be good for raptors crossing at Cazalla watchpoint so that's where we headed! At Cazalla there was still some mist in the valley and we could see raptors sat up waiting for the right conditions. A very beautiful Short-toed Eagle sat up in a nearby tree and gave lovely scope views - its eyes burning into your soul! It wasn't too long before birds got up and we observed at very close quarters Short-toed Eagles, Booted Eagles, Black Kites and Honey Buzzard. Additional non-raptors included a group of 11 Black Storks migrating along with several groups of White Stork. A Red-rumped Swallow flitted overhead catching insects and nearby several hundred (700+) Sand Martin, House Martin and Barn Swallow perched on a telegraph wire making it bow towards the ground.

This morning summed up what is so great about being able to witness this amazing bird migration here in the Strait - the mental pictures we took with us will last forever. David and I had some in-depth conversations regarding the salient identification features of Thekla Lark with Finnish birders and were able to identify three for them (one of which burst into song showing its grey underwing ..handy!). We had earned a break so we drove down the hillside to the little known and secluded Banti Guesthouse. Here coffee and tea was consumed enabling us to get back in the game after such a great morning – I did wonder whether some of you would have rather stayed! Head on we must there was still so much to see!

We headed along the coast to a very secluded private golf course at Montemedio. A surprise was in store and it was going to be good, we stopped at a green but no sign....were we going to luck-out? The next green produced them.... Northern Bald Ibis! 11 in total! A re-introduction program of Bald Ibis has been going on in Southern Spain for some years now, and this spring several pairs are now breeding in the wild, all adults fitted with rings and satellite transmitters were noted. Stopping for lunch here we added Little Owl, Great Spotted Cuckoo, (Iberian) Green Woodpecker and several Glossy Ibis.

After lunch we headed onto the La Janda basin, at the heart of the basin once was a rich mosaic of permanent pools and lagoons which during the winter months would flood, to form one extensive shallow lake covering more than 4,000 hectares.

With its associated reed beds and marshland La Laguna de la Janda was regarded as one of the finest of all Iberian wetlands, temporary home to hundreds of thousands of birds who would rest and refuel there on their migratory passage between Sub-Saharan Africa and Northern and Western Europe. There are discussions to return it to some part of its former glory but this maybe met with fierce opposition by those perhaps in part who have farmed here as farming has taken place here since 1929, when, criminally, work began here to drain the area for intensive agricultural use.

Driving further into the basin we noted Woodchat Shrike, Egyptian Vulture and amongst the House Sparrows up to 40 Spanish Sparrows. Stopping at a roadside pool we noted Green Sandpipers, Common Snipe and a Tawny Pipit. Scouring the agricultural lands we produced a Black-winged Kite, it gave great views and we were happy enough but we also found up to 6 in total! ...all gave brilliant views and we watched two over a recently topped field where 300+ Cattle Egrets also searched for food. As we moved through the area we were able to note European Bee-eaters and three Montagu's Harriers.

We headed onto Huerte Grande to retire after another fantastic day and lamented how quickly the time had passed. We celebrated our successes over varying beverages and vowed to stay in touch and maybe next year some of you might be back...

Day 5

Monday 24th September

Huerte Grande – Malaga – London

Our last day and Katrin was sad to see us go, she had enjoyed all your company, as had David and I, and so after an early breakfast we headed back along the road to Malaga waving good bye to the raptors still pouring overhead and arrived at Malaga airport in good time for our journeys back to various UK airports.

David and I would like to sincerely thank you for joining us on this fantastic trip to the '*migration festival*' and we hope you enjoyed your visit and long it may inspire you to always look up!

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Species lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common Name	Scientific Name	September				
			20	21	22	23	24
1	Scopoli's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea diomedea</i>		1	1		
2	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>		70+	150+		
3	Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>		10+			
4	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		20+			
5	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	30+	50+	40+	300+	
6	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>				10+	
7	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			1	6	
8	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>		203	1	20+	
9	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	c.5	31	10+	250+	
10	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>				3	
11	Northern Bald Ibis	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>				11	
12	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>				2	
13	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	30+	200+	30+	25+	5+
14	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	6	30+	15-	1	
15	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	20+	c.150	10+	30+	
16	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>				3	
17	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	1	2	3	20+	
18	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	10	20+	50+	2	
19	Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>		15+	10+	15+	2
20	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1	2		6	
21	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	40	250	200	40	5
22	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	100+	575	120+	40+	3
23	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	3	1	5+	40+	
24	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	6	2	1	10+	
25	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>				1	
26	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>				10+	
27	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		50+			
28	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>				1	
29	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>		4+			
30	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		1			
31	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		50+			
32	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		20+			
33	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		3			
34	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>				10+	
35	Audouin's Gull	<i>Larus audouinii</i>		20+	2		
36	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>		10+			
37	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>		800+	500+		
38	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		10+			
39	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>		80+	10+		
40	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>		4			
41	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	400+	
42	Feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
43	Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
44	Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>			1		
45	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	1H	1H	2H	1	
46	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		H		2H	

	Common Name	Scientific Name	September				
			20	21	22	23	24
47	European Scops Owl	<i>Otus scops</i>				1H	
48	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>				10+	
49	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	100+	60+	10+	20+	
50	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>				1+	
51	Green Woodpecker (Iberian)	<i>Picus viridis sharpei</i>				1	
52	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	20+	50+	3	30+	
53	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>				3	
54	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	10	15+	30+	60+	
56	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	30+	10+		5	
57	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	✓	✓	✓	250+	
58	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		✓	✓	200+	
59	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		2	1		
60	Yellow wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava (iberia)</i>	5	10+	1	100+	
61	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	1	3	2	1	
62	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	3	1	5+	1	
63	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>				3	
64	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	2	10+	5+	40+	
65	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		3		2	
66	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		1	1H		
67	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	1	1	7	40+	
68	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	5+	5+	2	2	
69	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	10+	5+	40+	20+	
70	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	20+	30+	40+	10+	1
71	Iberian Chiff-chaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>	2		5+		
72	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>	2	3	2	3	1
73	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>			2+		
74	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>	2	10+	15+	3	
75	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	10+	20+	20+	10+	
76	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	10+	6+	10+	1	
77	Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	4	2	1		
78	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		30+	1+		
79	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	100+	200+	30+	600+	
80	Black-billed Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	1	2		1	
81	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			2		
82	Western Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
83	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
85	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>				40+	
86	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	10+	10+	20+	10+	
87	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	20+	20+	10+	10+	
88	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	1	3		15+	
89	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	20+	40+	10+	200+	
90	Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>				30+	
91	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		10+		200+	

Cetaceans

Common name	Scientific name	September				
		20	21	22	23	24
Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		100+			
Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>		150+			
Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>		20+			
Ocean Sunfish	<i>Mola mola</i>		2			
Atlantic Flyingfish	<i>Cheilopogon heterurus</i>		20+			

Butterflies & Moths

Spanish Meadow Brown	Swallowtail	Geranium Bronze
Red Admiral	Large White	Lang's Short-tailed blue
Painted Lady	Grayling	
Two-tailed Pasha	Speckled Wood	
Clouded Yellow	Holly Blue	

Dragonflies

Southern Hawker	Lesser Emperor	Red-veined Darter
Migrant Hawker	Banded Groundling	Common Darter
Yellow-winged Darter		

Mammals

Barbary Macaques	Kuhl's Pipistrelle Bat
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Other Wildlife

Violet Carder-bee	Field Cricket	Moorish Gecko
Preying Mantis spp	Firebug	European Pond Tortoise
Blue-winged Grasshopper	Cicada spp	Stripe-less Tree Frog
Egyptian Grasshopper	Fiddler crab spp	Iberian Wall Lizard