

Gibraltar & Tarifa - Whales, Dolphins & Autumn Migration

Naturetrek Tour Report

19 - 23 September 2013



Ensenada de Bolonia



Northern Bald Ibis



Common Toad



Booted Eagle

Report & Images compiled by Simon Tonkin



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Day 1

Thursday 19th September

Malaga – Algarrobo – Huerte Grande

We arrived at Malaga on time and drove out of Malaga towards our destination at the delightful Huerte Grande. En route out of Malaga province we could still see the scars of the tremendous fire that ripped through this area a couple of years before. We had the odd Azure-winged Magpie flitting across the main road and further on two Red-rumped Swallows flitted for insects across our path. On the outskirts of Algeciras we saw our first White Storks standing on guard on the overhead lights and some impressively flying over our minibuses.

As we neared closer to our accommodation we could see more and more, eagles, kites and vultures manoeuvring over the hillsides and out of view. So we decided to make our first excursion to the Algarrobo watchpoint to get a feel for the raptor migration currently taking place. We were able to get to grips with loads of Short-toed Eagles, Booted Eagles, Black Kites and Griffon Vultures. We were lucky enough to have singletons of Lesser Kestrel and Egyptian Vulture too which was welcomed. After a few closer examinations, in particular of Booted Eagles we were able to begin attempting to age the birds flying through. This time of year post nuptial migration often contains a larger number of young 1st calendar year birds and this was clearly evident from our ageing assessments, some of you were clearly getting the hang of not only identifying the birds but ageing at least some of the Booted Eagles too. Tearing ourselves away from not only this lovely picturesque setting but also the wonders of masses of birds of prey soaring overhead and all around, we headed to meet with Katrin our wonderful host at Huerte Grande.

In usual Katrin style, she gave us the warmest of welcomes and we soon settled in for drinks ahead of our evening meal, with a few Firecrests putting in a wonderful appearance above where we sat.

Day 2

Friday 20th September

Los Lances – Rio Jara – Cazalla – Huerte Grande – Algarrobo – Cabrito – Santuario

Following a wonderful breakfast we headed west towards the intertidal habitat of Los Lances. Soon after parking we were finding large flocks of Corn Buntings common place and Iberian Yellow Wagtails flying overhead. Waders were clearly evident here with Kentish Plovers, Ringed Plovers and Sanderling in amongst the large groups of Yellow-legged Gulls. Alongside the Yellow-legged Gulls were the rare Audouin's Gulls with our maximum count reaching some 40 individuals. This species of beautiful larid is still listed as near threatened by the IUCN despite its population seemingly now to be stable following earlier population crashes. This is due to the species having the possibility to undergo a moderately rapid population decline in future if current fishery practices change, and therefore its status as near threatened remains. The population in more recent times has expanded owing to increased availability of fisheries discards close to key breeding colonies. As recent as the 1960s this species was down to less than 1,000 pairs, which is hard to believe now the population is estimated at over 21,000 pairs!

Looking inland was also rewarding with low flying Short-toed Eagle and Black Kites putting in great performances but also a single Short-toed Lark gave some worthwhile viewing time whilst an immature Woodchat Shrike posed on a post for scope views too. Heading further inland from here we headed up the river valley that flows into Los Lances to the Rio Jara we passed through agricultural fields where we hoped to see some more specialities. We hoped to find larks, shrikes and perhaps some harriers but none were forthcoming but we did watch an Osprey perched conveniently on a pylon, if that wasn't enough, just as we thought it was heading off to Senegal, it doubled back and began fishing the deeper parts of the river!

Two Honey Buzzards passed through and whilst hard to believe due to their low numbers this year on our trip, only a few days before our arrival, my friends had been watching huge squadrons of Honey Buzzards heading out across the strait and also coming to roost before making onward journeys. This was a signal for us however to move to higher ground to intercept migrating raptors. Therefore, we headed to the raptor watchpoint above Tarifa town of Cazalla, joining birders from across Europe, with the obvious local Spanish but add to the mix some Finnish, Dutch and French along with ourselves making up the British representation. Very large numbers of Booted Eagles and Short-toed Eagles passed very close to us, providing breathtaking views and even posing in mid-air for the obligatory photos. Here we could go through the salient identification features of each bird and also their ageing criteria. Griffon Vultures passed overhead and up to at least three of the endangered Egyptian Vultures giving stunning views. This vulture has undergone a marked decline throughout its range and in Europe alone it has suffered more than a 50% decline over the last 40 years.

Then the multi-lingual shout went up "Buitre Rupel" – and overhead a Rüppell's Griffon Vulture cruised alongside some Griffon Vultures. This vulture is a species that occurs throughout Central Africa in the Sahelian region, but since 1992 has occurred as a vagrant in the Straits with annual records since 1997. So whilst a good addition to our raptor festival it was somewhat hoped for on our trip as the birds now seemingly roost alongside Griffon Vultures in the region.

Stomachs were now rumbling so we headed down to Huerte Grande for our pre-prepared picnic lunch and regaled our delights of raptor migration over food and drink. The now omni-present Firecrest of Huerte Grande provided more views, Crested Tits called nearby and two Hawfinches put in an appearance for some. As we noted Pied Flycatcher we headed out once more as it signalled that new passerine migrants had arrived that morning. We headed to the area of El Cabrero where Griffon Vultures and Short-toed Eagles passed through but there was little to see here of note so we moved on. We also stopped at the nearby mirador for those who required facilities and ice creams!

Our next stop was the observatory of the Colectivo Ornitológico Cigüeña Negra and the Santuario de la Luz area. We scanned the nearby rock face and came up with two Crag Martins that put in some views. Some passerine migrants were evident in this valley with Pied Flycatcher and Common Redstart feeding amongst the lower cover. The Griffon Vultures here were marvellous as they normally pass very low (this area is a licensed feeding station for vultures) and you could hear their wing beats as they passed just overhead! I was presented here with a rather delightful present, a discarded old straw hat (which was donned immediately!) and I felt right at home! Heading back to Huerte Grande, once more we settled in for the evening and enjoyed our delightful meal and good conversations.

Day 3

Saturday 21st September

Los Lances – Algeciras Bay – Huerte Grande

Leaving again for the west we headed over once more to Los Lances for a look at the additions we may have missed on our previous saunter. Here we added much more satisfactory views of Short-toed Larks, Crested Larks and Iberian Yellow Wagtails. Ten Sandwich Terns were evident with at least five Mediterranean Gulls with the assembled Yellow-legged and Audouin's Gulls. In the adjoining fields we observed at least one Calandra Lark whilst near to the farm houses we found a Turtle Dove, yet more flocks of Corn Bunting and Crested Larks.

Preceding our boat trip we had some time at the relaxed setting of Banti to refuel the caffeine addicts (including myself!) and use their facilities. We also got views of Zitting Cisticola in the grounds and kept our eyes out for rolling flocks of Calandra Lark in the adjacent fields, those less distracted by caffeine were able to get views of them as they flew up from their grassy hideaways.

Following our respite and refuel we headed into Tarifa, the weather was not favourable for a boat trip out into the strait due to the strong levante wind we had been experiencing the last few days. This was unfortunate but we had a plan B! - to head for Algeciras harbour and see if we could pick up on some pods of Dolphins or Porpoises on a boat trip into the more sheltered confines of the harbour. We did get some lovely along side boat views of Common Dolphin but due to our obvious weather induced limitations it was difficult to add anymore to this tally of species. However we did add several seabirds including Northern Gannet, at least 20 Cory's Shearwaters and the Mediterranean subspecies of the (Atlantic) Cory's the Scopoli's Shearwater - best distinguished by the pattern of the underwing, being fairly distinct they are sometimes regarded as separate species. Following our time out on the sea we headed back to the shelter of Huerte Grande and on ensuring the Firecrest was still indeed present we freshened up before the evening log and the now expected culinary delights.

Day 4

Sunday 22nd September

Bolonia – Montenmedio – La Janda

On our final day we headed to the cliffs and caves above Bolonia, a roosting site for Little Swift in the past but they are notoriously difficult here. However, the views are breathtaking across into the strait and this area has other good birds to find. Indeed, we added good views of Blue Rock Thrush, and Griffon Vultures perched on pinnacles set the scene. Looking down we could also see the roman ruins just to the west of Bolonia. These ruins of the Roman town of Baelo Claudia are located near the beach, considered to be the most complete Roman town ruins yet uncovered in Spain. A rather curious *Buteo* species soared out from the rocks and eventually dismissing Long-legged or Steppe/Gibraltar Buzzard we soon realised it was a 1st year Honey Buzzard.

We headed ever further west to the Montenmedio golf course where we quietly drove along the deserted area looking for birds en route. Soon we happened upon a group of the critically endangered Northern Bald Ibis. Their occurrence here follows a successful Spanish reintroduction, initially involving the release of nearly 30 birds in the Ministry of Defence training ground in La Janda district. It had its first success in 2008, when a pair laid two eggs. This is probably the first attempt to breed in the wild in Spain for 500 years as the last definite reference to the Northern Bald Ibis breeding in Spain is from a 15th-century falconry book! We approached them cautiously and were able to get great views.

Following on from here we headed to the nearby La Janda area with some fragments of wetland still remaining of what was once a hugely important wetland for wildlife but was drained for agriculture, and today, cotton and rice dominate this landscape. However, despite this disastrous degradation of habitat some birds do still use this area. Pools here contained groups of Wood Sandpipers, Ruff, Black-winged Stilts, Glossy Ibis and nearby resting hordes of White Storks and the odd Green Sandpiper. Close to one extensively flooded area we found at least two Collared Pratincoles that allowed for incredibly close approach and views.

Checking the back roads here, we were able to add several Montagu's Harriers but not the expected Black-shouldered Kite, due in part perhaps to the very strong wind, which was disappointing, but Short-toed Eagles and Booted Eagles continued our week's theme. Next we headed back to Huerte Grande for a relaxing evening and more giggles. Including a post dinner toad performance where we were keen to show one of Katrin's staff a toad...(I had already caused to shriek earlier in the week by showing her a bush cricket). This time Dave and I presented her with an oversized Common Toad – this produced an ear-piercing shrill from her and a panicked retreat to the kitchen – not quite the reaction I had expected!I hope Katrin will have us back next year!

Day 5

Monday 23rd September

Huerte Grande – Malaga

Following breakfast we had a pleasant and relaxed drive back to Malaga airport where we boarded our various planes back to England and home in good time.

Unfortunately, this year we were unable to go into Gibraltar as the political situation along with the increased and ongoing boarder chaos meant it could have feasibly had us waiting for several hours in line to get back out into Spain.

Dave and I after speaking with several friends we know both sides of the border took the decision to abandon any excursion into Gibraltar this year. Hearing from others subsequent experiences, we are very pleased we did! We would like to take the opportunity to thank you for being such a great group, we saw some fantastic sites and wildlife and fully scared the locals with their own wildlife! We enjoyed some fantastic laughs – thank you!

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Species List

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

	Common name	Scientific name	Septemeber				
			19	20	21	22	23
1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>			20+		
2	Scopoli's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>			6		
3	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>		1	1		
4	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	2			2	
5	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	15+	c.10		600+	
6	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>				200+	
7	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	10+	140+	40+	500+	
8	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		2	2		
9	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		10+	10+	20+	
10	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			5+		
11	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>			1		
12	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>		3+	2	2	
13	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	20+	100+	20+	80+	10+
14	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	1	3			
15	Rupell's Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps rueppellii</i>		1+			
16	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	20+	80+	30+	40+	
17	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	40+	100+	30+	10+	
18	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	1			3	
19	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>				4	
20	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	5+	20+	40+	15+	
21	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	50+	150+	100+	50+	3
22	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	1	5+		50+	
23	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		2	c.3	30+	
24	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		2			
25	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		1			
26	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>				20+	
27	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>				10+	
28	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		15+	10+		
29	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>				3	
30	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>		5+	2+		
31	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		1	15		
32	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>				2	
33	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				5	
34	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>				10+	
35	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>				10+	
36	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>				20+	
37	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>				2	
38	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			6		
39	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>					
40	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		10+	130+		
41	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			20+		
42	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>				30+	
43	Collared Pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>				2+	
44	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
45	Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>		40+	30+		
46	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>			5+		
47	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>		150+	200+		

	Common name	Scientific name	Septemeber				
			19	20	21	22	23
48	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			1		
49	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>			10+		
50	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>				✓	
52	European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>		2	1+		
53	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
54	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	1		1		
55	European Scops Owl	<i>Otus scops</i>	H				
56	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>		2			
57	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>		30+	20+	10+	
58	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>		2		3+	
59	European Bee-Eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>		3			
60	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>			1		
61	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		1	1		
62	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>		1			
63	Iberian Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>	2+				
64	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	4		1	2	1
65	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		1		1	
66	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>			1		
67	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		4	4		
68	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		5+	15+		
69	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		5	10		
70	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>			20+		
71	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>		1	8		
72	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	5+	20+	10+	30+	
73	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>				5+	
74	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		50+	✓	✓	
75	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		2			
76	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		20+	5	50+	
77	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	2				
78	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	2	4	3	5	
79	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		5			
80	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		H			
81	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		15+	10+	70+	
82	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	5	20	5+		
83	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	3	7	4+	2	
84	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	4	4	5	4	1+
85	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	1	2	2	3	
86	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	2	2+	4+		
87	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		2+			
88	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
89	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		1+	5+		
90	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	1	1	2+		
91	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>		1+			
92	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>		1	1	5+	
93	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		20+	5+	30+	
94	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		2	1		
95	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>				1	
96	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	12	2			
97	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>	1	2	6+	4	

	Common name	Scientific name	Septemeber				
			19	20	21	22	23
98	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>				5+	
99	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
100	Yellow (Iberian) Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava (iberiae)</i>		30+	20+	80+	
101	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	1				
102	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		2	2		
103	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			c.10		
104	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		1	c.20		
105	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>	2		2+		
106	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	20+	10+	40+	10+	
107	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		1	2	5	
108	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		20+	10+	100+	
109	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	1			10+	
110	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		2	1H		
111	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		200+	150+	300+	

Mammals

1	Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>				c.15	
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Invertebrates

1	Egyptian Cricket				✓		
2	Southern Hawker	<i>Aeshna cyanea</i>			✓		
3	Ruddy Darter	<i>Sympetrum sanguineum</i>		✓	✓		
4	Keeled Skimmer	<i>Orthetrum coerulescens</i>		✓			
5	Banded Groundling	<i>Brachythemis leucosticta</i>				✓	

Butterflies

1	Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>	✓	✓			
2	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>	✓				
3	Geranium Bronze	<i>Cacyreus marshalli</i>		✓			
4	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>		✓	✓		
5	Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>		✓			
6	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>	✓	✓	✓		
7	Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>		✓			
8	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓			
9	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>		✓			
10	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>			✓		
11	Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>		☐	✓		
12	Two-Tailed Pasha	<i>Charaxes jasius</i>			✓		

Moths

1	Crimson Speckled Footman	<i>Utetheisa pulchella</i>		✓	✓		
2	Chinese Character	<i>Cilix glaucata</i>		✓			
3	Hummingbird Hawkmoth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>		✓			
4	Hooktip Sp.			✓			

Reptiles & Amphibians

1	Mediterranean Tree Frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
2	Common Toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>			✓	✓	