

Gibraltar & Tarifa: Whales, Dolphins & Autumn Migration

Naturetrek Tour Report

18 – 22 September 2014



'Pale' Honey Buzzard



Marsh Harrier



Pilot Whale



Barbary Macaque

Report & images compiled by Simon Tonkin



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Leaders:	Simon Tonkin David Morris
Participants:	John Fox Laura Ettrick Sean Locke Annie Woodhouse John Hart Joan Hart Colin Wake Mary Wake Jean Pearson Stella Pearson Roger Wasley Sheila Wasley Roger Gould Jill Haines Sue Scott-Kerr Helen Abbott

Day 1

Thursday 18th September

Arriving on our various flights into Malaga, we quickly picked up our minibuses and wasting no time headed out along the road to the Strait of Gibraltar. Passing through the Algeciras, White Storks began to appear and many sat on the roadside lights like sentinels watching the traffic go by.

We arrived at our hotel and were welcome by Katrin and the staff who made sure our stay was as comfortable as possible. Here we encountered Crested Tit, Firecrest and Short-toed Treecreeper.

After settling in and getting luggage sorted, we headed to the raptor watch point at Cazalla above the town of Tarifa. Due to the time of day numbers weren't great but we were able to get our first look at Griffon Vultures, Short-toed Eagles and Booted Eagles, some of which put on fabulous views overhead and a Montagu's Harrier zipped through the valley.

We then headed down to the nearby beach and inter-tidal lagoon of Los Lances where, despite this area being protected and access prohibited, kite surfers have been an increasing problem causing disturbance to roosting and feeding birds. However, good timing on our part meant we were here long after the peak of their activity, and we encountered pre-roosting gulls and terns as well as an assemblage of waders. Over 100 Kentish Plovers were dotted across the area together with Bar-tailed Godwit, Sanderling, Dunlin, Ruff and two rather smart Curlew Sandpipers. A Whimbrel called over-head but it could not be subsequently located. Although only two Audouin's Gulls were present, they provided a great introduction to this species whose population has bounced back, probably owing to increased availability of fisheries discards close to key breeding colonies. Encountering this species here, it is hard to imagine that the population fell to just 1,000 pairs in the late 60s, yet recent

evidence suggests a figure of 21,000 pairs in Europe. Terns were evident too in the form of Little and Sandwich, whilst a Peregrine Falcon was on view on the pylons.

This area is also good for a range of larks, pipits and wagtails. Searching the grassland areas we were able to find two Short-toed Larks amongst 15 Iberian Yellow Wagtails.

Taking our fill of this area and after checking the flocks one last time, we headed back to our eco-lodge for the evening.

Day 2

Friday 19th September

Following breakfast, we had new additions to our bird list including Grey Wagtail and Iberian Chiffchaff, new for many. Serin and the now familiar Firecrest and Crested Tit made brief appearances.

Heading out, mindful that raptors would be leaving their roosts, we headed for the raptor watch-point of El Algarrobo where we were able to get brilliant views and numbers of passing raptors. Hundreds of Booted Eagles passed through, mostly in the commoner paler form, and we logged over 200 Honey Buzzards including a rather bizarre individual with some leucism /schizochromism (see front cover photo).

Two Alpine Swifts also zipped through along with three European Bee-eaters, three Common Ravens and a single Egyptian Vulture to add to the low passing Griffon Vultures. The bushes at this watch point aren't to be ignored either as Common Redstart and Iberian Chiffchaff were found.

After a quick stop for refreshments and comfort needs we headed to our boat trip out into the Strait. After a little while we encounter our first Sun-fish (known as Moon-fish in every language apart from English), or the Mola-mola as it looks like a dustbin lid with a fin! We were able to log three of these bizarre but wondrous creatures. As we checked for seabirds we got onto 20+ Cory's Shearwaters and eventually at least one Scopoli's Shearwater. George Sangster, writing in the journal Ibis, has reviewed the taxonomy of the three *Calonectris* shearwater taxa of the Mediterranean and North Atlantic and considers that Scopoli's or 'Mediterranean Shearwater' *C. diomedea* that breeds within the Mediterranean is a monotypic species, separable from Cory's Shearwater *C. borealis* of the Macaronesian Islands in the North Atlantic. Hitherto these two taxa have been usually separated only at the sub specific level. The trouble is that both forms/species occur within this area at the same time of the year so careful scrutiny is needed to separate them.

We eventually came upon a pod of at least eight Long-finned Pilot Whales, and for those of the group who went downstairs to look, a young male inquisitively came right underneath the boat to have a look through the glass bottom at us; a truly magical experience.

Disembarking and gathering ourselves, we once again headed back to Huerte Grande for the evening.

Day 3

Saturday 20th September

At the border with Gibraltar there was a very brief queue before we were heading into this UK overseas territory. A contrast of styles was almost immediately apparent, and the fortifications highlighted the defence that was required to hold this important military asset. Whether it remains so today is arguable as fish and chip shops and arcades adorn the centre, but we headed to the huge monolith of the Rock, a more pleasing element. We went to the top via cable car and here we were able to obtain fantastic views of the surrounding area (well for those that could look!) and also introduce ourselves to the resident Barbary Macaques. The population in Gibraltar is the only “wild” monkey population in the European continent, and unlike that of North Africa, it is thriving although they do receive considerable care from park staff, being fed daily and receiving veterinary care. At present, some 300 animals in five troops occupy the Upper Rock area of the Gibraltar Nature Reserve, though occasional forays into the town may result in them not being considered overly popular! Also from here we were able to see a splendid Blue Rock Thrush.

After ice-creams (indoors!) we headed down and into the Alameda Gardens which were founded in 1816 at the initiative of the then Governor, General George Don, in order to provide an area for recreation for the residents of Gibraltar. The various plant and tree species, along with the irrigation, provides a great area for migrant passerines. Pied and Spotted Flycatchers were present, with Iberian Chiffchaff calling and giving snatches of song.

Following our picnic lunch we headed to Europa Point to look for seabirds. Offshore 15 Balearic Shearwaters were loafing on the sea, and there were plenty of Cory's Shearwaters.

Heading back into Spain we once more tried the raptor watch point of El Algarrobo. It was fairly quiet and the heat had ‘zapped’ some of the group so we headed back to our hotel with an option of relaxation, or exploration of one of the valleys of El Cabrito.

For those that joined us, after a brief drive along a dirt track, birds were seen descending rapidly out of the cloud layer that had formed across the valley and mountainside. This led to some panic as it was clear there was going to be rapid fall of birds...the stuff of dreams!

Everybody out! We craned our necks watching literally hundreds of Alpine Swifts, with Short-toed Eagles, Booted Eagles, Egyptian Vultures, 20+ Honey Buzzards, Sparrowhawks, and both White and Black Storks, the latter tallying up to 30. This wheeling mass of avian delights soon dissipated and we were left aghast at what we had just witnessed.

Day 4

Sunday 21st September

This morning we headed to the farmland of the Rio Jara valley and spotted Lesser Kestrel, Common Kestrel and Booted Eagle. The fields here can be good for Calandra Lark and searching we saw big groups of Corn Buntings and heard and saw a few Calandra Larks showing their dark underwing in flight.

We embarked on a drive along the coast encountering a Black-winged Kite en-route. At the bay of Cadiz we met Adrian, Antonio and Maria who showed us the work of conserving the traditional salt-pan activities (rather than

industrial salt pan extraction) and adopting Fair to Nature accreditation. In doing so, these pans are alive with life because the macro-fauna is not striped from them. We were able to add several new species to our tallies. These included Black-necked Grebe, Greater Flamingo, Eurasian Spoonbill, Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Slender-billed Gull and Caspian Tern, with at least three Ospreys observed.

Following our picnic lunch in the rather busy natural park visitor centre, we made a swift exit and headed for a golf course - not to play a round of golf but to see a critically endangered species. Driving up the main road the pressure was on, but just as we were running out of road we happened upon them; Northern Bald Ibis! These birds are so ugly they are beautiful! Several birds have now been released in the La Janda area, and in 2008 a released pair laid two eggs, perhaps the first breeding of the species in the wild in Spain for 500 years! The paparazzi assembled and everyone took appropriate pictures of this fantastic species.

Nearby we entered the La Janda marsh area. This was once one of Europe's biggest wetlands and despite attempts to revert areas back to its former glory, the area still remains heavily drained for agriculture. However this area can still yield plenty: Spanish Sparrow and Marsh Harrier were obvious, and apart from the many hundreds of White Storks we were able to find Green and Common Sandpipers. Popping out of a ditch a Squacco Heron provided great views whilst two Turtle Doves flew through.

Light was fading and we had one last stop to make. We headed to the valley that we had visited in the morning but drove around to the other side of it. Serin and Short-toed Treecreeper were spotted, and a Cirl Bunting put in an appearance. Also there were breath-taking views across the landscape. Heading back we were mindful of the need for packing, but still had time to see European Bee-eaters and watch them briefly hawking for insects before heading back for our final night at Huerte Grande.

Day 5

Monday 22nd September

We left at a reasonably relaxed time, bade farewell to Katrin and the team, and headed to Malaga airport. On the way we saw Red-rumped Swallows swooping across the main road, before arriving in good time. We said our farewells before catching our various flights back to varying UK destinations.

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	September				
			18	19	20	21	22
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	3			4	
2	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>				5	
3	Scopoli's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>		1+			
4	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>		20+	40+		
5	Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>			15+		
6	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>				8	
7	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>		4+	30	30+	
8	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	5+		10+	400+	
9	Northern Bald Ibis	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>				12	
10	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>				40+	
11	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>				1	
12	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
13	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	5+	10+	4	10+	
14	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	2+			20+	
15	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		2			
16	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1		1+	
17	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>		1		c.3	
18	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>				2	
19	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>		1	4	1+	
20	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>		200+	30+	2	
21	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	20+	50+	100+	30+	
22	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	20+	20+	150+	2	
23	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraetus pennatus</i>	2+	300+	50+	5+	
24	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	2+	4	5+	
25	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		1+		4+	
26	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>	1			2	
27	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		1		1	
28	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	2+	20+	5+	2	
29	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	2	1	2	1	
30	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>				8	
31	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	5	2	3+	
32	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	1		1	1	
33	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				1	
34	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>				20+	
35	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>				1	
36	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>				20+	
37	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>				6	
38	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>				10+	
39	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				150+	
40	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	100+			10+	
41	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>				30+	
42	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	6+				
43	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	1H			6+	
44	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>				50+	
45	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				100+	
46	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	2+			10+	
47	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>				4	

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			18	19	20	21	22
48	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	2+			10+	
49	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	10+			20+	
50	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	150+			6+	
51	Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	2				
52	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	20+			200+	
53	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>	1				
54	Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>				5+	
55	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>					
56	Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>	2				
57	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
58	Lesser-black backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus intermedius</i>	10+				
59	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>				2	
60	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>	10+	6		20+	
61	Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>	2+	1		5+	
62	Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>		50+			
63	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia (feral)</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
64	Common Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	2+	1+		1	
65	European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>	2+				
66	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
67	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	1H		H	H	
68	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>			H	H	
69	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymartus melba</i>	2	2+	200+		
70	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	10+	5+	c.100	10+	
71	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	1			1H	
72	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>		3+	3H	15+	
73	European Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	1				
74	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		1	1	2	
75	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>				1	
76	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>				1	
77	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>				1	
78	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	3			4+	
79	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
80	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	3+	3		
81	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>			1		
82	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	2+	5+	10+	5+	
83	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	2	2	3	2	
84	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	3	3	10+	5+	
85	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>				1+	
86	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>	2			1	
87	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	40+	10+	2+		
88	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	1+		200+	2	
89	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>			50+		
90	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>			100+	50+	
91	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	1+			5+	2+
92	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	1	1	2	2	
93	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		10+			
94	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>	1	5+	2	1	
95	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	5	1	1	20+	
96	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	2+	5+	20+	5+	
97	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>			5		

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			18	19	20	21	22
98	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	20+	✓	✓
99	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>	5+	5+	5+	3+	
100	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			1	2	
101	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	2	5+	6	10+	
102	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	5				
103	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
104	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	1+	2+	10+	5+	
105	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		1+	1	1	
106	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		1+	1+	1	
107	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>		1+	3		
108	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>	1				
109	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	20+		30+	✓	✓
110	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	2				
111	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			1		
112	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>			10+	1	
113	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>			10+		
114	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
115	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>				20+	
116	(Iberian) Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>	15+	3+		4+	
117	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1+	2		
118	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		1+			
119	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
120	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	✓	✓	5		
121	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
122	Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	✓	✓	2	
123	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
124	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>	1+			4	
125	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	20+			400+	
126	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>			2+	1+	

Butterflies

1	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>	✓	✓			
2	Geranium Bronze	<i>Cacyreus marshalli</i>			✓		
3	Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>	✓	✓			
4	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>			✓		
5	Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>		✓			
6	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Two-tailed Pasha	<i>Charaxes jasius</i>			✓		
8	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>		✓			
9	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓	✓	✓	
10	Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon gorganus</i>	✓		✓		
11	Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>			✓		
12	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>			✓	✓	✓
13	Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>		✓	✓		

Dragonflies

1	Southern Hawker	<i>Aeshna cyanea</i>	✓	✓	✓		
2	Ruddy Darter	<i>Sympetrum sanguineum</i>		✓		✓	
3	Banded Groundling	<i>Brachythemis leucosticta</i>	✓			✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	September				
			18	19	20	21	22

Amphibians & Reptiles

1	Mediterranean Tree Frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>	✓	✓	✓		
2	Common Toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
3	Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Other Taxa

1	Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>		8			
2	Sunfish	<i>Mola mola</i>		3			

Moths

Vestal, *Rhodometra sacraria*
 Lunar Thorn, *Selenia lunularia*
 Latin, *Callopietria juvenina*

Willow Beauty, *Peribatodes rhomboidaria*
 Waved Umber, *Menophra abruptaria*