

Gibraltar & Tarifa: Whales, Dolphins & Autumn Migration

Naturetrek Tour Report

17 – 21 September 2015



Zitting Cisticola



Long-finned Pilot Whale



Barbary Macaque



Booted Eagle (1cy)

Report & images compiled by Simon Tonkin



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Tour participants: Simon Tonkin & David Morris (leaders) with a group of Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Thursday 17th September

Having arrived on our various flights, we were soon ready to leave Malaga airport for our eco-lodgings at Huerta Grande. Unfortunately we were missing a key contingent of the group - namely co-leader David! David's flight had been delayed so our host Katrin took the majority of the group to our lodge whilst four lucky volunteers stayed with Simon to drink more coffee, or in some cases beer!

After a pleasant chat about the vagaries of shearwater identification, David arrived and then we were quickly on our way. Despite this slight set back we made good time along the major coastal toll road and soon arrived at Huerta Grande. Immediately we could hear Firecrest and Crested Tit calling and some were visible. We ate a picnic lunch before settling into our rooms.

Overhead Griffon Vultures were passing over the lodge so we headed to the watch point of El Algarrobo, about a mile up the road. From the watch point we had close views of Booted Eagle and Short-toed Snake Eagle - stunning birds.

Next we headed along the coast to El Trafico where two Black Storks and 50+ European Bee-eaters provided a rush for optics! Also Bottle-nosed Dolphins were spotted offshore.

After getting our eyes firmly 'in' with some low raptors, as is often the case at El Trafico, we headed back to Huerta Grande where we saw lots of Alpine Swifts over the lodge. We then had a delightful evening meal and further warm welcomes from Katrin, Antonio, Mary-Belle, Juan-Carlos, Juan-Louis and Yolanda - who were to take very good care of us at the delightful wooded valley of Huerta Grande.

Day 2

Friday 18th September

This morning we took a boat trip into the strait of Gibraltar. An early morning wind check showed that the conditions would be near perfect but changing later in the day, so timing was important. The wind was due to change to Levante which would make a trip rough and possibly fruitless too.

First we headed to the intertidal lagoon of Los Lances, adjacent to Tarifa, where a farmer wanted us to stop his cow running away! Luckily we had some avian delights to watch. Iberian Yellow Wagtails buzzed about our heads as they flew over, and groups of waders yielded a good selection including several Kentish Plovers, whilst the large group of Yellow-legged Gulls yielded the once extremely rare Audouin's Gull. A couple of Greater Flamingoes paddled in the shallows, and the distinctive calls of Greater Short-toed Lark were heard, giving away their presence as a group of 30 went over. Heading back toward the vehicles we were greeted by a rather obliging Zitting Cisticola that foraged next to the boardwalk and provided some excellent photographic opportunities. By the time we got back to the vehicles there was no sign of the cow or the farmer.

We travelled the short distance to Tarifa harbour and met with friends at Turmares who were expecting us for a boat trip. Whilst there were others on the trip, it is a big vessel and the forward lower compartments are often unoccupied and also offer the closest views of cetaceans through the glass bottom of the boat. Several of us

headed there whilst Dave stayed up top as a spotter. Immediately we were seeing seabirds, particularly Cory's Shearwaters, with 40 counted but in all probably this was an underestimate. A Great Skua also passed the boat. After being preoccupied with seabirds for about an hour, we came upon a pod of Long-finned Pilot Whales which put on an excellent display for us alongside and underneath the boat. One very special moment was when we watched a mother and calf under the boat through the glass bottom, and if that wasn't enough, we could hear them clearly calling....amazing! We also observed Short-toed Snake Eagles crossing the Strait with ungainly and laboured flight across the thermal-less stretch of sea.

After some breathtaking close encounters we returned to Tarifa harbour and moved to our picnic spot at the Cazalla watch point, just above Tarifa. It was clearly a good day for raptors. As we got out of the vehicles a Rupell's Vulture was disappearing into the distance but unfortunately Simon couldn't get anyone onto it. Lots of Booted Eagles were passing through, some giving close views, and a lesser but still impressive number of Short-toed Snake Eagles were still moving. We took our picnic lunch here but it was hard not to be distracted by raptors whilst eating, but we managed to multitask extremely effectively!

By the time we had packed away the lunch and taken our fill of both food and raptors, the levante wind had begun to build in strength. This can often be the case and can effect migration as it would be suicide for any migrating bird, particularly those that rely heavily upon thermals, to make a crossing in such a strong cross-wind. By reading the situation and knowing that the eagles would be looking for roosting sites, we drove a short distance to the valleys near Guadalmesi where, as predicted, in one sheltered valley several Short-toed and Booted Eagles were coming overhead and into the valley in front of us, and some continued to hunt along the valley giving excellent views.

Our time today had vanished quickly, and as the eagles were settling in, we went and did the same at our valley roost site of Huerta Grande.

Day 3

Saturday 19th September

Due to the now strong levante, we headed west to avoid the worst of the wind; towards Bolonia and the Sierra de Plata Mountains. We drove to the hidden Laja de la Zarga where we came very close to a colony of Griffon Vultures. As they swooped overhead we enjoyed their imposing size. We also heard Blue Rock Thrush and Rock Bunting but despite an extensive search we failed to see them; perhaps the high wind on the top of the rock curtailed our chances.

Lots of Booted Eagles had been pushed into the mountains by the wind and we enjoyed watching many different plumage variants. Also seven or more Egyptian Vultures drifted overhead, and several Honey Buzzards and Crag Martins cruised past the rock face.

Having spent a good time amongst the mountains, we headed even further west to a golf course; not for a round of golf but to observe the Northern Bald Ibis that forage on the well irrigated greens at Monntenmedio golf course. This extremely rare species is a true success story. After being extirpated by hunting, habitat change and pesticide effects, it was decided to run an exploratory project (*Proyecto Eremita*), rather than a full blown reintroduction, by releasing, starting in 2003, 30 birds in the La Janda district of Cadiz province. Part of the logic must have been that with feeding opportunities nearby, and Europe's only cliff nesting egret colony close at

hand, this was the ideal place to try. This exploratory project quickly became the ‘real thing’ when, in 2008, a pair laid two eggs in the wild – probably the first such attempt in Spain for well over 500 years. Yet here we were watching nine individuals, a couple with radio tags, at close range.

Following a delightful picnic lunch where we encountered Hoopoe and Wryneck, and several of the trees contained Common Redstart and Pied Flycatcher, we headed to the Salt pans of Barbate. Here we had close groups of Audouin’s Gulls, Greater Flamingos and Spoonbills with Black-winged Stilts and a single Little Tern.

Moving to our last area of the day, we headed for the agricultural lands of La Janda. This was once an impressive wetland system, and although sadly drained for agricultural, it still holds some glimmer of its former glory. Flocks of Glossy Ibis and several Montagu’s Harriers brightened the fields where several hundred White Storks were feeding.

Heading up to the farm we came across a Black-winged Kite and this tidy little raptor put on a great performance. We also saw a large group of 80+ Black Storks. Moving down the dirt track through the poplars provided great views of Turtle Dove with at least eight individuals feeding along the cultivated margin at the edge of the cotton field.

Time was against us so we headed back, only to be stopped by a Green Sandpiper feeding in a ditch with a showy Kingfisher perched for obligatory photographs.

After an action packed and full day, we headed back to Huerta Grande for a rest and to regale all the day’s sightings over a great meal!

Day 4

Sunday 20th September

Today we started in the grounds of Huerta Grande and Dave led the group through the valley and cork oak woodland where many passerine migrants can take shelter, and there are also resident specialities such as Short-toed Treecreeper, Firecrest and Crested Tit, all of which were encountered. Further on a Subalpine Warbler was seen, and Dave was very happy when the long awaited Hawfinch ‘lifer’ made a timely appearance. Simon returned from a picnic shop and then, making sure we had our passports, we set off for Gibraltar.

Arriving too early in the day would have proved frustrating with likely delays at the border crossing due to the annual dog show that takes place in Gibraltar (it nearly always coinciding with this trip!) so by the time we arrived at the border we had an easy crossing and continued to the car park at the Alameda Gardens. Most of the group wandered around the gardens searching for migrant passerines or simply enjoying the gardens whilst the picnic was prepared.

Following lunch we headed up the rock in the cable car, ensuring Paul didn't look down! At the top we saw the Barbary Macaques, and also several Booted Eagles and Short-toed Snake Eagles. After descending the monolith we assembled at the car park, but our leaving was curtailed when a large number of mostly Booted Eagles were seen making the crossing. We quickly followed them out to Europa Point and watched as they headed out toward Africa. Offshore several Cory’s Shearwaters were feeding in the bay with Balearic Shearwater also present.

Looking along the coast it was clear that lots of raptors were crossing in big numbers, so we left Gibraltar and headed to El Algarrobo where we encountered hundreds of eagles drifting in, seemingly from every point of the compass! When we got to around 400 Booted Eagles we stopped counting! There were also Short-toed Snake Eagles, Egyptian Vulture and Black Kites - we were in raptor metropolis and they were queuing at the border!

All too soon it was time to return to Huerta Grande for our last evening and relive our best moments of the tour.

Day 5

Monday 21st September

Today we had an early start and bade farewell to Katrin and the team before headed to Malaga airport, arriving in good time. We said our farewells before catching flights back to various UK destinations, where another Naturetrek adventure came to an end.

Dave and Simon had a fabulous time on the tour thank the group for brilliant company and good humour throughout.

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	September			
			17	18	19	20
1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			✓	
2	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓	
3	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>		40+		✓
4	Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>				c6
5	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>		3	50+	
6	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	2	4	80+	10+
7	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	c30	7	✓	30+
8	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>			100+	
9	Northern Bald Ibis	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>			9	
10	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>			30+	
11	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		2	✓	2+
13	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			1	
14	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		1+	✓	
15	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		1		1
16	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1+	5+	
17	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>			1+	
18	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>			7+	20+
19	Rüppell's Vulture	<i>Gyps rueppellii</i>		1		
20	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	1	2+	20+	10+
21	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	10+	40+	50+	150+
23	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	20+	100+	100+	400+
24	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	2+	10+	20+	15+
25	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			15+	
26	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>			5+	
27	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	2	20+	✓	50+
28	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		2	4+	1
29	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			2+	
30	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>			3+	
31	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓	✓	
32	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>		30+	✓	
33	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			1	
34	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		10+		
35	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>		1+		
36	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		1	5+	
37	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			1	
38	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			2+	
39	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		2+	1+	
40	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	2			
41	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		2		
42	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		30+	20+	
43	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		5+		
44	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		4+	✓	
45	Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>		10+	70+	
46	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>		1		
47	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		1		

	Common name	Scientific name	September			
			17	18	19	20
48	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
49	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		6	✓	
50	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>	50+	15+	50+	5+
51	Little Tern	<i>Stemula albifrons</i>			1	
52	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	3+		200+	✓
54	European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>			8+	
55	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		1H	1	1
57	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>	15+		20+	5+
58	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>			2	3+
59	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		2	2	
60	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	50+	20+	50+	40+
61	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>			1	
62	Eurasian Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>			1	
63	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	1	1	1	1
64	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	5+	2+	20+	
65	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	1	5+	2+
66	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	1			1
67	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>				1
68	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>				1
69	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	2+	5+	✓	
70	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	1		2	
71	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	1+	1	2	1
72	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
73	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	3+	✓	✓	✓
74	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
75	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>		30+	3+	
76	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	5+	10+	20+	10+
77	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>			5+	2
79	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	5+		✓	✓
80	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	2	3	4	2
81	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	1	1	3	1
82	Western Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>		1	2	1
83	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	2	10+	✓	2
84	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
85	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	1			
86	Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>				1
87	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
88	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	2+	5+	10+	10+
89	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				1
90	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		1		1+
91	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	6	2+	5+	10+
92	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
93	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		3+	10+	10+
94	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>				1
95	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	1	2+		1
96	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		1	5+	5+
97	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>		1	2+	1

	Common name	Scientific name	September			
			17	18	19	20
98	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			1H	
99	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>	1		1	
100	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	
101	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	1	1	3+	
102	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
103	Spanish Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>		20+	1+	
104	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1		1
105	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>			2	
106	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
107	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>				1
108	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
109	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		3+	2+	
110	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
111	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
112	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		50+	✓	
113	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>			1H	
114	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirius</i>		1		1
115	Iberian Chiff-chaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>		4+	2+	1+
116	Great Skua	<i>Catharacta skua</i>		1		c4
117	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>			✓	

Cetaceans

1	Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>				10+
2	Bottle-nosed Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	5+			
3	Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>		15+		

Fish

1	Yellow-finned Tuna	<i>Thunnus albacares</i>				✓
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Mammals

1	Barbary Macque	<i>Macaca sylvanus</i>				✓
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Odonata

1	Ruddy Darter	<i>Sympetrum sanguineum</i>			✓	
2	Banded Groundling	<i>Brachythemis leucosticta</i>			✓	
3	Lesser Emperor	<i>Anax parthenope</i>			✓	

Butterflies

1	Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>			✓	
2	Geranium Bronze	<i>Cacyreus marshalli</i>				✓
3	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓		✓
4	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>				✓
5	Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>		✓		✓
6	Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>				✓

Amphibians & Reptiles

1	Mediterranean Tree Frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>	1			
2	Common Toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>			1	
3	Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>	1		1	1
4	Iberian Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis hispanica</i>	1			✓