

# Gibraltar & Tarifa: Whales, Dolphins & Autumn Migration

Naturetrek Tour Report

21 – 25 September 2015



Black-winged Stilt



Long-finned Pilot Whale



Short-toed Eagles

Report & images compiled by Simon Tonkin & Amy King



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Tour Participants: Simon Tonkin & Amy King (leaders) with a Naturetrek group

## Day 1

## Monday 21st September

Having arrived on our various flights, the group met with Juan-Louis and Simon, and we were soon ready to leave Malaga airport for the Straits and our eco-lodging at Huerta Grande. As soon as we arrived at Huerta Grande we were able to partake in our lunch of local produce, as raptors poured over outside!

After we had settled into our rooms, we headed out to the raptor watchpoint of El Algarrobo (about 5 minutes up the road!). The track here has been eroded badly by heavy rainfall and, unfortunately, Amy got a flat tyre on her first excursion out with the group. So Simon continued to ferry people up to the watchpoint and once everyone was there, returned back down to Amy to see her covered in soot and having already largely changed the tyre! So we now were set again for raptors, with minimal fuss.

On returning to the group, we were able to go through the salient identification features of Short-toed Eagles, Booted Eagles and Griffon Vultures and, as we were doing so, a magnificent young Spanish Imperial Eagle cruised just a few metres above our heads! Wow!

We also watched several groups of Alpine Swift going through with Red-rumped Swallows hot on their trail. Also several Honey Buzzards were evident, and with all these species it proved to be a great start to our raptor-watching experiences!

We headed back to our lodge for our evening meal and to regale the day's highlights, even the flat tyre and soot-covered Amy!

## Day 2

## Tuesday 22nd September

With the fine weather, distinctive trilling calls overhead gave away the presence of a massive migrating group of Alpine Swifts; we counted up to 200, but higher up there were even more and counting became largely impossible, so we just enjoyed the swirling mass and depth of these migrants.

Following breakfast, we headed down to the intertidal habitat of Los Lances. Here we encountered Kentish Plovers, Greater Flamingo, the once extremely rare Audouin's Gull, and Short-toed Lark among the highlights. The fields here were full of Iberian Yellow Wagtails, Zitting Cisticola and Crested Larks.

After taking our fill of the myriad of wading bird species, we headed into Tarifa to catch our boat out into the Straits to observe hopefully some cetaceans and seabirds. Of course, we were not disappointed as we had, after less than an hour out to sea, spectacular views of Long-finned Pilot Whales not only right alongside the boat but also viewable from the glass hull which gave amazing views. We also encountered spectacular pods of Common, Striped and Bottle-nosed Dolphins in large numbers, giving equally magnificent views. We also observed a Sunfish (looking like floating dustbin lid!) and Yellow-finned Tuna.

Seabirds were evident too, with Balearic Shearwaters, Great Skua and at least 10+ European Storm Petrel and a possible Wilson's Storm Petrel, but due to the distance and speed of travel it was impossible to be certain.

Disembarking from a spectacular boat trip, we headed for the area of El Trafico just outside of Tarifa and here we took our picnic lunch. Sitting here we got excellent views of large groups of Red-rumped Swallows and several species of raptors, including some fabulous views of Egyptian Vultures. As we watched raptors coming overhead, a few birds were seen to make the crossing here and we cheered them on as they went. We headed to an area known as El Cabrito (meaning “the kid”) where we watched yet more Griffon Vultures, Short-toed Eagles and Booted Eagles before returning to Huerta Grande for a well-earned rest.

## Day 3

## Wednesday 23rd September

We headed out to the west of the Straits, to an area just above the village of Bolonia within the Sierra de la Plata mountains. Here we could observe fabulous views of Griffon Vultures circling just above our heads and putting on fantastic aerial displays as they left their roosting promontories. We also got to grips with Crag Martins and eventually a Blue Rock Thrush obliged, giving good views as it sat and sang upon a convenient pinnacle. The views from on top here are also spectacular and we looked down upon the Baelo Claudia Roman ruins on the edge of Bolonia, some of the most complete in the world.

As the heat of the day increased, we headed out of the mountains and further to the west to the Monetenmedio Golf course; here we took lunch in the shade and watched a rather obliging Hoopoe. Following this we went up to the club house and on exiting the van we had great views of Northern Bald Ibis. This marvellous species has been extirpated by hunting and land-use change, being now believed to be absent in Turkey, and with the Syrian population likely to go the same way, therefore the success of this re-introduction project, along with the conservation of the Moroccan population, is vital for the future of the species. Fortunately it has been a success: in 2008 a pair laid two eggs in the wild – probably the first such attempt in Spain for well over 500 years! So this was perhaps the rarest species we would encounter on this trip and what a cracker too!

We then had a short drive to the town of Barbate and the salt pans. Here, we clocked some great additions with Eurasian Spoonbill, Greater Flamingos, Black-winged Stilts and Stone-curlew giving fabulous views. We also had very close views of 70+ Audouin’s Gulls. In the scrub, a Spectacled Warbler briefly gave a flitting glimpse enough for a quick identity check, at least four Whinchat flitted along the fence line and Northern Wheatear fed along the shore.

We moved off to our final area of the day, entering the area of La Janda, a huge agricultural area, once one of the biggest lakes and wetlands in Europe with a surface area of 3,700 hectares. Unfortunately, a process of drainage started in the middle of the 19th century and completed in the late 1960s, destroying this ecological wetland wonderland; however, today it still holds a glimmer of that former glory and some fabulous species can be encountered here. We weren't to be disappointed: Glossy Ibis and squadrons of White Storks went overhead and fed in the rice fields. Stopping at some willows, we were able to observe several Spanish Sparrows amongst the House Sparrows as they dropped en masse into the rice crop to feed. Further on, we drove up a narrower road, banked either side with poplar trees screening the cotton fields. About half way up, we had to rename this stretch ‘Turtle Dove Alley’ due to the number of this massively declining migrant; we ended up counting up to 30 but undoubtedly there were more, and we discussed the conservation status of this bird that is now so scarily absent from large areas of the UK. Continued intensification of agriculture is the main culprit, and a lack of seeds over the breeding season means they aren't able to raise enough healthy young. Added to this they are hunted, causing further stresses to an alarmingly stressed population. However, these birds were feeding up

along a cultivated area which was full of arable plants providing small seeds for them to feast upon before they made the crossing into Africa.

At the end of 'Turtle Dove Alley' a large number of Black Storks were rising high on a thermal and we counted 150+. This alley was good because it also yielded a super Black-winged Kite which had us all clambering for views. Heading back along the main track, we finally connected with a fabulous Montagu's Harrier which also shared the frame with that super Black-winged Kite.

Time was marching on fast so we headed back to Huerta Grande and our evening meal.

## Day 4

## Thursday 24th September

This morning we decided to take a trip around the grounds of Huerta Grande, which can be so easily overlooked but can host a large number of passerine migrants. In fact, added to that, there are some wonderful resident species which we encountered: Crested Tit, Hawfinch, Firecrest and Short-toed Treecreeper. The most significant passerine migrant we encountered was a small group of Tree Pipits amongst the trees, feeding on the woodland floor, whilst both Spotted and Pied Flycatcher flitted amongst the branches.

Once we reconvened, we made for Gibraltar and, after a straightforward border crossing, we headed for the Alameda gardens, where we took our picnic. Looking across the harbour, several cruise ships were in for the day, indicating that our visit and our ascent of the Rock via cable car might be somewhat problematic, due to crowds. After realising the queue for the cable car wasn't going to move quickly, we decided to drive up the Rock and get views from there. After some skilful driving, we got as far as we could and this enabled views of several Barbary Macaques.

We then drove back down the Rock and back into Spain, firstly to the Mirador where we got well-earned ice creams and drinks. Here we watched a few close Booted and Short-toed Eagles and then headed down to the raptor watch point of Cazalla, with more Short-toed Eagles, Booted Eagles, Honey Buzzard, Griffon Vultures and Egyptian Vultures all giving breathtaking views, forming a fitting tribute to our trip. Perhaps it was fate then that a mighty Bonelli's Eagle rose up from the valley and crowned a superb raptor- and cetacean-filled trip.

## Day 5

## Friday 25th September

Heading out early, we bid farewell to Katrin and the team and headed on our way to Malaga airport. Arriving in good time, we bid our farewells and got on our various flights to varying UK destinations.

Amy and I had fabulous times in the Straits and we want to thank you for your brilliant company and good humour throughout – every day is a good day in the Straits!

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## Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	September			
			21	22	23	24
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>			✓	
2	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			✓	
3	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓	
4	Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>		2		
5	European Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>		10+		
6	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>		3	30+	
7	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>		5+	150+	60+
8	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	6+	3	300+	5+
9	Northern Bald Ibis	<i>Geronticus eremitus</i>			2	
10	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>			c100	
11	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>			15+	
12	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>			1	
13	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		1+	5+	
15	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			3+	
16	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		3+	✓	
17	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		6		
18	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			5+	
19	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	1			
20	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>			1+	
21	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	1	2	5+	3+
22	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	10+	c5	20+	5+
23	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	20+	40+	✓	✓
24	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	20+	30+	50+	100+
25	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	150+	50+	150+	100+
26	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>	1			
27	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>				1
28	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	20+	10+	✓	✓
29	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	5+	1	20+	2+
30	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>			1+	
31	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	20+	10+	5+	
32	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		14+	2	
33	Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>			6	
34	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		1	2	
35	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>			4	
36	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓	✓	
37	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>		15+	10+	
38	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		10+		
39	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>		1		
40	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		1	10+	
41	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			1	
42	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			2	
43	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		1		
44	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		1	2	
45	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		3		
46	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		✓	✓	
47	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		15+		

	Common name	Scientific name	September			
			21	22	23	24
48	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		20+	✓	
49	Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>		c6	70+	
50	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>		2+	1	
51	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓	
53	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>		50+	20+	
54	Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>		10+	5+	
55	Great Skua	<i>Catharacta skua</i>		2+		
56	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	4	2+	120+	5+
58	European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>			30+	
59	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Great Spotted Cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>			2	
61	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	H	H	H	1
62	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>	20+	200+	50+	10+
63	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	2			
64	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	4	10+		
65	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		1	3+	
66	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>		H		
67	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>			1	
68	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		1	2	2
69	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	5	10+	20+	5+
70	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2+	2+	10+	5
71	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>		1		1
72	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1	1
73	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	1+		1	
74	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	10+		✓	
75	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	12	1	2	2
76	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	2H	1+	3H	3+
77	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
79	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	2+	10+	✓	5+
80	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>		3+		
81	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>			20+	
82	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
83	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓s	✓
84	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>			5+	
85	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
86	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	10+	100+	100+	20+
87	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		2	2	2
88	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>			1	
89	Iberian Chiff-chaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>		1	1	
90	Western Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>			1H	
91	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>		1		
92	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		10+	✓	5+
93	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
94	Spectacled Warbler	<i>Sylvia conspicillata</i>			1	
95	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
96	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	c2	5+	5+	5+
97	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	1	1H	2	2
98	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	1		1	

	Common name	Scientific name	September			
			21	22	23	24
99	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	2+	5+	2+	4+
100	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		3		
101	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
102	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	2	3	✓	✓
103	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	2+		5+	5+
104	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	3+	2+	10+	10+
105	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>	5+		10+	6
106	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>	1+		2+	5+
107	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			3	1
108	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>			4+	1
109	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
110	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			2+	
111	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
112	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>			10+	
113	Spanish Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>		20+	10+	2+
114	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	1	1	1	1
115	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		1+	3	
116	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>				3+
117	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
118	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		3+	2	
119	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	✓	✓	5+
120	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		5+	✓	2
121	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
122	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	10+	10+	20+	10+
123	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		2	20+	
124	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>				2+

## Mammals

1	Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		✓		
2	Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>		✓		
3	Bottle-nose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		✓		
4	Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>		✓		
5	Barbary Macaque	<i>Macaca sylvanus</i>				✓

## Fish:

1	Sunfish	<i>Mola mola</i>		✓		
2	Yellow-finned Tuna	<i>Thunnus albacares</i>		✓		

## Reptiles & Amphibians:

1	Common Toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>			✓	✓
2	Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>		✓	✓	✓
3	Iberian Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis hispanica</i>		✓		✓

## Butterflies & Moths:

1	Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>	✓		✓	✓
2	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>		✓		
3	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓	✓	✓
4	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>			✓	✓
5	Two-Tailed Pasha	<i>Charaxes jasius</i>				✓

	Common name	Scientific name	September			
			21	22	23	24
6	Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>				✓
7	Humming-bird Hawk-moth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>				✓

#### Other Invertebrates:

1	Ruddy Darter	<i>Sympetrum sanguineum</i>			✓	
2	Banded Groundling	<i>Brachythemis leucosticta</i>			✓	
3	Lesser Emperor	<i>Anax parthenope</i>		✓	✓	
4	Banded Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx splendens</i>			✓	
5	Violet Carpenter Bee	<i>Xylocopa violacea</i>		✓		
6	Fiddler Crab	<i>Uca Tangeri</i>		✓		

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