

Gibraltar & Tarifa: Whales, Dolphins & Autumn Migration

Naturetrek Tour Report

15 - 19 September 2016



Booted Eagle



Long-finned Pilot Whales



Pilot Whale underwater



Northern Bald Ibis

Report and images by Niki Williamson and Simon Tonkin



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And a group of 15 Naturetrek clients

Summary

This tour, based at the eco-lodge of Huerta Grande in the village of Pelayo, yielded a total of 108 bird species and a wide range of other interesting species including great views of cetaceans. Bad weather in Northern Spain meant that numbers of migrating raptors were lower than expected early on, but numbers built up during the latter part of the week and the group had spectacular close-up views of all the key raptor species including Booted and Short-toed Eagles, Honey Buzzard and Griffon and Egyptian Vulture. Other highlights of farmland, coastal and inland wetlands, salt pans and Cork Oak forest included Firecrest, Short-toed Treecreeper, Black and White Storks in large numbers, Northern Bald Ibis, Black-winged Kite, Spanish Imperial Eagle, Audouin's Gulls, Cory's and Scopoli's Shearwaters and European Bee-eaters.

Day 1

Thursday 15th September

The group arrived on time on the Easyjet flight from Gatwick to a lovely sunny day in Gibraltar. First through the gate were Julie and Anne who had packed light to avoid the baggage carousels, and who were met by Simon and trainee guide Niki. The brand new terminal at Gibraltar runs smoothly, so the rest of the group soon emerged, accompanied by David.

We completed the short journey to our accommodation at Huerta Grande eco-lodge in two minibuses, spotting several White Storks and a Lesser Kestrel on the way. Once there we were greeted warmly by Katrin and the team.

Before settling into our rooms we were treated to a picnic lunch, during which we were serenaded by calling Firecrest and Short-toed Treecreeper. Our two early arrivals, John and Julie, who had been at Huerta Grande since the previous evening, joined the group for lunch. They were able to tell the others about the large flock of Alpine Swifts that had passed over the lodge that morning.

Next we headed to Cazalla watch-point, in the hope of seeing some raptors kept hanging around by the fairly strong westerly ('Poniente') wind. We were not to be disappointed – the very first bird over was a Spanish Imperial Eagle! What a spectacular start to the trip!

Despite it being a relatively quiet day for raptors, during this stop and a visit to the beautiful El Trafico watch-point by the coast, we were still treated to really good views of Booted Eagles, Short-toed Eagles, and Black Kites as well as a flock of 40+ Bee-eaters and three Whimbrel.

We returned happy to Huerta Grande, stopping at the Mirador café for some well-earned ice cream!

Day 2

Friday 16th September

Today we started the day at Los Lances wetlands, where we had lovely views of Ringed and Kentish Plover in front of the hide, and a selection of other waders including Sanderling, Little Stint, Bar-tailed Godwit, Whimbrel

and Curlew Sandpiper on the pools. Seven Audouin's Gulls were also showing well in a group of predominantly Yellow-legged Gulls.

Heading to Tarifa at noon, we were soon all aboard our boat the Jaquelin, with fantastic viewing seats and flat calm sea. David spotted a group of Sandwich Terns and a Sunfish within minutes of leaving the harbour and we knew we were in for a good trip! Sure enough, as we entered the deeper part of the Straits and several Cory's and Scopoli's Shearwaters drifted by, we encountered the first pod of Long-finned Pilot Whales and it had begun!

Over the next hour or more we encountered pod after pod of the whales, as well as over 100 Striped Dolphins. The entire group were treated not only to spectacular scenes of a sea surface alive with cetaceans, but also sensational close-up views as the whales came to peer in through the glass bottomed area of the boat.

After reaching shore, we headed straight to El Trafico for a late picnic lunch where we could look across the Straits to Morocco's Jebel Musa mountain and reflect on what had been an emotional experience for some!

To cross the Straits, large raptors need thermals from the land and ideally a slight head- or tail-wind to either give them lift or speed their progress. It was warm and almost still but with a slight southerly breeze, so the conditions were perfect for migration. But, Nature being Nature, the skies were relatively quiet again, both at El Trafico and at our final stop at El Algorrobo watch-point. Bad storms in the Pyrenees had caused a migration bottleneck and the birds had not reached us in time to make use of this perfect day.

But every day is a good day in the Straits and we were still able to watch several Honey Buzzards, Short-toed Eagles, Booted Eagles drift over while group members polished off the rest of the picnic wine and Jim chased a Swallowtail butterfly through the thistles!

Day 3

Saturday 17th September

After another delicious Huerta Grande breakfast we set off promptly for Gibraltar, arriving in good time and successfully avoiding the queues that can occasionally be encountered at the border. Finding a parking space at the cable car was another matter! Luckily, Niki was at hand as an extra guide so we were able to abandon Dave to park the remaining bus while the rest of us took the cable car to Top Rock. Here we enjoyed close encounters with Barbary Macaques and some great photographic opportunities.

Having rejoined Dave, who wasted no time in mocking the group with his lone encounter with six Barbary Partridges, we wandered round and picnicked in the lovely Alameda Gardens. The plants here – both native and introduced – make it a great place for butterflies and we were able to view delights such as Monarch, Two-tailed Pasha and Geranium Bronze.

Next stop was Europa point, where we spent a pleasant time getting to know our Shearwaters, which today included groups of Cory's and Scopoli's, as well as three or more Balearics and a good handful of Northern Gannets. We also had a beautiful moment where we looked up to find a Lesser Kestrel hovering low directly above us, watching us watch the Shearwaters!

After pausing briefly for ice cream, we headed over the border and back to the tranquillity of Huerta Grande. Here Simon led a walk around the grounds through the valley and Cork Oak woodland. We encountered resident and migrant specialities such as Short-toed Treecreeper, Firecrest, Crested Tit, and Hawfinch, as well as several Pied Flycatchers and Western Bonelli's Warblers.

Day 4

Sunday 18th September

With the weather in the north having improved and the local conditions once again perfect for migration, we headed straight for Cazalla viewpoint, where the wind was blowing a light and distinctly chilly easterly ('Levante'). Sure enough, raptor numbers were distinctly higher than previous days and we were treated to excellent views of Short-toed and Booted Eagles and Black Kites hanging in the breeze preparing to cross the water to Africa.

As we made a brief coffee stop in Tarifa before our next destination, we noticed that, as the air warmed up, something quite amazing was happening. Simon took the decision to head back up to Cazalla and picnic at the other, less-used viewpoint to the east. Exceptional local knowledge of wind and weather conditions like Simon's is vital to ensure the best raptor-watching experiences and, sure enough, as Simon and Niki prepared the picnic, it became apparent that we had hit the jackpot!

As we lunched we were treated to stunning views of hundreds of eagles, as well as Marsh and Montagu's Harrier and Common Buzzard. A highlight was the arrival of a huge, low-flying flock of excited European Bee-eaters, who circled low over the group as if to say hello! Bee-eaters are Margaret's favourite bird so she was especially thrilled with the experience!

Once we had had our fill, we continued on to Sierra de la Plata, where we were able to see close up the impressive colony of resident Griffon Vultures perching on and circling round the rocks. As we reached the salt pans of Barbate, we came across a large flock of Northern Bald Ibis on neighbouring fields, and the group were able to get within yards of these bizarre, enigmatic birds. The salt pans themselves yielded great views of Kentish Plover, Sanderling and a huge flock of over 200 Audouin's Gulls, as well as four Greater Flamingos and a distant Osprey.

Continuing on to the wetlands and extensively farmed agricultural land at La Janda, we encountered huge flocks of White Storks and Glossy Ibis, and some great views of young Red-rumped Swallows perched up and receiving food from their parents. And then, as if to round off the trip in as spectacular fashion as it began, out of the haze came a stunning Black-winged Kite, which perched on a pylon so close we could look right into its incredible red eyes!

After a long and dusty, but thrilling, day we returned happy for our last delicious evening meal at Huerta Grande.

Day 5

Monday 19th September

Today it was time to say 'Hasta luego!' to the Huerta Grande team and those group members who were remaining in Spain. We made an early start, heading to Gibraltar airport for the trip home, where the odd tear was shed after a wonderful trip!

Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	September			
			15	16	17	18
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>				✓
2	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>				✓
3	Scopoli's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>		1	10+	
4	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>		5	10+	5+
5	Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>			3+	
6	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>				4
7	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>				40+
8	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	5	10+	2+	1500
9	Northern Bald Ibis	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>				29
10	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>				50+
11	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>				3
12	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	5+	50+		1,250+
13	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		4	1	20+
14	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		3		50+
15	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		2+		
16	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				2
17	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>				1
18	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>				1
19	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	1+	2	5	3+
20	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	2	15+		
21	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	20+	30+	20+	50+
22	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	1	8	10+	100+
23	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	5+	10+	100+	200+
24	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>	1		1	
25	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			1	3
26	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>				3
27	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>				3
28	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	4	15+	10+	30+
29	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1	1		4
30	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		1+		
31	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>				4
32	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓		✓
33	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>		20+		20+
34	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		5		
35	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	3	2		
36	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		1+		5+
37	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>				2
38	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>				1
39	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		✓		✓
40	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>		1		
41	Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>		2		
42	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓		
43	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓		✓
44	Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>		7		200+
45	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>		1		
46	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>				2+
47	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	10+	✓	106	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	September			
			15	16	17	18
48	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>				10+
49	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>		4+		
50	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	2			✓
52	European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>		3+		c.10
53	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		1	2	1
55	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>	12+			3+
56	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>		2+	2	✓
57	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>				2+
58	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	40+	70+	50+	70+
59	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		3		2
60	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	2	1	1	1
61	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	2	5+	2	15+
62	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1		1	2
63	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>				1
64	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1	
65	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>				✓
66	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	3+			2
67	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	2+ H	3+	2+	3+
68	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	10+	10+	✓	✓
69	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>			1	2
70	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		1		1+
71	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	✓		20+
72	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>	1+	1		
73	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		1		
74	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
75	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>				✓
76	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>		3		5+
77	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	1	2H	2	3
78	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		2	10+	1
79	Western Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>			3	
80	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	1+	4+		✓
81	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
82	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>	1			
83	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>			1	
84	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
85	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	5+	3	5+	3+
86	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	2+	1	2	✓
87	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		1	1	
88	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	10+	5+	10+	✓
89	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
90	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	10+	✓	✓	✓
91	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	1	1	1	
92	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	2+	1+	10+	
93	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>	1+	1+	5+	2+
94	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>		1		
95	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			1H	
96	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	1	✓
97	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	2			2
98	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	September			
			15	16	17	18
99	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>				5+
100	Spanish Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>		10+		✓
101	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	1+	1+	1	1
102	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
103	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>			2H	
104	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	1+	2	2	✓
105	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>				2
106	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
107	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	1+	✓	✓	✓
108	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		20+		

Mammals

1	Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>		100+		
2	Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>		50+		
3	Barbary Macaque	<i>Macaca sylvanus</i>			✓	
4	Kuhl's Pippestrelle	<i>Pipstrellus kuhlii</i>			✓	

Ocean Fish

1	Sunfish	<i>Mola mola</i>		5+		
2	Triggerfish spp			✓		
3	Grey Mullet	<i>Mugil cephalus</i>		✓		

Reptiles & Amphibians

1	Mediterranean Tree Frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>		✓		
2	Common Toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>			✓	
3	Iberian Rock Lizard	<i>Iberolacerta monticola</i>			✓	
4	Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarantola mauritanica</i>		✓	✓	✓

Other Invertebrates

1	Fiddler Crab Species	<i>Ocypodidae sp.</i>		✓		
2	Southern Hawker	<i>Aeshna cyanea</i>		✓	✓	✓
3	Ruddy Darter	<i>Sympetrum sanguineum</i>				✓
4	Banded Groundling	<i>Brachythemis leucosticta</i>				✓
5	Emperor	<i>Anax imperator</i>		✓		
6	Lesser Emperor	<i>Anax parthenope</i>				✓
7	Blue Flash Grasshopper	<i>Oedipoda caerulea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Egyptian Grasshopper	<i>Anacridium aegypticum</i>	1	✓		
9	Violet Carpenter Bee	<i>Xylocopa violacea</i>				✓
10	Sloe Shield Bug	<i>Dolycoris baccarum</i>				✓

Butterflies & Moths

1	Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>		✓	✓	
2	Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>	1	✓	✓	
3	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>			✓	
4	Geranium Bronze	<i>Gacyreus marshalli</i>		✓	✓	
5	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	✓	✓	✓	
6	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>			✓	✓
7	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>	✓		✓	
8	Two-Tailed Pasha	<i>Charaxes jasius</i>	1		✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	September			
			15	16	17	18
9	Monarch Butterfly	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>	4+	✓	✓	✓
10	Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>			✓	
11	Humming-bird Hawk-moth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>			✓	
12	Red Underwing	<i>Catocala nupta</i>	1			

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Barbary Macaque

David, Simon and Niki had a fabulous time on the tour and we thank the group for being brilliant company and loads of fun throughout. We hope to see you again soon!