

Gibraltar & Tarifa: Whales, Dolphins & Autumn Migration

Naturetrek Tour Report

18 - 22 September 2017



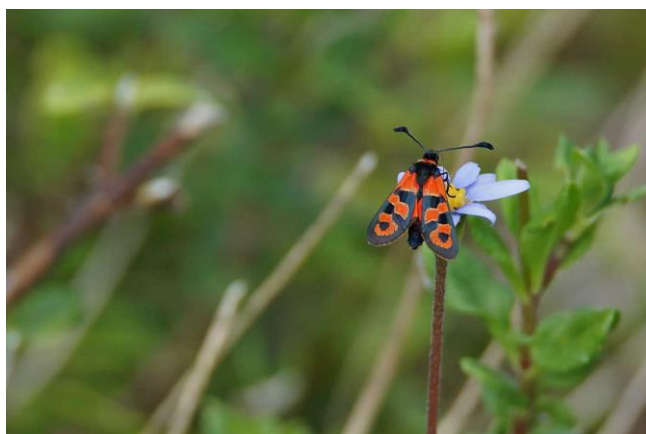
Barbary Macaque



Orca



Spotted Flycatcher



Chalk Burnet

Report and images by Niki Williamson and Simon Tonkin



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Summary

This tour, based at the tranquil eco-lodge of Huerta Grande near Tarifa, took place as the Autumn raptor migration was in full swing. The group was thrilled by spectacular close-up views of hundreds upon hundreds of Booted, Short-toed and Bonelli's Eagles, Montagu's Harriers, European Honey Buzzards, Black Kites, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures and Black Storks, while hirundines and swifts also numbered in their hundreds. As if this wasn't spectacular enough, this lucky group had breath-taking close-up encounters with Orcas during our boat trip. Other highlights of farmland, wetland, inter-tidal habitat and cork oak forest included Firecrest, Short-toed Treecreeper, Crested Tit, Kentish Plover, Black-winged Kite, Audouin's Gull, Wilson's Storm Petrel, Cory's and Scopoli's Shearwaters and European Bee-eater. A day trip to Gibraltar also brought the group face-to-face with Barbary Macaques and Two-tailed Pasha butterflies.

Day 1

Monday 18th September

Our flight from the UK arrived on time into Gibraltar airport, and we were soon out into the arrivals lounge where we met leaders Simon and Niki, who welcomed us to their home in the Strait!

We completed the short journey to our accommodation at Huerta Grande Eco-lodge in two comfortable minibuses, spotting several White Storks, Booted and Short-toed Eagles and Griffon Vultures on the way. Once there we were greeted warmly by owner Katrin and the team. Huerta Grande is set within the cork oak forests of the Los Alcornacales Park, so these resident woodland birds are never far away! Before settling into our rooms we were treated to a light buffet lunch and a glass of wine, during which we were serenaded by calling Crested Tit, Firecrest and Short-toed Treecreeper.

We had a little time to settle in before we headed out to nearby El Algorrobo watchpoint, in the hope of getting our first close-up views of raptors. We weren't disappointed as many raptors were making use of the afternoon thermals and we enjoyed the spectacle of dozens of Booted and Short-toed Eagles, European Honey Buzzards, Griffon Vultures and Sparrowhawks overhead, as well as a Bonelli's Eagle, a Montagu's Harrier and an Egyptian Vulture. Also enjoying the afternoon sun were numerous interesting invertebrates including sparkling Red-veined Darters (a first for Odonata buff Mark!), entertaining Egyptian Mantis, and surprising Blue-winged Grasshoppers.

We returned happy to Huerta Grande, in time for a refreshing gin and tonic before our first taste of chef Juan Carlos's delicious Spanish food!

Day 2

Tuesday 19th September

This morning, after a relaxed breakfast, we headed straight for Cazalla raptor watchpoint, near Tarifa. This site provides stunning views over Tarifa bay, but is also a great spot to pick up raptors leaving their roosts in the surrounding wooded hills. Local knowledge of wind and weather conditions is vital to ensure the best raptor-watching experiences in the area, as these define when and where the biggest raptor concentrations will be. Sure

enough, were able to pick up some stunning morning views of Booted and Short-toed Eagles hanging in the breeze, as they decided what to do next.

Moving on, we visited the inter-tidal habitat of Los Lances, where we had lovely views of Crested and Greater Short-toed Larks on the coastal pastureland. A selection of waders including Common Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Sanderling, Dunlin, Common Redshank and Bar-tailed Godwit were showing well in the pools and on the beach. A number of Audouin's Gulls were also showing well in a group of predominantly Yellow-legged Gulls.

Heading to Tarifa, Simon and Niki took the group straight to a café overlooking the marina to have a coffee and a snack before our boat trip, run by responsible whale-watching and research firm, Turmares. We were soon aboard our boat and had fantastic viewing seats. The sea was flat calm as we entered the deeper part of the Strait of Gibraltar and it wasn't long before the Turmares team spotted something. The captain turned and whispered rather loudly to Simon "Orcas...sssbhbbb" - but he had already given the game away! This was completely unexpected as we were at the wrong time of the year and in the wrong part of the Strait, but sure enough there they were! Again and again we saw the group which was possibly up to five individuals, including an enormous male. They were feeding in the area, not passing through, so we were able to remain in those waters and get repeated views as they arched powerfully through the surface waters, often right alongside the boat! They were joined by a pod of around a dozen Bottle-nose Dolphins. It was an absolutely thrilling experience which reduced some of the group to tears, and resulted in one very soggy cardigan (sorry Eunace!)

When occasionally we drew breathe to look at the birds, we saw Cory's and Scopoli's Shearwaters, Northern Gannet and Great Skua, and as we headed back towards Tarifa we were greeted by an enormous flock of over 100 migrating White Storks.

After reaching shore we headed straight to the raptor watchpoint at El Trafico for a late picnic lunch, where we could look across the Strait to Morocco's Jebel Musa mountain and reflect on our emotional boat trip! We found ourselves in the middle of a stream of hirundines with almost countless Barn Swallows, House Martins and Red-rumped Swallows dashing passed us. We also encountered many calling Yellow Wagtails and a flock of European Bee-eaters quipping excitedly. We also explored the excellent display at the Observatorio del Estrecho, staffed by the wonderful Fundacion Migres, who have been monitoring avian migration across the Strait for over 20 years.

Calling in at Mirador del Estrecho for a celebratory ice cream, we could see that raptors were still on the move, so before returning to Huerta Grande to freshen up for our meal, we made a brief detour to a nearby area known only as 'Niki's Watchpoint'! Here raptors often start to settle in the evenings, and sure enough we were treated to very close views of an Atlas Long-legged Buzzard, perched up on a pylon. This beautiful buzzard is an African species which occasionally drifts across the Strait to Spain.

Day 3

Wednesday 20th September

With the continuing *levante* wind, we again started our day at Cazalla for our early morning raptor hit! Today we were really in amongst it and were blown away by the site of over 300 Short-toed and Booted Eagles gathering around the watchpoint, waiting for thermals to gain height on.

We were admiring a Peregrine Falcon perched on a nearby electricity pylon when what should come into view but a stunning flash of turquoise – a European Roller! Almost before everyone had seen it, the Peregrine spotted it too! We watched, hearts in mouths, as it gave chase right in front of us. We waited for a dramatic ‘poof’ of electric blue-green feathers, but the agile Roller gave the Peregrine the slip!

Moving on to our next site, we made a stop in the seaside town of Bolonia to indulge in our daily ice cream! Suitably refreshed, we continued on to Sierra de la Plata, taking in the spectacular views down onto the roman ruins of Baelo Claudia. We enjoyed memorable views of Griffon Vultures perched up on the rocks, and both male and female Blue Rock Thrush were showing well perched atop the rocky outcrops.

We took our picnic lunch further round the hillside, opposite a colony of 100+ Griffon Vultures. While relaxing in the afternoon sun with a glass of wine and a selection of salads and local cheeses, chorizos and hams, we were able to see close up these impressive birds perching on and circling round the rocks. It was difficult to be distracted from the delicious lunch to see Egyptian Vultures, Crag Martins and low Alpine Swifts, but those who looked up weren’t disappointed!

In the afternoon we continued to the low intensity agricultural land at La Janda. Once a vast wetland, this area was drained in Franco’s time, but its rice paddies and low intensity grazed areas are still great for wildlife and hint at the site’s former glory. Along the fence lines we encountered many Corn Buntings and Zitting Cisticolas, and around ten smart Spanish Sparrows in a flock of hundreds of House Sparrows. Many Yellow Wagtails were also moving through the area. In the wetter fields, many White Storks, Greater Flamingoes, Eurasian Spoonbills, Little Egrets and Glossy Ibis were feeding. Among these long-legged birds moved numerous waders including Green Sandpiper, Northern Lapwing, Common Snipe, Black-winged Stilt and Ruff. We also had stunning views of many Montagu’s and Marsh Harriers quartering the fields all around us.

Moving to the upland area of the farm, we encountered around ten European Turtle Doves feeding by the roadside, and were able to observe a distant but gleaming Black-winged Kite perched on an irrigation boom.

Day 4

Thursday 21st September

We set off for Gibraltar straight after breakfast, crossing the border smoothly as ever and heading straight for the cablecar to Top Rock. Here we enjoyed close encounters with mischievous Barbary Macaques and had some great photographic opportunities. Poor Mark, supposedly in the safety of the café, was robbed of his crisps! It was an unusual, atmospheric morning at the top, with the *levante*, or easterly wind pushing swirling clouds up the rock. In the misty peace and quiet we had superb views of two Blue Rock Thrushes singing.

Arriving back down, we wandered round the lovely Alameda Gardens. The plants here, both native and introduced, make it a great place for butterflies. We soon found massive Monarchs, and Two-tailed Pashas – Europe’s largest butterfly. As the day warmed up tiny Geranium Bronzes and Lang’s Short-tailed Blues emerged, and we also encountered an interesting Chalk Burnet moth. Pied and Spotted Flycatchers and Iberian Chiffchaffs were busy in the overhanging trees.

Next stop was Europa Point, where we took our picnic by the sea, looking out from the UK’s most southerly point. Large splashes in the water just offshore at first suggested cetaceans, but we were actually watching a

group of enormous Blue-finned Tuna hunting. We spent a pleasant time observing seabirds, with views of Audouin's Gull among the Yellow-legged Gulls, Cory's and Balearic Shearwaters, and Northern Gannets.

After pausing briefly for ice cream, we headed over the border and back to finish the day, and the trip, at El Algorrobo raptor watchpoint. We weren't alone, and we enjoyed an afternoon glass of wine surrounded by many Griffon Vultures, Booted Eagles and Short-toed Eagles, as well as an Egyptian Vulture, a Marsh Harrier and a Common Buzzard.

Returning to the tranquility of Huerta Grande, Simon took some of us on a stroll around the grounds to make sure everyone had caught up with Hawfinch, Crested Tit and Firecrest, before it was time to enjoy one last meal; tonight a hearty traditional paella – and share our highlights of the trip over a glass of local dessert brandy.

Day 5

Friday 22nd September

Today it was time to say “Hasta luego!” to the Strait and the Huerta Grande team. Before breakfast, some explored the contents of the moth trap Simon and Niki had set up the night before. We enjoyed seeing Pine Processionary Moths, delightful Buff-tips and Mediterranean Tigers before our final Huerta Grande breakfast.

We then left Huerta Grande and arrived at Gibraltar airport in plenty of time to enjoy refreshments on the airport terrace overlooking the Rock. Simon and Niki had enjoyed welcoming the group to their home and sharing the delights of the Strait, and thanked them for their great company.

The return flight landed back in the UK, where another Naturetrek adventure came to an end.

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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	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>			✓		
2	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>			1		
3	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓		
4	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>			✓		
5	Scopoli's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>		1			
6	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>		5+		4+	
7	Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>				2	
8	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>			20+		
9	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>			13		
10	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	20+	100+	300+	30+	
11	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>			200+		
12	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>			20+		
13	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		✓	1,500+	✓	
14	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		1	3	1	
15	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			✓		
16	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		5+		1	
17	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>			1		
18	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	1		2	1	
19	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	60+	10+	5+	3	
20	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	10+	5+	100+	40+	
21	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	15+	50+	300+	20+	
22	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraetus pennatus</i>	40+	100+	150+	70+	
23	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>	1				
24	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	4+	4+	c.5	3	
25	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			20+	1	
26	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>	1		15+		
27	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>			1		
28	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	1		4		
29	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			3	1	
30	Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>		1			
31	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			c.10		
32	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>			20+		
33	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			10+		
34	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		200+			
35	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>		10+			
36	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			10+		
37	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		20+			
38	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		2			
39	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			30+		
40	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		1			
41	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>			2		
42	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		50+			
43	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		20+			
44	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				1	
45	Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>		c.5		1	
46	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓		✓	
47	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		3			

	Common name	Scientific name	September				
			18	19	20	21	22
48	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>		2			
49	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>				1	
50	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
51	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>			✓		
52	European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>			10+		
53	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
54	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	1	1	1	2	
55	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>	50+	200+	500+		
56	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>		4			
57	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			2		
58	European Roller	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>			1		
59	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>		150+	5+	30+	
60	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>			2		
61	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		1		1	
62	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	2	6+	70+	3	
63	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1	2	
64	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>			✓		
65	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			1		
66	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	3		1	2+	
67	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	1+		✓	✓	
68	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	1	2	✓	✓	
69	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		10+	✓		
70	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>		2	1		
71	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		1	20+		
72	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		50+	✓	✓	
73	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		70+	50+		
74	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓	5+		
75	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>		10+		15+	
76	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	1	1	1	2	
77	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	1+			3+	
78	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus</i>	1+			1	
79	Western Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>				1	
80	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		2+	5+		
81	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	3+	10+	✓	✓	
82	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	1	✓	✓	✓	
83	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	4	2	5+	3	
84	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	1+		1	2	
85	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	2	3	2+	5+	
86	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
87	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		1	✓	✓	
88	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>				2+	
89	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		1+	5+	3+	
90	Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>		1			
91	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>				2+	
92	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			2	2	
93	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓		
94	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		1			
95	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
96	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>			c.10		
97	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>		✓	✓		
98	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1		1	

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			18	19	20	21	22
99	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
100	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>				2	
101	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>			10+		
102	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
103	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	3+			20+	
104	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		10+	✓		

Mammals

1	Bottle-nose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		12			
2	Orca	<i>Orcinus orca</i>		5			
3	Barbary Macaque	<i>Macaca sylvanus</i>				✓	

Fish

1	Sun Fish	<i>Mola mola</i>		1			
2	Flying fish sp.					✓	
3	Blue-finned Tuna	<i>Thunnus thynnus</i>				✓	
4	Grey Mullet	<i>Mugil cephalus</i>				✓	

Dragonflies

1	Migrant Hawker	<i>Aeshna mixta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
2	Emperor	<i>Anax imperator</i>	✓		✓	✓	
3	Southern Hawker	<i>Aeshna cyanea</i>				✓	
4	Ruddy Darter	<i>Sympetrum sanguineum</i>				✓	
5	Banded Groundling	<i>Brachythemis leucosticta</i>			✓		
6	Red-veined Darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Butterflies & Moths

1	Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>		✓		✓	
2	Geranium Bronze	<i>Cacyreus marshalli</i>		✓		✓	
3	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>	✓			✓	
4	Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>				✓	
5	Two-Tailed Pasha	<i>Charaxes jasius</i>				✓	
6	Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
7	Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>				✓	
8	Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>				✓	
9	Safflower Skipper	<i>Pyrgus carthami</i>				✓	
10	Chalk Burnet	<i>Zygaena fausta</i>				✓	
11	Cleopatra	<i>Gonepteryx cleopatra</i>			✓		
12	Oak Hook-tip	<i>Watsonalla binaria</i>	✓				
13	Chinese Character	<i>Cilix glaucata</i>	✓				
14	Pine Processionary	<i>Thaumetopoea pityocampa</i>					✓
15	Vestal	<i>Rhodometra sacraria</i>		✓			
16	Dorset Cream Wave	<i>Stegania trimaculata</i>					✓
17	Buff-tip	<i>Phalera bucephala</i>					✓
18		<i>Campaea honoraria</i>					✓
19	Scarce Footman	<i>Manulea complana</i>					✓
20	Mediterranean Tiger	<i>Cymbalophora pudica</i>					✓
21	Least Yellow Underwing	<i>Noctua interjecta</i>					✓
22	Lunar Thorn	<i>Selenia lunularia</i>					✓

	Common name	Scientific name	September				
			18	19	20	21	22
23	Canary-shouldered Thorn	<i>Ennomos alniaria</i>					✓

Amphibians & Reptiles



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

Others

1	Egyptian Mantis sp.	<i>Miomantis sp.</i>	✓	✓		✓	
2	Blue-winged Grasshopper	<i>Oedipoda caerulea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
3	Wartbiter Bush-cricket	<i>Decticus verrucivorus</i>			✓		
4	Fiddler Crab sp.	<i>Uca sp.</i>		✓			
5	Squirting Cucumber	<i>Ecballium elaterium</i>			✓		