

Gibraltar & Tarifa: Whales, Dolphins & Autumn Migration

Naturetrek Tour Report

12 - 16 September 2018

Report compiled by Simon Tonkin



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Tour participants: Simon Tonkin (leader) and a group of eight Naturetrek clients

Summary

Avian migration was in full swing for this tour based at the tranquil eco-lodge of Huerta Grande near Tarifa. It yielded spectacular close-up views of hundreds upon hundreds of raptors and other soaring birds, including Booted, Short-toed Eagles, Montagu's Harriers, European Honey Buzzards, Black Kites, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures and Black Storks as they migrated across the Straits of Gibraltar. Hirundines, swifts, European Bee-eaters and other migrant passerines also poured through in their hundreds. On a boat trip into the Straits themselves, the group had breath-taking close-up encounters with Long-finned Pilot Whales, as well as Cory's, Balearic and Great Shearwaters. Other highlights of farmland, wetland, inter-tidal habitat and cork oak forest included Red-necked Nightjar, Firecrest, Short-toed Treecreeper, Crested Tit, Kentish Plover, Black-eared Wheatear and Northern Bald Ibis. A day trip to Gibraltar also brought the group face-to-face with Barbary Macaques and Two-tailed Pasha.

Day 1

Wednesday 12th September

After arriving into Gibraltar airport, where Simon met the group, we made our way the short distance to our accommodation at Huerta Grande rural eco-lodge, at the edge of Los Alcornacales Natural Park. We relaxed, having our lunch as Booted Eagles, Griffon Vultures and a group of European Bee-eaters passed overhead and Crested Tits and Firecrest called from the trees around.

After relaxing awhile and settling into our log cabins in the woods, we were soon heading out along the coast to the raptor watchpoint of Cazalla. Here we were literally surrounded by migrating raptors, with whirling vortices of Honey Buzzards, Egyptian Vultures, Booted Eagles, Short-toed Eagles and Montagu's Harriers. We delighted at our proximity to the birds: next to us, above us and even below us! They were also joined by Black Storks and then a huge group of over a thousand White Storks.

Day 2

Thursday 13th September

Our first stop was at Los Lances intertidal habitat, where we picked up our first waders in the form of Kentish and Common Ringed Plovers alongside Sanderling and Dunlins. Yellow Wagtails and Greater Short-toed Larks called overhead and we also found Northern Wheatear and Whinchat.

Walking down through the old town of Tarifa to catch our cetacean-watching boat, we enjoyed observing the Lesser Kestrel colony in the Castillo Guzman el Bueno, where we obtained fantastic views of juveniles and an adult male whilst discussing the salient identification features.

We were soon boarding our boat out into the Strait itself and, as we cruised out, we observed Northern Gannets and our first Cory's Shearwaters, as well as Mediterranean Flying Fish. As we headed out further, we encountered a large group of Common Dolphins, which jumped out to have a better look at us and for us to have a better look at them! Amongst them we found a large Shearwater which we readily identified as a Great Shearwater! This is a rare species in the Straits and a welcome addition both to our list and those of some friends on the boat too.

Before too long we headed to a pod of Long-finned Pilot Whales, which passed right under the boat to give us views through the glass bottom as well as close-by views above deck.

We headed back to port in Tarifa taking a slight detour due to some swimmers crossing from Europe to Africa! In doing so, we picked up a single Balearic Shearwater. Heading back into port, a huge number of Black Kites were passing out over Tarifa and so we got back into our birding wagon and headed to the watchpoint at El Trafico. Here there were huge clouds of raptors and storks! We counted 95 Eurasian Sparrowhawks passing over us, as well as legions of over a thousand Black Kites, 900+ Booted Eagles, Short-toed Eagles, Honey Buzzards and a good proportion of the global population of Egyptian Vultures! All this while the group were supping local wines and eating local cheeses and freshly baked bread - we thought we were in Elysium!

We ended the day there, enraptured by the constant flow of soaring birds crossing the Straits.

Day 3

Friday 14th September

Today we headed west to La Janda – an area of farmland that used to be one of Spain’s most important wetlands. Now used for the cultivation of rice and cotton, the 19th-Century draining of this massive wetland is thought to be Spain’s biggest ever ecological disaster. However, the wet fields and network of irrigation ditches mean that there are still many wetland birds to be found here, and it still holds onto some of its former glory, particularly during migration season. Plans to restore an area of this important habitat may hopefully soon come to fruition.

As we drove along the tracks between fields we were able to find a single juvenile Purple Heron which lolloped ahead of us, as Glossy Ibis sprang from the rice fields and Zitting Cisticolas bounced beside us. We also spotted Montagu’s Harriers and Marsh Harriers too.

As we drove further into the area we found Spanish Sparrows amongst thousands of House Sparrows and 24+ Turtle Doves nervously balanced on the overhead power cables.

Next, we moved up to an area that Simon knew to host a very special *Caprimulgus* species. After quite a lot of searching we found the Red-necked Nightjar day-roosting only two metres from our objective lens, so by keeping completely silent and working as a team, we ensured we didn’t disturb this crepuscular gem. In doing so, we not only paid due respect to the individual, but it also allowed us to get some mind-blowing views and photos. It wasn’t long before we found another right behind us and we again gave it the respect these fabulous birds need and deserve.

We took lunch by the farm here and even then, we found ourselves maintaining hushed tones despite being out of earshot of the Red-necked Nightjars! We toasted our special up-close-and-personal moment with the Red-necked Nightjars with local cheeses, bread and salads, seasoned with traditionally extracted salt!

Following our picnic, we headed to a private area where we were able to see Northern Bald Ibis and discuss the rarity of this reintroduced and breeding bird now in Spain. We moved on from here to the disused salt pans of Barbate. Here we found more Northern Bald Ibis feeding in a cattle field alongside a big group of *flava* Yellow Wagtails, Crested Larks and Greater Short-toed Larks.

Scanning the salt pans gave us great views of Greater Flamingo, Caspian Terns, Audouin's Gull and several species of wading bird which allowed for close comparison for identification purposes.

Day 4

Saturday 15th September

Today saw us migrating the short distance into Gibraltar and up to the top of the rock via the cable car after making the disconcerting drive across the airport runway!

At the top of the rock we observed the Barbary Macaques. Originally from the nearby Rif and Atlas Mountains of Morocco, currently some 300 animals in five troops occupy the Upper Rock.

After having a selfie with a Macaque, we descended in the cable car and wandered through the Alameda Gardens, where we had surprise encounter with Charlie Perez - an old friend of Simon's and a super nice chap of legendary ornithological status. He shared with us the latest news of bird-ringing and conservation on the Rock of Gibraltar. Charlie bid us farewell and we continued our foray into the gardens. Here we almost immediately found a Hummingbird Hawk-moth, later realising the gardens were teeming with them. We soon found a beautiful Monarch butterfly and then Europe's largest native butterfly, the amazing Two-tailed Pasha. In the canopy we found Spotted and Pied Flycatchers and, for those who looked down, we found Geranium Bronze butterflies.

We then drove the short distance to Gibraltar's southernmost point at Europa Point where we took our now legendary picnic lunch! From here were able to observe a pod of Striped Dolphins surrounded by Cory's Shearwaters, two Balearic Shearwaters and Northern Gannets.

We took our obligatory ice cream and headed back into Spain and on to Cazalla watchpoint to get the last migrating raptor experience of the trip. We weren't disappointed as the skies were full once more! One of the most amazing highlights was having European Bee-eaters flying between us at knee-level!

A storm was heading in our direction, so we decided to head into it! We wanted to see if raptors, hirundines and European Bee-eaters were heading along the front of it. By the time we got to the area the storm had dissipated, but we did manage to add Red-rumped Swallows and Black-eared Wheatears to the list as a result of the short detour.

Day 5

Sunday 16th September

All too soon our migratory experience had come to an end and we were forced to bid farewell to our beloved migratory spectacles!

Loading up, we made our final journey together, whether it was to Algeciras train station or to the airport. Crossing the border into Gibraltar we made it to airport in good time.

We had a brilliant adventure from start to finish and truly experienced some of the best days of migration and friendship! Simon hopes the group will be back next year...or even before!

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Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	September				
			12	13	14	15	16
1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			✓		
2	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓		
3	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>			✓		
4	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>		4		50+	
5	Great Shearwater	<i>Puffinus gravis</i>		1			
6	Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>		1		2	
7	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>			200+		
8	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	37	20+		29	
9	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	1,500	1000+	150+	300+	20+
10	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		3	50+		
11	Northern Bald Ibis	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>			16		
12	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>			5		
13	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>			1		
14	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	8	✓	✓	✓	
15	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			✓		
16	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>			1		
17	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			30+		
18	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		4		2	
19	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	1	2	1		
20	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	17	50+		3	
21	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	20+	10+		1	
22	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	12		20+	10+	
23	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	50+	500+	3	30+	
24	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	200+	800+	2	50+	2
25	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	10+	95	1	30+	1
26	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	2	1	10+	2+	
27	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>	8	1+			
28	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	400+	1,500	1	50+	
29	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			1		
30	Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>			8		
31	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>			4		
32	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		40+	100+		
33	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>		2	50+		
34	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>			2		
35	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			20+		
36	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			3+		
37	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			2		
38	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		1			
39	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		10+	✓		
40	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		5+	10+		
41	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>			✓		
42	Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>			200+		
43	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
44	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓		
45	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>			3		
46	Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>			2		
47	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	September				
			12	13	14	15	16
48	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>			150+		
49	European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>			24		
50	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	1	1	1		1
52	Red-necked Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus ruficollis</i>			2		
53	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>		✓	✓		
54	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>		✓		✓	✓
55	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			1		
56	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	23	10+		60+	
57	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		2	2	1	
58	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>			1		
59	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	2+	10+	4	5+	
60	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1		
61	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>			✓		
62	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			3		
63	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	3	2		2	
64	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	3	1+		✓	
65	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	2	1	1	✓	
66	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>	1+				
67	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		1+	✓		
68	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>		20+	30+		
69	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	✓				
70	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
71	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓	✓		
72	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>				4	
73	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		2	1	2	
74	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			1		
75	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus iberia</i>	1	1	1	1	
76	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		2	10+	1	
77	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	1	1	5+	✓
78	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
79	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	2+	2	1+	3	2
80	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	1	1	1	2	1
81	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	1		1	1	2
82	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
83	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
84	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>				3	
85	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
86	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>			1	3	
87	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>		1	1	3	
88	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	4	✓	✓	✓	1
89	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		1	2		
90	Black-eared Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>				1	
91	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
92	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>			✓		
93	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flav</i>		✓	✓	3+	
94	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1	1	1	1
95	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>					1
96	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
97	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>			✓	✓	✓
98	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>			✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	September				
			12	13	14	15	16
99	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
100	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>			1		1
101	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		5+	✓		

Mammals

1	Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		60+			
2	Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>				20+	
3	Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>		5+			

Insects

4	Red-veined Darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>			✓		
5	Violet Dropwing	<i>Trithemis annulata</i>			✓		
6	Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>	2	1		1	
7	Geranium Bronze	<i>Cacyreus marshalli</i>				✓	
8	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>			✓		
9	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
10	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>	✓	✓	✓		
11	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
12	Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
13	Two-Tailed Pasha	<i>Charaxes jasius</i>				4	
14	Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>		✓			
15	Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>				2+	
16	Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>				✓	
17	Hummingbird Hawk-moth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>				✓	
18	Vestal	<i>Rhodometra sacraria</i>			✓		
19	European Firebug	<i>Pyrrhocoris apterus</i>	✓				

Reptiles & Amphibians

20	Mediterranean Tree Frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>	1			1	
21	Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>	1		✓	✓	
22	Iberian Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis hispanica</i>	1		✓	✓	
23	Mediterranean Pond Turtle	<i>Mauremys leprosa</i>				3	