

Gibraltar & Tarifa: Whales, Dolphins & Autumn Migration

Naturetrek Tour Report

10 - 14 September 2019



Egyptian Vulture



Migrating White Storks



Roosting Red-necked Nightjar

Report by Niki Williamson
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Tour participants: Simon Tonkin & Niki Williamson (leaders) and a group of 15 Naturetrek clients

Summary

Based at the tranquil eco-lodge of Huerta Grande near Tarifa, our group found themselves in the midst of the East Atlantic Flyway's famed migration spectacle! Breath-taking close-up views of hundreds upon hundreds of raptors and other soaring birds awaited us, including Booted and Short-toed Eagles, European Honey Buzzards, Egyptian Vultures, Black Kites, and both White and Black Storks as they migrated across the Straits of Gibraltar. Alpine, Common and Pallid Swifts, European Bee-eaters and other migrant passerines also poured through in their hundreds.

On a boat trip into the Straits themselves, the group found themselves surrounded by playful Striped, Common and Bottlenose Dolphins, and had close encounters with Long-finned Pilot Whales.

In Gibraltar the maritime action continued with a Blue Planet-esque encounter with over 500 Cory's Shearwaters and innumerable submerged Yellowfin Tuna battling it out to devour a shoal of Mediterranean Flying Fish! The group also enjoyed Geranium Bronze, Two-tailed Pasha and Monarch butterflies and Barbary Macaques.

Views of ultra-rare Northern Bald Ibis and a snoozing Red-necked Nightjar stood out amongst the many other highlights of farmland, wetland, inter-tidal habitat and Cork Oak forest on this amazing Nature-packed trip!

Day 1

Tuesday 10th September

After connecting with local guides Simon & Niki at Gibraltar airport, the group were whisked across the border into Spain, through the coastal conurbation of La Linea, Los Barrios and Algeciras (complete with loitering White Storks!) and up into the wooded hills of Los Alcornocales Natural Park.

Soon we were all enjoying a light lunch and a glass of wine in the tranquil reception area of Huerta Grande, our eco-lodge accommodation, surrounded by the calls of Short-toed Treecreepers, Hawfinch and Eurasian Blackcaps. After lunch there was time to settle into rooms, whether they be alluring log cabins in the woods or a room in an early 20th Century house, once used as a retreat for Spanish military top brass.

The wind was a brisk westerly or *poniente* today, so we headed out to the coast to look for raptors defying the weather and attempting the crossing to Africa.

At Punta Carnero, we immediately found ourselves in the midst of a mass passage of Alpine Swifts, these huge swifts expressing their aerial prowess all around us, accompanied by an entourage of House and Sand Martins and Barn Swallows.

The group were able to get their first looks at Black Kites and both dark and light morph Booted Eagles heading out to sea.

A Western Osprey – at first presumed to be an exhausted migrant returning from a failed crossing – turned out to be fishing just off the coast, presumably looking for a packed lunch for the journey ahead! As it quartered, it flushed a small group of Audouin’s Gulls off the rocks.

We made another stop on an old military road in the hills above Tarifa. Here the wind was certainly invigorating! The leaders had used local knowledge to pick a fine birding stop however, and we were treated to views of Egyptian Vultures, Eurasian Sparrowhawks, Short-toed and Booted Eagles surfing the wind. An unexpected treat was a far-away but unmistakable flock of five Northern Bald Ibis scooting over the distant hillsides!

We finished our introductory day with a stop for ice cream at the Mirador del Estrecho café, complete with views over the Strait to Morocco and an accompaniment of Short-toed Eagles, Booted Eagles and migrating Marsh Harriers!

Day 2

Wednesday 11th September

As the sun began to warm this beautiful day, the group were already in position at Cazalla raptor watchpoint. The morning silence was broken by a jubilant group of European Bee-eaters, the first of the day’s guests at the migration party!

Soon the raptors began to arrive in numbers, with Black Kites, Booted and Short-toed Eagles making up the largest numbers in the steady stream drifting towards us from nearby hillsides. Honey Buzzards were truly stunning, beautifully marked and within easy reach of the photographers of the group.

We were thrilled to see numerous Egyptian Vultures – this gorgeous but critically endangered vulture making up a good proportion of the passing raptors. A group of similarly endangered Black Storks provided yet another uplifting moment.

But perhaps even more exciting was a young Bonelli’s Eagle, which clearly had an eye towards preying on some of these distracted birds of prey as it flew amongst them! We were also treated to a flyby by a young Spanish Imperial Eagle, also keen to get in on the action!

We headed down to lunch on the cliffs at El Trafico, looking right out into the Strait and the imposing rocky coastline of Morocco. A grumpy-looking Little Owl oversaw proceedings from a nearby ruin.

Amongst the many passing raptors, a Gibraltar Buzzard – a local phenomenon resulting from the occasional interbreeding of Common and Atlas Long-legged buzzards – provided an interesting talking point. Once again, our young Bonelli’s Eagle appeared, this time causing trouble for the local Lesser Kestrels!

As people tucked into their lavish selection of local cheeses, salads, olives and meats, the cry went up that “the Storks are coming!!” Starting as mere specks in the distance, soon a flock of nearly 300 White Storks was streaming over our heads and out over the sea. We watched their migratory journey until they were mere specks again!

Already an exciting day, but now it was time for our boat trip! We walked down through the picturesque old town of Tarifa to the port, where we boarded our boat with the Foundation for Information and Research on Marine Mammals (FIRMM). Pioneers of cetacean-watching in the Straits, they use our curiosity to fund their research and monitoring!

We zipped out over the waves, picking up Northern Gannets, Cory's Shearwaters, a couple of Balearic Shearwaters and a small flock of migrating Black Terns as we went. There were many Sunfish bobbing in the waves and the odd Mediterranean Flying Fish shot past.

This latter is a favoured food of delphids, and it wasn't long before we were amongst them too! At first, we encountered small pods of dolphins, but as our trip went on they seemed to become more and more! By the end we had seen over 200 Striped, Common and Bottlenose Dolphins, many of them coming right up to the boat.

They travelled alongside us, breaking the surface so we could see their markings and enjoy the rugby ball-shaped infants amongst them! There was a fantastic moment when a group of twenty or more Striped Dolphins were in a line, surfing a wave in unison, heading right for the boat! As if it couldn't get any better, several groups of Long-finned Pilot Whales moved sedately around us, again coming close to inspect the boat while we were stationary.

This had been quite an exceptional day! We returned happy to Huerta Grande to enjoy a refreshing G&T or beer before tucking into one of chef Juan Carlos's delicious three course meals.

Day 3

Thursday 12th September

Today we would head out to explore some of the area's excellent wetland and farmland habitats, starting with the nature reserve which now occupies the site of the disused saltpans of Barbate.

Our first stop overlooked some shallow bays at the south-eastern end of the reserve, and we immediately began to enjoy a nice selection of wading birds, including Kentish and Common Ringed Plovers, Black-tailed Godwit, Black-winged Stilt, Whimbrel, Common Redshank, Greenshank, Green Sandpiper, Sanderling and Red Knot. A single Slender-billed Gull paddled amongst them and we enjoyed views of Caspian and Sandwich Tern, Western Osprey and a group of thirty Audouin's Gulls. Over 200 Greater Flamingoes fed in the shallows.

A flock of larks in the pasture behind us included Crested, Calandra and Greater Short-toed Larks, and Yellow Wagtails of both *iberiae* and *flava* races were present. A sole European Turtle Dove whizzed by and a couple of migrating Woodchat Shrikes hung out in the scrub.

After lunch amongst the pines, picking up Pied and Spotted Flycatchers and Short-toed Treecreepers, we made a comfort stop and headed to our next site on the farmlands of La Janda.

On the way we were thrilled to pick up on one of the area's much sought-after inhabitants. A flock of Northern Bald Ibis had gathered on nearby pastureland! With only around 1,000 individuals left in the wild, this is one of the world's rarest birds, not to mention the most characterful! We watched as these iridescent, grotesque-yet-

beautiful birds probed in the soil. Their presence here is the result of a successful reintroduction programme, the first phase of which concluded in 2018, and the population continues to do well here.

The rice fields and pasturelands of the former Laguna de la Janda continue to hold on to some of their natural glory which must have been spectacular prior to the draining of this wetland in the early 20th century. We enjoyed large flocks of Common, Pallid and Alpine Swifts overhead, encountering over a thousand during our visit. Corn Buntings, European Linnets and European Goldfinches were also present in huge feeding flocks.

But the highlight was yet to come. Stopping at a scrubby area, Simon and Niki bade the group to wait in silence while they conducted a careful scan of the undergrowth. It wasn't long before the treasure was revealed – a roosting Red-necked Nightjar was visible just metres from the roadside! In a superb team effort, we all succeeded in obtaining intimate scope views of this resting migrant, leaving it completely undisturbed by our actions.

Day 4

Friday 13th September

Today we returned to the UK! We crossed the border back into Gibraltar to enjoy a taste of Little England in the sun.

We were soon riding the cable car to the top of The Rock, where we enjoyed spectacular views over Algeciras Bay and out into the Mediterranean, and views of two engaging Blue Rock Thrushes. A solitary Barbary Macaque watched us from its chill-out spot atop a wall. Several more were seen from the cable car, scattered around the landscape, demonstrating their right to rove The Rock as they pleased.

We took a wander around the Alameda Gardens, where a rosemary bush near the entrance proved very productive for views of Geranium Bronze butterflies. Further in, the wildlife garden yielded amazing views of several Two-tailed Pasha, Europe's biggest butterfly, feeding on flowers and fruit. A single Monarch butterfly sailed past. Introduced in the 18th century as eggs on Milkweed plants, these glamorous Americans provide a welcome addition to local wildlife.

For lunch we headed to Europa point, the most southerly point of the peninsula. We were thrilled to find a huge shoal (or flock?!) of Mediterranean Flying Fish in the bay area, which were being devoured from both above and below by hundreds of Cory's Shearwaters and Yellowfin Tuna! They would fling themselves skywards, chased by launching Tuna, only to be grabbed on the wing by the shearwaters! The whole spectacle went on for over an hour, and was like something you might expect to see on a particularly enthralling episode of Blue Planet!

All the while this continued, the group enjoyed a feast of their own, tucking into our delicious seaside picnic!

It was soon time to head back to our Spanish home at Huerta Grande, where the group enjoyed their last three course meal and relaxation in the wooded grounds.

Day 5

Saturday 14th September

All too soon our trip was at an end! We headed once again to Gibraltar, this time to catch our flights home or head on to local hotels.

Simon and Niki thoroughly enjoyed hosting this wonderful enthusiastic group at our home in The Straits of Gibraltar, and would like to thank them for witty banter, great fun and superb company throughout. We hope to see you all again soon!

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Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	September				
			10	11	12	13	14
1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			4		
2	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	2	6	4		
3	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>			1		
4	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>		10		500	
5	Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>		5			
6	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>			200		
7	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>		7			
8	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		292	700		✓
9	Northern Bald Ibis	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>	5		13		
10	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			4		7
12	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			10		
13	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		5		2	
14	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			4		2
15	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	1		1		
16	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	4	50	5		
17	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>		32	30	4	10
18	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	10	30	20	30	10
19	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	20	200	20	3	2
20	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	10	100	30	2	4
21	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>		1			
22	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>		3			
23	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	5	15	4	1	2
24	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	2	20	10		
25	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	30	50	20	2	
26	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		1	1		
	Gibraltar Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo x rufinus ssp cirtensis</i>		1			
27	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			1		
28	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>			5		
29	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			✓		
30	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>			20		
31	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>			2		
32	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>			1		
33	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			5		
34	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			3		
35	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			1		
36	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>			1		
37	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>			✓		
38	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			3		
39	Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>			1		
40	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>			5		
41	Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>			30		
42	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
43	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			10		
44	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>			1		
45	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>	20	2	2	2	8
46	Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>		30			

	Common name	Scientific name	September				
			10	11	12	13	14
47	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
48	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>			10		
49	European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>			1		
50	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		1	1	2	1
52	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		1			
53	Red-necked Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus ruficollis</i>			1		
54	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>	100	200	1,000		10
55	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	2	10	10		5
56	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
57	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	10	80	800		
58	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	1	1	1	1	1
59	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	1	4	5	1	
60	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2		1		
61	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>			2		
62	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		1			
63	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>			✓		
64	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2		2	2	
65	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	2	2	2	4	2
66	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		1	✓		1
68	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		2			
69	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>			✓		1
70	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>			50		
71	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>			15		
72	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	2		3		
73	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
74	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓	✓		
75	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	3	2		3	
76	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	3	2	✓	Y	1
77	Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>				1	
78	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	2	1			
79	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
80	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>				1	
81	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
82	Iberian Chiff-chaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>			3	1	1
83	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	2	3	3	5	3
84	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	1	1	2	2	2
85	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	3	3	2	4	2
86	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
87	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	2	2	✓	✓	2
88	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>			2	4	4
89	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	2
90	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>			1		1
91	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>			1		1
92	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>				2	
93	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	2	✓	✓	3
94	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			2		
95	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
96	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>			5		
	Iberian Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberia</i>		4			

	Common name	Scientific name	September				
			10	11	12	13	14
97	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	1	1	1	1	
98	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
99	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	7	5		4	5
100	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>				2	✓
101	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>			10		✓
102	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	5	✓
103	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>				2	
104	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>			20		

Mammals

1	Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		✓			
2	Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>		200			
3	Bottle-nose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		2			
4	Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>		20			
5	Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>				✓	

Marine

1	Sunfish	<i>Mola mola</i>		✓			
2	Mediterranean Flying Fish	<i>Cheilopogon heterurus</i>		✓		✓	
3	Yellowfin Tuna	<i>Thunnus albacares</i>				✓	

Reptiles

1	Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
2	Iberian Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis hispanicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Dragonflies

1	Southern Migrant Hawker	<i>Aeshna affinis</i>	✓	✓			
2	Lesser Emperor	<i>Anax parthenope</i>			✓		
3	Red-veined Darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>			✓		

Butterflies

1	Geranium Bronze	<i>Cacyreus marshalli</i>				✓	
2	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>				✓	
3	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	Two-Tailed Pasha	<i>Charaxes jasius</i>				✓	
5	Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>				2	

Other invertebrates

1	Blue-winged Grasshopper	<i>Oedipoda caerulea</i>		✓			
2	Wood Ants	<i>Formica spp</i>		✓			