

Gibraltar & Tarifa: Whales, Dolphins & Autumn Migration

Naturetrek Tour Report

14 - 18 September 2019



Barbary Macaques



Two-Tailed Pasha



Raptor watching

Report & Images by Simon Tonkin



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Tour participants: Simon Tonkin (leader) with a group of eight 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 and Bottlenose Dolphins and had close encounters with Long-finned Pilot Whales.

In Gibraltar the maritime action continued with an encounter with Cory's Shearwaters and Striped and Common Dolphins picking off 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

Saturday 14th September

After meeting at Gibraltar airport, we made the short journey to Huerta Grande and settled into our rooms.

Following our orientation and a bit of unpacking we made the short journey to the Cazalla Watchpoint just outside Tarifa. Here with the easterly wind we were able to pick up our first migrating raptors, who despite the brisk wind were still attempting to cross the Strait of Gibraltar to Africa.

Griffon Vultures descended from the clouds and we saw over 30 Egyptian Vultures due to make their crossing, alongside two Western Ospreys, 40+ Honey Buzzards, 20 Short-toed Eagles, 15 Booted Eagles, Sparrowhawks and Black Kites.

With a little local knowledge, we headed for an ex-military road and sheltered from the wind. We were able to watch raptors of various species cruise into the headwind low over the ridge of the valley right in front of us. Honey Buzzards, Black Kites and Booted Eagles cruised by at eye level or even below! Thirty European Bee-eaters cruised past us too!

Not bad for arrival day - the magic of The Straits!

We returned back to Huerta Grande in good time to look for the Crested Tits, Firecrest and Short-toed Treecreepers that abound in the grounds there.

Day 2

Sunday 15th September

Today we headed for the Salinas de Barbate. Here the intertidal disused salt pans yielded an avian party! 150+ Greater Flamingoes waded the shallows surrounded by waders including Kentish Plovers, Black-winged Stilts, Whimbrels, Eurasian Curlews, Greenshanks and others. Among the wading birds, six Eurasian Spoonbills and 30 regal Audouin's Gulls gave great 'scope views. We scanned a nearby island that revealed twelve Stone-curlews and we got close views of this paranoid-looking wader!

Raptors were also evident, including up to twenty Honey Buzzards, some of which landed briefly on the islands in front of us before continuing their clearly exhausting journey.

The pastureland was not to be ignored as flock of larks included Crested, Calandra and Greater Short-toed Larks. Yellow Wagtails of both *iberiae* and *flava* races were present and two Northern Wheatears fed on the short grass.

On the way back, we were thrilled to pick up on one of the area's much sought-after inhabitants. A flock of eight 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, debatably beautiful birds probed in the soil. Their presence here is the result of a successful reintroduction program, 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 former natural glory that must have been spectacular prior to the draining of this wetland in the early 20th century. Corn Buntings, European Linnets and European Goldfinches were present in huge feeding flocks. A Black-winged Kite was a great addition as well as three Black Storks cruising high.

But the highlight was yet to come. Stopping at a scrubby area, Simon asked the group to wait in silence while we 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 3

Monday 16th September

First stop today was the raptor watchpoint of Cazalla. Given the wind direction and strength today, conditions looked good for birds to attempt a crossing. Twenty European Bee-eaters soon whipped through but for the soaring birds we had to wait. Before too long, crowds of Short-toed eagles (150+) and over eighty Booted Eagles were making the crossing alongside many Honey Buzzards. At 10.30am we know it is likely to be time for the Storks to arrive! Today, they arrived a little late at 10.36am! Twenty-six Black Storks cruised overhead as well as a single Western Osprey and motoring Alpine Swifts. But the star this morning was the young Spanish Imperial Eagle that we spotted cruising among the throng.

Taking our eyes from the skies for a brief moment yielded good views of Thekla Larks and we were able to discuss the salient identification features which distinguish them from the superficially-similar Crested Larks.

Following this, we headed for the coast to take our lavish picnic of locally sourced, sustainably-produced cheese, meats and freshly baked bread as scores of Red-rumped Swallows, even more raptors and a group of 124 White Storks created an avian kaleidoscope in the sky.

Following lunch, we headed to the town of Tarifa. Taking a walk through the old town, we discussed some of the historical sites and proceeded to the Castillo Guzman el Bueno. Here, as we heard about the historical significance of this site, we watched the comings and goings of the colony of Lesser Kestrels that live here.

Soon it was time for us to board our boat and sail out into The Strait itself. We soon found twenty Bottle-nosed Dolphins and enjoyed their antics alongside the boat. Further on we found fifteen Long-finned Pilot Whales and two Striped Dolphins. Seabirds were evident too and we encountered 50 Cory's Shearwaters, a single Mediterranean Gull and up to five Wilson's Storm Petrels.

Day 4

Tuesday 17th 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 out over Algeciras Bay and out into the Mediterranean. We saw some of The Rock's famous Barbary Macaques, which we also got views of at Catalonia Bay later in the day.

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. Monarch butterflies also drifted through – these giants were introduced in the 18th century as eggs on Milkweed plants. In the gardens, passerine migration was evident with Common Redstart and Spotted Flycatchers seen.

For lunch we headed to Europa Point, the most southerly point of the peninsula. We enjoyed our picnic here as we watched 30+ Cory's Shearwaters cruising, looking for their own fish picnic! Striped and Common Dolphins fed on fleeing Mediterranean Flying Fish. Meanwhile a Blue Rock Thrush flitted amongst the sea cliffs.

As we headed back into Spain we stopped at the little known area affectionately referred to as "Niki's Watchpoint". Here we were able to get our last look at soaring bird migration, enjoying over 100 Short-toed and 80+ Booted Eagles, Black Kites, Eurasian Sparrowhawks and Marsh Harriers as well as two Black Storks.

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

Wednesday 18th September

Today it was time for us to bid farewell to Huerta Grande. We headed to La Linea and paid a visit to the park of Reina Sofia - where we observed Spotted and Pied Flycatchers and Common Redstart - before entering Gibraltar and to the airport for the group's homeward journeys.

Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted)

	N = Near endemic		September				
	Common name	Scientific name	14	15	16	17	18
1	Wilson's Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>			5		
2	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>			50	30	
3	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		1			
4	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>		150			
5	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>		3	26	2	
6	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	20	696	124	✓	
7	Northern Bald Ibis	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>		8			
8	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		1			
9	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		6			
10	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	2	7	3		✓
12	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		5			
13	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			2		
14	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				1	
15	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	2	1	1		
16	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>		1			
17	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	30	1	2	11	
18	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	40	20	10	30	
19	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	20	10	7	5	
20	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	20	5	150	100	
21	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	15	4	80	70	
22	Spanish Imperial Eagle - N	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>			1		
23	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	8	3	20	15	1
24	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	2	15	2		
25	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	40	3	15	2	5
26	Gibraltar Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo x rufinus cirtensis</i>		1			
27	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		1			
28	Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>		12			
29	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		10			
30	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓			
31	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>		15			
32	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>		1	1		
33	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		1			
34	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓			
35	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		5			
36	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		4			
37	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		3			
38	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>		1			
39	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		10			
40	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓			
41	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		5			
42	Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyophaga audouinii</i>		30			
43	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyophaga melanocephalus</i>			1		
44	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
45	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		50			
46	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>		2	4		
47	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	N = Near endemic		September				
	Common name	Scientific name	14	15	16	17	18
48	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		4		1	
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	1	1	1
52	Red-necked Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus ruficollis</i>		1			
53	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>			2		
54	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	3				
55	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	✓	✓	100		✓
56	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		2			
57	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	30	50	20	100	10
58	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	1	1	1	1	1
59	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	4	3	5		
60	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	2		2	3
61	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1	3	
62	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>		1			
63	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>				1	
64	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓			
65	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	2	1		2
66	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	1	4	2	4	2
67	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	5	✓	✓	✓
68	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	1	1	2	2	✓
69	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>			2		
70	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	2	✓			✓
71	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>		50			
72	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		20			
73	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		1	1		
74	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
75	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		1			
76	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		2	✓	✓	✓
77	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>		4	20	✓	5
78	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	1	6	2	4	1
79	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>					✓
80	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>				2	3
81	Iberian Chiff-chaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>			2	3	
82	Western Olivaceous Warbler	<i>Iduna opaca</i>		1			
83	Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>		1			
84	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		4	2	c.5	1
85	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
86	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
87	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	2	1	3	2	2
88	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	2	2	1	5	1
89	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>					1
90	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	5	10	2	3	
91	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
92	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	2	5	2	✓	✓
93	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	2	5	2	4	2
94	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
95	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>					1
96	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>		1		1	1
97	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>				2	
98	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	N = Near endemic		September				
	Common name	Scientific name	14	15	16	17	18
99	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		2			
100	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
101	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>		✓			
102	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	2		5		
103	Spanish Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberia</i>	4	20			
104	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	2	2	3	1	
105	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>					1
106	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
107	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	2		2	2	3
108	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
109	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓		3	✓
110	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
111	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		✓		1	✓
112	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		100		1	

Mammals

1	Barbary Macaques	<i>Macaca sylvanus</i>				✓	
2	Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>				✓	
3	Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>			2	✓	
4	Bottle-nose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>			20		
5	Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>			15		

Fish

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

Dragonflies

1	Banded Groundling	<i>Brachythemis leucosticta</i>		✓			
2	Southern migrant Hawker	<i>Aeshna affinis</i>		✓		✓	
3	Red-vented Darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>		✓			

Butterflies

1	Geranium Bronze	<i>Cacyreus marshalli</i>			✓	✓	
2	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>				✓	
3	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>				✓	
4	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓	✓	✓	
5	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>	✓	✓		✓	
6	Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>				✓	
7	Two-Tailed Pasha	<i>Charaxes jasius</i>				✓	
8	Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>				✓	

Reptiles & Amphibians

1	Mediterranean Tree Frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>				✓	
2	Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>		✓	✓	✓	
3	Iberian Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis hispanicus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
4	Giant Toad	<i>Bufo spinosus</i>		✓	✓		
5	Blue-winged Grasshopper	<i>Oedipoda caerulescens</i>			✓		

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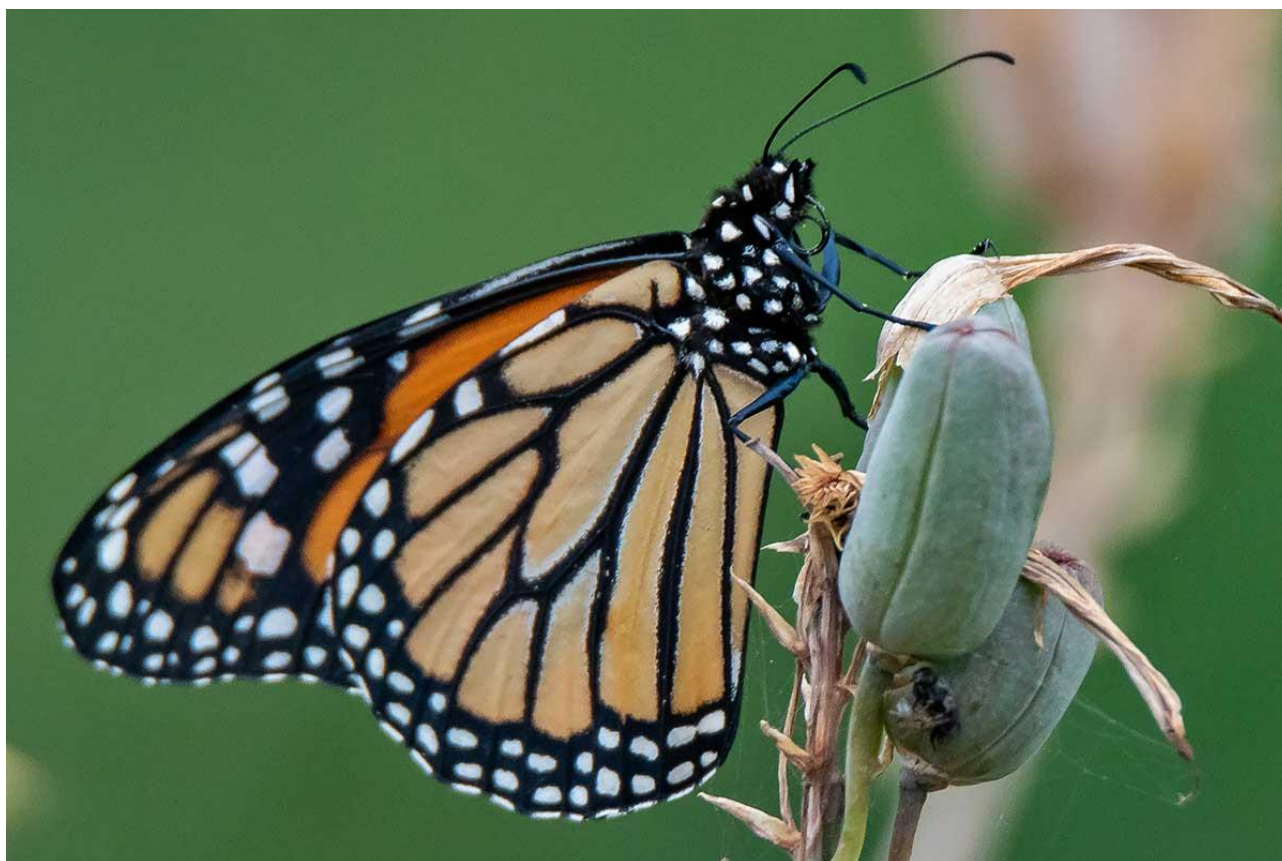
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