

# Tarifa & Gibraltar: Whales, Dolphins & Autumn Migration

Naturetrek Tour Report

13th – 17th September 2021

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Report by Simon Tonkin



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Tour participants: Simon Tonkin (leader) with seven Naturetrek clients.

## Summary

Our action-packed days together here in The Straits showed us magical avian migration, with swirling masses of Eagles and Storks making the 14km crossing to Africa, and the richness of the two meeting seas with Long-finned Pilot Whales, Common and Striped Dolphins, Yellow-finned Tuna and Mediterranean Flying Fish. The juxtaposition of human culture and history was demonstrated in the landscape and food but also the combined natural history of the wondrous Straits of Gibraltar.

## Day 1

## Monday 13th September

After meeting the group at Gibraltar airport and going through the now 'new-normal' process of the forms and tests involved with tourism in the age of Covid, we were on our way and out across the border and into Spain.

As we drove west, I pointed out several of the landscape features as well as several White Storks perched imperiously on their chosen street lights. As we neared Tarifa we decided to make for the sheltered area of La Peña and the Valle de Santuario de la Luz - here we were able to get to grips with the fundamentals of migratory raptor identification in the form of Short-toed Eagles, Black Kites and Booted Eagles. "Looking down" yielded views of a smart Black-eared Wheatear and we got to grips with the identification of several Thekla's Larks.

We also took our picnic lunch and relaxed as we watched the skies and eagerly awaited our forthcoming days together. We also examined a Palaeolithic sky burial site where tombs are carved out of the rocks some c.4,000 years ago for the bodies of the deceased to be offered to the Sky Gods - the Griffon Vultures!

On this poignant point we headed for our accommodation at the Cortijo el Indiviso and to our excellent evening meal.

## Day 2

## Tuesday 14th September

Today we headed for the rice fields of La Janda. Once this huge natural basin was a vast wetland but successive drainage for agriculture saw this wildlife jewel turned to intensive agriculture. Plans are in process to hopefully begin restoring parts of this area to its former glory following recent court cases and we eagerly await the reverse evolution of this important wetland. However despite this systematic change, La Janda is still very much an important refuelling point for many species - the wet rice fields being a huge draw for many migratory birds. Among them we counted 694 White Storks feeding and resting in the fields alongside 70 Glossy Ibis and 20 Marsh Harriers.

We also found 3 Black-winged Kites - a smart, compact little raptor that has eyes like the fiery pits of Mordor! We watched as they sat on the wires for us to get great views as migratory European Bee-eaters noisily vied for attention.

After taking in more views of a soaring mass of White Storks which were joined by an Egyptian Vulture, we decided to head for a coffee stop nearby. Here we could see a group of 15 Black Kites heading for Tarifa so we

followed them! At our coastal watchpoint, we watched as European Bee-eaters (over 200!), Alpine, Common and Pallid Swifts moved out overhead, c.40 Short-toed and c.50 Booted Eagles, 6 European Honey Buzzards, Egyptian Vulture and Montagu's Harriers attempted the crossing. While we watched, we ate our picnic with freshly baked bread from a wood fire oven!

After receiving word from a friend we headed back to La Janda as here the oddest thing had been found - a White Stork that was completely black! Originally given the uniformity of the colouration across seemingly all feathers we had surmised it to be a colour aberration. However several days later other birds with similar (but not as complete) staining were seen crossing The Straits and we suppose this must be from a 'staining event' from a rubbish tip.

## Day 3

## Wednesday 15th September

Today we headed to Gibraltar to discover the wildlife and history of this UK overseas territory. After some perfunctory border checks we headed for the cable car and up The Rock! Here the views were astonishing, and we largely had the place to ourselves due to the lack of tourism.

Below us and viewed from the cable car we caught sight of the Barbary Macaques - introduced from the nearby Moroccan Rif and Atlas Mountain areas to Gibraltar likely by the Moors who lived there between 700 and 1492. We also got our first views of Blue Rock Thrush among the crags.

Travelling down The Rock, we went to the Alameda Gardens established in 1816. I was greeted by the always friendly and welcoming John Cortes, who is the Gibraltar Minister for the Environment, Education, Heritage and Culture. He gave us a warm welcome and then proceeded to help someone with the pay and display machine! In the gardens, we were surrounded by migrant passerines - Spotted and Pied Flycatchers, Willow Warbler, Common Nightingales and European Robins.

We drove the short distance through narrow tunnels towards Europa Point. Here we took our picnic as masses of Scopoli's Shearwaters fed on Mediterranean Flying Fish that were escaping Yellow-finned Tuna that jumped out on several occasions!

A Peregrine Falcon cruised into view from behind as a Blue Rock Thrush sang behind us. We voted to next go for ice cream by the Ibrahim-al-Ibrahim Mosque. Said to be the largest mosque to exist in a non-Islamic country, it demonstrates the brilliant acceptance and juxtaposition of worlds and cultures that are both human and avian in The Straits of Gibraltar.

Following ice cream, we went to a little-known hidden corner of The Rock for our last stop of the day. Parking up next to a scrapyard seemed to be the most unlikely place to go birding but straight away we had brilliant views of a Blue Rock Thrush! Then among the rocky scree we saw two superb Barbary Partridge - a North African Species only found here in Gibraltar on mainland Europe.

It is unknown for sure whether this species was introduced by man but The Governor's Order Book records that the importation of "game from Barbary" for shooting purposes was authorised in 1749 by General H Bland, then Governor of Gibraltar (although it did not specifically state Partridges). The population has struggled due to

predation by feral cats and rats but measures by the Spanish ministry are helping the species habitat which was previously covered in corrugated iron to catch rain water! The area we were viewing has been restored to natural scree and sandy slopes with good natural scrub development - this restoration will undoubtedly benefit this and other species.

Onwards we once more drove across the airport runway and after some simple checks at the border we were back in Spain and on our way to our Cortijo and our relaxing and delightful evening meal.

## Day 4

## Thursday 16th September

This morning we headed for the inter-tidal habitat of Los Lances where calm conditions allowed us to view a huge variety of shorebirds - Audouin's Gulls, Common and Kentish Plovers, Red Knot, 200+ Sanderling, 80+ Dunlin - as Tree Pipits went out overhead and soaring birds amassed in the hills behind us ready to make the crossing to Africa.

To witness the best of the area's migration, wind direction, cloud cover and timing determine the best place to be, so we headed for a little-known private watchpoint where we were directly beneath a stunning flow of migratory soaring birds making the 14km crossing here at the narrowest point between Europe and Africa.

120 European Bee-eaters noisily made headway across the divide, alongside Pallid, Common and Alpine Swifts. Then the raptors! 50+ Short-toed Eagles (likened to the colouring of Vienetta ice cream!) 419 Booted Eagles, 192 Black Kites, Marsh Harriers and Eurasian Sparrowhawks, 4 Egyptian Vultures and beautiful swirling mass of 780 White Storks that searched the optimal thermals as a living magical sensory array before powering out and on into Africa! We watched them all the way! 13 gorgeous Black Storks also crossed.

Tearing ourselves away from the continuing flow of migration, we boarded our boat for our own foray into The Straits itself. Here we encountered seabirds and more avian migrants - Common, Black and Sandwich Terns, Cory's/Scopoli's Shearwaters and of course cetaceans with amazing close views of Common and Striped Dolphins and the beautifully social Long-finned Pilot Whales.

## Day 5

## Friday 17th September

Today was time to say goodbye but with many memories of the magic of The Straits of Gibraltar!

Despite the challenges of international travel at this time and the various forms and tests we worked together to overcome them and just like those White Storks we made it together on our magical migratory adventure!

We hope to see you again here soon because the promise of return is to be fulfilled...

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## Checklist

		Date:				
Common name	Scientific name	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Mammals</b>						
Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>				✓	
Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>				✓	
Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>				✓	
<b>Fish</b>						
Yellow-finned Tuna	<i>Thunnus albacares</i>			✓		
Mediterranean Flying Fish	<i>Cheilopogon heterurus</i>			✓		
<b>Dragonflies</b>						
Northern Banded Groundling	<i>Brachythemis leucosticta</i>		✓			
Red-vented Darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>		✓			
<b>Butterflies</b>						
Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>		✓		✓	
Geranium Bronze	<i>Cacyreus marshalli</i>			✓		
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>		✓			✓
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>			✓	✓	✓
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>	✓			✓	✓
Two-Tailed Pasha	<i>Charaxes jasius</i>			✓		
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>		✓		✓	✓
Mediterranean Skipper	<i>Gegenes nostradamus</i>		✓			
Zellers Skipper	<i>Borbo borbonica</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>		✓	✓		
Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>			✓		
Pea Blue	<i>Lampides boeticus</i>			✓		
Great Dart	<i>Agrotis bigramma</i>			✓		
The Gem	<i>Orthonama obstipata</i>			✓		
Pine Processionary	<i>Thaumetopoea pityocampa</i>			✓		

		Date:				
Common name	Scientific name	1	2	3	4	5
Crimson Speckled Footman	<i>Utetheisa pulchella</i>		✓			
<b>Other</b>						
Violet Carpenter Bee	<i>Xylocopa violacea</i>			✓		✓
Mediterranean House Gecko	<i>Hemidactylus turcicus</i>		✓		✓	✓
Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Barbary Macaque	<i>Macaca sylvanus</i>			6		

## Birds

			Date: September				
	Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16
1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		10			
2	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		2			
3	Barbary Partridge	<i>Alectoris barbara</i>			2		
4	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		2		3	
5	Scopoli's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>			20	✓	
6	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>			2		
7	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>				13	20
8	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓	694	4	780	
9	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		70			
10	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		4			
12	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		15			
13	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		3	2	2	
14	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1			
15	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>		3			
16	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>		2		4	4
17	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>		6			10
18	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	2	10		1	20
19	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	10	40	2	50	70
20	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	2	50	1	419	50
21	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		4	1	5	5
22	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		20		2	1
23	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>		10			2
24	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	1	15		192	100
25	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		2	1		2
26	Pied Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus longirostris</i>				2	
27	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				30	
28	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>				20	
29	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>		3			
30	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>				1	
31	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		8		3	
32	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>				3	
33	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>				200	
34	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				80	
35	Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaeetus audouinii</i>				2	
36	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	Date: September				
			12	13	14	15	16
37	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>				✓	
38	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>		1	2	2	
39	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>				10	
40	Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>				4	
41	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
42	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		120		✓	
43	European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>		2			
44	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
45	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>			1	1	1
46	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>			1	1	2
47	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>	6	2	4	10	
48	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
49	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		3			
51	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>		200		120	✓
52	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>		30		1	3
53	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	4	2	2	
54	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1	1		
55	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>				1	2
56	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2		2	2	2
58	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			4	✓	✓
59	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>			2	2	✓
60	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>	4	3		4	
61	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		6	✓	6	✓
62	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>				2	
63	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		2		2	
64	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
65	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	5	20	4		
66	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>				4	✓
67	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		6		1	2
68	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>			1		
69	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>		4		6	
70	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>		10			
71	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	2	10		6	✓
72	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			10	✓	✓
73	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
74	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			1	2	1
75	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			1	1	2
76	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	1				
77	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	2	3	10	4	1
79	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>		1	3	2	2
80	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			1	1	1
81	Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>	1	3	2		1
82	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		1		10	
83	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			2		
84	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
85	Black-eared Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>	1				
86	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
87	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>		✓			



			Date: September				
	Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16
88	Common Waxbill - I	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>		8			
89	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>				20	
90	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava flava</i>		4			
91	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			1	1	
92	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>		1			
93	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>		3		10	
94	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			2	✓	
95	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	1	3	1		
96	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓			
97	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
98	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		1	1	2	
99	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓