

Spain – The Best of Coto Doñana

Naturetrek Tour Report

22 - 26 November 2012



Corn Bunting



Glossy Ibis



Little Owl



Penduline Tit

Report compiled by Byron Palacios
Images by Julian Gayarre



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Day 1

Thursday 22nd November

Gatwick – Seville – El Rocío

It was a beautiful November sunny morning in Seville when the leaders headed to the airport to meet up with our group; some of them were already there as they arrived earlier to this lovely Spanish city. They arrived on time from Gatwick and we reassembled and went to the car park to board our mini-buses and drive out of Seville heading towards El Rocío. We made a stop half way on the outskirts of Aznalcázar in order to have a quick picnic lunch. There were a few birds around the picnic area such as Blackcap, Corn Bunting, Eurasian Stonechat, Eurasian Kestrel, and others.

After lunch, we carried on to our hotel in El Rocío where, after quickly settling into our rooms, had a little break and went for a walk around the marshes located right behind the hotel. Lots of wintering birds such as Common Snipe, Purple Gallinule, Common Coot, Moorhen, Great Flamingos, Mallard, Common Chiffchaff, Reed Warbler, Stonechat, Grey Heron, and others, were seen along the board walk. We kept walking towards the end of the village where we managed to see Crested Larks, Meadow Pipits, Spotless Starlings, White Wagtails and Corn Buntings flitting around a green grassy field occupied by local horses.

We then went to check up the visitors centre, located right by the marshes, from where we managed to see Glossy Ibis, Little and Cattle Egrets, Eurasian Spoonbill, more Great Flamingos, and the rare Marble Duck, a single one just by the edge of the right end of the marshes, something quite superb! A Wild Boar was seen walking quite fast at the far side of the marshes and walking along the shore; all this was happening whilst the sun was setting - it was lush and breathtaking, just like a proper wildlife film! We enjoyed ourselves until the sun disappeared in the horizon, so we returned and retired to our rooms in order to get ready to do our species log and enjoy our first delicious dinner together!

Day 2

Friday 23rd November

Doñana National Park (La Rocina and Palacio del Acebrón)

We hoped for a sunny day, although a chilly start was quite prominent in the early hours of the morning. After a good breakfast, we drove a short distance in order to visit the areas of La Rocina and El Acebrón. We started at La Rocina walking along the boardwalk and visiting the different hides located along the marshes. The waters were chocolaty-brown after the previous weeks heavy rain, but the activity around was starting to pick up at our arrival. We saw some fantastic birds from the hides, some of them resident and others just wintering species; Least Grebe, Teal, Common Pochard, Grey Heron, White Stork, Common Chiffchaffs, Azure-winged (Iberian) Magpie, Woodlark, Black Redstart, a very cooperative Penduline Tit, Eurasian Hoopoe, Stonechat, amongst others, were seen from the different hides. Our raptor list featured a perched Sparrowhawk, Common Buzzard, Marsh Harrier and a lovely female of Hen (Northern) Harrier. Other lovely birds seen along the boardwalk were Dartford Warbler, Thekla Lark, Sardinian Warbler, Long-tailed Tit, and Iberian Chiffchaff. We eventually walked the whole loop of the boardwalk finishing at the visitor's centre and car park area.

We got in the vehicles again and continued the park road towards our picnic spot, the gardens of the Palacio del Acebrón. We enjoyed our picnic lunch and then set off for another walk along a very picturesque trail making a loop to the other end of this big country mansion. We found a wintering group of Bullfinches, a lovely Firecrest, an Iberian Chiffchaff and a very elusive Short-toed Treecreeper which we finally managed to see. We also found plenty of Chaffinches, Common Chiffchaff, Robin, a pair of Siskin, Blackbird, Blue, Great and Long-tailed Tit, amongst others. We finished the trail by watching some Azure-winged (Iberian) Magpies and glimpses of a Crested Tit. We walked back to the car park and started to drive back to El Rocio (some had good sightings of an Egyptian Mongoose crossing the tarmac road still within the park). Once there, some of us took a break and others had a good stroll around the village and marshes. We gathered together again to do our usual log and to have another delicious dinner!

Day 3

Saturday 24th November

Doñana National Park (Coto Del Rey – La Escupidera – La Garvija – Hierba Buena)

We left our hotel a bit earlier in order to make our excursion to one of the restricted areas of Doñana. Our local park guide Miguel Angel was already at the hotel waiting for us with the other 4x4 vehicle for me to drive within the sandy tracks. We boarded both and set off on this marvellous adventure which we were all looking forward to! Once in the park, we started to search for Iberian Lynx by checking every single track and bushy area in case it happened to be there, somewhere! We worked hard and the rarest cat in the world seemed to be very elusive, at least this morning. Groups of Red and Fallow Deer were seen regularly along the track and a few important species of birds such as Azure-winged (Iberian) Magpie, Iberian (Southern) Grey Shrike, and Black Redstart, amongst others.

We continued on a different track along the dehesa habitat (cork oaks and lush meadows) making a stop at the place known as El Muro. We saw more Red and Fallow Deer from here, plus Marsh Harrier, Common Kestrel, Common Buzzard, Stonechat, White Stork, amongst others. We carried on the main track and checked a group of eucalyptus stumps cleverly piled up in order to make good and accessible burrows to encourage rabbits to live there making it easier for Iberian Lynx to hunt them effectively.

Here, we found two beautiful Little Owls perched on top of one of the stumps and showing off themselves nicely. A pair of Black-shouldered Kites was spotted in the distance, but it was later on when we moved further up the road that we managed to see them in the scope. We stopped at the point known as La Escupidera where we found a carcass of a domestic animal (likely a cow) and some Griffon Vultures feeding on it. It was to our surprise that we also found a beautiful Spanish Imperial Eagle perched nearby the carcass, getting fabulous views of this endemic raptor through the scope! A few other birds such as Red Kite (two perched on the fence), Crested Lark, White Wagtail, Stonechat, Common Cranes and Black Redstart were also seen here.

The weather was gentle and good to us; we continued our expedition driving on the main sandy track which crosses the main area of the park and headed through the area known as El Coto del Rey. We stopped in a nice dehesa called Hierba Buena where we meant to have a pre-lunch walk, but the day was going well so far that we decided to go to our lunch stop first and take the walk later on. We then arrived to La Garvija, an nice refurbished shelter previously used as a rangers home in the past, now a perfect place to enjoy a nice lunch surrounded by marismas (flooded heathland) and amazing wildlife. Two of the most emblematic birds were seen from here -Black Stork and Spanish Imperial Eagle. We enjoyed the fantastic spread the locals prepared for us, and full and happy, we continued with our plan and drove back to the dehesa of Hierba Buena, finding a nice Booted Eagle on the way, close to the palace of Coto del Rey; perhaps a late migrant or simply an individual who decided to stay and winter in the area. At the end of the day, the winter here is very nice!

We arrived at Hierba Buena and started our walk along the sandy paths watching a few Eurasian Hoopoes on the way. Also a few Southern (Iberian) Grey Shrikes were seen here, while Red Kites and Kestrels were constantly soaring and hovering around in search of food. We were keeping our eyes on the ground as this is normally a good area to see Egyptian Mongoose and Iberian Lynx! I heard an unusual call which was in fact a Lesser-spotted Woodpecker nearby - Julian checked an ash tree in front of us and there it was...a lovely male was greatly seen by all of us, even through the scopes, until it flew across the dehesa and stopping again in a cork oak tree not far from where we were. We quickly moved after him and, with a bit of playback assistance, we managed to bring him out to the open once again! One of the highlight birds of the trip, without a doubt, considering how difficult and overlooked this particular species of woodpecker is! We found other birds during the walk such as Song Thrush, Woodlark, Raven, Woodpigeon, and Corn Bunting, amongst others.

We finished the loop around the dehesa, picked the vans up and drove back on the main track heading to El Rocio; but we did work a bit more scanning and searching for Iberian Lynx once again. We kept looking around but we had to accept that we were not that lucky with 'el gato' today; well, perhaps another time! We headed back to our hotel in order to take a break and take a good stroll around El Rocio. Then, we gathered together again to do our checklist followed by a dinner.

Day 4

Sunday 25th November

Doñana National Park (Valverde visitor's centre – Isla Mayor)

Today would be another exciting day as we were about to explore the northern and north-eastern part of Doñana. We set off from El Rocio just in time to see the orange pinkish sunrise on the horizon whilst driving through the area of Villamarique; from there, we diverted east through Isla Mayor and entered the park, where a large flock of Serins welcomed us to this part of Doñana.

We then started to make a few stops, the first was quite productive with a pair of Marsh Harriers soaring over the high grass and also perched on the ground; a female Hen Harrier was also around too, but the main focus was a pair of Black-shoulder Kites perched on a Tamarisk nearby and then they both flew across the field and perched on the fence posts. We rapidly placed them in the scope having great views of them for some time! We then continued our drive along the tracks until some of us spotted a white blob in one of the bushes, so we decided to back up a little and check. It was well worth it as a lovely Barn Owl was beautifully perched in the bush by the road, which gave us great views. After this finding, we stopped to check a huge flock of sparrows, which happened to be a mixed group of Tree and Spanish Sparrows, and a few pairs of Rock Sparrows. We took our time getting them through the scope in order to see them all together and compare the differences between each other. Two large groups of wintering Common Cranes were also in the adjacent fields so we took advantage of the stop to put them in the scope too, fantastic! There were also plenty of Marsh Harriers around, Little and Cattle Egrets, Northern Lapwings and a single Great White Egret too.

We continued our drive making another stop right at the beginning of the marshes at the drainage area where the water follows the course of the River Guadiamar, but there were not that much around. We focussed on the opposite field where good groups of Meadow Pipits were flitting around, and amongst them, we found a pair of Short-toed Larks. We managed to see them through the scopes getting good details of this species. Plenty of Skylarks were flying around too, together with some Crested Larks which popped on the track at times. It was a good place to get good views of Fan-tailed Warblers which were flitting around the dry reeds and ‘zitting’ up in the sky making the call which made them formerly known as Zitting Cisticolas. There were plenty of White Wagtails around too.

The day was passing by so we decided to go to the Valverde visitors centre which has good coffee and hot chocolate. The large groups of waterfowl, along with Greater Flamingos, Purple Gallinules, Black-winged Stilts and many others, were located in the further lakes, and luckily we managed to see them all, despite the bright sun reflection off the water. A beautiful male Marsh Harrier gave us a great show as he flew very close and right in front of us, perching on the reeds twice, and very close! It was shortly time for lunch, so we had it right at the visitor’s centre car park, which was handy, and considering the beautiful sunny afternoon we were having it was a real treat!

After lunch, we decided not to drive far from the centre and have a walk along the track; however, the marismas were empty, so we decided to drive down the track instead, stopping when something relevant was around. A single Merlin was on the ground when it was spotted, and we focussed on this beautiful falcon having excellent views of it. We kept driving and returned towards the visitors centre, being amazed by the amount of White Wagtails which were found on the tracks, literally dozens of them together. We continued on a different track which eventually took us out of the park making a loop from where we started. A Great White Egret and a Grey Heron were spotted together which gave us a good comparison of these two beautiful species. Further up the track, plenty of Eurasian Kestrels were flitting from post to post, until a bigger and different falcon was found...it was a male Peregrine, which was seen very well while perched on the wires. More Common Cranes were in the adjacent fields and a lovely male Hen Harrier was drifting along the fields; and large flocks of Calandra Larks and Corn Buntings adorned the heathland in the sunny afternoon light. Other little birds such as Fan-tailed, Sardinian and Dartford Warbler were spotted here.

We continued our drive watching endless numbers of Grey Heron, Cattle and Little Egrets flying by, and even alongside the van; two Black Storks made us stop in order to watch them better, while two Stone Curlews were flying in the distance, landing in a far field. A spectacular pair of Black-shoulder Kites was a great sighting, and more Marsh and Hen Harriers were soaring around in the late afternoon sunlight. The day was coming to an end, and happy and satisfied, we headed home to El Rocio in order to get ready to have another great night at our hotel's premises!

Day 5

Monday 26th November

Doñana National Park (El Acebuche visitor's centre – Dehesa de Abajo)

Today was our last day but our flight left in the early evening, so we decided to have a 'birding-on-the-go' day, so we had breakfast and check out from our hotel, heading to the coast. The weather was meant to be nice today, but it was overcast by the time we arrived to El Acebuche visitor's centre to do some birding. Apart from the always numerous Azure-winged (Iberian) Magpies, Stonechats and Chaffinches, the waterfowl seemed to be scarce as the marshes were empty from any of the hides we tried. We rapidly thought of our plan 'B' so we walked back to our vans and set off to la Dehesa de Abajo, another wetland we had not explored yet. We crossed the many fields and meadows through the villages of Almonte, Hinojos and Villamanrique de La Condesa, until we got to the marshes area. A perched Booted Eagle interrupted our driving and we quickly jumped off the vehicles to watch this nice small eagle soaring around, and it was being mobbed by a unmistakeable Black-shouldered Kite; a very nice spectacle indeed!

We continued driving a short distance from the 'eagle-kite' stop until we got to the Dehesa de Abajo. The marshes were full with water to a high level, and the masses of waterfowl put us to work straight away with our scopes, spotting nice Shovelers, Wigeon, Mallard, Red-crested Pochard, Pintail, Teal, Common Pochard, Great Crested and Little Grebe, Greater Flamingos, and Black-necked Grebe, amongst others. A familiar call was heard within the dry reeds as a group of Common Waxbills landed in there, giving us great scope views of this introduced but nice bird. Lots of Fan-tailed Warblers, Chiffchaffs and the 'invisible' Cetti's Warblers were constantly flitting around. Two Black Storks, Grey Herons and Yellow-legged, Lesser Black-backed and Black-headed Gulls were on the rice fields; and also a group of Ringed Plovers were spotted in the nearest rice field to us.

We stopped at Villamanrique de La Condesa as it was suggested we have a sharing 'tapas' lunch with traditional Andalusian recipes. It was a good idea and all of us enjoyed this original and popular way of having lunch. Afterwards, we prepared ourselves to drive to Seville airport, but as half of the group were going to stay in Seville for a few more nights, this was actually the point where we finished our happy tour together, so we said goodbye to each other, happy with our unforgettable memories in the mysterious and beautiful Doñana!

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Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; h = heard only)

	Scientific name	Common name	November				
			22	23	24	25	26
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓			✓	✓
2	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
3	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>				✓	
7	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>			✓	✓	✓
9	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
10	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	✓			✓	
11	Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	✓		✓		✓
12	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
14	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>					✓
16	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>				✓	✓
18	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
19	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Marbled Duck	<i>Marmaronetta angustirostris</i>	✓				
21	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓			✓
22	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>					✓
23	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		✓		✓	✓
24	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
25	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	✓		✓		
26	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		✓		✓	
27	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>			✓	✓	✓
29	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓	✓		
30	Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>				✓	
31	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca (adalberti)</i>			✓		
33	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>			✓		✓
34	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>				✓	
36	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>				✓	
37	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓		
38	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
39	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
40	Purple Gallinule	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
41	Stone Curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>				✓	
42	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
43	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>					✓
44	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
45	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>					✓
46	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		✓			
47	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>				✓	

	Scientific name	Common name	November				
			22	23	24	25	26
48	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
49	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>				✓	✓
50	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>			✓	✓	✓
51	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓	✓	
52	Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>		✓			
53	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
55	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>			✓		
57	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>				✓	
58	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
59	Great-spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		h			
60	Lesser-spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>			✓		
61	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		✓		✓	
62	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
63	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>					
64	Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>				✓	
65	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>			✓	✓	
66	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>		✓			
67	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
68	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>				✓	
69	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
70	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		h			
71	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
72	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
73	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
74	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
75	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			✓		
76	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>				✓	✓
77	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	h	h	h	h
78	Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	✓				
79	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>		✓		✓	
80	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓				h
81	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
82	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
83	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus iberiae</i>		✓			
84	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>		✓			
85	Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>		✓			
86	Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>		✓			✓
87	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓			
88	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓			
89	Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pedulinus</i>		✓			
90	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		✓			
91	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>		✓	✓		
92	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>				✓	
93	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
94	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
95	Azure-winged Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cyana</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
96	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
97	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓			✓
98	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>				✓	

	Scientific name	Common name	November				
			22	23	24	25	26
99	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
100	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>				✓	
101	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>				✓	
102	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
103	Serín	<i>Serinus serinus</i>				✓	
104	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>		✓			
105	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
106	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓			
107	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
108	Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>					✓

Mammals

1	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	✓				
2	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓		✓		
3	Egyptian Mongoose	<i>Herpestes ichneumon</i>		✓			
4	Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>			✓	✓	

Other taxa

1	Red Admiral		✓	✓			
2	Painted Lady			✓		✓	
3	Blue??			✓			
4	Carpenter Bee			✓			
5	Common Grasshopper						
6	Southern Hawker			✓		✓	
7	Beetle sp.				✓		
8	Emperor Dragonfly				✓	✓	
9	Common Darter					✓	✓

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