

Spain – The Best of Coto Doñana in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

6th – 10th February 2022



Iberian Magpie

Tour report by Simon Tonkin



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Summary

A trip to Doñana National and Natural Parks in winter is about the spectacle of numbers and the stand-out moments, and we had plenty of both on this trip!

Wetlands teemed with Greater Flamingoes, Glossy Ibis and Black-winged Stilts as well as large numbers of wintering wildfowl and waders. Hundreds of Red Deer filled the plains, migrating Common Cranes and White Storks swept overhead and large flocks of Iberian Magpies adorned the woodlands!

Stand-out moments came in the form of Spanish Imperial Eagles, Bluethroats, Red-knobbed Coot, Marbled Duck, Red-crested Pochards, Penduline Tits and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker.

One of the area's best winter wetlands - the Madre de las Marismas lagoon - was literally right on our doorstep! What better way to start a winter's morning than by pulling back the curtains on a lake full of Greater Flamingoes?!

Day 1

Sunday 6th February

Upon arrival, Simon and Niki were waiting for the group at Sevilla airport, ready to introduce them to their home stomping grounds in Andalucía.

After the pleasantries we soon loaded the waiting vehicles and were on our way across Sevilla and out towards Huelva province. Along the route, Red Kites were seen, and many bands of Cattle Egrets headed to their roosts.

Soon enough we were in the stunning town of El Rocío (meaning "the dew"), where the sandy streets and *caballeros* (cowboys) were reminiscent of the set of a Western and it seemed Clint Eastwood might at any moment appear around the corner! We discussed the history and the significance of the town and - parking up next to a 1,000-year-old Olive Tree - we unloaded and settled into our rooms.

The evening sounds of Greater Flamingoes were evident from our accommodation overlooking the Madre de las Marismas lagoon just outside – which was totally full of birdlife for us to explore in coming days.

Day 2

Monday 7th February

This myriad of life was revealed to us the following morning as we took the long journey following breakfast - about 20 metres! - from our morning coffee to the shores of the Madre de las Marismas!

Greater Flamingoes reflected on the silvery still water, as Eurasian Spoonbills fed. Groups and individuals of Glossy Ibis waded the shallows. Groups of Greylag Geese noisily cruised by. This species the emblem of Doñana National Park and they winter here in Internationally Important numbers. We scanned the waders and

among the hundreds of Dunlin, Black-Tailed Godwits, Black-winged Stilts, Northern Lapwing and Ruff we found three Temminck's Stints and six Whiskered Terns cruised over. We also found White-spotted (*cyaneola*) Bluethroats that were really obliging and made for some great photos! A Peregrine Falcon cruised over causing absolute panic.

Clearly, we had only touched the surface of this fabulous lagoon, but we tore ourselves away, knowing we could return on other days. We headed the short distance to El Acebuche heath, where we took our picnic of local extensively-produced sheep's cheeses, organic vegetables and freshly baked bread. It wasn't too long before the clean-up crew arrived - the endemic Iberian Magpies! Such great birds to watch at close quarters, with amazing intelligence and problem-solving abilities.

We then took a journey to another major lagoon at the Dehesa de Abajo. Here we sifted through the ducks finding many different species - Red-crested Pochards alongside Common Pochards, masses of Northern Shoveler, and more!

One of the area's star ducks put in a brief showing - the rare Marbled Duck! Eventually everyone got scope views. There are less than 100 pairs of this species in this area of the Marismas del Guadalquivir, representing about half of the Spanish population, which is now listed as Critically Endangered.

Fresh from spotting success, we moved to another area of the lagoons for our next speciality. Right on cue three swam right in front of us - the wonderfully bizarre Red-knobbed Coot! This species, whilst fairly abundant and common in sub-Saharan Africa is close to extinction in Europe, so we were delighted to have the opportunity to observe and discuss its differences from Common Coot - and not just those "adornments"!

Soon it was time to head back to El Rocío, but not before we spotted a Booted Eagle and a Black Stork. Both species are normally sub-Saharan migrants but can be encountered overwintering around the Guadalquivir.

Day 3

Tuesday 8th February

Today was our day to journey into the centre of the Natural and National parks of Doñana, including areas not usually accessible to the public. Our friends and colleagues at Doñana Nature were on hand to take us to those mysterious sections of the park in 4x4 minibuses!

Through the park we searched for the rarest big cat in the world - the elusive and beautiful Iberian Lynx. As we searched, Iberian Magpies, Song Thrushes, Woodlarks and Long-tailed Tits called. We encountered large groups of Red Deer too.

We entered the Coto del Rey - an open heath area, where we got our first look at a young Spanish Imperial Eagle. Further on we found Eurasian Hoopoes on the sandy tracks. We headed on to a little lagoon area and watched a Great Egret eating what were probably Iberian Ribbed Newts! Also here were Black-winged Stilts, Glossy Ibis and Green Sandpipers. An adult Spanish Imperial Eagle came into view, and we paid it due respect as we got the scopes and bins on this beautiful endemic Eagle!

We also had chance to watch a Red Fox just chilling out beside a Rabbit warren. It seemed to decide the heat of the midday was getting a bit much and it had done enough work this morning, so it went and laid down in the shade, but not before we had chance to admire this beautiful mammal, arguably one of the most stunning in Europe.

We headed for El Rocío and took our lunch in the town before heading back to Hotel Toruño for some *siesta* time, more birding or time to explore the town and maybe buy a flamenco dress!

Following optional activities, we met up again with Doñana Nature and headed out to further explore the interior of the park. We headed out to the Antonio Valverde Visitor Centre where on the nearby fields we found Common Cranes. A bugling flock passed overhead, perhaps headed already to their northern breeding grounds in Central and Northern Europe. We also found amongst the masses of wintering Greylag Geese 10 'Eurasian' Greater White-fronted Geese (subsp. *albifrons* rather than the Greenland race) - a very unusual species to encounter here and only the second time Simon and Niki have seen this species in Spain!

We headed back to the area where we felt we had the best chance of encountering Iberian Lynx but despite all our efforts today was not our day. Despite that we did have great views of a little family of Wild Boar and more Red Deer including some truly impressive stags.

We headed back to El Rocío thanking Irene and Sammy from Doñana Nature and celebrated the day's action-packed wildlife-watching!

Day 4

Wednesday 9th February

Once more we started at the ornithological goldmine of the Madre de las Marismas lagoon. Here we had a lovely close Bluethroat and brilliant views of five Penduline Tits. Western Swamphens were pretty evident thanks to their nasal calls and crashing about.

We then headed for the heaths and woodlands around the Palacio de Acebron.

For our first stop on the heath, we were surrounded by gorgeous fluty Woodlarks, one of which sat for us to admire, as did an Iberian Grey Shrike. Subtle calls and song from the gorse and heather drew our attention to the skulking Dartford Warbler there. Looking like it had had an accident with a glass of *vino tinto*, it flitted among the gorse, singing and arguing with another nearby male as Sardinian Warblers did their best to confuse.

A little further up the road we got our best views of Thekla's Larks, and we were able to go through the salient identification features differentiating this species from the similar Crested Lark.

On to the woodland of the Palacio and we walked through the woodland paths to a freshwater lagoon. Here we observed Black-crowned Night Herons on its edge as three Short-toed Treecreepers argued above us, giving tremendous views.

With some searching we had amazing scope views of a Lesser-spotted Woodpecker drumming away. We also added a Great-spotted Woodpecker, Crested Tits, Firecrests, Cirl Bunting and a pair of Eurasian Bullfinches.

Following our relaxed lunch amongst the birds we headed for the Arroyo de Rocina where we checked the fast-dwindling spring pools. Here, Greater Flamingoes, Gadwalls, Red-crested Pochard and Eurasian Spoonbills swam and waded in the shallows. Above us we heard a Crested Tit which also gave some brief views.

Soon it was time to head back to the town of El Rocío and to relax before our great evening meal and friendly welcome from Paloma, Fran and Javi.

Day 5

Thursday 10th February

Today we had a relaxed start to the day to allow time for packing, but most of us opted to head out once more to the ever-changing Madre de las Marismas, to get last looks at the myriad of life this water provides food and shelter for.

An enjoyable last hour or so was spent as part of a delightful international congregation of birders from Poland, Spain, The Netherlands and the UK.

We finally loaded the vans with the luggage and headed once more for our picnic spot - as always among the birds! We spotted Black-necked and Great Crested Grebes on the lagoon and took our picnic among the nesting White Storks.

Following lunch, we headed out the short distance to the open fields and ditches of Isla Mayor where we added a Pied Wagtail (different to our usual migratory White Wagtails we had been encountering all week), Common Waxbills, Common Kingfisher, Tree Sparrow, and lots of Green Sandpipers.

Then it was time to head for the airport and we parted company with great memories of the best of Doñana!

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Species lists

Birds

Common name	Scientific name	February 2022				
		6	7	8	9	10
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>			300		
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		300	1000	400	✓
(Eurasian) Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons albifrons</i>			10		
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		30			10
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		6	8	4	4
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		40	✓		✓
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		1,000	✓	✓	✓
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		20	20	6	8
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		50	✓	✓	✓
Marbled Duck	<i>Marmaronetta angustirostris</i>		5			6
Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>		20			10
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		400	✓	✓	✓
Ferruginous Duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>		2			
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			20	4	4
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		1		6	4
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>					2
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>					3
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>		400	1500	400	1000
Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>		1			
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		50	✓	300	✓
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		20	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		50	✓	✓	✓
Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>				3	
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		10	✓	✓	✓
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		1	3	2	4
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	2	6	✓	✓	✓
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>					
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	2	8	✓	✓	✓
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>			20		4
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>		1			2
Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>			4		
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		20	10	5	8
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		20	40	5	4
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	2	4	8	3	2
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>				1	1
Western Swamphe	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>		12	30	10	6
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		3	✓	✓	✓
Red-knobbed Coot	<i>Fulica cristata</i>		3			
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		200	✓	✓	✓
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		50	✓	✓	✓
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		30	40	40	✓
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		200	✓	✓	✓
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		30			✓
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>			5		10

Common name	Scientific name	February 2022				
		6	7	8	9	10
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		70	200	150	✓
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		1			
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		1			2
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		8	4	2	8
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>					4
Temminck's Stint	<i>Calidris temminckii</i>		3			
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		150	✓		200
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>		9	20		10
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		1	8		✓
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	1			✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	800	30	1	✓
Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>		6	6		6
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>					2
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		1	6	2	4
Lesser Sotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>				2	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				1	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	8	✓	2	4
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>			1		
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1			
Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>			4	1	6
Iberian Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓	✓		✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		4	6	2	6
European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>				3	2
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		2	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>		1		5	
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>			3	2	
Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>				2	
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		4	✓		✓
Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>			✓		
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		4	3		2
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>					4
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	1	4	✓	✓	✓
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		6	2	5	✓
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		4	3		4
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			2		✓
Dartford Warbler	<i>Curruca undata</i>				3	
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>		10	✓	✓	✓
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>					2
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			4	5	4
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>					1

Common name	Scientific name	February 2022				
		6	7	8	9	10
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		2	✓	10	6
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			✓	✓	4
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	2	4	✓	✓	✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		2	✓	✓	✓
White-spotted Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>		3	3	3	4
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	1	6	✓	✓	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>		20			✓
Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>					6
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1	2		2
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarelli</i>					1
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		1	✓	✓	✓
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		2	8	4	2
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>				2	
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		✓	✓	4	✓
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>			1		

Others

		February 2022				
Common name	Scientific name	6	7	8	9	10
Mammals						
Brown Rat	<i>Rattus rattus</i>		✓			
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>			✓		
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>			✓		
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>			✓		
Amphibians						
Iberian Ribbed Newt	<i>Pleurodeles waltl</i>			✓		
Iberian Pond Frog	<i>Rana iberica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Butterflies						
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bath White	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>			✓	✓	
Southern Brown Argus	<i>Aricia cramera</i>		✓			
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓	✓		
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>			✓		
Spanish Festoon	<i>Zerynthia rumina</i>				✓	
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	February 2022				
		6	7	8	9	10
Dragonflies						
Southern Hawker	<i>Aeshna cyanea</i>		✓			
Iberian Blue Damselfly	<i>Ischnura graellsii</i>					✓
Other insects						
Violet Carpenter Bee	<i>Xylocopa violacea</i>				✓	



Red Deer