

Spain – The Best of Coto Doñana in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

15th – 19th February 2023



White Stork



Marbled Ducks



Pallid Swift



Common Cranes

Tour report by Simon Tonkin, images by Stuart Gillies



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Summary

Birding in the heart of the Doñana National and Natural Parks gave our guests some fabulous experiences alongside a warm Andaluz welcome and hospitality.

The first arriving sub-Saharan migrants were evident in their return this week with Black Kite, Great Spotted Cuckoos, Iberian Chiffchaff, Iberian Yellow Wagtails, masses of Hirundines and a large group of Pallid Swifts screaming overhead!

Encounters with the oldest known Spanish Imperial Eagle at 33 years, magical Marbled Ducks and Red-knobbed Coots were superb, whilst the forests yielded fabulous views of Lesser-spotted Woodpecker!

Day 1

Wednesday 15th February

We met at Sevilla airport where Simon and Stuart were waiting eagerly for the group's arrival.

Soon enough we were on our way out across the ring-roads of Sevilla and towards the East making great progress towards our first stop at El Rocío.

Once we arrived, we decided to convene at the far side of the Madre de Marismas - here this village-side lagoon was packed full of fabulous avian wonders!

600 + Common Coot grouped together forming an impressive display, as they occasionally scattered from any potential Marsh Harrier sorties. Common Ringed Plover waded the shoreline and we also found at least two Little Ringed Plover amongst them. Eurasian Curlew called and were soon discovered among the Northern Lapwings, Black-winged Stilts, Glossy Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbills and more!

House Martins swarmed overhead as wintering Common Chiffchaffs caught flies in flight from various bushes and trees.

Stuart expertly found a Hawfinch in a Poplar tree while we were all looking the other way! This provided fabulous scope views.

We then followed the *laguna* around into the *plaza mayor* of El Rocío, before checking in with Iván at reception and discovering which ornithologically-themed room we had been assigned!

Time to relax and familiarise ourselves with the 'patch'. Further views of the *laguna* provided two gorgeous Western Swamphen as Greater Flamingoes noisy strutted their stuff!

Javi and Fran were both on hand to welcome us at the bar and discuss options for the evening meal which as ever was a mix of sustainable local seasonal ingredients.

Day 2

Thursday 16th February

Today we headed out to the East towards the lagoon and reserve area of Dehesa de Abajo. As we drove through the area of soft fruit farms it was not difficult to understand why Coto Doñana is now dry in so many areas and later in Spring completely dry! This is due to irrigation of soft fruit crops, especially strawberries, and sadly now only fragments of good habitat remain.

One of these fragments is the lagoon at Dehesa de Abajo which is itself under threat from feed crop farming and poor management.

However, our timing for this trip is probably the best time to visit Doñana. Due to high rainfall proceeding this period, many of the few existing lagoons are full of water and birds.

Before reaching the lagoon, we found two Black Storks among roosting Eurasian Spoonbills and Little Egrets.

Onwards to the lagoon we stopped and immediately heard the throaty screams of Pallid Swifts as over 30 joyously ripped over our heads! Among them were at least 300 House Martins and Barn Swallows.

One of the first birds we put the scope on was a gorgeous Marbled Duck and we had awesome views of at least six. There are less than 100 pairs here in the Marismas del Guadalquivir, one of the strongholds of this endangered species. Relentless habitat destruction of seasonal and ephemeral wetlands like Doñana are causing massive issues for the species.

Onwards we went to the visitor centre and a welcoming committee of White Storks freshly back from sub-Saharan Africa, bill-clapping and calling as they tended to their nests.

As we walked to one of the observatories two Great Spotted Cuckoos flew past us calling and chasing each other giving fabulous views!

Some scanning from the observatories got us views eventually of Red-knobbed Coot, a species now close to extinction in Europe.

Over the car park flew newly arrived Black Kite, Booted Eagle and an over-wintering Red Kite.

We took our picnic lunch of fresh local sustainable ingredients alongside bill-clapping White Storks and discussed the morning's sightings.

Following refreshments, we journeyed the short distance to Caño del Juncal where we had encountered the Black Storks earlier this morning. Here we scanned some near ephemeral pools and finally we found our first Bluethroat feeding at the pool edges. Two Western Yellow Wagtails also passed by the pools adding to our growing list of trans-Saharan migrants.

Starting to make our way back towards El Rocío we stopped at the roadside pools at the Dehesa de Pilas. Here there were more Little Ringed Plover, a Green Sandpiper, Golden Plover and Northern Lapwings to finish our gorgeous day amongst the Birds!

Day 3

Friday 17th February

A slightly earlier start today as we headed out into the Parque Nacional with our colleagues Angelica and Jose-Manuel from Doñana Nature. We journeyed around the sandy tracks discussing the conservation, habitat and natural history of the area.

Stopping at the corner of El Raposo we spotted our first Iberian Grey Shrike, one of many we would find today.

Onwards to the private estate of the Coto del Rey. Here, we found lots of endemic Iberian Magpies, singing Woodlarks and Thekla's Larks, Eurasian Hoopoes and more Great Spotted Cuckoos!

After some pylon-scanning we found a distant Spanish Imperial Eagle so we made a quick drive across the *dehesa*. Keeping a respectful distance, we got views of this adult female. She is the oldest known Spanish Imperial Eagle at 33 years young!

We then travelled back to El Rocío and once again to our patch at the Madre de Marismas. Here we took our picnic among the 1,188 (yes we counted them!) Common Coot! Black-winged Stilts, a single Ruff and four Little Ringed Plover were spotted and among the group of Common Waxbills a Tree Sparrow was found!

We headed back to the village for chill-out time, more birding or time to wander the sandy streets of El Rocío before meeting up again with Doñana Nature but this time with good friend Sammy and his colleague Narcissus!

This time we travelled out further to the *marismas* or marshes. Huge areas of this lowland wet grassland area are now dry and considering the recent rainfall we have had here they should be full. This is the sad and depressing new normal for Doñana and we wonder if the issue of unsustainable abstraction agriculture will ever cease - sadly it looks highly unlikely.

The only wet area now remains in a small pocket adjacent to the Jose Valverde Visitor Centre. This is where we headed, picking up Common Greenshank, Green Sandpiper and Little Ringed Plover.

At the bridge we found a day-roosting Barn Owl and getting just the right scope line we got really nice views - not a common species in Andalucía so it was nice for us to add this enigmatic species to the ever-growing list!

Around the edges of a lagoon, twelve Western Swamphens clambered among the vegetation and two Great Egret were in the fields as 470 Common Cranes went overhead. A northern-type Peregrine Falcon ripped through the assembled masses of ducks, freaking out the c.80 Black-tailed Godwits. This "shuffling of the pack" revealed four Marbled Ducks and we ran out to meet them from one of the observatories. The previous day's views of this gorgeous little duck were good but these views were absolutely insane! Scope views only further enhanced the experience and allowed us to better observe the intricate plumage details - amazing!

Soon it was time for us to depart and make our way back towards El Rocío.

Day 4

Saturday 18th February

Our last full day together and we headed to a very different habitat on the heaths of Doñana where we found Dartford Warbler, Woodlark, Thekla's Lark and more Iberian Grey Shrikes.

We then took a relaxed circular walk through the wet woodland at Palacio de Acebrón. We soon got to grips with Short-toed Treecreeper here as we listened and continued our walking. There was a very distant call of a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker ...would we be lucky with this species?

By the freshwater springhead, we found 22 Black-crowned Night Herons roosting - stunning red-eyes, blue crowns and distinct head quills.

Then we heard it again! Calling Lesser Spotted Woodpecker! It flew over our heads but not everybody saw it! It kept calling and we heard it drumming, at times close by, but we couldn't locate it. Oh no! After some patience and perseverance, we found not the drummer, but a female, and we quickly got the right angle and amazing scope views for all! Typically, as we wandered around the woodland, we found more Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers and a male gave us excellent views as two others came and buzzed him! A distant Wryneck called ...

Among the trees many Chiffchaff were heard and seen but one song towards the end of our walk was different and we listened together and heard the Iberian Chiffchaff - the first of the season possibly in the Iberian Peninsula. This trans-Saharan migrant will soon replace the Common Chiffchaffs wintering here as they head to their breeding grounds in Northern Europe.

A successful woodland birding morning so we headed to the Acebuche Visitor Centre. Here we took our picnic among the pines and with some friends, our friends being the endemic and super-stunning Iberian Magpies! Any crumbs spilt were consumed and as soon as we left the table they cleaned everything up - *muchas gracias chicos!*

Following our picnic, we took a wander around the swampy area at La Rocina. here we heard a Water Rail, got close-ups with Glossy Ibis and observed a group of 90 Eurasian Spoonbills. In the woodlands Crested Tit was heard, Short-toed Treecreepers sang as a Eurasian Siskin went over and Serins sang.

Soon it was time to head back to El Rocío, review the list and settle down for yet another delightful evening meal this time hosted by all the team - Paloma, Fran, Sergio and Javi!

Day 5

Sunday 19th February

We took a leisurely breakfast with last looks at the 'patch', then went on our way to Sevilla airport in good time for flights and onward journeys.

The full eBird trip list can be found here: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/109879?welcome=true>

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

N=Near-endemic		February 2023				
Common name	Scientific name	15	16	17	18	19
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			14	4	
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	20	10	4	100	✓
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	30	150	200	140	✓
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		8	20	10	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	10	
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	10	20	30	4	19
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	10	20	50	10	
Marbled Duck	<i>Marmaronetta angustirostris</i>		6	4		
Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>		30			
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		10		15	
Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>		33	1		
Great Spotted Cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>		2	4		
Feral Dove	<i>Columba livia domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>			✓	4	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>				2	
Western Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>	2	10	20	15	2
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		2	2	2	
Red-knobbed Coot	<i>Fulica cristata</i>		1			
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	300	500	1,188	2,000	✓
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>			470		
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		4	5	8	
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	50	150	400	450	200
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	10	30	20	7	10

N=Near-endemic		February 2023				
Common name	Scientific name	15	16	17	18	19
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>			1		
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	20	70	50	✓	✓
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		45	70		
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		2			
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	3			1	
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>	2	3	8		
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	9		3		
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	20	40	80	10	20
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	1	1	2		1
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	17				
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	2				
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	20	30	50	20	10
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		2	3	1	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			1		
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			1		
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	5	10	20	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	30	600	30	1	✓
Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>		2			
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	30	200	30	50	2
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		4		5	
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	120	50	70	80	10
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	15	40	30	110	4
Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>				22	
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	2	7	20	10	✓
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		1	2		
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	2	6	4	10	
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>			4		
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>		1			
Spanish Imperial Eagle - N	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>			1		
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	3	14	4	6	
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		1	4		
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>		1			
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		1	5		
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		1			
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>			8	4	
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		1		1	
Eurasian Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>				1	
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates minor</i>				4	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				1	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	2	4	2	
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1		
Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>			10	4	

N=Near-endemic		February 2023				
Common name	Scientific name	15	16	17	18	19
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>				1	
Iberian Magpie - N	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓		✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	2	8	6	4
European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>				1	
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			2	6	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>			1	10	
Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>		2			
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>			2	4	
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		1			
Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		2	2	2	
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	10	6		✓
Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>			20		
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	4	20	15	✓	✓
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	10	300		✓	✓
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	1	4	6	4	1
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			10	20	
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>				1	
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		4		1	
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dartford Warbler	<i>Curruca undata</i>			1	1	
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>	2	2	✓	✓	✓
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>				2	
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			1	3	
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>				10	
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	5	10	4	✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	10	20	8	2	✓
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			2		
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	2	6	4	10	✓
Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>		1			
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	6	10	7	2	✓
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	4	6	15	✓	✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>			1		
Iberian Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>		2	1		
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			✓	✓	✓
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	2		1		
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	2	4	2	✓	2

N=Near-endemic		February 2023				
Common name	Scientific name	15	16	17	18	19
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	10	130	15	✓	✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	5	20	✓	✓	✓
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>				1	
Black-headed Weaver	<i>Ploceus melanocephalus</i>		2			
Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>	9		10		

Others

		February 2023				
Common name	Scientific name	15	16	17	18	19
Mammals						
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓		✓	✓	
Butterflies						
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>		✓			
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>		✓	✓		
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>				✓	
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>				✓	
Reptiles & Amphibians						
Large Psammmodromus	<i>Psammmodromus algirus</i>				✓	
Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>				✓	