Spain and Morocco: Birding on Two Continents!

Naturetrek Tour Report

1st - 8th October 2022

Tour report by Niki Williamson



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Summary

This action- and wildlife-packed adventure on two continents saw our group experience the very best of wetland, mountain, and farmland habitats on both sides of The Straits of Gibraltar. From our base in the forests of Los Alcornocales Natural Park in Andalucía, the late autumn migration of Europe's raptors had Short-toed and Booted eagles, Black Kites, Honey Buzzard, Eurasian Sparrowhawks, Griffon, Egyptian and even Rüppell's Vultures soaring over our heads.

In Morocco, we added a Maghreb twist to our birding with Black-crowned Tchagra, Atlas Pied Flycatcher, African Chaffinch, and African Blue Tit. Moroccan Marsh Owl stood out as a star species against a myriad of waders, gulls, and terns on the teeming Merja Zerga lagoon, whilst among the magnificent mountains of the Talassemtane National Park we encountered Moussier's Redstart, Black Wheatear, Atlas Long-legged Buzzard, Bonelli's Eagle and more.

With food made from outstanding local ingredients on both sides of The Straits, enjoyed in beautiful natural surroundings, or local homes and restaurants, and time to explore the rich cultural heritage of the blue *medina* of Chefchouen, we really did get a taste of two continents!

Day 1

Saturday 1st October

The group arrived on various flights into Málaga airport, where they were met by Simon and Niki before being whisked away along the Costa del Sol. Lunch was provided *en route* for the earlier arrivals. As we neared The Straits, we got our first views of "The Two Pillars of Hercules" – the Rock of Gibraltar and Morocco's Jebel Musa - both rising dramatically from the sea.

The hubbub of the high rise hotels along the Mediterranean coast and the busy port of Algeciras soon gave way to the Cork Oak-covered hills of Los Alcornocales Natural Park, where we found our first base for the trip at Huerta Grande Rural Eco-lodge.

Once the group had assembled and settled into accommodation in log cabins and turn-of-the-century houses, we took a stroll around our new habitat! Overhead the late autumn raptor migration was continuing, giving us our first views of Griffon Vultures, Short-toed and Booted Eagles, with the odd late Black Kite and European Honey Buzzard.

The woodlands were loaded with wintering Eurasian Blackcaps and we picked up passage Spotted and Pied Flycatcher and Willow Warbler. We had nice encounters with some local woodland specialities including Crested Tit, Short-toed Treecreepers, Firecrests and Hawfinch.

Our first three-course meal, prepared by chef Veronica, featured a delicious Mediterranean bean salad, and sustainably sourced local tuna.

Day 2

Sunday 2nd October

Today we were greeted by a very strong *levante* (easterly) wind, another local speciality! Heading out to the west, we made a stop at the migration watchpoint of Cazalla so that the group could experience its full force – it was hard to stand up! But we got a great view of a low juvenile Honey Buzzard also experiencing the *levante* for the first time.

Local knowledge is key to getting the best birding in variable local conditions, so we continued further west. A stop at the watchpoint of La Peña gave us great views of several Thekla's Larks and Spanish Sparrows. As we looked at an ancient sky burial site hewn from a huge boulder, Griffon Vultures cruised over, somehow emphasising the point...

Continuing the vulture theme, we headed up to La Zarga, an imposing but sheltered crag, home to around 90 pairs of Griffon Vultures. At this time of year their numbers are augmented by incoming juveniles migrating from France and northern Spain. As we tucked into our picnic lunch – which today featured local goats cheese matured in rosemary - we enjoyed their aerial comings and goings, and also got views of an Egyptian Vulture. A smart adult Rüppell's Vulture was also present – this Critically Endangered African vagrant is becoming more common in Spain as their plight worsens in Africa.

After a brief visit to a viewpoint to look down on the Roman ruins of Baelo Claudia, we headed back via a coffee stop at the hamlet of Los Porros.

Day 3

Monday 3rd October

Today we headed to Africa! Conveniently leaving most of our things at our home base of Huerta Grande, we packed the essentials and took the ferry from Algeciras, a short drive away. We took with us Juan-Lu from Huerta Grande, whose expertise in Moroccan travel would make everything go smoothly! As we said *basta la vista* to Spain and *salaam* to Morocco, we could see Common Dolphins in Algeciras bay, and Scopoli's and Balearic Shearwaters skimmed the water.

After swiftly completing border formalities, we headed to the town of Oued Marsa, where we enjoyed a second breakfast! While Juan-Lu organised mint tea, and local bread with fresh goat's cheese and honey, we were thrilled to watch African Blue Tit, African Chaffinch, Common Bulbul and Cirl Bunting amongst the hillside scrub. The vegetation was stuffed with migrant warblers, and we watched Booted and Short-toed Eagles arriving low to the coast.

Enlivened, we travelled onward to Moulay Bousselham. Hundreds of eagles were now pouring into the coast – thrilling! On arrival we took another tea while we relaxed on a hotel terrace overlooking the Merja Zerga lagoon. Around us were Laughing Doves and Common Bulbuls, and we could pick out Audouin's Gulls in the flocks around the bustling fish market.

We boarded small traditional fishing boats to further explore this extraordinary place teeming with life. As we wended round creeks and birded from a sandy spit in the middle of the lagoon, we saw Oystercatchers, Blackwinged Stilts, huge flocks of Sanderling, Dunlin, Grey, Common Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Black-tailed and

Bar-tailed Godwits, Whimbrel, Eurasian Curlew, Common Redshank, Greenshank, Common and Curlew Sandpiper, Slender-billed and Mediterranean Gulls, Caspian, Little and Sandwich Tern, hundreds of Greater Flamingoes and more. In a flock of several hundred Common Coots, Simon managed to pick out a Red-knobbed Coot!

After lunch back at the hotel terrace, we made the eye-opening drive through miles of intensive strawberry and salad farms to an ever-shrinking area of traditionally grazed pastureland. Here we hoped to see Moroccan Marsh Owl, a Critically Endangered subspecies of *Asio capensis*.

While we waited for dusk to fall, a stunning Black-winged Kite kept us entertained as it hunted over the marshes and returned repeatedly to a nearby perch.

Then finally – Marsh Owls! We picked out two in flight together and then two more individuals flying silently across the marshes. We were thrilled with our encounter, but it was a sad reminder for our local guide Hassan, who could remember a time when the roosting birds numbered in their hundreds.

Day 4

Tuesday 4th October

On the top floor of the charming colonial-style Hotel España in Larache, we enjoyed a quite simply delicious breakfast of *rghaif* flatbread with a selection of tahini, honey, local freshly-churned butter black olives and light fresh goat's cheese, washed down with orange and carrot juice and good strong coffee – fantastic! There was also a great continental breakfast of omelette and salad for the less adventurous!

We took a stroll around the tastefully-restored main square of Larache, taking time to enjoy the delightful colony of Little Swifts.

We then left for our second Moroccan base, making stops *en route*. At Loukkos wetland, despite the lack of water we had a nice time watching very close Glossy Ibis, Western Osprey and *algeriensis* Grey Shrike. We also picked out a couple of Plain Martins overhead.

In the Oak forests of Bouachem, we were sad to encounter the damage caused by three massive fires in July and August. Vast swathes of this magical forest – home to Levaillant's Green Woodpecker, Atlas Pied Flycatcher and four species of Oak tree – had been rendered to charcoal by these senseless acts of vandalism.

Heart-breaking though it was, we noted that many of the trees were already showing signs of regeneration. In the undamaged parts of the forest – still a very large area – we were thrilled to have close encounters with three separate groups of Barbary Macaques, all with very young babies in their number.

After a packed day, we were grateful to settle in to our accommodation at Auberge Dardara, where we enjoyed Moroccan tagine and herby mint tea before settling in for the night.

Day 5

Wednesday 5th October

Today we would explore the mountains of the Talassemtane National Park. While waiting to meet our 4x4 vehicles and drivers for the day, we birded the grounds of a local campsite, where we found Firecrests, African Chaffinch, African Blue Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper and Common Crossbill.

Driving up along the rough, steep tracks, we got great views down onto the blue-painted town of Chefchouen. We viewed out over a magnificent valley, where a mountain stream and small subsistence farms were attracting a suite of mountain birds. Both Red-billed and Alpine Chough were there, and we also picked out Dartford Warbler, Blue Rock Thrush, Black Wheatear, Rock Bunting – and the all-important Moussier's Redstart! Atlas Long-legged Buzzard and Bonelli's Eagle soared overhead.

Heading up higher we passed through forests of quasi-endemic (but badly named!) Spanish Fir, *Abies pinsapo*, and endangered Atlas Cedar, *Cedrus atlantica*, these ancient forests the survivors of two ice ages. Here we found Woodlarks, Tree Pipit, Atlas Pied Flycatcher and more Common Crossbills, as well as a Cardinal butterfly.

For lunch we joined the wonderful Aisha – a family member of our driver Abdul – who welcomed us into her home in the hills with characteristic warmth. Alongside her daughter and granddaughter, she prepared for us hearty and traditional hill-farmer fare, which we ate together using huge home-baked flatbreads.

The rest of the afternoon we spent exploring the dazzling blue streets and *souks* of Chefchouen, Morocco's "Blue Pearl", and all their colourful sights and spicy smells!

Day 6

Thursday 6th October

Our hotel was created from the ruins of a traditional stone water mill, and this morning we took a stroll around the woods and scrub alongside the river that used to power it. It was a delightful place and we enjoyed incredible views of Black-crowned Tchagra as well as Black-winged Kite, Common Kingfisher and Grey Wagtail, and Black Stork overhead.

Then it was time to begin our journey back to Spain. On the outskirts of Tetouan, 200 White Storks swirled over a rubbish tip. We made a brief stop by a newly-rejuvenated river – once little better than an open sewer, this clean and thriving stretch of urban water hosted dozens of Glossy Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbills, Greater Flamingoes and Black-winged Stilts.

During our ferry ride home to Huerta Grande, we encountered many feeding Scopoli's Shearwaters and Northern Gannets as well as Common and Striped Dolphin and Ocean Sunfish.

We arrived back in time for a very welcome beer before dinner!

Day 7

Friday 7th October

How to follow an action-packed excursion to Africa?! With a visit to the mudflats and saltpans of the Marismas de Barbate!

We began at the estuary of the Rio Barbate, where the tide was just right for us to get up close and personal with many mudflat-lovers – including Oystercatcher, Common Ringed, Grey and Kentish Plover, Bar-tailed Godwits, Whimbrel, Eurasian Curlew, Common Redshank and Greenshank, Spotted Redshank, Red Knot, groups of many of Dunlin, Sanderling and Curlew Sandpiper, Mediterranean Gull and Caspian Tern. Moving round to the nature reserve, created on the site of disused saltpans, we encountered Eurasian Hoopoe, Calandra and Greater Shorttoed Lark on the surrounding pastureland as well as passage Whinchat and Northern Wheatear. On the pans themselves, we added Greater Flamingoes, Eurasian Spoonbill, Eurasian Stone-curlews, Pied Avocets, Black-tailed Godwit, Common Sandpiper, Little Stint, Ruff and Audouin's Gull to the day's finds.

We were also thrilled to encounter four Northern Bald Ibis today, this Critically Endangered bird doing well locally after a successful reintroduction project around fifteen years ago.

We took our picnic at La Breña Natural Park, where the pine woodlands were full of migrant Pied Flycatchers. A handful of raptors passed over us, Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Eurasian Sparrowhawks and Black Kites – reminding us of the autumn event still in progress.

We made our last stop at the farmlands and rice fields of La Janda. This place really comes alive in late autumn as huge flocks of wintering and passage birds make the most of the harvested fields. Hundreds of White Storks and Glossy Ibis swirled around as well as Corn Buntings and mixed flocks of Spanish and House Sparrows. We picked up a wintering Purple Heron. Black-winged Kite and Montagu's Harrier gave us impressive flybys.

Day 8

Saturday 8th October

Today it was time to head home. We said goodbye to Juan-Lu - our Morocco companion guide - and to the rest of the team at the excellent Huerta Grande. Simon and Niki made sure the group were in good time for their various flights back to the UK.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

	Scientific name	October 2022								
Common name		1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata							4		
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos							6		
Barbary Partridge	Alectoris barbara						1			
Scopoli's Shearwater	Calonectris diomedea						70			
Cory's Shearwater	Calonectris borealis			50						
Balearic Shearwater	Puffinus mauretanicus			4						
Greater Flamingo	Phoenicopterus roseus			400				230		
Black Stork	Ciconia nigra						1			
White Stork	Ciconia ciconia	10		40	80		200	400		
Glossy Ibis	Plegadis falcinellus		1		1		30	200		
Northern Bald Ibis	Geronticus eremitus							4		
Eurasian Spoonbill	Platalea leucorodia			2			2	60		
Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea			4	6		✓	√		
Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea							1		
Little Egret	Egretta garzetta			16	10		4	10		
Northern Gannet	Morus bassanus				2		20			
Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo			√	√			√		
Western Osprey	Pandion haliaetus			2	3			1		
Black-winged Kite	Elanus caeruleus			1			1	1		
Egyptian Vulture	Neophron percnopterus		1							
Rüppell's Vulture	Gyps rueppellii		1							
European Honey Buzzard	Pernis apivorus	1	1							
Griffon Vulture	Gyps fulvus	20	200					20		
Short-toed Snake Eagle	Circaetus gallicus	4	10	300	1		10	4		
Booted Eagle	Hieraaetus pennatus	6	15	70			3	10		
Bonelli's Eagle	Aquila fasciata					1				
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus	6	30	10	7		4	10		

				October 2022						
Common name	Scientific name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus			20	4		1	20		
Montagu's Harrier	Circus pygargus							1		
Red Kite	Milvus milvus							2		
Black Kite	Milvus migrans	1						70		
Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo	1						1		
Long-legged Buzzard	Buteo rufinus					1				
Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra			500						
Red-knobbed Coot	Fulica cristatus			1						
Eurasian Stone-curlew	Burhinus oedicnemus							4		
Eurasian Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus			4				5		
Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus			10	20		10	40		
Pied Avocet	Recurvirostra avosetta							50		
Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus							10		
Grey Plover	Pluvialis squatarola			60				20		
Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula			150	8			150		
Little Ringed Plover	Charadrius dubius				1					
Kentish Plover	Charadrius alexandrinus		2	50	2			50		
Common Snipe	Gallinago gallinago							20		
Black-tailed Godwit	Limosa limosa			20				17		
Bar-tailed Godwit	Limosa lapponica			10				11		
Whimbrel	Numenius phaeopus			4	1			4		
Eurasian Curlew	Numenius arquata			2				2		
Spotted Redshank	Tringa erythropus			_				1		
Common Redshank	Tringa totanus			√	8					
Common Greenshank	Tringa nebularia			4				10		
Green Sandpiper	Tringa nebalana Tringa ochropus			2	2		1	√		
Wood Sandpiper	Tringa glareola							2		
Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos			4	2			3		
Ruddy Turnstone	Arenaria interpres			10				1		
Red Knot	Calidris canutus			10				3		
	Calidris alba		1	,	10			30		
Sanderling Little Stint	Calidris minuta		1	✓	10			4		
	Calidris ferruginea			1				30		
Curlew Sandpiper	<u> </u>			70	6					
Dunlin Duff	Calidris alpina			70	О			√ 		
Ruff	Calidris pugnax			- F0				8		
Slender-billed Gull	Chroicocephalus genei			50				ļ		
Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus			20	✓			✓		
Little Gull	Hydrocoloeus minutus							_		
Audouin's Gull	Ichthyaetus audouinii			2				2		
Mediterranean Gull	Ichthyaetus melanocephalus			4				3		
Yellow-legged Gull	Larus michahellis	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus			✓	✓		✓	✓		
Gull-billed Tern	Gelochelidon nilotica									
Caspian Tern	Hydroprogne caspia			8	3			3		
Sandwich Tern	Thalasseus sandvicensis			10	3		✓			
Little Tern	Sternula albifrons			1						
Common Tern	Sterna hirundo									
Whiskered Tern	Chlidonias hybrida			2						
Rock Dove	Columba livia	✓	✓	√	✓	✓	√	✓		
Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus				√	✓	√	✓		
Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		

				October 2022					
Common name	Scientific name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Laughing Dove	Spilopelia senegalensis			3					
Tawny Owl	Strix aluco	1	1				1	1	
Little Owl	Athene noctua			1	1			1	
Moroccan Marsh Owl	Asio capensis tingitanus			2					
Alpine Swift	Tachymarptis melba							4	
Pallid Swift	Apus pallidus			4	1				
Little Swift	Apus affinis				15				
Common Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis						2	1	
Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops							1	
Eurasian Wryneck	Jynx torquilla						1		
Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major				2				
Iberian Green Woodpecker	Picus sharpei							1	
Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	2	2	2	2	1	√	√	
Eurasian Hobby	Falco subbuteo			1			•	-	
Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus	2	1					1	
Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius	-	1		10	4		2	
Maghreb Magpie	Pica pica mauretanica		'		10	•	1		
Red-billed Chough	Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax					2	•		
Alpine Chough	Pyrrhocorax graculus					2			
Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula			,			,	,	
Northern Raven		2		2	4	√ 12	4	2	
	Corvus corax				4	12	-		
Black-crowned Tchagra	Tchagra senegalus			1			1		
Algerian Grey Shrike	Lanius excubitor algeriensis				5	40	40		
Coal Tit	Periparus ater					10	10		
European Crested Tit	Lophophanes cristatus	3	3					2	
Common Bulbul	Pycnonotus barbatus			✓	✓	✓			
Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus	✓	✓					6	
African Blue Tit	Cyanistes teneriffae ultramarinus			4	10	8	✓		
Great Tit	Parus major	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Woodlark	Lullula arborea					1			
Thekla's Lark	Galerida theklae		8		6	4	✓		
Crested Lark	Galerida cristata		4	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Greater Short-toed Lark	Calandrella brachydactyla							2	
Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra							50	
Tree Pipit	Anthus trivialis			3	2	1			
Plain Martin	Riparia paludicola				1				
Sand Martin	Riparia riparia							3	
Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Eurasian Crag Martin	Ptyonoprogne rupestris		6						
Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum							√	
Red-rumped Swallow	Cecropis daurica					2	4		
Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti		1	2	2			2	
Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus	10							
Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus	1	1						
Zitting Cisticola	Cisticola juncidis	<u> </u>		√	√		√	√	
Sedge Warbler	Acrocephalus schoenobaenus			_ v	1		V		
Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla	√	√	,		,	,	,	
Dartford Warbler	Curruca undata	V	V	√	V	3	✓	✓	
Sardinian Warbler		 	,	,	,		,	,	
Common Firecrest	Curruca melanocephala Regulus ignicapilla	4	4	✓	4	√ 15	√ √	✓ ✓	
								/	

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Common name	Scientific name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Eurasian Nuthatch	Sitta europaea					6		
Short-toed Treecreeper	Certhia brachydactyla	2	3	2	√	√		3
Spotless Starling	Sturnus unicolor	√						
Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	6	4	√	√	√	√	√
Spotted Flycatcher	Muscicapa striata	1						
European Robin	Erithacus rubecula	2	4	2	6	4	1	2
European Pied Flycatcher	Ficedula hypoleuca	1						11
Atlas Pied Flycatcher	Ficedula speculigera					1		
Common Redstart	Phoenicurus phoenicurus			4			1	
Moussier's Redstart	Phoenicurus moussieri					1		
Blue Rock Thrush	Monticola solitarius					2		
Whinchat	Saxicola rubetra				1			1
European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola	2	2	√	√	√	√	√
Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe				1			1
Black Wheatear	Oenanthe leucura					1		
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	√						
Spanish Sparrow	Passer hispaniolensis		10					√
Spanish Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla flava iberiae			√	10			
Western Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla flava flava						✓	√
Grey Wagtail	Motacilla cinerea	1	1			1	2	1
Common Crossbill	Loxia curvirostra					9		2
Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	√	√					√
North African Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs africana			✓	√	√	√	
Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes	4	9			1		11
European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris		2	√	✓	√	✓	√
Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina	4	10	√	✓	√	✓	√
European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	✓	✓	✓	√	√	√	√
European Serin	Serinus serinus					6	√	√
Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra		100	✓	√		10	√
Rock Bunting	Emberiza cia					2		
Cirl Bunting	Emberiza cirlus			3	2			

Others

Common name		October 2022								
	Scientific name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
Mammals										
Common Dolphin	Delphinus delphis			√			√			
Striped Dolphin	Stenella coeruleoalba						√			
Bottle-nose Dolphin	Tursiops truncatus									
Long-finned Pilot Whale	Globicephala melas									
Barbary Macaque	Macaca sylvanus				✓	✓				
Fish										
Ocean Sunfish	Mola mola						✓			
Butterflies										
Meadow Brown	Maniola jurtina						√	√		
Dusky Brown	Hyponephele lycaon									

Monarch	Danaus plexippus	✓					
Lang's Short-tailed Blue	Leptotes pirithous	✓					
Long-tailed Blue	Lampides boeticus	✓					
Cardinal	Argynnis pandora				✓		
Large Tortoishell	Nymphalis polychloros				✓		
Cleopatra	Gonepteryx cleopatra				✓		
Painted Lady	Vanessa cardui		✓	✓	✓	√	
Plain Tiger	Danaus chrysippus		✓				
Two-tailed Pasha	Charaxes jasius						√
Reptiles & Amphibians							
Vaucher's Wall Lizard	Podarcis vaucheri	✓					
House Gecko	Hemidactylus frenatus	✓					
Western False Smooth Snake	Macroprotodon brevis	✓					
Berber Toad	Bufo mauritanicus			√	√		