

# Spain & Morocco: Birding on Two Continents!

Naturetrek Tour Report

1st – 8th October 2023

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Short-toed Eagle



Booted Eagle



Barbary Macaque



Merja Zerga lagoon

Tour report by Niki Williamson. Photos by Simon Tonkin

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Tour participants: Simon Tonkin & Niki Williamson (leaders) with 14 Naturetrek Clients.

## Summary

A fantastic trip across two continents, packed with natural and cultural highlights! From our Andalucian base in a beautiful Cork Oak woodland, our group crossed The Straits following the thousands of European Honey Buzzards, Short-toed Eagles, Booted Eagles, Eurasian Sparrowhawks, Western Marsh Harrier, Black Kites, White and Black Storks, swifts and hirundines we saw making the same crossing that week.

Highlights included views of five Moroccan Marsh Owls, stunning Moussier's Redstart action in the Rif mountains, Barbary Macaques in the mystical Forest of Bouachem, and the extraordinary wealth of life in the Merja Zerga lagoon, experienced from small, brightly-painted traditional fishing boats and including Eurasian Oystercatchers, Black-winged Stilts, Grey, Common Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Bar-tailed Godwits, Whimbrel, Eurasian Curlews, Ruddy Turnstones, Red Knot, Sanderling, Curlew Sandpiper, Dunlin, Slender-billed and Audouin's Gulls, Caspian, Sandwich, Whiskered and Black Tern, over 200 Greater Flamingoes, three Western Ospreys and several Marsh Harriers hunting, and more! Just wow!

We delved into delicious local food on both sides of The Straits, enjoying tagines, freshly grilled *kefta* kebabs, local olives, tomatoes, goats' cheese and honey, and plenty of hearty Moroccan flatbreads and refreshing mint tea. There was also time to experience the labyrinthine pastel blue streets of Chefchouen and pick up a bit of local history and culture in this unique, unmissable *medina* full of scented spices, colourful fabrics and art, ancient architecture, lively cafes and lots of cats!

## Day 1

## Sunday 1st October

Simon and Niki met most of the group from their arrivals to Gibraltar airport, and we headed out into Spain, making the short drive to our wonderful accommodation at Huerta Grande Rural Eco-lodge. We met up with the independent arrivals in time to start the trip with a picnic lunch in the grounds, surrounded by Cork Oak trees.

After lunch and settling in, we started out on a woodland walk to connect with some of the area's resident birds, such as Short-toed Treecreeper and Crested Tit. We could see from our vantage point that there was lots of activity in a nearby valley, so we hopped in the vans and made the short drive to Cerro del Tambor nearby. Here, literally hundreds of raptors were riding up and down the coast, now desperate to migrate across The Straits after over a week of strong *levante* winds had held up their journey. We enjoyed views of European Honey Buzzards, Griffon Vultures, Short-toed Eagles, Booted Eagles, Eurasian Sparrowhawks, Western Marsh Harrier and Black Kites.

A great introduction to the area, and we headed back to base to relax before a delicious dinner of fresh local foods by chef Veronica.

## Day 2

## Monday 2nd October

Today we headed out to try and encounter some more of the area's famous migration of soaring birds across The Straits. We made a brief stop at the well-known observatory of Cazalla. From here we could see raptors were

gathering in the Santuario de la Luz valley, so we headed over to get into the migratory flow. Here over three hundred raptors were gathered! From our watching position in deck chairs, we enjoyed great views of many European Honey Buzzards, Short-toed Eagles, Booted Eagles, Eurasian Sparrowhawks, Western Marsh Harrier and Black Kites, as well as Black Storks. Around us several Thekla's Larks showed well.

Meanwhile, more and more Griffon Vultures were turning up to a livestock carcass in a nearby paddock. We had dress circle seats from the hilltop for the spectacle, as vultures squabbled and hopped around the carcass and soared low past us. Over seventy Griffon Vultures congregated, as well as a young Egyptian Vulture, and - yes!! - a Rüppell's Vulture soared low past us giving great views.

After lunch was done – for us and for the vultures – we headed to explore the ricefields of La Janda. Almost 1200 White Storks had gathered there sheltering from the wind, feeding in the paddocks and fuelling up for their onward journey south. Around them were Glossy Ibis, Hen Harrier, Marsh Harrier, and huge flocks of Spanish Sparrows.

Inspired by this fantastic first full day of wildlife, we headed back to our tranquil accommodation in time to relax by the pool and to pack for our Moroccan adventure the following day!

## Day 3

## Tuesday 3rd October

We left early and caught the ferry at dawn from Tarifa to Tanger Ville port. The border crossings were slick at both ends, and in not much over 90 minutes we were making our way through Tangiers, where we picked up a House Bunting in a market on the outskirts.

Soon we arrived at Oued Marsa, an unassuming “truck stop” on the mountainous north coast of Morocco, where we could have our first delicious Moroccan breakfast! While we waited looking back across The Straits, we picked up African Blue Tit, African Chaffinch, Cirl Bunting, Common Bulbul singing, and migrants in the form of Garden Warbler, Common Redstart and Spotted Flycatcher. A handful of Short-toed Eagles and Black Kites could be seen making their way across the sea towards us!

Breakfast was awesome, and featured *ergaif* (a kind of fried dough pancake) and Moroccan flatbread with delicious fresh goats' cheese, honey, fresh butter, fried egg with cumin, strong coffee and refreshing mint tea.

We ate our fill (and then some!) and continued on towards our first base in the shadow of the Rif mountains. En route we made a stop at the Oued Martil project on the outskirts of Tetouan. Until recently this stretch of the river was heavily polluted, but after an amazingly successful clean-up project we were now able to watch Greater Flamingoes, Glossy Ibis, Common Kingfisher, Grey Wagtails and Black-winged Stilts enjoying their new habitat.

We arrived at our first Moroccan base – a lovingly-restored water mill in the village of Dardara – in time for afternoon tea and sandwiches. After settling in we took a walk along the nearby dry river bed. Here we had great views of African Chaffinch, African Blue Tit, Common Bulbul and the *algeriensis* subspecies of Southern Grey Shrike.

## Day 4

## Wednesday 4th October

As the sun rose, we took a pre-breakfast stroll in our riverside 'patch'. We had again all the glories of the previous day, topped off with Black-crowned (Hooded) Tchagra – this is newly-established population of a normally more southerly species. There were also stunning views of Black-winged Kite.

After another brilliant Moroccan breakfast, we headed up the hill to the very special blue city of Chefchouen, where we met local guides Ibrahim and the team for our 4x4 expedition into the Talassamtane National Park.

In Land Rovers we climbed several hundred metres through spectacular limestone landscape. Stopping by a water trough, we immediately picked up a stunning male Moussier's Redstart! We were thrilled to have the opportunity to watch it for ages, alongside a female, and a Rock Bunting coming to the same water source. A Blue Rock Thrush showed well across the valley and a European Goshawk soared overhead.

We drove a little further up the mountain to a small house owned by Ibrahim's family, where he laid on a lovely picnic of flatbread with goats' cheese and tasty tomatoes and olives, with lashings of mint tea, and walnut-stuffed dates – delicious!

In the afternoon there was time to wander in the labyrinthine pastel blue streets of Chefchouen and pick up a bit of local history and culture in this unique, unmissable *medina* full of scented spices, colourful fabrics and art, ancient architecture, lively cafes and lots of cats!

## Day 5

## Thursday 5th October

Today we said goodbye to our lovely host Fatima and the team at Auberge Dardara and moved on to our second base via the forest of Bouachem, held to be sacred as the birthplace of Sufi Islam. This magical woodland hosts a unique assemblage of five species of Oak and is home to Endangered Barbary Macaques. As we drove through, we spotted a couple by the roadside which melted away, but later we found a large troupe moving across the hillside and got great views of males, females and young ones.

We stopped to collect drinking water from a mountain springhead, encountering Eurasian Nuthatch, Short-toed Treecreeper and two Atlas Long-legged Buzzards overhead. A Levaillant's Green Woodpeckers flashed up from roadside.

Next, we stopped in the bustling market town of Beni Aruss, for lunch in the restaurant of our friend Rachid. As he prepared it there was time for a quick look around the local market, which can be a great opportunity to gain insight into local life and interact with the friendly people of the area. We picked up some tasty-looking bananas on the way through. Meanwhile Rachid had dished up several local dishes for us all to share, including lentil and chick pea stews, chicken tagine and freshly grilled *kefta* kebabs!

We journeyed on and checked into our hotel in coastal Larache, before heading out to the grazing marsh of Moulay Boussalem for sunset. As one would expect from a marsh at dusk, there were mosquitoes aplenty! But we didn't let this deter us from our quest and as the sun dropped, we were thrilled to see five Moroccan Marsh Owls taking off from their roosts!

## Day 6

## Friday 6th October

After a relaxed breakfast at our hotel, we took a walk across the picturesque main *plaza* and wandered underneath a section of beautifully-tiled arches around the periphery. Here we could see a colony of Little Swifts, faces peeping out from snug-looking feather-lined nests!

We headed back to Moulay Boussalem and met our guide Hassan at a hotel over-looking the Merja Zerga lagoon. We enjoyed a mint tea on the terrace accompanied by Common Bulbul and Laughing Dove.

When the tide was right, we headed out in small, brightly-painted traditional fishing boats onto the lagoon itself. The richness and diversity of life on the lagoon was astounding, and we found ourselves surrounded by waders, terns, gulls and more, including Eurasian Oystercatchers, Black-winged Stilts, Grey, Common Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Bar-tailed Godwits, Whimbrel, Eurasian Curlews, Ruddy Turnstones, Red Knot, Sanderling, Curlew Sandpiper, Dunlin, Slender-billed and Audouin's Gulls, Caspian, Sandwich, Whiskered and Black Tern, over 200 Greater Flamingoes, three Western Ospreys and several Marsh Harriers hunting, and more!

We took our lunch at the hotel, then made a further short drive to Tangiers, where we had time for coffee stop at the port before our return ferry. We arrived back at Huerta Grande in plenty of time for a welcome home drink and hearty dinner of *lasaña*!

## Day 7

## Saturday 7th October

This morning we first took a look at the intertidal habitat at the seaside town of Bolonia. Kentish Plovers and Sanderling scampered around the sands, and we could see Northern Gannets out to sea.

We next headed up to craggy hills nearby, home to a large colony of Griffon Vultures. We spent the morning enjoying watching well over a hundred of them soar and spiral above our heads, coming in low for some great photos. As autumn wore on, their numbers were being augmented by young, recently-fledged birds arriving from the north ready to migrate later this month. There were also Marsh Harriers, Eurasian Sparrowhawks, Short-toed Eagles and Booted Eagles. A Blue Rock Thrush showed well on the rocks.

For our final picnic together, we headed to an area of woodland near the town of Barbate, part of the Breñas de Barbate Natural Park. Our post-prandial walk got us some nice encounters with European Serins, Short-toed Treecreepers, Spotted and Pied Flycatchers.

Next, we took our places in a quiet little spot next to the mouth of the Rio Barbate and enjoyed extraordinary close views of feeding waders, practically scuttling over our feet! We had great views of Black-winged Stilts, Grey, Common Ringed and Kentish Plovers, and Ruddy Turnstones amongst others. Eurasian Curlew and Whimbrel were added, and Audouin's Gulls, Sandwich and Caspian Terns loafed on the sand bars alongside Eurasian Oystercatchers. Great birding!

## Day 8

## Sunday 8th October

All too soon our trip was at an end! We had time for a morning walk around the grounds, enjoying views of Firecrests, Hawfinches and Crested Tits on the feeders.

Then it was time to head to Gibraltar airport for flights home, taking memories of some great nature and cultural experiences!

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	October 2023							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			30					
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>			10					
Barbary Partridge	<i>Alectoris barbara</i>			6					
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		6						
Scopoli's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>			40			10		
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>			50			20 0	19	
Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	6	29					1	
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	20	116 8	30		20	40	16	
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		25	40		1			
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		8	2	4	3	20	18	
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			4		5	4	3	
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>							3	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>					✓	✓	✓	
Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>						3	2	
Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>				1	1			
Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>		2						
Rüppell's Vulture	<i>Gyps rueppellii</i>		1						
European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	13	22	2	4				
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	30	70	4				12 0	
Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	64	142	11				6	
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	83	36	9	4		2	10	
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	25	14	2	2	3	1	4	
Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>				1				
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	2	10	1			3	2	
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		1						
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	6	16	4		3			
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1						1	
Atlas Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>					3			
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>							1	
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>						20 0		
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>						5	2	
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>			30			20	45	
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>						30	15	
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>						11 0	20	
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>						20	2	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			3					
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>						50	20	
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>						20	10	
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>						20	6	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>						✓	✓	
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>						2	8	
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			1					
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			3			7	2	

Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>						✓	10	
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>						8	1	
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>						50	28	
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>						1		
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>						70	30	
Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>						20		
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>						✓	✓	
Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>			1			5	1	
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>			10				9	
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>				✓		✓	✓	
Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>						47	3	
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>						7	5	
Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>						2		
Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>						1		
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domseticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	4	5	10	20	30	2		
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Laughing Dove	<i>Spilopelia senegalensis</i>						2		
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	1		1			1		
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>						1		
Moroccan Marsh Owl	<i>Asio capensis tingitanus</i>						5		
Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>			5					
Little Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>						11		
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			1			2		
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	1	2				2		
Levaillant's Woodpecker	<i>Picus vaillantii</i>						3		
Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>						2		
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	4				2	2	
Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>						1		
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1					1	
Algerian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor algeriensis</i>			1	1	2			
Black-crowned (Hooded) Tchagra	<i>Tchagra senegalus cucullatus</i>				3				
Common Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓		
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			2	6	4	6		
Coal Tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>				1	3			
European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	4	2				5	2	✓
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓					✓	
African Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes teneriffae ultramarinus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓		
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		4	2	1	10	✓		
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		4						
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		10					15	
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	100	200						
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	1	1		2		2		
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓						
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		1					2	
Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>	2		4					



Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>							1	
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	1	4	2	1	1	2	3	
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>			1					
Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>				2				
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	2	2				4		✓
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	1	1	1			1	2	
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>					4			
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	2				20	2	10	
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	4	10	✓	✓	
Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	3	1	1		2	2	3	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	2	4	5	6	2	
European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>	2					2	4	
Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>	1		1					
Moussier's Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus moussieri</i>				2				
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>				3	1		1	
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>							1	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>		✓						
Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>		1	5	4	✓	✓		
Spanish Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>							3	
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1	1	2	2	2	2	
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		1						
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓					✓	
North African Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs africana</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓		
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	6	6					7	✓
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>			7	12	✓	✓	✓	
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		2	1	4	10	✓	✓	
Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>				3				
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirius</i>			3	5	2			
House Bunting	<i>Emberiza sahari</i>			1		1	2		

## Others

Common name	Scientific name	October 2023							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Barbary Macaque	<i>Macaca sylvanus</i>					20			
Egyptian Mongoose	<i>Herpestes ichneumon</i>		4						
Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>	✓		✓			✓		
African Tiger	<i>Danaus chrysippus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓		
Geranium Bronze	<i>Cacyreus marshalli</i>	✓							
Two-tailed Pasha	<i>Charaxes jasius</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Cleopatra	<i>Gonepteryx cleopatra</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓		
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>			✓	✓		✓		

Common name	Scientific name	October 2023							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Rock Grayling	<i>Hipparchia semele</i>				✓				
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>				✓				
Hummingbird Hawkmoth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>		✓						
Praying Mantis spp			✓						
Vaucher's Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis vaucheri</i>	✓	✓						
Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>		✓						
House Gecko	<i>Hemidactylus frenatus</i>		✓						
Natterjack	<i>Epidalea calamita</i>				✓				