

Spain and Morocco: Birding on Two Continents!

Naturetrek Tour Report

3rd – 10th October 2025



Barbary Macaque



Moussier's Redstart



Maghreb Owl



Slender-billed Gull

Tour report by Niki Williamson



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Summary

This was a superb adventure exploring the stunning landscapes and ever-changing wildlife of The Straits of Gibraltar, in Europe, Africa and on the sea itself. Across The Straits, the late autumn migration was still going strong and we found ourselves among clouds of raptors including Booted and Short-toed Snake Eagles, Marsh Harriers, Egyptian and Griffon Vultures, Black Storks, Black and Red Kites, Honey Buzzards, Goshawks, Sparrowhawks, both as they left Spain and as they arrived in Morocco.

On the Moroccan side, familiar birds morphed into African Blue Tit, African Chaffinch, Atlas Great Spotted Woodpecker and Maghreb Owl, and we meet exotic strangers such as Moussier's Redstart, Common Bulbul, Black-crowned Tchagra and Marsh Owl. An excursion on traditional wooden fishing boats on the Merga Zerga lagoon brought us eye-level encounters with Slender-billed and Audouin's Gull, Caspian and Sandwich Terns, a long list of waders, and lots of Greater Flamingoes.

On the sea, we found ourselves surrounded by over fifty Long-finned Pilot Whales, and many Bottlenose Dolphins and Scopoli's Shearwaters.

It was an unforgettable week, and we kept our strength up between top class wildlife sightings with some of the most delicious and authentic local food imaginable.

Day 1

Friday 3rd October

Simon and Niki met some of the clients at Gibraltar airport, and we made the short drive along the coast and up through the hills of Los Alcornocales Natural Park, where the independent arrivers soon met up with us at Huerta Grande Rural Ecolodge. After a welcome drink on the patio, we settled in to cosy woodland cabins and turn-of-the-century houses among the Cork Oaks.

Having met up later, we took a stroll through the wooded grounds, and our leaders gave the group an introduction to The Straits and soaring migration, using a Gaudi-style sculpture of the area as a handy backdrop. On our walk, we got first looks at some locals such as Firecrest, Crested Tit, Hawfinch and Short-toed Treecreeper, as well as seeing Short-toed Snake Eagles coming in to roost in the surrounding hills.

Day 2

Saturday 4th October

Raptor watching in The Straits is an exciting confluence of wind, weather and topography, which requires local expertise and a touch of dark magic to interpret. After testing the air at a stunning watchpoint overlooking the Bay of Algeciras and the Rock of Gibraltar, we took the decision to move elsewhere, to an area closer to Tarifa. The watchpoint of Cascabel immediately turned out to be the right decision, as a cloud of Booted and Short-toed Snake Eagles drifted towards us. They were soon joined by more, as well as Marsh Harriers and Egyptian Vultures. A group of Black Storks could be seen crossing right out into the mist hanging over The Straits. Overhead, drama unfolded as a Goshawk and a Sparrowhawk had a fight over our heads.

The migratory flow continued all morning, and we had our picnic lunch featuring local salads, olives, feisty sheep's cheese, fresh goats' cheese, *tortilla de patatas* and fresh bread from the village bakery. Each time we tried to leave, something amazing happened. A big group of Griffon Vultures drifted over, among them a Critically Endangered vagrant Rüppell's Vulture. We had great views of juvenile Bonelli's Eagle surfing the wind, looking for a victim. Clouds of hirundines, comprising House Martins, and Barn and Red-rumped Swallows drifted over. Then a juvenile Goshawk and a juvenile Bonelli's Eagle came together for battle of the killer teenagers.

Via a celebratory ice cream, we headed to the pastures of La Peña, where we had lovely views of the assembled Thekla's Larks and flirty Spanish Sparrows in the Wild Olive bushes. A group of White Storks made a kaleidoscope in the sky. Tomorrow, we were heading for a whole new continent.

Day 3

Sunday 5th October

Setting off in the dark this morning was more than worth it; our ferry left as first light hit The Straits. After the crossing, we sailed through customs and border crossings on the other side, and arrived at the coastal village of Oued Marsa, in time to greet incoming Honey Buzzards, and Booted and Short-toed Snake Eagles also arriving to Africa. In the scrub growing on the cliffs below us, we got our first glimpses of African Chaffinch, African Blue Tit, Common Bulbul and Cirl Bunting.

We tucked in to a delicious second breakfast of goats' cheese, honey, olives and eggs with cumin, washed down with sweet mint tea, before continuing on our way. We moved on to the Merja Zerga lagoon, where we boarded our second and considerably smaller boats of the day. Traditional wooden fishing boats took us onto the lagoon on the high tide, right into the realm of Slender-billed Gull, Audouin's Gull, Caspian and Sandwich Terns roosting on the sand banks. A couple of Ospreys hunted successfully, and we had amazing views of them perched, eating their fishy prey.

As the water level dropped, exposing more mud, we found a host of waders congregating in the creeks. From our viewpoint in the boats, we felt part of the huge flocks of Curlews, Whimbrels, Sanderlings, Dunlins, Turnstones, Knots, Oystercatchers, Bar-tailed Godwits, Common Redshanks, Common Ringed, Kentish and Grey Plovers and more. In the distance were a pink haze of Greater Flamingoes and a black swirl of Common Coots.

In a friendly hotel-restaurant in the village of Moulay Bouselham, we enjoyed tea and sandwiches on the balcony overlooking the lagoon, with views of Common Bulbul and Laughing Dove. A slight hitch with the van turned into a blessing, allowing us to enjoy sunset over this special place, as literally thousands of egrets, herons and Jackdaws came in to roost.

Day 4

Monday 6th October

This morning, we made an early start to reach the marshes for first light, hoping for a glimpse of the Critically Endangered Moroccan subspecies of Marsh Owl. As the local extensive grazing marshes become replaced by intensive strawberry and avocado production, this beautiful owl is dwindling fast. We shuffled silently through the muddy fields that once were pastureland, took up positions soundlessly, and waited. As our eyes adjusted, suddenly there were two Marsh Owls flying in towards us! As it began to get lighter, we picked up five more. We felt wondrously lucky to see this many.

We headed back to the hotel, but not before getting great views of Little Owl and a stunning Black-winged Kite standing out from the mist, (Algerian) Great Grey Shrike and many passage Yellow Wagtails.

Me moved on to our next base, and headed up through the magical forests of Bouachem, where the scars of recent forest fires were beginning to heal. We were thrilled to encounter a huge troop of Barbary Macaques, and we sat mesmerised in the road as they sauntered past us, enjoying this privileged view of their natural behaviour, and the cuteness of their babies! The forest birds in this tranquil place included Atlas Great Spotted Woodpecker, African Blue Tit, Firecrest, Nuthatch and African Chaffinch.

We completed the journey to Dardara village through unbelievably stunning scenery, and settled in to our new base, before a fabulous dinner of lemon chicken and vegetable tagine baked in the hotel's traditional oven.

Day 5

Tuesday 7th October

Our new accommodation was in a beautifully converted watermill, so our hotel was of course located alongside a river and its associated pastureland, ideal for some pre-breakfast birding for those who felt inclined. Our morning walk got off to a great start with a Maghreb Owl roosting in the trees. We also spotted plenty of Common Bulbuls and African Chaffinches, and a Black-crowned Tchagra was calling. We had stunning views of two perched Short-toed Snake Eagles, Grey Wagtails in the stream and Atlas Great Spotted Woodpecker, and then had another look at the roosting owl in full light as we got ready to depart for the day.



Merja Zerga



African Blue Tit

In an area at the top of Chefchouen, we met with our local guide Abdul and his team, and piled into 4x4 Land Rovers to climb up some 1000m above Chefchouen, to a valley between two towering peaks. In this breath-taking habitat, we immediately encountered Black Wheatear, and with a little work two Moussier's Redstarts, a male and a female. We spent plenty of time watching these gorgeous birds, and also found Blue Rock Thrush.

We had our picnic right there in the mountains, before heading down to Chefchouen for some free time to look around. Chefchouen is known as Morocco's Blue Pearl, and is famous for its pastel indigo-blue paint job throughout its narrow labyrinthine streets, where it can be hard to tell where the village ends and the sky begins.

Day 6**Wednesday 8th October**

The day again had an owl-y beginning, this time with two Maghreb Owls perched on the wires outside the hotel. Our early walk again put us among Common Bulbuls, Grey Wagtails, African Chaffinches and awesome views of Cirl Bunting up close.

We punctuated our journey back to ferry with some great stops along the Oued Martil and associated wetlands, which yielded Black-winged Stilts, Spoonbills, Glossy Ibises, a host of feeding White Storks, Kingfisher, Little Ringed Plover and Common Sandpiper. Then, at a reservoir, we were thrilled to find a host of Ferruginous Ducks and Red-knobbed Coots among the assembled wetland birds. It was time to head for our ferry crossing back to Europe, during which we saw many Scopoli's Shearwaters and Mediterranean Gulls. And we were home in time for Spanish sundowners at the bar!

Day 7**Thursday 9th October**

On our last day together, we took the opportunity to make use of the fair weather and explore The Straits themselves in detail, heading out on our boat trip with the ethical local whale-watching company FIRMM. After an interesting talk on the quayside about our local cetaceans and their conservation work, we set sail back into the shadow of Morocco's Jebel Musa mountain.

We soon found ourselves surrounded by phenomenal numbers of The Straits' marine inhabitants, as over fifty Long-finned Pilot Whales and many Common Bottlenose Dolphins had assembled. We could see the shapes looming all around us, and many approached and swam around and under the boat. What a phenomenal experience it was! Our cetacean viewing was punctuated by large numbers of Scopoli's Shearwaters, Gannets, and an appearance by a Great Skua.

Back on shore, we headed for our final picnic on the hills above Tarifa, at the watchpoint of El Trafico. As we tucked into an abundance of fresh, local, seasonal produce, including two award-winning cheeses and top-of-the-range Black Label Iberian ham, we enjoyed the migratory ballet around us once more, with hundreds of hirundines and a firework show of migrating Yellow Wagtails. We also had close looks at Booted and Short-toed Snake Eagles, a wintry Red Kite and a late-summer Black Kite once more.

Our final stop of this relaxing afternoon was at the Mirador del Estrecho watchpoint. As we gazed at the lovely view with our ice creams, reminiscing about our adventures on both sides of The Straits, three Bonelli's Eagles hove into view. They comprised two adults and an immature bird, and were presumably a local family group. They proceeded to attack a Short-toed Snake Eagle right in front of our eyes. It was a spectacular note on which to end, and we headed back for a fantastic and very Spanish dinner of *paella* and wine.

Day 8**Friday 10th October**

Sadly, it was time to depart. While Simon took the Manchester crew for a quick spin around Gibraltar, catching up with much-coveted views of Barbary Partridge, the rest enjoyed a relaxed breakfast at Huerta Grande. As if to wave us off, we had great final views of Hawfinch, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Crested Tit, before we headed to the airport to make our journeys home.

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Species lists

Birds

Common name	Scientific name	October 2025							
		3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>						4		
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>						30		
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>					✓			
Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>						10		
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>						30		
Ferruginous Duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>						120		
Barbary Partridge	<i>Alectoris barbara</i>					2			✓
Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>						50		
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>				40				
Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	1							
Little Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>				20				
Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>			✓	✓	✓		40	
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Laughing Dove	<i>Spilopelia senegalensis</i>			1					
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>						2		
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			300			500		
Red-knobbed Coot	<i>Fulica cristata</i>						20		
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>						4		
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>				10		30		
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>		2000				20		
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		30						
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>						20		
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		20						
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		30						
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>						10		
Eurasian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>		30						
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		40						
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		20						
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		6						
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			2					
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		50						
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		3						
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		3						
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		4						
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		10						
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		15						
Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>		2						
Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>		8						
Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>						1		
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>		20			20	4		
Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>		40						
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		20			10			
Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>		1						
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>		3			50	20		

Common name	Scientific name	October 2025							
		3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓	✓		✓		✓
Scopoli's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>						70	150	
Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>							9	
Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>		34	2					
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	10	65	40			50		
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>						4	30	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			20			2	6	
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>				10		15		
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		1	10			30		
Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>			1					
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			✓	✓	6	6		
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Ardea ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			30	6		8		
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>			3					
Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>				1				
Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>		10					1	
European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>		2	10					
Rüpell's Vulture	<i>Gyps rueppelli</i>		1					1	
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	5	40					70	
Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	7	105	7		3			
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraetus pennatus</i>	10	122	2		4	2	10	
Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>			1				3	
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		7	2				1	
Eurasian Goshawk	<i>Astur gentilis</i>			1					
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	1	5	9	3		4		
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>			1			1	1	
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>		4	2				1	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			2				2	
Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>					1	2		
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>				4			1	
Marsh Owl	<i>Asio capensis</i>					7			
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		1					1	1
Maghreb Owl	<i>Strix mauritanica</i>					2	2		
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			1			1		
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	1	1					1	✓
(Atlas) Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major numidus / mauritanus</i>					2	1	1	
Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>		3					4	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			2	4			1	✓
Black-crowned Tchagra	<i>Tchagra senegalus</i>						1		
(Algerian) Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor algeriensis</i>					4	1	1	
Eurasian (Black-capped) Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius atricapillus</i>						1		
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>				✓	✓		✓	
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		4	3	6	2	2		
Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>								✓
African Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes teneriffae</i>				6	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	October 2025							
		3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	2	✓	✓	✓	✓
Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		8		4	1	3	2	
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		2						
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis rufula</i>		74					✓	
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		1	2	3		1	1	
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		1	4	2		✓	✓	
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	4	✓	✓	
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Currucà melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Dartford Warbler	<i>Currucà undata</i>					2			
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	4	5		12	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				2	1	1	2	
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	2	2		8		2	2	
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	3	4		6			✓	✓
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	10	✓			10	15	4	
European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>					1			
Moussier's Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus moussieri</i>					5			
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>					2			
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		8	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>					2			
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>		20						
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>		2	10	40	3	20	30	
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	1			4	3	4		
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		1					2	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>							2	
Eurasian Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓					✓	✓
African Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla spodiogenys</i>				✓	✓	✓		
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	7	9					7	✓
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		2	4		2	✓	✓	
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		4	6		4	✓	✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	3	✓	✓	✓
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		1	1	1	4			
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		1						
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		4		10				
Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>						1		
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		1	1		2	3	1	

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	October 2025								
		3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Barbary Macaque	<i>Macaca sylvanus</i>				60					
Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>							70		
Common Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>							20		

Reptiles

Common name	Scientific name	October 2025								
		3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Vaucher's Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis vaucheri</i>	✓								

Butterflies

Common name	Scientific name	October 2025								
		3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>		✓	✓						
Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>		✓							
Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>				✓					
Plain Tiger	<i>Danaus chrysippus</i>			✓						
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>	✓								
Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>			✓						
Southern Gatekeeper	<i>Pyronia cecilia</i>			✓						

Moths

Common name	Scientific name	October 2025								
		3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Speckled Footman	<i>Coscinia cribaria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓					