

Ronda & The Strait of Gibraltar

Naturetrek Tour Report

4th – 10th November 2021



Blue Rock Thrush



Report & images by Simon Tonkin



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

Summary

From the wild mountains of the Serranía de Ronda, to the rugged coastline and cross-continental views of The Straits of Gibraltar, Andalucía boasts outstanding winter birding and this group enjoyed it under glorious blue skies!

Up in the mountains, Golden Eagles soared over Spanish Ibex, Blue Rock Thrush, Black Wheatear and Rock Buntings, while Red-billed Chough, Crag Martins and Red Crossbills patrolled the streets and bridges of the historic city of Ronda.

Down at the coast we enjoyed huge flocks of Common Cranes and Spanish Sparrows, Glossy Ibis, White Storks and Black-winged Kites on the wetlands and Kentish Plover, Black-winged Stilts and Northern Bald Ibis around the salt pans of Barbate. From Tarifa, we gazed across the 14 kilometres divide to Africa while many thousands of Scopoli's and Cory's Shearwaters swept by. But above it all the group watched in awe as thousands of young Griffon Vultures gathered and filled the skies to make their first and only journey across The Straits to Africa!

A highly memorable birding week was capped off by gorgeous weather, fantastic food and Andalusian hospitality throughout

Day 1

Thursday 4th November

Simon and Niki met the group at Málaga airport, gathering them from various flights, and we were soon on our way up into the mountains. After going through a pass of 1065m above sea level, we found ourselves on the edge of the treeline. We stopped for a high-altitude lunch at a café overlooking the Sierra de las Nieves National Park, from where we could see our first Black Redstarts, a Blue Rock Thrush and a distant Golden Eagle!

After lunch, we took a stroll around Las Conejeras recreation area where we could see Griffon Vultures soaring over the distant mountains. The picturesque plateau was sparsely vegetated with Holm Oak and Andalusian Fir trees and we enjoyed Iberian Grey Shrike, Cirl Bunting, Siskin, Common Firecrest and Short-toed Treecreeper moving amongst them, as well as many wintering Common Chiffchaffs, Eurasian Blackcaps and Black Redstarts. We were also pleased to catch up with Golden Eagle again – two this time!

Then it was time to head to our hotel in the quirky *pueblo azul* (blue village) of Juzcar – but not before an unscheduled stop to enjoy fantastic close views of a Black Wheatear.

Day 2

Friday 5th November

Today, after a hearty warming breakfast and collecting freshly-baked chestnut bread from the hotel oven, we headed out and made our first stop locally at the crags of Los Riscos. Here we enjoyed views of Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Petronia and Thekla's Larks, large numbers of Corn Buntings, Serins, Chaffinches, Linnets and Goldfinches. Many Griffon Vultures and a Short-toed Eagle took to the air around us. Butterflies were

numerous on this limestone substrate, and included Small Copper, Clouded Yellow, Southern Brown Argus and Lang's Short-tailed Blue.

At the Cueva del Gato, the group found Grey Wagtails and Cetti's Warblers around the clear blue waters of this beauty spot while picnic was prepared, featuring local cheeses and of course the chestnut bread cooked by hotel chef Ivan!

This cave lies at the bottom end of a huge eight kilometre system, and we next drove up into the mountains once more to explore the top end at Cueva del Hundidero. Overlooking the dramatic crags, we enjoyed many Crag Martins in flight and dozens of Griffon Vultures perched on the rocks. As we watched, a family of 11 Spanish Ibex strolled by above us!

Around 80 Red-billed Chough called and tumbled around us in the gorge, putting on quite a display! We spent the afternoon watching the mountain birds coming in to roost, including Blue Rock Thrush, Black Wheatear, Peregrine Falcon and Rock Buntings.

Then it was back to the cosy Hotel Bandolero for a delicious three-course meal, prepared for us by *cordon bleu*-trained chef Iván.

Day 3

Saturday 6th November

Today we said goodbye to David and Ivan at Hotel Bandolero and transferred to our second base in The Strait of Gibraltar.

On the way, we spent the morning in the historic town of Ronda, whose three bridges – Roman, Moorish and 18th Century – and dramatic setting straddling the Tajo Gorge, have inspired poets and artists through the ages.

It's great for urban birding too, and during our stroll and free time we encountered Blue Rock Thrush, Red Crossbill and Red-billed Chough patrolling the streets, as well as the ubiquitous local Griffon Vultures soaring overhead.

After taking our picnic in the Sierra de las Nieves National Park, alongside Black Redstarts, Eurasian Jays, Dartford Warbler and Iberian Grey Shrike, we headed downhill and on to the coast.

We received a warm welcome at our new accommodation at Cortijo el Indiviso, a lovingly-restored traditional style Spanish farmhouse centred around a lovely cobbled courtyard.

Day 4

Sunday 7th November

This morning we explored the ricefields and reed-fringed ditches of La Janda, an area of arable farmland created on what was one of Spain's most precious wetland sites. Its ecological memory remains, and while there, we enjoyed the splendour of huge flocks of White Storks, Glossy Ibis and Eurasian Spoonbills feeding on the rice stubble and swirling overhead. Common Cranes were also there in force – their wintering numbers on this site are in the thousands – and they filled the air with their soft bugling calls.

Amongst flocks of Northern Lapwing were Black-winged Stilt, Common Snipe, Greenshank, Green & Common Sandpiper and Ruff as well as a surprise wintering Purple Heron! We picked out several Mediterranean Gulls amongst the flocks of Yellow-legged and Black-headed.

Many thousands of House and Spanish Sparrows chirped noisily from vegetation and swarmed through the air, hinting at the abundance of life still existing here. Impressive too were the flocks of wintering Woodpigeons, numbering 600 or more!

Two gorgeous Black-winged Kites posed really well for us, perched on telegraph wires and trees, and we enjoyed Common Waxbill, Penduline Tit and Common Kingfishers in the ditchside vegetation. Hen Harriers and Marsh Harriers quartered over the fields. A group of Black Kites drifted by – quite an unusual sighting for this late in the autumn. We were also thrilled to pick up a soaring Spanish Imperial Eagle!

At the viewpoint of La Peña we had our picnic lunch, and befriended some of the local donkeys! Between here and the coast at Punta Camorro, we enjoyed many Griffon Vultures soaring overhead along with Short-toed & Booted Eagles, hopefully anticipating a crossing of The Straits in days to come...

Day 5

Monday 8th November

Today the wind dropped, and we headed to the coastal hills above Tarifa to make the most of these almost ideal migration conditions. At this time of the year, young Griffon Vultures are dispersing from colonies all over western Europe and making their way here, to The Straits of Gibraltar. For such a long-winged bird, reliant on soaring warm air currents rising off the land, this is the only place where the sea is narrow enough to cross to Africa. Over 10,000 first-year Griffons attempt it every year, and it will be their first and only time to make the journey south.

After a couple of breezy days – treacherous for an aerial sea crossing – we were hopeful that these calmer conditions would prove just right for the mounting number of birds in the area. We weren't disappointed!

From our first stop at El Trafico, we could see the first few dozen vultures begin to leave their roosts in the surrounding hillsides, swirling in ever bigger groups up and down the coast. As the morning warmed up, we headed to El Mirador del Estrecho, and found ourselves looking down on hundreds of these huge birds gathering in front of us and heading out to sea in squadron formation! In total we saw 610 intrepid young Griffon Vultures head out to meet their destiny – an emotive sight! Amongst them were two Cinereous Vultures, Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Eurasian Sparrowhawks, Marsh Harriers and Black Kites.

After our picnic, we headed up to visit sites in the Sierra de la Plata hills, pausing to admire a perched Western Osprey on the way up. At the Cueva del Moro we enjoyed close views of perched Griffons and a Blue Rock Thrush as well as low Crag Martins. Heading further on, we came to the vulture colony at La Zarga. Normally home to some 100 birds, today it was dripping with young interlopers from all over Spain and France, with nearly 500 birds coming in to roost as the afternoon drew on - spectacular! We thrilled at the eerie screeching and squabbling sounds and the “whoosh” of those enormous wings just overhead as the birds competed for

ledge space. A huge Cinereous Vulture came in as well, and took its place on the highest rock, overlooking it all in the evening sun.

We encountered a nice array of hilltop birds too, including Iberian Green Woodpecker, Firecrest, Short-toed Treecreeper, Blue Rock Thrush, Siskin, Serin, Cirl Bunting and two Alpine Accentors flitting around the rock face.

Day 6

Tuesday 9th November

This morning the group visited Tarifa Island, for which our leaders had obtained a special permit. This small area of military land – actually a peninsula, not an island - hosts Tarifa's lighthouse, and is the closest point between mainland Europe and Africa. From this vantage point sticking right out into The Strait, we were in the midst of the impressive migratory flow of Scopoli's Shearwaters. Movement out to the Atlantic was huge and around 1,000 birds passed us in just a couple of hours.

Amongst them were Balearic Shearwaters, Northern Gannets and Sandwich Terns, and we enjoyed Ruddy Turnstones and Sanderling on the rocks, as well as the sights sounds and smells of the large Yellow-legged Gulls which inhabit the island.

Surprising and impressive in its own way was the continuous movement of small groups of Linnets, Serins, Goldfinches, Siskins and even House Sparrows heading out across The Strait. These tiny cross-continental migrants are thought to number in their millions.

For the afternoon we headed to the Marismas y Breñas de Barbate, where we took our picnic in pine woods among Short-toed Treecreepers and Black Redstarts. We also picked up Plain Tiger and Monarch butterflies, two glamorous introductions to the area.

The salt pans were teeming with wintering and resident birds, and amongst the many hundreds of assembled Sanderling and Dunlin we soon picked out Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Grey, Common Ringed and Kentish Plover, Common Redshank, Little Stint and Ruff.

Twenty-seven Eurasian Stone-curlews loafed on the islands amongst Audouin's and Mediterranean Gulls and Greater Flamingoes provided a haze of pink. Many Calandra and Crested Larks and White Wagtails were feeding on the surrounding pastureland.

We were also over the moon to encounter seven Northern Bald Ibis! The recent rains had softened the soil and these wonderful charismatic creatures wandered about feeding on soil invertebrates right in front of us, showing off their iridescent plumage, striking facial masks and crazy crests! What a treat to encounter one of the world's rarest birds in this way, and a superb end to the day – and the trip.

Day 7

Wednesday 10th November

All too soon it was time for the group to head home. We said goodbye to Laura, our fantastic host at the *cortijo*, and headed back to Málaga. On the way we made a final stop to visit an adorable colony of Monk Parakeets on a local golf course! These introduced cuties saw the group off in a joyous, squawky fashion!

Simon and Niki would like to thank the group for sharing a highly memorable week full of laughs and great birding! See you again, we hope.

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Checklist

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	Date:					
		4	5	6	7	8	9
Southern Hawker	<i>Aeshna cyanea</i>				✓		
Red-veined Darter	<i>Sympatrum fonscolombii</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Geranium Bronze	<i>Cacyreus marshalli</i>				✓		
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>			✓		✓	✓
Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>		✓	✓	✓		
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓	✓	✓		
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>			✓	✓		
Southern Brown Argus	<i>Aricia cramera</i>		✓				
Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>		✓				
Plain Tiger	<i>Danaus chrysippus</i>			✓	✓		✓
Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>					✓	✓
Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>			✓			

Common name	Scientific name	Date:					
		4	5	6	7	8	9
Hummingbird Hawkmoth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>		✓				
Iberian Pond Tortoise	<i>Mauremys leprosa</i>		✓				
Iberian Pool Frog	<i>Rana iberica</i>				✓		
Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarantola mauretunica</i>				✓		
Iberian Ibex	<i>Capra pyrenaica</i>		11				
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>				✓		

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	Date:						
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>				10		8	
2	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>				1			
3	Scopoli's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>				✓		948	
4	Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>						40	
5	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>						50	
6	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>			10	500			
7	Northern Bald Ibis	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>						7	
8	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>				50			
9	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>				94		9	
10	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			4	20		4	
12	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>				1			
13	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>				30		1	
14	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>				10		25	
15	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1	5	10	4	20	
16	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>					1		
17	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>				2			
18	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	10	50	50	400	610	6	
19	Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>					2		
20	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		2	1	6	4	1	
21	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>			2	4	3		
22	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>				2			
23	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	2						
24	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	2	1	1	1	3		
25	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			2	30	1	1	
26	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				4			
27	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>				8			
28	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>				4	3		
29	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		1	3	4	6	5	
30	Gibraltar Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo/ B. rufinus cirtensis</i>				1			
31	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				4			
32	Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>						27	
33	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>				6		20	
34	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>						10	
35	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			10	200			
36	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>						4	

	Common name	Scientific name	Date:							
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
37	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>							70	
38	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>							30	
39	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				4				
40	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>							5	
41	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>				1				
42	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>				20				
43	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>				2				
44	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>							2	
45	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>							20	
46	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>							5	
47	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>							80	
48	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>				3			1	
49	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				✓			✓	
50	Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>							60	
51	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>				6			5	
52	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓	
53	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓	✓			✓	
54	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>				6			10	
55	Rock Dove /Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
56	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>				1				
57	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	10	30	✓	600	✓			
58	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓	
59	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>						1		
60	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>			2			1		
61	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>				3				
62	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		1	1			1		
63	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>						1		
64	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	2	✓	10	6		1	
65	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1	2	1			
66	Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	1	1	1					
67	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	2	4	4					
68	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		78	20					
69	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>				✓	✓		✓	
70	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	8	4	4	4	6		2	
71	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	6	✓	✓	✓		✓	
72	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
73	Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>				4				
74	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>				✓				
75	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>			4	4	2			
76	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>				✓	✓		✓	
77	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>							30	
78	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>					2			
79	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>				2	2		1	
80	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	8	20	20	50	✓		✓	
81	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>				2				
82	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>				8	20			
83	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		2		✓				
84	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			✓				✓	
85	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
86	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>				1				
87	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>			✓	✓			1	

	Common name	Scientific name	Date:						
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10
88	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	2	✓	
89	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>	1	2	1				
90	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
91	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	2	3	2		2		
92	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		2	3	1	1		
93	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			1				
94	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	1		2		1	5	
95	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>						4	
96	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		2	✓	✓	✓	✓	
97	Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>					2		
98	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓	✓	2	8		
99	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		10	✓	2		2	
100	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
101	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	2	4	2				
102	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
103	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	20	30	✓	✓	✓	15	
104	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>	1	4	2		2		
105	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	2	6	✓	✓	6	✓	
106	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>					1		
107	Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>	1	2					
108	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
109	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>				✓			
110	Rock Petronia	<i>Petronia petronia</i>		20					
111	Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>				10			
112	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		2	1	1			
113	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	6	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	
114	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>						1	
115	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
116	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
117	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	1						
118	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	2			2	10	✓	
119	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		4	2	2	8	✓	
120	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
121	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		10	✓	✓	✓	✓	
122	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	10	30	
123	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		18	✓	✓		✓	
124	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>		3					

			Date:						
	Common name	<i>Scientific name</i>	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
4									
12 5	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>	2	1	2		2		
12 6	Monk Parakeet	<i>Myiopsitta monachus</i>							✓