

Spain – Ronda & The Strait of Gibraltar

Naturetrek Tour Report

3rd – 9th November 2022



White Storks in rice stubble



Common Cranes



Balearic Shearwaters



Watching the Rio Barbate

Tour report by Niki Williamson, photos by Simon Tonkin



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

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

Summary

Ranging from the mountains of the Serrania de Ronda to the craggy coast of The Straits of Gibraltar, this two-base trip was packed with wildlife highlights!

Blue Rock Thrush, Black Wheatear, Ring Ouzel, Iberian Grey Shrike and Rock Bunting flitted the impressive limestone crags while Bonelli's Eagles and Griffon Vultures soared overhead. The historic town of Ronda, straddling the Tajo gorge, provided amazing urban birding with Common Crossbill and Red-billed Chough and Blue Rock Thrush in the town.

The Straits provided great sightings across a range of habitats. Mudflats teemed with Common Ringed, Grey and Kentish Plover, Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Bar-tailed and Black-tailed Godwits, Slender-billed, Audouins and Mediterranean Gull. Wintering Common Cranes and White Storks crowded the farmlands alongside Glossy Ibis, Spanish Sparrows, Calandra Larks and a stunning Black-winged Kite. Out to sea, the Shearwater passage was astonishing, with hundreds of Scopoli's and Balearic Shearwaters recorded in one hour. There was plenty of other wildlife too, and we enjoyed recording Spanish Ibex and Bottlenose Dolphin on the same trip!

And of course, the incredible migration of soaring birds continued right over our heads, featuring many hundreds of Griffon Vultures, Eurasian Sparrowhawks, Black Kites, Booted and Short-toed Eagles, Hen Harrier and even a migrant Eleonora's Falcon.

With excellent weather, scenery and the best of Spanish local produce across two very different bases, this trip provided a great way to experience the fantastic winter birding of Andalucía!

Day 1

Thursday 3rd November

Simon and Niki gathered the group from various flights into Málaga airport, and we set off along the bustling Costa del Sol. We soon left the crowded coastline behind as we headed up into the mountains of the Serranía de Ronda.

We made a stop in the Sierra de las Nieves – Spain's newest National Park, designated just 18 months ago. Wintering Black Redstarts and White Wagtails and migrant Song Thrush were everywhere amongst the Holm Oak trees and Andalusian Firs. At a water trough, several Ring Ouzels were bathing. An Iberian Grey Shrike sang from a bush top.

We arrived at Hotel Bandolero in Júzcar just in time for a beautiful sunset over the wooded hills. We settled into our rooms and sat down for dinner cooked by top chef Iván, which tonight featured a hearty pea soup, Niki's favourite fennel risotto with Manchego, and passionfruit cheesecake – yum!

Day 2

Friday 4th November

We began the day by heading to the nearby crags of Los Riscos. We could hear Dartford Warblers in the scrub. As the day began to warm, we picked up Blue Rock Thrush, Black Wheatear and Rock Bunting flitting around the cliffs. As the thermals increased, Griffon Vultures started to leave their roosts, signaling it was time for us to move on and encounter them elsewhere!

After a brief stop to pick up some picnic supplies, we moved on to the impressive Cueva del Gato, the lower mouth of a huge cave system stretching eight kilometres into the limestone mountain. We were greeted by two adult Bonelli's Eagles! Lots of Griffon Vultures had now taken to the air and Crag Martins swooped low overhead.

We took a walk across the river and up the stream to the cave mouth, spotting Common Kingfisher, Grey Wagtail, Cetti's Warbler and glimpsing a Dipper. We hung out with wintering Common Chiffchaffs and Eurasian Blackcaps beside the cave's beautiful, secluded lagoon.

After picnic, we headed up to the other end of the cave system at Montejaque. The crags here were crowded with Griffon Vultures, as migrating juveniles from all over France and Spain were arriving to the area before crossing The Straits of Gibraltar to Africa. Incoming youngsters perched nervously on crag tops while local adults occupied prime roosting spots.

We explored the crags and valleys and enjoyed more sightings of Black Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush, and Rock Bunting, as well as Rock Petronia, Hawfinch and Thekla's Lark. We also spotted some Spanish Ibex.

Day 3

Saturday 5th November

All too soon it was time to say *adios* to David and Iván at Hotel Bandolero, but we knew we had more natural delights waiting at our second base in The Straits of Gibraltar!

We headed there via the historic town of Ronda, erstwhile haunt of literary talent such as Orson Welles and Ernest Hemingway. Before giving the group chance to explore the town, we fitted in some urban birding, spotting Common Crossbill in the park, two Red-billed Chough in the town and a Blue Rock Thrush in the spectacular Tajo Gorge which the town famously straddles.

The Sierra de las Nieves today provided us with the perfect picnic spot, where we sampled some of the amazing local goats and sheeps cheese which our guides had acquired in Ronda! It went so well with the fresh chestnut bread Iván had provided us with as we left... Once again, we enjoyed great views of the Iberian Grey Shrike, and also picked up a young Bonelli's Eagle and European Siskins and Woodlarks amongst the flocks of wintering Chaffinches and Black Redstarts.

As we headed down the mountains towards the coast road, we made a stop for a magnificent view of the Straits of Gibraltar, with both pillars of Hercules – the Rock of Gibraltar and Morocco's Jebel Musa – rising spectacularly out of the sea on this crystal clear afternoon. We also got views of a Crested Tit!

We soon arrived at Cortijo el Indiviso, our second base in a traditional Spanish farmhouse, where we settled in to rooms around a cobbled courtyard and headed to the converted barn for pre-dinner drinks around the log fire.

Day 4

Sunday 6th November

After a hearty breakfast featuring fresh eggs from the farm's own extremely well-cared-for chickens, we headed out to the marshes of Barbate. The light was beautiful as we viewed across the estuary mudflats from under a bridge where the tide was just right for us to get up close and personal with many mudflat-lovers – including Common Ringed, Grey and Kentish Plover, Bar-tailed Godwits, Whimbrel, Eurasian Curlew, Common Redshank and Greenshank, Red Knot, groups of many of Dunlin and Sanderling, Slender-billed and Mediterranean Gull, and Sandwich Tern. Western Osprey and Western Marsh Harrier quartered the marshes.

Moving round to the nature reserve, created on the site of disused saltpans, we encountered Little Owl, Eurasian Hoopoe and Calandra Lark on the surrounding pastureland. 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 32 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, wintering Black Redstarts and resident Short-toed Treecreepers.

Day 5

Monday 7th November

Today we headed to the cliff tops overlooking the coastal town of Tarifa – the shortest point between Europe and Africa at just 14 kilometres. Across the landscape, we could see many hundreds of Griffon Vultures leaving roosts as the thermals began to rise. They swirled up and down the coast, these recently-fledged birds understandably reticent to launch themselves across the sea in order to continue their migratory journey to sub-Saharan Africa. Many other migrants were doing the same and we watched Eurasian Sparrowhawks, Black Kites, Booted and Short-toed Eagles, Hen Harrier and even a migrant Eleonora's Falcon drifting around the nearby valleys.

After picnic under the migratory flow, we continued the vulture theme, heading up to La Zarga, an imposing but sheltered crag, home to around 90 pairs of Griffon Vultures. Their numbers were augmented by incoming migrating juveniles. We enjoyed their aerial comings and goings, and also got views of Blue Rock Thrush, Cirl Bunting, Northern Ravens and a perched Bonelli's Eagle surveying the scene.

We stayed watching these spectacular birds coming in to roost until sunset, then headed back to our hotel, stopping to photograph the stunning full moon sailing out over the hills.

Day 6

Tuesday 8th November

This morning we visited Tarifa's Isla de las Palomas. This permit-only peninsula is still military land, and juts out into The Straits, bringing Africa even closer. The desolate ruins of Franco-era military buildings were made eerier

by the calls of the many resident Yellow-legged Gulls. Out to sea there was plenty of marine bird action including an astonishing Shearwater passage – we recorded almost 700 Scopoli's and Balearic Shearwaters in around an hour! We also picked up Northern Gannets, a Pomarine Skua, a jumping Marlin and Bottlenose Dolphins surfing the wake of a boat.

After warming up with a coffee at the hamlet of Los Porros – and of course taking the chance to pick up more excellent local produce from the delicatessen there – we headed for picnic lunch at La Peña. Here we got great views of several really fresh-looking Thekla's Larks, enabling us to discuss the identification differences between them and the similar-looking Crested Lark. There were many newly arrived Meadow Pipits and White Wagtail – wintering birds here. A large flock of White Storks swirled up and down the valley, seemingly trying to decide whether to migrate or not.

We made our last stop of the day 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, and we picked up the first wintering Common Cranes. There were large mixed flocks of Spanish and House Sparrows, and Corn Buntings. A male Hen Harrier shone out amongst dozens of Marsh Harriers. It was fantastic to pick up two stunning Black-winged Kites, this gorgeous tiny raptor with its burning red eyes undoubtedly one of the birds of the day.

Day 7

Wednesday 9th November

Already our trip was at an end. After a leisurely breakfast and time to pack, we said goodbye to Laura and the team at Cortijo el Indiviso, who had made us feel so welcome.

For those with a later flight, there was time to do a little birding in La Linea, at the Parque Princesa Sofía, well-known for attracting passerine migrants. Then it was onwards to Málaga, and flights home.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	November 2022						
		3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>						1	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>				4			
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>					1		
Scopoli's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>						561	
Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>						134	
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>				230			
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>			6		17	1056	
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>				74		400	
Northern Bald Ibis	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>				32			
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>				9		30	
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>				15		20	
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			2	21		23	
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>						7	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				20	1	✓	
Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>				2			
Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>						2	
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	10	70	30		816	500	
Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>					4		
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>					6	2	
Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>		2	1		2		
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	1	1	2	3	2	
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>				4	2	26	
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>					1	1	
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>				1	1		
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>					2		
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			2	2	3		
Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>				7			
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>				17			
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>				32			
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>						32	
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>					1		
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>				40			
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				150			
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>						1	
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>				50			
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>				3			
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>				2			
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>				8			
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>				2			
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				20			
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>				10			
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>						6	
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>				2			
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				15			
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>				4			
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>				70		10	

Common name	Scientific name	November 2022						
		3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>				4			
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>				1			
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				250			
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>				3			
Pomarine Skua	<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>						1	
Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>				1			
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				30		4	
Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>				137			
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>				3			
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>				✓		✓	
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>				4		2	
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	1		1	1	1	1	
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>			1	1	1	1	
Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>					4		
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>					2		
Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>					1		
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		1		1		4	
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>				1		1	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	1	1	2	1			
Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>			1	2	1		
Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>					1		
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		2	1	2	2	10	
Eleonora's Falcon	<i>Falco eleonorae</i>					1		
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>					1		
Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	2	1	1				
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	2	6	8				
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		2	2	2	4	2	
European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>			1				
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>				2	3	40	
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>	10		3				
Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		8			4	6	
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>				2			
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>				2	2	5	
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	20	40	✓	10	30	4	
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>					1		
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>					300		
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		2	1	2	1	3	
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		10					
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	4	20	✓	10	4	15	
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>				4	2	6	
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Common name	Scientific name	November 2022						
		3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>	1	2	2				
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	2		2				
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	1	1	2				
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	1						
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	2	2	2	4			
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓	✓	4		1	
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Ring Ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>	4						
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	2		2				
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	40	20	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		6	2		1		
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>		8					
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Rock Petronia	<i>Petronia petronia</i>		9					
Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>				4		17	
Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava flava</i>						1	
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		2	1				
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	4	15	✓	✓	20	✓	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		2	✓	✓	15	✓	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		9		1			
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		16	5	10	1	✓	
Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>	2	7	2				
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>	1	3	2		2		

Others

Common name	Scientific name	November 2022						
		3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Spanish Ibex	<i>Capra pyrenaica</i>		3					
Bottle-nosed Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>						6	
Red-veined Darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>					✓	✓	
Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>					✓		
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓					
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓	
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>			✓		✓		
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>				✓			

Common name	Scientific name	November 2022						
		3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Crimson Speckled Footman	<i>Utetheisa pulchella</i>				✓		✓	
Blue-winged Grasshopper	<i>Oedipoda caerulescens</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Iberian Marsh Frog	<i>Rana iberica</i>						✓	
Vaucher's Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis vaucheri</i>					✓		