

# Spain – Ronda & The Strait of Gibraltar

Naturetrek Tour Report

3rd – 9th November 2023

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Griffon Vulture



Rock Bunting



Bonelli's Eagle



Northern Bald Ibis

Tour report compiled by Niki Williamson, photos by Simon Tonkin

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Tour participants: Simon Tonkin and Niki Williamson (leaders) with 11 Naturetrek clients.

## Summary

On this trip we explored two of Andalucía's most scenic areas to get the best of late autumn birding in this gorgeous nature-packed part of Spain!

The limestone crags of the Serranía de Ronda sparkled with mountain birds such as Bonelli's Eagles, Black Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting, Red Crossbill and Red-billed Chough.

In The Straits of Gibraltar, thousands of Scopoli's and Balearic Shearwaters surged out to their Atlantic wintering grounds while overhead Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Black and Red Kites, Egyptian, Rüppell's and Eurasian Black Vultures, White and Black Storks, Eurasian Sparrowhawks, Bonelli's and Spanish Imperial Eagles soared.

Newly-harvested rice fields were hooching with hundreds of White Storks, Eurasian Spoonbills, Glossy Ibis, Common Cranes, Spanish Sparrows, Hen Harrier, Marsh Harrier, Black-winged Kite and Merlin. Among Greater Flamingoes and Eurasian Spoonbills on the salt pans, we picked out Black-winged Stilt, Bar- and Black-tailed Godwit, Grey, Common Ringed and Kentish Plover, Eurasian Stone Curlews, Curlew Sandpiper, Sanderling, Dunlin, Pied Avocet, Ruff, Little Stint, Mediterranean Gull, Audouin's Gulls and more!

Our constant companions the Griffon Vultures filled the skies every day, and our minds were blown watching clouds of them fly across The Straits to Africa, and being right in amongst a soaring, swirling vulture roost, listening to the eerie squabbling calls echo around the crags as hundreds of birds fought for ledge space!

Great food, great accommodation, great company and amazing birding – a trip to remember!

## Day 1

Friday 3rd November

Simon and Niki met the group from the airport and we were soon on our way up to the mountains of the Serranía de Ronda – the journey starting well with an impromptu stop just outside San Pedro to watch a Bonelli's Eagle being mobbed by a Common Buzzard!

We made our first 'official' stop at a beautiful picnic area in Sierra de las Nieves National Park, designated amongst other reasons for the endemic Andalusian Fir trees that occur here. We enjoyed views of White Wagtails and Black Redstart against the stunning mountain backdrop and a couple of Red-billed Choughs flew overhead.

We headed onwards through the craggy landscape making another stop on the roadside to enjoy more Red-billed Choughs.

We arrived to our base in the village of Júzcar to receive the customary warm welcome from the team at Hotel Bandolero. After settling in we sat down to our first three-course dinner from the kitchen of *cordón bleu* chef Iván – puff pastry tomato tartlet, beetroot and Manchego risotto, and a cheesecake from heaven!

## Day 2

## Saturday 4th November

This morning after a hearty breakfast we headed up to the imposing limestone pinnacles of Los Riscos reserve. We were met by light rain showers, but this didn't stop the roosting Griffon Vultures from giving us a flyby or two.

We moved on to the Cueva del Gato, a beauty spot just outside Ronda, where a clear stream pours from the bottom of a limestone cave system creating spotless blue pools. Here we found not one but two adult Bonelli's Eagles! They circled around us and perched, one on a ledge and one in a nearby tree, suggesting they might be a pair.

There were many Griffon Vultures roosting and circling, as young birds from the north of Spain and France pour into the area to make their southerly migration. Some of the resident birds were also starting work on this season's nests! Crag Martins flew overhead and we enjoyed a Grey Wagtail by the river.

After a delicious picnic lunch – featuring fresh seasonal salads, local olives and cheeses and some of Ivan's excellent bread made from chestnut flour – we headed to a nearby café where we had a hot beverage accompanied by views of Iberian Ibex on the crags and a Peregrine Falcon!

Our last stop of the day was Montejaque Dam, at the upper end of the same cave system, where dozens of Griffon Vultures circled the precipitous limestone escarpments. More impossibly sure-footed Iberian Ibex patrolled.

We had fantastic close views of Blue Rock Thrush. Walking down to the dam, we had an outstanding encounter with a Black Wheatear and Rock Bunting was heard. Dozens of Red-billed Choughs put on a show, wheeling overhead amongst the Griffon Vultures. Three Hawfinches hung out in the pines.

## Day 3

## Sunday 5th November

Already it was time to say goodbye to the excellent food and pretty blue-washed houses of Júzcar, the *pueblo azul*, and embark on our journey to our second base.

Before leaving the mountains, we spent the morning in the historic town of Ronda. We wandered along the Alameda Park promenade where a couple of Red Crossbills flew over. Overlooking the 130m drop down into the spectacular Tajo gorge we could see Blue Rock Thrush, and many Griffon Vultures and Red-billed Choughs soared overhead. There was free time to take a coffee overlooking the town's three famous bridges – one Roman, one Moorish and one 18<sup>th</sup> century – and to wander the pretty streets, inspirational to twentieth century *literati* such as Ernest Hemingway, Orson Welles and Rainer Rilke.

We took our picnic back in the Sierra de las Nieves National Park - this time with sunshine! It brought out an Iberian Grey Shrike, lots of noisy Eurasian Jays, Black Redstarts and Firecrest. A Rock Bunting even came briefly to our picnic!

From here we drove down to The Straits of Gibraltar, where we made a stop at a raptor watchpoint just above the town of Tarifa. From here we overlooked the narrowest point between Europe and Africa – just 14 km – and we

could see the Moroccan coastline as if it was just on the other side of a bay. A Short-toed Eagle hunted over the hills.

We soon finished the drive and arrived at our accommodation at Cortijo el Indiviso, a beautifully-restored traditional Spanish farmhouse, with rooms arranged around a cobbled courtyard complete with orange trees! There was time to settle in before a delicious dinner by chef Stefanie.

## Day 4

## Monday 6th November

Today, after a brief stop in the pretty village of Tahivilla to get supplies, we followed our local knowledge of wind and weather conditions to get our group right in amongst the spectacle of migration! Migratory soaring birds from all over western Europe converge on this area throughout the autumn to make the shortest possible sea crossing to their wintering grounds in Africa. At this time of the year, it's the turn of the Griffon Vultures, and is one of the most spectacular sights of the year!

Preceding days had been windy and wet here, meaning that birds had accumulated in the area, unable to cross. Today a window of good calm weather finally opened, and it was awesome!

From our lofty viewpoint on the hills of Cascabel, we were treated to the spectacular site of over eight hundred Griffon Vultures crossing The Straits, alongside Egyptian Vultures, Short-toed Eagle, Booted Eagles, Black Kites, and a stunning Spanish Imperial Eagle! Passerines were flowing past too, including many Chaffinches, Siskins and House Martins. We had our picnic right here – today featuring a delicious sheep's cheese matured in *mojo picón* spices!

Coffee and ice cream at the nearby Mirador café brought a flow of vultures heading back inland, having given up on their crossing! This time the group included a Eurasian Black Vulture and really low Rüppell's Vulture! The drama continued with views of a Bonelli's Eagle piling into the vultures!

Our final stop for the day was at the newly-harvested rice fields of La Janda which were hooching with hundreds of White Storks, Eurasian Spoonbills, Glossy Ibis and the first newly-arrived wintering Common Cranes.

The raptor list exploded here, with Hen Harrier, Marsh Harrier, Black-winged Kite and Merlin all showing well. Huge flocks of Spanish Sparrows and Corn Buntings flitted through the reeds, and in the muddy stubble we could see Little Ringed and Common Ringed Plover, Northern Lapwing, Red Knot, Common Snipe and Green Sandpiper.

## Day 5

## Tuesday 7th November

Today we headed to the Marismas y Breñas de Barbate Natural Park, to enjoy the estuarine, marsh and woodland habitats there.

As we arrived, we were thrilled to find a flock of Northern Bald Ibis feeding on the pastures! We spent some time marveling at the iridescent plumage and extraordinary faces of these beautiful, Critically Endangered birds, doing well in the area after a successful reintroduction programme in 2008.

First we headed to the *marismas*, where the tide had pushed waders and waterbirds onto the main reserve, created from disused ancient salt pans. Among Greater Flamingoes and Eurasian Spoonbills we picked out many waders, including Black-winged Stilt, Black-tailed Godwit, Grey, Common Ringed and Kentish Plover, Curlew Sandpiper, Sanderling, Dunlin, Pied Avocet, Ruff, Little Stint, and also Mediterranean Gull and sixty wintering Audouin's Gulls. A group of Eurasian Stone Curlews showed well on one of the islands.

Next, we headed to the Las Breñas area of the Natural Park to take our picnic lunch of fantastic local produce amongst the trees there. We picked up some nice woodland birds here including Crested Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper, Pied Flycatcher and Red Crossbill.

The tide was now perfect to visit the mouth of the Rio Barbate, where we settled into a spot beneath a bridge to enjoy views of waders scampering on the exposed estuary mud – and practically across our feet! We got great views and photos of the selection of more waders, gulls and terns including Eurasian Oystercatcher, Eurasian Whimbrel, Eurasian Curlew, Bar-tailed Godwit, Ruddy Turnstone, Caspian and Sandwich Tern, as well as a wintering Western Osprey. Many of these hundreds of birds are migrants - part of one of the under-sung migratory spectacles of the area which is great at this time of year!

## Day 6

## Wednesday 8th November

Another lesser-known – but no less spectacular – migration taking place in the area is the huge east-west movement of hundreds of thousands of seabirds from breeding grounds in the Mediterranean to wintering grounds around the Atlantic – or in some cases *vice versa!* This morning we headed to experience this from the Isla de las Palomas – actually a tiny peninsula that juts out from Tarifa.

From here at the most southerly point of mainland Europe we were right in the action and we spent a couple of hours watching shearwaters surge west, with almost 2,000 Scopoli's and over 100 Balearics passing us. Among them were Northern Gannets, Razorbills, Sandwich and Black Terns, and we could pick out Ruddy Turnstones, Sanderlings and a Common Kingfisher on the rocks in front of us.

After warming up with a coffee, we headed to lunch at the raptor watchpoint of La Peña, which gives stunning views along the Tarifa Bay, and back toward the Isla where we had spent the morning. We enjoyed the Thekla's Larks around us, and more migrating birds including Griffon Vultures, Booted Eagles and Short-toed Eagles, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Red Kites, and an Atlas Long-legged Buzzard, probably a vagrant from the other side!

We ended our trip literally on a high, heading up into the mountains above the town of Bolonia. Stopping at the Cueva del Moro, we enjoyed gorgeous views out along the coast and down onto the Roman ruins of Baelo Claudia, as well as many Crag Martins.

We then headed up to the area's large Griffon Vulture colony to spend some final quality time with our seemingly constant winged companions for the trip. The colony on the crags is usually home to around 90 pairs of vultures, but at this time of the year hundreds more are arriving from the north, looking for somewhere to roost before their sea crossing. Today our minds were truly blown as several hundred of these massive birds swirled low around

our heads and filled every ledge with their squawking and squabbling! Among them there was a Eurasian Black Vulture, and we even got our (almost) daily Bonelli's Eagle fix!

Then it was back to the *cortijo* for great food, wine and company on our final night together!

## Day 7

Thursday 9th November

All too soon our trip was over! We said goodbye to the team at the *cortijo* – not to mention the assorted menagerie of friendly ducks, chickens, cats, dogs, horses and tiny goats and headed off. Simon and Niki took the group to Gibraltar airport in good time for their flights home and we said *¡basta luego!*

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	November 2023					
		3	4	5	6	7	8
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>				2		
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>				10		
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		1		2		2
Scopoli's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>						1821
Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>						128
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>				42	200	
Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>				1		
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		1	20	564	40	50
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>				560	40	
Northern Bald Ibis	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>					31	
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>				70	17	
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>				20	15	1
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>				15	6	2
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>						20
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1	1		30	5
Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>					1	
Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>				3		
Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>				1		
Rüppell's Vulture	<i>Gyps rueppellii</i>				1		
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	20	70	40	809	120	1200
Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>				1		1
Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		1	1	33	9	6
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>			1	2		3
Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>				1		
Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>	1	2		1	1	1
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				1		1
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	1			6	8	
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				3		
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		1		1		3
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>				1		
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1		1	4	1	1
Atlas Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus cirtensis</i>						1
Purple Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>				1		
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				2		
Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>					10	
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>					5	
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>					45	
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>					20	
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>				36		
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>					17	
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				4	50	
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>				1		
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>					10	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				12		
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>					15	
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>					4	

Common name	Scientific name	November 2023					
		3	4	5	6	7	8
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>					4	
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>					8	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>					50	
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>					3	
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>				10		
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>					2	
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>					15	2
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>				1	8	
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>					70	3
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>					10	
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>					2	
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>					450	
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>					11	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				150	✓	
Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>					60	
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>				3	5	
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>				60	✓	
Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>					1	
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>					1	8
Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>						2
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>						15
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	4	2		6	5	100
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	1	1	1	1		
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>			1			
Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>				8		
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		1		2	1	1
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			1			
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	2	2	5	2	3
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>				1		
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1	1		1	
Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>			2			
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	2		3			
Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>	4	80	20			
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	1	1	2	4	2	4
European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	2	3	2		1	
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>	2		9			
Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>	2		2	2		6
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓
Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>					1	
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>				10	4	1
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	10	20	60	70	20	80
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>				20	10	4
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>				2		
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>				3	1	
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		10				



Common name	Scientific name	November 2023					
		3	4	5	6	7	8
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	1	2	6	5	10	15
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>			1	8	10	2
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	2	3	10	3	✓	✓
Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>					1	
Dartford Warbler	<i>Curruca undata</i>	1	1	1			
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	2	2	3			
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		2	2			1
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			1			
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			2		5	2
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	2	3	5	✓	✓	✓
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	2		6			
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>					2	
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	3	1	10		15	11
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		3	1	1		
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	2		3	8	6	10
Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>		2				
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>				60		
Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>					2	
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1	2			2
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	5	20	50	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		1	10	✓	✓	✓
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		3				
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		2	2	✓	✓	✓
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	8	4	2	✓	✓	✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>				1		
Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>			3		2	
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>			4	20	10	
Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>		2	1			
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		2		2		1

## Others

Common name	Scientific name	November 2023						
		3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>Mammals</b>								
Bottle-nose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>						3	
Iberian Ibex	<i>Capra pyrenaica</i>		11					
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus hispanicus</i>			6				
Europe Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>			✓	✓			
<b>Dragonflies</b>								
Red-veined Darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>					✓	✓	
Vagrant Emperor	<i>Anax ephippiger</i>						✓	

<b>Butterflies &amp; Moths</b>								
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>					✓	✓	
Two-Tailed Pasha	<i>Charaxes jasius</i>					2		
Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>			✓				
Large Tortoiseshell	<i>Nymphalis polychloros</i>			✓				
Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>				✓			
Cleopatra	<i>Gonepteryx cleopatra</i>						✓	
Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>				✓		✓	
Hummingbird Hawkmoth	<i>Cilix glaucata</i>			✓				
<b>Reptiles</b>								
House Gecko	<i>Hemidactylus frenatus</i>		✓					
Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>	✓						



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Rüppell's Vulture