# Go Slow ... in Andalucia

# Naturetrek Tour Report

21 - 27 September 2018







Short-toed Snake Eagle by Richard Clinton



Common Dolphin by Simon Jones



Common Firecrest by Richard Clinton

Report compiled by Niki Williamson and Simon Tonkin Images courtesy of Richard Clinton & Simon Jones



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Tour Report Go Slow ... in Andalucia

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

## **Summary**

This seven-day laidback exploration of the fascinating wildlife of the Straits of Gibraltar is timed to coincide with the area's spectacular autumn migration event, and it certainly didn't disappoint! From the tranquil surroundings of our base at Huerta Grande Eco-lodge near Tarifa, we were treated to stunning views of migrating raptors simply by looking up from our gin and tonic! A huge migration bottleneck was in progress, and raptors and other soaring birds, including Booted and Short-toed Eagles, European Honey Buzzards, Black Kites, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures and Black Storks literally filled the sky as they waited in the Spanish 'departure lounge' for their opportunity to cross the Straits. On our cetacean-watching boat trip, this lucky group had breath-taking close-up encounters with over 200 Common Dolphins, which played and leapt around the boat for over an hour!

Other highlights of mountain, farmland, wetland, inter-tidal habitat and Cork Oak forest included Northern Bald Ibis, day-roosting Red-necked Nightjar, Rüppell's Vulture, Firecrests, Short-toed Treecreepers, Crested Tit, Stone Curlews, Kentish Plover, Greater Flamingoes, Audouin's Gulls, Cory's Shearwaters and a Mediterranean Chameleon. As well as being treated to some spectacular migration and cetacean events, the group enjoyed relaxed days in warm weather, taking in all the gorgeous wildlife, scenery, culture and cuisine Southern Andalucía has to offer.

#### Day 1

# Friday 21st September

After meeting Bob at the airport, Simon and Niki soon connected with the rest of the group arriving on the afternoon Heathrow flight. We made the short 30-minute journey to Huerta Grande, our eco-lodge base, enjoying our first views of Black Kites and Honey Buzzards on the wind, and White Storks roosting statuesquely on their nest sites.

Afternoon tea (although most chose beer!) and a selection of cakes awaited us at the cosy reception area in a clearing in the woods. The group relaxed and enjoyed the sounds of Short-toed Treecreepers in the nearby Cork Oaks, while looking out for Crested Tits on the bird-feeders.

There was time to settle in and enjoy the tranquil surroundings before our first three-course evening meal. Tonight was a special one, as it was Derek and Jan's 50th wedding anniversary, and Naturetrek had treated the whole group to a drink of locally-produced organic cava to celebrate! We enjoyed a tasty *calabacín* soup starter, followed by an introduction to a local traditional dish known as *pisto*, a delicious tomato and pepper-based meal adorned with a perfectly-cooked poached egg, and mopped up with *pan de Pelayo* – our village's local bread which is only baked in two bakeries in the world!

# Day 2

# Saturday 22nd September

After a leisurely breakfast, we set off to chase down some raptor migration action!

Today there was a stiff easterly – or *levante* – breeze. In a crosswind, large soaring birds struggle to cross the Straits to Africa, so the conditions were preventing their onward journey and whipping up a lot of activity from

frustrated raptors stuck in the Spanish 'departure lounge'! At Cazalla raptor watchpoint, we could look down over the whole sweep of Tarifa Bay. Some of the raptors able to use more powered flight, such as Booted Eagles and Honey Buzzards, were looking for opportunities to cross, and we had fantastic views of them moving along a nearby ridge. A group of Black Storks also tumbled along the coastline.

Moving further west to a watchpoint at La Peña, we settled in around the shade-providing structure, looking out south over the bay or behind us to the limestone crags, from where raptors were still leaving their roosts. Large groups of Honey Buzzards drifted overhead, showing their variable plumage. Here we relaxed and enjoyed our first hearty picnic lunch, prepared expertly in the field by Niki & Simon as we enjoyed views of Sardinian Warblers and Thekla Larks. Yet more raptors drifted over and, as we ate, we had great views of patrolling Griffon Vultures. To our delight, a Rüppell's Vultures also sailed by! Although superficially similar to Griffon Vultures, this African species is smaller and darker with no contrasting plumage and carries a bold, neat white band inside the leading edge of its underwing. The Straits is one of the few places in Europe they can be seen so we were lucky indeed to have a view of one.

Appetites sated, we drifted back along the coast ourselves like so many soaring birds before us. There were many raptors still in flight, so we stopped again at Cazalla, this time making use of the older watchpoint across the road. We were happy with our views before but this time we really hit the jackpot! As the air cooled and tired raptors began to search for somewhere to roost, there were suddenly hundreds of them circling low over our heads, including Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Black Kites, Egyptian Vultures, Sparrowhawks and Marsh Harriers.

A brief stop at the Mirador del Estrecho café, high up in the hills above Tarifa, allowed the group to enjoy a coffee and an ice cream, while taking in the spectacular views across the Straits to northern Morocco.

Arriving back at our lodge, there was plenty of time to relax at the bar or by the pool before our evening meal.

#### Day 3

# **Sunday 23rd September**

Heading west again this morning, we made the most of a brief traffic hold-up to enjoy Spotless Starlings singing from the wires, large flocks of Corn Buntings rootling through the grass verges, and Honey Buzzards and Black Kites leaving their roosts and drifting by, almost at eye-level.

Our destination today was La Janda, an area of farmland that used to be one of Spain's most important wetlands. Now used for the cultivation of rice and cotton, the wet fields and network of irrigation ditches mean that there are still many wetland birds to be found here, particularly during migration season. We weren't disappointed! The sky was full of swirling masses of White Storks, with Black Storks in amongst them. Huge flocks of Glossy Ibis and Black-winged Stilts glistened in the sun as they flew and waded. Every field seemed to be patrolled by its own Marsh Harrier.

Farmland passerines were also numerous, and the group got their first views of Zitting Cisticolas and Yellow Wagtails. Amongst the noisy flocks of many thousands of House Sparrows, we were able to pick out a sprinkling of male Spanish Sparrows, thanks to their bright white cheeks and chestnut heads. Many Sand and House

Martins, Barn and Red-rumped Swallows filled the air, making use of the last explosion of airborne insects before heading south for the winter.

Moving up the hill to the area of pastureland to the north of the farm, we made a stop for a very special bird! Peering into the undergrowth with our optics, and maintaining complete silence, we searched for several minutes before Niki let out the pre-arranged whistle to announce the bird had been found! There, completely undisturbed in all its cryptic beauty, was a Red-necked Nightjar! This gorgeous bird remained completely unperturbed just metres from the road, while the group viewed it through scopes in silent glee! A fantastic experience and one of the highlights of the trip for many.

Heading a little further up the track we could finally make a sound, and the group chattered happily as we took our picnic lunch in the shade of a farm building. Emerging at the Benalup end of the farm we wended our way back towards Huerta Grande through Los Alcornacales Natural Park – Europe's biggest Cork Oak forest. We stopped for our daily ice cream in a local café right in its heart, and our guides stocked up on some local delicacies for tomorrow's picnic!

We arrived back at base to find dozens of Booted Eagles, Griffon Vultures and Short-toed Eagles and some really low Honey Buzzards circling over Huerta Grande – we ended a brilliant day enjoying these birds while supping a G&T!

#### Day 4

## **Monday 24th September**

We made a leisurely start today, heading up to El Algorrobo raptor watchpoint for mid-morning. Despite terrific raptor-watching already on the trip, this morning we hit some of the best action so far! Several windy days meant that the bottleneck of birds waiting to cross the Straits was now huge, and we watched spellbound as hundreds of Booted Eagles, Honey Buzzards, Short-toed Eagles, Sparrowhawks and more drifted low over our heads, having just left their roosts. The light was perfect, and the photographers in the group had some great opportunities to get those perfect shots of raptors against a blue sky! Taking a moment or two to look down, we found Egyptian Mantis and Safflower Skippers patrolling the Golden Thistles at our feet. And just to cap things off, we were just about to leave when an enormous Golden Eagle hove into view!

Next, we headed into Tarifa for a tapas-style lunch in the Old Town. This spectacular spread featured many traditional Andalus specialities, including potato *croquetas* with ham, cheese or spinach, prawns wrapped in potato 'pastry', curried chicken, oven-roast green pepper, tostadas with tomato or guacamole and fresh anchovy, and a vegetable quinoa salad, all washed down with wine, beer, fresh orange juice or *tinto de verano* (red wine with cloudy lemonade, a kind of summer *sangria*). In true Spanish style, we spent a leisurely two hours consuming our delicious lunch! But we still had plenty of time to stroll around the picturesque narrow streets of Tarifa's Moorish Old Town before our next adventure.

This was to be our boat trip. Persistent high winds meant that we chose to vary our plan a little and head out into well-sheltered Algeciras Bay area, known for its high concentrations of dolphins. After a fascinating talk by our boat trip company FIRMM on the ecology and conservation of the cetaceans in the Straits, we headed to the port. The afternoon sun turned the peaceful waters of the bay to gold, and here we spent an enthralling two hours watching 200+ Common Dolphins all around us. Many had tiny calves, resembling rugby balls, and family

groups leapt and played all around us, often letting their curiosity get the better of them and swimming right underneath the boat. Mediterranean Gulls and Sandwich Terns floated by, a couple of Cory's Shearwaters were visible out to sea, a young Peregrine Falcon zoomed overhead, and as we returned to port we were welcomed by a Western Osprey. A most memorable day!

#### Day 5

# **Tuesday 25th September**

Today after breakfast we headed west again, first visiting a sheltered valley up in the hills west of Tarifa. Here we saw many Spotless Starlings, Corn Buntings and got good views of Spanish Sparrows among the House Sparrow flocks. Still held up by the *levante*, dozens of Short-toed Eagles hung in the wind in every direction, interspersed by Honey Buzzards and Marsh Harriers.

Spotting a large number of Vultures in the distance, we headed up further into the valley to see the potential reason for their gathering. Sure enough, the remnants of a cow carcass could be seen, and several cows had recently given birth, leaving fresh afterbirth in the fields. The circling carrion-feeders included over 30 Griffon Vultures, Black Kites and Northern Ravens. Much to our delight, a second Rüppell's Vulture could also be seen amongst them, this time giving a much better and prolonged view. Leaving the Vultures to their elevenses, we went and took ours at a local deli, where we also picked up some feisty goats' cheese and local, line-caught tuna for the picnic!

Refreshed, we continued to Barbate salt pans, where the wader pickings were rich indeed! Along the shores of these disused pans, we enjoyed great views of Common Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Sanderling, Dunlins, Ruddy Turnstone, Common Greenshank and Black-winged Stilts. Eurasian Spoonbills, Little Egrets, Grey Herons and over a hundred Greater Flamingoes fed in the shallow, food-rich water. Views of 20+ wintering Stone-curlews were a real highlight, as was a hunting Western Osprey right overhead.

We again enjoyed our picnic lunch in the field, savouring a selection of locally-produced cheeses and hams, salads, olives, allioli, Spanish omelette, crisps, freshly baked bread, fruits, cake (and of course the mandatory chocolate!), washed down with a selection of fruit juices, red and white wine and seasoned with olive oil from a 1000-year-old tree and traditionally-produced salt from the Bay of Cadiz! After lunch we worked our way further around the shores to find Slender-billed and Audouin's gulls amongst the flocks of Yellow-legged Gulls. On the way back, we visited an area where large amounts of irrigated grassland attract a very special bird. As we drove up the track, we were thrilled to catch a Northern Bald Ibis flying overhead! The result of a successful reintroduction programme on nearby sea cliffs, these birds are amongst the rarest in the world. With only about 1000 left in the wild, seeing them is a privilege indeed.

Then it was time to return home to relax and maybe explore the grounds for those who were inclined to stretch their legs before dinner.

## Day 6

# Wednesday 26th September

The group got another leisurely start today, heading off after breakfast to the seaside town of Bolonia, where we immediately went for coffee! This was sea-watching in true comfort, and our chosen café gave us great views out over Tarifa Bay, where we could see Cory's Shearwaters and Sandwich Terns. Honey Buzzards were visible up in

the hills, and we spotted a young Marsh Harrier coming back in off the sea, after an abortive attempt to make the crossing.

We headed up into the rocky hills behind Bolonia, on the way rescuing a Mediterranean Chameleon that was trying to cross the road. As we stopped the vehicles, it clambered up under the wheel arch of one of the vans and turned black! Happily, it was soon retrieved, and turned green immediately on being returned to the safety of a nearby tamarisk bush. Up in the hills, we stopped at the foot of a craggy cliff face – home to the area's largest colony of Griffon Vultures. Around 200 birds nest and roost here, and we were able to watch dozens of them at close hand, soaring over our heads and hissing and screeching at each other from their rockface perches. Many Crag and House Martins were whizzing around, and unexpectedly, Bob found a single White-rumped Swift in the melée! A very small number of pairs of this mostly African swift species do breed in the Straits area, and we were very surprised and pleased to find one so far from any currently active nest sites.

We were thrilled when a young and then an adult Bonelli's Eagle exploded into view, soaring over us before stooping powerfully back behind the rock face, almost causing some people to spill their lunches! We got to enjoy the third Rüppell's Vulture of the trip, low overhead and within easy reach of the group's cameras. We also saw both juvenile and adult Egyptian Vultures – all while we savoured our picnic together in the shade of the hide. Up at the top of the hill, we took in the view over the sweep of Tarifa bay, looking down over the extensive Roman ruins of Baelo Claudia and reflecting on all the strong *levante* winds they have withstood over the many centuries!

Then it was time to head back and relax before our final three-course meal. Chef Juan Carlos pulled out all the stops, feeding the group a traditional Andaluz gazpacho, a delicious chicken paella and a superb homemade cheesecake. As we rounded of the meal with a glass of local dessert wine, we reminisced about our highlights of the trip, of which there were many!

#### Day 7

# Thursday 27th September

Sadly, it was time to say goodbye, but the group's late-afternoon flights meant we had time after breakfast and packing for one last raptor fix before heading back to the UK. We clocked up another few-dozen views of Honey Buzzards, Black Kites, Short-toed and Booted Eagles at a local raptor viewpoint, and the group reflected once more on the simply mind-blowing number of soaring birds to be witnessed in this part of the world, and how sorely they would be missed back home! Soon we headed to Gibraltar, reaching the airport in good time, and said our "¡Hasta luego!"s at the end of a memorable trip.

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# **Species Lists**

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name		September							
		Scientific name	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	
1	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos			5+		15			
2	Red-legged Partridge	Alectoris rufa			6+					
3	Cory's Shearwater	Calonectris borealis				2		4		
4	Greater Flamingo	Phoenicopterus roseus					110			
5	Black Stork	Ciconia nigra		27	10			2		
6	White Stork	Ciconia ciconia	10+		900+	30+				
7	Glossy Ibis	Plegadis falcinellus			250+					
8	Northern Bald Ibis	Geronticus eremita					1			
9	Eurasian Spoonbill	Platalea leucorodia					10			
10	Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	✓	30+	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	1		10+		20+			
12	Little Egret	Egretta garzetta			✓	c.5	10+			
13	Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	2							
14	Western Osprey	Pandion haliaetus				1	1	1		
15	Egyptian Vulture	Neophron percnopterus		7		3		2	1	
16	European Honey Buzzard	Pernis apivorus	2	20+	20+	10+	30+	3	10+	
17	Rüppell's Vulture	Gyps rueppelli		1			1	1		
18	Griffon Vulture	Gyps fulvus	10+	40+	20+	20+	100+	70+	20+	
19	Short-toed Snake Eagle	Circaetus gallicus	5	80+	100+	30+	150+	1	10+	
20	Booted Eagle	Hieraaetus pennatus	20+	150+	c.200	80+	10+	10+	40+	
21	Golden Eagle	Aquila chrysaetos				1				
22	Bonelli's Eagle	Aquila fasciata						2		
23	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus	2	20+	5	c.20	c.10	3	15+	
24	Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus		2	10+	10+	20+	3	1	
25	Black Kite	Milvus migrans	2	10+	4	5+	14	2	10+	
26	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo		1	2				1	
27	Eurasian Stone-curlew	Burhinus oedicnemus					20+			
28	Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus			4		8+			
29	Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus			7					
30	Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula					<b>✓</b>			
31	Kentish Plover	Charadrius alexandrinus					<b>✓</b>			
32	Common Greenshank	Tringa nebularia					1			
33	Green Sandpiper	Tringa ochropus			1					
34	Ruddy Turnstone	Arenaria interpres					1			
35	Sanderling	Calidris alba					✓			
36	Dunlin	Calidris alpina					✓			
37	Slender-billed Gull	Chroicocephalus genei					4+			
38	Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus					<b>✓</b>		<b>✓</b>	
39	Audouin's Gull	Ichthyaetus audouinii					50+			
40	Mediterranean Gull	Ichthyaetus melanocephalus				2				
41	Yellow-legged Gull	Larus michahellis	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>		✓	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	
42	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus					✓	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	
43	Sandwich Tern	Thalasseus sandvicensis				4	1	6		
44	Feral Pigeon	Columba livia	<b>✓</b>	✓	<b>✓</b>	· ✓	· ✓	✓ <b>/</b>	<b>✓</b>	
45	Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus			<b>✓</b>					
46	Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	✓ ·	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	
47	Tawny Owl	Strix aluco		1	1	2	2	1	1	

	Common name		September							
		Scientific name	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	
48	Red-necked Nightjar	Caprimulgus ruficollis			1					
49	Pallid Swift	Apus pallidus		10+		3		2		
50	White-rumped Swift	Apus caffer						1+		
51	European Bee-eater	Merops apiaster		100+			1			
52	Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops			LO		1			
53	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major		1			1		1	
54	Lesser Kestrel	Falco naumanni	2	20+	10+	10+	4	2	1	
55	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus			1	1	1	1		
56	Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus	1			1		1		
57	Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula			✓		10+		✓	
58	Northern Raven	Corvus corax	1	2		2	4		1	
59	European Crested Tit	Lophophanes cristatus	1	2	3	1	2	2	1	
60	Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
61	Great Tit	Parus major	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
62	Thekla Lark	Galerida theklae		2						
63	Crested Lark	Galerida cristata	✓		6+	✓	✓	✓		
64	Sand Martin	Riparia riparia			✓	✓				
65	Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
66	Eurasian Crag Martin	Ptyonoprogne rupestris		2				10+		
67	Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum			✓	✓	1	2		
68	Red-rumped Swallow	Cecropis daurica			4		10+			
69	Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti			1	1				
70	Zitting Cisticola	Cisticola juncidis			✓		4			
71	Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
72	Iberian Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus ibericus	1	2	2					
73	Sardinian Warbler	Sylvia melanocephala	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
74	Common Firecrest	Regulus ignicapilla	2	3	3+	4	4	4+	2	
75	Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
76	Short-toed Treecreeper	Certhia brachydactyla	1	2		2	3	1	2	
77	Spotless Starling	Sturnus unicolor	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
78	Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
79	Spotted Flycatcher	Muscicapa striata			1					
80	European Robin	Erithacus rubecula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
81	Common Redstart	Phoenicurus phoenicurus						1		
82	European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola		4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
83	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
84	Spanish Sparrow	Passer hispaniolensis			5		1			
85	Western Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla flava	2	5+	✓	✓	✓	2	1	
86	Grey Wagtail	Motacilla cinerea	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
87	Tawny Pipit	Anthus campestris		1			2			
88	Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
89	Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes					2			
90	European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris			✓		✓			
91	Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina			✓					
92	European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
93	European Serin	Serinus serinus		1	1			1	2	
94	Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra			✓		50+	20+		

## Mammals

1	Common Dolphin	Delphinus delphis		✓			
2	Red Deer	Cervus elaphus			1		

				Se	ptembe	er		
Common name	Scientific name	21	22	23	24	25	26	27

#### Insects

1	Southern Hawker	Aeshna cyanea	✓	✓		✓		✓	
2	Banded Groundling	Brachythemis leucosticta			✓			✓	
3	Red-veined Darter	Sympetrum fonscolombii			✓	✓	✓		
4	Violet Dropwing	Trithemis annulata			✓				
5	Orange-spotted Emerald	Oxygastra curtisii						✓	
6	Red Admiral	Vanessa atalanta		✓					
7	Geranium Bronze	Cacyreus marshalli		✓					
8	Painted Lady	Vanessa cardui		✓					
9	Clouded Yellow	Colias croceus					✓		
10	Green-veined White	Pieris napi		✓					
11	Large White	Pieris brassicae		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
12	Small White	Pieris rapae		✓	✓	✓	✓		
13	Speckled Wood	Pararge aegeria		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
14	Holly Blue	Celastrina argiolus						✓	
15	Lang's -Short-tailed Blue	Leptotes pirithous		✓					
16	Safflower Skipper	Pyrgus carthami				✓			
17	Blue-winged Grasshopper	Oedipoda caerulescens			✓	✓	✓	✓	
18	Praying Mantis sp					✓			

#### Reptiles & Amphibians

1	Mediterranean Tree Frog	Hyla meridionalis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
2	Common Toad	Bufo bufo				✓	✓		
3	Moorish Gecko	Tarentola mauritanica	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	Iberian Wall Lizard	Podarcis hispanica		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
5	Mediterranean Chameleon	Chamaeleo chamaeleon						1	

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