

# Go Slow ... in Andalusia

Naturetrek Tour Report

25 September - 1 October 2019

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Booted Eagle



Rüppell's Vulture

Report compiled by Niki Williamson  
Images 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](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

Tour participants: Simon Tonkin & Niki Williamson (leaders) with 14 Naturetrek clients

## Summary

As well as being treated to some spectacular migration and cetacean events, this group enjoyed relaxed days in perfect weather, taking in the gorgeous wildlife, scenery, culture and cuisine Southern Andalusia has to offer. That's the beauty of a Go Slow trip to the Straits of Gibraltar - you can simply sit back in a deckchair and let the area's spectacular autumn migration event come to you!

We experienced the stunning spectacle of thousands of migrating raptors and storks drifting overhead. Booted and Short-toed Eagles, European Honey Buzzards, Black Kites, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures and White 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 Bottle-nosed Dolphins, as well as prolonged close-up encounters with a group of around 16 Long-finned Pilot Whales!

Resident Spanish Imperial and Bonelli's Eagles also put in appearances, as did superb African vagrants in the form of Rüppell's Vulture and Atlas Long-legged Buzzard.

Other highlights of this seven-day laidback exploration of the fascinating wildlife of the Straits of Gibraltar included snoozing Red-necked Nightjar right on our doorstep, Northern Bald Ibis, Blue Rock Thrush, Crested, Thekla and Calandra Larks, Firecrests, Short-toed Treecreepers, Crested Tit, Kentish Plover, Greater Flamingoes, Audouin's Gulls, Cory's and Balearic Shearwaters and Monarch butterfly.

## Day 1

## Wednesday 25th September

Simon and Niki met most of the group from their afternoon flight into Gibraltar, and whisked them away into Spain, making the short journey to our eco-lodge accommodation at the edge of Los Alcornocales Natural Park. Here we enjoyed afternoon tea in the sun, and began settling into the relaxed Go Slow spirit of things!

We enjoyed groups of Hawfinches moving around us, and the sounds of Firecrests, Short-toed Treecreepers and Great Spotted Woodpecker nearby. Then it was time for a bit of a *siesta* to recover from the journey, before our first delicious three-course meal – a courgette cream soup, barbecued pork and vegetable kebabs, a selection of salads and a sublime homemade crème brûlée, courtesy of chef Juan Carlos.

## Day 2

## Thursday 26th September

Today the winds were in our favour for migration watching. An easterly or *levante* wind took us to Cazalla raptor watchpoint, where our locally-based leaders knew that the action would be happening!

Short-toed Eagles and Booted Eagles were soon leaving their roosts and moving up and down the coast in dozens, testing the wind and their strength. Honey Buzzards and Egyptian Vultures flew close by us, and there were groups of Black Storks to be enjoyed as well.

Sat in our comfy deckchairs looking out over Tarifa and The Straits, the morning soon passed by! We headed to our lunch stop at Sanctuario de la Luz, another hillside watchpoint which offers superb views out over Tarifa Bay.

This uplifting place was the site of a Palaeolithic sky burial site, and it was thought-provoking to see the resident Griffon Vultures overhead, descendents of those vultures that helped carry the dead to the next place all those millenia ago.

But we soon noticed there were more than just Griffon Vultures overhead. Among them a Rüppell's Vulture! The bright underwing markings and flecking shone out from its dark chocolate brown plumage as it soared overhead.

Our raptor timing had again been perfect – as well as many more Short-toed and Booted Eagles, we were lucky enough to encounter a Bonelli's Eagle powering through them, prompting a game of "What bird would you drop your lunch for?"!

Amongst the raptors were many hundreds of Alpine Swifts, and we could hear their giggling calls above us. Continuing the black-and-white theme, a group of fifty Black Storks spiralled by.

After lunch we dropped down to Punta Camorro on the coast above Tarifa. It became apparent that the late Autumn Griffon Vulture migration had begun, as groups of these birds were gathering in thermals. Only first-year Griffon vultures migrate, dispersing to sub-Saharan Africa to come of age and "find themselves", before returning to seek a place in a breeding colony two years later. The crossing south is made only once in their lives, and the trepidation in these young birds was apparent, as they headed out high across the sea only to turn round and come back again!

En route back to base we stopped for a well-deserved icecream at the Mirador del Estrecho café, a lovely stop for a break and where the raptor watching could continue! Our efforts were not wasted as an Atlas Long-legged Buzzard appeared!

Back at Huerta Grande, there was a lovely afternoon of down time for those that wished. But our guides had a surprise for the group! Early that morning Niki had happened upon a Red-necked Nightjar in the grounds, and to our delight, it was still there! Simon and Niki took those that wished to see it in small groups down through the woodland, to where it was resting from its long journey in the leaf litter among dappled sunlight. In a superb team effort, we succeeded in obtaining intimate scope views of this resting migrant, leaving it completely undisturbed by our actions.

## Day 3

## Friday 27th September

Today was the day of our boat trip out into the Straits themselves. Parking in town, we enjoyed the presence of one of Tarifa's resident Common Bulbuls – one of the area's North African quirks! As we wandered down through the old part of Tarifa town, enjoying the winding back streets and the Spanish architecture with Moorish influences, our guides explained a little of its history. Admiring the stout walls of the Castillo de Guzman el Bueno, we were also lucky to see two male Lesser kestrels perched on top of them.

We left the harbour on board a vessel of FIRMM, who conduct research into the resident cetaceans while hosting marine visits. We passed through bands of Cory's Shearwaters just off Tarifa Island. Small groups of Balearic Shearwaters were also encountered as well as Sandwich and Black Terns, a Great Skua and several Mediterranean Gulls.

Out in the deep water, nearer to Morocco than Spain, we were thrilled to come across several groups of Long-finned Pilot Whales! These families of intelligent, sociable delphids were quite unperturbed by our presence, and even approached the boat for a closer look! We spent quite some time amongst these families at rest, and enjoyed their interactions with the Bottlenose Dolphins that swam among them.

Returning to dry land elated by our experience, there was time before lunch to wander around the old town and do some souvenir shopping. Next we celebrated with a delicious tapas lunch in a typical restaurant in the Old Town. The delights kept coming as quinoa with vegetable and spinach, cheese and ham croquettes followed *tomates aliñados* (tomato, garlic and basil salad), and roasted green peppers – delicious!

## Day 4

## Saturday 28th September

The weather conditions again took us to Cazalla watchpoint, where a day of complete calm was causing a spectacular cloud inversion in the Strait, with the peak of the Jebel Musa protruding out of it like a homing beacon for avian migrants!

The conditions were perfect and the next couple of hours were utterly humbling. We witnessed a migratory gathering of over 1200 Short-toed Eagles and 400 Booted Eagles, as well as fifty Black Storks, four Egyptian Vultures, twenty European Honey Buzzards, fifteen Sparrowhawks, two Red Kites, twenty Black Kites and a Eurasian Hobby. Barn Swallows poured through in unmeasurable numbers, amongst them over 500 Red-rumped Swallows, fifty House Martins and five Sand Martins. Scenes like this can never fully be described in numbers!

Having appreciated the sheer volume of raptors collected in the area, searching for the right moment to undertake the treacherous sea crossing to Africa, we descended to the cliffs east of Tarifa to see if we could enjoy some close individual views.

The cloud inversion was still rising and falling, sometimes obscuring the rocky coast of Morocco, sometimes allowing us to glimpse it. The Jebel Musa serves as an important visual cue to migrating raptors, and it seemed the lack of this reliable view was causing trepidation! A huge flock of over 400 White Storks arrived and headed out to sea, only to turn up again in Spain twenty minutes later!

As we enjoyed our picnic of fresh bread, local meats and cheeses, olives, salads and wines, we were impressed by views of Short-toed and Booted Eagles low over our heads.

We finished our day out with a refreshing drink outside a local café, where we could look up and enjoy further views of raptors drifting along the thermals of the coastal hills. Then back in time for afternoon tea (or G&T?!) and a relax in the wooded grounds or by the pool before dinner.

## Day 5

Sunday 29th September

Today we headed west along the coast, through the seaside town of Bolonia and up through the hills, past the Roman ruins of Baelo Claudia, once one of the empire's most prosperous towns.

Our first stop was way up in the Sierra de la Plata, on the side of a rocky outcrop overlooking Bolonia Bay. Here we could hear Rock Buntings calling, and the sweet song of a Blue Rock Thrush. We soon found not one but three of these delightful azure birds, where a battle over winter territory seemed to be undertaken in the form of a sing-off.

Griffon Vultures roosted on cliff ledges above us and we were also pleased to find again a Rüppell's Vulture. From our viewpoint we could look down on soaring Booted Eagles and European Honey Buzzards, and admire the amphitheatre and market square of the Roman ruins from above.

We next headed down a different track to the cliffs known as La Zarga. We made the short walk to this impressive, permit-only site. It is the first place where a Griffon Vulture was photographed on its nest, back in the early days of photography.

Here we took our lunch as the members of this impressive vulture colony numbering in the hundreds, swooped over us. We enjoyed their prehistoric-sounding squawks and hisses as they interacted over who could sit on which ledge! Also in the area were numerous Honey Buzzards, Short-toed Eagles and Booted Eagles and an Egyptian Vulture, as well as many Crag martins swooping in and out of the crevices in the cliffs.

Dropping back into the seaside town of Bolonia, we stopped for an obligatory ice cream by the sea before heading back to base.

## Day 6

Monday 30th September

We headed out to explore the nature reserve which now occupies the site of the disused saltpans of Barbate, one of the area's best wetland habitats.

Our first stop overlooked some shallow bays at the south-eastern end of the reserve, and we immediately began to enjoy a nice selection of wading birds, including Kentish, Grey and Common Ringed Plovers, Black-tailed Godwit, Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Common Redshank and Greenshank, Common Sandpiper and Ruff. We enjoyed views of Caspian and Sandwich Tern, two Western Ospreys and a group of forty Audouin's Gulls. Over 200 Greater Flamingoes fed in the shallows alongside several Eurasian Spoonbills. We were also thrilled to find eight Stone Curlews on one of the islands.

A huge flock of farmland birds in the pasture behind us included hundreds of Corn Buntings, Crested, and around fifty Calandra Larks, and migrating Yellow Wagtails of the *flava* race were present.

We enjoyed our picnic lunch with the waders, terns, gulls and larks, and it was soon time to head back towards our base for our afternoon relaxing time, pausing as we went to enjoy an Iberian Pond Tortoise loafing on a midriver log!

On the way back however, we were thrilled to pick up on one of the area's much sought-after inhabitants. A group of three Northern Bald Ibis were feeding on nearby pastureland! With only around 1000 individuals left in the wild, this is one of the world's rarest birds, not to mention the most characterful! We watched as these iridescent, grotesque-yet-beautiful birds probed in the soil. Their presence here is the result of a successful reintroduction programme, the first phase of which concluded in 2018, and the population continues to do well.

## Day 7

**Tuesday 1st October**

The group's afternoon flights allowed a nice relaxed morning to pack and take a final wander around the beautiful wooded grounds of our ecolodge home. For those that wished there was an optional local excursion to enjoy a few more of the area's soaring birds.

We reconvened for one last picnic at Huerta Grande, occupying the shady benches under the pine trees and enjoying the company of Crested Tits, Firecrests and Short-toed Treecreepers once more as we ate.

Simon and Niki collected bags for the group and we were soon back at Gibraltar airport, with plenty of time to enjoy the airport restaurant, overlooking the famous Rock.

It had been a fantastic week full of great wildlife memories and relaxation in a beautiful setting!

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## Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted)

	N = Near endemic		September/October						
	Common name	Scientific name	25	26	27	28	29	30	1
1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>			50				
2	Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>			8				
3	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>						1	
4	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>						200	
5	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>		50		50			
6	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	4			403		8	✓
7	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>						2	
8	Northern Bald Ibis	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>						3	
9	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>						9	
10	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		2			1	5	
12	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>						3	
13	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			1				
14	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		2	2			4	
15	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>						2	
16	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>		15		4	1		
17	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>		c.10	3	20	5	3	
18	Rüppell's Vulture	<i>Gyps rueppelli</i>		1			1		
19	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		64	10	30	100	2	
20	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		150	10	1,200	20	1	✓
21	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraetus pennatus</i>		100	50	400	10	3	✓
22	Spanish Imperial Eagle - N	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>		1	1				
23	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>		1					
24	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	5	20	5	15	3	1	✓
25	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>					1	2	
26	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>				2			
27	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	2	4	20	20	10	2	
28	Atlas Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus cirtensis</i>		1					
	Gibraltar Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus cirtensis x Buteo buteo</i>			1				
29	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>				1			
30	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>						1	
31	Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>						8	
32	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>						20	
33	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>						10	
34	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>						1	
35	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>						50	
36	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>						10	
37	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>						5	
38	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>						4	
39	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>						3	
40	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>						1	
41	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>						3	
42	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>			10+				
43	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>			1				
44	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>						3	
45	Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyiaetus audouinii</i>						40	
46	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyiaetus melanocephalus</i>			5				

	N = Near endemic		September/October						
	Common name	Scientific name	25	26	27	28	29	30	1
47	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
48	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>						10	
49	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>						2	
50	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>			2			7	
51	Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>			10				
52	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1	
55	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>						1	
56	Red-necked Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus ruficollis</i>		1					
57	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>		50			100		
58	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	1	1		1	2		
59	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>		1			1		
60	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>			1	3			
61	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		1	1	1	1	1	
62	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>				1			
63	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>						1	
64	Common Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>			1				
65	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>						✓	
66	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		2	2	1			
67	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		3	1	3	2	2	✓
68	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		2	2	2	2	2	✓
69	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		2	1	2	1	3	
70	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		1		1			
71	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		3			3	✓	✓
72	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>						50	
73	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		3		5		2	
74	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
75	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>					50		
76	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓	✓	50	✓		
77	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>		70	100	500	10	20	
78	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	1	1	1	1		1	
79	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		5		✓			
80	Iberian Chiff-chaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>		1				3	
81	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		2				3	
82	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
83	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
84	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	2	4	3	2	1	1	✓
85	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			1	1	3	1	
86	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>				2	2	1	
87	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	2	2	4	3	1	2	✓
88	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
89	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
90	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>					1		
91	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	2+	3+	4	✓	✓
92	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>					1		
93	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>					3	1	
94	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
95	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
96	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>		100	3	5	2	10	
97	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				1	1		



	N = Near endemic		September/October						
	Common name	Scientific name	25	26	27	28	29	30	1
98	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>						1	
99	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
100	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		2			2		
101	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>						4	
102	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
103	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>				2			
104	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	1			1		100	
105	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>			1		1		

## Mammals

1	Bottle-nose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>			20				
2	Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>			c.16				

## Dragonflies

1	Southern Migrant Hawker	<i>Aeshna affinis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
2	Red-veined Darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>		✓	✓			✓	

## Butterflies

1	Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>				1			
2	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
3	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓	✓			✓	
4	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>		✓	✓			✓	
5	Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
6	Two-Tailed Pasha	<i>Charaxes jasius</i>					✓		
7	Cleopatra	<i>Gonepteryx cleopatra</i>		✓					
8	Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>					✓	✓	

## Reptiles & Amphibians

1	Mediterranean Tree Frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>		✓			✓		
2	Common Toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
3	Iberian Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis hispanicus</i>		✓		✓		✓	
4	Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
5	Iberian Pond Tortoise	<i>Mauremys leprosa</i>						✓	

## Other Invertebrates

1	Blue-winged Grasshopper	<i>Oedipoda caerulescens</i>					✓		
2	Egyptian Cricket	<i>Anacridium aegyptum</i>						✓	