

Go Slow... in Andalucia

Naturetrek Tour Report

24th – 30th September 2021



Long-finned Pilot Whale



Northern Bald Ibis



Short-toed (& Booted) Eagle



White Stork

Report & images by Simon Tonkin



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Tour participants - Simon Tonkin & Niki Williamson (leaders) with 10 Naturetrek clients.

Summary

The weather, food - and of course the spectacular autumn raptor migration- did not disappoint during this laid back trip to Spain's Straits of Gibraltar.

Migrating raptors poured overhead in blue skies and the groups were treated to views of European Honey Buzzard, Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Marsh and Montagu's Harriers, Black Storks, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures, huge groups of White Storks as well as Bonelli's and Spanish Imperial Eagle.

Boat trips brought us within a flipper's length of Bottlenose Dolphins and inquisitive Long-finned Pilot Whales!

From our base in a beautifully restored traditional Spanish farmhouse, our groups enjoyed the best of autumn birding in Andalucía, including Northern Bald Ibis right in the grounds!

Wetland, farmland and mountain sites gave great views of delights like Black-winged Kites, Blue Rock Thrush, Alpine and Pallid Swift, European Bee-eaters, Eurasian Hoopoe, Little Stint and Eurasian Stone-curlew.

Day 1

Friday 24th September

Simon and Niki met the group at Gibraltar airport late afternoon, after a rainy day in The Straits. Once the arrival formalities were successfully completed, we crossed the border into Spain and headed off along the coast towards Tarifa.

As the clouds cleared, we made a stop at the famous raptor watchpoint of Cazalla, from where we had dramatic views out across the old town of Tarifa under sullen skies, and across The Straits to the rocky Moroccan coastline. We enjoyed the fresh air, the sharp smells of the Mediterranean maquis and the excited twittering of many Spotless Starlings after the first rains of autumn.

We continued west and were soon settling into our accommodation at Cortijo el Indiviso, a beautiful Spanish farmhouse based around a central courtyard, lovingly restored in the traditional style. Our host Laura gave us a warm welcome and we were soon sitting down to our first three-course meal together.

Day 2

Saturday 25th September

After a fabulous breakfast – featuring eggs from the *cortijo's* own chickens – we headed out and back towards the coast into fine weather. At this time of year, a day of bad weather like yesterday means the migration departure gates are closed for raptors and soaring birds and they are stuck waiting in Europe for a chance to cross The Straits. This “bottleneck” phenomenon is what makes the area so famous for raptor watching, and is great news for us!

Making use of local knowledge of the best crossing places based on wind and weather conditions, we headed for a site known as El Olivar, in the hills above Tarifa. Unusually, one of our first sights of the day was of a group of 20 migrating Greater Flamingos!

As the air warmed, it didn't take long before we could see raptors leaving their roosts in the mountains and forests, and heading straight towards the coast! We adjusted our position slightly to follow the flow of birds and got comfortable at El Trafico for what was to be a remarkable day!

Swirling groups of raptors were soon streaming towards us, spiralling on warm thermals and jetting out over our heads, to cross the 14km of sea between us and Africa. Both the numbers of birds and the diversity of species were mind-boggling! Highlights included over a thousand Booted and Short-toed Eagles, 13 Eurasian Sparrowhawks, 25 Black Kites, a Black-winged Kite, a Marsh Harrier and two Montagu's Harriers, 11 European Honey Buzzards, seven Egyptian Vultures 12 Black Storks, 12 White Storks and 70 Griffon Vultures! There were also two Bonelli's Eagles and a Spanish Imperial Eagle in with the horde!

With birding this awesome, we saw no reason to move at all, so we had our picnic right there, relaxing under the throng of migrating birds.

Day 3

Sunday 26th September

Today we headed to the Marismas de Barbate. These saltpans had been in use since at least Phoenician times, but fell into disuse with the decline of the local tuna industry in the 70s and 80s, due to overfishing. After a brief spell as a landfill site, they were capped and are now an important nature reserve for resident and migratory waders, gulls and terns.

We weren't disappointed today, and enjoyed large flocks of Sanderling, Dunlin, Ruff, Little Stint, Black-winged Stilts, Pied Avocet, Black-tailed Godwit, Grey, Common Ringed and Kentish Plover feeding together in the shallows.

Greater Flamingos numbered over 250, with Eurasian Spoonbills amongst them. Eurasian Stone-curlews and Audouin's Gulls loafed on the islands and Western Ospreys and Marsh Harriers hunted low over our heads, causing chaos amongst the waders!

As we headed off for lunch, we were thrilled to find a flock of Northern Bald Ibis! We watched these brilliant, iridescent, quirky birds feeding in the pastures, where the ground had been softened by the recent rain! This incredibly rare bird numbers less than a thousand individuals in the wild but is doing well here in Andalucía thanks to a successful reintroduction project.

We took our picnic in the shade of nearby Stone Pines, which hosted Common Nightingale, Pied and Spotted Flycatchers, Short-toed Treecreeper and Western Bonelli's Warbler, amongst others. We were also joined by a beautiful Two-tailed Pasha, Europe's largest butterfly, which at times appeared to dwarf some of the woodland birds.

Day 4

Monday 27th September

This morning we took the chance to explore La Janda ricefields, situated just ten minutes' drive from our accommodation. We drove down the track adjacent to the main drainage ditch, which just a century ago would have been in the centre of one of Spain's largest wetlands! This intensive farmland area still holds plenty of wildlife in its wetter areas and reed-fringed ditches.

We were particularly happy to spot a Black-winged Kite soon after arriving, a lifer for some in the group! We had even better views of this smart, compact little raptor further along the track as a pair perched near their nest site. Here we also saw Turtle Doves, and huge flocks of Corn Buntings, House and Spanish Sparrows, reminded us of the natural richness still available at the fringes of agriculture. Common Waxbills flitted amongst the farmland bird flocks, Common Kingfishers zipped by and Cetti's and Reed Warblers were present amongst the ditch vegetation.

As we reached the eastern end of the farm we met with a huge cloud of White Storks, numbering over 1500 – spectacular! Amongst them was a bizarre creature – a black White Stork! This individual had been present locally for some time and is thought to have become stained while feeding on a rubbish tip!

After picnic literally “back at the ranch”, we headed off for our boat trip out into the Straits. We spent two wonderful hours on a calm sea enjoying the riches of The Straits. Stars of the show were undoubtedly inquisitive Bottlenose Dolphins and Long-finned Pilot Whales, two of our resident cetacean species! Their strong supporting cast included leaping Sunfish and Yellowfin Tuna, Scopoli's Shearwaters, Northern Gannets, Sandwich Tern and Mediterranean Gull.

Simon and Niki brought the vans to collect the group from the seafront promenade, where the group spotted Ruddy Turnstones and Sandwich Terns. We then headed back for some down time before our fantastic dinner, courtesy of chef Katarina.

Day 5

Tuesday 28th September

Another day of perfect migration conditions saw us heading back to El Trafico to put ourselves once more at the heart of the spectacle that everyone had come to see!

The second half of September is the peak migration date for Short-toed and Booted Eagles. Today was a HUGE day for them, with over 1500 Short-toed and 763 Booted Eagles crossing out over our heads!! The group were able to simply relax in deckchairs and drink in the sheer magnitude of the scenes unfolding over our heads!

Other highlights included three Spanish Imperial Eagles, a squadron of 112 low Black Storks, Egyptian Vultures, European Bee-eaters and Alpine Swifts. A constant intense movement of Red-rumped Swallows was underway throughout the morning, and we estimated that around 7500 passed by us! It was also noticeable that the first young Griffon Vultures were tentatively heading south - they totalled 53 today.

We capped off a splendid day with an ice cream stop at the Mirador del Estrecho, high in the hills overlooking the 14km divide between Europe and Africa.

Day 6

Wednesday 29th September

This morning to the hills of Sierra de la Plata, past the Roman ruins of Baelo Claudia just outside Bolonia.

At a high point in the range sits the Cueva del Moro - an ancient dwelling which contains rock paintings. From here we had views of migrating Short-toed and Booted Eagles and Honey Buzzards as well as local mountain birds including Blue Rock Thrush, Alpine Swift, Crag Martin and Red-rumped Swallow. We also encountered a group of 45 Red Crossbills, a species currently being seen frequently in the area thanks to an irruption from the north.

Next we headed on to the crags of La Zarga - the site of a Griffon Vulture colony which was the first place a Griffon Vulture was photographed on the nest. Here we enjoyed the airborne grace of dozens of Griffon Vultures, soaring over our heads at their colony, and screeching from perches on the crag face.

After a spectacular morning savouring the natural highlights of the area, it was time to enjoy some cultural ones! We headed to the Old Town area of Tarifa and enjoyed a delicious, prolonged *tapas* lunch of many courses, followed by time to meander through the town's picturesque winding streets – and perhaps enjoy an afternoon ice cream.

Day 7

Thursday 30th September

All too soon it was time to leave Tarifa and The Straits of Gibraltar behind and head home. Our lovely host Laura and Nugget the tame chicken were on hand to wave us off! Simon and Niki were sad to say goodbye to a thoroughly lovely group so we simply said “¡Hasta luego!” and until next time.

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Checklist

Birds

	N = Near endemic	I = introduced	Date:					
	Common name	Scientific name	24	25	26	27	28	29
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		1				
2	Scopoli's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>				10		
3	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>				1		
4	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>		20	25 4			
5	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>		12		2	112	
6	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓	12	50	157 4	46	20
7	Northern Bald Ibis	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>		3	32			
8	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>				50		2
9	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>			13	4		
10	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		2	6	✓		1
12	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			10	10		
13	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>				2		
14	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			✓	6		
15	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>			2			
16	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>		1		5		
17	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>		7			4	
18	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>		11	4	6	13	4
19	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	10	70		5	53	80
20	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	4	31 9	2	10	1581	20
21	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	5	69 1	5	4	763	30
22	Spanish Imperial Eagle - N	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>		1	1		3	
23	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>		2				
24	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1	13	6	2	6	20
25	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		1	4	20		
26	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				1		
27	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>		2		3		
28	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		1			2	1
29	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>		25	4	2	33	10
30	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	2	2	2	6	3	6
31	Gibraltar Buzzard / Atlas Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus/B.b cirtensis</i>		1				
32	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				2		
33	Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oediconemus</i>			8			
34	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>			47			
35	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>			20 0			
36	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>			10			
37	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			✓			
38	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>			50			
39	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>			80			
40	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>		2				
41	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			15			
42	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			1	1		
43	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>				10		

	N = Near endemic	I = introduced	Date:					
	Common name	Scientific name	24	25	26	27	28	29
44	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			1	1		
45	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				4		
46	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>			12			
47	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>			✓			
48	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			✓			
49	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>			3			
50	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>			5			
51	Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>			54			
52	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>			3	1		
53	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			10	6		
55	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>				4		
56	Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>			1			
57	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	1	1		✓	1	7
59	European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>				4		
60	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
61	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	1	1		1	1	
62	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	2	2	2	2	2	2
63	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>					16	10
64	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>					3	
65	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			1	2		
66	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>					20	
67	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	1	1			1	
68	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>		4	15	20	6	
69	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	2	1	2	2	2
70	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>				1		
71	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>		1				1
72	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
73	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		4	1	2	4	4
74	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		4	6	✓	✓	✓
75	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	6	6	4	✓	✓	✓
76	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		4			2	1
77	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	2	4	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>			20			
79	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		4	2		10	4
80	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
81	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>						10
82	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
83	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	10	40		20	7,50 0	✓
84	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>				4		
85	Iberian Chiff-chaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>		1	9	2		4
86	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>			2			
87	Western Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>			2			
88	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>				4		
89	Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>						2
90	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	2	4	6	✓	2	4
91	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>					1	2
92	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>			1			1
93	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	N = Near endemic	I = introduced	Date:					
	Common name	Scientific name	24	25	26	27	28	29
94	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		1				
95	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>						1
96	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			8	2		2
97	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
98	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	4		2	4
99	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	1		2		1	
100	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>						2
101	Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>		1	2	1		1
102	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>			5		1	3
103	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>	1		2			5
104	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>						6
105	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>			4	1		
106	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
107	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			2		1	2
108	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
109	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>				✓		
110	Common Waxbill - I	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>				4		
111	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>					1	
112	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
113	Iberian Yellow Wagtail	<i>M. flava iberiae</i>			10			
114	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				1	1	
115	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>			1			
116	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		1	✓			✓
117	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	1	2	✓	✓	✓	✓
118	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		4	✓	✓	✓	✓
119	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
120	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	2	2			2	2
121	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>						45
122	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	4	✓
123	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>						2
124	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		1			1	3

Other

		Date:						
Common name	Scientific name	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
Bottle-nose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>				✓			
Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>				✓			
Sunfish	<i>Mola mola</i>				✓			
Mediterranean Flying Fish	<i>Cheilopogon heterurus</i>				✓			
Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarantola mauritanica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
House Gecko	<i>Hemidactylus turcicus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Southern Hawker	<i>Aeshna cyanea</i>			✓				
Banded Groundling	<i>Brachythemis leucosticta</i>				✓			
Red-veined Darter	<i>Sympatrum fonscolombii</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	
Violet Dropwing	<i>Trithemis annulata</i>				✓			

Common name	Scientific name	Date:						
		24	25	26	27	28	29	30
Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	
Geranium Bronze	<i>Cacyreus marshalli</i>		✓				✓	
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>		✓					
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>		✓		✓		✓	
Two-Tailed Pasha	<i>Charaxes jasius</i>			✓			✓	
Bath White	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>		✓					
Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>		✓					
Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>		✓			✓	✓	
Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>				✓		✓	
African Tiger	<i>Danaus chrysippus</i>				✓			
Zeller's Skipper	<i>Borbo borbonica</i>					✓	✓	
Crimson Speckled Footman	<i>Utetheisa pulchella</i>		✓		✓			
Hummingbird Hawkmoth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Silver Y	<i>Autographa gamma</i>		✓					
Vestal	<i>Rhodometra sacraria</i>		✓					
Pale Shoulder	<i>Acontia lucida</i>				✓			
Violet Carpenter Bee	<i>Xylocopa violacea</i>						✓	
Preying Mantis spp			✓					
Egyptian Locust	<i>Anacridium aegyptium</i>		✓					
Blue-winged Grasshopper	<i>Oedipoda caerulea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wasp Spider	<i>Argiope bruennichi</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Squirting Cucumber	<i>Ecballium elaterium</i>				✓			