

Go Slow in Andalucia

Naturetrek Tour Report

23rd – 29th September 2023



Short-toed Eagle



Spanish Sparrows



Griffon Vulture



Kentish Plover

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 and Niki Williamson (leaders) with 13 Naturetrek clients.

Summary

A great trip to explore the Straits of Gibraltar at a leisurely pace! Spectacular autumn migration of soaring birds was going on all around as we witnessed thousands of raptors, storks and passerines make the crossing, including Short-toed Eagles, Booted Eagles, Black Kites, Honey Buzzards, Egyptian Vultures, White and Black Storks, Pallid Swifts and European Bee-eaters.

Other highlights included several encounters with rare vagrant Rüppell's Vulture, Spanish Imperial Eagle, breathtaking encounters with Griffon Vultures at their colony, hunting Marsh, Hen and Montagu's Harriers and Black-winged Kites at the ricefields and hundreds of waders including Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint and Stone Curlew at the Marismas de Barbate.

Five-course *tapas* lunch in the Old Town of Tarifa was a delight, and our accommodation at the Cortijo el Indiviso – a lovingly restored Spanish farmhouse – was so good that it even included its own 300-strong White Stork flyby in the evenings!

Day 1

Saturday 23rd September

Simon and Niki met the group from their arrival at Gibraltar airport and we walked across the border into Spain, loaded up our minibuses and headed west along the coast road.

On the way to our accommodation we stopped at Punta Camorro, an area on the coast just above the town of Tarifa, from where we could overlook the historic town, and get our first stunning views of the north coast of Morocco, just 14km away across The Straits of Gibraltar.

Despite the stiff breeze we could already witness some of the visible migration for which the area is so famous. Over a hundred Short-toed and Booted Eagles drifted out over our heads to make the short but treacherous crossing south across the sea, along with Eurasian Sparrowhawks, Marsh Harriers, White Storks and Black Kites. An impressive start and a great opportunity for an introductory talk on raptor migration and ID by Simon.

Continuing on, we set the pace of the trip by stopping for our first ice cream! But every stop is a birding stop in The Straits, and as we were leaving a group of vultures appeared close by, having taken off from some carrion. Among them was a rare vagrant Rüppell's Vulture!

Then we continued on to our accommodation at Cortijo el Indiviso, where there was time to check in and chill before dinner.

Day 2

Sunday 24th September

Today we experienced the full force of the area's famous *levante*! This strong easterly wind influences where migrating birds will be – if unable to cross The Straits in these conditions, they gather in sheltered valleys along the coast, so this is where we headed.

At the watchpoint of La Peña we picked a sheltered spot and did some chilled raptor watching from deck chairs featuring many Booted Eagles, Griffon Vultures and Black Storks, Egyptian Vultures and a Bonelli's Eagle.

Next, we headed east to Cerro del Tambor, to take our picnic lunch. It was a superb spot where we found over seven hundred Booted Eagles plus assorted Short-toed Eagles, Marsh Harriers, Black Kites and Honey Buzzards which had gathered in the "departure lounge", waiting for the wind to drop.

We headed to nearby Huerta Grande where we had a coffee and enjoyed views of Crested Tit on the feeders. We took a woodland walk in Los Alcornocales Natural Park, Europe's largest Cork Oak forest. Here we found Firecrest, Short-toed Treecreeper, Pied and Spotted Flycatchers.

A great first day and we headed back to the *cortijo*, where we were greeted by a flyby of over 300 White Storks! There was then time to enjoy our space here at this lovingly-restored traditional Spanish farmhouse, set around a central cobbled courtyard, whether with drinks in the grounds, or perhaps a dip in the pool, before dinner in the pretty orange grove.

Day 3

Monday 25th September

Today we headed to the seaside town of Bolonia and had a quick look at the intertidal habitat on the beach. Here we found Sanderling, Common Ringed and Kentish Plover on the sands. We could see Honey Buzzards leaving roosts in the pine forest and attempting to cross The Straits in the stiff breeze, only to circle back to land.

We headed up into the mountains to visit the large Griffon Vulture colony at La Zarga. Well over a hundred of these spectacular birds soared around over our heads, parallel flying with one another, squabbling over ledge space and swooping in so low we could hear their wings. A Blue Rock Thrush flitted around the rocky pinnacles.

At the crags of Cueva del Moro migrating raptors passed over including Black Kites, Honey Buzzards, Short-toed and Booted Eagles and a glimpsed Eleonora's Falcon! We got great views of a Blue Rock Thrush on the road right next to us! As we tried to leave, we were stopped in our tracks by three Black Storks and two Egyptian Vultures!

We stopped for coffee and ice-cream in a charming local café in the hills above Bolonia before heading home for a dip!

Day 4

Tuesday 26th September

We began the day with an exploration of the lovely grounds and area of our hotel, wandering amongst the horse paddocks, hedgerows and orange groves to enjoy some of our locally-spottable birds! The hedgerows were stuffed with migrant passerines, including Reed Warbler, Eurasian Blackcap, Garden Warbler, Common Whitethroat, Spotted and Pied Flycatcher, Common Redstart and Whinchat.

We then had a relatively free day, heading into Tarifa where we first took our fabulous *tapas* lunch in the Old Town! Our friend Patti – chef at Café Geko, a charming pavement café – did us proud with a broad selection of typically local dishes to share, including *tomates a la abuela* ("grannie's tomatoes"), *pimiento frito* (deep fried local padron

peppers), *croquetas caseras* (home-made croquettes of spinach, cheese and mushroom), crispy *empanadas* (tiny pasties!) and delicious grilled artichoke hearts with garlic and Iberian ham garnish. What a feast! Ever generous, she even offered us more courses, but we decided to save our space for our delicious three-course meal to come that evening!

Afterwards there was time to wander in the picturesque Old Town of Tarifa, and perhaps enjoy an ice-cream!

Day 5

Wednesday 27th September

Today we headed over the Marismas de Barbate, where disused saltpans have been turned into a delightful saline nature reserve. We were delighted to find fourteen Northern Bald Ibis waiting for us there in a paddock, very close with sunlight shining off their iridescent plumage! These incredibly rare and Critically Endangered birds are doing well here after a successful reintroduction programme in 2008.

We took our places in a quiet little spot next to the mouth of the Rio Barbate and enjoyed extraordinary close views of feeding waders, practically scuttling over our feet! These included Eurasian Curlew and Whimbrel and we had great views of Grey Plover, Dunlin, Sanderling and Curlew Sandpiper, amongst others. Caspian Terns and Mediterranean Gulls loafed on the sand bars.

On the marshes themselves was a fabulous array of waders, including Kentish and Common Ringed Plover, Little Stint, Black-tailed Godwit, Pied Avocet, Ruff and more! Greater Flamingoes and Audouin's Gulls looked fabulous while Western Ospreys hunted. Moving a little further round the shoreline, we found several Eurasian Stone-curlews on the pastureland!

Day 6

Thursday 28th September

Today we spent the morning exploring the ricefields and reed-fringed ditches of the farmland of La Janda. Just a century ago this was the site of the Laguna de La Janda, an expansive freshwater lagoon, which was drained for agriculture. These days we can still see echoes of its former splendour – the area was full of life today and we found some great birds!

Eurasian Turtle Doves showed well on overhead wires, and we glimpsed Eurasian Hoopoe. Black-Winged Kites perched on an irrigation boom. Many Marsh Harriers and several Lesser Kestrels hunted together over the fields and we enjoyed views of our first Hen Harrier of the winter season. Huge flocks of Spanish Sparrows fed in the rice crops, swirling in and out in mini-murmurations.

In wetter fields, hundreds and hundreds of White Storks loafed and fed, perhaps building up strength for their journey south. They were joined by Glossy Ibis.

Banded Groundling dragonflies flitted along the path as Common Waxbills zipped by. Green Sandpipers and Common Kingfishers called from the ditches. Among a group of six Short-toed Eagles, we were thrilled to spot a Spanish Imperial Eagle!

We headed to our old favourite La Peña for lunch, where we spotted another Rüppell's Vulture! We spent our final afternoon relaxing under a flow of many raptors flying over – including Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Griffon Vultures and Honey Buzzards and Eurasian Sparrowhawks. A fantastic end to the trip, and we headed home for another of chef Stephanie's fantastic three-course dinners.

Day 7

Friday 29th September

Time to head home for our group! Simon and Niki got the group to the airport in plenty of time for their homeward bound flights, hopefully with some great memories of migrating raptors to tide them over!

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		September 2023					
Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>					1	
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			8			
Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	1					
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	5	2	✓
European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>						4
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>					270	
Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>					4	
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>					45	
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>					200	
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>					14	
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			3		50	
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>			5		10	
Eurasian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	2				6	
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>					2	
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>					3	
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>					15	
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>					4	
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>					5	
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>					2	
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>					27	
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>			40		30	
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>					40	
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>					2	
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			1		2	
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>						2
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>					30	
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>					5	
Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>					1	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>					✓	4
Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyophaga audouinii</i>					70	
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyophaga melanocephalus</i>					3	
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		50	1		✓	
Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>					3	
Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>		3	2		2	4
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	20	312	314	119	200	764
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>					20	
Northern Bald Ibis	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>					14	
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>						18
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>					42	
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	1				4	4
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	1				7	5

N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		September 2023					
Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28
Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>					2	
Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>						3
Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>		3	2			
European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>		2	17	8	3	3
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	10	75	120		1	10
Rüppell's Vulture	<i>Gyps rueppelli</i>	1					1
Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	32	58	7	20	8	28
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraetus pennatus</i>	77	819	32	40	2	17
Spanish Imperial Eagle - N	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>						1
Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>		1				
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	4	11	5	2	2	6
Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>				1		
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	3	8	8	10	3	10
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>						1
Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>		1				
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	1	3	28	3	1	2
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>				1	2	1
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	2	1	1	1	1	1
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>					1	
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>				1	1	1
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>						2
European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	5	10				
Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>		2		2		20
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1			1	1	1
Eleanora's Falcon	<i>Falco eleonorae</i>			1			
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2		2	2	2	1
European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		2				
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		2	2			3
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		2			5	3
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>			50			
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>			30		20	50
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>						2
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>						1
Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>			2			
Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>				1		
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		2		2	2	8
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		10	2	5	2	4
Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>				3		
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>	3	4	8	✓	✓	✓
Common Whitethroat	<i>Curruca communis</i>				3		
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		1				
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		2				

N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		September 2023					
Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			1			
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		2				
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	2	2	3	2	1	2
Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>		3		1		
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		5	1			
Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>			2			
European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		10	2	5		
Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>		1		2		
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			3			
Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>				2	1	1
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>					3	
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>						1200
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Waxbill - I	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>						3
Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	20	40	20	✓	✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1				
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		4		5		
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		1				
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>			2	4		10
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		10	✓		✓	✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>			✓		✓	2
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	✓	✓	✓		2	✓

Others

		September 2023					
Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28
REPTILES							
Spanish Pond Terrapin	<i>Mauremys leprosa</i>			✓			
Turkish Gecko	<i>Hemidactylus turcicus</i>						
Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Vaucher's Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis iberica</i>		✓				
House Gecko	<i>Hemidactylus frenatus</i>		✓				✓
DRAGONFLIES							
Red-veined Darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>	✓	✓				✓
Banded Groundling	<i>Brachythemis leucosticta</i>						✓
Lesser Emperor	<i>Anax parthenope</i>			✓			
Migrant Hawker	<i>Aeshna mixta</i>					✓	✓
BUTTERFLIES							
Common Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>	✓	✓				
Cleopatra	<i>Gonepteryx cleopatra</i>	✓					
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>			✓			
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>				✓		

Common name	Scientific name	September 2023					
		23	24	25	26	27	28
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>					✓	
African Tiger	<i>Danus chrysippus</i>					✓	
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>			✓			
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>			✓			
Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>		✓			✓	✓
Geranium Bronze	<i>Cacyreus marshalli</i>		✓		✓		
Scarce Swallowtail	<i>Iphiclidides podalirius</i>		✓				
Dusky Meadow Brown	<i>Hyponephele lycaon</i>			✓			
OTHER SPECIES							
Hummingbird Hawkmoth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>			✓			
Dung beetle spp			✓	✓			
Red-winged Grasshopper	<i>Oedipoda germanica</i>				✓		
European Fiddler Crab	<i>Afruca tangeri</i>					✓	
Noctule Bat spp	<i>Nyctalus sp</i>		✓				