Go Slow ... in Andalucia in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

18 - 24 March 2019



Short-toed Snake Eagles



Rüppell's Vulture

Report by Niki Williamson Images by Simon Tonkin



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

Summary

The breathtaking spectacle of migration ran through this trip, filling our days with views of many hundreds of raptors arriving on the shores of Europe. Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Black Kites, Sparrowhawks and Egyptian Vultures came in droves, often exhausted, always spectacular. Our first day in particular we experienced over 300 Black Kites arriving in just a few minutes, and raptors continued to stream overhead in almost inconceivable numbers!

Black Storks, Western Ospreys, Yellow-browed Warbler, Rüppell's Vulture, Collared Pratincole and the wonderfully quirky Northern Bald Ibis colony provided further avian highlights, while our butterfly list included Monarch, Painted Lady, Spanish Festoon, Cleopatra and Geranium Bronze and we enjoyed examining local populations of Sombre Bee Orchid and the Iberian endemic, Portuguese Sundew.

And all of this fitted into relaxing days with plenty of time for coffee and ice-cream stops, and free time to enjoy a prolonged tapas lunch and browsing in the historic town of Tarifa and mooch around the peaceful streams and woodlands of our rural eco-lodge base – a Go Slow experience with something for everyone!!

Day 1

Monday 18th March

Simon and Niki picked up the group at Gibraltar airport in the late afternoon, and we were soon aboard the buses, across the border and travelling our way through the coastal conurbation of La Linea and Algeciras. We admired views across Algeciras bay and the shadowy form of Morocco's northern coastline in the distance. White Storks flew by and perched atop their huge nests on many roadside structures.

We soon reached our base at Huerta Grande, a beautiful rural eco-lodge set within seven acres of native Cork Oak forest in Los Alcornacales National Park.

We were greeted by owner Katrin and the team, as well as Serins and Chaffinches on the bird feeders. Short-toed Treecreepers and Iberian Chiffchaffs called and sang from the trees as the group relaxed with a glass of wine while bags were whisked away to rooms.

But an early surprise was in store for the group. From the bushes near the Spy House, a Yellow-browed Warbler was calling! This Eastern vagrant rarity has been turning up with annual regularity at Huerta Grande, and the same ringed bird has returned at least twice.

After time to settle into the resort's secluded log cabins and elegant early-twentieth-century houses, we met for dinner - an array of delicious and original salads to start, followed by a superbly-cooked entrecote steak, and plenty of local wine!

As we left dinner, the resident Tawny Owl family were calling and the air was filled with the frog chorus of Iberian Pond Frogs.

Day 2

Tuesday 19th March

Although our breakfast was at a leisurely hour, there was plenty of birding to do around the bar terrace area for those that were keen to get started! Hawfinches were perching in bare trees around the car park, and groups of Alpine Swifts were migrating overhead. A Great Spotted Woodpecker flew in, and we enjoyed views of local regulars like Serins and Crested Tits.

After making sure we'd all enjoyed enough coffee, we headed down to Punta Camorro, a breezy clifftop near Tarifa, overlooking the Straits of Gibraltar.

Sandwich Terns were drifting up and down the coastline. On the pasture around us, Thekla Larks and Common Linnets foraged, and Common Stonechats sang. We could see clearly across the narrow stretch of water separating us from Africa and watched a steady stream of Barn Swallows and Goldfinches crossing it. On a derelict military building, an adorable Little Owl quietly watched us.

Finding the exact spot where migrating raptors will arrive on the shores of Europe requires a great deal of local knowledge. Taking into account the fairly stiff easterly breeze, we decided to relocate further along the coast. The decision was the right one, and as we arrived it really kicked off!

Floods of Black Kites poured overhead, interspersed with Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Egyptian Vultures, Eurasian Sparrowhawks, Red-rumped Swallows and Western Osprey. All the birds were in spanking new adult plumage, as only the sexually mature make the costly journey north to breed.

Tears were shed at the sheer numbers of raptors filling the sky – 300 Black Kites in just a few minutes! Then to cap off our morning we had a glimpse of a vagrant Rüppell's Vulture sailing past, having got caught up in the melée of migration and crossed the Straits with everyone else!

After a brief loo stop, with soaring birds still arriving in droves, we headed up to the raptor watchpoint at Santuario de la Luz. Here we had a delightful picnic in the sun with almost inconceivable numbers of Black Kites and Short-toed Eagles streaming over, as well as a group of White Storks. Here we had a fantastic view of the Rüppell's Vulture, presumably the same bird, low over our heads so that all the feather details could be seen.

A Blue Rock Thrush could be seen high on the rocks. Many Thekla Larks sang and foraged, allowing us to discuss ID features and how to distinguish from the superficially similar Crested Lark. Sardinian Warblers filled the scrub and we had views of Spanish Sparrows and a Tawny Pipit. An early Monarch butterfly sailed by.

We headed home via the fabulous Mirador del Estrecho, high on the hills opposite Morocco's Jebel Musa mountain. Here we grabbed a well-earned ice cream and enjoyed the steady, determined passage of Black Kites which had gone on all day. We had great views of low Booted Eagles, both light and dark morphs.

We returned in time for afternoon tea, and a chance to reflect on this quite extraordinary day of mass avian movement, of which we were truly privileged to be a part.

Day 3

Wednesday 20th March

After breakfast we headed out to the sleepy seaside town of Bolonia. We explored the beach area, enjoying the bracing breeze as we scanned intertidal pools, with Kentish Plovers, Sanderling and a Common Sandpiper scooting through the ripples. Out to sea we could see Cory's Shearwaters, Northern Gannets, Sandwich Terns and Yellow-legged Gulls, seemingly enjoying the choppy conditions. At the mouth of a small freshwater river, Spanish Pond Turtles (Iberian Pond Tortoises) loafed in the sun.

We dawdled up the winding road up to Laja de Zarga – a dramatic rocky outcrop which is home to a Griffon Vulture colony which was the first ever to be photographed. Our arrival was perfectly timed, as the air was beginning to warm and thermals were starting to form over the rocks. Many dozens of our resident Griffon Vultures were taking to the air, soaring around the cliff face, warming their wings and parallel flying to build their pair-bonds. They were right over our heads, giving breathtaking views. A pair of Egyptian Vultures were sat together on the rocks. With a bird so Critically Endangered, it's always a pleasure and a relief to see the return of this regular breeding pair to the site.

On rocky pinnacles, a male and a female Blue Rock Thrush were seen. An Iberian Green Woodpecker flew through and a gorgeous Short-toed Eagle hovered over us. Butterflies on this mild day included Painted Lady, Green-veined White, Clouded Yellow, Spanish Festoon and Cleopatra. And all of this was set against a constant background of Black Kites, dark and determined, crossing the sky on their way north.

Today's picnic featured two extraordinary local cheeses – an organic creamy goat's cheese with a memorable odour, and Boffard, a tangy mature sheep's cheese originating from near Seville, which proved very popular.

We made a further stop higher up the hill at Cueva del Moro, taking time to enjoy the beautiful view out over windswept Tarifa Bay. Here we could look down over the impressive Roman ruins at Baelo Claudia, where the market place, amphitheatre and underground heating for the bath houses are evident. A Blue Rock Thrush again caught our eye, perched on a crag. It dropped down out of sight, but a short walk along the path brought us to the very rock it had dropped to, and we were able to get an extraordinary close look of this Atlantic-blue bird peering back at us from just metres away, seemingly unaware it was on view!

We headed back via a coffee-and-ice cream stop, which was graced by many Spotless Starlings and yet more raptors drifting by, before returning to Huerta Grande for relaxation time before a tasty evening barbecue.

Day 4

Thursday 21st March

Today we headed to the salt pans near the fishing town of Barbate, admiring the dramatic windswept Atlantic coastline as we drove. As we arrived, we immediately saw four Collared Pratincoles dashing by – the first returning breeders to be recorded this year. A low Alpine Swift sailed past, and we noted an influx of Pallid Swifts and Sand Martins.

On the shores of the disused pans, we admired a selection of waders, including Common Ringed, Grey and Kentish Plovers, Dunlin, Sanderling, Greenshank, Black-winged Stilt, Common Redshank and some delightful

Little Stints. In skittish mood, they often took to the air in captivating swirling flocks. A group of Audouin's Gulls were roosting on the pools as was a Red-breasted Merganser.

We counted at least fourteen Stone-curlews, well camouflaged against the ground but given aware by their peculiar yellow eyes, bill and legs, and black-and-white wings clearly in visible in flight.

We braved the breezy day and used our minibuses as a windbreak for our picnic, allowing us to enjoy the mild 18°C spring sunshine. While we had a giggle trying to keep the lettuce on our plates, we also enjoyed the antics of a number of fishing Caspian Terns in front of us and a large group of elegant Greater Flamingoes.

The air above the surrounding pastureland was filled with song, featuring Crested, Calandra and Greater Shorttoed Lark and Zitting Cisticola. Yellow Wagtails were numerous and a Woodchat Shrike sat up on a fence. Clouded Yellow and Painted Lady butterflies were abundant.

After a quick comfort break, we headed to the hamlet of Barca de Vejer, where the shouts of surprise and glee rang out – walking along the road to a cliff face, we found ourselves looking at a small colony of one of the world's rarest birds - Northern Bald Ibis! There were around ten pairs in the colony, preening, calling and flying to and from the site with nesting material: so characterful, and beautiful in their own special, muppet-like way! With only 1000 individuals left in the wild, it was a real privilege to enjoy the endearing antics of this quirky bird.

The group warmed up over a coffee in a local *venta* before we headed back to base to relax before dinner – during which owner, Katrin, appeared clutching a massive Common Toad, the size of a football!

Day 5

Friday 22nd March

As well as our regulars, the birds around the terrace area this morning included a late-wintering Eurasian Siskin. Once we'd admired it we headed out into the hills of Los Alcornacales Natural Park, to an area known as El Bujeo. Here we saw many low Crag Martins overhead, as well as a handful of Griffon Vultures and a Booted Eagle. Rock Bunting, Short-toed Treecreepers and a Great Spotted Woodpecker called amongst the rocky terrain and lichen-clad Cork Oak trees.

But our main target for the morning was very obliging and everyone got great scope views – a colony of Portuguese Sundew, *Drosophilum lusitanicum*, was showing well on a rocky scree slope! This sinister little carnivorous plant is endemic to the Iberian Peninsula, occurring only in The Straits and in a few colonies in Portugal. We also enjoyed Barbary Nut iris, Autumn and Sand Crocus, Cuckoo-flower and Sage-leaved Cistus.

The intense botany had piqued our appetites, so we headed back into the beautiful old town of Tarifa to enjoy today's main event - an enormous tapas lunch! Although we started lunch early by Spanish standards, we certainly made it last; we spent two mouth-watering hours devouring tomatoes with truffle oil, creamy pesto pasta, cheese and spinach *croquetas*, meatballs, anchovies and guacamole on toast, and quinoa with roast vegetables, washed down with local wine and *tinto de verano* (Tarifa's favourite *sangria* variant).

The group had free time to wander and shop in the picturesque streets of the old town. We enjoyed lovely views of birds from the local Lesser Kestrel colony on their nest sites at the fort of Guzman el Bueno and the church of San Mateo Apóstol.

Then we headed back to base to sleep it all off in a Spanish-style siesta! For those that wished we headed out again to explore some of the low intensity farmland close to Huerta Grande. This proved a very productive stroll, producing Woodchat Shrike, Black-eared Wheatear, Cirl and Corn Bunting.

Day 6

Saturday 23rd March

Today we headed out to explore the vast area of rice paddies and cotton fields known as La Janda, which was formerly a vast wetland basin stretching all the way to the sea.

Here, White Storks from a nearby nesting colony were feeding in the fields. Numerous wet areas in the arable land hinted at the former glory of this erstwhile wetland paradise, which was drained for agriculture during Franco's era.

On the muddy pools we picked up Greater Flamingo, Eurasian Spoonbill, Grey Heron, Little Egret and a large group of feeding Little Ringed Plovers.

Zitting Cisticolas and Corn Buntings were numerous, as were Yellow Wagtails, mostly the local *iberiae* race. Common Kestrels hunted and we also saw Common Buzzard and a gorgeous male Marsh Harrier.

Suddenly three Western Swamphens emerged from the reeds that fringe the ditches. We enjoyed admiring their blue-purple sheen, bright red bills and improbable large feet!

Using the vans as hides, twice we were able to approach feeding Eurasian Hoopoes to within a few feet, allowing superb views of their pickaxe-shaped heads and stripy plumage.

Day 7

Sunday 24th March

With an afternoon flight for the group, we had time for those that wanted to explore the local area a little more, so we headed out to an area of rolling coastal pastureland known as Cerro de Tambor. This area is a haven for newly arrived passerine migrants and we enjoyed views of Woodchat Shrike and Black-eared Wheatear among the Cirl and Corn Buntings and a lingering Black Redstart. Amongst the Cork Oak groves, we caught up with a Short-toed Treecreeper.

A small plateaued area proved to be a haven for plants, yielding Sombre Bee Orchid, Mediterranean Kidney Vetch, Barbary Nut iris and a large orange Figwort.

And, as if to send us on our way, the sky suddenly filled with a stream of newly-arrived Black Kites, sailing along the horizon before gaining height and jetting out of sight.

We took one last picnic lunch amongst the Crested Tits and Serins of Huerta Grande before saying goodbye to Katrin and the team and heading back to Gibraltar airport to make our own northerly journey.

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Species Lists

Birds (<-recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	March						
			18	19	20	21	22	23	24
1	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos				5		10+	
2	Red-breasted Merganser	Mergus serrator				1			
3	Ring-necked Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus						1	
4	Cory's Shearwater	Calonectris borealis			20+				
5	Greater Flamingo	Phoenicopterus roseus				70+		1	
6	Black Stork	Ciconia nigra			1				
7	White Stork	Ciconia ciconia	5+	88		4		3+	✓
8	Northern Bald Ibis	Geronticus eremita				7			
9	Eurasian Spoonbill	Platalea leucorodia						1	
10	Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	✓	✓	~	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea				1		2	
12	Little Egret	Egretta garzetta		1		2+		4+	
13	Northern Gannet	Morus bassanus		1	3+		✓		
14	Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo		✓		7		✓	
15	Western Osprey	Pandion haliaetus		1					
16	Egyptian Vulture	Neophron percnopterus		5	2				
17	Rüppell's Vulture	Gyps rueppellii		1					
18	Griffon Vulture	Gyps fulvus		80+	70+	10+	5+	10+	10+
19	Short-toed Snake Eagle	Circaetus gallicus		70+	20+	5+	1	2	
20	Booted Eagle	Hieraaetus pennatus		30+	10+		2	1+	
21	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus		15+	2	1			
22	Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus				3		1	
23	Black Kite	Milvus migrans		547	200+	4	20+	10+	50+
24	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo		1	1			1	
25	Western Swamphen	Porphyrio porphyrio						3	
26	Eurasian Stone-curlew	Burhinus oedicnemus				14			
27	Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus				20+			
28	Grey Plover	Pluvialis squatarola				2			
29	Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula							
30	Little Ringed Plover	Charadrius dubius						20+	
31	Kentish Plover	Charadrius alexandrinus			5	20+		201	
32	Whimbrel	Numenius phaeopus		1	0	201			
33	Common Redshank	Tringa totanus		•		2			
34	Common Greenshank	Tringa nebularia				1			
35	Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos			1	•			
36	Sanderling	Calidris alba			4+	20+			
37	Dunlin	Calidris alpina			47	20+ 50+			
38	Little Stint	Calidris minuta				1			
39	Collared Pratincole	Glareola pratincola				4			
40	Black-headed Gull					4 10+			
		Chroicocephalus ridibundus Ichthyaetus audouinii				30+			
41	Audouin's Gull	-		✓	✓	30+ ✓	✓	✓	✓
42	Yellow-legged Gull	Larus michahellis	v	v	V		v	v	v
43	Caspian Tern	Hydroprogne caspia		~	F -	4			
44	Sandwich Tern	Thalasseus sandvicensis		2	5+ ✓	1	✓		
45	Feral Pigeon Common Wood Pigeon	Columba livia Columba palumbus	✓	✓	•	✓ 1	~	✓ 1	✓ ✓
46								1 1	· •

						March			
	Common name	Scientific name	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
48	Tawny Owl	Strix aluco	1	1	1	1		1	
49	Little Owl	Athene noctua		1			1		
50	Alpine Swift	Tachymarptis melba				1			
51	Pallid Swift	Apus pallidus				20+		6+	✓
52	Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops						2	
53	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major		1	1			1	
54	Iberian Green Woodpecker	Picus sharpei			1				
55	Lesser Kestrel	Falco naumanni		2		2	10+		
56	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus		4+	4	2+	1	2+	1
57	Eurasian Hobby	Falco subbuteo						1	
58	Woodchat Shrike	Lanius senator				1	2		2
59	Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula				✓			
60	Northern Raven	Corvus corax			2	2		5+	
61	European Crested Tit	Lophophanes cristatus	2	3+	2	2+	1	3	
62	Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus	∠ ✓	12	~	∠ i ✓	4+	√	 ✓
63	Great Tit	Parus major	· ✓	1∠ ✓		✓	2	✓	· ✓
64	Thekla Lark	Galerida theklae		6+			~		-
65	Crested Lark	Galerida cristata		2	2	✓		✓	✓
				2	2	_			•
66	Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra				10+		1	
67	Sand Martin	Riparia riparia				2		1	
68	Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Eurasian Crag Martin	Ptyonoprogne rupestris			2+		2		
70	Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum				3	2		
71	Red-rumped Swallow	Cecropis daurica		1			2		
72	Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti		1	1		1		
73	Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus				✓	3+		
74	Iberian Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus ibericus		1	2	2+	1	1	1
75	Zitting Cisticola	Cisticola juncidis		5+	3+	3		1	 ✓
76	Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
77	Sardinian Warbler	Sylvia melanocephala	~	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
78	Common Firecrest	Regulus ignicapilla	2	2+	2+	3	2	2	
79	Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes	✓	✓	✓	6+	✓	1+	✓
80	Short-toed Treecreeper	Certhia brachydactyla		1	1		1	2	✓
81	Spotless Starling	Sturnus unicolor	~	✓	✓	✓	~	✓	 ✓
82	Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos		2			1		
83	Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	✓	 ✓	✓	✓	·	✓	✓
84	European Robin	Erithacus rubecula	✓	✓	2+	2+	✓	✓	✓
85	Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros			21	21	1		1
86	Blue Rock Thrush	Monticola solitarius		1	2		1		
		Saxicola rubicola	 ✓ 	 ✓	∠ √	✓	✓	✓	✓
87	European Stonechat		v	v	v	•		v	
88	Black-eared Wheatear	Oenanthe hispanica					1		2
89	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	✓	✓ 	~	✓	✓	✓	✓
90	Spanish Sparrow	Passer hispaniolensis		20+					
91	Iberian Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla flava iberiae		1		3+		3	
92	White Wagtail	Motacilla alba		2	1	1			
93	Tawny Pipit	Anthus campestris		1					
94	Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
95	Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
96	Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes	3	1+	2				
97	European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
98	Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	March							
			18	19	20	21	22	23	24	
99	European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
100	European Serin	Serinus serinus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
101	Eurasian Siskin	Spinus spinus	2	1	1		1			
102	Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra		2		✓	✓	20+	✓	
103	Cirl Bunting	Emberiza cirlus		2	1		2		1	
Ma	mmals									
1	European Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus			✓					
Rer	otiles & Amphibians					1	1			
1	Iberian Wall Lizard	Podarcis hispanica		✓			✓			
2	Spanish Pond Turtle	Mauremys leprosa			✓					
3	Red-eared Slider	Trachemys scripta elegans			✓					
4	Ocellated Lizard	Timon lepidus		✓						
5	Mediterranean Tree Frog	Hyla meridionalis				✓	 ✓ 	✓		
6	Common Toad	Bufo bufo				✓				
7	Iberian Frog	Rana iberica		✓						
	terflies & Moths		I			1	1	1	<u> </u>	
1	Red Admiral	Vanessa atalanta		✓				✓		
2	Painted Lady	Vanessa alalania Vanessa cardui		▼ ✓	✓	✓		•		
2	Small Copper			▼ ✓	•	•				
4	Clouded Yellow	Lycaena phlaeas Colias croceus		▼ ✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
4 5	Green-veined White	I		•	• ✓	✓	✓	✓		
6	Large White	Pieris napi Pieris brassicae		✓	• ✓	▼ ✓	▼ ✓	▼ ✓		
7	Small White			✓	• •	· ✓	•	✓		
8	Speckled Wood	Pieris rapae Pararge aegeria	✓	▼ ✓	• ✓	•		▼ ✓		
9	Holly Blue	Celastrina argiolus		✓	• •			•		
10	Spanish Festoon	Zerynthia rumina		•	• •					
11	Wall Brown	Lasiommata megera		✓	•					
12	Cleopatra	Gonepteryx cleopatra		✓	✓	✓				
12	Green-striped White	Euchloe belemia		•	•	· ·	✓			
14	Monarch	Danaus plexippus		✓	✓					
		Danaus piexippus		•	•					
	gonflies									
1	Southern Migrant Hawker	Aeshna affinis		✓						
Not	able Plants	1								
1	Portuguese Sundew	Drosophilum lusitanicum					✓			
2	Barbary Nut	Moraea sisyrinchium		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
3	A Sand Crocus	Romulea clusianais		✓						
4	Squirting Cucumber	Ecballium elaterium		✓						
5	Star of Bethlehem	Ornithogalum umbellatum		✓						
6	Cuckoo-flower	Cardamine pratensis		✓						
7	Mediterranean Kidney Vetch	Anthyllis vulneraria agg.			✓		✓		✓	
8	Gum Cistus	Cistus ladanifer			✓		✓			
9	Sage-leaved Cistus	Cistus salviifolius			✓		✓			
10	French Lavender	Lavandula stoechas			✓		✓			
11	Spanish Gorse	Genista hispanica			✓		✓			
12	Sombre Bee Orchid	Ophrys fusca					✓		✓	
13	Figwort species	Scrophularia sp.				_			✓	