

Go Slow in Andalucia in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

11th – 17th March 2022



Bottle-nosed Dolphins



Black Kite



Long-finned Pilot Whales

Tour report by Niki Williamson, images by Simon Tonkin



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Summary

As Spring in Andalusia began in earnest, the group were there to bear witness as the area's "migratory bottleneck" opened - sunny days after recent rains allowed hundreds of Black Kites, Short-toed Eagles, Marsh Harriers, Egyptian Vultures and Black Storks to cross The Straits over our heads!

From our base in a beautifully renovated traditional Andalusian *cortijo* or farm villa, we explored the area's natural riches, getting right in amongst the migration action and also spending time to get great views of Bonelli's Eagle, Black-winged Kite, Woodchat Shrike, Alpine and Pallid Swift, Great Spotted Cuckoo, Northern Bald Ibis, Stone-curlew and more! Out to sea, Long-finned Pilot Whales and Bottlenose Dolphins swam alongside our boat!

We saw so much but there was plenty of time to relax under the flow of migratory raptors, enjoying an ice-cream or a scenic picnic featuring local award-winning cheeses! The *cortijo's* chef Katarina, expertly sourced and prepared fantastic local produce for our evening meals.

Day 1

Friday 11th March

Simon and Niki met the group from Gibraltar airport, and we loaded up the minibuses ready to make the scenic drive around Algeciras Bay, through Los Alcornocales Natural Park and along the coast to our accommodation. The Straits had a spectacular greeting lined up for the group as the heavens opened upon us and a winter's worth of much-needed rain fell hard!

As we made our way to the accommodation, we could see bedraggled White Storks in the fields. As we arrived, the rain cleared and we could admire the beautiful traditional farm residence of Cortijo el Indiviso, complete with cobbled courtyard and pony paddocks and a view of the white town of Vejer de la Frontera. We were soon settled in and enjoying a drink in front of the open fire in the bar/communal area, set in a beautifully-renovated barn building.

Day 2

Saturday 12th March

Today we awoke to a bright day with patches of soft mist clinging to the hills. We headed straight to the cliffs above Tarifa, where the group would learn just why Simon and Niki were so welcoming of the previous day's rain! The 'bad' weather had caused a migration bottleneck in Morocco, stopping migrating raptors from passing The Straits. The blockage had now cleared, and we arrived just as the first Black Kites were arriving from Africa.

A truly spectacular morning saw several hundred Black Kites arrive in the first hour alone! There were also a group of Black Storks, and many Short-toed Eagles, Booted Eagles and Marsh Harriers. The air was full of spring birdsong from Sardinian Warblers, Thekla's Larks and Corn Buntings. The first returning Pallid Swifts were recorded alongside Barn Swallows and House Martins. Bonelli's Eagle soaring along the hillside was also a major highlight, as were the massive Alpine Swifts swooping over our heads!

We next headed to the viewpoint of La Peña from where we could see out over Tarifa Bay. Groups of Griffon Vultures mooched around the hills as we explored the spot's intriguing sky burial site, carved into the rocks. As we devoured our first picnic lunch, many interested horses, donkeys, goats and a large but very sappy dog eyed up the fresh bread, local olives and fruit, and the delicious selection of cheeses and salads!

Late afternoon we rounded off our day with coffee and a taste of local *manzanilla* sherry before heading back to relax at the *cortijo*.

Day 3

Sunday 13th March

Today we headed out to the nature reserve at Barbate, created on the site of disused salt pans. The treats began as soon as we arrived with Northern Bald Ibis probing in pastureland right next to the track! We took our time to enjoy these incredibly rare, characterful birds, admiring their beautiful glossy plumage and crazy hairdos!

On the reserve itself there was a fantastic selection of waders, gulls and birds of pastureland including Calandra and Crested Larks, Eurasian Spoonbill, Eurasian Stone-curlew, Black-winged Stilt, Black-tailed Godwit, Little Stint, Common Redshank and Greenshank amongst hundreds of Kentish, Grey and Common Ringed Plover, Sanderling and Dunlin. Alongside the Yellow-legged Gulls were Audouin's and Mediterranean Gulls.

We headed off to lunch at the shady Breñas de Barbate woodland area, where we found Short-toed Treecreeper, Eurasian Hoopoe, Firecrest and Eurasian Nuthatch amongst the Stone Pines.

The group had one last surprise in store before we headed back. The Northern Bald Ibis were in residence at their breeding colony on the cliffs near our hotel, and we were able to quietly sit and enjoy their antics as they carried out nest repairs and renewed pair bonds with mutual grooming in preparation for the upcoming breeding season.

Day 4

Monday 14th March

We headed out into a rainy start to the day to explore the rice fields and pastures of La Janda. It soon stopped and the sun came out, promoting a flush of activity! We had lovely views of a male Woodchat Shrike and a Hen Harrier. A hunting Black-winged Kite provided another highlight, and we took our time to enjoy this gorgeous bird. Black-crowned Night Herons flew past us. But perhaps the highlight (of the trip for some!) was spectacular views of a Great Spotted Cuckoo perched up in a bush right next to the track!

Stopping for a comfort break and an ice-cream at the *gasolinera*, we found ourselves under the migratory flow of raptors! Suddenly the sky was full of them, and we counted 400 Black Kites in one group! We also spotted six Egyptian Vultures amongst them.

Next, we headed to the picturesque, wooded slopes of Monte Facinas, the gateway to Los Alcornocales Natural Park, the largest Cork Oak forest in Europe. Here we took our picnic under the shade of a huge Cork Oak tree, as European Serins and Corn Buntings sang nearby. We collected our water from the local spring, pausing to chat with the local villagers doing the same!

After a stroll back down the hill, we headed back to the *cortijo* for more relax time, before another delicious three-course meal courtesy of chef Katarina.

Day 5

Tuesday 15th March

We began the day once more at Punta Camorro overlooking Tarifa, from where we could observe groups of Scopoli's Shearwaters and Northern Gannets just out to sea. A solitary Eurasian Whimbrel called from the rocks below.

Walking down through Tarifa Old Town, we enjoyed its picturesque narrow streets. On the Old Fort, we watched a pair of Lesser Kestrels looking rather amorous on a protruding tree branch! While we waited to board the boat for our pelagic trip we were treated to a group of Black-crowned Night Herons migrating overhead.

The boat trip itself was full of treats, including Mediterranean Gull, Great Skua and Balearic Shearwaters. But the cetaceans were certainly the stars of show. As well as close views of groups of Bottlenose Dolphins, we were thrilled when a family group of Long-finned Pilot Whales came right up to the boat!

Calm seas and fresh air meant that everyone was ready for our huge lunch at local restaurant Venta Pelayo – a fantastic, authentic, and extremely welcoming place that fed us a selection of local delicacies such as *pescaito frito* (fried seafood selection) grilled local *retinta* beef and *iberico* pork, tasty spinach and mushroom croquettes and a seasonal roast cauliflower dish.

Day 6

Wednesday 16th March

Today the wind dropped once more, and we took our chance to enjoy some more thrilling migration action! Before we even reached our first formal raptor watchpoint we found ourselves making an ad hoc roadside stop to catch the first spirals of hundreds of Black Kites arriving!

We spent the day following where the ever-changing winds took us, spending time at Rio Jara, Punta Camorro clifftops, the hills and valleys of Trafico, and finally all the way around to west at Punta Carnero and Punta Secreta, each time putting ourselves under the flow of migration for the best viewing opportunities!

Our efforts were rewarded, and we witnessed a staggering 2823 Black Kites and 878 Short-toed Eagles arrive into Europe as well as over a hundred White and Black Storks, seven Egyptian Vultures, 11 Griffon Vultures, 26 Booted Eagles six Eurasian Sparrowhawks and 11 Western Marsh Harriers! A spectacular and fitting end to the trip which we celebrated with a toast or two back at the *cortijo*!

Day 7

Thursday 17th March

All too soon it was time to head home and after our last hearty breakfast we said our goodbyes to Laura and the team at the *cortijo* who had looked after us so well!

Afternoon flights meant we had time to explore the mountains of Sierra de la Plata before heading to the airport.

Whisps of cloud parted to reveal the surreal rocky crags. On top were male and female Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting, Iberian Green and Great Spotted Woodpecker.

We headed along a narrow track to a Griffon Vulture colony, where many dozens of resident Griffons swirled around our heads as well as Northern Ravens and Common Kestrels. And another great surprise – perched on the cliff face was a Rüppell’s Vulture! This rare African vagrant is turning up with increasing regularity in The Straits area as it is pulled north by the flow of migrating Griffon Vultures returning to Spain.

We enjoyed our picnic (today’s “Cheese of the Day” being a prizewinning goat’s cheese matured in rosemary!) under this splendid scene.

We had time for one last coffee and ice-cream stop at the Mirador del Estrecho, looking out towards the craggy coastline of northern Morocco, where we found ourselves once more under the migratory flow of raptors

Then it was time to head on to Gibraltar airport and for the group to complete their own northerly migration to the UK!

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only, N = Near endemic, I = Introduced)

	Common name	Scientific name	March 2022						
			11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>			4				
2	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			10	✓	✓	285	
3	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		20					
4	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>				✓			
5	Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>				1			
6	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>				10		2	
7	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>						70	
8	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>		4		10		100	
9	Great Spotted Cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>				1			
10	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>				20		200	
12	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
13	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				4			
14	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>			230				
15	Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedichnemus</i>			3	2			
16	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>			50				
17	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>			70			4	
18	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>			15				
19	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			50				
20	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>			30				
21	Eurasian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>					2	1	
22	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>			120				
23	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			2				
24	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>			20				
25	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			400				
26	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>			3				
27	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			1				
28	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>				2			
29	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			10				
30	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			2				
31	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>			2				
32	Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>			5			3	
33	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>			3		1		
34	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>						300	
36	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>		3			6	1	
37	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>					1		
38	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>						1	
39	Scopoli's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>					30		
40	Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>					4		
41	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>		17				90	
42	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		20	5	140	10	43	
43	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		✓			✓	✓	
44	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		3	150	✓	✓	✓	
45	Northern Bald Ibis	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>			23				
46	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>				30	10	10	
47	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>			3	2			

			March 2022						
	Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
48	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>				12	10	8	
49	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
50	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			3	5	4	✓	
51	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>				1			
52	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			2	5			
53	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>				1		1	
54	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>				1		3	
55	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>				8		7	
56	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		50	10	100	20	11	
57	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		12				878	
58	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>		10		6		26	
59	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>		1					
60	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		2				6	
61	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		10	3	4		11	
62	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				2			
63	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>		817		485	50	2823	
64	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1	1	2	8	2	7	
65	Gibraltar Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo x rufinus cirtensis</i>		1					
66	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>				1		2	
67	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	1				1		
68	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		1	3			4	
69	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				1			
70	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>				1			
71	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>			6		2		
72	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		2	2	4	1	2	
73	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>				1			
74	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
75	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	2	4	12	10	6	
76	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>				1			
77	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	4	✓		✓	
78	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	
79	Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		10		4		2	
80	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
81	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		30	50			10	
82	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		40	✓	✓	✓	✓	
83	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>				10		50	
84	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		10	6	✓		✓	
85	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>			3				
86	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		3	2	6	2	3	
87	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		4	5	10	✓	10	
88	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		3	5	10		2	
89	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
90	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
91	Dartford Warbler	<i>Curruca undata</i>				1			
92	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>			2	4			
93	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		2	6	5	2	3	
94	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			1				
95	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			8	4	1		
96	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

			March 2022						
	Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
97	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	2	10	✓	✓	✓	✓	
98	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		5	✓	5	2	3	
99	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		3	10			1	
100	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		1					
101	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
102	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>		30	40	✓		✓	
103	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
104	Iberian Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>			3	1		2	
105	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		1	4	6			
106	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
107	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		5	✓	✓	✓	✓	
108	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		6	✓	✓	4	✓	
109	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		40	✓	✓	✓	✓	
110	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
111	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		35	✓	✓	✓	✓	
112	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		4	10	20			
113	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
114	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>				1		1	

Others

		March 2022						
Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Bottle-nose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>					20		
Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>					30		
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>			✓				
Sunfish	<i>Mola mola</i>					1		
Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>		✓	✓				
Iberian Pond Tortoise	<i>Mauremys leprosa</i>			✓				
Violet Carpenter Bee	<i>Xylocopa violacea</i>			✓				
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>			✓				
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>			✓				
Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>		✓					
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>		✓	✓	✓			
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>				✓			
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>			✓	✓			
Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>		✓					
Spanish Festoon	<i>Zerynthia rumina</i>		✓		✓			
Western Bath White	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>		✓	✓				
Orange Tip	<i>Anthocharis cardamines</i>			✓				