

Go Slow in Andalucia in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

23rd – 29th March 2022



Black Stork



Booted Eagle

Tour report by Niki Williamson, images by Simon Tonkin



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Summary

The Straits of Gibraltar area is famed for its migratory bottlenecks, when unfavourable conditions prevent migratory soaring birds from making the treacherous sea-crossing. As migration enthusiasts this is what we hope for, and - thanks to some strong wind and “apocalyptic” red rain mid-trip - this is exactly what we got!

The migration departure gates finally opened in Morocco giving us spectacular migration, as hundreds and hundreds of eager raptors including Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Black Kites, White and Black Storks, Egyptian Vultures, Griffon Vultures, Eurasian Sparrowhawks, Western Marsh and Montagu’s Harriers and Western Ospreys soared by, gracing the skies above us in great swirling columns.

The same weather gave us an exceptional boat trip, featuring European and Wilson’s Storm Petrel, Scopoli’s and Balearic Shearwater, Great Skua, Northern Gannet, Mediterranean and Audouin’s Gull, not to mention three species of dolphin swimming right by the boat!

The area’s resident, breeding and passage species were on full show too, some highlights including Northern Bald Ibis, Collared Pratincole, Bonelli’s Eagles, Black-winged Kite, Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint, Eurasian Hoopoe and European Bee-eater.

Throw in relaxed afternoons at tranquil accommodation, fantastic dinners and scenic picnics – not to mention a good smattering of ice cream! This was a real trip to remember.

Day 1

Wednesday 23rd March

Simon and Niki met the group at Gibraltar airport and we made our way towards our accommodation at Cortijo El Indiviso, a beautiful traditional farmhouse villa located near the white town of Vejer de la Frontera, spotting our first Glossy Ibis, White Storks and Cattle Egrets along the way.

We settled in to our rooms – each one spacious and tastefully-decorated in Spanish style – before reconvening at the bar for a welcome drink and sitting down to our first delicious three-course meal, courtesy of chef Katarina.

Day 2

Thursday 24th March

We opened our trip by visiting one of the area’s best intertidal habitats, a nature reserve alongside the disused salt pans of Barbate. The pans fell into disuse with the collapse of the tuna fishing industry in the 80s, became a landfill site and have now been restored into a collection of saline lagoons and islands.

On arrival, pretty much the very first bird we found was a Northern Bald Ibis! This beautiful, critically endangered species is doing well in the area after a successful reintroduction project, and we wasted no time in hopping out to enjoy this bird’s iridescent plumage, strong down-curved bill and of course that bare neck and scalp that gives the bird its name and its character!

The lagoons themselves were packed with waders, including Little Stint, Kentish and Common Ringed Plover, Black-winged Stilt, Sanderling, Dunlin and Pied Avocet. There were also dozens of Collared Pratincoles in the breeding colony and we got great views of them in flight and on the ground.

Continuing round the track, we enjoyed Greater Flamingo, Eurasian Stone-curlew, Western Osprey, Ruff, Black-tailed Godwit, Curlew Sandpiper and a migrant Eurasian Hoopoe resting in the tamarisks before its onward journey north.

We took our picnic lunch at the Breñas de Barbate, enjoying our first taste of seasonal salads, local meats, olives and wines, fresh bread and of course the area's prize-winning cheeses! An after-lunch stroll through the pines gave us Hawfinch, Red-billed Crossbill, Short-toed Treecreeper and another Eurasian Hoopoe.

The group had one last treat in store before heading back for some downtime. A colony of around 10 pairs of Northern Bald Ibis have made their home on some unlikely cliff ledges right next to a main road! The group were able to watch their amorous antics and elaborate nest-building behaviours from a specially constructed hide opposite the colony, giving fantastic photographic opportunities and a great way to enjoy these fabulous birds.

Day 3

Friday 25th March

Overnight the rain had been not just heavy but apocalyptic, carrying with it so much Saharan dust that it rained red mud! Thick cloud covered the Straits but we knew that once the migration departure gates finally opened in Morocco it would surely be a spectacular day of migration! The Straits area is famed for its migratory bottlenecks, when unfavourable crossing conditions hold up the northerly journeys of soaring birds, and the numbers waiting to cross build up. This is what we hoped for today, and as the last of the cloud cleared this is what we got!

We spent the morning on the hills above Tarifa looking out across The Straits towards the coast of Morocco.

Simon's "clickers" went crazy as he counted the birds pouring overhead – 375 Black Kites, dozens of White and Black Storks, Egyptian Vultures, Griffon Vultures, Eurasian Sparrowhawks, and Western Marsh Harriers soared by. But above all it was a day of eagles, with 233 Short-toed and 1147 Booted Eagles gracing the skies above us in great swirling columns.

We enjoyed watching enormous Alpine Swifts arriving too, and in the scrub around us a Dartford Warbler and a Woodchat Shrike rested from their crossing.

Today was to be the most action-packed day of the trip, as we also had to make the most of the stiller weather to fit in our pelagic trip! After a picnic under the migratory flow at the viewpoint of La Peña, we walked down through Tarifa Old Town to the port, enjoying breeding Lesser Kestrels on the Moorish Fort as we passed.

Thanks to last night's dramatic weather, the boat trip was absolutely amazing for sea birds! The dusting of *calima* – Sahara dust – from the south often kickstarts the nutrient cycle in the Straits and much wildlife comes to profit from that! Many Wilson's and European Storm Petrels could be seen flying and feeding around the boat, and we

had great views of Scopoli's and Balearic Shearwaters, Audouin's and Mediterranean Gull, Northern Gannets and Great Skuas.

Sightings of Common, Striped and Bottlenose Dolphins were the icing on the cake, and we got a great send-off from a mixed pod of Striped and Common Dolphins which swam and jumped alongside the boat. They had tiny babies with them who bounced into the air like little rugby balls!

Day 4

Saturday 26th March

Today we visited the farmlands and rice fields of La Janda. Previously a giant freshwater wetland, this area was drained for agriculture in the early 20th century. However, after the recent rains, the fields had seemingly returned to the lagoon they should be! Black-winged Stilts, Ruff, White Storks, Glossy Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbills, Little and Cattle Egret, Western Swamphen and Purple Heron were all enjoying the pool party!

As the day warmed a Common Quail could be heard singing. We picked up a lovely selection of farmland birds including Calandra and Crested Lark, Zitting Cisticola, Woodchat Shrike and many Corn Buntings.

We were lucky enough to get superb views of two adult Black-winged Kites visiting a nest site. We also picked up the first ten European Bee-eaters of the year!

For lunch we headed up to enjoy a scenic picnic on Monte Facinas. The pathway is known as the gateway to Los Alcornocales Natural Park - the largest Cork Oak forest in Europe. We relaxed in the shade of these mighty trees accompanied by Short-toed Treecreeper, Crested Tit and Common Redstart. A good flow of raptors was also passing overhead by now, including Booted Eagles, Western Marsh Harriers and Black Kites.

Day 5

Sunday 27th March

We started the day at La Peña, where a blustery easterly wind was bringing a few bold Black Kites and Booted Eagles over our way. A river of Common and Pallid Swifts was passing by too, giving us a great opportunity to work on our swift ID skills. There were also Thekla's and Crested Larks to compare and contrast.

Woodchat Shrikes and Black-eared Wheatears gave us great views as we took a fascinating walk around tombs hewn into the rock at an ancient sky burial site. Griffon Vultures floated overhead as if to bring home the point...

It was soon time to do our own Griffon Vulture impression as we honed in on our delicious *tapas*-style lunch in Tarifa's Old Town! We settling in at Café Geko, overlooking the Iglesia de San Mateo Apóstol. The Geko team did us proud and the *tapas* treats kept coming! With a selection including *tostadas*, cod nibbles, spinach and mushroom croquettes, *tomates aliñados* (with olive oil and garlic) *pimientos fritos* (an Andalus speciality of fried seasoned green peppers) it was sure nobody would go hungry!

Afterwards we took a stroll to walk off our lunch and picked up the local Common Bulbul singing in the main car park.

Day 6

Monday 28th March

Today we headed up into the hills, high above the seaside town of Bolonia to explore a different habitat.

Our first spot was by the crags of Cueva del Moro, the site of ancient cave paintings. From here we could also look down onto the ruins of the Roman town of Baelo Claudia – some of the best-preserved in Europe. A pair of Griffon Vultures were nesting on the cliffs and a pair of Common Kestrels nearby.

Moving on into the hills, we enjoyed the main event at the vulture colony of La Zarga. Here we were right amongst over eighty Griffon Vultures soaring around their nest sites, low overhead! Through the scopes we could see several well-developed chicks on the nest ledges – surprisingly cute! It was also fantastic to see Bonelli's Eagles, Peregrine Falcon and Critically Endangered Egyptian Vultures breeding in the area.

With the easterly wind direction, this site was under the migratory flow of raptors and we were treated to a number passing over during our stay, including Booted Eagle, Western Marsh Harrier, Montagu's Harrier and Western Osprey.

Then it was back to our wonderful accommodation for some relaxation before our final Spanish dinner! Chef Katarina specialises in vibrant modern Mediterranean dishes created from seasonal local produce and using flavours from both sides of the Straits. Tonight was no exception!

Day 7

Tuesday 29th March

All too soon our trip was at an end, and it was time to say goodbye to the Straits, and the team at Cortijo El Indiviso. After a last hearty breakfast of home-grown eggs and great coffee, we made our way to Gibraltar airport for our guests to complete their own northerly migrations home.

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Species lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	March 2022					
			23	24	25	26	27	28
1	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		20				
2	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		4		✓	2	2
3	Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>				1		1
4	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>				10		
5	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>			20	4	2	4
6	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>					6	✓
7	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>		10	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	10
10	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				8		
12	Western Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>				2		
13	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>		230				
14	Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>		7				
15	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		40		11		
16	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		50				
17	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		30				
18	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>		50				
19	Eurasian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>			6			
20	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		20				
21	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			✓			
22	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>		5		3		
23	Curllew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>		1				
24	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		5				
25	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		30				
26	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>		2				
27	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		4				
28	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		10				
29	Collared Pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>		59				
30	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				4		1
31	Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>			2			
32	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>			30			
33	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		40	✓	✓	✓	
35	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>			4			
36	European Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>			20			
37	Wilson's Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>			4			
38	Scopoli's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>			1			
39	Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>			8			
40	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>			27			
41	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	5	2	74	40	30	20
42	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			✓		✓	
43	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓		✓	
44	Northern Bald Ibis	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>		22				

	Common name	Scientific name	March 2022					
			23	24	25	26	27	28
45	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
46	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		3		10		2
47	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
48	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		3		4		
49	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>				1		
50	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		5		10	3	
51	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>		2	3			1
52	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>				2		
53	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>			4	1		2
54	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>			36	✓	50	86
55	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>			233	3	2	
56	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>			1147	4	1	4
57	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>						2
58	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			4		1	
59	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>			1			
60	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			10	4	2	2
61	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>						1
62	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>		1	375	2	10	
63	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1	4	3	1	1	
64	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>						1
65	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		3	4	2		4
66	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>				10		
67	Eurasian Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>				1		
68	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>			17		6	
69	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	2	4	4	3	4
70	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>					1	
71	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus brookei</i>						2
72	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>		1	3	6	2	10
73	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
74	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2		2	4	4	8
75	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>				1		
76	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
77	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>			6	2	8	2
79	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		10		✓	✓	✓
80	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		20		10		
81	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>			4			6
82	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
83	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		10	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>			10	4		
85	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		2	6	8	2	
86	Western Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>				1		
87	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>					2	2
88	Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>						1
89	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		4	✓	✓	1	2
90	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
91	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
92	Dartford Warbler	<i>Curruca undata</i>			1	1		

			March 2022					
	Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28
93	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>				2		
94	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			3	4		3
95	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		1				
96	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		5		6		
97	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
98	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	4	3
99	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		2	2	4		
100	Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>			3	10	2	4
101	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	1		2			
102	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>				1		
103	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
104	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>				4		
105	Western Black-eared Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>			2		2	
106	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>		8	10	50	✓	
107	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
108	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava flava</i>				2		
109	Iberian Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberia</i>		5	2		1	
110	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		3	✓	✓	2	
111	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
112	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
113	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		4				
114	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
115	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
116	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
117	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	20
118	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		2	3	8		2
119	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
120	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>						1
121	Common Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>			1		1	

Others

		March 2022						
Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
Mammals								
Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>			✓				
Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>			✓				
Bottle-nose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>			✓				
European Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>				✓			
Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>				✓			
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>			✓	✓			
Reptiles & Amphibians								
Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>				✓			
Vaucher's Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis vaucheri</i>				✓			
Iberian Pond Frog	<i>Rana iberica</i>			✓	✓			
Mediterranean Tree Frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>			✓	✓	✓		

Common name	Scientific name	March 2022						
		23	24	25	26	27	28	29
Butterflies								
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>			✓	✓		✓	
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>			✓	✓	✓		
Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>						✓	
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Spanish Festoon	<i>Zerynthia rumina</i>				✓			
Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>						✓	
Moroccan Orange-tip	<i>Anthocharis belia</i>						✓	
Other invertebrates								
Southern Migrant hawk	<i>Aeshna affinis</i>				✓			
Violet Carpenter Bee	<i>Xylocopa violacea</i>					✓		
Firebug	<i>Pyrrhocoris apteru</i>						✓	