# Go Slow in Andalucia

## Naturetrek Tour Report

23rd - 29th March 2023





Booted Eagle

Common Dolphin





Short-toed Eagle

Booted Eagle

Tour report by Niki Williamson, images by Simon Tonkin



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Tour participants: Simon Tonkin and Niki Williamson (leaders) with 11 Naturetrek clients.

#### Summary

Spring migration started in stunning style for this laid-back break to take in the annual northerly passage of soaring birds across the Straits of Gibraltar. Each year tens of thousands make the crossing of the narrowest stretch of sea between Europe and Africa. Local knowledge put us right at the heart of this natural spectacle, under the flow of hundreds of Booted Eagles, Black Kites, Short-toed Eagles, Eurasian Sparrowhawks, Egyptian and Griffon Vultures, Western Marsh Harriers, Montagu's Harriers, Western Ospreys, flocks of White and Black Storks and more!

Other birds passing through or arriving home included European Bee-eaters, Collared Pratincoles, Greater Short-toed Larks, Black-eared Wheatears, Western Subalpine Warbler, Pallid, Common and Alpine Swift.

Fifty (5-0!) Long-finned Pilot Whales graced our boat trip, alongside Common and Bottlenose Dolphins, Balearic Shearwater and Atlantic Puffin. Wetlands thrilled with birds – again some arriving home, some with further still to travel - and our list included Greater Flamingoes, Eurasian Stone-curlews, Collared Pratincoles, Black-winged Stilt, Common Ringed, Grey and Kentish Plover, Black-tailed Godwit, Ruff, Curlew Sandpiper and Little Stint!

Lunchtime picnics featuring the best of local fresh produce and award-winning cheeses and olive oil, and our gorgeous accommodation at a traditional Spanish farmhouse surrounded by open countryside provided a perfect relaxing backdrop for great Andalucian food from chef Felipe. Hello, Spring!

#### Day 1

## **Thursday 23rd March**

Simon and Niki met the group from their flight into Gibraltar airport and we were soon across the border into Spain. Travelling west along the coastal hills and pastures of the Straits of Gibraltar, we saw our first Pallid Swifts, Spotless Starlings and Cattle Egrets as we went.

At Cortijo el Indiviso, we were met by Laura (and the resident nesting White Storks!) and settled into our rooms before heading into our first delicious three course meal, courtesy of chef Felipe.

#### Day 2

## Friday 24th March

After a hearty farm breakfast (complete with fresh eggs from the *cortijo*'s chickens!), we headed out to the east to seek out our first encounter with the spring migration. This requires local knowledge of wind and weather conditions, which affect the point along the coast at which the migrating raptors make land. Arriving at Punta Camorro, on the hills above Tarifa, it was soon clear that the wind was different to the forecast. Pausing just long enough to enjoy an unusually showy Sardinian Warbler, we hopped back into the vans and headed off, storm-chaser style, to be where the now westerly wind would bring our raptors in!

Western Europe's migratory raptors and storks are all drawn to this point, where the sea between Europe and Africa is narrowest. Reliant on thermals for soaring effortless flight, when over water they must work hard to retain height, hence the need for as short a crossing as possible! The birds can also use the area's easterly and westerly

winds to give them a little lift, hence the variability in what point they arrive at the European coast. Arriving at Punta Secreta overlooking the Bay of Algeciras, it wasn't long before the first speck appeared in the distance as birds began leaving the Moroccan coast, and soon eagles were pouring over our heads! We were now in just the right spot!

This was to be a very big day for Booted Eagles and Black Kites – crossings numbered 345 and 297 respectively. Amongst them, flocks of Black Storks, glorious views of Short-toed Eagles, Eurasian Sparrowhawks, Western Marsh Harriers and a Montagu's Harrier.

Out to sea, Northern Gannets and Sandwich Terns patrolled and we picked up a European Shag perched on the rocks.

After a brief comfort stop, we headed off to enjoy our picnic at El Bujeo overlooking the Tarifa side of the Straits. Griffon Vultures soared overhead, and we enjoyed watching a huge flock of over 200 White Storks arrive into Europe! Around the picnic area we picked up Eurasian Nuthatch, Short-toed Treecreeper, European Serin and Eurasian Siskin.

We headed back via an ice cream stop at the Mirador del Estrecho café, enjoying the spectacular view across to the Jebel Musa rock in Morocco, and picking up Booted and Short-toed Eagles surfing the thermals around us, recovering after the exertions of the day!

#### Day 3

#### Saturday 25th March

Today we headed to the Marismas de Barbate, disused saltpans now converted into a fabulous saline nature reserve. We were greeted by an eddying mass of Collared Pratincoles! Numbering over 200, they put on a wonderful noisy show for us during our visit as they swirled around their breeding colony on the islands and pastures of the reserve.

As well as Greater Flamingoes and Eurasian Stone-curlews to enjoy, there was a lovely selection of more "conventional"-looking (!) waders to see including Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Common Ringed, Grey and Kentish Plover, Black-tailed Godwit, Ruff, Curlew Sandpiper, Sanderling, Dunlin, Little Stint, Common Sandpiper, Common Redshank and Common Greenshank.

Great views also of Greater Short-toed and Calandra Larks, Zitting Cisticolas and a Black-eared Wheatear and a lovely show of migrant passerines on their way through, including Garden and Willow Warbler, Western Subalpine Warbler and Common Redstart.

After a comfort stop (and a sneaky ice-cream for some!) we headed to the wooded area of the nature reserve – las  $bre\tilde{n}as$  - where we enjoyed our picnic of seasonal local produce, which today featured an award-winning local sheep's cheese flavoured with black truffle!

One more stop to complete our afternoon – we dropped in on a local colony of Northern Bald Ibis. This group of ten or so pairs spread out from the main reintroduction project over a decade ago, and today we got to watch these charismatic birds doing parenting on their cliff-ledge nests! We admired their gorgeous plumage shining with all colours in the sun.

#### Day 4

#### **Sunday 26th March**

Today the conditions were perfect for our boat trip out onto the Straits themselves. We walked down to the port of Tarifa through the attractive Old Town, making some time for "urban birding" on the way, including Cetti's Warbler and Common Nightingale in the car park, Lesser Kestrels on the church and the Moorish fort and many Pallid Swifts swooping low over town. Simon also gave the group a potted history of this fascinating place as we wandered.

During our boat trip we were thrilled to encounter many groups of Long-finned Pilot Whales all around us – we saw around fifty in total, which is around 20% of the area's total population! Among them were several Bottlenose Dolphins, and we encountered a large pod of playful Common Dolphins as well. Groups of Atlantic Puffins scooted by, we picked up Sandwich Tern and Balearic Shearwater and we could see Black Kites migrating overhead.

Later there was time to wander the historic streets of Tarifa, an ever-changing settlement of strategic historic importance since pre-Roman times.

#### Day 5

#### **Monday 27th March**

Time for more migration action today, and the easterly wind direction allowed us to explore a different section of the coast in anticipation of the arrival of soaring birds being pushed in to that point. A cool start today meant a slower start to the migration, which allowed time to enjoy our immediate avian neighbours which included Little Owl, Common Cuckoo, Thekla's Lark, Cirl Bunting and brilliant views of Sardinian Warbler. Out to sea we could spot Long-finned Pilot Whales and bands of Atlantic Puffins.

Then suddenly it was raptor o'clock! As predicted the wind brought them directly over us – hundreds of Black Kites and Booted Eagles, interspersed with Short-toed Eagles, Eurasian Sparrowhawks, Western Marsh Harriers, Montagu's Harriers and many, many Common Swifts (and a single Alpine!) moving through. The first of the Griffon Vultures came in too – these young adult birds returning from their "coming of age" in Africa to begin searching a place to breed for the first time next season.

We moved to La Peña for our picnic. Magnificent views back across Tarifa Bay were made even more special by the constant migratory flow overhead which included Egyptian Vultures, Western Osprey and even a Long-legged Buzzard alongside the more numerous eagle species. On the ground, Cirl Bunting, Spanish Sparrow, Thekla's Larks, two stunning Black-eared Wheatears and a transitory Northern Wheatear provided the post-prandial show!

Then it was time to relax back at our accommodation and enjoy the extensive grounds before another delicious three-course meal. The sorbet - made with local *cava* and lemons from the *cortijo*'s own trees felt like a suitably celebratory dessert after a great day!

#### Day 6

## **Tuesday 28th March**

Aiming to finish our trip literally on a high, we headed up to the mountains today, to pay a visit to the Griffon Vulture colony of the Sierra de la Plata. There are around 70 pairs of Griffon Vultures here, and we were able to enjoy many of them on their nests as well as marveling at their aerial capabilities as they soared over us and hung

on the wind. We also got fabulous views of Egyptian Vulture, a pair of which are breeding in amongst the Griffons. We could see Crag Martins around the rock face, and a steady flow of Black Kites passed by.

Heading up a little higher, we looked out across the Straits to North Africa, and down onto the Roman ruins of Baelo Claudia below us – once one of the most important settlements of the empire due to the rich fish resources of the Straits and their function as a trading gateway to the known world.

Our last lunch together was a relaxed, drawn-out, typically Andaluz affair, enjoying *tapas*-style dishes at a friendly local restaurant. The delicious plates kept on coming from the tiny yet magical kitchen of chef Patti, as she fed us plenty of local specialities! We enjoyed *Tomates a la Abuela* - "granny's tomatoes" - tomatoes dressed with olive oil, garlic and truffle – *croquetas caseras* – homemade cheese, spinach and mushroom croquettes - *pimientos fritos* – fried local green peppers with a liberal sprinkling of Cádiz Bay salt – and cold roast pork from Iberian Black Pigs while we reflected on our trip!

There was time for one last wander in town before heading back to the *cortijo* for some relaxation before our final night. Felipe did us proud once more, and a group of European Bee-eaters gave us a nice flyby during dinner!

#### Day 7

#### Wednesday 29th March

All too soon it was time to say goodbye to Laura and the team at the *cortijo*. Simon and Niki escorted the group back across the border into Gibraltar and to their flights in plenty of time to begin their own northerly migration home.

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## **Species lists**

#### Birds

					arch 20				
Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	
Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna			11					
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos			6					
Red-legged Partridge	Alectoris rufa					2			
Alpine Swift	Tachymarptis melba					1			
Common Swift	Apus apus			2		300			
Pallid Swift	Apus pallidus	✓	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	✓			
Common Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus					1			
Feral Pigeon	Columba livia domesticus	✓	<b>√</b>	✓	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>		
Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus			2	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	8		
Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>		
Greater Flamingo	Phoenicopterus roseus			40					
Eurasian Stone-curlew	Burhinus oedicnemus			2					
Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus			45					
Pied Avocet	Recurvirostra avosetta			30					
Grey Plover	Pluvialis squatarola			4					
Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula			50					
Kentish Plover	Charadrius alexandrinus			30					
Eurasian Whimbrel	Numenius phaeopus		1	- 00					
Black-tailed Godwit	Limosa limosa		'	1					
Ruff	Calidris pugnax			6					
Curlew Sandpiper	Calidris ferruginea			1					
· ·	Calidris alba			20					
Sanderling  Dunlin				150					
	Calidris alpina								
Little Stint	Calidris minuta			30					
Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos			1					
Common Redshank	Tringa totanus			15					
Common Greenshank	Tringa nebularia			1					
Collared Pratincole	Glareola pratincola			200					
Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus			2					
Audouin's Gull	Ichthyaetus audouinii			7					
Yellow-legged Gull	Larus michahellis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus			2					
Sandwich Tern	Thalasseus sandvicensis		✓		6	10			
Atlantic Puffin	Fratercula arctica				23	30			
Balearic Shearwater	Puffinus mauretanicus				1				
Black Stork	Ciconia nigra		26						
White Stork	Ciconia ciconia	10	245	6	30	20	10		
Northern Gannet	Morus bassanus		<b>√</b>		<b>√</b>	8			
Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo		4	2	2		24		
European Shag	Gulosus aristotelis		1						
Northern Bald Ibis	Geronticus eremita			20					
Glossy Ibis	Plegadis falcinellus			14		4	<b>√</b>		
Eurasian Spoonbill	Platalea leucorodia			16			٧		
Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	√	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>		
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	V	\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \	4	<b>'</b>	1	<b>v</b>		

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Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
Little Egret	Egretta garzetta			2	3		1	
Western Osprey	Pandion haliaetus		1			5		
Egyptian Vulture	Neophron percnopterus					2	2	
Griffon Vulture	Gyps fulvus		40	10	6	35	200	
Cinereous Vulture	Aegypius monachus					1		
Short-toed Snake Eagle	Circaetus gallicus		91			24		
Booted Eagle	Hieraaetus pennatus		345	2	10	235	50	
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus		8		1	7	2	
Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus		4			2		
Montagu's Harrier	Circus pygargus		1		1	3		
Black Kite	Milvus migrans		297	1	300	441	70	
Long-legged Buzzard	Buteo rufinus					1		
Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo	1	2			2	1	
Little Owl	Athene noctua	1			1	1		
Tawny Owl	Strix aluco		1	1				
Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops				1		1	
European Bee-eater	Merops apiaster		3	14	6	34	<b>√</b>	
Lesser Kestrel	Falco naumanni		10	1	7	12	10	
Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus		2	1			4	
Woodchat Shrike	Lanius senator			2	2	4	1	
Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula		<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	
Northern Raven	Corvus corax		6	2	2	4	10	
Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus		4	4	2		2	
Great Tit	Parus major		2	2	4		4	
Thekla's Lark	Galerida theklae		1	_	-	6		
Crested Lark	Galerida cristata		· ✓	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	
Greater Short-toed Lark	Calandrella brachydactyla		V	4	30	V	V	
Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra			20				
Sand Martin	Riparia riparia			2				
Eurasian Crag Martin	Ptyonoprogne rupestris						5	-
Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	,		,	,			-
Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum	<b>√</b>	30	√ 10	6	✓	6	
Red-rumped Swallow	Cecropis daurica		30	2	4	30	0	-
Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti			2	2	2	1	
Western Bonelli's Warbler	Phylloscopus bonelli			1		1	1	-
Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus			2		ı	'	
				3	4	5	2	
Zitting Cisticola	Cisticola juncidis Sylvia atricapilla							
Eurasian Blackcap Garden Warbler	· '		✓	√ 1	✓	✓	✓	
	Sylvia borin			-				
Sardinian Warbler	Curruca melanocephala		6	4	✓	✓	✓	
Western Subalpine Warbler	Curruca iberiae			1		4	4	
Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes		3	2	4	1	1	
Eurasian Nuthatch	Sitta europaea		2					
Short-toed Treecreeper	Certhia brachydactyla		3	4	1			
Spotless Starling	Sturnus unicolor	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Blackbird	Turdus merula		3	5	4	5	4	
European Robin	Erithacus rubecula		4	1	1	2	2	
Common Nightingale	Luscinia megarhynchos			1	3	4	5	

		March 2023								
Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28	29		
Common Redstart	Phoenicurus phoenicurus			2						
European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola		<b>√</b>	4	4	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>			
Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe					1				
Western Black-eared Wheatear	Oenanthe hispanica			1		2				
Spanish Sparrow	Passer hispaniolensis			<b>√</b>		<b>√</b>				
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	✓	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>			
Western Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla flava					1				
Iberian Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla flava iberae			4		3				
White Wagtail	Motacilla alba		1	1						
Tawny Pipit	Anthus campestris			2		3				
Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis			5	2	10				
Tree Pipit	Anthus trivialis		1			1				
Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs		<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>			
European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris		2	4	3	4	8			
Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina		10	10		50	<b>√</b>			
European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis		<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>			
European Serin	Serinus serinus		10	10	3	15	<b>√</b>			
Eurasian Siskin	Spinus spinus		2							
Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra		<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>			
Cirl Bunting	Emberiza cirlus					2	1			

#### Other vertebrates

		March 2023									
Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28	29			
MAMMALS											
European Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus						1				
Common Dolphin	Delphinus delphis				✓						
Bottlenose Dolphin	Tursiops truncatus				4						
Long-finned Pilot Whale	Globicephala melas				50	✓					
REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS											
Iberian Wall Lizard	Podarcis iberica				✓						
Iberian Marsh Frog	Rana iberica	1			✓						

#### Invertebrates

Common name	Scientific name	March 2023									
		23	24	25	26	27	28	29			
BUTTERFLIES											
Cleopatra	Gonepteryx cleopatra				✓						
Small White	Pieris rapae		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Clouded Yellow	Colias croceus						✓				
Red Admiral	Vanessa atalanta	✓					✓				
Painted Lady	Vanessa cardui	✓				✓					
Speckled Wood	Pararge aegeria			✓			✓				
Wall Brown	Lasiommata megera					<b>√</b>					

Common name		March 2023									
	Scientific name	23	24	25	26	27	28	29			
Small Copper	Lycaena phlaeas					✓					
Spanish Festoon	Zerynthia rumina			✓	✓						
OTHER INSECTS											
Migrant Hawker	Aeshna mixta	1				✓					
Red-striped Oil Beetle	Berberomeloe majalis				✓						
Egyptian Locust	Anacridium aegyptium				✓						