

Go Slow in Andalucia

Naturetrek Tour Report

29th March – 4th April 2023



Long-finned Pilot Whale



Booted Eagle



Short-toed Eagle



Black Kite

Tour report by Niki Williamson, images by Simon Tonkin



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Tour participants: Simon Tonkin and Niki Williamson (leaders) with 13 Naturetrek clients

Summary

Our group experienced Spring migration 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, Eurasian Hoopoes, Eurasian Wryneck, Pallid and Common Swift.

Fifty (5-0!) Long-finned Pilot Whales graced our boat trip, as well as Bottlenose Dolphins and Cory's Shearwater. 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 Andalusian food from chef Felipe. Hello, Spring!

Day 1

Wednesday 29th March

Simon and Niki collected the group from their mid-afternoon arrival into Gibraltar airport and we were soon across the border into Spain, driving west along the coast followed by the area's famous strong *levante* or easterly wind.

En route to our accommodation, we made a stop for the group to truly experience this local weather event! At the raptor watchpoint of Cazalla, we could get a great orientation of the Straits area and watch several Black Kites, Booted Eagles and Griffon Vultures surfing the air currents. A Black Kite and then a gorgeous Egyptian Vulture whizzed past us very close.

Further on, we made another impromptu stop to cheer on a group of 43 White Stork arriving in a raggle-taggle band after an exhausting sea crossing. A quick loo stop at a service station gave us a flock of Collared Pratincoles in flight and several Zitting Cisticolas!

We settled into our rooms in Cortijo el Indiviso – a lovingly restored Andalusian farmhouse set around a central courtyard, with views over open countryside to the historic Moorish settlement of Vejer de la Frontera. We headed for dinner amongst the trees of the orange grove, where we enjoyed the sounds of Corn Bunting song and European Bee-eaters chirruping overhead.

Day 2

Thursday 30th March

Today the wind had flipped right round to *poniente* or westerly, so after a hearty breakfast (complete with eggs from the *cortijo*'s own chickens!) we headed east, back towards Algeciras Bay. Soaring birds are reliant on thermals for travelling, and since there are no thermals over the sea, they will seek the shortest sea crossing. However, they will also use the wind to give them lift, which affects the point at which they make land. Using local knowledge, Simon had anticipated that the birds would turn into the westerly wind and make the European coast east of Tarifa.

Sure enough, as we took our seats for the show at Punta Secreta, we found ourselves right under the flow of migrating raptors! Black Kites, Booted Eagles and Short-toed Eagles appeared as specks leaving Africa and pounded towards us, arriving low over our heads, panting hard after a crossing into the wind. We had time to get to grips with identification as we watched them arrive, and also to get involved with individual struggles, as Yellow-legged Gulls frequently attacked passing birds in defense of their colony – heart-stopping stuff! We often gave a cheer and a sigh of relief as the raptors made land, and as they popped upwards on their first European thermal, it looked a lot like a victory roll!

Among the more numerous raptors we also picked up Egyptian Vultures, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, and Montagu's Harrier. Out to sea Northern Gannets hunted and we picked up a Mediterranean Shag. In the scrub around us many Sardinian Warblers called, and we spotted a pretty Woodchat Shrike.

After a brief comfort stop, we headed 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 100 White Storks arrive into Europe! Around the picnic area we picked up Firecrest, Western Bonelli's Warbler, Eurasian Nuthatch, Short-toed Treecreeper, Pied Flycatcher, Common Redstart, Hawfinch, 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 – we could still see our White Storks spiralling up and down the coast!

Day 3

Friday 31st March

Today we headed to the Marismas de Barbate - disused saltpans now converted into a fabulous saline nature reserve. The stars of the show were undoubtedly the Collared Pratincoles - numbering well 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.

The congregation of waders was nothing short of spectacular with Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint, Grey and Kentish Plover, Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Black-tailed Godwit, Ruff (including one in full-collared breeding plumage), Common Sandpiper, Common Redshank and Common Greenshank, among many hundreds of Sanderling, Dunlin and Common Ringed Plover.

Eurasian Stone Curlews lurked on the islands as Short-toed Larks and brightly coloured Iberian Yellow Wagtails flitted amongst them. Crested and Calandra Larks and Corn Buntings were all around us singing loudly. As we were leaving, we spotted a stunning Eurasian Wryneck feeding on the ground!

After a comfort stop we headed to the wooded area of the nature reserve – *las breñas* - where we were greeted on arrival by a Eurasian Hoopoe. We enjoyed our picnic of seasonal local produce, which today featured an award-winning local goats' cheese matured in *pimenton*. Around us Short-toed Treecreepers called and many European Serins sang.

One more stop to complete our afternoon – having been told they were heading to see a Jackdaw colony, the group were surprised to find a cliff face covered in Northern Bald Ibis! One of the world's most endangered birds, they number just over 1,000 in the wild. This group spread out from the main reintroduction project over a decade ago, and chose their new home to be precarious-looking ledges right next to a busy road! They have been very successful and today we counted 17 occupied nests. We enjoyed watching these charismatic birds, their adorable chicks and their gorgeous plumage shining all colours in the sun.

We headed home for relaxation before another lovely three-course meal from chef Felipe – this evening featuring carrot salad seasoned with garlic and oregano, beetroot *gazpacho* and fresh hake.

Day 4

Saturday 1st April

Continuing 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. En route we made an unplanned stop to admire a noisy flock of European Bee-eaters and an equally noisy Common Nightingale.

At the colony there are around 70 pairs of Griffon Vultures, and we enjoyed seeing many of them on their nests as well as the uplifting sight of them soaring overhead, often flying in tandem and calling to partners and colony *compadres*. We also got fabulous views of the resident pair of Egyptian Vultures. A couple of Blue Rock Thrushes flitted about the rock face.

Heading up a little higher, we looked out across the Straits to North Africa, and down onto the Roman ruins of Baelo Claudia below – 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.

For our picnic we headed to a clearing in the Cork Oak forest on Monte Facinas – the gateway to Los Alcornocales Natural Park. Cheese of the Day was another award winner! This time an aged sheep's cheese flavoured with truffle and accompanied by a chickpea and roast pepper salad.

After lunch we took a coffee in the white village of Facinas (Simon and Niki's *pueblo!*) and enjoyed seeing the pretty white-washed buildings and cobbled streets lined with orange trees.

Day 5

Sunday 2nd April

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, enjoying Common Bulbul (the only one in Europe!) in the car park, views of 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, often coming right up to the boat! We saw around 50 in total, which is around 20% of the area's total population! We got good views of several Cory's Shearwaters and observed Bottlenose Dolphins surfing the bow wave of a huge container ship.

The Old Town of Tarifa was bustling for the start of Semana Santa (Easter Week) as we headed to take our lunch at Geko, a friendly little *tapas* place. Chef Patti looked after us well as the tasty little plates kept coming! We fed on *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 grilled artichoke with Iberian ham – delicious!

After coffee there was time to explore Tarifa's picturesque Old Town, where the ice cream parlours had now opened their doors for temptation!

Day 6

Monday 3rd April

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. As predicted the wind brought them directly over us – once again we found ourselves with breath-taking views of Black Kites and Booted Eagles coming low over our heads, interspersed with Short-toed Eagles, Eurasian Sparrowhawks, European Bee-eaters and many, many Common Swifts moving through. A spectacular morning!

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 today also included around sixty Griffon Vultures – 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 also picked up our first European Honey Buzzard of the year arriving back into Europe.

On the ground, Woodchat Shrike, Spanish Sparrow, Thekla's Larks, Red-rumped Swallow and two stunning Black-eared Wheatears provided the post-lunch show! We also took a walk amongst the beautiful Mediterranean scrub habitat to visit an ancient sky burial site hewn into the rock - fitting as Griffon Vultures drifted overhead!

We stopped for a coffee at the café-bakery in Los Porros, where there was one last chance to buy wondrous local produce from the deli counter! Then it was time to relax back at our accommodation and enjoy the extensive grounds before our last delicious three-course meal together.

Day 7

Tuesday 4th April

All too soon it was time to say goodbye to Laura and the team at the *cortijo*.

After a mooch around Parque Princesa Sofia in La Linea – which yielded Western Bonelli's Warbler and two roosting Tawny Owls - 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



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Birds (H = Heard on



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Common name	Scientific name	29	30	31	il 2023		
					1	2	3
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>			20			
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			4			
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>				4		
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>			70			
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	42	112	10	20	10	28
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	4	5	30	15	20	10
Northern Bald Ibis	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>			17			
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>			1			1
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			2	1	2	1
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			2			
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		10			20	4
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>		1				
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		4	20			18
Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>		1				
Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	1	2		2		
European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>						1
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		10		120	5	70
Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		23			4	12
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	20	225		2	5	81
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	2	7		3	2	6
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	1			1		
Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>		1				
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	20	139		2	3	63
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		1		1	1	
Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedichnemus</i>			2			
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>			45			
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>			30			
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>			3			
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			200	2		
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>				1		
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>			50	1		
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>			4			
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>		1				
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			8			

Common name	Scientific name	March/April 2023					
		29	30	31	1	2	3
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			2			
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>			6			
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>			2			
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>			50	6		
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			150			
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>			30			
Collared Pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>	20		230			
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>			2			
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>		6	2		10	4
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	4	1	10	4	5	10
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		1		1	1	2
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	4	200		✓	20	2,000
Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	70
European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	4	4		60	50	300
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>			2		1	1
Eurasian Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>			1			
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				1		
Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>			1			
Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>					10	6
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	2	1	4	2	2
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1				
Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>		3		1		3
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	4	2	4	2	4
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	2	5	4	2	2	2
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	2	4	10	2	1	2
Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>				2		6
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>			20			
Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>	10		50			
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>				6		
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		4	30	✓	10	4
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>		3				2
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	1		2	1	2	2
Western Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>		1		2		
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	4	2	10	4	6	3
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		1				
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		2	2	3	2	1
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		1				
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		1	6	2		
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	2	5	8	6	✓	✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			1			
Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>		3	4	5	3	4

Common name	Scientific name	March/April 2023					
		29	30	31	1	2	3
European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		1				
Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>		1				
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>				2		
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		1			1	
Black-eared Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>						3
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>						20
Iberian Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>			20			4
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		1				
Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>		1				
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			2		3	4
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		2				
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	2	4	4	5	3	1
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	30
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		1				
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		1		1		1
Common Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>					1	

Others

Common name	Scientific name	March/April 2023					
		29	30	31	1	2	3
MAMMALS							
Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>					✓	
Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>					50	
REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS							
Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>				✓		✓
Ocellated Lizard	<i>Timon lepidus</i>				✓		✓
Mediterranean Tree Frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>						
Common Toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>						
Iberian Marsh Frog	<i>Rana iberica</i>		✓		✓	✓	
BUTTERFLIES							
Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>				✓		
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓				
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>				✓		
Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>						✓
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>				✓		
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>				✓	✓	✓
Spanish Festoon	<i>Zerynthia rumina</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓
Cleopatra	<i>Gonepteryx cleopatra</i>		✓				
Moroccan Orange-tip	<i>Anthocharis belia</i>				✓		
Green Hairstreak	<i>Callophrys rubi</i>				✓		

Common name	Scientific name	March/April 2023					
		29	30	31	1	2	3
Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>						✓
MOTHS							
Giant Peacock	<i>Saturnia pyri</i>				✓		
Puss Moth	<i>Cerura vinula</i>				✓		
	<i>Cymbalophora pudica</i>				✓		
Dorset Cream Wave	<i>Stegania trimaculata</i>				✓		
Passenger	<i>Dysgonia algira</i>						✓
OTHER INSECTS							
Migrant Hawker	<i>Aeshna Mixta</i>		✓				
Red-striped Oil Beetle	<i>Berberomeloe majalis</i>		✓		✓		✓
Violet Carpenter Bee	<i>Xylocopa violacea</i>		✓		✓		✓