Go Slow ... in Southern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

11th - 18th May 2022





Little Bustard

Spanish Ibex





European Roller

Malaga Cathedral

Tour report and images by Niki Williamson



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Summary

Málaga The Beautiful, as it is known, is a vibrant cosmopolitan city on the shores of the sparkling Mediterranean, surrounded some of Southern Spain's most dramatic landscapes and varied natural habitats. From our luxurious hotel in the heart of the city's Old Town, the province's natural, cultural and gastronomic highlights were all within easy reach!

Relaxed mornings birding and wildlife-watching brought us to the realms of some of Andalucía's star species, including Little Bustard, White-headed Duck and Iberian Ibex. Among the limestone crags and forested mountains, Rock Buntings, Rock Petronia, Griffon Vultures, Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Honey Buzzards, Alpine Swifts, Blue and Common Rock Thrush, Scarce Swallowtail and Marsh Fritillary vied for our attention.

Birds of freshwater wetlands and saline lagoons included Black-necked Grebe, Red-crested Pochard, Black-winged Stilts, Curlew Sandpiper, Gull-billed, Caspian and Sandwich Tern and hundreds of Greater Flamingoes, Common Ringed and Kentish Plovers. The area's wildlife-rich farmland meadows were some of the most colourful we'd ever seen, not only for the wildflowers but also the smattering of European Bee-eaters, European Roller, European Turtle Doves, Painted Ladies and Clouded Yellows among the Crested, Thekla's, Calandra and Greater Short-toed Larks!

Our excellent hotel was just a hop, skip and a jump from some of Málaga's must-visit cultural attractions, including the Picasso Museum, the Alcazaba Moorish citadel and the famous cathedral, brought passionately to life for us by city guide Alberto. And with so many fantastic restaurants right on our doorstep, it was thoroughly enjoyable to spend our evenings in great company, sampling typical local dishes in some of Malaga's finest culinary institutions and hidden gems!

This is the first time this trip has been run in its current form - we think it was a great success and look forward to many more!

Day 1

Wednesday 11th May

Niki picked Sandie and Greg up from Málaga airport and we made the short drive into central Málaga, where we met up with Sheila and Dick at Hotel Molina Lario, our four-star base for the week.

We took some time to settle in to our swish upmarket rooms with views out over Málaga old town, then reconvened to eat a delicious lunch in the hotel's restaurant. Renowned in its own right, Restaurante Matiz serves local dishes brought into the modern day, each with their own *matiz* or nuance of the traditional. We got stuck straight in with an introduction to *porra*, the Málaga version of gazpacho, garnished with local tuna.

In the late afternoon we headed out for a stroll along the shady Paseo del Parque promenade, stopping to admire noisy Monk Parakeets in their nests as well as the odd Ring-necked Parakeet. We watched Sardinian Warblers to-ing and fro-ing from their nest and European Serins singing close by. As the air became cooler, the city's Pallid Swift population dropped lower and swirled calling above our heads.

After freshening up, we headed out for our first delicious meal at El Pimpi – a famous Málaga institution, based originally around a *bodega* or wine cellar. Our waiter encouraged us to order dishes to share so that we could try more things! Typical local dishes included *ajo blanco*, an almond, grape and garlic soup thought to be the precursor to *gazpacho* – and *ensalada malaguena*, made with a delicious combination of cod and fresh orange. A tasty start to our trip!

Day 2

Thursday 12th May

Today our birding and wildlife-watching started in earnest, and we headed up towards the picturesque limestone crags of El Torcal.

Our first stop was on low intensity farmland, where we enjoyed European Turtle Doves purring from the telegraph wires and views of Woodchat Shrike.

Heading further into the mountain habitat, we stopped just before the main peak, in an area packed with mountain delights!

Almost immediately we spotted a small group of Iberian Ibex strolling about on the rock face. A group of Rock Petronia were feeding on the pastureland. Western Bonelli's Warbler and Melodious Warbler sang from the sparse vegetation. Blue Rock Thrush and both male and female Black-eared Wheatears showed well, and we were thrilled to briefly glimpse a Common Rock Thrush, presumably a migrant individual.

Impressive Griffon Vultures soared low overhead, prompting us to head further to the peak and their roost site. We enjoyed more views with our coffee and ice-cream at the visitor centre!

Next, we went for a stroll and found another Blue Rock Thrush, well-illuminated in the midday sun. Rock Bunting perched up for us and we found Sawfly Orchid and the toadflax *Linaria verticillata* – this local *anticaria* subspecies being endemic to Málaga and Granada.

We had our picnic near the base of a sheer cliff face where lots of European Serins sang from the picnic area trees. Through the scope we could also see a Griffon Vulture with its partly grown chick on a nest.

We got back to Málaga late afternoon, with time to relax in the hotel or explore the local shopping, before dinner, which tonight was once again in our excellent hotel restaurant, where the knowledgeable waiting staff explained each dish to us

Day 3 Friday 13th May

Today's wildlife excursion involved a much shorter drive, to the local wetlands at the Desembocadura de Guadalhorce, where the Guadalhorce River reaches the Mediterranean Sea.

We soon found Dick's favourite birds, Black-winged Stilts, which amusingly were running along the track ahead of a jogger, appearing to be going for a jog themselves!

Viewing out of the first hide we got great views of roosting Sandwich Terns, Pied Avocet, Common Ringed Plover and Dunlin, and many Sardinian and Melodious Warblers called and sang from the plentiful scrub habitat.

From another hide we were thrilled to find five White-headed Ducks. Seeing this very rare duck is always a highlight, but in the end the show was well and truly stolen by a bright turquoise European Roller, which swooped in and gave us great views!

Today lunch was at The Top – a rooftop bar-restaurant overlooking Málaga old town with great views of the nearby cathedral, known locally as La Manquita, due to its various incomplete and missing bits!

Later in the afternoon our city guide Alberto took us on a guided tour of the spectacular Moorish Alcazaba. He encouraged us to look beyond the sumptuous contemporary gardens (and the European Serins and White Wagtails!) and imagine the building as it was – a thriving citadel, home to hundreds of people, interesting architecture peppered with masonry cannibalised from Phoenician and Roman structures.

For dinner we went *tapas*-style at Kraken, a modern restaurant with an interesting and tasty range of appealing dishes from sea (Black Cod with Jalapeño *allioli*), mountain (aniseed-spiced lamb rolls) and farm (beetroot and cream cheese *gazpacho*).

Day 4

Saturday 14th May

We left the city again to enjoy more of the area's excellent birding and wildlife. This time we headed out towards Fuente de Piedra, an inland saline lagoon in the north of the province.

Stopping first at an area of hay meadow, inauspiciously next to a large road construction project, we were delighted to straight away spot a Little Bustard! This gorgeous male was in full breeding plumage and was strutting his stuff in the flower-rich pasture. We enjoyed watching him flick his head back and emit his strange call – half-croak, half-fart! With a little more searching we spotted another two males, and could hear another calling distantly, making this a full-on lek!

The farmland was pleasingly wildlife-rich, and we also got great views of Crested, Calandra and Greater Short-toed Lark gathering insects and grubs to take back to nests. Bee-eaters and Gull-billed Terns flew over us.

Driving through Fuente de Piedra village we passed large attractive murals featuring Greater Flamingoes – spoiler alert! Taking a walk around the main reserve site, we looked down on the large lagoon. A Marsh Harrier sat on the shore before heading back to a hidden nest site. On the exposed mud were many hundreds of Common Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Slender-billed and Mediterranean Gull and Gull-billed Terns. On nearer pools we also had time to look at Curlew Sandpiper with Dunlin and Common Sandpiper. We had a breathtaking low flyover by Greater Flamingoes just over our heads!

In freshwater pools we enjoyed Red-crested Pochards, some funky-looking Common Coot chicks and a Black-necked Grebe very busily diving and feeding its little one which bobbed adorably on the surface. We had great close-up views of Pied Avocets, Greater Flamingoes and Common Pochard.

Driving on we took our picnic on the shores of Laguna Dulce. While Niki prepared the day's selection of fresh salads and bread and local olives, cheeses and meats, the group enjoyed Red-crested Pochards, Northern Shoveler and lovely views of Melodious Warbler.

Arriving back at the hotel mid-afternoon, the group had plenty of relaxing time in the town or hotel before we headed to our restaurant. Cañadu is a well-known vegetarian restaurant situated in the old market square, surrounded by beautiful purple Jacaranda blossom. They specialise in putting a vegetarian twist on the area's Spanish/Moroccan cuisine. We enjoyed *croquetas* of mushroom, cheese, apple and pine nut as well as couscous and *ajo blanco* soup.

Day 5

Sunday 15th May

Today was a relatively free day to further enjoy the cultural aspects of the city. All decided to join an optional visit to the city's attractive botanical gardens, where there was plenty of shade and tranquility to be had amongst beautifully-laid out beds featuring plants from all around the world.

After lunch and free time, we also enjoyed a visit to the Picasso Museum, where many of the artist's works are arranged in chronological order, with excellent interpretation of the development of his artistic style.

Tonight, we had dinner with a difference, heading out into the lesser visited coastal suburbs to have dinner with the locals at El Tintero. Another renowned Malaga institution, this huge beachside shed in the El Chanquete *barrio* serves the freshest and most delicious grilled seafood around, in a no-frills, unpretentious style. As we ate we enjoyed watching Scopoli's Shearwaters patrolling their own seafood restaurant in the bay, and showing the rising moon to our fellow eaters through our telescope!

Day 6 Monday 16th May

A relaxed start to the day today, in the nearby Montes de Málaga pine forests. At our first stop we found a delightful selection of woodland birds including Common Firecrest, Short-toed Treecreeper and Spotted Flycatcher. Two Short-toed Eagles soared high overhead, calling.

Stopping for a mid-morning coffee at Bar Fuente de la Reina – named for the elaborately-decorated springhead close by - we got great views of a pale morph Booted Eagle and another Short-toed Eagle, as well as a brief flyby by a pair of calling Crested Tits.

We had a lovely walk at the Lagar de Torrijos, the site of an old watermill that used to process everything from grapes to olives. Here we saw some fantastic butterflies, including Marsh Fritillary, Moroccan Orange-tip and Scarce Swallowtail. There were also great views of Western Bonelli's Warbler, Short-toed Treecreeper and European Nuthatch.

We had our picnic lunch by the river before heading back to town to meet city guide and all-round good egg, Alberto, this time to join him for a tour of the cathedral. Beginning on the site of a mosque and built over hundreds of years, it was never completed, hence its local nickname of "La Manquita" for the various towers, turrets and adornments that are obviously missing! A fascinating building - brought expertly to life by art historian Alberto - it encapsulates the city's fascinating history in both its architecture and interior artwork.

Tonight we elected to have a relaxing dinner at our excellent hotel restaurant (slippers optional!). More excellent local fare was sampled, including *buñuelos de feria* (a special Málaga savoury fritter) and an exquisite chocolate sponge dessert made with local *Marengo* stout!

Day 7

Tuesday 17th May

We finished our trip literally on a high, heading out once more to an area of spectacular craggy limestone scenery - this time to visit El Chorro and the area around. On the way we had some lovely impromptu stops for European Honey Buzzard and Thekla's Lark. We made a stop at the famous Caminito del Rey, a precarious-looking *via ferrata* footpath attached to the cliffs. As we arrived, Griffon Vultures were lifting off from their roosts and taking to the thermals, with a Peregrine Falcon amongst them, looking tiny by comparison! Hundreds of Alpine Swifts swirled around the cliff faces.

We had a coffee at El Chorro village, viewing out over the rocky gorge and picking up Red-billed Chough and Northern Goshawk. Crossing a dam, we stopped to admire Red-rumped Swallows and Grey Wagtails that were nesting there.

We headed up the pine slopes to encounter Common Crossbill, Crested Tit and Eurasian Jay. Driving on between the area's three huge reservoirs, we found ourselves underneath a massive Griffon Vulture flyby! Hopping out to watch them on an area of low intensity farmland, we also spied Corn Buntings, Iberian Grey Shrike and Zitting Cisticola.

Picnic was in an incredibly lush meadow on the shore of the reservoir, full of Clouded Yellow and Painted Lady butterflies and with Turtle Doves softly purring nearby. Calling Iberian Pond Frogs and Grey Herons hinted at the nearby water hidden by dense tamarisk scrub.

For dinner we headed just next door to the beautifully-located `La Malagueña' whose terrace overlooks the cathedral. The team there whipped us up a splendid *paella* and a bottle of *cava* to celebrate our last evening together in this wonderful city. Pallid Swifts screamed overhead as the sun set.

Day 8

Wednesday 18th May

All too soon our natural, cultural and gastronomic exploration of Málaga province was at an end! We admired the city's soundscape of screaming swifts and squawking parakeets one last time as our little group went their separate ways after a memorable and enjoyable trip!

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

	N = Near endemic	I = introduced				May 2022	2		
	Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1	Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna			2	2			
2	Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata				6			
3	Gadwall	Mareca strepera				12			
4	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos			✓	✓			
5	Red-crested Pochard	Netta rufina				20+			
6	Common Pochard	Aythya ferina			4	20+			
7	White-headed Duck	Oxyura leucocephala			5	5			
8	Red-legged Partridge	Alectoris rufa		√					
9	Common Quail	Coturnix coturnix						1	
10	Scopoli's Shearwater	Calonectris diomedea					10+		
11	Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis			1	6			
12	Black-necked Grebe	Podiceps nigricollis				2+ 2 juv			
13	Greater Flamingo	Phoenicopterus roseus			8	2000			
14	White Stork	Ciconia ciconia				1+1			
15	Glossy Ibis	Plegadis falcinellus				✓			
16	Eurasian Spoonbill	Platalea leucorodia			✓				
17	Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis				6			
18	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea							3
19	Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea			2				
20	Great Egret	Ardea alba				1			
21	Little Egret	Egretta garzetta			10+				1
22	Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo			1				
23	European Honey Buzzard	Pernis apivorus							2

	N = Near endemic	I = introduced				May 2022	2		
	Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
24	Griffon Vulture	Gyps fulvus		8					40+
	Short-toed Snake							_	
25	Eagle	Circaetus gallicus						5	1
26	Booted Eagle	Hieraaetus pennatus						1	
27	Northern Goshawk Western Marsh	Accipiter gentilis							1
28	Harrier	Circus aeruginosus				1			
29	Montagu's Harrier	Circus pygargus				1			
30	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo				1			
31	Little Bustard	Tetrax tetrax				4			
32	Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus			1	· √			
33	Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra			2	· √			
34	Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus			20+	√			
35	Pied Avocet	Recurvirostra avosetta			2	√			
36	Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula			1	√			
37	Kentish Plover	Charadrius alexandrinus				6			
38	Curlew Sandpiper	Calidris ferruginea				1			
39	Dunlin	Calidris alpina			2	·			
	Common				_				
40	Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos				2			
41	Slender-billed Gull	Chroicocephalus genei				1			
40	Disable to a dead Ood	Chroicocephalus			_	,			
42	Black-headed Gull	ridibundus Ichthyaetus			7	√			
43	Mediterranean Gull	melanocephalus			1	1			
44	Yellow-legged Gull	Larus michahellis	√	√	√	✓	√	√	√
45	Lesser Black- backed Gull	Larus fuscus			1				
46	Gull-billed Tern	Gelochelidon nilotica				50+			
47	Sandwich Tern	Thalasseus sandvicensis			20+			2	
48	Caspian Tern	Hydroprogne caspia			1				
	Rock Dove/Feral	<i>j</i> ,							
49	pigeon	Columba livia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus				1		4	√
30	European Turtle	Обіатьа раіатьиз				'		7	V
51	Dove	Streptopelia turtur		2		1			3
	Eurasian Collared			,	,	,	,		
52	Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	✓	√	√	✓	✓	✓	√
53	Alpine Swift	Tachymarptis melba	,	,					✓
54	Common Swift	Apus apus	√	√	,	,	,	,	
55	Pallid Swift Common	Apus pallidus	✓	√	✓	√	✓	✓	√
56	Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis				1			
	European Bee-								
57	eater	Merops apiaster				2			
58	European Roller	Coracias garrulus			1				
59	Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops				2			
60	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major							1
61	Iberian Green Woodpecker	Picus sharpei						1	
62	Lesser Kestrel	Falco naumanni						1	
63	Common Kestrel	Falco naumanni Falco tinnunculus		2	2			I	1
	+								
64	Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus	,	/	,	,	,	,	1
65	Monk Parakeet - I	Myiopsitta monachus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	N = Near endemic	I = introduced				May 2022	2		
	Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
00	Rose-ringed	Daitta anda Imamani	0						
66	Parakeet - I Iberian Grey Shrike	Psittacula krameri	3						
67 68	Woodchat Shrike	Lanius meridionalis		1					11
		Lanius senator		I	1			1	1
69 70	Eurasian Jay Red-billed Chough	Garrulus glandarius		1	l I			I	6
71	Western Jackdaw	Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax Coloeus monedula		4		/			0
72	Northern Raven					V			4
73	Coal Tit	Corvus corax						4	
	European Crested	Periparus ater							1
74	1	Lophophanes cristatus		2				2	1
75 70	Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus	2	2				√	√
76	Great Tit	Parus major		2				√	√
77	Thekla's Lark	Galerida theklae		4	4	0			1
78	Crested Lark Greater Short-toed	Galerida cristata		1	1	2			
79	Lark	Calandrella brachydactyla				1			
80	Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra		,	,	20+		,	
81	Barn Swallow Common House	Hirundo rustica	✓	✓	✓	√		✓	✓
82	Martin Red-rumped	Delichon urbicum		6	✓	√		✓	✓
83	Swallow	Cecropis daurica							2
84	Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti			6	2			2
85	Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus		3					
86	Western Bonelli's Warbler	Phylloscopus bonelli		4				1	
87	Great Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus arundinaceus				1			
88	Eurasian Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus scirpaceus			2	√			1
89	Melodious Warbler	Hippolais polyglotta		3		1		1	1
90	Zitting Cisticola	Cisticola juncidis			3	2			1
91	Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla	1		1			√	√
92	Sardinian Warbler	Curruca melanocephala	2	√	√	√	√	√	√
93	Common Firecrest	Regulus ignicapilla						10+	
94	Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes		2					
95	Eurasian Nuthatch	Sitta europaea						1	
	Short-toed								
96	Treecreeper	Certhia brachydactyla		1				10+	1
97	Spotless Starling	Sturnus unicolor	✓	√	✓	√	✓	✓	√
98	Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	✓	✓	✓	1	✓	✓	
99	Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus						2	1
100	Spotted Flycatcher	Muscicapa striata						1	
101	European Robin	Erithacus rubecula		1				✓	
102	Common Nightingale	Luscinia megarhynchos		1	1	√		1	1
103	Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros		10+					
104	Common Rock Thrush	Monticola saxatilis		1					
105	Blue Rock Thrush	Monticola solitarius		6					
106	European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola		4					1
107	Black-eared Wheatear	Oenanthe hispanica		3					
108	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	N = Near endemic	I = introduced				May 202	2		
	Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
109	Rock Sparrow	Petronia petronia		6					
110	Grey Wagtail	Motacilla cinerea							2
111	White Wagtail	Motacilla alba			1				1
112	Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	✓	4			✓	✓	✓
113	Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes						1	
114	European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris		√	√	√		√	√
115	Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina		3		6			
116	Red Crossbill	Loxia curvirostra							6
117	European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis		√	√	√	√	√	✓
118	European Serin	Serinus serinus	6	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
119	Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra		2		1			6
120	Rock Bunting	Emberiza cia		1					
121	Cirl Bunting	Emberiza cirlus		1					

Others

			May 2022						
Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	
Mammals									
European Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus				√				
Iberian Ibex	Capra pyrenaica		13					6	
Grey Squirrel	Sciurus carolinensis			√			√		
Common Genet	Genetta genetta						scat		
Reptiles									
Spanish Psammodromus	Psammodromus hispanicus						1		
Mediterranean Pond Turtle	Mauremys leprosa			2	√			√	
Iberian Wall Lizard	Podarcis hispanicus		√						
Amphibians									
Iberian Pond Frog	Rana iberica							√	
Dragonflies and Damselflies									
Southern Hawker	Aeshna cyanea				√				
Red-veined Darter	Sympetrum fonscolombii				✓				
Butterflies and Moths									
Scarce Swallowtail	Iphiclides podalirius						√		
Red Admiral	Vanessa atalanta		√	√				√	
Painted Lady	Vanessa cardui		√	√	√		√	√	
Marsh Fritillary	Euphydryas aurinia						✓		
Clouded Yellow	Colias croceus		✓					√	
Large White	Pieris brassicae	√		√	√		√	√	
Small White	Pieris rapae			√	√				
Speckled Wood	Pararge aegeria					√		√	
Black-eyed Blue	Glaucopsyche melanops						√		
Wall	Lasiommata megera						√		
Meadow Brown	Maniola jurtina							√	

Orange tip Moroccan Orange tip Small Heath Small Skipper Other insects Hairy-footed Flower Bee			May 2022							
Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16	17		
Orange tip	Anthocharis cardamines				√					
Moroccan Orange tip	Anthocharis belia						√			
Small Heath	Coenonympha pamphilus						√			
Small Skipper	Thymelicus sylvestris									
Other insects										
Hairy-footed Flower Bee	Anthophora plumipes	√								
Violet Carpenter Bee	Xylocopa violacea	√			√		√			
Dung Beetle spp							√			
Longhorn Beetle spp								✓		
Notable plants										
Sawfly Orchid	Ophrys tenthredinifera		√							
A toadflax	Linaria verticillata subspp anticaria		√							
Tassel Hyacinth	Leopoldia comosa						√			