

Go Slow in Southern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

11th – 18th May 2023



Rock Bunting



Spanish Ibex



Alcazaba tour



Red Crossbill

Tour report by Niki Williamson, images by Niki Williamson and Simon Tonkin



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Tour participants: Niki Williamson (leader), Simon Tonkin (leader) with a group of 14 Naturetrek clients

Summary

This eight-day break based in Southern Spain's most vibrant city showcased the best of Andalucía's fascinating wildlife, culture, history and food!

From our luxury hotel at the heart of Málaga's Old Town, we made daily excursions to rich and varied natural habitats, all within an hour's drive. Spanish Ibex, Black-eared Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting, Western Orphean Warbler and Griffon Vultures graced the mountain crags. White-headed Duck, Marbled Duck, Red-crested Pochard, Black-necked Grebe, Greater Flamingo, Black-winged Stilt, Kentish Plover, Curlew Sandpiper, Slender-billed, Audouin's and Mediterranean Gull, Sandwich, Whiskered and Gull-billed Terns filled the wetlands. European Turtle Doves and Calandra, Crested and Short-toed Larks sang from the low-intensity farmlands. A European Roller dropped by, and a Little Bustard even strutted its stuff for us!

Relaxing afternoons were spent exploring the Moorish citadel, unique cathedral and the museum of Picasso or simply enjoying the architecture and atmosphere of the bustling streets – always accompanied by charming Monk Parakeets and Pallid Swifts screaming overhead!

A varied gastronomic itinerary provided chances to sample interesting local dishes such as *ajo blanco* almond soup, the freshest seafood in town and delicious Iberian pork, and took us to some of Málaga's best loved institutions, as well as some hidden gems beloved by the locals!

Day 1

Thursday 11th May

With the help of Niki and Simon, our group assembled from various flights into Málaga into our sumptuous accommodation at the Molina Lario, this four-star Málaga institution giving wonderful views out over the old town on one side and the harbour on the other.

After taking a little time to relax in our rooms, we met up for a walk and headed out along the eclectic tree collection of the Paseo del Parque, between our hotel and the sea front. Above the bustle of the city noise, we could hear the loud calls of the resident population of Monk Parakeets, these harmless, entertaining birds very much providing the soundtrack to our stay! A couple of Rose-ringed Parakeets called too, and among a cluster of conifers a Short-toed Treecreeper was spotted.

We paused awhile to enjoy a flamenco display on the central stage. As the air started to cool, we got our first views of Pallid Swifts descending from the heights.

Our first dinner was in Matiz, the hotel's own restaurant, and a gourmet treat in its own right. They specialize in delicious original *matices* (nuances) on classic Malaga dishes. Tonight began with various starters to share and featured Iberian pork in Pedro Ximénez sauce, and marinated red tuna belly.

Day 2

Friday 12th May

Today our birding began in earnest with a trip out to the imposing rocky crags of El Torcal. En route we stopped to survey a valley of low intensity farmland, where European Turtle Doves were calling and seen well. Many European Serins and Sardinian Warblers sang, and Little Owls called from the knarled trunks of the ancient olive trees.

Our next stop was near the summit of the crag, where the wildlife came thick and fast! Spanish Ibex grazed and loafed on the rocks, and we got lovely views of Black-eared Wheatears. A Blue Rock Thrush sang and showed well, as did Rock Buntings and Rock Petronia. A Western Orphean Warbler sang and was eventually seen. Griffon Vultures soared overhead.

Heading to the top spot, we enjoyed a coffee while a confiding Rock Bunting potted about chasing crumbs! A Spanish Ibex sauntered across a nearby crag. Taking a stroll through the bizarre rock pillars of El Torcal, we were blown away by an amazing Common Nightingale singing its heart out from the top of a bush! A Black Redstart put up some fair competition to its song! On the rocks we found a patch of *Linaria verticillata anticaria*, or Antequera Toadflax, a subspecies endemic to this area.

On the way back we made a brief stop to look back up at the vast cliff face, on which we could see various Griffon Vulture nests, one with a chick visible!

They say you haven't really visited Málaga until you've eaten at El Pimpi, a sherry bodega turned famous restaurant, so we duly headed there for dinner! We dined on Iberian ham, local langoustine salad, cod with *pisto* and *croquetas de puchero*, a local speciality where a beef stew is transformed into tasty croquettes!

Day 3

Saturday 13th May

Birding more locally today, we made the short drive to the Guadalhorce rivermouth reserve.

Taking our time to stroll around the freshwater lagoons where the river Guadalhorce heads towards the sea, we were thrilled with our haul of wildfowl, waterbirds, waders which included White-headed and Marbled Ducks, Greater Flamingoes, Eurasian Spoonbill, Black-winged Stilts, Pied Avocet, Common Ringed and Kentish Plover, Curlew Sandpiper, Slender-billed, Audouin's and Mediterranean Gull, Sandwich, Whiskered and Gull-billed Terns, and more besides! We also spotted a couple of Black-headed Weavers, an introduced but handsome species.

After lunch in a café in the old town and bit of free time, we went on our visit to the city's famous cathedral. Nicknamed *La Manquita* for its missing spire, it took centuries of work to get to this point and is still incomplete! Knowledgeable guide Roland filled us in, not just on the history, but on the politics, intrigue and comedy of errors involved in the construction of this building!

For dinner we headed to Kraken, a cute restaurant in the bustling flower market square, serving an interesting selection of modern *tapas* dishes.

Day 4

Sunday 14th May

Today we headed to the inland salt lake of Fuente de Piedra, making a stop at a tiny pocket of low intensity farmland on the way. These pretty pastures sit precariously amongst a huge road development – thankfully quiet on a Sunday. Calandra, Crested and Short-toed Larks trilled all around us and masses of hirundines fed overhead. Then, beyond all hope or expectation, a Little Bustard popped its head out from the long grass! We edged closer using roadwork paraphernalia for cover, as the handsome bird decided to take a strut across the field. Fantastic!

Fuente de Piedra is a large endorheic lagoon – filled only by rainwater and with no water flowing out, it has become saline over millennia. Due to recent droughts in Spain, there was already a dry salt pan where the lake should be, but many dozens of Greater Flamingoes were feeding in the last remaining pool.

In the pretty freshwater lagoons around the visitor centre, we immediately found more Marbled Ducks! There was a great wader selection including Curlew Sandpiper in both summer and winter plumage, Pied Avocet, Common, Little Ringed and Kentish Plover and several Glossy Ibis looking absolutely gorgeous in the sun. A loud, showy Reed Warbler clamoured at us from the vegetation and European Turtle Doves purred.

We took a short walk along a section of boardwalk accompanied by Iberian Yellow Wagtails and Zitting Cisticolas in song flight. Lesser Kestrels were seen emerging from the specially constructed nesting tower. On the ground we picked out a Eurasian Stone Curlew. An unexpected bright turquoise flashed by – European Roller! It perched on a wire for us all to get a good look.

Picnic lunch in the shade featured as always plenty of fresh salads, local olives and award-winning local cheeses. Today we also had a Booted Eagle drift over!

We explored the remaining lagoons and enjoyed great views of stunning Black-necked Grebes, complete with their golden carnival masks! There were also Red-crested Pochard, and White-headed Ducks amongst the various Common Shelducks, Gadwalls, Northern Shovelers, Mallards and Common Pochards. A huge Ladder Snake basked in front of the hide! Several Iberian Pond Turtles sat by the water.

After some downtime in the afternoon, we headed out for dinner to experience the best of Mediterranean vegetarian cuisine at Cañadu, in the picturesque old market square lined with purple-flowered Jacaranda trees. The friendly team served us with *ajo blanco* - an Arabic almond soup, precursor to *gazpacho* – apple, mushroom and pine nut croquettes and a fabulous sharing selection of expertly-flavoured dishes.

Day 5

Monday 15th May

Today's morning wildlife trip was to the woodlands of the nearby Montes de Málaga. On the way up, we made a stop at a viewpoint out over the whole sweep of the Costa del Sol.

We made a couple of stops by glades in the coniferous woodland, where we enjoyed Crested, Coal, Long-tailed, Great and Blue Tits! We had lovely views of two pale morph Booted Eagles leaving their roost.

Stopping for coffee with a nice view of the mountains, we enjoyed European Serins and Short-toed Treecreeper.

We continued on to Lagar de Torrijos – a river valley and the site of an old watermill, used to process everything from wheat to olives. The Red Crossbills were amazing as they perched in a tree for us while waiting to come down to the water.

We went on a woodland walk where we had Short-toed Treecreeper calling and lovely views of Bonelli's Warbler. Great Spotted Woodpecker shimmied up a tree and Iberian Green Woodpecker was heard calling. A Eurasian Sparrowhawk flew over, and we had more views of Booted Eagle.

A lovely selection of butterflies included Cleopatra, Marsh Fritillary, Swallowtail, Small Copper, Clouded Yellow, Spanish Marbled White, Speckled Wood, Two-tailed Pasha, and Spanish Gatekeeper.

After picnic we headed back into town to spend the afternoon exploring the wonders of the Picasso Museum. The huge collection chronicles the development of the art of one of Málaga's most famous sons. Today we had the added bonus of a temporary exhibition of some of the artist's fascinating sculptures.

For dinner with a difference, we headed to El Tintero, a *chiringuito* in the suburbs. A locals' secret, this beach bar serves the freshest of seafood, caught in the bay and grilled right by the beach! As we nibbled on delicious prawns, whitebait, breaded bream and seafood fritters, we enjoyed Cory's and Scopoli's Shearwaters feeding in the bay.

Day 6

Tuesday 16th May

A relatively free day today for our team, beginning for those that wished with a trip out to explore the Concepción Botanical Gardens on the outskirts of town. This pretty 3.5-hectare garden hosts over 3,000 species of plants and is full of attractive waterfalls, streams, fountains, greenhouses and historical buildings.

After being released on Málaga centre for lunch (with lunch provided on the hotel terrace bar for those that preferred), we met with our charismatic city guide Kevin, who took us around Málaga's outstanding Moorish citadel, the Alcazaba. Built on the site of the preceding Roman amphitheatre and fortifications, this extraordinary place is as fascinating as it is stunning, with architecture cannibalizing the masonry of three civilizations, sumptuous gardens and water features, and many delicately preserved carvings and paintworks.

Dinner was once again at Matiz, our lovely hotel restaurant – slippers optional!

Day 7

Wednesday 17th May

Our final excursion was to El Chorro area, where we found a complex system of deep gorges and high crags worn into the sandstone landscape.

At our first stop, we could look up into the Caminito del Rey, a precarious-looking but very popular *via ferrata* pinned to the side of a steep gorge. Around us, Griffon Vultures left their roosts and a handful of Alpine Swifts zipped by high up. A Great Spotted Woodpecker showed well close by.

Heading to the village of El Chorro ("The Jet", referring to the emergence of a powerful spring) we enjoyed a coffee overlooking the gorge. Increasing numbers of Griffon Vultures soared around the rock face and a perched

Bonelli's Eagle took flight. Dozens of Red-billed Choughs swirled around the rock. A Golden Oriole could be heard singing from the nearby lake edge. Pausing at the dam, we saw both White and Grey Wagtail and a heap of Iberian Pond Tortoises.

We took our lunch at a spot with a glorious vista out across the valleys of the area, accompanied by Red Crossbills, Short-toed Treecreepers, Crested Tits and Firecrest!

After some down time at the hotel, we took a short stroll out across the Cathedral Square to Del Ólivo, our restaurant for the evening. What better way to complete a stunning trip to Spain than with this restaurant's speciality, a hearty *paella*?

Day 8

Thursday 18th May

Niki and Simon waved off the early departures, and then our last morning was a relaxed one, enjoying a last look around the pretty streets of Málaga's Old Town, before heading to the airport for journeys home.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only, I = Introduced)

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023						
		11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>			6	10			
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>				1			
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>				6			
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			8	✓		✓	4
Marbled Duck	<i>Marmaronetta angustirostris</i>			5	8			
Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>				20			
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>				30			
White-headed Duck	<i>Oxyura leucocephala</i>			4	40			
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		1				1	4
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>						2	
Scopoli's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>						10	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			3	10			
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>				2			
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>			34	50			
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>				6			
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>				20			
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>			2				
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>				1			2
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			2	2			
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			2				
Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>		1					
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		30		5			40
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>				1	4		1
Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>							1
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>					1		
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>				2			
Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>				1			
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			1	4			
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			20	15			
Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>				1			
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>			17	25			
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>			4	10			
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			4	12			
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>				1			
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>			2	4			
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>			1	7			
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			2	11			1
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				4			
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>				1			
Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>			14				
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>			10	2			
Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaeus audouinii</i>			1				
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaeus melanocephalus</i>			23				
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			1				
Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>			2				
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>			20				

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023						
		11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>			2				
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		4		3	✓	4	20
European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>		4		1			
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		2					
Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>							30
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>			1				
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		1					
European Roller	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>				1			
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>					1		2
Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>					1		1
Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>				5			1
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	2		2	1	1	2
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>							2
Monk Parakeet - I	<i>Myiopsitta monachus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rose-ringed Parakeet - I	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>	✓					1	
Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>			6	2			
Eurasian Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>							2
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>					1		
Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		4					70
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>			4	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>				1			
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>				2	2		4
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>					10		8
European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>					4		4
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓			6	1	5
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	10		4	2	4
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>					1		1
Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		8					
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>				2			
Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>				30			
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		10	1				✓
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓	60	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>			2	2			
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			1	3	1		
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		4			20		✓
Western Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>		3			10		
Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>			✓	✓			
Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>				1			
Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>		4					
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		1	6	10			
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		5	4	2	10	4	10
Western Orphean Warbler	<i>Sylvia hortensis</i>		1					
Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>			1	1			
Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>		6					
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023						
		11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>					2	1	3
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	1	3			4	2	16
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>					2	1	2
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	1	2			10	2	15
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>						3	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>					5	2	5
Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>		10	4	✓	✓	✓	4
Iberian Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		2					
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		7					
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		2					1
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓	✓			
Black-eared Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>		2					
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rock Petronia	<i>Petronia petronia</i>		20					
Iberian Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>				2			
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>							3
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		1					1
Black-headed Weaver	<i>Ploceus melanocephalus</i>			2				
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	2	5			✓	✓	✓
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>					1		
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		4	2	2	4	3	5
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	10		✓
Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>					30		20
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>		✓	3	✓	✓		10
Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>		20					
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>					1		2

Others

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023						
		11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Mammals								
Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>			1			3	
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>				✓			
Iberian Ibex	<i>Capra pyrenaica</i>		8		✓			
Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>				✓			
Reptiles								
Spanish Psammmodromus	<i>Psammmodromus hispanicus</i>		1	1		✓	✓	
Iberian Pond Turtle	<i>Mauremys leprosa</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓
Ladder Snake	<i>Zamenis scalaris</i>				✓			
Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>				✓			
Amphibians								

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023						
		11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Iberian Green Frog	<i>Pelophylax perezi</i>						✓	
Dragonflies and Damselflies								
Southern Hawker	<i>Aeshna cyanea</i>				✓			
Red-veined Darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>				✓		✓	
Orange-winged Dropwing	<i>Trithemis kirbyi</i>						✓	
Violet Dropwing	<i>Trithemis annulata</i>						✓	
Butterflies								
Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>				✓	✓		
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>						✓	
Geranium Bronze	<i>Cacyreus marshalli</i>						✓	
Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>		✓			✓		✓
Marsh Fritillary	<i>Euphydryas aurinia</i>					✓		
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Spanish Marbled White	<i>Melanargia ines</i>					✓		
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>		✓			✓	✓	
Two-Tailed Pasha	<i>Charaxes jasius</i>					✓		
Cleopatra	<i>Gonepteryx cleopatra</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Wall	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>					✓		
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>							✓
Spanish Gatekeeper	<i>Pyronia bathseba</i>		✓			✓		✓
Small Skipper	<i>Thymelicus sylvestris</i>				✓			
Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>						✓	
Bath White	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>							✓
Violet Ground Beetle	<i>Carabus violaceus</i>		✓					
Violet Carpenter Bee	<i>Xylocopa violacea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓