

# Go Slow in Fuerteventura

Naturetrek Tour Report

25th November – 2nd December 2023

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*Dericorys lobata luteipes*



Houbara Bustard



African Blue Tit



Band-eyed Drone Fly

Tour report by Richard Bashford, photos by Bob Eade

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Tour participants: Richard Bashford & Bob Eade (leaders) with 11 Naturetrek clients

## Summary

A week of winter sun in a distinctive and biologically special place. Our group explored the northern half of Fuerteventura, visiting all the main hotspots, and had time to revisit a couple of sites on the last two days. We saw most of the expected species of birds, survived being surrounded by Barbary Ground Squirrels, saw an incredible number of Houbara Bustards (every time we were in suitable habitat), and we were well looked after by the staff at the brilliantly positioned hotel Agro Rugama, which provided a great range of food over the week, and some impressively large starters. A great trip in the true Go Slow tradition with optional early and late excursions, and a post lunchtime siesta period.

## Day 1

## Saturday 25th November

Our journey started with a variety of airports and a variety of departure times. But all being well, two leaders, eleven Naturetrek clients and two minibuses should be at the hotel in Fuerteventura in the early evening.

Richard met Arthur on the flight from Luton and managed to get the hire vehicle and squeeze in a trip to the supermarket near the airport before picking up Chris, who had just arrived. With the next two group members landing in twenty minutes, we waited, meeting Jo and Phillip around 15.00. A fifteen-minute drive to the hotel, and we were all ready to check in. The only trouble was a lack of anyone actually to do the checking-in! Neil and Julia had now arrived at the airport, so Richard went to pick them up while Chris (a resident of Spain and a Spanish speaker) alerted the owner. Augustin arrived shortly after Richard got back with Neil and Julia and we got into our rooms.

Most chilled after the travel, but a wander around the garden for some produced Great Grey Shrike, Corn Bunting, Kestrel, Berthelot's Pipit and Barbary Partridge. It was a beautiful evening, and a message from Bob at 17.58 to say they had landed relieved nerves!

By 19.10, the remainder of the party had arrived and were shown to their rooms to relax and freshen up, before an introductory chat and then an amazing dinner. Roll on tomorrow!

## Day 2

## Sunday 26th November

Half the group opted for a pre-breakfast walk at 07.00 with Bob and Richard. The sky was stunning as the sun rose and we walked through the garden and onto the track south of the hotel. Our first bird was a calling Great Grey Shrike, but best were flyover Egyptian Vultures – first an adult, then a darker younger bird. We also saw Barbary Partridges, a Buzzard and a brief Spectacled Warbler before returning at 08.00 for a fine continental breakfast.

Meeting again at 09.00, we headed a few miles west to Las Parcelas and south to Los Molinos reservoir. En route, on the most inconvenient bit of road to stop, Bob and a few in his vehicle saw a Cream-coloured Courser. Fingers crossed for the rest of the tour! We took the stony track south to the reservoir, stopping a couple of times to scan but seeing little. At the dam, we started to see a few nice things including Ruddy Shelducks on the water, a long-

staying Lesser Scaup, a number of Black-winged Stilts, Little Ringed Plovers, a couple of Greenshanks and a Common Sandpiper. A bubbling call alerted us to Black-bellied Sandgrouse flying and over the next hour and a half, we saw several flocks including some giving great overhead views. A few Berthelot's Pipits showed well – far better than a couple of groups of Trumpeter Finches which just kept on flying. But best for us were a couple of pairs of Canary Island Chat (also known as Fuerteventura Chat, since it is an island endemic). Very nice views were obtained of this special species.

A walk along the edge of the reservoir brought better views of several species, including an obliging Kestrel and, more distantly, about 100 Ruddy Shelducks feeding in among the animals on a goat farm.

Our plans for picnic lunch at Los Molinos meant we retraced our steps and drove the short distance to the small collection of buildings at the coast. Here, the traditional Naturetrek picnic table was free for us to prepare our first picnic lunch. It was a winning location, and we watched the waves crash into the bay and the squadrons of Muscovy Ducks in the stream and pools. Berthelot's Pipits were astoundingly tame here and many photos were taken.

After lunch, we took a short wander up the barranco where Bob found Saharan Bluetail and Janet found a Scarlet Darter. A Barbary Ground Squirrel, clearly used to being fed, virtually ran up to us and seemingly checked out each of the group for offerings. More photos taken! After a quick look at the sea and an ice lolly break, we headed back and arrived at the hotel at 14.45 for a relax.

A few wanderings around the hotel produced a Laughing Dove or two and some amazing views of African Blue Tits. Also Band-eyed Drone Fly and Lang's Short-tailed Blue were seen. Checklist at 19.00 and more fabulous food.

## Day 3

## Monday 27th November

Well, what a good start to the day. We had decided to try for Houbara Bustard before breakfast. As a key species to see, we wanted to ensure we put a bit of effort in and so, having met at 07.00, we drove ten minutes down the road to where the species had been seen in previous years – although there were worryingly no records from this location on eBird in recent weeks. We arrived around 07.10 and although it was still a touch too dark to see, the two Houbara Bustards at the side of the track were very close and thankfully seen by the second minibus – Janet playing a blinder! We then stopped to make sure we could all see them before getting out of the minibuses. Typically, they were moving slowly back through small bushes and showing only occasionally – clearly watching us. But as we were well-behaved naturewatchers, the bustards became accustomed to us and moved to a more open area, and then out in to the open fields to our left – amazing views for all through the telescopes. What a privilege. After about 30 minutes of watching, we moved on a short distance to scan the wider desert area. Here we saw Barbary Partridges (one perched in a palm tree clearly didn't know the twelve days of Christmas), Berthelot's Pipit and as we were about to leave, a fine Barbary Falcon (now considered a form of Peregrine Falcon rather than a separate species, but still a fine looking bird). We were back by 08.15 for a celebration breakfast.

Another treat was in store as we set off again at 09.30: a trip to Lidl supermarket! Bob and Richard stocked up on a few picnic provisions and several group members found a few things to buy. Strangely, this supermarket carpark appears to be a good site for Plain Swift, and a bird seen by the second minibus was most likely this species. Then it was twenty minutes south to the Salinas del Carmen adjacent to the Salt Museum. Here a short walk around a

rocky bay to search the shore produced a few waders such as Ringed Plover, Redshank, Whimbrel and Turnstone. A Sandwich Tern also passed by. Back on the buses and we headed a short distance south for a wander along the Barranco de la Torre – a well-vegetated valley.

As it was noon, we decided to set up our picnic first. Then, around 13.00, we had a slow wander through the bushes, seeing many Spanish Sparrows, three Egyptian Vultures and the odd Spectacled Warbler. It was fairly warm and bird activity low, but Bob found a few interesting insects for us – Blue Emperor, Red-veined Darter, Painted Lady and the magnificent Plain Tiger. Bob also searched the first Apple of Sodom tree and quickly found the spectacular caterpillars of the Plain Tiger, which were much photographed. On the way back, Bob also found the gorgeous *Dericorys lobata luteipes* grasshopper, which is known only from this island and Lanzarote.

Our return journey to the hotel by 15.00 gave us some time for relaxing and, more importantly, some cups of tea. We had arranged to grab a kettle from the restaurant and Richard's room became a makeshift café for several group members.

We arranged a late afternoon walk for anyone interested – the lure of African Blue Tit and Laughing Dove meant most of the group joined Bob and Richard on a circuit of the gardens where both targets were secured! In addition, several Lang's Short-tailed Blues were found in and around the garden. This left a bit of down time before the usual 19.00 checklist and dinner.

## Day 4

## Tuesday 28th November

Stone Curlews calling failed to wake anyone except Richard. Or maybe he is a light sleeper... A sunrise walk from 07.15 produced the expected species and another glorious sky. However, a welcome new bird came in the shape of a Hoopoe, perched long enough for everyone to see it in the telescope. Back for 08.15 breakfast.

After another tantalising flyover swift, we left at 09.15 and were on the road to the key birdwatching site of the Tindaya Plain. Once through the village, we found the desired track north. Almost immediately, we found a Houbara Bustard which we all watched as it (or perhaps a second bird) moved left and off into the distance. A small number of stunning Black-bellied Sandgrouse flew over while others called unseen. Continuing slowly, we scanned and stopped, and scanned and stopped. It was very quiet indeed except from the regular Berthelot's Pipits. Then we found another Houbara Bustard: we were amazingly lucky, as this species can be tricky. Our hoped-for larks and coursers were the tricky ones – and so they continued to be as we neared El Cotillo – a town popular with surfers. Here we planned to have a comfort break. Well, it was certainly a break. The chosen café made an incredibly long-winded job of providing us with a drink each!

Onward, we headed towards the lighthouse at Faro de Toston. As we approached, we got into full scanning mode as Bob had managed excellent courser views in earlier trips...but not today. We set up our picnic by the lighthouse and watched the crashing waves as we ate, overlooking the southern tip of Lanzarote.

A short walk along the bay gave us the opportunity to see and photograph the stunning Sally Lightfoot Crabs clinging to the rocks – their deep red legs being their most obvious features. A small group of 10 or 11 Eurasian Spoonbills were sleeping (and occasionally waking) on a rocky island.

We retraced our steps and took the main road back across some amazing scenery, arriving at the hotel around 15.30, giving everyone a breather before another local walk.

Jan had asked for a Laughing Dove, so we started in the hotel carpark where Julia found a fine individual perched. Our walk took us left and across the stony tracks behind the hotel. Again, the 'usual' species were seen including an Egyptian Vulture, as many as 20 Ravens and some annoying fly-by Trumpeter Finches. Back for 18.00 and another checklist and enormous meal.

## Day 5

## Wednesday 29th November

We undertook a repeat of our successful pre-breakfast visit south of our hotel. Arriving at 07.10, we carefully scanned the area we saw the coursers before – no joy. Moving on, we stooped and scanned a wider area – picking up another three Houbara Bustards, Barbary Partridge, Hoopoes, Great Grey Shrike and Spectacled Warbler. Our hoped-for Mediterranean Short-toed Lark (fast becoming a “bogey bird”) was not showing itself. However, we soon heard a gradually increasing bird call – in fact, a mass of bird calls of what transpired to be over 100 Mediterranean Short-toed Larks overhead. Unfortunately, they were coming from the bright sunrise sky and did not stop. One for another day. Breakfast called and we returned for 08.45.

At 09.45 we hit the road again. Today we were visiting the old capital of the island at Betancuria. We arrived in good time at the southern carpark and were one of the first vehicles there. A walk to the south of the town gave us our first Sardinian Warblers and a Robin! Snatches of song may have been Canary and Goldfinch, but they got away amid the noise of the increasingly busy carpark. We walked into the nearby barranco and found a fine pair of Fuerteventura Stonechats, Laughing Dove and two Peregrines overhead. We had time for everyone to wander around the town for an hour before we retraced our steps a mile or two to the northernmost mirador for some amazing views. Then it was on to El Pinar Barbacoa for a picnic and some very tame, and clearly well-fed Barbary Ground Squirrels. A nearby tame Great Grey Shrike also performed a few feet away.

Onward, we took a route back via a further two miradors with more ground squirrels and very tame Ravens. Heading back via Toto, we reached the hotel at 15.40 for a breather – although Bob and Richard used this time for a quick recce and a shop – both significant for birds with a Curlew being seen at the pool on Fuerteventura Golf Course (a recent birding hotspot), and then (as tradition dictates), a flock of 15 Plain Swifts around the Lidl supermarket.

Back in time for checklist and a celebratory dinner with extra Cava to celebrate Neil and Julia's anniversary.

## Day 6

## Thursday 30th November

Stone Curlews were heard in the early morning again. There was a 07.10 start for most and a walk into the village – just to make a change from the normal route. In and around the village, many dogs were heard (what could they all be barking at...?) but few birds were seen except for a Hoopoe before we returned for breakfast.

Out again at 09.00, we headed for the birding hotspot of Lidl – actually the street next to the supermarket – where we could scan the skies without too much attention from shoppers. Within a couple of minutes, Bob picked up a Plain Swift and this was watched on and off, joined by two others for a few minutes.

Next was a journey back down to the golf course pool. Coot and Black-headed Gull were notable in that they were new trip birds, but nice Hoopoe, Black-winged Stilts and Common Sandpipers were more popular.

Next we headed back down to the Barranco de la Torre for another wander – it was still rather quiet but we had a great view of a juvenile Egyptian Vulture and more Plain Tigers were seen (including some egg-laying on their food plant). At midday, we prepared the picnic and added Sandwich Tern and Common Stonechat to our sightings.

By now, it was getting a little warmer, so we stopped off for another scan of the rocky pool by the salt museum, and another quick scan of the golf course pool – two Common Teal and a Redshank had joined the party.

We then returned to the hotel for a breather, before heading out in the minibuses to explore the stoney fields on the route to the rubbish dump. Despite looking promising, and also despite sightings in previous years, no coursers or larks were seen. Our exploration required some careful reversing at one stage, after reaching a chain across the track in a rocky ravine. Thanks to Phillip for his careful guidance!

We decided to get to flatter ground and visited the charming Barranco de Rio Cabras nearer to our hotel – surprisingly, it had some water and pretty lush vegetation. Heaps of Laughing Doves and Spanish Sparrows were here to roost but pride of place must go to the Banded Garden Spiders Bob found – related to the stunning Wasp Spiders we find in the UK, and really quite amazing. This species was discovered on Fuerteventura as recently as 2016.

Back for 18.00 for a wash and brush-up before dinner.

## Day 7

## Friday 1st December

Today was our last full day and likely to be a bit different, with a significant change in the weather forecast. We had decided to visit a café for lunch rather than to risk a wet picnic.

We woke to a slightly wet morning due to some overnight rain and headed down the road in the minibuses to Barranco de Rio Cabras again. We noticed a track leading the opposite way and found a fair amount of water here – a Grey Heron, several Little Ringed Plovers and two Green Sandpipers were here. Back the other way, we recorded the expected species plus a Grey Wagtail briefly. But the most spectacular sighting was a hunting Peregrine which smashed into one of the many Feral Pigeons – which got away this time.

It was back to the hotel for breakfast then out to our favoured site – Los Molinos Reservoir. On the way, we stopped to scan the place Bob and some of the group had seen a Cream-coloured Courser on our first day in the field. We'd noticed a nearby track which allowed us to scan the area – no joy but well worth a few minutes.

Onward to the reservoir: here we noted Greenshanks, Black-winged Stilts, Little Ringed Plovers and Ruddy Shelducks. A Common Teal and the Lesser Scaup were present. We walked along the water's edge and noted a small group of Mediterranean Short-toed Larks ahead, which did their usual disappearing act. However, while looking, we found at least fifty Trumpeter Finches which gave reasonable views every so often. Overhead, there were regular Black-bellied Sandgrouse. We walked towards the goat farm and actually found one on the ground, which proved a popular sighting after having seen so many in flight only.

Although there were more clouds, we seemed to be missing the rain completely – it was perhaps a shade cooler but as it was nearing midday, it was warm enough. We returned to the vehicles and moved on to the café at Los Molinos for lunch. Overlooking the small bay, we enjoyed cool drinks and mostly Spanish Omelette – although the scrambled egg with prawns and peppers were pretty good too.

By now it was early afternoon and we agreed we should give Tindaya Plain another go. We eventually found our way to the plain using a different route in and made a few stops to scan. We hoped for coursers, but got more bustards! Two birds on the way in, and then on the way back, what were likely to be another two or three different birds – very close to the track and well-photographed. We returned to the town and were pretty much of the opinion we would have gladly traded in a sighting or two of Houbara for at least one of a courser. That said, the bustards were fantastic, particularly these last sightings.

Back at the hotel by 16.30, we relaxed before our final checklist, and then enjoyed the mixed grill we could smell on the barbeque as we entered the restaurant. It was a fine evening with a chance to thank the staff for looking after us so well, and some group reflections on a lovely break in Fuerteventura.

## Day 8

Saturday 2nd December

With only time for a pre-breakfast walk this morning, we met at 07.15 and eyed the rain clouds. We felt light rain so stayed around the garden just in case, and waited until the weather looked better. We managed to make a circuit of the hotel grounds and worked up a respectable list including Cattle Egret, Peregrine and a flyover Siskin. Rain started just as we returned for breakfast, but it was nothing serious.

Final packing and sharing out of the remaining chewy bars from our picnic provisions followed. We then met in the carpark to get on our way and to say goodbye to five group members with afternoon flights.

Many thanks to everyone involved in this lovely trip: I hope we meet again.

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only, I = Introduced, LO = Leader only)

E=Endemic species, e=endemic subspecies		November - December 2023							
Common name	Scientific name	25	26	27	28	29	30	1	2
Ruddy Shelduck	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>		100	4	3	6	8	150	20
Muscovy Duck - I	<i>Cairina moschata</i>		50					✓	
Lesser Scaup	<i>Aythya affinis</i>		1					1	
Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>						2	1	
Barbary Partridge	<i>Alectoris barbara koenigi</i>	4	10	8	1	4	1		10
Plain Swift	<i>Apus unicolor</i>			?	?	15L O	3		
Houbara Bustard - e	<i>Chlamydotis undulata</i>			2	3	3		5	
Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>		70		2 h			100	
Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Laughing Dove	<i>Spilopelia senegalensis</i>		2	3	1	5	✓	7	3
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra atra</i>						1		
Eurasian Stone-curlew - e	<i>Burhinus oedichnemus insularum</i>		h		h		h	h	h
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		25			3L O	5	6	
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			6			5		
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>		10					15	
Eurasian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>			3	1	1L O	4		
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>					1			
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			1					
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		2			5	5	2	
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>							2	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			2			2		
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		2					2	
Cream-coloured Courser	<i>Cursorius cursor</i>		1						
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>					3	2		
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			1	1	✓	1		
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>			1			3		
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>				11		2		
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		8						2
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea cinerea</i>		1	1	3		1	1	
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta garzetta</i>	1	1	1	1		1		
Egyptian Vulture - e	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>		10	3	1	1	8	1	2
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo insularum</i>	2	5	1	1	2	2	2	
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>				1	3	4		
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	4	3	2	4	✓	4	2
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus pelegrinoides</i>			1		2		1	1
Great Grey Shrike - e	<i>Lanius excubitor koenigi</i>	1	4	6	5	10	✓	✓	4
Northern Raven - e	<i>Corvus corax canariensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	4
African Blue Tit - e	<i>Cyanistes teneriffae degener</i>		3	1	1	6	1		
Mediterranean Short-toed Lark - e	<i>Alaudala rufescens rufescens</i>					100 +		8	



E=Endemic species, e=endemic subspecies		November - December 2023							
Common name	Scientific name	25	26	27	28	29	30	1	2
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>			3					
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			1		2		1	
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>					3	1		
Spectacled Warbler	<i>Curruca conspicillata orbitalis</i>		2	3	2	5	✓	✓	h
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>					1			
Canary Islands Stonechat - E	<i>Saxicola dacotiae</i>		5			2	1	2	
Common Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			1			1		
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>							1	
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	2	1			LO	✓	1	
Berthelot's Pipit - e	<i>Anthus berthelotii berthelotii</i>	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Trumpeter Finch - e	<i>Bucanetes githagineus amantum</i>		20		4			50	
Common Linnet - e	<i>Linaria cannabina harterti</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	2	✓	✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>					?			
Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>					?			
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>					LO			1
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	2	8	1					

## Others (D = Dead)

		November – December 2023							
Common name	Scientific name	25	26	27	28	29	30	1	2
<b>Mammals:</b>									
Algerian Hedgehog - I	<i>Atelerix algirus</i>					D			
Barbary Ground Squirrel - I	<i>Atlantoxerus getulus</i>		1		✓	✓	✓	3	
<b>Amphibians &amp; Reptiles:</b>									
Atlantic Lizard	<i>Gallotia atlantica</i>							1	
East Canary Gecko	<i>Tarentola angustimentalis</i>								
<b>Butterflies</b>									
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>					✓			
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colius crocea</i>							2	
African Grass Blue	<i>Zizeeria knysna</i>						1		
Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>		2	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>					1		1	
Plain Tiger	<i>Danaus chrysippus</i>			✓		2	✓		
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>			1					
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>	1	1	2	✓	✓	1	10	
<b>Damsels &amp; Dragons</b>									
Sahara Bluetail	<i>Ischnura saharensis</i>		2				1		
Blue Emperor	<i>Anax imperator</i>			✓			✓		
Broad Scarlet	<i>Crocothemis erythraea</i>		1						
Red-veined Darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>			✓	✓	✓		1	

Common name	Scientific name	November – December 2023								
		25	26	27	28	29	30	1	2	
Band-eyed Drone Fly	<i>Eristalvius taeniops</i>									
A grasshopper	<i>Dericorys lobata luteipes</i>									
Desert Locust									1	
Sally Lightfoot Crab	<i>Grapsus grapsus</i>									
Banded Garden Spider	<i>Agiope trifasciata</i>							✓	✓	



Clockwise from top left – Sally Lightfoot Crab, Canary Island Stonechat, Garden Banded Spider, Berthelot's Pipit