

# Serranía de Ronda – A Vegetarian/Vegan tour

Naturetrek Tour Report

8th – 14th February 2024

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Cork Oaks, Genal Valley



Griffon Vulture



Chestnut cookery class with Chef Ivan



Marbled Duck

Tour report by Niki Williamson, photos by Simon Tonkin

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

## Summary

In this inaugural season of our tour catering specially for those who have chosen a more sustainable, plant-based diet, we were excited to showcase the stunning and varied habitats and landscapes of the Serranía de Ronda in Andalucía. Just an eagle's glide from the bustling Costa del Sol, this inexplicably under-birded area brings together an impressive range of habitats and species, all accessible from a single base!

Among lofty limestone crags, the hills were alive with Bonelli's and Golden Eagle, Griffon and Eurasian Black Vulture, Black Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting, Rock Sparrow (Petronia), Alpine Accentor, Red-billed Chough and Spanish Ibex.

On plains and low intensity arable farmland, we were thrilled to encounter Great and Little Bustard, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Eurasian Stone Curlews, Black-winged Kite and huge flocks of Calandra, Crested and Thekla's Lark, and Eurasian Skylark.

In the wetland areas, thrilling sightings came thick and fast with splendid White-headed Ducks and Marbled Ducks, Black-necked Grebes, Red-crested Pochard, and hundreds of Greater Flamingoes and bugling Common Cranes vying for our attention!

Our band of veggies and vegans were amply catered for by *cordon bleu* chef Iván, who also gave a cookery lesson using local chestnuts, his trademark ingredient. Picnics featured local organic produce and cheese from the free-range goats and sheep we saw roaming the crags on a daily basis. A visit to the historic city of Ronda provided a change of pace, with time to explore its picturesque old centre straddling the Tajo Gorge, and to do some urban birding to boot!

This was a superb trip exploring the natural, scenic, cultural and gastronomic heritage of this wonderful area!

## Day 1

## Thursday 8th February

Simon and Niki collected the group from various flights into Málaga airport, and we were soon on our way, leaving the city and heading up into the mountains of the Serranía de Ronda. En route, a small flock of Monk Parakeets flew over and we picked up a couple of Booted Eagles, newly arrived back in Europe for the breeding season. We continued on beyond the treeline of the Stone Pine forests, making our first stop at the Sierra de las Nieves, Spain's newest Natural Park.

Here we found a handsome Iberian Grey Shrike perched up on a bush. Eurasian Jays, Woodlarks, White Wagtails, Black Redstarts, Firecrests, Rock Buntings and Short-toed Treecreepers frequented the Holm Oak woodland around the picnic area. Dozens of Griffon Vultures circled overhead, and Northern Ravens played over the crags. We completed the journey along the last stretch of mountainous, moonscape limestone landscape which was our local patch. We were treated to display flight from two Golden Eagles!

Arriving at Júzcar – known as the *pueblo azul* due to being painted blue instead of white like its neighbours – we settled into rooms in the Hotel Bandolero, before meeting up for our first three-course dinner, courtesy of *cordon bleu*-trained chef, Iván! We began with a local goat cheese, apple and walnut salad with a honey dressing, yellow Thai curry with water chestnuts and vegetables served over jasmine rice, and a delicious juicy carrot cake for dessert – it became clear nobody would be going hungry on this trip!

## Day 2

## Friday 9th February

A wet morning awaited as much-needed rain poured down on the area! Undeterred, we set out to find breaks in the weather and the wildlife within them. We arrived at the Cueva del Gato and toggled up, taking a walk down to this gorgeous beauty spot. We managed to pick up both White and Grey Wagtails enjoying the weather.

We drove up through Benaolan and Montejaque villages to the other end of the same cave system, to the impressive limestone crags of Cueva del Hundidero. A break in the weather brought out the territorial battles of Spring and we witnessed a Black Wheatear turf war, with four birds fighting it out! We also found two Blue Rock Thrushes. Dozens of Red-billed Choughs swirled around the chasm below us and three Spanish Ibex grazed on the nearby rocks.

We headed back to Júzcar and took our picnic in the hotel's cozy salon area. The team even rustled us up a hearty pumpkin soup, which went so well with Iván's *masa madre* bread.

Later, as the rain stopped and the clouds lifted, we met for a woodland walk in the nearby chestnut and holm oak forest. There were many Hawfinches calling and we picked up European Serins, Eurasian Siskins, Eurasian Nuthatch, Short-toed Treecreeper and two surprise Eurasian Bullfinches.

## Day 3

## Saturday 10th February

Today, heading north of Ronda, we started by exploring some low-intensity arable farmland, specially managed for farmland species. Flocks of many Northern Lapwing and Golden Plovers swirled around us. The eerie calls of Eurasian Stone-curlews gave away their presence and we soon spotted them! We were also thrilled to pick up two gorgeous Black-winged Kites, hunting and subsequently perched in a tree. Several Black-winged Stilts fed in a rather stinky ditch!

We moved on to our main stop at the Laguna de Fuente de Piedra, a high altitude salt lake, fed by mineral-rich springs and rainwater, the salt concentrated by evaporation. It is also surrounded by smaller freshwater lagoons. A walk round the first of these got us great views of Marbled Duck, Water Pipit, Black-tailed Godwit in summer plumage and more!

We took our picnic of fresh local salads, cheeses, pulses, olives, wines and fruits (and of course chocolate!) before strolling out to explore further. From the hides we saw fabulous White-headed Ducks and their blue bills. The Black-necked Grebes and Red-crested Pochards were looking good too! Strolling out onto the wooden boardwalk through the marshes we picked up Little Ringed Plovers, got a brilliant flyover from a group of calling Greater Flamingoes, and spent some time with super-close Marbled Ducks. From the far shore of the main lagoon, we

looked out over pink clusters of Greater Flamingoes. From this high point we had views down on a couple of hundred Common Cranes, grazing and resting before heading to roost on the *laguna*.

Dinner tonight was another vegan-veggie delight, starting with a hearty chestnut *potaje*, followed by poached egg and *pisto* (a feisty Spanish relative of *ratatouille*) perched on a giant Portobello mushroom, then finished with confit apple cheesecake with cinnamon crumble: delicious!

## Day 4

## Sunday 11th February

Today we headed out to the plains in the area surrounding Osuna. On the way, we passed a Black Kite flying alongside the road, one of the first to arrive back from wintering grounds in sub-Saharan Africa! We used road bridges to view out over the expansive area. Despite the habitat being almost totally lost to arable farmland, some fantastic plains species are hanging on here thanks to specially-managed land.

At the first bridge, many Red Kites and Common Buzzards were roosting and testing the air currents. Scanning around, we almost immediately found a group of male Great Bustards! They were preening and testing out their “foam bath” display on each other. To the right, three females looked on, faking nonchalance before sidling towards the group.

We didn't see the outcome of the upcoming encounter, because a Little Bustard was spotted! We zeroed in with scopes, viewing across literally hundreds of Calandra Larks with Crested and Eurasian Skylarks in between. Once everyone had had a scope view, we used farm tracks to drive closer, and by approaching patiently and quietly we got amazing close views without disturbing this fabulous, threatened bird.

We took lunch next to the Laguna de Bastillera, where we enjoyed Greater Flamingoes, Kentish Plovers, Dunlin, Little Stint, and Shelduck.

We made our way back through the “Osuna Triangle” area to catch five Black-bellied Sandgrouse being flushed by a Griffon Vulture. A Eurasian Hoopoe showed well by the road and we picked up a Granada Hare making a run for it!

We headed home – in plenty of time for tomato salad topped with *burrata* or cashew cheese and dressed with chestnut pesto, orzo pasta with mushrooms and vegan *alioli* and a totally delicious vegan chocolate mousse!

## Day 5

## Monday 12th February

The historic city of Ronda awaited us today, for scenery, history and urban birding! We parked up close to the centre and walked in along Alameda promenade, with views of Blue Rock Thrush in the Tajo Gorge beneath us. Walking across the Puente Nuevo – the town's newest bridge across the gorge but still dating to the 18th century – we could see the smaller Moorish bridge next door, and the Roman bridge beyond that. Looking down into the depths of the gorge, we could see Eurasian Crag Martins surfing the updrafts and gathering airborne insects.

There was then time for wandering the historic streets, taking a coffee or maybe shopping for local produce, including some of the area's many superb conservation-grade goat and sheep cheeses.

We put this produce to good use for our picnic in the Parque Periurbano Dehesa del Mercadillo, where we also got to sample Iván's delicious chestnut bread. A sunbeam shone down on us and a walk amongst the Cork and Holm Oaks gave us views of Short-toed Treecreepers, Firecrest and European Serin.

On the way back to base we made a stop at the awesome barren moonscape of Los Riscos. We again picked up a soaring Golden Eagle and a couple of Red-billed Choughs. Driving up to the base of the crags, we followed a swirling group of migrating Black Kites. Many Crag Martins flew overhead, amongst them Barn Swallows and House Martins. We picked up Cirl and Rock Bunting singing as well as Blue Rock Thrush, Woodlark and Rock Sparrow (*Petronia*).

Then it was time for our cookery demonstration in the classroom of Iván, nationally known as the Chef de las Castañas for his chestnut specialities! He whipped up for us a three-course chestnut-based meal, starting with a tofu seaweed roll in crispy chestnut flour, seitan with red onion and chestnut sauce, and an experimental vegan and gluten-free chocolate, marron glacé and orange soufflé! We had great fun learning together, and the lesson was delivered with lashings of top tips and Iván's characteristic warmth and charm.

We saved some appetite for dinner of course, tonight warming pea soup with mint & crunchy sour dough bread croutons, baked filo pockets filled with ricotta/cashew cheese, pine nuts and blueberries and for pudding Ivan's twist on *torrijas*, a very naughty Spanish Easter snack.

## Day 6

## Tuesday 13th February

Today we headed to the limestone crags of Parque Natural de Sierra de Grazalema, recognized as one of Spain's most scenic areas. The sun shone bright today, filtering through the leaves of the Cork Oak *dehesas* and illuminating the sporadic explosions of pink blossom on the almond trees.

We stopped by an area of pretty meadows – an imposing rock face towered over us and we could see a Eurasian Black Vulture perched up on high with many Griffon Vultures. They eventually took off allowing us to appreciate its enormous 2.7m wingspan!

We took a streamside stroll through the pastures, finding Sombre Bee Orchid and Common Chiffchaffs and Eurasian Blackcaps galore. Butterflies were out in force today, among them Swallowtail, Spanish Festoon, Red Admiral, Small Copper, Clouded Yellow, Large Tortoiseshell and Monarch.

For our picnic we overlooked the most perfect wooded valley with Eurasian Nuthatch, Eurasian Jays, Iberian Green Woodpecker and Short-toed Treecreeper all around us. We even spotted a pair of Eurasian Nuthatches doing some home improvements on the mud entrance to their treehole nest! Overhead, a Eurasian Black Vulture put in another appearance, sharing a thermal with Griffon Vultures and a Peregrine Falcon.

We ended the trip on a literal high, heading up to the Puerto de las Palomas at 1300m ASL. Griffon Vultures soared low over our heads and we had spectacular close views of Eurasian Black Vulture too. Scanning the crags, we picked up Black Wheatear, with Black Redstarts and Rock Buntings visible close by. Two Alpine Acceptors could be seen skipping along the crag top, and a further flock of six flew by.

We headed back to Júzcar in time to pack, relax and eat a final expertly-prepared three course dinner featuring cucumber and feta cheese salad with sesame & Sichuan pepper dressing served in red lentil tacos, fennel and fine herbs risotto with crunchy fennel topping, and a spectacular chestnut soufflé!

## Day 7

## Wednesday 14th February

With midday flights for most, we enjoyed a final tasty breakfast before saying goodbye to David, Ivan, the blue village, and the mountains and plains where we had seen (and eaten) so much in the last week.

We were really excited by how well our first outing in this area and our first veggie-vegan tour had gone, with a superb list of wildlife encounters and some special scenic moments despite a smattering of dicey weather - and of course the fantastic hospitality and veggie/vegan-friendly food from the team at Hotel Bandolero!



Plant-based delights from Ivan's kitchen & Sombre Bee Orchid



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## Species lists

### Birds

Common name	Scientific name	February 2024					
		8	9	10	11	12	13
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>			20	2		
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>			80			
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>			6			
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			✓	4		
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			20			
Marbled Duck	<i>Marmaronetta angustirostris</i>			11			
Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>			3			
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>			7			
White-headed Duck	<i>Oxyura leucocephala</i>			5			
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			2	30	4	
Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>				10		
Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>				1		
Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>				5		
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domestica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			15			
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			20			
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			15			
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>			4			
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>			300	30		
Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oediconemus</i>			9	2		
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>			25			
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>			40			
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>			2			
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			50	20		
Kentish Plover	<i>Anarhynchus alexandrinus</i>				30		
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>			30			
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			2			
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			1	2		
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			10	30		
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>				4		
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>			✓	✓		
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓			2		
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			17	60		
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>			1	2		
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			2	4		
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			2			
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>			40			
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		2	1			
Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>			2			
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	80	20	20	10	30	200
Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>						2
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	1					
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	2				1	1
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>					1	
Eurasian Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>						1

Common name	Scientific name	February 2024					
		8	9	10	11	12	13
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			3	6		
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>				10		
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>				1	13	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1	3	5	15	2	
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>					1	
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upopa epops</i>				1		
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			1	1	2	2
Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>						3
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1		2	4	2	2
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>						1
Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	1		2	3		
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	2			1	1	4
Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		70			2	
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>			✓	✓	✓	
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	6	4	6	12	4	30
Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>						2
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	2	4	4	2	4	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	2	1	2	2	5	✓
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>	3				1	
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>				1		
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>			✓	✓		
Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>				300		5
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		40	20		50	✓
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		1	30		20	2
Western House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>			4	2	1	
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		1	2	1		1
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	10	6	8		10	4
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>			2			
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>	✓	10	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dartford Warbler	<i>Curruca undata</i>					2	2
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	1	2			4	2
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	2	8	2	1	6	10
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		2				4
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		4	1		6	10
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>						8
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		1	2	2	6	4
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	3	2	1		1	
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	10	15	10	6	✓	✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	5	9	4	8	10	
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	4	5	✓	✓	✓	✓
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		2			3	
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	2	6	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>		4	1			2
Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>					1	
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>			✓	✓		
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		2			4	2
Iberian Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>			1			



Common name	Scientific name	February 2024					
		8	9	10	11	12	13
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	6	3	✓	✓	✓	✓
Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>			1			
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			✓	✓		2
Eurasian Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrula</i>		2				
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		15				
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	2	2	4	4	3	✓
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	4		✓	✓	✓	✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	3	2	✓		10	✓
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	4	20	2			4
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		1	✓	✓		10
Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>	3	8			2	4
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		2			2	3
Monk Parakeet	<i>Myiopsitta monachus</i>	3					

## Others

Common name	Scientific name	February 2024						
		8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Iberian Ibex	<i>Capra pyrenaica</i>		3				4	
Europe Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>			✓	✓			
Iberian Hare (liebre ibérico)	<i>Lepus granatensis</i>			1	3			
Iberian Frog	<i>Rana iberica</i>						✓	
Iberian Pond Tortoise	<i>Mauremys leprosa</i>			✓				
Large Psammmodromus	<i>Psammmodromus algirus</i>						✓	
Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>						✓	
Spanish Festoon	<i>Zerynthia rumina</i>						✓	
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>					✓	✓	
Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>						✓	
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>						✓	
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>						✓	
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>					✓	✓	
Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>						✓	
Large Tortoiseshell	<i>Nymphalis polychloros</i>						✓	
Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>						✓	
Hummingbird Hawkmoth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>					✓		
Violet Carpenter Bee	<i>Xylocopa violacea</i>						✓	
Blue-winged Grasshopper	<i>Oedipoda caerulea</i>						✓	
Sombre Bee Orchid	<i>Ophrys fusca</i>						✓	
Common Asphodel	<i>Asphodelus aestivus</i>						✓	