

# Spain's Costa Blanca

Naturetrek Tour Report

11th – 18th March 2026

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Lesser Kestrel by Neil Murphy



Slender-billed Gulls by Steve Baxter



Red-nobbed Coot by Steve Ingleby



Firecrest by Steve Baxter

Tour report by Neil Murphy



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Tour participants: Neil Murphy (leader) with seven Naturetrek clients.

## Summary

It was a treat to escape the cold, wet, grey UK and enjoy some Spanish sunshine and hospitality on the Costa Blanca. Over the week we explored a range of habitats, from the coastal marshes and salt pans, before moving north up into the hills, *barrancs* and gorges. Finally, we headed a little west into the steppe country, which had its own range of specialist birds. On the coast, we were fortunate enough to see nearly all our targets, and particularly enjoyed White-headed and Marbled Ducks, Red-knobbed Coot, Purple Swamphen and Audouin's and Slender-billed Gulls. Iberian Magpie was a real bonus, as was a pair of displaying Bonelli's Eagle. In the hills we saw Griffon Vulture, Crag Martin, Blue Rock Thrush and Black Wheatear. Our day spent exploring the steppe was extremely rewarding, with the highlights being over fifty Great Bustards, a similar number of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, and other excellent birds such as Spanish Imperial Eagle, Lesser Kestrel and Calandra Lark. We were able to accommodate all the varied interests of the group, and greatly enjoyed each other's company over a thoroughly enjoyable week on the Costa Blanca.

## Day 1

Wednesday 11th March

### Santa Pola salt pans and lagoons

We congregated at Alicante airport arrivals hall mid-afternoon, and within an hour had checked in to our Santa Pola hotel. We were soon familiarising ourselves with Greater Flamingo, Black-winged Stilt and Avocet on the adjacent salt pans and lagoons, which would all become a daily feature in the wetlands. Here, we also saw our first Black Redstart, Sardinian Warbler, Spotless Starling and Serin, which would also become regular features every day. In the evening, we met up for a pre-dinner drink in the bar, before heading in for a buffet dinner, and then completing a quick checklist.

## Day 2

Thursday 12th March

### El Clot de Galvany, El Hondo, Santa Pola lagoons

Our first full day saw us head a little north-east, back to within earshot of the airport, but in the wonderful reserve of El Clot de Galvany. The reserve comprises a large lagoon surrounded by scrub and pine woodland, with an extensive circular walk which would take all day to complete. However, there are limited viewpoints over the lagoon, so we concentrated on these, and did a much shorter circular walk on the south-east side of the lagoon.

Sardinian Warblers were calling and singing everywhere, and we eventually had good views, although getting a good photo proved tricky. The first two small lagoons provided us with great views of Red-crested Pochard and European Pond Turtle from the hides, and we also noted six neck-collared Red-knobbed Coots, part of a monitoring programme here. We then climbed up through the scrub-covered hillside, noting Iberian Grey Shrike and Serin along the way, to a lovely view over the main lagoon. As we descended to the hide on the edge of the lagoon, a Pallid Swift flew overhead. The hide offered us superb views of White-headed Duck, the drakes sporting huge bulbous blue bills, and many stunning Black-necked Grebes in their fine breeding plumage. Many photos were taken, but the fly-past Little Bittern was too quick, and the four Ferruginous Ducks just a little too distant.

We completed our circuit, taking in a fourth hide where we added Marsh Harrier, before heading to a nearby supermarket to buy our picnic lunch. We pressed on for an afternoon at El Hondo marshes, but not before enjoying lunch in the car park, as a flock of forty Glossy Ibises flew overhead. From the visitor centre, we explored just one tiny area of the south-west side of the marshes, which cover an area of over ten square kilometres. A boardwalk over/through the first lagoon provided exceptional views of Red-knobbed Coot, at times too close for the photographers in the group! Marbled Duck were also to be found, along with Greater Flamingoes and some skulking Purple Swamphens. Zitting Cisticolas sang and bounced from over the reed-beds and Crested Larks were disturbed from the nearby fields. Little, Great and Cattle Egrets were all observed, and on returning to the visitor centre we found a pair of Tree Sparrow at a nest box, and two Booted Eagles drifted overhead. We returned to Santa Pola and our hotel, which offered a good vantage point over the road and tall reeds to the lagoons just beyond. We noted that gulls were gathering to have a late afternoon bathe, and we enjoyed good views of Audouin's and Mediterranean Gulls, next to Greater Flamingoes.

## Day 3

Friday 13th March

### Isle of Tabarca, Carabassi dunes, Santa Pola salt pans

Today saw us head out for a boat trip to the isle of Tabarca, the smallest inhabited Spanish island. We picked up a picnic lunch en route to Santa Pola harbour, where we saw our first Shag fishing in the harbour as countless Yellow-legged Gulls flew overhead. The weather was warm, sunny and still, which meant that the twenty-minute crossing was very pleasant. We soon arrived and set off to explore the island. As the weather was so good, it meant that there were very few grounded migrants around, but we enjoyed great views of four Black Redstarts and countless Sardinian Warblers, and played hide and seek with a Hoopoe. Whimbrel and Turnstone were also added to our growing trip list, and at the far eastern end of the island we enjoyed watching Sandwich and Common Terns fishing, while a couple of Gannets flew past in the distance.

There is a large breeding population of Yellow-legged Gulls on Tabarca, and we also found a few Audouin's Gull and had lovely views of Common Kestrel. We continued our circuit, took lunch in a secluded bay, and found our only two Common Starlings of the trip, in among a large flock of Spotless Starlings. We then headed back to the harbour, noting Corn Bunting on the way, and enjoyed a coffee before our 2.20pm return sailing. A few Scopoli's Shearwaters were seen from the boat as they followed a fishing boat, but they were hard to view as our boat rocked and rolled. We were soon back on the mainland, and headed just around the headland to Carabassi dunes, where a boardwalk lead down to the beach, where we had stunning views of more Audouin's Gulls. On returning to the hotel, some of us chose the short walk to view the Santa Pola salt pans, where we were rewarded with over three hundred Mediterranean Gulls and sixty Audouin's Gulls. Once again, we met up for a pre-dinner drink in the bar before heading to our buffet dinner, and then completing the checklist.

## Day 4

Saturday 14th March

### El Pinet, Torreveija, Barranc de la Garganta, Rambla del Castelar

Saturday saw us head just a few miles south to El Pinet, an area of old salt pans / lagoons which have become a nature reserve, overlooked by a couple of hides. Here the highlight was undoubtedly the huge numbers of breeding Slender-billed Gulls, with over a hundred pairs present. These elegant gulls looked incredibly pink in the

overcast light, and we also saw more Mediterranean and Audouin's Gulls, Curlew Sandpiper, Greenshank, Little Stint, Kentish Plover and thirteen Stone-curlews.

After a very enjoyable couple of hours, we moved further south to Torreveija, where we had good views of the small, satellite populations of both Iberian Magpie and Monk Parakeet, while an Alpine Swift flew over. We then picked up a picnic lunch from a nearby supermarket and had a late morning coffee break. Driving back north to the hills above Crevillent, we parked and enjoyed our lunch while scanning the cliffs. We didn't have to wait long for the pair of Bonelli's Eagles to show, but to have them displaying too was a massive bonus. Thekla's Larks were also singing and displaying all around us, while twenty Alpine Swifts were checking out the cliffs for nest sites.

Our final destination for the day was the nearby Rambla del Castelar trail, which rises into the rugged hills. We had barely left the vehicle when three immature Crossbills were spotted, allowing some great photo opportunities. The whole area looked perfect for Blue Rock Thrush and Black Wheatear, and these species were quickly seen, but a Little Owl was a real bonus. Other birds noted were a large flock of Serins, many Crag Martins, and Red-billed Chough.

## Day 5

**Sunday 15th March**

Santa Pola salt museum, Monnegre Hermitage, Ibi Botanic Garden, Hotel Mas Fontanelles grounds

It was time to pack up and head north into the hills, to our new farmhouse hotel just outside Biar. Our first stop was the fascinating Santa Pola salt pan museum, now a small nature reserve which offered great views of Greater Flamingo, Black-winged Stilt and Avocet, but also two Blue-headed Wagtails glowing in the sunshine. On leaving Santa Pola, we headed north via a *barranc* (dry river bed), where the highlights were Black Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush, Iberian Grey Shrike and lots of Crag Martins, but unfortunately the hoped-for Trumpeter Finch eluded us. A lunch and coffee stop at Ibi Botanic Garden added Iberian Green Woodpecker and Crested Tit to our list, and a Red Squirrel was a real bonus. We pushed on north through the beautiful Serra de Mariola National Park, before arriving at our stunning hotel, where a Firecrest sang and showed very well in the garden.

## Day 6

**Monday 16th March**

Hotel Mas Fontanelles grounds, Barranc del Cint, Biar steppe

Monday morning was spent exploring the grounds of the fantastic Mas Fontanelles hotel and the local environs. Both Crested Tit and Firecrest showed exceptionally well, allowing the photographers in the group to get some lovely shots. Later in the morning, we headed to the spectacular gorge at Barranc del Cint, in the heart of the Serra de Mariola National Park, where we took an early lunch before exploring the valley. As we enjoyed our picnic, majestic Griffon Vultures soared overhead, and they were joined by fly-over Ravens and Red-billed Choughs. The Griffon Vultures were constantly in view, soaring on the thermals, and several Black Redstarts flitted to and fro. We also had good scope views of Blue Rock Thrush, and many Crag Martins were exploring nest sites in the gorge, while a Peregrine Falcon flew past.

The more wooded areas of the gorge held yet more Crested Tits and Firecrests, and we finally tracked down Short-toed Treecreeper while Iberian Green Woodpeckers 'laughed' at us. This gorge walk was both beautiful and stunning, and was undoubtedly one of the highlights of our week, especially as we saw another Red Squirrel. We returned to the hotel, via a scenic drive back through the Serra de Mariola, and later some of us explored the valley below the hotel, where there was a good area of unspoilt steppe grassland. This area was particularly good for Little Owls, and superb for larks, with Calandra, Thekla's, Greater Short-toed and Skylark all recorded. Later, we enjoyed another excellent home-cooked dinner at the hotel, and completed the checklist over a beer and banter.

## Day 7

**Tuesday 17th March**

Laguna de Hoya Grande, Laguna Salada de Petrola, El Bachiller, Partida de Las Moratillas, Villena

For our final full day, we headed about an hour west, to the steppe country which used to cover much of central Spain but is now far more fragmented: much has been converted to agriculture. However, suitable areas can still be found, and they support some very special species. Luckily, we quickly found one of our main targets: the Great Bustard. In fact, we had a flock of thirty-two, which strutted across the fields towards us, allowing superb scope views. Some of the males even performed their 'foam-bath' display. Nearby, Calandra and Greater Short-toed Larks were also singing and displaying, and a tree full of Spanish Sparrow was also noted.

After a brilliant start we headed to the nearby Petrola Lagoon, where some Greater Flamingoes looked weirdly out of place so far inland. The lagoon was alive with Marsh Harriers quartering the margins, and it wasn't long before we located a rather distant Spanish Eagle, which gradually drifted closer to dwarf the harriers. We then moved on to El Bachiller, where we took lunch and enjoyed the company of Lesser Kestrel, Thekla's Lark, Rock Sparrow and another twenty Great Bustards. We searched in vain for Black-bellied Sandgrouse, but did turn up a pair of Hoopoes. Time was now pushing on, so we headed back towards Bair to check our final site near Villena. Much of this area is now agricultural, but in a remote corner we managed to find a few special fields. Here, we were delighted to encounter the much hoped for Pin-tailed Sandgrouse: and not just a few, but a flock of fifty-two. What a fabulous end to a great day! Other birds here included a large mixed flock of Rock Sparrows and Corn Buntings, together with Red-billed Chough and Stone-curlew. After another delicious dinner at the hotel, and with the checklist completed, some of us headed outside in an attempt to see the local Tawny Owls, which we had heard calling every night from the hotel gardens. Luck was again on our side: one gave good views in the torchlight.

## Day 8

**Wednesday 18th March**

Hotel Mas Fontanelles quarry and olive grove

This morning was again spent exploring the hillside around the hotel. As usual, Crested Tits and Firecrests were singing in the hotel grounds, and four Serins were singing in the quarry. We continued our walk through the pine woodlands and eventually arrived at an old olive grove, where an Iberian Green Woodpecker called, and a singing Woodlark became the 131st species added to our trip list. It was then time to head back to Alicante airport to say

our farewells, and we flew back to four different UK destinations, all agreed that this had been an extremely enjoyable and successful holiday on the beautiful Costa Blanca.



Great Bustards by Steve Ingleby

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## Species lists

Birds (H=heard only)

N=Near-endemic, I=Introduced		March 2026							
Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
White-headed Duck	<i>Oxyura leucocephala</i>		30						
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	6	50	20	8	6		12	
Marbled Duck	<i>Marmaronetta angustirostris</i>		34						
Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>		40						
Ferruginous Duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>		2						
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		40						
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	12	80			30		2	
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		10					8	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	2	✓		1			✓	
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		10						
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		2				4	4	
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	30	✓	30	70	30		40	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		40						
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		2						
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>		50						
Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>							53	
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>							52	
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>						1		
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓						
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓			2		2	
Red-knobbed Coot	<i>Fulica cristata</i>		40						
Purple Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>		3						
Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicanus</i>		2		14			4	
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	8	1		40	15			
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	8	3	5	10	10		4	
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>							4	
Kentish Plover	<i>Anarhynchus alexandrinus</i>			1	20				
Eurasian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>			1					
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>				3			6	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		2					1	
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	1		1		3			
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	1			2				
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>				1				
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			1					
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>				1				
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>			40					
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				175				
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	1			6				
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>			12	20				
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>			1					
Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>				250				
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	5	6			2	
Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>	1	8	70	4				

N=Near-endemic, I=Introduced		March 2026							
Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>		30	300	20				
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		6	
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			20					
Scopoli's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>			4					
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			2					
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>			25					
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	2	2	3	40	8		2	
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		150						
Little Bittern	<i>Botaurus minutus</i>		1						
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	2	6	3	1	3			
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		6			1			
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Ardea ibis</i>		25	2	1	10			
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		2					2	
Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>				20				
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>				4	2	2		
Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>		1						
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>				1				
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>						1	1	1
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>						40		
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>		2						
Spanish Imperial Eagle - N	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>							1	
Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>				2				
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	2	15					20	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>					2	2	6	
Common Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		3	1	1			4	
Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>		1		1	2	2	1	1
Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>							8	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	3	2	2	2			
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>						1		
Monk Parakeet - I	<i>Myiopsitta monachus</i>				20				
Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		2		1	1		1	
Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>				10		12	30	
Iberian Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>				10				
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>							1	4
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>						12	1	
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>							✓	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		1			2	2		
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>					4	6	2	2
Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>					3	2		2
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>								1
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>						1		
Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>				8	2	6	12	
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		4					4	
Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>						2	1	
Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>						4	12	
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		6	1				1	
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>				40	50	20		
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		2	2	4	2		2	
Western House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		100		1	6			

N=Near-endemic, I=Introduced		March 2026							
Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
European Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis rufula</i>							2	
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>				2	4	6	2	2
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		6			3			
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	1	5	3	1	2			
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		1		1	3	✓	✓	✓
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>	3	12	25	12	8	6		2
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>						6	2	6
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>						6	1	
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>						2		
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		30	75	6	4		✓	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>			2					
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>						1	1	
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>				1				
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓			4	✓	✓	✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓		1				
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	1	1	4	1	1	8	3	
Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>							1	
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>				2	2	2		
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>						1		
Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>				1	2	1		
Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>							60	
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		2					2	
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>							10	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>					2			
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓		4	12	4	1
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			2				12	
Eurasian Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>				2	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	1	2		2		2	2	
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		4	2	4		2	100	
Common Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>				3	1	1		
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		2		4	6	✓	✓	
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		4		40	12	✓	✓	4
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>			2			2	75	
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>						1		

## Mammals

Common name	Scientific name
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>
Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>

## Reptiles

Common name	Scientific name
Eurasian Pond Turtle	<i>Emys orbicularis</i>
Red-eared Terrapin	<i>Trachemys scripta elegans</i>

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## Butterflies

<b>Common name</b>	<b>Scientific name</b>
Scarce Swallowtail	<i>Iphiclides podalirius</i>
Spanish Festoon	<i>Zerynthia rumina</i>
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>
Bath White	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>
Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>
Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria aegeria</i>