



Swift Weekender

Friday 17– Monday 20 July 2020

(Extension Monday 20 – Wednesday 22 July)

Summary

When our guest arrives for a four-day trip and ends up staying for six days, we can definitely feel optimistic that we're doing something right!

We certainly loved showing our guest all the very best of The Straits in summer and having fantastic encounters with all five breeding Swifts of mainland Europe. For a short trip, our species list was phenomenal, and included sought-after birds like Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin, Red-knobbed Coot, White Headed Duck, Northern Bald Ibis, Bonelli's and Golden Eagle, Blue Rock Thrush, Audouin's and Slender-billed Gull, Black-eared Wheatear and the highly photogenic European Bee-eater.

Autumn migration was already well under way, and we had uplifting encounters with hundreds of Black Kites and White Storks, interspersed with Booted and Short-toed Eagles and Montagu's Harrier, waiting for their chance to cross The Straits of Gibraltar.

Throughout all this the trip kept its relaxed feel, with plenty of time to seize the perfect photo, enjoy an icecream or beer and a good laugh!

Day 1 Friday 17 July

We met Alan at Málaga airport and were soon jetting along the Costa del Sol towards our base in The Straits of Gibraltar, picking up Booted and Short-toed Eagles as we went. Stopping for lunch *en route*, we were joined by European Bee-eaters overhead, and as we passed through Algeciras, the sky was filled by our first Swift of the weekend – hoards of hawking Pallid Swifts.

We made another brief stop at the famous raptor watchpoint of Cazalla. Here, we enjoyed the already significant build-up of migrating Black Kites, gathering in the valleys around Tarifa awaiting their chance to cross the Straits.

We settled in to our accommodation at the international Centre for Avian Migration (CIMA) in the hills above Tarifa, where Sardinian Warblers could be heard calling from the scrub, and families of Spotted Flycatchers hunted insects.

Heading out for an afternoon's birding, we stopped to observe 50+ Black Kites resting in a field out of the easterly or *levante* wind.

In the cool shade of the woodlands of Monte Facinas, at the gateway to Los Alcornocales Natural Park, Western Bonelli's Warblers sang from the Cork Oaks and a colony of European Bee-eaters provided some great photographic opportunities.

For the late afternoon we head up to the Griffon Vulture colony at La Zarga – a magical place, accessed by permit only, where we were able to watch over a hundred Griffon Vultures coming in to roost. Overhead they are simply spectacular, and we loved hearing the swooshing of their wings as they came in to land. We were also graced with a pair of Egyptian Vultures! On high, many Common Swifts hunted, Ravens soared, and we got great views of Cirl Buntings and Woodchat Shrike. The air was thick with the purrs of a European Turtle Dove.

From here we headed straight to dinner on the leafy terrace of a local restaurant, specialising in amazing pizza topped with fresh ingredients, and – for those who like a bit of spice – a particularly feisty locally-produced hot sauce!

Day 2 Saturday 18 July

White-rumped Swift



We headed out fairly early to make the most of the cool morning and reach the site for our next Swift species – White-rumped Swift. We arrived to a lovely selection of House Martins, Red-rumped Swallows, and Barn Swallows feeding together when suddenly they popped into view – three White-rumped Swifts, really close! We were thrilled with the prolonged close views we got as they hawked for insects around us.

From this site we also had fab views of a Western Osprey nest – there were five birds sat on the nest, and another, unseen individual calling! Clearly a bumper breeding year for them!

Corn Buntings and White Storks were numerous in the surrounding fields. We also saw Monarch Butterflies – a magnificent introduced resident to the area – European Bee-eaters, Melodious Warblers and a constant flow of Black Kites heading determinedly south.

A great morning so far! But definitely time for second breakfast, so we headed for strong coffee and *tostada* – local bread topped with tomatoes and olive oil.

We started our return loop through the expansive fields of La Janda. Once a vast wetland it is now drained for agriculture but retains echoes of its former natural glory.

Its hilltop pastures are rightly renowned for their raptors. Sure enough, it wasn't long before we came across a Spanish Imperial Eagle being mobbed by a Marsh Harrier, which it dwarfed! A glorious close Booted Eagle made for some fantastic photos.

We took our picnic lunch in the shade of some farm buildings, with European Turtle doves feeding alongside. The many raptors overhead included Common Kestrel, Black Kite, Booted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle and Griffon Vulture.

The irrigated rice fields provided views of Glossy Ibis, Purple Swamphen, Wood Sandpiper, Ruff, Common Greenshank and Collared Pratincole. Many White Storks and Black Kites were moving overhead, interspersed with the odd Booted and Short-toed Eagle – mid-July, and the migratory dance was really beginning!

At the Marismas de Barbate, Audouin's and Mediterranean Gulls roosted amongst the many Yellow-legged Gulls on the disused salt pans. Short-toed and Crested Larks, female Black-eared Wheatear, Tawny Pipit fed near the shores. Further round the shoreline were Eurasian Spoonbills and Greater Flamingos, as well as interesting flocks of mixed waders including Curlew Sandpipers and Common Redshank amongst Dunlin and Ruddy Turnstones – more early migrants.

We were heading back but there were yet more delights to stop us! On a roadside arable field, we found eleven Northern Bald Ibis! Descendants of a successful reintroduction programme on nearby cliffs, these birds are doing well here, but they are still one of the world's rarest birds, numbering only 1000 in the wild.

Only one thing for it, we had to celebrate with an ice cream! This unscheduled stop proved serendipitous as a Eurasian Hoopoe was feeding nearby in the shade.

In the valley near CIMA, yet again several hundred Black Kites were gathering in the "avian departure lounge", waiting for the stiff *levante* breeze to drop and aid their southward journey.

Dinner was at El Ólivo - an excellent local restaurant specialising in free-range beef of the local *Retinto* breed.



Day 3

Sunday 19 July

A big day in store today, as we headed over to bird the fantastic Bahía de Cádiz. Some of the habitat here forms part of the eastern edge of the famous Coto de Doñana Natural Park, and there was lots to look forward to!

It would of course have been rude not to stop briefly and admire the many Black Kites hanging in the wind at sunrise as we left The Straits!

Our first proper stop of the day was at a small fishing harbour. We arrived to witness over 40 Little Swifts pouring out of their nest sites! This is a superb swift – agile, pretty, with a superb giggling call and incredibly photogenic for those with fast eyes and lenses!

We were able to carry on enjoying their antics as we took a coffee (and now traditional “second breakfast!”) on the harbour front. They were joined by huge screaming parties of Common Swifts, also nesting nearby.

We observed a nice selection of Terns at a nearby beach - Sandwich, Common and Black Terns in summer plumage – before heading on to the salt pans at Bonanza. This amazing stop is a mixture of industrial and – increasingly – traditional salt pans, and is teeming with both resident and migratory birds. Particularly impressive today were large flocks of Curlew Sandpipers in brick red summer plumage. Migrating Common Redshanks mingled with breeding Pied Avocets, Kentish Plovers and their chicks! Seabirds included Caspian Tern, and a spell-binding encounter with dozens of fairy-like Little Terns, fishing amongst Slender-billed Gulls.

Lesser Short-toed Larks and Iberian Yellow Wagtails flitted and called amongst the scrub.

Next, we headed to nearby irrigation pools. Used to feed local small-scale agriculture, these pools are reed-fringed and barely managed, and great for wildlife! Here - after a bit of searching - we found two Red-knobbed Coots! There were many male and female White-headed Duck, very close and highly photogenic. Other highlights included Black-crowned Night Heron, Purple Swamphens, and Common Waxbills.



Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin

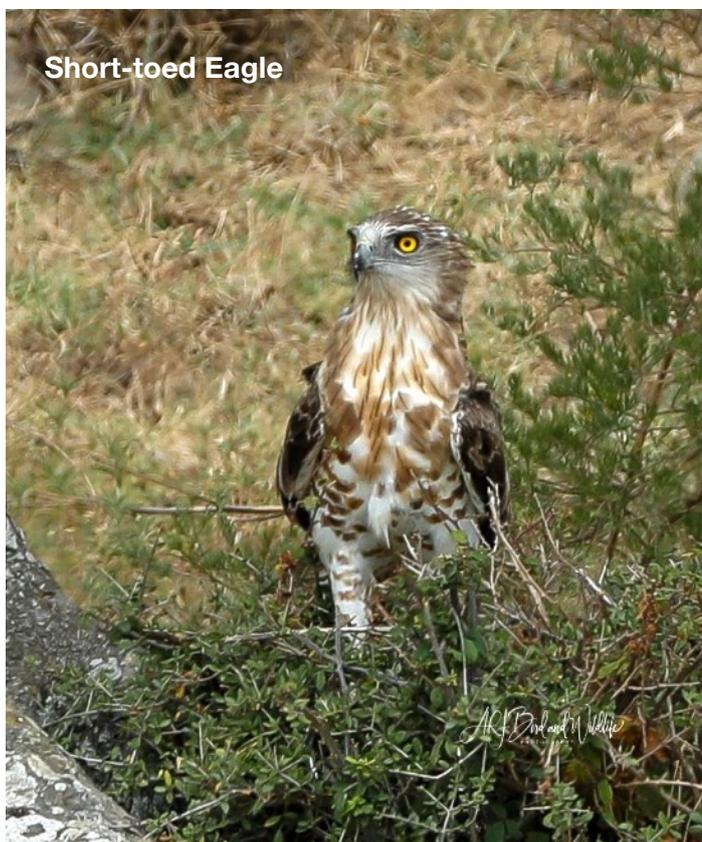
Today we took lunch in the shade of an almond orchard near Trebujena. This area is becoming famous not only for its vineyards but for the bird that thrives around some of them - the beautiful and much-coveted Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin. Even as we prepared the picnic, we could hear one singing, and before too long we were watching five of them! We got great views of two males fighting and a group of three hanging out together, presumably a family.

A superb day, rounded off with an excellent selection of *tapas* and cool beer at Geko, a welcoming family restaurant in Tarifa's old town.

Day 4 Monday 20 July

Today should have been a relaxed final morning's birding, followed by journeys home, but our guest Al was enjoying the trip so much that he decided to stay until Wednesday! This gave us time to explore still more of the area's delights, as well as revisit some of the weekend's favourite sites to get even more great photos.

Tarifa Island is military land that can be accessed only with a permit. The tip of this promontory is the absolute narrowest point between mainland Europe and Africa, and we headed here this morning in brisk easterlies. The large Yellow-legged Gull colony was lively, full of adults and newly-fledged birds calling. Out to sea were Cory's and Scopoli's Shearwaters so we spent some time getting to grips with the subtle differences between them. We also picked out Balearic Shearwaters and Sandwich Tern. A steady flow of Barn Swallows, Sand Martins and Common Swifts heading south over the water.



We walked up through Tarifa old town, picking out juvenile Lesser Kestrels perched on several of the picturesque historic buildings. Many had actually congregated in our car park - both adults and juveniles were perched together in a tree.

Next it was up to the Mirador del Estrecho café for cold drinks and a view out over the coastlines of two continents, before a brief stop at Cazalla watchpoint, from where we could see raptors were gathering in the valley of Santuario de la Luz. Here we headed for picnic, sharing the site with four hunting Short-toed Eagles, a Black-eared Wheatear and a family of Thekla Larks, while many Black Kites drifted overhead.

Cueva del Moro, high up in the crags above the town of Bolonia, gave us views of Blue Rock Thrush. After that we returned to the vulture colony at La Zarga where we spent some more time enjoying and photographing Griffon Vultures, as well as the resident pair of Egyptian Vultures and a steady stream of Black Kites.

Extension Day 1

Tuesday 21 July

Today the wind dropped and the migration floodgates opened - the build-up of Black Kites, Booted Eagles and Short-toed Eagles were finally able to make their way across the Straits on their southbound journey. We enjoyed a whole morning of this spectacle! At the raptor watchpoint, we also saw a Montagu's Harrier and had amazing close views of a Short-toed Eagle hunting, which gave rise to some absolutely spectacular photographs.

Lunch was in the cool shade of Cork Oak trees at El Chorrito, a freshwater spring, where we were amongst Short-toed Tree Creepers and Spotted Flycatchers, and enjoyed the antics of the local Bee-eater colony. We spent the afternoon exploring further the vast expanse of the La Janda farmlands, on the look out for more raptors, waders and farmland birds.

Another productive day was rounded off with the hospitality and traditional Andalus food of Pablo and Mercedes, at Inglorious Bustards' local restaurant, La Antigua Fonda in Facinas.

Extension day 2

Wednesday 22 July

Wednesday was the new Monday, and it was time for Al to head home! Happily, his evening flight from Málaga gave us opportunity to fit in yet another spectacular day's birding!

Making an early start, we headed for the hills of the Serranía de Ronda, where we made our first stop in the ancient town of Ronda itself. Walking along the park which perches on the edge of the El Tajo gorge, we picked up calling Red Crossbills, a Firecrest and a Blue Thrush clinging to the gorge walls, as Common Swifts hunted low over the town.



Alpine Swift

Next, we made a stop at the famous Cueva del Gato, at the lower end of an 8km cave system, where the streams emerge to form tranquil blue pools at the base of the crags. In this beautiful serene place, the peace was only broken by the spectacular swooping of Alpine Swifts, as fifty or more of them whizzed giggling and screaming over our heads, in and out of their colony. This was a truly amazing experience, brought to even greater heights by the sudden appearance of three Bonelli's Eagles!

We stopping for a *bocadillo* and a cool drink at a mountaintop café with a stunning view out over the limestone moonscape of the Parque Natural Sierra de las Nieves, before heading in to this area to explore further. A lovely area surrounded by Cork and Holm Oak trees and quasi-endemic Spanish Fir, gave us more chance to connect with Firecrests, Short-toed Tree-creepers, and Western Bonelli's Warblers, while we managed to see two distant Golden Eagles over the crags. We also added

Safflower Skipper and Rock Grayling to our butterfly list.

Now our time had finally run out! But as we headed for the airport, we managed one last stop – nipping into a golf course on the edge of Málaga, we cheered ourselves spending some time watching the antics of the introduced-but-adorable Monk Parakeets!

Thanks AI, for joining us on our Swift Weekend-cum-Short Week with AI – so much excellent birding, great laughs and company!

Thanks to AI for the pictures of White-rumped, Little and Alpine Swift and the astonishing close up encounter with a Short-toed Eagle !

More information here : <https://arjbirdandwildlifephotography.com> or more images on AI's instagram feed here: <https://www.instagram.com/arjbirdandwildlifephotography/>