



The Straits of Gibraltar – Bird Migration & Cetaceans

11 – 17 September 2021

Summary

Soaring birds ruled the skies during this laidback week to experience the spectacular autumn raptor migration across The Straits of Gibraltar. Masses of Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Egyptian and Griffon Vultures, Marsh and Montagu’s Harriers, Lesser Kestrels, European Honey Buzzards, Eurasian Sparrowhawks, White Storks, Black Kites and more poured through the area, giving our guests plenty of chance to get to grips with identification, and simply enjoy the view.

Bottlenose Dolphins and Long-finned Pilot Whales graced our boat trip and Striped and Common Dolphins even surfed our wake!

We enjoyed Greater Flamingoes, Curlew Sandpipers and Kentish Plovers along the coast; European Bee-eaters, Eurasian Hoopoes, Spanish Imperial and Bonelli’s Eagles and Black-winged Kites on the farms and pastures, Blue Rock Thrush and Rüppell’s Vulture in the mountains; and Hawfinch, Firecrest and Crested Tit practically from the breakfast table!

A fantastic wildlife week throughout, topped off with picnics and evening meals based on delicious, locally-sourced, sustainably-produced ingredients, and plenty of stops for coffee and icecream!

Day 1 Saturday 11 September

Our guests Sharon and Paul arrived and settled in to their accommodation amongst the cork oak forest of Huerta Grande Rural Eco-lodge. It was a calm day with a slight south-westerly wind – ideal conditions for raptor migration - so we headed straight out to get in to the midst of it!

We headed to the clifftops of El Trafico above Tarifa, where it was truly “Eagle O’clock”! Eagles ruled the skies! 359 Short-toed and 399 Booted Eagles crossed out over our heads, along with Black Storks, Egyptian and Griffon Vultures, Montagu’s and Marsh Harrier, Eurasian Sparrowhawks, European Honey Buzzards and Black Kites. A Goshawk and two Peregrine Falcons also sailed over. We enjoyed European Bee-eaters flying over us, as well as Alpine Swifts.



Short-toed eagle

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For our first picnic lunch together, we moved on to the area of Santuario de la Luz, a wonderful viewpoint out over Tarifa Bay. Alongside our local cheeses, wines, olives, salads and freshly-baked bread, we enjoyed more raptors overhead.

We also had great views of a smart Black-eared Wheatear and got to grips with the ID features of a family of Thekla's Larks.

Day 2 Sunday 12 September

After a leisurely breakfast, a breezy day took us to the well-known watchpoint of Cazalla, overlooking Tarifa & The Straits. We knew that birds were unlikely to be crossing in these conditions, but that they would likely gather in the "departure lounge" around this area, waiting for the wind to drop.

Our strategy worked well, and we were treated to close views of wind-surfing European Honey Buzzards, Short-toed Eagles and Booted Eagles. There were also several Egyptian Vultures and Griffon Vultures hanging out on the breeze.

With a great selection of species to work on, it was a nice opportunity to start really getting to grips with raptor identification, which was one of our guests' big hopes for the week. As a first step we had fun picking out reliable features to really latch onto, such as the "RAF rondelles" on a Honey Buzzard, and the resemblance that a Short-toed Eagle's underwing bears to tiramisú or Viennetta!

For the afternoon we headed out to the old saltpan complex at Marismas de Barbate. These ancient salt pans fell into disuse in the 1970s and spent some time as a landfill site, but have now been rejuvenated into an excellent nature reserve. There we found a lovely selection of waders including Curlew Sandpipers, Black-winged Stilts, Eurasian Stone-curlews, Pied Avocet, Black-tailed Godwit, Kentish, Grey and Common Ringed Plovers and Ruff among large flocks of Dunlin and Sanderling.

Mediterranean and Audouin's Gulls added some glamour to the assembled Yellow-legged and Lesser Black-backed flocks. Iberian Yellow Wagtails flitted along the shore and Eurasian Spoonbills and Greater flamingos towered over everything!



Day 3 Monday 13 September

Another sunny but breezy morning, so we headed out to explore the intertidal habitat at Los Lances beach and to experience the exhilarating *levante* (easterly) wind for which the area is famous!

We found ourselves in the middle of real migratory drama! Black Kites, desperate to reach Africa, were launching themselves out to sea, only to give up and arrive back minutes later to crash-land on the beach, exhausted from their efforts. A band of Lesser Kestrels powered over us, these colonially-nesting birds seemingly migrating *en masse*.

Sheltering from the elements in the intertidal pools and splashes we picked out Eurasian Oystercatcher and Red Knot among groups of Sanderlings, Curlew Sandpipers and Dunlin. Sandwich Terns and tired-looking Audouin's Gulls rested on wooden posts alongside a Common Kingfisher. Apart from us, the only creatures enjoying the breezy day seemed to be the Scopoli's Shearwaters, zipping along over the sea!

On the nearby pastures, large flocks of Calandra Larks seemed to sparkle as they flew, flashing black underwings.

We took a coffee and a brief stroll in the seaside town of Bolonia, where we picked up Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, Dunlin on the seafront and a couple of migrating Willow Warblers in the beachside tamarisks.

Heading up to La Zarga area, we spotted Black-eared Wheatear and a juvenile Woodchat Shrike. We took our picnic near the spectacular Griffon Vulture colony, which in the early 1930s became

the first place a Griffon Vulture was ever photographed at the nest. Huge group of Griffons were hanging in the air as we approached, and we enjoyed watching their aerial mastery and hearing the swish of their wings low over our heads.

Amongst them were three Egyptian Vultures and a Peregrine Falcon. After some searching of the dozens of birds resting on the rock face, we were thrilled to find a Rüppell's Vulture! As their numbers in Africa decline sharply, this Critically Endangered species is becoming a more regularly-recorded vagrant to The Straits.

Later we headed back to base through the valley of Santuario de la Luz, where we had nice views of Montagu's and Marsh Harriers and migrating Northern Wheatear in the fields.

After time to relax and refresh we headed out for a delicious vegetarian meal, catered in the home of our friend Jocelyn, and featuring home-grown ingredients from her *huerta* or vegetable garden.



White Storks

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Day 4

Tuesday 14 September

This morning the forested slopes around our accommodation were wearing their *barbas de levante* – “Levanter beards” – the local name for the mists that often shroud this hillside in an easterly wind. This year-round humidity is what makes the woodland so unique and full of life, so we spent some time exploring it this morning.

Our walk around the seven-hectare grounds of Huerta Grande was really magical, featuring close encounters with Firecrests, Spotted and Pied Flycatchers, Eurasian Blackcap and Wren. Short-toed Treecreepers called, large flocks of Hawfinches hung out in the Poplars, and as we took a mid-morning coffee, we picked up Crested Tits on the nearby birdfeeder!

We then headed out to explore the rice and cotton fields and reed-fringed ditches of La Janda, once a huge wetland lagoon. It’s now drained for agriculture, but still retains an ecological memory of the treasure it once was.

Raptors included Black Kites, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures. Of note were the large numbers of harriers feeding over the farmland. We saw around thirty Montagu’s Harriers fuelling up for their onward journey, and over fifty Marsh Harriers. Lesser Kestrels were numerous too, numbering at least twenty. Large flocks of over 2,000 Common Woodpigeons were also spectacular!



Spotted Flycatcher

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Green Sandpipers moved around the ditches and we picked up a lovely Common Kingfisher and a flock of Spanish Sparrows. There were many Pallid and Alpine Swifts feeding overhead as well as Barn Swallows and House Martins. We were thrilled to see thirty European Turtle Doves perched up on wires. Numbers of this fast-declining species continue to plummet due to the intensified agriculture needed to supply feed for the meat industry. But here, it feels like this beautiful bird is already bolder and easier to see, now that it is no longer hunted in most parts of Spain.

We headed back for some relaxation time at Huerta Grande, but not before topping off the visit with views of an adult Spanish Imperial Eagle!

Day 5 Wednesday 15 September

We began the day with a brief visit to El Algorrobo watchpoint, enjoying views of European Honey Buzzards and Black Kites leaving their roosts and heading west along the coast, ahead of an advancing rain shower.

We too headed west, to avoid the brief downpour and explore another section of La Janda, over towards Benalup area – pausing briefly for a coffee and some cheese-shopping at a local farm shop!

In the rice fields were many White Storks fuelling up for their journeys and also feeding Glossy Ibis – one young bird seemed keen to get into the vehicle with us! European Bee-eaters chirruped overhead and we saw migrating Whinchat and Northern Wheatears. Eurasian Reed Warblers and Melodious Warblers lurked in trackside bushes. Woodchat Shrikes and European Turtle Doves graced overhead wires and treetops. We were lucky enough to encounter two beautiful Black-winged Kites.

Before heading home, we made a brief visit to the area of Manzanete, on the lookout for one of the world's rarest birds. We were in luck, and spotted four Northern Bald Ibis in flight! With only around 1000 birds left in the wild, the successful reintroduction project in Andalucía is a boon to the bird's continued survival.

Day 6 Thursday 16 September

On this beautiful, calm morning we headed out for our boat trip into The Straits themselves, to look for some of the resident seabirds and cetaceans. Skipper Aurelio was in fine spirits, ready to show our small group some of the marine delights of The Straits from his private boat!

Near the harbour entrance, we saw Mediterranean Gull, Cory's and Balearic Shearwaters and Northern Gannet and a brief encounter with a Great Skua. It wasn't long before we found ourselves amongst a group of Bottlenose Dolphins, their curiosity bringing them right up to the boat! We encountered groups of hundreds of Striped and Common Dolphins, which could be heard squeaking and clicking under the surface, and indulged in a little surfing off the wake of our boat! We were also lucky enough to encounter several groups of loafing Long-finned Pilot Whales!

We returned to shore to see clouds of raptors gathering above Tarifa. After a couple of days of windy weather and yesterday's low cloud, numbers of soaring birds in the area had been building up, and these migrants were impatient and raring to go!

We took our picnic on the hillside of El Trafico, surrounded by European Bee-eaters, before heading up to the Mirador del Estrecho. Here we viewed out across the landscape down to The Straits to spot groups of raptors gathering on the building thermals. We also spotted a Bonelli's Eagle being mobbed by a Booted Eagle and a Black Kite!

We made our last stop at El Algorrobo watchpoint, from where we could see more raptors moving through, by now looking for a place to roost. They included Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Honey Buzzards, Black Kites, Marsh Harrier, and Egyptian Vulture. A Short-toed Eagle hovered low and gave us the full view of its "tiramisú" underwings, ending the day on a great show.

We celebrated our great day and our last night at lovely local restaurant Venta Pelayo, where chef Luisa summoned up another delightful menu of traditional Andalucian food, featuring locally-sourced vegetables, meat and fish, and served up with a warm welcome as always!

Day 7 Friday 17 September

It was our guests' last day, but with an extra night booked at Huerta Grande and no rush to leave, we were able to fit in more great birding!

A woodland stroll was quickly abandoned as Black Kites and Honey Buzzards began pouring out from roosts in the surrounding hills – it was clear this calm day was going to be another massive one for migration!

Beginning at nearby El Algorrobo, we spent a last glorious morning following the swirling masses of soaring birds along the coast as they sought out gaps in the cloud to cross. We enjoyed a surprise Blue Rock Thrush at El Cabrito as Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Black Kites and Honey Buzzards, Griffon Vultures and a large flock of White Storks gathered along the coast. We finished our trip together at Cazalla, where we joined many other birders gathered to watch the spectacle.

Such a privilege to experience and feel part of this epic migratory journey and lovely to share it with Sharon and Paul, who now most definitely knew their RAF rondelles from their tiramisú

			date						
			sat 11	sun 12	mon 13	tue 14	wed 15	thu 16	fri 17
	Species	Scientific Name							
1	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>				1			
2	Cory's/Scopoli's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>			√			√	
3	Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>						√	
4	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>						√	
5	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		√				√	
6	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	√	√	√		√	√	√
7	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		3	1		√		
8	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		3			6		
9	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	23						
10	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	50			-1	√		√
11	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>					√		
12	Northern Bald Ibis	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>					4		
13	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		14					
14	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>		√					
15	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		1			√		
16	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	20	7	1		6	√	√
17	Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>					2		
18	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	50	20	50	√	√	√	√

19	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	5	12	3	√	√	√	√
20	Rüppell's Vulture	<i>Gyps rueppellii</i>			1				
21	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	20	20	80	√	20	√	√
22	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	359	30	3		4	√	√
23	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>	1	1		30	5		
24	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	1	1	4	50	√	√	√
25	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	2	√				√	
26	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	1						
27	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>						1	
28	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus fasciatus</i>						1	
29	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>				1			
30	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	399	√	√		√	√	√
31	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	6		6	20	√	√	√
32	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	1	2	4	4	√	√
33	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	2		1				
34	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				1			
35	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		2	2				
36	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		√					
37	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		√					
38	Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedichnemus</i>		2					
39	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		√	√				
40	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>		√	√				
41	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		6					
42	Red Knot	<i>Calidria canutus</i>			6				
43	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		√	√				
44	Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>		1	3				
45	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		√	√				
46	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>		12					
47	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		√					
48	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		1	4		1		
49	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>				20	5		
50	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		1					
51	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		3	1				
52	Great Skua	<i>Catharacta skua</i>						1	
53	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Larus melanocephalus</i>		1				1	

54	Common Black-headed G	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>		6					
55	Audouin's Gull	<i>Larus audouinii</i>		√	√				
56	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		√	√			√	
57	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>		√	√	√		√	
58	Caspian Tern	<i>Sterna caspia</i>			2				
59	Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>			8			√	
60	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>				2000	100		
61	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
62	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
63	Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopilia turtur</i>				30	30		
64	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>			1				
65	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
66	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	√	√					
67	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>	16	√		√	√		
68	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			1	1	1		
69	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	100+	9			12	50	
70	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		1	1				
71	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		2					
72	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>		1			1		
73	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>			60				
74	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		1	√		2		√
75	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>	2		2				√
76	Common Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		1					
77	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>		√					
78	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>			20				
79	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
80	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	√	√		√	√		√
81	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>		12	3				
82	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>					1		
83	Common Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>						1	
84	Winter Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				√			
85	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	1	1		√			√
86	Common Stonechat	<i>Savícola torquatus</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
87	Whinchat	<i>Savícola rubetra</i>					1		
88	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		1	1		2		

89	Black-eared Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>	2		1				
90	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>							1
91	Eurasian Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	√	√	√	√			√
92	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			1		20		
93	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>					2		
94	Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>					1		
95	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>			2				
96	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>						√	
97	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>				1	1		
98	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	√		1	√			√
99	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
100	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	2	√		20			
101	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		1	2	√	√		
102	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	1	1			1		
103	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>					1		
104	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	6			1			
105	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	√	√		√	√		
106	Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>	√	√		√			
107	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	√	√		2			√
108	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>	1		1	1	4		
109	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2						
110	Western Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>					200		
111	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
112	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
113	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>				6			
114	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	1	4	√	√	√	√	√
115	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>				2			
116	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>					2		
117	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	√		√	√	√	√	
118	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	√			√	√	√	
119	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>				10	1		
120	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>				1			
121	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>			√				

Common Name	Scientific name	
Bottle-nose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	√
Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>	√
Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella Coeruleoalba</i>	√
Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>	√
Ocean Sunfish	<i>Mola mola</i>	√
Insects		
Common Name	Scientific name	
Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>	√
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	√
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>	√
Brown Hawker	<i>Aeshna grandis</i>	√
Migrant Hawker	<i>Aeshna mixta</i>	√
Reptiles and Amphibians		
Common Name	Scientific name	
Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>	√
Iberian Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis hispanicus</i>	√
Iberian Spiny Toad	<i>Bufo spinosus</i>	√
European Pond Tortoise	<i>Emys orbicularis</i>	√