

Serranía de Ronda

1 – 7 February 2023



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Led by Simon Tonkin & Niki Williamson

In support of [Fundación Migres](#)

Summary

As winter turns to Spring in southern Spain, the sun shone on us this week as our little flock explored the beautiful and varied habitats of Andalucía's Málaga Province.

Among the spectacular limestone crags of Sierra de Grazalema and Serranía de Ronda, we enjoyed amazing views of Blue Rock Thrush and Black Wheatear, Rock Buntings, Rock Petronia, Ring Ouzel, Red-billed Chough, Dartford Warbler, Bonelli's and Golden Eagle, Eurasian Black Vulture, and Spanish Ibex with a seemingly constant accompaniment of Griffon Vultures overhead.

On the plains and less intensively-farmed areas of the province, we hit ornithological gold with Great and Little Bustards and Black-bellied Sandgrouse. They had a strong supporting cast of farmland birds including Common Crane, Eurasian Hoopoe, Crested, Thekla's and Calandra Larks, Corn Bunting, Red-legged Partridge, Spanish Sparrows, European Serins, Marsh and Hen Harrier, Merlin and Short-eared Owl.

Wetlands sparkled with Greater Flamingoes, Black-winged Stilts, Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers, and we had outstanding views of Bluethroats, Black-necked Grebe, White-headed Duck and Marbled Duck.

In celebration of the plant-based diet, chef Iván created for us an entirely vegan evening menu, so that we could all share in the delights emerging from his *cordon bleu* award-winning kitchen! Picnics included locally-produced cured ham from free range acorn-grazed Iberian Black Pigs, award-winning local cheeses from small-herd extensively-grazed sheep and goats, local organic olives, salads and wines – and of course chef Iván's delicious chestnut flour bread! As always, something for everybody, sourced locally and sustainably, and free of single-use plastic.



Day 1 Wednesday 1 February

Simon and Niki gathered the group from Málaga train station and airport, ensuring that overland travel was just as convenient a way to meet the group as by air! We were soon on our way out of the bustling Costa del Sol and up into the mountains of the Serranía de Ronda.

We stopped for our first picnic lunch together in Spain's newest National Park - Sierra de las Nieves. Designated for its Andalusian Firs that only occur here and in Morocco's Rif Mountains, its unique and ancient woodland habitat also provides homes for plentiful wildlife. As we soon find out, encountering wintering Black Redstarts, Crested Tit, Woodlark, Firecrest, Short-toed Treecreeper, Redwings, Iberian Grey Shrike and Golden Eagle over the course of our lunch break! Lunch was seemingly appealing to the local extensively-grazed goats too, and the group nearly had to wrestle one to get to the picnic!

A comfort stop at a rural petrol station turned out to be a highlight of the day, as 94 Griffon Vultures amassed over our heads, being pulled in from all directions and descending onto a carcass just out of view. They were joined by two Golden Eagles!

Next, we headed onwards towards our accommodation, taking in the dramatic crags and mountain scrubland that was to be our "local patch" for the next week. Making several stops by the side of the quiet, narrow road into Júzcar, we picked up Black Wheatear, female Blue Rock Thrush, and Rock Petronia. A couple of Red-billed Choughs sailed by high and we got our first glimpses of Rock Bunting and Dartford Warbler.

We arrived at Hotel Bandolero in time for sunset on the terrace, and with some of our most sought after mountain species already on the list!

We were super-excited for our first dinner with our hosts David and Iván. As is becoming the norm with our groups, on this trip the balance in this group was tipped in favour of guests who preferred a plant-based diet. So *cordon bleu* chef Iván created for us an entirely vegan menu! We couldn't wait to see what he would produce and sure enough he straight away set himself a high bar, serving us red lentil crepes with cucumber and sesame salad, bulgar-wheat-stuffed courgette, and a carrot cake with cashew crème – irresistible!!

Day 2 Thursday 2 February

Today we would spend some time getting to know our mountain habitat. After a hearty breakfast with fresh cooked eggs for those who wished, we headed up to the local crags of Los Riscos.

It was buzzing with avian activity, with wintering flocks of Corn Buntings whizzing around, Cirl Bunting and Woodlark singing, Rock Buntings calling, and Rock Petronia in evidence too. We got amazing views of Blue Rock Thrush and Black Wheatear hopping around the rock faces. A beautiful Ring Ouzel sat up atop a boulder, giving us brilliant prolonged views in the morning sunshine – nice!

As the chilly mountain air began to warm, suddenly Griffon Vultures were leaving their roosts and soaring over our heads – our signal to move on to our next spot.

Cueva del Gato is a well-known local beauty spot, where spring water seeping out of a vast limestone cave system forms a beautiful blue lagoon. From here, the water joins a picturesque reed-fringed stream which eventually becomes the Río Guadiaro. As we arrived, we picked up a

gorgeous adult Bonelli's Eagle, hunting just metres away over a nearby field! Absolutely stunning views of this most awesome of raptors.

As the group walked down to the cave, a second Bonelli's could be seen higher up, being mobbed by a very brave Eurasian Sparrowhawk. A handful of Crag Martins could be seen in front of the rock face and the river itself gave us Common Kingfisher, Grey Wagtail, Cetti's Warbler and many wintering Common Chiffchaffs and Eurasian Blackcaps.

After picnic we headed up to the other end of the massive eight-kilometre cave system, and met it again where it emerges at Cueva del Hundidero – "the sinkhole". In this craggy landscape, we found our first Spanish Ibex – a mother and her kid – grazing lichens and mosses on a rocky pinnacle. Later from a viewpoint deep in the gorge, we found another larger group, including a handsome male with large horns, surveying the scene.

Griffon Vultures were everywhere as they flew around their colony on the cliff face opposite, soaring right over our heads. We had more fabulous views of Blue Rock Thrush and Black Wheatear very close, and we found two Thekla's Larks feeding amongst the trees.

We returned with time for relaxation and a G&T before our dinner – tonight an amazingly flavoured tomato soup with cashew cheese and chestnut bread croutons, a soy and vegetable lasaña, and caramelised banana with baked ramen noodles. Nommmmm.

Day 3 Friday 3 February

A complete change of scene today, with a journey out to the plains of Osuna, in search of some famous steppe species. Despite its large swathes of intensive agriculture and lack of protected status, this farmland area is still home to precarious populations of some very special birds, which we today hoped to encounter.

Taking a quiet farmland road heading away from Osuna, we scanned the landscape using bridges over an unfinished railway as vantage points. On our second stop we hit ornithological gold, with views of two Great Bustards strutting their stuff across some cereal stubble! We watched them a while before they flew off, following a kerfuffle with a Northern Raven.

Once the excitement died down, we examined the stubble more closely and found it also contained a group of Black-bellied Sandgrouse! Decent scope views showed them to be mostly females with one male. Alongside them many Northern Lapwings and Golden Plover, with Calandra Larks flitting in between, contrasting underwings sparkling as they flew.

We had our picnic by the side of the nearby Laguna de la Ballestera, where the group first took a short stroll. There were lovely views of Greater Flamingoes close to the shore, interspersed with Pied Avocet and Black-winged Stilt, and Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers along the shoreline. In the meantime, Niki had prepared picnic which, as always, had something for everybody, sourced locally and sustainably, and free of single-use plastic. Today featured locally-produced cured ham from free range acorn-grazed Iberian Black Pigs, two award-winning local cheeses from small-herd extensively-grazed sheep and goats, local organic olives, salads and wines – and of course chef Iván's delicious chestnut flour bread!

After a leisurely lunch we headed back to spend some more time looking out over the landscape, full of farmland birds including Eurasian Hoopoe, Corn Bunting, Red-legged Partridge (here a native, wild bird), Crested and Calandra Larks, Spanish Sparrows, White Wagtails, Meadow Pipits, European Serins, Goldfinches and Common Linnets



A Merlin, a couple of Marsh Harriers and a Hen Harrier added to the afternoon. There were a great many Northern Ravens and Red Kites. At one point several dozen corvids and raptors gathered in a kettle – as it rose higher, we found that right at the top was a Short-eared Owl!

This time we were able to approach the Black-bellied Sandgrouse – which now numbered eleven - using the vans as hides and got much closer, giving great views! And as the day was drawing to a close, a group of fourteen female Great Bustards materialized from nowhere and marched across the field, Beauxbatons Academy style!

There was sweet potato chocolate brownie for pud – what a day!

Day 4 Saturday 4 February

Today we took a beautiful scenic drive out through the undulating landscapes of the Cordilleras Béticas, to explore further wetland areas along the northern edge of Málaga province.

Our first stop was at Laguna Dulce, a freshwater lake which today we found worryingly dry, despite the season. Nevertheless, we were again surrounded by birdlife in the form of Crested and Calandra Larks, and mixed flocks of finches, buntings and pipits, Common Buzzards, Common Kestrels and Northern Ravens. We delighted in the sight and sound of 48 Common Cranes flying over our heads to nearby feeding grounds.

Driving further around onto the arable land to investigate a sighting, we found that yes, the shapes we could see at the far edge of the farm were indeed six Little Bustards! We edged closer using tracks around the fields and olive groves for cover and, still keeping a respectful distance, we got really nice scope views of this characterful and rapidly-declining bird. A sighting of Little Bustard is always a privilege, particularly as intensive farm production methods – largely to grow feed crops for the meat industry – edge them out of the countryside. They are currently declining at a rate of

around 50% every 10 years on average across their Spanish range, and the population in Málaga province is down to around 400 birds.

We moved on to our next stop at Fuente de Piedra, an endorheic lake, fed by rain and with no exit points, rendered saltwater by mineral leaching and water evaporation. The lagoon complex was teeming with life, and a walk around some of them brought a great selection of wildfowl (Shelduck, Northern Shoveler, Eurasian Teal, Mallard, Gadwall, Common Pochard, Black-necked and Little Grebe) and outstanding views of White-headed Duck and Marbled Duck – another rare and declining species.

Two beautiful Bluethroats showed really well and we had a random close encounter with two Water Rails! Common Cranes flew over and waders included Black-winged Stilt, Common Snipe and Black-tailed Godwit.

The *laguna* is perhaps most famous for its breeding Greater Flamingoes, which numbers between 20,000 and 50,000! Several thousand had already arrived back, and we headed to another vantage point of the lagoon, from where we watched a group of several hundred warming up for the mating dance!

Time to head back and no day would be complete without a report on dinner! Today featured a chickpea and chestnut *potaje*, and roasted pineapple with coconut milk icecream and a delicate fennel-infused cookie...

Day 5 Sunday 5 February

The group was in for a taste of urban birding today, with a trip into the historic city of Ronda. It started well, spotting two Red Crossbills as we prepared to leave the car park! We walked down through the pretty Alameda gardens with its plentiful Common Chiffchaffs and Eurasian Blackcaps to the promenade walk along the edge of the Tajo gorge, where we picked up Blue Rock Thrush. A Griffon Vulture soared overhead and a Rock Petronia strutted its stuff on a nearby rooftop.

The group then had the rest of the morning free to explore the splendid historic town, centred around three bridges over the Río Tajo – one Roman, one Moorish and one 18th Century. The town and its breath-taking vistas were an inspiration to a generation of early 20th century poets and writers, including Ernest Hemmingway, Orson Welles and Rainer Maria Rilke, who was clearly a birder:

“A birdsong can even, for a moment, make the whole world into a sky within us, because we feel that the bird does not distinguish between its heart and the world’s.”

Having explored (and acquired a stunning new sheep’s cheese from a local dairy outlet!) we left the town behind as the tour buses began to arrive in force. We took our picnic at a nearby parkland, before heading back towards our local patch to better explore the woodlands there.

In the village of Igualeja we visited the source of the Río Genal. Here it emerges from the Earth via a small cave, frequented by Grey Wagtails and usually Black-bellied Dipper, although it sadly wasn’t in evidence today. Crested Tit and Short-toed Treecreeper called.

Taking a walk through the Holm Oak and Sweet Chestnut woodlands in beautiful evening light, we enjoyed Firecrests, Short-toed Treecreepers, Eurasian Nuthatch and Cirl Buntings around us. Two Iberian Green Woodpeckers called close by and a Great Spotted Woodpecker flew past. A lepidopteran highlight was watching newly emerged Large Tortoiseshell and Spanish Festoon dance in a ray of sunshine.

Day 6 Monday 6 February

We spent our last full day together surrounded by the spectacular limestone scenery of Sierra de Grazalema Natural Park – Andalucía's first, created in 1984. We stopped on the way to view out over our valley and photograph the area's famous white villages, where we also picked up a Blue Rock Thrush, and a couple of Song Thrushes alongside a flock of Common Chaffinches.

We made a stop in a sheltered valley where we spotted Griffon Vulture, Blue Rock Thrush and two Black Wheatears on the crags above us. A short walk through a small Almond orchard yielded Red-legged Partridge, Woodlark, Thekla's Lark, Rock Bunting, Dartford Warbler and around twenty feeding Song Thrushes.

Stopping above the village of Grazalema, we picked up a couple of pairs of Red-billed Chough calling from nest sites on the looming cliff face, as well as loafing Griffon Vultures and a Peregrine Falcon. Perhaps this last bird was the one that caused a disturbance somewhere out of sight that caused another thirty or more Red-billed Chough to lift into the air!

Thanks to the heterogeneous habitat, a stroll down a wooded path next to a stream gave a great selection of sightings, including Cetti's Warbler, Hawfinch, Cirl Bunting, Iberian Grey Shrike, and Dunnock (soon likely to be Iberian Accentor...).

We took our picnic in the sun, looking down a gorgeous wooded valley surrounded by precipitous crags. Our "Cheese of the Day" was a local goat's cheese matured in *pimentón*, which paired nicely with Griffon Vultures and Crag Martins overhead, and Cirl Buntings singing nearby!

We literally ended our trip on a high, at the Puerta de las Palomas pass, 1180m ASL. Driving up past Spanish Ibex, we walked the final few dozen metres up to enjoy the dizzying views from the mirador. We enjoyed our mountain companions Blue Rock Thrush and Black Wheatear once more, and a Woodlark posed for us on a pine tree. Among thirty or more Griffon Vultures circling low over us, a single Eurasian Black Vulture!



Day 7 Tuesday 7 February

Already it was time for our little flock to disperse! We said our goodbyes at the hotel and Simon and Niki distributed the guests to their various trains, flights and ongoing adventures.

Massive thanks to David and Iván for their truly effervescent hosting, and for making our first ever fully vegan menu such a massive success with six incredible three-course meals. Guys, you knocked it out of the park!

And massive thanks also to the team for some great times, good laughs and thought-provoking discussions – we are looking forward to seeing you all again!

Trip list via eBird; <https://ebird.org/tripreport/105328>