

The Straits of Gibraltar - Bird Migration and Cetaceans

1 - 7 September 2023



Trip report by Stuart Gillies

It is probably fair to say that anyone with even a vague interest in wildlife would be aware of migration and, by extension, the importance of certain bottlenecks where mass migration can be observed. There really is only one way to fully understand this ancient imperative and that is to experience it first-hand.

The narrow stretch of water separating Europe from Africa is an evocative place to witness this miracle of Nature, to be positioned directly in the flow as thousands upon thousands of birds make their bi-annual journey.

This is Flyway Birding!

As the vanguard of the group assembled at Gibraltar airport an Osprey flapped purposefully south with the Rock of Gibraltar as a backdrop - welcome to the epicentre of migration!

The subsequent week was full of amazing wildlife spectacles - some anticipated and others very welcome surprises. Such is the nature of migration-watching in The Straits! At times an interactive cross between Wildlife on One and Blue Planet as we visited the varied habitats to best capture the flavour of this wonderful area.

From shimmering flocks of White Storks numbering in the hundreds, eagles and kites passing directly overhead, to sleek, metallic, torpedo-like tuna in pursuit of flying fish, this was a week of unforgettable experiences!

Friday 1 September - Welcome to Huerta Grande!

Time for the group to get settled in to the comfortable woodland cabins at Huerta Grande Eco-lodge and, after the fresh, locally-sourced picnic lunch, an introduction to woodland birding, Straits-style! Where the calls of Crested Tit and Western Bonelli's Warbler vie for attention along with the sweet calls of Iberian Chiffchaffs plus the, perhaps surprisingly subtle, calls of Hawfinch.

A hint of what to expect in the coming days as two Honey Buzzards powered overhead in characteristically direct fashion. The local Booted Eagles drifting over and calling were a nice swimming pool tick for some!

Saturday 2 September - Raptors and Swifts

Anticipating a great morning of raptor passage, we made the short trip to the Observatorio del Algarrobo with its magnificent views of the Rock of Gibraltar.

There is always a great feeling of camaraderie at a watchpoint in The Straits with eyes scanning constantly, counters clicking furiously at peak times, and the excitement when a shout goes out for a scarce bird.

One such shout led to one of the highlights of the entire trip, a stunning White-rumped Swift which gave us excellent views as it tracked down the coast with its Common and Pallid congeners! With a breeding range mainly in sub-Saharan Africa, this species is a relatively recent addition to the European breeding avifauna and remains a very sought-after bird.

If the spectacle of hundreds or thousands of birds of prey captivates, then the numbers only serve to astound the uninitiated. A very steady morning produced totals of 599 Honey Buzzards, 166 Booted Eagles, 47 Short-toed Eagles, 57 Black Kites to name a few - all great practice to get the eye in for the week ahead.

La Peña made for an excellent lunch stop with Thekla's Larks and Western Black-eared Wheatears giving close views. Griffon Vultures patrolled the sky which was very apt, given the neolithic sky burial history of this valley.

A brief stop on the road to La Janda to marvel at a group of over 300 White Storks circling and repositioning themselves in the invisible thermals, seemingly enacting ritual movements as old as migration itself.

To La Janda itself and this once mighty wetland, although greatly diminished by draining, still holds many wildlife wonders for keen observers.

A major surprise for our Northern European visitors was the abundance of Corn Buntings with 70 seen over the course of our afternoon visit! Five Montagu's Harriers languidly quartered the fields along with eight Marsh Harriers, and a beautiful Black-winged Kite put on an amazing display of gravity-defying hovering as it hunted close to the track. Two Woodchat Shrikes, four Zitting Cisticolas and ten Common Waxbills were all greatly appreciated.

Sunday 3 September - Phoenix from the Splashes!

First rule of migration-watching? Eyes, whenever possible, should always be to the skies! Every minute is birding time and 36 Black Kites passing over the car park at breakfast proved that migration doesn't happen at our convenience!

Reading and understanding the weather is a major part of Straits birding. The ever-changing winds present a great challenge to not only the migrating multitudes but also to those who wish to be best positioned to witness them. With leaden skies punctuated with flashes of horizontal lightning, we were still able to watch the hardiest of migratory birds from the watchpoint at Cazalla, including two elegant Montagu's Harriers and a brief Golden Oriole fly-past.

We then descended to Los Lances intertidal area which turned into a bit of a wet wader-fest in an epic downpour! No less than 50 Kentish Plover graced the pools with their stop/start, hunched hunting technique along with 30 Common Ringed Plover and a multitude of claw-waving Fiddler Crabs. Three gorgeous Audouin's Gulls were found amongst the Yellow-legged throng - our first encounter of the trip with these fantastic birds and a taste of things to come.

A welcome bonus came in the shape of a perched Peregrine Falcon of the Mediterranean race *brookei* which is slightly smaller, darker mantled, and has a rufous tinge to the breast compared with the Northern races.

We then retreated to Huerta Grande to dry off and have lunch. The sun appeared again and we were straight back into migratory action with Honey Buzzards streaming overhead, the speeded-up Turkey warble of European Bee-eaters, and two Pied Flycatchers repping the passerine migrants.

A short hop to nearby Cerro del Tambor provided the group with a breathtaking display of close fly-over raptors along with waves of European Bee-eaters and Common and Pallid Swifts. The

shared joy of the group as nearly 500 Booted Eagles, almost 400 Honey Buzzards and 17 Short-toed Eagles pass directly overhead at feather-counting range is just one of the addictive qualities of Straits Flyway Birding! Add to this Griffon and Egyptian Vultures plus mighty Alpine Swifts muscling through the valley in an awesome display of grace and power and you've really experienced migration!

Monday 4 September - Raptors, Ruins, and Vultures

This morning we took the opportunity to explore another part of Los Alcornocales National Park and were on station for the beginning of another wave of Honey Buzzard passage. Almost 600 Honeys in around an hour and a half logged, along with smaller numbers of Black Kites, Booted and Short-toed Eagles and three Egyptian Vultures. The Dick Forsman Field Guide to European Raptor Identification was pressed into service and the group were very soon confidently identifying raptors after only a few days practice! Newly acquired skills were put to the test when a magnificent Bonelli's Eagle bossed the airspace above us! A local predator of smaller eagle species on migration!

The now familiar, far-carrying calls of European Bee-eaters were ubiquitous and a ripple of excitement always accompanied these flying rainbows as they relentlessly headed South. On the odd occasion when the skies were quiet, Common Nightingales, Sardinian Warblers and European Stonechats vied for our attention.

With changing winds, we repositioned to a watchpoint on the coast closer to Tarifa and were soon practically in amongst a swirling mass of around 600 White Storks! Another standout moment in a week of monumental wildlife encounters. Over 200 Booted Eagles were counted in this session and another five Egyptian Vultures plus hundreds of European Bee-eaters darting through at hair-parting heights.

After lunch, a change of pace as we ascended into the world of the Griffon Vulture. The breathtaking vista from the Cueva del Moro was the perfect overview to learn about the fate of the roman city of Baelo Claudia, one of the best-preserved Roman cities in Spain and even more ancient history relating to the Neanderthal inhabitants of the aforementioned caves.

None of this culture and history, fascinating though it was, distracted away from birds for long though! Splendid views of the very aptly named Blue Rock Thrush and Rock Bunting as they hopped around their eponymous substrate. An Iberian Green Woodpecker was also noted here - a close relative of northern Europe's familiar Green Woodpecker differing mainly in the lack of any black surrounding the eye.

And to yet another major highlight of any trip to The Straits - the magnificent Griffon Vulture colony of La Zarga. It really is an awe-inspiring feeling to be standing under the cliffs with these master aerialists effortlessly wheel and gliding overhead with a view towards Africa that will be forever burned into memory.

Tuesday 5 September - Blue Planet

Hitherto we had been concentrating on the birds crossing The Straits. Today was all about the body of water itself - where Mediterranean and Atlantic meet, guarded by the pillars of Hercules - a place of many wonders!

Despite being one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world, The Straits are a seasonal haven for many and varied cetacean species and the deep and productive waters support a very important ecosystem. Past over-exploitation of fisheries has ceased and once Critically Endangered species such as tuna are now recovering. In scenes reminiscent of an epic Attenborough documentary, the groups were treated to the astonishing spectacle of the enormous robot-fish tuna leaping from the sea in pursuit of shoals of Mediterranean Flying Fish! Common and Striped Dolphins joined the fray and Long-finned Pilot Whales were also observed.

Diminutive European and Wilson's Storm Petrels danced over the waves and mini-Albatross Scopoli's Shearwaters glided by on ramrod-stiff wings, landing occasionally to feed, and be harassed by Yellow-legged Gulls.

Lunch at Punta Camorro was accompanied by some excellent views of Tawny Pipit and six Whimbrel taking a rest before crossing.



Wednesday 6 September - La Breña y Marismas de Barbate

Every day is a bird spectacle in The Straits, but *¡Qué día de días!*

Once traditional saltpans, latterly the municipal dump, and now a nature reserve, the Marismas de Barbate has to rank as one of my favourite places in the world. No less than 53 bird species logged in this visit, including a decent percentage of the world population of a rare, endangered, wonderfully enigmatic and (subjectively) beautiful bird - Northern Bald Ibis! We were privileged to bear witness to 33 individuals flying in and calmly feeding only metres from us - another standout experience and memory.

The first sight of around 400 Greater Flamingos is a striking experience for those new to birding in Southern Europe. Add tens of Black-winged Stilts wading around on their impossibly long and fragile looking legs and your attention is guaranteed! Closer inspection of the muddy edges of the lagoons reveals many more wader treats such as Little Stint and Kentish Plovers.

Eyes don't know where to rest binoculars next as that flock of around 100 gulls all prove to be Audouin's! A gateway gull for those sceptical of the charm of this much maligned group, with their bright red bill and grey legs they cut a unique look in the world of gulls.

Larks are another group of birds which often engender indifference as they are often deemed 'too difficult' or 'nondescript'. Many species can be seen, heard and appreciated in their subtle beauty in The Straits where careful and patient observation can reveal the salient identification features of species which upon cursory viewing may seem impossible to separate.

Rio Barbate was our next site on the falling tide and this literally placed us amongst the waders such as Curlew Sandpipers and Dunlin. A Caspian Tern proved to be a massive tick for many in the group both figuratively and literally when confronted by a Common Gull-sized Tern. At one point it shared its airspace with a Little Tern giving us a perfect illustration of the tern extremes.

Thursday 7 September - ¡Adios y hasta luego!

With the group parting ways due to differing departure points and times, it was time to say reluctant goodbyes.

For some we managed to squeeze in a bit of migration at the Princesa Sofia park in La Linea, where Melodious Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher and Common Redstart were noted, whilst the remainder headed back to Barbate for a totally understandable second helping!

A varied and wonderful week with a great, enthusiastic group who really 'got' what migration in The Straits is all about.

Thank you to everyone for making this such a memorable week with a special mention to our wonderful hosts at Huerta Grande.

eBird trip report available here: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/155129>

