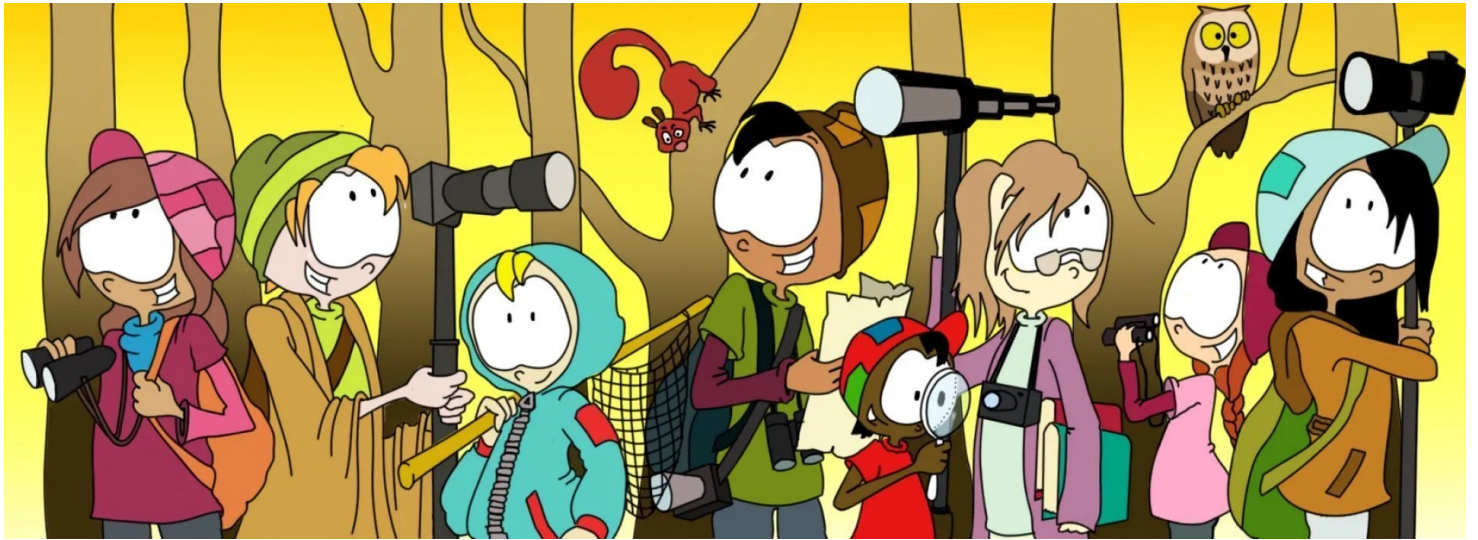


# The Straits of Gibraltar

**Bird Migration and Cetaceans 18 - 24 April 2024**



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Short-toed Eagle in active migration © Inglorious Bustards

Trip report by Stuart Gillies

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Adult Egyptian Vulture © Inglorious Bustards

The place where continents and cultures meet and millions of birds (especially soaring raptors), compelled by ancient imperatives, converge to avoid crossing inhospitable and thermal-free wide stretches of open water.

Welcome to The Straits of Gibraltar, where Africa and Europe meet and almost touch, a mere 14 kilometres apart!

In a week of magical encounters and discoveries, it is difficult to pick out highlights but, if forced to, the flow of migrating birds just overhead, noisy and wondrous Collared Pratincoles, splendid Northern Bald Ibis, the sight of over 200 Griffon Vultures, with Rüppell's and Egyptian Vultures joining the gathering to feed on a carcass and small birds resting among the cork oaks before continuing their northward migrations waiting to be discovered.

This or the complicated tangle that is Yellow Wagtail taxonomy manifest in a flock of assorted races consorting on migration before parting ways as they push northwards. Victory rolls from grateful Eagles as they cross The Straits and feel the relief of thermals under their wings again.....This is #FlywayBirding!

## **Bienvenidos a Huerta Grande Thursday 18 April**

Flyway Birders assemble! The group were soon acquainted and settled in to our incomparable home for the duration of the trip. Nestled in the National Park, Huerta Grande is the ideal base from which to explore the wonders of the area. With resident delights such as Hawfinch and Common Firecrest plus the added excitement of migrants passing through, necks were certain to receive a good daily workout!

Migration waits for no one and the group were immediately initiated on a familiarity walk around the local environs, with European Pied Flycatchers pausing in the cork oaks on their way north and the pulse-quickening sight of raptors including European Honey Buzzard, Short-toed and Booted Eagles, and Marsh Harrier overhead. Butterflies were very well represented with the highlights being Spanish Festoon, Monarch, African Monarch and Scarce Swallowtail. Another popular encounter was with the Spiny or Giant Toad, aptly named as this female was about 15 cms in length!

This was only the beginning of the adventure!



Common Firecrest © Inglorious Bustards

## **Serengeti de España or *flava* of the month? Friday 19 April**

A theme which quickly becomes evident to anyone new to Straits birding is the preoccupation with the weather. Specifically, the wind. Migrating birds, especially those reliant on thermals, are not the fondest of crossing open water. The blessing of the narrow crossing comes with a cost - the funnelling of winds alternating from East to West adding a formidable invisible obstacle to successful onward journeys.

High winds effectively close the departure gate as most large soaring birds are grounded and forced to wait for more favourable conditions. This is not to say that the flow stops entirely - the imperative to reach the breeding grounds is strong, and some birds will still attempt the crossing in seemingly impossible conditions. Such is the unfolding drama we are privileged to witness.

On a day of very strong easterly winds we headed west to Bolonia - an area steeped in millennia of history. From towering sand dunes to the rugged dominion of vultures, this was to be a memorable day.

The relative serenity of watching beautiful ginger-capped Kentish Plovers on the beach was suddenly supplanted by the high drama of willing a Marsh Harrier to make it to land as we followed its battle with the wind, barely keeping out of reach of the waves as it powered towards the sanctuary of landfall. Its fate would prove inconclusive - the harsh realities of long distance migration.

We ascended to the realm of vultures where humans have witnessed the ebb and flow of bird migrations for millennia. Vultures rule the skies above Cueva del Moro where Neanderthal paintings of birds evince the ancient connection with the natural world. Jump forward a few tens of thousand of years and from our lofty vantage point the remains of the Roman city of Baelo Claudia, a major trading point at the meeting of continents, can be seen sprawling below.



© Inglorious Bustards

Adult Rüppell's Vulture © Inglorious Bustards

Here we have our first close encounters with Griffon Vultures bossing the airspace with their 2 ½ metre wingspan. The Griffons share the cliffs with Ravens and Blue Rock Thrush as the hardest of Black Kites and Booted Eagles filter through, having braved the crossing.

A wonderful diversion, but our next stop is the imposing Griffon Vulture colony where the sky is filled with these magnificent birds, some with young in the nest. They are joined by an incredibly rare but increasingly encountered visitor from Africa, Rüppell's Vulture. About 10% smaller than the Griffons, the Spanish name *Buitre Moteado* is perhaps more apt - spotted or mottled vulture.

Magnificent as the colony is, this spectacle was surpassed as we descended towards Bolonia by the incredible scene of around 200 Griffons joined by 2 Rüppell's and 2 Egyptian Vultures at a sheep carcass. The view was filled with vultures attracted to the carrion perfectly illustrating their value as Nature's clean up crew.

Still buzzing from the extravaganza, more delights awaited at La Peña albeit in a more diminutive and colourful form.

The Yellow Wagtail exhibits amazing phenotypical variation with many distinct geographical forms. We met with some of these engaging *flavas* as they sought refuge from the wind and refuelled before resuming migration. The headliners were a male and female of the Fenno-Scandinavian race *thunbergi* distinguished by their all dark (deep blue-grey) heads. A mixed flock of over a dozen birds of at least three distinct forms was only rivalled by the confiding Western Black-eared Wheatears flashing their black and white tails as they boulder hopped ever closer.



Grey-headed Yellow Wagtail (*thunbergi*) © Inglorious Bustards

### **La Janda Saturday 20 April**

A migrant Eurasian Golden Oriole singing its slide whistle refrain at breakfast time proved an auspicious start to the day.

With continuing breezy conditions, a return to the relative calm at La Peña welcomed some hardy arrivals including a European Honey Buzzard, 9 Short-toed Eagles, 4 Booted Eagles, 13 Black Kites and an elegant Montagu's Harrier. European Bee-eaters, a Red-rumped Swallow and a smaller group of Yellow Wagtails including the striking *thunbergi* made for another excellent morning.

Afternoon was productively spent exploring the area of the once vast wetland at La Janda. Even in its extremely altered state, this area yields a quite simply stunning variety of birdlife. The tern-like calls of Collared Pratincoles alert us to the presence of these stunning birds who share the fields with another anomalous shorebird, in the shape of 2 Stone-curlew/Eurasian Thick-knees. Green Sandpiper zip along the irrigation canal as Larks and Corn Buntings dominate the soundscape.



Male Western Black-eared Wheatear © Inglorious Bustards

A riot of colour in one field of spring flowers was maxed out in terms of vividness as over 50 European Bee-eaters delighted the group. Perching on fence wires and small bushes or hawking close overhead their warbling calls seemingly surrounding us. A magical moment of excitement punctuated by the sighting of 3 Turtle Doves - a more than welcome addition to the lists given their relative scarcity in northern Europe.

We spotted some movement in a sand roadside paddock which, to our amazement contained no less than 16 Little Ringed Plover! Stopping at various intervals we added Reed, Sardinian, and Melodious Warblers plus Zitting Cisticola.

The greatest excitement of the day was reserved for arguably the bird of the day - Black-winged Kite. This charismatic little raptor with its piercing red eyes was a fitting highlight to end the day.

### **Barbate Sunday 21 April**

Once a busy town reliant on the tuna fishing industry, Barbate and its environs are an essential stop on any visit to The Straits

Firstly, taking advantage of the state of the tide, we explored the shorebird haven that is the Rio Barbate. Ten species of shorebird including 40 Curlew Sandpiper (some showing the gorgeous brick red breeding plumage), an actively sieving Spoonbill and 7 Little Terns gave fantastic views.



Collared Pratincole © Inglorious Bustards

Next, the *salinas*, former salt pans now restored as a nature reserve. A truly spectacular place where the shallow pans teem with shorebirds on passage and 60 Greater Flamingos. Iberian Yellow Wagtails flit along the margins and the sky suddenly fills with Collared Pratincoles roused by the perceived threat of any aerial intruder.

Larks feature here with Crested, Greater Short-toed and Calandra all noted.

Lunch among the pines at Las Breñas produced some nice woodland species with Short-toed Treecreeper, European Pied Flycatcher, 3 Whinchat, Serin and Cirl Bunting. Much happiness ensued for the group as 2 Eurasian Hoopoes decided to put in an appearance shortly before our departure quickly followed by a Two-tailed Pasha, one of the largest European butterflies.

Our group next spent some time with one of the rarest birds in the world - the ever-popular Northern Bald Ibis. Beautiful birds with their embarrassment-red, bare-skinned faces, iridescent plumage and punk crests, they cut a completely different - but equally resplendent! - look than their Glossy relative!

Our visit to the breeding colony coincides with there being chicks in the nest and their bickering sibling rivalry and the coming and goings of the adults provide us with a fantastic diversion before heading off to see one last surprise of the day where, from a respectful distance, we watched a sleepy young Eurasian Eagle Owl sunbathing on its lofty ledge.



Northern Bald Ibis © Inglorious Bustards

## **Amongst migration! Monday 22 April**

Without local knowledge, it is extremely easy to arrive in the vicinity of Tarifa at peak migration time and completely miss the spectacle of masses of birds making the crossing! An intimate knowledge of the area and years of experience with the unique conditions mean our group would be best placed to be in amongst the birds whatever the conditions.

In ever changing and conditions with winds difficult to predict, we made the short dash up the coast and were rewarded with hundreds of raptors passing overhead at times close enough to not only identify but even age without the aid of binoculars! Highly-coveted species in double and treble figures in an amazing 2 hour window including almost 1000 Black Kite, 75 Short-toed Eagles, 79 Booted Eagle, 12 European Honey Buzzard, 97 Griffon and 1 Egyptian Vulture making a stream of raptors! Other soaring birds were represented by 8 Black Stork and 4 White Storks.

A new habitat for exploration in the afternoon was the teeming waters of The Straits. Despite being one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world, the narrow stretch sustains an abundance of life above and below water.

Our private excursion around Algeciras Bay and out into the open sea past Europa Point with the famous Rock of Gibraltar looming over provided us with yet another indelible memory. Pods of Common Dolphin joyously bow-riding and breaching always draw gasps of admiration - pure happiness may indeed be cetacean-shaped! Pelagic birds included Sandwich Terns using navigation buoys as loafing points and the always exciting sight of shearwaters effortlessly cutting through the wind on stiff wings like mini albatrosses. Balearic Shearwater and several of their larger *Calonectris* cousins, Mediterranean breeder Scopoli's Shearwater in the main.

## Parklife Tuesday 23 April

Practically in the shadow of the Rock of Gibraltar, Parque Princesa Sofia is a haven for tired and hungry passerine migrants. European Pied Flycatchers hawk from their favoured perched as leaf warblers such as Wood, Western Bonelli's, Willow and Iberian Chiffchaff methodically search the foliage. Garden Warbler and Whinchat are also making use of this migrant highway service area. Two roosting Tawny Owls eventually gave themselves up despite being supremely camouflaged.



Wood Warbler © Inglorious Bustards

Another relaxing yet productive lunch at La Peña was rewarded with yet more migrating goodness this time with the background of Los Lances sands stretching south to Tarifa. An Osprey powered northwards along with 2 Egyptian Vultures, 2 European Honey Buzzards, a Short-toed Eagle, 6 Booted Eagles, a Western Marsh Harrier, and 112 Black Kite.

This raptor feast punctuated by more European Bee-eaters, Tawny Pipit, Serin and great views of singing Cirl Bunting. An ice-cream stop at the Mirador once again had us surrounded by Vultures which passed overhead and at eye level with the stunning vista of Jbel Mousa, part of the Rif mountain range and the monumental southern pillar of Hercules from legend.



© Inglorious Bustards

European Pied Flycatcher © Inglorious Bustards



Our delightful very international friendly group of Flyway Birders with representations from France, Spain, Australia and the UK to witness the miracle of #FlywayBirding



Tawny Owl © Inglorious Bustards

### **Golden Farewell 24 April**

A fluty fanfare and a splash of colour to say goodbye as a transient Eurasian Golden Oriole serenaded our departure.

During the week we visited varied habitats and shared the wonderful nature, life and drama on the flyway-highway here in The Straits

We parted with the lasting memories of being immersed in one the natural worlds greatest wonders - migration.

Special thanks to our excellent hosts at Huerta Grande and to our enthusiastic group for sharing this #FlywayBirding experience!

Trip report list via eBird:

<https://ebird.org/tripreport/223872>