

SOUTHERN SPAIN IN AUTUMN

MIGRATION AT TARIFA AND THE MARSHES & MOUNTAINS OF ANDALUCIA

Tuesday 1 to Friday 11 September 2026

TOUR OVERVIEW: Andalucía in southern Spain offers some of the very best bird watching in Europe. Unspoiled wildlife habitats abound in a region endowed with picturesque sierras, dry coastal plains and highly productive wetlands, all teeming with an amazing array of birdlife, whilst the proximity to Africa offers the opportunity to witness one of Europe's finest spectacles of bird migration. Every autumn huge numbers of soaring birds, principally storks and raptors, cross the Straits of Gibraltar on their southward migration to Africa. A procession of thousands of European Honey-buzzards, Black Kites and White Storks, hundreds of Short-toed Snake-eagles, Booted Eagles and Black Storks is a phenomenon which draws hundreds of birdwatchers to Tarifa, a small town at the southern tip of Europe. Meanwhile south of Seville, the mighty Guadalquivir river flows slowly towards the Atlantic Ocean, flanked by a profusion of channels, marshes and lagoons which form the eastern flank of the famous Coto Donana national park. This area is extraordinarily rich in bird life, the inspiration for expeditions in the 1950s led by Guy Mountford and others, which are described in his famous book *Portrait of a Wilderness*. Inland from there is the beautiful and verdant Sierra de Grazalema, whose rugged limestone peaks tower over gullies dotted with Spanish Firs and lush valleys cloaked with Cork and Holm Oaks and wild olives. This is the home of Bonelli's Eagle, Black Wheatear and Thekla's Lark. In September the weather is still warm and sunny, and combined with hospitable hoteliers and great cuisine, Andalucía has all the ingredients for a memorable and rewarding bird watching tour.



TOUR DESCRIPTION: A three centre, 11-day tour including full board accommodation. Our starting point is Malaga, readily accessible from a number of UK airports. From here we head west to Los Palacios on the banks of the Guadalquivir river, our base for the first four nights from where we can easily access the Coto Donana and adjacent wetlands and marismas. On our fifth day, we head inland to the Sierra de Grazalema staying for two nights in the stunning karstic mountains of the natural park,

before dropping down to the tip of Spain at Tarifa for the remaining four nights, where our base is close to the well-established migration watch points and marvellous southward raptor migration.

PHOTOGRAPHIC OPPORTUNITIES: Early autumn days have many hours of sunlight, and with the relaxed pace of the tour, we will have ample time for taking photographs of the great birds and scenery that we encounter.



Picturesque landscapes adorn the Sierra de Grazalema

BIRD LIST: Expected highlights include White-headed Duck, Marbled Duck, Ferruginous Duck, Greater Flamingo, European Turtle-dove, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Red-necked Nightjar, Alpine Swift, Little Swift, Pallid Swift, Purple Swamphen, Red-knobbed Coot, Black Stork, White Stork, Northern Bald Ibis, Glossy Ibis, Squacco Heron, Purple Heron, Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint, Collared Pratincole, Slender-billed Gull, Audouin's Gull, Gull-billed Tern, Whiskered Tern, Black Tern, Black-winged Kite, European Honey-buzzard, Short-toed Snake-eagle, Ruppell's Vulture, Griffon Vulture, Egyptian Vulture, Bonelli's Eagle, Booted Eagle, Montagu's Harrier, Black Kite, Common Hoopoe, European Bee-eater, Lesser Kestrel, Iberian Grey Shrike, Woodchat Shrike, Iberian Azure-winged Magpie, Eurasian Penduline-tit, Crested Tit, Mediterranean Short-toed Lark, Greater Short-toed Lark, Thekla's Lark, Crested Lark, Red-rumped Swallow, Eurasian Crag Martin, Western Olivaceous Warbler, Western Bonelli's Warbler, Spectacled Warbler, Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin, Blue Rock-thrush, Black Wheatear, Tawny Pipit, 'Spanish' Yellow Wagtail, European Serin, Rock Bunting, Cirl Bunting, and many more.

ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD: We have four nights in the quiet rural town of Los Palacios, south of Seville, two nights in the pretty mountain town of Grazalema, with the remaining four nights at a coastal countryside hotel near Tarifa. All hotels are of good quality and provide en-suite facilities with a restaurant and bar. Full board accommodation is provided commencing with dinner on day 1 and ending with breakfast on day 11. Lunches will normally be a packed lunch or involve a café stop.

WEATHER: In early September midday temperatures in southern Spain remain in the mid 20 degrees centigrade, with slightly cooler mornings and evenings. Sunny days should be expected and although rain is possible, it is unlikely.

PACE & DAILY ROUTINE: The tour is leisurely paced throughout, and basic fitness is all that is required. We will enjoy short walks from our vehicles on routes specifically chosen to enable us to stay on relatively flat ground with few inclines. Breakfast will be taken at about 07.30 and we should be back at our accommodation no later than 18.00 each day. On one evening we will try for Red-necked Nightjar, not far from our hotel in Los Palacios. We will take refreshment breaks during the day, in addition to our lunch break.



A Red-necked Nightjar poses obligingly for us

GROUP SIZE: The tour will be considered viable with 5 participants plus one leader. We will take a maximum group size of 10 persons with 2 leaders.

FLIGHTS: Flights to Malaga are readily available from several regional airports, including from Leeds Bradford and Manchester and the various London airports. From the north, we intend using the services of Jet2 which have convenient morning flights to Malaga. The return flight leaves at lunchtime, ensuring we are back home in the UK by mid-afternoon on the final day. From the south, there are convenient flight from London Heathrow and Gatwick using the services of both British Airways and EasyJet.

PRICE: The price of this 11-day tour is £2395 per person, which includes all transport in Andalucia using spacious people carriers, the services of Birding Abroad leaders, twin bedded accommodation in good quality hotels, breakfast, lunch and dinner, mineral water throughout, all entrance fees to parks and monuments. The single room supplement will be £425, reflecting hoteliers offering room rates largely irrespective of occupancy.

Not included are your international flights, drinks during the day and with evening meals. To book your place on this exciting tour please submit a completed booking form together with a deposit of £300 per person.

DAY TO DAY ITINERARY

Day 1 – Tuesday 1 September: The group will rendezvous in Malaga at lunchtime, before making the road journey of two and half hours westwards to the rural town of Los Palacios. En-route we will stop at the Laguna de Fuente de Piedra, which hosts Spain's largest Greater Flamingo colony. Occasionally Lesser Flamingo can also be noted here, so we will scan carefully just in case. The scrub and fields around the lagoon are likely to produce Iberian Grey Shrike and maybe a tardy Woodchat Shrike, as well as commoner species such as European Serin, Zitting Cisticola and Sardinian Warbler. Small pools with viewing hides host a few White-headed Duck and occasionally Marbled Teal, as well as migrant waders at this time of year. As we cross the Andalusian countryside we will keep an eye out for Black-winged Kite, which are often showier towards the end of the day. Night Los Palacios.



Day 2 – Wednesday 2 September: We will begin our exploration of the Coto Donana just a short distance from Los Palacios at the southern end of the famous Brazo del Este, an area offering exceptional bird watching due to a mosaic of habitats including marshes and cultivated land, endless canals and embankments and drier steppe-like plains. Tamarisk trees and shady poplars bordering the waterways provide habitat for Western Olivaceous Warbler which having finished breeding, are busily feeding alongside other passage songbirds, to prepare for their migration to sub-Saharan Africa. Common heron type species include Purple, Squacco and Black-crowned Night-heron, Eurasian Spoonbill, Glossy Ibis and the more secretive Little Bittern. The presence of Eurasian Penduline-tits is usually given away by their thin call and the area is home to established exotic escapes including Yellow-crowned Bishop, Common Waxbill and Black-headed Weavers. Aerial activity over the lagoons is likely to include Collared Pratincole, Gull-billed Tern and Whiskered Tern. As we don't want to over stretch ourselves on our first day in the field, we will return for a light lunch and some rest and relaxation, before going out for a short birding session in the early evening to local woodlands, where as the sun sinks in the western sky, we will listen and watch for the distinctive sound and ghost-like shapes of Red-necked Nightjars, sometimes at close range. Night Los Palacios.

Day 3 – Thursday 3 September: Today we spend a full day visiting a variety of excellent sites along the lower reaches of the Guadalquivir river close to where it enters the Atlantic Ocean. We can check a site we know for any Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin yet to migrate south, before dropping onto the Trebujena flood plain, scanning for small parties of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse which come to drink and feed here. The bare sun-baked mud margins and raised banks are frequented by Mediterranean Short-toed Larks whilst Spectacled Warblers feed in *salicornia* scrub on the salty marismas. Caspian Terns may well be patrolling the wide river as we drive southwards, checking the shallow lagoons and salinas for Marbled Duck and migrant waders, before we reach the welcome shade of the Algaida pine woods. Here Black Kites and Booted Eagles soar overhead, whilst the woods themselves provide perfect habitat for Short-toed Treecreeper and a variety of migrants. White-headed Ducks breed on a nearby lake alongside Red-crested Pochard and Ferruginous Duck. Close-by the Bonanza salt pans, now a reserve with good access and drivable tracks, offers close views of Greater Flamingos, Slender-billed Gulls and Kentish Plovers. At this time of year, the salt pans can be teeming with various waders returning from the Arctic including Little Stints and Curlew Sandpipers. A short drive to the river mouth at Chipiona will give us an excellent chance to see Little Swifts which have established a colony here, the most important one in Europe.

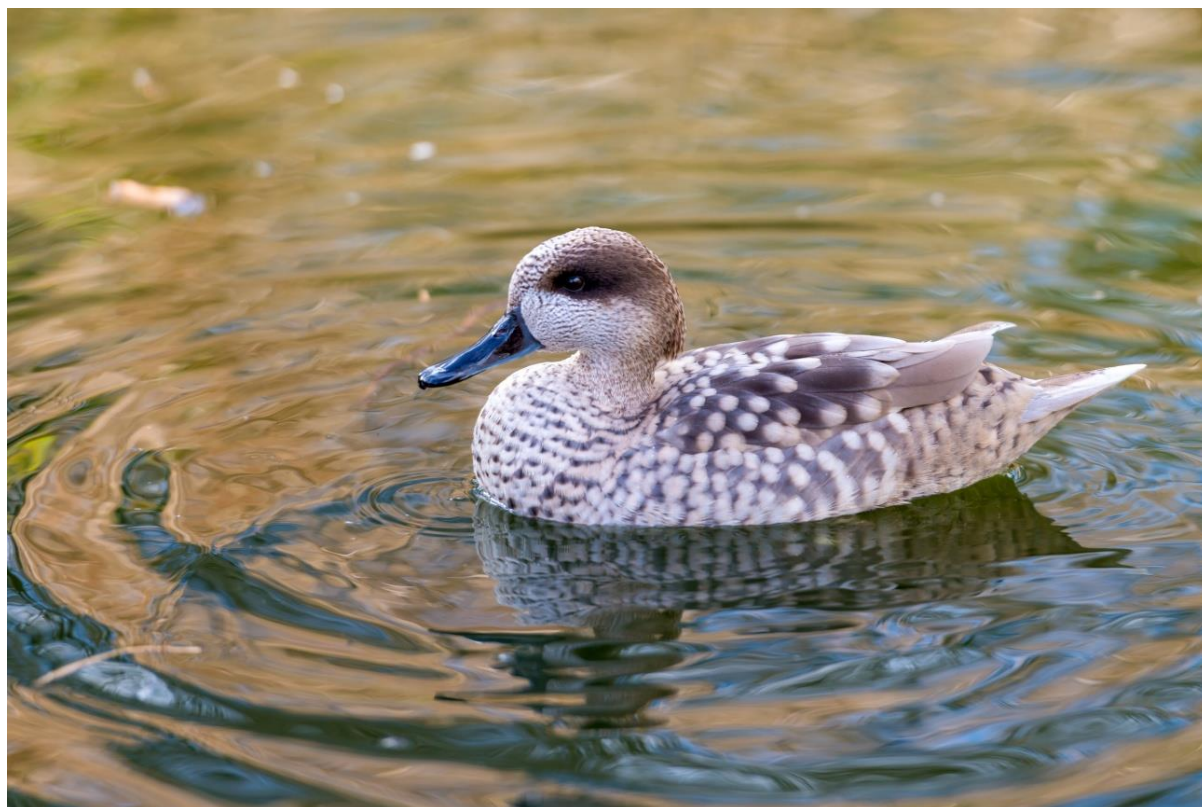


Spectacled Warbler, a denizen of the salt-flat salicornia scrub

Here too we can scour the foreshore for passing seabirds or 'loafing' gulls and terns. By late afternoon it will time to return to Los Palacios on the nearby motorway just over one hour away by-passing Jerez. Night Los Palacios

Day 4 – Friday 4 September: After breakfast we will take a simple car ferry across the Guadalquivir river to nearby Coria del Rio and spend the morning at the Dehesa de Abajo, a site well loved by Spanish bird watchers but not widely known elsewhere. It possesses a great mix of habitats from umbrella pines to wild olive woodlands, from pastureland to open water and it includes a visitor centre for our convenience. Whilst most of the White Storks and European Bee-eaters which nest here are likely to have already set off southwards, some will still be around. The lagoon has permanent water, where Purple Swamphen is common and if the surrounding area is drought-bound, then its waters

will contain an astonishing concentration of waterbirds, including two key target species: Red-knobbed Coot and Marbled Duck which is shown in the photograph below.



In the afternoon we can cross back over the river and explore another stretch of the Brazo del Este, enjoying further sightings of various waterbirds, whilst keeping an eye skywards for soaring raptors and storks as they continue to pass south, sometimes descending to seek roost sites as the afternoon progresses. Night Los Palacios.

Days 5 & 6 – Saturday and Sunday 5 & 6 September: On Saturday we will check-out from Los Palacios and set off eastwards inland, pausing briefly at an old, ruined castle where a small colony of Lesser Kestrels persists. Our onward journey will see us climbing steadily into the stunning Sierra de Grazalema, which was granted UNESCO biosphere reserve status in 1977. Surrounded by jagged mountain peaks, we will admire wonderful panoramic views of the countryside, sprinkled with ‘pueblos blancos’; small villages characterised by whitewashed walls and red-tiled roofs. We’ll have lunch overlooking the stunning scenery, which your Birding Abroad leaders have visited many times over the years, this being one of their favourite areas in Spain.

We have all afternoon and the whole of the following day at our disposal in the Grazalema area, where we will take short, pleasant walks to seek out notable resident species such as Black Wheatear, Thekla’s Lark, Blue Rock-thrush, Iberian Grey Shrike, Red-billed Chough, Rock Sparrow, Rock Bunting and Cirl Bunting. A lingering summer visiting warbler such as Western Bonelli’s is on the cards, and with luck Western Orphea is not out of the question. Dotted high on bare limestone ridges are a few groves of the renowned Spanish Fir or *pinsapa*, a relic of the last ice-age. These truly rare trees are restricted to just this tiny part of Spain and a few sites in North Africa.

We will take time on one of the days for a short stroll into the village of Grazalema itself where we can have lunch in the pretty market square. Our vehicles will help us climb to a mountain coll where there are even more spectacular panoramic views for miles around of the alluring countryside. Scrub

here is home to Dartford Warbler. Scanning the cliff faces we will pick out many Griffon Vultures, the sierras here being home to Europe's largest colonies of this huge raptor and we will also look skywards for Egyptian Vulture and Bonelli's Eagle which breed more sparingly in the hills hereabouts. Nights Grazalema.

Day 7 - Monday 7 September: We have another morning in the sierras, choosing our favourite site for another walk or exploring one of the many trails for yet more birding surprises. Around midday we rather reluctantly leave Grazalema and set off south towards the coast, taking lunch en-route.



A Griffon Vulture returns to its cliff edge roosting site; the sky can be filled with them

Later in the afternoon we will check-in to our hotel just outside Tarifa, mainland Spain's most southerly point with the mountains of Morocco clearly visible across the Straits of Gibraltar. After an afternoon transit we will be ready for relaxing drink in the hotel grounds, often accompanied by the sight of migrating raptors still moving along the coast and Spotted and European Pied Flycatchers feeding quietly in the garden. Night near Tarifa.

Days 8, 9 & 10 - Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday 8, 9, 10 September: We have three full days to explore a short section of the Andalucian coast. Our primary quest is to witness Europe's most impressive raptor migration, a true highlight of the tour. Large soaring birds are too big to power their own flight for long periods, so rely on thermals for lift. Thermals are only created over land, meaning sea crossings become a problem. They choose to cross at the narrowest point, in the Mediterranean this being the 10 miles between Tarifa and the Moroccan coast. The result is a bottleneck used by thousands of birds: European Honey-buzzards, Black Kites, Booted Eagles, Short-toed Snake-eagles, Montagu's Harriers, Griffon Vultures, Egyptian Vultures, Ospreys, and others including large numbers of White and Black Storks.

Utilising a number of migration watch points for added comfort, we will keep a close eye on the weather and wind direct to position ourselves at the most favourable spots, but in autumn anything but rain should produce birds in good numbers. Also heading south will be some Alpine Swifts and European Bee-eaters, adding yet more colour and sound to the panoply of birds on the move.

The colours of a European Bee-eater flash by against the azure blue sky of Andalusia



The terrain along and just inland from the coast is varied. Wooded hills and rocky outcrops are home to vultures, this being the best area in southern Spain to encounter Ruppell's Vulture, a recent immigrant from sub-Saharan Africa. The same habitat is home to both the rare White-rumped Swift and Little Swift, which can sometimes be found following careful scrutiny of swift flocks. Dry steppe-like valleys with scattered boulders are likely to have Black-eared Wheatear and Tawny Pipit, both species soon to be away to Africa. Tarifa is also ideally placed for visits to grassy plains and coastal salt pans where we may find Audouin's Gull amongst the more common Yellow-legged Gulls, together with a range of waders including Black-winged Stilt, Curlew Sandpiper and Little Stint. By chance, we may encounter a group of Northern Blad Ibis which wander this area, the birds being part of a re-introduction scheme, instigated in 2003, which appears to be doing well.

A few miles north of Tarifa, La Janda was once a huge wetland, the largest in Andalusia and one which rivalled the Coto Donana in terms of rare and scarce species. Sadly, it was drained in the early 1960's following an ill-informed government drive against malaria. All that remains today is a large flat plain, with canals and flooded rice paddies. However, it remains a classic bird watching site, attracting a whole range of raptors, waders and passage migrants. Purple Swamphen, White Storks, Glossy Ibis can be abundant. A few Little Bustards remain, and a couple of pairs of Spanish Imperial Eagles still reside on its fringes, so the bird watching remains good. Conservationists are working to see if parts of the area can be re-flooded to regain some of this important former wetland.

On one day we join a whale and dolphin-watching boat trip in the Straits when exciting possibilities include Common Bottle-nosed, Striped and Common Dolphins and Long-finned Pilot Whales, which can often be watched at close quarters. Larger whales are scarce, although both Sperm Whale and Orca have been seen on past trips. We may also be treated to close views of Scopoli's and Balearic Shearwaters, plus a few Northern Gannets, skuas and terns. Nights near Tarifa.



Playful Striped Dolphins close to our boat

Day 11 – Friday 11 September: After four nights in the Tarifa area, it will be time to drive back to Malaga, arriving in good time for our flights home.

Sincere thanks go to Andrew Ashworth, Peter Greaves, Sarah Hird, Bob Martin and Chris King for allowing us to use their lovely photographs.



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