Birding Abroad Ltd - Southern Spain in early autumn

Monday 31 August to Friday 11 September 2026

Andalucía, in southern Spain, offers some of the very best birdwatching in Europe. South of Seville, the mighty Guadalquivir River flows slowly towards the Atlantic, flanked by a profusion of marshes, lagoons and rice fields that form the famous Coto Doñana wetlands. Inland from here lies the beautiful Sierra de Grazalema, whose rugged limestone peaks tower above gullies and valleys cloaked in Cork and Holm Oaks and wild olives. Nearby at Spain's most southerly tip, the Strait of Gibraltar provides the shortest crossing to Africa for huge numbers of soaring raptors and storks on their autumn migration, one of Europe's great avian spectacles. Our tour aimed to savour the very different delights of each of these key landscapes, with the timing also carefully scheduled to catch the spectacle of post breeding birds in the marshes as well as any lingering summer visitors prior to their departure south, the very best of Andalucia in early autumn.

The group comprised Paul Bibby, Brian Coleman, Deborah Cook, Bob Groves, Keith & Liz Reynolds and Paul & Joyce Simmons, with Lance and Nick as the Birding Abroad leaders.

Monday 31 August
Flights from various parts of the UK arrived at Málaga during the late afternoon and evening, after which we transferred to a pleasant hotel nearby. With everyone safely gathered, we were ready to begin our Andalucían adventure in earnest the following morning.

Tuesday 1 September
After breakfast at 8.00 am, with several Monk Parakeets flying over the hotel gardens, Lance and Nick collected our two comfortable passenger vans. Once loaded, we set off north-west through the Andalucían countryside where olive trees dominated the landscape. The groves, often planted in neat rows across the rolling hills, are a defining feature of the region having shaped Andalucía's rural landscape for centuries.

We had been keeping a close eye on the weather forecast, as a heat wave was predicted and this was already evident as we began our first walk at the famous Laguna de Fuente de Piedra wetland, where temperatures hovered around 35°C. This great basin was largely dry; the intense summer heat having leached minerals from the lakebed, leaving a striking grey-white expanse of salt. Only a small area in the south-western corner still held water, and this supported around 120 Greater Flamingos, their pink forms shimmering in the heat haze. A few waders, including Pied Avocet and Black-winged Stilt, were feeding around the shallows in what must have been baking conditions at ground level. Two smaller permanent lagoons nearer the visitor centre offered better birding, and some welcome shade, so we concentrated our efforts there. Hirundines skimming low over the water included four Red-rumped Swallows, while the surrounding bushes held Sardinian Warbler and four European Turtle-doves, always a welcome sight these days. Careful scanning of the ponds revealed ten White-headed Ducks, comprising a single male and nine females, along with five Northern Shovelers, a single Gadwall and several Mallard. Around 30 Little Grebes were scattered across the pools in small groups, whilst two Green Sandpipers worked the muddy margins and three Cetti's Warblers called from dense tangles of vegetation. More distantly, a single European Honey-buzzard appeared, followed shortly by a group of five, all heading southwards on their long journey towards Africa.

We left at 1.15 pm, stopping for lunch at a motorway service restaurant which provided an ideal opportunity to escape the heat and recharge for an hour, before continuing west to Los Palacios y Villafranca. We checked into our hotel at around 4.00 pm and, after a short rest, reconvened for some introductory birding at small wetland sites on either side of town. At the first, we viewed from a dusty raised track, where an impressive 230 White Storks, 70 Glossy Ibises, 35 Cattle Egrets and 30 Eurasian Spoonbills gathered across the marsh. In the shallower areas, Common Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers were feeding, whilst two Common Hoopoes, around 20 European Bee-eaters, a Common Kingfisher and our first Woodchat Shrike of the tour added welcome variety. Western Yellow Wagtails were busy catching insects around the margins.

Ponds on the other side of town proved equally productive, with seven Squacco Herons sitting conspicuously amongst the reeds. Three Great White Egrets showed beautifully in the late-afternoon sunlight as three Black-crowned Night-herons emerged for their evening activities. Nine Common Sandpipers had gathered in a small group on the muddy margins. As the sun began to sink, we made our way back to the hotel for our evening meal, pleased with a productive first day.

Wednesday 2 September
Breakfast was at 7.30 am, after which we drove a few kilometres south-east to the Brazo del Este, a large mosaic of marshes, lagoons and cultivated land spread across the Guadalquivir

floodplain. This remarkable landscape is the product of both natural river processes and generations of agricultural modification, with the rich alluvial soils now supporting extensive rice cultivation.

A stop en route at a tree-lined agricultural compound produced Spotted Flycatcher and, with patience, at least two Isabelline Warblers (usually known as Western Olivaceous Warbler), which proved surprisingly confiding.

Western Yellow Wagtails passed overhead, whilst careful checking of the reeds in a nearby ditch produced 12 roosting Black-crowned Night-herons. Here too we noticed six Black-headed Weavers and four Yellow-crowned Bishops. Both these species are native to sub-Saharan Africa and have become successful colonists in southern Iberia over the last 50 years, aided by a classic mix of the global pet trade, agricultural opportunism and an ability for rapid ecological adaption, all these combining to create an unexpected new population far from their original range.

Moving on, we ascended a wide dirt track known as the El Muro de los Portugueses, built during a long-running effort to transform areas of marsh into productive rice fields. The raised track provided panoramic views across the floodplain, cutting directly through a succession of marshes, oxbow lakes and both cultivated and fallow areas. It was an excellent vantage point from which to appreciate the scale and variety of this remarkable area. Once up onto the embankment at the southern end of Brazo del Este, we made our way north pausing intermittently to take in the bird life where the habitat looked interesting.

Wildfowl included 50 Marbled Duck, a notable number we thought, and two Red-crested Pochard, while stands of bulrushes were favoured by Purple Swamphens, with nine birds being counted. The most spectacular sight, however, were huge gatherings of Glossy Ibis. Large flocks appeared and disappeared across the marshes, constantly shifting between different feeding areas, and our best estimate was an astonishing 5,000 birds.

The heron gathering was impressive too, with 100 Cattle Egrets, 30 Little Egrets, 15 Grey Herons, eight Black-crowned Night-herons, five Purple Herons, four Squacco Herons and four Great White Egrets. We worked our way systematically through the various groups of birds, with muddy margins producing an excellent selection of waders: 40 Black-winged Stilts, 25 Wood Sandpipers, 20 Northern Lapwings, 15 Pied Avocets, 10 each of Common Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers, six Common Snipe, six Green Sandpipers, two Common Sandpipers, and singles of Black-tailed Godwit and Temminck's Stint.

A couple of Gull-billed Terns and a single Whiskered Tern glided back and forth over the wetlands. The latter was particularly disappointing, as we have encountered noticeably higher numbers on all our previous visits. A large group of 150 Lesser Black-backed Gulls sat loafing on the water, probably not long arrived from further north in Western Europe.

Birds of prey were well represented, with seven Black Kites, five Western Marsh-harriers, three Ospreys, and a dark-phase Booted Eagle. Patches of tamarisk lined the banks, and here we tried for Eurasian Penduline-tit, eventually securing brief views of a single bird.

Pairs of Zitting Cisticola fluttered around the track, a species that was to become a daily sight during our time in the lowlands. More Yellow-crowned Bishops appeared as we continued, the brilliant yellow of the males catching the sunlight as they perched on the tops of the rice

stems, whilst a single male Spanish Sparrow was picked out among a group of ‘mixed’ sparrows. A Lesser Emperor dragonfly dashed about one of the ditches.

The area had recently benefited from conservation work to create a new wetland. This was already proving its worth as we found a large gathering of around 450 Collared Pratincoles, feeding and resting in the late-morning heat. Such numbers are an infrequent sight in Europe, and the gathering suggested that the local population had enjoyed a particularly successful breeding season. Watching so many of these elegant, long-winged birds gathered together on the floodplain was one of the morning's most memorable sights and we vowed to return here later during our stay.

Back at the hotel we were ready for our late lunch and, with temperatures climbing into the high 30°C, we sensibly rested through the hottest part of the afternoon. By early evening the worst of the heat had eased, so we set out again, this time for an area of pine woodland. With plenty of light remaining, we first explored the woodland on foot and found a Common Nightingale, which initially called from cover before breaking into a quiet subsong and eventually giving brief views to all. As dusk approached, however, our attention turned to the real target of the evening, Red-necked Nightjar. As the last light faded, two birds made several close fly-bys allowing excellent views of their distinctive features as they swept silently through the gathering darkness. The calls of five Eurasian Thick-knee and two Tawny Owl provided a fitting accompaniment and, with darkness now settling over the woodland, we returned to our hotel after a highly rewarding day in the Andalucía lowlands.

Thursday 3 September

Breakfast was again at 7.30 am before we set off south towards the lower reaches of the Guadalquivir. The vineyards and surrounding scrub near Trebujena provide ideal habitat for Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin, so we stopped at a site where we have previously found the species in spring. Our hope was that some might still be present before their autumn migration, and thankfully, after only a few minutes one bird appeared, albeit briefly. With patience this was joined by a second bird, one of which became increasingly confident, eventually showing really well for the group.

Overhead, European Bee-eaters were flocking and calling in the morning sunshine, their vivid colours flashing as they passed southwards towards Africa. We continued through the small town of Trebujena, from where the vast floodplain opened out below us, stretching for miles across the landscape. A male Montagu's Harrier drifted over the track, which we watched as it glided effortlessly across the fields and away.

We stopped on the salty marismas to check the fields, and small pools close to the banks of the Guadalquivir. Familiar waders like Black-winged Stilt and Pied Avocet were accompanied by three Kentish Plovers, whilst singles of Curlew Sandpiper, Dunlin, Common Redshank and Little Stint added to the variety. Track edges were clothed in *Salicornia*, giving the otherwise open landscape a distinctive green-and-red mosaic. It wasn't long before we found at least three Spectacled Warblers moving through the low vegetation, probably a post-breeding family party.

Following the river southwards, we checked patches of dried mud along the track margins for larks. It wasn't long before we found two small groups of Mediterranean Short-toed Lark, around 15 birds in all, with several approaching quite closely and allowing us to photograph them at leisure, as shown below.

A handful of passage Willow Warblers fed among the bankside tamarisks, whilst two Caspian Tern flew downriver as we continued south. Groups of Greater Flamingo were busy sifting the shallow waters, adding flashes of pink to the otherwise muted colours of the salt-marsh landscape. Our first Common Swallowtail butterfly of the tour was noted, being seen thereafter almost daily in single figure counts.

The temperature, meanwhile, continued to rise reaching 41°C by 1.30 pm. It was time to retreat, so we sought sanctuary in the cooler pine woodland at Algaida, where we enjoyed our picnic lunch shaded by the trees. Even here the birding continued, with six Booted Eagles circling overhead, eight Spotted Flycatchers feeding in the canopy and two Short-toed Treecreepers working their way through the trees.

There was little point in trying to beat the heat in the open landscape, so we took a further hour's break in the local café, grateful for the cool drinks and a chance to rest before venturing out again.

Our next destination was the nearby Bonanza saltpans, where waders were the focus. Numbers were noticeably lower than usual, perhaps because we were still a little early in the

season, but Sanderling, Ruddy Turnstone and Dunlin were all present in double figure counts, along with Ruff and Kentish Plover in single figures. Around 50 Slender-billed Gull were also present. These traditional saltpans are a long-established feature of the coastal landscape here, their shallow evaporating ponds creating a patchwork of habitats that can be remarkably productive for birds, although in the fierce afternoon heat it was certainly no place to linger.

We therefore moved on to a series of small lagoons in the village of Algaida, where old, shady tamarisks provided some partial relief from the sun. Here we enjoyed good views of three male and seven female White-headed Ducks, together with a fine male Ferruginous Duck and a Purple Swamphen. Groups of Common Coot were carefully checked for the possibility of Red-knobbed Coot, but on this occasion those birds eluded us. A fine Mediterranean Chameleon clung to a tamarisk using its prehensile tail, an impressive sight indeed.

Our final destination of the day was the attractive coastal town of Chipiona, just a few miles to the south. Here we visited an established Little Swift colony, the only known colony of this species in Europe. At least seven birds gave us good views as they hawked for insects over the town and repeatedly returned to their nests. The harbour also provided an opportunity for a useful gull tutorial, with plenty of Yellow-legged Gulls present in all plumages, while four Sandwich Tern plied the waters nearby.

It was soon time to make the journey back to Los Palacios, just over an hour away, where our evening meal awaited us. It had been a long and exceptionally hot day, but also a rewarding one, taking us through a wonderfully varied succession of habitats along the lower Guadalquivir and its Atlantic fringes.

Friday 4 September

Breakfast was at 7.30 am before we set off west towards the small car ferry at Coria del Río, where we crossed the Guadalquivir. At around 408 miles in length, the Guadalquivir is one of Spain's great rivers and remains its only navigable one, with ships able to travel inland from

the Atlantic Ocean as far as Seville. For Andalucía, the river is quite literally the lifeblood of agriculture, its fertile floodplain supporting extensive fields of cotton, maize, sunflowers and citrus, while the lower reaches have been transformed over the last century by the expansion of rice cultivation. These paddies depend upon an elaborate system of water management drawing on the tidal river and estuary, creating an extraordinary mosaic of natural and man-made wetlands.

Looking across the broad river, it was interesting to reflect on how different this landscape must have appeared during the famous expeditions of the 1950s led by Guy Mountfort and others, which helped inspire the wonderful book, *Portrait of a Wilderness*. Much has inevitably changed since then, but the Guadalquivir remains an impressive and defining feature of the landscape, and our few minutes aboard the ferry provided a suitably reflective start to the morning.

Our main destination was La Dehesa de Abajo, a large estate just a few miles south-west of Coria del Río, part of which is protected as a nature reserve. En route, we stopped when Liz spotted two Common Cranes feeding in fields. Both were colour-ringed and their presence in early September was intriguing, perhaps part of a local marking scheme. Common Cranes winter here in small and decreasing numbers, but these birds had presumably remained through the summer rather than making the journey north.

Further on, another roadside stop produced a fine gathering of at least 35 Black-crowned Night-herons, mostly juveniles, roosting around some old gravel workings. Sandstone bluffs beside the pools provided perches for groups of Eurasian Jackdaws. Rice paddies stretched across much of the surrounding landscape, some with areas of exposed mud remaining, creating a magnet for feeding birds. Waders included an impressive 175 Black-winged Stilts, as well as 55 Wood Sandpipers, 40 Ruff, 15 Black-tailed Godwits, 12 Pied Avocets, 12 Common

Ringed Plovers, a noteworthy 11 Temminck's Stints, 10 Little Stints, 10 Dunlin, five Little Ringed Plovers, and singles of Kentish Plover and Curlew Sandpiper. Herons and other wetland species were equally well represented, including 150 Glossy Ibises, 75 Little Egrets, 50 Cattle Egrets, 40 White Storks, 12 Squacco Herons, 12 Grey Herons, and two each of Purple Heron and Great White Egret. In such a concentrated area, the sheer number and variety of birds made for quite a spectacle.

A Squacco Heron sits quietly watching for prey

Eventually we tore ourselves away and continued to La Dehesa de Abajo, walking across the parched ground towards the seasonal lake. Our hopes of finding at least a small pool of remaining water were soon dashed: the lake was completely bone dry! This was particularly disappointing as the site is well known for Red-knobbed Coot, but after such a hot and prolonged summer there was clearly nothing left for them here. The two hides at least provided welcome shade from the sun, and we settled down to see what might emerge from the surrounding bushes. Patience produced another Isabelline Warbler, while a couple of Common Reed-warblers and two Woodchat Shrikes were also found in the scrub. The visitor centre was closed, although apparently due to reopen shortly, so we returned to the picnic tables outside for lunch. Overhead, a steady trickle of 15 Black Kites was moving south, accompanied by a few Booted Eagles and a Short-toed Snake-eagle, a reminder that even in the fierce heat of early September, migration was well underway.

After lunch we explored another section of the rice paddies, finding further concentrations of waders and at least ten more Purple Herons. Eventually we retraced our route across the Guadalquivir and returned to our hotel at around 4.00 pm for a welcome rest.

Later in the afternoon, with the peak of the heat beginning to ease, we headed out again for one final visit to the Brazo del Este. As we joined the El Muro de los Portugueses track, a male

Black-headed Weaver showed nicely in the shade of the eucalyptus trees. We then drove north towards the recently created scrapes where we had enjoyed the Collared Pratincoles a couple of days earlier. This time the spectacle was even more impressive. The gathering had increased and after a careful count, we estimated around 1,000 birds to be present. Adults and recently fledged young were spread across the scrape islands, some rising into the air to hawk insects before settling again to preen and rest. We spent a memorable hour simply watching them, with the soft late-afternoon light adding to the scene. It was an evocative sight, knowing that before too long these remarkable birds would be setting off on their long migration to Africa.

The muddy margins also held good numbers of Common and Little Ringed Plovers, with at least 15 of each, allowing particularly useful comparisons between the adults and more subtly marked juveniles. Further along, four Marbled Duck occupied the remaining water in an oxbow pool, whilst in the drier fields, sharp eyed Liz picked out what initially appeared to be little more than a pale brown shape. Closer inspection revealed it to be a Eurasian Thick-knee, and after manoeuvring nearer we eventually found seven of these wonderfully cryptic, crepuscular birds scattered across the field. One of the canal edges produced a couple of Common Waxbills, another of the exotic finch colonists, before we finally returned to our hotel. Small groups of Pallid Swifts, some still feeding young, circled the town's streets.

And so, another day drew to a close, and with it our exploration of the Guadalquivir lowlands. From the broad river and intensively managed rice country to saltmarshes, lagoons, old workings and newly created wetlands, the last few days had revealed just how much birdlife

these varied habitats can support. We returned to Los Palacios for our evening meal and a drink, bringing our stay in this area to a thoroughly satisfying close and ready to move on to the next phase of the tour.

Saturday 5 September

After breakfast we loaded our vehicles and set off at 8.45 am heading east inland away from the floodplain before gradually climbing into more rolling countryside. We paused for a short time to check out a small colony of Lesser Kestrels but unfortunately there was little activity, just four birds taking flight over the fields as we approached the small Castillo building that hosts their nest sites. The birds did not return whilst we waited. A Little Owl peered at us from the walls, and local gardens held Common Whitethroat, Willow Warbler and two each of European Pied Flycatcher, Spotted Flycatcher and Common Redstart, whilst groups of European Bee-eaters flew south.

From here, our journey continued east as we gradually climbed and wound our way past several pretty 'white-walled' towns (or 'pueblos blancos') into the stunning Sierra de Grazalema, a UNESCO biosphere reserve. We had lunch in a picnic area near Villaluenga del Rosario amongst the welcome shelter of Holm and Cork Oaks, for even here in the mountains the weather remained hot, up to 34°C today. Short-toed Treecreeper, Eurasian Nuthatch, and a Common Firecrest were watched as we picnicked, with the adjacent cliffs hosting several Griffon Vultures and a couple of Short-toed Snake-eagles. A distant Blue Rock-thrush sat out giving 'scope views', a party of 15 Rock Sparrows flew through without pausing and an Iberian Grey Shrike posed nicely.

The butterfly list grew somewhat today. A Gatekeeper (either Southern or Spanish) was spotted amongst the dappled sunlight of the picnic area trees, as well as four Southern Brown Argus, a Mallow Skipper, a Small Copper and the Cardinal Fritillary shown below.

By mid-afternoon we headed on to our next hotel, an old, converted farmhouse, situated in a quiet valley off the road to Ronda. As we arrived, a Eurasian Golden Oriole flew along the entrance lane, heralding a good start to our stay. After checking-in and a rest, we took a walk in the countryside surrounding the hotel. A further four Eurasian Golden Orioles were seen, mostly in flight as they moved between small patches of woodland and along the treetops edging the lanes. This was good terrain for Cirl Bunting with four being seen as well as a pair of Thekla's Lark on the more exposed stony ground. Migrants included Common Redstart and Garden Warbler. A group of 10 Alpine Swift had us checking skywards, where along a nearby ridge three flocks totalling 50, 70 and 50 European Honey-buzzard passed low in the sky, presumably descending to seek a nighttime roosting site. The sight of these birds on the move is always a highlight of any day. As darkness fell and after our evening meal, we took a short walk with a Eurasian Scops-owl heard calling.

Sunday 6 September

Today we earmarked a full day for exploring the Grazalema area, one of our favourite landscapes in Spain. After breakfast at 7.30 am, we set off an hour later with Red-legged Partridges in surrounding fields, heading towards Benaocaz to visit a site where we have previously found Western Orphean Warbler. Our short walk there produced two Blue Rock-thrushes and several Common Ravens passing overhead, but sadly there was no sign of the Western Orphean Warblers, which had presumably already moved on for the winter. We paused at a panoramic viewpoint to simply take in the magnificent views across the valleys and surrounding sierras.

Nearby, we explored another area where the pale limestone cliffs tumble dramatically towards the valley floor, with extensive rocky outcrops and boulders scattered across the slopes. A fine paved walkway, constructed by the local villagers, made exploring this rugged terrain considerably easier, and with patience, we eventually found our only Black Wheatears of the tour, three in all, one of which is shown below. These attractive, resident birds are perfectly suited to the rocky mountain landscape.

Nearby two separate pairs of Thekla's Larks showed beautifully at close range, whilst two more Blue Rock-thrushes added flashes of colour amongst the grey-white rocks. A Woodlark sang from a neighbouring field, two Black Redstarts fed amongst the boulders and a juvenile Subalpine Warbler showed nicely, if briefly, in the scrub. It was a good example of the varied birdlife packed into this seemingly stark landscape, where open farmland, scrub and limestone cliffs meet within a relatively small area.

Thekla's Lark – here showing the slightly stubbier bill with the lower edge marginally convex, one of the distinguishing features from its close relative of the lowlands, the Crested Lark

For lunch we visited a pleasant hotel on the outskirts of Grazalema, enjoying a rather relaxing break and wonderful views from the terrace across the surrounding sierras. Grazalema itself is one of Andalucía's classic white villages, its whitewashed houses tucked beneath steep mountain slopes.

After lunch we headed higher, climbing to the Mirador de las Palomas coll at 1,185 metres. The views from here were breathtaking, with the serrated mountain peaks and deep valleys stretching away in every direction. The combination of mountain air and high temperatures was perhaps beginning to sap our energy, so we kept our walk relatively short. Even so, the birds continued to come: a particularly obliging pair of Dartford Warblers, a Common Firecrest, another Blue Rock-thrush, a Eurasian Hobby and an Egyptian Vulture were all recorded, whilst at least 25 Alpine Swifts and three Common Swifts swept effortlessly around the crags. By late afternoon, we returned to the hotel for some well-earned down time. Some of the group took the opportunity for a short walk around our country finca, enjoying the peaceful rural setting and late afternoon air with a couple of Eurasian Golden Orioles noted.

After evening meal, we made one final sortie in search of Eurasian Scops-owl, which was heard and seen briefly, providing a wonderfully atmospheric end to a day amongst the sierras.

Monday 7 September
After breakfast we said farewell to our hosts and set off for a final few hours of birding at the high coll, hoping that an earlier start would bring slightly cooler and more tolerable temperatures than on our previous visit.

Four Iberian Ibex were feeding beside the roadside, and an Iberian Green Woodpecker flew over the lead vehicle as we climbed through woodland towards the coll. At the top, a newly filled water trough soon began to attract a steady stream of thirsty birds, providing an interesting focus for our birding. The star was undoubtedly a fine male Rock Bunting, joined by two European Pied Flycatchers, two Firecrests, two Dartford Warblers, a Spotted Flycatcher and two Coal Tits. A Melodious Warbler appeared briefly before disappearing back into the vegetation, while overhead Alpine Swifts whizzed past and several European Crag Martins circled effortlessly around the cliffs. A handful of Red-billed Choughs called as they flew over, with a much larger group of around 30 appearing as we made our way lower down amongst the pine woods. Here we tried for Western Bonelli's Warbler, which once again proved elusive. Two Crested Tits and another Rock Bunting nevertheless provided a pleasant finale to our Grazalema birding.

By 10.30 am it was time to leave the mountains and begin the journey towards Tarifa and the coast. We descended west to Arcos de la Frontera before turning south towards Medina-Sidonia, exchanging the dramatic scenery of the Grazalema massif for the more open agricultural landscapes of Cádiz province. The road dissected broad fields and near El Chaparrito a group of 'kestrels' hovering over some stubble fields caught our attention. A closer look revealed several adult males Lesser Kestrels, and it soon became apparent that almost all, if not all the estimated 50 birds present, belonged to this species. They hovered almost motionless above the fields before dropping suddenly into the stubble to seize small insects, presumably including grasshoppers. It was a fabulous sight and a particularly encouraging encounter with a species that has suffered a substantial decline across Spain in recent decades.

We continued south, stopping for a convenient lunch at a service station on the A381 before carrying on towards Algeciras and then our hotel just east of Tarifa, where we arrived at around 3.20 pm. Our rooms all had convenient balconies, everybody relaxing there with drinks in hand whilst overhead birds of prey periodically appeared, searching the valley beyond for an overnight roost. Dominant amongst these were Booted Eagles and Short-toed Snake-eagles, casual counts revealing over 100 of each as the dark of evening swept in.

We had now reached the southernmost part of our journey, where the Mediterranean and Atlantic meet and the African continent is tantalisingly close, just 14 km away across the Strait. The focus of the tour was about to change once again, as we prepared to witness one of Europe's great migration spectacles.

A Short-toed Snake-eagle sweeps low over the hotel

Tuesday 8 September

We had breakfast at 8.00 am before making the short drive to Cazalla, one of the celebrated observation points where birders from all over the world gather each autumn to witness the

phenomenal movement of raptors and storks from Europe towards Africa. The morning was almost calm, with only a very slight easterly breeze, and a hazy Strait stretched away below us. A few Common and Pallid Swifts moved across the valley before the first raptors began to appear. By Tarifa standards the movement was fairly modest, but for us it was still an exciting spectacle as bird after bird appeared against the blue sky, gradually gathering height before drifting south towards Africa, some crossing, some resisting and just coasting, perhaps waiting for another day. During the next two and a half hours we recorded 155 Short-toed Snake-eagles, 125 European Honey-buzzards, 75 Booted Eagles, 41 Egyptian Vultures, 25 Black Kites, six Eurasian Sparrowhawks and four Western Marsh-Harriers, whilst 30 Griffon Vultures also soared majestically over the valley to our north.

The passage of Black Storks had just begun for the season, and we were delighted to record 34 of them, mostly together in one impressive group. Watching these large, black-and-white birds circle upwards before setting off towards Africa gave us a real sense of the scale and purpose of the migration taking place around us.

Passerine movement was more limited, although a Eurasian Golden Oriole and a Tawny Pipit were both noted heading south-west, while a group of five European Turtle-doves dropped into the valley to feed. There was something wonderfully purposeful about the whole morning, with birds arriving from the north, gathering over the hills and then disappearing towards the Strait and the mountains of Morocco beyond.

We returned to the pleasant shade of the hotel garden for lunch, where two Geranium Bronze butterflies were basking before we resumed our exploration at mid-afternoon. We drove into the bustling port town of Tarifa, where the lively atmosphere was quite different from the quiet hill viewpoints of the morning. This provided the setting for one of the highlights of the tour, a whale and dolphin boat trip into the Strait of Gibraltar. The sea was calm as our boat headed out several miles in search of cetaceans and seabirds. It was not long before dolphins began to appear, the crew expertly manoeuvring the boat towards several pods. Over the next

two and a half hours we enjoyed excellent views of three species: 15 Common Dolphins, 20 Common Bottle-nosed Dolphins and 15 Striped Dolphins. Some passed close beneath the stern or surfaced alongside us, often appearing to take a playful interest in the boat and its passengers. It was difficult not to feel a sense of connection with these highly intelligent animals, and the crew were able to tell us more about their lives and the conservation work being undertaken in the Strait.

The real stars of the mini-pelagic, however, were the Long-finned Pilot Whales. Several pods were encountered, totalling at least 80 individuals, with some coming remarkably close to the boat. Their slow, powerful surfacing and rolling movements revealed the distinctive bulbous heads and almost imperceptible beaks that give the species its characteristic appearance. Two of the pods included young whales, swimming closely alongside family members, a particularly memorable sight and an encouraging glimpse of the next generation.

Seabirds were unfortunately in short supply, with only ten 'large' shearwaters recorded, none close enough to allow us to distinguish confidently between Cory's and Scopoli's. Four Sandwich Terns flew around the harbour with a Flying Fish bursting from the waves providing a final flourish before we sailed back into Tarifa.

The day had combined two of the great wildlife spectacles of southern Spain: hundreds of soaring birds heading towards the African continent in the morning, followed by the rich marine life of the Strait in the afternoon. With raptors and Black Storks overhead and dolphins and pilot whales all around us, it was, in every sense, a perfect Tarifa day.

Wednesday 9 September

After breakfast we travelled west along the coast road, making our first stop at La Peña, a few kilometres inland and formerly the site of one of the raptor-counting bases. Here, a broad valley of stony soils supports a patchwork of low, sparse scrub or *garrigue*, interspersed with agricultural fields. It made for a pleasant walk and, at this time of year, providing opportunities to encounter a mix of resident breeding birds and migrants passing through. A Common Nightingale was calling from the scrub, and with some patience, we managed a brief glimpse as it moved between the bushes, with another two birds heard as we walked. A juvenile Woodchat Shrike sat prominently in the morning sunshine, the first of seven to be seen during the day, whilst a Common Hoopoe probed the short turf below. Eurasian Blackcaps and Garden Warblers were feeding amongst the brambles, accompanied by several Sardinian Warblers, whilst four Spotted Flycatchers made short sallies from the bushes to catch passing insects. There was no sign, however, of any Black-eared Wheatears, which we have found here on previous tours. The adjacent cliffs provided roosting ledges for Griffon Vultures, and as the morning warmed the birds began to rise into the air. Perhaps the highlight of the morning was

a further 80 Griffons gathered in a nearby field. The reason for this sizeable congregation was soon apparent: the carcass of a dead horse lay in the field, clearly providing the vultures with their next meal.

For the remainder of the morning, we moved to another of the established migration watchpoints on the sea cliffs just east of Tarifa. Once again, the skies provided the main attraction as raptors began drifting south. Our counts included an impressive 285 Booted Eagles, 135 Short-toed Snake-Eagles, 100 Black Kites, five Western Marsh-harriers and two Egyptian Vultures. European Bee-eaters were also passing through, with around 350 recorded during the morning, their calls and flashes of colour adding another character to the migration spectacle.

Lunch was again taken in the shady hotel garden before we set off mid-afternoon for La Janda. This vast plain has a fascinating history. Once the largest freshwater seasonal marsh in the Iberian Peninsula, it was progressively drained between the 1930s and 1960s for agriculture, by a misguided government campaign against malaria. Today, the former wetland has been reduced into a flat agricultural landscape of fields, rice paddies and pasture, criss-crossed by drains and larger canals. Despite the changes however, La Janda remains an important area for birds, and its broad open landscape can still produce some excellent encounters.

We explored slowly the main unpaved track, stopping regularly to scan fields and ditches. It was a pleasant surprise to find a male Black-eared Wheatear feeding alongside the track, particularly as the species had eluded us at its more traditional site earlier in the day. A couple of Northern Wheatears were also feeding nearby.

Cattle Egrets were by far the most numerous heron, with around 200 scattered across the fields. Ten Little Egrets fed along the drainage channels, accompanied by a few Grey Herons and a single Purple Heron. Once again, a loose flock of 20 ‘kestrels’ attracted our attention, and again the majority proved to be Lesser Kestrels. At least five Woodchat Shrikes, all juveniles, were scattered through the fields, whilst flocks of sparrows moved restlessly between the crops and ditch-side vegetation. With patience, several birds settled long enough for us to pick out a few smart male Spanish Sparrows, together with some more subtly streaked females. In fact, most of the flocks appeared to be Spanish Sparrows, with a smaller proportion of House Sparrows mixed in. A few Western Yellow Wagtails passed overhead as we continued our slow drive. Groups of White Stork gathered to feed in the fields with others ‘kettling’ in the warm afternoon air, our tally being at least 380.

The mammal highlight came rather unexpectedly when two dark-coloured Egyptian Mongooses dashed across the track before disappearing into cover. They were gone almost as quickly as they had appeared but provided a memorable bonus amongst the birding.

Overall, La Janda was quieter than on some previous visits. Nevertheless, the combination of open farmland, drainage channels and remnants of the area's former wetland character produced an interesting afternoon, and another reminder of how much wildlife can persist in landscapes that have been profoundly reshaped by agriculture. We returned to our hotel for 6.30 pm after another interesting day.

Woodchat Shrike, here a juvenile, one of nearly 30 we saw on the trip

Thursday 10 September

Today was our final full day in the field, and after breakfast we returned to Cazalla for one last look at the raptor migration. Compared with our previous visits, the movement was decidedly slow, with only single-figure counts of European Honey-buzzards, Short-toed Snake-eagles and Booted Eagles. There was, however, a pleasing consolation in the form of an Iberian Chiffchaff, which began calling, even breaking into song, before showing well in the bushes around the watchpoint. A Tawny Pipit flew over calling, whilst a few Pallid Swifts and Red-rumped Swallows glided across the valley. Despite being a quieter morning in the skies, it remained a pleasant final visit to one of the great vantage points for watching the migration between Europe and Africa.

We then headed along the coast to the lagoons at Barbate, where the birding soon took on a different character. The bare, sun-baked ground around the edges of the lagoons held several Crested Larks and three rather flighty Greater Short-toed Larks. A small copse of tamarisks offered welcome shade and a productive feeding area for migrants. Here we found two European Turtle-doves, two Spotted Flycatchers, a Common Whitethroat and a Common Redstart, with 10 Willow Warblers becoming the most common migrant resent. A Melodious Warbler appeared briefly on a couple of occasions, each time slipping back into cover before we could enjoy more than a fleeting view. Along a nearby fence, four Woodchat Shrikes sat out at intervals, including a fine adult bird.

The lagoons themselves are a well-known hotspot for waders, terns and gulls, and a careful scan of the various pans revealed an excellent variety. Forty Pied Avocets were the most obvious species present, being joined by 80 Common Ringed Plovers, 80 Kentish Plovers, 30 Dunlin, 22 Grey Plovers, 20 Sanderlings, 20 Black-tailed Godwits, five Black-winged Stilts and two Little Ringed Plovers nearby. Four Whimbrels landed on another shallow pool joining eight Red Knots, three Curlew Sandpipers, two Ruddy Turnstones and a Little Stint on the muddy margins. A few Common Sandpipers, Green Sandpipers, Wood Sandpipers and Common Greenshanks completed a respectable wader tally.

Amongst the gulls, a flock of 75 Audouin's Gulls was perhaps the highlight of our visit. Their distinctive pale appearance, red bills and grey legs and elegant profile made them particularly pleasing birds to finish our tour with, whilst two each of Mediterranean and Slender-billed Gulls added further interest. A Gull-billed Tern and a Caspian Tern briefly appeared before moving on, and three Little Terns settled on one of the islands. At the back of the lagoon, a gathering of 65 Eurasian Spoonbills stood roosting together, their long bills and graceful forms completing the fine wetland scene.

For convenience, we took lunch in Barbate before making our way to La Janda for a final birding session of the tour. A few more Woodchat Shrikes brought the day's total to a very respectable 12, and we added Corn Bunting to the tour list. We scanned the open fields and drainage channels in the hope of finding some harriers or other raptors, but apart from Western Marsh-harriers, there was little further movement. And so, our birding came to an end, and we returned to our hotel for a final evening meal together.

Friday 11 September
An early start ensured that we reached Málaga airport in good time for our return flights. We said our farewells after a thoroughly rewarding and varied tour. We had been enthralled by a rich succession of landscapes and habitats, memorable encounters with both resident and migrant birds (172 species in total), with sea mammals and the marvellous spectacle of raptors moving between two continents.

Thanks to Liz and Keith and Joyce and Paul for the use of their photographs in this report.

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