

Bird Migration in The Strait of Gibraltar

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Led by Yeray Seminario



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Introduction



The narrowest point of the Strait of Gibraltar is a mere 14 km across to the African continent. The clear views of the Jbel Musa, on the other side of The Strait, were one of the first things we would see in the morning during this tour. The combination of constant changing winds and powerful thermals makes this area a unique strategic crossing point for raptors, allowing stunning views of these and other avian migrants.

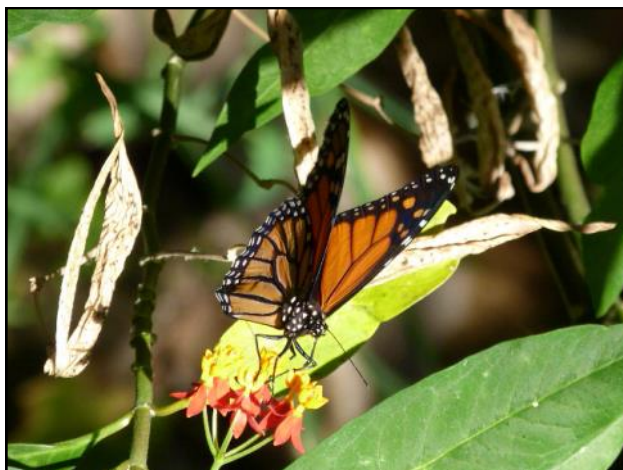
We travelled to the best observation points to enjoy the spectacle of migration and explored the areas in the surrounding countryside. We visited the beautiful and quiet Ojen Valley where we saw Griffon Vultures, the regular and rarer Rüppell's Vultures, Northern Goshawks and Bonelli's Eagles.

We drove through the ancient lagoon of La Janda, which was at one time, the largest freshwater lagoon in Southern Europe, to see Marsh and Montagu's, Lesser Kestrel, Black shouldered Kite, Bonelli's and Spanish Imperial Eagle. In the rice field corners and ditches we saw waders, Spanish Wagtails, Hoopoes, Wheatears, Whinchats, Tawny Pipits, Corn Buntings, Calandra, Crested and Greater Short-toed Lark.

We also watched Purple and Grey Herons, Great Egret, Glossy Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbills, Black-winged Stilts, Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwits, Ruff, Little Ringed Plovers, Kentish Plovers and Pied Avocets in the Bonanza saltpans, as well as good numbers of the threatened Marbled Duck and White-headed Duck.

We even had some time to enjoy other special wildlife in the area: We saw beautiful butterflies, such as the majestic Monarch and the simply dazzling Two-tailed Pasha. During our Whale-watching trip we were very lucky and enjoyed close views of a family group of Orcas.

All in all, we can say this was a fun and successful trip in one of the best birding destinations in Europe and one of the most important migration hotspots in the world.



Daily reports

Day 1

After picking up the group at Gibraltar, we headed to Algorrobo observatory for a relaxed introduction to raptor migration in the Strait of Gibraltar.

It wasn't the easiest day, as most of the birds were passing very far, and we had to use the binoculars and the scope to locate the birds. However, we got to see nice species during this first approach, most remarkably, an immature Rüppell's Vulture, ten Black Storks and a juvenile Bonelli's



Eagle. We got to see our first raptors, including Egyptian Vulture, Short-toed Eagle, Booted Eagle, Marsh Harrier, Black Kite. Most of the swifts were Alpine Swifts, and in fact, we saw several hundreds during the day.

After a couple of hours at the observatory seeing our first raptors, we went to the hotel to check in and rest for a little while before taking a short walk on the hotel grounds. Our accommodation, some lovely cabins in the middle of a tertiary forest, with Short-toed Treecreeper, Firecrest and Tawny Owl as neighbours. We started to walk on the trail around the cabins and saw our first Monarch. Apart from the aforementioned species, we saw more raptors, including Sparrowhawk, Marsh Harrier, dozens of honey buzzards and a Peregrine. Also, flocks of European Bee-eaters were seen and heard making their distinctive calls. A little bit before preparing for dinner, two Firecrest were chatting insistently, and all of a sudden, a Tawny Owl called just before it was getting dark. Not bad for a first short day!

Day 2

After breakfast we went to Los Lances beach bird observatory, overlooking a coastal lagoon. The pastures around los lances are an excellent spot for Tawny Pipits, Short-toed Larks and Kentish Plovers, plus a diverse array of passerines on migration.

We didn't find the pipits here, but we had great views of the larks and the plovers, amongst good numbers of other waders and gulls, including our first Audouin's Gulls and one Mediterranean Gull. There were good numbers of passerines, including large flocks of Corn Bunting and Spanish Wagtail (*Motacilla flava iberiae*, considered by some authors as a full species).



After Los Lances, we went to what probably is the best migration observatory in Europe: Cazalla. Even with unfavourable winds, as this has been an unusual year with mostly westerly winds that makes things way too easy for crossing, and things too difficult for birders, this birding hotspot shows its value. We saw 11 species of raptors in a little bit more than an hour, and this was a very slow day at Cazalla: Egyptian Vulture, European

Honey Buzzard, Griffon Vulture, Short-toed and Booted Eagle, Marsh and Montagu's Harrier, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Black Kite, Common Kestrel, and two Buzzards that under closer examination ended up being Gibraltar Buzzards. These birds seem to be hybrids between Common Buzzards from Europe and Long-legged Buzzards from Africa, being the Strait of Gibraltar the meeting point for them.

In the afternoon we went on a whale-watching excursion off Tarifa. The waters were calm and there



was very little wind: perfect conditions for whale-watching. On our way to the best spots for whales, we saw some Black Terns and even one Sand Martin in the middle of The Strait on its way to Africa. There were some Pilot Whales in the distance and we headed fast towards them. Suddenly I saw a black and white flash in the corner of my eye, and I thought "Orcas!". I told everyone that I thought that I had seen an Orca but there were Pilot Whales all around, maybe up to forty of them, so I was probably confused with one of those. However, a few minutes later the unmistakable black fins of five orcas could be seen near our boat! We followed the orcas at a distance for some time and we had great views of these magnificent animals. They were patrolling the traditional fishing boats of the Moroccans in search for Blue-fin Tuna, as they take them when they are closer to the surface and exhausted from fighting with the fishing line. We recovered from the trip with delicious local sweets and good coffee and went back to the hotel.

Day 3

On our third day we headed to the Barbate marshland, one of the best spots for waders and migrant passerines in the Strait of Gibraltar. Before we got there, we had to stop to watch our first Red-rumped Swallows of the trip. When we got to the marshland a thick fog was opening up, and we set our scopes next to the water. On the islands we found up to six Stone Curlews and there were good numbers of other waders and gulls, including more than thirty Audouin's Gulls and two

Slender-billed Gulls. Also, a small number of Montagu's Harriers kept flying south. Other raptors were Short-toed and Booted Eagle, Marsh Harrier and Griffon Vulture. The bushes were well occupied by migrant passerines, including Woodchat Shrike, Willow Warbler, Melodious Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher and Spectacled Warbler. We also had close views of a Eurasian Hoopoe feeding on the thistles.

Our next stop was going to be dedicated to look for the Northern Bald Ibis (or Waldrapp). These birds are the result of a reintroduction project that started in 2003. There were 25 pairs this year and 16 out of them succeeded on raising one or two chicks. We happened to find ten of these charismatic and unique looking birds, close enough so we could see the details and the purple-green sheen all over their plumage. These are really special birds!



After lunch we went to the former lagoon of La Janda, which was the largest fresh-water lagoon in southern Europe, until it was drained for intensive farming in the sixties. Nevertheless, this is one of the most important hotspots in the region when it comes to birding, and surely one of the bests to find Bonelli's and Spanish Imperial Eagle. We did see both species in the afternoon, even if there were very distant. One juvenile Bonelli's was carrying, in fact, what it seemed to be a Cattle Egret in its talons. The Spanish Imperial Eagle was far, but we could see the white patches on its wings through the scope. The high numbers of White Storks, as well as the Black Storks, were among the favorite sightings of the afternoon. We also had our firsts Whinchats (nine together), hundreds of Spanish Sparrows and twenty Lesser Kestrels feeding in the fields.

Close to sunset, we decided it was time to get some a short break before dinner and went back to our hotel.

Day 4

This morning we went to the Island of Tarifa, a restricted area that we got permits to access, as this is the best seawatching spot in the whole area. When we were driving on the causeway to the



island, we realized that there were many waders on the beach, so we spent some time with the scope on the small peeps and we got our first Little Sting of the trip, along with Kentish Plover, Greenshank and Ruddy Turnstone, among others.

Once in the Island, we set the scopes looking south. We didn't have to wait long before we could see our first Balearic Shearwaters. We saw around 100 in less than an hour, heading back into the Mediterranean

Sea. Also, many Scopoli's Shearwaters were flying nearby, most of them heading out to the Atlantic

Ocean. We also had a few Gannets and two Common Kingfishers, which are not the most common sighting on the island!

While we were looking for more seabirds, some suspicious fins broke the surface not far from where we were. As it happens, this was no fish or marine mammal, but a Loggerhead Turtle! We could see its head coming out to breath and its shell with the scope. A fantastic way to say goodbye to the Island of Tarifa.

After our seawatching time, we went to the Santuario Valley, as it's a good place to see Tawny Pipit. And there they were. We saw three Tawny Pipits together, as well as Black-eared Wheatear, Whinchat and some raptors flying high. They were too high, so we decided it was time to spend some more time at one of the observatories and do some raptor watching.

We did quite well in Algarrobo, as in one hour we got to see two Rüppell's Vultures, Honey Buzzards, Egyptian and Griffon Vultures, Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Marsh Harriers, Sparrowhawks, Black Kites and good numbers of White and Black Storks. The Pallid and Alpine Swifts were constantly flying above us. These are impressive large swifts and always a delight to see, with their powerful and agile flight.



After lunch, we spent the afternoon on a drive in Los Alcornocales Natural Park (Cork Oak Forest). A beautiful area that hold not only birds but some other fascinating wildlife, like the Two-tailed Pasha, which we were after. We got to see several of these huge butterflies, but unfortunately they didn't want to stop and pose for our cameras! We were content, however, with the amount of birds that we were seeing, including some good raptor migration with, again, good numbers of Honey Buzzards. Some passerines that we could see in the bushes and trees were: Short-toed Treecreeper, Firecrest, Isabelline Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher, Black Redstart and Whinchat. Overall, it was a good afternoon with some of the best views in the Strait of Gibraltar.

Day 5

We departed very early in the morning, as we had to drive about two hours to get to the Bonanza salt pans. This longer drive is well worth it, as there are chances to see Marbled and White-headed Duck and good numbers of waders. We did see the ducks (more than twenty Marbled!) and had great and close views of twenty species of waders, including Ruff, Wood Sandpiper, Common Snipe and Black-tailed Godwit, to name a few.

The salt pans were boiling with life, covered by Greater Flamingos, herons and egrets. The Little Terns were loud, and so were the Caspian Terns. An Osprey was carrying a large fish that escaped back to the River Guadalquivir and was probably recovered by some smart Yellow-legged Gull.

While looking through the scope, we could hear the Lesser Short-toed Larks flying above. We did see them well enough, including one bird walking on the road in front of us.

We spent most of our day in the saltpans and ponds nearby, but there was something else we needed to do. On our way back to the hotel we stopped to look for White-rumped Swifts. This is one of the most difficult species to see in Spain. On a single spot we saw Pallid, Common, Alpine



and White-rumped Swift. We only had to see the Little Swift to see all the resident swifts in continental Europe!

In the end, we got to see more than 80 species during the day, with some of the most difficult birds to see for this trip, so we were fully satisfied.

Day 6



This morning we decided to try to see the Common Bulbul in the town of Tarifa. These birds have been present in The Strait for the last two years and have successfully bred being the only known population of this species in continental Europe. We could only hear the bulbuls, but while we were looking for them we saw good migration, consisting on Honey Buzzards, Booted Eagles, Black Kites, European Bee-eaters, Alpine and Pallid Swifts, as well as some passerines, including Eurasian Reed-Warbler and Willow Warbler.

After the Bulbul attempt, we headed to Bolonia, where we were more lucky with the Thekla Lark, seeing several individuals with the scope and looking at the differences with the more abundant Crested Lark. Once on the beach, we looked for the Mediterranean Chameleon, as there is a small resident population here. Sure enough, we found one chameleon comfortably sitting on a Tamarix. He let us take all the pictures we wanted, and when

we were happy enough went to look for some migrant passerines in the bushes, adding Garden Warbler to our bird list.

Higher in the mountains we looked unsuccessfully for Little Swift, as it breeds in the caves nearby. We saw more migrants, flocks of Bee-eaters and Alpine Swifts, and two Common Redstarts, the firsts on our tour.

Our initial plan was to go to the other side of this mountains and look for the Little Swift, but we got some news that there was a carcass not too far with Griffons and a possibility of Rüppell's Vultures as well, so we changed course and went for it. When we arrived to the place, there were dozens of Griffons flying in circles above the area, a magnificent view. We saw two Rüppell's while we were waiting for the vultures to come down. Also, when we tried to get closer to the carcass we thought we saw a Sparrowhawk, but we looked better and it ended up being a juvenile Goshawk.



We were enjoying our time with the vultures, but it was time to look for the swift, so we headed back to Sierra de la Plata and went somewhere high enough so we could have a good view of the swifts and swallows feeding above Zahara. Sandwich in one hand, binoculars in the other, we didn't have to wait long until we saw a fast, small and tailless swift. A Little Swift indeed, showed up for a few seconds so we could see it and disappeared. Also, we had an immature

Bonelli's Eagle flying above. With these two birds we decided to call it a day and went back to the hotel for another fantastic dinner.

Day 7

On the last full day of the tour we had to explore more of La Janda. We had just a taste of it, but this time we'd drive through the least known roads. It happened to be a great day, as you will see. We started with large flocks of Corn Bunting and finches, including Goldfinch, Linnet, Greenfinch and Serin. Then, the distinctive call of the Calandra Lark warned us of its presence. We saw small flocks of these beautiful larks with dark wings and white edges on the forewings. Also, mingled with them, Greater Short-toed Lark and Tawny Pipit.



We scanned fields with good potential and we found four Little Bustards and an unusually high number of Common Buzzards. There were seven buzzards sitting on top of an irrigation system and feeding on insects apparently. Lesser Kestrels, Montagu's and Marsh Harriers could be found hunting nearby, and we didn't have to go far to find an obliging Black-winged Kite, that flew in circles to the delight of the group.

We kept exploring the roads and found a huge flock with probably more than two hundred Yellow Wagtails, most of them from the migrant subspecies *M. flava flava*. At this point it started to rain, and we thought that we had had the best of the day. But, as it happens, the best was still to come.

We found several birders that had located a pair of adult Spanish Imperial Eagles, so we went directly to the place and found the birds sitting on the ground, one next to the other. The female was considerably larger than the male, the difference was so obvious even at a distance. We could observe this pair with the scope at pleasure, making out the details on the plumage, the yellowish cap and white patches on the forewing and shoulders. It was a great observation. In addition to this, two juvenile Bonelli's Eagles flew by, even closer than the imperials. We were quite busy with the eagles, but, as it happens, there were at least three Red-necked Nightjars resting in the shade just next to us! We got great pictures of the nightjars and could see all the plumages in detail.



We had a late lunch and went to the hotel to take a break, as we had a special evening ahead of us. We went to Getares, where we were meeting the good people of Tumbabuey, a local ringing group that also does environmental education and research in the Strait of Gibraltar. With them, we had the opportunity to experience their work and learn about their projects first hand. We ringed Barn and Red-rumped Swallows and chatted with the friendly team.

Day 8

On our last day, and with little time to explore, we went straight to Gibraltar and drove around The Rock looking for more birds. We spent some time in Punta Europa where we were able to see Shag and some Scopoli's Shearwaters very close, with really good light. It was a good way to finish the tour, as in just ten minutes we were at the airport to say goodbye to the group and wish them a safe trip back home.

Photo credits

All photos courtesy of Yeray Seminario, except group photo and Monarch butterfly on page 2 which were both taken by Colin.

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