

# Andalucía - September 2006

## *Raptor Migration across the Straits of Gibraltar*

### Participants

Gordon Wilson, Tony Crilley, Peter Francis, Paul Stewart & Tony Stewart

### Background

It was during a family holiday in September 2005 that P.S managed to do a little birding in and around the Tarifa area of Andalucía, Spain. At this time the North-South Raptor Migration was in full swing and he witnessed at first hand the magnificent spectacle of thousands of Raptors moving South over the Mediterranean into North Africa. On his return to the U.K he recounted the story of the Raptor passage and it was then decided to organise a return journey in September of 2006 to coincide with the mass movement of European Honey Buzzards.

Paul quickly organized the return trip and we elected to get the real flavour of the region by stopping at a traditional Andalucían Farmhouse. The Almuña Farmhouse, run by Dianne Paget, is in the hills of Andalucía the lodging is tucked into the mountain between the picturesque white villages of Jimena de la Frontera and Gaucin. The Farmhouse is still however, only one hour's drive from both Gibraltar and Marbella. The farmhouse is on the ancient smugglers track from the coast, with panoramic views across the foothills of the sierras, over the straits of Gibraltar as far as the Atlas Mountains. The farmhouse is now a guesthouse and offers visitors bed and breakfast and evening meals, and by the way all alcohol was included in the nightly price, which we took great advantage of and consumed a lot !

### Day One – September 5th 2006

The lads met at Newcastle Airport for our Easyjet flight to Malaga. Security was extremely tight as we made our way through to departures. Warnings were posted throughout the airport forbidding the carriage of liquids onto the aircraft. Take off went smoothly and then the captain announced that the plane had developed a flight deck fault and the auto pilot was not working. Civil Aviation Laws forbid aeroplanes from flying without auto-pilot backup. We were then forced to head to "London" Luton for engineers to attempt to locate and fix the problems. Happily after an hour on the ground, the problem was diagnosed as a faulty switch and we were soon underway again. We landed at Malaga and were soon reunited with our minibus which we had hired through Hertz.

The birding began in earnest with our first trip ticks, all from the van as we made our way south, being Osprey, Kestrel, Bee-eater, Grey Heron and Common Swift. Heading along the main motorway to Gaucin we pulled over at a service station to stock up on fluids. A quick scan of the surrounding area revealed the presence of more Bee-eaters, 3 Short-toed Eagles, Southern Grey Shrike, House Martin and a Juvenile Montagu's Harrier. At Casares, Sardinian Warbler and another Short-toed Eagle were seen. We headed towards Crestillina where there is a colony of Griffon Vultures which were soon located and soon we were enjoying the spectacle of the effortless flights of these majestic birds, other Raptors here were Common Buzzard and Booted Eagle. Passerines included Serin, Spotted Flycatcher, Stonechat and House Sparrow. 30+ Bee-eaters hawked insects close by and Hirundines included Barn Swallow and Pallid Swift. Eventually we reached Gaucin and headed for the quarry, which is situated just outside the village. In the past the quarry has proved a reliable site for Black Wheatear. After scanning long and hard, a single Black Wheatear was spotted high upon the hill, away from the old quarry. We were pleased to have connected as it was a lifer for a couple of the group. Other birds seen in the quarry area were Stonechat, Blue Tit, Northern Wheatear and Crag Martin.

We moved off to go and check into our base at Almuña. Following our map and instructions we drove on, and on, and on.....until it gradually dawned on us that we were lost. We pulled in at a lay by at Jimena de la Frontera to reassess our situation. Whilst deliberating over the map we saw Common Cuckoo and several

Spotless Starlings. Close by were a couple of Griffon Vultures and a very close Booted Eagle. We felt that we were very close to our digs and moved off through Jimena....the wrong way!!! A few kilometres down the road we pulled over again and this time did the sensible thing and dug out a phone from the bottom of one of the bags and phoned Diana for help. We were 35km passed the digs by this time but compensation soon arrived during the telecon in the form of superb Peregrine Falcon. There were also several flocks of Greenfinch and Goldfinch in the area. Now that we were sure that we had the right directions we headed back to Almuña to check in. A friendly pack of Pitbulls rushed out to greet us on arrival and we cautiously made our way to check in and say hello to our host. The farmhouse was situated in a superb location affording fabulous views across the south of Spain. In one internet report the farm is described as gloriously chaotic more like a house party than a hotel. It was basic, somewhat rustic but a very nice place to stay, but those expecting 5 star luxuries will be disappointed. From the balcony terrace, as we downed an ice cold complimentary beer, we watch dozens of Bee-eaters and in the garden were Sardinian Warbler, Chaffinch, Blackbird and Wren, and as dusk descended a Tawny Owl called from the woods.

Day Two – 6th September 2006

A pre breakfast stroll around the gardens gave us Sardinian warbler, Blackbird, House Sparrow, Wren, Jay and loads of Bee-eaters. We were soon underway having had our fill of breakfast and we found ourselves heading south towards the southernmost tip of Spain at Tarifa. It would be here that we would experience our first taste of the raptor migration at the watch point manned by Spanish Volunteers. The first big bird of the day turned out to be a very posy Short-toed Eagle which was perched very close to the road. A quick stop enabled the boys to grab a few digi-scoped shots of the bird as it warmed itself in the morning sun.



Short-toed Eagle

We moved off down the valley and as we crossed a river, we spotted a Grey Heron and a Cetti's Warbler called loudly from the vegetation below. Further on 100+ Corn Buntings were perched on a wire fence and flying over the horizon were four Cattle Egrets. We got a taste of the Honey Buzzard fest when we pulled over and scanned a nearby hill. We estimated that there were probably 400+ Honey Buzzards moving through the valley. This was at best a conservative count as there were many more stretching as far as the eye could see. There were also 50+ Griffon Vultures and a single Collared Dove. Nearing Algeciras we saw the first White Storks of the trip with over 100 perched by their nests on manmade platforms. A Booted Eagle, Kestrel and a Black-headed Gull were also close by. We reached the raptor view point and already quite a crowd had gathered. The skies were full of birds of prey, some so high and distant it was impossible to identify them.



Honey Buzzards

We joined the assemble throng and sat back to enjoy the migration spectacle as the birds began to move through the valley. There were hundreds of wind turbines and we marvelled at the bird's ability to avoid contact with them. During the next two hours, we witnessed at firsthand, the southerly raptor migration with 150+ Short-toed Eagles, 30 Booted Eagles, 150 Egyptian Vultures, 175 Honey Buzzards, 40+ Griffon Vultures, 75 Black Kites, 3 Sparrowhawk, 2 Kestrel, 1 Montagu Harrier, 12 White and 3 Black Storks.



Booted Eagles

The afternoon became hotter and hotter and the raptor migration slowed to a trickle, although there were still plenty of birds to be seen over the far hills. Two Cattle Egrets went through and there a couple of smaller birds in the shapes of a Sardinian Warbler and Blackbird. It appeared that the Spanish volunteers were counting everything and some were even uploading there statistics into hand-held PC's. A couple of volunteers were lying down counting the birds which passed high overhead; to the casual observer they were just dots. The birds need to reach such heights to help navigate the fourteen mile crossing of the Mediterranean into North Africa. They need the right prevailing winds to assist their passage; the wrong wind direction can blow them horribly off course and on course to the Atlantic.



Sparrowhawk & Black Kite

Our next stop was the beach Los Lances just outside Tarifa and another glorious setting greeted us on arrival. We quickly began to list the birds with 2 Iberian Yellow Wagtails, 2 Fan-tailed Warblers, Spotless Starling, Corn Bunting, Crested Lark, Goldfinch, House Sparrow and a single Short-toed Lark. Pallid Swift and Barn Swallow were seen on the beach. A few waders were on the fringes and included Sanderling, Dunlin, Ringed and Kentish Plovers. Two species of Tern – Little and Sandwich were seen and Gulls included Yellow-Legged, Black Headed and our main prize of Audouins. After the beach stop we drove onto the Ojen Valley and a bumpy ride awaited us. The first stop was the reservoir which was very quiet although we did add Green Sandpiper and another small movement of Raptors passed by with 10 Honey Buzzards and 10 Short-toed Eagles. A mile or so up the valley were 10+ Griffon Vultures and 5 Booted Eagles. We rounded one bend and came across the amazing sight of over 500 raptors kettling in the distance. The jizz suggested the majority were Honey Buzzards but the heat haze and distance prevented positive i.d. It was late afternoon and just before we left the Ojen Valley we added Cirl Bunting, Spotted Flycatcher and Short-toed Treecreeper to our trip list with Sardinian Warbler being the last bird of the valley before we joined the main highway and headed back to our digs and a well earned pint or three.

Day Three – September 7th 2006

First stop of the day was the local river, near to the base of the valley. There was plenty of activity in and around the river with Grey Heron, Cetti's Warbler, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Blue Tit, Goldfinch, Wood Pigeon, Garden Warbler and an unidentified Chiffchaff species all seen close to the water. This site would have probably yielded more species but we had to press on towards our next destination. The height gained at our next stop at Castillar Castle meant that you had a superb panoramic view of the valley below; more Honey Buzzards were seen moving south towards Tarifa and other birds spotted from our viewpoint included a Peregrine Falcon, Sparrowhawk, four Griffon Vultures and several Crag Martins. There were a couple of Stonechats and a few House Sparrows.

We left Castillar and headed back to the Raptor viewpoint at Tarifa. The numbers of birds and observers was well down on the previous day, probably in no small part due to the severity of the wind. It would have been suicide for any bird to attempt the crossing. There were still plenty of birds in the valley and beyond and again more Honey Buzzards, Short-toed & Booted Eagles and Egyptian Vultures were present. As it was



Griffon Vulture

relatively quiet we motored off towards La Janda along the main N340 Highway west. As we approached the junction for Zahara de los Atunes we were greeted by roadwork's, which made access to La Janda on the left of the road a little tricky. We negotiated the roadwork's entered La Janda which at first glance consisted of a huge area of rice paddies. Our anticipation levels were rising steadily, as we were conscious of the fact that a very small number, probably less than five individuals, of Ruppells Griffon Vulture had been seen in the area. Ruppells Griffon Vulture had been recently added to Category A of the Spanish list and in turn has become an important Western Palearctic tick for visiting birders. We were well prepared with Ruppells information and we were armed with Dick Forsman's recent paper from *Birding World* – Volume 18 (10): 435-438, together with information from his website [www.dickforsman.com](http://www.dickforsman.com) to assist with identification. We knew from Dick's paper that the key to success was to locate a carcass of a dead animal and hope for the best. It wasn't going to be easy as La Janda is vast.

First bird on the rice paddy was a cracking Male Montagu's Harrier and we quickly added a nearby female, Marsh Harrier, Booted Eagle, White Stork and Common Moorhen. Further down several Water Pipits and Yellow Wagtail were feeding in a water-logged field. Peter managed to get onto a Common Kingfisher sitting on a weir on the canal. Further on we saw Black-shouldered Kite, Short-toed Eagle, Green Sandpiper, Redshank, Greenshank, Little Egret, Cattle Egret, Black-winged Stilt, Kentish, Little Ringed & Ringed Plover and there was a large flock of over 100 Glossy Ibis in one field. Other birds spotted as we drove around were Spanish Sparrow, Woodchat Shrike, Northern and Black-eared Wheatear, Whinchat, Common Whitethroat, Jackdaw, Red-legged Partridge and 2 Quail. We motored up and down the roads scouring for a freshly dead carcass and the much hoped for Ruppells, but sadly, although we came across a couple of dead cows, they had been picked clean by the resident Vulture population which could be seen on distant cliff face which had been bleached white. We tried to get as close as we could to the cliff but the only road was through a private ranch. We were as cheeky as we dared to be and got within spitting distance of the main ranch house. We scanned the cliffs but couldn't pick out any of the smaller Ruppells. As a bonus eagle-eyed Peter managed to pick out a Bonelli's Eagle. It was now late afternoon and we left La Janda and headed for the nearby town of Bologna. First port of call was the pub where we enjoyed a couple of ice cold beers before heading just outside of town to the Sierra de la Plata a huge rocky outcrop that dominates the hillside. Close to the rock was a huge sand dune made up of windblown sand and most definitely on the move, which must have had the residents of the nearby houses extremely worried. We parked up and immediately got onto three Griffon Vultures, which were perched on the cliff face. Two Sardinian Warblers were in the scrub by the road and a Blue Rock Thrush was perched on a boulder. To add to the list a Gannet was spotted out at sea during a very brief sea watch. It was very late in the day and a couple of Swifts appeared out of nowhere.



Montagu's Harrier

They were quickly identified as Pallid Swift, and then as we watched the Pallid's two more Swifts appeared into view but this time one of the birds was positively identified as White-rumped Swift. We were elated with this bird – no one more so than Paul who had tried on four previous occasions in Spain and missed out on the White rumps during the spring trip to Morocco as his rear end was glued to the toilet (severe case of the trots) as they flew north towards Spain and out of view. We knew we had a chance of White-rumped Swift at Bologna and the best time of day was early morning or dusk and so it proved.

#### Day Four – September 8th 2006

First stop of the day – Gaucin Quarry where our luck was in and we got straight onto 3 Black Wheatears. Also present were Cirl Bunting, Stonechat, Blue Tit and Robin. We left Gaucin and headed off down the Ronda Road. En route we had Griffon Vulture, Short-toed Eagle and a couple of Honey Buzzards. Our next stop was the reserve at Los Quigales for today's target bird – Rock Thrush. The trail into the heart of the national park gradually climbs until you reach the very top of the mountains. Stopping frequently to scan the area we picked up mainly passerines and these included Pied & Spotted Flycatcher, Subalpine and Melodious Warbler, Short-toed Treecreeper, Black Redstart. Several Jay were seen along with House and Crag Martin. We dipped on Golden Eagle, however we didn't really put the time in to see them, but Short-toed and Booted Eagle were seen well. Halfway up the mountain we found that the main track had been closed and access to the summit denied. We could only assume that it was because of the extreme risk of fire in baking hot conditions. It was still 4 km to the summit and no one could muster up any enthusiasm for the trek and with that our chance of Rock Thrush had gone. We did get Chaffinch and Coal Tit at the gate (Wow) and Peter had a possible flyover Ortolan Bunting. We returned to the bus and made our way out of the park, stopping only to enjoy a smashing Redstart.

We arrived at Ronda where the festival was in full swing. The main attraction of Ronda is the spectacular gorge which is home to a colony of Lesser Kestrels, sadly for us, no kestrels were present, as it was late in the season and they had probably departed south for the winter. The gorge is also home to Red-billed Chough and again we were out of luck as they were nowhere to be seen. Good news was that we did see a large colony of Feral Pigeons!. A single Spotted Flycatcher hawked insects from the side of the steep gorge and distantly a Booted Eagle was ticked. We stopped for lunch and beer, then had a walk around the delightful town before piling back into the van and headed for Grazelema. We stopped at the Las Palomas Mirador. There was upwards of 50+ Red-billed Chough on the hillside, and at the car park were Chaffinch and Stonechat, and a couple of Black Redstarts. We avoided the Mirador viewpoint and headed off away from the tourists and up the opposite hill. The view from the top was breathtaking. This is a known and reliable site for Rock Thrush but again we were out of luck. After an extensive search we reached the conclusion that we were probably too late in the season to see them. Black and Black eared Wheatear were present together with Southern Grey Shrike, Subalpine Warbler, Redstart, Crag Martin and House Martin. Alpine Swift was observed high over the opposite mountain and several Griffon Vultures patrolled the skies. We stayed here until late afternoon before heading back to base for our evening meal and ice cold beers.

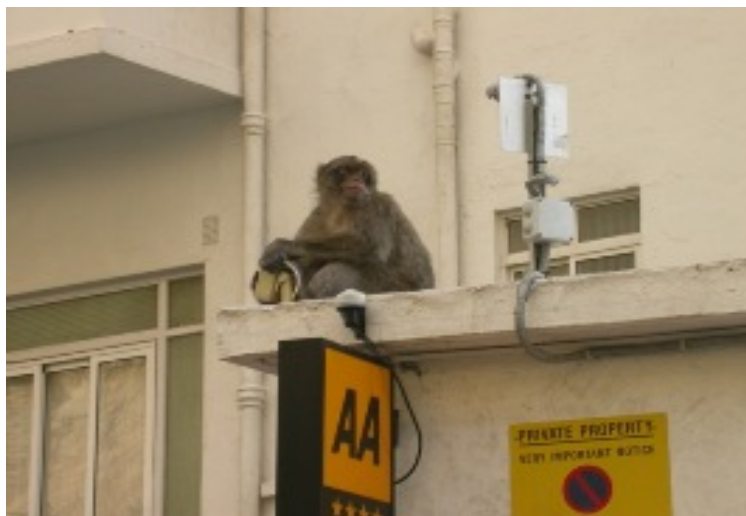




Black Redstart

Day Five – September 9th 2006

An early-ish start saw our intrepid group making a mad dash for the border crossing into Gibraltar. We knew we had to be there relatively early as the border control area gets heavily congested with tourists. We arrived at Gibraltar to find the place preparing for their National Day and the place was decked out with the Red Flag of Gibraltar and the St Georges Cross. The magnificent sight of the rock greeted us on arrival and thankfully we passed through the frontier with relative ease. We made our way across the main airport runway (seriously), and beyond the runway took a left turn at the first major roundabout. Following the road around the base of the rock we stopped at a disused oil depot very close to the AA rated, Four Star Hotel Europa. The concierge was waiting to greet us.



Concierge – Europa Hotel (Barbary Ape)

Our target bird here was Barbary Partridge and within minutes we had connected with at least 6 birds. The site information for Gibraltar was provided by Steve Holliday and Clive Finlayson for which we owe a big thank you.

We then done the touristy bit and had a look around town before heading to Europa Point. Yellow Wagtail and Blue Rock Thrush were at the Car park and on or near the sea were Yellow-legged Gull, Cormorant and Cory's Shearwater. Next stop was to be Tarifa Raptor viewpoint, but a quick stop at the local tobacconist was in order where we loaded up with cheap tabs which were to be sold for an obscene profit back in England !.



Blue Rock Thrush

At Tarifa the usual suspects were present namely Honey Buzzard, Short-toed & Booted Eagles, Griff & Gyppo Vultures, Black Kite, Sparrowhawk and Marsh Harrier. It was a quick in and out at Tarifa and we were soon heading back along the N340 to La Janda. We followed the same route as before and saw all sorts of birds at his fabulous place. The following were all seen – Northern Wheatear, Stonechat, Woodchat Shrike, Honey Buzzard, Montagu's & Marsh Harrier, Mallard, Purple Gallinule, Purple Heron, Snipe, Green Sandpiper, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Kestrel, House Sparrow, Cattle Egret, Black Winged Stilt, Black-shouldered Kite, White & Black Stork Hoopoe, Corn Bunting Griffon Vulture, Iberian Wagtail, Grey Heron, Water Pipit, Sardinian Warbler, Pheasant, Woodpigeon, Collared Dove and Raven. Again we searched in vain for any fresh carcasses, but were out of luck. On reaching the end of the road we decided to retrace our route and head back the way we came. Nearing the road junction we stopped to scan a rice paddy for waders when Gordo let out an almighty shout – he had spotted a number of Griffons at scavenging on a carcass. We hastily fixed our scopes on the kill and bingo there it was, a single Ruppells Vulture. We were ecstatic. At first it was difficult to get a good view as it was sheltering from the searing heat behind a tree. It was decided to try and get behind the bird by viewing from the N340. Peter stayed behind content with his view while the rest of us risked life and limb to scan from the main road. It was worth it though, because good views were had and good comparisons were made between the two vulture species. It's not very often Gordon gets a lifer so the beers were definitely on him and several of them plus as it later transpired a litre bottle of Islay's finest - Bowmore Malt.

The last hour of the day was spent back at the Bologna White rumped Swift site. No swifts were seen this time only the Griffons, Red-legged Partridge and Great Spotted Woodpecker. Heading back to base another Short-toed Eagle and a Southern Grey Shrike were seen.

Day Six – September 10th 2006

It was an early start this morning to catch our flight home, for what had been a fabulous experience and if you haven't seen a Honey Buzzard in Northumberland then get yourself to Tarifa, but then again Jumbo Jets don't fly to Malaga.

