

# Andalucía

21<sup>st</sup> - 26<sup>th</sup> September 2010



This year for my autumn birding holiday I forfeited the chance of scarcities and rarities in the UK and took up the invite to represent the Northumberland & Tyneside Bird Club on a 'familiarisation' trip to the the Straits of Gibraltar area and to visit and participate in the second international Tarifa Bird Fair. The tour was organised by [Plegadis](#) a conservation organisation based in Seville who develop projects for the protection, conservation and dynamisation of wildlife in Southern Spain and the trip was funded by the Regional Ministry of Andalucía. It is no secret to Birders that during the second half of September the Gibraltar area witnesses one of nature's great spectacles namely the mass migration of birds taking the shortest route to their wintering grounds in Africa. The Tarifa Bird Fair was developed to coincide with this migration; however the fair has another important purpose in that it brings together many aspects of Spanish, and in particularly Andalusian conservation along with the usual array of exhibitors, as well as presentations and lectures.

What we were shown on this trip was that this area has many hidden and relatively unknown birding hotspots and birders should not just concentrate on the raptor migration alone or gave the area a cursory glance on the way to better known sites for example Coto Donana. I fully recommend the staff at Plegadis and would urge any visiting birders wanting advice or guiding on birding in the area to get in touch.

Our accommodation for the week was the excellent [Hostal la Botica](#) in the white town of Vejer de la Frontera, the owner Enrique is a budding birder and stayed with us all week, he has visited the British Bird Fair at Rutland on several occasions and had a grasp of exactly what

birders desired in a tour of the area. As well as his hotel being in a marvellous location including Lesser Kestrels and Spotless Starlings from the rooftop terrace, Enrique will provide you with lots of local site information and even offers a free birding guided tour if you stay 3 nights or more – recommended



*Lesser Kestrel from Rooftop Terrace (Photo Mark Newsome)*

Below is a brief diary of bird highlights with links to places visited or other information visiting birders may find useful.

### **21<sup>st</sup> September**

Arrived Malaga late morning after an early flight out of Newcastle.

After a quick lunch we drove towards the Tarifa area stopping to watch raptors at the **Mirador Del Estrecho**.

Booted Eagle (60), Black Kite (30+), Short-toed Eagle (20), Marsh Harrier (20), Honey Buzzard (6), Sparrowhawk (2), Griffon Vulture (5+)

Late afternoon saw us arrive at **La Janda** an area that used to be one of the most important and extensive wetlands in Spain even rivalling the famous Coto Donana to the west, however this importance was not recognised or taken into account when it was drained during the 1960's. Today when dry the area is agricultural; however in spite of the large drainage systems in place the huge depression still floods to a degree during the winter when the area can be a magnet for Waterfowl, Raptors and Herons.

Numerous -Cattle Egret / Little Egret, Squacco Heron (1) White Storks, Glossy Ibis (50+), Spoonbill (8), Marsh Harrier (lots), Montagu's Harrier (3), Little Ringed Plover(5), Green Sandpiper (10+), Turtle Dove (3), Alpine Swift, Fan-tailed Warblers, Cetti's Warblers.



*La Janda*

## 22<sup>nd</sup> September

Today was spent travelling to a series of excellent reserves developed around the enormous [Bahia de Cadiz Natural Park](#), a huge intertidal area with more than 19,000 hectares of protected salt pans which are one of the best, yet least known, sites for waders in Andalucía.

First stop was the main reception area and then out to the salt marshes which gave the impression of a U.K estuary with good numbers of familiar waders such as Oystercatcher, Grey Plover, Sanderling, Turnstone, Dunlin, Redshank, Greenshank, Bar-tailed Godwit and Curlew with smaller groups of Curlew Sandpiper, and Little Stint. Gulls however were definitely 'Iberian' with small numbers of Audouins and Slender-billed Gulls. Several Ospreys hunted the channels and a large flock of Black Tern rested on the beach. We were next taken to the relatively new reserve of [Los Torunos](#) near El Puerto de Santa Maria, an area of well preserved marsh land which receives more than 400,000 visitors each year. A walk out to the beach which in season holds the largest colony of Little Terns in Andalucía produced several Woodchat Shrikes in instructive juvenile plumage as well as the Iberian race of Green Woodpecker (ssp *sharpei*) which lacks the black around the eye unlike birds back home in the U.K .

The nearby **La Esperanza Salinas**, is a traditional saltworks where artisanal salt is still made and a haven for roosting waders, we were informed that at high tide massive numbers of waders leave the nearby Bahia de Cadiz mudflats and utilise these pans to roost, in addition

this is an excellent site for passage Terns and a local ringing programme has recently turned up Roseate Tern which is rare in the area. Gulls were well represented with lots of Yellow-legged Gulls, Lesser Black-backed Gulls (of two subspecies – *graellsii* & *intermedius*) and a handful of Audouins Gull and Slender-billed Gull which is quite uncommon in the Cadiz area. Kentish Plover were common here and up to 20 Curlew Sandpiper were nice to see. A party of 8 Stone Curlew were present on the rough ground between Salinas. Our last stop of a long day was back to La Janda for an hour early evening; Kestrels were everywhere and included a couple of nice male Lesser Kestrel, with a flyover Black Stork the last bird noted.

### **23<sup>rd</sup> September**

First stop today was the impressive [Laguna de Medina](#) the most important reserve of the lagoons close to the Bahía de Cadiz, this 121ha lake holds large numbers of wintering waterfowl and is an important breeding ground for Purple Swamphen and White-headed Duck. Access is off the A381 some 15km south east of Jerez de la Frontera. We were all impressed with this area observing Red-knobbed Coot (5), White-headed Duck (20+), Ferruginous Duck (10,) and three species of Grebe among the hundreds of commoner wildfowl. Both Black Terns and Whiskered Terns hawked over the lake with the usual Herons and Egrets including several Great White Egret. The surrounding reedbeds held Purple Swamphen, Kingfisher, Penduline Tit and numerous Reed Warbler and Cetti's Warbler. The woods and rough areas surrounding the Laguna proved attractive to migrants with Whinchat, several Redstart, Whitethroat, Garden Warbler and Pied Flycatcher. Raptors as expected were a feature overhead and included a procession of Booted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle and a single Hobby – a scarce migrant in the Cadiz area.



*Griffon Vulture (Photo Mark Newsome)*

Our next stop was the largest cork oak forest in Europe [Los Alcornocales Natural Park](#) which extends some 167,777 hectares inland from Tarifa in the south to Sierra de Grazalema Natural

Park in the north. The area holds many endemic species of plants and ferns and is a particularly good area for Iberian Chiffchaff of which we positively identified at least three. Mid morning found us climbing the gentle marquis slopes above the El Picacho Field Centre at km 30 on the A375 out of Alcalá de los Gazules. The Field Station offers excellent budget accommodation in the heart of the Alcornocales Park. We were being taken to a hide overlooking a Vulture feeding station and it didn't disappoint as over the next hour or so we observed 100 + Griffon Vultures at close quarters and had up to a handful of Egyptian Vultures overhead.

Highlights here however was a migrating flock of 120+ Black Stork and a pair of Bonelli's Eagle. The woodlands and scrub held Tawny Owl, Wryneck, Woodlark, Blue Rock Thrush, Dartford Warbler, Short-toed Treecreeper and Crested Tit.



*Iberian Chiffchaff (Photo Mark Newsome)*

Mid afternoon and we visited the private estate at La Almoraima near **Castellar de la Frontera** reached from the C111 road that leaves the coast at San Roque, branching off to Castellar after just 10 kilometres. This historic fortress village is famous for its castle - the word 'Castellar' meaning literally, 'site of the castle'. We enjoyed a private jeep ride out into the reserve which produced several Iberian Chiffchaffs in the cork woodlands, this area however will be remembered for the magnificent views out over the Straits and no matter which direction we scanned we saw Raptors heading south.



*Black Storks (part of a flock of 120+)*

## **24<sup>th</sup> September**

As part of the familiarisation tour we were shown a variety of accommodation that was thought suitable for birders staying in the area, we all agreed that the lodges at the so called [Ornipark](#) were ideal. This project is the work of [Ornitour](#) who have transformed an area of land into a small reserve with the aim of encouraging environmental education to local people. The location of the park at Pelayo, Algeciras is ideal and as we sat with a coffee we had lots of Raptors going through, in the woods themselves we noted Firecrest, Crested Tit and at the feeding station several Serins and an early Siskin. Our afternoon saw the opening of the second international Tarifa Bird Fair and was spent at leisure browsing the displays which as well as conservation and bird societies included tourism, art and photography, optical accessories, clothing, books and magazines

## **25<sup>th</sup> September**

We spent today visiting the various observation points along the straits watching raptors, storms to the north meant there was little movement mid morning, however by lunch time the clouds lifted, out came the sun and we got a true taste of what this area is famous for – kettle after kettle of migrating Raptors. Early morning was spent in the **Puerto Del Bujeo valley** nestled between Tarifa and the Bay of Gibraltar. Access is from the picnic area on the north side of the N-340 exactly at the KM 95 marker post and simply following the path upwards for great views of the Straits. We found lots migrants – Turtle Doves, Wheatears, Whinchat, Redstarts, Blackcaps, Garden Warblers, Pied Flycatchers and Spotted Flycatchers and several Iberian Chiffchaff were seen and heard well. The rocky area near the parking area also produced a handful of Cirl Bunting and Rock Bunting. As the sun came out we headed for one of the main

watch points used by [MIGRES](#) to monitor migration - **Cazalla Mirador** just off the main N-340 north of Tarifa. A couple of hours here produced Egyptian Vulture (5+), Griffon Vulture (20+), Ruppell's Vulture (1-2), Booted Eagle (150+), Short-toed Eagle (40+), Sparrowhawk (5), Marsh Harrier (3), Black Kite (30+), Common Buzzard (2), Kestrel (6), Black Stork (12), White Stork (8), Grey Heron (8). The one surprise was the lack of Honey Buzzard passage however we were told that it was now getting late for these birds and mid September is the peak time.



*Ruppell's Vulture*

The afternoon was spent back at the Tarifa Bird Fair where a platform had been set up for those who no longer wished to browse the stalls. A few of us did just that and had a continued passage of Raptors up till about 1500 hours; we also noted lots of Red-rumped Swallows moving south, an albino Swallow, a handful Pallid Swift, Bee-eaters and several Wheatear in the vicinity of the bird fair tent.

Late afternoon saw the group assembled at Tarifa harbour for a 3 hour Whale, Dolphin and Seabird pelagic courtesy of [firmm](#), this was a worthwhile trip although it was far from perfect viewing conditions – a bit choppy! We did manage some decent views of Bottlenose Dolphin, Common Dolphin and lots of Long-finned Pilot Whales. Birds were represented by small groups of Balearic Shearwater, and Scopoli's Shearwaters, numerous Great Skua and Gannet heading west into the Mediterranean, Sandwich Terns and Black Terns. If you are in the area please visit and support this organisation which do a grand job in protecting these wonderful animals.



*Long-finned Pilot Whale*



*Scopoli's Shearwater (Mark Newsome)*

Having visited my family near Tarifa on numerous occasions over the last 30 years, this area of Spain is well known to me, however I did learn something new on this excellent trip, namely the dedication and enthusiasm of a small though growing number of conservationists in the area who are working tirelessly to protect land from development, set up reserves and educate local people about the worth of environmental issues in Andalucía. What I knew already about the area was that although travelled birders won't see many new birds there is no doubt that the



migration of birds across the straits is as good value as ever and a very worthwhile birding experience.

**Chris Knox: - October 2010**