

RAPTOR PASSAGE IN THE STRAIT OF GIBRALTAR & SURROUNDING AREA SEPTEMBER 2011

by
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The autumn migration in the area around the Strait has been a yearly event for me for some years (this was our 11th autumn trip, with another handful of late winter/early spring trips) and new species are getting hard to come by, but it's a spectacle I don't tire of. It started off by guess and by god, but over the years I've come to know a bit more than I did at first when the area was unknown territory for me on my first Spanish mainland birding trip.

I wasn't so much interested in the dashing around this year, although I still managed quite a bit of that. The list for the trip was down a little on last time, but that's not what I was there for this year. The success of this trip lay in the raptors. My previous best was 20 species on a trip in 2005. This one pipped that, with 22 species.

I decided to spend a bit more time than in the past at the various observatories - particularly Algarrobo near Algeciras – in the hope of picking up a Long-legged Buzzard, a species that so far has eluded me. Algarrobo has been the source of a number of sightings of the species, particularly since Spain's first breeding record was confirmed nearby a couple of years ago, although they have also been seen elsewhere. The ones they get here aren't the European race, *Buteo rufinus* with its many colour phases, but the smaller, rufous more buzzard-like *certensis* subspecies that finds its way in from Africa on occasion.

Apologies for the soft quality of the photos that follow. They don't seem to like the transfer to a word document.

Vultures



Griffon Vulture, Algarrobo

The vultures were as always spectacular. Griffons were all over in good numbers as usual, but noticeably absent from some sites where they would be expected a few years ago before Spain started getting particular about removing fallen livestock in response to EU directives around 2008.

The first part of the trip (three weeks from 6th to 27th September) gave the biggest movements of Egyptian Vultures, although they were still coming through at the end. My unscientific observations seemed to

suggest that the western end of the Strait in the vicinity of Tarifa produced more Egyptian Vultures (and Black Kites) than the eastern end whichever way the wind was blowing, although wind direction obviously has an influence on the location of the overall passage,

Being near Tarifa, the vultures (and other migrants) are more in conflict with the forest of wind turbines that litters the hills. The turbines are fewer in number than a few years ago, but the old ones that have been removed have been replaced with bigger ones with longer blades and taller towers.

Those who have claimed that they are not a threat to migrating birds because the birds fly too high to be in danger should look away now, because the vultures in the picture below don't appear to have read the script. They weren't an isolated incident. All sorts of raptors run the gauntlet as they pass over the ridges and along the valleys.



Egyptian Vultures, Cazalla, Tarifa.



Egyptian Vulture, Cazalla, Tarifa



Egyptian Vulture, Cazalla, Tarifa

Common vultures aside, the trip came good concerning a Spanish rarity that is becoming more numerous as the years pass. Ruppells Vultures are thought to tag on with returning immature griffons as they pass north out of Africa. They are often seen arriving over the coast. Most of the birds seen are young birds although the odd adult has been seen. I managed one last year, at Los Barrios tip.

Last autumn produced over 20 identifiable individuals, including those covered by a report on the species that was compiled by Ricard Guttierrez and Javier Elorriaga

<http://www.rarebirdspain.net/arbsi036.htm>

This year I did rather better than last. In the middle of the trip there was a veritable Ruppell-fest with four sightings in three days involving at least three different individuals. The first was a distant one on the afternoon of 17th September. I managed a couple of record shots after it was called out by one of the Migres observers at Algarrobo.



Ruppell's Vulture, Algarrobo

The following day the second bird was seen by an appreciative host of watchers as it put in an appearance low over the crowd at Algarrobo, many of whom were on a raptor identification course. I was sitting in the shade of the concrete shelter when a loud cry of “Ruppell” came from somewhere behind. Seconds later a small group of vultures consisting of griffons and the Ruppell came low over our heads from the west. By the time I had identified which was the Ruppell it was too late to get a picture. The tail-on view would have been useless.

The third bird, one I had later the same day was in complete contrast. My wife and I had just been down to Los Lances beach in the afternoon on a fruitless search for the Lesser Crested Terns and a Royal Tern that were reported earlier. All we saw were kite-surfers ignoring the signs forbidding them and skimming back and forward on the pool in front of the reserve hide. Terns there were none.

As we drove back past Tarifa there was a small group of vultures – three or four - hanging low over the side of the road. As luck would have it they were directly opposite the turn-off to Trafico, so I pulled in to take advantage of a photo opportunity. The first vulture drifted by. Click – click, a couple of shots before the second vulture got close. I fired a shot, then as I refocussed for the second I got my eye on the underwing bar – then the dark colour registered. “Bloody hell, another Ruppell’s!”.

The star of the show drifted past at least three times as it circled low over the near edge of the field below the road, coming to within 20 yards of us. Brilliant views. After the birds drifted off I crossed the road to see what had interested them. A dead cow lay in the field – or at least the hide-covered skeleton of one did. Literally skin and bones. I looked at this spot again whenever we passed after this, but we never saw another vulture. They had obviously had whatever was of use to them.



Ruppell's Vulture, Tarifa

Happy days, but it wasn't over yet.

The following morning, a Monday saw us back at Algarrobo still trying to latch onto a Long-legged Buzzard. I was frustrated following the events a week earlier when we spent the Sunday morning of the 11th at Algarrobo. There had been a good passage of migrants then, including good numbers of Honeys but about mid-day I noticed that birds were drying up. Although it was bright sunshine a haze had gathered over the strait and migrants, unable to see Africa were returning. We decided to cut our losses and went off to Los Barrios in a fruitless search for Ruppell's. Unfortunately not long after we left a Long-legged Buzzard turned up at Algarrobo and put on a fine performance. It did the same the following day, which I also missed because I was at Laguna de Medina dipping on Crested Coot.

Monday the 19th was different. Lots of low cloud and the light was often poor at the watchpoint. No Long-legged Buzzard, but shortly before 11.00 I looked through a stream of vultures that were coming through from Pelayo in a repeat of the events of the previous morning. This time it was my turn to shout “Ruppell” as I spotted one near the end of the stream. Great views for everyone as it flew low over our parked cars nearby. Given the time and direction of this bird, I’m inclined to think it was the same one that I’d failed to photograph the previous day.



Ruppell's Vulture, Algarrobo

By lunchtime the light was poor. Movement was slow and a low cloud was hanging over the area so we went off to La Janda. This was a big, a very big, mistake.

At about 1pm Javier Elorriaga of Migres found a White-backed Vulture feeding on a carcass only three or four hundred yards away up the hill from Algarrobo observatory – only the third record for Spain. It was on the hillside in the Ruppell's photo above. If only we'd stuck it out a bit longer we might have seen it arriving for its meal, or departing afterwards. I only heard about it in a text from the UK that evening from Richard Dunn who had read about it on the Rare Birds in Spain Facebook update for the day.

We found the vulture-less carcass up the track the following day. The vulture hasn't been seen since.

Ah, well. Can't have everything.

Osprey.

Ospreys are hit and miss. They turn up singly, where and when they choose. We saw odd birds on several occasions from the Strait observatories, but the closest view came when one flew low across the road in front of the car as we passed the Embalse de Charco Redondo on the road south from Jerez one afternoon.



Osprey, Algarrobo

Eagles.

Spanish Imperial Eagles are occasionally to be seen at La Janda. In the past I've seen them there twice. This trip produced two. The first was on our first full day of the trip, when a distant eagle was spotted being mobbed by a Black Kite over the dehesa north of Cortijo de la Mediana, the cattle farm on the hill as you travel north towards Benalup. I managed a couple of distant record shots then got the car moving to close the range, because the bird appeared to be heading across the road somewhere ahead. No luck. We didn't pick it up again. The second bird was sitting on an electricity pylon in the fields south of the farm on the 25th. Unfortunately it being silhouetted against the morning sun didn't help the fact that it was only a field away. More crap record shots were all that was gained. It flew off eventually, chased by a female Marsh Harrier.



Spanish Imperial Eagle, La Janda

Bonelli's Eagles were seen at a couple of locations in Malaga province, with Sierra Crestellina producing three birds at the south end of the sierra as seen from the Cacaes to Gaucin road.



Bonelli's Eagle, Benahavis

Short-toed and Booted Eagles of every plumage variation available were seen daily in large numbers around the Strait, with the sightings of Short-toed Eagles increasing as September wore on. Even if there were nothing else, these two species alone always give great views.



Short-toed Eagle, Algarrobo



Booted Eagle, Tarifa



Booted Eagle, Tarifa

Kites



Black Kite, Los Lances, Tarifa

Black Kites were a daily occurrence, sometimes in large numbers especially at the Tarifa end of the strait. They are often to be seen moving along the coast just behind the beach at Los Lances. On one occasion I even had a couple sitting on the beach, watched warily by the roost of Yellow-legged and Audouin's Gulls nearby. These feathered kites were a welcome change from the bloody kite surfers and their multi-coloured bird scarers that are all too often a feature of the beach in front of the hide.



The other kind of Kite, Los Lances, Tarifa

One Black Kite in particular was an eye-opener. I'd stopped the car to check out the carcass where I'd seen the Ruppell's a few days before when I spotted it. Even as I was photographing it I wasn't altogether certain what it was.



Black Kite, Tarifa

It seemed to have been crossed with a lace curtain. How it kept in the air was a mystery. Whether it would be up to the crossing to Africa was an even bigger one.

Red Kites aren't at all common in the Strait area and it took a trip to the Rio Guadalquivir between Trebujena and Bonanza to turn up the first, which were seen at what has become a regular site on my trips – the salt marsh between Algaida Salinas and the river. They are often to be seen overhead there or perching on a tall bare tree trunk that stands on the marsh. I watched one there once plucking a freshly-killed Black-winged Stilt, closely observed by a pair of Magpies (another uncommon bird in the area).



Red Kite, Algaida Salinas, September 2010

A first visit for me to the dried out marshes near Santa Maria a few days later turned up another Red Kite, but this like those at Algaida remained either up-sun or out of camera range. No photos on this trip, so I'll cheat and use one from last year.

Black-shouldered (or Black-winged if you must) Kites proved frustrating. I went to the right place – it's a regular haunt – but not apparently at the right time. Others had seen them at the expected spot, some even on the same day as I'd searched, but it took me about 4 visits before I finally caught up with one, sitting on the irrigator at La Janda, just where I expected to see it. The fact that the sunflower and maize harvest wasn't in yet, reducing the hunting ground available had maybe sent it further afield for food on my earlier searches.



Black-shouldered Kite, La Janda

Harriers

Marsh Harriers were all over the place at La Janda, hunting the rice fields that held who knows how many feathered food items. We saw two Purple Herons fly low across a rice field on the first day. They dropped into the rice and vanished. Flocks of Glossy Ibis disappear in the same way until they are flushed by a hunting raptor.



Marsh Harrier, La Janda

One male Marsh Harrier that was migrating over Algarrobo caused a bit of controversy on the 10th. Several there were trying to convince themselves that the high-flying white bird with the black wingtips was a Pallid Harrier until we zoomed in on my camera screen and showed that it was what I'd called it as in the first place. An old pale male Marsh Harrier.

The first half of September produced good numbers of Montagu's Harriers, mainly juveniles with only the occasional adult. Melanistic birds were particularly well represented on this trip and I saw four on the first afternoon as we travelled east along the track at La Janda towards Facinas. Odd Montagu's were seen elsewhere (including two or three more black ones), but the arable fields west of Facinas were consistently the best spot. On the 15th there were nine Montagu's hunting over one field.

The picture had changed by the following week. The millet had been harvested, the fields were being ploughed and the Monties had moved on. On the afternoon of the 22nd a Finnish birder at Algarrobo was asking about the best place for them. An English ex-pat birder said that he was probably too late, but he set off anyway. I don't know if he found his Monties, but a report on Rare Birds in Spain for that day gives a male Pallid Harrier being found at La Janda by a birder with a Finnish name.



Melanistic Monty, La Janda



Montagu's Harrier, La Janda

I looked a couple of days later, more in hope than in expectation, but there were no harriers at all by then apart from Marsh.

Buzzards

Sadly no Long-legged Buzzards were forthcoming, although there were some unlucky escapes. The change in visibility over the Strait on the 11th sent me off just in time to avoid one at Algarrobo as related earlier and that was probably the closest I came. There were the odd Common Buzzards around that could and did crop up almost anywhere. Each one got a good looking at, just in case. There was a heart-stopping moment one day at Algarrobo when I saw a buzzard with white undersides to its primaries and black fringing dip behind a bush just as I got onto it, but when it came out the other side it was only another common.



Common Buzzard, Tarifa

Honey Buzzards never failed to impress. We arrived in the main part of the passage. I would have preferred to be there a few days earlier for even more of them. They migrate on a broad front and in the past I've seen kettles of 50 or more as far east as the apartment we were renting on the coast at Manilva, half an hour drive from Algeciras.



Honey Buzzard kettle, Algarrobo

Some came through singly, some in twos and threes, some in a stream. Some were low enough to touch while others were just specks high overhead. What they all had in common was that they looked nothing like Common Buzzards. Even if one was seen far ahead crossing the road in front of the car its action still gave it away for what it was. Often the order was to spot a distant bird, identify it as a Honey Buzzard and only then use the binoculars to confirm the ID. They are so distinctive. The morning of the 10th was a particularly good time at Algarrobo. All morning there were Honey Buzzards passing through and there were many kettles turning to gain height in thermals between us and Algeciras. I saw kettles that contained 40s, 50s, and up to 150 birds before I left for La Janda after lunch.



Honey Buzzard, Algarrobo

The passage tailed off in the second half of the month but even just before we left on the 27th odd Honey Buzzards were still coming through, singly and in small groups. The last one I photographed was a close one on the 22nd. I've had them into October in the past.

Hawks.

Only one species – Sparrowhawk. These could and did turn up anywhere along the Strait and frequently. No photos worth keeping though. I binned the lot. The little blighters were always too far away and didn't loiter.

Falcons.

Fill your boots!



Common Kestrel on irrigator, La Janda



Lesser Kestrel, La Janda

Kestrels were all over the place, but especially at La Janda where they had an annoying habit of mixing with Lesser Kestrels and hogging the camera, being less likely to fly off just as the focus was setting. They often shared the same perches on the pylons and irrigators.

Lesser Kestrels grew in number as September wore on. At first there were a few locals around La Janda, particularly around the farm, but by the third week there were more, presumably moving in from elsewhere and hunting for grasshoppers over the recently harvested and ploughed millet fields that had held so many Montagu's Harriers the week earlier before the harvest. As more fields are harvested the numbers will be boosted. I've seen literally hundreds, maybe over a thousand hunting the fields of La Janda in the past. Looking from the central canal towards Benalup they looked like hay flies hovering in huge numbers.

Only one Hobby allowed me to see it, and that distantly and in poor light on one of the few cloudy days – no pics.

I've seen Eleonora's Falcons on Mallorca but not so far on the Spanish mainland. This trip broke the duck.

As I arrived at Los Lances beach on the morning of the 10th a dark falcon that immediately made me think Eleonora's flew along the beach. Like an idiot I hadn't turned my camera on yet and rather than do that I tried to alert some German birders who were at the hide some distance in front of me to the bird that was winging its way over their heads while they looked at Kentish Plovers. I failed. A Spanish birder behind me on the boardwalk also failed to spot it. By the time I got onto the Africa-bound bird with my scope all I got was a rear view of a long-winged falcon with a loose action on its way to Tangier.



Eleonora's Falcon, Algarrobo

A few days later on the same cloudy day that turned up the hobby an undoubted Eleonora's passed over Algarrobo. This time I was awake and managed a few very bad shots at long distance in hopeless light as it went overhead.

A small number of Peregrines put in an appearance. One at Algarrobo caused some controversy when many there thought it might be a Lanner. I got photos of it but without a computer I wasn't going to say yay or nay. Zooming in the camera screen in the shadow of the shelter only caused more discussion between those who thought Lanner and those who thought Peregrine, with the latter being in the minority. I sat on the fence. The argument was settled the following day when one of the Lanner camp asked me to show my camera to a famous author and authority on raptors who I am not going to name, but he's Finnish and we've

all heard of him and some of us have his book. He was there with a raptor identification course he was running.

It was a Peregrine.



Peregrine, Algarrobo

The star bird of the trip was one I stumbled upon after I left Algarrobo and Los Lances on the 10th. I drove north through La Janda, stopping on what used to be the bumpy track before it was repaired a couple of years ago to look for a Black-shouldered Kite that wasn't there and to photograph some Bee-eaters that were there. Past the sluice at the north end of this track the road swings around the side of a low hill on the left. The field on the right was where the Spanish Imperial was sitting on the power pole on a later visit.

I had hopes for this area. It sometimes hosts Stone Curlew, the irrigators on the road-side often have perched Lesser Kestrels and when the birds are in, the sky is black with Lesser Kestrels hunting the fields right beside the road. Last year I had a scruffy looking Bonelli's Eagle perching on an irrigator (I'd been tipped off about it by another birder). I heard from an English ex-pat that on the day we were arriving at the airport he'd seen two Little Bustards there, a bird that has so far eluded me in Andalucia.

As I rounded the curve the first thing I saw was a handful of Black Kites and a Marsh Harrier over the road ahead, but the closest bird was a falcon that was circling low over the edge of the field on my side of the car. I stopped, grabbed the camera and fired through the open window as it turned and drifted over the car. I still hadn't identified it in the seconds since I'd seen it so I jumped out to see what it was. 'Jumped' is a relative term here. My right foot had succumbed to a sudden and very painful attack of gout on the way from Algarrobo, so 'hopped' might be a better term.

No sign. It had vanished for good. Those few seconds were all I had.



I moved on and amused myself with photographing a Black Kite and Marsh Harrier that were perched on an irrigator a hundred yards or so further along the road.

Later I stopped and looked at the falcon to see what I had. I didn't look at all the photos, I just selected one and zoomed right in. A pale vent and heavily streaked breast got me thinking. It clearly wasn't one of the Kestrels, it wasn't a Peregrine. What the hell was it? A juvenile Hobby maybe, but the shape was wrong. It would have to wait until I got back to my Collins in the apartment.

The Collins that night caused a small degree of alarm. The wing pattern, the streaking, the moustache, the pale vent.

It was only a bloody Lanner!

I think they have been seen more frequently in recent years, but in the section 'Rare Birds in Southern and Western Spain' in Garcia and Paterson's second edition (2001) of 'Where to watch Birds, Southern and Western Spain' it describes Lanner as

'A scarce visitor from North Africa, although bred in Doñana in the 19th century. One was captured in Doñana in 1954. Most often recorded at Gibraltar from where there are some 20 records all in the months March-April and July – September....'



Lanner, La Janda

What a result!

Odds and Ends

Sierra de la Plata, Bolonia

One evening I went to Bolonia on the way back from La Janda to try for the Swifts that use the cliff cave there as a roost.

On past trips I've had both Little swift and White-rumped Swift here. I'd seen Little Swift on this trip at Chipiona a couple of days before, but any additions would be welcome.

I stayed until dark, but it was fruitless. The only birds of note were a couple of Crag Martins, a Blue Rock Thrush, a Great Spotted Woodpecker, a dark Montagu's Harrier and the local kestrels making a nuisance of themselves to the Griffons that were flying on and off the nest ledge.

There was however entertainment of another sort as a diversion to the dearth of birds. Just after I arrived, a van containing a young family, dad mum and a son of about 8 pulled up and they sat listening to music for a while before they moved up the bank that lies between the road and the cliff. The scrub seems to have been cleared from here recently, making the base of the cliff clearly visible.

Dad then showed Sonny a few rudimentary climbing moves – how to hang onto a hand-hold, where to put your feet and stuff like that. I thought that would be that, but no. The next thing I knew they were making their way up the face via a crack that runs up towards the swift cave, Dad leading, Sonny in the middle and Mum at the rear. After a short way they moved along a ledge to the next crack where they started up. Then a traverse left to another ledge that brought them back onto the original crack. This took them more or less straight to the swift cave and in they went.

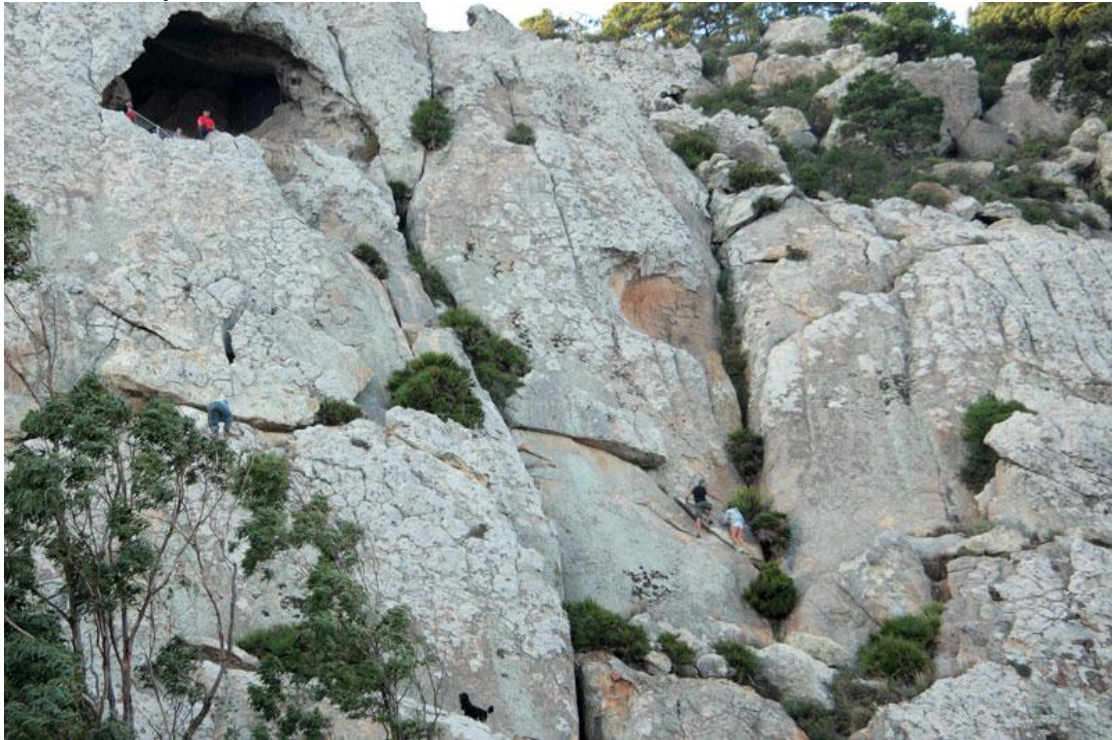
About quarter of an hour later another van rolled up. Out of this got a dreadlocked young man with saggy trousers and his black dog. Up the bank they went and at the cliff master and companion set off climbing. The dog only made it to the first ledge – not being schooled in or equipped by nature for rock climbing, but Saggy-trousers went straight up the face below the cave, shunning the easier route taken by the others.

He hadn't got far when a third vehicle pulled up and out came a young couple who then proceeded up the route taken earlier by the family. The young lady showed some trepidation on the way up (and a lot more on the way back down).

Before long all six were together in the swift cave, letting out the odd whoop and climbing up onto the grilles that are there to block access to the interior of the cave. After half an hour or so they came back down in fading light and retired to their vehicles for more music.



I don't know if the lack of swifts that evening was down to the disturbance or just bad luck, but the ease in which they all reached the cave suggests that the route was well known to them and it's likely that it's a common event these days.



It was certainly different to what I was expecting on the drive up.

The Breakwater, Puerto de la Duquesa

Many visiting birders like to stay in or around Tarifa for this trip. We don't. Tarifa is great for the migration, but as a location it can be a trial. It is always very, very windy to a degree that is tiring and being out on its own peninsula it isn't really convenient for many other birding hotspots to the north and east.

When we first started coming to the area it was for Spanish birds in general, with the raptor movement as an add-on. My wife would find an apartment that suited her required level of comfort in the general area indicated and we'd go there. The main thing is it needed to be within reasonable driving distance of the birding spots in Malaga and Cadiz provinces. As a result we've stayed some distance east of the Strait – a compromise between accessibility and comfort.

As the years have passed we've been moving closer to the migration action. Last year was La Duquesa, a marina and golfing ghetto on the coast near Manilva. On one or two mornings we had kettles of Honey Buzzards over the apartment and on one evening I watched from our terrace over 80 Cory's Shearwaters in 15 minutes as they flew east from feeding on squid in the Strait.

This year I wanted to stay at Los Barrios, which I thought would be ideally located for all the sites I wanted to visit, close to Algeciras and the motorways, but without the big city drawbacks of Algeciras. Unfortunately we couldn't find any digs, so we went back to La Duquesa, about 20 minutes further east.

On the last few evenings I spent an hour or so out on the breakwater photographing any Cory's that got close enough as they fed not far from the shore. Good fun. One of the advantages of a three week trip for those lucky enough to have that time is that you can take time off from the dashing about of shorter full-on birding trips.



Cory's Shearwater, Puerto de la Duquesa



Cory's Shearwater, Puerto de la Duquesa



Cory's Shearwater, Puerto de la Duquesa



Little Tern, Puerto de la Duquesa

Concluding

22 species of raptor for the trip, but what of the Might-Have-Beens?

The biggie – the White backed Vulture that was feeding only a few hundred yards away from where I'd been sitting an hour earlier, a third for Spain and fourth for Europe. The Long-legged Buzzard that turned up shortly after I'd moved on and was again at the same place the following day. I also went up to Old Ronda looking for them – on the wrong day. The Pallid Harrier that was found at La Janda on the 22nd. The Lesser-spotted Eagle that was seen at Tarifa on the 10th – can't have everything, I was busy finding my Lanner that day. The Royal and Lesser-crested Terns that dropped into Los Lances while we were there, but failed to show on the days I looked for them.

September at the Strait of Gibraltar – Highly recommended



Algarrobo Observatory