

SPAIN - Guadalhorce Natural Park, Malaga.

Anthony Toole



Laguna de la Casilla

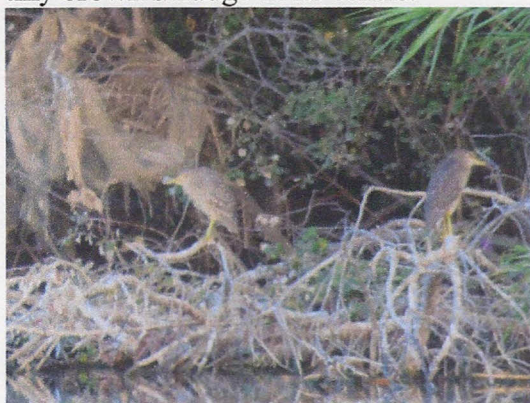
Spending a week in Marbella for the wedding of a relative of my wife, I grabbed a couple of opportunities that might not otherwise have presented themselves. The first was a visit to Gibraltar, where I saw not a single bird, though perhaps I did not look too hard. I did, however, manage to rescue a lady's handbag from a thieving monkey. The second was a day birding at the Guadalhorce Natural Park, on the outskirts of Malaga.

Luis Rodriguez picked me up outside my hotel at 6.20 am. At around seven o'clock, he pulled off the road onto a rough track with only a tall, wire fence between us and a runway of Malaga Airport. It was still dark, but he hoped we would see some nightjars, which he said often rested on the track. We saw none, and so adjourned to a nearby café for a short breakfast. I had contacted Luis, www.birdaytrip.com on the recommendation of his friend, David Lindo, the Urban Birder, with whom I had enjoyed a Press Trip to the Faroe Islands in 2017. He proved to be an excellent and very knowledgeable guide.



Sunrise

We returned to the same track just before sunrise and drove along it to a river bank. A **lapwing** rested on a sandbank and a pair of **little ringed plovers** stood on the near shore. About a hundred metres upstream, a **little egret** shared a wooded patch with two juvenile **night herons**, that were well camouflaged, but easily seen through the telescope. In the more distant reeds was a **little bittern**. Despite much trying in England, I have yet to see a bittern of any size. I took a photograph, but the distance was too great and the lighting still too poor, but at least I know the identity of the tiny brown smudge in its centre.



Night herons



Honey buzzard

As we drove back along the track, a flock of **cattle egrets** flew over us, as did some **pallid swifts** and **red-rumped swallows**. A pair of **serins** settled on a tree and half-a-dozen **monk parakeets** clung to the airport fence. Before we reached the main road, Luis stopped the car while we watched a **honey buzzard** fly past. The sun had just cleared the horizon. It was going to be a good birding day.



Around twenty minutes later, Luis parked the car and we stepped up onto an embankment that ran along the southern branch of the Guadalupe river. The embankment had been built to protect the adjacent housing estate from flooding that had been minimised further by splitting the river into two branches, creating an artificial island that now comprised the natural park. Sand extraction had left behind a series of lagoons, resulting in a wetland that attracted large concentrations of water birds.



Booted eagle

We followed a track between bamboo-like great reeds, Europe's tallest grass and past red oleander and blue chicory flowers, quince, olive, pomegranate and dwarf fan palm to Laguna de la Casilla. This was occupied by **coot** and **little grebe**, while beyond the far shore, a **grey heron** and **booted eagle** circled without apparent animosity. Beyond them, aeroplanes took off from and landed at the airport every few minutes.



Black-winged stilts

The next lagoon, del Rio Viejo, was a meandering remnant of the original river, and harboured several dozen **black-winged stilts**, small numbers of **sanderling** and **dunlin** and a **Kentish plover**. It seemed that each lagoon attracted its own particular avian devotees.

Continuing along the track, we reached the coast. Large groups of **black-headed, Mediterranean and lesser black-backed gulls** floated out to sea. A flock of eleven **common scoter** flew back and forth, coming ever closer, but not quite reaching land. They were the first Luis had seen this summer, and were probably a vanguard of the winter visitors.



Spotless starling

We retraced our steps, watching the many small birds that flew around the shrubs on either side of the track, resting on twigs just long enough to be identified. At Laguna Escondida, we saw more **coot** and **dabchicks**, some **shovellers**, a **gadwall** and a **kingfisher**. We did not see any of the white-headed ducks that normally frequent this lake, but were compensated by the close fly-past of our second **little bittern**.

But Guadalhorce was to reserve the best for the last. At Laguna Grande, the largest of the lakes, we saw a small flock of **flamingos**, while a much larger flock of gulls, including a couple of **Audouin's gulls**, laid claim to an island. Many of them took flight when a **booted eagle** passed over, but quickly returned. **Black-winged stilts** and several waders occupied the shallows and a **spotless starling** landed not fifty metres from the hide. But the real attraction, which had drawn half-a-dozen other birders to the lake, was a solitary **Pacific golden plover** that stood on the far shore. This was also a new bird for Luis.



Audouin's gull

By 2 o'clock, when we returned to the car, we had recorded 48 birds, 12 of which I had not seen before. At the request of the local tourist board, Luis had created an extended day trip, which he called the Route of 100 birds. I suggested that, with a bit of luck, he might advertise our trip as the equivalent for half that number. He was interested in the possibility.



Laguna Grande

BIRDS SEEN

Audouin's gull, barn swallow, blackbird, black-headed gull, black-winged stilt, booted eagle, cattle egret, (Cetti's warbler - heard only), collared dove, common sandpiper, common scoter, coot, dunlin, flamingo, gadwall, goldfinch, greenfinch, greenshank, grey heron, honey buzzard, house sparrow, jackdaw, Kentish plover, kestrel, kingfisher, lapwing, lesser black-backed gull, little bittern, little egret, little grebe, little ringed plover, mallard, Mediterranean gull, monk parakeet, moorhen, Pacific golden plover, pallid swift, red-rumped swallow, redshank, ringed plover, ruff, sanderling, Sardinian warbler, serin, shoveler, spotless starling, spotted flycatcher, turnstone, Zitting cisticola.