

Wingspan Bird Tours

Day-Trip Report

Andalucia 13th Sept. 2009

Leader Bob Buckler

Participants: Kay Edgar & Bob Healy.

We met in Ronda at the Hotel San Gabriel on a bright Sunday morning, a hazy sky produced a weakened sun with very little breeze which made for very good birding weather.

The Serrania de Ronda is an area of mountainous beauty clothed with lush Mediterranean vegetation that surrounds the ancient town of Ronda, our particular destination this morning amidst this vast wilderness was the tracks and trails of the Sierra de las Nieves (parque natural). This is a huge area of oak forest, pine woods, open scrubland, river gorges and high mountains of bare karstic rock. Large rounded grey mountains tops could be seen in every direction and you could imagine it to be a very desolate place in the middle of winter.

We drove a kilometre or so into the reserve and parked at a convenient pull-in onto very short, sun-burnt, brown grass, a chilly breeze greeted us as we emerged from the car. Undeterred by the temperature we headed off along a circular walk called the Senderos de Conejeras that cuts its way through the oak woodland along a dry stoney river bed. The trees were stunted and grew in an open lattice work of small clearings and clumps of no more than 4 meters high! The silence was broken by the harsh scream of the Jay which showed a large white rump as it disappeared into the dense trees, our first bird sighting. The feeding action of the Spotted Flycatcher next caught our attention in the under storey of the wood, as it made quick, short, sorties out into the open and back again in an attempt to catch unsuspecting flying insects as they innocently passed by, returning to the same perch each time so that we could have good views of it.

The stunning colours of the male Common Redstart impressed my guests on many occasions during morning as we encountered several of these little gems, even though the birds were not in pristine plumage they still looked both exotic and exquisite, producing their customary tail flicking and bobbing-action when alighting onto a new perch. We abandoned the walk after 200 metres as we found little use for our binoculars once we were deeper into the wood, on the return journey a little 'shreep' call drew our attention to a Chiffchaff which was determined not to show itself so we turned our attention to the sky which held small clouds of hirundines in the shape of Crag and House Martins, Barn and Red-rumped Swallows with the occasional Alpine Swift scything its way through the throngs.

The heavily rutted track, which made sure our breakfast & coffee were well stirred as it sloshed inside our stomachs, finally relented as we emerged from the woodland into an open sided gorge draped in sheep and goats. The gentle slopes were littered with broken rock and larger outcrops, scarce shrubs were littered with birds. One particular dead tree held Chaffinch, Goldfinch, Rock Bunting and Linnet, all new birds for my American guests. Our prize find, a male Black Wheatear, sat perched, preening itself nonchalantly, blissfully unaware of the commotion it was causing as we 'queued to view' through our shared telescope.

A fence-line provided our next amusement when a diminutive Stonechat alighted on the rusty wire, in fact a whole family party were found to be using the metallic perch, they drew our attention to other passerine delights which were also using this convenient rest station. A small flock of Linnets were joined by the smaller Serin both of these species looking rather drab in their autumn garb of browns and greys with just a hint of the bright yellows and reds which will break through before next spring. A little further along the track the valley opened out, on our right side a couple of small fincas were surrounded by dry cultivated areas and on our left a scrubland area covered the gentle slope. A Dartford Warbler dashed from shrub to shrub disappearing in a flash each time it landed, during one or two of its longer excursions we managed to get reasonable views of the dark colouring and very long tail.

The pinsapo pine (the very rare Spanish fir) is seen along the track side, some are saplings, found in shrouds of wire-mesh for protection, others, stand majestically 30 meters high in all their splendour. A quick look into the pine forest produced very little except for an appreciation of the woodland landscape, however along a stream two species of Wagtail were found, namely Grey, and the White variety, along with a Tree Pipit that was trying to bathe.

Finally we reached a summit at the head of the valley where views down to the coast at San Pedro were superb, to our right a huge rock formation in the shape of a castle stood proud some 50 metres high and sitting on top, equally as proud, was a Short-toed Eagle. The bird was upsetting a pair of Common Kestrels by its choice of perch, then suddenly it alighted and headed straight for us, it drew closer and closer passing just a few meters above us before diving onto the opposite hillside. It obviously missed its target because it took off empty 'handed' heading into the wind, drifting and climbing effortlessly into the distance. We were totally amazed at the strength of bird's eyesight, it must have seen some prey, a lizard or snake, at a distance of some 400 meters!

Just before we departed we scanned the sky for raptors and successfully located several other Short-toed Eagles and then a large eagle was located and appeared to be mobbed by a smaller Booted Eagle, as they drew closer we could identify the larger bird as an adult Bonelli's Eagle. The very straight trailing edge of both primary and secondary flight feathers always remind me of a Lammergeier, the bird soared extremely high and was lost to sight.

We made the return journey back to Ronda, stopping once, to use the servicios at a petrol station, where my day-long companions missed a fly-over Hobby whilst in the loo, for a solvent bird list they must learn to control their outgoings.

The afternoon was spent in the vicinity of Benaolan and Montejaque where a variety of habitats were explored and an impressive list of species was amassed. We ate our picnic lunch in the car park over looking the Cueva de Gato, helping ourselves to ripe figs fresh from the trees. We were not alone, House Sparrows and Blackcaps were doing the same and a Reed Warbler worked the branches looking for other trappings. An all too brief encounter was made with a Melodious Warbler and we gave up searching for a Cetti's Warbler that was delivering a stilted rendition of one of the loudest songs found in Europe.

After a brief stop at the Rio Guadiaro at Estacion de Benaolan, where we had excellent views of several White Wagtails and witnessed a fly-pass by a Green Sandpiper, we headed for the dam at the 'Embalse de Montejaque', I use the word embalse with reservation as I have never seen water behind this dam! Passing through the impressive Puerto de Tabizna, which is a very rugged and picturesque mountain pass, we arrived at the equally impressive Cerro de Tabizna, which is a massive rock outcrop reaching some 900 meters above sea level! The track led us down towards the dam, we spent sometime looking across the valley back towards the pass and were rewarded with good sightings of Black Wheatear and a pair of noisy Ravens perched on top of the ridge. Above us several Griffon Vultures wheeled across the sky, they were joined by our second sighting of Bonelli's Eagle, this bird soared so high I am sure it landed on the moon! We noted small groups of Crag Martins weaving in and out of the pass whilst Alpine Swifts dashed across the valley.

Down by the dam a path encircled a grassy knoll which supported several pine trees and a few Cork Oaks. We circumnavigated the knoll but not before watching a Blue-rock Thrush, a Black Redstart, A Great-spotted Woodpecker, Serins and Goldfinches. My American companions were delighted with the woodpecker and put it at the top of their list. Shortly afterwards the woodpecker was toppled by a couple of Spanish Ibex that we found sitting lazily on the top of the Cerro de Tabizna.

Our last stop of the day was a grass verge opposite an area of Cork Oak Dehesa, the cork had very recently been harvested, the rusty-red colour of the tree-trunks gave the impression that they had just been painted. The other side of the road overlooked a large basin where the recently cropped sunflower fields held many small flocks of birds. A male Cirl Bunting sat posing on a wire fence but did not impress my American friends, they were struck with awe at the beautiful colours of the Blue Tit and Great Tit, both of which showed well as they flew into the Sunflower field to pick up seeds and then fly back into cover to eat them. Both of these birds went to the top of list for beauty for my American friends, funny how perspectives differ, my bird of the day was the Bonelli's Eagle and theirs' was Great Tit!

Bird List. (52 Species)

Great Crested Grebe	European Honey-Buzzard
Black-necked Grebe	Bonelli's Eagle
Little Grebe	Booted Eagle
Balearic Shearwater	Golden Eagle
Cory's Shearwater	Peregrine Falcon
Great Cormorant	Eurasian Hobby
Northern Gannet	Eurasian Kestrel
Grey Heron	Lesser Kestrel
Purple Heron	Pheasant
Little Egret	Red-legged Partridge
Cattle Egret	Barbary Partridge
Squacco Heron	Common Moorhen
Black-crowned Night-Heron	Purple Swamphen
Little Bittern	Eurasian Coot
Eurasian Spoonbill	Red Knobbed Coot
Glossy Ibis	Pied Avocet
White Stork	Black-winged Stilt
Black Stork	Eurasian Stone-Curlew
Greater Flamingo	Collared Pratincole
Common Shelduck	Northern Lapwing
Mallard	Grey Plover
Gadwall	Common Ringed Plover
Teal	Little Ringed Plover
Garganey	Kentish Plover
Marbled Duck	Ruff
Red-crested Pochard	Dunlin
Common Pochard	Curlew Sandpiper
White-headed Duck	Sanderling
Osprey	Little Stint
Black Kite	Snipe
Red Kite	Black-tailed Godwit
Black-winged Kite	Bar-tailed Godwit
Short-toed Snake-Eagle	Eurasian Curlew
Egyptian Vulture	Whimbrel
Eurasian Griffon Vulture	Common Redshank
Western Marsh-Harrier	Spotted Redshank
Montagu's Harrier	Common Greenshank
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Common Sandpiper
Common Buzzard	Wood Sandpiper
Spotted Flycatcher	
Pied Flycatcher	
Long-tailed Tit	
Crested Tit	
Eurasian Blue Tit	
Coal Tit	
Great Tit	

Eurasian Nuthatch
Short-toed Treecreeper
Wren
Southern Grey Shrike
[Woodchat Shrike](#)
Eurasian Jay
Eurasian Magpie
Common Raven
Eurasian Jackdaw
Red-billed Chough
Spanish Sparrow
House Sparrow
Rock Petronia
Spotless Starling
Hawfinch
Chaffinch
European Serin
European Goldfinch
European Greenfinch
Eurasian Linnet
Rock Bunting
Corn Bunting
Cirl Bunting