

Wingspan Bird Tours

Trip Report

Andaluica

6th – 13th June 2009

LEADER: BOB BUCKLER

Participants: Rita & Ernie Parker, Anne Watson, Sue Morris, Barbara Gunn

SUMMARY

We had an excellent relaxed week of birding, eating and drinking, savouring the ambiance of a typical pueblo blanco! The weather conditions were mixed, the first day was very windy with light showers, Sunday was sunny and Monday was dull and overcast with a cold wind. From Tuesday the temperature reached the lower 30's when it became too hot to bird-watch during the mid-afternoon so we took shelter in local tapas bars for a break. The hot weather continued until the end of the week.

DAY I - SATURDAY 6TH JUNE

The group arrived in the arrivals hall at Malaga airport around 1:15pm an hour or so later than scheduled, they were greeted by rain as they emerged from the terminal building, not a great start! The luggage was loaded into one vehicle whilst the group boarded another and promptly set off for an immediate birding soiree. A short, 15 minute, drive from the airport found us at



Guadalhorce Natural Park and in bright sunshine. We parked right below a colony of **Monk Parakeets**, their noisy comings and goings increased in intensity with the arrival of a couple of **Jackdaws**, it looked as though the **Jackdaws** had taken over part of the huge colonial nest of the parakeets. Also in the fray was a pair of **Spotless Starlings** and a **Common Kestrel**.

Leaving the squawking parakeets we walk along the raised embankment of the river Guadalhorce and listed many species from our advantageous view point. We found **Serin** and **Red-rumped Swallow** at the bridge, **Spoonbill** in flight in the distance, **Bee-eaters** hawking insects above the scrub meadows. We reached a raised hide where we sat for an hour in pleasant sunshine watching the bird life of a large open laguna. We listed a good a number of species which included **Little Egret**, **Black-winged Stilt** (with chicks), **Common Pochard**, **White-headed Duck**, **Zitting Cisticola**, **Hoopoe** all three **Plovers** (**Little**, **Little-ringed** and **Kentish**) and on our journey to the car we found an unusual insect, a Nosed Grasshopper (pictured below).

DAY 2 - SUNDAY 7TH JUNE



Our first full day in Andalucia and what a lovely morning, clear blue sky, no wind and a nice temperature. We made the short journey down to the Rio Genal and began our birding with the sound of **Golden Orioles** as we emerged from the car, we then watched both **Grey** and **White Wagtails**, 'messing about on the river'. We then spent 30 minutes watching the trees from which the **Golden Orioles** were calling, we managed to see them in short flights and in the meantime we saw a **Great-spotted Woodpecker**. **Blackcaps** were singing everywhere, a **Long-tailed Tit** foraged above us and several **Serins** put in an appearance. Walking along the track beside the river both **Cetti's Warbler** and **Nightingale** were in good voice and both of them showed briefly. We spent another hour watching all the

birds mentioned above before setting off up the hill to a large mountainside called Sierra de Crestallina. From our roadside vantage point we overlooked farmland and areas of scrub, several new birds were found. We saw **Cirl Bunting** and **Woodchat Shrike** sitting side by side on the telephone wires and **Stonechat**, **Crested Lark** and **Sardinian Warblers** in the scrub.

Time was moving on so we set off for Soto Grande and ate our picnic lunch on the beach in bright sunshine. In the Paraje Natural of Soto Grande we saw a few more **Monk Parakeets**, **Purple Swamphen**, **Little Egret** and **Reed Warbler**.

We had a couple more stops before heading for home and the first was at Taraguilla where many **White Storks** had built their large nests on pylons along the railway track. The juveniles were ready to leave the nest, making practice flight-jumps and almost taking off in the wind.

Our next stop was at Castellar, in fact it was the hotel de Castellar, where we took a coffee break whilst watching a **Bee-eater** colony, some of the birds were flying very close above us. We also found a pair of **Black-eared Wheatears** and we watched **Common Buzzards** and a **Booted Eagle** soaring above us. After our break we set off for the Castillo de Castellar, but before arriving there, we made a couple of brief stops. The first was at a bridge where we spent 30 minutes watching butterflies, namely: **Monarch**, **Cleopatra**, **Southern speckled Wood** and **Spanish Gatekeeper**. We did notice a couple of birds as well, a pair of elusive **Firecrests** refused to show well, but several **Jays** and a **Robin** paraded for us.



Lastly we arrived at the Castillo de Castellar, an impressive hilltop fortress which commanded fantastic views for miles across the surrounding countryside, we could see Gibraltar quite clearly and the white village of Gaucin some 50 kilometers away, stood out like a patch of snow on the distant mountainside. We watched the **Lesser**

Kestrels popping to and from their nest holes in the castle facade, several **Crag Martins** were milling about the castle walls and lots of **Pallid Swifts** drifted overhead and sometimes visited their nest in the castle walls. All the above birds showed a great deal of flying skill in very windy conditions. We spent an hour walking the castle grounds and spending money in the gift shops, the girls had their photos taken holding a **Harris Hawk** whilst the men nipped into the local bar for a refreshing cold drink. It was now late afternoon so we set off for the hour drive back to Gaucin for a well deserved glass of vino and an home-cooked dinner.

DAY 3 - MONDAY 8TH JUNE

We awoke to a cloudy and windy morning with a bit of a chill in the air! We took breakfast indoors before setting off northwards towards Ronda, we by-passed Ronda and headed straight for the Sierras de las Nieves parque natural. Our first stop was in the woodland on the approach road, we took a short walk hoping to hear and see a **Woodlark**. It was quite windy and the bird failed to sing or show, however we did see several **Jays**, **Chaffinch** and **Great Tit**. Further along the track we heard the unfamiliar rattling song of the **Bonelli's Warbler** and despite the bird being only a few meters from us it failed to show before moving deeper into the woodland.

Moving on, the terrain changed as we entered a gorge, there was a stony stream bed to our right and steep sided limestone on either side. We spent a good hour picking out the birds flitting amongst the rocks and scrub. **Black Redstarts** were quite common, the males looking striking in their summer garb. The **Linnets** looked very bright and beautiful in the Spanish light, and we finally found several **Black Wheatears**, one of our target birds. Several **Griffon Vultures** braved the high wind and low cloud high above us.

Next we stopped where the valley widened and a very mature forest of pine trees came down the hillside to the banks of the stream. Our first bird there was a **Coal Tit**, picked out as it flew across a clearing, shortly afterwards a **Short-toed Treecreeper** was found, it was in a tree and it was creeping! A **Great Spotted Woodpecker** called and then showed well just up the track and a **Mistle Thrush** disappeared deeper into the woods. We walked for an hour so and had good views of **Crested Tit**, **Eurasian Nuthatch**, **Spotted Flycatcher** and heard a couple of **Firecrests** but did not locate them.

As we got into the car to drive further into the valley a shout went up "two raptors", the birds were high up and drifting towards us from up the valley. We got out of the car for a better look and after some deliberation the birds we found to be **Spanish Imperial Eagles**. What a find, these rare birds are only found in Spain and number only about 250 pairs. The birds drifted over to the far ridge and landed in full view, we scoped them, but they were distant and in poor light, nevertheless their identification was confirmed.

Back into the car and up the hill, we tried to find a sheltered spot for lunch which we duly did. The sun was breaking through the clouds as we ate our sandwiches and the wind began to subside. We had several brief sightings of **Dartford Warbler**, a very showy **Wren** and more **Sardinian Warblers**. Moving on again we reached our final destination at the head of the valley, we parked up and took a walk along a track beside a huge outcrop of rock. The views from there were tremendous, we could see down to the coast at San Pedro some 50 kilometers away. Along the track we watched butterflies, flowers and we found a very large spider in a hole, it turned out to be a **Wolf Spider**. A very obliging **Rock Bunting** sang from various song posts totally disregarding our presence, we had more sightings of **Dartford Warbler** and a couple **Spanish Ibex** were illusive high up on the rocky outcrop.

We drove out of the valley and back onto the main road to Ronda, we parked in the town centre and walked to the famous bridge over the gorge. The views and sheer height of the gorge were awe inspiring, the group were totally taken by surprise. We saw **Red-billed Chough**, **Pallid Swift**, **Lesser Kestrel** but not much else. We done the tourist bit, bought some souvenirs and walked back to the car picking out **Serins** from the car park.

Our last stop of the day was on the road back to Gaucin about 5 kilometres out of Ronda. We pulled into a lay-by and crossed the road to a low parapet wall. Below and beyond the wall we found several **Black Wheatears** and on

the wall several **Rock Sparrows** flitted about, they were joined by a **Rock Bunting** or two. Then a bird-shape was noticed high up on the ridge sitting on the side of a rock, it was none other than a **Rock Thrush**, we all had in-the-scope views of this beautiful bird before it disappeared over the ridge. Well that was a fine finale to a great day in the Serrania de Ronda.

DAY 4 - TUESDAY 9TH JUNE

This was to be a tourist day rather a birding day because our destination was Gibraltar. We set out at 9am and arrived at 9:45am at the back of the queue, it took about 30 minutes to get onto the 'rock' from there. We drove through the town and out to Europa Point where we spent a good hour bird and people watching. We had great views of a **Blue Rock Thrush**, sitting on a rock no less! We saw flocks of tourist everywhere of all nationalities and plumage. Sea-watching was disappointing just the odd **Gannet** flying by and thousands of **Yellow-legged Gulls** were all over the 'rock', however, the views across to Africa were tremendous. We drove to the upper Rock Nature Reserve, we visited the impressive limestone caves and we sat to eat our lunch overlooking the docks and Algeciras Bay. From our high vantage points all around the Upper Rock the scenery was fantastic, we could even see our village of Gaucin, 70 kilometers away. One source of amusement came when yours truly was rejected by one of the barbary Apes (Macaque Monkey's really), the ape slapped my arm when I tried to stroke it.

We left the rock during mid-afternoon without any fuss at the border crossing and we all arrived safely back into Spain. Our last port of call was Pinar del Rey, a lovely woodland habitat of mature Stone Pines just north of Taraguilla. We parked in the shade below the trees and walked the tracks and trails for a couple of hours. We heard **Blackcaps, Chaffinch** and had sightings of **Jay, Blue Tit, Great Tit**, before finding a family party of **Crested Tits**. We watched these delightful creatures for a time trying to take their photograph before walking down to a stream. On the way down to the stream we saw **Bonelli's Warbler** and also had brief glimpses of **Green Woodpecker**. We stood on a narrow bridge overlooking the stream, watching butterflies, a **Wren** and several dragonflies. The group waited by the entrance to the car park whilst I walked back to the bus, during their wait they saw **Cirl Bunting, Robin, Short-toed Treecreeper, Blue Tit** and **Chaffinch**. We loaded up the car and drove back to Gaucin, most eyes were shut during the drive back but we did manage to see **Woodchat Shrike** and **Griffon Vulture**.

DAY 5 - WEDNESDAY 10TH JUNE

We decided to make the long journey north to the Lagunas de Lantejuela, an area about 100 kilometers away which held a very different habitat to the mountains around Gaucin. After an early breakfast we drove up passed Ronda and took the road to Moron via Coripe. We stopped after about an hour just south of Coripe to stretch our legs and have a look at the bird life. We found many **Corn Buntings, Goldfinches, Greenfinches, Serins, Woodchat Shrikes, Spotless Starlings** and **House Sparrows**. We were surrounded by clouds of small midges which eventually drove us off, but not before finding a very pale raptor sitting in the tree, on closer inspection with the scope we discovered it was a **Booted Eagle**. A perched **Booted Eagle** like this was a new sighting for most of the group. We passed through Coripe and the landscape began to change, lots more cultivation, large fields of wheat and barley and many patches of vegetables. We found several **Little Owls** sitting on telephone wires, not on the poles, but on the wires! We also saw several **Southern Grey Shrikes** on the wires and a few **Red-legged Partridges** in the fields. We stopped in Moron to buy supplies and got lost, but once we were on the right road out of town we stopped because there were several raptors in the sky. Within minutes we saw **Red Kite, Black Kite, Booted Eagle, Common Buzzard** and **Griffon Vulture**, not a bad stop. We saw a few **Turtle Doves** on the telephone wires and one **Woodchat Shrike**, then we noticed that we had parked a few meters from a prison and with binoculars in our hands we thought we'd better move on. Over the next half an hour we saw more kites, vultures and eagles before stopping, in hot sunshine just before Lantejuela.

On the way to our first scheduled stop we saw two or three **Montagu's Harriers** and lots of **Black Kites** and **White Storks**. We parked near a wide expanse of open meadow and sat using the car as shelter from the sun and whilst watching the meadow a pale phase **Booted Eagle** drifted over us only 30 meters off the ground, what a

fantastic sight. During the next hour we saw **Common Buzzard**, more and more **Black Kites**, **White Storks** and **Booted Eagles**.

A few new birds appeared for our trip list the first, a surprising pair of **Lapwings**, then a **Collared Pratincole**, followed by a **Tawny Pipit**, a couple of **Ravens** joined the **White Storks** and **Black Kites** on the thermals. We could hear a **Hoopoe** in the distance and several **Crested Larks** were, in fact, larking about.

Passing through Lantejuela we travelled along the road to El Rubio looking for a sheltered place where we could eat our lunch. A shout of "Roller" came from the back of the bus so we made a quick stop. There was a pair of these beautiful birds perched on and near an electricity housing, they were obviously using the building to nest in. During the next couple of hours we ate lunch at a derelict motel site, the only place with shelter, we looked at two of the local lagunas. The first laguna was completely dry, the only birds found there in searing heat were a few **Black-headed Gulls**, a couple pair of **Avocets** and three **Stone Curlews**. At the second laguna there were hundreds of birds most of them unrecognisable because of the heat haze, but we picked out **Little Egret**, **Greater Flamingo**, **Mallard**, **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Kentish Plover**, **Gull-billed Tern** and a **Marsh Harrier**. We also saw several more **Rollers**, **Lesser Kestrel**, **Red-legged partridge**, **Short-toed Lark** and **Calandra Lark**, at one stop we saw over fifty raptors in the sky on the thermals, they were mainly **Griffon Vultures**, but there were also **Red Kites**, **Black Kites**, **Short-toed Eagles**, **White Storks** and **Booted Eagles**.

Well the hot weather finally got to us so we made a Bee-line to Osuna and found a bar where we could sit and relax over a cold drink. We set off for home at about 5pm and made only one stop, that was just before Ronda, overlooking a deep gorge at the side of the road. We found **Blue Rock Thrush**, **Crag Martin**, **Linnet** and we heard **Blackcap** and **Nightingale**.

Day 6 – THURSDAY 11TH JUNE

We headed for the coast today hoping for cooler weather, it wasn't cooler but at least there was a breeze. Our first stop was the Rio Palmones, we parked in the town of that name and walked along the river to its mouth. In actual fact we only saw five species which was incredible considering there was expansive salt marsh and mudflats. A **Little Egret** graced the river bank, a couple of **Yellow Wagtails** flitted amongst the scrub and a **Kentish Plover** or two dashed along the sandy spit. We made an early exit and pushed on to Bolonia and the Roman village of Baelo Claudia found there. The scenery was fantastic, with the Roman village set on a perfect sandy shore and the bright blue sea sparkling in the sunlight, no wonder the Romans picked this place to live. We spent a nice hour walking amongst the Roman ruins and at the same time we logged **Black-eared Wheatear** and a **Little Owl**.

The rocky mountains that formed a picturesque back drop to the village are called the Sierra de la Plata, we drove high up into the mountainside and parked at a mirador and that looked the Roman village far below us, we had a tremendous vista all along the shoreline. We ate our picnic lunch which was constantly interrupted by flocks of swifts above us, they were visiting a cave entrance on the rock face and the flock contained a pair of **Little Swifts**. This was one of our rarest finds as only a dozen or so pairs breed in Spain. Over an hour or so we watched a couple of pairs of **Griffon Vultures** visiting their nests, also two pairs of **Blue Rock Thrushes**, (the bluest ones yet), several pairs of **Crag Martins** and a very confiding **Rock Bunting** flew in close by and began collecting food just a few meters away. Just before we left we finally picked out a couple of **White-rumped Swifts** as they joined the flock of **Pallid** and **Little Swifts**.

La Janda was our next destination, we drove passed hundreds of wind turbines and reached the wide open expanse of La Janda. The whole area used to be a huge inland lake surrounded by miles of wild grassland, it used to support both Great and Little Bustards! But not now, the bustards have all gone, the fields now support arable crops, the lake has been drained and is now covered in rice paddies. However, it is still very good for birds!

We drove along the central raised bank giving us a good view of both sides of the central 'drain' (a large canal), from the car we saw many finches, linnets and sparrows. We stopped many times to watch **Red-legged Partridge**,

Purple Swamphen, lots of **Cattle Egrets** and we heard **Great Reed Warblers** but failed to see them as they kept themselves very low due to the windy conditions. We took a right turn and drove along a tree-lined track, the trees held a huge colony of **Cattle Egrets**, they were stunning in their summer plumage and very close to the car. Later we found several **Common Pheasants** and a **Collared Pratincole**.

Time was pressing but we had just enough to stop one more time before returning home for dinner. The last stop was along the Ojen valley, we searched along a track that had hedgerows of prickly pear cacti. This is supposed to be a favoured habitat of the **Rufous Bush Robin**, we didn't find a trace. Nevertheless we had an enjoyable hour watching family parties of **Stonechats**, we had good views of **Tawny Pipit** and three or four **Short-toed Eagles** performed in the distant sky.

Day 7 - FRIDAY 12TH JUNE

Our last full day had arrived, the week had flown swiftly by! Today we headed out to Cortes de la Frontera and along the limestone ridge of the Sierra de Libar. The scenery was truly magnificent, a deep valley was fenced in on either side by impressive limestone peaks and the mountainsides were covered in oak woodlands. Our destination was the Cueva de la Pileta, a series of caverns that held some prehistoric cave paintings (although some regard them with scepticism) and some fantastic stalagmite and stalagtites. We arrived early to ensure that we got in at the 10 o'clock opening, whilst waiting in the car park we scanned the mountainside and quickly located a singing **Blue Rock Thrush** and sat just beside it was a singing **Rock Bunting**. In the scrub we found **Sardinian Warbler** and in the sky above several **Griffon Vultures** drifted by, a host of **Pallid Swift** hawked the rock faces and a **Kestrel** hovered below us. We then climbed the steep path to the cave entrance and spent 40 minutes waiting before setting off deep into the mountain's belly. We spent an hour in the cold dark, damp caves, but what an hour the limestone formations were amazing and the incredible Neolithic cave paintings were fantastic.

The cave walkway was arduous with many steps, climbs and declines, the group emerged into brilliant sunshine dazed and bemused, deciding that the cave visit was magical but they wouldn't do it again.

We then had an exciting drive through Benaolan, a diversion sent us through very narrow streets and steep inclines, not for the faint hearted driver! We also passed through Montajaque on our way to our lunch stop noting one or two bars for our afternoon siesta on the return journey. We parked about 5km out of Montajaque in a gorgeous valley of limestone, we sat amongst the rocks and ate our picnic. We were duly entertained by a family party of **Red-billed Chough**, their noisy antic and superb flying ability kept us amused. There were also small groups of **Alpine Swifts** overhead and above those there were **Griffon Vultures**. A pair of **Rock Sparrows** were feeding young at their nest hole in the rocks, on the cliff face we saw **Blue Rock Thrush**, **Rock Bunting** and a few **Crag Martins** wheeled in and out of a cave below us. We finished our lunch in the very hot conditions and were driven to the tapas bar for cold drinks and shelter from the relentless sun.

Our last stop for the day was at the river Guadario, we drove down to Estacion de Benaolan, crossed the railway track and parked in the shade. A short walk found us on the bridge over the river, from the bridge we could hear **Golden Orioles** but did not locate them. On the rocks in the river a family group of **White Wagtails** fed and bathed in the fast flowing water and we found another **Nuthatch** in the olive grove on the opposite bank. We took the track up-stream from the bridge and apart from **Red-rumped Swallow**, **singing Blackcaps**, **Cetti's Warbler** and **Nightingale** we didn't see much. The heat of the day finally beat us and apart from the scary drive back through Benaolan the return journey was interrupted only by snoring.

DAY 8 - SATURDAY 13TH JUNE

Our last day started at 9:30am we all had a bit of a lie in, we had decided not to go birding but instead we took a walk around the village hoping to find shops open before 10am. It was a bit of a struggle but we managed it. We set off at 11am for Malaga and apart from the swallows, swifts, sparrows and starlings we saw nothing new. Just

before the airport a **Monk Parakeet** flew across the road as if say 'I was the first bird you saw on your trip and now I am the last'!