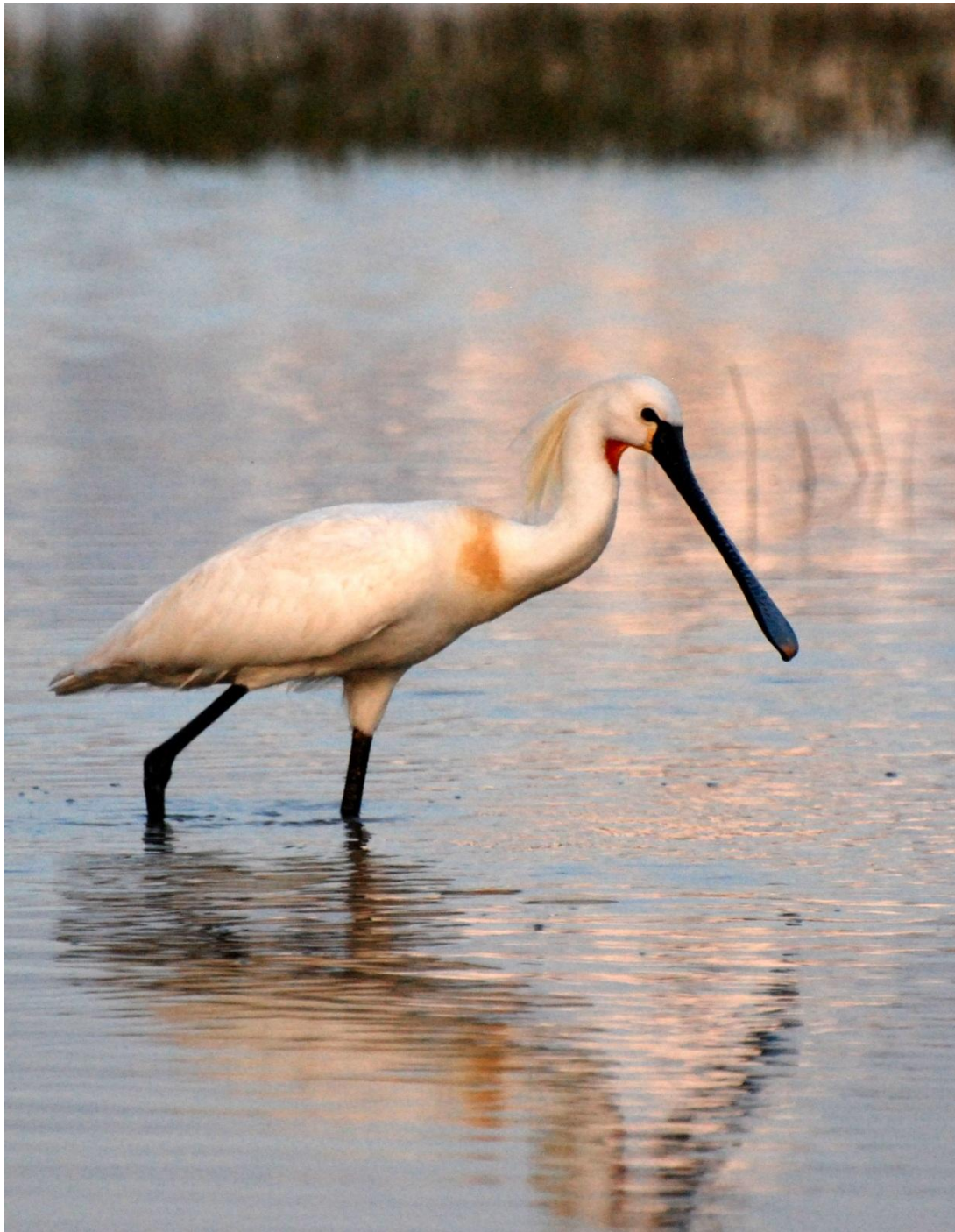


*Southern Spain, 3<sup>rd</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> April 2009*



*David Bowman and Doug Hume*

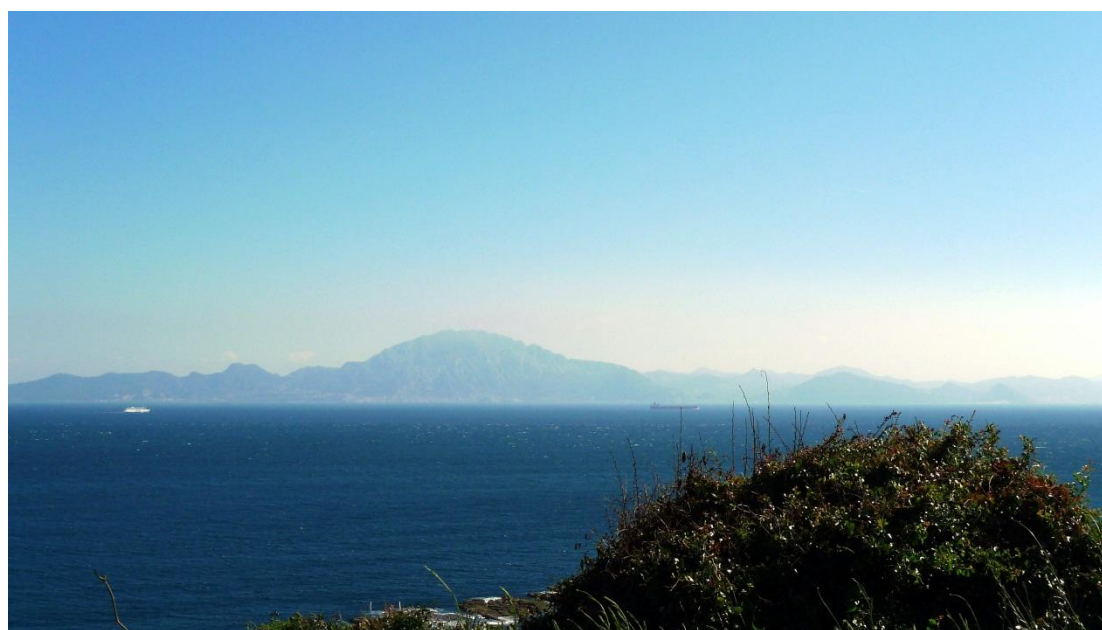
## 1. Introduction

This week was arranged, at relatively short notice, to revisit some of our favourite birding spots in Andalucia. We flew from Manchester to Malaga, planning to take in the raptor migration over Tarifa, the wetland birds of the Coto Donana and the mountain birds of the Sierra de Grazalema. As it turned out, we were able to cram in all of this and experience one of the heaviest migrations I've experienced in a dozen or so trips to the region.

## 2. Day 1      3<sup>rd</sup> April 2009      Tarifa

By the time we'd sorted out our car, which was complicated by overbooking by Alamo Cars (and sorted out by Autos Lidos, an excellent local firm, based at the airport), it was nearly 4.00 pm. We headed on south down the main coastal motorway, making for Tarifa. We arrived at Tarifa by 6.00 pm and stopped at a watch-point (mirador), over-looking the Straits of Gibraltar to assess the wind direction. Even though it was late in the day, there was still a chance of catching the tail-end of the day's migration.

When deciding where to base yourself for a spring raptor-watch in the Gibraltar/Tarifa area, wind direction is critical. The birds tend to start thermalling over the Jebel Musa, the highest peak on the Moroccan coastline, directly opposite the Rock of Gibraltar. These two prominences were known as the Pillars of Hercules in ancient times. If the wind is a prevailing westerly, most of the broad-winged raptors drift towards the Rock and are best viewed from either Gibraltar itself or from Punta Secreta, on the western side of the Bay of Cadiz. In an easterly wind the mirador near Tarifa is far more productive. Calm weather produces a broader front arrival, somewhere between the two.



*Looking from Punta Secreta, Spain, towards the Jebel Musa, Morocco.*

Scanning the skies over the Straits, we could see odd Black Kites drifting towards us but no major movement. Looking eastwards, however, we could see large numbers of Kites and other raptors making landfall towards Cadiz. Deciding to head for Punta Secreta, which is right down on the coast, just west of the Bay of Cadiz, we set off. As we drove back along the main road towards Cadiz, large flocks of Kites and smaller numbers of Booted Eagles were passing overhead. You reach Punta Secreta by turning right at the last traffic island



before Cadiz. The road then passes through a small housing development before following a very pretty, winding coast road down towards the lighthouse at the point. There is a pull-off on the seaward side of the road, where you can park and which offers stunning views, if migration is in full flow.



*The Rock of Gibraltar, seen from the road down to Punta Secreta.*

When we arrived at the viewpoint, a handful of local birders were still present. They had been involved in the co-ordinated count along the coast between Gibraltar and Tarifa. We immediately set about making a contribution, picking up an Osprey, a large female Goshawk and two Short-toed Eagles among the numerous Black Kites and Booted Eagles.



*A Short-toed Eagle, arriving at Punta Secreta.*

One of the main advantages of watching the migration from Punta Secreta is that the birds tend to have dropped down to sea-level by the time they reach the Spanish coast and fly past at eye-level. In just over an hour we counted 50 Booted Eagles, 30 Black Kites, 25 Lesser Kestrels, 4 Kestrels, 2 Sparrowhawks, 1 Goshawk and 2 Short-toed Eagles. Chatting to the Spanish counters, they reported 1,000 Black Kites and 500 Booted Eagles from the point over the whole day.



***Black Kite overhead at Punta Secreta***

Returning to Tarifa, we found a room at the Hostel Correos, which is well situated for the main area of restaurants and bars. Tarifa is a pretty, small town with an intriguing Moorish history. It still retains most of its ancient walls and is nice to wander round on a warm, spring evening. Beware, however, for it's also the haunt of pick-pockets, who travel over on the ferry from Morocco and who can put a crimp in an otherwise pleasant experience!

## **Day 2 4<sup>th</sup> April**

### **Tarifa and Coto Donana.**

The day dawned warm and sunny, with a brisk, northerly wind. We initially decided to try watching from the Tarifa Mirador, which has a café and offers spectacular views across the Straits. This was fairly productive, with a few raptors, 2 Little Swifts and Orphean Warbler, Nightingale and Dartford Warbler among the commoner birds. Eventually, we relocated to a watch-point by an empty, white-washed building, elevated above the road and giving panoramic views. An excellent raptor passage followed, with counts, over two hours, of: 220 Black Kites, 12 Booted Eagles, 2 Sparrowhawks, 5 Black Storks, 35 Lesser Kestrels, 4 Montague's Harriers, 3 Egyptian Vultures, 1 White Stork, 8 Common Kestrels, 5 Short-toed Eagles, 1 Buzzard and a local movement of 100 Griffon Vultures. By early afternoon, passage began to lighten and we decided to move on and head for Donana.



*Raptors and Black Stork over Tarifa*



The journey to El Rocio, the gateway village for the Coto Donana, took a couple of hours and we were soon checking into the Hostal Christina. This is a clean and pleasant hostel, with en-suite rooms. El Rocio itself is a remarkable place built entirely on sand and with a population of a few hundred, which swells to many hundreds of thousands during the annual pilgrimage.



*El Rocio, viewed from across the Rocina Lagoon*

Dumping our bags as quickly as possible, we were soon setting up our scopes on the viewpoint near the Hotel Turuno. As usual, the lagoon was thronging with a wide range of species. Two Collared Pratincoles, Black Kites and Booted Eagles soared overhead, while sizeable flocks of Golden Plover, Black-tailed Godwits, Dunlin, Redshank and Spoonbills were picked out among the thousands of Flamingos. Wildfowl were present in large numbers too, with Garganey and Red-crested Pochard among the commoner species. Away in the distance a flock of 20 Pin-tailed Sandgrouse flew in to drink at the water's edge. Eventually, we decided to walk round the lagoon to a nice restaurant on the western side, which offers a great vantage point at sunset. Over a cold beer, we saw flocks of Whiskered and Gull-billed Terns fly in, while a Hobby dashed after some of the many hundreds of hirundines, which whirled overhead.

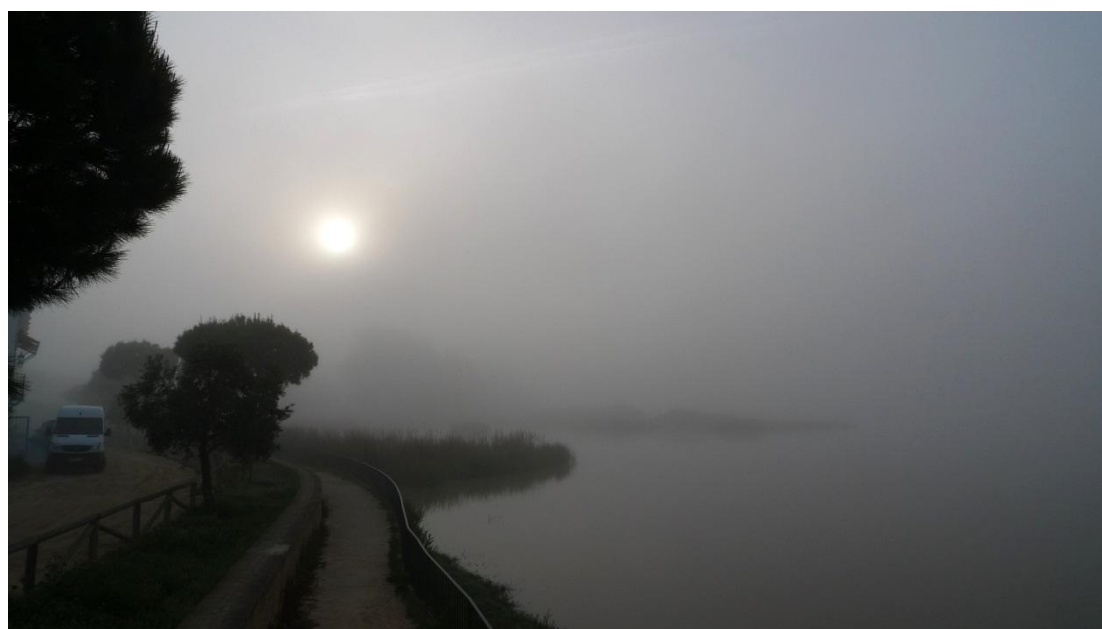


As the light started to fade we wandered back to the Christina, where we sat on the terrace digesting a wonderful day. Doug suddenly drew my attention to a cloud of soaring birds, which had appeared overhead. As they whirled several hundred feet above us I was able to get my bins on them – a flock of over 200 Collared Pratincoles!

**Day 3 5<sup>th</sup> April**

**Coto Donana**

I woke early this morning and while Doug was catching up on his beauty sleep, I wandered down to the lagoon, which was shrouded in mist. It was so beautiful and eerie, with the shapes of birds moving and calls echoing in the half-light. Several Black-crowned Night-Herons flew back towards their roost and a Savi's Warbler reeled from the nearby reeds.



*The sun rising through the morning mist over the El Rocio lagoon*

Soon, Doug joined me and we retired to sit outside the Hotel Turuno for our breakfast – toast, melocoton jam and several large “con leches”. Wonderful!

The plan was to make the long, bumpy but incredibly bird-rich drive out to the Valverde Hide. While there are a lot of good hides close to El Rocio (at El Acebuche and Acebron), the Valverde Hide is right out in the heart of the national park and offers the very best of marshland birding. It is a twenty-odd kilometre drive, heading for Villamanrique de la Condesa, on minor roads, for ten kilometres and then jolting the rest of the way along unmade tracks. The habitat is fantastic, with huge open areas of wildflower meadow thronging with larks and pipits, either side of the rough, elevated track. Eventually, the terrain gets wetter, with lagoons, ditches and massive reed beds dominating, until you arrive at the Valverde Visitors centre. This overlooks a small lagoon with emergent tamarisks, which hold breeding colonies of Glossy Ibis, Cattle Egrets and Spoonbills.

Just some of the birds from this classic drive included: 50 Black Kites, 3 Montague's Harriers, 1 Hen Harrier, 30 Common Kestrels, 230 Bee-eaters, 1 male Rock Bunting (a good bird for Donana!), 5 Woodchat Shrikes, 22 Avocets, 3 Short-toed Eagles, 3 Great White Egrets, 3 Black-necked Grebes, 4 Crested Coots, 1 Squacco Heron, 1 Little Bittern, 2 Purple Gallinules, 12 Marsh Harriers, 1 Booted Eagle, 1 Purple Heron, 1 Great-spotted Cuckoo, 24 Pin-tailed Sandgrouse and 10 Savi's Warblers. In addition, Calandra, Crested, Short-toed and



Lesser Short-toed Larks were ever present and an estimated 6,000 Sand Martins passed through.



The drive back, which always seems a lot longer after an early rise and a long day in the field, was just as productive, with raptors, larks, herons and egrets in constant view.



We finished the day with a nice meal (pork sirloin, chips, salad, bread and red wine!!) sitting out in the warm evening sunshine in one of El Rocios many sandy squares



**Day 4 6<sup>th</sup> April**

**Coto Donana**

This day dawned with just a hint of mist over the El Rocio lagoon and a light, warm southerly blowing. As usual, I was up at first light for some pre-breakfast birding. Migration was already evident, as a flock of 500 Black-tailed Godwits dropped in from the south, 10 Common Sandpipers were flushed as I walked and 5 Common Cuckoos flew across the lagoon. Scanning with the scope, I picked up a roosting flock of c250 Collared Pratincoles and noticed that wildfowl numbers had risen significantly overnight. Just a hundred yards away, 250 Black-winged Stilts and a handful of Avocets were feeding alongside 2,000 Greater Flamingos.



*Sunrise over the El Rocio lagoon*

Soon it was time for breakfast and I joined up with Doug for our usual coffee and toast outside the Turuno. The plan was to spend time walking some of the more local areas to try and add some woodland and scrub species to the list.

We started at El Acebuche, walking through pine woodland and sandy scrub, ducking into the occasional hide to scan the wetlands. Woodchat Shrikes were common, with 15 counted and we also added a nice male Subalpine Warbler plus a handful each of Black-eared Wheatears, Hoopoes, Nightingales, Blackcaps, Stonechats, Savi's Warblers and many other, commoner species. We grabbed a quick coffee at the visitor's centre before lying down in the shade of some trees to eat our lunch. We may even have closed our eyes for a moment or two, lulled by the sounds of Serins and Nightingales. A lazy hour later we headed to the Palacio del Acebron, where you can follow a boardwalk through dense, flooded, deciduous woodland, which holds some uncommon species for Donana.

As soon as we started down the boardwalk, we could hear 3 Wrynecks calling from around us, though we weren't able to get views. Nightingales were very common and we were able to get good views of several. Birds which are scarce this far south took a bit of digging out in the dense thickets but eventually we caught up with: Great-spotted Woodpecker, Song Thrush, Jay, Wren and Bullfinch. As we made our way out of the woodland a pair of Sardinian Warblers performed nicely for us and a single Willow Warbler gave a burst of song.



*Doug, on the boardwalk at the Palacio del Acebron*

By now it was late afternoon and we decided to decamp to our favourite evening view point, on the restaurant terrace at the western end of the lagoon. As usual, diligent scanning, as the sun started to set, produced good results. Fifty Dunlin dropped in, bringing with them single Turnstone, Curlew and Marsh Sandpiper. A flock of 50 Ruff, in all variations of plumage, foraged out on the marsh and all the waders were eventually sent scattering when a large, immature female Peregrine came rattling through. This was to be our last night in Donana and we celebrated with a nice meal and a bottle (or two!) of red wine before roaming round the sandy streets of El Rocio, wondering where the Hostal Christina had gone.

## **Day 5 7<sup>th</sup> April**

### **Coto Donana to Grazalema**

We decided to beat the traffic around Seville by making an early start. We were thus up and away by 6.00 am and were parked outside a roadside diner, near Seville, by 7.00 am, just waiting for the doors to open so we could get our customary coffee. Fully refreshed, we made our way across country on minor roads, heading for the high peaks of Grazalema National Park. Red-legged Partridges were the characteristic birds of the lowlands, along with the odd Hoopoe and good numbers of Bee-eaters. The scenery grew ever more stunning and the raptors more numerous as we climbed ever higher. Our intention had been to stay in the pretty, mediaeval village of Grazalema but as we gained in altitude, we ran into Grazalema's micro-climate. Famed as the wettest place in Spain, it got colder and colder the closer we got to the village. When we jumped out of the car to do some birding at the highest point, where we picked up Crossbill, Ring Ouzel and Thekla Lark, we were soon shivering and dashing back to the car to warm up. After a desultory look round Grazalema and hot coffee and cake, we decided to press on. We both knew of a wonderful little village, on the far side of the mountains, called Zahara de Los Sierras, which offered excellent birding, along with the chance of better weather.





*The approach to Grazalema National Park*

As soon as we started to drop down towards Zahara, the sun broke through and we stopped to do some birding, picking up Goshawk, Hobby, Red-billed Chough, Booted and Short-toed Eagles and 60 Griffon Vultures. We then made another stop, overlooking a reservoir, with Zahara sitting on a distant pinnacle.



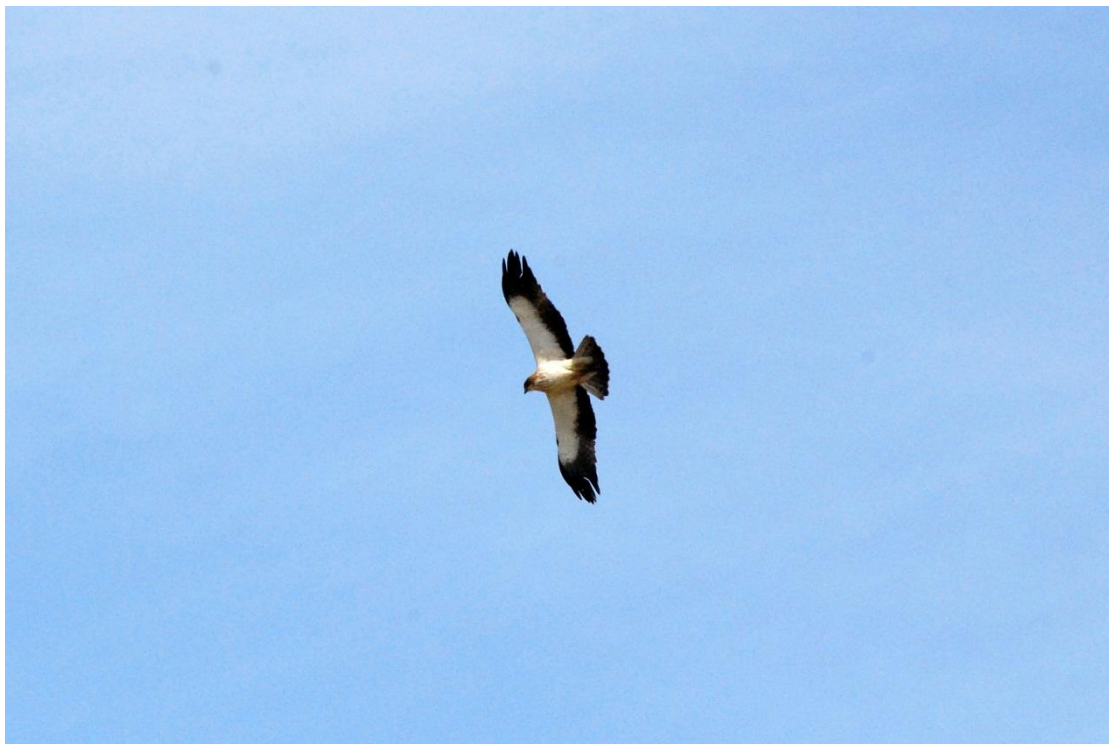
*Zahara de Los Sierras*

Arriving at Zahara we stopped several times for close views of various raptors, before climbing up to the stunning little village. We eventually found our way to our hostel, which had rooms with large balconies, overlooking a wooded valley. After checking in we took a couple of beers onto the balcony and enjoyed a wonderful, relaxing few hours birding.



*Doug on the balcony of the Hostal at Zahara*

As a raptor watch-point, the balcony was hard to beat. Sightings included: Griffon Vulture, Black Kite, Booted Eagle, Common Kestrel, Lesser Kestrel, Short-toed Eagle, Bonelli's Eagle, Goshawk and Hobby!



*Booted Eagle at Zahara*





*Griffon Vulture at Zahara*



*White Stork at Zahara*

After a superb afternoon's birding, we got ourselves cleaned up and wandered up the steep hill to the village's pretty main square to eat. We managed to find a nice bar restaurant which was also showing the Real Madrid v Liverpool Champion's League match. After such a good day, an equally good evening followed as, over a lovely meal, Liverpool thrashed Real 4-0, much to the chagrin of our local friends, who then all claimed to be Barcelona supporters!

## **Day 6 8<sup>th</sup> April**

## **Zahara – Teba Gorge – Chorro Gorge – Malaga**

This was the final day of a truly fantastic trip. We had breakfast in Zahara before heading for the Teba Gorge. This is a site which has long been noted for breeding Eagle Owl and Bonelli's Eagle. It was also a place which, for one reason or another, I'd never got round to visiting. In the end, it turned out to be a bit disappointing, certainly in comparison with Grazalema. It was redeemed, however, when a pair of Bonelli's Eagles slid over the ridge and disappeared over the reservoir to hunt.

The next stage of our journey took us through the spectacular Chorro Gorge, where Griffon Vultures were numerous and we caught up with our first Alpine Swifts of the trip. We passed a nice hour having lunch and a beer at the Hermita Restaurant, before, reluctantly, putting our bins away and heading for the airport for our journey home, no doubt to return before too long!



*Doug, scanning the entrance to the Chorro Gorge*

***David Bowman***



## ***SOUTHERN SPAIN BIRD LIST***

1. *Black-necked Grebe*
2. *Little Grebe*
3. *Great-crested Grebe*
4. *Cormorant*
5. *Shag*
6. *Little Bittern*
7. *Black-crowned Night-heron*
8. *Cattle Egret*
9. *Squacco Heron*
10. *Little Egret*
11. *Great White Egret*
12. *Grey Heron*
13. *Purple Heron*
14. *White Stork*
15. *Black Stork*
16. *Glossy Ibis*
17. *Spoonbill*
18. *Greater Flamingo*
19. *Mute Swan*
20. *Greylag Goose*
21. *Mallard*
22. *Gadwall*
23. *Shoveler*
24. *Teal*
25. *Garganey*
26. *Pochard*
27. *Red-crested Pochard*
28. *Griffon Vulture*
29. *Egyptian Vulture*
30. *Osprey*
31. *Short-toed Eagle*
32. *Booted Eagle*
33. *Bonelli's Eagle*
34. *Black Kite*
35. *Marsh Harrier*
36. *Hen Harrier*
37. *Montague's Harrier*
38. *Common Buzzard*
39. *Sparrowhawk*
40. *Goshawk*
41. *Common Kestrel*
42. *Lesser Kestrel*
43. *Hobby*
44. *Peregrine*
45. *Red-legged Partridge*
46. *Water Rail*
47. *Moorhen*
48. *Common Coot*
49. *Red-knobbed Coot*
50. *Purple Swamphen*
51. *Avocet*

52. *Black-winged Stilt*
53. *Collared Pratincole*
54. *Little Ringed Plover*
55. *Lapwing*
56. *Turnstone*
57. *Dunlin*
58. *Common Sandpiper*
59. *Marsh Sandpiper*
60. *Black-tailed Godwit*
61. *Curlew*
62. *Snipe*
63. *Ruff*
64. *Black-headed Gull*
65. *Yellow-legged Gull*
66. *Lesser Black-backed Gull*
67. *Gull-billed Tern*
68. *Whiskered Tern*
69. *Pin-tailed Sandgrouse*
70. *Rock Dove*
71. *Feral Pigeon*
72. *Stock Dove*
73. *Wood Pigeon*
74. *Collared Dove*
75. *Common Cuckoo*
76. *Great Spotted Cuckoo*
77. *Common Swift*
78. *Pallid Swift*
79. *Alpine Swift*
80. *White-rumped Swift*
81. *Hoopoe*
82. *Eurasian Bee-eater*
83. *Great-spotted Woodpecker*
84. *Wryneck*
85. *Skylark*
86. *Crested Lark*
87. *Thekla Lark*
88. *Woodlark*
89. *Short-toed Lark*
90. *Lesser Short-toe Lark*
91. *Calandra Lark*
92. *Sand Martin*
93. *Crag Martin*
94. *Barn Swallow*
95. *Red-rumped Swallow*
96. *House Martin*
97. *White Wagtail*
98. *Yellow Wagtail*
99. *Grey Wagtail*
100. *Wren*
101. *Robin*
102. *Nightingale*
103. *Northern Wheatear*
104. *Black-eared Wheatear*
105. *Stonechat*
106. *Blue Rock-thrush*



- 107. *Mistle Thrush*
- 108. *Blackbird*
- 109. *Ring Ouzel*
- 110. *Blackcap*
- 111. *Orphean Warbler*
- 112. *Sardinian Warbler*
- 113. *Subalpine Warbler*
- 114. *Dartford Warbler*
- 115. *Moustached Warbler*
- 116. *Zitting Cisticola*
- 117. *Savi's Warbler*
- 118. *Cetti's Warbler*
- 119. *Reed Warbler*
- 120. *Great Reed Warbler*
- 121. *Willow Warbler*
- 122. *Chiffchaff*
- 123. *Great Tit*
- 124. *Blue Tit*
- 125. *Woodchat Shrike*
- 126. *Southern Grey Shrike*
- 127. *Azure-winged Magpie*
- 128. *Magpie*
- 129. *Jay*
- 130. *Jackdaw*
- 131. *Red-billed Chough*
- 132. *Carrion Crow*
- 133. *Raven*
- 134. *Spotless Starling*
- 135. *House Sparrow*
- 136. *Chaffinch*
- 137. *Linnet*
- 138. *Goldfinch*
- 139. *Greenfinch*
- 140. *Serin*
- 141. *Bullfinch*
- 142. *Common Crossbill*
- 143. *Cirl Bunting*
- 144. *Corn Bunting*
- 145. *Reed Bunting*
- 146. *Rock Bunting*