Southern Spain, 3$^{rd}$ – 8$^{th}$ 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 is 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 3rd 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), overlooking 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 Morroccan 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, Morrocco.

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 4th 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 hostal, 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.

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  5th 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.

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 Rocío (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 Condessa, 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 Ibises, 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  6th 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.
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  7th 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 hostal, 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  8th 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](image)

*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. Orphea 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