

# Natural History of Southeast Andalusia Trip Report

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4 - 11 Nov, 2021



The Tabernas desert, one of the most striking landscapes in southeast Iberia

Report compiled by tour leader Álvaro Peral  
Images courtesy of Álvaro Peral



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## Introduction

The provinces of Almería, Granada and Málaga gather a series of habitats mostly unique in Europe. Maybe the badlands and semi-desertic plains of Cabo de Gata and Tabernas are the most emblematic ones. Sea cliffs, a few wetlands and the Béticas mountains give this itinerary a wealth of wildlife to add to the more austere –but enjoyable– wildlife of the predesertic plains.

The landscapes are mostly great, and taking advantage of sunrise and sunset daily is a great idea on these shorter days of November. Rains are very unlikely in the desert, the sun brightened in most of the days and the temperatures were mostly quite nice, ranging from 4 °C in some early mornings –just at sunrise– till 22 °C in some afternoons. Average daily temperatures ranged from 12 °C till 19 °C.



The total distance covered was 900 Km, mostly on good roads and just a few Km of tracks.

Most of the days we were on our own in both natural areas and restaurants. Flights were pointed to be cheaper than usual, plus service was fast in bars and restaurants. From a Covid perspective, we were certainly both vaccinated and enjoyed outdoor meals in the sunny tables whenever possible.

In this tour Thomas H. accompanied me and as being a solo traveller we could personalize it to a big extent, such as including a bird ringing activity, plus going specifically looking for some targets. Hence, please note **this is a trip report of a tailor-made tour.**



The wildlife was –as usual in Southern Spain- quite interesting, and we managed **140 species of birds**, including very localised birds of prey, such as Golden Eagle, Bonelli's Eagle and Black-winged Kite. We touched a bit of botanics, history and geology, and of course other forms of wildlife including insects, amphibians, reptiles and mammals.

## Day 1 (4/11/2021) - Arrival to Andalucía

Thomas flight Düsseldorf arrived on time at 1635 and with not much daylight left we started birding in the surroundings of Málaga's airport, which turned out to be quite productive. Just as we jumped out of the van Thomas saw a **Wryneck** (what a first bird to see!) on a fence that quickly plunged into a nearby bush. The reeds hosted small flocks of **Common Waxbills** –a pet now locally common in wetlands-, they moved around actively as sunset was approaching. A pair of **Hoopoes** popped out of our feet and a few minutes of walking produced a distant wintering Booted Eagle in its dark morph.



Well camouflaged in the river bank we found a **Snipe**, while further on we came across **Greenshank**, Kestrel, **Ziting Cisticola**, Grey Wagtail and Common Sandpiper. With this, we managed over 20 bird species in just 30 min. After our nice and short walk sun was about to set and we drove directly for about 1 h to Hotel Playa San Gabriel in Almuñécar, which was our base for the next 2 days. A walk along the sea promenade and a relaxed dinner watching football followed.

## Day 2 (5/11/2021) - Exploring the Costa

We woke up to witness the sunrise atop the San Gabriel cliffs in Almuñécar. Highlights were a few **Gannets** actively plunging, a single **Ruddy Turnstone** and several Lesser Black-backed Gulls mixed with our resident **Yellow-legged** ones. We smiled as a Blue Rock Thrush flew by and landed coincidentally right on top of our hotel board. The Sun rose above the sea and we headed for a coffee and toast to a nearby hotel cafeteria along the sea promenade.





Our next stop was one of the few cliffs along the Costa that still keeps itself widely preserved. To start with I showed Thomas one of these big Red-rumped Swallow nests that I remember in use for many years. Two **Red Squirrels** were actively feeding at the Stone Pine canopy and we got good views of them. Not far from where we parked we also got 2 female **Iberian Ibex**. Please note that all Ibex mentioned in this report belong to its endemic subspecies in SouthEast Spain, the *Capra pyrenaica hispanica*.

Following the edge of the cliff we spotted one **Peregrine Falcon** dashing through way below eye level. It seemed to be one of our resident birds of the *brookei* subspecies. The view of it with the dark blue sea in the background was so enjoyable that we refrained from taking a picture. Lots of Crag Martins flying overhead and a very obliguing singing Blue Rock Thrush added more magic to this place, far from the built-up Costa. Checking the gulls we both screamed **Osprey!**



It was again flying below eye level and the pictures revealed this bird had transmitter of some sort attached to its back. As we kept moving we met wildlife film maker José Antonio Atencia and exchange some nice conversations –about birds of course-. Time for us to move to a very impressive Canyon, where rockclimbers eventually metamorphosing into fearless parachuters presumably gave Bonelli's Eagle a reason to take holidays off till Jan 1st, as indicated in some information boards. We enjoyed this new habitat and it was entertaining checking the river edges and some old raptor nests, we found 6 of them. Rock Sparrows called in the distance, but the gorge was too big to get clear views of them. As we headed for lunch we found Kestrel and Sparrowhawk roosting in some eucalyptus trees along the gorge. After a nice Codfish salad and



other tapas we continued down the valley and got some nice new species, such as a little flock of Long-tailed Tits, a Marsh Harrier and both Grey and white Wagtails. We've recently received a big number of wintering Siskings, which were seen not just here but on a daily basis. This stop also produced two peculiar insects. To start with we found the largest –and maybe most beautiful- of the butterflies native to Europe, the **Two-tailed Pasha**. This was a very nice individual as it was recently emerged as an adult of its second annual generation. Another striking sighting was beetle *Ocypus olens*.



It was time for us to head towards the town of Motril, where we scheduled a visit to a fantastic wetland reserve known as Charca de Suárez. Here we met my friend Göran Storensten, who lives nearby and kindly pointed us spots for local wildlife. We soon chanced a few **Red Avadavats** feeding on the high reeds, one of the first two lifers Thomas got in the tour. A few jokes followed about how to pronounce this bird's name. But if there was a species to highlight in this reserve it was undoubtedly the **Red-knobbed Coot**. We got about a dozen of this localized bird, plus a very obliging **Water Rail**. After checking all the hides there, we ended up adding **Night Heron**, **Swamphen** and a very active **Kingfisher**, to name but a few species. Back to our hotel for dinner, we updated our birdlists, now with 73 species. We enjoyed dinner at El Vikingo and went to bed early to be ready for an earlier start on the following day.





## Day 3 (6/11/2021) - Ringing and salt pans

We woke up early and packed our stuff ready to move towards the Almería province. Some thunderstorms lightened the coast and we got to a gas station for a quick breakfast before meeting the ringing team at the Albuferas de Adra. We volunteered at a morning ringing at the Estación de anillamiento Lorenzo García. **Bluethroats** (up to 3) were the highlight there, and we got the first **Siskin** ever recorded at the Station. We enjoyed some bird watching on the albufera, which produced **Tufted Duck**, a busy **Water Rail** having a bath, 2 **Snipes**, **Avocet** and 2 **Marsh Harriers**. The Station and its walkboards over the reeds were very well maintained and the staff was very friendly. We enjoyed nice conversations and information exchanges with Jose Mari and the rest of the crew, and it was a very enriching experience as expected.



We left them by noon and headed towards Las Norias de Daza, a wetland caught in the middle of a sea of greenhouses. We honestly didn't much enjoy this place as the access was poor and one felt out of the Nature at once, so we had a couple of quick scans with the scope and decided to visit the always interesting Punta Entinas – Sabinar Nature Reserve. On the way we stopped at a place where Barn Owls usually breed, and we enjoyed checking its many pellets. The birds were most certainly quite well hidden in the roof chambers, so we couldn't actually see them. A Chamaeleon skull was found among the pellets, so we guess Barn Owls don't let any food opportunity scape! A few walks followed, one of them got us near the Sabinar Lighthouse. We soon found ourselves walking along a very beautiful wetland, where we saw 2 **Golden Plovers**, flocks of **Flamingos** and a



pair of **Oystercatchers** in beautiful afternoon light. We then drove to the Eastern part of the reserve, towards Roquetas. As we drove we came across a small group of **Lapwings** and a very surprising **Little Bittern** that crossed the track flying at short distance in front of us. What a nice encounter! We weren't that lucky with the Bedriagai's Skinks though, which we didn't find. The wetlands were mostly dry due to lack of rains, but as we continued on our van we got to the Cerrillo tower, where we had an appointment with a **Little Owl**.



A strong wind started blowing from the West and we headed to check the sheltering dikes at the Cerrillos salpans, where we got very good views of a small group of **Audouin's Gulls**, my favourite among the gulls. Other sightings there included a group of 6 **Shelducks**, 2 flocks of **Glossy Ibis**, **Redshank** and 2 **Marsh Harriers**. After quite a long day we headed to our next base for the upcoming three days in Cabo de Gata. This time we rented a very charming little house right in the village of Cabo de Gata and arrived there with a tiny growing moon shining.

## Day 4 (7/11/2021) - Cabo de Gata

We met downstairs for a strong coffee Thomas prepared and headed out right before sunrise. At the house there was a couple of big trees that held a massive night roost of **Spotless Starlings**, it is always amazing to hear their very loud songs as we packed our scopes into the van, specially if you don't park right below the tree. A quick stop at the salinas was made and we got a marvelous view of a **Red Fox** scouting the salicornia bushes for preys. It was a very chilly morning as the temperatures were around 5 °C right before sunrise. Two screaming **Iberian Grey Shrikes** were seen at the same spot, and so a pair of **Kestrels** mating (!). The Dupont's Lark mission got us to walk for some 5 Km along and across the Amoladeras stepic bird reserve. The habitat looked very suitable for this species, but what we found scores of **Thekla Larks** and a few **Skylarks** instead. **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** were heard calling a couple of times. We also got a flock of **Red-legged Partridges** and a few **Dartford Warblers** skulking in the very thorny bushes.





It was already 10:30 when we stopped for some sandwiches and the weather felt cozy and warm. From there we went to the Rambla Morales, getting a single **Trumpeter Finch** on the way. This is one of Cabo de Gata's special birds to see, so we were quite happy about it. The site held a rich bird community and a surprising number of locusts nearly everywhere! We soon checked some puddles to see the dinosaur-look footprints of a Sandgrouse. It was a bit early in the year for numbers of ducks, but we saw a few **Wigeons**, **White-headed Ducks** and **Pintails**. We were watching a single **Yellow Wagtail** feeding when Thomas was delighted to see quite a big sized **Praying Mantis**, well concealed in a bush. **Water Rails** were heard in the reeds, and as we walked up the ravine we saw a pair of **Hoopoes**. Thomas made out our second **Wryneck** of the tour, very wary in between the highest of the Tamarisks. I must say it was a bit discouraging finding small pieces of plastic –from the greenhouses- in the rambla, but the birdlife encountered was very good in numbers and in species. On the way back we came across one of the most fascinating creatures of the tour, the **Etruscan Shrew**. This is said to be the smallest mammal in the world, weighing around 2 gr. We took a few pictures of it and then dug a little shelter so it could stay away from the hot sand. It seemed not to be bothered by us and we watched it chewing a sort of beetle it hunted right after taking the picture below:



At the site a Jack Snipe was presumably recently reported and we tried hard to get it as it'd have been a lifer for Thomas, but it just wasn't the day or the time. We instead were delighted by close views of **Slender-billed Gulls** and enjoyed comparing their features with the nearby Black-headed Gulls. Some Sanderlings joined the stage and on the way back to the village we came across a couple of flocks of Trumpeter Finches. Time for a snack and we moved to the saltpans. Just as we arrived to the first one of the watchpoints, a flock of 10 **Curlews** flew out of the water to feed in the plains. A single **Common Crane** was standing at the middle of the saltpan, as Thomas identified 3 **Spotted Redshanks**, that were active in deeper waters than the Redshank would choose to feed in. A group of 8 **Eurasian Spoonbills** and another of 6 **Shelducks** flew together out of



the dikes, as did every now and then some **Kentish Plovers** and **Dunlins**. It was the time for us to go the main lighthouse to see a marvelous sunset and the impressive cliffs and islets of the Almería province. A brilliant day in all senses, that ended up with a delicious dinner at El Peteneras bar, where we were the only guests.

## Day 5 (8/11/2021) - Twitchers us?

The title says it all. We started at sunrise to give it a go on the wintering Jack Snipe. As we headed to the place for this, we enjoyed very beautiful views of a group of subadult Flamingos at short distance. It was again a chilly sunrise, but that wouldn't deter us from trying to get our target. As we got close to the site, two Snipes flew off. We splitted to check the best suitable spots for this and just for a few seconds I hit the lottery and got the **Jack Snipe** at the opposite shore. Although far, it showed its shorter bill and yellow stripes very well. Of course when I rushed to get Thomas to the place, the Jack Snipe had already disappeared, so we improvised a shelter to wait for it to be back.



Well, in the next one and a half hours it didn't come back, but we enjoyed other birds coming along, such as **Spanish Sparrow**, **Bluethroat**, Robin and Meadow Pipit. On the way back we were again delighted by a non-fethearted friend, in this case it was an impressively big **Tiger Spider** (*Argiope trifasciata*). A snack stop at a road caffè followed just before heading to another area of the Cabo de Gata to look for Dotterel. The day was warming up and we had to walk for 20 min before Thomas made out 4 **Dotterels** actively walking near the shore. What a magnificent bird the Dotterel! Their quick squatting movements reminded us of those of a Blackbird. Its tame –still dynamic- behaviour allowed us enjoy this species for a dozen of minutes, and we got some nice pictures of them. Not far from the action a couple of Kestrels flew by every now and then, with not many high bushes to land on. A lone Trumpeter Finch joined the scene and we went to check a nearby dry riverbed with a smile on our faces.



The temperatures were high and as we stepped on the riverbed we surprised an **Iberian Hare**, another endemic. Birdwise we were already happy so we paid a bit more of attention to other forms of wildlife, which soon lead us to find a young **Natterjack Toad** craving for the next rainfalls. Another hard-to-forget sighting was a mating pair of the **Stick Grasshopper** *Truxalis Nasuta*, a true example of sci-fi in front of us!

We heard our first **Lesser Short Toed Lark** as we were entering the van. Luckily we jumped out and were able to watch it although briefly. This was one species we didn't manage to get till now and one of the must see in the area. Then we headed to some wetland near the village of San José, where a female **Blue Rock Thrush** flew to welcome us. The wetland may have produced some rallids in early morning, but we got to see a Hoopoe, a Green Sandpiper and a few other common species. The mountains were significantly greener here than those near Cabo de Gata, and Palmitos were all around. A thought came to my mind that if it wouldn't be November we could have attempted getting Lataste's Viper, next time maybe!

At the Escullos we were able to see an active pair of **Black Wheatears**, scores of **Thekla Larks** and Meadow Pipits and a few **Sardinian Warblers**. The fossilized sand dunes were strongly hit by the waves in a very beautiful scenery that was really worth visiting. **Yellow-legged Gulls** were present at the Punta del Esparto islets and we also got several flocks of Spotless Starlings.

As there still was some daylight left I asked Thomas what he'd like us to do and he didn't think twice and choose us having another attempt at the Jack Snipe. And so we did, this time we sheltered in cammouflage nets at the opposite shore but again just a pair of Redshanks showed up. We stayed till it was nearly dark and the temperatures dropped down quickly.





Being a Monday most of the bars were closed for dinner so we opted for buying some food at a local supermarket. The surprise came after dressing up the salad with vinegar as we realized that the salt at the house wasn't actually salt but baking soda...

## Day 6 (9/11/2021) - Tabernas Desert

Packing our things to leave the amazing Cabo de Gata we went for an early start to briefly look for Dupont's Lark. We wouldn't have even bothered if we didn't know that 3 males were reported last February there. A very declining species in Almería province, much easier to find in Belchite steppes in Northern Spain. We covered three suitable areas but again no luck, we had to trade them for Song Thrush, Iberian Grey Shrikes, Thekla Larks and Dartford Warblers. At least we tried!

Time for us to visit the Tabernas desert, the only desert in Europe! Walking along the riverbeds (ramblas) provided more birdlife than expected. We actually didn't take long to find several pairs of **Black Wheatears** and a singing Blue Rock Thrush. Walking along the bottom of the canyon we saw a fast subadult **Bonelli's Eagle** dashing through the higher peaks. It's a pity the view was very brief—as usual with this species—. A pair of Hoopoes appeared along the way, as a few Dartford Warblers and **Blackcaps**. This area is famous because some renown western movies were filmed here. No wonder why they chose these impressive landscapes. On the way to a watchpoint I remarked a familiar silhouette atop a cliff and a quick confirmation by Thomas made us pull off the road to check. And yes! it was a roosting **Golden Eagle**! It flew off right as I was setting the scope on it, but at least we got nice binocular views and record shots. We soon realized it was looking down at some young **Iberian Ibex** that grazed next to us. We made another scenic pull off to photograph the desert and we thought it was time for lunch. We had something to eat at the Route 66 bar and headed West towards the province of Granada.





Our third hotspot of the day was a big valley west of Granada city, where small orchards and farms attract a rich bird community. First car stop and Thomas found a **Stone Curlew** through the scope. It was actively feeding and we enjoyed it for some minutes. Looking back East we saw nice numbers of **Lapwings** feeding on an already harvested Sunflower field. Scanning the area we got a dozen of Woodpigeons but it was a large **Peregrine Falcon** that got us most excited. It was a big bird, presumably female of one of the northern subspecies. It was feeding on an Iberian Hare and the Hare didn't look big at all when compared to it, what a scene!



We moved on our van and made several spots at suitable vantage points, thus allowing us to cover a vast area. **Hoopoes**, Red-legged Partridges and **Common Waxbills** were seen. Likewise, we got Spanish Sparrows, Crested Larks, **Corn Buntings** and Cattle Egrets, all of them in good numbers. As we headed to our next hotel near Archidona we heard a **Hawfinch** and Siskins. We spent the night at the hotel Ruta del Poniente near Antequera.

## Day 7 (10/11/2021) - Málaga Sierras and farmlands

The planning for today was checking a variety of birding hotspots as we headed back to Ronda in western Andalucía. Our first stop would take us to the valley of Hondonero near Archidona. This is a fantastic example of low-impact agriculture in a still very well preserved limestone mountain range –one of the many in southern Spain-. The valley was full covered in bushes containing berries, so no wonder the amount of thrushes and wintering passerines was remarkable. **Iberian Magpies** (formerly “azure-winged”) flew across the track several times as we parked. A distant Peregrine Falcon was seen, as did a small flock of (Red-billed) **Choughs**. We were again impressed by the number of Siskins we've received this autumn, they were literally everywhere!





The morning was fresh, so we decided to walk towards the first rays of Sun, which made a nice little stop in which we identified singing several **Cirl Buntings**. The woodlands produced all the expected forest birds, such as **Crested Tit** –actively feeding-, **Short-toed Treecreeper**, **Coal Tits**, **Crossbills** –abundants and singing- and at least two **Great Spotted Woodpeckers**. **Song Thrush** was abundant, while we only got 2 **Mistle Thrushes**. 3 distant Iberian Ibex were seen up in the cliffs, and not less than 30 **Griffon Vultures** showed up as soon as the air warmed up. It was time to continue our route so by 11am we headed towards the Fuente de Piedra lagoon.

The temperatures raised to near 20 °C at the lagoon, which was quite welcoming after a cold morning. The first bird that showed up at the lagoon was **Little Owl**, quite active by the way, moving up and down a derelict building. We knew the lagoon was nearly dry, but we sensed the possibility of Cranes made it worth to stop. And it really did! The first **Cranes** of the winter were gathering in the lagoon, we estimated around 400 individuals, that shared the concentrated space with some 100 **Greater Flamingos** and dozens of **Lapwings**.



Other wetlands we visited provided nice views of **Spanish Pond Terrapin** and a variety of ducks, starring a smart male **Ferruginous Duck**. It is always challenging to identify female ducks, which lead us to make out Teal, Shoveler, Mallard and **Red-crested Pochard**. **Rabbit** and **Spanish Sparrow** were also present among the nearby bushes. Our favourite sighting was a **Sparrowhawk**, that was soon mobbed by an increasing number of **Jackdaws**.



We enjoyed a traditional 2-course meal and headed to some agricultural lands where the initial target was Little Bustard, one of the very few lifers Thomas had left for his Spanish bird list. Soon after we arrived to this area we were surprised by a pair of **Red Kites**, which are a very localized species in this area of Southern Spain. They were clearly displaying and its acrobatic flights were soon disturbed by a Marsh Harrier and two **Common Buzzards**. It was a surprising gathering of birds of prey actually! There was plenty of man activity in the fields and maybe that was the reason why we did not find any Little Bustard that day. However the area provided very interesting views of around 150 Lapwings and scores of **White Wagtails** and Meadow Pipits.

As we headed back we came across a **Peregrine Falcon** flying overhead at impressive speed, followed by its partner. My favourite sighting was about to come, when we saw a Harrier approach from the distance, it was not just one but two adult male **Hen Harriers** (first ones for us in the season), that provided views in excellent afternoon light for a few seconds.

We were already heading back talking about the remarkable number of birds of prey we'd seen, when Thomas energetically pointed at what I quickly identified as presumably a **Buzzard**. I had to pay a second view on it to realize its excitement was really worth it: it was actually a **Black-shouldered Kite** approaching us! What a last sighting of the day! We enjoyed watching it hover and move from one electricity pylon to the next one for a while.

Today it was the day we saw the largest number of bird species and went to celebrate it with a drink as we saw sunset atop the always impressive Ronda's cliff.



## Day 8 (11/11/2021) - Hasta la vista

Today Thomas enjoyed a relaxed morning walking along Ronda's historical centre and we met on time to get to catch the fly back at Málaga airport. It was a formidable tour again and we enjoyed not just good weather and a wealth of wildlife but also some enriching conversations and thrilling plans for future tours.

Thank you for your time and interest taken while reading this tour report. Best regards,

Alvaro Peral – [Wild Andalusia](http://www.wildandalucia.com)

