

Spain - The Best of Coto Donana

Naturetrek Tour Report

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Report compiled by Roy Taylor



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Day 1

Monday 22nd October

The group assembled at Gatwick for our 16.15 hours flight to Seville. We departed on time and actually landed 30 minutes earlier than scheduled. After passing through Customs we met Catherine who had arrived on an earlier flight from Paris, and also Abel, our local guide from Donana Nature.

With 2 vehicles at our disposal we had plenty of leg room for the journey to El Rocio, a mere 60 km away and a journey time of just over an hour. On arrival we checked into a very spacious hotel on the edge of town - each apartment equipped with its own dining room and a choice of two bedrooms!

Over dinner and a bottle of red wine, we discussed our hopes for the trip and then retired to bed, ready for the adventures to come.

Day 2

Tuesday 23rd October

This morning we were at Le Madre, the large lagoon on the edge of El Rocio, to watch the sunrise. Large numbers of Pied Wagtails were leaving their reed bed roost and we watched a Cetti's warbler performing under the illumination of a streetlight! As dawn broke and the mist rolled back, we were treated to a dazzling array of waterfowl – Greater Flamingos, Cattle Egrets, Greylag Geese, Shoveler and Black-winged Stilts were all present in their hundreds. Amongst them we found Black-tailed Godwits, Squacco Herons, Spoonbills and several Marsh Harriers.

After enjoying this spectacle, we walked along the far side of the lagoon and looked back at the town of El Rocio. Built on sand, with an enchanting church as its centrepiece, the white washed buildings would not be out of place on the set of a "spaghetti" western!

In the drier areas, the vegetation was covered in the webs of Golden Orb Spiders and we had fun catching a Red-clawed Crayfish and photographing a superbly camouflaged Gecko. Crested Larks, Common Waxbills and Fan-tailed Warblers added to our already growing bird list.

Before we knew it, midday was approaching and so we headed west to the estuary at Marismas del Odiel. On arrival, at a small freshwater pool we had remarkable views of Crested Coots down to a few metres and found our first Purple Gallinule. We then drove slowly along the coast road, stopping at intervals to “scope” the salt pans. Here amongst large flocks of Greater Flamingos we found a diverse range of waders including Whimbrel, Spotted Redshank, Greenshank and Kentish Plovers.

We picnicked on an area of shingle and Salicornia scrub towards the estuary mouth and after satisfying our hunger we located a family party of Sardinian Warblers and a Bluethroat in the low scrub. Continuing down the estuary, an adult Audouin’s Gull on an offshore sandbank was a good find, while numerous Marsh Harriers patrolled the saltings.

As late afternoon approached it was time to head inland to the village of Manzanella. The old church here is host to a colony of Lesser Kestrels, but they were not co-operating, so we retired to a local bar for coffee and on our return to the church a Lesser Kestrel flew around a few times but refused to land.

With evening approaching, we drove a short distance to an area of nearby dehesa and were treated to magical displays by at least four Black-shouldered Kites. Against a fabulous sunset we enjoyed these birds hovering in the red sky and more than one camera came out to capture the image! A great way to end a full and bird filled first day.

Day 3

Wednesday 24th October

After yesterday’s blue skies and warm temperatures we awoke to cloud and drizzle. Unperturbed, we headed to the eastern side of Donana and the area around Dehesa de Abajo. In the huge rice fields, which characterise this area, we saw our first Great White Egrets, Green Sandpipers, Little Ringed Plovers and large flocks of Spanish Sparrows. We spent the next couple of hours scouring a large lagoon where thousands of water birds were concentrated. With the rain having stopped, we were able to walk along the shore of this lagoon and pick out new species such as Red-crested Pochard, Ferruginous Duck, Black Stork, Glossy Ibis and Ruff while marvelling at the Red Kites flying overhead.

However, as was to be the case throughout our stay in Donana, it was the bird spectacle, which was the real thrill. Squadrons of prehistoric looking Flamingos would fly past and the water was covered in rafts of Shoveler. In the shallows, bickering flocks of Stilts and Avocets created a kaleidoscope of black and white.

With the rain returning, we decided to drive along a raised causeway overlooking rice fields on one side and restored wetlands, which form part of the Parc Natural, on the other. Marsh Harriers were a constant feature of this area and wherever a machine was cultivating the rice, large flocks of White Storks, along with smaller numbers of the much rarer Black Stork were gathered.

We were aiming for a visitor centre, where we planned to picnic, but literally within a few hundred metres of reaching our goal, the lead vehicle got stuck in the mud. While the gentlemen collectively pushed the vehicle out, the ladies had to walk back a couple of hundred metres to the other vehicle. Sounds easy? Yes, but the mud on this track just stuck to the bottom of your boots and by the time we reached the second mini-bus, all involved appeared to have grown in height by a few inches!

Compensation however was quick to arrive and in the shape of a distant Spanish Imperial Eagle sat on top of a lone Eucalyptus tree.

Not wishing to risk any more mud, we had our picnic sat on the wall of the town square in nearby Isla de Mayor. The site of 12 muddy tourists enjoying a picnic, whilst sat on bits of cardboard, was of great amusement to the passing locals!

With the weather now improving, we spent all afternoon (and stayed till dark, it was that good!) in the private, Feta la Palma – a vast area of rice fields, fish ponds and marshland, criss-crossed by a network of driveable tracks. Once again, both the sheer number of birds, but also their approachability staggered us. Greater Flamingos, White Storks and Avocets once again stole the show, but amongst this throng, we enjoyed an array of exciting new species. An Osprey on a pylon, a Peregrine plucking a wader, 40 Night Herons in a single clump of Tamarisk bushes, small flocks of the rare White-headed Duck and a single Lesser Flamingo, a rare vagrant which has only been recorded in Europe on a handful of occasions.

As dusk fell, a herd of Fallow Deer and a Red Fox out on the marshes were a fitting end to an action packed day!

Day 4

Thursday 25th October

This morning excitement levels were high, as we were to spend the first couple of hours after dawn searching for the Iberian Lynx – the rarest cat in the world! We entered the northern section of Coto Donana National Park and slowly drove along the myriad of sandy tracks through native Stone Pine forest and scrub. Little Owls, Red-legged Partridge and Red Deer all revealed themselves, but sadly no Lynx. We did however find fresh tracks of the female (and her two cubs) who holds her territory in this part of the forest.

After a couple of hours tracking Lynx in the vehicles, we stretched our legs with a stroll through the forest and enjoyed the sight of Autumn Crocus in flower. Shortly the forest gave way to a vast area of open, cattle grazed pasture and marshland. For the next hour, we were in raptor heaven! At any one time, up to eight Griffon Vultures, a Booted Eagle, two Hen harriers, several Red Kites, Common Buzzard, Kestrel, plus a pair each of Short-toed Eagles and Black-shouldered Kites competed for our attention. Throw in some lovely, warm sunshine and this was really fun!

Leaving the raptors behind, we drove the short distance, past Palicio del Rey, to an isolated cottage, which has been restored by Donana Nature, where we were due to lunch. We had already seen a distant Spanish Imperial Eagle close to this cottage from our previous viewpoint and no sooner had we arrived, when we were treated to incredible views of this majestic bird, its silvery white forewings gleaming in the sun, as it soared over our heads.

Feeling privileged to have witnessed such great views of the eagle, we were then treated to a 4-course, traditional Spanish lunch – luxury indeed!

Full up after our meal, the afternoon then proceeded at a more sedate pace as we drove across the grasslands of Coto del Rey and the adjacent farmland, enjoying close views of several obliging Little Owls and an Egyptian Vulture overhead. We then had a coffee at the Jose Antonio Valverde visitor centre, before driving back to the woodlands, encountering mixed herds of Fallow and Red Deer en route.

The last hour or so of light was spent again searching for that elusive Lynx and we learnt that one of the Park wardens had seen mother and cubs cross the track in front of him an hour before we arrived!

Although we never found a Lynx, one could sense a palpable level of excitement as we searched the forest rides in falling light and one vehicle was rewarded with the sighting of two Wild Boar.

That evening, over a cold beer and a bottle of red wine, we reflected on what had been a remarkable trip to the wildlife spectacle which is the Coto Donana!

Day 5

Friday 25th October

We only had a couple of hours to spare before our flight, so this morning we opted for a stroll around the sandy streets of El Rocio, an exploration of the local shops and a final look at Le Madre. The lagoon was again full of birds with close views of Squacco Heron being a particular highlight.

On the drive back to Seville, we encountered a large flock of Azure-winged Magpies in the roadside pine forest – one of Spain's most enigmatic birds and a fitting way to finish the trip.

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Species Lists

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	October			
			23	24	25	26
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		12		
2	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricolis</i>	10	40		1
3	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	200	200	30	75
4	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	20	600	12	10
5	Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>		40		
6	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	500	500	50	500
7	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>	4			4
8	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	100	150	10	10
9	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>		100	3	3
10	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	20	200	30	10
11	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>		15	10	
12	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	40	2000	10	40
13	Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	8	75	50	25
14	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		9		
15	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>	900	4000	1	300
16	Lesser Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus minor</i>		1		
17	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	70	20	5000	50
18	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>		25		
19	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	50	500	100	100
20	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	30	50		2
21	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	25	100	20	30
22	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	500	4000	100	
23	White-headed Duck	<i>Oxyura leucocophala</i>		31		
24	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	30	50	20	30
25	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>		75	2	
26	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	10	100	20	30
27	Ferruginous Duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>		1		
28	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			1	
29	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	2	1	20	2
30	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>			1	
31	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>			12	
32	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	8	75	10	3
33	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>			3	
34	Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	5		2	
35	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1			
36	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1	2	10	
37	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca (adalberti)</i>		1	1	
38	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	2		1	
39	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>			2	
40	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	3	1		
41	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	10	10	20	
42	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	1			
43	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1		
44	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	10		30	
45	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	C	C	C	C
46	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	200	C	C	C
47	Crested Coot	<i>Fulica cristata</i>	3			

	Common name	Scientific name	October			
			23	24	25	26
48	Purple Gallinule	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>	1	10	1	
49	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	7	2		
50	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	100	1000	100	40
51	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	10	1500	15	5
52	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	10	30	2	
53	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>		7		
54	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	6	5		
55	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	5	4		
56	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	50	200	200	
57	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	3			
58	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	10			
59	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	10	2		
60	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>		20		
61	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	3			
62	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	2			
63	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	50	1000	1	50
64	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	500	100	5	
65	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>	1			
66	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	15	30	1	
67	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	1	7		
68	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		40	2	
69	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	10	10	5	
70	Audouin's Gull	<i>Larus audouinii</i>	1			
71	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Larus melanocephalus</i>	2			
72	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	30	1000		
73	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	15	100		
74	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	500	300		
75	Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>	10			
76	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>	7	10	3	
77	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	5	50	200	
78	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	C	C	C	C
79	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>			1	
80	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	C	C	C	C
81	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	1	1	5	
82	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	3	4	1	2
83	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	3	3	5	
84	Great-spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			1	
85	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	10	50	50	
86	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	C	C	C	C
87	Lesser Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>		5		
88	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		1		5
89	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	1	12	1	1
90	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>				2
91	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	10	10	50	20
92	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	300	C	C	C
93	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	4			
94	Yellow (Iberian) Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava (iberiae)</i>	1	3	4	
95	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			1	
96	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	1	1	10	
97	Bluethroat	<i>luscinia svecica</i>	1			
98	Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>	1	1		

	Common name	Scientific name	October			
			23	24	25	26
99	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	3	5	3	4
100	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	C	C	C	C
101	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	4	6	20	
102	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		1	3	1
103	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			5	
104	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	5	10	10	
105	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	2	5		1
106	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			1	
107	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	5	2	1	
108	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	10	3	10	3
109	Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>		1		
110	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	4		4	
111	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	2	2	2	
112	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>			30	
113	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	C	C	C	1000
114	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	C	C	C	
115	Azure-winged Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cyana</i>	10		8	20
116	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>		20	10	
117	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2		2	4
118	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	C	C	C	C
119	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>		500		
120	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	2		10	
121	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>			1	
122	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>			5	
123	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>		6	10	
124	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	C	C	200	100
125	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>			4	
126	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	30	50	100	
127	Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>	9			

C = common

Mammals

1	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>			1	
2	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>				10
3	Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>			18	75
4	Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>		1		
5	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		1		5
6	Iberian Hare	<i>Lepus granatensis</i>				3
7	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>				2