

Spain – The Best of Coto Doñana

Naturetrek Tour Report

5 - 9 December 2008



Coto Doñana in winter



Watching from the Acebuche



Large flock of Glossy Ibises *Plegadis falcinellus*

Images and report compiled by Jorge Garzón



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour leader: Jorge Garzón (Local Guide/Naturalist)

Participants: Neil Sherman
Denice Cauldfield
Brian Morris
Trevor Morris
Gail Dunn

Day 1

Friday 5th December

Members of the group happily arrived at Seville Airport at night, after some hours of endless 'delaying notices' on the airport screens. After landing, we took our mini-bus and drove directly to our hotel in El Rocío where, after quickly settling into our rooms and even though it was late we were offered a full warm dinner in the restaurant, previously negotiated by Jorge. After having had our dinner and a talk on the plans for the coming days, we went to rest.

Day 2

Saturday 6th December

At dawn, some of the members in the party were witnesses of a sunrise in Doñana. Bird sounds and colours filled up the foggy marshes, with Cetti's Warblers singing from the reeds and distant Roseate Flamingos calls.

After our continental breakfast, we jumped into the shores of the marsh to start our birding day. Now, better clear conditions allowed us to discover the first wintering species, being ducks the most noticeable, with hundreds of Northern Shoveler, Pintail, Wigeon, Teal, Pochard, Mallard or Gadwall. At the other side of the lagoon, a flock of more than 250 Greater Flamingos were feeding, and the first flying Glossy Ibises landed not far from us. Along the El Rocío marsh we could also see White Storks, Little and Cattle Egrets, hundreds of Common Coots and Moorhens, Osprey, Black-winged Stilts, Black-tailed Godwits and our first Spoonbills. In the shrubs and lawns aside we also found very active male Serins singing with Meadow Pipits and White Wagtails running, Crested Larks, Goldfinches and two Southern Grey Shrikes that gave us very close views. A few Barn Swallows of the scarce Iberian wintering population flew above us, while Chiffchaff, Robins and Blackcaps were calling from the trees.

Then we drove our van towards 'El Acebuche' where we inspected the small lagoons finding Purple Gallinule in the reeds and our first Sardinian and Dartford Warblers. The Stone Pine-trees were full of Tits with Crested and Great at the front. On the top of the Visitor's Centre, a White Stork nesting platform was full of Spotless Starlings and Iberian Magpies.

An hour later we had our picnic lunch on one of the wooden tables below the trees, where we were escorted with a dozen of beautiful Azure-winged Magpies, some daring Chaffinches and House Sparrows. After a while we headed to Huelva where we would explore the Odiel tidal marshes trying to find different species due to the ocean influence. Before arriving there, we inspected some of the Huelva lagoons where the sharp eye of Neil discovered a Ferruginous Duck almost hidden in the far reeds. We also had two Peregrine Falcons, being at least one of them of the Iberian race '*brookei*' with a noticeable cinnamon dyed breast.

At the Odiel marshes a local birder Carmen -one of the Jorge's pupils- joined us, and we drove through the salt pans, some fresh water lagoons and salt-water marshes founding very interesting birds: Sandwich Terns patrolling the shores, Audouin's Gulls mixed with Yellow-legged and Lesser Black-backed ones, Greenshanks, Redshanks and Bar-tailed Godwits feeding in the mud and also plovers like Grey, Ringed and Kentish. We also watched, close to forested patches, Osprey, Black Stork and Hoopoe. Eventually we got the beach where we discovered a flock of Common Scoters flying into the sea, next to Oystercatchers, Dunlins, Sanderling, a single Turnstone and Black-necked Grebes swimming in the Odiel Firth. On our way back from the dike and before our afternoon coffee stop, we found a couple of running Spanish Hares in the sand dunes and a flock of House Sparrows that produced at least five different Spanish Sparrows in winter plumage. It was a glorious day with 80 bird species and unforgettable landscapes that allowed us vanish our yesterday's flying experience.

Day 3

Sunday 7th December

Our third day was devoted to inspect the northern areas of Doñana, where a wide range of bird species can be found. All of us met before breakfast beside the marsh where the sunrise offered us another great day start with Spoonbills, White Storks, Greylag Geese, Red Kite, flocks of Lapwings in flight, Common Snipes and Black-tailed Godwits feeding in the mud next to Glossy Ibises going in and out of the lagoon.

After our breakfast, we started close to the 'Arroyo del Partido' where we quickly spotted Corn Bunting, Goldfinch, Greenfinch, Serin and our first Tree Sparrows. The northern forested areas also produced Raven, Azure-winged Magpie, Southern Grey Shrike, Mistle Thrush and Red-legged Partridge. In our trip through the open valleys, Jorge drove us to spots where hidden lagoons are one of the few places where Tufted Ducks winter, also seeing Great Crested Grebes and hundreds of Coots, Common and Red-crested Pochards.

This place also holds one of the local Black-shouldered Kite breeding pairs, nevertheless more birds can be seen in winter. We glimpsed one of them in the distance and we drove closer to have better views. Our reward was seeing not just one, but two birds performing in front of us: firstly perched on a tree, then flying with its well-known 'V' shaped flight, and finally hovering for half a minute. Not far from there we inspected the dry-farmed crops discovering what it seemed to be a juvenile Montagu's Harrier, which was a rare fact as here this is just a breeder. We held on the place until the harrier hunted something and landed two-hundred meters away, allowing focus our scopes on it. The head design was slightly different to be a Montagu's and after some checking with our books, it turned out to be a juvenile Pallid Harrier, a totally unexpected bird for this trip with just a few previous record in the Guadalquivir marshes and being a 'life bird' for most of the party members.

Following the track we got the river forest, visiting the most important Night-heron roosting place, with more than four hundred (!!!) birds resting at this time of the year. Ravens, Red Kites and two flying Black Storks were some of the birds that we found in our way to our picnic lunch site. Even with slight rain, the place was lovely: a wide Wild Olive Tree forest where the largest White Stork breeding colony in Europe settles every year. In winter, this is an outstanding spot with a big seasonal lake full of ducks. All of us were impressed for the spectacle: huge numbers of ducks, egrets, waders and raptors in flight. One of the comments was 'I am seeing more ducks and birds here than I have probably seen in my whole life'.

After finished the lunch, we walked and drove the area for a couple of hours finding, in the first fifteen minutes, hundreds of Avocets, Cattle Egret, Spoonbill, Roseate Flamingo and more than 3.000 Shoveller together.

In winter, thousands of birds meet here deserving a careful inspection. We changed our place and from the opposite shore we were lucky enough to discover European Golden Plovers, Red-crested Pochard, one more Ferruginous Duck and five different White-headed Ducks, one of our most-wanted birds in the trip. The surroundings offered us a wide range of raptors with Red Kite, Common Buzzard, Lesser and Common Kestrel, Booted Eagle (pale form) and Marsh Harrier. Probably, the highlight was a female Hen Harrier flying next to us for a few yards and allowing very close views.

We left the zone driving along the rice fields, where we saw Purple Gallinule, two Kingfishers in flight, Black-headed and Lesser Black-backed Gulls. Before leaving the marsh boundaries and under a heavy rain, we heard first and carefully approached later to the flocks of wintering Common Cranes, counting about 1.500 birds feeding and flying over the crops. Before arriving to the forest we added some more Black-shouldered Kites to our list, with a total number of six birds in the day! On our way back to El Rocío, Wood Pigeons, Collared Doves, Hoopoes and a solitary Little Owl were also watched. We got the hotel where we rested for a while, made our bird list and later on had our dinner in a familiar and happy atmosphere.

Day 4

Monday 8th December

Today would be our challenge day. We would try to see the rare and shy Iberian Lynx and the magnificent Spanish Imperial Eagle. We had to drive into the National Park so we hired a 4-wheel drive to avoid get stuck in the sand or flooded soils.

We started at eight and our driver explained the nowadays situation with the Lynx, the remaining population and the best time and places to watched it. During the first part of the day we roamed the shrubs and forested areas they patrol. There we saw Red Deer, Wild Boar, Fallow Deer and Rabbits, even an old stump used as a breeding hole, but no Lynx at all. Escorted with Red Kites, Buzzards and Black-shouldered Kites headed to the José Antonio Valverde Visitor's Centre, watching in our way hundreds of Greylag Geese, Woodlark, Skylark and six outstanding Great White Egrets. From the building we had close views of Penduline Tits, Glossy Ibises, Purple Gallinule, Great-crested Grebes and Flamingos. Before leaving the place, some Griffon Vultures flew high when Neil discovered our first Spanish Imperial Eagle, a 'pajizo' (this is the Spanish name for the light-brown dyed juveniles) was circling below the vultures. All of us were quite happy and an extra reward was three Black Storks in flight.

We went then to private land where we had our lunch, comfortably sat around a big table facing the wide open Doñana landscape. On our way we discovered some more Black-shouldered Kites and flying over the canopy, the most wanted raptors, the adult couple of the Spanish Imperial Eagle, with the ID features in full view (whitish nape and shoulders against its blackish colour). Before we left, we were fortunate enough to watch a large flock of Glossy Ibis with more than 800 birds flying together. They first arrived flying low and landing out of sight, but minutes later two big flocks of birds gained height in the sky.

A short time later we started our Lynx search again. We crossed the National Park gates and inspected the Cork Tree open forest arriving to a kind of old farmyard built with dry Eucalyptus stumps. This place was full of rabbits and it was occasionally visited by our Iberian 'Gato' ('The Cat', which is the familiar way that Spanish naturalists call the Lynx). We were also able to discover here an elusive Bluethroat and a big Peregrine Falcon perched on a wooden rod. Afterwards we drove back to the Lynx territory to inspect again the best spots.

We were scanning every inch of the terrain at both sides of our car when, half an hour later, our local guide said 'Gato' and a shadow disappeared fast into the bushes. We focused our binoculars in the area and two minutes later we were lucky enough to watch a female of Iberian Lynx walking on the sand. We enjoyed very much this moment, as we had in front of us the most endangered feline of the world, with less than 250 individuals on the whole planet. Fully happy, we drove back to El Rocío, where we had some spare time before going through the list. This extra time allowed us to enjoy a beautiful sunset facing the National Park. We finished our day in the restaurant, celebrating our success with a good Spanish wine and discussing about the ecology of the endangered mammals, Doñana, traditions, etc...with a cup of coffee in our hands, all agreed we had a glorious day.

Day 5

Tuesday 9th December

Today was our last day but our flight left in the afternoon, so we decided to have a 'birding-on-the-go' day. One of the habitats we had missed was the ancient Doñana river forests. After fixing some administrative papers with the police for the loss of one of our passports, we crossed again the National Park boundaries as Jorge proposed a walk under the old Cork Trees to find forest passerines. Minutes later we walked in an outstanding ancient woodland watching interesting species like Hoopoe, Woodlark, Wren, Cetti's and Sardinian Warbler. Walking along the wooden platforms through the Mediterranean River Forest other species displayed: Blackcap, Short-toed Treecreeper, Mistle Thrush, Siskin and Hawfinch were added to our list. The itinerary circled a small lagoon leading us to a pine wood where giant Umbrella Pine Trees grew. Birds flew and called everywhere, hearing and watching Firecrest, Song Thrush, Goldcrest, Crested Tit and Azure-winged Magpies. Off the beaten track, we enjoyed the peaceful views of the 'Acebrón Palace' while we heard distant calls of Iberian Green Woodpecker, Great-spotted Woodpecker and a varied sort of tits.

We left Doñana driving the Guadiamar Corridor. Choosing the right unpaved tracks we enjoyed close views of Black-shouldered Kites hovering, Hen harriers flying, small flocks of Red-legged Partridges, Calandra Larks calling and Griffon vultures soaring. In a small water reservoir we also saw Green Sandpiper, Great-crested Grebe and Pied Wagtail. Common Stonechat, Skylark and Southern Grey Shrike were some of our last birds before to get lunch in a closer village. We stopped there as we were suggested to have a sharing 'tapas' lunch with traditional Andalusian recipes. It was a good idea and all of us enjoyed this original and popular way of having lunch. Afterwards we drove to the Seville airport where we finished our happy tour, now full of natural treasures, unforgettable memories and glorious field moments.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Naturetrek Facebook

We are delighted to launch the Naturetrek Facebook page so that participants of Naturetrek tours can remain in touch after the holiday and share photos, comments and future travel plans.

Setting up a personal profile at www.facebook.com is quick, free and easy. The [Naturetrek Facebook page](#) is now live; do please pay us a visit!

Species Lists

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	TL
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	4
2	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	10+
3	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	5
4	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	50+
5	Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	412
6	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	50+
7	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	10+
8	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>	6
9	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	10+
10	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	5
11	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	50+
12	Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	10+
13	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	800
14	Roseate Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	325
15	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	2200
16	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	100+
17	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	50+
18	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	100+
19	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	5000+
20	White-headed Duck	<i>Oxyura leucocephala</i>	5
21	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	1000+
22	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>	7
23	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	1000+
24	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	11
25	Ferruginous Duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>	2
26	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>	9
27	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	50+
28	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	8
29	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	4
30	Pallid Harrier	<i>Circus macrourus</i>	1
31	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	25+
32	Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	14
33	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	25
34	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>	3
35	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	3
36	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	2
37	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	25
38	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	4
39	Mediterranean Peregrine falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus brookei</i>	2
40	Peregrine falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	2
41	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	21
42	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	500+
43	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	1000+
44	Purple Gallinule	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>	16
45	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	1400
46	Oystercatcher	<i>Haemantopus ostralegus</i>	2
47	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	2000+
48	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	1000+

	Common name	Scientific name	TL
49	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadius hiaticula</i>	10+
50	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadius alexandrinus</i>	25+
51	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	11
52	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	165
53	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	115
54	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	2
55	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	50+
56	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	50+
57	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	7
58	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	500+
59	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	18
60	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	22
61	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	6
62	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	10+
63	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	50+
64	Audouin's Gull	<i>Larus audouinii</i>	5
65	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	100+
66	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	50+
67	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	1000+
68	Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>	12
69	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	100+
70	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domesticus</i>	common
71	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	common
72	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	3
73	Pallid/Common Swift	<i>Apus sp.</i>	4
74	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	2
75	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	10+
76	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis sharpei</i>	1
77	Great-spotted Cuckoo	<i>Dendrocopus major</i>	2
78	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>	10+
79	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	50+
80	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	25+
81	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>	25+
82	Common Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	14
83	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	240
84	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	100+
85	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba alba</i>	50+
86	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	1
87	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	10+
88	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	50+
89	Black redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	50+
90	Common Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	15
91	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	50+
92	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	10+
93	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	10+
94	Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>	1
95	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	10+
96	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	25+
97	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>	2
98	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	50+
99	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	25+
100	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	50+

	Common name	Scientific name	TL
101	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>	10+
102	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	2
103	Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>	4
104	Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>	10+
105	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	25+
106	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalus caudatus irbii</i>	16
107	Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulines</i>	3
108	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	25+
109	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	8
110	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	25+
111	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	100+
112	Iberian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	50+
113	Azure-winged Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cyana</i>	50+
114	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	84
115	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	10
116	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	25+
117	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	common
118	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>	6
119	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	common
120	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	100+
121	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>	9
122	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	100+
123	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	100+
124	Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	25+
125	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	8
126	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	25+

Mammals

1	Spanish Hare	<i>Lepus granatensis</i>	2
2	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	6
3	Bats	<i>Pipistrellus/Myotis</i>	some
4	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	12
5	Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>	7
6	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	50+
7	Iberian Lynx	<i>Lynx pardina</i>	1

Reptiles

1	Striped-necked Terrapin		10+
---	-------------------------	--	-----