

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Tarifa & Gibraltar
5th – 12th September 2012

Holiday participants

Barbara Wheeler
Geoff and Hazel Woodard

Leader

Frank Vargas

Report by Frank Vargas

Photos of birds of prey and storks in flight, including cover photo of migrating black kites, by Frank's friend Francisco Jimenez, taken on around the same dates as the holiday. Orange-winged dropwing dragonfly and tarantula wolf spider by Antoño Rodríguez Ocaña. Other photos by Frank Vargas, taken during the holiday.

Our base was Huerta Grande www.huertagrande.com

El Grupo Ornitológico del Estrecho (GOES) www.grupoornitologicodelestrecho.org

Below – this year's small but select group, in Tarifa where the Mediterranean meets the Atlantic.



As with all Honeyguide holidays, part of the price was put towards a conservation project, in this case for El Grupo Ornitológico del Estrecho (GOES – the Ornithological Group of the Strait), who we watched ringing birds – see the account for 9 September. Current work by GOES includes:

"Iberian Chiffchaff: we want to characterise our populations (Cadiz and Malaga) with regard to biometrics, phenology and moult."

"Tawny Owl: we want to know if there is exchange between north African birds (*ssp mauritanica*) and our birds (*ssp aluco*). DNA analysis is needed."

"Chaffinch: we are looking for a way to distinguish females of the north African population (*ssp africana*) and Iberian population (*ssp coelebs*)."

The conservation contribution this year of £40 per person was supplemented by gift aid and some unallocated funds in the Honeyguide Wildlife Charitable Trust, leading to a donation of 300€, about £244, handed over to GOES by group member Geoff Woodard (pictured right). The total for conservation contributions from all Honeyguide holidays since 1991 is £83,202, to December 2012.



Introduction

The famous Rock of Gibraltar is a limestone promontory, some 5 km long and 1 km wide. The summit ridge, rising to 426m, offers superb if vertiginous views over the westernmost Mediterranean, the Costa del Sol and, especially, the Strait of Gibraltar itself. The Moroccan shore is only 20 km away and views often extend to the Rif Mountains beyond.

The strategic position of Gibraltar is the root of its ornithological fame. Migration of soaring birds, i.e. storks and raptors, occurs year-round in some form and numbers can be spectacular in the peak seasons of March-May and August-October, almost invariably during periods of westerly winds. The principal species are honey buzzards and black kites, which both produce daily counts of thousands at peak times. Significant but lesser concentrations occur of Egyptian and griffon vultures, short-toed eagles, marsh, hen and Montagu's harriers, sparrowhawks, common buzzards, booted eagles and ospreys, among others, as well as white and black storks.

Migration of seabirds is also an all-year phenomenon and features important numbers of Cory's and Balearic shearwaters, northern gannets, great skuas, Mediterranean, little, black-headed, lesser black-backed and Audouin's gulls, and Sandwich terns. Many other seabirds occur regularly, including lesser crested terns (October/mid-November).

The local list, of some 312 species, grows slowly but steadily. It may be consulted on the GONHS website www.gonhs.org. The list includes a particularly comprehensive contingent of passerines, most of them migrants grounded on the Rock by inclement weather, often during the frequent bouts of strong easterly winds which produce the famous *levanter* cloud over the summit. A diversity of vagrant species enlivens the birding scene – recent examples have included common eider, Rüppell's vulture, pallid harrier, long-legged buzzard, lesser spotted eagle, lanner, Allen's gallinule, Seeborn's wheatear, mountain chiffchaff, and red-breasted flycatcher.

Resident and breeding species are few but Gibraltar has one of only two colonies of shags in the westernmost Mediterranean and is the only mainland site in Europe for Barbary partridges. Other local breeders include peregrines, lesser kestrels, common, pallid and Alpine swifts, blue rock thrushes and, since their re-colonisation in 2004, a pair of eagle owls. The thousands of yellow-legged gulls are an unmissable feature; they even nest on rooftops and in the pine trees of the Botanic Garden.



Booted eagle over the busy Strait of Gibraltar.

Daily Diary

Day 1 – Wednesday 5th September

Today was mostly a transfer day, as group members arrived in the afternoon at the airport of Gibraltar. On arrival the bouts of strong easterly winds, which produce the famous *levanter* cloud over the summit, anticipated what could be an interesting trip for migration. We packed the van and drove from this famous city, known for its Barbary macaques, towards our base at Huerta Grande in the small village of Pelayo, located within sight of the Atlantic Ocean on the coast of Cadiz.

We stopped briefly to stretch the legs and have a light picnic at Algarrobo migration observatory. The views across the Strait of Gibraltar were poor as the weather had picked up after turning northwest onto the Atlantic shores. Just a few minutes after arriving, while having the first sip of freshly home-made gazpacho, a group of griffon vultures was circling fairly close. The attention from the birders at Algarrobo was drawn to one of the individuals in the group. At first, this bird did look very dark and there were suspicions that it was one of small local population of Rüppell's vultures. Later, after photographic analysis, that was dismissed by Migres: the lighter cream colour revealed just another griffon. Great numbers of honey buzzards and booted eagles were trying to make their way back to Africa. Short-toed eagles and a couple of Egyptian vultures also were seen.

We had a good dinner at Huerta Grande while I presented the schedule for the rest of the week to the group members.

Day 2 – Thursday 6th September

Anticipating a long birdwatching day ahead of us, we had an early breakfast and drove to the eastern part of the Natural Park of the Strait. The wind was very strong (up to 28 mph) and we made a short stop at Algarrobo before heading to the Cliff of Algeciras at Punta Carnero. After ten days of *levanter*, the number of soaring birds was starting to build up alongside the coast in the Natural Park of the Strait and the valley at the southern tip of Los Alcornocales Natural Park. The valley to the east of Algarrobo and the cliff to the north were bursting with booted eagles (1350+) and honey buzzards in hundreds. The appearance of flocks of bee-eaters was sometimes only noticed by the pleasant, distinctive trill of their call while flying. One marsh harrier, 10+ sparrowhawks, Montagu's harrier, Egyptian and griffon vultures put on great views and their variety of age and plumage came in very handy to demonstrate the variation of plumage through age.

Leaving Algarrobo with our bellies full after another great picnic, we headed to the cliff of Algeciras, taking us on a drive of 15 minutes climbing up through a serpentine road where the predominant vegetation is olive trees *Olea europaea*, lentisc *Pistacia lentiscus* and asphodels *Asphodelus* spp. On the other side of the road, looking towards the sea, were capricious flysch formations that in this encounter with the sea had created many small inlets, by the power of erosion disintegrating the softer clay materials, leaving the toughest remaining limestone forming ridges that cut into the sea. We stopped at the side of the road away from traffic and started scanning the mountains in front of us, where good numbers of honey buzzards were concentrating. A great surprise was a golden eagle perched in a branch of a dead tree. We all had a good look before it flew away behind the hills. House martins and sand martins came in small flocks, flying close around us and disappearing after a few minutes, during the time we spent here.

We took in the views of the sea of the Ensenada de Getares, near the mouth of Arroyo del Lobo, a small delta just north of Punta de San Garcia, Algeciras Bay, on the same latitude as Europa Point in Gibraltar. A few Balearic shearwaters at a good telescope distance were flying south, and also a Manx shearwater, which seemed more interested in staying away from the strong winds in the Strait.

Later on we visited Palmones Estuary just before the beginning of the low tide, a very rich location for waders and other water birds. We were able to see good numbers of Audouin's gull, black-tailed godwit and black-winged stilt, as well as dunlin, little stint and curlew sandpiper. A pair of flamingos also appeared, plus white stork and osprey. The many gulls and terns included Mediterranean, black-headed and yellow-legged gulls and Sandwich, common and little terns. During the short time we spent in Palmones we also saw many red-rumped swallows, common swifts and three pallid swifts. Returning to Huerta Grande in Pelayo we went through a long checklist for the day and then enjoyed a delicious dinner.

Day 3 – Friday 7th September

Much of the day was spent getting some medical help and advice for one group member – which was successful, to the credit of the local medics. A reaction to sun and dehydration was diagnosed, happily nothing more serious. The other two group members explored around Huerta Grande.

Day 4 – Saturday 8th September

Today we woke up to a cloudy day, probably due to the Atlantic winds coming from the west. We had breakfast at 8 am, left Pelayo and headed towards Los Lances for a morning of gulls and terns.



Broad-winged migrants, not to scale: black storks, marsh harrier, Egyptian vulture.

However, just before turning towards Tarifa, our attention was drawn to the hill north of Tarifa where more than 4,000 black kites were waiting for the clear view of the Strait that allows them to reach Africa. We parked by the house of Manuel Sanchez, an old friend of mine, to enjoy the views and scan through in the search of other species. Egyptian vultures and booted eagles were on display at such a close range that binoculars were not even necessary. Spanish sparrow and spotless starling were also easily viewed on the telephone wires by the house.

After this short but exciting encounter, we headed towards Los Lances in the hope of royal terns, seen there the day before. When we arrived at Los Lances there was no sight of the royal tern, but Audouin's gull, little and Sandwich terns were plentiful. In the dunes were calandra lark, crested lark, Thekla lark and short-toed lark.

With numbers of short-toed eagles and honey buzzards increasing in La Luz valley, we headed back to the raptor observation point of Cazalla, from where dozens of booted eagles, short-toed eagles, white storks, black storks and griffon vultures came close. Also, a couple of Egyptian vultures flew over us. In that gorgeous sky, full of activity, pallid and white-rumped swifts and bee-eaters kept flying close around us.

Suddenly, I noticed that an eagle was slightly different from the rest of the flock. I was about to point out this bird to the volunteers of the migration study group, Migres, when another person called what I was hoping it would be – a Spanish imperial eagle. The excitement of this sighting increased as the bird flew so close that the identification was possible with the naked eye, before it flew east towards Algarrobo with two Egyptian vultures and a short-toed eagle.

After this exciting afternoon of raptor migration, we went to La Janda, a large agricultural area where a huge lagoon was drained in the past to provide grasslands for cattle. To start with we were able to see turtle dove and large flocks of finches containing greenfinch, goldfinch, serin, chaffinch and linnet, as well as house sparrow and corn bunting. A Montagu's harrier, some lesser kestrels, and a couple of honey buzzards were seen, and booted and short-toed eagles and sparrowhawk appeared as well. In terms of waders, some common snipe and green sandpipers were feeding in the channels. Barbara's sharp eyes spotted a magnificent squacco heron and many hoopoes we were missing seeing at Huerta Grande. Later on, we arrived at flooded grassland, where it was nice to see many other waders like ruff, knot, ringed and little ringed plover, redshank, lapwings and dunlin.

Back in the hotel, having dinner, Geoff said that the Spanish imperial eagle had been, for him, the bird of the day.

Day 5 – Sunday 9th September

Honeyguide Wildlife Holidays supports the conservation work carried out in the Strait of Gibraltar by GOES, the Ornithological Group of Estrecho. We arrived early in the morning at Guadiaro Estuary where David Cuenca, director of GOES, was waiting to do a ringing demonstration for us. The ringing of wild birds is a technique that allows us to know more and better about the lives of birds, including here in the area that surrounds the Strait of Gibraltar, by providing data on their migratory movements, feeding and reproduction. The ringing is a momentary capture of the bird and, after taking its biometric data, the bird is released with a small, light ring on a leg. As you might assume, these activities can be carried out only by qualified personnel and with the authorities of environmental permits (Conselleria de Medi Ambient, ICONA). The most widely used method to capture birds for ringing is through the use of mist-nets.

We had the opportunity to accompany members of GOES during the collection from the mist-nets placed around the reedbeds and near the beach. We were also able to have a close look at a Cetti's warbler, which was a special revelation to Geoff, who is used to hearing them at his local patch. We also appreciated a yellow wagtail (too young to be able to be sure it was of the Spanish subspecies) and white-rumped swift which were captured during the early morning.

As we were coming back from collecting the birds from the mist-nets, we stopped at the lagoon that forms near the public footpath. Here we sighted a purple swamphen hiding behind the vegetation and using the scope we were able to have a good look at it. Many interesting dragonflies could also be seen flying near the hide. Some of the species I was able to identify, but failed to trap with my butterfly net, were: yellow clubtail *Gomphus simillinus*, red-veined darter *Sympetrum fonscolobii*, orange-spotted emerald *Oxygastra curtisii*, common darter *Sympetrum striolatum* and orange-winged dropwing *Trithemis kirbyi*.

After leaving Guadiaro estuary, we headed back to the Atlantic side of the Strait, driving through San Roque where we enjoyed the view of a white stork's nest and booted eagles on migration. We stopped at the Algarrobo observatory, where we enjoyed hundreds of black kites, at least a dozen booted and short-toed eagles, many marsh harriers, sparrowhawks and Montagu's harrier and 23 black storks that were flying around while deciding whether or not to cross the Strait. After spending three hours here, we went back to base for a deserved rest.



Huerta Grande anti-mosquito system – stripeless tree frogs.

Day 6 – Monday 10th September

Today we woke up to a nice day and had a big breakfast to keep us going for the rest of the morning. We had planned a boat trip from Tarifa harbour, so we took the opportunity to enjoy a short visit to the town.

Fortunately for us, the sea was unbelievably calm which helped us to enjoy even more our observations ... and the birds soon arrived. We started to see some black terns, as well as storm petrels, Balearic shearwaters, Cory's shearwaters, fulmars and gannets. The boat was sailing some miles into the Strait of Gibraltar, and we had fantastic views of both Spanish and Moroccan coasts. Later on, we could see, far away, the first cetaceans ... long-finned pilot whales! The boat approached them until they were very close. The members of the group really enjoyed having those wonderful animals close, hearing them, and experiencing their magic behaviour. Later, a little group of bottle-nosed dolphins came and joined the pilot whales. While observing the cetaceans and as we were coming back to the harbour, we saw some more Cory's shearwaters, common tern and Sandwich tern.

We had lunch at Cazalla, having a nice view of many birds of prey flying low, very close to us: some booted eagles, and a gorgeous short-toed eagle we could almost touch holding up our fingers! Really a nice view. Apart from these species, some white storks and a couple of Egyptian vultures were also seen. We returned to Huerta Grande to rest and have another nice dinner.

Day 7 – Tuesday 11th September – Gibraltar

We took the bus at the border, which took us to Casemates Square. From here we walked to the cable car, which rose up through incredible scenery, inspiration to ancient Greek legends. Once on the top we were welcomed by the resident Barbary macaques and glorious views of the Strait. From here we headed down alongside the steep slopes, providing us with excellent opportunities for finding species such as firecrest, crested tit and the two-tailed pasha butterflies. One of the exciting species we were able to spot as we walked down was the gorgeous orange-winged drooping dragonfly, which started colonising Europe from Africa in 2007. The blue rock thrush was today very shy, showing just briefly on a couple of occasions.



Orange-winged drooping dragonfly.

Once at the Botanical Gardens we went our separate ways to enjoy a bit of window shopping, meeting again at Casemates for a drink and then our return journey to Huerta Grande.

In the evening we drove to Bolonia, where we had the opportunity of watching this beautiful beach from the highest point at the most westerly side of the Ensenada de Bolonia. From here we enjoyed a beautiful sunset with the Roman ruins of Baelo Claudia in the background.

For our final evening, we had dinner at a local restaurant where we enjoyed freshly caught fish.

Day 8 – Wednesday 12th September

With an early afternoon flight to catch we were able to have a relaxed breakfast at Huerta Grande before driving to Gibraltar.

Tagged black kites

Geoff Woodard reported the details of six wing-tagged black kites near Tarifa on 8th September 2012 to migration study group Fundación Migres. The reply said:

“We are wing-tagging black kites since 2008 ... facilitating the acquisition of information concerning their movements. We always trap the kites in the same site, in the near vicinity of Tarifa. All kites you saw were tagged on 4th September. We put wing-tags to 100 black kites per year, and this season we have also used high resolution GPS transmitters to study their crossing behaviour” (of the Strait of Gibraltar).

A. Román Muñoz Gallego, Fundación Migres.

Fundación Migres also kindly sent the pictures below:



Kite with tag, and map showing migration route of tagged kites from Tarifa area to north Africa. Pictures courtesy of Migres.

Bird list

Great crested grebe <i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	Ruddy turnstone <i>Arenaria interpres</i>
Black-necked grebe <i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	Dunlin <i>Calidris alpina</i>
Little grebe <i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	Curlew sandpiper <i>Calidris ferruginea</i>
Cory's shearwater <i>Calonectris diomedea</i>	Little stint <i>Calidris minuta</i>
Balearic shearwater <i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>	Red knot <i>Calidris canutus</i>
Storm petrel <i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>	Sanderling <i>Calidris alba</i>
Gannet <i>Sula bassana</i>	Redshank <i>Tringa totanus</i>
Great cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	Spotted redshank <i>Tringa erythropus</i>
Grey heron <i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Greenshank <i>Tringa nebularia</i>
Purple heron <i>Ardea purpurea</i>	Common sandpiper <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
Little egret <i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Green sandpiper <i>Tringa ochropus</i>
Cattle egret <i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	Ruff <i>Philomachus pugnax</i>
Squacco heron <i>Ardeola ralloides</i>	Curlew <i>Numenius arquata</i>
Black-crowned night heron <i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	Whimbrel <i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
Glossy ibis <i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	Black-tailed godwit <i>Limosa limosa</i>
Eurasian spoonbill <i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	Bar-tailed godwit <i>Limosa lapponica</i>
White stork <i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	Snipe <i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Black stork <i>Ciconia nigra</i>	Black-headed gull <i>Larus ridibundus</i>
Greater flamingo <i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>	Yellow-legged gull <i>Larus michahellis</i>
Mallard <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Lesser black-backed gull <i>Larus fuscus</i>
Gadwall <i>Anas strepera</i>	Audouin's gull <i>Larus audouinii</i>
Teal <i>Anas crecca</i>	Sandwich tern <i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>
Pintail <i>Anas acuta</i>	Common tern <i>Sterna hirundo</i>
Shoveler <i>Anas clypeata</i>	Little tern <i>Sterna albifrons</i>
Wigeon <i>Anas penelope</i>	Caspian tern <i>Sterna caspia</i>
Red-crested pochard <i>Netta rufina</i>	Black tern <i>Chlidonias niger</i>
Pochard <i>Aythya ferina</i>	Rock dove/Feral pigeon <i>Columba livia/feral</i>
Honey buzzard <i>Pernis apivorus</i>	Woodpigeon <i>Columba palumbus</i>
Black kite <i>Milvus migrans</i>	Collared dove <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Red kite <i>Milvus milvus</i>	Turtle dove <i>Streptopelia turtur</i>
Egyptian vulture <i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	Little owl <i>Athene noctua</i>
Griffon vulture <i>Gyps fulvus</i>	Eagle owl <i>Bubo bubo</i>
Short-toed eagle <i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	Tawny owl <i>Strix aluco</i>
Marsh harrier <i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	Alpine swift <i>Apus melba</i>
Montagu's harrier <i>Circus pygargus</i>	Common swift <i>Apus apus</i>
Hen harrier <i>Circus cyaneus</i>	Pallid swift <i>Apus pallidus</i>
Sparrowhawk <i>Accipiter nisus</i>	White-rumped swift <i>Apus caffer</i>
Common buzzard <i>Buteo buteo</i>	Common kingfisher <i>Alcedo atthis</i>
Spanish imperial eagle <i>Aquila adalberti</i>	Hoopoe <i>Upupa epops</i>
Golden eagle <i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	Calandra lark <i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>
Booted eagle <i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	Crested lark <i>Galerida cristata</i>
Bonelli's eagle <i>Hieraaetus fasciatus</i>	Thekla lark <i>Galerida theklae</i>
Osprey <i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	Short-toed lark <i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>
Common kestrel <i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Lesser short-toed lark <i>Calandrella rufescens</i>
Lesser kestrel <i>Falco naumanni</i>	Crag martin <i>Hirundo rupestris</i>
Peregrine falcon <i>Falco peregrinus</i>	Barn swallow <i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Red-legged partridge <i>Alectoris rufa</i>	Red-rumped swallow <i>Hirundo daurica</i>
Common Pheasant <i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	House martin <i>Delichon urbica</i>
Common coot <i>Fulica atra</i>	Sand martin <i>Riparia riparia</i>
Purple swamphen <i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>	Tree pipit <i>Anthus trivialis</i>
Moorhen <i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	Tawny pipit <i>Anthus campestris</i>
Oystercatcher <i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	Yellow wagtail <i>Motacilla flava</i>
Avocet <i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	Grey wagtail <i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
Black-winged stilt <i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	Woodchat shrike <i>Lanius senator</i>
Grey plover <i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	Southern grey shrike <i>Lanius meridionalis</i>
Ringed plover <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	Reed warbler <i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>
Little ringed plover <i>Charadrius dubius</i>	Fan-tailed warbler <i>Cisticola juncidis</i>
Kentish plover <i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	Cetti's warbler <i>Cettia cetti</i>

Blackcap <i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	Short-toed treecreeper <i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>
Sardinian warbler <i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	Wren <i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Subalpine warbler <i>Sylvia cantillans</i>	Jay <i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
Whitethroat <i>Sylvia communis</i>	Raven <i>Corvus corax</i>
Willow warbler <i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	Jackdaw <i>Corvus monedula</i>
Common chiffchaff <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	House sparrow <i>Passer domesticus</i>
Firecrest <i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>	Spanish sparrow <i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>
European pied flycatcher <i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>	Tree sparrow <i>Passer montanus</i>
Spotted flycatcher <i>Muscicapa striata</i>	Common starling <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Whinchat <i>Saxicola rubetra</i>	Spotless starling <i>Sturnus unicolor</i>
Common stonechat <i>Saxicola torquatus</i>	Chaffinch <i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
Blue rock thrush <i>Monticola solitarius</i>	Serin <i>Serinus serinus</i>
Northern wheatear <i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	Goldfinch <i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
European robin <i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	Greenfinch <i>Carduelis chloris</i>
Blackbird <i>Turdus merula</i>	Linnet <i>Carduelis cannabina</i>
Long-tailed tit <i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	Hawfinch <i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>
Crested tit <i>Parus cristatus</i>	Reed bunting <i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>
Blue tit <i>Parus caeruleus</i>	Corn bunting <i>Miliaria calandra</i>
Great tit <i>Parus major</i>	Cirl bunting <i>Emberiza cirlus</i>

TOTAL = 154



Black storks, including browner immatures, and a spoonbill at La Janda.

Some notable invertebrates not mentioned in the daily diary



Left to right:

Tarantula wolf spider *Lycosa tarantula*, at Huerta Grande.

A longhorn beetle, probably *Monochamus galloprovincialis*.

Red palm weevil *Rhynchophorus ferrugineus*, an invasive alien that can be very damaging to palm trees. See, for example, www.flowersofcrete.info/Cretanpalm.html.