

Birding Spain's Valencia Region

Spain is widely known for its rich culture, gastronomy, and history. It is also a birdwatcher's paradise and one of the most biodiverse countries in Europe. Spain remains one of the continent's most popular birding destinations, with thousands of birders and wildlife lovers visiting the country every year.

Spain's geographical location is key. It provides the shortest sea crossings between Africa and Europe for many bird species, under nine miles (14 km) at its closest point. In terms of land use, about 60% of Spaniards live on or close to the coast, which means the interior of the country has some vast rural spaces with extremely low human population density. Habitat diversity is another plus. The contrasts can be incredible—from Mediterranean desert to dense and humid Atlantic forests, from coastline to mountain peaks above 11,200 feet (3,400 m).

The Valencia region is located on the east coast of Spain. Encompassing



almost 8,980 square miles (23,255 sq km), it's a popular birding destination, attracting birders from all over the world. Known as "La Comunidad Valenciana," this autonomous region comprises three provinces (Castellón, Valencia, and Alicante), and at its heart is the *avant-garde* city of Valencia, situated on the Mediterranean coast. Each province holds an international airport as well as a modern network of highways. Spain's high-speed rail system transports passengers from cities including Madrid and Barcelona to Valencia and Alicante on trains that reach speeds of 180 mph (300 km/h). The area is well-supported by a huge range of quality accommodation, from luxury contemporary hotels to traditional guest houses in historical villages. Immediately on arrival, birding can begin! Pallid Swifts

can be seen from the windows of the airports' arrivals halls, White Wagtails roost in the trees that surround their parking lots, and Peregrine Falcons, Eurasian Kestrels, and Black Redstarts can all be seen right in the city centers.

The Mediterranean climate is similar to that of the U. S. state of California. Summers are hot, reaching over 104°F (40°C), but spring, fall, and winter are quite comfortable. Rainfall is usually restricted to just a few days, mainly in early autumn, but can also occur in spring. The region has two key factors important to birdlife: its diversity of natural habitats protected by reserves and its location on a major migration flyway.

Looking past the coastal resorts and long golden beaches reveals a huge system of coastal wetlands. In the south,

Panoramic arial view of Peniscola in Valencia, Spain.
Photo © Truekit.



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■ BIRDING THE VALENCIA REGION



- 1 Salines de Santa Pola
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- 3 Clot de Galvany
- 4 Marjal de Pegó-Oliva
- 5 Montgó
- 6 Serra Mariola
- 7 Cap de San Antoni
- 8 Albufera
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- 11 Hoces del Cabriel
- 12 Reserva de la Biosfera del Alto Turia
- 13 Cabanes-Torreblanca
- 14 Marjal i Estanys d'Almenara
- 15 Illes Columbretes
- 16 Tinença de Benifassa
- 17 Comarca dels Ports

Map © John Allendorf.

salt pans are home to thousands of Greater Flamingos as well as numerous species of gulls, terns, and shorebirds. The freshwater lagoons and extensive reed beds are not only crucial resting and feeding points for millions of migrating birds, but also offer nesting grounds for globally threatened White-headed Ducks and Marbled Ducks. The reed beds provide perfect habitat for summer visitors, such as Great Reed Warbler and Savi's Warbler, as well as resident species that include Moustached Warbler and Bearded Tit. In winter, the same reed beds are home to the beautifully delicate Eurasian Penduline Tit. Many of the wetlands are surrounded by paddy fields, particularly important feeding grounds for Glossy Ibis, Squacco Heron, Purple Heron, Little Bittern, Whiskered Tern, Collared Pratincole, and Western Swamphen.

These rice fields are separated by dikes, which provide ideal nesting sites for Little Ringed Plovers and Black-winged Stilts. In winter, the wetlands become critical areas for visiting passerine species such as Bluethroat, as well as various species of pipits and finches. Recent years have seen an increase in the number of birds of prey that spend the winter in the region's marshes. Osprey, Western Marsh Harrier, and Booted Eagle are frequently seen, as well as vagrants from eastern Europe, including Great Spotted Eagle, which regularly overwinters in the wetlands of the Natural Park of El Fondo.

Elegant Tern sightings are becoming more common. A few examples of this New World species have shown up each spring to breed alongside

■ Eurasian Hoopoes are the stuff of dreams in North America, but they are common in Alicante. Marjal de Pegó-Oliva Natural Park, Alicante, Valencian Region. 13 Mar 2020. Photo © Pau Lucio.



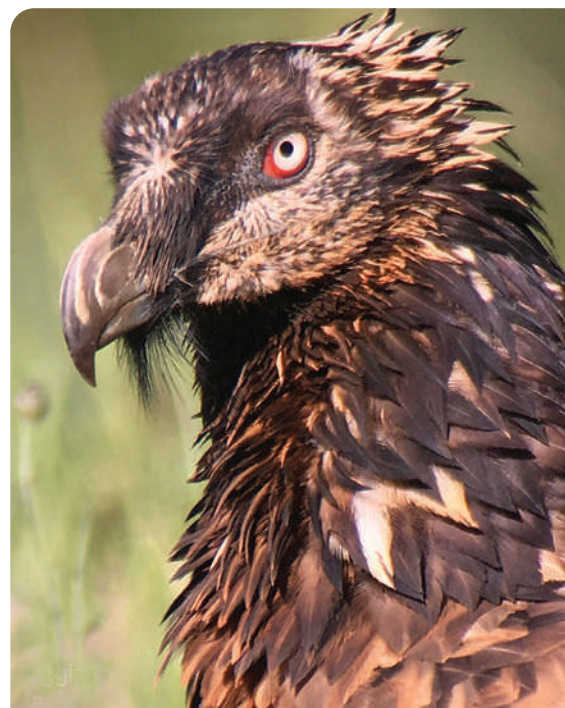
■ **TOP:** Golden Oriole (male) feeding on native cherries. Hoces del Cabriel Natural Park, Valencia, Valencia Region, Spain. 11 Jun 2015. *Photo © Jesús Villaplana.* ■ **MIDDLE LEFT:** Sadly, agricultural intensification is negatively affecting many farmland species in Spain. Among them is Little Bustard. Las Moratillas, Alicante, Valencia Region. 12 Oct 2019. *Photo © Yanina Maggiotto.* ■ **MIDDLE RIGHT:** This immature Lammergeier is part of an ongoing repatriation project. Tinença de Benifassà, Castellón, Valencia Region, Spain. 21 Jul 2020. *Photo © Yanina Maggiotto.* ■ **BOTTOM:** Red-knobbed Coot. El Fondo Natural Park, Alicante, Valencia Region, Spain. 20 Dec 2020. *Photo © Pau Lucio.*



Sandwich Terns. Thus, the region holds the only confirmed successful Elegant Tern breeding sites in all of the Palearctic. Their presence has brought many European birders to the area, looking to add this species to their Palearctic lists.

As we journey away from the coast, heading west, we don't have to travel far to reach the mountains. These peaks are not alpine, but extend up to around 5,900 feet (1,800 m) above sea level. This is the territory of many of the region's raptors, which benefit from little human activity and an abundance of prey, particularly rabbits and Red-legged Partridges. Eurasian Eagle Owl, Golden Eagle, Booted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, and Bonelli's Eagle all breed in the region. Two years ago, a reintroduction program to bring back the Lammergeier (also known as Bearded Vulture) started in the mountains of the northwest of the Valencia region. This emblematic species is the only bird known to feed almost exclusively on bones. The aim of the project is to establish a new colony midway between the most important existing populations in the Pyrenees Mountains of northern Spain and Andalusia in southern Spain. There are two other species of vultures in the region: Griffon Vulture and Egyptian Vulture.

These magnificent creatures share their wild surroundings with birds from other families, such as Alpine Swift, Red-billed Chough, and, in the winter months, Alpine Accentor. On the rocky mountain slopes, one might find the beautiful Common Rock Thrush, a sum-

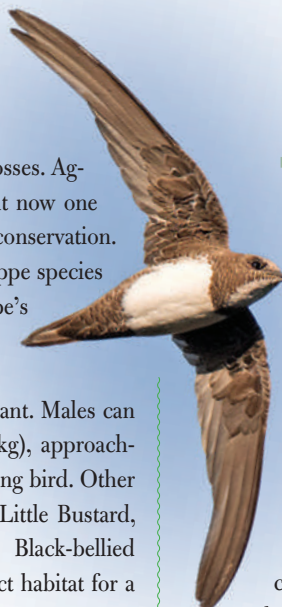


mer visitor to the region, while its cousin the Blue Rock Thrush is a resident.

Having crossed these rocky natural barriers that protect the coastal regions and help to provide them with such a mild climate, we are instantly faced with open farmland and steppe. The sudden change in landscape is accompanied by an equally dramatic change in birdlife. Throughout Europe and beyond, steppe and traditional farmland are, sadly, the

habitats suffering the greatest losses. Agricultural intensification is right now one of the main concerns in bird conservation. Fortunately, some specialist steppe species are increasing, including Europe's heaviest flying bird, the Great Bustard. Spain holds half of the world population of this giant. Males can reach almost 40 pounds (18 kg), approaching the natural limit for any flying bird. Other steppe-dwelling birds include Little Bustard, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, and Black-bellied Sandgrouse. This is also perfect habitat for a great variety of larks, including Thekla, Crested, Short-toed, Calandra, and the rarer Lesser Short-toed. Montagu's Harrier might be found nesting in the cereal fields. The old farms scattered across the plains provide ideal nesting sites for Little Owl and Rock Sparrow, as well as small colonies of Lesser Kestrel. On these high plains, summer daytime temperatures can soar past 100 degrees F. (40 C) and plummet below 25 degrees F. (-4 C) in winter. It's a fas-

This Alpine Swift was photographed on its way to Africa. Marjal de Pego-Oliva Natural Park, Alicante, Valencia Region, Spain. 14 Aug 2019. Photo © Jesús Villaplana.



cinating place to visit, but a tough place to live. So, it's time for us to head back east, down to sea level.

Taking a different route back, we can explore some of the forests of the region and extensive olive groves.

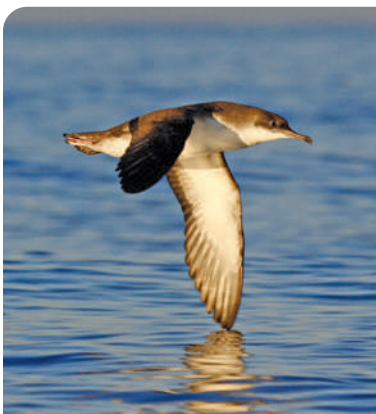
These are home to species such as the charismatic Eurasian Hoopoe, which is the only member of the *Upupidae* family present in Europe. In addition, one can find Crested Tit, Western Bonelli's Warbler, Subalpine Warbler, Short-toed Treecreeper, and one of the smallest European birds, the Firecrest. Living in the open mixed woodlands and traditional almond groves are the much-less-common Western Orphean Warbler and the European Turtle Dove. The region's poplar groves provide habitat for the extremely striking Eurasian Golden Oriole, the endemic Iberian Green Woodpecker, and the bold and charismatic Spotted Flycatcher.

The majestic (and endemic) Spanish Imperial Eagle prefers open woodland and scrub-covered hillsides, environments that hold established populations of rabbits. Once on the brink of extinction, this raptor is now slowly recovering. With a total population of fewer than 400 pairs, it remains one of the rarest of European raptors. Juvenile birds increasingly disperse to the Valencia region, and it is only a matter of time before the species breeds here.

In the area's dry, semi-desert gorges, scattered with Mediterranean scrub, Europe's most colorful bird, the European Bee-eater, can be found, nesting in tunnels that it digs in the earth. As well as Stonechat, Whinchat, Blue Rock-Thrush, Black Wheatear, and Spectacled Warbler, one can see the remarkably handsome Black-eared Wheatear here, too. This very distinct habitat also offers breeding habitat to one of the most mysteri-

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM:

- Thousands of Greater Flamingos can be seen year-round at Salinas de Santa Pola Natural Park in Alicante. Valencia Region, Spain. 28 Aug 2015. Photo © Pau Lucio.
- Yelkouan Shearwater. Cape of Cullera, Valencia, Valencia Region, Spain. 8 Dec 2014. Photo © Víctor París.
- Probably the most beautiful bird in Europe, the colorful European Bee-eater. Montgó Natural Park, Alicante, Valencia Region, Spain. 26 May 2019. Photo © Jesús Villaplana.





■ **LEFT: Marbled Duck, the rarest duck in Europe.** Clot de Galvany, Alicante, Valencia Region, Spain. 1 Jan 2021. Photo © Pau Lucio. ■ **RIGHT: Purple Heron.** Prat de Cabanes–Torreblanca Natural Park, Castellón, Valencia Region, Spain. 16 Jul 2019. Photo © Yanina Maggionto.

ous southern European birds, the Red-necked Nightjar. Their distinctive call carries through the darkness, and, during moonlit nights, as they hunt for moths on the wing, their long-winged silhouette is a memorable sight.

Finally, our journey takes us back to the Mediterranean Sea. In some of the more modern buildings by the coast, Pallid Swifts have been able to establish their colonies. Remarkably similar in flight to the Common Swift, identification of this slightly paler bird requires good light and a quick eye.

Some of the small islands off the coast of the Valencia region, such as the Columbretes Islands, provide nesting territory for Eleonora's Falcon. This species has a fascinating ecology and lifestyle. Having arrived from its wintering grounds in Madagascar, it feeds on large insects, small birds including martins and swallows, and bats. Breeding is delayed until late summer to coincide with the post-nuptial migration of small passerines, which are then hunted and caught over the sea as they make their way south from Europe to Africa. Other breeding birds include the tiny European Storm-Petrel and the Mediterranean Shag, a subspecies of the European Shag which is re-

covering from a severe decline. In winter, one can catch sight of large rafts of both Yelkouan and Balearic shearwaters, the latter being the only endemic seabird species in Spain. Gannets can also be spotted out at sea, diving to catch fish, while Great Skuas and Parasitic Jaegers can be spied mobbing gulls and terns, attempting to steal their prey.

The region sits right on a major migration flyway. Spring migration takes place largely in March and April, while fall (post-breeding) migration happens mainly throughout September. A great number of species pass through the area's coastal wetlands and foothills to reach the Strait of Gibraltar, where they make the crossing to Africa. During stormy weather over the Mediterranean, we may be lucky enough to see good numbers of vagrant species from eastern Europe, too.

Thanks to hard work and dedication, the region can proudly claim to have succeeded in many conservation projects, resulting in considerable growth in the populations of some extremely endangered species, including Marbled Duck, Western Swamphe, White-headed Duck, and Audouin's Gull. The efforts continue, and new reintroduction initiatives are taking place, one of the most recent being a

project to reestablish the Osprey at Pego–Oliva Marsh, one of the area's many coastal wetland sites. This magnificent raptor is often seen on migration, and a few also overwinter in the region, but it would be wonderful to see them breed here once again. At Albufera de Valencia, one of Spain's most important wetlands, bio-engineering projects are aimed at improving water quality by installing green filters, which create first-class habitat for breeding and wintering aquatic bird species. The popularity of birding and conservation in Spain have rapidly increased in recent years, especially among the younger generation. This is a welcome development, and one that will strengthen the sustainability, importance, and value of the area for birdlife in the coming years.

Our quick tour has offered a glimpse of the wealth of different habitats, birds, and stories in Spain, as well as the country's diverse birdlife. As more people actively bird here, more surprises will be revealed. That's nature, and that's what makes our hobby so fascinating, wherever we may be. 🌍

El Fondo Natural Park in Alicante is one of the best birding reserves in the Valencia Region. 14 Mar 2019. Photo © Pau Lucio.

