

Andalucía

The 2008 Tarifa Bird Fair and Birdwatching in Andalucía

Andalucía – an ideal holiday destination for birdwatchers and their families
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This supplement looks at the Spanish region of Andalucía (see inset location map), concentrating on birdwatching and other outdoor activities, trying to answer the question ‘Can you combine birdwatching with a family holiday?’

For many couples and families the choice of a holiday destination, and what to do when on holiday is a source of conflict. Let’s face it, some of us hate beach holidays whilst others can soak up the sun all day then party all night. What sounds like heaven to one is purgatory to another.

The key to an enjoyable holiday for everyone is a bit of give and take and not expecting to get all your own way. With that in mind, let’s look at Spain, and in particular the southern region of Andalucía. This is a land of mixed geography ranging from both atlantic and mediterranean coasts, across the fertile lowlands and into the high sierra mountains. A land that provides holiday possibilities that are hard to beat and all within easy travelling distance.

Spain

Forget the stereotypes of bullfighting, beach holidays and sunburn. Imagine a country of 17 autonomous regions with less than two-thirds of the UK population but more than twice the land area, lying at the crossroads of civilization, only 13 km (8 miles) from Africa but geographically and culturally part of Europe. A land that

must have been one of the first to be conquered by the Romans when they left Italy, and whose main language still reflects that. If you have learned Latin you will be amazed how similar Spanish is, and how quickly you can pick up words.



Travel to Spain is easy and cheap, low-cost airlines fly from most UK airports and other European countries. You can take your car by ferry or use other public

transport to travel there. Spanish airports handle large volumes of passengers with an ease that puts their UK counterparts to shame.

Accommodation ranges from low-cost to five-star luxury and can be found in cities, small towns and villages. In all respects Spain is a modern European country offering



Spectacular limestone scenery between Malaga and Ronda

everything you expect in terms of accommodation and service, and some pleasant surprises too, especially when you leave the coastal areas and move inland.

Andalucía location and climate

What does Andalucía have to offer? It has a great climate, national parks, mountains, small villages, friendly people, historic sites and a regional government that recognizes the value of its natural surroundings and wildlife as a tourist asset. If you prefer a beach holiday you will not be disappointed either with Malaga, Marbella and Manliva all close by on the coast.



A view of the landscape with olive trees, mountains and small white towns

Good weather is always a topic of interest for the British. Andalucía has three distinct weather zones matching the geography, the coastal areas, the inland lowlands and the mountains. The coastal areas have hot summers and mild winters. Expect clear blue skies with highs in the mid-thirties (°C) falling to around 15°C overnight from June through September, and virtually no rain. Rain starts around the beginning of October heralding a winter of clear days interspersed with cloudy days and heavy rain at times – but rarely lasting more than a couple of days. Highs around 20 °C, with cooler evening. Inland divides into two, the lowlands and mountains. The lowland climate can best be described as like the coast but hotter, with summer highs around 40°C. Something to consider carefully when planning your visit. The mountains are cooler with summer highs around 30°C and cooler evenings than the coast or lowland areas. The mountain air means that the power of the sun comes through with deceptive intensity, good sunblock would be needed by most people.

Andalucía birdwatching

The journey for the author began in Southern Ireland,



The 'new' bridge in Ronda

flying from Cork to Malaga - a popular tourist destination on the Mediterranean coast of southern Spain. Once the party was assembled we were driven by coach inland, to the medieval city of Ronda. My expectations of Spain were not great, wrongly believing that Spain was just Benedorm and the sun drenched Costas. The scenery was very different from my expectations, with olive trees, rugged limestone mountains and small 'white towns', so called because of the whiteness of the houses. The views changed with every turn of the road and change in height, revealing ever more interesting features.

Ronda is a medieval gem, set on two sides of a the El Tajo gorge, linked by the 18th century Puente Nuevo 'new' bridge, a high-level stone edifice towering almost 100 metres above the river Guadalevín. The views to the nearby mountains and over surrounding countryside are stunning. The two halves of the city located on each side of the gorge are totally different, the medieval side with its narrow streets, former palaces and merchants' houses separated from the modern city of banks, shopping and residential areas. I was sorry to leave this fascinating city, certainly worth a whole day in its own right.

The author had joined a party of experts on a 5-day tour of some of the best birdwatching sites in Andalucía. So in



Rugged limestone Sierras in Andalucía near Ronda



En route to Cueva del gato

many respects was in the same position as 3 or 4 others, of being a non-birding partner of a birdwatcher on holiday. As a keen nature photographer (landscape, trees, flowers and insects) the trip was a huge success. As far as birding goes it was a crash course in techniques, equipment and birds that resulted in a new interest and appreciation of this passion. The knowledge and enthusiasm of the experts was highly contagious.

‘Golden Eagle, 3 o’clock, level with us, going right’
 ‘Another just behind it’

Shouted one of the expert birdwatchers as our coach wound its way along the narrow mountain road. This was an auspicious start to what proved to be a spectacular birding adventure that left its participants tired and happy, many having seen their ‘life-bird’.

Spain seems to be bursting with birds wherever you go, but not just the common or garden birds, instead there are many that would be considered exotic by someone raised in the UK. This was one of those rare occasions when you realize that there are places in the world, and not too far distant from our shores, where birdwatching



Late summer seed heads near the Cueva del Gato

dreams do come true. Not only did we see one, but two Golden Eagles, so close that you could see the lighter coloured patches of feathers on the juvenile bird.

Our first full day began with a short coach journey to the Cueva del Gato (Cave of the cat), so called because of its appearance. This huge cave and maze of underground passages have been carved into the limestone hills by water. The birding began in earnest with many sightings while walking to the cave, meanwhile the non-birding contingent watched the ever-changing scene as the sunlight crept down the mountains, illuminating a series of views, and photographed the mountains, plants of the Sierra de las Nieves nature reserve and of course the rest of the party.

Our next call took us into the mountains along narrow roads with panoramic views. There was very little traffic and even fewer people. In the mountains we left the transport and walked along the narrow road, passing pigs and cattle grazing on the flat valley bottom. Holm-oak forests abound in this area where the pigs grow fat on the autumn acorns. This mountainous area was especially scenic with ever-changing vistas. It was rich in birdlife, with many smaller species such as warblers. En route we called at a country hotel that specialized in holidays for birdwatchers. The property was an old farm with



Cueva del Gato (Cave of the cat)



Country hotel, ensuite rooms with terraces set in farmland

extensive outbuildings that had been converted into high-quality accommodation with ensuite bathrooms and individual terraces. There was also a large outdoor swimming pool. A perfect place for a non-birding partner to relax and enjoy the peace and tranquility, reading and sunbathing.

After a buffet lunch we hiked into the forest to view different bird species. Although most of the wild



Laguna de la Landa, rice fields with stork and ibis



Inside birdwatching hide, Laguna de la Landa



General plan of the 2008 Tarifa Bird Fair

flowers were gone there were interesting fruits, seeds and views.

Day 2 started at the Laguna de la Landa, a huge area that used to contain a shallow lagoon until it was drained for agricultural production. This fertile area produces rice and other crops. Many large birds with seen, white storks, ibis, cattle egrets and others easily visible and in large quantities. Our stop here was relatively brief before journeying on to the tip of Spain, close to Tarifa, where the coast of Africa is easily visible just 13 km away. The reason for visiting is that this is one of the few points on the earth where vast numbers of migrating birds can be seen. The geography means that birds from all over Europe are funneled through Spain to this one point, because it offers them the shortest crossing to Africa. The area is famous especially for large birds (storks and raptors) that soar on thermal air currents. Such birds congregate in very large numbers as they wait for favorable conditions for the crossing to Africa. The veteran birdwatchers commented that on some occasions birds are seen to start their crossing but change their minds and return, sensing that they are not going to make the crossing. Even a light wind can cause the birds to drift several kilometers. Birds have been seen to land on the beach totally exhausted by the crossing.

Despite light rain that day numerous large raptors were recorded. We journeyed on to our next overnight stay in El Rocio, famous for its sand streets and annual pilgrimage when the town is home to around a million people from all over the world.

Tarifa Bird Fair 2008

Day 3 saw the group visiting the birdwatching fair at Tarifa. The location was perfect being just a short drive from the main migration route observation point at Tarifa. The timing of the event in autumn, to coincide with migrations was also good. This was the inaugural event at Tarifa, with the hope that it will become an annual event.

Three huge marquees were erected on the site, one for trade stands, one for crafts and a photographic exhibition and a third for education and information – for example national parks and migration routes. There were food, drink and toilet facilities that you would expect and the site was well supplied with car parking. Signs on the main road showed the location, and the local police were on hand to assist traffic flow.



Visitors outside the 2008 Tarifa Bird Fair

We found interesting trade stands from different areas and providers of a wide range of outdoor activities, birdwatching predominated. Other regions of Spain were represented too. Being a major highway for migrating birds Spain offers a wide range of birdwatching destinations. There are national parks spread throughout the country, which one can visit at different times to see many other species. Equipment suppliers had special offers on a range of spotting scopes, binoculars, accessories and photographic equipment. There was much discussion about the finer points of equipment in general amongst the adherents to particular brands. Something that is always a hot topic of discussion.

The photographic exhibition showed some stunning images. It was placed centrally in the marquee containing crafts, making an exciting combination.

Andalucía has large areas devoted to cork production, especially in the mountainous areas. The cork oak grows



Craft items and cork products on show

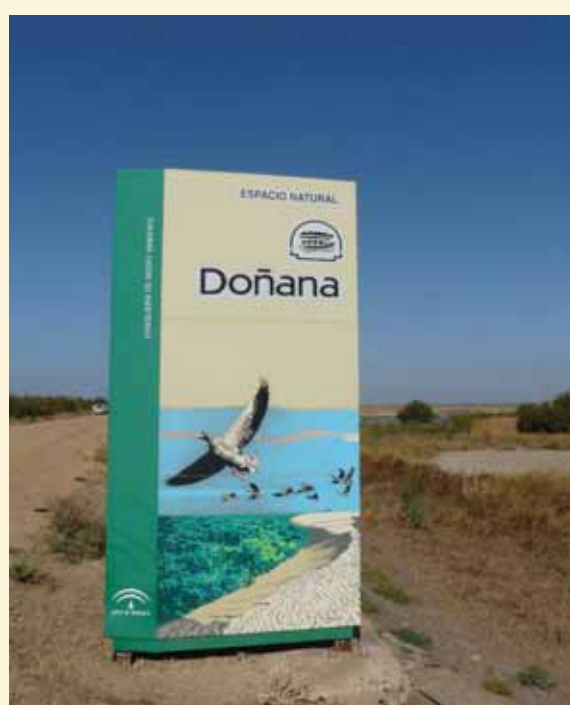
the thick layer of cork over its trunk and branches that can be harvested at regular intervals. After harvest the lower part of the tree is a dark reddish brown colour that contrasts sharply with the higher branches. This cork can be made into a wide variety of articles as well as being used for the more familiar wine bottles stoppers, floor tiles for example.

Donaña National Park

Our last full day began early boarding jeeps and people carriers for our visit to the Doñaña national park. The greater Doñaña area is approximately triangular, stretching from Huelva in the west to Sevilla (Seville) in the east, and down to Sahlucar de Barrameda in the south. Our base was the small town of El Rocío, ideally placed near the centre of the triangle. The Doñaña national park area exhibits different habitats depending on the time of year, ranging from shallow lagoons to



Cork oak tree after harvesting



Doñaña National Park



Donaña National Park - lunch stop

parched baked clay as the summer weather dries up the water. Some patches of water remain all the year round and at times these are simply teeming with birds. At one time the whole Donaña area was a vast delta of the Guadalquivir river, but over time this gradually filled with sediments and formed first a shallow lagoon and now marshes. The whole area is therefore very flat. Donaña national park is home to the Iberian Lynx, a shy predator that we hoped to see. Unfortunately this was not to be, but our guides reported that it had been seen on numerous occasions. We did find wild boars. Here, in the Donaña national park we observed the Spanish Imperial Eagle to the obvious delight of the whole party. After an open air lunch served close to a former royal palace and hunting lodge we moved to one of the remaining wetland areas close to the Donaña visitor centre. The centre itself is named after Antonio Valverde whose vision and foresight ensured that the area was not drained for agricultural use. En route we passed carrion that was attracting a large number of large bird species including Griffon Vultures that circled overhead on the thermals. As the season was well advanced there were not many wet areas. This meant that on the remaining water there were large numbers of different bird species, together with



Donaña National Park - wetland area

dragonflies and wild plants. The whole Donaña area is well-suited to outdoor pursuits, with campgrounds and hiking trails especially along the coast. Birdwatching sites are dotted around in many locations, as are museums and picnic areas.

Our next port of call was the Marismas del Odiel, (Marshes of Odiel) near Huelva. We began at the visitor centre, then boarded our coaches with a local guide for an excursion into the salinas area. Spain produces large quantities of salt by solar evaporation of sea water. The sea water passes through a series of huge shallow lagoons (salinas) where the heat of the sun and the sea breezes quickly evaporate the water. As the concentration of salt rises salt crystals form. Mountains of white salt can be seen in many coastal locations all over Spain. Model ships and other artifacts are suspended in the water where salt crystals form on them, later being sold to tourists.

These lagoons are a haven for water birds. As the tide ebbs and flows the birds are displaced from the coastal and estuarine areas and make their way to the lagoons where they can continue to feed. Our visit concluded with a visit to the spectacular spit of land that has formed at the Rio Tinto estuary, several kilometers long, with a road running its whole length. This area is popular for many



Marismas del Odiel, Huelva



Visitor centre, Marismas del Odiel, Huelva

types of outdoor activity including fishing and paragliding.

Andalucía - food, accommodation and people

Each evenings we enjoyed Spanish cuisine and hospitality with imaginative dishes served in congenial surroundings. The day's birdwatching was discussed over glasses of vino tinto, the next day considered and much speculation was made about what might be seen. If you like good food, cooked using fresh produce accompanied by good wine then you will not be disappointed. The Spanish love of fish and the closeness of the mediterranean coast meant that the fish was particularly good, with local specialities such as 'choco' (cuttlefish) and other fish with no English name. We may not have known their names but the tastes and differences were part of the attraction and culinary experiences.

Our accommodation was always of a high standard, with different levels of accommodation to suit all budgets. After the birdwatching trip I took a rental car and ventured further inland to the mountains to sample some more remote areas. This additional accommodation was booked via the internet with low-cost as the main criteria. The objective was to sample a range of accommodation and experience life in the villages. The two hotels were both excellent, with ensuite private bathrooms for 45 euros a night (single occupation) including breakfast. The local people were friendly and helped me practise my Spanish, correcting it where necessary. In the remote areas English was not generally spoken, although most people managed a few words of conversation. It was not a

barrier to enjoying the people and places and should not put you off more remote explorations in Spain. The roads were quiet, well surfaced and driving was easy. Free tourist road maps were adequate although a good larger scale map would have helped on a couple of occasions. The scenery was every changing and dramatic. Life moves at a much slower pace, with shops and businesses closing during the hottest parts of the day. If you speak a little Spanish you'll find people are very willing to make conversation, listen and help with pronunciation and new words.

Hiking trails were frequent, as were picnic areas. You will also find disused railways that have been converted into cycle paths, another excellent way of travelling to less well know areas.

Conclusions

In Andalucía you really can mix birdwatching with other types of holiday. The mix of different types of landscape means there is a wide range of activities from beach to mountains, hiking, cycling, visiting historic sites, painting and drawing or whatever takes your fancy. Planning and some 'give and take' will ensure a great holiday that includes birdwatching and activites for the whole group or family.



Well-equipped birdwatcher



Dragonfly Donaña National Park



Disused railway converted to cycle path

Acknowledgements:

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Bird species noted

Alpine Accentor	Common Swift	Lesser Short-toed Lark	Sharpe's Green Woodpecker
Alpine Swift	Common Tern	Little Bustard	Shelduck
Arctic Skua	Common Whitethroat	Little Egret	Short-toed Eagle
Audouin's Gull	Coot	Little Grebe	Short-toed Lark
Avocet	Cormorant	Little Owl	Short-toed Treecreeper
Azure-winged Magpie	Corn Bunting	Little Ringed Plover	Shoveler
Balearic Shearwater	Cory's Shearwater	Little Stint	Slender-billed Gull
Bar-tailed Godwit	Crag Martin	Long-tailed Tit	Southern Grey Shrike
Barn Owl	Crested Lark	Magpie	Spanish Imperial Eagle
Barn Swallow	Crested Tit	Mallard	Sparrowhawk
Black Kite	Curlew	Marbled Teal	Spectacled Warbler
Black Redstart	Curlew Sandpiper	Marsh Harrier	Spoonbill
Black Stork	Dipper	Mediterranean Gull	Spotless Starling
Black Tern	Dunlin	Melodious Warbler	Spotted Flycatcher
Black Wheatear	Egyptian Vulture	Mistle Thrush	Spotted Redshank
Black-crowned Night Heron	European Bee-eater	Montagu's Harrier	Stonechat
Black-eared Wheatear	European Storm-Petrel	Moorhen	Subalpine Warbler
Black-headed Gull	Fan-tailed Warbler	Nightingale	Tawny Owl
Black-necked Grebe	Firecrest	Northern Wheatear	Tawny Pipit
Black-tailed Godwit	Flamingo	Nuthatch	Teal
Black-winged Kite	Fulmar	Osprey	Thekla Lark
Black-winged Stilt	Gadwall	Oystercatcher	Tree Pipit
Blackbird	Gannet	Pallid Swift	Turnstone
Blackcap	Garden Warbler	Peregrine	Turtle Dove
Blue Rock Thrush	Garganey	Pheasant	Water Rail
Blue Tit	Glossy Ibis	Pied Flycatcher	Western Olivaceous Warbler
Booted Eagle	Golden Eagle	Pied Wagtail	Whimbrel
Buzzard	Goldfinch	Pintail	Whinchat
Carrion Crow	Great Crested Grebe	Pochard	White Stork
Caspian Tern	Great Skua	Pomarine Skua	Wigeon
Cattle Egret	Great Tit	Purple Gallinule	Willow Warbler
Cetti's Warbler	Great White Egret	Purple Heron	Wood Sandpiper
Chaffinch	Great-spotted Woodpecker	Raven	Woodchat Shrike
Chiffchaff	Green Sandpiper	Red Kite	Woodlark
Chough	Greenfinch	Red-crested Pochard	Woodpigeon
Cirl Bunting	Greenshank	Red-legged Partridge	Wren
Coal Tit	Grey Heron	Red-necked Phalarope	Yellow Wagtail
Collared Dove	Grey Plover	Red-rumped Swallow	Yellow-legged Gull
Collared Pratincole	Grey Wagtail	Redshank	
Common Crossbill	Griffon Vulture	Redstart	
Common Gull	Gull-billed Tern	Reed Warbler	
Common Sandpiper	Hen Harrier	Ring-necked Parakeet	
Common Snipe	Honey Buzzard	Ringed Plover	
Common Starling	Hoopoe	Robin	
	House Martin	Rock Bunting	
	House Sparrow	Rock Dove	
	Jackdaw	Rock Sparrow	
	Jay	Roller	
	Kentish Plover	Ruff	
	Kestrel	Sabine's Gull	
	Kingfisher	Sand Martin	
	Knot	Sanderling	
	Lapwing	Sandwich Tern	
	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Sardinian Warbler	
	Lesser Kestrel	Serin	