

Land of the Lynx, Andalucia 2010.

Contributed by Jos
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With a yearning to see Iberian Lynx, this trip was dedicated to seeking out the felines, amongst the rarest of cats worldwide. In the event, I was extremely fortunate, not only encountering six Iberian Lynx in little over 24 hours, but also finding all the secondary targets of the trip, namely Moufflon, Spanish Ibex, Garden Dormouse and Spanish Imperial Eagle. I also enjoyed a few days general birding in some of the region's most enigmatic localities, seeing such delights as numerous heron species, flocks of up to 800 Collared Pratincoles and a clean sweep of all five of Europe's swifts.

Swirling Icelandic dust clouds, Spanish airports closed, all was not looking good for my little foray into the land of El Lynx. From up above however, the Gods of the Feline must surely have been smiling down - one day prior to my departure, the skies miraculously cleared, Malaga reopened and it was all systems go, trip back on. 13 May. Departure. So it was, after finishing work on the Thursday, I hopped onto a plane to the UK and, after a mere two-hour stop-over in the airport coffee bar, continued onward to the delights of Spain. Touchdown at 11 p.m. local time, picked up a hire car and began the trip north, destination Andujar, haunt of the cats. An uneventful journey, no birds or mammals disturbing the drive (bar one Iberian Hare which I spectacularly managed to not see). Arrived at 2.30 a.m. to a distinctively chilly 8 C … brrr, this was supposed to be southern Spain! 14 May. Andujar. 4.00 a.m., refreshed after an hour and a half kip in the car, it was time for the first trawl the local byways, mammal spotting the quest. Great looming bulks in the dark, Red Deer by the bucket load, plenty of Rabbits adding fodder, up the winding road I bumped, imagining the Lynx that must surely be lurking somewhere near. A blur of wings, then atop a pole sat a Tawny Owl, first bird of the trip. Light now etching the horizons, a Red Fox picked its way through a meadow of Spanish bulls, mean-looking things, certainly not most inviting to any wayward trespass! Hints of dawn, Nightingales and Golden Orioles cranked the early morning chorus into gear, it was time to begin the long vigil for El Lynx at La Lancha. Up at my chosen vantage point, the expansive rolling slopes lit by the first rays of the morning, I was immediately taken aback - a vast mosaic of arid scrub, rock and bush stretching kilometres and kilometres, this had every potential to be a very long search! I had no illusions to the contrary, I had pencilled in three or four days to sit upon this hillside, scanning and watching, the single one purpose of my trip to see Iberian Lynx. I parked the car, had a quick chat a Spanish guy already slumped in a chair for his day of wait, then wandered along the road to select my vantage point for the hours that would surely follow. A half kilometre up the road, Common Swifts hurtling overhead, an early Griffon Vulture lumbering into the air, my ear caught the chacking of Magpies, some mighty peeved birds ahead. Hmm, thought I, well aware of a possible cause, but not truly believing it could be. Another Magpie flew over, swooping down the hillside to join the fracas. I perched upon a rock and watched the goings on, the Magpies were intend on something! Maybe a raptor, maybe not, I scanned to the right … Christ! I almost rolled off my rock!!! Right there, three or four hundred metres down, a fantastic Iberian Lynx strolled right out into the open, Magpies in tow. My eyes were like saucers, I was stunned, I had expected a wait of days and here I was, just 15 minutes into the search and I was looking at a most amazing animal. Generosity in my heart, I remembered not only my companion still asleep in the car, but also the Spanish guy down the road. I have not run so fast for many a year - almost killing myself in the process, just a few minutes later, the three of us were back on the hillside. Where was the Lynx? Chacking Magpies hinted a continued presence, I scanned to no avail. A full two minutes passed, then my now-awake companion spotted the Lynx on the move, followed by a sudden exclamation from the Spanish guy, the cat was back in view. Multilingual directions, but I could see nothing. Then I understood why - I was still scanning the area where I had initially found the Lynx, but it was now actually much closer! Having realised both the other two were watching the nearest slope, the cat was then easy to pick out, the views were fantastic, moving steadily towards us, closer and closer. A few moments later, I think the shouts were simultaneous ‘two’, ‘dos’, ‘another’ - suddenly our Lynx had transformed into two Lynx! We now had a pair of Lynx and, just to add the final icing to the cake, they then ambled onto a rock outcrop barely a hundred metres from us, climbing to the top, then pausing to lick paws and greet each other. Magic moment of the year! Onward they continued, off the rocks, across the road and into the bushes above us, all too soon lost them to view. It was now 7.40 a.m., we warmly congratulated ourselves, we had just had 20 minutes of unbeatable views, not what I had expected on my first morning. Well the pressure was off, the Lynx had fallen! I would now just relax and enjoy the other many offerings the Andujar mountains have, not least keeping a beady eye out for my other targets, namely Moufflon and Garden Dormouse, plus Spanish Imperial Eagle. Not helped by a malfunctioning telescope, a drop in Canada now finally impacting on its performance, I scanned the vastness of distant mountainsides for Moufflon. Fallow Deer popped up, plus plenty more Red Deer, but not a Moufflon sausage to be seen - no worries, I still had plenty of time to spare. Adjacent, nesting in a telegraph pole, a smart little Crested Tit scolded at my accidental position, right alongside the nest. As I backed off, a Black Vulture appeared right overhead, a cloud of Griffons rising beyond, the day now warming up a little. Black-eared Wheatears chacked from a rock nearby, a couple of Hawfinches zoomed over and Sardinian Warblers began their scratchy song from the scrubby slopes. A stroll down to the reservoir at the road’s end added a pair of corking Rock Buntings, along with nesting Blue Rock Thrushes and no shortage of Crag Martins and Red-rumped Swallows, plus several Chough circling in the air, the tally of birds now rising steadily. Ahead lay the road tunnel, my friend opted for a snooze in the car, I took a wander - little weep holes in the roof of the tunnel were full of bats … eeks to the species, I am still struggling with these - three different types were present, Greater Mouse-eared Bats were the easiest, I think Soprano Pipistrelles seemed to match the little tiny ones, the third maybe Schreiber’s Bat. Back in the glare of the sunshine, still only 10 a.m., I could not really argue with the proposition that it could be time to celebrate our morning’s

success with a coffee. Off to Los Pinos hotel we drove, Woodchat Shrikes and the first Azure-winged Magpies in our wake, flocks of Bee-eaters scattering and both Spotless Starlings and Rock Sparrows adorning quaint stone buildings. A coffee and croissant later, plus a night booked into their rooms, and it was off again. Decided to have a look at the Encinarejo area, rather lower than the areas explored earlier and another favoured area by Lynx. Down through mature pine woodland, across the Rio Andujar. A Roller in display made for a good start and flock after flock of Azure-winged Magpies were most engaging, one bunch dropping down to snatch cashew nuts tossed their way. Certain rumblings emanating from a nearby stomach, why was I throwing our only food out of the car?! What a stupid question. Down in the river, Spanish Terrapins sunned on rocks, I strolled over the bridge made famous in a recent video of a Lynx strutting its stuff as it crossed. No Lynx there today, just Rock Sparrows nesting under its supports. A Booted Eagle soared over, many Bee-eaters also on the wing. A Southern Grey Shrike perched atop a snag. However, it was now mid-afternoon, a good 24 hours since any meaningful refreshment and much longer since sleep, I faced a mutiny in the ranks. In the sleepy hours of the night before, in the depths of a dark deserted Andujar town, a closed McDonald's had been spotted, an order was issued - drive there! Dutifully I obeyed, a pause for a Golden Eagle on the way, a Hobby over the town as a reward. Fortunately fast food is just that, fast - an hour later, stocked up with a sticky bun for illicit night-time actions, we were back in the wilds. Ever the optimist, half hoping for another Lynx or maybe an Otter in the river below, my evening was spent squat on concrete blocks overlooking the river with views across the dehesa beyond. No sign of either, Iberian Green Woodpeckers and Fallow Deer the best in the woods, while the skies belonged to swifts - hurtling in at eye-level, mixed flocks of Common and Pallid Swifts making repeated sorties. Admiring these masters in action, suddenly a major bonus was in their midst, a lone White-rumped Swift back and fro, zooming in directly below. The sun was setting, no amphibians to note, so wandered down to the dam. A nightjar hawked past, not a Red-necked as I expected, but a European Nightjar, nice all the same. Then the hooters got going, to a backdrop of Nightingales, first the low hoo-hooo of an Eagle Owl, then the poop poop poop of Scops Owls, at least five vocal. The end of a perfect day was drawing near, it was now 10.30 p.m., a well deserved bed beckoned. One last little duty to perform - not recommended, but I had a single Longworth with me, by rocks beneath pines did I set it, who knows what may wander by in search of a midnight snack. 15 May. Andujar & Sierra Nevada. 5.30 a.m., a new day in the making. Firmly in the camp that lightning can strike twice, what better way to start the day, I thought, than back on the hillsides above La Lancha. Pre-dawn ambles revealed a Little Owl on a post - a good omen, the day before had begun with an owl too! So, with Red Deer and Rabbits on route again, dawn saw me back at my favourite viewpoint. Today being Saturday, it was positively crowded with potential Lynx-spotters - the same Spanish guy, plus a group of four, one still curled up in a sleeping bag by the roadside! Into position, me back at my viewpoint, one Spanish guy nearby, the others a half kilometre down. I scanned the slopes, hoping that the pair of Lynx might retrace their path of the day before. Red and Fallow Deer grazed, Red-legged Partridge scuttled across, Magpies chacked, more in quiet contemplation than alarm, no sign of feline action. 7.15 a.m. came and went, still no sign. A whole 25 minutes passed, no Lynx, nor Moufflon for that matter, my secondary target now gaining importance. Just up the road, the Spanish guy was on his phone, then he was hurrying over. His words, 'They've got a Lynx, round the corner'. Wow, lightning was going to strike for the second time! Down we hurried, arriving to see an Iberian Lynx strutting straight down a track, right out in the open, brilliant. More distant than the day before, maybe 400 metres, but what a sight, a big male, naturally with Magpies in tow. A mere few moments and he stepped off the path, almost immediately disappearing to view. Still the Magpies were agitating, so we should have continued to watch, but suddenly there was another distraction! Soaring right over our head, a fantastic adult Spanish Imperial Eagle, white shoulders a glory in the morning sun. Round it soared, passing almost an eye-level, all Lynx-spotters were once again birdwatchers. A few minutes of this and I glanced down again, 'Lynx back on the track', I uttered. Truly amazing - Spain's number one bird circling above Spain's number one mammal! Everybody was suitably impressed. The Lynx, totally unphased by the Magpies' constant harassment, continued his stroll, winding down the path for another ten minutes, occasionally stepping off into the bushes, always returning to the track. Eventually, over the brow of a ridge he went, another magical moment reaching its finale. An Alpine Swift came zooming over, swift species number four, but amongst Lynx-spotters, there was a very jovial mood. Much Spanish nattering, none of which I understood, but then '...ladera en la puedo ver muflón bajo el árbol'. One word seemed to jump out - Moufflon? And indeed there was, the guy had spotted a very fine flock of the beasties, seven in all, including a splendid male with full horns. What a good day it was turning out to be! Well, I really didn't expect to upstage any of that, so wandered off, thinking to photograph the Crested Tits I had found the day before. A walk of about a kilometre, but no sooner than I had arrived and the Magpie alert started chacking again! No I thought, it can't be, the Lynx went the other way. But still the Magpies chacked away, the calls from a densely bushed hillside just adjacent, I stopped and watched, changing position several times to get a better view. Chack, chack, chack, chack, they were certainly not happy about something and then there they were, Lynx again! Not the male, but a pair, not the pair from the day before either. Jumped from rock to rock, they moved fairly rapidly, then suddenly a third animal was with them!!! Three Iberian Lynx together, surely unusual. They looked adult, but I assume they may have been year-old siblings, either way quite stunning. One Spanish guy joined me, but the Lynx were not hanging about, into deep vegetation they went, they would not reappear. I think I needed a sit down. It was now decision time, I had allowed myself three to four days to find the Iberian Lynx, but here I was at 9 a.m., barely 24 hours after arriving, with six under the belt, plus Moufflon and Spanish Imperial Eagle. It really could not be bettered. After a quick wander back to the bat caves, we decided Andujar had really done us proud, but it was time to move on, plenty more to see and do in Spain. One more little task to do before departing Andujar, had anything taken a fancy to my sticky bun. Near the hotel, I stopped at a pine grove for my last check of the Longworth - it was triggered, somebody was at home! Lifted it up, quite heavy - could it really be? Opened the door and there peered a black and white stripy face, nestled in amongst the bedding, one big at Garden Dormouse, all too soon running off on his way. Very nice. Far to the

south, in the giddy heights of the Sierra Nevada mountains, there lurked another beast high on my 'most wanted' list. So, with the next quarry in sight, off we went, trundling down the highways and through Grenada city. A stop at a small café in the foothills added Black Redstarts and, on a wall appropriately enough, my first three Wall Lizards of the trip. Up the winding road, views becoming ever more spectacular, a pause in pine forest adding singing Firecrests and Serins, plus a Red Squirrel, then it was up to the slopes 2500 metres and above. Somewhere here would wander the Spanish Ibex, my target of the afternoon. Hours of scanning the tops, hiking the snowfields, no. In continuing good luck, a herd crossed the road just before the road ran out! Scrambling down scree, a dozen and half females eyeballed me, posed for photographs, then trotted off down to lower pastures. A few hundred metres further, males completed the line-up, four standing on the skyline, impressive beasts. So all there was left to do was enjoy the scenery, parking where the road vanished into snow, having a coffee at a ski lift car park. Rock Buntings, Black Redstarts galore, a stunning pair of Alpine Accentors. Good birding, good locality. Two Northern Wheatears hopping across the turf, then back down the road, still some hours till dark, time to squeeze in one more locality. Spoilt for choice, I opted for an area of steppe some 60 km east of Grenada - a most pleasant way to end the day, both Black-eared and Black Wheatears, a variety of larks, plus Woodchat Shrikes in abundance and flocks of Chough, Bee-eaters and Alpine Swifts. The sun was setting, into Grenada city we went, a short wander around town, a café stop, then on the road again, a 250 km drive through the night, dawn would see us waking to yet another bird paradise. 16 May. Rio Guadaquivir, the East Bank.

Having got lost in the wee hours of the night before, thus ending up down some dirt track surrounded by tamarisk, I woke to exploding Cetti's Warblers, their dawn cry very rude. Rubbed the eyes, tuned in to add Nightingales and Great Reed Warblers, then set about re-orientating. Just west of Los Palacios y Villafranca I was, and just a few kilometres to my west, the east bank of the Rio Guadaquivir, bird haven and part of the mighty Coto Donana complex. As the sun poked over the horizon, I sat overlooking a small marsh - absolutely crammed with birds, an impressive spectacle, multitudes of Little Egrets squabbling over a channel, mingling with a buzz of Squacco, Grey and Purple Herons, all in their dozens, along with good numbers of lumbering Purple Swamphens, Spoonbills and the first Greater Flamingos of the day, a true soup of top quality. One field along, a pool brimmed with Avocets and Black-winged Stilts, pods of Glossy Ibis and more Squacco Herons, most photogenic individuals at that. The next field along again, yet another mass of birds - all sat in a ploughed field, 65 White Storks, a lone Black Stork and, waiting the warmth of the day to begin their aerial haunts, about 150 Black Kites. The channel adjacent, nesting Black-headed Weavers, yet more Night Herons and singing Melodious Warbler. And so went the morning's birding, delight after delight, birds at every turn, but perhaps the greatest of them all, a shallow marsh a complete flutter, hawking its length and sat on its fringes, Collared Pratincoles 800 hundred-strong, truly a wonderful sight, also three Stone Curlews. With the sun well up, but still Night Herons galore, lining the banks and flying in, off to find a café we went Whiskered Terns on route, a Roller too, plus one Short-toed Eagle. A nice breakfast in a village square we found, the actual dish unidentified due to Spanish skills lacking, but tasty enough it was, a couple of coffees topping it off. Breakfast over, and the temperature now climbing to a most pleasant 26 C, some 'accidental' navigation took me to a most unsightly pool tucked to the north of Los Palacios y Villafranca - hot and dusty, one bird of note to tempt me here - singing even in the now sweltering day, Western Olivaceous Warblers took all of five minutes to locate, Penduline Tits filling in the short gap, with Cetti's Warblers and Nightingales adding extra flavour. It was now time to depart the area, my next destination lay all of 60 km to the south. Part of the same Guadaquivir system, the southern sections offer a variety of habitats - salt marsh, extensive salt pans, freshwater pools, fragments of pine forest, all rich in birds. Started off at the Salinas de Monte Algaida, high water levels providing habitat for many dabbling birds, the highlights dozens of Red-crested Pochards and, floating between reeded islands, four smart Marbled Ducks, the only ones to be seen on this trip. Also Savi's Warblers trilling, at least 75 Little Terns crammed onto a shingle island and, flying over, a dark Western Reef Heron look-alike, almost certainly a hybrid Little Egret-Western Reef Heron. Beyond the pools, along an exceptionally bumpy dirt track, a hot arid area of scrub merging into saltmarsh revealed more birds - plenty of Iberian Yellow Wagtails, plus a number of larks - Calandra, Short-toed and Lesser Short-toed Larks all being noted. Two Black Terns flew over, one Short-toed Eagle too. Via the pine forests, adding Spiny-footed Lizards and Ocellated Lizards, a quick stop at Laguna de Tarelo allowed a gander at the large colony of mixed Cattle Egrets and Spoonbills, a noisy affair. And then it was on to the highlight of the afternoon, the superb Salinas de Bonanza - no species of exceptional note, but simply impressive numbers of birds a exceptionally close range, many running mere metres from the car. A nice few hours here, photographing the abundant waders, hundreds of Avocets, Dunlins and Ringed Plovers, scores of Sanderlings, Kentish Plovers and Black-winged Stilts. Most pleasing, all were in prime plumage, most smart looking. Leggy fluff balls, the still chicks were rather less smart! Also a Curlew Sandpiper, a couple of Slender-billed Gulls and the small matter of several thousand Greater Flamingos. Wonderful.

Next came Chipiona, hoped to find Little Swift to complete the 'Spanish Five'. Had dinner in an open square, ordering fish by accident (failed lingo again), and watched the skies - Common and Pallid Swifts by the bucket load, screaming flocks tearing about the rooftops, but not a small fluttering swift in sight. No worries, there was a contingency plan for the next day. Fish dish coming to an end, sunset also approaching, we then drove down to Rota, a quick visit to the botanical gardens eventually producing two much desired Mediterranean Chameleons, almost sleeping they were by the time I found them! The day was over, into a hotel for the night, the plan to revisit the botanical garden next day to photograph the Chameleons in better light.

17 May. Tarifa & Environs.

This had the makings of a right naff day, at least initially! After waking nice and early with ideas to take the short trundle to a wetland only a half hour away, a reported haunt of White-headed Ducks, Red-knobbed Coots et al, we arrived to find access was now basically non-existent and the lake distant, hmm. After a nod from the owner, nipped through a neighbouring vineyard, so did get to see the White-headed Ducks, plus a Purple Swamphen, but the views were hardly qualified as amazing! No worries, the whole day still stretched before us.

Onward we decided to plough. Barcelona F.C. had taken the Spanish league the evening before, no self-respecting Spaniard was going to be out on the roads so early, so the streets were deserted, a most pleasant cruise ahead I thought. Destination number two, Laguna de Medina, another site supreme for White-headed Duck, lay just 20 km east, half hour at most. Then I hit roadworks approaching the A4 highway, the roadworks being the complete removal of the road and totally unsigned diversions via everywhere! Ended up taking a most unscenic detour via Jerez de la Frontera, the journey taking nearer an hour. Fortunately, Laguna de Medina was worth the hassle, a most pleasant little wetland oasis in otherwise rolling agriculture. From the car park, Red-rumped Swallows buzzing into a culvert, then a stroll along the lakeside trail - Iberian Water Frogs croaking in small pools, Woodchat Shrikes on snags, Cetti's Warblers and Nightingales in full voice. On the pool itself, many birds bobbed - numerous Common Coots stretched into the distance, my now virtually ex-scope not assisting in a search for red-knobbed cousins. Still, much closer, compensation with up to 45 Red-crested Pochard, a half dozen White-headed Duck and at least 45 Black-necked Grebes. A pause in the hide added a few more birds, most notably a small colony of Spanish Sparrows busy in the reeds.

Then came the next bit of naffness for the day - my partner in crime realised they had left their wallet and money back in the hotel, dimball! Back we went, via the roadworks again, only to arrive to a locked and deserted hotel. Much banging and several phone calls later, a groggy voice appears on the intercom - they pressed a buzzer, we gave the door a good kick, so it opened. Oh well, back in Rota, thought it would be nice to revisit the botanical gardens to find more Chameleons in the sparkling sunshine. Rats, it was Monday and the gardens were closed!!!

Enough of this, hit the highway and cruised south all the way to Tarifa, a storming wind ensuring all the boat trips there were cancelled, so no chance of adding any dolphins to the trip. Hmm, what to do? A quick coffee in Tarifa town, admiring the Lesser Kestrels to and fro from the town's castle, then a stroll along the town's beach. This is where the day took a distinct upturn - after a lengthy stroll with nothing much to note, a group of distant terns was spotted loafing on the beach. Another ten minutes and I was bunkered down on the beach admiring them, 45 Sandwich Terns and one stonking yellow bill in the middle of them - a Spanish rarity, one Lesser Crested Tern, very nice indeed. Though this beach is the single best locality for them in Spain, the records tend to be few and far between, most typically limited to a handful of records per spring. With time to kill, we now backtracked to La Janda, extensive grasslands a little to the west of Tarifa - excellent for birds, but blighted by the encroachment of hundreds of wind turbines, a criminal intrusion into such a vital area for raptors and storks. Most famed for its huge stork concentrations at migration times, the area still nonetheless was rich in birds, particularly the areas further inland, beyond the wind farms. Amongst many birds seen, raptors galore - a number of Black Kites, a Montagu's Harrier, two Short-toed Eagles, four Booted Eagles, three Egyptian Vulture and several Griffon Vultures, a bird at every turn. Also numerous White Storks, one busy in the process of dispatching a snake, plus a Collared Pratincole and numerous Crested Larks, along with smaller numbers of Lesser Short-toed Larks and Calandra Larks. Also notched up two Large Psaammophonas, a welcome addition to the day's tally.

So the afternoon was nearing its end, where better to position myself than on the hills above Bolonia, adjacent to the famous swift cave. Site of the initial colonisation of Europe by both Little and White-rumped Swifts, both still breed in the cave and should I find the former, my quest for a 'five up' on the swifts this trip would be accomplished. A most scenic locality, it was also very nice for birds - Blue Rock Thrushes dashing about, Griffon Vultures drifting over almost constantly, a small passage of Honey Buzzards filtering in very late afternoon, late arrivals from the African continent just across the blue waters. All remained quiet at the cave. I however had little to fear - sunset should bring the swifts to roost & indeed it did - with an hour to spare, after watching countless Common and Pallid Swifts, in fluttered two Little Swifts, their aerial show lasting a good half hour, swooping in and out of the cave, one eventually disappearing in, not to return. Fabulous, all five swift species on a single trip!

With that, returned to Tarifa, had a drink and waited dark - the idea a nocturnal transit to our next destination, hopefully critters of the night to enhance the journey. The sun sank, we ventured off into the hills beyond Tarifa. Three hours slowly winding the tracks and trails, a Horseshoe Whip Snake the first major bonus, Red-necked Nightjars the next, a total of five seen, one photographed. Also one Turkish Gecko (complementing the Moorish Geckos already seen), one Common Toad and one Tawny Owl. Arrived late somewhere by a lake, slept in the car.

18 May. Ardenelles & Gibraltar.

Pleasing landscapes, impressive woodlands of cork oak, a morning of wandering the lanes of Los Alconarles, an expansive national park in the rugged hills to the north of Algeciras. Famed for its colonies of Griffon Vultures, I managed to see less here than almost anywhere else - a grand total of just 15 - but other raptors in abundance to compensate the shortfall - Short-toed Eagles, Booted Eagles and Honey Buzzards for starters, plus Lesser Kestrels nesting in the picturesque hilltop town of Alcala de Los Gazules. Another warm sunny day, this was very much an amble without purpose, stopping here and there to add woodland species such as Iberian Chiffchaffs and Western Bonelli's Warblers, Crested Tits and Nuthatches. In open heath, Dartford Warblers fed recently fledged young, while sunny glades added a variety of butterflies, Scarce Swallowtail, Clouded Yellow and Painted Lady prominent.

Nice though Los Alconarles was, I fancied a visit to a place of complete contrast - the little chunk of British territory, i.e. the Rock of Gibraltar. Pleasingly short delays on the border, then on into Little Britain, pounds the currency, signposts back in English. Truth be told, however, there is little to attract outside the migration period - the key attractions being Barbary Ape and Barbary Partridge, with additional chances of the odd seabird and, to lizard aficionados, Vaucher's Wall Lizard. Not much chance of the partridge in the heat of the day, so opted for the hike up to the summit of the rock. Under a sweltering sun, up the steep path we slaved, Sardinian Warblers and Blackcaps bouncing out of the scrub, Yellow-legged Gulls dive-bombing us when our route straddled their nesting colonies. Almost at the top, three thuggish 'security guards' blocking the final steps - none too friendly-looking Barbary Apes! And they would not budge! With a drop of some metres either side of the path, gravely squeezed path, a younger animal tugging our trouser legs, the bigger one snarling and bearing its teeth. Barbary Ape, well and truly seen! More at the top, lounging around waiting for food hand outs, one Blue Rock Thrush rather more timid.

A nice cup of tea in the café on top, then back down the path and over to Europa Point for a seavatch. One Vaucher's Wall Lizard sunning on some rubble, a lily pad sea doing all it could to ensure I would see no seabirds. Stuck it out an hour, mainly sunbathing, occasionally scanning the empty waters - two Gannets, one Scopoli's Shearwater, the final tally!!!

Departed Gibraltar late afternoon, what to do? Having seen the Iberian Lynx so quickly at the beginning of the trip, I now had a day to spare. It would be nice to finish this mini-trip on a high - so, a quick perusal of the map, off we went, another drive into the night to put us in an excellent spot for the dawn of our last day.

19 May, Coto Donana.

Dawn on the final day of this trip, the wilds of Coto Donana. The wilds however more resembled the 'Wild West' - the village of El Rocío buzzing with horsemen galloping through sandy streets and horse-drawn carts by the hundred clogging lanes and byways! Quite unknown to me, it was the annual gathering of the El Rocío Pilgrimage, throngs of persons and horse descending in colourful rampage.

Fortunately, just down the road, the delightful El Acebuche offered more to my appeal - the visitor centre of the mighty Coto Donana National Park, a destination that really should be on every Spanish itinerary. Azure-winged Magpies and Tree Sparrows jostled in the car park, White Storks and Spotless Starlings nested around the reserve centre. Still only 7.00 a.m., but temperatures were already 25 C, the day was going to be a real scorcher! Trails forked out, branching along a meander of a lost river, reeded pools and islands, then beyond to open heath and scrub. Nightingales belting out song, Golden Orioles adding melody, all was looking good. Relatively little on the pools - several Glossy Ibis paddling the shallows, Red-crested Pochards further out, a Little Bittern winging over the reeds, rather more birds in the woodland and heath - Short-toed Treecreepers and Serins in the pines, Hoopoes and Bee-eaters in more open areas and a bevy of little extras as the open heath approached - a Spectacled Warbler the highlight, Woodchat Shrikes and a Southern Grey Shrike also noted. As the sun continued to climb, raptors began to take to the air - amongst Black Kites, the first Red Kite of the day, plus a Booted Eagle and Short-toed Eagle. Reptiles also appearing - Moorish Geckos sunning on the side of hides, several Spiny-footed Lizards on the heath and, in the pools, Spanish Terrapins.

Nice as all this was, it was hardly the deeming masses of birds that Coto Donana is famed for, heron numbers a mere few Grey Herons and occasional passing Cattle Egret! I decided to seek out richer pickings, somewhere deeper in the Donana. With much of the reserve restricted access, the best hope seemed to lay a little further to the east - Jose Antonio Valverde Centre. Bumpy dirt roads is a bit of an understatement, the route to this excellent sector of Coto Donana was certainly a bone-shaker, the track at times having pot holes in the pot holes! In between crunching the bottom of the car and hitting the roof, a few most welcome avian distractions - a flock of 180 Black Kites on the ground, two more Red Kites, a number of Short-toed Eagles and, many kilometres later, as the Jose Antonio Valverde Centre finally began to appear on the horizon, increasing numbers of Black-winged Stilts and Avocets on roadside pools, plus an ever-increasing stream of Glossy Ibises heading towards the centre. Brushing dust from everywhere, the temperature now a staggering 36 C, we arrived ..and the centre was closed, a sign helpfully apologising, stating the El Rocío Pilgrimage as reason for the inconvenience! Having endured the track out, I was not to be deterred - popped over the closed gate and had a quick spy of the colony from the blinds adjacent to the centre. Pretty amazing colony, adorning bushes in all directions, draped over pools, hundreds and hundreds of Glossy Ibises on nests, stacks of Cattle Egrets and many dozen Night Herons, Purple Herons and assorted extras, including Spoonbills and a couple of pairs of Squacco Herons. A feast for the eyes, the centre's tea shop unfortunately also closed, so not on the palate.

Retreating to the car, I then moved a couple of hundred metres further to the west, the road crossing an extensive area of marshland and shallow flooded meadow. Brimming with birds, Glossy Ibises feeding galore, birds back and fro from the colony non-stop. Also all the other herons and egrets, Night Herons especially still very active despite the heat. Whiskered Terns hawked, occasional Gull-billed Terns also flying by, plus Little Grebes, Coots and Moorhens. A little distant, a passing Marsh Harrier flushed a flock of waders - Ringed Plovers and Dunlins, a few Avocet, but beyond them rose another mega flock of Collared Pratincoles, perhaps 450 in all, an impressive sight as they hawked in unison. Spent a good couple of hours here, enjoying the spectacle and sun, a glorious combination.

Eventually, mid-afternoon, thoughts began to turn to the end of the trip, it was time to turn tail and head for Malaga, our flight out of Spain scheduled for late evening. Time to pop into a small reserve on the way back, a colony of 300 or so White Storks scattered across a hillside of olive trees, then a race back across Andalusia to drop into Malaga for early evening - squeezed in a quick visit to the Rio Guadalorce reserve near the airport, adding several more White-headed Ducks, plus Bee-eaters and, a touch of exotica, a half dozen Monk Parakeets.

Went to the airport, checked in, trip over …or so I thought!

11.30 p.m., a slight delay to scheduled departure, technical issues. Midnight, pilot announces he wishes to do a test

flight. Half an hour later cancellation is announced, we were going nowhere! Courtesy of Easy Jet, we are taken to a very nice hotel for the night, by far the most plush place I have seen in a while.

20-22 May. Rule Britannia, Puffins & Co.

Enormous breakfast, courtesy of Easy Jet, then back to the airport, rescheduled flight at 10.30 a.m. All went to plan, but of course arrived in Bristol well after our flight to Lithuania had departed, we were stranded.

With the sun enjoying a rare fiesta in Britain, decided upon a small bonus break - purchased new tickets for three days later, then headed off on a British twist to end the trip. Highlight, a day on Skomer Island, seabirds a rare treat for me these days. Puffins by the thousand, bobbing on the waters, sitting outside their burrows, Guillemots and Razorbills crowding the cliffs, all the familiar birds of this stunning island. Above bluebell meadows, on a day when by rights I should have been working, Short-eared Owls spiralled down, mobbing a Red Kite that appeared overhead. With Choughs and Peregrine, Grey Seals and Slow Worms, a most pleasing way to conclude a spectacular trip.

Eventually, some days later than expected, indeed we arrived back in Lithuania, me rather penniless having also managed to pop into Ace Optics and buy a new telescope!