

Mallorca 2012

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Club Med, sunny holiday isle. But so much more - Eleonora's Falcons and Balearic Warblers heading an impressive cast of birds, all seen in the stunning settings of the Serre de Tramuntana mountains and coastal cliffs of the Formentor Peninsula. Also Moltoni's Warbler, Black Vulture and a feast of owls. Add in the rural delights of the interior and the rich wetlands of S'Albufera, home to the likes of Marbled Teal and Purple Swamphens, and the result was a most fine short break.

Basic itinerary

The idea of this trip was just to savour the best of Mallorca, focussing on the excellent sites in the north-east of the island. The target birds were Eleonora's Falcon and Balearic Warbler, the latter a new species for me following its split from Marmora's Warbler. Additionally, Black Vulture and Moltoni's Warbler were also much desired, the latter also a new species following its split from Sub-alpine Warbler.

10 May. Transit in Germany, late evening arrival in Mallorca. Drive to Alcudia for a four-night stay. 11 May. Early morning hike through the Boquer Valley, exploration of the Formentor Peninsula. Afternoon visit to S'Albufera, walking the trails nearest the reserve centre. Evening hike on the coastal heaths of Son Real. 12 May. Multi-hour hike around S'Albufera, walking the 12 km perimeter trail, plus the area around the visitor centre. Afternoon visit to the lowland agricultural plains of the interior, focussing on the Es Blanquer north of Maria de la Salut. Evening visit to the small wetland at Albufereta, then an excellent night safari taking random lanes inland of Son Real. 13 May. Day in the impressive Serra de Tramuntana mountains, hiking in the area around the Cuber reservoir and then touring the mountains further north and south. An evening visit to Port de Pollenca was aborted due to a sudden unexpected thunderstorm. 14 May. An early morning return to the Boquer Valley, hiking to the coast. Later, walked again in the S'Albufera wetlands, before driving to the south of the island to explore the Salobrar de Campos salt pans. Late evening flight out of Mallorca, an onboard medical drama resulting in an emergency landing in Milan, the result being a rather long stay-over in Italy! Daily Log 10 May. Arrival In Mallorca. Transit in a German airport, a prospect I thought would be about as interesting as taking a stroll in a supermarket car park. Not quite so at Baden Baden - literally five minutes from the terminal and I was in a world of forest, tracks and trails meandering through endless mosaics of pine and deciduous woodlands. Glorious sunshine to boot, saw all the usual woodland species, plus a nice Black Woodpecker (actually within the airport), one Sand Lizard and a Red Squirrel. So nice was my wander in fact that I got lost, ending up in a village far from the airport and having to ask directions back! Onward and arrival in Mallorca, late evening with the sun dipping, oodles of Common Swifts screeching around the airport, picked up a rental car and drove the 60 km or so to the resort town of Alcudia, my base for the next four nights. Rather problematic trying to locate the apartment I had booked, but stopping for the umpteenth time to ask, I heard a shrill hooting emanating from a few pines on a traffic island. Low and behold, two fledgling Long-eared Owls bleating out their pleas for food. Nice start. Found my apartment, prepared myself for the next few days. 11 May. Boquer Valley, S'Albufera & Son Real. Up at 5.30 a.m., a pre-dawn drive through the deserted streets of Alcudia and Port de Pollenca to a small stony car park at the beginning of the Formentor peninsula, the start point for my hike through the Boquer Valley. With the sun still to rise above the high mountain crags, a soft semi-light illuminated the path ahead, Sardinian Warblers rattling out their trills and Cirl Buntings singing from fence posts. A couple of Spotted Flycatchers of the Balearic race sat adorning the walls of an old finca, right smart birds - smaller than the mainland race, a pale forehead and almost totally unstreaked below. Surely a candidate for species status. Still not really light enough for much in the way of photographs, I continued on, the walk taking me about four kilometres to a picturesque cove on the opposite side of the peninsula. On these slopes, the endemic Balearic Warbler resides, a species frequently elusive and reportedly not always easy to find. I surveyed the terrain around, low scrub hugging the hillsides, slightly thicker in the valley bottom - this could be quite a search ahead! Sardinian Warbler remained abundant, Stonechats chattered away from prominent twigs, Blackbirds popped out here and there. Just ten minutes into my search, focussing on a area that 'looked right', a little rattling song caught my attention, a slight change of direction and there flitted a small sylvia, a dark long-tailed midget of a bird disappearing into a thick clump. I circled round and sat overlooking the spot, a short wait then rewarded by a splendid male Balearic Warbler hopping out onto bare stoney ground just metres in front. And just then, the sun rose above the ridge, illuminating the little beauty in all its glory. Intent on searching out little insects, the bird paid no attention to my presence, approaching to barely a metre at one stage. And then he caught a juicy spider, flitted up

and vanished into a thicket just beyond. Out he came and pretty much repeated the actions, feeding on the ground and low in bushes, catching prey then returning to the clump, a female also doing likewise. I had stumbled upon a nest site, but as it seemed of no concern to the birds, I remained and watched for a while. 9.00 a.m., warm and sunny, the key bird of the trip already seen and photographed. Could it get any better? Em, yes. With the Balearic Warblers still busy just yonder, a shrill cry began to fill the skies. Overhead, rising from the cliffs opposite, a swirl of falcons ... Eleonora's Falcons, eight in all. Splendid, these birds were literally just arriving from their African wintering homes, so my timing was perfect. Round and round they went, dark-phase birds in their midst, elegant all. Many hundreds of Common Swifts too, plus hirundines zooming through. My walk back through the Boquer Valley added a few more species, a Woodchat Shrike the highlight, plus dozens and dozens of Serins singing from pines and orchards at the valley's bottom. I photographed the Spotted Flycatchers at the finca, then returned to base to pick up my co-travellers for a trip along the Formentor Peninsula. Stunningly beautiful, and a migration hot-spot, but Formentor did not really produce many birds on my visit - too late for the main movements of raptors, too early for the flocks of Eleonora's Falcons that frequent the end from later in the month. Still, a very nice spot for an ice-cream and one pale-phase Booted Eagle was nice. At the tip, a very distant Eleonora's Falcon did put in a brief appearance and, amongst much larger numbers of Common Swifts, I found my only Pallid Swifts of the trip - at least three birds hawking the clifftops around the lighthouse. Also added Clouded Yellow and Swallowtail butterflies and a few other odds and ends. It was now past midday and I fancied my first visit to the S'Albufera wetlands, a few minutes south of Alcudia. Swelteringly hot, plenty of tourists milling the paths, and certainly I did not feel like taking the multi-kilometre hike around perimeter trail, but still what a magical little oasis this is - concentrating on the area around the visitor centre and wandering out to a couple of nearby hides, my couple of hours here just about cleared up on all the specialities - to the backdrop of the gurgling of Cattle and Little Egrets in a busy colony, highlights included several Red-knobbed Coots amongst their more common cousins, four smart Marbled Ducks resting on a bank and a pair of chunky Purple Swamphens stalking tourists on a path. Equally nice, albeit an assault on the ears, bucketloads of Cetti's Warblers richoceting their songs from thickets all around, Nightingales trying to keep up, and a general background hullabaloo of Serins, Sardinian Warblers, assorted frogs and the occasional oop-oo-oo of Hoopoes. Even managed a few moments amongst the sun-worshippers on the nearby beach, carefully directing my telephoto lens past the topless bathers to a couple of rather stonking Audouin's Gulls loafing between the many tourist groups. Very obliging they were too. Coffee and ice-cream in town, then a journey of a few kilometres to the south, the evening's entertainment to take place at Son Real, an excellent area of coastal heath and pine forest. A gentle meander of a few kilometres, this was a pure delight - fragrant pine and flowers, a rich melody of birdsong and an excellent range of breeding species from start to finish. Nightingales, Turtle Dove and Hoopoe, no less than four Woodchat Shrikes, both Corn and Cirl Buntings, Woodlark and Thekla Lark, Serins all over the place, the list went on. As the broken woodland opened to coastal heath, so the variety of birds continued, Sardinian Warblers and Stonechats rattling and chacking, a couple of Tawny Pipits sitting atop bushes, Kentish Plovers strutting the beachfront. Didn't manage to find any Balearic Warblers here, supposedly common, but as the sun began to dip to the horizon, a Wryneck singing from a pine, I was content enough, day one had been most fine.

12 May. S'Albufera, Es Blanquer and Nocturnal Wanders. Dawn on the S'Albufera marshes, a hint of mist across the vale, a riot of songsters in full volume - Nightingales, Cetti's Warblers and Serins galore, a couple of grating Great Reed Warblers and the ever-present Sardinian Warblers in the mix too. Opting for the four-hour hike around the perimeter trail, the heron list was soon soaring - a constant to and fro of Cattle Egrets and Little Egrets to their colony, a few Night Herons returning from their nighttime sorties, my first Squacco Herons of the day, plus a Grey Heron flopping its way across the marsh. soon added Great White Egret, three on shallow pools, then Purple Heron as one rose from extensive reeds. Though the 12 km of the perimeter trail does not in reality offer that much more than the main trails nearer the reserve headquarters, it was certainly a very pleasant experience ... bar the slipping through a cattle grid with a near one-metre drop beneath, nicely jamming and twisting my thigh between the bars! Rather painful, leaving me with a hobble for the remainder of the day! That aside, plenty more birds, including two Stone Curlews, a couple more Squacco Herons, three fly-over Purple Herons, a booming Bittern (eighth species of heron) and a nice pair of Glossy Ibis, all more than compensating for the long walk. Also a total of four Moustached Warblers, two Common Waxbills and a variety of waders, including a flock of 35 Wood Sandpipers. Nearing the end of the walk, now late morning, a treat indeed lay in store - as I lingered on a bridge, Red-knobbed Coot and Purple Swamphen adjacent, so arrived Eleonora's Falcons to hawk above the marsh, dragonflies on the menu for a late breakfast. At least ten in all, again light-phase birds in the predominance, a most impressive showing they put on, repeated close-quarter fly-overs, then high passes and arcs off to hunt the reedbed just yonder. One Booted Eagle and several Marsh Harriers too, it made for a good place to sit and enjoy the sun for a half hour and more. With the day turning into a real scorcher, and a quick scoot along the beach failing to produce any Audouin's Gulls this day, I decided to kill the hot hours with a lazy tour of the rolling plains of the interior, focussing on the agricultural plains of Es Blanquer, taking a random zigzag of tracks and byroads north of the village of Maria de la Salut. In the heat of the early afternoon, it was never going to bustle with birds, but a nice enough selection all the same - Corn Buntings and Serins at every turn, singing Short-toed Larks and breeding Yellow Wagtails here and there. Also a Quail calling from the depth of a barley field, a couple of Woodchat Shrikes and plentiful Stonechats and, in wooded copse, Nightingales in song regardless of the time of day. In skies above, humungous numbers of Common Swifts, but hope as I might, the only raptors I managed were six Kestrels and one Booted Eagle. Added a short tour of a couple of the quaint towns in this region and then headed back to the coast, stopping en route for about an hour at the small wetland of Albufereta - relatively disappointing, a motley mix of waders and ducks scattered across a couple of pools, one Stone Curlew and three Purple Swamphens about the best of the bunch. Ahead however lay a nocturnal wander. As the hours of darkness fell, I purchased a little torch and set off along the lanes in a broad sweep inland from Son Real. And most excellent it was. To a backdrop of calling Scops Owls and the eerie wails of Stone Curlews, my few hours not only produced a splendid Barn Owl, but

also several close-quarter Long-eared Owls. Magnificent views of all, a Long-eared Owl even appearing on a fence post adjacent to the Barn Owl at one point. Also added a new mammal species for me, one Algerian Hedgehog shuffling along, a very pale leggy critter. 13 May. Serra de Tramuntana. Tramuntana mountains, impressive 1000 metre peaks, contorted roads winding their way up through fragrant pine forests and picturesque vistas. Another dawn start, my destination was the Cuber reservoir, a beautiful locality boasting a mix of shrubby grasslands, oak woodland and craggy mountain slope. Chaffinches by the bucketload on the drive up, Yellow-legged Gulls loafing on the water on arrival, but the birds I much desired this day were the large and small - Black Vultures hopefully overhead, Moltoni's Warbler on the hillsides. A warm pleasant morning, I began my walk, a slow clockwise circuit of the lake, a few kilometres in all. Serins trilling from trees around, Sardinian Warblers in their usual frequency, one Wryneck very vocal in woodland on the slope. With much zigzagging to try to find Sylvia warblers (both Moltoni's and Spectacled Warblers occur here), my progress was less than speedy, but very nice it was - one Tawny Pipit on a rocky slope, several Spotted Flycatchers in stunted trees, Nightingales in fair abundance. And then, a little short of the main dam, a distinctive churring coming from the adjacent hillside - trrrr trrrr, but clearly Sylvia in origin. Minutes later, a slight clamber to reach the point, and there he was, a most resplendant Moltoni's Warbler in all his glory. Very active, very showy and very keen on singing in full view, this little corker frequently flitted up to the overhead electric wires to belt out a little song, before rapidly moving on a few dozen metres to repeat the performance. Good views, but nigh on impossible to get more than a few fleeting photographs. Also located a female, far more secretive, preferring to stick to low tussocks, and a little later another male, this one further up the slope. And then, just as I sat admiring this bird, so appeared a spectacular giant of a bird - my first Black Vulture of the day, an individual circling low over the reservoir, then throwing in a few flaps to gain altitude and hug the crags a while before rising yet more and vanishing over the ridge. Another Wryneck calling, several Stonechats too, plus abundant Common Swifts filling the sky. Two hours into my walk, I finally crossed the dam and began a quiet stroll through the small stands of holm oak. Blue Tits of the Balearic race, brief glimpses of Firecrests, one Booted Eagle rising on thermals. By midday, I was back at the car. Two more Black Vultures drifted along the ridge, the Wryneck continued to sing adjacent. For a Mediterranean holiday island, I was more than impressed, this really was an interesting spot. Spent the next couple of hours exploring by car, adding a couple more Black Vultures before finally getting totally jammed between a bunch of buses that idiotically had decided to go down the narrow road to Cala Tuent, a serpentine twist of hairpins. Sat in a huff as the buses inched backwards for a half hour and more, then when finally free took a quick walk across a ridge to take in the views. No more birds of note this afternoon, and my ideas of an evening tracking down Scop's Owls in the area around Port Pollenca came to an abrupt end with the sudden arrival of a storm, wind whipping up from no where, a torrential downpour sending me scurrying. End of day three. 14 May. Boquer Valley, S'Albufera & Salobrar de Campos. The final day, and what better way to start than a return to the Boquer Valley. Managed to get some nice photographs of the Balearic race Spotted Flycatchers at the finca, then enjoyed a pleasant walk down the valley - three Blue Rock Thrushes en route, plus a few late migrants, Common Redstart and Whinchat about the best. Glorious sunshine again, and at the lip of the valley, the pair of Balearic Warblers were as confiding as a couple of days earlier, now zipping in and out of a new bush with food, it would seem fledged youngsters lurked unseen. Sat and watched them a while, a Sardinian Warbler surprising me by apparently bringing food in to feed to the Balearic Warblers on two occasions. Overhead, no Eleonora's Falcons this morning, but a Bonelli's Eagle low over the ridge was a bonus indeed. With ideas of visiting the south of the island, I returned about 10 a.m. to give myself time for a quick walk around the trails near the reserve headquarters at S'Albufera. Red-knobbed Coot and Purple Swamphen both with chicks, Red-crested Pochard too, plus the usual assortment of herons and egrets, to mention rather many boisterous groups of noisy Spanish school children! Highlight however was a most fine Viperine Snake sunbathing on a stone wall, a European Pond Turtle also seen to add to the reptile list. And with that, it was off to the south of the island, a stop in a bakery en route and another for ice-cream. Mid-afternoon, temperatures sitting nicely at about 30 C, I rolled into the semi-arid environs of Salobrar de Campos, a locality best known for a series of extensive salt pans stretching for a few kilometres. With two main access routes, I did the first by car, the second on foot. Oodles of Avocets, cute chicks with snub noses most entertaining. Also bucketloads of Black-winged Stilts, quite a collection of Curlew Sandpipers and a variety of other waders from nesting Kentish Plovers to small flocks of passage Ruffs and Wood Sandpipers. Also Marsh Harriers in regular attendance, a good hundred or so Greater Flamingoes and plenty of other birds, including Shelducks on several pans, a couple of Water Rails nipping across a track and, on the passerine front, both Zitting Cisticola and Woodchat Shrike. And with that, off towards the airport I went, arriving for my evening flight out. A very nice short break it had been, time to relax and savour the delights of Ryan Air and its coffee. One hour into the flight, a minor commotion on board, stewardesses running down the aisle and several rather worried looking faces. A passenger had collapsed and was gravely ill. Plane detoured and an emergency landing in Milan. Unplanned landings wreak havoc for flight plans and paperwork - even once the passenger was transferred to a waiting ambulance, it was a good few hours before we could again take to the air.