

Autumnal Andalusia 2017, Butterflies & Migration.

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September in Andalusia, raptors across the Strait of Gibraltar, flocks of Greater Flamingoes and other waterbirds on the salt pans, a fantastic array of traditional resident species across the region. However, for me, the main focus of this four-day trip was the search for several late season butterflies, most specifically Two-tailed Pasha, Geranium Bronze and the highly localised Desert Orange Tip and Zeller's Skipper. Despite September being way past the peak butterfly season, I did still manage to see a total of 22 species, including all my targets, plus some additional bonuses such as European Chameleon and a good range of birds, including impressive raptor movements and some highly desirable species such as Rüppell's Vulture, Long-legged Buzzard and Bald Ibis.

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2 September. Montril, Sierra Nevada & Alcornocales. No direct flights to southern Spain from Lithuania, so I arrived in Madrid just after midnight, picked up a rental car and hit the road, a 500-600 km drive ahead to the south coast. Itinerary was open – if tired, I'd start with relatively closer sites near Grenada, then work westward over the coming days, if not drive direct to the more distant Sanlúcar area and reverse the planned route. As it was, a couple of hours south of Madrid, I opted for the Grenada sites, parking up for a couple of hours snooze in the car, then arriving in the area a couple of hours after sunrise. My target was Desert Orange Tip, a fairly recent colonist from North Africa, now established as a rare butterfly on hot arid hillsides along the extreme southern fringes of Spain. Numbers get hit a bit each winter, then rise through the summer months to reach peak numbers in early autumn. To the best of my knowledge, the slopes between Granada and Motril might be productive. This said, butterflies sure didn't seem very abundant. Meandering around random tracks and byways, the immediate impression was of a total lack of butterflies of any sort! A few Bee-eaters drifting about, one Booted Eagle overhead, but as for butterflies, it took me over an hour to find even the first individual ...and that was a Marbled Skipper. Finally, quite some time later, having seen not a single additional butterfly of any sort, I got lucky - taking a small track below the Embalse de Béznar, I stumbled across a steep rocky bank with assorted flowers ... and there, no less than three Desert Orange Tips! Delicate butterflies and far smaller than I was expecting, these were very nice indeed, a just reward for so much effort. Quite mobile, it was some time more before I managed to get half decent photographs. One Small White here too. I seemed to be on something of a roll, a mere ten minutes later, I found myself another new butterfly in the form of Striped Graylings, six of these exquisite butterflies active in a patch of pine forest just up the hill from the Desert Orange Tips. With the day still young, my plan was now to explore the nearby Sierra Nevada massive for any late season butterflies flying. An endemic hotspot, these mountains rising to 3500 metre support numerous species in the summer months, but my trip was basically a waste of time – the tops were cloaked in clouds! Pretty sure if the weather had played ball, I would have got some nice stuff up here, this emphasised by the immediate appearance of several Cardinals in a brief spell of sunshine. With no real prospect of the tops clearing anytime soon, I abandoned the mountains and headed west to the sunny lands north of Algeciras, 32 C and not a cloud in the sky. Destination was the Alcornocales National Park, more specifically the dam at the Embalse del Guadarranque. Here, in wooded vales and rolling hills, I hoped to find my main target of the trip, Two-tailed Pasha, Europe's largest butterfly. All started well enough with a brief spot aside a stream some kilometres short of the destination - three Monarchs the reward, gracefully gliding back and fro occasionally settling on flowers or a hedgerow to sun. Then however, a slight glitch to the plan – all access to the dam area was now blocked, the roads all fenced off with clear signs warning of no access! More than a slight glitch actually, it totally stuffed my plans ...this was the only stake-out I had for Two-tailed Pasha in Spain! Wandered the area for a while, added a Southern Gatekeeper and two Holly Blues, but certainly no Two-tailed Pasha! Gave up after a while and wandered up to the nearby Castillo de Castellar – pretty scenic place to end the day, dozens of Griffon Vultures low overhead, plus a few butterflies too, four Southern Gatekeepers included, one Common Blue and a Marbled Skipper too. As the sun set, with a number of White Storks adorning nests in the area, I headed to Algeciras and booked into a hotel. Time to device a Plan B for Two-tailed Pashas! 3 September. Gibraltar, Tarifa & La Janda. Having lucked out with Two-tailed Pasha the day before, thought I would try again this day by crossing the border into Gibraltar to visit the botanical gardens, another site supposedly good for them. With the border between this British territory and Spain infamous for endless delays, magically getting worse when political tensions rise, I had considered leaving the car in Spain and walking across, but in the event opted for a sunrise crossing, hoping no normal folk would have the same ideas on a Sunday morning ...and indeed they didn't, the entire border crossing took all of two minutes! The botanical gardens, on the western flanks of the rock, are shaded till about 10 a.m., so went down to Europa Point for a while (nothing seen), then parked near the

gardens and strolled around to get my bearings. As the sun edged over the rock, some butterfly activity & Small Whites here and there, a bunch of Lang's Short-tailed Blues on small flowers near the entrance. And then amongst them, something rather better, two very nice Geranium Bronzes, cracking little butterflies, even if they shouldn't really be in Europe & accidentally introduced onto the Balearic Islands in the late 1980's from South Africa, they have since spread across Spain, southern France and even to the Canary Islands. Little crackers however. As the sun finally broke over the rock, I positioned myself in a central area of the park, stuck out a few rotting apples as potential bait and waited. For not very many minutes & suddenly a couple of very impressive Two-tailed Pashas were gliding back and fro, settling on trunks to take in the sun. And then there were four! Highly mobile and generally landing at height, they were stunners nonetheless. Totally ignored my apple baits, but then I noticed they were attracted by a few rotting apples still hanging in a nearby tree. Bit high for photographs, but I did get a few shots. Nearby, a number of Monarchs gathered around a Milkweed bush, while a couple of Speckled Woods found my apples. Had thoughts of lingering a while till they dropped down to my positioned apples, but a cap of cloud had stubbornly fixed itself to the top of Gibraltar Rock, cutting much of the sun to the garden and lowering activity. but the Two-tailed Pashas generally became fairly inactive, bar one doing a short flight to land on my face! Monarchs on flowers, a few flocks of Booted Eagles drifting over, Barbary Apes visible high on the rock, but with blue skies stretching for kilometres in all directions, I decided it was time to move on, crossing the border back into Spain and thereafter to the Tarifa area. With light easterlies, high temperature, clear skies and views across to Morocco, conditions were perfect for mass raptor movements across the Strait of Gibraltar, all the more so as weather fronts in northern Spain had cleared that had been blocking significant filtering down of species in preceding days. Joining 20 or 30 observers at the Cazalla migration point, the skies above were a picture indeed & swirling kettles of Black Kites to either side, a mass stream of Honey Buzzards streaming south and a healthy dose of Booted Eagles and Short-tailed Eagles too, one Osprey low overhead. And that is exactly how it remained the entire day, an absolute non-stop treat of at least 2000 Honey Buzzards and similar numbers of Black Kites, along with hundreds of Booted Eagles and Short-toed Eagles and many dozens of Egyptian Vultures. Equally remarkable, truly a sight for sore eyes, thousands of White Storks & appearing in mass flocks from early afternoon, each would thermal over the beachline, a glittering show of blacks and whites, continually gradually edging east before streaming out over the sea to make the crossing to Africa. Perhaps 3500 during the afternoon, all but the last few flocks heading out to sea, the last 500 or so bottling out and heading off west to presumably try on a later day. A few Black Storks too, about 18 in all, and hugging the ridges, a steady procession of Montagu's and Marsh Harriers, a dozen or so of the first, including a rather spectacular melanistic individual, and perhaps 20 of the latter. With quite a number of Sparrowhawks and Lesser Kestrels, and frequent Bee-eaters, it really was quite a remarkable day! And for the crowning glory, a juvenile Spanish Imperial Eagle had the good grace to put in an appearance, certainly adding spice as it plummeted landward into the valley beneath us, presumably an eye on a hapless rabbit or something. A Swallowtail drifting by certainly played second fiddle! About 6.30 pm, with no real let up in the stream of Honey Buzzards passing over, I decided to call it a day and head over to the legendary La Janda, a site famous for wetland birds and raptors. Wasn't here for birds though & my target was Zeller's Skipper, a very localised butterfly that is easiest to find in its final generation of the year, September to October. Only rediscovered in Spain in 2001 after decades of being lost, or overlooked, it is now known to occur in several pockets in the extreme south of Spain. I didn't have any exact spots, but given the extremely dry and parched landscape, almost totally devoid of greenery beyond the rice paddies, let alone flowers, it seemed all I had to do was find some suitable nectar plants and then hopefully the butterflies. Stacks of White Storks here, plus a single Marbled Teal and a freshly crashed aeroplane (!), but precious little in the way of flowers. After a bit, however, I did find a line of small flowering shrubs along a main drainage ditch ...and there, as hoped, a small colony of Zeller's Skippers!

Exceptionally mobile and flitty, getting a photograph was challenging to say the least, almost always they zipped off as soon as I got anywhere near. Still, I got a few shots and also found a Long-tailed Blue to finish things off nicely. With three of my main butterflies seen this day (Geranium Bronze, Two-tailed Pasha and Zeller's Skipper), I was really celebrating the end of an excellent day. 4 September. Tarifa, La Janda & Barbate. Shift in the winds this day, quite blustery westerlies being the order of the day. For raptor migration, sites closer to Algeciras are generally considered better in such conditions, and indeed they did seem so, a relatively brief stop at one of these sites seeing quite a number of assorted Honey Buzzards, Booted Eagles and Short-toed Eagles very low overhead. I however preferred the Cazalla viewpoint, so ignoring the conditions returned there. As predicted, quiet in comparison with the day before, but a steady trickle of raptors overhead, with Short-toed Eagles in no short supply. Certainly Griffon Vultures were very evident - not migrating, but drifting about in the hills behind the viewpoint. And it was amongst these that the main attraction of the day was to occur. Some top notch Spanish birders man this site daily and there I was busily gazing at raptors passing in front when a garble of Spanish words floated across accompanied by a scramble of scopes and chairs realigning - and in the middle of the mish-mash of Spanish words, one quite comprehensible stood out ...rueppellii! Enough to get me swivelling round - four Griffon Vultures were circling over the hillside to our rear and, immediately above them, a distinctively smaller darker looking vulture - low and behold, a Rüppell's Vulture. Not bad, it circled around for about ten minutes before drifting off to the east. Some short time later, I drifted off to the west, first returning to La Janda to have another look at the Zeller's Skippers, adding a Mediterranean Skipper in the same locality, as well as Small Copper and Clouded Yellow, then after a few photographs, headed a little south to the Barbate area where I hoped to find the Bald Ibises ...no luck initially, though did find an immense number of Audouin's Gulls roosting on some salt pans and a rather impressive Long-legged Buzzard just nearby. Didn't find the Bald Ibises early on as I expected them to be out on the slightly wilder hillsides along the coast ...where I did finally find them was amongst a bunch of cattle almost within Barbate itself!

Densely packed cattle and bunches of Cattle Egrets and Bald Ibises plodding their way through, nice! A grand total of 21 Bald Ibises seen in all, one thoughtfully wandering onto the verge adjacent to my car. From here, I headed further west,

stopping at Laguna de Medina near Jerez. Not quite sure why I did this, been there once before and didn't like it. Got there this time and didn't like it again! Temperature of 35 C probably didn't help, but bar a bunch of Red-rumped Swallows, saw next to zilch, no birds of note, no butterflies. Couldn't be bothered to go anywhere else, so went to Jerez and found a hotel, called it a day at the relatively early hour of 5 pm. 5 September. Sanlúcar, Rota & the Sierra de Grazalema. Final day, a pleasant few hours around the extensive salt pans and associated pools in the San Lucar area. Almost immediately was in the midst of Greater Flamingoes and Slender-billed Gulls, richly dotted with Avocets here and there, assorted other waders, a Night Heron on an embankment and numerous other species. On a small pool sandwiched between farm plots and shacks, stacks of Cattle and Little Egrets, a bunch of Squacco Herons and one Little Bittern, two White-headed Ducks too. Red Kite nearby, occasional Booted Eagles drifting over. Could have spent longer here, but a few kilometres south I had a little unfinished business - some four or five years earlier, plans to look for European Chameleon came to zilch when I arrived at a preferred locality for them about ten minutes after it closed! No such problem this time! With the temperature reaching 35 C, I arrived at the gates of the small Celestino Mutis botanical garden in Rota and almost immediately spotted a Lang's Short-tailed Blue fluttering around flowers high in a bush. Peering up at this butterfly, a green shape materialised midway up the bush ...green with goggle eyes swivelling around! At truly a snail's pace, this rather stunning Chameleon put on a fine show, stalking insects at one end of the bush for a while, then clamoring down branches to slowly relocate to the opposite side of the bush. And with that, my trip was nearly over - just the small matter of a 600 km drive back to Madrid. With some time to spare, I diverted to the stunning limestone landscapes of the Sierra de Grazalema in the hope a few final butterflies. Late afternoon, 36 C, Griffon Vultures hanging across the ridges, precious few other birds active, but a nice walk anyhow. A couple of Southern Gatekeepers, a few Meadow Browns and two Small Coppers along the way and then, as departing, the final treat of the trip - a splendid Iberian Scarce Swallowtail attending flowers in the nearby village. Time to go, back to Madrid, arrived a little before midnight, trip over. BUTTERFLY LIST

Marbled Skipper. One north of Montril, one in Alcornodales National Park Zeller's Skipper. Colony of about eight aside a canal at La Janda, another couple of individuals a few hundred metres further along. Mediterranean Skipper. Two at La Janda, same locality as the Zeller's Skippers. Swallowtail. One at the Cazalla viewpoint, Tarifa. Iberian Scarce Swallowtail. One at flowers in a village at Llanos de Libar. Small White. One north of Montril, at least six in the botanical garden on Gibraltar. Large White. One in the botanical garden, Gibraltar. Clouded Yellow. One at La Janda. Desert Orange Tip. Three on a rocky slope beneath the EXXX, north of Montril. Monarch. Three in Alcornodales National Park, seven in the Gibraltar botanical gardens. Two-tailed Pasha. Four attracted to rotting fruits in the botanical gardens on Gibraltar. Cardinal. Five at altitude in the Sierra Nevada mountains. Striped Grayling. Six in an area of oines beneath the EXXX, north of Montril. Meadow Brown. Two in Alcornodales National Park, four at La Janda and about 15 at Llanos de Libar. Southern Gatekeeper. Five in Alcornodales National Park, two at Llanos de Libar. Speckled Wood. Two in the botanical gardens on Gibraltar. Small Copper. One at La Janda, two at Llanos de Libar. Long-tailed Blue. One at La Janda. Lang's Short-tailed Blue. At least 25 in the botanical gardens on Gibraltar, two at La Janda, one at the Celestino Mutis botanical garden. Holly Blue. Two in Alcornodales National Park. Common Blue. One in Alcornodales National Park, one at La Janda. Geranium Bronze. Three in the botanical gardens on Gibraltar.
(22 species)