

100+ Birds Costa del Sol Birding Challenge (2016.03.08)
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Derek and Barbara Etherton, Andalucia Bird Society's "Birds of Andalucia" Magazine editors, suggested this 100+ challenge in Malaga province. Of course I accepted...

(See the complete list of birds here: <http://www.birdaytrip.es/blog/item/546-100-birds-costa-del-sol-birding-challenge-malaga-andalucia-southern-spain-2016-03-08>)

The plan was visiting every one of our different natural environments in Malaga in order to spot the higher possible number of species in one single birding day. So an enthusiastic group composed by Barbara and Derek Etherton, Mick Smith and myself, headed to the Montes de Malaga from our meeting point at 5:30 with the first of the birds identified in the car parking at Plaza Mayor: a very early White Wagtail!

We got at Lagar de Torrijos (Montes de Malaga Nature Reserve) at around 6:30. Only 3°C outside and a light air under a gorgeous clean starry sky. The aim of that early arrival was to record the Tawny Owl so we got closer to a pine tree stand where they use to hoot before dawn. Five minutes later, the first hoot came out.

-Let's go back to the car- I suggested... Not surprisingly, nobody argued about it!

The Tawny Owl kept hooting for a long time. When the windows started to steam up, Mick alerted of the presence of an animal walking by the car. Derek's powerful torch showed us it was an indifferent Fox going into the owl's pine stand. The day break was very close and we got out the car ready to record a lot of birds around Torrijos farmhouse. Robins and Blackbirds were among the first to call in the morning. Then Firecrest, Coal and Great Tit, Cirl Bunting, Wren, Wood Pigeon, Short-toed Treecreeper, Nuthatch, Spotless Starlin and Blue Tit.

The first bird in high flight was a Sparrowhawk that was soon followed by another one. And then some more couples in flight over the hills surrounding the area. Finches began to move. First the common Chaffinch and then, on the big poplars, the first Hawfinch followed by Siskin, Serin, Goldfinch and, finally, Common Crossbill. A Great Spotted Woodpecker also visited the tree while the Green Woodpecker was calling like crazy in the close surroundings.

We then had a walk around the house to find Blackcap, some thrushes we could not identify in their shy and fast rush from us, Long-tailed Tit, Greenfinch and Jay. It was nice to have good eye contact with the Green Woodpecker on the poplar, on our way back to the car, after so many hidden calls.

We then moved on to the next step: hot drinks and breakfast in Fuente de Piedra. We still spotted some more birds from the car: Sardinian Warbler, Mistle Thrush, Black Redstart, Collared Dove, House Sparrow, Corn Bunting and Kestrel.

The road from Las Pedrizas to Antequera was the only place for Azure-winged Magpies in our itinerary. We payed attention to the trees by the road until we could spot one of them sunbathing on a holm oak. There were also some Griffon Vultures in flight over the Sierra de las Cabras and Red-legged Partridges on the farmlands.

The first Barn Swallow showed up just at the village of Fuente de Piedra. Once at the Visitors Centre we had lots of Lesser Black-backed Gulls getting away from the lake and Jackdaws flying

around. The little lake by the car park gave Shovelers, Coots, Redshank, Teal, Iberian Grey Shrike, Snipe and Common Sandpiper. A walk through the wooden bridge showed Stonechat, House Martin, Red-rumped Swallow, Greater Flamingo, Yellow Wagtail, Golden Plover, Shelduck, Common Buzzard, Crested Lark, Chiffchaff, Little Ringed Plover, Water Pipit, Lapwing, Stone Curlew, Linnet, Meadow Pipit and Black-winged Stilt.

We surrounded the fence of the reserve when going from the pools to the Cerro del Palo viewpoint. There, we had one of the jewels of the day: a Wryneck! From the Cerro del Palo, we could see lots of Black-headed Gulls in the lake bed and could differentiate a Mediterranean Gull among them. There was also a nice flock of Cranes in the south shore of the lake.

The Laguneto and the other little pools around gave us Little Grebe, Moorhen, Cetti's Warbler, Mallard, Gadwall, Pochard, Marsh Harrier and some other interesting birds as Pintail, Glossy Ibis, Crag Martin, Purple Swamphen and White-headed Duck. A Hoopoe said goodbye to the group on our way out of the car park.

We then took the road around the north of the lake. We stopped in search of some steppe birds near Cantarranas, where we got several Lesser Kestrels hunting together, Raven and Rock Dove. Another stop by a farmhouse gave us a Green Sandpiper in a very strange place for it.

Our next stage was El Chorro but we made a call to the Peñarrubia cliff for a quick lunch. The Peregrine Falcon and several Choughs were recorded over there.

Driving by the reservoirs gave us Cormorant, Yellow-legged Gull and Great Crested Grebe.

We then reached the cliffs of El Chorro, where the first bird was the Blue Rock Thrush. We started a short walk in search of small and big birds. Dartford Warbler and Rock Bunting came out and then, another of the great birds of the day: a wonderful male Golden Eagle showed up over the ridge with his thrilling display flights and dives, chasing a Griffon Vulture and... a Short-toed Eagle flying above his territory! While leaving this site in search for some of the typical birds there which, unfortunately, did not come out this time, we finally found a Thekla Lark.

We were doing extremely well with still three good destinations to visit: 96 species identified, just 4 behind our target! Our next stage was Rio Grande and Derek was very close to his bet for the 100 bird: Great White Egret... We might possibly find Little and Cattle Egret, a Grey Heron and then, Derek would win with his Great Egret...

Once there, Little Egret and... poor Derek, Great Egret! Then Greenshank and the 100 bird was... the Grey Wagtail! After that, Cattle Egret and many Sand Martins among the swallows and other martins in the big flocks over the river.

It was a bit late to walk into the Mouth of the Guadalorce Nature Reserve so we decided to visit Zapata instead. Still in the Guadalorce Valley, we put the scope on a Bonelli's Eagle nest, one of the missed targets at El Chorro, from the road. We soon could see the movement of the female in the nest and spectacular dives of the male over their territory. Fantastic! The Bonelli's Eagle is, in my opinion, Malaga most emblematic bird and they could not be out of our list.

We were slowly driving by the reed bed north to the airport in search for our last ticks on the list when something happened that suddenly made us forget the challenge. Mick saw a bird of

prey on top of a telegraphic pole. It was pretty out of the binoculars range so we decided to put the scope on it.

We did not find a straight answer.

- What do you think it is, LA? –Derek inquired to me.
- If I tell you what I think it is, you will say I am crazy...
- Tell us what you think!
- It's a young Goshawk.

A wave of excitement shook the group. A Goshawk was standing on a bare pole, eating a prey, in front of us, in our telescopes! After the appropriate verification with the birds guide, we were positive about it and enjoyed our finding for a long time.

While Mick and I had our eyes still stuck to the scopes, a Little Bittern woke Derek and Barbara up and we went on with our challenge. We went closer to where the Little Bittern landed and had wonderful views of several very active Bluethroats.

The list was finally closed by a tiny bird we had been missing all day long: the lovely Zitting Cisticola with his wavy display flights.

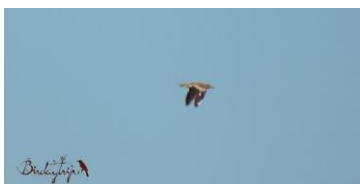
107 birds in total! What a fantastic birding exercise in the best possible company!



100+ Birds Costa del Sol Birding Challenge pioneers (from right to left): Mick Smith, Derek Etherton, Barbara Etherton & Luis Alberto Rodríguez (Birdaytrip)



Iberian Grey Shrike (*Lanius meridionalis*)



Stone Curlew (*Burhinus oedicnemus*)



Greater Flamingos (*Phoenicopterus roseus*)



Great Egret (*Casmerodius albus*)



Greenshank (*Tringa nebularia*)