



TOUR REPORT
MALLORCA
21ST – 28TH SEPTEMBER 2023

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Oriole Birding Mallorca and Cabrera September 2023

Mallorca is the largest of the Balearic Islands and in Autumn offers sanctuary to many migrant birds from northern Europe. Eleonora's Falcons are one of the star birds here in fact they delay their breeding to coincide with the arrival of migrant landbirds on which they feed their growing young.

The landscape and therefore the habitats are varied. The Sierra de Tramuntana range, comprising of several peaks of over 1000 m, spreads over 90 km from the southwest to the northeast coast of Mallorca. The dramatic coastline still holds pockets of Mediterranean maquis, a plant community which lends a distinctive character to the landscape. Maquis is a form of low-lying scrub on rocky ground comprised of heath, broom, rosemary and sage. This distinctive habitat is home to the endemic Balearic Warbler which occurs at sites around the coast of Mallorca.

Protected marshlands occupy large areas situated mainly inland from the port of Alcudia on the east coast of the island. The most famous of which is the Parc Nacional S'Albufera which is home to and provides refuge to a wealth of wetland birds. Key species such as the Western Swamphen and the endangered Red knobbed Coot have been successfully reintroduced to the reserve. The area provides a haven to many migratory waterfowl and in addition a refuge for the Marbled Duck.

Offshore islands provide safe breeding cliffs for the Eleonora's Falcons and an opportunity for watching endangered seabirds which also nest here. Both Balearic and Scopoli's Shearwaters can be observed close to their breeding colonies whilst other specialist species include the Mediterranean Shag and Audouin's Gull.



Sunrise in late September was around 0730 and sunset at 1900 during our stay. Daytime temperatures were high each day bar one, when it rained heavily in the morning. Otherwise

we experienced calm sunny conditions with daily temperatures ranging between 22 and 28 degrees C.

Thursday September 21st –Airport arrival and transfer to the Aumallia Hotel

John met the group at Palma Airport around midday on a glorious sunny day with temperatures around 25 C. Very soon we were on the road crossing the south side of the island heading to our quiet country hotel near Felanitx. A very tasty lunch spread of local dishes was provided which we enjoyed on the terrace restaurant. In fact, we would enjoy all our meals outside in the very comfortable surroundings of our family run hotel. After the rigours of the days journey to the island we took a short rest after checking in to our rooms before regrouping to explore our surroundings.

The local habitat consists of wooded hillsides, olive groves, vineyards and seemingly abandoned fields. Very soon we discovered a good selection of local specialities which included a splendid Balearic Woodchat Shrike (the endemic subspecies *badius*), also in the hotel grounds it was easy to find Spotted Flycatchers of the Mediterranean form. Several Tree Pipits were found along the driveway whilst overhead small parties of vocal Bee-eaters were passing by. Raptors were also a feature with a loose group of 12 Red Kites drifting on the wind as were several Booted Eagles. A couple of Stone Curlews were disturbed from their daytime roost in the adjacent vineyard. We would hear these strange birds calling at dusk each evening as we took the days bird log at the dinner table. Other species that we would encounter daily around the hotel included Red-legged Partridge, European Stonechats, Thekla Larks, Hoopoes and Collared Doves.



Western Swamphehen

Friday September 22nd – S' Albufera marshes

It was a rainy start to the day, so we headed north to Alcudia to escape the inclement weather in the south. It was still drizzling as we arrived at the car park, but the clouds soon cleared

and we enjoyed a relatively dry day at this internationally famous reserve. The heart of the reserve is reached along a kilometre long walkway flanked by canals and marshes, and it can take a while to traverse as you enjoy the varied birdlife along the way. Night Herons and Little Egrets were a feature of the walk. Cettis Warblers gave their explosive calls at regular intervals along the way.

The area was drained for agriculture and the canals are a legacy of a bankrupt venture. It is only recently that the reserve has been fully protected and the RSPB was involved in the design.

Amongst the marshes and dodging the rain showers we took advantage of the hides at the centre of the reserve, an area known as Sa Roca. The wetland here was covered in wildfowl, mainly Northern Shoveler, with patience we picked out a few Garganey and one of our target species here the Marbled Duck. A surprise sighting took the form of an adult Pacific Golden Plover which had been present since early September. Stars of the reserve nowadays are the introduced Western Swamphens and Red knobbed Coots which performed well for the group. The latter joining us for our picnic lunch which we took along the nearby canal bank!

Although we failed to locate the elusive Moustached Warbler, we did obtain excellent views of Zitting Citicolas aka the Fan-tailed Warbler. Other species included Purple Heron, three Greater Flamingoes, Black-winged Stilts, Greenshank and Wood Sandpipers, a nice overfly from a flock of sixty Glossy Ibis, two Squacco Herons showed well from the hides and of course nice views of the resident Kingfishers.

Saturday September 23rd Salobrar de Campos, San Jordi and Castle Santauri



Common Sandpiper

After a full day at S'Albufera the day before the plan was to stay local and visit the wetlands at Salobrar. It proved to be an eventful visit to the busy salt pans in more way than one as the

best lagoons for birds were along the beach road which is also very popular with beach goers! In a quieter moment we witnessed a light raptor passage with a Honey Buzzard drifting over with several Marsh Harriers. On the pans themselves a good variety of shorebirds were encountered with excellent views of Kentish and Ringed Plovers, Curlew Sandpipers and Little Stints plus plenty of Avocets and Black-winged Stilts.

On the shore at San Jordi, we enjoyed our picnic lunch at a spot which offered spectacular views of the bay. As we ate and drank, we were joined once again by our avian friends, this time by a confiding Audouins Gull. A lone Kingfisher landed on the nearby shoreline as we enjoyed some well-earned shade from the sun.

In the afternoon we visited the dramatic hilltop Castle Santaui where from the top we obtained splendid views of the southeastern coast of Mallorca. The birdlife was also rather special as it included a colony of Crag Martins playing in the wind and landing near vertical cliff faces. We also witnessed some exceptional behaviour from two male Blue Rock Thrushes as they relentlessly pursued each other around the castle walls! From the pine clad hills below Wrynecks could be heard calling from the treetop but inevitably proved a devil to see. In the same trees we could also hear a party of “chipping” Crossbills, we did see them in flight. The Crossbills are of the local Balearic race.



Tree Pipit

Sunday September 24th – Aumallia hotel grounds, Porto Colom and Pla de Lanzell

A late breakfast was planned today being a Sunday which allowed those that wished to accompany John on an early morning walk around the hotel grounds and adjoining lands. The birding was rather slow as many migrant breeding birds had obviously already departed. However, we persisted and dug out a Whinchat amongst several Northern Wheatears in the adjacent vineyards. We could hear Red-legged Partridges each day and this morning we discovered a small feeding party. Both Cirl and Corn Buntings were found to be common species of the hotel surrounds as were Thekla Larks, the abundant lark of the island. Our efforts around the hotel during our stay also produced Wryneck, Hoopoe, regular sightings of

passing flocks of Bee-eaters, Red Kites, Booted Eagles, Hobby, Firecrest, European Stonechats and Serins.

Following another super breakfast buffet we set off to the nearby coast at Porto Colomb. Here a coastal strip of garrigue holds some of the island special birds. Our target here was the endemic Balearic Warbler which is resident here and after a short walk we successfully saw them. As we



Male Lesser Kestrel

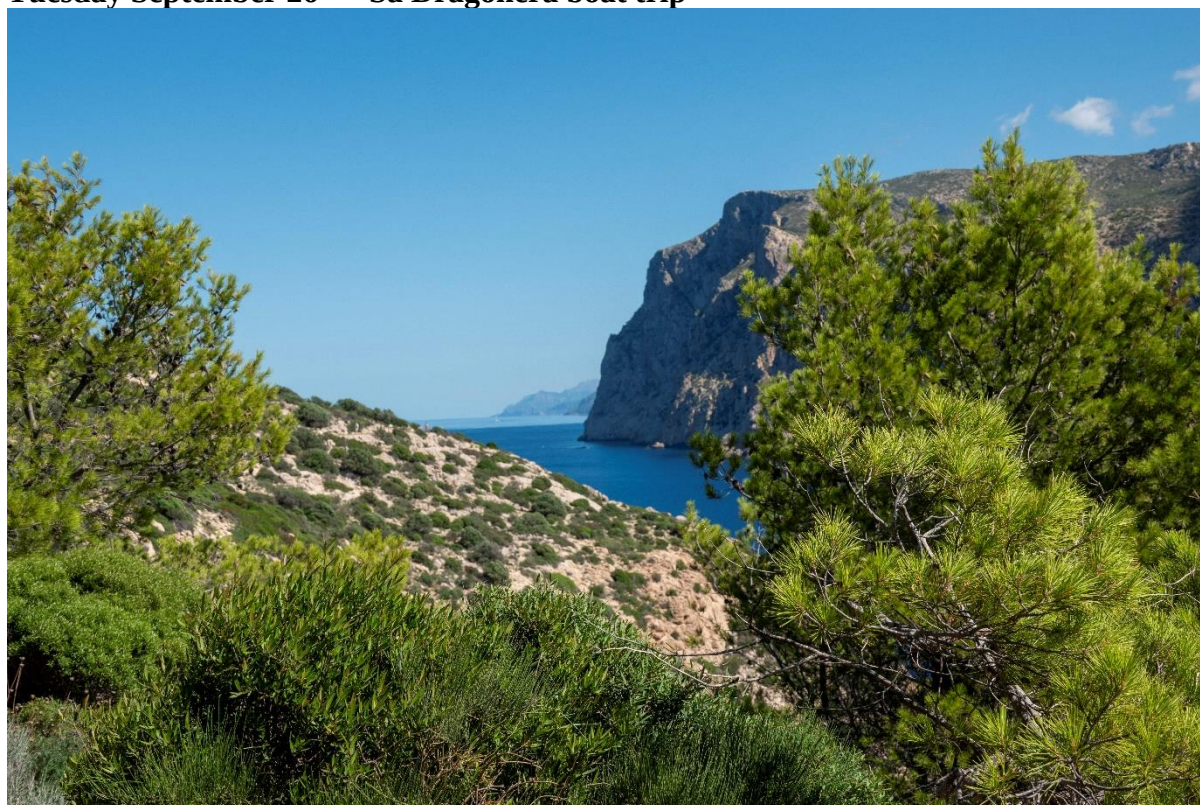
walked around small numbers of migrants were evident. In the taller trees which offered shade we observed Pied Flycatchers, Common Redstart and Firecrests. Today was one of the hotter days so we decided to take our picnic lunch back at the hotel. After relaxing lunch time, we set off on our afternoon adventure. Following up on some “hot gen” we ventured into the centre of the island to an area known as the Pla de Lanzell. An open farmland area complete with the scattered ruins of former farm buildings. It looked a perfect spot for Lesser Kestrels and so it proved to be as over the next couple of hours as we obtained progressively closer views of these attractive falcons as they foraged for bugs over the arable fields. The other prize here was an Iberian Grey Shrike which had returned for its fourth successive winter. After a short exploration we obtained distant views of it in an old fig tree, it proved to be a rather mobile individual, so we never obtained killer views but nevertheless it was another good and unexpected rarity sighting for the trip. In addition to the Lesser Kestrels, we also obtained good views of yet more Red Kites, Marsh Harriers, Booted Eagles and our first Common Buzzard of the week.

Monday September 25th – Tramuntana mountains Cuber Reservoir, Lluc Monastery and Mortitx

Today we headed into the Tramuntana mountains via the town of Inca and we soon we were ascending the dramatic switchback mountain roads. At Cuber Reservoir we disembarked and were soon watching one of our target species the impressive Black Vulture which were also joined by Griffon Vultures as they soared above the rocky peaks. A lone Cormorant flew in and rested on the reservoir shore and appeared to be the only bird present. Water levels appeared dramatically low, and we had an informative chat about the island with some local ex pat residents. We walked down to the dam picking up a few birds such as Great Tit, Common Crossbill, Firecrest and Spotted Flycatcher. Moving on we took advantage of the shady picnic benches at the Lluc Monastery where some noisy Crossbills sang from overhead trees.

Our next destination of the day was the impressive Mortitx valley which lies at the northern end of the Tramuntana range. The vineyards and oak forests here offer cover to many migrant birds. Along one lane we discovered a mixed group of such migrants which included both Pied and Spotted Flycatchers as well as Common Redstarts. A Nightingale was also glimpsed as we watched bright young Willow Warblers gleaning insects from the trees. Scanning the skies, we obtained a brief view of an adult Bonelli's Eagle, a pair are resident in the valley. All the time Black Vultures were visible in the skies above the mountain ridges, at least a dozen birds were observed during our visit. To complete the day, we paid a visit to the local winery and sampled some of the various wines that are produced from the surrounding vineyards before returning to our rural hotel base.

Tuesday September 26th – Sa Dragonera boat trip



Our morning boat departed at 10:15 hours so we took a slightly earlier breakfast to best time our arrival. The beautiful coastal village of Sant Elm lies on the tip of the island's southwest coast, an area thankfully saved from development by the actions of local people. A short boat ride across crystal blue waters brought us to the tiny island of Sa Dragonera. The lower slopes of this rocky islet are draped in native pines and Mediterranean maquis. A series of footpaths lead around the island to various viewpoints. We chose the northern path to the Far de Tramuntana lighthouse and made our way steadily up the rocky trail. Where it opened out into the maquis, we started to hear the distinctive "churrs" of the endemic Balearic Warbler and very soon we were treated to close, if brief, views of a pair. This area proved to be lively for birdlife with Robin, Spotted Flycatcher and of course the ubiquitous Sardinian Warblers which seemingly occupy each habitat across the archipelago. Of course, the main attraction here is a breeding colony of Eleonora's Falcons, and we were treated to amazing views of the birds as they called and chivvied each other as they wheeled around their breeding cliffs. All in all it was an amazing experience to witness this airborne spectacle whilst all the while we had to watch where we put our feet! The island is home to a large and curious population of an endemic lizard. The Lilfords Wall Lizard occupies a niche on the archipelago with

different subspecies on each island. Above the harbour at Calo Llado we explored the terraced fields and olive grounds. Here northern migrants such as Pied Flycatchers and Redstarts joined the islands resident Blue Rock Thrushes. Returning to the mainland we enjoyed some refreshing drinks in a shady restaurant before setting off on our journey back across the island. Another superb evening meal was enjoyed outside on the hotel terrace, life was good.

Wednesday September 27th - boat trip to Cabrera



Oriole group land on Cabrera

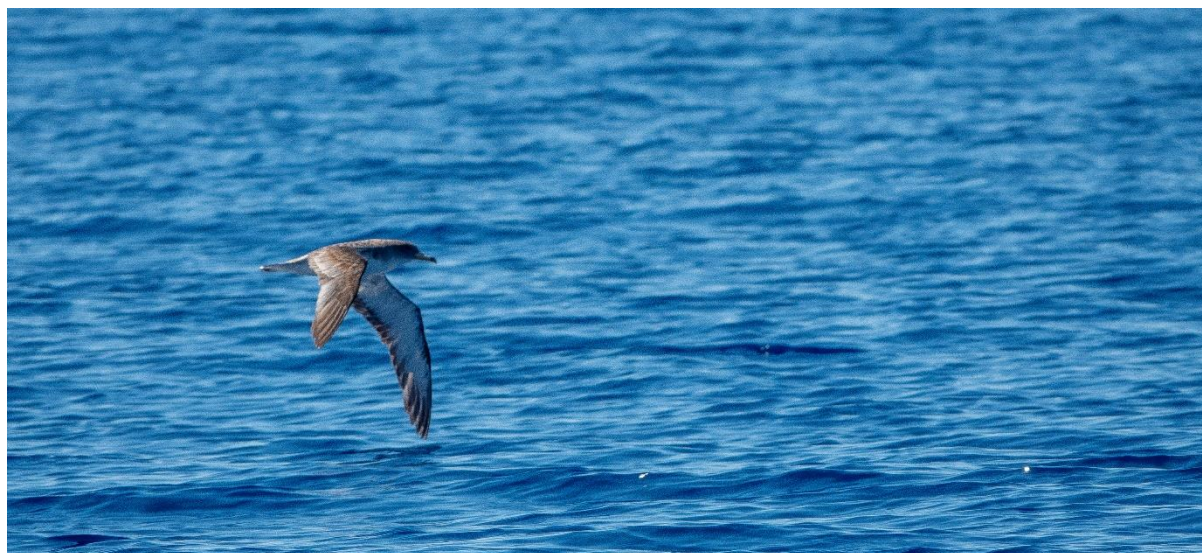
The climax of the tour was a day trip out from San Jordi to the offshore island of Cabrera. At the harbour in San Jordi, we were joined by resident expert birder Jason Moss, ex of Norfolk, he was to guide our group at his favourite birding spot on the islands.

Cabrera is an attractive place for migrants as we soon discovered approaching a small cove at the northern end of the island. First surprise was a Little Bunting which appeared by the path as we walked along. It was a very confiding bird and proved to be one our rarest sightings of the week. A weedy field held many Redstarts, Wheatears, Willow Warblers, Tree Pipits, Pied and Spotted Flycatchers, Reed Warbler, Yellow Wagtails, Song Thrush and Starlings. Again an Eurasian Wryneck called from cover but failed to reveal itself. After a picnic lunch we made ready to depart just as Jason picked up a Common Rosefinch as it dropped into cover, no doubt a freshly arrived migrant.

On the return voyage a diversion was made to visit the Blue Cave, and this gave us the opportunity to study the many shearwaters resting on the offshore waters. Flocks of fifty plus

Balearic Shearwaters were gathered in tight knit groups whilst loose groups of the larger Scopoli's Shearwaters were also seen flying alongside the boat at times. A dark morph Eleonora's Falcon gave a close fly by whilst others were disturbed by a migrant Marsh Harrier passing over their nesting places. Earlier in the day we came across another migrant raptor in the form of a juvenile Bonelli's Eagle which proved to be yet another unexpected sighting of the day. Although for some the sight of the Adonis in orange "speedos" may well linger longer in the memory!

Later back at Hotel Aumallia some of the group were treated to views of a group of three Hobbies hawking for dragonflies over the fields adjacent to the hotel car park.



Scopoli's Shearwater off Cabrera

Thursday September 28th – Hotel Aumallia and a return to the Salobrar de Campos

After breakfast Mark had to make his departure to the airport for his return flight. Others made the short trip to the salt pans to check out the wader activity. We found a similar selection as before with nice views of both Little Stints and Curlew Sandpipers, a roosting flock of eighty Avocets graced an adjacent lagoon. Additional species included Spotted Redshank, several Greenshanks and a Green Sandpiper. On the furthest lagoons were small parties of feeding Greater Flamingos adding their distinct splash of colour. Further still distant raptors soared over surrounding farmland, and they included the now expected Booted Eagles and our first Black Kite of the tour.

Back at the hotel we had to prepare for our lunchtime checkout. However, the hotel owners kindly allowed us to stay and enjoy a leisurely final picnic lunch. We took a poll of the favourite birds of the tour which were, in no particular order, Kentish Plover, Blue Rock Thrush, Hoopoe, Red Kite, Lesser Kestrel, Eleonora's Falcon, Willow Warbler and Little Bunting. A last walk around the hotel environs showed that fewer migrants remained compared to our first afternoon. However, our final views were of two pale morph Booted Eagles which circled low over the hotel grounds just before we had to depart for the airport.



Juvenile pale morph Booted Eagle

John McLoughlin October 2023