



TOUR REPORT
MALLORCA & CABRERA
19TH – 26TH September 2024

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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. It is also the site of several successful reintroduction projects for species such as Western Swamphen and Crested Coot.

Offshore islands provide safe breeding cliffs for the Eleonora's Falcons and haven for migrating birds. Sunrise in late September was around 0730 hrs and the sun was setting soon after 1900 hrs, local time, during our stay. Daytime temperatures were high each day bar one, when it rained heavily in the late afternoon. Otherwise, we experienced mainly calm and sunny conditions with daily temperatures ranging between 22- and 28-degrees C.

Thursday September 19th –Airport arrival and transfer to the rural 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, pronounced Felanich. A very tasty lunch spread of tortilla and mixed salads had been provided which we enjoyed on the terrace restaurant. In fact, we would enjoy all our meals outside on the terrace of this very comfortable family run hotel. After the rigours of the days journey to the island we took a short rest after checking in.

The local habitat consists of wooded hillsides, olive groves, vineyards and seemingly abandoned fields. Very soon we discovered that the walnut orchard next to the hotel contained several migrants which included, Whinchat, Wheatears, Redstarts and both Pied and Spotted Flycatchers.

Unfortunately, a juvenile Balearic Woodchat Shrike (the endemic subspecies *badius*), had flown into one of the Spa windows. Two other juvenile shrikes remained around the hotel grounds over the next couple of days. The adult birds it appeared had already left. Another speciality here is the island form of the Spotted Flycatcher known as the Mediterranean Flycatcher which was present in small numbers here. A flock or two of Bee-eaters passed overhead with some dropping into nearby orchard. Raptors were also a feature with a loose group of Red Kites drifting on the wind as were several Booted Eagles. The local pair of Bonelli's Eagles also showed above the distant escarpment, and we would obtain further views of these impressive birds during the days ahead. These birds are part of a successful reintroduction scheme which began in 2011, half a dozen pairs are now breeding on the island. At dusk we could hear the eerie calls of Stone Curlews from the dinner table. We failed to locate them at their daytime roosts but did see several at the Albufera marshes.

Friday September 20th –Porto Colomb and the Castell de Santueri

Following a relaxed start to the day, we enjoyed our daily breakfast buffet and 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 walked around small numbers of migrants were evident. In the taller trees which offered shade we saw several Pied Flycatchers, Common Redstart and Firecrests. As we walked across towards the coast a small flock of Crossbills flew past. Audouin's Gulls soared overhead whilst several Yellow-legged Gulls were observed offshore. Some magnificent sea cliffs held a pair of Peregrine Falcons which appeared to hold a territory there. Today was one of the hotter days, so we decided to take our picnic lunch back at the hotel.

In the afternoon we visited the dramatic hilltop Castle Santueri where from the top we obtained splendid views of the southeast coast of Mallorca. This Moorish castle stands some 500 metres above the surrounding landscape, and we explored its environs in search of two species the Blue Rock Thrush and its colony of Crag Martins. We encountered both species in rather windy conditions as well as small numbers of migrants including Redstarts and Willow Warblers. Booted Eagles hung effortlessly in the sky above the castle ramparts whilst a Nightingale sang from the pine clad hills below. 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 resident race *L.c.balearica* and have a strong association with the Aleppo Pine. They are also the most genetically divergent amongst the Common Crossbill subspecies.

Saturday September 21st Hotel Aumallia grounds and Pla de Lancell

After breakfast we took a slow birding walk to explore the immediate surrounds of our rural hotel. This proved to be very productive, and highlights included two Golden Orioles, an adult male and a juvenile bird. Wrynecks were also heard but not seen, they proved to be super tricky during the week. The two juvenile Woodchat Shrikes in contrast did show well whilst a Hobby passed by overhead. Spotted Flycatchers proved to be the commonest migrants with northern migrants mixing with the locally breeding Mediterranean birds. The first days Whinchat also remained as did 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. For our afternoon adventure we ventured into the centre of the island to an area known as the Pla de Lancell. An open farmland area complete with the scattered ruins of former farm buildings. It is a particularly good place for raptors and on arrival a migrant Short toed Eagle passed overhead. The eagle appeared to be seeking out somewhere to land as some ominously dark clouds hung over the southern horizon. The fields held small number of Common Kestrels but there was no sign of the Lesser Kestrels that we had enjoyed on last year’s trip. As the clouds gathered overhead the rain began to fall so, we made a slow drive around the country lanes. The fields were full of Corn Buntings and respectable number of Red-legged Partridges. As the heavens finally opened, we made a hasty retreat and returned to our hotel for the evening.

We had been hearing Scops Owls calling from the dinner table the previous night, so we planned to seek them out after dinner. Very soon we had found four calling birds close to the hotel and John quickly found one in the top of a tall palm tree. We all enjoyed “walk away” views of this confiding individual. The local subspecies *Otus scops mallorcae* can remain on the islands all year round.

Sunday September 22nd boat trip to the island of Cabrera



Tawny Pipit

Our Sunday jaunt was a day trip out from San Jordi to the offshore island of Cabrera. We sailed out of the harbour at Colonia San Jordi a traditional fishing village found on the southern tip of the island. The island is attractive place for passerine migrants as we discovered as we approached a small cove at the northern end of the island. We took our lunch at a shady picnic sight which overlooked a weedy field. Although things appeared superficially quiet on the migrant front birds began to literally drop out of the sky. One by one birds started to appear firstly Redstart and Robins then wagtails and warblers. The main surprise was a male Bluethroat that Val found feeding under one of the picnic tables! Later a male Blue Rock Thrush dropped onto to the table that the group had just vacated whilst a Tawny Pipit fed with a Blue-headed Wagtail in the field close by. Meanwhile there was a constant passage of Booted Eagles and Honey Buzzards with the occasional Eleanora's Falcon. The outbound voyage took a route around the island, and we passed an isolated rocky crag which held a small colony of Eleanora's Falcons which breed only on Mediterranean islands. The boatmen pointed out an Osprey eyrie on a high cliff and we would see the species later in the day. On the return voyage a diversion was made to visit the Blue Cave, and this gave John and Jonathon a chance to take a refreshing dip in the warm waters. As we left, we came across a large flock of Scopoli's Shearwaters attending a "tuna boil" close inshore. Our boat gave chase although the views of the tuna were restricted to a series of impressive splashes. The shearwaters could be watched flying alongside the boat and at times were joined by a few smaller Balearic Shearwaters.



Bluethroat at the picnic table!

Monday September 25th Parc National Albufera

It was an inclement start to the day as we arrived in the reserve car park, but the rain held until we reached the visitor centre and the hides at S' Roca. Later the weather cleared and we enjoyed a dry and sunny afternoon 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 Cattle Egrets were a feature of the walk.

Cettis Warblers gave their explosive calls at regular intervals along the way. A lone juvenile Purple Heron flew low overhead and would prove to be our only sighting of the day. More of a surprise was the group of four Stone Curlews which flew in the opposite direction.



Little Bittern

Amongst the marshes and dodging the rain showers we took advantage of the hides at the centre of the reserve, and the wetland here was covered in wildfowl, mainly Northern Shoveler, with patience we picked out a Garganey and one of our target species here the Marbled Duck. A mix of waders included Ruff, Greenshank and a juvenile Curlew Sandpiper. Stars of the reserve nowadays are the introduced Western Swampheens which stroll across the swamp appearing rather prehistoric. Greater Flamingos were present in small numbers many still in their glorious “pink” plumage. A few Glossy Ibis were present on the various pools, but it proved very hot and humid in the hides, so we didn’t linger. Some good fortune offered good views of a group of five Marbled Ducks which we found sat on some bare tree trunks along the shady canal and were joined by a “holidaying” Bahama Pintail! Lunch was a picnic taken by the Gran Canal bridge at the heart of the reserve and close by the star bird of the day was performing well. A Little Bittern could be seen feeding out in the open stalking unsuspecting sticklebacks on the edge of the reed fringed waterway. Further along the walkways the lagoons held some 50 Greater Flamingos and 150 plus Black-winged Stilts an impressive site. By this time, we had observed some fifty species not bad for a rainy day. Our experience was enhanced by some extremely friendly fellow birds who helped us with the gen on the Little Bittern. Sadly, though we did not locate the Crested Coots which proved to be surprisingly elusive on today’s visit. All too soon we were heading back to the van to cool down and take some welcome drinks. Under clear skies the afternoon temperature had reached 29 degrees C the hottest day so far.

Tuesday September 24th – Sa Dragonera boat trip

Our morning boat departed at 11:15 hours from the beautiful coastal village of Sant Elm which lies on the tip of the island’s southwest coast, an area 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 Aleppo 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 rattles of the ubiquitous Sardinian Warblers which seemingly occupy every 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. Overall, it was an amazing experience to witness their airborne spectacular 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 Lilford's 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 groves. Here northern migrants such as Pied Flycatchers and Redstarts joined the islands resident Blue Rock Thrushes. All too soon it seemed we returned to the mainland on the mid-afternoon boat. For a brief moment we had joined the sun-kissed tourists who frequent the island in ever increasing numbers each year. Forsaking the lure of a "free" cocktail at one of the harbour bars we said our farewells and retreated to our haven. Another superb evening meal was enjoyed outside on the hotel terrace, life was good.



Eleonora's Falcon

Wednesday September 27th - – Tramuntana mountains at Mortitx and Pla de Lancell

As dawn broke many of the group gathered to watch the morning "bat flight" as dozens of Common Pipistrelles returned to roost in the hotel walls. Thanks to Carolyn for sharing her love of all things "batty" and talking us through her recordings and observations throughout the week.

Today we headed into the Tramuntana mountains via the town of Pollenca and the back roads across the central part of the island. A fortunate roadside spotting of a ringtail harrier near Muro produced

views of our first Montagu's Harrier hunting over some rough agricultural fields. At the same spot a Marsh Harrier passed by as the Red Kites started ascending the mid-morning thermals. Soon we found ourselves on the ascent too as we climbed the dramatic switchback mountain roads. Our destination of the day was the impressive Mortix valley which lies at the northern end of the Tramuntana range. The vineyards and oak forests here offer cover for the many migrant birds in a valley full of vineyards just inland from the sea. Along one lane we discovered a mixed group of such migrants which included both Pied and Spotted Flycatchers as well as Common Redstarts. The oaks also held our first Blue Tits of the tour and offered reasonable views of a furtive Firecrest. Two Starlings were an indicator of the arrival of Autumn as we watched bright young Willow Warblers gleaning insects from the trees. Scanning the skies, we obtained splendid views of Griffon Vultures which were almost constantly in view. In addition, we obtained a brief view of two 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 seen during our stay. 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 homewards towards our rural hotel base.

On the return journey we diverted through the rather gorgeous town of Petra to revisit the Pla de Lancell where we had experienced our only "washout" of the tour a few days earlier. The other prize here was an Iberian Grey Shrike which had returned for its fifth 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, but nevertheless it was another good and unexpected rarity sighting for the trip. A further bonus was the presence of four juvenile Montagu's Harriers hunting across the open fields and meadows. Seeking shelter from the freshening wind we found a convenient bush and we all enjoyed prolonged views of these stunning birds with their chocolate and orange hues. So much so that we arrived back at our hotel only just in time for our final dinner. We warmly thanked our hosts for their excellent service and the wonderful meals that we had enjoyed throughout the tour.



Juv Montagu's Harrier

Thursday September 26th – Hotel Aumallia and San Salvador

After breakfast Cathryn and Rosemary made their departure to the airport for their return flight. All week we had been staring up at the impressive peak of San Salvador which sits opposite the Aumallia hotel and close to the nearby Castell de Santueri. After breakfast we sped up the windy

road to the top and found shelter from a rather blustery south-westerly behind the imposing statue of Christ the King. A juvenile Honey Buzzard was picked out by Jonathon and after a wait we obtained brief views of a male Blue Rock Thrush which refused to perch out in the open. Bird of the morning here appeared to be Spotted Flycatchers which could be found all over. In a walled garden near the monastery Wood Pigeons fed on the fruits of the Nettle Tree, look at the shape of the leaves. Inside the restored monastery we sought sanctuary from the breezy wind and had a moment to contemplate our wonderful birding holiday in the sun. The sanctuary of San Salvador was built in the 14th century in the belief that building on a tall peak would keep the Black Death at bay! Back at the hotel we had to prepare for our lunchtime checkout. However, the hotel owners kindly extended the check-out time to allow us to make final arrangements before our departure.



Castell Santuari



Monarch