

A holiday in Mallorca (with birding) October 2022

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In 2019 a small group of us planned a birding tour of Madagascar for the following year. The Covid pandemic scuppered that so we rescheduled for 2021. However, as the time drew near, we felt increasingly reluctant to travel through crowded airports and on a long-haul flight. No one wanted to risk falling ill so far from home. That left a rather large deposit in the hands of the tour company. We could re-book or use the deposit against any holiday within their group of companies. They specialise in bespoke luxury holidays at eye watering prices where the £700 deposit would make little dent. Mike and Elaine managed to find something more reasonably priced – a Jet2 holiday to Puerta Pollença – and a few of us invited ourselves along as well. We did some freelance birding and hired a local guide for two days, less hassle than hiring cars.

Day 1 Albufereta



Greater Flamingos

There is a wetland reserve about two miles south of Puerta Pollença, towards Alcúdia. We decided to walk there which was a bit of a mistake. The peaceful stroll along the seafront (1 Audouin's Gull and 6 Mallard) became a bit of a trial along a busy road with cycle lanes (and lots of lycra clad cyclists) but no pavement. The bus would have been a better bet. The reserve was a delight though, apart from the unmistakable waft from the sewage works up the road.

Lots of Great White

and Little Egret. A Cattle Egret roost with 100+ birds. Glossy Ibis, a juvenile Purple Heron, Black-winged Stilt, Kentish Plover, Greater Flamingo, Avocet, Marsh Harrier, Corn Bunting, Hoopoe, Red-legged Partridge



Kentish Plover

Day 2 Val de Bóquer

A morning visit to the Sunday market in Pollença was followed by an afternoon walk up the Val de Bóquer. The trail was about a ten-minute walk from our hotel and is well used by walkers, strollers, people who like swimming in secluded bays and the occasional birder. Our first sighting of a bird flitting around the scrub was identified, eventually, as a Spotted Flycatcher and soon after we found a Black Redstart and a Wheatear. Several flighty birds were Serins. A large, black raptor appeared in front of us. We had just a tail-on view for about a millisecond.

It was most likely a Black Vulture (one having been seen there by another birder). Our main target was the Balearic Warbler which looks quite like a Dartford Warbler. Although a good area for them, they are hard to see in the Autumn preferring to skulk in the scrub and I regret to say we failed. All of the birds we saw darting around and disappearing quickly were Sardinian Warblers. The Valley used to be a good raptor migration route but they now seem to be discouraged by the constant pedestrian traffic.



Audouin's Gull on the beach at Pollenca

Day 3

This was our first day with our local guide, Pere Tomas.

Parque natural s'Albufera de Mallorca

This wetland reserve is south of Alcúdia. It's about 1600ha. The area was a mosquito and malaria infested marsh until a British company took over the area in the 19th Century. They constructed drainage and irrigation channels and converted the land to agricultural use. The water level was controlled by steam driven pumps. It is now an extensive reed bed with open wetland areas maintained by grazing cattle.

We encountered a dozen or more Night Herons roosting along the main (canalised) river.



Black-crowned Night Heron

The first hide we went into looked over a pool with Flamingos, many Teal and another duck we first took to be a Garganey (due to its neck markings) but it was in fact a Marbled Duck. So, we all lost 10 points from our credibility rating. Marbled Ducks and Red Knobbed Coot (hiding elsewhere in the reserve) were reintroduced having suffered local extinction. Their breeding success is somewhat patchy.

In amongst a group of Black-headed Gulls sat a single Slender-billed Gull, although it didn't look much like the Collins Guide.

This one had an orange bill and red legs.



Purple Swamphen

The interweb has photos of similar colouration. Slender-billed Gulls often have a pink tinge as they feed on the same crustaceans as Flamingos. We saw three Kingfishers (a non-breeding migrant) and a Spotted Redshank among the other waders. Purple Swamphens were also quite numerous.

Finca Son Real

Not far away was our second stop of the day. The area contained farmland, managed to encourage wildlife, woodland and scrub leading up to the coast. The bird list was not extensive here but we had several sightings of Hoopoe, a flyover Booted Eagle, Thekla's Lark and, down by the beach, a group of Mediterranean Shag (sub-species *desmarestii*). These birds have a much paler breast than the Atlantic ones. The site has several areas ideal for Balearic Warbler. We didn't see one here either.

An interesting feature right on the beach was a group of pre-historic tombs (the earliest date from the 7th century BC). Over 150 skeletons were excavated from the site.

Day 4

This was a non-birding day of sorts. We took the bus across the mountains to Puerta Soller, a tram to Soller, narrow gauge train to Palma then the bus back to Puerta Pollençà. The railway was built to transport citrus fruit to Palma through the mountains. The weather was sunshine and heavy showers. Across the spectacular mountains we saw a flock of feral pigeons and two Ravens and that was it. It was obviously too wet for any raptor to bother entertaining us. Later in the afternoon, down on the sunnier plains towards Palma, we found Marsh Harrier, Red Kite and Kestrel.

Day 5

Formentor

This was our second day with the guide. In the morning we went north of Puerta Pollençà to the Formentor peninsula, dodging multiple cyclists up the narrow hairpins.

Our first stop was in the hope of Eleonora's Falcon and one appeared above us as we stepped out of the minibus. We saw six in total; a lifer for most of us.



Eleonora's Falcon

The bird is named after the 12th century queen who passed the first bird protection law we know of. This was, presumably, so the royals could monopolise the birds for falconry rather than any sentimental reason. They nest on north facing cliffs and breed late in the season when they change their diet from insects to migrant birds. They are not territorial and nest quite close together and have been observed hunting in groups (up to 100 birds on one occasion).

They breed on Mediterranean islands and winter in Madagascar (thus establishing a link to our aborted holiday). It was thought they migrated following the African coast but satellite tracking proved the adult birds fly straight across the African continent.

Juvenile birds migrate separately and take a different route altogether but still end up in Madagascar. While there, they revert to their insect and beetle diet. The birds are similar to Peregrines but with a longer tail and longer slimmer wings. They have darker coverts and a rusty brown breast although there is a dark morph just to confuse you. Without Pere we would have spent quite a while consulting Collins to confirm the species.

On to Cap Formentor where we saw more falcons, Blue Rock Thrush and quite a number of migrant Robins which is not a breeding bird in Mallorca.

Vineyard at Mortitx

The afternoon was spent at another reserve, adjacent to a vineyard making rather agreeable wines (well, you have to try the local produce).

A Griffon Vulture flew over as we got out of the bus. There were no Griffon Vultures in the Balearics before 2008. That year a violent storm blew a group of Griffons, including one with a satellite tag, to Menorca. These birds made their way to Mallorca where they now have a breeding colony. These birds are not migratory, unlike mainland Griffons, probably because the sea crossing is too far. That's also true about Booted Eagle and Black Vulture (although some Black Vultures try but usually drown).

We walked down the tree lined lane towards the reserve with unseen birds calling nearby. The Merlin Bird App confirmed our IDs of Robin and Great Tit calls but also picked up Firecrest (which I can't hear these days). I wouldn't record a bird just from an App but it does make you look a bit harder and sure enough a Firecrest made a brief appearance in a Cedar. As we approached the reserve, we stopped to consume whatever comestibles we'd brought with us. Pere was scanning the ridges in the distance and, at maximum magnification, picked out a large, white fronted bird perched on a high peak - Bonelli's Eagle. A blob in the far distance is how these birds are normally seen.



Bonelli's Eagle

These eagles last bred in Mallorca in 1964 and were persecuted to extinction by 1970. A reintroduction programme began in 2009 and there is now a self-sustaining breeding population. So successful that young birds are now being relocated to other projects in Spain. Bonelli's are a top predator. Booted Eagles once lived in the Mortitx valley but are now largely gone with at least one bird confirmed as predated by Bonelli's. Recently, a new female Bonelli's arrived in the territory, killed the resident, brooding female, and took over.

Further into the reserve we were privileged to see the pair of Bonelli's in the air and passing close enough to appreciate their plumage and size difference. They

perched on a nearby ridge where a Kestrel repeatedly dived at them although they didn't seem bothered by it.

Another raptor appeared from nowhere and flew over our group. It looked very much like a Peregrine. Our guide suggested Kestrel; Peregrines being fairly unusual. We knew it wasn't an Eleonora's Falcon because we were now experts in that bird having seen them in the morning. We weren't convinced the guide was right! Fortunately, the bird came back past us, closer with better light and there was no doubt it was indeed a Peregrine, and Pere concurred. On that basis we earned back our -10 credibility points from the mis-identified Marbled Duck.

A couple of Black Vultures lazily soared past. These birds were also persecuted but have rebuilt their population. They are now generally welcomed by farmers as they clean the environment of dead animals.

The other notable birds in the reserve were Common Redstart, Tree Pipit and a singing Cirl Bunting.

Other observations

Feral Goats

The Formentor peninsula is home to a population of feral goats that eat everything apart from a few goat-hostile plants. The local government culls the goats to keep the numbers in check with the carcasses left out for the vultures.

Monarch Butterflies

These butterflies, resident in North Africa, appeared only recently. They feed on milkweeds and there just happens to be an invasive, non-native plant of the genus – Narrow-leaved Cotton Bush – present in Mallorca and the butterfly larva feed on that. The plant has white flowers and seed heads that resemble spiny Horse Chestnut fruits. The ripe the seed heads split to expose the black seeds and a cotton wool like substance that disperses the seeds on the wind. The plants in the reserve are normally pulled up but there is a decision to be made about leaving some if it favours the butterfly.

Wild Pistachio



Wild Pistachio

Pistachio bushes are very common on the island. They are covered in small, bitter, red fruits that turn black when ripe. The migrant birds love them and help disburse the seeds.

Our Guide

Mike and Elaine found the guide, Pere (pronounced Perry) Tomas on-line www.mallorcanaturaltours.com. He proved to be a really nice person and very knowledgeable about the birds and other wildlife as well as local history. He worked at Slimbridge for a couple of years.

Bird list

Reserva Natural de l'Albufera

Red-legged Partridge, Shelduck, Mallard, **Greater Flamingo**, Woodpigeon, Collared Dove, Coot, Black-winged Stilt, Avocet, **Kentish Plover**, Ringed Plover, Common Sandpiper, Greenshank, **Audouin's Gull**, Yellow-legged Gull, Cormorant, Grey Heron, Great White Egret, Little Egret, Cattle Egret, Glossy Ibis, **Purple Heron**, Marsh Harrier, **Hoopoe**, Kestrel, Barn Swallow, Great Tit, Cetti's Warbler, Blackcap, **Sardinian Warbler**, Willow Warbler, Blackbird, Stonechat, House Sparrow, Greenfinch, Linnet, Goldfinch, Corn Bunting

Val de Bóquer

Woodpigeon, Red Kite, Raven, Chiffchaff, Sardinian Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher, Black Redstart, Northern Wheatear, Chaffinch, Goldfinch, Serin

Parque natural s'Albufera de Mallorca

Shelduck, Shoveler, Gadwall, Mallard, Teal, **Marbled Duck**, Greater Flamingo, Woodpigeon, Collared Dove, Moorhen, Coot, **Western Swamphen**, Black-winged Stilt, Avocet, Kentish Plover, Ringed Plover, Snipe, Common Sandpiper, **Spotted Redshank**, Greenshank, **Slender-billed Gull**, Black-headed Gull, Cormorant, Grey Heron, Little Egret, **Black-crowned Night-Heron**, Glossy Ibis, Marsh Harrier, Hoopoe, Kingfisher, Cetti's Warbler, Sardinian Warbler, Common/Spotless Starling, Stonechat, House Sparrow, Chaffinch

Finca Son Real

Audouin's Gull, Yellow-legged Gull, **European Shag**, Grey Heron, Little Egret, **Booted Eagle**, Hoopoe, **Thekla's Lark**, Cetti's Warbler, Sardinian Warbler, Robin, Stonechat, House Sparrow, Linnet, Goldfinch

Peninsula de Formentor

Yellow-legged Gull, [Eleonora's Falcon](#), Willow Warbler, Blackcap, Robin, **Blue Rock Thrush**

Cap de Formentor

Pallid Swift, Yellow-legged Gull, Eleonora's Falcon, Blackcap, Sardinian Warbler, Robin, Blue Rock Thrush, Stonechat

Mortitx

Black Vulture, **Griffon Vulture**, [Bonelli's Eagle](#), Kestrel, Peregrine Falcon, Great Tit, Blackcap, Sardinian Warbler, **Firecrest**, Blackbird, Robin, **Common Redstart**, House Sparrow, Tree Pipit, Goldfinch, **Cirl Bunting**