

The Sierra de Grazalema

1st - 8th May 2012

Tour Review



Juvenile Ocellated Lizard – Benaocaz - May 2012 © Teresa Farino

Note: All images used in this report were taken during the May 2012 tour.

Leaders: Teresa Farino & Jeff Clarke

Full Tour Participants:

Chris Adams

Anne Barbour

Amanda Calvert

Alan Harrison

Janet Haworth

Richard Haworth



Grazalema - May 2012 - May 2012 © Jeff Clarke

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Introduction

The rugged limestone terrain of the Sierra de Grazalema lies in South-western Spain and is home to an outstanding range of flora and fauna, partially because this area receives an annual rainfall of 2,200mm. During the week of our tour we explored a wide variety of habitats within and surrounding the sierra, taking in floristic limestone rock gardens, fabulously bird-rich wetlands, saturated meadows, ancient Spanish Fir forests and an arable landscape decorated with a myriad of annual cornfield flowers.



Cornfield Annuals in the *dehesa* of Andalucía - May 2012 © Jeff Clarke

As ever with these tours it helps to make the whole experience go well if everyone joins in locating the various plants and animals, and the participants on this tour were particularly adept at finding some biological gems. This proved invaluable on the botanical front, as the previous winter's drought had significantly impacted on the normally verdant landscape, which was a shadow of its usual self, and what the drought hadn't succeeded in killing off the rather hungry herds of goats had certainly done their best to reduce further. The group was also blessed with inveterate 'rock turners' and this resulted in some spectacular finds throughout the tour, particularly of reptiles.

Review

Monday 1st May

After gathering up most of the tour party at Málaga Airport we made our way to the Torcal de Antequera to join up with Alan and Amanda. It being a bank holiday, however, this popular spot was extremely busy, so we headed off to a quieter location for our picnic lunch, but not before having close views of a hovering Lesser Kestrel.

Our picnic stop proved to be highly successful. We hadn't been there very long, not even time to unpack cameras, when a stunning Bonelli's Eagle flew right over our heads. A meandering stream held a variety of birds, and while most proved elusive due to the extensive cover of streamside reeds, there was no mistaking the explosive voice of Cetti's Warbler. Chris spotted a Kingfisher and also picked out White-clawed Crayfish in the water. Butterflies were largely notable by their absence, but our one and only Lorquin's Blue of the week did show for most of the group, as did a smart Spanish Brown Argus.

After lunch we headed for the superb wetland of Fuente de Piedra. As we breasted the hill overlooking the area we could see a shimmering pink haze off in the distance: the large colony of Greater Flamingo that traditionally breeds at the site. The drought and vastness of the reserve meant that we were not going to get very close to them, as they were confined to the centre of the lagoon. There were, however, plenty of compensations closer at hand. As we made our approach Teresa caught a glimpse of a bird crossing the front of the car which proved to be a Collared Pratincole, and we also noted a few Woodchat Shrikes dotted about on top of the various bushes. A brief roadside stop in the scrub area also produced a Green-striped White and several Clouded Yellow butterflies.

As we continued to descend toward the wetland, a bird that acted more like a giant swallow as it patrolled gracefully in search of big flying insects caught the eye. Gull-billed Terns have a huge global range but are declining fast in Europe with just 3000 pairs left, making the 250-400 pairs breeding at this site critically important for its future status on the continent. For most of the party, this was their first close-up encounter with this 'inland' tern.



We made our way to the reserve centre and overlooked a shallow lagoon filled with Common Coots and a variety of waders, including Curlew Sandpipers resplendent in their breeding plumage, and some lovely graceful Avocets. The most obvious and garrulous wader present on the reserve, however, was the incongruously long-legged Black-winged Stilt. Pairs of these birds were dotted all around the site, often nesting very close to the edge of the path.



Curlew Sandpipers at Fuente de Piedra - May 2012 © Jeff Clarke

Overlooking another, deeper, lagoon close to the main car park we located a few of the special birds of the region, notably a few White-headed Ducks and Red-crested Pochard, while a couple of Black Terns picked at the water surface for emerging insects.

Botanical highlights of the reserve were mostly in the surrounding dry grasslands, and included Grey-leaved Cistus, White Horehound, Yellow Gromwell and the related *Nonea vesicaria*, the latter unmistakable with its blackish tubular flowers and inflated calices.

We eventually dragged ourselves away and headed off towards our hotel in the delightful 'White Town' of Grazalema, nestled in the spectacular limestone sierra to which it gives its name. This would be our home base for what was to prove a very successful week of wildlife exploring.

Tuesday 2nd May

After breakfast we headed down to the market square, which sits atop a cliff overlooking a small agricultural area ringed by mountains. The sky was alive with swifts and hirundines, giving us a great chance to get our eye in for separating Pallid and Common Swifts, both of which occur here in substantial numbers. A variety of other birds were spotted in the trees below us, with Goldfinches and Serins predominating. They created a musical tinkling and jingling backdrop of sound as a contrast to the banshee-like screaming of the swifts.

Looking over the edge we could see some of the characteristic plants of the region clinging to the vertical cliff face. The yellow flowered crucifer *Biscutella frutescens* shone gold in the sunlight, contrasting dramatically with the fluorescent pink valerian *Centranthus macrosiphon*.

We picked our way through the narrow streets and made our way to the start of the route that descends to the foot of the cliff. Within a few minutes we had locked on to our first Iberian Wall Lizards as they scuttled through the vegetation along the path edge. Alan, Chris and Jeff set the theme for the week by turning over every likely looking stone, though always careful to replace them as they found them; on this occasion their efforts produced many more Iberian Wall Lizards.

Meanwhile, a closer look at the cracks and crevices in the limestone turned up quite a number of interesting plants, including Spring Rock-cress (with pinky-mauve flowers), the blue-flowered form of Scarlet Pimpernel, the diminutive Rue-leaved Saxifrage, Round-leaved and Shining Crane's-bills, the regional endemic toadflax *Linaria platycalyx*, with yellow flowers and leaves arranged in threes, and the dandelion-like *Hyoseris radiata*.

At the bottom of the slope we spent some considerable time enjoying one of Spain's special butterflies, namely the Spanish Festoon. A couple of fine fresh specimens floating around



Blue Pimpernel - May 2012 © Jeff Clarke



Serin - May 2012 © Jeff Clarke

amongst the boulders and shrubs eventually allowed most people to get good photographs of this close relative of the Swallowtails.

We also found four of the bird species that typify rocky areas in southern Spain; so much so that three of them have the habitat in their name, Rock Sparrow, Rock Bunting and Blue Rock Thrush. These are all lovely looking birds in their own right but it was possibly the fourth

species took the prize for being the most dapper. The Black Wheatear may be a study in monochrome but it carries it off with stylish elegance, and this particular male bird performed like Fred Astaire as it flicked and twirled with aplomb after a tasty insect. Red-billed Choughs and Griffon Vultures were also visible overhead.



Yellow Bee Ophrys - May 2012 © Teresa Farino

A foray among these boulders looking for plants of note turned up a carpet of the stork's-bill *Erodium primulaceum*, Mediterranean Spurge, Star Hawkbit, Common Smilax and many clumps of Yellow Bee Ophrys, as well as a clump of the regional endemic star-of-Bethlehem *Ornithogalum reverchonii*, high up on the cliff, and sadly only visible through the 'scope.

After a brief diversion to look for Richard's missing glasses (thankfully re-found and intact), we headed further down the valley to a more open agricultural setting at La Rana: a series of stony fields with limited tree cover. On arrival we were greeted by the sight of a pair of Southern Grey Shrikes and here also we found our first Cuckoo, Bee-eaters and Thekla Larks.

As the day heated up we spread out a little as the botanists began a slow scour of the ground cover and the rest of the party began searching rocky walls and lifting stones. The rock turning eventually paid dividends as Alan appeared with a squirming 'shoelace': a Western Three-toed Skink. These amazing little reptiles act like a 'missing link' between the legless lizards such as Slow-worm and a typical lizard like the aforementioned Iberian Wall Lizard. The legs are almost redundant, tiny and regressed, and are barely noticeable yet the skink still moves them as if they may perform a function. They have little obvious need for legs as they whip through grassy patches at lightning speed. Thankfully this one was calm enough to photograph.

A short while later and a surprised yelp from Amanda brought our attention to the fact that Alan had uncovered something to put the hairs up on the back of your neck. We scurried across to see a giant Megarian Banded Centipede,



Megarian Banded Centipede
May 2012 © Jeff Clarke

longer than an outstretched hand and thicker than an index finger, hurling itself around. Whether in defence or attack this strategy worked, as I didn't notice any volunteers rushing to pick up this mighty invertebrate with a fearsome – and venomous – bite!

Meanwhile, the botanists had managed to find a few gems left behind by the goats: some tiny Green-winged Orchids, here belonging to the taxonomically dubious subspecies *champagneuxii* and the dwarf star-of-Bethlehem *Ornithogalum orthophyllum*, with umbels of starry white flowers. The shrubby areas were dominated by French Lavender, buzzing with hundreds of Honey Bees, in between which sheltered a few Southern Daisies and Jersey Buttercups.

In terms of invertebrates, we had a brief glimpse of a male Provence (Moroccan) Orange Tip, plenty of Small Heaths, a Small Copper and many diminutive little mantises that go by the name of *Apteromantis aptera*.



Apteromantis aptera - May 2012 © Teresa Farino

Post lunch we headed through a pass in the sierra to search a flora-rich limestone area that the goats hadn't got to first! Here we found a good number of orchids of several species,



Mirror Ophrys - May 2012 © Jeff Clarke

the most abundant of which were some splendid specimens of Early Purple Orchids and Yellow Bee and Sawfly Ophrys. Here too we found a late flowering Giant Orchid, but the most eye-catching of all were the exotic looking Mirror Ophrys. When looked at closely, the flowers bear an uncanny and unnerving likeness to the face of a rather 'scary' circus clown, perhaps one created by Stephen King. By comparison the Bumblebee and Dull Ophrys, though delightful in their own right, seemed a little, well, ... dull!

Apart from the plethora of orchids, this site also turned up Palmate Anemones, Asparagus Pea, Blue

Hound's-tongue and the related *Cynoglossum clandestinum*, whose flowers never open, White Asphodels, Tassel Hyacinths and luxuriant clumps of Dwarf Fan Palm,

Checking out the ridges for raptors produced a few additions to the trip list, with Booted and Short-toed Eagles being noted, as well as the ubiquitous Common Buzzards and Griffon Vultures. Whilst scanning the ridges we also had our first, if somewhat distant, views of Spanish Ibex. At ground level, scuttling among the bushes, we glimpsed a couple of longer tailed lizards which proved to be our first Large Psammodromus of the trip.

Wednesday 3rd May

In the morning we decided to stretch our legs and so it was that we headed for the forested rock gardens above Grazalema. We began a slow ascent in cool conditions, during which bird song was fairly subdued and the sibilant trill of the Bonelli's Warbler was one of the few sounds to penetrate the canopy of planted pines. A Firecrest called and showed briefly, while a Short-toed Treecreeper also sang but stayed hidden in the dense foliage. As we climbed a little higher we found a few examples of Spanish Fir, a species which is regaining ground in the region following protection measures.



Crossbill - May 2012 © Teresa Farino

By the time we neared the top of our climb – the statue of Christ that overlooks the town – it was positively cool and rain threatened. Invertebrates were decidedly scarce and the reptiles had also gone to ground, but a “toop” call alerted our attention to the presence of some Crossbills and one of them perched conveniently for a time giving excellent views to all and even staying around for long enough to be photographed. Plant-wise, practically the only species of note in the ‘strimmed’ grassland here was a clump of the local endemic viper's-bugloss *Echium albicans*, with its distinctive silvery foliage and pink and blue flowers.

On our way down the hill we took a short detour to explore the ruins of a chapel, where we stopped briefly for elevenses. The white-furry-leaved, blood-red-flowered hound's-tongue



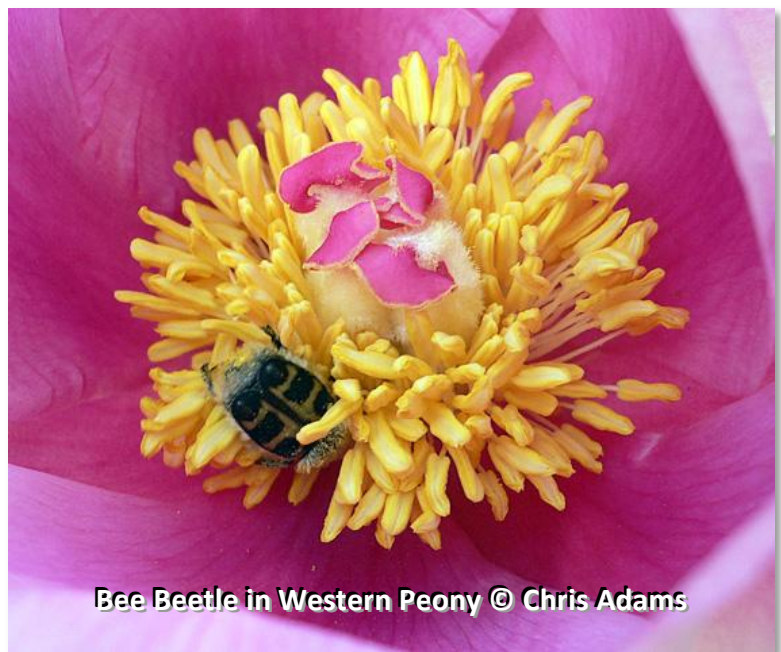
Cynoglossum cheirifolium was found here, as was the white-flowered, sprawling Cymbalaria-leaved Speedwell.

We decided that we needed to seek out better weather, or at the very least, warmer temperatures, so we descended and spent a few minutes in splendid interpretation centre near the town square, before heading off to an area of *dehesa* on the road to Ronda. En route we made a brief roadside stop to examine some cornfield flowers in the verge. This proved to be a

remarkably productive locality and we noted a splendid variety of plants including several spectacular members of the Broomrape family, Love-in-a-Mist, luminous-pink *Silene colorata*, Bladder Vetch, Mallow-leaved Bindweed, Slender Salsify and yellow-flowered Pallenis, with spiny bracts.

At the same stop, a flitting shape amongst the shrubbery finally resolved itself into a Melodious Warbler. Shortly afterwards we passed a field of Broad Beans that was liberally speckled with the appropriately named Bean Broomrape. This can be a real pest of leguminous crops, but a field full of it does have a certain charm!

The weather was still cool and drizzly so we settled on a sheltered spot for lunch. A call of nature led to Chris discovering a number of Western Peonies with flower heads as big as small cabbages, one of which even contained a lethargic Bee Beetle. Thankfully around this time the weather began to clear and warm



up and we even had a few sunny spells. Among the other notable plants found in this area were the Afro-Iberian endemic Mallow-flowered Crane's-bill, Rosy Garlic and Sword-leaved Helleborine.

The bird of the day – the Corn Bunting – was making its presence felt; its 'jangling keys' song seemed to be everywhere, the volume increasing as we headed slowly across the *dehesa*. This landscape of Cork Oaks overlying arable fields, many of which lie fallow, is filled with

kaleidoscopic colour as the annual cornfield flowers take their moment in the sun. We couldn't resist exploring them a little further for the likes of Rough Poppy and Weasel's Snout. As a backdrop to our botanising, birds were calling everywhere: Red legged Partridges, Crested Larks, various buntings, Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Jays and, distantly, Hoopoes, soporifically.

Suddenly this spellbinding scene was broken by the bizarre sight of a car passing us at low speed and a couple of hundred yards further on, driving off the road in slow motion, straight into a ditch. We headed down the road, anticipating putting a shoulder to the vehicle to extricate it, but somehow the driver, amid a lot of wheel spinning and grinding noises, managed to get the car back on the road.

From here we continued our explorations of the arable areas stopping at likely spots to observe a wide variety of birds, notably a couple of smart looking Black-eared Wheatears. After a time we came to a rather promising looking spot and on exiting the vehicle we could immediately hear calling Quail, while Turtle Doves purred from nearby cover. The botanists in the group pored over the dazzling array of wayside flowers, which here included the oversized relative of Love-in-a-Mist known as Fennel Flower, Violet Horned-poppy, the curious



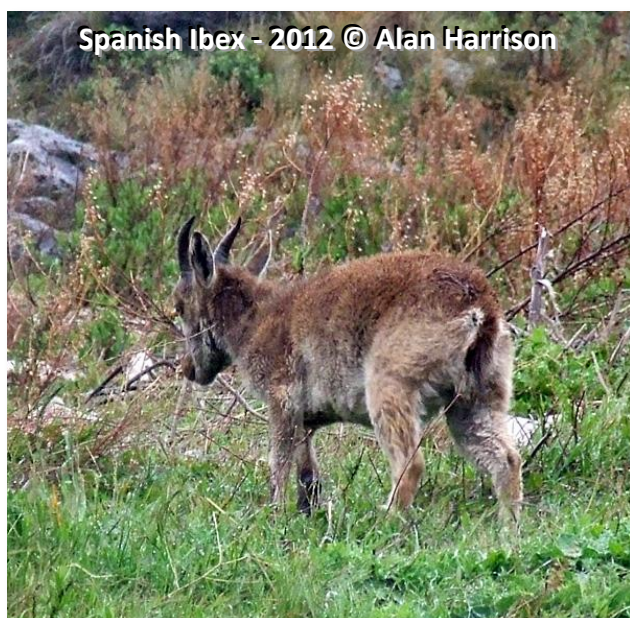
Fennel Flower - May 2012 © Teresa Farino

'hare's-ear' umbellifer *Bupleurum lanceolatum* and dramatic clumps of Honeywort.



Crown Daisies with Teresa in background © Chris Adams

Meanwhile, the birders explored along the road and after a time found a large selection of birds working through the fields, including a good sized flock of Rock Sparrows, together with Greenfinches, Goldfinches, Corn Buntings and Crested Larks.



Spanish Ibex - 2012 © Alan Harrison

We slowly returned to base and, despite a somewhat dismal day, weather-wise, found that we had chalked up an impressive plant list and had also managed to connect with a fine selection of the birds of the region.

Thursday 4th May

We awoke to a rather soggy Grazalema and decided we had better head away from the mountains in search of better weather. We passed through the cloud-laden sierra en route to El Bosque, as we did so we had our first close up views of

Spanish Ibex. Thankfully as we dropped down towards El Bosque the weather began to clear and as we pulled up outside the main information centre for the Grazalema Natural Park, were treated to the thrilling sight of at least three Bonelli's Eagles overhead.

After a perusal of the impressive exhibition we headed for the Botanical Gardens just up the hill, where – despite the drizzle – a good variety of warblers serenaded us. We had terrific close-up views of Blackcaps, Iberian Chiffchaff and a very compliant Bonelli's Warbler, which most people saw particularly well, as well as being serenaded more or less continuously by a Nightingale or two. Overhead a number of raptors showed well at times, including Booted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle and more Bonelli's Eagles.

The botanical garden harbours a good selection of south-west Spain's more distinctive flora, and not a few species were in flower, no doubt as a result of the assiduous watering that takes place during the winter months. We were particularly impressed by the meticulous labelling of the species here, so that we could see what such Iberian rarities as *Colutea hispanica*, *Teline monspessulana* and *Leucanthemum arundanum* looked like in the flesh, so to speak. As we exited the Botanical Garden we found yet another orchid species in a ditch by the car park, this time a cluster of Small flowered Serapias.



Grass Snake – May 2012 © Jeff Clarke

It was time for lunch and we headed for the nearby picnic site at Los Cañitos (Manantial del Quejigal), where our arrival was heralded by serenading Nightingales. As so often with this skulking species, the birds kept largely to cover but thankfully on this occasion one did show well, if briefly, to several members of the group. The weather remained showery, putting



paid to any butterflies, but there were sufficient flying insects around to attract a few Red-rumped Swallows to hunt nearby.

With lunch over, a few people headed upslope and started turning over stones. Before very long we had unearthed three gems. The first was a juvenile Grass Snake found by Alan, and everyone was keen to see this fabulous animal. We got a few photographs and then released it back in the same area. Minutes later excited voices brought another

crowd. This time Teresa had found something equally fascinating but perhaps less appealing. It was a massive spider, Europe's largest in fact: an Andalusian Funnel-web. She wasn't very happy, the spider that is, not Teresa, who was clearly delighted with her find! What a beast this thing was, with fangs to put Dracula in the shade and a powerful venom to boot; so not something to be messed with, although that didn't stop us taking a lot of pictures. Keeping to the theme of things that pack a punch, shortly afterwards we found a Mediterranean Yellow Scorpion. Once again cameras were clicking... Unfortunately, the Mediterranean Pine Vole also seen at this picnic site was too quick to be caught on camera.

The weather from here began an inexorable deterioration and by the time we had completed another hour's tour and selected a spot to try for some raptor watching the wind was fairly whistling through the valleys and more serious rain loomed on the horizon. The watch-point stop produced the anticipated Griffon Vultures and a few Common Buzzards but little else, so a few of the botanically inclined souls headed off down a nearby sheltered track towards La Colada de El Bosque.

The flowering shrubs along the track included Sage-leaved and Grey-leaved Cistuses, *Dorycnium hirsutum*, *D. pentaphyllum*, Oleander, Tree Germander and Blue Aphyllanthes, growing together with Lentisc and Holly Oak, the latter rarely exceeding a couple of metres



in height, and distinguished by its spiny acorn-cups. Here too we found Glandular Plantain, the thistle-like *Cynara humilis*, yellow *Asteriscus aquaticus*, Corn Marigold, Barbary-nut Irises and Portuguese Squill in bud. Fan-tailed Warblers 'zitted' overhead and Teresa also had a brief glimpse of a Great

Spotted Cuckoo flying through the fields here, alerted by its loud, parakeet-like call.

Teresa went back to get the minibus, although it was slow going as the track was so potholed. Having caught up with the back markers, rain was clearly on the way, so Jeff went to retrieve the rest of the group. As he approached them, a large powerful raptor swept low over their heads: a Goshawk carrying prey. Despite shouting loudly over the howling wind, and gesticulating wildly, Jeff failed to get their attention, but thankfully those who had already boarded the minibus did see it and so it made it on to the tour list. A few minutes later, the rain was stuttering hard against the windscreen; it was definitely time to head back to the hotel.

Friday 5th May

If the weather looked bad when we went to bed it was nothing compared to what awaited us on rising. We knew it was going to be a difficult day when Noah knocked on the hotel door and said "I can only take two of you". The rain was simply torrential so we needed an alternative venue, and decided to head for the fantastic cave system at Cueva de la Pileta. We waited under a shelter for our guide to arrive and as a bonus Jeff managed to find a Bryony Ladybird sheltering under a trailing stem of White Bryony. We finally got into the cave and explored the subterranean world of Palaeolithic and Neolithic cave paintings, but unfortunately didn't manage to locate any of the Schreiber's Bats that roost in the cave.

When we finally emerged the rain was pummelling down, and as we headed off to find a sheltered picnic site an animal slithered across the road ahead of us. It was an Otter and it was following a small stream downhill but was forced into view by a short culverted section under the road: a lucky break considering the weather. As we set up our picnic at

Benamahoma the rain eased slightly but it was a false dawn and before long we conceded defeat and retired to the warmth and dry of the hotel to pore over the books.

Finally shortly before 6.00pm the rain stopped and with a little persuasion and the promise of a good raptor session, Jeff persuaded most of the party to take a walk down below Grazelema. We were out for barely more than an hour but it was fireworks all the way. The raptors had been locked up all day and most were desperate to go hunting, or at least to have a shake down. Almost immediately we had Common Kestrels, Common Buzzards and several Griffon Vultures flying along the cliff edge, their progress marked by a bout of calling from the local Red Billed Choughs.

A juvenile Peregrine peeled off the cliffs and proceeded to fly around with total abandon. It suddenly took on a purposeful demeanour and tore across the sky with deadly intent. We couldn't yet see its quarry but we followed its progress closely. The Peregrine picked up its pace and with a wing-flicking stoop charged towards an unsuspecting Swift. At the last



moment the Swift became aware of the falcon and by the narrowest of margins evaded capture and the Peregrine barrelled off in pursuit of an easier meal. We then turned to see a pale-phase Booted Eagle scouring the landscape from several hundred feet up, before simply drawing its wings in and plummeting like bullet into a nearby field. It didn't re-appear so we think it was successful. We might have been waiting hours for this, but what a finale to the day, made even more memorable by Teresa locating a very obliging Western Three-toed Skink under a stone, which posed beautifully for photographs in the waning light.

Saturday 6th May

In complete contrast to the previous day, this one dawned bright and warm and we were going to make the very most of it. After breakfast we headed for endorheic lagoons of Espera, stopping briefly in the farmland areas on route to add a few typical open-country birds such as Skylark, White Stork, Black Kite and Little Owl to our list.



Large Psammodromus – May 2012 © Teresa Farino

On arrival at the lagoons we immediately spotted the distinctive form of a quartering Marsh Harrier and the sight of a few butterflies on the wing, including Green-striped White, was a welcome contrast to the previous two days.



Striped Oil Beetle – May 2012 © Jeff Clarke

As we walked down the track towards the first lagoon – Hondilla – the reptile hunters were soon in their stride and quickly found a pair of Large Psammodromus, close to a rabbit hole. A few minutes later we were gazing at the first of many Striped Oil Beetles as it lumbered across the path. These large cumbersome beetles seemed ill equipped for life, but they have a truly bizarre life cycle in which, as a tiny larva called a triungulin, they

hitch a ride on a mining bee. After raiding the bees' nest for pollen, nectar and bee eggs, the triungulins pupate and emerge as adult oil beetles the following spring. The adults avoid



Western False Smooth Snake – May 2012 © Teresa Farino

predation by exuding a toxic oil – containing cantharidin, which causes blistering – from their joints. This defence must be effective because they trundle across the landscape with seeming impunity. Another interesting creature observed here was a male ‘shovel-nosed’ cricket, which was later identified as *Sciobia caliendrum*.

A few minutes later and almost simultaneously, Alan and Jeff uncovered two interesting animals. Which to look at first? Alan had bagged another snake, so we took photographs and admired it and mulled over its identity, strangely marked Viperine? Slightly odd Smooth, or Southern Smooth Snake? It was a little while later when Teresa hit the mark. It was in fact a Western False Smooth Snake and more to the point we had the photographs to back up the identification. A first for all of us!



Sharp-ribbed Newt – May 2012 © Jeff Clarke

Chris and Jeff then revealed their prize: a rather less energetic Sharp-ribbed Newt which had been sheltering in a damp spot beneath a rock. The ‘sharp’ ribs could clearly be seen as defined bumps poking out along both sides of the thorax. This



amphibian can in fact defend itself by poking its poison-tipped ribs right through its skin. After a few photographs we allowed it to crawl back into its home. Shortly afterwards Teresa turned up another amphibian; this time above ground and clinging to vegetation, it was a Stripeless Tree Frog.

Alan and Jeff then approached a hollow. It literally screamed "snake" on such a hot day. But no matter how hard they tried they could not find any trace of one. On leaving the spot Alan spotted something glinting on his side of the hollow: a recently shed snake skin. A few seconds later Alan realised there was in fact a coiled snake

lying just a few feet from it. Somewhat larger than the previous one, this was indisputably a mature Viperine Snake.

As we moved on down the trail towards the second lagoon, Spanish Festoons darted between the shrubbery and set up temporary territories in sunny glades, while Spanish Brown Arguses skittered across the damper grassland strips. Among the many birds visible on the Laguna Salada de Zorrilla were Red-crested Pochard, female White-headed Ducks and several Black-necked Grebes. Around the margins we found a West Iberian Painted Frog, while several species of dragonfly were on show, including Broad Scarlet, Black tailed Skimmer and Red-veined Darter.

The heat of the day was taking its effect on people and it was definitely time to seek some shade and have lunch. We picnicked overlooking a shrubby bluff in the cereal fields, and after a time Amanda became convinced she could see an animal moving around that was not one of the many rabbits. Try as we might to resolve the apparition it remained unproven but seems likely to have been the stripy piglet of a Wild Boar. A little while later a couple of the party spied an Egyptian Mongoose casually wandering through a nearby field.

After lunch we headed back down the track past the second lagoon until we reached an abandoned farm area, complete with a brick-lined 'well'. Teresa approached cautiously in



West Iberian Painted Frog – May 2012 © Teresa Farino

anticipation and with good reason, because the pool held at least three Viperine Snakes. They had clearly been attracted by an abundant prey source as the pool held a strong population of juvenile fish and amphibians, including Iberian Water Frogs. In fact the damp ground around the pool also held large numbers of these frogs.

A nearby sheet of metal just begged to be lifted, so Alan and Jeff heaved it up and in a flash had spied, but lost, a Moorish Gecko. And a juvenile Viperine Snake expressed its displeasure at being nabbed by evacuating its smelly bowels over Jeff's hand. In total that day we recorded an impressive total of six Viperine Snakes. We continued on, slowly making our way down towards the far lagoon when a slow moving boulder turned into a Spanish Terrapin. This animal duly photographed at close quarters was a fair distance from the lagoons, and the dried mud on its shell suggested it hadn't been near water for some time.

As we approached the third, and deepest, lagoon - Laguna Dulce de la Zorrilla – it was obvious that there were more birds to be seen. Before we even reached the edge a bird took flight from the grassland and with a lazy winged action disappeared from view. It was a Stone Curlew and had it not flown, its cryptic camouflage would probably have fooled us. The lake itself was full of Coots, though none could be 100% identified as the hoped-for Crested species. Thankfully the Purple Swamphen was more obliging as it



Spanish Festoon – May 2012 © Jeff Clarke

perched, uncharacteristically, on a sparse bush. By now the real heat of the day had taken full effect and the shimmer made scoping a waste of time. Indeed most of the smaller birds heard so well earlier on in the day, such as the Nightingales, Great Reed and Cetti's Warblers, had fallen silent.



To compensate we spent a while searching for dragonflies and damselflies but added little new other than Iberian Bluetail and Common Blue Damselfly. Among the notable plants around the lagoons were lilac-flowered *Cleonia lusitanica*, in the mint family, and some superb spikes of the star-of-Bethlehem *Ornithogalum narbonense*.

On our return to the mini-bus we disturbed another couple of Stone Curlews, while another Marsh Harrier quartered the fields lazily in the distance. We made a slow

return to base, casting glances over the Embalse de Bornos with its contingent of Black winged Stilts, but the heat haze was too great and it was time to return to base after a very productive day.

That evening the warmth remained and after our meal we went out in search of bats. Common and Soprano Pipistrelles were present as was a larger Noctule sp. but couldn't put a definite name to the latter species.

Sunday 7th May

Another beautiful day dawned and we decided this would be ideal for an extensive walk in the mountains above Grazalema. Starting from the Puerto de El Boyar, we climbed slowly through the wonderful limestone landscape, stopping periodically to look at the wide variety of flowering plants on offer, including the infamously painful Hedgehog Broom.

Everywhere you looked small lizards scuttled away to cover, or were revealed as you lifted a rock; most were Iberian Wall Lizards but we also came across a good number of Large Psammodromus.



After a time we reached a grassy plateau with scattered bushes and following a short refreshment break we explored this area. It seemed particularly well endowed with Melodious Warblers, but here too we found Garden Warbler, a few Blackcaps and the first of many Stonechats. After a time we managed to winkle out a Subalpine Warbler or two, and then a Crested Tit. Even at this relatively early stage of the day the raptors had soared high into the sky and only the occasional Griffon Vulture would show distantly.

We climbed higher and began exploring another rockier plateau with a few scattered bushes dotted around among the lethal broom. Unfortunately the combination of drought and grazing sheep and goats here had put paid to any botanical gems of note, with a few tardy Rush leaved Jonquils found by Anne definitely the highlight.

Meanwhile, the reptile hunters were hard at work turning over stones and searching likely rocky patches for vipers, all the time being serenaded by the lilting song of Woodlarks. It was hard work with scant reward, until a beaming Alan, grin like a Cheshire Cat, hove into view over the horizon. He had every right to smile, for his prize was one of the least-known and seldom-seen reptiles in Europe. Commonly called the Iberian Worm Lizard, it is also known as the Amphisbaenian, and this pinkish, annulated creature did look far more like an earthworm than any lizard we'd ever seen.



Iberian Worm Lizard *Blanus mariae* – May 2012 © Teresa Farino

The botanists were 'slightly impressed', but for the rest of the group this was probably the outstanding find of the trip. It was a first for all of us, and Teresa even had the honour of being bitten by it! It later turned out that there are now thought to be two different species

of Worm Lizard in Iberia, and ours was probably the recently described *Blanus mariaae*, which has a marked south-westerly distribution in the peninsula.

Well, we were not going to top that but were determined to give it a darn good try. We had not gone very much further when one of the most beautiful birds of the mountains put on a show. A dazzling male Rock thrush flaunted itself, demanding to be admired and it duly was. The botanists were

not to be outdone and were soon admiring Portuguese Squill and the equally beautiful Spanish Iris. A short while later some diligent searching also brought the group's first Lang's Orchid, nestling in between some rock clefts, safe from the hungry local goats and ibex.

We descended a short distance and came to an area where reduced grazing pressure was very apparent and here, in a micro climate of higher humidity, dancing amid tall clumps of the legume *Adenocarpus decorticans*, in full flower, we found many more butterflies

including Cleopatra, Western Dappled White, Provence Orange Tip, Large Tortoiseshell, Wall Brown and more Spanish Festoons.

Just before our final descent we took a short break and it happened to combine with a slight cooling in the day. This brought down some of the Griffon Vultures and we were treated to a close fly-by of several individuals. One of them was a smaller darker bird with prominent pale stripes on the underwing, and Teresa and Jeff found themselves uttering the unexpected words "Rüppell's Griffon Vulture!" This species has recently started to colonise Spain but it is still very rare here. Any other day this bird would top the prize list, but for most of the party the Iberian Worm Lizard just held off this late challenge. Nonetheless, it was a fitting finale to a brilliant day in the Sierra de Grazalema.





Common Swift - May 2012 © Jeff Clarke

Monday 8th May

Our final day dawned bright and sunny, and we spent a few minutes soaking up the cacophony of screaming Pallid and Common Swifts by Grazalema's town square before heading off to an area of damp meadows near Benaocaz. On our arrival in the village it seemed as if the swifts had followed us as they were everywhere, careening over the landscape.

We began a slow descent through a well-wooded landscape, though the herb layer was distinctly goat ravaged, the answer as to why soon becoming clear, as we passed a goat milking parlour after a few hundred metres. Once again a myriad Bonelli's Warblers trilled from the trees lining the footpath, and a few butterflies put in an appearance, including a number of Provence Orange Tips, Berger's Clouded Yellows and Cleopatras, plus our first Red Admiral of the week.

We eventually arrived at a damp meadow which appeared to hold some promise, floristically, and sure enough we soon discovered the trip's first Lax-flowered Orchids, curiously not grazed out by the Black Pigs rootling around in the field. While Janet was avidly botanising she spotted something move. Closer inspection proved it to be the flamboyantly adorned nymph of a Cone-head Mantis. This bizarre creature looks so incongruous you can hardly believe it is not a plant that moves.

On the cliffs above the meadow we spotted several Griffon Vultures perched in what looked like perfect nest sites, as well as a couple of Lesser Kestrels and a single Common Kestrel wheeling about, giving us the ideal opportunity to compare the two.



Lax-flowered Orchid – May 2012 © Jeff Clarke

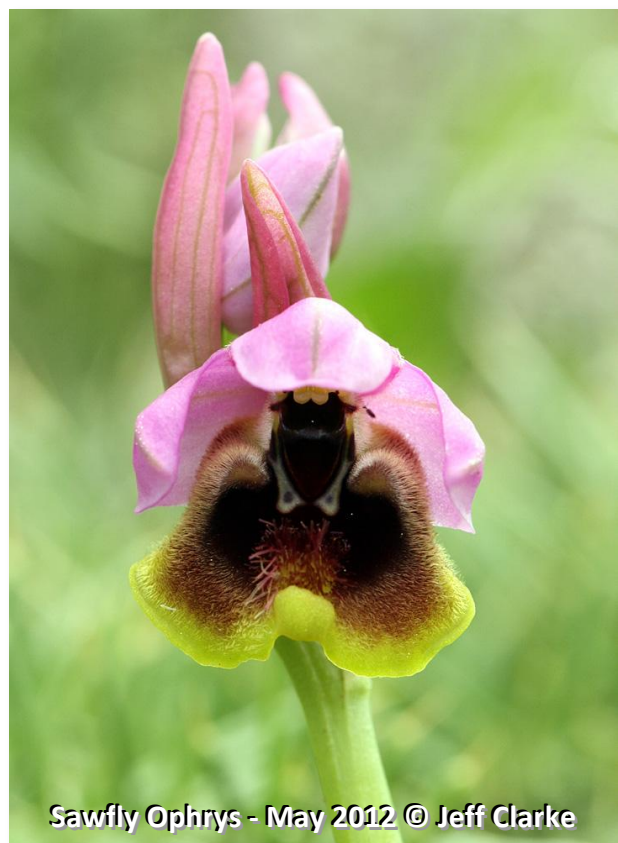


Stone turning was largely unproductive until Jeff, in slight desperation, lifted a rather large stone and beneath it spied a spotty lizard. This was a two person job and as Jeff lifted the rock once again, Alan was on hand to secure the beautifully marked juvenile Ocellated Lizard. We took time to admire and photograph this lovely animal before leaving it to return to its favourite rocky retreat. A probable Andalusian Wall Lizard was our only other reptile here, this species was only split from Iberian Wall Lizard as recently as 2006. The predominantly blue tail and greenish spotting on the body are good markers for this species in the field.

We returned to the vehicle – pausing briefly en route to photograph an obliging Egyptian Grasshopper – and found a comfortable picnic location in the shade for our final delicious lunch, prepared as usual by Teresa. Of course it wasn't long before we were off exploring the picnic ground. In a small stream we found several Sharp-ribbed Newt efts, while the botanists turned up a selection of orchids including Sawfly Ophrys, as well as some Barbary-nut Irises, this time in full bloom.

And Finally...

We returned to the hotel for the last time to collect our cases. It had been a memorable week, and despite a difficult few days weather-wise we had managed to find a terrific variety of wildlife. The leaders, as ever, worked hard to locate the specialities of the region for the



Sawfly Ophrys - May 2012 © Jeff Clarke

participants, but in truth the willingness and enthusiasm of the whole group to so actively seek their own finds proved invaluable and enhanced the tour no end.

This report is not a comprehensive account of our sightings, but simply describes the highlights. The species totals for the week only include what was seen by one or more of the participants; species observed solely by one of the leaders are not included in the tally. For the record, we encountered 10 species of mammal, 108 species of bird, 10 species of reptile and 6 species of amphibian, plus many interesting invertebrates. We also compiled a very extensive plant list, including at least 15 species of orchid, despite the previous winter's drought.

Jeff and Teresa would like to thank all members of the group for helping to make the tour so enjoyable. We hope to see you again sometime soon.



May 2012 tour party in the Sierra de Grazalema © Jeff Clarke

For information about future tours please visit our websites:

Jeff Clarke: <http://www.jeffclarkeecology.co.uk/>

Teresa Farino: <http://www.iberianwildlife.com/>

Jeff Clarke & Teresa Farino; 2012