

GIBRALTAR

Rüppell's Vulture & Elegant Tern

23-24th September 2016

Ben Macdonald

I. INTRODUCTION

The Gibraltar raptor migration has in recent decades thrown up one of the more puzzling specialties of Europe's birds of prey: the regular presence of the generally-African Rüppell's Vulture in September. Whilst some believe these birds may be dispersing from Africa, another theory is that these birds are, in fact, non-breeding birds that may already have spent the summer in Spain's large Griffon vulture colonies. The evidence for this is scant, but equally, a northwards migration all the way from the nearest breeding grounds, in central Africa (southern Mauretania, Niger, Mali) is not particularly likely either, especially as the species is now critically-endangered and withdrawing its range.

Given ID is not straightforward, and the movements of raptors around Gibraltar require a lot more understanding than simply sitting at an observatory, I enlisted the help of Javi Elorriaga (<https://birdingthestrail.com/>). Javi is a superb guide, to the extent that on the 24th, after us seeing 'only one Rüppell's Vulture, and not very well' the day before, he offered me an entire second day's birding free of charge, as he felt he had failed to deliver. Javi's knowledge of the region, its vulture migration and other birding areas is unparalleled, and particularly useful in an area with lots of private salt pans, hidden birding areas and where an understanding of the daily wind patterns is essential.

Over the course of just two days birding, I had an excellent trip. In addition to seeing my three targets of Rüppell's Griffon, Elegant Tern and Iberian Chiffchaff, I also had superb views of no fewer than 16 species of raptor, with other highlights, not detailed below, being a migrant Spanish Imperial Eagle at Tarifa, a superb pair of hunting Bonelli's Eagle, Egyptian Vulture, Montagu's Harrier, Lesser Kestrel and a close passage of Honey-buzzards. A range of other quality birds were noted including Gull-billed, Caspian & Roseate Terns, Iberian Woodpecker, a large colony of Alpine Swift, Melodious Warbler and Spanish Sparrow. An excellent trip – thanks to the team at Birding the Strait. I generally leave birders to decide their own accommodation options, but it's worth noting that the Hostel El Levante (11380 Tarifa, Cádiz, Spain, telephone +34 956 68 17 75) is an excellent place from which to reach all the main vulture migration sites around Tarifa.

II. TARGET & NOTABLE SPECIES

Rüppell's Vulture *Gyps rueppelli*

The definitive paper on the subject of regular Rüppell's Vulture and the exceptional records of African White-backed Vulture around the Straits of Gibraltar is written by Guillermo Rodriguez and Javier Elorriaga and available in *Dutch Birding* 38: 349-375, 2016. The prime time for encountering Rüppell's Vulture around the Straits is September, with a slight peak towards the third week of the month.

Two key observatories are often used to see birds, which generally travel in large kettles of Eurasian Griffons. These are the observatories at Cazalla, Tarifa (36.032974, -5.576703) and at El Agarrobo (36.090238, -5.484104), where late morning can often be an excellent time as the birds rise from roost sites over these areas. That said, you can also spend entire days at these observatories and, if the wind is not doing the right thing, see almost no vultures at all. There are then two alternatives for seeing the birds. One is to locate a fresh carcass, which often requires inside information.

The other is to seek out large kettles of vultures. In this regard, the valley road from the CA9210 leading to the N-340 (Tarifa region) takes you through superb vulture habitat with excellent chances to find Rüppell's Vultures as the heat gets up in mid to late morning. Exit the road at 36.050241, -5.624595 and follow it north, then cutting east at 36.072365, -5.613256. This section is superb for vultures, all the way back to the N-340. Javi and I located a single juvenile Rüppell's Vulture at the Rio de la Vega (36.049326, -5.578656) but it seemed Javi considered us fairly unlucky not to locate more than 1 more in a total of 2 days searching this region. It's worth noting we came close on a few occasions, narrowly missing an adult on carcasses further N on the CA-9210 (36.094011, -5.624368) by less than half an hour. Overall, this 'circuit' of the countryside immediately inland of Tarifa should produce Rüppell's Vultures over 3 days of observation in the 2-3rd weeks of September.

Elegant Tern *Thalasseus elegans*

Shortly before my visit, there came confirmation that the pair of Elegant Terns that had bred close to the salt-pans of Salina de la Tapa, Cadiz (c. 36.579052, -6.175488) was in fact a genetically pure pair, not carrying any mixed genomes from Lesser Crested or even African Royal Terns. Javi made a superb effort to get us around a range of sites on the 23rd September in order to catch up with the birds, which were still in the area but had dispersed from their breeding grounds. Because the breeding salt-pans are private and we failed to negotiate access, we instead searched some key tern roosts at coastal sites. It was real last-chance stuff but at around 19:00 on 23 September, a superb male Elegant Tern flew in to the roost of Sandwich Terns (and 2 Roseates) at the Rio de San Pedro, Cadiz Bay (36.525920, -6.229120). It immediately began displaying to the birds around it, and was quite aggressive, remaining 'on deck' for just 5 minutes before flying out to sea. All of the salient features were noted. Elegant Terns remain present in the area as of 2018.

Iberian Woodpecker *Picus sharpei*

The broken cork oak woodlands of the valley around Arroyo de Salado, immediately inland of Tarifa, off the CA-9210 is excellent for this species. Birds were noted at 36.065949, -5.594881 and 36.061231, -5.584939 but the whole habitat is good for the species, which as expected in late September is more readily heard than seen.

Iberian Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus ibericus*

The cork oak woodlands with a thick under-storey of tall bushes forms the habitat for this commonly-breeding bird in the Tarifa region. By our visit the majority of birds had already dispersed southwards or stopped singing, however, one bird did respond to tape and showed well for a short time at Las Caheruelas (36.100674,-5.581925), but earlier visits would easily secure this species.

III. SPECIES LIST

1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
2	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>
3	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>
4	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
6	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
7	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>
8	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>
9	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>
10	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
11	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>
12	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>
13	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
14	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>
15	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>
16	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>
17	Ruppell's Vulture	<i>Gyps rueppellii</i>
18	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>
19	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
20	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>
21	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
22	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
23	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>
24	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraetus pennatus</i>
25	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Hieraetus fasciatus</i>
26	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>
27	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
28	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
29	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>
30	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
31	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>
32	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
33	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>
34	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>
35	Temminck's Stint	<i>Calidris temminckii</i>
36	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
37	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>

38	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>
39	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>
40	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
41	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
42	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
43	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>
44	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
45	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
46	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
47	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
48	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Larus melanocephalus</i>
49	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
50	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>
51	Gull-billed Tern	<i>Sterna nilotica</i>
52	Caspian Tern	<i>Sterna caspia</i>
53	Elegant Tern	<i>Sterna elegans</i>
54	Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougallii</i>
55	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>
56	Little Tern	<i>Sterna albifrons</i>
57	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>
58	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
59	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
60	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>
61	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>
62	Alpine Swift	<i>Apus melba</i>
63	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>
64	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>
65	Iberian Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>
66	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>
67	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
68	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>
69	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>
70	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>
71	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>
72	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
73	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
74	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>
75	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>
76	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>
77	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>
78	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
79	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>
80	Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>
81	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>
82	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>
83	Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>
84	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
85	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>
86	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>
87	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>
88	European Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>

89	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>
90	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>
91	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
92	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
93	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>
94	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
95	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>
96	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
97	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>
98	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>
99	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>