

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Easter in Mallorca
16 – 25 April 1992

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List of participants

Dr Neville Skinner
Eric and Jean George
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Roy and Mary Prince
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Co-leaders:

Ian Hepburn
Ivan Nethercoat

Illustrations by Rob Hume

Front cover: osprey, black-winged stilt and little egret

Report written by Ivan Nethercoat

Honeyguide's first trip to Mallorca was a notable excursion along what is a very well worn route for the naturalist. We were the first party to be allowed onto the military garrison of the Isle of Cabrera, the area's first National Park, and we were blessed with wonderful weather and a group that was a real joy to lead. The weather, although very pleasant, was actually a handicap when it came to birdwatching. Birds tend to land in good numbers if the weather is bad: i.e. headwinds, fog, rain etc. Our bright clear skies and sunshine would allow many of them to fly straight over the island so we did not get any real 'falls' of migrants. This didn't really matter as it was the overall trip that was important and that had so much to do with the individuals concerned as what we saw. Thank you for your tolerance during the first few days when transport was a problem and for getting into a wonderful group. We hope you all had a good time and we look forward to seeing you again sometime.

Best wishes

Ivan Nethercoat and Ian Hepburn.

Thursday 15 April – Heathrow to Porto Pollenca

Arrival at Gatwick Airport before embarking on what was to be a very pleasant flight to Palma with British Midland. Their service to Mallorca was the equivalent of business class which meant comfortable seats with plenty of leg room, good food and drink and real cutlery! All in all a pleasant change from the previous flights that I have taken to the island. On arrival, Ian and I left the party to pick up our two minibuses that were to be our transport for the next ten days.

Unfortunately our quick journey was thwarted by the fact that, despite faxes to the contrary, the hire company claimed no record of our booking and to further complicate the matter their minibuses had been involved in an accident and were off the road! After much intense debate by Ian and staff in the office we eventually managed to get two cars for ourselves and a third to enable us to get everybody to the hotel along with a promise that the minibuses would be ready after the Easter holiday.

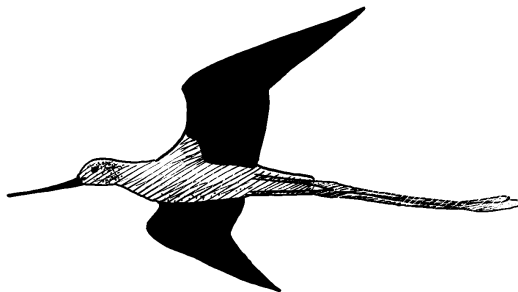
It was fortunate that our hotel was so well-positioned as a base for a wildlife holiday. Our destinations for the next few days were all close to the hotel so with two cars and thirteen people were able to operate a shuttle service to get everyone to the sites.

Friday 17 April – Albufereta and Albufera

A windy and showery morning dashed any hopes of waking up to sunny Mediterranean skies but, fortunately for us, the birds seemed oblivious to the weather. Our first stop was the area of marsh known as the Albufereta (literally ‘little marsh’) where there is a very well positioned abandoned house that, as well as giving shelter, provides an excellent vantage point over the marsh. Here we had a wonderful introduction to Mediterranean birding with excellent views of some of the specialities of the area. Little egrets, squacco heron, purple heron, osprey and marsh harrier were all sharing the riches of the marsh with more familiar birds such as migrating swallows and martins, grey herons, wigeon and mallard.

The rocky uncultivated areas were also home to some wonderful plants with serapias (tongue orchid) and spectacular mirror orchids prompting us to take extra care when walking towards the centre of the marsh.

Wetlands are one of Mallorca's special habitats and the rest of our day was spent on the island's only Natural Park – the Parc Natural De S'Albufera, a 4000 acre reedbed of international importance for wildlife that so nearly disappeared to make way for yet more hotels and tourist resorts. Our first stop in the park was at the old Salinettes – disused salt pans that are an important feeding ground for wading birds and one of the best places to see the amazing black-winged stilts, here feeding alongside redshanks, ruff and Kentish plovers.

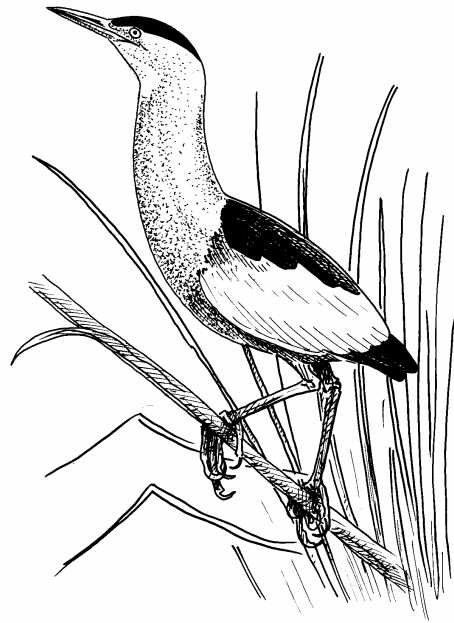


Having explored this area well we then took a short drive to the visitor centre in the heart of the park. Here the reeds grow to 15 feet or more and form dense beds intersected by numerous canals and rivers. To make viewing easier, several hides and pools have been put in the reserve which enable the visitor to get a rare glimpse of its precious wildlife. Here were garganey, shoveler and

teal alongside herons, egrets and waders galore. But the star bird of the day was the unusually obliging little bittern, fishing from the edge of an island of reeds in full sunlight.

Saturday 18 April – Casas Veyas

A change of scenery and a change of weather as we headed down the spectacular road along the Formentor Peninsula towards Casas Veyas. The road climbs high out of Puerto Pollensa, offering superb views over the bay and town before a hair-pin bend rapidly takes us in the opposite direction towards the Mirador, a spectacular viewpoint on the high cliff edges. From here one looks down onto the sea and along the main range of mountains on the island. Here also was blue rock thrush – a sentinel of the cliffs in full song to the many crag martins and swifts that were passing below us. On the distant sea were rafts of yellow-legged herring gulls and another Mediterranean bird, the Cory's shearwater. One sharp-eyed member of the party also saw a turtle briefly come to the surface before disappearing.



After this short but spectacular break we continued along the hairpins of the peninsula until we reached Casas Veyas, a farm set amongst the pinewoods with two large fig fields on either side of the road that seem to act as a magnet for tired migrants, making this one of the most famous sites on the island. The open fields, woodland edge, trees and mountains provide an excellent range of habitats as well as spectacular views.

Our good fortune with the weather however meant that migrants were a little thin on the ground but some good birds were still to be seen. Hoopoe, firecrest and peregrine accompanied us all day while marsh harriers were regularly passing through the valley – occasionally challenged by the resident ravens.

The woods here hold the Mallorcan race of crossbill which put on some very good views for us, unlike the vocal but elusive Bonelli's warbler. The hills above the farm hold good numbers of Sardinian warblers but the secretive Marmora's warbler did not show itself today, the wind keeping it down among the vegetation.

Sunday 19 April – Salinas de Levante

The furthest drive of the trip took us to the Salinas de Levante at the south of the island. This is an area of worked and disused salt pans that can be especially good for waders while the surrounding farm scrubland holds newly arrived migrants.

It is only a short drive from here to Porto Colom, the lighthouse on the southernmost tip of the island, and a good spot to watch for shearwaters out at sea and stone-curlew in the fields before the lighthouse. Highlights included osprey, marsh harrier, spotted redshank, Kentish plover, black-winged stilt and hoopoe on the salinas while near the tip of the island the elusive stone-curlews put on a wonderful performance, giving everybody excellent views. Out to sea the Cory's shearwater and Audouin's gulls also performed well in the glorious sunshine. Unfortunately the Marmora's warbler that had been seen an hour earlier decided it was time to disappear as we arrived and leave us with a wonderful display of Hottentot fig around the lighthouse.

Monday 20 April – Cuber

A trip to the mountains with wonderful weather, breathtaking scenery and nightingales singing from what seemed like every other bush.

An hour or so from the hotel and we were parked alongside the reservoir at Cuber, beneath Puig Major, Mallorca's highest peak and sight of a NATO early warning station. This is black vulture country and this man-made reservoir, built to supply Palma with water, is one of the best sites on the island to see both these and many other birds of prey.

During the short walk from the car park to the quarry on the side of the reservoir the vultures gave brief but good views. Along the way tawny pipit, stonechats, spectacled warbler and peregrine also showed well.

Eating lunch at the quarry we were serenaded by a beautiful male rock thrush while we watched an osprey circling over the water trying to make up its mind whether to fish or not.

Tuesday 21 April – Formentor and Albufera

Another trip down the Formentor peninsula, but this time to the very end. These cliffs are home to Eleonora's falcon later in the year which links with their attractiveness for migrant birds. The falcons time their breeding to coincide with the autumn migration and feed their young on tired birds which they catch out at sea. When the falcons arrive back on the island they spend their first few weeks hunting insects over the marshes so the cliffs were fairly quiet today, but smaller birds such as black redstart, kestrel, willow warbler and blackcaps could still be found, while out to sea the shearwaters were grouping in rafts.

The afternoon was again spent at the Albufera but this time with the spectacular addition of six marsh sandpipers feeding very close to the hides and footpaths along with ruff, wood sandpiper, egrets and garganey. The newly arrived great reed warblers were now very vocal as they sang from the tops of the reeds but the moustached warblers, although also singing well, were difficult to see but one or two of us were lucky enough to get some close views of a bird feeding on the edge of one of the ditches.

Wednesday 22 April – Cabrera

The trip to the Isle of Cabrera was the only excursion where we could not change the day. All fingers had been crossed that the weather did not stop the trip going ahead, but in the end all went well. We arrived at Porto Cristo almost exactly at the time we were expected, to be met by local conservationists working on the island – now one of Spain's few National Parks

The one and a half hour boat trip took us across a calm sea in an almost dangerously hot sun. Rafts of shearwaters were seen between the two islands as well as some very distant dolphins. Among the cliffs of Cabrera some of the newly returned Eleonora's falcons could be seen while fledged shags were jumping into the water as we sailed past.

Having circled the island we entered the bay and moored. The island is still a garrison and access is very restricted. We were the first party of tourists to be allowed on and this was on condition that we were escorted.

After lunch our guide took some of us on a circuit of the island while the rest of the party stayed at the base of the valley that dissects the island. Many migrants were busily feeding here; in a dry stony field a snipe looked decidedly out of place but the whinchats, willow warblers, redstarts and wheatear seemed to be very much at home although literally just passing through. In a small cultivated field a cuckoo looked extremely tired and oblivious to our presence while on the ridge the resident subalpine warbler and osprey gave brief but good views. Apart from being a beautiful

island to walk around our brief visit had some real surprises, such as the 8 foot high fennel towering over the wild cyclamen and pyramidal orchids or the spectacular dracunculus or dragon arum with its revolting smell that attracts flies to enable pollination to take place. On any of the exposed rocks, bathed in sunlight, the endemic wall lizards were basking.

On the return journey the large tin of pilchards given to us by the hotel was donated to the shearwaters. This seemed to be a new concept to the park staff, who seemed to think we were acting rather strangely. But eventually the smell of fish brought in some shearwaters extremely close to the boat and the staff could see method in our madness. Unfortunately the boat had to get back and we only had a short time to view these birds but any sea-watchers on the shore should have had a good evening's viewing.

Thursday 23 April – Porto Colom

Porto Colom is a small harbour in the south-east of the island. It was at one time the place to go to see the rare Audouin's gull but as the range of this bird has spread it is now seen over much of the island's eastern shore and in particular outside our hotel!

Just outside Porto Colom are two good sites for Thekla lark and Marmora's warbler and these were our main targets for the morning. The Theklas proved elusive and some birds that looked likely showed only very briefly before disappearing behind dense cover. The Marmora's warbler seems to get harder to see as the years progress and especially so when one is with a party of keen birdwatchers. After much searching of the cliff top we were eventually lucky to see and hear a male as he perched briefly on top of a bush. Here also were migrant wheatears, tawny pipits, woodchat shrikes and peregrine. All in all a pleasant walk before lunch and coffee in the town.

Today was also the day Ian had to leave us for 24 hours so our next venue was a drive along the road below the Arta mountains, aiming to get back in good time for Ian to get to the airport.

This is a favoured area for booted eagle and as if on cue a beautiful pale phase bird came down and gave the car a close inspection, allowing us very close views, all to a background of mountains and nightingale song. Unfortunately those in the minibus missed this bird despite much flashing of lights.

Further on we walked beneath the mountains and had a surprise sighting of six black vultures. Although for us the vulture's normal home of the Northern mountains seems a long way from here, when you have a ten-foot wing span and the hot sun gives good thermals for you to glide on, the Arta mountains are probably only a couple of wing flaps away. Still, for us it was a very pleasant surprise, especially when they were later joined by two black kites. At a lower altitude, swallowtail butterflies were also brightening up the day.

Some of the party left with Ian while Ivan took a slower drive back with the minibus. No eagles this time but instead good views of alpine swift.

Friday 24 April – Boquer Valler. Cuber and Albufera

A day off for sightseeing, buying souvenirs or birdwatching! A minibus full of die-hard birdwatchers resisted temptation to spend money and set off on a tour of the Boquer Valley, Cuber and Albufera.

The fields at the entrance to the Boquer Valley are well known for their migrant birds but today we were also on the lookout for wryneck, a summer visitor to the island, more often heard than seen due to its cryptic coloration.

This morning good views were had by all as a bird called from dead branches to proclaim its territory. The rest of the time here was spent exploring the mouth of the valley before we moved on once again to Cuber, leaving hoopoe, blue rock thrush and crag martins to the other birdwatchers.

The reservoir just before Cuber is often worth stopping at briefly to look, not at the water but at the skyline. This was a useful stop today as the booted eagles were cruising the top of the hills and seen well by those that missed them yesterday. At Cuber itself the birds were much the same as on our previous trip although the spectacled warbler was giving much better views. In the car park however was one of the best sights of the trip, for me at least. As I reversed the van I saw in the wing mirror a large creature heading for the back wheels – a dung beetle complete with dung ball! This wonderful insect had just one mission, to get the dung ball (about the size of a table tennis ball) across the road. As a reward for the surprise sight of the trip we duly picked her up and carried her safely across.



Lunch today was spent at a local café with spectacular views over the mountain range and a stuffed black vulture in the bar!

Late afternoon was again spent in the Albufera marsh. This is one of the best times to be here; the swifts, swallows and martins gather in their thousands, the temperature is very pleasant and the birds are again active. The marsh sandpipers were still showing well but an additional star bird had turned up since we were last here. A collared pratincole was now resting alongside a small pool in the marsh. No doubt it would soon be joining the swallows in search for insects but for now it was resting before continuing its migration into southern Europe. On the ground the yellow wagtails and pipits had a more leisurely approach to catching their food.

Saturday 25 April – Ternelles

Saturday is the only day when the public are allowed on the footpath in the Ternelles Valley. Despite being a path to the sea and therefore, according to Mallorcan law, open at all times the influential landowners manage to keep it closed all week.

Ternelles is a beautiful valley but as it is only open for one day it is also liable to be crowded. The path winds through woodland and alongside rivers and offers interesting views of mountains and farmland. The route to the castle is a day's walk but today was only a half-day visit as we were flying out that evening. Luckily the first mile or two is usually the most productive and today was no exception; wood warbler, firecrest and of course nightingale were in the trees while overhead peregrine, Eleonora's falcon, booted eagle, kestrel and honey buzzard performed well.

All in all a good morning's birdwatching before a surprise lunch in a local cafe in old Pollensa. A quick visit earlier in the week had allowed us to book a real paella for the whole party, a thank you from Ian and me for being such a good group and making our job very pleasant and enjoyable. Then it was to Palma, Heathrow and home.

HOLIDAY BIRD LIST

Little grebe	Serín	Starling
Cory's shearwater	Greenfinch	House sparrow
Mediterranean shearwater	Goldfinch	Tree sparrow
Cormorant	Linnet	Chaffinch
Shag	Cuckoo	Crossbill
Bittern	Swift	Cirl bunting
Little bittern	Pallid swift	Corn bunting
Squacco heron	Hoopoe	
Little egret	Wryneck	Total: 109
Grey heron	Short-toed lark	
Purple heron	Thekla lark	
White-fronted goose	Sand martin	
Wigeon	Crag martin	
Teal	Swallow	
Mallard	House martin	
Garganey	Richard's pipit	
Shoveler	Tawny pipit	
Red-crested pochard	Tree pipit	
Red kite	Water pipit	
Black vulture	Yellow wagtail	
Marsh harrier	Wren	
Osprey	Robin	
Kestrel	Nightingale	
Eleonora's falcon	Black redstart	
Peregrine	Redstart	
Red-legged partridge	Whinchat	
Water rail	Stonechat	
Moorhen	Wheatear	
Coot	Rock thrush	
Black-winged stilt	Blue rock thrush	
Avocet	Blackbird	
Stone-curlew	Song thrush	
Little ringed plover	Mistle thrush	
Ringed plover	Cetti's warbler	
Kentish plover	Fan-tailed warbler	
Little stint	Moustached warbler	
Ruff	Great reed warbler	
Snipe	Spectacled warbler	
Black-tailed Godwit	Subalpine warbler	
Spotted redshank	Sardinian warbler	
Redshank	Whitethroat	
Marsh sandpiper	Garden warbler	
Greenshank	Blackcap	
Wood sandpiper	Willow warbler	
Common sandpiper	Firecrest	
Black-headed gull	Spotted flycatcher	
Audouin's gull	Pied flycatcher	
Yellow-legged herring gull	Blue tit	
Whiskered tern	Great tit	
Black tern	Woodchat shrike	
Woodpigeon	Raven	