

# Spain: The Sierra Nevada & Alhambra Palace

Naturetrek Tour Report

10 - 17 June 2018

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Report compiled by Jorge Garzon



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Tour participants: Jorge Garzon (leader) with five Naturetrek clients

## Summary

This was a lovely week, blessed by mild weather and good company. The sun shone, but with no great fierceness or excessive temperatures, so we were able to complete all of the excursions as planned

### Day 1

**Sunday 10th June**

The group met at the airport on time and transferred immediately to the hotel in Granada. We had selected the Hotel Alixares, which is a modern four star establishment just by the main entrance to the Alhambra. For our purposes, it has several significant advantages, chiefly that it's almost 200 metres above the heat and pollution of the city centre, that it's away from the stag-night infested din of weekend Granada, and that it has a lovely outdoor pool.

A mid-day arrival meant that there was time for a leisurely stroll around the Albaicin district, that lovely warren of streets which connect the houses and walled gardens on the hill facing the palaces. This included a visit to an amazing bar for an ice-cold beer, with arguably the most sensational view in the country, before supper in a charming restaurant down by the river.

### Day 2

**Monday 11th June**

Given that we were about to disappear for a week into the wilds of the high mountains of the Alpujarras, the unanimous decision was taken to spend the day in the city for a dose of Andalusian city culture. This began with an amble around the relatively little-known gardens of the Carmen de los Martirios, a splendid public park not far from the hotel, an oasis of calm away from the tourist hordes. Later there was time for coffee and churros in a pretty square, a visit to two astonishing gilt-encrusted monasteries in the old town, a fine lunch at the market square, then time to wander around the fabled gardens of the Generalife within the palace walls. Then dinner in town at a fine old restaurant where for the first time the group were introduced to Jorge Garzon, the author and naturalist guide for the week.

### Day 3

**Tuesday 12th June**

Our first field day began right next to the hotel, by the gardens of the Alhambra, where Common Swifts flew noisily and martins swarmed everywhere in search of insects on a mild, sunny day. We set off comfortably in a 4x4 vehicle, skirting Granada on the bypass towards one of the most significant historical sites in the memory of the Spaniards, the Barranco de Víznar. In this gentle, peaceful place Jorge outlined some of the history of one of the most important European novelists, as we were at the site of the execution of Federico García Lorca, whose remains lie here, among trees, surrounded by nature. It was in this same place that the day's first butterflies appeared. Faithful to their territory, some male Spanish Gatekeepers began to sunbathe, which we were able to observe for some moments. A medium sized bird moved quickly among the pines, which Jorge and Mark quickly identified as Iberian Magpie. Other birds that filled the woodland with their songs included Goldfinch, Chaffinch, Blue and Great Tits, a short call of a Sardinian Warbler and the distant chatter of an Iberian Green Woodpecker.

The surrounding fields were generously filled with flowers thanks to the bounteous rains of the past winter, and the first Iberian endemic species appeared: *Phlomis lychniti*, *Thymus zygis*, *Lavandula stoechas* and *Cistus albidus* were everywhere. Before leaving we took our time to photograph several specimens of southern *Digitalis obscura* in full bloom, one of the most beautiful flowers of the surrounding limestone landscapes.

After a brief stop in Fuente Grande to admire the springs that the Arabs used to feed the Moorish neighbourhood of the Albayzin, we continued to the Sierra de Víznar, to visit a most interesting walk through an area well known to Jorge, who used to live close by. Upon arrival at the site a small group of Azure-winged Magpie received us confidently and we were able to observe properly this beautiful species that has made its home there. As we walked in the shade of the tall trees (*Pinus halepensis*, *Pinus pinaster* and oaks, fundamentally), we heard the first calls of another of the forest dwellers typical of the Iberian Peninsula: the Short-toed Treecreeper, easy to locate as they scooted tirelessly about the trees, and we watched fascinated as they searched the trunks of the pines in search of food for their offspring. The climb to the top of the hill revealed some interesting botanical species, including *Muscari*, *Linum* and the first bushes of the fragrant sage, whose leaves are used here to make a relaxing and aromatic bath salt. The extravagant *Cistus clusii* adorned every corner of the slope with their white flowers, and a multitude of bushes in flower and small semi-hidden wildflowers displayed all the magnificence of an authentic Mediterranean garden. Amongst the bushes were a host of butterflies: the endemic Panoptes Blue appeared, flying quickly, landing for a few seconds on the same spot, the Blue Spot Hairstreak allowed us magnificent views while resting on one of the nearby flowers, and when we finally reached the top we were in for a real surprise: dozens of butterflies, mostly males, fluttered across the hilltops. In less than five minutes we discovered Scarce Spanish Swallowtail, Large Wall Brown, Small White, Clouded Yellow, a fritillary that we could not identify, and up to four specimens of Iberian Marbled White which we photographed at leisure.

Meanwhile, a few metres down, Mark was entertained by another of the elusive Short-toed Treecreepers, and as we joined him we were able to enjoy a family of Long-tailed Tits looking for food, a specimen of Coal Tit fighting with a caterpillar, two individuals of the Iberian subspecies of Nuthatch and a very fast warbler who landed momentarily on a branch.

This corner of the hill, located in the shadow of the Republican trenches of the Spanish Civil War, had surprised us all - both for its exceptional natural wealth and for the significance of the unmarked graves of those brave men and women who had fought for an ideal of freedom.

After such an intense morning, some well-deserved refreshments were in order, as well as a light lunch of local cuisine. This we found in a small campsite near the highway that leads to Almeria. After our 'break' we continued the day with a visit to the last castle built in Spain: the castle-palace of La Calahorra, in the plains of the Marquesado. We had an appointment with the local guide at the castle for 5pm but on our way to meet him we managed to enjoy a sighting of a Black Wheatear in a nearby rocky area. It perched politely on the rock and did not seem perturbed by our presence. For the rest of the afternoon, we enjoyed the pleasures of this formidable castle, positioned on the side of a barren hillside. While still listening to the tale of the castle from our guide, we could also observe some Red-billed Chough and Rock Sparrow on the battlements and thick walls, as well as some Common Swift, both nesting in the castle and swooping and speeding through this historic building.

After saying goodbye to the keeper of the castle, we headed to Mairena through the La Ragua pass of the Sierra Nevada (2030 m.). We arrived in Mairena past 7:30pm, and within moments of arriving we were sitting at the dinner table, as dinner was waiting for us in a charming dining room, illuminated by the warm rays of the early evening sun.

## Day 4

Wednesday 13th June

Following a peaceful sleep, and after a good breakfast, we were ready to continue our trip early the next morning. As the day before had been so long, we decided to drive a little of the way, to a small Alpujarra village called Júbar. There, in the shadow of the ancient synagogue and hermitage, we reacquainted ourselves with the dramatic landscape and geomorphology of the Sierra Nevada. From Jubar, the plan was to follow the road to the bottom of the valley, to the Laroles river and the famous one-thousand-year-old sweet chestnut tree, flanked by a veritable jungle of green. It was a warm and sunny morning that was soon to become a magnificent day full of nature.

The route is an easy one, following a dirt track, and allows for plenty of stops to appreciate anything that might be encountered. And so we began....first of all observing the curious flowers and method of propagation adopted by the century plant (*Agave Americana*), as well as taking note of all the interesting plants that grow in the valley. This proved tricky as every corner of the route presented an authentic Mediterranean garden. There grew *Phlomis purpurea*, pallinas, *adenocarpus*, broom and many others, all under the shade of oaks, nogueras, black poplars and some 'nettle trees'. The first bolinas of the day, all in full bloom, appeared roughly at the mid-way point of our route, while in the cracks of the stone walls we surprised a Gecko sunning himself, who confidently allowed us to take a photo. There are two species of Gecko present in Andalusia, the other with a distribution restricted to areas of lower altitude and higher temperatures.

The two most common butterflies of the day were the Spanish Gatekeeper and the Iberian Marbled White. Both accompanied us during the day, and were the first species of our trip to be evidently abundant. Dozens of them, mostly males, patrolled the edges of the road, while also taking care to rapidly evade the attacks of the 'libelloids', a genus of insect that is evolutionarily located between the dragonflies and the butterflies and is endemic to the south of the Iberian Peninsula.

Other butterflies that we were able to photograph included Common Blue females, the first examples of Meadow Brown, Small Whites, the very small Black-eyed Blue, Clouded Yellow (including a female of the 'helices' form laying eggs on plants in the Pea family), Small Copper, a solitary Scarce Spanish Swallowtail patrolling one of the gullies, and the outstanding Marsh Fritillary perched on the leaf of a fern. It should be noted however, that the season of butterflies this year has been a bit delayed due to the very abundant rains during the winter and cool temperatures during the spring.

The small birds in the area did not disappoint either, whether in the oaks or when crossing the humid ravines. In particular, we saw many warblers, the increasingly scarce Turtle Dove, as well as Sardinian Warbler, Goldfinches and Serin. When we arrived at the coolest and most heavily wooded part of the walk, next to the waterway that would take us all the way to the bottom of the valley, Robin appeared, as well as the song of the Bonelli's Warbler, Iberian Green Woodpecker and Golden Oriole. We saw especially well a pair of Great Spotted Woodpecker, as well as Rock Bunting, Nuthatch, Booted Eagle and Crag Martin. There were brief glimpses of

Red-rumped Swallow and a Sparrowhawk as we entered the narrowest area of the valley, and we ended the afternoon with a magnificent 'display' of the local pair of Booted Eagle, as well as the quiet flight of a Common Kestrel over the town of Laroles. Here we had a quick snack, before returning to our accommodation in Mairena after a full and enjoyable day.

## Day 5

Thursday 14th June

After another lovely breakfast, we were ready to explore the highest areas of the Alpujarras region.

Today we would reach an altitude of 2100 metres, to explore La Ragua, and the broom and mountain meadow found there, to look for the most interesting endemic plants of the massif, as well as new butterflies and perhaps have an encounter with the queen of the raptors: the golden eagle.

After ascending the valley we parked the car in the partly cloudy Puerto de la Ragua, where the air was noticeably cooler. Penny accompanied us for the first part of our exploration, staying near the forest to make the most of the landscape and vegetation and the opportunities to document them in her sketchbook.

The first impression of the area was that everything had been delayed due to the cold and snow of the winter, since even our first plant, the southern subspecies 'australis' of the *Berberis hispánica* had not yet flowered. To compensate, the brooms of the entire slope that we ascended were covered in yellow flowers and an intoxicating fragrance filled the air. The birds were the protagonists of the first section of our walk, and we easily detected our first Citril Finches, which here in the Sierra Nevada, are at their Southern European limit. It is a small population, isolated from the rest of the Iberian peninsula, which remains stable and is in fact slowly extending its range through the high areas of Scots Pine forest. Serins, the first Rock Buntings, Coal Tits, Blue Tits, Blackcaps and Wrens filled the edge of the forest with songs of Spring. At a point where the scrub was less dense, we saw a small warbler perched on a bush. It turned out to be a male Subalpine Warbler, an interesting mountain warbler, not very abundant in the Sierra Nevada.

Throughout the morning, Woodlarks embarking on song flights, as well as the first trills of an exceptional bird, the Eastern Orphean Warbler, served as delightful accompaniment to our wanderings. At all times, eyes were fixed on the sky.

Every path we took was full of flowers. Among the brooms hid small violets and the *Cerastium gibraltarium*, with their white petals, filled in any gaps that existed between green plants. As we ascended, one of the endemic thistles of the Sierra Nevada, the Grenadian Thistle, treated us to an experience of its prickly leaves, although it still did not have flowers. Finally, we arrived at the swollen water meadows, which ecologically, closely resemble the conditions of peat bogs. Here we could admire the delicate design of the endemic flower *Veronica turbicola*, which is associated with these humid areas, as well as the *Lotus corniculatus*, with its small wing-like flowers with red and yellow tones. Exploring the surrounding rocky areas, where some marble outcrops offered respite from the dark metamorphic schists, we could note the intense smell of the mountain thyme *Acinos alpina* (used last century in small villages as an aromatic in coffee), as well as another of our most beautiful endemic species: *Hormatophylla espinosa*, with its fascinating pink flowers with rounded aspect. Next to these flowers was also the Nevada Mullein, whose flowers were beginning to appear on its stem, and the small *Erysimum nevadenses*, whose pretty yellow flowers had already bloomed.

Mark brought our attention to a raptor in the sky, but it was too far away to identify, although we agreed that it could be either the Golden Eagle or a Griffon Vulture. It mattered little however, as fifteen minutes later a silhouette of a large raptor, the closest yet, appeared on the slope, and now, looking up, we could appreciate the magnificent flight of a sub-adult Golden Eagle, which after circling once, disappeared into the upper part of the valley. Five minutes later, Janetta pointed out another large raptor nearby. This was identified as a Griffon Vulture, the first on our list, and allowed us to admire one of the largest birds in Europe, which was quickly followed by a second.

The butterflies took flight as the sun warmed the atmosphere, and after the first flights of Small Whites, a pair of Bath Whites came into view, perching for a few seconds in some broom. Along the ravine we also located Painted Ladies, a beautiful Small Tortoiseshell, Mountain Argus, Common Blue, and an unexpected female Adonis Blue of the form 'androgynis' that allowed us to enjoy the vibrant colors on its closed wing.

To finish the first part of the day, and after devouring our lunch under the trees (where we were visited timidly by an Eurasian Jay and a Magpie), we took the path that led to the Ferreira Viewpoint, in the hope of observing some more species, and perhaps including the Spanish Ibex. Female Cleopatra, Provence Orange Tip, Orange Tip and a brief glimpse of a Cardinal Fritillary were all new butterflies for the day.

It started to get hot and windy as we reached the end of the trail and after admiring the vast panorama in front of us, we began to scan the nearby rocky mounds, where rested a young male Spanish Ibex. He was initially not easy to see, but a couple of minutes later he arose and rewarded us with a glorious silhouette – an indelible symbol of the mountains, drawing smiles across all our faces.

By now, it was getting late, so we returned to Mairena, stopping on the way at a spot Jorge knew contained one of the most threatened wildflowers in the Sierra. After learning about its conservation and the etymology of its name we came to realize that a species as beautiful as the *Sarcocapnos speciosa* must be preserved for future generations. This treat was the icing on the cake on a day, with all that we witnessed and experienced, which we are unlikely to forget.

## Day 6

Friday 15th June

The temperature began to rise, and this being the Sierra Nevada and the Alpujarra, a land of contrasts, where no two landscapes are the same, Jorge and David agreed upon an alternative route, to include more shelter from the intense heat of the middle of the day. The result was a 'walk on the wild side of the Alpujarra', crossing a deep valley covered with vegetation, which followed an old path the local millers used to use.

We started our trek near the village of Bayárcal, and finished six hours later in the town of Laroles, at a bar terrace where we were able to appreciate the glorious day we had had in some comfort, enjoying the expansive view of the Alpujarra that lay before us.

But first, back to the start of our day. As we descended towards the river channel from Bayárcal, the vegetation, which at first was Mediterranean scrub with some green oak, became denser and more varied. Once we were on the narrow path that made its way through the vegetation, more and more species associated with Atlantic vegetation began to appear. Sierra Nevada possesses hidden corners of vegetation that could be found in the

evergreen and humid north of Spain, with a high density of Common Fern, and other interesting small ferns, such as the Mediterranean Fern.

As we descended, the feeling of being inside one of the chapters of 'Lost' became more intense. We left behind the remains of a pair of abandoned mills and after passing some tree trunks that had been uprooted by winter flooding, we enjoyed a small detour to a flower meadow. It was at this point that a large dragonfly appeared, patrolling a pool in the river. It hovered for a few seconds, which allowed us to see his yellow and black body, and quickly identify it as Golden Ringed Dragonfly *Cordulegaster boltonii*, a reliable environmental indicator of very good water quality in the area.

We then made our way further into the meadow, where we could see a lot of butterflies. Apart from the usual Small Whites, there also fluttered amongst the blackberries, Holly Blues, a couple of Cleopatra, and two Queen of Spain fritillaries. Southern Brown Argus also appeared nearby, along with what were most likely African Common Blues. Suddenly, Jorge asked for us to stop, quickly calling upon Sheila and David to join him. There they observed a pair of Knapweed Fritillaries, and were able to photograph and accurately document every detail of this butterfly's beautiful wings.

Upon leaving this spot, and after crossing the river on at least three or four occasions (sometimes with wet consequences), we arrived at a corner next to some enormous fallen rocks, where we stopped for our picnic lunch. The sound of the water, along with the Orioles, Wrens, Blackcaps, and Ortolan Buntings, filled the air. Above us, Crag Martins swooped and soared, and from time to time one or other of the local pair of crows took flight up the valley in search of food.

Once again we navigated the river and, after overcoming a recent landslide (there was a great flood in the valley in 2009 that caused large rock falls and the destruction of all the wooden bridges in the area), we came to a crossroads. From the rock face, we could hear a male Black Redstart and the unmistakable chirping of the Rock Sparrows. At this point, David then led the group on an easier and more accessible route to Laroles, while Jorge braved the 500 metres of precarious pathway at the Talburrica Gully, in order to pick up the vehicle and meet the group in Laroles. Upon entering the section of hillside with little vegetation, the temperature became very high, forcing the group to stop a number of times at the streams and gullies along the road.

Finally, we were all reunited on the terrace of the bar at Laroles, each with a look of satisfaction on their face, and we took the opportunity to recall the memorable incidents of the day, and reflect upon the interesting impressions left by this magnificent walk, which proved to be a real challenge for naturalists who love to venture 'off the beaten track'.

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A checklist will be added when available