

THE URBAN BIRDER

David Lindo gets away from the beaches to explore the urban Costa Del Sol



David Lindo
The Urban Birder is a familiar face on TV screens and is behind the Vote National Bird campaign

Málaga, Andalucía on the sun-kissed Costa del Sol seems like a very unlikely venue for enjoying the delights of urban birding. You may have visions of hordes of holidaying Brits around every corner kitted out with buckets and spades. The city, one of the oldest in the world, has been welcoming visitors for centuries. It is now also one of Spain's most popular tourist destinations. Before you recoil at the sheer thought of heaving streets let me tell you that I know a different Málaga. I mean, how many places do you know where you can watch Black Wheatear while enjoying a beer in a town centre?

“After dark, Red-necked Nightjars sing. But if you arrive before the mercury rises too high you would be rewarded with singing Great Reed and Sardinian Warblers”

I first visited Málaga with my mum during a winter in the late 1990s. We stayed at a family friend's apartment near the town centre and spent our week variously visiting attractions and soaking in the winter sun. My abiding memories were of the abundant Black Redstarts with their quivering red tails that seemed to be on every other rooftop aerial. I also remember finding a field full of around 160 wintering Stone-curlews at the Laguna de Fuente de Piedra Nature Reserve, 75km north-west of the city. To this day, I have never again witnessed a flock as large.

↓**HISTORIC**
Alcazaba – not just a tourist attraction... watch out for birds here, including Sardinian Warbler

Málaga has changed immeasurably since my early days and has gone through a metamorphosis over the past 10 years. Gone is the choking traffic of old and in are whole new pedestrianised areas largely constructed for the comfort of tourists to facilitate easy access to the multitude of museums and restaurants that have since sprung up. The city council have also recognised Málaga's attraction to wildlife and as such have strived to corner-off portions dedicated to nature conservation.

The Guadalhorce River Mouth

The top urban birding venue in the whole city has got to be the mouth of the Guadalhorce River, the principle river in the Province of Málaga. Although the estuary itself covers a larger area, the reserve I visited takes up 67 acres and was declared a protected Natural Area in 1989. Its main feature are the branches of the Guadalhorce River that flows through it. There is also an artificial lagoon complex, reedbeds, scrub and wet woodland. The whole site is encircled by housing, sports complexes, a main road and of course, the sea. Despite the urbanity the birdlife here is pretty impressive. On my visit spring was still just around the corner and there were some lingering winter visitors present like Gadwall, Shoveler and a few Greater Flamingos on the lagoons. While early House Martins, Swallows and a sprinkling of Red-rumped Swallows swooped, I also discovered a Water Rail, several Bluethroats and a Booted Eagle. Up to four of these impressive buzzard-sized raptors winter in the area. I also made a surprise find in the guise of an unexpected immature

DAVID SAYS
While in Málaga don't forget to keep looking out for migrants during the appropriate seasons, as the city is part of the great migratory funnel that leads to and from Africa. While having lunch in the city centre I saw a Booted Eagle drifting over.

DAVID SAYS
When strolling around crowded cities, try to ignore the people around you. Keep an eye out for movement in the trees or on the buildings you pass. Birds are everywhere. Always remember: anything can turn up anywhere at anytime.



White-headed Duck

Nature Picture Library

Crane looking distinctly forlorn, standing on a tiny wet field.

The summer months are hot – well, we are talking about the Costa del Sol. After dark, Red-necked Nightjars sing. But if you arrive before the mercury rises too high you would be rewarded with singing Great Reed and Sardinian Warblers. The Zitting Cisticola's incessant and monotonous pipping electric alarm clock-like song is also commonplace. In the reedy environs, Little Bittern nest alongside Purple Heron, while Kentish and Little Ringed Plover raise their young in proximity to leggy Black-winged Stilts. It's also worth scanning the estuary for Audouin's and Slender-billed Gulls – both absolutely gorgeous Mediterranean specialities.

The site's star birds are Purple Swamphen and around 15 pairs of White-headed Duck which was a major lifer for me. Much punching of the air and summersaults ensued after I saw six casually loafing close to the reeds.



Greater Flamingos

ImageBROKER/Alamy

KEY SPECIES WHITE-HEADED DUCK

The White-headed Duck is the prize bird of Málaga. It belongs to a family of ducks called 'stifftails' that contain six species found on all the continents bar the Antarctic. The male is fairly distinctive with a largely white head and bulbous blue bill. Although many of us think of this duck as a rare inhabitant of southern Spain (which it is) it is also patchily distributed across western and eastern Asia. Most of the population of this globally threatened bird is migratory, however the Spanish and North African birds are sedentary. It is the only stifftail to be naturally found in Europe. However, its smaller American cousin, the Ruddy Duck, has also established feral populations.

In Spain, the White-headed Duck had been decimated by habitat loss and hunting. Its plight was then further blighted by the problems caused by interbreeding with the more promiscuous and dominant Ruddy Duck. This led to the Ruddy Duck eradication scheme that resulted in its near annihilation in the UK and Western Europe.



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TRAVEL FACTS



OTHER SITES The roof terrace of Molina Lario Hotel

Why not enjoy a nice early morning cup of tea on the roof terrace of this well-appointed hotel taking in the gliding Yellow-legged Gulls, singing Spotless Starlings and the Peregrines that frequent Málaga Cathedral. In keeping with many towns and cities in Britain and Europe, this cathedral (also known as the One Armed Lady due to it only having one spire) is a magnet for this great falcon. The birds here are of the smaller, more reddish breasted and bluish backed 'brooke' race. hotelmolinario.com/en

Alcazaba of Málaga

This impressive 11th Century fortress and Roman theatre set on a hill is a major draw for tourists. The surrounding streets house numerous bars and museums including the recently opened Picasso Museum. While walking around this landmark look out for Short-toed Treecreeper, Spotted Flycatcher, Crested Tit, Sardinian and Western Bonelli's Warblers, alongside Blackcaps in the wooded areas that flank some of the walls. Pied Flycatchers are common on passage. While on the streets below the fortress, scan the walls for nesting Pallid Swift, and if you are really vigilant, you could bag yourself both Blue Rock Thrush and Black Wheatear.

WEBSITES

David stayed at Barcelo Málaga Hotel barcelo.com

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