

Birding Málaga

Where to go birding in January:
El Chorro (Desfiladero de Los Gaitanes
Nature Reserve)

Natural values.

A visit to this wonderful place will be rewarding at any time of year but January is when Griffon Vultures, the most representative birds here, start their breeding season and we can admire their male and female “synchronized” display flights and how they carry nesting materials to refurbish the rock shelves where the females will lay just one egg by mid January.



Some of the birds present at El Chorro in January are Mallard, Red-legged Partridge, Great Crested Grebe, Cormorant, Little Egret, Grey Heron, Griffon Vulture, Golden Eagle, Bonelli's Eagle, Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, Peregrine Falcon, Moorhen, Coot, Green Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper, Greenshank, Snipe, Black-headed Gull, Yellow-legged Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Rock Dove,



Wood Pigeon, Kingfisher, Thekla Lark, Crag Martin, Meadow Pipit, White Wagtail, Grey Wagtail, Robin, Black Redstart, Black Wheatear, Stonechat, Song Thrush, Redwing, Blackbird, Ring Ouzel, Blue Rock Thrush, Blackcap, Sardinian Warbler, Dartford Warbler, Cetti's Warbler, Chiffchaff, Firecrest, Wren, Great Tit, Coal Tit, Blue Tit, Crested Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper, Jay, Chough, Spotless Starling, Chaffinch, Linnet, Goldfinch, Greenfinch, Serin, Common Crossbill, Cirl Bunting and Rock Bunting.

The Paraje Natural Desfiladero de Los Gaitanes (Vultures' Gorge Nature Reserve), popularly known as El Chorro, is located just between the Guadalteba and Valley of the Guadalhorce districts. This is a place where three rivers (Turon, Guadalteba and Guadalhorce) converge, forming three big water reservoirs, and flow through a stunning gorge with high cliffs where the Griffon Vultures nest. The well known Caminito del Rey (King's Little Path), goes across this gorge.

Besides being part of the Andalusian Network of Protected Natural Sites, the Vulture's Gorge Nature Reserve is included in the European Natura 2000 Network as Birds Directive Special Protection Area (ES6170003).

The Vultures' Gorge reserve is a very diverse place in terms of many different habitats. The water reservoirs are artificial lakes where we will find Cormorants, Coots, Mallards, Grey Herons, Little Egrets, Great Crested Grebes, a few Yellow-legged Gulls and hundreds of Lesser Black-backed and Black-headed ones (specially in the Guadalteba and Guadalhorce reservoirs). The tail and some muddy banks of the reservoirs act as wetlands, where we can find waders like Green and Common Sandpipers, Snipe and Greenshank, as well as Goldfinches, Greenfinches and Serins.



Some of the roads and tracks in the area are surrounded by Aleppo Pine woods homing most of the typical forest birds like tits, including the Crested Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper, Firecrest and a big population of Common Crossbills. Mediterranean scrub

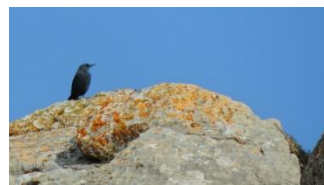
is also very common here, with wide stands of Phoenician Juniper -where Song Thrushes, Redwings and Ring Ouzels can feed all along the winter-, gorse –from which we will be able to hear the persistent calls of the Sardinian Warblers and the shy one-noted ones of the Dartford Warbler before it pops up for a moment and come down again into the bushes-, and Rosemary, the favourite perch of Stonechats and Rock Buntings.



As we reach the higher rocky areas, chances increase to find Black Redstart, Thekla Lark, Blue Rock Thrush and Black Wheatear, some of the gems of this fantastic place. In the cliffs, apart from

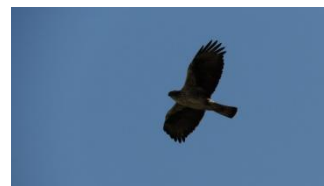


the Griffon Vultures, keep an eye to the flights of the Rock Dove, Spotless Starling and Crag Martin, and turn your head to the caws of the Choughs, as they could be betraying raptors like the Peregrine Falcon or one of the most emblematic birds of Malaga, the Bonelli's Eagle.



How to get there.

You can type "Caminito del Rey Malaga" in Google Maps to find this area. The best access is from Ardales, taking MA-5403. Once at the junction where you will see a big car park and the new Visitors Centre to the left, we can turn right (A) towards the south end of the gorge, or go straight on towards the Conde de Guadalhorce dam (B).



Route A.

The road goes down across a pine tree forest, with great views of the sandstone massive, with its typical tafonis –round cavities in the rocks- and alveoli formations -networks of smaller cavities sculpted in the sandstone cliffs-, to the left. Further down, we can take the road to Bobastro (MA-448) and follow it to the end, a wonderful view point from which we can see the big Sierra de Huma and the low Valley of the Guadalhorce after this river flows across Los Gaitanes Gorge. This is a good place for very close views of the vultures when they decide to fly around the Tajo de La Encantada, the name of this hill, where they enjoy a feeding point run by the Andalusian environment authorities. The circular dam forming another water reservoir at the very top is used as a way to store energy: the water is pumped up here when the cost of electricity is low and then released down to the hydroelectric power station at La Encantada when necessary.



Back to the junction with MA-5403, we can turn right towards El Chorro. Just a few metres ahead, on a bend to the left, we have some space to park the car on the right hand side of the road and watch the flights of the vultures between the Tajo de La Encantada and the Sierra de Almorchon, to the left side of the road. There can be hundreds of vultures flying together over this place. This is Bonelli's Eagle's territory, so let's keep an eye on it over the hills of the Sierra de Almorchon and close to the south end of the Vultures' Gorge. As we go on past the entrance to a restaurant and a little chapel, we will see a wooden platform to the left from which it is worthwhile scanning the cliffs for Bonelli's Eagles, Spanish Ibex, any other birds

around and to admire the striking vertical layers of limestone rocks. To finish with this route A trip, we can go on and park the car to the left, in front of another restaurant and a water fountain, to have a look to the south end of the gorge –Los Gaitanes- and the Caminito del Rey. Depending on the amount of water in the reservoir, there can be Grey Herons and even Black Storks at the banks of the river. We can drive back to the new Visitors Centre to start route B.

Route B.

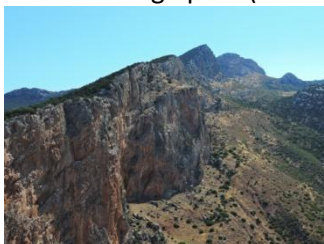


The road goes on towards the Conde de Guadalhorce dam. A track starts on the right just before going through a tunnel below the Restaurante El Mirador. It takes us to the Conde de Guadalhorce Dam Viewpoint. We can park the car near the barrier on the track down to the Caminito del Rey and walk on towards the viewpoint. This is a good place to watch forest birds though we have to be patient; birds in the woods move like in waves and we can go from no birds at all, to have a few different species together flitting and calling around us.

For hiking lovers, I highly recommend a “birdwalking” trip to the popularly known as Mirador (viewpoint) de las Buitreras (the place where the vultures nest). We just have to walk pass the barrier towards the entrance to the Caminito del Rey and turn right into another track around half way down (before going through the tunnel!). It is not a difficult walk that will take us to the most beautiful part of the Vultures’ Gorge Nature Reserve.



We can keep watching to the forest birds while in the pine tree forest, look for thrushes and Ring Ouzels just when we enter the scrub with the Phoenician Junipers to the left, and search for warblers, Rock Bunting, Blue Rock Thrush and Black Wheatear on our way up until we suddenly reach the end of the track. Then we have to keep going on towards the top of the cliff on a rough path (but not the one that goes right!), following the little piles of stones, until



we have the huge Tajos de Ballesteros in front of us, the big hollow between the Gaitanejo (north end) and Los Gaitanes (south end) Gorges, and Los Gaitanes Gorge with the bridge across the gorge in the distance. This is a magical place where you can even hear the flights of the vultures, find the Bonelli’s Eagles patrolling the cliff for doves and spot the Golden Eagle’s silhouette over the highest end of the Ballesteros Cliffs.

Back on the road towards the Conde de Guadalhorce dam, there is still another pedestrian track towards the entrance of the Caminito from the Restaurante El Kiosko. It goes along the Gaitanejo reservoir and, apart from the forest birds, we can hear (and spot with a bit of luck!) Cetti’s Warbler and see Grey Heron, Little Grebe and Mallard.



For those who did not reach the Mirador de las Buitreras, I recommend a last stop in front of the Tajo del Cabrero, another big cliff facing the Guadalhorce reservoir. To get there, we follow the road over the Conde de Guadalhorce dam, go straight on at the end of the Guadalteba dam (do not follow the sign to Campillos) over the Guadalhorce dam and take the road to Valle de Abdalajis. Once we go past “El Arpa”, we can park the car on a track to the right after a deep bend of the road to the left and check the scrub and the rocks for Dartford Warbler, Blue Rock Thrush, Black Wheatear,

Iberian Shrike, Hoopoe, Red-legged Partridge and Thekla Lark. Do not forget to keep looking up for the Bonelli's Eagle and the stars of our January trip, the Griffon Vultures.



PHOTOGRAPHS:

1. Griffon Vultures (*Gyps fulvus*) in synchronized flight
2. Griffon Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) carrying nest materials
3. Common Crossbill (*Loxia curvirostra*)
4. Dartford Warbler (*Sylvia undata*)
5. Rock Bunting (*Emberiza cia*)
6. Blue Rock Thrush (*Monticola solitarius*)
7. Black Wheatear (*Oenanthe leucura*)
8. Bonelli's Eagle (*Hieraetus fasciatus*)
9. Sierra de Huma from La Encantada viewpoint
10. Conde del Guadalhorce dam
11. Spanish Ibex (*Capra pyrenaica*) on the way to Las Buitreras viewpoint
12. Ballesteros Cliffs from Las Buitreras viewpoint
13. Griffon Vultures (*Gyps fulvus*)
14. Griffon Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*) by Las Buitreras viewpoint