

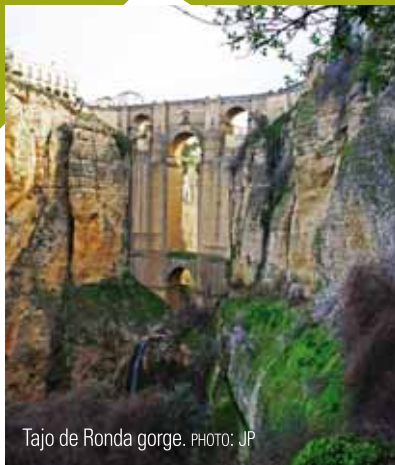


STAGE 24

Ronda - Estación de Benaoján

LOCATION

Stage 24 begins at the well-known Ronda gorge, Tajo (Cliff) de Ronda, in the old part of town, where you need to find El Camino del Campillo. After the **12, 8 km** long walk, which in most part follows the rivers Guadalevín and Guadiaro, Stage 24 ends in the Estación de Benaoján, at a square close to the train station.



Tajo de Ronda gorge. PHOTO: JP

DESCRIPTION

ABOUT THE BIRDLIFE:

This stage of the walk starts in a built-up zone, yet it includes typical rocky environment ingredients, so frequent in this mountain area. Once you leave behind the Tajo de Ronda and Alameda cliffs, the path leads through farmland where watercourses

play a major role. You will be passing through a Stone Pine wood, walking past sizeable riverside vegetation, crossing the river and continuing through a formation of retama bushes mixed with a few holm oaks, wild olives and, at the end, cultivated olive trees on the way to the Puerto de Ronda.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Gadares river, a tributary of Río Guadiaro, flows underground for about 4, 5 km through a cave system called Hundidero-Gato. There have been records of Cueva del Gato (Cat's Cave) since distant past, which emphasize the interest in the cave shown by the travellers who journeyed around the Serranía de Ronda, such as Francis Carter, who described it as one of the wonders of the Serranía. This author comments that he was assured there had been a big ruined structure a quarter of a league into the cave at a large lake, information which is also mentioned in 1811 by another traveller, William Jacob. Later on, in 1838, Captain Rochfort Scott in his book of travels around the Ronda mountains describes these ruins, attributing them to Roman times. The clergy William George Clark, in his "Gazpacho: or Summer months in Spain" from 1850, talks about the astonishing Garganta del Zumidero (Hundidero), a gorge with an exit in the Cueva del Gato. The cave harbours an important breeding population of bats and Alpine Swifts. TEXT: SMB



Red-billed Cough. PHOTO: JLM

From here to Benaoján, cultivated areas intertwine with natural vegetation along the last section which leads to the end of Stage 24, the Benaoján Station.

HIGHLIGHTED SPECIES

Stage 24 starts in an impressive environment due to its steep slopes and its sheer size. Here, the rock dwelling birds take over the sky, including such attractive species as Peregrine Falcon, Common Kestrel, Lesser Kestrel, Rock Dove, Pallid, Alpine and Common Swifts, Crag Martin, Black Redstart and the acrobatic flyer, Red-billed Cough, which can be seen mere metres from the bridge, Puente Nuevo. In spite of being so close to town, the first part of the route harbours the Eagle Owl, Tawny Owl, Scops Owl and Barn Owl,

therefore a night outing can reward you with owl calls and get you closer to these nocturnal raptors. Close to the riverbed the passerine community becomes visibly richer. There are four species of Hirundines during the breeding season (House and Crag Martin, Barn and Red-rumped Swallow) plus Sand Martin on migration, also White and Grey Wagtail, European Robin, Common Nightingale, Black-eared Wheatear, Stonechat, Common Blackbird, Blackcap, Sardinian Warbler, Great Tit, Western Jackdaw, Spotless and Common Starling, Golden Oriole, House Sparrow, Common Chaffinch, Goldfinch, Serin, Greenfinch, Common Linnet, Rock and Cirl Bunting. As soon as you enter farmland, Crested Lark, Zitting Cisticola and Corn Bunting turn up.



Learning Kingfisher's call will help you find it along the river banks since it is much easier to hear this bird than to see its extremely fast flight. The mountain environment supports various species of birds of prey at Stage 24, including Griffon Vulture, Short-toed, Bonelli's and Booted Eagle, Common Buzzard and Eurasian Sparrowhawk, together with previously named species. Noteworthy concentrations of finches and starlings occur in winter, they can happen around La Indiana, including such species as Eurasian Siskin and Brambling also present in the area. Back in the holm oaks, climbing up towards the Puerto de Ronda, the bird community is boosted by the presence of Hoopoe, Black-eared Wheatear and Western Orphean Warbler, as

the most prominent species. Since more rocky outcrops appear, the Black Wheatear occurs and breeding pairs of Black Redstart are present. In the area of vegetable plots the Meadow Pipit, White Wagtail and Stonechat are the most common species. Along the downhill section leading to the station, House and Crag Martins are predominant; they mingle with swifts in their high-speed flights. Species such as Little Owl, Bee-eater, Cuckoo and European Turtle Dove also populate the route of Stage 24.

TIMING

Given the short length of Stage 24 and the fact that a major part of it follows watercourses, this stage can be recommended year round.

Juvenile Spanish Imperial Eagles can be occasionally seen in the Serrania de Ronda. PHOTO: JB



**NATURAL VALUES**

Although Stage 24 does not go past Cueva del Gato, the cave is worth a visit if you are interested in birds. This cave is one of the entrances to the Hundidero-Gato system, almost 8 km long in total, with lakes and permanent water sources inside. Besides typical river species (Grey Heron, Kingfisher, Grey Wagtail and Blackcap, among others), the biggest attraction is the colony of Alpine Swifts located inside the cave. The flocks, constantly on the wing around the area, can reach quite good numbers. This is the biggest of European swifts, easily identified by the white belly and throat.

Blackcap. PHOTO: JLM



Black-eared Wheatear. PHOTO: JLM





Western Orphean Warbler. PHOTO: JLM



Its flying abilities make it possible for the bird to cover hundreds of kilometres a day in search for food. The prestigious science magazine "Nature" declared that these birds spend first two years of their lives in the air, without perching, and even sleep on the wing.



Common Linnet. PHOTO: JLM

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Migration passage periods, mainly autumn passage, produce large concentrations of birds of prey and Bee-eaters on their journey to the African continent. During that time you can see species which do not breed in the area such as Honey Buzzards and the alluring Black Stork.



Northern Wheatear. PHOTO: JLM