

STAGE 18





STAGE 18

Fuente de Piedra - Campillos

LOCATION

The José Antonio Valverde Visitor's Centre at the Reserva Natural de la Laguna de Fuente de Piedra is the starting point of Stage 18.

Taking the direction south around the eastern side of the salt water lagoon you will be walking through farmland until the end of this stage in Campillos village. The **15, 7 km** of Stage 18 will allow you to discover this wetland well known at national level in Spain, and cultivated farmland which creates a steppe-like environment.

DESCRIPTION

ABOUT THE BIRDLIFE:

Stage 18 begins at the northern tip of the lagoon where you take direction south through agricultural environment,



Predominant environment of Stage 18. PHOTO: ARM

taken up mainly by olive trees and grain. This type of environment will continue to the end of this stage and it determines the species of birds which can be seen here. You will be crossing a stream and then walking along the two lakes which will make your Stage 18 bird list fill up with highly desirable species. The combination of wetland and steppe creates very valuable habitats with a rare composition of taxa unique at European level.

HIGHLIGHTED SPECIES

Neither the length, difficulty level or elevation gain of this stage is particularly

DID YOU KNOW?

Cecilio Garcia de la Leña, in Conversation 9th of "Historical Conversations of Malaga" published by Cristóbal Medina Conde (1726-1798) and entitled «About Animal Kingdom of Malaga and some Places in its Bishopric», comments: «...In some lagoons, along sea shores and river banks some large and beautiful birds breed, called Flamingos and Phoenicopteros according to the ancients...», after a description of the bird's anatomy he adds: «The Romans appreciated the bird greatly, especially its tongue which was served as an exquisite dish...». TEXT: SMB



View of Laguna de Fuente de Piedra. PHOTO: ARM

demanding and you can spend some time around the Visitor's Centre to enjoy watching water birds from purpose-built hides. Little and Eared (Black-necked) Grebe, Grey Heron, Little Egret, Cattle Egret, Greater Flamingo, Mallard, Gadwall, Northern Shoveler, Green-winged Teal, Red-crested Pochard, Common Pochard, Eurasian Marsh Harrier, Common and

Lesser Kestrel, Water Rail, Coot, Moorhen, Black-winged Stilt, Avocet, Stone-curlew, Kentish Plover, Common and Little Ringed Plover, Golden and Black-bellied Plover,



Roller. PHOTO: JLM



Breeding structure for Lesser Kestrels and other steppe species placed beside the Great Malaga Path. PHOTO: ARM



Facilities around the Visitor's Centre of the Laguna de Fuente de Piedra. PHOTO: ARM

Common Snipe, Green and Common Sandpiper, Lesser black-backed, Yellow-legged, Black-headed and Slender-billed Gull, Whiskered Tern, Gull-billed Tern and Yellow Wagtail are the most frequently seen species of birds found in water environment, however the list can grow

considerably during migration passages if we include those waders and passerines which set off on migration journeys. Once you are on the footpath you will be entering agricultural environment in quite an abrupt manner and getting away from the lagoon progressively.



View from the hide at the Laguna Dulce. PHOTO: ARM



A pair of Lesser Kestrels. PHOTO: JLM

As a result, sightings of waterfowl and other aquatic birds will be limited to birds in flight commuting back and forth from the *laguna*.

In this environment, bird species occurring in open areas prevail, as well as birds which favour olive groves; noteworthy species are Red-legged Partridge, Stone-curlew, European Turtle Dove, Hoopoe, Barn and Red-rumped Swallows, Meadow Pipit, White Wagtail, Crested Lark, Calandra Lark, Skylark, Common Blackbird, Song Thrush, European Robin, Common Stonechat, Zitting Cisticola, Sardinian Warbler, Blackcap, Common Chiffchaff, Woodchat and Southern Grey Shrike, Great Tit, Spotless and Common Starling, House Sparrow, Goldfinch, Common Linnet, Serin, Greenfinch and Corn Bunting, the latter can be seen in large flocks in winter. What can seem at the start to be an unvarying and not very attractive

environment for the birdwatcher ends up being a real diversity hot spot. The path leads through places where in winter concentrations of hundreds of Golden Plovers and Stone-curlews can gather; both species go unnoticed once they perch on the ground thanks to their plumage. Sometimes a low-flying Merlin on the hunt will help you find these flocks of birds. Other species which can be found here are Common Kestrel, Little Owl, Barn Owl around the ruined farmhouses, Common Buzzard whose individuals arrive from Central and Northern Europe during winter season (and which are visibly bigger and lighter coloured), Long-eared Owl and Red-necked Nightjar. At the southern tip of the lagoon, at the level of the Cortijo de la Rábita, you will need to cross Arroyo del Hoyoero, and you will have to get your feet wet if the stream has water. In this environment, with its



Long-eared Owl chicks. PHOTO: MMA

strip of reeds and cane, you will be able to hear and see the Cetti's Warbler, Reed Warbler and Great Reed Warbler as well as a greater abundance of birds drawn to the focal point of the stream's water. Once you leave the stream behind and enter the olive grove, and then a great extension of dry crops, the following birds are the most abundant: White Wagtail, Crested Lark, Calandra Lark and Skylark. A ruined farmhouse, Cortijo de Las Monjas, harbours a population of

Lesser Kestrel which is getting smaller year after year due to the general decline this species is suffering from. Within the period of a few years the number of pairs has dropped from 30 to only 5, which resulted in direct action being taken to ensure that breeding places are



A field just before harvest time, a habitat which holds many species. PHOTO: ARM



Little Bustard. PHOTO: JLM



Stone-curlews. PHOTO: JLM

available for this charismatic species of bird occurring in a steppe environment.

In the same general area, once you leave the olive grove behind, you can delight in the Common Cranes frequenting the open fields to feed, Little Bustards which require meticulous observation and Montagu's Harriers, easily visible as they soar in large circles over the grain fields. During the cold months White Wagtails gather in large flocks which can contain over 4000 birds. Surprisingly, in winter and in summer, you can see Gull-billed Terns in this environment which is unusual for the species, hunting orthoptera in their elegant flight. Before walking uphill high enough to see the Laguna Dulce de Campillos, you will walk past an orangey-coloured building on your right. This is a purpose-built structure for the conservation of steppe bird species;

specifically it is meant as a nesting place for Lesser Kestrels and Rollers. At the moment it is Common Kestrels and various pairs of Western Jackdaw that are using the structure and they let you get quite close to watch. Further on, at the Laguna de Lobón, you will be able to enjoy some water birds again, depending on the availability of water; this *laguna* is small and shallow which causes it to dry out long before other lakes in the area. When there is water available, you can enjoy watching Mallard, Black-winged Stilt, Avocet, Common Ringed Plover, Little Ringed Plover and Kentish Plover, Collared Pranticole, Black-headed Gull, Gull-billed Tern, among other water species. The section which leads to Campillos takes you along the edge of Laguna Dulce, where it is not uncommon to see Black-winged Kite and Ferruginous Duck at the water surface, together with



The Lesser Flamingo successfully breeds in Fuente de Piedra Lagoon, with 4 pairs in 2015. PHOTO: JR

many of the species mentioned at the beginning of this section of Stage 18.

Among the many Coots present at this *laguna*, you may be able to see a few Red-knobbed Coots, which requires a careful search focused on the diagnostic features of the species. Basically, the Red-knobbed has two red nodules above the bill; the side of the bill does not form a white wedge which in the common Coot extends towards the nape. Migration periods are remarkable in this aquatic environment, but also in the fields around the lakes, especially as the Rollers appear. Finally, other species you can find at Stage 18 are Common Shellduck and Eagle Owl; the latter can be detected easier by its call.

TIMING

The characteristic features of Stage 18 make it recommendable during the whole year, except for the hottest months when temperatures can be very high around midday. During those years when the Greater Flamingo

breed it is worth visiting in spring to be able to enjoy the pink colour of the surroundings brought by the thousands of flamingos. In winter, the flight of Common Cranes also creates a spectacle of great beauty.

NATURAL VALUES

The Fuente de Piedra is the biggest Andalusian *laguna* (shallow natural lake)

Lesser Kestrel feeding its chick. PHOTO: JLM





Greater Flamingoes and Shovelers. PHOTO: JAS

and second largest in all of Spain, with the surface of over 1200 hectares. It is an endorheic basin (a closed drainage basin) which means that its water comes directly from rainfall and from run-offs. Perhaps what characterises and distinguishes this laguna from other Iberian wetlands is the saline nature of its waters, due to the gypsum salts which emerge in the basin. The lagoon's saline character and the seasonal availability of water in the typically Mediterranean environment favour many species of zooplankton and highly important vegetation. Amphibians are restricted to the small stretches of wetland around the Fuente de Piedra and noteworthy species are Common and Natterjack Toad, Iberian Painted Frog, Parsley Frog, Iberian Water Frog (Perez's Frog) and Iberian Ribbed Newt. Prominent reptiles include Spanish Pond Terrapin, Viperine Snake, Ocelated Lizard, Large Psammodromus, Spanish Psammodromus, Horseshoe Whip Snake,

Montpelier Snake and Ladder Snake. The easiest to observe mammals are Rabbit, Hare and Fox, whilst you can also find signs and tracks of Badger, Genet, Stone Martin, Weasel and Egyptian Mongoose. Small mammals are a source of food for many of the above named vertebrates. Worthy of mention are Southern Water Vole, Black Rat, Wood Mouse, Common Vole and Garden Dormouse. Besides the many birds described in

Montagu's Harrier in flight. PHOTO: JLM





Cranes in flight. PHOTO: ARM

the Highlighted Species section, the Spectacled Warbler also occurs in the salt marsh in the northern and eastern part of the lagoon, where Stage 18 does not take you but which is nevertheless worth a visit.



Calandra Lark. PHOTO: JLM

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

At the beginning of Stage 18 you will find various birdwatching hides placed around quite a small area: at the Laguneto, Laguna de los Abejarucos (Bee-eaters' Lake) and at the Laguna de Las Palomas (Doves' Lake). Besides these facilities, the footpath called La Vicaria leads to another hide which also looks out to a sheet of water during sufficiently rainy seasons. In the eastern section there is also an interesting viewpoint, Cantarranas, especially given the fact that it is the access point to the Cantarranas Hide (which requires a permit

from the natural reserve authorities, namely the environmental board called *Consejería de Medio Ambiente de la Junta de Andalucía*). The recently built Las Latas viewpoint, at the southern tip of the lake, is also highly recommended as it is located in an area surrounded by large holm oaks and offers beautiful views to the brackish lake. At the end of Stage 18 you will be walking close to the Laguna Dulce de Campillos, also equipped with a hide however there is no direct access to this hide from the Great Malaga Path. The hide provides very good view to the whole lagoon and is accessed from the A-384 road to Antequera. ◉



Bird's-eye view of the northern sector of the Laguna de Fuente de Piedra, and the Visitor's Centre "José Antonio Valverde". PHOTO: JP



