

Birding Málaga



Where to go birding in February:
Cerro Santi Petri

Natural values.



The Cerro (hill) Santi Petri is the tallest (796 m. above sea level) among a set of smooth rolling hills around Almogía, a beautiful village to the east of the Valle (valley) del Guadalhorce District. These hills have traditionally been devoted to grow almonds and olives, and even wheat, as shown



by the presence of some old threshing floors. In spite of the low productivity of these sometimes steep slopes, most of the olives and almond groves are still managed “the old way”, allowing a natural field layer on the ground and the presence of many different birds. Where the olive and almond groves have been abandoned, the Mediterranean scrub develops, giving these plots a very natural appearance.



As the Medina Azahara legend states, the almond groves are the way to create a falling snow illusion in the lower lands and February is the time it “snows” in Malaga province.

These are some of the birds we can find around here in February: Red-legged Partridge, Griffon Vulture, Bonelli’s Eagle, Common Buzzard, Sparrowhawk, Wood Pigeon, Collared Dove, Hoopoe, Green Woodpecker, Thekla Lark, Meadow Pipit, Dunnock, Robin, Black Redstart, Stonechat, Song Thrush, Blackbird, Blackcap, Sardinian Warbler, Chiffchaff, Firecrest, Great Tit, Blue Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper, Raven, Starling, Spotless Starling, House Sparrow, Chaffinch, Linnet, Goldfinch, Greenfinch, Siskin, Serin, Cirl Bunting, Corn Bunting and Rock Bunting.

Most of the hills here are topped by rock outcrops where a lush Mediterranean scrub and even little oaks grow away from the plough impact. This is a very appropriate habitat for the invisible Eagle Owl. When these rocks are big enough to form cliffs, Bonelli’s Eagles can (and in fact do!) use them to nest despite they are not very high. So, let’s keep an eye on the sky for such an emblematic bird of Malaga province.

We will also go across one of the last Cork Oak forests in this district which will give us some birds different from those in the groves.

The start of the route.



Type “Almogía, Malaga” in Google Maps. We will follow road MA-3403 to the north from Almogía. After driving past the sign of Km. 14, we will see signs to “Tomas Martín”, “Cerro Santi-Petri” and “Ermita de las Tres Cruces” among others (see picture), including boards with interesting information in Spanish about birds and plants in the area, on the left. If we are ready for a “birdwalking”

trip, we better park the car in the wider dirt track to the opposite side of the main road.



The route is 13 km long (return) on a comfortable track except the last climb to the summit of Santi Petri Hill, on a really steep and more difficult to walk path. We can also drive to the beginning of the path; if this is your choice, set the counter to zero at the junction and look for references to distance and stops suggested in the text below.

The first stretch of the track is asphalted. At both sides of the track there are houses surrounded by olive and almond groves and orchards, as well as patches of Mediterranean scrub



crowning the top of the closer hills. Most of the birds that show up here will go with us for the rest of the day: Thekla Lark, Blackbird, Sardinian Warbler, Blackcap, Chaffinch, Black Redstart, Stonechat, Meadow Pipit, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Great and Blue Tits and Corn Bunting. Other, like House Sparrows, Linnets, Serins and Collared Doves will be more common around here. There is a concrete track with a chain to the left at Km. 0.8 where it is worthwhile having a look to the Holm Oaks along the road and a little orchard opposite to them.



Olive and almond groves.

There is a junction at Km. 1 with a sign to “Cerro Santi-Petri, Ermita Las Cruces” (see picture) that we will always have to follow from now on. This is the end of the tarmac track, there will be fewer houses around and the landscape is now dominated by blossoming almond trees.



At this time of year some birds like Chaffinches, Corn Buntings, Greenfinches, Serins and even Hoopoes are starting to play their repertoire, and Common Starlings (as opposed to the Spotless ones, the resident species here) are abundant and feed from the olives to stock up with fat for their coming journey back to the north.



There is a water well and a Fig Tree on a bend to the left at Km. 1.1. Starlings, Goldfinches and House Sparrows are very active around and the bramble beyond the well deserves inspection for thrushes and other interesting small birds like Cirl Buntings.

We will turn left at the next signposted junction at Km. 1.9. It is a good place for another stop. This is the territory of a noisy couple of Ravens and Common Buzzards can also be present.



From now on, Olive Trees take over. An abandoned grove can be found on the right hand side of the track where the presence of Blackbirds, Blackcaps, Robins and Song Thrushes increases.

The Cork Oak forest.

We will find the entrance to “Cortijo Los Guerreros” on the left hand side at Km. 2.1, and follow the signs to the right towards a steeper stretch of the track that takes us to the Cork Oak forest after going through a narrow pass.



On the way to the pass, there is scrub to the right and olive trees down to the left, where Thekla Larks and Corn Buntings are common.



After the pass (Km. 3.0), at the end of the track uphill, the Cork Oak forest extends in front of us. The track widens 100 m. ahead and we can park to the left to have a walk around. Siskins will soon show up, and the presence of Chaffinches, Robins and Chiffchaffs will increase. Some birds more specific of this area are Sparrowhawk, Wood Pigeon, Green Woodpecker, Short-toed Treecreeper and Firecrest.



The climb to Santi Petri Hill.



The Cork Oak vanishes at Km. 3.9, where we will take right following the signs to Cerro Santi Petri once more. The track gets steeper again and the landscape around us is an open Mediterranean scrub. Let's pay attention to the small olive trees in the middle of the scrub for Song Thrushes flying away from them as we go by. The views to the low Valley of the

Guadalhorce, Malaga city and the sea are fantastic to the left from here.

After we go past a big fenced almond grove to the right (Km. 4.7) and reach km. 5.1 higher up the hill, the horizon widens and we have extraordinary views of El Torcal (to the north), Sierra de Huma and Desfiladero de Los Gaitanes (El Chorro, to the northwest) and Sierra de las Nieves (to the west).

We go straight on at the next signed junction (Km. 5.3) and will find the start of the little path to the Santi Petri summit 200 m. ahead. There will not be many new birds at the summit but Red-legged Partridges, Rock Buntings and the shy Dunnocks in the scrub, and maybe a lonely Griffon Vulture away from its



flyway over El Torcal and El Chorro, but we will always be accompanied by the Meadow Pipits and the stunning views around us from the triangulation pillar.



FOTOS:

- 1 Bonelli's Eagle (*Aquila fasciata*)
- 2 Almond grove in blossom

- 3 Almond tree flowers
- 4 Entrance to the Cerro Santi Petri track
- 5 Thekla Lark (*Galerida theklae*)
- 6 Black Redstart (*Phoenicurus ochruros*)
- 7 Stonechat (*Saxicola rubicola*)
- 8 Signpost to Cerro Santi Petri
- 9 Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*)
- 10 Raven (*Corvus corax*)
- 11 Corn Bunting (*Emberiza calandra*)
- 12 Cork Oak (*Quercus suber*)
- 13 Siskin (*Carduelis spinus*)
- 14 Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*)
- 15 Mediterranean Common Toad (*Bufo spinosus*)
- 16 Start of the climb to the Santi Petri summit
- 17 Sierra de las Nieves from the Santi Petri summit