

Table of contents

Landscape	11
Geographical overview	12
Geology	16
Habitats	24
Lowlands of the southwest	25
Central lowlands	33
Sierra Morena	35
Sandstone mountains of Alcornocales-Tarifa	41
Limestone mountains	47
History	57
Nature conservation	66
Flora and fauna	71
Flora	74
Mammals	92
Birds	98
Reptiles and amphibians	117
Insects and other invertebrates	124
Practical Part	133
Routes in Southwest Andalucía	134
Route 1: The classic Doñana	135
Route 2: To the José Valverde visitors' Centre	141
Route 3: Dehesa de Abajo	146
Route 4: The umbrella pine forests	149
Additional sites in southwest Andalucía	152
Routes in the Sierra Morena	154
Route 5: Aroche – on the edge of Extremadura	155
Route 6: The Chestnut groves of Castaño del Robledo	158
Additional sites Sierra Morena	160
Routes in Cádiz and Los Alcornocales	161
Route 7: Bonanza – the eastern part of the Coto Doñana	162
Route 8: The temporary lagoons of Cádiz province	167
Route 9: La Janda and Breña de Barbate	173
Route 10: Bird migration over the Strait of Gibraltar	178
Route 11: Exploring the Alcornocales	184

Route 12: Climbing Aljibe mountain	189
Additional sites in Cádiz province	192
Routes in the Sierra de Grazalema and las Nieves	198
Route 13: The Pinsapar	200
Route 14: La Garganta Verde	203
Route 15: Llanos de Libar	205
Route 16: Sierra de las Nieves – the high part	208
Route 17: Los Quejigales	211
Additional sites in the Grazalema-Nieves	214
Routes along Málaga – Antequera road	217
Route 18: Osuna and La Lantejuela	218
Additional sites in the Antequera area	223
Tourist information & observation tips	229
Bird list	244
Acknowledgements	252
Picture credits	253
Glossary	254
Species list & translation	255

LANDSCAPE

Western Andalucía is a hugely diverse and endlessly fascinating region. Between the barren thirsty karst plateaux high in the mountains and the marshy coastal flats of Coto Doñana lies a superb range of landscapes. There are Arcadian cork oak orchards and cool, shady, jungle-like river valleys, but also natural steppe lakes (rare in Europe!) and rocky plains that are extremely exposed and hot. There are wild gorges that cut deep into the bedrock and equally wild cliffs that tower high above the surrounding land – in short, the variation in landscape of western Andalucía is enormous.

What remains pretty much constant though, is the intactness of it all. The marshes of Coto Doñana are a true gem of unscathed wetland. At its margin is a beach which is, at 25 kms, the longest unspoilt one in Spain. Except for a few minor roads and pretty whitewashed villages, the oak woods of the Sierra Morena run, uninterrupted, for hundreds of kilometres. The Alcornocales and Sierra de Grazalema are similarly untouched.

The wildlife of western Andalucía matches this diversity and grandeur. There are plenty of butterflies, numerous rare dragonflies and scores of reptiles and amphibians. The flora consists of plants adapted to severe drought as well as those that require permanent dampness and everything in between. But nothing beats the birdlife. It is hard to name an area in Europe with a higher diversity of birds. From the familiar iconic ones like Flamingo, Hoopoe and Bee-eater to the more obscure and rare African birds as White-rumped Swift and Rüppell's Vulture and flagship species of large undisturbed areas such as Spanish Imperial and Bonelli's Eagle – western Andalucía has it all. In addition, the area is washed over twice a year by millions of migrant birds that cross the Straits of Gibraltar on their way to and from breeding or wintering quarters.

You get the picture – visit western Andalucía once and you want to return over and over again. This book will help you get to the best sites and tell you where to go and what to look for. Vámos!

The landscape of western Andalucía has many dramatic features, such as the secluded Garganta Verde gorge (route 14).

Geographical overview

Andalucía is the southernmost of the seventeen autonomous regions of mainland Spain. It spreads from the Portuguese border in the west all along the south coast to the autonomous region of Murcia in the east, Castilla–La Mancha in the northeast and Extremadura in the northwest. Andalucía is divided into eight provinces, of which Huelva, Sevilla, Cádiz and Málaga are covered in this guidebook on western Andalucía and others in a second volume on eastern Andalucía.

Overview of western Andalucía



water-body that is not part of this great water cycle and whose water will not reach the ocean so directly. Such water-bodies are called *endorheic lakes* – lakes that have an inflow of water from temporary streams, but no outflow to the sea. The evaporation is simply too strong and the streams that feed these lakes too feeble for these lakes ever to spill out of the depression in which they sit. What remains is an aquatic system that is completely isolated from other water bodies.

Biologically speaking, endorheic lakes are islands. They are isolated from similar habitats. Many aquatic species, fish above all, cannot (naturally) reach these lakes. Without these fish, amphibians and certain kinds of water plants thrive, creating a food chain that is very different from that of other wetlands. In short – the ecosystem of an endorheic lake is unique.

The central plain of Andalucía holds quite a number of small endorheic lakes, dotted in the gently rolling tapestry of fields and olive groves. They are especially important for amphibians and pondweeds, plus the birds that feed on these. The rare and threatened White-headed Duck is found mostly on endorheic lakes, and the lakes have important populations of Purple Gallinule, Crested Coot and Red-crested Pochard.

Many endorheic lakes have such a meagre influx of water in winter that they dry out completely during spring. Here the cards are dealt differently again – all the species that occur in these lakes must be able to either flee to other areas (like birds) or to adopt an amphibian lifestyle. Such sites can be teeming with life when conditions are right, or be silent and dormant when dry.

Endorheic lakes can hold fresh or brackish water, depending on the source of the water that feeds them. However, due to the high evaporation, many have become at least slightly brackish, resulting in fringes of salt-marsh, mixed with reeds and bulrushes that root deeper and profit from the periodic inundation in freshwater. This is especially visible in Europe's largest endorheic lake, the Laguna de Fuente de Piedra (site E on page 226).

View over the Laguna de Fuente de Piedra, the second-largest natural lake in Spain. It is of vital importance for birds.



Sierra Morena

Routes 4 and 5 and the sites on page 160 are situated in the Sierra Morena.

The rolling wooded hills of the Sierra Morena run from the Portuguese border eastwards along the edge of Extremadura and Castilla – La Mancha. Geologically, the Sierra Morena marks the southern extreme of the old, Hercynian plateau that forms the bedrock of central Spain. Hence the natural world of the Sierra Morena shows more similarities with central Spain than with the rest of Andalucía. More specifically, the western Sierra Morena, to which we limit ourselves in this guide, resembles Extremadura.

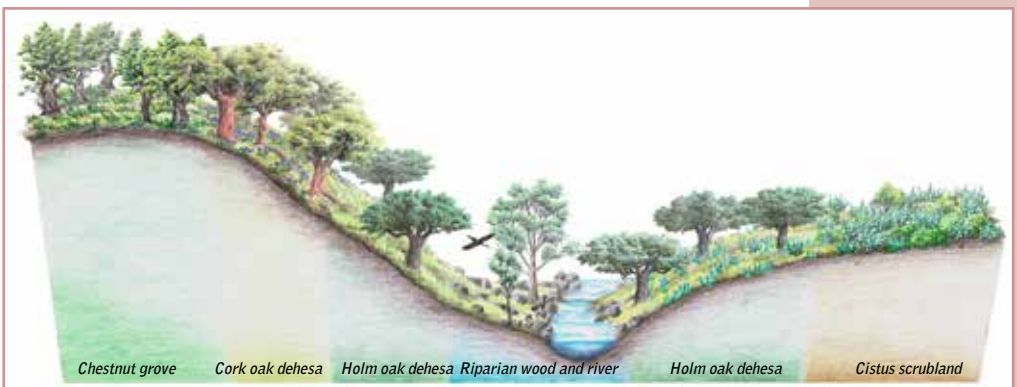
Just like Extremadura, the landscape of the Sierra Morena is dominated by open woodlands of Holm oak. If you drive the N433 from Sevilla to Aracena, you cross a landscape that is best described as endless groves of oak trees. This is a beautiful and inviting scenery in spring as the swards between the trees are full of flowers. In summer and autumn, when the grass turns yellow, it has more the feel of a savannah – an association that is strengthened by the broad canopies of the trees.

This is the *dehesa*, a vegetation that is unique to south-west Iberia. It dominates the lower parts of the Hercynian plateaux, from the Sierra Morena west into Portugal and north into Extremadura and the borders of Castilla Leon and Castilla La Mancha. Dehesas are special in many ways, ecologically and culturally (as we'll discuss further on in this chapter).



Location of the Sierra Morena (light grey). In dark, the part known as Sierra de Aracena, on which we focus in this guide.

Cross-section view of the Sierra Morena.





FLORA AND FAUNA

Naturally, species diversity is not evenly distributed across the world, but, generally, increases with higher temperature and moisture. *Biodiversity hotspot* is the technical term for an area with an exceptionally high number of plant and animal species. The tropical rainforests (warm and moist) are world famous for being natural treasure troves. Yet only few people know that the Mediterranean basin is also among the world's biodiversity hotspots.

Within the Mediterranean region there are again specific areas that are much richer than others. Amongst the 10 Mediterranean biodiversity hotspots is the Sierra Baetica (the range that extends north-west from Cádiz to Valencia) of which roughly a third lies in our area. It is literally the top of the tops. Hence, the flora and fauna of western Andalucía is hugely diverse. The number of species far exceeds that of any similar-sized area north of the Alps.

Much of this richness comes from its endemics – plants and animals that are confined to just a small area, be it the whole of the Iberian Peninsula or a smaller part like the Sierra Baetica. There are even some that are confined to a still smaller patch. Some plants are found exclusively in the Sierra de Grazalema. Obviously, such species have a special appeal.

To understand the why behind this uneven distribution of plant and animal species, you need to look back into the past. When the Iberian tectonic plate got sandwiched between the much larger African and Eurasian land masses, the Pyrenees were formed in the north and the Rif-Baetic chain was pushed up in the south. These east-west oriented mountain chains became, quite literally, hurdles for the flora and fauna as they moved north and south to the rhythm of the advancing and retreating ice. During the warm interglacials, cold-adapted species found refuge high up in the mountains, where isolated from northern populations, they evolved into new species.

While the mountains acted as a refuge for the cold adapted species, the warmth-loving ones found them a formidable, or even impassable, barrier. For some species (e.g. lizards like the Large Psammodromus) the Pyrenees are such a barrier, confining them within the Iberian Peninsula. Yet others, such as the Spanish Psammodromus, found a way into France, but ground to a halt when faced with impassable barriers in the Alps and an inhospitable northern climate.

The Common Chameleon was most probably introduced by the Moors and has established several populations on the warm west coast.



The shady depth of the Garganta Verde (top). Alpine Swift breeds in the gorge (bottom).



At the end of the route you reach an impressive, shallow cave, known as *La Ermita* (the chapel). Rock Doves, Alpine Swifts and Red-billed Choughs breed in the cave.

3 The first section offers great views of the vultures that nest a little further on. They fly by at eye-level, a spectacular sight. Look for Blue Rock Thrush too. There is a partially hidden trail in the sharp left turn with the Garganta Verde sign (careful; it is easily missed) that leads to a platform with views of the vultures on their nests.

4 The mid-section of the descent is very steep and leads along a wide variety of Mediterranean shrubs, like Dwarf Fan Palm, Kermes Oak, Carob Tree, False Olive, Shrubby Hare's-ear, Andalusian Gorse* (*Ulex baeticus*), Phoenician Juniper, Pale Stonecrop, Smilax and Jupiter's Beard, just to name a few.

Just before reaching the bottom of the gorge, the atmosphere becomes moister. Three-cornered Leek, Rustyback Fern and Maidenhair Spleenwort grow between the mossy rocks.

5 In the gorge turn right and make your way along the boulders. The gorge itself is dry, except after heavy rain. Oleanders and figs grow high up in search of sunlight, giving the bottom of the gorge a subtropical appearance.

Route 15: Llanos de Libar

3-6 HOURS
EASY



The best spot for birdwatching in the Grazalesa mountains
Easy walk through rugged karst landscape

Habitats karst, cliffs, dehesa

Selected species Yellow Bee Orchid, Spanish Ixib, Bonelli's Eagle, Golden Eagle, Black Wheatear, Black-eared Wheatear, Alpine Swift, Rock Bunting, Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Sparrow, Orphean Warbler, Subalpine Warbler, Dartford Warbler, Spectacled Warbler, Black Redstart, Ocellated Lizard

This route beautifully illustrates the two very different faces of limestone mountains. The first stretch takes you through extremely rugged rock-strewn terrain with bare cliffs on either side of the valley, while the second section runs through a doline (see page 254) with fertile soils converted to agricultural uses and on into woodland. Botanically, this is not the best of routes, but in terms of birdlife, it is hard to find a better spot in these mountains. Nearly all bird species of rocky terrain are present.

This route can be covered by car between November to June 1st, but we advise to go on foot, as you will see and enjoy more. If you do decide to drive, take great care as in places, the track is in poor condition.



Starting point Montejaque, just west of Ronda.

Follow the *Av. de Europa* at the northern end of the village (indicated by a sign for the *Refugio de Libar*) turning sharp right after 350m (see inset map). Park where convenient and continue on foot.



The karst and sierra of the Llanos de Libar is very rocky (top). It is a good habitat for Black and Black-eared Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush and many other birds, including the Rock Bunting (bottom).

1 About 500 m after turning off *Av. De Europa* you reach an obvious building on the left, below the rocky bulk of mount Hacho. This is a good spot to scan for a while. You may pick up your first Rock Bunting or Melodious Warbler here, but the main targets are raptors, particularly Bonelli's Eagle. Listen out for the call of Golden Oriole in the valley below and perhaps Wryneck in the much closer almond orchards.

2 The track drops down to meet a footpath, which is overshadowed by a cliff face. Listen for the hoarse call of Rock Sparrow and scan carefully for Blue Rock Thrush. Where the valley opens out into a rocky field Black-eared Wheatear can be seen and, with luck, Rock Thrush may appear. Woodchat Shrikes are common. Continue to scan for raptors and also for Crag Martin and Alpine Swift. Further along the track pause beside a small pool which is very attractive for small passerines (Linnet, Goldfinch, Sardinian Warbler, etc).

3 Further ahead, the terrain becomes increasingly rocky – a classic example of karst landscape. In spring, look for Yellow Bee Orchid, which is abundant here and for much of the trail. Black-eared Wheatears are joined by Black Redstarts and Black Wheatears, all of which perch on the rocks.

4 Continue until you reach an obvious 'saddle' in the landscape. You are surrounded by a jumble of rocks. The bushes which cling to the cliff face to the right conceal a small colony of Rock Sparrow whilst, to the left, the hillside plays host to Alpine Accentor and Ring Ouzel in winter. Check the kestrels carefully as this is a site where Lesser Kestrel, so often seen in villages, reverts to nesting in its natural habitat. Continue over the cattle grid, up the slope and round a gentle bend to a shady tree. The scrub here is excellent for Sylvia warblers with Sardinian being joined by Orphean (listen for the loud thrush-like song), skulking Dartfords, handsome Subalpines and even, with luck, Spectacled Warbler.

5 The track now drops down into a doline – a depression where sediments washed in to create a fertile patch of soil, of which farmers took advantage to grow their crops. For naturalists, this seems a less interesting spot although feeding vultures are sometimes found here, but it may be a good point to decide to return and make it only a short excursion.

6 If you carry on, you enter an open holm oak woodland, where Iberian black pigs are reared. The birdlife consists of familiar 'northern' birds like Common Redstart, Mistle Thrush and Jay, which are joined by Bonelli's Warbler and Iberian Chiffchaff.

7 Eventually, about 9 km from the starting point, the woods peter out and you reach an open grassy area. This is an excellent area for Cirl Bunting and Iberian Grey Shrike. Listen too for the nasal call of Red-billed Chough, often the best way to pick them up as they fly high above the valley.

Return via the same track or continue on foot to Cortes de la Frontera (16 km in total) and catch a bus/taxi back to your starting point.



Bonelli's Eagle (top) and Yellow Bee Orchid (bottom) are two attractions of the Llanos de Libar. Patient scanning of the sky is required to find the first, while the latter should be an easy find between the rocks in April/May.