



Natural values.



It is the start of Golden Eagle's breeding season what brings us to Hondonero at this time of year as this is an easily accessible place with reasonable chances for good and relatively close views of this majestic bird of prey. Unfortunately, our resident Andalusian eagles, Golden and Bonelli's, are not "ever-flying" birds like the vultures, so it is now that we can better witness their displaying

diving and patrolling flights over their territories. Golden Eagles at Sierra de Camarolos and Jobo prefer the south face of these sierras to hunt so we have to pay attention to the ridges of the rocky hills in order to spot them together with Griffon Vultures, Kestrels, Sparrowhawks and Peregrine Falcons.



Some birds present at Hondonero Highlands in January: Red-legged Partridge, Griffon Vulture, Golden Eagle, Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, Peregrine Falcon, Wood Pigeon, Eagle Owl, Tawny Owl, Crag Martin, Meadow Pipit, Robin, Black Redstart, Stonechat, Song Thrush, Redwind, Mistle Thrush, Blackbird, Ring Ouzel, Blue Rock Thrush, Blackcap, Sardinian Warbler, Chiffchaff, Firecrest, Wren, Great Tit, Coal Tit, Blue Tit, Crested Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Nuthatch, Short-toed Treecreeper, Iberian Grey Shrike, Azure-winged Magpie, Jay, Chough, Spotless Starling, Chaffinch, Linnet, Goldfinch, Greenfinch, Serin, Siskin, Bullfinch, Hawfinch, Common Crossbill, Cirl Bunting and Rock Bunting.

The Altos (highlands) de Hondonero extend south of Villanueva del Rosario, on the north side of the Sierra del Jobo, in the Northeast District of Malaga province. The Sierras del Jobo, Camarolos and San Jorge, make up the so called Malaga central limestone arc, separating the Northeast and Axarquía districts, and are included in Natura 2000 Network as Site of Community Importance and Special Areas of Conservation named Sierra de Camarolos (ES6170012). We hope this stunning site will soon be part of the Andalusian Network of Protected Natural Sites as well.

The Altos de Hondonero, dominated by the huge limestone rock of Chamizo peak (the highest mountain in the central limestone arc, with 1,640 m. above sea level), present a mixture of the typical mountain vegetation of southern Iberia (Holm and Portuguese Oaks, Montpellier Maple and Hawthorn), some reforestation stands of Aleppo Pine Trees and the traditional olive groves still subject to some of the old uses like that of separating the properties by using hedges made of stone, Blackberry, Dog Rose and Hawthorn. The abundance of Hawthorn and Olive Trees provides birds with food from the early autumn till the end of January, making this area very appropriate for thrushes to winter.

How to get there.

You can type "Villanueva del Rosario, Malaga" in Google Maps to know where to go. We will start our route on A-7203 road, just before crossing the bridge over the Arroyo de la Canaleja

before we enter the village if we took the west access from A-92M. Set your counter to zero here and follow the sign to “Mirador del Alto de Hondonero” (which can only be seen by those coming from the village!). After 400 metres, pay attention again to the signs “Mirador del Alto de Hondonero” and “Observatorio de Aves”. Turn right and follow the track uphill.

Route landmarks.

Our first stop will be 1.6 km from the start at the Ermita (chapel) de la Virgen del Rosario. The views here towards the sierra are fantastic. If we arrive early enough, we could even hear the hooting of the Eagle Owl and will enjoy a beautiful dawn. Goldfinches, Greenfinches and Serins are common in the olive trees around.



We should not stay for too long at the chapel if we do not want to miss some of the birds roosting in our next stop. This is the Tajo (cliff) de la Madera, 3.6 km from the start. We can park the car by a sign forbidding camping in the area and follow the track towards the cliff on walk (this is not the track to drive or walk towards Hondonero!). Once we get down the car, we will see plenty of Hawthornes, Andalusian Oaks and Olive Trees around, as well as a pine tree stand just in front of the cliff. We will soon be attracted by the calls of Robins, Blackcaps, Rock and Cirl Buntings, Wood Pigeons and even Azure-winged Magpies which, though at the edge of their very local distribution range in Malaga here, are becoming more and more common in the area. If you are lucky to find a flock, do not try to approach them as they are extremely elusive and will inevitably fly away from you.



You will also hear the calls of the Choughs (if they have not left yet) and the amazing calls and songs by the Spotless Starlings from the cliff. Just before entering the forest, follow a small path to the right that takes you to the foot of the cliff, and cut across the forest from there towards the track again back to the car.

Chances are for Ring Ouzels and Redwings on the way to the cliff, and for forest birds like Crested Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper, Firecrest, Nuthatch, Jay and Common Crossbill in the pinewood.



Back to the car again, we have two options: walking or driving to the Alto de Hondonero at the end of the main track 2.6 km uphill. The “birdwalking” option, obviously, will provide the observer with more and better views of all the birds in the area, as well as better chances to spot the Golden Eagle over the ridge of the sierra. But if we do not feel like walking that much, we will describe a few stops we can do on our way up with the car.

The first one will be 600m ahead, when the counter goes to 4.4 km after driving across a pine tree stand. It is worthwhile having a look in the woods for tits, treecreepers and firecrests. Be patient; you can go from no birds at all to a few different species flitting around you in just a few seconds.



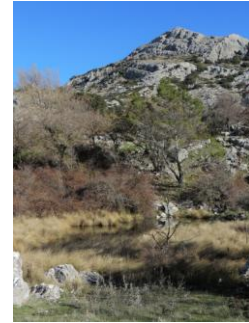
The next stop is at the Fuente (fountain) de Hondonero (4.9 km). You cannot see it from the track but it is well signposted. The fountain is surrounded by oaks and poplars where birds sunbathe after having a bath or drinking in the trough. One of the species you can find here is the Bullfinch, which is common in northern

Europe but we local birders love to see it as it is out of its distribution range here according to the bird guides. Once back at the track, have a look around the open Andalusian Oak forest marked out by piles of stones, very suitable for buntings, Black Redstart and Iberian Grey Shrike.



700m ahead (5.6 km.), you can park the car by the “Observatorio de Aves” sign (do not try to drive up, the path is not very good and there is no room to turn around) and walk up to the tables and shelter there. You have boards with interesting information about birds, mammals and amphibians in the area. The seats and tables are great to sit and search for the Golden Eagle up

over the Chamizo peak that elevates just in front of us. Below the shelter, there is one of the various temporary ponds in this area that home a rich population of amphibians like toads and salamanders.



If you took the birdwalking option, you can cut across a clear stand of young pine trees to go back to the track. This is often a good place for nice views of both Rock and Cirl Buntings. If not, back to the car

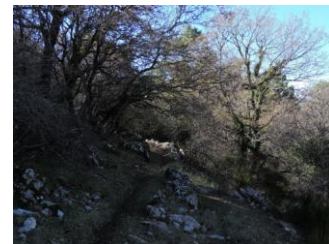
towards the end of the track at the Alto de Hondonero, with magnificent views of the high valley of the Guadalhorce to the north, and what is called



“Derrumbaero” (a very Andalusian derivation for the word rockfall), to the left of Chamizo peak, a sheet of big rocks that collapsed possibly due to an earthquake during the last century.

Way back on foot from the Alto de Hondonero.

For those who chose the birdwalking trip, I highly recommend taking a little path across the oaks and maples, which you will easily find walking from the viewpoint towards the foot of Chamizo, to come back to the car. Mind your steps here as it is sometimes steep and slippery after snowy or rainy days. Here, you will always have some birds, normally tits, Robins and



buntings to look at hiding in the trees and bushes. Further down, when the path approaches a little cliff on the left, there will be an intense passage of birds (thrushes and finches, including Hawfinch) from the oaks and pine trees to the bushes in the cliff. The Holm Oaks here are the best place to spot the restless fluttering of the Firecrest.

Did you finally find the Golden Eagle? If not, do not give up until getting into the car!

Photographs:

1. Hondonero Highlands and Chamizo Peak from the Tajo de la Madera
2. Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*)
3. Tajo de la Madera
4. Spotless Starlings (*Sturnus unicolor*)
5. Crested Tit (*Lophophanes cristatus*)
6. Hondonero Fountain
7. Hondonero Highlands and Sierra de Camarolos from the birds observatory
8. Hondonero Pond
9. Rock Bunting (*Emberiza cia*)
10. Hondonero viewpoint
11. "Derrumbaero" (rockfall)
12. Path across the oak and maple forest
13. Common Crossbill (*Loxia curvirostra*)