

Doñana N. Park

Getting There

From Carmona take the E-5/A-4 to Sevilla and then take the E-1/A-49, direction Huelva until the junction with the A-483 at Bollullos. El Rocío is directly south of there, about 24 kms away, and then continue on to El Acebuche Vistor's Center from where the park tours begin.

Background

The Guadalquivir river rises in the mountains of south- east Spain and then makes its way, westwards, across the alluvial Andalucian plain. Passing, along its journey, the ancient Moorish capital of Córdoba and widening at Sevilla, which it enriched by making it the only river port in Spain, before turning south and meeting with the Atlantic Ocean at Sanlúcar de Barrameda. It is unusual for a delta in that it only has one outlet to the sea. This is because, over the centuries, sandbars have developed on its western banks, blocking all other exits. These have been formed into towering dunes by the sea winds which, in turn, protect huge stretches of salt marshes *marismas* behind them. These two eco systems, the dunes and marshes, combine with another, scrubland *matorral* to form an amazing, and ever changing, natural habitat for a wide array of birds, animals and flora.

This was understood as far back as the 13th century when, in 1262, Alfonso X created a royal hunting preserve for wild boars here. During this era it was a mainly forested area, the way it stayed until the mid-16th century when ground husbandry decimated much of the forests, creating huge ecological changes that foresaw the beginning of the mobile dune system. In the early 14th century, Alfonso's son, King Fernando IV, granted the land to the famed Medina Sidonia family. And it was this combination of family and land usage that gave it its name. The first part *Coto* is actually logical as it means "Game Reserve", the second, though, is more interesting. One of the duchesses of the family, Doña Ana de Silva y Mendoza, built a palace and the area became known as the forest of Doña Ana - Doñana.

Since 1969 protective measures have been taken to preserve this area, and in that year the National Park of Coto Doñana was created, and this has been extended in size since and now incorporates over 213,000 acres. It is, also, the last great wilderness sanctuary in southern Europe, and has been recognized as such by having been granted numerous honors. In 1981 it was created a Biosphere Reserve, the following year it became a member of Ramsar, in 1988 it was made a special bird protection area (ZEPA), been granted various European Diplomas and named a World Heritage Site in 1994.

The Tour

As you pull into the car park at El Acebuche it is impossible to ignore the fleet of green, naturally, tall but not very long buses with oversized tires.

Once everyone is aboard the bus trundles out to the main road and then follows it towards Matalascañas, a rather inauspicious start, and then turns east passing much new development before, finally, turning into, and across, the sand dunes and down onto the beach. And what a beach it is! No other vehicles, except those belonging to the few fishermen who have the back-breaking job of scraping the top sand – with strange looking tools connected by strapping around their backs - during the two or three hours daily as the tide comes in and recedes, looking for small clams *coquinas*.



People are only allowed onto the beach as far as they can walk and these, usually just a few, and the rather ramshackle looking huts that used to belong to fishermen who lived here before it became a park are the only signs of human life. Consequently, almost the whole stretch of beach down to its junction with the Guadalquivir is one of the last in Spain to remain in a virgin state. Your only companions besides the occasional other bus are the birds that call this home, most notably terns, gulls and plovers.

Approaching the estuary of the Guadalquivir, the Chipiona lighthouse becomes visible along with the remains of a vessel broken in two. Some years ago a cargo ship with a hold full of rice became stuck on the sandbank. After a while the seawater found its way into the holds and as it interacted with the rice the latter expanded and then exploded leaving the ship in two parts! Sanlúcar, on the other side of the Guadalquivir is famous for its Fino sherry and shellfish, a combination that makes for a delicious dish. Especially when watching the famous horse races that are run on the sands in the middle and end of August.

There is also a possibility of taking the Real Fernando boat, www.visitadonana.com, across to visit park from Sanlúcar with a first stop at the Roblado de la Plancha interpretation centre for an hour, followed by a cruise up to the marismas before returning to Sanlúcar. However, the only time of the year people, in extraordinarily large numbers, pass over here is when they are on the

romería to El Rocío in May when hundreds of thousands descend onto this peculiar village.

The bus then follows the river bank, and the terrain changes dramatically. Here you are passing through the scrubland area, and it really isn't too pretty, except for the magnificent looking Mediterranean Pine trees. Soon, there is a stop at a collection of reed houses within their own compounds where people used to collect pine cones and make charcoal. There are also public toilets



here, and time is allowed for a short walk up to the river.

Immediately after, it is time to visit the marismas, which are large, intriguing and consist of a mixture of fresh water from the Guadalquivir and salt from the sea so, as a consequence, there is not much vegetation here. Of course, it depends upon the time of year as to how wet they are and, as a consequence, what wildlife and birds you will see.

In the drier periods the bird count will be much lower – but come May and June there will be flamingos in their thousands. Flamingos, are always popular with visitors, and their pinkness is not just a matter of prettiness; it has also to do with the males' sexual attraction. It turns out that the paler the male the less its chances of finding a mate. Interestingly, it comes by that color by its favorite food, shrimp; and the more it eats the brighter it gets. It is also of interest to note that the narrowness of the Straits of Gibraltar is, in part, responsible for the presence of so many birds with large wings. Such creatures are reliant upon the wind currents over land that allows them to glide long distances rather than have to use excess energy flapping their wings. As a consequence, they look for the shortest distances over water in their migratory patterns.

Pay special attention to the vera, the ever changing green strip between the dunes and marshes, which is always popular with the wildlife. The array of the latter is amazing; it is known that over 120 species of bird, 28 mammal species, 17 reptiles, 9 amphibians and 8 species of fish breed in the park. You will no doubt see cattle *vaca Mostrenca*, deer *Ciervo* and *Gamo* and wild boar *Jabili* aplenty and although *Lynx Lince* are around it is unlikely you will see them. This species of *Jabili* is indigenous to Andalucía and, at

90/100 kilos fully grown, is smaller than its northern European cousins.



When they are young they have stripes on their sides and, not surprisingly, are known as Stripies, and they go through four stages of growth, changing to a brown colour, before becoming adults. Every year some two to three hundred are hunted, but only the traditional method of being on horseback and with a lance is permitted. Perhaps the rarest creatures are the Spanish Imperial Eagles that can be identified by their white shoulders - a pair of which require nearly 6,500 acres of hunting land in summer, and even more in winter - of which there are only nine pairs in the park and, along with the shy Lynx are the most protected species.

The bus then heads into the large dune areas



behind the beach.

Continually evolving, these have been the location for some well known movies, such as Lawrence of Arabia that required such a setting. At a short stop it is fascinating to take a closer look at this sand, when picked up and allowed to run through your fingers you will discover that it is, actually, multi-colored and



very fine. These dunes, matted together by lumps of coarse grass, progress at a rate of between three to six meters annually and, in that process, they overwhelm pine trees that then die but are replaced, in turn, by new ones taking hold in the beginning of the dunes. Underneath these sands there is a

base of clay on which fresh water gets trapped and is vital to the flora and fauna. It doesn't help that local agriculture - especially the growing of strawberries and rice, as well as all the new hotels and houses in Mataslascañas and the golf clubs have depleted the water tables in the area. And if the water falls below a threshold level then it could become a danger for the flora and fauna here so, accordingly, it is continuously monitored. And, another threat to the park is the toxic waters of the huge old mines some way to the north. The bus then retraces its way back along the beach, and to the Acebuche Visitor's Centre.

This tour goes through the southern part of the park, and can only be taken as explained above. However, to the north there are some 30 kms of rough, unmade, roads which can be visited privately, and it is here where you will find much of the bird life. The Acebuche Visitor's Centre can provide simple maps, and a tough 4-Wheel drive vehicle is more than advised. It is most probably preferable, though, to take an organized tour - that way you will get to see and understand more, and Doñana Nature, tel: 959 44 21 60; e-mail info@donana-nature.com and www.donana-nature.com, has an office and interesting shop in the middle of El Rocío from where their tours depart.

Before leaving this area, it really is essential, if you aren't staying there anyway, to pay a visit to the village of El Rocío. Without doubt, it is one of the most unusual in Spain, and is an essential stop. At first glance, it resembles an old western movie set



except for the large church home of its famous Virgin. The roads are sandy, unmade, very bumpy and far more suitable for horses, and laid out in a grid pattern, it has street after street of small houses all with railings outside to tie up the horses. Looking more closely, you will find larger "Club Houses" for Brotherhoods that are identified, often by elaborate symbols, of the name of their cities. Another curiosity here is only seen if you look upwards - namely weather vanes which, more often than not, have a symbolic relationship to the buildings they are found on top of. For most of the year El Rocío, especially in the evenings after the tourists have left, resembles a very large ghost town. All that changes, though, in the middle of May when hundreds of thousands of people arrive here for the Romería and the place buzzes

with people, music and noise almost around the clock.

The authorities built a slightly elevated promenade around the side of the marisma. For those without the time, or inclination, to take the formal tour, and for those who have taken it and have had their consciousness raised, this offers a great opportunity, and free at that, to view some of the wildlife.

Place to Eat

The Pensión Restaurante Cristina, tel: 959 44 24 13, El Real 58, is located just around the corner from the Hotel Toruño in El Rocío, and has a basic, old-fashioned ambiance. It's tiled restaurant, complete with numerous photographs and paintings, offers a surprisingly varied menu and includes such delicacies as Jabili.

Practicalities

The only way to visit the southern interior of the park is on tours operated by the Coop. Marismas del Rocío, tel: 959 43 04 32. These leave from the Centro de Visitantes El Acebuche



(Acebuche means a Wild Olive tree, and there are some pretty, and spectacular examples by the Hotel Toruño in El Rocío) and leave between September 15 and April 30 at either 8:30am or 3pm and May 1 to September 14 at 8:30 or 5pm. The fare is € 25 and it is recommended to book ahead of time. Be sure to wear very casual clothes and preferably boots, and expect it to take between 3 and a half to four hours. Be warned, also, that this is a very rough and bumpy ride indeed, and as interesting as it is it is ABSOLUTELY not to be considered by those with such physical problems as artificial hips etc. Also, be aware that once the trip has started there is no way you can get off along the way. There is no way, either, that there is any guarantee of what wildlife and birds you will see along the way and, in any case, this will vary greatly with the different seasons. Beware, too, that in the high summer months it can get exceedingly hot and has been known to reach well over 50C, so always have a supply of water at hand.