



# ORIOLE BIRDING



## TOUR REPORT EXTREMADURA 2<sup>ND</sup> – 8<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2016

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SATURDAY 2<sup>ND</sup> APRIL – *Light winds and sunny spells, 19C*

After meeting up at a very busy London Gatwick this morning following the Easter crush, we departed about 45 minutes late and arrived in Madrid just after 11.30am in beautiful sunshine. The airport transition was smooth and after picking up our hire vehicle we were soon progressing nicely down the E90 motorway towards Talavera. Several Red Kites, White Storks, Corn Bunting, Iberian Grey Shrike and the first Black Kites were seen as we headed south-west, with Crested Lark, Booted Eagle and Eurasian Hoopoe not far behind. In fact Booted Eagles became increasingly common, with several pale phase and a single dark bird noted close to the motorway. A service station rest stop for coffee and a 'bocadillo' added a lovely pair of Red-rumped Swallows, inspecting a culvert by the edge of the parking lot, and in the trees behind Common Chiffchaff, Blackcap, a super Zitting Cisticola and a brief male Western Subalpine Warbler were also noted.



Crested Lark and Zitting Cisticola, 2<sup>nd</sup> April

An hour further on we left the motorway towards the village of Saucedilla, and as soon as we were on this quiet road we started seeing more and more birds. Crested Larks were everywhere and best of all, a cracking adult Short-toed Eagle was perched on the top of a pylon. We bundled out of the car to scope it and could even see its bright yellow eye – a stunning bird! A male Lesser Kestrel was on the same wires further down and in the distance we saw male Marsh Harrier, Common Raven and Eurasian Spoonbill in flight. A great haul of birds already and we hadn't even reached our main birding stop! This would be at the small reserve centre near Saucedilla, and soon we were enjoying some great wetland birds here. Zitting Cisticola, Corn Bunting and Common Stonechat were common around the small reed-fringed pools and Purple Herons gave some super views – several adult birds were flying around and a couple were seen well perched up in the reeds. Purple Swamp-Hens showed very well, with at least half a dozen seen, including a pair feeding on reed shoots in a small pool by the side of the path. A Cetti's Warbler popped up briefly and belted out its song from a tamarisk, and better still a male Penduline Tit was holding territory by a Weeping Willow. The bird gave great views singing from the reeds below his chosen nest site. Most of the time we were here we could hear Savi's Warbler reeling, and eventually with patience we located one and had some good views. Overhead the sky was now full of raptors – Eurasian Griffon Vultures, Black Kites and a single Black Vulture too, amazing to see so many birds of prey and a far cry from home!



Purple Swamp-Hen and Penduline Tit, 2<sup>nd</sup> April

Nearby, at the next observation hide, three Gull-billed Terns drifted by over the reservoir, making several close passes to the hide, and two adult Purple Herons floated by us at close range [the best of about a dozen noted]. A Great White Egret was also seen, and a pair of Iberian Grey Shrikes were building a nest close by. Finally, at the causeway, about fifty Cattle Egrets were feeding around a herd of sheep and a pair of Purple Swamp-Hens were escorting a well grown chick – what a fabulous two hours birding! Time was slipping away though and we made the final forty minute push on to our accommodation south of Trujillo, the delightful Vina las Torres. Birding continued along the entrance road though – a Eurasian Hoopoe flopped onto a Fig Tree and raised its crest in the evening sun, and some fabulous Azure-winged Magpies greeted us by the hotel gate. With a great meal of local Extremaduran specialities washed down with local wines and acorn liquer, we headed off to bed early after a super first day in central Spain.



Savi's Warbler, 2<sup>nd</sup> April



SUNDAY 3<sup>RD</sup> APRIL – *Rain clearing to cloud, 10C*

A pretty dreary first half of the day today with rain making for cool temperatures, but it didn't stop us enjoying a superb day's birding the steppe and dehesa regions north-west of Trujillo. The morning started at Vina las Torres with a nice flock of Spanish Sparrows near the parking area, and a Short-toed Treecreeper which was singing at point blank range on a tree by the gate. Heading through Trujillo itself and taking the old road towards the provincial town of Caceres, we soon turned north into the steppe and perhaps one of the best known birding routes in Extremadura – the Santa Marta Loop. As soon as we turned off the main road, we began to see Azure-winged Magpies and the first Woodchat Shrikes, and a small group of Mistle Thrush also came up from the roadside. Our first proper stop overlooked open steppe with broom and tamarisk, perfect habitat for Little Bustards, and indeed it wasn't long before we had the head and shoulders of a male in the scope. It eventually took flight, chasing a second male with its black neck feathering inflated into a ruff – great birds! Not as great though as their larger cousin, three of which lumbered across the skyline. This is a fantastic area for viewing Great Bustards, and we saw in excess of 80 individuals during the morning. These first sightings included a fine male which dropped in close to the road and began strutting his stuff with tail fanned. Iberian Grey Shrikes were singing from the scattered bushes, a Hoopoe flopped by and we had great views of a Thekla Lark by the side of the road. An unusual call high overhead alerted us to the presence of seven Pin-tailed Sandgrouse passing over with white bellies clearly visible, but sadly they did not linger and carried on high south. Keen to get better views of the Great Bustards, we carried on up the hill in the car and parked alongside a group of twenty or so, nice and close to the road. The males were again showing off, striding along the ridge with heads and tails aloft.



Great Bustards, 3<sup>rd</sup> April

It was raining quite hard now and we were confined to viewing from the vehicle as we took a track across the best area of steppe. A super view of Thekla Lark was had as we turned off the road, and once into this wonderful area larks really took centre stage. Calandra Lark was especially abundant – we must have seen hundreds – and while it took some time before we had close up views of any on the ground, it was worth waiting for – they really are impressive birds! A lek of Great Bustards could be viewed from a high point in the track, the males turning themselves inside out into giant white powder puffs! We sat out the worst of the rain over a coffee and then it cleared enough for us to get

out and scan with scopes. A male Hen Harrier drifted over the steppe, and more Great Bustards could be seen in all directions. Iberian Grey and Woodchat Shrikes were intermittently dotted along the fence among ever-present Corn Buntings, and then a superb male Montagu's Harrier floated by and we had cracking views as he began to quarter the fields in front of us. Two more were seen a bit further on, in sky-dancing display flight over the distant fields. A flock of a dozen Little Bustards flew in and landed out of sight in a fold in the landscape, and a Short-toed Lark flew by calling. The song of the Calandra Lark stole the show though, a constant cacophony of sound delivered from a great height over the steppe, including a stream of fantastic mimicry – especially their favourite, Green Sandpiper! They really were everywhere, and made for a spectacular sight and sound. Three Northern Wheatears were nice to see, and a distant Black Vulture was among a few Griffons.

Back to the main road and on the advice of a local birder, we turned back and retraced the last half mile of our route to check for the Pin-tailed Sandgrouse flock which had apparently returned and been showing well. Sure enough we located them reasonably close to the road, and with the scope were able to see the fantastic bright orange and gold markings of the males. Three European Bee-eaters could be heard and eventually seen briefly, hawking low among the oaks – always exciting to see our first ones of the trip! Hopefully, as they are just starting to arrive, we would see many more over the coming days. The morning had just evaporated, and so our next stop at the crossing of the Rio Magasca would also be our lunch stop. Several nice birds were seen, including an obliging singing male Cirl Bunting, male White Wagtail and several super Crag Martins. Best bird, though brief, was an adult Golden Eagle which circled over the gorge, interrupting our bocadillos!

Continuing north, we reached the road junction with the Monroy-Trujillo road and stopped at this fantastic vista to scan for raptors. With the day warming slightly, a kettle of fifty or so Eurasian Griffon Vultures was forming and among them were several Black and a single Egyptian Vulture. A Short-toed Eagle was hanging on the wind just above the road, and over the corn fields behind three more Montagu's Harriers included two fine males, seeing off passing Black Kites. Along a fenceline, a smart male Whinchat was a nice surprise and reminder how much further on the spring migration is here than back home.



Common Stonechat and Rio Almonte, 3<sup>rd</sup> April

The Rio Almonte is a beautiful river which winds its way through the dehesa, having cut itself a craggy gorge lined with oaks and olives. It provides a nesting refuge for numerous raptors and sure enough we had fantastic views of Short-toed Eagle and Black Kite just as we parked up by the bridge. Crag Martins were nesting here too, and down in the micro-climate of the valley bottom we enjoyed a fantastic half hours birding. Little-ringed Plover and Common Sandpiper were along the river while European Serins were jangling their tinny songs from every bush. A female Cirl Bunting flew up and perched but was eclipsed by a stunning Rock Bunting which gave some prolonged scope views on the far side of the river. The light was really good now the rain had stopped and scanning the waterside bushes also produced several Blackcaps, Common Chiffchaff, Common Stonechats and a male

Sardinian Warbler. We drew our first blank of the day looking for Black Wheatear on the crags, but instead bagged up a male Blue Rock Thrush as some compensation.

Our last stop of the day was north of the village of Monroy, to check a picturesque shallow valley for Black-shouldered Kite. Several White Storks were nesting in the tops of the Stone Pines and in the fields along the valley, hundreds of Spanish Sparrows were feeding. A male Woodchat Shrike posed occasionally on the fence beside our chosen watchpoint, from where we had a good panoramic view across the agricultural fields to the dehesa beyond, looking towards Monfrague National Park. Raptors were constant over the trees – Common Buzzard, Black Kite, Red Kite, Booted Eagle, Griffon and Black Vultures were all drifting over, and a pair of Common Ravens were nesting on a pylon. We could also hear the ‘blooping’ calls of European Bee-eaters, and sure enough we located four sallying from the bushes in the valley bottom. Almost at once, a Black-shouldered Kite appeared, chasing up from the trees to see off a Black Kite. It disappeared as quickly as it came, but thankfully reappeared about fifteen minutes later and began hunting the valley, giving great views in the improving afternoon light. After watching it hovering for several minutes, it headed away purposefully and dropped out of sight, but we saw it again as we headed back up to the parking spot, seeing off another Black Kite. Perhaps it was nesting close by – its behaviour certainly suggested as much – and we filled our boots again as it continued hovering over the fields to the south of the road. Our journey back took around an hour from here, and was punctuated by a single stop as we spotted an injured Common Crane, a straggler from the wintering throng, feeding below the Holm Oaks close to the road. Another action packed days birding!

#### MONDAY 4<sup>TH</sup> APRIL – Heavy rain all day, IIC

A challenging day today with heavy rain from breakfast time until dinner, and no let up in between! We planned to spend the day in the south of the area, our longest driving day and also one where we felt that we could see quite a few birds from the shelter of the vehicle. And so it materialised, as we actually had a pretty productive day despite the weather verging on biblical at times! About half an hour south of Vina las Torres is the Embalse de Sierra Brava, a superb area for wintering birds but also potentially productive in spring. A Lesser Kestrel was prospecting the loose tiles of an isolated barn as we turned down the service road, and a Eurasian Hoopoe was perched on the same set of ridge tiles. Our birding was limited to one side of the vehicle though, as the rain was driving in so hard from the other side! One hundred Great Crested Grebes were seen off the dam, but little else until we dropped down onto the ricefields adjacent to the vast Solar Farm at Madrigalejo. Here one or two paddies held water and a few waders – seven Wood Sandpipers were a nice surprise, alongside singles of Common and Green. Six Dunlin included one in breeding plumage, and among numerous White Wagtails and Meadow Pipits were many splendid Yellow Wagtails, predominantly of the Iberian race. There were one or two *flavissima* race too, and every one a male – a nice way to brighten up a very dreary day! Cattle Egrets were common throughout the ricefields, but raptors were not surprisingly scarce – only a single Marsh Harrier was noted. Taking the now tarmac road from the solar farm back to the village, we paused by some reed fringed ponds and added two drake Red Crested Pochards and a fine drake Garganey. The ricefields on the other side of the main road, adjacent to the pond fringed by Eucalyptus trees, now seem largely dry and abandoned – we did see our first Red Avadavats here though, and a few Spanish Sparrows.

After a coffee at the bar in Madrigalejo and a chance to dry out a bit, we pressed on south to Vegas Altas, where another network of ricefields and drainage channels offered further birding opportunities. A Cetti's Warbler showed really well in a ditch, and while watching this several other birds popped into view, including a European Reed Warbler and a better view of Red Avadavat. This introduced Indian species can be found in tightly packed flocks among the reed fringed ditches in the ricefields, but it is never easy to view. The birds tend to bounce away calling as soon as approached, and typically land well out of sight in dense cover – we only had one good view all morning. The second channel we crossed hosted a croaking Great Reed Warbler, which we managed some half decent views of as it moved through the Bulrushes. From here it was about a twenty minute drive to our lunch stop, by the Rio Zujar.



Despite this area now being more heavily disturbed than previously, due to a sand and gravel extraction plant, we still saw a few birds while parked up in the rain! Many Sand Martins were hawking over the pools, and two or three Common Kingfishers could be seen too. Singles of Common and Green Sandpipers, Blackcap and Common Chiffchaff were also noted. Taking the service road along the southern side of the Zujar, we found that many diurnal migrants had been grounded by the inclement weather. This included hundreds of hirundines, including fifty or more Red-rumped Swallows, and a fantastic flock of forty bedraggled European Bee-eaters, perched in a tree by the side of the track, their bills all pointing skyward and the rain running down their backs. None of us had seen them quite like this before! A new, well placed viewing screen allowed us to scope them, until they were spectacularly flushed over our heads by a passing male Marsh Harrier. Cetti's Warbler, two Willow Warblers, Little-ringed Plover, European Hoopoe and good scope views of a Penduline Tit were had here too, and a Common Nightingale was flushed off the road – one of about five heard singing along the route. Rejoining the main road at the Zujar dam, we took the road south towards La Serena, making an impromptu stop as a female Western Black-eared Wheatear flew up as we passed. Pulling over and scanning the rocky roadside area, we found a spanking male too – even in this light it was a stunning bird!



Black-eared Wheatear & Hoopoe, 4<sup>th</sup> April

La Serena plains are a vast area, and one only ever has time to scratch the surface, but we did our best by driving a couple of the side tracks to explore away from the main road. The first track we tried was a bit muddy for our vehicle, so we didn't go down it far – about a dozen Great Bustards were on the skyline, and two Little Owls were perched on a pile of rocks out in one of the fields. Back by the main road, three Little Bustards showed really well, a male displaying to two females, not only close but out in the open too. Further roadside entertainment came in the form of Montagu's Harriers – first a male perched right by the side of the road on a post, which flew up only as we parked alongside it. It joined a second male and two females over a cereal field and we had super views as they swept back and forth. More Great Bustards were on the skyline, and several Northern Wheatear were dotted around in this area of stony steppe. A second track was graded and easier to drive, so we continued along it for several kilometres until we reached an isolated finca. Here we found not only Calandra and Thekla Larks, but about twenty Short-toed Larks too. Most of them were well back from the road and hard to see, but one with a rusty cap landed right next to the car. The same could not be said for a brace of Tawny Pipits, which we just about got onto on the deck before they flew off behind the farm out of sight. Another Little Owl was seen, on another pile of rocks, and another handful of Great Bustards.

With no let up in the weather, we decided to leave the steppe and begin our route back, via the small village of Benquerencia de la Serena, complete with its Moorish Castillo atop a craggy hill. Our target here was the declining Black Wheatear, but in the horrible conditions we drew a blank. It was far from a waste of time though – two Alpine Swifts cruised over, two Red-billed Choughs were around the Castillo and a pair of Crag Martins were also noted. Rock Bunting and Sardinian Warbler were our last birds of the day, before we embarked on the 1.5 hour drive back north to Vina las Torres. Ironically, the sun came out for the first time today just after we got back, and the garden filled with Azure-winged Magpies – the view across the plains to Trujillo is certainly a spectacular one, and hopefully tomorrow we will be blessed with some sunshine!

**TUESDAY 5<sup>TH</sup> APRIL** – *Sunny and breezy, 20C*

A contrast in weather today with wall to wall sunshine and blue sky following yesterdays rain. We opted to take a walk near the hotel straight after breakfast, and this was great for seeing many of the commoner species typical of Extremadura. Corn Bunting, Spotless Starling, Red-rumped Swallow, Sardinian Warbler, Azure-winged Magpie and Woodchat Shrike were all abundant and easy to see, and we picked up a couple of list additions too – single Song Thrush, three flyover Hawfinch [later seen in the garden] and three Woodlark song-fighting low overhead. Three Common Cuckoo were chasing around calling, the female frequently giving her bubbling call, and one of the males eventually settled just above us on the wires. A nice selection, and a pleasant precursor to our full day exploring Extremadura's birding jewel, the excellent Monfrague National Park.



Common Cuckoo, 5<sup>th</sup> April



Our route north from Trujillo took us across the Rio Almonte, and from the road bridge we watched a big dog Otter fishing in the slack water at the edge of the river, right below us. Spanish Sparrows chirped from the bushes below the bridge, but sadly a Rock Sparrow did not linger, flying off over the dehesa. The sun wasn't quite catching the valley bottom yet, so it was otherwise a bit quiet – several close encounters with Crag Martins and a showy Cetti's Warbler were the best of the rest. Pressing on, we passed the single injured Common Crane again in the same spot as previously, and after twenty minutes or so we reached the Castillo de Monfrague. Winding our way up to the top, we parked up and made the walk up the stone steps to the top. It was windy here, but staying on the sheltered side we were able to enjoy the spectacle of amazing views of European Griffon and Black Vultures passing us at eye level. Two Red-billed Chough called as they breezed by, and a pair of Peregrine were riding the updraughts of the Pena Falcon crag on the other side of the gorge. The views back across the dehesa to the south from here are simply breathtaking, and worth the walk up the steps in any case! The highlight here was a second calendar year Bonelli's Eagle which was circling off the left hand shoulder of the crags, giving some superb views as the light was excellent – it offered several times to land, eventually finding a crag far enough away from the assembled throng of Griffon Vultures, and there we were able to watch it clearly through the scope. It was certainly an interesting bird to watch, with its very pale underparts, warm buff underwing coverts and Honey Buzzard like flight silhouette. When perched, its long neck and powerful bill could also be seen. Two Egyptian Vultures and a Black Stork were also seen above the crags, the latter drifting down from a great height no doubt towards its nesting place on the rocks below. Back down near the car park, three Hawfinch flew over and we were able to pick up our first Black Redstarts on the rocks down by the cave. Here, Crag Martins were very numerous, whizzing in and out of the nooks and crannies giving their nasal, almost sparrow like calls – easy to overlook them as 'common' but it was certainly a treat to see them so well today.



Black Storks, 5<sup>th</sup> April

Moving the car down to the parking spot opposite Pena Falcon crag, we were soon watching two Black Storks mating on their nest half way up the cliff opposite – the perfect light was illuminating their glossy green necks and bright red bills superbly. On the high crags behind us, we were watching

an immature male Blue Rock Thrush when another bird was spotted peeping around the side of a rock – a Black Wheatear! We thought we had missed out altogether on seeing this species but everyone just managed to get it before it disappeared out of sight and could not be relocated. A male Western Subalpine Warbler was singing from the trees below us, and several more Black Redstarts were seen, including a fine male. Driving on further into the park, after crossing the Rio Tajo, we passed the visitor centre at Villareal de San Carlos and took the road towards Portillo del Tietar. As we dropped down to the dam, two more Egyptian Vultures cruised along the ridge and a Grey Wagtail was added. Mirador de la Bascula is perhaps not the watchpoint it once was, but certainly served as a suitable spot to have a cuppa and scan for raptors. Booted Eagle and Black Vulture were seen, with Woodlark and Hawfinch also around the car park and up to three Western Subalpine Warblers in the bushes – one male in particular showed really well. Tietar Cliff is one of the premier birding spots in the park, and it did not disappoint in the now very warm afternoon sun. As soon as we arrived, an adult Spanish Imperial Eagle could be seen perched on a treetop. It was calling, and soon took flight, gaining height above the crags before dive-bombing a passing Griffon Vulture! It returned to its same perch, looking absolutely magnificent in the sunshine. We admired the Griffon Vultures, thronged on the cliffs, and we had nice views of a pair of Eurasian Sparrowhawks circling in front of us. Rock Bunting showed distantly but fairly well, and more Black Redstarts and another cracking Western Subalpine Warbler were noted. Eventually, the second Spanish Imperial Eagle appeared from a great height, and the pair circled together before the male dived at another Griffon, striking its back in mid air! They certainly did not like the vultures flying anywhere near their nest! We really filled our boots with the eagles, enjoying the most spectacular views we could ever hope for – a really memorable experience.



Spanish Imperial Eagle, 5<sup>th</sup> April

Our route back to base retraced our way back through Torrejon and down the Ex-208 towards Trujillo. We stopped again at the beautiful Rio Almonte, to see if we could catch up with the Rock Sparrow. It wasn't around, but we noted three Woodchat Shrikes, single European Bee-eater, Short-toed Eagle, Eurasian Sparrowhawk and two Common Swifts. It was easy to forget it was already 1800, given the warmth in the sun, but we had to make our way back to base for dinner via the town of Trujillo. Here a quick stop at the Bull Ring gave us super views of the Lesser Kestrels, swooping



overhead giving their fantastic call – four Pallid Swifts were also easy to identify in the strong light, looking super sandy as they wheeled above the rooftops. A long and happy day with lots of great birding moments to savour – bring on more tomorrow!



Griffon Vulture and Spotless Starling, 5<sup>th</sup> April

WEDNESDAY 6<sup>TH</sup> APRIL – *Sunshine and light winds, 21C*

We kicked off at Belen plain this morning, and after the usual detour trying to find the way in from Belen village, we eventually made our way out across the steppe on what was a beautiful sunny morning. Lark song greeted us as we made our first stop – Calandra's were everywhere, and their song just filled the air – including some very good and often confusing mimicry! We picked up the odd European Hoopoe, and a European Bee-eater flew low overhead calling. Other than the usual throngs of Corn Buntings though it was rather quite, so we continued on to a lagoon which can be distantly scoped from one of the tracks. Here we added our first Black-winged Stilts and Common Greenshank along the distant shoreline. Retracing the same route back, we flushed another Bee-eater from the roadside fence and then spent some time watching two pairs of Montagu's Harriers, quartering by the roadside. One of the males passed right across in front of us in perfect light, and the two females were hunting together, just alongside our car. Absolutely stunning views of one of the most magnificent of raptors and a real highlight of the morning for sure. Heading back through Belen village, we rejoined the motorway and headed about fifteen minutes south past Trujillo, down towards our next stop at Alcollarin.

Once leaving the motorway, and passing through a lovely area of dehesa, the road snaked its way through an interesting area of Mediterranean scrub about a kilometre before reaching the EX-102. Alongside the car, a cuckoo was flying – the shout of Great-spotted went up and we needed to find a pull of place fast! Thankfully there was a handy gateway, and soon we were scoping two Great-spotted Cuckoos perched on a distant bush. They took flight, but came straight towards us, landing quite close by and calling. Over the next half hour, we had superb views of them, with one being seen eventually down to about ten metres – what a treat! The whole area was thronged with a mass of Spanish Sparrows, and several Griffon Vultures were cruising overhead. A Common Waxbill was a surprise addition, and a Spectacled Warbler popped up briefly but was seen only by Ashley. What



was clear today was that the European Bee-eater migration was gathering pace – we were constantly surrounded by their wonderful calls, and saw several flocks passing overhead.



Great-spotted Cuckoo & Woodchat Shrike, 6<sup>th</sup> April

Reaching Embalse de Alcollarin, a new reservoir which has only been flooded for two years, we enjoyed a real feast of waterbirds. This fantastic site certainly does wonders for boosting the trip list, but there is quality to be had here too! From the southern side with the sun behind us, we scoped big flocks of Common Coot, Great Crested Grebes, Gadwall, Common Teal, Northern Shoveler and Eurasian Wigeon, a few Common Shelduck and Egyptian Geese, single Northern Pintail and seven breeding plumaged Eurasian Spoonbills.



Long-eared Owl, 6<sup>th</sup> April

This arm of the reservoir was thronged with waterfowl, and along the muddy edges Black-winged Stilts were feeding and Black-headed Gulls were hawking over the water. Two Yellow-legged Gulls were loafing on a small island and a Gull-billed Tern floated on and settled on the far shore. Thekla Larks were chasing around on the stony grassland below us and behind over the dehesa, Black Kites were displaying. This really is a tremendous birding location! Reaching the picnic spot near the small dam, a Black Redstart flicked into a bush with two Willow Warblers, and a Green Sandpiper flew off from the dam wall. We scoped the cut off lagoon from the dam and saw a single Great White Egret rooting among Cattle and Little Egrets, and across the far side a lovely male Pied Flycatcher was sallying from a Holm Oak. Two more Black-winged Stilts and a skulking Purple Heron were seen from the far end of the dam, and a Common Kingfisher popped up on the reeds in perfect light. Lunch beckoned, but the trees around the picnic area were full of birds! Woodchat Shrikes chased around the trees, Azure-winged Magpies were moving through and among the foliage, several Blackcaps, Sardinian Warblers, Willow Warblers and a single Garden Warbler were noted. A Rock Sparrow flew up from the ground and perched briefly but didn't linger, though this was somewhat eclipsed by the fact that, sitting in an old buzzards nest, peering out at us with ear tufts erect, was a fantastic Long-eared Owl! What a find! We couldn't believe we had parked right next to it without noticing! The bird watched us as we sat and ate our lunch in the now very warm sunshine, wondering how we could top that in the afternoon.

Around the far side of the reservoir, we had another nice flock of Bee-eaters passing through plus more views of many of the same waterfowl species noted earlier. Below the dam, another Common Waxbill was seen and a Sardinian Warbler was in song flight. Being almost 1500 now though, it was time to continue towards Campo Lugar and take the steppe road over towards Sierra Brava. This excellent road came up trumps straight away, with three European Rollers perched on the wires by the nesting boxes. We parked up and enjoyed good views, with yet more Bee-eaters passing overhead, Calandra Larks all around and a Stone Curlew sleeping among the grass – it did stand up and do a pirouette before settling back down to sleep again! A little further on, a Short-toed Lark showed well by the roadside and then we came across a flock of twenty five Great Bustards including several fabulous males – two of which were in full display. We really had enjoyed some super views of this iconic species on the tour this year.



Greater Flamingo and Spanish Wagtail, 6<sup>th</sup> April



Our final stop of the day was north of Obando, at the Embalse de Moheda Alta. This is a lovely area of dehesa surrounding ricefields and a small reservoir, with a couple of well placed hides overlooking the area. Climbing up to the reservoir we were dismayed to find a lot of water and no islands – and therefore no waders. Luck was on our side though, as a single Collared Pratincole appeared over the water and flew towards us before heading incredibly high, its call just audible, and heading off into the distance – what a stroke of good fortune! A pale phase Booted Eagle cruised by, and the warm afternoon air was now full of swirling Griffon Vultures and a few Common Swifts. We were keen to explore a bit further down the track where a tower hide overlooks the ricefields, and as we parked up we realised the field next to us was full of Yellow Wagtails. We saw at least seventy, mainly the Spanish race but also one or two *flavissima*, and were also pleased to pick out a breeding plumaged Water Pipit among them. A ringtail Hen Harrier floated by, followed by a male Marsh, and several Red Avadavats were in the reed fringed channel alongside. A real surprise came in the form of five Greater Flamingoes, feeding on a flooded paddy in front of the hide, three adults and two immatures. These were the first we had ever recorded on the tour, and presumably left over from the winter. Three Gull-billed Terns, two Black-winged Stilts and ten Common Redshanks were also present, but despite the seemingly fantastic looking habitat the numbers of waders were actually surprisingly low. Nevertheless, we had recorded a number of new trip birds today in some stunning spots, and reluctantly with dinner beckoning we headed back to base around 1900.

**THURSDAY 7<sup>TH</sup> APRIL** – *Sunny and calm, 22C*

Our last full day dawned beautiful and sunny, as we headed back to the Santa Marta Loop in order to try and connect with our only missing key species, Black-bellied Sandgrouse. A brief stop in Trujillo allowed us to spend some time comparing the often tricky pairing of Common and Pallid Swift in perfect light, plus the odd Lesser Kestrel. Once on the steppe, we stopped at the first bend as usual and scanned, picking up three Little Bustards and hearing a male doing his ‘raspberry blowing’ display call. A first-summer Great-spotted Cuckoo was feeding on the ground down by the fenceline, and a female Great Bustard flew along the skyline. Other than the usual assortment of larks and Corn Buntings, Woodchat Shrikes and Azure-winged Magpies, we didn’t see anything new so moved a short distance up the hill. Here we were greeted with a fantastic display from a lek of Great Bustards, with several males in full display to the watching females. After a good session of display, they gradually took flight one by one straight towards us, low over our heads, leaving only one determined male and two females behind. Two more Great-spotted Cuckoo flew by calling and a stunning male Montagu’s Harrier drifted right past in front of us.



Great Bustards, 7<sup>th</sup> April



Taking the track across the steppe as we had done in the rain on Sunday, we pulled up along with a crowd of birders of three or four different groups, and were kindly put straight onto three Black-bellied Sandgrouse feeding among the buttercups out on the steppe, our target bird for the morning! At least fifteen Pin-tailed Sandgrouse were flying around in small groups, and eventually they too landed and gave good views – its not very often you get both species on the deck! Great Bustards were parading in the field behind, and a cracking Short-toed Eagle was sat on a rock in the adjacent field. All around we were of course surrounded by the songs of Calandra and Thekla Larks – what a stunning place! Eventually the Black-bellied Sandgrouse took flight, and we got the views we wanted complete with black belly patches – by now we were almost immune, but not quite, to the calls of passing migrant European Bee-eaters overhead.



Short-toed Eagle and Gredos Mountain view, 7<sup>th</sup> April

From here we planned to take a different route today, heading west from Santa Marta de Magasca and first pausing by the Rio Magasca crossing. Red-rumped Swallows and Crag Martins were nesting under the bridge here and entertained us while we had coffee, bruschetta and jamon! A Booted Eagle circled over, before we made our way up onto the steppe area above and towards Caceres. This is an amazing spot, with incredible 360 degree views as far as the snow-capped Gredos Mountains. A European Roller was perched on a roadside wire, by the nesting boxes, with another two seen further along – always a crowd pleaser to see them so close and in such great light! A party of vultures, kites and buzzards were around a carcass in a distant field – lots of Black Vultures could be seen, along with a single Egyptian Vulture. An immature Golden Eagle cruised in across the field, no doubt attracted by the melee, and perched on a drystone wall. It was all happening today! Our route took us out towards the motorway, but we had two more impromptu stops – one for a splendid male Western Black-eared Wheatear, the other for a small pond which held two Black-winged Stilts and a Common Greenshank!

Once on the motorway, we headed east back to Trujillo then north towards Deleitosa. We planned to spend the rest of the day in the Sierra de las Villuercas to try and add one or two new species to our already impressive list, among some more quite beautiful mountain scenery. Our first stop by a river crossing was a useful place to have lunch, and a pair of Golden Eagle greeted us, circling over the ridge behind. Four Blue Rock Thrush, a Grey Wagtail and one or two other common birds were noted during lunch. Further on, at Cabanas del Castillo, we examined the castle and its crag hoping for a Black Wheatear – we didn't find one, but saw a belting male Black Redstart, four more Blue

Rock Thrush and an obliging male Western Subalpine Warbler which popped up in a bare tree beside us. Two Alpine Swifts cruised high overhead – we had not seen too many on the trip so far, and they are always such impressive birds. Continuing along the road, we screeched to a halt just before Solana – a pair of Egyptian Vultures were circling right next to the road, and one passed ridiculously close to our car!



European Roller & Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, 7<sup>th</sup> April

Once beyond the village of Berzocana, we had to pull over yet again as a Crested Tit flew across the road in front of us! Sure enough, we had super views of it in the pines by the side of the road. A handy layby further on enabled us to add Great-spotted Woodpecker, and a European Nuthatch was also new for the list. We didn't bank on the next bird though, a stunning little male Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, drumming, calling and showing really well in the oaks just by the lay-by! We really were having some fine luck today! The watchpoint a bit higher up was our destination for the last hour of the day, and we were hoping for another sighting of Bonelli's Eagle. We couldn't spot one, but had hordes of Griffon Vultures, Black and Red Kites, Booted Eagle and Egyptian Vulture. A Dartford Warbler was singing in the scrub around the parking spot, and we managed some sketchy views of it among the bushes. A superb spot though, with more breathtaking views – Extremadura just keeps giving!

FRIDAY 8<sup>TH</sup> APRIL – Cool and sunny, 13C

We had time for a bit of birding this morning on our way back to Madrid, and in particular we wanted to target Spectacled Warbler at a site near Jaraicejo. The Mediterranean scrub here is great for Sylvia warblers, and as soon as we got out of the car we could hear Sardinian and Dartford Warblers singing all around. A Short-toed Eagle lifted off a pylon just above our heads and circled round – what a bird! We had enjoyed some particularly awesome views of this bulky raptor on the trip this week but this was perhaps the best of the lot. Soon we heard the distinctly more musical rattle of our target Sylvia, and sure enough a male Spectacled Warbler was dancing high up above the broom bushes in song flight. Over the next half hour we had to be patient, but the bird was favouring a particular group of bushes as song posts and we all enjoyed some really great scope views. All the time, small groups of European Bee-eaters were passing low over us heading north and looking

absolutely dazzling in the amazing light. Across the road, a Woodlark perched on a fence for us and another male Dartford Warbler posed well, before it was time to move on to our last stop at Almaraz.



Spectacled Warbler, 8<sup>th</sup> April

Dropping down to the causeway we noticed two raptors in an aerial tussle above the road – a Black-winged Kite mobbing a Common Buzzard! The kite showed brilliantly, eventually giving up on the buzzard and hunting near the road – perhaps even better views than we had enjoyed near Monroy earlier in the tour. At the causeway, a Glossy Ibis flew over – our first of the trip – and we were soon watching Purple Swamp-Hens at close range on one of the reed-fringed inlets. Our main target here was Little Bittern, and sure enough we found two males, which gave super views as they stalked stealthily along the waters edge. Several Purple Herons were also here, and a Savi's Warbler – one of three reeling – was perched up on the reeds. We only had time for one more quick stop by the reserve at Saucedilla, and here we had great views of a very colourful adult Purple Heron, and overhead Black Vulture, Great White Egret and two Eurasian Spoonbills. From here it was a direct drive two hours to Madrid, where we arrived in good time for our 1640 flight back to London.

#### SYSTEMATIC LIST

1. Little Grebe
2. Great Crested Grebe
3. Great Cormorant
4. Cattle Egret
5. Great White Egret
6. Little Egret
7. Little Bittern
8. Glossy Ibis
9. Eurasian Spoonbill
10. Greater Flamingo
11. Grey Heron
12. Purple Heron
13. Black Stork



14. White Stork
15. Egyptian Goose
16. Common Shelduck
17. Eurasian Wigeon
18. Gadwall
19. Common Teal
20. Garganey
21. Mallard
22. Northern Pintail
23. Northern Shoveler
24. Red Crested Pochard
25. Black-shouldered Kite
26. Red Kite
27. Black Kite
28. Eurasian Griffon Vulture
29. Black Vulture
30. Egyptian Vulture
31. Short-toed Eagle
32. Marsh Harrier
33. Hen Harrier
34. Montagu's Harrier
35. Eurasian Sparrowhawk
36. Common Buzzard
37. Booted Eagle
38. Spanish Imperial Eagle
39. Golden Eagle
40. Bonelli's Eagle
41. Common Kestrel
42. Lesser Kestrel
43. Peregrine
44. Red-legged Partridge
45. Common Quail [H]
46. Common Moorhen
47. Purple Swamp-Hen
48. Common Coot
49. Common Crane
50. Great Bustard
51. Little Bustard
52. Stone Curlew
53. Black-winged Stilt
54. Little-ringed Plover
55. Collared Pratincole
56. Common Snipe
57. Green Sandpiper
58. Common Sandpiper
59. Wood Sandpiper
60. Dunlin
61. Common Greenshank
62. Common Redshank
63. Yellow-legged Gull
64. Black-headed Gull
65. Gull-billed Tern
66. Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
67. Black-bellied Sandgrouse
68. Rock Dove

69. Woodpigeon
70. Collared Dove
71. Common Cuckoo
72. Great-spotted Cuckoo
73. Little Owl
74. Long-eared Owl
75. Common Swift
76. Pallid Swift
77. Alpine Swift
78. Common Kingfisher
79. Lesser-spotted Woodpecker
80. Great-spotted Woodpecker
81. Eurasian Hoopoe
82. European Bee-eater
83. European Roller
84. Calandra Lark
85. Crested Lark
86. Thekla Lark
87. Woodlark
88. Short-toed Lark
89. Crag Martin
90. House Martin
91. Sand Martin
92. Barn Swallow
93. Red-rumped Swallow
94. Water Pipit
95. Tawny Pipit
96. Meadow Pipit
97. White Wagtail
98. Grey Wagtail
99. Yellow Wagtail
100. Wren
101. European Robin
102. Common Nightingale
103. Black Redstart
104. Common Stonechat
105. Northern Wheatear
106. Black Wheatear
107. Black-eared Wheatear
108. Blue Rock Thrush
109. Blackbird
110. Song Thrush
111. Mistle Thrush
112. Zitting Cisticola
113. Cetti's Warbler
114. Great Reed Warbler
115. European Reed Warbler
116. Sedge Warbler
117. Savi's Warbler
118. Sardinian Warbler
119. Dartford Warbler
120. Spectacled Warbler
121. Western Subalpine Warbler
122. Blackcap
123. Garden Warbler

- 124. Common Chiffchaff
- 125. Willow Warbler
- 126. Pied Flycatcher
- 127. Long-tailed Tit
- 128. Blue Tit
- 129. Great Tit
- 130. Crested Tit
- 131. Penduline Tit
- 132. European Nuthatch
- 133. Short-toed Treecreeper
- 134. Southern Grey Shrike
- 135. Woodchat Shrike
- 136. Azure-winged Magpie
- 137. Black-billed Magpie
- 138.       Western Jackdaw
- 139.       Common Raven
- 140.       Eurasian Jay
- 141.       Red-billed Chough
- 142.       Spotless Starling
- 143.       House Sparrow
- 144.       Spanish Sparrow
- 145.       Tree Sparrow
- 146.       Common Waxbill
- 147.       Red Avadavat
- 148.       Chaffinch
- 149.       European Serin
- 150.       Greenfinch
- 151.       Goldfinch
- 152.       Common Linnet
- 153.       Hawfinch
- 154.       Rock Bunting
- 155.       Cirl Bunting
- 156.       Corn Bunting

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