

ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT
EXTREMADURA
10TH – 14TH
JANUARY 2011

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Monday 10th January

Overcast with showery rain in the afternoon.

Following a smooth flight to Madrid from Luton we picked up our hire vehicles and headed south west on the A5-E90, passing Talavera and Naval Moral. Birds seen en route included Cattle Egrets, White Storks, Griffon Vultures, Red Kites, Merlin, Green Sandpiper, numerous Lapwings, Spotless Starlings and a couple of Southern Grey Shrikes.

After a couple of hours driving we decided to take a break at the Embalse de Arrocampo-Almaraz [Arrocampo Reservoir], a productive wetland within easy reach of the motorway. A Black Redstart was in Almaraz village as we approached; this species would prove to be widespread during our stay. Once at the reservoir some light rain forced a flock of Crag Martins low over the water, accompanied by a single Barn Swallow. Shortly after we were privileged to witness a Black-shouldered Kite fly directly overhead, before giving prolonged views as it displayed and hunted. We soon added Great White Egret, Osprey, Hen Harrier, several Marsh Harriers, two Common Kingfishers, Cetti's Warbler, three Common Chiffchaff and a Reed Bunting to the tally. Another highlight here was a female Little Bittern that showed well before creeping back into the reeds. Up to this point we had only been able to obtain distant views of another target bird, Purple Swamp-hen, so we drove a short distance to the information centre where more reed beds were present.

Sure enough we soon located one of these incredible looking oversized purple “moorhens” as it split open reed stems to feed on the insides. Further sightings here included Little Grebe, Great Cormorant, Grey Heron, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Common Kestrel, Common Coot, Eurasian Curlew, Grey Wagtail, White Wagtail, Common Stonechat, Southern Grey Shrike, Raven, Spanish Sparrow and Corn Bunting. Not a bad start!

As with so many birding sites Extremadura it was hard to tear ourselves away, but time was moving on and so we set off for Hotel Viña las Torres near Trujillo, our base for the next four nights. We arrived safely after about an hour to be greeted by our hosts Juan Pedro and Belen, and were soon enjoying a delicious home made meal, typical of the region.

Bird of the day: Black-shouldered Kite.

Tuesday 11th January

Sunny spells after a foggy start.

Our first destination this morning was the steppe [or more correctly pseudo steppe] between Trujillo and Caceres. Our spirits lifted as early fog around the hotel dissipated, but unfortunately this returned as we approached Trujillo and was still around at our first stop on a bend in the road to Santa Marta de Magasca, just north of the N521 Caceres road. Visibility was restricted for a while but we managed to pick out White Stork, Southern Grey Shrike, Common Hoopoe, Thekla Lark, Corn Bunting and Spanish Sparrow. Luckily the fog finally abated at about 10.00 and we soon spotted three Little Bustards on the sloping field looking north. Numerous Calandra Larks were chasing around over the grassland and Northern Lapwings were widely distributed. In fact, the latter species was particularly common throughout our visit at many locations; presumably visitors from northern Europe.

There was no sign of any of the hoped for Great Bustards at this first stop, so we took a short drive along the road and turned right along a farm track that passes through some good quality steppe. We had to disembark and walk after a few hundred metres as recent rain had made the track difficult to drive on safely. The fields were busy with small birds; mainly Calandra Larks, Crested Larks, Sky Larks, Goldfinches, Greenfinches, Meadow Pipits and Linnets. A male Merlin shot through all too briefly, with several Red Kites, a Common Buzzard and a Common Raven also noted. It wasn't long before we spotted our first Great Bustards, totalling 17 north of the track. Shortly after a flock of 30 more gave a close fly past, giving wonderful views of this emblematic species. Several groups of Black-bellied Sandgrouse were logged, probably 24 in all. A number of European Golden Plovers were seen in the Northern Lapwing flocks here.

We next headed north to Santa Marta de Magasca, collecting Wood Lark and Red-legged Partridge en route, where we stopped for an excellent cup of coffee [in the bar with the stuffed Pin-tailed Sandgrouse on a shelf]. From here we drove through some lovely countryside before stopping at the Rio Almonte crossing, south of Monroy. This proved a good decision as we were soon onto a Black Vulture with a flock of Griffons, followed by an adult Spanish Imperial Eagle, and then joined by a Golden Eagle, all giving great views. Wow!



From here we passed through Monroy, stopping briefly to admire the White Storks already at their nests, before taking the bumpy road north east. Along this road we encountered our first Common Cranes flock of the trip, over 100 in total. Several flocks of Azure-winged Magpies and three Black Vultures were also observed in this locality. At the EX208 we turned left to Torrejon el Rubio, headed for the Parque Natural de Monfragüe, where we would spend the afternoon.





Our lunch break was taken at the famous Salto del Gitano [or Penafalcon] viewpoint, which unusually we had to ourselves. Here a breach in the River Tagus allows fantastic views of the large Griffon Vulture colony on the towering rocks above. Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart and Firecrest were also recorded, but the highlight had to be a compact flock of 130 migrating White Storks that circled round above the rocks for what seemed an age. Our next port of call was a comfort break at the village of Villarreal de San Carlos. Some of the group were indisposed when a Spanish Imperial Eagle showed briefly, but everyone was able to scrutinise a Bonelli's Eagle that circled amongst a flock of vultures



Next we journeyed to the craggy outcrop at Portilla del Tietar, seeing Hawfinch and Grey Wagtail on the way. Here more vultures, including two Black, were logged as well as Eurasian Jay, Great Crested Grebe, Crag Martins, Sardinian Warbler and Long-tailed Tit. A Peregrine flew in with prey and landed on the cliffs to feast. On our way back to the hotel we made a brief stop at the Castillo, with fabulous vistas over the vast dehesa below. Here we were rewarded with nice views of a Red-billed Chough, before we headed back to the hotel for our first wine tasting session, followed by another excellent meal.

Bird of the day: Spanish Imperial Eagle.

Wednesday 12th January

Variable amounts of fog and mist most of the day.

Today we headed south for the rice fields beyond Zorita, first turning left off the EX355 for the Embalse de Sierra Brava. We initially parked by the dam, but visibility was severely restricted, frustratingly Common Cranes could only be heard and huge flocks of ducks were almost totally obscured in the murk. We moved on to an area of wet rice fields where visibility slightly improved. Here we noted four Green Sandpipers, many Northern Lapwings, Black-headed Gulls, Cattle Egrets, several flocks of Greylag Geese and four plus Marsh Harriers. Some of the group spotted a small calidris wader that was lost to view before a positive identification could be made. From here we turned right at a bridge and joined a track that leads through the rice fields for several kilometres, before eventually rejoining the main road at Madrigalejo. Almost straight away we were rewarded with a close Black-shouldered Kite aggressively harassing a Common Raven that had obviously entered its territory, while its partner perched nearby. A little further on numbers of Common Cranes increased, several Common Snipe were put up and Black-headed Gulls were widespread. The conditions were still misty, but visibility had at least improved. A short walk revealed two Bluethroat along the field side ditches, one eventually gave good views as it perched on an earth bank. At least two more Bluethroat were seen nearby, as well as a male Dartford Warbler, Zitting Cisticolas, Southern Grey Shrike, Reed Buntings, Common Stonechats and Black Redstart. A Merlin flew past and several hundred Cattle Egrets were noted in the area. As we approached Madrigalejo large flocks of Spanish Sparrows were evident, as well as mixed flocks of the restless naturalised Red Avadavat and Common Waxbills.

We then took a coffee break at a bar at the end of the track and drove a short distance up the road to lunch by a gravel pit, next to more rice fields, just outside the village of Madrigalejo. Here two Common Greenshank were new for the trip, with three Green Sandpipers, several Marsh Harriers and a distant flock of over 1000 sparrows [not specifically identified] also recorded. We took a short drive over the tracks crossing the rice fields here, noting another Hen Harrier, some groups of Common Cranes and small birds such as Red Avadavat and Zitting Cisticolas.



A little further south we turned left off the main road towards the village of Vegas Altas and into another area of rice cultivation, where we had our biggest numbers of Common Cranes, numbering hundreds. This area also held a flock of 40 Dunlin, a Common Kingfisher and another Bluethroat. Following this we decided to revisit Sierra Brava on our return journey, in the hope that visibility had improved. As we arrived at the reservoir the fog lifted just long enough to allow us to identify Eurasian Wigeon, Common Teal, Mallard, Gadwall, Northern Pintail and Northern Shoveler in the roost, before closing in again. This time we admitted defeat and headed back to the hotel. By some unknown local climatic quirk the hotel and grounds were bathed in sunshine, while thick fog still lay relatively nearby. Consequently, we enjoyed a sunny stroll down the quiet lane from the hotel, where good numbers of Common Hoopoes and Azure-winged Magpies were seen, as well as a Hawfinch, Eurasian Serin, Long-tailed Tits, Sardinian Warblers, Blackcaps, European Robins, Blue Tits, Great Tits and Corn Buntings. All in all, it had been a successful day despite having to work around the fog and mist, and soon there was another wine tasting and fabulous dinner to savour.

Bird of the day: Common Crane.

Thursday 13th January

Sunny all day, warm in the afternoon – bliss!

There was a change of scenery today, as we headed for the Sierra de Las Villuercas, the mountain range to the east of Trujillo. At Zorita we took the EX102 to Logrosan and then to Guadalupe, with its impressive monastery - a UNESCO World Heritage Site. From here we went north on the EX118, before turning left up a small road by the Ermita del Humilladero. This road leads to the summit of Pico Villuercas, the highest point in the region at 1600 metres.

Just before the summit we spotted four Alpine Accentors, which showed well to most of the group before flying off down the slope. The views from the top were simply stunning, although there were few birds up there apart from the accentors, a Wren, three Crag Martins and some passing Griffon Vultures. After a coffee and cake break we took the very steep road down the other [western] side of the mountain, great for fans of hairpin bends! A little way down we stopped in an area of Pyrenean Oaks and scree/boulder slopes and found a Rock Bunting, two Common Nuthatch and three Firecrest. A flock of Griffons and two Common Ravens circled over the other side of a valley. A collective sigh of relief was breathed as we returned to civilisation and we took the road north through the isolated villages of Navazuelas, Roturas, heading for the hamlet Cabanas del Castillo.



It should be remarked upon that the whole of this area has a very authentic and ancient ambience, with many age-old Cork and Holm Oak dehesa, and Chestnut groves. The roads are very quiet and the scenery is beautiful.

Just before Cabanas we stopped by the roadside where Wood Lark, Eurasian Serin, Chaffinch and Long-tailed Tits were noted. Thereafter we parked at Cabanas for lunch, beneath the imposing rock on which the castle ruins are situated. Many small birds were flitting around the slopes including Blackcaps, Sardinian Warblers, Eurasian Serin and Black Redstart. At least six Blue Rock Thrushes were counted. After lunch we walked up through the village and up past the small cemetery around the back of the ridge. Some of us followed the path to the castle on the summit, where there are spectacular views eastwards across the valley to the Sierra de la Ortijuela. However, it was the lingerers in the group who took the correct decision, finding a flock of seven Alpine Accentors feeding around mossy areas on the lower rock face. Luckily the whole group were able to get good views of this attractive specialist bird. On the way back down two House Martins were found in a group of Crag Martins, an unusual sight in January for us Brits.



After this we stopped in the pretty village of Berzocana for refreshments and after a brief discussion decided that we would revisit Sierra Brava, as it had been fog bound previously and wasn't far off our route home. The journey back down to Logrosan took us through more attractive landscapes and we added Great Spotted Woodpecker and Cirl Bunting to the list on the way. Other birds seen in this vicinity included Eurasian Jay, Common Buzzard, Common Kestrel and White Wagtail.

We were soon at the reservoir, which certainly looked different in the sunshine. Two Little Egrets were in the first bay on the way in, but after parking at the dam and scanning it was evident that thousands of ducks were loafing on the reservoir, most numerous being Northern Shoveler, with perhaps 5000 present. None appeared to be feeding, so presumably the birds roost here by day and fly out into the surrounding fields at night to feed? Smaller numbers of Great Cormorants, Common Coots, Great Crested Grebes and Little Grebes were also present, and Common Cranes and Greylag Geese were evident in the hinterland. A first-winter Common Gull was found in the gathering Black-headed and Lesser Black-backed Gull roost; this is a rare vagrant in Extremadura. Once again it was hard to leave, but another wine tasting and our final night's meal awaited.

Bird of the day: Alpine Accentor [no, not Common Gull].

Friday 14th January

Sunny in the morning, but fog encountered later.

After packing and leaving the excellent Viña alas Torres and saying our goodbyes, we decided to use what little time we had left to bird the steppe at Belen, just north east of Trujillo. We failed to find any bustards here, but there was plenty to compensate including two Black-bellied Sandgrouse on the ground, a Little Owl on some rocks, Spanish Sparrows, numerous larks including Thekla, Marsh Harriers, Red Kites, Red-legged Partridge, three Common Cranes, White Storks, Northern Lapwing, European Golden Plover and plenty of Common Hoopoes. Perhaps most impressive were the groups of Black and Griffon Vultures in groups on the ground, with others flying in to join them. What a magnificent sight to behold and yet another great memory of Extremadura.



We then made our way north to Madrid, encountering some fog in an otherwise uneventful and trouble free journey back to the UK.

Bird of the day: Black Vulture.

Acknowledgement: Thanks to Jon Mercer for the use of some of his photos in this report.

Systematic List

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|----|--------------------------|-----|--------------------------|
| 1 | Great Crested Grebe | 56 | Eurasian Hoopoe |
| 2 | Little Grebe | 57 | Great Spotted Woodpecker |
| 3 | Great Cormorant | 58 | Skylark |
| 4 | Little Bittern | 59 | Crested Lark |
| 5 | Cattle Egret | 60 | Thekla Lark |
| 6 | Little Egret | 61 | Woodlark |
| 7 | Great White Egret | 62 | Calandra Lark |
| 8 | Grey Heron | 63 | Crag Martin |
| 9 | White Stork | 64 | Barn Swallow |
| 10 | Greylag Goose | 65 | House Martin |
| 11 | Mallard | 66 | Meadow Pipit |
| 12 | Gadwall | 67 | White Wagtail |
| 13 | Northern Pintail | 68 | Grey Wagtail |
| 14 | Northern Shoveler | 69 | Wren |
| 15 | Eurasian Wigeon | 70 | Alpine Accentor |
| 16 | Eurasian Teal | 71 | European Robin |
| 17 | Black-shouldered Kite | 72 | Bluethroat |
| 18 | Red Kite | 73 | Black Redstart |
| 19 | Griffon Vulture | 74 | Common Stonechat |
| 20 | Black Vulture | 75 | Song Thrush |
| 21 | Osprey | 76 | Common Blackbird |
| 22 | Golden Eagle | 77 | Blue Rock Thrush |
| 23 | Spanish Imperial Eagle | 78 | Blackcap |
| 24 | Bonelli's Eagle | 79 | Sardinian Warbler |
| 25 | Marsh Harrier | 80 | Dartford Warbler |
| 26 | Hen Harrier | 81 | Zitting Cisticola |
| 27 | Common Buzzard | 82 | Cetti's Warbler |
| 28 | Eurasian Sparrowhawk | 83 | Common Chiffchaff |
| 29 | Common Kestrel | 84 | Firecrest |
| 30 | Peregrine Falcon | 85 | Great Tit |
| 31 | Merlin | 86 | Blue Tit |
| 32 | Red-legged Partridge | 87 | Long-tailed Tit |
| 33 | Water Rail | 88 | Eurasian Nuthatch |
| 34 | Common Moorhen | 89 | Southern Grey Shrike |
| 35 | Eurasian Coot | 90 | Azure-winged Magpie |
| 36 | Purple Swamphen | 91 | Common Magpie |
| 37 | Common Crane | 92 | Eurasian Jay |
| 38 | Great Bustard | 93 | Western Jackdaw |
| 39 | Little Bustard | 94 | Red-billed Chough |
| 40 | European Golden Plover | 95 | Common Raven |
| 41 | Northern Lapwing | 96 | Spotless Starling |
| 42 | Dunlin | 97 | House Sparrow |
| 43 | Green Sandpiper | 98 | Spanish Sparrow |
| 44 | Common Greenshank | 99 | Common Chaffinch |
| 45 | Eurasian Curlew | 100 | Common Linnet |
| 46 | Common Snipe | 101 | European Goldfinch |
| 47 | Black-headed Gull | 102 | European Greenfinch |
| 48 | Common Gull | 103 | European Serin |
| 49 | Lesser Black-backed Gull | 104 | Hawfinch |
| 50 | Black-bellied Sandgrouse | 105 | Reed Bunting |
| 51 | Rock Dove | 106 | Rock Bunting |
| 52 | Stock Dove | 107 | Cirl Bunting |
| 53 | Wood Pigeon | 108 | Corn Bunting |
| 54 | Collared Dove | 109 | Red Avadavat |
| 55 | Little Owl | 110 | Common Waxbill |