

# ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT  
EXTREMADURA 7<sup>TH</sup> —  
11<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2013

### **Monday 7<sup>th</sup> January**

Our arrival in Madrid was delayed by about an hour due to fog, but we enjoyed a swift transit through and after sorting out the minibus we were on our way a little after noon. The journey away from Madrid passed without incident and we were soon on the motorway heading towards Trujillo. Many Red Kites and Common Buzzards were seen from the roadside, and common species such as Common and Spotless Starlings, Crested Lark, Common Kestrel, White Stork, White Wagtail, European Robin, Northern Lapwing and Red-legged Partridge were noted along the way too. As we had made good time, we built in a birding stop at Saucedilla, where a wetland area bordering the Arrocampo reservoir produced an excellent range of species. Just before reaching our planned stopping place, an impromptu stop produced good views of a Black-shouldered Kite perched on wires and we set up the scope for a better view. There were several European Hoopoes here too, along with a smart Southern Grey Shrike and our first Stonechats. At the wetland area just on the outskirts of Saucedilla, another Black-shouldered Kite gave superb views perched on a small tree and we went on to see 4+ Crested Lark, 2 Marsh Harrier, 10+ Common Chiffchaff, Spotless Starling, 4+ Stonechats, 2 Zitting Cisticola, Common Moorhen, Common Coot, Little Grebe, Cattle Egret, 2 Grey Heron, Purple Swamp-Hen, Spanish Sparrow, loads of Corn Buntings, two more Southern Grey Shrikes and a stunning male Black Redstart all in under an hour! From here we continued the final forty minutes of the journey to our hotel at Vin alas Torres where our hosts Juan Pedro and Belen welcomed us to their delightful accommodation. Fifty or so Azure-winged Magpies going to roost in the garden rounded off what had been a very good start to the tour, and we enjoyed a delicious home cooked meal to cap it off.



***Southern Grey Shrike***

### **Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> January**

Our best day of weather on the tour today saw a still, dry and sunny day after the early cloud had lifted and temperatures up to 15C. We headed out at first light after breakfast to the plains west of Trujillo along the 'Santa Marta Loop' road towards Monroy. Our first stop just off the main caceres road was productive, as a field of livestock and the associated food available had attracted huge numbers of House and Spanish Sparrows, Corn Buntings and Collared Doves to feed, and among this throng was a flock of at least 25 Rock Sparrows, a real bonus. Southern Grey Shrike and European Hoopoe were easily seen again [with the latter seemingly everywhere] and a flock of 200+ Skylark flew over us on its way to the nearby steppe. Ten or so Red Kites were noted in this area too. Taking a farm track out across the steppe, we found a flock of 25+ Black-bellied Sandgrouse feeding with a few more seen flying around, and the plains were dotted with Northern Lapwings and European Golden Plovers too. Six Great Bustards flew majestically along the ridge, settling for some distant scope views – we were pleased to get something on this iconic species so soon. Back at the road, fifty Azure-winged Magpies feeding under the Holm Oaks caused us to stop and we ended up seeing male Black Redstart, two Thekla Larks, 100+ European Goldfinch and Greenfinch, 100+ Meadow Pipits, two Sardinian Warblers and a Griffon Vulture. A little further on, a party of Griffon Vultures came up from right beside the road, giving the most incredible views – we thought one of them was going to brush the vehicle with its wings! Ten Common Ravens were also in attendance, so we deduced there must have been some sort of carcass there. After a welcome coffee stop in Santa Marta de Magasca, we continued on to the junction with the Monroy road, spotting a large raptor dropping down into a field as we approached. We stopped to check this out, flushing the raptor which flew a short distance before perching on a rock – a fine adult Spanish Imperial Eagle! This was a superb view of this endangered raptor, complete with 'snow' on its shoulders – the characteristic white markings associated with this

species. A flock of Calandra Larks would not settle for the group to get views, so after the eagle had flown off we moved on ourselves. The Rio Almonte crossing, just south of Monroy, was our planned lunch stop but as we dropped down towards the river, a huge raptor could be seen circling so we pulled up. Good views of first the upper and then underside of the bird were had before it gained height and circled off, and the group announced with confidence that it must be a White-tailed Eagle. Ashley assured them that it couldn't possibly be, as this species didn't occur in Spain, and that there were several other large raptor species that were infinitely more likely. However, with its rectangular wing shape, long neck and massive bill, solid dark underside with pale streaked breast, randomly mottled upperwing and prominent white centres to the tail feathers, Ashley had to concede that it was indeed a White-tailed Eagle! It turns out the bird was the first for Extremadura, and it had been photographed on 6<sup>th</sup> December about 100km to the east. A remarkable sighting! Over lunch, 50+ Griffon Vultures, two Black Vultures, Spanish Imperial Eagle, Grey Wagtail, European Sparrowhawk and Hawfinch were noted, rounding off a pretty spectacular morning! North of Monroy, we stopped on the Torrejon road by a well known site near a stand of Stone Pines, just for a brief scan. Short-toed Treecreeper showed well in the trees and we also noted European Serin and a small flock of Redwing, with another Black Vulture among a circling flock of Griffons. A little further on, we saw our first Common Cranes by the roadside with a flock of about fifty by a small pond. Finally we reached Monfrague national park and visited the Castillo perched atop the mountain ridge. By the parking area a Blue Rock Thrush showed well and flocks of Griffon Vultures were soaring above our heads and flying up onto the ledges with nesting material. The surrounding trees along the walk up to the top yielded two Black Redstart, Hawfinch, Common Chiffchaff, Long-tailed Tit, two Blackcaps and Eurasian Jay while apart from the spectacular views from the top, more eye level views of Griffon Vultures were supplemented by another couple of Black Vultures and a Spanish Imperial Eagle distantly over the Penafalcon crag. From here we made the hour long drive back to the hotel and enjoyed our first wine tasting session before another excellent meal.



**Black Redstart**

### **Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> January**

A cold, overcast and occasionally drizzly day though with some more top drawer birding as we headed south to the network of ricefields and reservoirs of North-eastern Badajoz province. Sierra Brava reservoir was our first stop, and we scanned the water where vast flocks of thousands of wildfowl were resting. Northern Shoveler was the predominant species with several thousand present, though careful scanning also revealed smaller numbers of Common Teal, Eurasian Wigeon, Gadwall, Mallard and Northern Pintail. Many Great Crested Grebes, two Greylag Geese, several White Storks, Common Sandpiper, Black Redstart, four Western Jackdaws, three Marsh Harriers and many Red Kites were also noted, all to the backdrop of flocks of bugling Common Cranes in the fields away to the south. We took a service road along the edge of a canal where at least seven Green Sandpipers were seen, and this dropped us down into a network of ricefields below the reservoir accessed by a series of good tracks. Flocks of Common Cranes could be seen dotted around this area, and the flooded pans held hundreds of Northern Lapwings and Common Snipe [including one flocks of sixty]. About 100 Cattle Egrets and a few Little Egrets were also present and we also saw lots of Common Buzzards, Black-headed Gulls, five more Green Sandpipers, three Wood Sandpipers, twelve Dunlin and some sizeable flocks of Spanish Sparrows, one of which included two Tree Sparrows. The undoubted highlight of the morning was a dazzling male White-spotted Bluethroat which we flushed from a reedy ditch. With patience we were able to get some very good views, culminating with the bird perching in the open on a wooden pallet. Leaving the ricefields and heading out along the road back towards Madrigalejo [now dominated by a massive solar power plant which has sprung up since our last visit here two years ago!]. Along this road, we had fabulous close views of flocks of Common Cranes, and by using the car as a hide we were able to get really close and watch them feeding, with other flocks taking to the air in

the background, their bugling calls resonating through the whole area. A massive roadside flock of finches and sparrows held a few Eurasian Siskin and European Serin, while after about ten minutes of watching this flock we realised that one of the white blobs in the field next to us was not a plastic bag but a Eurasian Spoonbill! In Madrigalejo, we drove one of the tracks into the ricefields here and as well as more crane flocks, we had good views of Common Waxbills and brief views of a flock of Red Avadavat, two species which have healthy populations in this area having originated from escapes. A flock of fifteen European Siskin feeding on the ground, 20+ Common Chiffchaffs, Cetti's Warbler, Sardinian Warbler and several Southern Grey Shrike were also noted in this area. Continuing south, we headed towards another area of ricefields around Vegas Altas, passing more roadside crane flocks and Marsh Harriers on the way. Cattle and Little Egrets fed in the flooded paddies with the cranes, vast numbers of sparrows and Corn Buntings were seen throughout the area and a ringtail Hen Harrier was also seen. Another Bluethroat was seen only by Ashley, though numerous European Hoopoes, White Storks and Green Sandpiper were more obliging. Finally from here we made our way back towards Zorita, taking a rather pot-holed track across a good area of steppe towards Campo Lugar. It was cold and a bit miserable up here, but flocks of Northern Lapwing and European Golden Plover were everywhere and we chanced on a superb flock of at least 100 Little Bustards. About fifty took off and flew around before re-settling, drawing our attention to a similar number still sat amongst the vegetation. Big flocks of Skylark were also seen here, and it was only the closing in of the weather that moved us on. From Campo Lugar we took a minor road towards Alcollarin, passing through an interesting area of olive groves where Azure-winged Magpies and vast numbers of sparrows and finches could be seen, along with several more European Hoopoes. Once the road opened out a bit, we chanced on a lovely flock of twenty five Great Bustards, only one field from the road. This meant we could comfortably scope the birds and get good view without disturbing them - a great way to end the afternoon.



***Common Cranes***

#### **Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> January**

Our most difficult day of weather as thick fog hampered us for much of the day, though it didn't stop us seeing some more very good birds. We had already decided to head down to Montanchez to try for Alpine Accentor, though our prospects on arrival did not look good – we couldn't even see the castle! However, we decided we might as well give it a go, and took the path up around the south side of the castle walls. Two passerines perched on the wall in front of us, just looking like dark blobs in the murk – Alpine Accentors! We couldn't believe our luck that the birds were actually feeding on the path right in front of us! Over the next half an hour, we enjoyed just brilliant views of up to five birds, as we could peer down over the wall and look down on them as they fed on the mossy rocks no more than fifteen feet below us. We saw nothing else here in the awful conditions, but we didn't need to! After a coffee we decided that we had been extremely fortunate here, and that we should cut our losses in this foggy area and head back north in the hope we could find some clearer weather. As we reached the hamlet of La Cumbre, the fog began to lift and we stopped as a huge flock of finches were in roadside trees. We were surprised to find in the region of five hundred birds, mainly European Serins, which were being attracted by some weedy fields. From here the Santa Marta road was no distance at all, and we decided to drive part of Tuesday route again in the hope of connecting with more steppe birds. A

couple of Rock Sparrows were still in the same spot, but we also found a Dartford Warbler here, with a Sardinian Warbler for company. Fifteen Great Bustards, fifty Black-bellied Sandgrouse, two Thekla Lark, Black Redstart, several European Hoopoes and Azure-winged Magpies were seen, along with an out of place Common Teal on a pond. We called again at our favourite coffee bar in Santa Marta, and had some decent views of Crag Martins in the village flying around over the Plaza Major. Heading north from the village, we called in at the Rio Magasca crossing, quickly locating a Hawfinch perched on a tree at the top of the valley. Green Sandpiper and Grey Wagtail were on the river but the highlight was a fine Rock Bunting, located by call and then seen well through the scope as it fed on the ground among the rocks. From here the weather again closed in on us periodically so we took the road east towards Trujillo which produced two good roadside birds – the first a superb Little Owl sat on a drystone wall, and the second a Black Vulture perched on a rock in a field with its enormous wings outstretched. We finished the day with a visit to Belen Plain, close to Trujillo. It was largely quiet out here, but we did eventually succeed in getting good views of our main target species – Calandra Lark. Several flocks were encountered, but all proved too skittish apart from the last group of about six birds which we located far enough from the road to be able to set up a scope on them without flushing them. Our final wine tasting session and a first class meal followed, rounding off our last night in Extremadura.



***European Hoopoe***

### **Friday 11<sup>th</sup> January**

Bidding farewell to Juan Pedro and Belen, we loaded the van and begun our three hour journey North towards Madrid which would be punctuated by two excellent birding stops. The first was at the Puerto de Miravete, where the old Madrid road snakes over the mountain at around 700 metres up. Crested Tits were easily located no more than ten metres from the van, and we enjoyed superb views of three individuals at least. A Woodlark flew over, as did a Great-spotted Woodpecker, and we had further good views of Short-toed Treecreeper and Blue Rock Thrush. Three Goldcrest and two Firecrest in a small feeding party were a nice bonus indeed, especially since we had such brilliant views of the latter. Dropping down towards Arrocampo-Almaraz reservoir, two Black-shouldered Kites floated across the road and we pulled in at the adjacent causeway to check for waterbirds. Cetti's Warblers were singing all over the place and we saw five or more Purple Swamp-Hens with ease. Common Kingfisher, Great Crested and Little Grebe, a flock of Crag Martins, three Marsh Harriers and two Great White Egrets were also seen in this area, before we called in again at the small wetland on the edge of Saucedilla village. A Black-shouldered Kite perched on a pylon gave our best views of the lot, and we also did well with good views of Zitting Cisticola, Common Waxbills, another Purple Swamp-Hen and many Common Chiffchaffs. From here we completed the journey north to Madrid, arriving in time to drop off the hire bus and check in for our 1620 flight back to Luton which arrived on time.

### **Systematic List**

#### **Birds**

1. Great Crested Grebe
2. Little Grebe
3. Great Cormorant
4. Grey Heron
5. Little Egret
6. Cattle Egret

7. Great White Egret
8. Eurasian Spoonbill
9. White Stork
10. Greylag Goose
11. Canada Goose
12. Mallard
13. Common Teal
14. Eurasian Wigeon
15. Gadwall
16. Northern Shoveler
17. Northern Pintail
18. Red-legged Partridge
19. Black-shouldered Kite
20. Red Kite
21. Griffon Vulture
22. Black Vulture
23. Spanish Imperial Eagle
24. White-tailed Eagle
25. Common Kestrel
26. Marsh Harrier
27. Hen Harrier
28. Common Buzzard
29. Eurasian Sparrowhawk
30. Common Moorhen
31. Common Coot
32. Purple Swamp-Hen
33. Common Crane
34. Great Bustard
35. Little Bustard
36. European Golden Plover
37. Northern Lapwing
38. Green Sandpiper
39. Common Sandpiper
40. Wood Sandpiper
41. Common Snipe
42. Dunlin
43. Black-headed Gull
44. Lesser Black-backed Gull
45. Yellow-legged Gull
46. Black-bellied Sandgrouse
47. Woodpigeon
48. Collared Dove
49. Little Owl
50. Common Kingfisher
51. Great-spotted Woodpecker
52. European Hoopoe
53. Skylark
54. Crested Lark
55. Thekla Lark
56. Calandra Lark
57. Crag Martin
58. Meadow Pipit
59. White/Pied Wagtail
60. Grey Wagtail
61. Winter Wren
62. European Robin
63. Alpine Accentor
64. White-spotted Bluethroat
65. Black Redstart
66. Stonechat
67. Common Blackbird

68. Redwing
69. Song Thrush
70. Mistle Thrush
71. Blue Rock Thrush
72. Zitting Cisticola
73. Cetti's Warbler
74. Dartford Warbler
75. Sardinian Warbler
76. Blackcap
77. Common Chiffchaff
78. Firecrest
79. Goldcrest
80. Blue Tit
81. Great Tit
82. Long-tailed Tit
83. Crested Tit
84. Short-toed Treecreeper
85. Common Raven
86. Eurasian Jay
87. Western Jackdaw
88. Black-billed Magpie
89. Azure-winged Magpie
90. Southern Grey Shrike
91. Common Starling
92. Spotless Starling
93. House Sparrow
94. Spanish Sparrow
95. Tree Sparrow
96. Rock Sparrow
97. Chaffinch
98. Greenfinch
99. Goldfinch
100. Linnnet
101. European Serin
102. Eurasian Siskin
103. Hawfinch
104. Reed Bunting
105. Rock Bunting
106. Corn Bunting
107. Common Waxbill
108. Red Avadavat