



TOUR REPORT
EXTREMADURA
24TH – 30TH MARCH 2023

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Friday March 24th: John met the group as soon as they had arrived in Madrid late morning. Once clear of the busy capital the motorway to Extremadura was clear of traffic. A sunny lunch stop en route provided a refreshment boost as well as a first taste of Spanish birds. These included the ubiquitous Corn Buntings and the readily familiar Crested Lark.

As we were in good time we took advantage and made a mid-afternoon stop off at the well-known wetlands that surround the Embalse de Arrocampo. The reedbeds held an exciting array of Mediterranean birds which included Purple Heron, Spoonbill and Western Swamphen. A Gull-billed Tern flew past as we listened for the reeling Savi's Warblers, although we could hear them the birds stayed low in the reeds and evaded us. However as we waited a pair of Ferruginous Ducks flew past, which was a nice surprise. All around the skies were filling with soaring Griffon Vultures and Black Kites an inkling of what was to come. Sharp eyes focused on the ground revealed the presence of a migrant Subalpine Warbler, feeding on the ground in the company of a pair of Stonechats. Continuing our journey we soon arrived at our guesthouse near Trujillo where our hosts Martin and Claudia Kelsey were waiting to greet us. The gardens here held our first Iberian Magpies whilst Spotless Starling and Black Redstart sang from the rooftop, a fine welcome indeed.



White Stork – a familiar sight throughout Extremadura

Saturday March 25th: After breakfast we took a leisurely walk in the sunshine on the outskirts of the village of Pago San Clemente. A pair of White Storks had reoccupied their nest on the church roof whilst a newly arrived pair of Red-rumped Swallows flew around. The verdant Olive Groves held numerous Hoopoes, Short toed Treecreepers and a Wood Lark sang its heart out overhead. A pair of preoccupied Sardinian Warblers scampered around on the sandy track ahead of us. Across the adjacent meadows we picked out Woodchat Shrike and Iberian Grey Shrikes as they hunted from raised perches. Serins were particularly abundant with many in song and engaging us with their butterfly display flights. Other now familiar birds included Zitting Cisticolas, Spotless Starlings, Black Redstart and of course the chunky Corn Buntings which were in every field.

After a lunch in the shade of our guesthouse garden we set out to explore further afield and a quiet backroad took us out onto the legendary Belen Plain. Home to generations of bustards and sandgrouse would we be able to find them in warmth of the afternoon? As the temperatures subsided Calandra Larks took to the wing on their "slow-mo" display flights high above the plain. A

Great spotted Cuckoo was heard and soon located along a nearby fence, here no doubt to cause havoc amongst the resident Magpies whose nests host the Cuckoos eggs.

A ghostly grey male Hen Harrier then drifted across the fields to the east and this led us to discover a group of Great Bustards in the flight track of the harrier! No less than a dozen of these magnificent birds were holding a lek on an area of rocky ground. Our day ended with prolonged views of the unusual display of this endangered species. Overhead more Black Kites circled whilst in the distance the streams of Griffon Vultures were returning to their roosting sites.



Little Bustards

Sunday March 26th: It was our only cloudy start as we headed “over the hill” to our main destination for the day. Being a Sunday there were already a few fishermen on the dam at Allcollarin Reservoir and a group of lycra clad cyclists cruised by. Despite the cloud cover many birds were in full song and we picked out a distant Cuckoo amongst the backdrop of Thekla Larks and Woodchat Shrikes.

A scan of the shallows on the margins of the reservoir revealed a diversity of waterfowl. Several Shoveler, a small flock of Wigeon and numerous Gadwall whilst Great crested Grebes dotted the water. A lingering Common Crane was wandering through the waterside meadows and shortly after a group of five Glossy Ibis dropped in. A mix of shorebirds included Little Ringed Plovers, Black-winged Stilts, Redshank, two Ruff and a Spotted Redshank, still in winter dress.

A handful of Collared Pratincoles appeared and slowly their numbers built up and by early afternoon around fifty pratincoles were actively hawking for insects over the water. We enjoyed our picnic lunch in the shade of leafy oak trees and made the most of the impromptu pratincole spectacular. By mid-afternoon we were heading out onto the nearby steppes and soon found a small group of Little Bustards, six birds in a roadside meadow, including two splendid adult males. By late afternoon we had also totted up another fifteen Great Bustards including our first flight views of these enormous birds. The hillside was covered in Lesser Kestrels and we soon saw the reason why as we observed the lines of nest boxes provided to give them safe homes in which to nest. Our only Montagu’s Harrier of the trip, an early female, was watched quartering some cereal fields. Close by

we located a Short toed Lark which gave good views on the ground. Of course Calandra Larks and Corn Bunting were seemingly everywhere and were in full display mode as the sun went down.



Monday March 27th: A full day out to visit the famous Monfrague National Park. We arrived following a slow drive through the ancient Cork Oak woodlands on the margins of the reserve. At the magnificent Portillar de Tietar we joined a mixed group of Belgians, Dutch and German birders to witness the unfolding spectacle. We already had word from Martin about the nesting Eagle Owls and the female was observed as she fussed around the nest ledge. It appeared from her behaviour that her eggs may have recently hatched? The constant to and froing of Griffon Vultures would normally be spectacular enough but they were somewhat outgunned by the superb views of Cinereous Vultures. Then a pair of diminutive Egyptian Vultures flew in landed and did their business too! The star of this show however was an adult Spanish Imperial Eagle which arrived almost unannounced but then put on an amazing show over the rocky crags. Oh and there were small birds to vying for our attention. A cobalt blue male Blue Rock Thrush was picked up whilst Rock Buntings sang close by and our first Nightingale sang from the lakeside scrub. Before we left a superb Black Stork also put in an expected if late appearance in flight opposite the viewpoint.

The morning had simply flown by so we headed to our picnic spot at the Mirador la Bascula. This is a good spot for Hawfinch and soon we were tucking into views of a vocal male. The same trees also held a pair of Siskins. Across the valley from our picnic tables a Black Kite had built a nest and there were several occupied Griffon Vulture nests on the rocky outcrops. Finally an adult Bonellis Eagle drifted past giving excellent views as it passed over.

An ice cream stop was called for at the park visitor centre as the midday heat topped 23 degrees C which is unusual for early spring even in Spain. In fact the weather was going to get warmer still as temperatures reached 28 degrees C later in the week!

Late afternoon was spent at the western entrance to Monfrague and we took the slow winding walk up to the Castillo to enjoy the tremendous views over the mountain ridges. The woodlands here held Nuthatches and Western Subalpine Warblers but things were generally quiet due to the warm weather. So we made do and simply enjoyed the Griffon Vultures drifting by on the thermals, we counted over 400 birds during the course of the day. Then a straight drive back along the remarkable empty road to Trujillo just in time for our welcome dinner.



Griffon Vulture – great views at Monfrague!

Tuesday March 28th: After an early visit to the Plaza in Trujillo the group now had a taste of the history of the area epitomised by the statue of “Francisco Pizarro” conqueror of the Incas. Well actually the statue is apparently a statue of another infamous local man Hernan Cortez, conqueror of the Aztecs. Made by an American sculptor Charles Rumsey the story goes that Mexico declined the statue so the artist presented it to Trujillo instead! The steppes were calling however and all too soon we were back on the backroads heading towards the village of Monroy

A stop at an old hacienda proved to be very productive, multiple nests of White Storks graced the buildings whilst Lesser Kestrels cruised around an old viaduct. A colony of Grey Herons had made their homes in an adjacent plantation of mature pines. A distant singing Wryneck was heard and although it came closer we failed to pick out the bird on its hidden perch.

A well-timed stop further along the road was rewarded as after a short wait a party of Pin tailed Sandgrouse dropped in. Six birds turned out to be three pairs as scope views revealed the beautiful plumage patterns of these elusive birds. All the while flocks of Bee-eaters were passing high overhead although hard to detect against the deep blue skies. Our very own raptor festival followed as we continued along the road to Monroy. Two pairs of Short toed Eagles, Black Kites, Booted Eagle and best of all prolonged views of a juvenile and then sub adult Spanish Eagles. A close encounter was had with a Viperine Snake as it enjoyed the heat rising off the quiet road, we advised it that it was safer elsewhere and shooed it off the tarmac!!

The afternoon was spent out on the plains south of Santa Marta de Magasca an area well known for its steppe bird community. Here lines of nestboxes decorated the roadside pylons. Early in the season we found that some were occupied by a few pairs of Jackdaws, but then we located a Little Owl and best of all a lovely Roller, presumably one of the first returning birds of the season. Unfortunately, on this day there was no sign of any bustards in the heat of the afternoon. However, we did enjoy the shade offered by the observation hide.



Roller on the Santa Marta loop

A few Northern Wheatears started appearing and then suddenly there was a female Black eared Wheatear which popped up amongst them and gave nice views. White Storks were by now back in good numbers and their nests adorned the roadside pylons as we drove the new motorway between Cáceres and Trujillo.

After dinner we took a stroll around the village and located three singing Scops Owls, but their activity tailed off as the temperature dropped rapidly. Overhead the wonderfully clear night sky held amazing array of stars, planets and the nebula on Orions belt.

Wednesday March 29th: As the day warmed up our destination was again the backroads of the Steppe de Belén. At the Great Bustard lek 16 males were strutting their stuff across the bare terrain, it was hard to keep track of who was who as they kicked back and fluffed their boas. Then all too soon the train of birds disappeared from view behind the hillside.

As we headed through an area with a healthy population of Iberian Magpies we were treated to excellent views of a Great spotted Cuckoo. Landing trackside, it was joined on the fence in one memorable moment by a Woodchat Shrike! Wonderful. The cuckoo then dropped to ground and proceeded to forage on caterpillars amongst the thistles. After a refreshment break at the services we headed off up the motorway to Saucedilla. A short while later we found ourselves on a hillside

covered in shady olive groves. Here beneath the trees, we witnessed an amazing show of wild orchids in flower. Literally hundreds of Naked Man Orchids alongside many Champagne Orchids the odd Saw fly Orchid, Woodcock Orchid, Mirror Bee Orchid and Conical Orchid.



Naked Man Orchids

After admiring the abundant orchids we crossed back over the motorway for a return visit to the reedbeds at Embalse de Arrocampo. Amongst the reeds we again enjoyed good views of Western Swamphens, Purple Heron and a Gull-billed Tern. New birds included a Common Snipe whilst a splendid male Bearded Reedling popped briefly out of the reeds. A few Vagrant Emperor Dragonflies hawked over the reed cuts in front of the hide.

It was hot day with temperatures reaching 27 degrees C. Once again, we chose to follow the old road back making a few stops as we crossed the plateau below Jaraicejo. At the first we discovered a male Western Orphean Warbler in the riverside trees. There were several Western Subalpine Warblers on show to whilst a further stop revealed the presence of several Dartford Warblers and a couple of them showed well for our group.

Thursday March 30th: We tried something different on our final morning at Pago San Clemente. Heading off in the dark we arrived on the plains at Campo Lugar ready for the sunrise. Well, that was the plan and we did manage to witness the event but only after taking an unscheduled diversion! Several Quails sang from the cereal fields along a dirt track to nowhere as flights of Cattle Egrets dispersed from their roosts. As hoped the chorus of Calandra Larks were joined by a Short-toed Lark dancing away in a jerky fashion whilst delivering its stuttering song. As we had become accustomed

flocks of Azure winged Magpies crossed the lanes ahead as we wound our way along the country lanes returning for a late breakfast and a last walk around the villa and surrounding country lanes. With time on our hands, we decided on a relaxed return to the airport in Madrid. Pulling off on the old roads we found ourselves amongst the ruins of old lakeside hotels. Today the deserted properties provide excellent viewing platforms. An Osprey drifted over the hillside and an Egyptian Vulture dropped in for a bath and a drink. A colony of Alpine Swifts were nesting on the motorway bridge occasionally coming closer for better views whilst Crag Martin scuttled by below. Further on we sought a shady picnic spot and here we observed more Bee-eaters on the move with many dropping field over the cattle pastures. We had hoped to pick out a Black shouldered Kite which occur in this region. However, on this occasion we had to be content with a pleasant drive and stunning views of rural Spain all within an hour of the busy capital.



Dartford Warbler