

Report of Tour

Spring birding in Extremadura

(11th April – 21st April 2005)

An early flight from England meant that David, Sally and Vicky could be met at the airport in Madrid with the prospect of a good day's birding ahead. After a quick coffee, we headed from the city and onto the Madrid-Lisbon motorway, destination Extremadura. White Stork, Black Kite and Spotless Starling were quickly seen as we drove along, but our first proper birding took place at the reed-fringed reservoir of Arroyocampo. An obliging Savi's Warbler reeled close to the road, whilst at the same spot we got good views of Purple Swamphen, its toy trumpet-like call giving away its presence. A Squacco Heron was quickly found at the edge of the reeds, whilst "ping" calls betrayed the presence of a fine male Bearded Tit, an unusual find for the locality. Taking our lunch on a good vantage point on the shore of the reservoir, we could watch Bee-eaters foraging over an area of pasture, the first eagle of the trip, a dark-phase Booted, cruised overhead, whilst a pair of Marsh Harriers performed aerobatics nearby. As well as frequent sightings of Purple Heron, a Spoonbill circled over. A few Griffon Vultures passed by, followed by a fine Black Vulture. The nests of White Storks in the electricity pylons also provided structures for Spanish Sparrows to build their nests. We headed off from Arroyocampo, reaching our destination Casa Rural El Recuerdo, in the little village of Pago de San Clemente in time for tea. Hoopoes called in the garden. An evening walk along the lanes of the village produced the first Azure-winged Magpies, as well as Hawfinch and Serin.

The Bustard Plains

On the second day, we headed for the extensive plains north-east of the village of Belén. We stopped at our first sighting of Great Bustards, a small group of males in pasture alongside the road. The same field had a male Little Bustard, two Stone Curlew and a Little Owl, all almost in the same field of view! As we moved on we came across further groups of Great Bustards, this time with mature males in full display. We took our time to watch this spectacle at leisure, diverted only by passing Montagu's Harriers and the aerial song of Calandra Larks. A small group of female Little Bustards were feeding close to the Great Bustards, appearing tiny in comparison. As we moved across the plains, we passed a breeding colony of White Stork and Cattle Egret in a group of dead trees. Perched amongst them was the Bald Ibis, which has frequented the area since the beginning of the year. Its origin is unknown, so an intriguing bird indeed. At the same spot we saw the first Spanish Festoon butterfly of the trip. Continuing our drive, we found two very smart male Whinchats on the fence beside the road. These are uncommon passage birds in the area. A Tawny Pipit was seen just minutes later feeding on bare ground near a pool. Leaving the plains behind, we headed towards the hills to the east, stopping at a crossing of the Rio Almonte. Taking a short walk along the river, we saw Black Stork, as well as Kingfisher and Grey Wagtail. At another crossing, higher in the

mountains, we stopped for lunch, whilst an obliging Woodchat Shrike posed for photographs on a bare tree nearby.

The next stop was the scenic village of Cabañas del Castillo, at the base of twin crags, from which a breathtaking view of the oak savannah *dehesa* and plains is offered to the west, with the rocky ridges of the Villuercus to the east. At the old church we had excellent views of Black Wheatear, and climbing up to the castle we saw a Peregrine, Alpine Swifts, Rock Bunting, Black Wheatear and Blue Rock Thrush, the latter often in its downward gliding song flight. Scarce Swallowtail and Swallowtail butterflies were at the top of the castle.

We completed the day with a walk on the heaths above Madroñera, where Dartford Warblers were in full song, returning to El Recuerdo in the evening, with Scop's Owls calling.

Heaths and ricefields

On day three, we went first to the heath near Jaraicejo, where we quickly found a singing Spectacled Warbler, performing its delicate song flight. The site also gave a great opportunity to study the identification features of Thekla Larks. Crossing the heath, to a cork oak grove we heard a brief snatch of Western Orphean Warbler song and saw the bird flying from an isolated tree. The grove itself was very productive with good views of Short-toed Treecreeper as well as hearing a Golden Oriole. Onward to the small reservoir of in the valley of the Vid, we found Subalpine Warbler, passage Willow Warblers and Woodlarks. We stopped for a short walk on the pass, Puerto de Miravetes, before returning to the historic town of Trujillo for lunch in the square, accompanied with wonderful views of Pallid and Common Swifts as well as Lesser Kestrels. After lunch we headed south, stopping at the large Sierra Brava reservoir where we found Black-necked Grebes and some distant Gull-billed Terns. Onward to the rice fields north of Madrigalejo. The area was very dry, so there were no passage waders to be found, but we had excellent views of a Roller, as well as flocks of Red Avadavat (a common prey of the Southern Grey Shrike) and four Great Bustard.

Monfragüe raptors

The following day, David, Sally and Vicky heard a Quail on their early morning walk near El Recuerdo, and then, joined by Magda and Adam from Poland, we dedicated the rest of the day to the Monfragüe Natural Park. After crossing an almost endless vista of *dehesa*, we passed through the small town of Torrejón el Rubio, before a winding road took us up to the impressive entrance to the park: the great crags at Peña Falcon. There we stopped to watch the Griffon Vultures coming and going to their breeding ledges and had magnificent views of Black Storks carrying out their noisy greeting ceremony. A distant Bonelli's Eagle was found perched high on the cliffs, above which wheeled Alpine Swifts. Amongst them was a Peregrine, which then came to settle under an overhang on the cliff face, whilst Red-billed Choughs flew calling over the crags behind us. We then took a walk near the visitors' centre at Villareal, leading to a shady stream with trees seemingly full of Nightingale song. Subalpine Warblers were

common along the trackside vegetation, a Bonelli's Eagle flew overhead, whilst we found several Spanish Festoon butterflies. After lunch in the restaurant at Villareal, we headed to the Portilla de Tiétar, stopping en route at the cliffs at Trajadilla, where we had a distant Golden Eagle. At the Portilla de Tiétar, a splendid couple of hours was spent watching the pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles and a roosting Eagle Owl. A great day for raptors, with all five eagles seen.

Out on the steppes

The following day, we left early to head to an area east of Monroy, walking down a small track to a vantage point overlooking a lightly wooded and cultivated valley. Here we saw a Black-winged Kite, perched on a bare tree and then flying to settle in a densely foliated tree, effectively disappearing from view. South of Monroy we stopped to walk along a stretch of the Rio Almonte. Across the narrow valley, a male Black Wheatear glided with wings and tail spread out to rocks on the hillside. We then spent most of the day driving slowly through the plains east of Cáceres and then towards Santiago del Campo, with a lunch stop at a further crossing of the Rio Almonte with Alpine Swifts nesting under the large road bridge. During the drive we saw both bustards, many Montagu's Harriers, larks (including Short-toed) and had a prolonged view of a juvenile Golden Eagle drifting above us. We paid a short visit to the Guadiloba reservoir, where we found Gadwall. We ended the day on the wonderful Belén Plains, enjoying once again the spectacle of the Great Bustard leks.

Woodlands, plains and Great Spotted Cuckoos

We headed out early again the following day to the Zorita steppes to the south, where we had views of two groups of Black-bellied Sandgrouse, as well as Great Bustards. Dropping down into the rice fields, we watched Gull-billed Terns following the plough, whilst a Whiskered Tern flew by. We then travelled east to Cañamero, taking a road towards Berzocana, where we stopped for a walk along a forest trail through mixed pine and deciduous woodland up in the Villuercus mountains. Spring was much less advanced at this altitude, but we had several good views of Crested Tit, as well as Green and Greater Spotted Woodpecker. A highlight was a Large Tortoiseshell butterfly. After a late afternoon tea at El Recuerdo, we headed out for an evening drive to the plains east of Santa Marta de Magasca. Here we were rewarded with excellent views of at least five Great Spotted Cuckoos feeding on large hairy caterpillars which they found with consummate ease as they walked across the pasture. A Common Cuckoo was also seen taking one of these same caterpillars. Great Bustards, Little Bustards, Stone Curlew and Montagu's Harrier were further bonuses to a really memorable evening birding. That night, from the house, the begging calls of Long-eared Owls could be heard.

Black-winged Kites

Day Seven was designed to be wholly flexible to focus on areas that David, Sally and Vicky particularly wanted to visit again. The programme for the day resulted in a very productive package. Starting out early, we drove from Trujillo

to Monroy and were rewarded with excellent views of a Black-winged Kite, hovering over rough vegetation beside the road in open terrain. We watched it at close range and for a considerable time, before we decided to make a short detour towards Santa Marta de Magasca for Rock Sparrow. Returning to the same area a quarter of an hour later, the Black-winged Kite was still there. Just a few kilometres further on, between the Rio Almonte and Monroy, we found another Black-winged Kite, also hunting over rough ground. We then returned to Monfragüe and spent three hours walking the "Green Route", taking us to the top of the hill (Cerro Gimio) affording us magnificent views across to the Peña Falcon. Close-up views of Griffon and Black Vultures, as well as passing Black Stork. After a picnic lunch, we drove to the heath at Jaraicejo, as well as the Dartford and Spectacled Warblers, a Western Orphean Warbler sang strongly from the tree tops at the edge of a grove of cork oak and after a bit patience, we had excellent views of the bird in song. As we were leaving, a juvenile Golden Eagle drifted overhead. Following reports of two Long-legged Buzzards on the Belén Plains, we returned there, but it was late evening and heavily overcast by the time we arrived and despite a careful scan in the dusk, the birds were not found.

Birds and Roman architecture

The following day, as an extra to the tour, we drove down to Mérida to combine a visit to the fine Roman amphitheatre with some birding. At the Alange Castle we had two views of Bonelli's Eagle, and retracing our steps towards Mérida to the north, we stopped on the banks of the Guadiana River, to find Black-crowned Night Heron and a singing Melodious Warbler. At Mérida itself, a walk across the Roman Bridge yielded excellent views of Little Bittern.

Farewell to favourite sites

The next day, David, Sally and Vicky had to fly back to England, but since the flight was in the evening, we had the best part of the day to fit in some birding. We paid a final visit to the Jaraicejo heaths, to watch the courtship flight of a pair of Short-toed Eagles and were delighted to find that more Spectacled Warblers had arrived, with at least three singing males present. From there we drove across to Aldeacentenera, stopping at the crossing of the Rio Almonte for a walk, before heading up again to Cabañas del Castillo. We found a female Black Wheatear, Rock and Cirl Buntings and had a wonderful view of a Black Stork soaring high above us against a blue sky. After lunch, we then drove back to the motorway, to stop at Arroyocampo, heralded immediately by a singing Savi's Warbler. In a closely grazed meadow, we found a party of eight Whimbrel, an uncommon passage migrant in Extremadura. After a short detour to Valdecañas, we then headed back to Madrid airport, arriving with plenty of time for the check-in.

Overall 144 species were recorded, including 18 species of raptor, all within a radius of 100 km, although most sites were much closer to El Recuerdo than that. A total of 28 butterfly species were recorded (including almost daily encounters with Spanish Festoon), which was a pleasing total given the mixed weather conditions. Although we had very little rain, it had been quite windy for

three days during the middle of tour, which was not ideal for butterflies, of course. The tour lasted eight days, with an extra day for Mérida. David, Sally and Vicky also spent two additional days at local walks at their leisure and visiting Trujillo.

Martin Kelsey