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WINTER TOUR FOR PHILIP AND MAVIS HENDREY

By Martin Kelsey

ITINERARY

Day 1: Friday 16th February

Pick-up Madrid: 10.30

Lunch at Arrocampo

Arrive at Casa Rural El Recuerdo by 17.00

Day 2: Saturday 17th February

Zorita Plains

Ricefields near Madrigalejo (Palazuelo, Casas del Hito and Vegas Altas)

Day 3: Sunday 18th February

Plains west of Trujillo and Santa Marta de Magasca

Day 4: Monday 19th February

Plains west of Trujillo, Monfragüe National Park and Jaraicejo

Day 5: Tuesday 20th February

Cabañas del Castillo and the Villuercas Mountains. Return to Madrid for evening flight.

TRIP REPORT

Day 1

Martin met Philip and Mavis in downtown Madrid, just off the Paseo de Prado at 10.30. It was a mild, sunny morning and we headed out of Madrid in good time and soon were on the relatively empty A5 motorway heading south-west to Extremadura. We stopped at the reed and great reed mace-fringed reservoir of Arrocampo for a lunch stop and a chance to bird in one of the best wetland habitats in Extremadura. **Cetti's Warblers** were singing in the brambles beside the road and we quite quickly found a male **Penduline Tit**, feeding on the seed-heads of Great Reed Mace. It then flew into a bare willow tree and gave us superb views as it moved slowly through the tree. Small skeins of **Grey Lag Geese** flew over head, as did a party of **Sand Martins**. The waterside vegetation seemed alive with **Chiffchaffs**. Whilst trying to get views of Cetti's Warblers, we had good views of a **Squacco Heron** in flight, as well as a pair of

Black Vulture and several **Marsh Harriers** and **Purple Swamphen**. After lunch we walked around the edge of the wetland on the western side, reaching one of the newly built hides. A **Great White Egret** foraged on the far shore. A nearby Cetti's Warbler called and eventually showed itself in the fringing vegetation. Bushes held flocks of **Spanish Sparrows**.

The wind picked up and the weather front which had been threatening to the south-west got closer, with a spectacular black sky, flashes of lightening and soon very strong winds. We attempted to visit the remaining viewing areas, but little ventured out from the shelter of the reeds and as it started to rain we decided to call it a day and head for our final destination, Casa Rural El Recuerdo, in time for tea in front of the log fire.

Day 2

Although there was a fine drizzle as we left Casa Rural El Recuerdo after breakfast, that quickly cleared and we had a day of changeable weather: sometimes sunny, sometimes cloudy, but staying dry with a moderate wind. We headed south, through the small town of Zorita, across the Zorita steppes to the rice growing area around Madrigalejo. First of all we took the road towards Palazuelo, an area where most of the rice fields were ploughed in the autumn and with the winter rains, provide a good habitat for waders. We walked along the banks of the River Ruercas, hearing an amazing density of Cetti's Warblers, which afforded us merely tantalizing glimpses. Flocks of **Red Avadavats** were also present and a pair of **Kingfishers**. On the rice fields were small parties of **Common Crane**, **White Stork** and we had an opportunity to compare **Water** and **Meadow Pipits**. **Lapwing** were numerous throughout. In one small area we found a wonderful selection of waders: over 80 **Avocet**, two **Kentish Plovers**, about 1500 **Dunlin**, several hundred **Black-tailed Godwit** and **Golden Plover**. A walk beside a strip of rice stubble yielded over 30 **Common Snipe**. As we left Palazuelo, we stopped to admire an orchard of peach blossom and our attention was drawn to a **Hoopoe** in a fig tree, we then noticed a Red Avadavat in the same tree, when all of a sudden a **Wryneck** came into view!

We then drove onto the Zorita Steppes, from the village of Campo Lugar. Flocks of **Skylarks** and **Meadow Pipits** were present, as well as **Calandra Lark** and **Corn Bunting**. Some aerial activity caught our attention: a **Merlin** was in pursuit of a Skylark. The Skylark evaded the falcon and then swerved round to mob it, with the Merlin then drifting across above us. Stopping for lunch, a scan revealed a group of 15 **Great Bustard**. Further along the road we were able to get excellent views of them as they foraged.

We then stopped near the old railway station of Madrigalejo and saw 6 **Stone Curlew** fly into an old stubble field. We continued to make a brief visit to the rice fields and arable fields of Vegas Altas, there were few cranes, but the visit was well rewarded by a wonderful flock of over 300 **Pintail** feeding in roadside pools and several small groups, totalling about 20, of **Black-bellied Sandgrouse**.

Our final port of call were the rice fields of Casas del Hito. Again small groups of Common Crane were present and we had a lovely view of a pair of **Black-winged Kite** and a fine male **Hen Harrier**. However it was the smaller birds were took pride of place: excellent views, at last, of Cetti's Warbler, huge flocks of Spanish Sparrows, a colourful party of **Common Waxbill** and Chiffchaffs everywhere, darting for insects in the afternoon sunshine.

Day 3

A **Hawfinch** in song heralded us as breakfast was served at Casa Rural El Recuerdo. It was a fine day and we headed north-west from Trujillo on the small country road towards Monroy. Within a kilometre we were enjoying superb views of two **Great Spotted Cuckoos**. Out on open plains, we found a small group of **Little Bustard**, typically in pasture that is not too closely grazed, so that cover is provided by old dry stems from last summer. Stopping beside the Rio Tamuja, south of Santa Marta de Magasca, we watched **Crag Martins** hawking insects around the bridge, whilst Chiffchaffs sallied from the riverside bushes. A stop on the plains east of the village yielded a fine view of a **Woodlark** singing at the edge of the dehesa. Returning to the plains on the Monroy road, we searched for **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse**, but with a strengthening wind and Philip feeling unwell, we returned to Casa Rural El Recuerdo having just heard, tantalizingly, a couple of distant calls.

Day 4

With Philip feeling better, we set out to do a quick return visit to the Monroy road, but with the Pin-tailed Sandgrouse still eluding us (we did however see a Merlin), we headed to Monfragüe Natural Park (to be designated in just a few days afterwards as a National Park). We stopped at the imposing entrance of Pena Falcon, where the River Tajo cuts through an impressive gorge with colonies of **Griffon Vultures** on both sides. We then drove straight through to the other side of the park, where the River Tiétar comes in from the north, at a place called the gateway (Portilla). Here we had prolonged views of a perched **Spanish Imperial Eagle** preening and an incubating **Eagle Owl**, almost hidden in her nest tucked behind a rock on the cliff facing us. We had an excellent view of a fox walking along the water's edge. Lunch was taken in the shade of pines near the dam, where we had excellent views of **Crested Tit**. A stop near the Puente de Cardenal produced a spectacular view of a soaring and then stooping **Bonelli's Eagle**. Leaving Monfragüe, we went to the heathlands near Jaraicejo where we had good views of a male **Dartford Warbler** as well as **Thekla Larks**.

Day 5

The day dawned wet and in the rain we made a final visit to the plains west of Trujillo near Santa Marta de Magasca. The visibility was poor, but we managed to see seven Great Bustards in flight. We then headed east, via Deleitosa, to the Villuercas mountains. As we drove through the village of Retamosa we found a party of **Rock Sparrows** on roadside wires. Stopping in the rain in cork oak woodlands south of Cabañas del Castillo, we located a mixed species flock

(titmice, **Nuthatches** and **Short-toed Treecreepers**) and had brief views of a **Firecrest** which busily hovered high in the trees searching for insects. The clouds were low as we then climbed to the village of Cabañas del Castillo and in the mist found a male **Black Wheatear**, which despite the bad weather, afforded us excellent views. Mission accomplished, we returned to Casa Rural El Recuerdo for a late lunch, gathering the luggage and thence back to Madrid airport for the evening flight home.

BIRDS RECORDED

Excellent results were obtained in this short winter break, despite bouts of bad weather with an overall list of 116 species were recorded.

1. **Little Grebe**: Present at Arrocampo.
2. **Great Crested Grebe**: Two at Arrocampo and also at Casas del Hito, near Madrigalejo.
3. **Great Cormorant**: Common at Arrocampo, along rivers and on pools in the ricefields and also at Monfragüe.
4. **Squacco Heron**: One at Arrocampo.
5. **Cattle Egret**: Common, especially at Arrocampo and on the ricefields.
6. **Little Egret**: Small numbers seen at Arrocampo and the ricefields.
7. **Great White Egret**: One at Arrocampo.
8. **Grey Heron**: Singles seen everyday.
9. **White Stork**: Common and seen everyday.
10. **Grey Lag Goose**: About 60 seen in two skeins over Arrocampo and a similar number seen near Madrigalejo.
11. **Pintail**: Over 300 in flooded ricefields near Vegas Altas.
12. **Mallard**: Seen daily.
13. **Black-winged Kite**: Excellent views of two at Casas del Hito.
14. **Red Kite**: Seen daily.
15. **Griffon Vulture**: Seen daily.
16. **Black Vulture**: Seen daily.
17. **Marsh Harrier**: Several at Arrocampo and over the ricefields.
18. **Hen Harrier**: One male at Madrigalejo.
19. **Sparrowhawk**: A female seen at Vegas Altas.
20. **Common Buzzard**: Seen daily.
21. **Spanish Imperial Eagle**: One adult seen in Monfragüe.
22. **Bonelli's Eagle**: One adult in Monfragüe.
23. **Lesser Kestrel**: Seen in Trujillo.
24. **Common Kestrel**: Seen daily.
25. **Merlin**: One hunting skylarks over the Zorita Plains and one on the plains north-west of Trujillo.
26. **Red-legged Partridge**: Several seen, particularly near Santa Marta de Magasca.
27. **Water Rail**: One seen near Palazuelo.
28. **Moorhen**: Seen at Arrocampo and the ricefields.
29. **Purple Swamphen**: Excellent views at Arrocampo.
30. **Common Coot**: Several at Arrocampo.
31. **Common Crane**: About 300 seen on the ricefields.

32. **Little Bustard:** 150 in a field west of Trujillo.
33. **Great Bustard:** 15 on the Zorita Plains and 7 seen west of Trujillo.
34. **Avocet:** 80 in flooded ricefields near Palazuelo.
35. **Stone Curlew:** 6 in stubble near Madrigalejo.
36. **Kentish Plover:** 2 in flooded ricefields near Palazuelo.
37. **Golden Plover:** Seen almost daily. About 500 seen between Zorita and Madrigalejo.
38. **Lapwing:** Seen daily in good numbers.
39. **Dunlin:** 1500 in flooded ricefields near Palazuelo.
40. **Common Snipe:** Present at Arrocampo and the ricefields, with 50 seen at the latter.
41. **Black-tailed Godwit:** About 500 in flooded ricefields near Palazuelo.
42. **Greenshank:** One near Palazuelo.
43. **Green Sandpiper:** Seen at Arrocampo and near Santa Marta de Magasca.
44. **Lesser Black-backed Gull:** Seen at Arrocampo and the ricefields.
45. **Black-headed Gull:** Seen at Arrocampo and the ricefields.
46. **Black-bellied Sandgrouse:** 20 near Vegas Altas and two west of Trujillo.
47. **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse:** Heard, but unfortunately not seen, west of Trujillo.
48. **Rock Dove/Feral Dove:** Seen daily.
49. **Wood Pigeon:** Seen almost daily.
50. **Collared Dove:** Seen daily.
51. **Great Spotted Cuckoo:** Two seen west of Trujillo.
52. **Eagle Owl:** One seen in Monfragüe.
53. **Little Owl:** Heard most evenings at Casa Rural El Recuerdo.
54. **Kingfisher:** Seen at Arrocampo and the ricefields.
55. **Hoopoe:** Seen daily.
56. **Great Spotted Woodpecker:** Seen at Monfragüe and near Cabañas del Castillo.
57. **Wryneck:** One near Palazuelo.
58. **Calandra Lark:** Seen on Zorita Plains and on plains west of Trujillo.
59. **Crested Lark:** Seen daily.
60. **Thekla Lark:** Seen on plains west of Trujillo and at Jaraicejo.
61. **Woodlark:** In deshesa near Santa Marta de Magasca.
62. **Skylark:** Wintering flocks on plains, seen almost daily.
63. **Sand Martin:** Seen at Arrocampo.
64. **Crag Martin:** Seen at Monfragüe and in the Villuercas mountains.
65. **Barn Swallow:** Seen daily.
66. **House Martin:** Seen at Monfragüe.
67. **Meadow Pipit:** Seen daily.
68. **Water Pipit:** Several birds on flooded ricefields near Palazuelo.
69. **White Wagtail:** Seen almost daily.
70. **Wren:** Seen daily.
71. **Dunnock:** One seen near Cabañas del Castillo.
72. **Robin:** Seen daily.
73. **Black Redstart:** Seen around Casa Rural El Recuerdo, Monfragüe and Cabañas del Castillo.
74. **Stonechat:** Seen daily.

75. **Black Wheatear**: One at Cabañas del Castillo.
76. **Blue Rock Thrush**: Seen at Monfragüe.
77. **Blackbird**: Seen daily.
78. **Song Thrush**: Seen at Arrocampo.
79. **Mistle Thrush**: Seen at Monfragüe.
80. **Cetti's Warbler**: Seen at Arrocampo and the ricefields. Heard at Monfragüe.
81. **Zitting Cisticola**: Seen at Arrocampo and the ricefields.
82. **Dartford Warbler**: Good views of a male at Jaraicejo.
83. **Sardinian Warbler**: Seen near Palazuelo.
84. **Blackcap**: Seen at Casa Rural El Recuerdo and the Villuercas mountains.
85. **Chiffchaff**: Seen daily.
86. **Firecrest**: One near Cabañas del Castillo.
87. **Long-tailed Tit**: Seen almost daily.
88. **Crested Tit**: Excellent views in Monfragüe.
89. **Blue Tit**: Seen daily.
90. **Great Tit**: Seen almost daily.
91. **Nuthatch**: Several near Cabañas del Castillo.
92. **Short-toed Treecreeper**: Seen at Monfragüe and near Cabañas del Castillo.
93. **Penduline Tit**: Excellent views of a male at Arrocampo.
94. **Southern Grey Shrike**: Seen daily.
95. **Jay**: Seen at Monfragüe and near Cabañas del Castillo.
96. **Azure-winged Magpie**: Seen daily.
97. **Magpie**: Seen daily.
98. **Jackdaw**: Seen almost daily.
99. **Raven**: Seen west of Trujillo and at Monfragüe.
100. **Common Starling**: One at Arrocampo.
101. **Spotless Starling**: Seen daily.
102. **House Sparrow**: Seen daily.
103. **Spanish Sparrow**: Seen daily.
104. **Tree Sparrow**: Seen on the ricefields.
105. **Rock Sparrow**: Small flock on wires at Retamosa.
106. **Red Avadavat**: Seen on the ricefields.
107. **Common Waxbill**: Seen on the ricefields.
108. **Chaffinch**: Seen daily.
109. **Serin**: Seen daily.
110. **Goldfinch**: Seen daily.
111. **Linnet**: Seen daily.
112. **Hawfinch**: Singing at Casa Rural El Recuerdo.
113. **Cirl Bunting**: One seen at Cabañas del Castillo.
114. **Rock Bunting**: Seen at Monfragüe.
115. **Reed Bunting**: One seen at Casas del Hito.
116. **Corn Bunting**: Good numbers seen daily.