

WINTER TOUR FOR JOHN AND PAM SMALLWOOD JANUARY 2008

By Martin Kelsey

ITINERARY

Day 1: Tuesday 15th January

Pick-up Madrid: 10.40
Arrocampo
Arrive at Casa Rural El Recuerdo by 18.00

Day 2: Wednesday 16th January

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

Day 3: Thursday 17th January

Plains west of Trujillo and Santa Marta de Magasca

Day 4: Friday 18th January

Monfragüe National Park

Day 5: Saturday 19th January

Villuercas, Arrocampo and return to Madrid for check-in at 19.20.

TRIP REPORT

Day 1: Tuesday 15th January

John and Pam arrived just a few minutes behind schedule but as baggage reclaim is generally quick at Madrid's Terminal 1, we heading off from the airport well before 11 am. It was a cool, overcast and quite windy day, with dark clouds threatening rain most of the time. We stopped at Arrocampo for an afternoon's birding, the reservoir used as a cooling tank for a power station and surrounded by a wide fringe of vegetation: yellow at this time of the year. Collecting keys for the new hides, we made good use of the shelter the hides provided from the strong gusts of wind. The conditions made seeing small birds

unlikely as few would be perching high in the reeds, but we did see good numbers of wintering **Chiffchaffs** as well as **Reed Bunting**. Dozens of **Crag Martins** hawked insects over a more sheltered pool, with a couple of **House Martins** and a few **Barn Swallows** amongst them. **Cetti's Warblers** produced bursts of song, whilst a few **Grey Heron** stood still in the reeds. We got our first glimpses of **Purple Swamphen**, but better views were had later in the afternoon. We moved to the hide overlooking the pool at Cerro Alto, seeing an **Osprey** perched atop of a dead tree in the middle of the pool. It flew off as we went up to the hide. The pool had a good selection of birds from a **Great White Egret**, waders such as **Spotted Redshank**, **Redshank**, **Greenshank**, **Green** and **Common Sandpiper**, **Kingfisher** and **Shoveler**. We completed the afternoon at another hide, on the way to which we passed a field with a large flock of **Lapwing**, all facing the same direction into the wind, just as they are often shown in paintings. From the hide we enjoyed superb views of female **Marsh Harriers**, **Purple Swamphen**, another **Great White Egret** and more distant **Griffon** and **Black Vulture**, including two of each on the ground: demonstrating the significant size difference between the two and how they totally dwarfed the nearby **Magpies**.

We left Arrocampo at 17.00, and after a short refreshment stop, we reached Casa Rural El Recuerdo at 18.00, in time for dinner and doing the day's checklist in front of a lovely roaring fire.

Day 2: Wednesday 16th January

We braved the high winds which characterised most of the day but which eased by late afternoon. There was sunshine with some cloud most of the day and mercifully no rain. We headed south to the rice-fields, taking first of all a road towards the village of Palazuelo. Family parties of **Common Cranes** were seen almost immediately we were on this quiet road, feeding in the rice stubble, alongside **White Stork**. At the river Ruercas we parked and walked a track between maize stubble and the bank side vegetation. Amongst the flocks of **Spanish Sparrow** we found **Brambling** and during the course of our stay there we had excellent views of perhaps 40 birds, including some very smart males. A fleeting view was obtained of a **Wryneck** which momentarily was feeding beside the track. However the strong winds put paid to us finding many other small birds, although **Cetti's Warblers** frequently burst out in song. The morning light also lit up well the colours of passing **Red Kites**. We continued to the village of Palazuelo, seeing both **Common Waxbill** and **Red Avadavat** en route. From the village we scanned a flooded rice paddy finding a flock of about 20 **Little Ringed Plover** and a **Water Pipit** feeding amongst a group of **Meadow Pipits**. On our return to the main road a fine female **Hen Harrier** was seen quartering the stubble. We then visited a stony field close to the old railway station of Madrigalejo, which is a regular roosting site for **Stone Curlew**. We found nearly 40 there, mostly standing or sitting still with eyes half-closed. An overwintering **Black Kite** flew close by.

Then we moved onto the rice fields and cereal fields around the village of Vegas Altas. Again family parties of cranes were dotted about, but our main

focus was on a stunning group of ten male **Great Bustards**, in the field adjacent to the track and watched in excellent light, small flocks of **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** and a flock of about 40 **Little Bustard**. Equally impressive were the flocks of small birds, especially the **Spanish Sparrows**: hundreds queuing up on fence wires or swarming on the road.

We spent the final part of the day at another area of rice cultivation: Casas del Hito. Here the numbers of **Common Crane** were incredible: thousands in fields and coming into the area to roost. There were also perhaps a thousand **Grey Lag Geese**: some feeding in the rice stubble, others resting in the main pool of the area, whilst others passed overhead in skeins of ever-changing shape, en route to roost at the nearby Sierra Brava reservoir. We walked around part of the main pool and were delighted to find a newly arrived **Great Spotted Cuckoo** as well as a good selection of waders on some flooded paddies, including **Avocet**, **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Spotted Redshank** and **Dunlin**, as well as a pair of **Shelduck**. A female **Merlin** dashed overhead and a fine male **Hen Harrier** was also seen. A tight flock of 30 **Little Bustard** was also present in the stubble. We ended the afternoon watching the lines of **Common Crane** move into roost, hundreds upon hundreds, whilst a **Black-winged Kite** hovered over the nearby fields. A **Quail** called as dusk progressed and a **Little Owl** watched us from its perch on an irrigation pipe. As we left the area in darkness we passed the large **Cattle Egret** roost, filling roadside bushes with the hundreds of resting egrets deep in conversation!

Day 3: Thursday 17th January

Early morning fog quickly dispersed and we enjoyed a dry day with a fair bit of sunshine. First port of call was a small reservoir close to Trujillo where as well as **Little Grebe**, **Mallard** and **Pochard**, a small group of **Black-winged Stilt** were present. We then headed to the plains between Trujillo and Santa Marta de Magasca. A flock of 20 **Great Bustard** were quickly found and we saw a **Merlin** dashing through, putting up a flock of **Spotless Starling** as it did so. The flocks of small birds were remarkable: **Skylark**, **Linnet**, **Goldfinch**, **Spanish Sparrow**, and **Corn Bunting** and during the morning we also heard **Calandra Lark** and **Woodlark** in full spring song. Further along the road we saw a dispersed flock of about 60 **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** in the distance, and watching where they landed we backtracked to a point where we could scan the open field they had descended to. Luckily about 15 were in view, just, on the sky-line, and we were able to scope them, giving us the chance to see the plumage differences between the sexes easily. We drove on and spotted for coffee at the Rio Tamuja, where we enjoyed the wonderful sight of **Hawfinches** perched on overhead cables in full sunshine. At one time 34 were in view! A couple of **Rock Sparrows** were also up on the wires at one stage. A fine **Red Kite** soared overhead, whilst frogs croaked from downstream. We moved on towards the main road, stopping to watch another ten **Great Bustard**.

A brief stop at the Guadiloba reservoir produced **Gadwall** and **Great Crested Grebe** and then it was to our lunch stop beside the reservoir at Talaván. Within minutes of arriving we had excellent views of an adult **Golden Eagle** soaring overhead, with, at one stage, another adult in view higher up. A male **Hen**

Harrier was also seen. The reservoir boasted **Little** and **Great Crested Grebe**, **Teal** and about 50 **Pochard**. Two **Kingfishers** also produced interest as they engaged in a scrap resulting in both falling from the perch into the edge of the water!

We took an afternoon walk along the Rio Almonte, a very attractive and productive stop with two pairs of **Black Wheatear**, **Blue Rock Thrush** and **Black Redstart** present.

Back at home shortly after six, we took an evening stroll and listened to the soft hooting of **Long-eared Owl**, followed by a wing-clapping display, as the bird flew from the tree. **Little Owl** and a very brief call of **Barn Owl** were also heard on the walk. It was a satisfying conclusion to a day which took us to a good variety of sites, with a good variety of birds to show for it!

Day 4: Friday 18th January

Whilst Casa Rural El Recuerdo bathed in clear blue skies first thing, as we headed north to Trujillo we entered a fog bank which concerned us that it might make our raptor viewing at the Monfragüe National Park difficult. We stopped to check the pool in a small park at the edge of Trujillo, which boasted 20 **Little Grebe**, **Mallard**, **Coot**, a **Pochard** and a **Shoveler**. We then continued north and fortunately as we approached Monfragüe the fog was lifting, and indeed the sun was shining on the rock face at Peña Falcon. There the **Griffon Vulture** residents of the cliff were sunning themselves, many with wings opened, presumably to dry feathers thoroughly, which may have become damp overnight. We also had good views of perched **Black Vulture** on the rocks as well. Small birds were not outdone, with a fine male **Cirl Bunting** singing and just metres away a male **Rock Bunting**. **Blackcaps** were everywhere and we had good views of **Blue Rock Thrush**.

As the air warmed, the vultures lifted off, with dozens in the skies, some joining others in a tight thermal to the west.

From the Peña Falcon gorge we make a brief stop at the Villareal visitors' centre, before continuing to a lunch stop in pines overlooking the Tietár river. We were accompanied by a large flock of **Azure-winged Magpies** and an even larger number of **Hawfinches**. A **Great Spotted Woodpecker** was hammering away at a pine cone whilst a couple of **Goldcrests** were seen nearby.

We completed the afternoon at the Portilla del Tietár, with the clouds that had brought overcast weather during the middle part of the day clearing to produce a wonderfully sunny and calm afternoon. It was ideal for raptors and in due course we saw a juvenile **Spanish Imperial Eagle** fly over and shortly after a pair of adults. The latter engaged in some display, with their barking call and some sky diving. The sun illuminated their creamy white forewings brilliantly. As we had arrived a single call of **Eagle Owl** was heard. It was repeated later on and as the sun lowered we prepared to wait for the bird to call again. At about 6.30 pm a few calls were given, wonderful sonorous, wavering hoots. We scanned the cliff face opposite in the dusk light, but we could not see the bird. It

quickly got darker and we got ready to leave. Just as we were doing so, the calling started and almost immediately a second bird joined in. It was clear that we were listening to the mating calls of the pair and although it was too dark to see anything, we had the wonderful experience of hearing the **Eagle Owl** pair in full courtship.

Day 5: Saturday 19th January

The day, which dawned clear and bright, remained so throughout: wonderful sunshine and spring-like temperatures. Packed and the car loaded, Pam and John made their farewells at Casa Rural El Recuerdo and we drove south-east to Guadalupe and then to the highest peak in the Villuercas range, approaching it by a narrow mountain road. There, about a kilometre below the summit, in a cutting through the rock, we spotted movement and were thrilled to watch a **Wallcreeper** perched on the rocks ahead. We had good views of this exquisite bird before it flew off, back towards the peak where Martin had found one (almost certainly the same individual) a week before. We parked at the top and spent about an hour or so searching the area for Alpine Accentor. Apart from two **Red-billed Choughs**, there was very little movement, but we were compensated enough by the superb views and calm, sunny weather. After refreshments, we checked a gully nearby and almost immediately found an **Alpine Accentor**, then another and then another. Good views were obtained as they moved up the rocks. Then they flew across the gully and it was only then that we realised how many birds there were: no fewer than 20 crossed the gap in front of us!

We completed this productive stop with **Dunnock**, **Dartford Warbler** and **Crested Tit** in the heather and edge of the stunted tree-line.

We descended and took a road along the western side of the Villuercas mountains, stopping for lunch near Berzocana, watching **Griffon Vultures** overhead and hearing **Nuthatches** all around us. We made an afternoon stop in a belt of cork oak woodland to the north, which again abounded with **Nuthatch**, as well as **Short-toed Treecreeper**, **Crested Tit**, **Firecrest** and a **Grey Wagtail**. A further brief stop was had at the River Almonte where we saw more **Griffon Vultures** and nearby a **Mistle Thrush**. Sadly we had to take ourselves away from this wonderful landscape, but we did have time for one more stop at Arrocampo. In yet another different habitat for the day, we enjoyed a last half an hour's birding overlooking the reed beds. No fewer than 11 **Purple Swamphen** were in view at the same time, whilst two **Bluethroat** gave their distinctive snipping call, and both were briefly seen.

The day was completed with the drive at dusk to Madrid, arriving as scheduled at 19.20 for check-in and the chance to complete the day's tally and reminisce over the full and productive five day's of birding.

BIRDS RECORDED

Excellent results were obtained in this short winter break with an overall list of 136 species were recorded.

1. **Little Grebe:** Present in numbers of up to 20 at the small reservoirs at Trujillo, Talaván and Arrocampo.
2. **Great Crested Grebe:** Individuals at Guadiloba reservoir, Talaván and Monfragüe.
3. **Great Cormorant:** Common at Arrocampo and also at Monfragüe, with individuals seen elsewhere.
4. **Cattle Egret:** Common and seen daily, especially on the ricefields where a large roost is present near Madrigalejo.
5. **Little Egret:** Small numbers seen at Arrocampo, on the rice fields and at Talaván.
6. **Great White Egret:** Two at Arrocampo and one at Casas del Hito.
7. **Grey Heron:** Seen almost everyday.
8. **Black Stork:** Two sightings, possibly of same bird, at Vegas Altas and at Casas del Hito on 16th January.
9. **White Stork:** Common and seen everyday.
10. **Grey Lag Goose:** About a thousand at Casas del Hito on 16th January.
11. **Common Shelduck:** Two at Casas del Hito on 16th January.
12. **Gadwall:** About 12 at Guadiloba reservoir.
13. **Teal:** About six present at Talaván.
14. **Mallard:** Seen daily.
15. **Shoveler:** About ten seen at Arrocampo, with birds also near Trujillo.
16. **Pochard:** Small numbers on reservoirs at Trujillo.
17. **Black-winged Kite:** One at Casas del Hito on 16th January.
18. **Black Kite:** One near Madrigalejo on 16th January.
19. **Red Kite:** Seen daily.
20. **Griffon Vulture:** Seen daily.
21. **Black Vulture:** Seen almost daily.
22. **Marsh Harrier:** Several at Arrocampo and over the ricefields.
23. **Hen Harrier:** Seen on the ricefields, as well as a male at Talaván on 17th January.
24. **Sparrowhawk:** One at Monfragüe on 18th January and on the journey near Trujillo on the same day.
25. **Common Buzzard:** Seen almost daily.
26. **Spanish Imperial Eagle:** A pair (in display) and a juvenile seen in Monfragüe on 18th January.
27. **Golden Eagle:** A pair at Talaván on 17th January.
28. **Osprey:** One at Cerro Alto on 15th January.
29. **Common Kestrel:** Seen daily.
30. **Merlin:** A female at Casas del Hito on 16th January and a distant view of one near Santa Marta de Magasca on 17th January.
31. **Red-legged Partridge:** Seen almost daily.
32. **Quail:** One heard in the evening at Casas del Hito on 16th January
33. **Water Rail:** Heard on the rice fields and at Talaván.
34. **Moorhen:** Seen almost daily.

35. **Purple Swamphen:** Excellent views at Arrocampo on 6 on 15th January and 11 at one site on 19th January.
36. **Common Coot:** Seen daily.
37. **Common Crane:** Several thousand at Casas del Hito and smaller numbers seen at Talaván and north of Trujillo.
38. **Little Bustard:** 40 seen at Vegas Altas and about 30 at Casas del Hito on 16th January.
39. **Great Bustard:** 10 males at Vegas Altas on 16th January, 30 near Santa Marta de Magasca on 17th January.
40. **Black-winged Stilt:** About eight at small reservoir near Trujillo on 17th January and two at Arrocampo on 19th January.
41. **Avocet:** 30 at Casas del Hito on 17th January.
42. **Stone Curlew:** 40+ in stubble near Madrigalejo on 17th January.
43. **Little Ringed Plover:** 20 near Palazuelo on 17th January.
44. **Golden Plover:** About 30 at Casas del Hito on 17th January.
45. **Lapwing:** Seen daily in good numbers.
46. **Dunlin:** 10 in flooded ricefields near Palazuelo on 17th January.
47. **Common Snipe:** Present on the rice fields, Talaván and Arrocampo.
48. **Black-tailed Godwit:** A flock of 25 at Casas del Hito on 16th January.
49. **Spotted Redshank:** One at Arrocampo and at Casas del Hito.
50. **Common Redshank:** One at Arrocampo.
51. **Greenshank:** Four at Arrocampo and six seen on the rice fields.
52. **Green Sandpiper:** Seen almost daily.
53. **Common Sandpiper:** Seen at Arrocampo and on the rice fields.
54. **Lesser Black-backed Gull:** Seen at Arrocampo and the ricefields, as well as over the plains and at Sierra Brava.
55. **Black-headed Gull:** Fewer than above species.
56. **Black-bellied Sandgrouse:** 30 near Vegas Altas on 16th January.
57. **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse:** About 60 on plains near Santa Marta de Magasca on 17th January.
58. **Rock Dove/Feral Dove:** Seen almost daily.
59. **Stock Dove:** Two seen on the rice fields and 15 at Talaván.
60. **Wood Pigeon:** Seen almost daily.
61. **Collared Dove:** Seen daily.
62. **Great Spotted Cuckoo:** One at Casas del Hito on 16th January.
63. **Barn Owl:** One heard briefly at Pago de San Clemente on 17th January.
64. **Eagle Owl:** A pair calling at Monfragüe on evening of 18th January.
65. **Little Owl:** Seen at Casas del Hito and heard at Pago de San Clemente.
66. **Long-eared Owl:** Two seen at Pago de San Clemente on 17th January.
67. **Kingfisher:** Seen almost daily.
68. **Hoopoe:** Seen daily.
69. **Wryneck:** One at Rio Ruercas, near Palazuelo on 16th January.
70. **Great Spotted Woodpecker:** Recorded near Palazuelo and at Monfragüe.
71. **Calandra Lark:** Seen on plains near Santa Marta de Magasca.
72. **Crested Lark:** Seen daily.
73. **Thekla Lark:** Seen near Santa Marta de Magasca.
74. **Woodlark:** Heard near Santa Marta de Magasca and in Monfragüe.
75. **Skylark:** Wintering flocks on plains and rice fields.

- 76. Crag Martin:** Seen at Monfragüe, in the Villuercas mountains, near Santa Marta de Magasca and at Arrocampo.
- 77. Barn Swallow:** A few amongst a flock of the above species at Arrocampo.
- 78. House Martin:** Two amongst a flock of the above species at Arrocampo on 15th January.
- 79. Meadow Pipit:** Seen daily.
- 80. Water Pipit:** One near Palazuelo 16th January.
- 81. Grey Wagtail:** Seen almost daily.
- 82. White Wagtail:** Seen daily.
- 83. Wren:** Heard in Monfragüe and seen in the Villuercas..
- 84. Dunnock:** Two on Pico de Villuercas on 19th January.
- 85. Alpine Accentor:** A flock of 20 on Pico de Villuercas on 19th January.
- 86. Robin:** Seen almost daily.
- 87. Bluethroat:** Two at Arrocampo on 19th January.
- 88. Black Redstart:** Seen daily.
- 89. Stonechat:** Seen daily.
- 90. Black Wheatear:** Two pairs at Rio Almonte south of Monroy on 17th January.
- 91. Blue Rock Thrush:** Seen on Rio Almonte and Monfragüe.
- 92. Blackbird:** Seen daily.
- 93. Song Thrush:** Seen daily.
- 94. Mistle Thrush:** Seen in the Villuercas mountains on 19th January.
- 95. Cetti's Warbler:** Recorded (generally heard) on the ricefields and Arrocampo.
- 96. Zitting Cisticola:** Seen on the ricefields.
- 97. Dartford Warbler:** Recorded at the ricefields, Talaván and Pico de Villuercas.
- 98. Sardinian Warbler:** Seen almost daily.
- 99. Blackcap:** Seen almost daily.
- 100. Chiffchaff:** Seen daily with particularly large numbers at Arrocampo.
- 101. Goldcrest:** Two at Monfragüe on 18th January.
- 102. Firecrest:** One or two in the Villuercas mountains on 19th January.
- 103. Long-tailed Tit:** Seen almost daily.
- 104. Crested Tit:** Several in the Villuercas mountains on 19th January.
- 105. Blue Tit:** Seen in Monfragüe and the Villuercas.
- 106. Great Tit:** Seen almost daily.
- 107. Nuthatch:** Several in the Villuercas mountains.
- 108. Short-toed Treecreeper:** Recorded in Monfragüe and the Villuercas.
- 109. Wallcreeper:** One seen feeding beside the road in a cutting below the Pico de Villuercas on 19th January.
- 110. Southern Grey Shrike:** Seen daily.
- 111. Jay:** Seen at Monfragüe.
- 112. Azure-winged Magpie:** Seen daily.
- 113. Magpie:** Seen daily.
- 114. Red-billed Chough:** Two on Pico de Villuercas on 19th January.
- 115. Jackdaw:** Seen almost daily.
- 116. Raven:** Seen almost daily.
- 117. Common Starling:** 1 at Arrocampo on 15th January.
- 118. Spotless Starling:** Seen daily.

- 119. House Sparrow:** Seen daily.
- 120. Spanish Sparrow:** Seen almost daily with large flocks of several hundreds on ricefields.
- 121. Tree Sparrow:** Small numbers on rice fields.
- 122. Rock Sparrow:** One at Vegas Altas on 16th January and two on Rio Tamuja on 17th January.
- 123. Red Avadavat:** Seen on the ricefields.
- 124. Common Waxbill:** Seen on the rice fields.
- 125. Chaffinch:** Seen daily.
- 126. Brambling:** Flock of 40 at Rio Ruercas, Palazuelo on 16th January.
- 127. Serin:** Seen almost daily.
- 128. Greenfinch:** Present on the rice fields and the plains near Santa Marta de Magasca.
- 129. Goldfinch:** Seen daily.
- 130. Siskin:** Seen at Palazuelo and Monfragüe.
- 131. Linnet:** Seen almost daily. Large flocks on plains.
- 132. Hawfinch:** A flock of 34 birds on Rio Tamuja on 17th January and many in Monfragüe on 18th January.
- 133. Cirl Bunting:** Recorded at Monfragüe.
- 134. Rock Bunting:** Seen at Monfragüe and Pico de Villuercas.
- 135. Reed Bunting:** Seen on the rice fields and at Arrocampo.
- 136. Corn Bunting:** Good numbers seen daily.

Other sightings: Red Deer (Monfragüe)
 Large Tortoiseshell (Villuercas 19th January)
 Red Admiral (Villuercas 19th January)